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Published in the the USA
International Journal of Media and Information Literacy
Has been issued since 2016.
E-ISSN: 2500-106X
2021. 6(2): 453-463

DOI: 10.13187/ijmil.2021.2.453
<https://ijmil.cherkasgu.press>



Towards an Integrated Model of Electronic Word of Mouth Communication

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Abstract

The term electronic word of mouth has witnessed a constant evolution due to the technological advancements and increased internet mediated consumer conversations. The topic has become a subject of interest for both business professionals and academic scholars with its growing importance in business research. Past studies mostly discussed the dynamic nature of eWOM under the strong influence of emerging concepts and technological innovations. However, very few research studies have viewed its extensive evolution in the context of a basic model of communication. In this research paper, a theoretical review was conducted to systematically organize the literature findings to develop an eWOM communication model. From participants' classification and motivation to generate eWOM to its influence on receivers, the model elaborates all the basic elements of communication process which also include content type and transmitting platform. This paper significantly contributes to elaborate the basic eWOM communication process by the extensive analyzation of the existing body of knowledge which will help in building a strong foundation of the topic for future studies.

Keywords: eWOM, communication model, communication process, literature analysis.

1. Introduction

The oral interpersonal uncommercialized form of communication is traditionally referred to as a word of mouth (WOM) (Arndt, 1967). Since its emergence, the term has witnessed a constant evolution and has been widely discussed in social sciences, business studies and digital disciplines, however, the scope of this research paper is limited to the systematic review of electronic word of mouth (eWOM) studies in business research. The frequently quoted definition of electronic word of mouth (eWOM) in the literature states that “*it is a positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, and former customers about a product or a company via the Internet*” (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Technological advancements have shown a rapid increase in eWOM communication since the growing consumer base now has more opportunities to interact with Web 2.0 tools (Lee et al., 2008).

The researches available on eWOM confirmed that it influences the customer's decision-making process on digital platforms such as forums (Stephen, Galak, 2012), review sites (Archak et al., 2011), blogs (Onishi, Manchanda, 2012), social networks (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2015) and collective sources available online (King et al., 2014), which shows that eWOM certainly has a prevailing marketing power and provides consumers with the opportunity to interact is a

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computer-mediated environment where they can exchange their product-centered views to make informed purchase decision (Blazevic et al., 2013).

Due to its increasing relevance, a recent shift towards an explosive growth of literature encompassing the efficacy of eWOM have been witnessed (Chevalier, Mayzlin, 2006). Over the years, the emergence of extensive research discussing the variety of platforms and several types of eWOM communication, accompanied with various methods have left the diverse literature available on the topic scattered and inconclusive (King et al., 2014). Market level analysis and individual level analysis are the two main approaches has widely been used to analyze the eWOM phenomenon and its impact on consumers (Lee et al., 2008). Products and sales are the two important parameters on which market-level analysis have been conducted, mostly on objective panel data extracted from online review sites to determine how eWOM influences sales (Chen, Xie, 2005; Chevalier, Mayzlin, 2006; Zhu, Zhang, 2010). On the other hand, individual-level analysis caters to the communication process between sender and receiver about influencing purchase decisions (Cheung et al., 2009; Park, Kim, 2008; Zhang, Watts, 2008).

In this research paper, a theoretical review has been conducted to systematically organize the literature findings to develop an eWOM communication model. From participants' classification and motivation to generate eWOM to its influence on receivers, the model elaborates all the basic elements of the communication process which also include content type and transmitting platform. This paper significantly contributes to elaborate the basic eWOM communication process by the extensive analyzation of the existing body of knowledge which will help in building a strong foundation of the topic for future studies.

2. Materials and methods

There is a vast literature available on eWOM, but the scope of this study is limited to three journals – Journal of Consumer Research, Journal of Marketing and Journal of Marketing Research. the significant articles were searched and identified first, later their analysis was done. It was crucial to set a search strategy for identifying the relevant papers. The keywords used for searching the articles from digital databases include “eWOM”, “online reviews”, “online discussions”, “customer reviews” and “virality”. The papers with the keywords mentioned earlier were extracted from high impact factor journals i.e. Journal of Consumer Research, Journal of Marketing and Journal of Marketing Research to ensure that no important eWOM research articles were skipped.

As per the guiding principles of conventional systematic review methodology, the inclusion and exclusion criteria were set for the initial sorting of the articles. This was done to make sure that the chosen articles are relevant and appropriate for the analysis of the current research. The included articles were academic and peer-reviewed in nature and eWOM was the core subject of discussion in business to consumer settings. However, the papers entirely based on the theoretical and conceptual background without any research design were excluded from the current research.

The digital advancements and emergence of Web 2.0 have enabled customers to influence each other at individual and market-level through user-generated content tools i.e., social networking platforms, microblogging sites, personal blogs and closed or open groups. Therefore, the research studies addressing the impact of eWOM communication can be categorized into market-level analysis and individual- level analysis (Lee, 2009). During the literature review, it was found that the majority of the eWOM research studies were focused around an individual's decision-making process and analysis of consumer reviews on rating platforms, e-commerce websites and discussion forums. The papers selected for this study were focused on both market level and individual level analysis approaches to bring a broader perspective of eWOM research into context.

The 17 articles selected for this study were published between 1967 and 2018. The majority of articles were from the last decade. The timeline review is summarized in Figure 1. To observe the evolution of electronic word of mouth, it was important to include the first paper published on the topic in 1967.

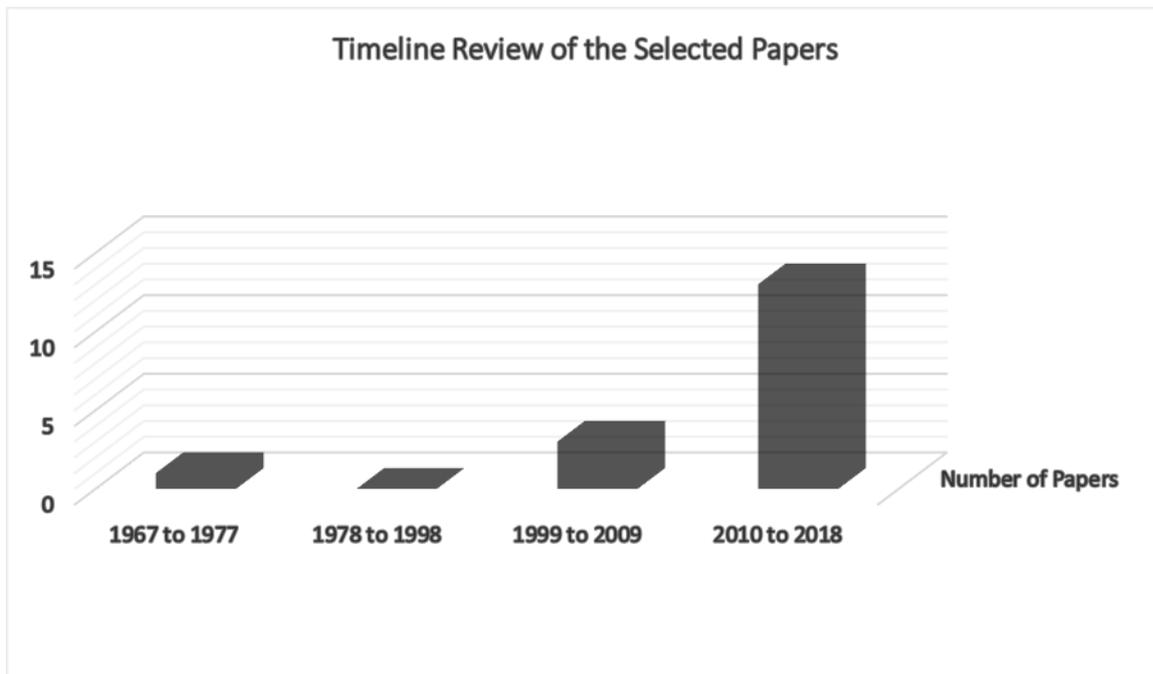


Fig. 1. Timeline Review of the Selected Papers

Among the selected 17 articles, 7 articles followed the market level approach, which constitutes 38.8 % of the total papers, 7 articles adopted the individual level approach, which constitutes the remaining 38.8 % of the selected papers and 3 articles followed both the market-level analysis and individual level analysis approach constitute 22.4 % of the total selected articles, summarized in [Figure 2](#).

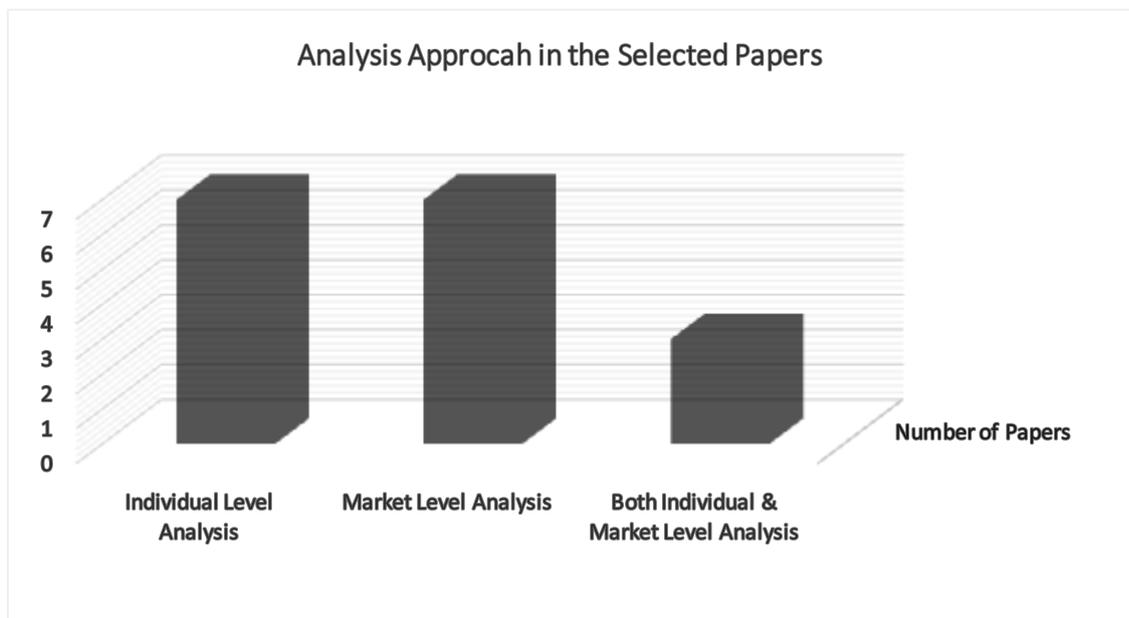


Fig. 2. Analysis Approach in the Selected Papers

During the literature review, it was observed that the term eWOM is constantly evolving with the unprecedented expansion of digital platforms. A slight variation in the context of the study and the difference of its source platform or change in stimuli results in altogether a different eWOM type. As per the findings of the review, the different types of eWOM are summarized in [Table 1](#).

Table 1. Summarized findings of Figure 1 and Figure 2

<i>Types of eWOM</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Analysis Type</i>	<i>Study</i>
Product Related Conversations	1967	Individual Level Analysis	Arndt, 1967
Negative Word of Mouth (NWOM)	2006	Individual Level Analysis	Voorhees, 2006
Consumer Reviews, Community Content,	2006	Market Level Analysis	Chevalier, Mayzlin, 2006
Word of Mouth Communication	2009	Individual Level Analysis	Lam et al., 2009
Negative Word of Mouth (NWOM),	2010	Individual Level Analysis	Cheema, Kaikati, 2010
Positive Word of Mouth (PWOM)	2011	Market Level Analysis	Chen et al., 2011
Rumor	2011	Individual Level Analysis	Dubois et al., 2011
Negative Content, Positive Content	2012	Both Market Level & Individual Level Analysis	Berger, Milkman, 2012
Braggarts, Gossips, Negative Word of Mouth (NWOM), Positive Word of Mouth (PWOM)	2012	Individual Level Analysis	De Angelis et al., 2012
Online Customer Reviews (OCRs),	2013	Market Level Analysis	Ho-Dac et al., 2013
Negative Online Reviews, Positive Online Reviews	2013	Both Market Level & Individual Level Analysis	Chen, Lurie, 2013
Word of Mouth Communication	2013	Market Level Analysis	Lovett et al., 2013
Microblogging Word of Mouth (MWOM)	2014	Market Level Analysis	Hennig-Thurau et al., 2015
Broadcasting, Narrowcasting	2014	Individual Level Analysis	Barasch, Berger, 2014
Consumer Reviews	2017	Both Market Level & Individual Level Analysis	Yin et al., 2017
Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM)	2018	Market Level Analysis	Liu et al., 2018
Word of Mouth Spikes	2018	Market Level Analysis	Gelper et al., 2018

The theories identified in the eWOM literature are presented in [Tab. 2](#). It was observed that most of the theories applied in selected studies were adopted from sociology, psychology and economics. Although the scope of this systematic review study is limited to the business research only, a single study has adopted the Organic Interconsumer Influence Model, Linear Marketer Influence Model, and Network Coproduction Model.

Table 2. Theories identified in eWOM literature

<i>Theory</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Study</i>
Riesman's Theoretical Formulations	1967	Arndt, 1967
Equity theory, Expectancy Disconfirmation, Signaling Theory, Adaptation Theory, Recency Effect,	2006	Voorhees, 2006

Regret, Negative Bias		
Positive Bias, Negative Bias	2006	Chevalier, Mayzlin, 2006
Hofstede's Four Cultural Dimension Theory (1980)	2009	Lam et al., 2009
Social Exchange Theory	2010	Cheema, Kaikati, 2010
Information Cascade Theory, Accessibility–Diagnosticity Model	2011	Chen et al., 2011
Information Transmission, Belief Certainty	2011	Dubois et al., 2011
Psychological and Sociological Approaches	2012	Berger, Milkman, 2012
Self-Enhancement Theory	2012	De Angelis et al., 2012
Signaling Theory, Prospect Theory	2013	Ho-Dac et al., 2013
Negativity Bias, Temporal Contiguity and Causal Attributions	2013	Chen, Lurie, 2013
Social, Emotional and Functional Drivers	2013	Lovett et al., 2013
Negativity Bias, Diagnosticity of Information, Prospect Theory	2014	Hennig-Thurau et al., 2015
Social Impact Theory	2014	Barasch, Berger, 2014
Expressed Emotional Arousal	2017	Yin et al., 2017
Agglomeration Theory	2018	Liu et al., 2018
Social Network Theory	2018	Gelper et al., 2018

The following components of an eWOM communication model have emerged while reviewing eWOM literature which includes Participants' Motivation, Participants' Classification, Influence on Consumer Behavior, Transmitting Platform and Content Types. [Table 3](#) elaborates the major findings.

Table 3. Components of eWOM Model

<i>Category</i>	<i>Subcategory</i>	<i>Publication</i>
Participants' Motivation	Trustworthiness	Hennig-Thurau et al., 2015
	Personal Factor	Gelper et al., 2018 Hennig-Thurau et al., 2015 Liu et al., 2018 Voorhees, 2006
	Environmental Factors	Voorhees, 2006
	Social Factors	Arndt, 1967 Liu et al., 2018 Lovett et al., 2013 Voorhees, 2006
	Emotional State	Berger, Milkman, 2012 Lovett et al., 2013 Yin et al., 2017
	Functional Drivers	Lovett et al., 2013
	Perceived Regret	Voorhees, 2006
	Self-Presentation	Barasch, Berger, 2014 Liu et al., 2018
	Sharer Focus	Barasch, Berger, 2014
	Information	Arndt, 1967

		Chen et al., 2011 Chevalier, Mayzlin, 2006 De Angelis et al., 2012 Gelper et al., 2018 Ho-Dac et al., 2013
	Certainty	Dubois et al., 2011
	Helpfulness	Yin et al., 2017
	Experience	Chen, Lurie, 2013 De Angelis et al., 2012
	Cultural Values	Lam et al., 2009
	Uniqueness of Possessions	Cheema, Kaikati, 2010
Participants' Classification	Age	Barasch, Berger, 2014 Cheema, Kaikati, 2010 De Angelis et al., 2012 Lam et al., 2009 Voorhees, 2006
	Gender	Arndt, 1967 Barasch, Berger, 2014 Cheema, Kaikati, 2010 De Angelis et al., 2012 Lam et al., 2009 Voorhees, 2006
	Education	Arndt, 1967 Cheema, Kaikati, 2010 Dubois et al., 2011 Lam et al., 2009 Liu et al., 2018 Voorhees, 2006 Yin et al., 2017
	Ethnicity	Lam et al., 2009 Liu et al., 2018 Lovett et al., 2013 Voorhees, 2006
	Culture	Lam et al., 2009
	Non-Complainers	Voorhees, 2006
	Audience Size	Barasch, Berger, 2014
	Proximity	Barasch, Berger, 2014
	Opinion Holders	Hennig-Thurau et al., 2015
Influence on Receivers	Correct Choice	Cheema, Kaikati, 2010 Chen, Lurie, 2013 Hennig-Thurau et al., 2015 Yin et al., 2017
	Re-purchase Intention	Voorhees, 2006
	Intention to Pass On	Barasch, Berger, 2014 De Angelis et al., 2012 Dubois et al., 2011 Lovett et al., 2013 Voorhees, 2006
	Virality	Berger, Milkman, 2012
	Sales	Arndt, 1967 Chen et al., 2011 Chevalier, Mayzlin, 2006 Gelper et al., 2018 Ho-Dac et al., 2013
	Product Adoption and Diffusion	Lam et al., 2009
	Increased Consumer Consideration Set	Liu et al., 2018

Transmitting Platform	Company Website/Social Media	Berger, Milkman, 2012
	Twitter	Gelper et al., 2018 Hennig-Thurau et al., 2015
	Blogs	Gelper et al., 2018
	Online/Offline (Surveys/Interviews/Experiment Settings)	Arndt, 1967 Barasch, Berger, 2014 Cheema, Kaikati, 2010 De Angelis et al., 2012 Dubois et al., 2011 Lam et al., 2009 Voorhees, 2006
	Barnesandnoble.com	Chevalier, Mayzlin, 2006
	Amazon.com	Chen et al., 2011 Chevalier, Mayzlin, 2006 Ho-Dac et al., 2013
	Yelp.com	Chen, Lurie, 2013 Liu et al., 2018
	Apple's App Store,	Yin et al., 2017
	Content Type	Tweets
Online Complains		Voorhees, 2006
New York Times Articles		Berger, Milkman, 2012
Online/Offline (Verbal/Written/Oral)		WOM Arndt, 1967 Barasch, Berger, 2014 De Angelis et al., 2012 Gelper et al., 2018 Lam et al., 2009 Lovett et al., 2013
Customer/Consumer Reviews		Chen, Lurie, 2013 Chen et al., 2011 Chevalier, Mayzlin, 2006 Ho-Dac et al., 2013 Liu et al., 2018 Yin et al., 2017
Recommendation		Cheema, Kaikati, 2010
Star Rating		Chen et al., 2011 Chevalier, Mayzlin, 2006 Yin et al., 2017
Rumors		Dubois et al., 2011

3. Discussion and results

Consumers articulate their views on opinion-based platforms. Various studies have been conducted to analyze the motivation behind sharing their thoughts and experiences (Fine et al., 2017; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2003). However, in the context of our study, this category is based on a holistic theme identified in all the papers about participants' motivation to create and share eWOM content. Only the active participants have been put into the category due to their higher motivation to disseminate eWOM. The information has been observed as the most motivating factor (Arndt, 1967; Chen et al., 2011; Chevalier, Mayzlin, 2006; De Angelis et al., 2012; Gelper et al., 2018; Ho-Dac et al., 2013) followed by personal, social and emotional factors respectively. Self-presentation and sharer focus has also been reported as an important factor of participants' motivation (Barasch, Berger, 2014; Liu et al., 2018). In addition to this, trustworthiness, environmental factors, functional drivers, certainty, helpfulness, experience and cultural values were exhibited as equally important contributors of the theme as reported in the eWOM literature. Contrary to the findings of motivating factors, perceived regret was holding participants back from engaging in eWOM activities (Buttle, Groeger, 2017; Voorhees, 2006). On the other hand, the uniqueness of possessions motivates participants to discuss the product detail, but make them less willing to recommend the product to the public (Cheema, Kaikati, 2010; Chen et al., 2018).

The participants' classification is defined as a set of characteristics on the basis of the participants of eWOM communication have been classified into various groups. This theme is based on certain factors identified in the papers selected for this study. Education was the most common factor used by various researchers to classify their participants. It was observed that for most of the researches the participants were students (Arndt, 1967; Cheema, Kaikati, 2010; Dubois et al., 2011; Lam et al., 2009; Liu et al., 2018; Voorhees, 2006; Yin et al., 2017), which was largely followed by other demographic factors such as gender (Arndt, 1967; Barasch, Berger, 2014; Cheema, Kaikati, 2010; De Angelis et al., 2012; Lam et al., 2009), age (Barasch, Berger, 2014; Cheema, Kaikati, 2010; De Angelis et al., 2012; Lam et al., 2009; Voorhees, 2006), and ethnicity (Lam et al., 2009; Liu et al., 2018; Lovett et al., 2013; Voorhees, 2006) respectively. It has been observed that the scope of the study influences the participants' classification. These specific study-based classifications to refine methodology include culture (Lam et al., 2009), opinion holders (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2015), audience size, proximity (Barasch, Berger, 2014) and non-complainers (Voorhees, 2006).

In the context of this review, the receivers are those who receive word of mouth messages generated by the participants. Several studies have proved that receivers' prior knowledge and experiences shape and moderate the impact of word of mouth communication (Li et al., 2016; Moore, Lafreniere, 2020; Rosario et al., 2020), hence it is important to analyze how eWOM communication influences the receivers. Under this category, the impact of eWOM on receivers' behaviour has been identified. eWOM communication empowers consumers to make suggestions, sharing opinions and experiences when it comes to adopting new product, ideas and innovations (Li et al., 2016; Roy et al., 2020; Zhou et al., 2021) therefore, the correct choice, intention to pass on and sales are found as the most common factors contributing to the theme (Barasch, Berger, 2014; Cheema, Kaikati, 2010; Dubois et al., 2011; Gelper et al., 2018; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2015; Ho-Dac et al., 2013). In addition, the research endorses that eWOM influences purchase intention (Voorhees, 2006), triggers virality (Berger, Milkman, 2012) and helps receivers to expand their brand consideration set (Liu et al., 2018) through adoption and diffusion (Lam et al., 2009) especially in case of new products.

An eWOM message needs a platform to travel that results in the emergence of the transmitting platform category. In the reviewed papers, it was observed that the message transmitting platforms for the papers followed market-level analysis approach were based on company websites (Berger, Milkman, 2012; Yin et al., 2017), microblogging and blogging sites (Gelper et al., 2018; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2015), review sites (Chen, Lurie, 2013; Liu et al., 2018), e-commerce website (Chen et al., 2011; Chevalier, Mayzlin, 2006; Ho-Dac et al., 2013). However, in the papers where individual-level analysis approach has been used, the unit of analysis were mostly students, and the transmitting platforms were included survey forms, interviews, and messages initiated in the experimental settings (Arndt, 1967; Barasch, Berger, 2014; Berger, Milkman, 2012; Cheema, Kaikati, 2010; Chen, Lurie, 2013; Dubois et al., 2011; Lam et al., 2009; Voorhees, 2006; Yin et al., 2017).

For this research, the content type is referred to the eWOM content taken from different online sources and collected during experimental settings. This is another theme found common in all the papers selected for the systemic review. Customer or consumer reviews (Chen, Lurie, 2013; Chevalier, Mayzlin, 2006; Liu et al., 2018) and online or offline word of mouth (Arndt, 1967; Gelper et al., 2018; Lam et al., 2009) were found to be the most prevailing content type used to examine eWOM in the available literature (Liu et al., 2019; Xu, Lee, 2020; Zhao et al., 2019). The star rating factor was also used either own its own or in combination with other content types to give meaning to an eWOM communication (Chen et al., 2011; Chevalier, Mayzlin, 2006; Yin et al., 2017). Other than that tweets (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2015), online complaints (Voorhees, 2006), newspaper articles (Berger, Milkman, 2012), recommendations (Cheema, Kaikati, 2010) and rumours (Dubois et al., 2011) have also significantly contributed to the theme. It has also been observed that papers in which both market and individual level analysis were conducted mostly used mixed methodology technique (Berger, Milkman, 2012; Chen, Lurie, 2013; Yin et al., 2017), and experiments were conducted to endorse the findings of market analysis mostly, however, no particular pattern was found among a particular content type and analysis technique.

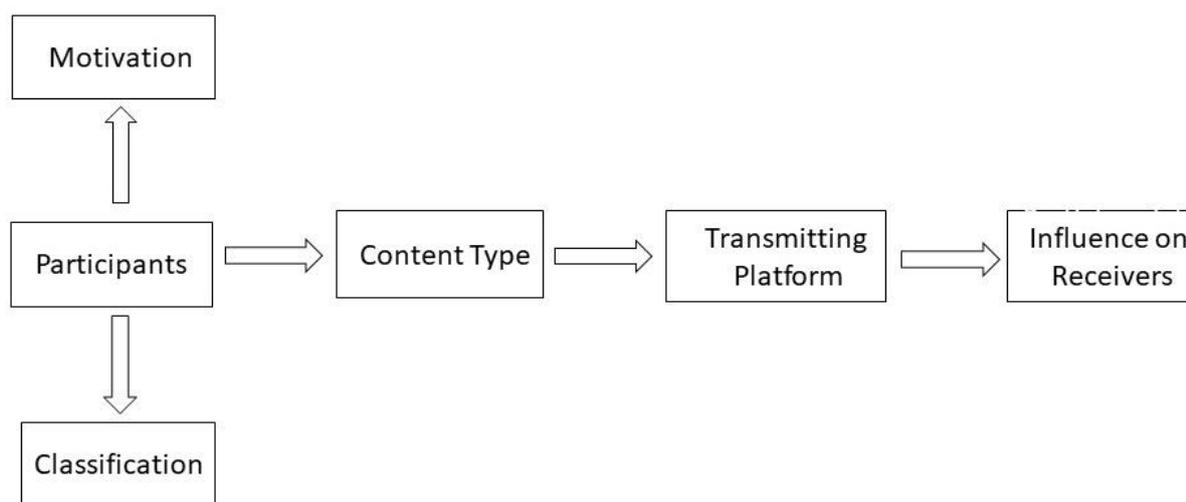


Fig. 3. Graphical Presentation of eWOM Communication Model

4. Conclusion

The prime objective of this systematic review paper is to analyze the eWOM communication process and to present the literature findings as an eWOM communication process. As discussed earlier, both individual level and market analysis papers have been reviewed in this study. After analyzing the literature, a basic eWOM communication model has been developed. The model elaborates participants' motivation and classification, content type, transmitting platform and its influence on receivers. This model provides a basic foundation for future studies.

There were a few limitations, which should be noted. The analyses and categorization are limited to the few impact factor journals fulfilling our selection criteria. Moreover, we have included both the market level and individual level studies in our literature analysis, and more extensive findings can be comprehended by selecting studies addressing either on market level or individual level approach. Our systematic review is based on only 17 papers; therefore, we are unable to perform empirical verification of our findings.

Future research on the topic should include more research papers so that it can be verified empirically. The eWOM model that has been developed in this study is very basic and future research can explore it further in a detail.

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