The Effectiveness of Electronic Word-Of-Mouth on Consumers' Purchase Decision: A Literature Review

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Abstract—*The purpose of the study is to identify factors influencing the effectiveness of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) message on the consumers' purchase decision. The researchers reviewed the factors investigated in the literatures to synthesize the effectiveness of eWOM message on consumers purchase decision by systematic literature review. Sixty five articles were collected on the topic of electronic word-of-mouth and purchase decision. At the end we selected seventeen articles but for the paper we have selected best ten articles. We found that five factors are the main players in the effectiveness of eWOM on consumers' purchase decision. The study not only provides us with an overview of the effectiveness of eWOM but also serves as a salient guideline for future research directions.*

Keywords: *Electronic word-of-mouth, Message, Purchase decision, Systematic Literature review, Effectiveness.*

1. INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt that we are passing an era of social communication (Facebook, twitter etc). It makes easier to all to spread their feelings i.e word-of-mouth via internet.

In the WEB 2.0 world, word-of-mouth has been playing a more important role than ever before in influencing consumer decisions. The opinions of others, especially the opinions of reference persons and groups, have always played a significant role in these decisions, but now it is possible to know the opinion of hundreds and thousands of others (people who consumers do not know personally or at all, who may well live on the other side of the world) (Majlath, 2013). She also mentioned that eWOM is a very popular topic among marketing researchers as it gives the chance for consumers to share their reviews almost totally freely. As more and more consumers' purchase decisions rely on the experiences of others shared on the Web, it has become more important to know what the motivation pattern behind the review writing activity is. For companies, the internet has provided new ways to bring value to the customers, and the change is continuing (Datta et al, 2005).

Cyberspace has presented marketers with new avenues to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of communication, and new approaches for the acquisition and retention of customers (Osenton, 2002).

Prior to the internet era, consumers shared each others' product-related experiences through traditional WOM. Today, the internet makes it possible for consumers to share experiences and opinions about a product via eWOM activity (Jalilvand et al, 2010).

Word-of-mouth marketing is a particularly prominent feature on the internet. The Internet provides numerous venues for consumers to share their views, preferences, or experiences with others, as well as opportunities for firms to take advantage of WOM marketing (Trusov, 2009).

Consumers increasingly use online media channels (e.g. online discussion forums, consumer review sites, weblogs, and social network sites) to share and use electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) about product and services (Cheung and Thadani, 2012). They also mentioned though the effectiveness of eWOM on consumers' perceptions of adopting product/services has been studied extensively in recent year, the scope of the published studies in this area is fragmented which made it difficult to draw systematic conclusions about the effectiveness of eWOM.

This paper presents a systematic review of the extant eWOM literature to synthesize the factors that shape the effectiveness of eWOM on consumers purchase decision.

1.1. What is WOM and e-WOM?

(Kotler et al, 2014) defines the word-of-mouth marketing as "people-to-people oral, written, or electronic communications that relate to the merits or experiences of purchasing or using products or services". Word-of- mouth marketing can be defined as giving people a reason to talk about your products and services, and making it easier for that conversation to take place (Word-of-Mouth Marketing Association,

2009).(Schiffman et al, 2013a) mentioned the term Word-of-mouth (WOM) implies personal, or face-to-face, communication, it may also take place in a telephone conversation or online.Word-of-mouth (WOM) is defined as an oral, person-to-person between a receiver and a communicator whom the receiver perceives as non-commercial, concerning a brand, a product, or a service (Arndt, 1967). Word-of-mouth is the interpersonal communication between two or more individuals, such as members of a reference group or a customer and a salesperson (Kim et al, 2001). (Westbrook, 1987) defined word-of-mouth as all informal communications directed at other consumers about the ownership, usage or characteristics of particular goods or their sellers."Word –of- mouth taking place online is called e-WOM" **(**Schiffman et al, 2013b**).** eWOM communication refers to any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, and former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institution via the internet. (Hennig-Thurau et al, 2004). Litvin et al.(2006) defined electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) as all informal communications directed at consumers through Internet-based technology related to the usage or characteristics of particular goods and services, or their seller.

The eWOM provides the possibility to obtain information from all over the world from the people who have relevant experience with the product or service (Cheung et al. 2008). Another difference between the traditional and Internet WOM is that the Internet WOM is not affected by the background of the participant, instead of spoken it is written. A fundamental characteristic of the Internet WOM is that it is visible for larger audiences and longer time compared to traditional WOM, and it can be anonymous (Datta et al, 2005). Importantly, WOM has been shown in situations to be more effective than the traditional marketing tools of personal selling and various types of advertising (Katz and Lazarfeld, 1955). eWOM communications are more measurable than traditional WOM (Park et al, 2008). Similar to WOM, research has shown that eWOM may have higher credibility, empathy and relevance to customers than marketer-created sources of information on the Web (Bickart and Schindler, 2001).

1.2. Why do we listen to WOM communication?

Consumers are faced daily with decision making under uncertainty. They must choose between various options in order to fulfill the various requirements of everyday living. They choose one product over another. They select services from the many that are available. While some of these decisions are straightforward and simple, others are more complex **(**Schiffman and Kanuk, 2013c).

1.3. When do we listen to WOM communication?

Frambach et al (2007) found that consumers who always find information about product and services online will think about

buying the product and services in three main stages. They are the pre-purchase stage, purchasing stage and post purchasing stage.

1.4. How do consumers use WOM communication?

"Consumption related, e-WOM occurs online in social networks, brand communities, blogs, and consumer message boards" **(**Schiffman et al, 2013d).

1.5. Why do consumer Spread WOM?

In general, when people satisfied with something they want to share with others and if they dissatisfied or something which is not performing according to their expectation then they also want to share with others to reduce their anger. Now it is easier to them, everyday people are writing their Facebook status or blog to share their good or bad feeling/experience.

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- To identify factors influencing the effectiveness of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) message on the consumers' purchase decision.

- To gain knowledge on eWOM communication research.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In order to analyze the existing research on effectiveness of electronic word of mouth and its role in purchase decision, this paper applied a systematic literature review method. In this manner, coherent and clear results can be obtained in order to summarize existing factors which affecting the effectiveness of eWOM and consumers purchase decision.

The first step for applying systematic review, we identified journals and conference papers that investigated the effectiveness of electronic word-of- mouth on consumers purchase decision. We searched a number of articles only Google search and Google Scholar.

We used search terms of "word-of-mouth" , "electronic word-of-mouth" , "WOM" , "eWOM", "effectiveness of eWOM", "eWOM and purchase decision", "factors affecting effectiveness of eWOM", " influence of eWOM on consumers purchase decision" , " influence of eWOM on consumers buying decision" and "effectiveness of electronic word of mouth on consumers purchase decision".

Sixty five articles were collected on the topic of electronic word-of-mouth and purchase decision. However not all of them analyzed effectiveness of eWOM on consumers purchase decision. We chose those articles which showed effectiveness of eWOM on consumers purchase decision. Thus, at the end we selected seventeen articles but for the paper we have selected best ten articles.

4. REVIEW OF EWOM LITERATURES

4.1. Word-of-mouth processes within a service purchase decision context. Harvir S. Bansal and Peter A. Voyer. Journal of Service Research, Vol.3. No.2. 2000. pp.166-177.

Though the study was on traditional WOM, we have chosen it because it gives the foundation of identifying factors that influence the effectiveness of eWOM on consumers' purchase decision.

It emphasized on service purchase decision not on product purchase decision. It showed effect of the noninterpersonal forces (receiver's expertise, receiver's perceived risk, and sender's expertise) on the influence of WOM on service purchase decisions; and the effect of the interpersonal forces (ties strength and how actively WOM is sought) on the influence of WOM on service purchase decisions. The study was pretested on the student of a Canadian university in 1998. After successful pretesting they started survey in the same year.

4.2. A multi-stage model of word-of-mouth influence through viral marketing. Arnaud De Bruyn and Gary L. Lilien. International Journal of Research in Marketing. Vol.25. 2008. pp.151-163.

The study mentioned that due to the growth of internet, electronic peer-to-peer referrals had become an important phenomenon, and marketers have tried to exploit their potential through viral marketing campaigns. A model was developed to identify the role of word-of-mouth in each stage (awareness, interest, and final decision) of a viral marketing recipients' decision making process. They observed the reactions of 1100 individuals. They found social ties influenced recipients' behavior: tie strength facilitated awareness; perceptual affinity, triggered recipients' interest, and demographic similarity had a negative influence on each of the decision-making process. This study was limited to email-based spreading; it did not take into account the social network. They differentiated electronic referrals from traditional WOM by following ways:

1. They are electronic by nature; there is no face-to-face communication.

2. Those referrals are usually unsolicited, that is, they are sent to recipients who are not looking for information, and hence are not necessarily willing to pay attention to them.

The paper mentioned the matter of opening email depends on tie strength. They concluded that tie strength influenced in the awareness stage, not in decision stage. Opening of email also depends on similarities between two people's values, likes, dislikes, and experiences (which is known as perceptual affinity/ perceptual homophily).

They found no significant role of experts in the flow of information and influence. WOM is subconscious process but the study focused on force/convince process of spreading.

4.3. Word of mouth communication within online communities: conceptualizing the online social network. Brown, J., Broderick, A., & Lee, N. Journal of Interactive Marketing, Vol.21. No.3.2007. pp.2-20.

The authors mentioned word-of-mouth (WOM) communication was a major part of online consumer interaction and offline theories of WOM were inappropriate to describe the online WOM and its influence on evaluation and purchase. The study felt a need for scholarly attention on online WOM communication. In-depth qualitative interviews were followed by the authors. It found three key factors (tie strength, homophily, and source credibility) of WOM which influenced consumers' decision making. They compared the three factors based on offline and online perspectives.

4.4. Electronic Word-of-mouth via consumer-opinion platforms: what motivates consumers to articulate themselves on the internet? Thorsten Hennig-Thurau, Kevin P. Gwinner, Gianfranco Walsh, and Dwayne, D. Gremler Journal of Interactive Marketing, Vol.18 No.1.(2004). pp.38-52.

The formal definition of eWOM was given by the authors which is presented in the introduction part of our paper. They mentioned web-based consumer opinion platform enabled customer to share their opinions and experience about goods and services with other consumers. They took two thousand sixty-three online German samples. The study suggested that consumers' desired for social interaction, desired for economic incentives, their concern for other consumers, and the potential to enhance their own self-worth were the primary factors leading to eWOM behavior. The paper showed the ways (web-based opinion platforms, discussion forums, boycott websites, news groups etc), how eWOM could take place. It identified eight motivators for eWOM: platform assistance, helping the company, expressing positive feeling, venting negative feelings, economic incentives, social benefits, extraversion/positive self-enhancement, and concern for other consumers.

4.5. Determinants of consumer engagement in electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) in social networking sites. Shu-Chuan Chu, and Yoojung Kim. International Journal of Advertising, Vol.30 No.1. 2011. pp.47-75.

The paper examined how social relationship factors were related to eWOM transmission via online social websites (Facebook, twitter, myspace). The authors attempted to identify social factors that influence consumers' engagement in eWOM in the online. The proposed model of eWOM in social networking sites (SNS) are composed with tie strength, homophily, trust, normative influence, informational influence these five parts.

As for the research methods, the authors used online survey to test the relationships among the key variables in the proposed model of eWOM in SNS. Finally they used three hundred

sixty three samples and most of them were undergraduate students. Most constructs were measured on a seven-point Likert scale. This study focused on perceived attitude homophily, as attitude has been recognized as one of the most important constructs in understanding consumer behavior. Trust was measured through seven items adapted from interpersonal trust and social trust scales. Eight items were used to measure normative influence, and four items to examine informational influence.

4.6. Social ties and word-of-mouth referral behavior. Jacqueline Johnson Brown and Peter H. Reingen. Journal of Consumer Research, Vol.14.1987.pp.350-362.

The article employed tie strength and homophily to examine referral behavior at micro and macro levels WOM processes. The authors addressed a significant gaps in understanding WOM phenomena that existed at the macro level inquiry (e.g. flows of communication across groups), and the micro level (flows within dyads or small groups). The study demonstrated different role played by weak and strong social ties. They concluded that weak ties displayed an important bridging function, allowing information to travel from one distinct subgroup of referral actors to another subgroup in the broader social system at the macro level. On other hand, strong and homophilous ties were more likely to be activated for the flow of referral information. They thought that tie strength (intensity of a social relation between consumers), and homophily (communication between similar consumers) had become popular in WOM literature. They showed ties could be of three types-strong, weak, or absent. The study was pretested on twenty three samples and final phase it closed on one hundred thirteen samples. They emphasized that future researchers might be benefited by examining effects of degrees of Homophily on WOM behavior.

4.7. e-WOM scale: word-of-mouth measurement scale for e-service context. Isabelle Goyette, Line Ricard, Jasmin Bergeron, and Francols Marticotte. Canadian Journal of Administrative Sciences. Vol.27.No.1.pp.5-23.

The main objective of the study was to create a multidimensional measurement scale for WOM in the context of electronic services. After a thorough study, it identified four dimensions of WOM-WOM intensity, positive valence WOM, negative valence WOM, and WOM content which contains nine items out of nineteen items to measure online word-of-mouth. They wished that their proposed eWOM scale would help managers to improve their word-of-mouth marketing strategies. Six e-services companies (amazon.com, eBay.com, admission.com, chapters.indigo.com, expedia.com, and archambault.ca) were selected for it.

A focus group study was conducted on ten consumers of e-services. Then an informal meeting was conducted on two consultants of buzz marketing. Finally questionnaires were distributed to 116 samples who were the students of Quebec University. The last round data were collected by email using snowball sampling asking the 116 respondents to send the questionnaire in word.doc format to their acquaintances, professors, and students of the university, and 107 completed questionnaires were found. After proper statistical analysis they claimed that it was an useful scale for the managers of e-services. The study tried to reduce confusion among word-of-mouth, viral marketing, and buzz marketing by defining these three terms.

4.8. Social ties and online word-of-mouth. Erin M. Steffes, and Lawrence E. Burgee. Internet Research, Vol.19, No.1, 2009.pp.42-59.

The authors focused that to evaluate eWOM in the context of the tie strength, homophily and consumers' decision making; the study was the first initiation. They commented that study of eWOM had been spawned with the emergence of internet and social networking. The study was limited to eWOM forum (RateMyProfessor.com). The authors found that the information gained from the eWOM forum was more influential in decision making than speaking with friends in person (WOM).

They suggested that though strong tie referral sources were more influential than weak tie, some weak tie information sources are rated as more influential. Data were collected from 482 students of a college of U.S.A. who were the user of a forum (RateMyProfessor.com). They differentiated between traditional WOM and eWOM. They told that more information of product and services were available in the hand of consumers due to eWOM. They emphasized the importance for firms in understanding the value of eWOM to the consumers.

4.9. The influence of eWOM within the online community on consumers' purchasing intentions- the case of the Eee PC. Fang-Mei Tseng, and Fang-Yu Hsu. The 2010 International Conference on Innovation and Management, Penag, Malaysia, July 7-10, 2010.

The paper applied eWOM communications and Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) to explain users' intention toward innovative product and service. It built an effective Internet marketing strategy, and guided managers in selecting an appropriate strategy for the consumers in the online communities. The authors found that eWOM effect was a key antecedent of perceived ease of use, perceived usefulness, and perceived enjoyment. The recommender's level of expertise, seeker's level of expertise, trust, and information quality were critical in building eWOM communication. The study was conducted on an innovative product- the Eee PC (first notebook in consumer market) which was the joint creation of Asus and Intel. Four hundred fifteen responses were collected through e-survey by a questionnaire (used seven-point Likert scale) developed based on previous research studies, pretested on fifty students.

4.10. Evaluation of effective factors on customer decision-making process in the online environment. Mohammad Takhire, and Taghizadeh Joorshari.International Journal of Managing Public Sector Information and Communication Technologies. Vol.6. No.3 ,2015. pp.1-11.

The study assessed the impact of social identity, electronic word-of-mouth, perceived risks, and trust and purchase intentions affecting customer decision-making process in online shops. Using technology acceptance model, a research model was developed to describe the relations of these variables that affected purchase intentions and finally leading to actual purchase. It revealed that purchase intention directly, positively, and significantly affected the actual purchase; the eWOM affected trust in the same way but the effect of social identity on trust is not significant, and perceived risk negatively affected the trust. The author suggested that business should build trust through the various interactions with customers and it could be built through enhancing transaction security, timely delivery of product and services, constant updates of events and offers etc. The study was limited to a online shop site-digikala. They used a questionnaire (five-point Likert scale) on six hundred fifty five respondents via email which was consisted of twenty five questions divided into six dimensions.

5.   SUMMARY OF THE FACTORS

After depth analysis of articles, a number of five factors were identified as having a strong connection with electronic word of mouth and consumers purchase decision. For better overview, these factors have been presented in the below Table:

Table 1: Summary.

Factor	Definition	Author
Tie Strength	The level of intensity of the social relationship between consumers or degree of overlap of two individuals' friendship varies greatly across a consumer's social network(Steffes and Burgee2009)	Brown et al (2007), Bruyn and Lilien (2008), Steffes and Burgee (2009), Granovetter(1973), Koo(2016), Bansal,,and Voyer, (2000).
Homophily/Source similarity	The degree to which pairs of individuals are similar in age, gender, education, and social status(Steffes and Burgee2009)	Brown et al (2007), Bruyn and Lilien (2008), Steffes and Burgee(2009), Gilly et al (1998)
Source credibility/Trustworthiness	A source should be perceived as more credible when it posses greater expertise and is less prone to bias (Brown et al 2007)	Brown et al (2007), Fan and Miao (2012), Jalilvand et al (2010), Hsu and Tran (2013), Park et al (2011), Lopez and Sicilia (2014), Takhire,and Joorshari(2015) , Fan et al.(2013), Senecal, and Natal,(2004).
Source Expertise/Senders Expertise	The extent to which the source is perceived as being capable of providing correct information, and expertise is expected to induce persuation (Bristor, 1990)	Gilly et al (1998), Koo (2016), Bansal,,and Voyer, (2000).
Receiver's Search Extent/ Internet Experience	The extent to which consumer knows about a product and internet search	Lopez and Sicilia (2014), Gilly et al (1998), Bansal,,and Voyer, (2000).

6.   DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The paper explores the question of which factors influencing the effectiveness of electronic word-of-mouth on consumers purchase decision, by following a systematic literature review. This literature analysis provide an overview of the current status of knowledge in the domain of eWOM communication research and tried to find out the factors affecting effectiveness of eWOM on consumers purchase decision. It found five factors which will help the researcher as well as managers in measuring effectiveness of eWOM on consumers' purchase decision. We believe that this study stimulates future research on eWOM communication by drawing attention to the variables and linkages that need further investigation.

7.   7. LIMITATION

Some limitations should be noted in this literature analysis. The results and analysis presented in this study were limited to the pools of journals that satisfied our selection criteria. Some articles may have been missed or overlooked due to their availability in electronic databases. Due to limited access and paid access we face problems in downloading articles.

8.   ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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