Adolescent's eWOM intentions: An investigation into the roles of peers, the Internet and gender

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**ABSTRACT**

Teenagers are major contributors of online content because of continuous communication and sharing with peers using social media or instant messaging apps. They like to immediately tell the world about their purchases and consumption experiences, which leads to the generation and transmission of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). This study uses consumer socialization perspective to examine how age, peers and Internet usage influence teenagers’ eWOM intentions. The findings suggest that normative and informative influence of peers and the Internet have significant positive association with eWOM. Moreover, these influences also mediate the direct influence of age and Internet usage on eWOM. Further, the potential eWOM behavior of male teenagers is influenced by the existing peer norms, whereas for females, their reliance and belief in the credibility of online information is more critical. The insights are valuable for marketers interested in the powerful and growing teenage consumer segment, especially in the new emerging markets.

**1. Introduction**

“The Internet is the first thing that humanity has built that humanity doesn’t understand, the largest experiment in anarchy that we have ever had.”

- Eric Schmidt (ex-CEO, Google)

Forty-one million (almost 95%) teenagers\(^2\) in the USA are online, or as they say, ‘hooked’ to the Internet using a multitude of devices such as smartphones, tablets, and computers (Madden, Lenhart, Duggan, Cortesi, & Gasser, 2013). On the contrary, sixty-four million (17%) teens in India and one hundred sixty million (24%) teens in China are currently using the Internet (Statista, 2016). The absolute numbers of teenage Internet users in India and China are substantially higher than those in the developed countries and the enormous teen segment presents ample opportunities as well as challenges to marketers. In India, teenagers are spending a considerable amount of time (approximately 2 h 18 min per day) on the Internet (Ericsson, 2015) and they are perceived to be crucial in driving the Internet economy estimated to be US $200 billion (IAMAI Annual Report, 2015). Hence, it is important to understand the online behavior of adolescents.

Teenagers are using the Internet and social media for many purposes, for example, making new friends, dating, entertainment, and interacting with family and friends using Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and instant messaging services like WhatsApp (Lenhart, Smith, Anderson, Duggan, & Perrin, 2015; Madden et al., 2013). They also discuss, share, and voice their consumption experiences on these digital platforms (Stafford, Stafford, & Schlade, 2004). Such online endorsements or recommendations (broadly known as electronic word-of-mouth or eWOM) lead to enhanced trust and higher purchase intentions among the online social network of peers and family (Lim, Sia, Lee, & Benbasat, 2006; Wang, Yu, & Wei, 2012). While the broad areas of eWOM has been studied in the literature (e.g., Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004; King, Racherla, & Bush, 2014), research on the antecedents and culture-specific factors that influence participation of adolescents, especially in emerging economies (e.g., India and China) needs more attention and coverage (King et al., 2014, p. 175). Therefore, it is important to find the antecedents and relevant factors that prompt the eWOM participation of adolescents.

The marketing literature recognizes the importance of adolescents as consumers. An impressive amount of research is available on understanding adolescents’ consumption and marketplace behavior using consumer socialization framework (John, 1999; Mangleburg, Doney, & Bristol, 2004; Moschis, 1985; Moschis & Churchill, 1978;
youn, 2008). also, the literature on consumer socialization has evolved and reflects the changes in external environment such as advances in technology. a good number of early research concentrated on the traditional socialization agents (parents, peers, and mass media) and their influences on parameters of interest to the marketers such as consumer behavior, knowledge assimilation, and attitude toward advertising (mangleburg & bristol, 1998; moore & moschis, 1978). later on, the internet and social media were proposed as the new socialization agents (barber, 2013; wang et al., 2012). the socialization framework has been used to investigate the acquired habits and behavioral outcomes relevant to new technology landscape such as online privacy concerns (feng & xie, 2014), attitude toward brand communication on social media (sook kwon, kim, sung, & yoo, 2014), and online music piracy behavior (yang & wang, 2015).

a limited amount of research exists on the applicability of consumer socialization theory in emerging economies. for example, teenagers in india are influenced by the consumption related information available on the internet (kaur & medury, 2011). in china, concept-oriented and socio-oriented families show differences in co-viewing behavior and discussion of commercials with children (chan & mcneal, 2003). further, peer communication on social media influences the purchase decisions of people through the process of online consumer socialization (wang et al., 2012). therefore, socialization process influences not only offline behavior but also online behavior of teenagers. how socialization influences teenagers’ eWOM intentions remains an under-explored area in research. this study is an attempt to provide useful insights on antecedents to teenage eWOM behavior, especially in emerging economies like india, where the internet penetration is still low but growing rapidly (PTI, 2016).

given this background, the present research employs the socialization framework to understand the eWOM intentions of adolescents. this study contributes to the existing literature in three ways. first, it provides a comprehensive and integrative perspective on eWOM intentions of adolescents in an emerging economy (India) using the consumer socialization model, including specific societal and cultural aspects (e.g., susceptibility to the interpersonal influence of peers, exposure to media, and gender). second, the study analyzes the role of traditional (peers) and virtual (the internet) socialization agents, and provides empirical evidence on the relative importance and relevance of these agents. third, a majority of consumer socialization research primarily examines how antecedents and agents directly influence the outcomes (de gregorio & sung, 2010; mangleburg & bristol, 1998). this study proposes that socialization agents could mediate the relationship between antecedents and learning outcomes. further, the study aims to enrich the literature by establishing a more complex and dynamic interplay among socialization variables in the context of behavioral intentions (eWOM) of adolescents. since socialization process also depends on cultural factors, we believe that the research findings can be extended to similar cultures or countries.

2. Foundations of the study

2.1. Consumer socialization

Socialization encompasses the array of processes by which human beings (from varied cultures and communities) achieve the need for harmonious existence as a group (maccoby, 2007). Socialization explains the mechanisms by which people learn the rules and norms of society and adopt values across social, emotional, and cognitive domains (maccoby, 2007). the marketing literature extends the psychological concept of socialization as ‘consumer socialization’ which describes how young people develop consumption behavior and acquire knowledge about marketplace and marketing communications (ward, 1974).

Consumer socialization framework (moschis & churchill, 1978) builds on two important theories - cognitive development (piaget, 1952) and social learning (bandura, 1977). the two theories present different perspectives on how humans develop behavioral, cognitive, and information processing skills. cognitive development theory focuses on the impact of natural maturation and environmental experience on the learning behavior, whereas social learning theory posits that learning happens in a social context by observation, reinforcement, or imitation (modeling). the social structural variables (e.g., economic status and gender) are the immediate social environment settings that can directly or indirectly affect the learning process (moschis & churchill, 1978). the socialization agents are persons or any other entity (e.g., parents and peers) that interact with individuals and have dominance or control to reward or punish their behavior. therefore, these agents are imperative in the socialization of children. prior research (Hunter-Jones, 2014) categorizes the influential socialization agents in three groups: traditional (parents/family, peers, school, and mass media); professional (marketing and communication entities); and virtual (the internet and social media).

Though parents are the first socialization agents, peers become more important during the adolescence period. for example, in selecting brands of fashion apparels, adolescents show higher preferences to approval from peers rather than from parents (lachance, Beaudoin, & robitaille, 2003). similarly, adolescents like to shop with their friends and take their advice in product selection (mangleburg et al., 2004). peer groups help adolescents build a distinct and unique identity, which can be different from their parents (Erickson, 1994). Peer influence is manifested through either informative or normative influence. informative influence is the process of gathering information from peers and taking decisions because of trust and belief in the acquired information, whereas normative influence is the willingness of a person to behave or act in accordance with the norms and expectations of peers (Bearden, Netemeyer, & Teel, 1989).

Mass media is another socialization agent that influences the economic and social motives, and consumer activism of adolescents (mangleburg & bristol, 1998). the interactive nature of new media (the internet and social media) results in the self-socialization of adolescents because it helps in the process of identity-development and achieving freedom (Anderson & McCabe, 2012). the internet had distinct effects on the socialization of Generation X and Generation Y because people from these two cohorts had unique experiences and opportunities to access the internet through various devices and overall network speed (Barber, 2013). the online communication on the internet also influences product attitude and product involvement of adolescents (Wang et al., 2012). thus, the internet is a new socialization agent that affects the teenage consumer skills and knowledge.

2.2. Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM)

eWOM refers to the online content (positive or negative) about products or firms, which is generated or transmitted by customers and made available to a multitude of people using the internet (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). an impressive body of research is available on the topic of eWOM (e.g., Cheung & Thadani, 2012; King et al., 2014). the research predominantly covers the consequences of eWOM on product performance (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006), consumer specific characteristics such as attitude and loyalty (Gruen, Osmonebekov, & Czaplowski, 2006), and motivations of consumers to participate in eWOM activities (Cheung & Lee, 2012; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004).

Consumers engage in eWOM (creating, sharing, or consuming information) to enhance their self-worth or online image, to help other users, and to derive social benefits through online interactions (Cheung & Lee, 2012). Adolescents derive gratifications of identity-signaling, social relations, and entertainment by participating in eWOM activities such as giving ratings, and writing articles and reviews (Courtis, Mechant, De Marez, & Verleye, 2009; Tsao & Steffes-Hansen, 2008). Adolescents explore and experiment with their identity by posting a variety of content on the internet (Valkenburg,
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