CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS
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Conclusion

The emergence of social technologies is changing consumer’s information processing and directly or indirectly changing consumer’s consumption behaviour (Kozinets 1999, Wang et al., 2012). This research was set to examine eWOM behaviour on social media. It started with the investigation of the motivational antecedents and social relationship properties significant to eWOM behaviour. Further went on to understand the moderating role credibility perceptions, related to source and content, will play over the relationship of eWOM behaviour and brand attitude. Research also tested the various manifestations of credibility on the social media platform and attempted to understand which form is more significant in social media context. Finally it tried to investigate to what extent eWOM is capable of influencing consumption intention - brand attitude and purchase intention. Results have increased theoretical understanding related to all the aspects investigated.

The objective of Study I was to understand how and why eWOM behaviour takes place. The question of ‘how’ was explained by looking at the social relationship-related variables- homophily; tie-strength; electronic propinquity. With all preliminary analysis of data found satisfactory the results conclude strong tie strength and weak tie strength were the two social relationship-related variable which were found significant to eWOM behaviour. Both categories of ties serve a distinctive purpose, strong ties are important for the transfer of valuable information, weak ties facility the bridging function and spread of information between networks. Hence both were found significant to eWOM behaviour via social media. The question of ‘why’ was explained by looking at motivation-related variables: altruism; advice seeking; vengeance; social benefit; self-enhance. The results suggest that advice seeking and social benefit are two motivations significant to brand-related conversations on social media as they both help fulfil two core uses of social media: nurturing relationships and conversations.

The objective of Study II was to test the role of credibility, source and message, in the context of eWOM behaviour. For this purpose a 2 X 2 factorial design experiment is conducted. The results of our study show that credibility moderates the relationship between eWOM behaviour and brand attitude formation. It was also found that high source and message credibility induced more favourable attitude towards the brand than when either one or both were low in the context of our study. Results also confirmed that credibility
perceptions are derived from both self-generated credibility cues and system-generated cues on social media where eWOM may often takes place between weak ties.

Study III was the first study of its kind that differentiated between various manifestations of credibility over the social media platform. Since credibility is established with the help of both self-generated credibility cues and system-generated cues this study evaluated how the variations in different cues affect consumption behaviour. For this purpose a 2 X 2 X 2 factorial design experiment was conducted. The results of our study concluded a severe confounding effect of system-generated cues over self-generated credibility cues for brand attitude formation and suggest that high system-generated cue may be able to compensate and even supplement for low self-generated credibility on social media. System generated credibility cues like number of friends a user has, number of comments, like and share a eWOM message gathers may be able compensate for lack of real expertise of the source and believability of content. The results point towards the fact that may be while building credibility perceptions on social media greater credence is placed on system-generated cues when the source himself lacked real knowledge and expertise. Evidence of the Warranting Principle is found in our study, whereby people tend to believe more on cues based on information not provided by the user himself, but more on information provided by the system (Walther, Van Der Heide, Hamel, and Shulman, 2009). Surface features of an interface like system-generated cues influence significantly on the computer mediated environment (Sundar, 2008; Westerman, Spence & Heide, 2012).

Social media is growing rapidly and brand-related conversations influence consumer choices significantly. Therefore the studies conducted in this research helps in better understanding of the nature of these conversations, factors that make these conversations, the influential and how they may be made more effective.

**Theoretical Implications**

Theoretical understanding of eWOM behaviour is derived from FtF WOM behaviour, however the two diverge at various points. This research was set out to examine social influence process of eWOM behaviour through the social media lens. Several theories have contributed to the understanding of social influence such as The Theory of Social Character, Theory of Interpersonal Susceptibility, Theory of Social Comparison, Social Cognition Theory etc. The primary contribution of our study to theory is that it lends greater understanding to the processes involved in social influence, pertaining to consumption-
related behaviour on social media. The studies identify drivers and enablers of the behaviour and our findings conclude eWOM behaviour via social media to be a significant driver of consumer brand attitude and intention to purchase. In a highly cluttered marketing communication environment, eWOM via social media may lead to greater brand awareness and knowledge for brands in different stages of their product life cycle. While marketer generated communication can cater to a single segment of consumers, eWOM may provide useful and easily understandable product information, from the perspective of a potential consumer, in each and every stage with in the product life cycle (Park & Kim, 2009). Also eWOM behaviour via different social media forums may influence consumers to move from attention to interest in the context of the AIDA hierarchy of effects model (Bickart & Schindler, 2001). However it will be moderated by all the manifestations of credibility examined in this research. The research further supports the Warranting Theory and confirms how interface related-features can influence product judgement. Our findings conclude that the social influence process in the social media environment is a complex process and influenced by heuristics beyond the scope of traditional influence process.

Managerial Implications

The primary objective of research is to be able to predict and control. To be able to predict and control eWOM behaviour on social media has been the goal of this research. Social media has empowered consumers by connecting them all together into conversational webs. 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. Brands need to have compelling stories to tell, such that consumers talk about them and create buzz (Fournier & Avery, 2011).

Marketers hope to control and predict all aspects about their brands and marketing efforts. Traditionally they have been using “one-to-many marketing communications” methods like advertising, promotion etc. to build brand equity (Hoffman & Novak, 1996) however social media has changed that. Consumers now play a central role in building the equity of the brand (Taylor, 2009). Marketers are also aware that WOM as a phenomenon is consumer driven. Controlling, predicting or inducing WOM was always a challenge for marketers. However with social media and social listening tools marketers are better equipped to monitor consumer sentiments and opinions very closely with greater efficiency and lower
cost. This research has offered greater understanding of the variables that drive eWOM behaviour, understanding these variables will give marketers a better chance to understand the behaviour and also develop effective induced word of mouth campaigns. This research gives an indication of the likely behaviour displayed by consumers on social media.

Marketers often engage in “exogenously-created WOM: conversations are created where none would naturally have occurred otherwise” (Godes & Mayzlin, 2009, p. 1). Various strategies have been used in the past by marketers to artificially create buzz around their brands. In a study done by Godes & Mayzlin (2009) they empirically test the impact of induced WOM. They suggest that WOM can be artificially created and the same may be effective in getting incremental sales. In other words, if effectively done, induced WOM may also be under marketer’s control. Therefore marketers often try to identify “influencers” who will be able to generate an induced eWOM campaign or buzz marketing. For example marketers of Lee Dungarees wished to change the opinion of the product amongst young teenaged boys, they identified a large number of “influencers”, from an online gaming base, with whom they engaged and further pushed an induced WOM campaign (Khermouch & Green, 2001). Select online influencers spread the word for the marketer (Carl, 2006). With the insights of this study, marketers may select online influencers such that they are able develop more effective induced eWOM campaigns.

Results of Study II confirmed the role that credibility, of source as well as message, is likely play. Results of the study further suggests that marketers while developing and induced WOM campaign must identify online influencers such that they are perceived as credible and the content of the message must be so designed that it includes all the cues to make the message more accurate, factual and believable. Source credibility played a stronger role than message credibility, therefore an induced WOM campaign must be developed accordingly. Study III further enhanced the study by highlighting the role of different kinds of credibility cues and suggested which cues are more effective on the social media platform. Results of Study III suggests that users give greater credence to social scores or system generated credibility cues than true knowledge and expertise on the social media platform. System-generated cue was also able to compensate for the overall credibility perception when self-generated credibility was low. This result further favours the marketer while developing online induced eWOM campaign.

Therefore from a realistic perspective of the marketer, the findings of both studies of Study II and Study III suggest a strong need for caution while developing induced eWOM campaign. Unlike the FtF context results of our study clearly confirm that perceptions of credibility on
social media are established based on a combination of cues quite unique to the context. Moreover systematic establishment of credibility is critical on social media as relationships are often weak. Hence all the aspects that help build perceptions of credibility must be carefully selected while operationalizing an induced eWOM campaign. Believability perceived of the online influencers will be moderated by all the manifestations of credibility pointed out in our research therefore a judicious operationalization will prove more productive.