SYNOPSIS

Researchers have studied how consumers integrate and respond to marketing communication from more than one source. These studies find that exposure to first stimulus impacts the way information is processed during the exposure to subsequent stimulus. Additionally, the persuasive effects differ because of the different combinations of message source one is exposed to. As Online Reviews provide opinions shared by fellow consumers, consumers seeking product related information are likely to attend this information more favorably as compared to information in the Advertisement. Therefore, Online Reviews are expected to engage consumers in more extensive information processing as compared to the Advertisements. Further, literature reveals that communication using more than one source is more persuasive than repeated exposure to same source, and assumes that certain mechanisms or psychological processes can explain the positive effects of multi-source communication.

This first study in this dissertation examines if Online Reviews are more persuasive in comparison to Advertisements. The study also examines role of argument strength and product involvement on persuasion, based on the dual-process theories such as, Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) and Heuristic-Systematic Model (HSM). The study was conducted using experimental design and 290 MBA students were exposed to Online Review or Print Advertisement of fictitious Alkaline Battery (low involvement) and Hard Disk Drive (high involvement brands). The dependent variables measured were message credibility, attitude towards the source, attitude towards the brand and purchase intention.
The results revealed that Online Consumer Reviews generated more persuasion in comparison to Print Advertisement. Further, there was a significant three way interaction between source, argument strength and product involvement. This indicated that when product involvement was low, subjects were more influenced due to source as compared to argument strength. Whereas, when involvement was high, subjects were more influenced by the stronger argument strength than the source. The findings of this study supported the dual-process theories, such as ELM and HSM.

The second study examines if Online Review and Advertisement together are more persuasive as compared to one of these sources alone. Further, we examined if difference in the extent to which individuals involve in these two psychological mechanisms (persuasion knowledge bias and priming), influenced persuasion across exposure conditions. The role of exposure sequence (Advertisement first vs. Review first) and message content (same vs. varied messages) was also examined. 340 MBA students participated in the study and were exposed to Print Advertisements, Consumer Reviews, or both, of a fictitious Laser Printer brand, across eight different exposure conditions. The dependent measures collected were same as the first study. Persuasion knowledge bias was measured using skepticism towards advertising scale.

The results indicate that subjects were more persuaded when they were exposed to both Online Consumer Reviews and Print Advertisements in comparison to repeated exposure to one of these sources alone. Moreover, varied messages and exposure to more credible source first (Online Consumer Reviews) enhanced persuasion. The study found that skepticism towards advertising and priming influenced persuasion, and were responsible in
making multi-source communication superior. However, contrary to the exception, subjects exposed to the varied messages in the multi-source condition did not exhibit higher skepticism towards advertisement as compared to subjects exposed to similar messages.

The findings of this dissertation make strong theoretical contribution in the domain of Integrated Marketing Communications. The study examines the role of priming and persuasion knowledge in making multi-source communication more persuasive than single source communication. To the best of our knowledge, this is one of the first studies to examine persuasiveness generated by Online Reviews and Print Advertisements, and the underlying psychological mechanisms. The study provides marketing practitioners a better understanding of influence exerted by consumer reviews in the market place, and how reviews influence consumers’ processing of advertising message. These findings help marketing practitioners to understand how indirect sources of communication, like Online Consumer Reviews, can be used along with paid media to better influence consumers. The study further enables managers to understand the role of Online Consumer Reviews in the marketplace, and how they can leverage these to their advantage. The findings suggest that in today’s media cluttered marketing environment, where majority of marketers fall short of marketing funds, Online Consumers Reviews can support the overall marketing efforts efficiently.

**Key Words:** Online Consumer Reviews, Integrated Marketing Communications, Persuasion Knowledge Bias, Priming, Information Processing, Cross-Media Campaigns