



**SOCIAL MEDIA COMMUNICATIONS IN GENERATING PURCHASE
INTENTIONS TOWARDS E-TAILERS**

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Abstract

The e-retailers like Amazon, Flipkart, etc. have, within less than a decade's time, evolved as big brands. Through their presence on almost every media channel, especially social media, these e-retailers have been rigorously connecting with the masses to influence their perceptions about the offerings and buying behaviour, besides creating awareness about their presence and easy promotion on a large scale. In this context, the present study aims to examine the influence of brand-related social media communications on consumers' purchase intentions. The final sample of 283 respondents for the study consisted of students and faculty from the Government Degree College (Boys), Kathua, who were active social media users and also had at least once shopped from one of the e-retailers (Amazon and Flipkart) under study. Convenience sampling technique was applied and a structured questionnaire was employed to collect the responses. The data gathered was analysed with the help of SPSS software. The regression results indicated acceptance of the two hypotheses of the study. Also, the moderating role of gender was analysed for the influences studied.

1. Introduction

Consumer purchase behaviour (intentions and decisions) has been examined to a large extent using frameworks from traditional (or offline) modes of purchasing (van der Heijden et al., 2003). Lately, the consumers' buying behaviour has also been researched in regards to online websites (or e-retailers), but very few studies have been undertaken to study the influence on buying decisions due to social networking sites. Online purchasing has become the latest trend in shopping (van der Heijden et al., 2003). When making purchases online, among many factors like user-friendly website interface, large varieties to choose from, etc., the trust factor emerges as the most important aspect that makes people buy from a virtual platform (Van der Heijden et al., 2003; Weisberg, Te'eni & Arman, 2011). Not just in case of online shopping, but even in the context of offline shopping, the trust factor created by the physical environment, the salesforce and word-of-mouth by the previous customers, tends to reduce the uncertainties in making purchase decisions. Thus, trust plays a significant role in consumer buying behaviour. When it comes to shopping online, where no physical shops are available, no salespeople are there for face-to-face interactions and no customers can directly

talk to each other regarding their experiences, developing a sense of trust among the customers becomes more challenging. So the companies and brands can make use either of their official websites or can well utilise the social media channels in order to connect with their audiences, where people in enormous numbers can be easily found connecting with each other, while sharing their all sorts of life and even day-to-day experiences, including their travel, achievements, relationships, and even shopping. Personalised offerings, better graphic interfaces, wide payment options, encouraging people to share their experiences on their social media accounts, are some of the potential strategies the e-retailers can opt for. Since people interacting on social media platforms with their peer groups, friends, family, etc. can highly contribute to electronic word-of-mouth, it is highly indicative of the fact that they can serve as great influencers of others' buying decisions. The present study, thus, attempts to examine how the different types of communications about the online retailers (e-commerce brands) taking place on social media channels affect peoples' intentions to purchase from them. In this context, the brand-related social media communications have been classified into the communications that

take place from the firm's end (i.e., Firm-Created Content, FCC) and the one carried out by the consumers or the social media users (i.e., User-Generated Content, UGC). To be more precise, it is analysed that how seriously people take such communications on social media as only the extent to which the content is considered significant will ultimately affect the purchase intentions. Hence, this study aims to investigate the influence of social media users' or consumers' Attitude towards FCC and UGC on their purchase intentions.

2. Literature Review

The latest interactive technologies have brought about significant changes in the lifestyle and socialisation patterns as well as corporate marketing strategies. Lately, the organisations have clearly understood the importance of the Internet and are extensively considering its services, like online communities, social networks, etc., to their advantage (Shankar & Batra, 2009; Winer, 2009). The coming up of web 2.0 technologies has exposed the Internet users to vast online content, especially through social media (Chen et al., 2012). Social media platforms offer both companies and customers new ways of connecting and engaging with each other.

While the customers connect with other

customers to give as well as find the reviews or opinions about different products/services, the firms in addition to floating information about their offerings, wish to engage with prospective as well as existing customers to know more about their audience, and influence their perceptions about their brands/products/services (Roderick J. Brodie et al., 2013). As compared to the traditional sources of communication like magazines, newspapers, radio, television, etc., social media is characterised by wider demographic appeal coupled with viral dissemination of information in the smallest time span (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Keller, 2009). These features have helped social media gain massive popularity, making internet users shift away from the traditional sources (Mangold & Faulds, 2009).

Social media platforms offer vast opportunities to the internet users for creating and sharing content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2012). In addition to getting connected and socialising with other people around the globe, the internet users engage in writing about their experiences about the various products/services/brands, thereby, making the firms no longer the sole source of brand communication on social media (Berthon et al., 2008). Various studies in the past have proven that consumers find

social media to be more trustworthy source of information in comparison with the traditional methods of marketing communications employed by the firms (Hennig- Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh & Gremler, 2004; Karakaya & Barnes, 2010; Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy & Silvestre, 2011). Thus, the marketing and brand managers may leverage the services of social media for enhancing their brand communication (Smith, Fischer & Yongjian, 2012).

In order to investigate the influence of brand-related social media communications, it is first important to see the various types of such communications that take place on these platforms. Godes & Mayzlin (2009) broadly categorised such communications into two main types, viz., firm-created and user-generated, on the basis of what the firms are saying about their offerings and what customers or social media users are saying about these offerings on these channels. While firm-created content (FCC) on social media is decided and managed and controlled by the firm, user-generated content (UGC) is absolutely self-sustained and unfettered by the firms (Bergh, Lee, Quilliam & Hove, 2011). Previous works (Balasubramanian & Mahajan, 2001; Chu & Kim, 2011) by the academic researchers in the context of firm-created social media

communications emphasise mainly on the studies related to word-of-mouth (WOM) and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM).

As mentioned by Godes & Mayzlin (2009), firm-created word-of-mouth (WOM) may be thought of as a blend of traditional advertising and consumer WOM, identified as being firm initiated but consumer implemented. The literature pertaining to word-of-mouth communication indicates a strong consensus on the fact that communications taking place between various customers on electronic platforms serve as a quite effective source of information dissemination (Dellarocas, Zhang & Awad, 2007). Social media channels, in particular, provide a highly economical alternative way for the firms to acquire and examine consumer-to-consumer communication (Godes & Mayzlin, 2004). According to Wikipedia (n.d.), user-generated content (UGC) or user-created content (UCC) may be referred to as, “any form of content, such as images, videos, text and audio, that has been posted by the users on online platforms such as social media and wikis”. The various aspects of UGC as described by Wikipedia (n.d.) are: “i) the content contribution is by the users of a product rather than the firm that sells the product, ii) these contributions are somewhat creative in nature and the user

adds something new to what has been done before, and iii) these ideas and contributions are posted online and are generally accessible to others". Earlier studies on user-generated content (UGC) indicate that customers on social media engage in the process of content creation for a number of reasons including self-promotion, enjoyment, and wishing to influence public perceptions (Berthon, Pitt & Campbell, 2008).

The social networking tools, based on Web 2.0 technologies, have revolutionised interpersonal interaction by smoothening the ways of communication among the users to a large extent (Al-Kandari & Hasanen 2012; Boulianne, 2015). Consumers today are increasingly socialising through peer communication on social media platforms and this phenomenon has become quite popular in marketing communications (Wang, Yu, & Wei, 2012). Social networking tools have revolutionised interpersonal interaction by greatly facilitating communication between users (Al-Kandari & Hasanen 2012; Boulianne, 2015). Brand-related peer communication can be referred to as the interactions that the consumers have on social media in connection with products and services (Bramoullé, Djebbari, & Fortin, 2009; Sarapin & Morris, 2015; Wang, Yu & Wei, 2012). The effect of peer groups on consumer

behaviour especially in case of social media channels, social networks to be specific, has been well recorded (Crawshaw, 2012; Hofstra, Corten & van Tubergen, 2016; Meacham, 2016; Momoc, 2013). In the current study, emphasis is placed on brand-related FCC and UGC, and its impact on brand purchase intentions.

3. Conceptual Framework and Research Hypotheses

The objective of the present study is to fill the voids in the exploration of the techniques in which firm-created and user-generated brand-related communication on social media (firm-created as well as the user-generated) influence the consumers' purchase intentions.

Previous findings regarding the behavioural effectiveness of firm-created content on social media and/or online advertising are not consistent. For instance, a study by Schivinski & Dąbrowski (2013) concluded with the Firm-Created Content (FCC) to have no significant impact on purchase intentions. Also, Soewandi (2015) in her work found a negative impact of firm-created content on purchase intentions. However, majority of the works evince a significant positive relationship between the e-advertising and the purchase (or

behavioural) intentions (Kosarizadeh & Hamdi, 2015; Manchanda et al., 2006; Martin et al., 2003). In addition, strong positive correlations have been established between advertising stimuli and the consumers' purchase intentions (Goodrich 2011; Groenhaug et al., 1991 as cited by Schivinski & Dąbrowski, 2013; Haley & Baldinger 2000). It has, therefore, been hypothesised that:

H1: Attitude towards brand-related Firm-Created Content (FCC) on social media has a significant impact on consumers' Purchase Intentions (PI).

Again, in case of User-Generated Content on social media also, there are mixed conclusions regarding its impact on the purchase intentions. Some studies have found UGC to have negative or no significant influence on purchase intentions (Schivinski & Dąbrowski, 2013; Soewandi, 2015). However, many studies suggest a positive relationship (Kosarizadeh & Hamdi, 2015; Poturak & Softic, 2019).

According to Li & Bernoff (2011) as cited by Schivinski & Dąbrowski (2013), customers find online opinions to be as trustworthy as they perceive about the brand websites or other newspaper articles. Many researchers have also pointed out that user-generated content serves as an important source of information about various

brands/products/service quality for the customers (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Riegner, 2007). Along these lines, UGC can be said to have an influence on the decision-making process and consequently, purchase intentions (Chatterjee, 2001). So, to some extent, User-Generated Content can be considered as a good reference for consumers while making a buying decision.

Thus, it is assumed that:

H2: Attitude towards brand-related User-Generated Content (UGC) on social media has a significant impact on consumers' Purchase Intentions (PI).

The conceptual framework of the study is in Figure 1 in the Appendix.

4. Research Methodology

The required data was collected using a self-structured questionnaire, using a convenience sampling technique. The participants were among the students and faculty of Government Degree College (Boys), Kathua, falling in the age group of 18-35 years. The data among these people was collected only from those who are active social media users and have shopped from at least one of the e-retailers (Amazon and/or Flipkart). A total of 310 people (students of University of Jammu), initially responded to the survey. Out of these 310, only 283 could make it to the

final analysis, rest being rejected either due to incomplete or unengaged responses.

Out of these 283 respondents, there were 139 males (49.12%) and 144 females (50.88%) and the mean age within the sample was nearly 24 years (S.D. = 0.334). Further, all the respondents had Facebook account and were active Facebook users, while around 88 % had Instagram account also. While Instagram was found to be a preferred channel for sharing pics and following celebrities among the youth, Facebook was found to be more commonly used for almost all sorts of activities like making friends, connecting with peers, family and other users on the platforms, following celebrities, brands, etc. So, in a way, in the context of brand-related communications, the results can be attributed to the influence of Facebook usage more than Instagram usage.

The items for the constructs Attitude towards firm-created content (FCC, 8 items) and Attitude towards user-generated content (UGC, 13 items), have been adapted from the works of various researchers, namely, Andaç, Akbiyik & Karkar (2016), Alsamydai & Al Khasawneh (2013), Bruhn, Schoenmueller & Schäfer (2012), Gefen, Karahanna & Straub (2003), Magi (2003), Mikalef, Giannakos & Pateli

(2013), Richard & Guppy (2014), Schivinski & Dąbrowski (2013), Shen (2012), Tsiros, Mittal & Ross (2004). The items for the construct consumers' purchase intentions (PI, 4 items) have been adapted from the works of Buil, Martinez & de Chernatony (2013), Choudhury & Kakati (2013), Mikalef, Giannakos & Pateli (2013), Schivinski & Dąbrowski (2013), Schivinski, Łukasik & Dąbrowski (2015). This study uses a 5-point Likert scale with anchors 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = agree, and 5 = strongly agree.

The Cronbach alpha value for the constructs FCC, UGC and PI was found to be 0.905, 0.793, and 0.905, respectively, indicating all the constructs to be reliable enough. All analyses were done using the statistical package of SPSS Version 22. In addition to the descriptive statistics reported above, a correlation and regression test was run to test the degree and nature of relationship between FCC-PI and UGC-PI.

5. Results

The correlation for social media users who followed an e-retailer brand on social media, was run to see the relationship between Firm-Created Content (FCC), User-Generated Content (UGC) and Purchase Intentions (PI). The

construct PI was found to correlate significantly with both FCC, $r(283)=.361$, and UGC, $r(283)=.448$.

Next, multiple regression was run to test the hypotheses. Regression, using “Enter” method, was run, as it allowed the simultaneous analysis of the impact of the two independent variables, viz., Attitude towards Firm-Created Content (FCC) and Attitude towards User-Generated Content (UGC) on the dependent variable, viz., consumers’ Purchase Intentions (PI). Carrying out this form of analysis allowed a better picture of how the two variables were influencing and interacting with the dependent variable.

The regression model was found significant in accounting for the variance in consumers’ Purchase Intentions (PI) with an Adjusted R-square=.249. Within the regression model, both of the predictor variables, FCC (Beta=.244, $p<.05$) and UGC (Beta=.371, $p<.05$) surfaced as significant predictors. Thus, both the hypotheses H1 as well as H2 were supported (Table 1 in Appendix) and both the relationships were found to be positively significant.

Further, to examine whether gender (categorical variable) plays a moderating role between social media communications (FCC and UGC) and consumers’ purchase intentions (PI), the data file was first split on the basis of

gender (in SPSS) and then again regression was run to test the hypothesis. The Tables 2 and 3 (in the Appendix) depict the regression results for “Males” and “Females” respectively. As can be seen from these tables, the regression model is significant in accounting for the variance in purchase intentions with an Adjusted R-square (males) = 0.101, and Adjusted R-square (females) = 0.437. However, within the model, in case of females, both FCC and UGC are significant predictors, while in case of males, only UGC surfaced as a significant predictor, with the following values:

FCC (males): $\beta = .224$, $p = .010$

UGC (males): $\beta = .190$, $p = .028$

FCC (females): $\beta = .078$, $p = .227$

UGC (females): $\beta = .646$, $p = .000$

Now, though the difference in the beta (β) values for males and females in case of both FCC and UGC is quite evident, it is necessary to check whether this difference is significant or not.

This significance has been checked with the help of one of the statistical online calculators, available on “www.danielsoper.com”. The calculated t-value for FCC (males and females) = 0.39, which is less than 1.96. This indicates that the difference is not

significant, and hence nomoderation.

However, in case of UGC (males and females), the t-value = 2.38, which is greater than 1.96. This indicates that the difference is significant and hence gender plays a significant role as a moderator between user-generated content on social media and purchase intentions.

6. Summary and Discussion

The current study offers two significant contributions to the research scholars and brand managers. Firstly, the study provides conceptual insights into how different types of brand-related social media communications foster consumers' purchase intentions. Secondly, to understand if the influences differ in case of males and females, the moderating effects of gender have been analysed both in case of firm-created content as well as user-generated content on social media. The investigation of the impact of brand-related social media communications on purchase intentions indicates that both firm-created and user-generated social media communication have a positively significant effect on the consumers' purchase intentions. However, the impact of UGC is more as compared to FCC. This is in line with the previous studies and indicates that people trust and rely on the reviews and feedbacks of family, friends and other consumers for

making buying decisions, more than what the firms promote about their offerings (Christodoulides, 2012; Schivinski & Dąbrowski, 2013). Though attitude towards FCC and UGC on social media were found to have a significant impact on purchase intentions, the results were for the whole sample taken together. And, when males and females were analysed separately to see if the influences differ significantly, in case of females, UGC was found to have more significant impact on PI, while males were found to be affected more by FCC. Moreover, gender emerged as a significant moderator between UGC and PI only. The influence of attitude towards FCC on PI did not differ significantly among different genders and these can be referred to as "differences by chance".

No doubt the values indicate a positive impact of both types of brand-related social media communications on consumers' purchase intentions, the low values indicate that still today the marketing managers have not been able to leverage the strength of social media to influence the buying behaviour. And perhaps, the success of these online retailers can be contributed to other factors also like, television advertisements, companys' official websites or mobile applications, etc. Nevertheless, social

media channels do help in increasing brand awareness, trust and indirectly lead to purchase decisions. Thus, the brand managers need to put in extensive efforts into attracting people more and more on their social media pages and engaging them with their customised offerings and also influencing the electronic word-of-mouth that propagates so easily on these platforms (Muntinga, Moorman & Smit, 2011; Schivinski & Dąbrowski, 2013). In addition to these, personalised and emotional connection needs to be made through special discounts, loyalty programs, promotional updates through text/email messages, etc. (Shankar, Venkatesh, Hofacker & Naik, 2010).

7. Research Limitations and Directions for Future Research

There are certain limitations of the present study that can offer recommendations for future research. It is suggested that, in addition to the two social networking sites considered, other such sites and other types of social media platforms also be examined in order to attain a comprehensive understanding of brand-related social media communications. This type of research would offer marketing/brand managers and the academic researchers a broader understanding of the nitty-gritty of the social media communications. Further, only two e-commerce brands (e-retailers)

have been taken into consideration. So, there are chances that different brands perform differently (message generation and exposure) on social media channels, and consequently have different influence on consumer perceptions, which ultimately affect the purchase intentions. Hence, it is advised to include other leading e-retailers in future studies. Also, it is suggested that a wider span of industries, in addition to e-retailers, be analysed in future studies. Lastly, the sample used in this research comes from the students and faculty members from a single college in the Jammu region, making it unreasonable to absolutely generalize the results to other places, though to some extent they can represent the population falling into this age-group in the city where the survey has been conducted, i.e., Kathua. Hence, future research in this domain should be administered in different colleges and/or cities to draw more valid and generalised conclusions.

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APPENDIX
(Figures and Tables)

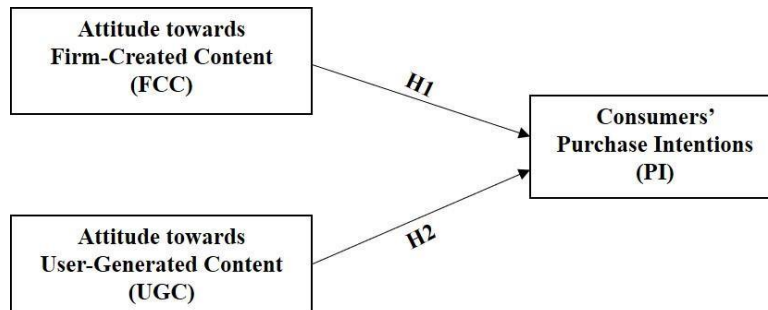


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Coefficients^a

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	95.0% Confidence Interval for B	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
(Constant)	-.767	.482		-1.592	.112	-1.716	.181
FCC	.354	.079	.244	4.480	.000	.199	.510
UGC	.772	.113	.371	6.823	.000	.549	.995

a. Dependent Variable: PI

Table 1: Impact on PI by: Attitude towards FCC and Attitude towards UGC

Coefficients^{a,b}

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	95.0% Confidence Interval for B	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
(Constant)	.625	.775		.807	.421	-.907	2.157
FCC	.281	.107	.224	2.624	.010	.069	.493
UGC	.441	.198	.190	2.226	.028	.049	.833

a. Gender = Male

b. Dependent Variable: PI

Table 2: Impact of FCC and UGC on Purchase Intentions (males)

Coefficients^{a,b}

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	95.0% Confidence Interval for B	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
(Constant)	-.683	.768		-.890	.375	-2.202	.835
FCC	.203	.167	.078	1.214	.027	-.128	.534
UGC	.964	.096	.646	10.051	.000	.775	1.154

a. Gender = Female

b. Dependent Variable: PI

Table 3: Impact of FCC and UGC on Purchase Intentions (females)