

The Effect of Argument Quality and Message Content on eWOM Credibility and Online Purchase Intentions

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the effect of argument quality on electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) credibility and the moderating role of message content. It further examines the influence of eWOM credibility on brand image and eWOM adoption, and how these factors, in turn, shape online purchase intentions. Data were collected from 513 social media users in southern Tamil Nadu using a structured survey instrument, and the instrument's psychometric properties were first verified through confirmatory factor analysis. Regression analysis was employed to test the hypothesised relationships. The results reveal that argument quality has a positive, significant effect on eWOM credibility, and that this relationship is moderated by message content. In addition, eWOM credibility significantly influences both brand image and eWOM adoption. Finally, brand image and eWOM adoption are found to positively affect online purchase intentions. These findings contribute to the growing body of knowledge on eWOM communication and provide practical insights for digital marketers seeking to enhance the persuasive impact of online reviews..

Keywords: eWOM credibility; argument quality; message content; brand image; eWOM adoption; online purchase intention; Elaboration Likelihood Model.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of digital technologies and social media platforms has fundamentally altered the way consumers gather and share product-related information. Unlike traditional word-of-mouth communication, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) enables consumers to express their opinions, experiences, and recommendations to a potentially unlimited audience across digital channels such as social networking sites, online forums, e-commerce platforms, and review websites (Cheung & Thadani, 2012). Given that eWOM is accessible, easily searchable, and largely generated by ordinary consumers rather than marketers, it is widely regarded as a more credible and trustworthy source of information compared with firm-generated content (Bickart & Schindler, 2001; Park & Lee, 2008).

In spite of the growing scholarly interest in eWOM, a fundamental challenge for consumers engaging with online reviews is the credibility of the information they encounter. Not every review or recommendation that circulates on digital platforms is equally useful or reliable. Consumers are often confronted with vast volumes of user-generated content that vary considerably

in terms of quality, depth, relevance, and objectivity. In this context, argument quality, defined as the strength and persuasiveness of the substantive claims made within a message, has emerged as one of the most important determinants of eWOM credibility. High-quality arguments are logical, well-supported, and informative, and they tend to be perceived as more credible and therefore more influential in shaping consumer attitudes and behaviours (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

Beyond argument quality, the type and nature of message content, including emotional versus rational appeals, and the richness and specificity of information, may further condition how consumers evaluate the credibility of online reviews. Message content has been identified as a significant contextual factor that interacts with argument quality in shaping perceptions of information credibility (Barger et al., 2016; Filieri, 2015). Yet, despite its theoretical relevance,

the moderating role of message content in the relationship between argument quality and eWOM credibility remains underexplored in the extant literature.

Furthermore, once eWOM credibility is established, it is expected to have downstream consequences for consumer

behaviour. Specifically, credible eWOM is likely to enhance consumers' brand perceptions and motivate them to adopt the information they encounter, ultimately leading to greater online purchase intentions. While previous studies have examined some of these relationships individually, there is a lack of integrated models that examine the full chain from argument quality through eWOM credibility to brand image, eWOM adoption, and online purchase intention.

This study addresses these gaps by developing and testing an integrated conceptual model grounded in the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM). The specific objectives of the study are threefold: (1) to examine the effect of argument quality on eWOM credibility and the moderating role of message content in this relationship; (2) to investigate the influence of eWOM credibility on brand image and eWOM adoption; and (3) to assess the impact of brand image and eWOM adoption on online purchase intentions. Data were collected from 513 active social media users in southern Tamil Nadu, India, and the hypothesised relationships were tested using regression analysis.

This study makes several contributions to the literature. Theoretically, it extends the application of ELM to the eWOM context by incorporating message content as a boundary condition that moderates the persuasive impact of argument quality. Practically, the findings offer actionable guidance for digital marketers and brand managers who wish to leverage the persuasive potential of eWOM to strengthen brand image and stimulate online purchase intentions. The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 presents the theoretical background and the development of hypotheses. Section 3 describes the research methodology. Section 4 reports the empirical findings. Sections 5, 6, and 7 present the discussion, limitations, and conclusions, respectively.

2. Theoretical Background of the Study

Extant studies of online consumer behaviour and eWOM relied on the Theory of Planned

Behaviour (TPB) and Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) (Ajzen, 1991; Fishbein & Ajzen,

1975). These studies explained to what extent consumer attitudes influence online purchase intentions. These frameworks assumed that online purchase intention is determined by perceived social norms and individual attitudes. However, in the modern digital era, the credibility of online review messages increasingly shapes the consumer decision rather than social pressure. Hence, TPB and TRA may not completely examine how consumers adopt eWOM message content in online shopping contexts. To address this theoretical gap, we used the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), which proposes a more suitable approach to explore how consumers process eWOM content.

According to ELM, individuals assess the persuasive message through a central route, trusting the message content, clarity, depth, and relevance when making informed decisions (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Consequently, eWOM credibility is predominantly determined by argument quality and message content, as

consumers are more likely to trust online reviews perceived as logical, well-supported, and informative. As a result, this study presents the viewpoints of ELM and provides a robust basis for understanding the direct relationship proposed in the conceptual model.

2.1. Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

H1: Argument quality positively influences eWOM credibility.

H1a: Message content moderates the relationship between argument quality and eWOM credibility.

The quality of an argument and the credibility of the source have both been shown to positively influence consumer attitudes and purchase intentions (Mathur et al., 2024). Consumers consider informativeness and persuasiveness, key dimensions of argument quality, as important cues when evaluating the trustworthiness of online reviews (Sun et al., 2025). Similarly, the integrity of reviewers and the quality of the argument they present have a significant effect on consumer trust (Borchers, 2023). In the context of tourism, eWOM has been found to serve as an effective decision-support tool, with high-quality information being more likely to be internalised and translated into behavioural intention (Silaban et al., 2023). Argument quality, source credibility, and the volume of reviews have all been found to be positively related to purchase intention (Alic & Cinjarevic, 2024). Further, expertise, objectivity, trustworthiness, and argument quality were found to positively influence the adoption of eWOM information (Willy, 2024). The perceived usefulness of eWOM content, a key antecedent of information adoption, was also found to depend on argument quality and credibility (Ranga et al., 2023).

The role of message content in shaping eWOM credibility has received growing attention in the literature. It has been found that consumers' tendency to avoid uncertainty moderates the impact of message cues on their judgements of eWOM credibility (Chauhan & Gupta, 2024). Informativeness and argument quality are both related to the perceived credibility of eWOM, and credibility subsequently influences behavioural intention (Chauhan & Gupta, 2024). Furthermore, opinion leaders, source credibility, and eWOM jointly shape the emotional decision-making of consumers with limited knowledge (Cao et al., 2024). The presence of both heuristic and systematic processing cues has been found to have additive effects on perceived credibility, suggesting that message content interacts with argument quality in determining eWOM credibility (Chauhan & Gupta, 2024). Accordingly, we propose that argument quality positively influences eWOM credibility, and that message content moderates this relationship.

H2: eWOM credibility positively influences brand image

The introduction of computers, internet services, and cell phones has driven a dynamic shift across the consumer market, the commercial sector, and even academic disciplines over the last few decades. The emergence of digital technologies and social media has transformed the nature of consumer-brand interactions. Electronic word-of-mouth has been identified as a critical mediating mechanism between source credibility, social style, and

brand image, suggesting that marketers who seek to enhance brand image should pay close attention to eWOM (Kaushal & Anuj, 2022). Research confirms that user-generated content plays a significant role in shaping brand perceptions, with source credibility repeatedly identified as a key cue in informational influence processes (Wanjugu et al., 2023). During the COVID-19 pandemic, brand image was found to moderate the impact of eWOM credibility and quantity on purchase intention, highlighting the dynamic interplay between eWOM credibility and brand perceptions (Hoang & Tung, 2022). Among the dimensions of eWOM, credibility was found to be the most critical factor influencing brand image, followed by quantity and quality (Hoang & Tung, 2022). The legitimacy of eWOM on social networking sites and brand image were both found to impact online consumer purchasing intentions significantly (Setyoningrum et al., 2023). The brand image also serves as a mediator between country-of-origin image and purchase intention (Nguyen et al., 2025).

H3: eWOM credibility positively influences eWOM adoption.

Social media platforms have emerged as powerful tools for eWOM communication, facilitating two-way user participation and creating a conducive environment for information exchange (Mendoza-Moreira et al., 2025). Consumers increasingly evaluate products and services by reading the recommendations of other users on online platforms before making purchasing decisions. The credibility and quality of visual eWOM have been found to influence perceived information utility and consumer uptake significantly (Bui et al., 2025). Customer expertise,

homophily, and rapport have been found to positively affect eWOM involvement, perceived eWOM credibility, and buying intention (Ghosh et al., 2025). Image, detailed text, and video reviews have been found to positively influence eWOM credibility and adoption, with verbal reviews enhancing the positive impact of non-verbal content (Roy et al., 2024). Social influence has also been found to significantly affect eWOM credibility and its adoption, with gender moderating the relationship between eWOM credibility and informational influence (Mendoza-Moreira et al., 2025).

H4: Brand image positively influences online purchase intention.

Advances in information technology and the rise of online social networking sites have significantly altered the way information is distributed and consumed. eWOM has emerged as one of the most influential factors shaping brand image and online purchase intention in consumer markets (Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012). Store image has been found to positively affect the purchase intention for private label brands, with service quality positively influencing brand image (Wu et al., 2011). Importantly, eWOM has been found to significantly influence both brand image and brand trust, both of which act as important mediators in the relationship between eWOM and purchase intention (Tafolli et al., 2025). Meanwhile, the perceived risk associated with a brand has been found to mediate the relationship between brand image and purchase intention (Wu et al., 2011).

H5: eWOM adoption positively influences online purchase intention.

Information adoption refers to the process by which consumers actively engage with and internalise online review content, thereby influencing their subsequent purchasing behaviour. It has been found that information adoption serves as a major mediator through which credible and useful eWOM content influences purchase intention (Bui et al., 2025). Consumers who adopt eWOM information, meaning they actively process and accept it as a basis for decision-

making, are more likely to express a clear intention to purchase the product or service in question. Several studies have confirmed that information adoption mediates the effect of eWOM credibility on purchase behaviour across different digital contexts (Cheung et al., 2009; Willy, 2024). Accordingly, eWOM adoption is expected to influence online purchase intention positively.

2.3 Conceptual Model

Based on the theoretical arguments and literature reviewed above, the following conceptual model is proposed (Figure 1). Argument quality is hypothesised to positively influence eWOM credibility (H1), with message content moderating this relationship (H1a). eWOM credibility is further hypothesised to positively influence both brand image (H2) and eWOM adoption (H3). Finally, both brand image (H4) and eWOM adoption (H5) are hypothesised to positively influence online purchase intention.

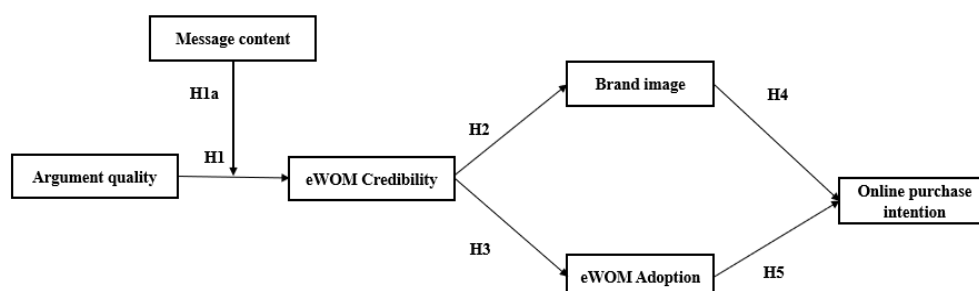


Figure 1. Conceptual Model

3. Methodology

3.1 Sample and Data Collection

This study examines the effect of argument quality and message content on eWOM credibility. Since eWOM communication primarily occurs on digital platforms, the respondents had to be active social media users. Data were collected through an online survey administered using

Google Forms. As there is no fixed sampling frame of social media users in the southern part of Tamil Nadu, a non-probability purposive sampling method was adopted. This approach ensured the selection of participants who were relevant to the study objectives. A total of 513 respondents participated in the survey. Respondents who had not used social media were excluded from the survey. According to Krejcie and Morgan (1970), a minimum sample size of 384 is recommended for a population of this nature. The present study exceeded this criterion, as the final sample size of 513 is well above the required threshold, thereby ensuring the adequacy and representativeness of the data.

3.2 Measures

The self-administered survey was developed by incorporating scale items from established, validated instruments on argument quality, eWOM credibility, message content, brand image, eWOM adoption, and online purchase intention, based on literature reviews. The items were assessed using a “five-point Likert scale,” with “1” indicating “strongly disagree” and “5” indicating “strongly agree.” Argument quality was assessed using four indicators derived from Daowd et al. (2021). One of the sample indicators is: “The relevance of information affects the trustworthiness of the review.” This measure exhibited a Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.92, indicating high reliability. eWOM Credibility was assessed using four indicators derived from Farzin and Fattahi (2018) and Cheung et al. (2009). The sample extract statement read as: “To make sure I select the correct products or

brands, I frequently read online reviews written by other members of social networks.” This measure exhibited a Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.92, indicating high reliability. Message Content was assessed using five indicators derived from Barger et al. (2016) and Filieri (2015). One of the sample indicators is: “I am highly concerned about the nature of content, particularly emotional content, on social media.” This measure exhibited a

Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.90, indicating high reliability.

Brand image was assessed using five indicators derived from Jalilvand & Samiei (2012) and Davis et al. (2009). One of the sample indicators is: “The trustworthiness of information shared by my connections on social media contributes to shaping the brand perception of products.” This measure exhibited a Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.94, indicating high reliability. eWOM Adoption was assessed using five indicators derived from Cheung et al. (2009). One of the sample indicators is: “To some extent, I agree with the review.” This measure exhibited a Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.93, indicating high reliability. Online purchase intention was assessed using five indicators derived from Jalilvand & Samiei (2012), Shukla (2009), and Ng (2013). One of the sample indicators is: “I tend to buy products or brands introduced by my friends on social media.” This measure exhibited a Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.92, indicating high reliability.

4. Analysis and Results

4.1 Demographic Profile

The demographic profile of the respondents is presented in Table 1. The majority of respondents were male (71%), and most were below 30 years of age (91.4%), reflecting the predominantly young social media user base in the study region. Regarding educational qualifications, 82.1% of respondents held an undergraduate degree. Regarding preferred online shopping platforms, Amazon was the most popular site (51.3%), followed by Flipkart (41.9%).

Table 1. Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Category	Profile	n	%
Gender	Male	364	71.0
	Female	149	29.0
Age	Below 30	469	91.4
	31-40	36	7.0
	41-50	3	0.6
	Above 50	5	1.0
Educational Qualification	School Level	26	5.1
	Undergraduate	421	82.1
	Postgraduate	54	10.5
	Professional	12	2.3

Preferred online shopping site	Amazon	263	51.3
	Flipkart	215	41.9
	Myntra	20	3.9
	Snapdeal	2	0.4
	Others	13	2.5

Source: Author's compilation.

4.2 Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA), Convergent Validity, Discriminant Validity, and

Reliability

Following the guidelines of Anderson and Gerbing (1988), a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was performed using Jamovi software to assess the validity and reliability of the measurement model. The CFA results are summarised in Table 2. All factor loadings were statistically significant and ranged from 0.72 to 0.90, exceeding the recommended threshold of

0.50 and thereby confirming indicator reliability. Cronbach's alpha and Composite Reliability (CR) values ranged from 0.90 to 0.94, both surpassing the recommended minimum of 0.70. The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values ranged from 0.65 to 0.75, well above the acceptable threshold of 0.50 (Hair et al., 2019). Collectively, these results confirm the convergent validity and reliability of all constructs. Model fit indices indicated acceptable fit:

CFI = 0.94, TLI = 0.93, and RMSEA = 0.06

Table 2. Measurement Model, Convergent Validity, and Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Constructs and Indicators	Alpha	Composite Reliability	Standardized Loadings	Reliability (Cronbach's Alpha)	Variance (Var(eigenvalue))	Average Variance- Extracted (AVE)
Argument Quality	0.92	0.90	0.85	0.85	0.3	0.65
			0.72	0.72	0.1	
			0.80	0.80	0.2	
			0.75	0.75	0.2	
eWOM Credibility	0.92	0.90	0.85	0.85	0.4	0.75
			0.78	0.78	0.3	
			0.82	0.82	0.4	
			0.75	0.75	0.2	
			0.80	0.80	0.3	
			0.72	0.72	0.2	
Message Content	0.90	0.88	0.85	0.85	0.4	0.70
			0.78	0.78	0.3	
			0.82	0.82	0.2	
			0.75	0.75	0.3	
			0.80	0.80	0.3	
Brand Image	0.94	0.92	0.85	0.85	0.2	0.60
			0.78	0.78	0.1	

			0	0	0.2	
			0	0	0.2	
			0	0	0.3	
eWOM Adoption	0.93	0				0
			0	0	0.3	
			0	0	0.2	
			0	0	0.2	
			0	0	0.3	
			0	0	0.2	
Online Purchase Intention	0.92	0				0
			0	0	0.3	
			0	0	0.3	
			0	0	0.2	
			0	0	0.3	
			0	0	0.3	

Source: Authors' compilation

The results of the zero-order correlation analysis are presented in Table 3. Correlations among the six constructs ranged from 0.62 (between brand image and message content) to 0.77 (between eWOM adoption and brand image). As all correlations were below 0.80, multicollinearity is not a concern in this dataset (Tsui et al., 1995). Furthermore, as the square root of each

construct's AVE exceeded its correlations with other constructs, it satisfies the criteria for discriminant validity and confirms that the constructs are empirically distinct

4.4. Hypotheses Testing

Table 3. Zero Order Correlations

Construct	1	2	3	4	5	6
1.Argument Quality	0.86					
2.eWOM Credibility	0.73***	0.81				
3.Message Content	0.69***	0.68***	0.81			
4.Brand Image	0.69***	0.70***	0.62***	0.87		
5.eWOM Adoption	0.73***	0.70***	0.64***	0.77***	0.85	
6.Online Purchase Intention	0.67***	0.67***	0.67***	0.71***	0.73***	0.84

Note. *** $p < 0.01$. Diagonal values (bold) are the square roots of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) estimates.

Source: Authors' compilation.

The regression analyses were conducted in multiple stages to test the hypothesized relationships (H1–H6 and H1a). This approach allows control variables to be accounted for before assessing the main predictor variables, making it more useful for testing the incremental contribution of these variables (Cohen et al., 2017). The results are reported in Tables 4-6.

The regression analyses were conducted in multiple stages to test the hypothesized

4.4.1. Testing of Hypotheses H1 and H1a

Table 4. Effect of Argument Quality on eWOM Credibility with Message Content as Moderator

Variables	Column 1	Column 2	Column 3
Dependent Variable ---->	eWOM	eWOM	eWOM
	Credibility	Credibility	Credibility
	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
<i>Control variables</i>			
Gender	-0.057 (-1.278; 0.202)	-0.068 (-2.363; 0.019)	-0.070 (-2.458; 0.014)
Age	0.110* (2.160; 0.031)	0.076 (2.316; 0.021)	0.063 (1.928; 0.054)
Qualification	0.082 (1.592; 0.112)	0.008 (0.257; 0.798)	0.022 (0.674; 0.501)
<i>Main Effect</i>			
Argument Quality		0.484*** (12.39; 0.000)	0.724*** (8.346; 0.000)
Message Content		0.344*** (8.873; 0.000)	0.551*** (7.137; 0.000)
<i>Moderation Effect</i>			
Message Content x eWOM Credibility			-0.420** (-3.089; 0.002)
R ²	0.027	0.600	0.607
Adj R ²	0.021	0.596	0.603
ΔR ²		0.573	0.007
F	4.722**	152.065***	130.445**
ΔF		363.004	9.540
Df	3; 509	5; 507	6; 506

Note: 't' values and 'p' values are in parenthesis with standardized regression coefficients. *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

0.01; * $p < 0.05$

Source: Compiled using IBM SPSS 25

Regression analysis was conducted in three steps with eWOM credibility as the dependent variable. In the first step, only control variables were entered into the model. The results showed that age had a significant effect on eWOM credibility ($\beta = 0.110$, $p < 0.05$), while gender ($\beta = -0.057$, $p = 0.202$) and educational qualification ($\beta = 0.082$, $p = 0.112$) were not significant. In the second step, the main predictors were included. Argument Quality ($\beta = 0.484$, $p < 0.001$) and Message Content ($\beta = 0.344$, $p < 0.001$) both had positive and significant effects on eWOM credibility, thus supporting H1. The model was significant and explained 60% of the variance ($F = 152.065$, $p < 0.01$; $R^2 = 0.600$; Adjusted $R^2 = 0.596$). In the third step, the interaction term between Argument Quality and Message Content was introduced, following the procedure suggested by Aiken and West (1991). The interaction effect was significant ($\beta =$

-0.420 , $p < 0.05$), thereby supporting H1a. The overall model remained significant and explained 60.7% of the variance in eWOM credibility ($F = 130.445$, $p < 0.01$; $R^2 = 0.607$; Adjusted $R^2 = 0.603$).

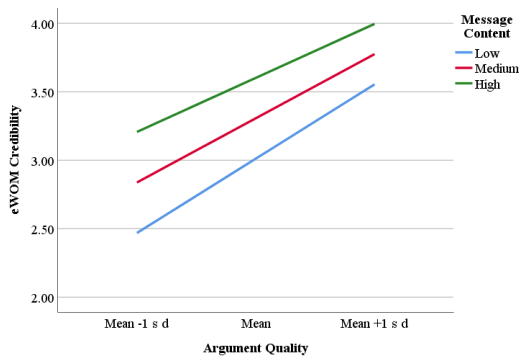


Figure 2. The interaction between Argument Quality and Message Content

The interaction between Argument Quality and Message Content (Figure 2) indicates that Argument Quality consistently enhances eWOM credibility, as shown by the positive slopes across all levels of Message Content. However, the strength of this positive effect is weaker

when the message content is high compared to when it is low. These results provide support for H1a.

4.4.2. Testing of Hypotheses H2 and H3

The regression analysis of brand image was conducted in two steps. In the first step, the control variables were included. The results showed that qualification had a significant positive effect on brand image ($\beta = 0.133$, $p < 0.01$), while age ($\beta = 0.048$, $p = 0.345$) and gender ($\beta = -0.036$, $p = 0.427$) were not significant. In the second step, eWOM credibility was entered into the model. The results revealed that eWOM credibility had a strong and significant positive effect on brand image ($\beta = 0.691$, $p < 0.001$). The model was significant and explained 49% of the variance in brand image ($F = 121.894$, $p < 0.001$; $R^2 = 0.490$; Adjusted $R^2 = 0.486$).

The regression analysis for eWOM adoption was also conducted in two steps. In the first step, the control variables were entered. The results indicated that both age ($\beta = 0.105$, $p < 0.05$) and qualification ($\beta = 0.102$, $p < 0.05$) had significant positive effects on eWOM adoption, whereas gender ($\beta = -0.016$, $p = 0.721$) was not significant. In the second step, eWOM credibility was added to the model and was found to have a strong and significant positive effect on eWOM adoption ($\beta = 0.691$, $p < 0.001$). The model was significant and explained 49.5% of the variance in eWOM adoption ($F = 124.547$, $p < 0.001$; $R^2 = 0.495$; Adjusted $R^2 = 0.491$).

Table 5. Effect of eWOM Credibility on brand image and eWOM Adoption

Variables	Column 1	Column 2	Column 1	Column 2
Dependent	brand image	brand image	eWOM adoption	eWOM adoption
	Step 1	Step 2	Step 1	Step 2
<i>Control Variables</i>				
Gender	-0.036	0.004 (0.120; 0.905)	-0.016	0.024 (0.729; 0.466)
Age	0.048 (0.944; 0.345)	-0.028	0.105* (2.066; 0.039)	.029

Qualification	0.133** (2.582; 0.010)	0.076* (2.043; 0.042)	0.102* (1.983; 0.048)	0.045 (1.217; 0.224)
<i>Main Effect</i>				
eWOM Credibility		0.691*** (21.509; 0.000)		0.691*** (21.608; 0.000)
R ²	0.025	0.490	0.031	0.495
Adj R ²	0.019	0.486	0.025	0.491
ΔR^2		0.465		0.464
F	4.362**	121.894***	5.443**	124.547***
ΔF		462.621		466.911
Df	3; 509	4; 508	3; 509	4; 508

Note: 't' values and 'p' values are in parenthesis with standardized regression coefficients. *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$

Source: Compiled using IBM SPSS 25

4.4.3. Testing of Hypotheses H4 and H5

The regression analysis of online purchase intention (OPI) was conducted in two steps. In the first step, the control variables were included. The results showed that qualification had a significant positive effect on OPI ($\beta = 0.119$, $p < 0.05$), while gender ($\beta = -0.009$, $p = 0.848$) and age ($\beta = 0.028$, $p = 0.589$) were not significant predictors. The model explained only 1.8% of the variance in OPI ($F = 3.056$, $p < 0.05$; $R^2 = 0.018$; Adjusted $R^2 = 0.012$).

In the second step, brand image and eWOM adoption were entered into the model. The results revealed that both

brand image ($\beta = 0.367$, $p < 0.001$) and eWOM adoption ($\beta = 0.448$, $p <$

0.001) had strong and significant positive effects on OPI. The explanatory power of the model substantially increased, with R^2 rising to 0.588 and Adjusted R^2 to 0.584. The change in R^2 ($\Delta R^2 = 0.571$) was statistically significant ($\Delta F = 351.309$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that brand

image and eWOM adoption significantly improved the prediction of online purchase intention.

Table 6. Effect of Brand Image and eWOM Adoption on Online Purchase Intention

Variables	Column 1	Column 2
Dependent Variable→	Online purchase intentions	Online purchase intentions
	Step 1	Step 2
<i>Control Variables</i>		
Gender	-0.009 (-0.192; 0.848)	0.012 (0.397; 0.692)
Age	0.028 (0.541; 0.589)	-0.037 (-1.111; 0.267)
Qualification	0.119* (2.300; 0.022)	0.024 (0.725; 0.469)

Main effect		
Brand Image (BI)		0.367*** (8.179; 0.000)
eWOM Adoption (EADOP)		0.448*** (9.970; 0.000)
R ²	0.025	0.490
Adj R ²	0.019	0.486
ΔR^2		0.465
F	4.362**	121.894***
ΔF		462.621
Df	3; 509	4; 508

Note: 't' values and 'p' values are in parenthesis with standardized regression coefficients. *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$

Source: Compiled using IBM SPSS 25

5. Discussions

The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of argument quality and message content on eWOM credibility, and to trace the downstream consequences of eWOM credibility for brand image, eWOM adoption, and online purchase intention. Drawing on the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), five hypotheses were developed and tested using regression analysis with a sample of 513 social media users in southern Tamil Nadu. The empirical results largely support the proposed conceptual model and provide meaningful theoretical and practical insights.

The first and most central finding of this study is that argument quality has a positive and significant effect on eWOM credibility (H1 supported; $\beta = 0.484$, $p < 0.001$). This finding is consistent with the central processing route proposed by ELM, which suggests that consumers who engage deeply with online review content will pay attention to the strength, logic, and relevance of the arguments presented. When arguments in online reviews are clear, informative, and well-reasoned, consumers are more likely to perceive those reviews as credible and trustworthy. This result also aligns with prior empirical evidence indicating that high-quality arguments are among the most influential determinants of eWOM credibility (Cheung et al.,

2009; Ranga et al., 2023; Sun et al., 2025). The implication is that the consumers in this sample actively processed information by carefully evaluating the content of eWOM, rather than relying solely on surface-level cues.

The significant moderation effect of message content on the argument quality and eWOM credibility relationship (H1a supported; $\beta = -0.420$, $p < 0.01$) is a particularly noteworthy finding. The interaction plot shows that when

message content is high, the positive effect of argument quality on eWOM credibility is weaker than when message content is low. This finding suggests that the context and nature of the message content set important limits on how consumers process eWOM. When message content is already rich, detailed, and engaging, the additional persuasive contribution of argument quality may be somewhat reduced, possibly because consumers have already formed a sufficiently favourable evaluation of the review based on its content characteristics alone. This finding extends existing literature on the interplay between central and heuristic processing in eWOM (Chauhan & Gupta, 2024). It highlights the importance of considering message framing alongside argument quality in eWOM research.

The finding that eWOM credibility positively influences brand image (H2 supported; $\beta =$

0.691, $p < 0.001$) confirms the important role that credible online reviews play in shaping how consumers perceive brands. When consumers encounter eWOM that they regard as trustworthy and well-reasoned, this positive assessment transfers to the brand being discussed, resulting in an enhanced brand image. This result is consistent with prior research demonstrating that eWOM credibility is a significant driver of brand perceptions across various product and service categories (Kaushal & Anuj, 2022; Hoang & Tung, 2022; Setyoningrum et al., 2023). The substantial effect size ($\beta = 0.691$) and the large explained variance ($R^2 = 0.490$) suggest that eWOM credibility is one of the most powerful predictors of brand image in the digital context, underscoring the increasing importance of online reviews in brand management.

Similarly, eWOM credibility was found to exert a strong and significant positive effect on eWOM adoption

(H3 supported; $\beta = 0.691$, $p < 0.001$). This finding indicates that when consumers perceive an online review as credible, they are more likely to internalise the information it contains and use it as a basis for their decisions. This result aligns well with the information adoption framework (Cheung et al., 2009), which proposes that perceived usefulness and credibility are key antecedents of information adoption in online settings. The finding is further supported by recent empirical work showing that the credibility of visual and textual reviews significantly promotes consumer information uptake (Bui et al., 2025; Roy et al., 2024). The equal effect sizes for eWOM credibility on brand image and eWOM adoption (both $\beta = 0.691$) suggest that credible eWOM may simultaneously reinforce brand perceptions and motivate consumers to actively engage with and adopt the information they encounter.

The effects of brand image (H4 supported; $\beta = 0.367$, $p < 0.001$) and eWOM adoption (H5 supported; $\beta = 0.448$, $p < 0.001$) on online purchase intention round out the findings and confirm the integrative nature of the proposed model. Brand image influences online purchase intention, likely because a favourable brand perception reduces perceived risk and increases consumer confidence in the purchasing decision. The stronger effect of eWOM adoption on online purchase intention, compared to brand image, suggests that actively internalising and accepting review information may be a more proximal driver of purchase behaviour. This finding is consistent with the view that information adoption serves as a critical mediating mechanism through which eWOM ultimately translates into purchasing behaviour (Bui et al.,

2025; Willy, 2024). Together, brand image and eWOM adoption explain a substantial 58.8% of the variance in online purchase intention, demonstrating the effectiveness of the proposed model.

From a theoretical perspective, this study makes several contributions. First, it extends the application of ELM to the eWOM context by demonstrating that both argument quality and

message content jointly shape eWOM credibility, with the latter serving as a moderator rather than an independent predictor. Second, the study integrates concepts from eWOM, brand management, and information adoption literatures into a single empirically validated model, offering a more complete picture of the consumer eWOM processing chain. Third, the study demonstrates the downstream consequences of eWOM credibility, namely its simultaneous positive effects on brand image and eWOM adoption, and traces how these constructs collectively drive online purchase intention.

From a practical perspective, the findings have important implications for digital marketers and brand managers. First, companies should invest in the quality and substance of user reviews on their digital platforms. Encouraging customers to write detailed, informative, and well-reasoned reviews is likely to enhance the credibility of eWOM and, in turn, strengthen brand image. Second, the moderating role of message content suggests that marketers should consider the broader informational context in which reviews are displayed. When the overall

message environment is content-rich, the marginal return from argument quality alone may be lower, meaning that platforms should also invest in diverse content formats to engage consumers through multiple routes. Third, the strong effect of eWOM adoption on purchase intention suggests that consumers who actively engage with and internalise review content are most likely to convert their reading into a purchase. Strategies that promote active engagement with reviews, such as structured review formats, rating systems, or prompts to respond to specific review features, may help facilitate eWOM adoption.

6. Limitations and Future Research

In spite of its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged and that point to productive directions for future research. First, the data were collected from social media users in southern Tamil Nadu, India, using a purposive non-probability sampling method. While this approach was appropriate given the lack of a defined sampling frame, it limits the generalisability of the findings to other geographic regions, cultural contexts, or demographic groups. Social media usage patterns, consumer trust in online reviews, and the relative importance of argument quality may vary substantially across different cultural settings. Future studies should replicate the model in other regional and international contexts to assess the cross-cultural robustness of these findings.

Second, the sample was predominantly young (91.4% below 30 years of age) and male (71%), reflecting the composition of social media users in the study region. This demographic homogeneity may limit the extent to which the findings can be applied to older consumers or more gender-diverse populations, who may process eWOM content differently. Future research should target more diverse and heterogeneous samples to improve the generalisability of the model.

Third, this study relied on self-reported survey data collected at a single point in time. Cross-sectional designs are susceptible to common method bias, as all variables were assessed using the same instrument administered on the same occasion. Future studies could adopt longitudinal or experimental designs to more rigorously establish causal relationships.

Fourth, the study focused on general social media platforms and did not differentiate between specific platform types (such as Instagram, Facebook, or YouTube), product categories, or review formats (textual, visual, or video). The effects of argument quality and message content on eWOM credibility may differ depending on the type of platform, the nature of the product being reviewed, and the modality of the review content. Future research should examine these boundary conditions in greater detail. Finally, future research could explore the mediating role of constructs such as trust, perceived usefulness, and emotional arousal in the relationships examined here. In addition, structural equation modelling (SEM) could be employed in future studies to test the proposed model simultaneously and to examine indirect and mediated pathways more precisely.

7. Conclusion

This study set out to examine the effects of argument quality and message content on eWOM credibility, and to trace how eWOM credibility subsequently influences brand image, eWOM adoption, and online purchase intention. Using data collected from 513 social media users in southern Tamil Nadu and employing regression analysis, all five hypotheses proposed in the study were supported.

The findings confirm that argument quality is a strong and positive predictor of eWOM credibility, and that this relationship is moderated by message content, with higher message content attenuating the effect of argument quality. These results highlight the dual role of content-related factors in shaping how persuasive and credible online reviews are perceived. In addition, eWOM credibility was found to exert equally strong positive effects on both brand image and eWOM adoption, and both of these constructs were found to positively and significantly predict online purchase intention. Taken together, the findings demonstrate a coherent and empirically robust chain of influence that begins with the quality and content of online reviews and ends with consumer purchase decisions.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study contributes to the eWOM literature by extending ELM to a social media context, incorporating message content as a moderator, and integrating constructs from brand management and information adoption research into a unified model. From a practical standpoint, the study underscores the strategic importance of eWOM quality for digital marketers, emphasising that credible, high-quality online reviews can simultaneously strengthen brand image and motivate purchase behaviour through the eWOM adoption pathway.

In an era where consumers increasingly rely on user-generated content to guide their purchasing decisions, understanding the factors that determine the credibility and persuasiveness of eWOM is of growing importance. This study provides a meaningful step in that direction by offering both a theoretically grounded and empirically validated model of how argument quality and message content shape eWOM credibility and, through it, brand image, eWOM adoption, and online purchase intention...

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