



The Effects of Electronic Word of Mouth on the consumer purchase decision in the apparel industry in Ireland.

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Abstract:

The aim of this research was to study the effects of electronic word of mouth on the consumer purchase decision with respect to the apparel Industry in Ireland. Through this study the researcher aims to find out whether EWOM has effects on the consumer decision process, the various factors that affect the acceptance of WOM amongst the people in Ireland. The study is conducted in one specific geographic area which is Ireland as the country has a large audience who purchases products in the internet.

The study was constrained to consumers residing in Ireland; for the purpose of the objectives of this thesis the researcher used the quantitative method of research with non-probability sampling snowball technique. Data was collected through the survey method and was analyzed using MS Excel.

The findings of the study indicated EWOM influencing the consumer purchase decision in Ireland. Consumers in Ireland pay attention to word spread on the internet and trust it for making purchase decisions, however source credibility is crucial for gaining trust of the consumers.

In this piece of research the method used for data collection was quantitative. Quantitative method provides insights with respect to a subject along with building a hypothesis for later quantitative research. A survey was conducted with questionnaires distributed to various categories of people. The target audiences for the survey were mainly university students.

The researcher looks forward to contributing to the existing knowledge about EWOM and its effects on the consumer behavior. Future research could include focus on a different geographical area or a different industry such as Electronics.

Keywords: WOM (Word of Mouth), EWOM (Electronic word of mouth), SNS (Social Networking Sites).

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Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Introduction:

The role of marketing strategies is crucial to the business world with recent developments. Marketing is a key activity that is carried out by companies (for either goods or services) to make the business viable. Effective marketing is not only done through advertising and promotions but also via all the departments in the company which is known as holistic marketing (Choi et al, 2015). In holistic marketing, the company is seen as a whole integrated with various other elements which include stakeholders, suppliers, and customers (consumers). Customers should be regarded as the most crucial part in the development of the company as they are vital in the success of the company and they can create word of mouth communication (Kim et al, 2009). In some parts of the world such as Indonesia word of mouth is known as stories that are spreading from mouth to mouth. Through word of mouth communication consumers who are satisfied with the product will recommend it to others so that they can purchase the product (Wangenheim & Bayón, 2007). Such strategies are crucial as companies can use them as promotional efforts and can preach positive things. The quality of the products and the services provided by the company are the ones that generate stories that lead to WOM communication. When compared with the general form of marketing the strategy of word of mouth communication has a higher chance of achieving its target (Hennig-Thurau et al, 2004).

The fast growth of the internet has given consumers the choice of voicing their views about products via quantitative ratings and/or qualitative text content. Buyers are beginning to depend on the reviews of other members when making purchasing decisions (W. Duan, B. GU, and A.B. Whinston 2008). Word of Mouth (WOM) communication is known to play a significant role in persuading customers and forming their behavioral intentions (Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006). Various researches have shown that WOM communication has a bigger impact than editorial recommendations or advertisements. (Bickart and Schindler, 2001). Initially known as a one to one conversation between consumers about a product, (Chatterjee, 2001; Sen and Lerman, 2007) the rapid spread of the internet throughout the world has given rise to a ubiquitous type of communication which is so-called as Electronic (online) WOM communication (Brown et al., 2007). This new form of WOM communication has become a vital platform for consumer opinions (Bickart and Schindler, 2001) and also considered to be of higher effect than WOM communication due to its greater reach (Chatterjee, 2001). Consumers consider online opinions to be as trustworthy of brand websites (ACNielsen, 2007). WOM posted on the internet leaves a strong image in the minds of the consumer about the brand image and as a result of the purchase intention. The perception of the brand held in the minds of the consumer is known as the brand image (Keller, 1993). Gilly et al. (1998) pointed out that there is a lack of information to differentiate between products which increase the risk of purchase hence at this moment eWOM plays a crucial role in consumers making a purchasing decision.

The purchase intention of the consumers for the fashion products amongst the consumers is affected by negative and positive comments; hence it is important to understand the factors and the effects of electronic word of mouth on the purchasing intentions within the fashion industry in Ireland. Understanding consumer purchase intention shall help the marketers while devising their business promotional strategies on the internet.

In a short period digital retailing has had great effects that have changed how business is done. According to Euro monitor data on 79 countries, offline store sales in the (2008-2018) decade have seen little increase of (10.1%) while non-store sales have seen a whopping 65.8% rise. Business models online incur fewer costs when expanding overseas which has led to rapid global expansion (Wood et al., 2019). It has had significant effects on the fashion retail sector in particular. A survey by Deloitte (2019) regarding the global 250 retailers has suggested that apparels and accessories retailers have their presence in an average of 26 countries whereas Fast Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) retailers had their presence in only 6 countries.

Until November 2016 fashion related products have ranked the most popular of the global online shopping categories with 58% of online purchases. With the number of products sold online increasing daily, consumers spend a significant amount of time searching for their preferred products and at times fail to find the apt ones. This is common especially in online shopping as the attributes of fashion products are difficult to describe or classify making recommendations of fashion items necessary which is where online word of mouth comes into the picture. The apparel industry was hence chosen as the research subject.

1.2 Problem Statement

What is the Problem?

The apparel retail sector contributes 20.2% within the online retail sector in Ireland (Source: MarketLine 2018) which means that it has a significant consumer base to evaluate. With the ease of the availability of the internet around the world and the increasing number of users, there are a high number of retailers selling products online. Previous studies conducted have given less focus on the factors determining the electronic word of mouth and the influence they have on the individual customer attitude and behaviors (López & Sicilia, 2014). It has been identified by Baber et al., (2016) that earlier studies have mainly focused on movie discussions, tourism industry, or restaurant experiences hence this problem statement is:

To understand the effects of electronic word of mouth on the purchasing decision of customers in the apparel industry in Ireland.

What will this research shed light on?

The main aim of this study is to understand the various effects that electronic word of mouth has on the purchasing decisions of consumers in Ireland. With the pandemic (COVID-19) still around and businesses selling online, online retailers must understand the consumers better which could help them devise strategies concerning online marketing. Through this study, the marketers will know about the behavior of the consumers in Ireland and understand them better.

1.3 Objective of the study.

This research aims to understand the effects of electronic word of mouth on the consumer purchase decision in the apparel industry in Ireland for which the objectives are as follows:

- **To examine the effects of EWOM on the consumer purchase decision with reference to the apparel industry.**

As stated by Baber et al., (2016) the effects of EWOM have mainly been studied with respect to movie, tourism and restaurant industries. The apparel industry has not been explored much.

- **To critically analyze the effects of EWOM on consumer behavior such as the purchase in Ireland.**

As reported by MarketLine (2018) the online apparel retail sector has a contribution of 20.2% towards the total online market in Ireland. This is a significant figure, hence understanding consumer behavior in Ireland with respect to EWOM can help marketers while devising their promotional and marketing strategies.

- **To analyze the role of Trust in acceptance of EWOM in.**

As stated in the literature review Saleem, Anum, and Abida Ellahi (May 2017) have stated trust to play a key role in fashion industry. The researcher tends to examine the same with relevance to the apparel industry in Ireland.

- **Evaluate the platforms that generate electronic word of mouth such as Social Networking sites.**

(Mariani et al. 2019) pointed out that EWOM depends on the platform where people can access it. This study shall find out the popular platforms amongst the consumer in Ireland with respect to EWOM.

1.4 Significance of the study.

In recent years the online retail sector in Ireland has grown significantly with further strong growth expected in the coming years. The Irish online retail sector grew by 13% in 2018 to reach a figure of \$3,071.9 million. A study conducted by the Royal Mail suggested that 48% of the Irish shoppers make purchases online compared to 33% in the UK. The rate of engagement amongst Irish consumers is still emerging. A survey by global data suggested that 54% of the

Irish population is interested in buying a product which is advertised on social media, the figure increased to 78% amongst the 18-24-year-olds. There is a significant increase in the power of web networks with increasing reach, speed, and interactivity of social communication. Bob Metcalfe came up with the phenomena in the early 1980s which was later known as Metcalfe's law suggesting that as the number of people in the network grows it leads to increase in connectivity and a greater value is achieved when people link to each other's content (Hendler and Golbeck 2007).EWOM has become an important part of the strategies of many companies to stimulate sales (Barry et al. 2011).

For this study, the researcher has chosen the Apparels industry as the subject. Below is a figure showing the contributions of the various sectors towards the online retail sector in Ireland. The Apparel industry is valued at \$619.6 million with (20.2%) contributions to the online sector in Ireland. The largest sector is Women's wear with 60% contributions from the industry value followed by men's wear and child wear.

Table 2: Ireland online retail sector category segmentation: \$ million, 2018

Category	2018	%
Electrical & Electronics Retail	942.3	30.7%
Food & Grocery Retail	676.8	22.0%
Apparel Retail	619.6	20.2%
Home & Garden Products	262.7	8.6%
Footwear	130.0	4.2%
Furniture & Floor Coverings	129.6	4.2%
Other	311.0	10.1%
Total	3,072	100%

SOURCE: MARKETLINE MARKETLINE

A report by Bain & Company has suggested that the spending by an average billion-dollar company was \$750,000 on earned media with companies such as Dell and American Express investing even more. There has not been much research done on the effects of electronic word of mouth in Ireland concerning the apparel industry and hence a study on the same would help online retailers understand consumer behavior which they can further use in their strategies. According to previous researches word of mouth, communication has a powerful and credible influence on consumer behavior; it has now become relevant to study word of mouth concerning online shopping environments. (Bansal and Voyer, 2000, Brown and Reingen, 1987).Previous studies have suggested that bigger consumer networks (Peters et al. 2013) increase the chances of exposure to EWOM.

1.5 Methodology

For this particular study the researcher has chosen the online questionnaire method for examining and analyzing the research questions, distributed through non probability snowballing sampling technique. The questionnaire was sent via Email and the social media

from which 50 responses were collected to meet the objectives of this dissertation. The researcher used MS Excel for the analysis of the data collected.

1.6 Structure of the Research

To enhance the understanding of the dissertation the researcher has divided it into 5 parts namely **Introduction, Literature Review, Research Methodology, Findings and Discussion**. The introduction gives a brief overview of the topic and why the study was chosen by the researcher. While the Literature review includes an overview of the important themes related to the topic namely Marketing, The EWOM process, online consumer behavior and how consumers are influenced online, lastly the relevance of SNS with respect to EWOM. Gaps in the existing literature have also been identified. Research Methodology gives an overview on the research design that has been selected for this study along with the sample size and the analysis techniques used by the researcher. This section also talks about the data collection methods deployed and the rationale behind the study. Limitations of the study were also highlighted. The findings section includes the representation of the data collected through Charts and the analysis done using MS Excel as well as the rationale behind it. An attempt to link the findings with the literature review has also been made. The Discussion part will provide an overview of the dissertation, summarizing the literature and giving a discussion on findings while also taking about the limitations and the future research directions of the study.

1.7 Definition of terms:

Word of mouth (WOM): When consumers provide information to other users without any commercial basis regarding brands, products, and services (Hasan 2010).It is defined by Rangkuti (2009) as a marketing strategy that is used to trigger consumers to promote, discuss, recommend, and sell a product or a service to other consumers.

Electronic word of mouth (EWOM):

As per Hennig and Thureau et al. (2004), EWOM is any positive or negative statement made by current or former customers regarding a product or a company that is made available to a large audience via the internet.

Social Networking Sites (SNS):

Social Networking Sites enable the users to create their profile which is visible to others; they are web-based applications through which people build their social networks (Obar and Wildman, 2015).

1.8 Assumptions and Limitations.

Assumptions

Regarding some previous studies conducted the following can be assumed:

- Electronic word of mouth affects the consumer decision-making process

- Consumers trust online reviews but it depends on the knowledge and the level of expertise of the person sending it.
- Consumers spend a good amount of time on social networking sites.

Limitations

Some of the limitations of the study are as follows:

- The target audience of the study could have been larger with the focus only on Ireland in this study.
- This study focuses only on one category i.e. apparels whereas there are other categories such as electronics where research can be done.
- Only a limited number of apparel manufacturers (Five) in Ireland have been taken as a reference for this study.
- The study includes the perspective of the consumer but does not include the viewpoint of the marketers.

1.9 Conclusion

More than three billion consumers and seven billion devices have been connected to the internet (International Telecommunication Union 2014) and are ever-increasing since then. EWOM is present everywhere, is easily accessible, and has turned consumers into "web fortified decision-makers (Blackshaw and Nazzaro 2006) hence a study on EWOM could help marketers in the apparel industry in Ireland in understanding consumer's behavior better and devising strategies which can be beneficial for them. A quantitative method of research was used in this study with a sample size of fifty people. A survey was designed and distributed to people in Ireland for gathering the data.

Chapter 2 Literature review:

2.1 Introduction:

The subject area of Electronic Word of Mouth is gaining exploratory interest from various scholars in recent times. Evaluating the literature related to the study will help the readers get a broad understanding. To achieve the desired results the researcher has divided the literature review into the following themes.

Theme 1: Marketing

Theme 2: Word of Mouth and Electronic Word of Mouth.

Theme 3: Online consumer behavior

Theme 4: Social Networking Sites and word of mouth.

2.2 Research Description

Theme 1

Marketing:

Marketers, these days cannot stick with the old ways of mass media, the rude manner in which they push the customers, the obtrusive bombardment, and the hype of customer manipulation. Consumers are bombarded with a lot of choices across multiple platforms such as tweets, emails, and YouTube videos. This is where WOM comes into the picture and is being used by marketers as a completely different way of doing business unlike traditional marketing methods (“New Perspectives in Marketing by Word-of-Mouth.” 2015: Paul C.S. Wu and Yun-Chen Wang).

In current times, Social Media Marketing gives marketers a wider reach with a little cost when compared to conventional marketing (Stelnzer, 2016). Marketing today is done through ‘likes’, ‘follow’, and ‘shares’ related to products by the consumers on their social media profile and company websites which is a cost-free promotion for companies (Waters et al., 2011; Kim & Ko, 2010; Cha, 2009). Report by Forrester states that 100% of marketers use social media to increase their awareness (Reiss-Davis, 2013). The goals of online marketing are to get new

customers, maintaining loyalty, creating brand awareness, wanting advocacy, and to understand consumer needs (Strout and Schneider (2011)). Knight and Kristina (2007) state that push advertising is transformed into truth advertising when consumers engage with the brand and positive WOM is promoted. WOM is also called as social media marketing, guerilla marketing, and viral marketing (Kozinets et al., 2010).

As per Social Marketing Report (2016), the benefits to companies are increasing sales, better exposure and enhanced market value. Social media marketing is also known to influence consumer relations (trust and intimacy) purchase intentions and WOM according to Kim & Ko's (2012) findings.

Theme 2

Word of Mouth:

Communication that takes place between parties either physically or online is known as word of mouth (WOM). WOM communication is crucial for businesses as their intangible nature might prevent consumers from gathering the right information about a particular product (Zeithaml et al., 1985). Customers interact with the other consumers and may get influenced by decisions taken by others as well as the experience that they've had. Feedback given by the consumers can either be negative, positive, or mixed (Walther, 2011). In the retail context, WOM communication can happen either before or after the consumption of the product by the consumer (Bitner, 1992). Referred to as an informal source of communication between products, WOM is a wide area of literature (Dichter, 1966; Singh 1988, East et al, 2007). According to many researchers, consumers prefer to know about the product from other consumers and it is more effective in influencing consumer attitude towards a product (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955; Mueller, 1958; Rich, 1963; Arndt, 1967; Keller & Berry, 2003). WOM plays a pivotal role in consumer decisions and affects the long term and short term purchase decisions on products. (Gelb – Sundaram 2002).

The average person is generally exposed to 200 to 1,000 WOM every day in the form of communications such as radio commercials, product packaging, billboards on buses, roads, subways roads and buildings, print ads, internet banners, and many others. If one reads the magazines or browse the web for half an hour they are likely to get exposed to hundreds of ads ("New Perspectives in Marketing by WOM." 2015: Paul C.S. Wu and Yun-Chen Wang).

II) Purchase Decision:

Lin (2009) pointed out consumer decision making as a series of decisions made in the process which included Programmed decision making, Extensive decision making, and limited decision making.

1) Programmed decision making:

Consumers who make decisions in a short time and collect of information swiftly with products being of low cost usually.

2) Extensive decision making:

Consumers making broad and complex decisions who are often linked to seldom purchases fall in this category. To make better decisions consumers invest more time and the products tend to be high cost real estates or advance automobiles.

3) Limited decision making:

This one appears somewhere between programmed and extensive decision making. It includes the involvement of consumers, the cost of products or services, the period of making decisions, the collection of information, and the selection of options are above the mediate level.

Electronic Word of Mouth:

WOM has been given new significance more than 60 years after its introduction in the literature books by the means of the internet (Dellarocas 2003). The increasing usage of digital technologies has empowered consumers with sharing their consumption related opinions giving rise to electronic word of mouth (EWOM) "a declaration made by prospective, actual or past customers regarding a product or an organization which is made available to various people and institutions via the Internet" (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004, p. 39). Yelp (an American company that posts crowd-sourced reviews about businesses) for instance 186 million people post nearly 150 million business reviews each month on which 90% of consumers rely on for buying decisions (Capoccia 2018).

However, there is also a difference of opinion and some lack of clarity concerning the understanding of EWOM. It is generally denoted as a way of sharing information from one person to another instead of being consumer-generated content with commercial implications (e.g., Daugherty et al. 2008). Although some researches argue that any type of consumer-generated content even when not related to direct recommendation towards customers should be called EWOM.

It is important to distinguish EWOM and its vital properties from some of the related concepts below:

- 1) EWOM is not general information sharing
- 2) EWOM is not offline WOM
- 3) It is not critics reviews
- 4) Different from advertising
- 5) It is not user-generated content
- 6) It is more than observational learning
- 7) Is not online search rankings.

Mixing up EWOM with some of these concepts may deplete progressive knowledge building (MacInnis 2011).

In the EWOM communication process, consumers may move along from EWOM creation to exposure, to evaluation stages being either the receivers or the senders and may shift between these roles in a non-linear way (Kannan and Li 2017). The impact of EWOM does not only depend on consumer's motivation but also the abilities and opportunities (MOA; Batra and Keller 2016; MacInnis et al. 1991)

The EWOM process:

Consumer MOA:

The MOA framework implies that the extent to which people process information is based on three elements: motivation, opportunity, and ability (MacInnis et al.1991). The motivation was understood as "goal-directed arousal" or the desire or readiness to process information" (MacInnis et al. 1991, p. 34).¹ opportunity as the limit to which distractions or limited exposure time affects consumers attention to information (MacInnis et al. 1991, p. 34); and ability as the extent to which the users have the required resources to make an outcome happen c. Within the EWOM domain, the MOA framework is used to explore how the EWOM senders engage in discussion forums or on social media along with how EWOM receivers process EWOM (e.g., Park et al. 2007; Tang et al. 2014).

The MOA framework speaks about the factors which influence the information processed by the consumers as EWOM. The model can be used by marketers while devising promotional strategies online however the framework lacks relations to the consumer demographics which could have further made the marketers locate their audience better.

Three-Stage EWOM process:

This is a three-stage process that conceptualizes the different EWOM that captures different consumer behavior needs which are inspired by new conceptualizations of the consumer journey (e.g., Hamilton and Price 2019; Lemon and Verhoef 2016). Usually, the route is for consumers to be exposed to EWOM before the purchase and then create EWOM after the purchase, although technological advances now permit different paths. Hence via this process users shift roles from being possible EWOM receivers to being senders and vice versa.

Stage 1: EWOM creation

In this stage, original content is produced by the consumers by either posting one time reviews or participating in prolonged conversations on online communities or forwarding content by companies or other consumers such as re-tweeting (Gong et al. 2017). The prime reason why consumers create EWOM is said to be altruism towards other members and companies (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004) or for enjoyment and gratification for themselves (Kozinets 2016; McGraw et al. 2015; Motyka et al. 2018).EWOM creation expanded in the early 2000s with the

introduction of dedicated online platforms (HennigThurau et al. (2004)) developed a theory based on what drives consumers to create EWOM on these platforms:

- People who are driven by economic incentives
- Consumers who are concerned for other consumers
- Members who act out of altruism and want to help other consumers
- People with multiple motives.

Although the creation of EWOM also depends on when people can access the Internet (e.g. device connectivity Mariani et al. 2019) and a platform where they post content on. The introduction of high-speed internet through 4G and 5G networks, easily available Wi-Fi networks, low data costs, and the worldwide adoption of smartphones has added to it. This has made EWOM instantaneous as the consumers can instantly create EWOM e.g.: the moment they check into a store and are about to make a purchase or post an unpacking video of a product. The increasing technological developments of formats such as images, likes, tags, videos, text ratings, and audios have expanded consumer's opportunity to create EWOM. For a very long time, marketers have attempted to stimulate EWOM with specific timings, specific kinds, or directed at a specific audience by adding to consumer motivations through incentives, communication, and community building. Usually companies' prompt EWOM creation through post-purchase Q & A by inviting verified purchasers such as Amazon and E-Bay these companies are appealing to altruism in this manner. Some companies also offer economic rewards in the form of incentives to EWOM senders (Du Plessis et al. 2014) however according to some researchers incentives should not be offered as they decrease the referral behavior of consumers and biased attitudes towards a product (Kim et al. 2016). Manipulations by marketers decrease the usefulness and value of EWOM (Mayzlin et al. 2014). However, marketers can shape EWOM creation by deciding the length of the text (e.g. six-second videos on vine & 140-280 characters on Twitter Schweidel and Moe 2014))

Stage 2: EWOM exposure

Once EWOM is created (by EWOM senders) consumers take note of it this is either due to their awareness, accidental exposure or due to the support of the marketer's actions. Marketers attempt to facilitate EWOM at this search through various tactics such as Search Engine Optimization. According to a survey, 63% of respondents reported that before purchasing an unfamiliar product it is highly important to read reviews (Worldpay 2017). Individual traits are crucial in consumers seeking EWOM (e.g. need for cognition) perceived expertise, goals, and market mavens throughout the decision-making process. Consumers look for EWOM when there is a high risk e.g. new products whose performance is unknown (Ho-Dac et al. 2013) however recent research has also suggested that consumers look for EWOM as a leisure activity (Goldsmith and Horowitz 2006). The increasing awareness of EWOM is also due to online

influencers as they have a large audience and higher trustworthiness. Accidental exposure to EWOM is imminent with the increasing number of internet users such as (26% of the world's population uses Facebook Internet World Stats 2017) and this has increased in time from Fear of Missing out (FOMO) and this makes consumers highly attentive to messages from their social circle. Previous researches have shown that EWOM is also influenced by specific periods such as days of the week and holidays (Bruce et al. 2012) due to the searching patterns on the Internet. Consumers also have to go through either platform or access costs such as entry barriers (registrations) before they get access to EWOM. Platforms such as Twitter which are "loosely knit" and have open-access are effective for viral dissemination and may have significant effects on EWOM exposure.

For the facilitation and accidental exposure of EWOM marketers deploy traditional marketing mix such as advertising and product design which motivates consumers to search for additional product information (Schmidt and Spreng 1996). Marketers also put forth EWOM in their media such as in a store (e.g., Hansen and Sia 2015), newsletters, and promotional materials. However, in some instances, marketers also tend to restrict brand exposure for strategic reasons and only keeping it to their media.

Stage 3: EWOM evaluation.

While taking a decision consumers evaluate EWOM and marketers manage it to make it relevant for their consumers and secure their brand image. Previous researches have suggested a strong relationship between involvement and processing of EWOM i.e. as consumer involvement increases there is an increasing desire to understand important information (Lee et al. 2008). On the other hand as the desire to process EWOM reduces users reduce their efforts to evaluate while purchasing (King et al. 2014) and utilize other people's opinions to decide (Risselada et al. 2018). What causes curiosity amongst consumers to evaluate EWOM is neutral reviews which contain mixed information (both positive and negative violence) (Tang et al. 2014). Users may also evaluate EWOM differently based on circumstances given such as in terms of devices, format length or order of presentation. For instance, users might absorb emotion in textual EWOM (e.g. anger; Fox et al 2018) at the same time they might find longer EWOM messages to be more complex and require additional resources to evaluate (Ghose and Ipeirotis 2011). The ability of consumers to evaluate EWOM depends on their skills, proficiency in interpreting information or prior knowledge " (Peters et al. 2013, p. 286). If consumers are unable to evaluate EWOM aptly then it might lead to partial results or superficial results (Kuo and Nakhata 2019; Tang et al. 2014). As EWOM increases consumers find it difficult to evaluate it all at once (De Langhe et al. 2016; Risselada et al. 2018) and they may use additional features such as sorting review by helpfulness might make it easier for consumers evaluation. Experienced EWOM has to separate fake product claims and understand product attributes that are not given (Tang et al. 2014).

.It has been stated by Risselada et al. (2018) that EWOM which contains highlighted pros and cons or displayed bullet lists is easier to understand or comprehend rather than unstructured

EWOM. Some marketers for instance use color guides on their websites which helps to spot outdated content (e.g., older EWOM is brighter; Brandes et al. 2011). Marketers have made it easier for users to evaluate EWOM with the help of technological advances for example by adding credibility assessments such as (e.g. status markers such as "top reviewer badges, social cues such as helpfulness votes Baek et al. 2012)) these can influence consumer activity and purchase intentions (Babić Rosario et al. 2016). A study on online reviews by Xu et al. (2015) has suggested that text, video and image formats may differ in perceived credibility and persuasiveness. Marketers also add to the evaluation of EWOM by adding spellchecks and the length of the reviews (i.e. maximum no of characters in a review).

Theme 3:

Online consumer behavior

The process of consumers engaging in making decisions and the physical activity of evaluating, acquiring, using, or disposing of goods and services is called the consumer behavior process (Loudon D.L., 1993). According to a study by Chung Hoon Park and Young Gul Kim, in Korea, 2003 on "Identifying key factors affecting consumer purchase behavior in an online shopping context" said that the quality of information, the user interface and security issues affect the commitment that the consumer has towards the site (Park C.H., 2003). Through the internet, customers can have a direct interaction with their online stores which means that customers focus mainly on the interface and appearance such as pictures, images, quality and video clips of the product rather than the experience (Lohse and Spiller, 1998; Kolesar and Galbraith, 2000). Things such as navigation, information present, and order fulfillment are vital to building trust amongst consumers unlike in traditional retailing (Alba et al., 1997; Reynolds, 2000).

Various studies have looked into the online shopping service features and have classified these into four categories such as customer service and promotions, merchandise, navigation and convenience and security (Jarvenpaa and Todd, 1997; Lohse and Spiller, 1998; Szmanski and Hise, 2000; Liu and Arnett, 2000) which are vital in influencing online consumer behavior.

Impulse buying:

When consumers make "unplanned" purchases without evaluating the product it is regarded as impulsive buying behavior (Raheem and Vishnu, 2013). (Dholakia, 2000) states that high involvement activities and emotions like hope, fear, love, happiness, sexuality, romance, etc lead the buyer to make impulse purchases. According to Park et al. (2005) apart from pricing and promotional strategy in a store, impulse buying can be motivated by having strong relations with the atmosphere in the store and the emotional state of the buyer. Some of the key factors which influence impulse buying are Visual merchandising, quality of the website, and Direct email marketing (Rasela Matharaarachchi 2016). Wang et al., (2007) suggests that when consumers interact with each other on a platform having strong social existence they are more likely to make impulse purchases.

(Beatty and Ferrell, 1998) have discussed some of the factors which act as a trigger for the consumers to make impulse buying decisions. They consist of individual characteristics, environmental characteristics, content targeted towards them along with the variety of the products, design, and navigation of the platform and promotions and pricing. (Deepti Wadera and Vrinda Sharma 2018) have conducted a study on impulsive buying behavior online concerning the Indian consumers whereas the audience for the researcher is consumers in Ireland.

Theme 4:

SNS and Word of Mouth.

A major part of our lives now is the internet and has changed how people communicate with each other. The way business is done has also now been changed by the internet with interactions now taking place between people and not just marketers (Levin et al., 2009). Interactions between people in the form of WOM have always been regarded by marketers as a powerful source when compared to other marketing tools. The credibility of the source is critical as suggested by Hovland, Janis, and Kelly (1953) that people are more likely to trust when the source is presented as credible (as cited in Umeogu, 2012). An interactive community has been provided to the consumers in the form of platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter and they have become a part of our daily lives giving new venues for marketers to understand and make connections with the customers (Chu & Kim, 2011).

Customers nowadays rely on online information created or shared by other people to make purchasing decisions (Hu et al., 2012) therefore there is high social media influence towards brand awareness, opinions and attitudes of consumers (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). In these times everyone uses the internet daily in their lives and can contribute to EWOM before and after the purchase of products (Berger, 2014).

Some of the factors that have been identified by Saleem, Anum, and Abida Ellahi (May 2017) which affect the electronic word of mouth concerning the fashion industry are Homophily, expertness, Trustworthiness, Informational influence and high fashion involvement.

Homophily:

Consumers sharing the same demographics and income to which a person communicates is called Homophily. High level of homophily helps consumers in shaping decisions (Chu & Kim, 2011). People also make decisions based on the characteristics of the message provider i.e. if the reader gets to know that the person sending the message is somehow like him then the message gets more persuasive to the reader (Petty & Cacioppo., 1981).

Expertness:

An individual possessing the knowledge, skills, or experience and can provide accurate information it is defined by Ohanian (1990) as expertness. It has been suggested by various empirical studies that EWOM generated from an expert in the specific field has a higher influence (Gilly et al., 1998).

Trustworthiness:

The credibility of the source of the information is regarded as trustworthiness (East et al., 2008). Lis (2013) has researched that the relationship between credibility and the level of trustworthiness and has concluded that people receiving EWOM communication mostly rely on the trustworthiness of the sender.

Informational influence:

When an individual thinks that someone else has more accurate information than others it results in Informational influence (Chu & Kim, 2011). There are two dimensions of interpersonal influence which are normative and informational influence (Bearden et al., 1989) Making a wise buying decision by accepting the knowledge of others is referred to as the trustworthy proof of reality.

2.3 Empirical studies and findings:

Empirical studies layout similar studies linked to earlier literature on the subject matter. According to the study conducted by (Monica Shu-Fen WU 2014) EWOM has significant effects on the purchase decision of consumers. The study was conducted with reference to the catering industry in Taiwan with data collected from 400 catering consumers. The dimensions of the study are based on the idea of (Lee-Lee 2010) which talks about factors such as Message intensity (Negative or Positive), sender's and receiver's expertise playing a key role in acceptance of WOM. With regards to purchase decision the literature talks about it as a series of decision making process with reference to Lin (2009) which can be studied by marketers to understand the purchasing process of the consumers. It states that source credibility is crucial to the acceptance of WOM and close relations among people can have further influence. There has been extensive use of statistical software SPSS for data analysis and findings. While the study was focused on the catering industry the researcher has chosen the apparel industry for this study to gain a different perspective. Another study conducted by (Gupta and Harris 2009) which studies the influence of EWOM on product consideration and quality of choice with reference to the purchase of laptop in context of online retail. The sample size was of 198 people. Results showed that EWOM makes people spend more time shopping online and analyzing information. A single EWOM is enough to influence the choice of the consumers according to the study. However the study focused on positive EWOM and lacked negative information related to EWOM.

(Romain Cadario 2015) conducted a study on the impact of EWOM on the viewership of television shows in the US. The literature speaks about the effect of EWOM on the TV viewership industry. Data was collected from the Nielsen website which is available to the general public. The sample size included 41 shows which were aired on five major networks of the US. Regression analysis was conducted using statistical software for data analysis. Results of the study indicated that EWOM has substantial influence on the start of the shows life but tended to decline in the later stages. The study however focused on the final outcome and did not focus on the intermediate process such as purchasing process. (Litvin, Goldsmith, and Pan 2008) conducted a study on the effects of EWOM on the tourism and hospitality industry with the literature speaking about the applications of WOM and the challenges faced in today's time. Popular tourism websites were taken into account for conducting the analysis. The study gave insights that consumers are moving towards the online platform and marketers should focus on devising their strategies accordingly. The study however lacked the practical implementation and focused on the theoretical aspects. (Shabnam Khosravani Zangeneha, Reza Mohammadkazemib and Mehran Rezvanib 2014) examined the effects of EWOM on the purchase intentions with 384 participants who bought digital products online. The study used regression analysis to understand the relations between expertise and EWOM acceptance. Findings showed effects of EWOM on the purchase intention of consumers also stating the effects of brand image.

2.4 Conceptual Frameworks.

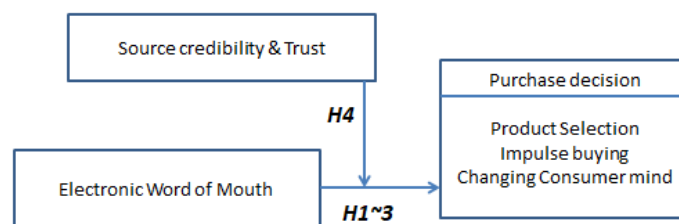


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework for this study

To sum up the above literature review the conceptual framework has been designed to discuss the relations between three elements EWOM, Trust and the consumer purchase decision. Trust is considered to be the key element for consumers when making transactions on the internet (Reichheld & Schefter 2000) & McKnight (2002). Awad & Ragowsky's study (2008) has shown that EWOM is known to have significant effects on the consumer purchase decision process. All three elements are closely linked to each other as without trust the consumer will not make the

purchase and EWOM has effects on the purchasing decision process whether it be impulsive buying, product selection or the ability to change the perceptions of the consumer regarding a product.

2.5 Review of the research:

The literature talks about how EWOM has gained importance in the past few years and has become a topic of interest to various scholars. The five themes discussed give a comprehensive overview concerning the key three elements discussed in the framework namely EWOM, Trust and the consumer purchase decision. Various studies conducted earlier have been discussed. However, the literature lacks the viewpoint of the marketers and the importance of EWOM for them, which can be an upcoming area of research.

Chapter 3 Research Methodology

3.1 Introduction

To complete this research there needs to be the selection of an appropriate methodology to guide the research on the desired path. It is important to illustrate as well as introduce the methodology concerning the manner with which data and information related to the topic of research have been approached. For the current study the major parts of the methodological framework research philosophy, research approaches have been highlighted to direct the research appropriately.

3.2 Research Design

The objectives of the study and the methodological design chosen should match and be aligned with the philosophy of the research. Its aim should be to assist the tutor in meeting the research objectives (Pereira-Heath and Tynan 2010). Quantitative, Qualitative and mixed methods are the types of research methods available to the researchers (Saunders et al 2009). With not much attention given to the subject of EWOM with regards to the apparel industry in Ireland, the researcher has chosen the quantitative method as it is often used by exploratory studies (Saunders et. al 2009). The researcher has chosen the quantitative method as it uses the numerical approach and the analysis can be done using quantitative measure, as the study focuses on a particular location the quantitative method is appropriate as it is objective and concise.

While the qualitative method of research requires conducting study via non-numerical data (Marshall and Rossman, 2011) and data is collected via interviewing specific individuals from the relevant field. It was not feasible to conduct a qualitative method in this study as the central theme was the consumer purchase decision which would require numerous interviews to be conducted to get a broader perspective. Also in the current times of COVID-19 reaching out to people has become a tough task. However, a qualitative method can be used in future studies conducted.

Quantitative Research Methods.

It has been explained by (Saunders et.al 2009) that quantitative study helps you in gathering large amounts of data in an economical way where the data has been standardized and can allow easy comparisons to be made. The researcher created a survey with the help of Question Pro targeting Millennials and distribution was done via email to gather responses. The form of the technique used was through the internet self-administered questionnaire which collected responses from a questionnaire using the Likert-scale along with questions of binary nature such as "Yes" or "No".

3.3 Population and Sampling.

Sampling: Why the sample size.

The method that is used in distinguishing concerning the flux of the population is known as the sampling technique. The researcher for this study relies on non-probability sampling technique which has been academically deemed. There are various types of sampling technique. Random sampling technique, systematic sampling technique and stratified sampling technique fall into the category of probability sampling (Kumar, 2019) whereas on the other hand in non-probability sampling there is convenience sampling and purposive sampling technique. For this piece of study, the researcher has selected a non-probability sampling technique as research was done based on the availability of the participants and is a low budget process which suited the study well. Snowballing sampling technique has also been used as it required for the researcher to focus on the particular geographic location and it was apt for the researcher to get involved with participants by getting in touch with them through the network while some of them were linked to each other. For this study, the researcher has chosen a sample size of 50 people who reside in Ireland and make online purchases. Gen Y (people aged between 18 to 35) are known to be obsessed with fashion (Williams and Page, 2011) and tend to spend 70% of their money on fashion and apparel goods (Bakewell and Mitchell, 2003) were targeted successfully with 84% of the participants falling in this category (Chapter 4: demographic questions).

Population:

The total number of people involved in the environment of the research is deemed as the population. In this context, online apparel shoppers residing in Ireland is the population of the research. It is not practically possible to include the entire population for the analysis of data and it is vital to select sample size. For this piece of research, the sample size will be 50 people who are online apparel shoppers in Ireland. The number of people who participate in the survey is known as the sample size. (Chakravarty, Liu, & Mazumdar, 2010).

3.4 Philosophy of the research.

The essence of the study is considered to be in the philosophy of the research. It illustrates the purpose of the study by studying the approach taken up to address the information. It also acts as a guideline with which to search for data and information that have the empirical declaration which is embedded with relation to the topic of the study (Huff, 2017). Various philosophies are utilized to drive it to the desired path to achieve the desired result. For this study, the researcher has selected pragmatism philosophy of research as it regards concepts with the relevance of putting the actions appropriately. In such a study there is a consideration that there are myriad ways of interpreting things as the research progresses. In pragmatism, it is understood that a single point of view cannot help the researcher in analyzing the complete picture and that multiple realities need to be addressed. Hence to conduct a study in a better manner the researcher has selected pragmatism.

3.4.1 Justification for selecting the philosophy

For this particular research pragmatism, philosophy is considered to be effective as it treats knowledge, value and the related subjects only if it is true. With this philosophy, the researcher will be able to deduce the result as the philosophy considers the practical aspect of the knowledge as an instrument that will help the researcher in adapting to reality and controlling it (Pheby, 2015). It also adopts the relative approach which assists in the modification of the truth related to discoveries and research which are associated with regards to time and place. It also helps the researcher in gathering the abstract truth and the selected philosophy also helps in collecting the methods which are needed to build the context and the base of the research. _

3.5 Research question and hypothesis.

In this chapter, we discuss the research questions that have been developed in the areas of concern that are extracted from the main problem. Further, the research question refers to the questions that the research has answered throughout the study. The main research question is as follows:

- What are the effects of electronic word of mouth on the consumer purchase decision in the apparel industry in Ireland?

With Regards to the main above question the sub-questions are as follows:

1. Does EWOM affect consumer purchase decisions in Ireland?
2. Can the online word of mouth shift the minds of the consumer from one product to another?
3. Do Promotional offers in the form of Mega Sales lead the consumers to buy products online?
4. Does Electronic word of mouth make consumers take impulse buying decisions in the apparel industry in Ireland?
5. Does source credibility matter for the consumers while embracing word of mouth on the internet?

6. On which platform is WOM trusted most by the consumers?

Hypothesis:

In the current times, consumer behavior is studied through the internet and the media which are the common modes of communication between one another. One of the key aspects of consumer decision making has been word of mouth. With the recent technological upgrades, WOM is not just the intrapersonal communications between people but it has developed into a new way of WOM of customer opinions, experiences and comments which are forwarded through chat rooms, discussions and message boards (Gelb-Sundaram 2002; Henning-Thurau et al 2004) which is the so-called Electronic Word of Mouth. EWOM results in becoming the primary source of information for online consumers helping them in understanding the quality of the products.

It has been indicated by Chevalier-Mayzlin(2006) that comments and word of mouth can minimize the risks and uncertainties when purchasing products or services and affect the consumer purchase intention and decision(Chatterjee2001; Godes-Mayzlin2006). The psychological effects are not the same on the internet as the products are not seen physically by the consumers and this can lead to the influence of the consumers by comments which affect the consumer purchase decision. Purchase intention is regarded as a series of the decision-making process by (Blackwell et.al 2006) and comments by other users through word of mouth have been considered by (Nantel 2004) as the principle for online decision. WOM has the phenomena of opinion leadership in the groups and the opinion leader provides information and advice which are asked by other people and it can make changes in the behavior and opinion of people becoming crucial in the decision-making process (Brooks, 1957). Previous researches have denoted that there is a change in consumer behavior when they receive information different from credible sources which also has an impact on their consumer behavior. Hence the following hypotheses have been proposed.

H1: Electronic word of mouth shows significant effects on the consumer purchase decision process in Ireland.

Scholars have decided product knowledge into two types the first being objective knowledge and the other subjective knowledge. Objective knowledge is where the product category information is available with the consumers for a long time and in subjective knowledge the consumer has self-perception about the products (Mothersbaugh, 1994). Researchers have suggested that positive word of mouth significantly influences the travel intentions of tourists (Jalilvanda et al., 2012).WOM can also influence the brand establishment, product development, and quality guarantees (Dellarocas, 2003). Consumers have different types of

opinions which can either be negative or positive which does have an impact on the consumer purchase intention for a product (Chen, 2010).

H2 EWOM can shift the minds of the consumer from one product to another.

WOM is known to affect sales (Godes & Mayzlin, 2004) the same as in the case of product sales as well. Consumers are twice as likely to select the recommended products after referring to reviews (Senecal & Nantel, 2004) indicating the impact of discussions online on product sales. A study conducted on movie ticket sales has suggested that popular word of mouth is related to the frequency of attendance in the movies (Chakravarty, Liu, & Mazumdar, 2010).

H3: EWOM can lead to impulse buying from consumers online.

Madhavaram and Laverie (2004) have analyzed the impulse online purchasing behavior and after considering previous definitions have defined it as "the immediate reaction by a person purchasing external stimuli which can often be charged hedonically". (Park and Kim, 2008; Bellenger, Robertson and Hirschman, 1978; DesMarteau, 2004; Phau and Lo, 2004; and Kim, Ferrin and Raghav Rao, 2008) have studied that apparel purchases are often affected by the spontaneous emotional attraction which makes apparel a common product to be purchased impulsively. Sensory products such as cosmetics, clothing, accessories, and jewelry have seen to be dominated by impulsive buying behavior (Kim, Ferrin and Raghav Rao, 2008). While WOM is known to have an impact on several consumer choices (Arndt, 1967; Richins, 1983) such as purchase decision (O'Reilly & Marx, 2011), service switching (Wangenheim & Bayo'n, 2004), perceptions about products and services (Sweeney et al., 2012) with the option of facilitating brand choice for the users (Huang & Li, 2007).

H4: Source credibility has significant effects on the consumer purchase decision.

Previous studies have shown that the strongest impact on the individual decisions of consumers is through peers, friends and family members (IFOP 2014). Information from people who we do not know e.g. from social media only has a 2% influence on the consumers. However, when the same social media is used by our friends the impact of recommendation is much more efficient (Chu and Kim 2011). A study conducted by Wu and Wang (2010) analyzed the impacts on brand attitude and the insights gathered have shown a positive relationship to exist between source credibility and brand affection, brand trust, and brand attitude. Lin Lu and Wu (2012) have suggested that the main measurements for source credibility were believability, objectiveness, fairness, persuasiveness and accuracy. Various researchers have agreed to the fact that source credibility influences the perception towards a brand (Grewal et al. 1997; Johnson and Kaye 2004).

3.6 Data collection

The researcher for the purpose of this study has deployed both primary and secondary data collection methods. The study design being descriptive the researcher has adopted the questionnaire method for the collection of data as suggested by Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2009). Self-administered questions were deployed using the internet which is known as internet mediated surveys (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill 2009). It has been studied by Nardi (2003) that in a survey participants are honest with their opinions and answers when they are allowed to be anonymous as they can share their views without having a risk of being identified, the same was adopted by the researcher.

To evaluate the research objectives and hypothesis the researcher collected data via online surveys which were sent to a target population. Gen Y (people aged between 18 to 35) are known to be obsessed with fashion (Williams and Page, 2011) and tend to spend 70% of their money on fashion and apparel goods (Bakewell and Mitchell, 2003). The questionnaire was sent to 50 participants who were at least 18 years of age and were living in Ireland. The researcher uploaded links on social media channels such as LinkedIn, Facebook and Email. Hence participants were mainly social media users and they were also told to forward the survey to as many people they could. The data collected for this study was done via QuestionPro a research tool which assists in creating online surveys in a quick time. Conducting online surveys felt advantageous such as fewer time consumption, fast results, user-friendly, low cost and easy access for both the researcher and the respondents. Gathering of data through surveys was much easier than other methods such as observations and interviews. The goal of the survey was to find what the people think about the topic. Quantitative method was adopted by the researcher as the focus of the study was on a specific geographic location (i.e. Ireland) and with sample size being 50 the quantitative method was ideal. Conducting interviews and interpretation would take a long time.

The secondary data was collected and analyzed from various journal databases such as Science direct, Emerald as well as external journals from the National College of Ireland library. These articles helped the researcher in forming a good platform for the literature review and assisted in forming the articulated objectives.

3.7 Data Analysis

The evaluation of data to produce relevant information and take out key insights is known as data analysis. For the purpose of this study the researcher has used MS Excel for analyzing the data collected through surveys. The data file was imported from QuestionPro the platform used for making the questionnaire. All questions answered were examined visually through Pie and Bar charts as they give a better understanding of the numerical data. The percentage method was deployed to understand the factors that are more effective than others. Likert-scale is one

of the most widely used tools to measure psychological and personality traits; it is a scale which measures the same content but varies in the responses to categories would put influence on the response style (Weijters, Cabooter, & Schillewaert, 2010). Hence the researcher has used the Likert- scale for understanding the viewpoint of the consumers. The findings and insights have been represented in chapter 4.

3.8 Conclusion

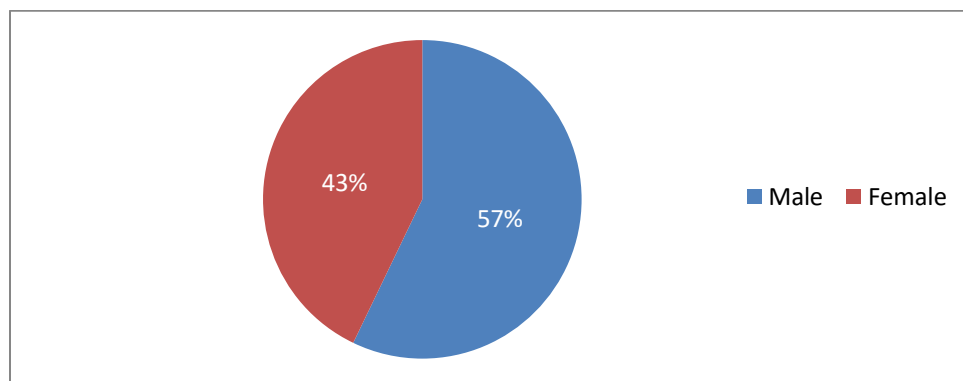
For the evaluation of the effects of EWOM on the consumer purchase decision the researcher should have deployed both quantitative and qualitative methods of research. However due to the limited time constraint and reaching out to people being difficult with the current pandemic (COVID-19) only quantitative method could have been used. Therefore a limited sample size of 50 people was targeted and analyses done using MS excel visual tools. The study was limited to location constraints, although the researcher deployed the best of abilities to garner quality and relevant information from the data collected through questionnaires.

Chapter 4 Data Analysis and Findings:

This chapter is regarded as the most important part of the research as it helps to present findings that are gathered from the data collected through primary research. Data has been collected by the researcher through surveys and using the questionnaire tool which was sent through email to online shoppers in Ireland. The researcher has collected 50 customers who shop online for apparel in Ireland to understand the effects of online word of mouth on the consumer purchase decision in Ireland. Deduced and analyzed via mathematical and statistical methods with the data also represented through charts.

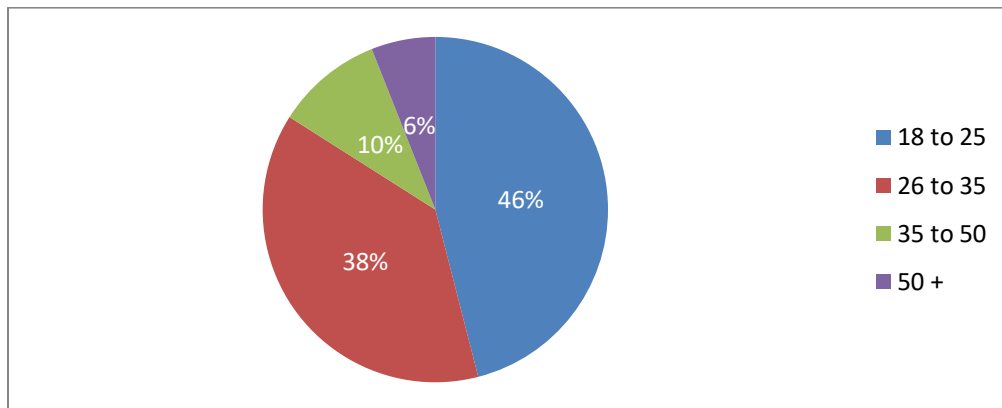
DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONS:

What is Your Gender?



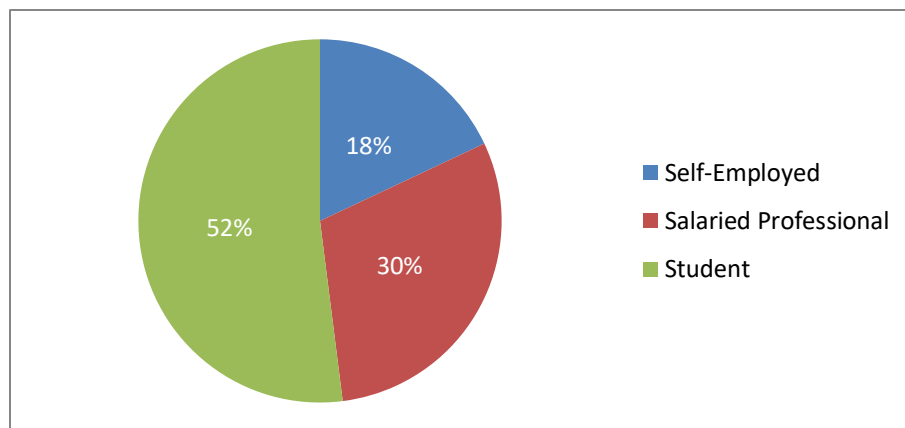
The above chart represents the percentage of male and female participants in the survey associated with online shopping for apparel in Ireland. As represented by the Data it can be seen that in comparison to female customers male customers were keener to participate in the survey. The numbers tell us that 57% of the participants were male whereas 43% of the participants in the survey were females.

Please specify your age range:



This chart represents the age group of respondents who were participating in the survey. It is illustrated from the chart above that 46% of the people involved in the survey were aged between 18 to 25 while another 38% belonged to the age group of 26 to 35. This indicates that the majority of the people who participated in the survey were of the lower age group as they are the majority users of the internet and more prone to getting used technological aspects. While 10% of the people belonged to the age group of 35 to 50 and a mere 6% to the 50+ category indicating low involvement from the higher age group people. Although the researcher has intentionally emphasized the involvement of people of all age groups as this assists in gathering various types of data based on their ideas, behaviors, and perspectives.

What is your Occupation?

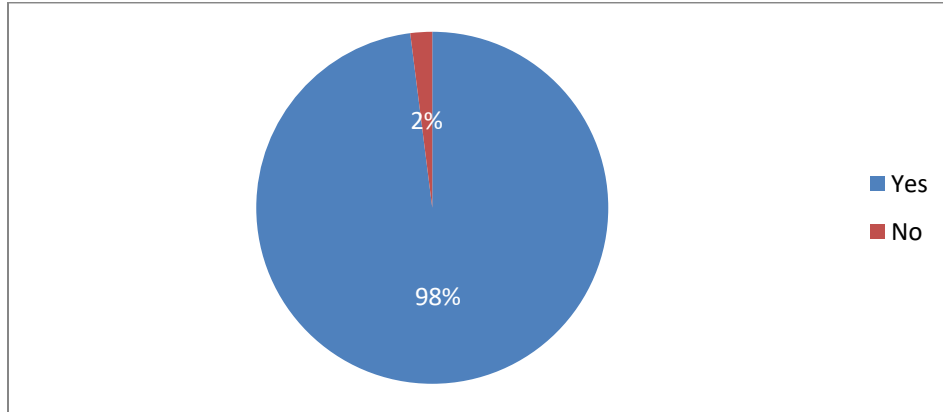


Responses gained from the survey concerning the occupation of the respondents have been illustrated through the above chart. The data tell us that more than half of the people involved in the survey were students as they visit colleges and universities they are more likely to be updated with the recent fashion trends. While 30% of the people are salaried professionals and it can be analyzed they are the ones who have high buying power while 18% of the people were self-employed. For this study, the researcher has selected people from different backgrounds as it gives a different perspective to the research topic and helps in gathering data and analyzing the various matters of the subject effectively.

General Questions

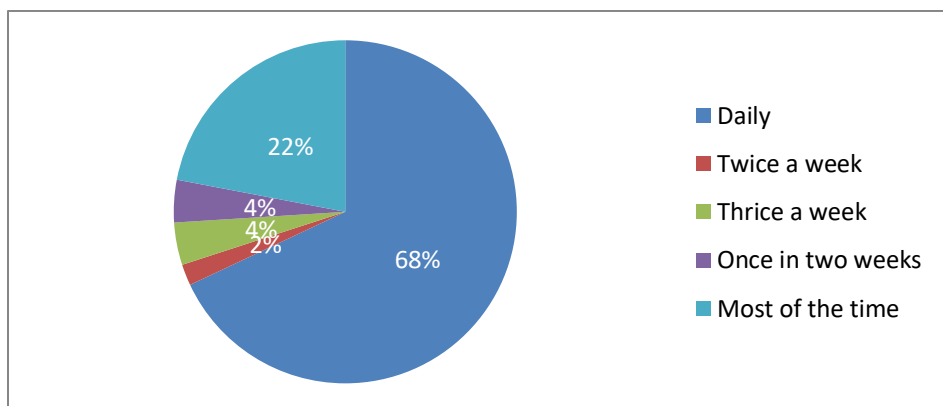
To set the tone of the survey the researcher asks the respondents questions which leads them to the main questions and makes it easier for the respondents to understand the agenda of the survey in a comprehensive manner. The following were some of the questions which were asked concerning the time they spend on the internet and some others which reflect their thought process and thinking pattern.

Do you use social networking sites?



As the topic of the research is based on the internet as the platform for shopping for apparels the researcher needed to understand the degree of involvement of the audience with the internet. Social networking sites such as Instagram and Facebook have become the crux of internet usage and an integral part of people's lives. Hence a lot of marketers now use social media to advertise and promote their products due to the large and different types of audiences available on one single platform. It can be deduced from the data that SNS's have become an integral part of people's lives with 98% of people have agreed to the use of such platforms.

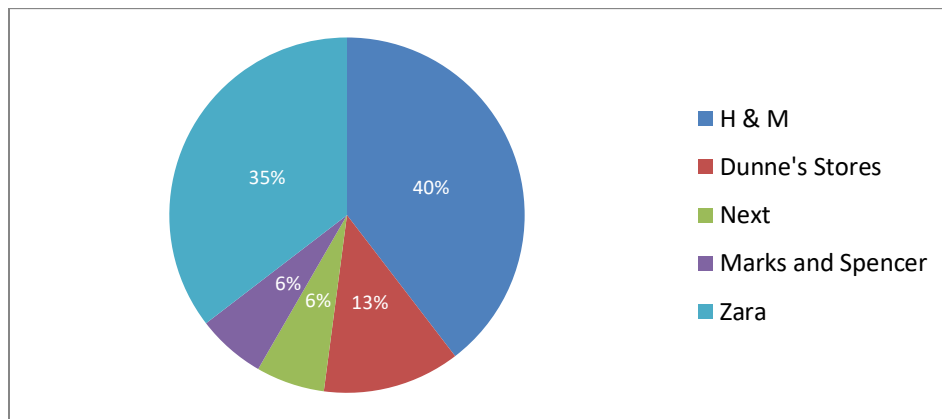
How often do you use social networking sites?



The researcher's idea about SNS's becoming an integral part of people's life can be further asserted through the above chart. With 68% of the people who responded through the survey

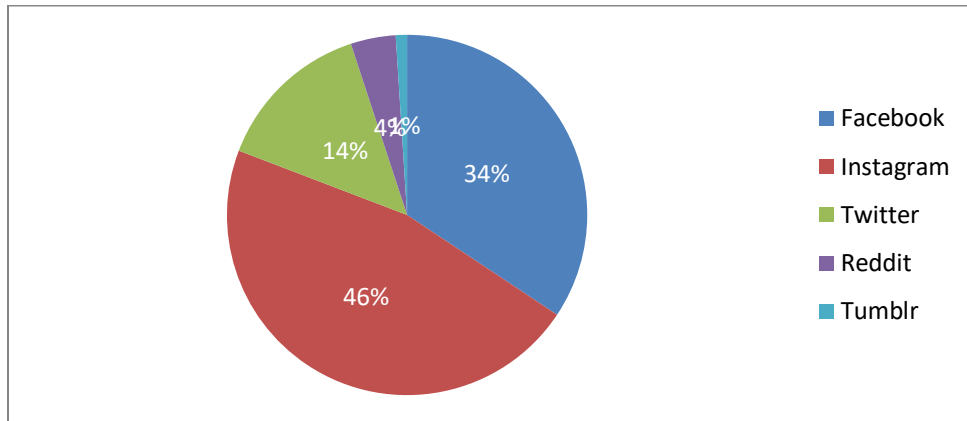
confirming they use SNS's daily and another 22% falling in the category of people who use it most of the time i.e. more than once in a day.4% of the people fell into the category of using SNS' once in two weeks and thrice a week respectively while a meager 2% of the people said they used it twice a week. The above data tells us that 90% (68+22) of the respondents are active on SNS's regularly and it has become a part of their daily lives.

From which online apparel/clothing retailer in Ireland do you shop from often?



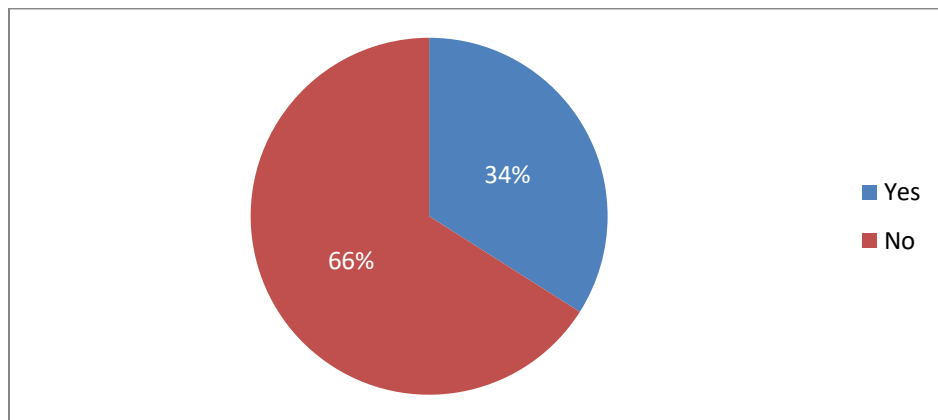
The topic of this study is heavily linked to the apparel industry; hence the researcher through the survey seeks responses from the people as to which apparel manufacturer do they often shop from often. The selection of the manufacturers was done by the researcher looking at the popularity of the manufacturers within the Irish market and a diverse range was selected. Premium as well as cost-benefit companies were selected so that the respondents have a diverse set of companies to select from. The Swedish manufacturer H&M had the highest share of 40% from the respondents while Zara the Spanish manufacturer had 35% of the share. Dunne's store the Irish based retailer had 13% contribution Marks and Spencer along with Next had 6% of contributions respectively. It can hence be concluded that H&M and Zara are the two manufacturers that were popular amongst the respondents followed by Dunne's.

Which Social Networking sites do you use?



For this particular study, the researcher needed to analyze the different SNS platforms on which people spend their time using the Internet. The researcher in the survey has included the various platforms which are popular amongst the people concerning SNS's. Facebook was one of the first SNS's to gain popularity amongst the people and the data shows a 34% contribution from the respondents towards it while Instagram was the platform with the highest percentage of 46%. Twitter stood at 14% while Reddit and Tumblr had contributions of 4% and 1% respectively.

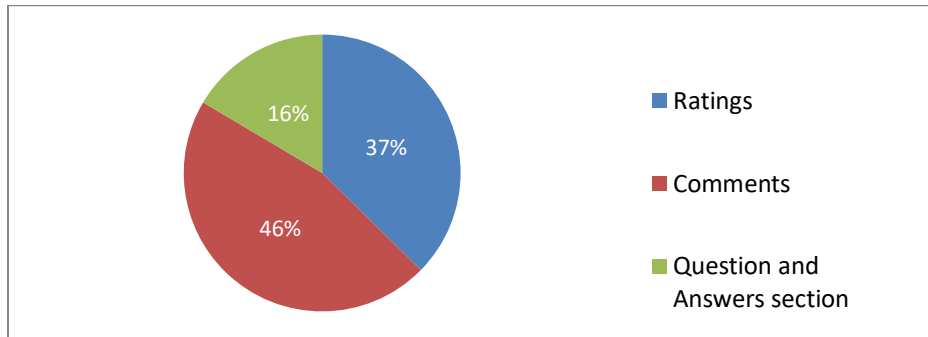
Do you post reviews about products on the Internet?



The central focus of this study is concerning the online word of mouth and the effects it has on the purchasing decision of the consumers. Word of mouth on the internet comes in the form of reviews and many other metrics as discussed in the literature review hence it was important to know whether the audience is interactive while purchasing products on the internet. A total of 66% of people said 'Yes' to being active and posting reviews of products online while 34% of

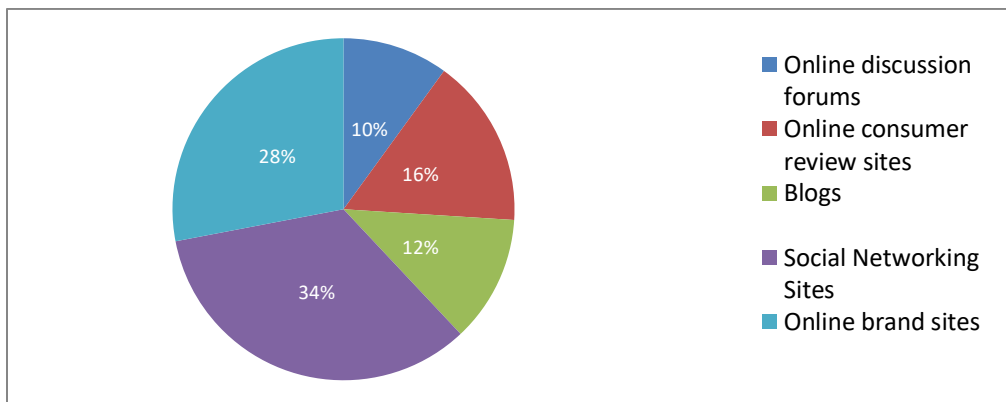
them did not do so. Hence it can be said that the majority of the audience is responsive and is open to sharing their opinion on the internet.

**Which among these do you prefer to get reviews about clothing products on their websites?
(Select all that apply)**



Consumers post their reviews on the online websites of their brands which are considered to be the most trusted source of information for the customers. Consumers pay attention to these and word of mouth is then spread through discussions via these mediums. Ratings are when the consumers rate the products based on their user experience and they can further elaborate on their experience via comments and Question & Answers. Comments had the highest percentage with 46% followed by 37% contribution towards ratings and 16% towards Question and Answers. Hence consumers are more focused on Ratings and Comments which marketers should keep in mind while devising their promotional strategies.

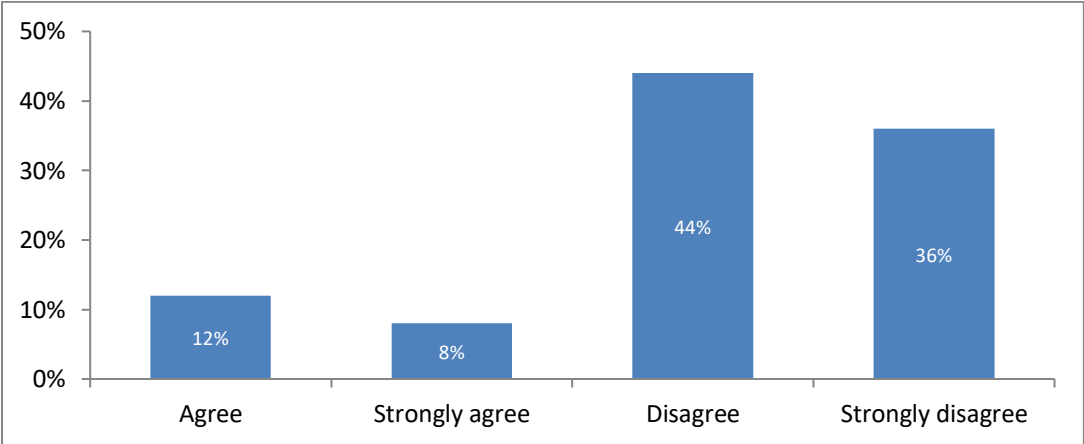
Word of Mouth generated on which of the following platforms is most likely to be trusted you?



Apart from the websites of the respective companies, EWOM is also spread through various other platforms such as online discussion forums, consumer review sites, blogs, SNS's and online brand/shopping sites. As seen in the earlier questions SNS's have become an integral

part of people's lives with a 34% contribution it is the most trusted platform for the respondents, another reason for high trust towards SNS's is the presence of one's friends and family on the network. Online discussion forums stood at 28% while consumer review sites had a share of 16%. Blogs and brand websites had 12% & 10% share respectively. It can hence be deduced that there is a diverse set of platforms through which people get access to and trust word of mouth.

Gender of the person posting reviews plays a role in trusting the reviews

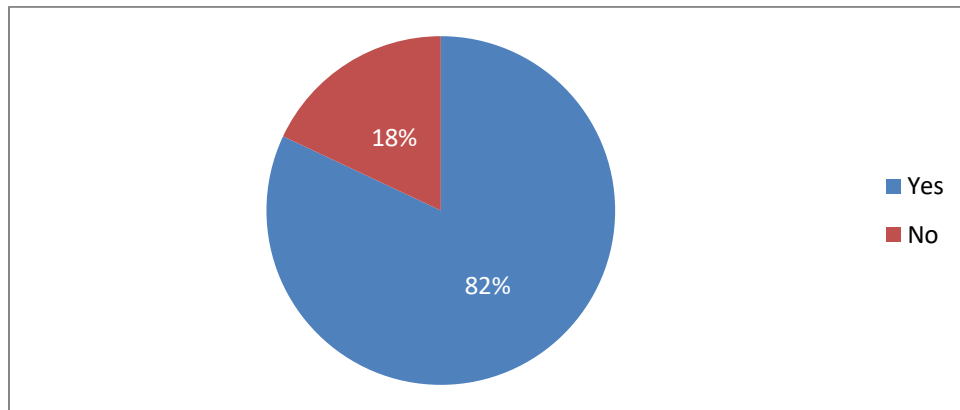


The researcher in this question takes a look at whether the gender of the person posting reviews on the internet affects the consumer decision process. A majority of the respondents 44% have disagreed to the same while 36% of the people have strongly disagreed for the same. Meanwhile, 12% of the people have agreed and 8% of the people have strongly agreed to gender playing a role in the consumer decision-making process. Hence it can be concluded that gender does not play a role in the consumer trusting the reviews or not.

MAIN QUESTIONS.

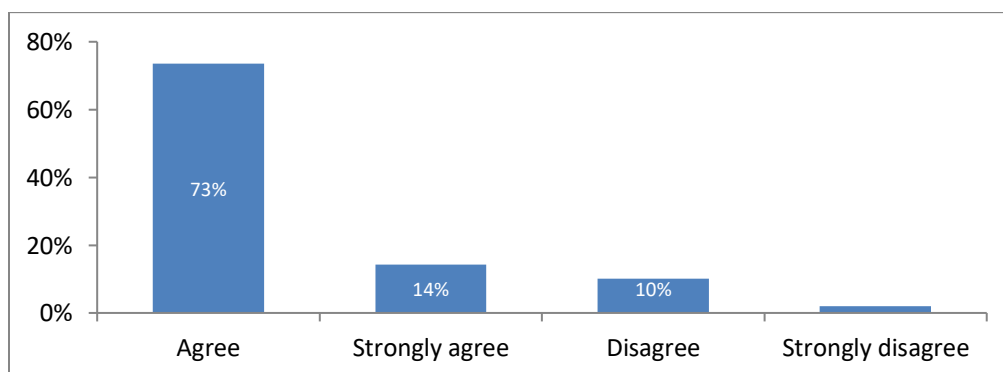
Hypthesis1: Electronic word of mouth shows significant effects on the consumer purchase decision process in Ireland.

Do you take advice from other members on the internet to get reviews about products?



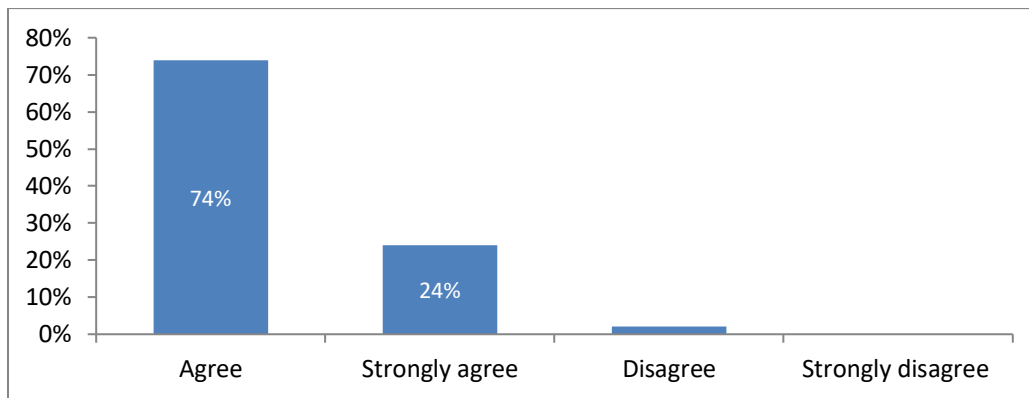
For a flux of word of mouth to be generated online, users must accept the advice given by other users regarding the products on the internet. However, there are various situations and aspects to WOM being accepted by people from other users on the internet which will be discussed in the questions to follow. It was vital for the researcher to analyze whether the audience takes advice from other members regarding products. A majority of 82% of respondents said they do take advice from other users while 18% of people said they would ignore such advice. This validates the findings by (Through the Eyes of the Consumer: 2010 Consumer Shopping Habit Survey) which says that before making a purchase 91% of the respondents look up to online blogs and consumer reviews.

A higher number of reviews of a product increase chances of you buying the product



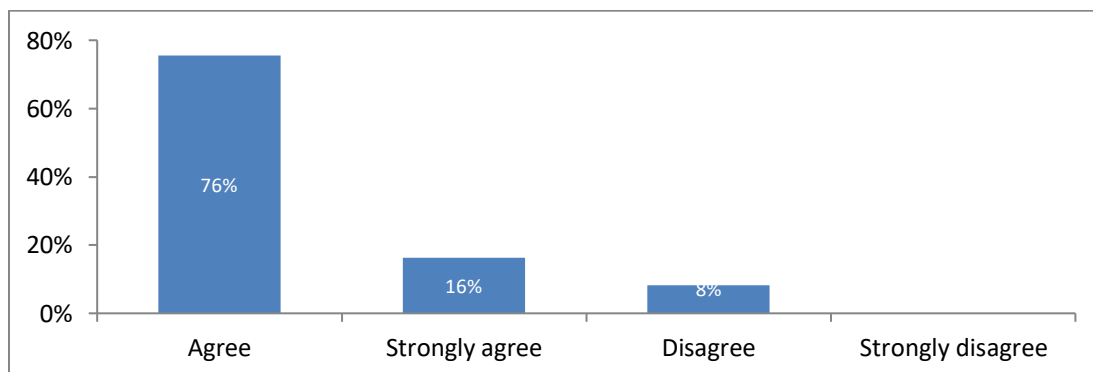
The high popularity of the products increases the chances of the consumers getting to know about it and it increases the consumer base for the products. Marketers also aim to make their products go viral on the internet and increase their popularity. 73% of the people strongly agreed to the fact that it increases the chances of buying the product while another 14% also strongly agreed to the same. 10% of the people disagreed and 2% strongly opposed the same. The same was found in Yelp which said that with 186 million people post nearly 150 million business reviews each month on which 90% of the consumers rely on buying decisions (Capoccia 2018).

The quality of the reviews has an effect on you purchasing the product



Reviews posted on the internet are in the form of comments on SNS's as well as on consumer blogs etc. However, consumers cannot relate to all the reviews as some of them might lack the clarity and quality of the information required to explain the product experience well. A majority of the respondents (74%) have agreed to the fact while 24% have strongly agreed to the same, hence the researcher concludes that the quality of the reviews affects the consumer decision-making process. Meanwhile, just 2% of people have disagreed for the same. Hence marketers apply their strategies to such as spell checks and keeping an eye on the length of the reviews (Xu et al. (2015))

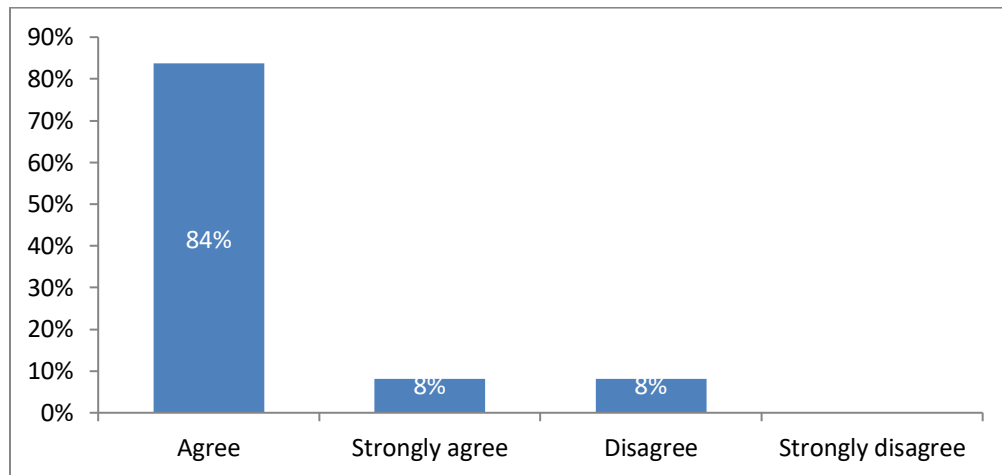
Negative comments influence the purchase intentions for a product



On the internet, there are either positive or negative comments posted on the internet by users and they tend to influence the consumer purchase decision process. Negative comments posted on the internet can put off customers from purchasing a product and have a major impact on the consumer decision-making process. 76% of the respondents agreed to the fact that negative comments affect while 16% have strongly agreed for the same. While 8% of the people have disagreed for the same. The same was confirmed by (Chen,2010) which said that both negative and positive reviews affect the purchase intentions of the product.

H2 EWOM can shift the minds of the consumer from one product to another.

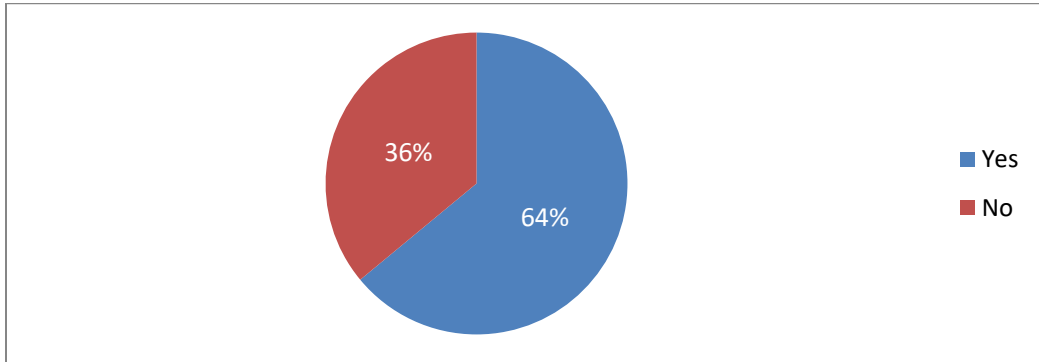
Comments by other members on the internet change your views regarding a product



People are often influenced by the comments and experiences of other users while making any decision. Also when shopping online people are likely to be influenced by the comments on their experiences with the products either good or bad. 84% of people agreed that they do get influenced by the comments of other users when purchasing a product while another 8% strongly agreed to the same. A meager 8% of people said they do not get affected by other users and it does not affect their purchasing decision. (Godes-Mayzlin2006) studied that comments affect consumer purchase decisions and intentions.

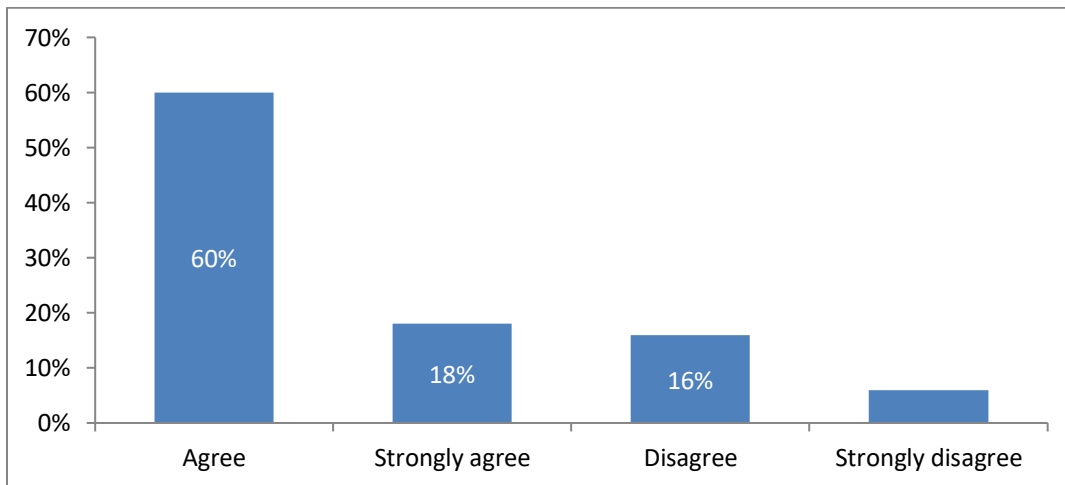
H3: EWOM can lead to impulse buying from consumers online.

Have you purchased clothing products online only due to positive word of mouth on the internet?



Consumers at times make purchases even though they might have not intended to do the same at the start and some of them are also looking just for window shopping often. However, comments by peers and friends can make users buy products they might not even need in the first place which can be caused due to word of mouth being spread on the internet by other users and marketers. 64% of people agreed to the phenomena while 34% of people denied it.

Word spread on Mega sales and discounts lead you to buy apparel products online.

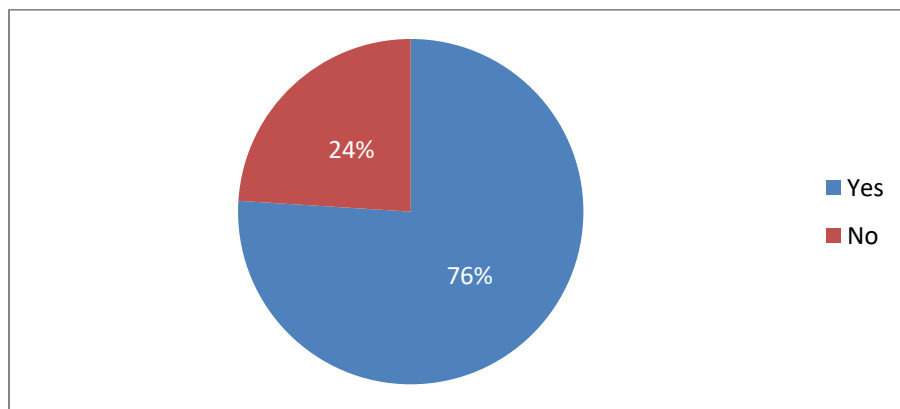


Marketers create word of mouth campaigns for their products for promotions and creating a wider reach for their products. For this, they devise strategies such as offering consumers with loyalty points and discounts via credit points so that the consumers post their experiences of the products used. 60% of the respondents agreed to the fact that such offers can lure them in posting and spreading word of mouth through reviews, ratings, and comments while another

18% also strongly agreed to make it 78% in total. While some users do not fall for such tactics and tend to avoid them with 16% of people disagreeing and another 6% strongly disagreed with the fact. The same is validated through (Godes & Mayzlin, 2004) who have researched that Word of Mouth affects the sales.

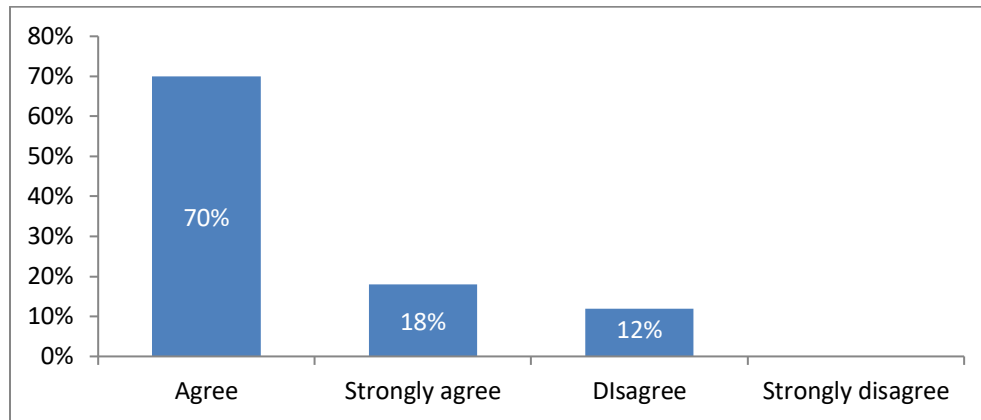
H4: Source credibility has significant effects on the consumer purchase decision.

Do you trust the product reviews posted by other members on Social Networking Sites?



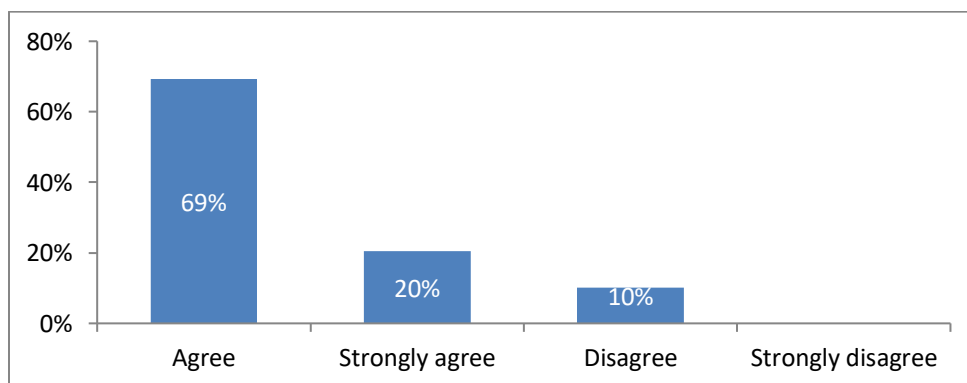
Trust is an important factor to believe what other people say regarding their experience of using products. The researcher needed to know whether the audience believes in WOM being spread on SNS's. On SNS's not all users know each other and it was interesting to know whether people would trust other members. Marketers create promotional campaigns to generate WOM for their products and increase sales and if there is no trust then such campaigns can go in vain. 76% of people said they trusted the reviews which are posted on SNS's while 24% of people said they would not do so. The insights from this data are in alignment with the industry reports which have said that users trust information posted online (Nielsen 2009).

Acceptance of Word of Mouth from other members depends on their level of expertise and knowledge



Not all word of mouth being spread on the internet comes from reliable sources and hence it can get difficult for people to trust them as they might feel the element of risk related to the investment they are about to make. However, there are also genuine opinions through experts of the particular field and customer experiences. A majority of 70% respondents agreed to the fact that the acceptance of word of mouth depends on the expertise of the person sending it while another 18% strongly agreed to the fact which means in the totality of 88% of people agreed to the fact that source credibility matters in word of mouth. While a meager 12% disagreed with the opinion of the acceptance of word of mouth depending on the level of expertise. Hovland, Janis, and Kelly (1953) have confirmed that the credibility of the source is critical in people trusting the products.

The platform on which online word of mouth is read is important.



On the internet word of mouth is presented on different platforms such as SNS's, consumer review sites, brand websites, blogs, etc. The researcher hence wanted to consider the fact whether the platform matters for the consumers while accepting the word of mouth. 69% of

people agreed to the fact that platform is important for them while another 20% strongly agreed to the fact. Hence for the majority i.e. 90% of the people platform matters while for the 10% it did not matter. (Mariani et al. 2019) have confirmed the same that creation and accessibility of EWOM depend on the platform it is posted on.

Chapter 5 Discussions and future recommendations:

5.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to examine the results that have been concluded from the analysis with the idea of addressing the objective of the study and relating it to the work of various other scholars. The responses gathered relate to the various hypothesis made by the researcher in Chapter 3.

5.2 Summary of findings:

- EWOM effects the consumer purchase decision in Ireland.
- The Quality and the quantity of the reviews are crucial in acceptance of WOM.
- Negative comments influence the purchase intentions
- EWOM influences consumer behavior such as changing the perceptions regarding products.
- EWOM can lead to impulse buying in the apparel industry in Ireland.
- Sales and discounts are crucial in gaining customer attention.
- Source credibility, expertise and knowledge is crucial in acceptance of EWOM.
- The Platform where EWOM is read is crucial.

5.3 Conclusions

Discussion of Hypothesis 1:

Electronic word of mouth shows significant effects on the consumer purchase decision process in Ireland.

Research questions with respect to the same:

Does EWOM affect consumer purchase decisions in Ireland?

The author wishes to commence with the central focus of this study which is studying the effect of EWOM on the consumer purchase decision process. 82% of the respondents which is 41 out of the 50 said they do consult people online before making purchase decisions; this is in sync with the insight by (W. Duan, B. GU, and A.B. Whinston 2008) which stated that buyers now depend on other members online for making purchases.92% (84+8) of the respondents agreed to the fact that comments by other users have the ability to change their perception regarding products. Marketers invest a lot of their time and money in formulating and devising market strategies to make a good impression about their product on the consumers, however EWOM is influential enough to change the direction of the consumer minds which means it can be regarded as a powerful tool and one that companies should keep their eyes on. Similar results

were achieved by Kim & Ko's (2012) findings which stated that social media marketing influences the purchase intention of the consumers.

The effect on the consumers can be both negative as well as positive through this study it was found that 92% of the participants believed that negative comments affected the purchase intentions of the consumers which is in relation to the idea of (Lee-Lee 2010) who stated that message intensity (Negative or positive) has a key influence on the consumers mind. Through negative comments not only does the company has loss of sales but it also hampers the brand image of the company in the long run and marketers should keep a track if negative word is being spread regarding them. The significance of the effect of EWOM was further curtailed by this study as 64% of the respondents believed that EWOM can lead them to impulse buying, selling is often hard but EWOM could make people purchase products they were not even going to in the first place, another reason for marketers to concentrate on EWOM. The same was confirmed by (Geetha.M & Bhardwaj.S 2016) when they conducted a study on impulse buying behavior in India. Most of the responses received through this study adhered to the fact that EWOM affects the consumer purchase decision process in Ireland.

Discussion of Hypothesis 2:

H2 EWOM can shift the minds of the consumer from one product to another.

Research questions with respect to the same:

Can the online word of mouth shift the minds of the consumer from one product to another?

As suggested by (López & Sicilia, 2014) previous studies conducted have given less focus to consumer behavior with regards to EWOM hence through this study the researcher explored the magnitude of the effect of EWOM on consumers in Ireland. 84% of the respondents said they changed their mind regarding a product after reading the comments of the other members on the internet. Social media influencers have a key role to play when it comes to influencing other members as they have a high level of attractiveness and trust amongst the people. But what are the factors which lead to the shift of the consumers mind from one product to another? The most common EWOM mediums on the internet are comments, ratings and Question & Answer's on the internet, the respondents of this survey said 46% of them referred to comments while 37% said ratings and 16% of them voted for Question & Answers which indicates that marketers should keep an eye on these metrics especially comments in order to drive positive word of mouth for their products. Chevalier-Mayzlin (2006) also stated that comments have a key role in influencing the consumer purchase process.

Do Promotional offers in the form of Mega Sales lead the consumers to buy products online?

As stated by (Paul C.S. Wu and Yun-Chen Wang 2005) marketers these days cannot stick to their old ways and they need to devise new marketing strategies to attract customers and increase

sales. Promotional offer on the internet is one thing deployed by most of the companies to catch the consumer eyes; in fact prices are also compared to the offline stores to convince the consumers to buy. 78% of the participants agreed to the fact that sales and discounts lead them to buy apparel products online, word regarding sales spreads fast as all consumers are looking to save money and buy products on the cheap. (Waters et al., 2011; Kim & Ko, 2010; Cha, 2009) have regarded promotion done through EWOM as a cost free promotion for the companies. Availability of the audience is also something not to worry about as 98% of the participants in the survey said they used SNS which according to 34% of the respondents is the most trusted platform for EWOM. (Godes & Mayzlin, 2004) have observed the same saying that EWOM has an effect on the company sales.

Discussion for Hypothesis 3

EWOM can lead to impulse buying from consumers online.

Research questions with respect to the same:

Does Electronic word of mouth make consumers take impulse buying decisions in the apparel industry in Ireland?

Impulsive buying is the act of consumers buying products that they did not think of previously and is a huge part of the company profits and sales. It has been observed by a Canadian grocery store that with increase in one purchase by the consumer leads to an increase of forty percent in the overall company sales (Babin and Attaway, 2000).64% of the participants of the survey said WOM lead them to make impulse purchases for apparels on the internet, which is a significant contribution towards the importance of EWOM for the companies as well as the consumers. The same has been observed by (Park and Kim, 2008; Bellenger, Robertson and Hirschman, 1978; DesMarteau, 2004; Phau and Lo, 2004; and Kim, Ferrin and Raghav Rao, 2008) who have stated that apparel purchases are often prone to emotional attraction which is linked to impulse buying.

Discussion for Hypothesis 4

Source credibility has significant effects on the consumer purchase decision.

Research questions with respect to the same:

Does source credibility matter for the consumers while embracing word of mouth on the internet?

(Umeogu, 2012) have stated source credibility as crucial in people accepting information said on the internet. (IFOP 2014) have stated that communication done on social media through close people such as relatives, friends and family have the strongest impact on consumer trust. 76% of the people said they trusted the information posted on the internet, meanwhile 88% of the participants said that the acceptance of WOM on the internet depended on the expertise

and knowledge of the person sending it through. As there is some amount of risk involved consumers hence reach out for WOM on the internet in order to play safe. (Kim, Ferrin and Raghav Rao, 2008) have stated that purchases of clothing are closely related to the impulsive buying behavior.

On which platform is WOM trusted most by the consumers?

(Mariani et al. 2019) have pointed out the importance of the platform with respect to EWOM. 89% of the participants in the survey agreed that the platform on which EWOM is crucial to the acceptance of WOM. As the consumers consider online opinions to be as trustworthy as brand websites (ACNielsen, 2007), platform is crucial for them. The same was observed in this study with 34% of the participants saying they trusted SNS the most followed by online brand websites at 28%.

Suggestions for future research:

- For this study the researcher has focused on one geographic location which is Ireland , further studies can be conducted with respect to different geographies and comparative studies can also be conducted.
- The researcher in this study has selected the apparel industry in Ireland; in the future different industries such as Electronics with respect to Ireland can be explored.
- With this study focusing on the effect on the consumer there is plenty of scope to consider EWOM with the view point of the marketers and the importance of EWOM for them.
- The field of EWOM research lacks qualitative studies conducted which could bring about a different perspective.
- The role of incentives paid to consumers for EWOM can be studied with respect to the effects on both the marketers as well as consumers.

5.4 Final conclusion

Further technological advancements are expected to increase interactivity amongst the people worldwide using the internet. With the introduction of high speed networks such as the 5G, new technological heights are expected to be reached. People are more likely to get dependent on the internet and invest most of their time there. Through this study it has been affirmed that EWOM affects the consumer behavior and it needs further attention from scholars around the globe. The increasing usage of social media sites has increased the time people spend on the internet.

The main idea of the study was to examine the various factors that influence EWOM, Source credibility and trust are the key issues which are vital in the acceptance of WOM. The growing importance of SNS can also not be ignored with majority of the respondents spending most of their time on the internet, marketers should run promotional campaigns to boost their visibility and enhance their brand value.

However there are certain things that should be kept in mind if marketers are to increase consumer engagement and increase their brand awareness .Trust is a key factor in influencing the consumers and should be built by the companies with the consumers. The platform where EWOM is spread is also crucial. The study however lacks the viewpoint of the marketers and the effect of EWOM on their sales and consumer base. The importance of EWOM for the consumers in Ireland has been stated hence a viewpoint of the marketers would broaden the horizons of EWOM research.

The study conducted however its own limitations such as geographical and industrial constraints had. Method deployed for analysis was quantitative where as a qualitative study could also be conducted or a mixed approach would give a different perspective to the audience. With respect to the analysis the study lacked a statistical approach which can be an area for future study for scholars. A small sample size of 50 was selected due to the current pandemic and difficulty of reaching out to people to get the survey filled.

The findings of this study give out key insights which can assist marketers understand the consumers in Ireland. The information and the various factors discussed can be utilized by marketers devise their promotional and marketing strategies. The role of platforms is however crucial in the success and acceptance of EWOM by the marketers.

The researcher would like to conclude with the fact that EWOM is a relatively low cost or even no cost promotion for marketers. It also provides the consumers with rich information when they are stuck or cannot make a decision with regards to their purchasing decisions; it reduces risk for the consumers and gives them real idea of the product without even purchasing it

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