

# Impact of Electronic Word-Of-Mouth Communications on Consumers' Online Purchase Decisions A Study on Sylhet City, Bangladesh

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## **Abstract:**

**Background:** This study sought to examine the influence of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) interactions on the purchase intentions of online consumers. As now-a-days consumers are increasingly becoming habituated in using online platforms for their buying decisions, I have chosen this sort of study in order to identify the impact of digital word-of-mouth communications or feedback mechanisms in this context.

**Materials & Methods:** Sylhet metropolitan city was selected as the study area, where the sample size was 100. Quantitative approach was being followed in data collection and analysis. The main research instrument applied here was a structured questionnaire which included questions regarding the respondents' demographic information and issues related to their online buying decisions. Questionnaires were distributed to only those people who have the experience of buying a product online, hence purposive sampling method was applied. After collecting 100 valid responses from the participants, those were analyzed in order to accomplish the research objectives. Besides the primary data obtained from the survey, secondary data were also used for better understanding of the theoretical aspects.

**Results:** From the overall analysis it was found that, consumers' decisions to purchase a product or service online are significantly effected through the eWOM communications, such as the informal statements, opinions, feedback, comments and suggestions of their friends, family members, acquaintances and even anonymous people posted online. The study also revealed that, negative eWOM information tends to produce greater influence to some extent compared to positive eWOM.

**Conclusion:** As the popularity of using internet platforms in assessing and purchasing products is rising in Bangladesh day by day, it has become imperative for e-marketers to grasp the issue of eWOM. Therefore the outcome of this study might be beneficial to the concerned individuals and online retailers in comprehending the impact of eWOM on consumer behavior.

**Key words:** Electronic Word-of-Mouth, Online Purchase, Consumer.

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## I. Introduction

Word-of-mouth communication has become a strong influential element for building consumers' perceptions and behaviors in today's competitive arena. Consumers do not solely depend on company initiated information or advertisements, rather they value the opinions, suggestions and recommendations provided by other consumers, who have already used or experienced the products or services. Along with the advancement of information technology and the internet in recent years, consumers are now greatly involved in a new form of word-of-mouth, that is Electronic Word-of-Mouth or eWOM (Cheung and Thadani, 2012). It performs the similar tasks as does the traditional or offline word-of-mouth marketing, but to a greater extent. Because of the widespread use of internet and social networking communications, electronic word-of-mouth is capable to involve a vast number of people and create more social relationships, where information are exchanged at a relatively low cost and thus is considered as more significant (Louis et al. 2011). It was obtained from a global survey that, 90% of online buyers notice product reviews of other consumers and 83% agreed that these reviews have outright influence on their buying decisions (channeladvisor.com, 2011).

In Bangladesh, online shopping and online exchange of product related information have become common phenomenon along with the advancement of internet usage. About 57.2% of total population are internet users here, so the number is 96,199,000 people (Internet World Stats, 2019) and among them, 8% are found to be online shoppers (UNCTAD, 2019) According to the presumption of E-Commerce Association of Bangladesh (e-Cab), in the year of 2017, the country had 700 formal e-commerce sites and around 8,000 e-commerce pages on Facebook that resulted in an amount of ten billion taka in transactions on e-commerce sites per year (export.gov, 2018). So the number of online consumers as well as online marketers (both individuals

and organizations) is increasing day by day. More and more consumers are involving themselves in the digital market for communicating product related information, sharing their experiences and making purchase decisions. Hence today's online marketers are ought to realize the influence of electronic word-of-mouth communication on their target customers and buyers.

## **II. Review of Literature**

Word of Mouth (WOM) communication means the act of sharing personal opinions and views among customers. This term has been fairly acknowledged in the study of consumer behavior as an informal exchange of product, service or company related information that affects consumers' buying decisions (Dichter, 1966). It is found to create more fruitful results than conventional modes of advertisements as consumers tend to believe personal sources more, compared to commercial sources (Brooks 1957). When this type of interpersonal communication is done through the online environment, it is considered as Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM). It takes place when by using the internet, a current/previous/potential customer shares any positive or negative information regarding a specific product, service, brand or company which is accessible by an immense number of people as well as organizations (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Its expansion is mainly supported by the internet technology through diverse categories of digital channels, for example, online chatgroups (e.g. messenger, whatsapp, viber), emails, newsgroups, discussion forums, online retail stores (e.g. amazon.com), company websites, review sites (e.g. tripadvisor.com, epinions.com), social networking sites (e.g. facebook, twitter, linkedin), virtual communities, electronic bulletin boards and blogs (Goldsmith, 2006; Luo and Zhong, 2015). By using these tools, today's consumers are able to gather unlimited information about particular products, services, brands or companies from their friends, relatives and acquaintances as well as from unknown people all over the world.

As eWOM has emerged with the application of internet technology, it consists of numerous identical properties that distinguish it from traditional offline WOM. Several researchers have identified eWOM to function more successfully than normal WOM due to its special advantages including greater velocity of communication, more extensive reach, 24/7 accessibility, more authenticity (Park and Lee, 2009; Cheung and Thadani, 2012; Augusto and Torres, 2018), more cost effective, availability of countless information for infinite time (Lyons and Henderson 2005), increased regulation of eWOM activities by the consumers with the help of multiple tools and user-created content (Riegner 2007) etc.

So the concept of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) has gained significant notice not only by the modern business organizations, sellers or marketers but also by the scholars and researchers. Many studies have been conducted in this regard. Chevalier and Mayzlin (2006) as well as De Bruyn and Lilien (2008) have identified that eWOM exerts special implications on consumers' online buying decisions, as it is perceived by the consumers as an effective store of information (Yan et al. 2015).

In case of online purchase, consumers are naturally exposed to more perceived risks regarding the quality and performance of a product, service or brand. As they tend to buy the item without seeing its physical appearance directly, they spend more time and efforts in collecting, analyzing and evaluating sufficient information before taking the final purchase decision. EWOM helps actively in this regard as a potential source of different consumers' feedback, reviews, suggestions and recommendations, by which in turn, consumers' perceptions of brand image and buying behaviors are largely effected (Jalilvand and Samiei, 2012; Charo et al., 2015). While taking online purchase decisions, today's consumers heavily depend on the opinions provided by other consumers online, as they are believed to have more knowledge and expertise by using the commodity (Hu, et al., 2011). It was identified from another study that, among the total number of respondents, around 97.9 % considered online WOM as a reliable source before taking their purchase decision (Doh & Hwang, 2009). According to Lee et al. (2009), the online reviews provided by unknown community gained greater credence by majority consumers as compared to the reviews published on traditional mass media, such as newspaper, journals, radio or television. Some recent surveys also found that, 93% of consumers admitted that their buying process was hugely affected through online reviews, (Podium.com, 2017) which is an active ingredient of eWOM communication. Due to its significant role in developing brand reputation, awareness and positioning, eWOM is regarded as a major component of a company's electronic marketing mix (Bambauer-Sachse and Mangold, 2011) as well as online promotion mix.

The scope of eWOM is further expanded because of the widespread use of social media communications (facebook, linkedin, instagram etc) through the internet (Cheung and Thadani, 2012; Kudeshia and Kumar, 2017) as they offer vast opportunities for people to interact spontaneously, share their personal views and opinions, create mutual dependency and intimate relations with both the acquainted and unacquainted personalities all around the globe.

However, when consumers are involved in WOM communication online, they either express positive views or negative views, based on their after-purchase experience and satisfaction (Roy et al., 2017). So eWOM can be categorized into two types: positive and negative. When a consumer states any positive information about

a product/service/company, or emphasizes on its strengths/merits online, or suggests others to buy the same, it is considered as Positive eWOM. On the contrary, when a consumer states any negative information about a product/service/company, or emphasizes on its shortcomings/demerits online, or makes criticism, or suggests others not to buy the same, it is considered as Negative eWOM. By nature, disclosure of positive WOM causes favorable perception of products or services, reduces perceived risk and stimulate others' purchase intentions. Similarly, appearance of negative WOM causes unfavorable perception of products and demotivate others' purchase decisions (Arndt, 1967). Online feedback and opinions are found to have the same influence on consumers' online purchase decisions (Cheung et al., 2009). Positive eWOM is signified as a fruitful marketing tool by many researchers. Senecal and Nantel (2004) attempted to compare two groups of consumers in order to evaluate the significance of online feedback. They found that consumers who received suggestions from others (PWOM) online chose the suggested items twice as often as consumers who did not get any suggestion online. Still the influence of negative eWOM has obtained more attention of marketers as it is found to be greater than positive eWOM (Lee et al., 2008; Bambauer-Sachse and Mangold, 2011). The significance of negative eWOM becomes more provoked in situations where consumers face increased number of negative expressions from others (Lee et al, 2008). According to Chevalier & Mayzlin (2006) and Sun (2012), the role of negative eWOM to reduce sales is more forceful compared to the role of positive eWOM to expand sales. Though a few studies contrast with it and suggested that negative eWOM encourages consumers to involve more in evaluating the particular items, and thus the amount of sales is incremented (Doh and Hwang 2009; Kikumori and Ono 2013). Some researchers have suggested that consumers are more accustomed to reveal positive eWOM (PWOM) as compared to negative eWOM (NWOM) (Naylor and Kleiser, 2000). For example, the website comments regarding TV programs were analyzed by Godes and Mayzlin (2004) where they identified that positive admiration appeared almost twice as often as negative evaluations. Despite of the variability in the amount of positive and negative eWOM, marketers or companies must be aware of the fact that, PWOM is always created by the satisfied customers and NWOM is always created by the dissatisfied customers (Mangold et al., 1999). Hence the impact of these two can not be avoided.

### **III. Research Objectives**

The basic purpose of this study is to examine how the purchase decisions of online consumers are influenced by the electronic word-of-mouth communication, in the context of Bangladesh. Two specific objectives can be identified in this regard:

1. To differentiate between the impact of positive electronic word-of-mouth and negative electronic word-of-mouth communication
2. To offer some recommendations to the online retailers of Bangladesh for better managing electronic word-of-mouth interactions among their target consumers.

### **IV. Methodology of the Study**

This study has used quantitative method for the collection and analysis of relevant data. It has used both primary and secondary data. Primary data were mainly collected from a survey conducted on a sample size of 100 respondents of Sylhet city. Purposive sampling approach was being used as the respondents were selected based on the feature that they have used online media for evaluating and purchasing products or services. Closed-ended structured questionnaire was used for collecting data from the respondents. The questionnaire included some multiple choice questions as well as some Likert scale statements ranging from strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (5). All of the 100 questionnaires were effectively distributed and collected from the respondents after they filled up spontaneously. Data obtained from the questionnaire were properly analyzed with the help of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Besides, secondary data were collected from different journals, books, reports and publications in order to gain better insights in the theoretical aspects.

### **V. Results and Discussion**

In this section, the findings of the study are being presented and analyzed according to the objectives of the research.

#### **Analysis of Demographic features**

The demographic profile of the respondents are summarized in a table (Table A1) presented on the appendix section. The table highlights that among the 100 respondents, 62% were male and 38% were female who participated in the survey. 37% (the largest portion) of them were aged between the range of 18-25 years, while 31% were between 26-35 years, 11% were between 36-45 years, 14% were less than 18 years and the remaining 7% were more than 45 years of age. In case of education level, those with graduation degree were the majority of respondents representing 38% of the total number. The percentages of others having completed post graduation, higher secondary, secondary school and primary school were 16%, 24%, 14% and 8% respectively.

The profession of the sample data were categorized into four: 21% of them were jobholder, 12% were businessmen, 12% were housewife and the largest part, 55% were students, who are supposed to involve more in online purchasing activities. However most of the respondents of the study were found to be irregular online shoppers, comprising 47%. 23% were found to purchase items online yearly, 15% purchase quarterly, 13% purchase monthly and lastly only 2% purchase weekly.

**Factors Related to the Respondents' Online Purchase Decisions**

**Table 1:** Factors related to respondents' online buying behavior

Variables		Frequency	Percentage
Most influential factor in online purchase decision	Online advertisement	12	12.0
	Brand reputation	10	10.0
	Experts' opinions shared online	18	18.0
	Online reviews of users and customers	32	32.0
	Opinions of family, friends and associates shared online	28	28.0
Tendency of viewing online reviews before making purchase	Present	83	83.0
	Absent	17	17.0
Persons whose opinions are most preferable	Family members	24	24.0
	Friends	26	26.0
	Colleagues	7	7.0
	Relatives	9	9.0
	Experts	16	16.0
	Celebrities	10	10.0
	Unknown persons	8	8.0
Mostly used media to view consumers' opinions	Facebook	52	52.0
	Instagram	16	16.0
	Twitter	5	5.0
	Linkedin	5	5.0
	Youtube	16	16.0
	Emails	6	6.0
Total		100	100

Source: Survey data (2019)

Respondents were asked to select the factor that influence them most in purchasing products online and in this regard most of them (32%) selected the option of “Online reviews of users”, 28% selected “Opinions of family, friends and associates”, 18% selected “Experts’ opinions”, 12% selected “Online advertisements” and 10% selected “Brand reputation”. Among the total participants, the maximum number represented by 83% admitted that they tend to see the online reviews prior to their online purchase decisions and the rest of 17% opined oppositely. When respondents were asked to choose more specifically the persons whose opinions they prefer most in online purchase, majority of them selected “Friends” (26%) and “Family members” (24%) because of their close attachment. The other preferences were Experts (16%), Celebrities (10%), Relatives (9%), Unknown persons (8%) and Colleagues (7%). Besides, it was found from the survey that, Facebook gained the top position (52%) as the mostly used media for viewing consumers’ opinions and suggestions, due to its huge popularity among the young generations of Bangladesh. The other platforms selected by the respondents were Instagram (16%), Youtube (16%), Emails (6%), Twitter (5%) and LinkedIn (5%).

**Impact of Positive eWOM**

When consumers find other people sharing positive characteristics of a product/service or expressing their usage satisfaction on the online platforms, it influences their future possibility of buying the product from the company. The following table shows some common influences of such positive eWOM, where the multiple columns indicate the predefined responses of the participants on the five-point likert scales.

**Table 2:** Impact of Positive eWOM on Online Purchase Decision

		Taking immediate purchase decision	Getting motivated to buy the product online	Considering the opinion in online purchase	Suggesting others to buy the product online	Searching more information about the product	Checking and evaluating the source of information
N	Valid	100	100	100	100	100	100
	Missing	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mean		4.17	3.82	2.05	3.68	1.88	1.78

Mode	5	4	2	4	1	1
Std. Deviation	1.198	1.266	1.140	1.197	1.018	1.088

Source: Survey data (2019)

It can be seen from the table, the lowest mean value is 1.78 (more close to 1= Strongly agree and 2= Agree), which demonstrates that the maximum number of respondents significantly agreed to the fact that they tend to check and evaluate the source from which they get positive information regarding a particular product or service. They try to examine it in order to confirm its accuracy. They are also found to agree to the statements of searching more information about the item and considering the positive eWOM in future purchase decisions, where the mean values are 1.88 and 2.05 respectively. However the highest mean value can be seen as 4.17 (more close to 4= Disagree and 5= Strongly disagree), which indicates that most of the participants significantly disagreed to the statement of taking immediate buying decisions after being exposed to positive eWOM communication. Here the modal value is also highest. Besides, respondents expressed some sort of differing opinions to the statements of becoming motivated to buy the item online and recommending other people to buy, where the mean values are 3.82 and 3.68; standard deviation are 1.266 and 1.197 respectively and modal values are 4 for the both.

**Impact of Negative eWOM**

When consumers are exposed to negative features of a product or negative comments about a company in the online sources, it severely affects their future potentiality of buying the product from the company. The following table presents some common influences of such negative eWOM and the responses of participants in this regard.

**Table 3: Impact of Negative eWOM on Online Purchase Decision**

	Never purchasing the product online	Getting demotivated to buy online	Considering the opinion in online purchase	Suggesting others not to buy the product online	Searching more information about the product	Checking and evaluating the source of information
N Valid	100	100	100	100	100	100
Missing	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mean	2.57	1.68	2.22	3.04	2.18	2.55
Mode	1	1	2	5	2	2
Std. Deviation	1.506	.952	1.031	1.504	1.123	1.313

Source: Survey data (2019)

It can be seen from the table that the lowest mean value is 1.68 (more close to 1= Strongly agree and 2= Agree), which indicates that majority of respondents significantly agreed to the fact that they become demotivated to buy a product online after receiving negative information about it. The value of standard deviation is also lowest here which means respondents's answers are found to be more uniform in this statement. The participants also expressed their consent to the other statements, like searching more information, considering the negative opinion in online purchase, checking and evaluating the information source, never buying the item online etc, where the mean values are found as 2.18, 2.22, 2.55 and 2.57 respectively. The highest modal value is 5 that is of the statement of suggesting others to not to buy the item online.

**Impact of Positive eWOM versus Impact of Negative eWOM**

While taking an online purchase decision, both positive and negative word-of-mouth interactions are taken into account by consumers, but the magnitude of each of them may vary. In this study, an effort has been made to contrast between the two types of impacts. The following table depicts some of these factors:

**Table 4: Impact of Positive eWOM versus Impact of Negative eWOM**

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Most influential information in online purchase	Positive eWOM	42
	Negative eWOM	58
Tendency of buying products after seeing positive eWOM	Never	22
	Rarely	20
	Sometimes	25

	Most of the time	18	18.0
	Always	15	15.0
Tendency of buying products even after seeing negative eWOM	Never	30	30.0
	Rarely	28	28.0
	Sometimes	18	18.0
	Most of the time	12	12.0
	Always	12	12.0
Total		100	100

Source: Survey data (2019)

When respondents were asked which type of information about a product or service exerts more influence on their online purchase decisions, majority of them (58%) selected Negative eWOM as their answers. This is probably because negative comments grab more attention of the viewers and are better stored in their memory. When respondents were asked whether they tend to purchase items online after being exposed to positive eWOM, only 15% of them chose the option “Always” and 18% chose “Most of the time”. A significant number of people chose the options “Never” and “Rarely”, which indicates that their purchase decisions are not so stimulated because of receiving positive eWOM. On the other hand, when respondents were asked whether they tend to purchase online products even after being exposed to negative eWOM, 30% and 28% of them selected the options “Never” and “Rarely”, which indicates that their purchase decisions are significantly hampered due to receiving negative eWOM.

Thus from the overall analysis it can be said that, consumers' online purchase decisions are significantly influenced by positive eWOM as well as negative eWOM. But the negative eWOM demotivates consumers' online purchase decisions to somewhat greater extent than the amount of motivations created by positive eWOM to purchase the items. It means more people tend to decide not to purchase the online items because of receiving negative reviews from others, as compared to the people who tend to decide to purchase the items because of positive reviews from others.

## VI. Recommendations

Based on the study findings, the following points can be regarded as some recommendations to the online retailers or marketers of Bangladesh:

- They should realize the impact of word-of-mouth communications generated on the online platforms and initiate their marketing strategies accordingly.
- They should monitor the purchase decision process of the online customers and try to reduce their perceived risks associated with the pre-purchase as well as post-purchase activities.
- They should not solely depend on online advertisements, rather should utilize the benefits of electronic word-of-mouth as an effective promotional tool. For example, they can promote the positive reviews of significant customers for building brand image and reputation.
- They should try their best to maintain the quality of their products and services, so that customers' expectations can be fulfilled and favorable word-of-mouth communications can be developed in the online platforms.
- They should identify their satisfied and dissatisfied customers and motivate the satisfied ones to engage more in word-of-mouth communications by sharing their positive reviews and experiences online, especially through the social media, so that more customers can be encouraged to purchase the items.
- They should take planned efforts to better manage the negative word-of-mouth communications spread by the dissatisfied consumers. For example, they may investigate the reasons of customers' dissatisfaction, provide clarifications and overcome the shortcomings.
- They should give special attention to the negative eWOM as it greatly affects consumers' online purchase decisions by demotivating their future purchase intentions.

## VII. Conclusion

In the conclusion, it can be said that, the significance of online word-of-mouth communications can not be overlooked in this age of digitalization and fierce competition. Consumers are the final users and buyers of an organization's products or services. If they do not hold positive notion regarding the products or do not purchase them, all the efforts of the company go in vain. So consumers are the focal point for organizational prevalence and they depend on the interpersonal rapport evolved from eWOM for building product perceptions, selecting alternative brands, taking their purchase decisions and also in post-purchase evaluations. Realizing this aspect of consumer behavior is mandatory for all e-marketers in order to maintain their consistent survival and growth. Therefore it can be expected that the findings of this study can make contributions to the academic literature of marketing sector and help the online marketers of Bangladesh in better comprehending the influence of eWOM (both positive and negative) and in establishing their strategies accordingly. As the usage of

internet as well as social networking sites in the country is enhancing day by day, more and more people are becoming accustomed to use online sources and applications in buying and selling multifarious items, searching and evaluating products, viewing and analyzing the reviews and experiences of other users and sharing own perceptions, opinions and judgements. While forming their intention to purchase products online, consumers highly tend to prefer these informal facts and interactions over the assertions made by the producers or marketers or sellers about their own products or services. This evolving issue of eWOM is offering not only manifold opportunities, but also variegated challenges and threats to the e-marketers. The opinions of a satisfied customer may create more new potential customers for the company and similarly, the opinions of a dissatisfied customer may keep away many more potential customers from the company. So the online retailers of the country should take this into account carefully with a view to achieve their marketing objectives in a successful way.

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**Appendix**

**Table A1: Demographic Profile of the Respondents**

Demographic Variables		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	62	62.0
	Female	38	38.0
Age	Less than 18 years	14	14.0
	18-25 years	37	37.0
	26-35 years	31	31.0
	36-45 years	11	11.0
	More than 45 years	7	7.0
Education level	Primary School	8	8.0
	Secondary School	14	14.0
	Higher Secondary	24	24.0
	Graduation	38	38.0
	Post-graduation	16	16.0
Profession	Student	55	55.0
	Job holder	21	21.0
	Businessman	12	12.0
	Housewife	12	12.0
Frequency of online shopping	Weekly	2	2.0
	Monthly	13	13.0
	Quarterly	15	15.0
	Yearly	23	23.0
	Irregular	47	47.0
Total		100	100

Source: Survey data (2019)