INFORMATION AND SOURCE ANTECEDENTS TO EWOM: A REVIEW OF LITERATURE

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Abstract:

Social media where people can create, share and exchange information has now become a part and parcel of everyone's life. Electronic Word of Mouth (EWOM) plays a prominent role in influencing the online buying intention of the customers as customers highly rely on the reviews shared by others. This paper extends the knowledge of EWOM by developing a conceptual model. Exploratory Research Design has been used to identify the two categories of antecedents to EWOM i.e. Information and Source.

Keywords: EWOM,Information, Source, Social Media, Online Buying Intention

1. Introduction:

In today's world, shopping has become an activity on its own, rather than just being a needed activity. People shop to meet their psychological, social, and physical needs. Socialization has become an important aspect of shopping. Studies are demonstrating that people buy more than usual when they are with their friends. For this reason, marketers are obliged to ensure that they emphasize the social aspect of shopping. Therefore, Word Of Mouth (WOM) has become more prevalent in marketing; WOM replaces advertising and promotions. WOM is an interpersonal transfer of information about the sale of products and services beyond the information or advertisements provided by companies that affect personal decisions (Brown et al., 2007). In this environment of intense competition, customers trust their friends or other customers rather than companies and enjoy the comfort of belonging to a community by behaving like others. Moreover, consumers generally rely on informal personal communication rather than official or organizational sources in their purchasing decisions (Bansal &Voyer, 2000). Consumers, at present, have the tendency to exchange their sentiments and encounters about products between each other, and this is alluded to as word of mouth (WOM) (Arndt, 1967).

1.1 EWOM:

In the modern era, the advent of information technology has provided a powerful edge to word of mouth (WOM) communication by allowing the consumers to gather information from other consumers and share their brand experience with other potential consumers within a few seconds (Resnick et al., 2000).

eWOM refers to the communication among the consumers via the internet or by using information technology (Cheung and Thadani, 2012). Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) defined eWOM as "[…] any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former consumers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet".

1.2 WOM VS EWOM:

Traditional Word-of-Mouth (traditional WOM) is a face-to-face communication about a product or company between parties that are not commercial entities of a product or company (Arndt, 1967). while Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) is a positive and negative statement or anything made by potential and actual customers, about products or companies, and is willing to talk to many people and institutions via the Internet (HennigThurau, Gwinner, Walsh , &Gremler, 2004). WOM, is the impact of somebody's casual opinion about products and brands from his/her experience of using them (Sen and Lerman, 2007). Moreover, eWOM can be created by both consumers and merchants. Unlike WOM, 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. In most cases, eWOM is not confined to geographical boundaries and does not disappear with the passing of time. As compared to WOM, the life of eWOM content is infinite. It stays almost forever and is not deleted or removed at regular time intervals, unless there are legal issues attached to it.

1.3 EWOM and Online Buying

A study conducted indicates that 61 per cent of consumers resort to eWOM before buying any product, and 80 per cent of consumers are only willing to purchase online after consulting online customers' reviews (eMarketer, 2008). Because of these enormous potentials of eWOM, researchers are now showing great interest in eWOM, in which a considerable amount of research relating to eWOM has been carried out (King et al., 2014).

1.4 Social Media and Role of EWOM

Through its expansion over the past decade, social media has gradually developed as a useful promotional instrument in the realm of business at a personal level. Today, many firms from various industries, including the consumer electronics industry, proactively use the social media as a contrivance to reach new and existing customers. Social networking sites (SNSs), such as Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn, allow users to create their own Web pages for sharing personal information and conversing

with other users in real and virtual life. Similarly, firms create brand pages to engage and disseminate market information (See-To and Ho, 2014). Social media brand pages are advantageous for the marketers and advertisers, as these pages enable them to build their brand image in an inexpensive way. Organizations have changed their marketing strategies through the use of social media as an interactive tool over the traditional marketing practices (Bauhuber et al., 2012). Social media plays a major role in decision-making by providing recurrent peer feedback during, before and post purchases and by providing a secured source for better online transactions through this disintermediation. The content created by users via social media platforms is considered "electronic word of mouth" (eWOM) (Ayeh et al., 2013; Burgess et al., 2011). According to the Global Web Index [4], almost 97% of online adult users have at least one social media account, 91% are Facebook users, and people spend an average of 2 h and 43 min a day on social networks and messaging. A total of 87% of users engage in social media to keep up with their friends and read the news to fill the time. Likewise, 87% of consumers acknowledge reading product recommendations on the web before making online purchases and 93% say they follow celebrities, artists, or athletes on social networks.

1.5 EWOM and Online Buying Intention

The number of internet users in India is continuously growing. India has the fifth largest internet user population after USA, China, Japan, and Germany (Internetworldstate.com). Reports by Nielsen indicate that India has emerged as the third biggest nation when it comes to online buying and the total number of internet users in India is 60 million. (Sahney et al., 2014)Online purchasing has undoubtedly become an integral, useful, and attractive activity on social media platforms. Nowadays, social media has enormously changed the style of the consumers' purchase decisions. Several people examine other consumers' experience and suggestions posted on social media before purchasing new fashion items. (Bilal, et al., 2021)

Exploratory research design has been carried out to undertake the study. The objective of the study is to identify antecedents to EWOM and develop a conceptual model to further establish the relationship between antecedents, EWOM and online buying intention.

2. Literature Review:

The unique interactive nature of cyberspace has provided online users with unprecedented accessibility to information about products and services, the ability to exchange ideas with other consumers and friends, or even companies and to compare price and quality in many ways. Prior to the introduction of

e-commerce, traditional word of mouth (WOM) was perceived as non-commercial communications between group of consumers who are willing to give feedback to each other on a product to reduce perceived risk (Nyilasy, 2006). The development of online platforms has provided consumers with the opportunity to voluntarily share organic WOM beyond their social groups and help others in their decision-making process (Hussain et al., 2017). Defined as "any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual or former customer which is available to a multitude of people via the internet" (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004, p. 39), eWOM can facilitate the speed and convenience of information search due to its permanent online availability.

Traditional WOM communication is usually discussed in marketing literature as unmediated communication among consumers, or face-to-face communication (Herr et al., 1991; Sweeney et al., 2008). However, in today's virtual and social networking era, eWOM communication alternatives have developed rapidly and dramatically. The internet and its evolving technological revolution have introduced new avenues for interactive communication – given the new ways people now connect with each other – and have changed the dynamics of WOM communication (Goyette et al., 2010). New media communication channels include e-mail, online forums, blogs, wikis, recommendation sites, online comment boards, social networking sites, digital virtual worlds, and more (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010; Brown et al., 2007; Libai et al., 2010). However, traditional word of mouth communication is only effective within limited social contact boundaries, and the influence diminishes quickly over time and distance. The emergence and development of the internet has profoundly changed the way word of mouth is transmitted and has transcended the traditional limitations of word of mouth. The otherwise fleeting word of mouth targeted to a few friends has been transformed into enduring messages visible to the entire world. As a result, eWOM plays an increasingly significant role in consumer purchase decisions. EWOM (electronic word-of-mouth) has become an important influence on consumers' product evaluation. Prospective customers visit Web sites and read reviews from other customers (eWOM) to learn more about a product before making a purchase. Hence, the power of eWOM is expanding.

EWOM is one of the important information sources for consumers' purchase decisions. Product feedback, product reviews, and discussions in the form of online consumer word of mouth can effectively compensate for the perceived risk of consumers and information asymmetries. More and more consumers rely on network communication to search for information when making purchasing decisions. Research has suggested eWOM, such as content included in online customer forums, may have greater empathy and relevance, and may generate more empathy compared with marketer-

generated web content. Huabl G. and Murray K. B. (2006) also showed that the eWOM is more credible than any other internet commercial information.

At the hub of the recent growth of WOM is the widespread adoption of the Internet, which has drastically facilitated WOM with a range of communication channels such as emails, instant messaging, online discussion boards and blogs. The Internet is said to open up a new era of WOM, that is, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM hereafter) by enabling consumers to freely and swiftly share information and opinions with peer consumers with no geographic or time constraints. eWOM is defined as a specific type of WOM that transpires in the online setting and shares the fundamental characteristics of WOM (Dwyer 2007). Yet the landscape and magnitude of eWOM is significantly different from that of traditional WOM (Mangold and Faulds 2009). No wonder marketers strive to capitalize on the emerging power of eWOM and increasingly employ viral marketing as a key component of marketing communications to reach their consumers. eWOM did appear to be the fastest-developing segment of marketing services with the growth rate five times faster than the overall marketing sector in 2006 (PQMedia 2007). Among the multitude of channels for eWOM, virtual or online communities have been of particular interest to scholars and marketers due to the unique social nature of the aggregates that propels information dissemination (Hung and Li 2007). Over the past few decades, the world of communication has changed significantly. We have witnessed the birth and rise of new communication channels that have given rise to eWom information (Bilal et al., 2020; Cheung &Thadani, 2012). Use of Social Networking Sites (SNSs) is on the rise. This increased use has fueled the SNS user growth. At the same time, the growing number of SNS users has resulted in increased electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). The eWom can be used by consumers to share their opinions and experiences related to various products/services with their friends or other consumers that share similar interests. Companies can also access this eWom information without any limitations (Gupta & Harris, 2010; Hajli, 2018; Seifert & Kwon,2019). In fact, an increasing number of brands are now relying on social media to increase interactions with customers and increase sales of their products/services.

 A virtual or online community refers to a social group of people who engage in interactions and develop personal relationships with one another in the online environment over an extended period of time (Rheingold 1993). Despite the absence of face-to-face communication, online communities serve as an effective platform for the formation and maintenance of social relationships (Rheingold 1993; Walther 1996) and provide a social venue for dynamic, engaging, interactive eWOM among like-minded people (Hung and Li 2007). Communities have become an integral part of consumer information search, with over 84% of Internet users resorting to an online community for acquiring and exchanging information (Horrigan 2001). These interactions are conducted via blogs, instant messages,

forums, online communities, social networking sites and so on (Goldsmith and Horowitz, 2006). With a cascade of messages, social media users engage and exchange information through numerous channels designated as social media, such as blogs, microblogging (Twitter), social networking sites (Facebook) and video sharing sites (YouTube). It is not surprising that consumers exchange product information online with other consumers. By sharing personal experiences and feelings about products and services, online users tend to accept and use online information in their decision-making processes. Unlike traditional word-of-mouth (WOM) electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) is able to include positive and negative reviews made by former, actual and potential consumers on products and services via the internet in a timely manner (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Online customer reviews provide prospective customers with important information on whether to buy the product/ service. Hence it is evident that online reviews have become an important source of information.

3. Antecedents of EWOM and Theoretical Model:

The extant literature revealed that eWOM communication is the function of several antecedents. The following paragraphs discuss those antecedents in detail.

3.1 Information Antecedents of EWOM

3.1.1 Information Quantity

Information quantity. Information quantity is the extent or volume of online information about a brand (Park et al., 2007). The amount of online reviews per brand is considered to be an indicator of brand popularity (Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006). Although the research in eWOM has found contrasting results regarding the influence of a number of reviews on consumers' purchase intentions, in general, the consumers tend to believe that the brands with a large number of online reviews are more popular than those with few ones.

3.1.2 Information quality

Information quality or argument quality refers to "the persuasive strength of arguments embedded in an informational message" (Teng et al., 2014). It is the extent to which the recipients are convinced about the information shared or received from the message (Teng et al., 2014). Previous studies have measured the argument quality as a function of completeness of information, value added by the information, understandability (Filieri and McLeay, 2013; Wang and Strong, 1996), relevance (Filieri and McLeay, 2013), and timeliness and accuracy (Filieri and McLeay, 2013; Nelson et al., 2005) of the online reviews. Information completeness is the extent to which any information can influence the

perception of the consumers. On the other hand, value added by any information is understood by the benefits and advantages that a consumer derives from any information (Filieri and McLeay, 2013; Wang and Strong, 1996). Information relevance is the degree to which information is appropriate and helpful for the recipients. Information accuracy is defined as the correctness of the shared information (Nelson et al., 2005). Furthermore, the extant literature on eWOM indicates that if the information about a brand is accurate, correct, and believable, it becomes easier for the consumer to interpret the same (Filieri and McLeay, 2013). Timeliness and understandability of the information also determine its quality and enhances eWOM intention (Filieri and McLeay, 2013).

Consumers always attempt to process any given information to ascertain the veracity or otherwise of any given message. When these consumers consider an argument to be valid, they believe in the usefulness of such information (Sussman and Siegal, 2003). Information quality is believed to be a vital construct by previous studies (Aghakhani and Karimi, 2013; Cheung et al., 2008). More specifically, prior literature has reported that the quality information positively affects purchase intention (Lee and Shin, 2014; Park et al., 2007).

3.1.3 Information Credibility

Information credibility is considered a crucial driver of the peripheral routes due to the fact that it is the message receivers' perception on the credibility of a message (Cheung and Thadani, 2012). When consumers adjudge information to be credible, they are more willing to engage in any form of communication. In online settings, users have unlimited freedom to express their feelings without personal meetings, so typical clues of information credibility do not apply (Reichelt et al., 2014). Furthermore, individuals could also be compromised as a result of incentives provided by firms. Several researchers have demonstrated the importance of information credibility. For instance, a study found that information credibility is the main determinant in consumers' decision-making (Awad and Ragowsky, 2008). Additionally, studies also revealed the effect of information credibility on consumers' purchase intention (Prendergast et al., 2010).

3.2 Source Antecedents:

3.2.1 Source Attractiveness

Source attractiveness refers to the extent to which the message receivers identified the source as appealing (Kiecker and Cowles, 2001; Khong and Wu, 2013). Specifically the attractiveness of online reviews will have an impact on users' online information acceptance. Source attractiveness encompasses

similarity, familiarity and likeability (Triandis, 1971). Similarity is the resemblance shared by the message receiver and communicator (Kiecker and Cowles, 2001). In particular people tend to perceive online reviews as credible sources if they have similar opinions to the message communicator. Familiarity is the level of comfort established between the message receiver and communicator (Kiecker and Cowles, 2001). In other words it is more likely that people will have confidence in products/services reviewed online if they are familiar with shared reviews. Likeability refers to the affection developed by the message receiver towards the physical appearance or personal traits of the source (Kiecker and Cowles, 2001). In cyberspace people find a source attractive when they like online reviews posted by other users. In particular it is illustrated by the "like" button developed by Facebook. These three characteristics of source attractiveness – similarity, familiarity and likeability – are studied to show their functional roles in effective persuasive communication (Kiecker and Cowles, 2001).

3.2.2 Source Perception

Prior studies have shown that reference groups exert significant impact on users' online information acceptance (Childers and Rao, 1992; Hsu et al., 2013). It is a logical extension that such concepts may be applied to eWOM communication in cyberspace. In particular online reviews created by users affect other users' intention to accept and use online information. Hence these online reviews are helpful, reliable and valuable for other users. Due to their speedy delivery, powerful scalability and attractive nature of interaction, online reviews are perceived as helpful tools in obtaining knowledge of products/services and reducing risks and uncertainty of buying. Davis (1989) proposed that perceived usefulness plays a crucial role in predicting the users' acceptance of information systems/information technology. Another dimension of source perception of effective eWOM communication is the interpersonal relationship strength of eWOM participants. Tie strength is defined as "the level of intensity of the social relationship between consumers or degree of overlap of two individuals' friendship [which] varies greatly across a consumer's social network" (Steffes and Burgee, 2009, p. 45). The strength of tie may range from strong primary ties such as with family and friends to weak ties such as with online acquaintances and complete strangers. According to Brown and Reingen (1987) strong ties demonstrate the flow of referral behaviour in small groups. Weak ties allow information dissemination among different groups, a crucial role in facilitating information seeking among acquaintances (Yoo et al., 2014). Moreover, one study supports the critical role played by weak ties, indicating that eWOM messages created by non-customers had more impact than the messages created by customers (Liu-Thompkins, 2012). Other studies asserted that demographic similarity and physical proximity are evidence of the influence of tie strength (Reingen et al., 1984). In other words message

receivers are more likely to imitate peers of similar social groups, where herding behaviour is activated in the context of eWOM communication. Homophily is another dimension of social perception in the study of antecedents of persuasive eWOM messages. Homophily refers to the extent to which pairs of individuals share common ground in terms of age, gender, education and social lifestyle (Rogers, 1983). Individuals tend to associate with those who have similar interests or who are in the same situations with them. Though conceptually distinct from each other, are in the same situations with them. Though conceptually distinct from each other, social ties and homophily are closely related in many ways. For example individuals tend to share similar views when they have strong social ties. Conversely, as in the abovementioned social ties, weak ties facilitate the flow of information between different groups.

3.2.3 Source Credibility

The attributes of an information source are the communicator's credibility, attractiveness, physical appearance, familiarity and power (Hovland and Weiss, 1951). They argued that these elements had an impact on the credibility of the message. In particular source credibility is defined as "the perceived ability and motivation of the message source to produce accurate and truthful information" (Li and Zhan, 2011). Credible information sources usually generate effective persuasive messages and induce a favourable attitude towards the products/services related to the reviews (Eagly and Chaiken, 1993; Pornpitakan, 2004; Khong and Wu, 2013). Source credibility generally consists of three dimensions: expertness, trustworthiness and source experience (Wu and Wang, 2011; Li and Zhan, 2011; Martin and Lueg, 2013; Khong and Wu, 2013). Expertness refers to the professional knowledge that the communicator has about products/services. Trustworthiness is the degree of confidence and acceptance that the message receiver developed towards the source. Source experience is the extent to which the communicator is familiar with the products/services based on his/her actual experience, as perceived by the eWOM receiver (Braunsberger and Munch, 1998; Martin and Lueg, 2013). Unlike traditional communication the salient cues of credible eWOM messages may be the reviewers' reputation and past experience shared in computer-mediated communication. It is important to address the critical role of online users' judgements on source credibility in the online environment. The level of source credibility ultimately determines the level of confidence and acceptance of the online reviews by message receivers. People tend to establish positive attitudes towards accepting products/ services related to credible eWOM messages. Conversely, it is less likely that people will accept the eWOM messages if the source is not perceived as credible.

3.2.4 Source Style

In the context of social media, to some extent, online reviews can be the combination of texts and visual cues presented in the social networking sites. A research study proposed that visual information can stimulate information elaboration and increase the likelihood of the information being retrieved in recall tasks (Kisielius and Sternthal, 1984). Moreover, researchers suggested that visual information exerts a significant impact on users' online information acceptance and intention to use online reviews (Then and DeLong, 1999; Lin et al., 2012). It is not surprising that more and more online reviews are posted with pictorial information by sharing personal experiences and emotions in eWOM communication (Lin and Huang, 2006). In terms of the volume of online reviews, studies suggest that the more users discussed the product, the more likely it was that other users become aware of the product (Dellarocas et al., 2007). In addition the quantity of information available may reduce risks and uncertainties perceived by potential buyers (Chen et al., 2004). As one important cue for product popularity, the quantity of online reviews is positively related to sales (De Maeyer, 2012). Alternatively it is suggested that the volume of online reviews can affect users' acceptance and intention to use online reviews. In respect to the valence of online reviews, previous studies found that negative reviews have more impact than positive ones (Cui et al., 2010; into more sales (De Maeyer, 2012). The dispersion of online reviews refers to the degree the reviews vary from each other. High dispersion reflects divergent individual preferences. De Maeyer (2012) found that users become more aware of product information when encountering conflicting online reviews. Evidence showed that users are more motivated to show preference by more dispersed reviews (Martin et al., 2007).

Consequence:

Based on the discussion, above mentioned antecedents are critical attributes that lead to EWOM. EWOM messages refer to online messages, especially recommendations, that are perceived as credible sources, indicating explanatory power in online information acceptance. It is noted that a message recipient's judgement of online information credibility determines the confidence the recipient has in the information (Wathen and Burkell, 2002; Khong et al., 2010). In other words if people perceive eWOM messages as credible sources, they tend to accept this type of online information. Moreover, Sussman and Siegal (2003) argued that it is very likely that people who accept eWOM messages (which are credible) intend to use the information in their decision-making processes. Prior studies further confirmed that the positive effects of online reviews generate willingness to accept and intention to use the eWOM information (McKnight et al., 2002; Cheung et al., 2008).

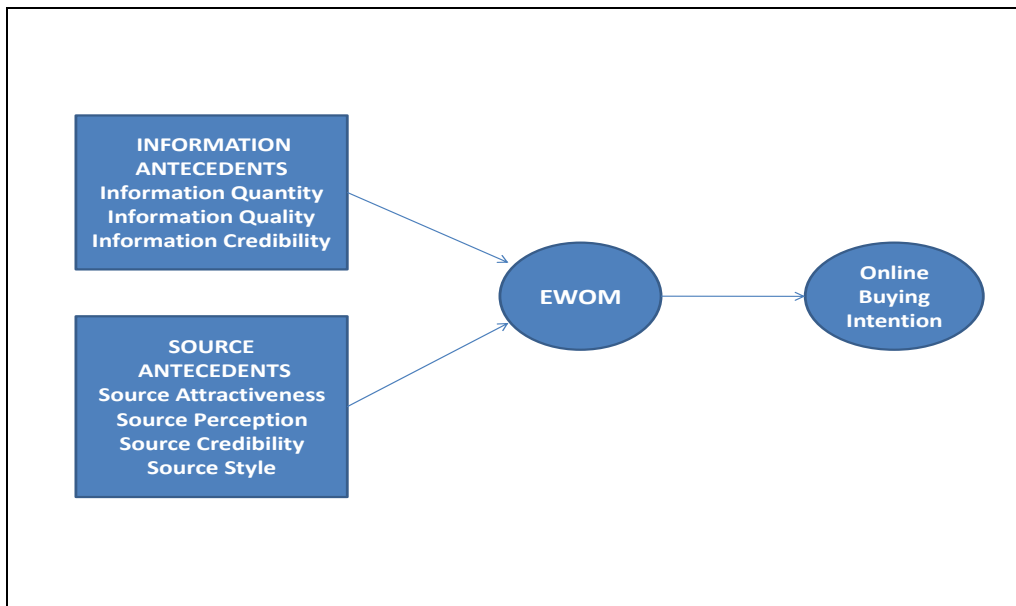_**Following figure depicts the conceptual model:**_

Fig. 1. Model developed based on review of literature

4. Conclusion

This research has advanced our knowledge of information and source antecedents that lead to EWOM and how it plays an important role in affecting the online buying intention of the consumers. This study focused on two antecedents; future research can be carried out to explore other antecedents that can lead to EWOM. Furthermore, a quantitative analysis can also be carried out as a part of future research to identify the relationship between antecedents, EWOM and Online Buying Intention.

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