
Consumer's Engagement in Social Media and Implications in Trusting e-Word of Mouth

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Abstract:

Purpose: Research in engagement in social media has identified many highly effective applications. However, there is a lack of theoretical studies concerning consumer's engagement in social media and trust of electronic Word of Mouth communication. Therefore, this study systematically reviewed the literature from the perspective of the Theory of Planned Behaviour. The purpose of this paper is to examine the engagement in social media and study multiple issues concerning communication and trust in online social communities, as well as the adoption of e-WOM as an influence parameter of consumer's purchasing intentions.

Design/methodology/approach: A descriptive cumulative review of the literature obtained articles published in relevant journals from 2018 to 2021 to examine the extent of trust in e-WOM which occurred from the engagement of consumers in social media environment and identify patterns or trends with respect to pre-existing theories, methodologies or findings.

Findings: The emerging results pointed out the Theory of Planned Behaviour as the cornerstone which explained the engagement in social media as well as the implications in trusting e-WOM. Additionally, businesses shaped novel techniques to apprehend communication with their customers while at the same time they attempt to maximize their credibility. Although, new ways of e-WOM manipulation were developed. Consequently, maintaining increased levels of trustworthiness in consumers reviews is getting more and more mandatory as new exploits are discovered.

Originality/value: A unified framework was created to locate concepts and to comprehend possible relationships. Most recent studies and developments concerning this subject are discussed.

Keywords: e-WOM, social media, engagement, trust, theory of planned behaviour.

JEL codes: M3, M31.

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1. Introduction

Nowadays, consumers communication has drastically transformed. Consumers receive information through popular networking platforms, called social media and this commercial information constructs the electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) (Hussain *et al.*, 2020). With the development of Information Technology at an extraordinary speed and the large adoption of it by multiple users, as well as the appearance of online social platforms has led these developments to become an integral part of everyday life. Users post, share and comment numerous of content online, creating valuable information. Visually enriched content posted in social media can enhance e-WOM even more and provide a more pleasant and attractive experience.

Additionally, social media platforms enable the distribution of e-WOM insights among a vast number of users (Li and Xie, 2019). Information acceptance of suggested products or services can be also a recurrent process and not a one-time only. Hence this decision and selection process may occur steadily and frequently (Hussain *et al.*, 2020). Consumers behaviour includes the trial of new products from the same brand and the e-WOM spread of information, while at the same time the isolation of any negative information.

According to a study three levels of involvement can be distinguished. Cognitive processing, which includes focusing on social media. Affection, which includes proudness and emotional connection with the brand expressed in social media. Activation, which includes the dedication of time and effort expressed through social media (Bilro *et al.*, 2018). Previous research has examined the intention to engage with E-WOM communication as a significant interdependent variable (Susilowati and Sugandini, 2018). According to Bigne (2018) there is a conceptual relation of traditional offline and online E-WOM communication, where a plethora of aspects can be identified in the literature as relevant in traditional offline environment and in the online setting as well.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine the engagement in social media and study multiple issues concerning communication and trust in online social communities. Communication can be bidirectional between consumers and between companies and consumers. In both cases the influence of consumers and their trust in online content is investigated. Additionally, the adoption of e-WOM as an influence parameter of consumer's purchasing intentions is examined.

2. Engagement in Social Media

To better understand user engagement on social media, it is necessary to distinguish social media engagement. This can be achieved by categorizing actions of social media engagement into two comprehensive categories. The first category includes direct actions to original content, including likes, dislikes and comments. These

actions enable users to show their enjoyment, gratitude, or acceptance of the content. The second category includes content sharing. This is more socially recognisable since the shared content is visible to all friends and followers of the user. In contrast, liking actions are more private since it gives a direct access to the posted content (Li and Xie, 2019). Liking, tagging, and sharing posts on one's personal newsfeed are the most frequently reported social media behaviours.

Customers engage in these activities to share excitement and emotions from encounters in social media, as well as to express their desires and wishes for advertised products. While sharing content with other consumers intensifies their happiness and enjoyment. Therefore, this phenomenon has the potential to stimulate reactions from other consumers, increase the total engagement as well as the number of followers (Pentina *et al.*, 2018).

Moreover, social media platforms empower consumers to post, comment and share their purchase experience with their followers in the social network. Additionally, consumers are likely to overwillingly refer a product to other persons in their social environment by recommending or spreading information if they think it covered their needs in a satisfactory way. In both these events, the post-purchase actions facilitate potential consumers to evaluate their views about a product.

Consequently, actions taking place in social media platforms are very similar to E-WOM and through this source consumers retrieve and search for trusted information (Ngarmwongnoi *et al.*, 2020). As the results of a research revealed, the intention to engage in e-WOM behaviours depends on the type of social media action. Marketing messages advertising free products, price discounts, contest participation or encouragement to visit an e-shop are able to generate higher levels of e-WOM engagement behaviour (Ananda, 2019). Consumer engagement significantly and positively influences both satisfaction and loyalty.

e-WOM can affect consumer engagement and is one of the tools which can be used to enhance engagement (Srivastava and Sivaramakrishnan, 2020). Therefore, e-WOM was further examined to investigate its characteristics and how consumers interact with each other as well as with information provided by businesses.

3. Characteristics of e-WOM Communication in Social Networks

Worldwide, people use social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and LinkedIn to share information. Social media has developed a significant role as a communication tool, since users are at the same time consumers which share product reviews, information, experiences, tips and warnings about certain products (Appel *et al.*, 2019). People have a lot of friends on social media, consequently information is spread to many users.

Social media have evolved to a source of information and reviews repository for e-consumers (Kim *et al.*, 2019). Social media has expanded in terms of engagement and impact, bringing consumers closer together (Shawky *et al.*, 2019). According to a research conducted from Nielsen (2020), 92% from responding consumers trust more the recommendations from friends or family compared to other forms of advertising. Shareef (2019) and Ngarmwongnoi (2020) argued that questionable placement of information and unappealing sources can be less convincing in influencing the opinion making mechanism.

In some particular cases, consumer behaviour and buying decision procedure may be undesirably affected by negative reviews and posts about products. Even more, negative feedback is more influential than positive one. As stated, negative expressions have a stronger influence on customers than positive ones particularly if most of the reviews are negative.

However, positive e-WOM can attract more attention during the purchase investigation process (Ngarmwongnoi *et al.*, 2020). e-WOM communication can be distinguished in three different categories. Experiential, consequential, and intentional: Experiential e-WOM is more frequently used and has more impact. This consists of positive or negative consumers' experiences about a product (Seller and Laurindo, 2018). Consequential e-WOM can be considered as the exposure of consumers to traditional marketing campaigns and advertising messages. Intentional e-WOM can be defined when businesses employ celebrities or influencers to create positive impression about a product to the public (Seller and Laurindo, 2018). Following the description of e-WOM unique characteristics, it would be suitable to make a reconnaissance of the way it integrates with marketing strategies.

4. Integration of e-WOM in Marketing Strategies

Consumers these days do not rely exclusively on marketing generated information (ads or promotions). As an alternative, they search for reviews on digital platforms such as TripAdvisor or Foursquare to find and compare product information, read customer reviews. Electronic word of mouth equips companies with an additional advantage compared with traditional e-WOM. This is mainly because it provides the option to try and understand what factors motivate consumers to spread their opinion online and simultaneously to calculate the impact of these comments have on other people (Srivastava and Sivaramakrishnan, 2020).

Nevertheless, consumers employ technology to post and share their opinions concerning products or services, hence e-WOM can be an uncontrollable responsibility for companies (Yang and Yecies, 2019). To counteract this, companies are trying to have greater control over consumers' electronic reviews by implementing special places on their web pages, where consumers can post comments and share their opinions about the companies' products and services (Seller and Laurindo, 2018).

This kind of e-WOM approach was implemented by Sephora, a cosmetics company. This can provide marketers with valuable information about the use of e-WOM content and how to apply this to their products. e-WOM content is easily reachable using a search function on the Sephora website, enhancing accessibility. Although the important part of this approach and implementation is to avoid interfering with user created content. Another appearance of e-WOM is projected through the online consumer reviews (OCRs) (Dhahak and Huseynov, 2020).

Dhahak and Huseynov defined OCRs as any feedback with positive, negative or neutral content concerning a product, service, business, or individual evidently created from a consumer who purchased or consumed a product or a service. Hence, this consumer shared his experience online for every other potential consumer (Dhahak and Huseynov, 2020). Companies are adopting new techniques to apprehend current needs and to communicate with their customers while at the same time they maximize their credibility in the online environment.

5. The Implications of Trusting e-WOM

Credibility of information was always a key issue concerning e-WOM. Ever since the active participation of the internet and social media in daily life, the credibility issue has been examined (El-Baz *et al.*, 2018; Jiang *et al.*, 2021). During the pre-internet era where traditional media was only available, the spread of information to a large scale, was only possible by parties that had the financial resources and the authority (Dwivedi, 2020). At present, digital development removed the barriers for everyone to be able to spread information to the general public. e-WOM can appear in multiple digital channels like online consumer communities, social platforms as well as at photo and video platforms (Dwivedi *et al.*, 2020).

Consumers used to search for information about a product over the Internet and could find many reviews and experiences about the desired product, although they were not able to decide the level of trustworthiness of this information. There was only one way to determine the reliability of the information and that was to figure out if there was an important number of similar opinions (Motyka *et al.*, 2018).

Though this fact is not supported in another research where users searching for online recommendation understand as more credible and can relate with the online reviews if the information creators display authoritarian qualities that opinion similarity (Yang and Yecies, 2019). There has been a considerable amount of e-WOM researches specifically focused to understand source credibility. An e-WOM message is perceived as credible when it is authentic, accurate or realistic to the consumer (Chih *et al.*, 2020). In the study of Zhao and Huang (2019), it was revealed that consumers consider more trustworthy product information generated by other consumers than the information given by businesses. With trust consumers evaluate the source and origin of the information (Yan *et al.*, 2018).

Hence, according to Mumuni the impact of source credibility diversifies to two categories, source expertise and source trustworthiness. This combination enables the e-WOM effectiveness. However, the focus on the source of credibility alone is limited and does not offer a comprehensive picture of the factors of e-WOM impact (Mumuni *et al.*, 2019). Online reviews became the designated way for consumers to source information about products or services and their success is mainly due to the fact that are considered reliable and beneficial (Dwivedi *et al.*, 2020).

e-WOM credibility and the role of credible co-producers as well as the impact they have on consumer behaviour has attracted the attention of researchers. The components that affect the recipient's approval of information rely on two variables. The first one is the source, which can be considered as an expert about valuable information on a specific subject. The second one is the trustworthiness, which concerns the sincerity and credibility of a source (Jiaxi, 2021). Source credibility is a key element of e-WOM since expert sources have a great impact on usefulness, information acceptance, and purchase intentions (Filiari *et al.*, 2018; Dwivedi *et al.*, 2020).

As another research states (Weitzl, 2018), trust in e-WOM and social media can be considered as an interactive relationship and as a communication concept. While at the same time consumer reviews can be considered as indivisible part of online shopping and social commerce. Therefore, Online Consumers Reviews is a critical part of e-WOM. As a consequence, the usage and adoption of e-WOM information may include trust to product experiences, descriptions reviews, and recommendations. A consumer while he is selecting and purchasing a product, he usually interacts with a social group that some individuals may have bought this product.

Consequently, in order for social exchange to be enabled and grow, a unique relationship between the potential consumer and the social group has to be developed. This relationship intergrades trust in e-WOM (Weitzl, 2018). There is a likelihood that personnel from businesses impersonate reviews normally created from consumers and therefore to counterfeit the content of these reviews (Weitzl, 2018). This is also supported by another research by Filiari (2018), stating that some business owners are trying to spread encouraging reviews concerning their businesses are doing so by trying to allure consumers to write their own positive experience by offering incentives. This is a common approach and may vary from free products, a discount or a gift-card reward (Filiari, 2018).

This is also supported by a research mentioning that free merchandise has the potential to indirectly increase sales and at the same time to make e-WOM marketing strategy more beneficial along with the creation of supportive e-WOM by social media users (Cui, 2018). In the last years, multiple scandals were reported from all around the globe concerning online reviews. Amazon, Walmart, and other companies were given a warning by regulatory authorities, since they likely to

receive substantial fines if they host fake reviews or misleading endorsements (Jackson, 2021). According to studies of Cardoso (2018), and Reyes-Menendez (2019), two types of fake reviews in online social media can be specified. The first one concerns users that are acting intentionally with a purpose to deceit in order to facilitate their personal interest as well as to promote their interests through an unfair competition. The second one concerns a new born industry of fake reviews creation.

Promotion or commercial agents have the ability to create a vast number of fake reviews. They undertake the improvement of reputation for a product by injecting a vast number of positive information including articles, reviews and even participate in discussions to social media. Amazon is one e-commerce platform which is trying to decrease the number of fake reviews by employing a combination of human moderators and artificial intelligence (Cardoso, 2018; Reyes-Menendez, 2019).

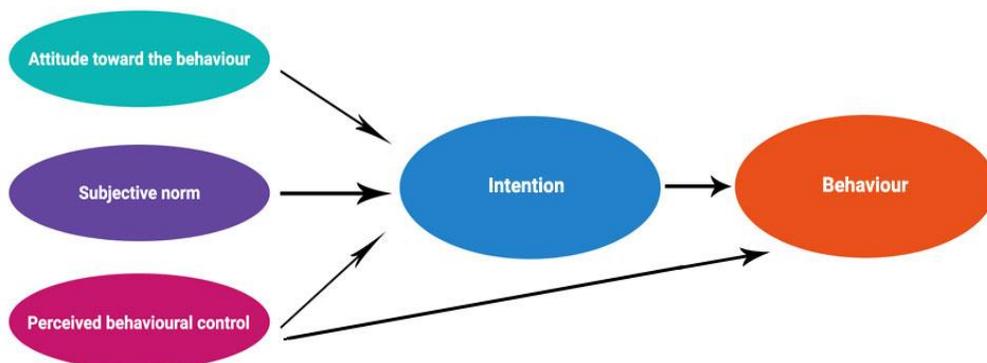
Instagram includes high possibilities for brand awareness creation by employing users to create a true reflection of the product. Social media revolution altered consumers' preference towards to specific products since consumers have an inclination to get influenced by other persons from their social network which ultimately may lead them to select a specific brand to another (Chivandi, 2020). The phenomenon of trust to information and interaction within the social media networks was examined under the prism of the Theory of Planned Behaviour model.

6. Theory of Planned Behaviour as an Explorative Model for Trust

This study was developed focusing on the TPB model (Figure 1). A vital question to facilitate the comprehension of the theory of planned behaviour is what triggers a consumer's purchase intention for specific products or services. It is commonly observed that every consumer has different tastes and preferences. Although, even for essential goods and services, there seems to be some fundamental factors influencing purchase decisions, excluding the economic factors (Badir and Andjarwati, 2020).

Taking into account psychological factors for the estimation and explanation of consumer behaviour it is not something new in the literature. Actually, numerous authors have approached and deepened issues associated with the psychological component to explain the factors driving individuals to make purchasing decisions (Hartmann *et al.*, 2018). As the research of Badir and Andjarwati (2020) suggested there is a significant influence on trust and in purchasing decisions of consumers.

More explicably if a consumer's confidence increases, it will drive purchasing decisions. Examined literature (Belanche *et al.*, 2020; Ikhsan and Ohliati, 2020) was concentrated on the TPB model variables (attitude, the subjective norm, and perceived control). Therefore, this study analyses the components of TPB model alongside with the phenomenon of consumers' engagement within social media networks and the effect this engagement has in trusting e-WOM communication.

Figure 1. Theory of Planned Behaviour.

Source: Ajzen 1991.

Intention in the TPB model reflects the motivational factors that influence a person's behaviour. It indicates the willingness of a person to act, as well as the amount of effort is willing to apply to display the behaviour. In the context of user's engagement in social media, e-WOM communication generates dynamic thinking about the behaviour, and willingness to spend time and adopt views, options and content shared or produced by other users.

Concluding from the above, this study examines trust in e-WOM through TPB, which is a well-known model. This course of action was also noticed and applied in many studies (Carfora, 2019; Apau and Koranteng, 2019; Canova, 2020). The Theory of Planned Behaviour, was employed as the foundation to test the background of trust in e-WOM communication. As the author of TPB explains this model "has been widely applied to the prediction and change of behaviour, including behaviour related to the use of technology" (Ajzen, 2020).

7. Conclusions

Therefore, since engagement in social media and e-WOM communication are digital processes taking place through the web, it is appropriate to examine these through the prism of a model compatible with technology. Reviewing a large number of studies, indicated that TPB is a useful framework to understand the investigated behaviour developed within social media (Giampietri *et al.*, 2018; Bigne *et al.*, 2018; Seller and Laurindo, 2018; Sembada and Koay, 2019; Ikhsan and Ohliati, 2020).

Through the above review, strong evidence was provided to the theory in measuring consumers' trust in e-WOM communication and provided insights into the leading techniques employed in e-WOM communication. From a managerial standpoint, it is imperative for marketers to create an environment that is conducive for inspiring trust in e-WOM while at the same time decreasing negative e-WOM. Consumers which intend to post positive e-WOM appear to be driven by underlying factors

connected with their attitude, whereas consumers who consider posting negative e-WOM are more driven by social pressure.

Even though, companies cannot directly control consumer to consumer messages, they are still able to influence the conversations among consumers (Lisjak *et al.*, 2021). The reliability of reviews in the coming years is expected to become even more important. Social media platforms in order to keep up with the upcoming developments is important to maintain increased levels of trustworthiness in consumers reviews by employing mechanisms to secure against the growth of fake reviews. Consumers may be less likely to spread negative E-WOM communication if they have an opportunity to express their comments or dissatisfaction (Cui, 2018).

In this study, the primary theory used is the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991). Two main reasons can be identified for selecting this model as a research framework. Initially, it can be presumed that people have the intention to act in such ways in order to obtain positive outcomes, meet the expectations of others and become sympathetic to a group.

More specifically, people do not behave as they would wish and do what they want, instead they take under great consideration the opinions of others who are close or important to them, mainly the consumers with a shared culture (Belanche *et al.*, 2020; Canova *et al.*, 2020). Moreover, the increase of incentives for posting positive reviews will most probably increase. Hence, the attention of social media platforms should also increase to prevent this phenomenon from expanding (Badir and Andjarwati, 2020).

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