

INTERNET MAVENS: THE ROLE IN CONSUMER DECISION MAKING

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INTRODUCTION

Interpersonal communications has long played an important role in explaining the unfolding of various social phenomena. Such interpersonal communications, referred to as word of mouth (WOM), have involved exchanges of product or brand-related information between members of personal social networks. Research has shown that messages exchanged through WOM are more influential in terms of shaping consumer choice than firm-controlled messages such as advertising (Godes et al., 2005; Walsh, Gwinner, & Swanson, 2004; Buttle, 1998).

Research has also revealed that not all members of personal social networks are equally important in terms of facilitating the spread of information by WOM (Clark & Goldsmith, 2005). Consumer behaviour researchers have identified several different types of consumers who are more likely to disseminate product or marketplace information to other consumers, and who also tend to exert influence over other consumers. Market mavens, early purchasers and opinion leaders are some of these special types of consumers. However, out of all these, the market mavens are the ideal target for communicating marketing mix changes that span multiple product categories and involve something more than new product introduction should have knowledge about a wide array of goods and services and the process of acquiring them (Feick & Price, 1987).

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Market mavens are recognized by other consumers for a generalized marketplace expertise across a wide range of product classes in contrast to opinion leaders that tend to focus on a narrow range of product classes (Feick & Price, 1987). They learn about products and brands across a wide variety of product classes and spread this knowledge to other consumers, thus making them especially important players in spreading marketplace information through WOM (Gladwell, 2000).

The rise of internet technologies allows interested individuals to form and exchange information in virtual communities. These communities enable consumers to extend into vast virtual social networks that span the globe. This empowers consumers and greatly increases the importance of WOM communication in consumer choice (Hart & Blackshaw, 2005). Because of this, marketing practitioners are exploring ways to stimulate and manipulate electronic WOM (eWOM) (Dellarocas, 2006) and marketing researchers are beginning to explore consumer behaviors and the flow of eWOM in virtual communities (Sun et al, 2006; Godes & Mayzlin, 2004).

eWOM takes place through a wide variety of Internet media including discussion forums (e.g., autoindustryforum.com), blogs/vlogs (Engadget.com, Rocketboom.com), social networking sites (Facebook.com, MySpace.com), experience, photo, or video sharing sites (youtube.com, Flickr.com), customer-review sites (Epinions.com), and any other website that offers the opportunity for the consumer to share their knowledge and familiarity with a product or experience. These media have been called consumer-generated media (Hart & Blackshaw, 2005) as consumers are often involved in the information exchanges. Mavens primarily acquire and pass on information on products they do not buy themselves (Walsh, Gwinner, & Swanson 2004).

WOM communications embedded in community-generated media are helping consumers make decisions about technically complex products, sort through the vast product-related information, aggregate the opinions of users, and do so at a vastly decreased cost (Godes et. al., 2005). The spread of community-generated media online and the indexing of this media by search engines are expected to increase the reach of WOM in the future (Blackshaw, 2005).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Building on prior consumer behaviour research regarding consumer marketplace and purchasing involvement such as Katz and Lazarsfeld (1972), Feick and Price (1987) identified a group of general marketplace influencers they called market mavens and defined

them as "individuals who have information about many kinds of products, places to shop, and other facets of markets, and initiate discussions with consumers and respond to requests from consumers for market information" (Feick & Price, 1987, p. 85). Market mavens along with opinion leaders, have a level of expertise that allows them to exert influence over other consumers. However, while opinion leaders are generally thought to possess domain specific expertise gained through an enduring involvement with a particular product class (Bloch & Richins, 1983), market mavens' expertise is derived from high levels of general marketplace interest driven by an obligation to share market information, pleasure derived from this sharing, and a general altruistic desire to help others (Walsh, Gwinner, & Swanson, 2004).

Since their identification as a distinct group of influential consumers, researchers have been interested in uncovering characteristics of market mavens to guide marketing practitioners in targeting them. Attempts to define market mavens demographically have proven difficult. In the U.S.A., market mavens are more likely to be black (Feick & Price, 1987), tend to be slightly less educated than consumers in general (Feick & Price, 1987; Williams & Slama, 1995), are more likely to be female (Higie, Price, & Feick, 1987; Williams & Slama, 1995), and are slightly younger than the average (Williams & Slama, 1995). However, these findings are not particularly informative or useful for marketing practitioners seeking to target market mavens given that they focus almost exclusively on demographic variables rather than behaviors. Wiedmann, Walsh, and Mitchell (2001) also found that the relationships between these demographics and mavenism do not hold up well across cultures and should not be considered generalizable.

Market mavens are said to be motivated by a sense of obligation to become knowledgeable consumers and share their knowledge (Walsh, Gwinner, & Swanson, 2004). Studies have found that mavens are heavy consumers of media and use diverse sources of media including television, direct mail advertisements, and magazines that expose them to a diverse set of market-related information (Feick & Price, 1987; Higie, Price, & Feick, 1987). This high level of marketplace involvement leads mavens to seek information for products they do not purchase or even have direct experience with (Feick & Price, 1987). Also contributing to mavens' general knowledge is their tendency to be recreational shoppers (Feick & Price, 1987) and to shop and buy more than other consumers (Goldsmith, Flynn, & Goldsmith, 2003).

Walsh, Gwinner, and Swanson (2004) find two key motives related to market mavens' sharing of information with other consumers. The first of these motives is that market mavens derive pleasure from sharing information with others, perhaps to share their own joy about a

positive marketplace experience. Other research suggests that market mavens find entertainment value and derive satisfying social benefit from the sharing of information (Price, Feick, & Higie, 1987). The other information-sharing motive comes from a general desire to help others (Walsh, Gwinner, & Swanson, 2004). This help may come in the form of saving time by helping the consumer wade through complex choices to aid in buying decisions or assist the consumer in risk reduction. This altruistic motive is thought to be the source, at least in part, of the mavens' tendencies to initiate discussions with consumers and to respond to requests for information.

Due to mavens' motivation to actively gather marketplace information (Feick & Price, 1987) and their sense of obligation to share that information with other consumers (Walsh, Gwinner, & Swanson, 2004), market mavens participate as members of virtual communities, such as customer-review sites or forums, and should be heavy consumers and producers of marketplace-related content in various forms of community generated media. If mavens do indeed act as producers of community-generated media, researchers should be able to examine their online behaviour in order to distinguish them from non-maven consumers.

By their very nature, customer-review websites, are designed specifically for eWOM communications. They provide product information across a very broad range of consumer products makes them an ideal vehicle for mavens' information seeking tendencies. In their original study, Feick and Price (1987) found that mavens engage in product-, brand-, and market-related information seeking through diverse sources. In particular, mavens were shown to be readers of Consumer Reports, a media source that contains product information for a broad range of consumer products. Female market mavens are readers of women's and homemaking magazines (Higie, Price, & Feick, 1987)--both media sources that would expose mavens to marketplace information across a broad range of products. Feick and Price (1987) also found support for the notion that market mavens exhibit higher levels of information provision across product categories than non-maven consumers. This finding was reinforced by research showing that mavens' provisioning of information is consistent over a broad range of product classes (Slama & Williams, 1990).

Research indicates that market mavens are heavy readers of direct mail advertising (Higie, Price, & Feick, 1987), so they would be receptive to targeted online advertising online and direct communication through invite-only forums or email.

According to Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004), individually identifying mavens would give firms the opportunity to make market mavens part of a special group of consumers that receives special attention. For example, pre-notifying market mavens about changes to the firm's

promotions or marketing mix might leverage the mavens' feeling of obligation to spread the information to other consumers. Walsh, Gwinner, and Swanson (2004) also note that sharing potentially negative information such as product recall notices or quality issues with market mavens could help generate goodwill among mavens and diffuse the impact of the negative information. Finally, Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) argue that, contrary to the traditional view of the market as a target for the firm's product offerings, a more productive view of the market in a world of highly interconnected and empowered consumers is that of a forum wherein firms and consumers collaborate to co-create value. In such a world, the ability to easily identify important groups of consumers is a key to realizing the benefits of co-creation opportunities. Market mavens could, for example, be useful collaborators for products that are typically thought to generate low levels of consumer involvement since these products are less likely to generate strong opinion leaders. Also, market mavens' higher than average level of price-quality sensitivity (Lichtenstein & Burton, 1990) could be useful for optimizing pricing levels relative to competing offerings.

In order to capitalize on market mavens' sense of obligation to disseminate information, desire to help others, and feelings of pleasure from informing others (Walsh, Gwinner, and Swanson, 2004), customer-review websites should consider adding messaging capabilities. Such capabilities would allow consumers to initiate requests to mavens for market information and allow for discussions between market mavens and other consumers. Employing a form of media that keeps messages persistent and publicly viewable would allow for community members to benefit from others' prior discussions with market mavens.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is based upon primary data. The primary data has been collected through a questionnaire with all close-ended questions except the last one in which suggestions regarding characteristics of internet mavens have been requested from the respondents. The questionnaire was based on the six item scale of internet mavens developed by Feick and Price (1987). It consisted of 40 questions with 39 close ended questions. Seven questions were for determining the demographic profile of respondents, six questions for determining the psychographic profile of respondents, eleven questions to test the internet usage of respondents, seven questions for testing their degree of influence on other consumers, eight questions on their purpose of use of internet and one open-ended question seeking suggestions regarding any other important characteristic of internet mavens.

In this study, a sample size of 622 respondents was taken from the two prominent modern cities in Northern India, i.e. Yamunanagar, a district town of Haryana and the state capital Chandigarh for Haryana and Punjab.

Besides the primary data, an extensive study of secondary sources of data like census reports, journals, newspapers, online articles and blogs was done.

HYPOTHESIS

Since Feick and Price (1987) have identified a six- item scale for measuring mavenness, so in this research work, the relationship between the items on this scale and degree of internet mavenness are tested. Hence, the hypotheses for this research work:

1. Null Hypothesis H_0 : There is no significant relationship between time spent on internet and internet mavenness.

Alternative Hypothesis H_1 : There is significant relationship between time spent on internet and internet mavenness.

2. Null Hypothesis H_0 : There is no significant relationship between Inclination to search for online information and internet mavenness.

Alternative Hypothesis H_1 : There is significant relationship between Inclination to search for online information and internet mavenness.

3. Null Hypothesis H_0 : There is no significant relationship between Inclination to look for bargain online and internet mavenness.

Alternative Hypothesis H_1 : There is significant relationship between Inclination to look for bargain online and internet mavenness.

4. Null Hypothesis H_0 : There is no significant relationship between Inclination to seek information about new product/market and internet mavenness.

Alternative Hypothesis H_1 : There is significant relationship between Inclination to seek information about new product/market and internet mavenness.

5. Null Hypothesis H_0 : There is no significant relationship between Inclination to introduce new brand/product to others and internet mavenness.

Alternative Hypothesis H_1 : There is significant relationship between Inclination to introduce new brand/product to others and internet mavenness.

6. Null Hypothesis H_0 : There is no significant relationship between disseminating brand/product information to others and internet mavenness.

Alternative Hypothesis H_1 : There is significant relationship between disseminating brand/product information to others and internet mavenness.

Statistical Analysis and Results

Hypothesis Testing

Chi Square Test has been used to test the hypotheses:-

Test Statistics

	Spending	Frequency	Introduce_p rod	Info_seek	Intro_Prodc t
Chi-Square	13.854 ^a	213.724 ^a	328.434 ^a	12.824 ^a	14.954 ^a
Df	3	3	3	3	3
Asymp. Sig.	.003	.000	.066	.05	.053

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5.

Interpretation:- This table represents that independent variables i.e. Spending and frequency has asymp. Side value .003 and .000 respectively, which is less than the critical value .05, hence the null hypothesis is accepted, which implies that there is no significant relationship between spending and internet mavenness and frequency and internet mavenness. Introduce_product, Info_seek and Intro_Prodc have asymp. side value as .066, .05 and .053 respectively which is equal to or more than .05. Thus, in these cases, the alternate hypotheses are accepted. This means that there is a significant relationship between Introduce_prod (introducing product information to others), Info_seek (seeking market and product information) and Intro_prodc (introducing product) and internet mavenness.

Factor Analysis:-

KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.620
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	5.364E3
	Df	45
	Sig.	.000

Component Matrix^a

	Component		
	1	2	3
Time spent	.932		
Info seek	.909		
Intro product	.896		
Modes of internet	.888	-.300	
purpose	.755	.337	-.501
Security	.726		.571
Spending	.678	-.612	
Seek info	-.610	-.422	.301
Frequency		.915	
	-.525	.463	.633

Interpretation:-

- This KMO and Bartlett's is signifying the value i.e. 0.620 which is greater than than the value 0.5. Hence the value is signifying that data collected is highly significant.
- This is the matrix showing three very important factors and their values in each column. Highest value is selected from each column which shows the importance of most important variables which are impacting more on the post purchase evaluation and will be most influencing factors.
- The graph is showing there are 3 important factors having more than 1 eigen values which is stating that these are the most important variables.
- Those three important variables are time spent online, seeking information and introducing product to others.

Tobit Model:-

Covariance matrix computed using second derivatives

	Coefficient	Std. Error	z-Statistic	Prob.
INFO INTRO	0.034603	0.049087	0.704942	0.4808
INFO SEEK	0.045963	0.041916	1.096559	0.2728
SPENDING	0.422307	0.036497	11.57103	0.0000
FREQUENCY	1.984121	0.330981	5.994668	0.0000

Interpretation:- This table represents that Info Intro has the highest amount of probability factor on dependent variable Internet Mavenness which results to 0.4808 in comparison to other independent variables.

Regression:-**Model Summary^b**

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.390 ^a	.852	.150	.50353

a. Predictors: (Constant):Info_intro

b. Dependent Variable: Internet Mavenness

Interpretation:- This table represents that independent variable, “Info_Intro” has R square value as 85.2% impact on dependent variable i.e. “Internet Mavenness”.

Correlation:-**Correlations**

		Info_seek	Maven
Info_seek	Pearson	1	.802**
	Correlation		
	Sig. (1-tailed)		.000
	N	431	431
Maven	Pearson	.802**	1
	Correlation		
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.000	
	N	431	431

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed).

Interpretation:- This table represents that there is high degree of positive correlation between “Info_seek” and “Maven” that amounts to .802.

Correlations

		Info_intro	Maven
Shop_freq	Pearson	1	.027
	Correlation		
	Sig. (1-tailed)		.287
	N	431	431
Maven	Pearson	.027	1
	Correlation		
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.287	
	N	431	431

Interpretation:- This table represents that there is low degree of positive correlation between “Shop_freq” and “maven” that amounts to .027.

Correlations

		spending	Maven	
spending	Pearson	1	-.390**	
	Correlation			
	Sig. (1-tailed)			.000
	N			431
maven	Pearson	-.390**	1	
	Correlation			
	Sig. (1-tailed)			.000
	N			431

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed).

Interpretation:- This table represents that there is moderate degree of negative correlation between “spending” and “maven” that amounts to -.390.

CHI SQUARE TEST has been used to test the hypotheses:-

Test Statistics

	Spending	Frequency	Introduce_p rod	Info_seek	Intro_Prodc t
Chi-Square	13.854 ^a	213.724 ^a	328.434 ^a	12.824 ^a	14.954 ^a
df	3	3	3	3	3
Asymp. Sig.	.003	.000	.000	.000	.000

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 107.8.

Interpretation:- This table represents that independent variables i.e. Spending, Frequency, Introduce_product, Info_seek and Intro_Prodct have asymp. side value as .003, .000, .000, .000 and .000 respectively which is less than .05. Thus the impact is significant & alternate hypothesis is accepted for the hypotheses.

FACTOR ANALYSIS:-

KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.620
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	5.364E3
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Component Matrix^a

	Component		
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security	.932		
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Intro product	.678	-.612	
Modes of internet	-.610	-.422	.301
purpose		.915	
Info introduce	-.525	.463	.633

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Component Matrix^a

	Component		
	1	2	3
security	.932		
spending	.909		
Seek info	.896		
frequency	.888	-.300	
Time spent	.755	.337	-.501
Info seek	.726		.571
Intro product	.678	-.612	
Modes of internet purpose	-.610	-.422	.301
Info introduce	-.525	.463	.633

Extraction Method: Principal Component

Analysis.

a. 3 components extracted.

Interpretation:-

- This KMO and Bartlett's is signifying the value i.e. 0.620 which is greater than than the value 0.5. Hence the value is signifying that data collected is highly significant.
- This is the matrix showing three very important factors and their values in each column. Highest value is selected from each column which shows the importance of most important variables which are impacting more on the post purchase evaluation and will be most influencing factors.
- The graph is showing there are 3 important factors having more than 1 eigen values which is stating that these are the most important variables.
- Those three important variables are security, difference in quality & scope of bargain.

REGRESSION:-**Model Summary^b**

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.390 ^a	.852	.150	.50353

a. Predictors: (Constant):Info_intro

b. Dependent Variable: Internet

Mavenness

Interpretation:- This table represents that independent variable, “Info_Intro” has R square value as 85.2% impact on dependent variable i.e. “Internet Mavenness”.

This research work used respondents from the cities of Yamunanagar of Haryana and Chandigarh. 302 respondents from Yamunanagar and 320 respondents from Chandigarh completed the questionnaires. Out of these respondents, there were 169 males and 101 females in Yamunanagar, and 250 males and 102 females in Chandigarh. This research was conducted using the six item scale developed by Feick and Price (1987).

The concept of consumer innovativeness (changing mobiles, seeking information about latest products and services) appears more focused on new products, while the internet mavens are more interested in learning and communicating information about the marketplace in general. Internet mavens likely include both new and old products in their field of interest, not simply the newest ones as the innovators do.

RESULTS

1. The internet mavens in Chandigarh and Yamunanagar are mostly males within the age groups of 16 to 24 years.
2. Most internet mavens belong to the families with sizes varying from 3 to 5 members.
3. Most internet mavens belong to urban areas, with educational background from graduation to professional degrees, therefore, they are well educated in the Indian scenario.
4. The Internet mavens so identified in this research work have a good lifestyle with possessions like cars, two wheelers, laptops, mobiles and DVD players.
5. Internet mavens are innovative, and seek knowledge about new technology/products in the market.
6. Internet mavens use internet very frequently and use it for various purposes like

education, entertainment, seeking information, and purchasing online.

7. Internet mavens find the online experience enjoyable, trustworthy, reliable and convenient to a high degree.
8. Internet mavens are sought by their friends/family/peers as sources of information about various product categories.
9. Internet mavens are active in writing/reading blogs about various products/services.

Results Drawn on the Basis of Statistical Tools (Chi Squared, Factor Analysis, Tobit Model, Regression, Correlation)

The statistical analysis of the data done through using the statistical software SPSS, has revealed the following results:

1. The application of Chi squared test on the data through the statistical software SPSS has revealed that there is a significant relationship between introducing product information to others, introducing a new product to others, seeking product and market information and internet mavenness.
2. The application of Factor analysis has revealed three important factors which affect internet mavenness, which are time spent online, seeking information and introducing product to others.
3. The use of Tobit model has revealed that introducing product and market related information to other consumers has the highest impact on internet mavenness.
4. Regression analysis has shown that introducing product and market information has the highest impact on internet mavenness.
5. The use of Correlation has revealed that seeking information has a high degree of positive correlation with internet mavenness, while shopping frequency has low degree of positive correlation with internet mavenness.

The use of Correlation has also revealed a moderate degree of negative correlation between online spending and internet mavenness.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Although being able to effectively identify e-Mavens in an efficient manner is potentially beneficial to firms, realizing the potential benefits will require further research into a number of tactical issues related to leveraging relationships with these important community members. Brown, Broderick, and Lee (2007) suggest that in contrast to traditional offline social cues, consumers appear to feel as if they are interacting and being influenced by web sites rather than individuals themselves, when looking at information online. This suggests

that although market mavens play an important role online, their influence may be much more intertwined with the influence of non-mavens than it is in the offline environment. Although this provides considerable challenge, the growing role of online social networks in marketing communications warrants further research in order to provide additional understanding to an important marketing puzzle.

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