CHAPTER 7
DISCUSSION

The objective of the first study was to examine if online reviews are more persuasive than print advertising. Further, the study examined if source lead to more persuasion than argument strength in case of high involvement products, whereas, for low involvement products if it was argument strength which lead to more persuasion than the source. The hypotheses were based on dual-process theories which assert that when involvement is high people pay more attention to logical information (argument strength), on the other hand, when involvement is low, people pay more attention to the source of information.

Overall the results supported the dual-process theories. Subjects found Reviews to be more credible than Advertisement, when the message contained in Reviews and Advertisements was equally convincing, supporting hypothesis 1. The experiment further revealed that both source and argument strength influenced message persuasion. The results supported hypothesis 2, and it was found that in case of Hard Disk Drive, subjects were influenced more due to the source in comparison to the argument strength. Similarly, for Alkaline Battery, subjects were influenced more due to difference in source as compared to difference in argument strength, supporting hypothesis 3.

Results indicated that message delivered through review was perceived to be more credible and subjects had stronger attitude towards review than advertisement. Further, Review was able to create stronger attitude towards the brand and purchase intention in comparison to Advertisement. The only condition where review was not able to create significantly more attitude towards brand and purchase intention than Advertisement was when argument strength
was strong. This could have possibly happened because, in case of high involvement product, subjects would have evaluated arguments more carefully in comparison to the source from which message was being delivered. On the whole, Online Consumer Reviews were more persuasive than Advertisements for both high and low involvement product categories, given that argument strength was same. The finding of this study empirically validates the theoretical literature which suggests that non-vested sources of information are perceived to be more credible than marketer induced sources (Bickart and Schindler, 2001; Eagly, Wood and Chaiken, 1978; Smith and Swinyard, 1982). Further, the results validate the findings of previous studies which assert that more credible sources lead to stronger attitude levels and behaviour compliance (Kim, Yoon and Lee, 2010; Pornpitakpan, 2004; Loda and Coleman, 2005). The results support the similar suppositions made by Hallahan (1999) in their study, which compared persuasiveness of advertising and publicity. However, in their study the results did not support the dual-process theories. This suggests that, Online Consumer Reviews may be perceived as more credible and persuasive source of information as compared to publicity by consumers.

The second study examined the persuasiveness in case of multiple exposures. The study examined if consumers were likely to be persuaded more when they encountered more than once source of information. The two sources considered were Online Consumer Reviews and Advertisement. Based on the Integrated Marketing Communications literature, it was expected that exposure conditions with two different communication sources would create stronger attitudes as compared to repeated exposure condition. Further, the role of exposure sequence (Advertisement first vs. Review first) and that of message content (similar vs. varied) was examined. Additionally, the study also examined two psychological mechanisms because of
which multi-source exposures were likely to be more persuasive than repeated exposure to the same source.

The results indicate that the two psychological mechanisms, skepticism towards advertising and priming, did differ across multi-source and single source conditions. Further, mediation analysis indicated that difference in the extent to which subjects involved in these psychological processes influenced dependent measures. It was found that subjects in multi-source exposure condition had less skepticism towards advertisement as compared to subjects who were exposed to repeated Advertisement \( (hypothesis \ 1a) \). This suggests that when consumers get brand oriented information from non-vested sources, their evaluation of similar information from marketer becomes favorable. On the contrary, it is also possible that exposure to same Advertisement again and again (message repetition) by the marketer may make consumers more skeptical of advertising. However, this was not tested in the study. Further, \( hypothesis \ 1b \) found that the reduced level of skepticism towards advertisement influenced subjects’ attitude perceptions and purchase intention favorably.

Subsequent hypothesis examined if the level of skepticism towards advertising differs, and influences persuasion, when either Advertisement or Review is viewed first and when Advertisement or review contain different messages. This was important to study, as in actual marketing environment consumers may come across different marketing sources in any sequence and online reviews may not contain information which is similar to advertising. Contrary to the prediction, the results indicate that skepticism toward advertisement was not less when message in the Review and Advertisement was different as compared to when it was same. However, subjects did have stronger attitudes and purchase intention when the message was varied across
source. Thus, this possible could have been induced by priming, rather than by skepticism. Previous studies in this context have theoretically attributed such effects to message variation and contrast effect theory. For example, Wang (2006) in their study while examining superiority of varied message explain that, “varied message condition might alleviate the degree of suspicions that the audiences might have regarding the purpose and the interdependence of the (publicity) article under the similar messages condition.” However, we found that persuasion was enhanced in varied message conditions due to higher degree of priming instead of change in perception regarding skepticism towards advertising.

The sequence of exposure affected the skepticism towards advertisement as expected. As proposed in hypothesis 3, the subjects exposed to review first rather than the Advertisement, had lower skepticism towards advertisement. Further, lower level of skepticism lead to higher attitude towards brand and purchase intention when subjects saw the review first. These results were similar to previous studies (Loda and Coleman, 2005; Kim, Yoon and Lee, 2010; Smith and Vogt, 1995 etc,) moreover our study further empirically validated the role of underlying psychological mechanisms, often mentioned in these studies.

Superiority of multi-source communication over single-source communication is often attributed to psychological process such as priming, also referred as forward encoding. Hypotheses 4 to 6 examined if subjects in multi-source condition were actually more persuaded because of such a phenomenon. The results were supported. Multiple-source conditions resulted in more priming than single-source conditions which positively influenced attitude towards the brand and purchase intention. These results were similar to previous study by Voorveld (2011), who tested priming (referred as image transfer) in the context of Web and Television Advertising.
Additionally, we analyzed if priming was responsible in enhancing persuasiveness when subjects were exposed to varied message as compared to similar message (hypothesis 5). However, we anticipated that given that both advertising and review are different and novel sources of information, level of priming subjects involve in would not change due to sequence of exposure to either Review or Advertisement (hypothesis 6). Both the hypotheses were supported.

7.1 Theoretical Contributions

The premise of Integrated Marketing Communications is based on several theories from the domain of information processing and consumer psychology literature. Extensive empirical investigations have been done to identify the combination of exposure conditions which lead to enhanced persuasion, based on ‘some’ underlying mechanisms or psychological phenomena. Nonetheless, studies directly examining presence and role of psychological mechanisms which are assumed to influence media effectiveness are scarce. Preacher and Hayes (p.13, 2008) specifically in context of communications research state that, “data analysis usually focuses on examining if the putative causal variable, weather manipulated or measured, is related to the outcome using a liner modals…but deeper understanding accrues when researchers investigate the process by which given effect is produced.”

Our study has considerable theoretical implications and advances the Integrated Marketing Communications theory in several ways. The first study extends the application of dual-process information processing theory in context of Online Consumer Reviews. The study extends the
Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) and Heuristic-Systematic Model (HSM) and illustrates how consumers are likely to vary in their information processing schemas for high involvement and low involvement products when information comes from different sources. It was found that a more credible source (online reviews) serves as an important cue (peripheral route) when subjects involvement is low, which parallels to ELM paradigm. However, in case of high involvement products ELM suggests that subjects would be persuaded only when the argument strength was strong (central route), we found that even when argument presented in Review was weak, subjects generated significantly more persuasion than Advertisement. This suggests that, rather than following one of the two routes (central or peripheral) as proposed by ELM, subjects were process information through two different routes simultaneously. One of the key differences in ELM and HSM model is that, “ELM postulated a continuum of theoretical persuasion process by its central and peripheral persuasion routes,” Andrews and Shimp (1990). In other words, both central and peripheral processing can’t exist simultaneously. Whereas, Heuristic-Systematic Model suggests that both heuristic and systematic processes can happen simultaneously and independent of each other (Chen, Duckworth and Chaiken, 1999). Further, HSM also suggests that consumers may process information in such a fashion that the judgmental implications of one process may lend a bias nature to the other. Thus, the finding of this study suggest that consumers’ rather following one particular route (central or peripheral) as per ELM, are more likely to process information as suggested by HSM.

Studies investigating effects of one communication source over the other or of more than one communication source consider some underlying mechanisms, though most often implicitly. Literature specifically examining presence and role of such mechanisms is scarce. For example, Wang (p.168, 2006) concluded that, “This study's examination of the marketing communication
form refers primarily to the priming of audiences' predisposed perception toward advertising and product publicity, which relates more to a biased processing rather than its unqualified superiority over advertising.”

The second study examined specifically if difference in extent to which consumers involve in specific psychological mechanisms leads to difference in superiority of one exposure combinations over other. This was the first study to examine how persuasion knowledge bias exists and functions when consumers integrate information from one or multiple message sources. The study adds to the body of knowledge in the domain of advertising psychology, depicting how consumers pre-disposed to particular information source (online review) may exhibit either positive or negative bias (skepticism) towards advertising. The investigation of second psychological variable, priming, demonstrated how consumers processing of initial message motivated subjects to process more cognitively. The results found subjects involved in more intensive priming when they were exposed to multiple sources of communication, which further influenced their brand perceptions and attitudes. By specifically testing the role of these psychological mechanisms this study further strengths the Integrated Marketing Communication theory.

To best of our knowledge, this study was one of the first one to examine the persuasiveness generated by Advertisement and online reviews jointly, in comparison to Advertisement alone. Previous research in this domain has often called for more integration studies considering advertising and other communication sources. For example, Smith and Vogt (p.149, 1995) suggested that, “…future Research focused on a full range of processing variables, e.g., attention, comprehension, depth, credibility, and message strength is likely to reveal other
significant departures from current models on Advertisement-based experiments.” Other recent studies (Voorveld, Neijens, and Smit, 2011; Kim, Yoon and Lee; 2010) studying advertising and publicity have also suggested to examine how consumers integrate advertising and other non-vested sources of information. By understanding how consumers integrate information from Online Reviews and Advertisements and reason in why multiple sources are more persuasive in comparison to a single source, this study contributes to the existing marketing and information processing literature.

7.2 MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The increased penetration of internet has provided consumers several online avenues to acquire and disseminate product related information, and consumers often trust these sources more than advertising. Research by Luca (2011) shows that a one-star increase in Yelp.com\(^1\) ratings translated into a 5 to 9 percent increase in revenues for restaurants listed on this popular business review website. While in a recent instance, Samsung, Korea based multinational conglomerate, was fined $340,000 by Taiwan’s Fair Trade Commission for posting fake positive reviews about its products and negative reviews about its competitors’ products (Ensing, 2014). Kliatchko and Schultz (2014) in their field based study, surveying 22 top-level marketing practitioners state that, “Clearly, senior managers are concerned about the rise of digital media and the fragmentation of previously monolithic marketer-controlled media systems. When asked about the changes they had observed, they highlighted a number of issues such as the deluge of data, the speed of change, and the demand for transparency and authenticity brought on by consumers' instantaneous access to external and third-party data.” These examples illustrate that marketers

\(^1\) Yelp, Inc. is a multinational corporation headquartered in San Francisco, California, that operates a popular business review site Yelp.com. Yelp is also present in Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, Japan, Mexico, New Zealand, Singapore and parts of Europe.
do understand that Online Consumer Reviews are seen as a critical and important source of information by their potential customers, a source which strongly influences consumers’ attitudes towards brands.

The findings of this dissertation provide marketing practitioners with several important implications. The study shows that consumer trust online reviews more than advertising, as advertising is seen as a vested source of information. Moreover, the results provide evidence of superiority of one communication tactic over the other, and how different sources interact with each other to contribute to the overall campaign effectiveness. The results further indicate that consumers are likely to be persuaded through Online Consumer Reviews even when they have considerably weak arguments, unlike advertising. Thus, marketing practitioners should leverage consumer reviews present in the marketplace when they portray an overall favorable perception about the brand. Further, they should actively create and support avenues where consumers can share their product opinions. This can be done by including sections in the company’s website where consumers can provide their product usage experiences and brand opinions. Further, marketing managers should provide consumers with easy access to channels which facilitate a two-way dialogue, and motivate consumers to share their brand related queries, suggestions and feedback.

The study provides marketing managers a better understanding of influence exerted by consumer reviews in the market place and how it interacts with consumers’ processing of advertising messages. The findings helps mangers to understand how consumers integrate information from online reviews and advertising, and how their pre-disposition to the first source affects the information processed through the second source. The findings reveal that consumers are likely
to involve in more priming and tend to exhibit positive persuasion bias towards advertising when Online Consumer Reviews reinforce the perceptions created by advertising. Moreover, results indicate that online reviews are likely to strength the weakly held attitudes created by advertising into more persistent attitudes and behavioral intentions. This suggests that managers may benefit from strategizing advertising message strategy, by taking into consideration the information which consumers are expressing or likely to express in the product reviews whenever possible. For example, marketers may reap more benefits by focusing on specific product attributes in Advertisements, which are not being discussed in Consumer Reviews. This strategy can be easily applied by marketers selling their products and services online, where they often display Online Consumer Reviews and product advertising simultaneously.

Further, the results indicate that for all the exposure conditions, consumers were more persuaded when they were exposed to Online Reviews and Advertisements in comparison to Advertisements alone. This finding should further instill the confidence of managers in using multiple communication sources, some of which are more credible in nature. Apart from advertising, these sources may include publicity, third-party product/brand endorsements, consumer reports, expert reviews, consumer reviews etc. Previous research also shows that consumers are likely to be less skeptical of advertising, if they receive similar information from different sources even if they are company oriented (Obermiller, Spangenberg and MacLachlan, 2005). Moreover, marketers are likely to benefit by integrating messages across channels with slight variation, as this motivates consumers to prime information they have received previously while evaluating current communication. Thus, the study helps mangers to understand how advertising and online reviews can be best used in harmony with each other, and the possible role of online reviews in executing strategic communication decisions.
7.3 LIMITATIONS AND SCOPE FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study has its share of limitations, some of which can be addressed in future research. First, the study was done with the help of a controlled laboratory environment which at best can come close in creating environment which consumers actually experience in the real life, but can’t replicate it. Therefore, to ensure robustness of the results of this study, more studies examining similar phenomena should be considered. Future research using alternative research methodologies, such as field based studies can bring in more insights and validate the results of this study. Research capturing these mechanisms using advanced technologies, such as Electromyography (EMG) and Electroencephalography (EEG), often used in advertising research should also be considered (Hazlett and Hazlett, 1999; Ohme, Reykowska, Wiener and Choromanska, 2009). Also, the findings of our study are based on MBA students alone. Therefore, research examining different sections of population, who often differ in their skepticism towards advertising (Obermiller, Spangenberg and MacLachlan, 2005) and respond to online reviews differently (Bae and Lee, 2011) must be considered.

Second, our study was conducted using specific products categories which were utilitarian in nature. Given that nature of services is different from products, previous research shows that consumer’s consumption of information for products and services differ to a great extent (Loda & Coleman 2005; Mitra, Reiss and Capella, 1999; Jacobsen and Munar, 2012). Also, consumers’ use of heuristics for information search and processing in case of hedonic products is likely to be very different from utilitarian products (Midgley, 1983). Future research focusing on consumers’ processing and response to information integrated though online reviews and advertising in context of services and hedonic products would be valuable and add more insights to the Integrated Marketing Communications literature.
Third, our study only incorporated online reviews which were positive in nature. Previous research has shown that negative reviews are often evaluated critically and impact the consumers’ persuasion. Though research examining negative WOM, publicity and trail along with advertising exists in present marketing literature, research on consumers’ persuasion incorporating negative consumer reviews and advertising should be considered.

Fourth, our study examined two psychological mechanisms i.e. priming and persuasion knowledge bias while consumers integrate information from advertising and reviews. Future research should centre upon identifying and examining more psychological mechanisms. For example, mechanisms like image transfer examined in context of Television and Web-advertising (Voorveld, Neijens, and Smit, 2011) can also be examined in context of online reviews and advertising.

Fifth, we tested how consumers integrate information from Online Consumer Reviews and Print Advertising. Future research incorporating expert online reviews and other types of advertising for example Television and Web advertising would be interesting. It is likely that consumers would respond to these sources differently because of their inherent characteristics. For example level of persuasion may differ for Television advertising as it carries both visuals and audio, and also unlike print advertising is externally paced in nature. On the other hand, consumers’ evaluation of expert reviews may differ significantly differ from consumer reviews (Reinstein and Snyder, 2005), and this could alter the underlying mechanisms consumers undergo while integrating the information.