The Impact of E-WOM Participation on Loyalty: The Mediating Role of Personal and Social Website Identification

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ABSTRACT:

Nowadays with the growth of the internet and e-commerce, remaining in the e-businesses competition depends on the endeavor for maintaining the customers, which shows the importance of loyalty in this environment. Along with this trend electronic word-of-mouth (e-wom) has become a significant source of information for shopping. The aim of this research was to investigate the impact of e-wom participation on loyalty with the mediation role of personal and social website identification. 384 customers of Digikala shopping website were selected as sample, using the convenience sampling method. A questionnaire with confirmation of validity and reliability was employed to collect data. Structural equations and Sobel's mediation test were used and research hypotheses were analyzed, using LISREL and SPSS software. The results showed that e-wom participation has a positive impact on personal and social website identification. Likewise, personal and social website identification had a meaningful and positive impact on e-loyalty. The mediation role of personal website identification was also approved, but the findings showed no meaningful and positive impact for the mediation role of social website identification as well as the direct impact of e-wom on e-loyalty.

1. Introduction

The benefits that the Internet has provided for business and customers has led to an increase of 3.5 billion Internet users online in June 2016, according to the Internet World Statistics (IWS) (Miguens, & Vázquez, 2017). With the growth of the Internet and e-commerce, online shopping has become a common and important activity in everyday life. In today's highly competitive online environment, the role of electronic loyalty has attracted the attention of business professionals as well as academic community, especially in online shopping platforms in which, switching cost is low and moving to another store is done with just one click (Zheng et al., 2017). Customer participation and in this research, virtual community participation and User Generated Content (UGC) are dominant social activities in the virtual space. In addition to these processes, Word of mouth advertisement or WOM have also increased dramatically. Information and Word of mouth on the Internet, called e-WOM, has become an important source of information for purchasing (Yoo et al., 2013). On the other hand, promoting and creating loyalty in customers is an important goal for any business company. Customer loyalty has a significant impact on increasing revenue, lowering marketing costs and gaining competitive advantage for companies as in the past ten years, attention toward customers' loyalty has increased significantly and it is considered as an instruction to increase revenues (Haghighi Kaffash et al, 2010). Most e-commerce websites are trying to encourage their customers to promote more word of mouth advertisements as well, because the information generated by the user, creates potential customers with a sense of trust (Gauri et al., 2008). In this age of social commerce, consumers are increasingly dependent on each other and seek online social support (informational, emotional) even before they make purchases (Ahmad & Laroche, 2016). Past studies of e-loyalty have examined relationships among different structures such as trust, customer satisfaction, and service convenience (Chen et al., 2014). Loyalty in the Internet environment, called e-Loyalty, is a seemingly familiar but neglected name in Internet companies. Customers staying with a supplier can have various reasons, such as buying because of the habit, lack of other good options, risk avoidance and other factors. In fact, when competitors

with better prices and choices appear and customers react, they did not show disloyalty toward the original company or organization because loyalty has never been part of the equation (Henry, 2000). Research on identification theory is an important bridge between e-WOM participation and e-loyalty and help to identify how psychological variables influence their relationship (Yoo et al., 2013). WOM and e-WOM are both useful resources for customer-generated information and more reliable, empathic and relevant than the information imposed on customers by marketers (Rosemann et al., 2016). When a customer engages in an e-WOM activity, this participation can be an opportunity for interaction with an online shopping store and also to understand the identity of the online social community (Bhattacharya, 1998). Researchers state that the concept of loyalty is widely discussed in the marketing literature, however, the study of e-loyalty is much more recent and dates back to 2000 (Toufailly et al., 2013). On the other hand, the issue of electronic loyalty has become increasingly important in recent years. However, there is little knowledge of the mechanism available, to create customer loyalty on the Internet (Ribbink et al., 2004).

This study is noteworthy that most researches about e-WOM show how e-WOM affects future customers and how it affects online shopping. Nevertheless, there are few studies for finding a relationship between e-WOM participation of a consumer and his/her next purchase from the website or the determination of the process by which, this participation will lead to increased e-loyalty (Yoo et al., 2013). The purpose of the research is to fill this gap.

2. Literature Review

2-1. E-Wom Participation

The motivations for creating e-WOM are related to the structures that explain the user's desire for searching advice (Kasabov, 2015). Studies have shown that the most important motivations for the consumer to read e-WOM include: reducing risk, reducing the search time, understanding different ways of consuming a product, reducing or eliminating the sense of regret of a purchase, a sense of sympathy from a virtual community, searching for new goods, and a better social status

that the most important of them are, reducing the decision-making time and the motivation to make a better purchase decision (Hennig-Thurau & Walsh, 2003). in a more comprehensive study, researchers combined motivations found for traditional WOM behavior with the motivations resulted from e-WOM specific features in customer opinion platforms, and introduce eight motivations for engaging in e-WOM communications: Platform assistance, venting negative feelings, Concern for other consumers, Extraversion/positive self-enhancement, Social benefits, Economic incentives, Helping the company, and Advice seeking (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). On the other hand, e-WOM is said to be exchanging evaluation of goods or services among people who have met in the virtual world with one another, or sending message to each other (King et al., 2014). An idea in the concept of electronic advertising is highlighting individuals and businesses looking for reputation on the Internet (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2003). In the beginning, the e-WOM phenomenon seemed to be a simple transition from WOM to the Web, but the shift to online space has changed the power and nature of WOM in terms of access, scope, style, size, and culture (Baka, 2016). According to (Wang et al., 2016), e-WOM messages are typically anonymous, and several customers can receive a message that can be used at any time and location, and e-WOM is more durable and measurable than its traditional type. Customer participation demonstrates relevant efforts in the production of a service and such a partnership allows companies to have a closer and more beneficial relationship with their customers (Chen & Wang, 2016). Participating in e-WOM is the real level of participation and frequency in writing e-WOM and suggesting a comment. For example, how much time and effort has been spent on writing e-WOM (Yoo et al., 2013), which is also defined as "the degree to which customers are involved in the production and delivery " (Revilla-Camacho et al., 2015). A customer actively participating in e-WOM takes responsibility for a poor product or service which indirectly, indicates that people with a low degree of participation tend to attribute the weakness of service to a service provider (Yoo et al., 2013).

2-2. Personal and Social Website Identification

2-2-1. Identification

Identification is the act of identity classification. Recognizing identity is a psychological process by which the individual or group, after presenting a model by others, make their own characteristics or attribute aspect similar to that of presented by the group (Rummens, 1993). Also, researchers believe that identification means a commitment to a particular identity, meaning that person A is interested in recognizing his/her own identity for herself/himself and the others by B (Hildebrand et al., 2010). Identity with a brand is categorized into the personal and social categories (Rio et al., 2001). personal identification begins with a person's relationship with a brand. Social identity with the brand subsequently grows and increases with membership in a society (Long & Schiffman, 2000). It is stated that identification may promote a tendency to favor the in-group over the out-group in evaluations and distribution of resources (Vahetra et al., 2017). Individual identity performance refers to things that consumers can unify themselves with some brands and develop feelings of affiliation with them. It is stated that, firstly, identity is considered to be a perceptual cognitive structure that does not necessarily involve any particular behavior or influential states, and secondly, social or group identity is experiencing success and failure of the group in personal mode (Foote, 1951). In the literature of brand influence, a basic theory is the coordination between consumer behavior, personal image and product image. This theory is based on the idea that individuals can enrich their personal image with the image of brands they buy and use. Hence, the greater the compatibility between brand's image and personal image of the consumer, the more will be the consumer's evaluation of a brand and his/her intention to purchase (Rio et al., 2001). Personal identity is said to be the area in which, implementing a behavior is an important part of personal self-concept (Conner & Armitage, 1998).

2.2.2. Social Identification

This theory was first introduced by Tajfel and Turner in 1979. The importance of self-concept is effectively seen in the theory of social identity (Tajfel, 1982). Self-concept is a person's opinion and feelings about himself and consists of two parts of personal identity and social identity. personal identity refers to the categorization of a person based on personal characteristics (such as shy, clever, kind, etc.). The basis of the social identity theory is that individuals do not fall into precise defined groups and instead begin to create their own group (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). It is claimed that perception of belonging to a group leads to higher identification with that group and empowers individuals to indirectly contribute to group success (Underwood et al., 2001). social identity also affects perception, recognition, evaluation, and attribution about issues and events both in emotional and behavioral ways (Turner, 1982). A group identification in a higher-level point out the boundaries inside and outside the group, which facilitates the grouping of individuals into "us" and "them" groups (Underwood et al., 2001). Hence, personal website identification refers to the extent to which the customer thinks the image of an online shopping site is similar to that of his mind, while social Website identification refers to a certain identification that a customer has with interaction through e-WOM with other customers in a similar online shopping site (Yoo et al., 2013).

2-2-3. Electronic Loyalty

It is argued that e-loyalty refers to customer retention and purchasing in the future, which is a strategic necessity for long-term business success (Zheng et al., 2017). Loyal behavior can take many forms, but is usually used as the intention to re-purchase goods and services or to continue a relationship in future (Dick & Basu, 1994). In electronic commerce, electronic loyalty is a customer-friendly view of an e-commerce business that leads to repetitive behavior (Anderson & Srinivasan, 2003). e-loyalty is defines as "The customer's willingness to maintain a stable relationship in the future and to engage in a repeat behavior of visits and/or purchases of online products/service, using the company's website as the first choice among alternatives, supported by

favorable beliefs and positive emotions toward the online company, despite situational influences and marketing efforts that lead to transfer behavior" (Toufailly et al., 2013). The concept of e-loyalty extends the concept of brand loyalty to consumer's online behavior (Gommans et al., 2001). The terms "continued intention to use", "intention to reuse or return," and "repeat purchase" have all the same meanings as e-loyalty (Chang and Chen, 2009), however, the structures used to indicate loyalty, like repeating a purchase, do not fully represent consumer loyalty because they do not distinguish between spurious and true loyalty of consumers (Chen et al, 2014).

3. **Conceptual Framework**

The internal motives result in e-WOM participation due to their positive excitement and pleasure, friendship and sense of well-being, which is beneficial to the individual and other clients themselves. External incentives can be facilitated by proposing material benefits such as gift certificates and other prizes. It seems that the external and internal motivations are the forerunner of participation in e-WOM (Yoo et al., 2013). In this study, using the research of (Rio et al., 2001), identification is divided into two parts: personal and social. When a customer engages in an e-WOM activity, this participation can be an opportunity to interact with an online shopping store and also to understand the identity of the online social community. This partnership is the most effective way to enhance identity (Bhattacharya, 1998). Therefore, it can be concluded that interactions with an online store such as expressing satisfaction, consulting, and feedback through an e-WOM system can increase personal website identification in the consumer. Researchers state that extra-role behavior creates a sense of belonging and increases the social identity within the group (Feather & Rauter, 2004). Hence, it can be expected that people who regularly participate in e-WOM will have a sense of belonging and membership more than others. In fact, the upgraded levels of customer participation are associated with higher levels of cognition (Yoo et al, 2013). There is a strong relationship between customer e-loyalty and identification with a brand (Rio et al, 2001). The customer usually increases the amount of purchase when there is a high level of

brand identity (Yi & La, 2002), which results in a higher level of personal website identification that ends in stronger e-loyalty. Also, in another paper it is indicated that blogging has increased the social identification with the blog and thus has a strong impact on forming loyalty toward the blog's service provider (Moon et al., 2006).

Based on the mentioned studies and the relationships between variables, the model of this research is adapted from the study of (Yoo et al., 2013). In the presented model, e-WOM participation is the independent variable and electronic loyalty is dependent variable and personal and social website identification are defined as mediating variables. The internal and external motives are also considered as the forerunners of participation in e-WOM.

4. Research Hypothesis

In this research, the following hypotheses have been examined:

Hypothesis 1. e-WOM Participation has a positive impact on personal website identification.

Hypothesis 2. e-WOM Participation has a positive impact on social website identification.

Hypothesis 3. personal website identification has a positive impact on e-loyalty.

Hypothesis 4. social website identification has a positive impact on e-loyalty.

Hypothesis 5. e-WOM Participation has a positive impact on e-loyalty.

Hypothesis 6. e-WOM Participation has a positive impact on e-loyalty through personal website identification.

Hypothesis 7. e-WOM Participation has a positive impact on e-loyalty through social website identification.
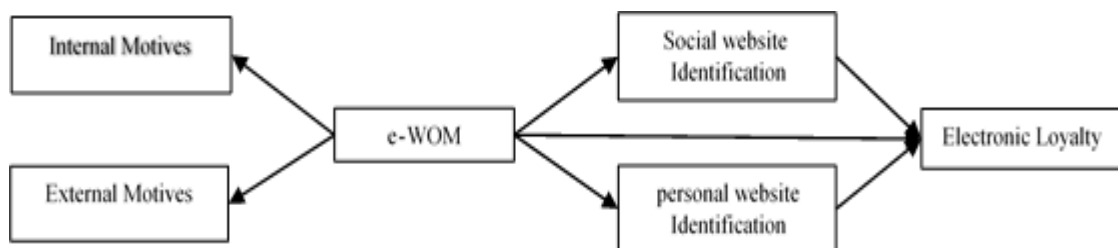
Figure 1: Conceptual Model of Research

5. Research Methodology

The present research due to the purpose is an applied research. Another point in this regard is the explanation of descriptive research. Descriptive research can be divided into several categories, one of which is a survey method. In this method, the attitude and behaviour of the community are based on the selection of the sample that represents the particular society and their views are examined through a series of specific questions (Khaki, 2008). This research is also a descriptive-analytical survey. The survey's population is considered to be the customers of Digikala as the greatest online store in Iran, and the convenience sampling method has been used due to the lack of access to a list of customers in this online store. For the studied population with a high and unknown population, 384 people were selected based on Morgan's table. In order to collect the required data, an online questionnaire with a five-point-Likert-scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree for all variables was used to measure e-WOM participation, personal and social website identification and e-loyalty. For this purpose, questionnaires of credible prior studies (Yoo et al., 2013; Rio et al., 2001; Srinivasan et al., 2002; and Chen et a.l, 2014) have been adopted. also, the average response was considered for the items which left unanswered in the survey.

5-1. Reliability and Validity of Questionnaire

Two types of face validity and construct validity have been investigated in this research. Hence, for face validity of the questionnaire, questions were identified with respect to the components extracted from past authoritative researches. Also, four professors from management department of Ferdowsi University of Mashhad were asked to comment on the validity of the questionnaire. Then, comments were applied, adjustments were carried out, the degree of conformity with the research goals was evaluated and the validity of the questionnaire was confirmed. Factor analysis has been used to determine the construct validity, the KMO and Bartlett's test in table 1 show that CFA is suitable for factor analysis (KMO>0.6, sig<0.01), this

analysis is a multivariate method in which independent and dependent variables are not considered because this method is one of the codependent methods and all variables are considered dependent to each other and it is tried to summarize many variables into the several factors (Kalantari, 2012). The confirmatory factor analysis was performed by LISREL software according to its good accuracy in structural equation modeling (SEM) for the present study. The results showed significance of factor loadings for the studied items.

Table1: KMO and Bartlett's test

Variable name	KMO	Bartlett's X^2/df	Bartlett's sig
e-WOM participation	0.740	32.205	0.000
Personal website identification	0.838	19.449	0.000
Social website identification	0.802	22.512	0.000
E-loyalty	0.945	15.718	0.000

The reliability test was performed by SPSS software and for reliability purposes, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was used. According to the results of SPSS software, Cronbach's alpha coefficient for all four main variables was more than 0.7 Therefore, the reliability of all four variables is acceptable. Also, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the whole test was 0.771, which indicates an acceptable reliability of the test.

Table 2: Cronbach's alpha coefficients of variables

Variable name	e-WOM Participation	Personal website identification	Social website identification	E-loyalty
Cronbach's alpha coefficient	0.864	0.865	0.754	0.836

6. Results

6-1. Fit Analysis of the Conceptual Model

The model fit results after modifying the initial model and adding the specified paths are shown in Table 3. The RMSEA value is 0.078 and since it is less than 0.08, then the average square error of the model is acceptable and the model is suitable. Also, the rate of NFI, IFI and CFI indices are

more than acceptable and are in ideal criterion; on the other hand, most fitness indices have increased and become closer to one, which means that the measurement model of research variables is fairly good.

Table 3: The Fitness Indices of the Modified Structural Model

Fit index	Amount	Acceptable fitness	Ideal fitness	Result
RMSEA	0.078	$0.05 < RMSEA \leq 0.08$	$0 \leq RMSEA \leq 0.05$	Acceptable
X^2/df	1.225	$2 < X^2/df \leq 3$	$0 \leq X^2/df \leq 2$	Ideal
NFI	0.91	$0.9 \leq NFI < 0.95$	$0.95 \leq NFI \leq 1$	Acceptable
IFI	0.97	$0.9 \leq IFI < 0.97$	$0.97 \leq IFI \leq 1$ ·	Ideal
CFI	0.97	$0.9 \leq CFI < 0.97$	$0.97 \leq CFI \leq 1$	Ideal
RFI	0.89	$0.9 \leq RFI < 0.95$	$0.95 \leq RFI \leq 1$	Not acceptable
PNFI	0.74	$0.5 \leq PNFI < 0.6$	$0.6 \leq PNFI \leq 1$	Ideal

6-2. Examining the Conceptual Model of Research

Figure 2 and figure 3, respectively, map the path coefficients and t-values graphs of the statistical equation model for the explanation of the research hypotheses. In other words, these forms represent the conceptual model of the research in the standard estimation state and then in the significance state of the parameters. The results of the mediation test and the final results obtained from the analysis of the hypotheses of this research are summarized in Tables 4 and 5.
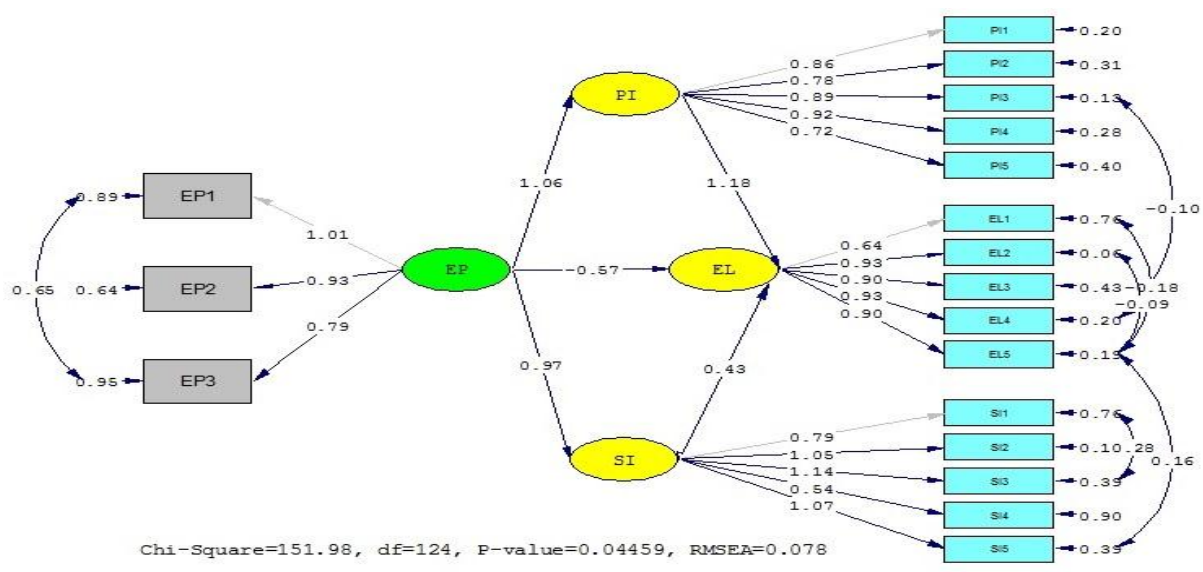

Chi-Square=151.98, df=124, P-value=0.04459, RMSEA=0.078

Figure 2: Factor coefficients and path coefficients of the research model

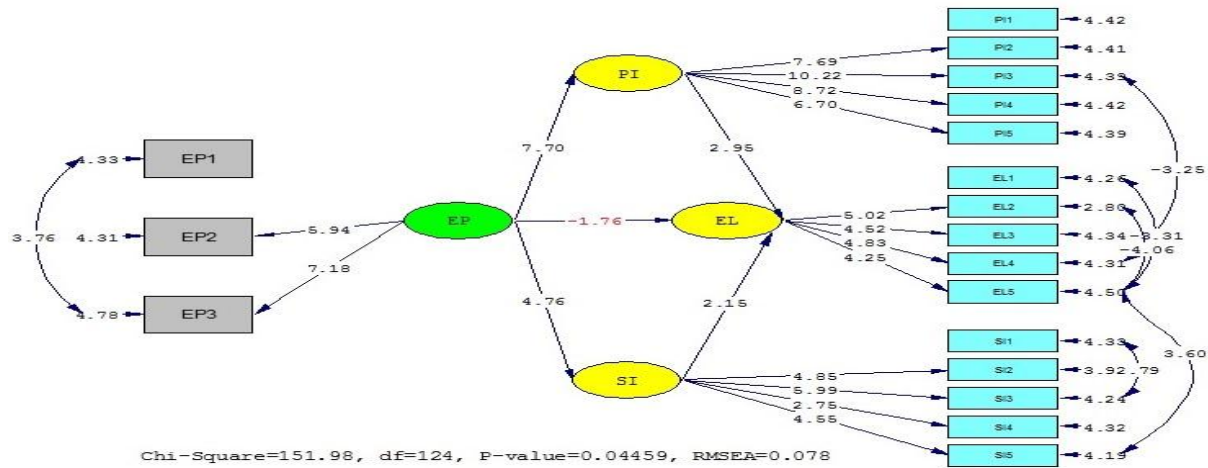**Figure 3: The conceptual model of the research in a significance state and T-value coefficients**

Table 4: Sobel's mediation analysis results

Sobel test	se$_{ab}$	p-value	t-value
Hypothesis 6	0.45847	0.00636	2.72815
Hypothesis 7	0.29034	0.15083	1.43685

Table 5: Summary of hypotheses test results

Hypothesis	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Path coefficient	1.06	0.97	1.18	0.43	-0.57	1.25	0.41
t-value	7.70	4.76	2.95	2.15	-1.76	2.73	1.44
Result	Confirmed	Confirmed	Confirmed	Confirmed	Rejected	Confirmed	Rejected

6-3. Final and Confirmed Conceptual Model of the Research

Based on the analysis and results, the research model is presented in (Figure 4). In this model, participation in e-WOM has a direct impact on personal and social identification with Digikala website among customers and buyers of this website. Also, personal and social identity of customers with the website directly affects their electronic loyalty. But in this model, participation in e-WOM customers does not directly affect their e-loyalty. However, indirect participation in e-WOM is indirect due to the individual identification of customers with the website on their e-loyalty.
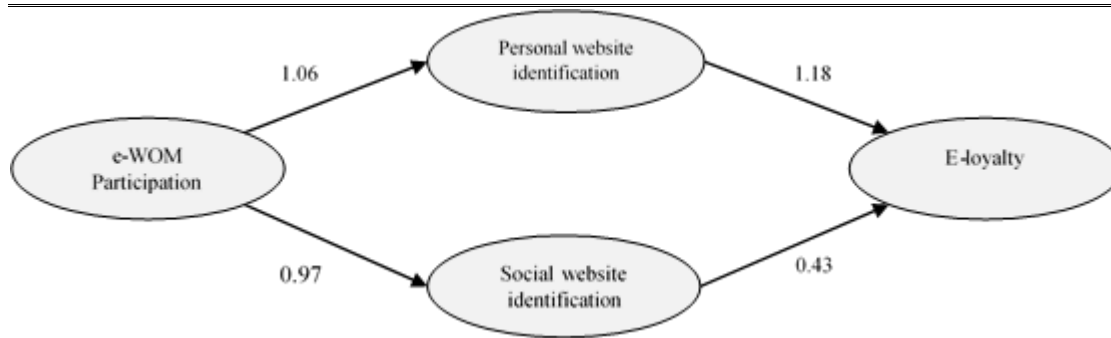
Figure 4: Final conceptual model of the research

7. Conclusion and Implications

In this research, the relationships between e-WOM participation and the role of personal and social website identification were analyzed and evaluated. The statistical population consisted of 384 Digikala customers that were selected by convenience sampling method as statistical sample. A questionnaire with confirmed validity and reliability was used to collect data. In order to analyze the information and examine the hypotheses structural equation model was implemented and Sobel test was used to investigate the effect of mediation variables. The research hypotheses were analyzed using LISREL and SPSS software. The results showed that e-WOM participation had a positive effect on personal and social website identification. these two types of website identification had a significant and positive effect on e-loyalty. The mediation effect of personal website identification was confirmed as well, but the results showed no positive and significant effect on the mediating variable of social website identification and also the direct effect of e-WOM on loyalty. it can be concluded from the first and second hypotheses that Interactions with online store through e-WOM system can increase the personal website identification in the participant, and the customer's participation in reviewing and suggesting comments has an important role in creating personal website identification and should not be neglected. On the other hand, as mentioned, the person who regularly participates in e-WOM has a greater sense of belonging and membership, and this behaviour of participation in e-WOM improves social identity among Digikala customers. The third and fourth hypotheses examination showed that personal

and social website identification has positive and significant effect on loyalty. According to what was mentioned in the theoretical foundations of the research, there is a strong relationship between customer loyalty and identification with a brand (Rio et al, 2001), and when there is a high level of identification with the brand, the customer usually increases her/his purchase (Yi & La, 2002) which results in a higher level of identification with the website in this study and ends in a stronger e-loyalty. The results of the fifth hypothesis test indicated that there was no positive and significant relationship between participation in e-WOM and e-loyalty, which led to the fifth hypothesis being rejected. This conclusion seems reasonable because e-WOM has a wide range of information and various factors, such as the quality and credibility of information, are involved, and all contributions to e-WOM do not necessarily lead to e-loyalty. On the other hand, e-WOM can have negative content and cause distrust and disloyalty. The sixth and seventh hypotheses examinations pinpoint that e-WOM participation has a positive and significant effect on e-loyalty through personal website identification on Digikala. The results of this study indicate that personal website identification leads customers to create e-loyalty through the digital website, and when it comes to identifying customers by continuing to participate in e-WOM, e-loyalty emerges. But the results indicate that there is no positive and significant relationship between e-WOM participation and e-loyalty through social website identification on Digikala. It seems that one of the factors contributing to this result is the product diversity in this website. Indeed, the heterogeneity of the products can affect this hypothesis, and if different products (such as artistic products) are sold in an online store, a different result can be obtained.

According to the results, social identity plays an important role in using e-WOM system. Maintaining an e-WOM system from the standpoint of communication media for an online store is essential to build a strong social identity on the website by improving interactions with other customers. For example, for improving social identity, encouraging customers to respond to other e-WOM clients or suggesting external rewards is helpful. Measures such as boosting economic stimuli, improving interactions with the active feedback of a manager, in the form of e-WOM

system, have led to increased customer engagement, as well as the development of a communications channel that connects customers and also a web-based connectivity channel to customers is essential, and therefore they can create and develop a strong social identity. Installing an e-WOM system, with which customers can send e-WOM through a richer media such as photo or video, helps to raise the quality of interactions between customers, and lead customers to create e-loyalty through the online store of Digikala. To enhance personal websites identification, there's a need to have custom and customized content services and appropriate feedback. A personalized content service and high-level interaction with the website enhance customer satisfaction and give them opportunities to understand the website. To advance these aspects, we can use machine learning technology that customizes websites and develops communication channels. These strategies increase individual website identification and ultimately lead to customer loyalty.

In this research, the effect of e-WOM participation on customer loyalty on Digikala was studied through personal and social website identification, which provides several opportunities for future research: studying the effect of the interaction of a shopping website can be useful in the field of various goods as customers on the Internet feel more uncertainty when shopping for non-identical goods than identical goods. Such a research could have useful practical results for website management. In this study, the cross-sectional and sampling methods restrict the results, on the other hand just one shopping website was considered and in order to generalize the results of the research, it is necessary to collect data from various online shopping stores. The negative e-WOM and the impact of these negative comments on website identification and e-loyalty could be considered in future researches.

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