

EWOM Drives Social Commerce: A Survey of Millennials in US and Abroad

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This study examines the role of eWOM in consumer-mediated purchasing. Findings from a survey of Millennials show a large segment of young consumers using eWOM in the form of reviews, forums, recommendations and referrals coming through their social networking sites as a basis for their consumption decisions. These inputs significantly impact the decision of which companies or brands to “like”, “follow” or “pin”. eWOM also influences the purchasing of certain product categories more than others. Marketers should carefully examine the potential of the Millennial shopper and the role of eWOM in the explosion of social commerce.

INTRODUCTION

Social commerce is a subset of electronic commerce or e-commerce and it is on the verge of becoming the next frontier for marketers. It involves “using social media that supports social interaction and user contributions, to assist in the online buying and selling of products and services” (2013 Business Insider). The term social commerce was introduced by Yahoo! in November 2005 to describe a set of online collaborative shopping tools such as shared pick lists, user ratings and other user-generated content sharing of online product information and advice (Rubel 2005).

Social commerce takes place through social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter and Pinterest. Consumers currently create, share and post content in the form of reviews, recommendations and comments on their social networking platforms.

According to Forrester Research (Anderson et al. 2011), the social commerce market will grow to about \$30 billion in the US by 2015. The driving force behind social commerce can be attributed to the Millennial generation’s penchant for social media. Numbering 76 million strong, Millennials, also known as Generation Y, are defined as the demographic cohort born between 1980 and 2000. It is estimated that Millennials will have a combined purchasing power of \$2.45 trillion world-wide by 2015. This buying will be carried out online and in stores. Their size and combined purchasing power make Millennials a necessary market segment for the future success of most companies.

This paper looks at eWOM and two related but distinct corollary behaviors to the buying process. It is posited that eWOM plays an important role in the pre-buying decisions on social networking sites including the decision of which products or brands to support. Additionally, eWOM inspired purchases may tend to favor certain product categories in the buying process itself. Both of these buying related circumstances broaden our knowledge and understanding of eWOM and its importance in the digital world.

Word of mouth (WOM) research dates back to the 1950’s. WOM is defined as the act of exchanging marketing information among consumers. It plays an essential role in changing consumer attitudes and behavior towards products and services (Katz&Lazarsfeld 1955).

Some of the earlier research on WOM focused on its place in the diffusion of innovation (Arndt, 1967; Sheth, 1971). Researchers looked at decision makers seeking information and interpersonal sources for making marketplace decisions (Haywood, 1989; Feick and Price, 1987). WOM became one of the most frequently studied topics, especially critical for services marketing and services buying decisions (File et al, 1998). Due to the fact that WOM is created and delivered by a trusted source (Feick & Price 1987), consumers often rely on it when they search for information on which to base their purchase decisions.

While most WOM conversations take place offline, the online platform (eWOM) became an increasingly important alternative for exchange of opinions and diffusion of information (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Gruken et al., 2006; Brown et al., 2007; Edwards et al., 2010).

Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) defined eWOM as any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet (p.39). EWOM also travels in digitally diverse ways. Blogs, emails, consumer reviews, websites and forums as well as social networking platforms provide fertile ground for eWOM (Phelps et al. 2004; Thorson & Rodgers 2006; Dwyer 2007; Hung & Li 2007). Researchers have examined the impact of eWOM on product sales (Chevalier & Mayzlin 2006; Goldsmith & Horowitz 2006), consumer decision making (DeBruyn & Lilien 2008), and attitude towards brands (Lee et al. 2009).

Researchers studied the WOM models to explain the eWOM concept. Brown et al (2007) indicated that the existing theories may not always be adequate to explain eWOM. The two concepts differ in their communications environments. WOM is described as fleeting since it vanishes when it is spoken. EWOM does not disappear since it is digitally inscribed. EWOM is less spontaneous and more goal-directed since it takes effort to both create it and search for it. It is technologically-facilitated and connects people who know each other and those that do not. There are researchers that cite the relative speed, convenience, breadth of reach, and lack of face-to-face social pressure of eWOM as more advantageous than traditional WOM in its influence on information and decision-making processes (Edwards et al., 2010).

Researchers began to look at the motivation for engaging in eWOM online through referral activities, in terms of both giving and receiving. Hennig-Thurau and Walsh (2003) provide a list of possible motivations including risk reduction, reduction of search time, learning how to consume a product, dissonance reduction, determination of social position, belonging to a virtual community, remuneration, and learning what products are new in the marketplace. Regardless of the motivation, it is clear that eWOM is a major influence in the online marketing environment.

It appears that social networking sites have the capacity to facilitate and shape eWOM yet how eWOM occurs in the digital space has not yet been examined. Understanding the role of eWOM can add to our knowledge of this concept and provide information to help formulate effective social commerce strategy.

EWOM is no longer simply a vehicle to facilitate the communication of marketing related information, but now holds a central place in the emergence of this new phenomenon called social commerce. This online communication leading to buying is now being called socially generated ecommerce, socially mediated ecommerce, social networking influenced ecommerce, socially inspired ecommerce and social network-enabled ecommerce. Regardless, of the terminology utilized, we are seeing the concept of EWOM being applied to the emergence of a new marketing paradigm.

This research attempts to identify two corollary roles of eWOM as they appear during the social commerce environment. Social commerce is considered to be buying that takes place on a social networking platform. It is posited that eWOM motivates more than buying. EWOM is critical in influencing non-buying behavior such as which brands or companies to like, follow or pin. Additionally, eWOM may be more influential for purchasing some product categories than others. The findings in this study provide opportunities for academic investigation that will contribute to our theoretical understanding of eWOM and help develop informed strategy as we move into the uncharted territory of social commerce.

Social commerce has quickly emerged as a new stream of research for both marketing practitioners and academics. To date, most of our information has come from trade articles, blog posts, industry reports

or publications from those in the field. There are only a handful of academic studies that focus on the emergence of social commerce and the implications for marketing strategy.

Given the potential of social commerce and the buying power of the Millennials, a study on this group and their propensity to make social inspired purchases, directly as a result of eWOM, could yield invaluable information from which to generate new marketing theory, strategy and best practices.

Some work has been done by marketing and social media practitioners on the subject of social commerce. One report (Smith, 2013) put Pinterest, a relatively new and less populated platform than Facebook or Twitter, squarely in the social commerce competition. According to their findings, during the second quarter of 2013, Pinterest accounted for 23% of social commerce sales while Twitter had 22% and Facebook's share was 28%. They attribute this success to the visual and product-oriented focus of Pinterest which creates a natural social platform for e-commerce.

A white paper released in July, 2013 (Stadd) reports the results of a survey with over 6,000 respondents over a 17 month period. The focus is social commerce on Facebook, Twitter and Pinterest. The results include the following:

- Social media drives roughly equal amounts of online and in-store sales
- Nearly 4 in 10 Facebook users report that they have at some point gone from liking, sharing or commenting on an item to actually buying it.
- 43% of social media users have purchased a product after sharing or favoriting it on Pinterest, Facebook or twitter.

These reports pose several important questions for marketing strategy. Are businesses ready to take advantage of the potential social commerce explosion? Are they moving to manage eWOM on social networking sites in order to benefit from the emergence of social commerce? Do they understand how to encourage and mobilize eWOM in order to derive maximum benefit from these socially driven purchases?

Two significant white papers were released in 2013 on social commerce. Neither focused specifically on Millennials but they do offer findings on the general population. Business Insider (The Rise of Social Commerce) concluded that "...one of the obstacles holding back social commerce has been the inherent friction in the buying process and the lack of intelligent buy now features incorporated directly into the social conversion." Their data comes from retailer tracking codes where sales are attributed to referrals from social media.

Vision Critical (From Social to Sales) surveyed 5,900 consumers with 4 online surveys from February to June of 2013. Their respondents are age 18-55+. They looked at social inspired purchasing on Facebook, Twitter and Pinterest and concluded that social media is driving a substantial volume of social influenced purchasing both in-store and online.

When possible, the study presented here will be compared with the findings of both white papers, demonstrating significant differences between Millennials and the general population with regard to social commerce.

The research questions driving this study are as follows:

- What role does eWOM play in motivating Millennials to like, follow or pin a brand or company?
- Do the likes, follows and pins shared through eWOM, trigger purchases by Millennials?
- Do certain product categories benefit more from eWOM than others?

The findings of this research are expected to assist practitioners in developing successful strategy for managing social commerce. For academics, the concept of eWOM will be examined as its influence extends beyond the purchase itself.

The research methodology is presented and the findings are discussed. The paper concludes with a discussion of theoretical and managerial implications and directions for further research.

METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted via a comprehensive survey available in both digital and physical form for distribution. Qualification for participation required the respondent to be a member of the Millennial

generation, using the popular demographic for this group of having been born between 1980-2000. The surveys were hosted on online and the URL was shared online by channels including, but not limited to, email, Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn. All data was collected during the fall of 2013. A total of 576 surveys provide the basis for this report.

In an effort to identify the link between online interest and related purchases, respondents were asked detailed questions about their social media decisions. The survey was divided by the platforms Facebook, Twitter and Pinterest. Respondents were first asked if they currently follow any companies or brands on that platform. If they did not, or indicated they did not have an account on that site, respondents were instructed to move to the next section.

For those that did qualify, questions were asked relating to respondents' motivations for following a company online and if they ever made a purchase resulting from their online experience. Respondents were asked to classify their purchases by platform and product category. Millennials were also asked to indicate what a company would have to do in order to convert their like/follow/pin into a sale.

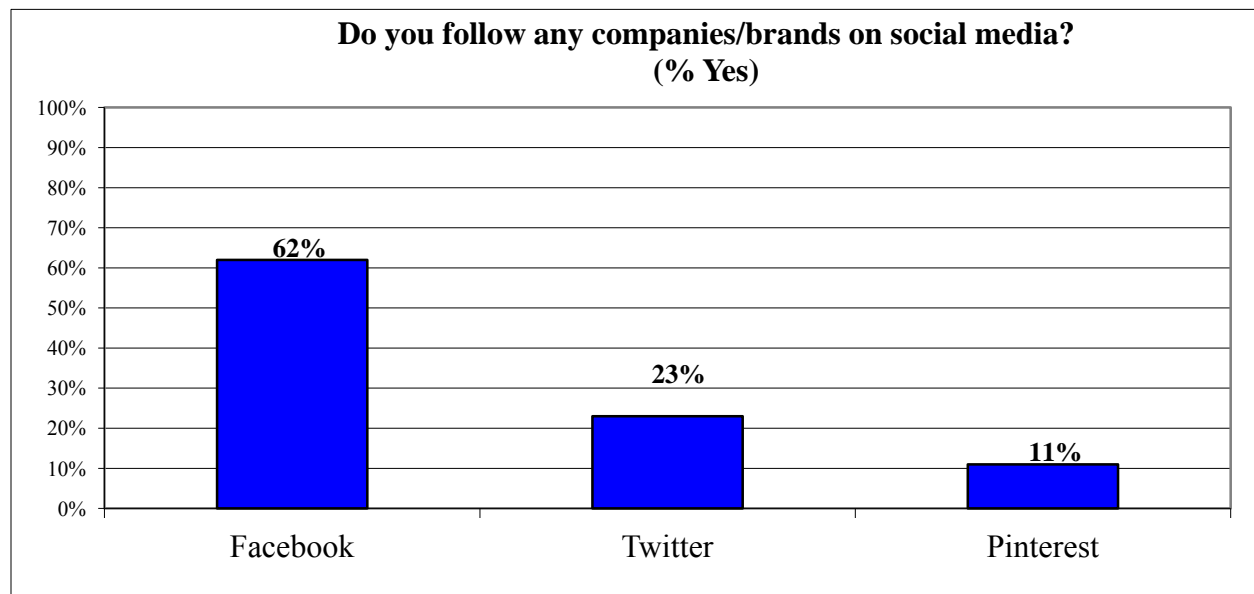
The 576 respondents in this study are diverse. They represent 32 US states and 21 people (4%) residing outside the US. There is nearly an even split in respondents' gender with 49% male and 51% female. The youngest Millennials, those 13-17, make up 13% of this study, 38% are between 18-22, 34% are between 23-27 and 15% are in the upper range of 28-33.

FINDINGS

When looking to interact with companies or brands online, Facebook is the most popular platform among Millennials, followed by Twitter and Pinterest. Facebook now has over 1 billion active users, far surpassing its social commerce competitors. Twitter boasts 650 million active registered users and Pinterest has 70 million users. Study participants were asked if they follow any companies/brands on social media.

For purposes of this study, the three platforms in question are Facebook, Twitter and Pinterest. Sixty-two percent of Facebook users indicated they followed companies/brands, 23% did so on Twitter and 11% did so on Pinterest. Over 30 million businesses have pages on Facebook making it a popular place to "like" a brand or company and receive information from them. (See Figure 1).

FIGURE 1



All respondents following companies/brands were asked to share their top 5 favorites on each platform they use of the three studied. Among their top choices, clothing retailers represent the companies/brands Millennials most “like” on Facebook. Nike takes the lead, with Target and Forever 21 also in the top five. Apple, earns second place among Millennials and Starbucks ranks fourth.

1. Nike
2. Apple
3. Target
4. Starbucks
5. Forever 21

Millennials predominantly follow sports related accounts on Twitter. Championing across platforms, Nike remains the most “followed” brand. Starbucks is the only top 5 Twitter favorite that is not sports related for this cohort.

1. Nike
2. ESPN
3. Starbucks
4. National Football League
5. National Hockey League

One area of interest in this study is the impact of eWOM in the pre-buying condition of choosing to follow, like or pin a company/brand. A list of 10 motivators were provided and respondents were asked to indicate which influenced them across each of the social media platforms studied.

The list included 3 motivators that describe receiving eWOM or providing it: Seeing my friends are already a fan, follower or have a board, to share my interests and lifestyle with others, and someone recommended that I like, follow or pin the company/brand. There is strong empirical evidence that these three eWOM motivators play a role in the pre purchase stage of social commerce on Facebook, Twitter and Pinterest. In all three cases, respondents report these as the reason they like, follow or pin companies/brands. There is no purchase at this point, but eWOM is instrumental in making a future purchase more likely. It is interesting to note, however, that although there is social influence in play, the top motivators are not socially influenced but individually oriented.

When asking Facebook users why they like a company/brand, 86% of respondents said it is to support the brand they like. Seventy-eight percent said receiving regular updates from brands they like is important. Sixty-four percent of respondents said it was to get a coupon or discount on their next purchase. The top three reasons why Twitter users follow a company or brand on Twitter are identical to those reported by Facebook users.

Pinterest has a very different orientation than Facebook and Twitter. When asking Pinterest users why they pin something from a company/brand, supporting the brand remains the top reason. After that, the focus becomes sharing and researching brands. Interestingly, 75% of Pinterest users are using the site to share their personal interests/lifestyle with others. Forty-four percent of Facebook users selected that particular reason for liking a company and 42% of Twitter users for following a company.

While Facebook and Twitter users like and follow brands in a more passive way, Pinterest users pin brands specifically to share the brand or product with others as part of their personal lifestyle. Pinterest has become a major source of information for Millennials providing volumes of pictures on boards about weddings, parties, fashion, food, decorating and DIY projects. Ewom is rampant on Pinterest. (See Table 1).

TABLE 1
MOTIVATORS FOR LIKES, FOLLOWS AND PINS ON FACEBOOK,
TWITTER AND PINTEREST

	Facebook	Twitter	Pinterest
To support the brand	86%	87%	78%
To receive regular updates from brands	78%	81%	N/A
To get a coupon or discount	64%	66%	42%
To research brands when I was looking for specific products/services	51%	52%	59%
Seeing my friends are already a fan, follower or have a board	45%	43%	48%
To share my interests/lifestyle with others	44%	42%	75%
To participate in contests	37%	50%	41%
A brand advertisement on TV, online or in print led me to like the brand	37%	34%	31%
Someone recommended me to like, follow or pin the brand	34%	31%	30%
To share my personal good experiences	27%	37%	44%
Other	5%	8%	5%

When it comes to social mediated purchasing, Pinterest resonates with Millennials. Forty-seven percent of respondents with Pinterest accounts said they had purchased something online after pinning it – a 9% and 14% increase over those with Facebook and Twitter accounts, respectively.

Companies have long been trying to understand how to convert traffic to their social media sites into sales. In the end, it may be that cost is the prime motivation for buying among this group. Millennials in this study indicate across Facebook, Twitter and Pinterest, that those companies offering coupons or discounts in exchange for a like/follow/pin would be more likely to see an increase in sales. Other popular responses included exclusive offers, free products, and more directed advertising.

The trade reports from Business Insider and Vision Critical report lower levels of purchasing after liking, following or pinning a company/brand on social networking sites. Both reports used a convenience sample from the general population. It is clear from our findings on Millennials that they are more likely than the general population to actually make a purchase once they have some link to the company/brand through social media. (See Table 2).

TABLE 2
COMPARISON OF RECENT STUDIES ON PURCHASING AFTER
LIKING/FOLLOWING/PINNING*

Source of Study	Facebook	Twitter	Pinterest
University study	38%	33%	47%
Business Insider	28%	22%	23%
Vision Critical	33%	22%	40%

**The University study focused solely on Millennials*

The second eWOM influence studied in this paper is the choice of purchase category. Of those purchases made after sharing something online, Millennials clearly prefer to buy things in the category of “Hair, Beauty and Apparel”. This is the category where the most purchases were made across the three platforms studied accounting for approximately half of all purchases.

On Facebook, Technology/Electronics was the second most socially influenced purchase category with 18% coming from this category. On Twitter, it is Food and Drink (21%) while Pinterest users are

likely to buy Art, Design, DIY, Crafts and Photography products (23%) as a result of online social influence. While eWOM is instrumental in stimulating purchases, it may be more effective for some product categories than others, at least for Millennials. Across all three platforms studied, Hair & Beauty as well as apparel were the goods most likely to be purchased after social influence. (See Table 3).

TABLE 3
SOCIAL INFLUENCED PURCHASING BY CATEGORY

Purchase Category	Facebook	Twitter	Pinterest
Food & Drink	11%	21%	7%
Art & Design, DIY, Photography, Crafts	5%	5%	23%
Gardening & Décor	2%	0%	13%
Hair & Beauty, Apparel	45%	50%	47%
Tech & Electronics	18%	14%	3%
Other	16%	7%	7%

Additional data was collected on perceptions of Millennials with regard to the ease of converting a like, follow or pin into a sale. The result is not unexpected. The conversion rate is inversely related to the amount of effort it takes to make a purchase.

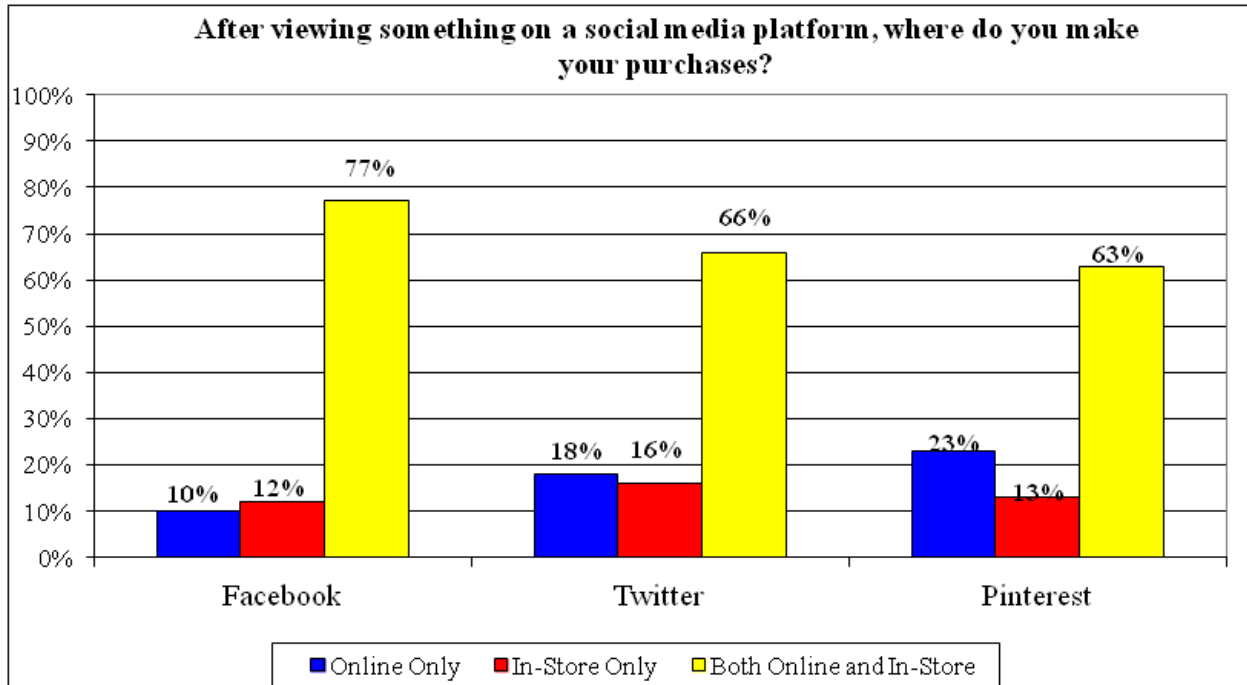
Of those respondents who answered ‘yes’ to purchasing only through a social media site, Pinterest ranks highest among social media platforms studied in lead conversion. Twitter earns second place with 18% of those with accounts making purchases through the site and Facebook comes in third with 10%. As Amazon has aptly displayed, consumers will click to buy when it’s relatively effortless. This is especially true of a casual shopper looking at a product as the result of a social recommendation. Social media networking sites that involve too many intermediate steps before they can click to purchase, will lose ecommerce business.

One concern among retailers is that social commerce will encourage only online sales. While eWOM takes place in the online environment, purchasing happens both on and off line according to Millennials in this study.

Some social influenced Millennials shop exclusively in stores. Sixteen percent of Twitter users purchase in-store only as compared to 13% for Pinterest and 12% for Facebook. All three platforms contribute to both online and in-store purchasing. Seventy-seven percent of Facebook users purchase both online and in-store as well as 66% of Twitter users and 63% of Pinterest users.

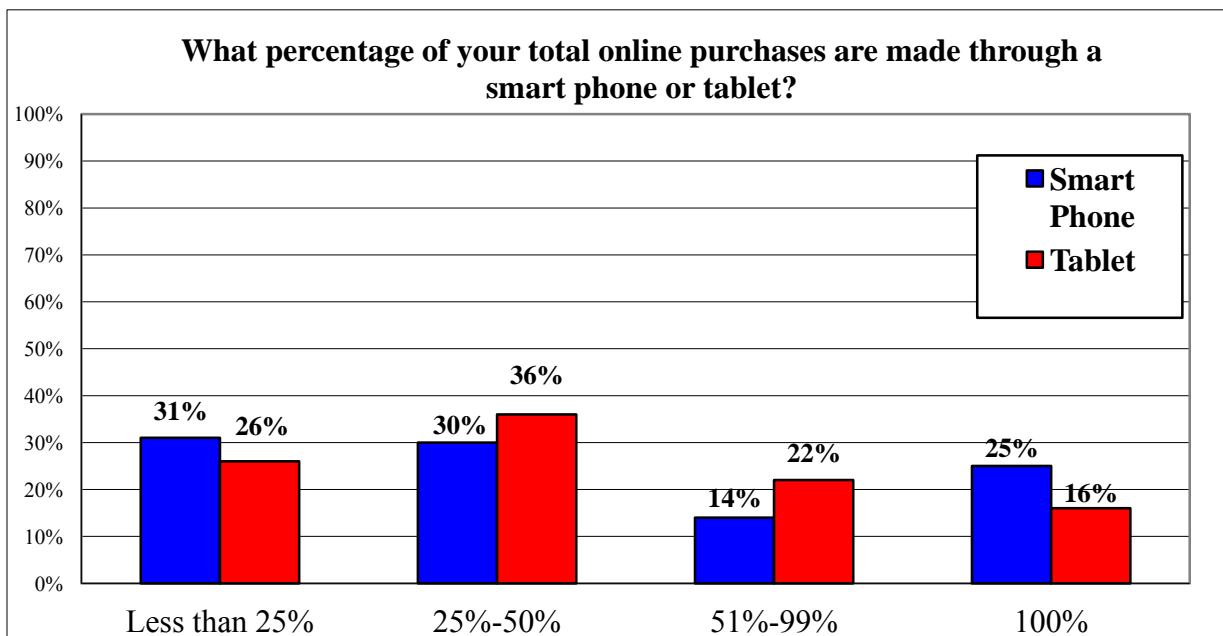
When it comes to ecommerce conversions triggered by social media, both online and in-store retailers benefit. One in ten Facebook purchasers report using only the online channel. Twelve percent use only in store retailers while over three quarters use both channels. This pattern is repeated with Twitter and Pinterest purchases although the Pinterest users are the most likely of the 3 platforms to buy exclusively online. The ease of purchasing, along with its new tools like “rich pins” for automatic updates and price drop notification on pinned items, makes Pinterest an attractive online buying site. Millennials are definitely multi-channel shoppers. (Figure 2).

FIGURE 2



With the continued growth of mobile computing, purchases are increasingly being made through mobile devices. This study looked at buying behavior of Millennials through smart phones or tablets. Half of Millennials who make social motivated purchases do so through their smart phones. One in four Millennials report using a tablet for these purchases. Clearly, mobile is an important factor in the social commerce movement among this generation. (See Figure 3).

FIGURE 3



The amount of money spent through social networking sites has not been effectively tracked. Monetate, a social media consulting company, reported data on average order by platform. The findings of this study are compared with those findings. Again, the comparison supports an increased level of buying for the Millennial generation. (See Table 4).

TABLE 4
AVERAGE ORDER VALUE BY PLATFORM

Source of Study	Facebook	Twitter	Pinterest
University of MA	\$105	\$72	\$150
Monetate	\$71	\$70	\$81

**The University study focused solely on Millennials*

This study parallels one by [Monetate](#) in which the average order value on Pinterest led all social referrers. Facebook was second and Twitter third. Given that the University study focuses on Millennials, it is obvious that these young consumers are making more social influenced purchases than than older counterparts.

THEORETICAL AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

Researchers will want to formulate models of eWOM in order to understand its causes, processes, and effects. The extensive literature available on WOM, eWOM and social communication will provide much of the groundwork for these efforts.

The results of our study suggest that eWOM is instrumental in pre-buying decisions as well as in the purchase of certain product categories. Not only does eWOM motivate buying, but it creates a potential buying environment from which considerable buying occurs. In this study, 47% of Facebook users made a purchase after liking or sharing product information on the platform. The act of sharing and liking (eWOM) precedes purchasing. EWOM plays a role in the pre purchase stage that has not been previously documented. These findings provide fertile ground for businesses to increase the likelihood of purchases by organizing pre purchase eWOM. Marketers can create attractive incentives for liking, following or pinning that do not currently exist. Focusing on pre purchase eWOM could be instrumental in gaining market share in the social commerce space.

When products are purchased by millennials online, (after liking, sharing, following or pinning), it the Health and Beauty category along with apparel that benefits most. Marketers in these product categories need to mobilize their influencers and court the younger shoppers in the on line space. These digital natives are making socially mitigated purchases. New strategy aimed at targeting this group of savvy, young, digitally proficient shoppers.

In this study, Millennial shoppers spent more than the general population in the social commerce arena and often made those purchases through tablets or smart phones. Marketers need to optimize their websites, ads and all communications for mobile devices. The mobile segment will only continue to grow.

Millennials make their purchases both online and in brick and mortar stores. By linking on and off line stores, marketers are more likely to realize sales. Many retailers now offer online sales which can be picked up at a store (Walmart), online purchases that can be returned at the store (Macy's, Kohl's, Target) and sales that might be announced initially online for both channels (Loft).

Managerially, our findings can be of use to marketers who seek to manage eWOM by providing insights into its impact in the purchase process. EWOM is pervasive and growing as the opportunities for interaction in the digital world expand exponentially. Understanding the power of this influence as it now exists on social networking sites is essential for both practitioners and academics.

It is important to understand the importance of eWOM in the marketing mix in this online environment. Marketers need to develop strategy that is viable across multiple platforms (Facebook,

Twitter, Pinterest etc.), multiple technologies (tablets, smart phones etc.), and multiple buying environments (on and off line). This will include the development of consistent messages, creating and maintaining business-influenced communities, and collaboration with diverse consumer segments. While companies/brands flock to social networks in search of sales, businesses will need to make their social communities distinctive from others and involve their customers in the creation of positive and persuasive eWOM.

A future study could examine the social factors that influence consumers engagement in eWOM, the link between social relationships and eWOM, and how influencers are identified. Understanding more about eWOM at a time when social commerce is exploding on social networking platforms.

CONCLUSION

Millennials are leading the social commerce movement. They are more likely than any other group to like/follow/pin companies and brands. They are enticed by coupons and discounts, purchase hair/beauty products and apparel, often using mobile phones and tablets. They are multi-channel shoppers, buying both online and in-store. This cohort is active online in ways that allow them to connect, organize, stay informed and shop. They spend more money on Facebook, Twitter and Pinterest than other groups making them the ones to watch as social commerce surges forward.

Unlike past generations, however, Millennials are not influenced by traditional 'push' marketing strategies. Born and raised in the age of technology, Millennials consume information when and how they want to. This has grave implications for companies who cannot adapt their marketing strategies quickly enough to capture and capitalize on their intermittent attention. Social media has provided companies with valuable tools to attract and engage Millennials on their own terms.

This generation has been defined as transparent, collaborative, and connected and they want their shopping experience to reflect those descriptions as well.

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