

# ELECTRONIC WORD OF MOUTH TRENDS AND TRANSFORMATIONS IN THE PAST FIVE YEARS: A SYSTEMATIC STUDY OF STRATEGY DEVELOPMENTS AND ITS IMPACT POST-COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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## ABSTRACT

*The rapid development of digital technology and shifting consumer behavior in the post-COVID-19 era have driven a major transformation in marketing communication patterns, particularly through Electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM). Over the past five years, e-WOM has evolved beyond simple text-based reviews to become visual and interactive content disseminated via social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube. This study aims to regularly examine the trends and transformations of e-WOM in terms of format, distribution channels, adaptive strategies used by businesses, and its impact on consumer behavior in the digital landscape after the pandemic. The research employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method by analyzing 18 scholarly articles sourced from reputable databases such as Scopus, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar, selected based on keywords: "electronic word of mouth," "e-WOM," "post-pandemic digital marketing," and "consumer behavior." The findings reveal that e-WOM has become a strategic instrument that not only enhances brand credibility through authentic and emotional content but also serves as a core component of data-driven, community-oriented, and participatory digital marketing strategies. This study provides valuable insight into the dynamics of digital consumer communication and offers practical guidance for companies and MSMEs in managing e-WOM effectively.*

## INTRODUCTION

In the digital era that continues to accelerate, information has become the most

valuable commodity in influencing consumer perception and behavior. One form of communication that is experiencing rapid development is Electronic Word of Mouth (e- WOM), namely a form of information dissemination based on user experience through digital media, such as social media, review sites, discussion forums, and e-commerce platforms (Xu et al., 2024). This phenomenon not only replaces the traditional form of word of mouth, but also expands the reach and intensity of its influence through technology. In a digital society, e-WOM plays a central role in shaping public opinion, increasing brand awareness, and driving instant purchasing decisions. The emergence of various platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube provides a space for individuals to share their views on products or services, which then forms a pattern of consumption behavior that no longer relies on conventional advertising (Poyoi et al., 2023). This change reflects a paradigm shift in marketing communications from a one- way approach to two-way interactions based on real experiences and the credibility of online communities.



Source : <https://shorturl.at/JrOkK>

**Figure 1.**Number of Indonesian Social Media Users in 2024

The development of e-WOM has become increasingly significant, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic that began in early 2020. This global pandemic has created massive disruption in various sectors of life, including the way people access information and conduct social interactions. Mobility restrictions, social isolation, and increased online activities during the pandemic have strengthened people's dependence on digital technology as a means of communication and information. In this context, e-WOM has become the main channel for conveying product reviews, sharing service experiences, and forming brand images. Many companies, both large-scale and MSMEs, have begun to rely on e-WOM-based strategies to maintain their existence amidst global economic uncertainty. The review boom phenomenon, namely the explosion in the number of consumer reviews on various digital platforms, emerged as a response to the limitations of physical interaction, making e-WOM not only a medium of information, but also a new social medium for building trust and establishing connections between consumers.

This phenomenon can be observed from various empirical data that show a significant increase in e-WOM activity in the last five years. Based on the report (Toubes et al., 2021), over 70% of global consumers admit to reading online reviews before making a purchase, and over 60% say that consumer reviews are more trusted than advertising. In Indonesia, data from We Are Social (2024) revealed that the average internet user spends up to 3.5 hours per day accessing social media, with a significant proportion spent viewing product review content and user testimonials. A survey by (Mubarok et al., 2023) noted that e-WOM is a major factor in purchasing decision-making, especially in the food and beverage, fashion, technology, and health product sectors. The surge in the use of review features on e-commerce such as Shopee, Tokopedia, and TikTok Shop is also a strong indication that e-WOM has undergone a transformation from mere consumer opinion to a strategic tool in digital marketing communications. However, there is still a lack of comprehensive research that systematically maps how e-WOM trends, forms, and strategies have developed in the last five years and their impact on consumers and business actors.

Several previous studies have examined e-WOM in terms of its effectiveness in increasing consumer purchase intentions, the credibility of the message delivered, and the role of influencers in strengthening the impact of e-WOM. Research conducted by (Mubarok, Sari, Wibowo, 2025) highlighted that the credibility and quality of information in e-WOM directly influence purchasing decisions. A study by (Tung & My, 2023) shows that consumer perceptions of the authenticity and relevance of e-WOM content are key factors in creating brand trust. However, most of these studies do not highlight the evolution of e-WOM in the post-pandemic context, where changes in consumer behavior and the technological landscape have created new complexities. Therefore, a systematic approach is needed to examine how e-WOM has evolved in the last five years, both in terms of content forms, platforms used, and adaptive strategies implemented by business actors.

The development of e-WOM is also closely related to the emergence of new technologies such as personalization algorithms, machine learning, and the integration of e-WOM into the customer journey. A study by (Thao et al., 2023) emphasizes that companies are now starting to design systems that are able to automatically manage and utilize e-WOM in data-driven marketing processes. This not only marks a new era in brand reputation management, but also shows that e-WOM has become an integral part of the architecture of a company's communication strategy. In addition, the participatory approach in user-generated content (UGC) shows how consumers are no longer passive, but active in creating and disseminating information that influences the market (Zhang et al., 2023). This dynamic is what reinforces the importance of systematic research on e-WOM, because the success of today's digital marketing strategies is largely determined by the ability of business actors to read, respond to, and manage the flow of information from and by consumers themselves.

Based on the above explanation, this study aims to conduct a systematic review of e-WOM trends and transformations in the last five years, with a focus on the strategies used by business actors and the impact of e-WOM on consumer

behavior after the COVID-19 pandemic. Through the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach, this study will inventory, classify, and analyze relevant scientific publications from 2020 to 2025, in order to formulate a complete understanding of changes in e-WOM characteristics, dominant platforms used, emerging communication strategies, and their contribution in supporting the effectiveness of digital marketing. This study is expected to provide theoretical and practical contributions in the development of digital communication studies and become a foundation in formulating adaptive e-WOM-based business strategies for the post-pandemic era.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### 1. Concept and Strategic Role of Electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM)

Electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM) is a form of modern interpersonal communication that is rapidly developing through digital media. Unlike conventional word of mouth which is oral and limited in reach, e-WOM is global, documented, and can spread very quickly on various digital platforms such as social media, review sites, online forums, and comment features on e-commerce. According to (Kuncoro, 2021), e-WOM is defined as any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, and made available to the general public via the internet. The development of information and communication technology has encouraged individuals to become both producers and consumers of information (prosumers), so that the role of e-WOM has become very significant in shaping perceptions and purchasing decisions. With the increasing dependence of society on online reviews and recommendations, e-WOM has become one of the most influential instruments in today's digital marketing strategy.

E-WOM plays a crucial role as an indirect yet highly effective marketing tool. The high credibility of user testimonials, the authentic perception of real experiences, and the organic nature of information dissemination make e-WOM much more convincing than commercial advertising. A study by (Liu et al., 2024) shows that the influence of e-WOM on purchasing decisions can even exceed the influence of traditional advertising, especially if the content is considered relevant and credible. In addition, the emergence of user-generated content (UGC) also strengthens the position of e-WOM as a representation of the voice of consumers that can encourage interaction, build brand loyalty, and expand the reach of promotions organically. Therefore, modern companies not only monitor e-WOM, but also actively integrate e-WOM strategies into their digital campaigns as a form of collaboration with consumers in the marketing process.

### 2. Post-COVID-19 Pandemic e-WOM Transformation and Developments in the Last Five Years

Post COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a significant transformation in the e-WOM landscape marked by increased intensity of digital platform usage and changes in consumer behavior that increasingly rely on online information. The

lockdown situation, social restrictions, and surge in online activity have caused people to be more active in seeking digital reviews, testimonials, and recommendations before making purchases. A study by (Zhang et al., 2023) stated that during and after the pandemic, consumers have become more sensitive to the credibility of online information and are more selective in trusting product reviews. This trend shows that e-WOM is no longer just an additional tool, but has become a key element in the consumer decision-making process. In addition, social media and e-commerce algorithms increasingly prioritize user experience-based content, which drives higher engagement between consumers and brands through e- WOM.

Over the past five years (2020–2025), e-WOM has shifted in form and strategy. Companies are now more focused on managing customer reviews, collaborating with micro-influencers, and optimizing UGC content as a strategic approach. Many brands are using a sentiment analysis approach to quantitatively evaluate e-WOM, and integrating machine learning to map consumer opinions in real-time. In addition, platforms such as TikTok (Ahmad et al., 2020), Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts are new media that encourage a more dynamic and visual e-WOM format. This change marks a new phase where e-WOM is not only part of passive interactions between users, but has also been formed as a strategy that is systematically and measurably managed by companies. Therefore, a systematic review of the literature in the last five years is very important to map trends, best practices, and the influence of e-WOM transformation on consumer behavior and business strategies in the post-pandemic era.

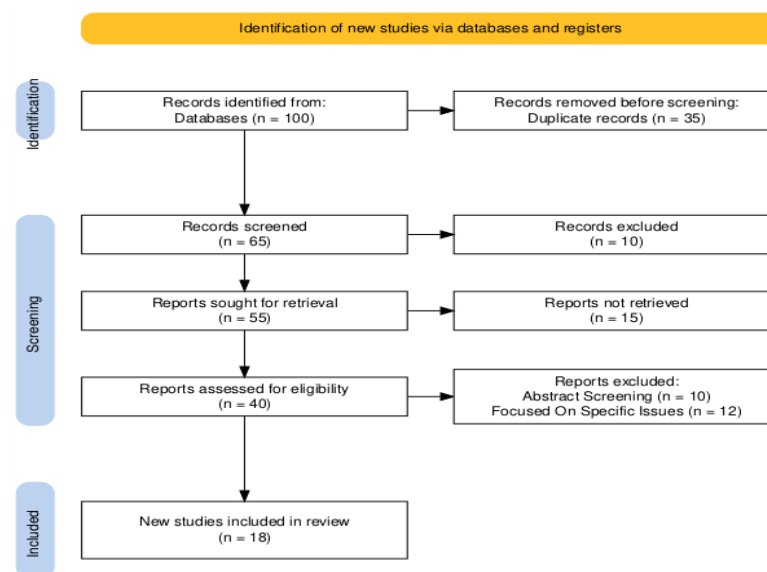
## RESEARCH METHODS

The research method used in this study is the Systematic Literature Review (SLR), which is a structured and transparent approach to identifying, evaluating, and interpreting all literature relevant to a particular research focus (J. Creswell, 2017). The SLR approach was chosen to gain a comprehensive understanding of the development of Electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM) over the past five years, especially in the post-COVID-19 pandemic context, with the aim of mapping changes in e-WOM strategies, media, and influences on consumer behavior and digital marketing practices. SLR was conducted through a series of systematic stages, namely identification of relevant studies, selection based on inclusion and exclusion criteria, data extraction, and synthesis of findings. This study focuses on literature published between 2020 and 2025, with an emphasis on empirically based scientific articles, qualitative and quantitative studies, and open access publications indexed in international scientific databases. The selection procedure was carried out strictly to ensure that only relevant and high-quality journals were used as the basis for analysis in this study.

The data sources used in this study include scientific journals obtained from various trusted academic databases, such as Scopus, ScienceDirect, Emerald Insight, Taylor & Francis, ProQuest, and Google Scholar. The journal search process was carried out using keywords that had been systematically arranged and were relevant to the topic, including: "electronic word of mouth", "e-WOM", "digital marketing", "consumer behavior", "COVID-19 pandemic", "post-pandemic digital



strategy", "online reviews", and "user- generated content". The combination of keywords also uses Boolean operators such as AND, OR, and NOT to optimize the appropriate search results. The selected journals are English and Indonesian language publications that are relevant to the scope of the study and have a scope of analysis on changes in trends, strategies, and the role of e-WOM in the context of post-pandemic digital transformation (JW Creswell & Creswell, 2018). To improve validity, duplication checks, article quality assessment using PRISMA criteria, and thematic synthesis were conducted to group research results into main themes that will be analyzed in depth in the discussion. Thus, this approach is expected to provide a comprehensive and evidence-based picture of the evolution and impact of e-WOM in the last five years.



Source :Prism Database (2025)

Figure 2.Prism Table

Figure 2. PRISMA table sourced from Prisma Database (2025) illustrates the systematic process in the identification, selection, and inclusion of literature for the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) study used in this study. The diagram shows that out of a total of 100 articles identified from various databases, 35 articles were removed because they were duplicates, leaving 65 articles to be further screened. From this screening stage, 10 articles were excluded because they were not relevant to the focus of the study, so 55 articles were continued for the full search process. However, only 40 articles were successfully accessed and assessed for eligibility because the other 15 articles could not be retrieved. Of the 40 articles, 22 articles were eliminated because they only included abstracts or discussed issues that were too specific and did not match the scope of the study. The final result of this rigorous selection process resulted in 18 articles that met the criteria and were included in the systematic review synthesis, which became the basis for analyzing e-WOM trends and transformations over the past five years after the COVID-19 pandemic. This

diagram emphasizes the principles of transparency and methodological validity in the scientific literature selection process (Haddaway et al., 2022).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Research result

The results of a systematic review of the literature in the last five years show that e-WOM has undergone significant evolution as a digital communication strategy that is increasingly integrated into consumer purchasing decisions. Research by (Tung & My, 2023) shows that the elements of credibility, message appeal, and delivery platform have a strong influence on the effectiveness of e-WOM, especially in the e-commerce sector. In the study, e-WOM was considered capable of forming a stronger perception of consumer trust compared to traditional advertising. The study by (Thao et al., 2023) emphasize that visual formats such as video reviews and interactive testimonials have become more dominant and effective during the pandemic, especially when face-to-face interactions are limited. Both studies underline that changes in media preferences and communication formats are important aspects of e-WOM transformation.

Other research by (Zhang et al., 2023) observed that post-pandemic consumers showed increased intensity in seeking user experience-based information before making purchasing decisions. This is supported by a study (Müller-Pérez et al., 2023) which highlights the role of micro and nano influencers who are able to increase the authenticity value in e-WOM communication, because they are considered closer and more emotionally relevant to the audience. Both studies indicate that e-WOM no longer relies on public figures or celebrities, but has shifted towards a more personal and communicative approach through high social engagement strategies.

Research by Robert (2020) found that the use of personalization algorithms on platforms such as Instagram and TikTok strengthens the effectiveness of e-WOM dissemination, as relevant information is more easily accessible to the target audience. (Yi, 2020) This research overlaps with findings that consumers are more likely to trust e- WOM that appears organically on their social media feeds than paid advertising. These results show how technology and data personalization are amplifying the impact of e- WOM as a persuasive tool that feels less pushy but is effective.

Fainshtein et al., (2023) highlights the importance of the emotional dimension in e- WOM, where touching narratives and personal experiences shared by users are more capable of influencing purchase conversions than just product information. The study is in line with the results of (Hashemi et al., 2023) which shows that during and after the pandemic, there was a spike in review activity with emotional content, both positive and negative, which then became an important indicator in mapping brand perception. Thus, the affective dimension of e-WOM is a key factor in building consumer loyalty in the dynamic digital era.

Research by Agusiady et al., (2024) highlighted that large companies have moved from simply monitoring e-WOM to a systematic e-WOM management strategy,

including the use of sentiment analysis and real-time digital crisis management. This research is supported by a study (Yang et al., 2024) in the Indonesian context, which found that MSMEs have begun to utilize consumer testimonials as part of their digital marketing strategy, especially on the Tokopedia and Shopee platforms. Both findings indicate that e-WOM transformation is not only occurring at the consumer level, but also extending to aspects of business operational strategies, both large and micro scale.

Based on the results of a systematic review of various literature over the past five years, it can be concluded that Electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM) has undergone a significant transformation, both in terms of form, strategy, and its influence on consumer behavior. The shift in consumer preferences towards digital media after the COVID-19 pandemic has driven the integration of e-WOM into the purchasing decision-making process more substantially. Message credibility, visual appeal, and the effectiveness of digital platforms have proven to be key elements in increasing the influence of e-WOM, with interactive video reviews and testimonials being the most dominant formats. Not only that, consumers are now more actively seeking real experiences from fellow users than relying on direct promotions from manufacturers, indicating that the power of e-WOM lies in the authenticity and emotional closeness conveyed through content based on personal experiences.

The development of digital technology has also driven the effectiveness of e-WOM through algorithmic personalization and organic content presentation on social media platforms. This phenomenon shows that e-WOM has transformed into a persuasive tool that is not only effective but also more acceptable to consumers because of its non-coercive nature. Affective dimensions such as emotional narratives and personal experiences are increasingly recognized as key factors in building consumer loyalty and strengthening brand perception. Not only at the consumer level, companies and MSMEs are also beginning to realize the importance of structured e-WOM management through sentiment analysis and testimonial management as part of a digital marketing strategy. Thus, e-WOM is no longer a spontaneous phenomenon, but a communication strategy that is systematically designed, monitored, and optimized to address the challenges and opportunities of digital marketing in the post-pandemic era.

## Discussion

### 1. Transformation of e-WOM Formats and Channels in the Post-Pandemic Digital Landscape

Electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM) has undergone a tremendous transformation in the past five years, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic drastically changed patterns of social interaction, media consumption, and consumer behavior. The pandemic forced global communities to shift almost all of their activities to the online realm. As physical social spaces were restricted by lockdown policies, digital media took over as the primary channel for communication, interaction, and transactions (Müller-Pérez et al., 2023). In this context, e-WOM has expanded both in terms of delivery format and distribution channels. This change is



not only an adaptive response to physical limitations, but also a manifestation of consumer needs for authentic, credible, and interactive information in the face of market uncertainty and declining trust in conventional advertising.

The e-WOM format is dominated by static text such as comments, product reviews, and written testimonials on e-commerce sites or online community forums. Although these forms remain relevant, post-pandemic consumer expectations have significantly escalated. They want not only information, but also visual experiences that are close to reality. Therefore, there has been a major shift towards visual and audio-visual formats such as video reviews, unboxings, tutorials, and live streaming. These formats allow consumers to see firsthand how a product is used in real life, hear the tone of voice and facial expressions of the reviewer, and get direct responses through the comment feature or direct interaction (Robert, 2020). This transformation strengthens the perception of authenticity and transparency of e-WOM content, two attributes that are highly valued in the era of post-truth and information overload.

Platforms such as YouTube, Instagram Reels, TikTok, and Facebook Live have become the main channels for the dissemination of visual and interactive e-WOM. TikTok in particular has seen a surge in users during and after the pandemic due to its ability to present short, entertaining, and easily accessible content. In this format, e-WOM is no longer passive, but participatory and viral. Creatively packaged product review videos can reach millions of viewers in a matter of hours, creating an instant "social proof" effect. This phenomenon provides great opportunities for brands, but also presents challenges in managing rapidly changing public perceptions. There are many cases where a product rises due to the virality of e-WOM, but then experiences a sharp decline due to one negative content that spreads widely and quickly.

The transformation of e-WOM channels is also seen in the increasing relevance of social media as a primary source of information compared to search engines or official company websites. Consumers are more likely to seek product reviews through personal accounts, online communities, or micro-influencers they trust, rather than relying on official content from manufacturers (Yi, 2020). This pattern indicates a shift in information authority from institutions to individuals, which is in line with participatory media theory where consumers act not only as message recipients, but also as creators and disseminators of information. Micro and nano influencers, despite having fewer followers, are considered more authentic and relatable, thus providing a stronger persuasive impact in the context of e-WOM.

One consequence of this transformation is the increasing reliance of companies on user-generated content (UGC) as part of their marketing communication strategy. Companies no longer rely solely on paid advertising or promotions, but have begun to integrate strategies that allow consumers to voluntarily share their experiences. Programs such as "customer spotlight", video testimonial competitions, or positive review incentives are new ways to stimulate the emergence of e-WOM organically. This strategy is not only more cost-effective, but also creates a psychological effect where consumers feel valued and included in the brand

narrative. This is in line with the community-based marketing approach that emphasizes collaboration between companies and customers in building brand identity.

This shift in channels and formats has also driven changes in the algorithms and design of digital platforms. Many platforms now prioritize content that contains high engagement, long viewing duration, and active comment engagement. Indirectly, this encourages the spread of narrative and emotional e-WOM rather than merely informative. Research by Fainshtein et al. (2023) shows that content that contains affective content such as joy, emotion, or anger tends to get higher engagement, and therefore, is more often recommended by algorithms. As a result, e-WOM is now more emotional and subjective, which although more relatable to the audience, also risks creating bias or misleading opinions if not accompanied by sufficient factual information.

Integration of technologies such as machine learning and artificial intelligence (AI) enables companies to analyze e-WOM more efficiently. Through sentiment analysis and opinion mining techniques, companies can map public perception in real-time, identify potential crises, and design appropriate communication interventions (Mubarok, Sari, Wibowo, 2025). This technology also allows content classification based on tone (positive, neutral, negative), product aspects discussed, and channel sources (eg: TikTok, Instagram, Shopee reviews). Thus, e-WOM management strategies become increasingly data-driven, no longer just responsive, but also proactive in anticipating trends and issues that have the potential to affect brand image.

Local contexts such as Indonesia also show unique dynamics in e-WOM transformation. E-commerce platforms such as Tokopedia, Shopee, and TikTok Shop not only provide text review features but also allow buyers to upload photos and videos directly from their purchasing experiences. In many cases, prospective buyers trust reviews with visual evidence more than product claims in official descriptions. In fact, many purchasing decisions are made solely based on reviews from other consumers who are considered to be in the same boat or have the same context. A study by Yang et al. (2024) revealed that Indonesian MSMEs actively utilize this channel as a testimonial-based promotional strategy without having to spend large amounts on conventional advertising. This shows that the e-WOM transformation also has a positive impact on democratizing digital marketing opportunities for small business actors.

The transformation of e-WOM formats and channels also brings serious challenges. One of them is the potential for the spread of false information or fake reviews that can damage a product's reputation or mislead consumers. In a highly open and rapidly spreading digital environment, even one invalid negative review can have a significant impact. Therefore, companies and platforms need to build a strict validation system to ensure that the e-WOM circulating truly reflects the real experience of consumers. Some e-commerce have implemented a "verified buyer" label, filtered automated content with AI, or involved community moderators to maintain content integrity. However, this challenge still requires more attention

because it concerns ethics, public trust, and consumer protection.

The transformation of e-WOM formats and channels has also given rise to new dimensions of study. If previously e-WOM research focused on credibility and purchase intention, now the study has expanded to aspects of digital consumer psychology, platform interactivity, and information sharing behavior in virtual communities. Recent studies have explored the relationship between types of e-WOM content and engagement levels, the long-term effects of e-WOM on brand loyalty, and the relationship between consumers' digital identities and willingness to share experiences. This development demands a more multidisciplinary research approach, combining perspectives from communication, psychology, marketing, and information technology holistically.

The transformation of e-WOM formats and channels in the post-pandemic digital landscape shows that consumer communication has entered a new phase that is more visual, emotional, interactive, and connected. From just written reviews on product pages, e-WOM has now transformed into a narrative experience that is widely distributed across various platforms and is a major determining factor in consumer decision-making. For companies, understanding these dynamics is crucial in designing relevant, adaptive, and participatory digital marketing strategies. Meanwhile, for academics, this change opens up new, challenging areas of study while enriching understanding of consumer communication in the high-tech era. Amidst rapid platform innovation and changes in digital behavior, the ability to understand and manage e-WOM strategically will be a competitive advantage that determines the sustainability of a brand in the future.

## 2. Adaptive Strategies and Implications of e-WOM on Digital Marketing

Electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM) has evolved from a consumer social phenomenon to a strategic marketing tool integrated into the modern digital landscape. In the past five years, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic, the world has experienced major disruptions in consumption patterns, social interactions, and the way people access information. The pandemic has driven massive acceleration of digitalization, shifting almost all community activities to the online realm. This change has also driven a significant increase in e-WOM-based activities, where consumers become more active in sharing their experiences and opinions about a product or service online (Agusiady et al., 2024). This condition creates challenges as well as opportunities for companies to respond to these changes through adaptive strategies that are relevant to the dynamics of today's digital consumers.

Adaptive strategies to e-WOM developments include three main approaches: consumer content management, utilization of analytical technology, and digital community engagement (Al Halbusi et al., 2022):

1. Consumer content management (user-generated content/UGC) becomes crucial in designing a two-way communication strategy based on real experiences. Companies no longer rely solely on one-way messages such as advertising, but rather embrace consumers as content producers who have a major influence in shaping brand image. This strategy involves activities such as

providing incentives for positive reviews, voluntary testimonial campaigns, content competitions, and integrating reviews into the company's official website. In this context, UGC not only expands the reach of promotions organically, but also strengthens the perception of authenticity that is difficult to achieve through corporate communications.

2. Companies are starting to adopt artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning- based analytics technology to manage and analyze e-WOM more effectively. Through a sentiment analysis approach, companies can map consumer opinions on a large scale and in real time, classify content into positive, negative, or neutral categories, and identify key topics that are frequently discussed by consumers. This technology allows business actors to be more proactive in making strategic decisions, for example by immediately responding to complaints before they develop into a crisis, or utilizing positive reviews to strengthen brand image. In this data-based adaptive strategy, e-WOM is no longer considered an entity that is out of control, but rather as a source of information that can be monitored, measured, and responded to tactically.
3. An important adaptive strategy in dealing with the dynamics of e-WOM is building engagement with digital communities. Online communities such as Facebook groups, Reddit forums, niche communities on Telegram and WhatsApp, to micro-communities on Instagram and TikTok, play a big role in shaping collective opinion. Companies that are able to enter and interact authentically in these communities have a competitive advantage in directing the public narrative towards their brands. This strategy also reflects a shift from a product-centric approach to a customer-centric approach. Brands are no longer just talking to consumers, but listening, participating, and even helping to shape the digital culture built by consumers themselves.

This strategic transformation also has a significant impact on the digital marketing communication model. In the classical approach, marketing is done linearly through a promotional mix such as advertising, direct selling, and public relations. However, in the context of e-WOM, the marketing process becomes non-linear, distributed, and collaborative. Brand control over the message is reduced, and instead shifts to the hands of consumers. Therefore, adaptive strategies emphasize the importance of building brand trust through credibility, transparency, and consistency in every interaction. Brands that are able to create positive experiences will be more likely to gain public support through positive e-WOM, conversely, failure to manage consumer expectations can trigger the spread of negative e-WOM that is difficult to control.

The implications of e-WOM for digital marketing are also seen in the shift in promotional budget allocation. Many companies have begun to shift some of their marketing funds from paid advertising to consumer advocacy-based strategies. This approach is considered more efficient because it has a high return on investment (ROI), especially when associated with content virality and consumer loyalty. A study by Agusiady et al. (2024) shows that companies that focus on empowering

consumers as promotional agents experience a significant increase in awareness and engagement. Strategies such as consumer-based brand ambassadors, affiliate marketing, and collaboration with loyal micro-influencers have been shown to have a deeper and longer-term impact than conventional celebrity endorsements.

In the context of MSMEs, an adaptive strategy towards e-WOM is often the key to success in building a strong digital presence on a limited budget. MSMEs that utilize review features on e-commerce such as Tokopedia and Shopee, as well as fostering active relationships with consumers via WhatsApp or local social media, have proven to be more competitive in building market trust. A study by Yang et al. (2024) emphasized that e-WOM is the main weapon for MSMEs in fighting the dominance of big brands, because the main strength of e-WOM is not in the advertising budget, but in the credibility of the message and emotional connection with consumers. Therefore, MSMEs that have good customer service and encourage positive testimonials tend to find it easier to build a reputation and retain customers in the long term.

However, an adaptive strategy for e-WOM also requires good risk management. One of the main risks is the spread of negative information that cannot be directly controlled. In an era where public opinion spreads in seconds, a single negative review can quickly form a collective perception that is difficult to reverse. Therefore, an adaptive strategy must also include a digital crisis management protocol, including a quick response to consumer complaints, a public apology when necessary, and concrete operational adjustments. A slow or unempathetic response can actually worsen negative sentiment and amplify destructive e-WOM. In this case, speed, empathy, and accountability are key elements in managing the negative implications of e-WOM.

Another implication of e-WOM for digital marketing is the growing need for transparency and honesty in brand communications. Today's digital consumers are far more critical and skeptical than ever before. They have the ability to verify information, compare testimonials from multiple sources, and even investigate the credibility of reviewers. Therefore, companies are required to not only make truthful claims but also include real evidence, such as demonstrations of use, reviews from real users, or third-party certifications. The more transparent a brand is in conveying its information, the more likely it is to gain support through positive e-WOM.

E-WOM is now also considered an important indicator in measuring brand equity and consumer loyalty. Many companies and researchers have begun to include e-WOM variables in marketing evaluation models, both to measure customer satisfaction, digital campaign effectiveness, and competitor analysis. Analytical platforms now provide metrics such as review volume, sentiment intensity, engagement rate, and e-WOM-based net promoter score (NPS). These implications strengthen e-WOM's position as a strategic



instrument, not just an informal communication phenomenon (Fainshtein et al., 2023). Digital marketers who do not understand or integrate e-WOM into their strategies will struggle to compete in an increasingly crowded and rapidly changing digital ecosystem.

The long-term implication of e-WOM on digital marketing is a cultural shift in the relationship between consumers and producers. Consumers are no longer seen as passive targets who only receive messages, but as active actors who have the power to shape and direct brand narratives. Companies that recognize and respond to this new role of consumers will be able to build a healthy, collaborative and sustainable communication ecosystem (Hashemi et al., 2023). A culture of openness, recognition of consumer contributions, and a commitment to authentic service are the main foundations for building brand loyalty in the digital era.

Based on the overall discussion above, it can be concluded that an adaptive strategy for the development of e-WOM and its implications for digital marketing is not only important, but also urgent. In an increasingly digitalized world, e-WOM is a collective voice of consumers that cannot be ignored. Companies that are able to embrace e-WOM as part of their core strategy will have a significant competitive advantage, because they are able to create more humanistic, relevant, and impactful communications. Meanwhile, for MSMEs, e-WOM is a golden opportunity to build reputation and market trust efficiently. Adopting technology, a community-based approach, and strengthening emotional relationships with consumers are the keys to successful digital marketing today and in the future. This transformation is not just a response to the pandemic, but a permanent shift in the way brands and consumers interact in the ever-evolving digital space.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the results of a systematic study over the past five years, it can be concluded that Electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM) has undergone significant transformation in terms of both format and distribution channels, especially as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic which has accelerated the digitalization of consumer behavior. e-WOM has now developed into a more visual, interactive, and emotional experience-based communication medium through platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram. This change has also triggered strategic adaptation by business actors, who now rely more on consumer content, digital community engagement, and analytical technology in managing public opinion. The influence of e-WOM on purchasing decisions has proven to be increasingly strong because consumer trust is formed more by organic reviews and authentic narratives than traditional commercial messages. This transformation shows that e-WOM is not just an additional information channel, but has become a central element in a digital marketing strategy based on consumer participation. To face the increasingly complex dynamics of e-WOM, companies need to develop adaptive, collaborative, and consumer-centric digital communication strategies. It is recommended that business actors actively encourage the creation of user-generated content through positive customer

experiences, and strengthen relationships with digital communities to build long-term loyalty. In addition, it is necessary to utilize technology such as sentiment analysis to monitor market perceptions in real time and respond to potential crises quickly and empathetically. For MSMEs, it is important to maximize e-WOM channels as a cost-effective yet impactful promotional medium, while maintaining service quality and product transparency. Academics and researchers are expected to continue to develop interdisciplinary studies on e-WOM to expand theoretical understanding and support more strategic and sustainable marketing practices in the post-pandemic digital era.

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