

THE INFLUENCE OF ELECTRONIC WORD-OF-MOUTH VALENCE TOWARDS  
CUSTOMERS' PURCHASE INTENTIONS – ROLE OF CUSTOMER-FIRM  
RELATIONSHIPS

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International Business  
Bachelor's Thesis  
Supervisor: Matti Aistrich  
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### **Objectives**

With the emergence of the Internet, customers can discuss about products and services on online platforms. This way of communication is called electronic word of mouth (eWOM). EWOM has offered customers many benefits such as large audience, fast transmission, custom-made conversations, visual aids, etc. Significantly, the quality of being positive or negative of eWOM, known as eWOM valence, interprets contradicting opinions and experiences, showing whether particular products or services are favourable or unfavourable. Hence, eWOM valence may influence customers' purchase intentions. In addition, during eWOM conversations, the strength of customer-firm relationships is among the potential factors in influencing the transmission of positive eWOM and the adoption of negative eWOM. Thus, the following objectives of this thesis are declared:

- To analyze the influence of positive and negative eWOM on customers' purchase intentions.
- To compare the degree of influence between positive and negative eWOM on customers' purchase intentions.
- To analyze the impact of strong customer-firm relationships on the transmission of positive eWOM information.
- To analyze the impact of strong customer-firm relationships on customers' resilience of negative eWOM information.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the influence of eWOM valence towards customers' purchase intentions. Further, the role of customer-firm relationships is examined on positive eWOM transmission and negative eWOM adoption. Thus, four hypotheses are proposed and tested by analyzing the collected data from 185 responses gathered from online self-administered survey. Finally, the results support all four hypotheses and provide valuable insights for marketers.

### **Conclusions**

While positive eWOM information is found to motivate people to make purchases, negative eWOM information discourages customers from acquiring products and

services. Between the two sides of eWOM valence, negative eWOM has higher impact on customers than does positive eWOM.

Based on the strength of customer-firm relationships, if customers feel emotionally connected to firms, they are more likely to generate positive eWOM and tolerate negative eWOM towards products and services related to those firms. However, if the unfavorable information is among social, ethical, or environmental issues, strong customer-firm relationships can't prevent customers from showing disapprovals.

**Key words:** word of mouth, electronic word of mouth, electronic word-of-mouth valence, customers' purchase intentions, strong customer-firm relationships, transmission of positive electronic word of mouth, adoption of negative electronic word of mouth.

**Language:** English

**Grade:**

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ABSTRACT

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1. Background

When it comes to making purchase intentions, people tend to look for credible and custom-made information, which is why word of mouth (WOM), the oral communication between customers, has been a trustworthy source for decades. As a result, WOM has received great attention from researchers; and it is found to have impacts on customers' purchase intentions (Arndt, 1967; Bansal & Voyer, 2000; Trusov et al., 2009). Customers usually depend on WOM when they consider making purchases (Arndt, 1967); because conversations in WOM have no selling intent (Sen & Lerman, 2007; Colliander et al., 2015). In fact, as Trusov et al. (2009) state in their study, WOM has stronger impact on customers' purchase intentions than do conventional marketing efforts.

With the emergence of the Internet, the power of customers has been enhanced since they have more opportunities to connect with a great number of people. Particularly, customers are able to make self-modified content with visual aids and share it to a multitude of other people at a lightning-fast speed without the restriction of geography and time-zone (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Goldsmith & Horowitz, 2006; Brown et al., 2007; Darban & Li, 2012; Erkan & Evans, 2016). Thus, WOM has gained a new perspective, conversations now can be executed on virtual platforms. These online WOM conversations are called electronic word of mouth (eWOM). With the above improvements, eWOM is worth for further examination.

The Internet has offered customers several platforms to perform eWOM, e.g., shopping websites, blogs, discussion forums and social media channels (Cheung & Thadani, 2012). Among these platforms, social media is a new concept with promising opportunities for facilitating eWOM (Cheung & Thadani, 2012; Wang et al., 2012; Das & Mandal, 2016; Erkan & Evans, 2016). As technology has substantially developed throughout this century, social media has earned an enormous increase in global popularity. Social media is a web-based platform used to create, exchange and discuss information among people.

Particularly, it is an instrument for interaction between human beings. In addition, social media has offered eWOM a new aspect which allows users to reach and interact with the people that are familiar to them. Hence, customers can discuss conversations about products and services with their acquaintances or close friends (Kozinets et al., 2010). Today, there are many popular social media channels such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Instagram. According to GlobalWebIndex's report (2016), the average amount of time a person spends on online social networks is 118 minutes, which has increased by more than 20 minutes compared to 2012. Significantly, it is the youngest age group between 16 and 24 years of age that spends the most time and 94% of them are members of at least one of the four main online services (Facebook, WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger and Instagram). Therefore, social networking services have become essential parts of everyone's life, creating valuable platforms for eWOM.

## **1.2. Research Problems**

Customers are exposed to a vast amount of different, conflicting opinions about products and services when engaging in WOM conversations. Positive and negative perspectives, or valence, is essential in any piece of WOM information (Arndt, 1967; Weiberger & Dillion, 1980; Sweeney et al., 2012; Farhangi et al., 2014; See-To & Ho, 2014). With the pervasiveness of social media channels, customers receive even larger amounts of divergent information from others since the eWOM conversations are more conveniently facilitated. In fact, Trusov et al. (2010) emphasize that it is social media which has led to the increase of online reviews made by customers. In addition, similar to WOM, the valence of eWOM plays an important role in eWOM conversations. In fact, the valence interprets contradicting opinions and experiences, showing whether particular products or services are favourable or unfavourable. Thus, the valence of eWOM may affect customers' purchase intentions. When studying about the influence of eWOM on customers' purchase intentions, the majority of studies focus on either the credibility and the quality of information (Das & Mandal, 2016; Erkan & Evans, 2016) or customers' attitude towards eWOM information (Bansal & Voyer, 2000; Wang et al., 2012). However, the impacts of eWOM valence on customers' purchase intentions have received little concern. Hence, this study will address the following research question:



**RQ1:** How does the valence of electronic word of mouth affect customers' purchase intentions?

Research has conflicting opinions on the influence of WOM valence: some believe positive WOM is more influential (Darban & Li, 2012; Sweeney et al., 2012), some posit that it is negative WOM (Arndt, 1967; Weiberger & Dillion, 1980) and some argue that it is not the valence but the other characteristics of WOM that influence customers (Huang et al., 2011). Therefore, this study will consider both aspects of eWOM valence in order to provide clarification to this issue.

Furthermore, the relationships between customers and firms have been studied by many researchers (Bull, 2003; Chang et al., 2005; Jayachandran et al., 2005; Kimiloglu & Zarali, 2009; Nguyen & Mutum, 2012; Colliander et al., 2015). There is one conceptual model, the "Customer-Company identification" (C-C identification), proposing the impact of strong customer-firm relationships on the transmission and the adoption of eWOM information (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Particularly, customers are believed to initiate more positive WOM (Gummerus et al., 2012), and overlook negative information about firms (Hibbard et al., 2001) if they have strong relationships with such firms. However, the C-C identification conceptual framework is proposed without empirical testing, which needs further research. And, the scope of this study will focus on eWOM on social networking sites. Hence, this study proposed another research question:

**RQ2:** How do strong customer-firm relationships influence electronic-word-of-mouth communication?

Regarding the second research question, this study considers two components, i.e., "Company Promotion" and "Resilience to Negative Information" from the C-C identification

conceptual model (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003: 79) to test their validity. Specifically, for “Company Promotion”, it is believed that customers initiate more positive eWOM about the firms to which they feel emotionally connected. And, “Resilience to Negative Information” indicates that strong customer-firm relationships result in the tolerance of customers towards negative information.

In general, this thesis aims at exploring the impact of eWOM valence (positive and negative eWOM) towards customers’ purchase intentions and examining the role of strong customer-firm relationships in the transmission of positive eWOM and the adoption of negative eWOM. To do so, the research objectives are proposed as follows:

- To analyze the influence of positive and negative eWOM on customers’ purchase intentions.
- To compare the degree of influence between positive and negative eWOM on customers’ purchase intentions.
- To analyze the impact of strong customer-firm relationships on the transmission of positive eWOM information.
- To analyze the impact of strong customer-firm relationships on customers’ resilience of negative eWOM information.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1. Introduction**

With the emergence of mass media, customers have been exposed to an enormous amount of commercial advertisements. Thus, this has posted a great opportunity for customers to obtain massive amounts of information about products and services from businesses. However, this brings difficulties to customers when they consider purchase intentions, leading them to exchange their thoughts or experiences about products and services among themselves, which is considered as word of mouth (WOM) (Arndt, 1967).

Having prevailed for an enduring period, WOM has earned a new perspective with the emergence of the Internet. Heretofore, WOM only existed when customers face-to-face exchanged their thoughts and experiences, but the Internet has provided everyone new platforms with much larger audience. EWOM enables information to spread among a multitude of individuals in an extremely high speed via online platforms (Brown et al., 2007; Darban & Li, 2012; Erkan & Evans, 2016). For that reason, in addition to marketer-generated advertisements, eWOM has become another source which provides knowledge about products and services. Recently, there has been a considerable amount of studies about the influence of eWOM towards customers' purchase (Wallace et al., 2009; Darban & Li, 2012; Wang et al., 2012; Farhangi et al. 2014; See-To & Ho, 2014; Cheah et al., 2015; Das & Mandal, 2016; Erkan & Evans, 2016).

WOM valence has been investigated for its influence on customers (Farhangi et al., 2014; See-To & Ho, 2014). Particularly, as Huang et al. (2011) state in their study, either positive or negative WOM has equal effect on customers. In another situation, Sweeney et al. (2012) suggest from their study that positive WOM has more impact on customers than does negative WOM, while other studies believe WOM have more influence if it is negative (Arndt, 1967; Weiberger & Dillion, 1980). There appears to be different viewpoints regarding the valence of WOM. Additionally, in the new and upgraded platforms, eWOM valence would even have stronger impact on customers, especially when it comes to the stage that they seek advice for their purchase intentions.

The relationships between firms and customers are among the important factors of every business' success which seem to be overlooked. Existing customer-firm relationships are perceived to offer firms economic benefit if it is managed properly (Jayachandran et al., 2005; Nguyen & Mutum, 2012). In addition, technological improvement has supported companies in interacting and getting closer to their customers (Chang et al. 2005, Kimiloglu & Zarali, 2009; Baird & Parasnis, 2011; Nguyen & Mutum, 2012; Colliander et al., 2015). Nowadays, on social media channels, customers no longer act as passive recipients of marketing information, but they are more inclined to take part in numerous

online activities, e.g., giving recommendations or taking part in discussions regarding experiences or thoughts about products and services (Das & Mandal, 2016). According to Gummerus et al. (2012), the more people get involved in a certain product or service, the more WOM behaviors they are likely to engage in. As proposed in the “Customer-Company identification” framework, Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) posit that high customer-firm relationship may lead to the increase in positive WOM initiation and the resilience to negative information. However, in case of strong customer-firm relationships, customers are likely to engage in more unfavorable behaviors towards companies if the negative information regarding related companies is of serious magnitude (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Hence, the strength of customer-firm relationships is likely to affect the transmission of positive eWOM and the adoption of negative eWOM.

This literature review is divided into four parts; first it will cover WOM together with its evolution into eWOM. Moreover, the influence of WOM valence on customers’ purchase intentions is examined. Thereafter, the third section introduces the customer-firm relationship as well as its technological transformation. Then, the potential correlation between the strength of customer-firm relationships and eWOM is discussed. And, the last part concludes by summarizing this literature review and proposing a diagrammatic conceptual framework. Subsequent to the literature review, methodology of the research is proposed.

## **2.2. Word of Mouth & Electronic Word of Mouth**

### **2.2.1. Word of Mouth**

WOM has long been one of the most influential and dominant forces in the marketplace (Arndt, 1967; Bansal & Voyer, 2000; Trusov et al., 2009). According to Arndt (1967), WOM is an oral communication among customers in which the sender provides negative or positive opinions and experiences about the products or services to the receiver (See Figure 1). It is emphasized that the communication has to be between customers and customers with non-commercial purposes (Sen & Lerman, 2007; Colliander et al., 2015). The incentive behind this kind of communication is probably generated from the senders’

wishes to express their subjective assessments of the products or services that they have experienced (Kozinets et al., 2010). However, it has been proposed that customers desire information from WOM when engaging in the acquisition of products or services (Arndt, 1967), since WOM communication is different from advertisements for its non-commercial intent (Sen & Lerman, 2007). Nowadays, the influence of conventional marketing attempts appears to be diminishing (Sweeney et al. 2008), perhaps because customers want to seek more reliable and customized information. In fact, recent research suggests that WOM has greater impacts on customers than do conventional marketing efforts (Sen & Lerman, 2007; Trusov et al., 2009; Darban & Li, 2012).

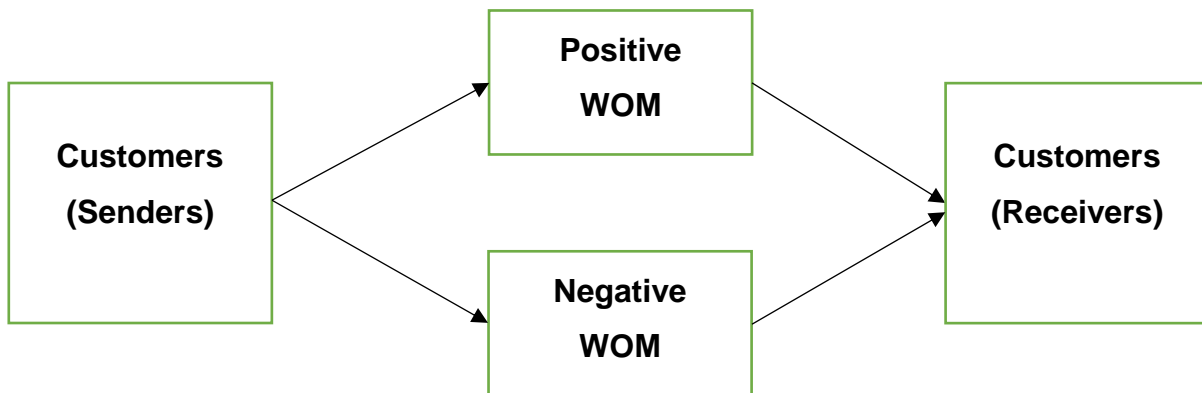


Figure 1: The process of transmitting and receiving WOM

There are several factors that affect the power of WOM. As the messages are transmitted between the receivers and the senders, their relationships are essential in determining the influence of WOM (Darban & Li, 2012). Bansal and Voyer (2000) argue that if the relationships are strong, the messages become more reliable. They also emphasize the significance of the knowledge level of the senders. In other word, if the senders are perceived as qualified sources, the receivers are easily persuaded. In addition, the authenticity of WOM makes customers willing to accept it (Romani, 2006). For that reason, customers' genuine opinions or experiences are preferable to commercial advertisements. Furthermore, customers' attitude towards information plays a key role in

the influence of WOM. In other words, the WOM information in which customers express more interest is more influential than those that are randomly distributed (Sweeney et al., 2012).

### **2.2.2. Electronic Word of Mouth**

The Internet has brought customers new platforms to share their feelings and wisdom with more convenience (Sen & Lerman, 2007; Erkan, 2014). In like manner, Neti (2011) indicates that social media facilitate communication between people. As a result, this has transformed traditional WOM into a new version, occurring on online space. Online WOM is defined as any piece of positive or negative information on the Internet created by a certain customer about a product or service, which is anonymously brought to multiple individuals (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). This kind of online communication is also called in many ways, i.e., “electric word of mouth”, “online word of mouth” or “electronic word of mouth”. However, the majority of recent literature refers this new kind of WOM as “electronic word of mouth” (eWOM) (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Kimiloglu & Zarali 2009; Erkan, 2014; Filieri & McLeay 2014; See-To & Ho, 2014).

Despite having evolved from traditional WOM, eWOM has some significant differences from the original form. EWOM can disperse information faster to a great number of customers (Brown et al., 2007; Darban & Li, 2012; Erkan & Evans, 2016). It is the Internet that makes the diffusion of eWOM information significantly fast. As Erkan and Evans (2016) state, social medial enables customers to share others’ thoughts easily, which contributes to the dissemination of information. Regarding geographical positions, while traditional WOM conversations have some limitations, the Internet enables individuals to have conversations, regardless of distance or time zones (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Goldsmith & Horowitz, 2006). Indeed, with Internet connection, people don’t need to be present at the same place to have conversations since they can interact with each other via virtual platforms. Furthermore, sometimes it is difficult for people to use visual effects in offline oral communications. However, eWOM information can be visually supported (Erkan & Evans, 2016). In fact, customers can attach pictures or videos as visual aids to

support their assessment of related products or services. Visually enhanced information makes eWOM more engaging (Erkan & Evans,2016). Significantly, with the emergence of social media, some social media channels such as YouTube and Instagram have successfully provided visual support from videos as well as images which users can exploit to enrich their messages. Apparently, those benefits seem to make eWOM a better upgraded version of traditional WOM.

### **2.3. Customers' Purchase Intentions & Electronic Word of Mouth Valence**

The relation between customers' purchase intentions and eWOM has been significantly examined for the past twenty years. Among the first researchers, Bickart and Schindler (2001) conducted studies about the impact of eWOM on customers' purchase intentions. They employed a twelve-week-period experiment to compare the effectiveness of customer-generated eWOM with marketer-generated eWOM. After having been exposed to different sources of similar product information, participants who were assigned to customer-generated sources were more inclined to make purchase intentions. It is believed that user-generated information gives customers more empathy, making eWOM more credible (Bickart & Schindler, 2001). However, as online information is exchanged among customers regardless of their relationships, trust is a vital factor that influences the purchase intentions (Hong & Cho, 2011). Further, Cheah et al. (2015) examined the relationships among customer attitudes, perceived behavioral control, subjective norms, and purchase intentions towards e-deals. Social media has enhanced eWOM conversations by allowing customers to interact with existing networks, i.e., acquaintances or friends. This has encouraged recent research to figure out the significance of eWOM between familiar individuals on their purchase intentions in social media context (Wallace et al., 2009; Wang et al., 2012; See-To & Ho, 2014; Erkan & Evans, 2016). Recently, Erkan and Evans (2016) investigate the impacts of eWOM communications on the purchase intentions of social media users, albeit using a different method. By conducting a survey of 384 college students, the authors examine eWOM conversations occurred on social networking sites. The attributes of eWOM information (quality and reliability) and the attitudes of customers towards eWOM information (need of information) are found to influence customers' purchase intentions.

Apart from the above research, multiples studies examine the valence of WOM information. By proposing a theoretical model after combining existing theories and models, See-To and Ho (2014) conclude that eWOM can enhance or reduce customers' trust on a product or service, depending on whether it is positive or negative, which has an impact on customers' purchase intentions. In addition, there are studies proposing a neutral viewpoint. Particularly, Huang et al. (2011) support their research by employing both survey and simulation. As a result, there is no difference in customers' acceptance of WOM whether one criticizes or recommends a product or service. In a different context, Weiberger and Dillion (1980) asked 240 participants about their purchase intentions after providing them all the relevant information and ratings of different products. The result yields that negative WOM is more influential than positive WOM. However, all the 240 participants were women, which brought limitation to the study. Furthermore, Sweeney et al. (2012) disregard the above result with the opposite standpoint. By conducting a four-stage study with an amalgamation of qualitative and quantitative data collection methods, the authors examined the content of messages and delivery of WOM. As a consequence, messages with positive perspective are found to have more impact on customers.

In general, it is proposed that positive and negative WOM information play an essential role in WOM communication (Arndt, 1967; Weiberger & Dillion, 1980; Sweeney et al., 2012; Farhangi et al., 2014; See-To & Ho, 2014). Moreover, with the emergence of social media (Neti, 2011), people spend more time on online social networking channels, which is likely to generate more eWOM conversations. EWOM has some advantages which possibly facilitate the process of exchanging opinions and experiences among customers before making purchase intentions. As evolved from WOM, eWOM valence is also a potential determinant of its impact upon customers' purchase intentions. Hence, this study posits the following hypotheses (Figure 2):

*H1: Positive eWOM has positive influence on customers' purchase intentions.*



H2: Negative eWOM has negative influence on customers' purchase intentions.

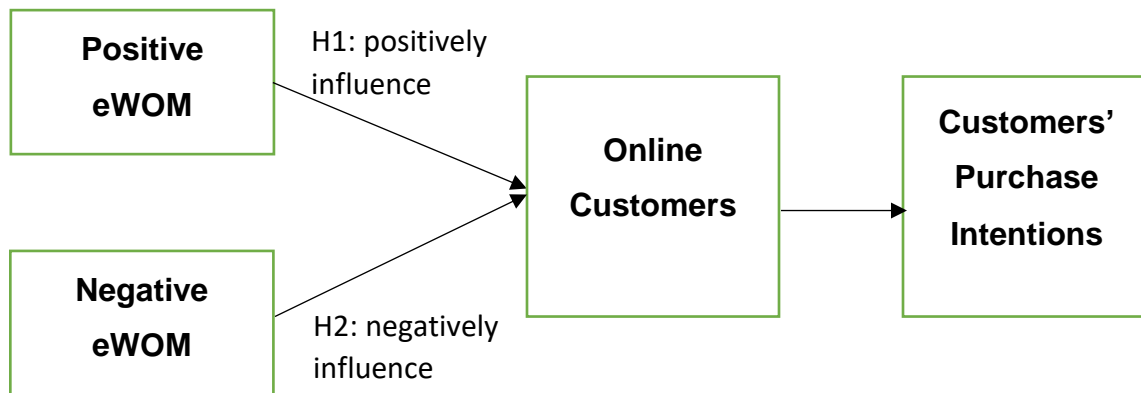


Figure 2: The influence of positive and negative eWOM on social media towards customers' purchase intentions

#### 2.4. The Strength of Customer-Firm Relationship & Electronic Word of Mouth

Customer relationship management (CRM) is a subject which has been extensively studied and investigated by scholars. CRM's basic objective is to increase customer loyalty and improve financial position (Kimiloglu & Zarali, 2009). CRM has long been an important approach to establish, interact and maintain customers. Specifically, CRM helps companies reach customers and improve the relationships. The bond between businesses and customers is nurtured and improved over a long period (Bull, 2003; Kimiloglu & Zarali, 2009; Nguyen & Mutum, 2012). Notably, Nguyen and Mutum (2012) argue that maintaining an existing customer-firm relationship costs less than acquiring a new one. Similarly, Jayachandran et al. (2005) suggest in their study that customer retention can increase profitability. As a consequence, customer-firm relationships receive high attention in every organization's marketing strategy since it would provide competitive advantages as long as it is managed successfully. Thus, corporations have been spending considerable amounts of time and money on CRM (Bull, 2003).

Recently, many studies put high emphasis on the technology aspect of customer-firm relationships and how to manage it via online platforms (Bull, 2003; Chang et al., 2005; Jayachandran et al., 2005; Kimiloglu & Zarali, 2009; Nguyen & Mutum, 2012; Colliander et al., 2015). Indeed, customer-firm relationships have been under a period of radical technological-modification, which provides businesses many opportunities. Significantly, among scholars, it is unanimously agreed that engaging in customer-firm relationships via online platforms enhances the interaction with customers as well as profitability (Chang et al. 2005, Kimiloglu & Zarali, 2009; Baird & Parasnis, 2011; Nguyen & Mutum, 2012; Colliander et al., 2015). According to Bauer et al. (2002), the Internet has offered great speed, easy accessibility and cost reduction, which enhances the interaction between businesses and customers. Also, Baird and Parasnis (2011) declare that social media provides corporations great opportunities to get closer to customers. Communication can be customized in order to reach customers individually via emails, social networking sites, e.g., Facebook and Twitter (Ragins & Greco, 2003; Nguyen & Mutum, 2012; Colliander et al. 2015). In addition, technological facilities such as data mining and data warehousing help companies gather information from customers (Tan et al., 2002). Hence, Winer (2001) firmly states that the Internet provides a perfect domain to build stronger relationships with customers than the offline environment.

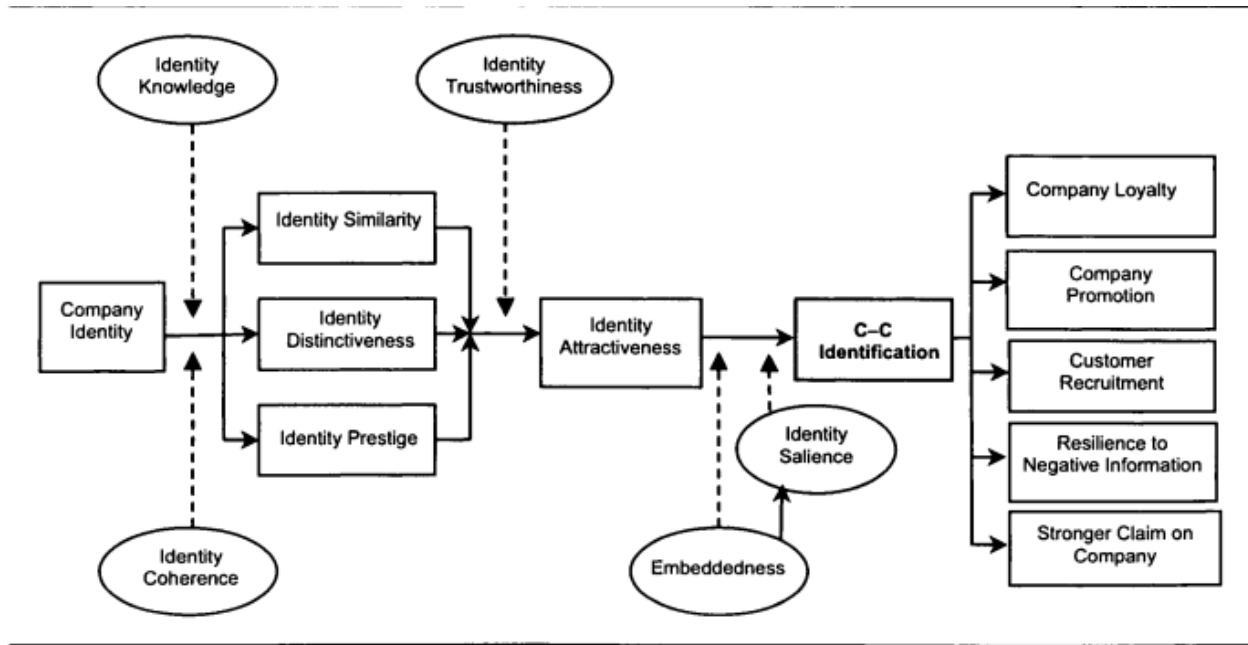


Figure 3: C-C identification framework (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003: 79)

The foundation of such strong relationships is established on customers' identification with firms which pleases some of their own definitional needs (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). In other words, customers tend to be loyal and emotionally connected to brands which satisfy not only customers' functional needs but also their psychological needs. For instance, some people always use products from a particular sport brand because it somehow conveys characteristics that are similar to the customers' identity. Based on organizational identification and theories of social identity, the concept of identification is developed by creating a conceptual model, known as "Customer-Company identification" (C-C identification) (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Figure 3 shows the complete C-C identification framework. C-C identification is defined as "active, selective, and volitional on customers' part and causes them to engage in favorable as well as potentially unfavorable company-related behaviors" (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003: 77). Although there are five consequences from the C-C identification, this thesis only considers the two components which are "Company Promotion" and "Resilience to Negative Information".

According to Bhattacharya and Sen (2003), the authors posit that identifications make customers psychologically associated to their identified companies. Hence, they are willing to nurture the companies to which they feel emotionally connected. In fact, other research also argues that customers' behaviors are positively influenced by strong identification with companies (Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Ahearne et al., 2005; Brown et al., 2005). As Gummerus et al. (2012) state, to enhance the relationships with brands, customers engage in WOM behaviors, which has gone beyond the traditional customer loyalty measures, such as purchasing behaviors or the frequency of visits. In the same manner, as one of the consequences from the C-C identification model, i.e., "Company Promotion", customers with high identification towards firms are more likely to carry out positive WOM about those firms and their products or services (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Brown et al., 2005).

Moreover, as customers tend to forgive their own mistakes, they are likely to overlook negative information from their identified firms since identification drives them to believe in those companies and their plans (Hibbard et al., 2001). This assertion correlates with one of the consequences which Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) propose in the C-C identification model, i.e., "Resilience to Negative Information" (p.79). In addition, Alsop (2002) posits that customers with high identifications towards firms tend to downplay negative information about such firms, especially when the information is of little significance. However, it is also believed that customers may engage in "potential unfavorable company-related behaviors" (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003: 77). In other words, when the negative information is above the tolerance level (e.g., a company is accused of using child labor or having unsafe working environment), customers who have relationship with firms tend to react in a more critical manner than others (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2001). Particularly, people have different standards in which they disregard negative information. However, problems related to social, ethical or environmental issues are usually intolerable and unacceptable (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2001). Hence, within a certain resilience zone, high customer-firm relationship is likely to moderate the effect of negative information towards customers, making them overlook those negative eWOM.

Based on the discussed two consequences from the C-C identification framework and the focus of this thesis on eWOM, the next hypotheses are developed (See Figure 4):

*H3:* The stronger the relationship between customers and firms, the more likely customers are to initiate positive eWOM.

*H4:* Within a resilience zone, the stronger the relationship between customers and firms, the higher the tolerance of customers towards negative eWOM about those firms.

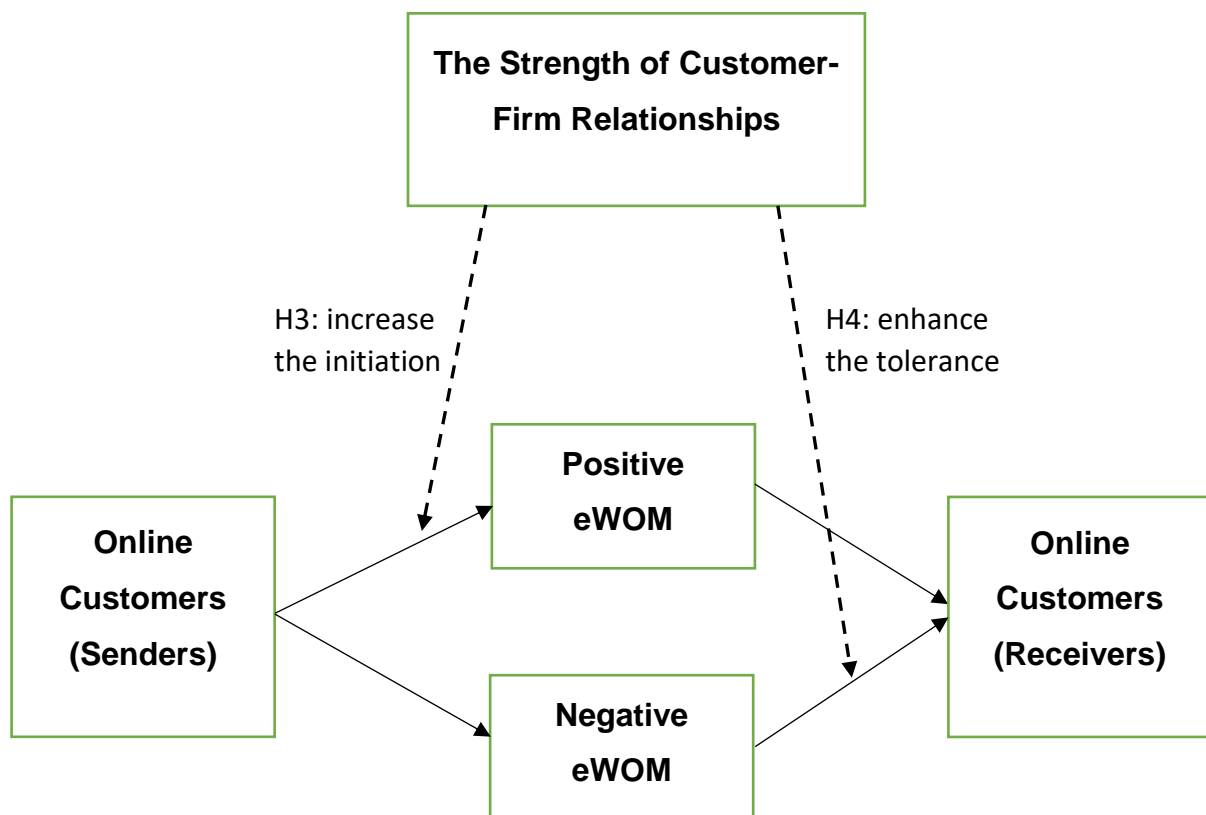


Figure 4: Influence of the strength of customer-firm relationships on the process of transmission and the adoption of eWOM on social media.

## **2.5. Conclusion & Conceptual Framework**

Generally, the connection between customers' purchase intentions and eWOM has received significant amounts of research, most of which have found that eWOM has impacts on customers (Bickart & Schindler, 2001; Cheung & Thadani, 2012; Cheah et al., 2015). The majority of studies concentrate on either the characteristics of eWOM information, e.g., credibility and quality of information (Das & Mandal, 2016; Erkan & Evans, 2016) or customers' attitude towards eWOM information (Bansal & Voyer, 2000; Wang et al., 2012). However, the impacts of eWOM valence on customers' purchase intentions have received little concern. In light of the mentioned divergent standpoints considering the valence of eWOM, it is essential to conduct further empirical research to better understand the issue. Thus, the first aim of this thesis is devoted to fill this gap. Furthermore, according to the C-C identification, the degree to which customers tie with certain firms may have favorable as well as unfavorable consequences. For instance, as stated in the C-C Identification framework, customers may engage in more positive eWOM or, within a zone of tolerance, overlook negative information regarding their identified companies (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Brown et al. 2005). However, the C-C Identification is only a theoretical model, which needs empirical testing for its validity and practicability. In favor of such clarification, the second aim will empirically test the validity of that issue. Finally, the proposed hypotheses are summarized in the below conceptual framework (Figure 5).

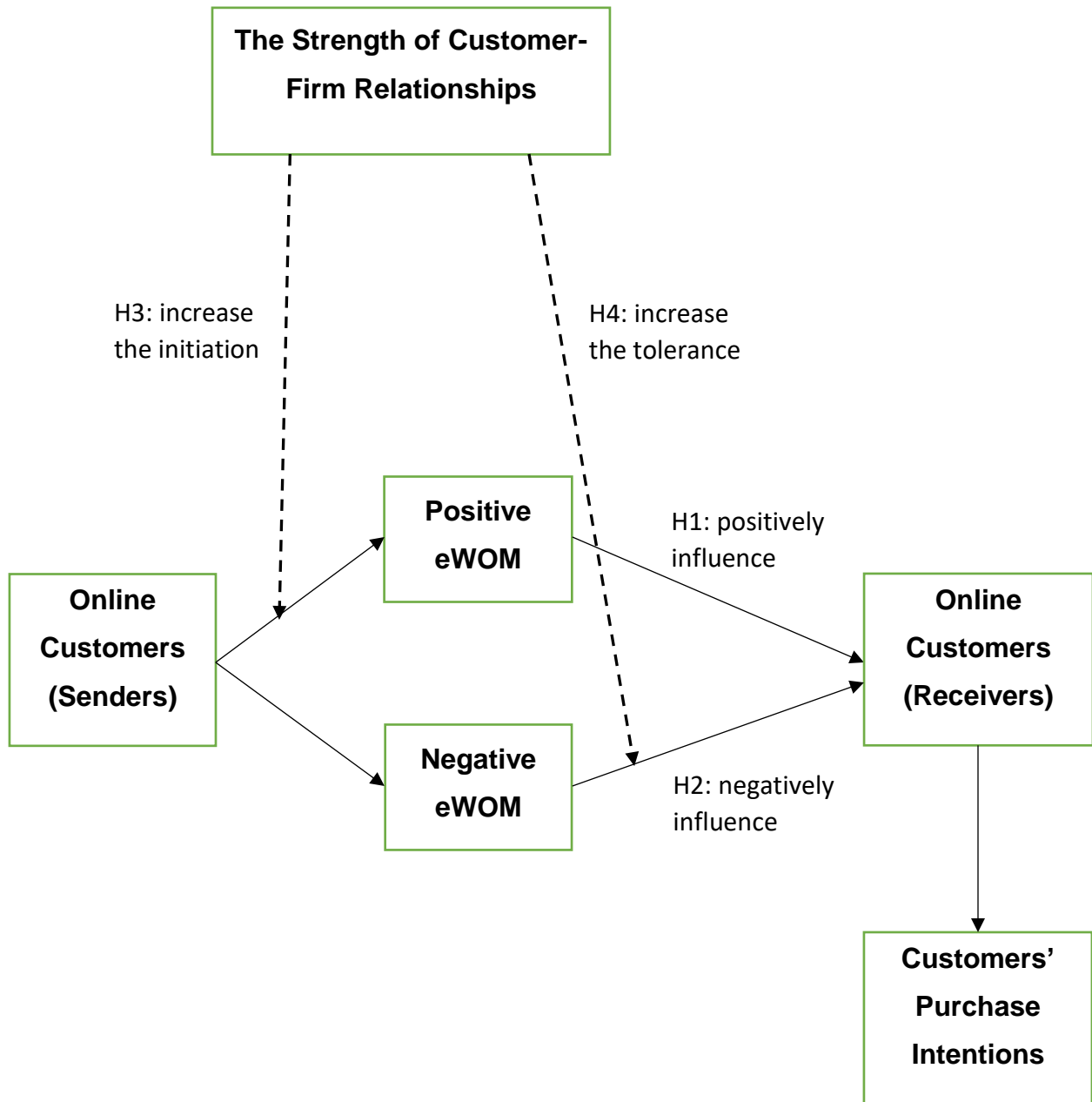


Figure 5: Conceptual framework

### 3. METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1. Research Approach

It is essential to find an appropriate research approach to support the objectives of a study. This thesis aims at examining the significance of eWOM valence on customers' purchase intentions as well as the influence of strong customer-firm relationships towards eWOM communication. To do so, a conceptual framework is proposed; and based on the discussed literature, four hypotheses are declared and will be empirically tested for their validity. Commonly, researchers choose between deductive approach and inductive approach for their studies. About deductive approach, the mechanism is to use collected data to verify hypotheses (Saunders et al., 2012). Hence, the adopted research approach is deductive approach. Figure 6 provides more information about this approach; and, the strategy employed in the thesis will be discussed in the next section.

	Deduction
Logic	In a deductive inference, when the premises are true, the conclusion must also be true
Generalizability	Generalizing from the general to the specific
Use of data	Data collection is used to evaluate propositions or hypotheses related to an existing theory
Theory	Theory falsification or verification

Figure 6: Deduction: from reason to research (Saunders et al., 2012)

#### 3.2. Research Strategy

There are various research strategies such as experiment, survey, narrative inquiry, case study, grounded theory, etc. (Saunders et al., 2012). The authors also state that, for quantitative research, experiment and survey are usually employed as methods of data collection; because they are suitable for studies which seek to examine their hypotheses



to discover whether they are true or false. However, survey offers convenient and cost-saving method of collecting data from a great quantity of participants. In addition, this method provides participants fixed sets of answers, which facilitates the data analysis process. This study aims at testing proposed hypotheses; hence, a great quantity of data is needed for statistical analysis. Therefore, survey is considered to be appropriate for this study. The subsequent section will explain about the collection method.

### **3.3. Data Collection Method**

This thesis is designed to carry out a large-scale empirical testing for the proposed hypotheses. To do so, a self-administered questionnaire is regarded as the suitable data collection method. Saunders et al. (2012) regard the questionnaire as one of the most convenient tools for collecting large amounts of data. Moreover, a questionnaire is known for its time-saving and cost-effective nature. This method brings convenience to participants as they can provide responses expeditiously. For researchers, analyzing data from collected responses can be done within a short amount of time. However, there is a critical point which requires great consideration from researchers who employ questionnaire to gather data. It is the questionnaire structure which may influence the validity, reliability and response rate of the data. Thus, the following section discusses the development of the instrument.

### **3.4. Instrument Development**

It is essential to use measures from existing studies because established scales were already tested. However, studies from the same context of this thesis conducted surveys with different objectives (Weinberger & Dillon, 1980, Sweeney et al., 2012) or employed different methods such as interviews (Darban & Li, 2012) and experiments (Huang et al., 2011). Hence, the author takes the contents from those methods into consideration to create measures and modifies them according to the proposed objectives.

In order to enhance the validity and reliability of the research, various items were employed to measure each construct. Specifically, eWOM valence was assessed by a six-item scale, equally divided between “positive information” and “negative information”. Of the six items, two were employed to ask the respondents how their purchase intentions

Positive eWOM information	P1: If you found a product or service with some positive reviews from other customers on social media, how likely would you be to choose it?
	P2: "Without a doubt, the best restaurant that I've ever eaten at. The food, employees and atmosphere were all superb!" (Restaurant review)
	P3: "Yummy...The new flavor: fruit & nut milk is just wonderful. Bought 2 bars yesterday, and finished them earlier this morning. I will definitely buy more when I get to the grocery store tomorrow." (Chocolate review)
Negative eWOM information	N1: If you found a product or service with some negative reviews from other customers on social media, how likely would you be to choose it?
	N2: "The sound quality when recording using a pole or in a vehicle is terrible. The mics are ridiculously over sensitive picking up far too much ambient noise and nonexistent noise just from holding the pole." (Action camera review)
	N3: "I have 2 kids with autism. And people that have kids with autism know that they have no patience standing long time in lines at rides. The new system of disability fails because you still have to wait a long time. And one of the staff that helped me get a disability pass did not want me to get one she was not only rude but kept asking what kind of disability did my kids have." (Amusement park review)

Table 3.4.1: Instrument measurements for eWOM valence

are affected by positive and negative eWOM information. Then, the other four were real reviews gathered from multiple brands' official pages on Facebook, providing respondents real situations to test the actual effect of eWOM valence on their purchase intentions. Table 3.4.1 demonstrates the six items in detail.

The impacts of strong customer-firm relationships towards eWOM conversations are divided into two processes: impact on the transmission of positive eWOM and impact on the adoption of negative eWOM. Plus, to accurately measure the influence of strong customer-firm relationships, two situations, one in which customers feel emotionally connected to firms and one is the opposite case, were provided to the respondents. Since there are different situations which lead to the initiation of positive eWOM, this construct requires more items to accurately measure the impact of strong customer-firm relationships on this construct. Specifically, a nine-item scale was used for the transmission of positive eWOM; and the adoption of negative eWOM was measure by a three-item scale (See Table 3.4.2). The results from these items will then be compared between the two situations (weak and strong customer-firm relationships). In addition, a list of eleven items was used to measure the tolerance level of customers towards negative eWOM (See Table 3.4.3). All items were developed based on the survey conducted by Erkan and Evans (2016), and the suggestions for empirical testings from Bhattacharya and Sen (2003). The items were measured with a five-point Likert scale where 1 = not likely, 2 = somewhat unlikely, 3 = neutral, 4 = somewhat likely, 5 = very likely. The measures were pre-tested with a sample of ten random respondents (most are university students), which resulted in rewording and modification of several items that were included in the final version of the questionnaire (See Appendix 1).

<b>Transmission of positive eWOM information</b>	When I found a certain product or service from Company X useful...
	T1: I will recommend it to my friends via social media.
	T2: I will give it a good review or rating on its official online page.
	T3: I will make an online post to share my good experience about it.
	When there is a new marketing campaign from Company X...
	T4: I will recommend it to my friends via social media.
	T5: I will share the online post about such campaign.
	When I read, or found some positive information about a product or service from Company X...
	T6: I will recommend it to my friends via social media.
	T7: I will share the online post about such information.
<b>Adoption of negative eWOM information</b>	When someone needs my advice for his/her purchase decision...
	T8: I will share my experience about product or service from Company X.
	T9: I will recommend product or service from Company X.
	When I read, or found some negative information (i.e., bad reviews) about a product or service from Company X...
A1: I think it is only a minor mistake of the company.	
A2: I will still use that product or service.	
A3: It won't affect my decision when acquiring any products or services from Company X.	

Table 3.4.2: Instrument Measurements for the impact of customer-firm relationships on eWOM conversations

<b>Eleven Unfavorable Activities</b>
Using child labor
Over-charging prices
Having unsafe and unhealthy working environment
Having slow-response customer service
Harming or negatively affecting other species
Having slow delivery service
Having employee work for long hours with low pay
Reported to have defected products by some reviews
Polluting the environment
Using unhealthy materials in production
Over exploiting natural resources

Table 3.4.3: Unfavorable activities which are considered as negative information to customers

### **3.5. Sample**

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the effect of eWOM valence on customers' purchase intentions and the influence of strong customer-firm relationships towards eWOM conversations. Thus, there are no restrictions on selecting the sample. The questionnaires were developed on the online survey tool of Webropol. A weblink to the survey was shared on several online communities of university students on Facebook. A total of 208 questionnaires were collected from participants, most are university students around the world (U.S, Finland, Germany, Vietnam, Australia, etc.). Questionnaires with insufficient answers were excluded and disqualified from statistical examination. Finally, a sum of 185 completed questionnaires were qualified for the analysis process of this study. Table 3.5.1 exhibits the sample profile.

Attribute	Value	Frequency	%
Gender	Male	100	54.05
	Female	85	45.95
Internet usage	Less than 1 year	1	0.54
	1 year to less than 3 years	1	0.54
	3 years to less than 5 years	13	7.03
	5 years or more	170	91.89
Time spent on social media channels (daily)	Less than 30 minutes	4	2.16
	30 minutes to 60 minutes	20	10.81
	61 minutes to 90 minutes	29	15.68
	91 minutes to 120 minutes	37	20
	121 minutes or more	95	51.35
Frequency of reading online reviews or recommendations about products or services	Never	7	3.78
	Sometimes	63	34.06
	Usually	80	43.24
	Always	35	18.92

Table 3.5.1: Respondents profile

Of all the total responses, 54.05 % were male and female being 45.95 %. Most of the respondents have been using the Internet for at least five years (91.89 %). In all, slightly more than half of the respondents (51.35 %) indicated that they spent more than two hours on social media channels while only 2.16 % spent less than thirty minutes. Furthermore, the majority of respondents usually (43.24 %) or sometimes (34.06 %) read online reviews or recommendations about products or services.

## 4. DATA ANALYSIS & FINDINGS

### 4.1. *Hypotheses Testing of H1 & H2*

The aim of this section is to determine whether positive eWOM information and negative eWOM information have positive and negative influence, respectively, on customers' purchase intentions. Specifically, respondents were asked about their decisions to choose products or services from firms if there were favorable (P1) and unfavorable (N1) information about such firms given to them beforehand. To measure the effect of eWOM valence, descriptive statistics of the responses from participants was conducted (See Table 4.1.1). The mean score of P1 was 3.48, which was above 3, the "neutral" scale. In addition, N1 scored below the average with 2.12. In other words, responses for P1 were more inclined to be "somewhat likely" or "very likely. On the other hand, either "somewhat unlikely" or "not likely" was more preferred for N1 by the respondents.

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
P1	185	3.4811	.91540	.06730
N1	185	2.1189	.77102	.05669

Table 4.1.1: Descriptive Statistics

Furthermore, to determine whether respondents rate P1 and N1 significantly different from neutral, this study conducted a test of the responses for each question about negative and positive eWOM against  $\mu = 3$  (neutral). To do so, One Sample t-Test from SPSS 19 was employed to examine the significance of eWOM valence on customers' purchase intentions (See Table 4.1.2).

	Test Value = 3					
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
P1	7.148	184	.000	.48108	.3483	.6139
N1	-15.543	184	.000	-.88108	-.9929	-.7692

Table 4.1.2: One Sample t-Test for the influence of eWOM valence

With reference to Table 4.1.2, the test was conducted base on two-tailed test with  $\alpha = .05$ . As a result, people who were surveyed had been significantly influenced by positive eWOM information when they considered purchase intentions with  $t(184) = 7.15$ ,  $p < .05$ . For the negative eWOM information, participants' purchase intentions were also significantly influenced,  $t(184) = -15.54$  and  $p < .05$ . Moreover, the absolute value of mean differences of P1 and N1 provided some insights into the degree of influence. Specifically, N1 had higher absolute mean difference than did P1 ( $|-88| > |.48|$ ). As a result, the significance of impact from N1 was greater than that of P1.



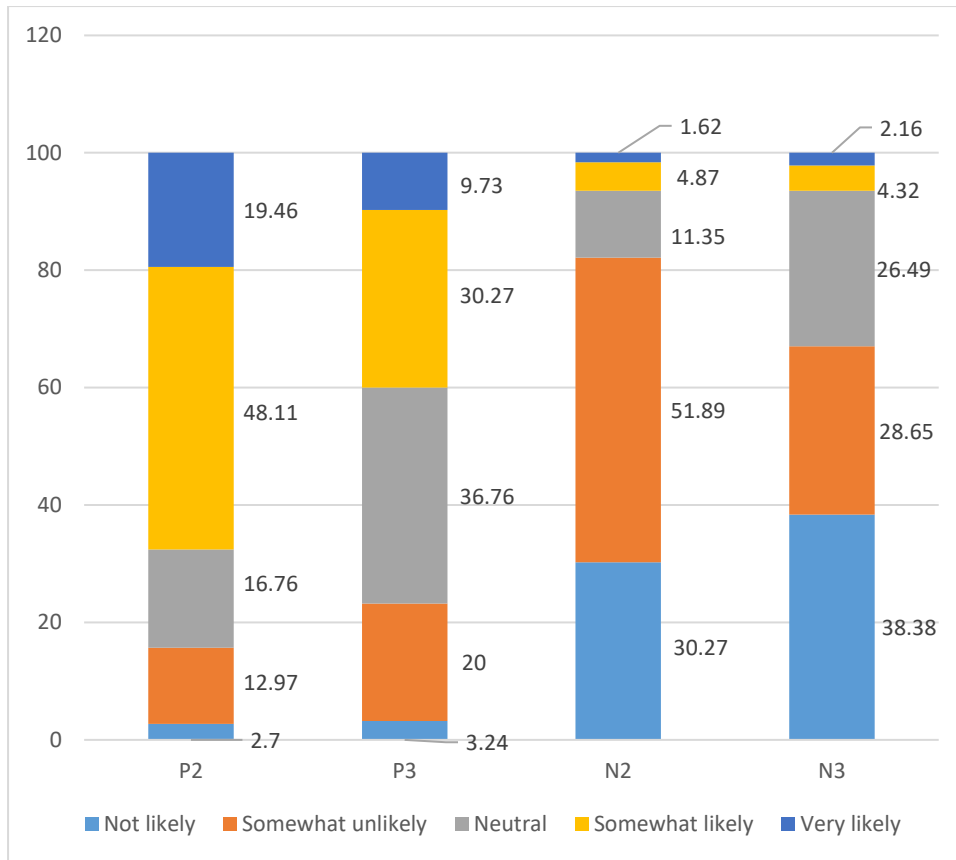


Table 4.1.3: The percentage of each Likert point on four customers' review samples

Moreover, this study provided participants four customers' reviews on Facebook (P2, P3, N2 and N3) to examine their purchase intentions based on these reviews. For positive reviews (P2 and P3), there were 40% and 67.57% of respondents which were "somewhat likely" or "very likely" to choose those businesses. However, 15.67% and 23.24% of respondents were either "somewhat unlikely" or "not likely" to choose products or services in P2 and P3, which was a large skepticism. For negative reviews, between 67.03% (N3) and 82.16% (N2) indicated that they wouldn't choose businesses with negative reviews. This means that the negative impact of unfavorable reviews was greater than the positive impact of favorable reviews (See Table 4.1.3), which is consistent with the result from One Sample t-Test.

Consequently, these results rejected  $\mu = 3$ . This means customers were influenced significantly by positive and negative eWOM when it comes to their purchase intentions. In addition, based on the Likert scale, the higher the score, the more likely customers are to make purchases. Thus, with an above average score (3.48), P1 supports *H1* and *N1* supports *H2* with a below average score (2.12). In addition, with a higher absolute value of mean difference from  $\mu = 3$ , the degree of impact from negative eWOM information was found to be higher than that from positive eWOM information.

#### 4.2. Hypotheses Testing of *H3* & *H4*

As there are multiple measures for the two constructs (transmission of positive eWOM and adoption of negative eWOM), this thesis employed Cronbach's  $\alpha$ , popular tool for testing the internal reliability of variables. Shown on Table 4.2.1, for all variables, the  $\alpha$ s were above the recommended value of 0.7. The results highlighted the internal consistency of the variables used in this thesis for *H3* and *H4*.

Scale measure		No. of items	Cronbach's $\alpha$
<b>Weak relationship</b>	Transmission of positive eWOM information	9	0.89
	Adoption of negative eWOM information	3	0.78
<b>Strong relationship</b>	Transmission of positive eWOM information	9	0.91
	Adoption of negative eWOM information	3	0.84

Table 4.2.1: Reliability assessment

The aim of this section is to examine whether the strength of customer-firm relationships affects eWOM. Specifically, there were two situations (weak and strong customer-firm relationships) provided to measure the impact of customer-firm relationships on two

separate processes of eWOM conversations, according to the C-C Identification model: 1) the transmission of positive eWOM information and 2) the adoption of negative eWOM information. The effect of customer-firm relationships will then be compared between these two situations to test the proposed hypotheses (*H3* and *H4*). The MANOVA from SPSS 19 was employed to test each hypothesis. There were two situations employed for the test, one which customers feel emotionally connected to firms (strong customer-firm relationship) and one is the opposite case (weak customer-firm relationship). In addition, all the nine items from the positive eWOM transmission were combined into one composite score (CS1) by calculating their mean. Likewise, three items from the negative eWOM transmission were transformed into one composite score (CS2). Before statistically analyzing the data, a test for normality of distributions was conducted. Table 4.2.2 shows the skewness and kurtosis for each composite score.

	Relationship Strength		Statistic	Std. Error
CS1	Weak	Skewness	.081	.179
		Kurtosis	-.524	.355
	Strong	Skewness	-.124	.179
		Kurtosis	.184	.355
CS2	Weak	Skewness	.073	.179
		Kurtosis	-.472	.355
	Strong	Skewness	-.203	.179
		Kurtosis	.267	.355

Table 4.2.2: Normality of distributions test

Regarding CS1, it has a skewness of .08 (SE = .18) and a kurtosis of -.52 (SE = .36) for the weak relationship and a skewness of -.12 (SE = .18) and a kurtosis of .18 (SE = .36) for the strong relationship. Considering CS2, the test shows a skewness of .07 (SE = .18) for the weak relationship and a skewness of -.20 (SE = .18) and a kurtosis of .27 (SE = .36) for the strong relationship. In addition, a Shapiro-Wilk's test ( $p > .05$ ) and a visual

inspection of their histograms, normal Q-Q plots and box plots showed that all the items were approximately normally distributed for both weak and strong relationships.

As employing the same method, this section analyzed *H3* and *H4* simultaneously, yet with separate null hypotheses. The null hypotheses were proposed:

*H01*: There is no significant difference between weak and strong customer-firm relationships considering the process of positive eWOM transmission.

*H02*: There is no significant difference between weak and strong customer-firm relationships considering the process of negative eWOM adoption.

Table 4.2.3 shows the multivariate tests for the two situations of relationship strength: 1) weak customer-firm relationship and 2) strong customer-firm relationship. There was a statistically significant difference between the weak and the strong customer-firm relationships when considered jointly on the two composite scores (CS1 and CS2), Wilks'  $\lambda = .675$ ,  $F(2, 367) = 88.5$ ,  $p < .05$  and partial eta squared = .325.

Effect		Value	F	Hypothesis df	Error df	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Intercept	Pillai's Trace	.947	3263.891 <sup>a</sup>	2.000	367.000	.000	.947
	Wilks' Lambda	.053	3263.891 <sup>a</sup>	2.000	367.000	.000	.947
	Hotelling's Trace	17.787	3263.891 <sup>a</sup>	2.000	367.000	.000	.947
	Roy's Largest Root	17.787	3263.891 <sup>a</sup>	2.000	367.000	.000	.947
Relationship Strength	Pillai's Trace	.325	88.513 <sup>a</sup>	2.000	367.000	.000	.325
	Wilks' Lambda	.675	88.513 <sup>a</sup>	2.000	367.000	.000	.325
	Hotelling's Trace	.482	88.513 <sup>a</sup>	2.000	367.000	.000	.325
	Roy's Largest Root	.482	88.513 <sup>a</sup>	2.000	367.000	.000	.325

Table 4.2.3: Multivariate Tests

A separate ANOVA was executed for each composite score, with each ANOVA assessed at an alpha level of .025. Specifically, there was a statistically significant difference between weak and strong customer-firm relationships in influencing the transmission of positive eWOM (CS1),  $F(1, 368) = 128.9$ ,  $p < .025$ , and partial eta squared = .259. Similarly, for the adoption of negative eWOM, the difference between weak and strong customer-firm relationships on CS2 was highly significant with  $F(1, 368) = 127.7$ ,  $p < .025$ , and partial eta squared = .258. Table 4.2.4 shows the ANOVA test result for each composite score in detail.

Source	Dependent Variable	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Relationship Strength	CS1	89.415	1	89.415	128.896	.000	.259
	CS2	95.524	1	95.524	127.662	.000	.258
Error	CS1	255.281	368	.694			
	CS2	275.360	368	.748			

Table 4.2.4: Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Furthermore, the mean score of each composite score was calculated to show which customer-firm relationship strength had higher mean. Specifically, strong customer-firm relationship demonstrated significantly higher on CS1 than did weak customer-firm relationship ( $3.56 > 2.57$ ). Similarly, CS2 had statistically higher mean value on the strong customer-firm relationship ( $3.50 > 2.49$ ). Table 4.2.5 illustrates more clearly the comparison of the mean scores between two situations of the customer-firm relationships.

	Relationship Strength	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
CS1	Weak	2.5724	.80498	185
	Strong	3.5556	.85988	185
CS2	Weak	2.4883	.82752	185
	Strong	3.5045	.90096	185

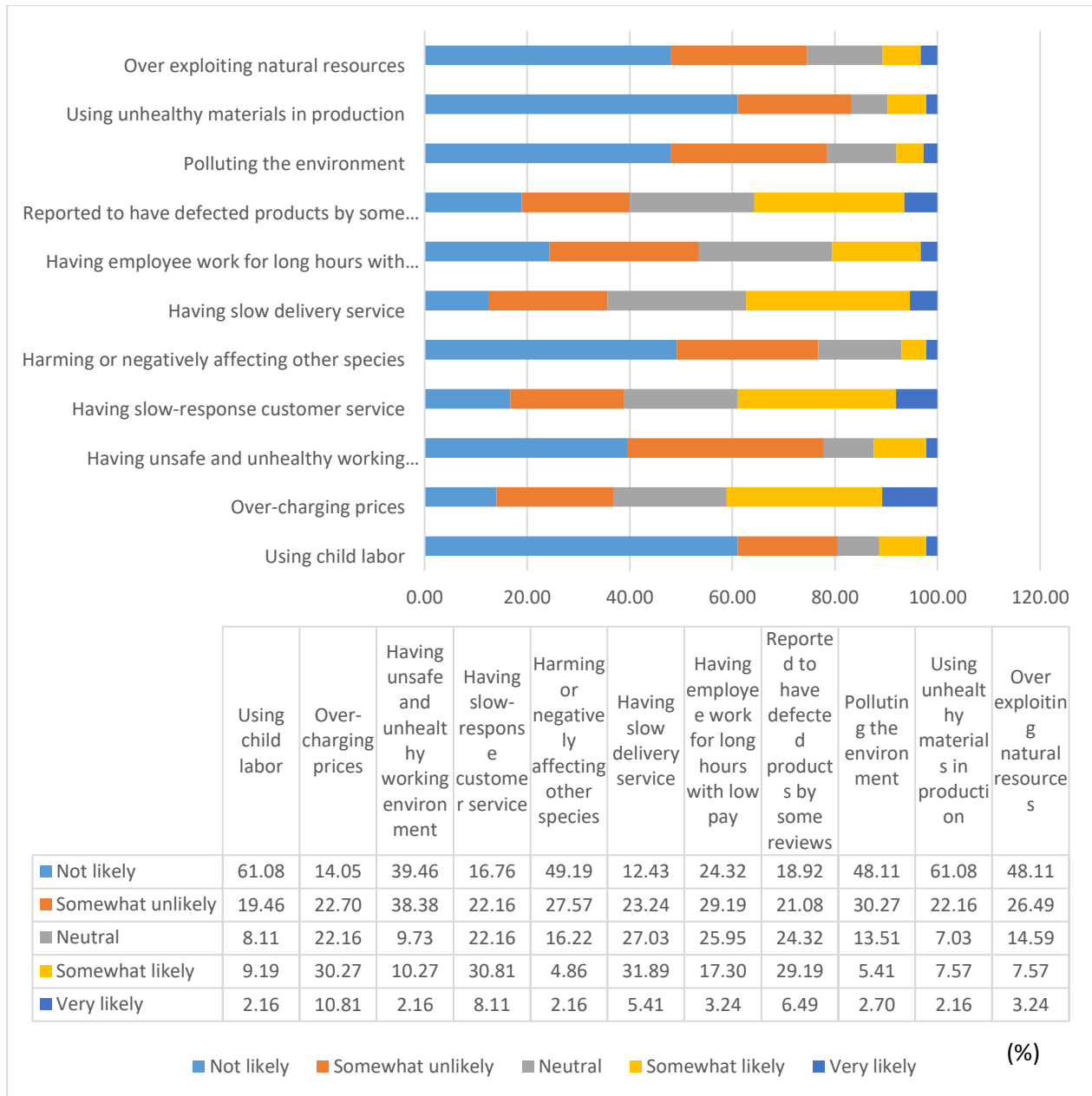
Table 4.2.5: Means of the two composite scores

In conclusion, the results generated from this test reject the null hypotheses  $H01$  and  $H02$ . This means there is statistically significant differences between weak and strong customer-firm relationships considering the process of positive eWOM transmission and

negative eWOM adoption. More specifically, strong customer-firm relationships had a higher mean score on every construct. Based on the Likert scale, the higher the score, the more impact had on eWOM conversations. Thus, strong customer-firm relationships had higher impact on the process of positive eWOM transmission and negative eWOM adoption than did weak customer-firm relationships, which supports *H3* and *H4*.

### **4.3. Tolerance Level Testing**

This study also gathered responses on the tolerance level of eleven activities that firms usually carry out. Hence, a graph was created to demonstrate various opinions on different activities, with a complementary table showing the percentage of respondents (See Graph 4.3.1). Noticeably, a large percentage of respondents was completely intolerant of “using child labor” and “using unhealthy materials in production” (both were 61.08%). In addition, there were other activities which respondents were “not likely” to tolerate, such as “harming or negatively affecting other species” with 49.19%, “polluting the environment” with 48.11%, “over exploiting natural resources” with 48.11%, and “having unsafe and unhealthy working environment” with 39.46%. Among the eleven activities, some were found to be somewhat tolerable if customers have strong relationships with firms. For instance, 31.89% of respondents were “somewhat likely” to overlook the slow delivery service and 30.81% were “somewhat likely” to accept the slow-response customer service. In general, the majority of the completely intolerable information was found to have connection with social, ethical and environmental issues.



Graph 4.3.1: Tolerance level of respondents based on eleven negative pieces of information about firms' activities



## **5. DISCUSSION**

### **5.1. EWOM Valence & Customers' Purchase Intentions**

This study has proposed that customers' purchase intentions are positively and negatively influenced by favorable and unfavorable eWOM information, respectively. The results from empirical test support the above claim; therefore, *H1* and *H2* are supported. Customers' purchase intentions are found to be significantly influenced by both positive and negative eWOM information. Specifically, positive eWOM information encourages customers to make purchases. On the other hand, it is found that unfavorable eWOM information deters people from acquiring products and services. Thus, these findings not only agree with previous claims about the importance of valence in offline WOM communication (Arndt, 1967; Weiberger & Dillion, 1980; Sweeney et al., 2012; Farhangi et al., 2014; See-To & Ho, 2014); but also broaden the scopes of their research. It confirms the powerful role of eWOM valence towards customers' purchase intentions on online platforms, i.e., social media channels. Additionally, this study provided respondents four samples of multiple brands' reviews created by customers on Facebook. Even though respondents reported that they were motivated to make purchases by positive eWOM information, they showed a certain degree of skepticism. The test results yields that the impact of negative eWOM information is more significant, which is consistent with previous research (Arndt, 1967; Weiberger & Dillion, 1980). In other words, negative EWOM is found to have more influence on customers' purchase intentions than did positive EWOM.

### **5.2. The Strength of Customer-Firm Relationships & the Transmission of Positive eWOM**

This study has proposed that customers are more likely to initiate positive eWOM about products and services from companies if they have strong relationships with those companies (*H3*). The empirical test provided results that support the above claim; therefore, *H3* is supported. Specifically, this study provided respondents multiple contexts that encourage customers to generate positive eWOM (e.g., when they found positive eWOM information, when they found new marketing campaigns, when someone needs their recommendations and when they found particular products or services useful). The results show that the stronger the relationships between customers and firms, the more

likely customers are to generate positive eWOM about such firms and their products or services. This finding is not surprising, as other research also suggests, in a more general context, that customers' behaviors are positively influenced by strong identification with companies (Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Ahearne et al., 2005; Brown et al., 2005). If the relationships with firms are strong, customers tend to be more loyal and feel connected to such firms, which creates a kind of identification called the C-C identification. This C-C identification results in customers engaging in favorable behaviors towards firms (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Thus, this finding support one of the proposed consequences from the C-C Identification model of Bhattacharya and Sen (2003), "Company Promotion". In fact, when customers place high preference on particular companies, they are more likely to carry out positive WOM about those companies and their products or services (Brown et al., 2005). With the results from the empirical test, this study broadens the validity of the previous claim to online platforms, e.g., social media channels.

### **5.3. The Strength of Customer-Firm Relationships & the Adoption of Negative eWOM**

This study has proposed that customers are more likely to overlook negative eWOM about firms and their products or services if they have strong relationships with those firms (*H4*). The empirical test provided results that support the above claim; therefore, *H4* is supported. It is found that the stronger the relationships between customers and firms, the more likely customers are to tolerate negative eWOM about such firms and their products or services. This result also supports one of the proposed consequences from the C-C identification model of Bhattacharya and Sen (2003), "Resilience to Negative Information". In addition, this finding is consistent with claims from previous research. When customers highly believe in firms, they tend to overlook negative information towards such firms (Hibbard et al., 2001; Alsop, 2002). However, there are some restrictions to the tolerance of customers even though they have strong relationships with firms. Hence, this study also provided respondents eleven negative pieces of information to test their tolerance level. The results yield that six of the proposed eleven negative activities are regarded as completely intolerable by the majority of respondents, i.e., using child labor, using

unhealthy materials in production, harming or negatively affecting other species, polluting the environment, over exploiting natural resources and having unsafe and unhealthy working environment. Hence, this finding is in accordance with previous claim that social, ethical and environmental issues are usually out of the customers' tolerance level (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2001). Moreover, the other negative activities of minor magnitude are also found to be intolerable; however, if customers have strong relationships with firms, they tend to easily overlook those problems.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

### **6.1. Main Findings**

This thesis has two purposes, one of which is to explore the effect of eWOM valence on customers' purchase intentions. To address this aim, the first two hypotheses (*H1* & *H2*) are supported through the analysis of responses gathered from self-administered questionnaires. The following are main findings for the first research question:

- Positive eWOM information is found to have positive influence on customers' purchase intentions. This kind of information motivates people to make purchases on products and services.
- Negative eWOM information is found to negatively influence customers' purchase intentions. Customers are discouraged from making purchases after being exposed to unfavorable reviews or information about products and services from other customers.
- Customers are found to be skeptical towards positive information, which reduces its effect. Thus, between the two sides of eWOM valence, negative eWOM has more influence on customers than does positive eWOM.

The second aim of this thesis is to examine the impact of strong customer-firm relationships on eWOM conversations. Specifically, the transmission of positive eWOM and the adoption of negative eWOM were considered to measure the impact. The remaining hypotheses (*H3* & *H4*) are also supported through the empirical test. The following are the main findings for the second research question:

- The stronger the relationship between customers and firms, the more likely customers are to generate positive eWOM about products and services related to those firms.
- Within the tolerance zone, the stronger the relationship between customers and firms, the more likely customers are to tolerate negative eWOM information about those firms. If the unfavorable information is among social, ethical or environmental issues, there is a high possibility that strong customer-firm relationships can't prevent customers from showing disapprovals.

## **6.2. Implications for International Business**

From practical viewpoint, this thesis brings marketers many insights about the significance of eWOM valence on customers' purchase intentions and the impact of strong relationships with customers on the transmission of positive eWOM as well as the adoption of negative eWOM. Both positive and negative eWOM were separately examined to provide a clear understanding on their impacts towards customers. Negative reviews are much more likely to negatively impact businesses than positive reviews are to help. Plus, the studied area is social media which has continuously increasing popularity, making it a valuable platform for eWOM. People engage more in social media channels which offer a promising number of potential customers to firms. As there are more people on these channels, marketers should realize the importance of customers' reviews on social media channels which may affect their businesses. Hence, they should carefully develop suitable strategies to handle online reviews from customers, especially unfavorable opinions.

In addition, as strong relationships with customers are found to have impact on eWOM conversations, marketers become aware of the importance of not only retaining but also improving the relationships with existing customers. Particularly, customers with emotional connection to firms will help facilitate favorable eWOM information throughout social media communities, generating new customers. Additionally, strong relationships with customers increase the possibility that they will overlook negative eWOM information (Hibbard et al., 2001). However, marketers should carefully handle or avoid problems related to social, ethical and environmental issues, otherwise these kinds of unfavorable information will likely to evoke adverse feeling from customers. Significantly, customers with emotional connection to firms are those who would react in a more critical way (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2001).

### **6.3. Limitations & Suggestions for Future Research**

Although providing valuable insights for marketers, this thesis has some limitations which can be improved in future research. Although the respondents of the survey come from different countries and continents, most of them are university students which may not accurately represent the whole population. In addition, the sampling technique was utilizing online networks among university students, which contributes to the limitation in deriving collected results to the larger population.

Another limitation is addressing social media channels in general, instead of considering each site separately. In regard of each social media channel, the results may be different. Hence, future research should investigate eWOM valence on one specific social media channel to gain deeper and more accurate insights. Additionally, future research may study other online platforms, e.g., shopping websites, blogs, discussion forums. Finally, as the time and resource were limited, the eleven negative activities to measure the resilience of strong-identified customers were based on subjective suggestion of the author. Future research therefore should first conduct additional study to create a list of

intolerable activities based on customers' perspectives. Then, a follow-up test to rank these activities will be more objective.

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# APPENDICES

## Appendix 1: Questionnaire

### 1. How long have you been using the Internet?

- Less than 1 year
- 1 year to less than 3 years
- 3 years to less than 5 years
- 5 years or more

### 2. How much time do you spend on social media daily? (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, etc.)

- Less than 30 minutes
- 30 minutes to 60 minutes
- 61 minutes to 90 minutes
- 91 minutes to 120 minutes
- 121 minutes or more

### 3. How frequently do you read reviews or comments on social media channels about products or services before acquiring them?

- Never
- Sometimes
- Usually
- Always

**4. If you found a product or service with some negative reviews from other consumers on social media, how likely would you be to choose it?**

- Not likely
- Somewhat unlikely
- Neutral
- Somewhat likely
- Very likely

**5. If you found a product or service with some positive reviews from other consumers on social media, how likely would you be to choose it?**

- Not likely
- Somewhat unlikely
- Neutral
- Somewhat likely
- Very likely

For question 6, 7, 8 and 9, there are reviews made by consumers from multiple brands' online pages on Facebook. Read the reviews and describe the likelihood that you will choose those products or services.

### **6. Restaurant**

**"Without a doubt, the best restaurant that I've ever eaten at. The food, employees and atmosphere were all superb!"**

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not likely	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very likely

### 7. Action camera

**"The sound quality when recording using a pole or in a vehicle is terrible. The mics are ridiculously over sensitive picking up far too much ambient noise and nonexistent noise just from holding the pole."**

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not likely	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very likely

### 8. Amusement park

**"I have 2 kids with autism. And people that have kids with autism know that they have no patience standing long time in lines at rides. The new system of disability fails because you still have to wait a long time. And one of the staff that helped me get a disability pass did not want me to get one she was not only rude but kept asking what kind of disability did my kids have."**

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not likely	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very likely

### 9. Chocolate bar

**"Yummy...The new flavor: fruit & nut milk is just wonderful. Bought 2 bars yesterday, and finished them earlier this morning. I will definitely buy more when I get to the grocery store tomorrow."**

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not likely	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very likely

For question 10, 11, 12, 13 and 14, think of a company which you don't give preference over others and rarely use its products or services.

Then, place that company name into "X" and tick the circle that shows the likelihood you will act the following behaviors on social media channels (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, etc.).

**10. When I found a certain product or service from Company X useful...**

	Not likely	Somewhat unlikely	Neutral	Somewhat likely	Very likely
I will recommend it to my friends via social media.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I will give it a good review or rating on its official online page.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I will make an online post to share my good experience about it.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**11. When there is a new marketing campaign from Company X...**

	Not likely	Somewhat unlikely	Neutral	Somewhat likely	Very likely
I will recommend it to my friends via social media.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I will share the online post about such campaign.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**12. When I read or found some positive information about a product or service from Company X...**

	Not likely	Somewhat unlikely	Neutral	Somewhat likely	Very likely
I will recommend it to my friends via social media.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I will share the online post about such information.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>



**13. When someone needs my advice for his/her purchase decision...**

	Not likely	Somewhat unlikely	Neutral	Somewhat likely	Very likely
I will share my experience about product or service from Company X.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I will recommend product or service from Company X.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**14. When I read or found some negative information (i.e., bad reviews) about a product or service from Company X**

	Not likely	Somewhat unlikely	Neutral	Somewhat likely	Very likely
I think it is only a minor mistake of the company.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I will still use that product or service.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
It won't affect my decision when acquiring any products or services from Company X.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

For question 15, 16, 17, 18 and 19, think of a company which you emotionally feel connected to and usually use its products or services.

Then, place that company name into "X" and tick the circle that shows the likelihood that you will act the following behaviors on social media channels (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, etc.).

**15. When I found a certain product or service from Company X useful...**

	Not likely	Somewhat unlikely	Neutral	Somewhat likely	Very likely
I will recommend it to my friends via social media.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I will give it a good review or rating on its official online page.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I will make an online post to share my good experience about it.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**16. When there is a new marketing campaign from Company X...**

	Not likely	Somewhat unlikely	Neutral	Somewhat likely	Very likely
I will recommend it to my friends via social media.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I will share the online post about such campaign.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**17. When I read or found some positive information about a product or service from Company X...**

	Not likely	Somewhat unlikely	Neutral	Somewhat likely	Very likely
I will recommend it to my friends via social media.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I will share the online post about such information.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**18. When someone needs my advice for his/her purchase decision...**

	Not likely	Somewhat unlikely	Neutral	Somewhat likely	Very likely
I will share my experience about product or service from Company X.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I will recommend product or service from Company X.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**19. When I read or found some negative information (i.e., bad reviews) about a product or service from Company X**

	Not likely	Somewhat unlikely	Neutral	Somewhat likely	Very likely
I think it is only a minor mistake of the company.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I will still use that product or service.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
It won't affect my decision when acquiring any products or services from Company X.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**20. How likely are you to tolerate the following activities from the company that you have STRONG relationship with?**

	Not likely	Somewhat unlikely	Neutral	Somewhat likely	Very likely
Using child labor	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Over-charging prices	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Having unsafe and unhealthy working environment	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Having slow-response customer service	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Harming or negatively affecting other species	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Having slow delivery service	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Having employee work for long hours with low pay	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Reported to have defected products by some reviews	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Polluting the environment	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Using unhealthy materials in production	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Over exploiting natural resources	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**21. What is your gender?**

- Male
- Female