Adolescent's eWOM intentions: An investigation into the roles of peers, the Internet and gender

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ABSTRACT

Teenagers are major contributors of online content because of continuous communication and sharing with peers using social media or instant messaging apps. They like to immediately tell the world about their purchases and consumption experiences, which leads to the generation and transmission of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). This study uses consumer socialization perspective to examine how age, peers and Internet usage influence teenagers' eWOM intentions. The findings suggest that normative and informative influence of peers and the Internet have significant positive association with eWOM. Moreover, these influences also mediate the direct influence of age and Internet usage on eWOM. Further, the potential eWOM behavior of male teenagers is influenced by the existing peer norms, whereas for females, their reliance and belief in the credibility of online information is more critical. The insights are valuable for marketers interested in the powerful and growing teenage consumer segment, especially in the new emerging markets.

1. Introduction

"The Internet is the first thing that humanity has built that humanity doesn't understand, the largest experiment in anarchy that we have ever had."

- Eric Schmidt (ex-CEO, Google)

Forty-one million (almost 95%) teenagers[2] in the USA are online, or as they say, 'hooked' to the Internet using a multitude of devices such as smartphones, tablets, and computers (Madden, Lenhart, Duggan, Cortesi, & Gasser, 2013). On the contrary, sixty-four million (17%) teens in India and one hundred sixty million (24%) teens in China are currently using the Internet (Statista, 2016). The absolute numbers of teenage Internet users in India and China are substantially higher than those in the developed countries and the enormous teen segment presents ample opportunities as well as challenges to marketers. In India, teenagers are spending a considerable amount of time (approximately 2 h 18 min per day) on the Internet (Ericsson, 2015) and they are perceived to be crucial in driving the Internet economy estimated to be US $200 billion (IAMAI Annual Report, 2015). Hence, it is important to understand the online behavior of adolescents.

Teenagers are using the Internet and social media for many

purposes, for example, making new friends, dating, entertainment, and interacting with family and friends using Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and instant messaging services like WhatsApp (Lenhart, Smith, Anderson, Duggan, & Perrin, 2015; Madden et al., 2013). They also discuss, share, and voice their consumption experiences on these digital platforms (Stafford, Stafford, & Schkade, 2004). Such online endorsements or recommendations (broadly known as electronic word-of-mouth or eWOM) lead to enhanced trust and higher purchase intentions among the online social network of peers and family (Lim, Sia, Lee, & Benbasat, 2006; Wang, Yu, & Wei, 2012). While the broad areas of eWOM has been studied in the literature (e.g., Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004; King, Racherla, & Bush, 2014), research on the antecedents and culture-specific factors that influence participation of adolescents, especially in emerging economies (e.g., India and China) needs more attention and coverage (King et al., 2014, p. 175). Therefore, it is important to find the antecedents and relevant factors that prompt the eWOM participation of adolescents.

The marketing literature recognizes the importance of adolescents as consumers. An impressive amount of research is available on understanding adolescents' consumption and marketplace behavior using consumer socialization framework (John, 1999; Mangleburg, Doney, & Bristol, 2004; Moschis, 1985; Moschis & Churchill, 1978;

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[2] We use the terms - teenagers, teens and adolescents in this research interchangeably to refer to the population that belongs to age group 12–18 years.

Youn, 2008). Also, the literature on consumer socialization has evolved and reflects the changes in external environment such as advances in technology. A good number of early research concentrated on the traditional socialization agents (parents, peers, and mass media) and their influences on parameters of interest to the marketers such as consumer behavior, knowledge assimilation, and attitude toward advertising (Mangleburg & Bristol, 1998; Moore & Moschis, 1978). Later on, the Internet and social media were proposed as the new socialization agents (Barber, 2013; Wang et al., 2012). The socialization framework has been used to investigate the acquired habits and behavioral outcomes relevant to new technology landscape such as online privacy concerns (Feng & Xie, 2014), attitude toward brand communication on social media (Sook Kwon, Kim, Sung, & Yoo, 2014), and online music piracy behavior (Yang & Wang, 2015).

A limited amount of research exists on the applicability of consumer socialization theory in emerging economies. For example, teenagers in India are influenced by the consumption related information available on the Internet (Kaur & Medury, 2011). In China, concept-oriented and socio-oriented families show differences in co-viewing behavior and discussion of commercials with children (Chan & McNeal, 2003). Further, peer communication on social media influences the purchase decisions of people through the process of online consumer socialization (Wang et al., 2012). Therefore, socialization process influences not only offline behavior but also online behavior of teenagers. How socialization influences teenagers' eWOM intentions remains an under-explored area in research. This study is an attempt to provide useful insights on antecedents to teenage eWOM behavior, especially in emerging economies like India, where the Internet penetration is still low but growing rapidly (PTI, 2016).

Given this background, the present research employs the socialization framework to understand the eWOM intentions of adolescents. This study contributes to the existing literature in three ways. First, it provides a comprehensive and integrative perspective on eWOM intentions of adolescents in an emerging economy (India) using the consumer socialization model, including specific societal and cultural aspects (e.g., susceptibility to the inter-personal influence of peers, exposure to media, and gender). Second, the study analyzes the role of traditional (peers) and virtual (the Internet) socialization agents, and provides empirical evidence on the relative importance and relevance of these agents. Third, a majority of consumer socialization research primarily examines how antecedents and agents directly influence the outcomes (De Gregorio & Sung, 2010; Mangleburg & Bristol, 1998). This study proposes that socialization agents could mediate the relationship between antecedents and learning outcomes. Further, the study aims to enrich the literature by establishing a more complex and dynamic interplay among socialization variables in the context of behavioral intentions (eWOM) of adolescents. Since socialization process also depends on cultural factors, we believe that the research findings can be extended to similar cultures or countries.

2. Foundations of the study

2.1. Consumer socialization

Socialization encompasses the array of processes by which human beings (from varied cultures and communities) achieve the need for harmonious existence as a group (Maccoby, 2007). Socialization explains the mechanisms by which people learn the rules and norms of society and adopt values across social, emotional, and cognitive domains (Maccoby, 2007). The marketing literature extends the psychological concept of socialization as 'consumer socialization' which describes how young people develop consumption behavior and acquire knowledge about marketplace and marketing communications (Ward, 1974).

Consumer socialization framework (Moschis & Churchill, 1978) builds on two important theories - cognitive development (Piaget,

1952) and social learning (Bandura, 1977). The two theories present different perspectives on how humans develop behavioral, cognitive, and information processing skills. Cognitive development theory focuses on the impact of natural maturation and environmental experience on the learning behavior, whereas social learning theory posits that learning happens in a social context by observation, reinforcement, or imitation (modeling). The *social structural variables* (e.g., economic status and gender) are the immediate social environment settings that can directly or indirectly affect the learning process (Moschis & Churchill, 1978). The *socialization agents* are persons or any other entity (e.g., parents and peers) that interact with individuals and have dominance or control to reward or punish their behavior. Therefore, these agents are imperative in the socialization of children. Prior research (Hunter-Jones, 2014) categorizes the influential socialization agents in three groups: traditional (parents/family, peers, school, and mass media); professional (marketing and communication entities); and virtual (the Internet and social media).

Though parents are the first socialization agents, peers become more important during the adolescence period. For example, in selecting brands of fashion apparels, adolescents show higher preferences to approval from peers rather than from parents (Lachance, Beaudoin, & Robitaille, 2003). Similarly, adolescents like to shop with their friends and take their advice in product selection (Mangleburg et al., 2004). Peer groups help adolescents build a distinct and unique identity, which can be different from their parents (Erikson, 1994). Peer influence is manifested through either informative or normative influence. Informative influence is the process of gathering information from peers and taking decisions because of trust and belief in the acquired information, whereas normative influence is the willingness of a person to behave or act in accordance with the norms and expectations of peers (Bearden, Netemeyer, & Teel, 1989).

Mass media is another socialization agent that influences the economic and social motives, and consumer activism of adolescents (Mangleburg & Bristol, 1998). The interactive nature of new media (the Internet and social media) results in the self-socialization of adolescents because it helps in the process of identity-development and achieving freedom (Anderson & McCabe, 2012). The Internet had distinct effects on the socialization of Generation X and Generation Y because people from these two cohorts had unique experiences and opportunities to access the Internet through various devices and overall network speed (Barber, 2013). The online communication on the Internet also influences product attitude and product involvement of adolescents (Wang et al., 2012). Thus, the Internet is a new socialization agent that affects the teenage consumer skills and knowledge.

2.2. Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM)

eWOM refers to the online content (positive or negative) about products or firms, which is generated or transmitted by customers and made available to a multitude of people using the Internet (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). An impressive body of research is available on the topic of eWOM (e.g., Cheung & Thadani, 2012; King et al., 2014). The research predominantly covers the consequences of eWOM on product performance (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006), consumer specific characteristics such as attitude and loyalty (Gruen, Osmonbekov, & Czaplewski, 2006), and motivations of consumers to participate in eWOM activities (Cheung & Lee, 2012; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004).

Consumers engage in eWOM (creating, sharing, or consuming information) to enhance their self-worth or online image, to help other users, and to derive social benefits through online interactions (Cheung & Lee, 2012). Adolescents derive gratifications of identity-signaling, social relations, and entertainment by participating in eWOM activities such as giving ratings, and writing articles and reviews (Courtois, Mechant, De Marez, & Verleye, 2009; Tsao & Steffes-Hansen, 2008). Adolescents explore and experiment with their identity by posting a variety of content on the Internet (Valkenburg,

Schouten, & Peter, 2005). By reading the content, others may draw conclusions and form opinions about individuals, which can have a positive or negative impact on the reputation and social appeal of individuals in social networking sites (Utz, 2010). For example, positive peer communication and acceptance motivates brand followers to share more eWOM messages on Twitter (Chu & Sung, 2015).

As part of natural biological maturation, adolescents of different gender go through distinct psychological experiences and display gender specific traits. Male and female adolescents report diverse motivations to use the Internet on variables of loneliness, technology, and social network (Tsao & Steffes-Hansen, 2008). Particularly, female teenagers go online to address the feelings of loneliness, to gossip, and to communicate with friends. In contrast, male teenagers use the Internet to experience new technologies and websites, to play games, and to explore who else is there. Also, the negative eWOM behavior of two genders differs because men are self-oriented and women are other-oriented (Zhang, Feick, & Mittal, 2014). Therefore, we anticipate that peers, the Internet, and gender are pertinent factors in characterizing the eWOM behavior of adolescents.

3. Conceptual model and hypotheses development

The conceptual model to study the effects of socialization variables on eWOM intentions of adolescents is presented in Fig. 1. The model has two antecedents: age and Internet usage; two socialization agents: peers and the Internet, each having two distinct dimensions of interpersonal influence (normative and informative); and the outcome variable eWOM intentions.

3.1. Age and Internet usage

Children continue to develop cognitive and social abilities during their biological growth. Their abilities of information processing and consumer skills also improve as they mature (John, 1999; Moschis & Churchill, 1978). This natural progression facilitates the understanding and increased usage of novel experiences of the Internet and social media. For example, older adolescents demonstrate better online shopping and technical self-efficacy skills (Hill & Beatty, 2011).

As children grow older, they get approval (e.g., from parents and school administration) to access and use sophisticated and relatively more complex equipment and objects such as bicycles, phones, TV, and computers. As another example, the Indian education system has a specific course on the subject of computer science in higher classes (Grade 11 onwards). In such courses, children get access to the Internet to learn about its features and benefits. The introduction of new communication medium opens a new platform for teenagers, where they can share their purchase and consumption experiences with a vast online audience.

Teenagers spent a lot of time on the Internet to do many activities such as social bonding, information search, entertainment, and academic assignments (Lenhart et al., 2015; NextBigWhat, 2013). In the context of online behavior, teenagers in emerging markets display similar characteristics as their Western counterparts, for example, higher feelings of acceptance on social media than in person, feeling important or depressed depending on the number of likes received on Facebook, and online risks due to sharing of personal information with strangers (Feng & Xie, 2014; McAfee, 2014; Moscardelli & Divine, 2007). Likewise, Indian teenagers prefer a 'no parent zone' by networking with peers only rather than with parents (McAfee, 2014).

The higher Internet usage (amount of time spent on the Internet) increases the chances of encountering marketing content about products, brands, and possibly reviews and recommendations. Such encounters lead to higher eWOM consumption (voluntarily or non-voluntarily) among adolescents, which can inspire them to follow and engage in similar eWOM activities. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H1a. Age is positively associated with eWOM intentions.

H1b. Internet usage is positively associated with eWOM intentions.

3.2. The mediating effect of peers

Developmental psychology research provides evidence on the inverted-U shape effect of peer influence on age from pre-adolescence to late-adolescence period (Gavin & Furman, 1989). Adolescents are more likely to exhibit independence and lesser susceptibility to peer influences as they mature. Peer influence is measured on two distinct dimensions: normative and informative. While the former dimension refers to the willingness of individuals to behave in a certain way to meet the expectations of peers, the latter dimension reflects the individual's trust in the credibility of information acquired from peers. The research findings suggest that both influences are negatively associated with age (Mangleburg et al., 2004).
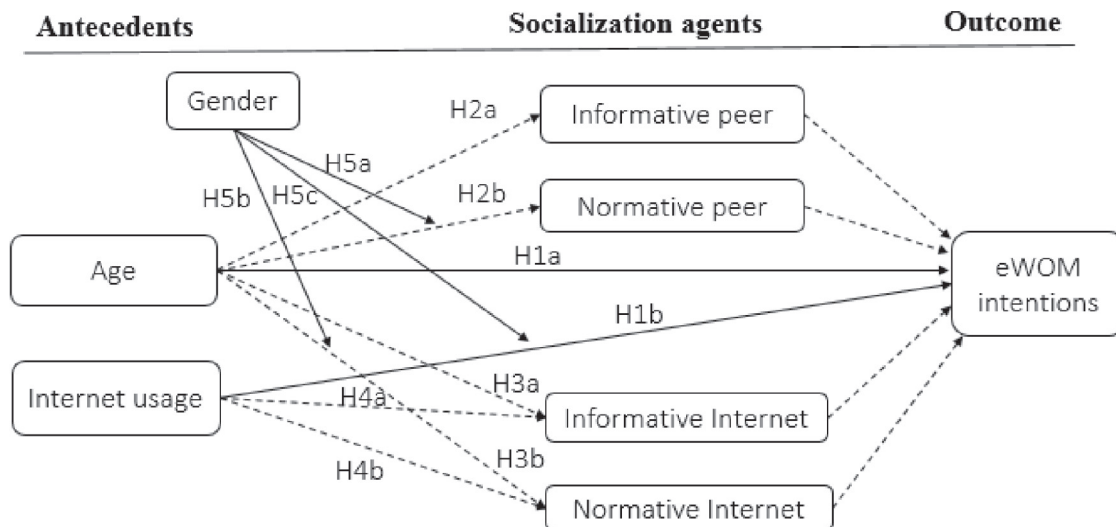
Note: The dotted lines represent mediation effects; gender acts as a moderator.

Fig. 1. Conceptual model.

Further, the magnitude and direction of two peer influences depend on cultural factors. For example, Asian Americans are most susceptible to the informative and normative peer influences because of the close-knit society and collectivist culture (Singh, Kwon, & Pereira, 2003). We expect a similar behavior among Indian adolescents under the influence of the dominant collective culture and societal norms (Hofstede, 2001). Moreover, we anticipate that due to the collectivistic culture (as compared to individualistic culture) adolescents engage in relatively more discussions with their peers. This may result in greater trust and reliance on the information acquired from their peers. Thus, we propose a positive relation between age and informative peer influence.

Adolescents identify with their peers and share interests, attitude, and role behaviors (Bandura, 1977). During the growth phase, adolescents expand their social circle and gradually friends become an integral part of their lives. The older (younger) adolescents reveal greater emotional self-disclosure to their peers (parents), and they are relatively more careful about their social image while dating (Rapini, Farmer, Clark, Micka, & Barnett, 1990). The biological changes related to sexual development initiate the need for a good social image among peers. In online environment, social image is akin to online reputation or impression. The importance of a positive online reputation is reflected in the teenagers' increased level of efforts and support seeking behavior on social networking sites (Oh & LaRose, 2016).

Teenagers exchange information (e.g., gaming handles and social media profiles) on the Internet with peers. Generally, they post popular or flattering content that makes them look good to friends and others (Lenhart et al., 2015). The online content is widely open for screening by others, which cautions adolescents about what they should post or share on the Internet. If the online content is deemed inappropriate, adolescents face the risk of being 'unfriended' or a series of counter-posts from peers. Such activities undermine the online reputation and may potentially lead to isolation among peers. Therefore, adolescents face pressure to remain a part of the group by adhering to the peers' expectations and group norms, which influences their intentions to create or share online content with peers.

In the offline scenario, teenagers prefer to buy brands which are accepted by their peers (Mangleburg et al., 2004). Likewise, teenagers may prefer to share information about products or brands which resonate positively with their online social group, and avoid discussion about brands which don't resound well with peers. The majority of the communication among teenagers and their friends takes place online. Teenagers not only seek information but find it more credible if it's coming from their friends (Lenhart et al., 2015). They tend to share (forward) the content posted by friends to convey their support, acceptance, or appreciation. To illustrate it further, imagine a situation where someone posts the positive content about a recent movie, which is liked and appreciated by online friends. A teenager who doesn't like that movie, may still try to show solidarity with the group by posting positive comments and sharing it further under peer pressure.

Therefore, the two forms of peer influence have sufficient potential to affect the eWOM behavior (generation and transmission) of teenagers. Adolescents may spend more time on the Internet and engage in eWOM, but their eWOM participation also depends on the levels of their susceptibility to peer pressure. Hence, we hypothesize that:

H2. The relationship between age and eWOM intentions is mediated by (a) informative peer influence, and (b) normative peer influence.

3.3. The mediating effect of the Internet

Early socialization research used traditional media such as TV, radio, and newspaper as important socialization agents that influence marketing related behavioral outcomes of adolescents (Mangleburg & Bristol, 1998; Moschis & Churchill, 1978). In the early evolutionary stages of the modern Internet, interestingly, past research acknowledged and successfully predicted the potential of the Internet

and its relevance on consumer socialization process (John, 1999; Singh et al., 2003). Similar to peer influence, the influence of the Internet can be operationalized using two distinct dimensions of normative and informative influence. The two types of Internet influences had relatively higher impact on the socialization process of Generation Y as compared to Generation X (Barber, 2013). This is due to the fact that younger Generation Y (vs. older Generation X) had better access and connectivity options to a much faster Internet network.

Past literature does not provide sufficient support on how exposure and access to the Internet affect teenagers' susceptibility to the two Internet influences. Generally speaking, teenagers have common members (classmates or friends) in their offline and online groups (Lenhart et al., 2015). Therefore, as in the case of peer influence, a similar association between age and the Internet influence can be predicted, which means age relates positively to the informative Internet influence and negatively to the normative Internet influence.

The Internet is gaining prominence as a new marketing channel over traditional channels (Angulo, 2016). It is not only a universal source for the latest and almost infinite information on products but it also reflects the global trends about product acceptance and consumption behavior. For example, online discussions and viral diffusion of information on online games, movies, music, or TV shows create a virtual establishment (e.g., fan communities) with well-defined beliefs, attitudes, norms, and expectations for its members.

Heavy Internet usage makes adolescents vulnerable because of the underdeveloped consumer socialization skills, which increases their dependence on the Internet (Moscardelli & Divine, 2007). Adolescents are likely to watch TV shows which are widely discussed and recommended by others on the Internet (Lyons, 2015). This further leads to situations where teenagers post opinions about the show and act as a recommending agent for future consumers. Therefore, the informative aspect of the Internet influences the available options (choices) for teenagers. The normative perspective in the form of 'a must watch show' may persuade teenagers to watch the show and spread opinions (eWOM) about it. Such participation in creation and transmission of eWOM by teenagers also fulfills their motives of identity-signaling and identity-development (Courtois et al., 2009).

Therefore, this study proposes that teenagers may spend more time on the Internet, but depending on the perceived social and informational importance of the Internet, they decide what and how much to share or discuss on the Internet. The individual comfort level about specific consumption experiences and the perceived effect of sharing online determines the volume of content that teenagers are ready to share online. Accordingly, we hypothesize that:

H3. The relationship between age and eWOM intentions is mediated by (a) informative Internet influence, and (b) normative Internet influence.

H4. The relationship between Internet usage and eWOM intentions is mediated by (a) informative Internet influence, and (b) normative Internet influence.

3.4. The moderating role of gender

The socialization and behavioral development of the two genders are different due to a number of factors such as socio-structural factors and biological factors (Leaper & Friedman, 2007). As adolescents mature, they demonstrate and imbibe gender stereotypes that exist in society or culture, for example, playing within the same-sex group and using particular toys (dolls versus guns). Gender also predicts the differences in attitude and actual behavior in distinct contexts such as product placements (De Gregorio & Sung, 2010), online privacy concerns (Moscardelli & Divine, 2007), and mobile phone usage (Maity, 2014).

There are mixed findings in the extant research on the effect of gender toward susceptibility to peer influences. In the context of buying

apparels, females are more likely to buy brands which are accepted by their peers (Rose, Boush, & Friestad, 1998). In contrast, males, rather than females, are more concerned about whether their peers would accept the brands they purchase (Khan & Khan, 2011). These two studies were conducted in two separate regions, North America (Rose et al., 1998) and Malaysia (Khan & Khan, 2011). A reasonable explanation for the contradictory findings is the significant differences in the cultural factors of these two places (power distance and individualism; Hofstede, 2001) and the existence of a patriarchal society in Malaysia (Karim, 1987). However, it is worthwhile to note that the Internet is proving to be a great equalizer especially for empowering women across the world (Brown, 2015).

Furthermore, the features of anonymity and voluntary disclosure of personal appearance on the Internet enable male adolescents to be more open and expressive by overcoming their shyness (Lanthier & Windham, 2004). Also, males and females differ in transmitting negative eWOM because of the relative concerns for 'self' versus 'others' which are determined by the existing cultural values and norms (Zhang et al., 2014). In general, a patriarchal society and gender inequality puts more pressure on males (as compared to females) to display stronger adherence to their peers in order to avoid being neglected or left out of the group. The unequal gender norms, power imbalances, and societal restrictions impede the formation of strong female peer groups (UNICEF, 2013). Therefore, females are less likely to be influenced by peer norms as compared to males.

The conventional rules are slowly changing in emerging markets due to rapid economic growth and exposure to globalization, yet some differences remain in the societal attitude toward females (Pandey, 2016). Also, females (vs. males) are at a higher risk of potential victimization on the Internet (Moscardelli & Divine, 2007). Hence parents are concerned and pay special attention to what their children (especially girls) are doing online to avoid cyber bullying and harassment (Hiranandani, 2016). The unfortunate exploitation of females and its coverage in media make female teenagers skeptical and hence they are vigilant about what they share on the Internet. Therefore, females are more likely to restrict their online activities to avoid any potential conflict that may arise due to their overstepping of existing societal norms. Thus, we propose the following hypotheses:

H5a. Gender moderates the relationship between age and normative peer influence, such that females (versus males) are less susceptible to normative peer influence.

H5b. Gender moderates the relationship between age and normative Internet influence, such that females (versus males) are less susceptible to normative Internet influence.

H5c. Gender moderates the relationship between Internet usage and eWOM intentions, such that females (versus males) are likely to have lower eWOM intentions.

4. Method

4.1. Sample and data collection

We followed a similar approach used in previous research on consumer socialization (e.g., Hill & Beatty, 2011; Yang, Kim, Laroche, & Lee, 2014; Yang & Laroche, 2011) where data was collected from school students. The sampling frame in our study consists of students from four schools in a Tier-2 city[3] (North India) and two schools in a Tier-1 city (South India). The schools are well known in the respective regions and impart education in English. The school admin-

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[3] The classification of cities is based on population (Census 2001) as recommended by Govt of India and Reserve bank of India. Tier-1 city has population of 100,000 and above, and Tier-2 city has population of 50,000 to 99,999.

istration and staff assisted in distributing and collecting the printed survey. Also, the overall exercise was projected as a curriculum (experience) activity because school authorities were interested in aggregated results and findings.

Students from Grades 8–12 completed the paper and pen survey in the class. Students were representative of the teenage population that is fairly active on the Internet. A majority of the respondents had social media profiles, e-mail accounts, and used instant messaging applications. All the relevant ethics approval from the Institutional committee and school authorities were obtained before administering the survey. A total of nine-hundred and eight students participated in the study. After removing invalid or incomplete responses, 797 valid responses were obtained for the final analysis. The average age of students was 14.8 years and the sample had 42.2% females (see Table 1 for more details).

4.2. Measures

Multi-item measures were adopted from extant literature and modified to suit the study context (see Table 2). A user can either create new content (eWOM generation) or share/forward existing content created by others (eWOM transmission). eWOM intentions for both dimensions were operationalized on the basis of behavioral intention items (Venkatesh, Morris, Davis, & Davis, 2003). We provided few examples of common activities (e.g., watching movies, shopping in a mall, visiting restaurants, and buying gifts, sports equipment, or apparels) in the survey, and asked respondents about their intentions of sharing information or experience on the Internet, social media, and instant messaging apps. The items were anchored on 7-point Likert scales (1 = Very likely and 7 = Very unlikely). Later, these items were reversed for data analysis such that the higher scores meant higher eWOM intentions. The participants were asked to report their average daily Internet usage in hour/minutes. Also, a pretest of the questionnaire was administered to 30 students from the eighth grade to ascertain that they could understand the statements correctly. Based on their feedback, minor modifications were made to finalize the survey.

4.3. Control variables

This research considered several control variables: student's Grade, number of family members, job type of parents (e.g., private, government, and professional), family type (e.g., single parent, nuclear, and joint family). In addition, we controlled for whether respondent: (a) has a social media profile (yes/no), (b) uses instant messaging apps (yes/no), and (c) has an email account (yes/no).

Another important aspect of teenager's online activities and eWOM behavior is the desire for a good online image/impression (Angelis, Bonezzi, Peluso, Rucker, & Costabile, 2012; Oh & LaRose, 2016). In the survey, items from Sweeney and Soutar (2001) were used to operationalize online impression with statements such as "Sharing content on Internet can enhance my self-image to others," and "Sharing content on Internet can make a good impression on other people."

4.4. Model estimation and results

A structural equation modeling (SEM) with partial least square (PLS) approach was used to test the proposed model and the hypotheses. The PLS was selected for the following reasons: (a) the focus of this study is to predict the eWOM intentions, and (b) the study uses latent variables' scores in further mediation analysis (Hair, Hult, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2016). PLS analysis was conducted using the SmartPLS 3.2.4 software (Ringle, Wende, & Becker, 2015). The moderation analysis was carried out using the multi-group analysis (MGA) in SmartPLS, and the mediation analysis was performed using the PROCESS tool (Hayes, 2013).

Table 1
Descriptive statistics of sample population.

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	%
Gender	Male	458	57.8
	Female	335	42.2
Total		793	100.0
Age	12 years	55	7.0
	13 years	196	24.8
	14 years	213	27.0
	15 years	117	14.8
	16 years	119	15.1
	17 years	82	10.4
	18 years	8	1.0
Total		790	100.0
Social media profile	Yes	505	64.1
	No	283	35.9
Total		788	100.0
E-mail address	Yes	597	75.6
	No	193	24.4
Total		790	100.0
Instant messenger	Yes	667	84.1
	No	126	15.9
Total		793	100.0
Internet usage (hours/day)	0–1	473	59.3
	1–2	195	24.5
	2 +	129	16.2
Total		797	100.0

Note. The total sample size is 797, but, not all respondents have reported all characteristics.

Since this study is based on self-reported data, the potential issue of common method variance (CMV) was analyzed (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). As a preemptive approach, to reduce the likelihood of CMV students were assured of anonymity and confidentiality (Chang, Witteloostuijn, & Eden, 2010). A post hoc Harman's single-factor test revealed that the first factor accounts only for 20.3% of the variance. Further, marker-variable technique was performed for CMV validity checks and results indicated that the difference between the original and CMV-adjusted correlations were very small (≤ 0.06) for all the relevant constructs (Lindell & Whitney, 2001). Hence, it can be concluded that CMV does not seriously distort the results and predictions in this study.

4.4.1. Assessment of the measurement model

An evaluation of the measurement model was undertaken by assessing internal consistency (composite reliability), indicator reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. All the outer loadings of the constructs were statistically significant, and the composite reliability (CR) values were above the recommended value of 0.7 (Table 2). The average variance extracted (AVE) values were above the recommended value of 0.5 and hence, the convergent validity of constructs was established (Hair et al., 2016).

The discriminant validity was confirmed by examining the cross-loadings and through the Fornell-Larcker criteria. Each indicator's loading was checked, and none loaded higher on any construct other than on its own. The square root of AVE for each construct was higher than the inter-construct correlations (Table 2).

4.4.2. Assessment of the structural model

The structural model was estimated using the bias-corrected and accelerated (Efron, 1987) bootstrapping procedure with 5000 resamples. The predictors were checked for multicollinearity using VIF values for each construct, which were lower than the recommended value of 5 (Hair et al., 2016). The R^2 value of 23.8% ($p < 0.001$) was obtained for predicting the eWOM intentions in the model. The following control variables had a significant influence on eWOM ($p < 0.05$): email account, social media profile, job type of parents and online impression. The blindfolding procedure was performed (omission distance = 7) to

obtain cross-validated redundancy measures for each dependent construct. The resulting positive Q^2 value (0.071) indicates that the model has predictive relevance.

We followed the recommendations from Henseler et al. (2014) to assess the overall model fit by using standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) as an index for model validation. Generally, values below 0.08 are considered favorable (Hu & Bentler, 1999). The model estimation with PLS reveals a SRMR value of 0.067 and the estimation with PLSc indicates a SRMR value of 0.038. Furthermore, the PLS analysis results indicate that age does not significantly influence eWOM (path coefficient = 0.029, $p = 0.439$. H1a not supported). But, Internet usage has a positive and significant relationship with eWOM intentions (path coefficient = 0.089, $p = 0.014$) supporting H1b.

4.5. Mediation analysis

The latent variable scores from PLS-SEM procedure were used for further mediation analysis. Two separate parallel multi-mediation models were analyzed (Fig. 2) using the PROCESS tool (Hayes, 2013) with 10,000 bootstrap resamples. The ratio of indirect to total effect (mediation ratio, P_M) and indirect to direct effect (R_M) are provided as measures of relative magnitude of the mediation effects (Table 3).

The mediation effect is confirmed when the indirect effects are significant (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). The specific indirect effects of all the four mediating variables are significant (due to the absence of zero in 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals) for the relationship between age and eWOM intentions. The indirect effect of the normative peer is negative (opposite to the sign of total effect). Hence, normative peer acts as a suppressor variable in the model (Rucker, Preacher, Tormala, & Petty, 2011). The lower range of confidence interval for informative peer ends at zero, suggesting marginal significance. Hence, we re-computed the mediation effects with 90% CI, which confirmed the marginal mediating effect of informative peer (90% CI = [0.010, 0.129]). The results show that informative Internet accounts for the majority of the total indirect effect of age on eWOM intentions. While calculating the differences between these specific indirect effects, the results reveal that mediation via informative Internet is significantly higher than the mediation via informative peer. In fact, mediation via both the Internet influences is significantly higher than the two peer influences (Table 3).

Likewise, the two indirect effects of the Internet usage on eWOM via informative Internet (CI = [0.284, 0.542]) and normative Internet (CI = [0.192, 0.365]) are significant. Of the total effect of Internet usage on eWOM influences, informative Internet accounts for 28.4% and normative Internet accounts for 19.2%. However, the difference between the two indirect effects is not significant. In the two mediation models, the most important indirect effect is via informative Internet.

4.6. Moderation analysis

To examine the moderating effects of gender, a multi-group analysis (MGA) was conducted in SmartPLS using bias-corrected and accelerated bootstrapping (5000 resamples) to test the differences in parameter estimates such as path coefficients between the two selected groups. The moderation is considered significant at 5% probability of error level, if p-value is either smaller than 0.05 or > 0.95 (Hair et al., 2016). The MGA was performed across all possible paths to test the hypothesized moderation hypotheses and to explore any other possible moderation in the model (Table 4).

As expected, gender moderates the three hypothesized relationships: (a) age and normative peer influence, (b) age and normative Internet influence, and (c) Internet usage and eWOM intentions (Fig. 3). All of these relationships show higher strength for males, compared to females. The results also indicate that gender moderates two more relationships which were not hypothesized: (a) informative Internet and eWOM intentions ($p = 0.98$), and (b) normative peer and eWOM

Table 2
Reliability and validity indices for the measurement model.

Measurement items	M (SD)	Outer loading	t-Value	CR	AVE
Age (years)	14.8 (1.48)	1.00	–	1.00	1.00
Internet usage (minutes)	58.9 (44.2)	1.00	–	1.00	1.00
Informative peer (Mangleburg & Bristol, 1998)	5.1 (1.5)	0.72	19.44	0.81	0.59
If I have little experience with something, I often ask my friends about it.					
I often consult my friends to help me in selecting what should I do.	4.7 (1.6)	0.82	35.54		
I often gather information from my friends before I do something.	4.8 (1.6)	0.76	24.12		
Normative peer (Mangleburg & Bristol, 1998)	3.6 (1.7)	0.71	15.33	0.83	0.62
When doing things, I generally do the ones that I think my friends will approve of.					
I like to know doing which activities or things, make a good impression on my friends.	4.3 (1.9)	0.82	31.58		
It is important for me that my friends like what I do.	3.9 (1.9)	0.82	26.25		
Informative Internet (Barber, 2013)	5.5 (1.5)	0.77	22.25	0.82	0.60
I often consult the Internet to find the best products or services.					
I often look at the online ads for information on various things.	4.2 (2.0)	0.77	24.38		
There is good advice on products and services on the Internet.	5.1 (1.6)	0.80	31.86		
Normative Internet (Barber, 2013)	3.9 (1.8)	0.73	14.95	0.76	0.51
The Internet determines which brand I should buy.					
I buy only those products/brands from the Internet that my friends buy.	2.2 (1.6)	0.71	15.05		
I continue buying the same brands as long as my favorite actors/actresses or any other entertainment stars approve them on the Internet.	3.1 (1.8)	0.71	14.61		
eWOM intentions(Venkatesh et al., 2003)	4.1 (1.8)	0.78	38.11	0.88	0.59
How likely are you to share or post about such activities on the Internet?					
How likely are you to start a discussion about such activities on the Internet?	3.8 (1.7)	0.76	33.83		
How likely are you to post your reviews, recommendation or feelings about such activities on the Internet?	3.9 (1.8)	0.78	41.80		
If one of your friends has shared or posted about his/her activities, then how likely are you to comment on it or participate in further discussion on the Internet?	4.6 (1.8)	0.71	27.51		
If one of your friends has shared or posted about his/her activities, then how likely are you to post your views or feelings about it on the Internet?	4.3 (1.8)	0.80	43.28		

Fornell–Larcker criterion for discriminant validity

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Age	Single item						
2. eWOM intentions	0.049	**0.767**					
3. Informative Internet	0.128	0.244	**0.777**				
4. Informative Peer	0.065	0.173	0.257	**0.764**			
5. Internet usage	0.225	0.114	0.192	0.146	Single item		
6. Normative peer	− 0.091	0.186	0.105	0.286	0.082	**0.783**	
7. Normative Internet	0.081	0.28	0.283	0.163	0.087	0.28	**0.713**

Note: t-values for the item loadings to two-tailed test: $t > 1.96$ at $p < 0.05$, $t > 2.57$ at $p < 0.01$, $t > 3.29$ at $p < 0.001$. For discriminant validity, the diagonal elements in bold are square root of AVE.

intentions ($p = 0.026$). For the former, the strength of relationship is higher for females and for the latter, the strength is higher for males.

4.7. Effect of age groups

As an exploratory step, we investigated the influence of age by dividing the sample into low and high age-groups (split at mean value). The results show that younger adolescents spend significantly lesser amount of time on the Internet ($M_L = 50.5$ min, $M_H = 71.6$ min; $t (733) = 6.5$, $p < 0.001$), and are more susceptible to normative ($M_L = 4.8$, $M_H = 5.1$; $t (786) = 3.6$, $p < 0.05$) and informative Internet influences ($M_L = 2.9$, $M_H = 3.2$; $t (784) = 2.1$, $p < 0.001$) as compared to older adolescents.

5. Discussion

Internet usage (the amount of time spent on the Internet) is positively associated with eWOM intentions. Also, we ascertain how the direct effects of age and Internet usage on eWOM are routed through normative and informative influences of peers and the Internet. The majority of the direct influences are accounted by informative Internet influence. The results confirm the importance of the Internet as a significant source of information for teenagers. Moreover, teenagers not only search for information on the Internet, but they trust and

perceive the information credible enough to make consumer decisions.

As adolescents grow up, they show less susceptibility to normative influence of peers, which is similar to the results in prior research (Mangleburg et al., 2004). But, in this study, age is positively related to informative influence of peers, which is opposite to the earlier findings (Mangleburg et al., 2004). A possible explanation for this finding is the predominant collectivistic Indian culture (Hofstede, 2001). While making decisions, older teenagers (vs. younger teenager) are more likely to seek information from their peers and trust their advice, but are less likely to adhere to norms and expectations of peer groups.

Further, the results show that age is positively related to the two types of Internet influence, though we expected a negative association between age and normative Internet. Teenager's susceptibility to normative peer vs. normative Internet is contrasting in nature as a function of their age. The findings indicate that as teenagers grow older, they pay more attention to the online norms and expectations rather than of peers. A plausible explanation we can think of is that teenagers have a high exposure to the Internet and online content. Also, they are more concerned with their online reputation and image. Therefore, what is deemed or recommended as 'cool' on the Internet has better chances of acceptance among teenagers.

All socialization agents, except informative peer (which is marginally significant) display positive and significant association with eWOM intentions. Especially, both types of Internet influence (normative and
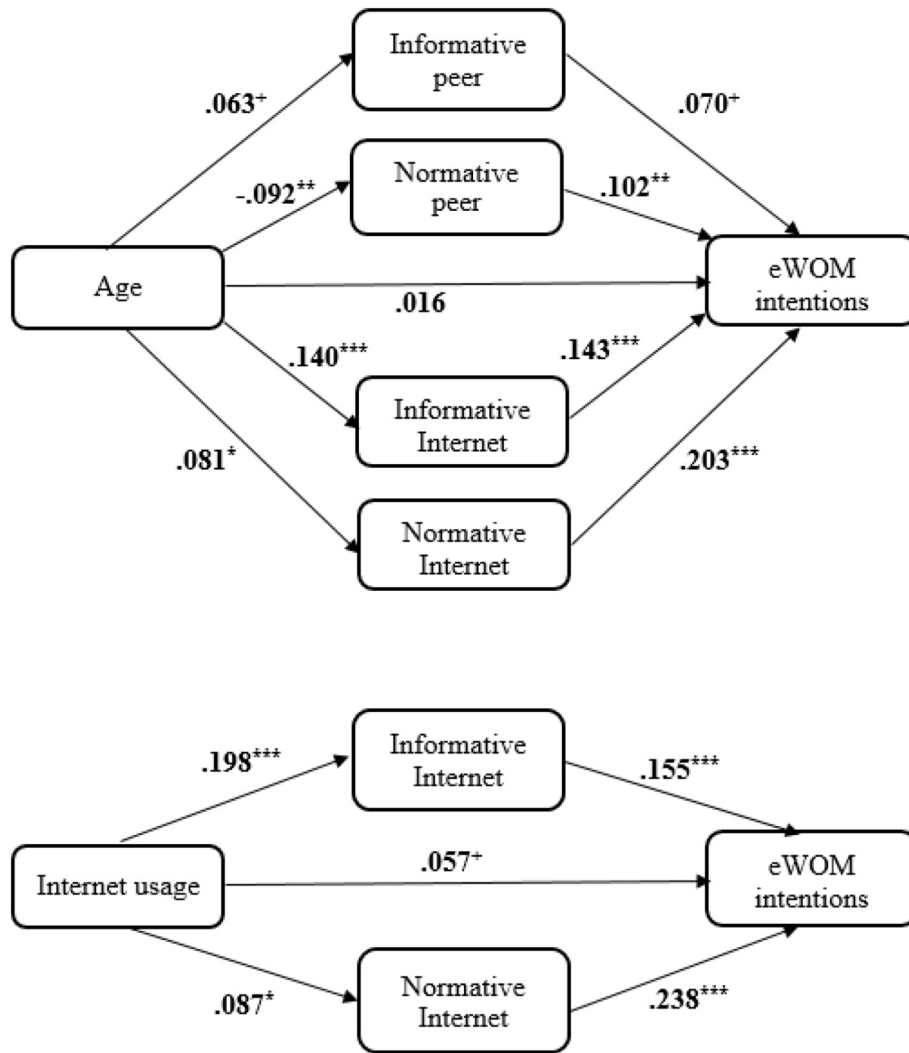
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Fig. 2. Mediation effects. $^+ p < 0.10$, $^* p < 0.05$, $^{**} p < 0.01$, $^{***} p < 0.001$.

informative), are the strongest agents with the two highest path coefficients. The credibility of information available on the Internet and individual's desire for conformity to the norms of the virtual world are the two important factors that ultimately influence adolescents' decision to express their opinions and experiences on the Internet. Eventually, adolescents are increasingly spending considerable time on the Internet (Madden et al., 2013), which makes it even more powerful than peers in guiding their online activities.

The moderating effect of gender presents some important insights into the potential eWOM behavior of adolescents (Fig. 3). As teenagers grow older, females (males) become less (more) susceptible to normative norms of peers and the Internet. A possible explanation lies in the patriarchal nature of the Indian society. Females in the adolescence period are faced with stricter norms (Bellman & Malhotra, 2016) and the possibility of adherence to the expectations of their peers is almost non-existent. Instead, we presume that the immediate family (parents) and society rules are more influential factors than peers for female adolescents. In contrast, males are relatively more persuaded by the well-established and powerful peer groups.

Females report higher eWOM intentions than males for Internet usage of up to one hour per day. Interestingly, after this value, we notice a sudden spike in eWOM intents of males which crosses over eWOM intentions of females and gradually the difference increases significantly with higher Internet usage. Almost a similar pattern is observed for the interaction between gender and normative peer

influence. During the initial lower values of normative peer influence, females (vs. males) display higher intentions for eWOM activities. However, this changes at higher values of normative peer influence, where males (vs. females) are more likely to engage in eWOM. The change in behavior suggests the presence of stronger peer norms for males which enforces higher eWOM activities, possibly due to the peer expectations of greater involvement in online activities and discussions with peer groups.

In another significant interaction with informative Internet influence, females show higher eWOM intents than males. This is probably due to the reciprocal effect. Female teenagers who search for product-related information on the Internet and perceive it trustworthy to make their purchase decisions, are more likely to generate and transmit eWOM about their own experiences, possibly to help others.

6. Theoretical implications

This study makes several contributions to the marketing literature. First, it adds a new perspective on antecedents to teenage eWOM intentions by applying the consumer socialization framework. Research suggests that age and Internet usage (time spent on the Internet) are important antecedents. In contrast to the majority of consumer socialization research concentrated on the direct effects among socialization variables, this study was guided by the interactions, mediation, and moderation of the key socialization variables. The mediating roles

Table 3
Mediation analysis results.

Path	Effect/coeffi.	Boot SE	BC bootstrap 95% CI	P_M	R_M	Result
A. Multi-mediators for age and eWOM relationship						
(1) AGE ➔ INFPEER ➔ EWOM	0.004	0.004	0.000, 0.015	0.093	0.271	H2a (sig)
(2) AGE ➔ NOPEER ➔ EWOM	− 0.009	0.005	− 0.024, − 0.002	− 0.197	− 0.575	H2b (sig)
(3) AGE ➔ INFINT ➔ EWOM	0.020	0.008	0.008, 0.038	0.418	1.222	H3a (sig)
(4) AGE ➔ NORINT ➔ EWOM	0.016	0.008	0.002, 0.035	0.344	1.006	H3b (sig)
Total indirect effect (1 + 2 + 3 + 4)	0.031	0.015	0.003, 0.063	0.658	1.924	sig
Direct effect AGE ➔ EWOM	0.016	0.034	− 0.050, 0.083			ns
Total effect of AGE on EWOM	0.048	0.035	− 0.022, 0.117			ns
Difference 1–2	0.014	0.006	0.005, 0.027			sig
Difference 1–3	− 0.016	0.008	− 0.034, − 0.001			sig
Difference 1–4	− 0.012	0.009	− 0.031, 0.005			ns
Difference 2–3	− 0.029	0.009	− 0.050, − 0.015			sig
Difference 2–4	− 0.026	0.008	− 0.044, − 0.011			sig
Difference 3–4	0.004	0.010	− 0.017, 0.024			sig
B. Multi-mediators for Internet usage and eWOM relationship						
(1) INTUSAGE ➔ INFINT ➔ EWOM	0.031	0.010	0.015, 0.053	0.284	0.542	H4a (sig)
(2) INTUSAGE ➔ NORINT ➔ EWOM	0.021	0.009	0.005, 0.040	0.192	0.365	H4b (sig)
Total indirect effect (1 + 2)	0.051	0.014	0.027, 0.081	0.476	0.907	sig
Direct effect INTUSAGE ➔ EWOM	0.057	0.034	− 0.011, 0.124			ns
Total effect of INTUSAGE on EWOM	0.108	0.035	0.039, 0.177			sig
Difference 1–2	0.010	0.012	− 0.015, 0.034			ns

Note: sig: significant effect; ns: not significant; INFPEER: informative peer, NOPEER: normative peer, INFINT: informative Internet, NORINT: normative Internet, INTUSAGE: Internet usage, Boot SE: bootstrap standard error, BC: bias-corrected, CI: confidence interval, bootstrapping based on 10,000 subsamples; P_M: mediation ratio (indirect effect/total effect), R_M: indirect effect/direct effect.
[+]$p < 0.10$, [*]$p < 0.05$, [**]$p < 0.01$, [***]$p < 0.001$.

Table 4
Multi-group analysis for testing the moderation effects of gender.

Path	Difference in path coefficients	*p*-Value for difference	Result
Age ➔ normative peer	0.17	0.004	H5a (sig)
Age ➔ normative Internet	0.189	0.031	H5b (sig)
Internet usage ➔ eWOM intentions	0.125	0.039	H5c (sig)
Informative Internet ➔ eWOM intentions	0.169	0.978	sig
Normative peer ➔ eWOM intentions	0.159	0.041	sig

Note: *p*-values < 0.05 or > 0.95 confirm the presence of moderation. Group 1 = male, group 2 = female. The difference in path coefficients is between group 1 and 2 respectively. sig: significant.

of peer and Internet influences suggest the significant interactions between socialization antecedents and socialization agents, which augment a new perspective to the consumer socialization theory.

Second, there is disagreement in the literature over whether parents or peers are the most influential socialization agents for children (Hunter-Jones, 2014). Recent research projects the Internet as a new socialization agent (Anderson & McCabe, 2012; Barber, 2013), which turns out to be the most important influencer in the current study. The marginal significance of the informative peer influence is surprising because the importance of peer influence is well-established in literature (Sook Kwon et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2012). Since adolescents are increasingly using the Internet for generating, sharing, and consuming information, they find the Internet more trustworthy and possibly easier to access when compared to getting similar information from peers. Therefore, adding to the existing debate, we suggest that in eWOM context, the Internet is a more prominent socialization agent than peers.

Third, interestingly, the direction of few relationships (e.g., age and informative peer, and moderating role of gender on age and peer influences) is opposite to the findings reported in earlier research conducted in Western countries (Mangleburg et al., 2004;

Rose & Rudolph, 2006). A possible explanation may lie in the distinct cultural and social environment in India, which is significantly different from the Western cultures. Therefore, this research also contributes to the literature on the effects of culture and society in the socialization process of children.

Fourth, we find important interactions between gender and other variables. For example, males display higher eWOM intentions than females, once they cross a certain limit of Internet usage (approximately one hour per day), and also under stronger normative peer influence. On the other hand, females are more likely to involve in eWOM due to their belief in the online information. Finally, as King et al. (2014) call for further research to understand eWOM especially in new markets such as India and China, we believe that to a certain extent, the current study fills the research gap on the effect of culture specific parameters on teenagers' eWOM behavior.

7. Managerial implications

The results reveal that normative and informative Internet influences are the major factors that impact the adolescent's eWOM intentions directly and also via mediation effects. In the Indian context, introduction of computers and the Internet in higher classes ensures that adolescents get access to the Internet and spend more time online, which increases their exposure to the Internet influences, leading to higher eWOM intentions. However, younger adolescents are more susceptible to informative and normative Internet influences. This means that they presume online content as being more truthful and are easily persuaded by online norms, which affects their marketplace decisions and choices. The different susceptibility behavior of younger and older teenagers offers two distinct approaches for marketers. For younger adolescents, marketers should try to attract them within their limited online presence to influence the consumer decisions. But, if marketers would like to have a higher involvement of adolescents to spread marketing messages (eWOM), they should preferably target older adolescents who are easy to reach (due to their higher Internet usage) and more likely to participate in eWOM activities.

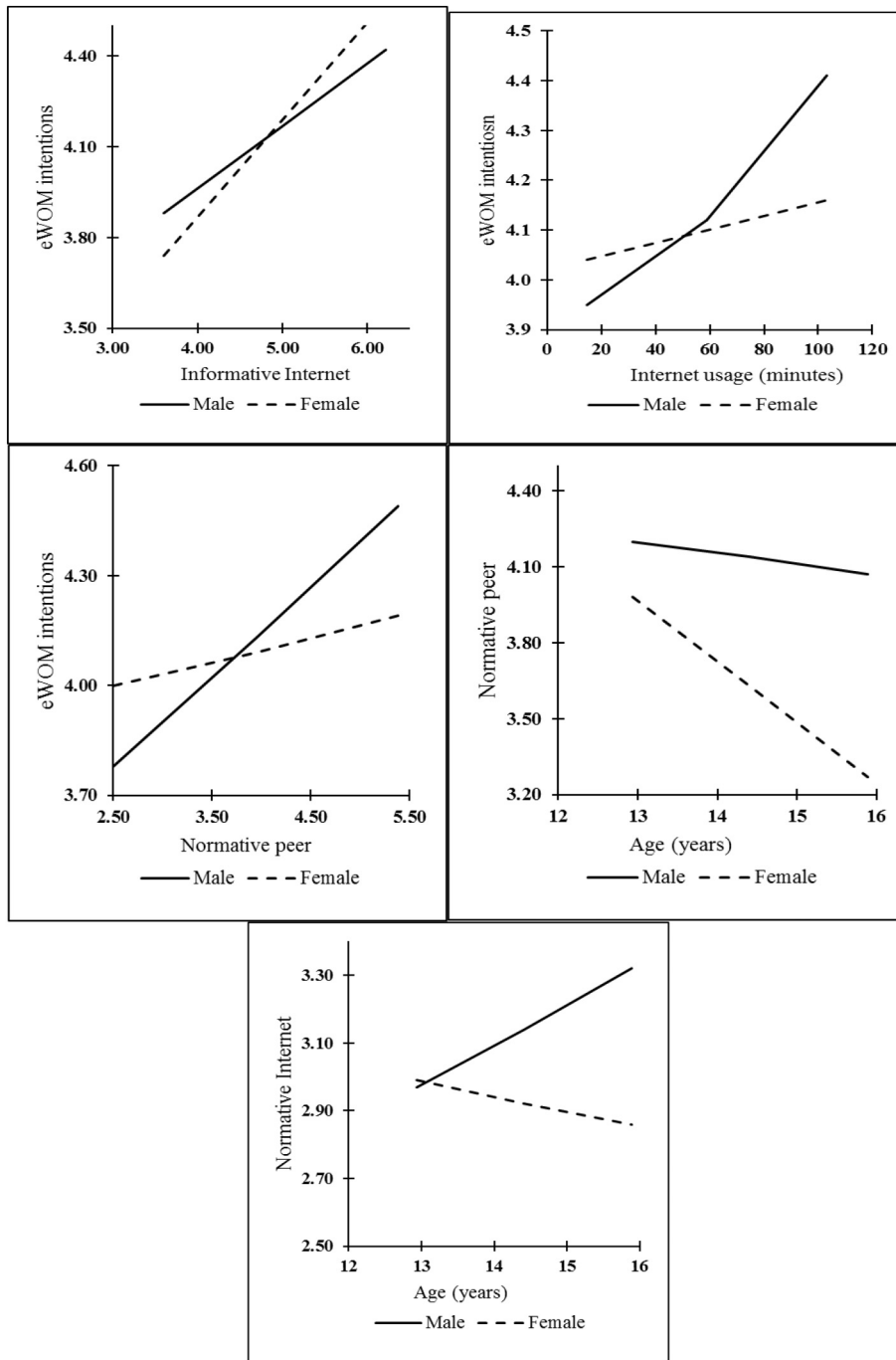In this digital age, traditional media (e.g., TV, newspaper, and

Fig. 3. Moderating effects of gender.

magazines) may not be as relevant as the Internet for teenagers. Teenagers get most of the required information instantly on the Internet. They also display higher levels of trust in the Internet than peers for getting information, and can be convinced by online recommendations and virtual norms. Therefore, marketers are more likely to attract adolescents if the brands/companies have a strong presence on the Internet (accessible either through a website, social media presence, or through search results on search engines). Specially, female teenagers who get influenced by online information are more likely to participate in eWOM. Hence, marketers can have innovative strategies particularly tailored for female teenagers. For example, firms can have dedicated blogs and review sections by female consumers, which should act as the first source of information about products including the consumption experiences of real users. Also, marketers can create

specific female user communities to provide a common platform to facilitate eWOM.

Further, we observe that teenagers who are heavy Internet users are more likely to involve in eWOM. The Internet offers teenagers new exciting opportunities such as access to global music, movies, and multi-player games with the additional feature of anonymity that can assist teenagers to bypass the usual parental controls, but may lead to other issues. Similar to other countries, the problems of cyberbullying and privacy risks also exists in India (McAfee, 2014), but we anticipate that the lack of appropriate implementation of regulatory mechanisms (as compared to developed countries) results in probably higher eWOM intents among Indian teenagers. Since controlling the Internet access is not practically feasible, parents and regulatory authorities in India should be more proactive toward monitoring the online risks for

children.

A large number of teenagers have access to the Internet and the numbers are continuously increasing in emerging economies. Teens of today are the adult consumers of tomorrow with enormous financial and social potential to drive consumption. We believe that our findings will help marketers to tap this critical segment more effectively.

8. Limitations and avenues for further research

The findings of this study should be interpreted in the context of study limitations. Though the research in consumer socialization has widely used the survey method to collect data, it may not be able to completely cover the complexity involved in answering various constructs. Further research may focus on observational techniques and experiments to address this issue.

A pilot test was conducted to check if the sample population was able to understand measures correctly. The survey was administered in schools where education and communication are done in English. The study sample is higher than the past consumer socialization research conducted in India (for instance, Kaur and Medury (2011) used responses from 346 participants; and Mukherji (2005) used responses from 197 participants). But, given the large teenage population in India, further research can use a combination of translated versions of survey in native/regional languages to cover a much larger sample to strengthen the generalizability of the study findings. Also, few of the results, for example, the effect of gender and the relationship between age and informative peer influence are opposite to earlier research findings. We attribute these findings to the distinct collectivistic culture and patriarchal society in India. Further research in similar cultures can explore and confirm the impact of culture-specific factors on the socialization of teenagers.

The consumer socialization framework is very broad and allows the inclusion of a variety of variables, for example, socio-economic status and education level of parents which can be included in further research. Similar to peers and the Internet, the normative and informative parental influence (Barber, 2013; Singh et al., 2003) can be important mediators that may influence teenager's eWOM behavior. Likewise, in schools, educators (teachers) can encourage or suppress teenager's use of the Internet and eWOM activities. Since teenagers spend most of their time either at home or school, further research can examine the effect of parents and educators on teenager's eWOM behavior to enhance the applicability of the research.

The psychological traits (e.g., the big five personality traits and self-esteem) and consumer motivations (e.g., altruism and impression management) also determine the degree of susceptibility to peer influences (Yang & Laroche, 2011) as well as eWOM behavior (King et al., 2014). This study has not considered these particular aspects and recommends further research which can investigate these potential influencers to provide further insights into the teenagers' eWOM behavior.

Finally, various examples (situations) were provided to participants to measure their general eWOM intentions (to create or share information on the Internet). But, teenagers' eWOM intentions may vary with their interests in different product categories. Thus, we recommend the inclusion of specific product categories (hedonic vs. utilitarian) that can provide comparable insights into the potential eWOM participation of teenagers. Also, the purpose to use the Internet (e.g., academic, entertainment, or social) may influence the eWOM activities of teenagers, which can be analyzed in further research.

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