

Understanding Electronic Word of Mouth: Literature and Future Research Direction



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Purpose: The purpose of the study is to consolidate and critically evaluate existing literature on electronic Word of Mouth (eWoM) by conducting a systematic literature analysis based on different phases of eWoM. After applying formulated exclusion and inclusion criteria, papers are presented across different thematic categories. Discussion revolves around three different phases. In the first phase extant literature focus motives for electronic word of mouth generation. Next phase focuses on eWoM processing by consumers and the last phases highlights impact of eWoM on customer and firm. Paper provides insights on practical implications and future research opportunities. Antecedents, processing, and consequences of electronic word of mouth: A systematic review and future research direction.

1. Introduction

More and more people have been adopting the Internet in recent years, for purposes of socializing, shopping and searching information. The Internet has become habitual product, especially for youngsters and teenagers who spend a significant amount of time online (Pew Research, 2016). Apart from socialization, the Internet has become the chosen channel/medium for seeking information about products (Papacharissi and Rubin, 2000)(Roy, 2009) and discussing consumption experience (Stafford et al., 2004)(Ko et al., 2005) among people.

Consumers, tend to search and read reviews about products before purchasing them online (Global Online Consumer Report, 2017). Thus, the information search behavior of the consumer is shifting towards the online medium from traditional sources like personal word of mouth or advertisement. Customers prefer to read anonymous reviews (Electronic word of mouth) from shopping sites instead of getting product or brand information physically from another person. Reviews or online electronic word of mouth (eWOM) has been described by (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004) as “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.” Websites like yelp.com, eopinion.com, and rottontomattos.com provide electronic word of mouth (reviews) for customers to take a better-informed decision.

A number of articles have been published on electronic word of mouth, leading to the development of different conceptual frameworks and theories (Dellarocas, 2003)(Pavlou and Dimoka, 2006)(Gruen et al., 2006). Few authors have attempted to summarize past studies on eWoM like; Chan and Ngai (2011) conceptualized eWOM to understand its communication phenomena and Allen et al., (2014) utilized conceptual framework developed by Nyilasy (2005) to demonstrate antecedents of eWOM. Others like De Maeyer (2012) studied eWoM in context of price sensitivity and highlighted its relationship with sales.

In contrast to the above literature review, the present work synthesizes and critically evaluates existing literature on eWOM in accordance with three different phases of eWOM communication. The first phase involves an understanding of the psychological, social and economical factors of eWOM generation. The second phase aims to understand consumer processing of information (eWoM). The third phase analyses the impact of eWOM on both consumer and the firm. This study would allow the marketer to better understand consumer behavior, their reliance on eWOM and how they process each review. Also, marketing professionals can understand the impact of eWOM on their products and brands. For academic researchers, this article would be helpful in the identification of future research areas in each phase.

The rest of the article is structured as follows: First, the methodology is briefly discussed. Next, a research framework is adopted to give direction for thematic discussion. Later origin of eWOM and its transition from WOM are briefly described before entering into the presentation of the research framework. Then the results of the descriptive analysis are discussed. The final segment is about research gaps identified for future studies and the practical implication.

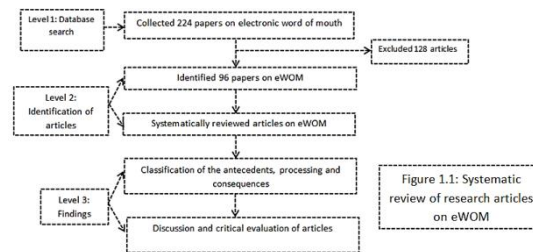
2. Methodology

The current study presents a systematic review of the subject to identify and understand how electronic word of mouth has been studied and understood in academic research articles. This approach ensures reliable and accurate assessment of relevant literature (Cook, 1997). The benefits of the systematic review approach include transparency, methodological rigor, and reproducibility (Denyer and Tranfield, 2006). The systematic review not only summarizes existing literature but also allows an element of constructive analytical criticism (Okoli and Schabram, 2010).

We used different databases like Science direct, Web-of-Knowledge, J-store, Emerald, Proquest and Google Scholar, to extract the literature pertaining to the topic of interest. Keywords such as electronic word of mouth, eWOM, online review,

online word of mouth, and online recommendation were used during the systematic search. We retrieved 224 articles related to the above keywords.

We formulated inclusion and exclusion to screen and filter articles to fulfill our objectives. In terms of inclusion, we considered all types of study methodologies. Articles revolving around three phases of eWOM communication were included. The first phase is related to psychological and economic factors of eWOM generation. The second phase is to understand the processing of eWOM by the consumer. Next, final phase of articles talks about the impact of eWOM on consumer and company. In terms of timespan, papers published between 2004 and 2018 years were considered. Under exclusion, we excluded conference proceeding and forum publications and omitted papers, not in line with our research objectives. Such inclusion and exclusion resulted in a total of 96 articles to be reviewed.



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3. Research framework

As discussed in the methodology section, synthesis and critical evaluation of article were done in accordance to an integrated research frame work adopted from Litvin et al., (2008) based on three stages: antecedents, processing and consequences, it is a modified version of the system model. Such system model has been previously adopted by Johnson et al., (1995) to explain service quality.

Analysis of existing research led to the identification of three major phases of eWOM. The first phase is related to understanding the review generating factor; second phase focuses on how consumers process eWOM, and the third deals with the effect of eWOM on consumer and company. This supports our adoption of the integrated framework as shown in Figure 1.2 for current study.

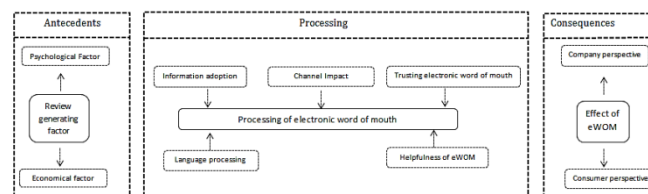


Figure 1.2 Integrated framework: Review Process

4. Thematic discussion

4.1 Online Review Generation

4.2 Internal Psychological and Social Factor

An individual’s egoistic and personal attitude motivates him/her to write an online review, he/she considers it as a cooperative behavior and participates in it for self-enhancement (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Customers having personality trait(s) of neuroticism and conscientiousness are psychologically induced to post a review after purchase (Picazo-Vela et al., 2010). There are several psychological benefits for consumer engagement in eWOM transmissions, such as reputation (marginal significance), sense of belonging, and the altruistic joy of helping others (Cheung and Lee, 2012).

Individuals are driven by perceived social pressure to help others, because, after purchasing a product online, consumers often perceive an obligation to write a review (Fu et al., 2015). Consumer social functions drive them to interact and share their experience on an online platform (Daugherty et al., 2008). In the social context, adolescents are influenced by peers in two dimensions- normative and informative – both of which have positive associations with eWOM behavior (Mishra et al., 2017). Customers under social pressure share negative reviews to warn others of poor service they experienced (Chelminski and Coulter, 2011), considering it a social obligation to guide others to a better decision.

4.3 Economical Factor

Apart from internal psychological factor to generate an online review, there are external monetary benefits for the customer to write online review. It is an effective catalyst to increase the likelihood of review generation (Wirtz and Chew, 2002). These economic incentives often induce customers to write reviews but end up with biased positive review (Lee and Youn, 2015) (Petrescu et al., 2017). Apart from cash and rebates, membership tiers where customers are classified and rewarded

based on their membership status are other forms of economic incentives. Higher purchasing customers are often given more rewards through such membership programs. Such benefits or rewards influence customer review generating behavior and are usually biased towards positive review (Fu et al., 2017).

According to Ahrens et al., (2013) magnitude of financial incentive influence customer to write online review. Running incentive campaign would inevitably generate higher number of reviews, and such higher number will increase product sales (Petrescu et al., 2017). It shows both retailer and review writer are mutually benefited through monetary incentives. In-fact review generation is a matter of reciprocity as both consumer and retailer are mutually benefited.

4.4 Processing of Online Review

4.5 Information Adoption

The search and adoption of information by consumer is a complex process. Consumers adopt two types of information search behavior before purchasing any product -web rooming and show rooming (Arora and Sahney, 2017). Web rooming is when customers search information online and shop through brick-and-mortar store, show rooming is the search of information in physical shops. In both ways, customers need to explore information for their decisions. Consumers no longer merely rely on advertisement messages to obtain brand information and make a purchase decision (Edelman, 2010); they refer to online channels due to ease of accessibility and availability of abundant information (Jung et al., 2016).

Intention to search and adopt electronic word of mouth is primarily driven by an individual's Internet usage behavior and his/her attitude towards online shopping (Gallant et al., 2017). They search information only when they lack subjective knowledge in a given product category.

Based on the information acceptance model, customers accept information only when they perceive it to be of higher quality and that it had originated from a credible source (Peng and Liao, 2016). Apart from information quality, honesty, competence, and benevolence of the eWOM channel impacts attitude towards intention to adopt information (Thara et al., 2017). Similar to traditional word of mouth, online review could be associated with tie-strength (Mahapatra and Mishra, 2017), and customers adopt online reviews only when it is written by a known person, typically of higher tie strength.

4.6 Helpfulness of Online Review

Various attributes of review determine its helpfulness. Each customer perceives review helpfulness in different ways. Customers consider a review to be more helpful only when it makes their decision making easy and purchase process stronger. Review helpfulness of a product is a formative construct and is determined through three different dimensions: perceived source credibility, perceived content diagnosticity and perceived vicarious expression of review. Reviewer profile photo as a visual cue enhances customers' perception of review helpfulness, and it impacts psychological response (Karimi and Wang, 2017).

Characteristics of review and its presentation format, both impact its helpfulness. For instance, two-sided reviews are more helpful for search goods than one-sided reviews. Conversely, for experience products, customers find one-sided reviews to be more helpful (Chen and Chen, 2016) (Schlosser, 2011). Other characteristics like review type (comparative, suggestive and regular) and concepts (multiword expressions) have varying degrees of impact on customer's perception of helpfulness. When reviews are longer in length, customers perceive reviews to be not useful as it fails to attract readership (Chua and Banerjee, 2017). Longer reviews require more cognition to understand, which impacts customers' processing threshold limit (Huang et al., 2015). Apparently, the number of concepts present in a review enhances customer semantic information assessment, which influences perceived helpfulness (Qazi et al., 2016) (Cao et al., 2011).

Apart from review characteristics, review order (sequence in which review is presented) impacts helpfulness of review (Zhou and Guo, 2017). When reviews are larger in number, customer find the initial review to be of more helpful than later one. It shows the detrimental effect of social influence on consumer's perception of helpfulness.

4.7 Language Processing

Customer information processing is dependent upon language and linguistic style. The linguistic style of reviewer drives interpretation of messages and shapes users' perception of review helpfulness. Verlegh, (2010) carried out a study to understand the behavior of consumers upon exposure to different language styles (description) abstract (e.g., He is helpful) and concrete (e.g., He gave us direction). Other side Figurative language style uses metaphors and conveys additional connotation beyond their literal meanings, while literal language means what it exactly says. When consumers read figurative reviews (vs literal) posted by low expertise reviewer, they show less favorable attitude (Wu et al., 2017). Overall, linguistic style moderates the impact of review valence (positive or negative) and review length on consumer perception of reviews (Guo and Zhou, 2016).

Online review writers use two different language styles to endorse products; implicit endorsement (e.g., I liked the product) and explicit endorsement (e.g., I would recommend the product). Both have different impacts; customers reading explicit endorsed review are persuaded to purchase the product (Packard and Berger, 2017). It may not be the intention of review writer to endorse a product, but their messages may endorse the product.

4.8 Online Review Trust

A trustworthy review can be defined as honest, sincere, truthful, and a non-commercial opinion of a customer who has experienced a product or a service (Filieri, 2016). There are many antecedents of trust towards online reviews such as

information quality, perceived website quality and user satisfaction. Reviews are considered to be more credible and trustworthy than the information given in product description by online retailers (Dou et al., 2012).

Customers perceive very short and extremely long reviews to be untrustworthy, while moderate reviews foster trust in customers (Furner et al., 2016). Review characteristics alone do not determine trust; reviewer characteristics like experience, reputation, competence, and sociability (Banerjee et al., 2017) determine trust of reviews. Overall, consumers who shop online want trustworthy information and reviews provided by other customers are the final source.

4.9 Channel Impact

Website attributes determine customer's evaluation of information present on the website and such information drives purchase intention (Chen et al., 2010). Online consumers identify websites based on credible information they provide; such information build trust for online repurchases (King et al., 2016). Customers find website reputation as extrinsic cue of eWOM information quality. The impact of online reviews on customers differs based on website establishment (Park et al., 2009).

The quality of website attracts customers and its ease of use enables the customer to process information quickly and conveniently. Website information search function and the informational content (online review and product description) determine the eWOM usefulness and in turn, impact website trust (Filiari et al., 2015). So, irrespective of information present on the website, if consumers believe that the website is not very credible, their purchase intention could diminish.

4.10 Impacts of Word of Mouth

4.11 Impact of Online Review on Consumer

The actual impact of word of mouth can differ from person to person based on their information processing tendency, and motivation to process information since individuals with high propensity to process information would spend more time analyzing word of mouth and end up purchasing optimum product (Gupta and Harris, 2010). Online review change consumer's attitude towards product. For instance, positive eWoM enhances perceived quality of product and brand attitude which leads to product purchase, whereas negative word of mouth diminishes purchase intention (Baber et al., 2016).

Impact of review differs based on product. For more expensive products, consumer tend to read larger number of reviews, it shows the purchase probability, and intention is determined through review numbers (Maslowska et al., 2017). Online reviews create a picture about a product or brand in the minds of the consumers. If consumers find more negative reviews about a product, they assume the particular product to be of low quality and such negative reviews would diminish the desire to purchase products and enhance purchase risk (Lee et al., 2008).

4.12 Impact of Online Review on Company

Reviews influence both product sales and its brand image. When a brand attracts positive reviews, it enhances sales and through negative review, opposite happens. Negative reviews cause detrimental effects on consumer-based brand equity, which leads to brand equity dilution. Customers having considerable brand knowledge are not immune to such detrimental effects and these effects are common among customers irrespective of their susceptibility to online product review (Bambauer-sachse and Mangold, 2011).

Impact of reviews differs based on product type and category. For instance, the impact of review for "experience products" such as video games, is more than those for search products (e.g., calculator) as customers need more details about the product and its experience (Lerman, 2007) (Lee and Shin, 2014). Online reviews have a positive impact on the sales of new products, but this happens only when the initial reviews given by early adopters are positive. Other characteristics, like volume of review also impacts sales, it has a diffusion effect on sales and these effects diminish on time (Cui et al., 2012) (Hu et al., 2008).

Online reviews impact sales of products that are unique and serve a particular group of customers. It affects long tail formation and could damage the reputation of niche products (products that serve a specific segment of customer needs). Long tail phenomenon is more prevalent in search goods than in experience goods (Gu et al., 2013). Popular or national brands benefit more from online reviews than niche products. Negative reviews also bring more adversity to niche products than to popular products.

5. Road Map for Future Research

The systematic review and analysis of existing research on electronic word of mouth lead to the identification of many research gaps and opportunities to expand knowledge in this field. This review has provided empirical data and ideas that have been used and could be used in future, to understand eWOM. Further studies could focus on understanding the influence of website attributes on customer inclination to provide online reviews. There is a need to understand the influence of brands on helpfulness of online reviews, and the effect of cost of services on processing and usefulness of reviews.

Future studies can be carried out to understand direct and indirect effects of review on customer cognition processing and trust. Information as such could be distinguished based on quality, and there are different dimensions of information quality. Future research could focus on exploring the effects of information quality (reviews) on customers' perceptions towards websites. Researcher could help identify the type of online users who are prone to monetary incentives. And study can be done concerning different product types. Future studies can also be done to understand the impact of economic incentives on quality of review generated.

6. Discussion and Practical Implication

This study provides an understanding of online consumer behavior and their affinity towards electronic word of mouth. Most customers are understood to generate reviews for two reasons - internal satisfaction and economic benefits. Existing literature shows that economic incentive could drive more reviews from customers but in the long run, economic benefits from such reviews are low. Hence, the marketer must focus on intrinsic motives of consumers to generate genuine reviews that are not biased.

Digital marketer must pay attention to negative reviews both on social media platform and e-commerce site as it impacts customers' brand evaluation and thereby brand equity. Nurturing brand in social media through engaging reviews could help to maintain brand equity and brand image. Marketers must ensure that no negative review is turned down or ignored; it is better to respond to all negative reviews, as it would make the customers feel that the firm is being customer responsive.

7. Conclusion

This study aimed to systematically review existing research on eWOM in all three different phases: antecedents, processing, and consequences. The nascent and progressing nature of the topic necessitates this review to understand electronic word of mouth. Overall the study provides an understanding of online consumer's behavior and their affinity towards electronic word of mouth.

Current study gives an understanding regarding different motives of customer to write online review. It provides an understanding towards consumers information processing. And finally, study shows how e-WoM could determine both firm's sales and consumer purchase behavior.

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