The Impact of Electronic Word-of-mouth on Gen Z Consumers' Online Purchase Intention in E-Commerce Platforms: A Case Study in the Mekong Delta

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Abstract

In the context of online shopping through e-commerce platforms, Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) plays a crucial role as a significant and unbiased source of information that many consumers rely on for decision-making. This research aims to examine the impact of eWOM on Gen Z consumers' online purchase intention in the Mekong Delta market. The study integrates the Information Acceptance Model (IAM) and builds upon empirical research to investigate the relationship between eWOM and Gen Z consumers' online purchase intention in e-commerce platforms. The Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS SEM) technique is employed by the group of authors based on data collected from a survey involving 274 Gen Z individuals residing in the Mekong Delta region. The research findings highlight that the Quality of Information, Source Credibility, and Quantity of eWOM all have a positive and significant influence on the Acceptance of eWOM. Furthermore, the study establishes that the Acceptance of eWOM positively impacts Gen Z consumers' Online purchase intention.

Keywords: *EWOM, gen Z, online purchase intention, E-commerce platforms, Mekong Delta.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of media and the internet has made online shopping increasingly familiar, replacing traditional shopping methods (Masoud, 2013; Zhang et al., 2020). In recent years, with the emergence of numerous e-commerce websites such as Lazada, Tiki, Shopee, Sendo, online shopping on these platforms has become commonplace among Vietnamese consumers, particularly the Generation Z. Moreover, the internet has provided a superior means for consumers to gather information and seek advice regarding products and services from previous consumers through electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) (Hennig-Thurau & Walsh, 2003; Moran & Muzellec, 2014). eWOM enables users to efficiently receive, share, and select information, overcoming spatial and temporal barriers (Cheung, 2014). It can be said that eWOM empowers consumers to influence other buyers through opinions about utilized products or services (Chu, 2009; Chu & Kim, 2011; Kozinets et al., 2010).

Despite several studies highlighting the significance of eWOM in relation to consumer purchase intentions, such as Katz et al. (1995), Cheung et al. (2008); Fan & Miao (2012); Lin et al. (2013), Ruiz-Mafe et al. (2018), Sánchez-Torres et al. (2018), Ismagilova et al. (2019), Guo et al., 2020, Mehrbakhsh Nilashi et al., 2022, it is challenging to directly apply the findings of these studies to the Vietnamese market in general, and specifically

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to the Mekong Delta region, due to differing cultural environments and consumer behaviors across countries and regions. Therefore, further research in this field is necessary to provide empirical scientific evidence that can enhance the understanding of the impacts of eWOM on Vietnamese consumer purchase intentions, benefiting online businesses. By employing qualitative and quantitative research methods based on real consumer survey data, this study aims to investigate and analyze the relationship between eWOM and online purchase intention on E-commerce platforms among Gen Z in the Mekong Delta region.

2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

Electronic Word-of-Mouth

E-WOM has emerged as a significant phenomenon in the context of the internet's development, combining traditional word-of-mouth with online information platforms. eWOM can be viewed as an extension of interpersonal communication in the digital era (Yolanda et al., 2011), overcoming the limitations of conventional word-of-mouth (Godes & Mayzlin, 2004). It has fundamentally transformed consumer behavior, as consumer opinions and experiences expressed in the online environment increasingly shape the decision-making process within consumer communities (Chu, 2009).

Among the various conceptualizations of eWOM, the definition proposed by Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) has gained broad acceptance and widespread application. According to this research, eWOM refers to any positive or negative statement made by prospective, current, or past consumers regarding a product or company, disseminated to individuals and organizations through the internet. Littlejohn and Foss (2009) provide a more detailed perspective, characterizing electronic word-of-mouth as a process through which customers share information with a large number of fellow customers on e-commerce platforms. These platforms facilitate the swift dissemination of eWOM to a wide user base (Chu & Kim, 2011). Consequently, eWOM encompasses consumer evaluations of services or products across any form of e-commerce platform. In contrast to a general or narrow focus, Fan and Miao (2012) underscore two core dimensions of eWOM: the internet and communication. Their research defines eWOM as encompassing all informal communications directed at consumers, relating to the usage or attributes of specific goods and services, or involving the seller, and facilitated by internet technologies. Such communications can occur between producers and consumers or among consumers themselves, constituting two essential components of eWOM. The internet has empowered individuals, allowing them to share their thoughts and experiences with millions of online users, exerting influence over the decisions of others based on their firsthand product or service usage. Furthermore, Nuria Huete-Alcocer (2017) emphasizes the significance of eWOM as a form of online evaluation and commentary, capable of spreading if the conveyed message possesses sufficient persuasiveness or impact. Particularly in the context of online platforms, eWOM has become one of the most influential sources of information.

In summary, for the purpose of this study, eWOM is defined as the public expression of comments, feedback, or direct communication with sellers by customers who have previously purchased products on e-commerce platforms. The nature of eWOM can be either positive or negative, contingent upon the customers' subjective perceptions and experiences.

The impact of eWOM on online purchase intention

Quality of Information

Online word-of-mouth information can be generated by the majority of internet users, leading to increased concerns regarding the quality and reliability of such information

(Xu, 2014). The Information Adoption Model (IAM), proposed by Sussman and Siegal (2003), is a highly regarded framework in eWOM research. This theory posits that, when faced with a message, consumers are influenced by two factors: Argument Quality and Source Credibility. More specifically, quality of information (Argument Quality) represents the strength and rationality of eWOM in its ability to persuade, instill trust, or influence consumer behavior through the conveyed evaluation information (Ratchford et al., 2001; Zhang et al., 2014). The predictive value of quality of information has been established as crucial for the success of an information system (DeLone & McLean, 1992).

In the context of eWOM, Lin et al. (2013) define quality of information as the content quality of consumer evaluations pertaining to goods or services on e-commerce platforms. Highly regarded eWOM content encompasses clarity, understandability, usefulness, reliability, and persuasive elements, supported by sufficient justifications to substantiate the author's perspective (Park et al., 2007). Consumers, who were previously anonymous on the internet, often exhibit hesitancy in accepting or trusting evaluations published on websites lacking comprehensive information (Ratchford et al., 2001; Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006). Consequently, when perceiving a comment or evaluation within an online community as valuable, consumers tend to place trust in it, accept the eWOM information (Davis et al., 1989; Sussman & Siegal, 2003; Lee & Koo, 2015).

In this study, the term "quality of information" specifically refers to the quality of evaluations, comments, and openly exchanged content with sellers concerning products or services on e-commerce platforms. Evaluating the quality of information encompasses various characteristics, such as relevance, timeliness, accuracy, and comprehensiveness. As consumers perceive higher quality of information, they are more likely to place trust in eWOM, resulting in a heightened impact on their purchase intention. Therefore, the following hypothesis (H1) is proposed:

H1: Quality of information positively influences the acceptance of eWOM.

Source Credibility

When engaging in online purchases, consumers often encounter incomplete or unreliable product descriptions, leading them to seek dependable electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) to mitigate uncertainties and risks associated with online shopping (Zhang et al., 2014). Consequently, the significance of information credibility has escalated, emerging as a pivotal criterion in the consideration of online purchases (Xu, 2014).

The Information Adoption Model theory posits that Source Credibility stands as a fundamental determinant of eWOM influencing consumer behavior (Sussman & Siegal, 2003). Hong and Park (2012) define eWOM credibility as the recipient's assessment of the trustworthiness of online reviews. Conversely, Moran and Muzellec (2017) argue that source credibility is manifested through the content of communication and its impact on recipients, pecifically, the degree to which they perceive a proposition or evaluation as trustworthy, accurate, or authentic (Fogg & Tseng, 1999; Cheung, 2009). Consistency among messages plays a role in shaping the credibility of eWOM; the greater the alignment among messages, the higher the perceived credibility, and vice versa (Wathen & Burkell, 2002; Charles C. Self, 1996).

Within this study, eWOM credibility is understood as the reliance consumers place on evaluations and comments regarding products and services on online shopping platforms. Consumers are more inclined to accept eWOM when they perceive eWOM pertaining to a product as credible (Cheung et al., 2009; Fan & Miao, 2012; Lee & Koo, 2012; Zhang et al., 2014; Guo et al., 2020). Similarly, if consumers perceive the opinions expressed by knowledgeable and trustworthy individuals, they are more likely to perceive these opinions and comments as useful (Gilly et al., 1998; Bansal & Voyer, 2000; Gefen et al., 2004; Cheung et al., 2008). In instances where eWOM possesses high credibility,

consumers are more prone to trust and accept it. Therefore, the following hypothesis (H2) is proposed:

H2: Source Credibility positively influences the acceptance of eWOM.

Quantity of eWOM

Nowadays, e-commerce platforms often provide tools to indicate the total quantity of eWOM for a specific product. Online shoppers on e-commerce platforms can find a large number of reviews about products or services. E-WOM plays a crucial role in e-commerce (Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006). The quantity of eWOM refers to the number of publicly posted opinions through e-commerce platforms (Cheung et al., 2008; Sicilia and Ruiz, 2010). Consumers do not need to examine all eWOM in detail; they can rely on the total number of reviews and evaluations for the products they are interested in to make decisions. If a product has a high total number of reviews, the likelihood of consumer purchase may be higher due to observation or emulation of the purchasing behavior of other users (Zhang et al., 2014). Consumers need a large quantity of eWOM to reinforce their trust, helping them avoid mistakes or risks while shopping (Bataineh, 2015). The comments, opinions, and online evaluations from previous product purchasers reveal the authenticity of various aspects such as quality, packaging, design, pricing, sellers, shipping providers, and the overall shopping and product usage experiences (Lee and Lee, 2009; Chatterjee, 2001). Studies by Park et al. (2007), Sher and Lee (2009), and Sicilia and Ruiz (2010) have provided evidence that the quantity of eWOM positively influences the acceptance of eWOM (Park et al., 2007; Lee et al., 2008). Based on this, the following hypothesis (H3) is proposed:

H3: Quantity of eWOM positively influences the acceptance of eWOM.

Acceptance of eWOM

The acceptance of electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) plays a crucial role as a prominent predictor of purchase intention, as individuals tend to align their actions with the information they accept and trust. Information acceptance refers to the intentional process of utilizing and incorporating received information into decision-making (Cheung et al., 2008). When consumers engage in online shopping through e-commerce platforms, they commonly rely on the opinions and comments of other consumers to gather insights before making their purchasing decisions. If consumers perceive an evaluation or comment as reliable and useful, they are more likely to accept the information and gain confidence in utilizing eWOM to guide their purchase choices (Sussman & Siegel, 2003).

Hence, within the scope of this study, the acceptance of eWOM is defined as the willingness to utilize the information provided by fellow online shoppers as a reference for making informed purchase decisions. Empirical studies have consistently demonstrated that the acceptance of eWOM significantly and positively influences consumers' purchase intention (Fan & Miao, 2012; Cheung et al., 2008; Erkan & Evans, 2016). However, it is important to note that not all instances of eWOM have the same impact on purchase intention, as the influence can vary considerably (Yang, 2012). Therefore, the following hypothesis (H4) is proposed:

H4: Acceptance of eWOM positively influences Gen Z consumers' online purchase intention in e-commerce platforms

Research model

The study builds upon the Information Adoption Model (IAM) proposed by Sussman and Siegal (2003), and further enhances the model's practical applicability by incorporating the factor of Quantity of eWOM.
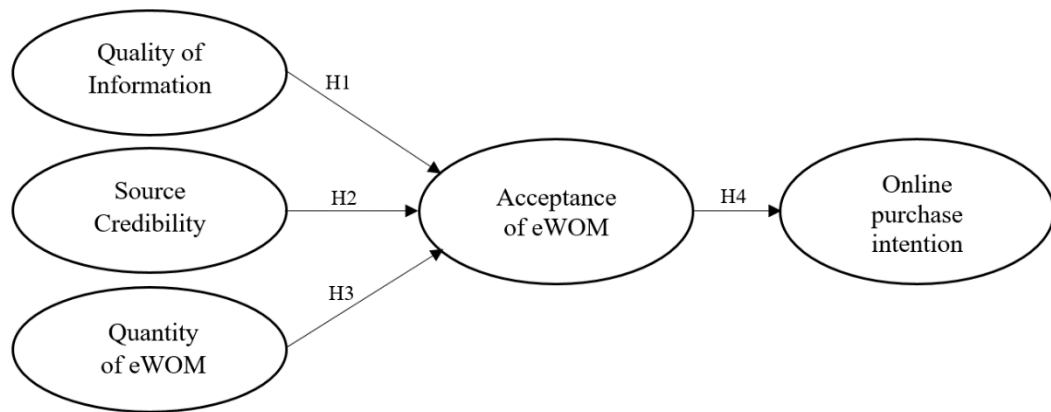
Figure 1. Conceptual Model

3. RESEARCH METHODS

With the aim of examining the impact of eWOM on purchase intention, the proposed research model is based on clear theoretical foundations. The study utilizes a quantitative research approach to measure the research variables and assess the correlations between the relationships based on survey data collected from 274 Gen Z individuals in the Mekong Delta region, specifically in Can Tho city and An Giang province. The respondents will be filtered to ensure that all survey participants have previous experience in purchasing on e-commerce platforms. The data was collected through online sampling in December 2022. The significance and reliability of the study heavily rely on the sample size. Kline suggests a sample size greater than 200 (Kline, 2015). Considering the proposed model with 21 variables and aiming for a robust study, the authors gathered data from 300 Gen Z participants. After excluding observations that did not meet the requirements, the final sample size for the study is 274 observations.

The study uses primarily the Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). This scale is widely utilized in research to describe individuals' attitudes towards social scientific behavior.

This study employs the Partial Least Squares-Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) technique to evaluate the reliability of measures, establish scale validity, and test the research hypotheses. To ensure convergence validity, the Composite Reliability (CR) and Cronbach's Alpha, coefficients are expected to meet or exceed the threshold of 0.7, while the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) is anticipated to surpass the value of 0.5 (Hair et al., 2014). Discriminant validity is assessed utilizing the Fornell-Larcker Criterion, which compares the square root of a construct's AVE with its correlations with other constructs. Furthermore, the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio, with a critical value of less than 0.9, is examined to assess the distinctiveness of the research data (Hair et al., 2014). The estimation of the theoretical model is conducted through a Bootstrap procedure with 5,000 samples, adopting a significance level of 5%.

4. RESEARCH RESULTS

The survey results revealed that among the 274 Gen Z individuals surveyed, females accounted for 67.9% of the sample, while males constituted the remaining 32.1%. The average age of the consumer respondents was 20-21 years old, with the oldest participant being 26 years old and the youngest being 17 years old. In terms of occupation, the majority of participants were high school students and students enrolled in vocational schools, colleges, universities, and vocational training institutions, representing 77% of

the sample. Office workers comprised 14.2% of the respondents, while 8.8% were engaged in business activities or working as freelancers.

The findings presented in Table 1 indicate that the examined concepts exhibit favorable levels of reliability. Specifically, both Cronbach's Alpha coefficients and composite reliability (CR) surpass the recommended threshold of 0.7, affirming the internal consistency and stability of the measurements. Moreover, the average variance extracted (AVE) surpasses the acceptable level of 0.5, attesting to the satisfactory convergent validity of the constructs. The factor loading coefficients exceed the desirable threshold of 0.7. Consequently, all the examined concepts can be regarded as reliable and demonstrate a notable level of convergence in the research context.

Table 1: Measurement Reliability Results

Factor	Cronbach's alpha	Composite Reliability (CR)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Quality of Information	0.738	0.813	0.632
Source Credibility	0.745	0.852	0.646
Quantity of eWOM	0.825	0.891	0.683
Acceptance of eWOM	0.716	0.784	0.612
Online purchase intention	0.852	0.921	0.719

To evaluate the discriminant validity of the measurement scale, the research employed Fornell-Larcker criterion. This criterion compares the square root of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) with the correlation coefficient between two latent variables. The obtained results reveal that the square root of the AVE for each factor surpasses the respective correlation coefficient, providing evidence for the discriminant nature of the measurement scale. The findings, as presented in Table 3, demonstrate that all variables within the model successfully meet both the Fornell-Larcker criterion, confirming the achieved discriminant values of the measurement scale.

Table 2: Discriminant Validity based on Fornell-Larcker Criterion

	Quality of Information	Source Credibility	Quantity of eWOM	Acceptance of eWOM	Online purchase intention
Quality of Information	0.745				
Source Credibility	0.363	0.786			
Quantity of eWOM	0.259	0.256	0.727		
Acceptance of eWOM	-0.427	0.157	0.257	0.796	
Online purchase intention	0.048	-0.036	0.036	0.168	0.731

The coefficient R2 is utilized to assess the impact/explanation of exogenous latent variables on endogenous latent variables. The results of PLS SEM indicate that three independent variables, namely Quality of Information, Source Credibility, and Quantity of eWOM, account for 57.2% of the variance in Acceptance of eWOM. Additionally, Acceptance of eWOM is capable of explaining 43.8% of the variance in Online purchase intention.

Given the assumption of non-normal distribution in the analyzed PLS-SEM data, the conventional parametric tests typically employed in regression analysis cannot be used to evaluate the significance of coefficients, including path coefficients. Consequently, the PLS-SEM approach relies on the non-parametric bootstrap analysis technique, as recommended by Hair et al. (2014), to assess coefficient significance. By employing bootstrap resampling, this technique enables the examination of whether the path coefficients significantly deviate from zero. For this specific study, the bootstrap technique was applied to a dataset consisting of 274 observations, with 5000 resampling iterations, ensuring robust testing of the validity of the linear structural model. These procedures are detailed in Table 3.

Table 3: Bootstrapping Results for the Structural Model

Relationship	Original Weight	P-value	2.5%	97.5%
Quality of Information → Acceptance of eWOM	0.254	0.001	0.157	0.294
Source Credibility → Acceptance of eWOM	0.336	0.000	0.261	0.428
Quantity of eWOM → Acceptance of eWOM	0.125	0.002	0.052	0.273
Acceptance of eWOM → Online purchase intention	0.324	0.000	0.249	0.416

When assessing the impact of independent variables on Gen Z consumers' Acceptance of eWOM, it is evident that Source Credibility holds the highest influence (β = 0.336), followed by Quality of Information (β = 0.254), and Quantity of eWOM (β = 0.125), in descending order. Consequently, all hypotheses (H1, H2, and H3) are accepted at a 95% confidence level, indicating a positive and significant impact of these factors on Gen Z consumers' Acceptance of eWOM in the Vietnamese context.

Moreover, this study also investigated the relationship between Acceptance of eWOM and Gen Z consumers' online purchase intention on e-commerce platforms. The findings demonstrate a statistically significant association between these two variables, revealing that Acceptance of eWOM positively influences online purchase intention in e-commerce platforms. Therefore, hypothesis H4 is also supported.

Overall, the analysis of the linear structural model and the conducted tests provide robust evidence for accepting all hypotheses from H1 to H4, validating the positive effects of the examined factors on Gen Z consumers' Acceptance of eWOM and their subsequent online purchase intention.
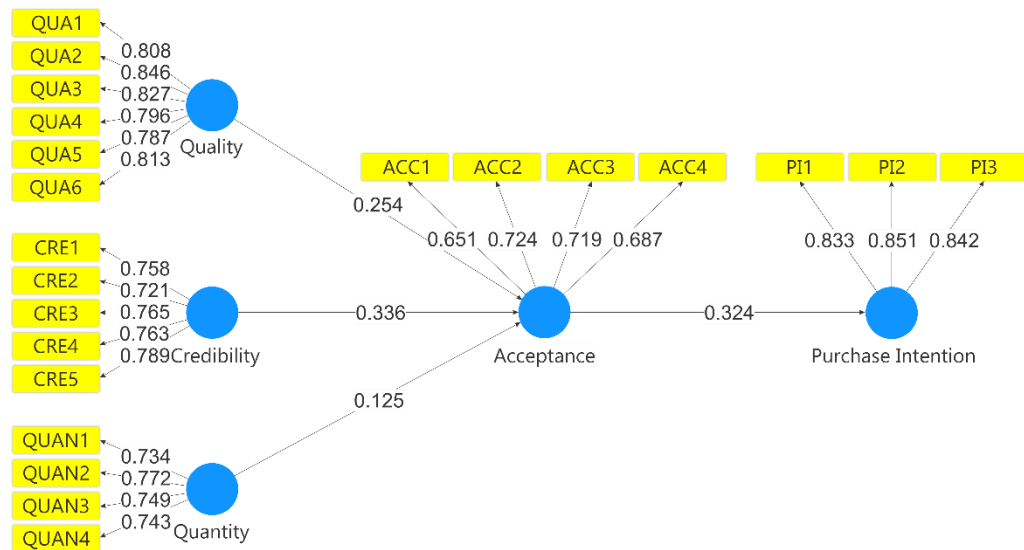

Figure 2. Analysis Results Using PLS-SEM Algorithm

Numerous studies have been conducted on the topic of eWOM and its influence on consumers' online purchase intention, with several notable works including those by Hennig et al. (2004), Bickart and Schindler (2001), Zhang et al. (2010), Lin et al. (2013), Lee and Koo (2015), Moran and Muzellec (2017), and Guo et al. (2020), etc. However, limited research has been conducted to empirically validate eWOM models in economically developing countries like Vietnam. Thus, the present study aims to delve deeper into eWOM and explore the behavior of Gen Z consumers in the specific context of the Mekong Delta region in Vietnam. By integrating the theoretical framework of the Information Acceptance Model (IAM) proposed by Sussman and Siegal (2003) and incorporating the Quantity of eWOM factor as suggested by Park et al. (2007), Sher and

Lee (2009), and Sicilia and Ruiz (2010), the research model, titled "eWOM and Gen Z consumers' online purchase intention in e-commerce platforms," has yielded promising and viable outcomes.

The primary focus of this study was to examine the impact of various dimensions of eWOM on the acceptance of eWOM, as well as investigate the influence of acceptance of eWOM on consumers' online purchase intention within e-commerce platforms. The findings substantiated all the proposed hypotheses, aligning with prior research conducted in related domains. Moreover, the study reaffirmed the Information Acceptance Model (IAM) by providing empirical evidence of the positive effects of Quality of Information and Source Credibility on the acceptance of eWOM. Notably, these three factors accounted for a substantial proportion (57.2%) of the variance in the acceptance of eWOM, while supporting hypothesis H3, which postulated the positive impact of Quantity of eWOM on the acceptance of eWOM. Among the three factors, Source Credibility emerged as the most influential, followed by Quality of Information and Quantity of eWOM.

Additionally, the research model shed light on the hypothesis proposed by Yang (2012), Fan and Miao (2012), Cheung et al. (2008), and Erkan and Evans (2016) concerning the relationship between acceptance of eWOM and consumers' online purchase intention within e-commerce platforms. The results derived from the Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS SEM) analysis provided robust evidence to support these hypotheses, thereby confirming the findings of previous studies and underscoring their relevance within the specific context of the Mekong Delta region. Importantly, the acceptance of eWOM was found to exert a significant influence, contributing to 43.8% of the variation in consumers' online purchase intention. This particular finding assumes critical significance within the realm of eWOM research, especially in technologically developing and culturally diverse countries like Vietnam.

5. CONCLUSION

Although numerous studies have been conducted on eWOM, there remains a dearth of in-depth research on various relevant issues. Furthermore, each study is typically conducted at different time points, focusing on different subjects and regions, which results in varying perspectives on eWOM and purchase intention. Consequently, when examining eWOM within the specific context of the Mekong Delta region, as well as in Vietnam overall, it is imperative to consider the distinctive characteristics that emerge. Additionally, due to the limited number of studies on eWOM in this region, investigating this topic holds significance both from an academic and practical standpoint. This present study integrates the Information Acceptance Model (IAM) and builds upon empirical research findings to explore eWOM and Gen Z consumers' online purchase intention in e-commerce platforms. Moreover, the introduction of the Quantity of eWOM factor is aimed at aligning the research framework with the specific context. The outcomes of this study yield statistically significant support for the proposed hypotheses, providing validation, demonstration, and expansion of prior research. Notably, the study offers meaningful academic and practical implications, further solidifying and broadening the understanding of eWOM and Gen Z consumers' online purchase intention in the Mekong Delta market. However, it is essential to acknowledge that this study solely examines three factors that influence the Acceptance of eWOM, consequently accounting for only 57.2% of the variance in Acceptance of eWOM and 43.8% of the variance in Online purchase intention. Numerous other factors have yet to be addressed, alongside the unexplored intermediate variables in the relationship between eWOM acceptance and purchase intention. The study's limitations encompass the sample size, the number of Gen Z participants, and the regional scale. These limitations serve as crucial indicators for future research endeavors, aimed at advancing the comprehension of eWOM and online

purchase intention within the unique context of the Mekong Delta region, as well as in Vietnam as a whole.

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