
Effects of Sociodemographic Variables on Electronic Word of Mouth: Evidence from Emerging Economies

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Effects of Sociodemographic Variables on Electronic Word of Mouth: Evidence from Emerging Economies

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Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM) engagement on social networking sites (SNSs) is influenced by social relationship factors and this influence is assumed to be consistent. This study investigates the effects of social relationship variables in the context of emerging economies. It also observes the mediating role of social relationship variables in the relationship between conformity and eWOM. We hypothesized a moderating role of age, gender, and country of residence. The results revealed that social ties, trust, and interpersonal influence exert consistent impact and that conformity exerts positive indirect influence on eWOM engagement via social ties, trust, social capital, and interpersonal influence. It was found that age, gender moderate the observed relationship, while country plays no moderating role. The theoretical and practical implications of these findings are discussed.

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1. Introduction

In a highly internet-enabled world, individuals increasingly rely on SNSs and social networks to gather brand-related information to support purchase-related activities (Lee & Choi, 2019). Examples of such behaviour are reading online reviews, asking for opinions, and crosschecking brand-related experiences with peers. (Chu & Kim, 2011; Donthu et al. 2021). E-WOM has been found to influence the purchase decisions of nearly 49% of consumers and nearly 150 million reviews are posted monthly on Yelp alone (Buhalis, López, & Martinez-Gonzalez, 2020). From the firm's perspective, positive eWOM relating to its brand can boost the prices of products by 10%. Conversely, negative eWOM can increase switching intentions by 11% (Saleh, 2020). The effectiveness of eWOM largely depends on the factors intrinsic to SNSs (Cheung, Pires, & Rosenberger, 2020). Given that eWOM is social communication (Farías, 2017), it is important to understand the influence of social relationships in a dynamic digital environment (Zhang, Liang & Qi, 2020).

Social networking theory (SNT) recognizes several constructs as major predictors of eWOM engagement on SNSs, namely social ties, conformity, homophily, trust, social capital, and interpersonal influence (Kim et al. 2018). Although a number of studies have recently been devoted to some of these constructs (see Chu & Kim, 2011; Farías, 2017; Lee & Choi, 2019; Yu, Liu, & Lee, 2019), all the domain relevant studies have been carried out in developed countries (e.g., USA, Korea, and Japan.). It is therefore logical to question whether a similar pattern of results would be found for the emerging economies of Eastern Europe, the geographic context of this research, given the fact that those present relatively novel studies (Iyer & Griffin, 2020). Such research is important given that, in the social sciences, the results obtained are often not generalizable across different sociodemographic contexts (Zhang & Khare, 2009; Hong et al. 2017; Donthu et al. 2021). The consistency argument (i.e., consumers across various sociodemographic contexts behave in similar ways) can be

attributed to the assumption that consumer behaviour on SNSs tends to be consistent across the world (i.e., users in various sociodemographic contexts behave similarly) (Makri, Papadas & Karolos, 2021). More specifically, similar motives dictate the typical behaviour of users of SNSs (e.g., entertainment, searching for information, everyday communication etc.) (Makri & Schlegelmilch, 2017). Given the similar behaviour of SNS users and the reported relationship to social relationship variables, it can be expected that eWOM engagement would follow the same or a similar trend in the context of emerging economies. As emerging countries account for almost 80% of global economic growth and approximately 82% of the world's population (IMF, 2017), it is surprising that this has gone unexamined. Moreover, this is important, as it considers the dynamic social context these variables capture (Li, Wu & Li, 2020), which is important for eWOM (Lee, Soo, & Kyu, 2012) and has extensive managerial implications. We therefore propose the following research question: *How consistent is the influence of social relationship variables on eWOM engagement in the context of emerging economies?*

By its definition, conformity can hypothetically provide a suitable environment for the development of social ties, homophily, trust, social capital, and interpersonal influence. Thus, it can be assumed that social ties, homophily, trust, social capital and interpersonal influence may mediate the relationship between conformity and eWOM engagement. Therefore, we pose the following question: *What is the mediating role of social relationship variables in the relationship between conformity and eWOM?*

This study also attempts to assess the moderating effects of age, gender, and country of residence. Given that these demographic variables can influence an individual's decision to engage in eWOM on SNSs (Iyer et al. 2017; Hwang & Kim, 2019; Babić et al. 2020), it is vital that marketers consider these factors in relation to eWOM-relevant activities on SNSs. No study to date has focused on the moderating role of age, gender, and country of residence in terms of social relationship factors and eWOM engagement on SNSs. To address this

deficiency, this study investigates the potential moderating role of these three demographic variables. We therefore inquire: *What is the moderating role of age, gender and country of residence on the propensity to engage in eWOM on SNSs?*

The uniqueness of this study is threefold. Firstly, it observes the previously unexamined context of emerging economies and tests whether the expected direction of relationships between socio-demographic variables and eWOM are consistent. Secondly, data was collected for various age groups and with a conscious effort to include individuals from diverse backgrounds (gender, education, residence). This was a direct response to the call from Lee and Choi (2019), who argued that this was needed in order to increase the generalizability of results. Thirdly, this study enriches the existing literature by investigating the mediating role of social relationship variables in the relationship between conformity and eWOM engagement, a relationship which has been overlooked by previous literature (although there is evidence to suggest a potential indirect influence).

This paper is structured as follows: Firstly, there is a review of the relevant literature on social relationship variables, SNSs and eWOM engagement. Secondly, the methodology, analysis and results of the study are presented. We then discuss the major findings and highlight the theoretical and managerial implications of the research. It provides guidance on how to approach the emerging economies of Eastern Europe in the context of eWOM engagement on SNSs. The paper concludes with an acknowledgement of the limitations of the research, which in turn indicates potential directions for future research.

2. Literature review

2.1. Theoretical underpinning

Individuals engage with their offline and online networks to satisfy their emotional,

psychological, commercial, and social needs (Granovetter, 1983). Although not new, SNT has gained momentum as SNSs have begun to play a significant role in the everyday lives of individuals (Kim et al. 2018). It is based on two major assumptions: (1) social networks have a major role in influencing the actions and perceptions of consumers; (2) from the perspective of eWOM, understanding the features of a particular social network is more crucial than the perceptions of individuals (Cheung, Pires, & Rosenberger, 2020). This theoretical stance relies heavily on social constructs to quantify the social network's dynamics, namely, social ties, conformity, homophily, trust, social capital, and interpersonal influence (Farías, 2017; Lee & Choi, 2019; Yu, Liu, & Lee, 2019). SNT provides a firm foundation and ample opportunities to investigate and verify individuals' perceptions and obtain an in-depth understanding of how individuals engage, with whom, on what occasions, and what influence eWOM has on their decision-making process and reoccurring engagement in eWOM (Babić et al. 2020).

With regard to social constructs and eWOM engagement, the individual building blocks in theory-building process are introduced below.

2.2. Electronic word of mouth on SNSs

Babić et al. (2020) recently revised the definition of eWOM to include all “*consumer-generated*” and “*consumption-related*” communication that uses digital platforms and is directed at peer consumers. Since eWOM uses electronic communication platforms as a mediator (Mladenović, Bruni & Kalia, 2020), it transmits information more efficiently than traditional word of mouth (WOM) (Cheung, Pires & Rosenberger, 2020). It can be assumed that eWOM on SNSs has a far greater valence in comparison with face-to-face WOM (Hennig-Thurau & Walsh, 2003). According to Jansen et.al. (2009), eWOM is executed via websites, instant messaging, news feeds, etc. and includes information about experiences,

products and services. SNSs as internet-based applications that allow for the creation, exchange, and archiving of user-generated content (e.g., reviews, testimonials, posts, social proofs, graphic content, etc.) (Chu & Kim, 2011) are a powerful tool for eWOM communication. Scholars have examined individuals' eWOM engagement on SNSs within the second-order constructs of opinion giving, opinion seeking, and opinion passing (Chu & Kim, 2011; Farías, 2017; Lee & Choi, 2019; Cheong & Mohammed-Baksh, 2020). These three important aspects of eWOM on SNSs formalize regular information flow (Kucukemiroglu & Kara, 2015; Lee & Choi, 2019; Mladenović, Krajina & Milivojević, 2019).

Opinion giving on SNSs implies the generating and sharing of information about experiences (Ladhari, Massa & Skandrani, 2020). The exceptional growth of SNSs offers opinion leaders (reviewers, bloggers, journalists, columnists, etc.) a channel to enhance their information sharing, as it is their influence that is important and central to the idea of opinion giving (Lyons & Henderson, 2005; Bray, 2008). Opinion seeking is based on a set of search queries (Ladhari, Massa & Skandrani, 2020). Given that opinion seekers consider their SNS contacts without hidden commercial intent (Chu & Choi, 2011; Cuevas, Chong, & Lim, 2020), they extensively seek information from opinion leaders on SNSs (Thiriot, 2018; Lee & Choi, 2019). Opinion passing implies the forwarding of user and marketer-generated content through social networks (Lee & Choi, 2019; Ladhari, Massa, & Skandrani, 2020), and it potentially mediates the relationship between opinion seekers and opinion leaders (Mladenović, Bruni, & Kalia, 2020).

2.3. Electronic word of mouth and social relationship variables

The major social relationship variables documented in the domain literature are social ties, conformity, homophily, trust, social capital, and interpersonal influence (see Brown, Broderick, & Lee, 2007; Chu & Kim, 2011; Farías, 2017; Lee & Choi, 2019).

- (1) EWOM communication on SNSs takes place within a social context that may be categorized according to the strength of the relationships between individuals. This link is formalized by the construct of **social ties** (Sun et al., 2019). Social tie measure the strength of the dyadic relationship (strong or weak) in social networks and refers to the strength of the bond between individuals (Chu & Kim, 2011). Lee and Choi (2019) claim that social ties are important and that eWOM on SNSs can be triggered by interaction between individuals with both strong and weak ties. It can be assumed that the stronger the social ties are, the greater the acceptance of the message, and the higher the level of impact (Granovetter, 1983). Thus, it is argued that the impact of eWOM messages on SNSs is higher between users who have strong social ties (see Hu et al., 2019). However, this relationship remains under-researched in the emerging economies of Eastern Europe.
- (2) Rogers and Bhowmik (1970) defined **homophily** as the tendency for social groups to consist of similar individuals (which may be based on age, gender, residence etc.). These kinds of groups are inclined to communicate/connect more to each other (can be based on age, gender, residence, etc.) and tend to behave similarly and promote similar behaviours (Chawdhary & Dall’Olmo Riley, 2015). It is assumed that homophily influences the strength of social ties and trust between communicators (Chawdhary & Weber, 2021; Leonhardt, Pezzuti & Namkoong, 2020). Therefore, eWOM on SNSs is more likely to take place between individuals where the information flow is frequent and impactful (Leonhardt, Pezzuti & Namkoong, 2020). Similarly, Ladhari and colleagues (2020) claimed that high levels of homophily expedite the information flow in external searches on SNSs and more efficient recognition of information needs.
- (3) Among the many definitions of trust, Moorman et al. (1993) provided the most comprehensive, whereby **trust** is the degree of willingness to seek information from a high-confidence source-partner. Ridings, Gefen, and Arinze (2002) have recognized trust

as a focal dimension of motivation for disseminating information online. Consequently, Algharabat et al. (2020) contend that higher levels of trust between the eWOM participants increase the overall intention to engage in eWOM (see also Xingyuan, Li, & Wei, 2010), as it is assumed that trust plays one of the major roles in the conveying of information on SNSs. Offline trustworthiness between peers may be replicated in a digital environment (Chu & Choi, 2011) and a high level of trust in SNS contacts supposedly influences eWOM engagement. Consequently, Lee and Hong (2019) believe that offline-to-online *conversion of trust*, has an overall positive effect on eWOM engagement on SNSs.

- (4) Social capital captures resources that an individual obtains whilst communicating (online) (Jun, Kim, & Tang, 2017). Previously, Chu and Choi (2011) argued that social capital is a set of intangible resources (e.g., advice giving, consultation, friendship, etc.) that an individual acquires after communicating with others. The literature distinguishes between bridging social capital and bonding social capital (Mortenson, 2009), wherein bridging social capital implies reciprocal opinion exchanges between heterogeneous individuals (out-group) and bonding social capital emerges within in-group communication between socially close individuals. SNSs provide ample opportunities to build up social networks and acquire social capital. According to Chu and Kim (2011), individuals gain social capital when they engage in eWOM on SNSs, as the overall information exchange contributes to the long-term growth of their social capital. However, how this assumption holds up in the context of emerging economies has remained unverified. Various external elements (e.g., demographics) may influence the strength and direction of this relationship (Jun, Kim, & Tang, 2017).
- (5) Interpersonal influence indicates how susceptible individuals are to the impact of their peers in their social networks (Chu & Kim, 2011). The literature recognizes two types of

interpersonal influences in the context of eWOM engagement (Zhang, Liang, & Qi 2020). Normative influence is defined as the propensity to adopt norms, attitudes, and behaviour from others, while informational influence reflects the degree to which individuals receive information from market mavens (Mortenson, 2009). Individuals who react to normative influence on SNSs tend to meet the expectations of individuals to whom they are socially close and are influenced by their norms, behaviours and values in eWOM messages. On the other hand, individuals who react to informational influence on SNSs gather information and opinions from knowledgeable individuals to support their decision-making processes (Farías, 2017; Zhang, Liang, & Qi 2020). Even so, interpersonal influences may converge across different countries (de Mooij, 2003), as the algorithmic nature of SNSs foster a similar impetus to engage in eWOM (Lee & Choi, 2019).

According to the literature (De Mooij, 2003; Dessart & van Bavel, 2017; Flanagan, 2017; Makri, Papadas & Schlegelmilch, 2021), the primary motives and typical consumer behaviour on SNSs should not be significantly different across countries. However, it is not clear whether the same assumption holds up in the context of eWOM engagement. Normally, developing (and underdeveloped) countries are those that adopt behaviours (e.g., SNS usage) rooted in developed countries (Phan, Pham & Nguyen, 2020). In terms of consumer behaviour on SNSs, distinctions between developing and developed countries are gradually disappearing. Given the universal social context of the SNS ecosystem (Barbro, Mudambi, & Schuff, 2020; Cuevas, Chong, & Lim, 2020) and its fertile social environment for eWOM (Lee, & Lee, 2013; Parry, Yang, & Takemura, 2020), it can be assumed that the positive relationships between perceived social ties, homophily, trust, social capital and interpersonal influence and eWOM engagement is consistent between developed and developing countries. Thus, we propose a new predictive model that aims to examine whether the above-mentioned

social relationship variables influence eWOM engagement on SNSs in a consistent manner (i.e., positive direct effect). Accordingly, we put forward the following hypotheses:

H1. *The influence of social relationship variables (H1a social ties, H1b homophily, H1c trust) on eWOM engagement on SNSs is consistent across countries.*

H2. *The influence of social capital (H2a bridging social capital, H2b bonding social capital) on eWOM engagement on SNSs is consistent across countries.*

H3. *The influence of interpersonal influence (H3a normative influence, H3b informative influence) on eWOM engagement on SNSs is consistent across countries.*

2.4. The moderating role of age, gender and country of residence

Age is considered an important predictor of consumer engagement in eWOM (Lam, Lee, & Mizerski, 2009). Different age groups can be expected to differ in terms of lifestyles, values, needs, and communication habits (Iyer et al. 2017). Thus, some scholars argue that age influences an individual's eWOM engagement, as their perceptions and behaviour mature with the age (Babić et al. 2016). Martin et al. (2019) contends that the number of individuals willing to engage in eWOM holds a linear relationship with their age. Given their experience and other social aspects, older people have a greater tendency to disseminate information (Klinkenberg et al. 2011; Bolton et al. 2013). Conversely, Heather, Murphy, and Valente (2014) believe that older generations tend to be accustomed to more profound messages, which cannot always be communicated via SNSs. Some scholars claim that younger people (as opposed to older ones) are more prone to engage in eWOM behaviour on account of their more advanced technical skills in terms of SNSs (Hennig-Thurau, Wiertz & Feldhaus, 2015; Buhalis, López, & Martinez-Gonzalez, 2020). Likewise, Mladenović et al. (2020) argue that younger people are better accustomed to the outreach of information on SNSs and use it more extensively to communicate with their peers.

It can therefore be concluded that the findings with regard to the influence of age on eWOM engagement are equivocal. Nevertheless, we contend that age moderates the effect of social relationship variables on eWOM engagement and propose the following hypothesis:

H4. *The effect of (a) social ties, (b) homophily, (c) trust, (d) social capital, and (e) interpersonal influence on eWOM engagement is moderated by age.*

Faqih and Jaradat (2015) claim that gender plays an important role in decision-making processes. According to Meyers-Levy and Loken (2015), males and females differ in many aspects regarding their behaviour on SNSs in terms of psychological, economic, and social reasoning. Similarly, Ahuja (2002) believes that males and females have different socially constructed cognitive structures that translate into different perceptions, on the basis of which scholars from various fields have investigated the predictive capabilities of gender with regard to eWOM communication (Sun et al. 2019; Hwang & Kim, 2019). Mladenović et al. (2020) found that gender significantly influences the propensity to engage in eWOM. Gender differences arise because females typically focus on socialization and networking (which enhances eWOM), while males primarily communicate to defend their established social positions (Swanson et al. 2003). Parry et al. (2020) argue that females are more subjective and personal in their communication, which directly enhances their eWOM intentions. However, Mishra et al. (2017) contends that, in extreme cases, females may limit their eWOM activities, so as not to infringe on existing cultural and societal values, which directly affects the dissemination of eWOM messages. Sun et al. (2019) found that genders differ greatly in terms of post-purchase behaviour and how they disseminate positive and negative eWOM on SNSs. On the basis of this discussion, we propose the following hypothesis:

H5. *The effect of (a) social ties, (b) homophily, (c) trust, (d) social capital, and (e) interpersonal influence on eWOM engagement is moderated by gender.*

Eastern European countries are relatively sociodemographically similar (Manrai et al. 2001). Therefore, the observed social relationship variables can be expected to have similar implications for broader marketing communication and the SNS environment. Moreover, typical SNS behaviours have tended to follow similar development paths globally, which also applies to this region (judging by the official statistics). Consequently, we theorize that country of residence does not influence the effect of the above-mentioned social relationship variables on eWOM engagement. Therefore, we put forward the following hypothesis:

H6. *The effect of (a) social ties, (b) homophily, (c) trust, (d) social capital, (e) interpersonal influence and (f) indirect effect of conformity on eWOM engagement is not moderated by country of residence.*

2.5. The indirect effect of conformity

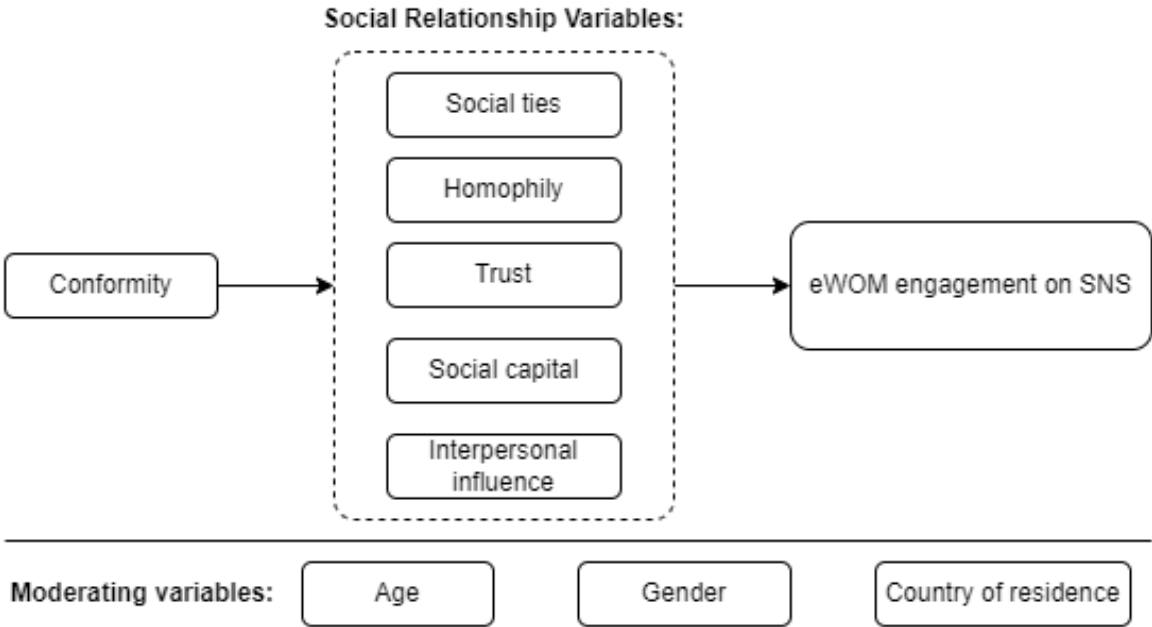
According to Lee and Choi (2019), conformity is the tendency for individuals to follow the accepted behaviour inside and outside a group on SNSs. In practice, individuals adhere to the wider group's values, attitudes, and behaviour (Eisingerich et al., 2015). Crowne (1979) contends that the extent of conformity is directly associated with the degree to which individuals seek wider social approval or disapproval (e.g., self-presentation or self-disclosure). Conformity implies being consistent with the group, even when the attitudes and behaviour the group promotes are inconsistent with one's own (Knobloch & Solomon, 2002). To enable such social consistency and align oneself with group norms, extensive (eWOM) communication with others takes place. In the context of online social groups and SNSs, higher perceived levels of conformity can be expected to lead to more extensive eWOM engagement. In broader terms, conformity can provide a favourable communication environment for enhancing social ties, trust, homophily, social capital and interpersonal influence. If SNS users have higher perceived levels of conformity in online social groups

(they align themselves more to social norms), they more easily develop social ties, homophily, trust, social capital and are susceptible to interpersonal influence. On this basis, we assume that social ties, homophily, trust, social capital and interpersonal influence may mediate the relationship between conformity and eWOM engagement.

We were not able to find any published study that investigated the mediating role of social ties, homophily, trust, social capital, and interpersonal influence on the relationship between conformity and eWOM engagement on SNSs. Therefore, we put forward the following hypothesis:

H7. *In the presence of social relationship variables (H7a social ties, H7b homophily, H7c trust, H7d social capital, H7e interpersonal influence) conformity has a significant positive influence on eWOM engagement on SNSs.*

Figure 1. Proposed research model



3. Methodology

To test the research model, data was collected by means of an online survey. This data

collection method was chosen due to the major advantages of surveys, such as audience outreach, convenience, and mandatory answers (Evans & Mathur, 2005). The data were collected in Czechia, Serbia, and Kosovo. Most European countries have high rates of SNS usage, and some are among the biggest internet markets in the world. Recent statistics (Eurostat, 2020; Kosovo Agency of Statistics, 2021) show that SNS usage is widespread in the observed emerging economies of Czechia (59%), Serbia (81%), and Kosovo (73%).

3.5.Measures

To capture users' behaviour on SNSs, we adapted several items introduced by Lee and Choi (2019). All the employed scales have adequate discriminant and convergent validity, as per the established benchmarks. For eWOM engagement, we sourced items from Sun et al. (2006) and Chu and Choi (2011). We utilized items from: Chu and Kim (2011), for social ties, homophily and interpersonal influence; Lee & Choi (2019), for conformity; Chu & Choi (2011), for trust; and Williams (2006), for social capital. All the items were translated into Czech, Serbian, and (Kosovar) Albanian languages. There are considerable linguistic differences between the three languages, and therefore the adaptation of items was carried out by means of a double translation procedure (Beaton et al., 2000).

The questionnaire was composed of closed questions with a 7-point Likert scale (with responses ranging from: 1 - strongly agree, 7 - strongly disagree). The survey consisted of three sections: (a) independent variables – social relationship and moderating variables, (b) dependent variables – eWOM engagement items, and (c) demographic section.

3.6.Sample

We used the technique of snowball sampling, whereby we initially contacted the first line of potential respondents. We selected them from our email lists and filtered fifty-three personal contacts as the first wave of snowball sampling. To increase generalizability, we

included personal contacts who were diverse in terms of age, gender, education, and country of residence (Mladenović, Bruni & Kalia, 2020). They were sent an email with contextual information, a link to the survey and a request to forward the survey on. The primary reasons for using this technique were its ability to access large numbers of respondents in three geographical locations and obtain a large sample size, and the relatively low cost (Benfield & Szlemko, 2006).

The data collection was carried out between November 2019 and mid-March 2020. All participating individuals were included in a draw with a prize of 30 EUR. To increase the response rate, individuals were contacted between Monday and Thursday, as these are reportedly the most receptive days for online respondents (Leon, Davis & Kraemer, 2011). A total of 831 valid individual responses were received from Czech (N=274), Serbian (N=354), and Kosovar (N=203) respondents. More females (57%) than males (43%) participated in the research, and the most populous age group was 18 to 34 years old.

As can be seen in the descriptive statistics in Table 1, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube were the top four SNS platforms. In general, Facebook was the most frequently used SNS across the observed samples. Most users had more than one hundred online contacts and were receiving their information primarily from the posts of others. Most of the surveyed respondents visited a SNS five to ten times a day, and their most frequent activity was browsing the newsfeed, followed by chatting and sharing information.

Table 1 Descriptive statistics

| Item | Country | | |
|------------|-----------------|----------------|----------------|
| | Czechia (N=274) | Serbia (N=354) | Kosovo (N=203) |
| Age | | | |
| Up to 18 | 21 (7.7%) | 72 (20.3%) | 60 (29.6%) |
| 18-25 | 95 (34.7%) | 59 (16.7%) | 91 (44.8%) |
| 26-34 | 68 (24.8%) | 140 (39.5%) | 38 (18.7%) |
| 35-45 | 52 (19%) | 65 (18.4%) | 2 (1%) |
| Over 46 | 38 (13.9%) | 18 (5.1%) | 12 (5.9%) |

| Most frequently used SNS | | | |
|--|--|-----------------|-----------------|
| 1 st | Facebook (41%) | Facebook (62%) | Facebook (77%) |
| 2 nd | Instagram (35%) | YouTube (48%) | Instagram (65%) |
| 3 rd | YouTube (21%) | Instagram (37%) | Twitter (21%) |
| 4 th | Twitter (13%) | Twitter (19%) | YouTube (19%) |
| Number of contacts | | | |
| Less than 10 | 14 (.5 %) | 7 (1.9%) | 6 (.3%) |
| 11 – 50 | 42 (15.3%) | 21 (6.1%) | 54 (26.7%) |
| 51 – 100 | 29 (10.6%) | 46 (13.1%) | 32 (15.8%) |
| 101 – 500 | 72 (26.3%) | 110 (31.1%) | 81 (39.9%) |
| 501 and more | 129 (47.3%) | 169 (47.8%) | 35 (17.3%) |
| Most frequent ways of receiving information | | | |
| Posts from SNS friends | 141 (51.5%) | 224 (63.3%) | 137 (67.5%) |
| Comments on posts | 9 (24.7%) | 21 (6.1%) | 17 (8.4%) |
| Messages from SNS friends | 49 (17.9%) | 25 (7.1%) | 40 (19.7%) |
| Chatting with SNS friends | 63 (23.1%) | 57 (16.1%) | 17 (8.4%) |
| Likes, Shares, Retweets of SNS friends | 3 (1.1%) | 15 (4.2%) | 7 (3.4%) |
| Others | 9 (3.3%) | 12 (3.4%) | 2 (.9%) |
| Average hours spent on SNS each day | | | |
| Less than 30 mins | 34 (12.4%) | 51 (14.4%) | 7 (3.5%) |
| 30 mins to 1 hour | 97 (35.4%) | 49 (13.8%) | 51 (25.1%) |
| 1 hour to 2 hours | 125 (45.6%) | 143 (40.4%) | 56 (27.6%) |
| More than 2 hours | 18 (6.6%) | 111 (31.4%) | 89 (43.8%) |
| Average daily frequency of SNS visits | | | |
| Up to 2 times | 19 (6.9%) | 26 (7.3%) | 8 (3.9%) |
| 3-4 times | 64 (23.4%) | 49 (13.8%) | 41 (20.2%) |
| 5 to 10 times | 110 (40.2%) | 201 (56.9%) | 109 (53.7%) |
| More than 10 times | 81 (29.6%) | 78 (22%) | 45 (22.2%) |
| Most frequent activities on SNS | | | |
| | Mean (SD) - 1=very infrequently; 7=very frequently | | |
| Reading newsfeed | 6.01 (1.50) | 5.59 (2.02) | 6.30 (1.65) |
| Posting comments | 2.19 (1.91) | 3.20 (1.91) | 3.31 (1.54) |
| Chatting | 3.01 (2.06) | 4.11 (1.56) | 4.56 (1.92) |
| Searching for existing friends | 1.91 (2.30) | 2.53 (1.74) | 2.15 (1.79) |
| Sharing Information | 3.84 (1.89) | 3.64 (1.76) | 5(2.05) |

4. Data analyses and results

4.5. Measurement model evaluation

Firstly, we checked the overall measurement structure of the model (Confirmatory Factor Analyses – CFA). In terms of CFA, the model indicates a solid fit to the data, whereby $\chi^2 = 340.020$, $df = 298$, $\chi^2/df = 2.998$, $p < 0.001$, normed fit index [NFI] = 0.898, comparative fit index [CFI] = 0.875, Tucker–Lewis index [TLI] = 0.898, root mean square error of approximation [RMSEA] = 0.065). All loadings are higher than 0.71 and all of them are

significantly loaded to their construct. The summary of respective loadings can be seen in Appendix A. The composite reliability values are all above 0.700 (from 0.750 to 0.901), which indicates high internal consistency (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988).

Additionally, values of average variance extracted (AVE) are all above the benchmark of 0.500 (0.715 to 0.901), which supports the convergence validity of the model (Field, 2013). To check for discriminant validity, we compared individual items' values of AVE with all squared correlations (R^2), whereby AVE was higher in all cases, implying satisfactory discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Table 2. Composite and discriminant analyses

| | Items | Mean (SD) | AVE | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 |
|----------------------|-------|----------------|------|-------------------------|-------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|--------------|
| Social Tie | 3 | 2.01 (1.29) | .715 | .814^a | .665 ^b | .574 | .501 | .621 | .521 | .620 | .705 | .589 | .804 | .624 |
| Conformity | 5 | 2.51 (1.32) | .804 | .721 ^c | .801 | .520 | .624 | .598 | .712 | .721 | .621 | .498 | .505 | .312 |
| Homophily | 3 | 3.22 (1.30) | .782 | .600 | .615 | .778 | .389 | .555 | .498 | .658 | .720 | .506 | .550 | .482 |
| Trust | 7 | 1.98 (1.21) | .812 | .570 | .425 | .520 | .872 | .572 | .422 | .620 | .705 | .589 | .804 | .488 |
| Bridging Cap. | 10 | 2.15 (1.35) | .901 | .521 | .620 | .620 | .515 | .790 | .501 | .721 | .621 | .624 | .598 | .712 |
| Bonding Cap. | 10 | 2.19 (1.40) | .889 | .521 | .798 | .584 | .601 | .625 | .701 | .505 | .251 | .389 | .555 | .498 |
| Normative Infl. | 3 | 2.31 (1.38) | .807 | .598 | .712 | .721 | .598 | .712 | .485 | .813 | .601 | .620 | .705 | .801 |
| Informative Infl. | 3 | 2.44 (1.34) | .811 | .555 | .498 | .658 | .720 | .589 | .804 | .624 | .754 | .450 | .582 | .601 |
| Opinion Seeking | 6 | 2.64 (1.32) | .872 | .618 | .812 | .512 | .601 | .312 | .505 | .512 | .404 | .891 | .721 | .620 |
| Opinion Giving | 3 | 2.51 (1.28) | .798 | .621 | .521 | .620 | .705 | .601 | .312 | .505 | .720 | .822 | .901 | .81 |
| Opinion Passing | 6 | 2.30 (1.25) | .815 | .598 | .712 | .721 | .621 | .498 | .505 | .312 | .760 | .801 | .780 | .850. |

Note. SD: standard deviation, AVE: average variance extracted. Composite reliability is along the diagonal. ^c Correlations are above the diagonal. ^c Squared correlations are below the diagonal.

Given the fact that self-reported data were utilized for the analyses, we conducted a Harman's single factor test to check for common method bias, as suggested by Tehseen and others (2017). The test reported that the total variance explained by a single factor is 27.36%, which is significantly below the 50% mark and indicates that there is no problem with common

method bias in the model (Field, 2013). Overall, the scales are valid and reliable.

4.6. Invariance assessment

Before performing tests for the moderation effect of age, gender and country of residence, we performed an invariance test (Steenkamp & Baumgartner, 1988). The respondents (N = 831) were divided by age into two groups by the median age of 34 years, thereby creating a younger group (N = 522) and an older group (N = 309). Essentially, there were two models: (1) a non-restricted model ($\chi^2 = 342.252$, $df = 175$, $\chi^2/df = 1.992$, $p < 0.001$, NFI = 0.901, CFI = 0.957, TLI = 0.971, RMSEA = 0.049) and (2) a full-metric invariance model (Chi-square = 381.001, $df = 190$, $\chi^2/df = 2.197$, $p < 0.001$, NFI = 0.935, CFI = 0.991, TLI = 0.961, RMSEA = 0.053), which both had a statistically relevant fit. The same approach was taken in the case of gender. The sample was divided into two groups of males (N = 383) and females (N = 448). Similarly, we observed two models: (1) a non-restricted model (Chi-square = 374.602, $df = 175$, $\chi^2/df = 2.301$, $p < 0.001$, NFI = 0.922, CFI = 0.960, TLI = 0.940, RMSEA = 0.052) and (2) a full-metric invariance model ($\chi^2 = 401.008$, $df = 190$, $\chi^2/df = 2.253$, $p < 0.001$, NFI = 0.909, CFI = 0.962, TLI = 0.952, RMSEA = 0.051), which both had a statistically appropriate fit. Additionally, no statistically significant difference was reported between the two, which further implies that full metric invariance is supported.

4.7. Structural Equation Modelling

Two models were tested. In the first, we observed the direct effects between the social relationship variables and eWOM engagement (Model I), while in the second we included the full mediation of the social relationship variables between conformity and eWOM engagement (Table 3). Essentially, the outputs indicated that Model II is superior, given the observed AIC, BIC, and goodness of fit (χ^2). The results indicate that social tie, trust, and normative and informative influence are related in the direction expected to eWOM

engagement on SNSs, thereby confirming H1a, H1c, H3a, and H3b. Furthermore, all indirect relations are statistically significant (except H7b: Conformity->Homophily->eWOM engagement). Thus, H7a, H7c, H7d, H7e are supported by this model.

Table 3. Parameter estimates and results of the models

| Relationship | | Model I (direct) | | Model II (indirect) | |
|--------------|---|------------------|---------|---------------------|----------|
| | From -> To | Std. | Results | Std. | Results |
| H1a | Social Tie->eWOM | 0.33** | S | 0.31* | S |
| H1b | Homophily->eWOM | 0.24* | S | 0.04 | NS |
| H1c | Trust->eWOM | 0.18** | S | 0.29** | S |
| H2a | Bridging social capital->eWOM | 0.02 | NS | 0.09 | NS |
| H2b | Bonding social capital->eWOM | 0.13 | NS | 0.07 | NS |
| H3a | Normative influence->eWOM | 0.23* | S | 0.41** | S |
| H3b | Informative Influence->eWOM | 0.23** | S | 0.39** | S |
| H7a | Conformity->Social ties->eWOM | - | - | 0.25** | S |
| H7b | Conformity->Homophily->eWOM | - | - | 0.11 | NS |
| H7c | Conformity->Trust->eWOM | - | - | 0.31** | S |
| H7d | Conformity->Social capital->eWOM | - | - | 0.24* | S |
| H7e | Conformity->Interpersonal influence->eWOM | - | - | 0.20** | S |
| | Goodness-of-fit χ^2 (df) | 301.55 (314)** | | 345.25 (315)** | |
| | GFI | 0.74 | | 0.92 | |
| | AGFI | 0.75 | | 0.89 | |
| | CFI | 0.99 | | 0.88 | |
| | AIC | 990.7 | | 873.44 | |
| | BIC | 1432.32 | | 990.15 | |
| | RMSEA | 0.76 | | 0.59 | |
| | TLI | 0.70 | | 0.84 | |

Notes: 'Std' refers to 'standardized coefficient'; *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; all other coefficients are not significant; CFI – comparative fit index; AIC – Akaike Information Criterion; BIC: Bayesian Information Criterion; RMSEA – Root Mean Square Error of Approximation; GFI – Goodness of Fit Index; AGFI – Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index; TLI – Tucker-Lewis Index; NS – Not supported; S - Supported

4.8. Moderating role of age, gender and country of residence

We performed multiple-group analyses (MGA) to check for the moderating role of age, gender and country of residence, as per Byrne's (2001) procedure. Firstly, we observed a moderating effect of age, whereby the tests revealed that age plays significant role in the following relationships: (1) social ties and eWOM – H4a ($\Delta\chi^2 = 4.234 > \chi^2 = 0.5(1) = 3.71$, df = 1); (2) trust and eWOM – H4c ($\Delta\chi^2 = 4.998 > \chi^2 = 0.5(1) = 3.71$, df = 1); (3) social capital and eWOM – H4d ($\Delta\chi^2 = 6.301 > \chi^2 = 0.5(1) = 3.71$, df = 1). In all three cases, the older age group had higher path coefficients. Contradicting the original assumptions (H4b, H4e),

homophily ($\Delta\chi^2 = 0.401 < \chi^2 = 0.5(1) = 3.71$, $df = 1$) and interpersonal influence ($\Delta\chi^2 = 0.298 < \chi^2 = 0.5(1) = 3.71$, $df = 1$) were not statistically significant.

In terms of gender, the results suggest that gender significantly moderates following relationships: (1) social ties and eWOM - H5a ($\Delta\chi^2 = 5.337 > \chi^2 = 0.5(1) = 3.71$, $df = 1$); (2) trust and eWOM - H5c ($\Delta\chi^2 = 7.001 > \chi^2 = 0.5(1) = 3.71$, $df = 1$); and (3) interpersonal influence and eWOM - H5e ($\Delta\chi^2 = 6.223 > \chi^2 = 0.5(1) = 3.71$, $df = 1$). In all three cases, the path coefficients were higher for females. By contrast, the hypotheses that formalize the relation with homophily ($\Delta\chi^2 = 0.408 < \chi^2 = 0.5(1) = 3.71$, $df = 1$) and social capital ($\Delta\chi^2 = 0.495 < \chi^2 = 0.5(1) = 3.71$, $df = 1$) were not statistically supported (H5b and H5e respectively).

For country of residence (Table 4), on four occasions (H2a, H2b, H3b, H7b) there were different effects of social relationship variables on eWOM than were predicted (no differences between the observed countries). In the case of social capital, informative influence and homophily (in mediation), the MGA indicates differences. For the rest, the direction of effects is uniform (country of residence does not moderate the effect).

Table 4. Results for MGA for country of residence

| Hypothesis | Relationship | Czechia | Serbia | Kosovo | Result |
|------------|---|---------|--------|--------|--------|
| H1a | Social ties->eWOM | 0.31* | 0.21** | 0.19** | S |
| H1b | Homophily->eWOM | 0.46** | 0.15* | 0.33* | S |
| H1c | Trust->eWOM | 0.54** | 0.65** | 0.61** | S |
| H2a | Bridging soc.cap.->eWOM | 0.14 | 0.29* | 0.22 | NS |
| H2b | Bonding soc.cap.->eWOM | 0.13 | 0.46* | 0.05 | NS |
| H3a | Normative infl.->eWOM | 0.29** | 0.31** | 0.51** | S |
| H3b | Informative infl. ->eWOM | 0.32 | 0.41 | 0.28* | NS |
| H7a | Conformity->Social ties->eWOM | 0.33** | 0.41** | 0.13* | S |
| H7b | Conformity->Homophily->eWOM | 0.16* | 0.01 | 0.07 | NS |
| H7c | Conformity->Trust->eWOM | 0.39** | 0.22* | 0.52** | S |
| H7d | Conformity->Social capital->eWOM | 0.29* | 0.24** | 0.52** | S |
| H7e | Conformity->Interpersonal influence->eWOM | 0.21* | 0.51** | 0.18* | S |

Note: Significant at: *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; S – supported; NS - Not supported

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study investigated how consistent the relations between social relationship variables and eWOM engagement on SNSs are in three emerging economies. On the basis of the

argumentation above, we proposed that the hypothesized relationships are consistent across countries. We then investigated the mediating role of social relationship variables in the relationship between conformity and eWOM engagement, a relationship previously unexamined. This study also investigated the moderating role of age, gender and country of residence. Data was collected from 831 SNS users in Czechia, Serbia and Kosovo to test a model that incorporates seven hypotheses. The findings should assist scholars and marketers in their efforts to better comprehend eWOM engagement on SNSs in emerging economies.

How consistent are the effects of social relationship variables on eWOM?

The majority of the hypotheses were supported by testing the proposed model (Table 3). These findings provide significant support for previous studies (Xingyuan, Li, & Wei, 2010; Eisingerich et al., 2015; Jun, Kim, & Tang, 2017; Sun et al. 2019; Leonhardt, Pezzuti & Namkoong, 2020, etc) and indicate the important role social relationship variables play in eWOM engagement on SNSs. Likewise, the effect of the independent variables was as expected, which, among other things, confirms the convergence argument suggested by the growing body of knowledge in this area (see Dessart & van Bavel, 2017; Cuevas, Chong, & Lim, 2020; Makri, Papadas & Schegelmilch, 2021).

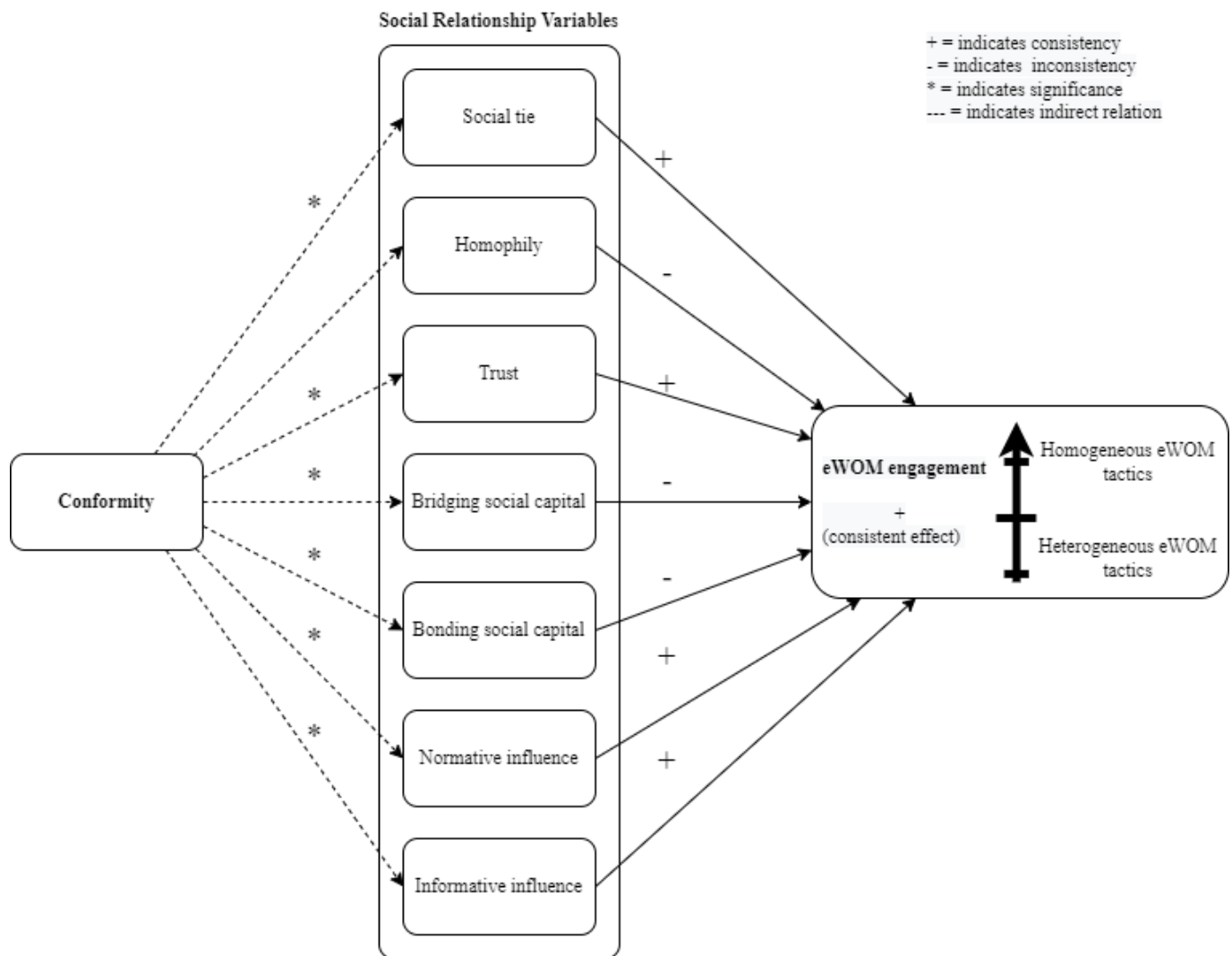
It is worthy of note that the hypotheses for homophily and social capital were not supported by the model, implying a different direction of effects than was predicted. These findings contradict the literature (Chu & Kim, 2011; Farías, 2017; Lee & Choi, 2019; Zhang et al., 2020) and may be attributed to the fact that (significant) sociodemographic differences may influence the propensity of individuals to engage in eWOM (Yu, Liu, & Lee, 2019; Barbro, Mudambi, & Schuff, 2020), as the above-mentioned studies were conducted in sociodemographic contexts that are very different to the observed emerging economies.

Moreover, culture can have a substantial impact on eWOM (see Lee & Choi, 2019), and there are substantial differences between the observed emerging economies in this study and the USA, Korea, China, Chile, and Japan, countries that provided the research context of the above-mentioned studies (Hofstede, 2001). Furthermore, these studies were based on student population samples. This may be a limiting feature, as older age groups tend to engage more in WOM in general (Martin, Greiling, & Leibetseder, 2019), and a student sample may not be a representative population (Steinmetz, Thompson, & Marshall, 2020).

What is the mediating role of social relationship variables in the relationship between conformity and eWOM?

All the proposed relations were supported, apart from conformity->homophily->eWOM engagement (H7b). This clearly indicates that conformity exerts a positive indirect influence on eWOM engagement. Essentially, higher levels of conformity (adhering to the social norms of groups) imply higher perceived levels of social ties, trust, social capital, and interpersonal influence, which further mediates the impact of conformity on eWOM engagement.

Figure 2. Reported consistency and significance and its impact on eWOM tactics



What is the moderating role of age, gender and country of residence?

The results indicate that age moderates the relationship between social ties, trust, social capital, and eWOM engagement. This implies that when older individuals perceive higher levels of (or stronger) social ties, social capital and trust they are more likely to engage in eWOM on SNSs. Although this confirms the findings of previous studies (Klinkenberg et al. 2011; Bolton et al. 2013; Martin, Greiling, & Leibetseder, 2019), it contradicts those of Mladenović et al. (2020), which indicate that younger people are more likely to engage in eWOM due to their higher familiarity with SNS platforms. This counterintuitive finding may be explained by reference group influence theory, which claims that there are exceptions to

channel preferences when the communication is intended for or comes from a member of a reference group (e.g., family, friends, partners) (Iyer et al., 2017). For older people, with whom they engage in eWOM is more important than the channel they use (Wang, Yu, & Wei, 2012), and therefore they adapt to their peers who communicate through SNSs. Moreover, the emerging economies observed in this study have high rates of literacy among the elderly (World Data Atlas, 2016), which is positively related to the use of SNSs (Olaniran, 2018).

We also found that gender moderates the effect of social relationship variables on eWOM engagement. Females are more likely to engage in eWOM on SNSs if their perceived levels of trust, informative influence, and strength of social ties are high/strong enough. These confirm earlier findings (Hwang & Kim, 2019; Parry, Yang, & Takemura, 2020) that are anchored in various theories (the theory of the strength of weak ties, the theory of perceived risk, cognitive dissonance, social role theory). Theoretically, these findings extend the knowledge on the moderating role of gender in the context of emerging economies, which has thus far attracted insufficient research attention.

Finally, we hypothesized that country of residence does not moderate the relationship between social relationship variables and eWOM engagement (as per the global identity argument). The results of the MGA indicate that in the majority of the observed relations the direction of the effect between the observed countries is the same (except in the case of social capital, informative influence and homophily as a moderator between conformity and eWOM engagement). This implies a high level of convergence between the observed emerging economies, where no major differences were observed (Table 4).

5.5. Theoretical implications

The findings, which were based on a verified research model, make multiple contributions to the theory. Firstly, this study largely confirmed the predicted consistent

positive influence of selected social relationship variables on eWOM engagement in emerging economies. Thus, these findings contribute to eWOM and social network theory by facilitating understanding of the nature of the relationship between the observed dependent and independent variables in the context of emerging economies. Peterson and Merunka (2014) argue that empirical findings must be based on multiple studies in diverse sociodemographic and cultural contexts to enact a scientific fact.

By providing empirical-based evidence, the results significantly contribute to the knowledge in this domain by observing the mediating role of social relationship variables in the relationship between conformity and eWOM engagement. They further emphasize the interconnected nature of social relationship variables and also contribute to social networking theory.

While confirming earlier findings on the implications of gender differences and age clusters (to a certain extent), the findings of this study extend the knowledge and understanding of the role of country on social relationship variables and eWOM engagement. This reinforces the consistency argument, as minor differences between observed emerging economies were reported. Finally, the findings reveal similar behaviour on SNSs across the emerging economies. This similar behaviour on SNSs is in line with the strong expectation that, in the long run, differences between cultures, nations, and societies will narrow as a result of universal lifestyles that are presented widely on the internet (Zhang & Khare, 2009, Makri, Papadas, & Schlegelmilch, 2021). This is an important conclusion given that there is little empirical evidence in relation to the emerging economies in this study.

5.6. Managerial implications

Although companies cannot directly influence customer-to-customer interactions, the findings of this study provide the basis for several practical suggestions. Firstly, by utilizing

individuals' social networks of strong ties, marketers can harvest the benefits without prior investment via opinion giving or leadership on SNSs (Kulmala, Mesiranta, & Tuominen, 2013). Companies should identify individuals who seek and pass on opinions within trustworthy circles on SNSs who would pass on eWOM messages to end consumers and influence their decisions. This means identifying social authorities (e.g., opinion leaders) whose propensity to engage in eWOM on SNSs is continuous and systematic. This would be anchored in two-step flow theory, whereby instead of mass media, marketers would use SNSs to communicate with social authorities. Sephora, the multinational retailer of personal care products, attempts to educate its consumers by providing very detailed instructions on how to compose concise eWOM. Marketers would then encourage consumers to allay any uncertainty by inviting them to check the opinions of others on SNSs or customer-driven forums on their websites.

Given that the findings of this study indicate a high level of consistency between developed and emerging economies, and between the emerging economies themselves, this can assist marketers when addressing the issue of the “standardization versus adaptation” on international markets. More specifically, the findings imply they should lean more towards the standardization of eWOM tactics on SNSs. This largely contradicts the body of knowledge that was built up before the emergence of SNSs and eWOM.

In terms of strategy, the findings could assist marketers in the areas of more precise persona development and market segmentation, which are major research subjects in relation to eWOM (Donthu et al. 2021). As the use of SNSs implies an ability to target various segments effectively, marketers can compose and test eWOM messages to enhance long-term relationships, social closeness, and source credibility, by, for example, providing additional value in form of advice and insights, and targeting SNS communities that are socially compact. Similarly, the findings indicate that marketers should engage in eWOM across

different SNSs (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube) and primarily target the older female population.

Marketers can also increase the dissemination of eWOM messages on SNSs by increasing the chances that one will get exposed to eWOM, which was originally known as accidental exposure (Hansen & Sia, 2015). Thus, they need to compose content that is relevant, credible and appropriate for SNSs. The content should be ready for dissemination, indexed by search engines, and included in paid promotions. and by reduction of signal-to-noise ratio on their digital touchpoints. Even asking for further dissemination may help an eWOM message to gain momentum. For example, the well-known brand Jane Iredale awards loyalty points to customers/registered members when they engage in eWOM on their digital platforms.

5.7.Limitations and Future Research

Although there have been studies focusing on eWOM engagement on SNSs, the context of emerging economies has been largely overlooked. Given that consumer behaviour on SNSs is still in its infancy (Kalia et al., 2019), further studies are needed to develop the knowledge from distinct sociodemographic, national, and geographic perspectives. Future studies could address the moderating role of demographic factors towards second-order constructs (seeking, giving, and passing on opinions). A significant limitation of this study is the generalizability of the findings from the snowball data collection (Field, 2013). Therefore, a more reliable sampling technique should be considered for future studies. Although the choice of countries included in the study may be challenged, it is based on the knowledge expansion notion that insights and theoretical frameworks must be captured and verified in different contexts to push forward research frontiers (Kano et al. 2020). This study was not platform specific. Given the argument that individuals behave differently on various platforms

(Barbro, Mudambi, & Schuff, 2020), future studies could focus on particular SNSs (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, etc.). Finally, all age groups were included in the sample for this study. Future studies could focus on age groups that are particularly inclined towards the use of SNSs (e.g., Generation Y and Z), given that they are the most frequent users of these platforms (Buhalis, López, & Martinez-Gonzalez, 2020).

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Appendix A CFA – Used Scales and Factors’ Loadings

| | | |
|--|---|---------------|
| Social Ties - α 0.85 | Approximately how frequently do you communicate with the contacts on your ‘friends’ list on this SNS? | α 0.81 |
| | Overall, how important do you feel about the contacts on your ‘friends’ list on this SNS? | α 0.92 |
| | Overall, how close do you feel to the contacts on your ‘friends’ list on this SNS? | α 0.87 |
| Homophily - α 0.82 | In general, the contacts on my ‘friends’ list on the SNS think like me | α 0.85 |
| | In general, the contacts on my ‘friends’ list on the SNS behave like me | α 0.74 |
| | In general, the contacts on my ‘friends’ list on the SNS is like me | α 0.90 |
| Conformity - α .87 | I am very sensitive to what other people think of me | α 0.82 |
| | Before making a decision, I often worry whether others will approve of it | α 0.93 |
| | My actions are governed by the way people expect me to behave | α 0.94 |
| | I'm concerned with what other people think of me | α 0.91 |
| Normative Influence - α .93 | I usually worry about making a good impression | α 0.89 |
| | When buying products, I generally purchase those brands that I think others will approve of | α 0.95 |
| | If other people can see me using a product, I often purchase the brand they expect me to buy | α 0.86 |
| Informational Influence - α .89 | I achieve a sense of belonging by purchasing the same products and brands that others purchase | α 0.89 |
| | If I have little experience with a product, I often ask my friends about the product | α 0.88 |
| | I often consult other people to help choose the best alternative available from a product class | α 0.92 |
| Bridging Social Capital α .88 | I frequently gather information from friends or family about a product before I buy | α 0.87 |
| | Interacting with people on the SNS makes me interested in things that happen outside of my town | α 0.92 |
| | Interacting with people on the SNS makes me want to try new things | α 0.85 |
| | Interacting with people on the SNS makes me interested in what people different from me are thinking | α 0.95 |

| | | |
|--|---|---------------|
| | Talking with people on the SNS makes me curious about other places in the world | α 0.94 |
| | Interacting with people on the SNS makes me feel like part of a larger community | α 0.93 |
| | Interacting with people on the SNS makes me feel connected to the bigger picture | α 0.82 |
| | Interacting with people on the SNS reminds me that everyone in the world is connected | α 0.86 |
| | I am willing to spend time to support general community activities on the SNS | α 0.89 |
| | Interacting with people on the SNS gives me new people to talk to | α 0.88 |
| | I come in contact with new people on the SNS all the time | α 0.86 |
| Bonding Social Capital - α .92 | There are several members of the SNS I trust to help solve my problems | α 0.95 |
| | There is a member of the SNS I can turn to for advice about making very important decisions | α 0.94 |
| | There is no one on the SNS that I feel comfortable talking to about intimate personal problems | α 0.88 |
| | When I feel lonely, there are members of the SNS I can talk to | α 0.92 |
| | If I needed an emergency loan of \$500, I know someone on the SNS I can turn to | α 0.91 |
| | The people I interact with on the SNS would put their reputation on the line for me | α 0.91 |
| | The people I interact with on the SNS would be good job references for me | α 0.96 |
| | The people I interact with on the SNS would share their last dollar with me | α 0.90 |
| | I do not know members of the SNS well enough to get them to do anything important | α 0.89 |
| | The people I interact with on the SNS would help me fight an injustice | α 0.91 |
| Trust - α .88 | Generally speaking, most contacts on my "friends" list on the SNS can be trusted | α 0.84 |
| | I feel confident about having discussions with the contacts on my "friends" list on the SNS | α 0.83 |
| | The contacts on my "friends" list on the SNS will do everything within their capacity to help others | α 0.88 |
| | I trust most contacts on my "friends" list on the SNS | α 0.89 |
| | I have confidence in the contacts on my "friends" list on the SNS | α 0.81 |
| | My contacts on my "friends" list on the SNS offer honest opinions | α 0.95 |
| | I can believe in the contacts on my "friends" list on the SNS | α 0.90 |
| Opinion Giving - α .74 | I often persuade my contacts on the SNS to buy products that I like | α 0.71 |
| | My contacts on the SNS pick their products based on what I have told them | α 0.78 |
| | On the SNS, I often influence my contacts' opinions about products | α 0.85 |
| Opinion Seeking - α .79 | When I consider new products, I ask my contacts on the SNS for advice | α 0.91 |
| | I don't need to talk to my contacts on the SNS before I buy products | α 0.84 |
| | I like to get my contacts' opinions on the SNS before I buy new products | α 0.72 |
| | I rarely ask my contacts on the SNS about what products to buy | α 0.88 |
| | I feel more comfortable choosing products when I have gotten my contacts' opinions on them on the SNS | α 0.73 |
| | When choosing products, my contacts' opinions on the SNS are not important to me | α 0.81 |
| Opinion Passing - α .88 | I tend to pass on information or opinions about the products to the contacts on my "friends" list on the SNS when I find it useful | α 0.95 |
| | On the SNSs, I like to pass along my contacts' comments containing information or opinions about the product that I like to other contacts on the SNS | α 0.84 |
| | When I receive product-related information or an opinion from a friend, I will pass it along to my other contacts on the SNS | α 0.82 |
| | On the SNS, I like to pass along interesting information about products from one group of my contacts on my "friends" list to another | α 0.93 |
| | I tend to pass along my contacts' positive reviews of products to other contacts on the SNS | α 0.88 |
| | I tend to pass along my contacts' negative reviews on products to other contacts on the SNS | α 0.87 |

Appendix B Dataset

Supplementary data to this article can be found at: <https://doi.org/10.17632/kt6km8bbgx.2>

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