Strategic Utilization Of Ewom By SME Managers In The UAE: Insights From A Focus Group Study

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Abstract

This study examines the strategic utilization of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), influencer marketing, and customer testimonials by small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to enhance brand trust, customer engagement, and business performance. While prior research has predominantly focused on consumer perspectives, this study adopts a managerial lens to address a notable gap in the literature, particularly within the Gulf region. Using a qualitative methodology, the researcher conducted a 90-minute focus group discussion (FGD) with five SME leaders owners, CEOs, and managers from diverse sectors. Thematic analysis, based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, identified five core themes: (1) active managerial engagement with eWOM, (2) dynamic communication strategies, (3) authentic influencer partnerships, (4) culturally resonant customer testimonials, and (5) eWOM monitoring as a strategic advantage. The findings highlight how SME leaders in the UAE adapt digital engagement strategies to navigate a multicultural, technologically advanced, and highly regulated market. Despite the small sample size, the study offers valuable insights into leadership-driven eWOM practices that align with the UAE's Vision 2030. It provides context-specific recommendations for improving SME digital visibility and fostering customer loyalty in the current landscape. The research foregrounds managerial interpretations and responses to eWOM, contributing to both practical understanding and future scholarship in this area.

Keywords *eWOM, SMEs, influencer marketing, customer testimonials, managerial perspective, UAE.*

INTRODUCTION

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has undergone a rapid digital transformation, driven by state initiatives such as Vision 2030 and the innovation-centric legacy of Expo 2020. Consequently, small and medium-sized firms (SMEs) in the UAE's dynamic, multicultural economy are progressively embracing digital tools to maintain competitiveness and enhance consumer interaction. Among these instruments, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), informal, internet-mediated communication about products or brands, has emerged as a powerful marketing approach (Ismagilova et al., 2019; De Cicco et al., 2020; Wonseok et al., 2020).

For SMEs with limited marketing budgets, strategically managing eWOM through channels such as consumer reviews, testimonials, and influencer collaborations offers a cost-effective way to build trust and amplify brand credibility (Idomi & Ishola, 2022; Almarzoqi et al., 2025). However, while the consumer impact of eWOM is well-documented, there is a notable lack of research exploring how SME managers in the UAE perceive, implement, and navigate eWOM within their broader digital marketing strategies (Alalwan, 2018; Ladhari et al., 2020; Mejía-Trejo & Sanchez-Gutierrez, 2019; Dwivedi et al., 2021)

This study aims to explore how SME leaders in the UAE interpret and implement eWOM-related strategies, with a focus on the managerial use of influencer marketing, customer testimonials, and trust-building digital practices. By adopting a qualitative approach and drawing insights from a focused group discussion with SME executives, this research provides region-specific insights into the strategic role of eWOM. The study's findings are expected to inform both practice and policy by offering grounded recommendations that align with the needs and realities of SMEs in the UAE context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) and SME performance

Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) refers to consumer-generated statements, positive or negative, about products or firms that are shared publicly via digital platforms (Ismagilova et al., 2020). With increasing digital connectivity, eWOM has become a strategic communication tool that shapes purchasing decisions and brand perceptions. Compared to traditional advertising, eWOM is more cost-effective, credible, and interactive, offering clear benefits for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) operating under financial constraints (Abubakar et al., 2019). Emerging evidence suggests that eWOM is linked to improved business performance in SMEs, including increased customer acquisition, enhanced brand loyalty, and higher revenue growth (Alraja et al., 2022; Dey et al., 2021). Social media platforms, such as Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook, enable the rapid dissemination of user-generated content, thereby amplifying marketing reach and consumer influence (Kumar & Ayodeji, 2023).

In the UAE, where social media penetration exceeds 99% eWOM plays a central role in driving SME competitiveness and growth (Global Media Insight, 2024). According to several studies (Luong et al., 2017; Kuo & Nakhata, 2019; Alraja et al., 2022; Almarzoqi et al., 2025; Kumar & Ayodeji, 2023), small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the United Arab Emirates utilize electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) for marketing purposes as well as to increase customer happiness, market visibility, and brand credibility. Effective management of eWOM enables SMEs to build trust and long-term customer relationships. However, negative eWOM, if left unaddressed, can harm a reputation and reduce performance outcomes. Proactive monitoring and response strategies are therefore essential for sustaining SME performance in digital marketplaces (Erkan & Evans, 2022).

2.2 Trust, Testimonials, and Influencer Endorsements

Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) has become a crucial digital marketing approach, particularly advantageous for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) with limited marketing resources (Yosra et al., 2020; Ki & Kim, 2019). Influencer marketing is a critical element of electronic word of mouth (eWOM). This strategy involves utilizing social media personalities with substantial followings to promote brands, thereby enhancing consumer trust and engagement (Borchers, 2019). This approach often surpasses conventional advertising by cultivating personalized connections that resonate with specific target demographics (Eun, Jin-Woo, & Yu, 2020).

Nevertheless, the efficacy of influencer marketing for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the culturally diverse and digitally evolving market of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is still uncertain (Idomi & Ishola, 2022). Additionally, despite influencer endorsements enhancing brand credibility, concerns persist regarding the authenticity of paid promotions, as some consumers perceive these endorsements as less trustworthy (Rosario et al., 2019).

2.3 Managerial Engagement with eWOM in SMEs

While most studies focus on consumer perceptions of eWOM, recent research highlights the importance of managerial agency in initiating, curating, and responding to online feedback (Ladhari et al., 2020; Algharabat et al., 2020). According to Park and Lee (2009), proactive monitoring, purposeful amplification of positive information, and responsive engagement with unfavorable reviews are all necessary for effective managerial use of eWOM. Leaders who recognize the strategic importance of electronic word-of-mouth often integrate it into comprehensive marketing, branding, and customer relationship management plans (Ahmad & Zabri, 2016; Shahidan et al., 2022).

However, SMEs often face barriers such as limited digital literacy, time constraints, and lack of standardized practices for managing eWOM (Ali et al., 2021; Khamis & Munt, 2021). These challenges are compounded in culturally diverse markets, such as the UAE, where content must be tailored to multiple languages, customs, and consumer segments (Hofstede, 2011; Alalwan et al., 2017).

2.4 Cultural and Regional Dimensions of eWOM in the UAE

The UAE presents a unique cultural context for studying eWOM, owing to its cosmopolitan population, high internet penetration, and government-led digital transformation (Global Media Insight, 2024). Cultural values rooted in collectivism, high power distance, and uncertainty avoidance influence how electronic word of mouth (eWOM) is perceived and shared (Hofstede, 2011). Arab and South Asian customers in the UAE often prioritize trust and community endorsements over institutional marketing (Al-Kwifi et al., 2020).Furthermore, governmental rules concerning content moderation, defamation, and influencer disclosures necessitate that organizations manage electronic word-of-mouth with caution (Khamis & Munt, 2021). This renders managerial knowledge and strategy increasingly vital for the ethical and effective utilization of eWOM. This makes managerial insight and strategy even more critical in leveraging eWOM ethically and effectively.

2.5 Research Gap

Although eWOM has been widely examined in marketing literature, few studies explore how SME leaders themselves engage with it strategically particularly in the MENA or Gulf region(Radwan et al., 2021; Almarzoqi et al., 2025). The voices and decision-making logic of these managers remain underrepresented. This study addresses that gap by examining how SME leaders in the UAE perceive, manage, and operationalize eWOM and related digital marketing practices to improve SME performance (Alshreef et al., 2023; Konstantopoulou et al., 2019).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore how SME leaders in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) engage with electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), influencer marketing, and customer testimonials. A qualitative approach enables deep insight into the respondents' context, experiences, and interpretations of the issues under investigation (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2002). As this is a revisit study, it explores five interrelated aspects of eWOM: (i) managerial commitment to customer satisfaction through active eWOM response; (ii) the evolution of communication strategies informed by eWOM feedback; (iii) the impact of influencer collaborations on positive eWOM; (iv) the role of digital testimonials in shaping brand image; and (v) how monitoring and response practices can provide SMEs a competitive advantage. This methodology aligns with qualitative research traditions that emphasize the co-construction of meaning from the respondent's perspective (Patton, 1990). Since reality is not fixed but socially constructed, understanding how individuals respond to their environment is vital (Merriam, 2002).

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were employed to gather data. FGDs are a methodical and interactive approach that fosters dynamic group dialogue within a safe and supportive environment (Krueger, 2014). Group interactions among participants are essential to surfacing a diversity of experiences and shared perceptions (Ivanoff & Hultberg, 2006).

Five SME business owners or leaders participated in the FGD. Each held key roles within their companies such as manager, owner, or CEO and had extensive experience in both digital customer management and eWOM practices. These participants were selected through purposive sampling, a qualitative sampling strategy that prioritizes information-rich cases with relevance to the study's objectives (Creswell & Clark, 2011; Patton, 2002). This approach allowed for deeper insight into managerial decision-making, particularly as all participants had several years of experience in direct consumer interaction, both online and offline. While this limits generalizability, it enhances the validity of findings within the studied context of SMEs in the UAE. The study was conducted in the UAE, and all participants were based in the region. Their inclusion was based on their seniority in decision-making and knowledge of customer-facing digital practices. The small sample

size was appropriate for the qualitative nature of the study and aligned with the goal of exploring lived experiences in depth.

Formulating clear, exploratory research questions is essential in qualitative studies (Turner, 2010). The study employed five core questions that guided the discussion and were expanded where appropriate. These were:

How do business owners perceive the impact of their responses through eWOM regarding customer satisfaction?

How do business owners perceive the impact of continuously evolving communication strategies through eWOM on business relevance and effectiveness?

How do business owners believe engaging with the right influencers can enhance positive eWOM for SMEs?

How do business owners perceive the role of online customer testimonials in promoting the SME's image?

How do communication efforts in eWOM monitoring and response give SMEs a competitive edge?

The FGD lasted approximately 90 minutes and was conducted in English, in line with recommendations for qualitative group interviews (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005; Rennekamp & Nall, 2006). The session began with an introduction and briefing on the study's objectives, followed by open-ended dialogue to encourage candid, reflective discussion (Pacho, 2015). Participants were allowed adequate time to share experiences and respond to one another. The interaction fostered a collaborative environment in which SME leaders shared perspectives on how eWOM affects business practices in the UAE (ETA, 2008).

The session was audio-recorded with participants' consent and supported by note-taking. This provided a basis for accurate transcription and allowed the use of verbatim quotes to support thematic insights (Krueger & Casey, 2000; Rennekamp & Nall, 2006; Guion et al., 2011).

While FGD analysis lacks a universally prescribed method due to the interpretive nature of the data (Krueger, 2014), this study followed a thematic analysis framework adapted from Braun and Clarke (2006). The process involved indexing (assigning initial codes to data excerpts), management (organizing data by code), and interpretation (generating meaning from grouped responses). The goal of analysis was not merely to catalog codes, but to derive interpretative propositions rooted in participants' discourse (Rennekamp & Nall, 2006). An inductive approach was adopted to allow patterns to emerge organically. Codes were grouped to identify thematic trends (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). To enhance reliability, multiple researchers were involved in reviewing the coded data (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Finally, the themes were refined and aligned with the original research objectives to ensure analytic coherence.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

This section presents and discusses the insights derived from a focus group discussion (FGD) conducted with five senior SME leaders in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), including owners, managers, and CEOs. Their collective input offers industry-relevant perspectives on how electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) practices are implemented, perceived, and managed within small and medium-sized enterprises. Table 1 provides a brief overview of the participants' positions and industries.

Table 1: presents the respondents in FGD

No	Position and firm
1	Owner (MEDU Educational Consulting Services), United Arab Emirates. Specializes in educational consulting services focusing on innovative teaching methods and e-learning solutions.
2	Owner and marketing manager (Orient Medical Equipment And Supplies LLC) in the United Arab Emirates. Manages a firm providing medical equipment and supplies, with expertise in healthcare marketing and sales strategies.

3	General Manager (NIKON Company), United Arab Emirates. Oversee operations at NIKON and bring valuable insights into corporate management and technological advancements.
4	CEO (Phronesis Advisory), United Arab Emirates. Leads a consulting firm focusing on strategic advisory services and business development.
5	Manager (Counseling Point Training And Development) United Arab Emirates. Manages a training and development organization, specializing in professional and personal development programs.

4.1 Managerial Commitment to Customer Satisfaction via eWOM

All participants strongly agreed that active engagement with eWOM reflects managerial commitment to customer satisfaction. Respondent 1 emphasized the debate between direct communication and video advertising, while Respondent 2 highlighted the importance of follow-up during the digital customer journey. Respondent 3 advocated for a holistic approach to customer well-being beyond key performance indicators (KPIs), and Respondent 4 raised concerns about privacy when managing unsolicited communications.

These insights align with previous research by Bustamante and Rubio.,(2017) and Nuseir et al., (2018), confirming that authentic, proactive digital engagement strengthens customer relationships.

Illustrative comments included:

"I often debate the effectiveness of direct communication versus video advertising for reaching clients." (Respondent 1)

"The digital customer journey must include accessibility and consistent follow-up." (Respondent 2)"We must prioritize customer well-being and not just KPIs." (Respondent 3)"It's a fine balance offering information while respecting privacy." (Respondent 4) highlights the challenges of dealing with unsolicited calls and emails, and the need to find a balance between providing information and respecting people's privacy."

4.2 Evolving Communication Strategies Based on eWOM Feedback

Participants emphasized the importance of adapting communication strategies in response to real-time eWOM feedback. Respondent 1 shared how they addressed a fake review through personalized outreach rather than ignoring it—demonstrating relational transparency. Respondent 5 stressed that customers, particularly in medical fields, value guided, clear communication channels. Respondent 3 reinforced this by noting that discovery calls and mentoring were more effective than rigid timelines.

These approaches confirm earlier studies by Luong et al. (2017) and Nuseir et al. (2018), who emphasized relationship-driven communication as central to eWOM strategy.

Selected comments included:

"I responded to a fake review by offering support instead of ignoring it." (Respondent 1)

"Especially in healthcare, we direct people to reliable, personal channels." (Respondent 5)

"I prefer building trust through discovery calls rather than enforcing deadlines." (Respondent 3)

Collectively, these perspectives underscore that evolving communication strategies based on eWOM feedback is vital for maintaining business relevance in dynamic markets.

4.3 The Role of Influencers in Generating Positive eWOM

Participants unanimously agreed that collaborating with credible influencers can amplify positive eWOM, but authenticity was emphasized as critical. Respondent 1 noted generational shifts in how influencer content is perceived. Respondent 2 distinguished between high-profile influencers and subject-matter experts. Respondent 4 emphasized alignment between brand values and influencer voice.

This reflects findings by Borchers (2019), Eun et al. (2020), and Yang (2019), who noted that credibility and value alignment increase influencer impact on SME brand perception.

Sample insights included:

"Influencers help SMEs gain visibility but authenticity is everything." (Respondent 1)

"There's a big difference between social celebrities and real experts." (Respondent 2)

"When an influencer resonates with our mission, their message becomes powerful." (Respondent4)

These responses confirm that meaningful influencer-brand alignment fosters trust and enhances digital brand reputation among targeted audiences.

4.4 Online Customer Testimonials as Strategic Brand Assets

All participants emphasized the significant role of customer testimonials in shaping SME credibility and trust. They noted that testimonials are perceived as authentic endorsements and directly influence purchase decisions. Their observations echo previous research by AlSharji et al. (2018) and Mechineaud (2023), and statistics from Fish (2018) suggesting that nearly 90% of consumers are influenced by online reviews. Respondents offered the following reflections:

"We must be transparent—honesty on social media is non-negotiable." (Respondent 1)

"Testimonials must be treated with care; they deeply affect customer perceptions." (Respondent 2)

"Empathy in response helps retain customers and builds loyalty." (Respondent 5)

"Testimonials are critical for establishing credibility." (Respondent 3)

"Positive reviews are key to strengthening brand image and trust." (Respondent 4)

Together, these responses reaffirm the power of customer testimonials as vital marketing tools in SME reputation-building.

4.5 Gaining a Competitive Edge through eWOM Monitoring and Response

Participants unanimously agreed that diligent eWOM monitoring and timely responses offer SMEs a competitive edge. By actively addressing online feedback, businesses can distinguish themselves from less responsive competitors. These insights align with findings by Konstantopoulou et al. (2019), who emphasized the strategic role of eWOM monitoring in reputation management.

Examples included:

"Monitoring reviews allows us to act on concerns even if some reviews are fake." (Respondent 1)

"Responding to customer feedback in real-time strengthens our social presence." (Respondent 2)

"We adjust our marketing based on Instagram feedback and that sets us apart." (Respondent 3)

"eWOM monitoring builds trust, expands our network, and supports growth." (Respondent 4)

These practices illustrate how eWOM responsiveness is institutionalized as a strategic advantage in SME operations.

4.6 Cross-Cutting Themes and Contribution to Literature

The insights presented across all five themes align with the broader eWOM literature (Bustamante & Rubio, 2017; Nuseir et al., 2018; Konstantopoulou et al., 2019; Yang, 2019; Eun et al., 2020; Mechineaud, 2023; Han et al., 2023; Small Business Connections, 2024). The findings affirm that proactive engagement, evolving communication strategies, credible influencer alignment, and testimonial trust are essential for modern SME success.

However, this study makes a novel contribution by centering the managerial perspective an often overlooked lens in eWOM scholarship. While much prior research has focused on consumer behavior (Cheung & Thadani, 2012; King et al., 2014; Yang, 2019), relatively few studies have explored how SME leaders interpret, manage, and strategically operationalize eWOM in their business practices (Nuseir et al., 2018; Bustamante & Rubio, 2017).

By foregrounding the internal decision-making logic and communicative behaviors of SME leaders, this study expands the literature on digital trust-building and brand strategy. It also highlights how SMEs in the UAE operating in a digitally advanced, multicultural, and regulated environment integrate eWOM into broader organizational practices. This managerial-centric perspective offers a practical framework for embedding eWOM into SME digital strategies, especially within fast-evolving and culturally diverse economies.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The focus group discussion revealed key insights into how SME leaders in the UAE strategically utilize electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) to enhance customer satisfaction, loyalty, and business performance. The participants unanimously emphasized the importance of actively engaging with eWOM, continuously evolving communication strategies, collaborating authentically with influencers, and leveraging customer testimonials to strengthen their digital presence. These findings align with existing literature (Bustamante & Rubio, 2017; Nuseir et al., 2018; Yang, 2019), which highlights the crucial role of proactive eWOM management in influencing consumer perceptions and business outcomes.

Significantly, this study contributes to the literature by focusing on the managerial perspective within SMEs a relatively underexplored angle in eWOM research, which typically centers on consumer behavior (Alalwan, 2018; King et al., 2014). The SME leaders interviewed demonstrated strategic awareness of how their communication efforts directly influence customer trust and brand reputation, confirming the notion that managerial involvement is essential for effectively harnessing eWOM (Mejía-Trejo & Sanchez-Gutierrez, 2019)Their emphasis on personalized responses, continuous strategy refinement, and ethical influencer partnerships aligns with recent studies' calls for businesses to foster authentic digital relationships (Borchers, 2019; Eun et al., 2020).

Moreover, the study's contextual focus on the UAE offers fresh perspectives on eWOM practices within a culturally diverse, digitally advanced emerging market. The unique socio-cultural and legal environment in the Gulf region influences SME leaders' approaches to digital communication, underscoring the need for context-sensitive eWOM strategies. This insight expands the global understanding of digital marketing practices beyond the dominant Western contexts prevalent in current research (Radwan et al., 2021; Almarzoqi et al., 2025).

The results indicate that that SMEs can gain a sustainable competitive advantage by investing in dedicated eWOM monitoring and response mechanisms, forming meaningful influencer partnerships, and fostering transparent and empathetic engagement with customer testimonials. These actions not only build customer loyalty but also enhance brand credibility in increasingly competitive digital marketplaces.

However, this study's qualitative focus group methodology and limited sample size present opportunities for future research. Larger-scale quantitative studies validate these findings across various industries and geographic regions, while longitudinal research examines how eWOM strategies evolve. Additionally, exploring individual interviews could uncover more nuanced managerial perspectives that group dynamics may have constrained.

In conclusion, this research enhances the understanding of how SME leaders in the UAE utilize eWOM as a strategic tool to navigate the complexities of digital communication and achieve competitive differentiation. Highlighting managerial roles in eWOM orchestration provides valuable insights for academics and practitioners aiming to optimize digital marketing practices in emerging and global markets.

Implications

The results of this study underscore the strategic importance of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) as a powerful, trust-based communication channel that SME managers can utilize to enhance brand reputation and cultivate customer loyalty. SME leaders must proactively manage the discussion of their brands across social media platforms, as eWOM is perceived as more authentic and has a greater impact on consumer decision-making than traditional advertising (Ismagilova et al., 2019; Almarzoqi et al., 2025). This encompasses tracking brand mentions, cultivating authentic influencer partnerships, and promoting culturally relevant consumer testimonials. Despite eWOM communications being often casual and non-commercial, their viral and public characteristics can profoundly influence a brand's reputation, either positively or negatively. In digitally mature yet culturally sensitive markets like the UAE, managerial involvement in crafting and responding to eWOM is crucial for gaining a strategic advantage. Therefore,

SMEs should treat eWOM not as a passive outcome, but as a core component of digital marketing strategy aligned with trust, transparency, and engagement.

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