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SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS  
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# The trustworthiness of anonymous eWOM

## **Authors**

Kasper Hörnfeldt  
Henrik Cavalli-Abrahamson

## **Supervisor**

Jon Bertilsson

## ABSTRACT

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<b>Title</b>	The trustworthiness of anonymous eWOM
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<b>Authors</b>	Kasper Hörnfeldt & Henrik Cavalli-Abrahamson
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<b>Key Words</b>	Anonymous eWOM, purchase process, trust, risk & cognitive dissonance.
<b>Purpose</b>	The main purpose of this research essay is to understand why and to what extent consumers trust anonymous eWOM. Secondly, it aims to understand what role anonymous eWOM has on the consumer's purchase decision.
<b>Methodology</b>	A qualitative approach where data is collected through semi-structured interviews. The research is conducted with a phenomenological method in combination with an abductive work approach. Furthermore, the data is analysed with hermeneutics and grounded theory.
<b>Theoretical approach</b>	The choice of theories is a mixture of classic well-founded theories in combination with modern research. The theories depict three major blocks – trust, purchase process and consumer behaviour.

These theories will be used to create a diversified theoretical framework, which will be of relevance to the research question.

### **Analysis**

The empirical foundation is based on 15 in-depth interviews with anonymous eWOM users. The analysis is furthermore presented in combination with the empirical material to create a unified and coherent picture.

### **Conclusion**

Consumers trust anonymous eWOM based on a mixture of previous experiences, product specific forums, increased seriousness online and the scarcity of other information sources. Additionally consumers use anonymous eWOM in their purchase decision process primarily as a complementary information source to reduce cognitive dissonance. Finally, factors, which influence trust towards anonymous eWOM sites, include; web-design, number of participants, number of comments and the level of activity.

## PREFACE

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The work with this essay has been educational, fun and at times very hard. The process of completing the essay proved to be both time consuming and interesting. We hope that we have contributed with some valuable insights to understanding the trust towards anonymous eWOM. Additionally, we hope that you, the readers, will find this essay well written and interesting.

We would like to acknowledge a number of individuals whom all contributed in the making of this thesis. Firstly, we would like to thank our supervisor, Jon Bertilsson for your valuable insights, thoughts and encouragement. Secondly, a special acknowledgment to our respondents for their help in completing this thesis by dedicating time, effort and knowledge throughout our interviews.

Lund May 25<sup>th</sup> 2011,

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Henrik Cavalli-Abrahamson

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Kasper Hörnfeldt

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## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

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*This chapter will first present an in-depth background of anonymous eWOM to understand the fundamentals of the research area. Furthermore, a problem discussion follows in which the problem is depicted and thoroughly motivated. Additionally, a literature review is presented where research gaps concerning anonymous eWOM are discussed in combination with the current research situation. Finally, the chapter presents the research's purpose and its limitations.*

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### 1.1 BACKGROUND

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Since its birth in the late 1980's, Internet has grown and developed to become a fundamental element in modern society. It is a phenomenon, which is firmly rooted and plays a vital role for millions of individuals and corporations daily. Crossing communication boundaries thought to be permanent, as Internet, has provided a platform that interconnects individuals from all corners of the world (Wikipedia A). One of these communication channels, which has evolved from the Internet, is social media. Although it was prematurely considered a temporary trend, social medias have grown steadily, and taken all critics by storm. One of its revolutionary characteristics is its high level of interaction capabilities, which allows writers and readers to communicate via electronic-word-of-mouth (eWOM)(Chung & Austria, 2010). An official definition for social media and the founding principles for eWOM is;

*“ media that is published, created and shared by individuals on the internet, such as blogs, images, video and more... as well as online tools and platforms that allow internet users to collaborate on content, share insights and experiences, and connect for business or pleasure” – Chung & Austria (2010) p. 581*

In social contexts, a segment that has experienced growth due to Internet consumer-to-consumer communication, is product and service feedback forums. These feedback sites main purposes are to provide an open dialogue between consumers concerning products and services in their daily lives. The sites might have started as simple interaction arenas among friends, but eventually developed into global reviewing, rating and comment networks with thousand of new posts every day (Thurau & Gwinner 2004). Feedback sites, have as many

Internet based phenomenon, differentiate themselves from competing sites with factors such as; product or service reviews, networks size but also the level of anonymity. Although there are several more factors that distinguish these sites from each other, one of the most significant attributes is the anonymity level provided (Thurau & Gwinner 2004). Comparing the auction site eBay.com, against the Swedish review site rejta.se, can clearly show this difference.

One of the main characteristics of eBay, is the use of two-way feedback. This means that both buyers and sellers can post feedback concerning their experience with the opposing part. Each individual that participates on the site needs an eBay profile on which several pieces of information are stored. Among other things, the account-holders previous purchase and sales history can be monitored by any other eBay member. This means that every member's track-record and feedback is stored as reference for future business partners to determine the reliability of the opposing part (Weinberg & Davis 2004). eBay's success can to a great extent be given to its feedback mechanism, as the system takes away the moral hazard of leaving fraud feedback (Weinberg & Davis 2004 ).

In contrast to eBay, rejta.se is a feedback forum that allows consumer to leave feedback with complete anonymity. This means that anybody can post comments under any alias. The construction of the forum implies, that writers can be extremely honest, as feedback cannot be traced back to the author. However, it also leaves space for fraud feedback, as there is no control mechanism or consequence that affect the writer if unlawful feedback is posted. This anonymous type of feedback is referred to as anonymous eWOM. The dilemma surrounding the structure of anonymous eWOM, is that there are many potentially useful posts, but it is harder to establish what is true and what is manipulated.

Regardless of which type of feedback forum is studied, and the level of anonymity, most of them have in common the possibility to post and read comments. This type of interaction and feedback between consumers and readers is called electronic-word-of-mouth (eWOM), which has its roots in traditional word-of-mouth feedback (WOM). An eWOM interaction can be defined as;

*“any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet.” –Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh & Gremler (2004) p. 39*

As mentioned above, feedback sites with the help of anonymous eWOM allow consumers to communicate thoughts concerning products from complete strangers on the other side of the world. This means that on one forum, there can be a cocktail of feedback-posts, ranging from experts to the average everyday user. The goal with the feedback system is for every product to have a relevant range of comments. Based on the trustworthiness of the comments the readers are able to decide how to proceed with their purchase decision (Thurau & Walsh 2003). The fundamental idea is that consumers help other consumers to create transparency in the jungle of products.

Anonymous eWOM, being the little brother of WOM, has inherited bits of its strengths such as the sense of reliability. Although not determined how reliable anonymous eWOM is among consumers, WOM is considered the most powerful and effective way to create a “buzz” and influence consumers (Chung & Austria. 2010). With this in mind, anonymous eWOM has to be considered a powerful tool as it possess a relatively high level of reliability, but can also be communicated to millions via the internet.

Despite the fact that anonymous eWOM feedback sites were created with the intention of generating transparency and helping consumers gain knowledge. There were automatically loopholes created for moral hazard when participants could leave feedback anonymously. (Weinberg & Davis 2004). Not only can consumers leave fraud feedback, but it also creates space for corporations to leave manipulated feedback to influence site participants. eWOM from anonymous feedback forums has in other words become a grey area of interaction that can help but also manipulate consumers when retrieving information. The phenomenon can be described as controversial, as consumers are aware of the implications involved when taking anonymous eWOM into consideration. Nonetheless, even though anonymous eWOM embodies possible fraud, they have still grown and become a widely consulted information source (Thurau & Gwinner 2004).

## 1.2 PROBLEM DISCUSSION

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One of the first social norms a child in western culture learns and which accompanies the child through life, often is; "Do not talk to, nor trust strangers". The logic behind this statement is that you never know what a stranger's intentions are and therefore, the risk of being harmed is minimized by not interacting with him. When dissecting the statement even further, it can also be assumed that society tends to believe that there are always individuals looking to exploit and take advantage of others, if the possibility is given. Therefore, no one should be trusted unless the individual can be identified and considered to have legitimate intentions (McKnight 2002). This social norm is an underlying cornerstone in western society and is experienced every day e.g. the avoidance of buying goods from street vendor, as there is no assurance that the product will work or is refundable. Another example is how individuals' logout from their e-mail accounts on public computers, as they never know who will be using the computer afterwards. Regardless if it concerns business matters, or just receiving product advice, individuals tend to be cautious when the interaction involves a stranger. This social behaviour is a normal part of modern society and has its roots in a trust and risk minimization mindset (McKnight 2002).

However, with the extended use and popularity of Internet, consumers have been presented with a different interactional reality. This reality is to some extent based on the limitations of emotions and impressions that can be transmitted over the computer screen. That is to say, there is not the same face-to-face interaction or physical presence on anonymous eWOM sites as the interaction experienced in real-life situations (Ulivieri 2005). That is to say, how can a sadistic comment that is hard to determine in real life be understood, if a persons voice cannot be heard nor body-language seen? Furthermore, how can a consumer be sure that an anonymous eWOM comment is posted from a consumer and not by a manipulated-source, when the subjects' identity cannot be determined?

As emotions, impressions and physical attributes tend to be of great importance when creating trust in real-life interactions. It can be assumed that other factors have replaced and serve a similar trust function on anonymous eWOM sites. Even though there is a high level of uncertainties correlated with anonymous eWOM sites, the Internet community has had to adapt and modify in order to achieve credibility.

What makes the phenomenon of eWOM from anonymous feedback sites intriguing, is the level of trust shown from consumers that tend to be conservative in real-life situations. It is remarkable how individuals can be so protective against risk in their everyday lives, but tend to let their guard down once they interact via the internet. This becomes particular interesting as there is a high level of consumer awareness concerning the possibility of misleading posts on these anonymous eWOM forums. It is almost as if the social norms of trust towards strangers loses its implications on the Internet. Regardless of why trust exist towards anonymous eWOM comments, it present potential modifications to previous consumer behaviour.

With the presence of a gap between consumers everyday approach to trust and the change of behaviour shown on anonymous eWOM sites, it becomes interesting to understand which factors have modified consumer behaviour and how. Is there a possibility that a new generation is emerging who embrace the benefits of truthfulness and peer sharing on the Internet? Is there a mutual consumer desire to create transparency against product pitfalls by providing reliable feedback? Or, are consumers just as critical as before, but have learnt how to read between the eWOM lines? Regardless of which, it becomes increasingly interesting to understand if there exists trust towards anonymous eWOM and in that case why.

### **1.2.1 RESEARCH PROBLEM**

Based on the contradictory consumer behaviour in real-life situations versus their behaviour when retrieving information from anonymous eWOM sites. It becomes increasingly interesting to answer the following questions in order to understand how consumer trust behaviour has evolved.

1. Why do consumers trust anonymous eWOM?
2. How does anonymous eWOM influence the purchase process?
3. What key factors make an anonymous feedback site credible?

## 1.3 LITERATURE REVIEW

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Previous academic research focuses on all types of eWOM regardless the level of anonymity. This means that the present research available is broad and does solely focus on anonymous eWOM.

A general conclusion that can be derived from several published eWOM reports indicates that eWOM, in general, does have an effect on consumer purchase behaviour. Thorsten Thureau and Gianfranco Walsh, argue that this trend is present and can be acknowledged in its simplest form, by the steady growth of eWOM forums and their visit statistics. One of the reasons for its popularity is assumed to be the simplicity-implications, which Internet provides. That is to say, the availability of information in combination with the effectiveness of being able to purchase products online without having to visit a store (Thureau & Walsh 2004). The accessibility and simplicity provided by Internet, makes eWOM a great source of information as it adds knowledge without being too difficult to obtain.

*“As markets become saturated with information and products, it is increasingly difficult for consumers to know and process all alternatives. . . . in such circumstances, competent advisors . . . can help consumers become informed without their engaging in cognitively demanding and time-consuming search activities” – Thureau & Walsh 2004 page 53*

Previous research identifies multiple theories and principles that can be used to explain parts of why consumers use eWOM. One of the reasons for the use of eWOM, which is presented by Thureau and Walsh is self-involvement motives. This means that consumers are willing to risk the possibility of using fraud feedback, in order to save time and effort. It can almost be considered a trade-off situation where effort is weighed against risk. The authors also point out that self-involvement motives tend to decrease as the prize and personal affection of the purchase increase. This means that consumers are picky when they choose information sources and vary the information composition depending on the price and type of product. However, eWOM is used actively and in some cases plays a determining role (Thureau, Walsh 2004).

Fred Bronner and Robert de Hoog, indicate that one key reason for using eWOM is consumer risk-reduction. That is to say, eWOM is used to gain knowledge from others experiences and based on that information, make an appropriate risk assessment. Their research results indicate that many choices concerning products and services are high-involvement decisions. That is to say that consumer who have no previous experience with the product, need to take multiple factors into account in order to obtain an objective picture. Based on these principles, they use eWOM as a primary or complementary information source to acquire information diversification (Bronner & Hoog, 2010). The eWOM received becomes a piece of the puzzle in order to minimize risk.

The fundamental ideas of Herr, Kardes & Kim noticed the applicability of the accessibility-diagnostic model on eWOM. This model indicates that consumers tend use information that is cognitively easy to access, rather than information that is hard to comprehend. Therefore, easily understood and obtained information does have a significant roll in a decision process (Herr, Kardes & Kim 1991). Although eWOM does not convey the same feelings as a face-to-face conversation, the information posted is often short and descriptive. By being easy to understand and very accessible, anonymous eWOM's success can partly be explained. The authors also argue that parts of message-accessibility theory can explain the use and acceptance of eWOM. The familiarity with a subject not only makes it easier to process, but also connects positive emotions to it. Based on this principle, the authors argue that a consumer's trust towards eWOM is to a great extent influenced by their previous experiences. This means, that if a consumer has had previous positive experiences with eWOM, it will probably influence their opinion of the phenomenon in a positive way (Herr, Kardes & Kim 1991).

Sang Jun-Lee and Zoonky Lee, further agree with previous research, which states that eWOM does have an affect on consumers attitudes. Although much of their research was gathered form member based auction sites, it was possible to see distinctive trends concerning the influence of positive and negative eWOM. Lee and Lee state that trust is based on calculative and knowledge factors that are evaluated in the individuals mind. Trust has its foundation in a complicated trade-off between benefits and costs, as well as knowledge and experience. That is to say; trust is developed gradually through interactions and time. With this in mind, trust takes time to achieve and tends to be low between new encounters due to their short history (Lee & Lee 2006). As there often is no history between consumers and the anonymous

writers on eWOM sites, consumers are believed to have a low initial trust level towards it. However, based on the assumption that trust, in general, is built through e.g. previous experience and knowledge, consumer's trust towards eWOM can be strengthened through time. Thus, Lee and Lee argue that if a consumer has a positive experience from their first eWOM encounters, it will affect their general attitude towards eWOM as a reliable information source (Lee & Lee 2006).

On the other side, Bruce Weinberg and Lenita Davis have through their research concluded that there is a limited level of knowledge concerning eWOM and its relation towards consumers. Bruce and Davis further state that there is incomplete knowledge of how consumers use eWOM and how they categorize the different types of eWOM sources. That is to say, if eWOM is used as a primary or secondary information source and how reliability differs between anonymous and member based eWOM (Weinberg & Davis 2005). The author's further conclude that the success of feedback eWOM sites, such as eBay, is based on their control and feedback mechanisms, which removes moral hazard associated with anonymity. However, they do not address why anonymous eWOM sites are growing in popularity, even-though clear risks are associated with them (Weinberg & Davis 2005). Furthermore, they believe that the speed and constant change associated with the Internet, means that a phenomenon such as eWOM, is continuously developing and changing its structure.

Concluding previous eWOM findings, much research has been done on eWOM as a general phenomenon, but less research has focused on anonymous eWOM. That is to say, what trustworthiness is there towards anonymous eWOM and what factors underlie that trust? Several eWOM theories do not distinguish between member-based and anonymous eWOM. As these two feedback methods imply several different implications, it cannot be assumed that research results are applicable to all eWOM. Oranges and lemons are both citrus-fruits, but they are not the same!

A secondary literature gap, indicates limited in-depth research concerning the degree of influence anonymous feedback has on consumers and their actual purchase. That is to say; how does a consumer interpret anonymous eWOM feedback, and what influence does it have on the purchase? Is anonymous feedback only used as a complimentary information source or does it have a significant authority in the purchase processes?

A third research gap that indicates for further research of the subject, is that the main research methods used in most presented reports, rely on quantitative research methods. This means that the results are identified and organized in general categories. It can be argued that a quantitative research method, might not present the detailed opinions, which can be of great relevance when understanding phenomenon that embodies personal emotions and trust.

Finally, as anonymous eWOM is considered to be a widely used information source, there is interest to see what its effect is in present time. How do consumers use eWOM 2011 and what implications does it have on consumer's information collection and purchase behaviour.

Based on these research and methodology gaps, there is an interest in understanding the implications of anonymous eWOM and its influence on consumer purchase behaviour.

## **1.4 PURPOSE**

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The main purpose of this research essay is to understand why and to what extent consumers trust anonymous eWOM. Secondly, it aims to understand what role anonymous eWOM has on the consumer's purchase decision.

## **1.5 TARGET GROUP**

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To research anonymous eWOM is interesting, as Internet forums have experienced a dramatic growth and tend to be reviewed by information seeking consumers. Although this essay is of interest for consumers in order to understand how anonymous eWOM is used and valued as a resource, it might be of greater use for feedback sites. This research will enlighten feedback forums by understanding today's reality in order to shape the anonymous eWOM forums of tomorrow. The research will act as feedback to anonymous eWOM sites, as it depicts how consumers experience and use these forums. The insights from this report might generate improvements or changes to current anonymous eWOM sites, which in the end will benefit the consumers.

From a judicial point of view, this report could reveal flaws that have gone unnoticed due to the fast development of these forums. Implication shown could be used to shape future

feedback forums in order to assure consumer safety and minimize possible e-fraud.

Additionally, from a corporate perspective, this report can serve as an indicator to understand the power and possibilities lodged in anonymous eWOM. The research might create a sense of how to obtain and embrace consumer “buzz”, in order to incorporate consumers’ wishes into their products.

Finally, from a psychological and social point of view, this research might act as a contribution to understand how social behaviour and mentality has changed due to implementation of anonymous eWOM. How consumer behaviour and trust have evolved based on the new implications provided by the Internet.

## **1.6 LIMITATIONS**

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The great popularity of social media has lead to the rise of countless forums, blogs and feedback sites. They might all have similar foundations, but vary dramatically depending on what the sites purpose is and who their target users are. Due to the fact that this reports aims to understand why and to what degree trust exists towards anonymous eWOM sites, there are several limitations that need to be taken into account.

First of all, as the research goal is to identify the contradiction of individuals more liberal approach to information sources on Internet based forums. Therefore, all forums that provide some sort of feedback identity need to be ruled out. This limitation includes forums like eBay and Pricerunner as they provide readers with a forum identity, or even show members track records. These types of sites insure a larger chance of feedback validity and are therefore not relevant for this report, whose focus lies on the level of acceptance and trust towards anonymous eWOM.

Given that the thesis aims at understanding anonymous eWOM in general, it is of less relevance to focus on anonymous eWOM posted on one specific site. Instead, the research will try to depict multiple experiences that united will give a well-balance picture of anonymous eWOM and the trust associated with it.

This report is based on Swedish interview subjects and their experiences of anonymous eWOM. Thus, the results might only be applicable to Swedish consumers. Nonetheless, the interview subjects' experiences of anonymous eWOM are not solely based on Swedish eWOM sites, which give the results some International usefulness.

## 1.7 DISPOSITION

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### **Chapter 1 – Introduction**

The introductory chapter aims at giving the reader a view of the background, the problem discussion as well as presenting the reader with a literature review of the eWOM area. The chapter further presents the research's purpose, research questions and thoroughly motivates why this study should be conducted.

### **Chapter 2 – Methodology**

The methodological chapter present the reader with a thorough description of the research design and why it was chosen. The research is conducted with qualitative approach where the empirical material was collected with semi-structured interviews. The material is thereafter analysed with the hermeneutic circle and grounded theory. Furthermore, the chapter discusses general issues such as source criticism and trustworthiness.

### **Chapter 3 – Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical chapter will present the reader with a relevant theoretical framework based on trust, purchase processes and consumer behaviour. The chapter will lie as a foundation for the analysis of the empirical material, which will then be further used in deriving conclusions.

### **Chapter 4 – Empirical Material and Analysis**

The empirical material will be presented in combination with the analysis in order to present a more coherent picture of trust towards anonymous eWOM. It is in this chapter where theory, empirical material and the authors own interpretations are combined to present a deep analysis of the research area.

### **Chapter 5 – Conclusions**

The function of the conclusion chapter is to, based on the analysis, answer the research

questions and fulfil the purpose of the thesis. That is to say, it will try to answer why and to what extent consumers trust anonymous eWOM. The conclusion will be presented as theoretical and practical contributions as well as suggestions for future research.

### **Chapter 6 – References**

A list of references used throughout the thesis will be presented throughout this chapter. Reference used includes articles, Internet sources and published literature.

## CHAPTER 2. METHODOLOGY

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*The methodology chapter will describe how the empirical material has been gathered. Secondly, a description and motivation of the research design is presented to illustrate why the specific methods have been used. Finally, the methodology chapter will discuss how the empirical material will be analysed and presented.*

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### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

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We have in this thesis chosen to view reality in accordance with the phenomenological view, initially we considered using social constructionism. However, given our purpose and aim to present an in-depth study of how consumers view and trust anonymous eWOM, we realised that a phenomenology approach would fit better. The choice to use phenomenology is based on the idea of social constructionism, which implies that reality is not determined by external factors but rather by individuals. Thus the research approach focuses on how the individual, collectively and individually, describes their experiences. That is to say, the focus should be on explaining and understanding why individuals have different experiences rather than focusing on external factors (Easterby & Smith et al 2008).

The strengths of social constructionism are that the approach is good for generating theories and possesses the ability to understand meanings and processes. Besides these factors, social constructionism is useful for the collection of data, which is seen as a natural process. On the other hand, weaknesses of social constructionism are that the method can be time consuming and that the analysis process is difficult to conduct (Easterby & Smith et al 2008). Given that we seek to present an in-depth study of anonymous eWOM, we argue that social constructionism would not aide us in our attempt to present an this study. Social constructionism would be too time-consuming in combination with the difficulty it presents when analysing and interpreting data.

Phenomenology, on the other hand, focuses on capturing undistorted phenomenon as individuals interpret them, where the overall goal is to present reality as it appears. Therefore an important factor that needs to be taken into consideration is that we are a part of the study

and this can affect our empirical material. Given that the focus of phenomenology is to present the reality as it appears without any influence from the researcher, we need to put our interpretations' of reality aside. Criticism towards phenomenology is that it can be difficult for the researcher to put their interpretations aside. Strengths of phenomenology are that the approach aims to present the reality as it is, without any distortion as well as not focusing on studying hidden messages (Phenomenology A). Considering our aim to conduct an in-depth study of why and to what extent, consumers trust anonymous eWOM. The possibility of studying anonymous eWOM without any distortion, as phenomenology allows, is to be preferred, compared to the implications of social constructionism. Phenomenology would allow a quicker and straightforward analysis approach, which we consider useful and valuable.

## **2.2 RESEARCH APPROACH**

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Given the thesis purpose and the development of our research questions we have chosen an abductive research approach. There are two other existing research approaches that are commonly used and which we initially considered – inductive and deductive. The abductive approach shares common traits with the other two research approaches but is considered more flexible. Induction uses empirical facts as a foundation to form a universal truth, for example “every time I have climbed this mountain there has been snow on the top so therefore there must be snow on it this time as well.” The weakness of the inductive approach is that it lacks the ability to generate theories and is only able to produce empirical summaries (Alvesson & Sköldbberg 2008).

The deductive approach on the other hand, has its foundation in theories and general assumptions, which then is used to explain a certain set of empirical material, for example “why do people have legs? Because all people have legs.” The deductive approach is often used when testing theories. Thus, one weakness of the deductive approach is that the researcher tends to only focus on finding empirical material, which is of relevance for the study and that will support the initial expectations of the research (Jacobsen 2002). Additionally, both the inductive and deductive approaches are considered to be more one-sided than the abductive approach. That is to say, that they are not as flexible as they lack the

ability to go back and forth between theory and empirical material (Alvesson & Sköldberg 2008).

Furthermore, the abductive approach is focused on using available theory to map theoretical patterns, which in turn are used to understand the gathered empirical material. For example, the abductive approach is used by doctors when diagnosing patients. Doctors use their knowledge combined with empirical material e.g. patient information, in order to set the correct diagnose. During the research process the theory and the empirical material is refined and further adjusted to the current case. The abductive work process permits the researchers to go back and forth between theory and the empirical material in order to discover the roots of the research problem. Thus one major difference to the inductive and deductive approaches is that the abductive approach focuses on understanding the phenomenon in focus. That is to say, the abductive approach focuses on understanding underlying patterns within the phenomenon, e.g. understanding why the patient is sick, rather than focusing on for example validating theories (Alvesson & Sköldberg 2008).

Given the flexibility of the abductive work process, described above, we have chosen to use an abductive approach. In addition, the abductive approach also enables us to combine existing theoretical eWOM knowledge with the empirical material e.g. how consumers view anonymous eWOM in terms of trustworthiness. By doing this we feel that we are able to contribute with new insights within the anonymous eWOM and consumer behaviour area. Therefore, we feel that the abductive approach is suitable for our research.

## **2.3 QUALITATIVE RESEARCH**

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There are two main approaches to consider when conducting a research – the qualitative and the quantitative approach. A quantitative research focuses on gathering hard data in form of numbers where as a qualitative research focuses on descriptive material in form of words (Easterby & Smith et al 2008). Additionally, a qualitative research approach aims to provide the researchers with a more in-depth understanding about the respondents and how they perceive their world (Easterby & Smith et al 2008). We have for this research chosen to conduct a qualitative study.

We are aware of the criticism towards qualitative research, which states that qualitative research is too subjective, hard to replicate and that there is a lack of transparency. (Bryman & Bell 2007)

Despite the criticisms and given our research problem we believe that a qualitative approach gives us the opportunity to collect a rich and more detailed data of consumers' attitudes and trust towards anonymous eWOM. Furthermore, we argue that the research area is of a complex nature, as the thesis focuses on how and why consumers trust anonymous eWOM. Therefore, we deem that a quantitative approach would only scratch the surface of the research area, since the approach is not focused on getting in-depth and rich data. Given the complexity of the research area, we have chosen a qualitative approach since we argue that by conducting a qualitative research, we are able to get a deeper understanding of the behaviour of the consumers and their use of anonymous eWOM. We feel that this would not be possible with a quantitative research as we would not be able to get a deep and thorough understanding of the consumers' view on anonymous eWOM. The reason for this choice is that consumers' attitudes towards eWOM are behaviour-based and thus, hard to capture using a quantitative data collection method.

## **2.4 PRIMARY AND SECONDARY DATA**

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The data collected for this study is divided into two types of data – primary and secondary data. Primary data is the data and empirical material, which we will collect ourselves. Our primary data was collected during in-depth interviews and it is the material that will base our research on. Secondary data, which is material gathered and presented by other researchers, was collected through search engines such as Business Source Complete, Google Scholar and Lund University libraries. The secondary data was gathered from literature, academic articles and other relevant material obtained (Andersen 1998).

### **2.4.1 SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS**

We have chosen to conduct interviews since we believe it to be a good and valid data collection method. Semi-structured interviews are also a suitable method for this thesis, given the purpose to study consumers' attitudes towards anonymous eWOM (Easterby & Smith et al 2008). Initially we considered performing a participant observation or focus groups as a

data collection method. However, we believe that since our focus is on the individual consumers' attitudes towards anonymous eWOM, interviews would be better suited for our research. During observations or focus groups, participants can be influenced by other participants and thus creating manipulated material. We argue that this would be unfavourable for our data collection as we strive to gather the individuals' own opinions. In addition, focus groups and participant observations are more time consuming, the researcher has less control, they are difficult to analyse and organize (Bryman & Bell 2007). Based on the mentioned drawbacks of focus groups and participant observation combined with our limited set of resources, we have chosen to conduct semi-structured interviews.

We are aware of that there are general issues that we need to consider in order to perform interviews at an acceptable level. The issues needed to be taken into consideration and that might affect the quality of the interviews, include biased questions, steering of the respondent and interview technique (Andersen 1998). However, we have to be aware that the right interview technique does not guarantee the collection of high quality material. The respondents have no obligations to tell the truth and should therefore be evaluated and reviewed in order to obtain material that is of high quality in terms of trustworthiness (Alvesson & Sköldbberg 2008).

Interviews can be conducted in multiple ways and one main difference between them is the level of structure. There are three main types of interviews – highly structured, semi structured and unstructured (Easterby & Smith et al 2008). We have chosen to conduct semi-structured interviews, which means that we will conduct in-depth interviews with a predetermined set of question. The semi-structured interview approach enables us to leave the script and engage in discussions with the respondent. This level of structure suits our research, as we want to have a predetermined set of question, which helps us to cover the important areas for our data collection. In addition, the semi-structured interview also enables us to gain better knowledge of anonymous eWOM by engaging into unplanned in-depth discussions (Bryman & Bell 2007). It is important that we during our interviews gain a deep and genuine understanding about the respondents, their view and their experiences of anonymous eWOM.

#### **2.4.1.1 INTERVIEW TECHNIQUE**

As mentioned in the previous section there are a number of factors that we need to take into account in order to perform our interviews at an adequate level. These factors include biased

questions, steering of the respondent and how the questions are asked. In addition to these factors, good interview skills are needed in order to collect data of high quality. The first initial step during the interviews is that the interviewer needs to address and explain to the respondent how the information is going to be used. Both the interviewer and the respondent need to be aware of the level of anonymity, which is attached to the collected information before the interview proceeds (Wallendorf & Beck 1989).

Wallendorf & Beck (1989) argue that interviews should begin with a broad set of questions with the goal to get the respondent relaxed and feeling comfortable when answering questions. Thereafter, interviewer should move on and focus on asking more detailed and specific questions, which are constructed to collect rich and thick descriptions of the research problem. Furthermore, the authors argue that sensitivity and adaptability are perhaps the most important parts of a good interview technique. This, as it is important for the interviewer to be able to adapt his behaviour towards the respondent and thereby being able to make the respondent feel more comfortable (Wallendorf & Beck 1989).

Interview technique is something needed to be taken into consideration in order to collect material of high quality. Given that we seek to gain a deep understanding about consumers' attitudes towards anonymous eWOM, we need to conduct our interviews so that the respondents feel comfortable answering, thus enabling us to collect rich and thick descriptions. Regarding the level of anonymity, we have chosen to offer our respondents full anonymity. Given our previous experience with interviews and anonymity request from respondents, we argue that the respondents feel at ease answering questions with full anonymity. The interview will therefore start off with a series of broad questions and then move on to more specific questions about our research problem. Effort will be focused on adapting our behaviour and attitudes in order to make the respondent feel more safe talking to us.

#### **2.4.1.2 RESPONDENTS**

Given the purpose of this study it is required that the respondents have experienced anonymous eWOM first handily during the last six months. Furthermore, it is also essential that they have purchased products online. We have not set higher requirements on our respondents since we do not only want to capture experienced online shoppers and anonymous eWOM readers. Our goal is to have diverse sample group, which by their

different experiences can help us create a multi-faceted picture of the trust associated with anonymous eWOM.

We have chosen to interview 15 respondents for this study, which all are students at Lund University. We have chosen to focus on students since they are frequent and well informed users of anonymous eWOM (Bailey 2005). The respondents were found through a send out to a wide group of individuals at Lund University. Thereafter we evaluated the individuals whom responded to our send out and selected 15 for the study. Our selection of the respondents was mainly based on their previous experience of anonymous eWOM, online purchase experience, their age and their eagerness to contribute to the study (Bryman & Bell 2007).

## **2.5 METHOD OF ANALYSIS**

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In order to present a relevant view of our collected data, a thorough analysis of the primary and secondary data is needed. When choosing an appropriate method for analysing and processing the collected material we need to take our research design into account. Some methods are more useful when analysing in depth interviews and other are better suited when analysing focus groups (Easterby & Smith et al 2008).

We have chosen to use grounded theory and hermeneutics as our analysis methods. The choice to use two analysis methods is driven by our choice to use an abductive approach throughout this thesis. The abductive work process, which continuously refines and adjusts theory and empirical material, is similar to the work process within hermeneutics and the hermeneutic circle (Alvesson & Sköldböck 2008). However, the abductive approach does not work painlessly with the basics of grounded theory. Glaser & Strauss, who developed grounded theory, argue, in the strictest form, that research conducted with grounded theory should be conducted without any previous knowledge, whatsoever (Bryman & Bell 2007). Given that the abductive approach uses theory throughout the research process we felt the need to mainly focus on hermeneutics and use grounded theory as a complement. The choice to use grounded theory as a complement is based on the theory's ability to capture complexity and method of analysis, which is further described below.

Additionally, we have chosen to combine the empirical chapter with the analysis in order to present a unified and pedagogical picture of the relation between anonymous eWOM and trust. We believe that by combining these chapters we will be able to link the theory, empirical material and our analysis by providing a multi-faceted interpretation of the findings. This might be criticized, but we value the ability of presenting a unified picture where all the factors are put into relation.

### **2.5.1 HERMENEUTICS**

Hermeneutics were developed during the renaissance, a period when bible studies and humanities studies started to co exist (Alvesson & Sköldberg 2008). The focus is on text interpretation and the main idea of hermeneutics is that the part can only be fully understood when the part is connected to whole. That is to say, you can only understand chapter 1 if it is put into relation with chapter 2-6. This is called the hermeneutic circle where the whole only can be understood through studying the parts and vice versa (Alvesson & Sköldberg 2008).

There are a number of different orientations within hermeneutics such as objectifying and philosophical hermeneutics and we have chosen to focus on objectifying hermeneutics. This view of hermeneutics was developed during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century in Germany, where a group of scholars, influenced by Immanuel Kant's ideas, started to view things differently. Objectifying hermeneutics were then developed and the main idea of objectifying hermeneutics is to transform the hermeneutic circle into to a spiral. This by finding a starting point where the researcher can put a part into the wholeness, which then can be further developed. Then the researcher alternates between the part and the whole. Given this work process the researcher are able to gain deeper understanding of both the individual parts as well as the whole. There are four micro processes, which the research alternates between in order to obtain a good interpretation of the research area. These four micro processes are – interpretation pattern, text, dialogue and interpretations (Alvesson & Sköldberg 2008).

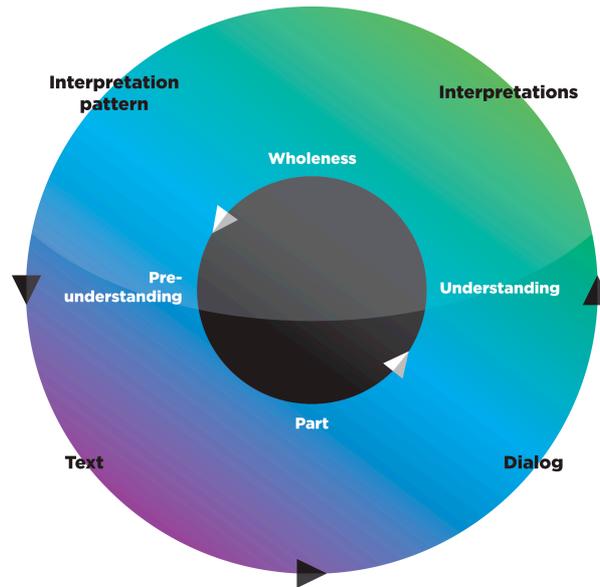


Fig. 1 – Hermeneutic Circle Alvesson & Sköldberg 2008

The strength of the hermeneutic circle is the ongoing shift back and forth between the part and the wholeness, which further develops the material. That is to say, the continuously refining of the empirical material and theory. Another strength of hermeneutic is the correlation with the abductive work processes, which also adjust and refines the material throughout the research process (Alvesson & Sköldberg 2008).

We have chosen to use the hermeneutic circle given the correlation with the abductive approach, described above. Furthermore, our research area was found by examining a part of the phenomenon eWOM, which then developed to investigate consumers' attitudes towards anonymous eWOM. We feel that the hermeneutic circle will enable us to present a well-founded and thorough research of anonymous eWOM. This by offering a work process and analysis where we are able to go back and forth between the part and the whole, which we feel will enable us to continuously adapt and strengthen our research.

## 2.5.2 GROUNDED THEORY

Barney G Glaser and Andrew L Strauss developed grounded theory in 1967. There exists two main orientations within grounded theory, mainly because Glaser and Strauss had different opinions and views on how grounded theory should have been further developed. It is therefore rather difficult to get a coherent and overall view of grounded theory. We have chosen to follow grounded theory as Bryman and Bell presents it. Grounded theory consists of a number of tools, which guide the researcher throughout the research. The tools include

theoretical sampling, coding, theoretical saturation and constant comparison. Using grounded theory results in a series of outcomes such as; concepts, categories and theories (Bryman & Bell 2007).

The grounded theory process starts with the coding of the gathered material, a phase where the empirical material is divided into parts. These parts are then reviewed and compared with our initial transcripts. The coding should be conducted as soon as possible as this may sharpen our understanding of the collected data. The parts are then categorised (Bryman & Bell 2007). The focus throughout the analysis is to continue to gather material until empirical saturation is reached. This applies both to the coding of the data as well as the collection of data, which should continue until we feel that interviewing another respondent would not bring anything new to the research (Bryman & Bell 2007).

The main reason for choosing grounded theory is that the model is good at capturing complexity and given its work process, grounded theory is well suited for open-ended research where the goal is to generate new theories. Additionally, we feel that the model will be a good compliment to the hermeneutic circle as grounded theory's processes, e.g. coding and categorising, which will enable us to move between the part and the whole in a structured way. However, grounded theory has some drawbacks, it is time consuming to code the material as well as it is difficult to fully grasp the principles of grounded theory (Bryman & Bell 2007). Despite these drawbacks we have chosen to use grounded theory as a compliment to the hermeneutic circle, due to the possibility to code and structure the data, which is a great strength when studying a multi-faceted subject as trust towards anonymous eWOM.

## **2.6 SOURCE CRITICISM**

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Criticism can be inferred towards the collected data, both to the primary data as well as the secondary data. Criticism can especially be directed towards our secondary data, which is work produced by other authors and material that is not necessarily objective (Lundahl & Skärvad 1999). In order for to be able to present an objective study we need to review the secondary data so that we are able to present an objective view throughout this thesis. In addition, most of our secondary data is written by authors and scholars whom are not Swedish or necessarily live in Sweden. We therefore need to take into account that the secondary data

may be based on international conditions. This is something that we need to be aware of since the respondents are Swedish and therefore might not be completely applicable to the secondary data. Nonetheless, the theories are of global nature and therefore can be considered to be of relevance.

The primary data is collected through interviews and the respondents' answers will be of importance for the outcome of this study. We are aware of that criticism can be directed towards our choice to interview 15 respondents, the selection of these respondents as well as their objectivity. We will critically review the primary data by evaluating the respondents' answers and their objectivity. We also continue to collect material until we have reached empirical saturation, which is achieved when no new information is generated (Bryman & Bell 2007). The selection of respondents has been made in order to guarantee that the respondents have experience of anonymous eWOM and online purchasing. We will review the selection in order to make sure that our respondents live up to set standards and are able to help us develop an objective study.

## **2.6.2 TRUSTWORTHINESS**

In order to deliver a thesis of high trustworthiness, we need to undertake a process in which we are able to assess and evaluate the thesis in terms of trustworthiness. Given the research design we need to perform the analysis with a specific method, as there is no universal approach to assess trustworthiness (Wallendorf & Belk 1989). For example in quantitative studies these concepts are known as validity and reliability (Bryman & Bell 2007). The authors Wallendorf & Belk (1989) discuss trustworthiness in qualitative studies as a main term with a number of subcategories, which affects the overall level of trustworthiness attached to the thesis. These subcategories include – credibility, transferability, dependability, conformability, and integrity (Wallendorf & Belk 1989).

Credibility focuses on the actions taken during the data collection. That is to say, how we interpreted the material and how the material finally was presented. In order to enhance the credibility, triangulation will be conducted between the researchers, the respondents and the theories, which will strengthen the credibility. The triangulation is based on the researchers' evaluation of sources and methods, which means that we evaluate the theory, the empirical material and ourselves as researchers. This triangulation serves as three nodes, which we can attach the research to (Wallendorf & Belk 1989).

Transferability depicts how the research material can be used in other studies and context whereas dependability discusses if the research's findings would be the same if the research were to be carried out again in a similar context. Conformability focuses on how readers and other interested parties are able to trace how the collected material was interpreted. Finally, integrity discusses how informants and others may have affected the material by lies and misinformation (Wallendorf & Belk 1989). These aspects will be enhanced in the same way as credibility. That is to say through triangulation between our selves, the empirical and theoretical material. Together these aspects will contribute to overall trustworthiness of the thesis if applied in the right manor.

However, the authors Wallendorf & Belk's framework is more extensive than described above and originally developed for enhancing trustworthiness in thesis's using ethnography and participant observation as data collection methods. Thus we chose to describe the part of the model, which we felt would work in this thesis, given our research design. Despite that the model initially was developed for other data collection methods, we feel that triangulation is a good method, which will enable us to achieve a trustworthy study of anonymous eWOM. This since we will stand on three legs throughout the analysis and review the material by triangulation e.g. evaluating and analysing the theoretical framework, the interviews and our own interpretations of these frameworks. Therefore, we believe triangulation will be a useful tool to create a high level of trustworthiness throughout the research of anonymous eWOM.

The thesis we will focus and use credibility, transferability, dependability, conformability, and integrity as our tools to produce a trustworthy study of consumers attitudes and trust towards anonymous eWOM. Therefore, the data collection will be further standardised so that it is collected in the same manor throughout the entire research. This will further increase transferability, credibility and dependability. Integrity has been previously discussed and by ensuring a high level of integrity, the respondents' will hopefully present accurate data without being biased. Conformability will be in focus, along with credibility, in the analysis section where the respondents' statements will be presented in a clear and distinctive manor. This will be done in order to present the reader with a clear view of the collected material. We believe that these actions will further increase the trustworthiness of the study.

## **2.7 SUMMARY – METHODOLOGY**

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To summarize, this research will be conducted in accordance with the phenomenological view. We have chosen to work with an abductive research approach. In addition, we have chosen to perform a qualitative research and thus the primary data will be collected through semi-structured interviews. The respondents have been chosen partly due to their willingness to contribute to the study but mainly due to their experience of anonymous eWOM and e-commerce. Secondary data will be based on academic articles, literature and other sources found through Google Scholar, Business Source complete and Lund University. The collected data will then be analysed with the hermeneutic circle and grounded theory. Given the purpose, which aims at understanding to what extent consumers trust anonymous eWOM, we are confident that our research design will enable us to deliver a thesis of high quality.

## CHAPTER 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

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*The theoretical chapter will present a cocktail of theories, which are of relevance when studying trust towards anonymous eWOM. The chapter further combines classic theories with contemporary research to give the framework a multi-faceted picture of trust, purchase process and consumer behaviour theory.*

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### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

The theoretical chapter presents a comprehensive framework, which will be used as a foundation to understand the implications of trust towards anonymous eWOM. The theories have been divided into three blocks in order to present a multi-faceted theoretical framework. The blocks are – trust, purchase process and consumer behaviour.

The theoretical chapter first discusses trust and focuses on explaining, which factors that can be used to create trust. The theory states that factors such as comprehension, previous experiences and website reputation are key when developing consumer trust. Trust theory is essential for this thesis since the study aims to explain contradicting trust behaviour between real life and eWOM purchase processes.

Furthermore, the second block depicts consumers' purchase processes. This means that it identifies the steps consumers undergo when making a purchase. Starting with a motive and ending up with the actual purchase, the consumer undergoes a number of stages where information is gathered and evaluated. This theory is of relevance when studying anonymous eWOM, as eWOM is an influential information source within modern society. Additionally, purchase theory is of relevance due the ability to understand how consumers think, act and evaluate information throughout their purchase process.

Finally, the theoretical chapter consists of multiple theories, which all focus on consumer behaviour. Theses theories are used to understand how consumers behave in order to minimise risk and maximise advantages of their purchase. The theories do not solely focus on monetary aspects, but also on the psychological effects that are in play when undergoing a purchase process. These theories are of relevance as they can explain why anonymous eWOM

can be used as complementary information source. Additionally, the theories also explain why basic and simple information that is provided by feedback sites has an influence on consumer behaviour.

## **3.2 TRUST**

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### **3.2.1 HOW TRUST IS CREATED**

Filippo Ulivieri's trust theory depicts which factors that are essential when individuals develop trust towards web-technology. The reason why trust is so important, is because it acts as a key instrument when developing a relationship. Trust possesses a determining role when shaping factors such as strength, validity and duration of a relationship (Ulivieri 2005).

The first point Ulivieri's theory criticizes, is the misconception concerning high security and how it can be considered to be equal to trust in technological contexts. Ulivieri means that trust is not linear and is based on several elements such as consumer experience, present relationship and reputation rather than just security features (Ulivieri 2005). A key assumption of the theory is, that not always the object or person is the underlying factor for trust, but rather the perceptions they generate. An Internet bank might be able to provide total transactional-security with help of technological solutions. Nonetheless, trust is not always high towards the Internet bank system, as the perception of doing bank transactions over the web is not associated with trustworthiness (Ulivieri 2005). As all trust indicators have strengths and weaknesses, it is unrealistically to crown one element as the key trust factor. In order to create trust, multiple elements are taken into consideration and then evaluated. It becomes a trade-off situation where the individual puts all the impressions into a "bowl" and then makes a decision based on the overall picture (Ulivieri 2005).

When it comes to trust towards technology, one major trust indicator is the individual's sense of comprehension. The phenomenon is based on the assumption that if the technical background of an object is known, then the individual understands why it is useful and if it can be trusted. However, comprehension can be traded against experience in order to create trust. The author exemplifies this trade-off by illustrating a possible reasoning pattern when it comes to cars. Few individuals fully comprehend all the mechanics behind how a car works.

Despite this, due to previous experiences, which indicates that cars do work, trust is associated with them (Ulivieri 2005).

Following the importance of experiences, humans construct mental models that are used as reference for future decisions. The models are essential for humans as information is needed as a foundation for decisions. The mental models are developed and changed throughout life and are constructions of all interactions and experiences. Humans rely on these models because they are based on reality and therefore considered trustworthy. Furthermore, when an attitude is incorporated into a mental model, trust towards the certain object will often be long-lasting, at least until a contradiction justifies a change (Ulivieri 2005).

In Ulivieri's theory, a strong tool to create trust is knowledge of items functionality and use. It is easier to justify the level of trust towards a brand if the individual has knowledge about product specification and materials used. The author argues that knowledge creates understanding, which is crucial to experience in order to feel trust. At the same time that knowledge is essential for creating trust, it can also have a counter effect. The theory argues that if consumer were to be completely aware of how a microwave oven works, they would truly be scared to eat anything cooked in it (Ulivieri 2005).

An ungraspable influence of trust that has substantial power is individuals' beliefs. If a belief is strong, it is often considered true and therefore trustworthy. With this in mind, Ulivieri argues that it is easier to build trust towards an individual or object if it can be associated with individuals' beliefs. The theory further implies that trust, which can be linked with beliefs, tend to have such a high level of credibility, that it is more powerful than actual experiences (Ulivieri 2005). The reason for beliefs being an influential power in developing trust, lays in the psychological assumptions that they are part of the foundation for the self-image. Beliefs, function as one of the primary pillars from which an individual's reality is created and can be compared with a ships ruder.

The sensation of confidence is often associated with the feeling of wellbeing and control. Ulivieri means that the incorporation of "over-help" factors into products and services creates confidence and therefore trust. Over-help factors are those features which make an individual feel calm and taken care of. When a person shows extra care towards another, the person being taken care-of often associates the caretaker as trustworthy (Ulivieri 2005). The theory

further states that by invoking the sensation of being taken care-of, an Internet based business, can generate consumer-confidence and thereby be considered more trustworthy (Uliveri 2005).

Reputation, one of Ulivieri's trust building features, has as other factors, connections with individuals' previous experiences. One of the best indicators if a persons or corporation is trustworthy can be derived from their past behaviour. If a person does as it promises and lives up to expected standards, it will gain a reputation that embodies trust. The theory further argues that a reputation often sticks to the individual for a prolonged period of time and can be a determining trust factor (Ulivieri 2005). Reputation is something that can be transferred among consumers and is considered dependable even though the receiver has no personal experience. With the power and transferability reputations incorporate, Ulivieri argues that it has a significant impact on whether a trust relationship even is initiated (Uliveri 2005).

Although Uliveri criticises security for being considered the core in achieving trust, it still plays a crucial role in trust development. Security can be achieved in multiple ways e.g. security in numbers, being part of something bigger and mechanisms that separate individuals from others. Ulivieri argues that within the technology arena, security and thus partly trust, is experienced by being able to share experiences and opinions. Even though the origin of the comment is unknown, they still influence the sense of reliability (Ulivieri 2005). Another factor that adds to the feeling of security, but also to the attractiveness of building a relationship is appearance. Although "you should never judge a book by its cover", Ulivieri means that individuals often do. The appearance is often linked to the level of quality and reliability. Sub-sequentially, high quality is often linked with positive attributes that contribute when creating trust.

Finally, one of the most significant factors that contribute to trust is the personal relationship and familiarity between two individuals. The stronger the relationship between people the higher level of trust is shown. Furthermore, the more familiar an individual is with a situation, the less frightening it becomes. With this in mind Ulivieri argues that trust is developed gradually. An episode that initially is considered risky eventually becomes more acceptable as the individuals experience develops. Confidence and eventually trust is generated with individuals or objects that are predictable and understandable (Ulivieri 2005). When a relationship is established, risks can be calculated, advantages evaluated and scenarios

understood to a greater extent. All these elements which relationships embody, are extremely useful for an individual when determining trust (Ulivieri 2005). Ulivieri's theory is of relevance when studying trust towards anonymous eWOM since the processes described are not only relevant when creating interpersonal relationships. This means that Ulivieri's theory could be useful to determine why trust has been developed towards a controversial information source such as anonymous eWOM.

### **3.2.2 DEVELOPING TRUST**

Parimal Bhagat's theory of trust development has multiple similarities with Ulivieri's theory. One main difference is that Bhagat primarily focuses on the mental processes that occur when determining trust, while Ulivieri focuses on the underlying factors for the processes. Bhagat argues that a conventional belief is that trust takes time to build. However, his research indicates that although time and experiences are important, the key to achieve trust is based on five mental processes, which can be developed fairly quickly. Therefore, trust is not always a product of time, but sometimes a product of evaluating the counterpart and putting it into relation with personal goals and values (Bhagat 2009). Although the theory was primarily constructed to be used when determining trust via face-to-face interactions, Bhagat argues that similar processes are implemented whenever trust is developed. With this in mind, Bhagat's theory is of relevance when researching trust towards anonymous eWOM, as the reader does a similar trust assessment before utilizing the information posted. One important factor that needs to be clarified is that Bhagat's five processes presented below do not follow a particular order and can vary in influence when developing trust towards different sources.

- The first mental process is a calculative assessment of costs and benefits. That is to say, what will be gained by trusting the new counterpart? Is there a personal interest that will be fulfilled? What is the worst-case scenario?
- Secondly, the individual engages in a credibility prediction process. In this process an evaluation is done to determine if its reasonable to trust the new counterpart. Do the motives and actions seem reasonable? Is it possible that personal goals will be achieved by trusting the new counterpart?
- Thirdly, a prediction process takes place in order to evaluate the counterparts' capabilities. In this process the individual tries to determine if the counterpart will be able to fulfill the desired task and therefore worth trusting. The individual also determines what level of trust is

adequate in relation to the counterpart's capabilities. That is to say, if the capabilities are high, then there are more incentives to trust the other party.

- Fourthly the individual tries to determine what the counterparts intentions are in order to decide if it is trustworthy. With this in mind, it is important when creating trust that the counterpart is assumed to have an underlying personal agenda. According to Bhagat, few factors counteract the development of trust as much as false intentions.
- The fifth and final mental process that is undergone when developing trust is a transference process. This process can be connected with experiences, as the individual examines the counterpart with the help of factors such as; beliefs, previous relationships and advice received from others (Bhagat 2009).

The combination of these five mental processes is according to Bhagat always in play when developing trust to either a person or a phenomenon such as anonymous eWOM. This acknowledgement makes Bhagat's theory even more relevant when studying anonymous eWOM, as there is nothing known about the counterpart. Furthermore, it is with the help of these processes individuals can create a temporary trust relationship in situations of distress or limited background information (Bhagat 2009).

### **3.2.3 PRISONERS DILEMMA**

The prisoner's dilemma was founded by Albert W. Tucker and was primarily developed to be used as game theory. However, the simple scenario of how two prisoners reason when given the chance to get out of jail has been useful in multiple research areas. Tucker's dilemma begins with a police officer that does not have enough evidence to prosecute two suspects. However, if one of the prisoners testifies against the other, there will be enough evidence to convict at least one. As the prisoners are separated from each other, they do not know how the other prisoner will respond to the officers' questions. The prisoners have two choices, either they can cooperate with the police or they can remain silent and defect. The faiths of both prisoners depend on their own choice in combination with the choice of the other prisoner (Rapoport & Chammah 1970). As the prisoners cannot speak with each other the possible outcomes are;

1. If prisoner A cooperates while prisoner B defects, than A goes free while B receives a 10 year jail sentence.

2. If both prisoner A and B betray each other and cooperate, then both receive a 5 year sentence.
3. If both prisoner A and B defect and stay loyal, then both receive a short 6 month sentence.

Based on the assumption that none of the prisoners want to spend time in jail, the logical choice would be for both of them to defect and be out in 6 months. However, there is always temptation of betraying the other prisoner and leaving jail immediately (Rapoport & Chammah 1970). As the prisoner cannot communicate with each other, they are in a dilemma, which is based on trust. Even though the best choice for both is to defect, the results is often alternative nr 2, were both testify (Rapoport & Chammah 1970).

The reasoning that the dilemma exemplifies is normal and occurs daily. When consumers shop, these types of risks can be minimized by knowing who the sales person is and by communicating with them. However, the dilemma becomes more interesting when studying eWOM from anonymous sites, as there is no assurance that the feedback is not fraud. Therefore, based on this theory it could be assumed that no trust should be shown towards anonymous eWOM as it is hard to determine the counterpart's intentions.

### **3.3 THE PURCHASE PROCESS - A THEORY OF BUYER BEHAVIOUR**

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Howard & Sheth presented in 1969 their theory of buyer behaviour where the authors argue that consumers purchase processes evolves over time and ultimately become routines. Howard & Sheth's model is focused on explaining the purchase process by examining; changes which affect the process over time, how decision factors influence the process as well as examining the overall effect that information has on the purchase process (Howard & Sheth 1969).

The purchase decision process begins with a set of motives, which the consumer has for purchasing a specific product or brand. The consumer thereafter has a set of alternative products or brands to choose from, given that they can satisfy the consumer's need. When alternatives have been ordered, the decision mediators take over and match the motives with

the set of alternatives. This purchase process is called the elements of a buyer’s brand-choice decision and includes the steps – motives, alternatives and decision mediators (Howard & Sheth 1969).

Howard & Sheth have combined the brand-choice decision model, mentioned above, with their theory of buyer behaviour. The buyer behaviour theory shows in-depth how different elements influence the consumer’s perceptions, attitudes and actions throughout the purchase process. The theory consists of four main elements – stimulus input variables, hypothetical constructs, response variables and exogenous variables. Simplified, Howard & Sheth’s model mainly focuses on consumer’s learning phase, which connects the consumer’s input to their output (Howard & Sheth 1969).

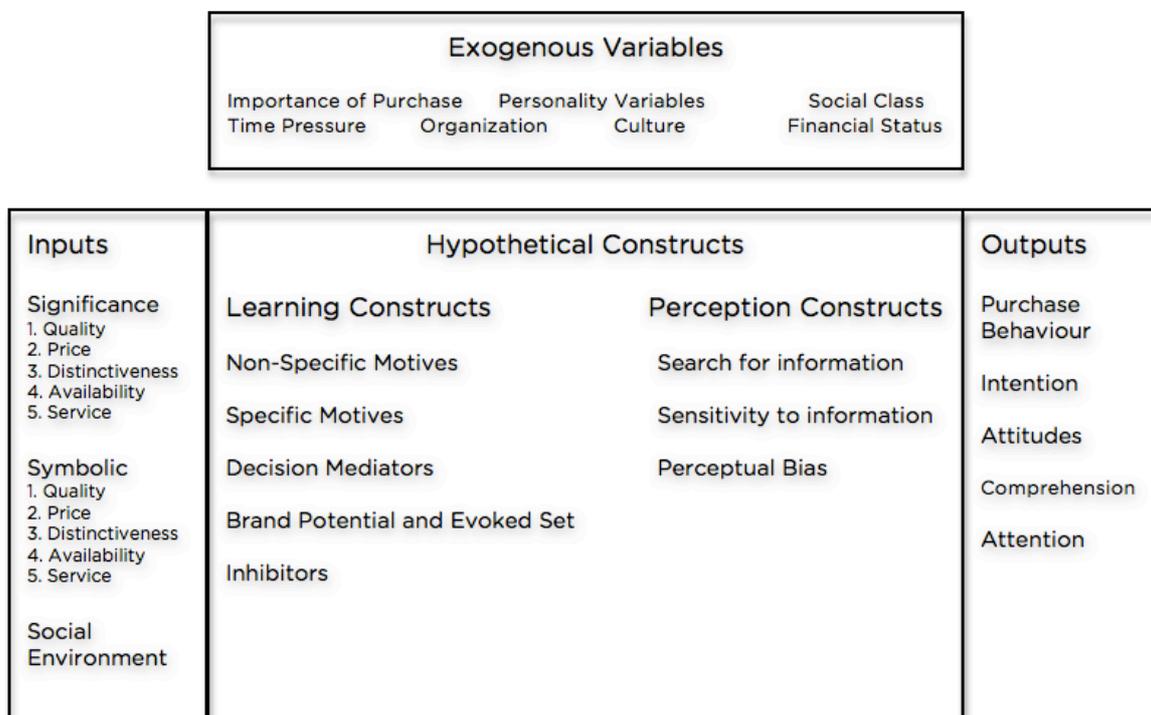


Fig 2. Modified version of Howard & Sheth model 1969

### 3.3.1 STIMULUS INPUT VARIABLES

Consumers are daily exposed to stimuli, which affects their thoughts and attitudes. Stimuli can be either commercial or social and influence the internal state of the buyer. Commercial stimuli is communication from companies and can be further divided into two categories – significant and symbolic stimuli. Significant stimuli are messages, which communicate brand attributes such as price, quality and availability through a brand object. Marketing messages communicated through sales men, mass media or catalogues are example of

symbolic stimuli. Furthermore, symbolic stimuli are often pictures or texts whereas significant stimuli are in the form of company logos or other brand objects (Howard & Sheth 1969). The social stimuli, on the other hand, is focused on feedback from the social environment, primarily through word-of-mouth. Both these stimuli communicate – quality, price, distinctiveness, availability and service. The consumer stores and processes the social stimuli together with the commercial stimuli, which then are integrated with the hypothetical constructs (Howard & Sheth 1969).

### **3.3.2 HYPOTHETICAL CONSTRUCTS**

The second element, hypothetical constructs are a set of processes, which the consumer undergoes subconsciously throughout the entire purchase. The foundation of hypothetical constructs is to evaluate and incorporate information received to the purchase process. Hypothetical constructs are divided into two categories – learning constructs and perceptual constructs (Howard & Sheth 1969).

#### **3.3.2.1 LEARNING CONSTRUCTS**

The learning constructs are the major components in the purchase decision and include – decision mediators, motives, brand potential of the evoked set, predispositions, inhibitors and satisfaction. Motives are the underlying reasons for purchasing a product and can either be nonspecific or specific. Nonspecific motives concern the buyer’s motivation to conduct the purchase. This can be exemplified by a consumer’s desire to show social status or wealth by purchasing specific products associated with these attributes. Specific motives are related to the product attributes, which are the main reason for the purchase e.g. “I want to lose weight and therefore buy products, which are connected with a healthy lifestyle” (Howard & Sheth 1969).

Brand potential of the evoked set are a group of multiple brands, which could satisfy the consumers’ motives or be used as substitutes. Given the characteristics of the consumer an ideal brand will emerge with strong correlation to the consumer’s characteristics. The consumer then undergoes a learning phase where the consumer evaluates and stores the brand’s characteristics for future reference. Ultimately the consumer ranks the evaluated brands and thereby, a set evoked of brand preferences has been created. The evoked set can be

compared with a mental ranking list of different brands and their ability to satisfy the consumer's need (Howard & Sheth 1969).

The third learning construct, decision mediators, are a set of cognitive rules, which function as a evaluation process in which brands and products are ranked by their capability to satisfy the consumers' desires. The decision mediators function as a list of criteria's which the brand or product needs to fulfil. The mediators are throughout the purchase process influenced by learning, which further forms the mediators. Learning can either be obtained form of experience or information. Experiences are derived from previous purchases of the specific or of a similar product (Howard & Sheth 1969). Anonymous eWOM is an information source, which can be argued to have influence over the decision mediators as it provides information, which can be used in the purchase. The use of experience in the Howard & Sheth model as a learning tool is similar to that of Uliveri, who state that experiences are essential in creating trust (Uliveri 2009).

The fourth learning construct, predisposition, is when the consumer continues to assort data and rank brands in terms of preference and attitude. It is during the predisposition phase where consumers combine and evaluate the decision mediators, brand potential of the evoked set and the initial motive. That is to say, the consumer evaluate which brand of the evoked set that can fulfil the initial motives given that they can live up to the decision mediators rules (Howard & Sheth 1969).

When the consumer has evaluated, ranked and found a particular brand, which will best satisfy his needs, the fifth construct – the inhibitors, will influence the process. The inhibitors are a set of obstacles that might prevent the consumer from buying the specific brand. These inhibitors include high price, lack of availability, time pressure and financial status. All of these inhibitors will prohibit the consumer from purchasing the specific brand. The inhibitors are generally not constant over time, and the obstacles, vary in intensity from consumer to consumer. However, if consumers experience some of these inhibitors over a prolonged period of time, they will start to develop their decision mediators by including these restraints. For example if a consumer has long-term financial restraints, he will include these restrictions in his current purchase process as well as in future purchases (Howard & Sheth 1969).

The final learning construct is satisfaction, which is determined by the consumers' experience with the brand as well as the consumers' initial expectations. If the consumers' expectations are exceeded or equal to the delivered experience then the consumer will be satisfied. However, if the expectations are higher than the delivered experience the consumer will be dissatisfied. The experience of a brand will affect future purchase processes by influencing or even changing the consumers' perception of the brand. This means that the brand will be positioned differently in relation to other potential and rival brands in the evoked set (Howard & Sheth 1969).

### **3.3.2.2 PERCEPTUAL CONSTRUCTS**

Perceptual constructs, the second hypothetical construct, is focused on processing and analysing information from three sub categories – sensitivity to new information, perceptual bias and search for new information. The consumer gathers information from commercial stimuli or social stimuli. No matter where the information comes from, new input alters or strengthens the consumers' view of the brand. Thus, the consumers need to be cautious towards new information by analysing it carefully. Anonymous eWOM becomes relevant when discussing perceptual constructs as it can affect consumers learning phase.

Sensitivity to new information functions as a security system, which reviews both the content as well as the sender of the information. Furthermore, information that is of too complex or considered ambiguous will affect the consumers' view of the brand. Given the impact new information has, consumers need to consider the source of the information and the content. For example a specific consumer may, through previous experiences, associate word-of-mouth as a source of high credibility, while commercials might be considered as a source of low credibility. The sensitivity to new information combined with the features of the brand will together form the consumers' perception of the brand (Howard & Sheth 1969).

Perceptual bias, a perceptual construct, argues that a consumer might alter or distort information in order to adapt it to fit personal references. The alteration of new information is primarily focused on information gathered from commercial stimuli. Information that is collected from the social environment is more likely to be left unaltered. This since the social environment may already have altered the information in order to fit the specific social context. Social stimuli has a stronger influence over the consumers' brand perception than commercial stimuli, which is harder to alter (Howard & Sheth 1969).

The final perceptual construct is searching for new information, which as the name indicates is the process where the consumer searches for new sources. Searching for information is present throughout the whole purchase decision process. The consumers may search for information actively by for example talking to friends or searching the Internet. However, some of the obtained information is received passively by processing information from commercial communication (Howard & Sheth 1969).

### **3.3.3 RESPONSE VARIABLES**

Given the various stimuli inputs, which the consumer undergoes throughout the purchase process, there are also a large variety of responses, which the consumer can carry out. These outputs include – attention, comprehension, attitude toward a brand, intention to buy and purchase behaviour. Attention is the first response of the buyer, whom based on the received information, directs his attention towards a specific brand or product. Depending on the attention phase, the consumer stores information traits attached to the specific brand. The consumer then forms an attitude toward the brand by evaluating the potential for the brand to satisfy the initial motives of the purchase. The fourth variable, intention to buy, then processes all the three initial variables and forecasts which brand he will purchase based on the information. The last variable, purchase behaviour is the action taken by the consumer based on his hypothetical constructs, which for example include decision mediators and inhibitors (Howard & Sheth 1969).

### **3.3.4 EXOGENOUS VARIABLES**

Howard & Sheth have a fourth dimension in their theory – exogenous variables. These variables include – importance of purchase, personality variables, social class, time pressure, organisation, culture and financial status. These variables are primarily derived from the social environment. However, Howard & Sheth wish to separate these variables from the model, as they believe that some of the variables may have taken place in the past and therefore might not be relevant to the current purchase process. That is to say, that the authors wish to separate those exogenous variables, which are in effect from those who are not relevant to the current situation (Howard & Sheth 1969).

### **3.3.5 SUMMARY OF THE BUYER BEHAVIOUR THEORY**

The Howard & Sheth model provides a descriptive and in depth framework about the consumers' purchase process. The strength of the model is that the hypothetical constructs connect input variables to output action. That is to say, information and experiences are processed and evaluated throughout the hypothetical constructs and thereby have an affect on the overall purchase process. As hypothetical constructs connect inputs to outputs it is considered to be the moderator of the information flow within the Howard & Sheth model. The hypothetical constructs are of relevance when studying the role of anonymous eWOM, since anonymous eWOM can be considered an information source, which could influence the purchase process. Furthermore, as Howard & Sheth argue, information is obtained and evaluated throughout the entire purchase process on the development of the consumers' hypothetical constructs. Based on this assumption, there is reason to believe that anonymous eWOM might have an influence. Howard & Sheth's model clearly shows how information and experiences influence consumers preferred brands, their motives as well as their purchase decision. Therefore, the insights presented by Howard & Sheth will be valuable in understanding anonymous eWOM's influence on the purchase process.

## **3.4 CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR**

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### **3.4.1 COGNITIVE DISSONANCE**

The psychological theory of cognitive dissonance has its foundation in how individuals act and react to uncertainties. These uncertainties primarily derive from the mental strain of having multiple choices. Dissonance can occur in situations when attitudes, opinions or ideas contradict each other (Evans, Jamal & Foxall. 2008). In order to minimize dissonance, individuals seek ratification for their actions and thoughts, through a use of authorization-practices. One of these authorization methods, which are widely used, is to find approval for ones actions by seeking justification from other information sources. A classic example of cognitive dissonance and individuals' struggle to minimize dissonance, can be illustrated by the purchase of a car. When buying a car, a consumer usually does not buy a certain model solely based on personal experiences and emotions. Instead they tend to consult friends, car magazines and other owners in order to obtain a well-balanced picture. This is not only done

to obtain factual information, but also done to get approval for the consumer's personal thoughts (Evans, Jamal & Foxall 2008).

The level of dissonance and the desire to minimize it, tends to grow in correlation with the importance that the particular product has for the consumers. Other methods, which are used to minimize dissonance, are to neglect contradicting information, minimize the importance of dissonance or modify/rationalize information so it fits into a predetermined mind-set (Evans, Jamal & Foxall 2008). Cognitive dissonance is most powerful when it concerns matters that are associated with self-image, immorality and foolishness. To be fooled and execute a purchase based on limited information is a common reason for insecurity and anxiety. In order to minimize the risk of being fooled, consumers tend to use quick and hopefully reliable information sources for daily purchases (Evans, Jamal & Foxall 2008).

Cognitive dissonance is of interest when researching the use of anonymous eWOM, as information found on these forums often is up to date and published by consumers that have experience with the particular product. These attributes tend to create a feeling of reliability, which might help minimize cognitive dissonance when seeking information. Additionally, multiple types of anonymous eWOM sites exist and are relatively easy to access. This makes the theory interesting in the equation of understanding how consumer behaviour connects with anonymous eWOM. The availability and information relevance of anonymous eWOM makes it interesting when studying trust, as it could be a source to minimise cognitive dissonance.

### **3.4.2 THE ACCESSIBILITY-DIAGNOSTIC MODEL**

The accessibility diagnostic model explains how receptive information is based on the level of complexity associated with it. The founders of this model, Feldman and Lynch, argue that there are three major attributes, which influence consumers' absorption and use of information (Herr, Kardes & Kim 1991).

1. The accessibility of the information.
2. The accessibility of alternative information sources.
3. The perceived relevance of the information.

The theory argues that any activity that increases the accessibility of information subsequently means that the likelihood of using the specific information increases. At the

same time, the theory states that the use of one accessible source, minimizes the use of other information sources, especially those that are harder to approach (Herr, Kardes & Kim 1991). This implies that information that is easier to obtain and understand tends to be of higher relevance for individuals. With this theory in mind, individuals will have difficulties absorbing and utilizing information if it is not comprehensible. Information that is easy to access, is understandable and from a “good-enough” source, might have a greater impact than information that is hard to grasp but from a credible source. The theory further states, that although information that is in-line with individuals’ expectations is valued, contradictory information tends to be more eye-catching (Herr, Kardes & Kim 1991). That might explain why some individuals tend to focus more on negative feedback rather than positive. The accessibility model is relevant when researching trust towards anonymous eWOM, as there is a possibility that anonymous eWOM is easy to understand and access, which makes it a popular information source.

### **3.4.3 RISK**

In order to determine consumers risk assessment when receiving new information, William B Locander and Peter W Hermann, present an in-depth model. Based on the founding principles of Bettman (1973), their research aims to understand how factors such as self-confidence and anxiety affect the risk evaluation process. By understanding how anxiety and confidence influence the decision process, the authors explain how consumers process information when forming purchase attitudes (Locander & Hermann 1979). The theory argues that every time a consumer is presented with a choice, there tends to be a level of uncertainty and risk involved. This uncertainty is associated with risk, as there generally are multiple choices when making a decision. When taking one path, the other path is automatically eliminated. This situation of uncertainty further leads to anxiety, which comes as a consequence of missing an opportunity by making a wrongful choice. However, in order to minimize unwanted anxiety, an individual can approach the uncertainty in several ways. The authors suggest that a commonly used mechanism to combat anxiety is the individual’s self-confidence. That is to say, factors such as previous experiences, knowledge and surrounding support, are believed to make an individual more confident (Locander & Hermann 1979).

Besides becoming more confident in the specific situation, the individual’s self-confidence also has a role in the level of risk, which they are willing to take. The more confident the individual is, the higher level of risk is willing to be taken. Nonetheless, the authors’ findings

indicate that as the level of risk rises, the consumers favour information sources such as personal observations and previous experiences (Locander & Hermann 1979). With this theory in mind, the authors state that whenever a complicated situation or new information is presented, an individual will likely base his decision on previous experiences. If previous encounters in comparable circumstances have resulted in a positive outcome, the individual's self-confidence will be higher and a decision will be straightforward (Locander & Hermann 1979). The phenomenon can be exemplified by examining stunt-car drivers. An inexperienced person would probably experience a high level of anxiety when performing a stunt, while a professional driver who has experience would manage with less distress. The experience leads to self-confidence and helps the individual to cope with decisions in a less distressful way.

Summarizing Locander & Hermann's theory, accumulated experiences lead to a stronger sense of self-confidence. This sense of confidence further minimizes uncertainties associated with difficult choices, which can be experienced as distressful and anxiety causing. Furthermore, as the level of anxiety diminishes, the level of perceived risk also declines as the individual has a better understanding of the possible outcomes. Locander & Hermann's risk theory and the influence that previous experiences have on individuals' decision process are of relevance when studying anonymous eWOM. This as their theory could shed light on why, a potentially unreliable information source as anonymous eWOM has, through consumer experiences, high credibility. The use of anonymous eWOM could be related with a decreased level of anxiety, since previous positive anonymous eWOM experiences might have strengthened consumers' self-confidence.

## CHAPTER 4. EMPIRICAL MATERIAL & ANALYSIS

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*The fourth chapter introduces the gathered empirical material in combination with the analysis. This is done to give reader a coherent view of trust towards anonymous eWOM as well as to provide a pedagogical presentation of the collected material. Furthermore, the researchers interpretations of the material and theories are discussed.*

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### 4.1 THE INFLUENCE OF E-COMMERCE

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The respondents argue that anonymous eWOM has a strong correlation with other Internet phenomenon such as e-commerce. The respondents state that they tend to use anonymous eWOM when engaging in e-commerce and therefore associate both the activities as being one single e-phenomenon. Based on this association, it is of interest to understand individuals' general attitude towards online shopping in order to fully comprehend anonymous eWOM.

*“I usually check rumours and feedback online before I go through with my purchase. Strangely, I think I only use eWOM when buying stuff online.”*

Based on the respondents' answers, a vast majority of the subjects have had positive experiences when executing online purchases. The positive attitudes derive from successful purchases where, the main characteristics of the respondents' answers were that the entire purchase process went smoothly. The respondents point out that deliveries were on time, they have never been scammed on payments, the purchase process was easy, practical, cheap and a comfortable way of shopping. One of the respondents points out that the main reason for purchasing online is the accessibility to products, which are hard to find in regular stores. In this particular case the respondent discussed vacuum cleaner-bags. Furthermore, most respondents engage in e-commerce 2-3 per month and were all amazed on how well e-commerce actually worked.

*“I have fairly old vacuum cleaner and I have no idea of where to buy bags. I have gone to OnOff and Elgiganten but have never found anything that works. I therefore go online to buy my vacuum cleaner-bags where I know I will get the right sort within three days.”*

One common denominator that all respondents agree on is that their previous online experiences have contributed to their current level of trust-associated with e-commerce in general. This can be directly linked to Uliveri’s theory, which states that trust towards potentially controversial sources can be developed with the help of personal experience. As the theory indicates, trust is built gradually with experience and increases slowly due to positive experiences (Uliveri 2005). Additionally, Howard & Sheth further argues that knowledge is gained from previous experiences and helps the consumer to develop adequate decision mediators (Howard & Sheth 1969). The authors Locander & Hermann follow in the same pattern and argue that experiences strengthen self-confidence and minimize anxiety. This means that the consumer develop self-confidence and trust by previous positive experiences (Locander & Hermann 1979).

Connecting the theories, presented above, in combination with the respondents’ answers, it can be inferred that the respondents’ positive encounters with e-commerce, in general has lead to a high level of trust towards e-commerce. As mentioned above, the respondents associate e-commerce and anonymous eWOM as the same phenomenon. The respondents argue that generally, most Internet services are judge as a whole. Therefore, positive experiences gained from one type of platform will have an influence on other platforms even though there is no relationship between them. One respondent states that fortunately most Internet experiences have been positive and therefore the level of trust towards anonymous eWOM has benefitted.

*“ I have had many positive experiences online and have a fair amount of trust towards most online activities.”*

## 4.2 ANONYMOUS eWOM AND THE PURCHASE PROCESS

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When the respondents engage in a purchase process, there are multiple information sources available to influence their purchase. Some sources are considered more reliable than others and generally, information that comes from a highly trusted individual or certified agency tend to be considered trustworthier. Surprisingly, half of the respondents indicate that anonymous eWOM is an important factor, which they consider, before they reach their final purchase decision. The other half consider anonymous eWOM of less significance and rather as a complementary information source. One respondent stated that when purchasing a product, he already knows what he is looking for and therefore uses anonymous eWOM as a complementary information source.

*“If I want to buy a cell phone, I know what I want. But of course it is nice to read positive comments that reassure my choice.”*

Other respondents mentioned that anonymous eWOM is used as a primary source and that the relevance varies depending on the specific product category and other sources available. That is to say, one respondent used anonymous eWOM to a higher extent when purchasing a new computer, then when purchasing other products such as clothes. The main reason for this was the respondent's desire to purchase the latest computer version and thus used anonymous eWOM in order to determine when the purchase should be conducted. The respondent searched for rumours on blogs and forums in order to be able to gather information about upcoming product developments and product releases. Furthermore, the respondent argued that blogs and forums are consulted regarding rumours as they are always posted there before on any other information source. According to the respondent, anonymous eWOM becomes a primary information source depending on the context. The respondent means that when it concerns certain product groups, like electronics, the best information source is anonymous eWOM as “product buzzes” often start there.

*“ When I was going to buy a new Mac, I didn't want to buy an outgoing model. Therefore I searched blogs and forums for the latest rumours on upcoming product releases.”*

The respondents' answers, although considered obvious, can be connected to how information is viewed within the Howard & Sheth model. That is to say that new information alters or strengthens previous opinions towards a brand or a purchase. It can also be associated to Locander & Hermann's theory, which states that relevant and easy to access information such as anonymous eWOM tends to be the information used in the purchase process. Additionally, Bhagat's theory and the prediction process is applicable to the respondents answers, as the theory states that anonymous eWOM, in this case, fulfils the desired task of providing computer rumours. Based on this ability, anonymous eWOM fulfils the prediction criteria and is therefore considered trustworthy.

#### **4.2.1 WHAT TYPE OF INFORMATION IS USED BY CONSUMERS?**

According to Howard & Sheth, information is derived from either the social or the commercial environment. Although, it is assumed that both of these sources are used when collecting data, one respondent, surprisingly stated that he does not search for information within his social environment e.g. traditional word-of-mouth. This is an interesting finding as word-of-mouth is considered to be one of the most important information sources. The respondent argues that he has no need to search for information within his social environment since he feels that he has better insights than any member of his social environment. The respondent states that he rather searches for information himself, through anonymous eWOM, than receive advice. Furthermore, the respondent argues that this applies to all his purchases whether or not he is well acquainted with the specific product class or not. This behaviour contradicts Howard & Sheth's model, which states that consumers whom are unfamiliar with a certain product class rely, to a higher degree, on information from their social environment.

*"I usually know more about the product I want than anybody in my surroundings. Therefore I usually don't feel the need to ask my friends or family."*

However, other respondents point out that when purchasing a product from an unfamiliar product class, they tend to search for information within their social environment to a higher degree. When the product class is familiar, information is usually gathered more from the commercial environment. This behaviour is inline with Howard & Sheth's model. Based on the findings, the respondents argue that anonymous eWOM can be used as a primary information source but also as one of a complementary nature. However, the respondents generally compare the use of anonymous eWOM to cognitive dissonance. That is to say,

anonymous eWOM is used as a resource to minimize the sense of anxiety when engaging in an unfamiliar situation. Although anonymous eWOM does not always have a significant impact on the purchase decision the respondents mean that it is comforting to have a third opinion, which can be used for further support and strengthen the choice of product.

*“ It is always nice to have a third opinion to justify my purchase. Online feedback is particularly useful if I feel a bit uncertain.”*

The respondents clear association between the use of anonymous eWOM and the reduction of anxiety is closely linked to cognitive dissonance. The respondents' use of anonymous eWOM is a prime example of the reduction of cognitive dissonance. The information is as used as third opinion to justify the purchase.

Additionally one of the interview subjects stated that written anonymous eWOM tends to be remembered even though the anonymous eWOM was found on a webpage of poor quality. The feedback is still used as a reference for future decisions. The behaviour described can be linked to the accessibility-diagnostics model. This theory means that information that is easily accessed and comprehended usually is the information, which is remembered and used. The anonymous eWOM might not directly be of a trustful character, but as it is easy to understand and caught in the subconscious, it will have an influence on the purchase decision.

*“Even though I only read the post once, it strangely sticks in my head and circles around.”*

#### **4.2.2 FACTORS INFLUENCING THE PURCHASE PROCESS**

When discussing the respondents overall purchase processes, the respondents' state that their first step is to identify a specific purchase motive. Once the motive has been determined, the respondents initiate an information seeking process in order to find a suitable product to match their initial motive. The respondents argue that when a product has been found in real life, the next step is to find an appropriate retailer. The respondents state that once a product is found, there is a large chance that they will search the web to find the best offer. However, when the respondent searches for a retailer on the Internet, their minds are already made up. That is to say that the respondents are not looking for product options but instead for a retailer that sells the desired product. Anonymous eWOM becomes relevant in this purchase process

since it is used as a way of assessing online stores. This means, that consumers partly use anonymous eWOM to find a reliable and trustworthy online retailer, which can offer the best deal.

The purchase process, described above, is closely linked with Howard & Sheth's purchase model. The link is evident since our respondents and the theory state that the process begins with an initial motive and follows similar steps until the purchase is completed. These findings can furthermore be linked to Howard & Sheth's model as the respondents process and evaluate information throughout their purchase. That is to say, that information acquired during the purchase process, will form and develop the consumers' decision mediators. These mediators will thereafter act as the foundation for the purchase decision. That is to say, the decision mediators will develop by incorporating new information provided by anonymous eWOM. Additionally, anonymous eWOM will also affect the potential of the evoked set of brands, as information will either strengthen or weaken consumers' attitudes towards products or brands. Thus, anonymous eWOM will have a direct impact on the purchase process as it provides information, which can influence consumers' perceptions.

Nonetheless, one major contrast between the respondents' process and the models is the shorter and faster purchase decision. The respondents have a relative efficient purchase process. Even though the respondents have a shorter process, the steps described in the Howard & Sheth model are involved.

*“ When I recently purchased a jacket, I went to store to find the right size and colour. Once I knew exactly what I wanted I searched for the best online store and bought the jacket at 50% discount.”*

Based on the gathered information the respondents purchase process in e-commerce decisions is; motive → information seeking → evaluation → decision → find an online retailer → purchase. The respondents point out that anonymous eWOM is most influential in three of these steps – information seeking, decision and finding an online retailer. In the information step, the respondents argue that anonymous eWOM has different roles depending on the product category and other available information sources. In the decision process, anonymous eWOM acts as a third opinion, which minimizes uncertainties created by cognitive dissonance. Finally, the respondents state that anonymous eWOM has significant influence in

finding an appropriate online retailer. This as the purchase decision is already made and the respondents use anonymous eWOM to find a cheap, reliable and trustworthy retailer. The model presented is a simplified version, which does not take into consideration the subconscious steps, which the respondents undergo. However, this is not a thesis aimed at evaluating purchase process models but there is a need to gain an understanding of the respondents purchase steps in order to understand their use of anonymous eWOM.

### **4.3 TO WHAT EXTENT DO CONSUMERS TRUST ANONYMOUS eWOM?**

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To further deepen the discussion of the importance of anonymous eWOM's as an information source, the respondents were asked to what extent they trust anonymous eWOM. The results indicate that there are two different camps concerning the trust level. Either there is a high level of trust and use of anonymous eWOM, or it is used to a limited extent with a low level of trust. One argument for the high level of trust, is the new generation's upbringing where the Internet has played a central role. Therefore trust towards Internet based phenomenon is of second nature and almost an essential part of everyday life. The new generation has experienced the evolution of online interaction and has since an early age developed a relationship, where trust towards the Internet has almost become a certainty. To strengthen this statement, one respondent states that he does not think so much about trust and its relation with anonymous eWOM. He points out that he has always had positive experiences and therefore, he has never had the need to question or promote his trust towards anonymous eWOM.

*“ I have never had a bad experience concerning misleading information online and therefore feel comfortable trusting information that is posted on forums and feedback sites.”*

The respondents who claimed to have a low of level trust towards anonymous eWOM do not totally dismiss anonymous eWOM in term of trustworthiness. Even though the level of trust is low the respondents do not mean that the level is insignificant. They consult anonymous eWOM regularly but if they have the possibility of receiving traditional word-of-mouth, they

believe it to be of more relevance. However, an interesting finding is that if there is no other available information, anonymous eWOM will serve as the primary information source.

*“ I use it when there is no other information available, like when I was searching for information of when to buy a new Mac.”*

The behaviour of using available information might be considered obvious, but as mentioned in the problem discussion, it can be a contradicting behaviour to base a decision on anonymous eWOM. This strange behaviour also challenges the prisoners dilemma theory, which assumes that individuals will always make a decision that will maximize their own benefits. As consumers have no relationship with the anonymous eWOM provider, the prisoners' dilemma states that the information source should not be trusted. According to the theory, there is theoretically not enough evidence to trust the third party. However, the research conducted, shows that consumers tend to have a high level of trust towards anonymous eWOM even though no personal connection exist, which can guarantee reliability.

The unorthodox behaviour of trusting unconventional sources might also be explained by the young generation's trust towards the written word. One respondent argues that there is a high level of respect towards texts and written material, both online and in real life. Furthermore, the respondent claims that this respect is based on a sense of truthfulness, which is believed to be incorporated in everything that is written. This behaviour can be related to Bhagat's credibility prediction process where an evaluation is done to determine if it is reasonable to trust new information. As the respondents have a respect towards the written word there is a relation of trust towards anonymous eWOM as it also is in written format.

*“ I have some kind of strange respect for the written word. Yeah, if its written then its probably true.”*

The combination of respect towards the written word and the long-term usage of Internet, indicates that there is a high level of natural trust, which has been developed gradually throughout the respondents lives.

#### **4.3.1 THE RELATION BETWEEN TRUST AND PRICE**

When the interview subjects were asked if the price of an object influenced their trust level towards eWOM, the majority said yes. The reasoning behind their answers is built on a risk evaluation of the purchase. Generally, when a product is expensive, the consumer wants to minimize risk as there is more to lose. In other words, as the price level increases, anonymous eWOM loses its influence and is used more as complementary information source. One respondent argues that when the price level increases, more accurate and relevant information is needed to minimize risk. Therefore, anonymous eWOM might lose its relevance as the respondents seek information sources, which enables personal face-to-face interaction. In accordance with Bhagat's theory, the consumer generally engages in a calculative assessment of costs and benefits. Based on this theory, as the product price increases, the cost of trusting anonymous eWOM outweighs the benefits. This as trusting anonymous eWOM involves trusting an anonymous counterpart with the possibility of basing a purchase on misleading information.

In contrast to the behaviour mentioned above a few respondents state that, at higher price levels, more reassurance is needed and thus the respondents argue that they would use anonymous eWOM in the purchase decision. This behaviour is of interest, as the respondents take anonymous eWOM into consideration at a high price level, but at the same time feel the need to use more credible sources when the risk level is higher. According to Locander & Hermann, in order to minimize anxiety when presented with different choices, consumers want sufficient information to make an adequate decision. The information can consist of recommendations and knowledge, but also by reading reviews as anonymous eWOM. Therefore, anonymous eWOM will have a contributing factor and depending on other available information, be more or less of relevance. With this in mind, anonymous eWOM is placed in a grey area where its relevance varies from one situation to another.

Besides basing trust towards anonymous eWOM on the availability of other available information sources, the respondents argue that experiences have a significant role when developing trust towards anonymous eWOM. A few respondents argue that the price level at, which they trust anonymous eWOM, increases as a consequence of previous positive experiences. As a result of positive experiences, the respondents adapt their risk evaluation since they are willing to accept more risk. A mindset based on experiences develops, where the respondents feel more comfortable to use anonymous eWOM when buying products at

higher price levels. The respondents' answers infer that experience is an important factor, which has an effect on the trust towards anonymous eWOM.

*“My price limit has increased as result of my positive experiences. However, should I be fooled, it would backlash and I would become more suspicious – experiences are extremely important and considering my good experiences I will keep on pushing my price limit.”*

The behaviour described above, where trust increases due to positive experiences, can be related to Howard & Sheth's model, where consumers are believed to adapt their decision mediators due to previous experiences. That is to say, positive experiences modify the decision process, as experiences are a part of the learning process. Additionally, the thought process explained above can be connected with Uliveri's trust theory and the importance of mind-models. The theory states that through previous experiences mind-models are built, which then are used as a reference for future information evaluation. The respondents clearly indicate that their previous experiences lay as a foundation for the level of trust towards anonymous eWOM.

#### **4.3.2 FACTORS THAT CREATE TRUST**

When discussing the number of anonymous eWOM comments needed for a review to be considered credible, all respondents point out the importance of a high activity level. This means that it is not only the number of comments that are of relevance but also that the comments are updated and that there is an ongoing discussion. With this in mind the respondents mean that the number of anonymous eWOM comments need to be put into context for each purchase. There is generally no predetermined number of comments that are needed in order to consider a viewpoint trustworthy. Instead, the respondents wish to receive a well-rounded picture that is based on number of comments, recent activity, appropriate terminology as well as a wide range of positive and negative comments. The respondents further argue that in order for a position to be credible, they want a balanced picture, which is reasonable. This means that too many positive comments can have a negative impact as it seems to good to be true. Additionally, the respondents stated that the feedback should be appropriate in correlation with the price class and product. That is to say, it is unreasonable to write half a page about the quality of a recently purchased sandwich.

*“Information needs to be put into context. Who writes half a page about a sandwich place?”*

*“ It is important that there is a number of comments available which show the positive and the negative sides of the product or service.”*

On the other hand, if the purchase concerns a high price product, the respondents would not be satisfied with a two-word comment. This as the length of the comment is generally expected to be more detailed in correlation with the increase of price, in order to be considered trustworthy. Furthermore, one respondent means that comments are of greater importance when the purchase is of international character. The respondents tend to have more trust towards Swedish sources when engaging in e-commerce.

An interesting finding is the respondents' relatively low level of fear towards trusting anonymous eWOM and the possibility of the comment being fraud. The respondents feel that they usually have enough knowledge and experience to determine the authentic comments from the manipulated ones. However, one respondent, whom has relatively little experience of eWOM, states that a minimum of 10 comments is needed in order to be trusted. This finding strengthens Uliveri's and Howard & Sheth's theories, which state that with more experience, comes a higher level of trust. Howard & Sheth argue that old purchases and brand experiences are used as a foundation for future purchase decisions. Uliveri shares the same opinion and means that experiences have an influential role in developing trust towards a certain source. Additionally, the findings can be connected with Bhagat's credibility prediction process, which states everything has to be put into context to determine the level of trust towards the counterpart. This is exactly, what the respondents do when they expect different lengths and types of comments for differently priced products. Finally, Bhagat's calculative assessment is also relevant as the respondents evaluate the price against the benefits to determine if the anonymous eWOM is worth trusting.

*“ I have only used anonymous feedback a few times and in those cases, I felt the need of reading at least 10 comments to feel assured and safe.”*

### 4.3.3 THE EVOLUTION OF TRUST TOWARDS ANONYMOUS eWOM

When the respondents were asked how their trust towards anonymous eWOM has developed, a majority answered that it has been a positive development. That is to say that trust towards anonymous eWOM has increased throughout time. The respondents mean that the increased level of trust is based on experience, the increased seriousness online, peer review as well as a larger variety of specific forums.

- With experiences the respondents mean that they have had positive outcomes when using anonymous eWOM. The comments have been useful, true and relevant, which has made them valuable.
- The increased seriousness online means that the Internet has developed from being an arena without a clear structure, to becoming a highly considered and reliable phenomenon. The respondents argue that Internet has more structure and unofficial rules, which they believe has increased the general level of trust. Furthermore, as all Internet phenomenon are evaluated as a whole, anonymous eWOM has benefitted from the overall positive developments online.
- The respondents mean that their trust towards anonymous eWOM has improved due to peer-reviews. That is to say, that users today review each other and fraud information is reported directly. A respondent states that;

*“with more anonymous eWOM readers there are also more critical opinions of the specific anonymous eWOM”.*

- The increased number of anonymous eWOM users has also created more topic specific forums. This means forums, where specific subjects are discussed with a high level of seriousness. These specific forums are easier to access and publish reliable information. That is to say, individuals who have a genuine interest in the subject debate issues in a relevant way, which contribute to create a higher level of trustworthiness.

Although the trend amongst the respondents is an increased level of trust towards anonymous eWOM, there are a few exceptions. One respondent states that he evaluates eWOM encounters independently and therefore argues that his trust towards anonymous eWOM has not changed over time. Sometimes anonymous eWOM plays a key role in the purchase decision, while at other times it has no influence at all.

*“I don’t judge all alike. As I do with people, I judge all eWOM encounters individually.”*

Two other respondents state that their trust has diminished over time since they argue that anonymous eWOM has grown in size but still is considered an unreliable source. The logic behind their reasoning is the correlation between the amount of feedback and the decreasing quality. Nothing has really changed over time, the quality level is still the same but there is more anonymous eWOM available.

*“ I don’t know, in the beginning when I started using the Internet, only serious companies were online. My trust was perhaps higher back then. However, today there seems to be more companies but also more sites that are out to fool you.”*

#### **4.4 SITES FEATURES THAT INFLUENCE ANONYMOUS eWOM**

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The general theme among the respondents regarding anonymous eWOM, is that it is judged by the overall feeling and appearance of the eWOM site. The respondents state that they try to determine the overall seriousness of the webpage and ask themselves the question “ Does this feel realistic?” A few respondents point out that they consider themselves knowledgeable enough to determine the authenticity of a website, based on the appearance. However, they realize that this behaviour might be naive as it is relatively easy and cheap to create a good-looking webpage.

*“ It might be naive, but I believe that I have enough experience to smell a rat. Nonetheless, today its getting harder to evaluate webpages as it is relatively easy to create a good-looking site.”*

Additionally, several respondents point out that factors such as website design, number of active participants, number of comments, multiple subjects, rumour and a well developed discussion platform are key factors in her evaluation of the website. Furthermore, the respondents argue that the combined effect of the mentioned factors have a strong influence

on anonymous eWOM as well as websites' overall level of trustworthiness. The respondents' answers indicate that the points made by Uliveri are applicable to consumers' e-commerce behaviour. Uliveri argues that consumers often focus on appearances, as quality, trust and reliability are linked to the overall appearance. That is to say, consumers judge anonymous eWOM by evaluating the site's design features and the general impression of the page. Uliveri states that appearances, as those of a website, are a key factor in creating trustworthiness. Based on the respondents' answers it can be inferred that if anonymous eWOM sites are presented in a serious and well-developed manor it will automatically strengthen their sense of trust towards anonymous eWOM and the sites.

*“ We touched upon it earlier, but in order to feel trust towards the site and the feedback, its important that the site has a good design, a fair amount of comments, different opinions as well as a lot of activity. ”*

A few respondents state that in order to strengthen the trustworthiness of anonymous eWOM several small adaptations should be implemented. Firstly, the respondents argue that if a webpage feels serious, then the information published is assumed to be trustworthy. Therefore, by creating a well-developed and professional webpage, the anonymous feedback will have more impact. In addition, the respondents argue that by incorporating small security measures, such as a validation codes, the forum can assure a higher level of trust. The respondents' reasoning is that if an anonymous eWOM author has taken the time to go through the hassle of a validation procedure, then there is good reason to believe that the posted comment is of high quality.

*“ If someone has taken the time to enter X2JS in the verification slot, there is a high reason to believe that they are serious and that the feedback is relevant. ”*

Although Uliveri criticizes the belief that security is considered to be synonymous with trust, the interviews still revealed a strong correlation between these factors. As the respondents associate nice appearance with a high level of security, they also link security with trust. With this in mind, websites that can assure security or at least perceive it, will be considered trustworthy. Following the same pattern, Uliveri argues that security, credibility and appearance are all contributors in creating consumer confidence. If confidence can be created

based on appearance, then the consumers will express a higher level of trust towards the webpage.

Finally, the respondents argue that the webpage owners should develop more efficient ways to leave anonymous eWOM and that some sort of responsibility should be placed on the anonymous eWOM writer. The respondents mean that well developed feedback comment fields should be incorporated on the website. Instead of just leaving a single comment like “Awesome speed and handling” there should be several slots where other information can be posted. For example four slots where feedback concerning price, quality, delivery and overall impression can be left. This would enable the webpage to deliver feedback of higher quality, which is more useful for the consumers. These requirements would also create a stronger sense of trust towards the anonymous eWOM and the sites.

## CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSIONS

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*The concluding chapter will reconnect the purpose of the research with the findings derived from the previous chapter. Thereafter, the research questions are answered based on the empirical material and the analysis. Additionally, the chapter presents the theoretical and practical contribution generated from the research. Finally suggestions for future research are discussed.*

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### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

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The main purpose of this research has been to understand why and to what extent, consumers trust anonymous eWOM. Secondly, the research has aimed to depict what role anonymous eWOM has in the consumers' purchase decision. The research has focused on answering the following research questions;

1. Why do consumers trust anonymous eWOM?
2. How does anonymous eWOM influence the purchase process?
3. What key factors make an anonymous feedback site credible?

#### 5.1.1 WHY DO CONSUMERS TRUST ANONYMOUS eWOM?

As Locander & Hermann, Howard & Sheth and Uliveri argue, previous experiences are one of the key motives to why consumers express trust towards something as controversial as anonymous eWOM. The authors' theories are inline with the findings of this research in the sense that a majority of the respondents argue that their trust has developed gradually through positive experiences. The first time anonymous eWOM was used the trust level was low and considered a risky gamble. However, small baby steps were taken and eventually more trust developed, as the results of the interaction were positive. The first step was taken as the overall monetary value of the transaction was at a low level and therefore the risk was worth taking.

A second major reason for trusting anonymous eWOM, is that the Internet has evolved and become a more serious arena. One example that illustrates the seriousness surrounding

anonymous eWOM, is the quick response from other consumers if fraud information is posted. Individuals assess and evaluate each other's comments and if someone disagrees with the comments a counter argument is posted. Therefore, consumers feel that Internet has become a more reliable source, which is informally regulated by the users. Furthermore, consumers are not afraid of fraud feedback since they believe that they are able to distinguish "the good apples from the bad." Anonymous eWOM has benefited from Internet's shift towards a more serious structure and consumers argue that anonymous eWOM is becoming a trustworthier information source. An additional factor, which contributes to the trust towards anonymous eWOM, is the respect consumers generally have towards the written word. Anonymous eWOM, being a written format, has also benefitted from this respect and further might explain why there is trust towards anonymous eWOM.

Even though consumers prefer traditional word-of-mouth, anonymous eWOM is sometimes the only information source available. The scarcity of information has therefore made anonymous eWOM an essential information source. It can further be concluded that many decisions have been based solely on anonymous eWOM and still experienced positive outcomes. Additionally, it can be concluded that anonymous eWOM can be the best information source, especially when it concerns rumours and technological innovations. Anonymous eWOM on technological sites, is continuously updated and provide information on the product development. This since consumers actively discuss the subjects in combination with the belief that companies intentionally leak information to anonymous eWOM forums, in order to create a buzz effect.

Finally, consumers trust anonymous eWOM due to the development of more product specific forums, which enable the consumer to engage into high quality discussions about a specific product. This in combination with active participants and well-established sites, make anonymous eWOM forums a trustworthy source where relevant information is posted. The reason for trust towards product specific forums is that they engage knowledgeable users, which have a genuine interest in discussing and exchanging thoughts with like-minded individuals. This means that consumers can feel assured that comments are of high quality and with an honest intention of helping others. The product specific forums in combination with previous anonymous eWOM experience, increased seriousness online and anonymous eWOM being the only source available are, based on the findings of this research, the main explanatory factors behind consumers' trust, towards anonymous eWOM.

### **5.1.2 HOW DOES ANONYMOUS eWOM INFLUENCE THE PURCHASE PROCESS?**

One of the main conclusions that can be drawn from this research is that anonymous eWOM is an important decision factor and is mainly used as a complementary information source throughout the purchase process. That is to say, anonymous eWOM is used as a third opinion, which confirms the consumer's purchase decision. The research indicates that consumers normally already know what they want to purchase before they consult anonymous eWOM. Additionally, consumers seek reassurance in order to feel more secure in their purchase decision. This behaviour is in accordance with cognitive dissonance, which states that human beings are frail and seek reassurance from its peers. This means that anonymous eWOM is used to tip the scale rather than a fundamental decision factor. However, it should be noted that consumers prefer traditional word-of-mouth as their primary information source, as two-way interaction generates a higher level of trust.

Furthermore anonymous eWOM's role varies depending on the level of previous experience as well as the product's price. The research indicates that consumers' vary their reliance on anonymous eWOM depending on the price of the product. That is to say, the cheaper a product is, the smaller the economical risk is related with the purchase. With this in mind, consumers are more reluctant to take a chance by trusting potentially fraud anonymous eWOM when the losses are small. However, when the price of the product rises, the consumer has more to lose, which makes them more eager to find credible sources. Anonymous eWOM can therefore be concluded to have an irregular role in the purchase decision, which varies to a great extent depending on the price of the item as well as the availability of other information sources.

Additionally, the study concludes that anonymous eWOM's role in the purchase decision has increased as it is considered accessible and easy to understand. These factors mean that consumers relatively fast can obtain information that strengthens or weakness their initial purchase decision. In other words, anonymous eWOM is accessible and serves a practical function in the purchase process. Finally, the research affirms parts of the Howard & Sheth theory, as anonymous eWOM influences the purchase decision by providing the consumers with information. In accordance with Howard & Sheth's theory a conclusion of the respondents purchase process can be drawn. The respondents' use of anonymous eWOM

primarily affects their information seeking, their decision process and when they search for a trustworthy retailer.

### **5.1.3 WHAT KEY FACTORS MAKE AN ANONYMOUS FEEDBACK SITE CREDIBLE?**

The research clearly shows that the main factor, which makes anonymous feedback sites credible, is the overall presentation and impression of the site. The overall impression includes aspects such as; web-design, number of active participants, number of comments, multiple subjects, the website's reputation and a well-developed discussion platform.

The webpage's design has proven to have a significant influence on the consumers' level of trust towards the anonymous eWOM. The site's design conveys the overall seriousness of the information posted. Additionally, the design indicates the investment of time and resources, which are associated with dedication and ultimately trust. Furthermore, consumers value sites, which have a high number of active participants, comments and subjects. The logic behind this reasoning is that these factors indicate that the site is used and trusted by others as well as the reassurance that discussions are updated. In addition, a key factor, which adds credibility to anonymous eWOM sites, is the availability of specific forums dedicated to individual topics.

A conclusion reached, which might be considered obvious, but that is of importance is the reputation surrounding the website. Consumers use recommendations when choosing feedback site and thus reputation becomes a vital factor in obtaining trust. Additionally, consumers value websites that offer well-developed and practical platforms where it is easy to interact with others. A well-developed site contributes to the overall sensation of a serious and trustworthy feedback arena. The platform becomes essential as consumers seek user-friendly sites where it is easy to interact with other participants.

Finally, contrary to popular belief, long and well formulated comments are not always the most trusted posts. Consumers believe that comments need to be put into relation with the product. That is to say, writing half a page about a sandwich is not credible, who does that? Furthermore, another factor that would enhance the level of trust towards anonymous eWOM

sites are better procedures when posting feedback, for example multiple comment slots where different types of feedback can be left.

## **5.2 THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTION**

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The main theoretical contribution of this research is that it affirms experiences role in the development of trust towards anonymous feedback. The theory presented by Uliveri, Locander & Hermann and Howards & Sheth all have in common that previous experiences form the base for trust. This research agrees with their theories and concludes that consumers' positive experiences surrounding e-commerce and anonymous eWOM are the reason for such a high level of trust towards a controversial phenomenon. In the beginning no trust was associated with anonymous eWOM. However, steps were taken progressively in accordance with the positive outcomes of reading and trusting the information posted. Additionally, with anonymous eWOM experience, consumers also believe that they have developed sufficient tools to evaluate anonymous feedback. The combination of these two factors can explain why consumers are not afraid of being scammed by reading anonymous eWOM. Instead a general tendency is that consumers have developed a relationship towards the phenomenon and see it as a trustworthy complementary source throughout the purchase process.

Howard & Sheth's presents in their model a complex framework describing the purchase process and buyer behaviour. This research agrees with the main points presented by Howard & Sheth but have also found a number of deviations to their theory when it concerns e-commerce. The research findings indicate that consumers have generally already made up their minds when they engage in e-commerce. This means that consumers go through the steps in the Howard & Sheth in real life but not to the same extent on the Internet. The research suggests that when consumers have found their ideal product, they go online with their minds set. That is to say that consumers do not apply Howard & Sheth's model when they have decided to purchase the product online. At this stage, consumers are not generally searching for product alternatives, but rather going online to execute the purchase. Consumers go online in order to a get a better deal but also to further strengthen their purchase decision. It is during the justification of the purchase that many consumers consult anonymous eWOM in order to justify their purchase decision. Therefore, a new dimension should be added to the Howard & Sheth model where anonymous eWOM is added as a complementary source to the

purchase process. Anonymous eWOM could be a complement to the information, which the consumer gathers from the social environment described by Howard & Sheth. This as anonymous eWOM is written by peers but also collected individually and with a clear motive. Arguably, this finding could be considered of less relevance since the Howard & Sheth model was developed in 1969 and presumably would have incorporated anonymous eWOM if it were to be rewritten in 2011.

### **5.3 PRACTICAL CONTRIBUTION**

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The research reveals that anonymous eWOM does have substantial influence on consumers purchase processes. Furthermore, the study shows that there is a moderate to high level of trust towards anonymous eWOM, which has primarily been developed through experiences. Thus, one practical contribution is to create awareness, especially for companies, how important it is to take anonymous eWOM into consideration. Consumers have the possibility to make or break a brand through anonymous eWOM with a limited set of resources and without involving the company. Additionally, another practical contribution is the acknowledgement of the power of the written word. This does not only apply in real life but is also relevant for online publications including anonymous eWOM.

The main practical contribution of this research is how feedback sites should be developed in order to create a high level of trust. The research indicates that factors such as web-design, number of active participants, number of comments, multiple subjects, website reputation as well as a developed discussion platform, are key when developing trustworthy feedback sites. Consumers focus on the overall impression of the site and partly associate the impression to the site's level of trustworthiness. Therefore, future anonymous eWOM websites should focus on creating a serious impression as it conveys relevance and reliability.

### **5.4 FUTURE RESEARCH**

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The aim of this research was initially to study a relatively narrow section of anonymous eWOM. However, as the research progressed in finding relations between consumers' trust and anonymous eWOM it became clear that the initially narrow research area had multiple sidetracks. Furthermore, the research area was not only wide but also deep, which means that

the ambition of being able to contribute with new groundbreaking insights to the research area was not fully achieved. Therefore, future research projects could be developed by examining the sidetracks revealed throughout this research.

One of the sidetracks, which the research touched upon, is the sense of truth and reliability consumers tend to associate with the written word. Surprisingly, the respondents stated that trust towards the written word is not only applicable in literature but also online. Therefore, a future research project could be to conduct an in-depth study aimed at determining consumers' level of trust towards the written word in an online context. The findings of such a research could contribute with new insights to the consumer behaviour area and the evolution of the written word. This research would be of relevance for practitioners such as authors, scholars, companies and ad agencies as they are all affected by written material online.

A second possible future research area could be to determine how anonymous eWOM sites could be developed in order to be considered trustworthier. Our research indicates that factors such as website appearance and developed feedback procedures are a few factors, which the respondents argue make anonymous eWOM sites trustworthier. With this in mind, it would be of interest to further determine which site characteristics that could be developed or changed in order to enhance the sense of trust. The research could be conducted with a quantitative approach in order to obtain a large data sample and thereby identifying, which website features that create trust. The results of the suggested research would mainly be useful for website owners and corporations, which could further develop their websites in order to enhance trust. It would also be useful for consumers, as the sites could be developed to match their preferences based on the research findings.

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## APPENDIX 1 – INTERVIEW TEMPLATE

Name:

Age:

City of residence:

Gender:

1. How many times per month/year do you shop online?
2. Which is your perception of e-commerce? Have your experiences been positive or negative and why?
3. Why do you shop online?
4. How is your purchase process structured when you shop online?  
(Motive, information seeking, evaluation, ranking, purchase etc)
5. What are the most important factors when deciding to make a purchase online?  
(e.g. the webpage, price factors, quick delivery)
6. Do you evaluate the webpage before engaging in a purchase?
7. If yes, how is the page evaluated?
8. How much do you consult your social environment before deciding to conduct a purchase?
9. For which type of purchases is consultation from friends and family used the most?  
(Expensive/cheap or product category)
10. Do you trust word-of-mouth gained from your social network?
11. Does the price of the product have any relevance in the level of trust associated with the anonymous eWOM?
12. What role does the appearance of an anonymous eWOM site have in determining the trust towards the specific comment?
13. Does your trust towards anonymous eWOM change if it is gathered from an anonymous eWOM site that has never been used before?
14. Does the number of anonymous eWOM comments posted have any influence to determining if the statement is considered trustworthy?
15. Are you ever afraid of being scammed by believing in anonymous eWOM? Why?
16. If an anonymous eWOM comment is long and well written, does it affect your perception of its trustworthiness?

17. How much does anonymous eWOM affect your purchase decision?
18. Please rank the importance of anonymous eWOM in your purchase process in consideration with the importance of other factors such as: Product price, delivery terms, brand values etc.
19. How much trust do you generally have towards anonymous eWOM?
20. Do you publish anonymous eWOM?
21. How has your trust curve towards anonymous eWOM developed since the first time you used it?
22. Which factors have contributed to the change of trust towards anonymous eWOM?
23. Which actions/changes do you consider could be implemented to anonymous eWOM comments and the sites they are published on in order to make them trustworthier?