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Article

Exploring the influence of eWOM in buying behavior

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EXPLORING THE INFLUENCE OF eWOM IN BUYING BEHAVIOR

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ABSTRACT

There is lack of published studies about the relationship between eWOM from SNS or Internet and purchase. This study intends to make a contribution to the understanding of this phenomenon. In order to do this, the research separates the eWOM arisen from the Internet and the eWOM arisen from SNS, and it includes gender as a moderator variable. Furthermore, the inclusion of experience and search goods in the analysis enriches the implications provided. In short, the main proposal of this study is to analyze the influence of eWOM and Internet referrals across different product types, including gender as a moderator variable.

KEYWORDS: eWOM, SNS, buying behavior, Internet

1. INTRODUCTION

Humans are social animals and group influence is a key motivation for many of our individual behaviors, including the purchase behavior. Consumer behavior has been strongly impacted by the Internet and particularly by Web 2.0 in last ten years. In fact, new business models have emerged because of the development of Web 2.0, such as social networks sites (SNS).

The influence of WOM in buying behavior has been widely studied in the academic literature. Nevertheless, there is lack of published studies about the relationship between eWOM from SNS or Internet and purchase. This study intends to make a contribution to the understanding of this phenomenon. In order to do this, the research separates the eWOM arisen from the Internet and the eWOM arisen from SNS, and it includes gender as a moderator variable. Furthermore, the inclusion of experience and search goods in the analysis enriches the implications provided.

SNS remain a novel phenomenon, but their impact on consumer behavior is likely to be enormous. The core of an SNS site is a collection of user profiles where registered members can post information that they want to share with others (Trusov, Bodapati, & Bucklin, 2010). The majority of users are involved in two types of activities on SNS: 1) creating new content by editing their profiles (e.g., adding pictures, uploading music, writing blogs and messages); 2) consuming content that others create (e.g., looking at pictures, downloading music, reading blogs and messages). SNS increase the possibility of finding people with similar interests, enrich the interaction and enhance the speed of communication among consumers. In addition, this phenomenon make easier to find more consumers of a product that provide purchase recommendations online. Associated with this technology new patterns of consumption are emerging, leaving out traditional intermediaries and allowing a more open and direct relationship between people. Today, companies should try to have prosumers. Taking into account that prosumer is an acronym formed by the combination of the words producer and consumer (Toffler, 1980), they are users who are potential purchasers and/or advisers.

Young people are the main users of SNS, this group of individuals in a few years will have an enormous capacity of consumption. In addition, these new generations have a set of specific characteristics that should be deeply analyzed (Nusair, Parsa, & Cobanoglu, 2011). We can conclude the relevance of understanding their behavior as consumers.

By other hand, the literature indicates that because of the special features of the Internet, its suitability for marketing depends on the characteristics of products and services commercialized (Peterson, Balasubramanian, & Bronnberg, 1997), if we consider the particular context of SNS, is it possible to confirm this statement?

In short, the main proposal of this study is to analyze the influence of eWOM and Internet referrals across different product types, including gender as a moderator variable. In addition, some sub-objectives that drive to the main one are the following: 1) to analyze how important are the recommendations for the buying process, in the Internet and in SNS; 2) to study the gender effect on the recommendations importance for the buying process; 3) to examine the role of product types in the relationship between eWOM and purchase.

WOM is an important research topic. Figure 1 shows a co-citation analysis on science articles of business discipline. Co-citation is a relationship of co-occurrence that occurs when two items of literature are cited together by a third party. The co-citation analysis aims to relieve the intellectual structure of a scientific area. The analysis was performed with "Internet" as a filter of ISI publications between 2002 and 2012. CiteSpace II software (Chen, 2006) was used for this analysis and only the 500 most cited articles have been considered. The result of the analysis shows that there are two research streams in the last decade. The first is related to how individuals accept and use this technology. These studies are associated with psychological models of individual behavior, such as the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT). And the second is related to consumer behavior on the Internet, and especially the development of phenomena such as the "word of mouth" in this technological context.

Figure 1. Co-citation analysis



To achieve the aforementioned objectives, this paper is organized as follows. It begins with a literature review of the key contributions related to eWOM, classification of products and gender. Subsequently, the methodology and results are presented. Finally, the paper is completed with the discussion and implications of the findings, addressing the main limitations of the study and proposal for future research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. eWOM (Internet and SNS)

In the marketing literature, word-of-mouth (WOM) is a widely studied topic, but nowadays it is particularly important for its application in Web 2.0 and online social networks (Trusov, Bucklin, & Pauwels, 2009). This topic has evolved over time. Currently there are three distinct concepts: WOM, eWOM and eWOM in SNS. Although there are multiple differences, attending to the needs of this study, we highlight the evolution of anonymity of senders and receivers among them. (Arndt, 1967) was one of the earliest researchers digging into the influence of

WOM on customer behavior. He characterized WOM as oral, person-to-person communication between a receiver and a communicator whom the receiver perceives as non-commercial, regarding a brand, product or service. Since WOM is a person-to-person communication, there must be a link between sender and receiver. Usually, they are friends, family or colleagues. WOM hardly occurs between anonymous people. Customers normally engage in WOM communications for multiple reasons, e.g., anxiety reduction, advice seeking, product involvement, and altruistic motives (Sundaram, Mitra, & Webster, 1998). Earlier research suggests that WOM is more effective than information from commercial sources (e.g., TV advertising) because it is perceived as being the most relatively unbiased source of information (Richins, 1983) for any product or service. WOM is still considered the most powerful form of communication (Kim & Cha, 2002) and is defined (Dick & Basu, 1994) as “volitional post-purchase communications by consumers”. Consequently, WOM communications take place when a customer has strong feelings toward an experience with a supplier, which may motivate him/her to tell other people of their experience (Werthner & Ricci, 2004). WOM has a significant influence on consumers’ decision to change the attitudes and behaviors of friends and relatives (Oppermann, 2000). Therefore, WOM has been described as one of the important post-purchase behaviors (Harrison-Walker, 2001). WOM is even more important and influential in the services context because of their intangibility and, therefore, greater perceived risk (Casaló, Flavián, & Guinalú, 2008).

A few decades ago, traditional WOM was applied in the new virtual environment because of the development of the Internet. In this way the concept of eWOM was born. According to Khammash & Griffiths (2011), at first, companies tried to use the Internet as a way to contact consumers more efficiently. However, the development of the Internet has led to greater interaction between consumers themselves. They employ the new environment to share product related information in the same way as they do offline. Consumers are encouraged to opt for cyberspace, because of the variety of ways or channels by which they can share product information with each other. There are differences between WOM and eWOM, noting the issue of anonymity. eWOM often occurs between people who have little or no prior relationship with each other (e.g. strangers or fellow consumers) and can be anonymous (Lee & Youn, 2009). It is assumed that anonymity encourages consumers to give their opinions more freely. However, it also poses a risk of disassociate themselves from the consequences that may result in the exposure of such opinions.

Today, the emergence of the SNS has meant a significant change in Internet, and in general, in the way to communicate of a significant portion of consumers. SNS have become one of the most popular social communications channels, contacting millions of consumers around the world, and the effect of word-of-mouth (WOM) on the Web 2.0 is an increasing phenomenon. SNS have transformed the way users interact with each others, obtain product and service information, and make purchase decision (Chu & Choi, 2011). The social network setting offers an appealing context in which to study WOM. The sites provide easy-to-use tools for current users to invite others to join the network. The electronic recording of these outbound referrals opens a new window into the effects of WOM (Trusov et al., 2009). As a result, SNS provides users with a tool for searching unbiased product and service information and nevertheless allows them to give their own consumption-related advice.

Again, one of the main differences between eWOM at SNS and others web-based WOM is related to the anonymity of the sender and receiver. According Chatterjee (2011) the most important differences between the two concepts are (1) connections (‘Contacts’, ‘Fans’ or ‘Friends’) who are also users of the SNS, (2) information, opinions, reviews or ideas posted by the profile owner on the profile page, and (3) groups or interest areas of which a profile owner is a member. eWOM on profile pages at SNS is not anonymous, but is linked to the profile owner and can be viewed by the profile owner’s connections if the profile is set for public display. The mutual and decontextualized nature of interpersonal links between connections and posts on profile pages reduces the propensity of profile owners to distort information or present a self-idealized virtual identity. In fact, in the context of the SNS, Coulter & Roggeveen (2012) show that closeness to the source of a persuasive communication (eWOM) may have less of an impact on message acceptance in online social networks compared to traditional WOM.

Moreover, it is reasonable to think that the recommendations should not affect all product types homogeneously. This is, there will be products / services that are most affected by recommendations than other products / services. These differences are based on the need of information to evaluate and purchase products.

2.2. Classification of products

In the marketing literature, one of the most used classifications of products and services is the proposal of Nelson (1970, 1974). This classification is based on the search of information needed for the evaluation and purchase of products. In this way, this author distinguishes two broad categories: search goods and experience goods.

Search goods are those products that consumers can search, inspect, and compare opinions (search behaviors) before purchase. According to Klein (1998) there are products that consumers can collect all the necessary information about their main attributes before purchase. Consumers are able to understand and evaluate the quality of the products before buying them. Examples of such products include cameras or mobile phones, where consumers can evaluate the products according to the specifications provided by the manufacturers.

The experience goods are those products / services that consumer is not able to evaluate their quality until they are purchased and used for a while (Klein, 1998). In this type of product / service is difficult to access to the necessary information for evaluation. An individual would be interested in finding information about a product or service until the marginal benefit equals marginal cost of having such information. In short, consumer needs to use his/her own experience to evaluate product / service quality. Some examples of these goods are travel and insurance services. Subsequently, Darby and Karni (1973) added a third category to this classification: credence goods. Consumers can not evaluate these products, although they buy and use them normally. To ensure product quality to consumers, "credentials" are necessary. Examples of such products are medicines and food supplements. Our work does not include this third category of products.

Although this classification appears to be clear and contains important groundwork in theory, the distinction between search goods and experience goods depends too often on opinions related to how to measure the benefits and costs of information search. Especially, if the current development of Internet is considered. Internet represents a more efficient access to information; therefore, many products traditionally classified as experience goods should be treated as search goods (Klein, 1998; Bei et al, 2004). However, the latter does not seem so clear, due to: (1) the increased technological complexity of many products and, (2) the marketing and communication strategies developed by manufacturers and distributors (Nakayama et al, 2010). A conciliatory position is proposed by Laband (1991). This author argued that search and experience goods should be considered as two ends of a continuum rather than two categories taken as two separate boxes. Between these extremes can be placed products / services, as they incorporate different degrees of both qualities. Even taking into account these considerations, categorization between search goods and experience goods continues to be widely accepted (Huang et al, 2009; Mudambi & Schuff, 2010).

From the point of view of communication, distinct communication sources have different importance for each category of product. Nelson (1970) noted that recommendations will have greater importance for experience goods than for search goods. The work of Bei et al (2004) compared the recommendations received through the Internet to those of relatives and friends (offline). The authors concluded that the Internet has a higher influence on experience goods than on search goods. They also found that recommendations from friends and family are especially important for experience goods. Other studies provide similar results. For instance, Park & Lee (2009) analyze both positive and negative eWOM communication, and its effect on search and experience goods. Their results confirm that eWOM communication exert a greater effect on experience goods, particularly when this communication is negative. Yang and Mai (2010) focused on product experience with hedonic value, such as video games. They found that a negative eWOM had a greater impact than a positive one. Related to this product, they distinguished search and experience attributes. They found significant differences between both groups of attributes in relation to the trust that recommendations of other users provided. These recommendations were more reliable in search attributes than in experience attributes. Mudambi & Shuff (2010) have addressed the usefulness of recommendations in the online shopping portal Amazon.com. In this case, results also indicate differences between the two categories of products.

The work of Huang et al (2009) is interesting; these authors examine the information search behavior on the Internet by consumers. Surprisingly, they did not find any differences between search and experience goods in the time consumers spend in searching for information. However, they obtained important differences in consumer behavior (time per page, number of web pages) depending on the type of product. Also, they noted that the inclusion of comments and recommendations affects in a greater manner to experience goods than to search goods. Considering the aforementioned literature review, there are several ideas we should summarize. Firstly, based in one hand on the

anonymity of the senders of recommendations in Internet, and in the other hand on friendship or closeness of senders of eWOM gathered through the SNS, it is very likely that differences between both type of recommendations exist (Chatterjee, 2011; Coulter & Roggeveen, 2012). We suspect that the perceived importance of eWOM collected through SNS must exceed perceived importance of eWOM through the Internet.

Secondly, previous literature ensures that there are differences between search good perceptions and experience good perceptions with regard to the importance of the recommendations (Bei et al, 2004; Park & Lee, 2009; Huang et al, 2009; Yang & Mai, 2010; Mudambi & Shuff, 2010). In fact, comments and recommendations published on the Internet–WOM- affect in a greater degree to experience goods buyers than to search goods buyers. Nevertheless, we know nothing about the recommendations that may be obtained through the SNS. Based on the previous literature review, the following hypotheses are formulated:

H1: There are differences in the perceived importance of the recommendations obtained from the Internet and those obtained through SNS.

H2a: There are differences in the perceived importance of the recommendations in the Internet depending on the product category. Recommendations for experience goods are more important.

H2b: There are differences in the perceived importance of the recommendations in SNS depending on the product category. Recommendations for experience goods are more important.

2.3. Gender, Purchase and eWOM

Gender is one of the most common demographic variables used to segment markets (Bhatnagar & Ghose, 2004), and gender differences are evident in many consumption decisions (Solomon, Russell-Bennett, & Previte, 2010). Particularly, in the decision making process of consumers online, the literature identifies three stages where these gender differences are directly present: search, purchase and outcomes.

According to other consumer behavior contexts (Putrevu, 2004), in the search stage of decision making process of consumers online, gender is a factor influencing information search (Bhatnagar & Ghose, 2004; Seock & Bailey, 2008). Indeed, men and women show differences in their search patterns, as well men have higher search termination time (Bhatnagar & Ghose, 2004). Moreover, the gender is related to choosing Internet as information source preference (Luo, Feng, & Cai, 2004).

Beyond to the conceptions about masculinity and femininity guide the acquisition of ‘sex-typed’ products and services (Solomon et al., 2010), in the purchase stage of decision making process of consumers online, gender is a discriminating factor in the frequency of online shopping (Seock & Bailey, 2008; Zhang, Prybutok, & Strutton, 2007), probability to shop online (Seock & Bailey, 2008), consumer impulsivity (Zhang et al., 2007), attitude towards online shopping (Seock & Bailey, 2008; Zhang et al., 2007) and purchase experience (Seock & Bailey, 2008). Furthermore, gender is a predictor of preference for online shopping, for example, men prefer to shop online to search products (such as books and personal computers) and a particular kind of experience products (such as mobile phones and TV), while women prefer to shop online to other kind of experience products (such as clothing and perfumes) (Girard, Korgaonkar, & Silverblatt, 2003).

In the outcomes stage, gender moderates the influence of perceived deception on satisfaction (Roman, 2010).

In addition, as external antecedents of the decision making process of consumers online, the literature identifies three factors where gender differences are present: motives, online environment and reference group.

Diverse authors indicated that exist gender difference of online buyers motivations (Andrews, Kiel, Drennan, Boyle, & Weerawardena, 2007; H. Dittmar, K. Long, & R. Meek, 2004; Huang & Yang, 2010; Seock & Bailey, 2008; Zhang et al., 2007). There are gender differences in functional value of online buying (Andrews et al., 2007; H. Dittmar et al., 2004). In particular, in compare of traditional buying, functional motivations of men are amplified and motivational priorities of women are reversed in online buying (H. Dittmar et al., 2004).

In relation to online environment, as in other new technologies, gender differences affect decision-making processes (Al-Maghrabi & Dennis, 2010; Venkatesh & Morris, 2000). Specifically, in technology acceptance of online shopping sites, gender moderate the relation between perceived usefulness and subjective norms (Al-Maghrabi & Dennis, 2010). Nevertheless, some characteristics as security concerns and user experience of Internet shopping show not gender differences (Hui & Wan, 2007).

Reference groups influence the decision making process of consumers online (Al-Maghrabi & Dennis, 2010; Darley, Blankson, & Luethge, 2010; Garbarino & Strahilevitz, 2004). Particularly, eWOM leads to both greater reduction in perceived risk and stronger increase in willingness to buy online (Garbarino & Strahilevitz, 2004). In this context, women consider perceived usefulness of recommendations greater than men (Doong & Wang, 2011), and eWOM is very likely to have a particularly positive effect among female consumers (Garbarino & Strahilevitz, 2004). From the previous literature review, the following hypotheses are stated:

Hypothesis 3a: For search products/service, gender will moderate the importance of SNS recommendations.

Hypothesis 3b: For search products/service, gender will moderate the importance of Internet recommendations.

Hypothesis 3c: For experience products/service, gender will moderate the importance of SNS recommendations.

Hypothesis 3d: For experience products/service, gender will moderate the importance of Internet recommendations.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Sample

The empirical research is based on a non-probabilistic and self-selection sampling method, therefore it is a convenience sample. Specifically, the data was collected in Chile and Spain from a sample of on-line questionnaires in March 2011. The exclusion of invalid questionnaires due to duplications or empty fields provided a final sample size of 502 SNS users that bought a mobile phone during last year, and 596 SNS users that bought some travel services in the same period. Of the final sample, 62% of respondents were women and 38% were men. Respondents were predominantly Spaniards (62.5%) and Chileans (24.5%), and marginally of other nationalities (13%). The average age of respondents was 24 years old. Most of the respondents were students and scholars. In relation to SNS, 82% of respondents use Facebook, 54.7% Twitter, and 20.1% Tuenti (a Spanish SNS).

According to Bei et al. (2004) and Mudambi & Schuff (2010), we selected the mobile phone as a search good and travel service (trip, accommodation or other related services) as experience good.

The measurement of the importance of recommendations was made through Likert-scale variables, ranked from 1 (very low importance) to 7 (very high importance).

3.2. Statistical tools

The T test procedure for related samples compares the means of two variables in a single group. The procedure calculates differences between the values of two variables in each case and contrast if the mean value is different from 0. The assumptions that data must meet are: (a) observations of each pair must be made under the same conditions; (b) differences between mean values should be normally distributed; (c) variances of each variable can be equal or unequal.

For Paired Samples Correlations we calculate the value of the correlation coefficient and the significance value for each pair of variables used in the Paired Samples T Test procedure. The correlation should be fairly high and the significance value low (typically less than 0.05).

We also run the Wilcoxon Signed-Rank; it is a non-parametric test that detects differences in the distributions of two related variables. Small significance values (<.05) indicate that the two variables differ in distribution.

One of the techniques used is the one-factor ANOVA procedure that generates an analysis of variance of one factor for a quantitative dependent variable with respect to a single factor (the independent variable). The analysis of variance is used to contrast the hypotheses that several mean values are equal. This technique is an extension of the T test for two samples.

Also, we run the Mann-Whitney U Test that is a non-parametric test. In this test, the two groups are combined and the data are ranked. Small significance values (<.05) indicate that the two groups have different locations.

4. RESULTS

In this section the main results that confirm or reject the proposed hypotheses are exposed.

H1 proposed that: “There are differences in the perceived importance of the recommendations obtained from the Internet and those obtained through SNS.”

Table 1 displays the number of cases, mean value, standard deviation, and standard error for the pair(s) of variables compared in the Paired Samples T Test procedure.

Table 1. Statistics for mobile phone

	Mean	N	Std. Dev.	Std. Error
Recommendations of my friends in SNS were important for buying the mobile phone	2.97	502	1.97	0.088
Recommendations in Internet were important for buying the mobile phone	4.42	502	2.01	0.090

From this table we can see that the mean score for the importance of recommendations in Internet for buying the mobile phone is 4.42 vs. 2.97 for recommendations in SNS. The T test procedure for related samples indicates significant differences for these mean values (p-value 0.000). This indicates that for mobile phone hypothesis 1 is accepted and, therefore, recommendations obtained through the Internet are more important than those obtained by SNS. This result is confirmed by the Wilcoxon Signed-Rank non-parametric test.

The analysis is repeated for the purchase of travel services.

Table 2. Statistics for travel services

	Mean	N	Std. Dev.	Std. Error
Recommendations of my friends in SNS were important for buying the travel services	3.49	596	2.03	0.083
Recommendations in Internet were important for buying the travel services	5.13	596	1.75	0.072

From table 2 we can observe that the mean score for the importance of recommendations in Internet for buying travel services is 5.13 vs. 3.49 for recommendations in SNS. The T test procedure for related samples indicates significant differences for these mean values (p-value 0.000). This indicates that for travel services hypothesis 1 is accepted too and, therefore, recommendations obtained through the Internet are more important than those obtained by SNS. This result is confirmed by the Wilcoxon Signed-Rank non-parametric test.

With regard to H2a: “There are differences in the perceived importance of the recommendations in the Internet depending on the product category. Recommendations for experience goods are more important.” The T test procedure for related samples is used to contrast this hypothesis. 381 people of the sample bought a mobile phone and travel services in last year and answer the question of recommendations in the Internet. We did the same analysis but now, in table 3 are exposed the descriptive statistics of the importance of recommendations through the Internet for both products.

Table 3. Statistics of the importance of recommendations in the Internet for both products

	Mean	N	Std. Dev.	Std. Error
Recommendations in Internet were important for buying mobile phone	4.45	381	1.97	0.101
Recommendations in Internet were important for buying the travel services	5.17	381	1.74	0.089

According to these results recommendations in the Internet for buying travel services (experience good) are more important (5.17 vs. 4.45) than for buying a mobile phone. The T test procedure for related samples indicates significant differences for these mean values (p-value 0.000). Therefore, hypothesis 2a is accepted, and recommendations in the Internet are more important for experience goods than for search goods. Once again this result is confirmed by the Wilcoxon Signed-Rank non-parametric test.

In relation to H2b: “There are differences in the perceived importance of the recommendations in SNS depending on the product category. Recommendations for experience goods are more important.” Again, the T test procedure for related samples is used to contrast this hypothesis. 383 people of the sample bought a mobile phone and travel services in last year and answer the question of recommendations in SNS. We did the same analysis but now, in table 4 are exposed the descriptive statistics of the importance of recommendations through SNS for both products.

Table 4. Statistics of the importance of recommendations in SNS for both products

	Mean	N	Std. Dev.	Std. Error
Recommendations of my friends in SNS were important for buying the mobile phone.	3.03	383	1.95	0.100
Recommendations of my friends in SNS were important for buying travel services	3.70	383	2.05	0.105

Table 4 information indicates that recommendations of friends in SNS for buying travel services (experience good) are more important (3.70 vs.3.03) than for buying a mobile phone. The T test procedure for related samples indicates significant differences for these mean values (p-value 0.000). Therefore, hypothesis 2b is accepted, and recommendations in SNS are more important for experience goods than for search goods. Once again this result is confirmed by the Wilcoxon Signed-Rank non-parametric test.

In order to contrast hypotheses H3a, H3b, H3c and H3d, one-factor ANOVA procedure was run. Also, the Mann-Whitney U Test, that is a non-parametric test, is used. Operating in this way, results can be confirmed although variables were not normally distributed.

Hypotheses 3a and 3b proposed:

H3a: For search products/service, gender will moderate the importance of SNS recommendations.

H3b: For search products/service, gender will moderate the importance of Internet recommendations.

Table 5 shows the descriptive statistics of the importance of recommendations through SNS and the Internet for mobile phones divided by gender. 506 people of the sample bought a mobile phone in last year and answer the question of recommendations in SNS, and 502 people of the sample bought a mobile phone in last year and answer the question of recommendations in the Internet.

Table 5. Statistics of the importance of recommendations in the Internet and SNS for mobile phones by gender

	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Std. Error	
Recommendations of my friends in SNS were important for buying the mobile phone.	Males	209	2.75	1.94	0.134
	Females	297	3.14	1.99	0.116
	Total	506	2.98	1.98	0.088
Recommendations in Internet were important for buying mobile phone	Males	206	4.61	2.05	0.143
	Females	296	4.28	1.97	0.114
	Total	502	4.41	2.01	0.090

Analyzing table 5, it is remarkable the fact that females give more importance to recommendations of friends in SNS than males for buying mobile phones. However, they give less importance to recommendations in the Internet than males. To contrast if these differences are significant, Anova analysis is run in table 6.

Table 6. ANOVA for mobile phone

	Sum of squares	df	Quadratic mean	F	Sig.	
Recommendations of my friends in SNS were important for buying the mobile phone.	Inter-groups	18.82	1	18.82	4.84	0.028
	Intra-groups	1958.90	504	3.89		
	Total	1977.71	505			
Recommendations in Internet were important for buying mobile phone	Inter-groups	13.21	1	13.21	3.29	0.070
	Intra-groups	2008.43	500	4.02		
	Total	2021.64	501			

Table 6 reveals that average importance of recommendations of my friends in SNS for buying a mobile phone is higher in females than in males, confirming H3a (F=4.84, sig.= 0.028). In addition, H3b is accepted too because gender also moderates the importance of recommendations in the Internet, but with a lower confidence level (90%) (F=3.29, sig. = 0.070). These results are confirmed by the Wilcoxon Signed-Rank non-parametric test; in this case H3b is accepted with a 95% of confidence level.

Finally, hypotheses 3c and 3d proposed:

Hypothesis 3c: For experience products/service, gender will moderate the importance of SNS recommendations.

Hypothesis 3d: For experience products/service, gender will moderate the importance of Internet recommendations.

Table 7 shows the descriptive statistics of the importance of recommendations through SNS and the Internet for travel services separated by gender. 599 people of the sample bought travel services in last year and answer the questions of recommendations in SNS and in the Internet.

Table 7. Statistics of the importance of recommendations in the Internet and SNS for travel services by gender

		N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Std. Error
Recommendations of my friends in SNS were important for buying travel services.	Males	228	3.23	2.00	0.133
	Females	371	3.66	2.02	0.105
	Total	599	3.50	2.02	0.083
Recommendations in Internet were important for buying travel services.	Males	228	5.05	1.83	0.121
	Females	371	5.18	1.69	0.088
	Total	599	5.13	1.75	0.071

Studying table 5, females give more importance to recommendations of friends in SNS and in the Internet than males for buying travel services. To contrast if these differences are significant, Anova analysis is run in table 8.

Table 8. ANOVA for travel services

		Sum of squares	df	Quadratic mean	F	Sig.
Recommendations of my friends in SNS were important for buying travel services.	Inter-groups	25.53	1	25.53	6.28	0.012
	Intra-groups	2426.20	597	4.06		
	Total	2451.74	598			
Recommendations in Internet were important for buying travel services.	Inter-groups	2.122	1	2.12	0.696	0.405
	Intra-groups	1820.98	597	3.05		
	Total	1823.10	598			

According to table 8, average importance of recommendations of my friends in SNS for buying travel services is significantly higher in females than in males, confirming H3c (F=6.28, sig.= 0.012). Nevertheless, H3d is not

accepted because gender does not moderate the importance of recommendations in the Internet, ($F=0.696$, $sig. = 0.405$). These results are confirmed by the Wilcoxon Signed-Rank non-parametric test.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This paper makes a great contribution to the understanding of the eWOM phenomenon. Firstly, this research separates the eWOM arisen from the Internet and the eWOM arisen from SNS, and it includes gender as a moderator variable. Furthermore, the inclusion of experience and search goods in the analysis enriches the implications provided.

The main aim of this study is to analyze the influence of eWOM and Internet referrals across different product types, including gender as a moderator variable. In addition, some sub-objectives that drive to the main one are the following: 1) to analyze how important are the recommendations for the buying process, in the Internet and in SNS; 2) to study the gender effect on the recommendations importance for the buying process; 3) to examine the role of product types in the relationship between eWOM and purchase. Statistical analysis shows that 6 from the 7 proposed hypotheses are accepted.

First of all, differences exist in the perceived importance of the recommendations obtained from the Internet and those obtained through SNS. Mean score for the importance of recommendations in the Internet for buying the mobile phone is higher than for recommendations in SNS. In addition, recommendations obtained through the Internet are more important than those obtained by SNS in the purchase of travel services. In short, independently of considering the purchase of a search good or an experience good, consumers prefer recommendations collected from the Internet to those picked up from their friends in SNS. This implies that marketers of both types of products should monitor and control the opinions and comments about their products, of bloggers or experts in the websites their potential clients might visit. It is expected that SNS will get more and more importance as a source of information. However, nowadays, to rely on the support of opinion leaders of the main virtual communities, at a certain extent anonym people, related to the analyzed products or services tend to be much more important. It is surprising that people usually rely more on “opinion leaders” almost anonymous than on friends, relatives or colleagues with regard to eWOM. Although this fact is not so surprising if we know that these friends, relatives or colleagues are not experts in the product or service we are searching the information.

Secondly, with regard to the importance of the product or service type, hypothesis 2a is accepted, and recommendations in the Internet are more important for experience goods than for search products. This idea is confirm widely in previous literature (Bei et al, 2004; Park & Lee, 2009; Huang et al, 2009; Yang & Mai, 2010; Mudambi & Shuff, 2010) and comments and recommendations published on the Internet -eWOM- affect in a greater degree to experience goods buyers than to search goods buyers. With regard to hypothesis 2b, the same interpretation could be made for the importance of recommendations in SNS. As a consequence, especially, marketers and managers of goods classified as experience should try to encourage users to explain their positive experiences in websites related to their products and also, in pages published by these users in their own SNS. And of course, marketers and managers want to avoid the publication of users’ negative experiences in the Internet and SNS. This comment seems a platitude, but nowadays, many firms do not monitor clients’ opinions and comments in SNS nor Internet and this is an increasing strategic mistake.

Thirdly, gender moderates the importance of SNS and Internet recommendations in search goods. Specifically, females give more importance to recommendations of friends in SNS than males for the analyzed search good buying mobile phones. However, they give less importance to recommendations in the Internet than males, in the case of search good purchase. This is an interesting point, according to these results, females seem to trust more on her friends and contacts from their SNS than males, but the latter trust more on advises collected from websites and likely from anonymous persons. Perhaps these anonymous persons are experts about the product or service they are giving their opinions, or maybe not. As a consequence, marketers and managers of goods aimed for women should take special care of eWOM in SNS. However, if goods are targeted for men eWOM in the Internet is particularly important.

Last but not least, gender moderates the importance of SNS recommendations for experience products/services. Females give more importance to recommendations of friends in SNS than males for buying travel services. But, it

does not moderate the importance of Internet recommendations. The eWOM from Internet is equally important for males and females in the experience good purchase. One implication of this result is the confirmation of the importance of eWOM in SNS for women, at the time of deciding their purchases of experience goods.

Finally, this research has some limitations. We have used a non-random sampling method and it is necessary to validate and generalize the results using random sampling methods in future investigations. Furthermore, we must point out that the majority of individuals who participated in the study are living in a Latin culture. The sample size did not enable us to make generalizations, and it may not hold for different nationalities. To develop cross-cultural studies is an important future research line. In addition, in future work to include more products and services will be necessary in order to enrich the analysis and conclusions.

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