Electronic Word-of-Mouth and Customer Experience in the Digital Age: Theoretical Foundations and Mixed-Methods Design in the Hong Kong Market

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Information of Article

Abstract
Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) has become a central driver of customer experience and business performance in digitally advanced markets such as Hong Kong, where consumers rely heavily on online reviews, ratings, and social media commentary to guide purchase decisions (Rochelle & Chan, 2024; Wong, 2019). This article synthesizes theoretical and empirical literature on eWOM, conceptualizes key independent variables—volume, sentiment, source credibility, and platform usage—and links them to customer experience as a dependent construct within the Hong Kong context (Ngarmwongnoi et al., 2020; Kala & D.S., 2018). It also presents a mixed-methods research design combining a large-scale online survey (450–500 respondents) with secondary data and qualitative analysis to examine how eWOM shapes trust, engagement, and perceptions, and to operationalize a reproducible framework for studying eWOM in highly connected urban markets (Archibald, 2019; Mulisa, 2019). The design provides a blueprint for future research and practice on managing eWOM to enhance customer experience and business outcomes in similar digital environments

1. Introduction

Digital transformation has fundamentally altered how customers interact with businesses, shifting customer experience from primarily physical, point-of-sale encounters to complex, multi-touchpoint journeys across online platforms, social media, and mobile applications (Kala & D.S., 2018; Teng, 2014). In this environment, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM)—user-generated reviews, ratings, comments, and posts about products and services—has emerged as a powerful determinant of consumer behavior and organizational performance, often carrying more weight than firm-generated communications (Zhang, 2012; Özgen, 2015). eWOM differs from traditional word-of-mouth by its reach, permanence, and speed, enabling consumers in connected markets like Hong Kong to influence each other's decisions at scale in real time (Sandes & Urdan, 2013; Rochelle & Chan, 2024).

Hong Kong, with high internet penetration, strong mobile adoption, and a highly competitive retail and service environment, provides a particularly salient context for examining eWOM and customer experience (Wong, 2019; Rochelle & Chan, 2024). Consumers in this market are information-intensive, culturally oriented toward peer recommendations, and highly sensitive to online reputation signals, making eWOM a critical factor in brand perception, trust, and loyalty (Farzin & Fattahi, 2018; Gvili & Levy, 2018). However, despite growing global literature on eWOM, there remains a gap concerning integrated frameworks and empirical designs that address the interplay of eWOM volume, sentiment,

source credibility, and platform characteristics on customer experience in Hong Kong's cultural and competitive setting (Sotiriadis, 2014; Xiang, 2017). This article addresses that gap by synthesizing theoretical foundations and detailing a mixed-methods design for studying eWOM and customer experience in this context.

2. Literature foundation

2.1 eWOM and customer experience

Word-of-mouth has long been recognized as a trusted communication channel due to the perceived authenticity and relational closeness of personal recommendations, but the advent of digital platforms has transformed it into eWOM with unprecedented scalability and persistence (Ngarmwongnoi et al., 2020; Sandes & Urdan, 2013). eWOM is defined as any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, made available via the internet to a multitude of people and institutions, and it encompasses reviews, ratings, blog posts, social media content, and forum discussions (Sijoria et al., 2018; Rosario et al., 2016). Its key characteristics—scalability, interactivity, anonymity, and multichannel dissemination—make it both a strategic asset and a risk factor for firms operating in digital markets (Elseidi & El-Baz, 2016; El-Baz et al., 2022).

Customer experience is conceptualized as the cumulative set of interactions and touchpoints a customer has with a brand, encompassing cognitive, emotional, sensory, and social responses across the entire customer journey (Kala & D.S., 2018; Lin, 2013). In the digital age, eWOM constitutes a pivotal touchpoint at pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase stages by shaping expectations, reducing uncertainty, and reinforcing or undermining satisfaction and loyalty (Krishnamurthy & Kumar, 2018; Ngarmwongnoi et al., 2020). Positive eWOM can enhance perceived value, trust, and brand advocacy, whereas negative eWOM can erode confidence and trigger switching behavior, especially in markets where consumers are highly connected and well informed (Rong, 2012; Albayrak & Ceylan, 2021). Understanding how specific dimensions of eWOM influence customer experience is therefore crucial for firms seeking to manage digital reputations and design effective customer engagement strategies.

The literature identifies four core independent variables of eWOM with particular relevance to customer experience: volume, sentiment, source credibility, and platform characteristics (Nuseir, 2019; Khan et al., 2023). eWOM volume refers to the number of reviews, comments, ratings, or posts about a product or brand, and functions as a proxy for popularity and social proof; higher volumes generally enhance perceived credibility and visibility, though they may also create information overload (Mishra & Satish, 2016; Kudeshia & Kumar, 2017; Rosario et al., 2019). Sector-specific studies in hospitality, retail, and technology show that products and services with higher eWOM volumes are often perceived as more trustworthy and attract greater purchase intentions, while low volumes can signal irrelevance or lack of reliability (Goswami, 2016; Cheng & Zhou, 2010; Tsao & Hsieh, 2015).

eWOM sentiment captures the valence (positive, negative, neutral) and emotional tone of messages and is commonly assessed through sentiment analysis using natural language processing and machine learning techniques (Siddiqui et al., 2021; Sharifpour et al., 2016). Positive sentiment typically enhances perceived quality and trust, encouraging purchase and loyalty, while negative sentiment can deter

customers, increase perceived risk, and damage brand equity, particularly when widely shared (Lin, 2013; Rong, 2020). Neutral sentiment, characterized by balanced and factual evaluations, may also contribute to credibility by offering nuanced perspectives, especially in high-involvement or high-risk decisions (Chu et al., 2019). Source credibility refers to the perceived trustworthiness, expertise, and authenticity of the eWOM source, and includes verified purchasers, domain experts, influencers, and ordinary consumers (Rochelle & Chan, 2024; Kuo & Nakhata, 2019). In an era of fake reviews and AI-generated content, credible signals such as verification badges, transparent sponsorship disclosures, and consistent message quality are critical for shaping how eWOM affects customer experience (Rochelle & Chan, 2024; Wong A., 2018).

Lastly, platform characteristics—social media, dedicated review sites, e-commerce platforms, and forums—moderate how eWOM is produced, displayed, and interpreted, influencing its reach, perceived reliability, and impact on engagement (Gvili & Levy, 2018; Kala & D.S., 2018). In Hong Kong, popular platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, WeChat, TripAdvisor, and major e-commerce sites provide different affordances for content format, visibility, interaction, and community norms, which in turn shape how eWOM contributes to customer experience in sectors like hospitality, retail, technology, and healthcare (Wong, 2019; Hoang & Tung, 2022). The combined effects of these variables form a complex, interdependent system through which eWOM influences perceptions and behavior, indicating the need for integrated theoretical and empirical frameworks.

2.2 Theoretical framework and Hong Kong context

The thesis synthesizes several theoretical perspectives to construct a framework linking eWOM variables to customer experience, including social influence theory, information processing models, and trust-based views of consumer behavior (Kala & D.S., 2018; Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012). eWOM volume and sentiment are posited to affect perceived social proof and informational quality, source credibility underpins trust formation, and platform characteristics moderate exposure and engagement dynamics, jointly shaping customer experience outcomes such as satisfaction, trust, engagement, and loyalty (Krishnamurthy & Kumar, 2018; Kuo & Nakhata, 2019). The framework also acknowledges the role of culture, noting that Hong Kong's blend of Eastern collectivist norms and global consumer culture amplifies the importance of peer opinions and social norms in digital decision-making (Verma, 2022; Yolanda, 2011).

Hong Kong's high digital literacy, dense urban environment, and concentration of local and multinational firms create a competitive landscape in which brands must actively manage eWOM to maintain reputation and market share (Wong, 2019; Chan, 2012). Consumers here are technologically savvy, frequently consult online reviews, and exhibit strong expectations for transparency and authenticity, making both positive and negative eWOM highly consequential for performance (Rochelle & Chan, 2024; Donthu, 2021). The literature also highlights managerial challenges in monitoring and responding to large volumes of user-generated content, integrating feedback into business decisions, and balancing local cultural expectations with global platform dynamics (Cheung, 2010; Thadani, 2012). This context motivates a research design that can capture both the quantitative relationships between eWOM variables and customer experience and the qualitative nuances of perception and culture-specific dynamics.

3. Research Methods

3.1 Research philosophy, design, and approach

The study adopts a mixed-methods paradigm grounded in a pragmatic research philosophy that prioritizes methodological pluralism to address complex, real-world phenomena such as eWOM and customer experience (Morgan, 2019; Johannesson, 2021). A convergent parallel design is used, where quantitative and qualitative data are collected and analyzed in parallel before being integrated at the interpretation stage to provide complementary insights and triangulation (Mulisa, 2019; Oliva, 2019). Quantitatively, the research employs a survey-based explanatory design to test hypotheses regarding the effects of eWOM volume, sentiment, source credibility, and platform usage on customer experience, using statistical techniques such as regression, correlation, and ANOVA (Jain, 2021; Archibald, 2019). Qualitatively, it draws on secondary data (e.g., existing studies, industry reports, digital content) and thematic analysis of narrative responses to explore underlying mechanisms and contextual interpretations (Rong, 2020; Mulisa, 2019).

The research adopts a deductive approach in operationalizing constructs and hypotheses derived from the literature and theoretical framework, while also incorporating inductive elements through qualitative analysis to identify emergent themes and refine understanding of eWOM dynamics in Hong Kong (Kala & D.S., 2018; Jiang, 2020). This integration aims to balance breadth and generalizability with depth and contextual sensitivity, thereby enhancing both the explanatory power and practical relevance of the findings (Krishnamurthy & Kumar, 2018; Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012). The mixed-methods approach is particularly suited to eWOM research because it allows quantification of relationships and patterns while also capturing subjective experiences, sentiments, and cultural nuances embedded in electronic word-of-mouth communications.

3.1 Sampling, data collection, and instruments

The target population consists of individuals in Hong Kong who actively engage with eWOM through online reviews, social media, and other digital platforms, reflecting a diverse cross-section of digitally active consumers (Hossan, 2023; Lu, 2023). A stratified random sampling technique is employed to ensure proportional representation across key strata such as age group, gender, industry interaction (e.g., hospitality, retail, technology, healthcare), and digital literacy levels, thereby enhancing generalizability and allowing meaningful subgroup comparisons (Iliyasu, 2021; Turner, 2019). The study uses a target sample size of 450–500 respondents, balancing statistical power, demographic diversity, and practical constraints related to time and resources (Hossan, 2023; Iliyasu, 2021).

Primary data are collected via an online survey disseminated through social media (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn), email invitations, and relevant online forums and consumer communities, leveraging the digital habits and connectivity of Hong Kong residents (Archibald, 2019; Alam, 2021). The survey instrument includes closed-ended items (e.g., Likert scales, multiple-choice questions, yes/no items) measuring eWOM volume, sentiment perception, source credibility, platform usage, and dimensions of customer experience such as satisfaction, trust, and engagement, as well as open-ended

questions probing motivations, perceptions, and experiences related to eWOM (Mulisa, 2019; Jain, 2021). Secondary data from academic literature, industry reports, and digital platforms complement the primary data by providing contextual benchmarks and trend insights (Alam, 2021; Archibald, 2019). Reliability and validity are evaluated using measures such as Cronbach's alpha, with initial results indicating moderate internal consistency and suggesting scope for further scale refinement in future work (Homer, 2024).

3.2 Ethical considerations and reproducibility

Ethical considerations include informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and avoidance of coercive incentives, with participants fully briefed on the research purpose, data usage, and their rights, in line with standard ethical guidelines for social and psychological research (Husband, 2020; Homer, 2024). The study minimizes risks to participants by focusing on non-sensitive topics related to consumer behavior and by anonymizing data to prevent identification of individuals or specific firms (Archibald, 2019; Alam, 2021). To support reproducibility, the research design clearly specifies sampling procedures, recruitment channels, instrument structure, and analysis methods, enabling other researchers to replicate the approach in similar digital markets or adapt it to different cultural settings (Morgan, 2019; Mulisa, 2019). The convergent parallel mixed-methods framework, combined with explicit operationalization of eWOM variables and customer experience constructs, provides a transparent blueprint for future empirical investigations into digital word-of-mouth and customer experience dynamics.

4. Conclusion

A growing body of theory and evidence indicates that eWOM is now a core determinant of customer experience, particularly in digitally intensive markets such as Hong Kong where consumers rely heavily on online reviews, ratings, and social media commentary to inform their decisions. By conceptualizing eWOM through four key dimensions—volume, sentiment, source credibility, and platform characteristics—this study offers an integrated framework linking these variables to customer experience outcomes such as satisfaction, trust, engagement, and loyalty. The framework highlights that the influence of eWOM is not only a function of message content but also of who speaks, where they speak, and how much they speak, all within a culturally specific context that values peer recommendations and digital transparency.

The mixed-methods design outlined in this article provides a reproducible blueprint for empirically examining these relationships, combining a stratified online survey of 450–500 digitally active consumers with secondary data and qualitative analyses to capture both statistical regularities and contextual nuance. This approach balances explanatory breadth with interpretive depth, enabling robust hypothesis testing while also illuminating how consumers in Hong Kong interpret and act upon different forms of eWOM in their daily lives. Beyond advancing academic understanding, the design also yields actionable insights for practitioners seeking to monitor, shape, and respond to eWOM in order to enhance customer experience and business performance in highly competitive, digitally saturated markets.

5. References

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