



THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON ONLINE SHOPPING CONSUMERS' DECISION MAKING PROCESS

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Abstract

Online Shopping has been increasingly becoming a popular mode of shopping. However, there is still considerable number of people who are anxious about Online Shopping as they are worried about product quality, timely delivery, security in the mode of payment etc. E-tailers i.e. Online retailers, have been capitalizing on the increased usage of Social Media for promoting their products and services. Further, Online Shopping Consumers are also sharing their shopping experience on Social Media. This paper is an attempt to understand the influence of Social Media on the Online Shopping Consumers' Purchase Decision Making Process. Further the paper examines the relationship between Online Shopping Consumers' Personality, Involvement and Motive with their Social Media usage. The study also suggests measures to E-tailers, the different ways Social Media can be used by them for serving the consumers in a better manner.

Keywords: Social media; Online Shopping; Personality; Involvement; Motive.

Introduction

Internet is an indispensable tool of communication in today's world. Social Media is an important part of our everyday communication. Consumers can now have discussions with their friends, relatives and can also interact with like-minded people on common areas of interest through different Social Media platforms (Yang et al., 2006). It is also a platform for getting information about various products, services, E-tailers etc. This is a medium through which the consumer is able to share as well as receive variety of opinions about different products and services. It also plays an important role in the different stages of the consumers' purchase decision making process and influences their buying decision (Mir and Zaheer, 2012). Social Media is an essential point of contact in online consumers' purchase decision making process. It allows a two way flow of information i.e. information from the E-tailers to the consumers and vice versa. E-tailers give information in the form of advertisements to attract consumers while the consumers give information through Social Media about their likes, dislikes and expectations from the E-tailers. Online shopping consumers generally tend to share their Online shopping experience with their friends on Social Media. Social Media is an important tool in the post-purchase stage of the consumer (Foxall, 2005). Moreover, there is a direct link between customer experience and loyalty, and between loyalty and willingness to repurchase (Jaffe, 2010). So, E-tailers use Social Media to make their customers loyal.

The influence of Social Media on the different stages of the Online Shopping Consumers' Decision Making Process and the relationship between Online Consumers' Personality, Involvement and Motive with Social Media usage is analyzed for 856 selected online shopping consumers.

Objectives of the paper

The objectives of this paper are to

- To understand the influence of Social media on consumers' Online shopping purchase decision making process.
- To study the relationship between Online shopping consumers' Personality, Shopping Involvement, Shopping Motive with Social Media usage.

Methodology

For the purpose of the study, Primary data and secondary data was collected. Primary data was collected through a questionnaire. The questionnaire consists of 5-point Likert scale and 3-point Likert scale.

The level of agreement of the Online Shopping consumers about the influence of Social Media on the different stages of the Online shopping consumers' Decision making process is measured on a scale of 1 - 5, where 1 is for 'Disagree', 2 is for 'Slightly Disagree', 3 is for 'Neither Agree nor Disagree', 4 is for 'Slightly Agree', and 5 is for 'Agree'.

The Online Shopping Consumers' Experience is measured on a scale of 1 - 3, where 1 is for 'Good Experience only', 2 is for 'Bad Experience only' and 3 is for 'Good and Bad Experience'.

The questionnaire was distributed to 1000 people in Visakhapatnam district of Andhra Pradesh through e-mail and also by meeting them personally. Among them, only 870 responses were complete and 856 responses were found suitable for the study. So, 856 responses have been considered for the study.

The age group of the respondents varies from 18 – 60 years. Judgmental sampling approach has been followed to select the respondents of the study and the criteria for selecting the respondents was that they must be active on Social Media as well as shop online frequently. The internal consistency and reliability of the scales used in the questionnaire were checked by calculating the Cronbach Alpha. The Cronbach Alpha value is 0.773 which implies that the variables taken for the study are reliable. The collected data was tabulated and the hypothesis is tested by using Correlation.

Hypotheses

In order to study the objectives of the paper, the following hypothesis are proposed:

- There is a significant relationship between Social Media usage and Stages of Online Consumer Decision Making Process.
- There is a significant relationship between Respondents' Personality, Online Shopping Involvement and Online Shopping Motive with Social Media usage.

Social Media and Pre-Purchase stage of Online shopping Consumer Decision Making process

The Pre-Purchase stage of Online Shopping Consumer Decision Making process includes Need Recognition, Information Search and Evaluation of Alternative products. The influence of Social Media in the Pre-Purchase stage of Consumers' Decision Making Process is analyzed below.

Influence of Social Media on Respondents' Need Recognition

Need recognition is the first step of consumers' purchase decision making process that may occur because a consumer has a desire for something new (Kardes, et al, 2011). There are different factors that affect consumers' need recognition such as social factors, cultural factors, reference groups, and environmental factors (Hawkins & Mothersbaugh, 2010). An E-tailer by using Social Media anticipates a consumer's latent purchase needs based on the social community or group to which a consumer belongs to e.g., virtual communities, education groups etc. Then, they stimulate latent purchase needs by sending recommendation emails to prospective customers. This encourages the individual to visit the E-tailer's website. E-tailers also send reviews and ratings given by the friends of an individual on Social Media who has purchased from that particular E-tailer. In this way, Social Media is used by E-tailers as a platform for bringing in new customers through their existing customer base. This is also done by advertisements of the E-tailer on Social Media.

Table - 1 shows the respondents' agreement regarding the influence of Social Media advertisements on Need to purchase a product online.

Table – 1, Influence of Social Media advertisements on Need to purchase a product online

Level of Agreement	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Disagree	160	18.7
Slightly disagree	168	19.6
Neither agree nor disagree	168	19.6
Slightly agree	272	31.8
Agree	88	10.3
Total	856	100.0

Source: Survey

Among the 856 selected respondents, about 19 per cent 'Disagree' that the Social Media advertisements influence their Need to purchase a product online, about 20 per cent each 'Slightly Disagree' and 'Neither Agree nor Disagree', about 32 per cent 'Slightly agree' while about 10 per cent 'Agree' that Social Media advertisements trigger their need to purchase a product online. Thus, it can be understood that only one-tenth 'Agree' that Social Media advertisements trigger their need to purchase a product online and almost one-third of the respondents 'Slightly agree' while the others do not seem to agree that Social Media advertisements influence their need to purchase a product online.

Table – 2, Influence of Social Media friends on Need to purchase a product online

Level of Agreement	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Disagree	256	29.9
Slightly disagree	128	15.0
Neither agree nor disagree	192	22.4
Slightly agree	168	19.6

Agree	112	13.1
Total	856	100.0

Source: Survey

Table - 2 presents the agreement levels of the respondents about the influence of Social Media friends on Need to purchase a product online. Among the 856 respondents, about 30 per cent 'Disagree', 15 per cent 'Slightly disagree', about 23 per cent 'Neither agree nor disagree', and about 20 per cent 'Slightly agree' and about 13 per cent 'Agree' that they recognize the need to purchase a product online due to the influence of friends on Social Media. In other words, a little more than one-tenth of the respondents 'Agree' and about 20 per cent of the respondents 'Slightly Agree' that they recognize the need to purchase a product online due to friends on Social Media while others do not seem to agree that Social Media friends influence their Need to purchase a product online.

Influence of Social Media on Respondents' Information Search

Once the need is recognized by the consumers, they begin to seek relevant information about the product. There are two types of information sources: Internal and External information sources. Social Media is an External source of information. This can be in the form of electronic word of mouth on Social Media (Kardes, et al, 2011). Nowadays, the online environment is an important tool for information search. The different sources of information influence the level and direction of the information search (Hawkins and Mothersbaugh, 2010). Consumers are more frequently using the various Social Media platforms for Information Search to make their purchase decisions (Lempert, 2006; Vollmer and Precourt, 2008). In pre-purchase stage, the E-tailers help the online consumers by providing them recommendations of a few products based on opinion leaders' ratings in a product category. E-tailers also assist the consumer's by providing previous customers' opinions or reviews on Social Media.

Consumers' prefer to carry out Information search on Social Media as they require immediate access to information at their own convenience (Rashtchy et al., 2007; Vollmer and Precourt, 2008).

Table - 3 shows the respondents' agreement level regarding searching for information on Social Media before purchasing a product online.

Table – 3, Information Search in Social Media before purchasing a product online

Level of Agreement	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Disagree	128	15.0
Slightly disagree	120	14.0
Neither agree nor disagree	200	23.4
Slightly agree	224	26.2
Agree	184	21.5
Total	856	100.0

Source: Survey

Among the 856 respondents, 15 per cent 'Disagree' that they search for information on Social Media, 14 per cent 'Slightly disagree', about 23 per cent 'Neither agree nor disagree', about 26 per cent 'Slightly agree', and about 22 per cent 'Agree' about searching for information on Social Media before purchasing a product online. Therefore, more than one-fourth of the respondents 'Slightly Agree' and more than one-fifth 'Agree' that they search for information on Social Media before purchasing online.

In the below Table - 4, the respondents agreement level regarding the convenience of using Social Media for Information Search is depicted.

Table – 4, Convenience in using Social Media for Information search to purchase a product online

Level of Agreement	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Disagree	136	15.9
Slightly disagree	120	14.0
Neither agree nor disagree	216	25.2
Slightly agree	232	27.1
Agree	152	17.8
Total	856	100.0

Source: Survey

Among the 856 respondents, about 16 per cent ‘Disagree’ that Information Search on Social Media is convenient for purchasing a product online, 14 per cent ‘Slightly Disagree’, about 25 per cent ‘Neither Agree nor Disagree’, about 27 per cent ‘Slightly agree’ and about 18 per cent ‘Agree’ that searching for information on Social Media is convenient. Thus, more than one-fourth of the sample respondents ‘Slightly Agree’ and about one-fifth ‘Agree’ that Social Media offer convenience in searching for information.

Influence of Social Media on Respondents' Evaluation of Alternatives

In the Evaluation of Alternatives stage, the consumers start to compare different varieties of the product and evaluate several alternatives in terms of the features of the products and consumers’ needs. Sometimes the consumers’ evaluation of alternatives is based on simple principles like price of the product but sometimes they are complex and consist of different or multiple criteria. In this stage, the consumers decide which alternative would be the best to fulfill their need (Blythe, 2008). E-tailers help them to decide which alternative to choose by providing them an assortment of relevant products based on average rating given by the consumers. Social media provides several friends or peers who act as socialization agents and provide product information and evaluations quickly (Gershoff and Johar 2006; Taylor, Lewin, and Strutton 2011). Information influences the product evaluation by the consumer which finally affects the consumer purchase decision making processes. The following table presents the agreement level of respondents about their evaluation of alternatives for purchasing a product online.

Table – 5, Influence of Social Media on Evaluation of Alternatives

Level of Agreement	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Disagree	88	10.3
Slightly disagree	72	8.4
Neither agree nor disagree	240	28.0
Slightly agree	304	35.5
Agree	152	17.8
Total	856	100.0

Source: Survey

Among the 856 respondents, about 11 per cent ‘Disagree’, about 9 per cent ‘Slightly Disagree’, 28 per cent ‘Neither agree nor Disagree’, about 36 per cent ‘Slightly agree’ and about 18 per cent ‘Agree’ that Social Media influences respondents’ evaluation of alternatives in online purchase of products. In other words, more than one third of the respondents ‘Slightly Agree’ and about one-fifth of them ‘Agree’ that Social Media influences evaluation of alternatives for online purchase.

Social Media and Purchase stage of Online shopping Consumer Decision Making process

The Purchase stage of Consumers’ Decision Making Process includes the respondents’ preference to purchase a product online and choice of an E-tailer. In the following paragraphs, the influence of Social Media in the purchase stage of Consumers' Decision Making process is analyzed.

Influence of Social Media on purchasing a product online

Virtual communities, blogs, and online social networking sites provide a platform to influence consumers’ purchase decisions (OTX research, 2008). These influence the consumers' choice of product as well as choice of E-tailer. The Social Media websites provide a public forum that gives the consumers a platform to voice their own opinion, as well as access to product information that facilitates their purchase decisions (Kozinets et al. 2010). Table - 6 provides the details of the respondents’ agreement about the Influence of Social Media on Preference to Purchase a product online.

Table – 6, Influence of Social Media on Preference to Purchase online

Level of Agreement	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Disagree	120	14.0
Slightly disagree	104	12.1
Neither agree nor disagree	240	28.0
Slightly agree	280	32.7
Agree	112	13.1
Total	856	100.0

Source: Survey

Among the 856 respondents, 14 per cent 'Disagree' about the influence of Social Media on Preference to purchase a product online, about 12 per cent 'Slightly Disagree', 28 per cent 'Neither Agree nor Disagree', about 33 per cent 'Slightly agree' and about 13 per cent 'Agree' that Social Media influences their preference to purchase a product online. Therefore, almost one-third of the respondents 'Slightly agree' and a little more than one-tenth of them 'Agree' that Social Media influences their preference to purchase a product online.

Social Media also plays an important role in selecting an E-tailer. Before purchasing a product from an E-tailer, respondents generally search for information about the reputation of the E-tailer. Table - 7 represents the respondents' agreement about the influence of Social Media in selecting an E-tailer.

Table – 7, Influence of Social Media in Selecting an E-tailer

Level of Agreement	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Disagree	88	10.3
Slightly disagree	96	11.2
Neither agree nor disagree	224	26.2
Slightly agree	280	32.7
Agree	168	19.6
Total	856	100.0

Source: Survey

Among the 856 respondents, about 10 per cent 'Disagree' about the influence of Social Media on selecting an E-tailer, about 11 per cent 'slightly disagree', about 26 per cent 'Neither agree nor disagree', about 33 per cent 'Slightly agree', and about 20 per cent 'Agree' about the influence of Social Media on selecting an E-tailer. Thus, about one-third of the respondents 'Slightly agree' and nearly one-fourth of them 'Agree' that Social Media influences their selection of an E-tailer by checking their reputation.

Social Media and Post-Purchase stage of Online shopping Consumers' decision Making process

After the product has been purchased by the consumer, he/she will form an opinion about it. If the product matches the expectations of the consumer then he/she is said to have a Good experience. On the other hand if the product does not match the expectations of the consumer then he/she is said to have a Bad experience. A consumer may share his opinion about the product on Social Media. Table - 8 shows the responses of the sample respondents regarding sharing of their shopping experience on Social Media.

Table – 8, Sharing of information on Social Media after purchasing a product online

Type of Experience	Number of respondents	Percentage
Good Experience only	280	32.7
Bad Experience only	56	6.5
Good and bad experience	520	60.7
Total	856	100.0

Source: Survey

Among the 856 respondents, about 33 per cent of them expressed that they share their online purchase experience in case of 'Good experience only', about seven per cent of them expressed that they share their online purchase experience in case of 'Bad experience only' while about 61 per cent of them expressed that they share their online purchase experience in case of 'Good and Bad experience'. Thus, more than half of the respondents share their online shopping experience in case of good as well as bad experiences.

Reliability of Social Media Reviews

Consumers believe that the information they receive from their friends on Social Media is more reliable, credible, and trustworthy (Solomon, 2011). This kind of information is a modified form of Word-of-mouth. It is popularly known as e-WOM or electronic Word-of-Mouth. It allows consumers to gather and obtain information not only from people they know, but also from different groups of people (Ratchford, et al, 2001; Lee, et al, 2006). They consider such information as unbiased, credible and reliable. The respondents' agreement level about the reliability of Social Media reviews are shown in Table - 9.

Table – 9, Reliability of Social Media reviews

Level of Agreement	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Disagree	112	13.1
Slightly disagree	88	10.3
Neither agree nor disagree	296	34.6
Slightly agree	248	29.0
Agree	112	13.1
Total	856	100.0

Source: Survey

Among the 856 respondents, about 13 per cent 'Disagree' that Social Media Reviews are reliable, about 11 per cent 'Slightly disagree', about 35 per cent 'Neither agree nor disagree', 29 per cent 'Slightly agree', and about 13 per cent 'Agree' that the Social Media Reviews are reliable. In other words, a little more than one-tenth of the respondents 'Agree' and about 30 per cent of them 'Slightly agree' that the reviews on Social Media are reliable.

Relationship between Social Media and Stages of Online Consumer Decision Making Process

Table - 1 to Table - 9 show the different levels of agreement of the respondents about the Influence of Social Media on the different stages of Online shopping Consumer Decision Making Process. To understand the relationship between Social Media and the different stages of the Online Consumer Decision Making Process, the Correlation among them is calculated and the following hypothesis is proposed:

H_0 : There is no significant relationship between Social Media and Stages of Online Consumer Decision Making process.

H_1 : There is a significant relationship between Social Media and Stages of Online Consumer Decision Making process.

The hypothesis is tested by Pearson Correlation.

Table - 10 presents the results of Pearson Correlation between Social Media and Stages of Online Consumer Decision Making Process.

Table – 10, Correlation between Social Media and Stages of Online Consumer Decision Making process

Particulars		Pre-Purchase			Purchase		Post-Purchase
		Need Recognition	Information Search	Evaluation of Alternatives	Purchase Strategy	Choice of an E-tailer	Sharing of information on Social Media
Influence of Social Media	Pearson Correlation	0.371**	-0.036	-0.033	-0.002	0.069*	0.006
	Significance	0.000	0.297	0.330	0.948	0.043	0.865
	N	856	856	856	856	856	856
Social Media Usage	Pearson Correlation	0.017	-0.017	0.026	0.105**	-0.027	0.024
	Significance	0.619	0.616	0.448	0.002	0.429	0.490
	N	856	856	856	856	856	856
Time spent on Social Media	Pearson Correlation	0.069*	-0.048	-0.038	0.038	0.032	0.063
	Significance	0.043	0.157	0.267	0.272	0.344	0.064
	N	856	856	856	856	856	856

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

From the table it can be observed that, Influence of Social Media and Need Recognition; Social Media Usage and Purchase Strategy have significance value less than 0.05. So, the null hypothesis (H_0) is rejected and alternate hypothesis (H_1) is accepted. Thus, it can be said that at 90 per cent confidence level there exists a significant relationship between Influence of Social Media and Need Recognition; and Social Media Usage and Purchase Strategy.

Relationship between Social Media and Respondents' Personality type, Online Shopping Involvement and Online Shopping Motive

Consumers communicate with their peer group through Social Media. This affects their purchasing decisions in two ways. One way is by following the peers and the other way is by increasing their involvement in the purchase process. Consumers with high involvement are more interested and likely to purchase a product (Karmarkar and Tormala 2010; Kim, Haley, and Koo 2009) than the consumers with low involvement (Martin and Stewart 2000; Zaichkowsky 1985).

To understand the relationship between Social Media and respondents' Personality type, Online Shopping Involvement and Online Shopping Motive, the following is hypothesized

H_0 : There is no significant relationship between Social Media and respondents' Personality type, Online Shopping Involvement and Online Shopping Motive

H_1 : There is a significant relationship between Social Media and respondents' Personality type, Online Shopping Involvement and Online Shopping Motive.

The hypothesis is tested by Pearson Correlation.

Table – 11, Correlation between Social Media and Personality type, Online Shopping Motive & Online Shopping Involvement

Particulars		Personality Type	Online Shopping Involvement	Online Shopping Motive
Influence of Social Media	Pearson Correlation	0.011	0.092**	0.072*
	Significance (2-tailed)	0.738	0.007	0.035
	N	856	856	856
Social Media Usage	Pearson Correlation	0.008	0.161**	0.061
	Significance (2-tailed)	0.813	0.000	0.074
	N	856	856	856
Time Spent on Social Media	Pearson Correlation	0.029	0.077*	0.003
	Significance (2-tailed)	0.401	0.023	0.931
	N	856	856	856

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Table - 11 shows the relationship between Social Media and respondents' Personality type, Online Shopping Involvement and Online Shopping Motive. It can be seen from the table that, Influence of Social Media and Online Shopping Involvement; Social Media Usage and Online Shopping Involvement; have significance value less than 0.05. So, the null hypothesis (H_0) is rejected and alternate hypothesis (H_1) is accepted. Thus, it can be said that at 90 per cent confidence level there exists a significant relationship between Influence of Social Media and Online Shopping Involvement; and Social Media Usage and Online Shopping Involvement.

Findings

The analysis of the influence of Social Media on Online shopping consumers' Decision Making process, and the relationship between Social Media and Online shopping consumers' Decision Making process reveals the following points:

1. In the Need Recognition Stage, almost one-third of the sample respondents 'Slightly agree' and only one-tenth 'Agree' that Social Media advertisements influence their need to purchase a product online. Nearly one-fifth of the sample respondents 'Slightly Agree' and a little more than one-tenth of the respondents 'Agree' and that Social Media friends influence their Need to purchase a product online.
2. With respect to the Information Search Stage, more than one-fourth of the respondents 'Slightly Agree' and more than one-fifth 'Agree' that they search for information on Social Media before purchasing products online. More than one-fourth of the sample respondents 'Slightly Agree' and about one-fifth 'Agree' about the convenience that Social Media offers in Information Search.

3. In connection with the Evaluation of Alternatives stage, more than half of the respondents have agreed, that the information provided by Social Media influences their evaluation of alternative products.
4. Concerning the Purchase stage, a little less than half of the respondents have agreed about the influence of Social Media on their preference to purchase a product online while a little more than half of the respondents have agreed that Social Media influences their selection of an E-tailer.
5. In the Post-Purchase Stage, more than half of the respondents have expressed that they expressed their online shopping experience on Social Media in case of good and bad experiences.
6. Regarding the Reliability of Social Media Reviews, a little more than one-tenth of the respondents 'Agree' and about 30 per cent 'Slightly Agree' that they find Social Media reviews reliable.
7. With reference to the relationship between Social Media and the Stages of Online Consumer Decision Making Process, it is found that at 90 per cent confidence level there exists a significant relationship between Influence of Social Media with Need Recognition; and Social Media Usage with Purchase Strategy.
8. Regarding the relationship between Social Media with Respondents' Personality type, Online Shopping Involvement and Online Shopping Motive, it can be said that at 90 per cent confidence level there exists a significant relationship between Influence of Social Media with Online Shopping Involvement; and Social Media Usage with Online Shopping Involvement.

Suggestions

The following points are suggested to the E-tailers to increase the reach of Online shopping.

The present research study indicates that Social Media is a very important platform for the E-tailers. The study shows that online shopping consumers find the reviews of other online shopping consumers reliable. They also share their good and bad experiences on Social Media. So, E-tailers should make an effort to ensure that their customers have good online shopping experiences only.

Social Media has a significant relationship with the Need Recognition and Purchase stage of Online Consumer decision making process. E-tailers can influence the Need Recognition and Purchase stage of the Online shopping consumers through Social Media posts.

E-tailers can make use of Social Media's potential by exerting peer pressure and motivate their prospective customers to purchase the product online. The peer pressure may be in the form of conforming to the standards followed by the members of a Social Networking group when they take purchase decisions.

Conclusion

It is concluded that Social Media has an influence on Online consumers' Purchase Decision Making process and its relationship with Online shopping consumers' Involvement is significant. Thus, E-tailers must keep this in mind and design their business strategies which make online shopping more user-friendly and enjoyable.

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