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THE INFLUENCE OF ELECTRONIC WORD-OF-MOUTH ON CONSUMER PURCHASE INTENTION: THE ROLES OF SOURCE CREDIBILITY, MESSAGE APPEAL, AND BRAND EQUITY

Ammar Haider¹, Dr. Syed Wajahat Hussain Naqvi², Sana Batool³ & Dr. Syed Mahad Ali Naqvi⁴

¹Lecturer, UE Business School, University of Education, Lahore.

²Lecturer, UE Business School, University of Education, Lahore.

³Lecturer, Government Sadiq College Women University (GSCWU), Bahawalpur.

⁴Institute of Business Management and Administrative Sciences, The Islamia University of Bahawalpur.

KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
Electronic word-of-mouth; message source credibility; message appeal; brand equity; product involvement; purchase intention; Elaboration Likelihood Model.	Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) has become an important source of information in consumers' purchase decisions, particularly in digitally connected markets such as the cellular phone industry. Drawing on the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), this study examines how message source credibility, message appeal, and brand equity influence consumer purchase intention, while investigating the mediating role of eWOM and the moderating role of product involvement. This study used a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design and collected data from 224 cellular phone consumers. The researcher examined the hypothesized relationships using correlation analysis, multiple regression, mediation analysis, and moderation analysis. The findings indicate that message source credibility ($\beta = .281$), message appeal ($\beta = .350$), and brand equity ($\beta = .375$) positively and significantly influence purchase intention, with brand equity demonstrating the strongest direct effect. The findings further provide evidence consistent with the proposed mediating role of eWOM in the relationships between these three antecedents and purchase intention. In addition, product involvement positively moderates the relationship between eWOM and purchase intention ($\beta = .139$), indicating that the influence of eWOM becomes stronger at higher levels of product involvement. Overall, the findings highlight the importance of credible sources, appealing messages, established brand equity, and consumer-generated online communication in shaping purchase intentions. The study extends eWOM research by integrating its mediating role with product involvement as a boundary condition within an ELM-based framework and offers practical implications for marketers seeking to strengthen digital communication and consumer engagement.
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Corresponding Author	Dr. Syed Wajahat Hussain Naqvi
Email:	wajahat.hussain@ue.edu.pk
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Introduction

Digital technologies have significantly changed how consumers search for information, evaluate alternatives, and form purchase decisions. Social media, e-commerce platforms, online reviews, and consumer communities have shifted marketing communication beyond firm-controlled messages toward consumer-generated information (Hai, 2024). In this environment, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) has become an important source of marketplace information because consumers can access and share product experiences rapidly and widely. Existing evidence indicates that the credibility, quality, and usefulness of online information can influence information adoption, consumer attitudes, and purchase intention (Majeed et al., 2023). Yet, the effectiveness of eWOM depends not only on its availability but also on how consumers evaluate the source, content, and brand associated with the information. Message source credibility can increase trust in online recommendations, while appealing and informative messages can attract attention and facilitate information processing (Sharif & Ahmad, 2020). Similarly, brand equity can reduce perceived risk and strengthen consumers' confidence in familiar brands. These factors are particularly relevant to smartphone purchasing, where technological complexity, financial investment, and numerous competing alternatives encourage consumers to search for and evaluate online information before making a decision.

Despite the increasing literature on eWOM, source credibility, message characteristics, brand equity, and purchase intention have often been examined separately or through relatively simplified models. Less attention has been given to an integrated explanation in which eWOM represents a mechanism connecting these antecedents with purchase intention while product involvement determines the strength of the eWOM purchase intention relationship. This gap is particularly relevant in emerging-market contexts, where digital consumer behavior may differ from that observed in developed markets (Majeed et al., 2023).

Pakistan provides a relevant setting for examining these relationships because increasing digital connectivity and smartphone use have expanded consumers' exposure to online information. The smartphone market also provides an appropriate context because consumers commonly compare product features, prices, user experiences, and reviews before purchase. Drawing on the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), this study therefore examines the relationships of message source credibility, message appeal, and brand equity with consumer purchase intention, while examining eWOM as a mediating mechanism and product involvement as a moderating condition (Majeed et al., 2023). The study contributes to the eWOM and digital consumer behavior literature by integrating message-, brand-, communication-, and consumer-level factors within a single ELM-based framework. It also provides practical insights for marketers seeking to strengthen digital communication, consumer engagement, brand equity, and the effectiveness of online word-of-mouth in the smartphone market.

Literature Review

Electronic Word-of-Mouth and Purchase Intention

Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) refers to consumer-generated positive or negative information about products, services, or organizations disseminated through internet-based platforms. Its importance has increased as consumers increasingly use online reviews, social media discussions, and user-generated content when evaluating products. eWOM provides consumers with experiential and peer-generated information that can reduce uncertainty, support information evaluation, and strengthen confidence in purchase decisions (Sharif & Ahmad, 2020). A meta-analysis by Ismagilova et al. (2020) demonstrated that eWOM positively relates to information adoption, consumer attitudes, and purchase intention, while credibility, usefulness, and information quality are important determinants of its effectiveness. Verma et al. (2023) similarly emphasized the importance of review credibility in strengthening trust and information adoption. The relevance of eWOM is particularly evident in smartphone purchasing, where consumers frequently compare specifications, prices, performance, and user experiences before selecting among competing brands (Hai, 2024). Thus, eWOM represents an important component of consumers' online decision-making and provides the broader context for examining the role of source credibility, message appeal, and brand equity in purchase intention.

Message Source Credibility and Purchase Intention

Message source credibility concerns the extent to which consumers perceive an information source as trustworthy, knowledgeable, reliable, and competent. In online environments, consumers often encounter information from reviewers, influencers, anonymous users, and digital communities whose expertise and intentions cannot always be directly verified. Consequently, perceived credibility becomes an important basis for evaluating whether online information should be accepted and used in purchase-related judgments (Sotgiu & Valck, 2022). Prior research indicates that source expertise and trustworthiness enhance the credibility and adoption of eWOM and can subsequently strengthen purchase intention (Ismagilova et al., 2020; Verma et al., 2023). In the smartphone context, credible recommendations from experienced users and reviewers can reduce uncertainty associated with technologically complex products. From an ELM perspective, source credibility provides an important persuasive cue through which consumers evaluate online information.

H1: Message source credibility positively influences consumer purchase intention.

Message Appeal and Purchase Intention

Message appeal refers to the characteristics through which information attracts attention, communicates value, and stimulates cognitive or emotional responses. Digital messages may employ informational appeals emphasizing product attributes and performance or emotional appeals emphasizing feelings, aspirations, and personal relevance. The effectiveness of such appeals depends on how consumers process and evaluate the information. Research indicates that

message informativeness, argument quality, relevance, and emotional appeal can enhance the perceived usefulness and persuasive effectiveness of online information (Nowak & McGloin, 2021). This is particularly relevant to smartphones because consumers frequently encounter technical comparisons, product reviews, promotional content, and user experiences online. Consistent with ELM, informative messages may encourage more extensive cognitive processing, whereas attractive or emotionally engaging elements may operate through peripheral cues. Accordingly,

H2: Message appeal positively influences consumer purchase intention.

Brand Equity and Purchase Intention

Brand equity represents the value consumers associate with a brand through awareness, perceived quality, associations, and loyalty. Strong brand equity can differentiate competing products, reduce perceived risk, and increase consumer confidence. Although brand equity was initially developed within traditional branding perspectives (Bui et al., 2023), digital consumer interactions and eWOM have increasingly become important in shaping brand perceptions. Previous research indicates that favorable brand perceptions can strengthen trust, perceived value, and purchase intention (Bui et al., 2023). In smartphone markets, established brands may benefit from accumulated perceptions of quality, reliability, innovation, and service. Such perceptions can provide consumers with an established basis for evaluating competing alternatives and online information. Therefore, **H3:** Brand equity positively influences consumer purchase intention.

Mediating Role of Electronic Word-of-Mouth

The previous literature suggests that source credibility, message appeal, and brand equity may influence purchase intention not only directly but also through consumers' engagement with Ewom (Ismagilova et al., 2020). Credible sources can increase acceptance of online information, appealing messages can stimulate attention and information sharing, and favorable brand perceptions can encourage positive recommendations and online advocacy. eWOM can consequently operate as a mechanism through which these factors are translated into purchase-related judgments (Khan et al., 2023). The ELM provides a useful theoretical explanation for this mechanism. Consumers process persuasive information through different levels of cognitive elaboration, with message characteristics and source cues shaping information evaluation. In digital environments, consumer reviews and recommendations provide an additional layer through which consumers interpret and validate marketing-related information (Bui et al., 2023). Existing evidence also indicates that credibility, information quality, usefulness, and trust contribute to eWOM adoption and subsequent purchase intention. Accordingly, the literature supports the following hypotheses

H4: Electronic word-of-mouth mediates the relationship between message source credibility and consumer purchase intention.

H5: Electronic word-of-mouth mediates the relationship between message appeal and consumer purchase intention.

H6: Electronic word-of-mouth mediates the relationship between brand equity and consumer purchase intention.

Moderating Role of Product Involvement

Product involvement refers to the degree of personal relevance and importance consumers attach to a product and the cognitive effort they devote to evaluating it (Ronzon et al., 2025). The ELM suggests that highly involved consumers are more likely to engage in systematic evaluation of information, whereas consumers with lower involvement may rely more heavily on peripheral cues (Personality & Loyalty, 2021). This distinction is important for eWOM because highly involved consumers are more likely to search for reviews, compare product specifications, evaluate user experiences, and assess competing information sources. Smartphones provide an appropriate setting because their technological complexity, financial cost, and extensive range of alternatives can encourage considerable information search. Consequently, the persuasive value of eWOM may vary according to consumers' level of product involvement (Sharif & Ahmad, 2020). Therefore, **H7:** Product involvement positively moderates the relationship between electronic word-of-mouth and consumer purchase intention, such that the relationship becomes stronger at higher levels of product involvement.

Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses Development

Drawing primarily upon the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), this study proposes an integrated conceptual framework explaining how message source credibility, message appeal, and brand equity influence consumer purchase intention within digital environments. The framework recognizes electronic word-of-mouth as a central mechanism through which marketing-related factors affect consumer behavior, while product involvement is proposed as a boundary condition influencing the strength of this relationship.

The ELM provides an appropriate theoretical foundation for the present study because it explains how individuals process persuasive information through different levels of cognitive elaboration (Personality & Loyalty, 2021). In the context of eWOM, source credibility and message appeal can influence how consumers evaluate online information, while product involvement can affect the extent to which consumers elaborate on such information (Hidayana & Noor, 2026a). Accordingly, the present study conceptualizes eWOM as a mechanism through which message-related and brand-related factors influence purchase intention, while product involvement determines the strength of the relationship between eWOM and purchase intention (Xue, 2019). Specifically, the model proposes that message source credibility, message appeal, and brand equity directly influence consumers' purchase intention. In addition, these three antecedents are expected to indirectly influence purchase intention through electronic word-of-mouth, reflecting the increasingly important role of consumer-generated online communication in digital decision-making (Sameeni et al., 2024). Finally, product involvement is hypothesized to strengthen the

relationship between electronic word-of-mouth and purchase intention, suggesting that highly involved consumers rely more heavily on online information than less involved consumers.

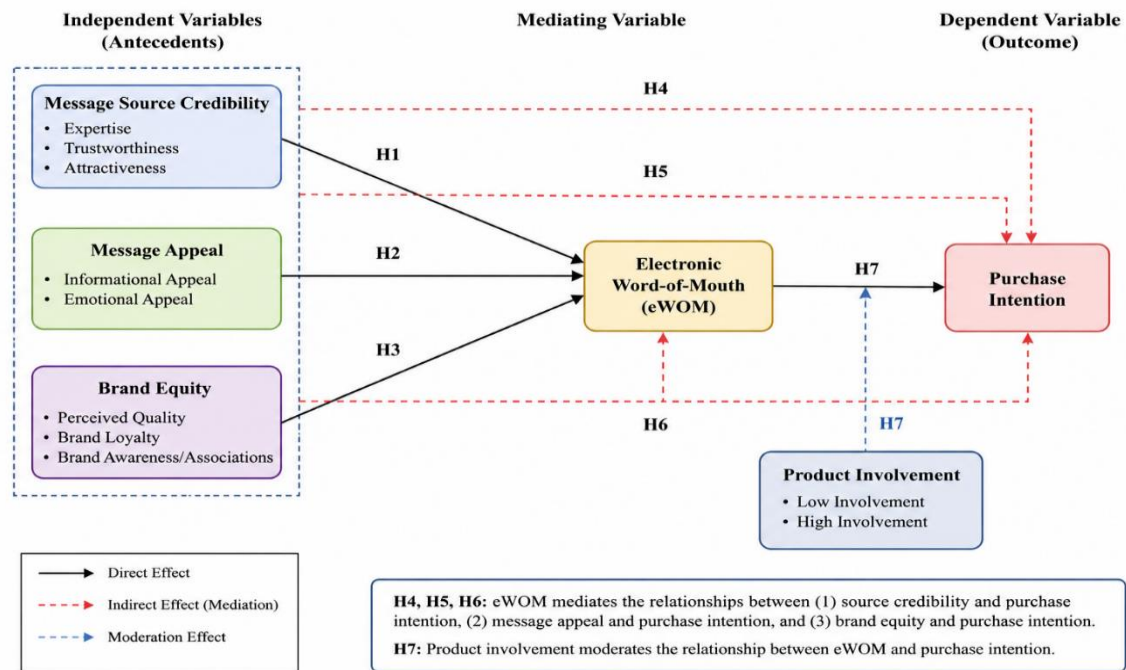


Figure 1: The proposed conceptual framework is depicted above in Figure 1, while the study hypotheses are summarized below.

Hypotheses

H1: Message source credibility positively influences consumer purchase intention.

H2: Message appeal positively influences consumer purchase intention.

H3: Brand equity positively influences consumer purchase intention.

H4: Electronic word-of-mouth mediates the relationship between message source credibility and consumer purchase intention.

H5: Electronic word-of-mouth mediates the relationship between message appeal and consumer purchase intention.

H6: Electronic word-of-mouth mediates the relationship between brand equity and consumer purchase intention.

H7: Product involvement positively moderates the relationship between electronic word-of-mouth and consumer purchase intention.

Research Methodology

Research Design and Sampling

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design to examine the relationships among message source credibility, message appeal, brand equity, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), product involvement, and consumer purchase intention in the smartphone market. Data were collected from respondents at a single point in time, making the design appropriate for examining consumers' perceptions, experiences, and behavioral intentions within the specified research context (Powoh, 2016). A non-probability convenience sampling technique was used because respondents were geographically dispersed across different cities in Pakistan, and probability-based sampling was constrained by practical considerations of accessibility, time, and research resources. Participants were approached through the researchers' networks of colleges, friends, and family members and were eligible if they had encountered online information, messages, advertisements, recommendations, or other forms of eWOM concerning smartphone brands. The unit of analysis was the individual consumer exposed to smartphone-related eWOM, while the target population comprised smartphone users with experience of receiving or encountering such online information. Accordingly, the one-shot cross-sectional approach enabled the study to assess how perceived message credibility, message appeal, brand equity, and eWOM were associated with consumers' purchase intentions at a particular point in time.

Data Collection

Primary data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered to individual smartphone users. A questionnaire-based survey was considered appropriate because the study examined respondents' perceptions of message source credibility, message appeal, brand equity, electronic word-of-mouth, product involvement, and purchase intention using standardized measures. Questionnaire surveys are particularly suitable for collecting standardized responses from geographically dispersed participants and for examining relationships among multiple variables in quantitative research (Ummah, 2019).

The questionnaire consisted of structured, closed-ended items measured primarily using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. The use of a standardized response format enabled respondents to indicate the extent to which they agreed with statements relating to the study constructs and facilitated the subsequent quantitative analysis of the collected data. The data collection focused specifically on consumers who had encountered electronic word-of-mouth or online information concerning smartphone brands. This criterion was consistent with the study's objective of examining how characteristics of online messages and brands influence consumer purchase intention and how electronic word-of-mouth operates within this relationship.

Measurement of Variables

Constructs of this study were measured using previously developed measurement items adapted to the context of smartphone brands. A five-point Likert scale was used for the measurement items, ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree (Ummah, 2019). The use of established measurement scales helps ensure consistency in the operationalization of the study constructs and facilitates the empirical assessment of the proposed relationships. In the proposed research model, message source credibility, message appeal, and brand equity were treated as independent variables. Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) was specified as the mediating variable, while purchase intention was the dependent variable. Product involvement was specified as the moderating variable, examining its moderating effect on the relationship between eWOM and purchase intention.

Table 1: Measurement Sources of Study Variables

Variable	Role in Model	Measurement Source	Measurement Focus
Message Source Credibility (MSC)	Independent variable	Wu and Wang (2011)	Perceived credibility and reliability of information sources encountered online
Message Appeal (MAP)	Independent variable	Sweeney et al. (2012)	Attractiveness and persuasive characteristics of messages concerning smartphone brands
Brand Equity (BEQ)	Independent variable	Yoo and Donthu (2001)	Consumer-based brand equity perceptions; four adapted items used in the smartphone-brand context
Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM)	Mediating variable	Sweeney et al. (2012)	Respondents' perceptions and experiences of eWOM concerning smartphone brands
Product Involvement (PIN)	Moderating variable	Wu and Wang (2011)	Personal relevance and importance attached to smartphone purchasing
Consumer Purchase Intention (PINT)	Dependent variable		Intention or likelihood of purchasing a smartphone brand following exposure to online information and eWOM

All measurement items mentioned in the table were adapted to the smartphone market context while retaining the underlying meaning of the original constructs. All variables were measured using a five-point Likert scale.

Data Analysis Techniques

The collected data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical techniques. First, descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, skewness, and kurtosis, were used to summarize the study variables. Cronbach’s alpha was employed to assess the internal consistency of the measurement scales, with values ranging from .704 to .813, indicating acceptable reliability (Cronbach, 1951). Pearson correlation analysis was then conducted to examine the direction and strength of relationships among the study variables. Multiple linear regression was used to test the direct relationships proposed in H1-H3, with message source credibility, message appeal, and brand equity as predictors of consumer purchase intention. Regression-based mediation analysis was conducted to examine the mediating role of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) in H4-H6, supported by Sobel, Aroian, and Goodman tests. Finally, moderation analysis was performed to examine whether product involvement moderates the relationship between eWOM and purchase intention (H7) through the interaction term between eWOM and product involvement. These procedures are consistent with established and contemporary guidance on mediation and moderation analysis (Hidayana & Noor, 2026b).

Reliability Analysis

The reliability of the measurement scales was assessed using Cronbach’s alpha, which evaluates the internal consistency of items used to measure a construct (Shi et al., 2017). The results indicate that all six constructs demonstrated acceptable internal consistency. Cronbach’s alpha coefficients ranged from .704 to .813. Specifically, message source credibility recorded an alpha of .717, message appeal .787, brand equity .704, electronic word-of-mouth .715, product involvement .813, and purchase intention .809.

Table 2: Reliability Statistics of Study Constructs

Construct	Number of Items	Cronbach’s α
Message Source Credibility (MSC)	4	.717
Message Appeal (MAP)	4	.787
Brand Equity (BEQ)	4	.704
Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM)	4	.715
Product Involvement (PIN)	4	.813
Purchase Intention (PINT)	5	.809

All coefficients exceeded the commonly used minimum level for acceptable internal consistency, indicating that the items within each construct demonstrated adequate consistency for subsequent statistical analysis. The highest reliability was observed for product involvement ($\alpha = .813$), whereas brand equity recorded the lowest coefficient ($\alpha = .704$), although it remained within an acceptable range.

Data Analysis

Demographic data analysis of the respondents

A total of approximately 250 questionnaires were distributed among the target respondents, of which 224 questionnaires were considered usable for the analysis. Questionnaires with inadequately completed responses were excluded from further analysis. The demographic profile of the respondents was assessed in terms of gender, age, and preferred smartphone brand.

Table 3: Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 224)

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	141	62.9
	Female	83	37.0
Age	18-23	93	41.5
	24-28	73	32.6
	29-34	45	20.0
	35+	13	5.8
Preferred cellphone brand	Samsung	61	27.2
	Vivo	40	17.8
	Oppo	38	16.9
	infinix	35	15.6
	LG	32	14.2
	iPhone	18	8.0

The table mentioned above presents the demographic profile of the 224 respondents. The results show that males constituted the majority of the sample (62.9%), while females represented 37.0%. Regarding age, the largest proportion of respondents was aged 18-23 years (41.5%), followed by those aged 24-28 years (32.6%), 29-34 years (20.0%), and 35 years and above (5.8%). In terms of preferred cellphone brand, Samsung was the most preferred brand (27.2%), followed by Vivo (17.8%), Oppo (16.9%), Infinix (15.6%), LG (14.2%), and iPhone (8.0%). Overall, the demographic profile indicates that the sample was predominantly male and relatively young, with Samsung being the most commonly preferred cellphone brand among the respondents.

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics were examined to summarize the central tendency, dispersion, and distributional characteristics of the study variables. The analysis included the mean, standard deviation, skewness, and kurtosis for each construct. All constructs were measured using five-point Likert scales; therefore, the observed minimum and maximum values were 1 and 5, respectively.

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables (N = 224)

Variable	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Message Source Credibility (MSC)	3.4888	0.74410	0.100	-1.020
Message Appeal (MAP)	3.2054	0.81447	-0.425	-0.249
Brand Equity (BEQ)	3.5692	0.60935	-0.558	0.517
Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM)	3.4766	0.49635	-0.268	-0.415
Product Involvement (PIN)	4.1339	0.72118	0.063	1.018
Purchase Intention (PINT)	3.0357	0.37712	-0.042	1.041

The mean scores indicate that respondents generally reported moderately positive perceptions of the study constructs. Product involvement recorded the highest mean ($M = 4.1339$, $SD = 0.72118$), indicating comparatively high involvement with smartphone brands among the respondents. Brand equity had the next highest mean ($M = 3.5692$), followed by message source credibility ($M = 3.4888$) and eWOM ($M = 3.4766$). Message appeal recorded a mean of 3.2054, while purchase intention had the lowest mean ($M = 3.0357$). The standard deviations indicate a relatively moderate degree of variation in respondents' responses. Purchase intention showed the lowest dispersion ($SD = 0.37712$), whereas message appeal showed the highest ($SD = 0.81447$). The skewness values ranged from -0.558 to 0.100, indicating relatively limited asymmetry in the distribution of the variables. The kurtosis values ranged from -1.020 to 1.041. These results provide an overall indication that the distributions did not exhibit extreme departures from symmetry.

Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the direction and strength of the bivariate relationships among message source credibility, message appeal, brand equity, electronic word-of-mouth, product involvement, and purchase intention.

Table 5: Pearson Correlations among Study Variables (N = 224)

Variable	MSC	MAP	BEQ	eWOM	PIN	PINT
MSC	1					
MAP	.015	1				
BEQ	-.004	.092	1			
eWOM	.178**	.210**	.163*	1		
PIN	.055	.044	.409**	.048	1	
PINT	.285**	.388**	.406**	.431**	.284**	1

The results indicate that Purchase intention was positively and significantly correlated with each of the five study variables examined in the correlation matrix. Specifically, purchase intention was positively associated with message source credibility ($r = .285$, $p < .01$), message appeal ($r = .388$, $p < .01$), brand equity ($r = .406$, $p < .01$), electronic word-of-mouth ($r = .431$, $p < .01$), and product involvement ($r = .284$, $p < .01$). Among these relationships, eWOM demonstrated the

strongest bivariate association with purchase intention ($r = .431$), followed by brand equity ($r = .406$) and message appeal ($r = .388$). Message source credibility ($r = .285$) and product involvement ($r = .284$) also showed positive associations with purchase intention.

The correlation matrix also indicates a significant positive relationship between brand equity and product involvement ($r = .409, p < .01$), while the relationship between brand equity and eWOM was positive and significant ($r = .163, p < .05$). eWOM was also positively associated with message source credibility ($r = .178, p < .01$) and message appeal ($r = .210, p < .01$). The remaining relationships were comparatively weak and statistically non-significant, including the association between message source credibility and message appeal ($r = .015$), message source credibility and brand equity ($r = -.004$), message source credibility and product involvement ($r = .055$), message appeal and brand equity ($r = .092$), message appeal and product involvement ($r = .044$), and eWOM and product involvement ($r = .048$).

Direct Effects / Regression Analysis

Multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to examine the direct effects of message source credibility, message appeal, and brand equity on consumer purchase intention. These variables were entered as independent variables, while purchase intention was specified as the dependent variable. The analysis was used to test H1, H2, and H3.

Table 6: Multiple Regression Results for Purchase Intention

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
Constant	1.190	.167	—	7.114	<.001
Message Source Credibility	.142	.027	.281	5.246	<.001
Message Appeal	.162	.025	.350	6.500	<.001
Brand Equity	.232	.033	.375	6.966	<.001

Model statistics: $R^2 = .368$; $\Delta R^2 = .360$; $F(3, 224) = 42.734, p < .01$. The regression model was statistically significant, indicating that the three predictors collectively explained a significant proportion of variance in consumer purchase intention. The model reported an R^2 of .368, indicating that approximately 36.8% of the variance in purchase intention was explained by message source credibility, message appeal, and brand equity. Message source credibility had a positive and statistically significant effect on purchase intention ($\beta = .281, t = 5.246, p < .001$), supporting H1. Message appeal also demonstrated a positive and statistically significant effect on purchase intention ($\beta = .350, t = 6.500, p < .001$), supporting H2. Finally, brand equity showed a positive and statistically significant effect on purchase intention ($\beta = .375, t = 6.966, p < .001$), supporting H3. Among the three predictors, brand equity demonstrated the largest standardized coefficient, followed by message appeal and message source credibility.

Mediation Analysis

Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) was examined as a mediating variable in the relationships between message source credibility, message appeal, brand equity, and consumer purchase intention. The mediation analysis followed the four-step regression procedure reported in the original study, based on Baron and Kenny (1986).

Table 7: Regression Results for the Mediating Role of eWOM

Step	IV	DV	R ²	F	B	β	t
1	MSC	PINT	.368	42.734**	.142	.281	5.246
	MAP	PINT			.162	.350	6.500
	BEQ	PINT			.232	.375	6.966
2	MSC	eWOM	.280	28.520**	.191	.284	4.971
	MAP	eWOM			.198	.322	5.600
	BEQ	eWOM			.228	.278	4.832
3	eWOM	PINT	.542	62.499**	.544	.736	16.200
4	MSC	PINT	.610	85.661*	.059	.116	2.613
	MAP	PINT			.076	.163	3.606
	BEQ	PINT			.132	.214	4.802
	eWOM	PINT			.436	.580	11.656

MSC = Message Source Credibility; MAP = Message Appeal; BEQ = Brand Equity; eWOM = Electronic Word-of-Mouth; PINT = Purchase Intention. ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$. The first step established the significant relationships between the three independent variables and purchase intention. Message source credibility ($\beta = .281$, $t = 5.246$), message appeal ($\beta = .350$, $t = 6.500$), and brand equity ($\beta = .375$, $t = 6.966$) were all positively associated with purchase intention. The second step examined whether the independent variables were significantly associated with the proposed mediator. Message source credibility ($\beta = .284$, $t = 4.971$), message appeal ($\beta = .322$, $t = 5.600$), and brand equity ($\beta = .278$, $t = 4.832$) were positively associated with eWOM. The third step demonstrated a significant positive relationship between eWOM and purchase intention ($\beta = .736$, $t = 16.200$, $R^2 = .542$, $p < .01$). In the fourth step, eWOM was entered together with the three independent variables. The coefficients for message source credibility, message appeal, and brand equity decreased from their respective coefficients in the first step, while eWOM remained a significant predictor of purchase intention ($\beta = .580$, $t = 11.656$). The original analysis interpreted the reduction in the direct effects, together with the significant relationships involving eWOM, as evidence consistent with the proposed mediating role of eWOM in the relationships between the three independent variables and purchase intention. Accordingly, the original study reported support for:

H4: eWOM mediates the relationship between message source credibility and purchase intention.

H5: eWOM mediates the relationship between message appeal and purchase intention.

H6: eWOM mediates the relationship between brand equity and purchase intention.

Sobel, Aroian, and Goodman Tests

To provide additional evidence for the mediating role of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), the study conducted Sobel, Aroian, and Goodman tests. These tests used the unstandardized regression coefficients and their corresponding standard errors obtained from the mediation regressions to assess the statistical significance of the indirect effects.

Table 8: Mediation of eWOM between Message Source Credibility and Purchase Intention

Test	Test Statistic	Standard Error	p
Sobel	4.6814	0.2211	< .001
Aroian	4.6730	0.2215	< .001
Goodman	4.6899	0.0220	< .001

The three tests produced statistically significant results, with Sobel = 4.6814, Aroian = 4.6730, and Goodman = 4.6899, all with $p < .001$.

Table 9: Mediation of eWOM between Message Appeal and Purchase Intention

Test	Test Statistic	Standard Error	p
Sobel	5.3313	0.0201	< .001
Aroian	5.3220	0.0201	< .001
Goodman	5.3407	0.0200	< .001

The results again indicate statistically significant indirect effects. The Sobel, Aroian, and Goodman statistics were 5.3313, 5.3220, and 5.3407, respectively, with $p < .001$.

Table 10: Mediation of eWOM between Brand Equity and Purchase Intention

Test	Test Statistic	Standard Error	p
Sobel	5.3313	0.0201	< .001
Aroian	5.3220	0.0201	< .001
Goodman	5.3407	0.0200	< .001

The original thesis reports the same Sobel, Aroian, and Goodman statistics for the brand-equity mediation test, with all three tests statistically significant at $p < .001$. Jointly, these additional tests provide statistically significant evidence consistent with the mediating role of eWOM in the relationships proposed in H4, H5, and H6.

Moderation Analysis

Product involvement was examined as a moderator of the relationship between electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) and consumer purchase intention. Regression-based moderation analysis was conducted to determine whether the strength of the relationship between eWOM and purchase intention varied according to the level of product involvement.

Table 11: Moderating Effect of Product Involvement on the eWOM-Purchase Intention Relationship

Step	Predictor	Outcome	R ²	F	B	β
1	eWOM	Purchase Intention	.542	62.499	.544	.736
2	eWOM	Product Involvement	.063	15.032	.363	.252
3	Product Involvement	Purchase Intention	.081	19.487	.149	.284
4	eWOM	Purchase Intention	.556	92.006	.502	.667
	Product Involvement	Purchase Intention			.149	.284
	eWOM $\times$ Product Involvement	Purchase Intention			.016	.139

The first step established a significant positive relationship between eWOM and purchase intention ($\beta = .736$, $t = 16.200$, $R^2 = .542$). The second and third steps examined the relationships involving product involvement and provided the preliminary regression evidence reported in the original analysis. In the final moderation model, eWOM and product involvement were entered together with their interaction term (eWOM $\times$ Product Involvement). The model produced an R^2 of .556, compared with .542 in the model containing eWOM alone. The interaction term was statistically significant ($B = .016$, $\beta = .139$, $t = 2.694$), indicating that product involvement significantly moderated the relationship between eWOM and purchase intention. Results that product involvement strengthens the positive relationship between eWOM and consumer purchase intention, providing support for H7.

H7: Product involvement positively moderates the relationship between electronic word-of-mouth and consumer purchase intention, such that the relationship becomes stronger when product involvement is high.

Hypotheses

The table depicted below reports the proposed relationships, the statistical evidence obtained from the respective analyses, and the resulting decision for each hypothesis.

Table 12: Hypotheses

Hypothesis	Proposed Relationship	Statistical Evidence	Decision
H1	Message source credibility $\rightarrow$ Purchase intention	$\beta = .281$, $t = 5.246$, $p < .001$	Supported
H2	Message appeal $\rightarrow$ Purchase intention	$\beta = .350$, $t = 6.500$, $p < .001$	Supported

H3	Brand equity → Purchase intention	$\beta = .375, t = 6.966, p < .001$	Supported
H4	eWOM mediates the relationship between message source credibility and purchase intention	Sobel = 4.6814, $p < .001$	Supported
H5	eWOM mediates the relationship between message appeal and purchase intention	Sobel = 5.3313, $p < .001$	Supported
H6	eWOM mediates the relationship between brand equity and purchase intention	Sobel = 5.3313, $p < .001^*$	Supported
H7	Product involvement moderates the relationship between eWOM and purchase intention	$\beta = .139, t = 2.694$	Supported

Discussion

This study examined how message source credibility, message appeal, and brand equity are associated with consumer purchase intention in the smartphone market, while considering electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) as a mediating mechanism and product involvement as a moderating condition. Overall, the findings support all seven hypotheses and demonstrate that consumer purchase intention is shaped by the credibility and appeal of online messages, existing perceptions of brand value, the role of eWOM, and consumers' level of product involvement.

Direct Effects

The findings support H1, showing that message source credibility was positively and significantly associated with purchase intention ($\beta = .281, p < .001$). This indicates that consumers are more likely to develop favorable purchase intentions when online information about smartphone brands is perceived as trustworthy, reliable, and knowledgeable. This finding is consistent with previous eWOM research showing that source expertise and trustworthiness enhance information credibility, adoption, and purchase-related responses (Ismagilova et al., 2020; Verma et al., 2023). This is also consistent with Wu and Wang (2011), who demonstrated the importance of source credibility in consumers' evaluation of online messages. From the perspective of the ELM, credible sources can serve as persuasive cues that facilitate the acceptance and evaluation of online information.

H2 was also supported, as message appeal demonstrated a positive and significant association with purchase intention ($\beta = .350, p < .001$). The finding suggests that the way online information is presented can contribute to consumers' purchase-related evaluations. This result is consistent with Wu and Wang (2011) and broader eWOM research emphasizing the importance of message characteristics, informativeness, relevance, and persuasive appeal in consumer decision-making. Within the ELM framework, appealing and informative messages can attract attention and

encourage consumers to process information more favorably, thereby strengthening purchase intention.

The strongest direct relationship was observed for brand equity, supporting H3 ($\beta = .375, p < .001$). This indicates that consumers' existing perceptions of a smartphone brand are particularly important in shaping purchase intention. Strong brand equity may provide consumers with familiarity, confidence, perceived quality, and reduced uncertainty when evaluating competing smartphone alternatives. The finding is consistent with the consumer-based brand equity perspective and previous research linking favorable brand perceptions with purchase intention (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993; Foroudi et al., 2018; Bilgin, 2018; Dwivedi et al., 2021). From an ELM perspective, established brand perceptions may provide an evaluative basis through which consumers interpret and respond to persuasive information.

Mediating Role of eWOM

The findings further support H4-H6, providing evidence consistent with the mediating role of eWOM in the relationships between message source credibility, message appeal, brand equity, and purchase intention. Message source credibility ($\beta = .284$), message appeal ($\beta = .322$), and brand equity ($\beta = .278$) were each positively associated with eWOM, while eWOM demonstrated a strong positive relationship with purchase intention ($\beta = .736$). Following the inclusion of eWOM, the direct coefficients of message source credibility, message appeal, and brand equity declined to .116, .163, and .214, respectively. The significant Sobel, Aroian, and Goodman tests further provided statistical evidence consistent with the proposed indirect relationships.

For H4, the results suggest that credible online sources may enhance consumers' receptiveness to eWOM, which can subsequently contribute to purchase intention. This is consistent with research identifying credibility as an important determinant of the effectiveness and adoption of online recommendations (Ismagilova et al., 2020; Verma et al., 2023). Thus, source credibility may influence purchase-related judgments both directly and through consumers' engagement with electronic word-of-mouth. Similarly, the support for H5 indicates that appealing messages may encourage favorable responses to eWOM, which subsequently contribute to purchase intention. In digital environments, attractive, relevant, and persuasive messages can stimulate attention and discussion, allowing consumer-generated communication to reinforce purchase-related evaluations. This finding supports the broader view that message characteristics are important in determining the persuasive effectiveness of online consumer communication.

The findings for H6 indicate that brand equity is also linked to purchase intention through eWOM. Consumers' existing perceptions of a brand may influence how they interpret, trust, and engage with online recommendations concerning that brand. Consequently, brand equity and eWOM appear to operate as complementary elements in the consumer decision process. Taken together, H4-H6 position eWOM not merely as another predictor of purchase intention but as a

potential transmission mechanism through which message and brand characteristics are translated into consumer purchase-related responses.

Moderating Role of Product Involvement

The results support H7, demonstrating that product involvement significantly moderates the relationship between eWOM and purchase intention ($\beta = .139$, $t = 2.694$). The inclusion of the interaction term increased the explained variance from $R^2 = .542$ to $R^2 = .556$, indicating that the relationship between eWOM and purchase intention varies according to consumers' level of involvement with smartphones. This finding suggests that consumers who consider smartphones more personally relevant or important may pay greater attention to online reviews, recommendations, comparisons, and user experiences when forming purchase intentions. The result is consistent with the theoretical rationale of the ELM and with Wu and Wang (2011), who highlighted the relevance of product involvement in consumers' responses to online messages. Higher involvement may encourage greater attention and elaboration of product-related information, thereby strengthening the usefulness of eWOM in purchase decision-making.

Integrated Discussion

Findings provide an integrated explanation of consumer purchase intention by combining message-level, brand-level, communication-level, and consumer-level factors. Message source credibility and message appeal represent important characteristics of online communication, while brand equity reflects consumers' established perceptions of the brand. These factors were directly associated with purchase intention and were also positively associated with eWOM. eWOM, in turn, demonstrated the strongest bivariate relationship with purchase intention ($r = .431$, $p < .01$) and a substantial regression relationship with purchase intention.

The findings therefore suggest that the effectiveness of digital marketing communication depends not simply on exposing consumers to information, but also on who provides the information, how the message is presented, what consumers already believe about the brand, and how involved they are with the product. The mediating findings position eWOM as a mechanism through which favorable source, message, and brand characteristics can be translated into purchase-related responses, while the moderation finding demonstrates that this influence is stronger under higher levels of product involvement. Overall, the results extend the ELM-based understanding of eWOM by demonstrating that online consumer communication operates within a broader decision-making process involving both persuasive message characteristics and consumer-level conditions. In the smartphone context, credible sources, appealing messages, strong brand equity, and active eWOM can jointly contribute to purchase intention, although the strength of eWOM's influence depends partly on consumers' involvement with the product.

Theoretical Implications

The study contributes to eWOM and consumer behavior literature by demonstrating that purchase intention is shaped through the combined roles of message characteristics, brand equity,

eWOM, and product involvement. The findings extend the traditional view of eWOM as a direct predictor by positioning it as both a mediating mechanism and a process whose relationship with purchase intention depends on consumer involvement (Sharif & Ahmad, 2020). The findings demonstrate that message source credibility, message appeal, and brand equity are significantly associated with eWOM, which subsequently relates to purchase intention. This suggests that eWOM functions as a transmission mechanism through which communication and brand-related evaluations are translated into consumer purchase responses. Thus, the study extends the theoretical understanding of eWOM beyond a simple direct predictor of purchase intention.

The significant interaction between eWOM and product involvement ($\beta = .139$, $t = 2.694$) indicates that the relationship between eWOM and purchase intention varies according to consumers' level of involvement. This supports a more context-dependent understanding of eWOM and highlights product involvement as an important boundary condition in explaining differences in consumer responses to online information. The study further contributes by integrating message-level factors (source credibility and message appeal), a brand-level factor (brand equity), a communication mechanism (eWOM), and a consumer-level factor (product involvement) within a single framework. This integrated perspective provides a broader theoretical explanation of how online communication and consumer characteristics jointly shape purchase intention, particularly in the Pakistani smartphone market.

Conclusion

This study examined the influence of electronic word-of-mouth on consumer purchase intention in the smartphone market, with particular attention to message source credibility, message appeal, brand equity, and product involvement. The findings demonstrate that these factors play important roles in shaping consumers' purchase intentions following exposure to online information. The results showed that message source credibility, message appeal, and brand equity each had significant positive effects on purchase intention, supporting H1, H2, and H3. Among the three predictors, brand equity demonstrated the strongest standardized effect, followed by message appeal and message source credibility.

The study further provided evidence consistent with the proposed mediating role of electronic word-of-mouth. The mediation analysis, together with the supplementary Sobel, Aroian, and Goodman tests, provided statistically significant evidence consistent with the proposed mediation of the relationships between message source credibility, message appeal, brand equity, and purchase intention, supporting H4, H5, and H6. Finally, the study established that product involvement significantly moderated the relationship between eWOM and purchase intention, supporting H7. The significant interaction effect indicates that the influence of eWOM varies according to consumers' level of involvement with the smart phone product.

Overall, the study demonstrates that consumer purchase intention is shaped not by eWOM alone, but by the interaction of credible sources, appealing messages, established brand equity, consumer-generated online communication, and product involvement. The findings therefore

provide an integrated view of how online consumer communication can influence purchase-related decisions in the smartphone market. The study also provides practical implications for marketers by highlighting the importance of developing credible communication, designing effective message appeals, strengthening brand equity, encouraging favorable eWOM, and considering consumers' level of product involvement when developing digital marketing strategies.

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