

**Gordon Institute  
of Business Science**  
University of Pretoria

**Word of mouth habits: The effect of past behaviour on  
positive electronic word of mouth**

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## ABSTRACT

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The ubiquity of the internet and online social platforms has led to social media addiction where people spend significant amounts of time spend creating and consuming content online. Therefore there was need to investigate whether these habitual behaviours of online content creation relate to communications about products and services such as word of mouth. The purpose of this study was to examine whether past word of mouth behaviour can predict future behaviour and whether it can become habitual.

An online survey was administered to online users for them to report on how frequently they posted their restaurant experiences and their perceptions of how much they do this automatically. By grouping the respondents into three frequency groups (low, medium, high), the results showed that past word of mouth behaviour predicted future behaviour but only through attitudes towards word of mouth. The results also demonstrated that indeed, positive electronic word of mouth can become habitual, particularly due to people expressing their self-concept as they publicly display their product consumptions.

This study concludes by providing recommendations for managers and directs future research on how consumer habits can be leveraged in word of mouth communications.

## KEYWORDS

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Word of mouth, past behaviour, habit, theory of planned behaviour

## DECLARATION

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I declare that this research project is my own work. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Business Administration at the Gordon Institute of Business Science, University of Pretoria. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other University. I further declare that I have obtained the necessary authorisation and consent to carry out this research.

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6 November 2017



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

---

<b>CHAPTER ONE : INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 INTRODUCTION.....	1
1.2 RESEARCH PROBLEM .....	1
1.3 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES.....	3
1.4 RESEARCH MOTIVATION .....	4
1.5 RESEARCH SCOPE.....	5
1.6 CONCLUSION.....	5
<b>CHAPTER TWO : LITERATURE REVIEW .....</b>	<b>6</b>
2.1 INTRODUCTION.....	6
2.2 WORD OF MOUTH.....	6
2.2.1 What is Word of Mouth? .....	6
2.2.2 Electronic Word of Mouth?.....	7
2.2.3 Why Positive Word of Mouth?.....	7
2.2.4 Impact of Word of Mouth? .....	8
2.2.5 Why consumers engage in Word of Mouth? .....	9
2.2.6 Incidence of Word of Mouth.....	10
2.2.7 Conclusion to Word of Mouth literature .....	11
2.3 CONSCIOUS INTENTIONS AND BEHAVIOUR .....	11
2.3.1 Introduction .....	11
2.3.2 Theory of Planned Behaviour.....	12
2.3.2.1 Attitudes towards the behaviour .....	12
2.3.2.2 Subjective Norms .....	13
2.3.2.3 Perceived Behavioural Control.....	14
2.3.3 Predictive validity of the Theory of Planned Behaviour .....	15
2.3.4 Past behaviour influence on future behaviour .....	16
2.3.4 Conclusion on Theory of Planned Behaviour .....	17
2.4 HABITS AND AUTOMATICITY .....	17
2.4.1 Introduction .....	17
2.4.2 Properties of Habit.....	18
2.4.2.1 Frequency of past behaviour .....	18
2.4.2.2 Automaticity.....	19
2.4.2.3 Context Stability.....	20
2.4.2.4 Self- Identity.....	21
2.4.2 Interaction of Intentions and Habits .....	21
2.5 RESIDUAL EFFECT OF PAST ON FUTURE BEHAVIOUR.....	21
2.5 CONCLUSION.....	22
<b>CHAPTER THREE : RESEARCH HYPOTHESES .....</b>	<b>24</b>
3.1 INTRODUCTION.....	24
3.2 RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS 1 .....	24
3.3 RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS 2 .....	25
3.4 RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS 3 .....	25
3.5 RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS 4 .....	26
<b>CHAPTER FOUR : RESEARCH METHODOLOGY .....</b>	<b>27</b>
4.1 INTRODUCTION.....	27
4.2 RESEARCH DESIGN .....	27

4.3 RESEARCH SCOPE.....	27
4.4 POPULATION .....	28
4.5 UNIT OF ANALYSIS .....	28
4.6 SAMPLING .....	29
4.6.1 Sampling Technique.....	29
4.6.2 Sample Size .....	29
4.8 DATA COLLECTION .....	30
4.8.1 Research Instrument.....	30
4.8.2 Measurement Instrument Design.....	30
4.8.3 Error Checking and Control Logic.....	32
4.9 PRE-TESTING OF THE SURVEY .....	32
4.10 RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY .....	33
4.11 DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION .....	33
4.11.1 Normal Distribution and Outliers.....	34
4.11.2 One-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) .....	34
4.11.3 Multiple Linear Regression.....	35
4.11.2 Pearson’s Partial Correlation.....	35
4.11 RESEARCH LIMITATIONS .....	35
<b>CHAPTER FIVE : RESULTS.....</b>	<b>37</b>
5.1 INTRODUCTION.....	37
5.2 DATA PREPARATION .....	37
5.3 DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF THE RESPONDENTS.....	38
5.3.1 Sample Description .....	38
5.3.2 Demographic Questions.....	39
5.4 DATA RELIABILITY .....	40
5.5 DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF THE MEASUREMENT SCALES .....	41
5.6 RESULTS FOR HYPOTHESIS ONE .....	43
5.7 RESULTS FOR HYPOTHESIS TWO .....	46
5.8 RESULTS FOR HYPOTHESIS THREE .....	49
5.9 RESULTS FOR HYPOTHESIS FOUR.....	52
<b>CHAPTER SIX : RESULTS.....</b>	<b>55</b>
6.1 INTRODUCTION.....	55
6.2 DISCUSSION FROM THE TESTING OF HYPOTHESIS 1 .....	55
6.3 DISCUSSION FROM THE TESTING OF HYPOTHESIS 2 .....	57
6.4 DISCUSSION FROM THE TESTING OF HYPOTHESIS 3 .....	58
6.5 DISCUSSION FROM THE TESTING OF HYPOTHESIS 4 .....	59
<b>CHAPTER SEVEN : CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>61</b>
7.1 INTRODUCTION.....	61
7.2 RESEARCH BACKGROUND .....	61
7.3 FINDINGS.....	62
7.4 ACADEMIC CONTRIBUTION .....	62
7.5 MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS .....	63
7.6 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH .....	63
7.8 CONCLUDING STATEMENT.....	64
<b>REFERENCES .....</b>	<b>65</b>
<b>APPENDICES .....</b>	<b>74</b>

## LIST OF FIGURES

---

FIGURE 1 : MEANS FOR THE TPB MEASUREMENT SCALES.....	41
FIGURE 2: MEAN FOR HABIT MEASUREMENT SCALES .....	42
FIGURE 3: REGRESSION PLOT FOR INTENTIONS AND HABIT .....	43

## LIST OF TABLES

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TABLE 1: THE RESEARCH CONSTRUCTS AND SOURCES OR MEASUREMENT SCALE .....	32
TABLE 2: PAST BEHAVIOUR GROUPING AND NOMINAL CODING .....	37
TABLE 3: QUALIFYING QUESTIONS RESPONSE SUMMARY .....	38
TABLE 5 : INTERNAL CONSISTENCY OF MEASUREMENT SCALES .....	40
TABLE 6: ANOVA OUTPUT FOR HYPOTHESIS 1 .....	44
TABLE 7 : HOMOGENEITY OF VARIANCES TEST OUTPUT FOR HYPOTHESIS 1 .....	45
TABLE 8 : POST HOC ANALYSIS OUTPUT FOR HYPOTHESIS 1 .....	45
TABLE 9: MODEL SUMMARY FOR MLR EXCLUDING PAST BEHAVIOUR .....	46
TABLE 10 : ANOVA OUTPUT FROM REGRESSION EXCLUDING PAST BEHAVIOUR.....	47
TABLE 11 : COEFFICIENTS OUTPUT FROM REGRESSION EXCLUDING PAST BEHAVIOUR.....	47
TABLE 12: MODEL SUMMARY FOR REGRESSION INCLUDING PAST BEHAVIOUR .....	48
TABLE 13 : ANOVA OUTPUT FROM REGRESSION INCLUDING PAST BEHAVIOUR.....	48
TABLE 14 : COEFFICIENTS OUTPUT FROM REGRESSION INCLUDING PAST BEHAVIOUR.....	48
TABLE 15 : HOMOGENEITY OF VARIANCES TEST OUTPUT FOR HYPOTHESIS 3.....	50
TABLE 16 : ANOVA OUTPUT FOR HYPOTHESIS 3 .....	50
TABLE 17 : POST HOC ANALYSIS OUTPUT FOR HYPOTHESIS 3 .....	51
TABLE 18: PEARSON'S CORRELATION OUTPUT FOR HABIT - PAST BEHAVIOUR .....	53
TABLE 19: PEARSON'S CORRELATION OUTPUT FOR INTENTION - PAST BEHAVIOUR .....	54

## LIST OF APPENDICES

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APPENDIX A: BLANK QUESTIONNAIRE .....	74
APPENDIX B: PEARSON'S CORRELATION OUTPUT FOR INTENTION - PAST BEHAVIOUR .....	83
APPENDIX C: ETHICS CLEARANCE ACCEPTANCE LETTER.....	85



# CHAPTER ONE : INTRODUCTION

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## 1.1 Introduction

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There are almost three billion active social media users all over the world, equating to a global penetration of 37 percent. That is definitely a huge number which has a variety of implications for society. Social networking accounts for 28 percent of all the time spent on the internet. On average, people spend over two hours a day on social networking sites and eighteen percent of these social media users cannot go more than a few hours without checking what is happening online. (Kemp, 2017).

The debate on social media addiction and its effects is growing, however, it is clear from behavioural research that addiction only constitutes compulsive behaviour that has negative effects (Griffiths, 2000). The use of social media includes both positive and negative effects and these have mostly been studied within the health sciences, particularly around mental health (Young, 1998), as well as the impact of such effects on employee performance in the workplace (Leftheriotis & Giannakos, 2014).

Of particular interest to this study though, is how businesses can maximize on the ubiquity of the internet and the online presence of potential and existing customers. People spend time creating or consuming content online, some of which relates to products and services offered by companies. A study by Bickart & Schindler (2001) showed that 92 percent of customers trust recommendations from people they know directly compared to traditional marketing methods. Therefore in addition to revolutionizing the way companies communicate with their customers, social media has also created unique ways for consumers to share both good and bad impressions of companies with their friends and followers. With the large amount of time spent online, it would be interesting to know whether some of the habitual behaviour of social media users relates to such word of mouth content.

## 1.2 Research Problem

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As online communities increase in number and membership, marketers have come to recognize the growing importance of word of mouth. Because consumers become overwhelmed with product choices, they tune out to the constant and ever-increasing bombardment of traditional marketing and prefer to make decisions independent of what companies tell them about their products. However, word of mouth cuts through the noise and is more effective in consumer purchase decisions (Bickart & Schindler, 2001). Its

influence is higher when consumers are buying products for the first time, or when the products are relatively expensive (Mitchell & Boustani, 1994). In this instance, consumers are likely to seek more information and opinions about the products and therefore deliberate much longer resulting in more time being spent online.

Word of mouth is not a new concept but the emergence of the internet, and more recently social media, has increased the need for brands to harness its influence. It has been found to be directly correlated with market share through its effects on brand perceptions and purchase rates (Uncles, East & Lomax, 2010) and therefore warrants effective management. It is therefore imperative to have some way of measuring word of mouth effectiveness. The number of recommendations for a product or service plays a role in word of mouth significance (You, Vadakkepatt & Joshi, 2015) and the impact of each recommendation depends on the relationship between the sender and the receiver (Brown & Reingen, 1987) and the richness and strength of the message (Sweeney, Soutar, & Mazzarol, 2008). In other words, the ability of any recommendation or dissuasion to change behaviour reflects what is said, how many times it has been said, by whom, and where.

It can be argued that current literature on Word of mouth exploring these impact dimensions (Chen & Berger, 2016; Berger & Iyengar, 2013) combined with older studies seeking to understand motives for engaging in word of mouth communications (Sundaram, Mitra & Webster 1998) has the underlying motive of increasing the incidence of positive word of mouth and decreasing that of negative word of mouth. Since products with more reviews are likely to be perceived as being better than products with less reviews, word of mouth volume increases the strength of the effect on the receiver (Khare, Labrecque & Asare, 2011). According to Uncles et al. (2010), the volume of word of mouth is directly correlated with market share while the impact of the message has no relationship with market share. Thus, the more word of mouth content that people create online, the greater is the effect of such communication on consumers and firms. These findings reflect the significance of word of mouth volume over and above other word of mouth factors for both firms and consumers.

However, very little research placed emphasis on word of mouth volume at the individual level. That is, the frequency of word of mouth communication by an individual consumer. In contrast to the impact on the receiver and the firm described above, this view has the sender as the focal point. Since consumers spend time online either creating or consuming content, most studies on word of mouth volume have focused on the consumption element and have consistently ignored or purposefully excluded the



creation aspect. The concept of word of mouth frequency by the sender has been studied in consumer opinion platforms where experience counts, and frequency of past behaviour results in opinion leaders, regarded as experts or market mavens (Richins & Root-Shaffer, 1988; Clark & Goldsmith, 2005). However in other WOM contexts, there is little knowledge of how past behaviour can influence future behaviour.

Behavioural research has identified that past behaviour influences future behaviour in two ways particularly for health behaviours. Firstly, when behaviours are repeated, the attitudes and perceived control of the behaviour become stronger in the same way that any skill is learnt and therefore intentions to perform the behaviour are stabilized and become more accessible (Ouellete & Wood, 1998; Ajzen, 2002). This is the reasoned action perspective which implies that more experience with a behaviour should be associated with stronger relationships between intention and behaviour. Secondly, the habituation perspective postulates that the frequency of performance of a behaviour can also lead to the formation of habit in which behaviour is automatic and controlled by contextual cues (Ouellette & Wood, 1998; Sheeran, Godin, Conner & Germain, 2017). Hence it can be implied that when a consumer frequently spends time online posting word of mouth messages, either their intentions to do so in the future become stronger, or the person develops a habit of posting.

In the digital economy, companies are becoming more data-driven and are using big data analytics to understand their customer needs. It goes without saying that the creation of such product and service related data by the consumers fuels these strategies. Therefore with all the focus on WOM marketing and the significance of its volume, it is imperative to understand how the creators of such content evolve as they become more experienced with the behaviour and whether such behaviour can become habitual.

### 1.3 Research Objectives

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The underlying purpose of this study was to understand how word of mouth volume impacts the sender. This was achieved by investigating whether the frequent posting of word of mouth content online will eventually lead to habit formation or whether it only strengthens intentions to perform the behaviour in the future. This also provided an opportunity to determine whether the word of mouth context is suitable for habit formation. The following research questions will therefore be answered:

1. How does past behaviour of a word of mouth communicator influence future word of mouth behaviour?

## 2. Can word of mouth on online platforms be classified as a habit?

### 1.4 Research Motivation

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The importance of this study is reflected in that it has both business and academic implications. With word of mouth influencing consumers in their purchase decisions, marketers are concerned with the volume and valence of these communications in which they seek to stimulate or incentivise consumers to share positive word of mouth and also to decrease negative word of mouth (Wirtz & Chew, 2002). This study provides additional leverage to marketers in understanding the drivers of WOM behaviour. They will be able to identify which customers are more likely to engage in WOM communications based on past behaviour. Current technologies such as artificial intelligence and data analytics can be used to isolate such consumers.

Habits are accompanied by an enduring cognitive disposition that makes the person less likely to be attentive to new information and courses of action (Verplanken & Aarts, 1999). This means that when consumer behaviour has habituated, the power of marketers in changing such behaviour is attenuated. However, if the habituated behaviours are favourable for the companies, lower marketing budgets are required for these customers since they are more likely to block out information from competitors.

The theoretical contributions of this study are fourfold. Firstly, this study contributes to word of mouth literature on volume by addressing the gap on how it affects the sender in addition to the influence on the receiver and the firm that has already been addressed.

Secondly, research on habits is important for consumer behaviour because a lot of people's behaviours are repeated in everyday life and are usually performed in the same context. Building on Wood and Neal's (2009) argument that purchase and consumption are repetitive behaviours, this research investigates whether post-purchase behaviours too, such as word of mouth, are repetitious. Furthermore, this study contributes to the research on habits outside the domain of health behaviours such as exercise and smoking.

Thirdly, this study provides an opportunity to test the applicability of the theory of planned behaviour in the word of mouth context. This theory has been mostly researched in a wide variety of health behaviours such as eating junk food, condom use, drinking milk, drug use, physical exercise, seatbelt use and student's class attendance (Ouellette & Wood, 1998). Therefore in this study, the applicability of the theory is extended to the behaviour of people in their role as a consumer.

Lastly, this study builds on the literature investigating the role of past behaviour on future behaviour. Only until recently when Sheeran et al. (2017) identified a quadratic relationship between habits and intentions, there had been some debate among scholars regarding the moderating role of past behaviour on future behaviour (Ajzen, 2002; Ouelette & Wood, 1998; Sheeran & Webb, 2016). Therefore this study presents an opportunity to support or disprove these findings.

## 1.5 Research Scope

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The primary scope of the research was limited to electronic word of mouth (eWOM) and only participants that actively post on online platforms will be considered in the sampling frame. These platforms include social networks, blogs, micro-blogs, review platforms and company websites. There was no geographical or any other demographic limitations to the study in order to attain a heterogeneous sample across the research dimensions which were tested quantitatively. Furthermore, the study will be limited to measuring intentions and habit constructs based on individuals self-reports and therefore will not measure the performance of the actual WOM behaviour.

## 1.6 Conclusion

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This chapter presented the need for the research and provided context for the current environment. The rest of the document is presented as follows. In Chapter 2, the literature on the topic is discussed. This includes a review of word of mouth literature, the Theory of Planned Action and how it applies to the consumer environment as well and how past behaviour has been found to influence future behaviour. Specifically, the contrast between stabilized intentions and the concept of habit formation is discussed.

In Chapter 3, a set of hypotheses that were tested during the research are developed from the literature review and Chapter 4 presents the methodology that was used to test these hypotheses. It outlines the research design, the sampling rationale, data gathering process, analysis approach and the limitations of the study.

Chapter five then presents the results obtained from the analysis which are then discussed in Chapter 6 in the context of the literature review and the research questions. Finally, Chapter 7 provides the implications of these findings and possible recommendations for future research.

## CHAPTER TWO : LITERATURE REVIEW

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### 2.1 Introduction

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The present study sought to understand how the frequency of posting online word of mouth (WOM) in the past affects future behaviour. The following literature review covers a variety of theories relating to the research topic. The review begins by presenting a background on word of mouth marketing which provides a lens for reviewing the rest of the literature. This will offer an understanding of the antecedents, moderators and consequences of WOM and how pundits in consumer behaviour have viewed the relationship between these constructs. Emphasis is placed on word of mouth volume on the part of the sender in a bid to understand frequency of behavioural performance.

The literature review then moves to reasoned action models of predicting behaviour, particularly the theory of planned behaviour (TPB), and explains how environmental factors and personal factors influence behaviour through intentions. The predictive validity of such models for repeated behaviours is then discussed, outlining the effects of past behavioural performance on predicting future behaviour. Specifically, it is identified that frequently performed behaviours in stable contexts may lead to the formation of habit.

Thereafter, the concept of habit is explored, citing its properties and the situations in which it is likely to thrive and a contrast with the reasoned action approach is also provided. The residual effect of past behaviour in predicting future behaviour over and above intentions is explained and the literature review concludes with a closing argument on the research gap.

### 2.2 Word of Mouth

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#### 2.2.1 What is Word of Mouth?

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Word of Mouth (WOM) can be defined as the informal communications between private or non-commercial parties regarding evaluations of a brand, product or service (Anderson, 1998). Hence it does not include formal communication between firms and their customers such as complaints and promotional messages. According to Richins (1983), it is the act of sharing the personal experiences about a satisfactory or

unsatisfactory product or firm with at least one friend, acquaintance or family member. This process depends on the underlying credibility of interpersonal communications which in turn makes it more effective than traditional marketing (Bickart & Schindler, 2001).

### 2.2.2 Electronic Word of Mouth?

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Electronic WOM (eWOM) emerged with the advent of the internet which mediates these consumer-consumer interactions and extends them to social networking sites, weblogs, review websites, newsgroups, discussion forums and e-bulletin board systems (Cheung & Thadani, 2012). eWOM is noteworthy because of its various differences from traditional WOM. Firstly, eWOM is highly scalable and can be spread much faster than traditional WOM since traditional WOM can only be shared between small groups of consumers in private conversations (Dellarocas, 2003). Such communication requires all communicators to be present at the time that the information is shared whereas eWOM can take place in asynchronous mode where a consumer can have access to information long after it has been posted (Hung & Li, 2007).

Secondly, eWOM information can be stored for an indefinite period resulting in its persistence and repeated accessibility (Dellarocas, 2003). Consumers can revisit reviews online and come up with new evaluations in light of new information or different contexts. Finally, due to the nature in which eWOM information is stored, it can be collated, quantified, measured and analysed (Park & Kim, 2008). For these reasons, this study only focuses on eWOM.

### 2.2.3 Why Positive Word of Mouth?

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The valence of WOM can be positive, neutral, or negative. Positive WOM includes giving an account of interesting and new experiences, recommendations to others, and public display of products (Anderson, 1998). Positive WOM has received considerable attention and primarily results from customer satisfaction, commitment and loyalty (Anderson, 1998; Brown, Barry, Dacin, & Gunst, 2005). When customers are satisfied, they are more willing to make recommendations to others. Likewise, satisfaction, commitment and loyalty are also antecedents to the repeat purchase behaviour of consumers (Richins, 1983; Kim, Han & Lee, 2001). Thus, positive WOM and repeat purchase intentions are both outcomes of customer satisfaction (Anderson & Sullivan, 1993; Athanassopoulos, Gounaris & Stathakopoulos, 2001) and have been found to be positively correlated with each other (Kim et al., 2001). These findings suggest that consumers that engage in

positive WOM are likely to repeat their consumption experiences as long as they are satisfied.

In contrast, a body of literature based on Oliver's (1980) expectancy disconfirmation theory explains how negative WOM is a result of consumer dissatisfaction with the consumption experience. It is therefore not expected that consumers would repeatedly expose themselves to such products and services, especially considering that consumers engage in negative WOM for altruism, vengeance, anxiety reduction, and advice seeking (Sundaram et al., 1998). The exception would be when the consumer does not have alternative options for the products and/or services (Kuo, Hu & Yang, 2013). Since this study investigates the habitual nature of WOM communications, it is unlikely that negative WOM communications would exhibit this trait (Richins, 1983) which requires repeat purchase behaviour. Therefore the present study only focused on positive WOM.

#### 2.2.4 Impact of Word of Mouth?

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While, according to the definition, WOM communications take place between non-commercial actors, it is important to note that the consequences of communication are not limited to the sender and the receiver. WOM communication has both individual and market consequences. One of the most important characteristics of WOM communication as a marketing vehicle is that it is more influential than traditional marketing in consumer purchase decisions (Bickart & Schindler, 2001). Despite the fact that its effects may be difficult to observe in the short-term, firms have realised its power in driving sales, leading to such concepts as viral marketing and buzz marketing (Kirby & Marsden, 2006). Therefore, for companies, word of mouth is instrumental in driving profitability since, after all, it is a marketing channel.

Aaker (1991) argues that the value of loyal customers is not in their repeat purchases but rather in their impact on other existing and potential customers. For the receiver, WOM communication affects behaviour by creating brand awareness and by shaping consumer preferences on brands and products (Ferguson, 2008). For instance, positive WOM plays an instrumental role in the diffusion of new innovations (Sultan, Farley & Lehmann, 1990). Zeithaml, Berry and Parasuraman (1993) claim that WOM also creates expectations in potential customers which can then be used as a basis for the evaluation of consumption experiences.

The most studied impact of WOM communication on the receiver is its influence on purchase intentions (Reza Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012) which translates to the relationship

between WOM communication and future sales (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006). The influence in the decision-making process of consumers is even more significant in respect to services or intangible products which require an arduous effort to evaluate prior to initial purchase (File, Judd & Prince, 1992). However, the adoption of WOM information depends on the comprehensiveness and relevance of the reviews (Cheung, Lee & Rabjohn, 2008) as well as the strength of the relationship between the sender and the receiver (Brown & Reingen, 1987; Steffes & Burgee, 2009). In other words, people trust recommendations from people that they know.

The above line of reasoning illustrates how WOM communication acts as a precursor to consumer behaviour for the receivers of information. However, it is also an outcome of past behaviour on the part of the sender, which forms the kernel of this study. The consequences of WOM to the sender are typically the motives for communication and are discussed in the following section.

### 2.2.5 Why consumers engage in Word of Mouth?

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Alexandrov, Lilly and Babakus (2013) posited that there are two aspects to the benefits of positive WOM communication to the sender. WOM is initially driven by the desire to gratify (1) *self needs* which in turn triggers (2) *social needs*. That is, WOM is a result of the desire to engage in a social interaction that is instigated by the desire to satisfy self-needs. An understanding of these motives sheds light on why such behaviour could be repeated. Sundaram et al. (1998) reviewed the motives to spread positive WOM and grouped them into three dimensions: altruism, product involvement, and self-enhancement.

*Altruism* is the genuine desire to help other consumers find satisfactory products or services and make better purchase decisions without anticipating any reward in return (Sundaram et al., 1998). Dichter (1966) suggested that people have a willingness to help such that other consumers can also share in the benefits of things they have enjoyed. In other words, products act as vehicles for expressing care, friendship and love. Positive WOM is viewed as a public good phenomenon in which all members of a group have access to information regardless of whether or not they contribute to its provision (Cheung & Lee, 2012).

*Product involvement* is the personal interest in the product, and excitement resulting from the consumption experience. Dichter (1966) argued that when consumers feel strongly about a product, an urge to do something about it arises. Therefore recommendation of the product to others reduces the tension triggered by the consumption experience.

When consumption of the product with high involvement is repeated, it is most likely that recommendations will be made with each use. However, Richins and Bloch (1986) identified that product involvement is temporal in nature and declines over time as the situation inducing involvement changes.

*Self-enhancement* motives apply when recommendations are used by a consumer to gain attention, status and superiority, or to give the impression of having inside information (Engel, Blackwell & Miniard, 1993). Therefore WOM communication would be a means through which the sender can satisfy certain emotional needs (Dichter, 1966). Alexandrov et al. (2013) made a distinction between self-enhancement and self-affirmation as creating and protecting self-image respectively.

A large portion of the early literature on self-related motivations to engage in WOM communication focused on opinion leaders (King & Summers, 1970) and market mavens (Feick & Price, 1987) that want to be viewed as experts in a specific category and to influence the purchase decision of other consumers. More recently, Saenger, Thomas and Johnson (2013) introduced the consumption-focused self-expression motivation whose intention is solely to inform others of the person's consumption behaviour, regardless of whether or not it will influence others. This lies on the premise of the self-concept wherein consumers communicate who they were, who they are, and who they want to be, by choosing products and brands that express a desired meaning (Ahuvia, 2005; Belk, 1988). This form of communication is more consistent with the posts that are common on social media platforms and relates to the public display of products as described in the definition for positive WOM.

#### 2.2.6 Incidence of Word of Mouth

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Current WOM literature has taken the direction towards understanding the content of WOM message, how it is acquired by the receiver (Chen & Berger, 2016), the medium of transmission (Berger & Iyengar, 2013), and how it influences both the sender (Moore, 2012) and the receiver (Sweeney et al., 2008) as discussed above. After realizing the power of WOM, firms seek to stimulate referrals in order to drive profitability (Kumar, Petersen & Leone, 2010). Therefore the underlying motive for all these studies is to increase the incidence and effectiveness of positive WOM and decrease that of negative WOM. By understanding all the different factors that contribute to consumers engaging in WOM communications, they can be stimulated, manipulated or incentivised to do so (Wirtz, & Chew, 2002; Ahrens, Coyle & Strahilevitz, 2013).



You et al. (2015) studied the effects of WOM on sales across three dimensions as moderators for WOM volume under the assumption that consumers seek out the information. *Product* attributes such as whether the consumption is public or private, durability, and trialability, affect the perceived risk associated with the product and consequently increase the benefits of obtaining WOM information. *Industry* characteristics such as growth and competition, as well as the characteristics of the *platform* on which the information is shared were all found to influence the incidence of WOM (You et al., 2015).

WOM volume also influences the strength of the effect on the receiver or information seeker since, for instance, a product with more positive reviews is perceived to be better than one with less reviews (Khare et al., 2011). In another study, Uncles et al., 2010) found that volumes of positive and negative WOM were correlated with market share while the impact of the messages showed no relationship with market share. Although other factors are significant, this literature supports the notion that WOM volume is a very important aspect of WOM communications for firms and consumers alike.

### 2.2.7 Conclusion to Word of Mouth literature

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This section introduced the concept of WOM and its relevance in the marketplace. The rationale for only focusing on positive eWOM from a sender's perspective in the present study was also explained. It concludes by highlighting the importance of WOM volume which, for the sender, reflects the frequency of posting online. In the following section, the literature shifts attention towards behavioural intentions in order to understand the difference between rational and automatic behaviours.

## 2.3 Conscious intentions and behaviour

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### 2.3.1 Introduction

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Rational reasoning models of human behaviour explain how actions are driven by conscious intentions. One of the most studied and well-documented of these models is Ajzen's (1985) theory of planned behaviour. This section provides an overview of the theory with the purpose of explaining how antecedents and consequences of WOM are explained by rational reasoning models. In other words, it describes how people use personal and environmental factors to consciously make decisions to post WOM

communications online. It concludes by outlining the shortcomings of such models and identifies that past experience with a behaviour is a possible reason for their criticism.

### 2.3.2 Theory of Planned Behaviour

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A large number of people's behaviours in their daily lives may be considered to be under volitional control in the sense that they can be easily performed if these individuals have an inclination to do so. The theory of reasoned action (TRA) was developed by Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) to predict such volitional behaviours and to explain their psychological determinants. This theory assumes the rational behaviour of human beings where people make decisions based on both available information and the consequences of their actions. Hence a person's intention is based on their attitude towards the behaviour and the subjective norms associated with the behaviour (Ajzen, 1985). The theory postulates that the proximal determinant of action is behavioural intention.

Even though there was compelling empirical evidence to support TRA, attempts were also made to improve its predictability, either through the introduction of new variables or by changing its internal structure (Bagozzi, 1992). Consequently, Ajzen (1985) included perceived behavioural control as an additional variable which measures the confidence of a person in their ability to perform the behaviour. This extension allowed the resulting theory of planned behaviour (TPB) to predict behaviours that are not under complete volitional control. The following sections discuss the different determinants of behavioural intentions according to TPB.

#### 2.3.2.1 Attitudes towards the behaviour

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Attitudes are the individual's overall instrumental and affective evaluations of performing the behaviour. Intentions are formed when the consequences of the behaviour are favourable and when these effects are important. It is important to note that the attitudes predict behaviour through their effect on intentions. (Ajzen, 1991).

Attitudes can originate from affect or from cognition. The emotions and feelings associated with an attitude form the affective component while the cognitive component includes thoughts, judgements and beliefs associated with an attitude (McGuire, 1969). Attitudes vary in strength, and affect-based attitudes were found to be stronger than their counterparts in predicting behaviour (Edwards, 1990). Strong attitudes tend to be stable over time and to be resistant to persuasion (Ajzen, 2001). According to self-determination theory (Ryan, Sheldon, Kasser & Deci, 1996), intentions derived from attitudes are

intrinsic in nature and are likely to be more consistent with behaviour performance since they are self-chosen.

In the WOM context, the motivations such as product involvement and self enhancement described earlier represent the attitudes towards the behaviour. Because attitudes are linked to values, personal traits play a role in attitude formation (Maio & Olson, 1995). Therefore the personality characteristics of the sender not only influence the formation and strength of attitudes towards WOM communication (Mowen, Park & Zablah, 2007), but also the effectiveness of the message (Sweeney et al., 2008).

The expectancy-value model proposes that, although an individual can develop multiple beliefs about a behaviour, it is only the salient beliefs that would influence behaviour at any particular moment (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). The importance of a belief, the recency of activation of the expectancy, and the frequency of its activation increases the chronic accessibility of that belief (Higgins, 1996). This indicates that attitudes are influenced by different situations and, because they are learnt over time, the frequency of performance of a behaviour is likely to increase attitude strength.

#### 2.3.2.2 Subjective Norms

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In addition to attitudes which are personal in nature, subjective norms, which reflect social influence, are also considered to be a determinant of behavioural intention. At a collective level, norms act as social code that governs the behaviours that members of a social group can perform and it is the individual's interpretation of these norms that is referred to as perceived norm (Lapinski & Rimal, 2005). Therefore subjective norm is an individual's perception of the social pressures imposed on him/her to perform or not perform a specific behaviour (Ajzen, 1985).

A distinction is made between what most people in a social group approve or disapprove of doing versus what they actually do, and these are termed injunctive and descriptive norms respectively (Cialdino, Kallgren & Reno, 1991). Injunctive norms are driven by a desire to avoid social sanctions whereas descriptive norms are based on people's judgements about the prevalence of a behaviour and provide insight into typical conduct. Lapinski and Rimal (2005) found that norms are moderated by outcome expectations, group identity and ego involvement. In other words, behaviour is influenced by expectations of reward or punishment, the level of affiliation to the social group in which the norms are formed, and the extent to which the individual's self-concept is connected to the performance of the behaviour.

Altruistic motives for engaging in WOM behaviour are driven by social rules which prescribe and proscribe the behaviour in a given situation. While subjective norms may be influential in predicting behaviour, in some cases, other factors may become dominant. For example, Berkowitz (1972) argues that a person may deviate from social standards even though he may be fully convinced of their appropriateness. Thus a person may occasionally deviate from these standards although they may typically be adhered to in other situations.

Bagozzi, Wong, Abe and Bergami (2000) posit that injunctive norms are less likely to influence behaviours performed in private because other group members are unaware of the performance of the behaviour and its consequences thereby reducing one's accountability for their behaviours. Likewise, it is also not possible to obtain information about the behavioural ubiquity of private actions thus limiting the influence of descriptive norms from such behaviours. Since eWOM is a public phenomenon, it is therefore expected that social norms would have an influence on its enactment (Cheng, Lam, & Hsu, 2006). In fact, WOM plays a role in the formation of these norms (Banerjee & Fudenberg, 2004).

### 2.3.2.3 Perceived Behavioural Control

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In order to be able to predict behaviours that are not completely under volitional control, TPB incorporates perceived behavioural control (PBC) as an additional determinant of intentions (Ajzen, 1991). This is because the performance of most behaviours depends on the availability of required resources, skills, opportunities and cooperation of others (Ajzen, 1985). Hence PBC is the individual's perception of the extent to which the performance of a behaviour is under their control (Ajzen, 1991).

The conceptualization of PBC by Ajzen (2002) resulted in two distinct item clusters namely self-efficacy and controllability. Self-efficacy deals with the ease or difficulty of performing a behaviour. It measures a person's confidence that they are able to perform the behaviour if they are motivated to do so. On the other hand, controllability is about people's beliefs in their control over the behaviour and measures the extent to which the performance or non-performance of the behaviour is up to the actor. Perceived self-efficacy has been found to have a greater influence on intentions than attitudes and subjective norms, as well as a greater impact on behaviour than intentions. In contrast, controllability was found to contribute to the prediction of behaviour and not to intentions. (Ajzen, 2002).

The concept of PBC refers to a specific behavioural context rather than a generalized predisposition of the actor as is the case with locus of control (Ajzen, 1991). In this sense, control beliefs are not inherent in a person but rather vary depending on the behaviour in question and the situation. It is also concerned with control over the behaviour itself as opposed to control over outcomes (Ajzen, 2002). Therefore, in WOM communications, this would refer to a person's belief in their control over the act of sharing WOM content rather than in their expectation or ability to attain the consequences of WOM such as self-enhancement. Self-efficacy and expectations of outcomes have been found to be significant predictors of WOM behaviour (Lee, Kim, and Kim, 2012).

Once behavioural intention has been established, it is this intention together with the actual behavioural control that predict the performance of the behaviour. This implies that behavioural action is a result of both motivation and ability. Therefore while PBC has a significant effect on intentions, it does not translate into how much a person has actual control over the behaviour. However, when PBC is veridical, it provides insights into actual control over the behaviour and can be used to predict behaviour directly (Ajzen, 2002).

### 2.3.3 Predictive validity of the Theory of Planned Behaviour

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There is no shortage of research showing that intentions predict behaviour. In one such study, Sheeran (2002) performed a meta-analysis of ten meta-analyses and found that intentions explain 28 percent of the variance in the prediction of various health behaviours. With a sample-weighted average correlation of 0.53, the results showed a relatively large effect size. Hence the predictive validity of TPB is good and it has been tested across a wide variety of behaviours (Sheeran, 2002). But even with motivation and ability, the accuracy in predicting behaviour is based on the absence of intervening factors that cause behaviours not to be enacted. In other words, people do not always do what they intend to do. Similarly, the intention-behaviour consistency is influenced by other determinants that account for the remainder of the variance.

Studies investigating the intention-behaviour gap have highlighted several of these factors that could account for the discrepancy between intentions and behaviour. Sheeran (2016) summarized these variables to include the behaviour type (frequency, stability of context, goal directed versus single action), the intention properties (accessibility, certainty, and temporal stability), personality (anticipated regret, self-schemas), as well as the experience with the behaviour. The present study explored the

last factor, which refers to the frequency with which a person has performed the behaviour in the past.

A study on the effects of prior behaviour in exercise behaviour found that, after accounting for the TPB variables, the addition of past behaviour into the prediction equation resulted in a highly significant increase in the proportion of explained variance (Norman & Smith, 1995). These findings implied that earlier experience has a significant residual impact on future behaviour. However, this observation contradicted the initial premise of TPB which expected that the effects of prior behaviour would be fully mediated by perceptions of desirability, norms, behavioural control and intentions to perform the behaviour (Ajzen, 1985). In other words, TPB expected that past behaviour would only lead to the formation and strengthening of attitudes, social norms and perceptions of control. Subsequent sections will show that this argument may not always be valid, particularly in situations where behaviours are repeated so often that they become habitual.

#### 2.3.4 Past behaviour influence on future behaviour

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People are often told that past behaviour is the best predictor of future behaviour. This is because people tend to continue doing what they have become familiar with, to the extent that Trandis (1980) used the frequency of prior behaviour as a measure of habit strength. The explanatory value of repeated behaviours has been questioned in reasoned action models which emphasize that choices are made consciously. Ajzen (1987) argued that it is not particularly meaningful that, because a behaviour has been performed in the past, it could have a causal effect on its performance in the future.

Experience has been found to have paradoxical effects on the predictive validity of intentions on behaviour. On the one hand, it increases the accessibility and stability of intentions to perform the behaviour (Doll & Ajzen, 1992), thereby strengthening the intention-behaviour relationship. Conversely, when a behaviour is performed more often, it has a tendency to become automatic resulting in less need for conscious intentions to guide behaviour (Wood and Neal, 2007). There is empirical evidence to support both perspectives, and Ouellette and Wood (1998) resolved this discourse by proposing that both views lie on opposite ends of a continuum. Behaviours that are not well learned or that are performed in unstable or difficult contexts are likely to be mediated by intentions through deliberative reasoning processes. However, in more stable contexts, well-practiced behaviours are performed automatically and the frequency of past behaviour reflects habit strength.

For simple actions, attitudes and intentions can also be activated automatically (Gollwitzer, 1999). This implies that the degree of deliberation required to establish intentions varies depending on motivation and reasoning capacity. Therefore some actions may be controlled by automatic intentions which require minimal effort and thought as is the case when intentions are retrieved from memory, while others involve more effortful and extensive cognitive processing. This view contrasts that of habit formation which postulates that frequently repeated behaviours are controlled by stimulus cues. The key note here is that habitual actions can be instigated without the mediation of intentions.

### 2.3.4 Conclusion on Theory of Planned Behaviour

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This section used the Theory of Planned Behaviour as a framework to explain how intentions predict behaviour. Attitudes, subjective norms perceived behavioural control lead to intentions which form the proximal determinant of behaviour. Examples in the WOM context were also cited. The section concluded by noting that intentions do not explain all the variance in the prediction of behaviour, and identified past behaviour as one of the factors affecting intention-behaviour consistency. Past behaviour has been found to influence future behaviour in two ways. Firstly, by strengthening intentions through the effect of experience on attitudes, subjective norms and perceived control and secondly, through the formation of habit where behaviours are performed automatically. The following section explores the concept of habit.

## 2.4 Habits and Automaticity

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### 2.4.1 Introduction

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Most of the behaviours performed in everyday life are performed frequently and in the same physical and social environment. The repetition and practice of a behaviour can lead to habit formation in which the response becomes spontaneously triggered by a specific cue in the environment (Ouellette & Wood, 1998). In this sense, mental links are developed between the behaviour and the features of that context. Eventually, these behaviours can be invoked automatically by mere encounter with the relevant contextual cues such as a particular place, time or person and are therefore performed quickly, effortlessly and without the mediation of deliberate intentions (Bargh, 1994).

The formation of habit and its subsequent strength relies on the positive reinforcement of the relationship between the behaviour and the actual goal that the behaviour is attempting to achieve. A satisfactory experience with a behaviour strengthens the link between that act and the desired goal and therefore increases the likelihood that the same action will be repeated in future. Conversely, when results are not satisfactory, it is unlikely that the instrumental action will be repeated in order to attain the same goal. (Bolles, 1972).

## 2.4.2 Properties of Habit

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### 2.4.2.1 Frequency of past behaviour

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A behaviour is likely to come under stimulus control when it has been performed more frequently in the past. However, it is not the recurrence of the behaviour per se that constitutes a habit. Behavioural frequency has been associated with habit due to Triandis' (1977) model of interpersonal behaviour in which he posits that habit strength increases with repetition of a behaviour. The meta-analysis by Ouellette and Wood (1998) showed that the predictive validity of prior behaviour on later behaviour was more significant for behaviours that are performed more frequently and consistently in a stable context.

Using behavioural frequency as a measure of habit strength has been generally accepted by social psychologists (Ouellette & Wood, 1998, Verplanken & Aarts, 1999). However, Verplanken and Orbell (2003) argued that this was inadequate and habit should rather be measured as a psychological construct rather than simply a frequency measure. The independent construct would also be useful to determine the effect of habit in addition to the frequency of behaviour as is the case in the present study.

An interesting point from the work of Hull (1943) is that frequency of past behaviour does not account for habituation towards alternative behaviours. In his study, rats developed strong habits to turn left towards food. Although frequency of turning right was low, this was not an indication of weak habit. That is, it could be argued that the rats had a habit against turning right. Hence, only in cases where there is no preference for left and right choices would there be an indication of weak habit. This shows that habit strength is not directly proportional to past behaviour frequency but it is rather a quadratic function where habit strength increases when the frequency of a chosen alternative either increases or decreases.



### 2.4.2.2 Automaticity

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Synonymous with skill acquisition, repetition and practice of a behaviour leads to automatic responses in two ways. From a reasoned action perspective, the cognitive processing that initiates and controls responses is performed in largely automatic fashion with minimal conscious control. In other words, spontaneous attitudes and intentions are formed (Ajzen & Fishbein, 2000). On the other hand, the habituation perspective postulates that behaviour is under the control of stimulus cues (Aarts, Verplanken & Knippenberg, 1998). Ajzen (2002) argued that the implications of both perspectives are similar in that automatic responses are triggered for routinized behaviours with minimal conscious effort.

Automaticity in habits is elicited by certain stimuli in order to achieve a specific goal and is therefore goal-directed. For instance, many of the everyday behaviours that can be described as automatic such as typing and driving require an end goal in order for them to be performed. A person only drives a car if there is a goal to move from one location to the other. Similarly, the posting of WOM on an online platform is an act that is performed in order to realize certain consequences as described earlier and is thus goal-directed.

A distinction needs to be made between automaticity in the decision to perform a behaviour and automaticity in the execution of the behaviour. Wegner and Bargh (1998) argued that most routinized behaviours in everyday life are best described as semiautomatic response patterns consisting of both controlled and autonomous phases. Intentions represent the decision to perform a specific behaviour and hence automaticity is attained when the decision is made repeatedly (Ajzen, 2002). In this case, intentions become spontaneous and are readily accessible in memory. In contrast, although intentions may have been formed through extensive thought, the subsequent action can be performed automatically. This distinction is important in identifying whether automaticity in WOM could lie in the decision, the actual behaviour, or both. In decision making, habit strength attenuates the amount of information acquired and used, leads to increased focus on the habitually chosen option, and also leads to cognitive shortcuts where alternatives are eliminated early in the decision making process (Verplanken, Aarts, & Van Knippenberg, 1997).

Bargh (1994) identified four independent characteristics of automaticity namely intentionality, awareness, controllability, and efficiency. Intentionality here does not imply that actions are consciously planned, but rather that they are instrumental towards

achieving a goal. Controllability is expected to decrease with increasing habit strength such that strong habits are often difficult to overrule. Lastly the efficiency of habits is displayed in the ability to simultaneously perform other activities since cognitive capacity is not necessarily required. Verplanken and Orbell (2003) introduced these four features into a self-report scale for measuring habit strength in their conceptualization of habit as a psychological construct.

#### 2.4.2.3 Context Stability

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For habits to form, a behaviour also needs to be performed consistently (Ouellette & Wood, 1998; Verplanken & Aarts, 1999), meaning that the execution of the behaviour in the past must have been in a stable context (time, place, or situation). The level of constancy required to define a stable context varies, however, the contextual cues that are integral to performing the response need to be similar across time and setting in order for habitual responses to occur. Hence stable contexts provide a constant supporting environment for performance even though they may vary in superficial attributes while on the other hand, unstable contexts are characterized by new goals and challenges due to changes in the supporting environment (Proctor & Dutta, 1993).

The role of context stability in habit formation is based on the assumption that people are sensitive to changes in this context. These changes invoke cognitive responses in which evaluations of attitudes, social norms and behavioural control are made to determine the appropriate course of action for the new context. Consequently, habits are likely to be established when goal-directed behaviours are performed repeatedly in the same context since it is unlikely that the evaluations will be consulted (Aarts, Paulussen & Schaalma, 1997). At this point, the mental representation of the behaviour and the context become strongly linked such that the contextual cue is able to elicit the performance of the behaviour directly without conscious intent (Heckhausen & Beckmann, 1990).

From the explanation above, it can be inferred that reasoned approaches are more likely to be used when behaviours are performed in the same context infrequently, or when the same behaviour is performed regularly but in different contexts because the behaviour is less uniquely or less strongly linked to the context. Therefore, the extent to which goal-directed behaviour is expected to be habitual is dependent on the frequency of past behaviour in a specified period of time as well as the stability of the context in which it was performed. In other words, a scale of habit strength would range from high frequency in stable context to low frequency or unstable context (Ouellette & Wood,

1998). The point here is that at least one (not necessarily both) of the conditions of either infrequent performance or a variable context indicates weak or no habit.

#### 2.4.2.4 Self- Identity

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Verplanken and Orbell (2003) also included self-identity as a property of habit under the assumption that habits reflect how people organize their everyday life and therefore indicates personal style. According to Trafimow and Wyer's (1993), mundane social events are cognitively represented and might be descriptive of a person, thus expressing their identity. Although Verplanken and Orbell (2003) acknowledge that this property of self-identity may not hold for all habits, it has been included here because of its close conceptual association with the consumption-focused self-expression motive for engaging in WOM communications in line with Wood and Neal's (2009) research on the habitual consumer.

#### 2.4.2 Interaction of Intentions and Habits

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As has already been demonstrated, habitual responses are automatic in that they are efficient and require minimal attention. However, this does not mean that they are unintentional and non-volitional. According to Bargh (1994), automatic behaviours can either be non-volitional or can be enacted as part of volitional and intentional processes. Many of the routinized behaviours in daily life such as driving and exercise can be described as both volitional and automatic.

Notwithstanding the above argument, intentions can sometimes conflict with habit. In light of new information, evaluations of behavioural consequences can lead to the formation of new intentions (Ajzen, 1985). An example is when conscious intentions are made in an attempt alter bad habits. Bad habits are formed when acts result in short-term benefits that contradict long-term goals or when the outcomes of the act are no longer valued (Verplanken & Faes, 1999).

#### 2.5 Residual Effect of Past on Future Behaviour

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The discussion has shown that when the supporting environment and intentions remain the same, it is expected that past behaviour should be a good predictor of later behaviour. Yet past behaviour still has a direct residual impact on future behaviour that is not accounted for by intentions and PBC. Although some of the explanation is due to habit formation, this perspective does not account for behaviours where habits are unlikely to form. For example, while habits thrive in high opportunity behaviour, Drake & McCabe

(2000) found a significant effect of past on future behaviours in a study on infidelity, which is a low opportunity behaviour. Therefore if the context has not changed, a possible explanation is that the intentions have changed and the new intentions are less predictive of future behaviour (Ajzen, 2002).

Another possible explanation is that past and future behaviour are measured in a similar fashion and hence they are likely to share method variance which is very different from that of the measure of the intention and behaviour determinants of TPB (Ajzen, 1991). As a result, the strong compatibility between the prior and future behaviour measurement scales leads to greater predictive validity than other constructs (Courneya, 1994).

Strong attitudes and intentions are expected to have temporal stability and thus predict behaviour better than weak attitudes and intentions (Petty & Krosnick, 1995). When intentions are weak, they are likely to be a sign of indifference or uncertainty and exhibit low predictive validity of future behaviour. Therefore some residual effect of past behaviour should be observed when attitudes and intentions are weak rather than when attitudes and intentions are strong (Ajzen, 2002). In other words, the predictive validity of past behaviour on future behaviour is moderated by the stability of intentions. When intentions are stable, it makes no significant difference how many times the behaviour has been performed in the past in the prediction of future behaviour.

TPB is based on people's beliefs and perceptions of control over the behaviours in question. However, it is only predictive of future behaviour to the extent that these perceptions are veridical. With limited information and cognitive biases, people can form unrealistic intentions (Ajzen & Sexton, 1999). For example, people can underestimate the difficulty of performing a behaviour or overestimate its benefits. When confronted with the actual behaviour, people may receive contradictory feedback to their expectations resulting in altered intentions prior to engaging in the behaviour (Doll & Ajzen, 1992). Therefore past behavioural frequency is more likely to provide a more realistic evaluation of a person's actual capabilities and dispositions. Accordingly, a residual effect if past behaviour is expected in such a scenario.

## 2.5 Conclusion

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The literature has demonstrated that when behaviour is performed frequently, intentions to perform the behaviour in the future are stabilized. When repetition occurs in stable contexts, then habit is likely to be formed. WOM behaviour is goal directed in that it is instrumental in obtaining the self and social outcomes described. When consumers post frequently on the same social platforms, it is reasonable to speculate that the context is

stable enough to elicit habit formation. Therefore the probability that a WOM sender will continue to post positive WOM should increase with frequency of past behaviour. Chapter 3 presents the research hypotheses resulting from this discussion.

## CHAPTER THREE : RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

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### 3.1 Introduction

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The present study broadly investigates the role of past WOM behaviour in predicting future behaviour. It has often been said that past behaviour is a good predictor of future behaviour. The literature review highlighted two avenues through which past behaviour can influence future behaviour. This can be through strengthening intentions or through the formation of habit. Each of these perspectives has implications for marketing managers particularly in identifying candidates for WOM dissemination. Thus, the research questions that the study aims to answer are restated as follows:

1. Does past WOM behaviour increase the likelihood of future WOM behaviour?
2. Can online WOM behaviour become habitual?

With the advent and ubiquity of the internet and social media, people spend a lot of time creating and consuming content on these platforms. Consumption-focused self-expression is a form of WOM communication which is related to the self-concept (Saenger et al., 2013). People share videos, images, comments and reviews of the products/brands that they consume to promote or protect their own brand. As with other forms of WOM, these are high opportunity behaviours since consumers consume products and services repeatedly on a daily basis. It is expected that the frequent performance of the WOM behaviour should have an effect on engaging in WOM behaviour in the future especially when experiences are satisfactory.

### 3.2 Research Hypothesis 1

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From a reasoned action perspective (Ajzen 1991), experience with a behaviour is expected to increase the strength of intentions through its influence on attitudes, social norms and perceived behavioural control. When the behaviour is repeated, these determinants of WOM behavioural intention are expected to become stronger indicating that past behaviour has an indirect positive relationship with intentions. This led to the following hypotheses:

H<sub>1(a)</sub>: *Frequency of past behaviour has a direct positive effect on **attitudes** towards positive online WOM behaviour*

H<sub>1(b)</sub>: *Frequency of past behaviour has a direct positive effect on **subjective norms** regarding positive online WOM behaviour*

H<sub>1(c)</sub>: *Frequency of past behaviour has a direct positive effect on **perceived behavioural control** regarding positive online WOM behaviour*

### 3.3 Research Hypothesis 2

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Even after the determinants of intentions according to the theory of planned behaviour have been accounted for, there is still a residual effect of past behaviour on future behaviour (Ajzen, 2002). In other words, past behaviour should be able to explain some of the variance not explained by attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control. This disagrees with the findings of Ajzen (1985) that the effects of past behaviour would be fully mediated by perceptions of desirability, norms, behavioural control and intentions to perform the behaviour. It is expected that there should be a direct positive relationship between past WOM behaviour and intention. Hence the following hypothesis is derived:

H<sub>2</sub>: *Frequency of past behaviour has a direct positive influence on **intentions** regarding online positive WOM behaviour*

### 3.4 Research Hypothesis 3

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In order to answer research question two, there is a need to investigate the existence of habit in eWOM communications by exploring the interaction of the dimensions of habit, with frequency of past behaviour. This would provide an opportunity to identify which of these factors, if any, are responsible for explaining its formation. The properties of habit identified in the literature review are automaticity, frequency of behaviour, and self-identity. Hence the following hypotheses were derived:

H<sub>3(a)</sub>: *Frequency of past behaviour has a direct positive influence on **automaticity** of online positive WOM behaviour*

H<sub>3(b)</sub>: *Frequency of past behaviour has a direct positive influence on **self-identity** regarding positive online WOM behaviour*

H<sub>3(c)</sub>: *Frequency of past behaviour has a direct positive relationship with **habit strength** of positive online WOM behaviour*

### 3.5 Research Hypothesis 4

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From a habituation perspective, experience with behaviour is expected to lead to the formation of habit when the context is stable. For online WOM, the supporting environment for the behaviour is the platform on which communication is made. For example, a person can post content on the same device and to the same social network each time they engage in WOM, in which case the only requirement is the contextual cue such as a novel consumption experience. When frequency of a behaviour increases and becomes automatic, it is more likely to be guided by habit rather than by deliberate intentions (Sheeran, 2017). It can therefore be hypothesized that:

H4:            There is an indirect negative relationship between habit and intentions as past behaviour increases.



## CHAPTER FOUR : RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

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### 4.1 Introduction

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This chapter focuses on details of the research methods that were employed for the purposes of answering the research questions of the present study. It outlines the research design, sampling techniques as well as the data collection instrument, method and process, and finally how that data was analysed.

### 4.2 Research Design

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The present study aimed at determining whether past WOM behaviour strengthens intention-behaviour consistency as well as to ascertain whether dissemination of positive WOM can be classified as a habit wherein behaviour is autonomous. This was achieved by measuring restaurant consumer experiences through self-reports of their past positive WOM behaviour to describe their contribution towards existing concepts of behavioural intention and action as presented in the literature review.

The nature of this study therefore dictated a quantitative research in which descriptive data needed to be collected and analysed. Descriptive quantitative research is suitable for studies where there is an understanding of the research problem (Blumberg, Copper, & Schindler, 2008) such as the determinants of behavioural intention and their relationship with future behaviour as demonstrated by the literature review. Therefore the research was not exploratory since frameworks already exist to describe the characteristics of both habits and intentions. Rather, the theory was tested for applicability to the positive WOM context.

This research was not interested in noting changes over time and also had a time constraint and therefore was cross-sectional, where respondents only completed one survey while reflecting on their experiences. Primary data was collected since no secondary data was found that was relevant to the research question.

### 4.3 Research Scope

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The primary scope of the research was limited to electronic WOM (eWOM) and only participants that have shared their experiences on online platforms were considered in the population. eWOM was chosen because of the speed and reach of communication on these platforms (Cheung and Lee, 2012), which include social networks, blogs, micro-

blogs, review platforms and company websites, and because of the amount of time spent on online platforms which resembles a high opportunity behaviour that is a prerequisite for habituation.

The nature of consumer experiences varies across different contexts and therefore restaurant customers were selected in order to obtain analogous opinions. Restaurants provide both goods and services, and all the antecedents and consequences of WOM described in the literature are applicable to the restaurant context, including the proneness to both valences of WOM. Furthermore, restaurants have several cues which can trigger WOM such as the food quality, experience with service employees, and the atmosphere (Jeong & Jang, 2011). People also eat at restaurants at varying degrees of frequency and some frequently enough to potentially formulate habit. For the purposes of this study, a restaurant was defined as any place where one can pay to sit and eat meals that are cooked and served on the premises.

#### 4.4 Population

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The population for this study included all individuals that had eaten at restaurants at least once in the last six months from the time of completing the survey and had shared their restaurant experiences on an online platform at least once within the prior six months from the time of completing the survey. The frequency of restaurant consumption experiences and the subsequent sharing of the experiences was included in the research instrument as descriptive variables. The population was also not limited to any geographic locations or demographic groups.

#### 4.5 Unit of Analysis

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While organizations and groups can also act as consumers, this research was limited to soliciting information from individuals. Hence the unit of analysis was the individual consumer that had eaten at a restaurant and shared their experience online. The experiences and perceptions of the individuals were then measured and aggregated to get a composite picture of past behavioural influences on future behaviour intention and habits.

## 4.6 Sampling

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### 4.6.1 Sampling Technique

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The criteria used for sampling included respondents that had eaten at a restaurant at least once within the last six months from the time of completing the survey and had shared at least one of those experiences on online platforms. The sampling technique employed for this study was a combination of non-probability convenience and snowball sampling (Saunders & Lewis, 2012). An initial group of diverse personal acquaintances of the researcher that were known to fall within the population were identified and invited to participate in the survey using online platform messaging tools (Email, Facebook, LinkedIn, WhatsApp). These respondents were then asked to forward the invitation and hence recruit further participants.

This snowball approach was used because the recruited participants would be able to identify people that they normally eat out with, or that they exchange experiences with on their online social networks. Therefore the researcher acknowledges that the sampling method could have introduced response bias into the sample.

Once the invitations had been sent out, the researcher ceased to have control over the suitability of recruited respondents and therefore the research instrument had a set of qualifying questions to eliminate such respondents. The respondents were not incentivised to participate and the survey did not incur any costs.

### 4.6.2 Sample Size

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The sample size of this study was supposed to be large enough to measure the relationships between past behaviour and the various dimensions of habits and intentions regression and test for differences. Systematic errors such as sampling error can occur in a research design and these were mitigated by using recommended sample sizes. Green (1991) suggests that for multiple linear regression, the recommended minimum sample size can be calculated as  $N > 50 + 8m$  where  $m$  is the number of predictor variables. The maximum number of predictor variables used in this study for a regression analysis was four, and therefore the target sample size was at least 82 valid responses to achieve a statistical power of 0.8.

## 4.8 Data Collection

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### 4.8.1 Research Instrument

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An online self-completing Likert scale survey was used as the research instrument. The survey was hosted on Survey Monkey ([www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com)) for the collection of primary data. The Likert scale consisted of seven points ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree (Saunders & Lewis, 2012).

The questionnaire survey was selected because it allows for a set of standardised questions to be asked to a large number of respondents which is ideal for descriptive research (Saunders and Lewis, 2012). Online surveys are easy to administer remotely, geographically flexible, low cost, and data can be collected quickly (Blumberg et al., 2008). This served the time and cost limitations of this study and since the population consisted of people sharing experiences online, an online survey was arguably the best choice.

### 4.8.2 Measurement Instrument Design

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The survey questions were constructed from existing literature on behavioural intention and habit self-reports. The approach employed by Cheng, Lam and Hsu (2006) was used where various studies were consulted to identify the relevant questions. Since no TPB and habit scales could be found for positive WOM behaviour, the selected items were adapted to the context of positive online WOM dissemination. Rather than designing new questions, this technique was used to establish both content and construct validity (Saunders and Lewis, 2012). TPB has been vastly studied and therefore documentation exists on how to construct questionnaires to measure the constructs of attitudes, subjective norms and perceived control (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980; Ajzen, 2002). Similarly, Verplanken and Orbell (2003) have provided a framework for measuring habits.

Many authors have cited the disadvantages of self-report surveys including social desirability (Del Boca and Nel, 2002), introspective ability and response bias (Fan, Miller, Park, Winward, Christensen, Grotevant and Tai, 2006). However, self-report measures are time and cost effective, can be implemented to larger samples and can be used to measure constructs such as behavioural intentions, attitudes and feelings, as well as memories of past experiences which are difficult to measure using behavioural and psychological methods (McDonald, 2008). The vast literature on TPB uses self-reports to measure behavioural intention and its antecedents, while experiments are used in the

case where the actual behaviour is observed. Since this study did not measure the actual behaviour, the self-report survey was appropriately selected.

The key constructs of attitudes, subjective norms, perceived behavioural control and intention were conceptualised as defined by Ajzen (1991) and customized to the research context. 'Attitudes towards the behaviour' was conceptualized as a person's overall evaluation of sharing positive WOM on online platforms. 'Subjective norms' was conceptualized as a person's perception of the social pressures to share or not to share positive WOM on online platforms. 'Perceived behavioural control' measures how well a person believes they can execute the actions required to deal with specific situations in WOM dissemination.

Habit was conceptualized as a history of repetition of sharing WOM, automaticity (lack of control, lack of awareness, efficiency), and expressing one's identity through sharing online WOM (Verplanken and Orbell, 2003). This scale does not include properties of habit such as cues and context. Gardner, De Bruijn and Lally (2011) argued that the inclusion of these factors could result in habit not being detected if the incorrect cues were used and it would be impractical to include all the various cues that could lead to habit.

Past behavioural frequency is a one-item scale that measures the frequency of performance of the behaviour in the prior six months. This approach was consistent with the vast behavioural literature measuring this construct (Sheeran and Orbell, 1999; Smith, Terry, Manstead, Louis, Kotterman, and Wolfs, 2007).

The questions constituting these elements were presented to the respondent in the questionnaire in random order so as to reduce response bias. Table 1 shows the constructs for the research together with the source from which the measurement scale was adapted.

**Table 1**

*The research constructs and sources of measurement scale*

<b>Construct</b>	<b>Source/ Scale Adapted From</b>	<b>Cronbach's Alpha</b>
Past Behaviour Frequency	1-item measure	Not Applicable
Habit	Verplanken and Orbell (2003)	0.94
Attitudes	Ajzen (1991); Ajzen (2002); Cheng, Lam & Hsu (2006)	0.83
Subjective Norm	Ajzen (1991); ; Ajzen (2002); Cheng, Lam & Hsu (2006)	0.86
Perceived Control	Ajzen (1991); Ajzen (2002); Cheng, Lam & Hsu (2006)	0.82
Intentions	Ajzen (1991); Ajzen (2002)	0.94

The survey consisted of items grouped into four independent variables and two dependent variable. Multiple measures were used to measure each construct, except for the frequency of past behaviour which is a one-item scale. The questions were phrased from the perspective of the unit of analysis towards the WOM behaviour and only one question was negatively worded since framing it differently would have changed its meaning.

*Q8. For me to post positive content on restaurant experiences online in the forthcoming month would be impossible.*

The full questionnaire of the study is included in Appendix A.

#### 4.8.3 Error Checking and Control Logic

The survey was coded into Survey Monkey with automated checks to ensure that all the data collected was valid thereby reducing systematic and non-sampling errors. The survey began with qualifying questions to divert unsuitable respondents. Thereafter, all questions were set to require an answer such that the respondent could not continue without providing answers to all the questions. In an effort to further reduce invalid data, closed-ended questions were used where the respondent selected one answer on a Likert scale. Only the country of residence and the racial group 'other' had variable input text. Lastly, the survey did not have any identifiers to ensure anonymity of participants.

#### 4.9 Pre-testing of the Survey

A pilot test was performed to check whether the survey worked, that the respondents did not encounter problems in answering the questions and that their responses were being

recorded correctly (Saunders and Lewis, 2012). The survey was tested by an initial group of ten respondents who were asked to look out for spelling and navigation mistakes and to measure the duration of completing the survey. These respondents were conveniently selected using the same criteria as the eventual sample.

Once the feedback from the pre-test was received, the following changes were made to the questionnaire:

- Questions were made shorter by explaining “posting online” in the instructions rather than including a description at each question.
- A disqualification page was added to reassure respondents not meeting the population criteria since they thought there was an error with the survey after answering only two qualifying questions.

Apart from these changes, the pre-test did not indicate any further misinterpretation of the questions probably due to the fact that the questions were adapted from vastly used scales. As a result, the responses from the pre-test were also included in the final results. The pre-test further indicated that the responses were being recorded correctly and that the questions were sufficient to answer the research hypotheses.

#### 4.10 Reliability and Validity

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For the findings of this study to be valid, the research instrument needed to be tested for validity and reliability. Validity is the extent to which (a) data collection method accurately measures what they were intended to measure and (b) the research findings are really about what they profess to be about (Saunders and Lewis, 2012) and therefore there is need for internal consistency among the items that compose a scale.

Reliability implies consistency and measures the extent to which the study, when repeated or measured using a different study population, would yield the same findings (Saunders & Lewis, 2012). IBM ® SPSS ® Version 24 software was used to determine the Cronbach’s Alpha values for each of the constructs as a measure of the internal consistency. Values greater than 0.7 were considered acceptable to indicate that the items within the scale belonged together according to the rule of thumb provided by (Gliem and Gliem, 2003).

#### 4.11 Data Analysis and Interpretation

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Once the data had been collected, it was downloaded and checked for errors through observation in Microsoft Excel ® 2013 to ensure that all the data were within the expected

ranges. Thereafter, the data analysis was done in a series of three steps; Sample description, scale validity and reliability, and finally, statistical tests for the hypotheses of the study. The following tests were conducted for each research hypothesis.

Research Hypothesis 1: One-way ANOVA test for differences

Research Hypothesis 2: Multiple Linear Regression

Research Hypothesis 3: One-way ANOVA test for differences

Research Hypothesis 4: Pearson's Partial Correlation

#### 4.11.1 Normal Distribution and Outliers

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In order to perform parametric tests, the assumption of normality of the sample was required. A normal distribution describes a symmetrical, bell-shaped frequency distribution curve where the highest frequencies lie in the middle (Zikmund, 2009). Tests for normality were conducted using the Shapiro-Wilk's test ( $p > 0.05$ ). Unsuccessful measurement scales were further tested by dividing the skewness and kurtosis by their standard error, and the resulting scores were expected to lie between -1.96 and 1.96 (Hair, Black, Babin & Anderson, 1998). Further to the tests conducted, the central limits theorem suggests that for large random sample sizes ( $n > 30$ ), normality can be assumed (Moore, McGabe & Craig, 2012). Therefore normality was assumed for all the tests conducted in the study.

#### 4.11.2 One-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA)

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The one-way ANOVA test is a statistical test that examines whether there is a difference in the means of three or more groups. The responses from the frequency of past behaviour question were classified into the three groups (low, medium, high) which prescribed this particular test.

For research hypothesis one, the ANOVA test was used to test the difference in the means of the determinants of intentions across the three past behavioural frequency groups. This was expected to determine whether past behaviour has an effect on these dimensions. For research hypothesis three, the ANOVA test was used to identify which dimensions of habit strength explain the relationship between intention and habit. This was achieved by testing for the difference in the means of these habit dimensions across the three past behaviour groupings.



The ANOVA test requires a set of assumptions to be met which include independence, normality, and homogeneity of variances of the residuals and these were accounted for in the tests. Post hoc analyses to understand the differences between the individual groups were performed using the Bonferroni test. This method was preferred since it can be used for groups with different sizes. The tests were performed in IBM SPSS Statistics Version 24 package at the 95 percent level of confidence ( $\alpha = 0.05$ ).

#### 4.11.3 Multiple Linear Regression

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Multiple regression is the appropriate method of analysis when the question involves a single dependent variable that is presumed to be related to two or more independent variables (Hair et al., 1998). This was the case for research question two which tested the relationship between four independent variables (attitudes, subjective norms, perceived control, past behaviour) and one dependent variable (intentions). The approach was to run a multiple regression test with only the determinants of intentions according to TPB, and then comparing the results after adding past behaviour to the prediction model in order to establish the effect of past behaviour in predicting intentions. Again, the assumptions for this test were taken into consideration when performing the tests.

#### 4.11.2 Pearson's Partial Correlation

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Pearson's partial correlation can be used to measure the strength of a linear relationship between two variables while controlling for the effects of a third variable (Hair et al., 1998). Research question four needed to establish the relationship between intentions and past behaviour while controlling for habits. In other words, the test assessed whether habit strength accounts for the relationship between intentions and past behaviour.

The assumptions for the test include normality, linear relationship of the variables, and no significant outliers (Hair et al., 1998). These assumptions were considered when performing the tests.

### 4.11 Research Limitations

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The limitations of the research methodology include:

- The time limit of the research did not allow for a longitudinal study which would have enabled the actual behaviour to be measured. This would have provided an opportunity to directly measure the strength of the intentions moderated by past behaviour.

- The research methodology was designed within the restaurant context as a proxy. Thus, the applicability of the study to other contexts was limited.
- Self-report surveys requesting respondents to report on past experiences are subject to availability bias which could have contaminated the results.
- The snowball sample was initiated from the researcher's acquaintances and that could have led to response bias.

## CHAPTER FIVE : RESULTS

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### 5.1 Introduction

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This chapter presents a description and analysis of the data collected from the questionnaire shown in Appendix A. It outlines the results of the process followed to analyse the data in order to answer the research questions and hypotheses presented in Chapter 3. The facts resulting from the analysis are also presented as a foundation for the interpretations explored in Chapter 6.

### 5.2 Data Preparation

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The data obtained from the survey was exported from Survey Monkey into Microsoft Excel 2013 for data verification. The data was inspected for missing and erroneous records which were then excluded from the final data set that was used for analysis. There were 26 such instances of incomplete responses that were discarded. The data from Survey Monkey was already numerically coded. However, responses for one question were reverse-coded because the question was negatively worded. The clean data was then imported into IBM ® SPSS ® Statistics Version 24 for data analysis.

In order to apply the statistical test for differences, the responses from the frequency of past behaviour question were classified into the three groups (low, medium, high) as shown in Table 2.

**Table 2**

*Past Behaviour grouping and nominal coding*

Past Behaviour Group	Code	Past Behaviour	Code
Low	1	Almost never	1
		Rarely	2
Medium	2	Occasionally	3
		About half of the time	4
High	3	Frequently	5
		Usually	6
		Almost always	7

## 5.3 Descriptive Statistics of the Respondents

The online questionnaire consisted of two qualifying questions that were used to filter out invalid responses. These were used to determine whether the respondent could progress to the survey questions and were therefore not included in the data analysis. Additionally, three demographic questions of age, gender and country of residence were included to assist in describing the sample.

### 5.3.1 Sample Description

The online questionnaire consisted of two qualifying questions that were used to filter out invalid responses. These were used to determine whether the respondent could progress to the survey questions and were therefore not included in the data analysis. Additionally, three demographic questions of age, gender and country of residence were included to assist in describing the sample.

A total of 407 responses were collected over a two month period of which 84 were considered valid. Five respondents had not eaten at a restaurant within the past six months and a further 292 respondents had not posted any of their positive restaurant experiences online within the past six months from the time of completing the survey as shown in Table 3. Since they did not meet the population qualification criteria they were therefore discarded. A further 26 responses were excluded because they failed to answer all questions.

**Table 3**

*Qualifying questions response summary*

Number of respondents		<b>407</b>	
		Response Count	Percent
Eaten at Restaurant	Yes	402	98.8%
	No	5	1.2%
Posted Online	Yes	109	27.2%
	No	292	72.8%
	Skipped	6	-


















The resulting sample size of 84 was deemed adequate to answer the research questions as it met the minimum requirements for performing the relevant tests as discussed in Chapter 4. The response rate refers to the proportion of members of a sample that respond to a questionnaire (Vogt, 2005, p.279). Since the snowball sampling method was used, it was not possible to determine the response rate.

### 5.3.2 Demographic Questions

The demographic information of the valid respondents is presented in Table 4. From the table, it can be seen that a significant portion of the respondents (61.9%) fell within the 25 to 34 age group and no responses were received from people older than 65. There were also slightly more female respondents than male respondents in the sample. South Africa accounted for 73.8% of the sample size and most countries only had one valid response. The skewness in these distributions could possibly be attributed the sampling method employed as discussed in the research limitations presented in Chapter 4.

**Table 4**

*Summary of demographic information*

Number of respondents		84		
	Value	Response Count	Percent	Graph
Age	18 to 24	8	9.5%	
	25 to 34	52	61.9%	
	35 to 44	22	26.2%	
	45 to 54	1	1.2%	
	55 to 64	1	1.2%	
	65 or older	0	0.0%	
Gender	Male	34	40.5%	
	Female	50	59.5%	
Country	Barbados	1	1.2%	
	China	1	1.2%	
	Italy	1	1.2%	
	Namibia	1	1.2%	
	South Africa	62	73.8%	
	Spain	1	1.2%	
	Swaziland	1	1.2%	
	UK	3	3.6%	
	USA	4	4.8%	
	Zimbabwe	9	10.7%	

## 5.4 Data Reliability

Testing for reliability of the measurement scales was conducted by calculating the Cronbach's Alpha coefficients. Scores higher than 0.7 were deemed to be acceptable as prescribed. Table 5 shows the scores for the measurement scales used in this study.

Although the Cronbach's Alpha score of 0.699 could have been accepted to ensure consistency with the scale of five items widely used in literature, the internal consistency of the subjective norms scale was improved by removing the item "*The people in my life whose opinions I value would approve of me posting positive restaurant experiences online*" to achieve a higher score of 0.730. This was done in order to be more consistent with the scores obtained from the literature review as well as the other scales in the data set.

All the other scales exhibited internal consistency as evidenced by the acceptable scores which were above 0.7. The variances in the observed internal consistency scores from those in the literature could possibly be attributed to the fact that these scales have been mostly been used to measure health behaviours.

**Table 5**

*Internal consistency of measurement scales*

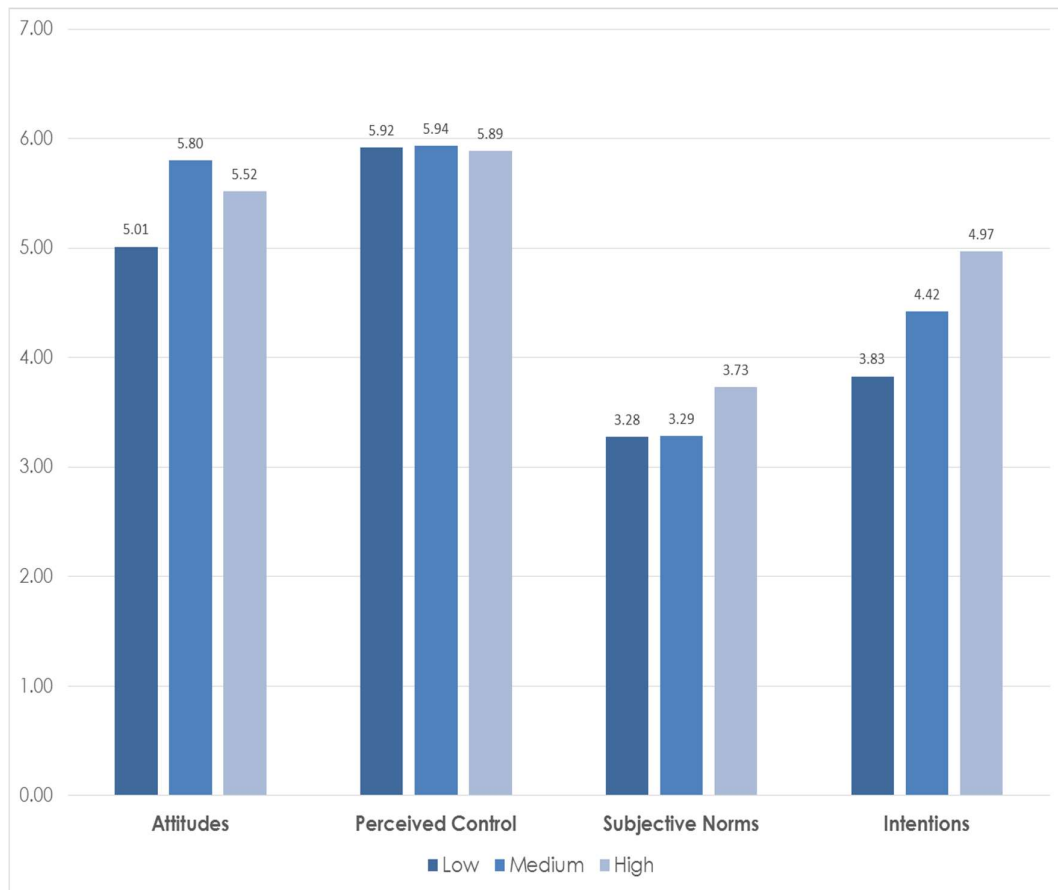
Measurement Scale	Before Modification		After Modification		Literature Review
	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha	CronBach's Alpha
Attitudes	5	0.840	-	-	0.83
Subjective_Norm	5	0.699	4	0.730	0.86
Perceived_Control	4	0.845	-	-	0.82
Intention	3	0.764	-	-	0.94
Habit_Automaticity	8	0.809	-	-	-
Habit_Frequency	3	0.709	-	-	-
Habit_Identity	1	n/a	-	-	-
Habit_Total	12	0.865	-	-	0.94

## 5.5 Descriptive Statistics of the Measurement Scales

Figure 1 presents the means for the measurement scales of intention and its determinants across the three past behavioural frequency groups. It is interesting to note that attitudes increase from Low to Medium groups but then decreases from Medium to High. Another interesting observation is that perceived control does not seem to change between the three groups as mean values only range from 5.89 to 5.94 and are relatively large compared to intentions and subjective norms. Subjective norms do not show a difference between low and medium groups, but the mean increases thereafter. Lastly, intentions show a constant increase between the groups from low to high frequency. Although Figure 1 shows interesting trends, these differences will be tested for statistical significance for hypothesis one.

**Figure 1**

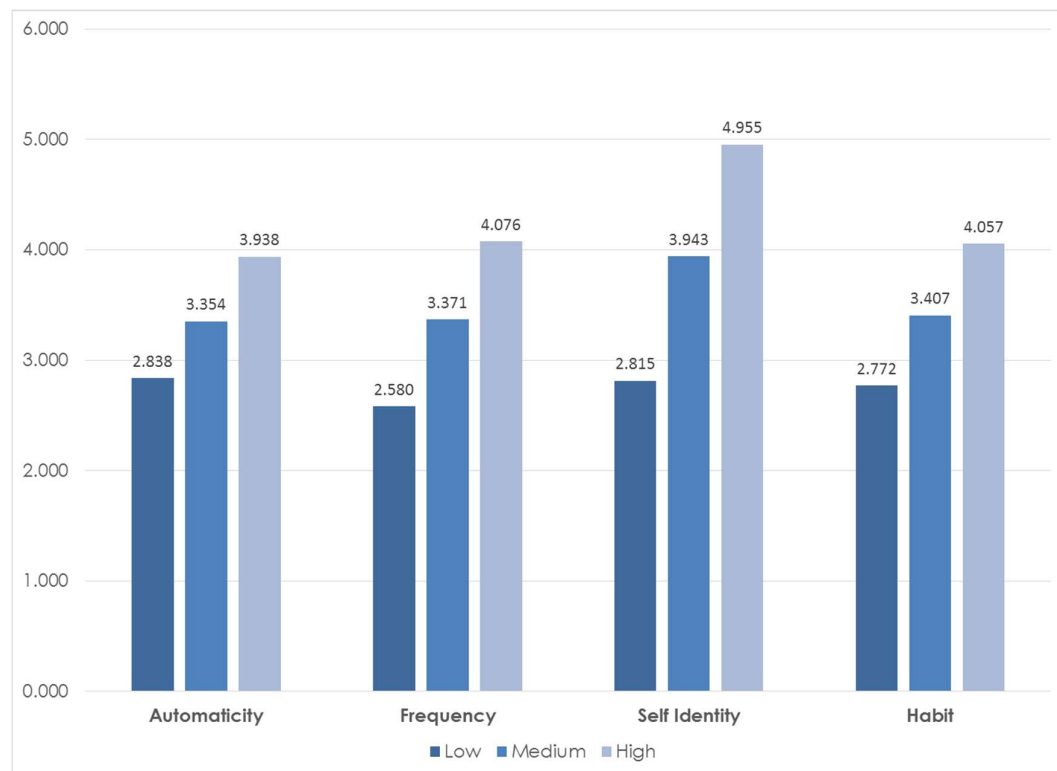
*Means for the TPB measurement scales*



The graph shown in Figure 2 represents the mean scores for the habit measurement scale as well as its dimensions of automaticity, frequency and self-identity across the three past behaviour frequency groups. The graph reveals that there is a relatively constant increase in habit and all of its dimensions as past behavioural frequency increases. Apart from the high frequency group on self-identity which has a mean of 4.955, habit and its dimensions are fairly consistent and there is little variance within the groups. For example, the low frequency group has means ranging from only 2.580 to 2.838 from the four measurement scales. The differences represented in the graph were tested for statistical significance in hypothesis three.

**Figure 2**

*Mean for Habit measurement scales*





**Figure 3**

*Regression plot for Intentions and Habit*

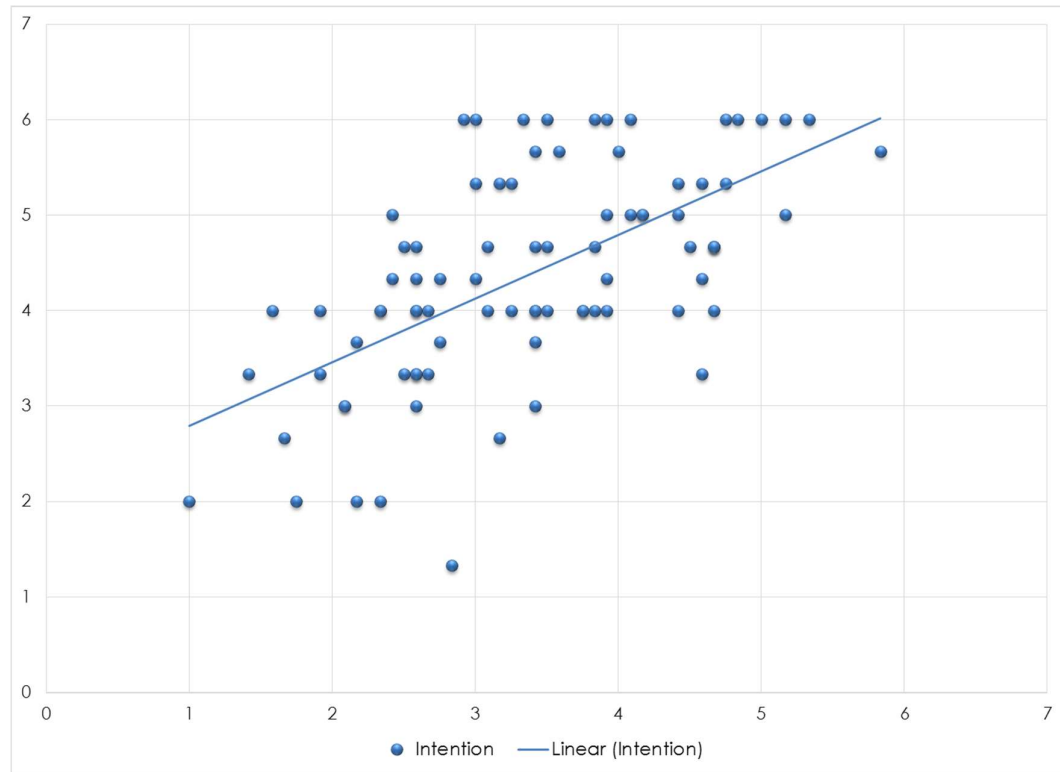


Figure 3 represents a regression scatterplot that shows the relationship between intentions and habits. It can be seen that there is a linear positive relationship between intentions and habits for all respondents in the sample. This relationship will be verified in the tests for hypotheses four, taking past behaviour into account.

## 5.6 Results for Hypothesis One

Research hypothesis one sought to understand the effect of past behavioural frequency on the determinants of intention according to the theory of planned behaviour. The one-way ANOVA test was used to test whether attitudes, subjective norms and perceived control were different for groups of people with different past behavioural frequencies. The responses were classified into three groups: Low ( $n = 27$ ), Medium ( $n = 35$ ) and High ( $n = 22$ ) based on the criteria described in Section 5.2

The null hypotheses ( $H_0$ ) are stated below:

- (a) Past behaviour frequency has no effect on attitudes towards positive online WOM behaviour

- (b) Past behaviour frequency has no effect on subjective norms regarding positive online WOM behaviour
- (c) Past behaviour frequency has no effect on attitudes towards positive online WOM behaviour

The alternative hypotheses in all the above cases describes a test for equality and therefore signals a two-tailed test. Thus, there was no need to further manipulate the test output as would be the case for one-sided tests. The tests were performed at a 95% level of confidence ( $p < 0.05$ ). The results from the tests are presented in Table 6.

**Table 6**

*ANOVA output for Hypothesis 1*

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Attitude	Between Groups	9.511	2	4.756	3.716	0.029
	Within Groups	103.646	81	1.280		
	Total	113.157	83			
Perceived_Control	Between Groups	0.033	2	0.016	0.018	0.982
	Within Groups	73.134	81	0.903		
	Total	73.167	83			
Subjective_Norm	Between Groups	3.217	2	1.608	1.365	0.261
	Within Groups	95.423	81	1.178		
	Total	98.640	83			

With p-value = 0.029, the null hypothesis from the ANOVA test for attitudes was rejected in favour of the alternate hypothesis ( $p < 0.05$ ). Therefore there was a statistically significant difference between at least two of the three past behaviour groups of low medium and high frequency.

The p-values for perceived control and subjective norms were 0.982 and 0.261 respectively and these were greater than 0.05, hence the null hypotheses could not be rejected. Thus it could be concluded that there was no significant difference between the three groups. The p-value for perceived control was quite high (close to 1.000) indicating the level of similarity between the three groups in their perceptions of control over positive WOM behaviour. The implications of these results will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.

**Table 7**

*Homogeneity of Variances test output for Hypothesis 1*

	Levene Statistic	df1	df2	Sig.
Attitude	0.984	2	81	0.378
Perceived Control	1.341	2	81	0.267
Subjective_Norm	1.167	2	81	0.316

**Table 8**

*Post Hoc Analysis output for Hypothesis 1*

Bonferroni						
	Dependent Variable		Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	
Attitude	Low	Medium	-0.787654321*	0.2897440463	0.024	
		High	-0.502805836	0.3248922845	0.377	
	Medium	Low				
		High	0.284848485	0.3077702558	1.000	
	High	Low				
		Medium				
Perceived_Control	Low	Medium	-0.01905	0.24339	1.000	
		High	0.03030	0.27291	1.000	
	Medium	Low				
		High	0.04935	0.25853	1.000	
	High	Low				
		Medium				
Subjective_Norm	Low	Medium	-0.00794	0.27801	1.000	
		High	-0.44949	0.31174	0.460	
	Medium	Low				
		High	-0.44156	0.29531	0.416	
	High	Low				
		Medium				

In order to understand which groups exhibited differences, a post hoc analysis was conducted. The Levene's test for homogeneity of variances whose results are provided in Table 7 showed that equal variances could be assumed since all p-values were greater than 0.05. Therefore the Bonferroni test was used for the post hoc analysis and the results are presented in Table 8. These results show that only one group pair, Low-Medium, showed a statistically significant difference between the means for the attitudes towards positive WOM behaviour. This is evidenced by a p-value of 0.024 which is significant at the 95% level of confidence.

Overall the tests for hypothesis 1 suggest that past behaviour has no effect on the perceived behavioural control and the subjective norms regarding positive WOM dissemination. However, for attitudes towards the behaviour, past behaviour has an effect between low to medium frequency of past behaviour. An interesting observation is that there is no significant difference between the low and high frequency groups. By comparing the means shown in Figure 1, it can be seen that attitudes towards WOM behaviour increase from low to medium frequency and then decrease as frequency of past behaviour becomes higher. The findings from these tests will be discussed in Chapter 6.

## 5.7 Results for Hypothesis Two

Research hypothesis two sought to understand the influence of past behavioural frequency in predicting intentions to disseminate positive WOM online. This was achieved by conducting a multiple linear regression with and without the past behaviour predictor variable and comparing the output. The null hypotheses for the tests are shown below:

- (a) There is no relationship between attitudes and intentions for positive online WOM behaviour
- (b) There is no relationship between subjective norms and intentions for positive online WOM behaviour
- (c) There is no relationship between perceived control and intentions for positive online WOM behaviour
- (d) There is no relationship between past behaviour and intentions for positive online WOM behaviour

The multiple regression was conducted at the 95% level of confidence ( $\alpha = 0.05$ ). The first iteration excluded past behaviour from the prediction equation and the results are presented in Tables 9, 10 and 11.

**Table 9**

*Model Summary for MLR excluding past behaviour*

<b>Model Summary</b>				
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.585 <sup>a</sup>	0.342	0.318	0.9260944832

a. Predictors: (Constant), Subjective\_Norm, Perceived\_Control, Attitudes

**Table 10**

*ANOVA output from regression excluding past behaviour*

ANOVA <sup>a</sup>						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	35.700	3	11.900	13.875	.000 <sup>b</sup>
	Residual	68.612	80	0.858		
	Total	104.312	83			

a. Dependent Variable: Intentions

b. Predictors: (Constant), Subjective\_Norm, Perceived\_Control, Attitudes

**Table 11**

*Coefficients output from regression excluding past behaviour*

Coefficients <sup>a</sup>						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	Sig.	
		B	Std. Error	Beta		t
1	(Constant)	-0.140	0.814		-0.172	0.864
	Attitudes	0.410	0.092	0.427	4.460	0.000
	Perceived_Control	0.251	0.110	0.210	2.278	0.025
	Subjective_Norm	0.231	0.098	0.224	2.347	0.021

a. Dependent Variable: Intentions

From the ANOVA output shown in Table 10, the p-value of 0.000 ( $p < 0.05$ ) shows that there is overwhelming evidence that there is a statistically significant relationship between intentions and their determinants. An inspection into the individual independent variables in Table 11 shows that all these predictor variables have a statistically significant relationship with intentions ( $p$ -value  $< 0.05$ ). Of these variables, attitudes have the largest influence on intentions (beta = 0.427). Altogether these variables explain 34.2 percent (R-Square = 0.342) of the variance in the prediction of intentions as shown in Table 9.

Past behaviour was then introduced into the model to determine whether the new model would be statistically significant and if so, to compare the size of the explained variance in predicting intentions. The results of the linear regression analysis including past behaviour as a predictor variable are provided in Tables 12, 13 and 14.

**Table 12**

*Model Summary for regression including past behaviour*

<b>Model Summary</b>				
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.655a	0.429	0.400	0.8682067972

a. Predictors: (Constant), Past\_Behaviour, Perceived\_Control, Subjective\_Norm, Attitudes

**Table 13**

*ANOVA output from regression including past behaviour*

<b>ANOVA<sup>a</sup></b>						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	44.763	4	11.191	14.846	.000b
	Residual	59.549	79	0.754		
	Total	104.312	83			

a. Dependent Variable: Intentions

b. Predictors: (Constant), Past\_Behaviour, Perceived\_Control, Subjective\_Norm, Attitudes

**Table 14**

*Coefficients output from regression including past behaviour*

<b>Coefficients<sup>a</sup></b>						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
1	(Constant)	-0.498	0.770		-0.647	0.520
	Attitudes	0.359	0.087	0.374	4.107	0.000
	Perceived_Control	0.254	0.103	0.213	2.457	0.016
	Subjective_Norm	0.196	0.093	0.191	2.116	0.037
	Past_Behaviour	0.217	0.062	0.303	3.468	0.001

a. Dependent Variable: Intentions

From the ANOVA output shown in Table 13, the p-value is still 0.000 after introducing past behaviour indicating that the regression model is still valid and statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ). Table 14 shows that all other independent variables remained statistically significant ( $p$ -value  $< 0.05$ ). However, the Beta coefficients were reduced, particularly for attitudes thus providing evidence of potential moderation effects of past behaviour in

predicting intentions. In contrast, the beta coefficient for perceived control only changed from 0.210 to 0.213 indicating a weak moderation effect of past behaviour on perceived control as already been shown in Hypothesis 1. The explained variance of the model increased significantly from 34.2 percent to 42.9 percent after the introduction of past behaviour into the model as shown in Table 12.

The tests for hypothesis two revealed that all the determinants of TPB have a significant effect in the prediction of intentions to post online positive WOM, with attitudes having the most effect. The results also showed that past behaviour has additional 8.7 percent explanation of variance in the prediction of intentions that is not accounted for by the determinants of TPB.

### 5.8 Results for Hypothesis Three

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The third research hypothesis focused on identifying the presence of habit in online WOM communications. A one-way ANOVA test was performed to test the difference in means for the three past behavioural frequency groups (Low, Medium, High) across the three dimensions of habit recorded in the habit scale (automaticity, frequency, self-identity), as well as the entire habit scale. Difference in the groups would indicate that habit is at play. The following null hypotheses were tested:

- (a) Past behavioural frequency has no significant effect on automaticity of online positive WOM behaviour
- (b) Past behavioural frequency has no significant effect on self-identity of the online positive WOM communicator
- (c) Past behavioural frequency has no significant effect on habit strength

Similar to all the other tests performed in this study, the two-tailed test for differences was conducted at a 95% level of significance and the results are presented in Tables 16, 17, and 18.

From Table 16, it can be seen that there was overwhelming evidence to show that there is a statistically significant difference between at least two of the three groups for all the habit dimensions ( $p$ -value  $< 0.05$ ). Thus, all the null hypotheses could be rejected. Due to the equality of variance shown in Table 15 ( $p$ -value  $< 0.05$ ) for all habit dimensions, the Bonferroni test was conducted to investigate the individual intergroup differences. The results for the post hoc analysis are presented in Table 17.

**Table 15**

*Homogeneity of Variances test output for Hypothesis 3*

<b>Test of Homogeneity of Variances</b>				
	Levene Statistic	df1	df2	Sig.
Automaticity	0.206	2	81	0.815
Frequency of Behaviour	0.231	2	81	0.795
Self-Identity	1.585	2	81	0.211
Habit	0.170	2	81	0.844

**Table 16**

*ANOVA output for Hypothesis 3*

<b>ANOVA</b>						
		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Automaticity	Between Groups	14.666	2	7.333	7.364	0.001
	Within Groups	80.658	81	0.996		
	Total	95.323	83			
Frequency	Between Groups	27.405	2	13.703	11.267	0.000
	Within Groups	98.510	81	1.216		
	Total	125.915	83			
Self-Identity	Between Groups	56.074	2	28.037	12.416	0.000
	Within Groups	182.914	81	2.258		
	Total	238.988	83			
Habit	Between Groups	20.093	2	10.047	11.980	0.000
	Within Groups	67.927	81	0.839		
	Total	88.021	83			



**Table 17**

*Post Hoc Analysis output for Hypothesis 3*

		<b>Multiple Comparisons</b>			
		Bonferroni			
Dependent Variable			Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.
Automaticity	Low	Medium	-0.51561	0.25560	0.141
		High	-1.09954*	0.28661	0.001
	Medium	Low			
		High	-0.58393	0.27150	0.103
Frequency	Low	Medium	-0.791181658*	0.2824736890	0.019
		High	-1.49551066*	0.3167399755	0.000
	Medium	Low			
		High	-0.704329004	0.3000475787	0.064
Self Identity	Low	Medium	-1.128*	0.385	0.013
		High	-2.140*	0.432	0.000
	Medium	Low			
		High	-1.012*	0.409	0.046
Habit	Low	Medium	-0.635537919*	0.2345626890	0.025
		High	-1.28521324*	0.2630169933	0.000
	Medium	Low			
		High	-0.649675325*	0.2491558316	0.033
	High	Low			
		Medium			

\*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

The results from the post hoc analysis revealed that, for the automaticity dimension, there was only a statistically significant difference between the Low and High groups ( $p = 0.001$ ) and the Medium group had no statistically significant difference with the other groups.

The self-identity dimension had statistically significant differences between all three groups as shown in the  $p$ -values which were all less than 0.05. Since this dimension was based on a one-item scale, a Pearson's bivariate correlation was performed to confirm the relationship between self-identity and past behaviour. A positive linear relationship was observed ( $r(82) = 0.474$ ) which was overwhelmingly statistically significant. ( $p = 0.000$ ).

Lastly, all three groups interestingly showed statistically significant differences from each other for habit strength as shown by the  $p$ -values that are all less than 0.05. These findings indicate that habit strength increases from Low to Medium frequency and from Medium to High frequency of past behaviour. The implications of these findings are discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.

## 5.9 Results for Hypothesis Four

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Research Hypothesis four was interested in investigating the interaction of intentions and habit for online positive WOM behaviour. Therefore two Pearson's partial correlation analyses were performed to assess, first the relationship between habit and past behaviour while controlling for intention, and secondly, the relationship between intentions and past behaviour while controlling for habit. By computing zero-order correlations, it was possible to identify the relationship between the variables before and after the control variable was introduced.

There were linear relationships between intentions, habit and past behaviour which were assessed using scatterplots and partial regression plots to satisfy the conditions necessary for the test. Normality was assumed and there were no significant outliers as discussed in Chapter 4. The results for the analysis on habits and past behaviour are provided in Table 18.

**Table 18**

*Pearson's Correlation output for Habit - Past Behaviour*

			<b>Correlations</b>		
Control Variables			Habit	Past Behaviour	Intentions
-none <sup>a</sup>	Habit	Correlation	1.000	0.474	0.612
		Significance (2-tailed)		0.000	0.000
		df	0	82	82
	Past Behaviour	Correlation	0.474	1.000	0.411
		Significance (2-tailed)	0.000		0.000
		df	82	0	82
	Intentions	Correlation	0.612	0.411	1.000
		Significance (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	
		df	82	82	0
Past_Behaviour	Habit	Correlation	1.000	0.309	
		Significance (2-tailed)		0.005	
		df	0	81	
	Past Behaviour	Correlation	0.309	1.000	
		Significance (2-tailed)	0.005		
		df	81	0	

a. Cells contain zero-order (Pearson) correlations.

A bivariate Pearson's correlation demonstrated that there was a moderate positive linear relationship between habit and past behaviour ( $r(82) = 0.474$ ) which was statistically significant ( $p = 0.000$ ). The Pearson's partial correlation then established that the strength of this linear relationship was attenuated when intention was controlled for ( $r_{\text{partial}}(81) = 0.309$ ), but still statistically significant ( $p = 0.005$ ).

The analysis was then repeated for the relationship between intentions and past behaviour while controlling for habit and the results are shown in Table 19.

**Table 19**

*Pearson's Correlation output for Intention - Past Behaviour*

			<b>Correlations</b>		
Control Variables			Intentions	Past Behaviour	Habit
-none <sup>a</sup>	Intentions	Correlation	1.000	0.411	0.612
		Significance (2-tailed)		0.000	0.000
		df	0	82	82
	Past Behaviour	Correlation	0.411	1.000	0.474
		Significance (2-tailed)	0.000		0.000
		df	82	0	82
	Habit	Correlation	0.612	0.474	1.000
		Significance (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	
		df	82	82	0
Past_Behaviour	Intentions	Correlation	1.000	0.173	
		Significance (2-tailed)		0.117	
		df	0	81	
	Past Behaviour	Correlation	0.173	1.000	
		Significance (2-tailed)	0.117		
		df	81	0	

a. Cells contain zero-order (Pearson) correlations.

The bivariate Pearson's correlation demonstrated that there was a moderate positive linear relationship between intentions and past behaviour ( $r(82) = 0.411$ ) which was statistically significant ( $p = 0.000$ ). The Pearson's partial correlation then showed that the strength of this linear relationship was attenuated to a weak relationship when habit was controlled for ( $r_{\text{partial}}(81) = 0.173$ ), and was not statistically significant ( $p = 0.117$ ).

In order to investigate which dimensions of habit were responsible for the attenuation of the relationship between past behaviour and intentions, the above test was repeated for each dimension. The results shown in Appendix B revealed that each of the dimensions attenuated the relationship to a weak one, with automaticity resulting in the most attenuation. However in each case, the relationship was still statistically significant. Therefore, only the combination of all three dimensions resulted in a weak relationship that was not statistically significant.

## CHAPTER SIX : RESULTS

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### 6.1 Introduction

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The purpose of this research was to investigate the role of past behaviour in predicting future behaviour for online positive WOM. In particular, the aim was to determine whether such communication can become habitual with increasing frequency of the behaviour. This chapter serves to discuss the findings presented in Chapter 5 in the context of the research objectives and the literature review outlined in previous chapters.

The literature review highlighted that when goal directed behaviours are repeated over time, they are likely to be guided by automatically accessed intentions or through habit. This chapter uses the evidence from Chapter 5 to explore these phenomena in the WOM context.

### 6.2 Discussion from the testing of Hypothesis 1

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Research hypothesis one was aimed at identifying whether there is an indirect relationship between past behaviour and intentions in that the frequency of past behaviour would have an effect on the determinants of intention. The expected result was that the frequency of past WOM behaviour would have a positive effect on these dimensions. In other words, when people become more experienced with posting online positive WOM, their attitudes towards the behaviour, subjective norms and perceived control over the behaviour was expected to increase (Ajzen, 1991; Higgins, 1996).

The results indicated that this was only true for attitudes towards the behaviour and not for subjective norms and perceived control. There was a significant difference in the attitudes of people that rarely post positive eWOM and those that post at medium frequency. However, there was no difference in the attitudes for these rare communicators compared to the people that post frequently.

There may be a number of reasons to explain the observed effect of past behaviour on attitudes. Within TPB, attitudes refers to the desirability of outcomes of a behaviour (Ajzen, 1985) and the effect of experience could be due to positive reinforcement (Bolles, 1972). Since WOM communication is goal directed, it would require some experience with the behaviour to determine the strength of the relationship between this instrumental action and the goal. Therefore when people post more frequently and see positive results of their actions, their attitudes towards the behaviour are likely to strengthen. Once these

attitudes have been established, frequency of the behaviour should therefore not continue to have an effect.

Nevertheless, the analysis in the descriptive statistics indicated that attitudes towards positive WOM initially increase, and then decrease as people become more experience with the behaviour. Apart from the fact that attitudes stabilize over time (Ajzen, 2002), this can also be explained by the fact that people engage in positive WOM communications due to product involvement and self enhancement (Sundaram et al., 1998). This requires that the factors that trigger WOM behaviour should continue to be novel experiences. For most behaviours, particularly those that are repeated frequently, product involvement is attenuated over time as was suggested by Richins and Bloch (1986).

Another possible explanation for the decrease in attitude strength is due to their automatic evaluation over time. Automaticity and habit formation will be discussed in subsequent sections, but it is important to note here that when behaviours become automatic, attitudes are readily accessible in memory and the introspective ability in measuring them is reduced (Fan et al., 2006).

The results also showed that past behaviour had no effect on subjective norms. This could be attributed to the fact that these are perceptions of norms that are external to the person and are moderated by outcome expectations and group identity (Lapinski & Rimal, 2005). Once a person has discovered the group norms that prescribe and proscribe behaviour, the perceptions of these external norms should not change regardless of how many times the behaviours is performed. As with attitudes, perceptions of norms stabilize over time (Ajzen, 2002) and perhaps measuring perceptions of people that do not post (no past behaviour) could have confirmed this argument. Also, because positive WOM has been described as a public good phenomenon, it makes sense that people would have positive perceptions of its social outcomes whether or not they actually perform the behaviour (Cheung & Lee, 2012).

Lastly, the results showed that perceptions of control and efficacy over the behaviour were not affected by past behaviour. The descriptive statistics showed that the means for all the three groups were relatively high, indicating that people who post online generally believe that they have the required skills, resources and opportunity to do so (Ajzen, 1985). PBC measures perceptions about the instrumental action. Hence the results make sense since the online users sampled already knew how to post content on social network platforms. However, these actions may have been learnt in other contexts and not necessarily for WOM.

As a result, the simple answer to research hypothesis one is that past behaviour indirectly influences intentions but only through attitudes and not through social norms and PBC. These findings do not fully support the findings of Ajzen (1991) that intentions are expected to become stronger with repeated behaviour through attitudes norms and PBC and this could possibly be due to the fact that the theory has been mostly used for health behaviours such as drinking milk, drug use and physical exercise (Ouellette & Wood, 1998).

### 6.3 Discussion from the testing of Hypothesis 2

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Research hypothesis two sought to demonstrate that past behaviour would be able to predict behaviour over and above the other determinants of intentions. The expectation from this analysis was that there would be a significant increase in the proportion of variance explained by adding past behaviour into the intention prediction model (Norman & Smith, 1995; Ajzen, 2002).

From the analysis, it was observed that all the determinants of intentions according to TPB were significant contributors to its prediction for positive WOM dissemination. Attitudes contributed significantly more than their counterparts in predicting intentions. This is consistent with self-determination theory (Ryan, Sheldon, Kasser & Deci, 1996) which argues that intentions derived from attitudes are intrinsic in nature and self-chosen, and are therefore more likely to be more consistent with behaviour.

Another possible explanation for higher effect of attitudes on intention could have been linked to the results discussed in the previous section which indicated that subjective norms and PBC are generally consistent for online positive WOM. In other words, by being a social good, people generally have the same perceptions on positive WOM and therefore the enactment of the behaviour depends on the personal evaluations of the desirability of the outcomes (Ajzen, 1985).

Adding past behavioural frequency to the prediction model resulted in a significant increase in the explained variance from 34.2 percent to 42.9 percent. The effect of attitude in the predictions of intentions was reduced by adding past behaviour. While this was not specifically tested for, it is reasonable to speculate that past behaviour moderated the effects of attitudes on intentions since it was found in hypothesis one that past behaviour has an effect on attitudes. Likewise, the effect of subjective norms and PBC were not really affected by the introduction of past behaviour.

The significance of this result is that it helps to answer the overarching question of this study. Past behaviour has a significant influence in the prediction of future behaviour through intentions. In the results, the effect of past behaviour was even greater than that of subjective norms and perceived control. This means that the expectation of reward or punishment, or affiliation to the social group in which norms are formed is less important than past behaviour for someone to post positive WOM online.

To summarize, the results from this hypothesis disproves the findings of Ajzen (1985;1991) that the effects of past behaviour would be fully mediated by perceptions of desirability, norms, behavioural control and intentions to perform the behaviour. Rather, they support Ajzen (2002) and therefore it can be concluded that past behaviour has an effect on intentions that is not accounted for by the determinants of TPB.

#### 6.4 Discussion from the testing of Hypothesis 3

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The first part of the research objectives was aimed at identifying whether past behaviour plays a role in predicting future behaviour. The second part of the research objectives was to investigate the nature of this relationship between past and future behaviour. Hypothesis three therefore sought to examine the existence of habit in WOM communications. The habituation perspective on frequency of behaviour suggests that behaviours become more automatic in stable contexts (Ouellette & Wood, 1998). The expectation was that frequent WOM communicators would exhibit greater habit strength as measured by the habit dimension.

As expected, the results confirmed that various degrees of past WOM behaviour exhibit proportional degrees of habit strength. Stated another way, the degree to which a person has posted positive WOM communications online in the past serves as an indication of the level to which that behaviour has become a habit. For the entire habit measurement scale, the results showed that all three groups of past behavioural frequency were significantly different from each other. That is to say, when the dimensions of habit provided by Verplanken and Orbell (2003) are considered holistically, it can be concluded that habit is present in such online communications. To further understand which components of habit this observation was attributable to, each dimension of habit was considered individually with interesting results.

Differences in automaticity were only observed between low and high frequency groups. This implies that automaticity can only be traced when comparing low frequencies and very high frequencies of past behaviour. When considering that Bargh (1994) defines the characteristics of automaticity to include lack of awareness and lack of controllability,



it can be deduced that a behaviour has to be performed very frequently before a person begins to perform a behaviour without conscious deliberation. Although automaticity was evident, these results are inconclusive on whether automaticity is attributable to habit since behaviours can also be guided by automatically accessible intentions (Ajzen & Fishbein, 2000). Research hypothesis four discussed addressed this issue and the results are discussed in in section 6.3.

The frequency dimension of habit measured both the opportunity for behaviour and how often it had been performed in the past. Because the analysis was based on three classifications on past behavioural frequency, the results for this dimension are not particularly insightful when it is considered independently since both variables measured the same thing.

Interestingly, the results on self-identity showed significant differences between all groups. The limitation of this scale was that it was a one-item scale. Therefore a subsequent test was performed to investigate the relationship between past behaviour and self-identity. While many authors have questioned the inclusions of self-identity as a measure of habit strength (Gardner et al., 2011), the findings in the analysis agreed with its inclusion since it increased significantly with past behaviour. The literature review noted that people engage in WOM communications to express who they are by publicly displaying their consumption experiences (Seaner et al., 2013). Therefore this evidence suggests that this desire increases as the behaviour is performed more frequently probably due to reinforcement (Bolles, 1972).

Findings from this hypothesis partially answered the question on whether WOM communications can be classified as a habit by showing that dimensions of habit are present in such communications. However, these findings do not take intentions into account. Despite this limitation, it can be concluded that WOM behaviour can be automatically triggered.

## 6.5 Discussion from the testing of Hypothesis 4

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In order to address the limitation of the results from the analysis in section 6.4, hypothesis four was interested in assessing the interaction between habit and intentions. Specifically, the aim was to determine whether the effect of past behaviour on intentions to perform WOM behaviour could be explained by habit. The expectation was that there would be an indirect negative relationship between intentions and habit strength.

The initial test showed that the relationship between habit and past behaviour explained in section 6.4, although still moderate and statistically significant, was reduced when accounting for intentions. In light of the findings in sections 6.3, it makes sense that the relationship between habit and past behaviour would still be significant. Stated simply, intentions do not significantly affect the influence of past behaviour in the formation of habit. This may sound counterintuitive, but as Sheeran (2017) has explained, there is a quadratic relationship between intentions and habit. The attenuation of the relationship also signals that some of the habitual WOM behaviours are intentional, and yet others are less guided by intentions. According to Bargh (1994), automatic behaviours can be both volitional and intentional and therefore the fact that a behaviour is being performed as a habit does not mean that it is unintentional.

The second test examined the relationship between intentions and past behaviour while controlling for habit. Although this relationship was initially moderate and statistically significant, it was attenuated by accounting for habit and became weak and not statistically significant. It can therefore be concluded that habit accounted for much of the relationship between intentions and past behaviour. According to Sheeran (2017), the interaction of intentions and past behaviour is U-shaped in the sense that increasing behavioural frequency first stabilizes intentions through strengthened attitudes, and then decreases as habit is formed.

These synthesize the research questions in that, while past behaviour is a significant predictor of intentions to post WOM communications online, part of these intentions are attributable to habit. Nevertheless, the implications of automaticity in WOM behaviour for both intentions and habits is the same.

## CHAPTER SEVEN : CONCLUSION

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### 7.1 Introduction

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The final chapter presents the major findings of the present study on how past behaviour influences future behaviour in word of mouth communications and discusses the business and academic implications of these findings. It also provides recommendations to stakeholders and outlines the limitations of the research resulting in directions for future research.

### 7.2 Research Background

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This study broadly investigated the role of past behaviour in predicting future behaviour in the context of online word of mouth communications. The objectives were twofold; Firstly, it aimed at establishing whether the frequency of posting eWOM communications has an effect on future communication. Secondly, it sought to explain the nature of this relationship by investigating whether such behaviour can be classified as a habit. The research problem arose from the discussion around social media addiction where people are uncontrollably online for significant amounts of time. Therefore there was a need to investigate whether these habitual online interactions could include business related content such as word of mouth.

The literature review suggested two avenues that past behaviour can influence behaviour. Frequent performance of a behaviour can increase the strength of intentions to perform that behaviour in the future as attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control become reinforced and become stronger (Ajzen; 1985; Ouellete & Wood, 1998). Alternatively, frequent repetition of a behaviour in a stable context can lead to habit formation where behaviour is directed by contextual cues (Ouelette & Wood, 1998; Sheeran, 2017).

Therefore, by demonstrating in the literature review the determinants of both perspectives and the suitability of positive WOM communication to take either avenue, the research design of this study was to determine how respondents varied in levels of intention and habit based on the frequency of past WOM behaviour.

## 7.3 Findings

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The major findings from this study are summarized as follows:

- While past behaviour has been found to influence the determinants of intention according to the theory of planned behaviour, this was only true for attitudes in the context of positive online WOM
- Past behaviour has a significant effect in the prediction of intentions over and above attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control.
- Online positive WOM can be automatically triggered due to repetition of the behaviour and this automaticity can be attributable to habit formation.

Therefore the research objectives were addressed and it was demonstrated that past behaviour has positive influence in the prediction of future behaviour and positive word of mouth can be classified as a habit when performed frequently.

## 7.4 Academic Contribution

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The theoretical contributions of this study are fourfold. Firstly, this study contributes to WOM literature on volume by addressing the gap on how it affects the sender in addition to the influence on the receiver and the firm that has already been addressed.

Secondly, research on habits is important for consumer behaviour because a lot of people's behaviours are repeated in everyday life and are usually performed in the same context. Building on Wood and Neal's (2009) argument that purchase and consumption are repetitive behaviours, this research argued that post-purchase behaviours too, such as word of mouth, are repetitive. Furthermore, this study contributes to the research on habits outside the domain of health behaviours such as exercise and smoking.

Thirdly, this study provided an opportunity to test the applicability of the theory of planned behaviour in the word of mouth context. This theory has been mostly researched in a wide variety of health behaviours such as eating junk food, condom use, drinking milk, drug use, physical exercise, seatbelt use and student's class attendance (Ouellette & Wood, 1998). Because it was supported, the applicability of the theory can be extended to the behaviour of people in their role as a consumer.

Lastly, this study built on the literature investigating the role of past behaviour on future behaviour. Only until recently that Sheeran (2017) identified a quadratic relationship between habits and intentions, there had been some debate among scholars regarding the moderating role of past behaviour on future behaviour (Ajzen, 2002; Ouelette &

Wood, 1998; Sheeran & Webb, 2016). These findings were supported by the results on this study.

## 7.5 Managerial Implications

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The research contributed to the existing knowledge on word of mouth communications, habits and intentions. The study showed that people that post frequently online are more likely to perform the behaviour in future. Therefore marketing managers are able to identify which customers are more likely to engage in WOM communication based on past behaviour. As a result, these managers can perform targeted marketing where they only send to their promoters, who can then share their experiences. Since WOM is more effective than traditional marketing (Bickart & Schindler, 2001), this approach constitutes a more effective strategy that significantly reduces marketing costs.

The findings also suggest that the number of likes and reviews on products and services can be misleading as they may be coming from the same people. In order to truly assess the effectiveness of their marketing campaigns on social media, they need to deduplicate reviews from the same clients, as well as elicit reviews from silent customers.

Habits are accompanied by an enduring cognitive disposition that makes the person less likely to be attentive to new information and courses of action (Aarts & Verplanken, 1999). Hence when consumer behaviour has habituated, the power of marketers in changing such behaviour is attenuated. If the habituated behaviours are favourable for the companies, lower marketing budgets are required for these customers because they are more likely to block out information from competitors. However, when the roles are reversed, marketers are less likely to be able to attract customers that have habituated towards alternatives, even if they have negative experience with the company in question.

## 7.6 Recommendations for Future Research

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In light of the various limitations to the research, the recommendations for future research are summarized as follows:

- Self-report surveys requesting respondents to report on past experiences are subject to availability bias which could have contaminated the results. A suggestion would be to conduct an experiment in which the actual behaviour is measured. This eliminates the need to measure behaviour using intentions.

- Because contextual cues cannot be measured in a survey, the habit scale used in the study did not measure all the conditions required to make bold conclusions. Similar to the above point, research designs that cater for this requirement are required
- The research methodology was designed within the restaurant context as a proxy and therefore this limited the applicability of the study to other contexts. Therefore there is need to verify the results of this study for other products and services.
- Some of the habit measurement scales used in the study were one-item scales and could lead to erroneous results. Scales from other literature could have been sought to build onto the habit scale that was used.

## 7.8 Concluding Statement

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In an increasingly digitally driven economy, the need to understand consumers is of paramount importance in order to be able to attract and retain their attention on product promotion platforms such as social media. Outsourcing this marketing role to happy customers has been proven to be very effective. Therefore there is an incentive to increase such WOM marketing activity.

This study highlighted that people engaging in WOM communications are more likely to continue doing so in the future if nothing changes in the context, to the point that they can even do it automatically without conscious deliberation.

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## APPENDICES

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### Appendix A: Blank Questionnaire

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 **Online Word of Mouth for Restaurants**

Dear Participant

The main purpose of this study is to understand consumer behaviour with regards to sharing their restaurant experiences on online platforms. You are requested to complete an electronic survey which should take no more than 10 minutes of your time.

Your participation is voluntary and you may withdraw from the process at any time without penalty and all responses are anonymous. By completing this survey, you indicate that you voluntarily participate in this research.

If you have any concerns about the research or the questionnaire, please contact the following:

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Your contribution to this study will be valuable and highly appreciated.



## Introduction

### INSTRUCTIONS

1. The following survey asks questions regarding your experiences at restaurants.
2. In this survey, a "restaurant" refers to any place where you can pay to sit down and eat meal(s) that are prepared and served on the premises.
3. In this survey, "Online platforms" refers to mediums used to facilitate mass communication through the internet and include social networks, blogs, micro-blogs, review platforms and company websites. (e.g Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter,)
4. In this survey, "posting online" refers to the publishing of content (pictures, audio, videos, compliments, reviews, etc) on an online platform

**\* 1. In the past six (6) months, how often have you eaten at a restaurant?**

- |  |                                     |
|--|-------------------------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> Never            | <input type="radio"/> Twice a month |
| <input type="radio"/> Once in 6 months | <input type="radio"/> Once a week   |
| <input type="radio"/> Once in 3 months | <input type="radio"/> Twice a week  |
| <input type="radio"/> Once a month     | <input type="radio"/> Every Day     |

**2. In the past six (6) months, have you posted any positive restaurant experiences online? (pictures of yourself, food, recommendations, comments, reviews, etc)**

- Yes
- No

\* 3. In the past six (6) months, about how often have you posted your positive restaurant experiences online?

- |  |                                     |
|--|-------------------------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> Almost never           | <input type="radio"/> Frequently    |
| <input type="radio"/> Rarely                 | <input type="radio"/> Usually       |
| <input type="radio"/> Occasionally           | <input type="radio"/> Almost always |
| <input type="radio"/> About half of the time |                                     |

\* 4. Posting positive restaurant experiences online is something that I do without thinking

- |   |                                      |
|---|--------------------------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree | <input type="radio"/> Somewhat Agree |
| <input type="radio"/> Disagree          | <input type="radio"/> Agree          |
| <input type="radio"/> Somewhat Disagree | <input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree |
| <input type="radio"/> Neutral           |                                      |

\* 5. For me to post positive content about my restaurant experiences online within the forthcoming month would be

Bad							Good
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

\* 6. The people in my life whose opinions I value would approve of me posting positive restaurant experiences online

- |   |                                      |
|---|--------------------------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree | <input type="radio"/> Somewhat Agree |
| <input type="radio"/> Disagree          | <input type="radio"/> Agree          |
| <input type="radio"/> Somewhat Disagree | <input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree |
| <input type="radio"/> Neutral           |                                      |

\* 7. I find it hard not to post positive restaurant experiences online

- |   |                                      |
|---|--------------------------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree | <input type="radio"/> Somewhat Agree |
| <input type="radio"/> Disagree          | <input type="radio"/> Agree          |
| <input type="radio"/> Somewhat Disagree | <input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree |
| <input type="radio"/> Neutral           |                                      |

**\* 8. For me to post positive content on restaurant experiences online in the forthcoming month would be impossible**

- |   |                                      |
|---|--------------------------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree | <input type="radio"/> Somewhat Agree |
| <input type="radio"/> Disagree          | <input type="radio"/> Agree          |
| <input type="radio"/> Somewhat Disagree | <input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree |
| <input type="radio"/> Neutral           |                                      |

**\* 9. I plan to post positive restaurant experiences online in the forthcoming month**

- |   |                                      |
|---|--------------------------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree | <input type="radio"/> Somewhat Agree |
| <input type="radio"/> Disagree          | <input type="radio"/> Agree          |
| <input type="radio"/> Somewhat Disagree | <input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree |
| <input type="radio"/> Neutral           |                                      |

**\* 10. I have a daily, weekly or monthly routine that includes posting positive restaurant experiences online**

- |   |                                      |
|---|--------------------------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree | <input type="radio"/> Somewhat Agree |
| <input type="radio"/> Disagree          | <input type="radio"/> Agree          |
| <input type="radio"/> Somewhat Disagree | <input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree |
| <input type="radio"/> Neutral           |                                      |

**\* 11. For me to post positive content about my restaurant experiences online within the forthcoming month would be**

- |                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Harmful               |                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |                       | Beneficial            |
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

**\* 12. I feel weird if I do not post positive restaurant experiences online.**

- |   |                                      |
|---|--------------------------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree | <input type="radio"/> Somewhat Agree |
| <input type="radio"/> Disagree          | <input type="radio"/> Agree          |
| <input type="radio"/> Somewhat Disagree | <input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree |
| <input type="radio"/> Neutral           |                                      |

**\* 13. It is expected of me that I should post positive restaurant experiences online**

- |   |                                      |
|---|--------------------------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree | <input type="radio"/> Somewhat Agree |
| <input type="radio"/> Disagree          | <input type="radio"/> Agree          |
| <input type="radio"/> Somewhat Disagree | <input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree |
| <input type="radio"/> Neutral           |                                      |

\* 14. I have been posting positive content on restaurant experiences online for a long time

- |   |                                      |
|---|--------------------------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree | <input type="radio"/> Somewhat Agree |
| <input type="radio"/> Disagree          | <input type="radio"/> Agree          |
| <input type="radio"/> Somewhat Disagree | <input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree |
| <input type="radio"/> Neutral           |                                      |

\* 15. How much control do you believe you have over posting positive restaurant experiences online in the forthcoming month?

No Control							Complete Control
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

\* 16. Posting positive restaurant experiences online is something that I do automatically?

- |   |                                      |
|---|--------------------------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree | <input type="radio"/> Somewhat Agree |
| <input type="radio"/> Disagree          | <input type="radio"/> Agree          |
| <input type="radio"/> Somewhat Disagree | <input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree |
| <input type="radio"/> Neutral           |                                      |

\* 17. I will try to post positive restaurant experiences online in the forthcoming month

- |   |                                      |
|---|--------------------------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree | <input type="radio"/> Somewhat Agree |
| <input type="radio"/> Disagree          | <input type="radio"/> Agree          |
| <input type="radio"/> Somewhat Disagree | <input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree |
| <input type="radio"/> Neutral           |                                      |

\* 18. Most people who are important to me post positive restaurant experiences online

- |   |                                      |
|---|--------------------------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree | <input type="radio"/> Somewhat Agree |
| <input type="radio"/> Disagree          | <input type="radio"/> Agree          |
| <input type="radio"/> Somewhat Disagree | <input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree |
| <input type="radio"/> Neutral           |                                      |

\* 19. It would require effort for me not to post restaurant experiences online

- |   |                                      |
|---|--------------------------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree | <input type="radio"/> Somewhat Agree |
| <input type="radio"/> Disagree          | <input type="radio"/> Agree          |
| <input type="radio"/> Somewhat Disagree | <input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree |
| <input type="radio"/> Neutral           |                                      |

\* 20. Posting positive restaurant experiences online is something that I do frequently?

- |   |                                      |
|---|--------------------------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree | <input type="radio"/> Somewhat Agree |
| <input type="radio"/> Disagree          | <input type="radio"/> Agree          |
| <input type="radio"/> Somewhat Disagree | <input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree |
| <input type="radio"/> Neutral           |                                      |

\* 21. For me to post positive content about my restaurant experiences online within the forthcoming month would be

Unpleasant							Pleasant
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

\* 22. Posting positive restaurant experiences online is something that I do not need to think about doing

- |   |                                      |
|---|--------------------------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree | <input type="radio"/> Somewhat Agree |
| <input type="radio"/> Disagree          | <input type="radio"/> Agree          |
| <input type="radio"/> Somewhat Disagree | <input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree |
| <input type="radio"/> Neutral           |                                      |

\* 23. If I wanted to, I could post positive restaurant experiences online in the forthcoming month

- |   |                                      |
|---|--------------------------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree | <input type="radio"/> Somewhat Agree |
| <input type="radio"/> Disagree          | <input type="radio"/> Agree          |
| <input type="radio"/> Somewhat Disagree | <input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree |
| <input type="radio"/> Neutral           |                                      |

\* 24. Most people who are important to me think that I should post positive restaurant experiences online

- |   |                                      |
|---|--------------------------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree | <input type="radio"/> Somewhat Agree |
| <input type="radio"/> Disagree          | <input type="radio"/> Agree          |
| <input type="radio"/> Somewhat Disagree | <input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree |
| <input type="radio"/> Neutral           |                                      |

\* 25. The people in my life who I value post positive content on restaurant experiences online

- |   |                                      |
|---|--------------------------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree | <input type="radio"/> Somewhat Agree |
| <input type="radio"/> Disagree          | <input type="radio"/> Agree          |
| <input type="radio"/> Somewhat Disagree | <input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree |
| <input type="radio"/> Neutral           |                                      |

\* 26. I do not have to consciously remember to post positive restaurant experiences online

- |   |                                      |
|---|--------------------------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree | <input type="radio"/> Somewhat Agree |
| <input type="radio"/> Disagree          | <input type="radio"/> Agree          |
| <input type="radio"/> Somewhat Disagree | <input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree |
| <input type="radio"/> Neutral           |                                      |

\* 27. For me to post positive content about my restaurant experiences online within the forthcoming month would be

Worthless							Valuable
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

\* 28. I find myself posting positive restaurant experiences online before I realize I'm doing it

- |   |                                      |
|---|--------------------------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree | <input type="radio"/> Somewhat Agree |
| <input type="radio"/> Disagree          | <input type="radio"/> Agree          |
| <input type="radio"/> Somewhat Disagree | <input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree |
| <input type="radio"/> Neutral           |                                      |

\* 29. It is mostly up to me whether or not I post positive restaurant experiences online

- |   |                                      |
|---|--------------------------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree | <input type="radio"/> Somewhat Agree |
| <input type="radio"/> Disagree          | <input type="radio"/> Agree          |
| <input type="radio"/> Somewhat Disagree | <input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree |
| <input type="radio"/> Neutral           |                                      |

\* 30. For me to post positive content about my restaurant experiences online within the forthcoming month would be

Unenjoyable Enjoyable

\* 31. Posting positive restaurant experiences online is typically me

- |   |                                      |
|---|--------------------------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree | <input type="radio"/> Somewhat Agree |
| <input type="radio"/> Disagree          | <input type="radio"/> Agree          |
| <input type="radio"/> Somewhat Disagree | <input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree |
| <input type="radio"/> Neutral           |                                      |

\* 32. I intend to post positive content on restaurant experiences online in the forthcoming month

- |   |                                      |
|---|--------------------------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree | <input type="radio"/> Somewhat Agree |
| <input type="radio"/> Disagree          | <input type="radio"/> Agree          |
| <input type="radio"/> Somewhat Disagree | <input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree |
| <input type="radio"/> Neutral           |                                      |

\* 33. Which country are you based in?

\* 34. What is your gender?

- Male  
 Female

\* 35. Which race/ethnicity best describes you?

- Asian  Indian  
 Black / African  White/ Caucasian  
 Coloured  
 Other (please specify)

36. What is your age group?

- 18 to 24  45 to 54  
 25 to 34  55 to 64  
 35 to 44  65 or older



## Appendix B: Pearson's Correlation output for Intention - Past Behaviour

### Correlations

Control Variables			Intentions	Past Behaviour	Automaticity
-none <sup>a</sup>	Intentions	Correlation	1.000	.411	.605
		Significance (2-tailed)	.	.000	.000
		df	0	82	82
	Past Behaviour	Correlation	.411	1.000	.417
		Significance (2-tailed)	.000	.	.000
		df	82	0	82
	Automaticity	Correlation	.605	.417	1.000
		Significance (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.
		df	82	82	0
Automaticity	Intentions	Correlation	1.000	.220	
		Significance (2-tailed)	.	.046	
		df	0	81	
	Past Behaviour	Correlation	.220	1.000	
		Significance (2-tailed)	.046	.	
		df	81	0	

a. Cells contain zero-order (Pearson) correlations.

### Correlations

Control Variables			Intentions	Past Behaviour	Behavioural Frequency
-none <sup>a</sup>	Intentions	Correlation	1.000	.411	.469
		Significance (2-tailed)	.	.000	.000
		df	0	82	82
	Past Behaviour	Correlation	.411	1.000	.408
		Significance (2-tailed)	.000	.	.000
		df	82	0	82
	Behavioural Frequency	Correlation	.469	.408	1.000
		Significance (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.
		df	82	82	0
Behavioural Frequency	Intentions	Correlation	1.000	.272	
		Significance (2-tailed)	.	.013	
		df	0	81	
	Past Behaviour	Correlation	.272	1.000	
		Significance (2-tailed)	.013	.	
		df	81	0	

a. Cells contain zero-order (Pearson) correlations.

### Correlations

Control Variables			Intentions	Past Behaviour	Self Identity
-none- <sup>a</sup>	Intentions	Correlation	1.000	.411	.383
		Significance (2-tailed)	.	.000	.000
		df	0	82	82
	Past Behaviour	Correlation	.411	1.000	.458
		Significance (2-tailed)	.000	.	.000
		df	82	0	82
	Self Identity	Correlation	.383	.458	1.000
		Significance (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.
		df	82	82	0
Self Identity	Intentions	Correlation	1.000	.287	
		Significance (2-tailed)	.	.009	
		df	0	81	
	Past Behaviour	Correlation	.287	1.000	
		Significance (2-tailed)	.009	.	
		df	81	0	

a. Cells contain zero-order (Pearson) correlations.

## Appendix C: Ethics Clearance Acceptance Letter

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# Gordon Institute of Business Science

University  
of Pretoria

10 August 2017

Gabriel Danda

Dear Gabriel,

*Please be advised that your application for Ethical Clearance has been approved.*

*You are therefore allowed to continue collecting your data conditional to the below:*

*We wish you everything of the best for the rest of the project.*

*Kind Regards*

GIBS MBA Research Ethical Clearance Committee