

DRIVERS OF CONSUMER DECISION-MAKING IN E-RETAIL AND THEIR EFFECTS ON WORD-OF-MOUTH: A STUDY ACROSS INDIAN E-RETAILERS**Mr. Mohd Altaf Wani¹, Prof Iqbal Ahmad Hakim^{2*}**¹Research scholar, Department of management studies, university of Kashmir²Professor, Department of management studies, university of Kashmir**Abstract**

This research analyzes the influence of primary consumer decision factors such as perceived value, search engine utility, and purposive promotion on word-of-mouth (WOM) behavior within the realm of e-retailing. Data were gathered from 408 respondents in Jammu and Kashmir through a structured online questionnaire. Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was utilized to evaluate the relationships among the variables. The results indicate that perceived value and purposive promotion have a significant impact on word-of-mouth, with purposive promotion exhibiting the most substantial effect. The usefulness of search engines showed a positive yet marginally significant correlation with word-of-mouth communication. The findings underscore the necessity for e-retailers to align their value propositions and promotional strategies to foster positive word-of-mouth communication. This research enhances the literature on relationship marketing and consumer behavior by illustrating the influence of decision drivers on post-purchase communication. The limitations consist of employing convenience sampling and omitting other potential factors such as customer satisfaction and brand trust. Subsequent research must tackle these limitations and investigate a wider array of factors affecting WOM in e-retailing.

Keywords: Consumer decision, E-retailing, and Word of Mouth

Introduction

The emergence of e-retail has revolutionized the global retail environment, providing consumers with unparalleled ease, diversity, and accessibility to products. As an increasing number of consumers transition to online shopping platforms, digital decision-making factors have become crucial in influencing both purchasing behavior and subsequent word-of-mouth (WOM) dynamics. In today's interconnected landscape, word-of-mouth (WOM) has become a formidable instrument in influencing consumer perceptions, prompting firms to increasingly rely on favorable WOM to bolster their market visibility. This article examines the influence of three fundamental customer decision drivers in e-retailing preconceived values, search engine utility, and purposeful promotion on word-of-mouth behavior. Understanding the complex relationship between preexisting values, search engine functionality, and intentional marketing provides significant insights into the factors that influence word-of-mouth in online purchasing. These decision factors jointly affect customer perceptions and interactions with companies, eventually determining their propensity to share experiences (Cheung & Lee, 2012). The challenge for e-retailers is to synchronize these factors to promote favorable word-of-mouth and enhance brand advocacy.

Literature review and research framework

E-retailing and word of mouth

Consumer decision-making acknowledges word-of-mouth communication, both offline and online, as a significant factor (Cheung & Thadani, 2012). In e-retailing, word-of-mouth has evolved beyond conventional interpersonal recommendations to encompass online reviews, social media interactions, and brand advocacy across digital platforms. A study by Forbes (2019) indicates that more than 90% of consumers place greater trust in peer recommendations than in branded content, highlighting the importance of word-of-mouth as a key factor in online consumer behavior. Furthermore, consumers are increasingly depending on digital word-of-mouth sources, including review aggregators and social media influencers, to guide their purchasing decisions (BrandZ, 2021).

The viral potential of online platforms heightened the importance of word-of-mouth in digital contexts. Positive word-of-mouth can quickly amplify brand perception, whereas negative word-of-mouth can be detrimental, especially in e-retailing, where trust and reliability are critical (Zhang, Ko, & Kim, 2010). Understanding the underlying drivers that influence consumer decisions and their propensity to engage in word-of-mouth communication is essential for brands seeking to enhance customer loyalty and advocacy in the digital retail environment.

Preconceived values and WOM

A fundamental factor affecting consumer behavior in e-retail is preexisting values—those entrenched views and attitudes that dictate individuals' interactions with brands and products (Lee & Lou, 2021). Preconceived values frequently arise from cultural, social, and psychological influences and have a significant impact on consumer perceptions of e-retail offerings. Consumers that prioritize sustainability may actively pursue eco-friendly products and businesses, and their post-purchase word-of-mouth may highlight these values in their recommendations to others (Lim, Kim, & Cheong, 2020). Research indicates that preconceived values impact purchasing decisions and shape the tone and content of word-of-mouth communication. The Journal of Consumer Research (2017) published a study that suggests individuals are more likely to engage in positive word-of-mouth when their purchases align with their fundamental values, as these experiences reinforce their personal opinions. A disconnection between a consumer's ideals and their e-retail experience may lead to negative word-of-mouth, as discontent serves as a means of expressing dissonance (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004).

Search engine utility and WOM

In the digital age, search engines have emerged as an essential resource for customers seeking information regarding products, brands, and retailers. Search engine utility denotes the efficiency and ease with which users may locate pertinent information, evaluate options, and make informed choices (Jansen & Schuster, 2011). For e-retailers, enhancing search engine

exposure via strategies like search engine optimization (SEO) and paid search advertising is essential for capturing consumer interest. Research published in Marketing Science (2019) indicates that the quality and relevancy of search engine results profoundly influence consumer views of brand credibility and trustworthiness. Consumers often correlate higher-ranked results with increased brand reliability, which can directly affect their purchasing choices (Pan et al., 2010).

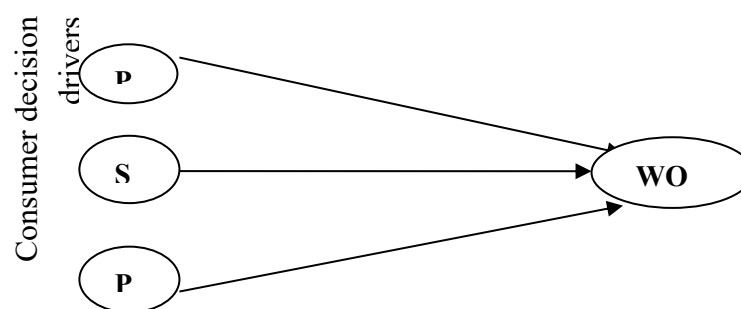
Furthermore, search engine results significantly influence word-of-mouth behavior, as consumers who are content with their search experiences are more inclined to disseminate favorable information about businesses and products, both online and offline (Ghose & Yang, 2009). Moreover, e-retailers that adeptly manage their search engine presence can improve their visibility and cultivate increased consumer involvement. This increased visibility frequently results in higher conversion rates and greater word-of-mouth activity, as consumers are inclined to share their experiences with brands that are easily accessible and esteemed (Forbes, 2022).

Purposive promotion and WOM

Targeted marketing efforts aimed at influencing specific consumer groups, has emerged as a fundamental component of e-retail strategies. Utilizing data analytics and consumer insights enables brands to develop personalized promotional campaigns that align with the needs and preferences of their target audience (Zhang & Mao, 2020). This promotional method is notably effective in digital retail settings, where consumers anticipate personalized experiences tailored to their specific preferences.

Afaqs (2021) indicates that purposeful promotions, including targeted advertisements and personalized offers, directly influence consumer decision-making by enhancing engagement and facilitating conversions. In e-retail, characterized by intense competition, brands that utilize targeted promotions effectively are more likely to foster positive word-of-mouth, as consumers value the personalized approach (BrandZ, 2020). The Journal of Interactive Marketing (2019) published a study that found personalized promotional efforts, such as email marketing and retargeted ads, significantly enhance consumer satisfaction, leading to increased rates of WOM engagement. Furthermore, purposeful promotion frequently intersects with influencer marketing and user-generated content, thereby enhancing word-of-mouth communication. When consumers view promotional efforts as genuine and in line with their interests, they are more inclined to share their experiences with others, thus broadening the impact of the brand's marketing initiatives (Forbes, 2021).

Figure 1 Research framework



PV perceived values, *SU* search engine utility, *PP* Purposive promotion

Hypotheses

H₁: Perceived values positively influences word of mouth

H₂: Search engine utility positively influences word of mouth

H₃: Purposive promotion positively influences word of mouth

Methodology

Participants

This study focused on individuals who are actively involved in and have experience with purchasing goods via online platforms. The study specifically focused on individuals aged 15 and older, intentionally avoiding data collection from minors. The sample comprised 408 survey participants from diverse regions within the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir, Table 1 presents a comprehensive summary of the demographic characteristics and preferences of 408 respondents across multiple categories, including gender, age, income, occupation, and preferred online platforms. The sample consists of 59.80% male respondents (244 individuals) and 40.20% female respondents (164 individuals), demonstrating a greater male participation rate. The predominant age group is 15-25 years, comprising 39.22% of respondents, followed by the 25-35 year group at 37.99%, and a lesser percentage in the 35-45 year category at 22.79%. This indicates a dominance of younger respondents in the sample. Undergraduate students constitute the largest demographic at 43.63%, followed by postgraduate students at 24.02%. Scholars represent 18.38%, while other occupations account for 13.97%. Amazon is the preferred online shopping platform for 26.96% of respondents, followed by Flipkart at 23.28%, Myntra at 21.32%, Snapdeal at 19.61%, and other platforms at 8.82%. The table indicates a sample primarily consisting of younger, male undergraduate students with moderate incomes, with Amazon identified as the most favored online retail

Instrument

The principal instrument employed for quantitative data collection in this study is a structured questionnaire. We carefully structured the questionnaire into two separate sections to ensure

thorough data collection and facilitate a systematic investigation of the impact of consumer choice factors on word of mouth. The questionnaire consisted of two primary sections: the first component gathered demographic data from participants, encompassing gender, age, and factors influencing consumer decision-making in e-retailing. The second phase assessed four elements of the study model, comprising 15 items evaluated on a 5-point Likert scale (from 1-strongly disagree to 5-strongly agree). We modified the items based on validated investigations to ensure their suitability and measurement reliability. We evaluated perceived values, purposeful promotion, and search engine utilization using three items each, adopted from validated studies (Shirazian et al., 2022), and six items for word of mouth (Goyette et al., 2021). These modified articles ensured conformity with the E-retailing setting. This organized questionnaire method enabled thorough data collection.

Table 1
Respondents' information

Characteristics	Criteria	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	244	59.80
	Female	164	40.20
	<i>Total</i>	<i>408</i>	<i>100</i>
Age	15-25	160	39.22
	25-35	155	37.99
	35-45	93	22.79
	<i>Total</i>	<i>408</i>	<i>100</i>
Occupation	UG-Student	178	43.63
	PG-Student	98	24.02
	Scholars	75	18.38
	Other	57	13.97
	<i>Total</i>	<i>408</i>	<i>100</i>
Preferred Online Platform	Amazon	110	26.96
	Flipkart	95	23.28
	Myntra	87	21.32
	Snapdeal	80	19.61
	Other	36	8.82
<i>Total</i>		<i>408</i>	<i>100</i>

a) Data collection and analysis

This study utilized quantitative methodology, employing online surveys distributed through Google Forms for data collection. We selected convenience sampling due to its accessibility, time efficiency, and cost-effectiveness, factors that have contributed to its prevalence in similar research contexts (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). We distributed the questionnaire through instant messaging platforms like WhatsApp, Telegram, and WeChat to engage a diverse demographic from Jammu and Kashmir, aiming to maximize participation (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). We informed participants about the study's purpose and obtained their explicit consent prior to their involvement, adhering to ethical research practices (Dillman,

Smyth, & Christian, 2014). The questionnaire provided a comprehensive overview of the study's objectives, along with guarantees of confidentiality and data protection, in accordance with established privacy standards (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2019).

This study focuses on business and management; employing surveys to examine consumer perceptions, a common method in marketing and consumer behavior research (Hair et al., 2020). We conducted no experimental procedures involving human or animal subjects. We collected data from 408 qualified participants who actively engaged in e-retailing on platforms such as Amazon, Flipkart, Snapdeal, and Myntra over a three-month period from July to August 2022. We included only individuals who completed at least one online purchase or transaction in the sample to ensure the dataset's accuracy and relevance. To improve the reliability and precision of the final dataset, we excluded responses containing incomplete or invalid data, including uniform selections across all questions (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

The main statistical analysis method used in this study was partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM), which is great for looking into complicated models and doing exploratory research (Hair et al., 2019). PLS-SEM has many benefits, including being able to work with smaller sample sizes and being better at modeling latent constructs than covariance-based SEM (Hair, Risher, Sarstedt, & Ringle, 2019). As suggested by prior studies (Hair et al., 2017; Fornell & Larcker, 1981), we performed analyses of Average Variance Extracted (AVE) and Composite Reliability (CR) to assess the convergent validity, internal consistency, and reliability of the measurement model.

The study also looked at discriminant validity using the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio of Correlations (HTMT), a method that is becoming more popular because it can find problems with discriminant validity (Henseler, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2015). These analytical methodologies together enhance the validity and reliability of the measurement model, ensuring the robustness and methodological soundness of the study's conclusions.

Results

Analysis of measurement model

Hair et al. (2017) propose two primary methods for evaluating the reliability of a measurement model within the study context: Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (ρ_c).

Table 2

Convergent validity

Construct Indicators	Loading	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted
Pre-conceived values		0.761	0.875	0.865

3735

This brand gives me a sense of respect.	0.755			
Purchasing from this brand saves me time.	0.668			
This brand cares about customer tastes and personal traits.	0.745			
Search engine utility		0.725	0.945	0.728
This website has a smart and fast search engine.	0.875			
The search engine of this website has a wide array of options and adjustment filters.	0.762			
This website has up-to-date and precise search results.	0.621			
Purposive promotions		0.754	0.821	0.657
The seasonal sales and promotions of this online retailer are appealing.	0.651			
This brand's attractive offers can compel me to buy even when I do not need that product.	0.756			
The offers and promotions often contain a wide array of products and are not limited to certain ones.	0.723			
Word of mouth		0.785	0.927	0.921
I recommended this company	0.725			
I speak of this company's good sides	0.845			
I am proud to say to others that I am this company's customer.	0.645			
I strongly recommend people buy products online from this company.	0.721			
I mostly say positive things to others.	0.826			
I have spoken favorably of this company to others.	0.659			

Nevertheless, it is crucial to acknowledge that Cronbach's alpha may not accurately represent the model's actual reliability, whereas composite reliability may occasionally overestimate it. Therefore, Hair, Hult, Ringle, & Sarstedt (2017) suggest presenting both metrics, with a dependable value typically lying between the two.

The measurement model in this study was evaluated according to the steps laid out by Hair et al. (2017). These steps included checking the peripheral loadings, average variance extracted (AVE) for convergent validity, Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability (CR), and discriminant validity. Table 2 indicates that the outer loadings for all items were within the range of 0.692 to 0.910, which is virtually equivalent to the minimum threshold of 0.70. Moreover, the AVE values, which are indicative of convergent validity, exceeded the

minimum threshold of 0.50, thereby confirming the convergent validity of all measures (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Moreover, the high internal consistency reliability confirmed the reliability and validity of the research model, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients for all constructs surpassing the acceptable threshold of 0.70.

The study employed two methods to assess discriminant validity: the Fornell-Larcker criterion and the heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT). Despite the frequent use of the Fornell-Larcker criterion and cross-loadings in this evaluation, research suggests that these methods may not consistently detect a lack of discriminant validity in common research scenarios (Henseler, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2015). This investigation (Henseler et al., 2015) implemented the HTMT method, a more effective alternative for evaluating discriminant validity. An HTMT value of less than 0.90 suggests that there is sufficient discriminant validity between two reflective constructs (Clark & Watson, 1995). The data presented in

Table 3 indicates that all HTMT values for the reflective constructs were less than 0.90, which is strong evidence of discriminant validity.

Research hypothesis examination

The table 4 displays the outcomes of the structural model evaluation, analyzing the correlations among perceived value (PV), search engine utility (SU), and purposeful promotion (PP) and word-of-mouth (WOM). The path coefficients (β) demonstrate positive correlations among all variables, with PV->WOM at 0.128, SU->WOM at 0.144, and PP->WOM at 0.213, indicating that purposeful promotion exerts the most significant influence. The sample means (M) aligns with the initial route coefficients, indicating stability over bootstrapped samples. The standard deviations (σ) are modest, ranging from 0.049 to 0.055, signifying negligible variability in the estimations, hence enhancing the reliability of the model results (Hair et al., 2017).

Table 3

Discriminant validity

	PV	PP	SU	WOM
PV				
PP	0.127			
SU	0.245	0.312		
WOM	0.159	0.245	0.241	

T-statistics and p-values indicate the statistical significance of these associations. The connections between PV->WOM and PP->WOM are substantial, exhibiting T-values of 2.33 and 4.333, respectively, with p-values below 0.05, so providing robust support for these pathways (Hair et al., 2014). The association between SU and WOM is marginally significant, indicated by a T-value of 1.738 and a p-value of 0.085, implying that search engine utility is less influential than perceived value and intentional promotion. The Variance

Inflation Factor (VIF) values, spanning from 1.001 to 1.188, remain far below the crucial threshold of 5, so affirming that multicollinearity is not a concern in the model (Sarstedt et al., 2020).

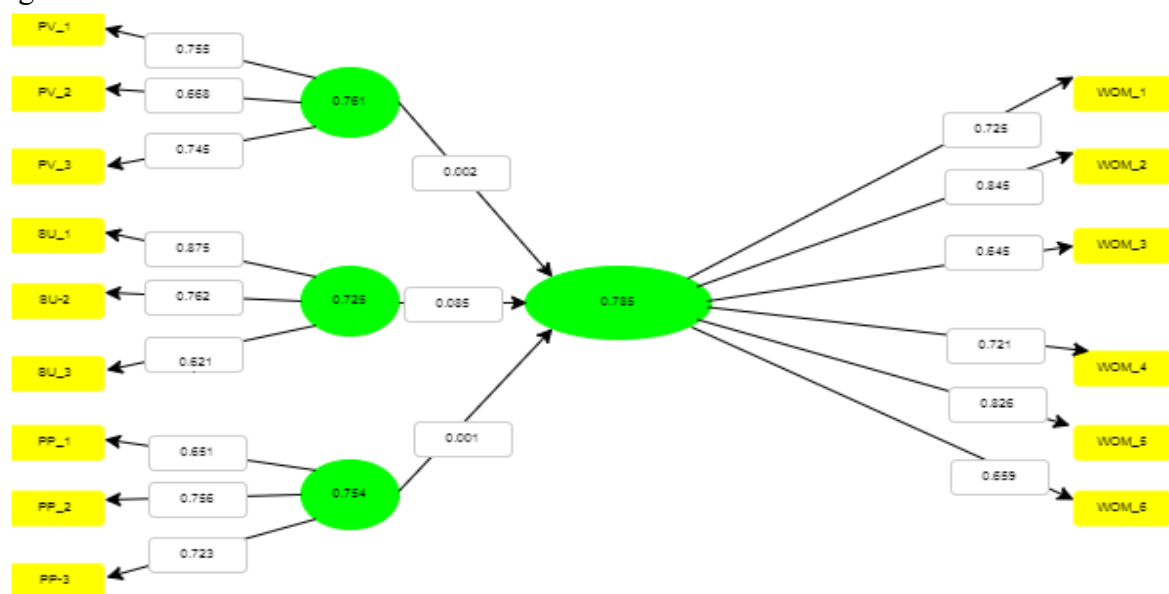
Table 4

Examination of research hypothesis

	β	M	σ	T-statistics	p-value	VIF	Result
PV->WOM	0.128	0.132	0.055	2.33	0.002	1.001	Accepted
SU->WOM	0.144	0.133	0.055	1.738	0.085	1.188	Accepted
PP->WOM	0.213	0.216	0.049	4.333	0.001	1.038	Accepted

β =original sample, M= sample mean, σ = standard deviation

Figure 2 Results of PLS-SEM



Discussions

The notable correlation between perceived value and word-of-mouth ($\beta = 0.128$, $p < 0.05$) is consistent with prior research indicating that consumers who perceive high value in their online shopping experiences are more inclined to disseminate positive feedback through word-of-mouth channels (Chae, Black, & Heitmeyer, 2020). In this context, perceived value encompasses more than just price; it also involves elements such as convenience, quality, and overall satisfaction with the shopping experience. This supports previous research indicating that consumer satisfaction and perceived value are essential factors influencing word-of-mouth behavior, as they motivate consumers to endorse products or services to others (Sweeney & Soutar, 2001).

The association between search engine utility and WOM ($\beta = 0.144$, $p = 0.085$), while marginally significant, offers noteworthy insights. The efficiency with which consumers locate pertinent information about products and services via search engines is referred to as search engine utility. Prior research indicates that search engines are essential in e-retailing,

as they improve information accessibility and support consumer decision-making (Horriggan, 2008; Boshoff, 2012). The findings of this study indicate that consumers who perceive search engines as beneficial for navigating the extensive online retail landscape are more inclined to participate in word-of-mouth communication, although this effect is less significant compared to other influences such as targeted promotion. This indicates that although search engines play a crucial role in directing consumers, additional factors may have a more substantial impact on their post-purchase communication.

The significant impact of purposive promotion ($\beta = 0.213$, $p < 0.05$) on word-of-mouth (WOM) corroborates prior studies indicating that targeted promotional strategies directly affect consumer engagement and advocacy (Ashley & Tuten, 2015). Purposeful promotion, encompassing personalized marketing and timely advertisements, fosters a stronger connection between consumers and the brand, thereby increasing the likelihood of positive word-of-mouth dissemination. This finding aligns with the research of Schivinski and Dabrowski (2016), which posits that promotional content tailored to consumer preferences significantly influences purchase intentions and word-of-mouth communication.

The findings indicate that perceived value and purposive promotion play essential roles in influencing post-purchase communication behaviors. The findings align with earlier research indicating that consumers who perceive high value and encounter effective promotions are more likely to endorse the product to others (Alalwan, 2018). Positive customer experiences and brand interactions, shaped by perceived benefits and retailers' promotional strategies, increasingly influence word of mouth (Goyette et al., 2010).

Limitation

While this study offers valuable insights, it is important to acknowledge several limitations when interpreting the findings. The research utilized a convenience sampling method, potentially restricting the generalizability of the findings. Participants primarily from Jammu and Kashmir gathered the sample, potentially limiting its representation of consumer behaviors across various regions or demographic groups. Future research may improve by employing diverse or randomized sampling methods to enhance generalizability.

The study examined three particular consumer decision drivers: perceived value, search engine utility, and purposive promotion. However, these may not encompass the complete array of factors affecting word-of-mouth (WOM) behavior. The model excluded additional variables such as customer satisfaction, brand trust, and emotional engagement, which could significantly impact word-of-mouth communication. Incorporating these variables into the study would improve our understanding of the factors that influence WOM in e-retailing contexts.

Implications

This study's findings offer significant insights for e-retailers and contribute to theoretical research. The findings demonstrate that perceived value (PV) and purposive promotion (PP)

significantly enhance word-of-mouth (WOM) behavior, with purposive promotion exhibiting the most substantial effect. This is consistent with earlier research highlighting the importance of value and targeted marketing strategies in improving consumer engagement and brand advocacy (Ashley & Tuten, 2015; Sweeney & Soutar, 2001). Search engine utility (SU) positively influences recommendation (WOM); however, its marginal significance indicates that search engines serve a supportive role in consumer decision-making. Consequently, e-retailers must enhance search engine efforts with additional engagement strategies to optimize the impact of WOM.

Theoretical implications are relevant to consumer behavior and digital marketing, emphasizing the importance of perceived value and promotion in influencing post-purchase communication. This research extends relationship marketing theories by illustrating the impact of customized promotional strategies on word-of-mouth, specifically within the context of e-retailing (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2016). The research enhances the information processing theory by highlighting the role of search engines in boosting consumer confidence, although overall satisfaction may moderate their direct impact on word-of-mouth (Boshoff, 2012). The findings highlight the significance of a comprehensive strategy for consumer engagement that integrates value, promotion, and information accessibility to enhance positive word-of-mouth.

Conclusion

This study underscores the significant influence of consumer decision drivers—perceived value, search engine utility, and purposive promotion—on word-of-mouth (WOM) behavior in the e-retail sector. The results indicate that perceived value and purposive promotion significantly enhance word-of-mouth, with purposive promotion identified as the most impactful element. While search engine utility contributes to word-of-mouth, its limited significance indicates a supplementary role, highlighting the necessity for a comprehensive strategy in customer engagement. The findings have actionable implications for e-retailers aiming to improve word-of-mouth marketing by developing value-rich experiences and implementing targeted promotional strategies. Theoretical contributions enhance relationship marketing and information processing theories, emphasizing the necessity of aligning promotional efforts, perceived value, and information accessibility to promote positive post-purchase communication. Future research may enhance these findings by integrating additional variables and utilizing more varied sampling methods to increase generalizability.

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