

Electronic word of mouth effects on consumers' brand attitudes, brand image and purchase intention: an empirical study in Egypt

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Keywords:

Electronic word of mouth, Brand attitudes, Brand image, Purchase intention, Smartphones.

Abstract

Word of mouth communication has changed massively over the years, due to sophisticated technologies and new techniques, to a more ubiquitous form of communication called electronic word of mouth. The purpose of this paper is to examine the influence of e-WOM on purchase intention, as well as examining the mediating effect of brand image and consumer's attitude towards the brand on the relationship between e-WOM and purchase intention. To empirically test the hypothesized relationships between variables a model consisted of those variables was developed based on literature review. This model was analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) using AMOS program 22. A quantitative, descriptive analysis a self-administered structured questionnaire was designed to investigate model relationships and was distributed on 469 undergraduates students from two large Business Schools affiliated to public and private universities operating in Cairo the capital of Egypt using the convenience sample technique. As most studies can hardly be implemented and applied to countries like Egypt. Therefore, Egypt is worthwhile to be studied on the topic of e-WOM and its influence on purchase intention. Empirical results indicated that eWOM had a significantly positive impact on brand image, brand attitudes and consumers' purchasing intention also findings revealed that brand image has a strong effect on the consumers' attitude toward a specific brand. The results could be useful for the organizations to better serve their consumers through the online buzz marketing strategies.

1. Introduction

With the spread of the internet worldwide interpersonal communication has been profoundly reshaped from the traditional face to face communication to a more virtual way of communication called electronic word of mouth, where consumers have got an excellent opportunity to share information about their consumption experience and to spread advice regarding products and brands using social networking platforms and consumer reviews sites (Godes and Mayzlin, 2004; Brown *et al.*, 2007; Xia and Bechwati, 2008), which in turn can be taken into consideration when gathering pre-purchase information (Adjei *et al.*, 2009; Zhu and Zhang, 2010; Lee and Koo, 2012), and result in directing consumers attitude (Lee *et al.*, 2009, Jalilvand *et al.*, 2012), influencing brand image perception (Lee *et al.*, 2009), as well as purchase intention (Lin, *et al.*, 2013; Torlak *et al.*, 2014, Charo *et al.*, 2015; Ladhari and Michaud, 2015). Thus, studying e-WOM significant influences and the great power it can exert on brand image perception, attitude towards the brand formation, as well as its impact on purchase intention is an essential scientific investigation that can add to previous literature and expand our knowledge about e-WOM influence in a new cultural context.

Literature witnessed that creating a better brand image is crucial for directing consumer decision making process (Erdem *et al.*, 2002; Kotler and Keller, 2009), building brand equity, charging an added premium to the brand (Ait-Sahalia *et al.*, 2004; Keller 2009), affecting attitude towards the brand (Chiou and Cheng 2003; Jalilvand *et al.*, 2012), influencing purchase intention (Shukla ,2011; Wu *et al.*, 2011; Charo *et al.*, 2015; Lien *et al.*, 2015), mediating the effect of e-WOM on purchase intention (Lin *et al.*, 2013) , in addition to establishing an outstanding competitive advantage. Moreover, past research pointed out the overwhelming impact of information sharing on brand image perception (Jalilvand and Samiei, 2012; Setiawan, 2014; Torlak *et al.*, 2014, Charo *et al.*, 2015). Consequently, it was important for the sake of this study to include brand image as a mediating variable in the relationship between e-WOM and purchase intention. The main purpose of this study is to examine the interrelationship among electronic word of mouth (eWOM), brand image, consumers' attitude toward brand and purchasing intention toward smartphone in Egypt.

2. Literature review

2.1 From WOM communication to e-WOM

Word of mouth communication is a key driver in shaping consumer's attitudes as well as directing behavioral intentions (Chiou and Cheng, 2003; Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006; Xia and Bechwati, 2008; Jalilvand

et al., 2012). Research postulated that WOM communication is more influential than other sources of communication such as advertisements and critiques recommendations (Smith *et al.*, 2005; Trusov *et al.*, 2009). Consumers trust peer consumers more than companies and are willing to evaluate products and services according to their experience and personal opinions before decision making (Lee and Koo, 2012; Wei and Lu, 2013), as it is perceived to be comparatively reliable (Gruen *et al.*, 2006). Wagenheim and Bayon (2004) mentioned that consumers would search for a more credible source of information like WOM information when they perceive high psychological or social risk with their purchase. In addition, the message source theory affirmed that in case of high source credibility, the receiver will be highly persuaded by the message, however in case of low source credibility, the receiver will have doubts about the message (Eagly and Chaiken, 1993; Zhang and Buda, 1999).

Nowadays, how consumers interact with each other has massively changed, due to the vast change in technology and wide spread of the internet that facilitates to consumers to share consumption-related advice by getting engaged in online activities. Thus the internet brought up a less personal source of communication yet a universal one called electronic word of mouth (Godes and Mayzlin, 2004; Brown *et al.*, 2007; Xia and Bechwati, 2008). Studies showed that it is increasingly common between consumers when gathering pre-purchase information to consider online product reviews (Adjei *et al.*, 2009; Zhunand Zhang, 2010), which not only vary in their content, but also in their polarity from positive to negative comments (Liu 2006; Sparks and Browning, 2011). Ladhari and Michaud (2015) showed that exposure to positive online comments about a specific hotel result in a significant higher booking intention for it. Researchers also indicated that comments influences attitude towards the brand, as the existence of excessively positive comments leads to more desirable attitude toward the brand, while the presence of negative comments leads to negative influence towards the brand (Lee *et al.*, 2009). Findings also showed that there is a significant positive relationship between the e-WOM on brand image and purchase intention (Torlak *et al.*, 2014, Charo *et al.*, 2015). Likewise, Jalilvand and Samiei (2012) concurred that e-WOM is one of the most effective factors influencing brand image. Lin *et al.* (2013) revealed that product involvement and brand image have a moderating effect in the relationship between e-WOM and purchase intention. Setiawan (2014) research results indicated that e-WOM has a significant direct effect on destination image, and an indirect effect on satisfaction and loyalty mediated by destination image. The argument presented above lead to the following research hypothesis:

H1. Electronic word of mouth has a positive and significant impact on brand image.

H2: Electronic word of mouth has a positive and significant impact on consumers' attitude toward the brand.

H3. Electronic word of mouth has a positive and significant impact on purchasing intention.

2.2 Brand image

Brand image concept has been drawing academics and practitioners attention, due to its importance in affecting many marketing outcomes. Research revealed that brand image is a critical factor in building brand loyalty (Tepeci, 1999; Hyun and Kim, 2011). According to Kotler and Keller (2009) a brand can simplify consumer's decision-making process. Researchers also mentioned that brands and their image are usually a crucial competitive advantage that helps in creating an added premium and a significant value for organizations (Ait-Sahalia *et al.*, 2004; Keller 2009). Moreover, Shukla (2011) demonstrated that brand image is an essential mediator in the relationship between normative interpersonal influences and luxury brand purchase intention. Findings from Ariely and Levav (2000) study also showed that in the presence of others, consumer's choices differ from what they would have made by themselves. This indicates that consumers assume that obtaining a better image can be achieved through the acquisition and the use of products and brands (Leigh and Gabel, 1992; Tsai, 2005). Wilcox *et al.* (2009) revealed that brand image associations are crucial indicators for its ability to fulfill its social function of self-expression and self-presentation. Chiou and Cheng (2003) reported that negative reviews negatively influence product evaluation and attitudes if brand image is weak. According to Keller (2003), establishing a positive brand image can be done through marketing campaigns by connecting the unique and strong brand associations with consumers' memories about the brand. Since a brand's fundamental purpose is to provoke confidence, feeling of trust, strength, durability, security and exclusivity (Aaker, 1996; Keller, 1993), thus it can be considered an important means of decreasing uncertainty and providing useful information that can help in directing consumer decision-making processes (Erdem *et al.*, 2002). Furthermore, Wu *et al.* (2011) found a direct and positive effect for store image on brand image as well as purchase intention. Likewise, Charo *et al.* (2015) found that up to date online reviews related to food discussion are more likely to be adopted by consumers, and can influence their perception of a brand or

product, in addition, a significant impact of e-WOM on brand image and purchase intention was established. Torlak *et al.* (2014) concluded that brand image has an important influence on purchase intention regarding cell phone brands through electronic word of mouth. Lien *et al.* (2015) indicated that brand image is a key driver that positively influence hotel booking purchase intentions. Moreover, in a study involving destination image results revealed its positive effect on attitude towards the destination (Jalilvand *et al.*, 2012). Finally, Jamal and Goode (2001) concurred that the congruence between the brand image and customers self-image would reinforce customer satisfaction and preference for the brand. Thus, the following hypothesis presented itself as an integral part of this research:

H4. Brand image has a positive and significant influence on purchasing intention.

H6. Brand image has a positive and significant impact on consumers' attitude toward the brand.

2.3 Consumer's attitude towards the brand

Attitudes are a critical psychological construct due to their ability in anticipating and influencing behavior (Kraus, 1995). The power of attitude is reflected in its cognitive responses, which refer to conscious beliefs or opinions, and affective responses, which are derived from emotions and feelings (Petty *et al.*, 1997; Keller, 2001). According to Agarwal and Malhotra (2005) Attitude towards a brand is defined as consumers' general judgment and evaluation of a specific brand based on their brand beliefs. Ajzen (2001) suggested that the more desirable the attitude towards the behavior, the stronger will be the intention to commit that behavior. It was found that consumers develop a strong emotional attachment to brands linked to central attitude (Grewal *et al.*, 2004). Previous studies revealed that consumer attitude towards a product or a brand affect intention to purchase this product or that brand (leonidou *et al.*, 2010; Limbu *et al.*, 2012). For example, results from Liu *et al.* (2012) research showed a positive relationship between attitude and intention. Jalilvand *et al.* (2012) empirical results suggested that destination image and tourist attitude have a significant relationship with intention to travel. Moreover, tourist attitude is positively affected by destination image (Woomi and Soochong, 2008). In addition, it was found that there is a positive relationship between attitude and intention to choose halal products (Iada *et al.*, 2009; Abd Rahman *et al.*, 2015). Furthermore, Ferreira *et al.* (2012) revealed that entrepreneurship intention is significantly and positively correlated to attitude towards entrepreneurship. Even online, Castaneda *et al.* (2009) revealed the important role of attitude towards the internet and the website in explaining attitude toward the brand and consumer e-behavior. Likewise, in their conceptual model of e-consumer behavior Dennis *et al.* (2009) concurred that positive attitudes towards the e-retailer positively influence e-consumer intention to purchase from the e-retailer. The previously mentioned literature manifested in the hypothesis mentioned below:

H5: Consumers' attitude toward the brand has a positive and significant impact on purchasing intention.

2.4 Purchase intention

Purchase intention can be considered as one of the main components of consumer cognitive behavior that can show how an individual intends to buy a certain brand or a specific product (Hosein, 2012). According to Spears and Singh (2004) purchase intention is consumer's conscious plan to make an effort to purchase a product. Past research also incorporated purchase intention as a key indicator of online advertisement success (Raney *et al.*, 2003; Moe and Fader, 2004). In the study of Rivera *et al.* (2015) they attempt to investigate consumers' attitudes towards mobile applications as well as their intentions to use a mobile, to find out that attitude plays an important role in shaping users' intent to use a mobile application. Numerous studies concurred that consumer attitude towards a product or a brand affect purchase intention (Ajzen, 2001; Dennis *et al.*, 2009; Leonidou *et al.*, 2010; Jalilvand *et al.*, 2012; Liu *et al.*, 2012; Limbu *et al.*, 2012). In their model (Dennis *et al.*, 2009) of e-consumer intention towards purchasing from an e-retailer, they found that purchasing is positively influenced by the positive attitudes towards the e-retailer. Also, Ajzen (1991) indicated in his theory of planned behavior that behavioral intentions are affected by subjective norms, attitude and perceived behavioral controls towards the behavior. In addition, Mauri and Minazzi (2013) pointed out that hotel purchasing intentions increase in the ubiquity of positive reviews and decreases with negative comments. Furthermore, researchers indicated the presence of a significant relationship between brand image and purchase intention (Shukla, 2011; Wu *et al.*, 2011; Charo *et al.*, 2015; Lien *et al.*, 2015). Based on the above discussion it is implied how important it is to further investigate factors influencing purchase intention for better implementation of successful marketing strategies.

Moreover, the choice of mobile phones and specially the smartphones for this study has therefore been based on that Smartphones became very popular and widespread in the 21st century. According to forbes.com

(2015), mobile now accounts for 29% of all online transactions globally, and by 2020 it is expected for 80% percent of the world's adult population to have smartphones. With sophisticated technologies and severe competition between brands we are getting towards what is called global mobile wallet, as they can be used anywhere in the world both online and in stores. Thus, the previous discussion shows the importance of applying our study on this product and its brands. Accordingly, a conceptual framework (Figure 1) was developed to study the interrelationships among electronic word of mouth (eWOM), brand image, consumers' attitudes, and consumers purchasing intention toward the brand in the context of the Smartphones.

3. Research methodology

3.1 Data collection and sample

The current study based on a conclusive descriptive cross sectional research. The study was conducted during the months of February and March 2016 by surveying 550 undergraduate students from two large Business Schools affiliated to public and private universities operating in Cairo the capital of Egypt using the convenience sample technique. Consistent with many previous studies within the context of electronic word of mouth university students deemed appropriate sample for this study (Sun et al., 2006; Chuan Chu, 2011; Erkan and Evans, 2016). 469 usable responses were obtained after excluding incomplete questionnaires, yielding an 85% response rate, where male students composed 27% of the sample and female students accounted for 73%. The ages of the students ranged from 18 to 22 years.

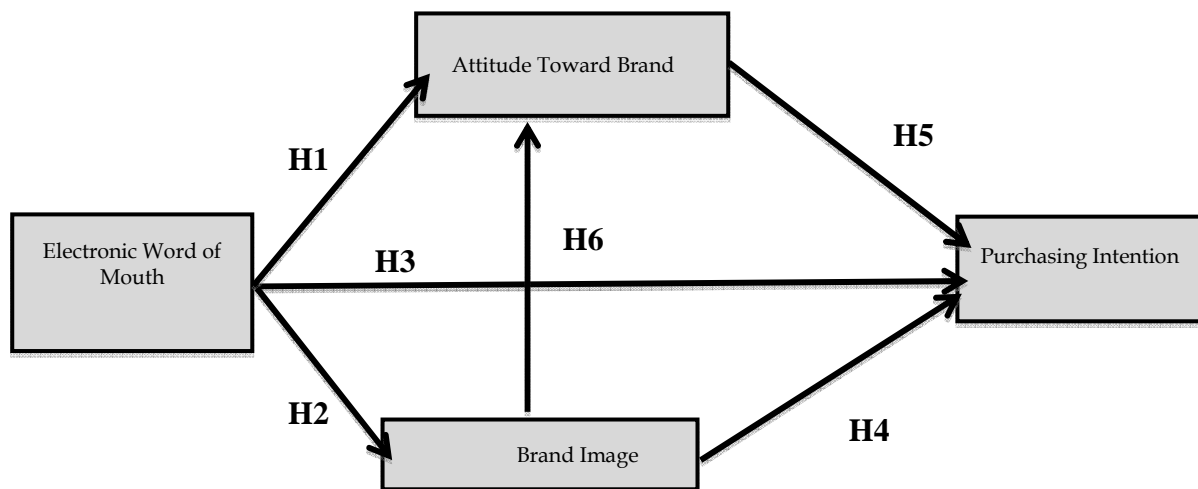


Figure 1: The proposed research model

3.2 Measurement

To achieve the study objectives and test the hypothesized relationships among variables in the proposed research model, a self-administered structured survey was adapted based on the previous literature review. The questionnaire was in three parts: a first part including questions examined the respondents' pattern of internet usage and motives of involvement in a word-of-mouth communication; a second part with questions about eWOM, brand image, brand attitudes and purchasing intention and a third part to identify the demographic characteristics (by two questions in terms of age and gender) and the preferable smartphone brand. Six items adopted from Bambauer-Sachse and Mangold (2011), measured eWOM. Brand image was measured by four items adopted from Keller and Aaker (1992), using four semantic differential items, developed by Batra et al (1991), assessed brand attitudes, items included were bad/good, unpleasant/pleasant, worthless/valuable and unfavorable/favorable (in the category). Finally consumers' purchasing intention was measured by three items from Jalilvand and Samiei (2012). The final questionnaire included a total of 18 items. The measurement of "eWOM, brand image, brand attitudes and purchase intention" were carried out using a five -point Likert scale, ranging from strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (5). In addition, a pilot study was conducted in order to pretest the questionnaire wording, relevance and pattern of the statements.

3.3 Data analyses techniques

The data analysis of this study involved descriptive statistics using SPSS and structural equation modeling (SEM) technique using AMOS 22 program by employing the maximum likelihood estimation method. The study followed the two-step approach suggested by Anderson & Gerbing, (1988) for assessing the

measurement and structural models respectively to test the hypothesized casual relationships among the research variables. Several goodness of fit indices were evaluated including the chi-square goodness-of-fit test statistic, the goodness-of-fit index (GFI), the comparative fit index (CFI), the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) and the Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), which are considered the most important fit indices. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed to assess the constructs validity in the measurement model and the Cronbach's alpha coefficient and Composite Reliability (CR) were used to test the reliability of analyses. After verifying the constructs validity and reliability, structural model was examined to test the hypotheses and model fit

4. Analysis and results

Based on the results of CFA and modification index of indicator variables (Jöreskog & Sorbom, 1986), two items of eWOM was dropped, one item of brand image was omitted and two items of brand attitude eliminated (as shown in Table 1). In this study, Questionnaire items have a factor loading of 0.65 and above (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2010), which means that the measured variables represent the constructs in the direction expected and providing evidence of convergent validity. Moreover, the study employs the Average Variances Extracted (AVE) and composite reliability (CR) to estimate also the convergent validity (Hair et al., 2010). According to Fornell and Larcker (1981), a dimension with an AVE value of over 0.5 would be considered to have high convergent validity. As can be seen in Table 1, all dimensions have AVE and CR that are greater than the aforementioned cutoff values, which imply a good convergent validity. Table 1 shows Cronbach's alpha coefficients of all the constructs were greater than 0.70 and a Composite Reliability (CR) value are higher than 0.7 which indicating high reliability and internal consistency.

Construct	Scale item	Factor loading	Cronbach' s alpha	A.V.E	C.R
Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM)	eWOM1	0.703	0.805	0.519	0.810
	eWOM2	0.687			
	eWOM3	0.792			
	eWOM4	0.781			
Brand Image (BIM)	BIM1	0.800	0.756	0.530	0.769
	BIM2	0.780			
	BIM3	0.650			
Brand Attitude (ATT)	ATT1	0.853	0.866	0.766	0.867
	ATT2	0.897			
Purchasing Intention (PI)	PI1	0.797	0.856	0.670	0.859
	PI2	0.868			
	PI3	0.789			

Table 1: Reliability analysis and convergent validity

Table 2 presents the interfactor correlation analysis among electronic word of mouth, brand attitudes, brand image and purchasing intention. It shows that the square root of AVE for each construct exceeds the correlation shared among constructs in the research model which represent good for discriminant validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981).

Component	eWOM	BIM	ATT	PI
Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM)	1			
Brand Image (BIM)	0.050**	1		
Brand Attitude (ATT)	0.046**	0.303**	1	
Purchasing Intention (PI)	0.065**	0.289**	0.225**	1

Table 2: the squared correlation among the constructs

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Lately, a structural equation model was tested and the findings of maximum likelihood estimation method indicated that the model fits very well to the data and the values were all inside the bounds. For instance, Chi-Square statistic = 53.582; df =47, normed chi-square statistic (CMIN/DF) =1.140; p -value = 0.001; goodness -of-fit index (GFI) = 98%; Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = 99.7%, Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) = 99.6%, and Incremental Fit Index (IFI) = 99.7%. In addition, the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) was 0.01 (values close to zero indicate a better fit) and the value of the chi-square test was not statistically significant, which

shows adequate fit. Table 3 depicts estimates for all paths modeled in the study. Moreover, six hypothesized relationships between variables were found statistically significant and positive. Figure 2 shows the paths of the full model using SEM and the specified relationships among the model constructs. As shown in table 3, support was found for all the research hypotheses. Therefore, hypotheses H1, H2, H3, H4, H5, and H6 were accepted. Specifically, eWOM had a significantly positive impact on brand image, with $\beta = 0.28$, $t=4.65$, and $P =0.000$, and eWOM also was significantly and positively associated with consumers' brand attitude ($\beta = 0.099$, $t=2.020$, and $P =0.043$), and consumers' purchasing intention ($\beta = 0.13$, $t=2.616$, and $P =0.009$). Furthermore, brand image ($\beta = 0.47$, $t=5.98$, and $P =0.000$) and consumers' attitude toward brand ($\beta = 0.21$, $t=3.05$, and $P =0.002$) were significantly and positively associated with consumers' purchasing intention. Additionally, brand image also had a strong positive effect on consumers' attitude toward brand ($\beta = 0.64$, $t=9.17$, and $P =0.000$)

5. Discussion and conclusion

The major objective of this study was to examine the interrelationship among electronic word of mouth (eWOM), brand image, consumers' attitude toward brand and consumers' purchasing intention toward the smartphone in Egypt. The findings show that electronic word of mouth has a significant and positive influence on the consumers' purchasing intention. These findings are consistent with those of Liu et al, (2006); Setiawan (2014); Jalilvand and Samiei (2012), Jalilvand et al., (2012) and Baber et al (2016). So, if a person has a positive attitude toward an online review, that will increase the receiver's purchase intention to products and services discussed favorably in that review. This result indicates that eWOM is an important type of communication which cannot be denied due to its significant effect on the consumer behavior which might be more than the traditional communication tools (Trusov et al., 2009). Such results can be interpreted that consumers are more likely to involve in an eWOM when purchasing a product associated with high financial and emotional risk. These results confirm those of previous studies regarding the effect of eWOM on brand image and brand attitude such as Torlak et al., (2014); Charo et al., (2015); Setiawan (2014); Jalilvand and Samiei (2012).

It can be concluded that either positive or negative eWOM can shape the brand image and attitude in the consumers' mindsets. Eventually, the influence of electronic word-of-mouth communication on consumers' purchase intentions is significant and can bring positive change in consumer attitudes toward the brands when they have received information from a source that is trustworthy and experienced. Another conclusion can be drawn from this study that both factors brand image and brand attitude have a pivotal role on purchase intention regarding mobile phones especially smartphones brands through electronic word of mouth. Thus, the consumers consider the reviews that obtained from eWOM channels and use these reviews in shaping their perception and attitude towards a given brand. These findings are supported by Jalilvand et al., (2012) who reported that brand image and brand attitude are full mediators on purchase intentions.

Therefore, marketers should focus on adopting the marketing strategy of online buzz, which will more be profitable for organizations if handled correctly. Additionally, understanding the effect of eWOM on a consumer choice among different brands is significant because it is likely to help managers and marketers build a positive brand image and a favorable attitude which increase consumers' intention to purchase a given brand. The positive eWOM is generated by a satisfactory experience with the brand in terms of its attributes such as easy to use, reliability, price, battery period, design, size and digital camera resolution. Thus, exploring and understanding the different types of consumers' experiences with a given brand that are likely to trigger positive eWOM is useful for the marketers to develop a positive brand image perceptions for non-users this brand not only for the current users. In fact, the information which generated through either positive WOM or eWOM creating a favorable image of the brand leading to a favorable brand attitude and reducing promotional expenditures (Torlak et al., 2014 and Jalilvand et al., 2012).

Therefore, marketers should monitor the website's community for the mobile phones to analyze the review messages and measure the positive and negative reviews by counting the numbers of positive or negative words that reviewers have used. In addition, such review sites may provide demographic and psychographic information that could be useful and utilized by the marketers to improve the product-service combinations that match the consumers' expectations and needs. Moreover, marketers should encourage the consumers by expressing their good experience with a given brand electronically through the social networking and website's community. Finally, marketers and policy makers should reinforce the brand image to meet the consumers' expectations

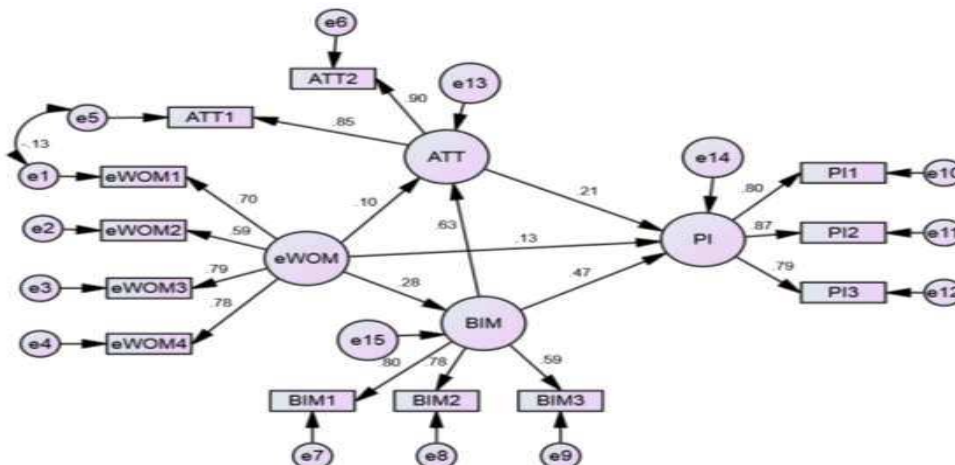


Figure 2: Structural model results.

HP	path		Estimate	Standardized	S.E	t-statistic	p	Accepted/Rejected
H1	eWOM	BIM	0.180	0.28	0.039	4.650	***	Accepted
H2	eWOM	→ ATT	0.086	0.099	0.043	2.020	0.043*	Accepted
H3	eWOM	→ PI	0.130	0.13	0.050	2.616	0.009*	Accepted
H4	BIM	→ PI	0.751	0.47	0.125	5.989	***	Accepted
H5	ATT	→ PI	0.243	0.21	0.080	3.051	0.002*	Accepted
H6	BIM	→ ATT	0.861	0.64	0.094	9.167	***	Accepted

Table 3: Test of research hypotheses (n=469)

*p < 0.05. **p < 0.01. ***p < 0.001. ns= not significant

6. Limitations and recommendations for future research.

Although this paper has shed some light on electronic WOM, it has some limitations. First of all, this study focused on the single product category of mobile phones especially smartphones, although it was found to be appropriate to the student group. It would be valuable to repeat the research in other areas of interest such as fashion or political candidates or travel destinations. Second, this study covered only the undergraduate student in Egypt; thus, the results cannot be expected to explain the effect of eWOM on brand image and purchasing intention. That is why, future research can including participants in other geographical areas in Egypt and other different ages. Third, the study opted to examine the effect of eWOM on brand image, brand attitude and purchasing intention, but other variables could be considered in the further studies, such as brand credibility, brand trust, source of information and product involvement as a moderate variable between eWOM and purchasing intention. It should be noted that future research could investigate also the negative word of mouth on consumer attitude toward brand and purchasing intention not only the positive word of mouth.

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