The Times They Are E-Changin':

A quantitative survey study examining consumer word-of-mouth behavior
in the context of e-commerce services

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Abstract

The emergence of e-commerce services has resulted in a new and digitized environment to conduct business in. Hence, marketers today place great value in understanding consumer behavior within an online context, as it is seen as a competitive advantage. Contemporary studies emphasize that consumers of the digital age to a large extent trust recommendations from friends, family and followers rather than traditional advertising. The passing of such information between individuals is called word-of-mouth, and is regarded as a powerful marketing tool by practitioners. Few contemporary studies have addressed what aspects might stimulate word-of-mouth behavior in an e-commerce context. Consequently, the purpose of this study was to establish which aspects in terms of service experience, visual design, personalization and personal motivators affect consumer word-of-mouth behavior. Our empirical material was collected through an online survey, providing us with 126 valid responses that was subsequently analyzed through a multiple regression analysis in SPSS. The findings showed that personal motivators had the most significant impact in explaining word-of-mouth behavior. Further, the factors of service experience, visual design and personalization showed little or no statistical significance in explaining word-of-mouth behavior in an e-commerce context.

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1. Introduction

The following section will introduce the concerned area of study, present the aim and research question as well as account for this study's delimitations.

As the internet gradually spreads across the world, we are witnessing a rapid transformation of the retail industry. The digital landscape has provided new opportunities for companies to conduct business, resulting in the emergence of e-commerce. The world of e-commerce provides an immense online shopping arena in which millions of consumers have access to a wide range of products and services. According to a report issued by Nielsen (2018), the global e-commerce sales within multiple categories such as electronics, fashion and fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) accounted for about 10% of the global retail market sales in 2018, and is estimated to continue to grow exponentially every year. Furthermore, increased focus on digitization in commerce have also had an effect on consumer behavior, as shopping habits evidently have changed due to the simplicity and flexibility that e-commerce entails (Swedish Trade Association, 2019). Since the future consumer is projected to spend more time on internet shopping, heavier demands are likely to be placed on retailers' ability to create innovative e-commerce services that can offer consumers smart, safe and fast technological solutions (Priporas, Stylos & Fotiadis, 2017).

As a consequence of the recent developments, many companies are now refocusing and adjusting their marketing efforts in relation to e-commerce. In a report examining global trust within the advertising industry, Nielsen (2015) points out consumers' decreasing distrust for traditional advertising, and how consumers increasingly place their confidence in recommendations from friends and others in their near surroundings. A recommendation can in this sense be defined as a way of engaging in word-of-mouth (WOM) behavior; namely, to talk about or mention a brand or a product offered by a brand (Fill & Turnbull, 2016). WOM marketing is a popular communication strategy that has been lauded for its marketing capabilities; it is a marketing method that consumers seem to trust greatly, and one that is very likely to drive sales to companies (Whitler, 2014, July 17). WOM is further listed as "the third most

important global source of information that customers use before making an online purchase decision" (Nielsen, 2018, p. 12).

Hence, from a strategic communication perspective, WOM in an e-commerce context seemed like an interesting topic to further explore in this thesis.

1.1 Problem Definition

Much seems to indicate that companies today place much value in the capacity to design marketing strategies that focuses on the customer experience. It also seems to be evident that WOM is regarded by many companies as a valuable and trusted marketing tool. With this in mind, and with regards to the rapid growth of e-commerce and changing patterns of consumer behavior, we became interested in the marketing potential that WOM holds within this context. When companies within the retail industry today design their e-commerce services, what factors influences whether or not consumers choose to engage in WOM behavior?

Existing literature within e-commerce marketing underlines the significance of features such as service quality, user interface design and ease of website use (April & Pather, 2008; Bilgihan, Kandampully & Zhang, 2016; Palese & Usai; 2018; Gajewska, Zimon, Kaczor & Madzík, 2019) when creating satisfactory customer experiences. Yet, it is also argued that there is no fixed understanding, or unanimous voice in academia, establishing what aspects are compulsory in creating positively perceived customer experiences (Bleier, Harmeling & Palmatier, 2019). Therefore, we became interested in investigating whether it was possible to determine which aspects of a e-commerce experience are most important to customers, and if so, what possible effect they may have on consumer word-of-mouth behavior. More specifically, we wanted to gain knowledge about how aspects like *service experience, visual design, personalization and personal motivators* potentially could create a WOM-effect amongst consumers in an e-commerce setting.

When searching for existing literature on how certain factors in relation to e-commerce services can influence customers' tendency to engage in WOM behavior, it became clear that relatively little research has been devoted to this area of study. Numerous searches in different academic and peer-reviewed databases using relevant keywords such as "word-of-

mouth", "e-commerce", and "customer experience" resulted in very few suitable hits regarding the topic of interest.

With the information above in mind, we felt that this was a research gap that needed to be addressed. As e-commerce seems to be growing rapidly in the world today, it could be of great value for practitioners within the field of strategic communication to know if and how certain elements within their e-commerce marketing strategies make customers more likely to engage in WOM behavior.

1.2 Aim and Research Question

The aim of this study is to examine and gain increased knowledge about word-of-mouth behavior in relation to e-commerce. More specifically, this study intends to investigate which specific factors in terms of service experience, visual design, personalization as well as personal motivators increases consumer inclination to engage in word-of-mouth behavior. Thus, the primary purpose of this study is to analyze the extent to which these factors help generate a WOM-effect among e-commerce users. Based on previous literature covering WOM, the e-commerce customer experience, service quality and psychological motivations, we formulated the research question as follows:

RQ: Which aspect in terms of *service experience*, *visual design*, *personalization* and *personal motivators* in relation to e-commerce services have the most impact on consumers' tendency to engage in WOM behavior?

1.3 Delimitations

Although the main subject of this study is WOM behavior within the context of e-commerce, we decided to only examine and analyze how the factors service experience, visual design, personalization and personal motivators may impact consumers' tendency to engage in such behavior. This delimitation has been made based on previous research that has emphasized the significance that these factors pose on the e-commerce customer experience. Thus, as the focus of our thesis only encapsulates a smaller segment of what constitutes the broader WOM phenomenon as a whole, it is inevitable that other interesting aspects of what produces WOM

behavior may be left out. Furthermore, as the sample of our study is limited to people who have previously engaged in word-of-mouth behavior within the context of e-commerce, we have not applied any limitations of demographic or geographical character. This is further motivated by the fact that e-commerce services are easily accessible in nature, enabling people to use them on a daily basis worldwide. Finally, we decided to examine WOM behavior exclusively from a consumer perspective as this thesis aims to obtain knowledge of how customers perceive experiences online. Nonetheless, we hope this study provides some insights for marketers and practitioners within the broader field of strategic communication and inspire further attention to this matter in the future.

2. Literature Review

The following section will provide an overview of contemporary research within areas such as word-of-mouth communication, different aspects of the customer experience and consumer motivations. Moreover, we will present our theoretical framework and hypotheses.

2.1 Word-of-Mouth Communication

Consumers, potential consumers, as well as non-consumers, naturally engage in conversations where they exchange information about products, brands, and their marketing messages. In a marketing context, these types of conversations are often referred to as WOM (Fill & Turnbull, 2016, p. 50). Stokes and Lomax (2002) define the nature of word-of-mouth communication as "interpersonal communication regarding products or services where the receiver regards the communicator as impartial" (p. 5). In contrast to traditional marketing, where messages often are constructed as formal and linear transmissions, WOM is considered to be a more interactive form of communication. This is mainly due to its spontaneous nature, as it often occurs as a by-product of intimate interpersonal conversations (Breazeale, 2008; Steffes & Burgee, 2009). Moreover, since WOM is perceived as being spontaneously transmitted by a third party, in a way that is independent of the producer or seller, it is regarded as a more trustworthy source of information by consumers. Much of this credibility stems from the fact that WOM communication is more likely to include negative aspects of the service or product, in comparison to other kinds of advertising messages whose contents are often designed for the purpose of selling (Silverman, 2011). With this aspect in mind, however, companies must be wary of what type of effect their consumer WOM communication results in - positive or negative WOM. When a consumer engages in positive WOM (i.e. the exchange of positive experiences of products, services or brands), this is usually regarded as beneficial for a company (Keller, 2007; Hajli, Lin, Featherman & Wang, 2014). On the contrary, WOM can also take a negative form when the customer experience, product or service is unsatisfactory. Silverman (2011) and Schueller (2015) emphasize that, in a consumer experience context, the

occurrence of negative WOM is more probable than positive WOM. Furthermore, Silverman (2011) points out that "a customer is three to ten times more likely to tell other people about a negative experience than a positive one" (p. 26). Yet, in contrast, some existing papers have found that positive WOM has a larger impact on customer purchase intentions than negative WOM (East, Hammond & Lomax, 2008; East, Uncles, Romaniuk & Lomax, 2016).

As WOM is a naturally occurring phenomenon, marketers can with advantage construct communication strategies to amplify the engagement in this kind of behavior (Fill & Turnbull, 2016). Within commerce, WOM is held in high regard, and is oftentimes believed to be a more effective marketing method than traditional advertising (Silverman, 2011; Buttle & Groeger, 2017; Nielsen, 2015). This belief is not unfounded, as WOM communication is considered to be the primary driver of 20 to 50 percent of customer purchasing decisions (Bughin, Doogan & Vetvik, 2010). As argued earlier in accordance with Nielsen (2015), consumers also trust recommendations from people in their near surroundings to a much larger degree than messages sent from the companies themselves. Prior research within WOM marketing has further maintained that the method presents a unique opportunity for companies to build trustworthy relationships with its consumers (Keller, 2007; Silverman, 2011; Hajli et al., 2014).

2.1.1 Electronic Word-of-Mouth

Since the rise of the internet as a common supplier of channels for everyday communication, marketers and researchers have also expressed interest in the marketing possibilities presented in the practice of electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM). In essence, e-WOM is person-to-person communication that occurs on the internet - for example, consumers who share product reviews with each other online. Earlier research has suggested that 90% of consumers trust recommendations from friends, and that at least 70% trust an e-WOM recommendation online (Fill & Turnbull, 2016). Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh & Gremler (2004) define e-WOM 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" (p. 39). Studies that focus on e-WOM in relation to e-commerce have outlined what factors might influence the customer to recommend e-commerce sites (Jattamart, Kwangsawad & Boonkasem, 2019), what factors lay behind the motivation for consumer engagement

in e-WOM (Fine, Gironda & Petrescu, 2017) and how e-WOM can have an impact on consumers' satisfaction and online buying intentions (Kuo & Nakhata, 2019; Nuseir, 2019).

To conclude this section, our definition of WOM behavior encompasses positive, negative WOM as well as e-WOM. In other words we want to address if service experience, visual design, personalization and personal motivators have an impact on any kind of WOM behavior.

2.1.2 Consumer motivations for WOM

WOM behavior is, in essence, a psychological phenomenon (Silverman, 2011). In order to understand what motivates people to engage in WOM behavior, one must understand the basics of group psychology. The work of Schueller (2015) stresses the significance of the human herd instincts; that is, the urge of belonging in a larger group or society. Moreover, Schueller underlines that emotional involvement is the primary source for people to engage in WOM behavior. In accordance with this line of thought, Silverman (2011) states that offering cashback or coupons is an inefficient way for companies to produce word-of-mouth, as consumers might feel like they are being "bought" by the company (p. 54). According to Silverman, the optimal way of generating WOM is to provide consumers with an emotionally engaging experience. Furthermore, the work of Milaković & Mihić (2016) provides interesting insights for understanding the reasons for consumer word-of-mouth engagement. In their comparative study of literature on the subject, they concluded that personal motivations for WOM engagement is highly individual. The authors state it depends on a mix of personality, social prerequisites, cultural circumstances, the relationship between the sender and receiver of communication as well as the uniqueness of the situation of occurrence. Milaković & Mihić further emphasize that consumer motivations for engaging in word-of-mouth are in need of further research.

Research aiming at explaining human motivation and innate psychological needs have also focused on self-determination; namely, to which extent an individual's behavior is self-motivated or impacted by external factors (Ryan & Deci, 2017). These two types of motivations can be divided into intrinsic and extrinsic motivations (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Intrinsic motivations refer to the performance of, or engagement in, an activity out of inherent enjoyment, satisfaction or need. An individual could thus have an intrinsic motivation towards

understanding, learning, or accomplishing something. In contrast, extrinsic motivation is the performance of an activity in order to achieve a separable outcome beyond personal satisfaction; in essence, it is motivation that is controlled by external incentives such as rewards, praise and punishment avoidance (ibid.). There is limited contemporary research that has studied the impact of psychological motivators on consumer WOM engagement. However, several papers have studied the positive impact of such motivators in terms of e-WOM (Hennig-Thurau & Walsh, 2004; Cheung & Lee, 2012; Baldus et al., 2015; Fine, Gironda & Petrescu, 2017; Gellerstedt & Arvemo, 2018; Bhatnagar & Kumra, 2020), but often with a focus on online reviews or the sharing of personal data.

2.2 E-commerce and Customer Experience

In our thesis, we have decided to refer to online stores as "e-commerce services". Our definition of an e-commerce service is an online commerce platform that offers products or services to be purchased digitally. Our definition of e-commerce is not limited to e-commerce web sites exclusively, as it also stretches to other digital commerce options like those offered by social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook and other applications. That being said, e-commerce service in this sense means some kind of e-commerce platform.

As retailers and companies have adapted their businesses to the online environment, it has become essential for researchers and practitioners to understand the customer experience in this context (Izogo & Jayawardhene, 2018). Essentially, the customer experience is a customer's perception of how an organization interacts with them prior to, during, and after a purchase. In an e-commerce setting, customer experience refers to the customer's perception of the online experience while interacting with an e-commerce service (Nielsen, 2018). According to a report by Big Commerce (2020), customers' online perception is affected by a multitude of interactions, such as the actual e-commerce visit, engaging with the company's social media accounts, and reading emails sent by the company. Furthermore, the report suggests that 57% of online customers claim that they have waived a purchase because of a bad customer experience, or because a competitor offered a better experience (p. 3). Thus, it stands to reason that providing customers with a seamless online experience will only be beneficial for companies in the long run, generating increased sales and higher brand engagement. From a competitive perspective, the customer experience has become one of the most

vital outcome variables (Adobe, 2019) and companies today therefore have to constantly improve their e-commerce services in order to keep customers satisfied. In the paragraphs below, we will dive deeper into what aspects that in academia have been implicated to be of importance in relation to the online customer experience.

2.2.1 Service Quality

When searching for existing literature on how certain aspects within the commerce business can influence the customer experience, the concept of service quality was recurring. Service quality is a phenomenon that has been discussed and researched at length within the traditional retail industry. One of the early definitions as per Lewis & Booms (1983) explain the core of the term as "a measure of how well the service level delivered matches customer expectations. Delivering quality service means conforming to customer expectations on a consistent basis" (p. 101). Lehtinen & Lehtinen (1982, cited in Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1985, p. 43) describe service quality as the product of the interaction between the customer and the elements present in the service experience offered by an organization. Furthermore, they present three dimensions of service quality: physical quality, which is constituted of the physical aspects of the service (office building or equipment), corporate quality, which involves the company's image or profile; and interactive quality, which emanates from the interaction between the company's personnel and customers. While these definitions address the term service quality from the perspective of the traditional retail sector, contemporary research on service quality have also underlined significance of service quality within the e-commerce industry, and how they impact customer satisfaction and the customer experience overall (April & Pather, 2008; Palese & Usai; 2018; Gajewska et al., 2019).

2.2.1.1 SERVQUAL Model

While investigating the notion of service quality, we came across the multiple-item scale model SERVQUAL, created by Parasuraman & Zeithaml (1988), which became an important inspiration in the development of this study. The model is generally accepted as a precise measure of service quality that retailers can use to comprehend consumer service expectations

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and improve their services afterward (Fine et al., 2017). Yet, the SERVQUAL model has also been used to measure service quality in the retailing and service industry by numerous researchers since its invention (Fine et al., 2017; Yildirim, Yildirim & Ozcan, 2019; Hasan, Khan & Farooqi, 2019). The model is structured with five dimensions of service quality: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy - all of which are used as measurement instruments of service quality (Parasuraman & Zeithaml, 1988). The first dimension, tangibles, refers to the mere physical elements of a service experience: the facility where the service is located, the equipment as well as the appearance of the personnel. The second dimension, reliability, refers to the organizations' ability to deliver the service as promised. The third dimension, responsiveness, refers to the personnel's willingness to act helpfully and deliver service as expected to customers. The fourth dimension, assurance, regards the personnel's professional mannerliness, knowledge, and thereby their ability to inspire their customers with confidence and trust. The fifth and last dimension, empathy, addresses the sense of personalized care and attention that the organization provides their customers with.

With the above in mind, we believe that the SERVQUAL model is applicable to our study and aim, yet, needing some alterations in order to fit the e-commerce context that we are interested in. Service quality as a concept, as well as the SERVQUAL model presented above, will function as a theoretical base in the development of this thesis model and our hypotheses, which will be further elaborated upon in section 2.3.

2.2.2 Servicescape

In line with previous literature on the subject, the physical and purely aesthetic dimension of service quality has been argued to be a key aspect of the customer experience (Lethinen & Lethinen, 1982; Parasuraman & Zeithaml, 1988; Luhita, 2018; Park, Back, Bufquin & Shapoval, 2018). As coined by Bitner (1992), this dimension can be described as the "servicescape"; the physical environment in which a service organization delivers services to its customers. Svingstedt (2012) has also emphasized the significance of the servicescape within several industries, stressing that the presence of atmospheric elements such as sound, light and smell, or physical elements such as decoration, equipment and signs, creates novel opportunities for companies to increase the overall customer experience. However, as this paper explores the
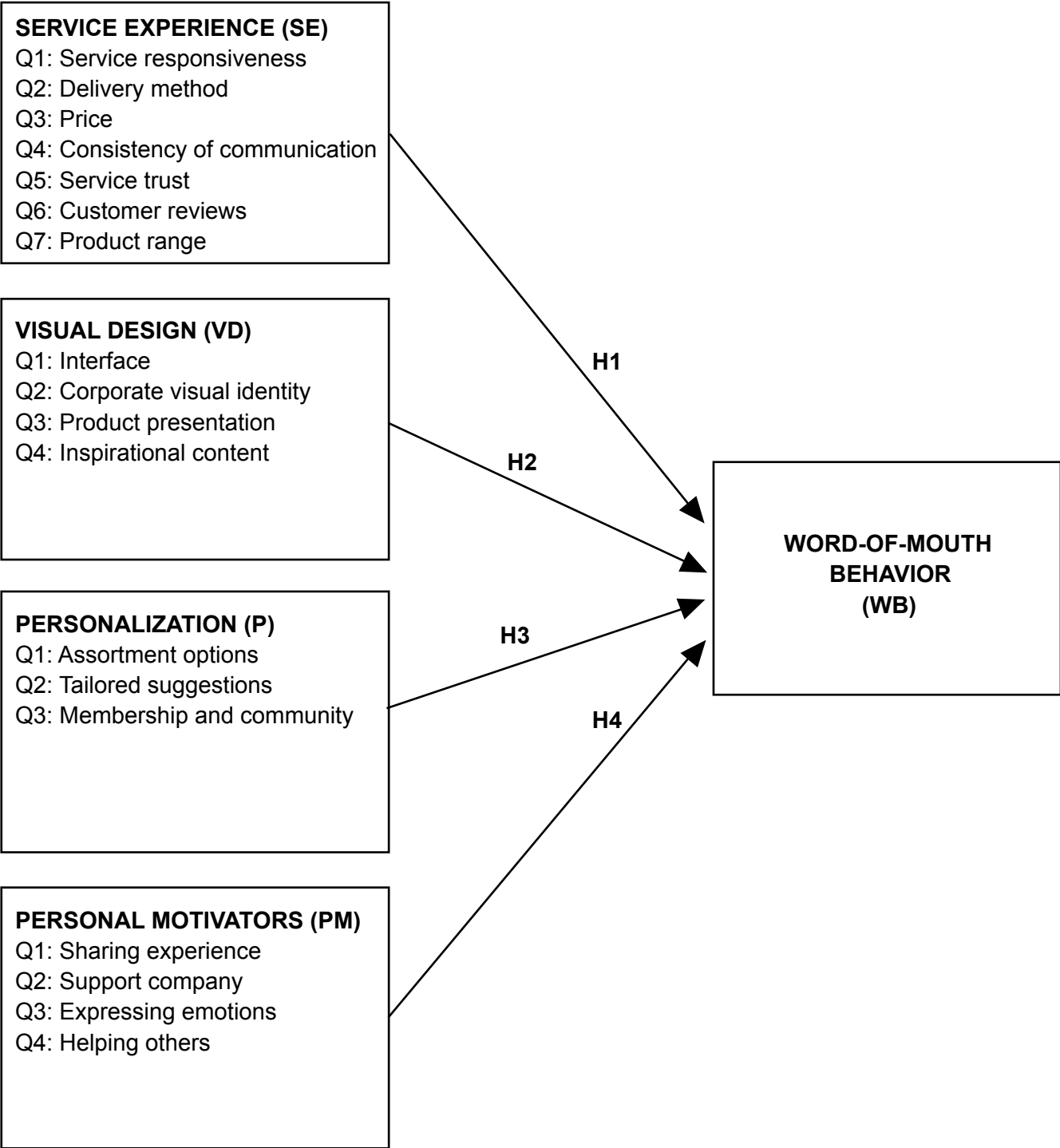
customer experience in an e-commerce context, our interest strictly lies in how companies are able to provide their customers with such an experience in an online environment. The online customer experience is undoubtedly different from the traditional retail visit, as sensations such as touch or smell become lost in this digital transformation. Instead, companies place focus on visual and aesthetic features in the web page design, such as consistency of colors, size of fonts or animations, and how such elements can influence the visual appeal of an e-commerce company (Schaik et al., 2005). Moreover, the online customer experience also involves providing customers with quality informational content, interactive features, and a seamless user experience (Aladwani & Palvia, 2002; Loureiro, 2015; Bilro, Loureiro & Ali, 2018). Just as the physical environment of a store plays a large role for the traditional customer experience, the different types of e-commerce features presented above seem to be of similar importance for the customer experience in the online environment. With this in mind, we believe the concept of servicescape to be applicable even in the context of e-commerce.

2.2.3 Personalized Experience

Further exploring what constitutes the key aspects in regards to the e-commerce customer experience, personalization seems to be a frequently spoken of phenomenon. The concept of personalization in contemporary research is pointed out as a main element in strategizing businesses. For instance, a digital trend report made by Adobe (2019) points out the personalized customer experience as being the "ultimate differentiator" when designing marketing strategies today. The term personalization is usually referred to as an effective way to meet customer needs through creating tailored customer experiences in order to increase customer satisfaction, purchase intentions and stimulate repeated visits (Kaptein & Parvinen, 2015). The ability to offer personalized experiences is seen as a key benefit within e-commerce and can be achieved by modifying elements in terms of user interface, functionality and content available on the e-commerce service in order to meet relevant customer needs (Dzulfikar et al., 2018). This can be implemented by, for example, collecting and analyzing the e-commerce service visitors' data concerning purchase patterns and browsing history. Hence, organizations can use this information to design their service based on a certain customer data and preferences (Zhang, 2011).

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2.3 Construction of Model and Hypotheses

Based on the previous literature and theoretical framework of the SERVQUAL model described above, we have constructed our own research model that visualizes the hypotheses and the presumed relationship between them. The model is presented below:

SERVICE EXPERIENCE (SE)
Q1: Service responsiveness
Q2: Delivery method
Q3: Price
Q4: Consistency of communication
Q5: Service trust
Q6: Customer reviews
Q7: Product range

VISUAL DESIGN (VD)
Q1: Interface
Q2: Corporate visual identity
Q3: Product presentation
Q4: Inspirational content

PERSONALIZATION (P)
Q1: Assortment options
Q2: Tailored suggestions
Q3: Membership and community

PERSONAL MOTIVATORS (PM)
Q1: Sharing experience
Q2: Support company
Q3: Expressing emotions
Q4: Helping others

H1

H2

H3

H4

WORD-OF-MOUTH BEHAVIOR (WB)

Model 1. *Model showing the independent variables, service experience, visual design, personalization and personal motivators, presumed effect on the dependent variable WOM behavior.*

The model illustrates the relationship between the four independent variables - service experience, visual design, personalization and personal motivators, and the dependent variable - WOM behavior. Along with each independent variable, numerous items have been created to more concisely address the crucial elements of every hypothesis. The items have been developed in order to fulfill our ambition to cover as many impactful aspects as possible that can explain consumer engagement in WOM behavior. As presented in the model, we have decided to refer to our four hypotheses posed as *service experience, visual design, personalization and personal motivators*.

2.3.1 H1: Service Experience

Our first hypothesis, *service experience*, is based on several of the service quality dimensions from the SERVQUAL model, more particularly reliability, assurance and responsiveness. As mentioned in 2.2.1.1, the service dimensions of reliability and assurance measures the accuracy of the service performance and the personnel's ability to inspire trust and confidence during the service meeting, and responsiveness measures the personnel's willingness to help and provide fast service to the customers. Previous research has already emphasized the importance of such parameters with regard to the customer experience in the retail and service industry (Chaniotakis & Lymperopoulous, 2009; Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1985; Kitacpi, Akdogan & Dortyol, 2014; Hasan et al., 2019). Since contemporary studies also have determined that certain service quality dimensions can have a distinct effect on consumer WOM behavior (Harrison-Walker, 2001; Jeong & Jang, 2011; Fine et al., 2017; Rajani & Nakhat, 2019), we consider these service dimensions to be relevant measurement parameters for our study. With this mind, we anticipate that service experience will have a significant impact on consumer WOM behavior within the context of e-commerce services. Our first hypothesis is presented as follows:

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Hypothesis 1: *Service experience has a significant impact on consumer WOM behavior within the context of e-commerce services.*

In the table below, a more detailed explanation of the items related to the measurement of service experience is presented:

Item	Explanation
1. Service responsiveness	An e-commerce service's ability to provide their consumers with customer care and service on multiple communication channels (e.g., over the phone, social media platforms, website, email, etc.).
2. Consistency of communication	An e-commerce service's ability to provide consistent communication during the experience (i.e., correspondence in terms of confirmation emails, parcel tracking, etc.).
3. Delivery method	An e-commerce service's ability to offer multiple delivery alternatives to their customers (e.g., different mail providers and shipment methods like door-to-door delivery, click & collect, etc.).
4. Price	An e-commerce service's ability to offer product prices that correspond to the perceived overall quality of the service (whether the service lived up to consumer expectations in relation to the cost).
5. Service trust	An e-commerce service's ability to inspire consumer trust (e.g. whether the service has a secure payment process, or if you've had previous positive experiences of the service).
6. Customer reviews	An e-commerce service's ability to provide customers with opportunities to read other customers reviews about the service or products.
7. Product range	An e-commerce service's ability to offer their consumers with a wide selection of products or brands.

Table 1. *Presenting the items related to hypothesis 1, service experience, along with explanations of each item.*

2.3.2 H2: Visual Design

In line with the SERVQUAL model described in 2.2.1.1, *visual design* refers to the first service dimension, tangibles, which involves the physical elements of a service experience. Since e-commerce as a service does not offer any of these tangible items in the same manner, we decided to reshape this parameter into one that refers to the visual elements that are implemented into the design of e-commerce services. Thus, our second hypothesis will measure the degree to which the *visual design* of a e-commerce website can have an impact on users' tendency to engage in WOM behavior. The current amount of research studying correlations between visual design and customer WOM engagement is scant. Existing literature have, however, addressed how visual elements that are integrated into e-commerce services can affect the overall customer experience (see 2.2.2). We believe that previous paper findings motivate the choice of our second hypothesis, as visual design arguably seems to be a feature that has an impact on customer experiences within e-commerce.

Hypothesis 2: *Visual design has a significant impact on consumer WOM behavior within the context of e-commerce services.*

Below, we present and describe the four items linked to the measurement of the second hypothesis:

Item	Explanation
1. Interface	An e-commerce service's ability to offer their customers an aesthetically appealing user interface.
2. Corporate visual identity	An e-commerce service's ability to provide a clear corporate visual identity that is uniform on all platforms (e.g, website, app, Facebook page, etc.) in terms of, for example, logo and color-coordination.
3. Product presentation	An e-commerce service's ability to provide a qualitative visual presentation of the products or service offered (e.g. picture quality, video presentation, 360° product animations etc.).

4. Inspirational content	An e-commerce service's ability to provide their customers with inspirational content in relation to the products or service offered (e.g. styling advice, tutorials etc.).

Table 2. *Presenting the items related to hypothesis 2, visual design, along with explanations of each item.*

2.3.3 H3: Personalization

The fifth dimension in the SERVQUAL model, empathy, refers to the company's personnel providing individualized attention and care for their customers (Parasuraman & Zeithaml, 1988). To better fit this dimension into the context of e-commerce services, we reformulated this dimension into the degree to which a company can offer their customers a customized service experience. Prior literature have mainly looked into the role of personalized experiences and mechanisms and the impact they have on consumer behavior during online shopping, as well as determining personalization to be an important factor for providing positive user experiences online (Ho & Bodoff, 2014; Bilgihan, Kandampully & Zhang, 2015; Pappas, 2018). Since personalization features seem to be highly relevant for the customer experience in the e-commerce environment, and therefore might influence customers' tendency to engage in WOM behavior, we opted to center our third hypothesis around the concept of *personalization*. Thus, the hypothesis was formulated as follows:

Hypothesis 3: *Personalization features in e-commerce services has a significant impact on consumer WOM behavior.*

We further divided our third hypothesis into the three different items displayed beneath:

Item	Explanation
1. Filter options	An e-commerce service's ability to provide filter options for their customers when browsing products (e.g. sorting between different sizes, colors or brands).
2. Tailored suggestions	An e-commerce service's ability to offer customers personalized product suggestions based on their previous purchases and search history.

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3. Membership and community	An e-commerce service's ability to offer their customers membership options in order to receive certain community exclusive benefits (e.g. special offers or invitations to events).

Table 3. Presenting the items related to hypothesis 3, personalization, along with explanations of each item.

2.3.4 H4: Personal Motivators

Our fourth and final hypothesis, which we decided to call *personal motivators*, measures to what extent underlying psychological motivations can have an effect on consumers' tendency to engage in word-of-mouth behavior. While this measurement parameter is not a part of the SERVQUAL model, it has been used as a complement to the original SERVQUAL model in a previous study that measured WOM behavior in a similar context (Fine et al., 2017). In the development of this hypothesis, we have also used Ryan & Deci's (2000) explanation of intrinsic motivations as an inspiration. We consider this to be a relevant aspect to include in our study, as previous literature suggests that such innate motivations may impact consumers' inclination to engage in word-of-mouth behavior in the context of e-commerce services. Thus, the hypothesis was phrased as follows:

Hypothesis 4: *Personal motivators has a significant impact on WOM behavior within the context of e-commerce services.*

The fourth hypothesis was further divided into the four different items that are displayed below:

Item	Explanation
1. Sharing experience	Consumers' inclination to share their e-commerce service experience, in order for others to have the same positive experience.
2. Support company	Consumers' desire for supporting a company that has provided them with satisfactory customer experience.

3. Expressing emotions	Consumers' inclination to share their particularly negative or positive experience of an e-commerce service with others.
4. Assisting others	Consumers' desire to assist others in finding the right products online.

Table 4. *Presenting the items related to hypothesis 4, personal motivators, along with explanations of each item.*

3. Method

The following section will account for the scientific approach of this thesis. Furthermore, this thesis' research design, sample strategy and analytical process will be presented. Lastly, the methodological limitations will be critically discussed and ethical considerations accounted for.

3.1 Scientific Approach

This study adopts a positivistic ontological standpoint, which means that we assume that there is an objective reality to any research phenomenon, irrespective of the researchers's beliefs or perspectives. Thus, our epistemological view is that acquired knowledge can only be handled objectively through empirical observation (6 & Bellamy, 2012). Furthermore, since our study is guided by several hypotheses that have been derived from previous literature in related areas, we assume a deductive research approach (ibid.). This positivist philosophical assumption is appropriate in relation to our research method, since we are examining objective data collected in a survey, and for that reason, we do not seek to interpret the data from a certain point of view.

3.2 Research Design

In order to analyze and examine the possible impact of our hypotheses on consumer WOM behaviour within the context of e-commerce services, a small-scale online survey was conducted. Furthermore, the survey was of a quantitative nature, since the data was to be statistically analyzed in order to determine whether our hypotheses were to be rejected or accepted. The contents of the questionnaire have been formulated and designed based on modified concepts from the SERVQUAL model, as well as from the previous literature. While some of the survey questions are taken directly from research using SERVQUAL as a theoretical framework, many of the questions had to be altered in order to better fit the context of the e-com-

merce environment, and the aim of our study. Moreover, the questionnaire (see appendix 7.1) was also constructed so that the questions correspond to the different sets of measurement instruments introduced in section 2.3.1-2.3.4. Conducting a web survey instead of a postal one can be beneficial because of the effective distribution as well as for the flexible collection possibilities it provides (Trost & Hultåker, 2016). Furthermore, another advantage with this methodology is that it is possible to create interactive surveys where the answers to a question control which subsequent questions are asked. Our study profited from this, since we used a question in our survey to sort out respondents who did not engage in WOM behavior. The data gathering process being managed digitally was also seen as beneficial from an environmental viewpoint as well as in respect to the Covid-19 pandemic which took place simultaneously as this investigation was carried out.

With regards to the survey design, the questionnaire was divided into six sections. The introductory part consisted of questions addressing the respondents demographic characteristics. The questions regarding gender and occupation was measured using nominal scale, age was measured using ratio scale and education level through ordinal scale. The following five parts were themed in accordance with the constructs constituting our model presented in section 2.3: WOM behavior, service experience, visual design, personalization and personal motivators. As mentioned above, one of the questions related to WOM behavior was used to eliminate people who did not engage in WOM. Further, all questions related to our dependent and independent variables were designed in accordance with the Likert scale. The Likert scale is a well established measuring tool of attitudes (Bryman, 2012) that is designed so that the respondent is asked to consider a number of statements and thereafter decide whether they agree with the statement or not (Oppenheim, 1992). The level of agreement is then presented through a scale of answering options from "disagree completely" to "agree completely". Additionally, The Likert scale is a specified version of a summation scale, meaning that the options are numbered, usually from one to somewhere between five and seven (Trost & Hultåker, 2016). We have chosen to design our questions with a Likert scale from one to seven since more numbers equals a possibility for the respondents to answer the questions in a more nuanced manner.

3.3 Sample strategy

When choosing the target populace for our sample, we did not see a purpose in applying any demographic or geographic restrictions, since e-commerce services are such a global and large-scale phenomenon. Thus, our survey was made available to anyone who previously had engaged in WOM behavior within the context of e-commerce. However, due to time constraints, we ultimately decided to use a convenience sampling strategy, a form of non-probability sampling where one chooses respondents from the part of the population that is close at hand (Trost & Hultåker, 2016). Convenience sampling has, however, been criticized for its inability to obtain results that can be generalized to the larger population (Bryman, 2012). Thus, if the study's results are not generalizable, they tend to contribute with less scientific value (Pallant, 2010). To ensure that our study has a sample that is somewhat replicable, we have followed the formula made by Tabachnick & Fidell (2007) to calculate the required amount of answers in relation to the number of used independent variables. The formula follows: $N > 50 + 8m$, where m equals the number of independent variables. Accordingly, since we use four independent variables, our survey would need at least 82 responses ($N>50+(8x4=32)=82$) to be of any scientific value. The survey participants were reached through distribution of the questionnaire being posted on our personal social media accounts on Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn. In the end, we ended up with a total of 155 survey responses. However, only 127 of these were considered as valid since the 28 rejected responses were made up of respondents stating they never engaged in any kind of WOM behavior. Further, one additional response was neglected as it was detected as an outlier (see 3.4), leaving us with the final frequency of 126 responses which were later statistically analyzed through SPSS.

3.4 Analytical Process

When the data collection was completed, the material was processed in the statistical analysis software SPSS. As previously mentioned, a total of 155 people participated in the survey, of which 127 were valid submissions (see 3.3). Further, one of the valid submissions was subsequently removed as it was identified as an outlier. This decision was made since our intent was to perform a multiple regression analysis (MRA) of our data in SPSS, and MRA is known

to be very sensitive to outliers (Pallant, 2010). Accordingly, the rest of our analysis was based on the empirical data from 126 responses. We decided to use MRA since it allows us to see how much of the dependent variable is explained by the independent variables (Pallant, 2010; Djurfeldt, Larsson & Stjärnhagen, 2018). Initially, scales were created in SPSS in order to categorize the items measured in accordance with each variable - one scale for our dependent variable (WB) and four scales, one for each independent variable (SE, VD, P & PM). Before running the data through a MRA, a reliability analysis was performed on each variable for the purpose of checking the internal consistency between the items that constituted each scale The internal consistency is important to evaluate in order to detect if items in the survey are too similar or simply address the same matter (Pallant, 2010). Furthermore, there are two possible ways to measure the internal consistency; looking at the Cronbach's Alpha value and the mean inter-item correlation value. It is desirable for a scale to have a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient that is above 0.7, but as Cronbach's Alpha values can be rather sensitive to the number of items in a scale, it is common to get quite low Cronbach values when using scales with fewer than ten items (ibid.). In these cases it is often more suitable to check the mean inter-item correlation value, which ideally should land between 0.2 and 0.4 (Briggs & Cheek, 1986). As each of our variables were composed of less than ten items, we found it fitting to check both values. Firstly, the internal consistency of each of our variables was evaluated by reviewing the Cronbach's Alpha value. If the value was lower than suggested, we moved on to check if the mean inter-item correlation value was somewhere in between 0.2 and 0.4. Thus, if none of the recommended values were reached, the possibility of increasing the values by deleting one or more items was explored, a procedure that has been recommended by Pallant (2010).

The second step of the reliability analysis, before conducting a MRA, was running a multicollinearity test on each of the independent variable indexes. This was done in order to ensure that the correlation between them was not too high (Pallant, 2010). The two values of interest in regards to the multicollinearity test is *tolerance* and *VIF*. Tolerance indicates to what degree the variability of an independent variable is not explained by the other independent variables in our model. A low tolerance value (less than .10) suggests that the model might be experiencing problems with multicollinearity. The VIF (variance inflation factor)

value is an indicator of multicollinearity when it reaches levels beyond 10 (Pallant, 2010, p. 158). Hence, these were the values used as references when examining the results.

Lastly, a multiple regression analysis was conducted in order to investigate which, if any of the independent variables, have a significant impact on the dependent variable. The multiple regression analysis is also done in order to accept or reject the hypotheses posed. In this kind of analysis, the independent variables' individual ability to predict the dependent variable is presented (Pallant, 2010). The aspects included in a MRA we decided to more closely explore was the R squared ($R^{2)}$), Beta value (β), Sig. value (*p),* Pearson correlation value (*r)* as well as the normal probability plot. The R^2 explains how much of the variance in the dependent variable could be explained by the model as a whole. Yet, in case of a small sample, Tabachnick & Fidell (2007) recommend to use the Adjusted R^2 statistic as it provides a better estimate of the true population value. Thus, we opted to look at the Adjusted R^2 instead. Further, we checked the statistical significance of our model by investigating the *p*-value in the ANOVA table based on Pallant's (2010) recommendation: $p < 0.005$. The next step was exploring the β- and *p*-value presented in the Coefficients table. Again, as per Pallant, the higher the β value, the greater the impact the independent variable has on the dependent variable, regardless if the values presented are positive or negative. Furthermore, to validate which of the independent variables' make the most significant statistical unique contribution to the overall equation, the *p*-values in the Coefficients table were evaluated. Here, a value of $p < 0.05$ or less is recommended (Pallant, 2010). The Pearson correlation values were investigated in order to explore the strength of the relationships between our independent variables and WOM behavior; whereas Pallant proposes a *r*-value of at least 0.3. Furthermore, the normal probability plot table is used to check that our model does not exhibit any major deviations from normality. Preferably, the dots should lie in a fairly straight diagonal line that runs from the bottom left corner to the top right (ibid.). Lastly, we presented the results and an analysis in relation to our hypotheses - establishing whether and discuss why they were rejected or supported.

3.5 Methodological Limitations

An unfortunate side effect of using convenience sampling as a strategy is that it can result in skewed distribution with regards to the demographic disproportion among the respondents.

Statistical over-representation of some groups in the sample will generally make the results of the study harder to generalize to a larger population (Trost & Hultåker, 2016). For instance, as the survey was distributed through our own social media accounts, the chosen sample mainly constituted of our friends, family members and followers, and thereby tended to be of the same demographic nature. Yet, we do not consider this to invalidate the result of our study since we are mostly interested in people using e-commerce services in general that engage in WOM behavior, regardless of their demographics. Furthermore, due to lack of resources and time, our sample is relatively small. The universal rule with regards to sampling is that the larger the sample, the more likely it is to be representative of the population as a whole (Trost & Hultåker, 2016). With the above in mind, the results of our study may not be generalizable to a broader population. Nonetheless, it is our expectation that this study will provide interesting knowledge of WOM behaviour within e-commerce, sparking further interest in this area of study.

As previously mentioned under 2.2.1, our theoretical and methodological inspiration for this study has been the SERVQUAL model. Since we had to make certain modifications to the original SERVQUAL model in order to better suit the context of e-commerce, it is relevant to address any potential validity concerns that this entails. For instance, since our altered version of the model has never been tested thoroughly in this context before, and thereby never had the opportunity to be further evaluated and revised, it could affect the validity of our results. As pointed out by Djurfeldt, Larsson & Stjärnhagen (2018), failure in translating the theoretical framework into measurable constructs could result in systematic errors that could lead to incorrect results. Moreover, it is also vital that our study has a high construct validity; meaning, that the measures or codes used to operationalize a concept actually captures what the study intends to capture (6 & Bellamy). The questions in our survey are grounded on the methodological guidelines as dictated by SERVQUAL, a model that has been proven to be a valid and precise measurement of service quality. To further improve the validity of our constructs, we looked to previous studies that have used the SERVQUAL model as theoretical foundation, drawing additional inspiration from the measurement items in their indexes.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Regarding the more ethical aspects of conducting a survey study using people's opinions as the base for our empirical data, it is worth contemplating on the moral responsibilities that this involves. For instance, Bryman (2012) makes valid points highlighting that respondents should be provided a thorough description of the study and its aim before they choose to participate. Furthermore, the author suggests that the respondents should be offered anonymity all the way through their participation to ensure protection of their privacy and integrity. These are guidelines that have adopted when carrying out our survey, as we provided detailed information about the purpose of our study as well as offering anonymity to our survey participants.

4. Results and Analysis

The following section firstly highlights the demographic distribution of the survey respondents, then presents the results and the analysis derived from the collected data. More specifically, we will account for the reliability analysis and multiple regression analysis conducted.

4.1 Demographic Distribution

		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	40	26%
	Female	112	72,7%
	Other	0	0%
	I prefer not to say	2	1,3%
Age	15-19	45	29,2%
	20-30	100	64,9%
	31-40	4	2,6%
	41-50	0	0%
	51-65	2	1,3%
	65+	3	1,9%
Occupation	Student	114	74%
	In between jobs	7	4,5%
	Employed	27	17,5%
	Self-employed	2	1,3%
	Other	4	2,6%
Education*	Primary School	20	13%
	Senior High School	83	53,9%
	Vocational Degree	8	5,2%
	Bachelor's Degree	39	25,3%
	Master's Degree	3	1,9%
	Doctorate Degree	1	0,6%
	Other	0	0%

*Referring to highest level of finished education.

Table 5. *Presenting the demographic distribution of the thesis sample in regards to gender, age, occupation and education - shown in both frequency and percentage.*

When examining the demographic distribution among the survey respondents, one can observe that women are overrepresented, making up for 72,2% of the total population. Furthermore 100 of the respondents were in the ages 20-30 years old, making up for 64,9% of the overall population. Additionally, 29,2% of the respondents were even younger, somewhere in between fifteen and nineteen years old. Regarding the occupational demographics the respondents were mostly students, making up for 74% of the total cohort. Followed by a percentage of 17,5 respondents being employed. In accordance with the age-wise young sample distribution, the majority of our respondents (53,9%) have chosen Senior High School as their highest level of completed education. Thus, one can establish that our average respondent is a female student in her twenties who have finished Senior High School, presumably studying at a more advanced level. Lastly, worth commenting is that the sample demographic distribution is somewhat skewed - a fact that has been reflected upon above in 3.4.

4.1 Reliability Analysis

4.1.1 Internal Consistency

Variable	WB*	SE*	VD*	P*	PM*
Cronbach's Alpha	.777	.571 (.675)	.630	.590	.781
Mean Inter-Item Correlation	.286	.197 (.306)	.324	.300	.476
No. Items	9	7 (5)	4	3	4

Table 6. *Presenting all model variable's Cronbach's Alpha and mean inter-item correlation values as well as number of items related with each construct.*

The Cronbach's Alpha value (0.777) of our dependent variable, WOM behaviour (WB), exceeded the desired value of 0.7, thus no further evaluation of reliability was needed. Furthermore, the original Cronbach's Alpha value of the first independent variable, service experi-

ence (SE), was 0.571, thus too low in accordance with Pallant's (2010) recommendation. Subsequently, the Mean Inter-Item Correlation value was explored and also rejected as it was lower than 0.2 (0.192). Consequently we had to explore the potential of increasing these values by removing items. In order to reach a minimum value of valid internal consistency for SE we deleted two items, "wide product range" and "price", resulting in a Mean Inter-Item Correlation value of 0.306. In regards to the next independent variable, visual design (VD), the Mean Inter-Item Correlation value (0.324) corresponded to the desired value, thus no further alterations were required. The same was true concerning the third independent variable, personalization (P), having a mean inter-item correlation value of 0.300. As to the last and fourth independent variable, personal motivators (PM), both the desired Cronbach's Alpha value (0.781) and the mean inter-item correlation value (0.476) was exceeded, thus no items were deleted.

4.1.2 Multicollinearity Test

Model	Tolerance	VIF
Service Experience	.820	1.219
Visual design	.745	1.342
Personalization	.831	1.204
Personal motivators	.865	1.156

Table 7. *Presenting the relevant values in relation to all independent variables from the executed multicollinearity test.*

As seen in the table above, the multicollinearity test on our independent variables presented us with good results. The tolerance value for each of the independent variables were significantly higher than .10, and the VIF did not show any values above 10, implying that our model is a good fit for a multiple regression analysis.

4.4 Multiple Regression Analysis

4.4.1 R Squared and Anova

Model	R Squared	Adjusted R Squared
1	0.288	0.264

Table 8. *Presenting the R squared and Adjusted R Squared value for the overall model.*

The first thing we investigated was how much of the variance in the dependent variable could be explained by the model as a whole. This is done by looking at the R Squared value (R^2) in the model summary presented above. In our case, the model ended up with the value $R^2=0.288$. Worth noting is that our sample was relatively small (126 valid responses) and thus we opted to use the Adjusted R^2 value (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007), which in our case was 0.264. This means that 26,4 percent of the variance for our dependent variable (WB) is explained by the independent variables (SE, PZ, PM, VD). Cohen (1988) suggests that a R^2 value of 0.26 or above indicates a high effect model size within social science research. Accordingly, our Adjusted R^2 value of 0.264 can be motivated to be a decent result. The *p*-value (Sig.) in the ANOVA table determines if the model is statistically significant, which is only the case if the model has a value of *p*<.05 (Pallant, 2010). As our ANOVA table displays a Sig. value of .000, which is equal to *p*<.05, our model is statistically significant.

4.4.2 Coefficients

	Standardized Coefficients	
Independent variables	Beta	Sig.
Service Experience	-0.022	0.797
Visual Design	0.061	0.493
Personalization	0.061	0.470
Personal Motivators	0.500	0.000

Table 9. *Coefficients table presenting the β- and p-values for each independent variable.*

As seen in table 9, our by far most impactful contributor to WOM behavior was the independent construct personal motivators with a value of β=0.500. Furthermore, to validate if the independent variables' unique contribution to the dependent variable is of statistical signifi-

cance, we investigated the p-values of the constructs, which are presented in the Sig. column. Followingly, a desired *p*-value is a value lower than 0.05 (Pallant, 2010), yet only one of our independent variables had a statistically significant unique contribution on the dependent variable - personal motivators.

4.4.3 Pearson Correlation

Variable	WB	SE	VD	P	PM
WB	1.000	0.119	0.198	0.232	0.529
SE	0.119	1.000	0.405	0.129	0.216
VD	0.198	0.405	1.000	0.339	0.250
P	0.232	0.129	0.339	1.000	0.307
PM	0.529	0.216	0.250	0.307	1.000

Table 10. Presenting the Pearson Correlation values between all constructs in the model. The important values are highlighted in grey.

When examining the relationships (*r*-values) between our dependent and independent variables in the Pearson Correlation table, we found that $r=0.119$ for service experience, $r=0.198$ for visual design, $r=0.232$ for personalization and $r=0.529$ for personal motivators. Keeping in mind that Pallant (2010) proposes a *r*-value of at least 0.3 in order to be valid, only personal motivators had a strong correlation as a predictor to WOM behavior.

4.4.4 Normal Probability Plot

As seen in the table below, our model does not show any serious deviations from normality. Only a few minor deviations can be distinguished when observing the boxes within the 0.4 and 0.6 diagonal, but nothing that directly compromises our model as a whole.
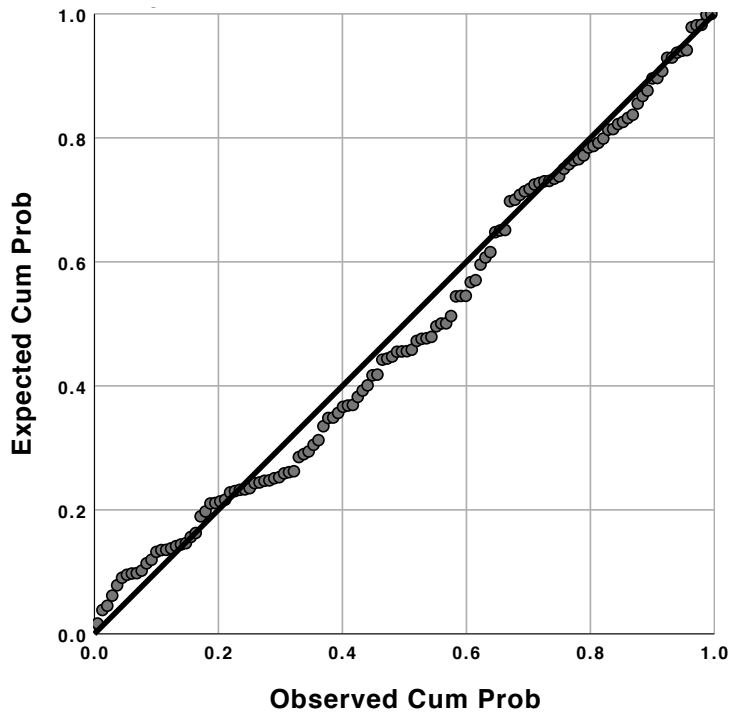
Table 11. *Table visualizing the normal probability plot of the standardized multiple regression analysis performed.*

4.4.5 Hypotheses Testing

Hypotheses	Effect	Beta	Sig.	Result
H1	SE → WB	-0.022	0.797	Rejected
H2	VD → WB	0.061	0.493	Rejected
H3	P → WB	0.061	0.470	Rejected
H4	PM → WB	0.500	0.000	Supported

Table 12. *Table presenting our accepted and rejected hypotheses based on the β- and p-values.*

In the table above, we have included the assumed effect of each hypothesis, the standardized beta coefficient, the *p*-value and the turn-out of each hypothesis. The results show that three of our hypotheses were rejected (H1, H2 & H3) and that only one was supported (H4). Neither of SE (*p*=0.797), VD (*p*=0.493) or P (*p*=0.470) made a significant contribution to WOM behavior within the context of e-commerce services, and therefore, H1, H2 and H3 were re-

jected. PM (*p*=0.000) was the only independent variable with a *p*-value below 0.05, making it a significant predictor for word-of-mouth behavior within the context of e-commerce services. Thus, H4 was supported. Further, when looking at table 12, it can be discerned that PM (β=0.500) makes the strongest unique contribution to the explanation of WOM behavior in relation to e-commerce services. The other independent variables, P (β=0.061), VD (β=0.061) and SE (β=-0.022), all exhibit notedly weaker beta coefficients in comparison to PM, and thus cannot be argued to contribute the explanation of the dependent variable.

As addressed in the literature review chapter, the correlation between the service quality dimensions inherent to the SERVQUAL model and WOM behavior has been researched before, and it has been determined that such dimensions can influence consumer engagement in WOM behavior (Harrison-Walker, 2001; Chaniotakis & Lymperopoulous, 2009; Jeong & Jang, 2011; Fine et al., 2017). Contemporary research, however, has mainly explored that relationship from a traditional service industry perspective, as in food services or in the healthcare industry, and not in the context of e-commerce. Accordingly, as very few papers have addressed how these dimensions can impact consumers' inclination of engaging in WOM in an e-commerce context, we were uncertain what to expect of the results. Yet, since existing research has emphasized the importance of the service quality dimensions within e-commerce, and how they can positively affect the customer experience (April & Pather, 2008; Palese & Usai, 2018; Gajewska et al., 2019), we anticipated a positive relationship between our three first hypotheses and consumer WOM behavior. With all facts on hand, however, we can now conclude that all hypotheses related to the SERVQUAL model were rejected. In sum, the results from the MRA analysis showed that the aspect of personal motivators made a significant contribution to consumer WOM behavior within the context of e-commerce, whereas the contribution of the aspects service experience, visual design and personalization were very insignificant in comparison. This indicates that our respondents' inclination to engage in WOM behavior is heavily dependent on personal motivators. For instance, our participants agreed strongly to wanting to share their positive experience with others in order for them to have the same experience, as well as wanting the company providing a great customer experience to be successful. Furthermore, these findings are in line with the results presented in a similar study made by Fine et al. (2017), who found a positive relationship between intrinsic motivators and e-WOM review behavior engagement within the hospitality industry. Our

fourth hypothesis, personal motivators, drew inspiration from Fine et al.'s study's theoretical and methodological framework about intrinsic motivators (see 2.3.4).

With regards to our three rejected hypotheses, these were also measured in Fine et al.'s study. In our study, service experience (see 2.5.1) is a variable that has been created by merging together the SERVQUAL dimensions of service reliability, responsiveness and assurance. In the study by Fine et al. (2017), there were three independent variables related to each of these dimensions, where reliability was supported and the two others rejected. Thus, it could be argued that our results are similar to these findings, as service experience did not make a significant contribution to WOM behavior. Hypothesis two relating to visual design (see 2.3.2) was inspired by the SERVQUAL model dimension tangibles, which was measured in Fine et al. (2017). The results from our study show great similarity when compared to Fine et al.'s, as both studies' hypotheses concerning service tangibles were rejected. The last rejected hypothesis, personalization, was derived from the SERVQUAL model dimension empathy (see 2.3.3). Fine et al.s' hypothesis addressing the same SERVQUAL dimension was also rejected, in line with the results from our own study.

Worth noting is that although Fine et al.'s study was centered around WOM behavior in an online context, its main purpose was to explore this behavior from the perspective of the traditional retail industry. Moreover, while the authors applied the original SERVQUAL model to their study, we chose to modify the model and its associated dimensions in order for them to fit into the context of e-commerce. Putting the contextual contrast aside, Fine et al. (2017) also added two constructs to their model that differed from ours; age and preferred review-writing platform. Finally, Fine et al. also employed a different and more extensive sampling strategy than ours, as they gathered 204 valid respondents through the means of purposive sampling. Yet, while the circumstances mentioned above might have affected the generalizability of our study, the results of both studies still hold close similarities.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

In the following section the results and analysis presented in the previous section will be discussed in macro perspective, further, this thesis will be concluded, followed by suggestions for further research.

5.1 Discussion

In the developmental phase of this thesis, our idea was to contribute with knowledge about what features practitioners working in an e-commerce setting should focus on when designing marketing strategies in order for consumers to engage in WOM behavior. Yet, as we dove in to the existing literature in related fields of research, we realized that there was not much prior literature to rely on. This could be explained by the fact that internet consumer behavior is still relatively unexplored, possibly due to the internets' dynamic and ever evolving nature that is part of today's fast paced society. As argued by Bleier, Harmeling & Palmatier (2019), well-designed product pages are crucial in order to create successful retail businesses, yet, there is no consensus among researchers how this is actually achieved.

Thus, the aim of this study was to, on a more specific note, examine which aspects in terms of e-commerce customer experiences had the greatest impact on consumer tendencies to engage in WOM behavior. Correspondingly, we found that service experience, visual design, personalization and personal motivators were four suitable aspects to more closely look into.

With the results of this study at hand, it became clear that our independent variable personal motivators, built on theories of psychological reasoning, was the most significant predictor of WOM behavior. When reflecting on our findings from a broader perspective, personal motivators can be distinguished from the three rejected predictors as being the only psychologically grounded variable. Personal motivators address our inherent need to share our experiences with people around us (Ryan & Deci, 2000), as well as to belong in the society that we live in (Schueller, 2015), whereas service experience, visual design and personali-

zation are all elements of external nature. With this in mind, it can be argued that our inherent psychological human need of belonging is incomparable with the external factors addressed in the other hypotheses (H1, H2 & H3). One reason for personal motivators being the only significant contributor to WOM behavior may, thus, be that such intrinsic motivations simply outweigh the significance of service experience, visual design and personalization. In our study, the personal motivators variable was measured through items that attempted to capture the possible internal motivations people have for engaging in WOM behavior. For instance, the items addressed people's urge to assist others in finding the right product (Q4: *Assisting Others)*, and desire to support the companies that provide them with satisfactory experiences (Q2: *Support Company*).

An additional explanation to why personal motivators made such a strong contribution in predicting WOM behavior could be the fact that people tend to share their negative experiences to a larger extent than positive ones (Söderlund, 1998). On the contrary, an especially good service experience has also been found to cause strong positive WOM behaviour (Silverman, 2011). With this in mind, it is not unreasonable that the statement that directly refers to people's urge to express their feelings in connection with an online experience (Q3: *Expressing emotions),* ended up with a score that showed strong correlation to WOM behavior.

In line with Silverman (2011), the most important factor in order for consumers' to engage in WOM behavior is to stimulate them emotionally. In an e-commerce setting, it is probable that consumer emotions would only be evoked by an extraordinary or unsatisfactory online shopping experience. As the literature states, people are more inclined to engage in WOM behavior when the experience is either especially good or disappointing in some manner probably because it caused them frustration or delight (ibid.). Accordingly, one could argue that a WOM effect is more effectively generated when a customer have a very positive or a very bad experience.

Furthermore, what more specifically causes people to emotionally engage in relation to an online experience, is unclear (Bleier, Harmeling & Palmatier, 2019). As pointed out by Milaković & Mihić (2016), personal motivations to engage in WOM depends on matters like personality, socio-economic status, cultural context as well as the relationship between sender and receiver of information. Thus, with the starting point that all peoples' reasons for

engaging in WOM is unique, it is reasonable to state that it would probably be hard to establish what feature in terms of visual design, service experience and personalization is the general preference. Yet, regardless of what specific external features in e-commerce might make consumers' engage in WOM, our findings show that they do share a strong inherent drive to share their experiences with other people.

In summary, our results show that the main reason for our sample to speak of their experience moderated by an e-commerce service is their personal psychological motivators. Contemplating our findings, the external features constituting an e-commerce service such as visual design, personalization and the service experience does not seem to be of crucial importance, at least not in comparison to the respondents' intrinsic drive to share their experiences with others.

5.2 Conclusion

To conclude, this study aimed to investigate what aspect in terms of service experience, visual design, personalization and personal motivators in regards to e-commerce services had the strongest impact on consumers' WOM behavior. In order to fulfill this purpose we formulated the following four hypotheses with support from previous literature on related areas of research:

H1: *Service experience has a significant impact on consumer WOM behavior within the context of e-commerce services.*

H2: *Visual design has a significant impact on consumer WOM behavior within the context of e-commerce services.*

H3: *Personalization features in e-commerce services has a significant impact on consumer WOM behavior within the context of e-commerce services.*

H4: *Personal motivators has a significant impact on WOM behavior within the context of e-commerce services.*

The implications we arrived at after carrying out the survey was that one out of four hypotheses posed were statistically supported. Hence, to answer our research question regarding what aspect had the most impact on consumer WOM behavior, personal motivators was the inde-

pendent variable that stood out statistically. Personal motivators, in accordance with our analysis, had a remarkably stronger correlation and predictive capacity in regards to WOM behavior in comparison to the other independent variables tested. These findings imply that consumers' personal intrinsic motivations, such as wanting others to have the same satisfactory experience as themselves, and wishing companies who provided them with satisfactory experiences to be successful, outbalance the other three factors explored.

5.3 Suggestions for Further Research

This thesis has attempted to understand the concept of WOM behavior from an e-commerce perspective. The world of e-commerce is a relatively new phenomenon, and as current research on online behaviour is rather scarce, there are many unexplored possibilities to contribute with interesting knowledge to the field of strategic communication and digital media. First of all we would suggest making a large-scale quantitative study in the future in order to achieve more generalizable results, as our own study turned out to be rather small-scale due to time constraints and lack of resources. Our study's sample can further be argued to be disproportionate, as the majority of our respondents were young females. Thus, it could be of value to use another sampling method if further research on this area is conducted. For instance, we reckon that a sample using a populace of mostly elders might result in a different outcome.

Furthermore, as previously argued, the SERVQUAL model that has been applied in this study is in its original state meant for a traditional retail commerce context. Hence, it would be of value to further explore the possibilities of developing this model to better suit the modern digitized commerce setting.

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7. Appendices

7.1 Appendix 1 Questionnaire - "E-commerce Experience"

Scales	No. of items	Items
Service Experience (SE)	7	SE1: An e-commerce service should be able to provide me with customer service on multiple communication channels (e.g., over the phone, social media platforms, website, email, etc.)
		SE2: An e-commerce service should be able to offer me multiple delivery alternatives (e.g., different mail providers and shipment methods like door-to-door delivery, click & collect, etc.).
		SE3: The price of the product offered by an e-commerce service should correspond to the overall quality of the service (e.g., the service lived up to your expectations in relation to the cost).
		SE4: An e-commerce service should be able to provide consistent communication after making a purchase (i.e., correspondence in terms of confirmation emails, parcel tracking, etc.).
		SE5: The level of trust I feel towards an e-commerce service is important for my overall experience of the service (e.g. if the service has a secure payment process, or if you've had previous positive experiences of the service).
		SE6: It is important to me that the e-commerce service offers me the possibility to read other customer's reviews about the service.
		SE7: An e-commerce service should be able to offer me a wide selection of products or brands.

Visual Design (VD)	4	VD1: The interface of an e-commerce service should be aesthetically appealing.
		VD2: An e-commerce service should have a clear corporate visual identity that is uniform on all platforms (e.g, website, app, Facebook page, etc.) in terms of, for example, logo and color-coding.
		VD3: The visual presentation of the products offered by the e-commerce service is important to me (e.g. picture quality, video presentation, 360° product animations etc.).
		VD4: An e-commerce service should be able to offer me inspirational content in regards to the products offered (e.g. styling advice).
Personalization (P)	3	P1: It is important to me that an e-commerce service provides filter options when browsing through products (e.g. sorting between different sizes, colors or brands).
		P2: An e-commerce service should be able to offer me personalized product suggestions based on my previous purchases and/or search history.
		P3: An e-commerce service should be able to offer me membership options that give me certain benefits (e.g. special offers or invitations to events).
Personal Motivators (PM)	4	PM1: If I am satisfied with my e-commerce experience, I want to recommend it to others so that they can have the same positive experience.
		PM2: If I am satisfied with an e-commerce experience, I want the company behind it to be successful or supported.
		PM3: When I have a negative or positive experience of an e-commerce service I used, I want to share my frustration or joy with others.
		PM4: I want to assist others in finding the right products online.

WOM-behavior	9	WB1: I communicate with people in my near surroundings (e.g. friends, family, colleagues) about my e-commerce experiences face-to-face.
		WB2: I communicate with people in my near surroundings (e.g. friends, family, colleagues) about my e-commerce experiences over the phone or via text messages.
		WB3: I share my experiences or opinions of an e-commerce service on my own social media accounts (e.g., Facebook or Instagram posts).
		WB4: I press the "like-button" or follow the e-commerce service page on social media platforms (e.g., like the company's Facebook page or follow their Instagram account).
		WB5: I write online reviews about my experience of an e-commerce service (e.g., reviews on the service's website, or on the service's Facebook page).
		WB6: I rate the e-commerce service quality through online ratings (e.g., rate the app I used via App Store or on rating sites like "Trustpilot").
		WB7: I write to people in my near surroundings (friends, family, colleagues) in private chats about my e-commerce service experience (e.g., Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, Instagram Direct Message).
		WB8: I share my experience of the e-commerce service in online communities or groups (e.g., on Facebook or other online forums).
		WB9: I communicate directly with the company in charge of the e-commerce service (e.g., posting on their Facebook page, commenting on their Instagram, writing them an email).
Demography	Gender	
	Age	
	Education	
	Occupation	