

Electronic Word Of Mouth (Ewom) And Consumer Purchase Decision Making: A Study In The Digital Economy Of Kerala

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: These are (i) to find the effect of ICT interventions on daily routine of consumers with a focus on the impact of Electronic Word Of Mouth (eWOM) on their buying decisions, and (ii) to find if eWOM could be used as a trust factor for making purchase decisions.

Methods: The study is on the influence of eWOM in this era of widespread use of social media on consumer purchase decision making and the current study is based on both primary and secondary data. Primary data were collected from 100 respondents from different parts of Kerala. A well-structured questionnaire was designed to collect information from the respondents to know about the influence of social media on their purchase decision and to understand how do consumers gather and process information before a purchase. Online survey was used for collection of primary data. Secondary data's like information from company websites, research studies and other published sources of companies are also used.

Findings: It was found that eWOM through social media had significant impact on consumer buying behaviour in this ICT age, in the emerging digital economy of Kerala. No doubt, social media could bring about many changes to both consumer and businesses, and eWOM emerged as a very significant influencer today. Though there are many sources for gathering information through social media, personal attitude of the consumers makes a lot of difference in choosing and making a purchase decision. The quality of content on social media makes a big impact so it should be consumer-relevant. When the marketing is done through social media, it is not all about consumer awareness or selling the product itself. It is more than that, as it involves retaining a built-up relationship and building relationships between the potential buyers and corporations. The study found that social media reviews and suggestions about products and services through eWOM or otherwise by users influenced their purchase decisions. Also, social media is widely used to search for information about products and services. Accordingly, social media is used as a trust factor while making purchase decisions by consumers. In the current scenario, consumers are using social media to get updates about products rather than in the traditional modes. Based on the findings of this study, the majority of consumers feel that social media via eWOM greatly influenced their purchase decisions.

Novelty: Studies on eWOM are rather scarce, especially in the context of Kerala which is an emerging knowledge economy in the whole of India. Hence, this empirical study done using online survey in the Kerala context has novelty in its research theme and also practical applications.

Keywords: eWOM, Social Media, ICT, Mobile penetration, Purchase decision.

I. INTRODUCTION

In the digital age, more and more consumers are using social media to communicate among themselves but also with brands. Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM) has become vital for business success, as eWOM forms the basis of purchase decisions. Over the last few years, social media has totally changed business's marketing strategy. Today, social media has become the most effective means to communicate about products and services by marketers to consumers. Social networking sites offer platforms to communicate with customers and influence their purchase decisions. Product promotion through social media ensure better attention to brands at lower cost. The study aims to explain the influence of social media (eWOM, to be specific) on the consumer purchase decision-making process.

I.1. Analytical Significance

Over the past decade a new form of media has arisen which due to its social feature seem to have a great power of influence on consumers purchasing decision-making process. Today, more and more consumers use social media to communicate together but also to communicate with brands. This new interaction is of interests for marketing professionals. The study aims to explain how the influence of Social Media is reflected on consumers 'purchasing decision-making process. Technology and the boom of the internet have encouraged people to connect with each other, share information and build relationships and the social web has presented a new form of communication through social media which allow people to interact and converse with each other. This presents marketers with the opportunity to affect consumers purchase decisions through online marketing and social media. This social engagement by consumers has significant impact on marketing activities as marketers need to be aware of the factors affecting consumer's purchase decision. Social Media has revolutionized the ways of communication in sharing information and interests. The rapid growth of social media and social networking sites, especially, in developing countries like India is providing marketers a new avenue to contact customers. The case of eWOM has been looked into closely in this paper. The relationship between social media and consumer decision-making present that social media affects advertising attitudes, brand attitudes, and purchasing intentions of consumer.

I.2. Past Studies

Many studies relating to the role of technology, especially Information and Communication Technology (ICT) on purchase decisions of diverse products and services are available. Mangold & Faulds (2009) [1] has noted that technological advances through social media influenced consumer behavior from information acquisition to post-purchase behavior like dissatisfaction statements or behaviors. Technology has influenced purchase decisions of consumers, right from durable items including fixed assets like houses (Manoj, 2009) [2] to the management of risks and operational efficiency of service organizations like banks (Manoj, 2010) [3] as well as scientific inventory management in large manufacturing firms (Manoj, 2010) [4]. The positive role of ICT on transparent, efficient and corruption-free administration of major GOI schemes like MGNREGA (Manoj, 2012) [5] is no exception in this regard. Nasir, S., Vel, P., & Mateen, H (2012) [6] have reported that social media do not always need some language or words to spread the message to the consumer. Once a product or service is marketed then that marketing context can be explained by its potential purchaser. Accordingly, the buyer gives the response; this could be by buying that product, repurchasing the product or it could also be by way of not purchasing that product. Hence the above process follows the customer's needs, his awareness and interest towards the product, brand loyalty & brand value, word of mouth and its demand. Pietro & Eleonora Pantano (2012) [7] investigated to what extend social networks, as Facebook, influence consumer's purchasing decision. They found that enjoyment denotes a vital influencing factor of the usage of social networks as a means of helping the decision on purchases. Also, they pointed out that usefulness perception of consumers regarding recommendations as well as suggestions relating to products on social media viz. Facebook. Thus, their enjoyment while using the social media viz. Facebook to get information regarding products as well as brands, and also perceptions on their ease of use were all factors that influenced their attitude towards such products and brands and ultimately their purchasing decision also. They also suggested a casual positive relationship between attitude of customers towards social media and behavioral intention. Sharma & Rehman (2012) [8] find that positive or negative information about a product or a brand available on the social media has got significant overall influence on consumers' purchase behavior or decisions. As customers spread positive eWOM

through social media, its demand rises. If it is negative eWOM, then that might hamper demand too.

Forbes & Vespoli (2013) [9] investigated consumers who made a purchase of an item based on the recommendation of a peer or contact via social media results indicate that consumers were buying either very inexpensive, or very expensive goods, and they did so as per the recommendations of people whom they would not take into account as “opinion leaders”. Besides, findings showed a gradual transition from more conventional modes of social media such as Facebook to swifter and quicker social media forms such as Twitter. Many respondents expressed their interest in “information now” (instantaneous), not stale even by a day or two. Their research findings show a shift towards social media type that conforms to general social media themes of modern days. Leerapong & Mardjo (2013)[10] have examined the factors influencing consumers’ online purchase decisions, like, online social networks, particularly Facebook. The respondents have thus been arranged as per their ranking importance, comparative benefits, trust, risk perception, and compatibility as the parameters which encouraged or discouraged them from purchasing product through Facebook. Manoj, P K (2013) [11] has noted the need for using ICT for facilitating the delivery of Green affordable houses in an environment-friendly way. Themba, G., & Mulala, M. (2013)[12] has studied the limit upto which students in University of Botswana engaged in the brand-related eWOM through social media and the influence of their eWOM engagement on their purchasing behavior or decisions. They have reported that students’ engagement levels in brand-related eWOM through social media is comparatively less. Besides, their engagement in brand-related eWOM in general and opinion seeking in particular are significantly (positive) influencing their purchasing decisions. William George & Manoj P K (2013)[13] have noted better technology adoption (ICT-based services) of private sector banks and hence more efficient CRM systems in such banks vis-à-vis the public sector (Govt-owned) banks. Neeraja James & Manoj P K (2014) [14] have pointed out the high relevance of E-Banking in rural areas for better quality service to the rural people and cost-effective service delivery too.

Barhemmati. N. et al. (2015) [15] have found that the best and the successful way of advertising is Social Media Marketing. The study focuses on

knowing the factors how the buying pattern of those consumers change who are on Social media through Social Network Marketing. This study has also revealed the association between the selling activities of business firms as well as the customer engagement and their buying behaviour. This finding was based on a survey undertaken among 50 students at Malaysian National University. The result of the study shows the positive relation in between consumer buying behaviour and Social media engagement. Nasar K K & Manoj, P K. (2015) [16] have noted technology adoption can ensure qualitative and cost-effective delivery of apartments and is advisable because price, quality etc. are the main purchase considerations for the buyers. Godey, B. et. al. (2016) [17] have noted in their article that the use of social media is growing fast. For companies and their marketing executives, social media could be used to enhance the knowledge regarding various or services. This paper, based on a survey conducted to explain and interpret the relation between usage of social media, social media marketing and consumer purchase behavior. The key question also included the membership status indifferent Social media sites and the generated content by them on those sites. The research analysis provides statistical basis (evidence) as to how Social media could make a greater influence on consumer’s purchase behavior. This research also shows whether the investment on Social media marketing is impactful or not and if it is, which ones? Manoj, P K (2016) [18] has pointed out the utmost need for ICT adoption effective delivery banking services in the ongoing digital era in India. Lakshmi & Manoj, P K (2017) [19] have made an empirical and comparative study of ICT-based banking products of two rural-focused banks viz. Kannur district co-operative bank and Kerala Gramin Bank (KGB); have pointed out the better ICT adoption and hence superior banking services by KGB. So, enhanced ICT adoption has been suggested by the authors.

An empirical study on ICT-based banking in the Kerala done by Joju et. al. (2017) [20] has pointed out the positive attitude towards ICT-based services and e-channels and have accordingly suggested for better ICT-adoption by the banks. Another empirical study done by Joju et. al. (2017) [21] on the role of Fin-tech (financial technologies) and quality of services provided by banks in Kerala has reported a positive relation between the two, and the authors have suggested more Fin-tech adoption by banks for better customer by the banks in Kerala. Yet another

empirical study by Joju et. al. (2017) [22] has reported that there are customer who still prefer, especially rural customers, the traditional or conventional kind of banking viz. 'Brick and Mortar' type banking. It has been noted the whatever might be the technology (ICT) adoption there is scope for maintaining right level of 'human touch' points so as to ensure the customer delight even in this ICT era. A research study to assess the influence of the social media on buying behavior by Michael Putter (2017) [23] has noted the significance of social media in modern days to 'reach the customers' by companies, and thus companies that can use social media widely and effectively would get the benefit from higher business.

Gupta, et. al (2018) [24] have explained the past and also the future influence of social media in the context of the Fifth Social Media Week (SMW) being held in Sept. 2011. Toby Daniels, the founder of SWM, found growth in social media's role on the lives of people. SMW is in vogue in 21 cities of the world. SM's growth in the Middle East, has led to change in business models too. Manoj, P. K. (2018) [25] has noted that ICT-enabled CRM services should be fostered by old private sector banks in Kerala as done by the more 'high-tech' new generation private sector banks as well as foreign banks as ICT can enhance service quality and reduce cost. A study by Duangruthai Voramontri & Leslie Klieb (2019) [26] on the influence of social media on the buying behavior of customers has noted that use of social media provides satisfaction to customers during the stages of information search as well as alternative choice. As the customer's satisfaction improves during these phases that would lead to purchase decision and also post-purchase decisions. A study on the HRM practices by the Kerala based private sector banks by Manoj, P. K. (2019) [27] has noted that banks with 'high-tech' platforms or better ICT adoption have better chances of business growth as well as customer service and also lower operating costs. Hence, ICT investment has been suggested by the author for banks that are lagging in this respect. Another study by the same expert, Manoj, P. K. (2019) [28] has focused on the issue of social banking and priority sector lending in the ongoing reforms where adoption of ICT, Fin-tech etc. is the new normal. The need for ICT adoption for better catering to the marginalized groups under the new 'Financial Inclusion' paradigm as against the erstwhile Priority Sector Lending (PSL) has been pointed out by the author. Accordingly, ICT should be used as a tool for financial inclusion. Joju, J. &

Manoj, P. K. (2019) [29] have studied the role of Banking Technology in enhancing Service Quality of banks in Kerala and has observed the utmost need for higher level of adoption of banking technology for enhanced service quality, lower costs and also customer delight. Liu, Q. et. al. (2020) [30] have sought to explore consumers' purchasing behavior as part of a large online promotional initiative and also to assess the role played by their psychological distance and involvement. It is noted that temporal distance has positive impact on low involvement products and negative impact on high involvement products.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Data Sources and Data Collection

Descriptive research design is used in this study to analyse and investigate about the variables. The present study uses both primary and secondary data sources. It is collected from the respondents through online using a structured questionnaire. Was designed in such a way that it consists of questions related to individual basis. Interviews and observation methods also used. The secondary data's collected for this study were the information from company website, journals and other published records of the company.

2.2. Sampling Design

The current study is based on primary data collected from 120 respondents from the different parts of Kerala. A well-structured questionnaire was designed to collect the information from the respondents the questionnaire was designed to study the influence of social media on consumer purchase decision making. The responses have been collected through online mode. The sample size is chosen as 120. The study was conducted among users of social media. There are lots of users in this area. The respondents were selected randomly using lottery method and the questionnaires were administered to each respondent. The researchers adopted random sampling method for collection of primary data, using Online means (Google form Questionnaire) as it is difficult to meet the respondents face to face as there is large number of respondents. Purpose of this research was told to respondents and questions were explained to them in case there was any need for understanding any particular questions. The research instrument used for the study was structured questionnaire (Online, Google form).

2.6. Scope of the Study

The study is basically conducted to know how consumers influenced by the social media. The perception consumers may vary under different

circumstances. From this study, we can have a better understanding of the influence of social media on Consumers purchase decision making. The study is essentially focused on the role played by social media (eWOM) in influencing consumers during their purchasing decision making process. The dissertation will thus explore Social Media Marketing in relation with models and theories about consumers' decision-making.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

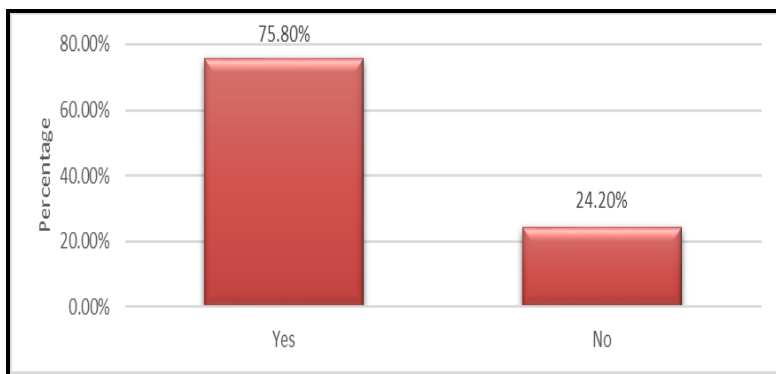
It is noted that over three-fourth (75.80 percent to be specific) would buy products based on eWOM through social media. Only less than one-fourth (24.20 percent) do not have faith in eWOM. Thus, eWOM through social media exerts tremendous influence on purchase decision of modern consumers of the emerging digital economy of Kerala. (Table I and Figure II) are self explanatory.

Table I: Buying Decision based on eWOM in Social Media

Category	No of Respondents	Share (Percentage)
Yes	91	75.80 percent
No	29	24.20 percent
Total	120	100.00 percent

Source: Field Survey (Online)

Figure I: Buying Decision based on eWOM in Social Media



Source: Field Survey data (as in Table I above)

Table II: Features of Purchase Decisions using eWOM in Social Media

Particulars	Never	Recently	Sometimes	Frequently	Always	Total	Total/120
Seek your friends' opinions (eWOM) via social media before making your purchase decision	(13*1) =13	(24*2) = 48	(43*3) =129	(25*4) =100	(15*5) =75	365	(365/120) = 3.04
Use social media to seek the opinion (eWOM) of people you do not know before making your purchase decision.	(11*1) =11	(22*2) =44	(53*3) =159	(17*4) =68	(17*5) =85	367	(367/120) = 3.05
Ask your friends opinion (eWOM) via social media when you hesitate between many products (Dilemma)	(9*1) = 9	13*2 =26	50*3 =150	29*4 =116	19*5 =95	396	(396/120) = 3.3
Ask the opinion (eWOM) of people you do not know through social media when you hesitate between many products? (Dilemma)	(12*1) =12	11*2 =2+2	50*3 =150	26*4 =104	21*5 =105	393	(393/120) = 3.27
How often do you buy products after reading a positive review (eWOM) on social media?	(5*2) =10	18*2 =36	44*3 =132	27*4 =108	26*5 =130	416	(416/120) = 3.46

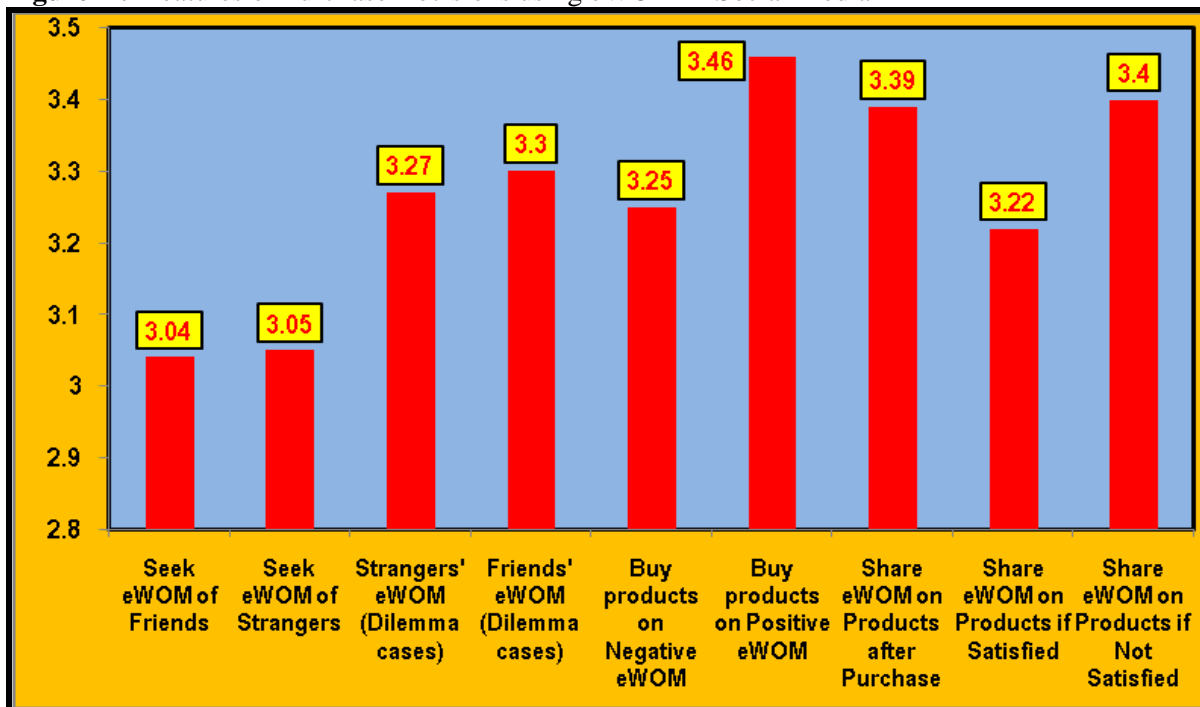
How often do you buy products after reading a negative review (eWOM) on social media?	(14*1) = 14	(11*2) = 22	(50*3) = 150	(20*4) = 80	(25*5) = 125	391	(391/120) = 3.25
How often do you rate (share eWOM) on products on social media after purchase?	(8*1) =8	16*2 =32	43*3 =129	27*4 =108	26*5 =130	407	407/120 =3.39
How often you share your eWOM on social media about products if you are satisfied?	(13*1) =13	16*2 =32	42*3 =126	29*4 =116	20*5 =100	387	(387/120) =3.22
How often you share your eWOM on social media about products if you are NOT satisfied?	(15*1) =15	(11*2) =22	(36*3) =108	(26*4) =104	(32*5) =160	409	(409/120) =3.40

Source: Field Survey (Online)

Weighted Average, $X = (W_1X_1+W_2X_2+.... W_nX_n)$, where W is relative weight and X is value. Using Table II, $X = [(3.04+3.05+3.3+3.27+3.46+3.25+3.39+3.22+3.40)/9]=3.26$. Thus, using weighted average method the influence of social media (eWOM) on consumer purchase decision can be found to be 3.26. This is a significant positive relation.

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Figure II: Features of Purchase Decisions using eWOM in Social Media



Source: Field Survey data (as in Table II above)

There are many statements depends on while buying products from social media. There are a group of parameters are used to determine the validity of the statements. The parameters include: “Always”, “Frequently”, “Recently”, “Sometimes” and “Never”. The weighted average figure computed based on the feedbacks received works out to 3.26 which lies in between the parameters of ‘Sometimes’ and ‘Frequently’. From the factors influencing the buyers buying behaviour and calculation of weighted average it is identified that 3.46 is the highest value among the factors and it belongs to the factor that “How

often do you purchase products after reading a positive review on social media?” The lowest value among the calculation is 3.04 and it belongs to the factor that “Seek your friends' opinions via social media before making your purchase decision” it is concluded that the weighted average figure of 3.26 which lies in between the parameters of “Sometimes” and “Frequently”.

It is observed from the study that most of the respondents are between the age group of 19 to 24 years of age. From the study, the researcher has identified that most of the respondents are males (67.50 percent) and the rest are female

respondents (32.50 percent). The data from the survey shows that almost 84 percent of the respondents follow brands on social media. From the study, the researcher has identified that Most People follow brands on social media as they want to get updates about products and to read comments and reviews about new products. It is observed from the study that majority of the respondents which is 46.60 percent will recommend a brand to their friend after following the brand and 19.30 percent of respondents suggested that the recommendation will be depend on the brand. From the study, the researcher has identified that most of the respondents will follow a brand on social media because of friends follows. It was found that 75 percent of the respondents will buy products after following on social media by way of eWOM. It is observed from the study that majority of the respondents (86.70 percent) are using social media to grab information about products by way of eWOS. The data collected through the survey conducted as part of the study shows that almost all the respondents are using social media to compare products that they want to purchase.

4. CONCLUSION

The research has shown a powerful impact of social media on consumer buying behaviour in digital age. No doubt that social media had brought major changes to both, consumer as well as businesses. The research has shown that consumers are highly selective while making a purchase. Though there is a plenty of data and sources of information on social media, still personal attitude of the consumers makes a lot of difference in selecting and making a purchase. The quality of content on social media makes a big impact so it should be consumer relevant. When the marketing is done through social media, it is not all about consumer awareness or selling the product itself. It is more than that which includes retaining a built-up relationship and building it between the potential buyers and corporations. Now the consumer is the king who can get all the information regarding a product or services by simply speaking with each other. So, the companies and marketers should highly careful about the bad mouth on social media or eWOM because it can lead to destroy the company's reputation. Even many individuals have agreed on the fact that through social media, they can share their opinion and talk to other consumers and the corporations more effectively. Social media has definitely bridged up the gap between the brands and the consumers. Considering this fact, companies are now making

each possible effort in making the buyer feel connected with the brand and allowed them to put their views, opinions, feedbacks and reviews.

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