

**SOCIAL EWOM IN CONSUMERS' DECISION-
MAKING PROCESS AND THE EFFECT OF COVID-19
PANDEMIC ON CONSUMERS' SOCIAL MEDIA
BEHAVIOR**

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**Author Pinja Karjala
Discipline Marketing
Supervisor Heikki Karjaluoto**



JYVÄSKYLÄN YLIOPISTO

ABSTRACT

Author Pinja Karjala	
Title of thesis Social eWOM in consumers' decision-making process and the effect of COVID-19 pandemic on consumers' social media behavior	
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Abstract Social media is today an integral part of consumers' daily communication and, in addition, it is a valuable source of information. The influencing power of peer consumers has moved from the offline environment strongly to the online environment, including social media. The effectiveness of traditional word-of-mouth (WOM) and electronic WOM (eWOM) affecting consumers' purchase behavior is widely recognized. Social eWOM, an emerging concept concerning eWOM in social media has gained interest recently and is proposed as a separate concept from anonymous eWOM. However, conceptual knowledge about social eWOM is lacking and it is unclear how consumers utilize it to support their purchase decisions. Thus, this study investigates how consumers utilize social eWOM in their decision-making process. The aim of the study is to develop theoretical knowledge about the concept of social eWOM. In addition, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on consumers' social media behavior is examined. The research data consists of semistructured interviews in a retail context including 17 participants between the ages of 18 and 68. The main findings of the study reveal that consumers perceive social eWOM as a significant source of information supporting their decision-making. Social eWOM is utilized mostly in the information search- phase of the process. In addition, consumers seek inspiration from social eWOM and it can be the trigger of the need recognition or purchase intention. In addition to peer consumers, consumers perceive social media influencers as a significant source of social eWOM. However, the persuasive power of the influencer is affected by several factors including authenticity and transparency. During the COVID-19 pandemic, consumers have searched for more information about products and brands from social media. They have begun to follow more social media influencers when the hunger for new content has evoked because of the increased time spent on social media and declined content shared by peer consumers. The results suggest that social eWOM has a significant influencing power on consumers' purchase decisions and the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the significance of social media as an information source. These exceptional circumstances require companies to adapt to the changes in consumer behavior in order to maintain their profitability and competitive advantage.	
Keywords electronic word-of-mouth, social eWOM, social media, social networking sites, COVID-19 pandemic, consumer behavior	
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<p>Tiivistelmä</p> <p>Sosiaalinen media on tänä päivänä olennainen osa kuluttajien päivittäistä yhteydenpitoa ja lisäksi se toimii arvokkaana tiedonlähteenä. Kuluttajat ottavat vaikutteita toisilta kuluttajilta ja enenevässä määrin vaikutteille altistutaan offline ympäristön ohella online ympäristöissä, kuten sosiaalisessa mediassa. Toisten kuluttajien mielipiteillä on todettu olevan merkittävä vaikutus kuluttajien ostopäätöksiin ja sosiaalinen sähköinen suusanallinen viestintä (sosiaalinen eWOM) eli sosiaalisessa mediassa tapahtuva keskustelu tuotteista ja brändeistä on noussut esiin uutena käsitteenä, jolla on tunnistettu olevan merkittävästi anonyymista eWOM:sta poikkeavia ominaisuuksia. Tämä tutkimus tarkastelee sosiaalisen eWOM:in konseptia ja kuinka kuluttajat hyödyntävät sitä päätöksentekoprosessissaan. Lisäksi tutkimuksessa arvioidaan COVID-19 pandemian vaikutuksia kuluttajien sosiaalisen median käyttöön. Tutkimusaineisto kerättiin kvalitatiivisin menetelmin puolistrukturoiduilla haastatteluilla vähittäiskaupan kontekstissa. Aineisto sisälsi 17 haastattelua ja vastaajat olivat iältään 18-68 vuotiaita. Tämän tutkimuksen tulosten mukaan kuluttajat kokevat sosiaalisen median ja sosiaalisen eWOM:n merkittävinä tiedonlähteinä ostopäätösprosessissaan. Niitä hyödynnetään erityisesti tiedon etsintä- vaiheessa ja lisäksi sosiaalinen eWOM voi olla itse tarpeen tai ostohalun herättäjä. Toisten kuluttajien lisäksi, kuluttajat kokevat sosiaalisen median vaikuttajat merkittävänä sosiaalisen eWOM:n lähteenä. Sosiaalinen media ja sosiaalinen eWOM tiedonlähteenä on korostunut COVID-19 pandemian aikana. Kuluttajat ovat alkaneet seuraamaan enemmän sosiaalisen median vaikuttajia tyydyttääkseen kasvaneen sisällön kuluttamistarpeensa, jonka lisääntynyt sosiaalisessa mediassa vietetty aika ja samaan aikaan vähentynyt kuluttajien jakama sisältö ovat aiheuttaneet. Tutkimuksen tulosten pohjalta voidaan todeta, että sosiaalisella eWOM:lla on merkittävä vaikutus kuluttajien ostopäätöksiin ja COVID-19 pandemia on korostanut entisestään sosiaalisen median merkitystä tiedonlähteenä. Poikkeukselliset olosuhteet edellyttävät yrityksiltä mukautumista kuluttajien käyttäytymisessä tapahtuviin muutoksiin, jotta toiminta pystytään pitämään tehokkaana ja kilpailukykyisenä.</p>	
Asiasanat eWOM, sosiaalinen eWOM, COVID-19 pandemia, kuluttajakäyttäytyminen	
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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1. Research background

The power of traditional Word-of-Mouth (WOM) influencing the consumer decision-making process is widely known among researchers and marketing practitioners. The influencing power of WOM has recently become even more significant when the internet has become into play (e.g., Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004; Lee & Youn, 2009). According to SVT (2017a), 87% of people in Finland use the internet on daily basis. Internet users spend on average 144 minutes on social media per day and the most used social media worldwide is Facebook (Statista, 2020). A total of 55% of people in Finland use Facebook, a total of 33% use Instagram and 11% of people use Twitter (SVT, 2017b).

Hennig-Thurau, Malthouse, Friege, Gensler, Lobschat, Rangaswamy, & Skiera (2010) introduced the “pinball” framework of new media’s impact on customer relationships. According to this description, marketing has changed from one-way communication into a more complex framework where marketing communication consists of multiple bigger or smaller contacts with consumers. Most of these contacts where potential, actual, or former customer is somehow in contact with the company or a brand are not under a company’s control. (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010.) Taking into consideration the exponential growth in social media usage, a big part of these contacts between brands and consumers today take place on social media and these contacts are not always under the control of companies. For instance, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) communication. Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) define eWOM as "any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet." This is the most used eWOM definition in marketing and advertising literature. However, divergent definitions have been proposed and these will be discussed later in this paper.

Consumers’ decision making always includes some amount of risk associated. Internet-based platforms have created a possibility to reduce this risk because consumers have wide abilities today to gather product and firm related information from peer consumers to support their decision-making (Simonson & Rosen, 2014). Through the fast development of the internet, online content is accepted as one of the most used information sources in consumers’ product evaluation processes (Yoon, Polpanumas, & Park, 2017). Previous research has investigated several channels of eWOM communication, such as discussion forums (e.g., Cheung, Luo, Sia, & Chen, 2009), product review sites (e.g., Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006), blogs (e.g., Kozinets, De Valck, Wojnicki, & Wilner, 2010), and social media sites like Facebook (e.g., Teng, Khong, Chong, & Lin, 2017; Choi, Thoeni, & Kroff, 2018; Vermeer, Araujo, Bernritter, &

van Noort, 2019), Twitter (e.g., Barnes & Jacobsen, 2014; Kim, Yoon, & Choi, 2019), Instagram (e.g., De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017), and WeChat (e.g., Chu, Lien, & Cao, 2019). According to Kaplan & Haenlein (2010), social media is suggested to provide social support for its users but in addition also informational support. Kaplan & Haenlein (2010) have defined social media as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content”. It is noted that consumption-related peer communication in social media may significantly influence consumers’ attitudes towards a product (Wang, Yu, & Wei, 2012). According to Le, Do, Azizah, Dang, & Cheng (2018), comments about products in social media are considered as the most effective social media marketing tool. Product comments on social media are one type of social eWOM. Their effectiveness can be explained mainly by trustability and quality, which are identified as important elements of social eWOM messages (Le et al., 2018). The effectiveness of social media affecting consumers’ decision-making is widely recognized in the research literature and thus in this study, we focus on eWOM in social media platforms. eWOM in social media is a rather new research topic and therefore its concept has not yet been strongly established. However, some researchers in the field of marketing and advertising have proposed separate term to be used for eWOM in the context of social media. One term used is social eWOM. According to Pihlaja, Saarijärvi, Spence, & Yrjölä (2017), “Social eWOM applies to social media platforms in which membership is restricted and content providers are known to recipients. In relation to traditional eWOM platforms that post anonymous reviews, social eWOM has several unique characteristics: intended audience, information trustworthiness, source evaluation, and interpersonal relationships.” (Pihlaja, Saarijärvi, Spence, & Yrjölä, 2017). This study investigates the concept of social eWOM and its effect on consumers’ decision-making process. eWOM is communication among peer consumers without commercial interests (Brown, Broderick, & Lee, 2007). According to Brown et al. (2007), it is recognized as a more trustworthy source of information and it is found to have a greater influence on consumers’ product evaluation than marketer-generated content. In addition, the influence of eWOM in social media on consumers’ purchase intention is widely recognized in the literature (see e.g., Erkan & Evans, 2016; See-To & Ho, 2014; Colliander, Dahl’én, & Modig, 2015; Wang, Yu, & Wei, 2012).

1.2. Research objectives and problems

As Pihlaja et al. (2017) state, there is a research gap considering social eWOM and its effect on consumers’ decision-making process. Their study is a step forward to fill this gap. When anonymous eWOM has gained a wide interest in the research literature, social eWOM does not have yet an established view among researchers of the field. The Marketing Science Institute (MSI) has identified as a research priority the question of how consumers form platform and channels

preferences, and what is the right channel, right content, and right time to reach a customer. It is also stated that the co-creation of content with consumers needs further research (MSI 2020-2022 Research priorities). Existing research considering eWOM in social media is focused mainly on Twitter, Facebook, and WeChat (in China) as eWOM channels. Thus, evidence remains unclear whether differences exist between platforms and what is the significance of other social media platforms. Recent studies have recognized various effects in consumers' buying behavior caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Laato, Islam, Farooq, Dhir, 2020; Naeem, 2021; Prentice et al., 2020; Tran, 2021). In addition, significant changes have found in the use of social media during the pandemic situation (e.g., Donthu & Gustafsson, 2020; Naeem, 2021; Prentice et al., 2020; Sheth, 2020). Therefore, the effects of COVID-19 is relevant to take into consideration also in this study. The aim of this study is to expand knowledge on the concept of social eWOM and how consumers use it to support their decision-making process. In addition, we examine how the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced consumers' social media usage and how they utilize social media in their decision-making process. Thus, the following research questions are applied:

Primary research questions:

- *How do consumers utilize social eWOM in their decision-making process?*
- *What kind of social eWOM do consumers perceive useful as support for their purchase decisions?*

Secondary research questions:

- *Has the COVID-19 pandemic affected consumers' actions in social media?*
- *Has the COVID-19 pandemic affected how consumers utilize social media in their decision-making process?*

The theoretical background of this study was gathered based on a research literature review, which included mainly academic journal articles but also a few books. Research papers considering eWOM in social media take place on a timeline between 2009-2020. Thus, it can be stated that the topic is recent and though, relevant. The empirical research data of this study focused on the retail context. The research data was gathered by semistructured individual interviews, thus the study is conducted by qualitative methods. Structure, themes, and questions of the interview were composed based on the theoretical background. The research methodology used is described in more detail in section 4.

1.3. Research structure

This study consists of five separate chapters. The structure of the research is illustrated in the following figure (FIGURE 1).

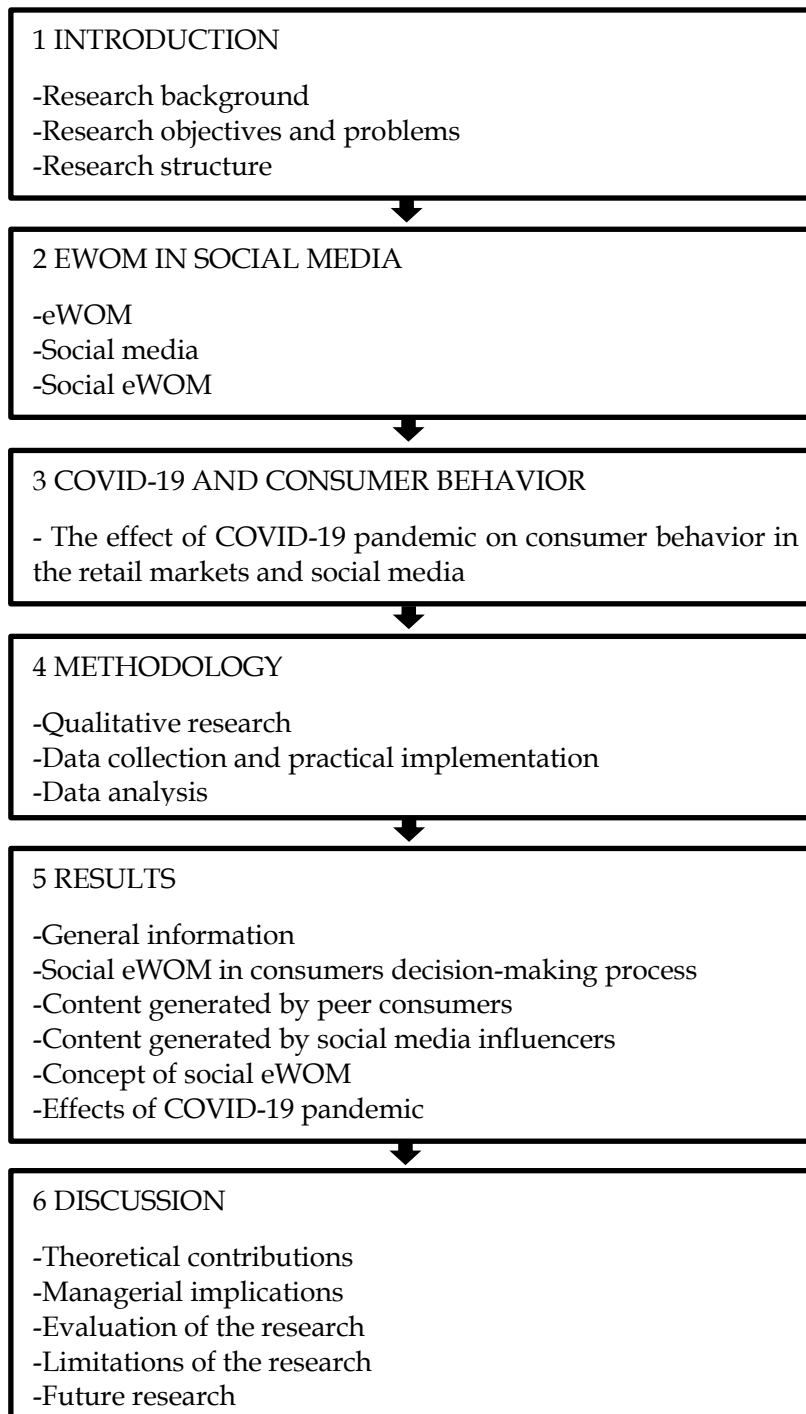


FIGURE 1 Structure of the study

After the introduction, the theoretical background will be discussed. The theoretical background includes the concepts of eWOM, social media, and social eWOM. Then in chapter 3, the effects of the COVID-19 are discussed. After that, the research methods of this study are described. Then the results from empirical data will be discussed and finally, in the discussion section, the theoretical and managerial implications, and limitations of the study as well as the evaluation of the reliability and validity of the study and the proposition for future research are discussed.

2 EWOM IN SOCIAL MEDIA

This chapter describes the theoretical background of the study. The concepts of eWOM, social media, and social eWOM are discussed. However, the main focus is on the literature of social eWOM.

2.1 eWOM

Although eWOM has gained wide attention in the field of marketing and advertising research, its concept is not fully established, and though a wide variety of terms concerning word-of-mouth in the online environment exist in the literature. For instance, Hansen, Kupfer, & Hennig-Thurau (2018) have used the term *digital word of mouth* in their paper. Azemi, Ozuem, & Howell (2020) and Yoon et al., (2017) talk about *online WOM*, which is used also in many other research papers. Breazeale (2009) mention *word of mouse* as one used term of eWOM. Pihlaja et al. (2017) have proposed the term *social eWOM* considering the eWOM in social media platforms. Also, in the context of social media as eWOM channel, Balaji, Khong, & Chong (2016) and Eisingerich, Chun, Liu, Jia, & Bell (2015) have used the term *sWOM* (WOM in social networking sites, WOM communication on online social sites like Facebook). In this paper, we focus on eWOM in social media and use the term social eWOM.

The concept of eWOM has a wide variety of definitions. Some of these definitions are presented in the following table (TABLE 1).

TABLE 1 Definitions of eWOM

Author(s)	Definition
Bronner & de Hoog (2011) (p.15)	" eWOM involves consumers' comments about products and services posted on the Internet"...in eWOM, recommendations are typically from unknown individuals with whom strong ties are lacking."
Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan (2008) (p. 461)	"all informal communications directed at consumers through Internet-based technology related to the usage or characteristics of particular goods and services, or their sellers"
Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) (p.39)	"any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet."
Thorson & Rodgers (2006) (p.40)	"positive or negative statements made about a product, company, or media personality that are made widely available via the Internet."
Chu & Kim (2018) (p.1-2)	"eWOM involves the behaviour of exchanging marketing information among consumers in online environments or via new technologies (e.g. mobile communication)."

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (continues)

Wang & Rodgers (2010) (p.214)	"any degree or combination of positive, negative, or neutral comments, recommendations, or any statements about companies, brands, products, or services discussed or shared among consumers in digital or electronic formats."
Wolny & Mueller (2013) (p.565)	"the definition of eWOM (by Hennig-Thurau, T., Gwinner, K. P., Walsh, G., & Gremler, D. D., 2004) is expanded to include non-textual communications, which can be observed by peers such as 'liking' a brand on Facebook or recommending ('retweeting') a story on Twitter, as well as ... product reviews and comments on social networks."
Kietzmann & Canhoto (2013) (p.146-147)	"any statement based on positive, neutral, or negative experiences made by potential, actual, or former consumers about a product, service, brand, or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet (through web sites, social networks, instant messages, news feeds...)."
Goldsmith (2006) (p.412)	"electronic word-of-mouth, or social communication on the Internet. Web surfers either transmitting or receiving product-related information online"
Xun & Reynolds (2010) (p.21)	"dynamic and ongoing information exchange process."

Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) have investigated the motives to engage traditional WOM and that can also be expected to be relevant for eWOM. They base their study on Sundaram et al. (1998) suggestion of eight motives for consumer WOM communication. Four of those motives explain positive WOM communication (i.e., altruism, product involvement, self-enhancement, and helping the company) and four of them motivate to engage in negative WOM communication (i.e., altruism, anxiety reduction, and advice-seeking). Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) represent empirical support for five motivations, which are a concern for other customers, extraversion/positive self-enhancement, social benefits, economic incentives, and (to a lesser extent), advice seeking. Based on these identified motives, they suggest that consumers divide into four different segments (i.e., self-interested helpers, multiple-motive consumers, consumer advocates, and true altruists). Although some consistency can be found between eWOM and WOM, eWOM differs from traditional WOM in several ways. King, Racherla, & Bush (2014) have identified six major characteristics that describe the nature of eWOM. These characteristics are: 1) *Enhanced volume*. Through the internet, it is possible to reach a vast amount of people within a short period of time. This enables eWOM to gain unprecedented volume and reach in comparison to traditional WOM. Though, a greater volume of WOM enables greater awareness which in turn tends to generate greater sales. 2) *Dispersion*. Platform dispersion is defined as "the extent to which product-related conversations are taking place across a broad range of communities" (Godes & Mayzlin, 2004). Dispersion has two major implications in the eWOM context. First, the nature of the platform may have an impact on the evolution of eWOM, and second, it causes difficulties for eWOM measurement. 3) *Persistence and observability*. eWOM is persistent and available for consumers to find when information is needed. eWOM enables influence between weak ties when in comparison in traditional WOM, the communication

occurs typically between strong-tie relationships. The effort to transmit eWOM is higher when people are busy and do not have time to write opinions on the internet. This leads to significant under-reporting. The textual nature of eWOM makes the content of the message and source characteristics salient in consumers' evaluations of source credibility and information usefulness. In addition, eWOM is a continuous process where existing eWOM has an influence on future eWOM. When eWOM has an impact on consumer purchase behavior it also is the outcome of consumer purchases. 4) *Anonymity and deception*. Anonymity on the internet may decrease the trust of consumers on eWOM. For example, the situations where sellers have manipulated online reviews. This kind of action reduces the credibility and informativeness of eWOM. 5) *Saliency of valence*. Valence of eWOM refers to a positive or negative rating. In product reviews, typically 1-5 or 1-7 Likert scales are used. 6) *Community engagement*. eWOM platforms enable firm-consumer-consumer relationships, where the most engaged customers engage again with other consumers. In these non-geographically bound consumer communities, people can share information and opinions but more importantly, learn from each other about the products/services. (King et al., 2014.) According to Filieri (2015), informational and normative influences of eWOM are in a key position when consumers assess the quality of products. Informational influence of eWOM is stronger than normative influence. However, Filieri (2015) found that normative influence exists also in the online environment even though other consumers are not physically present. High-quality customer reviews and crowd opinions are perceived as the most important factors when consumers seek information about the quality and performance of a product. Thus, when considering information diagnosticity in eWOM, information quality is the most important antecedent. Also, customer ratings and normative cues (overall product rankings) have a significant effect on information diagnosticity. (Filieri, 2015.)

2.2 Social media

As described in the introduction section of this study, Kaplan & Haenlein (2010) defined social media as a group of Internet-based applications that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content. Social media encompass a wide variety of internet-based platforms in which information can be shared (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). While some researchers have defined social media websites quite broadly, representing various forms of consumer-generated content such as blogs, virtual communities, wikis, and social networks (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010), Mangold & Faulds (2009) have divided social media channels into several groups including, for example, social networking sites (SNSs) (e.g., Facebook, MySpace, and Friendster), creativity works-sharing sites (e.g., YouTube and Flickr), and business networking sites (e.g., LinkedIn). Chu & Kim (2011) have added into the list a separate category for microblogging sites (e.g., Twitter). The definition of social media is quite broad and the variety of social media channels is enormous, therefore, this study focuses on social networking sites as a form of social media.

The terminology of social network sites has varied especially in the early stages of the phenomenon from “social networking sites,” and “online social networks,” to “social networks” (Ellison & Boyd, 2013). Boyd & Ellison (2008) defined social network sites as:

“web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.”

Social media and SNSs are sometimes in research literature used almost as synonyms (see e.g., Balaji et al., 2016). However, as can be noticed when looking at the definitions of social media and SNSs, the main distinctive factor is the network. A social networking site enables users to build a network in an online environment. In the research literature, contradictions exist about which social media channels can be defined as SNSs and which are something else. The most studied SNSs are Twitter and Facebook (see e.g., Balaji et al., 2016; Fariás, 2017; Kim et al., 2019). Then again, for instance, Chu & Kim (2011) have identified Twitter as a microblogging site and Mousavi, Chen, Kim, & Chen (2020) define microblogging sites (e.g., Facebook and Twitter) as a subcategory of online social networks. On microblogging sites, users can create short texts with pictures and videos included (status updates and tweets) to express themselves (Mousavi et al., 2020). Balaji et al. (2016) have also defined Google+, Hangout, LinkedIn, and Fariás (2017) Instagram as SNSs. Chu & Kim (2011) have studied MySpace and Friendster as SNSs. Phua (2019) has identified Pinterest and Wiese & Akareem (2020) Snapchat as SNSs. According to Teng et al. (2017), Qzone, Tencent Weibo, Sina Weibo, and WeChat are the top four SNSs in China. Kim, Yoon, & Choi (2019) have named also blogs, forums, and news as SNSs which is a quite divergent definition compared to other research literature. Amezcua & Quintanilla (2016) on the other hand, classify also YouTube as SNS. As it can be noticed when examining the concept of social media and SNSs in marketing, advertising, and IT literature, somewhat inconsistency exists. While some researchers include a wide variety of social media channels under the concept of SNSs (e.g., Kim et al., 2019), some have divided social media channels into even more specific subcategories (e.g., Mangold & Faulds, 2009).

Facebook is the most studied social media because of its enormous amount of users. Facebook is also widely recognized as SNS (e.g., Balaji et al., 2016; Teng et al., 2017; Chu & Kim, 2011; See-To & Ho, 2014; Vargo, Gangadharbatla, & Hopp, 2019; Amezcua & Quintanilla, 2016; Wade, Julie, Philip, Roth, Thatcher, & Dinger, 2020). Twitter has gained also wide interest in the research literature and it is recognized as SNS (e.g., Balaji et al., 2016; Fariás, 2017; Vargo et al., 2019; Amezcua & Quintanilla, 2016; Mousavi et al., 2020). LinkedIn is recognized as a significant social media and especially in the B2B sector. Mangold and Faulds (2019) have identified LinkedIn as a business networking site which is a rather specific categorization. Typically LinkedIn is categorized as SNS (e.g., Balaji et al., 2016; Chu & Kim, 2011; Wiese & Akareem, 2020; Wade et al., 2020). Instagram is

identified as social media widely in the research literature and as SNS in some studies (e.g., Mousavi et al., 2020; Wiese & Akareem, 2020; Fariás, 2017). However, some (e.g., Abeza, O'Reilly, Finch, Séguin, & Nadeau, 2020) have defined Instagram as a content-sharing site. Instagram is one of the most used social media platforms among younger adults as is also Snapchat. Snapchat is a rather new social media but it has already gained attention in the research literature. For instance, Mousavi et al. (2020) and Wiese & Akareem (2020) have identified Snapchat as SNS. Besides Snapchat, also Pinterest is included in the literature as a social media platform. In some studies (e.g., Abeza et al., 2020), Pinterest is recognized as a content-sharing site but for example, Phua (2019) defines Pinterest as SNS. However, in the research literature, Pinterest is widely recognized as social media (e.g., Voorveld, van Noort, Muntinga, & Bronner, 2018). Besides the channels described above, Google+, Hangout, and Friendster are also identified as social networking sites in the research literature (e.g., Balaji et al., 2016; Chu & Kim, 2011; Mangold & Faulds, 2009), however, they are not widely used in Finland. YouTube is typically in the research literature defined as social media, but somewhat inconsistent categorization also exist. For example, Abeza et al. (2020) include YouTube in content-sharing sites and Liu, Zhang, Susarla, & Padman (2020) identify YouTube as a video-sharing social media platform. See-To & Ho (2014) have referred to Constantinides' and Fountain's (2008) suggestion of classifying social media like YouTube as a content community. Even if YouTube cannot be defined as a social networking site it is still widely recognized as social media. Tao, Wei, Wang, He, Huang, & Chua (2020) have defined one of the most recent social media, TikTok also as a content sharing platform. TikTok is a less social network and more entertainment platform like YouTube, where users enjoy the content, which is produced by users who they might know or might not know (Haenlein, Anadol, Farnsworth, Hugo, Hunichen, & Welte, 2020).

2.3 Social eWOM

For the purpose of this study, a literature review was made gathering literature considering eWOM specifically in social media. When eWOM is recognized as a significant research topic from the beginning of the century, social media as eWOM communication channel has been under the wide interest of researchers only in the last five years. However, this is understandable when social media is quite recent technological innovation, and the development of new and existing platforms is continuous and fast.

2.3.1 Social eWOM as a concept

Despite the wide attention eWOM has gained in the research literature, there is a lack of evidence on how consumers utilize social networks (social eWOM) in their decision-making process (Pihlaja et al., 2017). Le et al. (2018) suggest that consumers might seek and share product information from WOM in social media

rather than from firms' websites. Compared to traditional WOM, social WOM (sWOM) is more sensitive to self-enhancement motives and social risk perceptions (Eisingerich et al., 2015). According to Balaji et al. (2016), social eWOM differs significantly from WOM and eWOM in terms of anonymity, social risk, confidentiality, and geographical and spatial freedom. Pihlaja et al. (2017) propose that social eWOM and anonymous eWOM are different forms of eWOM from the consumers' point of view. They see eWOM as a continuum, where on the other end is anonymous eWOM (online reviews) and on the other is social eWOM (content generated by known sources inside the consumers' own social networks). Liang, Ho, Li, & Turban (2011) have suggested that there should be different terms for different forms of eWOM (anonymous and social eWOM). While research considering the effects and drivers of social eWOM exist, social eWOM as a concept itself has not yet a widely recognized definition.

TABLE 2 Comparison between WOM, eWOM and social eWOM (adapted from Balaji et al., 2016)

	WOM	eWOM	Social eWOM
Channel	Typically face-to-face, oral communication	Various online platforms	Social media platforms
Mode	One-to-one communication Simultaneous communication	One-to-one and one-to-many Simultaneous and non-simultaneous	One-to-one and one-to-many Mostly non-simultaneous
Receivers	Individuals	Individuals, small groups and public	Individuals, social networks and public
Senders	Identifiable and accountable	Mostly unidentifiable, sometimes identifiable	Identifiable and accountable
Scope	Geographical and temporal constraints	Limited geographical and temporal constraints	Limited geographical and temporal constraints
Connection between the receivers and senders	Strong ties	Strong or weak ties	Combination of strong and weak ties
Risk associated	Low social risk	Low social risk	Higher social risk
Speed of diffusion	Slow	Fast	Fast

As presented in the table above, several differences exist between WOM, eWOM, and social eWOM. According to Balaji et al. (2016), social eWOM takes place in social media platforms and can be one-to-one communication but usually happens to be one-to-many communication. Social eWOM is mostly non-simultaneous communication. The messages take place in internet-based platforms where the communication may happen in real-time, but when the messages stay on a platform persistent, receivers may find it when they need the information. Receivers of the social eWOM can be individuals, a social network or the message may be public. Typically eWOM messages take place in a social network and thus the individuals inside the network are the receivers. However, some social media platforms have features, which enable communication with separate individuals. In some social media platforms, the content is open to the public, even though the reader is not part of the network (i.e., registered user of the platform). Social

eWOM has limited geographical and temporal constraints, which enables it to spread fast and globally. The connection between the receivers and senders of social eWOM is a combination of strong and weak ties. Social eWOM has a higher social risk associated than WOM and eWOM does, and the social risk associated has a significant effect on consumers' intention to engage in social eWOM. (Balaji et al., 2016.) According to Eisingerich et al. (2015), sWOM (WOM in online social sites like Facebook) is communication through a written word, which though is not the fact in today's social media channels where pictures and videos are used in continuously growing volume. Different forms of social eWOM will be discussed in more detail later in this study. Pihlaja et al. (2017) have identified four dimensions which determine social eWOM. These characteristics separate social eWOM from anonymous eWOM.

Four dimensions of social eWOM by Pihlaja et al. (2017):

1. Intended audience

Nonpublic audience, which is limited and known to the sender. When the audience is limited, privacy is higher. Limited membership of the audience excludes the opinions of unknown senders and thus facilitates information search.

2. Information trustworthiness

Information from known senders is considered more reliable. Authentic and not false information enables better decision making.

3. Evaluation of source

Information shared is prioritized. The receiver evaluates the benefits holistically. In terms of source, strength of the relationship matters. In the context of social eWOM, relationship ties are rather strong than weak. The receiver knows the source and their level of experience. The value of the information can be weighted by considering the background of the content provider.

4. Interpersonal relationships

Communication is social interaction, building social connections, not just decision-making. Continuous comparison and competition within the social network. Perception of self as a part of the network.

As it can be noticed, some inconsistency exists in the characteristics of social eWOM by Pihlaja et al. (2017) and Balaji et al. (2016). For instance, Pihlaja et al. (2017) state that social eWOM has an intended, nonpublic audience when Balaji et al. (2016) suggest that social eWOM may be also public. This refers to that Balaji et al. (2016) include social media platforms more widely as a channel of social eWOM communication when Pihlaja et al. (2017) in their definition include only social network sites, where membership is restricted and thus the audience is

nonpublic. Pihlaja et al. (2017) suggest as a definition of social eWOM the following:

“informal, interpersonal communications within a restricted social network related to the usage or characteristics of particular goods and services or their sellers that is deemed more trustworthy by recipients than anonymous postings, serves to develop interpersonal relationships, and is provided in a context in which the receiver knows the content provider, and thus can better interpret or weigh the information given knowledge about the content provider.”

2.3.2 Effects of social eWOM

eWOM and WOM are widely known to have a significant effect on consumers' purchase intention. Also in the literature of eWOM in social media, direct and indirect effect on purchase intention is found in several studies (see e.g., Chu, Chen, & Sung, 2016; Colliander, Dahlén, & Modig, 2015; Erkan & Evans, 2016; See-To & Ho, 2014; Jin & Phua, 2014). Erkan & Evans (2016) have utilized the Information adoption model (IAM) and Theory of reasoned action (TRA) combined to investigate the effect of eWOM in social media on consumer purchase intention. They suggest that information quality, information credibility, information usefulness and adoption of information, need of information, and attitude towards information are the key factors of eWOM in social media that influence consumers' purchase intentions (Erkan & Evans, 2016). According to See-To & Ho (2014), eWOM in social media has a direct impact on consumers' purchase intention and in addition an indirect impact on purchase intention moderated by a trust on the underlying product. Message source in the SNSs is also seen to have a moderating effect on the influence of eWOM on consumers' trust on a product, value co-creation, and purchase intention (See-To & Ho, 2014). Colliander et al. (2015) argue, that dialogue in social media between a brand or a company and consumers enhances brand attitude and purchase intention but one-way communication only from the company's side does not. Increased perceived expense and perceived caring signaled by a company using dialogue explain this effect at least to some degree (Colliander et al., 2015). In addition, Chu et al. (2016) suggest that intention to follow a brand on Twitter has a direct positive effect on purchase intention. Jin & Phua (2014) have investigated the influence of eWOM communicated by celebrity endorsers on Twitter. They found that the higher the number of followers of a celebrity, the higher is the source credibility perceived by consumers. In addition, consumers have a higher intention to build an online friendship (i.e., follow them) with a celebrity who has a higher number of followers rather than with a celebrity who has a low number of followers. Jin & Phua (2014) also found a two-way interaction between the valence of brand tweets (social eWOM) and the number of followers. Consumers who were in the study exposed to positive tweets by a celebrity with a higher number of followers found to express significantly higher product involvement and purchase intention. It was also found that consumers who identified themselves to a greater extent with the celebrity endorses were more strongly influenced by the celebrity (Jin & Phua, 2014). Even though the effect of social eWOM on purchase

intention is found to exist, based on empirical findings Erkan & Evans (2018) argue that anonymous reviews on shopping websites would have a stronger influence on consumers' purchase intention than friends' recommendations on social media has. They propose, that this difference could be explained by factors of information quantity, information readiness, detailed information, and dedicated information. Teng et al. (2017) investigated the social networking site (SNS) use of Malaysian and Chinese consumers. Based on their findings, SNSs are the first choice of Malaysian and Chinese consumers' as an information source when searching for information about studying abroad. Argument quality is found as the most significant factor of persuasive eWOM messages. Teng et al. (2017) see argument quality as the extent to which the informational message of the argument does convince the receiver and what is the persuasive power of the argument.

The effect of eWOM on its sender is also recognized in the literature. According to Kim, Naylor, Sivadas, & Sugumaran (2016), providing recommendations in social media can change the communicator's own attitude. It is likely, that the communicator remembers the recommendation and may also refresh his/her attitude afterward by using the memory trace (Kim et al., 2016).

Besides the effects of social eWOM on consumer behavior, the relationship of social eWOM, brand relationships, and other brand outcomes can be identified as one topic category in social eWOM literature, when considering the effects of social eWOM. According to Eelen, Östuran, & Verlegh (2017), brand loyalty has a stronger effect on spreading in-person WOM than eWOM. However, loyal consumers are willing to engage in eWOM (in social media) if they are motivated to signal their identity through a brand. That is if they have a high self-brand connection. In addition, a willingness to help a brand is also found to be a strong motive for loyal consumers to engage in eWOM. (Eelen et al., 2017.) Hudson, Huang, Roth, & Madden (2016) have investigated social media's effect on customer-brand relationships. Empirical findings of their study suggest that consumers who engage with brands in social media platforms tend to have stronger and higher quality brand relationships compared to those consumers who do not engage with their favorite brands through social media. The effect is more significant if the consumers have high uncertainty avoidance and if the brand is highly anthropomorphized. (Hudson et al., 2016.) According to Hansen, Kupfer, & Hennig-Thurau (2018), social media firestorms create negative brand associations and the effect is stronger when they are initiated by a vivid trigger (e.g., a video), linked to a product or service failure, include a large volume of social media messages, and when the firestorm lasts longer. Social media firestorms are found to have both short-term and long-term effects on brands and thus they do have significant opportunities to harm businesses (Hansen et al., 2018).

When WOM and eWOM have been found to have a strong effect on sales, also the effect of social eWOM on sales and other outcomes for a company is studied and found. According to Rosario, Valck, & Bijmolt (2016), eWOM in social media does positively affect sales, but its effectiveness differs across the platform, product, and metric factors. For instance, the effect of eWOM is stronger when a receiver has the ability to assess his/her own similarity with the eWOM

sender. In addition, eWOM is found to have a stronger effect on sales for tangible goods that are new to the market. eWOM volume and valence both have an impact on sales but the impact of the volume is stronger. However, negative eWOM does not always have a straightforward negative effect on sales but high variability in eWOM does. (Rosario et al., 2016.) Pauwels, Aksehirli, & Lackman (2016) have investigated the relationship between eWOM in social media, other marketing communication actions, and company performance. They found brand-related eWOM and neutral eWOM about purchasing at the retailer as more effective compared to advertising-related eWOM when considering the influence of eWOM on offline store traffic lift. Paid search was found to show the highest elasticity in stimulating online conversations (social eWOM). They also found that in the case of the studied retailer, eWOM and organic search together yields indirectly over a third of the offline store traffic. Viglia, Minazzi, & Buhalis (2016) investigated the effect of online reviews and their various aspects on hotel occupancy rates. The review score was found to have the highest impact. According to their findings, a one-point increase in the review score increased the occupancy rate by 7.5 percentage points. A number of reviews were also found to have a positive effect, but with decreasing returns. That is, the higher the number of reviews (eWOM volume) the lower the profitable effect on occupancy rates. (Viglia et al., 2016.) As always in marketing, measuring and analyzing actions and results is critical. Barnes & Jacobsen (2014) have investigated the social media monitoring behavior of a company. They suggest that social media monitoring behavior may be related to how involved a company is in social media. For instance, do they have a written social media policy, goals related to a social media plan, and do they use tracking measures, etc.? (Barnes & Jacobsen, 2014). Vermeer et al. (2019) have investigated techniques to find response-worthy eWOM from social media based on its content. The results of their study demonstrate that machine learning techniques show high accuracy and thus are suitable for detecting relevant eWOM on social media.

2.3.3 Drivers of social eWOM

There are several drivers of social eWOM identified in the literature. Various factors motivate consumers to engage in social eWOM and different behavior patterns are studied. Vargo et al. (2019) have studied eWOM sentiment in SNSs (Facebook and Twitter). They found the majority of eWOM to be positive and that eWOM mirrors a consumer's non-eWOM sentiment valence across SNSs. Whiting, Williams, & Hair (2019) conducted a qualitative study and found six motives to engage positive eWOM in social media and six motives to engage negative eWOM in social media. Motives to engage in positive eWOM were help company, help employees, altruism, express positive feelings, product involvement, and self-enhancement. And the six motives to negative eWOM were altruism, resolution seeking, express negative feelings, vengeance, want to be heard by organization, and help company make changes. (Whiting et al., 2019.) Chu et al. (2016) have investigated what affects intention to follow brands on Twitter. They suggest that attitude toward brand following, subjective norm, perceived

behavioral control, and brand attachment affect the consumers' intention to follow brands on Twitter. And the intention to follow the brand on Twitter has a direct influence on the intention to create and disseminate brand-related information (Chu et al., 2016). Then again, Haikel-Elsabeh, Zhao, Ivens, & Brem (2019) found that the Facebook activity of active users has a positive effect on brand content sharing and brand engagement of both, active and non-active Facebook users has a positive effect on brand content sharing. Wolny & Mueller (2013) suggest that high brand commitment is one motive to engage eWOM. Farías (2017) has investigated eWOM behavior in SNSs in Chile and the empirical results of his study show that tie strength, normative influence, informational influence, self-presentation, and voluntary self-disclosure all have a positive direct influence on eWOM behavior. In addition, homophily was found to have an indirect positive effect on eWOM behavior through tie strength, normative influence, informational influence, and self-presentation. And, trust affects indirectly eWOM behavior through tie strength, normative influence, and voluntary self-disclosure. (Farías, 2017.) According to Chu & Kim (2011), tie strength, trust, normative influence, and informational influence have a positive effect on consumers' overall eWOM behavior (in social media). Then again, homophily is found to have a negative effect on eWOM behavior (Chu & Kim, 2011). Chu et al. (2019) investigated Chinese travelers' engagement with WeChat. They found that the need for self-enhancement has a positive effect on eWOM engagement (in WeChat). Dedication towards the eWOM channels has a direct influence on intention to engage eWOM. In addition, a dedication was also found to mediate the influence of consumers' need for self-enhancement on eWOM intention (Chu et al., 2019). Eisingerich et al. (2015) argue that consumers are less willing to engage in social eWOM than traditional WOM. The difference can be explained by perceived social risk. However, consumers' need to self-enhance may lessen the difference between the desire to engage social eWOM and WOM. (Eisingerich et al., 2015.) Wolny & Mueller (2013) have investigated eWOM engagement in the fashion industry. In their study, high fashion involvement is recognized as a motive to engage eWOM. In addition, consumers who have a high product involvement and need for social interaction are found to engage eWOM considering fashion brands more frequently than those consumers who are not motivated by these factors (Wolny & Mueller, 2013). Munar & Jacobsen (2013) investigated the information search and eWOM intentions of travelers. They found that especially older people still trust more on websites controlled by tourism organizations as an information source when searching for information related to traveling than social media. Even older adults share their holiday memories in social media, but not in "real-time". They like to post their experiences on social media afterward when the holiday is over. (Munar & Jacobsen, 2013.) Munar & Jacobsen (2013) have divided eWOM utilizers to "lurkers" who are interested in gathering information from social media but are not willing to engage by producing any content themselves and to "posters" who are engaged to produce content on social media by themselves. According to Munar & Jacobsen's findings, trustworthiness is a more important factor to "lurkers". Jin & Phua (2014) found that consumers who were exposed to negative tweets by a celebrity endorser with a low number of

followers expressed significantly higher intention to spread eWOM. Jin & Phua (2014) explain the effectiveness of Twitter as a channel of eWOM by that the “following” of people creates personal relationships and these relationships with celebrities may then have a significant effect on eWOM behavior when consumers may have a high intention to build online friendships with celebrities.

2.3.4 Forms of social eWOM

Social eWOM may occur in different formats like video, text, or pictures, or as a combination of these and the forms may vary between different platforms of social eWOM. Jansen, Zhang, Sobel, & Chowdury (2009) have investigated tweets as a form of eWOM. They found that the structure of tweets is quite similar to the linguistic patterns of natural language expressions. Hoffman & Daugherty (2013) studied whether image-based eWOM is effective in all situations and the findings suggest that images are not the best option in every condition. For instance, image-based elements were found to be effective in the situation of non-luxury restaurant reviews, but in the situation of luxury restaurant reviews, research participants paid more attention to textual elements rather than pictures. (Hoffman & Daugherty, 2013). Social eWOM may also have different kinds of sentiments. Amezcua & Quintanilla (2016) have found three forms of cynical consumers (eWOM) communication styles on SNSs and these were; skeptical, passive-aggressive, and warrior eWOM. Sometimes eWOM may culminate as social media firestorm and this kind of spectacular gathering of eWOM may be detrimental to brands and companies (Hansen et al., 2018). According to Hansen et al. (2018), social media firestorm is the most impactful if there is a vivid trigger attached in the first firestorm message (e.g., a video).

While many of the eWOM research papers consider eWOM as recommendations and thus as positive eWOM, though a few papers focus on investigating negative eWOM as a separate concept. For instance, Balaji et al. (2016) have suggested a feeling of injustice, firm attribution, firm image, face concern, reappraisal, use intensity (of SNS) and tie strength as key antecedents of negative eWOM communication in social networking platforms. In addition, in a recent study by Azemi et al. (2020) the authors investigated negative eWOM through frustration-aggression theory and formulated a three-fold negative eWOM (nWOM) typology, which divides negative eWOM into lenient, moderate, and severe negative eWOM. They also recognized three online customer types; tolerable, rigorous and, confrontational negative eWOM customers. Their model strives to describe how customers’ frustration-aggression tags reflect their decision-making and how their actions affect companies.

2.3.5 Social media influencers

As already mentioned earlier in this paper, social media allows producing and sharing of user-generated content. When a user gains a high number of engaged followers, he/she may become a social media influencer (Audrezet, Kerviler, & Moulard, 2020; Li & Du, 2017). A social media influencer is someone who creates

content on social media in exchange for compensation from a company (Campbell & Grimm, 2019). A company can offer as compensation either money or free products, services, trips, or experiences (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Social media influencers can share content that includes expressions of their opinions about products or services, tips on product usage, and text, pictures, or videos containing products or services (Bernritter, Verlegh, & Smit, 2016). Thus, social media influencers are separate from celebrity endorsers. Social media influencers have become popular through their presence in social media, not from some other aspects like music career, acting, or sports. According to Audrezet et al. (2020), social media influencers have often expertise in their own field (i.e. fashion) or they have some special passion about which they then produce and share content. Influencers are a complement to traditional branding communication. The content shared by social media influencers is user-generated and therefore consumers may perceive it as more real and authentic. Thus, influencers are attractive to brands and marketers. (Audrezet et al., 2020.) Audrezet et al. (2020) describe influencer marketing as a form of product placement. Then again, for example, De Veirman et al. (2017) interpret endorsements made by social media influencers as highly credible eWOM rather than paid advertising. Despite the effectiveness of social media influencers, Audrezet et al. (2020) note that influencer marketing includes the risk that consumers perceive that the influencer is “hiding” an advertisement. It may often be unclear to consumers, that which extent the content is under the influencer’s control. This creates ambiguity about what is paid advertising and what is for example own opinions of the influencer. To avoid such a lack of knowledge, more strict regulations have been established and today influencers are required to disclose when content is produced in cooperation with a company. (Audrezet et al., 2020.)

Djafarova & Rushworth (2016) have found that consumers perceive eWOM communicated by social media influencers as more significant than eWOM communicated by traditional celebrities. Participants of their study perceived social media influencers as more credible and felt that they are able to relate to them. In addition, Djafarova & Rushworth (2017) note that female users of Instagram prefer influencers who share positive images and provide encouraging reviews. Jiménez-Castillo & Sánchez-Fernández (2019) have studied the effectiveness of social media influencers on recommending brands via eWOM and they found that social media influencers have an effect on expected value and behavioral intention regarding the recommended brands. Brand engagement raises the brand's expected value and both of these affect the intention to purchase recommended brands (Jiménez-Castillo & Sánchez-Fernández, 2019).

De Veirman et al. (2017) have found that the number of followers of Instagram influencers has a significant effect on consumers’ perceptions about influencers’ likeability and thus, popularity. Consumers perceive influencers with a higher number of followers as more likeable. This is partly explained by that they are then considered as more popular. Popularity does not, however, directly stand for opinion leadership. (De Veirman et al., 2017.) On the other hand, Tafesse & Wood (2021), have found that follower count and follower engagement have a negative relationship. When the influencer gains a large number of

followers, he/she turns to be perceived more as a traditional celebrity and a consumer may perceive the tie strength to weaken and therefore the engagement may diminish (Tafesse & Wood, 2021). According to De Veirman et al. (2017), an influencer is perceived as less likeable if he/she him-/herself follows only a few numbers of accounts. Then again Tafesse & Wood (2021) have found that the followee count of the influencer describes the extent to which the influencer seeks information, trends, and, for example, opinions from other social media users. De Veirman et al. (2017) also note that when searching for an influencer as a brand's promotor, a high number of followers is not always the best criteria. More important is to consider what kind of audiences a possible influencer could reach. Choosing only the most popular influencers can negatively affect brand attitudes if the brand's perceived uniqueness then suffers. (De Veirman et al., 2017.) Tafesse & Wood (2021) have also found that content volume may interfere the follower engagement. If an influencer shares a high volume of content, it might harm the influencers' creativity and originality. (Tafesse & Wood, 2021.) They also found a negative relationship between influencers' follower count and domains of interest. That is if an influencer has a high number of followers and diverse interests a follower might feel the tie strength to weaken, which affects a feeling of disconnection and thus harms the engagement. However, it is found that influencers with diverse interests can create higher engagement by sharing a higher volume of content. (Tafesse & Wood, 2021.)

It is clear that social media influencers have a significant effect on consumers. Nonetheless, it remains unclear when the content shared by a social media influencer can be defined as eWOM. As noted, some researchers (see e.g., Audrezet et al., 2020) define influencer marketing as a form of product placement when some (see e.g., De Veirman et al., 2017; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2016; Jiménez-Castillo & Sánchez-Fernández, 2019) interpret the product information communicated by social media influencer as eWOM. Audrezet et al. (2020) note that the content shared by social media influencers may be controlled either entirely or at some level by the marketer. In this kind of situation, the content is not entirely user-generated and thus cannot be unambiguously defined as eWOM. Then again, in some situations, social media influencers share their actual opinions and feelings about products in social media and this kind of content can be defined as social eWOM. However, as Audrezet et al. (2020) note, it is often unclear for consumers to which extent the content shared by an influencer is under his/her own control and this creates a challenge for consumers and also research aiming to investigate the effects of social eWOM communicated by social media influencers.

2.3.6 Summary of eWOM literature

A majority of social eWOM literature takes place in the tourism industry (e.g., Viglia et al., 2016; Munar & Jacobsen, 2013; Cantallops & Salvi, 2014). Only a few studies from the retail context exist (e.g., Pauwels et al., 2016). Besides the narrow industrial view, the research has focused on only a few channels as social eWOM platforms. Even though there is a wide variety of social media channels and new

ones are continuously developed, research considering social eWOM is focused mainly on the biggest SNSs (i.e., Twitter, Facebook, and WeChat (in China)) leaving the other channels (i.e., Instagram) for a low interest despite their wide usage. Furthermore, there are only a few studies in the research literature that investigate the concept of social eWOM separate from eWOM. Literature review made for the purpose of this study has shown that several studies exist investigating eWOM in social media including its effect on consumer behavior, company and brand outcomes, motives to engage in eWOM, and different forms of eWOM. In addition, social media influencers have gained wide interest as a research topic, however, influencers as a source of social eWOM are lacking in the extant research literature. These studies investigate eWOM in a different context compared to anonymous eWOM, which takes place, for instance, in discussion forums, product review sites, and company websites. Nonetheless, this divergent context is not fully covered in the studies and thus the concept of social eWOM remains unclear. The social eWOM research literature is summarized below, based on the four characteristic factors of social eWOM by Pihlaja et al. (2017).

Intended audience

According to Pihlaja et al. (2017), in social eWOM differently from eWOM the audience is nonpublic and limited to the social eWOM communicator. This enables higher privacy. Limited membership of the audience (social network) also leaves unknown communicators and their opinions outside and thus eases the consumers' information search. (Pihlaja et al., 2017.) Social media platforms as eWOM channels also provide companies a segmented platform to reach targeted audiences through encouraging eWOM communication (Chu & Kim, 2011). However, the extent of the audience varies across different social media platforms. If the social eWOM communication takes place on SNS like Facebook, the message is available only for a communicator's own social network. Whereas social eWOM communication in a content-sharing site like YouTube is more public and therefore the audience cannot be strictly limited. As mentioned before, Balaji et al. (2016) divergent from Pihlaja et al. (2017) note that the audience of social eWOM can be nonpublic (social networks) but also public. Thus, Balaji's et al. (2016) definition includes more wide range of social media channels as a platform of social eWOM.

Information trustworthiness

In the literature, trust is recognized as a significant factor of social eWOM. Chu & Kim (2011) note that consumers themselves have selected the individuals into their own social network in SNSs and this may promote the source credibility and trust between individuals. Consumers perceive the information coming from their own social network as more trustworthy (Pihlaja et al., 2017). Chu & Kim (2011) found that trust has a positive influence on consumers' overall social eWOM behavior and Fariás (2017) found that trust has an indirect influence through tie strength, normative influence, and voluntary self-disclosure on eWOM behavior. Munar & Jacobsen (2013) argue that trustworthiness is relevant especially for those users who search for information from social media but do

not share (eWOM) content themselves. In addition, information quality, information credibility, information usefulness, adoption of information, needs of information, and attitude towards information are found to be the key factors of social eWOM that influence purchase intentions (Erkan & Evans, 2016).

Evaluation of source

The influence of homophily has been under investigation in several studies concerning eWOM in social media. Rogers (1983) defines homophily as “the degree to which pairs of individuals who interact are similar in certain attributes, such as beliefs, education, social status, and the like.” Steffes & Burgee (2009) added into this definition also the attributes of age and gender. The results of the relationship between homophily and social eWOM are to some extent inconsistent. Chu & Kim (2011) have found a negative relationship between homophily and eWOM behavior and Farías (2017) has found that homophily has an indirect positive influence on eWOM through tie strength, normative influence, informational influence, and self-presentation. Rosario et al. (2016) have also investigated the influence of homophily, on companies’ point of view but did not find any effect between homophily details and the effectiveness of eWOM on sales. According to Pihlaja et al. (2017), source evaluation allows consumers to adjust how much they place weight on the information (social eWOM) on the basis of the information source. This is not possible in the context of anonymous eWOM, where the source is not known for the receiver and thus cannot be evaluated.

Interpersonal relationships

Tie strength is positively associated with consumers’ eWOM behavior in social media (Chu & Kim, 2011; Farías, 2017). According to Mittal, Huppertz, & Khare (2008), tie strength refers to “the potency of the bond between members of a network”. Chu & Kim (2011) found that tie strength (how close and important a consumer feels to the source of information) has a significant effect on consumer’s intention to seek and also on intention to pass information in social media. Tie strength is also recognized as a key antecedent of negative social eWOM (Balaji et al., 2016). Farías (2017) have found that self-presentation and voluntary self-disclosure have a positive effect on social eWOM behavior. In addition, self-enhancement is found to play as a motive to engage social eWOM (e.g., Chu et al., 2019; Whiting et al., 2019). According to Eisingerich et al. (2015), consumers are less willing to engage in social eWOM than WOM because of the social risk associated. However, they suggest that consumers’ need to self-enhance may lessen this difference. Pihlaja et al. (2017) note that social eWOM drives social interactions. It enables consumers to build an understanding of one’s own social network (Pihlaja et al. 2017). When anonymous eWOM is one-way communication and rather passive, social eWOM allows two-way dialogue (Pihlaja et al., 2017) and dialogue on social media is found to have an influence on brand attitude and purchase intention (Colliander et al., 2015).

3 COVID-19 AND CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

The novel coronavirus, COVID-19 has affected consumer behavior in several ways. The effects are recognized specifically beginning from March 2020, when the COVID-19 escalated to a pandemic. This chapter will discuss the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on consumer buying behavior in the retail context and consumers' social media usage.

3.1 The effect of COVID-19 pandemic on consumer behavior in the retail markets and social media

As Prentice, Chen, & Stantic (2020) note, the COVID-19 pandemic that began from Wuhan, China in December 2019 has significantly changed our world. The effects extend from individuals to businesses, industries, and countries. Several measures have been taken around the world to prevent the spread of infections including lockdowns, travel restrictions, quarantines, and social distancing. (Prentice et al., 2020.) Recent studies have recognized various effects in consumers' buying behavior in retail markets caused by the worldwide pandemic (e.g., Laato, Islam, Farooq, Dhir, 2020; Naeem, 2021; Prentice et al., 2020; Tran, 2021). In addition, there have been recognizable changes in the use of social media (e.g., Donthu & Gustafsson, 2020; Naeem, 2021; Prentice et al., 2020; Sheth, 2020).

As Sheth (2020) state, consumption is habitual but also contextual. Besides the social, technological, and rules and regulations, also ad-hoc natural disasters such as global pandemics including the COVID-19 pandemic are contexts that affect consumers' consumption behavior (Sheth, 2020). COVID-19 has affected consumer behavior in multiple ways. Sheth (2020) has identified the immediate effects of COVID-19 on consumption and consumer behavior. One of these is the embracing of digital technology. During the pandemic, consumers have adopted several new technologies and their applications (Sheth, 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, people have also worked from home, and because of digitalization, the working life is becoming 24/7. This has caused that when people spend more time at home, the surf-mentality, privatized home entertainment, online shopping, and convenience living have increased. (Naeem, 2021.) Donthu & Gustafsson (2020) have also recognized the extreme increase in the usage of the internet and social media during the lockdowns. They identify social media as the main channel for communication during the pandemic and Naeem (2021) have noted that social media have enabled people to connect also globally (i.e. US, UK, China, Italy) and share recommendations for buying when the virus has been in a different situation in different countries.

As Naeem (2021) states, the socializing power of social media is widely recognized in the existing literature and people engage for example in WOM communication is continuously growing amounts on the internet. Naeem (2021) has

found that socialization is one reason that has given rise to panic buying and because of the social distancing, and during the pandemic situation, the socialization is coming mainly through social media and other internet sources. This is supported by Kelman's (1958) social influence theory, which proves that social influence can create beliefs and attitudes and that other people significantly affect the behavior of individuals.

Findings of Naeem (2021) reveal that communication with close connections in social media can enhance panic buying behavior. During the COVID-19 pandemic, also the content in social media has been different than usual and these contents are seen to have an effect on consumers' buying behavior. Social media users have shared for example on Twitter, pictures of empty shelves in supermarkets, and this has caused stockpiling behavior among consumers, which in turn has increased the pressure on supermarkets and suppliers (Naeem, 2021). Consumers have exposed to content like videos in which people advise to keep social distance by purchasing necessities and staying at home. This has driven consumers to buy extra food, hand sanitizer, toilet paper, masks, and gloves due to the risk associated. (Naeem, 2021.) Prentice et al. (2020) have found that the number of posts and comments about panic buying peaked in late March and early April and at the same time, the common sentiment in social media was negative towards the social distancing and lockdown measures. Sentiment towards panic buying was positive in March and early April, but then soon turned to be negative and minor. (Prentice et al., 2020.) Besides the rise of the usage of social media, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, people are also purchasing now more online (e.g., Naeem, 2021; Tran, 2021). According to Donthu & Gustafsson (2020) internet has been a major way to purchase essential products during the pandemic. According to Tran (2021), people are more concerned about sustainability during pandemics and they are expressing more sustainable consumption through e-commerce platforms. Tran (2021) has also found that the perceived effectiveness of the e-commerce platform has a positive effect on economic benefits, and economic benefits have an influence on sustainable consumption.

Coronavirus pandemic has forced governments to set lockdowns in many countries. This has created fear and panic in consumers and many have rushed to buy the necessary items (Naeem, 2021). Either because of the fear of a lockdown or because of a coming lockdown. Thus, Naeem (2021) states that the actions of authorities, for instance, speeches showed on television are beside the socializing power of social media one major reason for panic buying behavior. Panic buying is a psychological reaction and often a consequence of a large-scale crisis like COVID-19 when people start to fear the interruption of the supply chain (e.g., Prentice et al., 2020; Laato et al, 2020). Prentice et al. (2020) have also found that timed intervention measures cause to some extends panic buying behavior. The effect varies by the extend of the measures and the infection situation. Panic buying peaked in March and early April 2020 when lockdowns and social distancing were tightened. However, the buying behavior settled down to more normal in April. (Prentice et al., 2020.)

Laato et al. (2020) collected data from 211 Finnish respondents and found a relationship between the intention to self-isolate and the intention to make unusual purchases. They refer to earlier studies concerning for example the H1N1 virus when noting that people perceive purchasing of food, facemasks, hand sanitizer, and other items important for surviving the pandemic. Laato et al. (2020) have found that exposure to online information sources and information overload both increased cyberchondria, which refers to a state of health anxiety. In addition, the exposure to online information sources and information overload both had an impact through cyberchondria on the intention to self-isolate and intention to make unusual purchases (Laato et al., 2020). However, buying behavior during a crisis like COVID-19 also depends on personal factors. According to Laato et al. (2020), self-efficacy plays a role in unusual buying behavior. They have found that people who have a high purchasing self-efficacy tend to believe that they are able to make purchases in a normal way despite the possible quarantine measures or supply chain disruptions. According to Prentice et al. (2020), more pessimistic people may continue stockpiling necessary items and may prefer online buying, whereas people who are more optimistic may behave more casually and visit for example grocery stores in a normal way.

4 METHODOLOGY

The methodology is a general approach to study a research problem (Metsämuuronen, 2011, 215). It describes how the method selected is used to achieve the objectives placed in the research (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2009, 13).

This chapter describes the research methodology of this study. First, qualitative research as a research method is described and it is discussed how it is an appropriate method for this current study. Then the data collection and practical implementation of the study are discussed. And finally, the data analysis process is described.

4.1 Qualitative research

According to Metsämuuronen (2006, 220), the qualitative research approach is based on the existential-phenomenological-hermeneutic philosophy of science. Thus, qualitative research is on some occasions called also phenomenology (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018, 10). The epistemological position in qualitative research is interpretive, that is the aim is to understand the social world through interpretation of the words of the research participants (Bryman & Bell, 2007, 386). According to Hirsjärvi, Remes, & Sajavaara (2009, 161), the aim of qualitative research is to describe real-life and this includes the view that reality is multifaceted. A qualitative research approach is particularly reasonable to research when there is an interest in the detailed structures of actions and the meanings of the individual actors involved in certain actions, and when information is needed about causalities within specific cases that cannot be studied experimentally (Metsämuuronen, 2006, 220). Metsämuuronen (2011, 34-35) note that when the subject of the research is humans and their intentions, ambitions, and motives, their objectives, goals, visions, as well as attitudes affect the results. This makes the research interesting and challenging but at the same time significantly vulnerable and delicate (Metsämuuronen, 2011, 34-35). Qualitative research is often inductive research, whereas quantitative research is deductive (Bryman & Bell, 2007, 13). In inductive research, the theory is more an outcome of the study whereas deductive research is testing an existing theory. An inductive study is usually conducted as qualitative research, where consistent theory is not available on the topic and the phenomenon needs further investigation. Similar to deductive research, inductive research also is based on a former theory. (Bryman & Bell, 2007, 13.) However, there is also a third approach recognized, that is abductive research. Abductive research takes places in between inductive and deductive. In abductive research, theory formation is possible when the making of observations involves some guiding idea or clue and existing theory is used in an interplay with the empirical data gathered. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018, 95.) Thus,

this current study can be described as an abductive research, which utilizes former theory and at the same time seeks to find new observations from the empirical data.

4.2 Data collection and practical implementation

The research method is a technique for data collection (Bryman & Bell, 2007, 41) and it validates the information established in the study (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2009, 13). Research data for the purpose of this study was gathered by semi-structured individual interviews. An interview is in qualitative research a presentation of more or less open-ended questions to selected individuals or groups (Metsämuuronen, 2006, 220). An interview is chosen often in a situation where the topic remains unclear and thus needs further research (Hirsjärvi et al., 2009, 205). In addition, an interview is a suitable method to gather information when there is a need to understand what people think and why they act like they act (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2009, 72; Eskola & Suoranta, 1998, 85). One advantage of the interview is that typically the planned interviewees agree to participate (Hirsjärvi et al., 2009, 206). 18 potential participants were contacted for the purpose of this study and all of them agreed to participate. However, one person contacted did not use any social media, so she was excluded from the sample. Another advantage in the interview is the flexibility. The interviewer has the ability to repeat the question and clarify the wording of expressions. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2009, 73.) Therefore, individual interviews are the most used data collection strategy in qualitative research (Gubrium, Holstein, Marvasti, & McKinney, 2012; Hirsjärvi et al., 2009, 210) and are chosen as a data collection technique also for the purpose of this study. The interview focuses on pre-selected themes (Metsämuuronen, 2006, 247) which were chosen based on a theoretical background. Interview questions were formed in light of these themes concerning social eWOM in the retail context. A semistructured interview is a suitable data collection method when the researcher has a clear theory on the background from which the concepts and issues can be addressed more specifically (Bryman & Bell, 2007). In a semistructured interview, the interviewer has a list of questions, which are all asked from all participants (Eskola & Suoranta, 1998, 86) by the same exact words (Bryman & Bell, 2007, 467). Nonetheless, the interview situation is quite flexible and the interviewer can ask some additional questions as they pick information from the interviewee's answer. Participants can answer the questions freely in their own words and they can use that amount of time they like. (Bryman & Bell, 2007, 467.) A semi-structured interview is optimal in situations where the topics investigated are intimate and sensitive or if there is a need to find out about less conscious things like values, ideals, and justifications. Like a thematic interview, a semi-structured interview requires interviewer knowledge about the topic concerned. (Metsämuuronen, 2006, 247.)

When choosing a survey method, the objective is to choose a method, which maximizes data quality within cost and resource restrictions (Gubrium et al.,

2012). In qualitative research, the aim is to understand a phenomenon, some event, or actions not building statistical generalizations. Thus, it is important that the participants of the interview have knowledge or experience about the topic studied. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2009, 85; Gubrium et al., 2012.) This is why several participants from the study field of business and economics were chosen to participate in the interviews in this study. Students of this field have at least some level of knowledge of marketing and buying behavior, so it might have an influence on the quality of the answers on the interviews. In addition, when it is known that social media usage is higher among younger adults rather than the older generation, the majority of the sample included participants from the ages between 23 and 30. A convenience sample is used often in qualitative research because it is stated that issues of representatives are not that important in qualitative research as they are in quantitative (Bryman & Bell, 2007, 489). Taking into consideration this and the resource restrictions, convenience sample was used, that is, the participants were chosen from the acquaintances of the author.

The quality of qualitative research is not measured by the amount but by quality. Coverage of the conceptualizing matters. (Eskola & Suoranta, 1998, 18.) Thus, there is no need for a big amount of interviews if the analysis of the data available is comprehensively conducted. Therefore, the amount of interviews conducted for the purposes of this study is not enormous. The focus is on the analysis conducted. There were 17 interviews conducted when the data started to saturate and new interviews were not seen to have additional value for the study. Saturation is the situation where the data begins to repeat itself, that is when no new information is found if data collection is continued (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2009, 87). To ensure standardization of the data, follow-up questions like "Anything else?" or "How do you mean that?" can be used if an interviewee does not answer fully to the question. In addition, recording the interviews and ensuring that the relationship between interviewer and interviewee keeps professional are important ways to ensure standardization. (Gubrium et al., 2012.)

4.2.1 Interviews

Eight questions were presented in the interview and before the actual interview questions, three preparatory questions were presented to ease the answering of the actual interview questions. These preparatory questions were; What social media channels do you use? Which retail companies do you follow/which companies do you "like" on social media? (name a few) and Which social media influencers do you follow? (name a few). The data gathered from the interviews is utilized in other studies also besides this current study. From the eight questions, the answers to seven questions were utilized as empirical research data in this study. As can be found from the following table (TABLE 3), in total, 17 interviews were conducted. All the interviews were conducted in October and November 2020. The sample included 9 female participants and 8 male participants. The age of the interviewees varied between 18 and 68 years and several different occupations were represented. In addition to various occupations, university students from different fields were included in the sample including students from the

field of business and economics, sports sciences, and language and communication sciences. The average length of an interview was 13 minutes 12 seconds. In total, 3 hours and 45 minutes of interview material were generated.

TABLE 3 Interviews

Nr.	Gender	Age	Occupation	Length of the interview
1	Female	26	Class teacher/Finnish teacher	9 min 30 sec
2	Female	25	Marketing assistant	11 min 13 sec
3	Male	25	University student	16 min 16 sec
4	Male	24	University student	10 min 38 sec
5	Female	23	University student	12 min 54 sec
6	Male	18	High school student	11 min 55 sec
7	Male	27	Electrical engineer	12 min 46 sec
8	Female	27	Junior personal banker	9 min 44 sec
9	Female	51	Practical nurse	7 min 30 sec
10	Male	24	University student	11 min 8 sec
11	Female	24	University student	7 min 52 sec
12	Female	25	University student	12 min 37 sec
13	Male	68	Pensioner	5 min 20 sec
14	Female	24	University student	21 min 33 sec
15	Female	31	Senior communication specialist	37 min 35 min
16	Male	32	Product owner	20 min 50sec
17	Male	55	Sales engineer	3 min 41 sec

Bryman & Bell (2007, 482) note that because in qualitative research interviews it is not just important to hear what people say, but also how they say it, recording and transcribing the interviews is a proper way to get all the information available. In the interview situation, the interviewer needs to focus on listening to the answers the interviewee gives and also be ready to make additional questions when needed to get as much information as possible and needed. This is why the recording is a proper way to save the interview situation rather than the interviewer making notes during the interview. (Bryman & Bell, 2007, 482.) Therefore, the interviews conducted were recorded and the interviewer had the ability to focus on getting the all information available. Some people may be reserved or feel discomfort about a recording device and this may affect how they act in the interview situation and how freely they share information (Bryman & Bell, 2007, 482). However, this was not seen to be an issue for the participants in this study. The interviews were conducted in a safe and familiar place for the interviewer. Most of the interviews were held at the interviewee's home, some took place at the interviewer's home, a few at the university, and a few remotely from the interviewee's home. And this may have affected that the interviewee feels more comfortable to answer the questions about their own behavior without interruption or other disruptive factors. Three interviews were conducted via telephone and two of them with a video connection so the interviewer had the ability to observe the interviewee similar to if the interview would have conducted face-to-face. As Bryman & Bell (2007, 206) note, telephone interviews are cheaper to conduct if the interview otherwise would have demanded traveling and they also

enable a geographically wider sample which in the case of this study would have been otherwise challenging to accomplish because of the present COVID-19 pandemic situation.

3.3. Data analysis

The purpose of the analysis of qualitative data is to increase the value of information because the aim is to create meaningful, clear, and coherent information about the phenomenon under study from fragmented data. The analysis creates clarity in the data in order to draw clear and reliable conclusions about the phenomenon under study. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018, 108.) Before the actual analysis of the research data, the dataset is organized in such a way that makes analyzing possible (Metsämuuronen, 2006, 254). Transcribing is used in qualitative research to understand how study participants organize their speeches (Metsämuuronen, 2006, 220). First, the interview recordings were transcribed exactly word for word. This created 28 pages of text in Microsoft Word with the font Calibri, font size 11, and line spacing of 1. In abstraction, the research data is organized in such a way that the conclusions drawn from it can be detached from individuals, actions, and statements and transferred to a general conceptual and theoretical level (Metsämuuronen, 2006, 254). From the original text, answers to the questions were moved to Microsoft excel. In this phase, the names were left out and answers were connected to participants only through their age, gender, and the interview date. When the data is organized, the actual analysis may begin. Analysis of the data was started by first reading through the whole material. Before this, the author had already got to know the content briefly during the transcribing. The qualitative analysis of the data is based on logical reasoning and interpretation, in which the data is initially broken down into parts, conceptually, and re-assembled in a new way into a logical whole (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018, 108). A content analysis was started by identifying four themes and their subthemes based on the research interview questions. After this, the data was observed in the light of the theoretical background and five new themes were identified. Interview answers were categorized into these themes and a few analysis rounds were conducted where the data was organized to its final form. After the content analysis, the data was reported by describing the data verbally and supported with appropriate quotations from the interviews. Report of the research data is presented in the next chapter.

5 RESULTS

In the following, the empirical findings of the research are discussed. The analysis is structured on the basis of the themes covered in the research interviews and themes which were identified from the interplay between the theory and empirical observations. After the general information about the empirical research data, social eWOM in the consumers decision-making process is discussed including the subthemes of peer consumer-generated content, and influencer-generated content. Then, the concept of social eWOM is discussed, and finally, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are presented.

5.1 General information

The empirical data is presented in the following and supported with specific quotes from interviewees. Interviewees were given identification tags to maintain privacy. For example in the ID of F3, F stands for a gender, female, and the number tells that the participant was the third female interviewed. Because the research interviews of this study were conducted and transcribed in Finnish the quotations used in this chapter were translated into English, however, as an objective was maintaining the substance of the original data.

5.2 Social eWOM in the consumers decision-making process

Type of purchase

The study reveals that consumers tend to utilize social media especially when they are considering buying something bigger or more expensive compared to usual daily purchases. In addition, social media is utilized as an information source when buying cosmetics.

Type of action

Specific types of action can be identified from consumers' information search on social media. Consumers, for instance, compare products by themselves, make searches by using hashtags and keywords, and perform a comparison between brand image, the image of the users of a specific brand, and their own image and identity.

Channels

A majority of the interviewees brought up that Instagram is their most used social media when considering their decision-making process. However, Facebook is also widely used. Besides these two channels, Twitter is also used and outside the SNSs, YouTube is a common social media used as an information source.

Phase of the decision-making process

There are differences in which phase of the decision-making process consumers utilize social media as an information source. They also seek different types of social eWOM in different phases of the process (Figure 2). Some seek inspiration and their need or interest may evoke when they receive some specific social media content. A majority of the interviewees of this study note that they use social media in the phase of information search when they already have a specific need. However, different types of information search are identified. While some search information as a support for their purchase intention, some have identified that information search can happen also passively. A majority of the participants of this study do not search for information on social media after the purchase. A few participants search for information after the purchase but they prefer other channels (i.e. forums) rather than social media. Then again, some utilize social media if they have problems with their product purchased. In this kind of situation, consumers seek for example, if someone else would have experienced similar issues. In addition, social media is identified as a channel to find new ways to use a purchased product.

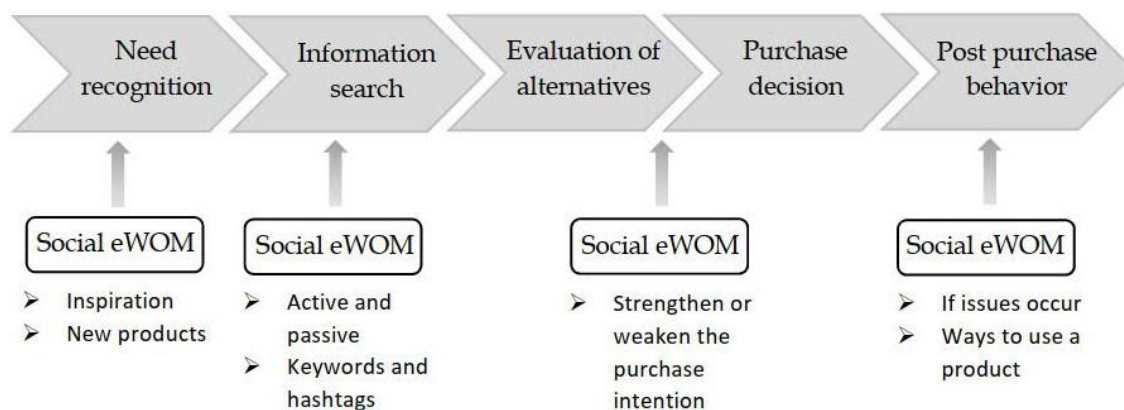


FIGURE 2 Social eWOM in consumer's decision-making process

5.2.1 Type of content in general

Consumers seek different types of content on social media. Next, these different types of content are discussed beginning from which kind of content in general consumers seek on social media and utilize as a support for their purchase decisions. And after that, the content generated by peer consumers and social media influencers is discussed.

Consumers are looking for inspiration on social media and as passive information search, they see people having specific products.

For example, now came to my mind the X store I follow on Instagram, when they actively do posts and, they also give an inspiration, because they have made different outfit hauls, so maybe it also creates a little need for it [the product]. (F2)

And maybe usually, however, it starts from seeing someone with the product or something, and then, of course, you investigate what he/she thinks [about the product]. (M2)

Consumers also seek content generated by users of a specific product including user experiences, reviews, and opinions of the users and content from which can be seen what kind of people use some specific product.

Instagram, in particular, I utilize perhaps like going through hashtags, how others use [a product] or whatever, like when we thought about getting those strollers, then we, or I at least searched from Instagram what people who use the product or the brand look like, that whether or not the entire userbase is such that I would like to belong to that userbase. (F9)

Well, I could at least utilize it like that if I want to buy something then I can look at what other people have thought that if there are some reviews or user experiences or something like that then I could at least look what others have thought about it. (M1)

They also may seek conversations about a product they are interested in and even if the original source of information would be the internet in general, often conversations on social media can be found for example in Google search results.

Well quite often if I'm buying something bigger then I google it and then I look at what's been talked about it. And often it's somewhere on social media, that there's some Facebook conversation or something like that, so then I'm interested in what's been said about it. (F4)

Consumers are interested in recommendations and reviews about a product they are attracted to. In addition, comments for example in an ad about a specific product are seen as valuable information when considering decision-making.

Perhaps mostly based on recommendations or reviews from someone else about the product. So if there are good reviews then of course it boosts my own willingness to maybe try that product or buy it. (M5)

And if I see an ad somewhere like on Instagram, I'll read the comments about a product first. (F4)

People also seek content about products when it is not possible to see or try the product in real. For example, when purchasing products online, it may ease the decision-making if it is possible to see the product in practice before the purchase.

Well, it's just that if you can't see the product, how it works like in practice then I see how it works like in practice if those people test them then I see that okay that it works like that and then you are able to perceive much better versus the fact that you should just order something online or something. Then it would be easier to buy or make the decision whether to buy or not. (M1)

Discount codes are seen as useful and desired on social media. They may help the consumer to make a purchase decision.

Well, almost first I look for discount codes. They can be easily found there. (F6)

It can already be noticed, that consumers are utilizing social media as a significant information source in their decision-making process. As they are found to

have an interest in the content generated by other users of a product, in the next section, the content generated by peer consumers is discussed in more detail.

5.3 Content generated by peer consumers

People are looking for different kinds of consumer-generated content shared by peer consumers on social media including, for instance, consumer experiences, recommendations, and tips.

5.3.1 Content perceived as significant

Participants of this study perceive a wide range of content shared by peer consumers as significant when making purchase decisions. They are seeking, for instance, inspiration, opinions, user experiences, reviews, and comparisons. In reviews and user experiences, they consider it to be critical that the consumer has really tested the product by him/herself. In addition, information about the availability of a product is seen as important and interesting. Consumers want to know where they can get a specific product. Is it available only online or does the company have a small brick-and-mortar store, for example.

Those opinions that when they are shared that well this is good and this is not. Inspiration and user experiences so those I feel useful, but so those user experiences as positive and negative. And maybe also when some people share where they [specific products] can be bought though because there might be some of them that they are from some small stores, that are not necessarily such big ones that I would find otherwise. (F2)

Well product reviews or someone has compared something, done some comparison that I have now this here and this here and from these this one won. So they can affect yeah. (F9)

Positive experiences. And negative experiences. Yes, all the experience shared. (M4)

For the content to be credible, consumers expect transparency, clarity, and objectivity. They seek authentic content where the positive and negative sides of a product are honestly described. However, excessive positivity or negativity evokes suspicion. Some of the interviewees note that not-paid content is perceived as more credible and for example, if you see that a peer consumer has a product in use, it is more interesting than a commercial collaboration would be. Also, the attention that a content giving recommendations has gained for example, in a form of comments affects the credibility of the content.

I think it has to be comprehensive, I think it has to have the pros and cons, it has to be clear enough or like that to reveal those problems and the good sides of that product or service. So and maybe it's like the transparency overall in that if you try something too hard that if it's way too or if it's too positive then it's like ringing alarm bells a little bit but then if it's too negative then then it's also ringing alarm bells so maybe the transparency in general, to be able to objectively cover some product. (M1)

Well, it's probably the kind of sharing of one's own experiences and the kind of communication that is kind of transparent, that when there are some of those commercials and sometimes it's so hard to say that well, maybe kind of like that if some just feels like that he/she really says that he/she likes this product then I'm interested in it. (F7)

Such is, in my opinion, such significant content, then maybe also, if somewhere you notice that ... some social media user that would always have the same really nice scarf in Instagram stories. And he/she doesn't seem to mention anything about it, but at some point, some follower asks that hey where did you get that scarf? Well then maybe he/she could be like that oh well it's Marimekko's this from this collection, so then you might pay attention to content like that, that those are like briefly mentioned stuff, so I think they are such that you trust them quite a bit or you may be interested in them then more than then from such direct product collaborations. (F9)

Well, that if it's really a consumer, and not the kind of social media influencer who is paid for to advertise that product, then if someone posts that this is really good and I recommend it, then yes, I usually want that you can see that some others have commented that "yeah it works" or "this is really good". So then I only believe it after that. (F8)

Consumers also look for different ways to use a product that is, if a peer consumer with the same product has, for example, invented a new innovative way to use the product or just share how they tend to use a product. In addition, they are interested in pictures of a product taken by a peer consumer. This kind of non-edited pictures may give a completely different view of a product compared to pictures taken by a brand itself. However, consumers may also feel information overload, when all the social media channels are full of product-related content. This may cause that the decision-making process becomes excessively complex if you begin to think through all the options too deeply. Then again, more aged consumers who do not use social media that much, perceive that content generated by peer consumers does not have an effect on their decision-making process.

Maybe I'm interested in the different ways to use it, for how... it depends a bit on the product that what it is. But perhaps in general, I find it useful if other consumers have introduced ways in which they use some product. How do they like make coffee with that coffee maker, or how do they manage to use some detergent, or what strollers look like from a certain angle, or if the brand has their own brand images that are really finished and good looking and from the same angles, then I'm interested in what they look like now in natural light just taken by a mobile phone and without any filters preferably. So these like, seeking that kind of authentic information about it, too. So inspiration in addition to the authentic information. (M7)

Maybe the fact that you shouldn't try too much to think about things... if you start thinking too much about things then it will go harder to make a decision and you don't really know anymore that is it a good or bad thing or what you think about it yourself. (M1)

5.3.2 Positive and negative content

Consumers perceive negative and positive content both as significant when considering their decision-making process. A majority of the participants of this study perceive that negative content is more significant and some of them note that only a few negative comments affect their perceptions even if there would

be also positive comments related to a product or a brand. However, one interviewee had the opinion that from negative and positive content, the one affects most, which is presented more. Negative comments may cause the feeling that a product is not worth to try. Negative comments may also cause a stronger vision, which sticks to one's mind more easily than a message from the mass of positive content. Some participants note that they search for negative content on purpose. It is also brought up, that commercial collaborations are often positive and this may cause that consumers have reservations about all content that is positive. Then again, negative content is not usually paid content, which cause that it is more convenient to trust on negative content compared to positive content.

... yes it does affect, very easily I do not buy if someone has said bad things about it. Well a negative comment is probably enough like one comment and a positive ones needs to be like ten comments before it has the same effect. (M4)

Between the positive and the negative... well both have it that it matters how many of them there is. That if there is clearly more of either one, positive or negative then it gives generally better or worse picture about it [a product]. (M2)

Well, negative, negative content in itself is more significant that if someone says out loud that this is not a good product, then even if there are only a few, then you start to doubt, when then there are always quite a lot of positive comments. That always someone likes if it is even on the market. But so, I always look more for the negative ones, because those are the ones that I'm interested in. (F3)

Well, maybe the negative has more significance, that it will leave a stronger image when there is more positive content though maybe, and then the more commercial content is usually more positive, so it may be easier to ignore it because he/she is getting paid for this and that is why this is his/her opinion. But then if someone really says a negative opinion, then in general it is not any paid marketing... it will be better stick in one's mind that at least then it [a product or a retailer] may not be worth trusting. (F7)

Well maybe more that if there is something negative then I consider it more significant, but if there is something positive then I have a little reservations for it because I know it is a paid advertisement. (F4)

Well, then maybe those shortcomings are alarming, ... those negative things, maybe you pay more attention to them, because then maybe in presenting the positive aspects, you always think ... that they have a cooperation agreement so he/she is required to talk good about it [a product]. (F9)

However, one interviewee noted that if the purchase decision has already been made, the negative content does not have an effect anymore. In this kind of situation, only positive content has an influence.

Positive (is perceived more significant), if the purchase decision has already been made, if I know that now I am going to buy it, then I will skip the negative contents, that I won't even look at them after that. Those positive ones, they have more significance, that then it can be a coincidence, well no, I don't those negatives really anymore then, so ... they don't affect. (M7)

Negative comments on retailer's social media

When considering the negative comments on a retailer's social media, consumers perceive that they have a more significant effect in the situation, where the product or a retailer is new for them. If a consumer is not familiar with the product or a retailer, already a few negative comments have a significant effect on purchase intention. However, if a consumer does already have its own experience of the product or the retailer, negative comments on the retailer's social media do not affect significantly. It is also brought up in the interviews that if a consumer has another choice to choose, they would possibly change to another retailer if they see negative comments about a retailer they have used earlier. Then again, in the context of online shops, an individual negative comment does not have a significant effect on consumers' attitudes towards the retailer.

Well, it affects, or at least if I don't have much own experience about that particular product or a retailer then it will affect more. But if I have a good experience about a product or a retailer, then it doesn't affect that much. (F1)

If it's a new retailer that I've never been to, then it has a significance that there's a negative comment, but if I've been there before and I've already had that experience of what I think of it, then it is not that significant anymore, but in the case of some hotel, for example, if there are a few negative comments, it will quite much affect the purchase decision. (F4)

Especially if there is a new service or product that you would be using. Somehow in the case of a new product, those kinds of things affect the most. (F9)

Well negatively, or so that if I have read some bad comments, then... yes it does affect, if it stays in my mind then it is so that I would not necessarily even go to their online store or store at all if there is someone said that they have got poor customer service or bad products, or there were some other problems. So then maybe I would prefer to go somewhere else. (F2)

As mentioned before, negative comments, in general, are given more weight compared to positive comments. Negative comments stick to one's mind more strongly and this may affect avoidance of the retailer, in order to gain savings.

That's probably a bit like that if there is positive feedback or negative given or commented, then it is the same, one negative is enough to undo the ten positives. (M4)

Yes they affect of course yeah. Of course it then sticks to mind, that is, you might then avoid that product and try to save there. (F5)

Negative comments on a retailer's social media also evoke skepticism towards the person who has written the comment. It is often unclear for other social media users, what is really behind the negative comment. Participants of this study note that the reason may be in the customer him/herself, for example, if the customer has not used the product correctly or he/she has something else behind this outburst of emotion. It is also noted that if the comment is about the retailer in general, a consumer may have a cautious approach towards it, but if the comment is concerning a specific product and it is properly argued, it is perceived as more significant. In addition, constructive feedback about, for example, the delivery time of the retailer may affect the purchase decision. If a consumer perceives the

negative comment as significant, it may affect the image of the retailer and this may cause avoidance of the company.

Very often it doesn't affect at all, because whoever can write a negative comment, even if they may have no reason to do so. Of course, well, maybe that skepticism has been practiced so much now that you know how to filter the ones that are... if it's like properly argued that why it was bad ... then you can take it but if it only says that this was bad, and that's it, then it is not worth putting weight on it, so then it does not bother or interest me at all. (M1)

Not much. That you know what kind of people there is on social media so quite critically you read them, and you usually notice that whether the bad feedback is for some real reason or if it is something else that annoys the customer. So quite a little, but then again, if there are a lot of them, of course, it then affects. (M2)

In the retailers' pages may not affect that much, because I feel that I most often come across those kinds of negative comments which are such trolls or there is a lack of negative feedback which could be taken seriously if they concern the retailer as a whole. So I see it more significant if it's like a more specific product where those comments are, but maybe if there is some constructive feedback, if there would happen to come across something in delivery times or somewhere, then maybe I'd think more closely whether or not to use it. (F3)

Well, it maybe depends a bit on how real the issues mentioned in them seem, that sometimes it feels like that some of the reviews on Facebook, for example, may include that kind of nonsense about something unnecessary, especially when you have done customer service work before, so in a way you have that kind of censorship that certain things don't affect, but then of course if there comes something really like spectacular, or some really negative thing then yes it affects the image of that company and then you might start avoiding it. (F7)

There can also be differences found between different social media channels. Twitter is often seen as a suitable channel for customer service and customer feedback, thus one interviewee states that negative comments on retailer's Twitter can have a significant negative effect on purchase intention. Especially if more than one comment exists.

In my opinion, Twitter is a completely different thing, although there may be something there too. ... Yeah they can affect. That is if I suddenly see that someone has given bad feedback to some service provider though and then I start to investigate it a little more, okay there is a long conversation where dozens of other people are like saying that yeah we didn't receive proper service in there either, or like that. So then, I am not really in the mood for trying it now. (F9)

The content of the comment affects how consumers perceive the negative comment. One participant noted that if he agrees with the comment, then he might change the retailer to another, but if he does not agree with the comment, then the comment does not have any effect on him. It is also noted that if a customer perceives that a product is defective, it might be for example a manufacturer's fault, not the retailers. However, consumers perceive negative comments as significant and might approach them by interest but with some filter on. The answer or reaction of the retailer might at least in some cases have a greater significance than the comment itself. An appropriate answer from the retailer's side might increase trust towards the retailer, then again poor answer from the retailer may hurt the trust.

I don't care much about them necessarily... the content also affects, there is a little possibility, that it would have an influence on my choice, that if there is a product that is available in more than one retailer, then it has a little possibility that I would choose some other,... or yes I will definitely choose if the negative feedback written by the consumer is like that, which is, I kind of agree with the feedback provider, but if I don't agree then it doesn't matter. I'm interested in those, but maybe even more than that brand's reaction or that retailer's reaction affects even more. That is, if that feedback is appropriate and the answer is appropriate, then it will probably increase my trust in that retailer, but if the feedback is miserable, the answer is even worse, then it kind of weakens the trust and if the feedback is poor and the answer is really good, then nevertheless, it also increases the trust on that retailer. That the retailer's reaction to that feedback affects more than the feedback itself. (M7)

Well, it depends on what it's all about. That if it's like something that one product has been somehow bad or something else, then I don't really care because I don't think it's the retailer's fault, but maybe more of its product manufacturer's fault. And if it's a retailer's fault that they have, for example, sold some product where is date expired or something, so then I am like "okay human error" that shouldn't be lynched about. But then if there is someone who has experienced something really bad customer service or something, then it has a bit of a negative effect, but on the other hand I have also done a lot of customer service work myself, then maybe a little bit also sees the fact that there are always two different sides to the story. And even if that customer tells a story like that, maybe the customer service representative has also tried to do something about it, but then it didn't end up on social media. So it does not have an influence unless something terrible has happened and you don't even have screenshots of how a certain company has responded to customer feedback. And then if that company, like, or retailer's view is like really outrageous, then yes they end up black-listed. ... That kind of has a negative effect though. (F8)

A few of the interviewees note that negative comments on retailer's social media do not have an effect on them, because they do not follow any retailers. One participant noted that negative comments about specific products on YouTube have an effect on his perceptions and the effect is greater if the comments have gained attention from other users also.

5.3.3 Emotional and informative content

In the interviews of this study, one question concerned whether consumers perceive emotional or informative content as more significant in their decision-making process. The majority of interviewees perceive informative content as more significant when considering purchase decisions.

Yeah, informative really has a bigger influence, that is, it's nice to read praises, but then if someone has really praised the headphone sound or something else, that will create a feeling that there is something really on point in those. (M2)

Well, maybe I'm usually looking for something more informative to support a purchase decision, but on the other hand, sometimes it may be from the emotional base, like oh gosh I need one of those only because it just looks nice. But usually, it's more like that okay this is probably better than the one I had before, or something like that, like more information-intensive. (F7)

Well, I find the informative more significant, because I usually just want those facts, like that. But of course, always on those platforms, there is a bit more like that emotional content. (F3)

It is also depended on the product intended to purchase, whether emotional or informative content is perceived as more significant. One participant state that it typically takes a rather long time for her to make a purchase decision and in this kind of process the informative content has a significant role to make the purchase happen in the end. However, it is noted that informative content is often searched from other channels rather than social media where the content is usually more emotional.

It depends a lot on what you are buying, that is, if I was buying something that requires some accurate product information, which I never really buy, then I probably would look for it. But on the other hand, I am not interested in social media at that point, that what other people have said about it, thus, maybe emotional is more important, however, if I am interested in what other people think about it. (F4)

Both in a little bit different ways because, I always get really excited about everything at first, so in that sense, it's emotional maybe, but since I always think about all my purchase decisions for a really long time, then that's where the informativeness takes a more important role. (F8)

5.4 Content generated by social media influencers

Besides the peer consumer-generated content, social eWOM can also be communicated by social media influencers. Consumers are interested in influencers' experiences, recommendations, and feedback about products.

...make-up influencers, for example, when they make such testing videos and through them recommended or then the other way around says that it doesn't work... because for example, the last thing that comes to mind when I bought an eyebrow pen and then when she [the influencer] had said that this is good but then again it can't be tested in the store so then it was easier to make that purchase decision when someone had said that this works. So maybe as such as recommendations. (F2)

And maybe usually, however, it starts from seeing someone with the product or something, and then, of course, you investigate what he/she thinks [about the product] and then when you search from the internet, you usually come across something like this, such customer experiences or other feedback what these have done these social media celebrities of some level at least, so those are quite interesting. (M2)

Next, the perceptions interviewees have about social media influencers and their product-related content are described and after that, the effects of social media influencers' content on consumers' purchase decisions are discussed.

5.4.1 Perceptions

Content shared by social media influencers evokes several different and rather strong opinions in consumers. It is noted that content generated by social media influencers is mainstream nowadays. Consumers tend to have a rather skeptical approach towards social media influencers and their content. However, trans-

parency is crucial and clear mentions about commercial collaborations are important so that consumers do not need to speculate whether the content is paid by some company or not.

Well, I feel like it's like the real mainstream today. Partly I am skeptical about it. Especially paid collaborations evoke questions. On the other hand, I think it has been really important and significant, in my opinion, that ...it has been transparently stated that if the product is received from some company. Or that there is such a collaboration behind something, I think it is really important that it is known and visible. (F9)

As noted, the content of social media influencers evokes skeptical feelings. However, nowadays influencers are required to inform clearly if the content is produced in commercial collaboration with some company and this has made it more convenient for consumers to identify what is paid content. Then again, notification about the commercial collaboration may cause speculation among consumers whether the content is credible and has the influencer even used or tried the product him/herself.

Well, I'm a little skeptical about those. But luckily for that today, was it a couple of years ago when it came that there needs to be a mention that if it has paid product content. Well, it has made it easier. (F3)

I somehow don't believe them, because it's always like that there is a text at the end that is, something like "made in collaboration with this and this", then it feels like they are just being paid for that advertising and marketing and they don't really use or like that product, so then it loses the credibility. (F8)

Excessive positivity in social media influencers' content also evokes speculative feelings and consumers may not trust this kind of content. It may cause a thought that the influencer is not taking it seriously and is just producing content because of the money he/she gets from the posts. One participant also notes that an influencer may share excessively positive content in order to create a positive image of him/herself.

Well, it's a two-way street, that sometimes they are so overly positive that it quite quickly creates a feeling, that is he/she really serious now, or is it because he/she gets paid. (F7)

Then if they're just kind of truly over positive, then it's not really plausible, that it feels like he/she is faking so he/she would look good him/herself. (F6)

Some interviewees of this study perceive the content shared by social media influencers negatively. It is perceived as irritating imposing especially if the product recommended does not fit the influencer's own field.

Irritating imposing. (M4)

Sometimes it can be a little bit annoying if there is some channel [in YouTube] that is not related to that product at all and then makes about some product, some commercial collaboration so then I usually don't pay attention to those. (M3)

Some participants prefer not-paid content because it can be perceived as more authentic if he or she really wants to recommend this product or service. Besides

the positive recommendations and reviews, also negative comments and posts are perceived as significant, if the influencer, for example, gives feedback about a product. On the other hand, one participant gives an example about a situation where an influencer conducts a comparison between specific products and she notes that in this kind of situation it does not matter if some or even all of the products are received (for free).

Well, if you have just that kind of not-paid ad, then, of course, it always feels like more authentic, that now he really wants to recommend this service, so then maybe it's more interesting. But then there are also some negative comments or posts so yes they at least affect quite a lot and I think that it is good that they give such feedback and recommends and then also give negative feedback as well. (F1)

Well product reviews or someone has compared something, done some comparison that I have now this here and this here and from these this one won. So they can affect yeah. ...And then if it is in this kind of test set-up that someone tests, that he has tried this, this, and this lamp, then in such cases it does not matter to me whether some of the products are received or not, or whether all the products are received from those retailers or importers or anyone else. (F9)

Content shared by social media influencers is also perceived as useful when making a purchase decision. It may make decision-making more convenient. It is also perceived as inspirational and may get a consumer to try new products. Some specific influencers are perceived as trustworthy, at least up to certain point.

But just like I said before, then I also find it useful in that sense that is, when you are making the purchase decision yourself, then it is easier to make that decision when someone has said that hey this is good. (F2)

Well, I find them inspiring [content of social media influencers]. (F5)

But yes, then, just like this kind of certain influencers, I can also trust their opinion to some extent. Maybe not quite blindly, but up to a certain point. (F7)

Maybe I don't really follow a lot that, but just a little bit like I mentioned, so if it can make me try sometime something new, if there comes some good, some content that really interests me a lot, but I don't very easily go and buy a product just because I have seen something good about it in social media. The strongest is that if there is something negative and if I don't know about it myself or I don't have any experiences about that product, then I will probably never try it, or buy it. (M5)

One participant brings up the richness of this kind of content. Social media influencers' content can introduce, for example, new brands and services for consumers. It is one source of information about the supply available. And even if the content would not lead to purchase immediately, it may have an effect in the longer term. Consumers may keep the product or a brand in their minds until the next time they need this specific product.

And then, on the other hand, it is such a richness, of course, that if someone brings out something, some product or service, then it can be unknown to me so this way you can get to know new brands and services, and get more information about the existing offerings so it can be quite a positive thing, although it may not necessarily lead to a purchase decision at that moment, but it can of course bear fruit to a little further. Like now last summer... [one social media influencer] had such a really nice looking swimwear on some posts, and then she said that from which brand those swimwear were.

So I have taken a screenshot of one post where it was told that they are swimwear from this and this manufacturer, so maybe next time if I need a swimsuit or a bikini I will... look for that post and see what was the brand that then had those nice looking ones. (F9)

Authenticity, transparency, and clarity affect the perceptions about the content produced by social media influencers. If the influencer is acting naturally and tells clearly about his/her own experience about a product the content is perceived as more interesting and it may have an effect on the decision-making process. It is also noted, that the content should fit the personality of the influencer and it should support the opinions the influencer has expressed previously.

Pretty much it probably depends on the person who advertises, that does he/she create a genuine feeling that it's not just like that he's forced to do it now. That some people I think can do it really well that they are so natural in that advertising so then I be like okay it could be a good thing and I want to test it or buy it. But then again, that if it's very forced, then at least I don't buy it, then I get the feeling... that he does it only for the money and at least I'm not interested in it at all then. (M1)

This is also really variable, that some people seem fake and then it doesn't work at all, but if that ad seems to me that okay, first of all it is honestly said that this is like a paid collaboration, but then there is also told about the own experience the pros and cons, so then it will positively affect that purchase experience. [What affects that the content seems fake?] The fact that the message is not somehow authentic, that it sounds like... that the words have been given to the mouth of that influencer. It must fit to the influencer and be very personal and support his/her previous opinions that he/she has expressed. (F4)

Microinfluencers may have a smaller follower count and they have expertise in some specific field. They are perceived as more trustworthy and significant than influencers who have a large follower count and produce content including products from a wide variety of product categories. Microinfluencers are perceived as more credible and authentic and they may have a significant effect on purchase intention.

If someone kind of produces content that he/she compares to a topic, like in the context of orienteering, then if someone has an orienteering blog or vlog or an Instagram account, then if he/she does comparison about the best of those headlamps then, I could like ... buy one. (F9)

Biased, pretty much. It depends on how big a deal this social media person is, or a social media influencer. That usually those microinfluencers so they usually have something like of course they have vested interest too, but somehow they tell you like more straightforwardly and fairly about that product. That, of course, tells the good sides about it, but, in my opinion, gives a more accurate picture compared to the social media influencers of many thousands of followers. (M2)

Yes, some influencers may be like that I get interested and check out what this is. The influencer has to be like really, like a pretty kind of marginal influencer, like one who isn't so much an advertiser of all possible things. Not like that kind of a common social media influencer maybe,... but he/she is specialized on something. That if he/she is specialized, like in telescopes, so then I am interested in it, if it has commercial cooperation about some telescope, then I would probably be interested in it if I would be interested in telescopes and he/she would be like a social media influencer specialized to telescopes, but if he/she is like a general known from social media, on all channels, and sometimes he/she advertises smoothies and sometimes

shirts and then like some audiobook-service or something so they will pass, that I don't bother to watch those. (M7)

Besides the microinfluencers, consumers tend to trust more influencers who they have been following for a longer time. If they feel they know the influencer, the influencer is perceived as more credible and their content as more interesting compared to an influencer who they have not followed earlier.

I think in those influences is that, if there is an influencer or a social media influencer which I have been following for a really long time, and then it feels like that I know him/her, or that I find him/her reliable because he/she has done it for so many years and still continues to do so, then it appreciates and believes in such opinions or collaborative posts more compared to ones you begin to follow, some content from a new content producer, so of course, I can't trust them so much because they are new acquaintances to me. (F9)

Well, that also depends on the fact that have I followed them for a long time, that if it's someone like that I don't know, then I don't pay much attention to it. But if it's someone that I've been following for several years, then I somehow know about that person... (F6)

More aged interviewees note that they do not have any connection to social media influencers and thus this kind of content does not affect them. However, one of these participants recognizes that the content shared by social media influencers can have a significant effect on those who follow them.

Not in any way at the moment, but those will probably have a big impact on those who follow this kind of things. (M6)

5.4.2 Effect on purchase decisions

Almost all of the interviewees perceive that the content shared by social media influencers does have an effect on their purchase decisions. Especially, if the content concerns some specific products or topic area on which the consumer is interested in or the product is new for the consumer. However, the effect is either negative or positive depending on the tone of the reviews.

Well yeah, if they are that kind of products or stuff I would use or buy myself. Maybe to some extent. (F1)

Well, if it's a more special topic then, which I'm already interested in anyway, then it would probably have an influence. (M7)

Well, if you say that you have a brand new product, then you can look those reviews about them... But of course that there is always probably from both sides... that some say positive and some say bad, but then of course if... 95% of people say that it is bad so then I won't buy it either. (M1)

Influencer-generated content is perceived as useful to support purchase decisions. A few participants noted that the content may have an effect especially by supporting a preliminary purchase decision (purchase intention) made. The effect can be either positive or negative, that is, it can strengthen the purchase decision or it can prevent the decision.

I also find it useful in that sense that is, when you are making the purchase decision yourself, then it is easier to make that decision when someone has said that hey this is good. (F2)

Well yes they do pretty much, but it's usually that way, that I have a need and then I go and for information, so it might confirm that if I have a certain product in mind and it is praised a lot on social media, then I'll buy it... Rather, not like that I see something and then I get the need that okay I need that one. So it goes maybe that way. (F6)

Well yeah yes, it can have an influence. Not to a large extent but maybe I would say that the strongest it can prevent my purchase decision if there comes bad from someone but of course it can maybe give it such a small boost that it can be bought, but maybe it won't come from it like that if I see it for the first time there on social media and then I get "okay I have to get that". But that if I have thought before, then it will only give such a positive boost to my thinking. (M5)

It is recognized that the effect also depends on the price of a product. If a product is affordable, it is more convenient and lower risky to test a product recommended. This risk can be decreased by offering a discount code on social media content. However, if the product associated is expensive in its product line, a consumer may seek less expensive options. One participant note though, that the influencer-generated content does bring points to the brand associated.

After all, it depends on the price of the product then, that i can give something a try if it's not terribly expensive. Even if it had received bad reviews, because then I would still give it like that, maybe a chance for it nonetheless. (M1)

Well, they may affect, well, of course, in those commercial collaborations, there is quite often some discount code, which can have an influence just through the price, and then of course if it's such a reliable influencer, then I might like yes I usually look for other options like is there any other options for this and whether this is like the most expensive option of all, ... but maybe it will bring points to that brand. (F7)

Some participants noted that more than the informativeness of the content they put a value on the overview of the content. For example, if the content is perceived as cool, it may have a stronger effect. It may also be the trigger of purchase in a situation where a consumer did not at least notice a specific need previously. A consumer may have not intended to buy anything but then the content evokes a need.

Yeah, definitely. In that, it probably affects the most... that what it seems like, the product and what it's like the general picture of it rather than the informativeness itself that if it feels cool and it creates kind of a, like, the cool image then it certainly affects more. (M2)

Yeah, it does affect. That maybe like they are the ones who actually trigger it quite often. That I am not necessarily buying anything but... then suddenly comes a urgent need. (F3)

The effect of social media influencers' content may happen also in the longer-term. It is noted, that social eWOM communicated by social media influencers can affect in the awareness-stage where a consumer gets his/her first connection with a brand, and the possible purchase may happen somewhere in the future

when a need is relevant. Also, if a consumer sees some specific product or products of a specific brand widely on several social media channels and in the content of a wide variety of social media influencers in long term, the product rather passively stays in one's mind for a longer time and can evoke a purchase intention eventually.

Yeah, if you can see enough like the same product on many different social media. For example, as a good example, I was just talking about this with a friend that when the X products started appearing on everybody, we were just like okay again some new brand, which is being pushed on all social media users, but now when like half of the athlete persons on Instagram seems to have them, so you start a little to warm up for them. And now we just talked in the gym yesterday that maybe we should order that kind of gym pants. But yes, it took quite a long time, because I think it's been a year or year and a half since I started to pay attention to how much they show up on social media. ... but it seems to have affected somehow after a long time, when in the beginning just rolled its eyes and now it be like maybe I should also. Looks so nice on so many them. Yeah, yes it can (affect purchase decisions), although I would like to say that it does not. (F8)

Yeah in the long run it can affect.... I hardly ever go like that I read about something and then I am like well now I need to order that also myself. But maybe on the basis of them, often an idea is left to simmer, or that a brand becomes heard or familiar for the first time and it can, as at a later stage, actually change in a way. That is like in a decision-making process somewhere that has an "awareness" like something and then they are left there in the background and then it can later lead to that you purchase that product or service of a service provider. (F9)

As stated before, microinfluencers are often seen as more credible than more general social media influencers. One interviewee notes that a general social media influencer needs to offer something excessively significant benefit for a consumer to wake up interest and possible action.

And then if it's such that it's such a general social media influencer, a little bit of everything you just get money for, then not despising their work when that's their job, but then it might affect if someone offers something like a real benefit or a discount that would then get you to try a product. That some brand has, for instance, agreed that well hey through that influencer you can get audiobooks for like three months for free, and it also applies to old customers, then I would go and try it. But then the benefit must already be really great in it. (M7)

One interviewee stated that he perceives the content shared by social media influencers as an advertisement and therefore it does not affect his purchase decisions significantly.

Very little. Because, well it's practically a paid advertisement in my head. (M4)

5.4.3 Social media influencers as a source of social eWOM

As discussed in the theory section of this study it is unclear when the content produced by social media influencers can be defined as eWOM or social eWOM. eWOM, according to its definitions, is communication between peer consumers. Then again, social eWOM according to Pihlaja et al. (2017) is communication within a restricted audience where the communicator of social eWOM is known

to the receiver. Thus, the sender of social eWOM do not have to be a peer consumer. Through the Pihlaja's et al. (2017) definition, it could be argued that a social media influencer can also be the content provider of social eWOM. In this subchapter, the thoughts of participants are described concerning the evaluation of social media influencers as a source of social eWOM.

Consumers expect transparent communication from social media influencers. However, if the content is made in commercial collaboration, it evokes a suspicion whether the opinions are the influencer's own or coming given from the marketer.

Well, it's probably that kind of sharing of your own experiences and communication that is kind of transparent, that when there are some of those which are commercial and sometimes it's so hard to say that well, is he/she sure or does he/she really think like this about this product. (F7)

Well, maybe something that isn't paid content, because then I've often noticed that if there has been some kind of paid content collaboration, and later on, that influencer has been like after a year that he/she doesn't really like this, and then a little question has arisen as to whether this was done just because of the money. (F3)

It is noted that if the content is authentic and transparent, it can have a positive effect on the purchase experience. The influencer needs to clearly state the possible commercial collaboration and then honestly describe his/her own experiences about the product. All the content needs to be in line with the previous opinions provided by the influencer, otherwise, the trust in this influencer is affected negatively.

This is also really varying, that some people seem fake and then it doesn't work at all, but if that ad seems to me that okay, first of all, it is honestly said that this is like a paid collaboration, but then there is also told about the own experience the pros and cons, so then it will positively affect that purchase experience. [What affects that the content seems fake?] The fact that the message is not somehow authentic, that it sounds like... that the words have been given to the mouth of that influencer. It must fit to the influencer and be very personal and support his/her previous opinions that he/she has expressed. (F4)

It is noted, that in paid commercial collaborations the social media influencer gets a part of his/her wage from the marketer, and thus the opinions and recommendations provided may not match the real opinions of the influencer. Even though a majority of the social media influencers nowadays have stated that they present only that kind of products they can truly stand for, the paid collaboration posts in social media evoke skepticism.

Then again, when there are a lot of such collaborative posts concerning different brands... Then I'm really skeptical about the content when she (one social media influencer) has [a brand] stuff. Even though some of the content producers say, it's or in fact quite a large part probably nowadays say that they present and present only products that they can really stand behind, but if you have a co-operation agreement with some company, you get a part of your salary from it, then, of course, they then bring those products up. So then you are like skeptical that well are those praises or others how legit then. (F9)

Some of the interviewees have quite a strong presume that the money received is guiding the opinions shared by a social media influencer. They even see the content as a paid advertisement.

This is perhaps a bit of a two-way street that, of course, when someone is given money for to advertise something, of course, it advertises it because it is practically their job. (M1)

Because, well it's practically a paid advertisement in my head. (M4)

In some cases where a company has established collaborations with a wide variety of social media influencers and then a consumer sees a specific product recommended by many influencers, a suspicion may again wake up. In this kind of situation, it can be questioned whether the content can be defined as social eWOM.

Or I think it's really disturbing, from which can become a negative feeling, in the end, is when like some brand when like... [a brand] a while ago suddenly made that kind of, suddenly all social media accounts had something like that, whether they were some snack smoothies or snack biscuits, I don't remember which one now. Something which is an everyday product, so suddenly there were on all blogs: "I always have such snacks in my bag when we are on the move with my family, so here are all the snacks for everyone". And then suddenly ... when you follow certain social media accounts or certain channels or something, then came such a really unbelievable feeling when everyone suddenly has the same product. (F9)

5.5 Concept of social eWOM

When the empirical research data was observed in the light of the existing theory about the concept of social eWOM, the four characteristic factors of social eWOM proposed by Pihlaja et al. (2017) were identified. In the next subchapters these characteristics, intended audience, interpersonal relationships, information trustworthiness, and evaluation of source are discussed.

5.5.1 Intended audience

It is noted that people do not like to follow those kinds of social media influencers whose content is mainly product related. Consumers build their online social network in such a way that they find it pleasant to consume the content shared in the network. One participant noted in the interview that he perceives social media influencers negatively and thus he does not follow them on social media.

Well, I find it quite positive, because I only follow accounts that don't annoy me, then if it comes like too much, so then, or well... then it also causes that I stop following someone if there's nothing else than just like product reviews. (F2)

Facebook groups related to some specific topic were also brought up in the interviews. These groups could be defined as separate social networks inside the social media platform. In these groups, the users are interested in the same topic and the conversations are focused on a specific theme, which facilitates the information search.

5.5.2 Information trustworthiness

There can be several factors identified which affect consumers' perceptions about the trustworthiness of social eWOM. It is noted, that not-paid content is more convenient to be trusted when it gives a more authentic feeling. If it is clear that the user really wants to recommend the product or service, the content is seen as more interesting.

Well, if you have just that kind of not-paid ad, then, of course, it always feels like more authentic, that now he really wants to recommend this service, so then maybe it's more interesting. (F1)

As already noted before, microinfluencers are seen as more trustworthy rather than social media influencers who have dozens of followers. Microinfluencers are seen to give a more straightforward and reliable view of a product related.

...those microinfluencers...somehow they tell you like more straightforwardly and fairly about that product. That, of course, tells the good sides about it, but, in my opinion, gives a more accurate picture compared to the social media influencers of many thousands of followers. (M2)

Even though paid social media content causes skepticism among consumers, an influencer has the ability to make paid content also in a way that makes it more trustworthy. Transparency and connection with the opinions expressed previously have a significant effect on how trustworthy the content is perceived.

This is also really varying, that some people seem fake and then it doesn't work at all, but if that ad seems to me that okay, first of all it is honestly said that this is like a paid collaboration, but then there is also told about the own experience the pros and cons, so then it will positively affect that purchase experience. [What affects that the content seems fake?] The fact that the message is not somehow authentic, that it sounds like... that the words have been given to the mouth of that influencer. It must fit to the influencer and be very personal and support his/her previous opinions that he/she has expressed. (F4)

It is noted that the content shared by peer consumers in social media is perceived as more trustworthy compared to social media influencer generated content. However, there are also factors that can affect the trustworthiness of the content shared by peer consumers. For instance, the attention gained through, for example, comments, can affect significantly the trustworthiness of the content.

Well, that if it's really a consumer and not the kind of social media influencer who is paid for to advertise that product, then if someone posts that this is really good and I recommend it, then yes, I usually want that you can see that some others have commented that "yeah it works" or "this is really good". So then I only believe it after that. (F8)

5.5.3 Evaluation of source

The trustworthiness of social eWOM can be considered also through evaluation of the source. Consumers tend to give more weight to the content shared by a user who they perceive as alike with themselves.

But yes, if that influencer is like-minded as I am, or has a similar style so then I take pretty seriously always those product recommendations. (F3)

(How do you perceive the content shared by social media influencers?) It depends a bit on who advertises it, and does it hit me that do I have an interest to look at it at all then, or is he/she my type at all who advertises it. (M1)

Evaluation of the source is also often made by concerning how long a consumer has followed, for example, a social media influencer. The longer the followership, the better the consumer perceives that he/she knows the influencer. In addition, the commercial collaborations of a specific social media influencer whom a consumer has followed for a longer period of time, are perceived as more trustworthy and valuable compared to the paid content shared by other social media influencers.

Well, that also depends on whether I've been following them for a long time, that if it's like someone I don't know... then I don't pay much attention to it. But if it's one that I've been following for several years, then I somehow know about the person.... (F6)

I think in those influences is that, if there is an influencer or a social media influencer which I have been following for a really long time, and then it feels like that I know him/her, or that I find him/her reliable because he/she has done it for so many years and still continues to do so, then it appreciates and believes in such opinions or collaborative posts more compared to ones you begin to follow, some content from a new content producer, so of course, I can't trust them so much because they are new acquaintances to me. (F9)

One interviewee notes that he trusts more the content provided by his friends rather than the content of social media influencers because he knows the values of his friends when about the social media influencers he knows nothing beside the public image.

Well yes, I think it is (content produced by friends is more significant than influencers) because in the case of my friends I know pretty much what they like, what their values are, for example, if considering responsibility or things like that, so I trust them much more because however, I don't know those social media influencers, I don't know probably anything about their lives besides their public image, so then I'm a little more reserved towards their opinions. (M5)

If a social media influencer is an expert in some specific field, his/her opinions and recommendations are weighted more if he/she shares content about specific products in the field compared to if a more general social media influencer would share content about these products.

If someone kind of produces content that he/she compares to a topic, like in the context of orienteering, then if someone has an orienteering blog or vlog or an Instagram account, then if he/she does comparison about the best of those headlamps then, I could like ... buy one. (F9)

Yes, they have an influence, for example, if there is some, if some technology channel (on YouTube) makes a collaboration about some technical device, then at least they are usually quite good. (M3)

5.5.4 Interpersonal relationships

Sharing social eWOM is a way for consumers to express themselves, highlight their personality, and bring up their identity to their online social network.

And although now yeah I bought last weekend that absolutely awesome chocolate calendar, which is just huge and my husband was like this is the most expensive calendar he has ever bought, then it was just so lovely ... then I of course immediately put it on my Instagram Story that now I have this, look at it. That I also wanted to highlight the fact to my followers in ig then that I love Christmas and all so then I took the picture. It is like that you want to pass on your own ... own values ... if you have made purchases that what is important to yourself. Rarely then maybe it is something like that... well I bought a new piece of clothing, well what's important about it, but well maybe if I had made a really ethical purchase decision or bought an ethically sustainable product, or somehow made in my own opinion like a really reasonable purchase, so then you could, would like to tell others about it and express your own values to others then through it. (F9)

By observing the content generated by other social media users, it is possible for consumers to investigate, for example, different brand identities and what kind of brand communities exist in which a consumer may like to be related.

When we were thinking about getting those strollers, then we or I at least searched from Instagram what people who use the product or the brand look like, that whether or not the entire userbase is such that I would like to belong to that userbase... That I thought for quite a long time that would the brand fit for me... because then if I use a brand and it kind of can be seen that I use it, then I like to know that I can stand behind that brand or that I have some sort of a good feeling to carry its brand's like a bag or to use a phone of a particular brand that, whether the product or service, transmits that kind of messages that I want to belong to. (F9)

One participant noted that more than the informativity of a product related content, the general overview of the content is more significant. If he perceives that some product is "cool" it may have a stronger effect on his purchase intention. Through this kind of purchase, the consumer may want to be connected to this "cool" image also himself.

Yeah, definitely. In that, it probably affects the most... that what it seems like, the product and what it's like the general picture of it rather than the informativeness itself that if it feels cool and it creates kind of a, like, the cool image then it certainly affects more. (M2)

5.6 Effects of the COVID-19 pandemic

The last questions of the research interview concerned the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The questions concerned the usage of social media and the utilization of social media in the decision-making process. In general, participants have recognized some rather clear changes during the pandemic in their behavior on social media but changes in the utilization of social media in the decision-making process were more challenging to identify, however, some significant changes also in the latter are recognized.

5.6.1 On social media usage

When asking interviewees how has the COVID-19 pandemic affected their behavior in social media, many of them had challenges at first to recognize any changes. However, the increased amount of time spent was recognized as a rather common effect. The time spent on social media increased significantly in March 2020 when hobbies were canceled and people had to stay home. In general, interviewees noted that they tend to read, watch, and browse on social media more than share content.

Well, maybe ... that you spend more time inside that you cannot leave anywhere then you might use social media more, but like the behavior then there on social media so it has not changed, like the same way I have been posting pictures or liked the pictures or browsed it or commented, or like this, so it hasn't affected the actual behavior there inside social media. (M1)

Well maybe I haven't shared more or liked more but maybe spent more time then, at least in the beginning I might have spent more time. (F1)

Well, maybe at the beginning at least when there were no hobbies and you couldn't leave from home so then used a bit too much social media. So it was noticed and maybe so, it had negative effects. I don't really have ever shared much pictures or anything. (M3)

... I'm pretty lazy to "like" anyway. I like to browse, but there are days when I like and then most days I just more browse. (M2)

Sharing content on social media has decreased significantly and for example, canceled events and restricted traveling are reasons for that. People do not have much content to share when going to events and traveling, as usual, is restricted. Increased time spent on social media has caused that more time can be spent also on searching content by hashtags for example, on Instagram.

Well to my own behavior not much. I may update less today, when there is less happening in life, then there is not so much to update. That when all the events have been canceled and in general, like Instagram, for example, I tend to update when something happens, that I don't like, I'm not that good to update from such an ordinary day, although on the other hand, I like to see that kind of content from others, but it doesn't seem natural to me, so maybe that and then like that I browse the social media more nowadays when I have more time to sit at home. (F7)

Well, first of all, I update less, even less myself, because usually always those few stories (Instagram story), what I've shared has been about when I've been somewhere, and now I can't go anywhere, so I can't share anything myself, of course. But then the other one is that because you spend so much more time at home, and then it's so boring that then all of a sudden there on Instagram looking for those hashtags you can spend quite a lot of time. And then find everything new and nice. And yeah... I spend more time on social media now than before because I have more time at home too. (F8)

One interviewee notes that the pandemic has maybe decreased her overall social media usage when there is a lack of interesting content in life to share when traveling, for example, is restricted.

Well, I have not noticed that it has influenced my own behavior significantly. I have not shared more or less than normal ... if I think about it, it could have even lessen it a bit, because on the other hand there has been so much more at home, but because it may not have happened so much in life, because normally like when traveling or something, you share more content from there. (F2)

There have been several different challenges going on in which consumers have had an opportunity to take part in social media during the pandemic. Especially during the stronger restrictions at the beginning of the pandemic, these challenges created a possibility for people to maintain a connection with their acquaintances and feel a sense of community when other social interaction was restricted. Taking a part in these challenges may have increased the content sharing temporarily during spring 2020.

Well pretty much it has at least increased browsing. Maybe at the beginning of the corona pandemic, when we didn't see people at all, we were here (at home) with Jonne just the two of us, then it also added the sharing that I don't really share anything or personal things especially. But at the beginning of the pandemic, I took more part in all the handstand challenges and like those, which I don't usually do, that maybe a little bit of that, that sense of community was seeking from there. (F4)

... well in general I think that then (in March) it was nice, when social media became somehow like more communal, there was on Instagram that What are you doing now?-challenge and somehow that everyone clearly to some extent wanted to know how other are doing. Maybe there is a certain kind of communality now, well it was at least in the spring, now it has somehow subsided when this has lasted so long. No one can be so communal for many months. (F7)

During the pandemic, it has been reprehensible to be on the move and travel and this has caused that people do not feel comfortable to share any activities on social media, which could be characterized as reprehensible. The restrictions have enabled people to have more free time and this has evoked a hunger for new interesting content on social media.

And maybe it's the fact that you didn't update so many of those events yourself, which someone might have been considered reprehensible at some level, so it can be noticed that I myself and many others also haven't updated that kind of content on social media. (M2)

But that somehow that you haven't so much maybe shared as previously and then because then maybe in the corona has also been that it has been reprehensible to be on

the move like normally when you are somewhere traveling or something so then you share content and less often at home, or at least I don't, at least because I'm not an influencer like that I would tell my own stuff all the time. So then it's kind of decreased in my opinion, but then on the other hand when you have been a lot less anywhere and maybe been in that sense more, or as if there's more time somehow then available. And then there has been a kind of hunger for different contents, because suddenly in a way that social life has been more limited. Maybe then it has been consuming [social media content] more because of it. Or I have that kind of feeling that I've consumed quite a lot now. (F9)

The increase in the amount of time spent on social media has caused in some consumers that the usage of social media has moved from "fast" channels like Snapchat into "slow" channels like YouTube. People have also found new social media channels like TikTok. In addition, the content consumed has concerned different topics compared to the time before the pandemic. For example, when the pandemic has inspired people to do sports and move in nature, consumers are seeking content about camping gear and fitness clothes. In addition, one interviewee notes that she has begun to follow some influencers who share content including ideas for new activities like home training videos.

... it has changed to a different style, that I have used less "fast" social media, that is, like Snapchat, but more been watching longer YouTube videos and that content has changed that, for example, before I was watching makeup videos and now I have been watching and searching good camping equipment... like for outdoor activities, or like that when the activities has changed because of corona, so does the content. ... Perhaps it has just been emphasized that there have been more social media influencers (started following) who have like created home workout videos and yoga videos and picked up a bit of like activities from social media. (F3)

Well, then maybe TikTok has come as new, I haven't yet had it on my phone for a long time, but it's really addictive and it's just such that you can spend time browsing there. It has been kind of new. (F7)

When the time spent on social media has increased and at the same time consumers are sharing less content themselves, they have looked for new content by beginning to follow more celebrities or social media influencers. Social media influencers are seen to have more content to share in their lives. And because of the increased free time, consumers have the ability and also interest to watch through all the content available on their social media channels.

I may have perhaps begun to follow new ones, that like on Instagram have begun to follow some certain social media influencers. And when you have some influencers, who I'm already following then you normally have skipped their stories when they produce so much content, but now it has been like that you may have really watched all the clips through in stories and like that. (F9)

Well, I just followed Miisa Nuorgam as an example, somehow now I like to follow more those influencers who actively update there when I have noticed that many of my friends also update less, so maybe there is a need for more content there to follow now. (F7)

... Maybe even more celebrity-based users (started to follow) that they have then had more interesting content than friends had, because there has been something happening in their lives. (M2)

Some of the interviewees note that they have become tired of the similar content shared on social media. Especially at the beginning of the pandemic, social media influencers shared a lot of content concerning the pandemic and for example, the restrictions, and on the other hand peer consumers have shared a lot of similar content about outdoor activities and exercises. Then again, one interviewee brought up that she has been interested in the content shared by a social media influencer who has been traveling during the pandemic when traveling is restricted and concerned as reprehensible.

Well, maybe not really much. Of course, if now some of the influencers I'm following now if there's been a lot of content concerning it [corona pandemic], then I have no interest to read them anymore, so I'm skipping. ... Maybe one [social media influencer] comes to mind when I saw now that she has gone traveling, so then somehow follow it much more closely because I'm interested in how it goes now because of the corona, so maybe that. (F6)

Not otherwise except got bored sometimes when there have been some certain periods when there came similar postings only because no one was doing anything else now but went outdoors and like that. And maybe then you didn't update that much about such events yourself either. (M2)

5.6.2 On utilizing social media in the decision-making process

People have spent more time on social media during the pandemic and this has caused that they have passively exposed more to all kinds of content. In addition, the information search on the internet in general, and online purchases have increased.

Yes, it is, because now more and more I have been searching about products through the internet. That is, search the information from there and even buy it. So, I've increased the buying through the internet a lot compared to the non-corona-time. (M6)

Well, maybe one effect in the way is that maybe it has been more on social media than before so then you have seen more ads and postings from there, then maybe it has had some effect that it has searched for example, on Instagram more like decoration stuff or like that, with certain keywords or something, maybe because there has been more time. (F1)

As noted already before, consumers have begun to follow more social media influencers during the pandemic and this has caused that they see more content shared by these influencers and if the influencer is perceived as trustworthy, the content can have an effect on purchase decisions.

Well, I don't really see there an effect, maybe when I now follow more of those influencers, then if there's some influencer, that I like or that I think is reliable, then if he/she speaks about something or like on behalf of a product so then I might be more interested in it now or maybe give it more like give more attention. (F7)

Some interviewees have not identified any changes in the use of social media to support the decision-making process during the pandemic. One interviewee notes that he prefers making purchases in brick-and-mortar shops rather than online.

No. I use quite only a little. In the case of electronics I use the most, but then the clothes and others I like to buy on the spot now and in the past, so that is not changed like the behavior of mine. (M2)

People have spent more time at home during the pandemic and thus, one interviewee has noted that it is then more convenient to take your laptop and for example, browse through the Facebook pages of retailers and search information from there when it is not what you would usually do by phone.

Well, not really. In that sense, it may have had the effect that if there is more during a corona pandemic, perhaps spent more time at home than usual, then you might have more a laptop nearby than normally, which may make it easier to quickly browse all the retailers' pages on Facebook, or wherever you browse them. So like that it may have even more actively used when with the cell phone there is less feeling to see that effort. (M4)

When the time spent on social media has increased, consumers have found new and faster ways to find user experiences on social media. Also, when it has been preferable to make purchases online, consumers have searched for information and inspiration about, for example, the supply of products through social media.

There may be, of course, that when it has been spending more time on the social media during the corona, then you have found new ways to get there faster to read those user experiences, so in that sense yes. (F4)

Well, maybe yes, because I may have used online stores more than before, for example, and I have not gone to brick-and-mortar stores to search for products, so maybe I've also had more of an influence, such as videos about from where I could order something... or what's on offer there. Or, maybe like through social media I have got that idea more. (M5)

Consumers have done more background research about products on social media, compared to the normal situation where it is possible to stroll around in stores and test and view products on the premises. Interviewees find it easy to seek information on social media and they see it as a valuable source of information during exceptional circumstances. Contents on social media have also created new purchase intentions.

Maybe that it has just been searching more for that information and reading from there, that it's so easy then when you have an idea that you want something, then it's just so easy to read from somewhere on Instagram or elsewhere. (F6)

Maybe now when you want a product, you first search for more information about it on the internet and google different pictures, when you don't necessarily go to the store to just view the products, but when you go, you go to buy. So then you need to see the product in many different pictures... I don't know if it's in any way a corona's fault, but somehow when it's been following more like the interior design accounts, like I follow a lot anyway. But now maybe you use even more time there in their depths, so yes, I have succumbed to that, that many things visible in those pictures has ended up on the purchase list. (F8)

Maybe yeah it has done more like background checks, when like, with those baby essentials especially at least in the early stages of a pandemic, then there was a feeling that not really feel like going to any stores to check things out. So then maybe you did

more of those kinds of background checks and googled and as if googled on social media ... So maybe you did, you did more of that kind than you normally would on a smaller threshold go to a store to finger things. That now you then tried to do it through the social media. (F9)

The increased free time and restrictions during the pandemic have forced people to find, for example, new ways to exercise. Outdoor activities and exercises have inspired people and through them, also the intention to purchase exercise equipment and clothes has increased. Because of this trend, consumers are seeking information about these products also on social media. Interviewees have identified that the products they are intended to purchase have changed but the ways to search for information about the products have remained as same as it was before the pandemic. However, content concerning sports and sports equipment is seen as a significant and valuable source of information and this kind of content shared by influencers who have a sports background is perceived as credible.

Well, maybe now during the corona I have used it in the same way, but the products have changed. That maybe I haven't done so much shopping because there is somehow been so at home and not had so much to do. That then, those few purchases of what has been done have been quite different than before. I have been looking for some sportswear and those kinds of things, but in pretty much the same way as before. (F3)

Well, maybe, of course, probably the most impact has had such exercise and well-being related that kind of, because it may have become more part of my life too during this corona pandemic, or even stronger, and then I may have invested in those products and things and from there [social media] I have received some content about those, which has certainly influenced my purchase decisions as well. (M5)

Well, because of the corona, what has probably become the most bought is some kettlebells and dumbbells, sportswear and such things, so maybe those [contents] related to them, if there is like some athletes or something that is not like a basic influencer but someone with a sports background. (F6)

During the pandemic, online grocery shopping has increased enormously. One interviewee notes the significance of content and ads shared by online grocery stores. She also notes that even if one of the biggest online grocery stores has not done commercial collaborations with social media influencers, the smaller competitors have done and these may have affected positively also the bigger one. Thus, the content shared by any online grocery store can affect the whole field, and thus several service providers benefit.

(Have certain types of content affected your purchase decisions during the corona?) Well, for example, online grocery store ads and others. And that how convenient it is to order food at home yes it is, it is the one that has influenced me and what I have done now and then maybe it is with it then that with the corona so that not only, I don't know that is it [one of the biggest online grocery store] done, I don't now remember that have they done directly with influencers on social media some collaborations. But then some smaller shops ... may have done some collaborative stuff ... maybe it may have contributed to others, even if concerning the big competitor, even if it didn't produce some content, but maybe those others who are in the same, like related to the online grocery, so they have encouraged then to it (order food from the online store). (F9)

6 DISCUSSION

In this final chapter, the empirical findings presented in the previous chapter are discussed in light of previous studies, and the research questions set at the beginning of the study are answered. First, the theoretical contributions are discussed and managerial implications will be proposed. Then, evaluation and limitations of the study will be discussed and in the end, propositions for future research will be made.

5.1. Theoretical contributions

The aim of this study was to expand the knowledge about social eWOM as a concept and how consumers utilize it in their decision-making process. In addition, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic was seen as an appropriate phenomenon to investigate because of its identified effects on consumer behavior. Thus, the following research questions were applied:

Primary research questions:

- *How do consumers utilize social eWOM in their decision-making process?*
- *What kind of social eWOM do consumers perceive useful as support for their purchase decisions?*

Secondary research questions:

- *Has the COVID-19 pandemic affected consumers' actions in social media?*
- *Has the COVID-19 pandemic affected how consumers utilize social media in their decision-making process?*

Different types of social eWOM are utilized in different phases of the decision-making process. Consumers, for example, seek reviews, recommendations, and inspiration, and make comparisons between the brand image, the image of users of a specific brand, and their own identity. Consumers also search for information on social media by hashtags and keywords, but it can be questioned whether the information searched like this is social eWOM when the content may then come from outside the user's online social network. Social eWOM is perceived as useful especially when making online purchase decisions, where the product cannot be seen in real or tried before the purchase. Participants of this study use Instagram mainly as a source of information when considering their social media usage to support the decision-making process. This may be because a majority of the participants were between the ages of 23 and 27, which is one of the biggest user group of Instagram (SVT, 2017b). Social eWOM was found to

ease the decision-making and reduce the risk associated with the purchase decision when consumers have the ability to gather product and firm related information from social media. This is in line with previous studies by, for example, Simonson & Rosen (2014). Also in line with Kaplan & Haenlein (2010) consumers are seeking social support but also informational support through social media. The influence of social eWOM on consumers' attitudes towards a product, in line with Wang, Yu, & Wei (2012) is also found in this study. Social eWOM significantly affects consumers' attitudes towards products related to social eWOM. Though, there are several factors that affect the effectiveness of social eWOM and these will be discussed later in this chapter.

Social eWOM in the consumer's decision-making process is not studied in the previous research literature and thus, the findings of this study can be seen as rather new theoretical contributions. It was found that consumers seek information from social media in different phases of their decision-making process. Some consumers actively seek inspiration, which can then evoke a need and some consumers have identified this first phase as passive when interesting content may evoke a need or purchase intention even if a consumer was not actively seeking product-related information. The next phase of the decision-making process is the information search, which can also be done passively or actively. Both of these types of information search are found in this study. Consumers seek information on social media and they perceive social media and social eWOM as a valuable information source. When considering the information search after the purchase, a majority of the participants of this study do not utilize social eWOM in this phase. A few participants noted that they could utilize it if some issues evoke after the purchase. However, social eWOM is found to have a significant effect on purchase intention and this is in line with previous studies (see e.g., Chu, Chen, & Sung, 2016; Colliander, Dahlén, & Modig, 2015; Erkan & Evans, 2016; See-To & Ho, 2014; Jin & Phua, 2014).

Participants of this study perceived social eWOM communicated by peer consumers as a more trustworthy source of information compared to paid content, which is acknowledged also in previous studies concerning eWOM (see e.g., Brown et al., 2007) and social eWOM (see e.g., Pihlaja et al., 2017; Le et al., 2018). According to Erkan & Evans (2016) information credibility, need of information, and attitude towards information are key factors of social eWOM that influence consumers' purchase intentions, and the results of this study also support this. Some consumers seek information purposefully from social media as eWOM and it was found that a majority of consumers perceive informative social media content as more significant compared to emotional content when considering purchase decisions. Consumers perceive informative content with high argument quality as persuasive and this is in line with previous studies (Teng et al., 2017).

Social eWOM is typically seen as consumer-generated but the communicator can also be a social media influencer. However, social media influencers as a source of social eWOM is not studied widely in the research literature and it remains unclear when, their content can be defined as social eWOM. One objective of this study was to bring new evidence on this question and the findings will be discussed later in this chapter.

It was found that the content shared by social media influencers evokes rather different emotions in consumers. Some consumers perceive their content as significant and useful when making purchase decisions. Audrezet et al. (2020) note that the content shared by social media influencers is user-generated and therefore consumers may perceive it as more real and authentic. The findings of this study support this. Consumers in some cases perceive that they “know” the influencer already well if they have been in the consumer’s social network for a rather long time and become one of the other users in the network. However, the content shared must also feel real and authentic to a consumer in order to be perceived as trustworthy and cause a possible behavioral effect. Consumers were found to have also skeptical thoughts about social media influencers and their content. The lack of knowledge about to which extent the content is under the influencer’s control creates ambiguity about what is paid content and what is not. This risk is noted also in the previous studies (e.g., Audrezet et al., 2020). Social media influencer’s popularity, the number of followers, does not directly stand for opinion leadership (De Veirman et al., 2017). The findings of the current study support this. It was found that consumers perceive more marginal social media influencers, also called microinfluencers, as more credible and authentic than influencers with a high follower count. This is in line with a study by Tafesse & Wood (2021) who note that when the follower count of an influencer is higher the tie strength with the consumer may weaken and therefore the engagement may diminish. Influencers with a specific professionalism or interest were perceived as more credible and this is also in line with the findings of Tafesse & Wood (2021). Social media influencers have been found to have an effect on expected value and behavioral intention regarding the recommended brands (Jiménez-Castillo & Sánchez-Fernández, 2019) and the findings of this study also support this.

eWOM is defined as communication among peer consumers without commercial interests (Brown, Broderick, & Lee, 2007). However, social eWOM is defined as interpersonal communication within a restricted social network where the content providers are known to the receivers (Pihlaja et al., 2017) and thus it can include the communication between consumers and social media influencers. Yet, there are contradictions in the literature about whether the content of social media influencers is eWOM and thus not-paid user-generated content or, for example, product placement and thus marketer-generated content (see e.g., Audrezet et al., 2020; De Veirman et al., 2017; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2016; Jiménez-Castillo & Sánchez-Fernández, 2019). Based on the findings of this current study, it could be discussed that this depends on the extent to which the content is controlled by the influencer.

As the theory of social eWOM as a separate concept from anonymous eWOM is not fully covered in the research literature, the conceptual observation of social eWOM was seen as appropriate in this study. One significant theoretical contribution is the proof of the four characteristic factors of social eWOM by Pihlaja et al. (2017). However, some of them gained strong evidence while some only limited.

According to Pihlaja et al. (2017), social eWOM has an intended nonpublic audience that is limited and known to the sender. Limited membership of the

audience excludes the opinions of unknown senders and thus eases the information search (Pihlaja et al. 2017). The findings of this study to support this factor were limited but some evidence though exists. Consumers choose their own network, and thus, for example, consumers who perceive social media influencers negatively, do not include them in their online social network. In addition, the limited membership is highlighted in the case of separate Facebook groups focusing on some specific products or actions. This kind of focused conversation group enables the gathering of a highly restricted group of people who are interested in the same topic and thus it eases the information search.

According to Munar & Jacobsen (2013), trustworthiness is relevant especially for those users who search for information from social media but do not share content themselves. The findings of this study also support this because all of the participants noted that they do not share content much themselves and trustworthiness was strongly brought up as a significant factor in social eWOM. It was also found that consumers tend to trust the individual users in their own social network, including peer consumers and social media influencers. This is in line with the findings of Chu & Kim (2011) and Pihlaja et al. (2017) which note that consumers themselves have selected the individuals into their own social network in SNSs and this may itself increase the source credibility and trust.

Pihlaja et al. (2017) note that source evaluation allows consumers to adjust how much they put weight on the information on the basis of the information source. It was found in this study that consumers execute constantly this kind of evaluation on social media. As noted in the theory section, the results of the relationship between homophily and social eWOM are in the existing research literature to some extent inconsistent. Chu & Kim (2011) have found a negative relationship between homophily and eWOM behavior and Fariás (2017) has found that homophily has an indirect positive influence on eWOM through tie strength, normative influence, informational influence, and self-presentation. Findings of this study reveal that homophily does have an effect on the persuasive power of social eWOM and it could be argued that tie strength can strengthen this effect. Consumers trust more social media influencers to who they can relate and who they have followed for a longer time and thus “know” them. This kind of trusted influencer is perceived to have an effect on purchase decisions. This is in line with, for example, the study of See-To & Ho (2014).

This study was not concerning consumer's intention to share social eWOM and therefore evidence about the development of their interpersonal relationships on social media is limited in this paper. Pihlaja et al. (2017) note that social eWOM enables building and developing social connections and perception of self as a part of the network. Despite the limited support for this, it was found that consumers may express themselves and highlight their identity through social eWOM. Consumers can also make a comparison between their own identity and brand identity using social eWOM in order to evaluate whether or not they want be identified as a part of the user group of some product or a brand.

Several recent studies have identified recognizable changes in the use of social media because of the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Donthu & Gustafsson, 2020; Naeem, 2021; Prentice et al., 2020; Sheth, 2020) and the findings of this study are

consistent. Donthu & Gustafsson (2020) have recognized an extreme increase in the use of the internet and social media. Also in this study, it was found that consumers have used social media more during the pandemic. However, the participants of this study noted that their time spent on social media has increased but content sharing has declined. Donthu & Gustafsson (2020) have identified social media as the main communication channel during the pandemic. The findings of this study support this. Consumers have maintained the communality and kept in touch with their acquaintances through social media. Sheth (2020) has noted that consumers have also adopted several new technologies during the pandemic and the findings of this study are consistent when consumers have, for instance, found new social media channels like TikTok.

Recent studies have recognized various changes also in consumers' purchase behavior in retail markets caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Laato, Islam, Farooq, Dhir, 2020; Naeem, 2021; Prentice et al., 2020; Tran, 2021). The findings of this study reveal that when consumers have had more time to spend at home, they scroll social media more and seek information about products they could buy online. This is in line with the findings of Naeem (2021). Increased time spent on social media has also caused that the consumers have exposed more to all kinds of content. It was also found in this study similar to several other studies that consumers have made more online purchases during the pandemic (e.g. Naeem, 2021; Tran, 2021; Donthu & Gustafsson, 2020). Naeem (2021) has found that the content on social media has been different during the pandemic and these contents are seen to have an effect on consumers' buying behavior. In addition to exposing to different kinds of content, consumers were in this study found to seek different content, and the products that interest consumers have changed. The findings of this study reveal that consumers have, for example, in growing amounts exposed to content concerning online groceries and this kind of content has caused an intention to order food online. This is also in line with Sheth's (2020) finding that consumers have adopted new technologies and applications.

5.2. Managerial implications

Social eWOM is identified as a significant factor affecting consumers' decision-making process and thus, it is a phenomenon that marketing practitioners should take into consideration. Companies could encourage consumers to engage more in social eWOM with specific actions and campaigns. Utilizing social eWOM in their marketing practices could be highly efficient for a company given the amount of time consumers spend on social media and the trust they tend to have towards communication from their online social network.

Besides the social eWOM communicated by peer consumers, marketing practitioners should also leverage the value of social media influencers in their marketing communication. However, several factors need to be considered in order to build and maintain efficient cooperation with social media influencers. As

consumers value transparency and authenticity in the content shared by social media influencers, a company needs to offer also for the influencer an opportunity to influence the content he/she is sharing in his/her social media channels concerning a company or its products. As consumers keep transparency in high value a company needs to take it into consideration when making cooperation agreements with social media influencers, at least within the limits of the regulations. The type of content should vary along with the marketing objectives. A company may consider whether the goal is to create content through a social media influencer that could be perceived as product placement or to get the influencer to engage in social eWOM. Keeping in mind the marketing objectives of a company, it might be efficient to cooperate with microinfluencers, when consumers perceive them as a trustworthy source of information if the field of the influencer matches the product or a brand related.

The four characteristic factors of social eWOM offer companies a framework through which they can examine potential actions to take in order to encourage social eWOM communication. Social eWOM offers companies an intended audience, which enables even a rather precise targeting to specific customer groups. Social eWOM is also perceived as a more trustworthy source of information compared to many other marketing communication tactics, and it enables people to express themselves and observe a brand identity.

The last managerial implication of this study concerns the changes in consumer behavior during exceptional circumstances like a worldwide pandemic. While there are several negative effects that a pandemic cause to companies, conscious management can also take advantage of the situation by taking into consideration the changes in consumer behavior. As it was found in this study that consumers have spent more time on social media, searched for more information there about products and brands, and begun to follow social media influencers in order to get more interesting content to engage with. In order to gain an advantage of the situation, companies should focus more on social media, where consumers are spending their time. In addition, the results of this study reveal the effectiveness of social eWOM and it creates a possibility for companies to engage customers and ease their decision-making process. Consumers perceive social media as an important source of information and this has accentuated during the pandemic and thus it is critical for companies to be present in social media through diverse actions.

5.3. Evaluation of the research

There has been discussion about whether reliability and validity are proper measures to use in qualitative research to assess the quality of research (Bryman & Bell, 2007, 394; Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2009, 137). Some researchers have adopted the measures of reliability and validity to fit better on qualitative research, but some have also identified whole separate concepts to be used in qualitative research (Bryman & Bell, 2007, 394-395). The reliability of qualitative research can

be examined, for example through its credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Eskola & Suoranta, 1998, 211-212; Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2009, 138-139). The research is evaluated as a whole, so the focus is on the internal consistency of the entity. Including for example evaluating the purpose and aim of the study, the involvement of the author, and data collection. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2009, 140-141.) Qualitative research includes personal reflections of the researcher and for instance, Eskola & Suoranta (1998, 210) highlight the significance of the researcher him/herself when evaluating the credibility of a qualitative study. Bryman & Bell (2007, 31) also note that researchers are influenced by their own interests and domains of knowledge and personal values when choosing a research topic. However, this may be positive, when the interest towards the topic then more likely lasts throughout the research process (Bryman & Bell, 2007, 31). The author of the study chose the topic of this research based on her own interests. Thus, it was convenient to maintain the interest towards the topic throughout the entire research process. In addition, the research process was conducted in a rather tight schedule and thus, the author had an ability to fully focus on the process. Next, the quality of the current study is discussed through the concepts of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

The credibility of research can be examined through the "truth value" of the data and findings (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2009, 138) and whether the conceptualization and interpretation of the researcher correspond to participants' conceptions (Eskola & Suoranta, 1998, 211). To increase the credibility, the sample was chosen as an objective to include participants from several different age groups and with different occupational backgrounds in order to gather relevant and comprehensive data. Students and graduated students from the field of business and economics were included in the sample because this was seen appropriate when they may have a better understanding about the research topic and thus they might be more familiar with the themes concerned in the interview, which in turn might have made the answering easier for them. However, in order to enable similar possibilities for all interviewees to answer the questions, the concepts and possible challenging words in the interview were clarified for the interviewees at the beginning of the interview.

Transferability refers to whether the results of a study are applicable to another context even when generalizations are not possible because of the diversity of the social reality (Eskola & Suoranta, 1998, 211). Results of this study are not generalizable and they are fully applicable to another context because they are individual perceptions of the participants. Although certain similarities appeared in the results of the study, further research is still required in order to extend the results beyond the context of this study.

Dependability of research concerns the external factors that can affect the study. Factors can also arise from the research and from the phenomenon itself. (Eskola & Suoranta, 1998, 212.) To achieve dependability, the research was conducted following the general research principles of the field in order to maintain the quality of the research. After a comprehensive literature review, an appropriate research methodology was established. Interview questions were formed based on the themes arising from the theoretical background and interviews

were conducted in a professional manner either face-to-face or via telephone. It was highlighted for the participants that the data would be handled confidentially and anonymously to ensure that the interviewees could find the interview situation safe and they could openly answer the questions. Interviews were recorded and carefully transcribed. When the interview data was gathered and adapted into an appropriate form, as the first analysis round, the data was separated under the themes concerned in the interview and after that, in interpretation with the theoretical background a few new themes were identified, and data was organized again including these themes. Then again as a new round of analysis, the data was organized again in subthemes. By following this kind of structured research process, and analysis of the data by several analysis rounds, it can be assumed that the research was conducted in a way that maintains its quality and the results could be repeated in a similar context than in which this study was conducted.

Finally, confirmability refers to confirming the truth value and the applicability of the research by various techniques including, for example, that the interpretations made are supported by other studies investigating the same phenomenon (Eskola & Suoranta, 1998, 212). To increase the confirmability and thus, the objectivity of the study, in the results section, the research results were presented including appropriate quotes from the interviews in order to bring forward the results transparently and thus to strengthen the objectivity. In addition, the results were interpreted in the light of previous studies and this was reported in the theoretical contributions section including references to the studies concerned in the theoretical background section. However, when social eWOM has not gained a wide research background yet the confirming support from previous studies was limited.

In summary, the trustworthiness of this study is relatively well addressed through credibility, dependability, and confirmability. However, the transferability of the results is limited because of the nature of the interviews as a research method where the objective is to examine a phenomenon in its context. Thus, the results are not generalizable, but although, there were repeated similarities found in the research data and thus it could be possible to conduct the results again in similar settings.

5.4. Limitations of the research

Even though this study revealed several theoretical contributions to existing knowledge about the topic and also managerial implications, the limitations of the study must be acknowledged. The first limitation of this study is the limited theoretical background concerning social eWOM. However, for the purpose of this study, a literature review was conducted, including the journal articles from high-quality academic journals considering eWOM in social media. Based on these articles the aim of this study was to develop further the theoretical knowledge on social eWOM as a separate concept from anonymous eWOM. In

addition, the theoretical background about how consumers utilize social eWOM in their decision-making process is lacking, and thus when this was part of the main objectives to study in this research the theoretical background for this phenomenon was built from the eWOM in social media literature and the theoretical contributions were based strongly to empirical findings.

Interviews as a research method also have some limitations. In the interview situation, there is a possibility that the interviewee does not fully give all the information he/she has. In addition, when the objective is to gather information about consumer behavior, it may be difficult for the interviewee to objectively examine and verbally describe his/her own behavior. Thus, in the interview situations, it was notable that some of the interviewees perceived the questions as rather challenging to answer. However, the interviewer did her best in the situation by giving the interviewees plenty of time to answer and by supporting the interviewees with additional questions and examples in order to ease the answering. It is also possible that an interviewee does not want to narrate about some behavioral patterns in order to become evaluated as an individual based on these truths.

In addition, the sample size can be seen as one limitation of the study. Even though several theoretical and managerial contributions were established, the sample size does not enable the research results to be generalized. However, the sample size was appropriate for this study taking into consideration the existing temporal and financial restrictions. In addition, the sample included a rather similar amount of female and male participants and thus, imbalance in genders did not exist. The sample included also widely participants from different age groups.

One limitation of qualitative research is the lack of objectivity. The researcher's subjective reasoning always has an effect on the results. The researcher observes and analyzes the data through his/her own knowledge and capabilities, and this creates an individual context where the results are formed. Interviews are a situation, where the researcher can have a significant effect on the answers arising and thus on the quality of the data. If a different person would have conducted the interviews, the data would be relatively different. To minimize the effect of subjectivity, the researcher aimed to maintain transparency throughout the research process and describe the process and results as honestly as possible so it could be examined and read by anyone without the need of having excessive knowledge about the topic.

5.5. Future research

Social eWOM is a current and significant topic that requires further research (e.g., Pihlaja et al., 2017; MSI 2020-2022 Research priorities). One objective of this study was to develop theoretical knowledge about social eWOM as a separate concept from anonymous eWOM. Theoretical contributions and managerial implications were established but the topic still requires further research. As noted, the sample

size of this study was rather small and the data was gathered only through individual interviews. Therefore a greater sample, longitudinal data, and experimental studies could offer valuable information about the concept of social eWOM.

Social media influencers were identified as a significant source of information, which affects consumers' purchase decisions. In this study social media influencers were identified as one source of social eWOM, however, it remains unclear whether or not their content that is produced in commercial collaboration can be defined as social eWOM. Does it depend on the situation? Or is it defined by the extent to which the social media influencer has control over the content?

The empirical data of this study included participants from different age groups and significant differences were identified between them. It would be intriguing to investigate the perceptions and behavior of different age groups more deeply and to conduct comparisons between the groups. Though, this would require a significantly larger sample than which was in this study. In addition, focusing on some specific age group, for instance, millennials would also be fruitful when their social media usage is a way different from older generations.

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APPENDIX 1 - INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

(Research interviews were conducted in Finnish, therefore this is a translation.)

Preliminary questions:

- What social media channels do you use?
- What retail stores do you follow / like in social media? (name a few)
- Do you follow any social media influencers? (name a few)

1.a) How do you utilize / could utilize social media in your (purchase) decision-making process?

1.b) Do you tend to seek information on certain social media channels before making a purchase decision? What about after the purchase decision?

2. What content produced / shared by other consumers on social media do you consider as useful when making a purchase decision? (positive / negative, informative, emotional, etc.) Example?

3. How do negative updates / comments from other consumers on retailers' social media sites affect you? (Attitudes, buying behavior?)

4. (What kind of social media content shared by retailers do you consider relevant to your purchasing decisions? (Informative content, emotional, etc.) Example? How could a retailer improve your purchasing experience through their social media channels?) *Not used in the empirical data of this study*

5. How do you perceive product-related content shared by social media influencers? Does such social media content influence your purchase decisions?

6.a) Has the COVID-19 pandemic affected your own behavior on social media? What kind of effects? (Have you produced content in different ways or reacted (liked / shared) to social media content in different ways than before the pandemic? Have you begun following users in different ways?)

6.b) Has the COVID-19 pandemic had an impact on how you use social media in your (purchase) decision-making process? What kind of effects? Have certain types of social media content influenced your buying behavior during the corona pandemic?

APPENDIX 2 – LITERATURE REVIEW SOCIAL MEDIA + EWOM

Literature review Social Media + eWOM				
Author(s)	Proposed Theory/Aim of the study	Study	Variables Tested	Key Results
Balaji, Khiong, & Chong (2016)	Building on the cognitive dissonance theory and social support theory. The role of contextual, individual and social networking factors in determining the customers' intentions to engage in negative WOM communication in social networking sites.	Self-reported retrospective survey (N = 206 onlineshoppers).	Feeling of injustice, firm attribution, perceived firm image, face-concern, suppression emotion regulation, reappraisal emotion regulation, SNS use intensity, tie strength and negative word-of-mouth.	Feeling of injustice, firm attribution, firm image, face concern, reappraisal, use intensity and tie strength are key antecedents of negative word-of-mouth communication.
Azeni, Ozuem & Howell (2020)	Frustration-aggression theory applied to online WOM literature, it can support a higher-order understanding of the phenomena. "Frustration-aggression theory concerns the emotional undertaking of frustration/aggression in which frustration arises from experiencing an incident and diverges into aggression with an increased negative inference about the encounter."	Interviews and focus groups, data collected from millennials in Albania and Kosovo. Phenomenology. 48 interviewees: 12 in-depth interviews (six interviews per country) and six focus groups with six individuals in each (three focus groups per country).	Lenient online nWOM, moderate online nWOM, and severe online nWOM. Customers' frustration-aggression stance as a mediator: frustrated complainant and frustrated complainant and aggressive recipient, aggressive complainant and frustrated recipient, aggressive complainant and aggressive recipient.	A three-fold online negative word of mouth (nWOM) typology (i.e., lenient online nWOM, moderate online nWOM and severe online nWOM) recognizing the negative impact customers have on frustration-aggression tags. Construct of three types of customers that engage in online nWOM: tolerable online nWOM customers, rigorous online nWOM customers and confrontational online nWOM customers. Findings culminated with satisfactory recovery strategies aligned to customer inferences regardless of the nWOM context.

Teng, Khong, Chong & Lin (2017)	Identifying critical factors that influence Chinese and Malaysian users' attitudes and behavior when processing persuasive eWOM messages.	The authors used probability sampling, randomly posting the link of Google Docs of the present study in study abroad social groups. (N = 147).	Argument quality, source credibility, source attractiveness, source perception, source style, persuasive eWOM messages, attitude change, and behavioral intentions.	Facebook is the most used social networking site in Malaysia and QQ Qzone in China. SNSs have become consumers first choice to obtain online information and reviews with regard to choices of countries to study. Argument quality is the most determinant factor of persuasive eWOM messages. Increasing of consumers' favorable attitudes is likely to result in higher behavioral intentions of studying abroad. Users are likely to be influenced by persuasive eWOM messages, but cultural differences in influencing factors exist.
Erkan & Evans (2016)	Conceptual model, Information Acceptance Model (IACM) developed based on the integration of Information Adoption Model (IAM) and related components of Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) model.	Surveys of 384 university students who use social media websites.	Attitude towards information, information quality, information credibility, needs of information, information usefulness, information adoption and purchase intention.	Information quality, information credibility, information usefulness and adoption of information, needs of information and attitude towards information are the key factors of eWOM in social media that influence consumers' purchase intentions.
Collander , Dahl'en & Modig (2015)	Highlighting and comparing the effects of communicating with customers in social media with either one-way communication or dialogue.	Authors let randomly selected consumers follow real well-known company Twitters using one of the two strategies for 1 week and then compared their impressions of the companies compared to control groups.	One-way communication ja dialogue, Brand attitude, purchase intention, perceived brand expence, and perceived brand care.	Dialogue enhances brand attitudes and purchase intentions and one-way communication does not. This effect can be explained, in part, by the increased perceived expence and perceived caring signaled by using dialogue.

Jin & Phua (2014)	Examining the impact of Twitter followers, eWOM valence, and celebrity type (prosocial/ antisocial) on consumer behavior in Twitter-based marketing communication. Applying social capital theory, social identity theory, source credibility, and extant literature on eWOM. Whether Twitter could be a viable marketing communication vehicle for celebrity eWOM regarding brands.	Experiment 1: (N = 160) effect of number of followers on source credibility, and the interaction effect between eWOM valence and number of followers on product involvement, buying intention, and intention to pass along eWOM. Experiment 2: (N = 157 (all female)) interaction effect of celebrity type and number of followers on social identification with the celebrity and the mediating effect of social identification. In East Coast of US.	Source credibility, Intention to build an online friendship with the celebrity, Product involvement, Buying intention, Intention to spread eWOM, Number of Twitter followers and popularity, Prosocial (versus antisocial) characteristics, Social identification.	Number of followers positively affects the source credibility. Consumers perceived the celebrity with a high number of followers as more physically attractive, trustworthy, and competent. A high number of followers significantly increased consumers' intention to build an online friendship with the celebrity. Consumers who exposed to positive tweets by the celebrity with a high number of followers showed higher product involvement and buying intention. Consumers exposed to negative tweets by the celebrity with a low number of followers showed higher intention to spread eWOM. The prosocial celebrity was rated higher on source credibility and higher intention to build an online friendship with and stronger social identification. Twitter is an effective medium for eWOM and celebrities can add value for companies through it. Users who identified strongly with a celebrity endorser were socially influenced to a greater extent by the celebrity. Users in microblogging sites may have high intention to build online friendships with celebrities.
Yoon, Polpanum as & Park (2017)	Examining the effect of WOM generated in social media through the existing decision process theory. The prospect theory adopted to illustrate how the volume and valence of WOM influence a person's decision to watch a movie through the movie quality evaluation stage.	U.S. movie industry data and online post data from Twitter were used.	As a dependent variable, the study used the daily gross revenue. The independent variables include WOM factors: negative rate, positive rate, and moving sums of the difference in the number of weekly Tweets.	The effect of online WOM is well explained by the prospect theory. Moviegoers are influenced by the volume and content of previous WOM because they utilize it to construct their expectations. Results suggest that intensively advertising a movie before its release to attract moviegoers could raise the moviegoers' expectations. eWOM (positive and negative) has a significant influence on gross revenue.

Erkan & Evans (2018)	The influence of friends' recommendations on social media and anonymous review on shopping websites in the context of online purchase intention. Analyzing the effects through information adoption model (IAM).	Study 1: Survey (N = 384) in UK. Study 2: in-depth interviews, to find reasons why consumers prefer anonymous reviews.	Independent variables: information quality, information credibility, information usefulness and information adoption. Dependent variable online purchase intention.	Anonymous reviews are seen more influential on consumers' online purchase intentions than friends' recommendations on social media. Information quantity, information readiness, detailed information and dedicated information are factors that make shopping websites superior compared to social media in terms of the impact of eWOM.
Kim, Naylor, Sivadas & Sugumaran (2016)	The effects on the person who communicates eWOM. The impact that incentivized eWOM has on communicator attitude.	Experimental study (N = 157). They chose a hypothetical utilitarian/functional product with concrete product features. Students were incentivized by giving extra course credit for participating the study. Thus, they were incentivized to engage in the eWOM process.	Attitude	Providing recommendations changes communicator's attitude. The communicator of eWOM is likely to remember the biased recommendation and will also use it to update their attitude.
De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders (2017)	Impact of influencers' number of followers on attitude formation. In terms of attitudes towards the influencer (i.e. influencer likeability) and in terms of attitudes towards the brands the influencer promotes.	Two experimental studies. Study 1: (N = 117 Instagram users from US). Two fictitious influencers were created. Manipulation stimuli. Study 2: (N = 118 female Instagram users from US). Manipulation stimuli. Same two fictitious profiles used as in the study 1.	Perceived popularity, number of followers, likeability and ascribed opinion leadership. Perceptions of the endorsed product; perceived divergence, attitude towards the bottle design, aesthetic evaluation, attitude towards the product/brand, perceived quality of the brand, evaluation of product packaging, perceived product attractiveness, and perceived expressive aesthetics.	Influencers with high numbers of followers are found more likeable, partly because they are considered more popular. Only in limited cases, perceptions of popularity induced by the influencer's number of followers increase the influencer's perceived opinion leadership. If the influencer follows very few accounts him-/herself, this can negatively impact popular influencers' likeability. Cooperating with the most popular influencers might not be effective for promoting divergent products, as it may decrease the brand's perceived uniqueness and consequently brand attitudes.

Choi,	Social media from brand's perspective. Testing theoretical links between brand-action antecedents and positive eWOM, and how brand loyalty and social media usage intensity moderate the relationships between the antecedents and eWOM.	Structural equation modelling from 290 Facebook users.	eWOM, personalization, responsiveness, transparency and user empowerment.	Support for the effect of three brand action constructs (personalization, responsiveness, and transparency) on eWOM. Social media usage intensity and brand loyalty moderate the relationship between responsiveness and eWOM.
Eelen, Ozturan & Verlegh (2017)	The impact of brand loyalty on engaging in WOM and eWOM. Examining the effect of a connection between a brand and the self, and desire to promote a brand on the motivation of loyal consumers to engage in eWOM.	Survey (N = 1061) and three follow-up experiments.	In-person WOM, eWOM, loyalty, self-brand connection, and media use. Channels: in person/online, social risk, and faster diffusion. Psychological cost associated with online and offline WOM, and psychological benefit.	Brand loyalty is less positively related to spreading eWOM than WOM. Loyal consumers' willingness to engage in eWOM increases when they are motivated to signal their identity through a brand or to help a brand. eWOM spreads faster and is less spontaneous and more deliberate than WOM. Loyal consumers need strong motivation tied to the brand to engage in eWOM.
Hudson, Huang, Roth & Madden (2016)	How individual and national differences influence the relationship between social media use and customer brand relationships.	Study 1: Survey for panel of consumers, with former experience of at least one brand and its products from 7 brands list (N = 533). Study 2: Survey (N = 207). Study 3: Survey (N = 281).	Anthropomorphism, Net Promoter Score (NPS), brand relationship quality, and social media use.	Results offer cross-national support for the proposition that engaging customers via social media is associated with higher consumer-brand relationships and WOM communications when consumers anthropomorphize the brand and they avoid uncertainty.

Vermeer, Arayo, Bernitter & van Noort (2019)	Approach based on supervised machine learning that first decides whether eWOM is relevant for the brand to respond, and then—based on a categorization of seven different types of eWOM (i.e., rejection, complaint, comment, question, suggestion, acknowledgement and compliment)—classifies three customer satisfaction dimensions (dissatisfaction/neutral/satisfaction)	Dataset of approximately 60,000 Facebook comments and 11,000 tweets about 16 different brands in eight different industries.	Testing and comparing the efficacy of various sentiment analysis, dictionary-based and machine learning techniques to detect relevant eWOM.	Study identifies response-worthy eWOM based on the content. The results indicate that machine learning techniques used achieve considerably higher accuracy in detecting relevant eWOM on social media compared to any kind of sentiment analysis.
Rosario, Sotgiu, Valck & Bijmolt (2016)	Building a framework that describes the key characteristics of the platforms, products, and eWOM metrics that may moderate the impact of eWOM on sales.	Examining the effect of consumer generated information on sales across a large body of literature. A meta-analysis of 1,532 effect sizes across 96 studies covering 40 platforms and 26 product categories.	Platforms: social media platforms, review platforms, e-commerce platforms. Products: tangible good, service, digital product, utilitarian product, hedonic product, high financial risk, low financial risk, mature product, new product. Metrics: eWOM volume (average, incremental, cumulative), eWOM valence (average rating, incremental eating, positive valence, negative valence), eWOM composite valence-volume (positive volume, negative volume), eWOM variance (agreement and precision, variability, incremental), other eWOM measures (existence, content).	On average, eWOM is positively correlated with sales, but its effectiveness differs across platform, product, and metric factors. For example, the effectiveness of eWOM on social media platforms is stronger when eWOM receivers can assess their own similarity to eWOM senders. These homophily details do not influence the effectiveness of eWOM for e-commerce platforms. eWOM has a stronger effect on sales for tangible goods new to the market, however, the product life cycle does not moderate the eWOM effectiveness for services. eWOM volume has a stronger impact on sales than eWOM valence does. Negative eWOM does not always jeopardize sales, but high variability in eWOM does.

<p>Barnes & Jacobsen (2014)</p>	<p>Organizations' social media monitoring behaviours.</p>	<p>Cross sector, longitudinal research on prominent sectors, including business, non profits, and academia.</p>	<p>Social media usage, Employ permanent staff to handle social media efforts, plan to increase investment in social media, believe social media is important for web traffic, believe social media is important for brand awareness, believe social media is important for company reputation, believe social media is important for lead generation, believe social media is important for customer support. Have written social media policy, measure effectiveness of SM using comments/fans/followers/page views/Google Analytics, believe SM is worth the investment, have a well-executed SM plan.</p>	<p>Monitoring behavior may be related to how involved an organization is in social media (written policy, goals related to social media plan, using tracking measures etc.). Charities were most likely to engage in monitoring behaviour for their causes.</p>
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<p>Pauwels, Aksehirli & Lackman (2016)</p> <p>The effect of different topics of eWOM on company performance. Which specific marketing communication channels obtains most of its performance impact by stimulating eWOM topics?</p>	<p>Quantifying the dynamic interactions among marketing, eWOM content, search, and online and offline store traffic for an apparel retailer. A longitudinal data set of marketing actions, company performance, online search and eWOM content metrics.</p> <p>Store traffic, online traffic, organic search, brand eWOM, ad eWOM, purchase eWOM, television GRPs, radio GRPs, Print: number of circulars, and paid search impressions.</p>	<p>Managers should track how their marketing actions induce specific eWOM content metrics and how these affect company performance. While it yields a similar online store traffic lift, advertising-related eWOM yields only half the offline store traffic lift of brand-related eWOM and of neutral eWOM about purchasing at the retailer. Paid search shows the highest elasticity in stimulating online conversations, but drives less business than offline marketing actions. While TV is the main paid driver of online store traffic, print is the main paid driver of offline store traffic (for the studied retailer). Over a third of the offline store traffic effects materialize indirectly through eWOM and organic search.</p>
<p>Viglia, Minazzi & Buhais (2016)</p> <p>Investigating the effect of various aspects of online reviews in terms of hotel occupancy rates.</p>	<p>The first data set: occupancy rates obtained directly by contacting the 956 hotels present in the city centre of Rome. Second data set: online customer review ratings for the 346 hotels.</p> <p>Review score, review variance and review volume in relation to occupancy rates.</p>	<p>Review score is the dimension with the highest impact. The results suggest that after controlling for other variables, a one-point increase in the review score is associated to an increase in the occupancy rate by 7.5 percentage points. Regardless the review score, the number of reviews has a positive effect, but with decreasing returns, implying that the higher the number of reviews, the lower the beneficial effect in terms of occupancy rates is.</p>

Kim, Yoon & Choi (2019)	Examining the effect of customer driven conversations (on earned media) on business performance. The effect of eWOM volume and valence on sales. Authors argue that conversations from earned social media, along with other forms of marketing communications, can be both a precursor to and outcome of sales in the context of the movie industry.	Data from social media and traditional advertising that jointly contribute to box office and home video sales. 65,665,859 social media postings from blogs, forums, news, and Twitter, Nielsen's ad expenditure data, Rotten Tomatoes ratings, movie trailer views, ratings, production budget, and the number of screens for 170 movies.	eWOM volume and eWOM valence. Movie revenues, critical ratings, media spending, production budget, trailer views and number of screens.	eWOM in SNS is valuable for service providers. eWOM volume and eWOM valence have a significant effect on sales.
Kim, Sung & Kang (2014)	The influence of consumers' relationships with brands on their engagement in retweeting brand messages on Twitter.	Survey (N = 315), Korean consumers who currently follow brands on Twitter.	Brand-retweeting behavior, brand identification, brand trust, community commitment, and community membership intention. Twitter usage frequency and number of postings.	Consumers who retweet brand messages outscore those who do not on brand relationships (i.e., brand identification, brand trust, community commitment, community membership intention), Twitter usage frequency, and total number of postings.

Chiu, Chen & Sung (2016)	The study examines brand-following behavior on Twitter using the Ajzen's model of theory of planned behavior (TPB).	Online survey, 649 adults from which 351 passed the screening question (Do you follow brands on Twitter?) and completed the survey. Survey items were based on TPB variables, in addition brand attachment was also measured.		Attitude toward brand following, subjective norm, perceived behavioral control, and intention to follow brands (on Twitter); Intention to tweet and retweet, and purchase intention, were measured as outcome variables.	Attitude toward brand following, subjective norm, perceived behavioral control, and brand attachment are positively associated with intention to follow brands on Twitter. Consumers' intention to create (i.e., intention to tweet at brands) and disseminate (i.e., intention to retweet the links of brands) brand-related information, as well as purchase intention, are the outcomes of intention to follow brands on Twitter. They suggest, that TPB model is suitable for predicting Twitter users' brand-following behaviour. Finding, that brand attachment drives consumer intention to follow brands extend the original TPB framework.
Eisingerich, h, Chun, Liu, Jia & Bell (2015)	Conceptual difference between eWOM on online social sites (sWOM) such as Facebook and traditional WOM.	Study 1 (N = 118). Participants were asked to name one of their favorite brands and then to answer several questions about the brand. Study 2 (N = 208). Consumers' need for self-enhancement was measured. Study 3 used a 2 (communication mode: WOM vs. sWOM) × (self-enhancement need: high vs. control) × 2 (salience of social risk: high vs. control) mixed experimental design. (N = 161).		WOM (positive), sWOM (positive), perceived social risk in the WOM context, perceived social risk in the sWOM context, and brand attitude.	Consumers are less willing to engage in sWOM than WOM. The difference can be explained by social risk associated. The difference between people's desire to engage in sWOM and WOM is mediated by perceived social risk and amplified when social risk is made salient. Consumers' need to self-enhance mitigates the difference in willingness to offer sWOM versus WOM.

Farias (2017)	Identifying the factors that influence eWOM in SNSs. Cultural aspects that may affect the eWOM concept are discussed.	Latin America, Chile. Online survey (N = 240).	Opinion seeking, opinion giving, opinion passing, the strength, normative influence, informational influence, homophily, trust, self-presentation, voluntary self-disclosure.	The strength, normative influence, informational influence, self-presentation, and voluntary self-disclosure are all positively associated with eWOM behaviour in SNSs. Homophily exerts a positive indirect influence on eWOM through the mediators of the strength, normative influence, informational influence, and self-presentation. Trust exerts a positive indirect influence on eWOM through the mediators of the strength, normative influence, and voluntary self-disclosure.
Chiu, Lien & Cao (2019)	Drawing from social identity theory, the research examines the influence of two personality traits, sense of belonging and need for self-enhancement, on consumer engagement and in turn to eWOM intention.	Online survey (N = 455) in China.	Sense of belonging, need for self-enhancement, vigour, absorption, dedication, and eWOM intentions.	The need for self-enhancement positively influences Chinese travellers' engagement with WeChat. Only a partial positive relationship between consumer engagement and eWOM intention was found: only dedication towards WeChat is directly related to travellers' intention to engage in eWOM on WeChat. Dedication was found to mediate the influence of need for self-enhancement on eWOM intentions.
Chiu & Kim (2011)	How social relationship factors relate to eWOM in social websites (SNSs). Conceptual model identifies the strength, homophily, trust, normative and informational interpersonal influence as an important antecedent to eWOM behaviour.	Testing the conceptual model by online survey (N = 400).	The strength, homophily, trust, normative influence, and informational influence in relation to eWOM in SNSs.	The strength, trust, normative and informational influence are positively associated with users' overall eWOM behaviour. Negative relationship was found with regard to homophily.

Vargo,	The study assess the degree to which	Historical Facebook and	Historical eWOM data from	Self-enhancement is found on both platforms
Gangadha	impression management and its	Twitter eWOM (N =	actual Twitter and Facebook	(Facebook and Twitter). The majority of eWOM was
rbadla &	principal theory self-enhancement	47,907) is analyzed for a	accounts.	positive and vengeance was rare. eWOM mirrors a
Hopp	exist in Twitter and in Facebook.	static group of 783 active		consumer's non-eWOM sentiment valence across
(2019)	Also they consider the different	US consumers.		SNSs. Twitter is seen to have less privacy
	affordances on SNSs.			expectations and a larger customer service focus
				than Facebook.
Whiting,	Motives for engaging in positive and	Qualitative study, using		Negative eWOM motives, from most to least
Williams	negative eWOM about organizations	the critical incident		frequently mentioned: altruism, resolution seeking,
& Hair	on social media. Existing WOM	study. 64 positive and 60		express negative feelings, vengeance, want to be
(2019)	frameworks is used. Study seeks to	negative incidents were		heard by organization and help company make
	confirm established motives in	analyzed.		changes. The six positive motives, from most to
	literature and also indentifying new			least frequently mentioned: help company,
	motives specific to social media			altruism, express positive feelings, help employees,
	environment.			product involvement and self-enhancement. This
				research identified two new motives for positive
				eWOM: help employees and express positive
				feelings, and two new motives for negative eWOM:
				help company and want to be heard by
				organization. Further refinement of WOM motives
				and scales within a social media context is needed.
Hakel-	This study examines individual and	A field study of a real	Brand engagement, brand	Facebook activity has a positive influence on brand
Elsabel,	collective factors that lead to brand	brand on its Facebook	community involvement, and	content sharing for active users (posters) but not for
Zhao,	content sharing behaviors.	fan page to gather actual	eWOM.	nonactive users (turlkers). Brand engagement
Ivens &		behavioral data. Both		positively affects brand content sharing for both
Brem		declarative and		active and nonactive users. Brand community
(2019)		behavioral data were		involvement was not found have an influence on
		used to explain brand		brand content shaning.
		eWOM, based on 250		
		participants.		

Wolny & Mueller (2013)	Analysing consumers' interactions with fashion brands on social networking sites, focusing on consumers' motives for engaging in eWOM. Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) model is expanded to include context-specific fashion and brand variables.	Social networking sites included Facebook and Twitter. Online survey (N = 192).	Traits: fashion involvement and brand involvement, motivations: product involvement, other involvement, advice seeking, and need for social interaction. Attitude towards behaviour, subjective norm, and eWOM engagement.	High brand commitment and fashion involvement motivate consumers to engage in talking about and interacting with fashion brands. Those who are motivated by product involvement or have a high need for social interaction engage more frequently in fashion brand-related eWOM than those that are not motivated by those factors.
Jansen, Zhang, Sobel & Chowdury (2009)	Microblogging as a form of eWOM for sharing consumer opinions concerning brands. Investigating the eWOM trends, characteristics of brand microblogging and microblogging patterns.	> 150,000 postings in Twitter containing branding comments, sentiments, and opinions were analyzed. Overall structure the types of expressions, and the movement in positive or negative sentiment were analyzed. Comparing automated methods of classifying sentiment in microblogs with manual coding. Case study approach, they analyzed the range, frequency, timing, and content of tweets in a corporate account.	Actions in Twitter: Announcement, Answer, Chitchat, Comment, Confirmation, Consulting, Expecting, Forwarding, Maintenance, Missing, Negative comment, Notification, Order via Twitter, Patronizing, Positive comment, Question, Recommendation, Recommendation request, Request, Research, Response, Suggestion, Supplement, and brand sentiment by week. Terms in tweets, term co-occurrence, twittering frequency, and action-object pairs.	Linguistic structure of tweets approximate the linguistic patterns of natural language expressions. In the most of the posts, sentiment for the brands was positive. More than 80% of the tweets that mentioned one of the brands investigated did not express any sentiment. People are using Twitter for general information seeking and sharing, asking questions, and expressing opinions about brands or products. Weekly changes in sentiments on the tweets occur. There are differences on tweets concerning different brands and industries. Microblogging is seen to be a rich area for companies interested in brand and CRM.

Hoffman & Daugherty (2013) Providing a theoretical rationale for presuming that a more complex relationship unfolds in a social media environment where product information is consumer-generated. Subjects were expected to fixate more frequently on a) the image based elements of non-luxury brands and b) the text-based elements of luxury brands.

Eye-tracking study.

Visual elements, message valence and brand type in relation to consumer attention.

Participants paid more attention to image-based as opposed to text-based elements of non-luxury restaurant reviews. Attention to text-based elements was greater than attention to image-based elements for reviews of the luxury restaurant. Attention to the text-based elements of luxury restaurant was greater than attention to the image-based elements of this condition. Mean levels of attention to image-based elements as opposed to text-based elements was higher in each of the remaining conditions. Findings suggest that image-based elements may not be the most attended to in every condition.

Amezcuca & Quintanilla (2016) The research takes corporate social responsibility (CSR) communications on SNSs as a context to evaluate how negative eWOM may reach the levels of cynicism.

Qualitative assessment, ethnography of posts written on the official YouTube site of Coca Cola.

Consumers' responses to a Coca Cola social media campaign released in January 2013.

Three forms of cynical consumer communication styles in response to corporate campaigns on SNSs is found: skeptical, passiveaggressive and warrior eWOM.

Hansen, Kupler & Hennig-Thurau (2018)	Building a conceptual framework to identify which firestorms harm long-term brand perceptions and become part of consumers' long-term memory. Categorizing different social media firestorm factors into (a) trigger characteristics, which can be observed right at the beginning of the crisis, and (b) firestorm characteristics, which evolve during the crisis. Trigger characteristics (different reasons, vividness) also might influence the firestorm characteristics (strength, length, and breadth). Identifying the characteristics and explaining their influence on memory and brand perceptions with consumer behavior's elaboration likelihood model.	Secondary data about 78 real-lifefirestorms with daily brand perceptions obtained from the YouGov panel and survey data from 997 consumers.	Product or service failure, social failure, communication failure, vividness of trigger, strength (of the firestorm measured in number of tweets), length, breadth (number of print and online articles covering the firestorm), start TM, SM (traditional or social media), years_ago, FST_2015 (did a brand experience a firestorm in 2015), abnormal short-term change in brand perceptions, abnormal long-term change in brand perceptions, aided recall, and correct reason.	58% of all affected brands suffer from a decrease in short-term brand perceptions, and 40% suffer long-term negative effects, suggesting that social media firestorms can indeed harm businesses but also that strong variations exist. Social media firestorms are most impactful in terms of negative brand association changes and/or memory effects when they are initiated by a vivid trigger(e.g., video in the first firestorm tweet), linked to a product/ service or social failure, characterized by a large volume of social media messages, and when they last longer.
Kitbler, Colicev & Pauwels (2020)	Comparing the explanatory and forecasting power of different sentiment extraction tools (SETs) used in marketing studies based on social media volume, top-down language dictionaries and bottom-up machine learning approaches.	Daily customer mindset metrics obtained from survey data. 48 brands in diverse industries.	Volume of engagement, LIWC, SVM no neutral, SVM neutral, SVM dispersion, awareness, impression, purchase intent, satisfaction, recommendation, advertising awareness.	Volume metrics explain the most of brand awareness and purchase intent. Bottom-up SETs excel at explaining brand impression, satisfaction and recommendation. The most nuanced version of bottom-up SETs (SVM with Neutral) performs best for the search goods for all consumer mindset metrics. For Purchase Intent the Volume metrics work best. For experienced goods, Volume outperforms SVM with neutral.

Chen, Fay & Wang (2011)	Examining the relationships between consumer posting behavior and marketing variables (such as product price and quality) and explores how these relationships evolve as the Internet and consumer review websites attract more universal acceptance.	Automobile-model data from several leading online consumer review sources that were collected in 2001 and 2008.	Number of postings, overall rating, quality, price, sales, vehicle class (luxury, compact, sport, SUV, pickup, van), review website (car and driver, autobytel, MSN, Yahoo, and Epinions).	The relationships between marketing variables and consumer online-posting behavior are different at the early and mature stages of consumer Internet usage. In the early stage, price is negatively correlated with the propensity to post a review. As Internet usage becomes prevalent, the relationship between price and the number of online consumer reviews shifts to a U-shape. In the early years, price has a U-shaped relationship with overall consumer rating, but this correlation between price and overall rating becomes less significant in the later period.
Wallace, Bul, de Chernaton y & Hogan (2014)	Facebook fans can be classified based on brand loyalty, brand love, use of self-expressive brands, and WOM for "liked" brands.	Web-based survey. Sample of 438 individuals who "like" brands on Facebook. Cluster analysis.	Consumers' brand attitudes in relation to the self-expressive nature of the brand "liked", brand loyalty, brand love, and WOM for the brand "liked". Beside these "Reasons for Liking", Social Network, and Personal Traits were measured.	There is four fan types: the "Fan"-atic, the Utilitarian, the Self-Expressive and the Authentic.

<p>Pihlaja, Saarijärvi, Spence & Yrjölä (2017)</p>	<p>Conceptualizing social eWOM. Exploratory research using a case example that unearths consumers' perceptions of social eWOM. Three complementary data collection techniques were employed: verbal protocols, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups.</p>	<p>In relation to traditional eWOM platforms that post anonymous reviews, social eWOM has several unique characteristics: intended audience, information trustworthiness, source evaluation, and interpersonal relationships. Suggestion as a definition of social eWOM: informal, interpersonal communications within a restricted social network related to the usage or characteristics of particular goods and services or their sellers that is deemed more trustworthy by recipients than anonymous postings, serves to develop interpersonal relationships, and is provided in a context in which the receiver knows the content provider, and thus can better interpret or weigh the information given knowledge about the content provider.</p>
<p>Lee & Bogomolova (2020)</p>	<p>Examining the relationship between positive online reviews behaviour for university and students' well-being. And the impact of eWOM behaviour on students' psychological well-being among active and passive social media users.</p>	<p>University brand identification, positive eWOM behaviours, university life satisfaction, and psychological well-being.</p>
		<p>Students who share positive reviews about university on social media tend to have better psychological health. Active social media users benefit more in terms of well-being through sharing positive online reviews.</p>

Canhoto & Clark (2013)	Contributing social media and social capital research by studying the perceptions that social media users have of companies that interact with them in online environment.	The researchers posted invitations for participation in the (qualitative) research on Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook and asked respondents to share the invitation with other social media users who might have participated in or witnessed positive interactions with organisations online. (N = 44)	The users value social networks and support as part of their online relationships. In interactions with commercial organisations, there is a clear preference for formal networks. Respondents appreciate the selective use of alternative channels of communication to complement social media conversation. The dominant motivations to interact with organizations online are tangible support and exchange of relevant information. Preference for targeted and relevant interactions is recognized. Emotional and social support is an important source of value in interactions between firms and consumers on social media platforms. Solving customers' problems and sharing useful information is crucial for companies in social media (in short term).
Munar & Jacobsen (2013)	Exploring Scandinavian tourists' perceptions of Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 information sources and scrutinises influence of social media on holidaymakers' information sharing and examining tourists' involvement in developing and sharing digital content. Discussing also information intensity, hedonic aspects and utilitarian values of tourist information in relation to interaction aspects of social media.	A summer season survey in the nature and well-known destination of Mallorca, Spain. Questionnaire (N = 405).	Importance of information from social media for aspects of travel decisions, trustworthiness of travel information source, and possible media reports about the holiday tour. Trustworthiness may be more relevant for "turkers" who only want to access information on social media sites than for "posters", who want to actively contribute by uploading content to the sites. Social media are of low relevance for common travel decisions. This study shows higher perceived trustworthiness of information from Web 1.0 websites controlled by tourism organisations rather than social media. Review sites such as TripAdvisor, appears as the most trustworthy type of social media platform. Tourists in this study to a quite large extent create and share content about their holidays by way of electronic media but they do this after the journey, not "real time"- postings. Age has a significant influence on the use of social media.

- Knoll (2016) Literature review on advertising in social media. Two international databases from business and communications. 51 relevant studies.
- Cantallop s & Salvi (2014) Literature review on eWOM in tourism industry. Gather and analyze published articles regarding the influence of eWOM on the hotel industry.
- See-To & Ho (2014) Based on the theories in trust and value co-creation the study analyzes how electronic eWOM affects purchase intention in social network sites (SNSs). They develop a theoretical model by blending cutting-edge research in consumers' trust, value co-creation, and eWOM to study how these factors interact with each other.
- Audrezet, Kerviler, & Moulard (2020) Investigating social media influencers (SMIs) authenticity management. Qualitative study, SMI-brand partnership observations, SMIinterviews, and a comparison of these data sources.
- Seven emerging themes: use of advertising in social media, attitudes about and exposure to advertising, targeting, user-generated content in advertising, electronic word-of-mouth in advertising, consumer-generated advertising, and further advertising effects.
- Two main lines of research concerning eWOM and hotels is identified: review-generating factors (previous factors that cause consumers to write review(s) and impacts of eWOM (impacts caused by online review(s) from consumer perspective and company perspective.
- eWOM has a direct impact on purchase intention, and indirect impact on purchase intention which is moderated by consumers' trust on the underlying product. eWOM has an impact on value co-creation, and value co-creation has an effect on purchase intention. Consumers' trust on a product has an impact on value co-creation, and the message source in the SNSs moderates the impacts of eWOM on consumers' trust on a product, value co-creation, and purchase intention.
- Two authenticity strategies were found: passionate and transparent authenticity.

Li & Du (2017)	They are proposing a framework for identifying opinion leaders and maximizing the dissemination of messages.	Analyzing existing micro-blogs
Campbell & Grimm (2019)	Authors investigate the evolution of regulation relevant to native advertising.	Reviewing and discussing the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) regulations relevant to native advertising.
Campbell & Farrell (2020)	Describing the roots of influencer marketing. Identifying three functional components of influencers' (ie. audience, endorser, and social media manager) and defining different sources of value an influencer may offer through each of these components.	Literature review
Bernitter, Verleg, & Smit (2016)	Investigating consumers' intention to endorse brands on social media. They suggest that consumers aim to express their identity through endorsing brands.	Seven experimental studies, non-profit and for-profit brands.

The framework enables companies to strengthen their marketing, select keywords, search micro-blog content and blogger information, form ontologies, estimate and analyze the indices of bloggers' influence, identify opinion leaders, and maximize message dissemination.

They identify shortcomings and remedies are proposed. Also agenda for future research among the topic of native advertising is developed.

Advices about how to leverage the three functional components strategically.

Brand warmth mediates the effect of brand type on consumers' intention to endorse brands and branded content. Brand symbolism also moderates the process. Brand symbolism increases the positive effect of warmth on consumers' intention to endorse for-profit brands. Perceptions of brands' warmth and not competence decrease the efforts that brands are required to make to gain consumers' endorsements.

Djafarova & Rushworth (2016)	Investigating the impact of Instagram through source credibility, buying intention, and social identification.	In-depth interviews, 18 female Instagram users between ages 18 and 30.	Perceived influence, Brand engagement in self-concept, brand expected value, and intention to purchase recommended brands.	Social media influencers are more powerful and they are perceived as more credible and participants are able to relate to them rather than to traditional celebrities.
Jiménez-Castillo & Sánchez-Fernández (2019)	Determining the effectiveness of digital influencers in recommending brands via eWOM.	Online survey in Spain (N = 280).	Perceived influence, Brand engagement in self-concept, brand expected value, and intention to purchase recommended brands.	Perceived influence of digital influencers helps to generate engagement and increases expected value and behavioral intention regarding the recommended brands. Brand engagement in self-concept raises brand expected value and both variables also affect the intention to purchase recommended brands.
Tatlese & Wood (2021)	Examining how influencers' content and engagement strategy are associated with followers' engagement behavior on Instagram.	Dataset of Instagram influencers, databases were utilized.	Follower count, followee count, content volume, domains of interest, and follower engagement.	Follower count and content volume are negatively associated with follower engagement. Followee count is positively associated with follower engagement. These effects are modified by influencers' domains of interest.