



## Exploring the role of word-of-mouth marketing in shaping consumer buying behavior in Northern Ghana's retail sector

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### Abstract

**Purpose:** The study investigates the influence of traditional and digital word-of-mouth (WOM) marketing on consumer purchasing decisions in Northern Ghana's retail sector. It further explores the mediating role of community structures, trust, and social networks, while analyzing strategies retailers adopt to leverage WOM for enhancing customer loyalty and competitiveness.

**Methodology:** The research adopted a qualitative exploratory design, anchored in interpretivist assumptions. Data were collected through 30 semi-structured interviews with retail consumers and 47 interviews with retailers, complemented by focus group discussions across selected communities in Northern Ghana. Thematic analysis was employed to derive key patterns and generate insights into the socio-cultural dynamics of WOM marketing.

**Findings:** The results reveal that WOM credibility is strongly rooted in community trust and collective endorsement, with social networks serving as powerful amplifiers both offline and online. Retailers strategically stimulate WOM through three approaches: cultivating customer service excellence, leveraging community influencers, and integrating digital platforms for extended reach. WOM thus emerges as a culturally embedded mechanism that significantly shapes consumer behavior and retail competitiveness.

**Practical Implications:** The findings underscore the need for retailers and marketers to invest in community-based trust-building, customer service, and hybrid WOM strategies that bridge offline and digital channels to sustain competitiveness in emerging markets.

**Originality/Value:** By linking WOM dynamics to Social Exchange Theory, Diffusion of Innovations Theory, and the Theory of Planned Behavior, the study advances theoretical and empirical understanding of consumer influence in underexplored retail contexts, offering actionable insights for both scholars and practitioners.

**Keywords:** Word-of-mouth marketing, consumer behavior, retail sector, Northern Ghana, social networks, customer loyalty, digital platforms

### Introduction

Word-of-mouth marketing (WOMM) has consistently been recognized as one of the most trusted and influential communication strategies in both developed and emerging economies. Unlike conventional advertising, WOMM thrives on personal credibility, as consumers are more inclined to rely on the recommendations of family, friends, and peers than on formal brand messages (Schall, Adonoo, & Appiah, 2019). In Ghana, this phenomenon is particularly pronounced due to the communal nature of society, where interpersonal communication is central to daily life and commercial exchange (Auwah, 2022). The emergence of digital platforms has further extended WOM into hybrid spaces, blending traditional face-to-face interactions with mobile messaging and social media group communications, thereby reshaping consumer engagement (Abubakari & Thurani, 2021)<sup>[1]</sup>.

In Northern Ghana, the retail sector operates within socio-cultural contexts characterized by kinship, trust-based networks, and strong community ties. Here, consumer decision-making is deeply influenced by interpersonal endorsements and community narratives rather than solely by formal promotions. Despite the recognized role of WOMM in Ghanaian marketing, empirical studies have largely concentrated on urban centers in southern Ghana, leaving a knowledge gap on how WOM operates in the northern retail sector. Understanding this dynamic is crucial for contextualizing consumer behavior, which involves

cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses to market offerings (Ajzen, 2020). This study therefore situates WOMM as a pivotal construct in exploring consumer behavior patterns in Northern Ghana's retail industry.

### Problem Statement

While existing scholarship affirms the significant role of WOMM in shaping consumer attitudes, and purchase intentions, its influence in localized and culturally distinct contexts such as Northern Ghana has not been sufficiently explored. Prior studies highlight how WOM, transmitted through interpersonal networks and increasingly through digital tools, supports product sales and brand credibility in Ghana (Schall *et al.*, 2019). However, these investigations are geographically biased toward southern markets, often neglecting the unique cultural and structural realities of Northern Ghana's retail economy. Retailers in the region rely heavily on informal, trust-based marketing practices, yet little is known about the mechanisms through which WOMM drives consumer buying decisions within this ecosystem.

This gap presents both theoretical and practical challenges. Theoretically, it limits the extension of WOM literature into under-researched contexts, undermining the ability to generalize marketing behavior insights across Ghana. Practically, the absence of empirical evidence leaves retailers and policymakers in Northern Ghana without data-driven strategies to harness WOMM for sustainable retail

growth. If unaddressed, this oversight may perpetuate ineffective marketing practices and hinder competitiveness in a rapidly evolving retail environment. Hence, this study is necessary to critically examine how WOMM shapes consumer behavior in Northern Ghana's retail sector.

### Research Objectives

The study investigates the influence of traditional and digital word-of-mouth (WOM) marketing on consumer purchasing decisions in Northern Ghana's retail sector. Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. Examine how traditional and digital word-of-mouth marketing influences consumer purchasing decisions in Northern Ghana's retail sector;
2. Explore the role of community structures, trust, and social networks in mediating the impact of word-of-mouth marketing on consumer behavior and'
3. Analyze the strategies retailers adopt to leverage word-of-mouth marketing for enhancing customer loyalty and competitiveness in Northern Ghana.

### Significance of the Study

This study carries theoretical, practical, and policy relevance. Theoretically, it contextualizes word-of-mouth marketing (WOMM) within Northern Ghana's socio-cultural and economic realities, extending existing scholarship beyond the commonly studied southern regions. It also enriches global discussions by showing how trust, community ties, and hybrid communication channels shape consumer decision-making in emerging markets (Abubakari & Thurunira, 2021) <sup>[1]</sup>. Practically, the study provides retailers with insights on leveraging WOM both traditional and digital to build consumer trust and loyalty. For policymakers and development agencies, the findings offer evidence to design culturally aligned interventions that enhance retail competitiveness. Overall, the study bridges a knowledge gap while offering actionable implications for multiple stakeholders.

### Scope of the Study

This study is geographically limited to Northern Ghana's retail sector, particularly Tamale and selected urban and peri-urban retail hubs. It covers both informal retailers (market vendors and small traders) and formal outlets (shops and supermarkets). The timeframe spans 2019 to 2025, capturing socio-economic shifts, including the influence of COVID-19 on consumer behavior. Methodologically, the research adopts a qualitative approach using interviews and focus groups to explore the perspectives of consumers, retailers, and community influencers. The scope excludes national-level WOMM campaigns beyond local community networks, focusing instead on the intersection of face-to-face and localized digital WOM. Emphasis is placed on lived experiences and meaning-making rather than statistical generalization.

### Theoretical Framework

The study is underpinned by three relevant theories: Social Exchange Theory, Diffusion of Innovations Theory, and the Theory of Planned Behavior. Each offers a distinct but complementary explanation of the mechanisms through which WOMM influences consumer buying behavior.

### Social Exchange Theory

Social Exchange Theory (SET) posits that human interactions are shaped by the pursuit of rewards and the

avoidance of costs in social relationships. In marketing, this theory explains why consumers share product information through word-of-mouth: they expect social recognition, reciprocity, or enhanced trust in return for providing useful advice. In Northern Ghana's retail sector, where community ties and relational trust are strong, SET helps explain how consumers rely on WOMM as a low-cost, high-trust mechanism for reducing uncertainty in purchasing decisions (Boateng & Kosiba, 2020). This theory provides a basis for analyzing how social value and relational benefits drive WOM behaviors.

### Diffusion of Innovations Theory

Rogers' Diffusion of Innovations Theory explains how new ideas, practices, or products spread within a social system over time. Word-of-mouth plays a central role in this diffusion process, as early adopters influence peers' adoption decisions through interpersonal communication. In Northern Ghana, where peer networks, opinion leaders, and community influencers strongly shape consumption norms, WOMM serves as a critical channel for diffusing new products and retail practices. This theory is particularly useful for examining how informal conversations accelerate or hinder the acceptance of goods in local markets (Mensah *et al.*, 2021).

### Theory of Planned Behavior

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) suggests that consumer intentions and ultimately behaviors are influenced by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. WOMM directly shapes subjective norms by transmitting social approval or disapproval through trusted networks. In the Northern Ghanaian retail context, where cultural values and collective opinions strongly influence buying, WOMM becomes a powerful driver of consumer intention. This theory helps explain how word-of-mouth recommendations translate into actual purchasing decisions, especially in environments where formal advertising is less dominant (Abubakari & Thurunira, 2021) <sup>[1]</sup>.

**Word-of-Mouth Marketing:** Word-of-mouth (WOM) marketing remains a powerful promotional tool because it is perceived as more credible and trustworthy than traditional advertising. Recent studies highlight that both traditional face-to-face WOM and digital WOM through social media significantly shape consumer opinions (Osei & Agyeman, 2021). WOM spreads faster in digital contexts but often carries stronger influence in personal, offline interactions where trust is higher (Acheampong & Kwarteng, 2022). In emerging markets, WOM is particularly relevant due to close-knit communities and strong social networks (Mensah & Abubakar, 2020). Positive WOM enhances brand image, while negative WOM can quickly damage reputation (Boateng, 2023). Retailers often stimulate WOM intentionally through influencer partnerships and customer referral programs (Adomako & Asare, 2022). Thus, WOM is both an organic process and a strategic marketing tool in modern retail.

**Consumer Buying Behavior:** Consumer buying behavior is influenced by psychological, social, and cultural factors that shape preferences and decision-making processes. In emerging economies, trust, affordability, and social influence play critical roles in consumer choices (Yakubu &

Sulemana, 2021). Studies reveal that recommendations from peers and community members are often more persuasive than direct advertising (Ampofo *et al.*, 2022). The rise of digital platforms has further altered buying behavior by increasing access to peer reviews and testimonials (Boateng, 2023). Consumers in Ghana often blend traditional trust-based decision-making with online information before making purchases (Ibrahim & Abdul-Rahman, 2023). Buying decisions are also driven by perceived product quality, customer experience, and brand credibility (Owusu & Appiah, 2021). Overall, consumer behavior reflects a dynamic process influenced by both personal values and external social cues.

**Retail Sector:** The retail sector is rapidly transforming due to globalization, digitalization, and shifting consumer expectations. In Ghana, retail growth is driven by both traditional markets and modern retail outlets that coexist within the economy (Mensah & Abubakar, 2020). The sector is highly competitive, requiring businesses to adopt customer-centered strategies such as personalized service and community engagement (Owusu & Appiah, 2021). Digital platforms have also become central to retail operations, enabling e-commerce and online customer interactions (Boateng & Amankwah, 2025). Word-of-mouth and consumer loyalty are particularly vital for retailers with limited advertising budgets (Yakubu & Ibrahim, 2024). Retailers are increasingly using influencer marketing, customer experience management, and trust-building practices to remain competitive (Adomako & Asare, 2022). This highlights the evolving nature of retail in emerging markets, where tradition and innovation intersect.

### **Traditional and Digital WOMM influences on Purchasing Decisions**

Word-of-mouth (WOM) marketing remains one of the most influential drivers of consumer decision-making, particularly in regions where social ties and communal interactions strongly influence consumption patterns. In Northern Ghana, traditional WOM—often driven by interpersonal recommendations, face-to-face discussions, and communal endorsement—continues to shape consumer trust and reduce perceived risks associated with purchase decisions. Studies suggest that traditional WOM is perceived as more credible than firm-driven advertising because it emanates from trusted personal networks (Osei & Agyeman, 2021). However, the retail landscape in Ghana is also experiencing the growing impact of digital WOM, especially through social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and TikTok, where younger consumers increasingly rely on peer reviews and online testimonials before making purchases (Acheampong & Kwarteng, 2022). The convergence of both traditional and digital WOM has created a hybrid influence on purchasing behavior, where consumers cross-verify offline recommendations with digital opinions to enhance decision confidence (Boateng, 2023). Importantly, digital WOM allows information diffusion at a faster pace and broader scale compared to traditional channels, which remains localized but more intimate. This interplay between traditional credibility and digital reach underscores the unique dynamics of WOM marketing in Northern Ghana's retail sector, where cultural trust and technological adoption coexist to guide consumer behavior.

### **Community Structures, Trust, and Social Networks as Mediators**

Community structures and social networks provide the cultural and relational foundation upon which WOM marketing thrives in Northern Ghana. In societies where, communal living and kinship networks are central, consumer decisions are not only individual choices but collective ones influenced by extended family, religious associations, and local trade groups (Mensah & Abubakar, 2020). Trust plays a mediating role in this process, as consumers are more likely to rely on recommendations from in-group members whose opinions carry legitimacy within the social fabric (Yakubu & Sulemana, 2021). Social networks act as powerful channels for the transmission of both positive and negative WOM, where credibility is amplified through repeated reinforcement across community ties (Ampofo *et al.*, 2022). For instance, a retailer's reputation can spread rapidly through mosque gatherings, market associations, and informal women's cooperatives, influencing consumer perceptions and brand image. In digital contexts, trust is also mediated through social media groups where community members endorse or discredit products based on shared experiences. Scholars argue that in contexts such as Northern Ghana, WOM is less about individual persuasion and more about collective validation within trusted networks (Ibrahim & Abdul-Rahman, 2023). This highlights the importance of community-based trust systems as mediators of WOM marketing, where purchasing decisions are embedded within cultural norms of reciprocity, belonging, and shared accountability.

### **Retailer Strategies that Leverage WOMM for Loyalty and Competitiveness**

Retailers in Northern Ghana have increasingly recognized WOM marketing as a cost-effective and culturally resonant strategy for sustaining competitiveness and building customer loyalty. One common approach involves cultivating strong customer service experiences that naturally stimulate positive WOM through satisfied consumers (Owusu & Appiah, 2021). Additionally, retailers leverage community leaders, opinion influencers, and social media micro-influencers to amplify endorsements, blending traditional credibility with digital virality (Adomako & Asare, 2022). Retailers also adopt referral programs and incentives that encourage loyal customers to recommend products to their networks, thereby formalizing WOM into structured marketing strategies. Importantly, retailers in Northern Ghana tap into community structures—such as market unions and religious groups—as platforms to build reputation and encourage advocacy (Yakubu & Ibrahim, 2024). On digital fronts, strategies include sharing user-generated content, engaging in online reviews, and using WhatsApp broadcast groups to reinforce personalized trust-based marketing (Boateng & Amankwah, 2025). By systematically managing WOM through both informal and formalized mechanisms, retailers enhance customer retention, improve brand image, and remain competitive in a retail environment characterized by resource constraints and intense competition. This indicates that WOM marketing is not only an organic process but also a deliberate strategic tool for retailers seeking sustainable growth and differentiation in Northern Ghana.

## Methodology

The study is grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, which was deemed appropriate for exploring the socially constructed meanings that consumers and retailers attached to word-of-mouth (WOM) marketing within the retail context of Northern Ghana. A qualitative research design was employed to generate rich, contextual insights into how WOM shaped consumer buying behavior in everyday market interactions. The study adopted a multiple case study strategy, focusing on diverse retail settings, including open-air markets, small-town shops, and peri-urban supermarkets, in order to capture variations in WOM practices across contexts.

Participants were selected purposively to ensure that those most knowledgeable and experienced with WOM were included. The sample comprised consumers, retailers, and local influencers such as market leaders and social media micro-influencers. In total, 47 participants were engaged, a size that was sufficient to reach data saturation where no new themes were emerging.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and non-participant observations. Interviews allowed participants to narrate their experiences of WOM influence on purchase decisions, while focus groups facilitated the observation of group dynamics and collective opinion formation. Observations in retail spaces provided contextual validation of WOM interactions, and relevant documentary materials such as WhatsApp broadcast messages and shop flyers were also reviewed. All interviews and discussions were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and supplemented with detailed field notes.

Data analysis was conducted using reflexive thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach. An inductive coding process was employed to allow themes to emerge from the data while remaining attentive to the research objectives. NVivo software was used to manage data and support systematic analysis. To ensure trustworthiness, multiple strategies were applied: triangulation of methods and participants enhanced credibility, member checking with a subset of participants validated interpretations, and reflexive journaling strengthened confirmability. Thick descriptions of contexts and participant experiences further enhanced transferability of findings. Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board prior to fieldwork. Informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity were strictly upheld, and participants were assured of their right to withdraw at any stage.

Through this qualitative methodological approach, the study generated nuanced insights into the mechanisms by which WOM shaped consumer decision-making in Northern Ghana's retail sector, providing a culturally embedded understanding of its role in influencing buying behavior.

## Results

### Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

The demographic profile of respondents reflected a balanced representation of gender, with 53.2% male and 46.8% female participants. The age distribution indicated that the majority of respondents were within the active working-age brackets of 26–35 years (31.9%) and 36–45 years (25.5%), suggesting that WOM marketing practices were largely shaped by economically active consumers and retailers.

Educational attainment varied, with 31.9% having completed secondary or technical education, while 25.5% each held tertiary or basic education, and 17.0% had no formal education. This variation in literacy levels provided insights into both traditional and digital WOM channels, as those with higher education levels were more inclined toward digital platforms, whereas those with lower education levels relied more on interpersonal recommendations.

In terms of occupation, consumers constituted the largest group (53.2%), followed by retailers (25.5%) and local influencers (21.3%). This composition ensured a holistic understanding of WOM processes from both the demand and supply sides of the retail sector, as well as from community opinion leaders who often mediate trust and information exchange. The diversity of demographic characteristics enriched the findings by highlighting how age, education, and social roles influenced the way WOM marketing was generated, transmitted, and received within Northern Ghana's retail environment.

### Objective One: Influence of Traditional and Digital Word-of-Mouth on Consumer Purchasing Decisions.

The analysis revealed that both traditional and digital forms of word-of-mouth (WOM) significantly shaped consumer purchasing decisions in Northern Ghana's retail sector, although their influence varied across demographic and contextual factors. Three dominant themes emerged: (1) trust and credibility in traditional WOM, (2) accessibility and reach of digital WOM, and (3) the convergence of hybrid decision-making.

#### Theme 1: Trust and Credibility in Traditional WOM

Traditional WOM, conveyed through family members, friends, neighbors, and religious or community leaders, emerged as the most credible source of product information. Respondents repeatedly emphasized that recommendations from trusted individuals reduced the perceived risks associated with purchases, particularly for food items, clothing, and household goods. One participant remarked, "When my sister or church elder recommends a shop, I do not doubt it because they have no reason to deceive me." This finding underscores the enduring role of communal trust in shaping consumer decisions, especially among older and less digitally literate consumers.

#### Theme 2: Accessibility and Reach of Digital WOM

Digital WOM, primarily mediated through WhatsApp groups, Facebook, and increasingly TikTok, was highlighted as influential among younger consumers and urban-based shoppers. Participants noted that social media reviews and online peer recommendations provided quicker access to information and a broader range of product options. Retailers also shared that customer testimonials posted online enhanced brand visibility and attracted new buyers. For example, one retailer explained, "When a customer posts about my shop on WhatsApp, I get many new buyers who say they saw the message online." Digital WOM was particularly effective for promoting fashion, electronics, and cosmetics, where visual content and peer validation were highly persuasive.

#### Theme 3: Hybrid Decision-Making

Interestingly, many consumers described a process of hybrid decision-making, whereby they verified online

recommendations through offline discussions with trusted acquaintances before making purchases. This cross-validation was evident across all age groups, though more pronounced among middle-aged respondents who used digital platforms but still relied heavily on traditional endorsements. For instance, a consumer explained, "I first see the product on Facebook, but before I buy, I ask my cousin if she knows the shop is reliable." This hybrid practice demonstrates that digital WOM did not replace traditional WOM but rather complemented it, creating a layered influence on consumer behavior.

**Objective Two:** The Role of Community Structures, Trust, and Social Networks in Mediating Word-of-Mouth Influence.

The findings indicated that community structures, trust, and social networks were central mediators in the way WOM marketing shaped consumer behavior in Northern Ghana's retail sector. Three interrelated themes emerged: (1) community structures as channels of endorsement, (2) trust as a foundation of WOM credibility, and (3) social networks as amplifiers of consumer influence.

### **Theme 1: Community Structures as Channels of Endorsement**

Community organizations including religious groups, market associations, savings cooperatives, and family networks were found to serve as key channels through which WOM circulated. Consumers often described how endorsements made during community meetings or religious gatherings influenced their choice of shops and products. For example, one participant noted, "In our market women's group, if someone says a shop sells quality rice, most of us will buy from there because we know each other and trust the group." Such structures created collective consumer behavior patterns, where purchasing decisions were not merely individual but shaped by community-level endorsement.

### **Theme 2: Trust as the Foundation of WOM Credibility**

Trust consistently emerged as the central factor underpinning WOM influence. Respondents emphasized that the trustworthiness of the message sender was more important than the content of the message itself. Consumers expressed higher reliance on information from kinship ties, respected elders, and religious leaders, perceiving them as unbiased and credible. As one male respondent explained, "If my uncle recommends a shop, I will go there because I know he wants the best for me." Retailers also acknowledged that their reputation depended heavily on maintaining trust within the community, since a single breach of trust could lead to widespread negative WOM.

### **Theme 3: Social Networks as Amplifiers of Influence**

Social networks both offline and online were highlighted as amplifiers of WOM's reach and intensity. Offline, information spread quickly through family compounds, workplace groups, and market clusters, where one satisfied consumer often influenced an entire circle of buyers. Online, social media platforms extended the reach of WOM by allowing endorsements to spread beyond local boundaries. Respondents indicated that being part of WhatsApp or Facebook groups enabled them to share and verify product information more widely. However, they also

stressed that digital messages were often validated offline through trusted community networks before decisions were made. This interplay between social networks and trust reinforced WOM's impact on consumer behavior.

**Objective Three** Strategies Retailers Adopt to Leverage Word-of-Mouth Marketing for Customer Loyalty and Competitiveness.

The findings revealed that retailers in Northern Ghana actively adopted deliberate strategies to stimulate and manage word-of-mouth (WOM) marketing as a means of retaining customers and remaining competitive in a highly dynamic retail environment. Three key strategic approaches emerged: (1) cultivating customer service excellence, (2) leveraging community influencers and networks, and (3) integrating digital platforms for extended reach.

### **Theme 1: Cultivating Customer Service Excellence**

Retailers consistently emphasized the role of personalized and respectful service in generating positive WOM. Many participants explained that consumers valued retailers who treated them fairly, offered flexible payment options, and maintained product quality. A shop owner stated, "If you serve a customer well, they will tell others, and those others will also come. That is how I survive."

By ensuring positive shopping experiences, retailers encouraged organic recommendations that translated into repeat patronage and strengthened loyalty within consumer networks.

### **Theme 2: Leveraging Community Influence and Networks**

Another strategy involved the strategic use of trusted community figures such as market leaders, religious elders, and respected traders to endorse shops or products. Retailers often provided discounts or gifts to these opinion leaders, knowing that their approval carried significant weight in consumer decision-making. One retailer explained, "If the chief imam or market queen mentions your shop, people will come to you because they believe in them." Such endorsements embedded retailers within community trust structures, allowing WOM to spread rapidly and authentically. This practice reinforced not only loyalty but also the retailer's reputation as a credible business actor.

### **Theme 3: Integrated Digital Platforms for Extended Reach**

Retailers increasingly adopted digital WOM strategies by encouraging satisfied customers to share their experiences online, particularly through WhatsApp and Facebook. Some retailers created customer broadcast groups where promotional information and user testimonials were circulated. Younger entrepreneurs especially highlighted the use of TikTok and Instagram to showcase satisfied buyers, which encouraged others to purchase. A retailer noted, "When customers post about my products online, it brings me new buyers who have never been to the market before." Digital WOM thus complemented traditional strategies, expanding competitiveness beyond local networks to broader markets.

## **Results Discussions**

**Objective One:** Influence of Traditional and Digital Word-of-Mouth on Consumer Purchasing Decisions.

### Trust and Credibility in Traditional WOM

The data showed that traditional WOM operated as a primary credibility filter for consumer decisions, whereby endorsements from family members, neighbours, religious leaders and market elders substantially reduced perceived purchase risk. This pattern was consistent with Social Exchange Theory: consumers treated recommendations as socially embedded exchanges in which the recommender's ongoing relationships and reputation served as informal collateral, thereby increasing message reliability and motivating reciprocative behaviour (Blau, 1964). Empirically, participants reported higher willingness to purchase when recommendations originated from individuals occupying durable, trust-bearing roles in their networks, which explained the especially strong influence of traditional WOM on purchases of staple and high-risk items. These findings extended SET by illustrating how normative obligations and reputational costs within tightly knit communities functioned to verify claims about product quality and supplier reliability (Osei & Agyeman, 2021; Ibrahim & Abdul-Rahman, 2023). In short, traditional WOM produced normative assurance that directly shaped subjective perceptions of risk and trust, and thus facilitated purchase enactment.

### Accessibility and Reach of Digital WOM

Findings indicated that digital WOM disseminated via WhatsApp, Facebook, and emerging platforms such as TikTok enhanced exposure to product information and accelerated diffusion across social clusters, particularly among younger and urban respondents. This empirical pattern aligned with Rogers' Diffusion of Innovations framework: digital channels increased the observability and communicability of product attributes, enabling faster information transmission and wider reach beyond immediate social circles (Rogers, 2003)<sup>[10]</sup>. Participants and retailers described rapid customer acquisition following online testimonials, demonstrating DOI's assertion that media and opinion leaders can amplify adoption rates. Moreover, digital WOM influenced attitudes toward products by providing visual evidence and peer evaluations—attributes that DOI identifies as reducing uncertainty and increasing perceived relative advantage for potential adopters (Acheampong & Kwarteng, 2022; Boateng, 2023). Empirically, digital WOM therefore acted as a catalyzer of awareness and positive attitude formation, though its persuasive force often required complementary trust signals to convert exposure into purchase.

### Hybrid Decision Making

The study documented a recurrent hybrid validation process in which consumers used digital signals to form favourable attitudes but sought offline confirmation from trusted contacts before acting. This integrative behaviour was well explained by the Theory of Planned Behavior: digital WOM primarily altered consumers' attitudes by presenting product benefits and social proof, while traditional endorsements supplied subjective norms necessary to convert attitude into behavioural intention (Ajzen, 1991)<sup>[2]</sup>. Empirically, respondents described forming intentions only when digital information (attitudinal influence) and community approval (normative influence) co-occurred, and when perceived behavioural control (confidence in accessing a reliable vendor) was assured through local verification. This

triangulation of DOI (information/observability), SET (trust/norms), and TPB (attitude → intention → behaviour) thus explained the layered pathway from exposure to purchase in Northern Ghana. Middle-aged respondents exemplified this hybrid strategy most clearly, balancing the speed and breadth of digital WOM with the credibility and risk mitigation offered by traditional networks. The empirical implication is that digital and traditional WOM were complementary rather than substitutive: digital channels increased awareness and shaped attitudes, but traditional social exchange mechanisms were frequently required to legitimise action and complete the intention–behaviour sequence.

**Objective Two:** The Role of Community Structures, Trust, and Social Networks in Mediating Word-of-Mouth Influence.

### Community Structures as Channels of Endorsement

The data showed that formal and informal community structures (religious groups, market associations, savings cooperatives, and family networks) functioned as organized conduits through which WOM circulated and was legitimized. Empirically, endorsements made in group settings (e.g., market women's associations or religious gatherings) produced swift collective action participants reported that an endorsement uttered in these fora frequently translated into coordinated buying behaviour across network members. Theoretically, this pattern resonated with Social Exchange Theory insofar as group membership entailed ongoing reciprocal obligations and reputational accountability; endorsement within these structures carried amplified weight because members expected mutual support and truthful communication (Blau, 1964; Osei & Agyeman, 2021). At the same time, the community channels also served DOI functions by acting as localized opinion-leadership nodes that accelerated the diffusion of information within bounded adopter clusters (Rogers, 2003)<sup>[10]</sup>. Thus, community structures both legitimized messages through social exchange mechanisms and increased the speed and breadth of diffusion, producing collectivized consumption responses that were more than the sum of individual recommendations.

### Trust as the Foundation of WOM Credibility

Trust emerged as the pivotal mediator that determined whether WOM translated into behaviour: respondents consistently privileged the source's trustworthiness over message content, relying more on kinship ties, elders and religious leaders than on anonymous endorsements. Empirically, statements such as "If my uncle recommends a shop, I will go there" illustrated that perceived benevolence and lack of self-interest in the recommender reduced cognitive and perceived-risk barriers to purchase. From a SET perspective, these dynamics reflected cost–benefit calculations embedded in long-term relationships: trusted actors bore reputational costs for misinformation, which increased the credibility of their advice (Blau, 1964; Ibrahim & Abdul-Rahman, 2023). Trust also interfaced with TPB: endorsements from trusted referents constituted strong subjective norms that shaped intentions toward buying (Ajzen, 1991)<sup>[2]</sup>. Consequently, trust operated as the indispensable bridge between exposure to WOM and formation of purchase intentions—without trust, both digital and community messages had limited persuasive power.

### Social Networks as Amplifiers of Influence

Social networks manifesting offline in family compounds, workplaces and market clusters and online in WhatsApp and Facebook groups were found to amplify WOM by increasing message reach and intensity. Empirically, one positive experience often cascaded through immediate network ties, producing ripple effects where whole clusters adopted the same buying choice; digital groups extended this reach beyond local confines but were typically validated back through offline ties. This amplification dynamic mapped onto DOI's emphasis on communication channels and opinion leaders that facilitate rapid spread (Rogers, 2003) <sup>[10]</sup>, while also reflecting SET because the credibility of networked endorsements depended on entrenched relational ties. TPB complemented these perspectives by explaining how amplified messages influenced attitudes (via observable endorsements) and subjective norms (via repeated peer approval), thereby strengthening behavioural intentions. In short, social networks magnified WOM's influence by combining diffusion mechanics (speed and reach) with relational credibility, producing robust, and network-level shifts in retail patronage.

**Objective Three: Strategies Retailers Adopt to Leverage Word-of-Mouth Marketing for Customer Loyalty and Competitiveness**

#### Cultivating Customer Service Excellence

The results revealed that retailers in Northern Ghana deliberately cultivated high-quality customer service to stimulate WOM. Personalized attention, respect, and fairness were particularly emphasized, with flexible payment arrangements and consistent product quality serving as mechanisms for securing loyalty. Empirical studies support this finding, showing that superior service delivery significantly enhances customer satisfaction, which in turn generates positive WOM (Amoako *et al.*, 2021). From the lens of Social Exchange Theory, customers perceive fair treatment as a valuable benefit and reciprocate by recommending the retailer to others, creating a cycle of mutual reinforcement. Recent evidence from emerging markets indicates that satisfied consumers act as WOM "multipliers," spreading positive experiences within their social networks and strengthening retailer competitiveness (Abubakar & Bala, 2022). These findings highlight service excellence as not merely an operational choice but a deliberate strategic tool for building sustainable loyalty in resource-constrained retail environments.

#### Leveraging Community Influencers and Networks

The findings also indicated that retailers engaged trusted local opinion leaders such as market queens, religious figures, and community elders to stimulate WOM endorsements. This reflects a culturally embedded marketing practice where legitimacy and trustworthiness are reinforced through community gatekeepers. The empirical literature on Diffusion of Innovations Theory affirms that opinion leaders accelerate adoption by shaping collective attitudes within social systems (Rogers, 2003; Gyasi & Boateng, 2020) <sup>[10]</sup>. In Ghanaian and broader African retail contexts, the voice of authority figures often outweighs formal advertising, making their endorsements powerful drivers of consumer choice (Mensah & Asare, 2021). Retailers strategically offering discounts and gifts to influencers mirrors recent findings in Kenya and Nigeria,

where informal endorsements were shown to significantly increase small business competitiveness and consumer loyalty (Chikweche & Fletcher, 2020). Thus, leveraging influencers represents an empirically validated strategy for embedding WOM within existing community trust structures.

#### Integrating Digital Platforms for Extended Reach

The results further highlighted that retailers increasingly utilized digital WOM channels such as WhatsApp, Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram. Younger entrepreneurs, in particular, encouraged customers to post testimonials and share product experiences online, thereby expanding WOM beyond traditional geographic boundaries. This resonates with the Theory of Planned Behavior, where digital WOM creates favorable subjective norms and positive attitudes that influence consumer purchase intentions (Ajzen, 1991) <sup>[2]</sup>. Recent studies in Ghana confirm that social media WOM significantly influences brand loyalty and purchase behavior, especially among younger demographics (Boateng *et al.*, 2020; Addo, Fang, & Asare, 2022). Retailers' adoption of digital platforms reflects broader trends in emerging markets, where social media marketing enhances accessibility and competitiveness by reaching consumers previously outside traditional networks (Mensah, 2023). Thus, digital WOM acts as a complementary strategy to community-based WOM, offering a hybridized approach to sustaining competitiveness in an increasingly digitalized retail environment.

#### Conclusion

The study examined how word-of-mouth (WOM) marketing influences consumer buying behavior in Northern Ghana's retail sector, with specific attention to the interplay between traditional and digital forms, the mediating role of community structures and trust, and retailer strategies for leveraging WOM. The findings demonstrated that WOM remains a powerful determinant of purchasing decisions, shaped by both cultural embeddedness and technological adoption.

First, the analysis revealed that traditional WOM, anchored in trust, credibility, and communal bonds, continues to exert strong influence, particularly among older and less digitally literate consumers. Digital WOM, while increasingly significant, especially among youth and urban dwellers, functioned not as a replacement but as a complement to traditional WOM, creating a hybrid decision-making process that cross-validates information across both channels.

Second, the study highlighted that community structures, trust, and social networks mediate the impact of WOM by embedding consumer behavior within collective frameworks. Trust—whether derived from kinship ties, religious authorities, or respected community leaders—emerged as the most critical factor underpinning WOM credibility. Social networks further amplified WOM's reach, allowing both traditional and digital endorsements to shape consumer choices beyond individual transactions.

Finally, the findings revealed that retailers actively harness WOM through deliberate strategies centered on service excellence, leveraging community influencers, and embracing digital platforms. These approaches not only generated positive WOM but also enhanced customer

loyalty and competitiveness in a dynamic retail environment.

### Implications of the Study

The findings of this study hold significant theoretical, managerial, and policy implications.

Theoretically, the study advances understanding of word-of-mouth (WOM) marketing within the unique socio-cultural context of Northern Ghana by demonstrating how traditional trust-based interactions and digital platforms jointly shape consumer decision-making. By integrating perspectives from the Social Exchange Theory, Diffusion of Innovations Theory, and the Theory of Planned Behavior, the research provides a nuanced explanation of how credibility, accessibility, and social validation interact to drive purchasing behavior.

From a managerial perspective, the study highlights the need for retailers to adopt a dual strategy that leverages both traditional and digital WOM mechanisms. Retailers must not only provide excellent service and maintain community trust but also actively engage digital platforms to broaden reach and attract younger consumer segments. The findings suggest that cultivating hybrid WOM strategies where offline credibility reinforces online messages—offers a sustainable pathway for enhancing customer loyalty and competitiveness.

At the policy level, the study underscores the importance of strengthening digital literacy and infrastructure to ensure equitable access to online WOM benefits across rural and urban divides. Community-based consumer associations and trade networks can also be supported as trusted intermediaries that enhance the reliability of marketplace interactions. This has broader implications for consumer protection and market regulation in emerging economies.

### Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, several recommendations are proposed for practice and policy.

First, retailers should prioritize customer service excellence as a deliberate WOM strategy. By ensuring fairness, quality assurance, and personalized engagement, retailers can stimulate positive WOM that strengthens loyalty and sustains competitiveness.

### Theoretical Recommendations

The study advances the theoretical understanding of WOM by demonstrating its embeddedness in community trust structures and digital networks. Scholars are encouraged to further refine Social Exchange Theory and the Theory of Planned Behavior in the context of collectivist societies like Northern Ghana, where purchasing decisions are mediated more by communal endorsement than individual intention. Future research should also explore how Diffusion of Innovations Theory can be localized to explain the dual role of offline and online WOM in emerging markets.

### Managerial Recommendations

Retailers should adopt deliberate strategies to leverage WOM for competitiveness. First, customer service excellence through fairness, respect, flexible payment, and quality assurance must remain central to sustaining positive WOM. Second, retailers should engage community influencers and networks, such as religious leaders and market queens, to reinforce credibility and accelerate WOM

circulation. Third, managers should integrate digital WOM platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, and TikTok to expand reach beyond immediate communities, while ensuring alignment with existing trust-based offline networks.

### Policy Recommendations

Policy interventions should aim at strengthening the enabling environment for WOM-driven competitiveness. Government and trade associations should enhance digital literacy and infrastructural access for small retailers, enabling them to effectively use online WOM tools. Consumer protection agencies should enforce fair trade and trust-building mechanisms, ensuring that WOM communication remains credible and not manipulative. Moreover, support for community-based retail associations can further embed trust systems that sustain authentic WOM and consumer protection.

### Limitations and Suggestions for Future Studies

This study is not without limitations. First, its focus on Northern Ghana constrains the generalizability of findings to other cultural and economic contexts where WOM dynamics may differ. Second, the qualitative emphasis, while rich in depth, limits the extent of causal inferences between WOM strategies and consumer behavior. Third, reliance on self-reported data may have introduced bias, as participants could understate or overstate experiences based on social desirability.

Future studies should adopt comparative, cross-regional designs to examine how WOM operates across diverse cultural contexts in Ghana and beyond. Employing mixed-methods and longitudinal approaches would allow for stronger causal insights into the relationship between WOM and consumer loyalty. Additionally, future research could explore the role of emerging digital ecosystems, such as influencer marketing and e-commerce platforms, in reshaping WOM dynamics in African retail markets.

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