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Role of electronic word-of-mouth content and valence in influencing online purchase behavior

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ABSTRACT

Electronic word of mouth (eWOM) becomes an important tool for online consumers for evaluating and selecting a product. Extant research has mainly studied how various eWOM characteristics such as valence, volume, and text-based eWOM content affect purchase behavior. This study, for the first time, has explored the role of mixed neutral WOM valence and rich eWOM content on online purchase intention. Initially, the qualitative analysis method was used to conduct in-depth interviews with experts-cum-online shoppers from different fields. Purposive sampling was used to select 14 experts and online shoppers from diverse fields. Inductive analysis was conducted to analyze the interview generated content. It helped in forming various codes and categories in explaining eWOM constructs. Content analysis was also used to analyze the importance of various factors in key constructs (themes) affecting online behavior. The finding from the content analysis confirmed that both mixed neutral eWOM and rich eWOM content positively affects online purchase intention. This study has also explored how insights derived from the content analysis of valence and content can help marketers to develop an online marketing strategy. Research implications and future research directions have been discussed in this paper.

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Electronic word of mouth; mixed neutral eWOM; online review; eWOM valence; online purchase intention

1. Introduction

Globally, 61% online shoppers give importance to the electronic word of mouth (eWOM) before making a purchase decision (Charlton 2015; Floyd et al. 2014). In India, eWOM is considered as a key driver that aids people in making an online purchase as 20–50% of online sales are influenced by eWOM (Marketingbuzzar 2015). Hence, marketers should find the right customer segment and analyze online behavior before launching any eWOM campaign to engage those customers.

The earlier research studied how various eWOM characteristics such as valence (type of online review), volume (number of reviews), review content, and digital platform affected purchase behavior (Cheung and Thadani 2012). Online purchase behavior (especially purchase intention) is an important aspect of online behavior. However, along with the advancement of digital technologies, online shopping behavior is getting

affected by changing dynamic (in the form of new eWOM characteristics) of the eWOM communication process (Erkan and Evans 2016).

eWOM has the potential to generate nonfinal outcomes like online purchase intention. The new factors like mixed neutral eWOM and rich eWOM content have gained importance among the online shoppers. However, their roles in influencing online behavior (purchase intention) are largely unexplored in the context of eWOM communication framework as represented by Cheung and Thadani (2012). Similarly, the content analysis of eWOM valence and content not only helps in product and service innovation but also helps in digital strategy formulation. Proper digital strategy and promotions can also affect online purchase behavior. But these facts have been largely unexplored in the Indian context. Hence, our study has explored these issues in the Indian context.

This study has addressed three major issues. First, previous studies on eWOM valence have primarily focused on positive and negative WOM effect on consumer behavior, and less focus was given to study mixed neutral nature of eWOM valence (Chevalier and Mayzlin 2006; Tang, Fang, and Wang 2014). The literature analyzing the role of neutral eWOM is scanty and fragmented. Hence, there is a research gap in exploring how mixed neutral eWOM affects overall trust on eWOM and the online purchase intention of the consumers. Second, the improvement in the web technologies allows online visitors to share rich review content (video- and image-based review). However, limited research has been conducted to study the role of rich media eWOM content on purchase intention and customer engagement. This creates a research gap to examine the effect of rich eWOM content on purchase intention. Finally, research indicates that the insight about the customers' need-based in-depth analysis of both valence and review content can help marketers develop video review of a product with 'humorous message, suitable multimedia effect, and disguised commercial intent' (Hsieh, Hsieh, and Tang 2012). This type of video review can help marketers in engaging online users. Research studies are yet to examine how to use this insight in formulating a digital strategy. This indicates a gap in examining whether insights from eWOM valence and volume can help in formulating digital strategies.

Based on the above discussions, the following research questions remain largely unexplored in the Indian context, i.e., RQ1: How does eWOM valence (positive or negative or mixed neutral) affect the eWOM credibility and purchase intention? RQ2: How do different types of rich eWOM content influence eWOM credibility and purchase intention? RQ3: How do eWOM valence and content support the formulation of digital strategies? These questions raise the need to study the following objectives: RO1: To study the importance of eWOM valence (especially mixed neutral eWOM) on eWOM credibility and purchase intention, RO2: To study the roles of various eWOM content on eWOM credibility and purchase intention, RO3: To study how insights from eWOM valence and content can help marketers in formulating digital strategies.

The findings of our study can help marketers present the most convincing mixed neutral reviews to prospective online customers. Second, our study also uniquely deciphers how rich media (image, video, info-graphics, etc.)-based online reviews from existing customers and firms affect purchase intention and help customers in evaluating products. Hence, this study elaborately discusses how online purchase behavior can be enhanced by using the rich eWOM content. Third, this study, for the first time, examines

how Indian firms could make use of the insights derived from both eWOM valence and content in formulating the digital marketing strategy.

This study provides three major contributions to the extant literature. First, it explores the importance of mixed neutral WOM and discusses how managers can use it to enhance customers' online purchase intention. Second, it presents the increasing importance of rich media online review in influencing online purchase intention, and how the manager can influence customers to write rich media review content. Third, it clearly defines how managers can form actionable marketing strategies based on the insight developed from customers' voice in the form of eWOM valence and eWOM content.

2. Literature review

The importance of eWOM is increasing in influencing online shopping behavior. Recent research on eWOM has indicated that the power of eWOM had more influence on tour destination image than that of face-to-face eWOM (Jalilvand and Heidari 2017). It was also found that the effect of eWOM touring intention got amplified with the presence of city image (Doosti et al. 2016).

The initial phase of research on eWOM valence mostly focused on analyzing how positive and negative valence affected the dispersion of online review and online sales (Godes and Mayzlin 2004). Research studies have also identified various motivating factors in influencing online users in reading eWOM valence (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004; Jalilvand and Samiei 2012). Interestingly, it was found in a study that detailed negative WOM had an effect on online sales than that of positive review valence (Chevalier and Mayzlin 2006). Increased eWOM volume tends to generate more positive WOM (PWOM) and positively affects online sales (Duan, Gu, and Whinston 2008). Researchers found that PWOM positively moderated customers' trust and belief toward online vendors and built customers' confidence in taking online purchase decision (Cheung, Lee, and Thadani 2009). Researchers later found that besides PWOM and neutral WOM (NWOM), the role and volume of neutral WOM were also increasing (McAlister, Sonnier, and Shively 2012). The research has also indicated that credibility and effectiveness of eWOM valence were greatly influenced when these reviews were posted on a third-party website (Floyd et al. 2014). The study of Babić Rosario et al. (2016) unveiled an interesting finding that 'negative eWOM does not always jeopardize sales, but high variability does'. Most of the above research studies were conducted to study the roles of PWOM and NWOM; however, a recent study has analyzed the nature of neutral eWOM. This study indicated that neutral eWOM could be two types. The first type is called indifferent neutral eWOM (INWOM), which contains only product/service details. The second type is called mixed neutral eWOM (MNWOM), which contains both pros and cons details of a product/service (Tang, Fang, and Wang 2014). As per the opportunity–motivation–ability (OMA) theory, MNWOM provides an opportunity to online shoppers to compare products based on both pros and cons details. This enhanced the credibility of online review and positively affected online sales (MacInnis, Moorman, and Jaworski 1991; Tang, Fang, and Wang 2014). However, studies are yet to analyze how mixed neutral eWOM affects the nonfinancial outcome of eWOM communication such as online purchase intention. In the practical implication, sales may be more preferable than purchase intention; however, the study on the effect of

MNWOM on purchase intention may bring more rich insights about the immediate purchase or future purchase behavior of online shoppers in India. This raises the need to study our first research question (RQ-1).

Extant research has mostly focused on text-based online reviews. Customers adopt online reviews when they find that the reviews from different sources are consistent and repetitive (Celso Augusto and Vargas Rossi 2008). Research studies have indicated that the detailed online review content in the form of customer feedback enhances the credibility of a product to the prospective customers (Daugherty and Hoffman 2014). Similarly, customers found online review credible when review content was in-depth and was shared by an authoritative source (Cheung and Thadani 2012). Moreover, eWOM content becomes viral when reviews are presented with a humorous tone and multimedia effect (Hsieh, Hsieh, and Tang 2012). In a recent study, the result indicated that detailed positive review content on different online media helped companies to build a strong online brand (Kim and Johnson 2016). However, previous studies did not analyze the roles of rich eWOM content in influencing online behavior (King, Racherla, and Bush 2014). It has been found that careful analysis of online review content helped a firm in implementing product and service innovations (Andreassen and Streukens 2009). However, limited research has been conducted to study how content analysis of online review helped in formulating online marketing strategies (Lang and Hyde 2013). The above review raised the need to study the influence of eWOM valence and content on online behavior (RQ2) and digital strategy (RQ3).

3. Research method

This study has used qualitative analysis method for examining the roles of online content and mixed neutral valence on purchase intention. It has been found that online consumer behavior becomes an important factor for planning an effective eWOM campaign in emerging countries. The online behavior is largely influenced by various demographic factors (Roy, Datta, and Basu 2017; Tran and Strutton 2013). A recent survey by Deloitte Digital on online consumer behavior across nine countries (developed and emerging) revealed that customer behavior 'varies based on country and by micro-characteristics within the market'. This study found that various factors like age, income, digital experience, etc., of Indian consumers are different from that of other countries (Lobaugh 2016). These factors make Indian online consumer behavior distinct as many users (older and less net savvy) still prefer offline shopping (Roy, Datta, and Basu 2017). Earlier research on the scales of eWOM valence and content was mainly confined to the context of the US and other Western countries. eWOM information (content) plays an important role in influencing low and high involvement consumers in the different cultural and country-specific contexts. Online consumers from developed nations (like the US) take less time to process eWOM information than consumers from emerging nations (India) (Krishnamurthy and Kumar 2018). Moreover, eWOM valence and eWOM content are becoming popular among online shoppers in India for making a purchase decision (Pauwels, Aksehirl, and Lackman 2016). Hence, these constructs need to be studied in the Indian context to understand Indian consumer behavior and attitude toward eWOM. Given the dearth of literature in the Indian context, extant research has indicated that qualitative content analysis could be a good alternative to quantitative

method in explaining the eWOM content and mixed neutral eWOM in an interpretive paradigm (Bryman and Bell 2013; Das, Mukherjee, and Roy 2016). Qualitative content analysis can help researchers in analyzing data collected from 'interviewing and observation' process for bringing new insights into a phenomenon in a new context (Graneheim and Lundman 2004). Therefore, content analysis was used to analyze the 'practical applicability, promise, and relevance' of eWOM valence and content in the Indian context (Downe-Wamboldt 1992). A detailed research process has been presented in [Appendix](#).

In order to generate related content about eWOM valence and volume, in-depth expert interviews (all experts were also online shoppers) were conducted. This study used purposive sampling and selected experts with good overall knowledge and experience (over 10 years) in their related fields (academic, legal, IT industry, online marketing, and online retails) and also having over 5 years' online shopping experience for an in-depth interview (Pfadenhauer 2009). In this study, research was carried out in two phases. In the first phase, an inductive approach was used to conduct in-depth unstructured interviews with experts from different fields (Bryman and Bell 2013). Unstructured interviews are generally used by researchers to generate greater insight into various constructs representing relatively new ideas in a new research context (Gill et al. 2008). In this study, unstructured interviews were used to gather expert views on two new constructs including (i) roles of MNWOM and (ii) rich eWOM content on purchase intention in Indian online retail context. This phase helped in developing 'rough definition of research questions' for addressing the research gaps. After few unstructured interviews, rest of the interviews were conducted in the semi-structured mode in the second phase. In this phase, 'Grand Tour Questions' and 'Prompts' were used to engage experts to share their real-life experience and knowledge about the key topics (Leech 2002). Researchers have found that inductive content analysis method helps in analyzing new phenomenon in an objective and systematic way (Elo and Kyngäs 2008). In the second phase, the inductive content analysis was used with prior information about research questions and objectives.

3.1 Sampling and sample size

In this study, each expert representing his/her organization was considered as a unit of analysis. In total, 14 individuals (experts) were chosen from 14 different organizations representing different industries. These experts also shared their views as online shoppers. Purposive sampling was used to select respondents, and the selection was based on accessibility, resource, and time availability (Rowley 2002). This study was used to confirm the reliability, variability, and generalizability of the result.

Many social researchers support a small number of samples for in-depth interviews in order to maintain close interaction and engagement with the respondents in a natural setting (in an uncontrolled environment) (Crouch and McKenzie 2006). The results indicate that when semi-structured or unstructured interviews are conducted saturation (a point when no new concept/points are generated during further interviews) happened within first 12 interviews (Galvin 2015). Hence, the sample size of 14 experts was found to be sufficient (refer [Table 1](#)) in this study.

Table 1. Demographic details of expert-cum-online shoppers.

Interviewee number	Interviewee's (expert-cum-online shoppers) domain	Online shopping experience (in years)
1	e-Governance and legal policies	8
2	Education industry	6
3	Telecom industry	8
4	Online retail and marketing	6
5	Online retail and marketing	7
6	Legal issues in online sales	6
7	Online retail and marketing	8
8	Online retail and marketing	6
9	Education industry	6
10	Education industry	8
11	Telecom industry	6
12	IT industry	7
13	IT and e-commerce industry	6
14	Telecom industry	8

3.2 Data collection

Data collection protocol ensured that data was collected by using various methods and sources in order to triangulate it. Expert interview, observation, and archival data (data collected from leading e-commerce platforms) were used. Field data collection was done by audio recording and using memo notes. Recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim as written notes. Altogether 112-page transcribed document was created for further analysis. Additionally, researchers used memo notes to record nonverbal cues such as body movement and facial expression of interviewees while sharing their views (Adler and Rottunda 2006).

3.3 Preparing for content analysis

Since there are limited research and fragmented knowledge about mixed neutral eWOM and rich eWOM content, inductive analysis becomes suitable to explore their roles in Indian context. Inductive analysis was started with identifying specific observations (views from interviewees). Data analysis was aimed to link these specific observations with the general trend. Specific observations from different interviews were categorized and linked to represent the whole or larger thoughts (themes) (Elo and Helvi 2008).

Inductive analysis was planned in three phases (Elo and Helvi 2008). The first phase was the preparation phase in which units of analysis were selected based on research questions. Extant literature defined the unit of analysis as a letter, or word, or sentence, or a phrase (Graneheim and Lundman 2004). In this study, the unit of analysis was identified for developing open codes. A set of minimum words or phrases that represented a whole new meaning of fact or event related to the target construct (Graneheim and Lundman 2004) were identified. Thus, the unit of analysis is the foundation for generating content coding in subsequent phases. While selecting the unit of analysis, the expressed meaning (stated) and latent meaning (through observation) of content was considered. This helped in relating the content of expert interview to specific roles and situations of the speaker (whether expert shares his/her view as an expert or online purchaser) while analyzing their views (Elo and Helvi 2008; Morse 1994).

3.4 Inductive content analysis

The second phase of qualitative content analysis is organizing data using inductive approach. The inductive content analysis consists of open coding, generation of categories (axial coding), and creation of related themes (abstraction) (Elo and Helvi 2008; Corbin and Strauss 1990). In this study, open codes were created based on the units of analysis related to the key topical areas under discussion. After generation of all open codes, a set of related codes were identified to represent a condensed meaning of a fact. This led to the generation of a category (Graneheim and Lundman 2004). One or more category(ies) were grouped to represent a single theme (Goulding 2005).

3.5 Open coding

Before open coding, the data was transcribed from 14 expert interviews. Texts were read and re-read to make notes and headlines (Elo and Helvi 2008). Initially, authors have written headlines to represent all aspects that emerged from the interview contents. In the next step, the lists of similar codes or redundant codes were identified. Here, the objective was to reduce a large number of codes into a smaller set of codes representing all concepts. Once the refined set of codes were available from all interview contents, researchers made the comparison of codes and tried to find out commonality among codes in that group. Afterward, researchers found out a set of open codes that represented a phenomenon or concept (Corbin and Strauss 1990). For example, researchers collected all open codes that represented mixed online review (both positive and negative reviews). All such codes (14 in number) exclusively defined interviewees' perception and views about the mixed type of review. All possible codes were put in a single group until saturation happened to represent mixed neutral review. This group represented a category named as mixed neutral reviews (Tang, Fang, and Wang 2014). Similarly, the grouping of related codes was done to generate categories like PWOM, negative WOM, rich eWOM content, purchase intention, etc. Hence, a category represented a set of similar observation or expert views about various aspects of an eWOM construct. Codes in a category not only represented a similar idea but were also completely different from the codes in other categories (Dey 2003). For example, codes in MNWOM are different from that of positive WOM. Similarly, codes in category 'depth of review content' represented different concept/meaning than codes listed under 'rich media review content'. In this study, a category is generated by grouping the codes that represent the same phenomenon/concept (Elo and Helvi 2008).

The connections of open codes and axial codes were cross-checked to avoid multicollinearity of the variables and their association with more than one construct. The associations between the constructs were checked to find out the common themes (Cavanagh 1997; Graneheim and Lundman 2004). For example, MNWOM, PWOM, and negative WOM represent 'customer sentiment and correspond to the theme' of eWOM valence (types of review). Hence, eWOM valence represents a theme for all sentiments of the online review. Similarly, categories like 'online purchase decision', 'online purchase intention', and 'previous online experience' can be integrated into the theme of 'online purchase behavior'.

3.6 Reliability and validity of the content analysis

In order to enhance the trustworthiness of the research study, exhaustive support from the extant literature was documented against the formation of the categories (Elo and Helvi 2008). In this study, the categories were conceptually validated based on existing literature (Dey 2003). For example, the categories like MNWOM, PWOM, negative WOM, rich media content, referral marketing, online purchase intention, etc., were conceptually validated from the extant literature (Cheung and Thadani 2012; Godes and Mayzlin 2004; Tang, Fang, and Wang 2014).

In order to enhance the reliability of this study, it was ensured that the codes, related categories, and themes were also supported by data (Elo and Helvi 2008; Polit and Beck 2004). To ensure internal validity of the content analysis, two team members initially performed open coding and categorization (Graneheim and Lundman 2004). There were disagreements among the coders for labeling open codes and related categorization. Team members discussed the apparent difficulty in labeling the codes and deleted some redundant codes. Afterward, members again performed categorization based on the reduced set of open codes. Kappa statistics were obtained to analyze inter-coder reliability among two coders for categorization, and the obtained kappa value of 0.799, which was found within the acceptable limit. Researchers also used 'member checking mechanism' to improve the credibility of analyses (Turner and Coen 2008). Researchers discussed the results (agreement and disagreement) with two experts from industry. Based on the mutual discussion, final open codes and categories were developed for further review by an expert in the online selling domain.

The credibility of the study was ensured by selecting experts with varied experience in different fields (Graneheim and Lundman 2004). Domain experts were selected from various fields who were directly and indirectly attached with online shopping. For example, experts from telecom (platform providers), IT company (e-commerce solution providers), academia (teaching experts), and online retailers (direct online sellers) formed a 'critical reference group', which explained various construct from different perspectives. They discussed the research questions both as an online purchaser and domain expert. Hence, 'shedding light on the research question from a variety of aspects' ensured the credibility of this study (Patton 1987).

4. Results from the content analysis

The third phase of content analysis consisted of analyzing and presenting the results for developing the conceptual map or model or construct relations.

4.1 Inductive analysis

This analysis identified 66 open codes that can be grouped into 13 categories until the codes obtained theoretical saturation (Elo and Helvi 2008; Polit and Beck 2004) (refer Table 2).

Inductive analysis table indicated the frequency of the open codes in the transcript and memo. In this table, many codes under each category indicate low frequency. Hence, an optimal table (refer Table 3) was developed based on important factors (designated by codes

Table 2. Inductive content analysis.

Coded word	Frequency of words	eWOM categories	eWOM theme
Review with pros and cons details	29	Mixed neutral WOM	eWOM valence
Mixed neutral views	27		
Review with positive and negative details	24		
Review explaining positive and negative feature	18		
Elaborate way of explaining positive and negative experience	17		
Review with both positive and negative experience	15		
Review with positive and negative justification	14		
Mixed feedback containing positive and negative view	10		
Both positive and negative reviews	10		
Indifferent neutral experience	12		
Review with comparative analysis of good and bad features	6		
Review sharing positive and negative attributes	4		
Review containing good and bad experience	2		
Reviews with good and bad opinions	1		
Positive features supersedes negative review	1		
<i>Positive experience</i>	19	Positive review (PWOM)	
Many positive reviews – manipulated ones	9		
Too many positive reviews by sponsored ones	7		
Too many positive reviews	7		
Customer feels skeptical for too many positive	4		
Many positive reviews with justification	2		
Positive review meeting expectation	2		
Heavy positive rating by users	2		
Positive review for products	1		
<i>Negative experience</i>	41	Negative review (NWOM)	
Many negative reviews – competitor action	17		
Negative review for service	8		
Many negative reviews – service and support issues	6		
Negative review makes customer cautious	6		
Negative review with justification	3		
Negative feedback	3		

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued).

Coded word	Frequency of words	eWOM categories	eWOM theme
<i>Detailed review content</i>	33	Depth of review content	eWOM content
Useful text review	32		
Review with a clear format and relevant detail	17		
Fact-based review	14		
Review content with proper justification	13		
Online review with product comparison	11		
Content comparing competing brands	6		
Detailed review on third-party website	6		
Detailed review content for high-value product	4		
<i>Relevant and short video review</i>	41	Rich media review content	
Image review with a comparison of product and service	26		
Rich media review with positive and negative details	11		
Visual review for aesthetic value	9		
Info graphics-based review	7		
Useful video review for technology product	7		
Audio review with details	4		
Paid review	12	Sponsored review content	
Rich media (image and texts) helps in the purchase decision	21	Online purchase decision	Online purchase behavior
Review that fulfills my needs and expectation	14		
Detailed review stating favorable terms and condition	48	Online purchase intention	
Review from actual users	25		
Rich media detailed review affects purchase intention	16		
Rich media (image and texts) positively affects in purchase intention	14		
Positive review of past users	14		
Negative review adversely affects purchase intention	6		
Service issues negatively affect purchase intention	3		
Online experience	7	Previous online experience	
Review offering free trial and incentive	6	Incentive for writing review	Online marketing strategy
Provide incentives to buyers to share detailed feedback	4		
Request existing customer to share detailed feedback	19	Request customers for writing review	
Employ clear review format	5	Offer upgraded review sharing platform	
Allow customer share to share their feedback in video and image format	4		
Regularly upload detailed audio and video review to educate the customer	3		
Share review of new products with existing customers	3	Referral marketing	
Check customer feedback for augmenting company's products and supports	7		

Table 3. Optimal Pareto table.

Open code	Categories	Theme
Review with pros and cons details	MNWOM	eWOM valence
Mixed neutral views		
Review with positive and negative details		
Review explaining the positive and negative feature		
Elaborate way of explaining positive and negative experience		
Review with both positive and negative experience		
Review with positive and negative justification		
Mixed feedback containing positive and negative view		
Both positive and negative reviews		
Negative experience		
Many negative reviews – competitor action	NWOM	
Positive experience	PWOM	
Detailed review of past users	Depth of review content	eWOM content
Useful text review		
Review with a clear format and relevant detail		
Fact-based review		
Review content with proper justification		
Indifferent neutral experience		
Online review with product comparison		
Relevant and short video review		
Image review with a comparison of product and service		
Rich media review with positive and negative details		
Visual review for aesthetic value	Rich media review content	
Detailed review stating favorable terms and condition		
Review from actual users		
Rich media detailed review affects purchase intention		
Rich media (image and texts) positively affects in purchase intention		
Rich media (image and texts) helps in purchase decision		
Review that fulfills my needs and expectation		
Request existing customer to share detailed feedback		
Paid review		
		Online purchase intention
	Online purchase decision	
	Request customers for writing review	Online marketing strategy
	Sponsored review content	

with high frequency) from each category. These codes represented significant amount (80%) of occurrence in Pareto analysis data (refer Table 3).

The optimal table illustrates that in the Indian context, along with NWOM and PWOM, MNWOM is also gaining increasing importance. Interviewees shared the meanings of the mixed review from various aspects including positive and negative details, experience, product attribute, mixed views, etc. Similarly, eWOM content was explained by text and rich content format. It is interesting to find that the top 10 codes got mentioned from various categories. Pareto diagram (refer Figure 1) indicated that the top 10 codes represented nearly 41% of cumulative frequency.

It was observed from the Pareto diagram that the detailed review of the product including favorable terms and conditions of purchase topped in the list. Figure 1 indicates a higher share of codes (40%) from the eWOM content category. The second most important category of codes was MNWOM (30% codes). Negative experience emerged as the third most important category. This indicated that consumers shared many negative reviews on online media due to poor service and product experience. Figure 1 portrays that online marketing strategy failed to get top attention (less frequently mentioned by experts) in the top 10 list, which indicates that in the Indian online retail context marketers are yet to adequately emphasize eWOM-based marketing.

4.2 Developing model: relationship among key variables

While analyzing the open codes across categories, the relationship of codes across different categories was frequently observed in the transcripts, which called for identifying the conceptual linkage among categories. Axial coding and selective

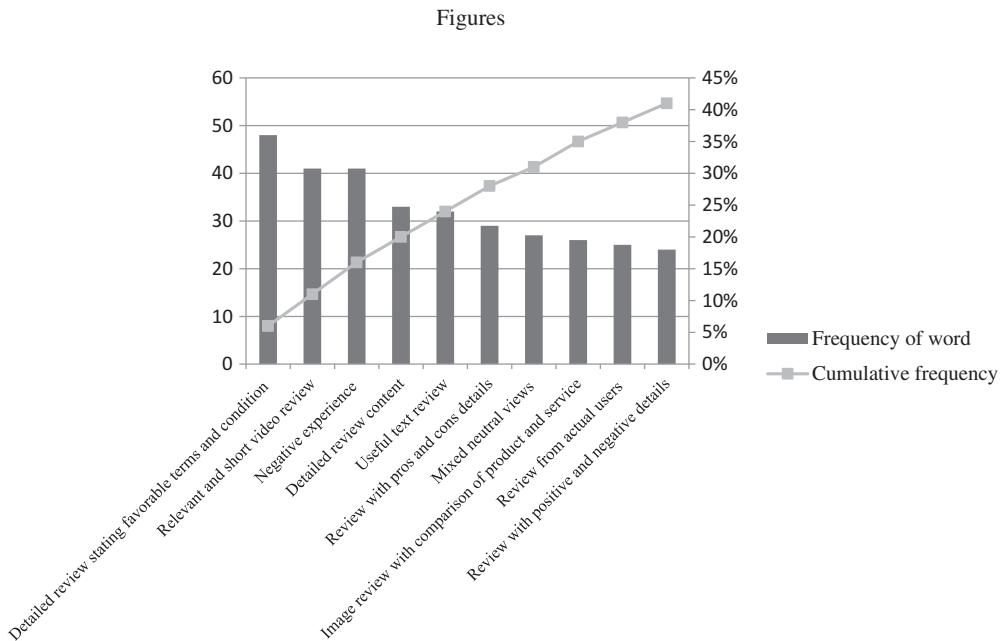


Figure 1. Pareto diagram representing top 10 open codes.

coding were used to identify the relationship between the categories (Corbin and Strauss 1990). Axial coding revalidates the category under different situations influenced by various moderating factors. This ensures the robustness of categories before developing a causal relationship among them. Afterward, researchers used selective coding. Corbin and Strauss (1990) defined 'selective coding is the process by which all categories are unified around a "core" category'. The main objective of this study is to find the effect of the antecedents (eWOM valence and eWOM content) on purchase intention. 'Online purchase intention' was considered as the core category, and it was analyzed how other categories affect it. Here, the category 'online marketing strategy' played a moderating role between antecedents (eWOM content and valence) and outcome (purchase intentions). Researchers identified the relationship among categories by checking how interviewees discussed interdependence of factors (codes) across various categories under different situations. The causal relationship between categories was also developed by checking how experts explained how the variation in one category affected the other category (Corbin and Strauss 1990; Jones and McEwen 2000).

Researchers identified and analyzed the causal references made by interviewees. At the same time, during selective coding, it was checked how experts related different open codes (from the optimal table) of different categories to core category 'online purchase intention'. Causal relationships among core category with other antecedents' category like different types of eWOM content and valence are presented in Figure 2. For example, it was frequently emphasized by interviewees that mixed neutral review with detailed analysis of pros and cons help online customers evaluate products, which results in augmenting the purchase intention. Besides MNWOM and rich content, purchasers frequently check positive review (PWOM) and negative reviews (NWOM). Surprisingly, Indian customers give more importance to negative experience (NWOM) than PWOM and MNWOM (see Figure 1). However, this study indicated that MNWOM also has a significant effect on online purchase (see Figure 2) because it provides 'an elaborate way of explaining positive and negative experience' to influence customer purchase decision (see Table 3). The result also revealed an interesting insight into the roles of rich eWOM content. It has frequently been referred by the interviewees that online consumers find short and relevant videos more informative and engaging for evaluating online products. Hence, this enhances their purchase intention. Similarly, customers find 'image review with the comparison of product and service' (see Table 3) very useful to evaluate high involvement products. Product/service advice from these reviews positively affects customers' purchase intention.

The model also indicated the moderating role of an eWOM campaign (incentivizing and soliciting customers for writing review and generating referrals) to engage customers and influence their purchase intention. It has been found that the digital marketing strategy that provides various monetary (discount, gifts) and non-monetary (helping-incentive, donation-incentive) incentive programs encourage online users to write online reviews and share the review in their online communities (Reimer and Benkenstein 2016). Therefore, online marketing efforts play an important role in amplifying the effect of eWOM on the online behavior of community members (Kozinets et al. 2010).

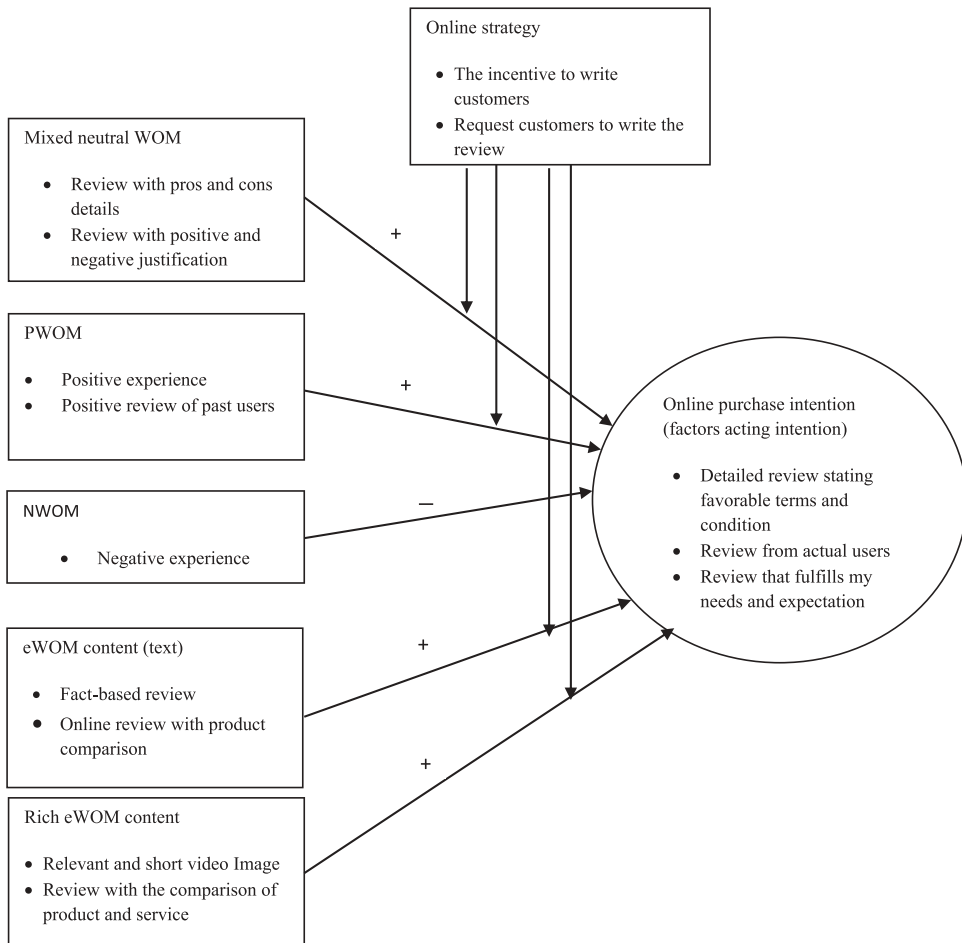


Figure 2. Conceptual model.

5. Discussion

This paper aimed at examining how less explored mixed neutral eWOM valence (MNWOM) and rich content affect online purchase intention. It was observed from the open coding that besides positive and negative word of mouth mixed neutral views had drawn much attention from interviewees. Since the MNWOM and rich eWOM content are less explored areas (phenomena or constructs) in the Indian context, researchers performed expert interviews followed by inductive content analysis of the transcribed content. Inductive content analysis with open coding generated greater insights about the keywords that can be used to describe the underlying constructs.

5.1. Insights from the coding process

The inductive content analysis with open coding helped researchers in generating the optimal table (see Table 3). In the optimal table, four major themes emerged from in-

depth content analysis process including eWOM valence, eWOM content, online purchase intention, and marketing strategy.

While grouping a set of open codes to represent a single phenomenon (or concept), many categories were generated under each theme. This process revealed that three main categories representing eWOM valence were positive, negative, and mixed neutral. Similarly, 'eWOM content' is largely represented by 'depth of review content' that represents fact-based review, 'review with a clear format and relevant detail'. This category is mainly referred to as text-based review. Along with text review, it was found that 'rich media review content' also gained importance and acceptance among online shoppers. This category of eWOM content was referred to as 'rich media review content'. Indian shoppers mostly prefer 'relevant and short video review' for evaluating online products.

5.2. Importance of each category

5.2.1. Mixed neutral WOM

The result indicated that customers found online reviews useful and engaging when those were presented with pros and cons details (refer open code 'review with pros and cons details'). Customers preferred to read reviews explaining 'positive and negative feature' of the products. On an online shopping platform (like Amazon), customers up-vote (shares, like) those reviews that share detailed information about products' positive and negative features. Interviewees also share the same view that they found reviews useful when those reviews shared product's positive and negative sides. It was also stated by the interviewees that the customers tend to share positive and negative experience, where the service is an integral part of the product. Mixed reviews were generated for good product performance and poor post sales support. Hence, mixed reviews highlighting both product performances (mixed features) and service support (mixed experience) motivate customers to read and engage in an online review. One interviewee explained,

For online purchase, I prefer balanced review with the specification, features, positive and negative facts stated by actual users. I feel mixed reviews with justification are more credible than only positive or negative review.

5.2.2. Rich text review

It was observed that the content of the text-based detailed reviews is still popular among online buyers in India. For text reviews, a customer gives more importance to 'useful text review' that shared detailed 'facts' about product and service. As one of our participants stated,

In online reviews, someone says good, someone says very bad, but generally as an online shopper I go for the review that shares little bit explanation than a simple remark only.

Along with ongoing online sales promotion, many customers purchased products online and shared views instantly, which resulted in huge eWOM volume with related contents. This calls for presenting reviews in a specific format so that review navigation would be easy for prospective customers. This study also found that the 'review with a clear format and relevant detail' helps customers go through a large number of reviews quickly (Fang 2014).

5.2.3. *Rich eWOM content*

Besides the format of the review, if the same content is presented in the visual format (image and video), customers feel motivated to further read the review detail. This enhances customers' engagement with the product. Our study revealed that 'visual review for aesthetic value' can have an important effect on purchase intention. This improves the ability to check more online reviews in less time and hence affect the purchase intention. One interviewee stated that:

A carefully crafted review has a definite positive impact on the consumer's mind. We have attention deficit nowadays, nobody has time to read a lengthy text review. Hence graphic review is preferred. Video reviews engage customers with an audio-visual presentation, hence has high impact. In this way, I find rich media (image and texts) positively affects purchase intention.

It was observed that customers were looking for reviews that shared comparative analysis of competitive brands. Customers felt reviews to be credible when those were mentioned on third-party websites. Findings from this study revealed that the customers often checked 'relevant and short video review' before making the purchase decision.

5.2.4. *Antecedents for online purchase intention*

Inductive analysis showed that 'a detailed review stating favorable terms and condition' positively affects online purchase intention. Customers generally prefer to hear from actual user experience ('review from actual users') in the form of any type of eWOM valence and content. Hence, most of the e-commerce companies ensured that reviews are posted by 'verified purchasers' (e.g., Amazon, MakeMyTrip, etc.). It has been found that 'review with positive and negative justification' and 'rich media (image and texts) review' helped customers evaluate products using text and visual guidance. Hence, these antecedents affect the online purchase intention positively. Similarly, 'positive review of past users' and 'negative experience' in the form of review affects the purchase intention in a positive and negative way respectively. However, experienced users always look for both mixed and negative reviews before making purchase decisions. A participant stated:

Before making a purchase based on an online review, I always check the review for any hidden charges, return policy, payment options, warranty, etc. Hence review (from verified customer or firm) sharing favorable terms and condition influence final decision about going ahead with the purchase.

5.2.5. *Online strategy for managing eWOM*

As mentioned in the previous section, the analysis of top 10 open codes illustrated that the negative experience ranked third in the Pareto diagram. This requires the marketing department to analyze why Indian customers are more active in sharing negative WOM. Firms should be proactive while replying to negative reviews. It has been found that if a firm adopts accommodative strategy while replying to those comments future customers will perceive the firm as accommodative and responsive to customers' pain. This supports the earlier view that firms must engage customers through replying customers' reviews in the form of eWOM management (Lang and Hyde 2013).

Researchers have conducted causal analysis during selective coding and developed a matrix as presented in [Table 4](#). This matrix analyzed how customers (here experts are also considered as customers) perceived eWOM valence and content, and how this perception-based insight could be used to form digital strategies.

The above table calls for a set of strategies based on customers' perception of valence and content. This analysis provided a detailed insight into the third objective of the study. It has been found that too many positive or too many negative reviews negatively affect platform credibility and purchase intention. The marketing manager should request existing customers to share their detailed review. An interviewee mentioned,

I feel it's always easy if you extend incentive to existing customers, then they will be sharing and referring product review in their networks; otherwise, no reason they will spread product review.

At the same time, the firm should allow mixed neutral reviews and negative reviews on the platform as this enhances the credibility of the review process. Another effective way to amplify the brand value through eWOM is to hire blogger or expert to write a 'paid review' (see [Table 3](#)). Many sponsored review (including paid review) play a moderating role in enhancing the eWOM effect on purchase intention. Since rich media review in clear format enhances the entertainment value of the message, the marketing manager should allow customers to upload video and image-based feedback in a clear format.

6. Implications

Results of this study indicated that customers find 'review with positive and negative justification' more credible and this positively affects their online purchase intention. It has been found that MNWOM with detailed review content from actual users enhanced eWOM credibility. However, eWOM has an underreporting bias (King, Racherla, and Bush 2014) as only highly satisfied or dissatisfied customers share an online review. This study suggested that a firm should request existing customers to share their online feedback in a structured review format. Firms can launch incentive program to encourage customers to write reviews. This initiative can enhance brand visibility and online referral. Lately, many online review platforms (e.g., Glassdoor, NDTV 360, etc.) share the structured format for writing an online review, and it requires review writer to mention at least one pro and one con details about the company/products/services. Hence, the firm can send this type of structured review format to repeat customers for capturing pros and cons details. This objective evaluation from existing customers can enhance eWOM credibility and adoption of potential customers.

Our study revealed that review with relevant facts, justification, necessary imagery, and video tutorials educate customers about the products. Hence, good rich media review content positively affects eWOM credibility, adoption, and online purchase intention. This study put forth immense managerial implications. First, careful analysis of eWOM contents, especially negative reviews, helps the firms to understand customers' pain points and deficits of product and service. Hence, marketers should continuously monitor all positive and negative reviews as this helps firms adopt product and service strategy based on the customer's feedback and experience. Second, a customer looks for quality review for acquiring product/service knowledge.

Table 4. Customers' perception about eWOM and strategic response of firms.

	eWOM valence (mixed neutral)	eWOM content
Customer perception	<p>(1) Too many positive or negative reviews affect the credibility of the online review. The customer feels many positive reviews may be generated by marketing efforts (not actual customer voice).</p> <p>(2) The customer generally perceives that many negative may be generated by competitors.</p> <p>(3) Review with pros and cons details enable them to make the purchase decision.</p>	<p>(1) Customer perceives that review with texts and images improve their awareness of proper decision making.</p> <p>(2) For technology products, video reviews are more helpful.</p> <p>(3) Video or image review should be short and relevant as they want to take quick decision and don't have time to watch for a long time.</p> <p>(4) Reviews presented with clear format helps them to evaluate the product/service.</p>
Marketers' response	<p>(1) Highly satisfied/dissatisfied customer generally leaves feedback. Marketers should encourage a large number of moderately satisfied customers to leave mixed feeling about the products/firms. These mixed feedbacks (voice) improve platform and product credibility.</p> <p>(2) Firms should make standard and clear valence format that requires the customer to share both pros and cons details. This encourages customers to leave their voice online.</p>	<p>(1) The firm should allow the customer to upload video and image reviews. In that case, customers would feel their voices are honored, and prospects would feel contents are genuine.</p> <p>(2) Firms should analyze the video and texts contents and especially look for negative comments and customers suggestions. This helps firms for service innovation.</p> <p>(3) Firms should not censure quality negative and mixed neutral review content. In fact, their presence would improve platform credibility.</p>

This study emphasizes increasing importance of rich media content for educating customers about the present and future product/service offerings. Infographics (image-based content) is the new marketing tool in promoting product/service online (Siricharoen 2013). The marketer should create infographic-based product/service review to educate the customer about products and motivate them for future purchase. Similarly, the firm can launch video-based review for the new products for providing an enriching experience to customers to evaluate products (Yoo, Kim, and Sanders 2015). At the same time, the firm should provide a standard review format with options for video and image upload. This helps new prospects see the images of products uploaded by actual customers. This improves the credibility of review and platform. Marketing managers should have a proper eWOM management system in place so that a set of detailed eWOM review content with pros and cons details is presented to the customer first. This will enhance his knowledge about products and positively affect purchase intention. Pareto diagram also indicated that managers should communicate products' review with favorable terms and conditions, relevant video review, review with pros and cons to existing and new customers on an ongoing basis for brand development and customer engagement.

7. Theoretical contribution

Extant research largely studied positive and negative WOM valence. This study for the first time highlighted the nature and importance of MNWOM in the Indian context. This study indicated that customers found reviews credible when the reviews discussed both positive and negative facts about a product/service with justification. Hence, good mixed neutral review in which pros exceed cons and meet customer expectation can enhance the online purchase intention. This finding also supported the relevance and importance of OMA theory that mixed review valence also positively affected online purchase intention (a nonfinancial outcome of eWOM).

This study also uniquely identified and analyzed how rich eWOM content affects purchase intention. This study extended the research scope of nature of online review content from text-based review to image and multimedia-based review. Results indicated that text-based review that shares useful facts are still popular among many online shoppers. However, for niche products, customers prefer rich media reviews containing product review in video and image format. This study indicated that improvement in content richness (adding image and video to text) can enhance customer engagement and reduce uncertainty. Rich eWOM content (image and video-based review) provides a visual presentation of the product in image format and product performance in video format. This information richness (features) is largely beyond the scope of simple text-based eWOM content. It has been found that usage of video and image, rather than text alone, can improve the richness of information. This type of rich review content is important on the retail website that sells high involvement (also heterogeneous products) (Yoo, Kim, and Lawrence Sanders 2015). For the high involvement (technology) products, customers need to see the direct experience and performance of products in the video demonstration. Product demonstration in the form of image and video reduces uncertainty, which in turn improves customers' satisfaction and purchase

intention (Ramirez and Burgoon 2004). However, these two new factors (mixed neutral eWOM and rich eWOM content) are yet to be explored in detail with the help of new marketing theories. This can lead to the development of more market-related theories in explaining these new eWOM characteristics.

Earlier researchers found that country-specific demographic factors affect online purchase behavior. The findings of our content analysis can provide a basic foundation to academic researchers in developing suitable scales for measuring mixed neutral eWOM and eWOM content in the contexts of developing countries including India. Researchers could explore theories of new online marketing strategies that can enhance engagement of online purchasers. This study extended the scope of eWOM content analysis from service innovation to digital strategy formulation (Andreassen and Streukens 2009). For the first time, this research indicated how eWOM valence and content analysis can help a researcher to develop digital marketing strategies and related theories.

Our results indicated that online marketing efforts can enhance positive effect of the eWOM campaign on brand building and online behavior. However, the online marketing strategy was not listed in the top 10 keywords in this study. Academic researchers can develop new marketing theory explaining the reasons for slow adoption of the eWOM campaign in emerging countries.

8. Conclusions

Indian shoppers become cautious while evaluating products based on online eWOM valence and content. The content analysis showed that an increasing number of online shoppers write and check mixed neutral review for evaluating products. This study has found that customers give more importance to positive or mixed neutral eWOM valences, which share pros and cons detail. Thus, these types of review positively affect online purchase intention.

This study also indicated that Indian online shoppers found image review sharing comparative analysis (price and feature) more useful while evaluating products. Online shoppers found the short and relevant video more useful for evaluating (especially) the technology products. Hence, rich eWOM content plays an important role in enhancing eWOM credibility and online purchase intention. Finally, our study indicated that suitable eWOM campaign can amplify the positive effect of eWOM valence and content on online purchase intention.

9. Limitation and future research direction

This study used only inductive content analysis method. Future studies could use case study approach to check further insights about the constructs and model. This study only adopted interview method to gather insights from few experts-cum-online shoppers. More generalized insight into research objectives could be developed based on focus group study consisting of ordinary eWOM users or use customer review data contained in online forums as the basis for content analysis. This study did not analyze how the nature of product moderates the relationship between eWOM content, MNWOM, and purchase intention. However, roles of eWOM valence and content are largely influenced by the nature of the product (Yang et al. 2012). Future research could explore whether the effect of valence and content would be same for all types of products (search vs. experience).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Appendix. Research process adopted in this study

Research steps	Description
1. Identify the new constructs based on literature review	Since the constructs are new and less explored, related references are collated from the previous studies conducted in other countries
2. Unstructured Expert interviews	Initially, few in-depth expert interviews were conducted for developing 'rough definition of research questions' for addressing the research gaps
3. Semi-structured expert interviews	For the rest of the interviews, 'Grand Tour Questions' and 'Prompts' were used to engage experts to share their real-life experience and knowledge about the key topics
4. Data collection during the interviews	Field data collection was done by audio recording and using memo notes
5. Performing the content analysis	This study used open coding, axial coding, and selective coding for generating codes, categories, and related themes
6. Internal validity of the content analysis	Kappa statistics were calculated to analyze inter-coder reliability among the two coders for categorization
7. Improve credibility of analyses	This study used 'member checking mechanism' to improve the credibility of analyses by verifying outcome with two experts from industry
8. Final open codes and categories	The final codes and categories were developed based on further review by an expert in online selling domain
9. Development of the conceptual model	Axial coding and selective coding were used to identify the relationship between the categories and develop the conceptual model