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WORD-OF-MOUTH: THE KEY DRIVER BEHIND GEN Y'S BUYING TRENDS

Ima Ilyani Ibrahim[1*], Nurwahida Fuad[2], Noor Amirah Kamaruddin[3]

[1] Faculty of Business and Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA Perlis Branch, Arau, Malaysia
Email: ilyani686@uitm.edu.my
[2] Faculty of Business and Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA Perlis Branch, Arau, Malaysia
Email: wahida.fuad@uitm.edu.my
[3] Faculty of Business and Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA Perlis Branch, Arau, Malaysia
Email: amirah.kamaruddin@gmail.com
[*] Corresponding Author

Abstract:

In today's digital landscape, online word-of-mouth (WOM) has emerged as a powerful influence on purchase decisions, especially among Generation Y through social media (Socmed). This study explores the impact of key factors—innovativeness, trust, social capital, and opinion leadership—on Gen Y's buying behaviour. Surveying 230 respondents from Northern Higher Learning Institution in Malaysia, the analysis used correlation and multiple regressions, revealing significant relationships among the variables. The findings underscore the importance for marketers to craft distinctive and innovative marketing strategies to capture the interest of their target audience.

Keywords:

Gen Y, Word-of-Mouth (WOM), Social media (Socmed), Innovativeness, Trust, Social Capital, and Opinion Leader

Introduction

Online word-of-mouth has become a significant phenomenon on social networking sites among Generation Y. Cheong et al. (2014) noted that people now frequently use their smartphones to take pictures of their food and instantly share them on social platforms like TikTok, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, creating a substantial impact on online marketing, especially among

Generation Y. Zhu and Chang (2014) explained that today's digital environment allows people to communicate freely over long distances and often share common interests within online communities. Moreover, online WOM plays a crucial role in customer purchase decisions and marketing strategies (Adjei et al., 2010; Parmelee and Perkins, 2012; Wang et al., 2012). This influence is particularly strong among younger generations who are active in the digital space. Generation Y, in particular, is not hesitant to discuss brands online, with their comments—whether positive or negative—affecting brand reputation if not managed properly. According to Cha (2009) and Ortutay (2009), social networking sites are predominantly used by younger consumers. Zhang et al. (2014) found that online WOM, especially through consumer reviews, heavily influences purchase decisions, while Chang and Wu (2014) warned that fake information can lead to negative eWOM adoption.

This study aims to investigate online word-of-mouth among respondents who belong to Generation Y that were selected from Northern Region of Higher Learning Institution (HLI) in Malaysia. This generation is known for its strong socializing tendencies, and their online behaviour reflects a positive engagement with online word-of-mouth. The respondents were staff members from various faculties and departments, was deemed appropriate for this study due to their extensive exposure to IT through their professional roles. According to Gunelius, Susan (2011), 50% of purchase decisions are influenced by word-of-mouth, with 1,000 customers generating 500,000 conversations about a brand, and 92% of customers trusting recommendations from friends and family over other forms of advertising. This highlights the significant impact of online word-of-mouth on Generation Y's purchasing decisions through social networking.

In the context of this research, online word-of-mouth has emerged as a key factor in Generation Y's purchasing behaviour, given their unique preferences and attitudes towards branded products. According to Kotler (2023), Generation Y, born between 1981 and 1996, is one of the most talked-about and debated generations of the past two decades. Known as the "Millennial Generation," they grew up in the digital age, making them the first to be deeply intertwined with social media and the internet from a young age. On these platforms, Millennials are driven by a desire for self-expression, constantly sharing and comparing their lives with their peers in search of approval. This makes them highly susceptible to the influence of what their peers say and buy. While they are thorough in researching and shopping online, especially via smartphones, they tend to prioritize experiences over possessions, buying fewer products than previous generations. Generation Y's shopping habits differ from those of other generations, as they are more exposed to new shopping styles and trends through platforms like Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, blogs, and popular online shopping sites like Lazada and Shopee. Shih et al. (2013) pointed out that social networking sites enable users to share their favourite interests and hobbies, helping marketers identify their target market segments for product promotion. Most researchers agree that Generation Y is highly active in reviewing products, sharing opinions, and engaging in online networking activities via email, blogs, message boards, chatrooms, and instant messaging (Valenzuela et al., 2013). This study shows that online word-of-mouth communication can widely spread information through social networking sites. Furthermore, Generation Y has the power to influence others' purchasing decisions due to their knowledge, education, and curiosity. Unlike Generation X and Baby Boomers, Generation Y is eager to explore new products and experiences, directly influencing online word-of-mouth. Marketers must focus on building trust and reliability in their products and services while ensuring they are innovative and relevant in the current era. Social capital can benefit buyers, and opinion leaders can significantly influence their purchasing decisions.

Literature Review

Word of Mouth (WOM)

According to Winer (2009), word-of-mouth is increasingly recognized as a powerful communication and promotional tool because it influences what people know, feel, and do. Godes & Mayzlin (2009) further demonstrated that word-of-mouth, also known as WOM or viral marketing (WOMM), plays a significant role in consumer behaviour. Generation Y tends to share their experiences and compare products to find the best options that meet their needs and desires. Consumers often share detailed product or service-related messages through WOM, which shapes the recipient's perceptions of product or service attributes and significantly impacts an organization's reputation (Allsop et al., 2007). News about a product—whether positive or negative—spreads rapidly through word-of-mouth, creating widespread awareness and curiosity, which can drive consumers to try the product. Harris, L. C. and Ogbonna, E. O. (2013) revealed that WOM provides valuable insights, particularly regarding the spread of negative information about products and services, especially in face-to-face interactions. Smith et al. (2007) noted that in traditional retail settings, while customers rely on visual appeal, if a product fails to attract them, word-of-mouth can still heavily influence their purchase decisions.

Online Word of Mouth (WOM)

Zhang JQ, Craciun G, Shin D (2010) suggests that online word-of-mouth (WOM) has tremendous potential to boost consumer demand for products purchased online. It enables marketers to effectively convey their messages, making it crucial to explore how online WOM can foster positive perceptions among consumers. Generation Y, as digital natives, are prime targets for online WOM and social networking market strategies. Awad, N. F., & Ragowsky, A. (2008) defines online WOM as a web-based system deemed relevant and useful, noting that trust varies across genders, as men and women communicate and evaluate information differently. Studies show that women tend to be more emotional in their buying attitudes, while men are more pragmatic. Hennig-Thurau et al. (2010) discuss how social networking sites (SNS) have become vital sources of information for consumers seeking product opinions. Zhang, Y., Zhang, J., & Liu, C. (2021) argues that online WOM surpasses traditional WOM because today's busy lifestyles limit the time people have to express their opinions, leading them to rely on product reviews from previous posts. As online WOM becomes increasingly mainstream, the focus should shift to quality over quantity (Mudambi and Schuff, 2010). Online WOM facilitates interaction through social media platforms like TikTok, Facebook, where any information—positive or negative—shared by real, potential, or past customers can significantly impact a product or company's image (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Previous researchers also argue that social networks have transformed consumer-to-consumer communication and have become essential marketing tools (Chu, S.C. and J. Kim, 2018). According to the Global Internet User Overview January 2023 DataReportal (2023), a high percentage of young consumers in Malaysia engage with media tools, with 92.3% using mobile phones and only 65.6% using computers or laptops. This trend reflects the growing influence of these media tools among Malaysian youth, who find them enjoyable and engaging. Moreover, SNS platforms provide a space for young consumers to interact, and they often use these platforms to start their own businesses, selling products like clothes, cookies, and more through social media.

Innovativeness

According to Winer (2009), word-of-mouth is increasingly recognized as a powerful communication and promotional tool because it influences what people know, feel, and do. Godes & Mayzlin (2009) further demonstrated that word-of-mouth, also known as WOM or viral marketing (WOMM), plays a significant role in consumer behaviour. Generation Y tends to share their experiences and compare products to find the best options that meet their needs and desires. Consumers often share detailed product or service-related messages through WOM, which shapes the recipient's perceptions of product or service attributes and significantly impact Generation Y is always in sync with the latest trends, consistently opting for the newest products on the market. However, researchers have noted that many marketers struggle to attract these tech-savvy consumers to their websites, often due to ineffective promotional strategies. Anderson (1998), as cited by Wong et al. (2008), defined innovation as the successful application of new processes and products within an organization, offering tangible benefits to others. In the realm of online word-of-mouth (WOM), creativity and unique ideas are crucial for effective promotion. According to Sam, D., & Berry, J. (2010), Generation Y is particularly influenced by product design and interactive services, which play a significant role in shaping brand loyalty, purchase behaviour, and the perceived lifetime value of products or services. Studies by Zlatko Nedelko and Vojko Potocan (2013) further reveal that individuals resistant to innovation tend to cling to traditional methods, while those open to change are eager to explore new possibilities. Aaker (2007) highlights that innovation drives growth and profitability, exemplified by breakthroughs like the Apple iPod, iPhone, and iPad. Therefore, marketers must seize opportunities to enhance profits by fostering a high level of innovation adoption. As Hanna, P. (2012) suggests, from a consumer's perspective, the ideal products are those that are both innovative and closely associated with reputable brands.

Trust

From a researcher's perspective, trust is a crucial factor influencing consumers' purchasing decisions, especially when they choose to buy products they've never tried before. Trust leads consumers to rely on others' opinions shared through forums, comments, reviews, blogs, and social media platforms like TikTok, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Jones & Leonard (2000) suggest that trust can diminish the uncertainty caused by others, alleviating consumers' fears of unreliability and the risks of being deceived. Moreover, people are motivated to follow recommendations when word-of-mouth (WOM) comes from those with shared interests, close relationships, and provides clear evidence or proof. Trust is, therefore, often established when individuals purchase products or services based on friends' recommendations through social networks. Mcknight and Chervany (2002) define trust as encompassing both trusting beliefs and trusting intentions, while Boeyen and Moses (2003) argue that trust can be categorized into direct trust or third-party trust. In the online world, where parties often interact without prior familiarity, third-party trust becomes particularly important. Additionally, their research identifies three key factors influencing trust in online WOM: the relationship between online companies and end-users, online safety, and a company's goodwill, as well as the quality of the website. This indicates that trust can be classified in various ways and plays a vital role in guiding consumers' decisions when choosing products or services through online WOM.

Social Capital

According to O'Reilly (2011), social media and Web 2.0 technologies have empowered individuals to create and share user-generated content, while also enabling organizations to forge stronger connections with customers, suppliers, and vendors. In this context, marketers have been leveraging social networks to share their insights and opinions, thereby sparking

increased interest and paving the way for future revenue generation. Additionally, Generation Y is not just engaging with social media as consumers, but also harnessing it to earn money and gain valuable experience. Social capital, as described by Dayton-Johnson (2003), refers to the time, effort, and resources individuals invest to foster cooperation with others. Essentially, social capital represents the flow of individual investments. Today, people, companies, and vendors are increasingly using Social Networking Sites (SNS) to sell a wide array of products, including cars and spare parts, cakes and cookies, clothing, cosmetics, perfumes, and even catering services for weddings and parties. This trend illustrates that everyone is engaging in online business, and people now instinctively turn to the internet to find products or services. Moreover, social capital plays a crucial role in motivating Generation Y to earn their own money through SNS, extending beyond mere social interaction.

Opinion Leader

According to Jeong and Jang (2011), opinion leaders share their insights and experiences with products not just with family but with a broader audience, significantly influencing Generation Y's purchasing decisions. This impact is heightened when these leaders are admired figures like popular singers, actors, actresses, business leaders, and other celebrities. Opinion leaders have become key sources of information for Generation Y, offering online reviews on everything from restaurants and travel destinations to hotels. The concept of opinion leadership, as defined by Shoham and Ruvio (2008), refers to an individual's ability to spread information and influence the behaviour of other consumers. Smith (2017) adds that when someone's views are shaped by a well-known person or organization, it demonstrates the power of opinion leadership. Moreover, opinion leaders can be found across various fields, including politics, business, journalism, entertainment, and healthcare.

Research Framework
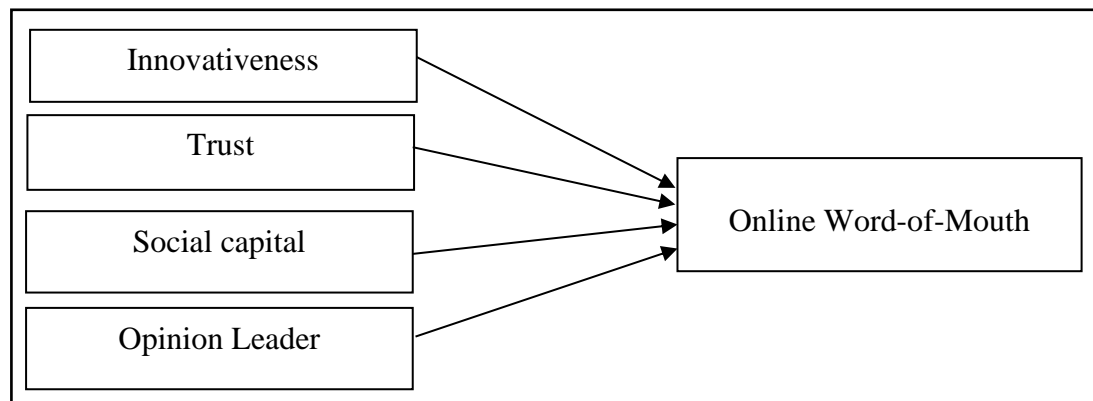
Figure 1: Theoretical Framework

Source: Kucukemiroglu, S. & Kara. A (2015)

Research Methodology

This study focused on staffs from the Higher Learning Institution to identify their engagement towards online word-of-mouth. Using convenience sampling technique, the sample was chosen from a few public universities in Northern Region Malaysia that involved 230 staffs from various faculties and departments that were considered suitable for this study. The study

utilized questionnaires adapted from Kucukemiroglu, S. & Kara. A (2015). The research instrument consists of two sections with 40 items including demographic. To measure the items, Likert scale of 1 to 5 (from the lowest value of 1 indicate to "strongly disagree" and the largest value of 5 indicate to "strongly agree") were used to collect information on the study variables.

Findings Analysis

Table 1 showed the respondent's profile presented based on the frequency and percentage. Among those who participated, 64.3% is female and most (57.8%) of the respondents are Malay with 69.13% of them was married. Apparently, there is slightly different between respondents who spend between 1-3 hours on social media which reported 30.9%, whereas 37% spend their time on social media between range of 4-6 hours per day. The reliability of the questionnaire ranges from 0.8-0.9 which indicates that they are appropriate for use (Nunnaly, 1978). The mean value for all dimensions shows that most respondents agree with the statements offered in the questionnaire. Table 2.0 depicts the alpha value and mean for each of the sections.

Table 1 Demographic of Respondents

Variables	Categories	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	82	35.7
	Female	148	64.3
Status	Single	67	29.13
	Married	159	69.13
	Others	4	1.74
Race	Malay	133	57.8
	Chinese	52	22.6
	Indian	26	11.3
	Others	19	8.3
Hours spend on social media	1-3	71	30.9
	4-6	85	37.0
	7-9	44	19.1
	10 and above	30	13.0

Table 2 Reliability Analysis

Variables	No. of items	Cronbach's Alpha	Mean
Online Word-of-Mouth	9	0.92	3.22
Innovativeness	6	0.84	2.88
Trust	7	0.90	3.16
Social Capital	6	0.85	3.64
Opinion Leader	6	0.82	3.17

To achieve the researcher's objectives of investigating the relationship between innovativeness, trust, social capital, and opinion leader with online word-of-mouth, the data were analyzed using Pearson Moment Correlations. The results showed that there is a significant relationship between each of the variables with the dependent. However, the strength of the relationship differs. Thus, the relationship between innovativeness and online WOM, it is moderate r=0.613 at 99% significant level. Similar results were discovered with the relationship between opinion leaders with dependent variable, the relationship is also moderate (r=0.675, p=0.01).

Meanwhile, there is moderate relationship between trust and social capital towards the dependent variable that indicates the strength of relationship was only at r=0.564 and r=0.457. All variables are also found to be significantly correlated with each other. The information is summarized in Table 3.0.

Table 3 Correlation Analysis

Variables	I	T	SC	OL	OWOM
Innovativeness	1				
Trust	.477**	1			
Social Capital	.494**	.447**	1		
Opinion Leader	.567**	.561**	.479**	1	
Online Word-of-Mouth	.613**	.564**	.457**	.675**	1

Next, a multiple regression test in Table 4 was conducted to understand the predicted power of the factors that effects entrepreneurship inclination. The result shows the adjusted r^2 is 0.554, with a different weightage of the standardized coefficient. All variables and positively affected on dependent variable. The results were supported by previous study conducted by Park & Cho (2012), Hung & Li (2007) and other researchers.

Table 4 Multiple Regression Analysis

Variables	β	Sig.
Innovativeness	.286	.000
Trust	.219	.001
Social Capital	.060	.374
Opinion Leader	.459	.000
Online Word-of-Mouth	.028	.900

Discussions

The research aimed to explore the factors influencing online word-of-mouth (WOM) on purchase decisions among Generation Y. A total of 230 questionnaires were distributed and completed by respondents. The researcher initially assumed that all independent variables would have a relationship with the dependent variable. However, the results revealed that one of the independent variables, which are "social capital", did not show a significant relationship ($P > 0.05$) and was therefore rejected. To ensure reliability, a Cronbach's Alpha test was conducted, with all variables scoring above 0.70, indicating good reliability according to SPSS results.

For the first independent variable, the correlation analysis showed a strong relationship between innovativeness and online WOM, with a value of 0.613, falling within the range of 0.50 to 0.69. The regression analysis also confirmed this, with a significant value of 0.00, leading to the acceptance of H1. This means that innovativeness strongly influences Generation Y's purchase decisions through online WOM. The study also highlights a challenge for retail stores that struggle to survive by focusing solely on offline sales. Innovativeness offers a solution by encouraging retailers to create unique products and promote them online.

The second independent variable, trust, also showed a strong relationship with online WOM, with a correlation value of 0.564. The regression analysis confirmed its significance with a

value of 0.00, leading to the acceptance of H2. This indicates that trust significantly influences online WOM and purchase decisions among Generation Y. The study suggests that issues like fraud, fake products, and unverified sellers can be mitigated through the experiences shared by previous online customers.

The third independent variable, social capital, had a value of 0.457, indicating a moderate relationship with online word-of-mouth (WOM). However, the regression analysis yielded a value of 0.37, which was not significant in this study, leading to the rejection of the H3 hypothesis. This suggests that social capital does not significantly influence online WOM and purchase decisions among Generation Y. Previous research by Lin et. al, 2013 also found a negative correlation, indicating that social capital is less impactful when people don't actively interact on social media, such as posting, sharing, or commenting, and instead passively scroll through content.

On the other hand, the independent variable of opinion leadership showed a value of 0.675, reflecting a strong relationship with online WOM. The regression analysis confirmed its significance with a value of 0.00. This means that opinion leaders have a notable influence on Generation Y's purchase decisions through online WOM, helping them feel more confident and comfortable when making online purchases.

Conclusion

The researcher embarked on a groundbreaking study to unravel the factors that sway online word-of-mouth (WOM) and its impact on Generation Y's purchasing decisions. This research holds profound implications for users and marketers seeking to decode the intricate dynamics of Gen Y's online buying behaviours. The study unveiled that innovativeness wields a powerful and positive influence on online WOM. For marketers, especially those plying their trade in the digital realm, this means that to captivate Generation Y, products must not only stand out for their uniqueness but also embody cutting-edge innovation. Gen Y is drawn to novel and distinctive offerings, with their purchasing decisions often guided by the allure of originality and the promise of unprecedented value. Furthermore, they are voracious seekers of detailed information to align with their stringent criteria and satisfaction standards. Trust emerged as a crucial factor with a significant positive correlation to online WOM. For online marketers, this underscores the necessity of showcasing authentic customer feedback and testimonials. Such strategies enhance Gen Y's confidence in making purchases through online WOM. Moreover, peer-to-peer sharing mechanisms—via ratings, recommendations, and social media channels like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Telegram—are pivotal in this trust-building process. Conversely, the study found that social capital had a negligible effect on online WOM purchase decisions among Generation Y. Social capital, representing active social network engagement and reciprocal efforts, did not significantly influence this demographic's buying patterns. Future research might need to explore different respondent profiles, as current findings suggest that Generation Y's interaction with social capital is more about social engagement rather than capitalizing on it for purchase decisions. The results also highlighted a robust and positive relationship between opinion leaders and online WOM. Understanding this dynamic allows marketers to harness the influence of admired figures—such as celebrities, close friends, and family members—who shape Gen Y's purchasing behaviours. These opinion leaders play a critical role in guiding Gen Y's choices, often prompting them to follow trends endorsed by trusted individuals.

Acknowlededgment

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