

THE IMPACT OF ELECTRONIC WORLD-OF-MOUTH (EWOM) TO THE PURCHASE INTENTION FOR COSMETIC PRODUCTS OF ONLINE CUSTOMERS: AN INVESTIGATION IN VIETNAM

Ly Thi Minh Pham

Abstract

This study aims to investigate the impact of electronic world-of-mouth (eWOM) to the online consumers' purchase intention in the cosmetic products in Ho Chi Minh City, specifically in terms of cosmetic product experience. The study investigates a specific cosmetic field and uses the ELM model to test for these hypotheses. A survey on cosmetic users was conducted in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam and the results show that several factors have positive effects on the customers' trust in eWOM including the expertise, involvement and cohesion. Especially, expertise is the most significant factor influencing on customers' trust in eWOM. This study also proposes some suggestions for cosmetic companies in order to increase the positive impact of eWOM to online customers' purchase intention.

Keywords: eWOM, purchase intention, cosmetic products

Introduction

Recently, cosmetic industry as well as many other different industries has to face with the difficulty of huge amount of stock. According to a report from GSO (General Statistics Office of Viet Nam), at the beginning of January, 2015, the Manufacturing Index of domestic processing and manufacturing industries increases by 7.6 percent in comparing to the same period in 2014. However, the Inventory Indexes increase by 9.6 percent in comparing to the index in 2014. This huge amount of inventory has motivated many manufacturers to use different marketing methods in order to reduce the amount of inventory and promote online selling. Moreover, due to the fast development of Internet as well as other social networks, modern customers have formed a new

tendency of sharing information about using products, freely talking about individual experiments on blogs, social networks and leaving questions on official websites when they need to buy any products. As a result, the world-of-mouth culture has recently become popular in the international business through the worldwide internet. According to a recent research conducted by Kotler (2007), world-of-mouth marketing is developing naturally but powerfully through popular electronic networks such as internet or mobile phone, so the world-of-mouth marketing can be named as the electronic world-of-mouth marketing (eWOM). Similarly, Allsop et al (2007) also studied in this area and concluded that world-of-mouth marketing was considered to be significantly more powerful and reliable than the advertising in the modern economy. Moreover, the information from eWOM has such higher reliability, sympathy and relevance to customers than information which is created by the manufacturers (Bickart & Schindler, 2001). Ennew et al (2000) discovered that the impact of eWOM was seven-times effective as much as the impact of advertising on magazines. Besides, consumers consider that the advertisement is not as reliable as WOM marketing and according to the NOP research (now is GFK) in America, 92 percentage of American prior to believe the information about certain products from WOM.

In Vietnam, cosmetic companies have also realized the importance of eWOM, so they are conducting some primary actions such as disseminating the advantage of eWOM to their employees, creating convenient environment for the development of eWOM. For instance, DeBon is a successful company with a smart advertising strategy using the eWOM. According to AC Nielson's reports, 99 percentages of DeBon's consumers know about this brand through advertising campaigns, especially through world-of-mouth information from their families or friends. Another example is the brand of Essance (LG Vina). This is just an economy-class product but LG's marketing team has "pushed" and promoted it as a remarkable high-class product by using fascinating advertisements and communications on television, world-of-mouth information from families, friends continuously.

In general, the role of WOM in determining customers' purchase intention is highly visible for many industries, and cosmetic industry is not an exception. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to discover the degree of the influence of eWOM to the purchase intention of online customer in Ho Chi Minh City, and give some suggestions for cosmetic companies to increase their customer satisfaction and their business's performance.

1 Literature Review

1.1 Study in World-of-Mouth, electronic WOM and its impact

The term World-of-Mouth has been studied in several industries and revealed different results. At the early study, according to Greg Nyilasy (1964), WOM can be considered as “Oral, person-to-person communication between a receiver and a communicator whom the receiver perceives as non-commercial, concerning a brand, a product or a service”. Meanwhile, Kirby and Marden (2006) stated that “Word of Mouth is the promotion of a company or its products and services through an initiative conceived and designed to get people talking positively about that company, product or service”. Since then, WOM had become an attractive topic for the following researchers. The definition of Arndt (1967) about WOM was used by most of following papers in this area. WOM developed in the context of Internet development by Arndt (1967). On Internet, people do not communicate directly by voice but they must use an input device such as computer or mobile to interact by texting. The type of WOM in the context of electronic global communicating environment was call electronic world-of-mouth, abbreviated as eWOM. Bickart and Schindler (2001) considered eWOM as having higher credibility, empathy and relevance to customers than marketer-created sources of information on the Web. To be more specific, Hennig-Thurau et al (2004) stated that eWOM can be defined as positive or negative feedbacks of potential customers, existed customers or previous customers who used to experience products; were provided to different individuals and organizations through the global connecting network. The global connecting network can be understood as forum sites, information sites, retailing sites, evaluating-product sites, electronic mail, private diary pages and social network.

eWOM has some basic differences from the traditional WOM. Using Internet, eWOM is not limited for any Internet users if they want to search for their own purposes (Hennig-Thurau et al, 2004). Additionally, eWOM can be stored automatically as files for a long time so that is always available for searching information. Hennig-Thurau and Walsh (2004) investigated 2903 German customers and they discovered that one of the main motivations for using eWOM was to find relevant information easily. Recently, Fan et al (2013) provided evidences showing that eWOM plays an important role in purchasing decision. Hence, companies should not only focus on advertising but also need to aware of customers’ feedbacks when these customers create their comments on viral community.

1.2 Credibility of eWOM and its impact factors

Wathen and Burkell (2002) stated that the most important stage in the process of persuading through global internet network is the receiver's judgment about the credibility of information. The credibility will determine the individual's level of learning and applying the received information. Factors which are included in the model can be listed as below:

eWOM credibility (abbreviated as CR) can be defined as "the extent to which customers perceive that product information, reviews, or recommendations are factual, true, or believable" (Cheung et al, 2009; Fan & Miao, 2012). In extended ELM model, credibility factor is affected by three antecedences including expertise, involvement and rapport.

Customers' expertise (abbreviated as EX) relates to the ability to process information. Ohanian (1990) defined expertise as the understanding level of a person who is considered to have knowledge, skills or experiences; as a result he/she has the ability to process information precisely. The expertise reflects an individual's level of specialized understanding, the more expertise the higher understanding. In Ohanian's study, the author believed that expertise was the most determined factor which influenced the credibility construct.

The term involvement (abbreviated as IN) relates to the motivation of processing information. Involvement can be understood as a personal need, the care or interest with a particular issue. Involving in an issue leads to the higher awareness and different responds comparing with non-involving (Zaichkowsky, 1985). Moreover, Petty and Cacioppo (1986) stated that with high involvement, people will have motivation to handle information and using peripheral route to analyze information. This means they do not use their knowledge, due to the lack of understanding, but use signals to determine the possible responds to the received information. In the case of eWOM, signals of peripheral route can be the rating star, number of "like" or comment.

Rapport (abbreviated as RA) is another factor which can affect the eWOM credibility. This term can be defined as the extent to which eWOM receivers feel about the similarities in interest and lifestyle with the eWOM's creators (Fan & Miao, 2012). Gilly et al (1998) stated that rapport can influence the connecting information between individuals and the credibility of that communication.

1.3 eWOM adoption and online purchase intention

eWOM adoption (abbreviated as AD) is affected by eWOM credibility and influences customers' online purchase intention by itself. The term online purchase intention (abbreviated as PI) can be understood as full intention of consumer to do a particular purchasing behavior through global

network connectivity (Chiu, 2009). In the extended ELM model, AD has positive effect on PI. Many researchers have been studied in the field of eWOM with different purposes, research aspects, used models as well as the methodologies. Some recent typical researches which related to this paper's purposes will be discussed below. In Korea, Lee et al (2011) had studied the impacts of eWOM to online purchase intention of customers with the respect to trust. The results showed that consumers who trusted on eWOM could become patronages and can become eWOM's creators. This study also compared the impacts between eWOM and advertisement and suggested that companies should build marketing campaigns by using eWOM.

In Taiwanese market, Lin et al (2011) also used ELM model of Petty and Cacioppo (1986) to investigate eWOM and found out the attitude, quality and quantity of eWOM determine the purchase intention. The attitude in this case was determined by customers' expertise and rapport. Study of Fan and Miao (2012) modified this model into extended ELM model, applied in Taiwanese market. In this investigation, the authors claimed that expertise, involvement and rapport factors had indirect effects to purchase intention through eWOM credibility and eWOM acceptance factors. The main results showed that involvement factor had the strongest effect to eWOM credibility, eWOM acceptance and purchase intention. However, the results also differentiated between male and female and the involvement was the only factor which affected on male's purchase intention.

In Vietnam, recently there is a lack of studies about this issue. Duong (2012) had conducted a study about factors affecting online purchase intention of consumers in Hue City and found out that online purchase intention was influenced by perceived risks, product and company's properties, perceived ease of use and perceived benefit. In another paper, Le and Hong (2011) initiated in studying the factors influencing WOM in the field of cosmetic products including promotional attitude, brand awareness, brand quality and brand diversity. Although the marketing WOM field received a huge intention from scholars in different countries, this research field is quite new to Vietnamese economy and just a few researchers studying the impact of eWOM to purchase intention in the context of Vietnamese market. Therefore, based on the previous studies, this article aimed to apply extended ELM model of Fan and Miao (2012) in order to study the eWOM in Vietnam and proposed the following conceptual framework as the figure 1 below. We can separate a sub title here as model specification and hypotheses:

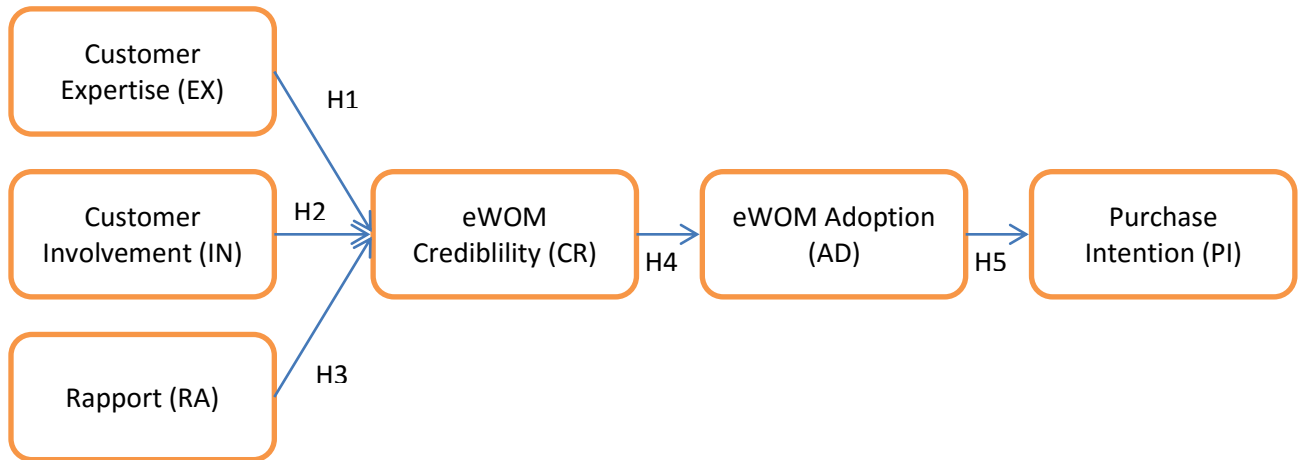


Figure 1: Proposed conceptual framework

H1: Customer expertise has a positive impact on the eWOM credibility

Customer expertise can be understood as customers' expertise, judgment and knowledge in a particular area or product. According to Basal and Voyer (2000), the more knowledgeable in a product, the more confident customers are to determine purchasing product without listening other opinions. eWOM comments belong to customers who do not have experience in the field are not convincing to receivers. Petty and Cacioppo (1986) believed that available knowledge and experiences of expertise customers will help them to decide the purchase and this was called central route. As a result, customers and online customers tend to trust in opinions of knowledgeable and experienced customers in any products, especially cosmetic products due to the sensitivity and safe of this industry. Therefore, the first hypothesis will focus on the idea that customer expertise is necessary and has positive impact to customers' eWOM credibility in the field of cosmetic products.

H2: The degree of involvement has a positive impact on the eWOM credibility

Zaichkowsjy (1985) discovered that if the level of involvement was low, little of information can be received enough to aware them. In contrast, the high level of involvement means strong motivation in searching information and as a result, the more information can be gathered. Customers with high involvement will have motivation to read more evaluation and recommendations (Fan & Miao, 2012). The information resulting from searching motivation will lead to higher confidence to purchase and we can predict that eWOM information received from high involvement can help to increase the eWOM credibility.

H3: The higher level of rapport between transmitter and receiver of eWOM will lead to higher eWOM credibility.

People tend to trust in opinion, recommendations from friends and relatives rather than strangers due to their natural strong connections (Bansal & Voyer, 2000). However, in this study, the rapport will not only exist between friends or relatives but also include individuals who have similar interest, share and lifestyle (Smith et al, 2005). Even though these strangers do not know each other, the similarity in dealing with eWOM will make their opinions more convincible. Gilly et al (1998) stated that the rapport influenced the knowledge and indirectly affected the credibility. The higher level of rapport, the higher credibility customers have from their received eWOM opinions (Sweeney et al, 2008).

H4: eWOM credibility has positive impact on eWOM adoption.

Once customers consider that eWOM comments are real and precise, they will adopt eWOM information they received. Reliable eWOM will make people please because that satisfaction gives them more confidence to decide without certain hesitation and isolation. Cheung et al (2009) believed customers will learn and use if they have eWOM credibility. The high credibility of eWOM will help customers easy to adopt eWOM opinions and use them to determine purchasing (Sussman & Siegal,)

H5: eWOM adoption has positive impact on purchase intention

Finally, eWOM adoption is a meaningful mediator but not easy to recognize. Normally, people will think high eWOM credibility is enough to decide whether to buy. However, the high credibility only proves that eWOM information is real and precise, not enough to create confidence and motivation to buy. The adoption is a next stage after the credibility, when customers believed eWOM information contributes to their product knowledge (Fan & Miao, 2012). Once the eWOM adoption exists, the purchase intention will increase (Fan & Miao, 2012).

2 Methodology

This research includes two stages including preliminary and formal stages. The research questionnaire was designed with three basic parts: arranging respondents, information and the main questionnaires with 23 questions related to eWOM on online customers' purchase intention. The questionnaires followed 5 Likert scales, with the purpose to quantify the customers' evaluation on purchase intention in Ho Chi Minh City. The sampling method is convenient and random sampling. This research was conducted in Ho Chi Minh City by quantified method through sending the questionnaires to customers directly at cosmetic stores, indirectly through online websites or

mail/facebook accounts of customers. With 300 questionnaires at the beginning, there were 270 usable responds with the respond rate at 76.67 %.

3 Results

3.1 Descriptive information

This research investigated related aspects of respondents such as gender, age, educational background, income, typical products and review websites and also the frequency when purchasing online products. The results were represented in table 1 as below.

Table 1: Characteristics of respondents

Demographic variables	Statistical criteria	Quantity	Percentage
1. Gender	Female	168	73.0
	Male	62	27.0
2. Age	Less than 18	92	40
	From 18 to 45	138	60
	More than 45	0	0
3. Education background	Unskilled workers	11	4.8
	Vocational degree	82	35.7
	Undergraduate	103	44.8
	Postgraduate	34	14.8
4. Income (VND)	Less than 3.000.000	35	15.2
	3.000.000 – 5.000.000	57	24.8
	5.000.000 – 7.000.000	115	50
	More than 7.000.000	23	10
5. Online regular purchasing products	Clothes	58	25.2
	Fashion and accessories	78	33.9
	Cosmetic products	51	22.2
	Other products	43	18.7
6. Regular review websites	www.banmypham.vn	11	4.8
	www.unilever.com.vn	24	10.4
	www.essance.com.vn	57	24.8
	www.vn.oriflame.com	81	35.2
	www.debon.com.vn	45	19.6
	Other websites	12	5.2
7. Online purchasing frequencies	First time	35	15.2
	Sometime	115	50
	Many times	80	34.8
Total		230	100

(Source: author's data)

3.2 Reliability test

Cronbach Alpha would be used to test the reliability of research constructs. This tool helped to eliminate unsuitable observed variables or constructs. In this research, after eliminating variables

with Cronbach Alpha less than 0.6, the remaining variables with item-to-total correlations less than 0.3 will also be rejected in order to increase the reliability of data. According to results, the Cronbach Alpha of each item is 0.936 for customer expertise, 0.943 for customer involvement, 0.9 for rapport, 0.864 for eWOM credibility, 0.856 for eWOM adoption and 0.862 for customer's purchase intention, so that the data can be considered as reliable and suitable for further Exploratory Factor Analysis.

3.3 Exploratory Factor Analysis

In Exploratory Factor Analysis, researchers focused on some particular criteria. The KMO value of sampling must be from 0.5 to 1 to be considered as satisfactory sampling. According to Hair et al (1998), factor loading must be higher than 0.5 to be considered as meaningful sampling. Moreover, average variance extracted and eigenvalue must be higher than 50 % and 1 respectively (Gerbing & Anderson, 1998). Based on the result in Table 2, KMO and Bartlett indicators satisfied the necessary requirements with KMO=0.631 > 0.5 and Sig =0.000. These indicators mean there were correlations among variables in each construct and the EFA analysis to group variables into factors was appropriate.

Table 2: KMO and Bartlett's test results

KMO		0.631
Bartlett's test	λ^2	6.373E3
	Df	253
	Sig.	0.000

3.4 Regression Analysis

Regression analysis would be progressed in three steps. The first step was to test H1, H2, H3 by conducting the regression between three independent variables including (1) expertise, (2) involvement, (3) rapport and dependent variable, (4) customers' credibility. The second step would focus on regression between (4) credibility variable and (5) adoption variable to investigate the H4. The regression between adoption variable and (6) purchase intention variable was the final step to confirm H5. The mean values of variables and Enter method were used for regression analysis.

Testing H1, H2, H3

This model had $R^2=0.684$ and adjusted $R^2 = 0.680$ and showed that 68 % of credibility variable could be predicted from expertise, involvement and rapport variables while the remaining 32 % of credibility variable could be explained by other variables which were not mentioned in this study. Besides, F-value was 163.036 and significant. This mean when expertise, involvement and rapport were entered by themselves, they were significant predictors of credibility variable, with p-value = $0.000 < 0.001$.

Table 3: Coefficients results

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	VIF
	B	Std.Error	Beta			
Constant	3.391	.033		103.442	.000	1.530
Involvement	.114	.033	.130	3.466	.001	1.554
Expertise	.710	.033	.808	21.602	.000	1.653
Rapport	.106	.033	.121	3.230	.001	1.632

Based on the previous results, the regression analysis illustrated that eWOM credibility was affected by three factors including expertise, involvement and rapport. The Beta values of each factor showed the affecting level of each independent variable to dependent variable. In this model, expertise factor had strongest effect to eWOM credibility with $\beta = 0.808$, following by involvement factor with $\beta = 0.130$ and rapport factor with $\beta = 0.121$. In conclusion, three hypotheses 1, 2 and 3 were accepted.

Testing H4

This model had $R^2=0.781$ and adjusted $R^2 = 0.780$ and showed that 78 % of eWOM adoption variable could be predicted from eWOM credibility variable. Besides, F-value was 814.906 and significant. This mean when eWOM credibility entered by itself, it was significant predictor of eWOM adoption variable, with p-value = $0.000 < 0.001$.

Table 4: Coefficients results

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std.Error	Beta		
Constant	.432	.104		4.133	.000
Credibility	.851	.030	.884	28.547	.000

Based on the previous results, the regression analysis illustrated that eWOM adoption was affected by eWOM credibility. The Beta value showed the affecting level independent variable to dependent variable. In this model, In conclusion, hypothesis 4 was accepted.

Testing H5

This model had $R^2=0.886$ and adjusted $R^2 = 0.886$ and showed that 88.6 % of purchase intention variable could be predicted from eWOM adoption variable. Besides, F-value was 17.11 and significant. This mean when eWOM adoption variable entered by itself, it was significant predictor of purchase intention variable, with $p\text{-value} = 0.000 < 0.001$.

Table 5: Coefficients results

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std.Error	Beta		
Constant	.230	.075		3.060	.002
Credibility	.924	.022	.941	42.160	.000

Based on the previous results, the regression analysis illustrated that eWOM adoption had positive effect on purchase intention and as a result, hypothesis 5 was accepted.

Conclusion

This paper studied the impact of electronic World of Mouth (eWOM) on the purchase intention of online consumers for cosmetic products in Ho Chi Minh city. Among the three factors, expertise factor has the strongest effect to customers' trust in eWOM with the highest β value at 0.808, following by β value of involvement at 0.103 and β value of connection at 0.121. Besides, this study also pointed out that customers' trust factor significantly influenced the customers' recognition on eWOM with high impact factor. Finally, the increase in recognition of customer on eWOM also leads to the increase of customers' purchase intention significantly.

This research's results contribute a strong foundation for initiating some important suggestions to increase the impact of eWOM on online customers' purchase intention in Vietnam. In modern era, people are highly busy and they need products which are convenient and time-saving and online purchase is such an effective tool to satisfy the high-pacing customers. However, the customers' trust on online purchase is relatively low, due to dishonest sellers, selling

unqualified products with prices of qualified ones. This paper does not investigate the impact of dishonest factor to customers' trust but not only focuses on factors that affect customers' trust through official businesses. Some recommendations related to each impact factors will be discussed respectively.

Firstly, in order to increase the customers' trust, customers' knowledge about cosmetic products such as ingredients, effects, manufacturing technologies, usages as well as the origins of products must be improved. Beside gaining extra knowledge through self-searching, customers also need proactive information from manufacturers including official and detail information about products, how to distinguish the authentic and fake products, not only on the packages, company's websites but also on social media. The repetition of recommendations about usages and how to distinguish authentic products will both provide product's knowledge for customer and enhance the belief of customers on products as well as company's brand.

Secondly, in order to increase the connection with customers, manufacturers as well as distributors should launch more effective promotions and campaign to attract more consumers to their own websites, products. Moreover, strengthening customer service is another efficient activity in order to raise the connection with customer as well as customers' trust.

Last, while the e-commerce field and online purchasing are relatively new in the context of Vietnamese business, it is necessary to conduct careful theoretical researches in order to form a strong foundation before practicing activities. This study has contributed another scientific evidence to the online purchasing field through building a conceptual framework anticipating possible factors that affect the purchase intention of cosmetic-online consumers in Ho Chi Minh City and in Vietnam in general. The conceptual model was built based on the above model and expanded ELM model which Fan and Miao (2012) developed from ELM model of Petty and Cacioppo (1986). By doing this combination, this paper has provided a better and clear view of the investigated issues compared with using only original model. On the other hand, the aim of this research is to test the model in the environment of developing countries, so the authors have moderated the research's scale and tested in Ho Chi Minh City, the biggest city in a developing country in South East Asia, Vietnam. Therefore, this paper is useful for academic researchers and practitioners who need to study about Vietnamese market. The research's result also found out the similarity in online customers' behavior in Taiwan (Fan & Miao, 2012) and Vietnam.

Limitations and Future Research

Due to the limitation of time, budget, human resource as well as support tools, the representativeness of the data set overall was low due to convenient sampling method. Moreover, the sample size was also relatively medium, so the evaluation based on these respondents can be subjective and can deflect the research's result. As a result, future researches should increase the sample size, choose statistical sampling method and distinguish different types of respondents to raise the generality of the investigation. Another limitation is that this paper ignored the relationship between the purchase intention and the real buying action. Moreover, the researches on the impact of eWOM on online customers' purchase intention is limited so that the conceptual model of this field had just a few constructs as mentioned in this paper. Future investigation should focus on adding more factors to increase the persuasiveness of the results.

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Ly Thi Minh Pham

Faculty of Business Administration, Ton Duc Thang University, Vietnam.

Email: phamthiminhly@tdt.edu.vn