#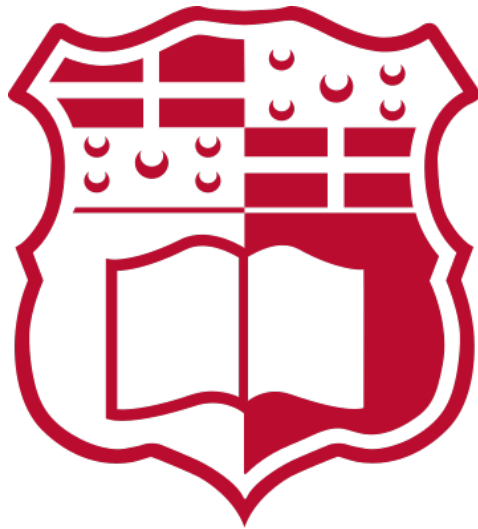 Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) and its impact on online purchases: Taking a study of the Maltese Generation Z population in the fashion retail industry

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Abstract

Purpose: The study aims to investigate whether electronic word-of-mouth influences the purchase intention of members of the Generation Z population in Malta, focusing on the online fashion retail industry. This shall be done in terms of positive and negative of electronic word-of-mouth to identify the effect of valence. Moreover, the study shall also identify the influence of credibility and sidedness on the impact of electronic word-of-mouth in terms of purchase intention.

Research Design: A review of secondary data through a literature review is followed by an analysis of primary data. This was implemented though a quantitative methodology in the form of an online survey. The survey was successfully completed by 325 respondents who were Maltese, aged between 16 and 25 and have engaged in purchasing from the fashion retail industry at least once.

Research findings: Positive and negative electronic word-of-mouth were both found to influence consumers' purchase intention, but negative electronic word-of-mouth had a higher level of influence. Additionally, credibility was found to influence purchase intention after reading positive electronic word-of-mouth and two-sided electronic word-of-mouth was found to be more powerful in terms of credibility and purchase intention. These findings were true for the sample population.

Practical implications: Electronic word-of-mouth is a tool which provides companies with critical feedback on how to improve the organisation. It should be monitored, acted upon and encouraged for the better of the organisation.

Keywords: Electronic word-of-mouth; Reviews; Purchase Intention; Generation Z; Fashion Retail Industry

Acknowledgements

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List of Abbreviations

C	Credibility of electronic word-of-mouth
eWOM	Electronic word-of-mouth
Gen Z	Generation Z
IACM	Information Acceptance Model
IAM	Information Adoption Model
MNWOM	Mixed Neutral Electronic word-of-mouth
NC	Credibility of negative electronic word-of-mouth
NPI	Purchase intention after reading negative electronic word-of-mouth
PC	Credibility of positive electronic word-of-mouth
PPI	Purchase intention after reading positive electronic word-of-mouth
TPB	Theory of Planned Behaviour
TRA	Theory of Reasoned Action=
U	Usage of electronic word-of-mouth
WOM	Word-of-mouth

1. Introduction

In Malta, word-of-mouth has been for centuries the most effective form of communication and information diffusion (Serracino Inglott, 1978). Literature has described it to be not only one of the earliest methods of information transmission, but also as one of the most powerful forces influencing consumer behaviour (Dellarocas, 2003; Litvin, Goldsmith and Pan, 2008). Generation by generation, the internet is becoming ever-so-popular and constantly used by individuals, proving to become an integral part of our day to day life and changing the way people connect with one another (Duffett, 2017). The shift into a technology-driven world, empowered by Web 2.0, shifted the powerful word-of-mouth into electronic word-of-mouth, where consumers share their opinions and experiences online (Filieri and McLeay, 2013; Lee et al., 2011). Members of the Generation Z population are known to be prime electronic word-of-mouth users. This is because they are active internet users and take great interest in sharing their opinions and experiences with products, services and brands. They also tend to seek information online prior to making a purchase (NSO, 2022a; Berkup, 2014; Djafarova and Bowes, 2021). Slowly and effectively, this generation is flourishing into the e-commerce world, which is being dominated by the online fashion retail industry; the fastest-growing e-commerce sector (Cowart and Goldsmith, 2007).

The aim of this research is to combine these increasingly relevant concepts and enhance the academic knowledge by investigating whether electronic word-of-mouth influences the purchase intention of members of the Gen Z population in Malta, focusing on the online fashion retail industry. Hence, the predominant research question is – Does electronic word-of-mouth influence the purchase intention of the Maltese Generation Z population in the online fashion retail industry? The study examines the effect of the valence of electronic word-of-mouth on the intent to purchase fashion items online, focusing on the impact of both positive and negative

electronic word-of-mouth and their relative effects on purchase intention. These are analysed in the primary hypotheses. Furthermore, as secondary hypotheses, the study also investigates the influence of other noteworthy factors such as credibility and sidedness.

The research question and hypotheses are developed after a thorough review of literature which is recapitulated in Chapter 2. The hypotheses are then tested by gathering empirical data in the form of quantitative research, as outlined in Chapter 3. The methodology is implemented through the dissemination of an online survey distributed to members of the Maltese population aged between 16 and 25 who have purchased fashion retail items online at least once. The results of the study are analysed using a number of statistical tests, as elucidated in Chapter 4. Here, data is interpreted to eventually accept or reject the hypotheses. These results fuelled the development of a number of key findings, which are discussed in Chapter 5, and are then compared to academic knowledge acquired through secondary data.

The key findings, subject to their limitations, shall provide a new body of academic knowledge and implications to practitioners.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

To gather secondary data and acquire knowledge on the topic of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) and its effectiveness, a review of the known academic knowledge through literature was carried out. This was done with the aim of building an understanding of past findings, identifying gaps in literature and ultimately developing the appropriate research questions and hypotheses.

This chapter shall begin by defining the concept of eWOM, understanding its growing relevance and comparing eWOM to its origin, which is, traditional word-of-mouth. After this analysis, the review shall delve into what studies have found on the credibility and effectiveness of eWOM subject to volume, valence and sidedness. Finally, an overview of information on the online fashion retail industry and Generation Z is also provided.

2.2 Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM)

2.2.1 Background

Thanks to the internet technology's rapid advancement, a rising number of customers rely on the internet for information on brands, products and services. Web 2.0 has enabled communication amongst consumers and as a result, many consumers resort to online tools to share their opinions and experiences with brands, products and services and, in turn, seek information about the experiences of others (Lee et al., 2011). This made eWOM progressively an essential component in influencing consumer purchase intent (Reza Jalilvand and Samiei, 2012) and effectively, this increased the academic interest in the topic (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Brown, Broderick and Lee, 2007).

The internet allows consumers to collect product information provided by other consumers on the web and to share their own opinions and experiences with the brand and products (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). This creates eWOM, which is defined by Litvin, Goldsmith and Pan (2008) to be informal communication related to the use and characteristics of goods, services and sellers directed to consumers using internet-based technology. Similarly, Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) define eWOM as any statement about a product or company, being positive or negative, which is written by potential, actual or former customers and released publicly through the internet. They have also studied the determinants of eWOM, highlighting that the primary factors that lead to eWOM are consumers' desire for social connections, financial incentives and enhancement of self-worth and sympathy towards other customers. Brown, Broderick and Lee (2007) looked at the popularity of eWOM communication in online groups and came up with the notion of an online social network. It was found that in social networks, individuals behave as a communication channel creating a social proxy (Brown, Broderick and Lee, 2007).

Numerous studies have focused on the conceptualisation and the theoretical background of eWOM to identify and understand the factors which influence consumers' process of adapting information. The most established models that provide a theoretical background include the adoption of the Theory of Reasoned Action, developed by Fishbein and Ajzen (1975), the Theory of Planned Behaviour, developed by Ajzen (1991), the Information Adoption Model, by Sussman and Siegal (2003) and the Technology Acceptance Model, by Davis (1989). Other theories, whereby the theoretical background of eWOM is embedded, also include Petty and Cacioppo's Elaboration Likelihood Model (1986), Homans' Social Exchange Theory (1958), Katz and Lazarfeld's Multistep Flow Model (1955) and Oliver's Expectation Confirmation Theory (1980).

In the emerging digital environment, it has become extremely easy for consumers to share product, service and brand-related reviews on different media, including companies' websites as well as blogs, other independent websites and social media which can expeditiously reach a significant number of potential buyers (Kannan and Li, 2017). Litvin, Goldsmith and Pan (2008) describe a typology of eWOM media. This shows asynchronous media, including emails, websites, product review and hate sites, blogs and virtual communities, as well as synchronous media, including instant messaging, chat rooms and newsgroups. Each include communication that is described as one-to-one, one-to-many and many-to-many in that specific order. Customers' insights about what they think of products, their experience with using them, suggestions, and their positive and negative feedback are all included in eWOM. Chu and Kim (2011) state that the most frequently used eWOM media is social eWOM, whereby consumers communicate through the use of social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and other sites. Here, consumers are provided with easily accessible information from their own personal networks (Ellison and Boyd, 2013).

2.2.1 Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) vs Word-of-mouth (WOM)

Traditional word-of-mouth is the origin and theoretical base of electronic word-of-mouth and is one of the earliest methods of information transmission (Dellarocas, 2003). Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) introduce one of the first definitions of WOM, defining it as the communication between consumers about marketing information. They add that it plays a pivotal role in consumers' attitudes and behaviours towards the brand, product or service. Other authors' definitions are consistent with this definition. For instance, Arndt's (1967) defines WOM by saying that it is the interpersonal communication between consumers, about a brand, product or service whereby the persons in such communication do not have any commercial ties with the company. Similarly, Westbrook (1987) defines WOM as oral communication between non-commercial communicators regarding a brand, product or service.

The popular phrase 'the power of word-of-mouth' can be backed up by literature as traditional WOM is considered to be one of the most powerful marketing forces which influences consumer behaviour (Litvin, Goldsmith and Pan, 2008). Brooks (1957) in fact described WOM to be an extremely powerful factor which leads to the spreading of information on various products through networks of interpersonal relations. A study by Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) had compared WOM to traditional marketing efforts such as radio advertisements, personal selling and print advertisements, finding WOM to be several times more effective.

Villanueva and Hanssens (2008) highlight that WOM gives long-term value to a company while traditional marketing gives short-term value. They add that customers who got to know about the product, service or brand through WOM continue to spread WOM leading to an exponential effect (Villanueva and Hanssens, 2008). Trusov, Bucklin, and Pauwels (2009) also find that WOM has a powerful impact on customer acquisition.

While a large body of research suggests a degree of certainty when it comes to the influence of WOM on consumer behaviour (Arndt, 1967; Litvin, Goldsmith and Pan, 2008; Brown, Broderick and Lee, 2007; Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955; Trusov, Bucklin, and Pauwels, 2009), one may assume that the influence of WOM is simply shifted to eWOM, whereby, eWOM is considered to be the evolution of WOM into electronic means (Filieri and McLeay, 2013). However, a number of differences between the two make this shift less straightforward.

While traditional WOM is usually shared with small groups of individuals in private conversations, eWOM is far more large-scale and rapidly spread with a larger body of individuals. Moreover, unlike traditional WOM, which fades away soon after it is spoken (Stern and Dietz, 1994), individuals through eWOM, not only have access to the information at the time that it is being shared, but may also view past discussions and opinions. Such discussions are very easily accessible as they are made public and can be revisited indefinitely (Cheung and Thadani, 2012). The accessibility and transferability in the digital world results

in eWOM having greater substance and capacity than conventional WOM (Kannan and Li, 2017).

Another key difference is that WOM usually takes place between individuals who are familiar to each other, with an established level of trust and credibility, while eWOM can emanate from individuals whose trustworthiness and credibility are not known to the receiver and may even be anonymous (Cheung and Thadani, 2012).

Nonetheless, word-of-mouth and electronic word-of-mouth are both independent of commercial ties since they are consumer dominated, making them both more reliable than traditional marketing communications (Cheung and Thadani, 2012). In fact, Kannan and Li (2017) suggest that eWOM, despite the differences from WOM, is usually regarded as trustworthy and dependable, just like conventional offline WOM. Moreover, it is also stated that eWOM may have greater substance and capacity than conventional WOM, since it is far more accessible and transferable in the digital world leading to a high speed of diffusion (Mishra and Satish, 2016). However, other researchers, question the credibility and trustworthiness of eWOM and seek to investigate the impact of different levels of credibility on the effectiveness of eWOM (Brown, Broderick and Lee, 2007; Cheung et al., 2009; Reichelt, Sievert and Jacob, 2013).

2.3 The credibility of electronic word-of-mouth

Some studies suggest that the credibility of eWOM is higher than that of traditional marketing primarily due to the fact that eWOM is a channel which is consumer-dominated with participants in the interpersonal communication being independent from the company in question (Brown, Broderick and Lee, 2007). This concurs with the notion that consumers place a higher level of trust on other consumers than on businesses, making earned media more influential than paid and owned media (Nieto, Hernández-Maestro and Muñoz-Gallego, 2014).

As a result, eWOM, being earned media, was found to be reliable, credible and, consequently, highly influential especially when compared to traditional owned channels (Arndt, 1967; Brown, Broderick and Lee, 2007).

Although studies have suggested that eWOM is generally perceived to be more credible than other traditional marketing channels, not all eWOM have the same degree of perceived credibility. Brown, Broderick and Lee (2007) weighed the differences in source credibility of online social networks, stating that the credibility of eWOM depends on the website's trustworthiness as well as the expertise of the persons providing the information on the website. Moreover, previous experiences from using the websites also influence credibility. For instance, if the information was found to be correct the last time it was used by the person, credibility increases (Brown, Broderick and Lee, 2007).

Cheung et al. (2009) concluded that the perceived credibility of eWOM has a positive effect on eWOM adoption. eWOM adoption refers to whether consumers decide to take up the recommendation given, shifting their purchase behaviour and attitudes. In the study, it is stated that power of eWOM in terms of adoption is moderated by the credibility of such eWOM. Moreover, Cheung et al. (2009) also find that the perceived credibility is determined by the extent of customer interaction and prior knowledge. They also suggest that there are informational factors, such as the strength of the argument, the credibility of the source and confirmation of prior opinions, as well as normative factors, such as the consistency and rating of the recommendation, that influence the perceived credibility of eWOM. This study also tests the perceived credibility of eWOM based on a number of factors such as argument strength, recommendation framing, consistency, rating and sidedness, source credibility and confirmation of prior belief. They find that recommendation framing and sidedness, which refer to whether the eWOM is positive, negative, one-sided or two-sided, are not significant factors in determining the perceived credibility (Cheung et al., 2009).

Reichelt, Sievert and Jacob (2013) support the argument that credibility has a significant impact on the usefulness and adoption of eWOM, as readers may have doubts on the truthfulness of the information. They study whether trustworthiness, similarity and expertise are significant in influencing eWOM adoption by observing the utilitarian function and the social function of eWOM. The utilitarian function refers to eWOM whereby readers actively seek information to learn about the products and resolve issues. On the other hand, the social function refers to eWOM whereby users share information on areas of interest to interact with each other socially. In their findings, Reichelt, Sievert and Jacob (2013) state that expertise and trustworthiness are significant credibility dimensions for eWOM related to the utilitarian function. Additionally, similarity and trustworthiness are significant credibility dimensions for eWOM related to the social function.

The study by Lee, Park and Han (2011), also supports the theory that perceived credibility of eWOM has a positive effect on eWOM adoption and applies it specifically to the purchase intention of consumers. They find that purchase intention increases as their perceived credibility of eWOM increases. This shows that there is a correlation between the two variables.

The theory that perceived credibility of eWOM has a positive effect on eWOM adoption stems from the Information Adoption Model which includes source credibility as a predominant force which leads to information adoption (Sussman and Siegal, 2003).

2.4 The impact of electronic word-of-mouth

Daugherty and Hoffman (2014), describe electronic word-of-mouth as one of the most influential factors that affects consumer behaviour. It facilitates the consumers' buying process as it allows for an easier and more efficient method of gathering information to make more informed purchasing decisions (Dellarocas, 2003). Moreover, it increases consumers'

confidence and willingness to purchase a product as their doubt in the product, brand or service is decreased (Brynjolfsson and Smith, 2000).

2.4.1 Volume and Valence of electronic word-of-mouth

Literature suggests two core attributes which influence the impact of eWOM. These are volume, which refers to the amount of electronic word-of-mouth present in terms of opinions, discussions and reviews, and valence, which refers to the nature of such opinions, that is the direction of the review being positivite or negative (Lee and Youn, 2009).

Studying the impact of the both the valence and volume of word-of-mouth, Liu (2006) proved that WOM has a beneficial influence on box office revenue and concluded that the volume of word-of-mouth reviews has a larger power in influencing consumers than the valence of the reviews. Chen, Wu and Yoon (2004), find similar results in the context of eWOM, stating that there is a positive relationship between the volume of online customer reviews and sales. Supporting the research conducted by Liu (2006) and Chen, Wu and Yoon (2004), Babić Rosario et al. (2016) further observed, through a meta-analytic review, that eWOM volume had a higher influence on sales than eWOM valence, and that while negative eWOM did not necessarily hurt sales, substantial fluctuation in reviews did. They also found that eWOM had a greater effect on sales with regards to tangible products when compared to services.

Studying the influence of online reviews on sales in terms of valence using online book reviews, Chevalier and Mayzlin (2006) observed that while most positive online reviews are effective in enhancing sales rank, negative reviews have a higher impact. The effect of eWOM on sales in terms of valence was further studied by Sonnier, McAlister, and Rutz (2011) who modelled eWOM and its products and discovered that positive, negative, and neutral eWOM all had a substantial influence on daily sales performance.

Park and Lee (2009) compare the effectiveness of positive and negative eWOM which is referred to, in this study, as information direction. The results show that negative eWOM was more effective than positive eWOM, agreeing with Chevalier and Mayzlin (2006).

Duan Wenjing et al. (2008), through a dynamic simultaneous equations system, prove that there exists a positive feedback mechanism between eWOM and retail, which acts as a pioneer towards sales. Similar to other authors, they highlight the effectiveness of eWOM volume on box office performance. However, they state that eWOM valence does not have a direct relationship with sales but an indirect one. This is since eWOM valence not only influences box office revenue but also influences eWOM volume which in turn leads to better performance. Moreover, eWOM, in this context, is not only viewed as a precursor to sales but also as an outcome.

Yang et al., (2012) suggest that studies have reached a consensus on the effectiveness of eWOM volume on sales, however, state that there is still a mixture of findings when it comes to eWOM valence. They go on to study the reason for this and find that eWOM valence is mainly effective in the case of movies which are not mainstream and have smaller budgets, and on the other hand, the effectiveness of eWOM valence can be diluted when marketing budgets and eWOM volume are high.

Taking a different perspective, Moe and Trusov (2011) studied the influence of eWOM on sales by classifying online reviews into product evaluations and social dynamics. Both of these dimensions showed that eWOM effects sales.

2.4.2 Sidedness of electronic word-of-mouth

Luo et al. (2015), describe two types of eWOM determined by sidedness, which are two-sided reviews and one-sided reviews. The difference between the two is that two-sided reviews contain arguments in favour and against the product, service or brand. Hence, integrating both

levels of valence, which are positive and negative eWOM, into one review, making the reviews more comprehensive. This is also known as mixed neutral eWOM. One-sided reviews, on the other hand, include only one side of the argument, being fully positive or fully negative eWOM. (Luo et al., 2015).

Sidedness is an important factor which determines the quality of eWOM (Luo et al., 2015). Due to this, it also impacts eWOM adoption and purchase intention as proven through the Information Adoption Model (Sussman and Siegal, 2003).

Literature such as that of Kamins and Assael (1987) and Jensen et al. (2013), suggest that two-sided reviews, or mixed neutral eWOM, are perceived by consumers to be more complete and hence more credible that one-sided eWOM.

However, there is also research that finds that the difference in perceived credibility of one-sided versus two-sided eWOM to be marginal. For instance, Cheung et al. (2009), tested the hypothesis that two-sided eWOM is perceived to be more credible than one-sided eWOM and found that this was not significantly significant. Hence, they found that the perceived credibility of an argument is not significantly influenced by the argument's sidedness. Albon et al. (2018) and Chakraborty and Bhat (2018), find similar results.

2.4.3 The impact of electronic word-of-mouth on purchase intention

The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) by Ajzen (1991), states that purchase intention is determined by the attitude, subjective norm and perceived behavioural control. By the definition of various authors, purchase intention is the predisposition, tendency, willingness or possibility of consumers to buy a product or service from a brand (Belch and Belch, 2004; Dodd and Supa, 2011; Sam and Tahir, 2009). Spears and Singh (2004) also define purchase intention as the consumers' conscious plan to purchase a product.

Erkan and Evans (2016), prove the key factors that lead eWOM to the influence consumers' purchase intention. Using the Information Adoption Model (IAM), which explains the factors that lead individuals to adopt information in the context of an organization and ultimately changing their intentions and behaviours (Sussman and Siegal, 2003), and the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA), which suggests that the people's actions are determined by their intention to act (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975), Erkan and Evans (2016), build and validate a new model which they call the Information Acceptance Model (IACM). This states that the quality and credibility of information, as well as the need for information and attitude towards information, create information usefulness which leads to the information adoption and ultimately purchase intention.

A number of academics have focused their research on the impact that eWOM has on consumers' intention to purchase products and services.

Park, Lee and Han (2007) found that online consumer reviews do in fact have a persuasive impact. They state that eWOM has a positive impact on the purchase intention of customers. They elaborate their findings stating that the quality of online reviews, as well as the volume of reviews have a positive effect on the purchasing intention of customers. Park, Lee and Han (2007) also make a distinction based on the level of involvement of customers and find that low involvement customers are more influenced by the quantity of reviews while high involvement customers are more influenced by the quality of reviews.

Focusing on the hotel sector, Sparks and Browning (2011) find that consumers had increased intentions to purchase and increased trust in the hotel, following exposure to positively valanced reviews. On the other hand, consumers were also highly influenced by reviews which were overall negative, having a decreased intention to purchase and decreased trust in the hotel (Sparks and Browning, 2011).

Roy, Datta and Mukherjee (2018), also studied the role of eWOM on purchase intention, taking a different perspective through the focus on the sidedness of eWOM rather than the valence. They found that purchase intention is highly positively impacted by mixed neutral reviews (MNWOM), which show both positive and negative justifications, due to their high credibility. In their study, they also delve into rich eWOM, such as video or image-based reviews, which was also found to have a positive impact on credibility and online purchase intention.

2.4 The online fashion retail industry

Since the 1990s, e-Commerce activities have been steadily growing, and the number of online-based commercial transactions has been steadily increasing. Because of its ease, time-saving features, price comparison capabilities, and variety of product characteristics, consumers are increasingly turning to the internet as a shopping option (Chen and Dubinsky, 2003). Apparel purchases are currently one of the fastest-growing e-commerce sectors (Cowart and Goldsmith, 2007). The growth of online retailers has posed considerable hurdles for brands as the fashion industry is highly competitive. For companies to be successful, they must understand consumer behaviour (Djafarova and Bowes, 2020).

Consumers go through several phases in the purchasing journey, beginning with awareness, familiarity, consideration, evaluation, and finally purchase. Then, if they constantly perceive value from a brand, customers may also become loyal to the company (Edelman and Singer, 2015). In the online environment, there are significantly lower search costs due to social media and ease of access to information. This offers a fresh outlook to the customer decision process in the digital setting, facilitating the consideration and evaluation stages and highlighting the growing impact of eWOM (Kannan and Li, 2017).

2.5 Generation Z

Every generational cohort tends to experience unique events and situations that form their beliefs, values and preferences, consequently shaping their behaviour and attitudes. The Generation Z population includes consumers born between 1997 and 2012 (Sethi, Kaur et al., 2018). Although the previous generation, millennials, are technology-driven, Generation Z is the very first generation to have grown up with technology and have never lived in a world without internet, making them the most internet-connected generation in history (Duffett, 2017). Members of the Gen Z population spend a substantial amount of time using digital networks and technologies, while engaging in social communities (Sambashiva Rao and Acharyulu, 2018).

The Generation Z population can be characterized by being innovative, creative, open-minded, entrepreneurial, enthusiastic, intelligent, have ethical principles and a significant trust in technology (Steele Flippin, 2017; Priporas, Stylos and Fotiadis, 2017). Technology plays an important part in their everyday life and they spend a substantial amount of time on social media channels on their smart devices (Lee, 2020). Being born in a technological era, the Generation Z population has constant access to the internet where they share their opinions, desires and exchange information (Vizcaya-Moreno and Pérez-Cañaveras, 2020). Members of the Generation Z population are enthusiastic in sharing their experiences with different products and services and tend to perform thorough research to identify their optimum purchase decision and ensure that they are spending their money wisely (Berkup, 2014). Hence, it has become commonplace for them to seek inspiration on social networking sites especially prior to making a purchase (Djafarova and Bowes, 2021). As a result, a plausible conclusion is that marketers can engage better with Gen Z on social media and influence their purchasing

decisions using digital platforms. In fact, it is expected that the Generation Z population will lead the e-commerce consumer behaviour (Monaco, 2018).

Fashion purchases are one of the first purchases that members of the Gen Z population make independently from their parents. They are used by young people as a form of self-expression (Djafarova and Bowes, 2021). However, when making such purchases, consumers are heavily influenced by friends and family as well as celebrities they follow on social media (Djafarova and Bowes, 2021).

A report by Nielsen (2015) shows that the most trustworthy advertisements for Generation Z come from individuals they know and trust with 83% stating that they trust family and friends' recommendations. However, trust is not limited to their peers and family as 63% stated that they trust in consumer reviews online. Making eWOM the third most trusted media after peer recommendations and brand websites for Generation Z. In fact, it is emphasised that many of the important consumer decisions when it comes to product or service purchases are influenced by eWOM (Hussain, Song and Niu, 2020).

Despite there being a substantial amount of literature contributing to the impact of eWOM on consumers in various product categories and sectors, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, there is a gap in the literature which analyses the effects of eWOM specifically focusing on purchases made in online fashion retail industry from members of the Maltese Generation Z population.

3. Methodology

3.1. Introduction

The chapter hereunder shall set out a description and explanation of the research question and hypotheses, the research method and research design and the rationale behind them. The chapter shall also outline the ethical considerations and limitations encountered throughout the research.

3.2 Research objectives

The primary aim of this research is to study whether eWOM influences the local Generation Z population into purchasing online in the fashion retail industry. After a review of the literature, it was deemed fit to focus on the valence of eWOM rather than the volume of eWOM. The reason for this is that a consensus has already been reached when it comes to the effectiveness of eWOM volume. However, there is no consensus yet regarding valence, making the topic more relevant. Therefore, in choosing the objective of the study, emphasis was made on the valence of eWOM rather than volume. The objective is to identify whether there is a relationship between positive and negative eWOM and the purchase intention of the Maltese Generation Z population taking the case of the fashion retail industry.

Hence, the following research question and hypotheses have been developed:

Does electronic word-of-mouth influence the purchase intention of the Maltese Generation Z population in the online fashion retail industry?

H1: Positive electronic word-of-mouth is linked with an increased intention to purchase fashion items online.

H2: Negative electronic word-of-mouth is linked with a decreased intention to purchase fashion items online.

The following secondary research hypotheses shall also be tested.

H3: There is a correlation between credibility of electronic word-of-mouth and purchase intention after reading positive electronic word-of-mouth

H4: There is a correlation between credibility of electronic word-of-mouth and purchase intention after reading negative electronic word-of-mouth

H5: Credibility and purchase intention are higher for mixed neutral electronic word-of-mouth compared to one-sided electronic word-of-mouth

H6: The impact of negative electronic word-of-mouth on purchase intention is higher than that of positive electronic word-of-mouth

H7: Credibility of negative electronic word-of-mouth is higher than that of positive electronic word-of-mouth

3.3 Research instruments

Two data collection methods were utilized throughout this study. Secondary data was used in the development and the establishment of the research question and hypotheses. However, the dominant source of data collection in this study was the specific data which was collected by the researcher and used to provide an answer to the research question developed. This is known as primary data (Lacobucci and Churchill, 2015).

For the collection of primary data, a mono-method quantitative research methodology was used in the form of a survey. This was chosen for several reasons.

Firstly, the philosophy being adopted is positivist, meaning that importance is given to the scientific method to measure a phenomenon as objectively as possible, deriving a universal truth which is reliable and valid (Saunders et al., 2009). Moreover, the approach to theory development is deductive in the sense that theory was identified at the literature review stage and is now being tested for the Generation Z Maltese population in the online fashion retail industry through the collection of empirical data.

Mono-method quantitative research was also effective due to the study being descriptive research, meaning that the study aims to find statistics to describe the population, gaining an accurate profile (Saunders et al., 2009). This is because the study aims to describe whether the Generation Z Maltese population are indeed influenced by eWOM in their purchase intention. Due to the feasibility offered and the time restrictions present, it was logical for the research conducted to be cross-sectional. Although alternative options could have been taken to collect the relevant data, a survey was concluded to be the most practical, effective and reliable method.

The survey was created through the use of Google Forms. This system is effective for distribution and allows the researcher to track the progress of data collection and monitor data at any time as it is automatically inputted into an easily accessible Excel sheet being updated in real-time. Upon the completion of data collection, the excel sheet could be downloaded and inputted into the computer software SPSS which allows the researcher to carry out statistical analysis.

3.4 Population and sampling

The qualifying criteria to be able to participate in the study included that respondents must be within the ages of 16 to 25, hence are above the national legal age of consent and within the age bracket of Generation Z, are of Maltese nationality, and have carried out purchases online from the fashion retail industry at least once.

According to the National Statistics Office, the total Maltese population stood at 404,113 in 2022, that is, excluding non-Maltese people residing in Malta. This figure was further reduced to 40,544 by excluding people who were outside the age bracket required for the study. A limitation lies here as the NSO only provides figures in brackets of 15-24, hence it was assumed that the age bracket of 16-25 would be approximately identical (NSO, 2022b).

A sample of the target population was chosen through online convenience sampling. The primary reason for choosing this non-probability method is due to the lack of an adequate

sampling frame which was accessible. This method of non-probability sampling was also chosen due to complexity and time constraints.

An online sampling method offers the researcher a wide reach without incurring any costs and allows for ease of data entry which is automated. The survey was distributed through online means such as on social media including Facebook groups, Instagram and Messenger. This sampling method was effective as the NSO states that almost the entire population within the age group of 16-24 were internet users in 2021 who used the internet every day or almost every day (NSO, 2022a). Moreover, since the target audience engages in e-commerce, they must be internet users and reachable online. This means that the total target population are internet users, counteracting the bias discussed by De Vaus (2002) stating that persons who do not have access to the internet would not be reached through internet sampling.

Since the researcher is not present, it allows the participant to answer questions independently, eliminating interviewer bias and increasing the validity and reliability of responses. Moreover, the participants can carry out the questionnaire whenever it is convenient for them and there is also the possibility of several participants carrying out the survey concurrently since no induvial attention is required by the interviewer.

Administering convenience sampling through online means such as social media may lead to a bias whereby the sample population may possess similar characteristics to the researcher due to being socially connected. Moreover, advertising the survey online may also lead to self-selection bias whereby individuals who are more likely to willingly participate in an online survey are chosen (Sekaran and Bougie, 2013).

To reduce these biases, a QR code was created and distributed physically amongst members of the general public present in educational institutions and public spaces who are unrelated to the researcher. The public was asked to scan a QR code which directs them to the survey. Participants were then left free to carry out the survey without the presence of the researcher.

Despite the effort to decrease the limitations, non-probability convenience sampling may not reflect a generalized view of the population, as the whole population did not have equal opportunity to participate in the study. However, non-probability convenience sampling is still widely used in academia as it provides useful and insightful information, contributing to academic knowledge (Saunders et al., 2009).

With regards to sample size, there is no universal rule for minimum sample size, however, according to the rules of thumb described by Roscoe (1975), a sample size larger than 30 and smaller than 500 is viable for most research. Thus, a minimum sample size of 265 was sought to surpass the median.

3.5 Research design

The questionnaire was split into sections as follows:

1. Demography
2. Usage of Electronic Word-of-Mouth
3. Credibility of Electronic Word-of-Mouth
4. Positive Electronic Word-of-Mouth
   a. Credibility of Positive Electronic Word-of-Mouth
   b. Positive Electronic Word-of-Mouth Purchase Intention
5. Negative Electronic Word-of-Mouth
   a. Credibility of Negative Electronic Word-of-Mouth
   b. Negative Electronic Word-of-Mouth Purchase Intention
6. Mixed Neutral Electronic Word-of-Mouth
   a. Credibility of Mixed Neutral Electronic Word-of-Mouth
   b. Mixed Neutral Electronic Word-of-Mouth Purchase Intention

3.5.1 Demography

The first section gathered data on the demographic information of respondents. Firstly, two of the qualifying criteria were asked, to eliminate participants who were not eligible for the purpose of the study, i.e., age and nationality. To counter the final requirement, that is, having carried out purchases online from the fashion retail industry at least once, respondents who responded with 'never' to the question "How frequently do you purchase fashion items online?" were immediately disqualified by providing a message thanking them for their time and letting them know that they are not eligible to continue. This same message was provided to anyone outside the target age group and persons whose nationality is not Maltese.

Other questions included in this section were related to gender, education and employment, the social networking site that they use most frequently and the amount of time they spend using social networking sites per day. These were asked to get a clearer picture of the sample

population and identify any changes in credibility, usage and purchase intention based on different demographics and behaviours.

3.5.2 Usage of electronic word-of-mouth

In the second section, the researcher aims to assess the susceptibility of participants to make use of online product reviews prior to purchasing fashion products online, as an indicator to the usage of eWOM. The scale 'Perceptions of susceptibility to online product reviews' from the study of Bambauer-Sachse and Mangold (2011) was utilized in the development of the questions to increase the validity and reliability of the questions and ensure that the right data is collected. This scale was slightly tweaked to specify that reference is being made to fashion products and companies. Moreover, one of the Likert Scale questions was not included due to it being misinterpreted by participants during the pilot testing.

3.5.3 Credibility of electronic word-of-mouth

To gather data on whether participants perceive eWOM posted by social networking users to be credible or not, the scale created by Bataineh (2015) was adopted. This scale consists of five Likert Scale questions whereby participants were asked to choose their level of agreement with the statements provided. The credibility measured in this scale was the percieved credibility as a general overall sentiment towards all types of eWOM, regardless of valence or sidedness.

3.5.4 Positive and negative electronic word-of-mouth

Positive and negative eWOM were studied using identical questions to make sure that the data collected is comparable. Each section was comprised of 3 marketing scales. In the first part, credibility was assessed using Thomas, Wirtz and Weyerer's scale (2019). Credibility, in this case, is different to the previous section as it is applied specifically to positive and negative eWOM respectively. This aims to assess whether there is variability of credibility depending on the valence of eWOM.

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On the other hand, the second part aimed to measure the perceived purchase intention after reading the respective type of eWOM. Two scales were used to capture purchase intention in two attributes; that is, the intention to purchase a particular product and the intention to purchase from the company. The marketing scales 'Purchase intention' created by Bower (2001) and 'Purchase intention (Company's Products)' created by Chiu, Hsieh, and Kuo (2012), were respectively used.

In total, 12 Likert Scale questions were asked for positive and negative eWOM respectively. In each question, participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with each question using the statements Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Agree and Strongly Agree. Due to the similarity of the questions and the repetitiveness of the answers, one must consider that there is a risk of habituation where respondents start losing interest and roughly start giving the same response to each question. To counteract this, some of the scales were shortened by eliminating questions which were excessively repetitive and were synonymous with other questions. This also aided in shortening the duration of the survey, increasing the likelihood of participants to complete the survey.

3.5.5 Mixed neutral electronic word-of-mouth

In the final section of the survey, two multiple choice questions were asked to identify whether there is higher credibility and purchase intention for mixed neutral eWOM, that is, reviews which provided two-sided arguments, when compared to one-sided reviews. This was done to analyse the perceived credibility and purchase intention of eWOM subject to sidedness. This section was kept as short as possible due to it being the final section of the survey where the patience level of respondents would have decreased. Moreover, for the relevance of the study, more importance is given to positive and negative eWOM rather than mixed neutral eWOM.

3.6 The pilot

A number of sample surveys were created to test and explore different structures, wordings and survey lengths to ultimately find the optimal survey for the scope of the research. The characteristics which were tested were aimed at utilizing the right questions which are worded in a way that is understood in the way they were intended. Additionally, pilot testing was also utilized to find the optimal amount of questions; making the survey long enough to get the data required for the study, but short enough to avoid risks of incompletion due to irritation and impatience by the average respondent.

A pilot study was carried out with 10 participants. 5 tests were carried out individually with the researcher present and 5 others were carried out online by sending a private link to the survey. The average time to complete the survey was observed and found to be 5 minutes. After completion, an evaluation was carried out to gather feedback and identify any difficulties and concerns. Moreover, each question was revised to make sure that it was understood correctly. Additionally, in the case of the respondents carrying out the survey in the presence of the researcher, the behaviour of the participant was observed to analyse any signs of impatience or irritation caused by repetitive questions or by the duration of the survey.

After evaluation, questions were refined and modified as per the feedback collected and reworded to be understood correctly and remove any ambiguity. This reduces the risk of research error and any misinterpretations, thereby increasing the validity and reliability of the survey.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

It was ensured that ethical conduct was adhered to throughout the research process. To limit ethical issues, all participants involved in the study were of legal age of consent and had full anonymity and confidentiality, conforming to GDPR standards. Additionally, all participants were given clear and truthful information about the purpose of the research and details about the researcher conducting the study. Participants were asked for consent to participate in the study and had the option to agree or disagree to participate, ensuring that participation was entirely and clearly voluntary. They were also given the possibility to end the study at any time and revoke their consent to make use of the data inputted. No risks, physical harm, danger or discomfort were anticipated for participants.

3.8 Conclusion

The research carried out in this dissertation is of a deductive nature and the research philosophy is a positivist one. To gather descriptive evidence, a mono-method quantitative research method was administered through the use of a survey. This was in the form of a cross-sectional study with regard to the time horizon. The target audience of the survey was the Maltese population aged between 16 and 25 who have purchased fashion retail items online at least once. Non-probability convenience sampling was used for sample selection.

The survey was split into sections gathering data on the demography of respondents, the usage of eWOM, the credibility of eWOM, the credibility and effectiveness of positive eWOM and negative eWOM on purchase intention and finally the credibility and effectiveness of mixed neutral eWOM on purchase intention. The scales utilized throughout the survey were adopted from previous research to ensure validity. A pilot study was administered to increase the validity and reliability of the survey.

4. Results

4.1 Introduction

The chapter hereunder presents an analysis of the data collected through an online survey. The tools utilised include Google Forms, Microsoft Excel and IBM SPSS. Firstly, an analysis of the sample population was done based on demographic variables. Secondly, an analysis of the Likert Scales was conducted together with a test for scale reliability, a test of normality, a Friedman test and a central tendency analysis. Moreover, the relationship between the Likert Scales was investigated using a Spearman correlation test. A Kruskal-Wallis test also analysed the relationships between the Likert Scales and demographic variables to identify any statistically significant differences in the behavior towards eWOM subject to customers' demographic factors. After this, a descriptive analysis of the perceived credibility and influence on purchase intention of mixed neutral electronic word-of-mouth (MNWOM) compared to one-sided eWOM is provided. Finally, the results also include an analysis of the variance between the positive and negative eWOM in terms of credibility of eWOM and the impact of eWOM on purchase intention.

4.2 Demographics

A total of 327 responses were received, however, two of these respondents opted out of participating. Therefore, 325 participants were considered for data analysis. All 325 participants met the qualifying criteria to participate in the questionnaire as none of the respondents were under the age of 16 or over the age of 25, had a nationality other than Maltese or responded with 'never' when asked about how frequently they purchase fashion items online.

As indicated in table 1, from the 325 respondents who participated in the study, 193 of participants were female while 132 were males.

Table 1: Gender Distribution

	Frequency	Percent
Female	193	59.4%
Male	132	40.6%

The ages were reasonably well distributed across the sample population, although a higher percentage of the sample population belonged to the 22-23 age group, occupying 28.6% of the total sample, and the 20-21 age group, occupying 25.2% of the total sample. A visual representation of this data is presented in figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Age Distribution
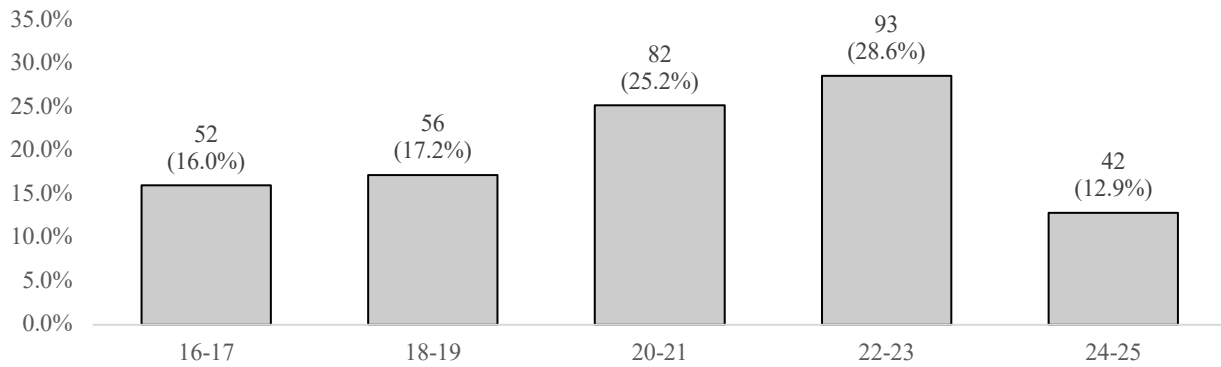
As observed in table 2, the level of education of participants was skewed towards the post-secondary and the degree level education, occupying 35.1% and 39.4% of the population respectively.

Table 2: Level of education

	Frequency	Percent
Secondary level	41	12.6%
Post-Secondary Level	114	35.1%
Degree Level	128	39.4%
Masters Level	42	12.9%

The current enrolment status of participants can be observed through the crosstabulation in Table 3 below. This shows the student enrolment status and the employment status of the sample population. It can be noted that a significant proportion of the sample population, that is, 123 out of 325 participants (37.8%), were full-time students engaged in part-time employment.

Table 3: Student enrolment status * Employment status crosstabulation

		Type of employment status				
		Full-time Employed	Part-time Employed	Self-Employed	Unemployed	Total
Type of student enrollment status	Full-time student	5	123	6	92	226
		1.5%	37.8%	1.8%	28.3%	69.5%
	Part-time student	18	4	0	0	22
		5.5%	1.2%			6.8%
	Not a student	69	3	2	3	77
		21.2%	0.9%	0.6%	0.9%	23.7%
	Total	92	130	8	95	325
		28.3%	40%	2.5%	29.2%	100%

Participants were asked to determine how frequently they purchase fashion items online. As observed in table 4, almost half of the sample population, being 48.3% of the sample population, stated that they purchase fashion items online 'A few times a year'. This means they purchase fashion items online more than once a year but less often than once a month.

Table 4: Frequency of purchase of fashion items online

	Frequency	Percent
More than once a month	46	14.2%
Once a month	83	25.5%
A few times a year	157	48.3%
Once a year	13	4.0%
Very rarely	26	8.0%

Table 5 below shows that the social networking site most used by participants was Instagram, occupying 66.2% of the sample population. The remaining 33.8% of the population, in order of popularity, made use of TikTok (15.1%), YouTube (9.2%), Facebook (6.5%), and Other, which included Twitter (2.2%), Reddit (0.3%) and Tumblr (0.3%).

Table 5: Social networking site used most frequently

	Frequency	Percent
Instagram	215	66.2%
TikTok	49	15.1%
Facebook	21	6.5%
YouTube	30	9.2%
Other	10	3.1%

The final demographic question asked participants about the number of hours they spend using social network sites on an average day. A significant proportion of the sample population, being 45.8%, stated that they spend 3-4 hours using social network sites on an average day. More details are presented in table 6 hereunder.

Table 6: Hours using social networking sites

	Frequency	*Percent*
1-2 hours	55	16.9%
3-4 hours	149	45.8%
5-6 hours	90	27.7%
7-8 hours	21	6.5%
9-10 hours	6	1.8%
11 or more hours	4	1.2%

4.3 The Likert Scales

4.3.1 Introduction

The Likert-type questions were summarised to create six Likert Scales as follows:

1. Usage of electronic word-of-mouth **(U)**
    i. To make sure I buy the right fashion products from the right brand, I often read other consumers' online product reviews or comments. (U1)
    ii. I often consult other consumers' online product reviews or comments to help choose the right fashion product/brand. (U2)
    iii. I frequently gather information from online consumers' product reviews or comments before I buy a certain fashion product/brand. (U3)
    iv. If I don't read consumers' online product reviews or comments when I buy a fashion product/brand, I worry about my decision. (U4)
    v. When I buy a fashion product, consumers' online product reviews or comments make me confident in my purchase. (U5)
    (Bambauer-Sachse and Mangold, 2011)

2. Credibility of electronic word-of-mouth **(C)**
    i. Most users on my social networking site can be trusted. (C1)
    ii. I feel confident about having discussions with the users on my social networking site. (C2)
    iii. The users on my social networking site will do everything within their capacity to help others. (C3)
    iv. The users on my social networking site always offer honest opinions. (C4)
    v. I can believe the users on my social networking site. (C5)
    (Bataineh, 2015)

3. Credibility of positive electronic word-of-mouth **(PC)**
    i. I believe that positive online reviews are accurate. (PC1)
    ii. I believe that positive online reviews are convincing. (PC2)
    iii. I believe that positive online reviews are credible. (PC3)
    (Thomas, Wirtz and Weyerer's scale, 2019)

4. Purchase intention after reading positive electronic word-of-mouth **(PPI)**
    i. After reading a POSITIVE review about a fashion product or company, I am eager to check out the product. (PPI1)
    ii. After reading a POSITIVE review about a fashion product or company, I am intrigued to try the product. (PPI2)
    iii. After reading a POSITIVE review about a fashion product or company, I am interested in seeing how the product looks on me. (PPI3)
    iv. After reading a POSITIVE review about a fashion product or company, I plan on buying the product. (PPI4)
    v. After reading a POSITIVE review about a fashion product or company, it is likely that I will buy the product when it becomes available. (PPI5)
    vi. After reading a POSITIVE review about a fashion product or company, I would consider purchasing the product. (PPI6)
    (Bower, 2001)
    vii. After reading a POSITIVE review about a fashion product or company, I am likely to purchase products from the company in question. (PPI7)
    viii. After reading a POSITIVE review about a fashion product or company, I would consider buying products from the company if I need a product of such kind. (PPI8)
    ix. After reading a POSITIVE review about a fashion product or company, it is possible for me to buy products from the company. (PPI9)
    (Chiu, Hsieh, and Kuo, 2012)

5. Credibility of negative electronic word-of-mouth **(NC)**
    i. I believe that negative online reviews are accurate. (NC1)
    ii. I believe that negative online reviews are convincing. (NC2)
    iii. I believe that negative online reviews are credible. (NC3)

(Thomas, Wirtz and Weyerer's scale, 2019)

6. Purchase intention after reading positive electronic word-of-mouth **(PPI)**

    i. After reading a NEGATIVE review about a fashion product or company, I am eager to check out the product. (NPI1)

    ii. After reading a NEGATIVE review about a fashion product or company, I am intrigued to try the product. (NPI2)

    iii. After reading a NEGATIVE review about a fashion product or company, I am interested in seeing how the product looks on me. (NPI3)

    iv. After reading a NEGATIVE review about a fashion product or company, I plan on buying the product. (NPI4)

    v. After reading a NEGATIVE review about a fashion product or company, it is likely that I will buy the product when it becomes available. (NPI5)

    vi. After reading a NEGATIVE review about a fashion product or company, I would consider purchasing the product. (NPI6)
    (Bower, 2001)

    vii. After reading a NEGATIVE review about a fashion product or company, I am likely to purchase products from the company in question. (NPI7)

    viii. After reading a NEGATIVE review about a fashion product or company, I would consider buying products from the company if I need a product of such kind. (NPI8)

    ix. After reading a NEGATIVE review about a fashion product or company, it is possible for me to buy products from the company. (NPI9)
    (Thomas, Wirtz and Weyerer's scale, 2019)

The method used to combine the Likert-type questions into Likert Scale variables was through a computation of the means. To implement this, the compute variables option on IBM SPSS was utilized.

4.3.2 Scale reliability

The reliability of the factor analysis can vary depending on the sample size (Field, 2017). According to Comrey and Lee (1992), having a sample size greater than 300 constitutes to an overall good reliability for factor analysis. This criterion was met as the survey was administered successfully by 325 participants.

The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) was utilized to assess the Likert Scales' sampling adequacy. It is stated that a value higher than 0.5 and closer to 1 is an indicator that factor analysis is reliable since the patterns of correlations would be relatively compact (Field, 2017).

The Cronbach's alpha was used as a measure of internal consistency between the related statements to determine the reliability of the scales (Cronbach, 1951). As a general rule, it is stated that a Cronbach's alpha greater than .70 indicates an adequate internal consistency, above 0.8 is better, and above 0.9 is best. A Cronbach's alpha below 0.5 indicates that there is no significant internal consistency (Nunnally, 1978).

Table 7: Scale Reliability

Scale	KMO	Cronbach's Alpha	Reliability
U	0.852	0.848	Yes
C	0.807	0.826	Yes
PC	0.705	0.818	Yes
PPI	0.889	0.911	Yes
NC	0.725	0.849	Yes
NPI	0.924	0.928	Yes

As observed in table 7, all values in the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin and the Cronbach's alpha meet the previously mentioned criteria. As a result, it can be said that all scales were internally consistent and reliable.

4.3.3 Test of normality

To ascertain if the score distribution of the scales was normal or not, the Shapiro Wilk test is performed. If the p-value is higher than the threshold level of 0.05, the null hypothesis, which states that the score distribution is normal, is accepted. On the other hand, if the p-value is

smaller than the threshold level of significance of 0.05, the alternative hypothesis, which indicates that the score distribution is skewed, that is, not normally distributed, is accepted.

Table 8: Shapiro-Wilk Test of Normality

	Statistic	**df**	**P-value**
U	.940	325	<.001
C	.980	325	<.001
PC	.928	325	<.001
PPI	.905	325	<.001
NC	.930	325	<.001
NPI	.946	325	<.001

Table 8 shows that for all Likert Scales, the p-value is lower than 0.05, hence, we reject the null hypothesis. As a result, it is concluded that none of the Likert Scales follow a normal distribution. For this reason, the data shall be analysed using non-parametric tests

4.3.4 Friedman Test

The mean scale scores of the Likert Scales are compared using the Friedman test. Scores on the scales range from 1 to 5, with 1 denoting "strongly disagree" and 5 denoting "strongly agree". The null hypothesis, which indicates that the mean scale scores of the scales are similar, is accepted if the p-value is higher than 0.05. The alternative hypothesis indicates that the mean scale scores are significantly different and is accepted if the p-value is lower than the 0.05 level of significance.

Table 9: Friedman Test

	Sample Size	Mean scale score	Std. Deviation
U	325	3.66	.859
C	325	3.10	.682
PC	325	3.44	.691
PPI	325	3.70	.625
NC	325	3.54	.735
NPI	325	2.21	.685

$X^2(5) = 597.016$, p **<0.001**

Upon interpretation of the Friedman Test in table 9, it can be noted that the p-value is lower than 0.05, hence, the null hypothesis is rejected. As a result, and it concluded that mean scale scores differ significantly.

Table 9 also indicates the mean scale score for each Likert Scale. This is used as a measure of central tendency. A mean score of 3 would represent neutrality as it denotes 'neither agree nor disagree'. A score higher than 3 signifies that participants tended towards agreement to the statment, while a score lower than 3 signifies that participants tended towards disagreement to the statment. The degree of agreement or disagreement to the statment increases as distance from 3 increases. The Likert scales for usage of eWOM (U), credibility of eWOM (C), credibility of positive eWOM (PC), purchase intention after reading positive eWOM (PPI) and credibility of negative eWOM (NC) all tended towards agreement to the statment in varying degrees. On the other hand, the purchase intention after reading negative eWOM (NPI) tended towards disagreement to the statment.

The mean score of 3.70, showing a tendency towards agreement to the statment for purchase intention after reading positive eWOM (PPI), shows that for the sample population, positive eWOM is linked with an increased intention to purchase fashion items online. This is identical

to the first hypothesis, that is, 'positive electronic word-of-mouth is linked with an increased intention to purchase fashion items online'. Therefore, **H1 is supported.**

Contrastingly, the mean score of 2.21, shows a tendency towards disagreement to the statment for purchase intention after reading negative eWOM (NPI). This indicates that, for the sample population, negative eWOM is linked with a decreased intention to purchase fashion items online, identical to the second hypothesis. Hence, **H2 is supported.**

4.4 Relationships

4.4.1 Spearman correlations

The Spearman correlation test analyses the degree of association between two continuous variables. This gives a correlation coefficient ranging from -1 to 1. When the correlation coefficient is positive, this means that there is a positive relationship between the two variables; while when the correlation coefficient is negative, this means that there is a negative relationship between the two variables. The null hypothesis, which indicates that the relationship between the two variables is not significant, is accepted when the p-value is higher than the 0.05 criterion. The alternative hypothesis, on the other hand, indicates that the relationship between the two variables is significant. It is accepted if the p-value is lower than the 0.05 criterion.

Table 10: Spearman Correlations

		U	C	PC	PPI	NC	NPI
U	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	**.175**	**.308**	**.292**	**.297**	-.067
	P-value	.	**.001**	**.000**	**.000**	**.000**	.227
C	Correlation Coefficient	**.175**	1.000	**.289**	**.159**	**.220**	.058
	P-value	**.001**	.	**.000**	**.004**	**.000**	.298
PC	Correlation Coefficient	**.308**	**.289**	1.000	**.425**	**.329**	-.061
	P-value	**.000**	**.000**	.	**.000**	**.000**	.273
PPI	Correlation Coefficient	**.292**	**.159**	**.425**	1.000	**.355**	-.073
	P-value	**.000**	**.004**	**.000**	.	**.000**	.189
NC	Correlation Coefficient	**.297**	**.220**	**.329**	**.355**	1.000	**-.188**
	P-value	**.000**	**.000**	**.000**	**.000**	.	**.001**
NPI	Correlation Coefficient	-.067	.058	-.061	-.073	**-.188**	1.000
	P-value	.227	.298	.273	.189	**.001**	.

The p-values indicated in table 10 corroborate that there is correlation across the Likert Scales for usage of eWOM (U), credibility of eWOM (C), credibility of positive eWOM (PC), purchase intention after reading positive eWOM (PPI) and credibility of negative eWOM (NC). All these correlations are positive, meaning that as one variable increases, so does the other.

In the case of the Likert Scale for purchase intention after reading negative eWOM (NPI), there is only one correlation which is with credibility of negative eWOM (NC). This correlation is negative, meaning that as NC increases, NPI decreases.

The above Spearman correlation can be used in addressing the third and fourth hypothesis which state that there is a correlation between credibility of eWOM and purchase intention after reading positive and negative eWOM respectively. These are satisfied using two criteria

for each hypothesis; the correlations with credibility of positive and negative eWOM respectively (PC and NC) and the correlations with overall credibility of eWOM (C).

In testing the third hypothesis, one needs to refer to the correlation between PPI and PC as well as the correlation between PPI and C. Since both correlations are statistically significant, **H3 is supported.**

On the other hand, in testing the fourth hypothesis, one needs to refer to the correlation between NPI and NC and the correlation between NPI and C. In this case, the correlation between NPI and NC is statistically significant, however, the correlation between NPI and C is not. As a result, **H4 is only partially supported.**

The correlation between credibility of positive eWOM (PC) and purchase intention after reading positive eWOM (PPI) is the correlation with the highest correlation coefficient, indicating that the correlation was the strongest compared to the other correlations observed in table10. This is visualised in Figure 2 below which shows a scatter plot of the two variables including a line of best fit which is inclined in a way that depicts the positive correlation.

Figure 2: Scatter Plot of PPI and PC
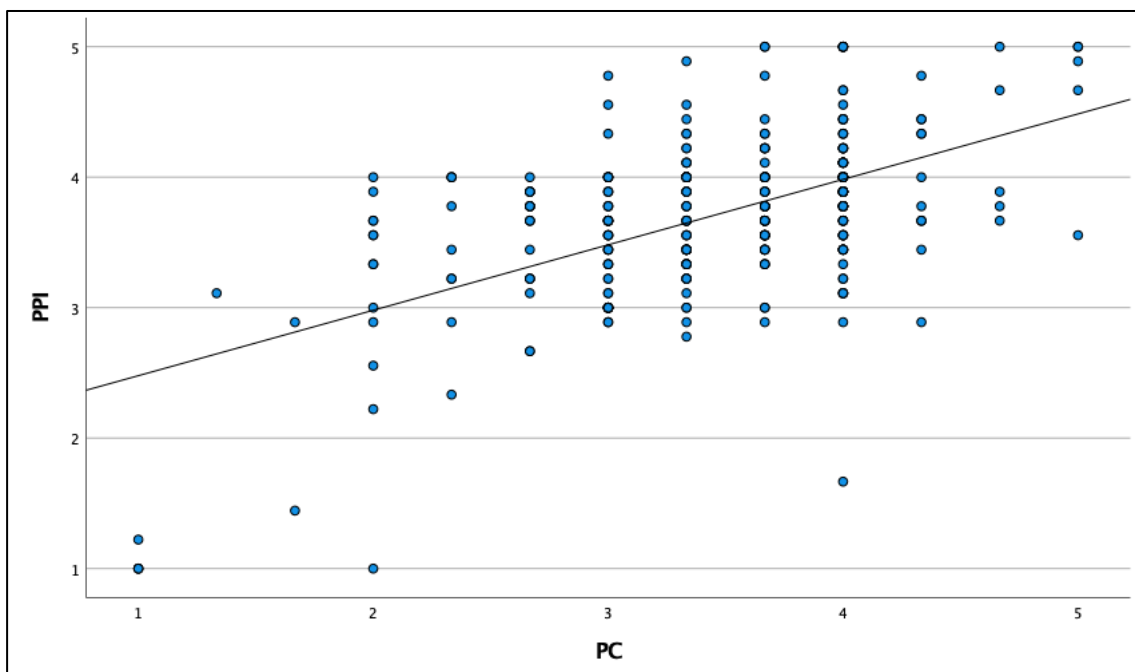
The lack of correlation between purchase intention after reading positive eWOM (PPI) and purchase intention after reading negative eWOM (NPI) is shown in Figure 3 below. Here, the line of best fit is almost completely horizontal. This means that there is no statistically significant correlation between the purchase intention after reading positive eWOM (PPI) and the purchase intention after reading negative eWOM (NPI).

Figure 3: Scatter Plot of PPI and NPI
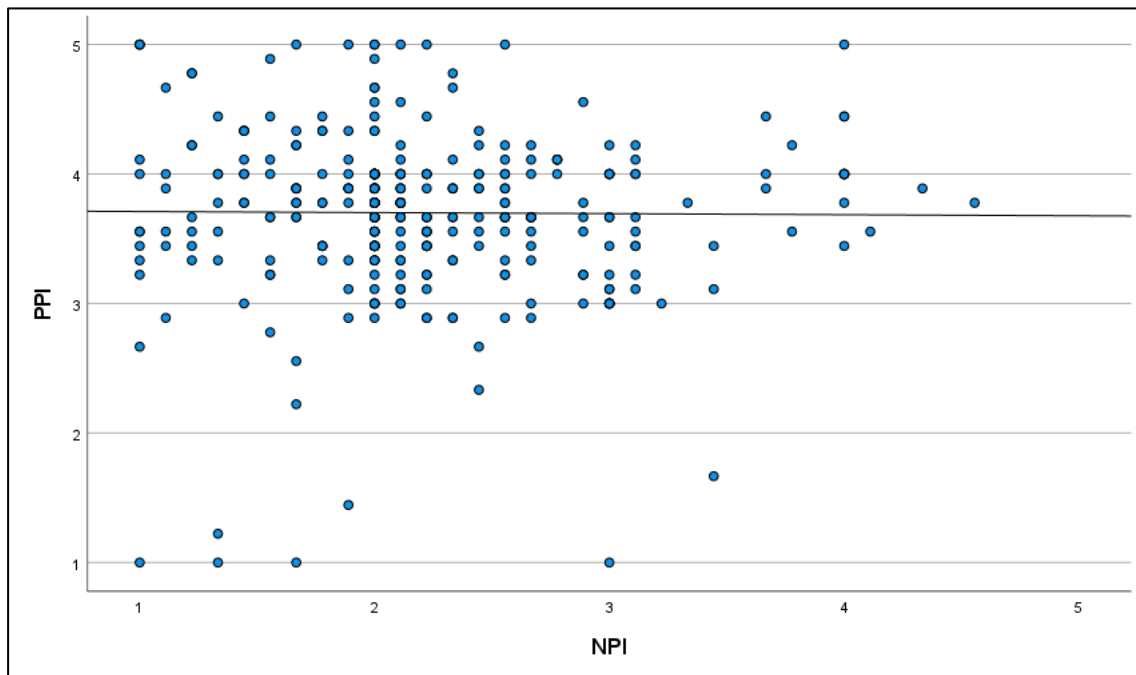
4.4.2 Kruskal Wallis test

To compare mean scale scores between participant groups clustered by gender, education level, hours using social network sites and frequency of purchase of fashion items online, the Kruskal Wallis test is utilized. The null hypothesis indicates that the difference in mean scale scores between the groups is marginal. It is accepted if the p-value is higher than the threshold level of 0.05. On the other hand, if the p-value is lower than the 0.05 threshold, the alternative hypothesis is accepted. This states that there are significant differences in the mean scale scores between the groups.

Table 11: Kruskal Wallis Test - Gender

		Sample size	Mean	Std. Deviation	P-value
U	*Female*	193	3.73	.907	**0.010**
	Male	132	3.56	.777	
C	*Female*	193	3.09	.681	0.826
	Male	132	3.13	.685	
PC	*Female*	193	3.45	.706	0.718
	Male	132	3.41	.670	
PPI	*Female*	193	3.77	.637	**0.012**
	Male	132	3.59	.593	
NC	*Female*	193	3.55	.718	0.780
	Male	132	3.54	.761	
NPI	*Female*	193	2.15	.681	**0.014**
	Male	132	2.31	.683	

Table 11 indicates that scores for males and females where significantly different for the scales U, PPI and NPI. Females scored higher in U and PP1 than males; while males are scored higher in NPI. Mean C, PC and NC scores varied marginally between genders since the p-values exceed the 0.05 level of significance.

Table 12: Kruskal Wallis Test – Age Group

		Sample size	Mean	Std. Deviation	P-value
U	16-17	52	3.58	.965	0.694
	18-19	56	3.70	.835	
	20-21	82	3.76	.844	

	22-23	93	3.62	.801	
	24-25	42	3.60	.928	
C	16-17	52	2.80	.855	**0.002**
	18-19	56	2.97	.669	
	20-21	82	3.19	.646	
	22-23	93	3.26	.508	
	24-25	42	3.14	.741	
PC	16-17	52	3.19	.864	0.270
	18-19	56	3.49	.623	
	20-21	82	3.53	.666	
	22-23	93	3.42	.647	
	24-25	42	3.50	.634	
PPI	16-17	52	3.49	.927	0.360
	18-19	56	3.72	.565	
	20-21	82	3.79	.555	
	22-23	93	3.70	.545	
	24-25	42	3.77	.488	
NC	16-17	52	3.39	.847	0.237
	18-19	56	3.58	.828	
	20-21	82	3.67	.732	
	22-23	93	3.51	.662	
	24-25	42	3.52	.585	
NPI	16-17	52	2.14	.724	0.952
	18-19	56	2.23	.650	
	20-21	82	2.23	.679	
	22-23	93	2.23	.721	
	24-25	42	2.22	.640	

As seen in table 12, the mean scale scores varied significantly between the different age groups of participants in the case of C since the p-value is less than 0.05. Participants within the age group of 22-23, scored the highest in credibility of eWOM, while participants within the age group of 16-17 scored the lowest. The mean scale scores for U, PC, PPI, NC and NPI vary marginally between different age groups of participants.

Table 13: Kruskal Wallis Test - Social networking site used most frequently

		Sample size	Mean	Std. Deviation	P-value
U	Instagram	215	3.67	.859	0.218
	Tiktok	49	3.50	.898	
	Facebook	21	3.95	.681	
	YouTube	30	3.77	.720	
	Other	10	3.32	1.234	
C	Instagram	215	3.11	.682	0.178
	Tiktok	49	2.99	.658	
	Facebook	21	3.28	.700	
	YouTube	30	2.97	.722	
	Other	10	3.50	.492	
PC	Instagram	215	3.46	.686	**0.023**
	Tiktok	49	3.26	.771	
	Facebook	21	3.71	.669	
	YouTube	30	3.54	.376	
	Other	10	2.97	.853	
PPI	Instagram	215	3.73	.614	0.364
	Tiktok	49	3.62	.711	

	Facebook	21	3.79	.425	
	YouTube	30	3.73	.531	
	Other	10	3.24	.893	
NC	Instagram	215	3.52	.739	0.056
	Tiktok	49	3.61	.671	
	Facebook	21	3.92	.649	
	YouTube	30	3.51	.566	
	Other	10	2.97	1.149	
NPI	Instagram	215	2.23	.724	0.422
	Tiktok	49	2.10	.608	
	Facebook	21	2.29	.589	
	YouTube	30	2.31	.610	
	Other	10	2.06	.589	

Upon interpretation of table 13, it can be observed that in the case of the p-value is less than the 0.05 criterion for the Likert Scale PC. This corroborates that the mean scores vary significantly depending on the social networking site used most frequently. Participants who used Facebook most frequently scored the highest in PC, with a mean score of 3.71, while participants who used other social networking sites such as Twitter scored the lowest. In the case U, C, PPI, NC and NPI, mean score variations were marginal.

For the demographics 'frequency of purchase of fashion items online' and 'hours using social network sites', none of the p-values in the Kruskal Wallis Test were lower than 0.05, hence all mean score variations were marginal.

4.5 Mixed Neutral electronic word-of-mouth (MNWOM)

Tables 14 and 15 below indicate that the majority of participants, that is 80% and 93.5% of participants respectively, have a higher purchase intention and credibility of eWOM in the case of mixed neutral eWOM, when compared to that of a review that is one-sided.

Table 14: Purchase intention of Mixed Neutral vs One-sided electronic word-of-mouth

	Frequency	Percentage
A review that is one-sided (fully positive or fully negative)	65	20.0%
A review that gives both negative and positive aspects	260	80.0%

Table 15: Credibility of Mixed Neutral vs One-sided electronic word-of-mouth

	Frequency	Percentage
A review that is one-sided (fully positive or fully negative)	21	6.5%
A review that gives both negative and positive aspects	304	93.5%

These results indicate that credibility and purchase intention are higher for mixed neutral eWOM compared to one-sided eWOM, which conforms to the fifth hypothesis. Therefore, the results show that **H5 is supported.**

4.6 Comparison of positive and negative electronic word-of-mouth

4.6.1 The impact of electronic word-of-mouth on purchase intention

To analyze and compare the impact of eWOM on participants' purchase intention, the Likert scales needed to be modified to develop scales whereby a high score, that is closer to 5, denotes a high impact of eWOM on purchase intention and a low score, that is closer to 1, denotes a low impact of eWOM on purchase intention. A high impact of positive eWOM means that the

purchase intention after reading positive eWOM is high. On the other hand, a high impact of negative eWOM means that the purchase intention after reading negative eWOM is low. For this reason, the data for purchase intention after reading negative eWOM (NPI) was inverted, creating a new scale showing the impact of negative eWOM on purchase intention, denoted as 'FNPI'. The data for purchase intention after reading positive eWOM (PPI) does not need any modifications and can be used to measure the impact of positive eWOM on purchase intention. As a result, two consistent scales measuring the impact of eWOM were created.

A Friedman test was carried out to compare mean scores between the two scales using the following hypotheses.

H^0: *There is no statistically significant difference between the impact of positive electronic word-of-mouth on purchase intention (PPI) and the impact of negative electronic word-of-mouth on purchase intention (FNPI).*

H^1: *There is a statistically significant difference between the impact of positive electronic word-of-mouth on purchase intention (PPI) and the impact of negative electronic word-of-mouth on purchase intention (FNPI).*

Table 16: Friedman Test for the impact of electronic word-of-mouth on purchase intention

	Sample Size	Mean scale score	Std. Deviation
PPI	325	3.70	.625
FNPI	325	3.79	.685

$X^2(1) = 9.653$ p =**0.002**

The Friedman Test in table 16 above shows that the p-value is 0.002, that is, lower than 0.05. Hence, H^0 is rejected, and it can be said that for the participants of the study, there is a significant difference between the impact of positive eWOM on purchase intention (PPI) and the impact of negative eWOM on purchase intention (FNPI). Therefore, upon interpretation of

the mean scale scores, the impact of negative eWOM on purchase intention was higher than the impact of positive eWOM on purchase intention.

This result concurs with the sixth hypothesis which states that the impact of negative eWOM on purchase intention is higher than that of positive eWOM. Hence, **H6 is supported**.

4.6.2 Credibility

To identify whether there is a difference in mean score of credibility of positive eWOM (PC) and credibility of negative eWOM (NC), the Freidman test is used. No modifications on the scales PC and NC were required.

> H^0: There is no statistically significant difference between the mean scores of credibility of positive electronic word-of-mouth (PC) and credibility of negative electronic word-of-mouth (NC)

> H^1: There is a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of credibility of positive electronic word-of-mouth (PC) and credibility of negative electronic word-of-mouth (NC)

Table 17: Friedman Test for Credibility

	Sample Size	Mean scale score	Std. Deviation
NC	325	3.54	.735
PC	325	3.44	.691

$X^2(1) = 3.299$ p =**0.069**

The null hypothesis is accepted since the p-value is larger than 0.05 as observed in table 17. This means that although the mean for credibility of negative eWOM is slightly higher, this difference is not statistically significant.

This analysis is used to address the seventh and final hypothesis which states that credibility of negative eWOM is higher than that of positive eWOM. Since the difference is not statistically significant, **H7 is not supported**.

4.7 Hypotheses results

The results of the hypotheses are summarized in table 18 below.

Table 18: Hypotheses results

	Hypotheses	Result
H1	*Positive electronic word-of-mouth is linked with an increased intention to purchase fashion items online.*	Supported
H2	*Negative electronic word-of-mouth is linked with a decreased intention to purchase fashion items online.*	Supported
H3	*There is a correlation between credibility of electronic word-of-mouth and purchase intention after reading positive electronic word-of-mouth*	Supported
H4	*There is a correlation between credibility of electronic word-of-mouth and purchase intention after reading negative electronic word-of-mouth*	Partially supported
H5	*Credibility and purchase intention are higher for mixed neutral electronic word-of-mouth compared to one-sided electronic word-of-mouth.*	Supported
H6	*The impact of negative electronic word-of-mouth on purchase intention is higher than that of positive electronic word-of-mouth*	Supported
H7	*Credibility of negative electronic word-of-mouth is higher than that of positive electronic word-of-mouth*	Not Supported

4.8 Conclusion

The results were classified into five sub-sections, which were demographics, Likert scales, relationships, mixed neutral electronic word-of-mouth and variance between positive and negative electronic word-of-mouth.

The Likert Scales were confirmed to be reliable through the use of the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) and the Cronbach's alpha test. The Likert scales were not normally distributed as indicated through the Shapiro Wilk test; hence, non-parametric tests were used for data analytics. The Friedman test was used to derive three conclusions. Firstly, it confirmed that the mean scale scores of the Likert scales differ significantly, and secondly, it indicated the central tendency of the sample population for each scale using the mean. This central tendency was used to support H1 and H2.

The second sub-section included the Spearman test which showed positive correlations across U, C, PC, PPI and NC. NPI, on the other hand, had one correlation with NC which was a negative correlation. This was used to support H3 and partially support H4.

A Kruskal Wallis test was also administered to identify differences in behaviour towards eWOM across different demographic groups. The results showed that female participants were more likely to use eWOM, had a higher purchase intention after reading positive eWOM and a lower purchase intention after reading negative eWOM when compared to males. Moreover, it was indicated that participants from the 22-23 age group were more likely to have a higher overall credibility in eWOM. Participants who were primarily Facebook users were more likely to have a higher credibility in positive eWOM.

The analysis of mixed neutral eWOM led to the acceptance of H5. Therefore, credibility and purchase intention were higher for mixed neutral eWOM compared to one-sided eWOM.

The results of the Friedman Test in the sub-section 'Variance between positive and negative eWOM' proved that the impact of negative eWOM on purchase intention is higher than that of positive eWOM (H6). Moreover, it proved that there was no statistically significant difference between PC and NC, hence rejecting H7.

A summary of the results of all seven hypotheses was included in the final sub-section.

5. Discussion

5.1 Introduction

Following the results, this chapter shall summarise the key findings and evaluations from the research study. This shall be done by delving into the hypotheses and comparing the survey findings to academic knowledge evaluated in the literature review. Furthermore, this chapter shall include a discussion of the study's limitations, which must be acknowledged when interpreting the findings, as well as a number of recommendations for future research.

5.2 Key findings

5.2.1 Electronic word-of-mouth and purchase intention

The study primarily set out to address the question - Does electronic word-of-mouth influence the purchase intention of the Maltese Generation Z population in the online fashion retail industry? It is studied by supporting the following research hypotheses.

> *H1: Positive electronic word-of-mouth is linked with an increased intention to purchase fashion items online.*

> *H2: Negative electronic word-of-mouth is linked with a decreased intention to purchase fashion items online.*

The acceptance of the two hypotheses confirms that for the sample population, eWOM does in fact influence the purchase intention of the Maltese Gen Z population in the online fashion retail industry. This is confirmed by analysing the mean scores of purchase intention after reading positive eWOM (PPI), and purchase intention after reading negative eWOM (NPI), respectively. The central tendencies show that participants are more likely to purchase a product after reading a positive review and are less likely to purchase a product after reading a

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negative review. Therefore, it can be concluded that positive eWOM is linked with an increased intention to purchase fashion items online, and negative eWOM is linked with a decreased intention to purchase fashion items online. Through the acceptance of these hypotheses, the answer to the research question is confirmed and it can be stated that for the sample population, eWOM does influence purchase intention.

This supports the claim by Park, Lee and Han (2007) stating that eWOM has a positive impact on the purchase intention of consumers. It also agrees with Sparks and Browning (2011) in saying that consumers have increased purchase intention after reading online reviews. Moreover, the study also concurs to the general statement by Daugherty and Hoffman (2014), which states that eWOM is an influential factor that affects consumer behaviour.

There are a number of variables that were kept general when asking participants about their purchase intention after reading a negative or positive review. These variables include the type, quality, and usefulness of the review, qualities of the reviewer, the specific product or brand, the level of involvement allocated, and whether there is additional information, other reviews or prior experiences with the product or brand in question. This could be a limitation of the study because various factors could have varying effects on how eWOM impacts customers' purchasing intentions (Park, Lee and Han, 2007; Ajzen, 1991; Belch and Belch, 2004; Dodd and Supa, 2011; Sam and Tahir, 2009).

5.2.2 Credibility of electronic word-of-mouth and purchase intention

The study also sought to confirm whether there is a positive relationship between the perceived credibility of the Maltese Gen Z population in eWOM and their purchase intention after reading eWOM. This was done by testing the following hypotheses.

> *H3: There is a correlation between credibility of electronic word-of-mouth and*
> *purchase intention after reading positive electronic word-of-mouth*

H4: There is a correlation between credibility of electronic word-of-mouth and purchase intention after reading negative electronic word-of-mouth

The findings demonstrate a relationship between eWOM credibility and participants' intention to purchase after reading positive eWOM. This was true regardless of whether the perceived credibility was a general sentiment towards all eWOM or only applied to positive eWOM. This was done by using the scales C and PC and determining a correlation with PPI for each.

On the other hand, correlation between credibility of eWOM and purchase intention after reading negative eWOM was supported in the case of credibility specific to negative eWOM only (NC). As a result, this hypothesis cannot be fully accepted.

While in the case of positive eWOM this study concurs with the study of Lee, Park and Han (2011), which found that the higher the perceived credibility of eWOM, the higher is the purchase intention of consumers, this cannot also be said for negative eWOM. Due to this correlation between credibility and purchase intention after reading positive eWOM, it can also be said that the power of *positive* eWOM is moderated by the credibility of such eWOM – partially agreeing to the study by Cheung et al. (2009) who applies this statement regardless of valence.

The survey holds a limitation since different reviews may vary in credibility depending on factors such as, which website the review is on and the perceived trustworthiness of the website, the level of expertise of the reviewer, previous experiences and knowledge, strength of the argument, and normative factors (Brown, Broderick and Lee, 2007; Cheung et al., 2009). Since the survey was limited in length, it does not specify any information on the above factors, therefore, it only allows participants to provide a general perception of credibility regardless of the factors mentioned.

5.2.3 Sidedness of electronic word word-of-mouth

The study also analysed the effect of sidedness on the perceived credibility and purchase intention. Sidedness describes whether the eWOM is two-sided, which refers to mixed neutral eWOM, or one-sided, which refers to either positive or negative eWOM. This led to following secondary hypothesis.

> *H5: Credibility and purchase intention are higher for mixed neutral electronic word-of-mouth compared to one-sided electronic word-of-mouth*

The significantly high percentage of participants who stated that they perceive mixed neutral eWOM to be the most credible and mostly influences them into purchasing (or avoid purchasing) a product, leads to the acceptance of the hypothesis. Therefore, for the sample population, it can be said that credibility and purchase intention are higher for mixed neutral eWOM compared to one-sided eWOM. This agrees with the study of Roy, Datta and Mukherjee (2018) which states that mixed neutral eWOM is highly credible and highly impacts purchase intention.

Moreover, taking specifically the aspect of perceived credibility of one-sided and two-sided eWOM, the results agree with the findings of Kamins and Assael (1987) and Jensen et al. (2013), who suggest that two-sided reviews are perceived to be more credible than one-sided reviews.

The study's findings can be contrasted with those of Albon et al. (2018), Chakraborty and Bhat, (2018), and Cheung et al. (2009), who tested and disproved the hypothesis that two-sided eWOM was regarded as more credible than one-sided eWOM. This goes against the findings for the sample population.

Although positive and negative eWOM both independently impact purchase intention, as stated in the H1 and H2 which were accepted, participants perceive mixed neutral eWOM to impact

purchase intention to a higher degree. This claim could have been better supported if the three levels of valence were studied in the same way, that is, if a similar scale for purchase intention after reading mixed neutral eWOM was developed. This would ensure a coherent approach and increase the validity, however, the pilot test showed that the survey would have been too repetitive and long if this was administered.

5.2.4 Valence electronic word-of-mouth

Finally, the study sought to compare the perceived credibility and impact on purchase intention of positive and negative electronic word-of-mouth by testing the following hypotheses.

> *H6: The impact of negative electronic word-of-mouth on purchase intention is higher than that of positive electronic word-of-mouth*

> *H7: Credibility of negative electronic word-of-mouth is higher than that of positive electronic word-of-mouth*

Hypothesis 6, which compared the impact of the two types of eWOM on purchase intention, was accepted. This was after a modification of the Likert Scales and an analysis of the Friedman test. The results indicated a mean scale score of 3.79 for the impact of negative eWOM on purchase intention which is higher than the mean scale score of 3.70 for the impact of positive eWOM on purchase intention. This indicates that participants were more likely to change their purchasing behaviour after reading negative eWOM. Because of this, it can be said that the results concur with Chevalier and Mayzlin's (2006) study, which found that while most positive online reviews are effective in enhancing sales rank, negative online reviews have a greater impact. Although in this study, the focus was on the impact on purchase intention rather than sales, the studies can be compared due to the Theory of Reasoned Action (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975) and the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991), which suggest that purchase intention is significantly associated with actual purchase, i.e., sales. The study's findings also

support Park and Lee's (2009) claim that negative eWOM was more effective than positive eWOM.

The comparison of the perceived credibility of the two forms of eWOM in hypothesis 7 was disproved. Despite the fact that NC's mean scale score was greater than PC's, the Friedman test analysis revealed that this difference was marginal. This research supports the findings of Cheung et al. (2009), who found that the perceived credibility of an argument is not significantly influenced by the argument framing, which relates to whether eWOM is positive or negative. They thereby disproved the hypothesis that negative eWOM was perceived to be more credible than positive eWOM, equivalent to this study.

5.3 Limitations and recommendations for further research

The primary limitation in the study is that the data is not generalizable to the population. This is due to the unattainability of pursuing probability sampling resulting from the lack of availability of an adequate sampling frame. This refers to a list which encompassed all members of the target population, from which it would have been possible to extract a sample using probabilistic methods such as random sampling. Gathering enough data to create a sampling frame would have required a significant amount of research and investment which was limited by time constraints and by the cost of the solution. Hence, non-probability sampling, or more specifically, convenience sampling was administered. This has a number of limitations due to the inherent sample bias and other biases such as that whereby respondents may have had similar characteristics due to being socially connected and inadvertently selected by the interviewer, or even through self-selection. However, this was moderated through the introduction of a system whereby participants who are not socially connected to the researcher were selected at random in public spaces.

Other biases which may be present in this study include a respondent bias. Although the researcher's presence ensured anonymity and reduced social desirability bias and researcher bias, meaning that the data was not skewed by the researcher towards a desired outcome, it may have led to the bias that participants may have responded to the survey inaccurately, untruthfully, or without devoting the necessary attention as a result of the lack of guidance. The nature of online questionnaires introduces limitations as respondents may administer the questionnaire in different circumstances, causing variability in the data collected. Furthermore, there is no control environment in which all participants are subjected to identical conditions to ensure that all participants focus exclusively on the questionnaire. Some participants may have been interrupted while filling out the survey, resulting in participant errors. Other participant errors may have been caused as a result of repetition in the marketing scales causing habituation bias. This means that since the questions in the Likert Scales were worded similarly and the answers to each Likert Scale item was identical, participants may have tended to answer these questions with similar answers due to habituation.

The concept of a cross-sectional methodology also has limitations due to the inability to ensure causal relationships over time. The cross-sectional study provides an indicator of the phenomena at the time of the study, however, the opportunities to probe deeper into the causal relationship between eWOM and actual purchase would rise if the research was conducted using a longitudinal time horizon. This was not feasible for the researcher due to the dissertation's time constraints, however, as a recommendation for further research, it would be interesting to conduct a longitudinal study which follows consumers through their purchasing journey and identifies the effects of eWOM throughout such journey. This would identify at what point in the consumers' purchasing journey eWOM has the highest impact, that is, whether that being in the attention, interest, desire or action stage in the AIDA framework. Possible research questions would be – 'Does electronic word-of-mouth instigate a new interest

in consumers?' and 'Does electronic word-of-mouth influence consumers who already desire the product to taking action?'

The Generation Z population includes persons born between the years 1997 and 2012, therefore, their current ages span between 10 and 25. This means that the actual population includes persons who are below the legal age of 16 in Malta meaning that they are dependent on parental consent for participating in research. Moreover, persons below the age of 15 are also likely to be financially dependent on parents and guardians and may not yet carry out online purchases independently. For this reason, persons below the age of 16 were not included in the study. This places a limitation on the study since it did not use a sample that is representative of all the Generation Z population's range of ages.

Another limitation is that the eWOM mentioned in this research study is primarily focused on online reviews and there is no specification on the content of the review apart from it being positive or negative. Assumptions on the characteristics or anonymity of the reviewer, the specific channel that the review is on, and the level of prior knowledge or experience of the individual with the product or brand may have varied from respondent to respondent causing variations in the data collected. Further research may be conducted to investigate and compare various elements and characteristics of eWOM to determine how each of them influences the effectiveness of eWOM and which is the most effective in influencing consumer behaviour. Examples would be different levels of argument strength, quality and consistency, different levels of in source credibility, social connectedness and expertise, and also different levels of engagement on the eWOM and ratings on recommendations. There may also be different channels, such as company websites, a variety of social media networks or even focusing on consumer engagement, such as comments and likes on the brands' social media content. Variations of eWOM adoption may also lie in the person receiving the eWOM. As the results of the study confirm that for the sample population there is variation in the impact of eWOM

on purchase intention by gender, there may also be other characteristics and behavioural factors which make receivers have a higher likelihood for eWOM adoption. This may lead to new academic knowledge regarding what factors lead eWOM to have the greatest influence on customer purchase behaviour.

The use and administration of qualitative research to study the phenomena is recommended for future research in order to increase the level of depth of the research and gather substantial insight on different characteristics of eWOM and their effectiveness in a more profound manner. While quantitative research was used in this study to confirm the hypotheses and gather numerical data, qualitative research would shift towards explanatory research, yielding to a deeper level of understanding behind the constructs of eWOM subject to the population's experiences. Moreover, while this study has shown a correlation between eWOM and purchase intention, qualitative research would allow for the understanding of the causal relationship and variability of different factors.

A final recommendation for further research is to add to the body of academic research on sidedness of eWOM. The study identified with a significant majority that participants perceived two-sided eWOM as more credible and more likely to influence purchase intention than one-sided eWOM. This means, that while one-sided eWOM was perceived to be credible and was found to influence purchase intention, two-sided eWOM is stronger as it does this to a higher degree. Having said this, this study has a limitation since sidedness was not tested using statistical tests such as correlation of the Friedman test. This was done to limit the length and duration of the survey and decrease the amount of repetition since it may have otherwise decreased the completion rate and validity of other more prioritized questions for the purpose of the study. Future research may tap into this degree of adoptability and credibility of two-sided eWOM and compare these to one-sided eWOM in a more defined manner. Additionally,

researchers may seek to identify the characteristics of two-sided eWOM which increase credibility and adoptability to create a model.

If embarked upon, these recommendations may help in contributing significantly to the body of academic knowledge, providing new insights and explanations on eWOM which may then be taken up by practitioners to further understand the behaviour of consumers, enhance their company's performance, and ultimately creating a competitive edge.

5.4 Conclusion

Four key findings were extracted from the results of the survey and compared to academic knowledge observed in the literature review. All findings apply to the sample population who were members of the Maltese Generation Z population and focused on the online fashion retail industry. Firstly, a positive relationship was found between eWOM and the purchase intention of the sample population. This was due to the acceptance of the first and second hypotheses, agreeing to current academic knowledge. It was also found that for the sample population, purchase intention after reading positive eWOM was congruent to their perceived credibility. However, this statement did not hold for purchase intention after reading negative eWOM. Moreover, while observing the relationship of sidedness with both purchase intention and credibility, it was found that the sample population perceived two-sided eWOM to be more credible and more likely to influence their purchase intention. Finally, it was found that negative eWOM had a higher impact on purchase intention for the sample population, and that the valence of eWOM did not significantly influence the perceived credibility of the sample population towards eWOM.

Although the methods are valid, the findings should be interpreted with caution due to the study's limitations. Furthermore, the findings are not generalizable to the population, primarily due to the adoption of non-probability sampling. A number of recommendations for further

research are presented, with the aim of increasing the body of academic knowledge and providing practical insights for managers.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Conclusions related to the research objectives

Gen Z are the up and coming generation entering the e-commerce world and the most internet-connected generation (Duffett, 2017). On the other hand, the online fashion retail industry is currently one of the fastest-growing e-commerce sectors (Cowart and Goldsmith, 2007). Taking these two highly relevant concepts, the research aimed to study whether eWOM influences members of the Gen Z population locally into altering their purchasing intention related to the online fashion retail industry. This study analysed eWOM with a focus on its valence, investigating the effectiveness of positive and negative eWOM, respectively, and eventually comparing the results of each. This was decided upon after interpretation of secondary research.

Interestingly, the results showed that both positive and negative eWOM shifted the purchase intention of the sample population after reading the reviews. Respondents had an increased purchase intention after reading positive eWOM, and a decreased purchase intention after reading negative eWOM (H1 and H2). This showed that eWOM indeed influences the participants' purchase intention, therefore, the answer to the main research question is simple. Does electronic word-of-mouth influence the purchase intention of the Maltese Generation Z population in the online fashion retail industry? For this sample - Yes!

While both positive and negative eWOM influenced participants' purchase intentions, it was interesting to discover that negative eWOM was more effective than positive eWOM in influencing purchase intention (H6).

Literature also hinted at aspects of eWOM which were interesting to observe, such as, credibility and sidedness. The Information Adoption Model, along with other academic

literature, highlighted the pivotal role that credibility holds on consumers' purchasing intention. This led to a number of secondary hypotheses focused on credibility; some analysing the correlation that credibility has with purchase intention after reading eWOM (H3 and H4), as well as some hypotheses which focused on the perceived credibility of eWOM subject to sidedness (H5) and valence (H7). The results were varied. Correlation analysis showed that credibility was an important factor in determining the purchase intention of consumers after reading positive eWOM (H3). This was less so for negative eWOM (H4). When analysing the credibility of eWOM subject to sidedness, the study found that mixed neutral eWOM, or two-sided reviews, were perceived to be more credible (H5). On the other hand, subject to valence, the perceived credibility was not significantly different for positive and negative eWOM (H7).

The subtopic of sidedness was observed in the development of H5. Mixed neutral eWOM proved to be stronger than positive and negative eWOM in both aspects – credibility and purchase intention. The sample population, with a majority for both aspects, stated they perceived two-sided eWOM to be more credible and influential on their purchase intention. This makes it a very strong tool in the shaping of consumers' purchase intention.

6.2 Implications and recommendations

As a result of the research conducted throughout this study, new academic knowledge was developed which can be specifically applied to the Maltese Gen Z population and the fashion retail industry. Future studies could utilize these findings as a steppingstone for further research, seeking to understand different factors of eWOM and their varying levels of effectiveness on different aspects of consumer behaviour. Researchers could implement qualitative methods, such as, focus groups to understand attitudes towards eWOM on a deeper level. Moreover, researchers are encouraged to study the characteristics that lead consumers to have a higher susceptibility to adopt eWOM, or, from a different perspective, a higher

susceptibility to spread eWOM. This may provide interesting insights to the industry, especially in terms of targeting. Furthermore, there is room for growth in academic knowledge when it comes to the sidedness of eWOM. This study, despite only investigating sidedness as a secondary hypothesis, has shed a light on the effectiveness of two-sided eWOM.

This research provided a number of insights which can be used to provide recommendations to managers in the industry. Focusing primarily on the fashion retail industry, managers are encouraged to incentivise customers to review their products, even on platforms such as their own company website. This would make eWOM more easily accessible to consumers, helping those who are doubtful to be more confident in making a purchase decision and increase their likelihood to purchase. Additionally, this would also decrease the likelihood of consumers to engage in further research on other external platforms with the possibility of finding other alternatives in the process. Furthermore, given the effectiveness and credibility found for mixed neutral eWOM in this study, managers are advised to encourage customers to provide two-sided reviews. This could perhaps be done by implementing a system which facilitates consumers' process of two-sided reviewing on their website. Another recommendation is that managers are highly encouraged to monitor and track eWOM. Consumers would highlight key strengths and weaknesses of the company in the form of eWOM, providing the company with fruitful feedback that can and should be taken into consideration. As a result, the company may address any issues raised in negative eWOM and continue to deliver and promote any advantages raised in positive eWOM. Consequently, this would potentially result in a decrease in negative eWOM and an increase in positive eWOM.

Hence, by encouraging, listening and acting upon the publics' opinions through eWOM, the number of positively valanced reviews would increase, and consequently, so would consumers' purchase intentions and the company's performance.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 - Survey

Online word of mouth

My name is Yanica Aquilina and I am currently reading for a Master of Science in Strategic Management and Digital Marketing at the University of Malta.

I am currently conducting research that aims to identify the influence of online word of mouth on the purchase intention of the Maltese Generation-Z population in the fashion retail industry. The survey that you have been invited to complete forms part of this study. This will take you approximately 5 minutes to complete. Any data collected from this survey will be used solely for purposes of this study. There are no direct benefits or anticipated risks in taking part. Participation is entirely voluntary, i.e., you are free to accept or refuse to participate.

At no point will you be asked to provide your name or any other personal data that may lead to you being identified. Furthermore, you may skip over any questions that you do not wish to answer.

If you wish to participate in this study, please click the button that says "I agree to participate". If not, please close the browser window or click "I do not wish to participate".

Should you have any questions or concerns, you may contact myself (Email: yanica.aquilina.18@um.edu.mt) or my supervisor (Email: franco.curmi@um.edu.mt).

Yours Sincerely, Yanica Aquilina

1. I hereby confirm that I am 16 years of age or older. I am aware that completing and submitting this anonymous questionnaire implies that I am participating voluntarily and with full informed consent on the conditions listed above
   - I agree to participate
   - I do not wish to participate

Demographics

2. Kindly indicate your age
   - 16
   - 17
   - 18
   - 19
   - 20
   - 21
   - 22
   - 23
   - 24
   - 25
   - Other

3. Kindly indicate your nationality
    - o Maltese
    - o Other _____
4. Kindly indicate your gender
    - o Male
    - o Female
    - o Other
5. What is the highest level of education you have completed?
    - o Secondary Level
    - o Post-Secondary Level
    - o Degree Level
    - o Masters Level
    - o PhD Leve
    - o Other _____
6. Presently, I am
    - o Full-time Student
    - o Part-time Student
    - o Not a student
7. Presently, I am
    - o Employed Full-time
    - o Employed Part-time
    - o Self-employed
    - o Unemployed
8. How frequently do you purchase fashion items online?
    - o More than once a month Once a month
    - o A few times a year
    - o Once a year
    - o Very rarely
    - o Never
9. Which is the social networking site that you use most frequently?
    - o Instagram
    - o Tiktok
    - o Facebook
    - o YouTube
    - o Other _____
10. On an average day, how many hours do you spend on using social network sites?
    - o 0 hours
    - o 1-2 hours
    - o 3-4 hours
    - o 5-6 hours
    - o 7-8 hours
    - o 9-10 hours
    - o 11 hours or more

Use of online word of mouth

Keep in mind that the following questions refer to when you are purchasing fashion items online.

11.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
To make sure I buy the right fashion products from the right brand, I often read other consumers' online product reviews or comments.					
I often consult other consumers' online product reviews or comments to help choose the right fashion product/brand.					
I frequently gather information from online consumers' product reviews or comments before I buy a certain fashion product/brand.					
If I don't read consumers' online product reviews or comments when I buy a fashion product/brand, I worry about my decision.					
When I buy a fashion product, consumers' online product reviews or comments make me confident in my purchase.					

Credibility of online word of mouth

12.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Most users on my social networking site can be trusted.					
I feel confident about having discussions with the users on my social networking site.					

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
The users on my social networking site will do everything within their capacity to help others.					
The users on my social networking site always offer honest opinions.					
I can believe the users on my social networking site.					

Positive online word of mouth

13.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
I believe that positive online reviews are accurate.					
I believe that positive online reviews are convincing.					
I believe that positive online reviews are credible.					

14. After reading a POSITIVE review about a fashion product or company,

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
I am eager to check out the product.					
I am intrigued to try the product.					
I am interested in seeing how the product looks on me.					
I plan on buying the product.					
It is likely that I will buy the product when it becomes available.					
I would consider purchasing the product.					
I am likely to purchase products from the company in question.					

I would consider buying products from the company if I need a product of such kind.				
It's possible for me to buy products from the company.				

Negative online word of mouth

15.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
I believe that negative online reviews are accurate.					
I believe that negative online reviews are convincing.					
I believe that negative online reviews are credible.					

16. After reading a NEGATIVE review about a fashion product or company,

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
I am eager to check out the product.					
I am intrigued to try the product.					
I am interested in seeing how the product looks on me.					
I plan on buying the product.					
It is likely that I will buy the product when it becomes available.					
I would consider purchasing the product.					
I am likely to purchase products from the company in question.					

I would consider buying products from the company if I need a product of such kind.				
It's possible for me to buy products from the company.				

Final section

17. Which of the following mostly influences you to purchase (or avoid purchasing) a product?
    o A review that is one-sided (fully positive or fully negative)
    o A review that gives both negative and positive aspects
18. Which of the following do you think is more credible?
    o A review that is one-sided (fully positive or fully negative)
    o A review that gives both negative and positive aspects