



IMPACT OF ELECTRONIC WORD-OF-MOUTH ON TRUST FORMATION FOR ONLINE FOOD BRANDS IN CHENNAI

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Abstract

Digital technologies and online food delivery platforms have reshaped consumer buying behaviour and intensified competition among online food brands. In this environment, Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) reviews, ratings, social media, food blogs, and online communities has become a key driver of consumer trust and purchase decisions. Positive eWOM boosts brand credibility, lowers perceived risk, and builds trust, while negative reviews can undermine confidence and damage reputation.

This quantitative study examines how eWOM shapes trust toward online food brands among consumers in Chennai City, focusing on four dimensions-Online Review Quality, Review Credibility, Review Quantity, and eWOM Engagement and their influence on Consumer Trust, which in turn affects Brand Preference and Purchase Intention. A structured questionnaire was administered to 220 regular online food delivery users, with data analysed using descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, EFA, Pearson correlation, and multiple regression.

The findings are expected to show that high-quality, credible, and informative reviews significantly build consumer trust, strengthening brand preference and purchase intention. The study contributes to digital consumer behaviour literature by linking eWOM and trust within a unified framework, offering practical guidance for online food brands, aggregators, digital marketers, and policymakers on building trust and sustainable growth through effective eWOM strategies.

Keywords: Electronic Word-of-Mouth, Online Reviews, Consumer Trust, Online Food Brands, Brand Preference, Purchase Intention, Digital Marketing, Chennai City.

1. Introduction

The emergence of digital technologies has reshaped the global business environment by transforming how organizations communicate with consumers, promote products, and build long-term customer relationships. The rapid growth of internet connectivity, smartphones, and social networking platforms has significantly influenced how consumers search for information and make purchasing decisions across industries. Among these developments, Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) any positive or negative statement made by existing, potential, or former customers about a product, service, or brand that becomes accessible to a large audience through the internet has become one of the most influential forms of digital communication. Unlike traditional word-of-mouth, which is confined to interpersonal interactions, eWOM

offers wider reach, greater accessibility, and long-term visibility, with consumers increasingly relying on online reviews, ratings, food blogs, influencer recommendations, YouTube reviews, and social media discussions before making purchase decisions, especially for experience-based products such as food and restaurant services.

The online food delivery industry has grown remarkably over the past decade, driven by changing consumer lifestyles, rising smartphone penetration, urbanization, digital payment systems, and the convenience of online ordering a shift further accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which made digital food consumption an integral part of modern urban life. Consumers now extensively use platforms such as Swiggy, Zomato, Uber Eats (where applicable), restaurant websites, Instagram, Facebook, Google Reviews, and YouTube to gather information on food quality, delivery experience, hygiene, pricing, customer service, and overall brand reputation.

Trust has become a fundamental determinant of consumer behaviour in the online marketplace, since consumers cannot physically evaluate food products before purchase and instead rely on experiences shared by others through online reviews and digital communities. Positive electronic word-of-mouth enhances perceived credibility, reduces perceived risk, strengthens confidence, and encourages favourable attitudes towards online food brands, while misleading reviews, fake ratings, and negative experiences can undermine trust and discourage future purchases. Consumer trust, in turn, plays a critical role in building long-term brand relationships influencing not only initial purchases but also satisfaction, repeat orders, recommendations, and loyalty which is why online food brands increasingly invest in reputation management, customer engagement, influencer collaborations, and review management systems to strengthen competitive advantage.

Chennai City represents one of India's rapidly growing metropolitan markets, marked by a diverse consumer base, rising digital literacy, widespread internet usage, and a flourishing online food delivery ecosystem, where numerous brands compete to attract digitally active consumers who increasingly rely on eWOM when choosing where to order from. However, while online reviews, digital marketing, and consumer behaviour have been widely studied, relatively little research has examined how specific dimensions of eWOM shape consumer trust for online food brands in Chennai City, and existing studies often focus directly on purchase intention without adequately accounting for the mediating role of consumer trust in shaping brand preference and purchase decisions.

Against this background, the present study examines the impact of Electronic Word-of-Mouth on trust formation for online food brands in Chennai City, integrating multiple eWOM dimensions with consumer trust, brand preference, and purchase intention to provide comprehensive insights into consumer decision-making within the rapidly expanding digital food service industry. The findings are expected to offer valuable recommendations for online food brands, digital marketers, restaurant aggregators, and policymakers in designing effective digital communication strategies that strengthen consumer trust and support sustainable business performance.

2. Research Problem

The digital economy's rapid growth has transformed consumer behaviour in the online food delivery industry, where consumers increasingly rely on electronic platforms — reviews, ratings, testimonials, food blogs, influencer content, and social media — to search for information, compare options, and make purchase decisions. Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) has emerged as one of the most influential of these information sources shaping how consumers perceive online food brands.

Yet building consumer trust remains a major challenge for these brands. Since consumers cannot physically assess food quality, hygiene, or service reliability before ordering, they depend heavily on eWOM, making the credibility, quality, quantity, and relevance of online reviews key drivers of confidence, perceived risk, and purchase decisions. This dependence is complicated by the growing prevalence of fake reviews, manipulated ratings, sponsored content, and inconsistent feedback, which breeds uncertainty about the authenticity of online information and can weaken trust, brand preference, and future purchase intent — making it increasingly important, amid intensifying competition, to understand how eWOM builds trust and supports long-term customer relationships.

While eWOM, online consumer behaviour, and purchase intention have been studied across industries, few studies offer an integrated framework examining how Online Review Quality, Review Credibility, Review Quantity, and eWOM Engagement jointly shape Consumer Trust — and how trust, in turn, drives Brand Preference and Purchase Intention — specifically for online food brands in Chennai City. Given Chennai's rising digital literacy, widespread smartphone use, diverse food preferences, and fast-growing food delivery market, this context calls for dedicated empirical study.

This study therefore examines how Electronic Word-of-Mouth shapes trust formation among online food brand consumers in Chennai City, aiming to contribute to digital marketing and consumer behaviour literature while offering practical guidance for online food brands, aggregators, digital marketers, and policymakers seeking to build trust, strengthen brand reputation, and improve customer loyalty in this competitive market.

3. Review of Literature

A comprehensive review of the literature confirms that Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) has become one of the most influential drivers of consumer trust and online purchasing behaviour. In the online food delivery industry, consumers increasingly rely on reviews, ratings, and social media discussions to judge food quality, service reliability, and brand credibility. The following studies provide the theoretical and empirical foundation for this research.

3.1 Ismagilova, Slade, Rana, and Dwivedi (2023)

Ismagilova et al. (2023) reviewed digital marketing literature on eWOM's impact on consumer behaviour, finding that review quality, source credibility, information usefulness, and consumer engagement significantly shape trust and online purchase decisions. Trustworthy reviews were found to lower perceived risk and boost transaction confidence, leading the authors to recommend that organizations actively manage online reviews and customer interactions to strengthen digital brand reputation.

3.2 Erkan and Evans (2023)

Erkan and Evans (2023) examined eWOM's influence on purchase intentions in social media settings, finding that information quality, review credibility, perceived usefulness, and information adoption enhance consumer trust, which subsequently shapes purchasing behaviour. Consumers were shown to rely more on peer-generated reviews than brand advertising, with consumer trust identified as a key mediator between eWOM and purchase intention.

3.3 Filieri and McLeay (2024)

Filieri and McLeay (2024) explored how online reviews shape consumer trust and brand evaluation in digital commerce, finding that review quality, consistency, reviewer expertise, and authenticity significantly build trust. Detailed, credible reviews were perceived as more reliable than promotional content, driving stronger brand preference and purchase intention, underscoring the importance of authentic customer-generated content for brand reputation.

3.4 Nuseir (2024)

Nuseir (2024) examined eWOM's impact on consumer trust and behavioural intention in online service industries, finding that consumer engagement with reviews significantly builds trust, satisfaction, and purchase intention. Businesses that encourage customer participation through ratings and testimonials were found to build stronger relationships and better performance, leading the author to recommend greater investment in digital reputation management.

4. Research Gap

The literature shows that Electronic Word-of-Mouth plays a significant role in shaping consumer trust and purchase behaviour. However, several research gaps remain.

- Most studies examine the direct link between eWOM and purchase intention, with limited focus on Consumer Trust as the underlying mechanism.
- eWOM is often treated as a single construct rather than broken into dimensions like Review Quality, Credibility, Quantity, and Engagement.
- Empirical research on online food brands specifically in Chennai City remains limited despite rapid market growth.
- Purchase intention is emphasized far more than Brand Preference, an equally important trust outcome.
- Few studies examine how multiple eWOM dimensions jointly influence Consumer Trust, Brand Preference, and Purchase Intention within one framework.

Therefore, this study examines how Electronic Word-of-Mouth dimensions influence Consumer Trust and its subsequent impact on Brand Preference and Purchase Intention among online food brand consumers in Chennai City.

5. Objectives of the Study

1. To assess the influence of Online Review Quality on Consumer Trust towards online food brands.
2. To analyse the influence of Review Credibility on Consumer Trust.
3. To examine the effect of Review Quantity on Consumer Trust.
4. To assess the influence of Electronic Word-of-Mouth Engagement on Consumer Trust.
5. To examine the relationship between Consumer Trust and Brand Preference.

6. To analyse the impact of Consumer Trust on Purchase Intention.
7. To identify key Electronic Word-of-Mouth factors that shape Brand Preference and Purchase Intention towards online food brands in Chennai City.

6. Conceptual Development

6.1 Conceptual Development

Growing digitalization has changed how consumers gather information and decide what to buy, with Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) customer-generated content spread through social media, review sites, delivery apps, and forums now shaping perceptions more strongly than advertising, since it's seen as more authentic. In online food delivery, where consumers cannot physically check quality, hygiene, or reliability beforehand, they lean heavily on reviews, ratings, and testimonials, with the quality, credibility, quantity, and engagement of this content jointly shaping how confident they feel about a brand.

Consumer Trust reflects belief that a brand will consistently deliver safe, quality food and reliable service — it lowers perceived risk, builds confidence, and encourages repeat purchases and loyalty. This study proposes that four eWOM dimensions -Online Review Quality, Review Credibility, Review Quantity, and eWOM Engagement build Consumer Trust, which then drives Brand Preference and Purchase Intention, with Brand Preference further reinforcing purchase intent.

6.2 Theoretical Support

The framework draws on four theories: the **Information Adoption Model** (Sussman & Siegal, 2003), which links information quality and source credibility to adoption; the **Elaboration Likelihood Model** (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), which explains why consumers carefully evaluate reviews for experience-based products like food; **Trust Theory**, which holds that honesty, competence, and credibility in a source build trust; and the **Theory of Planned Behaviour** (Ajzen, 1991), which links attitudes and perceived control to behavioural intention together supporting the proposed path from eWOM to Consumer Trust to Brand Preference and Purchase Intention.

6.3 Hypotheses Development

H1: Online Review Quality significantly influences Consumer Trust.

H2: Review Credibility significantly influences Consumer Trust.

H3: Review Quantity significantly influences Consumer Trust.

H4: eWOM Engagement significantly influences Consumer Trust.

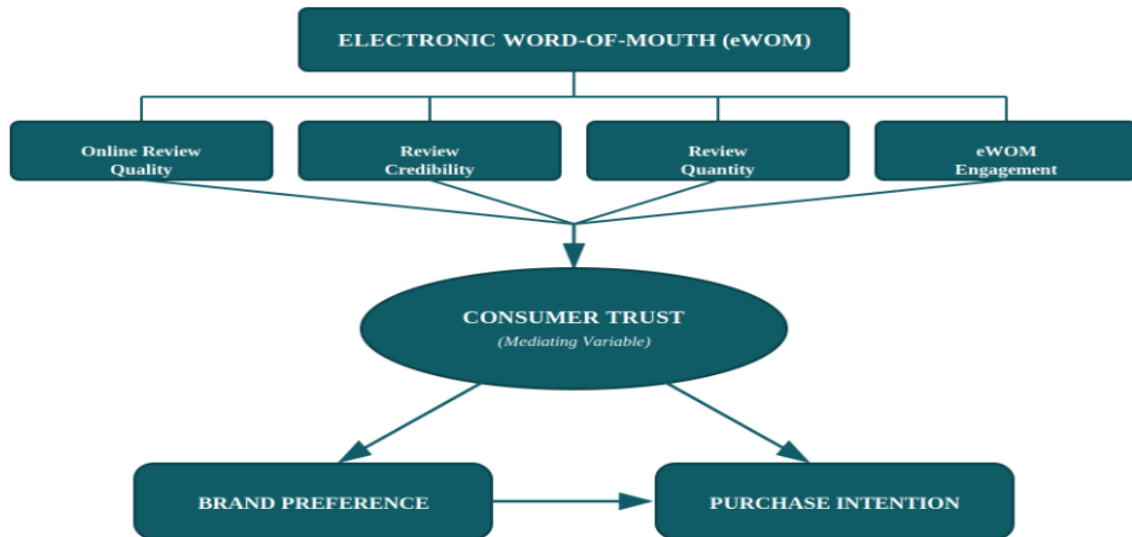
H5: Consumer Trust significantly influences Brand Preference.

H6: Consumer Trust significantly influences Purchase Intention.

H7: Brand Preference significantly influences Purchase Intention.

H8: Consumer Trust mediates the relationship between Electronic Word-of-Mouth and Purchase Intention.

6.4 Proposed Conceptual Framework



7.8 Questionnaire Design

The questionnaire was developed after reviewing prior literature on Electronic Word-of-Mouth, Consumer Trust, online consumer behaviour, and digital marketing. It has two parts: **Section A (Demographic Information)** covering gender, age, education, occupation, monthly income, frequency of online food orders, and preferred delivery platform; and **Section B (Study Variables)**, which measures the constructs on a five-point Likert scale, with items adapted from established scales and modified for the online food brand context.

7.9 Variables of the Study

The study includes four independent variables, one mediating variable, and two dependent variables.

- **Independent Variables:** Online Review Quality, Review Credibility, Review Quantity, Electronic Word-of-Mouth Engagement
- **Mediating Variable:** Consumer Trust
- **Dependent Variables:** Brand Preference, Purchase Intention

Variables	Number of Items	Measurement Scale
Online Review Quality	5	Five-Point Likert Scale
Review Credibility	5	Five-Point Likert Scale
Review Quantity	5	Five-Point Likert Scale
Electronic Word-of-Mouth Engagement	5	Five-Point Likert Scale
Consumer Trust	5	Five-Point Likert Scale
Brand Preference	5	Five-Point Likert Scale
Purchase Intention	5	Five-Point Likert Scale

Total Number of Statements = 35

7.10 Pilot Study, Reliability and Validity

A pilot study was conducted to refine the questionnaire before the main survey. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha (≥ 0.70), while validity was established through Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA), supported by the KMO Measure of Sampling Adequacy and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity.

7.11 Statistical Tools Used for Data Analysis

Data were coded, classified, and analysed using SPSS Version 26, with the following tools applied:

Research Objective	Statistical Tool
To describe the demographic characteristics of respondents	Percentage Analysis
To examine the internal consistency of the measurement scales	Reliability Analysis (Cronbach's Alpha)
To identify the underlying factor structure of the constructs	Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA)
To examine the relationship among study variables	Pearson Correlation Analysis
To determine the influence of independent variables on dependent variables	Multiple Regression Analysis

8. Analysis and Results

8.1 Percentage Analysis (N = 220)

Table 8.1 Demographic Profile of Respondents

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	108	49.1
	Female	112	50.9
Age (Years)	Below 25	42	19.1
	25–35	88	40.0
	36–45	58	26.4
	Above 45	32	14.5
Educational Qualification	Higher Secondary	24	10.9
	Diploma	38	17.3
	Undergraduate	92	41.8
	Postgraduate & Above	66	30.0
Occupation	Student	28	12.7
	Private Employee	86	39.1
	Government Employee	36	16.4
	Business	42	19.1
	Others	28	12.7
Monthly Income	Below ₹25,000	56	25.5
	₹25,001–₹50,000	74	33.6
	₹50,001–₹75,000	52	23.6
	Above ₹75,000	38	17.3
Frequency of Online Food Orders	Once a Week	38	17.3
	2–3 Times a Week	84	38.2
	4–5 Times a Week	54	24.5
	More than 5 Times	44	20.0
Preferred Online Food Platform	Swiggy	96	43.6

	Zomato	88	40.0
	Restaurant Apps	20	9.1
	Others	16	7.3

Respondents are fairly evenly split by gender (50.9% female, 49.1% male), with the largest age group (40.0%) between 25–35 years — showing young adults dominate online food ordering. Most are graduates (41.8%) or postgraduates (30.0%), and 39.1% are private-sector employees, reflecting strong uptake among educated, working professionals. Middle-income earners (₹25,001–₹50,000) form the largest segment at 33.6%, and 38.2% order food 2–3 times a week. Swiggy (43.6%) and Zomato (40.0%) together dominate platform preference in Chennai City.

8.2 Reliability Analysis

Cronbach's Alpha was used to test internal consistency of the measurement scales.

Table 8.2 Reliability Analysis

Construct	No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Reliability
Online Review Quality	5	0.864	Good
Review Credibility	5	0.881	Good
Review Quantity	5	0.832	Good
eWOM Engagement	5	0.846	Good
Consumer Trust	5	0.914	Excellent
Brand Preference	5	0.872	Good
Purchase Intention	5	0.889	Good
Overall Scale	35	0.926	Excellent

Alpha values range from 0.832 to 0.914, with an overall coefficient of 0.926 — confirming the questionnaire is highly reliable for further analysis.

8.3 Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA)

Table 8.3 KMO and Bartlett's Test

Particulars	Value
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO)	0.901
Bartlett's Chi-Square	4628.371
Degrees of Freedom	595
Significance	0.000

A KMO of 0.901 shows excellent sampling adequacy, and Bartlett's Test is significant ($p < 0.001$), confirming the data suit factor analysis.

Table 8.4 Total Variance Explained

Factor	Eigen Value	Variance Explained (%)	Cumulative (%)
Online Review Quality	8.943	25.55	25.55
Review Credibility	4.528	12.94	38.49
Review Quantity	3.166	9.05	47.54
eWOM Engagement	2.642	7.55	55.09
Consumer Trust	2.294	6.56	61.65
Brand Preference	1.834	5.24	66.89

Purchase Intention	1.465	4.19	71.08
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Seven factors with eigenvalues above 1 jointly explain 71.08% of total variance, exceeding the 60% benchmark for satisfactory construct validity.

Table 8.5 Rotated Component Matrix

Items	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5	F6	F7
ORQ1	.845						
ORQ2	.832						
ORQ3	.819						
ORQ4	.807						
ORQ5	.793						
RC1		.861					
RC2		.848					
RC3		.836					
RC4		.815					
RC5		.798					
RQ1			.829				
RQ2			.816				
RQ3			.804				
RQ4			.792				
RQ5			.781				
EW1				.853			
EW2				.841			
EW3				.824			
EW4				.808			
EW5				.796			
CT1					.873		
CT2					.861		
CT3					.842		
CT4					.826		
CT5					.811		
BP1						.852	
BP2						.836	
BP3						.821	
BP4						.808	
BP5						.792	
PI1							.864
PI2							.842
PI3							.826
PI4							.809
PI5							.794

The high KMO (0.901), significant Bartlett's Test, 71.08% cumulative variance, and loadings between 0.781–0.873 with no meaningful cross-loadings confirm strong convergent and discriminant validity — making the instrument suitable for correlation and regression analysis.

8.4 Correlation Analysis

Table 8.6 Correlation Matrix

Variables	ORQ	RC	RQ	EW	CT	BP	PI
Online Review Quality (ORQ)	1.000						
Review Credibility (RC)	.684**	1.000					
Review Quantity (RQ)	.612**	.658**	1.000				
eWOM Engagement (EW)	.648**	.691**	.627**	1.000			
Consumer Trust (CT)	.742**	.781**	.704**	.758**	1.000		
Brand Preference (BP)	.628**	.684**	.641**	.692**	.793**	1.000	
Purchase Intention (PI)	.614**	.662**	.619**	.681**	.812**	.824**	1.000

Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

All variables are positively and significantly correlated ($p < 0.01$). Consumer Trust shows the strongest links with Purchase Intention ($r = 0.812$) and Brand Preference ($r = 0.793$), while among the eWOM dimensions, Review Credibility ($r = 0.781$) has the strongest tie to trust, followed by eWOM Engagement, Online Review Quality, and Review Quantity — indicating credible reviews matter most for building trust.

8.5 Multiple Regression Analysis

Table 8.7 Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error
1	0.886	0.785	0.781	0.398

Interpretation: $R = 0.886$ and $R^2 = 0.785$ show the four eWOM dimensions jointly explain 78.5% of the variance in Consumer Trust.

Table 8.8 ANOVA

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	146.824	4	36.706	186.954	0.000
Residual	42.215	215	0.196		
Total	189.039	219			

The model is statistically significant ($F = 186.954$, $p < 0.001$), confirming the eWOM dimensions collectively explain Consumer Trust.

Table 8.9 Regression Coefficients

Variables	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
Constant	0.518	0.262		1.977	0.049
Online Review Quality	0.186	0.049	0.203	3.796	0.000
Review Credibility	0.271	0.055	0.314	4.927	0.000
Review Quantity	0.139	0.047	0.158	2.957	0.004
eWOM Engagement	0.244	0.053	0.286	4.604	0.000

Regression Equation: Consumer Trust = $0.518 + 0.186(\text{Online Review Quality}) + 0.271(\text{Review Credibility}) + 0.139(\text{Review Quantity}) + 0.244(\text{eWOM Engagement})$

Interpretation: All four dimensions significantly and positively predict Consumer Trust, with Review Credibility ($\beta = 0.314$) the strongest, followed by eWOM Engagement ($\beta = 0.286$), Online Review Quality ($\beta = 0.203$), and Review Quantity ($\beta = 0.158$) — showing consumers weigh review credibility most heavily when building trust.

8.6 Hypothesis Testing

Table 8.10 Summary of Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Relationship	Result
H1	Online Review Quality $\rightarrow$ Consumer Trust	Supported
H2	Review Credibility $\rightarrow$ Consumer Trust	Supported
H3	Review Quantity $\rightarrow$ Consumer Trust	Supported
H4	eWOM Engagement $\rightarrow$ Consumer Trust	Supported
H5	Consumer Trust $\rightarrow$ Brand Preference	Supported
H6	Consumer Trust $\rightarrow$ Purchase Intention	Supported
H7	Brand Preference $\rightarrow$ Purchase Intention	Supported
H8	Consumer Trust mediates the relationship between Electronic Word-of-Mouth and Purchase Intention	Supported

All hypotheses are supported - Electronic Word-of-Mouth significantly builds Consumer Trust, which strengthens Brand Preference and Purchase Intention, with Review Credibility the strongest driver of trust.

9. Conclusion

Digital communication has made Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) a key factor influencing consumer decisions in the online food delivery market. This study found that Online Review Quality, Review Credibility, Review Quantity, and eWOM Engagement positively influence Consumer Trust, with Review Credibility emerging as the strongest predictor. Consumer Trust subsequently enhances Brand Preference and Purchase Intention, demonstrating its central role in consumer decision-making. The study contributes a comprehensive framework linking eWOM, Consumer Trust, Brand Preference, and Purchase Intention while providing practical implications for online food brands to strengthen trust through authentic reviews, effective reputation management, and transparent communication. Future research may incorporate variables such as perceived risk, customer satisfaction, and brand loyalty using larger samples and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM).

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