

## **Attitude Towards eWOM and Purchase Intention: Exploring the Effect of Central and Peripheral Cues**

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### **Abstract**

This study aims to investigate the influence of eWOM factors in Facebook on attitude towards eWOM and purchase intentions of fitness membership in the emerging economy. In addition, the moderating effect of users' expertise and involvement were also examined. A non-probability convenience sampling was employed, and an online survey questionnaire was posted on the Facebook pages of fitness clubs and fitness-related groups. There were a total of 388 questionnaires received in this study. The hypotheses were tested by Partial Least Squares-Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM). Peripheral factors have a stronger effect than the central factor on the attitude of eWOM and purchase intention. Perceived eWOM quantity is the strongest predictor of purchase intention; however, perceived eWOM attractiveness has the most favourable impact on attitude toward eWOM. Perceived eWOM quality and credibility have a negative relationship with purchase intention. Users' involvement moderates eWOM factors and purchase intention, while attitude towards eWOM fully mediates perceived eWOM quality and purchase intention. The findings gleaned from this study allow fitness clubs in the emerging economy to create effective social media campaigns, which will result in Facebook users spreading eWOM and changing their prospective consumers' attitudes to influence their purchase intentions of fitness memberships.

**Keywords:** Facebook, electronic word of mouth (eWOM), Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), purchase intention, fitness membership

### **1.0 Introduction**

With the rapid increase and adoption among consumers in social media, Social Networking Services (SNSs) have become a rising platform for consumers to get information about a product or service besides interacting with fellow users (Casaló et al., 2017a; 2017b; Kim et al., 2018). Past studies on consumer interaction with SNSs have

focused on social networking sites, such as Facebook (Aghakhani et al., 2018; Hsu et al., 2016; Kim et al., 2018; Wang & Kubickova, 2017) and Instagram (Casaló et al., 2017a; 2017b). However, the relevance of using Facebook in the Malaysian context seems to be much greater due to the high penetration rate of Facebook compared to others.

Generally, eWOM consists of a positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former consumers about a product that is available to the public via the internet (Kudeshia & Kumar, 2017). Using social media, such as Facebook, eWOM is possible because of its dynamic characteristics in which there will be an ongoing exchange process between consumers about a product or service (Ismagilova et al., 2019). Owing to the popularity of Facebook in Malaysia, many fitness clubs (Celebrity Fitness, Fitness First, Jatomi Fitness) have embraced Facebook in communicating their fitness services. Although there have been many studies about eWOM on various online platforms, there is a dearth of research regarding eWOM from Facebook, especially when SNS has started to weave into Malaysians' lifestyles. Thus, the novelty of this study is to extend the literature on eWOM from SNS (Facebook) in an emerging economy like Malaysia.

Social media marketing has created a paradigm shift in the communication, interaction, and sharing of information between people. Many researchers have emphasised source-related factors of eWOM, such as source credibility (Teng et al., 2016; Lim et al., 2017) while ignoring how the characteristics of eWOM influence consumers' purchase intention according to the dual-process theory of the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM). Moreover, past research has demonstrated some contradictory results on the relationship between the central and peripheral factors of eWOM, attitude towards eWOM, and purchase intention. Prior studies have shown that eWOM can directly affect purchase intention (Bataineh, 2015; Leong et al., 2019) or influence purchase intention by changing consumers' attitudes (Baber et al., 2016; Teng et al., 2017). The inconsistent findings between eWOM quality (Erkan & Evans, 2018; Teng et al., 2017), credibility (Wang, 2014; Teng et al., 2017), and quantity (Bataineh, 2015; Teng et al., 2017) towards purchase intention, coupled with the debate over the relationship between eWOM credibility (Wang, 2014; Teng et al., 2017) and eWOM quantity (Yang et al., 2016; Teng et al., 2017) towards attitude heightened the need for further investigation.

Ismagilova et al. (2019) argued that different contexts used in the empirical studies could lead to contradictory results. Therefore, this

study aims to close the research gap by investigating the central type and peripheral factors of eWOM that influence attitude and purchase intention by addressing the effect of eWOM in the fitness membership context. By validating these relationships, this study will ascertain which eWOM characteristic strongly influences attitude towards eWOM and purchase intention.

By applying ELM, one would expect that users with high expertise and involvement will go through the central route of information processing while neglecting the peripheral factors. Even though there is high consensus among scholars about such relationships: users' expertise positively moderates eWOM quality and purchase intention (Cheung et al., 2014; Zhao et al., 2018); users' expertise negatively moderates eWOM quantity and purchase intention (Obiedat, 2013); users' involvement positively moderates eWOM quality and purchase intention (Le et al., 2018); there is still a need to verify whether users' expertise and users' involvement have such moderating relationship between the central and peripheral factors of eWOM in Facebook in terms of the purchase intention of a fitness membership. The potential moderating effect facilitates our understanding of the strength of the relationship that may emerge from this study.

This study uses a dual-process and attitude formation theory to contribute to past literature in the Facebook context based on a consumer behaviour perspective. Moreover, this study contributes to the extant body of eWOM literature on Facebook by adopting ELM as the theoretical basis to investigate eWOM on consumer purchase intention as part of the first research vein (Hsu et al., 2016) context. For practitioners, this study will shed some light on the specific eWOM factors that may affect the attitude and purchase intentions of fitness memberships. This practical guide helps the managers to facilitate or refresh their current marketing plan with eWOM when promoting their fitness membership programmes on Facebook.

## **2.0 Literature Review and Hypotheses Development**

### **2.1 Underlying Theory**

A combination of the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), which is based on a dual-process theory, and the attitude formation theory (Ajzen, 2001) is used to build the theoretical framework (see Fig. 1) to understand the relationship among the

different constructs to achieve the objectives set forth on the onset of this study. ELM has been widely used to explain consumers' routes when processing persuasive information online (Aghakhani et al., 2018; Filieri et al., 2018), especially in online product reviews (Teng et al., 2017; Filieri et al., 2018). It has also seen its application in the studies of eWOM in social networking sites (SNS) after the emergence of the new communication channels (Zha et al., 2017; Shi et al., 2018). This study also uses the attitude formation theory by Ajzen (2001) to incorporate purchase intention into ELM. Ajzen (2001) mentioned that the ability of attitude to predict behavioural intentions depends on the degree of attitude formed. Highly embedded attitudes are more strongly related to behavioural intentions. This approach was also used by some researchers (Wang, 2014; Baber et al., 2016; Lim et al., 2017) in which the behavioural intention is a result of attitude, which is the outcome of a change in belief that is formed by reliable sources of information.

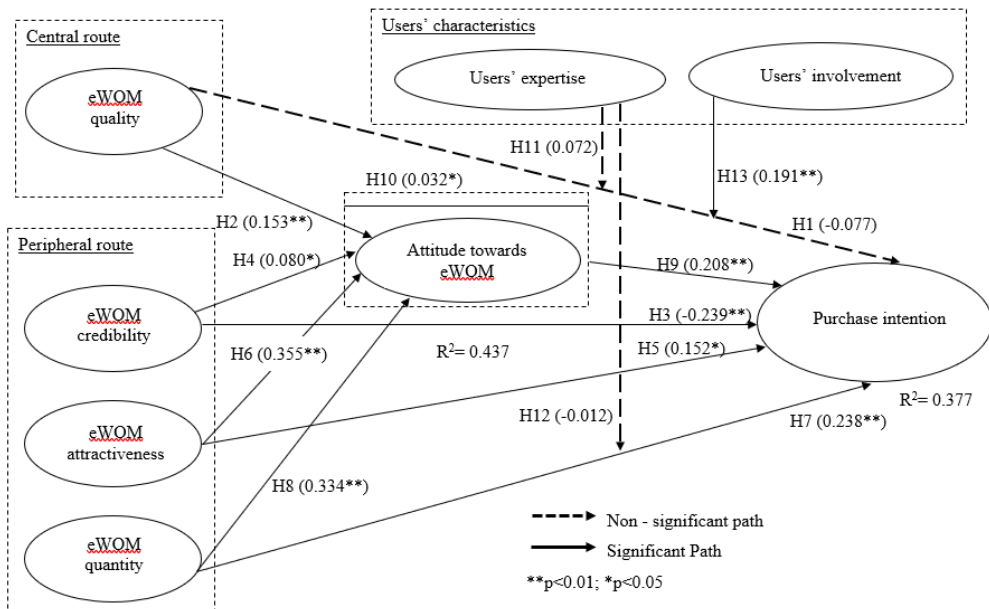


Figure 1 : Research Model

## 2.2 Purchase Intention

Purchase intention is defined as the intent, effort, willingness, or likelihood of a buyer to purchase a product or service (Nam et al., 2017; Shin et al., 2017). There is a consensus that purchase intention is

positively associated with the actual purchase behaviour, thus motivating many researchers to use purchase intention instead of purchase behaviour in their studies (Yang et al., 2016). It has always been a frequently measured dependent variable (Lee et al., 2017) and is used by businesses to understand the factors that influence purchase intention (Chang et al., 2019; Leong et al., 2019; Wu & Lin, 2017). Specifically, several scholars have determined that eWOM from Facebook influenced purchase intentions (Ladhari & Michaud, 2015; Phua & Ahn, 2016).

### 2.3 Perceived eWOM Quality

Perceived eWOM quality is the user's perception of the quality of online reviews found on e-commerce websites or SNS like Facebook (Yan et al., 2016; Bataineh, 2015). It is classified as the central route of information processing because it focuses on the core messages (Bi et al., 2017; Shi et al., 2018). Furthermore, eWOM quality positively and significantly influences consumers' purchase intentions (Le et al., 2018; Zhao et al., 2018). A consensus among the previous studies postulated the positive relationship between eWOM quality and attitude towards eWOM (Chang et al., 2015; Teng et al., 2016; Teng et al., 2017; Shin et al., 2017). Therefore, it seems reasonable that users who perceive eWOM information review and share about fitness clubs on Facebook are of high quality and, as a result, increase their purchase intention (in this context, fitness membership). In addition, users who perceive a high eWOM quality will generate a positive attitude towards eWOM. Taking all this into account, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Perceived eWOM quality positively affects consumers' purchase intentions of fitness memberships.

H2: Perceived eWOM quality positively affects attitude towards eWOM.

### 2.4 Perceived eWOM Credibility

Perceived eWOM credibility is the user's perception of which eWOM review provides accurate, factual, and truthful information (Bataineh, 2015). In the peripheral information processing route, eWOM credibility is one of the most frequently identified factors (Shi et al., 2018) that allows consumers to reach a particular judgement

without processing eWOM quality because it lessens the ambiguity in the processing of persuasive information (Leong et al., 2019). Recent researchers claimed a significant positive relationship between eWOM credibility (Leong et al., 2019; Teng et al., 2017) and purchase intention. Extant studies reported a positive relationship between eWOM credibility and attitude toward eWOM (Teng et al., 2017; Reimer & Benkenstein, 2018). Therefore, in terms of Facebook, when the users perceive the source of the review on Facebook as accurate and reliable, they will demonstrate a positive feeling towards eWOM and substantially influence their purchase intention of a fitness membership. Based on the literature mentioned, this study proposed the following hypotheses:

H3: Perceived eWOM credibility positively affects consumers' purchase intentions of fitness memberships.

H4: Perceived eWOM credibility positively affects attitude towards eWOM.

## 2.5 Perceived eWOM Attractiveness

Perceived eWOM attractiveness refers to the extent to which recipients of messages perceive the posts as admirable and appealing (Chang et al., 2015). When eWOM in photos of fitness ambassadors or fitness clubs are aesthetically attractive, it might influence the attitude towards eWOM (Chang et al., 2015) and purchase intention (Khong & Wu, 2013; Shi et al., 2018; Martins et al., 2019). Previous studies have shown a positive relationship between eWOM attractiveness and purchase intention (Jung et al., 2018; Shi et al., 2018; Martins et al., 2019). Moreover, most studies have also verified the positive relationship between eWOM attractiveness and attitude towards eWOM (Chang et al., 2015; Teng et al., 2016). Therefore, it can be hypothesised that an attractive eWOM will attract more attention from the user and generate a greater desire to purchase the services, thus leading to a greater purchase intention. Therefore, this study hypothesis that:

H5: Perceived eWOM attractiveness positively affects consumers' purchase intentions of fitness memberships.

H6: Perceived eWOM attractiveness positively affects attitude towards eWOM.

## 2.6 Perceived eWOM Quantity

A user's perception of eWOM quantity includes the total number of online comments, the ranking of those comments, or the equivalent of the number of likes, sharing, and comments in SNS, such as on Facebook (Bataineh, 2015; Chang et al., 2015). Additionally, the number of "likes" on Facebook will positively affect the behaviour of consumers (Bi et al., 2017). Past empirical studies reported a positive relationship between eWOM quantity and purchase intention (Bataineh, 2015; Phua & Ahn, 2016). Separately, Teng et al. (2017) found that eWOM quantity is associated with the attitude towards products, which is similar to the findings of Phua and Ahn (2016). Therefore, when users perceived that many online comments were shared on Facebook about the fitness clubs, it was inferred that the fitness clubs are trendy. They will most likely develop a positive feeling toward eWOM and thus will positively influence the intention to purchase the fitness membership. It is hypothesised that:

H7: Perceived eWOM quantity positively affects consumers' purchase intentions of fitness memberships.

H8: Perceived eWOM quantity positively affects attitude towards eWOM.

## 2.7 Attitude Towards eWOM

The relationship between attitude and purchase intentions has been widely studied (Lim et al., 2017; Shin et al., 2017; Reimer & Benkenstein, 2018). Many researchers use the element of attitude to predict purchase intention (Muda & Muhamed Khan, 2020; Kudeshia & Kumar, 2017; Teng et al., 2017; Wu & Lin, 2017). When consumers develop a positive attitude towards a product content on social media, for example, the effect on their purchase intention is significant (Muda & Mohamed Khan, 2020). There have also been numerous studies that have found that attitude positively predicts purchase intentions (Lim et al., 2017; Nam et al., 2017; Teng et al., 2017; Wu & Lin, 2017). In addition, more studies concentrated on the direct effect of eWOM quality on attitude and attitude to purchase intention. Still, few studies have identified attitude as a mediator between eWOM quality and purchase intention except Shin et al. (2017). Consequently, in the context of Facebook, we posit that when the users perceive eWOM quality as clear and comprehensible, the feeling of wanting to read the

information shared is high, positively influencing the purchase intentions of fitness memberships. Hence, this study postulates that:

H9: Attitude positively affects consumers' purchase intentions of fitness memberships.

H10: Attitude mediates the relationship between perceived eWOM quality and consumers' purchase intentions of fitness memberships.

## 2.8 Users' Expertise

Expertise plays an important moderating role in determining how eWOM influences consumers' purchase intentions in online social communication (Cheung et al., 2014). Users' expertise is the level of knowledge that consumers have on products or services that they tend to buy (Yan et al., 2016). Depending on the moderating effect of expertise (ability), the central and peripheral factors can either be enhanced or hindered (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Cheung et al., 2012; Shin et al., 2017). Users with high expertise are generally less susceptible to influences because their greater cognitive level decreases the reliance on peripheral factors (Cao et al., 2017; Shin et al., 2017). Many scholars have highlighted that a high level of expertise will significantly enhance the influence of eWOM quality (Zha et al., 2017; Zhao et al., 2018), which means that they will scrutinise central factors like eWOM quality than peripheral factors. Researchers who studied the effect of persuasive messages on purchase intention have found that users' expertise positively moderates the relationship between eWOM quality and purchase intention (Obiedat, 2013; Cheung et al., 2014). Obiedat (2013) studied the moderating effect of users' expertise between eWOM quantity (peripheral factor) and purchase intention and found that the purchase intentions of consumers with high expertise are not affected by eWOM quantity. Based on the aforementioned literature, we propose the following hypotheses:

H11: The stronger the users' expertise, the stronger the effect of the relationship between perceived eWOM quality and consumers' purchase intentions for fitness memberships.



H12: The stronger the users' expertise, the weaker the effect of the relationship between perceived eWOM quantity and consumers' purchase intentions for fitness memberships.

## 2.9 Users' Involvement

Users' involvement refers to the degree of psychological identification, and affective, emotional ties the consumer has with a stimulus or stimuli (Yan et al., 2016). In agreement with ELM, highly involved people are more motivated to take the central route of information processing to process the information that requires effort, like eWOM quality (Cheung et al., 2014; Yan et al., 2016; Teng et al., 2017). Cheung et al. (2014) argued that highly involved consumers were more likely to rely on peripheral factors to make purchase decisions because they have cultivated a sense of belonging in an online social setting. However, the effect of eWOM quality on purchase intention is stronger for consumers who are highly involved (Le et al., 2018). Thus, based on the literature, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H13: The stronger the users' involvement, the stronger the effect of the relationship between perceived eWOM quality and consumers' purchase intentions of fitness memberships.

## 3.0 Methodology

### 3.1 Research Design

The unit of analysis was individual Malaysians aged 18 years old and above who stay in Peninsular Malaysia and are potential fitness club members via Facebook. Facebook was chosen as the social networking site for the current study as it has 22 million users in Malaysia (Internet World Stats, 2018). In this study, the minimum sample size based on a power analysis with a medium effect size by Green (1991, p.503) is 117. Using a cross-sectional study, data was collected by posting the link to the self-administered questionnaire created via Google forms on the Facebook pages of fitness clubs and fitness-related Facebook groups like Fit Touch Malaysia and Fit4Ever, to reach the individual respondents.

It was a non-probability convenience sampling as the samples were not statistically chosen on a random basis. The eligibility of the target samples of this study was filtered using filtering questions at the

beginning of the questionnaires. The questionnaire consisted of three sections. The first section was the demographic information of the respondents. The second section measured the central factor (eWOM quality), peripheral factor (eWOM credibility, eWOM attractiveness, and eWOM quantity), attitude towards eWOM, users' expertise, and users' involvement. Finally, the purchase intention of fitness membership was measured. All the measurement items used were adapted from the past studies (see Table 2).

Indicators for the constructs were adapted from previous studies to ensure the validity of the data. The questionnaire employed a five-point Likert scale for section two, from 1-“strongly disagree” to 5-“strongly agree”, whereas the purchase intention was measured based on a seven-point Likert scale, from 1-“strongly disagree” to 7-“strongly agree”. Different Likert scales were used to measure the variables to avoid common method variance and prevent consistency in the respondents' pattern of answers. According to Avolio et al. (1991), CMV might be a problem if a similar measurement applies to all questions. Hence, we use different Likert-scale measurements for the independent and dependent constructs in this study, as suggested by Hsu et al. (2016). The data was collected in 2018, and it takes one month to complete. A total of 388 completed questionnaires were obtained, and this sample size is deemed sufficient based on the recommendation given by Green (1991). Both SPSS version 20 and SmartPLS 3.0 by Ringle et al. (2015) were used for data analysis and hypothesis testing. Table 1 shows the respondents' demographic profiles.

Table 1 : Respondents' Profiles (n = 388)

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Number of respondents</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
Gender	Male	188	48.5
	Female	200	51.5
Age	18–29 years old	97	25.0
	30–39 years old	162	41.8
	40–49 years old	89	22.9
	50–59 years old	31	8.0
	60 years old and above	9	2.3

Variable	Description	Number of respondents	Percentage (%)
Marital status	Single	171	44.1
	Married	205	52.8
	Divorced	7	1.8
	Widow/widower	5	1.3
Monthly income	Not working	37	9.5
	Retiree	19	4.9
	RM2,000 and less	12	3.1
	RM2,001–RM4,000	76	19.6
	RM4,001–RM6,000	91	23.5
Education level	RM6,001 and above	153	39.4
	Secondary school	38	9.8
	Bachelor's degree	233	60.1
	Diploma	66	17.0
	Master's degree	47	12.1
	PhD	4	1.0

## 4.0 Results

### 4.1 Common Method Bias

If the dependent and independent variables are gathered with a similar instrument, common method bias may occur (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Hence, this study adopted the method suggested by Kock (2015) through a full collinearity test to determine whether the model is free of common method bias. Referring to the VIF results in Table 4, it was found that all the inner VIF values for the independent variables are less than 3.3. Overall, it fits with the level of acceptance suggested by Kock (2015) and Diamantopoulos and Siguaw (2006). This result indicates that collinearity is not a concern. To conclude, common method bias is not a serious threat in the present study.

### 4.2 Reflective Measurement Model

For a reflective measurement model, three types of assessment are required, namely internal consistency reliability, convergent validity (indicator reliability/outer loadings and AVE), and discriminant validity (Hair et al., 2017; Ramayah et al., 2018). As shown in Table 2, the values for composite reliability are above 0.7, which is regarded as satisfactory for internal consistency by Hair et al. (2017). The convergent validity of the reflective constructs was tested by using the outer loadings of the indicators and the AVE. It is apparent in Table 2

that all indicators' outer loadings were above 0.708 (Hair et al., 2017), and the AVE of the constructs was more than 0.50. This result demonstrated an adequate convergent validity. To test the discriminant validity using the HTMT approach, Table 3 shows that all the HTMT values are below HTMT.85 value of 0.85 (Kline, 2011). For HTMT inference (Henseler et al., 2015), it was found that there is no confidence interval of HTMT values for the structural paths, which contains the value of 1 (Hair et al., 2017; Ramayah et al., 2018). In other words, it could be concluded that discriminant validity is established in this study.

Table 2 : Measurement Model for Reflective Constructs and Their Descriptive Statistics

Construct	Indicator	Loading	CR	Cronbach Alpha	AVE	VIF	Mean	SD	Source
eWOM quality			0.918	0.869	0.789	1.818	3.410	0.842	Adapted from Erkan and Evans (2016b)
	QL 1: The information that is shared by my friends on Facebook is understandable.	0.937					3.639	0.903	
	QL 2: The information that is shared by my friends on Facebook is clear.	0.942					3.510	0.955	
	QL 3: In general, the quality of the information that is shared by my friends on Facebook is high.	0.777					3.080	0.981	
eWOM credibility			0.971	0.956	0.918	1.417	2.934	1.044	Adapted from Yan et al. (2016)
	CR 1: Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) is factual.	0.950					3.013	1.070	
	CR 2: Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) is accurate.	0.972					2.876	1.086	
	CR 3: Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) is credible.	0.953					2.912	1.113	
eWOM attractiveness			0.967	0.950	0.908	1.963	3.962	0.712	Adapted from Chang et al. (2015)
	AN 1: The photos displayed in the post shared by my friends on Facebook are attractive.	0.946					3.956	0.741	
	AN 2: The photos displayed in the post shared by my friends on Facebook are aesthetically appealing.	0.958					3.941	0.764	

Construct	Indicator	Loading	CR	Cronbach Alpha	AVE	VIF	Mean	SD	Source
eWOM quantity	AN 3: The photos displayed in the post shared by my friends on Facebook look attractive.	0.955					3.990	0.737	
	QN 1: The quantity of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) provided by Facebook users is great, inferring that the fitness club is trendy.	0.962	0.962	0.922	0.927	2.051	3.858	0.795	Adapted from Bataineh (2015)
	QN 2: The number of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) provided by Facebook users is large, inferring that the fitness club is popular.	0.961					3.835	0.806	

Note: QN3 was deleted due to low outer loading

Construct	Indicator	Loading	CR	Cronbach Alpha	AVE	VIF	Mean	SD	Source
Attitude towards eWOM	ATT 1: I always read the information that is shared by my friends on Facebook when I purchase a service.	0.906	0.948	0.917	0.858	1.801	3.884	0.754	Adapted from Erkan and Evans (2016b)
	ATT 2: The information that is shared by my friends on Facebook is helpful for my decision-making when I purchase a service.	0.943					3.874	0.855	
	ATT 3: The information that is shared by my friends on Facebook makes me confident when	0.928					3.894	0.789	

Construct	Indicator	Loading	CR	Cronbach Alpha	AVE	VIF	Mean	SD	Source
	I purchase a service.								
Users' expertise			0.973	0.959	0.923	2.179	3.090	1.209	Adapted from Yan et al. (2016)
	UE 1: I am knowledgeable about the service.	0.967					3.173	1.263	
	UE 2: I have rich purchasing experience in the service.	0.969					2.961	1.266	
	UE 3: I have the ability to judge the electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM).	0.947					3.137	1.243	
Users' involvement			0.982	0.973	0.948	2.559	3.686	1.075	Adapted from Yan et al. (2016)
	UI 1: The service is of concern to me.	0.971					3.704	1.065	
	UI 2: The service is important for me.	0.980					3.722	1.130	
	UI 3: The service is relevant to me.	0.971					3.634	1.118	
Purchase intention			0.970	0.953	0.914	1.000	4.877	1.547	Adapted from Nam et al. (2017)
	PI 1: I intend to purchase fitness membership in the future.	0.957					5.028	1.638	
	PI 2: I will try to purchase fitness membership in the future.	0.967					4.907	1.629	
	PI 3: I will make an effort to purchase fitness membership in the future.	0.945					4.696	1.587	

Table 3 : Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT)

Construct	Attitude towards eWOM	Purchase intention	Users' expertise	Users' involvement	eWOM attractiveness	eWOM credibility	eWOM quality	eWOM quantity
Attitude towards eWOM								
Purchase intention	0.418 (0.313, 0.513)							
Users' expertise	0.034 (0.012,0.041)	0.278 (0.198, 0.354)						
Users' involvement	0.111 (0.032,0.211)	0.398 (0.313, 0.482)	0.715 (0.639, 0.779)					
eWOM attractiveness	0.632 (0.544, 0.709)	0.383 (0.278, 0.479)	0.074 (0.028, 0.172)	0.076 (0.024, 0.186)				
eWOM credibility	0.257 (0.156, 0.350)	0.214 (0.113, 0.306)	0.359 (0.232, 0.468)	0.422 (0.311, 0.518)	0.285 (0.187, 0.385)			
eWOM quality	0.132 (0.041, 0.250)	0.216 (0.124, 0.317)	0.657 (0.576, 0.731)	0.681 (0.597, 0.750)	0.044 (0.013, 0.083)	0.205 (0.113,0.316)		
eWOM quantity	0.616 (0.510, 0.712)	0.358 (0.244, 0.458)	0.232 (0.130, 0.329)	0.107 (0.024, 0.219)	0.670 (0.581, 0.753)	0.309 (0.214,0.398)	0.088 (0.022, 0.213)	

Note: The values in parentheses ( ) show the 95% bias-corrected and accelerated confidence interval of the HTMT values obtained by running the bootstrapping routine with 5,000 samples in SmartPLS.



Table 4 : Direct and Indirect Relationship: Path Coefficient and Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Relationship	Path coefficient	SE	t value	p-value	95% confidence interval	Decision
H1	eWOM quality -> Purchase intention	-0.077	0.067	1.145	0.126	(-0.183, 0.038)	Not supported
H2	eWOM quality -> Attitude towards eWOM	0.153	0.038	4.056**	0.000	(0.093, 0.216)	Supported
H3	eWOM credibility -> Purchase intention	-0.239	0.048	4.958**	0.000	(-0.320, -0.162)	Not supported
H4	eWOM credibility -> Attitude towards eWOM	0.080	0.042	1.904*	0.029	(0.010, 0.148)	Supported
H5	eWOM attractiveness -> Purchase intention	0.152	0.076	1.983*	0.024	(0.028, 0.280)	Supported
H6	eWOM attractiveness -> Attitude towards eWOM	0.355	0.059	5.997**	0.000	(0.258, 0.453)	Supported
H7	eWOM quantity -> Purchase intention	0.238	0.077	3.085**	0.001	(0.110, 0.365)	Supported
H8	eWOM quantity -> Attitude towards eWOM	0.334	0.067	4.959**	0.000	(0.224, 0.444)	Supported
H9	Attitude towards eWOM -> Purchase intention	0.208	0.062	3.340**	0.000	(0.104, 0.312)	Supported
H10	eWOM quality -> Attitude towards eWOM -> Purchase intention	0.032	0.013	2.548*	0.011	(0.012, 0.062)	Supported
H11	eWOM quality*Users' expertise -> Purchase intention	0.061	0.050	1.220	0.223	(-0.044, 0.157)	Not supported
H12	eWOM quantity*Users' expertise -> Purchase intention	-0.053	0.052	1.011	0.312	(-0.151, 0.052)	Not supported
H13	eWOM quality *Users' involvement -> Purchase intention	0.191	0.052	3.651**	0.000	(0.082, 0.292)	Supported

\*\*p &lt; 0.01; \*p &lt; 0.05

### 4.3 Structural Model

It can be seen from the results in Table 4 that a total of seven hypotheses (H2, H4, H5, H6, H7, H8, and H9) are supported, and two hypotheses were not supported (H1 and H3). There was an insignificant negative relationship between eWOM quality and purchase intention ( $\beta = -0.077$ ,  $t = 1.145$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ,  $f^2 = 0.005$ ), as stated in Table 4. On the other hand, H3 has a negative and significant relationship between eWOM credibility and purchase intention ( $\beta = -0.239$ ,  $t = 4.958$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $f^2 = 0.066$ ). On the supported hypotheses, the results showed that eWOM attractiveness ( $\beta = 0.152$ ,  $t = 1.983$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ,  $f^2 = 0.019$ ), eWOM quantity ( $\beta = 0.238$ ,  $t = 3.085$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $f^2 = 0.046$ ) and attitude towards eWOM ( $\beta = 0.208$ ,  $t = 3.340$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $f^2 = 0.039$ ) positively affected purchase intention. Thus, H5, H7, and H9 are supported. It can also be seen from the path coefficients that eWOM quantity had the strongest positive relationship with purchase intention, followed by attitude towards eWOM and eWOM attractiveness. Interestingly, eWOM credibility had the strongest negative relationship with purchase intention.

Subsequently, eWOM quality, eWOM credibility, eWOM attractiveness, eWOM quantity, and attitude towards eWOM explained 37.7% ( $R^2 = 0.377$ ) of the variance in purchase intention, which is considered a substantial ( $> 0.26$ ) (Cohen, 1989) level of the model's predictive power. The  $R^2$  value (coefficient of determination) of 0.20 and above is also considered high in the discipline of consumer behaviour (Hair et al., 2017). In this study,  $Q^2$  of 0.325 for purchase intention (reflective endogenous latent variable) indicates that the path model accurately predicts data that is not in use in the model estimation since Hair et al. (2017) mentioned that  $Q^2$  values, which are larger than zero, describe good predictive relevance.

All the exogenous constructs to attitude towards eWOM had a significant and positive relationship. eWOM attractiveness had the strongest positive effect on attitude towards eWOM ( $\beta = 0.355$ ,  $t = 5.997$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $f^2 = 0.131$ ) compared to eWOM quantity at ( $\beta = 0.334$ ,  $t = 4.959$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $f^2 = 0.116$ ) and eWOM quality at ( $\beta = 0.153$ ,  $t = 4.056$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $f^2 = 0.039$ ). eWOM credibility was shown to have the weakest positive relationship with attitude towards eWOM among the other exogenous constructs ( $\beta = 0.080$ ,  $t = 1.904$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ,  $f^2 = 0.010$ ). The effect size of all the exogenous constructs to attitude towards eWOM was small according to Cohen's (1988) threshold value of 0.02

for small and 0.15 for medium. As a result, H2, H4, H6, and H8 are supported.

Then, eWOM quality, eWOM credibility, eWOM attractiveness, and eWOM quantity explained 43.7% ( $R^2 = 0.437$ ) of the variance in attitude towards eWOM, which is considered a substantial ( $> 0.26$ ) (Cohen, 1989) level of the model's predictive power. The predictive relevance,  $Q^2$ , of 0.349 for attitude towards eWOM (reflective endogenous latent variable), more than zero, indicates good predictive relevance (Hair et al., 2017). Therefore, as demonstrated in Table 4, the model can predict both endogenous constructs since they are superior to zero, as apparent from their predictive relevance.

As shown in Table 4, two out of four indirect relationship hypotheses are supported. The indirect effect of attitude towards EWOM was significant because there is no zero in the bias-corrected 95% confidence interval (0.012, 0.062). According to the mediation analysis procedure, attitude towards eWOM fully mediates the eWOM quality to purchase intention relationship (Hair et al., 2017). Therefore, H10 is supported. The path linking the interaction term (eWOM quality \* users' expertise) and purchase intention was not significant at ( $t = 1.220$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ). Similarly, the 95% bias-corrected bootstrap confidence interval of the interaction term's effect included zero (-0.044, 0.157). Furthermore, its effect size was small ( $f^2 = 0.004$ ) (Kenny, 2016). Thus, H11 is not supported. There was also no significance for the interaction term of eWOM quantity and users' expertise ( $t = 1.011$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ). In addition to that, there was a zero in the 95% bias-corrected bootstrap confidence interval of the interaction term (-0.151, 0.052) and the effect size was small at  $f^2 = 0.003$  (Kenny, 2016). Thus, H12 is not supported.

The path linking the interaction term (eWOM quality \* users' involvement) and purchase intention was significant at ( $t = 3.651$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Similarly, the 95% bias-corrected bootstrap confidence interval of the interaction term's effect did not include zero (0.082, 0.292). Its effect size was also large ( $f^2 = 0.039$ ) (Kenny, 2016). Hence, H13 is supported. The interaction term had a positive effect on purchase intention (0.174), whereas the simple effect of eWOM quality on purchase intention was -0.014. For an average level of users' involvement, the relationship between eWOM quality and purchase intention was -0.014. At a higher level of users' involvement, the relationship between eWOM quality and purchase intention increased by the size of the interaction term to 0.16. The simple slope plot in

Figure 2 supports the positive interaction term: A higher level of users' involvement leads to a stronger relationship between eWOM quality and purchase intention. Overall, the high  $R^2$  and significance in the majority of the hypothesis testing suggest that our model is suitable to explain the influence of eWOM on attitude and purchase intention.

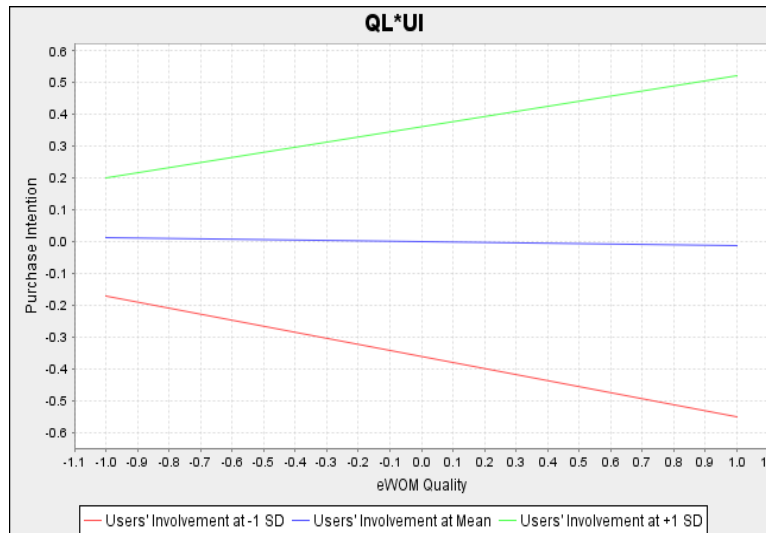


Figure 2 : Simple Slope Plot of The Moderating Effect of Users' Involvement Between Ewom Quality and Purchase Intention

## 5.0 Discussion

The empirical results showed that peripheral factors had a stronger effect than the central factor on the attitude of Malaysian Facebook users towards eWOM. This finding resonates with ELM, whereby Petty and Cacioppo (1986) postulate that when an individual is unable or unwilling to exert much effort in processing the message, they make decisions based on mental shortcuts by using peripheral factors. Out of the peripheral factors identified in this study, perceived eWOM attractiveness is the most dominant factor that affects attitude towards eWOM. This relationship is similar to other researchers' (Chang et al., 2015; Teng et al., 2016).

The next peripheral factor that exhibits the second strongest relationship with attitude towards eWOM is perceived eWOM quantity. Facebook resides in a socially-oriented environment. There is an array of distinct features, such as the number of likes, comments, shares, and ratings, to represent eWOM quantity on Facebook. These features often become the indicators of the popularity of that particular eWOM

(Phua & Ahn, 2016). In line with the findings of previous work (Phua & Ahn, 2016; Teng et al., 2017), the large number of likes, shares, or comments elicit a more positive attitude toward eWOM from Facebook users, inferring the fitness club to be trendy and popular. Furthermore, Malaysians feel more confident when making decisions based on what the majority thinks since they are collectivistic (Noordin & Jusoff, 2010).

It is encouraging to note that Malaysians still place more importance on perceived eWOM quality than on perceived eWOM credibility in their attitude towards eWOM. Albeit not the most crucial factor in influencing attitude towards eWOM, Malaysians prefer to engage in the central route of information processing compared with just looking at the credibility of eWOM to change their attitude towards eWOM. Compared with accepting the eWOM as accurate, Malaysian Facebook users prefer to exert more cognitive effort in evaluating the relevance and merits of the eWOM (Shi et al., 2018) before they have a stand-in their attitude toward eWOM.

It is interesting to note that despite perceived eWOM credibility positively affecting attitude towards eWOM, it has a negative but significant relationship with purchase intention. Generally, credible eWOM determines the acceptance of the eWOM. If Malaysians perceive the eWOM as credible, their attitude towards eWOM will be reinforced. However, due to low eWOM credibility ( $M = 2.934$ ) in this study, they associate those eWOM with uncertainties and high risk. So, the effect on their attitude towards eWOM is also low. It explains that perceived eWOM credibility has the weakest positive relationship with attitude towards eWOM. According to Shi et al. (2018), the attitude formed from the peripheral route is less enduring as less cognitive effort is used to process the eWOM. A possible explanation for this finding is that online comments are usually posted or shared by unknown individuals, possibly lending it less credibility than the traditional WOM messages that family members and close friends convey. Thus, perceived eWOM credibility seems not to be a strong peripheral factor for Malaysian Facebook users to rely on to lessen their ambiguity in the processing of eWOM.

Next, the most influential factor influencing purchase intention of fitness membership is perceived eWOM quantity, followed by attitude towards eWOM and perceived eWOM attractiveness. In agreement with the findings of other scholars (Bataineh, 2015; Phua & Ahn, 2016), Facebook serves as an online communication platform that differentiates itself from the power of social networking. Malaysian

Facebook users have a sense of belonging or share-group membership when their opinion is congruent with the others. Tsao et al. (2015) also revealed that in a more collectivistic culture, virtual communities' members have a greater influence on the behaviour of individuals. Along the lines, people from collectivist cultures portray a higher level of information-seeking and giving behaviour on SNSs than on individualistic (Aghakhani et al., 2018).

The second strongest predictor of purchase intention is an attitude towards eWOM. Along with the other researchers who reported similar results (Teng et al., 2017; Wu & Li, 2017; Reimer & Benkenstein, 2018), Facebook users who form a positive attitude towards eWOM will have a higher possibility of purchase intention. Supported by the attitude formation theory by Ajzen (2001), behavioural change or purchase intention in this context is the result of attitude, which is the outcome of a change in belief formed by reliable sources of information (eWOM from Facebook). The mean score for attitude towards eWOM ( $M = 3.884$ ) implies that Malaysian Facebook users have a favourable attitude towards eWOM. This highly embedded attitude renders it capable of predicting behavioural intention (Ajzen, 2001).

Being another crucial influential factor of purchase intention, perceived eWOM attractiveness plays a pivotal role in the perception of the eWOM to Facebook users (Jung et al., 2018; Shi et al., 2018; Martins et al., 2019). Photos or poorly displayed videos will distract the users and affect the perception of their reliability (Martins et al., 2019). In contrast, attractive eWOM is usually associated with higher credibility (Jung et al., 2018). Sometimes, the portrayal of aesthetically appealing fitness ambassadors in eWOM will trigger purchase intention due to their physical attractiveness (Khong & Wu, 2013) and the desire to emulate them.

Similar to Wang (2014), the significant negative relationship between perceived eWOM credibility and purchase intention defies our expectation that if the eWOM is deemed not to be accurate, factual, and trustworthy, the probability of purchase intention will be lower. Although our respondents rated eWOM credibility as low ( $M = 2.934$ ), their purchase intention is still high, probably because purchasing a fitness membership is considered a high-risk product requiring a financial commitment. So, apart from relying on the credibility of eWOM, they may engage in other sources of information that may lead to higher purchase intention.

Contrary to our expectations, this study has a negative non-significant relationship between perceived eWOM quality and purchase intention, which agrees with several studies (Lee & Shin, 2014; Shin et al., 2017; Teng et al., 2017). Concurring with Lee and Shin's (2014) argument about the negative relationship, fitness membership is an experience good. Its characteristics are difficult to observe in advance but can be ascertained upon consumption. Thus, evaluating perceived eWOM quality alone will not bolster the confidence of Facebook users to have the purchase intention of the specific fitness membership as the price and commitment of fitness membership are quite high.

Although we share the same findings with most scholars (Chang et al., 2015; Teng et al., 2016; Shin et al., 2017; Teng et al., 2017) that agree to perceived eWOM quality positively affects attitude toward eWOM, it does not directly lead to purchase intention. It indicates that when Malaysian Facebook users process eWOM from Facebook, perceived eWOM quality would not directly arouse their intention to purchase fitness membership. Instead, Facebook users go through the central route of information processing to scrutinise the quality of the eWOM before leading to a favourable change in attitude towards eWOM. Echoing the results from Teng et al. (2017), a possible explanation is that Facebook users seek objective and comprehensive eWOM, and high eWOM quality can generate a favourable attitude towards eWOM. This change of attitude towards eWOM will eventually lead to purchase intention. It highlights the full mediation role of attitude towards eWOM between perceived eWOM quality and purchase intention in this study, consistent with the findings of Shin et al. (2017). Besides, this finding is also in coherence with Fishbein and Ajzen's (1975) theory, in which attitude mediates the relationship between belief and behavioural intention.

This research refutes the claim that users' expertise plays a vital role in moderating the central and peripheral factors and purchase intention. Differing from the postulation of ELM, this research sheds light that users' expertise neither moderates the central factor (perceived eWOM quality) nor peripheral factor (perceived eWOM quantity) towards purchase intention. Regardless of the level of expertise about fitness membership, Malaysians are receptive to both perceived eWOM quantity and perceived eWOM quality in influencing their purchase intentions. A probable explanation is that Facebook brings forth another realm of virtual networks that even users with high expertise are open to public opinions and reviews about fitness

membership. Zhao et al. (2018) concur that eWOM is mostly about personal experiences with the service. Being an experienced product, the existing fitness members best explain the experience of a differing fitness membership. Our study is consistent with ELM, which confirms the significant moderating effect of users' involvement between perceived eWOM quality and purchase intention. In addition, highly involved users will spend more time sharing eWOM of high quality with the online social community (Cheung et al., 2014). Besides, highly involved users may consider themselves opinion leaders. Thus, they are more motivated to elaborate on the quality of the eWOM to get additional information about fitness membership. Conversely, users with low involvement are unwilling to expend effort on perceived eWOM quality because they are merely followers of a particular eWOM. Therefore, they will seek easier eWOM peripheral factors that may affect their purchase intentions.

## **6.0 Conclusion and Implications of The Study**

Based on our knowledge, this study is the first to integrate ELM with the attitude formation theory in SNS research, particularly on Facebook in Malaysia. The integrated model has a strong predictive power, which provides insights in explaining the preferable route of processing eWOM on attitude towards eWOM that eventually leads to consumers' purchase intentions of fitness memberships in Malaysia. It has contributed to the existing works of literature on eWOM communication and social media marketing about the influence mechanism of persuasion on Facebook. Furthermore, the proposed model has validated the relationship between central factors, peripheral factors, attitude towards eWOM, and purchase intention. Peripheral factors overshadow the central factor in Facebook to be strong predictors of attitude towards eWOM and purchase intention. Moreover, the role of attitude towards eWOM as a mediator between the central factor and purchase intention has been established.

Drawing from the major findings, peripheral factors are a stronger predictor of purchase intention than central factors. Since perceived eWOM quantity is the most dominant factor influencing purchase intention, efficient social media marketing can be devised to encourage perceived eWOM quantity. Nowadays, various companies provide certain freebies if Facebook users share, like, or tag their friends in their posts. This is because testimonial advertising by consumers sharing their experiences is more persuasive in eWOM



communication (Teng et al., 2017), and the bandwagon effect will catch other Facebook users. Despite having demonstrated that monetary incentives increase the quantity of eWOM, caution should always be exercised to contain the use of such strategies as it can also besmirch a company's reputation and reduce the credibility of eWOM (Reimer & Benkenstein, 2018).

This study reveals that perceived eWOM attractiveness has the strongest relationship with attitude towards eWOM. It implies that fitness clubs will be more likely to have effective digital marketing strategies to maximise their revenue when creating attractive advertisements. Thus, fitness operators must be prudent in selecting their "face" of fitness, with fitness ambassadors who can seize the attention of their target consumers. Then, the addition of visual attractiveness on Facebook (placing footage of the fitness activities of the fitness clubs) to be shared by Facebook users might render it an attractive eWOM. Such initiatives will assist in cultivating a positive attitude towards eWOM that will eventually lead to purchase intention.

Since fitness membership involves financial commitment and is considered a high-risk experience product, deliberation on perceived eWOM quality will not lead to purchase intention. Therefore, fitness clubs can foster confidence in prospective consumers by giving trial classes. Doing so may create a favourable attitude towards eWOM and ultimately lead to purchase intention. The need for offline intervention may explain the full mediating role of attitude towards eWOM between perceived eWOM quality and purchase intention found in this study. Management must note that perceived eWOM credibility has very little influence on attitude towards eWOM. Thus, fitness operators must know that Facebook users are not that susceptible to marketing gimmicks that will influence their purchase intentions.

## **7.0 Limitations and Future Research**

Some caveats need to be aware of in the present study. Firstly, this study focuses only on one SNS, which is Facebook. It may create issues of generalisability among SNS as each has its distinctive features. Future research may need to account for other social networking services available in Malaysia. Secondly, the current study only samples those from Peninsular Malaysia, where most international franchise fitness chains operate. The findings may not reflect the Malaysian population as a whole. Further research is recommended to extend to East Malaysia to reflect the overall Malaysian population.

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