

The Power of Electronic Word-of-Mouth Communication (EWOM): A Literature Review

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Abstract

Word of mouth (WOM) communication has been well recognized and researched in academic literature with regard to its antecedents as well as potential for influencing the consumer decisions. The growth of internet technology and proliferation of social media has given rise to Electronic Word of Mouth (EWOM). Since, its emergence it has received a great deal of attention from marketing academics and practitioners alike. The increased attention from last decade resulted in a great body of literature and very little attempt has been made to consolidate and synthesize the findings of literature. Therefore, the existing literature on EWOM appears scattered with neither a classification framework nor a thorough review of articles (Chan and Ngai, 2011). This fragmentation poses a risk to the systematic accumulation of knowledge and the integration of the literature's findings (Babic Rosario, et. al., 2020). Present paper, therefore, will make a modest attempt to review EWOM literature, its antecedents and consequences to bridge this research void.

Keywords: Word of mouth, Electronic word of mouth, and Online word of mouth.

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Introduction

Companies may use marketing communications to communicate with consumers and encourage or persuade them to make a purchase. Marketing communications are important in raising awareness, changing perceptions, and increasing sales and profits in studies (Assmuss, et. al., 1984; Honka, et. al., 2017). In general, marketing communications can be divided into two types: marketer-driven communication, such as ads, and nonmarketer-driven communication, such as word of mouth (WOM), which is a powerful alternative medium of communication (Keller, 2007). Marketing research on WOM dates to the 1960s (Arndt, 1967; Ditcher, 1966; Engel, et. al., 1969), and over time WOM definitions have evolved (Carl, 2006). According to Arndt (1967), “WOM may refer to any positive or negative oral or personal communication regarding a brand, product, service, or an organisation, in which the recipient perceives the sender to have a noncommercial intent”. Westbrook (1987) defined WOM as “all informal communications aimed at other consumers regarding the possession, use, or characteristics of specific products and services or their sellers”. Similarly, word of mouth has been described as consumer communication about a product, service, or company in which sources are perceived free of commercial influence (Litvin, et. al., 2008). Word of mouth has been described in all three definitions as an informal contact between subjects (e.g., sender and receiver) about an item (e.g., goods, brands, organisations, or sellers) or an experience (such as ownership or usage) for the purpose of sharing and acquiring knowledge with a noncommercial intent. Word of mouth is one of the oldest ways of conveying information (Dellarocas, 2003), widely regarded as one of the most important source of information in consumers buying decision (Litvin, et. al., 2008) and intended behaviour (Jalilvand and Samiei, 2012). Since word of mouth is a consumer dominated marketing channel in which the senders are independent of commercial influences (Ardnt, 1967), and a result, consumers regard word of mouth as a more reliable medium than traditional media (Cheung and Thadani, 2012).

The transition of internet technology from web 1.0 to web 2.0 has empowered consumers with new, easy and accessible tools to obtain and compare information about products and services with other people. Web 2.0 has made it possible for marketers and customers to communicate in one-to-one, one-to-many, many-to-one, and many-to-many ways (Weisfeld-Spolter, et. al., 2014). Consumers are no longer restricted to their personal network in order to get recommendations, as they can also access information from

unknown people via the web platforms and as a result WOM has transformed into EWOM. Hennig-Thurau, et. al., (2004) defines EWOM as any positive or negative statement made by potential, former or actual customers about product or company which is made available to the multitude of people via the internet. The conceptualization and theoretical background of EWOM is embedded in theories spanning various areas such as sociology literature, information system literature and from marketing literature. The prominent ones are Information Adoption Model (Sussman and Siegal, 2003), Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986), Cognitive Fit Theory (e.g, Park and Lee, 2008), Social Exchange Theory (Homnas, 1958), Social Contagion (e.g, Trusov, et. al., 2009), Multistep Flow Model (Katz and Lazarfeld, 1955) and Expectation Confirmation Theory (Oliver, 1980). For two reasons, researchers have also labeled EWOM as word of mouse (Xia and Bechwati, 2008). To begin with, the number of internet users is growing every day. Second, since the introduction of web 2.0 in the early 2000s, there has been a substantial increase in the number of open platforms devoted to knowledge sharing, such as social networking sites, forums, blogs, and online communities (Barreto, 2014). Electronic word of mouth has altered the buying environment, and customers can now access the comparative evaluation of product attributes with a single click of a mouse (Varadarajan and Yadav, 2002). Existing studies suggest that EWOM plays a significant role in influencing the various stages of the consumer decision-making process (Davis and Khazanchi, 2008; Day, 1971) and purchase intentions (Erkan and Evans, 2016; Plotkina and Munzel, 2016).

In light of the research findings, EWOM has attracted immense scholarly attention from past two decades, however, continuous evolution of the phenomenon fueled by technological, social, and cultural developments, insights have accumulated in different directions, providing fragmented evidence on the meaning and market implications of this phenomenon (Babic Rosario, et. al., 2020). Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to conduct a review of EWOM literature published in the last decade and summarize it with regard to its characteristics, antecedents and consequences in the marketing domain. The paper is written in a narrative style, a comprehensive look on EWOM literature while ignoring the small discrepancies in the academic findings. The following sections present the objective of the study; methodology; literature review on characteristics, antecedents and consequences of EWOM followed by discussion. Limitations and directions for future research are discussed at the end of the paper.

Objective of the study

The purpose of this study is to conduct a review of EWOM literature published in the last decade and summarize it with regard to its characteristics, antecedents and consequences in the marketing domain in order to consolidate the fragmented findings, which makes it difficult to derive meaningful and conclusive implications from it.

Methodology

This study reports the findings of previous research studies, therefore, is descriptive and narrative in nature. Initially, 120 papers were downloaded with keywords as word of mouth, electronic word of mouth, and online word of mouth which were searched out on the databases like, ProQuest, EBSCO, Emerald insight, Science Direct, SAGE publications, JSTOR, and Google Scholar. Evaluating the downloaded articles keeping in view the theme of the research reduced the number to 52 which acted as a reference for more than 15 papers. In total 67 papers were used to meet our objective. In addition, websites and reports have also been used for better comprehension.

Literature review

Characteristics of EWOM

Though word of mouth and electronic word of mouth are conceptually close (Henning-Thurau, et. al., 2004), there are some important differences in the characteristics which cannot be overlooked. Stern (1994) claimed “WOM communication occurs in a spontaneous manner and vanishes soon as it is uttered”, a notion that does not hold in case of EWOM which is written and occurs for an indefinite period of time. Thus, EWOM is *persistent and observable*. Traditional word of mouth is face to face i.e occurring in a physical setting largely among intimates such as friends and family members (close ties) while EWOM occurring in digital platforms is *extensively diffusive* and occurs among people known as well as unknown to each other nonetheless linked by a common interest or need (weak ties). Traditional word of mouth occurring among close ties is wrapped with higher levels of trust. In case of EWOM *anonymity or false identity* raises the issues of credibility. However, based on the principles from social psychology (Social Network theory) it is suggested that the perceptions of other members credibility could be the result of continuing evaluations based on the verbal contributions from those members to the group they all belong to, even though they are unknown to each other (Brown, et. al., 2007). Furthermore, technological affordances made possible to express EWOM in

different forms such as images, videos, animations apart from text. Privacy of the message is high in word of mouth and nonexistent in EWOM. Since EWOM is written, it remains in websites for an indefinite period and offering opportunity for the anonymous others to view it. EWOM statements are published on the internet, consequently the speed of diffusion and accessibility is high (Mishra and Satish, 2016).

Antecedents of Electronic Word of Mouth

On the basis of conceptual closeness, antecedents relevant to offline WOM may find justification in the online context as well. However, paying attention to the differences, researchers have analysed the motivations of the consumers to engage in WOM in digital settings resulting in new research stream with fragmented findings which needs to be consolidated at this stage so that a clear direction can be identified and there is no duplication of efforts. In their widely cited paper, Hennig-Thurau, et. al., (2004), based on the review of literature on motives for traditional WOM communication (Ditcher, 1966; Sundaram, et. al., 1998) and research on virtual communities (Balasubramanian and Mahajan, 2001), attempted to build a comprehensive typology for what motivates consumers to articulate themselves on the internet resulting in the identification of four primary factors leading to EWOM giving: (1) desire for social interaction, (2) desire for economic incentives, (3) concern for other consumers, and (4) to enhance their own self-worth. Further analysis revealed that these factors were likely to influence both frequency of consumer visits to opinion websites and the number of comments written by consumers on those sites (Hennig-Thurau, et. al., 2004). Moreover, it was possible to classify consumers into four segments according to the drivers most likely to prompt them to transmit EWOM: (1) self-interested helpers (driven primarily by economic incentives), (2) multiple-motive consumers (motivated by a large number of drivers), (3) consumer advocates (motivated by their concern for others), and (4) true altruists (driven to help companies and other consumers). Overall, the multiple-motive consumers segment was likely to engage in the most EWOM communication, whereas true altruists and consumer advocates contributed the least EWOM.

While taking a deductive approach to identify the motives for EWOM seeking in web based opinion platforms, Hennig-Thurau and Walsh (2003) conducted a comprehensive review of relevant theories including Schiffman and Kanauk's (1987) opinion leadership theory, Ditcher's (1966) motive typology for information giving and seeking behaviour, and cognitive dissonance theory (e.g Sweeney, et. al., 2000), a total

number of eight motives are identified through exploration of these relevant theories, while putting identified motives to descriptive analysis resulted in five motives for EWOM seeking: (1) obtaining buying related information, (2) social orientation through information, (3) community membership, (4) remuneration and (5) to learn to consume a product. Henning-Thurau and Walsh (2003) further examined the change in behaviour as an outcome variable and empirical results support those motives do have an influence on buying behaviour as well as communication behaviour. Goldsmith and Horowitz (2006) complementing the study of Hennig-Thurau and Walsh (2003) came up with eight motives for online opinion seeking ranging from more utilitarian purpose to more hedonic, these are; to reduce risk, because others do it, to secure lower prices, to get information easily, by accident (unplanned), because it is cool, because they are stimulated by offline inputs such as TV and, to get prepurchase information. Given the social nature of social networking sites, Chu and Kim (2011) hypothesised social relationship variables i.e, tie strength, trust, homophily and interpersonal influence (normative and informational influence) as antecedents of EWOM behaviour comprising of opinion giving, opinion seeking and opinion passing. Through a survey directed at college students, the results reveal that trust and interpersonal influence had a significant positive relationship with EWOM behaviour. However, informational interpersonal influence do not have significant relationship with opinion giving as individuals who are susceptible to informative interpersonal influence will involve more in opinion seeking rather than opinion giving (Chu and Kim, 2011). Tie strength also had a significant positive relationship with opinion seeking and opinion passing and a non-significant impact on opinion giving on which authors supply a possible explanation that consumers tend to share their product experiences with all their contacts being it a strong or weak tie and it is very and convenient to share experiences in SNSs. Homophily was found negatively associated with opinion seeking and opinion passing and a non-significant relationship was found between homophily and opinion giving. Based on psychology literature, Cheung and Lee (2012) identify four perspectives, viz Egoism, Collectivism, Altruism and Principlism as the reasons consumers spread EWOM in online opinion platforms. Through the analysis of semi structured interviews, Pasternak, et. al., (2016) focussing more on individual attributes concluded that the two main drivers of EWOM on Facebook brand pages are self-presentation or how to present oneself and concern for privacy. Specifically focussing on music related WOM in online music community and building on opinion leadership and diffusion of innovations theory, a survey directed at college students, Sun, et. al., (2006)

discovered innovativeness, music internet usage and internet social connection as significant predictors of online WOM. Using the social interaction perspective, Dholakia, et. al., (2004) identified it is due to a sense of belonging and to showcase their loyalty towards products, consumers engage in EWOM behaviour (EWOM giving). Another study by Wang, et. al., (2016) applied the perspectives of social capital and self-determination theory to examine the EWOM behaviour of consumers. They found tie strength and user innovativeness representing social capital and personal factors respectively strongly influence the EWOM engagement in social networks. The marketing practitioners are accordingly suggested to focus on tie strength between members i.e to increase it and to identify the innovative members as opinion leaders to promote EWOM behaviour.

Knoll (2015) argued an EWOM message on a social media platform whether conveyed or passed on by end users depends both on consumer characteristics as well as message characteristics, if consumers are highly connected with brand and are self-expressive, they will forward a message more readily and when the message itself is provocative and humorous, it increases its propensity to be forwarded. Giving due cognizance to this argument, Erkan and Evans (2016) conducted an empirical study incorporating information adoption model and relevant elements of theory of reasoned action. They developed an information acceptance model and the results of the study support the claim of Knoll, (2015). Lovett, et. al., (2013) studied brand characteristics (differentiation, excitement and complexity) as antecedents of word-of-mouth. The empirical analysis revealed brand characteristics affect WOM through three drivers: social, emotional and functional. Furthermore, the value of brand characteristics varies across the WOM channels, while the three drivers are ranked social, functional and emotional in the online channel, they are ranked emotional, functional and social in the offline channel. In their widely cited paper, Kozinets, et. al., (2010) argued that word of mouth theory has evolved from organic inter-consumer influence model, in which consumers were motivated by a desire to help others, to warn others about poor service and to communicate status (Ardnt, 1967; Engel, et. al., 1969), to linear marketer influence model, where marketers target the opinion leaders to spread their messages in order to take the advantage of their more than average influence on other consumers decisions and accordingly prompting them by means of various incentives to spread the word, to network coproduction model, in which marketers make deliberate attempt to influence the WOM communication of the consumers in their digital communities and at the same time accepting the fact that

marketing messages and meanings do not flow unidirectional but rather are exchanged among members of the consumer network. Therefore, the engagement of consumers in EWOM in these virtual settings is a complex process which is culturally embedded. The paper identifies four strategies assumed by communicators/consumers in consumption-based communities' i.e, evaluation, explanation, embracing and endorsement depending on character narrative, communal norms, communication forum and the nature of the marketing promotion.

Consequences of EWOM

Various empirical studies have demonstrated the impact of EWOM on consumers' intention to buy products or services (Erkan and Evans, 2016; Plotkina and Munzel, 2016); for instance, on purchase intention of smart phones (Kudeshia and Kumar, 2017), laptops (Uribe, et. al., 2016) and cars (Jalilvand and Samiei, 2012a), intention to decide on tourist destinations (Jalilvand and Samiei 2012b), and intention to book hotels (Sparks and Browning 2011; Teng et al. 2017), to state a few. In examining whether or not online product recommendations influence consumers' product evaluation, Senecal and Nantel, (2004) demonstrated that online product recommendations, a popular form of EWOM, have an influential impact on consumers' product decisions. EWOM allows more informed purchase decisions because easy access to information make it less time consuming for consumers to better determine which products from which sellers best meet their needs and preferences (Dellarocas, 2003). More information reduces consumer doubt and search costs, leading to an enhanced willingness to pay for products (Brynjolfsson and Smith, 2000). However, the experimental study by Park and Lee (2009) focusing on the moderating role of product type (experience vs. search) suggests that EWOM information is more useful for experience goods than for search goods as experience goods cannot be evaluated before purchase. Level of involvement with the product also moderates the impact of EWOM quality and quantity on purchase intentions where low-involvement consumers are affected by the quantity rather than the quality of reviews, but high-involvement consumers are affected by review quantity mainly when the review quality is high (Park, et. al., 2007). From the sellers' viewpoint, EWOM enables better sorting and matching between products and consumers so that they may be able to charge higher prices (Clemons and Gao, 2008). Researchers have continually been on an enquiry to quantify the positive and negative effects of EWOM on a wide range of outcomes that marketers truly value. Varied studies realize that EWOM considerably affects individual level outcomes

such as consumers' willingness to spend in a product category (Bickart and Schindler 2001; Pavlou and Dimoka 2006); levels of trust and loyalty (Awad and Ragowsky 2008; Gauri, et. al.,2008); and consumer engagement (Nambisan and Baron 2007; Schau and Muniz 2002). Consequently, EWOM also affects many firm-level outcomes, like product sales, revenues and stock prices (e.g., Chevalier and Mayzlin 2006; Trusov, et. al., 2009).

Discussion

The continuous evolution of digital media has changed the power structures in the marketplace where consumers are no longer passive recipients of information rather marketers now share influence with consumers who are more active and aware than ever before. Consequently, research investigating how the internet and new technologies affect word-of-mouth behaviour has gained unprecedented levels of attention over the past few decades. Simply defined, EWOM refers to the act of consumers sharing marketing information in digital environments. EWOM occurs in many different channels such as discussion boards, product review sites, virtual consumer communities, emails, blogs and social media sites. Because EWOM is generated and disseminated among peer consumers without commercial intent, it has been assumed as a more trustworthy source of information compared to advertiser generated messages and thus has a greater impact on consumers' product evaluation (Brown, et. al., 2007). Examples from real world such as 'Dell hell', the term coined by blogger in 2005 who was disappointed with Dell's customer service and this brought Dell national embarrassment (Xia, 2013), similarly, United Airlines breaks guitars, a youtube video posted by famous musician Dave carroll in 2008 when his guitar breaks during travel for which the company refuse to pay for the damages to the guitar. The video received immense attention which led to a brand and public relation crisis for United Airlines (Bernoff and Schadler,2010) and many others highlight the importance of EWOM communication for marketers. Therefore, the phenomenon demands the continued attention of the researchers.

The literature reveals that EWOM is quite different from its traditional counterpart with its own unique characteristics, nonetheless, enjoys special position as compared to marketer generated sources in influencing the consumer decisions. The anonymity of EWOM raises credibility issues, however, based on the assumptions of Social Network analysis, the issues can be mitigated (Brown, et. al., 2007). With regards to the antecedents, it was found that previously consumers engage in WOM behaviour as a result of altruism or reciprocity or to attain higher status (Ditcher, 1996; Engel, et. al., 1969),

however, in digital context, the motivations are more complex and culturally embedded, shaped by communal interests and communicative orientations and charged with moral hazard, along with previously identified factors, such as desire for social interaction or economic incentives (Hennig-Thurau, et. al., 2004; Wang, et. al., 2007). WOM communicators demonstrate their need to balance inherent commercial–communal tensions while being consistent with the character elements of their ongoing narrative (Kozinets, et. al., 2010). Throwing light on consequences of EWOM it was found that overall a great amount of research on EWOM focuses on its effects on individual level outcomes as well as firm level important marketing outcomes such as purchase decisions and sales.

Understanding the antecedents and consequences of EWOM provide valuable insights for academic community as well as important implications for marketers. From a theoretical standpoint, identifying the causes and consequences of EWOM could provide a complete picture of the diffusion process in an online environment. Practically, marketers could use research findings to develop effective EWOM campaigns that reach their marketing goals. Armed with the greater understanding of how EWOM arises in virtual settings and more specifically in a social media setting, marketers can make more confident decisions with regard to branding and positioning, segmenting and targeting, media strategy, monitoring programs to listen to the voice of the customer, and products and services improvements and all this leads to measurable and enduring improvements in performance (Allsop, et. al., 2007). EWOM has important implications for academic community, practitioners as well as policy makers and it presents a window of opportunity for continued academic research.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

This paper is a commentary on existing literature on EWOM in the marketing domain written in a narrative style while ignoring the small discrepancies in academic findings. Future studies should focus on systematic analysis of the literature to come up with more refined results. The paper entirely focuses on text based EWOM. However, the technological flexibility makes it possible to express EWOM content not only by using textual information but also by using rich multimedia such as images, videos, and animations (Mishra and Satish, 2016) on new rapidly growing visual platforms such as youtube, instagram, pinterest and snapchat. Consumers perceive visual information as more credible, helpful, and persuasive than textual EWOM (Xu, et. al., 2015). However, methodological tools and problems, as well as wider effects of non- textual EWOM on the

marketplace and consumer culture, have yet to be addressed. We agree with recent calls for future research on visual EWOM (images, videos) (e.g., King et al., 2014) and urge marketing researchers to develop vigorous methodologies for in-depth analysis of visual content and for interpreting the manifested from latent content. As is evident from the literature there are various factors affecting electronic word of mouth, such as, personal factors, social factors, product related factors, message related factors, source related factors and contextual factors as well, therefore, a comprehensive typology is warranted incorporating all factors in order to provide a complete picture of the phenomenon. As the popularity of the internet, social media as well as mobile communications persist to rise; the importance of EWOM in marketing communications will only increase. One of the attributes of EWOM is persistence and observability which means existing EWOM considerably influences prospect EWOM (King, et. al., 2014). Thus, EWOM is endogenous (Godes and Mayzlin, 2004), it not only influences consumer purchase behaviour, but is also the result of consumer purchases (Duan, et. al., 2008). Therefore, future research should focus on capturing the endogeneity of EWOM which demands the use of more sophisticated, new and novel methods for its monitoring and measurement.

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