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Social Media and Online Shopping—Are the Choices Swayed? A Youth Perspective

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Abstract: In a relatively short period Social Media has become ubiquitous and indeed turned out to be an inseparable part of modern day lives. Enhanced presence of internet through computing and mobile devices fast changing generations of transmission technology and fascination among youth for connectivity have all contributed to this proliferation. Like any other social interaction, social media also has its share of opinion moulding and influencing dynamics. Yet, it is interesting to note that this influence has turned out to be unprecedented and trendsetting. It remains to be seen how this credence and dependence, so distinctive of social media, verbalizes buying choices and brand preference. Undoubtedly, simply for its attraction towards newer modes of socializing and technology, the younger generation tends to be more social media savvy. Does this fascination also make them susceptible to its influences in the matters of spending choices and buying behaviour? This paper undertakes to empirically study the extent of such influence along with a secondary perspective to analyze the Digital Marketing Strategies that stimulate regular online shopping pattern. It evaluates the factors that trigger purchase of new products through Social Media and examines the relative importance of online reviews, opinions and recommendations in purchase decisions.

Keywords: Social Media Marketing, Online Purchase, Youth

INTRODUCTION

The social media has emerged as a greater influencing factor than the time-tested marketing tools in vogue hitherto. It has not only had its say on the product and service choices in particular but, in fact, is also impacting people's social interactions, opinions, and preferences. Gradually it has become a mode of direct recommendation that wields a power to impact such decisions as purchase destinations. It is a human tendency to prefer things which one can understand easily and, secondly, on the basis of some familiarity factor. This cognitive fluency, according to psychologists, impacts, "Every purchase you make, every

interaction you have, every judgment you make can be put along a continuum from fluent to disfluent,” says Adam Alter, a psychologist at the New York University Stern School. “If you can understand how fluency influences judgment, you can understand many, many, many different kinds of judgments better than we do at the moment.”¹

Market research has an age old theory that people make choices on the rational conscious thought process. With the advent of newer means of communications, particularly information technology driven communications, human interaction and cognition has also undergone changes. They are now exposed to a much bigger world outside their community, friend circle, group of colleagues, kin and relations. This world has taken seamless proportions and available in the comfort zone of homes and workplace beyond the limitations of time and space. Riding on the latest technologies, it has gained easy and prompt acceptance. In its own way, it has the credence and access to make inroads into conscious thought process so intricately linked to people’s reliance on the social media. It is in this context that social media like Facebook, Twitter, etc. come into focus. People no more write their friends/relatives’ birthdays or anniversaries in the diaries, they rather rely on the auto-reminder of the social media, share thoughts, pictures and memories instantly.

It is natural that such trust and dependence manifest in forming opinions and choices. Traditionally, marketers and producers chose to advertise their products and services through print or audio-visual media. Users and buyers often looked upon this as a marketing pep talk sugar-coated or overstated. It always lacked an objectivity which was subject to recommendation or opinion of family and friends either to corroborate or reject. Social media, in its present avatar addresses this natural quest for objectivity and ‘third-party’ endorsement. As per the focus of this paper, it remains to be assessed as to which identifiable group of people is more open and responsive to such influences. A large number of studies put the educated, middle and upper middle class as the biggest identifiable group as members and subscribers of social media. In the course of the study conducted for the purpose of this research reveals that within this group majority of youth are habituated to communicate through social media. As a corollary to this fondness, their opinions, choices and views are also influenced to a remarkable extent, more so in their decisions in on-line shopping. However, the new generation with a higher level of awareness and education is not absolutely fallible to the novelty of social media and hi-tech communication fora. There is a perceptible tendency among youth to seek value for money, and this drives them to thrive upon the vast information available through internet and other print and electronic sources. Not many among them might indulge in impulsive shopping just on the basis of good word spread on social media or discard their preferred products for some adverse personal opinion in the web sphere. This paper seeks to evaluate all these factors through an empirical study data for which is obtained by questionnaire method.

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Hoch and Schkade (1996) human decision makers are typically good at selecting variables that are relevant in the decision process, but weak at integrating and retaining large amounts of information. Effective decision aids should be designed to capitalize on the strengths and compensate for the inherent weaknesses of their users. Various researchers have studied behavioral pattern in decision making, particularly in purchasing and expenditure related decision. Behavioral decision theory (Einhorn and Hogarth, 1978) suggests that since feedback on effort expenditure tends to be immediate while feedback on accuracy is subject to delay and ambiguity, decision makers may be inclined to focus more on reducing cognitive effort

than on improving decision accuracy. Kleinmuntz and Schkade (1993) also suggest that response to feedback on peer choices is reflected in expenditure related decisions. Although such decisions run are inconsistent to cognitive accuracy based upon personal experience and unswerving familiarity. Owing to the level of networking and greater communication opportunity provide by the social media and social networking sites potential customers can gauge the prospects of advantage in an online purchase easily comparing the trending views with the claims made by sellers. In view of this dimension, Kozinets (1999) argues that building relationships and engaging in conversations with consumers in online communities has become increasingly important. There is an interesting observation by Haythornthwaite (2005) that an easy accessibility and affordability to devices that facilitate connectivity with the internet people have a new found opportunity to communicate with other folks previously unknown to them. This new form of bonhomie and sociability would not be possible without the social media. Research supports the assumption that more and more consumers are finding their information online. The research findings of Barnes, *et al.*, (2008), concluded that more than 70 percent of respondents engage in pre-purchase online search and behavior at least sometimes. Rishika *et al.* (2013) examine roles of social media activity and customer characteristics on the link between social media participation and the intensity of customer-firm relationship. The researchers have assembled a data set that pools customers' social media participation data with individual customer level transaction data. They further emphasize the need to integrate knowledge from customers' transactional relationship with their social media participation. In this sense, Adar and Adamic (2005) and Gruhl *et al.* (2004) elaborate upon the two conventional information dissemination models elucidating the way the information spread takes place in networks and how these have been replaced with the a scientific inquiry into understanding the word-of-mouth effect. A good expanse of literature is emerging with this research perspective, mainly focused on the understanding of the impact of social networking sites on firms' performance (Scullin *et al.*, 2004; Yang *et al.*, 2012; Luo *et al.*, 2013) as well as consumers' behavior.

METHODOLOGY

The study uses descriptive research design to measure the impact of social networking sites on youth. The variables from the literature were used to frame the questionnaire which was administered to 600 respondents, out of which 354 were male and 246 females. The target population was students of leading private university in Delhi NCR region. The elements of the population were identified with the help of stratified sampling technique.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The primary objective of this study is to find out whether the gender male/female gets influenced by Social Media while making online buying particularly in the Delhi/NCR region. The secondary objectives are as follows:

1. To what extent young men and women register presence on social media sites
2. To study whether they put reliance on social media while making online purchase.
3. To study whether the choice of products/services available on-line is influenced by the views, opinions, recommendations or positive and negative review.

After reviewing the literature following hypothesis were formulated.

Ho₁: That there is significant presence of youth, both male and female on social media

Ho₂: There is an element of preference among youth for on-line shopping

Ho₃: That the choices in online purchases are influenced by social media

DATA ANALYSIS

Presence on various Media

Facebook: Out of the total 600 respondents, 354 were males and as the result shows almost 94.5 per cent males used Facebook and out of 246 females 225 responded that they use facebook which is 91.5 per cent.

Linkedin: Only 50 per cent of females and males use this social media platform.

Pinterest: Among 600 respondents it was found that Pinterest is not a popular social media platform as only 24% of females are using it and the number of male users is even lesser.

Youtube: Among 600 respondents almost 90 per cent of males are using Youtube, whereas 71 per cent of females subscribe to Youtube. Thereby, we can clearly see that males have larger presence on Youtube than females.

Twitter: Twitter doesn't seem to be so popular amongst females since only 37.39 per cent are using this social media account, whereas almost 50 per cent males are members of this social portal.

Instagram: This social media site seems to be more popular amongst youth with both men and women where 77.68 per cent men and 71.54 per cent women use this platform.

The results depicted that more than half of the respondents visit social media sites two to three times in a day, males scoring high in this category. Simultaneously a sizeable proportion of respondents visit these sites at least once a day—female respondents exceed their male counterparts in this respect. Between 50 to 80 respondents browse social media sites twice a day, gender based frequency difference can be observed in this case as well. The number of respondents reporting weekly or monthly social media interaction is very small.

PREFERENCE FOR SOCIAL MEDIA SITES

Table 1
Media-wise preference

		<i>Media Preference</i>					
		<i>Twitter</i>	<i>Linkedin</i>	<i>Instagram</i>	<i>Pinterest</i>	<i>Google Plus</i>	<i>Youtube</i>
Valid	Never	332	366	193	357	337	291
	Rarely	99	102	87	79	101	60
	Sometimes	69	57	117	78	68	86
	Frequently	83	56	150	63	64	121
	Always	17	19	53	23	30	42

INFLUENCING FACTORS FOR PURCHASE AND EXPENDITURE

Opinions of friends, experts, colleagues and strangers have their influence in varying measures on purchase decisions of the respondents but the narrow range of standard deviation confirms that the people are subject of influence of opinion in large measure. Similarly they go by the recommendation of peer group like colleagues, friends and acquaintances. The trend further confirms that the opinion and recommendation of experts, colleagues and friends along with product review and empathy messages are taken into consideration before settling for a product or service.

Table 3
Opinion and Recommendation

	<i>Mean</i>
Opinions of Friends	3.2817
Opinions of Experts	2.7867
Opinions of Colleagues	2.6900
Opinions of Strangers	2.2217
Recommended By Friends	3.1000
Recommended By Experts	2.7500
Recommended By Colleagues	2.5050
Recommended By Strangers	2.1167
Empathy Message	2.6050
Product Reviews	3.1733

Impact of Social Media on spontaneous purchasing decisions

The data reveals that the younger generation sampled in the survey for this study have varying degree of spontaneous influence of the social media for making on line purchases. A staggering 47.5 percent of respondents are not subjected to impulsive buying while surfing the social media sites. Another 8.7 percent and 12.7 percent of the respondents answer about their impulsive purchase decision as rarely or sometimes, respectively.

However, a total of 159 respondents, constituting a 26.5 percent of people participating in survey are prompted frequently for such an influence. Whereas, only 26 respondents or a paltry 4.3 of sample population always make their decision while surfing the social media sites. The data goes a long way to reaffirm that people, particularly youth, do not indulge in impulsive online buying after being prompted by the marketing gimmicks on social media sites. They take into account opinions and recommendation, mostly by the word of mouth, before deciding for online shopping.

ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

An analysis of the data collected from survey reveals some interesting trends. The presence of younger generation on various social network sites is in conformity with the worldwide trend of popularity of this new media of social interaction. It is commonly experienced that the youth take lead in adopting newer means of social interaction and they adapt equally fast to the demands and technicalities of these means.

Our survey shows that a vast majority of people are member of one and in large cases more than one social network sites. The preference is driven by the educational background, profession as well as gender. However the fascination with the media is one common factor in the age group of people surveyed for this study. The choice across the sites also shows the appeal of particular site in terms of popularity, utility, universality and networking purpose. A site like LinkedIn may not be attractive for someone looking for entertainment or gossip but it is preferred by the professionals or the people looking for trends in professional networking. The survey evidences finesse employed in choice of networking sites among youth.

Personal choices, as it is, are often subject to influence with opinions and experiences of people who matter to us. However, psychologists maintain that a number of other factors also sway the cognition choice. Responses on the questionnaire too suggest that people spend time on social media for interaction, creativity, learning new things, participating in professional collaboration and thriving on others' experiences by noticing their comments and reviews. All these together supplement the cognitive process. The data suggest that rational choices are based on a number of factors including, opinions, experts' advices and empathy messages. The data further indicate in sufficient measure that respondents tend to strike balance among these factors. Though they may be visiting social networking sites with greater frequency, yet they steer clear of any obsessive influence. Almost fifty percent respondents are not prompted to indulge in impulsive purchases at the bidding of a marketing gimmick or an isolated recommendation on social media. The total scenario depicts a very interesting picture. Younger generation people, both male and female, register abundant presence on social media, they display their choices according to their orientation and professional hues, take note of the trends, at times form their opinion based upon the comments, remarks, recommendations and reviews of the friends and fellow members—yet refrain in large numbers from taking it as sole influence in making their buying choices, more so spontaneously.

This goes to the credit of both social media as well as the aware customer that a fine balance is maintained in choices. The lateral factors contributing to this being the opinion and suggestions from relatively more reliable quarters. An analysis of the data shows in unequivocal terms that the social networking sites and media may help in making final choices but do not sway the customers off their feet just on the factors like novelty, technology or mass appeal.

CONCLUSION

The study makes an interesting observation of interaction between social behavior and marketing strategies when it is faced with an aware and educated customer particularly in prime of their youth. Though enjoying an edge over print or electronic media, marketing strategies over social media have to take a number of factors into account. There is a potential of direct approval or rebuttal of marketing claims on social media, since the users realize its importance as much as the marketers. The sample response gathered through this research takes the saying influence of social media with a pinch of salt. In fact proliferation of social media has created greater awareness, alertness and understanding among the followers. More people are exposed to the possibilities of expanding horizons of knowledge more sensitive and judicious they become in taking advantage of the prudence thus gained. There is, no doubt, a big inclination and preference for online buying yet the buyers are circumspect about social media influence. This situation is both a challenge as well as an advantage for the marketing strategists. They have to garner and employ their experience of marketing over traditional media to intelligently address the new found awareness among

buyers, particularly youth, who are not be simply prompted into buying a product just for the sake of their fascination with social media.

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