

Whom Do You Believe? Examining the Effects of Different Review Sources on Third Person Effect, Electronic Word of Mouth, and Purchase Intention

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Abstract: A large volume of information from various sources constantly assaults the consumer. It impairs advertisers in reaching their target audience, involving more work and effort to create an effective strategy. Previous studies have shown their importance on consumer behaviors towards the product, but how source typologies affect young people's consumption behavior on small brands has not yet been explored. This study aims to determine the impact of the sources of the review on the levels of the TPE, eWOM, and purchase intention. Two studies were conducted: an experimental study with three groups exposed to the same stimulus, a smartwatch review for a small brand, and a semi-structured interview. The results of the first study show no differences between the three groups regarding the Effect of the source of the review on the level of the TPE and eWOM. Still, it was found that the subjective and objective sources influence respondents' purchase intention. The second study reveals that individuals rely on reviews when purchasing and are more likely to share information with friends when they are satisfied with the product. This paper highlights the importance of understanding source typologies in shaping consumer behavior online.

Keywords: review sources, Third-Person Effect, electronic word of mouth, purchase intention, online reviews.

1. Introduction

Social networks represent the medium through which information about products is transmitted faster and more efficiently than in the case of traditional advertising (Boerman et al., 2017). At the same time, it is notable that people trust eWOM more and more over traditional media because eWOM is much more specific and trustworthy, but also because it presents information from third-party sources by people with expertise (You et al., 2015).

The increasing importance of eWOM attracted the attention of scholars by determining the motivation behind information-sharing behaviors. Thus, it was discovered

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that the level of closeness of an individual to a brand and the types of promoted messages represent elements that mediate the individual's decision to pass on the information about a product (Knoll, 2016). Likewise, other studies emphasize that trust in reviews is essential to purchasing products through online review communities. However, it does not impact the distribution of information (Gharib et al., 2020).

The effects of eWOM on individuals' consumption behavior are also present in the case of repurchase intention. In this sense, online reviews and social media comments can increase the repurchase level of products (Heryana & Yasa, 2020). Other studies demonstrate that the product's perceived value determines greater credibility towards the source of the review and increases the purchase intention (Chakraborty, 2019). Regarding the preference of individuals for review sources, scholars state that people prefer reviews made by strangers over those made by friends, this fact being determined by four elements: the amount of information, the availability of information, the detail of the information, and the dedication of the information (Erkan & Evans, 2018).

Other authors (Bi et al., 2019) studied the relationship between TPE, eWOM, and purchase intention. They concluded that the distribution of positive reviews occurs due to the influence transferred on others, in contrast to the distribution of negative reviews, which occurs due to the perception of the effect on one's person (Bi et al., 2019).

Various studies have been done on the behavior of individuals in the online environment (Iusan, 2021) and how the review sources affect attitudes and consumption behavior (Dou et al., 2012). Still, none have considered behavior toward small brands mediated by different review sources.

The primary purpose of this research paper is to study the effect of different sources of a review (objective and subjective) on the concepts of *the Third Person Effect*, *electronic word of mouth*, and *purchase intention*. The reason behind the choice of this topic was to understand users' purchasing behavior, more specifically, to determine the factors that influence buyers when they make purchases from online merchants' websites.

The concepts mentioned above, *the source of the review*, *TPE*, *eWOM*, and *purchase intention*, have been researched by authors from the field of marketing, advertising, and communication (Bi et al., 2019; Corbu et al., 2017; Eisend, 2017; Erkan & Evans, 2018; Filieri et al., 2018). Still, the relevance of this study lies in observing the effect of reviews on young students in Romania in a post-pandemic context. The present study brings practical implications for communication and advertising by providing insights into the consumption behavior of 19-25-year-olds. At the same time, this paper paves the way for specialists to deepen the topic in future research that can focus on other aspects of reviews, such as persuasion knowledge, the trust and valence of reviews, and their mediating effect on consumer behavior.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Third-Person Effect on advertising

Third-Person Effect was first mentioned under this name by Davison (1983). *Third-Person Effect* (TPE) states that “individuals will overestimate the influence that mass communication has on the attitude and behavior of others” (Davison, 1983, p. 3). The studies that highlight *the Third-Person Effect* show that its involvement in the field of advertising is varied and is dependent on various variables such as the exposure time of individuals to advertising (Lim, 2017), credibility offered to advertise messages (Grier & Brumbaugh, 2007; Skeiseid et al., 2020), social desirability (Jensen & Collins, 2008; Skeiseid et al., 2020), social status (Grier & Brumbaugh, 2007), perception of advertising intent (Eisend, 2017; Kim, 2013), the frequency of product use (Lim et al., 2018), consumer attitudes and values (Chung et al., 2015; Skeiseid et al., 2020), as well as cultural elements of advertising (Grier & Brumbaugh, 2007; Zhang & Daugherty, 2010).

The study conducted on Facebook by Corbu et al. (2017) is relevant for understanding young people’s online behavior and how they perceive the media’s influence on themselves and others. Thus, one of the most critical conclusions is that, although young people have been exposed to this social network for a long time, they perceive the people around them to be much more susceptible to its effects (Corbu et al., 2017). Another paper also considers exposure time (Lim, 2017), revealing that participants believed online cosmetic surgery advertising has a more significant influence on others if they believed others were much more exposed to this kind of advertising (Lim, 2017). At the same time, the relationship between the level of product use and self-report makes consumers perceive themselves as more susceptible to online advertisements than others. In the same field, the paper of Lim, Chock & Golan (2018) shows that people who have used weight loss products are more aware that their use has been influenced by online advertising compared to people who have not used these products. In this case, we can talk about the *Reverse Third-Person Effect*, in which people feel the more significant influence on their person and not others (Lim, Chock & Golan, 2018).

2.2. Third-Person perception in advertising

Third-Person Effect (TPE) presents two hypotheses: *behavioral and perceptual*. Thus, if the first hypothesis captures that people act based on perceptions, the second highlights that individuals tend to perceive others as much more susceptible to communicating than themselves (Eisend, 2017).

The specialized literature shows that, like TPE, the degree to which consumers feel TPE differs depending on the context in which it is measured and the considered variables. These differences that arise within the TPE level are mediated by consumers’ skepticism towards advertising and its intentions (Xie, 2014; Chen & Ng, 2016), the negative (Ham & Nelson, 2016), and positive (Pan & Meng, 2017) valence of the ads, the degree of

controversy of the ads (Lambe & McLeod, 2005; Johnston & Bourgeois, 2015), the age of individuals (Tal-Or, 2007) and the type of promoted products (Ekici et al., 2020).

When it comes to the level of information individuals have, studies show that the more informed people think they are, the greater the perceived effect of persuasion on others (Eisend, 2015). Awareness of the existence of advertising or the media's intent to persuade creates a perception among people that they cannot be influenced, as they are aware of the power of the industries. Still, they believe others are affected more or less (Shen et al., 2015).

In understanding the phenomenon that causes people to transfer the Effect of persuasion on others, the position of consumers on advertising and its intention also comes into play. More specifically, if individuals perceive a negatively valenced persuasive power from advertising, they will project this intention onto others (Eisend, 2015). Another study shares the same idea, which shows that advertising is much more effective for bystanders than for the people surveyed. Thus, the more skeptical people are about advertising, the more they perceive others as more vulnerable than themselves (Xie, 2014).

2.3. The phenomenon of word of mouth in the digital context (eWOM)

Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM) encompasses “the behavior of exchanging marketing information among consumers in online environments or through new technologies such as mobile communication” (Chu & Kim, 2018, pp. 1–2) and represents a “writing communication mediated by the Internet between current and potential consumers” (You et al., 2015, p. 1). Distinctive elements of this phenomenon include discussions about products or product-related content, direct recommendations, or simple mentions and reviews (Berger, 2014).

As for the effects that eWOM can have, they can extend to influence the decision and purchase intention and are determined by numerous factors such as the desire for social inclusion, validation from social groups, the level of trust in the advertiser, as well as the desire to create entertainment (Taylor & Carlson, 2021). Also, there are two types of word of mouth: natural or organic. The first refers to individuals who voluntarily share without realizing it, and the second is when this behavior is promoted through campaigns (Chiosa, 2014). At the same time, this phenomenon is interdependent with three variables: *trust*, *credibility*, and *persuasion*. How they vary can create a positive or negative eWOM (Aramendia-Muneta, 2017).

Considering the accessibility of information from the online environment, it should be mentioned that eWOM can inform but also misinform users since they cannot accurately differentiate valid comments from false ones (Aramendia-Muneta, 2017). Also, the result of eWOM depends on the buyers' characteristics and content. Thus, the level of closeness of an individual to the brand and the types of messages distributed represent elements that mediate the individual's decision to pass on the information about a product (Knoll, 2016). At the same time, traditional WOM is perceived as the most important source of information, especially in the case of online shopping (Hu & Ha, 2015). In parallel, people rely on eWOM to inquire about movies, books, music, games, and electronic products and

turn to traditional sources of WOM for purchases that present a higher purchase risk and have a more excellent symbolic value (Hu & Ha, 2015).

2.4. Online reviews

Online reviews represent an essential element in developing a better understanding of the effects of eWOM on consumers' behavior. In the case of how consumers relate to reviews, studies show that individuals categorize information as reliable when their perception is influenced by various dimensions, such as the length of the review, the ranking score, credibility of the source, factuality, and spread of the review (Filiari et al., 2018). However, when the level of involvement in the case of a review increases, individuals no longer take into account the dimensions presented above but get information from close sources or compare reviews from other media to establish the correctness of the information (Filiari et al., 2018). Trust in reviews is vital to purchasing products through online review communities. However, it does not impact the distribution of information (Gharib et al., 2020). Online product reviews also impact sales. However, the effect is mediated by several elements, such as the person who did the review, the site where the review is posted, and the content's valence (Floyd et al., 2014). Trust in reviews is crucial to purchasing products through online review communities. However, it does not impact the distribution of information (Gharib et al., 2020).

2.5. Source of a review

A significant concept related to online review is its *source*. The *source* of a review is the person who submits information about a product/service online. It can be represented by people close to the users (friends, acquaintances) (Erkan & Evans, 2018), by regular consumers, product manufacturers, and people paid to do reviews, or by people who regularly test products and do reviews (Dou et al., 2012). Previous studies conducted on the sources of reviews show that they can influence the purchase intention of individuals depending on the degree of trust that people establish towards the message of the review (Dou et al., 2012; Floyd et al., 2014; Gharib et al., 2020). Also, the source of the review may decrease or increase the willingness of users to share information on social media accounts or with friends. More specifically, the more individuals attribute a degree of trust to a review, the more likely they will engage in WOM and eWOM behaviors (Mahapatra & Mishra, 2017). At the same time, research on the sources of reviews shows that variables such as the valence of the review (Bi et al., 2019) and familiarity with the source (Poturak & Turkyilmaz, 2018) produce effects on the purchase intention and the level of eWOM. At the same time, the valence of a review causes individuals to perceive differently how they attribute the effect of reviews on themselves and others. Thus, TPE can show different fluctuations (Bi et al., 2019).

3. Problem statement

For a better perspective on the main topics of this study, it is relevant to observe previous studies conducted on *TPE* and *eWOM*. In this case, the relationship between information sources and the level of trust people place in online product reviews was the main focus of the study conducted by Dou et al. (2012). This research was based on an experiment that had a 10-second video about the Kindle 2, an e-book reader from Amazon, as a stimulus. The participants were divided into three groups, informed that they would be exposed to a video review by an Amazon product manufacturer, an independent consumer making product reviews, and a regular product user. The experiment results showed that the message's source influences the degree to which individuals trust the transmitted eWOM information. It has also been observed that the more individuals perceive a person's intentions to be sincere, the more they will trust them and have a better opinion of the product (Dou et al., 2012). Considering these fascinating insights, the first set of hypotheses for the present study is the following:

H1. The third-person Effect is perceived if the review is done by a subjective source (the product manufacturer).

H2. If the review is made by an objective source (independent consumer and regular user), then the Effect of the third person is not perceived.

Consumer trust in eWOM sources affects not only purchase intention and decision but also information-sharing behavior. The study focused on consumers who made a purchase based on recommendations from the online environment and followed how the credibility of the message and the credibility of the source create changes in the acceptance of eWOM messages and their distribution (Mahapatra & Mishra, 2017). The findings support that consumers only accept eWOM messages if the source is credible. Also, the intention to share eWOM information is positively influenced when the message comes from trusted sources (Mahapatra & Mishra, 2017). Based on these previous results, the second set of hypotheses of the study is the following one:

H3. If the review is done by a subjective source (the product manufacturer), users will not perform eWOM.

H4. If the review is done by an objective source (independent consumer and regular user), users will perform eWOM.

The study conducted on students from Timișoara and Sarajevo (Poturak & Turkyilmaz, 2018) is relevant in understanding the characteristics of eWOM that produce effects on purchase intention and captures contradictory results with the study conducted by the authors Erkan & Evans (2018). For this research, online surveys were applied to frequent social media users. Thus, the study considers variables such as familiarity with the source, two-way communication in social media, the expertise of the writer, and the level of popularity of the product/service and how they impact the purchase decision. The results showed that the two groups reported the most significant influence from the source familiarity variable regarding purchase intention. Thus, the closer individuals are to the reviewer, the more likely they are to purchase.

Regarding the action to perform eWOM, it was observed that the differentiating element is social media activity. In this case, users who spend more time online are likelier to share their opinions with friends in their virtual community (Poturak & Turkyilmaz, 2018). Therefore, the final set of hypotheses of the present study claims that:

H5. Users will not purchase the product if the review is made by a subjective source (the product manufacturer).

H6. Users will purchase the product if the review is done by an objective source (independent consumer and regular user).

Along with the three sets of research hypotheses, the main research question is:

RQ. How does the source of the review influence the consumption behavior of individuals?

4. Solution approach

The main objectives of this research consist of determining the Effect created by the subjective source on the level of TPE, eWOM, and purchase intention and observing the Effect created by the objective sources on the previously stated concepts. According to the research hypotheses presented in the previous chapters, a conceptual model was created (figure 1) with links between the concepts presented above.

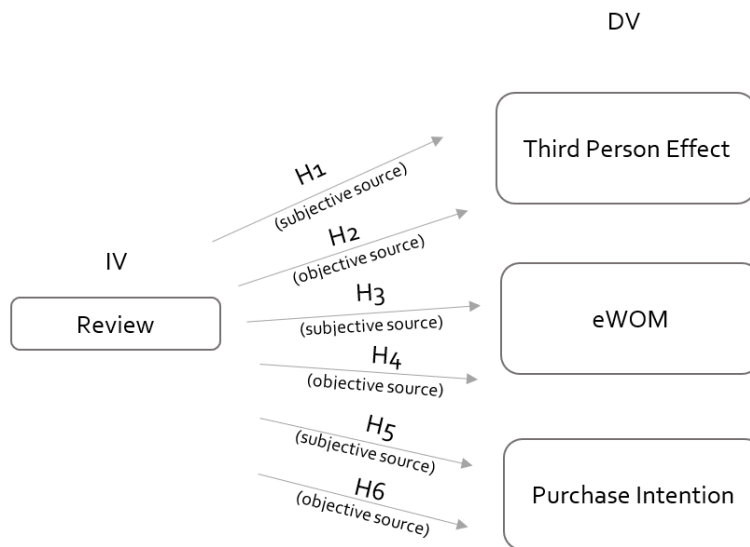


Figure 1. Conceptual model

This research was conducted in Romania because the Effect of review sources on consumer behavior was not considered in this cultural context, even though many Romanians rely on online reviews in the context of online buying. A study conducted by Mocapp and Cult Research on a sample of 508 Internet users shows that 57% of Romanians will not purchase online unless they consult online reviews (Iusan, 2021). In this case, understanding the Effect of the source of the review can help advertisers and marketers develop better strategies for their campaigns.

The present study concentrates on three main concepts: TPE (Davison, 1983), eWOM (Chu & Kim, 2018), and purchase intention (van Reijmersdal et al., 2016), and how their intensity differs depending on the nature of the review source. The first method of this study represents a reinterpretation of Dou et al. (2012) experiment, a 1x3 survey-based between-subjects experimental design, where one variable, the source of the review, is illustrated in three different alternatives for each of the three groups. The objective source represented by the regular user is shown to the control group, the objective source represented by the independent consumer is shown to the first experimental group, and the subjective source represented by the manufacturer is shown to the second experimental group. Following Erkan & Evans (2018), the second method consists of a semi-structured interview to discover individuals' behaviors, attitudes, and perceptions of online reviews that the experiment cannot provide.

5. Concept and terms

5.1. The Experiment

5.1.1. Method

Sample

Given the increased interest of Gen Z over Millennials in shopping online (Thangavel et al., 2021), the target group of this paper consists of young adults (table 1). The experiment participants (N=100) represent young people from Romania aged between 19-25 years, of whom 62% are women and 38% are men ($M=1.38$, $SD=.488$). The area of origin of the respondents ($M=1.33$, $SD=.473$) is predominantly urban, with a percentage of 67% and a percentage of 33% for the rural environment. Most respondents have an average level of education ($M=1.64$, $SD=1.010$), 70% being high school graduates, 24% with completed bachelor's studies, 5% with master's studies, and 1% having completed post-secondary studies. Regarding income ($M=2.77$, $SD=1.213$), most of them have incomes between 500-1000 lei (30%), between 1001-2000 lei (30%), less than 500 lei (15%), between 2001-3000 lei (13 %) and over 3000 lei (12%). The sampling technique is convenient since the survey was distributed online on social networks.

Table 1. The sample distribution in the three groups

Variable	Control group (regular user)	Experimental group 1 (independent consumer)	Experimental group 2 (product manufacturer)	Total
Age				
19	2	2	2	6
20	10	0	5	15
21	6	12	10	28
22	9	9	8	26
23	4	4	3	11
24	2	0	2	4
25	2	5	3	10
Gender				
Female	20	21	21	62
Male	15	11	12	38
Area of origin				
Urban	24	20	23	67
Rural	11	12	10	33
Education				
High school graduates	24	22	24	70
Post- secondary studies	1	0	0	1
Bachelor's studies	9	7	8	24
Master's studies	1	3	1	5
Income				
less than 500 lei	5	4	6	15
500-1000 lei	9	9	12	30
1001-2000 lei	14	8	8	30
2001-3000 lei	2	8	3	13
over 3000 lei	5	3	4	12

5.1.2. Design overview

Participants were randomly selected to be part of one of the three groups and were informed about the source of the review before exposure to the stimulus. The review was constructed based on the characteristics identified by Floyd et al. (2014), Filieri et al. (2018), and Erkan & Evans (2018). The three reviews were identical, with the differentiator factor being the review source. The variables influencing the respondents' perception of the review were limited by choosing a product that does not belong to a well-known brand, more precisely, a SmartWatch ISP LikeSmart TrendFIT watch that can be purchased on Emag. This platform is the biggest e-commerce company in Romania, with a turnover of 5.682 billion lei in 2021 (Seceleanu, 2022). The three people who did the review (the producer of the product, the independent consumer, and the regular user) represent fictitious people in order not to change the answers of the participants, in case the reviews were made by influencers, celebrities, or other well-known people (see Appendix 1 for stimulus).

5.1.3. The instrument

The instrument used to conduct the experiment and collect the data was the online survey. It consisted of three main sections. The first section aimed to collect general data regarding online behavior and consumption behavior, the second section included the stimulus presented above, and the third section included the measurement of effects after respondents' exposure to the given review using scales obtained from previous studies. Thus, after applying the stimulus, the scale made by Dou et al. (2012) was used with two additional items, *subjective* and *objective*, for the manipulation check. As for the dependent variables, they were measured in the following way: for TPE, a 7-point Likert scale was used (1= "Not at all", 7= "Totally") with items proposed by Shin & Kim (2011), which looks at how the respondents perceive the Effect of the review on themselves or others. Examples of items used are: "I think the review convinces me more than others." and "I think the review convinces others more than me." For this scale, the Cronbach alpha coefficient was .57. In the case of eWOM, a scale taken from Evans et al. (2017) study was used with 7 points (1= "Not at all", 7= "Totally") to observe respondents' willingness to perform online information sharing behaviors. Examples of items used are: "I am interested in passing on product information to friends." and "I would pass on the information from the review in a social media post." The Cronbach alpha coefficient of .89 was obtained for this scale.

Regarding purchase intention, it was also measured through a 7-point Likert scale (1= "Not at all", 7= "Totally") with items taken and modified from the authors' studies Erkan & Evans (2018) and van Reijmersdal et al. (2016). Statements such as: "I want to try the product from the review." "I am considering the review to buy the product" was used for this variable. For this scale, the Cronbach alpha coefficient showed a value of .92.

5.1.4. Manipulation check

The research instrument sought to determine the degree to which the participants noticed the stimulus to verify the effects of the experimental manipulation. More specifically, the source that did the review, the objective sources (the independent consumer and the regular user), and the subjective source (the product manufacturer). Cross-tabulations showed that most participants from the first group (regular users) and the third group (product manufacturers) correctly identified the review source they were exposed to—the first group in proportion of 54.3%, and the third group in proportion of 51.5%. For the second group (independent consumers), the manipulation was not as effective; only 28.2% correctly identified the source of the review, and 50% perceived the review as subjective. This result can be attributed to the way the participants perceived the description; thus, an independent consumer could have been perceived as a person who has an interest in promoting the product.

5.2. The Interview

5.2.1. Method

Participants

The interview sample was a purposive sampling and included data collected from 15 interviews. After collecting 15 interviews (table 2), the method reached the point of theoretical saturation. Thus, gathering other interviews would not have provided relevant information for the present research. The participants were people aged between 19 and 25 years old living in Romania (11 female and 4 male), and they were different from the ones included in the experiment. Their environment of origin was predominantly urban, as in the case of the experiment, with 9 people from the city and 6 people from the countryside.

Regarding the participants' education level, it is an average one, 11 people being high school graduates, 2 people with bachelor's studies, and 2 people with master's studies. The distribution of respondents by age is concentrated more on the ages 21 (6 people) and 22 (5 people). The other age segments, 19, 20, 24, and 25 years old, have one representative each, and for the age 23, there is no participant. Participants were also described based on their consumption behavior. Thus, they can be divided into three categories: low-experienced, medium-experienced, and high-experienced consumers. The table below shows the distribution of participants by age, gender, level of education, and consumption behavior while giving each participant a code for a better understanding of the information of this study.

Table 2. Participants' description

Code	Age	Gender	Level of Education	Consumption behavior
F1	21	Female	High school graduate	High experienced
F2	21	Female	High school graduate	High experienced
F3	21	Female	High school graduate	Medium experienced
F4	22	Female	Bachelor's studies	High experienced
F5	19	Female	High school graduate	High experienced
F6	24	Female	Master's studies	High experienced
F7	22	Female	High school graduate	High experienced
F8	21	Female	High school graduate	High experienced
F9	22	Female	High school graduate	Medium experienced
F10	25	Female	Master's studies	High experienced
F11	20	Female	High school graduate	High experienced
M1	21	Male	Bachelor's studies	Medium experienced
M2	21	Male	High school graduate	Medium experienced
M3	22	Male	High school graduate	Medium experienced
M4	22	Male	High school graduate	High experienced

5.2.2. Design overview

Like the authors Erkan & Evans (2018), the present study uses an exploratory approach for the second method to discover in-depth information about the behaviors, attitudes, and perceptions of individuals related to online reviews that the experiment could not provide. At the same time, another reason behind the choice of this method was the attempt to observe whether the participants' answers would be consistent with the results of the experiment in the context where the interview has greater freedom in terms of answers and offers at the same time, the opportunity to observe what elements determine certain perceptions and behaviors.

5.2.3. The instrument

The semi-structured interview guide considered several domains, after which the questions were developed. These domains were inspired by Erkan & Evan's (2018) in-depth interviews with university students. They included online behavior, purchase behavior, WOM behavior, opinions related to reviews, purchase intention based on the review, opinions related to the source of the review, and TPE. The tool was applied via social networks (Messenger, WhatsApp, and Instagram) since the target group is much more likely to give answers online than through face-to-face meetings. At the same time, the online environment offers respondents the opportunity to stay in a comfortable, private context, which will lead them to feel more open to honestly answer the questions without feeling pressured by the physical presence of the guide. The guide contained 13 questions

that sought to discover the reason behind attitudes towards reviews and their sources and to observe what behaviors are created by online reviews. The guide was supplemented with additional questions to help respondents develop their answers.

6. Analysis of results

6.1. The experiment

A one-way ANOVA analysis was performed to measure the effects of the dependent variable on the independent variables. Thus, it was demonstrated that, regarding the Effect of the review source on TPE, no significant difference could be mentioned between the three groups ($F(2, 100) = 4.519, p=.013$). Following this analysis, the first set of hypotheses (H1 and H2) is not supported, with all three groups revealing TPE. The same is true for the Effect of the review source on the eWOM level, which is not statistically significant ($F(2, 100) = 5.425, p=.006$). In this case, it can be implied that the second set of hypotheses (H3 and H4) is not supported. The review source does not significantly affect the level of eWOM. For the third variable, represented by purchase intention, one-way ANOVA showed that the Effect of review source on purchase intention is statistically significant ($F(2, 100) = 7.085, p=.001$). Thus, it can be stated that the third set of hypotheses (H5 and H6) has been supported. The review source has a significant effect on respondents' purchase intention. The one-way ANOVA analysis can be observed in the table below.

Table 3. One-way ANOVA analysis of variance on the relationship between variables

Variables		Sum of Squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.
TPE	Between groups	3.934	2	1.967	4.519	.013
	Within groups	42.216	97	.435		
	Total	46.150	99			
eWOM	Between groups	29.318	2	14.659	5.425	.006
	Within groups	262.129	97	2.702		
	Total	291.448	99			
Purchase intention	Between groups	33.246	2	16.623	7.085	.001
	Within groups	227.593	97	2.346		
	Total	260.838	99			

Although the analysis of variance did not find significant differences in terms of TPE and eWOM, some results are relevant in the present case. In this sense, Third Person Perception (TPP) was frequently observed, with participants attributing the effects of reviews more to others than to themselves. More precisely, 48% of the respondents positioned themselves on the numerical scale between points 5-7 (1= "Not at all", 7= "Totally") in the case of the item "I think the review convinces others more than me." ($M=4.55$, $SD=1.666$). Regarding the perceived Effect of reviews on purchase intention, 67% of participants chose between points 5-7 on the scale for the item "The review may persuade others to buy the product more than me." ($M=4.95$, $SD=1.553$), how the answers were distributed can be seen in the figure below (Fig. 2). For the perceived Effect of reviews on the general opinion, 57% of the respondents placed themselves on the numerical scale between points 5-7, in the case of the item "I think the review would convince others to have a better opinion than me towards the product." ($M=4.83$, $SD=1.518$).

Regarding the availability of the participants to perform eWOM behaviors, the frequencies show a low level of information distribution in the online environment, which is highlighted by the fact that points 1-3 on the numerical scale (1= "Not at all", 7= "In totality") were chosen in a proportion of 72% for the item "I would pass on the information from the review in a post on social media." ($M=2.92$, $SD=2.116$), the distribution of the choices can also be seen in the table above (table 3). The low level of eWOM in the case of the participants is also supported by the answers received for the item "I will post on social media my opinion about the product." ($M=2.63$, $SD=1.973$), in the context where 68% of the participants ranked on the scale between points 1-3. The same can be said about sharing information among friends, with a lower percentage than the ones above; thus, in the case of the item "I will tell my friends on social networks about the presented product." ($M=3.72$, $SD=2.084$), 58% positioned their answers on the numerical scale between points 1-3.

Considering the outcome of the one-way ANOVA, which indicated that the Effect of the review source on purchase intention is statistically significant, post hoc tests were conducted to discover which of the three groups presented a higher level of purchase intention (table 4). A post hoc Tukey test showed that the first group, the one exposed to the objective source represented by the regular user, and the third group, the one exposed to the subjective source represented by the product manufacturer, differ significantly with $p=.002$. Regarding the second group, the one exposed to the objective source represented by the independent consumer, and the third group, there was no statistically significant difference with $p=.772$. The same is valid in the case of the relationship between the first and the second group with $p=.016$. Thus, the source of the review determines an increased level of purchase intention only if individuals are exposed to an objective source represented by a regular user. At the same time, it determines a decrease in buying intention if individuals are exposed to a subjective source.

Table 4. Post Hoc Tests

(I) Study Groups	(J) Study Groups	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Control group (regular user)	Experimental group 1 (independent consumer)	1.05607*	.37465	.016	.1643	1.9478
	Experimental group 2 (product manufacturer)	1.31706*	.37167	.002	.4324	2.2017
Experimental group 1 (independent consumer)	Control group (regular user)	-1.05607*	.37465	.016	-1.9478	-.1643
	Experimental group 2 (product manufacturer)	.26098	.38003	.772	-.6436	1.1655
Experimental group 2 (product manufacturer)	Control group (regular user)	-1.31706*	.37167	.002	-2.2017	-.4324
	Experimental group 1 (independent consumer)	-.26098	.38003	.772	-1.1655	.6436

Discussion study 1

The primary purpose of this study was to determine the influence of review sources on the concepts of TPE, eWOM, and purchase intention by comparing three groups within the experiment. The study also sought to test three sets of hypotheses, each referring to the three independent variables.

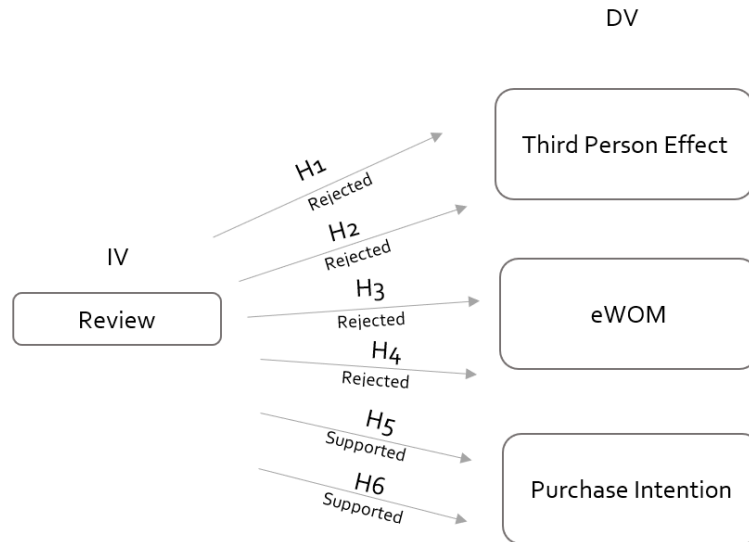


Figure 2. The conceptual model with validation/ invalidation of hypotheses

First, the results did not show significant differences between the three experimental groups regarding the first variable, so it can be said that the review source does not affect the level of TPE (figure 2). Hence, **H1** and **H2** are not supported. Although the level of TPE did not change within the three groups, it was present in all three contexts. More specifically, the results showed that individuals attribute the Effect of reviews to being more assertive of others in purchase intention than of themselves. Also, in the same context, TPE appears. Thus, the respondents perceived others as more influenced by the review than themselves.

Second, no differences were reported between the three groups regarding respondents' willingness to share information about the review in the online environment and among virtual friends, so **H3** and **H4** are not supported. However, considering the review, the three groups generally reported a low intention to share information online. It implies that respondents are less likely to perform eWOM behavior on their social media accounts and in conversations with friends. The results from the first part of the survey support this fact, as a low tendency among participants was observed to carry out information-sharing behaviors in the online environment.

Also, the results show a significant difference between the three groups regarding purchase intention, and **H5** and **H6** are supported. Thus, the subjective source represented by the product manufacturer negatively affected purchase intention, while the objective source represented by the regular user positively affected purchase intention. However, in the case of the objective source consisting of the independent consumer, no trend can be

observed, the results within this group being divided between a low and high purchase intention at the same time. To sum up, a subjective source decreases purchase intention, while an objective source increases purchase intention.

6.2. The interview

The data collected through semi-structured interviews reinforced the results brought by the experiment and provided insights into consumer behavior.

Buying behavior of individuals

In the domain of the buying behavior of individuals, it was determined that all participants make online purchases with a frequency that includes several purchases in a month and a week. The reasons that lead them to choose online purchases over those in physical stores include convenience, safety, time saved, product diversity, promotions, and lower prices than in physical stores. These reasons can also be highlighted: “Things are more accessible online; you don’t have to look for them in stores. Plus, you find different things online that you might not find in physical stores. And online products are often cheaper because there are many discounts.” (F2). The interview additionally brought the respondents’ perspective regarding other elements that lead them to purchase certain products from the online environment. Thus, positive reviews, product quality, price, necessity, shopping site design, and product promotion are the main reasons that generate a purchase for a particular product online.

WOM behavior

The following domain that focuses on the interviewees’ willingness to share information among friends shows that most share their opinions with friends about the purchased products. However, WOM behavior is achieved when they have tried the product and are sure of its qualities, but also when their opinion was requested: “Yes, I recommended various products to friends, but only when I was excited about them.” (F6).

Opinions related to reviews

The interview results also captured the participants’ opinions regarding the reviews. In this sense, opinions oscillated between trust and distrust. Regarding trust, the majority ranked reviews as valuable, especially in the case of purchases involving high costs, and ranked them as relevant, convincing, and credible when accompanied by images showing both the product’s strong and weak points. Regarding distrust, reviews were ranked as a means of promotion, and the risk of being fake was mentioned.

Purchase intention based on the review

The domain of purchase intention of the participants based on the reviews shows that, in the case of a purchase, the buyers choose to rely both on the recommendations of friends and the reviews on the shopping sites. However, a few participants reported that they only preferred information from online reviews.

Opinions related to the source of the review

The domain related to the opinions about the sources of the review showed that the participants believe a review is subjective when its purpose is to convince people to purchase the product, when the description of the product is based on personal tastes, and when only the qualities of the product are presented, when no arguments are made and if a producer or a paid influencer makes it.

Also, within this field, the way respondents perceive reviews with subjective and objective sources and the level of purchase intention for each case were tracked. Thus, for the subjective source the product manufacturer represents, most of the responses – except one person – consisted of a negative opinion on this type of review. What led to this was the idea that manufacturers tend to overstate the qualities of the product to convince people to buy it: “I think the manufacturer of the product will only have good things to say about their product, so I would consider the review exaggerated or untrue.” (F10). The purchase intention established for the product manufacturer’s review was negative, in line with H5.

In the case of the reviews made by an ordinary consumer, the responses highlighted a primarily positive opinion derived from the consumer’s lack of interest in selling a product, the wide range of perspectives on the product’s features, and the help provided in deciding about the purchase. Regarding the purchase intention, the responses aligned with those in the experiment and implicitly with hypothesis H6. Thus, most interviewees reported an increased purchase intention, the main reason behind this decision being the valence of the review, the arguments presented, and the need to purchase the product:

“It depends on the arguments and objectivity with which the review is made and my determination to purchase that product. If I’m not convinced, and the review is positive, I tend to consider it and look for similar ones. It will weigh heavily on my decision to abandon the purchase if it’s negative. If, on the other hand, I’m super convinced, a negative review might make me take a step back momentarily, but I’d most likely go back and buy the product, taking the risk. If it’s positive, it will only speed up my purchase.” (F8).

TPE opinions

The last area related to TPE shows the predominance of the participant’s answers to the existence of a greater persuasive power of reviews on others than on themselves. Except for one response, which involves the perception that reviews have a much more significant effect on oneself, in which case the First Person Effect can be identified, all participants supported the presence of TPE. Participants motivated their responses based on the fact that others are not as informed, cannot differentiate between real and fake reviews, and do not analyze the information: “Yes, there are always people who are easily influenced and who do not distinguish real reviews from fake ones.” (M1).

Discussions study 2

The second research method sought a deeper understanding of the behaviors and attitudes reported in the review sources within the experiment.

As for how people distinguish an objective source from a subjective source of a review, aspects related to the purpose of the message, the language used in the product description, the financial interests of the person doing the review, and the general presentation are considered. For a review to be considered subjective, it must be made by a paid producer or influencer, focus only on benefits, have the goal of making a purchase, and have a financial gain from the person recommending the product.

Also, individuals show a low level of purchase intention when referring to a review made by a subjective source. It is determined by the manufacturer's intention to persuade potential buyers and the lack of information. To make a purchase, buyers need both strengths and weaknesses of the product.

In the case of a review made by an objective source, individuals show an increased level of purchase intention. Compared to the previous situation, the message of the review is not intended to influence, the source of the review has no benefit, and the product presents both benefits and disadvantages.

The respondents reported positive responses in the case of the WOM. They presented a behavior of distributing information about the tested products among their friends. At the same time, they perceived the reviews as having a much more persuasive effect on others than on their selves, confirming the presence of TPE.

Regarding the research question of the study, *How does the source of the review influence the consumption behavior of individuals?* it can be said that the source of the review determines both positive and negative effects on consumers. It is mainly possible in the case of purchase intention, where an objective source causes an increased purchase intention while a subjective source causes a decreased purchase intention. In other words, the more the source aims to sell the product, the more it loses the trust of individuals in the message, which ultimately leads to lower purchase intent.

7. General conclusions

This research mainly aimed to determine the Effect of review sources on the concepts of TPE, eWOM, and purchase intention. Thus, the first study's results show no notable differences between the Effect of the subjective source and the objective sources on the level of TPE and eWOM. However, all three groups invoked the presence of TPE, with individuals perceiving others to be more affected by the persuasiveness of reviews than themselves. These results were also supported by the responses received from the participants of the second study, in which individuals attributed a higher level of persuasiveness to reviews to those around them. The interviewees considered others less informed and less capable than themselves, demonstrating the results of other authors who suggest that the more people perceive themselves as informed, the more they attribute a more significant effect of information on those around them (Lev-On, 2017).

Regarding eWOM and WOM, the present research brought some relevant results for the target group studied. More specifically, the experiment demonstrated low eWOM on

social media. Young participants aged 19-25 are less likely to engage in product information-sharing behavior on their social media accounts. This fact contradicts the results of authors Poturak & Turkyilmaz (2018), which imply the relationship between time spent on social networks and eWOM. According to them, the more time users spend on social media, the more openly they share their opinions with virtual friends (Poturak & Turkyilmaz, 2018). In the case of the present study, time spent on social media had no impact on the level of eWOM, as the average time was high and eWOM was low. However, the presence of TPE in the three experimental groups and the low level of eWOM demonstrate that individuals who attribute a more significant effect of reviews on others will report a low willingness to share information, a fact also supported by Chung et al. (2015).

The interview responses demonstrated a high level of WOM, with participants indicating their intention to tell friends about the product provided and whether they were satisfied with the product experience. Although Bi et al. (2019) imply that individuals' predisposition to perform eWOM is related to review-seeking behavior, the interview responses show that this is only achieved in the case of WOM. Thus, the more reviews individuals search for, the more often they engage in WOM behaviors.

Among the most important results of this study is the confirmation that the source of the review determines the effects on the purchase intention. In this sense, both studies demonstrated that the subjective source represented by the product manufacturer negatively influences the level of purchase intention. In the case of the objective source, the effect occurs in the opposite direction; the review made by the regular user determines a high level of purchase intention. These results are supported by several studies, which emphasize how trust in reviews alters purchase intention (Dou et al., 2012; Floyd et al., 2014; Gharib et al., 2020).

Study 2 also showed how the participants relate to different types of reviews. Thus, there is a preference for online reviews over those from friends, although the latter is perceived as an element that complements the consumer's decision. Making online reviews complex, presenting strengths and weaknesses, gives individuals an overall picture of the main benefits of online reviews found in other studies (Erkan & Evans, 2018; W. M. Lim, 2015). Also, the results showed the importance of the valence of the reviews on the overall opinion of the products. Thus, as the study of Floyd et al. (2014) shows, positive reviews determine a favorable opinion of the product, while harmful recommendations cause individuals to focus only on its flaws.

8. Limits and future work

For this study, some limitations can be mentioned. The samples of the two studies have a predominance of female participants, which limits the determination of an exact pattern for the male gender. In the experiment, the time limit given by the respondents to the stimulus could not be established, and the site chosen for the review stimulus, Emag, may have represented a bias. Finally, in the manipulation check, in the case of the group

exposed to the independent consumer, participants may have perceived this source as subjective and not objective.

For future studies, it is recommended to experiment with a more significant number of participants and a gender-balanced sample. It is also interesting to apply the experiment to several product categories to examine how significant the Effect of the source is when the financial variable is considered. The research could be continued with the physical participation of the subjects in the experiment; thus, they will be in a controlled laboratory environment in which their exposure to the stimulus can be measured. Another future research perspective would be to test the Effect of the source of the review more effectively on the TPE level, with the implication of persuasion knowledge and the trust that the respondents give to the review.

Appendix

Stimulus 1- Control group and Experimental Group 1

The screenshot displays a product page for a smartwatch. At the top, the product name is 'Ceas SmartWatch ISP LikeSmart™ TrendFIT, 1.55" FULL Touch Display, Apelare Smart Call Bluetooth, Oximetru'. It has a 4.69 star rating from 306 reviews and a price of 239.00 Lei. A 'Adauga in Cos' button is visible. Below the product information, there are tabs for 'Descriere', 'Cumparate frecvent impreuna', 'Specificatii', 'Review-uri (306)', and 'Intrebari si raspunsuri (57)'. A review by Andreea Rusu is highlighted, dated 28 Feb 2022. The review is titled 'Recomand' and is a 5-star review. The text of the review describes the smartwatch as practical and functional, mentioning its ability to connect to a phone, its audio function, and its battery life. It also mentions that the watch is easy to wear and provides notifications for social media messages. Three small images of the smartwatch are shown below the text. At the bottom of the review, there are icons for liking, adding a comment, and viewing other comments.

Stimulus 2 – Experimental Group 2



The screenshot shows a product page for a smartwatch. At the top, the product name is 'Ceas SmartWatch ISP LikeSmart™ TrendFIT, 1.55" FULL Touch Display, Apelare Smart Call Bluetooth, Oximetru'. It has a 4.69 star rating from 306 reviews and a price of 239.00 Lei. There are navigation tabs for 'Descriere', 'Cumparate frecvent impreuna', 'Specificatii', 'Review-uri (306)', and 'Intrebări și răspunsuri (57)'. A review by 'Andreea Like Smart' is highlighted, dated 28 Feb 2022. The review text describes the watch as practical and functional, mentioning its connectivity, battery life, and design. Below the text are three small images of the watch and a 'Vezi comentarii (1)' link.

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