Electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM) and consumers' purchase decisions: Evidences from Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

The ascent and spread of the Internet have prompted the rise of another type of word of mouth (WOM) namely the electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) which is considered one of the most persuasive casual media among purchasers, business organizations, and the people at large. The purpose of this paper is to measure the impact of electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) on brand image and online purchase intention of shopping products among Bangladeshi consumers. Recently, Bangladesh is experiencing rapid growth in terms of e-business and e-commerce. However, investigation regarding the impact of e-WOM and brand image on online purchase intention has remained mostly unexplored. This study follows a quantitative research methodology and collects data of the consumers by using a non-probability convenience sampling technique. This study reveals that e-WOM affects both brand image and purchase intention positively.

Keywords: E-commerce, e-WOM, Online Purchase, Consumer Behavior, Brand Image.

1. Introduction

The emergence and expansion of Web 2.0 pave way several online platforms, which have become a natural source of dissemination of consumer opinions and experiences. The electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) is one of the online platforms. Now the online platforms including different social media sites, blogs, product review websites, shopping websites, discussion forums, consumer reviews are considered as a form of e-WOM (Cheung & Thadani, 2012; Yeap, Ignatius & Ramayah, 2014). Nowadays, e-WOM communication is well thought out as the trustworthiness form of advertisement (Nielsen, 2015).

Thus it has become a critical loop, which has a significant impact on different marketing outcomes, purchase intention, value co-creation, brand equity dimensions, consumer decision-making process, and online purchase intention (Erkan & Evans, 2016; Shan, 2016; and Chakraborty & Bhat, 2017;). Moreover, e-WOM can also help a firm or its products or services to gain complimentary brand image (Jansen, Zhang, Sobel, & Chowdury, 2009). Thus, it helps the brands to reduce the perceived risk and increase the perceived value of the customers (Wang & Tsai, 2014). Furthermore, the brand image, as a result, helps to take marketing strategy of the firms and it has a significant impact on brand equity, and it affects the purchase behaviour of the consumer (Rahman et. al. 2020; Liu, Zhang, & Qin, 2016).

In connection with the global trends, for the past few years, Bangladesh has been experiencing rapid growth of e-business and e-commerce (Rahman, 2015a). Each year the number of an Internet user is increasing at a significant ratio. Millions of people come under Internet facilities over the years (Husain, 2016). The Government of Bangladesh has set a vision of making "Digital Bangladesh" by 2021 and in line with this goal; the government is continuously working to develop the information technology infrastructure throughout the country (Rahman, 2015b). Currently the e-commerce market in Bangladesh stands at $1.6 billion and is expecting to be doubled to $3 billion by the year 2023 (The Daily Star, 2019).

Online market is based on selling physical goods through a digital platform to the end-users or consumers. Day by day, the trend of online shopping is gaining popularity (Uddin & Sultana, 2015). And in Bangladesh the practice of online shopping has increased a lot than before. Moreover, according to Statista report earnings from selling consumer goods via online is expecting to reach $1.24 billion by the year 2023 (The Daily Star, 2019).

Within the last few years, Internet connections in Bangladesh have improved than before and as a result access to the Internet has also increased. This particular characteristic of the digital market thus has made the e-commerce business flourished in Bangladesh. As a result, in Bangladesh, currently there are approximately 2000 e-commerce sites and 50000 Facebook-based online markets delivering approximately 30000 products each day. Moreover, majority (80%) of the sales through online-based platforms are taking place in cities like Dhaka, Chittagong and Gazipur (The Financial Express, 2020). Although there is enormous growth of e-commerce in Bangladesh, research on the impact of e-WOM on brand image and online purchase intention has remained mostly unexplored and study on this field received minimum attention from the researchers. This study, in this backdrop, aims to explore the impact of e-WOM on brand image and online purchase intention and at the same time to examine the impact of brand image on online purchase intention as a whole.

2. Literature Review

2.1 *Electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM)*

The Electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) is the statements (either positive or negative) about a product or a company, which is on the internet (Xue and Zhou, 2010). It is a phenomenon that takes opinion place over the Internet and the majority of the associated people who opined there remain anonymous (Cheung & Thadani, 2012; Shan, 2016). With the comprehensive use of the electronic word of mouth (e-WOM), present-day consumers can evaluate other people's opinions about products and services regardless of their geographical limits (Makrides et. al., 2020). Studies conducted on e-WOM have established the fact that e-WOM is a critical concept for both consumers and marketers. Cheung & Thadani (2012) divided e-WOM into two broad segments, which are: market-level analysis and individual-level analysis. The market-level analysis deals with the organizational outcome such as product sales, as a consequence of e-WOM and individual level analysis deals with the effect of e-WOM on different aspects of consumer behaviour such as purchase intention. In recent times, e-WOM has established a commitment to the issue of strategic importance in both research and practice (Wilson et. al., 2017).

A lot of differences in many aspects can be found between the principal concept of e-WOM and traditional word of mouth (WOM). One of the critical differences in the range and speed of e-WOM in terms of coverage (King, Racherla, & Bush, 2014; Cheung & Thadani, 2012). As the e-WOM is readily available on the Internet, it spreads rapidly reach millions within a brief period. However, during the early phases, the format of e-WOM was mainly text-based, but with the phases of time various formats of e-WOM started to emerge, and now the people could share picture-based and video-based reviews (Lin, Lu, & Wu, 2012). Thus, shortly we can conclude that numerous studies have been undertaken using the concept of e-WOM. However, the majority of these studies focused on e-WOM adoption, attitude, purchase intention and purchase as the outcome of e-WOM effect. Very few studies focused on the relation between e-WOM and online purchase intention. More specifically, the study of the impact of e-WOM on online purchase intention and brand image in Bangladesh is absence.

2.2 *Online Purchase Intention*

Online purchase intention is an individual's desire of making any purchase that gets reflected through different websites associated with each other (Chen, Hsu, & Lin, 2010). Online purchase intention as described under the principle of the theory of reasoned action (TRA), can also play as an indicator of consumer online shopping behaviour since the intention is considered as a predictor of behavior (Ajzen and Fishbein 1980). Understanding the determinants of purchase intention can help marketers in understanding consumer shopping behaviour. Other factors that are responsible for shaping the purchase intention also became important area to study for researchers for many years. It is valid for online purchase intention, as well. Because online purchase intention involves the higher degree of risk and uncertainty compared to purchase from traditional brick and mortar setting, trust plays a significant role in affecting online purchase intention (Ariffin, Mohan and Goh, 2018). This was further confirmed by Nathan et al. (2019) who conducted a study on young Malaysian consumers and one of the findings of the study showed that online trust is positively related with online purchase intention. The technology perspective is another widely cited component of online purchase intention. Another study by ye et al. (2019) confirmed that both technology and trust perspectives have a significant influence on online purchase intention.

2.3 e-WOM and Online Purchase Intention

As discussed above, it is evident from prior studies that trust plays a significant role in affecting online purchase intention. One of the ways of generating trust in a company and its products is e-WOM (See-to & Ho, 2014). People share their opinions and experiences through e-WOM, which can work as an information source for potential customers. Based on the nature of the information (positive e-WOM or negative e-WOM) shared by prior consumers about a product or company, a potential customer can develop a degree of trust in the reviewed company or product (Tran and Strutton, 2020). This trust will later impact the online purchase intention of that potential customer. Lin et al. (2011) revealed that the quality of online review argument is positively associated with online purchase intention. Erkan & Evans (2016) came up with the same findings that e-WOM found on shopping websites is more influential on online purchase intention compared to e-WOM found on social media websites. Hsu, Lin, & Chiang (2013) argued that online recommendations obtained from bloggers significantly influence online shopping intention of the blog users. See-to & Ho (2014) also said that e-WOM has a direct impact on online purchase intention. Thus, from these discussions, the following hypothesis was developed:

"H1- Electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) has a significant impact on Online Purchase Intention."

2.4 Brand Image

Brand Image is an individual's collection of brand association, which helps a customer to form a favorable or unfavorable perception about a particular brand (Keller, 1993). Aaker (1991) proposed five dimensions of the brand equity out of which one of the dimensions was the brand association. Going forward, Keller (1993) came up with customer-based brand equity (CBBE) dimensions, which comprises two dimensions, namely brand awareness and brand image. The definitions of the brand image by Keller (1993) and brand association by Aaker (1991) are the same (Chakraborty & Bhat, 2017). However, previous knowledge or experience can help in developing brand association. We know that brand experience can be direct or indirect. And, direct experience refers to prior usage experience of the product/service and indirect experience refers to other sources like advertising, word of mouth and online product reviews (Gensler et al. 2015). Brand experience helps to form favorable or unfavorable memories regarding a particular brand, which creates the brand association in the mind of the consumers and ultimately helps to form the brand image (Rahman et al, 2018).

2.5 e-WOM and Brand Image

Online communication and information sharing through different platforms can significantly impact the perception level of a customer as people use these channels to collect information about a product or service (Jansen et al. 2009). People look for e-WOM or online product reviews so that they can have a better understanding of the product as well as can make an informed purchase decision (Hu et al. 2008). Online product reviews are nothing but one form of electronic word of mouth (e-WOM). Gensler et al. (2015) showed that online product reviews could help to generate a favorable brand image. Chakraborty & Bhat (2017) opined that credible online reviews could lead to a favorable brand association formation. Having a favorable brand association toward a brand is a prerequisite of brand image formation. Thus, from these discussions, the following hypothesis was developed:

*"H2- Electronic word of mouth (*e-WOM*) has a significant impact on Brand Image."*

2.6 *Brand Image & Online Purchase Intention*

Having a favorable image towards a brand can enhance the likelihood of purchasing that branded product or service. Many researchers have supported this notion like Ansari and Hashim (2018) who found that brand image could directly influence purchase intention of the individuals. Brand association is the building block for brand image. For instance, the study of Jalilvand & Samiei (2012) on the automobile industry of Iran showed that brand image could significantly affect purchase intention of automobile products. Liu et al. (2016) conducted a study on the online purchase intention of cosmetics products. They found that both the firm's brand image and product's brand image positively affect online purchase intention. Chattaraman et al., (2012) studied on online purchase intention of apparel products and confirmed that having favorable product brand image helps to reduce risk perceptions and can in turn influence consumer's online purchase intention. Thus, from these discussions, the following hypothesis was developed:

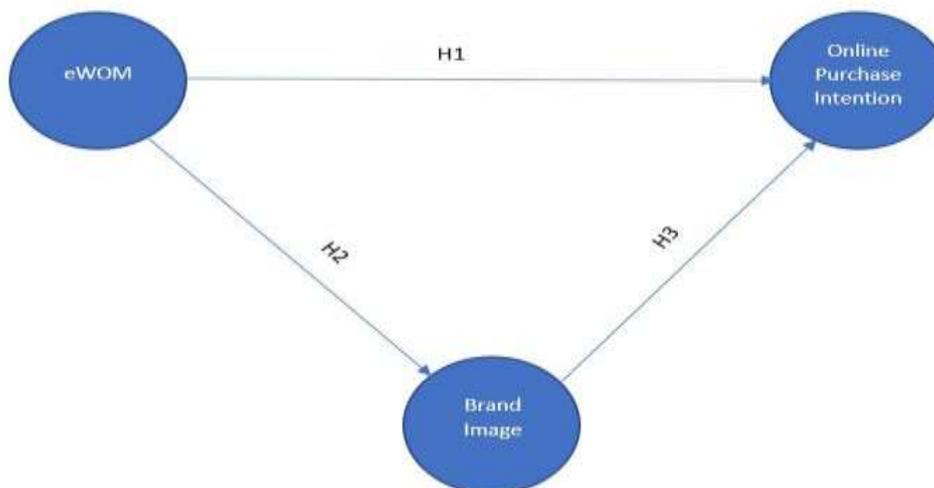"*H3- Brand Image has a significant impact on online purchase intention*"

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework*

***Adapted from Jalilvand & Samiei (2012)**

3.1 Sampling Technique

This research chose purposive sampling to accommodate inclusion of social media users who had online shopping experience. Advantage of using purposive nonprobability sampling is helps to answer specific research questions in relation to particular part of a population characteristics (Neuman, 2014). Random sampling was not possible because not every Social Networking user is an online shopper and this study aimed to investigate the effect of e-WOM on the purchase intention of digital products. The sample was chosen from two cities of Bangladesh i.e. Dhaka the capital city of Bangladesh and the most populous city of Bangladesh with 1,20,43,977 population (National Census 2011) and Chittagong from the second largest city of Bangladesh also the economic capital of Bangladesh with a population of 7,616,352 (National Census 2011).

3.2 Data Collection Procedure

A close-ended questionnaire with items borrowed from previously developed items on the selected constructs was used to collected data for this research. Online surveys developed using 'Google forms' was administered through social networking sites (Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp). The researchers for data redundancy manually screened automatically collected data. The questionnaire was administered for a period of two months (January and February, 2019).

A total of 278 responses were obtained from the respondents of the study. However, 233 responses were retained for final analysis because the other 32 responses did not meet the screening criteria of the respondents (i.e. they answered that they are not familiar with online reviews). This target was set according to the rules of structural equation modeling (SEM) as between 100 and 150 samples. Additionally, Hair et al. (2018) states that the ideal sample size is five times higher than the number of indicators. The number of indicators in the study questionnaire was 17, so the ideal sample size was 105 or more. Hence, a sample size of 233 respondents was sufficient to continue on to the data processing stage.

3.3 Measurement

All the items were measured using the five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagrees with agreeing strongly. All the items were adapted from previous studies. A total of fourteen items were used to measure the three variables (e-WOM, brand image & online purchase intention). Six items adapted from Bambauer-Sachse and Mangold (2011) were used to measure e-WOM. Four items were adapted from Moon, Chadee, and Tikoo (2008), Coyle and Thorson (2001) to measure online purchase intention. Finally, four items adapted from Davies, Golicic, & Marquardt (2009) were used to measure brand image. Table-1 outlines all the items used in this study.

3.4 Data Analysis

This research uses AMOS (2019) version 24 to establish underlying relationships, where the path coefficients are tested for significance and goodness-of-fit. . Tools those measure goodness-of-fit (GFI) ($\chi 2$ (chi-square) test), absolute fit index (root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA)), incremental fit indices (incremental fit index (IFI), the Tucker–Lewis index (TLI) and the comparative fit index (CFI)) were used to identify and explore the relationships on the constructs for this study. Furthermore, Standardized estimation allows reporting relationships between endogenous and exogenous constructs.

4. Results

4.1 *Demographic Profile*
Out of the 233 respondents, 66.5% of the respondents were male, and 33.5% were female. A large portion of the respondent's age was within the range of 19-28 (63.9%), which highlights the fact that majority of the respondents were young Bangladeshi adults. In terms of monthly income, the majority of the respondents (41.6%) were dependent.

Table 2: Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
Age		
18 or Below	5	2.1
19-28	149	63.9
29-38	60	25.8
39-48	10	4.3
49-58	7	3.0
59 or Above	2	.9
Gender		
Male	155	66.5
Female	78	33.5
Monthly Income		
Dependent	97	41.6
Below BDT10,000	17	7.3
BDT10,000-BDT30,000	41	17.6
BDT30,001-BDT50,000	41	17.6
More than BDT50,000	37	15.9

4.2 Measurement Model

The above-mentioned tests demonstrated relationships between e-WOM, the Brand Image and the purchase Intention of customers. This research uses the parameter estimates and the measurement model's overall fit index. The relationships are based upon the method of maximum likelihood (ML).

This research uses Cronbach's α to test the internal consistency and measure reliability of the study. The internal consistency level was appropriate for each build, with the alpha ranging from 0.750 to 0.777, which surpassed the minimum hurdle of 0.60 (Hair et al., 1998). All measuring objects had uniform load estimates of 0.5 or higher at the alpha stage of 0.05 (ranging from 0.532 to 0.805), suggesting the convergent validity of the measuring model. Construct reliability to predict convergent validity was verified; each construct had acceptable construct reliability, with estimates ranging from 0.801 to 0.836 (Hair et al., 1998).

        Table 3: Psychometric Properties of Measures

Construct	Item	Standardized loading	t-statistic	Mean	St. dev	Cronbach's α
eWOM CR= .841; AVE= .592	eWOM1	.548	-	3.926	.890	.777
	eWOM2	.647	7.233	3.955	0.948	
	eWOM3	.600	6.905	3.758	1.028	
	eWOM4	.692	7.518	3.902	0.981	
	eWOM5	.546	6.479	3.615	1.006	
	eWOM6	.623	7.067	3.963	0.876	
Brand Image (BI) CR= .841; AVE= .571	BI1	.787	10.181	3.652	0.959	.765
	BI2	.545	7.485	3.623	0.878	
	BI3	.658	8.837	3.725	0.792	
	BI4	.679	-	3.799	0.849	
Purchase Intention (PI) CR= .889; AVE= .567	PI1	.805	-	3.762	0.847	.750
	PI2	.596	9.108	3.889	0.743	
	PI3	.677	10.494	3.664	0.939	
	PI4	.532	8.043	3.820	0.786	
Notes: CR= Construct Reliability, AVE= Average Variance Extracted; e-WOM = Electronic word of mouth; BI= Brand Image; PI= Purchase Intention						

Additionally, because the average variance extracted (AVE) from all three constructs surpassed the minimum requirement of 0.5 (ranging from 0.567 to 0.592), convergent validity was guaranteed (Hair et al., 1998). The correlations for the constructs are shown in the following table. Overall, these measurement results are satisfactory. These also suggest that it is appropriate to proceed with the evaluation of the structural model.

	PI4	PI3	PI2	PI1	BI1	BI2	BI3	BI4	eWO OM6	eWO OM5	eWO OM4	eWO OM3	eWO OM2	eWO OM1
PI4	1.000													
PI3	.408	1.000												
PI2	.354	.401	1.000											
PI1	.393	.567	.449	1.000										
BI1	.370	.436	.466	.567	1.000									
BI2	.187	.230	.270	.410	.459	1.000								
BI3	.303	.351	.319	.436	.513	.442	1.000							
BI4	.340	.488	.356	.489	.505	.329	.450	1.000						
eWOM6	.319	.300	.341	.432	.347	.244	.317	.366	1.000					
eWOM5	.313	.346	.290	.380	.394	.296	.269	.304	.348	1.000				
eWOM4	.297	.335	.341	.453	.423	.172	.320	.406	.441	.345	1.000			
eWOM3	.241	.303	.326	.383	.357	.245	.287	.265	.369	.296	.474	1.000		
eWOM2	.254	.334	.297	.433	.354	.187	.323	.357	.379	.327	.464	.407	1.000	
eWOM1	.179	.307	.246	.409	.361	.152	.329	.315	.336	.300	.342	.283	.411	1.000

Note: All of the correlations are significant at the 0.01 level; EWOM-Electronic word of mouth; BI-Brand Image; PI-Purchase

4.3 Structural model

The figure below displays the overall explanatory force, the standardized coefficients of path regression that signify the predictor's direct effect on the model's expected latent constructs, and corresponding t-values of the research model's pathways. The table below is used to determine structural model fit indices and the cut-off value of those fit indices. The goodness-of-fit statistics suggest that the structural model matches the data relatively well. The 3-- element model developed a 77.244 chi-square (d.f = 54, p = 0.003). Although the overall chi-square was important (p < 0.05) for this measuring model, it is well established that this statistic is sensitive to large sample sizes (e.g. Hair et al., 1998). The value of chi-square is usually divided by the degrees of freedom to reduce the uncertainty of the chi-square statistics. The re-estimated chi-square value was 1.044, and this new value ranges from 1.0 to 3.0 under an appropriate value cut-off. The goodness fit index (GFI= 0.958, with 1 indicating maximum fit), Comparative Fit Index (CFI = 0.997, 1 = maximum fit), the comparative fit index (NFI = 0.933, with 1 indicating maximum fit), Tucker–Lewis index (TLI= 0.996, 1 = maximum fit) and the incremental fit index (IFI= 0.997) met the proposed

criterion of 0.90 or higher. Third, root means approximation square error (RMSEA = 0.013, with values < 0.08 suggesting good fit), one of the best-suited indices for our large-sample model suggested that the structural model was a fair match.

Table 5: Maximum likelihood estimates for the research model

Independent variable	Dependent variable	Estimate	Standardized estimate	Standard error	t-statistic	P
e-WOM	BI	.890	.761	.136	6.558	***
e-WOM	PI	.506	.366	.161	3.136	.002*
BI	PI	.708	.599	.142	4.975	***

**Significant at the p < 0.001 level (two-tailed)
* Significant at the p < 0.05 level (two-tailed)

		Structural Model	Cut of Value	
Model fit Statistics	Chi-Square d.f p-value	77.244 74 < 0.05		
	Normed Chi-Square	1.044	Between 1 and 3	Excellent
	GFI	.958	> 0.90	Excellent
	NFI	.933	> 0.90	Excellent
	CFI	.997	> 0.90	Excellent
	TLI	.996	> 0.90	Excellent
	IFI	.997	> 0.90	Excellent
	RMR	.029	< 0.50	Excellent
	RMSEA	.013	< 0.08	Excellent
		Model fit is excellent!		

The Table-5 presents the results of the individual tests on the relationship's significance among variables. e-WOM had a substantially positive effect on the brand image, with β= 0.890, t = 6.558 and p = 0.000 suggesting that the e-WOM contact of consumers was an effective track record of the brand image. e-WOM also had a clear positive impact on intention to purchases (β=0.506, t=3.136, p=0.002). Such findings show that e-WOM plays a major role as a substantial antecedent of the behavioral expectations of consumers relative to other advertising outlets. Finally, brand image affected purchases intention, with β= 0.708, t = 4.975, and p = 0.000 suggesting that brand image was a precedent of purchase intention.
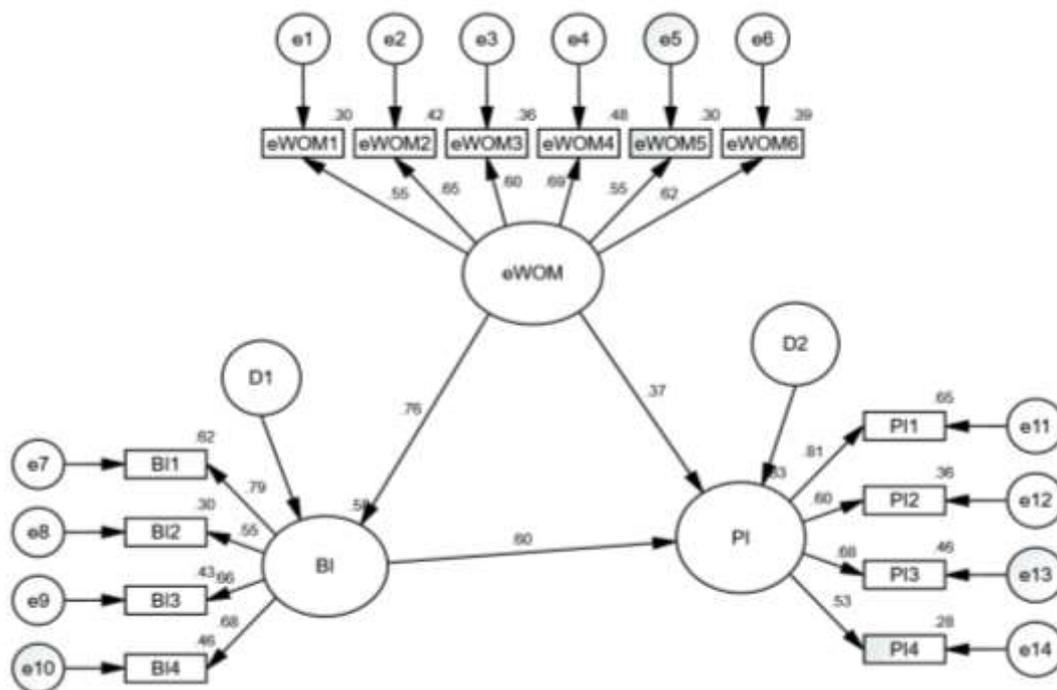
Figure 2: Standardized regression coefficients-proposed model

Moreover, to analyze the interplay between the two variables purchase intention we studied the performance of the direct, indirect and total effects (see below table). The direct impact of e-WOM on purchase intention is of particular interest (0.506). The study also indicates that e-WOM, through its effect on the brand image, has an indirect influence on purchasing intention (0.630).

Table 6: Decomposition of total effects for the research model				
Independent variable	**Dependent variable**	**Total effect**	**Direct effect**	**Indirect effect**
e-WOM	BI	.890	.890	.000
e-WOM	PI	1.136	.506	.630
BI	PI	.708	.708	.000
Note: e-WOM= Electronic word of mouth; BI= Brand Image; PI= Purchase Intention				

5. Conclusion and Future research:

One of the limitations of the study is the absence of a specific product category. No specific product category was considered in this study as to improve the generalizability. However, the inclusion of a specific product category (for example, electronic product) by future researchers can provide a more concentrated result. Moreover, incorporating different product types (search vs. experience product; high involvement vs. low involvement product) can be another area of future research. Another limitation of the study is the absence of a specific platform. E-WOM can be found on different online platforms such as; social media sites, shopping websites, blogs etc.

Moreover, in Bangladesh, consumers nowadays make online purchase not only from online shopping websites but also from businesses that operate through social media pages like shop up. Therefore, to have a more comprehensive understanding, future researchers can focus on a specific online platform (example: Facebook). Moreover, the comparison among different platforms can also be made by future researchers to understand the impact of e-WOM. The findings of this study can help future researchers in understanding the importance of e-WOM from the Bangladeshi context. Researchers in this ground intending to study the brand image and online purchase intention in Bangladesh can get valuable insight from this study. Furthermore, marketing practitioners and policymakers can have a better understanding of the role of e-WOM in e-commerce and online purchase. Appropriate measures can be taken by the policymakers to ensure availability of e-WOM across different online platforms.

In Bangladesh while consumers purchase any product through online platforms, they look at the content and design of the platform as well. As a result, customers will be inclined to log in or purchase where they found online companies providing more lucrative designs or offerings. So, there are scopes of research to find out how these online companies can make their platforms more attractive to lure more consumers.

In addition, as there are lot of online shops available now a days and consumers have less time to visit shops physically, this study will help the future researchers to think about ways to structure brand images and make the brand available as per the consumer want to develop an effective and constructive purchase intention.

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Appendix-1: Measurement Items

Variable	Items
e-WOM **(Bambauer-Sachse and Mangold, 2011)**	I often read other consumers' online product reviews to know what products/brands make good impressions on others
	To make sure I buy the right product/ brand, I often read other consumers' online product reviews
	I often consult other consumers' online product reviews to help choose the right product/ brand
	I frequently gather information from online consumers' product reviews before I buy a certain product/brand
	If I don't read consumers' online product reviews when I buy a product/brand, I worry about my decision
	When I buy a product/brand, consumers' online product reviews make me confident in purchasing the product/brand
Online Purchase Intention **(Coyle & Thorson, 2001; Moon et al. 2008)**	It is very likely that I will buy the product
	I will purchase the product next time I need a product
	I will definitely try the product.
	I will recommend the product to my friends.
Brand Image **(Davies et al. 2009)**	In comparison to other products/brand, the reviewed product/brand has high quality
	The product/brand has a rich history
	I can reliably predict how this product/brand will perform
	Compared to other products/brands, the reviewed product/brand is highly respected by others