Brand-related, Consumer to Consumer, Communication via Social Media

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Abstract

Social media has a lot to offer to the marketers in the form of a 'web of brand-related-conversations'. With the popularity of social media, users indulge in 'eword-of-mouth' (eWOM) behaviour while interacting with other users of social media, thereby diffusing the brand-related discussions to a much larger audience. Consumers have compelling stories to share about their brand experiences, seek recommendations and exchange product information with other users of social media. This research brings to the fore factors that can, at outset, induce eWOM behaviour in the form of motivation and social relational properties. Drivers or motives of eWOM behaviour on social media are unique and at the same time nurturing relationships and networking is one of the fundamental functionality users of social media derive. Therefore, both of these factors ought to play a crucial role in comprehending the underlying eWOM behaviour. Researchers have empirically found eWOM on social media to be capable of influencing, both, consumption-related behaviour and brand equity. Even marketers, with the help of technology, are closely monitoring eWOM to capture consumer sentiments and insights. Unlike traditional WOM, which mostly originated from known and trustworthy sources, eWOM may originate from sources where no significant prior relationship exists. Therefore, the influence of eWOM towards consumption-related behaviours is likely to be moderated by credibility perceptions consumers derive from both, the source of the eWOM and the message itself. Hence to understand the phenomenon better, this is a conceptual article based on extensive review of relevant literature that attempts to understand the precursors that lead to eWOM behaviour on social media and the role of credibility. The study suggests a conceptual model along with testable propositions.

Keywords

Word of mouth, eWOM, social media, credibility, motivation, social relational properties

Introduction

Socials is a Latin word meaning being united, living with others. Although the meaning of the word is quite restricted to the physical world, with the increase in popularity of social media, a lot has changed. Each day countless users converse through online communities, discussion boards, blogs and social networking sites. They turn to social media as the first place for socialization, connect with friends they are no more are in touch with, broadcast their views and opinions, share experiences, advice, grievances, recommendations, etc. For some users, these communities may have supplemented, or even replaced, their existing primary and secondary reference groups (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002). While interacting on social media, consumers have compelling stories to share about their brand experiences, seek recommendations and exchange product information. Social media has become a web of brand-related conversations capable of influencing various aspects of consumer behaviour including awareness, information acquisition, opinions, attitudes, purchase intention and post-purchase communication (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Brands which were originally shaped by top-down mass communication are being tested every day on this

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new platform for mass consumer to consumer connection (Noort & Willemsen, 2012). Even though social media interactions are capable of influencing consumer's thoughts and actions through eWOM behaviour yet very little research has been done to understand the peer influence behaviour on social media and its impact. More specifically what drives brand-related consumer to consumer communication and how it may alter or influence consumption-related behaviour. The persuasiveness of these conversations is likely to be significantly moderated by its perceived credibility; therefore, credibility is also an aspect that needs to be understood (Cheung, Luo, Sia & Chen, 2009). Traditionally, WOM is considered to be more persuasive than advertising, as it emerges from sources within a given physical social network. However, same is not entirely true for eWOM (Jansen, Zhang, Sobel, & Chowdury, 2009). To what extent such conversations are capable of changing the consumer-based brand equity and influence consumption behaviour, is something that is yet to be fully understood.

Therefore, the focus of this article is to understand brand related consumer to consumer conversations, also called as word of mouth or eword of mouth, how they originate and what conditions are conducive for their origination. Along with this, the study aims to understand the issue of credibility and the persuasiveness of eWOM on social media. A conceptual model is suggested along with testable propositions.

Research Motivation

WOM is thought of as a persuasive source of marketplace information. It was originally stated to occur only in interactions that take place face to face (Arndt, 1967, 1968). However later, with the advancement in information technology, it was said that WOM may take place, via phone, email or any other means of communication that allows two individuals to converse (Silverman, 2001). The fundamental principles of human communication are changing with the popularity of Internet and social media. Social media is the new platform for eWOM (consumer to consumer brand related communication) and offers many unique benefits and features to its users previously missing. These features have spun a brand-related-conversational-web that influences consumers (Jansen *et al.,* 2009). Facebook, Twitter, MySpace and other such social networking sites are the new age platforms producing brand conversations (Reynolds-McIlnay & Taran, 2010). Users, while engaging on social

media, have become influencers to others about their brand choices, thereby creating an alternate channel of brand endorsement. Furthermore eWOM on social media varies significantly from the tradition face-to-face WOM. Traditionally, WOM was considered to be more trust worthy and credible as it was generated from known and familiar sources (Herr, Kardes & Kim, 1991). Technology has enabled interpersonal communication to be visible on a more transparent public domain, simultaneously accessible to a very large set of audience. Therefore, people rely on the opinions of those outside their known circle (Jansen *et al.,* 2009). Social media has provided multiple ways for consumers to interact with, 'advocate for, discuss and rail against brands' (Fogel, 2010). An example below will clarify:

Consumption of social media has been growing remarkably. Globally, one out of every seven people has Facebook account and close to four in five active Internet users visit blogs and social networking sites.[1] Brand-related conversations on social media or eWOM have across countries begun to influence purchase decisions of different consumer categories: home electronics; travel/leisure; clothing; food and beverage, etc.[2] Even though eWOM is capable of influencing consumer's thoughts and attitude, very little research has been conducted to understand the impact. Moreover, no research has been done to study the persuasiveness of these eWOM and its perceived credibility. This research hopes to fill a conceptual gap, contribute to the understanding of the phenomenon and provide the necessary theory for further empirical studies.

Literature Review

Social Media

Define Social Media

Very early form of social media started with 'Open Diaries'. Open diaries was an online diary system that connected users into one virtual community (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 60). While Chung and Austria (2010, p. 581) defined social media as 'the media that is published, created and shared by individuals on the Internet, such as blogs, images, video and more as well as online tools and platforms that allow Internet users to collaborate on content, share insights and experiences and connect for business or pleasure'. Manglod and Faulds (2009) explain it more from the perspective of a platform that enables the social exchange of online information related to products,

Table 1. Tabular Representation of the Review of Literature

Overarching Concept/Constructs	Linkage of Concept/Construct with the Proposed Conceptual Model	Key Aspects of Concept/Constructs
1. Social Media	Context of examination	1.1. Definitions of Social Media 1.2. Difference between Social Media, Web 2.0 and User-generated Content 1.3. Forms of Social Media 1.4. Social Networking Site and Micro blog
2. Peer Influence Process and Interpersonal Communication	Overarching phenomenon to be examined	2.1. Word of Mouth 2.2. eWord of Mouth
3. Computer-mediated Communication	Context of examination	3.1. eWOM in CME of Social Media
4. Credibility of eWOM	Moderating role over the outcomes to eWOM	4.1. Definition Source and Message Credibility 4.2. Moderating Role of Credibility 4.3. Credibility on Social Media
5. Motivation to indulge in eWOM	Antecedent to eWOM behaviour	Altruism; Self-enhancement; Social Benefit; Vengeance and Anxiety Reduction.
6. Social Relational Properties	Antecedent to eWOM behaviour	6.1. Homophily 6.2. Tie-Strength 6.3. Electronic Propinquity
7. Influence of eWOM	Outcome to eWOM behaviour	Brand attitude and Purchase Intention

Source: Developed by the authors.

brand, services, personalities and general issues, primarily produced and published by the consumers themselves to educate others. Edosomwan, Prakasan, Kouame, Watson and Seymour (2011) explain social media as an electronic communication medium, which enables users to share ideas, messages and information through forms of inter-connect communities. It is a collection of Internet-based applications built on an interactive platform, driven by the web-based and mobile technological foundation, also called as Web 2.0, that enables exchange and co creation of user created information in various forms amongst users (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy & Silvestre, 2011). Common between all the definitions is creation and interactive exchange of user generated content via Web 2.0 based technological foundation.

Social Media versus User-generated Content versus Web 2.0

User-generated content (UGC) is the different ways people share and exchange media content, created by themselves and available publicly, on social media. User is someone who is an active Internet contributor and UGC is required to fulfil three criterions[3] to be called so: it must be published such that it is accessible publicly or to a given network; it must be, at least in parts, a creative effort; it must not be an output of a user's professional routines (Christodoulides, Jevons & Bonhomme, 2012; Dijck, 2009; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). UGC is also called as user-created content and user-led content creation. A narrow definition of UGC[4] explains it as 'any material created and uploaded to the Internet by non-media professionals' while broader perspective calls users as 'ordinary people'. Social media thrives on UGC. Democracy of communication has given users the freedom to express, in different forms, publicly, allowing UGC to be a convenient means of gathering brand-related conversation and consumer insights. Based on a study, close to about 70 per cent of brand-related searches on social media is linked with user-generated content rather than content created by marketers (Christodoulides *et al.,* 2012).

Web 2.0 characterizes the 'ideological and technological foundation' of social media. Content publishing was prevalent from the time of Web 1.0; it was further supplanted by blogs, wikis, and collaborative projects into Web 2.0. Technological foundation represented by Web 2.0 includes Adobe Flash, RSS and AJAX (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). The ideological foundation of Web 2.0 says users play a fundamental role in the 'information architecture'. Philosophy of Web 2.0 technologies

says: scalability is cost-effective; data gets richer with more users collaborating; trusting users for co-creation and collective intelligence; openness; development of micro-content; wisdom of crowds (Alexander, 2006; O'Reilly, 2007).
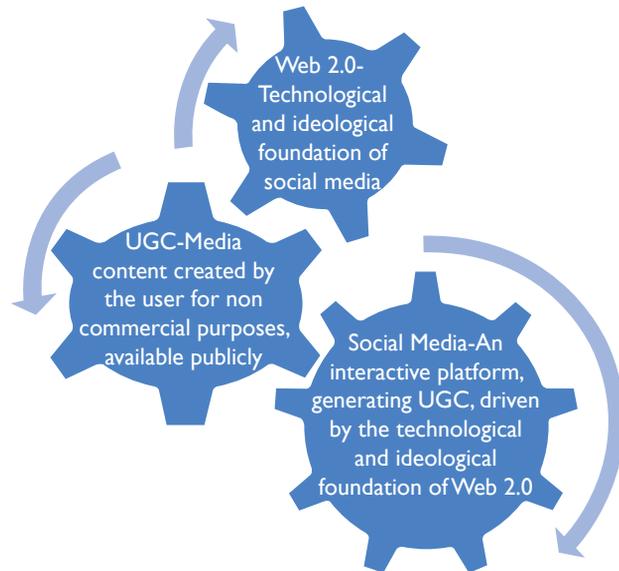
Figure 1. Diagrammatic Representation of Interconnection of Social Media, UGC and Web 2.0

Source: Developed by the authors.

Forms of Social Media

Six categories of social media, classified on the basis of existing media theories: social presence; media richness; self-presentation and self-disclosure, include blogs, include: collaborative projects (Wikipedia); social networking sites; connect sharing communities (Youtube); virtual social worlds (Second life); Virtual game worlds (World of war craft) (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Kietzmann *et al.* (2011) in a honeycomb model depicted seven functional building blocks of social media: identity; conversations; sharing; presence; relationships; reputation and groups. Each of these building blocks iterate a functional utility fundamental to a given type of social media. For instance, Facebook, a social networking site, has relationship as the core functional utility followed by conversations, reputation building, etc. From the marketers' perspective there are different social marketing tools. Each tool offers a specific utility to the marketer. These tools are as follows: chat rooms, blogs, Youtube, Facebook, Linkedin, Twitter, Google wave, Four square. For instance, chat rooms allow marketer to improve customer service, blogs drive word-of-mouth recommendations, etc. (Castronovo & Huang, 2012).

Social Networking Site and Micro Blog

Social networking site (SNS) is define 'as web-based services that allow individuals to (a) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (b) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (c) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.' Although not a necessary feature, many of the relationships forged on SNSs have a pre-existing offline connection. A few blogs have also incorporated SNS features (Boyd & Ellison, 2008, p. 211). SNS allows users to connect for social or professional interaction and information on the personalized user profile differs accordingly (Trusov, Bucklin & Pauwels, 2009). Micro-blogs on the other hand enable users to share small versions of content such as very short blogs, photos, videos, etc. They enable the users to create an 'ambient awareness', several tweets or messages breed a feeling of closeness or intimacy, much similar to physical proximity. Micro blogs are classified in between blogs and SNS in the Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) social media classification (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011b). Micro blogging is a new form of conversing which allows users to describe things of interest and exhibit attitudes with others in short posts called micro blogs, micro updates or micro sharing (Jansen *et al.,* 2009).

The focus for this research is on SNS and micro blogs and for the purpose of data collection specifically Facebook and Twitter. Facebook is the largest SNS and Titter is the fastest growing social media today.[5]

Peer Influence Process and Interpersonal Communication

Under the 'consumer socialisation' framework, learning through peer influence is investigated with the level of interpersonal communication taking place between the socialization agent and learner and the nature of that communication. Socialization agents (for the sake of specificity for this research—peers) 'transmitted norms, attitudes, motivations and behaviours to the learners' (Moschis, 1976, p. 600). Learning processes in general refers to the method by which learners pick up values and behaviours from socialization agent during their interactions with them (Churchill & Moschis, 1979; Moschis, 1976). Therefore, consumer-oriented learning, through peer influence, involves acquiring values and behaviours from peers specific to the role of consumer. Peer influence behaviour may be investigated by understanding the level and nature

of interpersonal communication (Lueg & Finney, 2007; Moschis & Moore, 1978; Wang, Yu & Wei, 2012). In other words, presence of peer influence is judged with the amount and kind of interpersonal communication taking place between agent and learner.

Interpersonal peer communication is theorized as 'encouragement or approval of certain behaviours and intentions through either spoken or unspoken messages that peers send to each other' (Lueg & Finney, 2007, p. 27). Interpersonal communication is mechanized in both spoken as well as non-spoken form. Spoken form or oral form refers to 'reinforcement' and non-spoken form refers to 'modelling or observational behaviour' (Lueg & Finney, 2007; Mangleburg *et al.,* 2004). Modelling is the process in which the behaviour of the peer is observed and imitated. Reinforcement involves the mechanism of oral reward and punishment. While reward is expressed through positive conversations, opinion sharing and referral behaviour, punishment will be expressed through negative conversations, opinion or discouragement through scolding (Lueg & Finney, 2007; Moschis & Churchill, 1978). Spoken opinion-based interpersonal communication, reinforcement, is also known as Word of Mouth (WOM) (Chen, Wang & Xie, 2011).
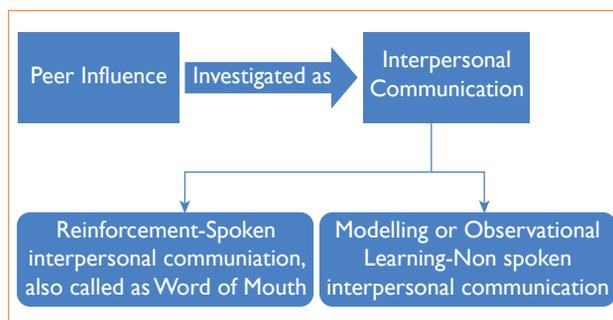

Figure 2. Diagrammatic Representation of the Process of Peer Influence

Source: Developed by the authors.

Word of Mouth

WOM is a multi-dimensional construct. Many definitions are available in the literature and most of them focus on at least one of these dimensions: Informal/formal communication; non-commercial; post-purchase behaviour; exchange/flow of conversation (Goyette, Ricard, Bergeron & Marticotte, 2010). WOM has been defined as an oral brand-related interpersonal communication between receiver and communicator where the receiver perceives

communication not to be driven by commercial interests (Arndt, 1967; Cheong & Morrison, 2008; De Matos & Rossi, 2008). Westbrook (1987, p. 261) defined WOM as 'informal communications directed at other consumers about the ownership, usage, or characteristics of particular goods and services and/or their sellers'. Therefore, WOM may be sharing of experiences consumers have had regarding the product or the firm (Richins & Root-Shaffer, 1988; Westbrook, 1987). It is widely an informal brand-related communication between people. Thus, WOM may not include communication with the firm in forms of complaints or otherwise (Anderson, 1998; Mazzarol, Sweeney & Soutar, 2007). However Haywood (1989, p. 56) termed it as 'a process that is often generated by a company's formal communications and the behaviour of its representatives'. WOM may be an outcome of marketing effort such as advertising, media relations and public relations. Therefore, WOM sources may be personal or impersonal (Goyette *et al.,* 2010). Although WOM is usually a post purchase behaviour but mass media brand-related exposure may also lead to WOM. An interaction effect of mass media and WOM is called the Two-Step Flow Theory. According to the Two-step Flow Theory, brand-related interpersonal communication between peers is influenced by advertising (or any other form of media communication) where the opinion leaders share brand knowledge derived from mass media (Keller & Fay, 2009). However, it is critical to differentiate between WOM from word-of-mouth marketing (WOMM) which implicates 'intentional influencing of consumer-to-consumer communications by professional marketing techniques' (Kozinets *et al.,* 2010, p. 71). From a B2B context, it is explained as the process of recommending the services of a firm as well as the firm itself to others (File, Judd & Prince, 1992).

There are three core WOM behaviours: product information collection, product opinion sharing/discussion and product recommendation (Eccleston & Griseri, 2008), although literature is divided over including 'explicit recommendation' as a mandatory behaviour of WOM (Harrison-Walker, 2001; Mazzarol *et al.,* 2007). Four aspects of WOM behaviour have been studied in literature: intensity/frequency; detail/content; praise/favourableness of WOM/positive valance; negative valance (Goyette *et al.,* 2010; Harrison-Walker, 2001).

WOM is a significant influencer in conditioning consumer's attitude and behaviour (Brown & Reingen, 1987). Several empirical studies in the past have found WOM to be more effective than mass media advertising. It was found to be 'seven times more effective than newspaper

and magazine advertising, four times more effective than personal selling, and twice as effective as radio advertising' in making consumers switch brands (Harrison-Walker, 2001, p. 60; Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). Day (1971) in an experiment concluded that WOM is nine times more influential than advertising in changing neutral to negative brand attitude to positive brand attitude. Such may be the case as the source of WOM is known and trustworthy (Harrison-Walker, 2001; Murray, 1991).

eWord of Mouth

Along with the arrival of information technologies and Internet, WOM has attained newer version. Viral marketing, email marketing, Internet word-of-mouth, word-of-mouth marketing and eWOM (Goyette *et al.,* 2010). Internet has not only offered consumers more opportunities for collecting non-commercialized brand-related information from other consumers, but also extended opportunities to consumers to share their own experiences with other consumer through eWOM. eWOM may be defined as 'any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet'(Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh & Gremler, 2004, p. 39). Product review websites (for example, mouthshut.com), online retailers' websites (for example, flipkart.com), brands' websites (for example, forums.us.dell.com), personal blogs, message boards and social networking sites (for example, Facebook, MySpace, Twitter) are all the forums for eWOM (Bickart & Schindler, 2001; Hennig-Thurau *et al.,* 2004; Lee & Youn, 2009). Therefore eWOM may take place between people who may be somewhat or entirely unknown to each other, allowing them to be more candid in sharing their opinion. It also raises the question of credibility of such information (Goldsmith & Horowitz, 2006; Lee & Youn, 2009; Park & Lee, 2008, 2009; Steffes & Burgee, 2009). However, studies have also shown that eWOM, just like WOM, may have higher credibility and believability in comparison to marketer created communication (Bickart & Schindler 2001; Gruen, Osmonbekov & Czaplewski, 2006). eWOM for this research is from the perspective of social media (SNS and Microblogs).

Computer-mediated Environment of eWOM

eWOM takes place in a computer-mediated environment (CME) as the brand-related information is exchanged through computer networks or through Internet-enabled mobile phone network these days. Computer mediated communication (CMC) literature has evolved from two general direction of thoughts. The first direction claims that CMC is impersonal, lacks socioemotional and social context cues in comparison to face to face (FtF) communication. Social context cues reduce due to the lack of physical environment of interaction and 'nonverbal hierarchical status cues' (Kiesler, Siegel & McGuire, 1984; Tang, 2010; Walther, 1996). 'In traditional forms of communication, head nods, smiles, eye contact, distance, tone of voice, and other nonverbal behaviour give speakers and listeners information they can use to regulate, modify, and control exchanges' (Kiesler *et al.,* 1984, p. 1125; Tang, 2010). This thought direction is termed as 'cue filtered-out' perspective by Tang (2010). The second direction of thought that emerged later, based on the social-information-processing-model, claimed the contrary (Tang, 2010; Walther, 1992). Many empirical and anecdotal accounts suggested increased levels of intimacy and liking through CMC. Social information process model suggested that there will be eventual parity between the effects of CMC and FtF communication, if time is not of constraint (Walther, 1996). Simply put, there is absence of nonverbal cues, however users adjust to the CME and use linguistic and other cues to overcome. Therefore one could say, between FtF WOM and CMC WOM, context of communication is changing, however there exists a lot of conceptual closeness (Hennig-Thurau *et al.,* 2004) and eWOM on social media is one such new computer-mediated context of WOM.

eWOM in CME of Social Media

Despite the conceptual closeness of FtF WOM with eWOM, unique characteristics of the social media context make it further distinctive and there are many unanswered questions. Consumers are always connected to social media services and may collaborate with their network constantly, which allows them fast communication as well as immediacy of response (Jansen *et al.,* 2009; Sun, Youn, Wu & Kuntaraporn, 2006). Communication is usually in the textual form which enables long-term availability of eWOM information to seekers as well as marketer. Marketer is now able to gather consumer insights and sentiments which was not possible in FtF WOM or before social media (Hennig-Thurau *et al.,* 2004). A single piece of information on social media takes the secondary effect and spreads to a very large audience through the friends of friends' network. This phenomenon can work against the marketer in the context of negative eWOM (Fogel, 2010).

Another unique feature that differentiates social media is that the members of an SNS already have an offline relationship. Even though the relationship may not be of a close one, they have access to each other's profiles from which credibility perceptions may be drawn. Social media allows users to publish 'check-ins' of restaurants, entertainment places, etc., and 'likes' of brand-communities, all leading to possibility of observational behaviour for others on the network (Coulter & Roggeveen, 2012; Lipsman, Mudd, Rich & Bruich, 2012).

Credibility of eWOM

Definition Source and Message Credibility

An important unsettled question with regard to social media context is credibility. Only recently researchers have begun to investigate credibility of eWOM, online recommendations and reviews (O'Reilly & Marx, 2011). Credibility from the perspective of online recommendation and reviews has been defined as 'the extent to which one perceives a recommendation/review as believable, true, or factual' (Cheung *et al.,* 2009, p. 11). Traditionally, credibility has been explained with the help of factors such as believability, trust, reliability, accuracy, fairness, objectivity, etc. Credibility is shaped at three levels, characteristic of the source, characteristics of the message or content and lastly on the perception of media (Hilligoss & Reih, 2008). Hovland and Weiss (1951) showed that the perceived sources—credibility, attractiveness, physical appearance, familiarity and power, all cumulatively contribute to the overall credibility perception. Credible sources are considered to be 'trustworthy and expert' on the basis of their 'competence, character, composure, dynamism and sociability' (Eastin, 2001; Wathen & Burkell, 2002, p. 135; West, 1994). Message credibility, on the other hand, evaluates the believability that the reader perceives of the written or spoken words of the message. Credibility of message is measured by its accuracy, believability and factualness (Eastin, 2001). eWOM which are 'attribute-value reviews' are considered to be more informative, therefore more effective, than simple recommendations. In other words, messages that have greater product-related information are considered more credible (Lee & Youn, 2009; Park & Lee, 2008). Hence looking at credibility as a composite of both source and message, it can be explained as 'credibility of a source or message is a receiver-based judgment which involves both objective judgments of information quality or accuracy as well as subjective perceptions of the source's trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness' (Metzger, 2007, p. 2078).

Moderating Role of Credibility

Academicians have extensively studied the role of the personal characteristics of the source while making a persuasive claim. These personal characteristics—expertise; attractiveness; trustworthiness—determine level of influence. Credibility perception plays a moderating role over the influence of the message for opinion formation. Significant difference in opinion and product judgement is observed with variation in the perceptions of credibility by the respondents (Bone, 1995; Cheung *et al.,* 2009; Dholakia & Stemthal, 1977; Hovland and Weiss, 1951; Witt & Bruce, 1972). This is further explained by the Source Credibility Model. Source credibility model posits that the persuasiveness of message will depend on the perceived trustworthiness and expertise of the source (Dholakia & Stemthal, 1977). According to McCracken (1986), 'Expertness is defined as the perceived ability of the source to make valid assertions' and 'Trustworthiness is defined as the perceived willingness of the source to make valid assertions'. Highly credible sources are more persuasive than ones of low credibility. However, in studies where people's behaviour is available as a cue regarding their attitudes, low credibility sources are more persuasive than sources of high credibility (Dholakia & Sternthal, 1977).

Credibility on Social Media

Social media credibility is defined as 'the aspect of information credibility that can be assessed using only the information available in a social media platform' (Castillo, Mendoza & Poblete, 2011). According to the MAIN Model (Sundar, 2008), users of social media have access to system-generated content or metrics that may be used as cues for credibility judgement. These heuristics or cues are available for both source as well as message. Source credibility cues may be number of friends, followers and followings in the network, and message credibility cues may be number of likes, favourites and responses to the comment. It is only on the social media platform that such system-generated cues can be accessed for credibility assessment (Castillo *et al.,* 2011; Sundar, 2008; Westerman, Spence & Heide, 2012). Users are sharing brand-related information on social media. Social media has provided multiple ways for consumers to 'interact with, advocate for, discuss and rail against brands' or in other words indulge in eWOM (Fogel, 2010). User-generated product information through eWOM is an influential source of

information critical for determining consumers' attitudes and purchases (Bickart & Schindler, 2001). eWOM on social media may take place between people who may be less known to each other and the computer-mediated context allows them to lose inhibition, provide visual anonymity and be more candid in sharing their opinion (Goldsmith & Horowitz, 2006; Lee & Youn, 2009; Park & Lee, 2008, 2009; Steffes & Burgee, 2009). Therefore, the level of persuasiveness of eWOM on social media is a function of the perception of credibility. In general, consumers are doubtful of credibility of eWOM due to lack of familiarity of source and scepticism about informational accuracy of message (Cheung *et al.,* 2009; Park & Lee, 2009). Behavioural influences are likely to be high, only when the perceived credibility of the eWOM is high than when it is low (Bone, 1995; Brown, Broderick & Lee, 2007; Dholakia & Sternthal, 1977). Despite all, a few studies have also shown that eWOM, just like WOM, may have higher credibility and believability in comparison to marketer-created communication (Bickart & Schindler 2001; Gruen *et al.,* 2006). Therefore, further investigation for the moderating role of credibility on the impact of eWOM on social media is imperative to be studied.

Motivation to Indulge in eWOM

In the consumer behaviour literature, motivation refers to 'the drives, urges, wishes or desires which initiate the sequence of events known as behaviour' (Bayton, 1958; MacInnis & Jaworski, 1989, p. 4). The Motivation Opportunity Ability (MOA) Theory suggests that the amount of information processing individuals do is based on the individual's motivation, ability and opportunity to process that information (Gruen *et al.,* 2006; MacInnis & Jaworski, 1989). Therefore, motivation explains 'the readiness, willingness, interest, and desire to engage in information processing' (Gruen *et al.,* 2006, p. 452; MacInnis, Moorman & Bernard, 1991). In the context of eWOM, it is the motivation to exchange brand-related information between consumers (Hennig-Thurau *et al.,* 2004; Goldsmith & Horowitz, 2006; Gruen *et al.,* 2006). Several motives have been identified for WOM, which drive WOM behaviour. It has been suggested that the primary driver for WOM behaviour is based on the Expectation Confirmation Theory; WOM is indulged in when consumer's expectation are disconfirmed (Hennig-Thurau *et al.,* 2004). Ditcher (1966) has articulated four motivational categories of positive WOM: product-involvement, self-involvement,

other-involvement and message-involvement, while other authors Engel, Blackwell and Miniard (1993) have identified involvement, self-enhancement, concern for others, message intrigue and dissonance reduction (Hennig-Thurau *et al.,* 2004). Specifically in the context of eWOM, Henning-Thurau *et al.,* (2004), based on the utility typology suggested by Sundaram, Mitra and Webster (1998) and using critical-incident technique, have developed the most comprehensive list of motivations to eWOM-Altruism; self-enhancement; social benefit; vengeance and anxiety reduction. They suggest that many consumers are driven by 'Equity Theory'. Equity theory explains that individuals are usually equitable and fair in their exchanges, implying 'if a consumer feels he or she has received a higher output/input ratio than the company, then helping the firm by recommending its offerings over the Internet is one way the output/input ratio can be equalized' (Goldsmith & Horowitz, 2006; Hennig-Thurau *et al.,* 2004, p. 42). Consumers are driven by all kinds of utilities for exchanging product-related information on social media, termed as 'total social interaction utility' (Balasubramanian & Mahajan, 2001). Therefore, the starting point of understanding eWOM behaviour on social media is to understand the motivations significant to this behaviour.

Social Relational Properties

Nurturing relationships and networking is one of fundamental functionality users of social media enjoy (Kietzmann *et al.,* 2011); therefore, properties that define the nature of social relationships, the communal characteristics and the strength of these relational properties ought to play a crucial role in comprehending the underlying eWOM behaviour (Chu & Kim, 2011). Relations formed, on both SNS and microblogs, may be based on a pre-existing offline connection, but the intensity of those relations are difficult to determine in the social media context. These relations may be more fluid and flexible and a result of diverse social affiliations (Boyd & Ellison, 2008; Brown *et al.,* 2007). Theory of Social Presence (Short, Williams & Christie, 1976) categorizes different mediums of communication on a continuum. The continuum measures the degree of social presence by measuring the 'degree of awareness' of the other party in a given communication situation. FtF interactions are said to have maximum social presence while text-based interaction, CMC, the least (Short *et al.,* 1976). However, both SNS and micro blogs are rated high on Social Presence, as

several posts or tweets generate a strong feeling of awareness, closeness and intimacy (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011b), equivalent to FtF, signifying the nature of the relations to be rather unique. Hence greater understanding of the properties of social relations is particularly important to understand as it is with the influence of these properties that WOM behaviour is expected to arise (Brown & Reingen, 1987). Three such properties are as follows: Homophily; Tie-Strength; Electronic Propinquity.

Homophily

Homophily refers to the similarity of the source and the receiver, McCroskey, Richmond and Daly (1975) conceptualized a multi-dimensional measure of perceived homophily which was based on the basic interpersonal communication principle: more the source and receiver are similar, more the interpersonal communication and its influence. A self-reported perception of similarity, in terms of background and attitude, was more reflective than real similarity (Gorham, Cohen & Morris, 1999; McCroskey, McCroskey & Richmond, 2006). Homophily explains that greater communication is likely between similar consumers. This similarity may be of age, gender, attitude, etc., (Brown & Reingen, 1987) and this property of social relationship shared between peers will explain many aspects of the effectiveness and diffusion of communication (Choudhury, Sundaram, John, Seligmann & Kelliher, 2010; De Bruyn & Lilien, 2008; Kandel, 1978; Rogers & Bhowmik, 1970). This theory proposes that people compare their attitudes and behaviours with others. This comparison increases when others are similar to one. Individuals inherently believe somehow that similar people have similar needs and therefore indulge in greater eWOM behaviour (Festinger, 1954; Prendergast, Ko & Yuen, 2011).

Tie-strength

Tie strength explains the 'level of intensity of the social relationship between consumers'. Relationship ties amongst consumers generally vary in a wide range. They range from strong primary ties such as the ones shared with family and very close friends to weak secondary ties such as the ones shared with acquaintances (Steffes & Burgee, 2009, p. 45). Strength of a tie (relationship) is a result of the combination of: the amount of time spent; the emotional intensity shared; the intimacy shared; and the reciprocity of services to each other. Tie strength ranges in a continuum from weak ties to strong ties (Granovetter, 1973). Tie strength offers significant explanatory power to

the influence of WOM communications. Weak ties are crucial for the dispersion of information; they perform a 'bridging' function (Brown & Reingen, 1987; Brown *et al.,* 2007; De Bruyn and Lilien 2008; O'Reilly & Marx, 2011; Wang *et al.,* 2012).

Electronic Propinquity

Theory of Electronic Propinquity, proposed by Korzenny (1978) and updated by Walther and Bazarova (2008), is a general theory of mediated communication which refers to the feeling of 'the psychological distance between communicators or the degree of perceived closeness'. The theory originally was focused on 'physical propinquity'. Physical propinquity is the physical nearness to another person, is associated with the opportunity to communicate better and being involved. Electronic propinquity is an extension of the same. It refers to 'electronic proximity, electronic nearness, electronic presence' (Blau, Mor & Neutal, 2009; Walther & Bazarova, 2008, p. 623). Both SNS and micro blogs are high on social presence, several posts or tweets generate a strong feeling of awareness, closeness and intimacy (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011b) equivalent to physical proximity. Propinquity has often been attributed to peer imitation, brand congruence and herding behaviour (De Bruyn & Lilien, 2008).

Summary: Tie strength explains the strength of a relationship, homophily explains the similarity, and electronic propinquity explains the feeling nearness and presence. All the three properties are expected to be correlated; however, these are conceptually different and explain a distinct aspect of the social interactions on social media (De Bruyn & Lilien, 2008). All three are expected to play a significant role in explaining the occurrence of eWOM behaviour.

Influence of eWOM

WOM has a strong influence on product and service perceptions, leading to changes in judgements, value ratings and the likelihood of purchase (Sweeney, Soutar & Mazzarol, 2008). Interpersonal influence through consumer to consumer communication is of two kinds—Informational and Normative (Burnkrant and Cousineau, 1975; Deutsch and Gerard, 1955). Normative influences push people to modify their attitudes and behaviours in order to confirm with the others. Informational influences instead drive people to learn about some product/service by seeking

information from peers, leading to conformity of behaviour among social media users (Bearden, Netemeyer & Teel, 1989; De Bruyn & Lilien, 2008). Therefore, eWOM behaviour on social media will lead to brand attitude formation and intention of purchase (Wang *et al.,* 2012).

Research Gap

Influence context and social setting of interaction is an important determinant of the effects of influence (Dholakia & Sternthal, 1977; Moschis & Churchill, 1978). The review of literature clearly states that there is a need to understand eWOM behaviour from the context of social media. This is a new area and very limited work has been done. According to our knowledge, academic work has not been done to investigate motivational antecedents significant to the eWOM behaviour on social media as well as understand the moderating role of credibility over outcome variables of eWOM of social media. Though very few in number, some researches have studied some independent aspects of the social relational properties from the social media perspective (published in marketing journals as well as information system journals) but the relationship is far from settled. We attempt to address this gap through our research. We propose to develop a conceptual model and propositions to study the relationships of the conceptual model.

Research Questions

RQ1—What are the motivational antecedents significant to eWOM behaviour on social media?

RQ2—Given the computer-mediated context of social network, which of the social relational properties are favourable and significant for eWOM behaviour on social media?

RQ3—In the absence of face to face interaction and social cues, how is the perception of credibility derived? How does social media source credibility moderate the impact of eWOM behaviour to product attitude formation?

RQ4—To what extent are the eWOM on social media capable of influencing brand attitude and purchase intention?

Proposed Research Framework

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual model firstly iterates determinants that are likely to be significant to eWOM behaviour on social media. Secondly, it depicts the moderating effect of credibility on formation of brand attitude and purchase intention from eWOM behaviour on social media.

Propositions

Determinants of eWOM Behaviour on Social Media

Motivation to Indulge in eWOM on Social Media

As explained earlier, MOA Theory suggests that the amount of information processing individuals do is based on the individuals' motivation, ability and opportunity to
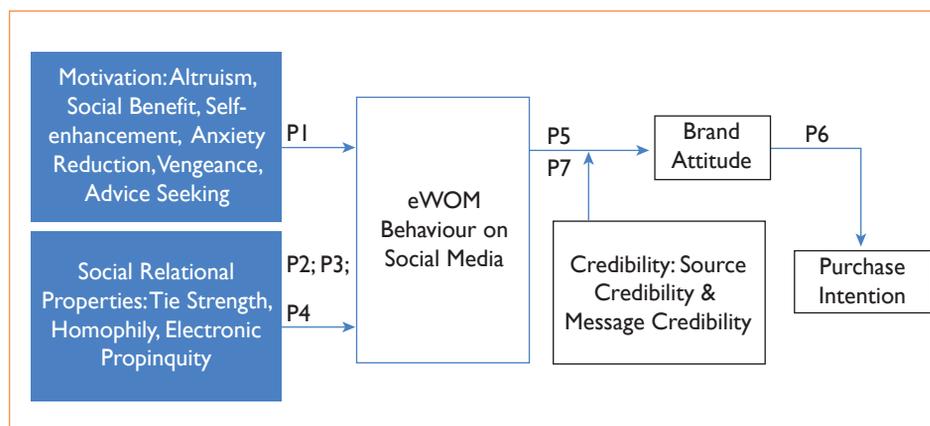

Figure 3. Conceptual Model

Source: Developed by the authors.

process that information (MacInnis & Jaworski, 1989; Gruen *et al.,* 2006). As a construct, motivation, is age old and spreads over many disciples of social sciences. In the consumer behaviour literature, several motivations have been identified to induce consumers to indulge in WOM. From the perspective of our research it is explained as the motivation to exchange brand-related information, eWOM, between consumers (Goldsmith & Horowitz, 2006; Gruen *et al.,* 2006; Hennig-Thurau *et al.,* 2004) on social media. Individuals who indulge in exchange of brand-related communication, whether it is in the form of product feature discussion or sharing of brand related experience, are driven by a set of motives namely: Altruism; Social Benefit; Self-enhancement; Vengeance and Advice Seeking (Hennig-Thurau *et al.,* 2004). Altruism is a motive that has been defined as 'the act of doing something for others without anticipating any reward in return'. Social benefit motive explains the affiliations users hope to forge through the virtual community, by indulging in WOM behaviour. The motive of Self-enhancement is 'enhancing images among other consumers by projecting themselves as intelligent shoppers'. This motive drives users to indulge in WOM behaviour so as to be able to project a desired image of them. The motive of Vengeance explains 'to retaliate against the company associated with a negative consumption experience' and finally the motive of Advice seeking refers to a deliberate act on part of the user to seek product-related information from others within the social network (Sundaram, Mitra & Webster, 1998; Hennig-Thurau *et al.,* 2004, p. 41). This existing construct definition by Hennig-Thurau *et al.* (2004), to explain the drivers of eWOM behaviour, will be tested for its applicability on eWOM taking place over the social media platform and help seek answer for our first research question.

Therefore, below mentioned propositions intend to study the above relationship and answer our first research question:

> *P1a: Motive of Altruism will drive users to eWOM behaviour on social media.*
> *P1b: Motive of Social Benefit users derive will drive users to eWOM behaviour on social media.*
> *P1c: Motive of Self-enhancement will drive users to eWOM behaviour on social media.*
> *P1d: Motive of Vengeance with organization will drive users to eWOM behaviour on social media.*
> *P1e: Motive of Advice seeking will drive users to eWOM behaviour on social media.*

Social Relational Properties

Social relational property will be tested through the analysis of the significance of Tie strength; Homophily and Electronic Propinquity over eWOM behaviour on social media. Based on the review of literature, most appropriate construct definitions are as follows: Tie strength—'level of intensity of the social relationship between consumers' (Steffes & Burgee, 2009, p. 45); Homophily—'refers to the similarity of the source and the receiver' (McCroskey *et al.,* 2006, p. 2). Both background and attitudinal homophily will be tested and Electronic Propinquity—'refers to the psychological distance between communicators or the degree of perceived closeness' (Walther & Bazarova, 2008, p. 623). Since nurturing relationships and networking is one of the fundamental functionality users of social media enjoy (Kietzmann *et al.,* 2011), it is expected that these properties, that define the nature of social relationships and the communal characteristics will to play a crucial role in inducing eWOM behaviour (Chu & Kim, 2011).

Therefore, to answer our second research question, following propositions are suggested:

> *P2: Tie strength with 'friends' on social media will lead to eWOM behaviour on social media.*
> *P3a: Background homophily with 'friends' on social media will lead to eWOM behaviour on social media.*
> *P3b: Attitudinal homophily with 'friends' on social media will lead to eWOM behaviour on social media.*
> *P4: Electronic Propinquity with 'friends' on social media will lead to eWOM behaviour on social media.*

eWOM Behaviour on Social Media

Based on the literature studied, it is observed that eWOM as a measure is less studied as an independent construct. The most suitable definition for the construct is 'any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet' (Hennig-Thurau *et al.,* 2004, p. 39). Here focus is only on eWOM of social media and not any other form of eWOM on the Internet.

Influence of eWOM on Social Media

Influence of eWOM behaviour of social media will be measured by studying consumer's Brand Attitude

and Purchase Intention. Purchase intention and brand attitude—exchanges are important investigation. Traditionally, marketers have understood that the power of WOM communication is to inform, drive and influence attitudes and purchase intentions towards products and services (O'Reilly & Marx, 2011). Brand attitude or attitude towards a brand is 'predisposition to respond in a favourable or unfavourable manner to a particular brand after the advertising stimulus has been shown to the individual' (Phelps & Hoy, 1996). Purchase intention explains the likelihood of an individual purchasing a particular brand. Brand attitude plays a crucial role in pushing the consumer's purchase intention (Phelps & Hoy, 1996).

Therefore, in order to understand the persuasiveness of eWOM on social media and seek answer to our fourth research question, below propositions can be tested:

> *P5: eWOM behaviour on social media will influence brand attitude.*
> *P6: Brand attitude will influence purchase intention.*

Moderating Role of Credibility

The extensive review of literature on credibility and its moderating role clearly highlights the need to study this construct with the 'eWOM social media' lens. From the perspective of this research, the construct of credibility on social media is defined as credibility perceived only on the basis of all the information available on social media platform about the source and message (Castillo, Mendoza & Poblete, 2011). Measurement of credibility will be based on the explanation that 'credibility of a source or message is a receiver-based judgment which involves both objective judgments of information quality or accuracy as well as subjective perceptions of the source's trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness' (Metzger, 2007). Therefore, credibility will be evaluated at the level of source, perceived source expertise and perceived source trustworthiness (Willemsen, Neijens & Bronner, 2012), as well as message, perceived message accuracy, believability and factualness (Eastin, 2001). A factorial design with four combinations will be made to study the moderating effect of all the conditions: High Source Credibility and High Message Credibility; High Source Credibility and Low Message Credibility; Low Source Credibility and High Message Credibility; Low Source Credibility and Low Message Credibility. High credibility of source increases the likelihood of paying attention to the contents of the message, so the combinations with

high source credibility will be more influential than those with low source credibility (Heesacker, Petty & Cacioppo, 1983).

Below propositions intend to study the above relationship and answers RQ3:

> *P7a: High source and high message credibility will have a greater positive relation to brand attitude than low source and low message credibility.*
> *P7b: High source and low message credibility will have a greater positive relation to brand attitude than low source and high message credibility.*
> *P7c: High source and high message credibility will have a greater positive relation to brand attitude than low source and high message credibility.*
> *P7d: High source and high message credibility will have a greater positive relation to brand attitude than high source and low message credibility.*
> *P7e: High source and low message credibility will have a greater positive relation to brand attitude than low source and low message credibility.*
> *P7f: High message and low source credibility will have a greater positive relation to brand attitude than low source and low message credibility.*

Discussion, Managerial Implication and Future Research

In this article a conceptual model along with suitable propositions are suggested that initially identify the role of motivation and social relational properties and subsequently suggests a moderating role of credibility over the persuasiveness of eWOM behaviour on social media. Consumers have always been susceptible to interpersonal influence and social media has empowered consumers by connecting them all together into conversational webs. Marketers have started to appreciate the growing power of this influence with the help of social listening and monitoring tools. Although WOM behaviour takes place amongst users, traditionally not marketer generated and controlled, eWOM behaviour offers greater opportunity to marketers to artificially stimulate and control it. As suggested by our research, if the prime motive of a user is to indulge in eWOM behaviour is altruism, helping others with brand-related information, then an eWOM campaign can be stimulated in lines with a campaign Sears had done on Facebook. Sears stimulated an eWOM campaign amongst young girls on Facebook based on the theme 'I know the kind of dress I want to wear for my Prom, let me help

others in selecting a nice dress from Sears' (Zhang & Daugherty, 2009). Similarly, with greater understanding of precursors that lead to eWOM, marketers stand a better chance in stimulating effective eWOM campaigns. Prof. Schaefer (2012), in his book *Return of Influence: The Revolutionary Power of Klout, Social Scoring, and Influence Marketing*, focuses purely on the power or influence of an average user, indulging in eWOM behaviour on social media, and calls this the rise of 'Citizen Influencer'. Citizen influencers are the everyday users of social media who possess both 'offline' and as well as 'online' traits that make them powerful and influential (credible) on the social web. Empirical results of our suggested propositions, that explore the moderating role of credibility and the interplay of source and message credibility, should help marketers better identify such 'citizen influencers'. The traditional push strategy of marketers will not work alone in the years to come. Consumers are finding newer ways of avoiding the traditional forms of advertising, even Internet advertising. Brands need to penetrate into the conversations of people, seamlessly for which they must have compelling stories to tell, such that consumers talk about them and create buzz (Fournier & Avery, 2011).

Attempts on part of the marketers are being made to intervene and offer service support through the process of Webcare on social media. Webcare refers to monitoring and intervention on part of the markets to control negative eWOM. Webcare may be proactive or reactive; with greater understanding of brand-related communication, marketers may ensure proactive Webcare (Noort & Willemsen, 2012).

This study further emphasizes that marketers must change their approach of marketing using social media platform from a narrow-minded top-down approach to a more participative and interactive one. They must capitalize on the strength of the media, of having the critical mass and design their communication strategies accordingly. With the growing traffic of the social media, there is a need to understand the distinctiveness of the medium from traditional forms of media alongwith understanding how different the media consumption habits are for the consumers of social media. To apply existing principles of traditional media (like banner ads) to social media would not only be 'ill-fitting but may also lead to an early failure' (Taylor, 2009).

This research article being conceptual requires empirical investigation. Further this research attempts to focus on factors that lead to eWOM rather than reasons that lead to positive or negative eWOM. To that extent, further research needs to be done to empirically test other dimensions of

eWOM behaviour like praise or the role of eWOM valance on social media. eWOM on social media is an emerging concept and its full impact and potential should further be tested from consumer decision-making perspective.

Notes

1. Retrieved from http://www.nielsen.com/content/dam/corporate/us/en/reports-downloads/2013%20Reports/Nielsen-Paid-Social-Media-Adv-Report-2013.pdf
2. 'State of Social Media: The Social Media Report 2012', NM Incite.
3. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) released a report titled 'Participative Web: User-generated Content', April 2007.
4. Interactive Advertising Bureau in the United States (2008).
5. Social Media Report, 2012. NM Incite (Nielsen & McKinsey collaboration).

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