

# Exploring the Role of Culture in eWOM Adoption

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**ABSTRACT:** *Given the explosive growth of customer review sites, the questions of why and how individuals use these services in different cultures, as well as whether eWOM exerts comparable influence in different cultures, warrant comprehensive research. The majority of studies in this emerging stream are conducted in a single-country context, and do not consider the impact of cultural environment on consumers' eWOM dissemination, usage, or outcomes. To address this gap, this study compares eWOM attitudes and usage in the US (an established eWOM tradition within a developed market economy) and Ukraine (reflecting a relatively recent eWOM adoption in transitional political and institutional circumstances). We apply content analysis to in-depth interview transcripts obtained from 14 Ukrainian and 10 American consumers and compare differences in their usage and perceptions of online product reviews.*

**KEYWORDS:** *eWOM, Communication Culture, Uncertainty Avoidance, Ukraine, Cross-Cultural Study, Customer Review, Reviewer Credibility, Website Trustworthiness, Review Persuasiveness.*

## 1. Introduction

The importance of social influence in the process of shopping and in the consequent purchase-related decision-making has been firmly established in the marketing literature (Bearden & Etzel, 1982). It is rooted in the socially prominent role of possessions, long recognized as symbols of status (Veblen, 1898) and as material representations of a person's identity (Belk, 2010). Involving peers in the process of purchase selection boosts consumer self-confidence (Bearden et al., 2001) and provides greater legitimacy to the choices made (Burnkrant & Cousineau, 1975). The persuasive superiority of word-of-mouth (WOM) in comparison to paid marketing communications is largely attributed to the trust and/or liking experienced by customers towards their friend and family (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1965).

In addition to utilizing product and brand information from these strong-tie connections, shoppers increasingly rely on the opinions of unfamiliar fellow consumers in

the digital space (electronic WOM or eWOM) (Ludwig et al., 2013). According to a recent industry report, 90% of global consumers read and rely on online product reviews for their decision-making (Channel Advisor, 2011). The growing popularity and influence of online customer reviews stems from their perceived objectivity due to apparent independence from commercial communication sources, and from their potential to represent multiple and diverse perspectives (Godes & Mayzlin, 2004). Other advantages to consumers who utilize eWOM include its instant, ubiquitous and nearly permanent availability, amenability to search, interactivity (encouraging content co-creation), and transparency (Lindgreen et al., 2013).

Given the mounting impact of eWOM on sales revenues and corporate reputations (Griffith, 2011), companies are raising their expenditures on eWOM campaigns and paid review and rating postings. Gartner estimates that by 2014, 10-15% of all reviews posted online will be paid for, either by cash, coupons, or promotions (Gartner, 2012). This practice can potentially lead to damaged reputations and litigations and undermine customer reliance on online reviews and ratings, reducing their access to objective product information and increasing information asymmetry. Therefore, better understanding of what factors affect the adoption and credibility of eWOM information, and ultimately influence shopping outcomes, is imperative for marketers designing communication strategies for the digital age.

An emergent stream of research in the areas of eWOM and online consumer reviews has addressed consumer motivations to post (Alexandrov et al., 2013; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004) and seek (Goldsmith & Horowitz, 2006) online reviews. Considerable attention has also been given to the source and message characteristics that affect online reviews' perceived usefulness and credibility (Cheung et al., 2009; Li & Zhan, 2011; Park & Lee, 2008; Purnawirawan et al., 2012). Additionally, several recent studies have assessed the effects of eWOM on new product adoption (López & Sicilia, 2013) and sales (Davis & Khazanchi, 2008; Zhang et al., 2013). Other issues that received attention in the extant literature include the moderating roles of product (Sen & Lerman, 2007), social (Steffes & Burgee, 2009), and personality (Gupta & Harris, 2010) factors in the eWOM's influence on purchasing decisions. Typically, the majority of studies in this emerging stream are conducted in a single-country (mostly economically developed) context, and do not consider the potential impact of cultural environment on consumers' eWOM dissemination, usage, or outcomes (Kim et al., 2011). However, the role of culture in affecting inter-personal communication cannot be underestimated (Hall, 1976). Existing marketing literature has documented cultural influences on consumers' beliefs and attitudes towards traditional (Durvasula et al., 2001) and online advertising (Roberts & Ko, 2001), cautiousness in shopping behaviors (Marinov et al., 2002), patterns of online media use (Chau et al., 2002), and word-of-mouth activities (Lam et al., 2009). These

significant findings imply that cross-cultural differences may exist in consumers' eWOM-related behaviors and attitudes, pointing at an important research gap unaddressed by previous studies.

Given the explosive world-wide growth of customer review sites and their potential use for global marketing, the questions of why and how individuals use these services in different cultures, as well as whether eWOM exerts comparable influence in different cultures and economic conditions, warrant comprehensive research. To address this gap, the current study compares eWOM attitudes and use behaviors in the US (an established eWOM tradition within a developed market economy) and Ukraine (reflecting a relatively recent eWOM adoption in transitional political and institutional circumstances). We apply the qualitative method of content analysis to in-depth interview transcripts obtained from 14 Ukrainian and 10 American consumers and compare differences in their usage and perceptions of online product reviews.

In the remainder of the paper, we describe prior relevant research, identify the gaps addressed by the current study, report the study's methods and discuss its results. Further, managerial implications are derived from the findings, and directions for future research in the area are proposed.

## **2. Related literature**

The existing literature on the role of online product reviews in affecting consumer attitudes and purchase intentions has mainly focused on the following issues:

- motivations to use reviews in the process of online product information;
- message characteristics affecting persuasiveness and helpfulness of online reviews;
- product, user and source characteristics as moderating variables in the relationship between message characteristics and online shopping outcomes.

A number of existing studies address characteristics of online shoppers who adopt eWOM. As a result of surveying 220 US marketing students, Bailey (2005) proposed that consumers seek eWOM to obtain additional product information, to seek assurance or reassurance in product choice, as a primary source of information, because they came across it by chance, and because they were referred to it by others. Goldsmith and Horowitz (2006) also investigated motivations for seeking others' opinions online. After surveying 309 undergraduate business students in the US they identified the following eight factors that prompt consumers to use eWOM: risk reduction, "because others do

it,” to secure lower prices, to easily access information, by accident, “because it is cool,” because of offline (e.g., TV) stimulation, and to get pre-purchase information.

The previous studies on the role of message-related attributes have focused on the usefulness, credibility and persuasiveness effects of positive/negative framing of a single review (Park & Lee, 2009), ratios of positive to negative reviews in a set (Doh & Hwang, 2009; Purnawirawan et al., 2012), star rating valence (Cheung et al., 2009; Yang et al., 2012), emotional vs. factual presentation modes (Park & Lee, 2008), message sidedness (Cheung et al., 2009), and number, volume, order, and sequence of differently valenced reviews (Park & Lee, 2008; Purnawirawan et al., 2012; Yang et al., 2012).

In terms of message characteristics, comprehensiveness and relevance were identified as the most important factors affecting eWOM adoption in the US (Cheung et al., 2008). A survey of Chinese consumers found that argument strength, source credibility, and confirming users’ prior product beliefs positively affected eWOM message credibility (Cheung et al., 2009). Additionally, recommendation consistency and aggregate ratings were found to increase eWOM credibility, with greater effect of recommendation consistency for low-involvement consumers. No valence or message sidedness effects, however, were identified (Cheung et al., 2009). Recently, Siering and Muntermann (2013) examined Amazon.com’s product reviews for different categories of search and experience goods and identified message factors that affect their perceived helpfulness. According to the authors, review depth, statements of product quality and number of total votes on its helpfulness are positively related to review helpfulness. Review extremity and experiential product classification are negatively related to review helpfulness rating. In addition, positive review sentiment increases helpfulness for search goods, while negative review sentiment increases perceived helpfulness of reviews about experience goods.

In an experiment involving Korean students, Doh and Hwang (2009) manipulated ratios of positive and negative messages in message sets. They found that, in general, more positive sets showed greater eWOM effects than negative sets. However, customer involvement and prior product knowledge moderated the relationships, with high-involvement and high-knowledge consumers showing lower outcomes for all positive sets. Purnawirawan et al. (2012) conducted an experiment with Belgian university students, in which ratios of positive-negative-neutral reviews of a resort and their sequence in eight-review sets were manipulated. The results showed that unbalanced (positive or negative) review sets are perceived as more useful than balanced sets. In addition, positive wrapping in positively balanced sets and negative wrapping in negatively balanced sets improved their perceived usefulness. Park and Lee (2009) found that negative messages have greater effect on eWOM persuasion than positive messages. Yang, Kim, and Amblee (2012) used secondary data from Korean movie box office revenue to show that eWOM

valence is significantly related to revenue only in the case of non-mainstream movies. For mainstream movies, only the volume of eWOM had positive effect on revenues.

Through an observational study and two experiments, Sen and Lerman (2007) showed that product type moderates the effect of review valence, with review readers exhibiting a negativity bias for utilitarian products only. Readers of negative utilitarian product reviews attribute them to product-related attributes and consider them more useful than positive product reviews. On the contrary, users of negative hedonic product reviews are more likely to attribute the negative opinions expressed to the reviewer's internal (and not product-related) motives, finding these reviews less useful than positive reviews. Park and Lee (2009), in an experiment involving Korean undergraduate students, found that the impact of negative eWOM is greater for experience vs search goods and the website reputation has a stronger impact on eWOM effects for experience vs search products. Davis and Khazanchi (2008) used data from a multi-product e-commerce firm and found that product category and the volume of postings moderated the relationship between eWOM and sales. Senecal and Nantel (2004) considered the impact of product (search vs. experience), source (personal vs. impersonal) and website (seller vs. shopping engine vs. opinion site) characteristics on consumers' online choices in an experiment. They concluded that reviews by impersonal recommender systems and those for experience products were more influential in consumer product choice. The type of the website did not make a significant influence on this choice.

Park and Lee (2008) reported that low-involvement consumers use the number of reviews offered as the product's popularity measure and rely on it as a heuristic to increase purchase decision-making. On the other hand, high-involvement consumers who are willing to elaborately process all information, when exposed to large numbers of reviews experience information overload and decreased purchase intentions. Gupta and Harris (2010), in an experiment with 198 US students, discovered that users with lower Need for Cognition (NFC) used eWOM as a decision-making heuristic and were influenced more by the number of recommendations than by their arguments, which led to suboptimal product choices. Those high in NFC, on the contrary, paid more attention to the review arguments and were more motivated to process the message, which resulted in more optimal product selections. Zhu and Zhang (2010) used ratings data from the video game industry to examine how product and consumer characteristics moderate the influence of online consumer reviews on product sales. They found that online reviews are more influential for less popular games and for consumers who have greater experience with the product.

Li and Zhan (2011) considered combined effects of message and source characteristics on eWOM adoption using data from 1,793 Amazon Kindle reviews. They

identified message comprehensiveness, argument strength, positive valence and source expertise as significant influencers of eWOM adoption. In a follow-up experimental study, they noted that the positive message valence increased eWOM adoption only for consumers with prior positive product attitude and for those with prior negative product attitude, but high product involvement.

In summary, the reported findings identify a great number of variables that play a role in utilizing eWOM and in increasing its persuasiveness. However, the majority of reported results lack consistency and comprehensiveness, probably due to wide diversity of the contexts of the investigations, including product types and categories, sample composition, and different cultural environments. In an attempt to explore the role of cultural context in addressing some of the mentioned inconsistencies, the current study utilizes a qualitative approach and compares in-depth interview transcripts with broad range of online consumers in different cultures.

### **2.1 The role of culture**

Defined as “shared perceptions of the social environment” (Triandis, 1972), culture incorporates language, art, customs, habits, knowledge, morals, and beliefs acquired by a person in the process of socialization (Tylor, 1958). It affects information processing and evaluation and has an influence on each individual’s self-construal and group identification (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). It also has an impact on the mechanism of cognitive stereotyping that leads to classification and evaluation of self and others in terms of personality traits and similarity, shaping trust, credibility, attitudes, and behaviors of individuals. People from different cultures choose different messages and channels to communicate (Kale, 1991). Additionally, several prior studies identified differences in social relationships and trust antecedents among cultures (Kim, 2005; Pavlou & Chai, 2002; Smith et al., 2007).

Research in online communication contexts suggests possible influence of value orientations on online shoppers’ motives and usage patterns, which underscores the possibility of unique findings in the Ukrainian context. For example, a comparative study of motives to join the online social network Facebook found that Korean students were “seeking social support” and “seeking information” (Kim et al., 2011), while students in the US joined Facebook for “entertainment” and “convenience.” The authors suggested that in low-context cultures (like the US), users join social networks for superficial impression management and casual relationships, while in high-context cultures (like Korea), the motives are based on the needs to form long-term relationships and define one’s group identity. Another comparative Korean-American study (Lewis & George, 2008) identified a positive effect of cultural trait of masculinity on deceptive behavior in online social networks.

While no studies to date have compared eWOM motivations and usage patterns in different cultures, existing findings confirm important role of culture in the frequency and intensity of traditional WOM (Money et al., 1998). In particular, individualism is likely to facilitate the spread of positive WOM to out-groups (weak ties), masculinity intensifies WOM sharing with in-groups, and uncertainty avoidance is negatively associated with in-group (strong-tie) WOM. Additionally, customers in high uncertainty-avoidance cultures were found less likely to complain or engage in negative WOM (Liu et al., 2001).

Boasting a high level of education and literacy and classified as an emerging market by the World Trade Organization, the United Nations, and the World Bank, Ukraine is representative of other former Soviet countries in economic transition. With the GDP per capita estimated at \$3,867 in 2012 (World Bank, 2012) and the human development index of 0.740 in 2012 (United Nations Development Programme, 2012), Ukraine is undergoing a prolonged complex transition to a free-market, consumption-based economic model. While numerous business and marketing practices effective in Western economies are being implemented by businesses in Ukraine, the low Internet penetration (34% in Ukraine and 81% in US) prevents a mass scale use of Internet for shopping (International Telecommunication Union, 2012). However, the emerging middle class exhibits great interest and involvement with the Internet as both informational and commercial communication channel. The few existing research studies of Ukrainian marketing and marketing in former Soviet countries focus on the specifics of advertising perceptions (Wells, 1994), stages and managerial approaches to adopting marketing in Eastern Europe (Akimova, 1997; Marinov et al., 1993), as well as the effect of marketing adoption on firm performance (e.g., Akimova, 2000; Brooksbank, 1991). Done more than a decade ago they can't be a reliable source for characteristics of consumers' online behavior in post-Soviet-Union countries as they underwent great institutional and infrastructure changes since that time. E.g., Internet penetration rate in Ukraine has grown almost 50 times -- from 0.72% in 2000 to 33.7% in 2012 (International Telecommunication Union, 2012).

Contemporary Ukrainian culture has been influenced by both the traditional communal values of the 17 ~ 19th centuries, quasi-collectivistic features of the oppressive Soviet regime, and the growing individualistic tendencies borrowed from Western pluralism (Badan, 2011). As a result, it can be presently characterized as "tribal," where loyalty and interdependence are concentrated at the family (or small in-group) level and competition and hedonism are practiced in the society in general (Leaptrott, 2003). Dominated by the Russian communal culture through the 17 ~ 19th centuries and by the Soviet ideology for a large part of the 20th century, Ukrainian population has distinctive preferences for the personality traits desirable in communication (Badan, 2011). According to Katz (2006), Ukrainians are "generally serious people who rarely smile and may seem stern." They appreciate sincerity, firmness and dependability in their counterparts (Katz, 2006). Based

on this, the message and source characteristics affecting Ukrainians' perception of trust and credibility of online reviews may differ from those in the US (Robins et al., 2000).

Since communication media patterns and motives are shaped by cultural contexts (Kim et al., 2011), and cultural dimensions of individualism, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance and high/low communication context influence WOM patterns (Lam et al., 2009), we anticipate that Ukrainian eWOM users are driven by a somewhat different set of motivations and exhibit different use patterns than those in the developed Western countries. The present research endeavors to explore motivations to use eWOM, its usage and persuasiveness factors in Ukraine, and to compare them to those in the US.

### **3. Method**

This paper employed qualitative interviews and the content analysis methods, designed to explore potential attitudinal and behavioral differences among online review users in different cultural environments. This approach follows the grounded methodology method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), seeking insights for little researched phenomena at the initial research stages. The total sample was comprised of twenty-four respondents from a wide range of backgrounds and demographic segments (Tables 1 and 2). While the demographic and socio-economic spread of respondents was large, the data were analyzed without the regard to these individual characteristics, keeping in line with the purpose of discovery (Zaltman et al., 1982).

Fourteen in-depth interviews (15 to 30 minutes each) with Ukrainian online review users and ten interviews with online opinion users in the US were conducted with the goal to elicit information about the respondents' motivations, uses and perceptions of the eWOM process. An interview guide, developed from existing empirical studies, was used to ensure consistency across all the interviews. The interview scripts were identical for both countries but done in the native language of respondents to avoid language-related errors. Correct English-Ukrainian translation was assured by two bilingual authors. All interviews were recorded without objection. Two trained graduate students (in the US) and professor and two trained graduate students (in Ukraine) conducted the interviews and applied probing questions to complement the interview guide and uncover rich insights and unexpected examples.

The Ukrainian sample was 57% male and ranged in age from 17 to 57 years old, with the average age of 33.3 years old. 86% of respondents had a bachelor's or higher degrees. Table 1 shows the respondents' demographic information. Ukrainians spend on the Internet a median of 5 hours per day (min = 1.5, max = 9), 64% of them named home as the major place of Internet access, 43% named work, 21% of respondents use mobile



devices for online access. In terms of annual household income, the sample was equally split into \$7,500 to \$11,250 range and \$3,750 to \$7,500 range, reflecting the average Ukrainian annual of \$4,537 in 2012. The sample characteristics are representative of the Ukrainian Internet user who is characterized by younger age and higher socio-economic status that facilitates access to wireless and mobile communications (Kostenko, 2011).

**Table 1** Participant Profile: Ukraine

Pseudonym	Age	Education	Occupation	Income, \$ Per Year	Access to the Internet	Time Spent in the Internet, Hours Per Day
Female						
Alona	21	B.A.	Student	7,500 ~ 11,250	Home, mobile	3
Svetlana	22	B.A.	Accountant	3,750 ~ 7,500	Work, mobile	8
Anna	27	M.A.	Marketing associate	3,750 ~ 7,500	Work	8
Helen	32	M.A.	Sales manager	3,750 ~ 7,500	Work	2.5
Natalia	41	Ph.D.	Professor	7,500 ~ 11,250	Home	7
Nataly	57	M.S.	Retired economist	3,750 ~ 7,500	Home	3.5
Male						
Roman	17	High school	Schoolboy	3,750 ~ 7,500	Home	3
Maxim	19	Some college	Student	3,750 ~ 7,500	Home, mobile	6
Vlad	22	B.A.	Student	3,750 ~ 7,500	Home	4
Igor	28	M.S.	Technical support	7,500 ~ 11,250	Work	9
Alexey	36	Ph.D.	Professor, IT consultant	7,500 ~ 11,250	Home, work	6
Konstantin	41	M.S.	Engineer	7,500 ~ 11,250	Home	2.5
Alexander.	50	M.S.	Retired state employee	7,500 ~ 11,250	Home	6
Ivan	54	Ph.D.	Research director	7,500 ~ 11,250	Work	1.5

**Table 2** Participant Profile: US

Pseudonym	Age	Education	Occupation	Income, \$ Per Year	Access to the Internet	Time Spent in the Internet, Hours Per Day
Female						
Francine	22	Vocational school	Cosmetology & retail	\$65,000	Home	5
Jennifer	30	Associates degree	Banking procurement	\$78,000	Work	5
Patricia	57	B.A.	Finance	\$85,000	Home	4
Susan	24	B.A., almost MBA	Student, photography	\$25,000	Mobile	16
Donna	31	Some college	Operator, engineer	\$150,000	Home, mobile	3
Male						
Wesley	33	MBA	Student, software sales	\$50,000	Home, work, school	4
Daniel	27	BFA	Graphic designer	\$45,000	Home, work, mobile	6
James	23	Some college	Retail	\$30,000	Home	9
Eric	58	B.A.	Engineering	\$80,000	Home	2
Jacob	60	M.A.	Engineering manager	\$120,000	Work	0.5

The US sample was 50% male, ranging in age from 22 to 60 years old, with the average age of 37 years old. 60% of respondents reported having a bachelor's or higher degrees. Table 2 shows the respondents' demographic information. US participants spent online a median of 5.5 hours per day (min = 0.5, max = 16), with 70% naming home as their major place of Internet access, 40% indicating work, and 30% predominantly using mobile devices for online access. US respondents' median annual income is \$72,800 (min = \$25,000, max = \$150,000). These demographics reflect the characteristics of an average American online shopper, with equal proportion of males and females, higher educational level, and the diverse age and income spread as identified by Pew Research Center (Pew Research Center, 2013).

## 4. Results

The interview recordings were transcribed verbatim as soon as possible by paid transcribers in each country. One coder was assigned in each country to identify emergent themes, using both fully inductive and based on preliminary work classification (Brown et al., 2007). Two bi-lingual authors (inter-judge reliability index 89%) then compared the results in both countries. Table 3 summarizes the differences in eWOM motivations, usage, and persuasiveness drivers between the two cultures.

**Table 3** Comparing eWOM Motivations and Usage Patterns in the US and Ukraine

Emerging Themes	US	Ukraine
<i>eWOM motivations</i>		
<i>Product-related</i>	- Product price, importance, significance	- Product price, importance, significance
<i>Consumer-related</i>	- Need to validate preexisting wants, needs and desires	- Need for information (add to information available from salespeople, little prior knowledge, others may know more)
	- Personal relevance, product interest, involvement	
<i>Search process-related</i>	- Need to find best option (fit)	- To reduce consideration set
	- Easy availability, convenience	- Ease of getting eWOM info compared to traditional WOM
	- Habitual use	
<i>eWOM information sought</i>		
<i>Product categories</i>	- All products and services	- Home appliances, electronics, cell phones
		- Apparel and cosmetics
<i>Subjective opinions</i>	- Ratings, opinions, points of view	- Travel
	- Common themes among reviewers	- Ratings, opinions, points of view
	- Majority opinions from those who experienced the products	- Common themes among reviewers
		- Majority opinions from those who experienced the products
<i>Objective facts, specifications and details</i>	- Store locations (online and retail)	- Customer service quality
	- Customer service	- Product/service quality
	- Product/service quality	- Advantages and drawbacks of product, problems encountered
	- Product pictures	- Technical specifications
		- Usability, length of service
		- Effectiveness
		- Warranty, size, delivery options
		- Assortments, prices, contacts
		- Model comparison

**Table 3** Comparing eWOM Motivations and Usage Patterns in the US and Ukraine  
(continued)

<i>Categories of eWOM sources</i>		
<i>Search engines</i>	- To broaden range of opinions - To compare prices	- To broaden range of opinions - To compare prices
<i>Category specific review sites (e.g., Yelp)</i>	- Due to great number of users - Access to expert reviews - Narrow focus on product category - More objective (more perspectives represented) than selling sites - More frequent and recent updates	- Due to great number of users - Access to expert reviews - Narrow focus on product category - More objective (more perspectives represented) than selling sites - More frequent and recent updates - Ability to compare prices - Large reviewer base - Prior buying experience, familiarity with the site
<i>Selling sites (e-retail and manufacturing)</i>	- Ability to compare prices - Large reviewer base - Prior buying experience, familiarity with the site - High traffic and number of users - Convenience and simplicity (located near the product) - Good established reputation	- High traffic and number of users - Convenience and simplicity (located near the product) - Good established reputation - Objectivity - No links to businesses
<i>Discussion sites (blogs, forums, communities)</i>	- Objectivity - No links to businesses	
<i>Determinants of website trustworthiness</i>		
<i>Trust criteria</i>	- Prior usage (by self or friends) - Objectivity (diversity, number of reviews, no connection to seller) - Expertise and narrow focus - Reputation (size, traffic)	- Prior usage (by self or friends) - Objectivity (diversity, number of reviews, no connection to seller) - Expertise and narrow focus - Reputation (size, traffic) - Convenience, simplicity
<i>Reasons to use the site</i>	- Convenience, simplicity - Frequent and current updates - Objective and trusted - Relevant (product category focus)	- Frequent and current updates - Objective and trusted - Relevant (product category focus)
<i>Determinants of reviewer credibility</i>		

**Table 3** Comparing eWOM Motivations and Usage Patterns in the US and Ukraine  
(continued)

<i>Style</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Readable, knowledgeable</li> <li>- Few or no mistakes (grammar, vocabulary)</li> <li>- Punctuation, paragraph structure</li> <li>- Educated (expert) language</li> <li>- Length and presence of details</li> <li>- Non-standard, not template-based</li> <li>- Two-sided (positive and negative)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Readable, knowledgeable</li> <li>- Few or no mistakes (grammar, vocabulary)</li> <li>- Punctuation, paragraph structure</li> <li>- Educated (expert) language</li> <li>- Length and presence of details</li> <li>- Non-standard, not template-based</li> <li>- Two-sided (positive and negative)</li> <li>- Logical and competent</li> <li>- “whining” vs. legitimate complaints</li> </ul>
<i>Content</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Logical and competent</li> <li>- “whining” vs legitimate complaints</li> <li>- Similar experience in usage, buying, preferences</li> <li>- Unemotional, objective</li> <li>- Not related to wrong product use or individual service issues</li> <li>- Not abstract: need details and analysis</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Similar experience in usage, buying, preferences</li> <li>- Unemotional, objective</li> <li>- Not related to wrong product use or individual service issues</li> <li>- Not abstract: need details and analysis</li> </ul>
<i>Drivers of persuasiveness</i>		
<i>Valence</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Positive majority for reassurance</li> <li>- Would not consider products with majority of negative reviews</li> <li>- Valence is contingent on issues and their importance for buyer</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Positive majority for reassurance: need 70 ~ 72% of positive reviews</li> <li>- Would not consider products with majority of negative reviews: if 50% or more negative -- would not buy</li> <li>- Valence is contingent on issues and their importance for buyer</li> <li>- First read most recent or most helpful, or in the order posted, then move to negative only</li> </ul>
<i>Order of reading reviews</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- First read most recent or most helpful, or in the order posted, then move to negative only</li> <li>- If inconsistent: focus on negative, mainly whether negative evaluations concern important issues</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- If inconsistent: focus on negative, mainly whether negative evaluations concern important issues</li> <li>- Up to 40 ~ 70, from several sites</li> <li>- Contingent on price</li> </ul>
<i>Number of reviews read</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Up to 20 (lack of time, involvement, interest, boredom); if inconsistent: read more</li> </ul>	

#### **4.1 Motivations to utilize eWOM, information sources and content sought**

From the interviews, the product categories for which a representative Ukrainian consumer seeks online reviews include home appliances and electronics, cell phones, travel, apparel and cosmetics. While a few American respondents specifically mentioned electronics, the majority did not specify individual product categories, implying virtually unlimited use of available online opinions for a broad range of product and service categories.

The most frequently cited motivation to search for and read the opinions of other consumers online for both the Ukrainian and the US samples was the perceived significance of the purchase manifested through its high price or personal importance. Respondents used phrases like “big purchase,” “expensive,” and “not a trivial or low price item” to describe what would prompt them to read online customer reviews. Interestingly, other reasons mentioned for consulting the reviews differed between the two cultural samples. Such personal reasons as the need for validation or confirmation of preexisting wants, needs and desires, and personal interest (involvement) in the product category were only mentioned by the US respondents. The need for information, on the other hand, was only indicated by the Ukrainian shoppers. They explained that the reviews posted by others added to the product information provided by salespeople, and that they consulted the reviews because others may know more, or when they had little prior knowledge of the product in question. Finally, task-related motivations for referring to online reviews were also different for each sample. Ukrainian consumers mentioned the need for help with decision making and with reducing their product consideration set, they also stated that ease of obtaining eWOM compared to requesting product information from friends and acquaintances was a driver for their eWOM use. American consumers pointed out the need to find the best product option (fit), habitual use of review sites, and easy and convenient availability of customer reviews as reasons for utilizing eWOM.

The kind of information sought about the products was generally similar for both samples. It contained a) subjective emotions and opinions of other people about the product/service, including points of view, ratings, common themes, and majority opinions among the reviewers and b) objective details about the products. The latter category comprised product/service quality, customer service levels, store locations (US only) and pictures (US only). In addition, the objective information for Ukrainian consumers also included problems encountered, advantages and drawbacks of the product, technical specifications, usability and length of service, effectiveness, warranty, delivery, model comparison, assortments, prices, and sizes.

Generally, respondents in both countries looked for eWOM information on a wide range of websites and did their best to obtain reviews from multiple sources. These

websites can be classified into: category-specific review sites (e.g., cnet.com, yelp.com, tripadvisor.com for the US consumers), selling sites (e-retailers and manufacturers), and discussion sites (forums, blogs, and communities unaffiliated with commercial entities). Frequently, the starting point for these websites was a search portal (Google for the US and Yandex.ru for Ukrainian consumers).

Respondents in both countries stated that they utilize a wide variety of sources to obtain a more objective picture representing multiple perspectives. The incentives for utilizing category-specific sites included perceived expertise of reviewers, great number of users, narrow product focus, and greater perceived objectivity compared to seller sites, as well as frequent and more recent updates. It should be noted that the number of such sites mentioned by Ukrainian consumers was significantly lower compared to those identified by the US respondents. The reasons mentioned for using eWOM on selling sites were: the possibility to compare prices, large reviewer base, customer prior experience buying from the site and familiarity with it, high traffic and number of users, convenience and simplicity of reviews located near the products, and good reputation. Finally, user groups and discussion sites were considered superior due to their perceived independence from businesses. Search engines were used by both samples as a gateway to the review sites to obtain exposure to more diverse available opinion outlets, and for price comparisons. In general, the criteria for utilizing a particular eWOM website coincided for both samples and included: convenience/simplicity, frequent and current updates, trustworthiness and objectivity, as well as relevance to the product.

#### ***4.2 Website trustworthiness and reviewer credibility***

As a major criterion used in selecting review websites and adopting individual reviewer postings, trust and credibility were discussed in depth by respondents in both countries. Surprisingly, we found no differences in the determinants of trust in review websites or credibility of individual reviews between Ukrainian and American responses. Respondents trusted the websites that were: previously used by them or their friends (for purchasing or reading reviews), objective (either due to the high volume and diversity of posted reviews, or independence from sellers), expert or narrowly focused, and/or those with proven reputation (because of their size, traffic volume, or prior use).

The credibility of individual review postings was judged by their style and content. In particular, respondents in both samples indicated that they trusted reviews that were intelligible, readable, with fewer mistakes, well-structured and punctuated. They preferred reviews from the sources that were “well spoken,” educated, expert, competent, knowledgeable and smart. They considered reviews more credible if they were meaningful, logical, reasonably long, containing details, not based on standard templates, “not too flowery,” and presenting both negative and positive sides. Review users in both

countries differentiated between reviewers who were “whiners” from those who had legitimate complaints, and preferred to receive information from those who were similar to them in experience, buying preferences and usage behaviors. They favored unemotional and objective messages, containing details and analysis instead of abstract descriptions, and did not consider negative opinions related to customer service problems or failures due to wrong usage.

#### *4.3 Drivers of online review persuasiveness*

Three major variables appeared to influence the persuasiveness of online reviews in both countries, although to a different extent. Specifically, message valence, order in which reviews were read, and the number of reviews read were mentioned as important determinants of eWOM influence. Greater part of respondents favored products, for which the majority of reviews were positive. According to them, it provided “reassurance,” with some respondents not even willing to consider products for which the majority of reviews were negative. Several Ukrainian respondents gave more specific details on acceptable valence proportions: they stated that they would buy products with 70 ~ 72% of positive reviews. A lower weight of positive reviews would alert them to consider specific product attributes receiving negative opinions in more detail. If 50% of reviews or more are negative, Ukrainian consumers would most likely not buy the product at all.

In terms of the review order, respondents in both countries read reviews either in the order they are posted on the site, or preferred to start with most recent or most helpful reviews. After reading a few reviews in any of the above orders, the majority of respondents would focus on negative reviews to identify specific issues warranting attention. Customers paid more attention to identifying individual problems when they encountered inconsistencies among the reviews. In particular, they attempted to identify whether the negative evaluations pertain to the delivery, product, seller, or price. Based on the priority of the negatively reviewed issues for their purchase, customers used or discarded the reviews in subsequent decision-making.

Finally, the number of reviews sufficient to affect a shopping decision differs between the samples. American respondents on average read up to 20 reviews before making a decision to buy or abandon the product. They cite lack of time, boredom, lack of interest/involvement, and lower cost as factors reducing the number of reviews consulted. However, if the reviews appear inconsistent, they would read more reviews and/or visit other review websites. Ukrainian respondents report visiting several sites and reading on average 40-70 reviews before making a decision, although this number is also contingent on the price of the product.



## **5. Discussion**

The findings of this study reveal that while online shoppers in Ukraine and the US exhibit similar behavioral patterns in using and evaluating the credibility of eWOM, important differences exist between the two samples in (1) the dominant reasons to read others' reviews, (2) the information sought in these reviews, and (3) the number of total, positive, and negative reviews sufficient to influence purchasing decisions. Whereas these differences may be explained by the relatively recent availability of eWOM in Ukraine, it is also possible that such cultural characteristics as high-context communication tradition and higher degree of uncertainty avoidance can affect usage patterns and attitudes to eWOM in Ukraine.

While representatives of both cultures admit that they are more likely to refer to others' opinions online for expensive and personally important items, there are differences in their motivations to utilize eWOM.

Specifically, the social aspect of shopping (confirmation and validation of one's product selection) is only prominent among American respondents, while the need for functional product information is predominant in the Ukrainian responses. This finding is corroborated by the differences in the depth of information sought, with Ukrainians naming many more functional and performance-related evaluation aspects they want to see in online reviews than the American respondents. This greater focus on factual, product performance-related aspect of eWOM use can tentatively be explained by differences in the cultural communication context dominating each country. It is possible that a higher-context culture in Ukraine does not encourage extensive sharing of subjective, non-factual information with strangers in a transparent manner, limiting the available information to technical specifications of the product and its performance. It is also possible that more tribal and closed social structure discourages trust in the subjective opinions of unknown others, resulting in greater reliance on factual information. An alternative explanation may be the greater abundance of product information in sources other than consumer-generated content sites in the US compared to Ukraine due to Ukraine's later entrance in the area of internet shopping. In this case, American consumers would be more interested in the valence of others' experiences with the product, and less -- with the objective specifications that could be easily obtained elsewhere. However, this reasoning alone does not account for the absence of the need for social validation by other online consumers in the Ukrainian data.

Another eWOM use motivation mentioned by the American, but not Ukrainian, respondents was involvement with and personal interest in the product category (e.g., golf clubs). This motivation was not recorded for the Ukrainian sample. A possible

explanation can be lack of specialized in-depth product information in the Ukrainian internet space that has not achieved full scale of content marketing and co-creation due to low internet penetration rates. This is supported by very few mentions of the available category-specific websites offering product information. It is also possible that Ukrainian consumers mostly use online reviews in the initial stages of their shopping process, and use other communication sources (such as strong-tie personal connections) to share their interests and validate their opinions for the product categories of special interest, reflecting the high-context communication tradition.

The finding that Ukrainians utilize eWOM to help with such functional tasks as reducing consideration set and purchase decision-making, while American respondents seek to identify a better fitting option (model) of the product, may also signal that each sample uses eWOM at different stages of online shopping. It is possible that Ukrainian consumers turn to online opinions at the initial stage of their shopping process, when they have less information about the product and find it difficult to obtain such information from the strong-tie connections. American shoppers, on the other hand, may turn to online reviews after they have located the product in several outlets and compared the prices before making a final narrow selection among available models.

While the criteria for the review website trustworthiness (prior use, objectivity, diversity, no commercial affiliation, expertise and reputation) and individual review credibility (readability, competence, two-sidedness, objectivity, focus on detail, and source similarity) were similar for both samples, drivers of review persuasiveness were more specific in the Ukrainian interviews. Respondents in both samples preferred products with the majority of positive reviews. However, for Ukrainians, 70% or more of the available reviews had to be positive to influence a purchase decision. Several respondents indicated that 50% or more of negative reviews would most likely determine their decision not to buy the product. No specific proportions were indicated by the American consumers. Indicating more specific cut-off points for the reviews to influence purchase decisions may reflect lower uncertainty tolerance by the Ukrainian sample, implying a possibility of the underlying uncertainty avoidance cultural trait. This desire to react to the majority opinion was also evident in the greater number of reviews the Ukrainian consumers had to read on average before making a decision (40-70) compared to the American respondents (up to 20).

Both samples reported similar behaviors in selecting the order in which they read the reviews. The respondents were equally likely to start reading the reviews, regardless of their valence (or star ratings), in one of the three patterns: in the order they were posted, newest first, or most helpful first. After getting the initial impression, both American and Ukrainian consumers moved on to the negatively valenced reviews to identify specific

product issues that were considered problematic. After weighing the importance of the problematic issues, they decided to include or exclude the negative reviews in their decision process.

## **6. Conclusion and implications**

This study contributes to the existing literature on consumer attitudes towards eWOM and its usage patterns by identifying a potential impact of culture on the dominant motivations to utilize online product reviews, the type of information sought for in these reviews, and the amount of reviews sufficient for affecting a purchase decision. The qualitative content analysis of in-depth interviews with a broad cross-section of Ukrainian and American online shoppers reveals that online product reviews exert significant influence on shopping processes and buying decisions in both countries. However, Ukrainian consumers utilize eWOM mainly to receive objective product information that includes technical specifications and performance reports, while American respondents rely on others' opinions mainly to validate their pre-existing preferences and to satisfy curiosity about product categories of interest. Additionally, online shoppers in Ukraine need online reviews to reduce their shopping consideration set and assist in decision-making, while American consumers use eWOM to help with finding a better fit (option) of the selected product. Further, a greater number of positive/negative reviews are required for a Ukrainian consumer to make a purchase decision compared to a US online shopper, although the trustworthiness and credibility criteria are very similar for each country.

These findings imply that in cultures, characterized by the dominance of high-context communication tradition, weak-tie eWOM environments (where participants are unknown) encourage sharing of objective information. On the contrary, both objective and subjective information is exchanged in low-context cultures, with subjective information being more clearly articulated and therefore better capable of performing a diagnostic role. It is also possible that consumer online review websites are used in high-context cultures only at the initial stages of the shopping process, with strong-tie connections becoming more influential closer to the purchase decision. This can explain the dominance of information-related motivation for eWOM use, as well as the task of consideration set reduction in the Ukrainian sample, compared to the needs for social validation and more focused option selection in the US sample. The fact that a greater number of positive or negative reviews is necessary for Ukrainian consumers to consider or reject the purchase compared to the US respondents may be a manifestation of greater uncertainty avoidance and lower tolerance for ambiguity that has traditionally characterized societies with extensive social programs and safety nets.

These initial findings imply that companies employing eWOM marketing techniques should utilize different strategies in diverse cultures and at different stages of the online shopping process. For example, companies operating in high-context cultures should encourage consumers to post product reviews with more objective product information, possibly providing a list of decision criteria to help reduce the number of available products and brands, and solicit greater numbers of online opinions. Based on a qualitative analysis of a small sample of cross-cultural consumers, the results of this study should be generalized with caution. Future research should rigorously test the potential explanations of differential eWOM attitudes and behaviors for different cultural traditions offered in this paper.

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