



The influence of E-WOM and Brand Image on Purchase Decisions for Games on the Steam Platform

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Abstract. The phenomenon of Electronic Word of Mouth (E-WOM) in digital communities has become a dominant factor that can influence consumer behaviour, including purchasing decisions for games on digital distribution platforms such as Steam. The brand image formed from online interactions and consumer perceptions also plays an important role in shaping purchasing preferences. This research aims to explore how E-WOM and brand image influence purchasing decisions for digital games through a qualitative approach. The method used is a phenomenological study, with data collection techniques involving in-depth interviews with 12 active respondents who are users of the Steam platform and have purchased games based on recommendations or brand image. Data were analysed using a thematic approach to identify patterns of meaning and consumer experiences. The research results indicate that E-WOM has a strong influence as a trusted source of information within the gaming community, particularly through forums, user reviews, and content creators. As for brand image, it fundamentally contributes to building emotional associations and quality perceptions towards certain games. These findings suggest that purchase decisions are driven not only by rational factors but also by affective ones shaped through digital social interactions.

Keywords: Brand Image; Digital Games; E-WOM; Purchase Decision; Steam Platform.

Abstrak. Fenomena Electronic Word of Mouth (E-WOM) dalam komunitas digital telah menjadi salah satu faktor dominan yang dapat mempengaruhi perilaku konsumen termasuk dalam keputusan pembelian game di platform distribusi digital seperti Steam. Citra merek yang terbentuk dari interaksi online dan persepsi konsumen juga memiliki peran penting dalam membentuk preferensi pembelian. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi bagaimana E-WOM dan citra merek membentuk keputusan pembelian game digital melalui pendekatan kualitatif. Metode yang digunakan adalah studi fenomenologis dengan teknik pengumpulan data melalui wawancara mendalam kepada 12 responden aktif pengguna platform Steam yang pernah membeli game berdasarkan rekomendasi atau citra merek. Data dianalisis menggunakan pendekatan tematik untuk menemukan pola-pola makna dan pengalaman konsumen. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa E-WOM memiliki pengaruh kuat sebagai sumber informasi terpercaya dalam komunitas gamer terutama melalui forum, ulasan pengguna, dan konten kreator. Adapun terkait citra merek pada dasarnya berkontribusi dalam membangun asosiasi emosional dan persepsi kualitas terhadap game tertentu. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa keputusan pembelian tidak hanya didorong oleh faktor rasional akan tetapi juga afektif yang dibentuk melalui interaksi sosial digital.

Kata Kunci: Citra Merek; E-WOM; Game Digital; Keputusan Pembelian; Platform Steam.

1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of digital technology has had a significant impact on consumer behaviour, including in the interactive entertainment sector such as the digital gaming industry. The presence of internet-based game distribution platforms like Steam has now become the main medium for the purchase and consumption of games, evidently replacing the physical distribution that previously dominated (Idris, 2023). In this context, the emergence of digital user-to-user communication phenomena known as Electronic Word of Mouth (E-WOM) plays an important role in shaping public opinion and indirectly influencing purchasing decisions. E-WOM essentially encompasses user reviews, forum comments, and recommendations from content creators, and has become one of the dominant sources of information used by

consumers in assessing the quality and reputation of a game product before making a purchase (Arkista, 2023).

In addition, brand image also plays a strategic role in influencing consumer perceptions of value, quality, and exclusivity of a game. In the highly competitive gaming industry, a game developer or publisher strives to build a strong and differentiated brand image to foster loyalty and attract greater purchasing interest (Sanjaya, 2020). The interaction between E-WOM and brand image in the decision-making process becomes increasingly complex amid a digital culture dominated by active participation of online communities. This essentially creates a new dynamic in consumer behaviour where information spread horizontally among users has a greater influence than traditional top-down marketing strategies (Riyanto, 2023).

In this context, it ultimately raises a fundamental question regarding how the two variables, E-WOM and brand image, can interact and contribute to purchasing decisions for games on the Steam platform, which is essentially one of the largest digital ecosystems for global PC game distribution. Although several previous studies have discussed the influence of E-WOM on consumer behaviour in e-commerce or the role of brand image in digital marketing, such as the research by (Nafisah, 2021), which shows that the influence of E-WOM on consumer behaviour in e-commerce, there is still a lack of research that specifically highlights these two variables in the context of digital gaming platforms like Steam, particularly with a qualitative approach that prioritises a deep understanding of consumer experiences (Wjaya, 2022).

In Indonesia, literature on consumer behaviour regarding digital games is generally still descriptive and has not critically examined the relationship between user community perceptions and the branding strategies employed by game developers. In fact, understanding consumer motivations and considerations when purchasing digital games can provide important contributions to designing more relevant and effective marketing strategies in the digital economy era. Additionally, a qualitative approach that explores consumer experiences directly through interviews is needed to uncover new dimensions that are not always accessible through conventional quantitative surveys.

Therefore, based on this background, this research aims to analyse the influence of E-WOM and brand image on purchasing decisions for games on the Steam platform through a qualitative approach. This study will explore narratives, motivations, and perceptions from active consumers through in-depth interviews with a number of relevant respondents. Thus, it is expected that the results of this research can enrich theoretical understanding in the realm of

digital consumer behaviour and provide practical implications for the development of communication and branding strategies in the rapidly growing gaming industry.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Research regarding consumer behaviour on digital platforms, particularly in the context of game purchases, is increasingly relevant alongside the rise in internet penetration and online community culture. One key concept that has garnered attention is Electronic Word of Mouth (E-WOM), which refers to communication among users via digital media about their experiences with a product or service (Purwanti, 2022). E-WOM is considered to have a strong influence because it originates from the direct experiences of other users, creating a perception that is more authentic compared to official promotions from manufacturers.

Electronic Word of Mouth (E-WOM) refers to a form of informal communication generated by users about products or services through digital platforms (Nafisah, 2021). E-WOM has advantages over traditional promotions because of its wide reach, permanent nature, and can be accessed at any time. (De Yusa, 2024) explains that the influence of E-WOM is largely determined by the credibility of the source, the number of messages, and the emotional tone conveyed. In the context of games, user reviews on platforms such as Steam, YouTube, and Reddit are the main references that are often considered more authentic than official information from developers. Brand image as explained by Keller is the perception and association formed in the minds of consumers towards a brand based on previous experiences and communications. In the digital ecosystem, brand image is built not only from the quality of the final product but also from the interaction between developers and the community. Developers such as Valve or FromSoftware have a strong image in the eyes of consumers, which can sometimes reduce the need for consumers to seek additional information before purchasing. However, brand image is dynamic and can change if user expectations are not met (Putri, 2023).

Although E-WOM and brand image have been widely studied separately, there has been little research that explores how the two interact in shaping purchasing decisions, especially on digital platforms such as Steam. Can negative user reviews defeat the reputation of a well-known brand? Or can brand image cloud critical assessment of a product? Starting from this background, this study aims to explore how E-WOM and brand image are interrelated and influence the decision-making process of purchasing games on the Steam platform.

RQ1: How does E-WOM influence game purchasing decisions on the Steam platform?

RQ2: How does brand image shape consumer perceptions of digital games?

RQ3: How does the interaction between E-WOM and brand image shape consumers' final purchasing decisions?

3. METHOD

Research Design

This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach to examine the influence of Electronic Word of Mouth (E-WOM) and brand image on purchasing decisions for games on the Steam platform. This approach was chosen as it provides a broad exploratory space for the perceptions and subjective experiences of Steam users in making purchasing decisions. This qualitative research emphasises a deep understanding of the meanings constructed by informants regarding the roles of E-WOM and brand image in digital consumption behaviour.

Sampling Method

Sampling was conducted using purposive sampling methods, meaning informants were selected based on specific criteria that match the research objectives. The criteria used for selecting informants are:

- a. Have purchased a game on the Steam platform within the last 6 months.
- b. Have read or considered other user reviews before making a purchase.
- c. Aged between 17 and 35 years.
- d. Willing to participate in in-depth interviews.

The number of informants targeted for interviews is 10–12 people until data saturation is reached.

Data Collection Technique

Data was collected using semi-structured interviews. The interviews were conducted online via video and text communication platforms according to the informant's preferences. The interview guide contained open-ended questions designed to explore the informants' experiences, motivations, and perceptions regarding:

- a. The influence of E-WOM on their decisions to purchase games.
- b. The brand image of the chosen game.
- c. Factors that influence the final decision in purchasing games on Steam.
- d. Each interview was recorded (with permission) and transcribed, then analysed thematically.

Data Analysis Technique

Data was analysed using the thematic analysis approach from Braun and Clarke, which consists of:

1. Familiarisation with the data, namely rereading the interview transcripts.

2. Creating initial codes by identifying relevant data segments. 3. Searching for themes by grouping the codes into initial themes.

4. Defining and naming themes by explaining the essence of each theme.

4. Writing reports by compiling narratives of the analysis results accompanied by informant quotes.

Research Instruments

The main instrument in this research is the researcher themselves, assisted by an interview guide. The list of questions used in the interviews includes:

1. What are your main considerations when choosing games on Steam?

2. Do you read user reviews before purchasing? Why?

3. What are your thoughts on those reviews (positive/negative)? 4. What do you think about the brand of the game you purchased?

5. How does E-WOM influence your final decision?

6. Have you ever regretted or been satisfied with a purchase because of user reviews?

7. In your opinion, is brand image important when purchasing digital games? Why?

8. Do you recommend games to others? In what way?

Ethical Considerations

This research adheres to the ethical principles of qualitative research which include:

Informed consent:

a. Informants are given detailed explanations regarding the purpose and process of the research before the interview

b. Confidentiality where all data is stored securely and not shared with external parties.

c. Anonymity where the names and identities of informants are concealed.

d. The right to withdraw, with informants having the right to stop their participation at any time without any consequences.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on in-depth interviews with 12 active respondents who use the Steam platform in Indonesia, it was found that Electronic Word of Mouth (E-WOM) and brand image play significant roles in influencing decisions to purchase digital games. The respondents were aged between 18 and 30, with a minimum of 5 game purchases per year, and were active in following forums, user reviews, and content creator accounts on platforms like YouTube and Reddit. The questions posed to respondents were structured around three main themes that emerged from the data analysis: (1) trust in E-WOM as a source of information, (2) perceptions of the brand

image of game developers, and (3) the integration of E-WOM and brand image in shaping the final purchase decision.

Trust in E-WOM as a Source of Information

From the results of interview data with respondents, it can be seen that fundamentally, the majority of respondents stated that user reviews and comments in discussion forums such as Steam Community and Reddit, as well as video platforms like YouTube, are the main references before purchasing a game. Honest reviews based on real experiences and spontaneous nature tend to be more trusted than official information from publishers.

This is evident from the data of Interview Question 1 Interview Findings The first question in the interview was: “What is the first thing you check before buying a new game?” where out of a total of 12 respondents interviewed, 11 respondents explicitly stated that they first looked at user reviews either through the Steam platform, YouTube, or game community forums such as Reddit and Discord.

In general, the outline of the respondents’ responses can be grouped into three main patterns, first, the dominance of user reviews as the main reference where the majority of respondents prioritize reading reviews on Steam, YouTube, or online communities. Second, distrust of official promotional materials where many respondents feel that trailers can be misleading because they only show the best parts of the game. Finally, the existence of personal experience or other people’s experiences as validation where respondents often look for real experiences from other players before making a purchasing decision.

As stated by Sanjaya (2020) Electronic Word of Mouth (E-WOM) is a key factor in the digital economic ecosystem because the spread of information is fast and horizontal. The results of this study support this statement where E-WOM has been shown to be able to form what is called “decentralized social information” which has a persuasive influence on purchasing behavior (Mufashih, 2022).

Respondents who have experienced failed purchases stated that they tend to rely on user reviews rather than just trailers or visual promotions presented by developers. This indicates a shift in information authority from producers to users. In other words, the perception of quality is not formed top-down but rather through participatory interactions that occur in digital spaces.

Perception of Game Developer Brand Image

The dimension of brand image has also proven to be one of the important factors. It can be seen from the data that the majority of respondents stated that they have more trust and loyalty towards games released by large developers such as Valve, CD Projekt Red, or

FromSoftware. These brands are considered to have a good track record in prioritising quality and listening to their community.

Interview Findings The second question in the interview was: “How much influence does the developer’s name have on your decision to buy a game?” Of the 12 respondents interviewed, 9 respondents stated that the developer’s name and reputation play an important role and are often the determining factor in their purchasing decisions regardless of whether they have read reviews or watched gameplay footage. The respondents stated that they have high trust in developers who have proven their quality. In several cases, respondents admitted to making purchases immediately upon release (day-one purchase) simply because the game was developed by a particular studio that they trusted.

One respondent said: “If the game is from a proven developer like FromSoftware, I don’t need to wait for reviews. I just buy it. This finding shows that a developer’s brand can replace the rational evaluation process in decision-making. In fact, three of the respondents who admitted to not actively following the development of the game industry stated that they still rely on the developer’s big name as their main reference. They believe that a developer with a good reputation will maintain the quality of its products in order to maintain community loyalty. In theory, this result strengthens the concept of brand image put forward by Keller, namely that brand image is formed through strong, unique, and positive associations in the minds of consumers.

In the digital context, this association arises through the consistency of positive user experiences and the reputation formed by the collective gaming community. When a developer consistently delivers high-quality products, an implicit trust is formed that can go beyond rational considerations such as reading reviews or watching gameplay footage.

The outline of the respondents’ responses to this question can be categorized into several main patterns, namely

1. Trust in old reputation where R respondents stated that they tend to trust developers who have a good track record such as FromSoftware CD Projekt Red or Nintendo.
2. Brand loyalty and emotional attachment where some respondents feel emotionally attached because of past positive experiences with games from certain developers so that they are a form of loyalty.
3. Perception of quality assurance where the developer’s name is considered a guarantee of quality, reducing concerns about the risk of purchase failure.

As a concrete example, the Elden Ring game was often mentioned in interviews where several respondents bought the game without much other consideration because “this is a

FromSoftware game”. This indicates that brand image can function as a heuristic in the decision-making process, namely a cognitive shortcut that makes it easier for consumers to make choices without having to go through a complex evaluation process.

However, it can be noted that not all large brands have succeeded in maintaining their positive image (Hazbi, 2023). One example is the negative reaction from users towards Cyberpunk 2077 released by CD Projekt Red. Despite having a high reputation, the image of this brand was tarnished due to the mismatch between expectations and reality at launch. Thus, this indicates that brand image is dynamic and greatly influenced by the responses of the digital community (Holilah, 2022).

Integration E-WOM

Another important finding is how E-WOM and brand image do not work separately but rather influence each other in shaping the final decision. Some respondents mentioned that even though they liked a developer brand, they still waited for reviews from other users before making a purchase. On the other hand, good reviews are sometimes not enough to encourage purchases if the developer’s brand image is unknown or questionable.

Regarding Interview Question 3, which asks, “Have you ever canceled your intention to buy a game because you are not familiar with the brand/developer name, even though the reviews are good?” The interview results showed that 10 out of 12 respondents answered “yes” or “often” which shows that emotional factors towards brands are still the dominant element in the game purchasing decision-making process. The majority of respondents stated that they tend to feel hesitant or unsure when faced with games from developers they have not known before. Even when the game gets high ratings or positive reviews on Steam, Metacritic, or YouTube, they still choose not to buy it because they feel “unsafe” or are not sure about the long-term reputation of the developer.

One respondent said, “The reviews are good, but if the brand is not known, I’m afraid it will be a dud. It’s better to just wait for a game from a developer that is clear.” This shows the strong influence of brand familiarity, which in consumer psychology is often closely related to perceived risk and emotional trust. In conditions where objective information is available, such as reviews or ratings, consumers still prioritize the emotional comfort obtained from previously recognizing the brand name. In other words, familiarity basically creates a sense of security that forms the basis of preference.

This phenomenon demonstrates the synergy between affective factors (emotion towards a brand) and cognitive factors (rational information through reviews). This aligns with the dual-process model in consumer behaviour that simultaneously combines affective and cognitive

approaches. In the context of purchasing digital games, this model explains why users can impulsively buy games from trusted brands with little consideration, while at other times conducting strict evaluations through E-WOM of less familiar brands. These findings also reinforce the S-O-R (Stimulus-Organism-Response) theory of Mehrabian & Russell, where E-WOM and brand image serve as stimuli that trigger both emotional and rational responses within consumers, ultimately influencing purchasing decisions.

Critical Analysis of Previous Research

The results of this study enrich previous research that focused on E-WOM and brand image in the context of e-commerce. One prior study conducted by (Harisandi, 2023) mentions that E-WOM significantly influences purchase decisions for online fashion products. However, in the context of the gaming industry, it shows a more complex dynamic because it involves an active and very vocal user community. Furthermore, another previous study conducted by (Dr Yusa, 2024) regarding brand image in the technology sector states that perception of a company's reputation is a determinant of consumer loyalty. However, in the context of Steam, loyalty is built not only on the company's reputation but also on the company's active engagement in addressing criticism and supporting the community.

Furthermore, The last question in the interview read, "Have you ever felt deceived by a game review that turned out to be misleading or not in accordance with reality when played?" Of the total 12 respondents, 7 respondents stated that they had had negative experiences due to trusting reviews or public opinions that turned out not to reflect the quality or actual playing experience. Most respondents said that bias or excessive expectations in reviews often occur, especially in the context of competitive games such as Overwatch and Valorant. Many reviewers or content creators on YouTube and social media emphasize certain aspects, such as visuals, game concepts, or new features without discussing fundamental weaknesses such as unequal matchmaking systems, toxic communities, or character imbalances.

This was reinforced by a respondent who said, "At that time I bought Overwatch because the reviews were really good, they said it was fun and addictive. But when I played it, the community was toxic and I got bored quickly." This experience shows that although Electronic Word of Mouth (E-WOM) is very influential in the purchasing process (as discussed in the first question), not all forms of E-WOM are objective or neutral. Several respondents said that they were starting to be able to differentiate between honest reviews and overly promotional ones, especially when the content came from influencers who collaborated with game developers or publishers.

These findings illustrate that game consumers are increasingly aware of the potential for information manipulation in the digital ecosystem. They are becoming more selective in choosing sources of information and are starting to develop a kind of digital skepticism, especially towards reviews that are too positive without including criticism.

Then, another study conducted by (Wjaya, 2022) that combined E-WOM and brand image in the context of mobile applications showed that both have a simultaneous effect on purchasing decisions. These results are consistent with the findings in this research, however the qualitative approach used here was able to delve deeper into the psychological and social aspects of the decision-making process, which are not always apparent in quantitative approaches.

Challenges and Implications

One of the challenges identified is misinformation or bias in E-WOM. Some respondents stated that there are reviews that are too extreme or influenced by certain agendas such as rivalries between gaming communities. This demands consumers to have high digital literacy in sorting out information. Therefore, platforms like Steam need to enhance their curation and verification systems for review content to maintain the quality of E-WOM. Additionally, game developers need to be aware that reputation and brand image are not only shaped by the end product but also by the entire process of interaction with the community. Thus, transparency in development as well as openness to criticism and involvement in user forums will significantly contribute to positive perceptions.

Integration of Theory and Contributions of Research

This research contributes theoretically by expanding the understanding of the interaction between E-WOM and brand image in digital consumer behaviour. By using a qualitative approach, this study is able to uncover deep motivations and decision-making logic that consumers undergo, which often do not appear in statistical figures alone. In addition, the use of the S-O-R theory in brand image and E-WOM within a single interpretative framework results in a more comprehensive mapping of the purchasing dynamics on digital game platforms. Therefore, it can be concluded that this research also shows the potential for integration between consumer behaviour theory and digital sociology by examining how online communities contribute to the creation of value, meaning, and legitimacy for digital products. Thus, this research also encourages the emergence of a multidisciplinary approach in the study of consumer behaviour in the digital age.

Discussion and Analysis

The Influence of E-WOM and Brand Image on Game Purchase Decisions on the Steam Platform In this study, in-depth interviews were conducted with 12 respondents who had previously purchased games on the Steam platform and were active in reading and providing user reviews (E-WOM). The results of the interviews yielded a number of responses that were then coded into 30 main codes. These codes were grouped into 9 thematic categories to facilitate the analysis process.

1. **Consumer Needs** The interviews revealed that all respondents considered games an important part of their entertainment and leisure activities. The need to purchase games was based on personal interest, community trends, and peer influence. Several respondents mentioned that they bought games due to the latest updates, favourite genres, or because they were trending among gamers.
2. **Consumer Experience** The majority of respondents had a positive experience with purchasing games through Steam. The ease of navigation, transaction speed, and refund policy were considered advantages of the platform. However, some respondents also expressed disappointment, such as the game quality not meeting expectations or discrepancies between reviews and actual gameplay. This highlights the importance of critical evaluation skills regarding E-WOM.
3. **Expectations Regarding E-WOM** Respondents stated that E-WOM significantly influenced their purchasing decisions. Respondents 3, 6, and 9 regarded reviews from other users as primary references before purchasing a game. They were more inclined to choose games with high ratings and detailed reviews that objectively discuss the pros and cons.
4. **Perception of Brand Image** Game brand image is an important indicator in determining the quality and trustworthiness of a game. Respondents 2 and 7 even stated that they would prefer games from trusted publishers despite mixed public reviews.
5. **Barriers and Criticism of E-WOM** Some respondents highlighted the weaknesses of the E-WOM system such as fake reviews and user bias and a lack of moderation. Respondents 5 and 11 mentioned that they had felt deceived by reviews that seemed overly positive while the gameplay was disappointing. Therefore, this criticism serves as important input for Steam to improve their review verification system.
6. **Reasons for Interest and Disinterest** Promotional factors such as large discounts, bundle packages, and in-game bonuses are essentially the main attractions for respondents to purchase games. On the other hand, some respondents also stated that promotions would

not have an impact if the game's brand image was poor or if community reviews were negative.

7. **Knowledge about the Steam Platform**All respondents demonstrated a good understanding of Steam's features such as Steam Sale, Wishlist, refund system, and review community. This knowledge provides a sense of security and greater control in making purchasing decisions.
8. **Trust and Loyalty Factors**Trust in the Steam platform and previous experiences play a significant role in building loyalty. Respondents 1, 4, and 10 stated that they would remain loyal to Steam because it has provided a comfortable and safe shopping experience for many years.
9. **Emotional and Social Factors**Emotional factors also influence purchasing decisions. Some respondents admitted to buying games due to friends' invitations, the desire to follow trends, or nostalgia for certain franchises. This indicates that purchasing decisions are not only rational but are also influenced by affection and social aspects.

Thus, based on interviews with 12 respondents, it can be concluded that E-WOM and brand image have a significant influence on purchasing decisions for games on the Steam platform. E-WOM plays a role in shaping initial perceptions and evaluating quality, while brand image provides assurance to consumer expectations. Both interact and reinforce each other in influencing consumers' interest and confidence in making purchases.

5. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

This research indicates that Electronic Word of Mouth (E-WOM) and brand image fundamentally play a significant role in shaping consumer purchase decisions in the digital ecosystem, particularly on game distribution platforms like Steam. Where consumer perception of product quality can be said to have credibility in information and emotional appeal towards a game is no longer determined solely by formal marketing strategies but is also organically shaped through digital social interactions. When the user community becomes the primary source of reference and validation for a game product, the authority of the brand also shifts from the producer to the user network itself. Thus, this situation signifies a transformation in the decision-making process that is not entirely individual but rather a result of social construction in the digital space.

Thus, a more holistic conceptual understanding of digital consumer behaviour is still needed, where E-WOM is not merely seen as a communication channel but rather as a social influence structure with symbolic power in shaping consumer perceptions and preferences.

Therefore, recommendation it can be concluded that this research recommends the importance of a paradigm shift in marketing communication practices and brand management in the digital gaming industry. Where community-based approaches as well as information transparency and social credibility should be the main foundations for building consumer loyalty and driving purchasing decisions. Essentially, through this approach, game developers and distributors can maintain their relevance in the ever-evolving digital ecosystem, increasingly defined by active consumer participation.

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