

**MASARYK
UNIVERSITY**

FACULTY OF ECONOMICS AND ADMINISTRATION

**Electronic Word of
Mouth (eWOM) Through
the Lenses of
Information Seeking,
Sharing, and
Forwarding**

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Brno 2024

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ELECTRONIC WORD OF MOUTH (EWOM) THROUGH THE LENSES OF INFORMATION SEEKING, SHARING, AND FORWARDING

Bibliographic record

| | |
|-------------------------|---|
| Author: | Ing. Dušan Mladenović, Ph.D. Faculty of Economics and Administration Masaryk University |
| Title: | Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM) Through the Lenses of Information Seeking, Sharing, and Forwarding |
| Report type: | Habilitation Thesis |
| Year: | 2024 |
| Number of Pages: | 167 (with annexes) |
| Keywords: | electronic Word of Mouth, Word of Mouth, Metaverse, metaWOM, information seeking, information sharing, online consumer behaviour, media richness theory |

Abstract

Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM) is reportedly among the most powerful communication channels to date. There are numerous of scientific and practical evidence of its persuasive power on a consumer level. Still, until recently this research domain was greatly overlooked in favor of more conventional marketing communication channels. In light of this, my long-term research domain is to inquire about various aspects of eWOM generation, forwarding, and sharing.

The present habilitation thesis aims to provide a collection of recent and domain-relevant articles that investigate various aspects of eWOM. In total I present six papers published in some of the top-positioned outlets: International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management, Telematics and Informatics, International Journal of Culture, Tourism and Hospitality Research, etc. Along the way, I present detailed commentary on each contribution, together with the major limitations and prospects related to each paper. To present a whole picture, I am categorizing each paper into one of the relevant categories: information seeking (Paper #1 and Paper #2), information sharing (Paper #3, Paper #4, Paper#5), and information forwarding (Paper #6). The following commentary is an overreaching theoretical frame that my long-term research activities are nested within. Consequently, building on the findings and contributions of the papers in the collection, the commentary also outlines future research steps. Hereby I would like to underline my substantial contribution to each of the presented papers, whereby I am always the leading and corresponding author.

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Acknowledgment

I would like to thank an array of individuals without whom I would not be in a position to compose a set of papers in this fashion. First of all, an honest thank you to all my co-authors and colleagues who made the realization of this work possible (Anida Rajapakse, Rafale Fillieri, Elvira Ismagilova, Roberto Bruni, Yogesh K. Dwivedi, Emmanuel Mogaji, Michal Jirasek, Ahad ZareRavasan, Moein Beheshti, Visar Rrustemi etc.).

I am also hugely appreciative of Masaryk University, the Faculty of Economics and Administration, and the Department of Business Management for providing a motivating environment to carry out challenging studies. Being surrounded by inspiring people truly makes the journey easier.

Finally and foremost, I would like to thank my family for standing by my side and supporting me along the way.

This work is dedicated to my daughter Mila and my son Luka.

Table of Content

| | |
|---|-----------|
| List of Figures | 11 |
| List of Tables | 12 |
| List of Terms and Abbreviations | 13 |
| 1 Introduction | 15 |
| 1.1 Goals and Structure of the Thesis..... | 17 |
| 1.2 Paper Collection | 18 |
| 1.3 Note on the Authorship of the Tables and Figures..... | 20 |
| 2 State of the Art in eWOM engagement domain | 22 |
| 2.1 Prologue | 23 |
| 2.2 The Multifactorial Relationship Between Information and eWOM..... | 25 |
| 2.3 Why do individuals engage in eWOM? | 27 |
| 2.4 Why to research eWOM engagement?..... | 31 |
| 2.5 The Current Research Gaps for Information Seeking, Sharing, and Forwarding | 33 |
| 3 Summary and Scientific Contributions of the Published Papers | 36 |
| 3.1 Papers related to consumers' information-seeking online | 36 |
| 3.2 Papers related to consumers' information sharing online | 40 |
| 3.3 Paper related to consumers' information forwarding | 47 |
| 4 Epilogue - self-reflection and future horizons | 49 |
| References | 53 |
| Appendix A – Abstracts of individual papers | 63 |
| A.1 Paper #1 | 63 |
| A.2 Paper #2 | 64 |
| A.3 Paper #3 | 65 |
| A.4 Paper #4 | 66 |

| | | |
|---------------------------------|----------------|-----------|
| A.5 | Paper #5 | 67 |
| A.6 | Paper #6 | 67 |
| Appendix B – Full papers | | 69 |

List of Figures

Figure 1 The visual overview of contributions across three central eWOM pillars 20

List of Tables

Table 1 Papers included in the habilitation thesis – a bibliometric overview 19
Table 2 Emergence of metaWOM..... 42

List of Terms and Abbreviations

| | |
|---------|--|
| WOM | Word of Mouth |
| eWOM | Electronic Word of Mouth |
| IT | Information Technology |
| CEITEC | Central European Institute of Technology |
| metaWOM | Metaverse Word of Mouth |
| NTT | Non-transferable tokens |
| SEO | Search Engine Optimization |
| DA | Domain Authority |
| BR | Bounce Rate |
| ALT | Alternative Text Attribute |
| mWOM | Mobile Word of Mouth |
| SNS | Social Networking Sites |
| NCA | Necessary Condition Analysis |
| fsQCA | Fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis |
| VR | Virtual Reality |
| AR | Augmented Reality |
| AI | Artificial Intelligence |
| GAI | Generative Artificial Intelligence |
| ORP | Online Review Platform |
| CLT | Cognitive Load Theory |
| TFA | Theory of Fear Appeal |
| S-O-R | Stimulus Organism Response |

1 Introduction

The literature around concepts of electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM) until recently was scattered, inconclusive, and presented an abysmal portion of the available literature within the marketing communication domain. In its essence, eWOM may be defined as user/consumer-induced positive, negative, or neutral communication about the offering (e.g., product, service, experience) that is consumed or purchased (Babić Rosario et al., 2020). The central to this definition is that this communication takes place via multiple digital channels (so-called multi-channel environment). The recent spike in scientific interest (Donthu et al., 2021) may be attributed to the fact that both marketers and scholars realized that eWOM possesses extraordinary power and relevance for the consumer domain. In particular, given that 97% of surveyed respondents rely on online reviews (type of eWOM) before making any decisions (Haj Khalifa et al., 2024). Moreover, a staggering number of online reviews are generated each day (Filiari, Lin, et al., 2021). Notably, the fact that consumers possess an additional and lucrative channel to express opinions to a large audience online, puts severe pressure on companies and marketers on how to manage their reputation online and react to opinions generated online.

The early research confirmed the central role of eWOM in various contexts. To date, the researchers were mainly interested in eWOM's role in inducing purchase decisions (for instance: Abedi et al., 2020; Bilal et al., 2021; Filiari et al., 2018; Ismagilova et al., 2021; Lin et al., 2012; Matute et al., 2016; Mortazavi et al., 2014; Muda & Hamzah, 2021; Verma et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2018; Yusuf et al., 2018), booking decisions (for instance: Filiari, Galati, et al., 2021; Filiari, Lin, et al., 2021; Ladhari & Michaud, 2015; Lee et al., 2021; Roy et al., 2021; Xie et al., 2016), switching intentions (for instance: Ismagilova et al., 2020), trust (for instance: Abubakar & Ilkan, 2016; Hong & Pittman, 2020; Ladhari & Michaud, 2015; Mortazavi et al., 2014; Nilashi et al., 2022; Phan et al., 2020; Teng et al., 2014; Verma et al., 2023), loyalty brand advocacy (Iyer et al., 2017; Lam et al., 2009; Mladenović et al., 2023;

Oc et al., 2023; Ribeiro & Kalro, 2023), etc¹. Moreover, the vast majority of the eWOM literature is nested within the experiential domains due to the intangible nature of services and no “*try before you buy*” option (Bulchand-Gidumal & Melián-González, 2024). Notably, several industry domains emerged as dominant contexts in prior literature: hospitality and tourism, education, electronic commerce and communications, etc. Based on the accumulated knowledge (Donthu et al., 2021; Hornik et al., 2015; Liu et al., 2024; Ribeiro & Kalro, 2023), the following topical clusters are mostly addressed: (1) negative eWOM, (2) consumer trust, (3) eWOM in social networks and social networking sites, (4) online reviews and ratings, (5) service failure and eWOM, (6) service recovery and eWOM, (7) the importance of user-generated content, etc. While the growing number of prior studies confirms the persuasive power of eWOM on various aspects of consumer and user behavior, there is only a fraction of studies that are particularly focused on three pivotal aspects of information flow within eWOM.

The importance of information in electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM) cannot be overstated, as it forms the backbone of how consumers perceive and interact with brands. High-quality, accurate, and relevant information shared online—whether through reviews, social media posts, or forums—plays a crucial role in shaping consumer opinions and influencing consequent decisions (Cheung & Thadani, 2012). For illustration, when users trust the information they receive from their peers, they are more likely to engage with and advocate for a product or service (Mohammed Abubakar et al., 2017), thereby amplifying its reach and impact. In this interconnected environment, the flow of information through eWOM not only enhances but fosters a community of informed consumers who can make better decisions (Lee & Choi, 2019). Essentially, the information flow within eWOM may be observed through the lenses of information sharing (leadership), information seeking, and information forwarding (Chu & Kim, 2011). These important (and

¹ Please note that this is not exhaustive list of investigated variables.

largely overlooked) aspects present second-order constructs of peer-to-peer communication executed in digital environments (Mladenović et al., 2021) – regardless of the particular type of eWOM that exists nowadays. Essentially, the multidirectional online environment allows individuals to be involved in information sharing, forwarding, and seeking at the same time (Mladenović et al., 2023). This is one of the major differences when compared to traditional Word of Mouth (WOM).

Given the proven persuasive power of eWOM and its plethora of practical forms online (e.g., online reviews, ratings, social testimonies, etc.), over time it became necessary to thoroughly analyze and conceptualize the dynamic and evolving eWOM landscape through the lenses of the above-mentioned pillars. This is important considering the marketers' growing concerns about deciphering the proper reaction to peer-to-peer communication online (exponential increase in consumer power online) to manage the company's reputation and defend its brands (Filiari et al., 2023). On the other side, literature seeks more practical and conceptual contributions that would portray the changes in the digital environment and provide tangible output to the emerging fields of eWOM and WOM (Babić Rosario et al., 2020).

This habilitation thesis is an effort to present an array of published articles that address various aspects of information flow within eWOM – information seeking, forwarding, and sharing.

1.1 Goals and Structure of the Thesis

The central goal of the present habilitation thesis is to communicate my direct and indirect contribution to the evolving field of eWOM, through the lenses of three building blocks information seeking, information sharing, and information forwarding. To achieve its goal, the habilitation thesis is composed of several interrelated sections that all together

should present a compact whole and my individual contributions to previously accumulated domain-relevant knowledge. Hereby I visually present an overall research framework and where each attached paper sits within it. This section should provide an overall picture of the current body of knowledge and key research streams. Moreover, it should provide theoretical anchoring to my papers. The third chapter consists of six papers including my contributions, theoretical basis, and research method. In closing, the final section 4 concludes this thesis.

1.2 Paper Collection

In its essence, the present habilitation thesis includes six relevant and timely papers. All of them are peer-reviewed and published papers in WoS and Scopus journals. The list of presented papers is as follows²:

1. **Mladenović, D.**, Ismagilova, E., Filieri, R., & Dwivedi, Y. K. (2024). MetaWOM—toward a sensory word-of-mouth (WOM) in the metaverse. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 36(6), 2144-2163.
2. **Mladenović, D.**, Rajapakse, A., Kožuljević, N., & Shukla, Y. (2023). Search engine optimization (SEO) for digital marketers: exploring determinants of online search visibility for blood bank service. *Online Information Review*, 47(4), 661-679.
3. **Mladenović, D.**, Todua, N., & Pavlović-Höck, N. (2023). Understanding individual psychological and behavioral responses during COVID-19: Application of stimulus-organism-response model. *Telematics and Informatics*, 79, 101966.
4. **Mladenović, D.**, Bruni, R., & Kalia, P. (2021). Social and demographic predictors of consumers' word of mouth engagement in Czechia. *Journal of International Consumer Marketing*, 33(4), 418-433.

² The list presented is based on the year of publication.

5. **Mladenović, D.**, & Krajina, A. (2020). Knowledge sharing on social media: State of the art in 2018. *Journal of Business Economics and Management*, 21(1), 44-63.
6. **Mladenović, D.**, Krajina, A., & Milojević, I. (2019). Motives for writing online reviews in the post-vacation phase. *International Journal of Culture, Tourism and Hospitality Research*, 13(2), 244-256.

A more thorough and detailed overview of selected papers is indicated in Table 1. This table includes a brief bibliometric overview, including the Journal's ranking in WoS and Scopus, total citations³, and my respective contributions.

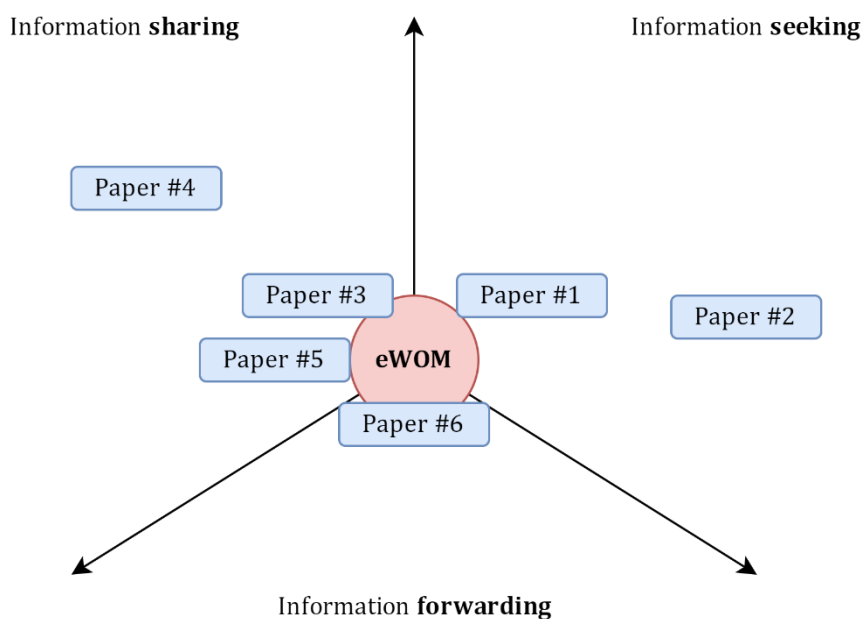
Table 1 Papers included in the habilitation thesis – a bibliometric overview

| ID | Journal | Publisher | Contribution | WoS Quartile | Scopus Quartile | Citations | | |
|-----------------|--|------------------|--------------|--------------|-----------------|-----------|--------|------------|
| | | | | | | WoS | Scopus | Scholarpus |
| Paper #1 | International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management | Emerald | 55% | Q1, D1 | Q1 | 12 | 14 | 21 |
| Paper #2 | Online Information Review | Emerald | 40% | Q2 | Q1 | 13 | 16 | 28 |
| Paper #3 | Telematics and Informatics | Elsevier | 55% | Q1, D1 | Q1 | 6 | 7 | 13 |
| Paper #4 | Journal of International Consumer Marketing | Taylor & Francis | 50% | Q2 | Q2 | 6 | 9 | 25 |
| Paper #5 | Journal of Business Economics and Management | VILNIUS TECH | 60% | Q4 | Q2 | 11 | 10 | 29 |
| Paper #6 | International Journal of Culture, Tourism and Hospitality Research | Emerald | 50% | - | Q2 | 7 | 9 | 19 |
| Total: | | | | | | 32 | 65 | 135 |

³ Number of citations as of 17.07.2024.

Figure 1 aims to present where each paper belongs according to the model suggested by Chu and Kim (2011). Namely, Paper #1 (Mladenović et al., 2023) and Paper #2 (Mladenović et al., 2023) fall in the information-seeking pillar, while Paper #3 (Mladenović et al., 2023), Paper #4 (Mladenović & Krajina, 2019) and Paper #5 (Mladenović et al., 2019) comprise my biggest contributions to the information-sharing pillar. Lastly, Paper #6 (Mladenović et al., 2021) is the sole contribution to the information forwarding sub-domain. It must be noted that the proximity to the center implies that the respective paper works/covers other pillars as well to a certain extent.

Figure 1 The visual overview of contributions across three central eWOM pillars



1.3 Note on the Authorship of the Tables and Figures

The tables and figures featured in this commentary were either designed exclusively by me for this purpose or derived from my unpublished materials, such as research proposals. In keeping with the formatting traditions of management journals, I have not

ELECTRONIC WORD OF MOUTH (EWOM) THROUGH THE LENSES OF INFORMATION SEEKING,
SHARING, AND FORWARDING

included authorship details beneath each table and figure. I confirm that I am the creator of all the tables and figures presented.

2 State of the Art in eWOM engagement domain

Because of individuals' increasing dependence on digital platforms to exchange information (Kalia et al., 2022), eWOM gradually emerged from WOM (Siqueira et al., 2019). Initially, one of the most generic definitions of eWOM comes from Babić Rosario et al. (2020) who broadly define eWOM as an information exchange that is executed via electronic means of communication, between consumers. Crucial to this definition is the central role of online platforms via which information is communicated in various typologies and formats (e.g., online reviews, posts, tweets, posts, likes, pins, images, testimonials, social proofs, etc) (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). To a certain degree, eWOM is like traditional WOM as it implies individuals, directly and indirectly, exchanging information (Mladenović et al., 2023). The most notable difference lies in the scalability of the amount of information exchanged, which due to the digital nature of eWOM is significantly higher and faster (Chu & Choi, 2011; Lee & Choi, 2019).

Next to the technological setting that serves as a proxy, the other crucial aspect of eWOM is how individuals engage with information sourced from eWOM (Chu & Choi, 2011). Namely, the eWOM may be considered as a communication vehicle to cascade certain information (Berger, 2014). Yet, which way individuals engage with eWOM narratives is a domain seeking further empirical and conceptual explorations.

As a whole, eWOM may be considered one of the most significant developments in contemporary consumer behavior which largely affects individuals' attitudes, perceptions, and consequent behaviors (Liu et al., 2024). But to understand the roots of why individuals seek share, and forward information, one needs to review one of the earliest recorded trace of WOM – how Warren's and Rever's small piece of information potentially transformed the outcomes of the American Revolution.

2.1 Prologue

On the afternoon of April, the 18th 1775, a young boy who worked at a livery stable in Boston overheard one British army officer say to another something about “hell to pay tomorrow”. The stable boy ran with the news to Boston’s North End, to the home of a silversmith named Paul Revere. Revere listened gravely; this was not the first rumor to come his way that day. Earlier, he had been told of an unusual number of British officers gathered on Boston’s Long Wharf, talking in low tones. British crewman had been spotted scurrying about in the boat tethered beneath the HMS Somerset and the HMS Boyne in Boston Harbor. Several other sailors were seen on shore that morning, running what appeared to be last-minute errands. As the afternoon wore on, Revere and his close friend Joseph Warren became more and more convinced that the British were about to make the major move that had long been rumored – to march to the town of Lexington.

What happened next, became part of the historical legend, a tale told every American child since. At ten o’clock that night, Warren and Revere met. They decided they had to warn the communities surrounding Boston that the British were on their way so that local militia could be roused to meet them. Revere was spirited across Boston Harbor to the ferry landing at Charlestown. He jumped on a horse and began his “midnight ride” to Lexington. In two hours, he covered thirty kilometers. In every town, he passed along the way – Charlestown, Medford, North Cambridge, Menotomy – he knocked on doors and spread the word, telling local colonial leaders of the coming British, and telling them to spread the word among others. Church bells started ringing. Drums started beating. The news spread like a virus as those informed by Paul Revere sent out riders of their own until alarms were going off throughout the entire region. The word was in Lincoln, Massachusetts, by 1 am, in Sudbury by 3 am, and by 9 am had reached as far west as Ashby.

When the British finally began their march toward Lexington on the morning of the nineteenth, their foray into the countryside was met – to their utter astonishment – with organized and fierce resistance. In Concord that day, the British were confronted and soundly beaten by the colonial militia, and from that exchange came the war known as – the American Revolution. - (Gladwell, 2006)

Revere's ride is perhaps the most famous historical example of WOM communication and how contagious and influential it might get. Namely, a small piece (an unconfirmed rumor at the beginning) of significant information (a British raid) traveled a long distance in a very short time, covering and alarming an entire region. From a strategic communication standpoint, this is one of the first documented examples of traditional WOM.

On the other hand, according to Gladwell (2006), there is another significant part of this communication story – Revere's country-mate William Dawes set out on the same errand, working his way to Lexington through towns west of Boston. Dawes was carrying the identical information, in the same context and covered approximately as many kilometers as Revere. But, Dawes's ride did not set the countryside in alarm state. The local militia leaders were not properly alerted and did not prepare their defenses accordingly.

So, why the same information did not ignite the same/similar reaction? What was different? What made, and still makes, individuals engage with information or WOM?

The historical account of Paul Revere's midnight ride underscores the potent impact of traditional WOM in disseminating critical information swiftly and effectively. This legendary event exemplifies how information, even in its rudimentary form, can catalyze significant action when communicated persuasively and timely. In contrast, the less impactful ride of Dawes illustrates that the same information can yield disparate outcomes depending on its conveyance and reception. This divergence prompts crucial questions about the factors that influence the effectiveness of information transmission and engagement. As we move from historical examples to contemporary practices, it becomes evident that eWOM leverages digital platforms to disseminate consumer-generated content more

broadly and rapidly. The relationship between information and eWOM encompasses various elements such (e.g., as information quality, dissemination channels, user engagement, and technological advancements). By understanding these, we can better comprehend how eWOM operates and why it is a powerful tool in today's interconnected world.

2.2 The Multifactorial Relationship Between Information and eWOM

As already noted, eWOM leverages digital platforms to disseminate consumer-generated information, opinions, and experiences to a broader audience (Babić Rosario et al., 2020). The central concept when discussing eWOM or WOM is the core information itself (Berger, 2014). The relationship between information and eWOM is multifactorial, encompassing various elements such as information quality, dissemination channels, user engagement, and technological advancements.

The quality and credibility of information are fundamental to the effectiveness of eWOM (Filiari, 2015). High-quality, credible information enhances the trustworthiness of the message and the likelihood of it being consumed (shared or forwarded). Consumers seek reliable and detailed information to make informed decisions, and the perceived credibility of eWOM significantly impacts their purchasing behavior. Studies have shown that eWOM with detailed descriptions, balanced perspectives, and verifiable facts is more persuasive than vague or overly positive eWOM (e.g., Camilleri & Filiari, 2023; K. Y. Lee & Choi, 2019; Tsao & Hsieh, 2015; Zhang et al., 2014). Thus, the credibility of information hinges on the authenticity and comprehensiveness of the eWOM.

The channels through which eWOM is disseminated also play a crucial role in its impact. Social media platforms, review websites, and online forums are the primary channels for eWOM (Bigne et al., 2023; Haj Khalifa et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2024). Each platform has unique characteristics that influence how information is sought, shared, and perceived. For instance, social networking platforms (e.g., Facebook, X) allow for rapid dissemination

of information through networks of friends and followers, enhancing the speed and reach of eWOM. Review websites like Yelp and TripAdvisor provide structured environments where users can find and contribute detailed reviews, often influencing decisions in sectors such as hospitality and retail. The choice of dissemination channel can thus affect the reach, speed, and credibility of eWOM (Ismagilova et al., 2021).

Consumer engagement is another critical factor in the relationship between information and eWOM. Engagement can be seen in the form of likes, shares, comments, and reposts, which help amplify the reach of eWOM (e.g., Gvili & Levy, 2018, 2023; Phan et al., 2020). High levels of engagement indicate that the information resonates with the audience, prompting further sharing and discussion. Additionally, the interactive nature of digital platforms allows for two-way communication, enabling consumers to ask questions, seek clarifications, and provide feedback (Mladenović et al., 2023). This interaction not only enriches the information but also builds a sense of community and trust among users.

Technological advancements have significantly transformed the landscape of eWOM (Dwivedi et al., 2023). Artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning algorithms are increasingly used to analyze vast amounts of data, identify trends, and personalize content (Gursoy et al., 2023). These technologies can enhance the relevance of eWOM by ensuring that consumers receive information tailored to their preferences and needs. Blockchain technology also holds promise for eWOM by providing a transparent and secure way to verify the authenticity of reviews (Bulchand-Gidumal & Melián-González, 2024; Mladenović et al., 2023) (Mladenović, Ismagilova, et al., 2023), thus combating the issue of fake reviews. Hypothetically, virtual and augmented reality (VR/AR) offer immersive experiences that can enhance the persuasive power of eWOM by allowing consumers to virtually experience products or services before making a decision.

Therefore, the relationship between information and eWOM is inherently multifactorial, with each factor influencing and being influenced by the others. For instance, high-quality information enhances credibility, which in turn increases consumers' engagement

and the likelihood of further involvement (e.g., dissemination). The choice of dissemination channel affects how quickly and widely information spreads, while technological advancements continually reshape the landscape, introducing new ways for information to be shared and validated. However, the relationship between information and eWOM is complex and dynamic.

Understanding this relationship is crucial for businesses aiming to leverage eWOM effectively and lays a foundation for exploring the individual's engagement in these digital interactions. As noted above, the effectiveness of eWOM relies upon the information itself. Notably, to fully leverage the potential of eWOM, it is essential to delve deeper into the human element: the reasons why and ways how individuals choose to engage in eWOM. Historically rooted in the dynamics of WOM, eWOM involves complex behaviors such as information-seeking, sharing, and forwarding (Chu & Kim, 2011). These behaviors are driven by the roles individuals assume as information leaders and seekers, and how they interact with and disseminate information within their networks. By examining these aspects, it can be better comprehended how eWOM functions as a whole.

2.3 Why do individuals engage in eWOM?

Historically, WOM is based on communication engagement between two major parties – information leaders and information seekers. Whilst engaging, information leaders generate and share their opinions (information) with those who seek information. In general, information leadership refers to individuals' willingness and motivation to commit him/herself to information dissemination (Money et al., 1998). On the other hand, information seeking is the type of engagement that implies proactive looking for information to fill out the recognized information gap to support the ongoing decision-making process (Mladenović et al., 2023). Lately, in particular, in the context of online and virtual environ-

ments, individuals increasingly exhibit a third type of information engagement which implies forwarding (or pass-along) of information they may find useful for their immediate or wider circle of contacts (Flavian et al., 2021). In terms of information exchange (eWOM) virtual nature of the online environment enhances the volume and anonymity of the information (Fong & Burton, 2008). Thus, leading to immense scalability of the amount of information exchanged. According to Hennig-Thurau et al. (2015), the information can be saved, archived, and stored to be retrieved in the future on countless occasions. It is to assume that eWOM online has a far greater valence in comparison to “face-to-face” WOM (Bigne et al., 2020). Therefore, scholars examine individuals’ eWOM engagement and information exchange within the second-order constructs of information sharing (leadership), information seeking, and information forwarding (for instance: Cheong & Mohammed-Baksh, 2020; Chu & Choi, 2011; Chu & Kim, 2011; Farías, 2017; Flynn et al., 1996; Lee & Choi, 2019; Soares et al., 2007). These three important aspects of eWOM present natural information flow (Berger, 2014).

2.3.1 How Do Individuals Seek Information?

“Opinion seekers - Listeners.” – Dichter (1966).

The information-seeking aspect of eWOM is based upon the realm that other people seek and follow the opinion provided by leaders (Kucukemiroglu & Kara, 2015). This two-step process implies that leaders learn and form their opinion that is consequently passed to those in need – information seekers. It is important that information leaders also exercise the role of information seekers due to their strong desire for more knowledge and information. Contrary, information seekers are not necessarily information leaders (Li & Du, 2011). Information-seeking behavior is based on a set of product/service information searches or queries (Ladhari et al., 2020). For obvious reasons (e.g., convenience, speed, speed, etc.), nowadays, information seekers prefer to attain information online (Hennig-

Thurau et al., 2015; Lee & Choi, 2019; Thiriot, 2018). In general, individuals seek information to make more “need-satisfying” decisions or to avoid associated risks (Leonhardt et al., 2020). In doing so, they consult their social networks (both offline and online) during the decision-making process. Primarily, they consider their inner circles of contacts more trustworthy and without hidden commercial intentions (Farías, 2017). In broad terms, it could be said that persons looking for information possess relatively lower product or service knowledge or expertise.

Information seekers are the highest in numbers as they present ordinary individuals solving everyday situations who do not invest plenty of time investigating in detail available offerings (Wang & Huang, 2023). Consequently, and as a cost-effective alternative, they proactively seek information from information leaders who already committed themselves to that task (Zhong et al., 2024).

While information seekers actively pursue knowledge to make informed decisions and mitigate risks, they often rely on the expertise and insights provided by information leaders. These leaders, who also engage in information seeking, play a crucial role in gathering and disseminating valuable information. Consequently, the transition from information seeking to information sharing (leadership) underscores the symbiotic relationship between these roles, highlighting the importance of opinion leaders in shaping and influencing eWOM dynamics.

2.3.2 Information Sharing Aspect of eWOM

The topic of information sharing (or leadership) has been a long time an area of interest for scholars due to the important role it exhibits in the success of marketing strategies and the influence it has on individuals’ eWOM engagement (e.g., Cheung & Thadani, 2012; Ismagilova et al., 2021; Mladenovic et al., 2019, etc.). Information-sharing behavior includes the generation and sharing of information about products, services, brands, etc.

(Cheong & Mohammed-Baksh, 2020; Chu & Kim, 2011). Personal social networks and social networking sites present a massive venue for opinion dissemination - the fertile two-way environment to exchange experiences (Babić Rosario et al., 2020; Mladenović et al., 2021). The online environment as a social and communication environment provides a solid ground for information dislocation for opinion leaders. The exceptional growth of online platforms (e.g., social media, online review platforms) offers information leaders an ultimate channel to enhance their capabilities of information sharing (e.g. product reviewers, travel bloggers, journalists, columnists, politicians, celebrities, etc.). In its essence, eWOM communication would not be possible without those who willingly and voluntarily share information (recall Rever's story from Prologue). Information leadership has been identified in the literature as an important interrupting element in the context of eWOM engagement (Ismagilova et al., 2021; Money et al., 1998) as opinion leaders may entertain a significant impact on others' behaviors (Ladhari et al., 2020). Filieri et al. (2018) argue that information leaders show higher levels of involvement, innovativeness, exploratory behavior, and knowledge than non-leaders. Although information leaders will highly likely communicate with others based on product/service involvement (Cheong & Mohammed-Baksh, 2020; Jeong & Jang, 2011), it is their influence that is important and central to the construct of opinion-giving (Farías, 2017; Gvili & Levy, 2023).

While information sharing is driven by the active dissemination of knowledge by information leaders, information passing involves the subsequent transmission of this information within social networks. This dimension highlights the crucial role of individuals in further spreading marketer or user-generated messages and recommendations, thereby facilitating a broader exchange of information within the eWOM landscape.

2.3.3 Why Do Consumers Increasingly Forward Information?

An important and somewhat overlooked dimension of eWOM engagement is opinion-passing (Zhao et al., 2020). An individual decides whether to pass further a "marketer or

user-generated content” within social networks. In its essence, information passing (or forwarding) can be considered a tool for the exchange of information between information seekers and information leaders (Chu & Kim, 2011; Lee & Choi, 2019). Since eWOM engagement is defined as a broad exchange of information, “*pass-along*” behavior must be taken into consideration as one of the essential parts of eWOM engagement online. According to Gvili and Levy (2018), information passing is more likely to take place online as the unique characteristics of the online environment facilitate “multidirectional communication” and relatively effortlessly individuals could disseminate information on a massive scale. Practically, information passing implies individuals selectively forwarding information to the socially close or distant individuals they consider to be interested in the content of that information (Gvili & Levy, 2023).

2.4 Why to research eWOM engagement?

As elaborated, the dynamic interplay between information seeking, sharing, and passing forms the cornerstone of effective eWOM engagement (Chu & Kim, 2011; Farías, 2017; Lee & Choi, 2019; Mladenović et al., 2021). Information seekers rely on the expertise of leaders to make informed decisions, while leaders not only gather but also actively disseminate valuable insights through various online platforms. This dissemination is further amplified by information passing, where individuals share messages within their social networks, ensuring a broad and multidirectional flow of information. Together, these processes underscore the critical roles of both seekers and leaders in shaping consumer behavior and enhancing the impact of eWOM in the digital age.

The significance of further exploration of information seeking, sharing, and passing lies in the profound impact these processes have on consumer behavior, brand, online reputation, marketing strategies, etc. (Bond et al., 2019; Pauli et al., 2023; Ribeiro & Kalro, 2023; Zhong et al., 2024). As the digital landscape continues to evolve, understanding these

mechanisms is crucial for businesses aiming to leverage eWOM to enhance their reach and influence.

As one of the central pillars of eWOM engagement is information seeking, this behavior is driven by the desire to mitigate risks and optimize satisfaction with their purchases. Research indicates (Srivastava et al., 2024) that individuals often turn to online reviews, social media discussions, and digital forums to gather insights about products or services. By exploring this aspect further, businesses can identify the key drivers behind information-seeking behavior and tailor their digital content to meet these needs. For instance, understanding the types of information most sought after by consumers—such as product quality, user experiences, and comparative analyses—can help businesses create more targeted and effective content. Additionally, by analyzing patterns in information-seeking, companies can predict consumer trends and adapt their strategies accordingly.

Secondly, information leaders are pivotal in the dissemination of information within eWOM. These individuals not only seek information but also share their insights with a broader audience, influencing the opinions and decisions of others (Nilashi et al., 2022). The exploration of information-sharing behaviors can reveal the characteristics that make opinion leaders effective, such as their credibility, expertise, and communication skills. Understanding these traits allows businesses to identify and collaborate with potential opinion leaders within their target market. By fostering relationships with these influencers, companies can amplify their marketing messages and build trust with their audience. Furthermore, exploring the dynamics of information sharing can help businesses develop strategies to encourage more consumers to share their experiences, thereby expanding the reach of their eWOM efforts.

Lastly, information passing, or forwarding, involves the subsequent transmission of information within social networks (Shen et al., 2021). This process is crucial for the widespread dissemination of eWOM messages. Individuals often share information they find valuable with their peers, leading to a multiplier effect that significantly enhances the

reach of marketing messages. Investigating information-passing behaviors can uncover the factors that motivate individuals to share (previously generated) content - such as social validation, altruism, or perceived relevance. Businesses can leverage these insights to design campaigns that encourage sharing, such as creating shareable content or incentivizing referrals. Moreover, understanding the cultural and social contexts that influence information passing can help companies tailor their strategies to different markets, ensuring that their eWOM efforts resonate globally.

In closing the exploration of information seeking, sharing, and passing is essential for understanding and further enhancing eWOM engagement. These processes form the foundation of how consumers and customers interact with brands in the digital age, influencing their perceptions, attitudes, and consequent decisions. By delving into these parallel processes, businesses can identify key drivers, develop targeted strategies, and ultimately, create a more effective and impactful eWOM presence. Hypothetically, this not only enhances brand reputation and customer loyalty but also drives growth and competitiveness in an increasingly digital, fluid, and evolving marketplace.

2.5 The Current Research Gaps for Information Seeking, Sharing, and Forwarding

The strong rise of social and e-commerce in recent years (Laila et al., 2024), has further amplified the importance of eWOM, as consumers now have additional avenues to share their perspectives. Understanding how consumers adopt and utilize eWOM has become a critical research issue (Gvili & Levy, 2023), as it has significant implications for both consumers and businesses. However, several gaps in the existing literature warrant further exploration.

Firstly, there is a need for a comprehensive meta-analysis that examines the various factors influencing eWOM engagement, including responses, moderators, and credibility.

The existing literature has primarily focused on isolated aspects of eWOM, but a more holistic view is necessary to fully capture the dynamics at play.

Secondly, the role of individual motivations in eWOM adoption and sharing remains relatively understudied (Hussain et al., 2020). Research has suggested that self-worth reinforcement is a significant driver of eWOM engagement, but more work is needed to understand the nuances of this relationship and how it may vary across different product categories or consumer segments.

Third, the information adoption process within the eWOM domain requires further examination. While some studies have explored the effects of eWOM antecedents and mediators on information adoption (including seminal work by Erkan & Evans, 2016), the field would benefit from a more in-depth understanding of how consumers navigate and utilize the abundance of eWOM information available to them in their decision-making (Khwaja & Zaman, 2020).

Fourth, the future of information seeking, sharing, and forwarding in eWOM can be significantly enhanced through the integration of various advanced technologies and innovative strategies. One promising avenue is the integration with Virtual and Augmented Reality (VR/AR). VR/AR can create immersive experiences where consumers explore products or services in a virtual environment before making a purchase (Mladenović et al., 2023), enhancing the quality and engagement of information seeking. Hypothetically, information leaders can use VR/AR to generate interactive content that vividly showcases their experiences, attracting a larger audience. Furthermore, VR/AR can enable users to share their virtual experiences directly with their social networks, providing a richer, more immersive way to pass information.

Notably, artificial intelligence (AI) driven personalization engines are another significant advancement that can transform eWOM (Kshetri et al., 2024). Advanced AI can personalize the information discovery process by recommending content tailored to individual preferences and past behaviors (Ali et al., 2023), making the information-seeking

process more efficient and relevant. AI can assist opinion leaders in creating personalized content for different segments of their audience, thereby increasing engagement and relevance. Additionally, AI can identify the most effective ways and times to share information (Wong et al., 2023), optimizing the reach and impact of eWOM messages. Consequently, interactive AI assistants and chatbots represent another frontier for eWOM engagement investigation.

Overall, the research gaps in the eWOM engagement domain present opportunities for scholars to delve deeper into the complex interplay between information seeking, sharing, and passing within the digital landscape. Addressing these research gaps would enhance our understanding of the eWOM ecosystem and provide valuable insights for both practitioners and academics. As the influence of eWOM continues to evolve, scholars must develop a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of this phenomenon.

In my previous and current work, I explored some aspects of these emerging research streams in the context of eWOM and three domains of information seeking, sharing, and passing. However, these streams are massive in scope and require continuous scientific attention to significantly enhance the effectiveness of eWOM by making information-seeking, sharing, and passing more efficient, credible, and engaging. Notably, as eWOM is directly dependent on advances in the communication technology domain, integrating these innovations will be key to staying ahead in the eWOM engagement domain.

3 Summary and Scientific Contributions of the Published Papers

This particular section comprehensively presents a summary of my six domain-relevant and published papers. Specifically, the overview includes information about the research gap, the methodology employed, theoretical and practical contributions, and my contribution. In all papers, I was the lead and corresponding author. Based on the three central eWOM pillars (see section 2.2), the six papers are categorized accordingly.

3.1 Papers related to consumers' information-seeking online

Information retrieval or seeking is one of the central subdomains within eWOM literature. In its essence, individuals mostly experience first engagement with WOM or eWOM whilst trying to fill out their information gaps. This is, for instance, the case when one engages in extensive searching of information online - via search engines (e.g., Google, Seznam) or online review platforms (ORP). For scholars and marketers this underresearched aspect is important as it should portray individuals' behavior in an observed context. In Paper #1 I (with my co-authors) observe how individuals engage in information-seeking online during the crisis period (COVID-19). The second paper takes a slightly different angle and captures information search through the lenses of search engine optimization and respective metrics. Both papers are the result of a collaborative effort in which I had a coordinating role, and both papers respond to the recent calls for more empirical studies that would depict real-life consequences and situations.

3.1.1 Paper #1: Understanding individual psychological and behavioral responses during COVID-19: Application of stimulus-organism-response model

- **Citation:** Mladenović, D., Todua, N., & Pavlović-Höck, N. (2023). Understanding individual psychological and behavioral responses during COVID-19: Application of stimulus-organism-response model. *Telematics and Informatics*, 79, 101966.

- **Estimated contribution** – 55%: I had a central role in this paper, implying that I was directly involved in conceptualization, literature review, methodology setup, and ongoing improvements during the revision process. I am the corresponding and leading author.

This paper, explores the psychological and behavioral responses of individuals during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on the effects of exposure to online information sources. The study develops a robust research framework and relies on the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model, Cognitive Load Theory (CLT), and the Theory of Fear Appeal (TFA) to investigate how continuous exposure to COVID-19-related information online leads to information overload, cyberchondria, and subsequent behaviors such as, for instance, information seeking. The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a massive flow of information, often conflicting and unverified, which has significantly affected individual behaviors. The study aims to understand how this information overload impacts psychological states and resulting behaviors. The S-O-R model is used to establish the relationship between the stimulus (exposure to information), the organism (individuals experiencing information overload), and the response (cyberchondria and information behaviors). CLT is applied to explain how limited cognitive capacities lead to information overload, while TFA examines how fear influences information-related behaviors.

The analysis confirmed that continuous exposure to excessive online information leads to information overload, while information overload was found to significantly contribute to cyberchondria. Next, cyberchondria was shown to strongly influence the seeking and providing of COVID-19-related information. The moderation analysis revealed that fear levels significantly influenced the relationship between cyberchondria and information behaviors, particularly for seeking and providing information. The results highlight the critical role of managing information quality and quantity during a crisis. Health au-

thorities should focus on disseminating reliable, timely information to mitigate the negative effects of information overload. The findings suggest that individuals with cyberchondria are more likely to seek and provide information, driven by fear and the need to mitigate perceived risks.

There are several key contributions to this paper. Firstly, in the context of theoretical implications, this study enhances understanding of CLT, TFA, and the S-O-R framework by applying them in a crisis context, demonstrating their relevance in explaining informational behavior during COVID-19. In the context of managerial implications, the findings offer insights for health authorities and stakeholders to develop effective communication strategies that reduce information overload and its negative psychological impacts. Thirdly, in the context of methodology, the study showcases the effectiveness of PLS-SEM and PLS-MGA in examining complex relationships between information exposure, psychological states, and behavioral responses during a crisis. Lastly, this research provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how individuals process and respond to overwhelming information during a crisis, emphasizing the need for strategic communication interventions to manage public health information effectively.

The study acknowledges limitations such as reliance on self-reported data, and the focus on a single moderator (fear). Future research should explore additional moderators and mediators, employ different methodological approaches, and investigate post-crisis communication dynamics.

3.1.2 [Paper #2: Search engine optimization \(SEO\) for digital marketers: exploring determinants of online search visibility for blood bank service](#)

- **Citation:** Mladenović, D., Rajapakse, A., Kožuljević, N., & Shukla, Y. (2023). Search engine optimization (SEO) for digital marketers: exploring determinants of online search visibility for blood bank service. *Online Information Review*, 47(4), 661-679

- **Estimated contribution** – 45%: I largely contributed to this paper in the context of problem contextualization, literature review, project overview, and provisional and final write-up. I am the corresponding and leading author.

In its essence, this paper takes a more technical angle and primarily investigates the determinants of online visibility for blood bank services, recognizing that visibility is influenced by various factors. While the paper does not directly investigate eWOM engagement, in a broader sense, this research delves into how easy and convenient is for potential blood donors to look for and find information related to blood donation. Given the critical role of online search technology in information retrieval, the study aims to identify key predictors of online search visibility. We quantify visibility via several established metrics - SEO Index, website ranking, and the number of visitors. The study tests ten hypotheses using clickstream data from 57 blood banks in Czechia, emphasizing the importance of online visibility and search engines for connecting blood banks with potential donors. The study employs activity theory to understand how different factors impact enhanced information retrieval online. Data was collected from reputable third-party providers. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was used to analyze the data.

The key outcomes reveal that ALT text and bounce rate positively affect the SEO Index, ranking, and the number of visitors. Backlinks and domain authority are significant predictors of online visibility. Robots.txt files significantly influence SEO Index, ranking, and the number of visitors. Mobile-friendliness and speed scores had mixed effects, while sitemaps did not significantly impact the visibility metrics. The findings challenge existing knowledge on SEO determinants, highlighting sector-specific nuances. The study emphasizes that blood banks must adopt a strategic approach to SEO, focusing on both on-page and off-page factors. Particularly, the study reveals a lack of strategic focus on off-page determinants like backlinks and social media engagement, which are crucial for improving

search visibility. The research underscores the need for blood banks to enhance their content production and engagement strategies to improve online visibility.

This article brings up several key theoretical, practical, and methodological contributions. Firstly, this study extends activity theory to the context of SEO for blood banks, providing insights into how different SEO determinants affect online search visibility and information retrieval. On a practical note, the reported findings offer actionable recommendations for blood banks to improve their online visibility and optimize their digital marketing efforts, potentially enhancing donor acquisition and retention. This is a central output as with a list of practical recommendations, the respective stakeholders should better manage the information flow from information providers (blood banks) to information seekers (donors). Notably, there is a major methodological contribution as well. Namely, the study showcases the effectiveness of SEM in analyzing complex relationships between SEO determinants and online visibility metrics, and the reliability of clickstream data to base conclusions upon.

We acknowledge a few limitations such as the small sample size and the ever-evolving nature of search engine algorithms. Future research should consider a larger sample, explore additional SEO determinants, and investigate the impact of mobile-friendliness and social media engagement on online information retrieval. The study also suggests that future research should incorporate experimental designs to capture causal relationships more accurately.

3.2 Papers related to consumers' information sharing online

The prior WOM and eWOM literature directs most of the attention toward the information-sharing (giving) aspect of eWOM engagement. While this generally makes sense given that the WOM and eWOM are heavily reliant on individuals' propensity to engage in

the sharing of information, many unattended aspects seek more empirically-based conclusions. In my effort to contribute to this competitive subdomain of eWOM, I produced three articles that handle individual aspects of information sharing online. Paper #3 is the only conceptual paper of mine in which the novel concept of metaWOM is developed and presented. In paper #4, I had a bibliometric look at how information and knowledge are being shared through the lenses of systematic literature review. The last paper (#5) in this cluster, deciphers the tourists' motives to engage in information sharing after the trip took place. All three papers are the results of my long-term efforts and collaboration with some of the most prominent names in the eWOM domain nowadays globally (e.g., Rafelle Filieri, Elvira Ismagilova, Yogesh K. Dwivedi).

3.2.1 [Paper #3: MetaWOM–toward a sensory word-of-mouth \(WOM\) in the metaverse. International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management](#)

- **Citation:** Mladenović, D., Ismagilova, E., Filieri, R., & Dwivedi, Y. K. (2024). MetaWOM–toward a sensory word-of-mouth (WOM) in the metaverse. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*. 36(6), 2144-2163.
- **Estimated contribution** – 55%: I largely contributed to this paper in the context of problem contextualization, literature review, project overview, and provisional and final write-up. I am the corresponding and leading author.

This conceptual paper explores and introduces the concept of sensory WOM within the Metaverse, introducing the term "metaWOM." The study is grounded in Media Richness Theory (MRT) and examines how the immersive, high-fidelity, and sociable nature of Metaverse (virtual) environments can enhance the persuasiveness of WOM in virtual environments and engagement in WOM activities. Additionally, we propose that the use of non-transferable tokens (NTTs) may be suitable to create a transparent, secure review ecosystem, thus addressing the issue of fake reviews. The research follows Macinnis'

(2011) three-phase approach to conceptual contributions: summarizing the literature, integrating key concepts, and delineating the relationships between Metaverse dimensions and WOM engagement. By reviewing over 110 relevant articles, the study contextualizes the Metaverse's impact on consumer behavior and communication, particularly focusing on the travel and tourism industry.

Key findings indicate that the Metaverse's immersive environments significantly enhance the sensory experience of WOM, making it more engaging and persuasive. For the success of WOM within virtual worlds, it is central that users (avatars) start sharing information and individual experiences. This new form of WOM, or metaWOM, is expected to influence consumer decisions more profoundly than traditional WOM or electronic WOM (eWOM) due to its higher levels of interactivity and sensory engagement. The attached table indicates major distinction points between WOM, eWOM, and metaWOM.

Table 2 Emergence of metaWOM

| | Type | | |
|--------------------------|------------------------|--|---------------------------------------|
| | WOM | eWOM | metaWOM |
| Medium | Talk, personal meeting | SNS, discussion forums | Virtual environment |
| Type of interaction | Face-to-face | Online | Immersive |
| Easiness of transmission | Difficult | Easy | Not possible |
| Communication format | Speech | Video, image, graphics, testimonials, etc. | Immersive experiences |
| Communication | One-to-one | Many-to-many | One-to-one; One-to-many; many-to-many |
| Synchronicity | Synchronicity | Synchronous or Asynchronous | Synchronous or Asynchronous |
| Reach | Limited | Broad | Broad |
| Diffusion speed | Slow | Fast | Fast |
| Verification | Low to High | Low | High |
| Privacy | Private | Public | Both |
| Accessibility | Low | High | High |
| Credibility | High | Low | High |

ELECTRONIC WORD OF MOUTH (EWOM) THROUGH THE LENSES OF INFORMATION SEEKING, SHARING, AND FORWARDING

| | | | |
|---|-------------|---------------------------|-------------|
| Social ties | Strong | Weak | Both |
| Engagement | High | Low | High |
| Persuasiveness | High | Low to High | Low to High |
| Immersiveness | n.a. | n.a. | Low to High |
| Fidelity | n.a. | n.a. | Low to High |
| Sociability | Low to High | n.a. | Low to High |
| Technology | n.a. | Opinion-sharing platforms | Blockchain |
| Sensorics | n.a. | n.a. | Low to High |
| Can be modified | Yes | Yes | No |
| Non-consumers generate WOM | Yes | Yes | No |
| Consumers have data on the WOM reliability | Partially | Partially | Yes |
| A central authority manages the WOM | No | Yes | No |
| Cooperation between vendors and consumers is possible | Yes | Yes | Partially* |

Essentially, multiple contributions are steaming from this conceptual piece. On a theoretical note, notably, the development of the metaWOM concept, which integrates MRT with the unique characteristics of Metaverse environments. The study presents various scenarios showing how different levels of immersiveness, fidelity, and sociability impact WOM persuasiveness. This theoretical framework helps predict the effectiveness of metaWOM in different virtual settings and suggests that more sensory-enhanced experiences will lead to greater persuasiveness. Practically, the study highlights the potential for metaWOM to generate buzz and enhance customer engagement for companies operating in the Metaverse. Businesses can leverage high-fidelity and immersive features to provide virtual previews of products or services, aiding in customer decision-making processes. However, the study also warns of the risks associated with metaWOM, such as the spread of misleading or unethical content, which could harm a company's reputation. Future research directions include examining the motivations behind creating and sharing

metaWOM, the demographic factors influencing its effectiveness, and the potential regulatory challenges. The study calls for further exploration into how different formats of metaWOM affect consumer behavior and how companies can best utilize this new form of communication to enhance their marketing strategies.

3.2.2 Paper #4: Knowledge sharing on social media: State of the art in 2018

- **Citation:** Mladenović, D., & Krajina, A. (2020). Knowledge sharing on social media: State of the art in 2018. *Journal of Business Economics and Management*, 21(1), 44-63.
- **Estimated contribution** – 60 %: I was leading this research project in a way to browse and analyze the data, provisional and final write-up. I am the corresponding and leading author.

This paper maps out the role of social media in knowledge and information sharing. It underlines the growing importance of computer-mediated communication platforms and their impact on management practices. The study conducts a systematic literature review of published papers over the past decade, focusing on how social media facilitates both explicit and tacit knowledge and information sharing. The paper maps the existing research, identifies gaps, and suggests future research opportunities. We employed a systematic literature review approach, following the guidelines by Saunders et al. (2012). The review process included defining specific research questions, selecting relevant keywords, and applying inclusion and exclusion criteria to filter the literature. The final dataset consisted of 45 empirical studies, which were analyzed using a knowledge matrix to identify key themes, methodologies, and findings.

The results revealed that the majority of studies focus on explicit knowledge and information sharing, with less attention given to tacit knowledge. The studies predominantly use qualitative methods, indicating a need for deeper exploration of the topic. Explicit

knowledge is more frequently shared due to its easier transfer, while tacit knowledge sharing is less common and requires more personal interaction. Social networking sites and content communities are the most studied platforms, with limited research on forums, blogs, and microblogs. The primary contributing disciplines are Information Technology (IT) and Management, with emerging interest from fields like psychology and marketing. Levels of Analysis: Research often focuses on group and organizational levels, neglecting individual and national levels.

There are several contributions to the present paper. Firstly this SLR contributes to a more holistic understanding of knowledge and information sharing on social media. The current paper identifies gaps and suggests future research directions. On a practical note, findings provide insights for organizations on leveraging social media to enhance information management practices. Lastly, limitations include the short publication timeframe and the limited availability of full-text articles. Future research should address these limitations by expanding the scope of the literature reviewed and incorporating a broader range of studies. Additionally, further research is needed to explore the motivations behind knowledge sharing on social media and to develop tools for assessing the impact of social media on knowledge management practices.

3.2.3 Paper #5: Motives for writing online reviews in the post-vacation phase

- **Citation:** Mladenović, D., Krajina, A., & Milojević, I. (2019). Motives for writing online reviews in the post-vacation phase. *International Journal of Culture, Tourism and Hospitality Research*, 13(2), 244-256.
- **Estimated contribution** – 50 %: This is one of my initial attempts to research eWOM. I was heavily involved in the research in terms of conceptualization, data collection, data analyses, and revision process. Consequently, I am the corresponding and leading author.

Paper #5 explores the motives that drive individuals to write online reviews after their vacations, specifically focusing on tourists who visit Serbia. It aims to understand these motives from the perspectives of age, gender, and nationality, providing insights into post-vacation behaviors and contributing to the literature on eWOM in tourism. Data were collected over six weeks using a self-administered web survey. The sample consisted of 155 respondents. The survey was based on a scale developed by Bronner and de Hoog (2010) and included 16 items grouped into five motive categories: helping vacationers (altruism), self-directed motives, social benefits, consumer empowerment, and helping the company. Demographic variables (gender, age, nationality) were controlled to assess their impact on the motivations for writing reviews. The primary motive for writing online reviews was altruism, specifically the desire to help other vacationers. This was closely followed by social benefits. The only significant difference observed between genders was in the motive of helping vacationers, with women being more inclined towards this altruistic behavior.

The findings highlight the importance of altruism in driving individuals to write online reviews in the post-vacation phase. This prosocial behavior, characterized by a genuine desire to help others, is prevalent across different demographic groups. The study also discusses the implications of these findings for the tourism industry, suggesting that understanding these drivers can help formulate strategies for engaging with tourists and encouraging positive eWOM. The lack of significant differences based on age and nationality suggests that these altruistic motives are universally applicable, regardless of demographic differences.

In the context of contributions, this study enhances the understanding of eWOM motives, particularly highlighting the role of altruism in online review behavior. On a practical note, findings provide actionable insights for tourism marketers to engage with tourists and leverage online reviews for destination promotion. However, the main limitation of the study is the relatively small sample size and its focus on a specific destination (Serbia).

Future research should expand the sample size, include diverse destinations, and consider other external factors such as the influence of different online platforms and previous travel experiences. Exploring additional demographic variables and their impact on review motivations can further enrich the understanding of eWOM behaviors in tourism.

3.3 Paper related to consumers' information forwarding

3.3.1 Paper #6: Social and demographic predictors of Consumers' word of mouth engagement in Czechia

- **Citation:** Mladenović, D., Bruni, R., & Kalia, P. (2021). Social and demographic predictors of consumers' word of mouth engagement in Czechia. *Journal of International Consumer Marketing*, 33(4), 418-433.
- **Estimated contribution - 50 %:** This is one of my initial attempts to research eWOM. I was heavily involved in the research in terms of conceptualization, data collection, data analyses, and revision process. Consequently, I am the corresponding and leading author

This paper explores how various social relationships and demographic factors influence consumers' eWOM engagement in Czechia. It aims to understand the extent to which social ties, trust, and homophily affect eWOM, and to examine the impact of demographic variables such as age, gender, and education on these preferences. The study investigates whether consumers prefer offline or online WOM engagement and the significance of these social relationship variables in different contexts. This research utilized an online self-administered questionnaire, collecting data from 794 respondents using a snowball sampling technique. The questionnaire, adapted into Czech, included sections on demographics, information giving, information seeking, information passing, social ties, homophily, and trust. The scales for information giving, seeking, and passing

were adapted from established sources. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was used to test the hypotheses and analyze the data, focusing on the relationships between social relationship variables and WOM engagement. The findings reveal that strong social ties significantly impact information seeking and giving but not information passing. Surprisingly, homophily negatively influences WOM engagement, contradicting initial assumptions that similar individuals would share more information. Trust positively affects all three pillars of WOM engagement—information giving, seeking, and passing.

Notably, this study highlights a preference for offline WOM engagement across all types of WOM activities, despite the high internet penetration in Czechia. This preference for face-to-face communication can be attributed to stronger social bonds and trust levels in direct interactions. The unexpected negative impact of homophily suggests that diverse social networks might facilitate more dynamic information exchange. The findings also indicate that gender plays a role in WOM engagement, aligning with sociolinguistic theories that suggest different communication behaviors between men and women.

In terms of major contributions, this study extends the understanding of WOM by exploring the roles of social ties, trust, and homophily, particularly in the Czech context, which has been under-researched. In practical terms, marketers can use these findings to identify influential individuals within social networks and tailor communication strategies that leverage trust and strong social ties. However, certain limitations may reduce the generalizability of the findings. Namely, the study's sample is demographically unbalanced, with a high proportion of younger respondents. Future research should aim for a more balanced sample and consider additional external factors that might influence WOM behavior. Further studies should explore the role of homophily in different cultural contexts and the impact of positive versus negative WOM.

4 Epilogue – self-reflection and future horizons

The present habilitation thesis offers a comprehensive overview of my long-term contributions to the field of eWOM engagement. I have detailed the methodologies, contributions, and limitations of the papers presented, highlighting my substantial involvement and contribution throughout all stages of the research and publishing process. To cohesively connect the various papers and different angles of eWOM engagement, I utilized the theoretical framework developed by Chi and Kim (2011), which identifies three central aspects of eWOM engagement: information seeking, sharing, and passing (forwarding). This framework enabled me to navigate more precisely eWOM's research frontier and to properly map my contributions to each of these foundational pillars (see Figure 2).

In a nutshell, hereby I list the most notable contributions of the presented papers to the theoretical model developed by Chi and Kim (2011):

- Paper #1 explores how individuals engage in information-seeking during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. It applies the S-O-R model, CLT, and the TFA to understand how continuous exposure to COVID-19-related information leads to information overload and subsequent behaviors. This research highlights how crisis situations drive intense information-seeking behavior to mitigate perceived risks.
- Paper #2 investigates how SEO impacts user's information retrieval. This paper emphasizes the role of digital marketing strategies in enhancing the visibility of information, thus facilitating easier and more effective information seeking by consumers. It shows how digital tools and techniques influence the efficiency of information-seeking online.
- Paper #3 introduces the concept of metaWOM, which integrates MRT with the characteristics of Metaverse environments. This paper discusses how immersive, high-fidelity

virtual experiences enhance the persuasiveness and engagement of information sharing. It suggests that more sensory-enhanced experiences will lead to greater persuasiveness and engagement in eWOM.

- Paper #4 conducts a systematic literature review of how social media platforms facilitate knowledge and information sharing. This paper identifies key themes, methodologies, and findings in the context of social media's role in explicit and tacit knowledge sharing, providing a comprehensive understanding of how social media supports the information-sharing pillar of eWOM.
- Paper #5 examines why tourists share their experiences and reviews after vacations. This study deciphers the motivations behind information sharing, such as social validation and altruism, contributing to the understanding of factors that drive individuals to share their experiences and opinions online.
- Paper #6 discusses the dynamics of information forwarding within social networks, emphasizing the role of individuals in passing along marketer or user-generated content. It explores the motivations and mechanisms behind information forwarding, highlighting its importance in the broader exchange of information within the eWOM context.

Looking towards future work and scientific production, I plan to build on several key aspects. Currently, I am heavily involved in multiple research projects closely aligned with the domain of eWOM engagement. eWOM remains my dominant research topic, and I am committed to continuously contributing to this emerging and dynamic field. Notably, I have four additional eWOM-related papers under revision⁴, where I maintain a leading role with a substantial contribution in each of them

⁴ Situation as of 29.07.2024. These papers are:

- Effect of Generative Artificial Intelligence on Travel Planning – **Annals of Tourism Research** (Q1, D1, 4*)

The success of my current research endeavors is greatly attributed to the constructive roles of various co-authors. At present, I collaborate with some of the most renowned scholars in the eWOM and digital marketing domains, such as Rafelle Filieri, Elvira Ismagilova, Yogesh K. Dwivedi, Sebastian Martin, Emmanuel Mogaji, etc.. Sustaining and expanding this social network is crucial for my future development and positioning within this research domain. Additionally, I continuously submit applications for external funding from institutions like the Czech Science Foundation with topics⁵ closely related to eWOM and digital communications. Despite some unsuccessful attempts, I remain committed to this significant aspect of my research activities.

On a pedagogical note, I strive to effectively communicate my findings to my students and integrate the reported outcomes into generating additional knowledge⁶. Given the overlap between my research and the digital marketing course I guarantee, there is significant potential for future synergy in these areas.

In closing, I consider eWOM engagement a key driving force behind consumer decision-making. My overarching intention is to produce high-quality, impactful, and robust scientific contributions that benefit various stakeholders, including consumers, service providers, marketers, and authorities. To achieve this, I am focusing on the activity pillars presented above that will support my ongoing efforts.

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- The Power of Electronic Word-of-Mouth in Inducing Adoption of Emerging Technologies – **Technology in Society** (Q1, 3*)
 - Generative Artificial Intelligence and WOM: the emergence of synthetic WOM - **Journal of Computer Information Systems** (Q2, 2*)
 - When Online Review is Not Enough? Adoption of Cryptocurrencies in Online Shopping through the lenses of NCA and fsQCA – **Electronic Commerce Research** (Q2, 2*)

⁵ The proposal currently under consideration by Czech Science Foundation (under the Weave scheme in collaboration with University of Dubrovnik): Helpfulness of Negative Electronic Word of Mouth: The Role of Discrete Emotions and User-Generated Content

⁶ As I use my research findings to debate and discuss them, I often consult with my students to inquire about their perceptions on certain matters (e.g., the adoption of novel technologies, information dissemination during COVID19 etc.).

As one of the leading scholars in WOM-eWOM domains, Berger (2016) aptly states: "*People do not think in terms of information. They think in terms of narratives and value. But while people focus on the story itself, information comes along for the ride.*" It is our collective responsibility as scholars to decipher and map how consumers or individuals engage with information (seek, share, forward), and by doing that ensure that future research continues to illuminate the complexities of eWOM engagement.

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Appendix A – Abstracts of individual papers

A.1 Paper #1

Understanding individual psychological and behavioral responses during COVID-19: Application of stimulus-organism-response model

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To comprehend the nature, implications, risks and consequences of the events of the COVID-19 crisis, individuals largely relied on various online information sources. The features of online information exchange (e.g., conducted on a massive scale, with an abundance of information and unverified sources) led to various behavioral and psychological responses that are not fully understood. This study therefore investigated the relationship between exposure to online information sources and how individuals sought, forwarded, and provided COVID-19 related information. Anchored in the stimulus-organism-response model, cognitive load theory, and the theory of fear appeal, this study examined the link between the online consumption of COVID-19-related information and psychological and behavioral responses. In the theory development process, we hypothesized the moderating role of levels of fear. The research model included six hypotheses and was empirically verified on self-reported data (N = 425), which was collected in early 2021. The results indicate that continuous exposure to online information sources led to perceived information overload, which further heightened the psychological state of cyberchondria. Moreover, the act of seeking and providing COVID-19 information was significantly predicted by perceived cyberchondria. The results also suggest that higher levels of fear led to increased levels of seeking and providing COVID-19-related information. The theoretical and practical implications of these findings are presented, along with promising areas for future research.

Keywords: COVID-19; Crisis; Cyberchondria; Fear; Information overload; Information providing; Information seeking

Citation: Mladenović, D., Todua, N., & Pavlović-Höck, N. (2023). Understanding individual psychological and behavioral responses during COVID-19: Application of stimulus-organism-response model. *Telematics and Informatics*, 79, 101966.

A.2 Paper #2

Search engine optimization (SEO) for digital marketers: exploring determinants of online search visibility for blood bank service

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Abstract: Purpose: Given that online search visibility is influenced by various determinants, and that influence may vary across industries, this study aims in investigating the major predictors of online search visibility in the context of blood banks. Design/methodology/approach: To formalize the online visibility, the authors have found theoretical foundations in activity theory, while to quantify online visibility the authors have used the search engine optimization (SEO) Index, ranking, and a number of visitors. The examined model includes ten hypotheses and was tested on data from 57 blood banks. Findings: Results challenge shallow domain knowledge. The major predictors of online search visibility are Alternative Text Attribute (ALT) text, backlinks, robots, domain authority (DA) and bounce rate (BR). The issues are related to the number of backlinks, social score, and DA. Polarized utilization of SEO techniques is evident. Practical implications: The methodology can be used to analyze the online search visibility of other industries or similar not-for-profit organizations. Findings in terms of individual predictors can be useful for marketers to better manage online search visibility. Social implications: The acute blood donation problems may be to a certain degree level as the information flow between donors and blood banks will be facilitated. Originality/value: This is the first study to analyze the blood bank context. The results provide invaluable inputs to marketers, managers, and policymakers.

Keywords: Blood banks; Health care; Online search visibility; SEO; Search engine optimization

Citation: Mladenović, D., Rajapakse, A., Kožuljević, N., & Shukla, Y. (2023). Search engine optimization (SEO) for digital marketers: exploring determinants of online search visibility for blood bank service. *Online Information Review*, 47(4), 661-679.

A.3 Paper #3

MetaWOM – toward a sensory word-of-mouth (WOM) in the metaverse

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Abstract: Purpose: Based on the key dimensions of the Metaverse environment (immersiveness, fidelity and sociability), this paper aims to develop the concept of sensory word-of-mouth (WOM) in Metaverse – the metaWOM. It attempts to upgrade the Reviewchain model and suggests the utilization of non-transferable tokens (NTTs) in curbing the explosion of fake WOM. Design/methodology/approach: Following Macinnis' (2011) approach to conceptual contributions, the authors browsed the currently available literature on WOM, Metaverse and NTT to portray the emergence of metaWOM. Findings: By relying on Metaverse's three building blocks, the authors map out the persuasiveness of metaWOM in the Metaverse-like environment. By incorporating NTT in the Reviewchain model, the authors upgraded it to provide a transparent, safe and trusted review ecosystem. An array of emerging research directions and research questions is presented. Research limitations/implications: This paper comprehensively analyzes the implications of a Metaverse-like environment on WOM and debates on technologies that can enhance the metaWOM persuasiveness. The proposed model in this paper can assist various stakeholders in understanding the complex nature of virtual information-seeking and giving. Originality/value: This is the original attempt to delineate the sensory aspect of WOM in the Metaverse based on three crucial aspects of the Metaverse environment: immersiveness, fidelity and sociability. This paper extends the discussion on the issue of fake reviews and offers viable suggestions to curb the ever-growing number of fraudulent WOM.

Keywords: Credibility; Hospitality; Media richness theory; Metaverse; NTT; Persuasiveness; Reviewchain; Sensory; Tourism; WOM; Word-of-mouth; metaWOM

Citation: Mladenović, D., Ismagilova, E., Filieri, R., & Dwivedi, Y. K. (2024). MetaWOM–toward a sensory word-of-mouth (WOM) in the metaverse. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 36(6), 2144-2163.

A.4 Paper #4

Knowledge sharing on social media: State of the art in 2018

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Abstract: In the past decade, the importance of social media has increased, especially in knowledge sharing practices. Current massive evolution of computer-mediated communication platforms influenced the ways of how knowledge is managed and shared by individuals. This literature review of published papers in the past decade explores the potential of using social media in knowledge sharing by individuals and, through the mapping of the existing studies, identifies research opportunities for future studies. Primary, tacit and explicit knowledge sharing have been investigated. The findings suggest that there are different ways in which knowledge is shared across social media, but the systematic approach and synthesis is challenging to define. Therefore, there are some open courses of future research that may form the basis for a theoretical framework. The results of the present literature review should increase methodological rigor, and provide the guidelines to academics by identifying research opportunities. They can also serve as a comprehensive collection of findings for knowledge management decision makers.

Keywords: Explicit knowledge; IT; Knowledge management; Knowledge sharing; Social media; Social networking sites; Systematic literature review; Tacit knowledge

Citation: Mladenović, D., & Krajina, A. (2020). Knowledge sharing on social media: State of the art in 2018. *Journal of Business Economics and Management*, 21(1), 44-63.

A.5 Paper #5

Motives for writing online reviews in post-vacation phase

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Abstract: Purpose: This quantitative study aims to examine background motives that navigate individuals to share their opinions, in the context of an individual's post-vacation phase and its relation to the destination of Serbia, from the standpoint of age, gender and nationality. Design/methodology/approach: The data were collected throughout six weeks via a self-administered Web survey. The survey was adopted and based on the scale developed by Bronner and de Hoog (2011). Findings: Results indicate that the dominant driver to submit an online review after a trip is to help vacationers (altruism) and that men and women display differences in this, but not in other motives. Both age and nationality do not influence the particular motive to leave an online review. Research limitations/implications: The main limitation of this study is the total number of answers. However, sampling was rather purposive, which gives us a good indicator of the population behavior. Practical implications: Understanding these drivers is essential in formulating strategies for managing the interaction with opinion leaders. On a larger scale, the results can contribute the market segmentation and customer communication approaches in Serbian tourism marketing. Originality/value: Motives that trigger individuals to compose an online review have not been investigated and thematic studies are still missing, in the case of Serbia in particular.

Keywords: Altruism; Consumer behaviour; Motivation; Online reviews; Post-vacation; Serbia

Citation: Mladenović, D., Krajina, A., & Milojević, I. (2019). Motives for writing online reviews in the post-vacation phase. *International Journal of Culture, Tourism and Hospitality Research*, 13(2), 244-256.

A.6 Paper #6

Social and demographic predictors of consumers' word of mouth engagement in Czechia

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Abstract: Given that consumers' Word of Mouth (WOM) communication is influenced by demographic and social background this study investigates (1) to what extent consumers' WOM engagement is influenced by social relationship variables, (2) in what capacity demographic factors affects preferences to engage in WOM and (3) the preferred WOM environment. Our findings indicate that offline context is preferred, trust and social ties are positively related to WOM, whilst homophily has reportedly negative impact. Age, gender, and education are reported to influence consumers' propensity to engage in WOM. Based on the results, several practical and theoretical implications are discussed.

Keywords: Czech Republic; WOM; homophily; social tie; trust; word of mouth engagement

Citation: Mladenović, D., Bruni, R., & Kalia, P. (2021). Social and demographic predictors of consumers' word of mouth engagement in Czechia. *Journal of International Consumer Marketing*, 33(4), 418-433.

Appendix B – Full papers

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