Theoretical investigation of the antecedent role of review valence in building electronic customer relationships

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Abstract: The valence of online reviews (positive or negative) offers a systematic linkage between consumers and company brands. Online reviews can deteriorate or improve electronic customer relationships. The findings of a thorough analysis of a set of organisational and individual behavioural theories indicate that negative reviews increase a consumer's perceived conflict with a focal firm, leading to a reduced level of perceived relational benefit and trust, undermining the consumer's loyalty. Fundamental propositions indicate that researchers should focus more on word-of-mouth (WOM) as an antecedent of relationship marketing, and marketers should focus on proactive WOM campaigns, critical for establishing long-term reciprocal relationships with consumers.

Keywords: electronic customer relationships; online review; valence; relationship marketing; online marketing.

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1   Introduction

This research conceptualises the pivotal role of electronic word of mouth (eWOM) in electronic customer relationship marketing and establishes a new theoretical model wherein eWOM serves not only as a consequence of electronic customer relationship but also a critical causal mechanism in changing consumers' perception of an electronic customer relationship, which has emerged as a dominant exchange mode for both goods and service industries (Yusuf Dauda and Lee, 2015). The findings of cross-industrial studies provide a robust examination of how eWOM shapes consumers' perceptions; therefore, marketers need to adjust strategies accordingly. Yadav and Pavlou (2014) define eWOM as Internet-mediated communications among different groups of consumers. A significant difference between eWOM and traditional communication is the direction of information exchange (Maslowska et al., 2017) between sellers and buyers (Palmatier et al., 2006). eWOM can be multidirectional, including communication between sellers and buyers, sellers and sellers, and, most often, buyers and buyers (Bruhn and Schnebelen, 2017).

In examination of the impact of eWOM, this study contributes to marketing theory and practice. The findings offer implications for brand managers intending to build long-term relationships with consumers. By identifying the process of how positive (negative) online reviews increase (decrease) consumers' level of conflict with a business partner, the research provides evidence that WOM is an important antecedence of relationship marketing (RM). To conduct meaningful RM activities, the findings indicate that marketers should recognise the importance of the potential deterioration of consumers' perceived relationships with the company/brand when they are exposed to negative reviews. Therefore, firms should reduce potential conflict with consumers and create

positive reviews across service and durable goods industries. Moreover, the findings will help marketers to evaluate the eWOM campaign using improved RM as a novel key performance indicator, rather than solely relying on sales (Saura et al., 2017; Liu, 2017). Second, extant theories of RM focus on how WOM affects consumers' short-term decisions (Anderson and Salisbury, 2003), such as purchase or retransmission intentions, suggesting that WOM serves as an outcome of a relationship (Palmatier et al., 2006). Consistent with signal theory and fairness perception theory, this study demonstrates the critical role of online reviews in shaping consumers' perceptions of product and service company relationships. While previous studies reveal how WOM affects firms' short-term performance (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2015), this research provides varied perceptions of consumers regarding their different relationships with firms, explained by the valence and extremity of reviews. As the present work focuses on online reviews, its validity can be applied to other forms of eWOM, such as discussions on Twitter and Facebook. Lastly, this work complements growing research interest on the role of electronic interactions in determining electronic customer relationships and relevant marketing outcomes (Kozinets et al., 2010; Steinhoff et al., 2018).

## 2   Theoretical framework and proposition development

Social exchange theory (SET) is employed to explain the psychological mechanism underlying the relationships between WOM and relationship outcomes. In particular, positive word-of-mouth (PWOM) indicates that customers receive good service and support from a company and perceive low conflict with the company. According to SET, customers will have the social obligation to build and maintain good relationships with the company in return for the company's excellent service and support. SET argues for building reciprocal and rewarding transactions and relationships; accordingly, the exchange partners need to seek fairness and take rewarding actions of the relationship partners (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005). SET serves as an important theoretical foundation in explaining organisational behaviours balancing the relationship between enterprise and customer satisfaction (Meeker, 1971; Rastgar et al., 2019). In a marketing context, interpersonal exchanges involve individual decisions and contingency upon perceiving justification to relational partners (Simonson, 1989; Meeker, 1971; Blau, 1964). SET includes six types of exchange resources – love, status, information, money, goods and services – that result in either an economic or a socioemotional outcome. The former refers to tangible financial reward, and the latter sends the message that a person is respected and treated fairly (Foa and Foa, 1980; Shore et al., 2001). As consumers receive decent goods or services (as shown in a PWOM), consumers are willing to pay money so that the exchange is fair and the relationship is reciprocal (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005; Bennett et al., 2021). In cases wherein an individual does not agree with the relational partner's behaviour (as shown in negative word of mouth (NWOM) and therefore perceived conflict increases, the relationship is altered by this perception, and the individual is more likely to behave unfavourably to the relationship (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995). In this case, the consequence of the initial social exchange ultimately undermines consumer trust in the seller and causes consumers to be less loyal to the relationship (Molm, 2000).

Under the umbrella of SET, multiple theories explain how WOM valence alters perceived conflict in a relationship. One of the factors inducing conflict based on social exchange theory is perceived unfairness, which is often emotionally laden, serving as a salient factor in shaping consumer exchange outcomes, satisfaction, and sales performance (Samaha and Palmatier, 2015). Perceived fairness includes distributive fairness. Procedural fairness is related to process-oriented and interactional fairness (Greenberg, 1986; Bies and Moag, 1986). Distributive justice is based on equity theory, where people compare their rewards and contributions to others and adjust their behaviour to maintain an equitable state (Greenberg, 1986). Procedural fairness is about the perceived fairness to make a decision, in which the decision-making process should meet a specific criterion, such as consistency among people and being free from bias, and is believed to be fair (Leventhal, 1980). Interactional fairness is related to the treatment of and communication between two parties, consisting of both interpersonal and informational dimensions (Bies and Shapiro, 1987). Interpersonal aspects pertain to the politeness and dignity people receive in interaction and informational exchange, using a specific procedure (Bies and Shapiro, 1987). All these types of fairness: distributive, procedural, and interactional, are not based on objective standards, but the perception of a decision is the comparison with a reference to a standard of judgment (Cropanzano et al., 2001). These findings are consistent with the reciprocity theory, which suggests that people are driven to punish unfair behaviours even with their accrued costs (Offerman, 2002). Consequently, while distributive and procedural unfairness leads to a reduced level of satisfaction and trust, interactional and informational injustice are related to negative agent-referenced evaluations and undesirable outcomes (Colquitt et al., 2001). Distributive and procedural unfairness are also responsible for decreased relationship quality (Kumar et al., 1995a), adverse affective reactions, and unfavorable experiences (Kozlenkova et al., 2017).

eWOM valence is the messages, expressed positively, negatively, or neutrally, which serve as a critical metric of eWOM messages (You et al., 2015). Volume is the total amount of eWOM messages; valence represents the direction of signals. Previous studies have shown that positivity and negativity of information on a specific issue affect consumer arousal and purchase intentions (Berger and Milkman, 2012; Berger et al., 2010). As one of unfavourable affective reactions, negative WOM behaviours signal negative sentiment, and consumers use NWOM as a channel to retaliate against an offending retailer (Blodgett et al., 2001). Other potential buyers use the negative signal to evaluate their purchase risk by testing suitability and reciprocity of a relationship (Kozlenkova et al., 2017). The power of the negative effect that signals an individuals' attitude depends upon the diagnosticity of the reviews (Tirunillai and Tellis, 2011). For example, if a product is technologically complicated and involves high purchase risk, written online product reviews may provide consumers with limited diagnosticity, and the signal effect might be ambiguous. In this case, video product reviews which provide more detailed information have a potentially higher impact on consumers' behaviours, firms' cash flow as well as stock returns (Tirunillai and Tellis, 2011). Consumers evaluate the level of the diagnosticity of information based on the extent to which the input can help them make a judgment or decision and allow them to accomplish their goals (Lynch, 2006). As negative information is perceived as more informative or diagnostic than positive information for categorising targets, negative information has a higher weight in evaluations (Ahluwalia, 2002). Although in some circumstances, the individual's ability and success may overshadow the signal from diagnosticity of

negative information (Skowronski and Carlston, 1987), the signal effect of NWOM, in which others' emotional states activate the observer's empathy-related sensations (Singer et al., 2006). It is plausible that when others are in a bad situation, people's perceived fairness is likely to be affected by unjustified circumstances and respond to it accordingly with an increased level of emotions such as anger, frustration, and resentment (Singer et al., 2006). Observations or the mere presence of an object may unconsciously affect the consumers' cognitive processes (Ward et al., 2017). Furthermore, consumers' attitudes toward a brand are not only affected by the signal effects of reviews posted by others, but also by their reviews, which serve as 'self-signals' to reinforce their attitudes toward a product [Grewal et al., (2019), p.199]. Low volume and high-dispersed WOM often signal increased product adoption risk (Bond et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2021).

Figure 1 Conceptual model
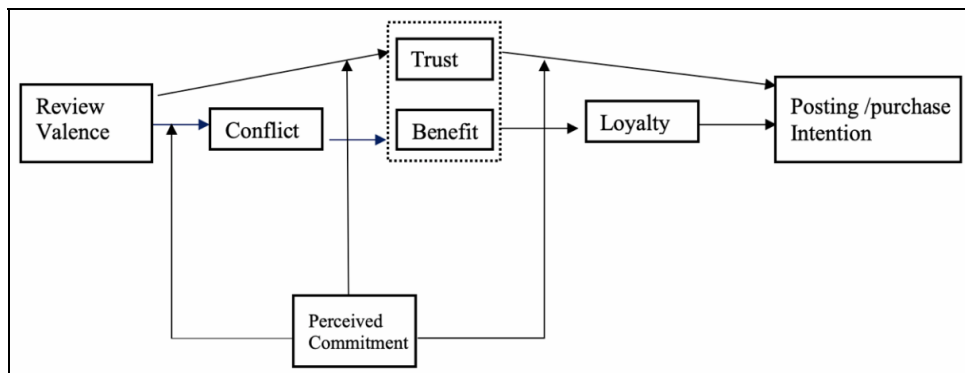
Regarding a flood of research, including literature previously discussed on the relationship between WOM and consumers' attitude and behaviour, how consumers generate WOM based on their buying experiences; a lack of insight is remarked regarding how WOM directly or indirectly affects RM. To fill up this research gap, the present study highlights eWOM as a significant communication proxy to measure consumers' attitudes toward a relationship. Similarly, Higgins and Rholes (1978) find that being exposed to positive or negative information substantially affects subsequent evaluations. Based on the aforementioned perceived fairness and signal theories, it is plausible to propose that a consumer's disagreement with a firm occurs if they are exposed to either negative or positive reviews about the firm. In some cases, consumers create NWOM to release negative emotions or retaliate against a firm (Richins, 1984; Sweeney et al., 2005). They may also create a scenario, in which NWOM may exacerbate a poor experience with the intent to criticise the involved partner and push the partner to resolve the issue. Due to the negativity effect mentioned here (please see Figure 1), the following proposition is offered:

P1   Review valence affects consumers' perceived conflict, which plays an essential role in determining relationships.

The extent to which the perceived conflict might be affected by review valence depends on consumer characteristics. Cook and Emerson (1978) state that commitment is a variable, which distinguishes social exchange from an economic exchange. Steinhoff et al. (2018) propose that commitment is a psychological process that can be stimulated

by virtual agents in electronic customer relationship marketing. SET argues that while the social exchange alters the relationship, the causal direction might be the opposite of what would be expected (Eisenberger et al., 2001). In other words, while commitment is affected by relational constructs, it is common that commitment serves as the key determinant of the relationships (Bishop et al., 2000). Kumar et al. (1994) identify two dimensions of commitment: affective and calculative commitment. Affective commitment is measured based upon an exchange partner's willingness to maintain a relationship and a general positive feeling toward others. Calculative commitment is the desire of an exchange partner to keep a relationship based on the costs and benefits associated with it. Calculative commitment is usually treated as a negatively-oriented motivation because the relationship is maintained out of a lack of availability of an alternative connection (Kumar et al., 1994; Konovsky and Cropanzano, 1991). Wiener (1982) states that commitment is a motivational phenomenon that mediates behavioural antecedents and outcomes. In talking about membership commitment, Gruen et al. (2000) suggest three levels: continuance, normative, and affective commitment. Continuance commitment is the psychological bondage to an organisation based upon perceived costs and benefits; normative commitment is a sense of moral obligation; and affective commitment focuses on a positive emotional attachment to an organisation (Allen and Meyer, 1990). Moreover, in building and enhancing a relationship, the perception of the relational partner' level of commitment is also crucial (Jap and Ganesan, 2000). Consumers who believe their business partner has a low level of commitment have little desire to maintain a relationship; so, they are not sensitive to either positive or negative reviews. On the other hand, consumers who perceive their partner is strongly committed are more likely to be affected by the review valence in the evaluation of conflict. As previous work has shown that commitment positively affects loyalty, the following proposition is posited:

P2   The strength of the relationship between a review valence and consumers' perceived conflict depends upon the consumers' perception of the partner's level of commitment to the relationship. Consumers who perceive their partner has weak commitment are less likely to be affected compared to those who believe their partner has a strong commitment.

Along with commitment, trust is another critical cornerstone of RM. Trust is a willingness to rely on and have confidence in another individual's word (Moorman et al., 1992; Rotter, 1967; Sitkin and Roth, 1993). This definition reflects both cognitive and behavioural facets of trust. Morgan and Hunt (1994) describe trust as the confidence an exchange party has in the 'reliability and integrity' of others, which is associated with qualities such as consistency, competency, honesty, fairness, responsibility, helpfulness, and benevolence (p.23). Doney and Cannon (1997) find the different patterns by which trust develop depend on whether the target is an individual or an organisation. Trust influences relational commitment, which decreases or increases the level of commitment in a relationship and shifts the transaction toward either a long- or short-term direction. Lohmann (2000) identifies trust as the fiduciary obligation to place others' interests before one's own. He further argues that a trust is a tool that consumers use to avoid risks when making a decision.

The concept of trust is categorised as ability beliefs, benevolence beliefs, and integrity beliefs. Ability beliefs refer to the level of confidence a consumer has in a firm's capability to implement their tasks. Benevolence beliefs are confidence that a consumer

has of a company regarding its positive attitude toward customer welfare beyond the pursuit of profit. Integrity beliefs are the consumer's assurance that a firm follows a series of moral and professional standards when providing its products or services (McKnight et al., 2002; Mayer et al., 1995). These three dimensions of trust are conceptually separated but also closely connected. Researchers treat these concepts as either an aggregate or as distinct facets of trust, depending on whether or not they are attempting to create a global measure (Kumar et al., 1995b; Doney and Cannon (1997); Schlosser et al., 2006). The behavioural aspect of trust that involves a willingness of consumers to put themselves at risk to maintain the relationship is important in the e-commerce literature. Taking risks is the most significant distinction between trusting intentions and other behavioural intentions. Online purchasing is mainly dependent on the level of trust intention because consumers must take risks when they decide to buy something and disclose their resources, such as their credit card number and address, online. Another risk involves the receiving of an inferior product or service (Schlosser et al., 2006; Moorman et al., 1992). Schlosser et al. (2006) argue that trusting beliefs may or may not positively impact corresponding intentions to trust. The level of trustworthiness improves dramatically for unknown consumers if the information's source is from a trusted website.

Awad and Ragowsky (2008) study how the quality of WOM affects consumer trust in an e-commerce context. They refer to the perceived quality of WOM on a retailer's website and find that WOM quality significantly affects consumer's trust across both genders. Awad and Ragowsky's (2008) study is one of the few that establishes a causal relationship between WOM to trust. However, their research distinguishes between the decision-making patterns of men and women and is limited to retailers' websites; therefore, how the valence of WOM affects relational trust and commitment is not conclusive. In an online relational context, consumers are not aware that their personal information will be protected by an online retailer or shared for varied reasons, not to mention whether the quality of the product or services is reliable (Urban et al., 2000). This information asymmetry highlights the pressing need for the building of a trust-based electronic customer relationship between the seller and buyer. Statistics show that 80% of the firm's revenues come from 20% of the customer base, and these key customers continue to buy from the company because of a solid trust relationship that they have with the company (Urban et al., 2000). When consumers are exposed to WOM with different valences from what was expected, it may challenge their existing perceived trust and thus jeopardise their intention of posting reviews. For example, if consumers see a negative review about a firm with which they are currently doing business, they may begin to doubt their previous trust in the firm, especially when they have previously had a negative experience with the firm. In this case, it is likely that they will be motivated to post a similar review or add a comment such as 'I have had the same bad experience.' In this scenario, what is being seen is a potential mediation effect of perceived trust between review valence and review posting intention. As discussed in the previous section, the level of commitment would affect this indirect effect of the review valence on the posting intention. This discussion leads to the following propositions:

P3 Relational trust plays a mediating role in the process of review valence and affects relational outcomes, such as the review posting or purchase intentions.

P4   The impact of review valence on trust and effects of trust on the relational outcome (i.e., posting and purchase intentions) is contingent on the level of perceived commitment that relational partners possess.

Oliver (1999) defines loyalty as a desire to re-patronise a preferred brand and be resistant to other brands. Loyalty appears in two stages: attitudinal loyalty and behavioural loyalty, indicating an intention the loyal consumer forms and then translates the intention into actual purchase behaviour (Oliver, 1999). In other words, loyalty represents a customers' willingness to improve their relationship with the company (Palmatier et al., 2006), which is further reflected in repeat buying behaviour and the spreading of PWOM (Zeithaml et al., 1996). Sirdeshmukh et al. (2002) consider PWOM as a factor of loyalty, which they define as the intention to conduct behaviours to maintain a relationship with an organisation. When consumers have a high level of conflict with a firm, they are more likely to challenge their beliefs about the firm's ability, benevolence, and integrity, thus leading to a reduced level of trust, which is an antecedent of loyalty.

Morgan and Hunt (1994) propose that relationship commitment and trust are developed only when a firm provides resources and opportunities that benefit their exchange partners. Relationship benefits affect relationships positively, and it is an essential factor for an exchange partner to believe that an ongoing relationship is valuable enough to justify their maximum patronage (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). To motivate the consumer's willingness to strengthen the relationship, the company involved needs to ensure that the exchange is reciprocal and of particular benefit to the customer (Hibbard et al., 2001). Extant literature shows a positive relationship between customer benefits and relational mediators (Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Hibbard et al., 2001). Morgan and Hunt (1994) find that relationship benefits affect how consumers cooperate with sellers. To maintain a healthy relationship, both the exchange parties should share the benefits from that relationship, such as convenience, social status, or improved decision making. Palmatier et al. (2006) find that relationship benefits are one of the most influential RM antecedents. The level of benefits depends on the consumer's perception of the potential rewards from the relationship, and that perception is a response to other social objects (Campbell, 1950). According to SET, fairness, which is highly related to perceived conflict, plays a key role in the maintenance of a relationship between exchange partners (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005). As electronic customer relationships are omnichannel, networked, and anthropomorphised (Steinhoff et al., 2018), disagreements or conflict between relational partners is common, even unavoidable, and any hostility and bitterness from those conflicts are detrimental to the consumer's perceived benefits, which have been shown as an antecedent of loyalty. Thus, this leads to the following propositions:

P5   Relational trust mediates consumers' perceived conflict and relational loyalty.

P6   Consumers' perceived benefits mediate consumers' perceived conflict and relational loyalty.

3   Discussion

A review of the literature on eWOM reveals a dearth of research on how eWOM affects the consumer's decision and how firms can bolster online reviews (De Bruyn and Lilien, 2008; King et al., 2014). Moreover, the impact of eWOM on RM mostly remains

unknown. Several factors influence these gaps. First, most of the contemporary research has relied on retrospective data collected from successful eWOM communications and has often excluded unsuccessful ones. Moreover, the extant literature has focused on the eWOM effect on active consumers seeking information, but there is a gap in terms of the impact on passive consumers (Bristor, 1990; Bansal and Voyer, 2000; Wangenheim and Bayon, 2004). Another issue is that previous research has primarily focused on the direct effect of eWOM on marketing outcomes and has ignored the indirect impact in testing mediation significance. This impedes further theoretical development (Zhao et al., 2010). By identifying the pivotal role of consumer perceived conflict in serving the linkage between review valence and relational mediators, the current research proposes that being passively exposed to certain types of reviews would significantly affect consumers' perceived relationships with the partner and ultimately change their review creation intention. Compared with positive reviews, the study proposes that negative reviews will increase perceived relational conflict, and this valence effect is expected to exist when consumers' commitment is high. The propositions presented here reveal that increased conflict will cause a reduced level of perceived trust and benefit, thereby undermining relational loyalty and further decreasing the intention of posting positive reviews.

Overall, current research has concluded that WOM is a consequence of relational mediators in consumer-focused outcomes, reflected by two dimensions of customer loyalty: attitude and behaviour (De Matos and Rossi, 2008). This suggests that a customer will recommend a product to another potential buyer. Sellers' actual performance and cooperation with customers are two other consequences of relational mediators. A controversial aspect of this model is that it includes WOM only as an outcome of RM, ignoring its impact on relational mediators. Based on the review of literature, firms do not actively pursue WOM as a strategic goal in building customer relationships and rather attempt to use it as a marketing tool to increase consumers' perceived credibility of products or services. The present study illustrates that WOM is an outcome of RM activities and an essential antecedent of RM that has both direct and indirect impacts on multiple relational antecedents, moderators, and consequences.

4   Implications

These theoretical investigations and propositions offered complementary theoretical and practical implications relevant to the research avenue of electronic customer relationship management (ECRM). The theoretical implications of this conceptual work lead scholars to apply SET to the field of ECRM, and provide abundant research avenues in which the robustness of SET is examined in online contexts. As it is suggested by this work, the valence of online information serves as an important force in balancing firm-customer relationships. Specifically, the sole presence of negative information could have a detrimental long-term effect for an online relationship, which is preconditioned by perceived trust. These suggestions are also consistent with a resource-based view (RBV) theory, which argues that unique sets of intangible and tangible resources contribute to a firm's strategic competitive advantage (Wernerfelt, 1984). Based on the findings of the present work, positive online reviews serve as an effective and intangible resource that have a direct impact on customer electronic relationships and their purchase decisions (Simonson and Rosen, 2014; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004).

Contemporary research has focused on how firms' marketing activities influence buyers' WOM creation in RM. Considering that WOM serves as a solely passive outcome of a relationship, which is a useful tool for improving financial performance, this study proposes that WOM is a consequence of a relationship and essential antecedent that may strengthen or undermine relational trust and benefit through consumers' levels of perceived conflict. Previous RM studies have categorised the antecedents of RM into different dimensions, such as buyers, sellers, and dyadic (Palmatier et al., 2006); however, the present study shows that WOM may not be categorised in any of those groups; it is independent because of the unique multidirectional characteristics that WOM possesses. As Dunning (2005) describes, consumers make a decision to revise attitudes in order to flatter their self-image. Thus, marketers should consider how their marketing efforts threaten or augment consumers' beliefs when evaluating marketing activities. In a business environment, this study adds incremental knowledge on the role of WOM in building a strong relationship, indicating that executives must recognise the importance of creating positive WOM for using it as a direct marketing tool to minimise the fallout from potential consumer conflict. Managers also need to realise that WOM is closely related to the consumer's perceived benefit and trust from a relationship, and they should allocate a proportion of their budget for WOM campaigns to improve the RM investment. Moreover, managers should be aware that review valence only affects highly committed consumers, which highlights the importance of maintaining and enhancing a reciprocal relationship with consumers. These findings are consistent with previous literature arguing that the payoffs from consumer committed reciprocal relationships are more than a unilateral relationship in which consumers commitments are low (Kozlenkova et al., 2017).

eWOM is an antecedent of RM that does not belong solely to buyers or sellers or is dyadic in nature. Since eWOM should be treated as an independent antecedent of RM that has direct and indirect effects on both relational trust and commitment, managers should focus on developing customer loyalty, which is identified as an essential moderator that affects a direct relationship between WOM, relational trust, and commitment. For firms that are conducting marketing strategies toward consumers who have strong customer loyalty, it is likely that little effort is needed to create WOM campaigns that will affect relational trust and commitment. Contrarily, for firms employing marketing strategies toward consumers with low customer loyalty, their efforts to create WOM campaigns may be more productive.

The conceptual examination of the work provides practical implications for marketers in terms of how to use the new perspective of online information to enhance electronic customer relationships. For example, the work implicates that marketers should treat the valence of online information at the strategic perspective of consumer relationships, calling for a rebalance of internal marketing resources with an emphasis on online information management. The framework and propositions of the work offer abundant potential for future research. Specifically, scholars may test this conceptual model with empirical experiments or data collected from the business field. Moreover, future research may also look at the boundary conditions of this model and identify underlying factors that may affect how online information valence serves as an antecedent to electronic customer relationships.

5 Limitations and future research

This study is limited in its scope since it is one of the first articles to examine the active role of eWOM in RM. Firstly, using the valence of eWOM to examine the underlying correlations may inadequately represent the characteristics of eWOM. Any future studies on propositions mentioned above should control for review volume, which is another critical review metric embedded in the effects of eWOM on all marketing outcomes. The framework and propositions of the work offer abundant potential for future research. Specifically, scholars may test this conceptual model with empirical experiments or data collected from the business field. Moreover, future research may also look at the boundary conditions of this model and identify underlying factors that may affect how online information valence serves as an antecedent to electronic customer relationships. For example, research may look at other attributes of eWOM, such as variance and contents of eWOM, which may impact RM differently. Secondly, because eWOM has a global impact, a single cultural context may have limited validity in cross-cultural or international business applications. Future research should examine the different roles eWOM plays in building and maintaining relationships across national cultures since the strength of eWOM in RM will probably be culturally related. For example, in countries that have a low level of rule-based governance, firms may rely more on consumer relationships to support their investments and enhance firm performance (Li and Filer, 2007). In these countries, eWOM may affect relational constructs differently. Thirdly, this study focuses on how eWOM affects a limited number of RM mediators; future research might focus on the effect of eWOM on more relational constructs to get an accurate picture of eWOM's role as an antecedent of RM.

Furthermore, the present study does not differentiate among different business contexts, which may have limited scope in terms of applicability. Prior research has shown that business contexts affect relationships (Zeithaml et al., 1985). For example, the effects of eWOM on a relationship are presumably different in B2B and B2C settings (Anderson and Weitz, 1989). Future research may extend the relationship to different types of businesses, such as B2B vs. B2C, products vs. services, and test the potential moderating effect of those business types on the relationship between eWOM valence and RM.

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