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How Consumer Involvement Reweights WOM and eWOM in a Hybrid Market

Dr SAMAKE Amadou[1], Dr KOIVOGUI Siba Kolin[2], Dr KEITA Abdoulaye[3], Dr ELMOCTAR Ibrahim AG[4]

1 Faculty member, université Général Lansana Conté de Sonfonia-Conakry, faculty of Economics and Management (FSEG) Conakry – Guinea, samamadou11@yahoo.fr

2 Faculty member, université Général Lansana Conté de Sonfonia-Conakry, faculty of Economics and Management (FSEG) Conakry – Guinea, sibakolinkoivogui@gmail.com

3 Faculty member, université de Labé, Faculty of Economics and Management (FSEG), Labé – Guinée, abdoulayebkeita@yahoo.fr

4 Faculty member, university de Labé, faculty of Economics and Management (FSEG), Labé – Guinée, ibrahimagelmoctar@yahoo.fr

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how interpersonal word-of-mouth (WOM) and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) jointly shape Brand Trust and Purchase Intention in a hybrid consumer-information environment, with particular attention to the moderating role of consumer involvement. Survey data from 341 young consumers in Guinea were analysed using partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) in SEMinR, complemented by measurement-robustness analyses across four alternative specifications and fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA).

The results show that both interpersonal WOM and eWOM consistently contribute positively to Brand Trust and Purchase Intention across alternative measurement specifications. In contrast, the Brand Trust → Purchase Intention relationship and the corresponding

indirect effects of WOM and eWOM through Brand Trust are sensitive to measurement purification and therefore do not support a robust mediation claim. The most stable finding concerns consumer involvement: across all specifications, involvement weakens the behavioural effect of interpersonal WOM on Purchase Intention while strengthening the effect of eWOM. The moderation effects on Brand Trust are not supported.

The fsQCA results complement these net-effect findings by revealing multiple configurations associated with high and low Purchase Intention, thereby indicating equifinality and causal asymmetry. The study contributes to social-influence and involvement research by conceptualising interpersonal WOM and eWOM as coexisting relational and distributed social-information architectures and by proposing involvement-driven channel reweighting. Rather than uniformly amplifying social influence, consumer involvement appears to change the relative behavioural weight assigned to interpersonal and electronic information channels. The findings also distinguish Brand Trust formation from behavioural conversion and highlight the importance of measurement robustness when evaluating mediation claims.

Keywords: interpersonal word-of-mouth; electronic word-of-mouth; consumer involvement; Brand Trust; Purchase Intention; channel reweighting; PLS-SEM; fsQCA

1. INTRODUCTION

Consumers increasingly make purchase decisions in information environments where interpersonal recommendations coexist with digitally distributed consumer opinions. Traditional word-of-mouth (WOM) continues to operate through socially embedded relationships such as family members, friends, and colleagues, while electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) enables consumers to access reviews, ratings, comments, and experiences generated by geographically and socially dispersed others (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Kozinets et al., 2010). Rather than representing mutually exclusive channels, these forms of social information increasingly operate side by side within the same decision process.

This coexistence raises an important theoretical issue. Interpersonal WOM and eWOM both transmit consumer-generated information, but they do so through different credibility architectures. Interpersonal WOM derives much of its informational value from prior knowledge of the recommender, relational proximity, perceived expertise, similarity, and interpersonal accountability. Electronic WOM, in contrast, derives value from the accessibility, persistence, comparability, and aggregation of multiple consumer experiences. Research on eWOM has shown that message, source, and platform characteristics shape the credibility and behavioural consequences of digitally distributed information (Cheung & Thadani, 2012; Verma et al., 2023).

Yet much of the literature continues to examine WOM and eWOM separately or to compare their effectiveness without fully addressing how consumers allocate influence across both channels when they are simultaneously available. This is increasingly restrictive in hybrid consumer environments, where individuals can consult a trusted person, read online reviews, compare ratings, watch user-generated content, and move repeatedly between interpersonal and digital sources before reaching a purchase decision.

A second unresolved issue concerns the role of Brand Trust. Social information can provide consumers with evidence about whether a brand is reliable, consistent, and likely to fulfil its promises. Brand Trust has long been treated as consequential in consumer-brand relationships (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Delgado-Ballester et al., 2003; Sichtmann, 2007). However, trust formation and behavioural conversion are not necessarily the same process. Consumers may form stronger trust in a brand without that trust constituting the sole or universal mechanism through which WOM and eWOM influence Purchase Intention. This distinction suggests that Brand Trust should be examined empirically as both an outcome of social information and a possible, rather than assumed, transmission mechanism.

A third and more central issue concerns consumer involvement. Involvement research has long shown that consumers do not process all marketplace information with equal intensity. Higher involvement is associated with greater motivation to search for, evaluate, and compare information (Zaichkowsky, 1985), while classic persuasion research demonstrates that involvement can alter the relative weight assigned to different informational cues rather than simply increasing sensitivity to all cues uniformly (Petty et al., 1983).

This reasoning has important implications for hybrid WOM environments. When involvement is relatively low, interpersonal WOM may provide an efficient basis for judgement because the consumer can rely on socially embedded knowledge about the recommender without engaging in extensive external information search. As involvement increases, however, consumers may become more motivated to seek broader and more comparable information. Online review research similarly shows that involvement changes how consumers process review quality

and quantity and how extensively they engage with eWOM (Park et al., 2007; Krishnamurthy & Kumar, 2018).

The theoretically relevant question is therefore not only whether consumer involvement moderates WOM or eWOM independently. A more consequential question is whether involvement changes the relative behavioural weight assigned to interpersonal and electronic social information when both channels coexist. The present study addresses this issue by introducing the concept of involvement-driven channel reweighting: the possibility that increasing consumer involvement redistributes behavioural influence across coexisting social-information architectures rather than uniformly strengthening or weakening social influence.

This study examines these relationships among young consumers in Guinea, a setting in which interpersonal recommendation networks and expanding digital information sources coexist. The theoretical importance of the context does not rest on assuming a distinct or uniform "African" consumer psychology. Rather, the setting provides an opportunity to examine social influence in an environment where relational and distributed information architectures are simultaneously accessible and behaviourally relevant.

The study has four objectives. First, it examines whether interpersonal WOM and eWOM independently predict Brand Trust and Purchase Intention when modelled simultaneously. Second, it tests whether Brand Trust contributes to Purchase Intention and whether it mediates the effects of interpersonal WOM and eWOM. Third, it examines whether consumer involvement moderates the effects of the two WOM channels on Brand Trust and Purchase Intention, with particular attention to whether involvement produces opposite behavioural effects across the two channels. Fourth, it complements the net-effect analysis with fsQCA to identify alternative configurations of WOM, eWOM, Brand Trust, and involvement associated with high and low Purchase Intention.

Methodologically, the study combines PLS-SEM with a measurement-robustness strategy and fsQCA. Rather than relying on a single measurement specification, structural relationships are compared across the original and several conceptually purified models. This makes it possible to distinguish findings that are structurally stable from those that are sensitive to construct operationalisation.

The study makes three principal contributions. First, it conceptualises interpersonal WOM and eWOM as distinct but coexisting relational and distributed social-information architectures rather than as simple offline and online substitutes. Second, it distinguishes trust formation from behavioural conversion, allowing Brand Trust to be evaluated as a robust outcome of social information without assuming that it must serve as a universal mediator. Third, and most importantly, it advances the concept of involvement-driven channel reweighting, proposing that consumer involvement may change which social-information channel carries greater behavioural weight rather than uniformly amplifying social influence.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

2.1 Hybrid Social-Information Environments

Interpersonal WOM and eWOM share a common origin in consumer-to-consumer communication, yet they differ in how social information is produced, stored, evaluated, and transmitted. WOM is embedded in identifiable interpersonal relationships, whereas eWOM makes consumer experiences persistent, searchable, scalable, and accessible to audiences beyond the originator's immediate social network (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Kozinets et al., 2010).

The distinction is therefore not adequately captured by a simple offline-versus-online dichotomy. In contemporary decision environments, consumers can use interpersonal and electronic sources sequentially or simultaneously. The two channels are better understood as coexisting social-information architectures with different credibility properties. This framing provides the basis for distinguishing relational credibility from distributed credibility and for examining whether involvement changes the relative behavioural value of the two architectures.

2.2 Relational Credibility and Interpersonal WOM

Source-credibility research establishes that message effectiveness depends partly on how receivers evaluate the source of persuasive information (Hovland et al., 1953). Building on this tradition, the present study uses the term relational credibility to describe credibility grounded in prior knowledge of, familiarity with, and social proximity to the recommender.

Interpersonal WOM allows consumers to evaluate advice using knowledge of the recommender's expertise, experience, preferences, similarity, motives, and social accountability. Such relational information can reduce uncertainty about both the message and the brand. Because interpersonal recommendations are embedded in ongoing social relationships, they can contribute to confidence in brand reliability and can also provide direct behavioural guidance.

Accordingly, interpersonal WOM is expected to contribute positively to both Brand Trust and Purchase Intention.

H1: Interpersonal WOM positively influences Brand Trust.

H2: Interpersonal WOM positively influences Purchase Intention.

2.3 Distributed Credibility and Electronic WOM

Electronic WOM extends consumer-generated information beyond immediate social ties. Consumers can consult online reviews, ratings, comments, user-generated demonstrations, and discussions produced by multiple, often unfamiliar, sources. The absence of prior interpersonal familiarity makes credibility assessment more complex, but it also creates alternative forms of evidence based on message quality, convergence, source characteristics, platform signals, and the accumulation of multiple experiences (Cheung & Thadani, 2012; Verma et al., 2023).

The present study uses the term distributed credibility to describe credibility that emerges from the accessibility, persistence, comparability, and aggregation of socially distributed consumer information. These features can help consumers infer brand reliability and can provide direct support for purchase consideration. Prior research also shows that eWOM can shape Purchase Intention and brand-related evaluations (Farzin & Fattahi, 2018).

Accordingly, eWOM is expected to contribute positively to Brand Trust and Purchase Intention.

H3: Electronic WOM positively influences Brand Trust.

H4: Electronic WOM positively influences Purchase Intention.

2.4 Brand Trust as an Evaluative Response to Social Information

Brand Trust represents consumers' confidence that a brand will perform reliably and fulfil expectations associated with its promises. Within consumer-brand relationships, trust reduces perceived vulnerability by providing confidence in brand reliability and intentions (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Delgado-Ballester et al., 2003; Delgado-Ballester, 2004; Sichtmann, 2007).

Social information can contribute to Brand Trust because consumers rarely evaluate brand reliability exclusively from direct experience. Interpersonal WOM supplies relational evidence, whereas eWOM supplies distributed evidence. Both can influence expectations about whether a brand is dependable and likely to fulfil its promises.

Brand Trust may, in turn, be relevant to behavioural intention because confidence in brand reliability can reduce uncertainty surrounding a purchase decision. However, the transition from trusting a brand to intending to purchase it should not be assumed to represent a universal behavioural mechanism. The present study therefore distinguishes theoretically between trust formation and behavioural conversion and treats the mediating role of Brand Trust as an empirical proposition rather than a presupposed mechanism.

H5: Brand Trust positively influences Purchase Intention.

H6: Brand Trust mediates the relationship between interpersonal WOM and Purchase Intention.

H7: Brand Trust mediates the relationship between electronic WOM and Purchase Intention.

2.5 Consumer Involvement and the Reweighting of Social Information

Consumer involvement refers to the perceived personal relevance of an object or decision based on an individual's needs, values, and interests. Involvement affects the motivation to acquire, compare, and process marketplace information. Zaichkowsky (1985) linked higher involvement with greater information gathering and attribute comparison.

The information-processing consequences of involvement are particularly relevant when consumers encounter different types of social information. Higher involvement does not necessarily increase the influence of every cue equally. Petty et al. (1983) showed that argument quality had a greater effect under high involvement, whereas an endorser cue exerted greater influence under low involvement. This establishes a general principle that involvement can change the relative weight consumers assign to different sources and characteristics of information.

Applied to a hybrid social-information environment, interpersonal WOM and eWOM may therefore not retain identical behavioural importance across involvement levels. Interpersonal WOM provides relational efficiency: advice from a familiar source can support judgement without extensive external search. eWOM provides a different architecture of persistent, searchable, comparable, and distributed evidence. These characteristics may become increasingly useful as consumers become more motivated to investigate alternatives. Online review research supports the broader proposition that involvement changes review

processing and the extent of eWOM engagement (Park et al., 2007; Krishnamurthy & Kumar, 2018).

The role of involvement in Brand Trust formation is less straightforward. Both interpersonal and electronic WOM can provide credibility-relevant evidence, but involvement may alter the depth with which this evidence is evaluated. Therefore, moderation is tested without imposing a directional expectation for the Brand Trust relationships. For Purchase Intention, the framework advances directional expectations consistent with a reweighting account.

H8: Consumer involvement moderates the relationship between interpersonal WOM and Brand Trust.

H9: Consumer involvement moderates the relationship between electronic WOM and Brand Trust.

H10: Consumer involvement negatively moderates the relationship between interpersonal WOM and Purchase Intention, such that the positive effect becomes weaker as involvement increases.

H11: Consumer involvement positively moderates the relationship between electronic WOM and Purchase Intention, such that the positive effect becomes stronger as involvement increases.

2.6 Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses

The framework integrates three processes: direct social influence, trust formation and potential behavioural conversion, and involvement-dependent channel weighting. Interpersonal WOM represents a relational social-information architecture, while eWOM represents a distributed social-information architecture. Both are expected to contribute to Brand Trust and Purchase Intention. Brand Trust is expected to contribute to Purchase Intention and may transmit part of the effects of both WOM channels. Consumer involvement is introduced as a boundary condition that may change how each channel contributes to Brand Trust and, more specifically, redistribute their relative behavioural influence on Purchase Intention.

The framework therefore shifts the theoretical question from which channel is more influential to the more conditional question of when the relative influence of interpersonal and electronic WOM changes.

Tableau 1: Summary of research hypotheses and proposed relationships

Hypothesis	Proposed relationship	Expected direction
H1	Interpersonal WOM → Brand Trust	Positive
H2	Interpersonal WOM → Purchase Intention	Positive
H3	eWOM → Brand Trust	Positive
H4	eWOM → Purchase Intention	Positive
H5	Brand Trust → Purchase Intention	Positive
H6	WOM → Brand Trust → Purchase Intention	Positive indirect effect
H7	eWOM → Brand Trust → Purchase Intention	Positive indirect effect
H8	Involvement moderates WOM → Brand Trust	Non-directional
H9	Involvement moderates eWOM → Brand Trust	Non-directional
H10	Involvement moderates WOM → Purchase Intention	Negative moderation
H11	Involvement moderates eWOM → Purchase Intention	Positive moderation

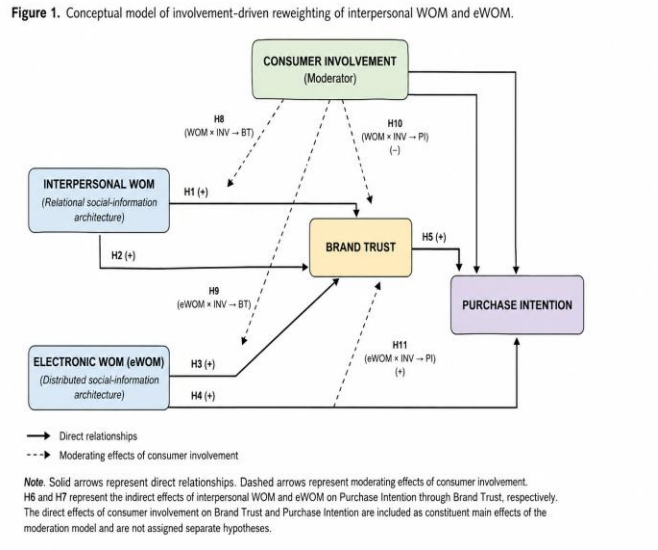


Figure 1: Conceptual model of involvement-driven reweighting of interpersonal WOM and eWOM.

Note: Solid arrows represent direct relationships. Dashed arrows represent moderating effects of consumer involvement. H6 and H7 represent indirect effects through Brand Trust. Direct effects of consumer involvement on Brand Trust and Purchase Intention are included as constituent main effects of the moderation model and are not assigned separate hypotheses.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

A quantitative cross-sectional survey design was employed. PLS-SEM was used to estimate the net direct, indirect, and interaction effects specified in the structural model, while fsQCA provided a complementary configurational perspective by identifying alternative combinations of conditions associated with high and low Purchase Intention (Pappas & Woodside, 2021; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2021). The two approaches were treated as analytically complementary rather than as equivalent hypothesis tests.

3.2 Study Context, Sampling and Data Collection

The study targeted young consumers in urban Guinea who were familiar with both interpersonal recommendations and online product information. Convenience sampling was used because a complete sampling frame was unavailable. A total of 342 questionnaires were initially retained. During subsequent screening, one almost entirely incomplete response was excluded, yielding a final analytical sample of 341 observations.

The initial retained sample was predominantly young and university based. Most respondents were aged 18–24 years and the overwhelming majority were students. Data were collected between October and November 2025 through paper and online questionnaires. Online distribution relied primarily on WhatsApp and direct messaging. The questionnaire required approximately 10–15 minutes to complete. The study therefore provides evidence from a theoretically relevant hybrid-information population rather than nationally representative estimates.

3.3 Measurement Development

All focal variables were measured using multi-item indicators on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The questionnaire initially contained eight indicators for interpersonal WOM, eight for eWOM, eight for Brand Trust, seven for Purchase Intention, and eight for consumer involvement. Because several items were contextually reformulated and the item sets do not correspond exactly to a single published instrument, the measures are described as adapted rather than adopted.

Interpersonal WOM was initially measured with B1–B8. B8 incorporated purchase likelihood into the predictor and was therefore retained only in the original specification. eWOM was initially measured with C1–C8; C7 explicitly linked online testimonials to Brand Trust and was removed from purified specifications. Brand Trust was initially measured with D1–D8; D1 was removed in purified specifications because its exclusion improved measurement coherence rather than because of downstream semantic contamination. Purchase Intention was initially measured with E1–E7; E7 explicitly stated that intention increased when the brand was trusted and was therefore excluded from the principal purified specification. Consumer involvement was initially measured with F1–F8; F7 incorporated confidence in recommendations and was excluded from the purified core model. A restricted involvement specification retained only F1–F5 to represent a more homogeneous cross-category interest measure.

The study thus distinguishes the questionnaire actually administered from the original full-item measurement model and the alternative purified specifications used for sensitivity analysis. Indicator deletion was not based on whether it improved the significance of structural hypotheses.

3.4 Translation, Pretest, Common Method Bias and Data Screening

The questionnaire was translated into French by the lead researcher and reviewed by the two co-authors for linguistic clarity and consistency with the intended meaning of the measures. A pretest was then conducted with 30 undergraduate students from first-, second-, and third-year levels. The pretest was used to assess item clarity and questionnaire comprehensibility before the main data collection.

Participation was voluntary, and respondents were informed that their answers would remain confidential and would be used exclusively for academic research. No directly identifying information was collected. The focal constructs were separated into distinct questionnaire sections. Because all constructs were self-reported within the same survey, common method variance cannot be ruled out completely. Harman's single-factor test was conducted as a post hoc diagnostic. Because the archived output does not preserve the exact first-factor percentage, Harman's test is treated as a supplementary diagnostic rather than definitive evidence regarding common method variance.

After excluding one almost-empty case, all 341 retained observations were valid for SEMinR estimation. No reverse-coded focal items were used.

3.5 PLS-SEM Analysis

PLS-SEM was conducted in R using the SEMinR package. The measurement model was specified using composite constructs, and the structural model included WOM and eWOM effects on Brand Trust and Purchase Intention, Brand Trust → Purchase Intention, the main effects of consumer involvement, and the four interaction effects involving WOM/eWOM and involvement.

PLS estimation used the path-weighting scheme, a maximum of 300 iterations, and a convergence criterion of 10^-7. Moderation was estimated using SEMinR's two-stage interaction approach. Statistical inference was based on 10,000 bootstrap resamples with two-tailed 95% confidence intervals and seed 20260802. All five prespecified models completed successfully with no estimation errors.

Direct hypotheses were assessed from structural path coefficients and bootstrap confidence intervals. H6 and H7 were assessed from bootstrapped indirect effects rather than inferred solely from the component paths. Explanatory power was assessed using R^2 and adjusted R^2 for Brand Trust and Purchase Intention, together with structural diagnostics such as antecedent VIF and effect-size information where appropriate (Hair et al., 2019).

3.6 Measurement Robustness Strategy

Four theoretically motivated specifications were estimated using the same structural model and estimation procedure. Model A reproduced the original full-item questionnaire. Model B constituted the principal purified core specification and removed B8, C7, D1, E7, and F7. Model C retained the purified structure while restricting consumer involvement to F1–F5. Model D2 subjected Purchase Intention to a stricter operationalisation using E2, E3, E5, and E6.

The purpose of this strategy was not to identify the specification producing the largest number of significant paths. It was to distinguish structural conclusions that survived plausible measurement changes from those that depended materially on item composition. A relationship was described as robustly supported when its direction and inferential conclusion remained stable across specifications, robustly unsupported when non-support persisted, and measurement-sensitive when support changed systematically following theoretically justified purification.

3.7 fsQCA Procedure

fsQCA was used to examine alternative configurations of interpersonal WOM, eWOM, Brand Trust, and consumer involvement associated with high and low Purchase Intention. Construct scores were calibrated into fuzzy-set membership using the direct method with the 5th percentile as full non-membership, the median as the crossover point, and the 95th percentile as full membership.

Each antecedent and its negation was first assessed as a potential necessary condition using a necessity-consistency threshold of 0.90. Separate truth-table and sufficiency analyses were then conducted for high Purchase Intention and its negation. Configuration consistency, raw coverage, unique coverage, solution consistency, and solution coverage were used for interpretation. XY plots were treated as supplementary visual diagnostics.

The archived configurational outputs document the calibration procedure, necessity criterion, solution consistency, and coverage statistics reported below. Remaining truth-table settings and software details will be verified against the original configurational output before submission. Importantly, fsQCA configurations are not treated as confirmations or rejections of individual PLS-SEM hypotheses (Ragin, 2008; Pappas & Woodside, 2021).

3.8 Ethical Considerations

The study received institutional ethical approval from the Scientific and Ethical Committee of the Faculty of Management Sciences at Université Général Lansana Conté de Sonfonia-Conakry (UGLC-SC). Participation was voluntary, respondents were informed about the nature of the research, and responses were treated confidentially. No personally identifying information was collected or reported. The manuscript does not claim that the documented approval preceded data collection because the available approval letter does not establish that chronology.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Sample and Analytical Overview

The final PLS-SEM analyses used 341 valid observations. The original questionnaire produced 342 retained responses, but one almost-empty record was excluded during screening. The empirical analysis proceeded in three stages: measurement-model assessment, structural estimation with direct/indirect/interaction effects, and robustness comparison across Models A, B, C, and D2. fsQCA then provided a

complementary configurational analysis of high and low Purchase Intention.

The final analytical sample comprised 341 valid observations. Because the excluded record was almost entirely incomplete, demographic characteristics are described conservatively from the retained sample rather than used as a basis for population-level inference.

4.2 Measurement Model Assessment

The purified measurement models showed satisfactory internal consistency for the focal substantive constructs. In the restricted-involvement specification (Model C), Cronbach's alpha ranged from 0.801 to 0.885, rhoA from 0.813 to 0.890, and rhoC from 0.854 to 0.911. AVE exceeded 0.50 for PCI, Brand Trust, and Purchase Intention, while WOM (0.461) and eWOM (0.457) were slightly below the conventional 0.50 benchmark. Because internal consistency remained satisfactory and further deletion would have reduced content coverage, indicators were not removed mechanically solely to force AVE above 0.50.

HTMT values remained below 0.85 in Model C. Among the substantive constructs, values were well within acceptable ranges; the interaction-construct HTMT between WOM×PCI and eWOM×PCI was 0.795. These results support adequate discriminant separation (Henseler et al., 2015) while reinforcing the decision to interpret measurement quality jointly with content validity rather than by a single threshold.

Table 2: Reliability and convergent validity assessment of the measurement model

Construct	alpha	rhoA	rhoC	AVE
WOM	0.805	0.818	0.856	0.461
eWOM	0.801	0.813	0.854	0.457
PCI	0.821	0.836	0.874	0.582
Brand Trust	0.885	0.890	0.911	0.593
Purchase Intention	0.832	0.834	0.877	0.544

4.3 Structural Model and Direct Effects

Model B was used as the purified core structural specification. It explained 49.9% of the variance in Brand Trust and 47.4% of the variance in Purchase Intention (adjusted $R^2 = 0.491$ and 0.464, respectively). Both interpersonal WOM and eWOM positively predicted Brand Trust and Purchase Intention. Consumer involvement also displayed positive main effects on both endogenous constructs. In contrast, the Brand Trust → Purchase Intention coefficient was positive but not statistically significant in Model B.

The final 10,000-resample bootstrap supported H1–H4 but not H5. In Model B, Brand Trust did not significantly predict Purchase Intention (β = 0.085, t = 1.263, p = .197, 95% CI [-0.044, 0.221]).

Tableau 3: Structural model results and hypothesis testing

Path	β	t	p	95% CI	Decision
WOM → BT	0.220	4.196	<.001	[0.123, 0.326]	H1 supported
WOM → PI	0.140	2.508	.016	[0.030, 0.248]	H2 supported
eWOM → BT	0.175	2.992	.004	[0.058, 0.286]	H3 supported
eWOM → PI	0.207	3.777	<.001	[0.105, 0.322]	H4 supported
PCI → BT	0.306	6.008	<.001	[0.210, 0.409]	Main effect
PCI → PI	0.314	3.590	<.001	[0.128, 0.472]	Main effect
BT → PI	0.085	1.263	.197	[-0.044, 0.221]	H5 not supported

4.4 Mediation Analysis

Mediation was assessed directly from the 10,000-resample bootstrapped indirect effects. In Model B, WOM positively predicted Brand Trust, but Brand Trust did not significantly predict Purchase Intention. The corresponding WOM → Brand Trust → Purchase Intention indirect effect was small and non-significant (β = 0.019, t = 1.175, p = .197, 95% CI [-0.010, 0.053]). H6 was therefore not supported.

A similar pattern emerged for eWOM. Although eWOM positively predicted Brand Trust and Purchase Intention, the eWOM → Brand Trust → Purchase Intention indirect effect was non-significant (β = 0.015, t = 1.260, p = .201, 95% CI [-0.009, 0.038]). H7 was not supported.

The mediation conclusions differ materially from Model A, where Brand Trust → Purchase Intention and both indirect effects were significant. Once the measurement was purified, the mediation effects declined and failed to recover across Models B, C, and D2. The appropriate interpretation is

therefore measurement sensitivity rather than a universal absence of behavioural relevance for Brand Trust.

Table 4: Mediation analysis results

Hypothesis	Indirect path	β	t	p	95% CI	Decision
H6	WOM → BT → PI	0.019	1.175	.197	[-0.010, 0.053]	Not supported
H7	eWOM → BT → PI	0.015	1.260	.201	[-0.009, 0.038]	Not supported

4.5 Moderation Analysis

Consumer involvement did not significantly moderate the effects of interpersonal WOM or eWOM on Brand Trust in Model B. WOM×PCI → Brand Trust was β = -0.054 (p = 0.376), and eWOM×PCI → Brand Trust was β = -0.109 (p = 0.092). H8 and H9 were therefore not supported.

A different pattern emerged for Purchase Intention. The interaction between interpersonal WOM and involvement was negative and statistically significant (β = -0.206, t = -3.752, p < .001, 95% CI [-0.313, -0.095]), indicating that the positive behavioural effect of interpersonal WOM becomes weaker as involvement increases. H10 was supported. Conversely, the eWOM×involvement interaction was positive and significant (β = 0.127, t = 2.368, p = .029, 95% CI [0.017, 0.229]), indicating that eWOM becomes more behaviourally influential as involvement increases. H11 was supported.

The opposite signs of H10 and H11 provide the empirical basis for the channel-reweighting interpretation: increasing involvement does not uniformly amplify social influence; it changes the relative behavioural contribution of interpersonal and electronic WOM.

Table 5 : Moderation analysis results

Hypothesis	Interaction	β	t	p	95% CI	Decision
H8	WOM×PCI → BT	-0.054	-0.992	.302	[-0.164, 0.046]	Not supported
H9	eWOM×PCI → BT	-0.109	-1.704	.110	[-0.225, 0.024]	Not supported
H10	WOM×PCI → PI	-0.206	-3.752	<.001	[-0.313, -0.095]	Supported
H11	eWOM×PCI → PI	0.127	2.368	.029	[0.017, 0.229]	Supported

4.6 Measurement Robustness Results

The comparative analysis across Models A, B, C, and D2 produced three clear patterns. First, the direct contributions of WOM and eWOM to Brand Trust and Purchase Intention were stable across all specifications. Second, Brand Trust → Purchase Intention and the two corresponding mediation effects were supported only under the original full-item specification and became non-significant after purification. Third, the opposite moderation effects on Purchase Intention were highly stable: WOM×involvement remained negative and significant, while eWOM×involvement remained positive and significant across all specifications. Involvement interactions on Brand Trust remained unsupported.

These results distinguish robust structural findings from measurement-sensitive conclusions and provide the strongest empirical foundation for the involvement-driven channel-reweighting interpretation.

Table 6: Robustness analysis of hypothesis testing across alternative models

Hypothesis	Relationship	Model A	Model B	Model C	Model D2	Robustness
H1	WOM → BT	Supported	Supported	Supported	Supported	Robust
H2	WOM → PI	Supported	Supported	Supported	Supported	Robust
H3	eWOM → BT	Supported	Supported	Supported	Supported	Robust
H4	eWOM → PI	Supported	Supported	Supported	Supported	Robust
H5	BT → PI	Supported	Not supported	Not supported	Not supported	Measurement-sensitive
H6	WOM → BT → PI	Supported	Not supported	Not supported	Not supported	Measurement-sensitive
H7	eWOM → BT → PI	Supported	Not supported	Not supported	Not supported	Measurement-sensitive
H8	WOM×PCI → BT	Not supported	Not supported	Not supported	Not supported	Robust non-support
H9	eWOM×PCI → BT	Not supported	Not supported	Not supported	Not supported	Robust non-support
H10	WOM×PCI → PI	Supported	Supported	Supported	Supported	Strongly robust
H11	eWOM×PCI → PI	Supported	Supported	Supported	Supported	Strongly robust

4.7 fsQCA Results

No individual antecedent or its negation reached the 0.90 necessity threshold for either high or low Purchase Intention. For high Purchase Intention, Brand Trust displayed the highest necessity consistency (0.802), followed by involvement (0.790), eWOM (0.762), and WOM (0.760). For low Purchase Intention, the absence of eWOM displayed the highest consistency (0.794), followed by the absence of Brand Trust (0.763), involvement (0.761), and WOM (0.756).

The sufficiency analysis identified three pathways associated with high Purchase Intention: WOM, eWOM, and Brand Trust×involvement. The overall high-PI solution consistency was 0.728 and coverage was 0.908. Three pathways were also identified for low Purchase Intention: ~eWOM, ~Brand Trust, and ~WOM×~involvement, with solution consistency of 0.707 and coverage of 0.924. These results illustrate equifinality and causal asymmetry; configurations associated with high PI do not simply mirror images of those associated with low PI.

Table 7: fsQCA results for high and low purchase intention

Outcome	Configuration	Consistency	Raw coverage	Unique coverage
High PI	WOM	0.777	0.760	0.052
High PI	eWOM	0.805	0.762	0.051
High PI	BT × PCI	0.867	0.687	0.039
Low PI	~eWOM	0.749	0.794	0.094
Low PI	~BT	0.775	0.763	0.061
Low PI	~WOM × ~PCI	0.877	0.626	0.015

4.8 Integrated Interpretation of PLS-SEM and fsQCA Findings

The combined analyses yield three broad empirical patterns. First, WOM and eWOM operate as parallel but distinct information channels: both have stable positive net relationships with Brand Trust and Purchase Intention, and each also appears in fsQCA pathways associated with high PI. Second, Brand Trust is consistently explained by both social-information channels but is not a robust behavioural mediator after measurement purification. The fsQCA finding that Brand Trust can participate in a high-PI configuration does not restore the unsupported net mediation mechanism; rather, it indicates that trust may remain relevant within particular combinations of conditions.

Third, consumer involvement produces the clearest and most stable asymmetry. Across all PLS-SEM specifications, increasing involvement weakens the behavioural influence of interpersonal WOM while strengthening the influence of eWOM. The moderation effects do not emerge consistently for Brand Trust. The integrated evidence therefore points toward a behavioural channel-reweighting condition rather than a uniform amplification mechanism. fsQCA complements this conclusion by showing that multiple combinations of conditions can characterise similar behavioural outcomes.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Discussion of Key Findings

Three findings are particularly important. First, interpersonal WOM and eWOM remain independently relevant to Brand Trust and Purchase Intention. The stability of these paths across four measurement specifications supports a coexistence perspective rather than a substitution perspective. Digital social information has not rendered interpersonal recommendation behaviourally obsolete. This interpretation is consistent with foundational work showing the expansion of WOM into networked and digitally distributed forms while retaining consumer-to-consumer influence (Kozinets et al., 2010; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004).

Second, both channels consistently build Brand Trust, but Brand Trust is a fragile mediator. The positive WOM/eWOM → Brand Trust paths indicate that relational and distributed evidence both contribute to trust formation. However, the Brand Trust → Purchase Intention path and the corresponding indirect effects weakened after measurement purification. This does not contradict the broader literature establishing trust as behaviourally relevant; rather, it qualifies the stronger proposition that Brand Trust necessarily mediates the effects of social information on Purchase Intention.

Third, consumer involvement does not amplify social influence uniformly. The WOM×involvement and eWOM×involvement interactions on Purchase Intention move in opposite directions and remain stable across measurement specifications. Petty et al. (1983) established the more general principle that involvement can change the relative influence of different persuasive cues. Park et al. (2007) and Krishnamurthy and Kumar (2018) further show that involvement changes the processing of online reviews and eWOM. The present study extends this logic from cue processing within a channel to the relative behavioural weighting of coexisting interpersonal and electronic social-information architectures.

The channel-reweighting interpretation should remain precise. Higher involvement does not eliminate interpersonal WOM, nor do the data measure a stated preference for eWOM. Rather, involvement is associated with a weaker marginal behavioural effect of interpersonal WOM and a stronger marginal effect of eWOM. This pattern occurs for Purchase Intention but not Brand Trust, suggesting that involvement becomes especially consequential when consumers translate social information into behavioural judgement.

5.2 Theoretical Contributions

The study makes four related theoretical contributions. First, it reconceptualises interpersonal WOM and eWOM as coexisting social-information architectures rather than competing channels. The important theoretical distinction concerns the architecture of credibility: interpersonal WOM draws on relational credibility, while eWOM provides distributed credibility based on accessible, persistent, and comparable information.

Second, the study proposes involvement-driven channel reweighting. Traditional involvement research explains variation in depth of information processing, but the present study extends this logic to the relative weighting of two coexisting channels. The central contribution is not that involvement strengthens eWOM or weakens WOM in isolation; it is that involvement reweights their relative behavioural influence when both are modelled simultaneously.

Third, the results separate trust formation from behavioural conversion. WOM and eWOM robustly contribute to Brand Trust, but the subsequent conversion of trust into Purchase Intention is measurement-sensitive. Brand Trust is therefore more robustly supported as an outcome of social information than as a universal behavioural transmission mechanism.

Fourth, the moderation pattern is outcome-specific. Involvement does not robustly change how the two channels contribute to Brand Trust, but it does change their behavioural contribution to Purchase Intention. This suggests that consumer involvement may operate less as a general moderator of social credibility and more as a behavioural allocation condition governing which information architecture receives greater decision weight.

The complementary fsQCA analysis adds a configurational layer by showing that different combinations of conditions can be associated with similar outcomes. This does not confirm individual PLS-SEM hypotheses; it highlights equifinality and causal asymmetry and therefore broadens the theoretical account beyond a single universal pathway.

5.3 Managerial Implications

The central managerial implication is that WOM and eWOM should not be managed as interchangeable channels. Firms should maintain mechanisms that facilitate interpersonal advocacy while simultaneously developing credible digital consumer-information environments.

Channel emphasis should also reflect involvement. For relatively low-involvement decisions, interpersonal recommendation may provide an efficient decision shortcut. For higher-involvement decisions, consumers may require richer information capable of supporting comparison and evaluation. Managers should therefore emphasise informational depth—detailed reviews, verified experiences, searchable feedback, and product comparisons—rather than simply increasing promotional volume.

Because eWOM becomes more behaviourally influential as involvement rises, firms should distinguish online visibility from diagnostic usefulness. The present study does not causally test specific review-platform design interventions, so these practices should be treated as managerial applications of the observed channel pattern rather than individually demonstrated effects.

Managers should also separate trust building from purchase conversion. Both WOM and eWOM contribute to Brand Trust, but trust alone does not robustly account for Purchase Intention after purification. Firms should protect reliability, transparency, and consistency while recognising that conversion can also depend on value, affordability, availability, product fit, convenience, and perceived risk. The broader managerial principle is adaptive channel orchestration: adjust the relative emphasis placed on relational and distributed social information according to involvement and decision stage.

5.4 Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations define the boundaries of the findings. First, the study is cross-sectional and relies on self-reported Purchase Intention, so the estimated relationships should not be treated as definitive evidence of temporal causality or actual purchasing behaviour. Longitudinal, panel, and experimental research should test whether involvement causally redistributes behavioural weight between WOM and eWOM.

Second, the sample is predominantly young, urban, and university-based, and therefore should not be interpreted as nationally representative. Replication among older consumers, rural populations, non-students, and respondents with different income and digital-access profiles would clarify the generalisability of the channel-reweighting pattern.

Third, the operationalisation of consumer involvement is adapted and cross-category rather than a standard single-category involvement inventory. Future research should test the mechanism using established category-specific measures and distinguish enduring involvement, situational involvement, purchase-decision involvement, perceived risk, and information-search intensity.

Fourth, the Brand Trust → Purchase Intention relationship and the mediation effects are measurement-sensitive. Future studies should use measures developed from the outset to minimise semantic overlap among predictor, mediator, and outcome constructs.

Fifth, all focal constructs were collected from the same respondents. Procedural safeguards and a post hoc Harman diagnostic were used, but common method variance cannot be eliminated. Multi-source, temporally separated, or behavioural data would provide stronger evidence.

Sixth, the fsQCA solutions currently available were derived from the original construct operationalisation and have not undergone the same measurement-specification robustness analysis as PLS-SEM. Future research should replicate the configurational analysis using purified scores and test sensitivity to calibration anchors, frequency thresholds, consistency criteria, PRI thresholds, and solution types.

Finally, involvement-driven channel reweighting requires independent replication. Experimental designs that manipulate involvement while holding message valence and informational quality constant across interpersonal and digitally distributed sources would provide a particularly strong test of whether involvement causally reallocates behavioural influence between channels.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how interpersonal WOM and eWOM jointly shape Brand Trust and Purchase Intention in a hybrid consumer-information environment, with particular attention to the moderating role of consumer involvement. Using PLS-SEM, measurement-robustness analyses, and fsQCA, the study distinguished stable structural relationships from findings that depended on measurement specifications.

Interpersonal WOM and eWOM coexist as distinct but simultaneously relevant social-information channels. Both consistently contributed to Brand Trust and Purchase Intention across alternative specifications. In contrast, the Brand Trust → Purchase Intention relationship and corresponding mediation effects were not robust to measurement purification. Brand Trust is therefore supported more confidently as an outcome of social information than as a universal mechanism through which social influence is converted into behavioural intention.

The most robust finding concerns consumer involvement. Across all measurement specifications, increasing involvement weakened the behavioural effect of interpersonal WOM while strengthening the effect of eWOM on Purchase Intention. This asymmetric pattern suggests that involvement does not uniformly amplify social influence; it changes the relative behavioural value of different information architectures.

The study therefore advances the concept of involvement-driven channel reweighting. At lower levels of involvement, relational recommendations may provide an efficient basis for behavioural judgement. As involvement rises, consumers appear to place greater behavioural weight on digitally distributed information that enables broader comparison and evaluation. The fsQCA results complement this net-effect perspective by showing that high and low Purchase Intention can emerge through multiple configurational pathways.

The central question is therefore no longer simply whether WOM or eWOM is more influential, but under what conditions the behavioural weight assigned to each social-information channel changes. By identifying consumer involvement as one such condition, the study provides a foundation for future research on how consumers allocate influence across relational and distributed information sources in increasingly hybrid marketplaces.

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