

# Relationship Between Interpersonal Influence and E-wom in Social Networking Sites

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**Abstract:** *Enhanced socialization activities by individuals over online social networking platforms, marketers have found themselves a great opportunity to engage in peer to peer (P2P) communication via electronic word of mouth. The three behavioural dimensions highlighted in past literature about electronic word of mouth are information pass along behaviour, opinion giving and seeking behaviour. In order to study the association between social relationships and eWOM (Electronic word of mouth) in online social network websites one of the prominent social relationships of interpersonal influence has been selected, because it acts as a major factor in decision making by consumers. Keeping the same in mind interpersonal influence has been considered, to study its relationship with electronic word of mouth in online social network sites. For a better understanding of the stated relationship, three constituents of interpersonal influence i.e. value expressive, utilitarian & informational influence have been considered.*

**Index Terms:** *interpersonal influence, value expressive influence, informational influence, utilitarian influence, electronic word of mouth, online social network sites.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Till a couple of years ago, the internet was a one-way communication platform facilitating limited interactions through emails. However, with the advent of online social networking sites, there has been a sea change in the scenario. Online social networks are different from traditional media because of its model of the consumer to consumer networking. Online consumer to consumer (C2C) communication through social network sites, allow messages to be spread in word of mouth fashion i.e. quickly from one individual node in the network to the another. Word of mouth is one of the oldest media to communicate with peers, which is considered highly reliable and carries a reliable character.

The transfer of marketing related information, from one consumer to the others over social networking sites i.e. electronic word of mouth communication do make an influence on purchases by consumers. The importance of electronic word of mouth (eWOM) in the online ecosystem

has increased many folds than before to marketers, due to the emergence of online social network websites. The interactive nature of online social network sites, empowers an individual to generously share and seek opinions from other peer group members about any service/product experiences, affecting an individual's brand choice behaviour and sales of goods and services.[11]

There are acknowledged peers, which are linked on an online social network site to any user, who can influence an individual in his/her purchase or any other kind of decisions [18]. Majority of people who use social networking sites in a study conducted by Knappe & Kracklauer (2007) voted that their social networking links act as a source of information during buying decision process. Word of mouth is a crucial source of stimulus in the purchase of domestic goods, and advice from peer consumers about a product or service wields a superior impact than any other type of marketer-generated information.[2] This scenario highlights a need to study the association between social relationships and consumer to consumer electronic word of mouth behaviour.

Social relationships signify interaction between two or more individuals. Social relationship variables, in case of online social networking websites, are important for understanding electronic word of mouth (eWOM) behaviour among people. Electronic word of mouth offers explicit information, interactivity and empathetic listening, but the distance between the source of communication and the receiver is much lower than the distance in marketer induced communications. In order to study the association between social relationships and eWOM (Electronic word of mouth) in online social network websites, one of the social relationships of interpersonal influence was selected. Interpersonal influence is most important for the study of social relationships because it acts as a major factor in decision making by consumers.[10]

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

This part consists of a review of literature related to components of interpersonal influence and electronic word of mouth.

### A. Interpersonal Influence

There is no denying the fact that a consumer's purchase decision to buy any specific product is influenced by his or her reference group comprising of friends, family or peers etc. A consumer may consider following some group consciously, but in most of the cases, a person will agree

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with the group at subconscious level. The degree of consumer's predisposition to interpersonal influence may vary from one individual to another,[1],[3],[6].But, any individual who is more inclined to the social relationship of interpersonal influence will make an effort to satisfy the expectations of the reference groups by following group norms.[21] Interpersonal influence is important for the study of social relationship because it acts as a major factor in decision making by consumers [23].[22]To understand the interpersonal influence, one needs to understand three type of influence i.e. value expressive, utilitarian & informational influence.[28]

Value-expressive as well as utilitarian influence share a similar type of nature as both reflects a person's aspiration to conform to social group forces or norms because of ascertain expectation of rewards or in order to avoid some sanctions [17] [4] When people try to get themselves associated with a group in order to portray a particular kind of image to others, it leads to value expressiveness. Value-expressive function implies that the reflection of the product on the consumer is the main reason for a consumer to use this product. Value expressiveness mirrors a person's aspiration to augment his self-image. An individual with high levels of value expressiveness would show a strong need for association in terms of attaining similarity to a reference group and feelings for a peer referent.[5] Under this value expressive influence, an individual actively follows a groups beliefs and internalizes the values of the reference group. The consumer is under value-expressive function when the product usage intention depicts his/her social identity [7]. In simple terms, it means that people use a product or service to portray their belongingness to a group.

When users show a complaint behaviour in order to get praise from are ferece group or avoid punishment from the group, utilitarian influence occurs. Under utilitarian influence an individual strives to satisfy the expectations others have for him and this influence affects one's product purchase of service consumption behaviour.

When an individual complies with the expectations of other to receive rewards or avoid punishment, it leads to the occurrence of Utilitarian influence. But, when an individual uses a group's image or position to support his or her own ego or self-image through association or identification with the group, value-expressive influence occurs.

Informational influence occurs when an individual asks about informational support from members of his or her reference group, whom he or she considers being acredibleinformation source. This can be simply equated to a person, who is asking someone for some service or product related information in order to support his or her purchase decision i.e. referrer is considered as more knowledgeable. Informational influence is characterized by a desire to make informed choices. An individual interested in buying his first car posted in his online community about which car should he purchase within his limited budget. The people in his reference group gave their opinion to him about which car to purchase and that individual made the final decision based on the information received from reference group experts. This will be regarded as an informational influence. Informational influence can occur both voluntarily and involuntarily in social networking sites.

Acceptance behaviour is showcased by an individual under the informational interpersonal influence, compliance behaviour is portrayed under the utilitarian interpersonal influence.

### B. eWOM in online social networking sites

As per, sharing of product or service or brand-related information by former, current or potential customers via the mode of internet comprises of electronic word of mouth (eWOM). The influential power of e WOM can witness in the study conducted by (Senecal & Jacques, 2004), where it was found that people who consulted others online for recommendations have the tendency to buy a product or service as compared to those who have not consulted anybody. The three behavioural dimensions which are prominently highlighted in past literature about electronic word of mouth (eWOM) are information pass along behaviour, opinion giving and seeking behaviour.[9] In opinion giving behaviour people act as opinion leaders and try to influence the behavior of their followers. On the other hand, opinion giving behavior can be characterized by content pass along behavior of people through their social networking profiles and opinion seeking behavior is about people asking for opinion of others from their social network profiles about any of the products, services or some idea etc. eWOM in online networks was described to comprise of opinion leadership activities along with opinion seeking and information or content pass along behavior.[26] Based on this literature, for the purpose this study, eWOM in online networks is studied considering three variables of opinion giving, seeking and pass along. It is worth noting down that an individual acting as opinion leader in online social networking sites can also act as an opinion seeker or the situation could be vice-versa.[27]Brand advocates have been observed by marketers to recommend brands to others along with trying to seek more knowledge and keeping themselves updated with favorite brand knowledge. Brand advocates leads to amplification of word of mouth leading to boost in product/brand ratings and enhancing credibility in the market. Brand advocates acts as the customers who have reduced their consideration set to the minimum and are extremely in favor of a particular brand. Brand advocates do not need any kind of provocation to recommendations about the brand. Brand advocates over social platforms act as a voice of the brand showcasing their authentic and genuine feelings toward the brand. This can lead to inference that opinion leadership and pass along behavior of the users over social networks act as advocacy activities which lead to recommending of brand to others along with trying to seek more knowledge and keeping oneself updated with favorite brand information. Considering the interactions in social networking sites, opinion leaders can create positive impression of the brand by suggesting the brand to opinion seekers. On the other hand advocates can pass on information or their opinion on brands to contacts on their "friends" list on the social networking site whenever they find it fit to share.

India is having 355 million active internet users [8] India has the largest number of Face book Users in the word, counting nearly to 241 million.[25]The extensive social interactions among multiple consumers over the online

social network sites have created an information-intensive environment where users or non-users of a product or service can effortlessly and swiftly publish their opinions or thoughts. Due to this reason, online social networking sites play a noteworthy role in distribution and dispersion of marketing information and acts as a major source of eWOM. It is important for marketers to have better learning regarding the information interchange patterns of individuals using online social network sites. For the same reason, interpersonal influence has been selected to study the association with electronic word of mouth occurrence on online social networking sites. In other words, we can say that, does interpersonal relationship play a part in online social networking website. The consideration of all three types of interpersonal influence, to study their effect on the occurrence of eWOM is which is less explored in past literature and particularly from the perspective of India.

### III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study was a two-phase study that started with exploratory qualitative research using focus groups and it was followed by the extensive quantitative study.

#### A. Measures

In order to get qualitative inputs for the purpose of framing the research instrument, exploratory qualitative research using focus group was completed to discover which components of interpersonal influence and eWOM actually mattered to social network site users. For the purpose of same 2 focus groups were conducted based on the framework of Krueger (1994). Focus group interviews were conducted in two cities of Punjab (a state of India) i.e. Mohali and Jalandhar. A set of predefined questions were asked of the participants during the focus groups. Considering the output of focus groups and borrowing items from past literature, an instrument consisting of questions related to interpersonal influence (informational, value-expressive and utilitarian) and eWOM (opinion giving, opinion seeking and pass along behaviour) among users of social network websites was prepared. The instrument was submitted to five academicians for evaluation. After making the corrections suggested by experts in the instrument, considering the purview of this study, a revised instrument was shared with the same five academic experts for re-evaluation. Upon confirmation of appropriateness from the experts, a pilot study was initiated. Based on the data collected for the purpose of the pilot study, using PASW Statistics software, the reliability of the instrument was found to be more than 0.80.

#### B. Sample and Procedure

Primary data in the form of the responses from online social networking site users was obtained with the help of widely used and well-known method of as ample survey, utilizing structured questionnaire. The study sample consisted of one thousand social networking site users (i.e. from Face book). Snowball sampling technique was used for the identification of sample from the population under study i.e. India. The sample unit in the study comprised of any individual who is having an account on Face book and belongs to India. Otherwise, there was no limitation as to who can take the survey. Age of survey participants varied from nineteen years to forty-eight years with the majority of

the respondents in the range of nineteen to twenty-five years.

#### C. Administration of the Instrument

The final instrument was administered using the web-based questionnaire survey method using the service of surveymonkey.com. The link to the survey was shared through Face book through the account of the researcher and through personal e-mails. Connections (friends) in researcher's Face book network were also requested to share the survey link from their profiles. This act of sharing the link for data collection from the researcher's network and from the socialnetwork of the friends was repeated after every 48 hours, until, a usable set of 1000 filled questionnaires were not completed.

### IV. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

In order to study the relationship between social relationships and eWOM, the technique of stepwise multiple regression has been applied. Stepwise multiple regression assessed the relationship between the dependent variable i.e. electronic word of mouth and interpersonal influence variables. Firstly, a stepwise regression was applied to find the influence of components of interpersonal influence on the occurrence of information pass along behaviour on social networking sites.

Table 4.1: Step-wise regression for pass along behaviour

Mo del	Variable	$\beta$	R2	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	Signific ance
1	First Regression: (Dependent variable: Information pass along behavior)	-	0.136	0.135	-
	Utilitarian Influence	0.369	-	-	0.000
	F=157.114				
2	Second Regression: (Dependent variable: Information pass along behavior)	-	0.169	0.167	-
	Utilitarian Influence	0.236	-	-	0.000
	Informational Interpersonal Influence	0.225	-	-	0.000
	F=101.480				
3	Third Regression: (Dependent variable: Information pass along behavior)	-	0.185	0.182	-
	Utilitarian Influence	0.163			0.000
	Informational Interpersonal Influence	0.203			0.000
	Value-Expressive Influence	0.152			0.000
	F=75.161				

Considering the output obtained from table number 4.1, in the third model, Utilitarian influence, informational interpersonal influence and value-expressive influence emerge as predictors to information pass along behaviour in social networking sites and account for 18.2percent ( $R^2=0.182, P<0.05$ ). Information pass alongbehaviour is affected by all the variables considered in the construct of interpersonal influence.

In this next section, a stepwise regression was applied to find the influence of components of interpersonal influence on the occurrence of opinion seeking in social networking sites.

Table 4.2: Step-wise regression for opinion seekingbehaviour

Model	Variable	$\beta$	R2	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	Significance
1	First Regression: (Dependent variable: opinion seeking)	-	0.174	0.173	-
	Informational Interpersonal Influence	0.417	-	-	0.000
	F=210.406				
2	Second Regression: (Dependent variable: opinion seeking)	-	0.198	0.196	-
	Informational Interpersonal Influence	0.345	-	-	0.000
	Value Expressive Influence	0.170	-	-	0.000
	F=122.833				

As per the output obtained from table number 4.2, in the second model, informational interpersonal influence and value-expressive influence emerge as predictors to opinion seekingbehaviour in social networking sites and accounts for 19.6percent ( $R^2=0.196, P<0.05$ ). Utilitarian influence is not accounted for in any of the two models, signifying it does not predict the occurrence of opinion seeking by people on social networking sites.

Thirdly, a stepwise regression was applied to find the influence of components of interpersonal influence on the occurrence of opinion giving in social networking sites.

Table 4.3: Step-wise regression for opinion givingbehaviour

Model	Variable	$\beta$	R2	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	Significance
1	First Regression: (Dependent variable: opinion giving)	-	0.030	0.029	-
	Informational Interpersonal Influence	0.172	-	-	0.000
30.581					

Only one regression was obtained as per table 4.3 and it was the only informational interpersonal influence that emerged as predictors to opinion giving behaviour in social networking sites, which accounted for 2.9percent ( $R^2=0.029, P<0.05$ ).The result also signifies that neither

utilitarian influence, nor value expressive influence predicts the occurrence of opinion giving by people on social networking sites. The informational interpersonal influence does predict the occurrence of opinion giving but the relationship between the two is weak.

To understand the moderating influence of age on susceptibility to interpersonal influence in predicting the occurrence of anelectronic word of mouth, stepwise regression analysis was run. The results have been depicted in table 4.4.

Table 4.4: Beta value of Age as a Moderator

Dependent Variable	Independent Variable	Moderator	$\beta$
Pass along behaviour	Utilitarian Influence	Age	-0.060
	Informational Interpersonal Influence		-0.083
	Value-Expressive Influence		-0.081
Opinion Seeking	Informational Interpersonal Influence		-0.075
	Value-Expressive Influence		-0.101
Opinion Giving	Informational Interpersonal Influence		-0.079

The demographic variable of age as a predictor of theoccurrence of anelectronic word of mouth by people on social networking sites. The  $\beta$  value for age was negative when its moderation was calculated with each of the independent variables under study. This leads to the conclusion that hat as the age of the consumer increases their involvement in theelectronic word of mouth creation decreases.

V.DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The explosion in the number of people using online social networking sites has forced the marketers to redesign their communication strategies. Increase in the socialization activities by individuals over the online social networks presents a great opportunity to engage in peer to peer communication and as a result enhance the eWOM behavior. This study of relationship between variables of interpersonal influence and electronic word of mouth on social networking sites suggested that eWOM is influenced by the informational, utilitarian and value-expressive interpersonal influence. Overall, regression analysis



advocated that the three variables of interpersonal influence aid as an influential driver affecting electronic word of mouth in online social networking websites. It has been found that when individuals on online social networking websites are more susceptible to informational interpersonal influence, they are more likely to engage in opinion seeking, opinion giving and information pass along behaviour. The individuals who are more susceptible to utilitarian interpersonal influence, are more prone to engage in information pass along behaviour in online social networking sites. When an individual is found to be more susceptible to value-expressive interpersonal influence, the changes for this individual to engage in opinion seeking and information pass along behaviour are high. Informational Interpersonal Influence leads to increased likelihood of eWOM (electronic word of mouth) in social networking sites as compared to value expressive and utilitarian influence. The age of an individual makes an impact on the electronic word of mouth creation. There is an inverse relationship between age of the online social network site users and occurrence of an electronic word of mouth considering the social relationship of interpersonal influence. Young individuals have been found to be more susceptible to share opinions or seek opinions or indulge in the behaviour of information pass along over online social networks.

Information pass along behaviour in social networking sites can be triggered by all three types of interpersonal influence i.e. utilitarian, informational and value-expressive influence. Opinion seeking behaviour is triggered generally by informational and value-expressive interpersonal influence. Lastly, the behaviour of opinion giving is triggered by the informational interpersonal influence.

## VII. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The research did not take into account the gender status of the respondents in the study. The gender status would have helped in understanding the susceptibility of occurrence for eWOM based upon interpersonal influence among the male and female population. The focus of this study was limited only to the online social network site of Facebook. Through a broad review of the literature, an effort to assimilate all obtainable literature was made, yet understanding may have been reserved by the visualization of the researcher.

## VII. CONCLUSION

The online social networking sites in India are likely to grow further in years to come. Online social networking site platforms offer a medium to spread of word of mouth electronically. Due to a high degree of interactivity, online social networking sites enable individuals to copiously give, seek, and pass along information about the service or product experiences. This sharing of interpersonal information among peer group members lead to an effect on consumers' brand choice behaviour and sales of goods and services. Marketers need to understand the relationship between interpersonal influence and the sharing of eWOM by users over OSNS (Online social networking Sites). This study of the relationship between variables of interpersonal influence and electronic word of mouth on social networking sites suggested that eWOM is influenced by the

informational, utilitarian and value-expressive interpersonal influence. This study further helps in validating that interpersonal influence affects eWOM but adds to the theory that as the age of OSNS users increases the degree of interpersonal influence on EWOM decreases.

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