

Where electronic Word of mouth stands in consumer information search: An empirical evidence from India

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ABSTRACT

Consumer needs information at every stage of purchase process. Ever since the emergence of Internet and adoption of electronic media the information search process has been transformed by enabling consumers to make informed decisions. The various platforms to talk about product, rate the product and write the product review provides valuable information from one consumer to other consumer. This type of Word of mouth (WOM) which occurs in computer mediated environment is referred as electronic word of mouth (eWOM) (Kozinets, 2002). This study explores about where and how consumer uses eWOM in their information search phase and how reliable they consider eWOM as a information source on Internet for electronic products in India. The author segregate the information source as paid, earned and owned media as per Nielson Global survey, 2015. This study is limited to a specific sector of electronic product. The research finds that consumers predominantly use and look for eWOM in the form of online product reviews for finding interest in product, evaluation and information check. They consider eWOM more reliable than any other source, even more than that of WOM from friends and family. It has been concluded by hypothesis testing that there is significant difference between the effect and reliability of paid, earned and owned information sources. The authors have identified the marketing implications and have suggested prospective strategies. The scope for further study is identified and discussed.

Keywords: Word of mouth, electronic word of mouth, information search process, eWOM

Introduction

Internet has changed the way businesses were working till last decades. The shift in consumer preference has made companies to experiment & migrate from traditional mass media to Internet media due to lower cost, ease, better targeting & higher profit (Ramsey, 2008). Businesses being aware of rewards of Internet based digital media, social media and other web based media are slowly yet decisively cutting their traditional media resources and investing on new marketplace and web based business models (Vizu, 2013). The Internet technologies have had an irreversible impact on consumer behaviour and attitude which is significant in that it drives concentration of companies on other web strategies like Integrated Communication, CRM and Data Management, Branding, Marketing Distribution, Market Governance and many more (Chaffey, 2010). Internet Marketing strategies consist of but not limited to -directing sales, integrated communication, CRM and Data Management, Branding, Marketing Distribution, Market Governance and many more on world wide web.

Internet gives opportunity to two distinctive types of business practices. One is paid services (refers to online advertising, sponsored content & paid customer data management) and other is free services (refer to social media tools, content management, data management & User generated/created content) to companies or customers (Leckenby and Li, 2000; Vizu, 2013). One of the most important features of internet is content creation ability by users, which we generally call "User generated/created content". Internet provides opportunity for users to write and read product reviews and rating which is one type of user generated content

on web. Online product reviews and rating are interchangeably used as 'electronic word of mouth communication (eWOM)', has changed the authority of business to control information. Therefore, they have become significant in consumer decisions making process.

Park and Kim advocate (2008, p.399) that “word of mouth provides product information from the user perspective”. Consumer often trusts them as word of mouth (WOM) from friends & family which carries information that is unbiased and is not available in promotional communication. WOM is defined as the act of exchanging marketing information among two or more consumers, and plays an essential role in changing behaviour of consumer towards products and services (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). The emergence of Internet has facilitated the growth of WOM online – that is, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). eWOM is 'any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet' (Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004). eWOM occurs on a wide range of online channels, such as e-tailing, blogs, emails, consumer review websites and forums, virtual consumer communities, and Social networking sites (Thorson & Rodgers 2006; Dwyer 2007; Hung & Li 2007).

Consumer behaviour studies have given an adequate amount of focus on consumer decisions making process (Kotler, 2014). The five stage model of consumer buying decision process explains the phases, a consumer goes through, in purchase of any product. The Information search phase is one of the most vital phases of this process. Kuhlthau (1991), states that they are six stages in information search phase. They are Initiation, Selection, Exploration, Collection, Presentation and Assessment. All these stages have the component of Feeling, Thoughts and Action. A consumer goes through information search process while seeking information for any product specially medium - high involvement product purchase decisions (Miller, 2004, Chuang & Thadani, 2012).

Combining the above knowledge from previous literature, the coming decade will witness the significant role of eWOM in consumer search process (Burton & Khamash, 2010). So far the researchers have focused on WOM but the new business models inevitably will be Internet driven and it is need of the time to understand the information source which consumer prefer and find credible in current time.

Objective of the study

Consumers increasingly use online media channels like eWOM to share and refer product & consumption related information. Therefore, the objective of this study is to know “How and when consumer utilizes different information source, specifically eWOM during information search phase of consumer decision making process for purchase of electronic products. The study aims to understand ranking of earned, owned and paid sources of information (Nielsen, 2015). Second, marketing literature analyses the effectiveness of new media but most often ignore customer-generated electronic sources (Hennig-Thurau et al, 2010). The previous studies have investigated the conventional information sources, but this study will also significantly fulfil the need to know about electronic source in consumer information search process (Markham, 2010). This study also aims to know “How reliable eWOM are as information source in purchase of electronic products”.

Literature Review and Hypothesis Formulation

Electronic word of mouth

Various factors influence consumers at each stage of Consumer Buying decision process. Marketers have used their resources to persuade consumer's decisions since ages but nothing is as influential as information from friends and family. This informal and personal communication of consumer to other consumer about product & brand is termed as word of Mouth (Dichter, 1966; Singh, 1988; East et. al. 2007). Researchers have

frequently come to the conclusion that word of mouth (WOM) has influence on consumer behaviour towards products like food service (Arndt, 1967), clothing (Richins, 1983), entertainment (Brown & Reingen, 1987), electronic products (Herr et al. 1991), banking (Keaveney, 1995) etc. Earlier the access to WOM was to close network in oral form which was difficult to capture and measure. Today with extensive availability of Internet (Social networking sites, Blogs & e-commerce sites etc) and mass communication technology, the informal communication which is bi-directional in nature (Dellarocas, 2003) between consumer to consumer have become written, 24/7 available, viral and can be accessed by many (Huang et. al, 2011). This type of WOM which occurs in computer mediated environment is referred to as electronic word of mouth (Kozinets, 2002). (Trusov, et. al. 2009) have defined eWOM as an important feature on the internet as it provides many different channels for consumers to share their experiences and exchange information. eWOM has greater influence on consumer behaviour than print ads, personal selling, and radio advertising in most of the circumstances (e.g. Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955; Engel, Blackwell, and Kegerreis 1969; Chuang & Thadani, 2012; Gligorijevic, 2014; Neumann, 2015). In recent virtual era, the power and effectiveness of eWOM has grown multiple times. Scholars suggest that information search and recommendation is very important for new Business Models (Chaparro-Peláez et. al, 2015; Edelman, 2011). Researchers have shown the results in evidence that eWOM adoption is positively associated with purchase decision (Mishra, 2016).

Traditional advertising effect on sales related outcomes have extensively paid attention in research field, which proves the relevant consequences of paid sources (Hutter et al., 2013). Studies imply that paid sources influence consumer behaviour by affecting sales, Brand knowledge and consumer attitude ((Elberse, 2007; Xie & Lee, 2014). The owned sources creates brand awareness, transfer brand benefits and encourage trial and sales both on conventional media and contemporary media. (Lewis & Bridger, 2000). Although the paid and earned media sources seem logical to expect the brand exposure and brand purchase, the earned sources both offline and online is views more trustworthy. Thus, receiving information from earned sources has higher influence on consumer behaviour (Gretzel & Yoo, 2008; Lewis & Bridger, 2000). Thus, earned social media may more effectively reach high-involvement consumers who want to socially interact and who are more inclined to purchase. Therefore, we hypothesize the following research questions about consumer electronic product.

1. Research question: What triggers interest for consumer electronic product?

H1: Earned sources positively trigger interest for consumer electronic product.

2. Research question: When looking for information about consumer electronic products, how do consumer start information search?

H2: Earned sources helps consumer in getting information about consumer electronic products than other sources.

3. Research question: Which information sources are reliable for information about consumer electronic products?

H3: Earned sources are more reliable for information about consumer electronic products.

As consumer start leaning about a brand and its consumption related information, they may take advantage of multiple source of information (Pauwels et al. 2012). These sources increase consumer objective and subjective knowledge about product and brand. The earned sources particularly eWOM is more useful in evaluation the product and brand by providing additional knowledge and information (Chuang & Thadani, 2012). Thus we want to rank the information content by the question “when searching information on Internet which information content is important about consumer electronic products?”

Sources of Consumer Information

Consumers have various options of information sources from where they get the necessary information. The different media, personal and digital sources in many forms give platform for product information. According to Nielson Global survey, 2015, the top sources are listed as below:

Table 1: Top Sources for Product Information

Top Product Information Sources		
1	Earned Sources	Friends & Family recommendation
		Professional /Expert
		News stories / article/ content
		Internet based Forum /online reviews
		Social Media posting
		Search Engine
2	Paid Sources	Advertising with different media
		Public Event
		Other paid sources (Mobile messages)
3	Owned Sources	Retail store
		Product trial sample
		Companies/ Manufacturing website
		Marketing email
		Manufacturer recommendation based on consumer search history

Image Source: (Nielsen, 2015)

The study intended to know the preferences and trustability of the above sources in India in context of consumer electronic product.(Nielsen, 2015)

Research Methodology & Hypothesis

The study explores consumer information search behaviour towards consumer electronic product. It is an empirical study which aims to understand as to when and where consumers consider WOM in their information search process(Gligorijevic, 2014). The study ranks the information sources in order of respondent preferences to describe the current preference of consumers in India.

The study adopts a quantitative approach and gathers the needed information by a structured questionnaire. The consumers who have purchased or is planning to purchase a consumer electronic product in span of six month have considered as sample respondent. The method of sampling is convenience sampling method. The questionnaire has been distributed to 380 respondents in India choosing convenience method of sampling and got 234 responses. Total 220 fully filled responses have been considered in this study. Further, rank order has been generated to grade the sources of information in preference. ANOVA has been applied to test the hypothesis using MS Excel.

The consumer durable product is a high involvement product which needs a broad information search in most of the categories. So this study narrows the scope by limiting a industry specific behaviour. The study has used restricted time and resources, which may consider as a limitation. Also the results can be limited to consumer electronic products in India.

4. Findings and Discussion

This research explored how consumers used electronic WOM in their online searches, and how influential this type of info-source was on the purchasing decision-making process. Data collected in this survey from respondents has been analysed to represent and interpret the following findings. First, the measure of reliability was done by Cronbach's alpha test which show high reliability of data gathered.

Table2: Cronbach alpha test

ANOVA						
Source of Variation	SS	df	MS	F	P-value	F crit
Rows	3572.366	219	16.31217	14.21595	0	1.165037
Columns	716.7802	35	20.47943	17.84769	2E-104	1.424469
Error	8795.248	7665	1.147456			
Total	13084.39	7919				
Cronbach's alpha		Value	0.929656			

The demographic structure of the sample was represented in the table. The age group of majority of respondent's falls among 18 to 37, which is the customer group who are most engaged in purchase of electronic product. The gender distribution of sample represent that majority of them are male but considerable amount of female are represented by respondents. The education level of respondents ismostly evenly distributed but graduates and post graduates are slightly over presented. There is no representation of any substantial income group in sample. They are evenly distributed from more at lower level and few at higher level as per Indian income distribution.

Table 3: Demographic profile of Sample

Characteristics		Numbers (n=220)	Percentage
Gender	Male	141	64.09
	Female	79	35.90
Marital Status	Married	90	41.90
	Unmarried	130	59.09
Age	18-27	126	57.27
	28-37	69	31.36
	38-47	22	10.00
	48 & Above	3	1.36
Educational qualification	Less than High	7	3.18
	High School	29	13.18
	Graduate	84	38.18
	PG	91	41.36
	PG+	9	4.09
Income (in lakhs)	2 to 5	85	38.63
	5 to 8	62	28.18
	8 to 11	40	18.18
	11 to 14	16	7.27
	14+	17	7.72

Research question: What triggers interest for consumer electronic product?

The purchase intention of consumer can bedetermined by various reasons. When investigated on information sources which raise their interest in consumer electronic product, the consumer indicates that 'reading online reviews' indicates eWOM is very important. Also visiting e-trailers is significant information source which triggers interest in electronic product. Where in “recommendation from friends and family” indicates WOM from close tiesisas one of dominant drivers raise their interest in consumer electronic product. Additionally,

'Visiting local store', 'special offers' and 'advertising' had a very strong influence in creating interest towards these products.

Figure1: Information Sources which trigger interest towards electronic product.

Sources	Consumer Response on information sources which triggers interest in electronic product.													Rank	
	Always		Often		Sometimes		Rarely		Never		Mean		Influence		
	Feq.	%	Feq.	%	Feq.	%	Feq.	%	Feq.	%	Feq.	Feq.	%		
Reading Online Reviews	78	35.45	55	25	49	22.27	23	10.45	15	6.818	3.7	133	60.45	1	
Visiting Online store	73	33.18	57	25.9	42	19.09	29	13.18	19	8.636	3.6	130	59.09	2	
Talking with Friends and family	84	38.18	43	19.5	45	20.45	30	13.64	18	8.182	3.7	127	57.73	3	
Visiting Local store	84	38.18	40	18.2	54	24.55	19	8.636	23	10.45	3.7	124	56.36	4	
Promotional Offers	56	25.45	65	29.5	64	29.09	24	10.91	11	5	3.6	121	55	5	
Advertising	60	27.27	50	22.7	46	20.91	35	15.91	29	13.18	3.4	110	50	6	
News stories	54	24.55	53	24.1	57	25.91	45	20.45	11	5	3.4	107	48.64	7	
Brands on Tech blog	43	19.55	53	24.1	57	25.91	36	16.36	31	14.09	3.2	96	43.64	8	
Conversation on SNS	43	19.55	46	20.9	44	20	46	20.91	41	18.64	3.0	89	40.45	9	
Recommendation of category expert	42	19.09	42	19.1	72	32.73	37	16.82	27	12.27	3.2	84	38.18	10	

Influence is determined by total response on Always and often category

The Data shows that Earned sources such as eWOM, WOM & online stores have strongest influence than other sources.

Table 4: Results of ANOVA to know which sources trigger interest towards electronic product.

ANOVA: Single Factor						
SUMMARY						
Groups	Count	Sum	Average	Variance		
Owned Sources	220	796	3.651376	1.794952		
Paid Sources	220	731	3.353211	1.897709		
Earned Sources	220	813	3.729358	1.516277		
Source of Variation	SS	df	MS	F	P-value	F crit
Between Groups	17.18349	2	8.591743	4.94827	0.00736486	3.0095602
Within Groups	1130.339	651	1.736313			
Total	1147.523	659				

To test the described hypothesis, ANOVA test has been applied and results confirms the significant difference between three information sources that is Owned paid and earned sources. Hence hypothesis is accepted that earned sources trigger interest towards electronic product. The earned sources such as WOM and eWOM are very significant to raise interest about product among consumers.

Research question: When looking for information about consumer electronic products, how do consumer start information search?

The search process can be started by various conducts. To understand that how consumer does usually start the search process of consumer electronic product, the following information was collected. The findings confirms that consumers like to seek first information regarding their purchase of electronic products from

their 'friends and family' followed by search engine. Consumers often listen to the people around and try to self-assure their experiences from a wide perspective by using search engine. However, search engines, manage to give listing of website and online reviews & rating, which can provide necessary information regarding electronic product. Consumer often considers 'paid marketing sources' unreliable in comparisons to 'earned sources' for information on electronic product. So we can conclude that earned sources helps consumer in getting information about consumer electronic products than other sources.

Figure 2: Information sources for initiating product search

Sources	How consumer start their information search while looking for electronic product.													
	Always		Often		Sometimes		Rarely		Never		Mean	Influence		Rank
	Feq.	%	Feq.	%	Feq.	%	Feq.	%	Feq.	%	Feq.	Feq.	%	
Friends and family	87	39.55	51	23.2	45	20.45	22	10	14	6.36	3.9	138	62.7	1
Search engine	103	46.82	30	13.6	51	23.18	11	5	25	11.4	3.8	133	60.5	2
Online store with reviews	78	35.45	55	25	47	21.36	28	12.7	12	5.45	3.7	133	60.5	3
local shop's Assistance	42	19.09	70	31.8	79	35.91	20	9.09	9	4.09	3.5	112	50.9	4
Social networking Site	63	28.64	48	21.8	63	28.64	30	13.6	16	7.27	3.5	111	50.5	5
Manufacturer's website	65	29.55	43	19.5	68	30.91	25	11.4	19	8.64	3.5	108	49.1	6
Tech blogs	34	15.45	56	25.5	63	28.64	40	18.2	27	12.3	3.1	90	40.9	7
Others	25	11.36	31	14.1	56	25.45	45	20.5	57	25.9	2.6	56	25.5	8

Influence is determined by total response on Always and often category

The results of ANOVA Test shown that there is a significant difference between sorces of information while starting the information search about consumer electronic product. The earned sources helps consumer in getting information about consumer electronic products than other sources.

Table 5: Results of ANOVA to knowwhich sources is effective in initiating product search

ANOVA: Single Factor						
SUMMARY						
Groups	Count	Sum	Average	Variance		
Owned Sources	220	856	3.8509091	1.5588211		
Paid Sources	220	731	3.1862727	1.2976546		
Earned Sources	220	889	3.9972727	1.3019925		
Source of Variation	SS	df	MS	F	P-value	F crit
Between Groups	32.439394	2	17.219697	10.990671	8E-06	3.00943357
Within Groups	988.34455	647	1.5194894			
Total	1044.3939	657				

Research question: Which information sources are reliable for information about consumer electronic products?

The next point of investigation was to answer the reliability of information sources in study. Remarkably, consumer finds 'user generated online reviews' as most reliable source of information, even more than close friends and family. Consumer appreciates the easily available and highly accessible content on internet in the form of online reviews. However expert reviews and retailer's advice are also trustworthy sources of information. The strong indication is alarming for marketer in that the consumers consider advertising as

unreliable source for information. Firms must take this fact into account while directing their resources for paid Medias. So, Third hypothesis can be accepted. Further, the ANOVA test confirms that there is a significant difference between the influenced of three sources.

Figure 3: Reliability of information source for electronic products

Sources	Consumer Response on reliability of information sources for electronic products.													
	Very Reliable %		Somewhat Reliable %		Neutral %		Somewhat Unreliable		very % unreliable		Mean	Influence %		Rank
User generated Online reviews	95	43.18	56	25.45	34	15.45	20	9.091	15	6.818	3.9	151	68.64	1
Friends and family	95	43.18	63	28.64	31	14.09	20	9.091	11	5	3.8	151	68.64	2
Expert review/ Professional blogs	64	29.09	75	34.09	42	19.09	30	13.64	9	4.091	3.7	139	63.18	3
Retailer's advice	58	26.36	69	31.36	45	20.45	27	12.27	21	9.545	3.5	127	57.73	4
Product ratings	51	23.18	68	30.91	52	23.64	34	15.45	15	6.818	3.5	119	54.09	5
Talk on SNS	51	23.18	67	30.45	62	28.18	25	11.36	15	6.818	3.5	118	53.64	6
Automated recommendaion websites	56	25.45	62	28.18	53	24.09	27	12.27	22	10	3.5	118	53.64	7
Product information from manufacturer	43	19.55	73	33.18	58	26.36	33	15	13	5.909	3.5	116	52.73	8
Online retailers	39	17.73	63	28.64	68	30.91	30	13.64	20	9.091	3.3	102	46.36	9
Advertising	30	13.64	61	27.73	64	29.09	43	19.55	22	10	3.2	91	41.36	10

Influence is determined by total response on very reliable & somewhat Reliable category

Table 6: Result of ANOVA to test Reliability of information source

ANOVA: Single Factor						
		SUMMARY				
Groups	Count	Sum	Average	Variance		
Owned Sources	220	856	3.9209091	1.5588211		
Paid Sources	220	731	3.2627273	1.3976546		
Earned Sources	220	876	3.9772727	1.6019925		
Source of Variation	SS	df	MS	F	P-value	F crit
Between Groups	36.439394	2	18.219697	11.990671	7.679E-06	3.00943357
Within Groups	998.30455	657	1.5194894			
Total	1034.7439	659				

Research question: When searching information on Internet which information content is important about consumer electronic products?

The most important information when searching on Internet about electronic product is reported to be expert opinion. It confirms the belief that expert in the form of 'opinion leaders' are needed to be identified on the internet as well. Information about product and its value and regarded as second most sought after information. In addition, preferred brand and product price comparisons are very useful on Internet as most customers prefer to look for same. Therefore, the hypothesis can be partially acknowledged because product quality and price information is ranked second most useful information while searching on Internet about electronic product.

Figure 4: Information content on Internet while searching about electronic product.

Sources	Consumer Response on reliability of information sources for electronic products.													
	Very Reliable %		Somewhat Reliable %		Neutral %		Somewhat Unreliable		very % unreliable		Mean	Influence %		Rank
User generated Online reviews	95	43.18	56	25.45	34	15.45	20	9.091	15	6.818	3.9	151	68.64	1
Friends and family	95	43.18	63	28.64	31	14.09	20	9.091	11	5	3.8	151	68.64	2
Expert review/ Professional blogs	64	29.09	75	34.09	42	19.09	30	13.64	9	4.091	3.7	139	63.18	3
Retailer's advice	58	26.36	69	31.36	45	20.45	27	12.27	21	9.545	3.5	127	57.73	4
Product ratings	51	23.18	68	30.91	52	23.64	34	15.45	15	6.818	3.5	119	54.09	5
Talk on SNS	51	23.18	67	30.45	62	28.18	25	11.36	15	6.818	3.5	118	53.64	6
Automated recommendaion websites	56	25.45	62	28.18	53	24.09	27	12.27	22	10	3.5	118	53.64	7
Product information from manufacturer	43	19.55	73	33.18	58	26.36	33	15	13	5.909	3.5	116	52.73	8
Online retailers	39	17.73	63	28.64	68	30.91	30	13.64	20	9.091	3.3	102	46.36	9
Advertising	30	13.64	61	27.73	64	29.09	43	19.55	22	10	3.2	91	41.36	10

Influence is determined by total response on very reliable & somewhat Reliable category

Information indicates that consumer often looks for expert in category to give advice and also they narrow down their search based on preferred brand, product quality (feature) and price. The firms can crucially use this information to design their web strategy in India.

Consumers have agreed that they often use eWOM in form of product review to learn & raise attentiveness of electronic product purchase. In online context, eWOM is most dependable sources of information. eWOM featuring product related information are believed to provide detailed explanations, personal views and usefulness of product.

The 'eWOM' is a user generated content on internet, which can be found in form of product reviews, user recommendation, discussion on consumer forum, product rating and many more. One of the most easily accessible eWOM is 'online reviews' which is evaluated as highly significant source of information while searching information for consumer electronic product. It is not only helpful for consumer but also for firms who try to sell best quality product for value of money. The information like product & features, price, technical capabilities, brand value, substitute availability is offered on right time, right place to right person through online reviews. The findings reported that consumers predominantly use and look for eWOM in form of online product reviews for finding interest in product, evaluation and information check.

Conclusion

The informal talk about product is a general phenomenon, which occurs online as well as offline inform of personal talks/review of product. Till last decade, researcher where able to give little attestation that virtual relationship can be trusted as much as real (Laat, 2005). This paper put the point forward that eWOM is most significant source of information in information search phase. The literature recognizes and hence evident that WOM and eWOM have influence to purchase decision of products particularly for electronic products in India. One of the issues that need to be addressed is whether consumer trusts eWOM as much as WOM. This study significantly concludes that although eWOM comes from virtual stranger it does not affect the reliability. eWOM is a significant source of information at level of initiation, selection, exploration, formation and assessment of electronic product in India.

Marketers and firms hence can build the strategies around word of mouth marketing on internet to persuade about the electronic products in India. Online retailers are the easiest available destination for online reviews, which may work in favour of these online firms in days to come. The current situation which is described in study will unquestionably strengthen the knowledge field of eWOM and further research could assertively explore. Research can even explore how a consumer review can be treated as expert review. Besides, a technological mechanism can be explored to understand credibility of eWOM. Such study can also be replicated in other industry to validate the reliability of study. In short this study can be concludes that eWOM& WOMhave stronger influence in the present marketing environment than any other commercial sources.

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