

The Influence of Electronic Word-of-Mouth on Consumers' Purchase Intentions in Iranian Telecommunication Industry

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Abstract

Electronic word of mouth (eWOM) is an emerging marketing experience for consumers which impact their assessment of different existing brands and products such as mobile brands through online communication channels. The World Wide Web is a wonderful trend of the millennium that the essential trend in communication has designed. Communication is an essential function of the internet that is not seen in other media. The World Wide Web provides probability to make details for people such as the publishing market, the capability to return details through phone, guides, and publications make studying possibilities, as well as self-learning. Films and TV provide enjoyment, and all these things are done at the same time. This study aims to explain the effect of electronic word of mouth (eWOM) on consumers purchase intentions in Iran telecommunication industry. However, the main features are having reviews and the capability to communicate, which personalizes the communication process. This study has been inspired by the need to understand how eWOM influences consumers' purchase intentions with regards to the Iranian perspective.

Keywords

Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM), Consumers Purchase Intentions, Iran Telecommunication Industry, *Word of Mouth Marketing*

1. Introduction

Due to this appearance electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) now provides one of the most effective marketing resources in use nowadays (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2004). The internet makes available several locations for customers to discuss their opinions and encounters, and electronic word of mouth (eWOM) propagates it at an unmatched rate and at a much cheaper rate than the conventional WOM (Li, and Zhan, 2011). Currently, customers can discuss their products knowledge to others online, due to the high transmission of the internet and the emergence of Web 2.0. The coming of Web 2.0 technological innovation recently has given increase to the growth of social media sites (SMSs) such as YouTube, Tweets and Facebook or Myspace (Muntinga *et al.*, 2011) These systems allow customers to make and discuss product relevant information's online (electronic word-of-mouth or eWOM) in their recognized social media sites including of

buddies, family, class mates and other associates (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2003; Chu and Kim, 2011).

The consumers' purchase intentions studies constitute one of the central parts of consumers' purchase intentions research (Bansal & Voyer, 2000; Dumrongsiri, 2010; Zamil, 2011). Generally, most consumers' purchase intentions studies have been conducted in USA and Europe countries and few studies have been carried out in developing countries in general and in Middle East context in particular (e.g. Bansal & Voyer, 2000; Dumrongsiri, 2010; Zamil, 2011). Thus, this study will be exploring the consumers' purchase intentions in Iran. Based on previous studies, most researches pertaining to consumers' purchase intentions have been conducted in developed countries (e.g. Bansal & Voyer, 2000; Dumrongsiri, 2010; Zamil, 2011), and a few studies have concentrated their scope on developing countries in this industry (e.g. Ramezani and Rasouli, 2011; Boon-Young Lee, and Lee, 2004).

2. Literature Review

Consumers' purchase intentions and their behavior reviews the relevant literature on purchase intentions in marketing, and more generally on the intentions-behavior relationship in social psychology, since purchase intentions are a particular form of the more general construct of intentions (Morwitz, 2014). Starting with the importance of purchase intentions to marketing managers, the author then focuses on reviewing the literature that provides an understanding of how strong the relationship between purchase intentions and purchasing is, what factors influence the strength of the relationship between purchase intentions and purchasing, and how a marketing manager should best use purchase intentions to forecast future sales (Morwitz, 2014).

Consumers' feelings and evaluation and external factors develop consumer purchase intention and which is vital feature to envisage consumer behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). Purchase intention can determine the prospect of a consumer to buy the product or service (Hsinking *et al.*, 2011). Purchase intention indicate that consumers will chase their experience, liking and external environment to gather information about the products or services, evaluate alternatives and make final Decision about the product or service (Dodds *et al.*, 1991).

Advertising celebrity's popularity, attractiveness and expertise can appeal consumers' attraction in a short time and improve consumer's purchase intention. Advertising celebrity can increase exposure rate and also can change consumer predilection and also promote consumer's purchase intention. If a brand provide multi-purpose functions and meet consumers' needs and want than it will produce psychological associations and a unique relation with the brand. Consumer purchase intention is a result of consumers' perception about the product and it is also important element to predict consumer purchase interaction it is also stated that apparent value and apparent quality will impact the purchase intention (Monroe and Krishnan 1985).

The studies on purchase intention have been widely investigated by marketers considering the cost of gaining new customers (Maxham, 2001). It also has been studied in the marketing literature about the relationship between purchase intention and Word of mouth (Litvin, *et al.*, 2008). Consumers consider other consumers' reviews and obtain information about products in purchasing process. Word of mouth represents an informal and suggestive communication style. Word of mouth that is commercial, interactive, rapid and unbiased communication type has a strong impact on consumers' decisions. The studies demonstrated that Word of mouth has a critical role on consumers' preferences and behavioral intentions (Torlak *et al.*, 2014). These studies also indicated that Word of mouth is more effective than other communication methods due to perceived high reliability (Jalilvand, and Samiei, 2012).

Although WOM has received great attention by marketing and consumer researchers, it has never become a major stream of marketing research. The advent of the Internet has

dramatically expanded the scale and scope of consumers' word-of-mouth communications, and the market power of eWOM has increased at an unprecedented rate. As a result, WOM communication through the Internet is increasingly becoming a hot topic in consumer and marketing research. Especially, consumer online forums are emerging as alternative sources of information to mainstream mass media in consumer and marketing research (Dellarocas, 2006). Compared to other Internet media, such as company websites and online advertising, the information from consumer online forums has greater credibility and relevance, and is more likely to evoke empathy (Bickart and Schindler, 2001).

Chen and Xie (2008) proposed that online consumer reviews can serve as a new element of the marketing communications mix and work as free sales assistants to help consumers identify the products that best match their idiosyncratic usage conditions. Dellarocas (2006) found that strategic manipulations of Internet online forums such as anonymously posting online review praising its own products, or bad-mouthing those of its competitors, would influence firm profits and consumer surplus.

Consistent with the major research stream in traditional WOM research, much research attention on eWOM has been paid to the market impact of eWOM. Growing evidence has shown that both consumers' purchasing decisions and behaviors and firms' sales are influenced by reviews posted in consumer online forums. For example, Gruen *et al.* (2006) reported that customer know-how exchange influenced customers' perceptions of product value (received benefits in relation to cost or sacrifice) and likelihood to recommend the product, but customers' repurchase intentions.

Most of the above studies that empirically examined market outcomes (i.e., product revenues and diffusion) resulting from eWOM focused on either the volume (the total amount of online reviews) or the valence (whether the online reviews are positive or negative) of eWOM, or both. Previous studies (Dellarocas *et al.*, 2003) have provided relatively consistent evidence that the volume of eWOM has a significant effect on product sales or diffusion. Similarly, Dellarocas *et al.* (2003) found that the total number of user reviews posted helped to predict both first week box-office revenues as well as total box-office revenues.

Besides the above quantitative research, some studies on eWOM are conceptual or qualitative in nature as in other emerging areas. Boush and Kahle (2005) proposed that consumer online reviews provided a good opportunity to understand and respond to consumers, and furthermore suggested methods for evaluating negative information in online discussion based on qualitative content analysis and signal detection theory. In addition, Kozinets (2010) created a framework for netnography research, which is a qualitative research technique that employs an ethnographic research method to study online customers.

2.1. Consumers' Purchase Intentions

Today consumers read digital word-of-mouth (eWOM) to make purchasing choices. Research has shown that

community factors effect acceptance of eWOM (Okazaki, 2009). eWOM can be found in unique communities: recommendations, weblogs, forums, and community social networking websites. Following the appearance and growth of Web 2.0, social networks have become a popular place for internet surfers to search for and gather informations on other consumers' buying encounters, assessments, and views (Kozinets, 2010). They not only increase the speed at which details is passed on, but also reduce the details asymmetry.

This trend is the so-called electronic recommendations (eWOM) impact. Due to the eWOM interaction of the social network mainly provides user-oriented details that explains a product in terms of its utilization, and also actions the product's efficiency from a user's viewpoint (Bickart and Schindler, 2001), it is higher and more efficient with powerful impact than conventional promotion resources (Bickart, 2001). Most customers often study all available and in-depth details, especially in the case of recently-innovated products. Furthermore, around 74% of internet surfers in Taiwan indicate that the assessments of online communities or weblogs are likely to impact their buy objective. Therefore, firms should build the efficient Internet online promotion technique, and understand the eWOM effect for the consumers' buy objective.

2.2. Electronic Word of Mouth

Electronic WOM (eWOM) "electronic consumer-to-consumer interaction regarding a brand or product" (Petrescu & Korgaonkar, 2011), performs a vital role in the way customers communicate with one another on the internet (Brown *et al.*, 2007). Certain social media tools designed to advertise interaction seem to offer themselves to eWOM, such as the internet customer scores and reviews (Davis & Khazanchi, 2008; Liu, 2006), boards, blog articles and user reviews boards (Dellarocas *et al.*, 2006; Godes & Mayzlin, 2004), and even social media sites like Tweets, YouTube, MySpace, and Facebook or myspace (Dhar & Alter, 2005; Petrescu & Korgaonkar, 2011).

eWOM has certainly been a highly effective marketing strategy. Recently, some researchers believed that experienced a growing literary work concentrating on the potency of eWOM interaction (Davis and Khazanchi, 2008). However, the opportunity of published research on the effect of eWOM interaction is rather wide, and the research appears relatively fragmented and undetermined. The effect of eWOM has been getting remarkable attention in latest research as scholars analyze the different factors of eWOM interaction. Brown *et al.* (2007) considered three key online effect factors, such as; tie strength, homophily, and source reliability of eWOM from an online community viewpoint.

The coming of the Internet has elevated the consequences that eWOM has on customers. Khammash (2008) quantitatively looked into one form of eWOM, on the internet testimonials, and the reasons as to why customers rely on testimonials before they make up their minds on whether or not to order or buy an item on the internet (Almana, 2013). He elucidated that the propelling force for

seeking other's views on internet testimonials bear classified levels of impact on different aspects of customer actions. A conclusion was made that on the internet testimonials have been used as a angles for consumers' search for information and that they do have an impact on their buying actions. Online testimonials serve as choice aids, reviews from customers systems, and a recommendation system in an online buying system (Celsi and Olson, 1988).

2.2.1. Word of Mouth Marketing

WOM is believed to be "more exciting, easy to comprehend, efficient, appropriate, purposeful, reliable and engaging" (Breazeale, 2009; Eccleston, and Griseri, 2008) than other types of marketing. Unfortunately, adverse WOM has been proven to be even more highly effective and efficient than positive WOM (Hsieh *et al.*, 2010). Because of this, it is crucial that marketers comprehend who is producing WOM about their product as well as how and why (Gladwell, 2002).

To benefit from the advantages of WOM, promoters have taken practical actions to integrate WOM techniques into their promotion preparing initiatives (Barnes, 2010). Word-of-mouth marketing (WOMM), then, is "the deliberate impacting of consumer-to-consumer marketing communications by expert promotion techniques" (Kozinets *et al.*, 2010). According to Petrescu and Korgaonkar (2011), although the ideas detailed below differ a little bit in meaning, it is typical for many in the promotion market to make reference to word-of-mouth promotion as exchangeable with any of the following terms:

a) *Popular Promotion*: This can be described as "online and off-line promotion activities conducted to impact customers to successfully pass commercial information to other consumers" (Petrescu & Korgaonkar, 2011).

b) *Hype Promotion*: This essentially implies "peer-to-peer promotion communications as an impact on popular marketing" (Petrescu & Korgaonkar, 2011).

c) *Popular Advertising*: This phrase is described as "unpaid digital (e-mail, web, or social media) submission of business or customer produced ads from customer to customer, depending on ad material likeability, enjoyment, and questionable characteristics" (Petrescu & Korgaonkar, 2011). In the next section eWOM communication models is described.

2.2.2. eWOM Communication Models

An examination of related studies on Brunswik's Lens Model is delivered, followed by the Process Model of eWOM Communication (PMEC) which was advanced from the Brunswik's Lens Model is also reviewed. The Simplified Model of eWOM Communication is also examined.

(i) Brunswik's Lens Model

Brunswik's Lens Model was first developed to investigate organisms' perception of physical environment. The original Lens Model is presented in Figure 1. As shown in Figure 1, the Lens Model proposes that since targets of perceptions, called distal environmental variables or initial focal variables, are not directly observable, a perceiver needs to rely on some

imperfect indicators to develop his/her own perceptions. Initial focal variables are the targets of the perceptions. The imperfect indicators, termed as proximal cues, are the directly observed information that provides the basis for perception and judgment. The developed perceptions, called terminal focal variables, represent individuals' perception and judgment about the initial focal variables.

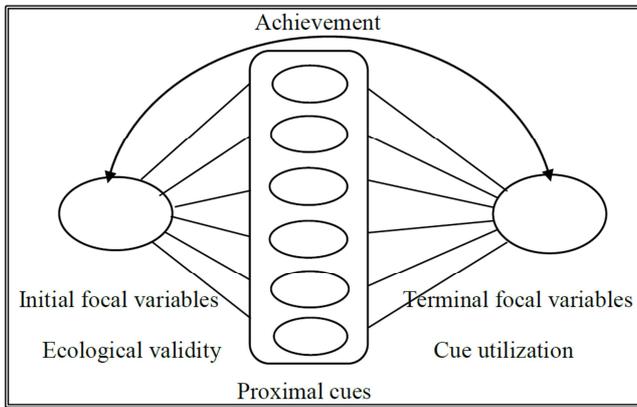


Figure 1. Brunswick's Lens Model (Source: Tang, 2010).

In early stages of research, the Lens Model was mainly used to study individuals' perceptions of their physical environments (Brunswik, 1956). One recent example of this approach was conducted by Gifford *et al.* (2000). The authors employed the Lens Model to study individuals' perceptions of the beauty of modern buildings. This study identified some physical characteristics of modern buildings and then connected them to the emotional impact of the buildings on observers, and the observers' global appraisal of the building. They found that both architects and laypersons strongly based their global assessments on elicited pleasure, but the two groups based their emotional assessment on an almost entirely different set of objective building features.

(ii) Process Model of eWOM Communication (PMEC)

The first purpose of this study is to examine the effectiveness of eWOM communication in terms of to what extent the attitudinal and affective information communicated by eWOM senders can be perceived accurately by eWOM receivers and can influence the eWOM receivers' attitudes, emotional states, and future purchasing intentions toward a product/service. The Process Model is established to examine the effectiveness of all communication links within consumer-to-consumer online communication process with an emphasis on the potential influence of eWOM communication on consumers' future patronage intentions. This model seeks to provide researchers with a systematic tool to investigate the entire range of eWOM communication activities, from encoding, transmission, decoding, to their outcomes.

The Process Model for eWOM Communication is presented in Figure 2. This model proposes that the eWOM communication process starts when an eWOM sender develops his/her attitudes and emotional states toward a product/service based on his/her consumption experience.

Then the eWOM sender determines how good or how bad the information about the product/service is that he/she plans to deliver to other consumers through eWOM. This process is the formation of communication intentions. After his/her communication intentions are established, the eWOM sender will incorporate his/her attitudes or emotional states into the text of the online review according to his/her communication intentions. This process is called encoding, and the cues or indicators the eWOM sender employed in the online review to convey his/her attitudinal and emotional information are called distal cues. The Process Model for eWOM Communication (PMEC) will be discussed in detail in the following paragraphs.

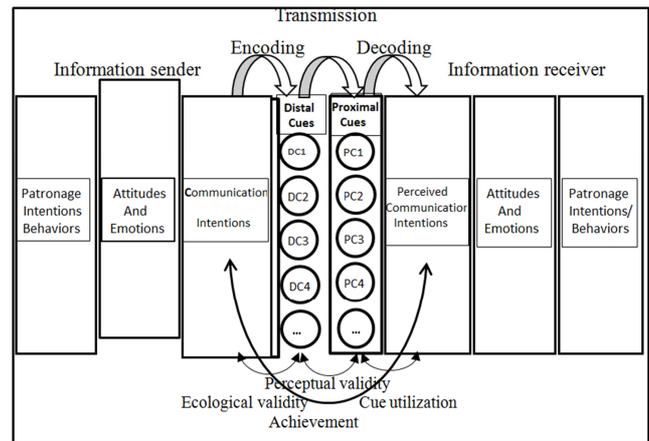


Figure 2. Process Model of eWOM Communication (Source: Tang, 2010).

(iii) Simplified Model of eWOM Communication

Although the Process Model of eWOM Communication (PMEC) proposed in this study is thought to be an effective tool for studying eWOM communication, it is too complex to be operationalized. Especially, measuring distal and proximal cues is time-consuming and subject to human errors. In addition, in empirical research, researchers care more about how much the eWOM communication process can influence eWOM readers' attitudes and emotional states, and also their patronage intentions, rather than the communication process itself. Thus, in terms of practical purposes, the Process Model of eWOM Communication (PMEC) is too complicated and a simplified version is needed. In the simplified model, communication cues should be automatically measured rather than human-coded. Furthermore, in order to provide managerial implications, the outcomes of eWOM communication but the communication process should be emphasized in the simplified model.

The simplified eWOM communication model is presented in Figure 3. This model starts from eWOM senders' attitudes and emotional states toward a product/service. Then eWOM senders encode their attitudes and emotions into cues that are contained in online reviews. When eWOM receivers read online reviews, they decode the linguistic cues, and form their own attitudes and emotional states toward the product or service. Finally, the attitudes and emotional states will drive eWOM receivers' future patronage intentions and

behaviors toward the product/service.

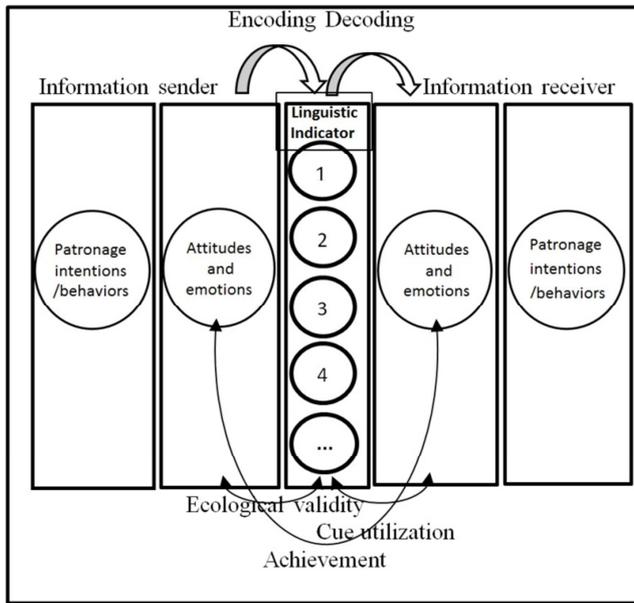


Figure 3. Simplified Model of eWOM Communication (Source: Tang, 2010).

Overall, the Brunswik's Lens Model depicts the complete communication process and provided a theoretical foundation for our framework. Based on the Lens Model, a Process Model of eWOM Communication (PMEC) and a simplified model of eWOM communication are developed in order to examine the effectiveness of eWOM communication process in eWOM research.

3. Summary

Most of the time, consumers purchase decisions are dependent on online ratings and user comments (Miriam *et al.*, 2010). Consistently, the word of mouth can play an essential part in affecting consumers' purchase activities (Nekmat, and Karla, 2012). Understanding the influence of eWOM on consumer purchase intentions will highlight the importance of communication and efficiency of the social media tools employed in modern marketing communication in Iran. This study was enhancing the understanding of consumer purchase intention in organizations within developing countries as evidenced by Iran.

As a result, literature review shows that there is the effect of eWOM on consumer purchase intentions. This study extends the literature by assessing the effect of eWOM on consumer purchase intentions. Consistent with the earlier researches (Park *et al.*, 2007; Pappu *et al.*, 2005; Bloemer and Odekerken-Schroder, 2007; Aaker, 1991), this study evaluates the effect of eWOM on consumer purchase intentions to address this gap in the literature. In fact, it is clear that eWOM causes of increasing consumer purchase intentions.

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