

## **eWOM as an information source for consumers**

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<p>Online review from a consumer is one type of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). This widespread social form of influence has changed consumers role from passive buyers into empowered consumers. Electronic word-of-mouth is a valuable source of information to consumers communicated by other consumers who have experience of a product or a service. Reviews from other consumers may reduce the risk of buying and provide an additional verification that a product or a service has good quality.</p> <p>The more people write reviews of services and products, the better these collaborative review systems work for everyone. Nowadays it has become a common norm to search reviews online before buying a product or a service in order to see what other consumers have written.</p> <p>The topic has been studied over the recent years more and more. This research-based thesis examines previous studies and analyses reviews written on Verkkokauppa.com website from the view point of eWOM credibility by means of qualitative content analysis supported with netnographic approach.</p> <p>The aim of this thesis is to gain a better understanding of eWOM as a phenomenon and to determine which factors particularly make unknown users' reviews trustworthy. Theory provides a short review of events in the past that has eventually resulted in emerge and rise of eWOM.</p> <p>Prior studies of eWOM form the basis of the theory. Motives for consumers to provide eWOM and to read eWOM are examined and whether negative reviews are disadvantageous or advantageous. Theory also highlights shortcomings and bias of the review and rating systems.</p> <p>By analysing reviews collected from Verkkokauppa.com website and interpreting the findings reflecting on theory of prior study from 2009 by Cheung, Luo, Sia and Chen. The research indicated that the most important factors for credible eWOM is that a review provides valid arguments, confirms prior beliefs, is from a credible source, consistent with other reviews and supported by other users.</p>	
<b>Keywords</b> reviews, eWOM, ratings, credibility, e-commerce, trustworthiness	

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# 1 Introduction

Shift of power from companies to consumers started to interest me when I volunteered in Nordic Business Forum 2017. I was listening to Rachel Botsman's speech and since then I have been highly interested in why people are more willing to trust other consumers rather than well-known brands. It is interesting that we don't know the people online or will never meet them and yet we trust their opinions and make purchase decisions based on their views.

Trust on advertising has decreased because it is everywhere, and all ads have quite similar message how their product is better, it will make your life easier and you'll get better run for your money. Consumers have grown to be more critical and they question the quality of products and services sold. All this has led to a point where consumers mainly believe peers' recommendations and word of mouth. The emergence and widespread of the Internet has made it possible to reach thousands of consumers' opinions online providing relevant user-experience information concerning goods and services from people outside of personal ties. This widespread and strongly trusted peer communication form has had a significant influence on the market (Hennig-Thurau & Walsh, 2003, 63, 51). This online word of mouth is known as electronic word of mouth (eWOM).

These days, consumers trust other peers more than commercial content and online reviews are considered as trustworthy as personal recommendations (BrightLocal 2018). Reviews contributed from users' own experience are genuine and aren't trying to sell you anything. It is an opinion from an ordinary user of a product or a service and you can choose to overlook it or maybe it supports your pre-expectation which may lead to a purchase decision. Reviews are a way to facilitate decision making with all this option and information overload that is accessible.

Findings of this study may help to understand consumers and what are the factors that make reviews seem credible, as well as to evoke consumers to bear in mind the bias and inequality of online reviews. Also, this study may help online retail stores to understand eWOM better and to critically examine how they could increase their website's trustworthiness.

First, this paper describes events in the past that have eventually led to the rise and spread of eWOM. Then theory brings out how consumers' role has changed, thanks to the Internet, from passive buyers into empowered consumers with the ability to compare prices and better selection of choices (Lee, Cheung, Lim & Sia, 2006, 290). As a matter of fact,

nowadays almost 70% of consumers do research online before purchase (Wunderman Thompson Commerce, 2019, 41). From then on, the concept of eWOM is explained more thorough and what motivates people to share their opinions online. Also, the reason for people to search for eWOM is explored.

As the purpose of this research-based study is to shed a light on factors that indicate eWOM credibility, theory reflects upon previous study on how consumers assess eWOM credibility. Positive-negative ratio of reviews is also studied, as in whether negative reviews are a good thing or disadvantageous. Theory also aims to highlight shortcomings of rating scales and inequality of eWOM participation.

The analysis of the empirical data is intertwined with reflecting theory from a previous study of eWOM credibility characteristics. With the help of prior theory and qualitative research methods this study aims to understand which factors makes unknown users' reviews trustworthy. Reviews written of high-risk products' particularly high-priced smartphones on Verkkokauppa.com website were analysed for this study.

## 2 From one-way to two-way web

This first chapter looks back on occurrences in the past and the shift of culture that has eventually resulted in emerge and rise of eWOM.

Before the Internet and Google, consumers made purchase decisions based on word-of-mouth (WOM), TV, radio and advertisements. Advertisements are generally one-sided that only bring out the advantages of a product/service. Word-of-mouth then again is shared face-to-face and among close ties, whereas the information giver's personal opinion has influence on the conveyed information. In 1990s a new channel emerged which has changed the way consumers make purchase decisions.

Sir Tim Berners-Lee is the father of the World Wide Web. He was knighted by H.M. Queen Elizabeth in 2004. His creation revolutionized the way people do business, shop, socialize and entertain themselves. The Queen Elizabeth Prize for Engineering was awarded to him in 2013 for "ground-breaking innovation in engineering that has been of global benefit to humanity" (The World Wide Web Consortium). He and his parents were British computer scientists. Tim graduated from Oxford University and became a software engineer. In March 1989, he submitted a document called "Information Management: A Proposal", which was declined at first by his boss with written words "vague but exciting" on the cover page. Tim got time to refine the proposal further and by the end of 1990 he had developed HTML, URI also known as URL and HTTP that are still in use to this day as improved versions. The World Wide Web was then launched in 1991 and later on he secured that it would be accessible to anyone royalty-free (World Wide Web Foundation).

Web 1.0 has been referred to as "read-only web" by Tim Berners-Lee. It signifies the first stage of the web from mid 90s when communication was one-way and users could surf the net in search for information and reading it. There was very little interaction and users were just passive receivers of information. It's impossible to draw a timeline where the web 1.0 ends and 2.0 begins because it has changed gradually over time, although some web pages still use web 1.0 model (WittyCookie 2012; Getting 2007; Technopedia). In the late 90s, the adoption of the Internet and growth of usage was very quick. The hype was heavy and many investors were extremely eager to invest in Internet based companies. However, at the change of the millennium the dot-com bubble collapsed, due to extensive speculations, overly valued stocks and investors' fear of not being able to cash in profits for several years (Hayes 2019). The outcome was that by the end of 2001 most dot-com stocks had crashed (Kenton 2018).

Since the dot-com bust, the general ambiance was thrown off balance and Web 2.0 Conference was held in 2004 to reinforce the industry by O'Reilly Media. The conference's visitors consisted of the most influential people and thinkers of the web industry. Afterwards the term Web 2.0 was adopted in use on large-scale. The key points learned from the survivors of dot-com bust like Amazon and eBay was that they welcomed user engagement and collaborative content creation (O'Reilly, 2007, 17, 36-37; Battelle & O'Reilly, 2009, 1). Tim Berners-Lee has questioned the entire term Web 2.0 as jargon and there's been some debate of the definition and whether it's just an overused buzzword (Websitebuilders.com, Technopedia). Tim O'Reilly has defined Web 2.0 as following: "Web 2.0 is a set of social, economic, and technology trends that collectively form the basis for the next generation of the Internet – a more mature, distinct medium characterized by user participation, openness and network effects" (O'Reilly & Musser, 2007, 10; Wright & Zdinak, 2008, 9-10).

Users changed from passive receivers of content into co-creators. Users could change content although the core of the page remained the same, this was all about harnessing collective intelligence of users. Among the first services like these were Wikipedia.org and Youtube.com (O'Reilly & Battelle, 2009, 1; Wright & Zdinak, 2008, 9-10). Web 2.0 has also been referred as the social web, since the web turned into more interactive and toward two-way communication as users could share, receive and contribute information. Emergence of social media revolutionized the way people share and how we make connections during the Web 2.0 era (Nations 2019; Technopedia 2011; GeeksforGeeks).

Web 3.0 has no clear definition for it yet. Only vague idea of what it will bring, but at this point predicting the future is merely a guessing game. Presumed features highlight artificial intelligence's key role, how computers can interpret information and intelligently sort findings based on user preferences. The use of virtual assistants will gain popularity, smart home appliances will become widespread and the internet of things will evolve (Nations 2018; Technopedia; WittyCookie 2012).

All of these events in the history has made it possible that at the present time we have internet accessible at all times, right in our pockets. Thousands of reviews are shared by consumers every day on various platforms. We can turn to this invisible online crowd to reassure us whether to buy something or not. Consumers no longer need to rely on information they are told by sellers, in contrary consumers have full access to product information, reviews, comparisons, test results and testimonials to help to make a choice.

## 2.1 Network effect

Internet wouldn't have much use if it hadn't become a widespread channel. You see, the more users a good or a service has, the more of value it serves to its users. Also, the broader the user base is, the more use that service has for all its users (Banton 2019). That is network effect, in simple terms. HubSpot's blog post (2018), defined it more explicitly by: "A network effect is when new, additional users signing up for a product or service increases its value and utility for current and future users. If a product or service has a network effect, its value and utility will increase as its user base grows."

There are three types of network effects: local, direct and indirect. Direct network effect is also known as same-side network effect. Users benefit directly when user base broadens and the usage of the service increases. A good example of this is MobilePay which is a mobile payment service. The more users it has, the more of use it is for its users for making transactions. Another straightforward example is the phone network, the more people have phones, the more people you can reach (Johnson 2018; Chi 2018).

Indirect network that is also known as cross-sided network effect, requires both buyers and sellers, so it's a two-way street. Peer-to-peer business platforms like Uber and Airbnb are great examples of indirect network effect. This is a bit trickier to explain, so pay attention. Here's how it works. With Airbnb, the more travelers register, the more there's need and value for hosts. With Uber the more riders, the more there's need and value for drivers. Then at a time when there are more hosts and drivers, then there's more variety of selection to users. Wider reaching locations and shorter waiting times attracts even more new users to the service, which means more business opportunities. Then again, increased number of users draws more sellers to join the service. Buyers and sellers increase the value of the network for each other by multiplying. Compared to direct network effect, the key difference is that both parties don't benefit for all additions to the network. For instance, a new host doesn't bring value to another host, but a new registered traveler can benefit multiple hosts (Johnson 2018; Chi 2018).

When a service's value to a user depends on the usage of a small group of users instead of the entire network, it's called local network effect. As an example, WhatsApp is beneficial to a user only if the people who are meant to be reached use the same instant messaging application as the user (Corporate Finance Institute).

The same network effect applies to online reviews as well. As the quantity of reviews and diversity of opinions are one of the key things that induce trust in users, therefore the review sites depend on engaged users (Couzin & Grappone, 2013, 29). The more users contribute and share their user experience, the better these collaborative rating systems work for everyone and they reflect what the majority thinks. All the users who provide content in somewhat way, create value for others and that is how the system rolls. User contributors may not even understand just how many people makes or changes their opinions based on something that they had written (Botsman & Rogers, 2011, 91).

## **2.2 ROPO, research online, purchase offline**

Ever since the internet was launched in 1991, and since a more recent development when smartphones became common, the way people do business, search for information and shop has been revolutionized. With smartphones people have access to internet at all times and everywhere, at least when phones have battery left. Over the course of time, this has reshaped the customer journey towards the modern customer journey, which brings us to the ROPO effect.

ROPO stands for research online, purchase offline (aka ROBO, research online, buy offline) which refers to a buying behavior where consumers seek online information of a product prior to purchasing in-store (Baldwin 2019). Sixty-nine percent of consumers research purchases online before buying them in-store, according to the Future Shopper report (Wunderman Thompson Commerce, 2019, 41). Consumers want to make informed purchase decisions and nowadays they have unlimited access to see online reviews, product details, comparisons, testimonials, store availability and pricing with smartphones.

As mentioned earlier, the vast majority of consumers do research online before purchase, furthermore 82% of smartphone users look up online information on purchases they're about to make in-store (Bazaarvoice, 2018, 8). People do not only seek online information regarding e-commerce, but online research has an ever increasing impact on in-store purchases as well (Ellet 2018). The gap between e-commerce and in-store shopping narrows at a steady pace while both influence each other. Consumers use their smartphones to find stores, to compare prices and to make informed purchase decisions by reading online reviews (Vito 2018).

The most researched before purchase items include appliances, electronics, automotive, wearable technology and health, beauty & fitness, these product categories have a high ROPO value. Then again, mundane goods that are bought regularly such as food and

products which quality and performance is easily assessed by the looks of it has a lower ROPO value (Skeldon 2018; Bazaarvoice, 2018, 11-13).

Consumers are still keen on making purchases in-store, although they might reach a purchase decision online. The leading reasons for why consumers still value brick-and mortar stores over online are that they can see, touch and try merchandise in-person. Plus, they get to take the product home immediately and they don't need to wait for delivery (McDonald 2017; Skrovan 2017).

Online and offline commerce coexist and are more intertwined than ever, this is often referred as the omnichannel world of commerce. People find stores by searching online and assures themselves on making the right decision in-store by checking online. Also, customers are drawn to brick-and-mortar stores by stock availability information online. With regards to the future, storekeepers should take into account that every time a customer goes to a store just to find out that what they came for is no longer available will make that customer likely buy online the next time around (Vito 2018; 1&1 IONOS 2019).

### **2.3 POEM, paid, owned and earned media**

Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) is part of earned media. Earned media is media exposure that is free of charge, an acknowledgment of a sort that is distributed by a third party with means of WOM, recommendations, user-generated content, reviews, press mentions, quotes and eWOM. Brands don't have control over earned media and that is one of the key issues why consumers consider it as the most trustworthy information source (Prasanna 2018; Gallegos 2017; Fine 2016).

On account of cost effectiveness and gained trust among consumers, it really does payoff to invest time and energy on building strong relationships with existing and prospective customers. Passionate fans of a brand known as brand advocates are very influential mediums to reach wider target audience and to build credibility. As consumers are more likely to trust content and messages coming from peers rather than commercial content created by a marketing department, it's needless to say that earned media is an essential form of marketing (Gallegos 2017; Prasanna 2018; CP Communications blog; Mediakix 2018).

Nevertheless, all three elements: paid, owned and earned media, are necessary means to gain attention of consumers. Paid media refers to advertising, like pay-per-clicks, social

media ads, search engine ads, digital screens, billboards, TV etc. In a nutshell, it's paying for promotion which results in growth of awareness (Garman; Robinson 2016).

Owned media refers to owned content, like everything on a web page, a blog and on brand-owned social media channels. A brand has considerable or full control over owned media channels (Garman). These channels are companies' medium to convey their message the way they want (Fine 2016).

Like mentioned above, all three elements are needed in order to gain attention of consumers. Earned media strengthens a brand's authenticity and can draw people to owned media channels whereas paid media can grow awareness (Fine 2016). Considering that already in 2013 Nielsen's Global Survey remarked that consumers around the world trust earned media above all other sources of advertising, it proves that it is authoritative media among consumers (Nielsen 2013). That is why I chose to study more in dept about electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), which is a form of earned media.

### **3 Electronic word-of-mouth**

In this chapter the concept of eWOM is explained more thorough. Theory delves into key motives for people to engage in eWOM and why people read eWOM.

Marketing researchers have noticed the impact of word of mouth (WOM) a long time ago. It can have an effect on opinions, purchase decisions, the power to motivate, inform and endorse. The key differences between traditional WOM compared to eWOM is that by means of the Internet, eWOM can reach more people, information is in print format and available at that moment when it is needed. Traditional WOM is purely verbal and happens person-to-person, whereas eWOM occurs mainly between people without personal ties (O'Reilly & Marx, 2011, 331-333).

Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, (2004, 39) defines eWOM as “any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet.” Internet has provided means to gain objective information straight from other consumers and it has given the possibility to give valuable insight for other consumers with electronic word-of-mouth (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004, 39).

Peer-to-peer communication online is very influential because people are more willing to believe an unknown user than marketing messages. Consumers don't gain anything from recommending a product, unlike advertisers and marketers do because they have a vested interest. Consumer reviews are just honest opinions of regular users who are just like you (Botsman 2017). This peer communication medium has shifted the position of market power from companies to consumers and it is a form of social influence (Goldsmith, 2006, 409).

#### **3.1 Online reviews**

Online review from a consumer is one type of eWOM. Online product reviews are written from consumers perspective who have bought or used a product. Consumer generated product reviews generally bring out both advantages and disadvantages from user's point of view. As opposed to seller information which emphasizes only good aspects and withholds disadvantages (Park, Lee & Han, 2007, 125-127). Therefore, online product reviews bring out the voice of consumers and gives information about user experience and, also provides a different point of view.

People often seek the opinions of others to facilitate their own decision making, this is in order to make informed purchase decisions, especially when it comes to new products. Online reviews are very influential to potential buyers and valuable additional information source from the end-users. Customers who have not yet tried a new product rely on those who have already had an experience with the product (Bonfrer, 2011, 308). User reviews can reduce doubts towards a product or can help with the overload of choices (Charlton 2012; Bazaarvoice, 2018, 4).

Reviews are gathered generally by email post purchase. The timing is essential because the customer needs time to use the product and try its features, but not too much time so the novelty of the product is still unspoilt (Couzin & Grappone, 2013, 35; Charlton 2012). A way to ensure authenticity of reviews is to send follow-up emails only to verified buyers who have traded with a business before they can write and post reviews. Usually review request emails direct to a web page that doesn't show other reviews and that is a way to avoid being influenced by those (Bassig 2016).

Online reviews give consumers access to other users' unbiased opinions and social proof to assure making the right purchase decision (Bazaarvoice, 2018, 5). Social proof term refers to a psychological and social phenomenon where at situations of uncertainty, people seek and copy what others are doing for reassurance. It's driven by the assumption that others have more knowledge or are better informed (Charlesworth, 2015, 136).

According to Park et al. (2007) if an online review is persuasive and logical, consumers are more prone to adopt the information. Also, if many consumers recommend a product then other consumers are likely to believe the recommendations and have a favorable attitude toward the product. Furthermore, when a product has plenty of reviews, this indicates popularity of a product which then increases consumers' purchasing intention (Park et al. 2007, 127, 140). All in all, online reviews are very important source of information to consumers in making purchase decisions and eWOM as an information source is considered more credible and relevant to consumers than seller provided information (Ismagilova et al. 2017, 49).

### **3.2 Reasons for engaging in eWOM**

Reasons for people to engage in eWOM has been studied by Hennig-Thurau et al. in 2004. The reason why I chose a source from 15 years back is that I have read multiple studies regarding eWOM and their study was cited or referred to in numerous occasions.

Their research builds on previous studies that have examined consumers' motivation to engage in traditional word-of-mouth (WOM). Based on these previous studies their study presents 11 motives why consumers engage in eWOM. Those are (1) concern for other consumers, (2) desire to help the company, (3) social benefits, (4) exertion of power from companies, (5) postpurchase advice seeking, (6) self-enhancement, (7) economic rewards, (8) convenience in seeking redress, (9) hope that the platform operator will serve as a moderator, (10) expression of positive emotions and (11) venting of negative feelings (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004, 44).

Balasubramanian and Mahajan's (2001, 125) framework categorized these motives by featuring three utility types to explain reasons for social interaction in online environment. These categories are focus-related utility, consumption utility and approval utility. In addition to these three types Hennig-Thurau et al. introduced two additional ones in their study which are moderator-related utility and homeostase utility (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004, 44).

Focus-related utility is about adding value with user's own contributions to the consumer-opinion platform for example by means of writing reviews, commenting or rating. Topmost ambition is to add value in order to enrich the platform and the motives to do so are concern for other consumers, helping the company, social benefits and exerting power (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004, 42). Concern for other consumers or 'altruism' like Sundaram et al. (1998) study characterizes it, sources from a desire to prevent others from facing the problems they encountered with or a genuine desire to help others to make better purchase decisions. Motive for helping the company is a by-product of a positive experience and a consumer wants to pass on the good by supporting the company (Sundaram, Mitra & Webster, 1998). Social benefits refer to a sense of belonging to a consumer-opinion platform and the feeling of communicating with likeminded people (McWilliam 2000). Exertion of power over companies is consumers' way of collectively having leverage on companies. Volume of eWOM and how many people it reaches makes it influential and it can have a great impact on prospective customers (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004, 42).

Consumption utility is gaining firsthand knowledge on user experience from other users' contributions. A user may write about a problem that has arisen and others can provide information about a possible solution or share similar experiences. Here the user can benefit from others contributions. Reason to commit is postpurchase advice-seeking (Balasubramanian & Mahajan, 2001, 125; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004, 43).

Approval utility relates to people's need for approval and acceptance. eWOM contributors feels gratification when other users give comments or responses for the usefulness of their input. Self-enhancement and economic rewards motives are linked with approval utility (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004, 43; Sundaram et al. 1998). Self-enhancement motive origins from people's aspiration to gain positive notions from others. For example, written comments can illustrate knowledge on the subject and, to others who read comments and reviews, this signals that the writer is an expert of a sort and this achieved status can have an impact on the writer's self-concept. Receiving economic rewards is a form of recognition from the reward giver and therefore it is categorized with approval utility (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004, 43; Sundaram et al. 1998).

Moderator-related utility is closely linked to characters of consumer-opinion platforms and was introduced by Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004). Goldsmith and Horowitz (4, 2006) expressed this simply by "Moderator-related utility occurs after a third party helps make it easier for a community to make a complaint." Motives for problem solving support and convenience are linked with moderator-related utility. Consumer-opinion platforms can be more influential channels to reach the target of complaints and more convenient way to seek redress. Moderators and operators of such platforms can forward the arisen issues to parties that are concerned and act as supporters of consumers voice. This way there's no need for the Consumer Disputes Board or for example news media representatives to get consumers message across and for consumers there's a low threshold channel to shed a light on issues (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004, 43-44).

Homeostase utility is about balance and how after a strong positive or negative experience balance can be restored by writing a comment or a review on an opinion platform. Motives for expressing positive emotions and venting negative feelings are associated with homeostase utility. The need to share a positive experience of a product or service results from excitement and can be defused by engaging in eWOM. Also vice versa, disappointment and frustration caused by a negative experience can be reduced by engaging in eWOM (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004, 44; Sundaram et al. 1998).

According to Hennig-Thurau et al.'s study (2004) the primary reasons for engaging in eWOM are self-enhancement, social benefits, economic incentives and concern for other consumers. Therefore, it is not too far-fetched to conclude with stating that most people simply want to pass on the good by writing reviews after they themselves have benefitted from reading other users' reviews (Beaton 2018).

### 3.3 Reasons for seeking eWOM

Consumers seek opinions online for various reasons. Seeking information pre-purchase is a way to diminish risk of buying, especially for high-priced purchases or intangibles like experiences such as holidays, entertainment and restaurants (Goldsmith 2006, 409). Consumers read opinions from product review sites mainly for reassurance and as an additional information source (Bailey, 2005, 76).

Hennig-Thurau and Walsh's (2003, 57) study specified eight motives for why consumers seek eWOM. These motives are (1) risk reduction, (2) reduction of search time, (3) determination of social position, (4) dissonance reduction, (5) belonging to a virtual community, (6) to learn what products are new in the marketplace, (7) remuneration and (8) to learn how a product is to be consumed. These motives were categorized in five motive factors.

Obtaining buying-related information factor relates to making a purchase decision. This includes motives for risk reduction and reducing search time. Users benefit from contributions of others in order to make informed purchase decisions (Hennig-Thurau & Walsh, 2003, 57-59).

Second motive labelled, social orientation through information, includes motives for determination of social position and dissonance reduction. Users read others assessments to assure themselves of making the right decision and/or to see if there are others who have faced a similar issue and/or if there are others who share similar ideas of a certain product. Comparing one's own evaluations of a product with others evaluations is determining one's own position (Hennig-Thurau & Walsh, 2003, 57-59).

Community membership contains motives of belonging to a virtual community and learning what products are new in the marketplace. Neither of the motives are directly related to making a purchase decision. These aforementioned motives pertain to exploring exchange of information. Users want to know what is in at the moment and enjoy belonging to a community and being involved in the experiences of other members (Hennig-Thurau & Walsh, 2003, 57-60).

Remuneration can be a reward or money gained directly or indirectly in exchange for reading and evaluating. Objective is to gain monetary value. Motive for seeking online opinions can also be to learn how to consume a product. Users may find tips and solutions to issues they face (Hennig-Thurau & Walsh, 57-60).

All in all, according to their study the most important motives for seeking online opinions are to save decision-making time and to make well informed buying decisions, so therefore obtaining buying-related information is the most typical reason to seek eWOM (Henig-Thurau & Walsh, 55).

## 4 Credibility of reviews

This chapter aims to explain which factors make eWOM trustworthy and which factors should be taken into consideration when reading eWOM.

According to Cheng and Zhou (2010) “eWOM credibility is the degree to which an individual perceives the recommendation from others as believable, true, or factual” (Ismagilova et al. 2017, 49). As eWOM occurs among people who are unknown to each other, people reading online reviews assesses the credibility of the information, which then determines whether to accept the information or not. Therefore, if a person perceives the information as credible, then that person will be more prone to adopt the received information and use it (Cheng & Zhou, 2010; Ismagilova et al. 2017, 51). Many previous studies have proved the link between information credibility and adoption of the information, so for that reason it is important to understand better how eWOM is assessed as trustworthy/credible (Ismagilova et al. 2017).

### 4.1 Factors of credible eWOM

According to a study conducted by O’Reilly and Marx (2011) there are four factors to assess credibility of online opinions. These are (1) the polarity and quantity of posts, (2) the logic and articulation of posts, (3) ability to find corresponding sources, and (4) own previous experience with a seller. Nine young, culturally diverse, very tech-savvy men were interviewed for their study.

The first point, polarity and quantity of online reviews is in line with a preceding study by Sher and Lee (2009, 142-143). Their study indicated that consumers with low scepticism are affirmed by quantity of online reviews, because higher quantity is considered as an indicator of greater popularity. The polarity of posts is also a reliable factor, so the quantity of positive reviews should clearly outweigh negative ones and the more consistent the reviews are, the more credible (O’Reilly & Marx, 2011, 345).

The logic and articulation of posts indicates the poster’s ability to form valid arguments and the use of good grammar signals scholarly (O’Reilly & Marx, 2011, 345-346). A research by Cheung, Luo, Sia and Chen (2009, 15) said it well that: “If the received information is perceived to have valid arguments, the receiver will develop a positive attitude towards the information and consider it as credible information.” Online reviews that are written by likeminded users or so to say ‘intellectual equals’ are regarded as credible

eWOM. When user's own pre-assumptions are met, arguments are strong and the source is reliable then posts are deemed as trustworthy (Cheung et al., 27; O'Reilly & Marx, 2011, 346).

The third point to determine credibility of posts is to seek other sources to verify the information. The nine men interviewed for the study expressed that they evaluate credibility of online opinions by reading multiple different sources to reach a conclusion. Research takes time and therefore large number of reviews are mainly glanced through and not a lot of time is used per one individual post. Other users' ratings of the reviews are valuable indicators, which helps to see opinions that are the most common and useful. Users count on the assumption that others make credibility assessments and there are always those who are more thorough (O'Reilly & Marx, 2011, 347).

The men interviewed for the study relies on eWOM to make smart purchase decisions and compare prices, but after interviewees' have formed an opinion, they buy from trusted sites they have used before. The credibility towards a site builds on prior experience or traditional WOM (O'Reilly & Marx, 2011, 347-348).

In conclusion, credibility of online opinions is assessed by quantity and consistency, logic and argumentation as well as comparing to other sources, but once the decision has been made then purchase is carried out with a trusted or previous seller.

#### **4.2 Positive and negative eWOM**

When a service or a product meets the expectations that we have, it generally does not inspire us to use our time to write a review. However, in case we are very pleased or very unhappy then we do have a tendency to get our message across. On that account, eWOM writers most often are polarized customers, and therefore neutral opinions are not broadly represented (O'Reilly & Marx, 2011, 344; Charlesworth, 2015, 139).

Both, negative and positive feedback is needed and the mix of the two increases trustworthiness of reviews. If there is no variation in reviews then customers may suspect authenticity of those (Graham 2012). This remark is in line with a study by Cheung et al. "[...] a negative message reduces the possibility that the information is actually posted by marketers or by someone who would like to promote the product" (Cheung et al., 2009, 15).

Doh and Hwang made a study in 2009 to examine more on positive-negative ratio of eWOM messages. They had five separate groups were participants were exposed to

10 different eWOM messages and the ratio of negative and positive messages varied. Ratios were 10 to 0, 9:1, 8:2, 7:3 and 6:4, meaning that in the first group all eWOM messages were positive. In 9 to 1 group there were nine positive eWOM (peWOM) and one negative eWOM (neWOM). In 8:2 there were eight peWOM and two neWOM and so forth. eWOM messages were gathered from authentic Internet sites and modified for the study (Doh & Hwang, 2009, 194).

In their study they put to the test how peWOM and neWOM affects attitude towards the product, purchase intention, credibility of eWOM messages and attitude towards the Internet site (Doh & Hwang, 2009, 195). With the notion of my research questions, I was most interested on the findings of how peWOM and neWOM messages affect attitude towards the product and credibility of eWOM messages.

The results illustrated that attitude towards the product was most positive when the consensus of eWOM was strong and favourable. However, there weren't noteworthy differences with group ratios of 10:0, 9:1 and 8:2. This indicates that few negative messages among positive messages are not disadvantageous when it comes to attitude towards the product. Analysis of the credibility of eWOM messages didn't show noteworthy difference among all five groups, but the group with ratio 8:2 had the highest score indicating the degree of credibility. The reason for the group with 10:0 ratio to remain equivalent to other groups, was explained by how a perfect set of positive messages can arouse suspicion of companies' attempts to affect consumers' opinions (Doh & Hwang, 2009, 196).

Above described study from 2009 shows that a few negative messages are not disadvantageous. Here are some possible explanations why negative messages are welcomed. The concept of negativity bias is often integrated with research of eWOM. Frankly, expression 'bad is stronger than good' is a more descriptive wording to my mind. It refers to the perception that people put more weight on negative information than positive (Rozin & Royzman, 2001, 297). One explanation to the negativity bias is that negative information holds more value as it can be more informative and rarer (Chen & Lurie, 2013, 464). According to Lightspeed's research statistics from 2011, positive reviews online outweigh the number of negative reviews (Greenleigh 2011). Data indicated that 85% of users had posted a positive review and 15% had posted a negative review most recently. Shortage of negative reviews may be associated with value and people consider negative reviews as more informative because they bring out shortcomings (Beaton 2018).

To that end, don't be too alarmed if you find an occasional negative review. On the contrary, it is good to be skeptical if you encounter reviews that are a bit too good to be true.

Mix of negative and positive reviews reduces the possibility that the reviews are written by someone with a vested interest.

### **4.3 Participation inequality**

Jakob Nielsen introduced a 90-9-1 rule in 2006 to describe participation inequality in online communities. Majority of users never contribute online and they simply read content generated by others, these are referred as 'lurkers', they represent 90% of the entire user base. Most of the content is contributed by 1% of users that are highly active (Nielsen 2006). This means that 1% of the entire user base has an enormous impact altogether. The 9% that is left of the total counts for those who participates sporadically or on rare occasions. According to Nielsen the 90-9-1 rule applies to most online communities (Nielsen 2006).

Nielsen demonstrated inequality on the Internet with a drastic example of Wikipedia, the free-content encyclopedia that anyone can edit. It was created in 2001 and in a nutshell, users can collectively create content and make changes freely (Wikipedia). English Wikipedia has even worse participation inequality than the 90-9-1 rule exposes (Nielsen 2006; Wikipedia). The English site has approximately 246 418 260 daily pageviews on average (Oct, 17. - Nov, 6.2018) and yet the number of active users is 134 673, this would be 0,05% of the total amount of page visitors, but anyhow it is safe to say that his argument that 99% of Wikipedia users are lurkers, still stands ground to this day.

Participation inequality doesn't only concern online communities, but it is an important aspect to take into consideration when reading reviews and comments on the Internet, because 1% of highly active users cannot possibly represent unbiased opinion of the lot. Regardless, Nielsen suggested that instead of focusing on how to overcome participation inequality, we should accept that it will always occur online and offline that not everybody participates. Furthermore, he suggested five ways to maximise the number of contributors (Nielsen 2006).

Firstly, when contributing is made as simple as possible it is more effortless to take part (Nielsen 2006). For example, YouTube has a feature where a subscribed user can simply click thumbs up/thumbs down without the need to write a comment about a video.

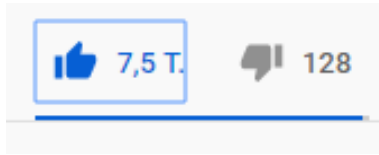


Figure 1. YouTube's rating system

Secondly, participation can be a side effect. Using recommendation algorithms, like for example Nelly.com with 'others have also bought', requires zero effort from the users (Nielsen 2006). Recommendation algorithms collect data about customers' interests and make recommendations to users based on the data, this is in order to personalize a better e-commerce experience. Recommendation algorithms were initiated from Amazon.com in 2003 and have since then spread and evolved greatly (Linden & Smith 2017).



Figure 2. Recommendation algorithm makes participation a side effect by collecting data of visited pages

Thirdly, ready-made templates make it easier to contribute than write reviews and comments to an empty textbox. It is easier to modify an existing template than create one from scratch (Nielsen 2006).

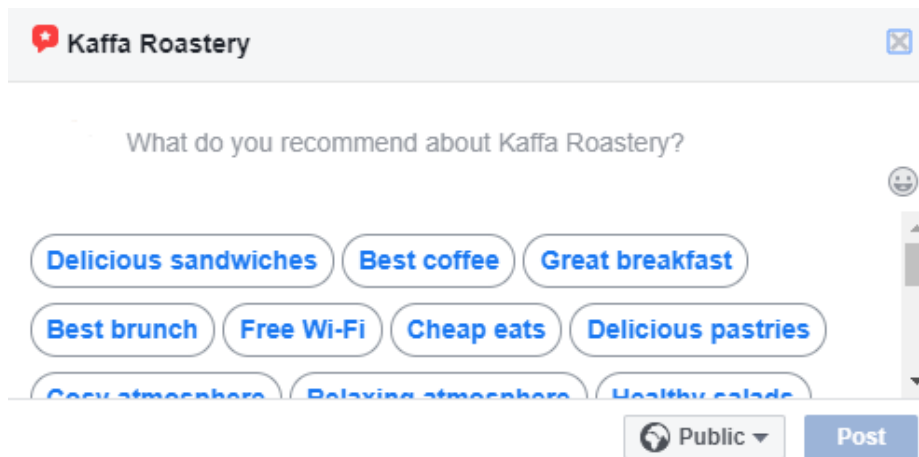


Figure 3. Facebook's recommendations include review tags to generate more expressive reviews

Fourth suggestion from Nielsen is to reward contributors, but not too excessively. Economic rewards like discounts and beforehand notice of new items can motivate users or giving prominence by simply adding a golden star on a profile. It is important not to reward highly active contributors immensely because that will only lead to them ruling the system even more (Nielsen 2006).

Fifth suggestion is to give special value to useful and good contributions. Highlighting valuable contributions prevents losing sight of those among plenitude of other comments and reviews (Nielsen 2006). For example, Verkkokauppa.com has a thumbs up/ thumbs down feature where users can click to evaluate usefulness of the reviews and sort reviews by the newest, oldest, most useful, most valued and most criticized.



Figure 4. Verkkokauppa.com's sorting option for most useful reviews

These five suggestions are ways to make participation easier, but like mentioned earlier, we should accept that participation inequality will always occur online and offline, regardless. It is important to take into consideration when reading reviews and comments on the

Internet, that the average of all web users is not accurately represented. Highly active users cannot possibly represent opinions of all web users, considering that most users never contribute (Nielsen 2006).

#### **4.4 Biased rating scale**

Poor, decent, OK, good and excellent are adjectives that mean different things to different people. For example, excellent is very strong and highest appraisal one could get, from a Finns' perspective, however in comparison to an American, excellent can mean simply good or ok. It's a matter of perspective (Islam 2018). The same applies to star ratings, people interpret the rating scales very differently. 5-star rating system leaves plenty room for open interpretation which can lead to misrepresentation of results (Glass 2009; Willis 2018).

Over the recent years media giants such as YouTube.com, Netflix and Facebook have shifted away from 5-star rating systems. YouTube made the change in 2009, Netflix in 2017 and Facebook in 2018. YouTube took notice that majority of videos on their website appeared to receive 5 stars and the second most common rating scale were 1-star ratings. Most users either gave a 5-star rating when they really liked a video and if not, well then users were indifferent and didn't rate at all, in general. Of course, some people rated with 2, 3 and 4 stars, but to the majority of the users it seemed to be all or nothing. As 5-star ratings dominated the system, YouTube changed into a more suitable thumbs up/thumbs down rating system where users can see the division and the total of votes (YouTube blog 2009; Siegler 2009).

In 2017, Netflix's transition to binary rating system, in plain English thumbs up/thumbs down system, didn't receive all that warm welcome. The thing with Netflix's ratings is that users have not always been on the same page how the rating system works. You see, Netflix's prior star rating system and current binary rating system has an algorithm where suggestions to users are based on other users' preferences who have similar taste in entertainment and similar viewing data. The ratings and suggestions a user see doesn't represent an average of ratings among all Netflix users (Scotti 2016; Alexander 2017).



Figure 5. Netflix's binary system with thumbs up/thumbs down feature

The better the algorithm knows user's preferences, the more personalized suggestions user gets. By rating movies and series user can improve their own experience instead of rating it on account of all the other users of the service. This can be new information to many, because people are so accustomed to star rating systems in e-commerce context, which are based on total of ratings, in general. With the transition to binary rating system there was a 200% increase in the number of ratings users provided (Scotti 2016; Goode 2017; Malone 2017). This rating update has been criticized for not having an alternative between 'I don't want to see this again' and 'the best movie I have seen'. Not to mention that there's no difference in rating for 'this was entertaining' and 'the most magnificent ever' (Smith 2017; Alexander 2017).

Facebook can be considered as one of the most significant review site for consumers. Last year in 2018, they also switched 5-star rating system and nowadays they have recommendations. Users are simply asked whether they recommend a service/company or not. After yes/no question users have choice of words also called review tags, where to choose the best fitting description and empty space for more detailed feedback in writing, minimum character amount is 25. With this update Facebook's intention is to encourage people to write more in-depth and provide thoughtful comments that can be more valuable to businesses and to other consumers. Another advantage since the update is that fake, deceitful and irrelevant reviews can be easier to detect and report. As word-of-mouth continues to be one of the most influential and trusted form of marketing among consumers, prioritizing the authenticity of recommendations is definitely a step towards a better direction at this time (Weisleder 2018; Weiche 2018; Goldstein 2018).

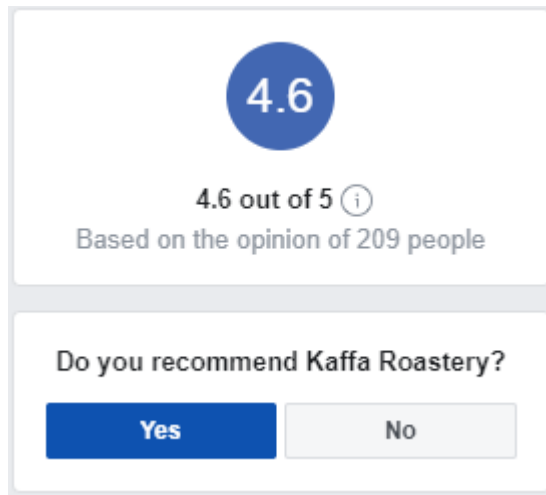


Figure 6. Facebook's recommendation system

In conclusion, credibility of all reviews, even the authentic ones are somewhat problematic. People have different rating standards, for example to some people simply meeting expectations, like Uber taking you from point A to point B results as a good 3-star rating. Someone else might rate that with a 5-star rating. Without written reviews it is difficult to tell difference between a 3-star rating from a 4-star rating. Bottom line is that the number of stars in ratings has often very little to do with the review text (Beaton 2018; Maupas 2017). Therefore, as we use reviews to vet our opinions it is good to focus on written reviews and take into consideration the context, as an example, if someone rates Nice as a poor destination for a vacay, could it have something to do with a companion or the weather at that time of the year?

## **5 Conducting the study**

In the previous chapters, eWOM has been analysed from many points of view based on prior studies. This chapter presents chosen methods to study eWOM for this thesis. This research-based thesis analyses reviews collected from Verkkokauppa.com website and framework for this study is built on prior theory adapted from Cheung, Luo, Sia and Chen's study from 2009.

### **5.1 Netnography**

Netnography is a modern form of ethnography adapted to the study of online communities and culture, as well as consumer behaviour on the Internet. As the use and popularity of the Internet increased, research methods had to go online as well to stay relevant. The term netnography was coined in 1996 by Robert Kozinets and it comes from words 'Internet' and 'ethnography' (Kozinets, 2010, 1, 6).

Netnography uses publicly available information online as a primary data source. It is a qualitative research method that is far less time-consuming and more cost-effective than research requiring face-to-face interviews. As people have natural tendency to vet their opinions online, netnographic research can be conducted in its original context (Kozinets, 2002, 62-63). Netnographers are professional 'lurkers', the subjects of the research don't know that information they provided is being used for research purposes (Kozinets, 2002, 68). This can be considered as a reliability factor, because consumer behaviour might be skewed due to awareness of being observed, which is called 'the observer effect' or 'Hawthorne effect' (Make Your Lists blog 2018; Wikipedia).

Netnography observes, follows conversations, searches for online places of interactions, pursues to understand those as social phenomena, captures and analyses data and then looks for similarities as well (Kozinets 2011). As the purpose of this study is to find out and understand which factors makes unknown users' reviews trustworthy, netnographic research approach seems especially fitted to study electronic word-of-mouth.

### **5.2 Content analysis**

Online content analysis is part of netnography in a way as it is based on content created by online customers and aims to identify and understand their needs (Kozinets, 2002, 62-

63; Yang & Fang, 2004 ,310). The vast quantity of eWOM data can create a challenge to capture and analyse it. According to Ismagilova et al. (2017) there are three types of eWOM data analysis methods which are content analysis, sentiment analysis and network text analysis. All three types can be used to analyse dialogs, conversations and commentaries online (Ismagilova et al. 2017, 104-105).

Content analysis is one of the most common approach to analyse qualitative text data. Content is analysed by finding patterns, similarities or differences within the data focusing on content or contextual meaning of the text (Gray, 2009, 500). Text data may be in print or electronic form, book, article, letter, interview, dialog, report, speech or just about any written form of text data. Qualitative content analysis is not about counting words or frequencies, in contrast it aims to outline and interpret the content of the text under analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005 ,1278).

There are three approaches to content analysis: conventional (inductive), directed (deductive) and summative. The selection of an approach depends largely on the research's purpose and the existing knowledge of the topic under study. With regards to eWOM and especially which factors make eWOM trustworthy, there are previous studies made and prior theory available. Therefore, this study approaches with directed content analysis to substantiate prior theory of the topic (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, 1281; Hsieh & Shannon, 2018, 393). The strength of directed approach is that it can affirm the existing theory and broaden it. Implicit limitation of this approach is that researcher reflects on the data consciously with a strong bias. For this reason, the researcher is likely to find results that are in line with prior theory rather than inconsistent (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, 1283).

Directed approach to content analysis starts with developing a framework for the study based on existing theory and knowledge (Hsieh & Shannon, 2018, 394). Categories are derived from prior theory before analysing the data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, 1286).

As this study aims to explain which distinct factors make eWOM seem credible, therefore this study follows research of Cheung, Luo, Sia and Chen from 2009. The reason why I chose to reflect findings through their prior study is that I have read multiple studies regarding credibility of eWOM and their study was cited or referred to in numerous occasions. Although O'Reilly and Marx made a similar research in 2011, which makes it more recent, I chose to stick with Cheung at al. because they had 159 respondents from more diverse background as in contrast to 9 tech-savvy men.

Cheung et al. (2009) presented seven factors that affect the perceived credibility of eWOM, those are: argument strength, recommendation framing, recommendation sidedness, source credibility, confirmation of prior belief, recommendation consistency and recommendation rating. Table 1 summarizes the meaning of these factors.

Table 1. Attributes of credible eWOM adapted from Cheung, Luo, Sia and Chen's study from 2009.

<b>Argument strength</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- when information provides valid arguments, the receiver is more prone to adopt information and consider it credible</li> <li>- strength of argument has effect on the perceived credibility</li> </ul>
<b>Recommendation framing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- whether an opinion is positively or negatively framed has an effect on perceived credibility</li> </ul>
<b>Recommendation sidedness</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- one-sided messages bring out either positive or negative features</li> <li>- two-sided messages bring out both positive and negative features</li> <li>- gaining information on both aspects gives a more complete overall view which is perceived as more credible</li> </ul>
<b>Source credibility</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- user's posting history, reviewer's level of reputation (e.g. verified buyer) and basics information of a user (e.g. demographic factors) are indications of source's credibility</li> <li>- when information is from a highly credible source people are more prone to believe and more willing to accept the information</li> </ul>
<b>Confirmation of prior belief</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- when information is in line with user's prior beliefs, the user is more likely to believe the information</li> </ul>
<b>Recommendation consistency</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- when information is in line with other users' remarks the information is perceived as more credible</li> </ul>
<b>Recommendation rating</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- when message's rating is high, it implies that most users agree with the information provided</li> <li>- message's low rating implies that most users disagree with the information provided</li> </ul>

These are further explained later in this chapter. However, according to Cheung et al.'s study recommendation framing and recommendation sidedness doesn't have significant effect on eWOM credibility.

### 5.3 Reviews on Verkkokauppa.com website

Above mentioned seven factors of eWOM credibility outlined by Cheung et al. (2009) were the categories for this study. To conduct this study, reviews from Verkkokauppa.com web-

site were analysed based on how reviews bring out argumentation strength, recommendation framing, recommendation sidedness, source credibility, confirmation of prior belief, recommendation consistency and recommendation rating.

**Loistava kamera, erinomainen akunkesto. Iso.** Suosittelen tuotetta Oliko arvostelusta hyötyä?

Mikäli puhelimen kameran ominaisuudet, akunkesto ja näytön luettavuus kaikissa olosuhteissa ovat tärkeitä on tämä ihan huippua. Mitat ja paino vähän kiusaavat, mutta nykytrendin mukaisesti huippulaitteen kaiketi pitää myös olla iso. Suosittelen!

**eseikku** mies, 45–54v 25.6.2019

Tuotteen laatu ★★★★★  
Vastinetta rahalle ●●●●●  
Käyttömukavuus ●●●●●

[Kommentoi](#)

Figure 7. Example of a review from Verkkokauppa.com website

Verkkokauppa.com was established in 1992 and its headquarter is located in Helsinki. Along with Verkkokauppa.com online retail they have four brick-and-mortar stores as well. According to their website, they are the most known and the most visited online retail store in Finland. Furthermore, they have hundreds of thousands uncensored product reviews available aiming to help customers making purchase decisions. Verkkokauppa.com Oyj listed in Nasdaq First North Finland in 2014 (Verkkokauppa.com).

For the purpose of this study I chose to examine reviews written of high-involvement products, smartphones in particular and limited the study to include smartphones of the three global market share leaders in 2019, which are Samsung, Huawei and Apple (Kingsley-Hughes 2019). High-involvement products refers to purchase items that perceive a higher risk. These items are not bought on day-to-day basis and require thorough pre-purchase consideration. Examples of high-involvement products are cars, domestic appliance, apartments, laptops and high-priced smartphones as well. High-involvement products are essentialities and expensive (Pratap 2019).

Only smartphones priced from 500€ to 950€ were included, in total there were 68 items, but as Verkkokauppa.com has same reviews visible for all colour and memory capacity options of the same model, so therefore only 21 different smartphone models reviews were looked into more carefully, which in total had 490 reviews (Verkkokauppa.com).

Result were gathered between 19 – 23 August 2019. All reviews from those 21 different discussion threads were taken into consideration before that time period. Results were gathered by taking PDF formatted copies of the review pages. All reviews were analysed

and some highlights are presented in the following sections. The key aspect was to analyse how reviews gathered from Verkkokauppa.com support prior theory about attributes of eWOM credibility.

### 5.3.1 Argument strength

Argument strength refers to the message's ability to convince and present a valid point. Many previous studies have shown that argument strength is directly related to the information receiver's positive/negative perception. When information seems to be on point the receiver is more prone to accept it as trustworthy, and vice versa the receiver is more prone to overlook the information if it's off the point (Cheung et al. 2009, 15).

A user named "Generic" describes phone's features and provides valid arguments for all points s/he makes. Review conveys that the writer has personal experience of usage.

*"Clearly Android world's highest rank – and quality costs. Phone's features run always without a delay and software's details seem thoroughly thought. Especial thanks for the camera and sharpness of the screen: photos are excellent and watching media on screen makes one feel like looking a bigger screen. Screen is large though. 6,2" fits barely in jeans' pocket and no point in trying to crouch. [...] Curved edges don't add usability, it's just finetuning extra. [...] There's no home-button, which is classy, now there aren't buttons on screen. Water and dust resistance add in protection, now that there's also shock-resistant screen cover to use. All in all, the phone is excellent, the price is just very high, so price-quality ratio is not in place." — Generic*

### 5.3.2 Recommendation framing

Formulation of messages can be inclined to positive aspects or negative aspects of a product/service. Praising messages brings out the strengths and resenting messages brings out shortcomings. People also observe recommendation framing to assess the level of credibility of the information (Cheung et al. 2009, 15).

A user named "Wivese" was very pleased with his purchase so he wrote a review "All plus". Review has a very strong positive tone and doesn't provide any opposing views.

*“Excellent usability, large screen – old data was easy to transfer through iCloud to the new phone. Sufficient amount of storage space and apps run smoothly. Nothing bad to say, more in use than tablet or PC.” — Wivese*

Below a review “Microphone doesn’t work properly” that only focuses on shortcomings of a phone. There’s one feature apparently that is not working and the review doesn’t present any opposing views or describe other features.

*“I upgraded well served iPhone 6 to iPhone 8. This new phone’s microphone doesn’t work properly. Customers wonder why they can’t quite hear me. I surfed online and apparently the same issue occurs elsewhere as well. Brand new phone to a repair shop straight away. Awful fuss. Didn’t start too promisingly.” — Work calls*

### **5.3.3 Recommendation sidedness**

Previous studies have noticed that two-sided information is generally considered more credible than one-sided information. One-sided information focuses on either positive or negative aspects of a product/service. Two-sided information brings out both advantages and disadvantages. There are different theories that explains why two-sided information is usually considered more credible, to summarize those Cheung et al. outlined it as follows: “two-sided information reduces the information receiver’s skepticism and therefore enhances the information credibility”. Besides every product or service has its advantages and disadvantages, by bringing out both sides the receiver of the information has a better overall view (Cheung et al. 2009, 15-16).

For example, below a review written by “GaiusLallus”, where he brings out advantages and disadvantages. Advantages could be written straight from the product description, but disadvantages bring out usage experience.

*“Advantages:*

- Screen is no doubt finest of the market based by its view angles, brightness and colour rendering*
- Quality of phone calls are good*
- Memory card option*
- Waterproof*

*Disadvantages:*

- Internal storage space could have been more*

- *Curved edges are disturbing. Images are distorted from the edges and if the palm of a hand touches the edge it causes malfunctions.*  
—GaiusLallus

“Apples’ active user” wrote a two-sided review titled “Finally a waterproof iPhone”. Writer brings out plenty of features and tone is overall very positive. Nonetheless, two downsides are mentioned with supportive arguments.

*“The new fingerprint recognition works with the speed of thought and doesn’t require constant cleaning. The battery endures better than 5 and 6 models although the screen is considerably brighter. The quality of the camera is excellent and image stabilization with live photos eliminates the likelihood of taking blurry photos almost entirely. A10 processor’s speed feels little exaggerated because programs and sites run smoothly all its own. The only disadvantage is the phone’s low resistance to cold, but unfortunately other flagship phones has a low resistance to cold as well. It is high priced but still worth the money due to the features mentioned above.”* — Apples’ active user

#### **5.3.4 Source credibility**

People evaluate credibility of information based on its source. Many eWOM website have this reviewer reputation system to indicate reviewer’s level of credibility. Also, history and profile information can be checked to verify reviewer’s level of credibility (Cheung et al. 2009, 16). In the online world reputation measurement is vital and it is the good reputation that makes unknown users want to do business and trust each other (Rachel Botsman 2017).

Despite this, Verkkokauppa.com doesn’t have a reputation measurement system nor verified reviews. Actually, I managed to send a review there although I bought my smartphone from a rival company. Reviews are submitted using a nickname and it is possible to use a different nickname each time. However, Verkkokauppa.com review template collects reviewer’s age and gender information which gives some reference of the reviewer. The age is mandatory to be filled out, but the gender can be left out. Nevertheless, this doesn’t give much background information to contemplate credibility of the source.

### 5.3.5 Confirmation of prior belief

Consumers assess the credibility of received information comparing it to their own prior knowledge. If the received information is in line with prior knowledge, then a reader will be more likely to believe the information. However, in case the received information is against the reader's prior knowledge and presumptions, then the reader is more likely to be critical regarding the information (Cheung et al. 2009, 17). People are more willing to believe information that is in line with their own views (Cheung et al. 2009, 29).

It would require a survey on Verkkokauppa.com's website to test review readers prior beliefs and then test how reading reviews effects their beliefs. This study focuses on analysing text content on Verkkokauppa.com, so therefore confirmation of prior beliefs can't be evaluated. However, I found a few reviews where the writer states that they bought a phone based on reviews or their expectations have been met after purchase.

"Gelblad" sent a review "Adequate replacement of Huawei P9". His/her expectations have been met after purchase.

*"I bought as a replacement of my three-year-old P9, indeed. Has met my expectations and maybe even exceeded those.*

- Battery endures even three days with my normal use*
- Fingerprint recognition is low with panzer glass (though this was mentioned in panzer glass' instructions, so it wasn't a surprise)"*

*—Gelblad*

"Jyrki" sent a review "Good camera". His prior beliefs have been fulfilled after purchase.

*"I purchased a phone that has the best camera, especially for night shoots, according to the tests. Didn't fail. At night time taken city pictures are sharp and optimistically bright with regular settings. No need for [camera] stand. I've tried to take all notification sounds off, but attaching to a charger, makes a sound. [...]" —Jyrki*

"Kullervo" sent a review "Excellent camera phone". His prior beliefs were also accurate, at least according to his review he wrote after purchase.

*"I bought Huawei Mate 20 Pro based on its reviews. Main criteria in smartphones is the quality of the camera and this model's camera, photo quality and functions are outstanding. Of course, at this price range other*

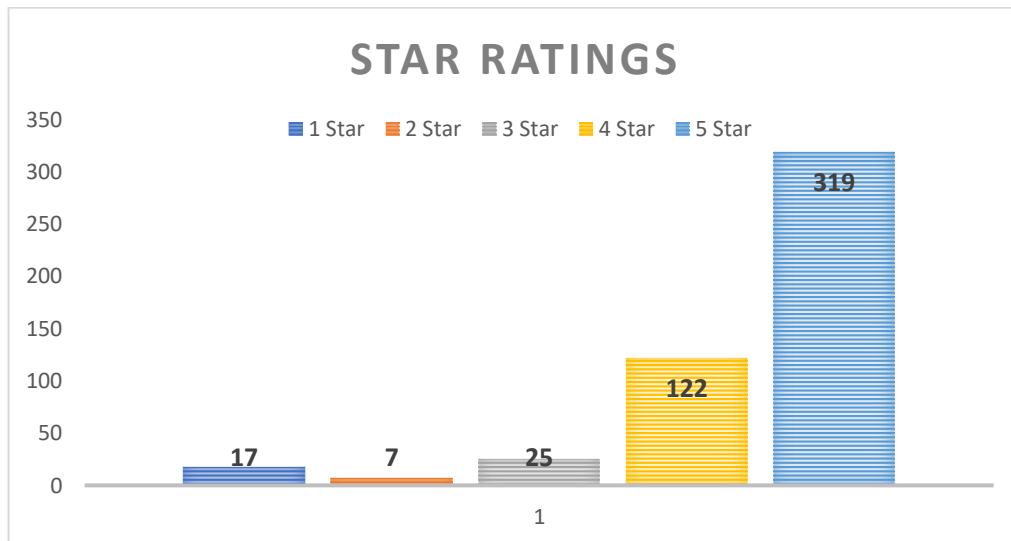
*features are also high-quality; screen is sharp and bright, everything operates smoothly and phone calls quality is excellent. When it comes to surfing online Huawei operates also good; using YLE and YouTube is smooth. A user like me who shoots a lot, requires high-standards when it comes to photos and videos, a user who has left out digital- and system cameras off everyday use. This just happened, although I wouldn't have believed it a few years back.” —Kullervo*

### 5.3.6 Recommendation consistency

When a review is consistent with other reviews written of the same product/service, it gives reason to trust. Differing reviews from majority creates mixed feelings and the reader considers the review as less credible (Cheung et al. 2009, 18).

As one can see from the table 2, out of all 490 ratings 65% are 5-star ratings. This shows that majority of reviewers are consistent with their reviews. This gives reason to trust.

Table 2. Distribution of star ratings on Verkkokauppa.com



### 5.3.7 Recommendation rating

On most eWOM websites other readers have possibility to rate reviews online. For example, Verkkokauppa.com has thumbs up/thumbs down feature. This rating gives an indication to the reader of how others perceive this review, whether others agree or disagree with it. Many studies have shown that this rating has strong influence on how information receiver measures review's relevance. When a review has a high rating, it indicates that

many people agree with it, and vice versa if the rating is low it indicates that many people disagrees with the review. A reader is likely to be skeptic towards a review with a low rating (Cheung et al. 2009, 18).

On Verkkokauppa.com website readers can filter reviews by newest, oldest, most useful, most valued and most criticized. Therefore, most users probably don't read all reviews written of a certain model. As an example, one iPhone had 75 reviews, which is 8 pages, so readers probably read just some of those. Most of the reviews have only a few thumbs up/thumbs down votes, amount varying from 1 to 40 as roughly estimated. Then there were some reviews that had loads of votes. This is probably due to the feature were users can filter reviews based on most criticized and most valued, so those might get the most of viewings. These examples had the most thumbs up/thumbs down votes.

"Writer of a review" didn't get much support for his negative opinion. 298 voted thumbs down for "Kallks" titled review.

*"1200€ priced phone should be the best one can get, but it isn't. In USA the selling price is 999\$ that is 850€ which would be an understandable price, but not more than that. Innovations are not up-to-date. Not worth the money." — Writer of a review*

"Good update from 6 to 7" review had 126 thumbs up votes. This indicates that this review is considered valuable to others.

*"My previous phone was iPhone 6. I changed it to this iPhone 7 and I'm more than happy. I really like the new matte black colour. The new improved camera is significantly better than 6 [model] (finally OIS :D). I recommend this to all those who has either 6 or older [model], but not to those who has 6s already, because there isn't that significant difference or new features. Of course, if one has too much money to spare, then go for it." —Jape307*

In this study the data was gathered from Verkkokauppa.com website. This platform was chosen because they have hundreds of thousands uncensored product reviews available and it is the most popular online store in Finland. As presented on table 2, the overall tone of reviews is very positive. Most reviews are quite lengthy and provide details of usage. Communication is informal, but respectful and grammar is conversational. Reviews seem authentic in regard to choice of words, providing details of usage and use of some deep-rooted Finnish expressions e.g. Apple is referred as 'Omppu' or phone referred as 'luuri'.

## 6 Discussion

The purpose of the study was to shed a light on factors that indicate eWOM credibility as well as to describe and analyse data from an eWOM context. Before analysing content on Verkkokauppa.com I trusted the reviews on the site much more than afterwards, now I find it specious that anybody can write reviews on that site. I believe this study succeeded in providing informative knowledge and summarizing relevant theory on the subject. This study could help online retail stores to understand eWOM better and to critically examine how they could increase their website's trustworthiness. Also, this study could make consumers more observant to inequality and bias of online reviews.

eWOM has been studied over the last two decades more than in the past, but results of the studies are not entirely consensus, this was one of the challenges I faced. Also, the expression "a dear child has many names" could describe the challenge to find related information of the research topic as prior research has been made under many different terms, so that made the search of sources challenging. Still the biggest challenge was to find the original sources of a research. I often found a secondary source that referred to the original source and then it required a thorough search just to find the original source which was very time-consuming.

The empirical results reported in this thesis should be considered in the light of some limitations, because the study especially utilized prior research as a framework for the study and only the most fruitful reviews were chosen to be presented in the study which may cause selection bias. Another limitation is that reviews written on Verkkokauppa.com website are published under a nickname, so therefore there is a possibility for the reviews to be false.

In terms of trustworthiness of the study, the research clearly indicates the used sources and those are traceable. Majority of the sources that have been used are of high quality and previously published academic researches of the topic. Information was adapted from multiple sources such as articles, blogs, academic journals, books and e-books.

In summary, the analysis of this study indicates that consumers provide eWOM for different reasons, but the primary reasons are self-enhancement, economic incentives, social benefits and concern for other people. Verkkokauppa.com provides three years guarantee for purchased items as a reward in return for reviews. This may explain why they usually have plenty of reviews per product, although this guarantee doesn't include Samsung

products. It would be interesting to analyse how many of the reviews written on Verkkokauppa.com are written because of an economic incentive and does that make reviews less trustworthy from consumers point of view.

People evaluate reviews on multiple aspects and one reliable factor doesn't make a review trustworthy on its own. People are more willing to adopt information that is in line with their own prior knowledge. Many of the consumers reach a purchase decision only after their preconceptions are verified by another users' recommendation. When a review presents usage experience and provides reasonable arguments, people are more prone to accept it as trustworthy. When it comes to source credibility, it would be crucial to have a reviewer reputation system or at least verified reviews to confirm that only those who have bought a product or used a service are able to write reviews. Background information of the reviewer would clarify whether the information provided is relevant, as in criteria of a phone are different for a senior versus a millennial. Also, it would be good to know how long usage there has been to get some reference on credibility of a review.

Table 2 showed distribution of star ratings of those 490 reviews analysed, which clearly indicated that positive reviews outweigh the number of negative reviews. However, many of the reviews analysed had a positive tone and rating, but provided negative points as well. Thing is that every product and service have its disadvantages and advantages, by providing both sides reviews gives a better overview. When it comes to negativity bias, it's not that bad is stronger than good, but a praising review doesn't add much new information to marketing information and that might explain why negative reviews are valued, to my mind.

Participation inequality is something I never thought of before. After reading about it I started to think how many times I have read reviews to reassure a purchase decision and how few times I actually have written a review. On those occasions that I have written a review I have been highly frustrated or I have gained that three years guarantee, but I have never written a good review for something that has simply met my expectations. Another interesting aha-factor for me was that I have never stopped to wonder that if I rate something with a 3-star rating that somebody might consider it a poor rating. For example, Uber drivers need to maintain a certain minimum rating to work and giving a rating less than five stars may change the average rating into too low score which might jeopardize their position (Griswold 2018).

During this process I have learned a lot about eWOM and there would have been much more to look into for example, how to spot fake reviews. I have also learned that when it

comes to academic sources it is not all that straightforward because there are always new researches that provide new information or contradict prior research. With this study I chose to stick with the most favoured researches that could be considered as cornerstones of research within this area of research because these were easier to get ahold of.

If I would do this entire process again I would read less of the topic because information overload is a genuine issue that causes disorientation. I would choose only a few researches to go with and focus solely on those because it was immensely time-consuming to read plenty of researches of the same topic from different viewpoints that in the end only confused. Not to mention, that when there are plenty of sources it is difficult to find the one that mentioned about something specific if you have too many sources to search from. My skills of information retrieval have been under test and I believe I have indicated my ability to find relevant information of my research topic. I especially learned the importance of searching information with proper terms and the key to find the specific terms is to read about similar research of the topic and check the pages of references for further research.

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