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From reviews to conversions: What drives and prevents users from sharing eWOM on social media

Od recenzji do konwersji: co skłania użytkowników do udostępniania eWOM w mediach społecznościowych, a co ich przed tym powstrzymuje

Abstract

Drawing on the Uses and Gratifications Theory, this study investigates what drives and prevents social media users from sharing electronic word of mouth (eWOM). The results of the online survey conducted among 511 respondents and logistic regression analyses reveal that using social media for self-promotion is a significant predictor of the frequency of eWOM spreading. Gender also plays a role, with women spreading eWOM more frequently than men. Additionally, LinkedIn users are nearly five times more likely to use social media to spread eWOM than non-users, and follower count is positively associated with the frequency of eWOM sharing. The study highlights barriers such as private nature of user profiles, embarrassment, and lack of content creation skills, which limit eWOM spreading. Together, these findings offer practical insights for brands seeking to foster authentic engagement and influence consumer purchase decisions through user-generated content.

Keywords

electronic word of mouth, social media marketing, uses and gratifications theory, user-generated content

Streszczenie

Bazując na teorii użytkowania i gratyfikacji niniejszy artykuł analizuje, co skłania oraz co powstrzymuje użytkowników mediów społecznościowych przed rozpowszechnianiem komunikacji nieformalnej w środowisku wirtualnym (eWOM). Wyniki ankiety internetowej przeprowadzonej wśród 511 respondentów oraz analizy regresji logistycznej pokazują, że korzystanie z mediów społecznościowych w celu autopromocji stanowi istotny determinant częstotliwości komunikacji nieformalnej w środowisku wirtualnym. Płeć również odgrywa rolę – kobiety generują komunikację nieformalną w środowisku wirtualnym częściej niż mężczyźni. Dodatkowo użytkownicy LinkedIn wykazują niemal pięciokrotnie większe prawdopodobieństwo wykorzystywania mediów społecznościowych do komunikacji nieformalnej w środowisku wirtualnym w porównaniu z osobami niekorzystającymi z tej platformy, a liczba obserwujących jest pozytywnie związana z częstotliwością tego typu aktywności. Badanie identyfikuje także bariery, takie jak prywatny charakter profili użytkowników, załopotanie oraz brak umiejętności tworzenia treści, które ograniczają rozpowszechnianie komunikacji nieformalnej w środowisku wirtualnym. Artykuł dostarcza praktycznych wskazówek dla marek, które chcą wspierać autentyczne zaangażowanie użytkowników i wpływać na decyzje zakupowe konsumentów poprzez treści generowane przez użytkowników.

Słowa kluczowe

komunikacja nieformalna w środowisku wirtualnym, marketing w mediach społecznościowych, teoria użytkowania i gratyfikacji, treści tworzone przez użytkowników

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Introduction

Electronic word of mouth (eWOM) refers informal, interpersonal and Internet-mediated communication between two or more individuals about a brand, product, service or an organization (Bianchi, 2021). Since the early 2000s, researchers have shown that eWOM plays a critical role in shaping consumer attitudes, trust, and purchase intentions (Cheung & Thadani, 2012; Ismagilova et al., 2020). Research consistently shows that social media play a crucial role in shaping consumer behaviour through eWOM, influencing purchase decisions across various industries. The impact of eWOM on consumer purchase intentions remains a consistent theme in academic research. This theme explores how online reviews, social media interactions, and digital recommendations influence consumer behaviour and decision-making processes. The consistent presence of this theme indicates its ongoing relevance and importance in understanding consumer dynamics in the digital age.

Although the literature on eWOM has expanded significantly, several research gaps persist. First, while several studies have explored why consumers spread eWOM (Cheung & Lee, 2012; Chu & Kim, 2011; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004), there is a notable research gap concerning the relationship between motivations for using social media and eWOM spreading behaviour. Secondly, while some research touches on influencer credibility and social capital focusing on how follower count affects influence (Cowan et al., 2025; Li et al., 2024; J. Park et al., 2021), there is no evidence of studies examining how a user's own follower count influences their likelihood to spread eWOM. Thirdly, there is a clear research gap concerning the factors that prevent social media users from spreading eWOM – a dimension often overlooked in favour of what motivates users to share. While motivations for eWOM (e.g., altruism, self-enhancement) have been widely studied, the barriers or inhibitors to sharing eWOM are under-theorized and underexplored in academic literature. Furthermore, the majority of eWOM studies have been conducted in the United States, Western Europe and Asian countries leading to the call for studies from other regions, specifically from Eastern Europe (Sepac et al., 2024).

The aim of this study is to identify the key factors that drive and inhibit users from sharing eWOM on social media. Specifically, it explores how users' motivations for using social media, frequency of social media use and follower count relate to their likelihood of spreading product- or service-related opinions. The study also identifies the characteristics and behaviours of eWOM contributors, the platforms they use, the types of content they

create, and the psychological or contextual barriers that prevent broader engagement in eWOM. Using Uses & Gratifications (U&G) theory as the background, the study provides deeper insight into the mechanisms by which eWOM influences consumer decisions in today's digital landscape.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. The next section presents the theoretical background and reviews prior studies on eWOM, leading to the development of both research questions and hypotheses. Next, the research method is described. The results section then reports the main findings, including insights into motivations for social media use in relation to eWOM spreading, user characteristics associated with eWOM spreading, barriers in spreading eWOM, and its importance in purchase decision-making. The discussion section interprets these findings in light of existing literature. Finally, the paper concludes by outlining its theoretical contribution, practical implications, limitations and by suggesting directions for future research.

Theoretical background, research questions and hypotheses

Uses & Gratifications (U&G) theory (Katz et al., 1974, 1999) offers a foundational framework for understanding how and why individuals engage with media to satisfy specific psychological and social needs. Unlike traditional media effects models that treat audiences as passive recipients, U&G theory conceptualizes media users as active agents who selectively choose platforms and content to fulfil their needs (Rubin, 1983; Ruggiero, 2000). While previous research has established that motives such as self-expression or promotion, entertainment, and social interactions can drive eWOM behaviour (Bernritter et al., 2017; De Vries et al., 2017; Rohm et al., 2013), the integration of these motives with general patterns of social media use remains underexplored.

Motivations of eWOM spreading

Early studies on traditional word of mouth (WOM) found that people are driven by four different motivations to spread positive opinions (Dichter, 1966; Sundaram et al., 1998), product-involvement (e.g., experience with the product, excitement), self-involvement (e.g., gratification of emotional needs, including self-enhancement and reassurance), other-involvement (e.g., altruism or desire to help the company), message-involvement (e.g., appreciation or emotional involvement in an advertisement). Similarly, in the online environment motivations such as altruism (concern for

others), self-enhancement and reciprocity positively impact attitudes towards eWOM encouraging users to share positive reviews and engage in eWOM (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Hsu & Lin, 2008; Sohaib et al., 2018). EWOM spreading includes two distinct behaviours: giving opinions and forwarding (sharing) online content about brands, products, services and their sellers. EWOM on social media is the dominant form of eWOM (Chu & Kim, 2018).

The extant research suggests that that self-enhancement, or self-presentation, is one of the key motivations for spreading eWOM on social media (De Vries et al., 2017; Eisingerich et al., 2015; Lampel & Bhalla, 2007). In online communities, most active users that spread information become recognized as authorities (Mathwick, 2002). The desire to enhance one's reputation and self-image drives eWOM. People spread eWOM on social media to gain attention and to signal connoisseurship, uniqueness and social status (Fu et al., 2017; Lovett et al., 2013; Sung et al., 2018). Consumers' need to self-enhance mitigates the difference in willingness to offer electronic eWOM versus traditional WOM (Eisingerich et al., 2015). eWOM spreading in social networks is positively predicted by users' materialism, extraversion, and narcissism (Leung, 2013; Mehdizadeh, 2010; Moisescu et al., 2022). Users motivated by self-enhancement are also more likely to share positive experiences to build their online persona (Çadirci & Güngör, 2015; J. H. Choi et al., 2020). However, as previously noted, no studies have examined the relationship between motivations for using social media and eWOM spreading behaviour. Accordingly, drawing on the theoretical background, it is hypothesized that:

H1a: Consumers' use of social media for self-promotion is positively associated with their frequency of eWOM spreading.

Another important motivation for eWOM spreading on social media is the desire for social interactions (Azar et al., 2016; Kozinets, 2016; Muntinga et al., 2011). People may spread eWOM to establish and maintain social relationships within their personal networks (Chu & Kim, 2011). By sharing product information and experience users can help their friends with purchase decisions. In fact, other motivations mentioned in prior studies include altruism or concern for other consumers (Cheung & Lee, 2012; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Smith et al., 2007). People can share opinions on social media to help others in choosing the right (or avoiding the wrong) product, service or company. Therefore:

H1b: Consumers' use of social media for social interactions is positively associated with their frequency of eWOM spreading.

User characteristics associated with eWOM spreading on social media

A strong consumer–brand relationship increases the intention to share advertising messages on social networks (Hayes & King, 2014; Shan & King, 2015). Consumers are more likely to spread WOM for brands they love and that are consistent with their self-concept (Wallace et al., 2017). However, users spreading eWOM on social media represent a very small group of brand fans (Kimmel & Kitchen, 2014). Users with high social media usage intensity and those with strong attitudes towards the product are more likely to engage in eWOM (Dasanayaka & Karunarathne, 2024). There is a positive correlation between social media addiction and the likelihood of spreading eWOM. Users who are more addicted to social media are more likely to engage in eWOM activities (Simay et al., 2023). Mladenović et al (2021) show that gender is a statistically significant variable in predicting opinion giving and opinion passing behaviour. Women are more likely to engage in eWOM, particularly when they have strong online ties and higher levels of privacy protection behaviour (N. Park & Kim, 2020; J. Sun et al., 2019). They also tend to be more active in spreading negative eWOM compared to men (Kim & Hwang, 2022). Teenagers are major contributors to eWOM due to their continuous communication and sharing with peers on social media (Mishra et al., 2018). While some studies have identified general predictors of eWOM spreading behaviour, there is still limited and fragmented knowledge about who exactly spreads eWOM. Considering this research gap, the following research question is proposed:

RQ1: What are the characteristics of consumers who use social media to spread eWOM?

Jin & Phua (2014) conducted two experiments on Twitter using celebrities with varying follower counts and found that the number of followers significantly impacts the credibility of the source. Higher follower counts enhance the perceived credibility of the individual, which in turn increases the effectiveness of eWOM (Hwang & Zhang, 2018; Jin & Phua, 2014). This credibility can lead to higher product involvement, buying intention, and intention to pass along eWOM (Jin & Phua, 2014). Individuals with higher centrality (i.e. more connected or more followed) are more likely to spread negative opinions, especially when they are heavy users of social media, however there is no significant effect on positive eWOM intention (Anastasiu et al., 2023). Given the lack of empirical evidence regarding the role of users' follower count in eWOM spreading, the study addresses the following question:

RQ2: How is the number of followers related to the frequency of eWOM spreading?

Barriers in spreading eWOM

Preece and co-authors (2004) outline several key reasons why users refrain from posting in online discussion communities. Their research highlighting the role of lack of motivation, privacy concerns and shyness provide a valuable starting point for examining potential barriers to spreading eWOM on social media. Compared to traditional WOM, users may be less willing to engage in eWOM due to the perceived social risk of exposing themselves to criticism (Eisingerich et al., 2015). Fear of being judged, unfollowed, or publicly criticized can discourage users from sharing their opinions online. Privacy concerns and the potential negative consequences of disclosing personal experiences may further inhibit eWOM activity (Abbas et al., 2024). In some cases, cultural taboos, politeness norms, or consumer shame may suppress especially negative eWOM. On the other hand, the absence of tangible rewards or social benefits can also be a deterrent of eWOM spreading. Users are more likely to share information if they perceive a direct benefit, such as economic incentives or social recognition (Ismagilova et al., 2021). To understand why users refrain from spreading eWOM on social media, the following question is proposed:

RQ3: What are the main barriers in spreading eWOM on social media?

EWOM on social media as a driver of purchase decisions

According to We Are Social (2025a), 23.2% of global Internet users discover new brands, products and services through social media comments, while 22.5% do so on consumer review sites. In Poland, consumer review sites play an even more important role: 29.3% of Internet users report discovering new brands, products, and services through this type of social media and 16.2% through social media comments (We Are Social, 2025b). Academic literature to date shows that eWOM on social media also helps consumers make more informed purchase decisions (King et al., 2014; D.-H. Park et al., 2007; Senecal & Nantel, 2004). For 37.7% of global Internet users and 46.5% of Internet users in Poland consumer reviews are the primary source of information while researching brands (We Are Social, 2025a, 2025b). According to the Pew Research Center, 62% of U.S. adults who use TikTok, 44% of those who use Instagram, 37% of Facebook users, and 29% of X (formerly Twitter) users report using these platforms to look at product reviews or recommendations (Pew Research Center, 2024). Yelp and TripAdvisor are well-known platforms where users post reviews and ratings about various services, especially in the tourism and hospitality sectors (Bonifazi

et al., 2023; Jalilvand & Heidari, 2017). Although less frequently studied, Reddit is also an important platform for eWOM, with specific models developed to evaluate the eWOM power of Reddit posts (Bonifazi et al., 2023). From the companies' perspective, prior studies confirm that eWOM on social media has a significant impact on sales (Babić Rosario et al., 2016; Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Gopinath et al., 2014). Yoon and co-authors (2018) found that the number of comments on a company's Facebook brand posts is significantly and positively associated with revenue. Specifically, they report that, on average, a 1% increase in number of comments corresponds to a 0.0063% increase in revenue (Yoon et al., 2018). To date, only one study from the U.S. market (Pew Research Center, 2024) has examined which specific social media platforms are used to search for consumer opinions on brands, products and services. Therefore, it remains necessary to investigate this issue further. Accordingly, the following research question is posed:

RQ4: Which platforms are used for searching eWOM on social media?

Several studies highlight the critical role of eWOM credibility in shaping purchase intentions (Bulut & Karabulut, 2018; Ladhari & Michaud, 2015; See-to & Ho, 2014). The credibility of eWOM is a crucial aspect that can either enhance or undermine its effectiveness. When consumers perceive eWOM as credible, they are more likely to trust the information and make a purchase (Rao & Rao, 2019). Authentic eWOM, perceived as genuine and trustworthy, is more likely to influence consumer behaviour positively (Moran & Muzellec, 2017). Conversely, suspicion about the authenticity of eWOM can negatively impact its effectiveness. When consumers doubt the authenticity of reviews, they find them less convincing and are less likely to purchase the product (Ren et al., 2017). The adoption of eWOM information is another critical factor. Consumers who find eWOM information useful and credible are more likely to adopt it, which in turn increases their purchase intention (Ngo et al., 2024; Rahaman et al., 2022; Tien et al., 2019). Positive attitudes towards eWOM significantly increase consumers' purchase intentions (Y. Choi, 2018, 2020; Ruangkanjanases et al., 2021). Considering findings from prior research, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: The perceived authenticity of eWOM is associated with greater likelihood of purchasing based on user opinions.

The literature on eWOM is fragmented, with inconsistent findings across studies, making it difficult to reach a consensus on its impact across different product categories (Qahri-Saremi & Montazemi, 2019; Tabbane & Debabi, 2015). Traditional WOM is particularly important when there is

a high involvement of a consumer (Dwyer, 2007), when decisions are related to new (Bone, 1992; Derbaix & Vanhamme, 2003; Moldovan, Goldenberg, & Chattopadhyay, 2011), complex, high risk products (Brzozowska-Wos & Schivinski, 2017), those bringing intangible benefits (De Bruyn & Lilien, 2008) and services (Hogan, Lemon, & Libai, 2004; Murray, 1991; Sweeney, Soutar, & Mazzarol, 2008). Moreover, prior research indicates that the impact of eWOM varies depending on the type of product. Specifically, eWOM has a stronger influence on the sales of experience goods than on search goods (products whose key qualities and characteristics can be evaluated before purchase), because consumers find eWOM more trustworthy for products that require personal experience to evaluate (Renteria-García et al., 2020). EWOM credibility and perceived information quality have a greater impact on purchase intentions for services than for commodities (Roy et al., 2024). A study by Roy and co-authors (2024) comparing the influence of eWOM on both goods and services found that while eWOM affects purchase intentions for both, its impact is much higher for services. Similarly, a meta-analysis of the effect of eWOM on sales revealed that eWOM's effectiveness varies across different product types, with a stronger effect observed for services (Babić Rosario et al., 2016). Based on the existing literature, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H3a: Consumers are more likely to consult eWOM before purchasing services than products.

H3b: Consumers are more likely to purchase services than products as a result of exposure to eWOM on social media.

Method

The study was conducted in Poland using an online survey administered through Google Forms. The questionnaire consisted of 26 questions, including demographic items (age, gender, education; 3 questions), social media usage items (platforms used, frequency of use, motivations, follower count; 4 questions), and eWOM measures (19 questions). The eWOM construct was operationalized across multiple dimensions: e.g., frequency of consulting user opinions, trust in others' opinions, types of products or services for which user opinions on social media are read, social media platforms used to search for opinions on products or services, eWOM spreading on social media, motivations for recommending brands, products or services, willingness and barriers to promote favourite brands on social media, and behavioural outcomes such as purchase decisions influenced by eWOM (user opinions) on social media. Responses were measured

using a combination of Likert scales (1 = "strongly disagree"/"never" to 5 = "strongly agree"/"very frequently"), multiple-choice items (single- or multiple-response), and yes/no questions. The questionnaire also included open-ended items to capture favourite brands or additional comments. All responses were anonymous, and participants provided informed consent prior to participation. This design allowed for the comprehensive assessment of both attitudinal and behavioural aspects of eWOM in the context of social media.

The sampling method was non-probability convenience sampling, which is commonly employed in exploratory research involving digital behaviour. Participants were recruited via a university research panel (SONA) and social media. Data were collected in June 2025 and a total of 511 respondents completed the questionnaire.

The sample was predominantly female (73.6%), with 22.7% male and the remainder identifying as non-binary or preferring not to disclose gender. The age distribution was skewed toward younger participants, with 74.6% aged 18–24, followed by 14.7% aged 25–34, 4.3% aged 35–44, 4.3% aged 45–54, and 2% aged 55 and above. In terms of educational attainment, the majority of participants had completed secondary education (67.2%), while 31.7% held a higher education degree (bachelor's or above). The sample also demonstrated a high level of engagement with social media. 94.3% of participants reported using social media several times a day, while an additional 4.4% used it at least once a week, indicating that the vast majority of respondents are active users and familiar with the social media environment – an essential condition for investigating eWOM behaviour. Respondents reported using a variety of social media platforms, with Instagram (73.6%) being the most frequently used, followed by YouTube (67.9%), Facebook (59.5%), and TikTok (37.2%). Other platforms included Twitter/X (20.7%), Pinterest (13.3%), and LinkedIn (9.8%). In terms of social media reach, respondents were asked how many followers they had on their most-followed profile (options: less than 100; 101–500; 501–1,000; 1,001–3,000; 3,001–5,000; 5,001–10,000; more than 10,000; or "I don't know"). The majority of participants (80.3%) reported having fewer than 1,001 followers, confirming that the sample mainly consisted of common consumers rather than influencers. Since eWOM is, by definition, informal, it was important to ensure that individuals who may use social media for commercial purposes were not prevalent in the sample. A smaller segment (10.8%) fell into the nano-influencer category, with between 1,001 and 10,000 followers, while only 0.8% had more than 10,000 followers.

The data were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics (version 29.0.2.0). Descriptive statistics were first computed to summarize respondents' social media usage patterns and their engagement in eWOM.

To examine the predictors of whether users use social media to spread eWOM and whether they make purchases based on user opinions, binary logistic regressions were conducted. For this analysis, dummy variables were created (0 = "does not use social media mainly to spread eWOM"/"does not make purchases based on eWOM", 1 = "uses social media mainly to spread eWOM"/"does make purchases based on eWOM"). To assess what predicts how frequently users spread eWOM, an ordinal logistic regression model was used, reflecting the ordered structure of the dependent variable ("never," "occasionally," "regularly"). Employing both models enabled distinguishing between factors influencing participation in eWOM and those influencing its intensity.

Additionally, two McNemar tests were conducted to examine whether consumers are more likely to consult eWOM before purchasing services compared to products (H3a), and whether consumers are more likely to purchase services than products as a result of exposure to eWOM on social media (H3b). Both tests are appropriate for paired nominal data and determine whether significant differences exist in users' consultation and purchase behaviors across product and service categories.

Results

Motivations for social media use in relation to eWOM spreading

The findings of the current study confirm that people primarily use social media for information-seeking purposes. Specifically, 74.4% reported using social media to keep up with friends and current events, while 30.5% stated they searched for information before making a purchase, underscoring the relevance of social media as a source of product-related knowledge and eWOM. Entertainment needs also featured prominently: 69.3% reported using social media to spend free time, 58.5% to relax, and 48.1% to find inspiration. The need for social interaction was another important driver: 65.2% of respondents use social media to stay in touch with friends, suggesting that relational maintenance remains a central purpose. Other social motivations included a sense of belonging (14.3%), emotional support (10.6%), and meeting new people (13.7%). Motivations related to self-expression and self-promotion were notably less common. Only 16.6% of participants reported using social media

mainly to share emotions related to personal life events, 12.9% cited self-expression, and 8% aimed to create a personal image. Interestingly, the explicit use of social media for eWOM – that is, sharing information about products, services, or their providers – was reported by just 3.1% of respondents as a primary motivation. This suggests that while users may consume eWOM content passively or incidentally, few actively produce it as a central part of their social media activity.

Although eWOM spreading was not a central motivation of using social media, many users reported occasional engagement. 56.8% occasionally shared product or service opinions on social media, while 3.7% did so regularly. An ordinal logistic regression was performed to examine the relationship between self-promotion motivation for using social media and the frequency of eWOM spreading. The model showed that participants who did not report self-promotion as a motivation had significantly lower odds of engaging more frequently in eWOM spreading, $B = -1.234$, $SE = 0.366$, Wald $\chi^2(1) = 11.35$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI $[-1.952, -0.516]$. In other words, self-promotion motivation increases the likelihood that users will share product- or service-related opinions more frequently, supporting H1a.

To test H1b, which proposed that consumers' use of social media for social interactions is positively associated with their frequency of eWOM spreading, an ordinal logistic regression was conducted. The model showed that the motivation of using social media for social interaction was not a significant predictor of eWOM spreading frequency, $B = -0.269$, $SE = 0.187$, Wald = 2.063, $p = 0.151$. The 95% confidence interval for the estimate ranged from -0.636 to 0.098 , crossing zero, which further suggests a lack of statistical significance. Therefore, H1b was not supported by the data.

User characteristics associated with eWOM spreading on social media

A binary logistic regression was conducted to examine which user characteristics predict the likelihood of using social media to spread eWOM (RQ1). The predictors included gender, age, education level, frequency of social media use, number of followers, and platform use. The overall model was statistically significant, $\chi^2(6) = 12.953$, $p < 0.05$, indicating that the predictors, as a set, reliably distinguished between users who do and do not engage in eWOM. Among the predictors, only LinkedIn use emerged as a significant factor. Specifically, users who use LinkedIn were significantly more likely to use social media to spread eWOM compared to those who do not, $B = 1.607$,

$SE = 0.571$, $Wald = 7.907$, $p = 0.005$. The odds ratio $Exp(B) = 4.987$ suggests that LinkedIn users were nearly 5 times more likely to spread eWOM than non-users.

Moreover, based on an ordinal logistic regression, gender was found to be a statistically significant predictor of eWOM spreading frequency. Specifically, men are less likely than women to spread eWOM frequently on social media ($B = -0.548$, $SE = 0.256$, $Wald = 4.592$, $p = 0.032$). In other words, women are more likely to spread eWOM frequently on social media.

An ordinal logistic regression was conducted to examine whether the number of followers predicts the eWOM spreading frequency (RQ2). The proportional odds assumption was met, as indicated by a non-significant Test of Parallel Lines, $\chi^2(6) = 8.586$, $p = 0.198$. The model revealed that follower count was a statistically significant predictor of eWOM spreading frequency. Specifically, individuals with fewer than 1,000 followers reported significantly lower odds of engaging in frequent eWOM compared to those with more than 10,000 followers. For example, social media users with less than 100 followers were significantly less likely to post about products or services ($B = -2.978$, $p = 0.006$). For users with 1,001–3,000 followers, the difference was marginally significant ($B = -2.145$, $p = 0.052$), whereas for those with 3,001–10,000 followers, the difference was not statistically significant compared to the highest follower category.

The most common methods of spreading eWOM included leaving reviews on e-commerce sites (34.6%) and sending private messages to friends (27%). Only 4.5% commented on brand posts, and 1% posted about products or services directly on their social media profiles.

The most frequently cited reasons for spreading eWOM were altruism – helping others to make choice (40.1%), a desire to share positive experiences (38.9%), and support for liked brands (19.2%). A small segment (3.9%) was motivated by potential benefits like discounts or collaborations.

Conversely, 39.5% of users never shared eWOM on social media, and 29.5% did not share opinions on products or services at all.

Barriers in spreading eWOM

Although users frequently consume eWOM, relatively few are willing to actively promote their favourite brands on social media. Only 11.2% would definitely and 13.9% would rather promote their favourite brand such as Nike (3.9%), Zara (3.5%), Apple (3.1%), Adidas (3.1%), and H&M (2.4%) on social media. Nearly half stated they definitely (24.3%) or rather (23.3%) would not share brand-related content. Regarding the main barriers to spreading

eWOM on social media (RQ3), the findings indicate that users' reluctance is primarily due to: the private nature of social media profiles (47.9%), embarrassment (26.4%), lack of content creation skills (18%), shyness (16.8%) and fear of followers' reaction (12.7%).

EWOM on social media as a driver of purchase decisions

The results clearly indicate the significant role of eWOM in the consumer decision-making process. The main platforms used for searching opinions on products and services (RQ4) are YouTube (41.3%) and Instagram (41.1%), followed by Facebook (35%) and TikTok (29.5%).

73.8% of respondents somewhat trust and 2.3% definitely trust opinions of other users. Participants reported high levels of trust in peer-generated eWOM but significant scepticism about influencer and celebrity endorsements. 62.4% trust friends most, and 20% trust family. Only 7% trust strangers, and a mere 2% place trust in influencers or celebrities. Moreover, only 21.5% of respondents described eWOM as authentic, and 14.9% as trustworthy.

A binary logistic regression was conducted to examine whether the perceived authenticity of eWOM is associated with greater likelihood of purchasing based on user opinions (H2). The overall model was statistically significant, $\chi^2(6) = 7.018$, $p < 0.05$, indicating that the perceived authenticity reliably distinguished between users who do and do not purchase based on eWOM. Users who perceive eWOM on social media as authentic were significantly more likely to report a purchase based on user opinions compared to those who do not, $B = 0.734$, $SE = 0.293$, $Wald = 6.267$, $p = 0.012$. This result supports H2. The odds ratio $Exp(B) = 2.084$ suggests that those who perceive eWOM on social media as authentic are 2 times more likely to make a purchase based on eWOM on social media than those who do not.

A majority believe that opinions and recommendations on social media are often exaggerated (55%), superficial (29.2%), or unreliable (9%). 6.3% somewhat distrust and 0.8% strongly distrust eWOM. Some respondents indicated that this distrust stemmed from suspicions that content was commercially sponsored.

Nevertheless, 20.6% of respondents would definitely, and 34.4% would somewhat, like to see more user opinions on social media. 57.3% believe that user content makes brands appear more authentic, and 33.1% are more likely to interact with brands as a result. A majority feel that brands should respond to user expressions like comments

or reviews, with 19.8% saying definitely and 42.3% somewhat. 13.9% of respondents always read user opinions before purchase, 47.6% do so in most cases, and 35.2% in some cases. Only 3.3% reported never doing so. Product categories for which consumers most frequently consult eWOM on social media before purchase include electronics (57.7%), cosmetics (49.3%), books (36%), sports equipment (25.2%), luxury goods (16.8%), as well as food and beverages (8.4%). Service categories included accommodation (58.3%), restaurants/cafés (55%), educational services (38.9%), hair and beauty services (38%) and repair services (23.3%). Gender-specific analyses indicated that men most commonly read user opinions on social media prior to purchasing electronics (62.9%) and accommodation (53.4%), whereas women predominantly consult such opinions before booking accommodation (60.1%), purchasing cosmetics (60%) and electronics (56.4%), as well as before visiting restaurants/cafés (58.5%).

A McNemar test was conducted to determine whether social media users are more likely to consult eWOM before purchasing services compared to products (H3a). The analysis revealed a statistically significant difference between the two conditions, $\chi^2(1, N = 511) = 5.689, p = 0.017$. However, the number of respondents who consulted eWOM before purchasing products but not services ($n = 31$) was higher than those who did so before services but not products ($n = 14$). This result contradicts hypothesis H3a and suggests that eWOM may play a more prominent role in product-related purchase decisions than service-related ones, at least within this sample.

Most respondents (58.7%) find eWOM on social media useful in making purchase decisions. 30.1% find user opinions and recommendations convincing and 76.3% reported having purchased something because of user opinions on social media.

A McNemar test was conducted to assess whether social media users are more likely to purchase services than products because of exposure to eWOM on social media (H3b). The test revealed a statistically significant difference between the two categories, $\chi^2(1, N = 511) = 129.93, p < 0.001$. Specifically, significantly more respondents reported purchasing products but not services ($n = 186$) compared to those who purchased services but not products ($n = 21$). These findings contradict hypothesis H3b, indicating that eWOM on social media is more influential in driving product purchases than service-related purchases.

The most affected purchase categories were cosmetics (50.5%), food in restaurants (37.2%), clothing (32.1%), electronics (25.4%), food and beverages (22.7%), and travel bookings (14.3%). Among men, the categories most influenced by eWOM were electronics (36.2% reported having purchased a product

in this category because of others' opinions on social media), food in restaurants (22.4%), and clothing (20.7%). Among women, the most influenced categories were cosmetics (63.6%), food in restaurants (42.3%) and clothing (37%), reflecting purchases made as a direct result of exposure to user opinions on social media.

Discussion

Consistent with the tenets of U&G theory, the results confirm that social media users are driven by a variety of gratifications, particularly information-seeking, entertainment, and social interaction. As in a recent study by We Are Social (2025b), information-seeking emerged as a dominant motive, with 74.4% of participants using social media to stay informed, and 30.5% specifically to search for product-related information before purchase. This supports earlier findings that eWOM plays a crucial role in the pre-purchase decision-making process (Cheung & Thadani, 2012; Ruggiero, 2000).

Although only a small proportion (3.1%) reported eWOM spreading as a primary motivation for using social media, 60% of the respondents at least occasionally engage in it and nearly 97% read user opinions before purchase. This aligns with prior research suggesting that most users consume eWOM passively rather than actively producing it (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004) and people willing to spread eWOM represent a small group of brand fans (Kimmel & Kitchen, 2014). Using social media for self-promotion is positively associated with higher eWOM spreading frequency. This supports hypothesis H1a and is consistent with previous studies indicating that self-enhancement can motivate eWOM sharing (De Vries et al., 2017; Eisingerich et al., 2015; Lampel & Bhalla, 2007). In contrast, hypothesis H1b is not supported, as social interaction motives do not predict eWOM spreading behaviour. This suggests that while users use social media to connect socially, this does not necessarily translate into brand or product-related communication.

The study also sheds light on the demographic and behavioural characteristics of social media users spreading eWOM. Gender and follower count emerged as significant predictors of sharing product and service-related opinions and experiences on social media. Women are more likely to spread eWOM, which confirms the results of earlier studies that found women to be more active in online opinion-sharing (Kim & Hwang, 2022; N. Park & Kim, 2020). Additionally, follower count is positively associated with eWOM spreading frequency. This suggests that users with broader social reach may feel a greater sense of visibility or influence, making them more inclined to share

product- or service-related opinions. The non-significant results for follower categories between 3,001 and 10,000 followers suggest that the relationship between follower count and eWOM spreading frequency may plateau beyond a certain threshold. While having more followers is generally associated with more frequent eWOM spreading behavior, the data indicate that once users reach approximately 3,000 followers, additional increases in audience size do not significantly enhance their likelihood of sharing opinions about products or services. This could imply that users with medium-to-high follower counts may already see themselves as active contributors or micro-influencers, and further growth in follower numbers does not meaningfully change their sharing behavior.

The role of LinkedIn is also notable: users of this platform were nearly five times more likely to share opinions on product and services compared to non-users. Exploratory analyses were conducted to better understand why LinkedIn emerged as a significant predictor of eWOM spreading on social media. Although not part of the study's original aims, a supplementary binary logistic regression showed that LinkedIn users had significantly higher odds of reporting self-promotion as a motivation for using social media ($B = 1.520$, $SE = 0.382$, $Wald = 15.852$, $p < 0.001$, $Exp(B) = 4.573$, 95% CI [2.164, 9.665]). LinkedIn, unlike most other social platforms, is explicitly designed for career development, reputation building, and personal branding. As a result, users may be more motivated to strategically share content (including product or service recommendations) to enhance their professional image. Engaging in eWOM on social media can be perceived as a form of self-promotion, allowing users to position themselves as knowledgeable, resourceful, and connected within their industry. Other demographic factors, such as age and education, did not significantly predict eWOM spreading.

While a large portion of respondents trust user-generated content to some extent (73.8% somewhat trust, 2.3% definitely trust), their perceptions of authenticity remain skeptical. Only 21.5% considered eWOM authentic and 14.9% trustworthy. These findings highlight a disconnect between trust in the source (i.e., peers) and trust in the content itself, potentially due to suspicions of commercial bias or inauthentic promotion (Moran & Muzellec, 2017). Nevertheless, the perceived authenticity of eWOM significantly predicted purchase behaviour. Users who considered eWOM authentic were more than twice as likely to report making a purchase based on it, confirming hypothesis H2. This supports prior research indicating that perceived credibility and authenticity are key to eWOM effectiveness (Babić Rosario et al., 2016; Moran & Muzellec, 2017; Rao & Rao, 2019).

This study reinforces the pivotal role of electronic eWOM in consumer decision-making. Nearly 97% of respondents reported consulting opinions at least occasionally before purchase. While electronics and cosmetics were the most frequently researched product categories, services such as accommodation and dining also ranked highly, underscoring the significance of eWOM in tourism-related decisions. Contrary to expectations (H3a and H3b), the results revealed that eWOM had a stronger influence on product-related decisions than service-related ones. This finding diverges from prior literature suggesting eWOM is more impactful for experience goods and services (Babić Rosario et al., 2016; Renteria-García et al., 2020; Roy et al., 2024). Interestingly, the study also found that eWOM is considered important before purchasing luxury goods, supporting prior findings that consumers tend to rely on peer recommendations when evaluating high-involvement or high-risk categories (Brzozowska-Woś & Schivinski, 2017; De Bruyn & Lilien, 2008). Regarding RQ4, YouTube and Instagram were the most frequently used platforms for consulting eWOM, highlighting the importance of visual content in consumer decision-making. Contrary to findings from a U.S.-based study by the Pew Research Center (2024), which highlighted TikTok as a major platform for seeking product reviews and recommendations – particularly among young women – none of the respondents in Poland indicated TikTok among the most frequently used social media for searching opinions on products and services. This may be related to the credibility of social media: in Poland TikTok is the least trusted platform while YouTube is the most trusted one.

Finally, addressing RQ3, the study identified several psychological and structural barriers to eWOM sharing. Many users are reluctant to promote brands on social media due to private nature of their profiles, embarrassment, lack of content creation skills, shyness or fear of negative follower reactions. These findings confirm the results of few prior studies (Preece et al., 2004) and underscore the need to further explore not only motivations for eWOM, as much of the literature has done, but also inhibitors.

Conclusions

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on eWOM by examining the motivations, behaviors, and barriers associated with users' engagement in eWOM on social media. Guided by the U&G theory, it examines motivations behind the frequency and nature of eWOM spreading. This focus fills a critical gap in the literature by connecting broader social media usage patterns with specific

eWOM activities – something prior studies have often examined in isolation. Moreover, this study also considers the role of user characteristics (e.g., gender, age, education, follower count, and platform usage) in shaping eWOM behaviour. This perspective is in line with more recent developments in U&G research, which emphasize that gratification-seeking behaviours are not only goal-oriented but also influenced by contextual and demographic variables (Shao, 2009). By grounding the analysis in U&G theory, the study provides a nuanced understanding of what drives and inhibits eWOM sharing on social media, how user motivations are translated into behaviour, and which types of users are most likely to engage in eWOM activities. This theoretical approach thus offers a comprehensive lens through which to interpret the empirical findings and expand current knowledge of eWOM dynamics in digital environments.

Practical implications

The study highlights the strategic relevance of WOM marketing for categories such as electronics, cosmetics, accommodation, and restaurants/café, where a majority of consumers report consulting user-generated content before making a purchase. The findings also provide practical insights for marketers, especially in the cosmetics industry, which emerged as one of the sectors in which purchases are most influenced by eWOM. Notably, 63.6% of women reported having purchased cosmetics as a result of user opinions on social media. Given the experiential and highly visual nature of cosmetic products, brands in this sector can benefit substantially from encouraging satisfied customers to share authentic content on platforms like Instagram and YouTube (Bianchi, 2025). The results point to the strategic value of mobilizing everyday consumers and nano influencers as brand advocates. Several practical implications follow:

- Prioritize authenticity. Brands should focus on enabling and motivating consumers to share genuine, experience-based content rather than relying heavily on influencers.
- Engage female nano-influencers with 1,000–3,000 followers. These creators are as likely as larger influencers to share opinions about products or services, yet their recommendations tend to be perceived as more authentic and trustworthy – an essential factor for driving conversions.

- Optimize presence on visual platforms. Companies – especially in cosmetics, electronics, fashion, dining, and tourism – should optimize their presence on visual platforms and foster engaging, easy-to-share content.

- Leverage self-promotion motivation. Given that self-promotion motivation for using social media emerged as a strong predictor of eWOM activity, marketers should create opportunities for users to express themselves through branded content that aligns with their identity. On LinkedIn, for example, companies can activate employees as their ambassadors in both brand and product promotion as well as in employer branding initiatives.

However, the study also reveals important barriers to eWOM participation: the private nature of social media profiles, embarrassment, lack of skills, and fear of social judgment inhibit many users from actively sharing brand content. Addressing these barriers – for instance by providing training, content templates or private sharing options – could increase consumer participation in eWOM.

Limitations and further research

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the sample used in this study was predominantly female and primarily composed of young adult users, limiting generalizability across demographics. Second, the self-reported nature of eWOM behaviours may be subject to social desirability bias. Third, while the study was cross-sectional, eWOM behaviour may vary over time or in response to specific marketing efforts.

Future research could explore eWOM in longitudinal designs or experimental settings, comparing user motivation to spread eWOM and reactions to product- versus service-focused campaigns. Given the unexpected findings related to LinkedIn, users' eWOM behaviour on this platform also warrants deeper examination – for instance, which platforms they use to share opinions, what motivates them to do so, and what outcomes their contributions generate. Further investigation into barriers to eWOM – including psychological or contextual inhibitors – would also enrich theoretical models. Additionally, segmenting consumers based on eWOM production vs. consumption behaviours could provide deeper insights into user roles within digital brand ecosystems.

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Adiunkt na Wydziale Zarządzania Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego oraz doświadczona ekspertka ds. marketingu. Od 20 lat opracowuje i wdraża strategie komunikacji marketingowej dla międzynarodowych marek, pracując zarówno w działach marketingu, jak i w agencjach reklamowych w Polsce, Włoszech i w Stanach Zjednoczonych. Jako międzynarodowa ekspertka w obszarze marketingu internetowego i w mediach społecznościowych prowadziła projekty, które były wielokrotnie nagradzane. Jej badania naukowe i publikacje koncentrują się na mediach społecznościowych i komunikacji nieformalnej. Jest założycielką BRANDLOVERS®, doradcą biznesowym oraz trenerką prowadzącą zajęcia z zakresu innowacyjnej komunikacji marketingowej zarówno dla studentów uczelni wyższych, jak i pracowników działów marketingu.