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## **Conceptualizing the Electronic Word-of-Mouth Process: What We Know and Need to Know About eWOM Creation, Exposure, and Evaluation**

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# Conceptualizing the Electronic Word-of-Mouth Process: What We Know and Need to Know About eWOM Creation, Exposure, and Evaluation

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## **Conceptualizing the electronic word-of-mouth process:**

### **What we know and need to know about eWOM creation, exposure, and evaluation**

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**Conceptualizing the electronic word-of-mouth process:  
What we know and need to know about eWOM creation, exposure, and evaluation**

**Abstract**

Electronic word of mouth (eWOM) is a prevalent consumer practice that has undeniable effects on the company bottom line; yet it remains an over-labeled and under-theorized concept. Thus, marketers could benefit from a practical, science-based roadmap to maximize its business value. Building on the consumer motivation–opportunity–ability framework, this study conceptualizes three distinct stages in the eWOM process: eWOM creation, eWOM exposure, and eWOM evaluation. For each stage, we adopt a dual lens—from the perspective of the consumer (who sends and receives eWOM) and that of the marketer (who amplifies and manages eWOM for business results)—to synthesize key research insights and propose a research agenda based on a multi-disciplinary systematic review of 1,050 academic publications on eWOM published between 1996 and 2019. We conclude with a discussion of the future of eWOM research and practice.

**Keywords:** Electronic word of mouth (eWOM); motivation, opportunity, ability (MOA) framework; eWOM process; eWOM creation; eWOM exposure; eWOM evaluation; systematic review; research agenda

## Introduction

More than 60 years after its introduction to the literature (Brooks 1957), word of mouth (WOM) has been revitalized and given new significance by means of the Internet (Dellarocas 2003). The proliferation of digital technologies has enabled consumers to share their *consumption*-related opinions, thereby creating electronic WOM (eWOM)—a “statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet” (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004, p. 39). These technologies have further amplified the importance of WOM as a buying influence. On Yelp alone, for example, 186 million people post nearly 150 million business reviews each month on which 90% of consumers rely for buying decisions (Capoccia 2018). Yet marketers are still struggling to maximize the business value of eWOM (Lioukas 2018).

Despite the vast increase of eWOM research in the past two decades (see Lamberton and Stephen 2016), insights have accumulated in different directions, providing fragmented evidence on the meaning and market implications of this phenomenon. Why are eWOM conceptualization and assessment so challenging? To begin with, eWOM has been used to denote different online phenomena, as evidenced in the proliferation of *conceptual labels* across academic studies and among marketing practitioners. Depending on the research perspective, scholars have used different labels, including “sentiment,” for work on consumer attitudes, and “user-generated content (UGC),” in the information systems literature. In addition, certain aspects of eWOM are emphasized with specific conceptual labels, such as consumer knowledge (e.g., “amateur rating”), the facilitator role of marketers (e.g., Amazon.com “Like”), the consumption aspect (e.g., “product review”), or contextual characteristics (e.g., “tweet,” “brand community”). These

different labels highlight a fragmented academic discourse and the need to distinguish eWOM from related concepts that may be mislabeled as eWOM.

Further complicating the academic debate on eWOM is consumers' *dual role* in the eWOM exchange. Consumers may progress along the eWOM communication process, moving from the eWOM *creation*, to *exposure*, to *evaluation stages*, acting at times as senders and at other times receivers of eWOM and shifting between these stages and roles in a non-linear way (Kannan and Li 2017). To date, most research has focused on one of these roles at a time and on consumers' motivations behind sending and receiving eWOM. However, the impact of any communication process, including that of eWOM, depends not only on consumers' *motivations* but also on their *opportunities* and *abilities* (MOA; Batra and Keller 2016; MacInnis et al. 1991). A framework that integrates consumers' dual role in the eWOM process and their MOA along this process can help marketers understand (1) when and how to facilitate consumers' MOA (e.g., by incentivizing the creation of eWOM) and (2) how to shape the outcome of the MOA on both eWOM senders (e.g., eWOM volume, valence, credibility) and eWOM receivers (e.g., buying influence, business value).

Marketing research needs a unifying effort to organize and discuss key research insights, emerging trends, and avenues for further research. The current study takes a step in this direction. First, we reflect on the different definitions and labels of eWOM to clarify what eWOM is and what it is not. Second, we propose an organizing framework that accounts for the dual role of consumers (senders, receivers) and their MOA in the eWOM process. Building on the vast body of eWOM literature, for each stage we summarize consumers' MOA and identify the most effective strategies for marketers. We are guided by four research questions: (1) What is eWOM? (2) What do consumers experience in the eWOM process? (3) How can marketers

support the consumer and amplify the business value of eWOM? and (4) What remains to be known about the process, antecedents, and consequences of eWOM?

To address these questions and develop a research agenda on eWOM, we take stock of academic articles published between 1996 and 2019 and survey the main research findings on consumers' MOAs in terms of creating, being exposed to, and evaluating eWOM as well as the implications of these findings for marketing practice. In the remainder of the article, we detail the methodology, the eWOM concept, and the organizing framework. We then present what we know and need to know along the three-stage eWOM process, providing recommendations for scholars and marketers.

## **Methodology**

We searched for published studies on eWOM in scientific databases (e.g., Business Source Premier, Google Scholar, JSTOR) using keywords, including “buzz,” “consumer-generated content,” “electronic word of mouth,” “online review,” “online word of mouth,” “social earned media,” and “user-generated content.” We included publications across several fields of research and applied a snowballing procedure by examining publications' references to find additional studies. Finally, we searched for articles that use netnographic data (even if they do not refer to eWOM explicitly), as this method helps investigate consumer-to-consumer interactions in online communities (Kozinets 2016). We focused on research that (1) specifically investigates eWOM (e.g., antecedents, consequences), (2) employs eWOM as a crucial part of data collection (e.g., investigation of fashion blogs), (3) discusses technological or methodological advances that enable the study of eWOM (e.g., netnography), and (4) focuses on consumption-related, consumer-generated online content. Thus, we excluded articles that investigate purely marketer-generated online communication (e.g., online advertising); offline interactions such as offline

WOM, complaints, and face-to-face brand communities; recommendations by critics, experts, and celebrity endorsers; and phenomena not related to consumption (e.g., general conversation topics, social media usage). Our final sample consists of 1,050 articles published between 1996 and 2019 in 86 different publication outlets (see Web Appendices 1 and 2), 59% of which pertain to marketing and consumer research, 23% to information systems and computer science, 11.5% to economics and management, and 6.5% to tourism.

We performed a content analysis (Webster and Watson 2002). In addition to the descriptive information for each article (e.g., year of publication, research discipline), we coded the conceptual labels and definitions of eWOM used by authors, key theoretical approaches, research methodology, consumer MOAs in terms of participating in the eWOM exchange (as either senders or receivers), stage of the eWOM process (creation, exposure, or evaluation), characteristics of the eWOM exchange (source, message, channel, and audience), and key findings and implications.

### **The concept and theoretical underpinnings of eWOM**

The literature provides a plethora of definitions and theorizations of eWOM that differ in scope and reference to particular elements of the eWOM exchange, i.e., the message, source, receiver, and channel (see Table 1). Liu's (2006) definition of buzz, for example, stresses eWOM participants, but not the digital context; Dhar and Chang's (2009) definition of UGC emphasizes the opposite. The different facets of the eWOM exchange are reflected not only in the many eWOM definitions but also in the 390 eWOM conceptual labels used, such as buzz, UGC, online reviews, and consumer-to-consumer know-how exchange (for an overview of the research evolution and major milestones in eWOM research, see Web Appendix 3; for the complete list of labels, see Web Appendix 4).



--- Insert Table 1 about here ---

### ***Lack of clarity on the meaning of eWOM***

As evidenced in Table 1, eWOM is sometimes implied at the mere mention of certain platforms (e.g., virtual communities; Kozinets 1999), actions (e.g., virality, diffusion, online sharing), and data collection methods (e.g., netnography). When explicitly mentioned, eWOM is often used outside the marketing and consumer context to denote a general way of sharing information from person to person, rather than any consumer-generated content with commercial implications (e.g., Daugherty et al. 2008). We argue that any online consumer-generated content about products, even if far from a direct recommendation to other consumers, should be recognized as eWOM. To advance the holistic understanding of the phenomenon, we contend that “eWOM” can serve as an umbrella term to denote *online consumer-generated content*.

However, it is necessary to first clarify the concept of eWOM by distinguishing its essential properties from those of related concepts: (1) sharing general information, (2) offline WOM, (3) critics’ reviews, (4) advertising, (5) UGC, (6) electronic recommendation systems, (7) online search rankings, and (8) observational learning. Confusing eWOM with any of these concepts or using them interchangeably may impair the retrieval and comparison of findings across publications and hinder progressive knowledge building (MacInnis 2011).

**eWOM is not a form of sharing general information.** eWOM is more specific than a broadly conceptualized channel for content transmission, which may, but does not need to, have *commercial* implications. Prior work has examined mechanisms such as email transmission (Rapp et al. 2013) and controversial conversation topics (Chen and Berger 2013). While insights from these studies may have implications for the eWOM phenomenon, the content investigated therein should not be equated with eWOM.

**eWOM is not offline WOM.** The differences between eWOM and traditional WOM have been extensively discussed (e.g., Berger 2014; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2015; Lovett et al. 2013) and can be summarized along four elements. First, the *communication network* in eWOM is larger than that of traditional WOM because eWOM extends its reach via the Internet. Second, eWOM eliminates the restrictions on *time and location*, as asynchronous information is usually kept online for some time (Hoffman and Novak 1996). This has expanded the scope of eWOM communication from consumer-to-consumer exchanges to a broader phenomenon that includes online consumer-generated communication *directed* at marketers but *visible* to other consumers (Kim and Slotegraaf 2015). Third, whereas traditional WOM refers to mostly spoken or written formats, eWOM takes place in *many other formats*, and this has implications for information processing and adoption (Schweidel and Moe 2014). Fourth, eWOM is embedded in an *online context* whose idiosyncrasies shape its credibility and effectiveness (Babić Rosario et al. 2016).

**eWOM is not critics' reviews.** It is important to distinguish between eWOM and critics' reviews. Simply put, consumers generate eWOM, whereas critics' reviews are largely provided by independent, third-party experts. The recognized expertise of critics amplifies the credibility of their message, leading to a significantly greater impact than that of eWOM on consumers' purchase decision (Floyd et al. 2014). Some confusion may arise from using terminology typical of consumer-generated information (e.g., "online buzz," "online reviews") for critics' and experts' reviews. In addition, the rise of influencer marketing is blurring the distinction between regular consumers and critics as some influencers turn their hobby into a business generating income by professionally reviewing. We contend that paid influencers' reviews should be considered a form of advertising (see below) rather than eWOM.

**eWOM is not advertising.** While marketer-generated messages and paid advertisements can spark eWOM (Dichter 1966), they are conceptually different from eWOM because they are not originally generated by consumers and are commercial in nature (Tellis et al. 2019). When consumers share advertisements, these may “go viral,” that is, be shared by a large number of others (Akpınar and Berger 2017). In general, this act of sharing, liking, or commenting on an advertisement can be considered part of the eWOM phenomenon.

**eWOM is not UGC.** UGC is a broad concept that refers to any content created by users and primarily distributed on the Internet (Daugherty et al. 2008). By contrast, eWOM is necessarily *consumption-related*. For example, eWOM does not include communication that merely reflects people’s moods or expressions that are not related to products, brands, companies, or consumption experiences. This is important because some research investigating the effects of UGC (e.g., Lee and Workman 2014) or, as discussed earlier, marketer-generated content (e.g., Thorson and Rodgers 2006) has used the term “eWOM,” making it more difficult to identify and progressively build on existing knowledge on this topic.

**eWOM is not electronic recommendation systems.** eWOM is a mechanism characterized by human social interaction and thus is quite different from electronic recommendation agents that “assist consumers in making product decisions by generating rank-ordered alternative lists based on consumer preferences” (Aksoy et al. 2006, p. 297). We acknowledge that eWOM may be “fed into” such recommendation systems via proprietary algorithms that may represent consumer opinions (Piramuthu et al. 2012); nonetheless, because the resulting recommendation may be significantly altered by the marketer and based on additional business intelligence, we consider this information *marketer-generated* and thus distinct from eWOM.

**eWOM is not online search rankings.** We further distinguish eWOM from online activities that yield no recorded content. For example, Karniouchina (2011, p. 63) defines buzz—a common alias for eWOM—as “consumer excitement, interest, and communication around a [movie] project or a participating star that is capable of increasing their visibility with both moviegoers and movie industry participants.” This “buzz,” however, is measured by the intensity of Internet searches rather than actual consumer-generated content. In other words, it does not convey consumer opinions but rather levels of public awareness and/or interest. In that respect, these rankings resemble marketer-facilitated observational learning, in which others’ search behavior becomes visible to the public in aggregate form.

**eWOM is more than observational learning.** Prior research has clearly distinguished between WOM and observational learning (Chen et al. 2011b; Godes and Silva 2012; Libai et al. 2010; Ludwig et al. 2013). Compared with eWOM, which often reveals consumers’ motivations behind an opinion or a recommendation, observational learning contains less information—it reveals the actions of other consumers, but not the reasons behind them (Bikhchandani et al. 1998). Online, observational learning assumes marketer facilitation. Consider, for example, the electronic recommendation systems employed by online retailers, which use algorithms to aggregate and report consumer behavior (e.g., “people who bought X also bought Y”). Increasingly popular are the so-called social contexts—online advertisements linked to snippets of text that show which friends have “liked” a page, event, or application (Li et al. 2014). Pauwels et al. (2016, p. 640) state that “eWOM includes observing the actions of peers ... [as this is part of] informal communications directed at other consumers about the ownership, usage, or characteristics of particular goods and services or their sellers.” Other scholars (e.g., Risselada et al. 2018) theorize observational learning as an *underlying mechanism* for eWOM, in which

certain metrics (e.g., eWOM volume) signal the actions of others (e.g., eWOM volume implies the number of products sold) and therefore can be used for judgment. In summary, while some studies include observational learning in their scope of (e)WOM investigations (e.g., Pauwels et al. 2016), eWOM and observational learning are conceptually different—consumers’ online *actions* may become visible through no action of their own but from the explicit effort on the side of the marketer. Therefore, we propose that eWOM is a broader phenomenon that has traditionally included explicit recommendations and mere mentions of products and brands and has expanded to non-textual mentions, implicit recommendations, and other online consumer actions (e.g., products featured in YouTube tutorials).

### ***Revised definition of eWOM***

As outlined, eWOM is conceptually distinct from other related online phenomena, and it is differentially shaped by consumers’ circumstances and technological affordances. Furthermore, in light of the dynamic changes in the marketplace and the digital context, the prevailing views on eWOM have become outdated. For example, the most frequently used eWOM definition to date has the word “statement” at its core (see Table 1), which evokes mainly textual postings while ignoring other available formats. Similarly, eWOM may be directed to non-consumer audiences, such as company customer service representatives on specialized Twitter accounts, and still be visible to other consumers, due to the open nature of many platforms. Consequently, we recognize the need to revise the definition to reflect these and future changes. Thus, to facilitate consistent use of the eWOM construct and progressive knowledge building on this topic, we offer the following revised definition: *eWOM is consumer-generated, consumption-related communication that employs digital tools and is directed primarily to other consumers.*<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> We thank one of our anonymous reviewers for valuable feedback regarding this revised definition.

This proposed definition of eWOM parsimoniously addresses the prevailing confusion about this concept. In addition, it allows us to delineate the key components for theory development: the source (i.e., consumers as senders of eWOM), the message (i.e., consumption-related content), the channel (i.e., digital conversation tools), and the receiver (i.e., primarily other consumers), in line with the source–message–channel–audience model of communication (Berlo 1960). For purposes of theory development, these elements continue to be “the key components [that] still represent a valuable starting point” (Yadav and Pavlou 2014, p. 32). To complete the discussion of the eWOM concept, we next address its theoretical foundations.

### ***Theoretical underpinnings of eWOM***

To date, many researchers have referred to *the* WOM theory to explain eWOM (e.g., Abrantes et al. 2013; Steffes and Burgee 2009). Less clear, however, is what such an overarching theory entails. Typically, three classic, enduring frameworks are evoked as (e)WOM theory: (1) Katz and Lazarsfeld’s (1955) two-step flow theory, according to which information trickles down from mass media to opinion leaders and then to the general public; (2) Dichter’s (1966) theory of involvement and motivations to engage in (e)WOM; and (3) Brown and Reingen’s (1987) theory of strong and homophilous ties among (e)WOM participants. Common among all these early theories is their focus on influential consumers and their role in spreading information.

With the evolution of eWOM, other scholars have departed from this influence model. For example, Kozinets et al. (2010) critique the one-to-one interpersonal WOM theory and propose a revised, many-to-many network model made available by web-based technologies. Von Wangenheim (2005, p. 68) posits that there is “no single or consistent WOM theory that explains why and when [e]WOM is given [but rather that there are several] ... theories.” Relatedly, in their summary of early eWOM research, Cheung and Thadani (2012) distinguish

between 13 theoretical approaches to eWOM; however, some of these approaches represent literature streams rather than particular theories (e.g., impression formation literature, trust literature, negativity bias). In line with these authors, we acknowledge a *multiplicity of theories* in extant eWOM scholarship. Over time, a range of economics, communication, information systems, psychological, and sociological theories have been invoked to explain the eWOM process. In particular, the number of psychological theories may seem overwhelming and lead us to conclude that the majority of knowledge on eWOM pertains to individual-level, underlying psychological processes; however, we find that as many as 767 studies (73% of our sample) use field data (including surveys, quasi-experiments, and real-market data) to investigate eWOM and 239 of them (23%) use lab data.<sup>2</sup> Thus, a large part of extant eWOM research has drawn from real-life phenomena (for an overview of key theories and methodologies used per stage of the eWOM process, see Web Appendix 5). In the remainder of this article, we develop an organizing framework in which we describe how eWOM informs *consumer* decision making and how *marketers* can use it to support and influence consumer decision making.

### **Organizing framework: The eWOM process**

Our central research focus is on identifying the enduring principles of eWOM (i.e., organize insights from extant research and trends related to eWOM) and highlighting outstanding debates and research avenues. Our organizing framework builds on the established MOA framework.

#### ***Consumer MOA***

To organize extant eWOM research, we draw on the MOA framework and its underlying theory, which implies that the degree to which people process information is based on three factors: motivation, opportunity, and ability (MacInnis et al. 1991). Early work understood *motivation* as

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<sup>2</sup> Some studies use both field and lab data. The sum is not 100% because the remaining studies use a purely conceptual, meta-analytic, or simulated analytical approach.

“goal-directed arousal [or] ... the desire or readiness to process ... information” (MacInnis et al. 1991, p. 34); *opportunity* as “the extent to which distractions or limited exposure time affect consumers’ attention to ... information” (MacInnis et al. 1991, p. 34); and *ability* as “the extent to which consumers have the necessary resources (e.g., knowledge, intelligence, money) to make an outcome happen” (Peters et al. 2013, p. 286). In the eWOM domain, research has used the MOA framework to explore how eWOM senders *participate* in discussion forums or in social media (e.g., Ashley and Tuten 2015; Lee et al. 2008), as well as how eWOM receivers *process* eWOM (e.g., Park et al. 2007; Tang et al. 2014). We extend these efforts and use MOA as a theoretical lens to synthesize extant literature from both consumers’ (i.e., eWOM senders and receivers) *and* marketers’ perspectives. In doing so, we map the research findings and gaps in this domain onto the three stages in the eWOM process: creation, exposure, and evaluation.

### ***Three-stage eWOM process***

As illustrated in Fig. 1, we conceptualize a three-stage process of eWOM that captures distinct consumer needs and behaviors, and we parallel marketers’ needs and actions with respect to this phenomenon. This process is inspired by new conceptualizations of the consumer journey (e.g., Hamilton and Price 2019; Lemon and Verhoef 2016). For example, a common path is for consumers first to be exposed to eWOM before purchase and then to create eWOM after purchase; however, technological affordances now allow different paths. Thus, we propose that this process is *non-linear*, as consumers may create eWOM in the form of pre-purchase buzz but never proceed to the eWOM exposure or evaluation stages for the same product category, and *recursive* (i.e., repeating on an individual level), in which consumers may re-experience the first stage (eWOM creation) as part of the decision process for another product. Throughout this process, consumers shift roles from (potential) eWOM receivers to (potential) eWOM senders,



and vice versa. Moreover, they may skip stages, compress them, or extend them. This reality, however, does not negate the usefulness of conceptualizing the eWOM process as consisting of different stages that have a distinct nature and different goals and influences. For simplicity, we begin with a description of the eWOM process from the creation stage, as this stage is necessary for the subsequent stages of exposure and evaluation. Tables 2–4 summarize the key insights for the three stages.

--- Insert Figure 1 and Tables 2–4 about here ---

### ***Stage 1: eWOM creation***

eWOM creation includes consumer contributions of original content—either in a short-term fashion through one-time product reviews or through long-term engagement such as prolonged participation in online communities—and sharing other consumers’ or companies’ content such as re-tweeting (Gong et al. 2017). In turn, the marketer can support this creation by encouraging eWOM participation and designing benefits for the consumer (eWOM sender).

**eWOM creation from a consumer perspective.** In the past two decades, scholars have devoted significant attention to understanding consumers’ *motivations* to create eWOM. The primary motivations identified in the literature are altruism toward other consumers or the company (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004); social value from community interaction (Kozinets 1999; Peters et al. 2013); hedonic benefits, such as personal enjoyment and gratification (Kozinets 2016; McGraw et al. 2015; Motyka et al. 2018); impression management and identity formation (Belk 2013; Berger 2014; Moe and Schweidel 2012); balance restoration, venting, and retribution (Anderson and Simester 2014; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004); and economic incentives (Ahrens et al. 2013; Godes and Mayzlin 2009). Researchers have also identified product characteristics that may prompt eWOM creation; for example, hyper-differentiated and niche

products (e.g., craft beer [Clemons et al. 2006], limited-edition sneakers [Berger 2014]) may attract eWOM senders because impression management encourages consumers to talk about high-status, distinctive products and experiences. Overall, these motivations differently influence consumers' propensity to create eWOM and their specific eWOM content (e.g., negative opinions to signal expertise; Schlosser 2005). However, over time, eWOM senders' motivations have changed owing to technological and social developments.

Three classic works illustrate these changes and the debate on the primary motivation to create eWOM: Kozinets (1999), Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004), and Berger (2014). In the early 1980s, consumers gathered in online communities of consumption in the form of email lists, Usenet newsgroups, bulletin board systems, and chat rooms (Okleshen and Grossbart 1998). Kozinets (1999, p. 254) highlights the prevalence of eWOM in these communities by defining them as “affiliative groups whose online interactions are based upon shared enthusiasm for, and knowledge of, a specific consumption activity or related group of activities.” Online communities, which attract consumers because of their mix of “social” and “topical” (i.e., product-related) benefits, are the cradle of eWOM. In the early 2000s, eWOM creation expanded with the introduction of dedicated online opinion platforms. Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) developed a motivation-based segmentation of eWOM creators on these platforms that distinguishes among (1) self-interested helpers driven by economic incentives, (2) consumer advocates who act out of concern for other consumers, (3) altruists who want to help other consumers and companies, and (4) multiple-motive consumers. A decade later, Berger (2014) challenged the rationale that consumers can hold truly altruistic motives to create eWOM and posited that they engage in this behavior primarily out of self-interest (e.g., impression management, status). Berger's (2014) assessment is in line with academic discourse that

identifies an evolution of online communication and consumer culture brought about by changes in the platforms and devices that consumers use to connect. Thus, while consumers' motivations are still multiple, as they are shaped by the platforms and communities in which they occur, they may be less social and altruistic than they were in the early days of the Internet.

In addition to motivation, consumers' creation of eWOM depends on their *opportunity* to access the Internet (e.g., device, connectivity; Mariani et al. 2019) and a platform on which to post eWOM. Greatly expanding this opportunity was the introduction of 3G, 4G, and 5G networks; widespread Wi-Fi; lower connectivity costs; and the global adoption of smartphones. As a consequence, eWOM has become more instantaneous (Berger 2014), and consumers can more immediately create eWOM throughout their decision-making journey (Liu et al. 2013). For example, they can check into a store and announce their intent to purchase, they can rate the service provider while enjoying a meal in a restaurant, and they can post a video of unpacking a product. However, consumers' opportunities to create eWOM are often restricted (e.g., connection availability; Gruen et al. 2006). In this direction, research has examined the role of posting costs (e.g., eWOM senders may need to purchase the product or register as a member to post a review; Yadav et al. 2013). Another important technological development extending consumers' opportunity to create eWOM is the proliferation of eWOM formats (Berger 2014): text, ratings, images, videos, "Likes," tags, and audios. Each format differentially affects eWOM effectiveness and its persuasiveness (Schweidel and Moe 2014).

Finally, eWOM creation is shaped by consumers' *ability* to access necessary resources (knowledge, expertise, skill) to create eWOM. To engage in eWOM communication, consumers must be familiar with the product (Lovett et al. 2013). Whereas the ability to create offline WOM may not have varied much among consumers, the increasingly complex technological

environment causes considerable differences in consumers' abilities to create eWOM (Gruen et al. 2006). For example, more skill is required to create a video and post it on social media than to click on a star rating (Eisingerich et al. 2015). Despite the clear implications of consumers' abilities to create eWOM, this area remains under-theorized.

**eWOM creation from a marketer perspective.** Marketers have long attempted to stimulate eWOM—more of it, specific kinds of it, specific timing of it, or directed at a specific audience—by leveraging consumer *motivations* to create it through communication, incentives, and community building. Specifically, marketers often use short-term prompts or nudges (e.g., post-purchase Q&A, requests to share top-of-mind brand experiences; Eelen et al. 2017). For example, Amazon.com, eBay, Sephora, and TripAdvisor have all introduced a consumer “questions and answers” feature (Hamilton et al. 2017; Kozinets 2016). By inviting verified purchasers to answer other consumers' questions about a product, these companies are appealing to altruism (Schulze et al. 2014). This information may prevent product returns by reducing uncertainty for other consumers; research has shown that products with more answered questions are indeed less likely to be returned (Minnema et al. 2016). Marketers have leveraged other consumer motivations to create eWOM, such as social value from interaction, by engaging with consumers in firm-owned or third-party communities. In these communities, eWOM creation can be stimulated, for example, through product co-development challenges (Beckers et al. 2018) or user testimonies, such as Harley Owners Group's riding stories. Marketers sometimes resort to subtler approaches centered on self-presentation (Berger 2014). Consider, for example, firm investments in designing picture-perfect settings such as the Paul Smith pink wall in Los Angeles (Bean et al. 2018). These investments leverage consumers' interest in creating eWOM (e.g., the perfect pink wall pictures on Instagram) and are tied to their self-interested impression

management motivations. Extant research in this area indicates that providing social status markers on a platform, such as reviewer badges (e.g., Baek et al. 2012) and helpfulness scores (e.g., Hong et al. 2017), motivates consumers to create eWOM to increase their status, which may even shape the valence of their opinions (e.g., make them less extreme; Schuckert et al. 2015).

In addition to these firm-to-consumer communication efforts to stimulate eWOM, marketers can offer incentives to eWOM senders, which may include economic rewards (Du Plessis et al. 2014). For example, the cosmetics brand Jane Iredale offers loyalty points when registered members post online reviews on the brand's platform. Marketing research documents reasons marketers should (and should not) incentivize eWOM creation. First, offering economic benefits is more effective than offering none or offering only social benefits (Ahrens et al. 2013; Dose et al. 2019). Yet caution is warranted: extrinsic rewards may weaken the relationship between loyal consumers and the brand (Godes and Mayzlin 2009), as well as decrease their referral behavior (Dose et al. 2019). Second, research also documents that monetary rewards motivate passive members (Garnefeld et al. 2012) and those with few social connections (Sun et al. 2017) but demotivate active and well-connected members (for whom normative incentives and status markers may be more effective; Garnefeld et al. 2012). Finally, a caveat regarding extrinsic rewards lies in the resulting valence of eWOM and a long-term change in senders' attitudes—incentives may increase negative eWOM (Poch and Martin 2015) and bias senders' attitudes toward the product (Kim et al. 2016).

The marketer's role in eWOM creation has been further complicated by regulatory changes. Incentivizing eWOM may have gone undisclosed for a long time—making the incentives a purer individual benefit driver—but today eWOM senders are often legally

obligated to disclose any benefits (see, e.g., Federal Trade Commission's [2017] "Endorsement Guidelines"). Through such disclosures, eWOM senders' benefits become visible to others and may acquire social status (e.g., "She has a professional connection to Louis Vuitton"), thereby creating positive externalities, such as increased credibility and subsequent eWOM, that may affect future consumers' attitudes and purchasing behaviors (Carr and Hayes 2014). By contrast, such disclosures may discredit eWOM senders in the eyes of their audiences (e.g., "She is selling out to Louis Vuitton"; Ashley and Leonard 2009; Kozinets et al. 2010) and lower eWOM receivers' product quality expectations (Du Plessis et al. 2014).

In addition to triggering consumers' motivation to create eWOM, marketers at times get involved in eWOM creation by *demotivating* consumers from eWOM creation (e.g., by inviting negative feedback to be sent directly to the firm, instead of being shared publicly). Some firms are actively trying to combat this marketer practice; for example, Amazon.com provides guidelines that help regulate buyer-seller messaging (i.e., discourage sellers from diverting buyers' dissatisfaction from public to private channels or from requesting that the consumer alter an unfavorable review following webcare interventions). While such guidelines prohibit deceptive eWOM conduct, some marketer efforts to encourage eWOM creation remain unethical and, at times, unlawful. Scholars have assessed the impact of incentivizing fake positive reviews (Mayzlin et al. 2014) and "injecting" competitors with negative eWOM (Lappas et al. 2016). Broadly, marketers' manipulations decrease eWOM usefulness and value (Mayzlin et al. 2014).

Marketers' involvement with eWOM creation actually begins by securing the necessary *opportunities* for consumers' contributions, such as designing a web page on which consumers can leave textual reviews. eWOM creation is further shaped by technological and platform affordances, which marketers can control. On some platforms, consumers have the opportunity

to access a platform (e.g., no barriers to enter; Gruner et al. 2014), reach and form ties with others (e.g., Stephen and Lehmann 2016), and create eWOM (e.g., posting a review following a verified purchase on Expedia.com vs. posting unrestrictedly on TripAdvisor.com; Mayzlin et al. 2014). At times, platforms try to minimize the manipulation of eWOM creation to ensure high-quality information (e.g., GameSpot allows only one review per consumer per game; Zhu and Zhang 2010). Another important factor is consumers' opportunities to self-present via status markers (e.g., VIP badge; Hanson et al. 2019), and this may support eWOM creation.

Marketers can also benefit from building online communities. Schau et al. (2009) describe community practices that marketers can support to increase value co-creation. Many of these practices directly relate to eWOM; consider milestoneing, for example, which is the practice of noting landmark events in brand ownership and consumption, such as Saab drivers relaying tales of their cars' odometers hitting 100,000 miles (Schau et al. 2009, p. 44). Marketers can also support community members in their evolution from mere lurkers to active contributors, thus increasing the pool of members who create eWOM (De Valck et al. 2009; Kozinets 1999).

Marketers can further shape eWOM creation by prescribing the eWOM format, such as the length of text (e.g., 140–280 characters on Twitter, six-second videos on Vine; Schweidel and Moe 2014), and other features, such as the color and size of online rating scales (Jiang and Guo 2015) or the “Like” button, which allows users to show support for specific online content (e.g., comments, images). Research indicates that these opportunities influence eWOM creation and that consumers respond differently to the varying elements of communication. For example, in their study on online product reviews, Chen and Godes (2012) show that consumers report higher eWOM creation intentions when rating on a 5- versus a 100-point scale, presumably because of “rating certainty” (i.e., the extent to which an online context allows consumers to rate

in a way that accurately captures their underlying utility). Smith et al. (2012) demonstrate that the volume, valence, and content of eWOM—even for the same brand—can all differ across platforms because of consumers’ varying opportunities for expression (e.g., brands are more central in eWOM on Twitter than on YouTube or Facebook). Furthermore, the mere number of opportunities to create eWOM may change (i.e., bias) the eWOM sender’s attitude (Kim et al. 2016). Many marketers have experimented with these elements to influence eWOM creation (e.g., Facebook’s multiple changes to its ratings format since 2011).

Finally, in addition to leveraging motivations and opportunities, marketers can support eWOM creation by increasing consumers’ *abilities*—skills, proficiencies, and competencies to engage in eWOM exchange with other consumers (Gruen et al. 2006)—thereby helping them mitigate the risks associated with using certain platforms (Eisingerich et al. 2015). Without the necessary cognitive resources, even a motivated consumer will not create eWOM (Gruen et al. 2006). Marketers may assist consumers with the complex aspects of eWOM creation; for example, Sephora provides detailed guidelines for rating and reviewing products to educate consumers on how to compose and submit eWOM.

### **Research gaps for eWOM creation.**

The first goal of this article was to provide a multidisciplinary overview of extant knowledge on eWOM. To complement knowledge development efforts in this area, we provide a research agenda for each stage in the eWOM process, which we hope will stimulate future research. Here, we first discuss the research gaps identified for eWOM creation.

*1. Settle debates on incentivizing eWOM creation.* As discussed previously, debate is ongoing about the benefits and optimal structure of eWOM incentive programs. This debate raises questions such as *whom* to incentivize (loyal consumers vs. others), *how* to incentivize



them (with economic or non-economic benefits), and whether and how to *disclose* the incentive to others. In addition, how do incentives and rewards affect *eWOM senders* (e.g., motivation to post, brand perceptions, consumer engagement, loyalty) and *the nature of eWOM* (positive or negative)? A promising avenue for future research lies in the overlap of eWOM and consumer loyalty program design, as marketers increasingly offer loyalty points to spark eWOM creation. Recently, Breugelmans et al. (2015) called for research on the cost and reward structure of loyalty programs because it is unclear how redemption of loyalty points affects consumers and firms. We argue that, in light of incentivization-related debates in the eWOM literature, the question of redemption would be especially relevant when consumers receive points to create eWOM. For example, Jane Iredale rewards consumers with 20 points for each written online review. It is plausible that loyalty point redemption may negatively affect consumer engagement, brand attitudes, and firm profitability.

2. *Explore eWOM senders' abilities.* Prior research shows that differential levels of consumer ability influence eWOM (Gruen et al. 2006). However, it is not clear specifically how eWOM senders' ability influences eWOM creation and how that, in turn, shapes the subsequent stages of the eWOM process (i.e., on eWOM receivers' side). For example, Internet proficiency and past experience with eWOM may help shape consumers' eWOM contributions (in terms of information formats, metrics, and so on). On the marketer side, how effective are practices to structure eWOM, as well as to educate and guide consumers through eWOM creation? How does this affect eWOM content and eWOM valence? For example, if consumer abilities are high and perceived level of difficulty to create eWOM is low, will eWOM be more balanced as a result? If perceived as difficult, will consumers engage in more extreme eWOM? In which case is eWOM more persuasive?

3. *Explore eWOM and privacy issues for unsought products.* What are the consequences of the identified trends in eWOM creation? If consumers indeed hold more self-oriented motivations, will they ever be interested in sending eWOM about products that have less identity-signaling value or that threaten identity preservation? Will there be an unbalanced representation of the types of products referenced by eWOM? Extant research has not yet captured the contexts of unsought products. For example, an Amazon.com product page for a #1 best-selling hemorrhoid cream shows merely 183 reviews (despite more than 10 million annual cases in the United States, according to the Mayo Clinic<sup>3</sup>). By contrast, best-sellers in other Health & Personal Care categories receive significantly more eWOM (e.g., more than 3,400 reviews for top brands of allergy medicine). Consequently, it is important to explore how to motivate consumers to create eWOM for unsought products and increase public self-consciousness (Townsend et al. 2019).

4. *Explore the helpfulness of altruistic eWOM creation.* Because the market for eWOM has professionalized with the rise of pay-per-post arrangements, influencer marketing, and other marketer-driven tactics geared toward boosting the creation of eWOM, the weight of altruistic eWOM has declined in favor of incentivized eWOM providing individual-oriented benefits, such as recognitions through badges. At the same time, research on the effectiveness of altruistic eWOM creation encouraged by the marketer is lacking. For example, how helpful is eWOM that results from a firm's invitation to participate in Q&A about a purchased product? Anecdotal evidence suggests that altruistic eWOM creation is not always helpful or useful, as consumers sometimes reply to a question by stating "I do not know about this feature."

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<sup>3</sup> Mayo Clinic. (2016, May 13). Retrieved May 20, 2019, from <https://www.mayoclinic.org/medical-professionals/digestive-diseases/news/hemorrhoidal-disease-diagnosis-and-management/mac-20430067#targetText=Diagnosis,so%20they%20suffer%20in%20silence>.

*5. Investigate the types of online communities in which eWOM creation is most valuable for both consumers and marketers.* Generating and maintaining engagement in online communities is critical for marketers to enhance relationships and gain customer loyalty (Hanson et al. 2019; Kozinets 1999). Marketers can invest in a firm-owned brand community or collaborate with third-party or consumer-initiated communities. However, online communities vary in ownership and governance structure (Sibai et al. 2015), platform characteristics and affordances (Dholakia et al. 2004), community culture (Kozinets et al. 2010), and purpose (e.g., fan vs. activist communities; Kozinets and Handelman 2004). Although much is known about consumer participation in online communities and its effect on consumer decision making (e.g., Adjei et al. 2010; Relling et al. 2016; Wiertz and De Ruyter 2007), little is known about how eWOM creation differs (e.g., in volume) across these different types of communities. A better understanding of how community governance, affordances, and culture influence eWOM creation will help marketers make strategically informed decisions about which communities to target. For example, when is it appropriate to support a brand public versus a brand community? How should marketers deal with negative eWOM in consumer activist communities?

### ***Stage 2: eWOM exposure***

After eWOM is created (by eWOM senders), other consumers (eWOM receivers) take note of it. This awareness may be the result of either an active search or consumers' accidental exposure, and it may be supported by marketer actions. In this stage, marketers may try to facilitate this exposure by maintaining online platforms on which eWOM receivers can access eWOM, as well as through online tactics such as search engine optimization. Further understanding of "best practices in capturing exposures across platforms" is important, to enable a holistic view of the consumer (Marketing Science Institute 2018).

**eWOM exposure from a consumer perspective.** What do we know about consumers' MOAs with regard to eWOM? In a recent survey, 63% of respondents reported that reading reviews before buying an unfamiliar product or selecting a new service provider is highly important (Worldpay 2017). In general, consumers' motivations to seek eWOM are shaped by individual traits (e.g., need for cognition [Gupta and Harris 2010], perceived expertise, market mavenism [Adjei et al. 2010]) and goals throughout their decision-making journey. One important goal is to reduce pre-purchase uncertainty and the perception of risk (Moe and Trusov 2011). Products with attributes that are difficult to observe, predict, verify, or control are associated with higher levels of risk (Lee and Bell 2013), which in turn may motivate consumers to seek eWOM. For example, consumers may search for eWOM when they perceive high functional risk (e.g., new products whose performance is unknown; Ho-Dac et al. 2013), high financial risk (e.g., long-term investments; Grewal et al. 2004), and/or high social risk (e.g., publicly consumed products; You et al. 2015). Finally, consumers seek eWOM after purchase to reduce cognitive dissonance (Bailey 2005) or to problem-solve (Mathwick et al. 2008).

Whereas these motivations for seeking eWOM are primarily utility-driven, recent research has also identified consumers search for eWOM as a leisure activity (Goldsmith and Horowitz 2006). This trend may be related to the proliferation of humorous eWOM (McGraw et al. 2015) and the prevalence of online influencers. Online influencers exert a greater-than-average social influence through eWOM (Kozinets et al. 2010; Kupfer et al. 2018), due to their large audience, authority, and/or trustworthiness (Algesheimer et al. 2005). Consumers are motivated to follow influencers—and are exposed to their eWOM—because they find their posts entertaining, interesting, and inspirational (Gong and Li 2017). The decision of an influencer to recommend a brand—and, thus, the probability of consumers to be exposed to eWOM—is a

function of the influencer's social network (e.g., size) and recipient type (e.g., platform member vs. non-member). Notably, long-term influencers recommend brands less frequently than new influencers, but their recommendations have higher conversion rates (e.g., receivers are more likely to act on their recommendation to visit a website; Chatterjee 2011).

Consumers gain exposure to eWOM not only from their active search behavior related to purchasing but also from accidental exposure to eWOM (Hildebrand and Schlager 2019). This happens when consumers spend time on social media, watch online videos, or surf the Internet (Chen and Berger 2016). In effect, every time consumers create eWOM, they are exposing their first-circle connections to it (Lipsman et al. 2012). Given the penetration of certain platforms (e.g., 26% of the world's population uses Facebook; Internet World Stats 2017), such accidental exposure to eWOM is significant (Moran et al. 2014). We also argue that such exposure has increased over time from FOMO (fear of missing out), as this makes consumers exceptionally attentive to messages from those in their social circle (Beyens et al. 2016).

Consumers' *opportunity* to be exposed to eWOM is determined by contextual factors, such as Internet penetration, available time, platform characteristics, and network-related factors. For example, when consumers participate in online communities of consumption, they are more likely to be exposed to eWOM because they linger at reservoirs of consumer knowledge (De Valck et al. 2009). In addition, prior research has shown that eWOM exchange is shaped by specific periods including holidays (Bruce et al. 2012) and days of the week because of Internet searching patterns (e.g., increased search on the weekend; Rutz and Bucklin 2011).

Furthermore, eWOM receivers may incur platform and/or eWOM access costs, such that they must overcome certain entry barriers or complete steps (e.g., registration) before they can gain access to eWOM (Gruen et al. 2006). By contrast, some platforms expose visitors to eWOM

immediately on arrival (Schau et al. 2009). Considering access costs, we distinguish between restricted and open-access platforms (Gruner et al. 2014). A recent study finds that open-access and more “loosely knit” sharing environments, such as Twitter, are particularly effective for viral dissemination and may significantly increase exposure to eWOM (Hayes et al. 2016). Other platform affordances also allow consumers to access more eWOM than ever before: for example, a Google search for a restaurant returns average ratings from different sites (e.g., Facebook, Foursquare, OpenTable), thereby exposing consumers to unsolicited eWOM. This may be more common for products with high signaling value (e.g., high-end restaurants), as these types of products are typically featured on people’s social accounts (Moran et al. 2014).

Building on the strength-of-weak-ties theory (Granovetter 1973), prior research also demonstrates that larger consumer networks (Peters et al. 2013), higher in-degree centrality of the consumer in those networks (Lu et al. 2013), and boundary-spanner positions with high betweenness centrality (Schulze et al. 2014) all increase the probability of exposure to eWOM. In addition, research on eWOM contagion and diffusion finds that more consumers get exposed to eWOM as a function of (1) the depth of influence (e.g., the number of social connections that an eWOM message jumped [Kumar et al. 2013], the proportion of the population reached by the message [Langley et al. 2014]), (2) the velocity or speed of contagion (Kumar et al. 2013), and (3) the uniformity of direction (i.e., the existence of a dominant opinion shared among eWOM senders; Langley et al. 2014).

Finally, we posit that consumers’ exposure to eWOM is shaped by their *abilities*, which are driven by the particular consumption context and individual characteristics, such as age, literacy, language and Internet proficiency, and also the capabilities to join eWOM platforms and navigate different eWOM formats (e.g., online reviews, social media posts). Prior research finds

that higher Internet proficiency lowers online search costs and subsequently increases consumers' likelihood of using eWOM to expand product knowledge (Zhu and Zhang 2010).

**eWOM exposure from a marketer perspective.** In this section, we explore what is known about marketers' role in consumers' exposure to eWOM. For example, what can Amazon.com do to effectively facilitate consumers' active search for or accidental exposure to eWOM? Primarily, the traditional marketing-mix elements such as product design and advertising (e.g., more complex, risky, and controversially advertised products) can *motivate* consumers to search for additional product information (Schmidt and Spreng 1996). In addition, marketers can more directly invite consumers to complement their internal knowledge and reduce uncertainty through eWOM (e.g., to follow a brand on Twitter [Rui et al. 2013], to check other shoppers' opinions [Aldo 2017]).

Marketers can also increase consumers' *opportunities* to be exposed to eWOM. For example, they can make eWOM more visible and more searchable. eWOM that is indexed and displayed by search engines and social media platforms holds large potential for worldwide exposure (Moran et al. 2014). Marketers may also feature eWOM in their owned media, such as in store (e.g., Hansen and Sia 2015), in promotional materials and newsletters, as well as through search engine advertising (e.g., star ratings displayed in Google ads). Similarly, when searching for brands or companies on Facebook, consumers can see average ratings and recommendations; they may also see when network members are seeking recommendations (e.g., on Facebook), effectively stumbling upon incidental eWOM. This accidental exposure to eWOM may happen more on social media and online community platforms, which are inherently designed to support social interaction rather than retailer services.

In addition, marketers may help consumers' search for eWOM by building a sorting feature (e.g., by date) in the platform and by allowing customized eWOM search (e.g., checking a box to ensure similar skin type via Beauty Matches on Sephora.com). Some platforms also offer partial, on-demand displays of eWOM, such that users can search for specific content or sort eWOM by, for example, favorability (Ghose et al. 2014), recency (e.g., "sort by newest" on Travelocity.com), their own preferences (e.g., eye color on Sephora.com), or eWOM sender characteristics (e.g., family status on HolidayCheck.com; Brandes et al. 2011). Finally, to expose consumers to eWOM, marketers can reduce the signal-to-noise ratio on their platforms, that is, minimize the distracting "information [within eWOM] with little or no relevance to specific products and brands" (Tirunillai and Tellis 2012, p. 199).

As part of the strategy in this stage of the eWOM process, however, marketers may also want to restrict exposure to eWOM for strategic and brand preservation reasons. This primarily occurs through controlled displays of eWOM in owned media. Prior research documents many examples of this practice; on some platforms, eWOM is displayed only after a minimum volume threshold has been reached (e.g., four ratings per restaurant [Lu et al. 2013], 10 reviews per eWOM sender [Clemons et al. 2006]). In addition, marketers can control the exposure to eWOM by determining the amount of eWOM displayed per page (e.g., five reviews per page on Travelocity, 10 per page on TripAdvisor; Ghose et al. 2012). Overall, platform design may limit consumers' opportunities to be exposed to eWOM and may even result in eWOM bias (e.g., because some consumers only seek eWOM on the first page of a site; Ghose et al. 2012).

Finally, to expose consumers to eWOM, marketers can influence their *ability*. To this end, they can lower consumers' platform access costs and eWOM search costs and educate them on searching through large amounts of eWOM (e.g., how to use the hashtag to retrieve tweets on



a topic or to sort reviews on a retailer platform). Consider the case of Amazon.com in 2003, when consumers needed to invest significant search efforts to find eWOM on a product page (Babić Rosario et al. 2016); today, eWOM is immediately visible. Ultimately, today's consumers do not need to be particularly skilled to find eWOM on most platforms.

### **Research gaps for eWOM exposure.**

In the eWOM literature, researchers have mainly considered how consumers search for eWOM. The following initial insights regarding eWOM exposure still need further exploration.

*1. Investigate maximizing versus satisficing eWOM search behaviors.* Prior studies confirm that eWOM is a risk-reducing mechanism (Lovett et al. 2013). However, what specific behaviors do consumers engage in to mitigate risk? For example, what are the effects of searching for eWOM on one versus multiple platforms, maximizing versus satisficing eWOM search behavior, or soliciting versus not soliciting eWOM to reduce risk? It is possible that consumers faced with many alternatives may engage in satisficing eWOM searches (You et al. 2015). While maximizing and satisficing strategies in online information seeking are widely available in the information systems literature, eWOM scholars have not yet investigated the so-called cognitive economy (Warwick et al. 2009). Relatedly, in light of emerging technologies, consumers are using augmented reality (e.g., viewing a couch in own room using a smartphone camera) and other sampling opportunities (e.g., “look inside” a book on Amazon.com). So, what will be the role of eWOM relative to this new risk reduction?

*2. Investigate curated and altered eWOM.* As discussed previously, extant research indicates that marketers' actions shape consumers' opportunities to be exposed to eWOM (e.g., by controlling its display online; Brandes et al. 2011). Scholarly attention in this area has focused on digital environments, even though the modern consumer engages in an omni-channel journey.

Elements of digital communication are seeping into people's analog lives, as marketers are including eWOM in their offline settings (Hansen and Sia 2015). Examples include the cardboard Instaframe cutouts used at social events and Amazon.com's recent opening of "4-star" stores, stocking four-star-and-above-rated products from various categories and featuring electronic price tags that show average star ratings updated several times a day (Goldberg 2018).

Consumer behavior across offline and online environments has been the subject of several recent investigations. For example, Pauwels et al. (2011) show that consumers exposed to offline marketing further browse online for convenience, and vice versa. Kushwaha and Shankar (2013) demonstrate that consumers who shop for hedonic products across the two environments spend more money than those who use just one channel. De Haan et al. (2018) show that consumers who switch between channels (e.g., from a smartphone to a desktop computer) exhibit a higher conversion rate. Lacking in extant research, however, is knowledge about the effectiveness of cross-channel or omni-channel marketers' curated displays of eWOM. Specifically, academic attention has largely neglected marketers' use of eWOM for promotional purposes in owned media, such as quoting consumers' online reviews in official newsletters, in-store product description labels, and mass promotion. This marketer practice is prevalent and interesting because it contains elements of—while remaining conceptually distinct from—testimonials and eWOM. On the one hand, it is possible that these hybrid forms of market-relevant information will replace both advertising and eWOM. On the other hand, eWOM senders' original intentions and disassociation from commercial interest (Dichter 1966) may be questioned, potentially reducing the credibility of the message (see Thompson and Malaviya 2013) and activating consumers' persuasion knowledge. Further research could address the

question: How does the embeddedness of eWOM in marketing messages alter its meaning and effectiveness?

3. *Investigate optimal platform design in high-social-risk contexts.* Perceived social risk tends to be higher for hedonic and high-status products because of their symbolic value for social groups (Miller et al. 1993). This necessitates reliance on reference groups and implies higher susceptibility to peer-generated information such as eWOM (Childers and Rao 1992). Thus, marketers need to ensure that eWOM is available when and where consumers need it. However, marketer actions may not be intuitive in this particular consumption context, as eWOM may signal messages incongruent with the brand. For example, a high volume of online reviews signals wide adoption of the product (Babić Rosario et al. 2016), which is counterintuitive to luxury marketing in which scarcity and unavailability are considered dominant appeals. While several studies have explored the role of eWOM for luxury hotels (e.g., Dinçer and Alrawadieh 2017), restaurants (Hoffman and Daugherty 2013), and fashion (e.g., Kim and Ko 2012), research in this area has been scant overall. Consequently, it is pertinent to explore ways to reduce uncertainty with eWOM while preserving the brand in contexts with high social risk.

4. *Distinguish eWOM as a proxy from eWOM as a market influence.* Future research should better distinguish between eWOM metrics that are visible to consumers (e.g., average rating) and econometrically derived metrics researchers and practitioners use to approximate underlying issues in the market (e.g., variance, “incremental” rating). More insight is necessary into the way consumers respond to eWOM that they have *actually read, seen, or heard* versus eWOM that was *merely present* on a platform but never seen (Cadario 2015). Thus, we call for research to employ eye-tracking methodology to advance understanding of consumers’ processing of eWOM.

### ***Stage 3: eWOM evaluation***

Consumers (eWOM receivers) evaluate eWOM to inform their decisions. Marketers manage eWOM to ensure its relevance for consumers and perform webcare to preserve brand image.

**eWOM evaluation from a consumer perspective.** *Motivation* in this stage refers to consumer readiness, interest, desire, or willingness to process eWOM (Tang et al. 2014). Prior research suggests several motivational drivers among the characteristics of (1) eWOM receivers, (2) senders, (3) message characteristics, and (4) other contextual characteristics.

Primarily, the motivation to process information is shaped by eWOM receivers' psychological characteristics, such as their susceptibility to interpersonal influence (Naylor et al. 2012), innate desire to think about information (i.e., need for cognition; Gupta and Harris 2010), and psychological need for uniqueness (Wang et al. 2012). For example, consumers scoring high on need for uniqueness tend to resist majority influence, which makes them less susceptible to certain eWOM signals such as the high volume of messages (Wang et al. 2012). Early studies on eWOM evaluation also highlight gender as an important factor, with men finding eWOM to be of higher quality than women (Awad and Ragowsky 2008). Cultural characteristics such as uncertainty avoidance, individualism, and power distance also help explain which consumers value peer information for reducing consumption risk (Kübler et al. 2018).

Furthermore, prior research notes a strong relationship between involvement and eWOM processing: as involvement increases, consumers are more motivated to comprehend salient information (Lee et al. 2008). Otherwise, as involvement to process eWOM decreases, consumers want to reduce pre-purchase evaluation efforts (King et al. 2014) and tend to use other people's opinions as a decision heuristic (Risselada et al. 2018). For example, consumers are presumably more involved when they are members of an online community of consumption

and when they actively search for eWOM (vs. being exposed to it accidentally); here, their motivation to evaluate eWOM is generally already high, and they are likely to engage in more effortful information processing (Lu et al. 2013). However, when involvement is low, consumers rely on peripheral cues such as sender credibility, expertise, trustworthiness, and personal similarity (Lee et al. 2008). In general, eWOM from credible senders is more valuable and more influential (Mayzlin 2006). Similarly, a credible eWOM message—one that is similar to the eWOM receiver's own product evaluation (Zhao et al. 2013), complete and detailed (Jiménez and Mendoza 2013), objective (Kusumasondjaja et al. 2012), or rated as helpful (Ghose and Ipeirotis 2011)—exerts more influence on consumer behavior (Jiménez and Mendoza 2013).

Research highlights other message characteristics that affect consumers' motivation to evaluate eWOM. Overall, consumers prefer simple eWOM information to complicated content (Dillard et al. 2007) and more neutral to valenced eWOM (Tang et al. 2014). Yet an important finding in the literature is that not all neutral messages are created equal. Neutral eWOM, which contains mixed information (with both positive and negative valence), can stimulate consumers' curiosity to evaluate additional eWOM (Tang et al. 2014). However, when neutral eWOM lacks both positive and negative assessments, consumers' motivation to further evaluate eWOM decreases, as they consider indifferent messages less interesting (Tang et al. 2014).

With regard to consumers' *opportunities* to evaluate eWOM, research is in disagreement. Gruen et al. (2006) find that eWOM receivers' opportunity does not influence their perceived value of eWOM (while *motivation* and *ability* do). However, subsequent studies demonstrate that consumers may evaluate eWOM differently depending on the opportunity provided, in terms of devices, format, length, or order of presentation. For example, receivers may absorb emotion that is expressed in textual eWOM (e.g., anger; Fox et al. 2018) and perceive longer eWOM

messages as more accurate and informative (Risselada et al. 2018); at the same time, they may perceive longer eWOM messages as more complex and requiring additional cognitive resources (Ghose and Ipeirotis 2011).

Consumers' abilities to evaluate eWOM refer to their cognitive resources, skills, or "proficiency in interpreting information given prior knowledge" (Peters et al. 2013, p. 286). If consumers' abilities to evaluate eWOM are inadequate, the resulting processing of information will be superficial and/or partial (Mafael et al. 2016), leading to impoverished persuasion and attenuated bottom-line effects (Kuo and Nakhata 2019; Tang et al. 2014). Research also finds that as eWOM proliferates, consumers filter information on the basis of certain characteristics, as they are not able to evaluate all of it at once (De Langhe et al. 2016; Risselada et al. 2018). For example, sorting reviews by helpfulness may simplify consumers' evaluation. By contrast, consumers may adopt a more advanced cognitive elaboration of eWOM (Kozinets 2016; Simonson 2016); in particular, experienced eWOM receivers have learned to integrate disparate product claims and to infer unstated product attributes (Tang et al. 2014). Similarly, consumers often adopt a systematic processing strategy when eWOM is complex (e.g., it contains both positive and negative information; Tang et al. 2014).

**eWOM evaluation from a marketer perspective.** How can marketers leverage consumers' MOA to evaluate eWOM? Furthermore, how can they evaluate and moderate eWOM on their end to ensure the preservation of their brand image? Scholars have been debating whether marketers can truly influence consumers' *motivations* and *abilities* to evaluate eWOM. Research in this area is limited, but some studies show that providing monetary compensation to increase eWOM receivers' involvement results in differing eWOM evaluations and increased usage of central cues, such that the message is more heavily elaborated by the

consumers (Ahrens et al. 2013). Risselada et al. (2018) find that structured eWOM (e.g., highlighting pros and cons of a product or displaying a bulleted list) is easier to comprehend and ultimately evaluated as more helpful than unstructured eWOM. On some platforms, marketers use color to guide consumers and increase their ability to spot outdated content (e.g., older eWOM is brighter; Brandes et al. 2011).

Importantly, by shaping the technological affordances of the platforms, marketers provide consumers with *opportunities* to evaluate eWOM. For example, they may include information known to affect credibility assessments (e.g., status markers such as “top reviewer” badges, social cues such as helpfulness votes; Baek et al. 2012), determine the format of eWOM, and make managerial responses observable or not (Wang and Chaudhry 2018); these activities can substantively influence consumer perceptions and purchase intentions (Babić Rosario et al. 2016). In their study on online reviews, Xu et al. (2015) demonstrate that text, image, and video formats differ in perceived credibility and persuasiveness, ultimately resulting in differential intentions to purchase the product. Other marketer-afforded opportunities to evaluate eWOM include supporting eWOM creation by adding a spelling checker and specifying the length of a review (i.e., the maximum number of words); in supplying these features, marketers do not affect actual eWOM content but influence how consumers process the information.

In addition to leveraging consumers’ MOA to shape their eWOM evaluation, marketers need to evaluate eWOM for themselves. We identify three key guidelines on the basis of extant research. First, marketers should track eWOM across different platforms because their inherent characteristics have implications for the nature and scope of the eWOM exchange. Research has shown that “listening in” on just one (type of) platform may lead to erroneous estimations of the scope and consequences of eWOM because platforms “are different and can show varied

patterns of [e]WOM” (Lovett et al. 2013, p. 442). However, “little attention has been given to [platform] differences, [which] is particularly troubling” (Schweidel and Moe 2014, p. 388). Second, when listening in, marketers should understand and use advanced methodological approaches developed to collect eWOM and information about its senders and receivers. One of the most acclaimed methods in this area is netnography (Kozinets 2002). In addition, it is important to account for the dynamic and endogenous nature<sup>4</sup> of eWOM. In comparing methodologies, several recent studies (e.g., Babić Rosario et al. 2016) have found that relying on simpler regression techniques instead of statistically more robust methods may lead to serious overestimations of eWOM effectiveness. Marketers should also be sensitive to the time necessary for eWOM to yield measurable marketplace effects. For example, Tirunillai and Tellis (2012) observe that eWOM might take from a few days to weeks to be fully reflected in business performance. Other methodologies, adapted for eWOM processing and analysis, include natural language processing, sentiment analysis, stylometric analysis, and advanced text classification (e.g., Lee and Bradlow 2011). Third, following their own evaluation of eWOM, marketers can (and should) engage in webcare (e.g., by directly responding to eWOM senders). Recent research suggests that such communication should be personalized (Schamari and Schaefer 2015), moderately frequent (Homburg et al. 2015), and observable to subsequent eWOM senders (Wang and Chaudhry 2018).

### **Research gaps for eWOM evaluation.**

We see much room for additional research on eWOM evaluation. There is a strong need to examine the robustness of consumer MOA in an increasingly complex digital environment.

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<sup>4</sup> The endogenous nature of eWOM signifies that eWOM is not only a driver of firm performance (e.g., sales measures), but it could also be its outcome (e.g., high-selling products attract more eWOM) (Chintagunta et al. 2010).



*1. Explore the role of devices used to evaluate eWOM.* A fruitful area for further research is the role of the device consumers use to access the platform and evaluate eWOM, such as desktop computers, touch-based devices (e.g., smartphones), or touchless devices (e.g., wearables, Microsoft Kinect) (Yadav and Pavlou 2014). We know that consumers tend to self-identify with mobile devices (Liu et al. 2013), and these devices can act as influential agents that deliver eWOM and meet consumers' expectations of staying connected, informed, and entertained (De Haan et al. 2018). These factors may, consequently, influence the way consumers evaluate eWOM. Academic research finds that certain devices differently affect the other two stages of the eWOM process (i.e., eWOM creation and exposure) (Mariani et al. 2019; Melumad et al. 2019; Xu et al. 2015). Some managerial studies find that consumers prefer to research products on personal computers over smartphones (Shannon-Missal 2013), suggesting that devices may differentially affect eWOM evaluation as well. However, to the best of our knowledge, marketing scholars have not fully explored this notion (notable exceptions include recent studies by Grewal and Stephen [2019] and März et al. [2017]).

*2. Explore the consequences of facilitated eWOM creation on eWOM evaluation.* As discussed previously, marketers aim to facilitate consumer engagement by making eWOM more searchable. For example, they create hashtags to allow consumers to more easily locate mentions of products. Such social tagging systems have become prevalent; "images are tagged and shared on Pinterest and Facebook, videos are tagged on YouTube, and Tweets are tagged (using hashtags) on Twitter" (Nam and Kannan 2014, p. 21). Yet, while hashtags can increase eWOM exposure, it is unknown how they affect evaluation and downstream consequences. Because eWOM senders can (ab)use hashtags, eWOM receivers plausibly find multiple perspectives but not a guaranteed, true sense of community (Arvidsson and Caliandro 2016). Consider the failure

of McDonald's #McDStories Twitter campaign, which resulted in an online firestorm (Pfeffer et al. 2014). While prior research offers a marketer perspective on the value of tagging systems (Nam and Kannan 2014), little is known about how consumers evaluate such eWOM and how it influences their engagement and choice.

*3. Explore the role of other eWOM formats (e.g., visual).* It is time to consider formats other than text and numerical ratings, as well as new, rapidly growing visual platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, Pinterest, and Snapchat. We echo recent calls for additional research on visual eWOM (e.g., King et al. 2014) and urge marketing researchers to develop robust methodologies for in-depth analysis of visual content and for parsing the manifested from latent content. While visual analysis of eWOM may be cumbersome, due to high context dependence and the vast amount of information to be analyzed, it may yield high rewards. Farace et al. (2017) recently described sharing visual content as a global phenomenon, and consumers and marketing practitioners are increasingly expressing interest in this format. For example, Xu et al. (2015) find that consumers perceive visual information as more credible, helpful, and persuasive than textual eWOM. However, methodological tools and issues, as well as broader implications of non-textual eWOM on the marketplace and consumer culture, have not yet been discussed.

*4. Explore the impact of heuristic eWOM evaluation.* As noted previously, consumers often rely on peripheral eWOM cues, such as review helpfulness votes (Ghose and Ipeirotis 2011). Knowledge has accumulated in the past decade on consumers' motivations (e.g., low involvement) for heuristic eWOM evaluation and reliance on others' judgment; however, little is known about its consequences. Limited research in this area shows that such online heuristics can reinforce consumer biases, ultimately hindering their decision making (Risselada et al. 2018). Future research could explore whether consumers are more satisfied with their product

choice when they rely on more helpful reviews. Do consumers believe they are making better, less risky decisions in such cases? In turn, does such reliance on eWOM helpfulness votes lead to greater product satisfaction and fewer product returns?

## **Conclusion**

In the past two decades, eWOM has remained a stable point of interest and inquiry. Perhaps because of its unwaning popularity as a research topic fueled by continuous evolution of the phenomenon due to technological, social, and cultural developments, academic literature became fragmented in light of eWOM definitions and conceptual labels. Moreover, the multi-faceted nature of eWOM complicates the integration of findings, which affects future research. This article discusses these complexities through a “conceptual–empirical blend” (MacInnis 2011) that provides (1) an updated view of eWOM, (2) key research findings organized in a three-stage eWOM process, and (3) a research agenda made timely by the many expansions of eWOM in the fast-evolving digital environment. We organized prior work into a framework structured around consumer MOAs that we investigate along a three-stage non-linear eWOM process. For each stage, we describe key findings, identify relevant research gaps, and provide a roadmap for marketers to support consumers’ MOA to (1) create, (2) be exposed to, and (3) evaluate eWOM.

In addressing the research gaps outlined herein, scholars should consider both the evolution of the eWOM phenomenon and eWOM research per se. *Technological* developments will continue to affect all three stages of the eWOM process, and eWOM formats will continue to change. For example, TechHive (2019) predicts that Bose’s augmented reality audio sunglasses will present eWOM in audial form, possibly affecting eWOM creation, exposure, and evaluation. Artificial intelligence is already influencing the exposure and evaluation of eWOM, making it more automated and data-driven.

In addition to technological developments, from an *economic* perspective, eWOM is taking a central part in platform economics, from the news industry in which eWOM facilitates interactions between readers and journalists and guides further news consumption, to the sharing economy (e.g., HomeExchange) in which eWOM is at the heart of the business model (Dellaert 2019). In contexts in which eWOM has become big business, marketers are increasingly incentivized to influence, manage, and alter consumption-related communication among consumers. Thus, we wonder how much space there will be for organic eWOM. Will it change the heuristics that consumers use to seek out and evaluate eWOM? Will it lead them to view eWOM as persuasion attempts? In short, which new MOAs will emerge?

Finally, researchers should consider the impact of *regulations* on the eWOM phenomenon. Recent regulatory trends in business practices (e.g., the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation 2016/679<sup>5</sup>) mandate a revision of marketers' approaches to collecting and analyzing eWOM. This trend is also visible in research (e.g., INFORMS journals' data provenance and web-scraping restriction; Simchi-Levi 2019), thus affecting academic practice. Specifically, the ethics of tracking consumers' digital footprints represent a disruption to the collection and research of eWOM. In addition, consumers can now own and trade their own data in the data-driven economy (e.g., HAT—Hub of All Things; Ng and Wakenshaw 2017). Going forward, marketing scholars may be challenged for scraping the web for eWOM because of these privacy and ethics issues. The question of who owns online consumer data is quickly becoming a relevant one. In conclusion, eWOM is a dynamic phenomenon offering a rich well of research opportunities that is not likely to dry up soon.

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<sup>5</sup> Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council of the EU. Retrieved from <https://publications.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/3e485e15-11bd-11e6-ba9a-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>.

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**Table 1** What eWOM is and is not: Definition of eWOM and related phenomena

Original Conceptual Label	Definition	Consumption	Consumer		Digital	Is eWOM?
			Sender	Receiver		
eWOM	1. <i>“eWOM communication [is] any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet [and which] can take place in many ways (e.g., Web-based opinion platforms, discussion forums, boycott Web sites, news groups)” (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004, p. 39).</i>	X	X	X	X	Yes
	2. eWOM referral is an invitation to others to join the social network using easy-to-use tools such as “import your address book” (Trusov et al. 2009).				X	
	3. eWOM is “positive or negative information about [a] product ... obtain[ed] from fellow consumers (Forman et al. 2008, p. 291).	X	X	X		Yes
	4. “eWOM can be defined as all informal communications directed at consumers through Internet-based technology related to the usage or characteristics of particular goods and services, or their sellers” (Litvin et al. 2008, p. 461).	X	X	X	X	Yes
	5. “eWOM involves consumers’ comments about products and services posted on the Internet; for example, ... the rating on a 10-point scale of a hotel and textual comments on the service and location” (Bronner and De Hoog 2011, p. 15).	X	X		X	Yes
	6. “Online WOM includes referrals through online message boards, blogs, and online communities” (Choi et al. 2012, p. 758).		X		X	
Reviews	1. “[O]nline reviews, now often called simply “word of mouse” ... are available for ... virtually every imaginable [product] category. While some of them are prepared by expert reviewers ..., increasingly reviews are prepared and posted by individuals who have been profoundly delighted, or truly appalled, by an individual product or service experience” (Clemons et al. 2006, p. 151).	X	X		X	Yes
	2. “Online consumer reviews (OCRs), which are the electronic version of word of mouth, ... are enabling consumers to share their experiences, opinions, and feedback regarding products, services, or brands ... for other consumers” (Filieri 2015, p. 1261).	X	X	X	X	Yes
	3. “Online customer reviews can be defined as peer-generated product evaluations posted on company or third-party websites” (Mudambi and Schuff 2010, p. 186).	X	X	X	X	Yes
UGC	1. UGC refers to “the conjunction of blogs and social networking sites” (Dhar and Chang 2009, p. 300).				X	
	2. UGC “refers to media content created or produced by the general public rather than by paid professionals and primarily distributed on the Internet” (Daugherty et al. 2008, p. 16).		X		X	
Consumer-generated ads	1. Consumer-generated ads are “any publicly disseminated, consumer-generated advertising messages whose subject is a collectively recognized brand” (Berthon et al. 2008, p. 8).	X	X			
	2. “Consumer-generated advertising is ... defined to include any user-generated brand-related content, in the form of online brand testimonials, product reviews, and user-generated commercials” (Salwen and Sacks 2008, p. 199).	X	X		X	Yes
Other	1. Buzz “involves informal communication among consumers about products and services” (Liu 2006, p. 74).	X	X	X		
	2. Social voice is “online ... brand mentions and conversations ... among consumers” (Keller and Fay 2012, p. 462).		X	X	X	
	3. Consumer-to-consumer know-how exchange is “the interactions among individuals that serve as an information source that enhances competency and knowledge” (Gruen et al. 2006, p. 451).		X	X		
	4. Travel blogs are “individual entries which relate to planned, current or past travel [and are] commonly written by tourists to report back to friends and families about activities and experiences during trips” (Pühringer and Taylor 2008, p. 179).	X	X	X	X	Yes
	5. Virtual communities of consumption are “affiliative groups whose online interactions are based upon shared enthusiasm for, and knowledge of, a specific consumption activity or related group of activities” (Kozinets 1999, p. 254).	X		X	X	Yes
<b>Revised definition</b>	<b>eWOM is consumer-generated, consumption-related communication that employs digital tools and is directed primarily to other consumers.</b>	X	X	X	X	Yes

Note: Hennig-Thurau et al.’s (2004) definition (in italics) is the one most commonly used in extant eWOM research. The revised definition of eWOM proposed in this article is in bold.



**Table 2** Stage 1: eWOM creation

		Why and how do consumers create eWOM?	How can marketers facilitate eWOM creation? (Examples from practice)
Key Research Insights	Motivation	Altruism, e.g., helping others (Dubois et al. 2016; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004)	Amazon.com, Bed Bath & Beyond and Sephora appeal to altruism by inviting verified purchasers via email to answer other consumers' product questions (e.g., "A customer just posted the following question about [product] that you bought. Would you be able to help out with an answer? Thank you so much in advance for sharing your firsthand knowledge ... and helping a fellow customer!").
		Social value from community interaction (Kozinets 1999; Peters et al. 2013)	Develop and maintain brand communities for listening, product co-development, and problem-solving.
		Hedonic benefits, e.g., enjoyment and gratification (McGraw et al. 2015; Motyka et al. 2018)	Consumers engage in humorous complaining (e.g., amusing Amazon.com reviews for Sugarless Haribo Gummy Bears titled "Gastrointestinal Armageddon" or reviews on the existential hangover produced by a cable's speedy music data transfer, Kozinets 2016).
		Impression management and identity formation (Belk 2013; Berger 2014; Hollenbeck and Kaikati 2012)	Sephora's Speak Your Truth messaging encourages eWOM creation; the Paul Smith pink wall in Los Angeles allows idealized content creation; Arby's instantaneous reaction to Pharrell Williams's hat (which resembles Arby's logo) at the 2014 Grammy Awards exemplifies real-time marketing initiatives to engage in conversation; status markers (badges, helpfulness scores) invite participation.
		Balance restoration, venting, retribution (Anderson and Simester 2014; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004)	The electronics brand Anker delivers a two-sided leaflet with its product: if "Happy", consumers are encouraged to create a positive review; if "Not Happy," consumers are referred to customer service (and demotivated from creating negative eWOM). However, Amazon.com sellers are discouraged from diverting buyers' dissatisfaction from public to private channels or requesting that the consumer alters an unfavorable review following webcare interventions.
		Monetary and non-monetary incentives, e.g., rewards (Ahrens et al. 2013; Godes and Mayzlin 2009)	85% of the "top 1,000" reviewers on Amazon.com are incentivized, such as with free books from publishers (Pinch and Kesler 2011). Jane Iredale offers registered members loyalty points for reviews on the brand's website. Be mindful of disclosure policies (Federal Trade Commission 2017).
	Opportunity	Access to device, Internet, eWOM platform (Berger 2014; Mariani et al. 2019)	Provide free Wi-Fi (e.g., Disneyland offers multiple wireless hotspots throughout their parks). Encourage consumers to elaborate on eWOM when creating on mobile devices (Mariani et al. 2019) and design device-specific response strategies to negative eWOM.
		eWOM posting costs, e.g., time, connection availability (Gruen et al. 2006; Yadav et al. 2013)	Define posting costs (e.g., purchase required on Expedia.com but not on TripAdvisor.com); reduce hurdles for creating eWOM (e.g., White House Black Market uses email information from recent purchase orders to generate an online username, so the consumer can create eWOM immediately and easily); balance censorship (negative impact of few reviews/low volume) with immediate access to eWOM creation and avoid eWOM manipulation (GameSpot allows only one review per consumer).
		eWOM format, e.g., text, rating, image, rating scale, "Like" (Berger 2014; Jiang and Guo 2015; Riedl et al. 2013)	Recognize restrictions of 140-280 characters on Twitter; six-second videos on Vine; Like button, etc. Facebook changed the feature of its reviews and ratings from 5- to 10-point scale and most recently replaced it with a recommendation request feature (binary yes/no + qualitative feedback) in an attempt to counter fake eWOM, provide more context of poor firm performance, and encourage consumers to interact with local businesses.
	Ability	Knowledge and expertise, e.g., product familiarity (Lovett et al. 2013)	Stimulate eWOM through marketing communication aimed at increasing brand awareness and familiarity. As complex products receive less eWOM than they do offline WOM, marketers could offer detailed product descriptions that reduce complexity (Lovett et al. 2013).
		Skills (Eisingerich et al. 2015; Gruen et al. 2006)	Offer guidelines on how to create useful and valuable eWOM to improve skill to review a product and the usability of eWOM (e.g., Sephora).
Key Research Gaps		Settle debates on incentivizing eWOM creation	<i>Whom</i> to incentivize (loyal consumers vs. others); <i>how</i> to incentivize them (with economic or non-economic benefits); <i>whether to disclose</i> the incentive to others. A promising avenue for future research lies in the overlap of eWOM and consumer loyalty program design, as marketers increasingly offer loyalty points to increase eWOM creation.
		Explore eWOM senders' abilities	How effective are marketers' practices to structure eWOM, as well as educate and guide consumers in the eWOM process? How does this affect the creation of eWOM content and eWOM valence? In which case is eWOM more persuasive for the receiver?
		Explore eWOM and privacy issues for unsought products	If consumers hold more self-oriented motivations, will they be interested in sending eWOM about products that have less identity signaling value or threaten identity preservation? Will there be an unbalanced representation of the types of products referenced in eWOM?
		Explore the helpfulness of altruistic eWOM creation	How effective is altruistic eWOM and should marketers encourage it? For example, how helpful is eWOM that results from a firm's invitation to participate in Q&A about a purchased product?
		Investigate most valuable types of online communities	Better understanding of how community governance, affordances, and culture influence eWOM creation will help marketers more strategically target communities. For example, when is it more appropriate for marketers to support a brand public versus a brand community?

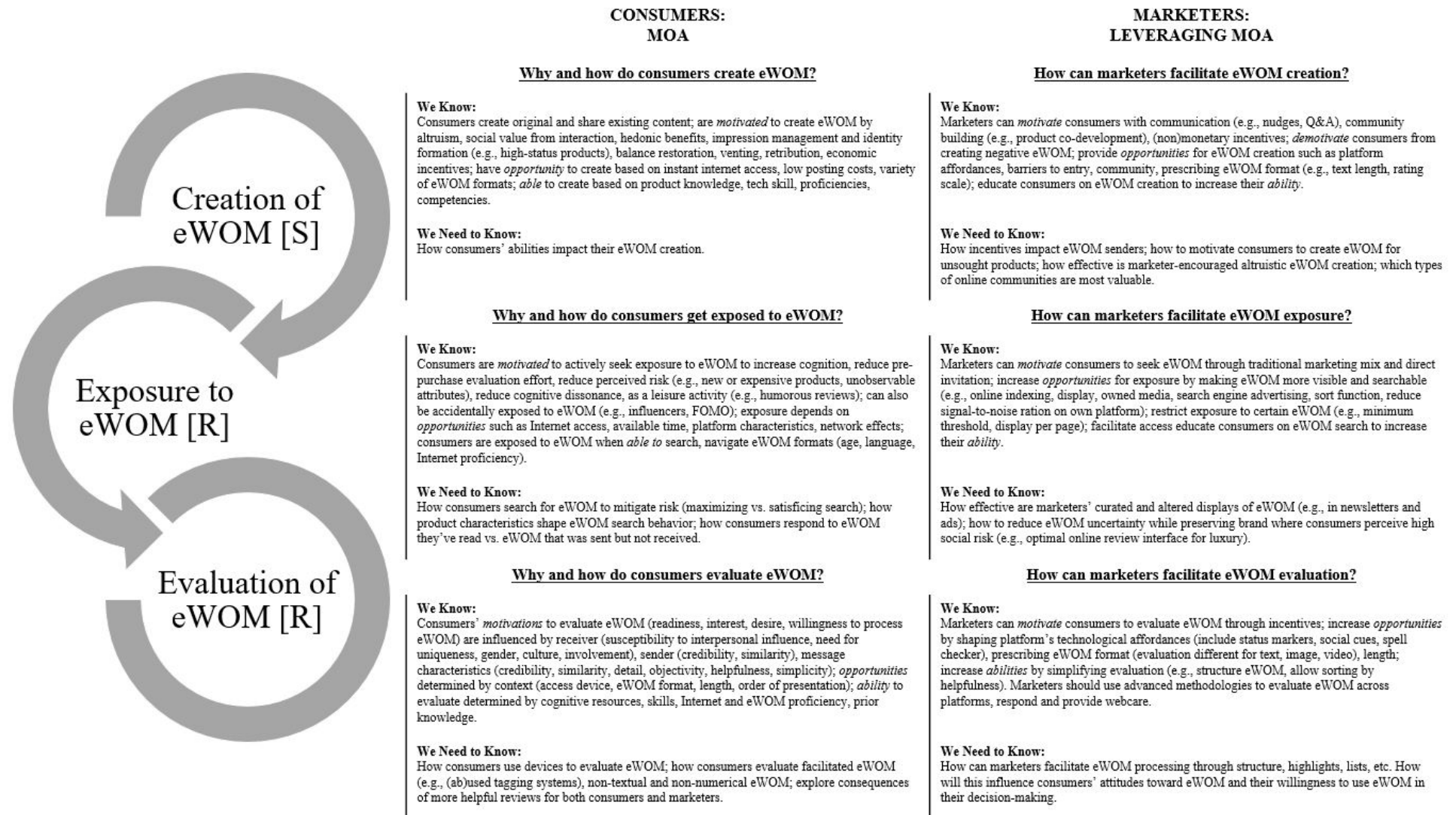
**Table 3 Stage 2: eWOM exposure**

	<b>Why and how do consumers search for and get exposed to eWOM?</b>	<b>How can marketers facilitate eWOM exposure? (Examples from practice)</b>
<b>Key Research Insights</b>	<i>Motivation</i>	Individual traits, e.g., high need for cognition (Gupta and Harris 2010), perceived expertise, market mavenism (Adjei et al. 2010)
		Invite consumers to check other shoppers' opinions (e.g., the shoe retailer Aldo [2017] recently stated in its newsletter: "Don't just take our word for it, see what shoppers are saying about these summer styles").
		Reduction of uncertainty and perceived risk (Fong and Burton 2008; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004; Moe and Trusov 2011).
		Some platforms, such as StumbleUpon and Mix, attract consumers by showing them "interesting content selected by friends and like-minded people" (Mix.com 2019). Marketers should be aware that eWOM seeking may be culturally determined (e.g., higher in China than U.S.; Fong and Burton 2008).
		Reduction of cognitive dissonance in the post-purchase stage (Bailey 2005), problem solve (Mathwick et al. 2008)
		Dell has pioneered with offering discussion forums on their website that give customers access to peer support in addition to employee-staffed helpdesks and after-sales services.
	<i>Opportunity</i>	Leisure (Goldsmith and Horowitz 2006; McGraw et al. 2015)
		Marketers may work with influencers who combine a large audience, authority, and trustworthiness in the product category with an entertaining, interesting, and inspirational posting style.
		Accidental exposure (Beyens et al. 2016; Chen and Berger 2016; Goldsmith and Horowitz 2006)
		Marketers may feature eWOM in their promotional materials, from newsletters to search engine advertising (e.g., star ratings displayed in Google ads). On social media platforms, consumers may see when others in their network are seeking recommendations (e.g., on Facebook).
		Visibility (Anderson and Magruder 2012; Clemons et al. 2006; Hansen and Sia 2015; Lu et al. 2013)
<b>Key Research Gaps</b>	<i>Ability</i>	Open platform vs. restricted; sort feature (e.g., by date, similarity–family status, consumption goals as done by Sephora, Travelocity, HolidayCheck); eWOM display (show only after a threshold has been reached, e.g., 4 ratings per restaurant or 10 reviews per eWOM sender); amount of eWOM displayed per page (e.g., 5 reviews per page on Travelocity, 10 per page on TripAdvisor, Ghose et al. 2012); censorship, rounding off numerical ratings to the nearest half-star (e.g., on Yelp, an average rating of 3.24 displays a 3-star average). For example, in Hummel (sportswear brand) stores, customers can upload pictures of themselves or of products via the Instagram hashtag #hummelsport which is then displayed on a live screen in store and on Hummel's global website. This way, visual eWOM is showcased instantaneously across digital channels (Hansen and Sia 2015).
		Network characteristics (strength-of-weak-ties theory [Granovetter 1973], Dubois et al. 2016; network size, Peters et al. 2013, Stephen and Lehmann 2016; network centrality, Lu et al. 2013, Schulze et al. 2014)
		By enhancing eWOM visibility, specifically of eWOM created by friends in the eWOM receiver's network, marketers can leverage network characteristics and increase contagion (e.g., "interesting content selected by friends and like-minded people," Mix.com 2019).
	<i>Motivation</i>	Contagion characteristics, e.g., depth of influence, velocity, uniformity of direction/dominant opinion (Kumar et al. 2013; Langley et al. 2014)
		Exploit the spreadability of marketer-generated communication efforts (e.g., buzz / guerilla marketing, hashtag hijacking). Oreo's Dunking in the Dark tweet during the 2013 Superbowl power outage set a new standard for real-time marketing that leverages intense moments where consumers use relevant fodder to keep a conversation going. The Oreo tweet was retweeted 15,000 times and reached thousands of consumers.
		Individual characteristics, e.g., age, literacy, language and Internet proficiency, ability to join a social network and navigate eWOM formats (Zhu and Zhang 2010)
		Educate consumers on searching through large amounts of eWOM (e.g., how to use the hashtag to retrieve tweets on a certain topic or how to sort online reviews on a retailer platform).
<b>Key Research Gaps</b>	<i>Motivation</i>	Investigate maximizing vs. satisficing eWOM search behaviors
		What behaviors do consumers engage in to search for eWOM to reduce risk? What choices do they make in terms of searching eWOM on one versus multiple platforms? What is the role of eWOM in light of new risk-reducing options other than eWOM?
		Investigate curated and altered eWOM
		What is the effectiveness of cross-channel or omni-channel marketers' curated displays of eWOM?
<b>Key Research Gaps</b>	<i>Motivation</i>	Investigate optimal platform design in social-risk contexts
		How to reduce uncertainty with eWOM for luxury products in which high eWOM volume may signal accessibility and eWOM content may deteriorate brand image?
<b>Key Research Gaps</b>	<i>Motivation</i>	Distinguish eWOM as a proxy vs. as a market influence
		More insight is necessary into how consumers respond to eWOM that they have actually read, seen, or heard versus eWOM that was merely present on a platform but never seen.

**Table 4** Stage 3: eWOM evaluation

		Why and how do consumers evaluate eWOM?	How can marketers facilitate eWOM evaluation? (Examples from practice)
Key Research Insights	Motivation	Individual traits, e.g., high need for cognition (Gupta and Harris 2010), susceptibility to interpersonal influence (Naylor et al. 2012), need for uniqueness (Wang et al. 2012)	Facilitate or hinder majority influence, depending on consumers' susceptibility to influence. To facilitate it, consider reducing evaluation efforts and use others' opinions (e.g., review helpfulness score) as a decision heuristic.
		Cultural characteristics, e.g., uncertainty avoidance, individualism, power distance (Kübler et al. 2018), holistic vs. analytical thinking style (Park and Jeon 2018)	Because consumers are more sensitive to certain eWOM metrics (e.g., rating valence in countries with higher individualism and uncertainty avoidance; eWOM volume in countries with higher power distance), marketers should develop culturally specific eWOM listening and webcare tactics.
		Involvement, e.g., low involvement increases consumers' reliance on peripheral cues (sender credibility and similarity, expertise, trustworthiness, helpfulness; King et al. 2014; Lee et al. 2008; Risselada et al. 2018)	Recognize differences in consumers' involvement to evaluate eWOM, e.g., eWOM processing is biased depending on receivers' attitude towards that brand (Mafael et al. 2016). Allow credibility assessment, e.g., by including drop-down menus for geographic, demographic, or other bases for similarity evaluations to the eWOM receiver (e.g., Beauty Match on Sephora.com, Families vs. Couples travelers on TripAdvisor.com, Verified Purchaser on Target.com). For more involved consumers, allow a search feature (e.g., 'search review' on TripAdvisor.com).
		Message characteristics, e.g., credibility, completeness, simplicity, objectivity (Dillard et al. 2007; Tang et al. 2014)	Allow eWOM assessment by reporting details, e.g. date it was created; cater to consumers' differential information processing preferences, e.g. by offering simple, summarized eWOM (e.g., highlighted pros and cons, average rating) as well as expanded eWOM (e.g., in freestyle, textual format). For example, Target offers a multidimensional summary of eWOM that includes consumer images, average rating, number of ratings, % of consumers recommending the product and number of recommendations, date of review, and a series of category-relevant ratings (e.g., age appeal and length of play for Monopoly). Because eWOM receivers may experience emotional contagion (e.g., becoming angry after reading an angry textual review; Fox et al. 2018), marketers should consider public webcare versus redirecting the communication to private channels.
Key Research Gaps	Opportunity	Devices, eWOM platform characteristics (Grewal and Stephen 2019; März et al. 2017; Melumad et al. 2019; Okazaki 2009; Xu et al. 2015; Wang and Chaudhry 2018)	Recognize consumers' preference to research products on personal computers over smartphones (Shannon-Missal 2013) and their differential effect on eWOM evaluations (e.g., consumers find eWOM created on mobile devices more effortful; Grewal and Stephen 2019). Marketers should recognize and manage platform characteristics such as the observability of their responses to eWOM (e.g., observable on TripAdvisor.com vs. not on Expedia.com) as these can buffer negative eWOM and influence subsequent eWOM (Wang and Chaudhry 2018).
		Format, length, order of eWOM, spell-checker (Ghose and Ipeirotis 2011; Park and Jeon 2018; Risselada et al. 2018)	Sorting features and structured display of eWOM simplifies eWOM evaluation, so marketers could provide structured eWOM to facilitate information processing, such as highlighting pros and cons (e.g., Amazon.com), providing bulleted lists (e.g., BestBuy.com), or helping consumers easily find more (vs. less) recent eWOM (e.g., Target.com). Also, consumers who consider eWOM metrics (e.g., review valence or variance) in isolation are prone to making incorrect inferences (Langan et al. 2017; Pavlou and Dimoka 2006), so marketers should display multiple metrics. Marketers should facilitate the identification of fake eWOM.
	Ability	Cognitive capacity, e.g., confusion, information overload, fake eWOM (Anderson and Simester 2014; Gursoy 2019; Kuo and Nakhata 2019; Mafael et al. 2016; Risselada et al. 2018)	
		Explore the role of devices used to evaluate eWOM	Does the device (e.g., mobile vs. personal computer) influence consumers' processing of eWOM? Do they pay attention to different eWOM elements or aspects (e.g., rating vs. review, like vs. post) on different devices?
		Explore the consequences of facilitated eWOM creation on eWOM evaluation	How do consumers evaluate eWOM through hashtags? How does hashtagged eWOM affect their engagement and choice?
Key Research Gaps		Explore the role of other eWOM formats (e.g., visual)	How do consumers evaluate visual eWOM versus other eWOM formats? What is the effect of manifest visual content (e.g., central picture of product) versus latent content (e.g., showing a product in the background of a YouTube video)?
		Explore the impact of heuristic eWOM evaluation	Do helpfulness scores of eWOM help consumers make better decisions? Are they more satisfied with their purchases decisions when evaluating more helpful (vs. less helpful) eWOM?

**Fig. 1** Organizing framework



Notes: [S] denotes eWOM sender; [R] denotes eWOM receiver.

## Web Appendix 1

### Publication outlets represented in this systematic review on eWOM

<b>A: Marketing &amp; Consumer Research</b>		<b>B: Economics &amp; Management</b>	
<b>Publication Outlet</b>		<b>Publication Outlet</b>	
Academy of Marketing Studies Journal		Academy of Management Journal	
Advances in Consumer Research		American Economic Review	
Consumer Tribes		California Management Review	
Consumption, Markets and Culture		Corporate Communications: An International Journal	
European Journal of Marketing		European Management Journal	
Industrial Marketing Management		Harvard Business Review	
International Journal of Advertising		Journal of Business Ethics	
International Journal of Marketing Research		Journal of Business Research	
International Journal of Research in Marketing		MIS Quarterly	
International Marketing Review		MIS Quarterly Executive	
Irish Marketing Review		MIT Sloan	
Journal of Advertising		Management Science	
Journal of Advertising Research		Strategic Management Journal	
Journal of Applied Psychology			
Journal of Brand Management		<b>C: IS &amp; Computer Science</b>	
Journal of Consumer Behavior		<b>Publication Outlet</b>	
Journal of Consumer Culture		Computers in Human Behavior	
Journal of Consumer Marketing		Decision Support Systems	
Journal of Consumer Policy		Electronic Commerce Research	
Journal of Consumer Psychology		Electronic Commerce Research and Applications	
Journal of Consumer Research		Electronic Markets	
Journal of Direct, Data, and Digital Marketing Practice		Expert Systems with Applications	
Journal of Interactive Advertising		IEEE Transactions on Knowledge and Data Engineering	
Journal of Interactive Marketing		Information Systems Research	
Journal of Macromarketing		International Journal of Electronic Commerce	
Journal of Marketing		International Journal of Information Management	
Journal of Marketing Communications		Internet Research	
Journal of Marketing Management		Journal of Computer-Mediated Communications	
Journal of Marketing Research		Journal of Management Information Systems	
Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice			
Journal of Product Innovation Management		<b>D: Tourism</b>	
Journal of Product and Brand Management		<b>Publication Outlet</b>	
Journal of Public Policy and Marketing		Annals of Tourism Research	
Journal of Research in Interactive Marketing		Current Issues in Tourism	
Journal of Retailing		International Journal of Culture, Tourism, and Hospitality Res.	
Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services		International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Man.	
Journal of Service Research		International Journal of Hospitality Management	
Journal of Services Marketing		International Journal of Tourism Research	
Journal of Strategic Marketing		Journal of Hospitality Marketing & Management	
Journal of Vacation Marketing		Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Research	
Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science		Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Technology	
Marketing Letters		Journal of Travel Research	
Marketing Science		Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing	
Mercati e Competitività		Tourism Management	
Psychology and Marketing		Tourism Management Perspectives	
Research in Consumer Behavior			
The Marketing Review			

The full list of studies is available in Web Appendix 2.

## Web Appendix 2

### Articles represented in this systematic review on eWOM

Authors	Year	Title	Publication outlet
Laughlin and MacDonald	2010	Identifying market mavens online by their social behaviors in community-generated media	Academy of Marketing Studies Journal
Ballantine and Martin	2005	Forming Parasocial Relationships in Online Communities	Advances in Consumer Research
Chakravarty, Liu, and Mazumdar	2009	Persuasive Influences of Online Word of Mouth and Professional Reviews	Advances in Consumer Research
Chatterjee	2001	Online Reviews: Do Consumers Use Them?	Advances in Consumer Research
Coker	2012	Seeking the Opinions of Others Online: Evidence of Evaluation Overshoot	Advances in Consumer Research
Dambrin and De Valck	2007	Look Who's Talking! Technology-Supported Impression Formation in Virtual Communities	Advances in Consumer Research
Domma, Morschett, Schramm-Klein, and Zentes	2012	The Effect of an Integrated Virtual Community on The Evaluation of an Online Store: Findings from an Internet Experiment	Advances in Consumer Research
Faraji-Rad and Dimitriu	2011	The Impact of Negative Online Reviews: When Does Reviewer Similarity Make a Difference?	Advances in Consumer Research
Granitz and Ward	1996	Virtual Community: A Sociocognitive Analysis	Advances in Consumer Research
Hoffman and Daugherty	2013	Is a Picture Always Worth a Thousand Words? Attention to Structural Elements of eWOM for Consumer Brands within Social Media	Advances in Consumer Research
Kim, Bickart, and Brunel	2011	Too Much Information? How Expertise Disclosures Affect the Persuasiveness of Online Consumer Reviews	Advances in Consumer Research
Kozinets	1997	"I Want to Believe": A Netnography of The X-Files' Subculture of Consumption	Advances in Consumer Research
Kozinets	1998	On Netnography: Initial Reflections on Consumer Research Investigations of Cyberculture	Advances in Consumer Research
Kozinets and Handelman	1998	Ensouling Consumption: A Netnographic Exploration of The Meaning of Boycotting Behavior	Advances in Consumer Research
Li and Hung	2006	Netnographic Study of a Community of Beauty Product Enthusiasts in China: Consumer Reflexivity and Social Concerns	Advances in Consumer Research
Liu, Lurie, and Ransbotham	2013	The Content and Impact of Mobile Versus Desktop Reviews	Advances in Consumer Research
Madupu and Krishnan	2008	The Relationship between Online Brand Community Participation and Consciousness of Kind, Moral Responsibility, and Shared Rituals and Traditions	Advances in Consumer Research
Mochon and Schwartz	2014	The Individual Dynamics of Online Reviews	Advances in Consumer Research
Oberhofer, Füller, and Hofmann	2014	Tryvertising - What Makes Consumers Share Product Innovations with Others?	Advances in Consumer Research
Okleshen and Grossbart	1998	Usenet Groups, Virtual Community and Consumer Behaviors	Advances in Consumer Research
Park and Park	2008	The Multiple Source Effect of Online Consumer Reviews on Brand Evaluations: Test of the Risk Diversification Hypothesis	Advances in Consumer Research
Park, Yoon, and Lee	2009	The Effect of Gender and Product Categories on Consumer Online Information Search	Advances in Consumer Research
Schau and Muniz	2002	Brand Communities and Personal Identities: Negotiations in Cyberspace	Advances in Consumer Research
Schlosser	2005	Source Perceptions and the Persuasiveness of Internet Word-of-Mouth Communication	Advances in Consumer Research
Schneider and Kozinets	2011	Beyond Enemy Lines: Sociality in Consumer Activism	Advances in Consumer Research
Schwob	2010	For a Deeper Understanding of the Sociality that Emanates from Virtual Communities of Consumption	Advances in Consumer Research
Sen	2009	Gendered Differences in the Trust of e-Word-of-Mouth from Virtual Reviewers	Advances in Consumer Research
Sen	2012	Trust of the Virtual eWOM Reviewer and the Role of Gendered Self-Constraint	Advances in Consumer Research
Siddiqui, Turley, and Rifai	2008	Cries from the Goblin Market: Consumer Narratives in the Marketplace	Advances in Consumer Research
Sussan, Gould, and Weisfeld-Spolter	2006	Location, Location, Location: The Relative Roles of Virtual Location, Online Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) and Advertising in the New-Product Adoption Process	Advances in Consumer Research
Thompson and Ward	2008	The Evolution of New Product Rumors in Online Consumer Communities: Social Identity or Social Impact?	Advances in Consumer Research
Willemssen, Neijens, and Bronner	2001	The Effects of Expertise Claims and Expertise Warrants on Attitude towards Online Product Reviews	Advances in Consumer Research
Yin, Bond, and Zhang	2012	Are Bad Reviews Stronger than Good? Asymmetric Negativity Biases in the Formation of Online Consumer Trust	Advances in Consumer Research
De Valck	2007	The war of the eTribes: online conflicts and communal consumption	Consumer Tribes
Pace, Fratocchi, and Cocciola	2007	Internationalization of a craft enterprise through a virtual tribe: 'Le Nuvole' and the pipe-smoker tribe	Consumer Tribes
Bean, Khorramian, and O'Donnell	2018	Kinfolk magazine: Anchoring a taste regime	Consumption, Markets and Culture

Bengtsson, Ostberg, and Kjeldgaard	2005	Prisoners in Paradise: Subcultural Resistance to the Marketization of Tattooing	Consumption, Markets and Culture
Holak	2014	From Brighton beach to blogs: exploring food-related nostalgia in the Russian diaspora	Consumption, Markets and Culture
Hollenbeck and Zinkhan	2010	Anti-brand communities, negotiation of brand meaning, and the learning process: The case of Wal-Mart	Consumption, Markets and Culture
Perfetto and Dholakia	2010	Exploring the cultural contradictions of medical tourism	Consumption, Markets and Culture
Abrantes, Seabra, Lages, and Jayawardhena	2013	Drivers of in-group and out-of-group electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM)	European Journal of Marketing
Ahrens, Coyle, and Strahilevitz	2013	Electronic word of mouth: The effects of incentives on e-referrals by senders and receivers	European Journal of Marketing
Barrot, Becker, and Meyners	2013	Impact of service pricing on referral behaviour	European Journal of Marketing
Campbell, Ferraro, and Sands	2014	Segmenting consumer reactions to social network marketing	European Journal of Marketing
Chen and Huang	2013	An investigation into online reviewers' behavior	European Journal of Marketing
Chiu, Pant, Hsieh, Lee, Hsiao, and Roan	2014	Snowball to avalanche: Understanding the different predictors of the intention to propagate online marketing messages	European Journal of Marketing
Christodoulides, Michaelidou, and Argyriou	2012	Cross-national differences in e-WOM influence	European Journal of Marketing
Colliander and Wien	2013	Trash talk rebuffed: consumers' defense of companies criticized in online communities	European Journal of Marketing
Cova and Pace	2006	Brand community of convenience products: new forms of customer empowerment – the case “my Nutella The Community”	European Journal of Marketing
Farace, Van Laer, De Ruyter, and Wetzels	2017	Assessing the effect of narrative transportation, portrayed action, and photographic style on the likelihood to comment on posted selfies	European Journal of Marketing
Fox, Deitz, Royne, and Fox	2018	The face of contagion: consumer response to service failure depiction in online reviews	European Journal of Marketing
Huang, Cai, Tsang, and Zhou	2011	Making your online voice loud: The critical role of WOM information	European Journal of Marketing
Kerr, Mortimer, Dickinson, and Waller	2012	Buy, boycott or blog: Exploring online consumer power to share, discuss and distribute controversial advertising messages	European Journal of Marketing
Khan and Vong	2014	Virality over YouTube: An empirical analysis	European Journal of Marketing
Koo	2015	The strength of no tie relationship in an online recommendation: Focused on interactional effects of valence, tie strength, and type of service	European Journal of Marketing
Lopez and Sicilia	2013	How WOM marketing contributes to new product adoption: Testing competitive communication strategies	European Journal of Marketing
Marder, Marchant, Archer-Brown, and Colliander	2018	Conspicuous political brand interactions on social network sites	European Journal of Marketing
Moon, Park, and Kim	2014	The impact of text product reviews on sales	European Journal of Marketing
Presi, Saridakis, and Hartmans	2014	User-generated content behaviour of the dissatisfied service customer	European Journal of Marketing
Qiu and Leszczyc	2016	Send-for-review decisions, brand equity, and pricing	European Journal of Marketing
Qu, Wang, Wang, and Zhang	2013	Implications of online social activities for e-tailers' business performance	European Journal of Marketing
Risselada, De Vries, and Verstappen	2018	The impact of social influence on the perceived helpfulness of online consumer reviews	European Journal of Marketing
Rogers, Daunt, Morga, and Beynon	2017	Examining the existence of double jeopardy and negative double jeopardy within Twitter	European Journal of Marketing
Shen and Luan	2018	Influence of aggregated ratings on purchase decisions: an event-related potential study	European Journal of Marketing
Tsang and Prendergast	2009	Is a “star” worth a thousand words? The interplay between product-review texts and rating valences	European Journal of Marketing
Wallace, Buil, and Chernatony	2017	Consumers' self-congruence with a “Liked” brand Cognitive network influence and brand outcomes	European Journal of Marketing
Yang, Kim, Amblee, and Jeong	2010	The heterogeneous effect of WOM on product sales: why the effect of WOM valence is mixed?	European Journal of Marketing
Zhang, Ma, and Cartwright	2013	The Impact of Online User Reviews on Cameras Sales	European Journal of Marketing
Bruhn, Schnebelen, and Schäfer	2013	Antecedents and consequences of the quality of e-customer-to-customer interactions in B2B brand communities	Industrial Marketing Management
Chatterjee	2011	Drivers of new product recommending and referral behaviour on social network sites	International Journal of Advertising
Chu and Kim	2011	Determinants of consumer engagement in electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) in social networking sites	International Journal of Advertising
Chu and Kim	2018	The current state of knowledge on electronic word-of-mouth in advertising research	International Journal of Advertising
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Berezan, Raab, Tanford, and Kim	2015	Evaluating Loyalty Constructs Among Hotel Reward Program Members Using eWOM	Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Research
Kim and Lee	2015	How do consumers process online hotel reviews? The Effects of eWOM consensus and sequence	Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Research
Lee and Cranage	2014	Toward Understanding Consumer Processing of Negative Online Word-Of-Mouth Communication: The Roles of Opinion Consensus and Organizational Response Strategies	Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Research
Leung, Bai, and Stahura	2015	The marketing effectiveness of social media in the hotel industry: a comparison of Facebook and Twitter	Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Research
Mkono	2013	Using net-based ethnography (netnography) to understand the staging and marketing of "authentic african" dining experiences to tourists at Victoria Falls	Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Research
Noone and McGuire	2014	Effects of price and user-generated content on consumers' repurchase evaluations of variably priced services	Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Research
Ye, Li, Wang, and Law	2014	The influence of hotel price on perceived service quality and value in e-tourism: an empirical investigation based on online traveler reviews	Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Research
Memarzadeh, Blum, and Adams	2015	The impact of positive and negative e-comments on business travelers' intention to purchase a hotel room	Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Technology
Pantano and Di Pietro	2013	From e-tourism to f-tourism: emerging issues from negative tourists' online reviews	Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Technology
Dinçer and Alrawadieh	2017	Negative word of mouse in the hotel industry: A content analysis of online reviews on luxury hotels in Jordan	Journal of Hospitality Marketing & Management
Liang, Choi, and Joppe	2018	Understanding repurchase intention of Airbnb consumers: perceived authenticity, electronic word-of-mouth, and price sensitivity	Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing
Cheng and Loi	2014	Handling Negative Online Customer Reviews: The Effects of Elaboration Likelihood Model and Distributive Justice	Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing
Schuckert, Liu, and Law	2015	Hospitality and Tourism Online Reviews: Recent Trends and Future Directions	Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing
Schuckert, Liu, and Law	2015	Stars, Votes, and Badges: How Online Badges Affect Hotel Reviewers	Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing
Abrate and Viglia	2017	Personal or Product Reputation? Optimizing Revenues in the Sharing Economy	Journal of Travel Research
Arsal, Woosnam, Baldwin, and Backman	2010	Residents as Travel Destination Information Providers: An Online Community Perspective	Journal of Travel Research
Ayeh, Au, and Law	2013	"Do We Believe in TripAdvisor?" Examining Credibility Perceptions and Online Travelers' Attitude toward Using User-Generated Content	Journal of Travel Research
Banyai and Glover	2012	Evaluating Research Methods on Travel Blogs	Journal of Travel Research
Bronner and De Hoog	2011	Vacationers and eWOM: Who Posts, and Why, Where, and What?	Journal of Travel Research
Crotts, Mason, and Davis	2009	Measuring Guest Satisfaction and Competitive Position in the Hospitality and Tourism Industry: An Application of Stance-Shift Analysis to Travel Blog Narratives	Journal of Travel Research
Duverger	2013	Curvilinear Effects of User-Generated Content on Hotels' Market Share: A Dynamic Panel-Data Analysis	Journal of Travel Research
Filieri and McLeay	2013	E-WOM and Accommodation: An Analysis of the Factors That Influence Travelers' Adoption of Information from Online Reviews	Journal of Travel Research
Magnini, Crotts, and Zehrer	2011	Understanding Customer Delight: An Application of Travel Blog Analysis	Journal of Travel Research
Pan, MacLaurin, and Crotts	2007	Travel Blogs and the Implications for Destination Marketing	Journal of Travel Research
Sun, Ryan, and Pan	2015	Using Chinese Travel Blogs to Examine Perceived Destination Image: The Case of New Zealand	Journal of Travel Research
Wang and Fesenmaier	2004	Modeling Participation in an Online Travel Community	Journal of Travel Research
Chaves, Gomes, and Pedron	2012	Analysing reviews in the Web 2.0: Small and medium hotels in Portugal	Tourism Management
Filieri, Alguezaui, and McLeay	2015	Why do travelers trust TripAdvisor? Antecedents of trust towards consumer-generated media and its influence on recommendation adoption and word of mouth	Tourism Management
Kim and Stepchenkova	2015	Effect of tourist photographs on attitudes towards destination: Manifest and latent content	Tourism Management
Li, Law, Vu, Rong, and Zhao	2015	Identifying emerging hotel preferences using Emerging Pattern Mining technique	Tourism Management
Litvin, Goldsmith, and Pan	2008	Electronic word-of-mouth in hospitality and tourism management	Tourism Management
Liu and Park	2015	What makes a useful online review? Implication for travel product websites	Tourism Management
Llodra-Riera, Martinez-Ruiz, Jimenez-Zarco, and Izquierdo-Yusta	2015	A multidimensional analysis of the information sources construct and its relevance for destination image formation	Tourism Management
Lui, Bartosiak, Piccoli, and Sadhya	2018	Online review response strategy and its effects on competitive performance	Tourism Management

Luo and Zhong	2015	Using social network analysis to explain communication characteristics of travel-related electronic word-of-mouth on social networking sites	Tourism Management
Mariani, Borghi, and Gretzel	2019	Online reviews: Differences by submission device	Tourism Management
Munar and Jacobsen	2014	Motivations for sharing tourism experiences through social media	Tourism Management
Nieto, Hernández-Maestro, and Muñoz-Gallego	2014	Marketing decisions, customer reviews, and business performance: The use of the Toprural website by Spanish rural lodging establishments	Tourism Management
Papathanassis and Knolle	2011	Exploring the adoption and processing of online holiday reviews: A grounded theory approach	Tourism Management
Phillips, Zigan, Santos Silva, and Schegg	2015	The interactive effects of online reviews on the determinants of Swiss hotel performance: A neural network analysis	Tourism Management
Rong, Vu, Law, and Li	2012	A behavioral analysis of web sharers and browsers in Hong Kong using targeted association rule mining	Tourism Management
Sparks and Browning	2011	The impact of online reviews on hotel booking intentions and perception of trust	Tourism Management
Sparks, Perkins, and Buckley	2013	Online travel reviews as persuasive communication: The effects of content type, source, and certification logos on consumer behavior	Tourism Management
Stepchenkova and Zhan	2013	Visual destination images of Peru: Comparative content analysis of DMO and user-generated photography	Tourism Management
Tseng, Wu, Morrison, Zhang, and Chen	2015	Travel blogs on China as a destination image formation agent: A qualitative analysis using Leximancer	Tourism Management
Vermeulen and Seegers	2009	Tried and tested: The impact of online hotel reviews on consumer consideration	Tourism Management
Yan, Zhou, and Wu	2018	The influences of tourists' emotions on the selection of electronic word of mouth platforms	Tourism Management
Yang, Park, and Hu	2018	Electronic word of mouth and hotel performance: A meta-analysis	Tourism Management
Callarisa, García, Cardiff, and Roshchina	2012	Harnessing social media platforms to measure customer-based hotel brand equity	Tourism Management Perspectives
Jacobsen and Munar	2012	Tourist information search and destination choice in a digital age	Tourism Management Perspectives
Mkono, Markwell, and Wilson	2013	Applying Quan and Wang's structural model of the tourist experience: A Zimbabwean netnography of food tourism	Tourism Management Perspectives
Nguyen and Coudounaris	2015	The mechanism of online review management: A qualitative study	Tourism Management Perspectives
Radojevic, Stanistic, and Stanic	2015	Solo travellers assign higher ratings than families: Examining customer satisfaction by demographic group	Tourism Management Perspectives
Ukpabi and Karjaluoto	2018	What drives travelers' adoption of user-generated content? A literature review	Tourism Management Perspectives

### **Web Appendix 3**

#### **Research evolution and major milestones**

In the late 1990s, before the transition of traditional (i.e., offline) WOM to the Internet became apparent, researchers highlighted the new WOM opportunities provided by online media and thus implied eWOM by noting various platforms and aggregations of consumers in cyberspace—for example, by using the term “virtual community of consumption” (Kozinets 1999, p. 253). Soon after 2000, scholars turned their attention to the motivation behind eWOM, leading to a proliferation of eWOM conceptual labels highlighting the consumer perspective (e.g., UGC, feedback). At that time, eWOM occurred primarily through online discussion platforms, which then gave way to the creation of cohesive consumer communities organized around brands or consumption activities (Kozinets 2002; McAlexander et al. 2002). Connecting with like-minded others online was a new experience that was an attraction in itself, and social benefit was the primary motivator of eWOM creation.

Halfway through the 2000s, a revolution occurred on social media platforms, and discussion forums and chat rooms lost their attraction. The new social networks (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Twitter) afforded connections and communication differently. Whereas consumers typically formed strong social bonds in the early days of online communities, today they predominantly form publics (Arvidsson and Caliandro 2016; Hayes et al. 2016)—that is, looser gatherings of individuals temporarily linked through hashtags to give publicity to a shared interest, such as a brand, person, or cause (e.g., #BeliebersHelpBeliebers, Langley et al. 2014). Berger (2014) qualifies this trend as driven by self-interested impression management.

Over time, eWOM also became increasingly negative, as eWOM environments matured and consumers began using eWOM to signal their expertise (Godes and Silva 2012; Moe and Schweidel 2012). Not surprisingly, a wealth of research has analyzed “sentiment” and “valence.” As rising Internet adoptions gave eWOM more reach, its buying influence substantially

increased by 2005 (Chen et al. 2011a), causing the research focus to shift to the consequences of eWOM on the bottom line. The easier access to review data and the ability to use product rankings as a proxy for online sales made terms such as “rating” and “review” more popular in the eWOM literature.

As the field continued to expand, researchers began combining key terms to develop unique conceptual labels<sup>1</sup> (e.g., “word-of-web recommendations within virtual consumer communities”; Dambrin and De Valck 2007, p. 451) to signal their specific topic of inquiry. In some studies, however, eWOM remained merely alluded to by mention of a specific type of platform that enables consumer-generated entries. Pühringer and Taylor (2008), for example, use “travel blogs” to signify tourists’ eWOM. In acknowledging this practice, McQuarrie et al. (2013, p. 136) define “blogging as one instance of a larger phenomenon that includes online reviews ... and extends to the consumption of [many product categories].”

The existence of various conceptual labels shows an overwhelming interest in the eWOM phenomenon. At the same time, this inconsistent nomenclature (Marchand et al. 2017) causes confusion; for example, the drop of publications on eWOM in the last few years could be due to the usage of different labels (e.g., “social media”) instead of decreasing academic interest. Understanding related conceptual labels also informs meta-analytic work (Palmatier et al. 2006), in which the quest for empirical studies of the same phenomenon requires thoughtful consideration of construct labels. The proliferation of labels thus necessitates a discussion about what eWOM is and what it is not.

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<sup>1</sup> As part of our content analysis, one coder first manually classified eWOM labels in a corpus. We then employed automated textual analysis to capture labels appearing in a publication’s title, abstract, or keywords. We find that most of the 390 identified eWOM labels are used only a handful of times. This means that most eWOM labels are not catching on beyond a small number of academic articles.



## Web Appendix 4

### eWOM conceptual labels: aliases (1996–2019)

No.	eWOM Alias
1	3rd party consensus rating
2	ad eWOM
3	aggregate consumer preference
4	aggregate polarity score
5	aggregated rating
6	amateur feedback
7	amateur rating
8	Amazon Like
9	antibrand community
10	average user grade
11	average user review
12	blog
13	blog buzz
14	blog conversation
15	blog post
16	blog reference
17	blogger buzz
18	blogger sentiment
19	blogging
20	blogosphere
21	brand community
22	brand evaluation
23	brand eWOM
24	brand public
25	brand-embedded interaction
26	brand-related user-generated content
27	buyer-created information
28	buzz
29	buzz in online chatter
30	buzz in social media
31	buzz marketing
32	C2C advocacy
33	C2C communications in online brand community
34	CGM
35	CGM content
36	chatter
37	commercial chatting
38	community content
39	community of consumption
40	computer mediated communication
41	consumer activity in social media
42	consumer attitude
43	consumer buzz
44	consumer comment

No.	eWOM Alias
45	consumer commentary
46	consumer communication
47	consumer conversation
48	consumer evaluation
49	consumer eWOM
50	consumer feedback
51	consumer interaction
52	consumer media
53	consumer narrative
54	consumer online activity around new products
55	consumer online product rating
56	consumer online talk
57	consumer online word of mouth
58	consumer opinion posting
59	consumer post on Facebook
60	consumer posting
61	consumer posts in social media outlets
62	consumer price posting
63	consumer product judgment
64	consumer product narrative
65	consumer product review in the online market
66	consumer rating
67	consumer reaction
68	consumer recommendation
69	consumer response
70	consumer review
71	consumer sentiment
72	consumer social interaction
73	consumer storytelling
74	consumer talk
75	consumer text review
76	consumer voice
77	consumer word of mouth
78	consumer-created communications
79	consumer-created content
80	consumer-created information
81	consumer-driven eWOM
82	consumer-generated anti-brand social networking site
83	consumer-generated brand-related Pinterest page
84	consumer-generated campaign
85	consumer-generated content
86	consumer-generated electronic word-of-mouth
87	consumer-generated information

No.	eWOM Alias
88	consumer-generated media
89	consumer-generated media content
90	consumer-generated message
91	consumer-generated narrative
92	consumer-generated online review
93	consumer-generated platform
94	consumer-generated product page
95	consumer-generated product rating
96	consumer-generated product review
97	consumer-generated review
98	consumer-generated word-of-mouth
99	consumers' voicing of discontent in blog posts
100	consumer-to-consumer communication
101	consumer-to-consumer interaction
102	consumer-to-consumer narrative interaction
103	consumer-to-consumer online communication
104	consumer-to-consumer WOM conversation
105	consumer-to-consumer word of mouth on the internet
106	contagious commentary about products, services, brands, and ideas
107	conversation Internet community
108	crowd-based wisdom
109	customer expression
110	customer feedback on the web
111	customer knowledge sharing
112	customer opinions in social media
113	customer rating
114	customer referral
115	customer referral intensity
116	customer review
117	customer-created complaint web site
118	customer-generated brand message
119	customer-generated opinion
120	customer-to-customer know-how exchange
121	desktop eWOM
122	digital community
123	digital conversation
124	digital storytelling
125	digital word of mouth

No.	eWOM Alias
126	digitized word of mouth
127	discussion forums
128	discussions among consumers
129	dispersion
130	e-buzz
131	e-comment
132	e-customer-to-customer interaction in B2B brand communities
133	earned audience
134	earned media impressions on Facebook
135	electronic consumer-to-consumer communication
136	electronic referral
137	electronic word of mouth
138	e-referral
139	evaluative judgment
140	eWOM
141	eWOM conversation
142	eWOM instrument
143	eWOM of user message
144	eWOM recommendation
145	eWOM review
146	external WOM
147	Facebook fan
148	Facebook fan page
149	Facebook Like
150	Facebook-mediated WOM
151	fashion blog
152	feedback
153	feedback mechanism
154	feedback review
155	feedback score
156	firm's consumer buzz
157	hype on Twitter
158	internal WOM
159	Internet user opinion
160	Internet WOM
161	Internet word-of-mouth communication
162	Internet-enabled online word-of-mouth communications among consumers
163	invite
164	member-generated information
165	microblog reaction
166	microblogging
167	microblogging word of mouth
168	microblogosphere
169	mobile eWOM
170	mWOM
171	negative (online) brand imagery

No.	eWOM Alias
172	new media
173	numeric rating
174	numeric review rating
175	OCR
176	online amateur review
177	online articulation
178	online attitude
179	online blog posting
180	online brand advocacy
181	online brand evaluation
182	online brand tribalism
183	online buzz
184	online buzz activity
185	online C2C conversation
186	online CGM
187	online chatter
188	online comment
189	online comment about a product
190	online communication
191	online community of consumption
192	online community post
193	online complaining
194	online consumer attitude
195	online consumer content
196	online consumer evaluation
197	online consumer product review
198	online consumer rating
199	online consumer review
200	online consumer voice
201	online consumer-generated content
202	online consumer-generated media
203	online consumer-generated review
204	online content
205	online conversation
206	online customer dialogue
207	online discourse
208	online discussion
209	online feedback
210	online feedback mechanism
211	online forum
212	online media
213	online merchant review
214	online message
215	online message on products
216	online opinion
217	online opinion-sharing community

No.	eWOM Alias
218	online peer influence
219	online posting
220	online product rating
221	online product review
222	online product testimonial
223	online recommendation
224	online referral
225	online reputation
226	online review rating
227	online review score
228	online review sentiment
229	online score
230	online social influence
231	online social interaction
232	online social network
233	online testimonial
234	online text
235	online user review
236	online user-generated content
237	online user-generated rating
238	online user-generated review
239	online user-generated WOM
240	online viral marketing campaign
241	online voice
242	online WOM activity
243	online WOM communication
244	online WOM referral
245	online word of mouth
246	online word-of-mouth information
247	online word-of-mouth via consumer-generated product reviews
248	opinion-sharing community
249	OWOM
250	peer comment
251	peer communication about products via social media
252	peer feedback
253	peer information
254	peer online opinion
255	peer-to-peer community recommendation
256	peer-to-peer message
257	personalized referral
258	person-to-person recommendation
259	person-to-person word of mouth advertising
260	polarity score
261	population buzz
262	post-release buzz
263	pre-release buzz

No.	eWOM Alias
264	product comment
265	product rating
266	product recommendation
267	product reference in blogs
268	product review
269	product review information
270	product-related word-of-mouth conversation
271	promotional chat on the internet
272	purchase eWOM
273	qualified buzz
274	quantified online consumer review
275	rating
276	rating of consumers
277	rating of online consumer review
278	rating of online review
279	ratings and comments by fellow consumers
280	ratings from online forums
281	recommendation on the Internet
282	reference in blogs
283	reputation
284	reputation feedback
285	reputation in social media
286	reputation system
287	retailer-hosted WOM
288	review
289	review comment
290	review from buyers
291	review information
292	review on products
293	review post
294	salience of valence
295	score
296	seller average reputation
297	seller rating
298	sentiment
299	social data
300	social discussion
301	social earned media
302	social influence
303	social interaction
304	social media
305	social media consumer conversation
306	social media content
307	social media conversation
308	social media discussion
309	social media peer communication
310	social media post

No.	eWOM Alias
311	social network
312	social network site
313	social network-based recommendation
314	social publishing
315	social referral within social network
316	social sharing
317	social tag metric
318	social voice
319	social word of mouth
320	social-network referral
321	social-network WOM
322	star rating
323	star review
324	sWOM
325	third-party review
326	tourist-generated content
327	tweet
328	UGC
329	unpaid brand impression on Facebook
330	unpaid market communication
331	user eWOM
332	user feedback
333	user opinion
334	user post
335	user rating
336	user recommendation
337	user review
338	user WOM interaction
339	user word of mouth
340	user-contributed online content
341	user-created content
342	user-generated advertising
343	user-generated content
344	user-generated content in the form of eWOM
345	user-generated feedback review
346	user-generated media
347	user-generated online product review
348	user-generated online review
349	user-generated online word-of-mouth information
350	user-generated product information on the Internet
351	user-generated social media
352	user-generated WOM
353	user-generated word-of-mouth activity
354	user-generated word-of-mouth interaction
355	valence

No.	eWOM Alias
356	variance
357	viral ad
358	viral advertising message on social networking site
359	viral buzz
360	viral marketing
361	virtual community
362	virtual community post
363	virtual eWOM review
364	virtual public
365	virtual review
366	virtual word of mouth
367	volume
368	web of things recommendation
369	web user comment on product
370	web user WOM
371	web-based brand community
372	weblog post
373	WOM communication in the context of the Internet and online communities
374	WOM information on the Internet
375	WOM referral
376	word of mouse
377	word of mouth by consumers
378	word of mouth communication
379	word of mouth in social media
380	word of mouth marketing on online social blogs
381	word of mouth on social-networking sites
382	word of mouth on the Internet
383	word of mouth within online communities
384	word of web
385	word-of-mouth activity
386	word-of-mouth conversation
387	word-of-mouth information
388	word-of-mouth interaction
389	word-of-mouth on online social sites
390	word-of-web recommendation within virtual consumer communities

## Web Appendix 5

### Theoretical and methodological approaches used to study eWOM (1996-2019)

	eWOM Creation	eWOM Exposure	eWOM Evaluation
Investigated in ...	51% articles	31% articles	81% articles
<b>Theories used to study the eWOM phenomenon</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Agglomeration theory (Marshall 1920)</li> <li>• Uses and gratifications theory (Katz and Foulkes 1962)</li> <li>• Theory of WOM involvement (Dichter 1966)</li> <li>• Social network theory (Granovetter 1973)</li> <li>• Theory of reasoned action (Ajzen and Fishbein 1980)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accessibility–diagnosticity theory (Kanouse and Hanson 1972)</li> <li>• Uncertainty reduction theory (Berger and Calabrese 1975)</li> <li>• Conformity theory, a.k.a. information cascades theory (Akerlof 1980; Asch 1956)</li> <li>• Technology acceptance model (Davis 1989)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Source credibility theory (Hovland et al. 1953)</li> <li>• Attribution theory (Kelley 1967)</li> <li>• Expectancy–disconfirmation theory (Anderson 1973)</li> <li>• Flow theory (Csikszentmihalyi 1975)</li> <li>• Social exchange theory (Emerson 1976)</li> <li>• Prospect theory (Tversky and Kahneman 1974)</li> <li>• Dual-process theory of information processing (Bettman and Park 1980; Petty and Cacioppo 1986)</li> <li>• Social impact theory (Latané 1981)</li> <li>• Media richness theory (Daft and Lengel 1986)</li> <li>• Signaling theory (Boulding and Kirmani 1993; Urbany 1986)</li> <li>• Actor–network theory (Latour 1990)</li> <li>• Cognitive fit theory (Vessey and Galletta 1991)</li> <li>• Regulatory focus theory (Higgins 1997)</li> <li>• (Temporal) construal theory (Liberman and Trope 1998)</li> </ul>
<b>Methodologies used to study the eWOM phenomenon</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 6% Conceptual</li> <li>• 4% Experimental</li> <li>• 12% Qualitative</li> <li>• 25% Modeling</li> <li>• 4% Mixed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 4% Conceptual</li> <li>• 2% Experimental</li> <li>• 8% Qualitative</li> <li>• 15% Modeling</li> <li>• 2% Mixed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 8% Conceptual</li> <li>• 14% Experimental</li> <li>• 13% Qualitative</li> <li>• 40% Modeling</li> <li>• 6% Mixed</li> </ul>

Note: This table reports the most common, landmark theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches applied in eWOM scholarship between 1996 and 2019. All percentages are calculated to the total number of articles (1,050).

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