

HABILITATION THESIS REVIEWER'S REPORT

Masaryk University

Applicant

Ing. Dušan Mladenović, Ph.D.

Habilitation thesis

Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM) Through the Lenses of Information Seeking, Sharing, and Forwarding

Reviewer

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It was my pleasure to read the habilitation thesis submitted by Dušan Mladenović. This thesis explores the evolving field of eWOM by examining both direct and indirect contributions through three key pillars: information seeking, information sharing, and information forwarding. The thesis not only addresses a highly relevant topic but is also conducted at a high scientific level. In addition to introductory chapter it includes six relevant and timely papers. All of them were published in high-ranked journals, which further confirms the quality of the author's work. In all of the mentioned publications, the author is the first and leading author, demonstrating a significant contribution to the development of the eWOM field on a global level. This is also evident from the bibliographic overview of the papers included in the habilitation thesis, clearly presented in Table 1.

In all six articles, the author demonstrates scientific excellence. Each article presents a clearly defined research problem, which is subsequently addressed through a comprehensive review, integration and advancement of theoretical concepts, further supported by appropriate statistical methodologies. The articles provide well-defined results and conclusions while also acknowledging the study's limitations. Given the high scientific quality of these works, it is no surprise that they have been published in highly esteemed international peer-reviewed journals. The significance of these contributions is further reflected already at this moment in quite a few citations, which are expected to continue growing in the future.

The first two papers address the information-seeking aspect of the eWOM process. The first paper examines the psychological and behavioral responses of individuals during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on the effects of exposure to online information sources. It provides clear theoretical, methodological, and practical contributions.

The second paper, also a quantitative study, does not directly investigate eWOM engagement. However, it explores how easy and convenient it is for potential blood donors to search for and access information related to blood donation. To test ten hypotheses, clickstream data from 57 blood banks in Czechia were analyzed. The study highlights the importance of online visibility and search engines in connecting blood banks with potential donors.

The next three papers investigate individual aspects of online information sharing. The third, a conceptual paper, introduces the term metaWOM as it examines sensory WOM within the Metaverse. Grounded in Media Richness Theory (MRT), the study examines how the immersive, high-fidelity, and interactive nature of Metaverse environments can enhance the persuasiveness of WOM and encourage greater engagement in WOM activities within virtual spaces. A key contribution of the paper lies in its findings, which suggest that metaWOM, due to its higher levels of interactivity and sensory engagement, is likely to have a more profound impact on consumer decision-making compared to traditional WOM or eWOM.

Paper 4, as a systematic literature review of published papers, focuses on how social media facilitates knowledge and information sharing. The final dataset consisted of 45 empirical studies. Through interpretation and analysis, the research emphasizes the diverse ways knowledge is shared across social media, each presenting its own set of challenges. This article paves the way for a series of future investigations in social media research.

The fifth article deepens the understanding of eWOM motives that drive individuals to write online reviews after their vacations. The sample consists of tourists who visited Serbia. According to the study's findings, the primary motive for writing online reviews was altruism, specifically the desire to help other vacationers. In addition to its theoretical contributions, the paper also provides practical actionable insights for tourism marketers.

The final paper explores the third key building block of this thesis: consumers' information forwarding. Taking a regional perspective, it examines how different social relationships and demographic factors influence consumers' engagement in eWOM. The study expands the understanding of WOM by investigating the impact of social ties, trust, and homophily.

Reviewer's questions for the habilitation thesis defence:

My questions will relate to the topic mentioned at the end of the dissertation overview, which, in both the author's and my opinion, is an important area for future research in the field of eWOM.

1. Without a doubt, we are entering the era of artificial intelligence, which will significantly change the way businesses operate and how consumers behave. In your opinion, how will the field of eWOM develop, and will the current approach to measuring eWOM need to adapt accordingly? If so, what will these adaptations be? In which of the three investigated building blocks can we expect the most significant differences?
2. We anticipate that consumers will also generate messages using artificial intelligence, a trend we are already witnessing today. Do you see this as an opportunity or a threat? How do you view the management of such messages?
3. In your opinion, how qualitative and credible will AI-generated eWOM messages be, and could this significantly influence the perception of WOM as a tool?

Conclusion

The habilitation thesis entitled *Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM) Through the Lenses of Information Seeking, Sharing, and Forwarding* by Ing. Dušan Mladenović, Ph.D. **fulfils** requirements expected of a habilitation thesis in the field of Business Management.

Date: January 15, 2025

Signature: prof.dr. Maja Konečnik Ruzzier