

# Electronic word of mouth by potential customers: A prepurchase behavioural perspective

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## ABSTRACT

Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) is crucial in customers' decision-making process and purchase decisions. Although the eWOM phenomenon has been widely explored, limited studies have investigated eWOM as a volitional prepurchase behaviour by potential customers. Therefore, this study seeks to investigate eWOM intention towards alternative service providers (OTT TVs) as a volitional prepurchase behaviour by potential customers. The study was cross-sectional and it used a quantitative descriptive research design. A self-administered online survey using a non-probability sampling by means of convenience sampling was implemented to gather the data from users of South African cable tv services in Gauteng. The usable sample of the study had 438 respondents. The proposed conceptual model of the study was tested by conducting a structural equation modelling using the statistical package SPSS with AMOS version 27.0. Among the study's key findings, the study shows that service quality negatively impacts alternative attractiveness.

Furthermore, the research findings indicate that alternative attractiveness is a strong predictor of attitudes towards switching. The empirical findings also reveal that switching intention significantly predicts eWOM intention. Several contributions were ultimately drawn from the current study and recommendations were provided based on the empirical findings of the study. The study bridges the gap in literature by uncovering that eWOM can also be perceived as a prepurchase behaviour rather than only as a post-purchase behaviour as it is traditionally perceived.



## INTRODUCTION

Due to technological advancement, eWOM has evolved to be a prominent tool to spread and acquire information online about products (Jain *et al.*, 2022:1). EWOM has risen into prominence as it is perceived to be more accurate and trustworthy as compared to company-generated content (Moradi & Zihagh, 2022:4). While eWOM is developing to be an influential source of information among customers, the effectiveness of traditional channels of communication utilised by marketers is decreasing. These different trajectories have prompted marketers' interest in harnessing the power of eWOM (Todri *et al.*, 2021:1). According to Ruvio *et al.* (2020:1116), questions have been raised about the future for marketers and advertisers. Nouredine and ZeinEddin (2018) assert that the future of marketing to a large extent will be ad-free, with communication through WOM dominating in business. As a result, there is a rise in the number of firms intensively investing social media marketing efforts in attempt to create more eWOM from customers. Some of the marketing efforts to create more customer eWOM include attracting customers to brand posts, establishing eWOM sharing platforms for customers and sharing of brand-related posts by recommenders (Sardar *et al.*, 2021:2). For instance, to encourage customers to share travel stories on social media, in 2014, Ctrip, one of the largest travel agencies in China, started a campaign #Say Go! Let's Go! (Yan *et al.*, 2022:1). In some instances, customers are intrinsically motivated to generate eWOM by sharing information about products and their service experiences via review sites and social media. These customers do this out of their own volition and in so doing, they create organic eWOM (Ai *et al.*, 2022:1).

Toth *et al.* (2022:229) posit that eWOM can cause customer-driven social influence that effectively drives customers' intentions and behaviours. Nilashi *et al.* (2022:2) reported that 62% of online customers in the USA read eWOM before purchasing a specific service. Furthermore, a substantial number, approximately 88% of internet users acquire information about products before making a purchase. A significant number, 61.7%, of users on social media consider customers' reviews when they are making purchase-related decisions (Kunja *et al.*, 2022:4).

Although extant literature has extensively researched the antecedents of eWOM (Cheung & Lee, 2012; Kong *et al.*, 2021 & Yan *et al.*, 2022;), and the outcomes of eWOM (Abubakar & Ilkan, 2016; Habib *et al.*, 2021; Matute *et al.*, 2016; Srivastava & Sivaramakrishnan, 2021), majority of the research has predominantly focussed on eWOM as a post-purchase behaviour by existing customers. EWOM has been traditionally perceived as a prepurchase behaviour when it is sought (i.e. eWOM seeking), and as a postpurchase behaviour when shared (i.e. eWOM) (Lim *et al.*, 2022:582). However, little attention has been paid to investigate eWOM as a volitional prepurchase behaviour and, more specifically, by potential customers. Hennig-Thurau *et al.* (2004:39) defined eWOM as “*any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet*”.

Against this background, the current study seeks to address the knowledge gap identified in extant literature by investigating the antecedents of eWOM by potential customers. More precisely, the study investigates eWOM towards over-the-top TVs (OTT TVs) by customers of cable TV services who may be considering to switch to OTT TVs. This paper explores eWOM by potential customers as a prepurchase behaviour. Accordingly, this paper aims to answer the subsequent research questions: (1) do potential customers voluntarily engage in eWOM about the alternative service provider? (2) can eWOM be perceived and regarded as a prepurchase behaviour? and (3) what are the factors that contribute to customers having eWOM intentions about an alternative service provider? Theoretically, the current study contributes to the literature by uncovering volitional eWOM as a prepurchase behaviour by potential customers. Secondly, the study makes contribution to the literature by uncovering the antecedents for eWOM by potential customers for alternative service providers. Service providers can use the information on eWOM as indicators for customer perceptions about their services. Alternative service providers can use the findings in the current study to identify how they can influence potential customers to spread information about their services.

The remainder of this paper is organised as follows. The following section presents the underlying theory of the study, the proposed model and a review of the literature informing the posited hypotheses. Thereafter, the research methodology used for the study is discussed and the study's empirical findings are presented. This is ensued by a discussion of the findings and a presentation of the theoretical and managerial implications of the findings. Lastly, limitations encountered in the study and future research recommendations are provided before concluding.

## UNDERLYING THEORY

The current study uses the stimuli-organism-response (S-O-R) theory to explain eWOM by potential customers. S-O-R states that a range of environmental factors can function as stimulus (S) that affect individuals' internal states represented by organisms (O) that drive his/her behavioural responses (R) (Mansor *et al.*, 2022:875). Based on the S-O-R framework, an individual's internal processing has a critical role in their response to external environmental stimuli (Hsiao & Tang, 2021:3). The stimulus are therefore the triggers that cause arousal in an individual. The organism that mediates the relationship that exists between stimulus and response (Djakfar *et al.*, 2021:2) relates to an individual's affective and cognitive state that occurs when they interact with the stimuli. The cognition state relates to the formation of perceptive images caused by the environmental stimulus, whereas the emotion state relates to a person's feelings that are prompted by external environments, for instance pleasure, arousal or dominance (Li *et al.*, 2021:3). Lastly, the response refers to the reaction an individual has to stimuli and organism (Tang *et al.*, 2019:218). More specifically, response is the ultimate consequences or acts that encompass psychological responses such as attitudes and behavioural intentions (Han *et al.*, 2022:3). Customers build emotional, psychological and behavioural (approach or avoidance) responses to their surroundings based on their internal state reactions (Rayburn *et al.*, 2021:2). Response can be classified as approach behavioural response or avoidance behavioural response. The approach behavioural response relates to a positive response while avoidance behavioural response relates to a negative behavioural response (Sun *et al.*, 2021:486).

## PROPOSED MODEL AND HYPOTHESIS FORMULATION

### SERVICE QUALITY

The quality of service delivered is pivotal in the success of any service industry (Gupta, 2018:36). When a customer transacts with a business, he/she determines if the quality provided will make them continue or stop transacting with the business (Al-Bashayreh *et al.*, 2022:8). Service quality is defined as the gap that exists between customer expectations of the service providers' performance and their assessment of the service provided (Inegbedion, 2018:325). According to Wang *et al.* (2019:180), it is vital to accurately measure service quality as it helps the service provider to correctly identify and address their customer needs. When assessing service quality, customers compare their perception of what they receive in the service encounter with their expectations of that encounter (Zeithaml *et al.*, 2018:177). Customer expectations therefore influences service quality. If a service provider can deliver services that meet customer desires, the service can be perceived to be satisfactory and when the service provider delivers beyond what the customer desires, it exceeds their expectations (Gupta, 2018:36). The expectations from customers of the service delivered are both influenced by controllable and company uncontrollable factors. Controllable factors relate to explicit and implicit service promises (Zeithaml *et al.*, 2018:419). Uncontrollable factors relate to enduring and transient service intensifiers, individual needs, perceptions of alternative services, self-perception of participation in service, word of mouth communication, previous experience, situational factors and anticipated service (Zhu *et al.*, 2018:1023).

### ATTITUDES TOWARDS SWITCHING AND SERVICE QUALITY

Attitudes refer to the positive or negative feelings a person holds towards a behaviour (Phan *et al.*, 2019:119). Attitudes comprise motivational qualities that likely encourage customers to incline towards or away from a certain behaviour (D'Souza, 2022:3). Individuals who hold a positive attitude towards a specific attitude have a high propensity of executing the behaviour in question (Ahmmadi *et al.*, 2021:2). Attitude is derived from behavioural beliefs and outcome evaluation. More specifically, an individual's behavioural belief relates to their personal belief regarding the effects of participating in a certain behaviour whereas outcome evaluation is their favourable or unfavourable judgement of the results of that behaviour (Vo *et al.*, 2022:6). Attitudes are salient in the customer's mind and can therefore be easily recalled (Hegner *et al.*, 2017:288). They are formed through an internal association and an assessment process and play a direct role in the development of positive or negative intentions (Farah, 2017:149). According to Anubha and Shome (2021:645), attitude can be considered as a readiness state controlled by experience

and it influences an individual's behavioural responses for an object. Extant research establish that attitudes can be influenced by service quality (Wu & Chan, 2011). Empirical findings in the study by Ayo *et al.* (2016) within the banking sector indicate e-service quality influences customers' attitudes towards the use of e-banking. In addition, Diallo and Seck (2018) found that service quality influences customers' attitudes towards store brands in emerging countries. To contribute more to the body of literature, the current study argues that a high level of service quality has a negative impact on customers' attitudes towards switching and therefore hypothesised:

**H<sub>1</sub>: Service quality from cable TV service providers negatively influences customers' attitudes towards switching to OTT TVs.**

### **ALTERNATIVE ATTRACTIVENESS, SERVICE QUALITY AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS SWITCHING**

Alternative attractiveness has an important role in the customer decision-making process when deciding whether or not to continue using a service (Mannan *et al.*, 2017:148). Xue *et al.* (2020:164) assert that if the relative benefits of using an alternative outweigh the sacrifice, customers are more probable to choose the available alternative. If the competitors' service offering is perceived to be more attractive than the current service provider, it may negatively impact the customers' level of commitment (Tiamiyu *et al.*, 2020:182). However, if customers perceive few feasible alternatives are available which are unattractive to them, it minimises their likelihood of terminating their current relationship with a service provider, therefore, leading to lower switching intention (Wu *et al.*, 2017:163).

Liao *et al.* (2017:654) assert that when better alternative service providers become available, customers will compare them with current service providers and if they believe the alternative will satisfy their needs better, it will be chosen for the next purchase. A competitor's attractiveness such as better service may influence a customer to end their existing relationship with the current service provider (Saidin *et al.*, 2018:180). Based on the foregoing discussion, it can be argued that when there are alternatives available, service quality from the current service provider can be a stimulus to perceived alternative attractiveness. In this study it is hypothesised that:

**H<sub>2</sub>: Service quality from cable TV service providers negatively influences customers perceived alternative attractiveness of OTT TVs.**

Alternative attractiveness influences the customer decision-making process when deciding whether or not to continue using a service (Mannan *et al.*, 2017:148). However, the existing studies have largely focussed on the behavioural responses of an individual to alternative attractiveness (Chan *et al.*, 2022; Ghazali *et al.*, 2016; Lee & Kim, 2022) overlooking the impact of alternative attractiveness on an individual's attitudes. As noted by Djakfar *et al.* (2021:2) as well as Jung *et al.* (2021:2), an individual can affectively or cognitively respond to a stimulus, therefore, highlighting the attitudinal response of an individual. Accordingly, it is hypothesised that:

**H<sub>3</sub>: Perceived alternative attractiveness of OTT TVs positively influences customers' attitudes towards switching to the OTT TVs.**

### **SWITCHING INTENTION, ALTERNATIVE ATTRACTIVENESS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS SWITCHING**

Switching intentions represent unfavourable repercussions for a service provider, as it refers to the affirmed propensity of shifting from the current service provider to an alternative service provider (Wu *et al.*, 2017:166). According to Su *et al.* (2016:112), customers switch brands and products due to various reasons. For instance, switching may signify an approach tendency (e.g. pursuing after new and better product alternatives) or it may be

caused by avoidance motivation (e.g. to switch away from unsatisfied option from the incumbent). Irrespective of the causes for customers' switching intention, the undisputable truth is that service providers cannot survive except when measures have been taken to combat any reasons for switching (Sohaib, 2022:1). It is crucial for businesses to effectively reduce the intentions of customers to switch to other service providers (Chih *et al.*, 2012:1306). When customers switch to an alternative service provider, there is a less likelihood for them to switch back to their previous purchase and this typical switching behaviour significantly impacts the business negatively (Burhanudin & Ferguson, 2018:100).

The availability of alternative service providers with more benefits than the current service provider increases customer switching intention (Nikbin *et al.*, 2022:498). The research of Liao *et al.* (2021) on customer brand switching among smartphones established that there is a positive relationship that exists between alternative attractiveness and switching intention. In addition, a study among Malaysian prepaid mobile phone services, alternative attractiveness had a positive and significant relationship with the intention to switch (Anis & Mohd Noor, 2021). Based on that, the following hypothesis is formulated:

**H<sub>4</sub>: Perceived alternative attractiveness of OTT TVs positively influenced customers' switching intentions towards the OTT TVs.**

According to Kim *et al.* (2019:17), an attitude can be used to explicate the predictive function through which individuals establish the intention to participate in a particular behaviour. A study by Palau-Saumell *et al.* (2021) among Spanish customers found that customers' attitudes towards locally produced foods had a positive effect on their switching intentions towards locally produced foods. This highlights the predictive function of attitudes on an individual's intention. Drawing on these findings, it is hypothesised that:

**H<sub>5</sub>: Customers' attitude towards switching to OTT TVs positively influences switching intentions towards the OTT TVs.**

### **EWOM, ATTITUDES TOWARDS SWITCHING AND SWITCHING INTENTION**

Online media is inherently interactive. In an ecommerce or social commerce context, the interactive characteristics of online media enables customers to engage with other customers on the internet through online product reviews, sharing of product-related information or commenting on other customers' product reviews. This form of marketing information exchange is called eWOM (Um, 2019:506). EWOM research postulates that customers generally share product related or service information for altruistic reasons (Labsomboonsiri *et al.*, 2022:3). Altruistic reasons pertain to customers' desire to assist other customers with their purchasing decisions. For instance, sharing positive word of mouth to allow similar positive experience and sharing negative word of mouth to discourage other customers from making poor purchases (Reimer *et al.*, 2016:324). EWOM is advantageous both to customers and businesses. Customers engage in eWOM at all three phases across the purchase process, which include the prepurchase, during the purchase and postpurchase, to gain specific information, share some ideas and provide feedback.

On the other hand, businesses use eWOM to interact with customers, building online presence, acquire customer reviews, impact intentions and generate revenue (Akbari *et al.*, 2022:663). EWOM can generate customer-driven social influence that highly influences other customers' purchasing intentions and behaviours (Toth *et al.*, 2022:226). As businesses and marketers recognise the relevance of eWOM, they are also increasingly making resources available to use for encouraging customers to share their consumption experiences online (Yan *et al.*, 2022:1). Customers actively generate and engage in eWOM in the postpurchase stage to share about positive and negative consumption and purchase related experiences (Lim *et al.*, 2022:586).

Previous studies show that eWOM intention can be influenced by customers' attitudes. For instance, empirical



findings from the study conducted by Lee and An (2018) show that attitudes towards an online lecture website have a positive impact on eWOM. Although prior research indicate that a significant relationship exists between alternative attractiveness and customer behavioural intentions, limited studies have investigated eWOM intention as a behavioural intention, which is influenced by alternative attractiveness. Moreover, while existing studies highlight that eWOM can also influence customers' switching intention, there is a dearth of studies showing how switching intention can influence customers' eWOM intention. Among the limited studies on the influence of switching intentions on eWOM, Nhan (2021) found that switching intention has a negative impact on eWOM intention among Taiwanese ecommerce customers. On the contrary, this study argues that customers who have switching intentions will have eWOM about the alternative service provider they intend to switch towards. Following the above discussion, three hypotheses are drawn:

- H<sub>6</sub>: Customers' attitude towards switching to OTT TVs positively influences their eWOM intentions towards the OTT TVs.**
- H<sub>7</sub>: Perceived alternative attractiveness of OTT TVs positively influences customers' eWOM intentions towards the OTT TVs.**
- H<sub>8</sub>: Customers' switching intentions towards OTT TVs positively influences their eWOM intentions towards the OTT TVs.**

#### **THE MEDIATING ROLE OF ATTITUDE TOWARDS SWITCHING**

Attitude is widely accepted to be a significant antecedent of behaviour for example loyalty (Albaity & Rahman, 2021), adoption behaviour (Abou-Shouk *et al.*, 2021) as well as switching intention (Kim *et al.*, 2019:17). Attitude has also been found to play a mediating role between various dependent variables and independent variables. For example, the study by Zheng *et al.* (2021) found that attitude has a mediating role on the relationship between perceived environmental responsibility and green buying behaviour. Hanafiah and Hamdan (2021) found that consumption attitude mediates the relationship between Muslim traveller's subjective norm and their behavioural intention. Considering the mediating role of attitudes, the following hypotheses are formulated:

- H<sub>9</sub>: Attitudes towards switching mediates the relationship between service quality and eWOM intentions.**
- H<sub>10</sub>: Attitudes towards switching mediates the relationship between service quality and switching intentions.**

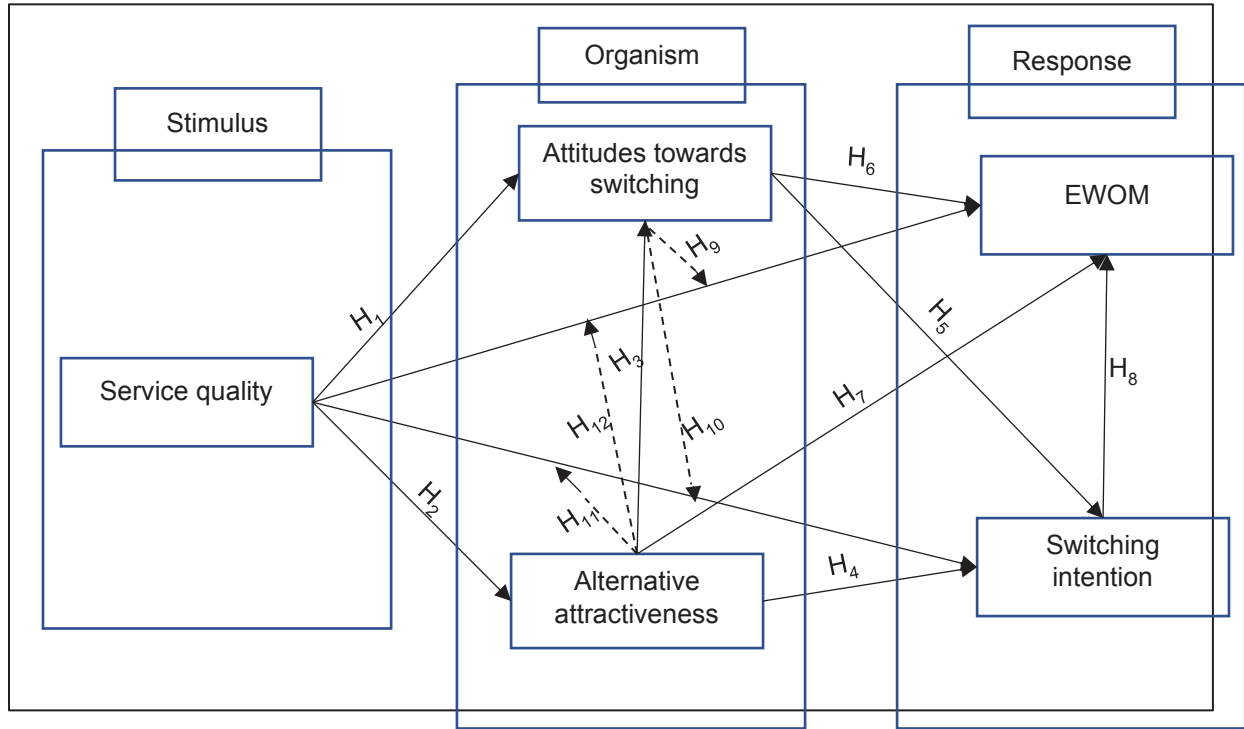
#### **THE MEDIATING ROLE OF ALTERNATIVE ATTRACTIVENESS**

Alternative attractiveness is cited in literature as a motivating factor for switching to an alternative service provider or as a factor that fosters increased loyalty to the current service provider (Picón *et al.*, 2014:747). Therefore, continuous repurchasing from a brand does not necessarily signify customers' loyalty to the respective brand. The repurchase behaviour may be due to the unavailability of substitutes or the similitude of available alternatives (Nikbin *et al.*, 2022:499). Prior studies have established the mediating role of alternative attractiveness. For instance, in the Malaysian mobile internet service providers sector, Chuah *et al.* (2017) found that alternative attractiveness mediates the relationship between satisfaction and loyalty. Accordingly, this study also assumes the mediating role of alternative attractiveness on the relationship between different independent factors and dependent factors. Based on the foregoing discussion, the following hypothesis is drawn:

$H_{11}$ : Alternative attractiveness mediates the relationship between service quality and eWOM intentions.

$H_{12}$ : Alternative attractiveness mediates the relationship between service quality and switching intentions.

**CONCEPTUAL MODEL**



**FIGURE 1: PROPOSED CONCEPTUAL MODEL**

**RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

**MEASUREMENT INSTRUMENT**

The constructs used in the current study were measured by means of scales adapted from literature. A 7-point Likert scale where 1 represented strongly disagree and 7 represented strongly agree was used to measure construct items. Specifically, alternative attractiveness was adapted from Jones *et al.* (2000) and Mannan *et al.* (2017), attitudes towards switching was adapted from Siegfried, (2014), eWOM was adapted from Ahmadi, (2019) and Luong *et al.*, (2021), service quality was adapted from Chang *et al.* (2021) and Quoquab *et al.*, (2016) while switching intentions was adapted from Chih *et al.* (2012) and Quoquab *et al.* (2018).

**SAMPLING AND DATA COLLECTION**

The study was quantitative and descriptive in nature using a cross-sectional design. To acquire responses from the targeted population, an online survey was conducted using a self-administered questionnaire which comprised screening questions to make sure only the required respondents took part of the sample. The targeted population included subscribers of cable TV services in South Africa who were aged between 18 and 65. Considering the unavailability of a representative and up-to-date sampling frame of the target population, non-probability convenience sampling method was used to reach the respondents and participation in the survey was voluntary. A total of 438 usable responses were received from the data collection.

Among the 438 respondents the majority were female (59.1%). In terms of the age, most of the respondents (81.5%) were between the age of 18 and 35. The sample was dominated with respondents in the income bracket between R3,501–R10,000. Concerning the highest level of education attained, the distribution was 31.1% for high school, diploma/certificate (30.6%) and bachelor's degree (27.9%). Most of the respondents also indicated that they use DStv as their cable TV service provider (97.0%).

## ANALYSIS OF DATA AND RESULTS INTERPRETATION

### RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY

An assessment of the scales reliability of the study was done using the Cronbach's alpha coefficient and composite reliability. Based on the Cronbach's alpha results and as shown in Table 1 and the composite reliability results as shown in Table 2, respectively, all the constructs of the study were reliable as they were above the recommended cut-off value of 0.7 (Hair *et al.*, 2017:168).

**TABLE 1: CRONBACH'S ALPHA, STANDARDISED FACTOR LOADINGS, MEAN AND STANDARD DEVIATION (SD)**

| Variable                    | Cronbach's alpha | Items | Standardised factor loadings | S.E. | p-value* | Mean | SD    |
|-----------------------------|------------------|-------|------------------------------|------|----------|------|-------|
| Alternative attractiveness  | 0.942            | AA1   | 0.917                        | 0.89 | 0.001*   | 4.80 | 1.865 |
|                             |                  | AA2   | 0.951                        | 0.87 | 0.001*   | 4.94 | 1.824 |
|                             |                  | AA3   | 0.894                        | 0.85 | 0.001*   | 5.04 | 1.779 |
|                             |                  | AA4   | 0.826                        | 0.82 | 0.001*   | 5.12 | 1.709 |
| Attitudes towards switching | 0.970            | ATS1  | 0.921                        | 0.89 | 0.001*   | 5.11 | 1.868 |
|                             |                  | ATS2  | 0.958                        | 0.86 | 0.001*   | 5.09 | 1.809 |
|                             |                  | ATS3  | 0.959                        | 0.87 | 0.001*   | 5.07 | 1.826 |
|                             |                  | ATS4  | 0.936                        | 0.87 | 0.001*   | 5.11 | 1.817 |
| eWOM                        | 0.892            | EW1   | 0.744                        | 0.93 | 0.001*   | 4.72 | 1.945 |
|                             |                  | EW2   | 0.824                        | 0.80 | 0.001*   | 5.09 | 1.680 |
|                             |                  | EW3   | 0.855                        | 0.80 | 0.001*   | 5.30 | 1.671 |
|                             |                  | EW4   | 0.876                        | 0.84 | 0.001*   | 4.96 | 1.755 |
| Service quality             | 0.937            | SQ5   | 0.752                        | 0.67 | 0.001*   | 5.82 | 1.321 |
|                             |                  | SQ9   | 0.869                        | 0.67 | 0.001*   | 5.77 | 1.396 |
|                             |                  | SQ10  | 0.894                        | 0.67 | 0.001*   | 5.66 | 1.409 |
|                             |                  | SQ11  | 0.871                        | 0.71 | 0.001*   | 5.62 | 1.477 |
|                             |                  | SQ12  | 0.897                        | 0.66 | 0.001*   | 5.76 | 1.386 |
|                             |                  | SQ13  | 0.709                        | 0.73 | 0.001*   | 5.39 | 1.528 |
|                             |                  | SQ14  | 0.819                        | 0.62 | 0.001*   | 5.71 | 1.343 |
| Switching intention         | 0.919            | SI2   | 0.903                        | 0.90 | 0.001*   | 4.64 | 1.878 |
|                             |                  | SI3   | 0.824                        | 0.84 | 0.001*   | 5.05 | 1.756 |
|                             |                  | SI4   | 0.855                        | 0.90 | 0.001*   | 4.80 | 1.876 |
|                             |                  | SI5   | 0.859                        | 0.85 | 0.001*   | 4.93 | 1.773 |



### MEASUREMENT MODEL, CONVERGENT VALIDITY, AND DISCRIMINANT VALIDITY

Prior to testing the research hypotheses, the validity and reliability of the measurement model were confirmed by performing a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) whereby model fit, convergent validity and discriminant validity were assessed. The measurement model indicated a good fit as evident from the indices (chi-square = 530.766, df = 211,  $\chi^2/df=2.402$ , p-value < 0.005, CFI = 0.969, TLI = 0.965). The RMSEA = 0.057, which is below the required cut-off value of < 0.08 (Hair *et al.*, 2014:630).

Convergent validity was done by calculating the average variance extracted (AVE). As indicated in Table 1, the factor loadings of the items in the model are between 0.709 and 0.959, which is above the acceptable cut-off level of 0.7 (Malhotra, 2014), which implies the items significantly load into their respective constructs. Furthermore, the AVE of the latent variables all included in the model as evident in Table 2 have a value above 0.5, thereby confirming that all the observable items converge well in the research constructs.

In order assess discriminant validity, the square root of AVE with the correlation of each pair of constructs were compared. The AVE value for all the constructs as indicated in Table 2, which range from 0.826 to 0.944 were all higher than the off-diagonal elements in the corresponding rows and columns. Furthermore, the AVE values were all above the minimum acceptable threshold value of 0.5 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), therefore, confirming discriminant validity among constructs measured in the study.

**TABLE 2: DISCRIMINANT VALIDITY**

|                            | CR    | AVE   | MSV   | MaxR(H) | eWOM         | Attitudes towards switching | Alternative attractiveness | Switching intention | Service quality |
|----------------------------|-------|-------|-------|---------|--------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------|-----------------|
| eWOM                       | 0.895 | 0.682 | 0.580 | 0.904   | <b>0.826</b> |                             |                            |                     |                 |
| Attitude towards switching | 0.970 | 0.891 | 0.585 | 0.972   | 0.679***     | <b>0.944</b>                |                            |                     |                 |
| Alternative attractiveness | 0.943 | 0.806 | 0.467 | 0.954   | 0.543***     | 0.683***                    | <b>0.898</b>               |                     |                 |
| Switching intention        | 0.919 | 0.740 | 0.585 | 0.924   | 0.761***     | 0.765***                    | 0.587***                   | <b>0.860</b>        |                 |
| Service quality            | 0.940 | 0.694 | 0.059 | 0.949   | 0.243***     | 0.083†                      | 0.146**                    | 0.028               | <b>0.833</b>    |

### STRUCTURAL EQUATION MODELLING

The structural equation modelling permitted the researcher to test the hypothesised relationships between the research constructs alternative attractiveness, attitudes towards switching, eWOM, service quality and switching intention. Accordingly, a path analysis was performed using IBM SPSS AMOS 26.0. The fit indices for the model were satisfactory indicating a good fit of the model to the data. The structural model obtained a  $X^2/df$  value of 2.532, which is below the maximum acceptable value (of 3.00) recommended by Wheaton *et al.* (1977:99). Moreover, the CFI-value of 0.966 and the TLI-value of 0.961 were above the acceptable cut-off point (> 0.90), thereby indicating a good model fit (Malhotra *et al.*, 2017:807). Lastly, the RMSEA value yielded was 0.059, which is below the maximum allowed threshold of < 0.08 (Hair *et al.*, 2014:630).

Bootstrapping was performed to determine the significance levels for the factor loadings and path coefficients of the structural model.

**TABLE 3: SUMMARY OF RESULTS OF THE HYPOTHESISED RELATIONSHIPS**

| Hypothesis   | Estimate | S.E. | p-value* | Results   |
|--|----------|------|----------|-----------|
| H1: Service quality → attitudes towards switching            | .147     | 0.62 | 0.655    | Rejected  |
| H2: Service quality → alternative attractiveness             | -.026    | 0.81 | 0.003    | Supported |
| H3: Alternative attractiveness → attitudes towards switching | .686     | 0.42 | 0.000    | Supported |
| H4: Alternative attractiveness → switching intention         | .122     | 0.49 | 0.014    | Supported |
| H5: Attitudes towards switching → switching intention        | .682     | 0.51 | 0.000    | Supported |
| H6: Alternative attractiveness → eWOM intention              | .083     | 0.43 | 0.104    | Rejected  |
| H7: Attitudes towards switching → eWOM intention             | .682     | 0.55 | 0.005    | Supported |
| H8: Switching intention → eWOM intention                     | .0572    | 0.57 | 0.000    | Supported |

Based on the structural equation modelling (SEM) tests done and as shown on Table 3, the results show that hypotheses H<sub>2</sub>, H<sub>3</sub>, H<sub>4</sub>, H<sub>5</sub>, H<sub>7</sub> and H<sub>8</sub> are supported. However, hypothesis H<sub>1</sub> and H<sub>6</sub> are rejected.

### MEDIATION ANALYSIS RESULTS

This study proposed four mediating relationships. Mediation occurs when an additional third variable known as a mediator variable is considered to intervene in the relationship between two other related constructs (Hair *et al.*, 2017:232). In order to confirm the significance of the mediator variables, a bootstrap test was conducted and the results (refer to Table 4) reveal insignificant mediation effects of attitude as well as for alternative attractiveness on the relationship between service quality and eWOM. Accordingly, H<sub>9</sub>, H<sub>10</sub> and H<sub>11</sub> are not accepted. The mediation effect of alternative attractiveness on the relationship between service quality and switching intentions was found to be significant based on the path analysis results (0.023;  $p < 0.05$ ; CI [0.007, 0.069]) and therefore H<sub>12</sub> is accepted.

**TABLE 4: INDIRECT EFFECTS OF THE HYPOTHESISED RELATIONSHIPS**

| Hypothesis   | Unstandardised Estimate | Lower  | Upper | p-value* | Standardised estimate |
|--|-------------------------|--------|-------|----------|-----------------------|
| H9: Service quality → attitudes towards switching → eWOM                 | 0.004                   | -0,026 | 0,012 | 0,484    | -0,003                |
| H10: Service quality → attitudes towards switching → switching intention | -0,019                  | -0,099 | 0,059 | 0,657    | -0,012                |
| H11: Service quality → alternative attractiveness → eWOM                 | 0.017                   | -0.001 | 0.053 | 0.110    | 0.012                 |
| H12: Service quality → alternative attractiveness → switching intention  | 0.029                   | 0.007  | 0.069 | 0.023    | 0.018                 |

### RESULTS DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

The aim of the current study was to investigate the antecedents of eWOM intention as a volitional prepurchase behaviour by potential customers. Although it is well-established in extant literature that attitude towards switching and alternative attractiveness are antecedents of behaviour (Chan *et al.*, 2022; Kim *et al.*, 2019:17), the focus of this study was the mediating role of these variables on the relationship between service quality, eWOM and switching intention. In doing so, the study tested a model showing service quality as the antecedent that directly and indirectly

influences eWOM and switching intentions with the indirect effect posited to be through attitude towards switching and perceived alternative attractiveness. Consequently, a conceptual model was developed and further tested using empirical data that was gathered from respondents between the ages of 18 and 65 who were subscribed to cable TV services.

Extant research indicates the predictive role of service quality on customers' attitudes (Ayo *et al.*, 2016). However, the empirical findings of this study reveal that there is no significant relationship between service quality and customers' attitudes towards switching. Furthermore, as hypothesised, the empirical findings of the study reveal a negative relationship between service quality and alternative attractiveness. This finding implies that high service quality of the current service provider can help the service provider to retain its current customers irrespective of the attractiveness of the alternative service provider and as literature suggests that service quality can be regarded as a crucial determinant for competitiveness (Koc & Kaya, 2021:214). Contrary with findings in past studies including Ghazali *et al.* (2016) as well as Kim *et al.* (2017), which mainly focused customers' behavioural intentions overlooking the impact of alternative attractiveness on attitudes, the study found a strong relationship exists between alternative attractiveness and customers' attitudes towards switching. This finding implies that when customers perceive the alternative service provider to be attractive, it will increase their attitudes towards switching to that alternative service provider.

Moreover, whereas the study of Nhan (2021) indicates that customers with switching intentions have negative eWOM towards their current service provider, the findings of this study indicate that customers with switching intentions towards alternative service providers will have eWOM intentions towards the alternative service provider they intend to switch to. This highlights volitional eWOM as a prepurchase behaviour by potential customers. From the various mediation effect tests of this study, only the organism factor of alternative attractiveness mediates the relationship between the stimulus (i.e. service quality) and response (i.e. switching intention). This result means an increase in service quality can result in a decrease in alternative attractiveness, which ultimately reduces customers' switching intentions to alternative service providers.

### **THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS**

This study has implications on theory. Firstly, it contributes to knowledge on the applicability of the S-O-R theory in explaining switching intentions and eWOM. The model fitted to the data accounted for 59.4% of the explained variance for switching intention and 64.7% for eWOM. This evidently indicates that the conceptualised model in the current study empirically provides an appropriate model for the current context. The current study makes effort to provide an empirical explanation of the mediation effect of the organism factor on the relationship between the stimulus and the response. The mediation test confirmed that alternative attractiveness indirectly influences the relationship between service quality and switching intention.

Building on previous literature, the study is to the author's knowledge one of the first to investigate eWOM as a volitional prepurchase behaviour by potential customers. Among the few studies on eWOM as a prepurchase behaviour, one study by Lim *et al.* (2022) focussed on goal-orientated eWOM. Accordingly, this study contributes to literature specifically in the cable TV market and OTT TV market by providing an understanding of eWOM as a volitional prepurchase behaviour by potential customers. As a result, the study sheds light beyond eWOM's conventional association as a post-purchase behaviour by existing customers to a service provider as in the studies of Albayrak and Ceylan (2021) as well as Habib *et al.* (2021).

This study also contributes to theory by shedding light on the predictive function of alternative attractiveness on customer' attitudes towards switching. As previously indicated and evident from literature, most of the existing studies have focussed on the behavioural responses to alternative attractiveness (Chan *et al.*, 2022; Ghazali *et al.*, 2016) without considering how alternative attractiveness can also influence an individual's attitudes, more precisely their attitudes towards switching. The results of the study confirm and show a strong positive relationship between alternative attractiveness and customers' attitudes towards switching meaning when an alternative service provider is perceived to be attractive, it positively influences customers' attitudes towards switching.

Furthermore, the study provides a novel effort to uncover behavioural intentions which an individual may have when they have switching intentions to a certain alternative service provider. Whereas extensive literature such as Liao *et al.* (2021) as well as Palau-Saumell *et al.* (2021) has been done to explore the antecedents of switching intention, less efforts have been given to observe the outcomes of switching intention and more precisely, behaviour towards the service provider an individual intends to switch towards. In fact, majority of the studies including Alsaggaf and Althonayan (2018) have investigated eWOM as a precursor of switching intention. The current study, therefore, contributes to literature by confirming the significant role of switching intention as an antecedent of eWOM. Therefore, when an individual has switching intention towards an alternative service provider, they also develop positive eWOM intentions towards the alternative service provider they intend to switch towards.

### **MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS**

The empirical findings of the current study provide vital insights to managers. The results reveal that service quality negatively influences alternative attractiveness. It is, therefore, recommendable for cable TV service providers to optimise and use service quality as a competitive factor to retain customers against the attractive OTT TVs. To optimise service quality, cable TV service providers should offer prompt services and be responsive to customer needs. In addition, cable TV service providers should ensure that their employees are competent, skillful and efficient by equipping them with the necessary skills for service delivery through employee training programmes.

The empirical findings of this current study also reveal the predictive function of alternative attractiveness on customers' attitudes towards switching as well as their switching intentions. Accordingly, for cable TV service providers to make their services appealing as alternative services from OTT TVs, it should conduct market research on the service needs and desires of customers. In so doing, cable TV service providers could be able to develop customer-orientated services that are appealing to existing and potential customers. Furthermore, cable TV service providers should also do market research on the service offerings from OTT TVs to gain insights on the competitive and attractive service offerings. From the insights gathered, cable TVs can extend to offer the same or more superior services in the market therefore helping to retain their customers and minimise switching.

Based on the results analysis of the study, both attitudes towards switching and switching intention are strong predictors of eWOM as a prepurchase behaviour. When customers have eWOM about an alternative service provider, this can generate more social influence to other customers to switch to the alternative service provider, hence, making the current service provider unattractive to potential customers. This research, therefore, suggests that cable TV service providers should attempt to minimise the attitudes towards switching by identifying the benefits desired by customers through customer interaction and using customer feedback to co-create valuable services.

Lastly, since customers with switching intentions tend to have eWOM intentions towards alternative service providers they intend to switch towards, cable TV service providers should strive to retain and maintain their customers. This could be achieved through valuable and attractive services to the customers. In so doing, it also encourages customers to have positive eWOM towards the cable TV service providers.

### **CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

The aim of the current study was to investigate eWOM as a volitional prepurchase behaviour by potential customers from other existing service providers. Existing research on eWOM as a volitional prepurchase behaviour is limited and rather mainly focusses on eWOM as a postpurchase behaviour by existing customers. Using the S-O-R framework, the study incorporated service quality as a stimulus, attitudes towards switching and alternative attractiveness as organism (mediators) and the response factors included switching intention and eWOM intention. The results of the study revealed that the service quality of cable TV service providers has a negative relationship with alternative attractiveness of OTT TVs.

The empirical findings of the study further reveal that alternative attractiveness is a strong predictor of customers' attitudes towards switching and attitudes towards switching are also a strong predictor of switching intention. However, although the result between alternative attractiveness and switching intention is significant, it is weak compared

to the relationship between alternative attractiveness and switching intention through attitudes towards switching. Therefore, this suggests that attitude towards switching is a potential mediator for the relationship between alternative attractiveness and switching intention. The current study also reveals that alternative attractiveness is a mediator for the relationship between service quality and switching intention. Lastly, the study confirms switching intention is a strong predictor of eWOM intention towards OTT TVs.

However, the current study poses some limitations. The sample mainly captured responses from respondents from the lower income bracket. These responses could, therefore, be not reflective of the responses of customers of a higher income bracket. Furthermore, the empirical findings of the current study are only based on the data collected from South Africa. Therefore, future studies should investigate the relevance of the current findings in different countries as customers may differ based on country of origin. Since the current study investigated behavioural intentions, future studies could also extend the study by investigating actual behaviour.

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