

Review Ambiguity and Consumer Indecision: A Study on eWOM-Induced Purchase Dilemma

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ABSTRACT

In the digital marketplace, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) has become a dominant source of information influencing consumer purchase decisions. While online reviews are intended to reduce uncertainty, contradictory and ambiguous reviews often create confusion and indecision among consumers. This study examines the impact of review ambiguity on consumer indecision and the resulting purchase dilemma in online shopping contexts. Using a structured questionnaire, primary data were collected from 258 respondents who regularly engage in online purchasing. The study employs quantitative techniques, including descriptive analysis, correlation, and structural equation modelling, to analyse the relationships between review ambiguity, perceived risk, information overload, trust, and purchase indecision. The findings reveal that high levels of review ambiguity significantly increase consumer confusion and delay in decision-making, leading to heightened purchase dilemma. Furthermore, perceived risk and information overload are found to mediate the relationship between ambiguous reviews and consumer indecision, while trust partially moderates this effect. The study contributes to existing eWOM literature by highlighting the negative consequences of inconsistent online reviews on consumer behaviour. The results offer practical implications for e-commerce platforms and marketers to improve review credibility, filtering mechanisms, and information presentation in order to facilitate more confident consumer decision-making. This research provides valuable insights for enhancing consumer experience and reducing decision paralysis in digital marketplaces.

Key words: eWOM, Purchasing Behaviour, preference, E-Commerce, Satisfaction

INTRODUCTION

The rapid growth of digital technologies and e-commerce platforms has fundamentally transformed the way consumers search for information and make purchase decisions. In contemporary online marketplaces, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), in the form of online reviews, ratings, comments, and recommendations, has emerged as one of the most influential sources of product-related information. Consumers increasingly rely on these peer-generated opinions to evaluate product quality, reduce perceived risk, and enhance decision confidence before making purchases. As a result, eWOM plays a crucial role in shaping consumer attitudes and behavioural intentions in digital environments. Despite its significant advantages, eWOM does not always facilitate smooth decision-making. The vast volume of user-generated content available on e-commerce and social media platforms often contains inconsistent, contradictory, and ambiguous information. Consumers frequently encounter situations where positive and negative reviews coexist, reviewers present conflicting experiences, or product

evaluations lack clarity and credibility. Such review ambiguity creates uncertainty and cognitive conflict, making it difficult for consumers to accurately assess product performance and reliability. Instead of simplifying the purchase process, ambiguous reviews may intensify confusion and hesitation, leading to delayed or abandoned purchase decisions. Consumer indecision arising from review ambiguity has become an increasingly relevant issue in digital marketing research. When faced with mixed or unclear information, consumers tend to experience information overload, heightened perceived risk, and reduced trust in online platforms. These psychological responses contribute to a purchase dilemma, wherein individuals struggle to choose among alternatives or postpone their buying decisions altogether. In highly competitive online markets, such indecision not only affects individual consumers but also poses significant challenges for marketers and e-commerce firms seeking to convert browsing behaviour into actual sales. Existing literature on eWOM has predominantly focused on its positive influence on purchase intention, brand credibility, and customer

engagement. However, comparatively limited attention has been given to the negative consequences of ambiguous and contradictory online reviews. Understanding how review ambiguity influences consumer indecision is essential for developing more effective digital communication strategies and enhancing user experience. Moreover, examining the underlying mechanisms, such as perceived risk, information overload, and trust, provides deeper insights into the complex relationship between eWOM and consumer decision-making. In this context, the present study investigates the impact of review ambiguity on consumer indecision and purchase dilemma in online shopping environments. Using empirical data collected from 258 respondents, the research analyses how conflicting and unclear eWOM affects consumers' cognitive and emotional responses during the purchase process. The study aims to contribute to the growing body of digital marketing literature by highlighting the dark side of eWOM and offering practical recommendations for improving review management and information presentation. Ultimately, the findings are expected to assist e-commerce platforms and marketers in designing more transparent and reliable review systems that support confident and informed consumer decisions.

2.LITERATURE REVIEW

Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) refers to consumer-generated statements about products or services shared through digital platforms (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). With the rapid expansion of e-commerce, eWOM has become a primary source of information influencing consumer purchase decisions. Unlike traditional word-of-mouth, online reviews reach a wider audience, remain permanently accessible, and significantly affect brand evaluation. Prior studies confirm that review valence, volume, and credibility strongly influence purchase intention (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Filieri & McLeay, 2014). Positive reviews enhance perceived product quality, whereas negative reviews increase perceived risk and reduce purchase likelihood. Additionally, review diagnosticity the extent to which information facilitates product evaluation plays a crucial role in shaping decision confidence (Mudambi & Schuff, 2010). Consumers tend to rely more on peer-generated content than firm-generated promotional messages due to higher perceived authenticity and trustworthiness. While eWOM often reduces uncertainty, inconsistent and ambiguous reviews may produce the opposite effect. Review ambiguity arises when consumers encounter contradictory opinions, vague descriptions, or insufficient product information, thereby reducing clarity and complicating evaluation. Research indicates that mixed reviews require greater cognitive effort and generate more confusion than uniformly positive or negative feedback (Schlosser, 2011). According to information overload theory (Jacoby, 1984), excessive and conflicting information exceeds consumers' cognitive processing capacity, leading to decision difficulty. Lee and Lee (2004) further reported that excessive online information negatively affects decision quality and increases frustration. Moreover, contradictory reviews reduce perceived diagnosticity and generate scepticism regarding product reliability (Filieri,

2015). Consumers often struggle to determine whether negative reviews reflect genuine product deficiencies or isolated experiences, thereby intensifying uncertainty. Consumer indecision refers to difficulty in selecting among alternatives due to uncertainty, perceived risk, and conflicting information. In online shopping contexts, indecision is frequently triggered by information complexity and excessive choice. Anderson (2003) demonstrated that while product reviews influence sales performance, conflicting feedback may delay decision-making. Cognitive dissonance theory suggests that contradictory information creates psychological discomfort, motivating consumers to postpone or avoid decisions (Festinger, 1957). Similarly, Iyengar and Lepper (2000) highlighted the "choice overload" effect, whereby excessive alternatives result in decision paralysis and reduced purchase likelihood. Previous research further indicates that indecision increases purchase deferral and abandonment behaviour (Dhar, 1997). Consequently, although eWOM can facilitate informed decisions, ambiguous reviews may instead generate purchase dilemmas characterised by hesitation and delay. Perceived risk plays a central role in online purchasing behaviour. Bauer (1960) conceptualised perceived risk as the uncertainty and potential negative consequences associated with purchase decisions. In digital environments, ambiguous reviews heighten performance and financial risk perceptions (Kim, Ferrin, & Rao, 2008). Information overload also mediates the relationship between review ambiguity and decision outcomes. Malhotra (1982) argued that when information exceeds processing capacity, decision quality deteriorates. Consumers exposed to excessive and inconsistent reviews experience cognitive strain, which contributes to confusion and indecision. Empirical findings suggest that perceived risk and information overload significantly weaken purchase intention in online contexts (Park & Lee, 2008). Thus, ambiguous eWOM influences consumer behaviour primarily through psychological mechanisms rather than direct persuasion. Trust is a critical determinant of online transaction success. In uncertain environments, trust reduces perceived risk and enhances decision confidence (Gefen, 2000). Consumers who trust e-commerce platforms are more likely to rely on review systems even when encountering mixed opinions. Platform credibility, verified reviews, and transparent rating mechanisms have been shown to strengthen consumer trust (Ba & Pavlou, 2002). Furthermore, trust moderates the negative effects of information uncertainty on purchase intention (Pavlou & Fygenson, 2006). Accordingly, trust functions as a buffering factor that mitigates the adverse impact of review ambiguity on consumer in decision.

3.RESEARCH GAP

Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) has been widely examined in marketing and consumer behavior literature, particularly with respect to its influence on purchase intention, brand perception, and consumer trust. Most existing studies emphasize review valence, volume, rating scores, and source credibility as key determinants of online purchase decisions. These studies generally assume that consumers are able to interpret online reviews clearly

and form rational evaluations based on available information. However, this perspective overlooks the presence of ambiguous reviews that contain mixed opinions, vague expressions, or contradictory statements, which may complicate consumers' decision-making processes. Limited scholarly attention has been given to understanding how review ambiguity affects consumers' cognitive and emotional responses. While prior research acknowledges information overload and uncertainty in online environments, few studies have specifically examined ambiguity as a distinct construct influencing consumer behavior. Moreover, consumer indecision, hesitation, and purchase dilemma are rarely treated as independent outcome variables, as most research focuses primarily on purchase intention or actual buying behavior. Furthermore, there is a lack of comprehensive empirical models that explain the mechanisms through which ambiguous reviews lead to decision paralysis, confusion, or perceived risk. The mediating roles of factors such as uncertainty, trust erosion, and perceived complexity remain insufficiently explored. In addition, most existing studies are concentrated in developed economies, limiting the generalizability of findings to emerging markets such as India, where online shopping behavior, digital literacy, and trust perceptions may differ. Therefore, a significant research gap exists in systematically examining the impact of review ambiguity on consumer indecision and purchase dilemma. Addressing this gap can contribute to a deeper theoretical understanding of eWOM effects and provide practical insights for digital marketers and e-commerce platforms.

4.OBJECTIVES

1. To examine the effect of review ambiguity on consumers' perceived uncertainty in online shopping.
2. To analyze the relationship between perceived uncertainty, perceived risk, and trust erosion.
3. To study the impact of trust erosion on consumer indecision and purchase dilemma.
4. To develop and validate a model explaining how eWOM ambiguity leads to consumer hesitation and purchase delay.
5. To determine the key factors that influence customers in selecting and evaluating online reviews

5.RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a descriptive and causal research design with a quantitative approach to examine the influence of review ambiguity on consumer indecision in the context of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). Primary data were collected from 258 online consumers who regularly refer to online reviews before making purchase decisions, using a structured questionnaire based on a five-point Likert scale. Convenience sampling technique was adopted for selecting the respondents. The questionnaire comprised two sections: demographic details and items measuring review ambiguity, perceived uncertainty, perceived risk, trust erosion, and consumer indecision. The measurement scales were adapted from previous validated studies and suitably modified for the *Advances in Consumer Research*

present research context to ensure content validity. The reliability of the instrument was tested using Cronbach's alpha, while construct validity was examined through confirmatory factor analysis. The collected data were analyzed using statistical tool SPSS to test the proposed research model and to assess the relationships among the study variables.

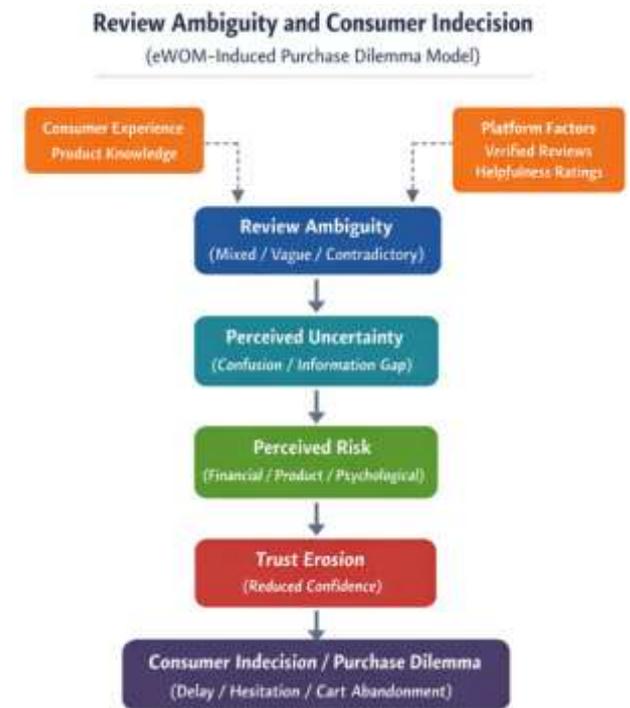


Figure 1 Research Model

5.1.Data Analysis

Total Respondents : 258		
Age Category	No Respondents	Percentage %
18-20	112	43
21-30	141	55
31-40	2	1
41+	3	1
Profession	No Respondents	Percentage %
Government Employee	1	0.4
Self Employed	1	0.4
Student	255	98.8
Unemployed	1	0.4

Marital Status	No of Respondents	Percentage %
Married	5	2
Unmarried	253	98
Internet Familiarity	No of Respondents	Percentage %
Extremely Familiar	102	40
Moderately Familiar	119	46
Slightly Familiar	35	14

Table 1. Demographics

Inference: A majority of respondents (98%) are under the age of 30, indicating a predominantly young sample group. Nearly all respondents (98.8%) are students, showing that the survey primarily targeted an academic population. Most respondents (86%) are either moderately or extremely familiar with the internet, suggesting a digitally literate group.

Question	Always	Never	Some time
Do you look for online reviews while purchasing laptops ?	215	39	4

Multiple Regressions for the Research Model

Dependent Variable	Independent Variable	B	Std. Error	(β)	t-value	Sig. (p)
Perceived Uncertainty	Review Ambiguity	0.462	0.058	0.521	7.97	0.004
Perceived Risk	Perceived Uncertainty	0.438	0.062	0.486	7.06	0.032
Trust Erosion	Perceived Risk	0.415	0.067	0.451	6.19	0.029
Consumer Indecision	Trust Erosion	0.497	0.061	0.538	8.15	0.002

Table 4 Regression Table

Model	R ²	Adjusted R ²	F-value	Sig.
1	0.27	0.26	63.52	0.004
2	0.24	0.23	49.84	0.032
3	0.21	0.20	38.32	0.029
4	0.29	0.28	66.42	0.002

Table 5 Model Fit Statistics

The regression results indicate that review ambiguity has a significant positive effect on perceived uncertainty ($\beta = 0.521, p < 0.001$), suggesting that ambiguous reviews increase consumers' confusion and information gaps.

Percentage %	83	15	2
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Table 2. Preference of Online Reviews

Inference: The above pie chart demonstrates that the vast majority of college students consult a variety of internet resources in order to get customer testimonials that will help them make an informed buying decision.

Online Review Usage	No of Respondents	Percentage %
It creates a dilemma	61	24
It is not supportive in purchase decision	15	6
It makes me clear and supports for purchase decision	182	71

Table 3. Online Review Usage

Inference: A significant majority of respondents (71%) stated that online reviews help them make clear and confident purchase decisions. About one-fourth (24%) felt that reviews create a dilemma, while only a small fraction (6%) found them unhelpful. This pie chart makes it very evident that the internet evaluations left by other consumers are of great assistance to the students in making purchase decisions

Perceived uncertainty significantly influences perceived risk ($\beta = 0.486, p < 0.001$), implying that higher confusion leads to greater perceived financial, product, and psychological risk. Perceived risk also has a significant positive impact on trust erosion ($\beta = 0.451, p < 0.001$), indicating that increased risk perception reduces consumers' confidence in online reviews and sellers. Furthermore, trust erosion significantly affects consumer indecision ($\beta = 0.538, p < 0.001$), showing that reduced trust results in purchase delay, hesitation, and cart abandonment. The R² values indicate that the independent variables explain a substantial proportion of variance in each dependent variable. Overall, the findings support the proposed research model and confirm that review ambiguity indirectly contributes to consumer indecision through perceived uncertainty, perceived risk, and trust erosion.

Key factors that influence customers in selecting and evaluating online reviews

Aspects	Preference Level of Respondents				
	Alwa ys	Ofte n	Someti mes	Rare ly	Neve r
Reviewer Name	98	65	42	28	25
Reviewer Gender	33	38	57	73	57
Reviewer Place	90	58	42	36	32
Reviewer Expertise	115	81	38	12	12
Relevance of Content	160	65	25	6	2
Technical Words/ Explanation	147	74	26	5	6

Table 6 Key factors that influence customers in selecting and evaluating online reviews

The table presents respondents’ preferences toward various reviewer and content-related aspects while evaluating online reviews. The results indicate that relevance of content is the most influential factor, with the highest number of respondents reporting “Always” (160) and “Often” (65) preferences. This suggests that consumers primarily focus on whether the review content is relevant to their needs and purchase decisions. Similarly, technical words and explanations are highly preferred, as reflected by 147 respondents selecting “Always” and 74 selecting “Often.” This indicates that detailed and informative reviews enhance consumers’ understanding of products and reduce ambiguity. Reviewer expertise also receives strong preference, with 115 respondents indicating “Always” and 81 indicating “Often.” This implies that consumers place considerable trust in knowledgeable and experienced reviewers when evaluating products online. In contrast, reviewer gender shows relatively low importance, with higher responses in the “Rarely” (73) and “Never” (57) categories. This suggests that demographic characteristics of reviewers have minimal influence on consumers’ evaluation of online reviews. Reviewer name and reviewer place show moderate importance, as responses are distributed across “Always,” “Often,” and “Sometimes” categories. This indicates that while identity and location information contribute to credibility, they are less critical than content quality and expertise. Overall, the findings reveal that respondents prioritize content relevance, clarity, and reviewer expertise over personal or demographic details. This suggests that informative and well-explained reviews play a vital role in reducing uncertainty and supporting effective online purchase decisions.

Chi-square between Gender and Online Review Usage

Test	Value	df	Sig. (p)
Pearson Chi-Square	0.742	2	0.689
Likelihood Ratio	0.731	2	0.694
N of Valid Cases	258		

Table 6 Gender vs Online Review Usage

Gender	Creates Dilemma	Not Supportive	Makes Clear & Supports	Total
Male (178)	42	11	125	178
Female (80)	19	4	57	80
Total	61	15	182	258

Table 7 Cross tabulation

The Chi-square test was conducted to examine the association between gender and online review usage. The results indicate that the relationship between gender and online review usage is not statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 0.742$, $df = 2$, $p = 0.689$). Since the p-value is greater than 0.05, the null hypothesis is accepted. This implies that male and female respondents do not differ significantly in their perception and usage of online reviews. Both groups similarly believe that online reviews mainly help in clarifying and supporting purchase decisions. Furthermore, the majority of respondents from both genders reported that online reviews make their purchase decisions clearer, indicating the overall importance of eWOM irrespective of gender.

6. FINDINGS

The findings of the study reveal that review ambiguity plays a significant role in increasing consumers’ perceived uncertainty by creating confusion, inconsistency, and information gaps in online product evaluations. When reviews are vague, contradictory, or unclear, consumers find it difficult to assess product quality and reliability, which weakens their confidence in making purchase decisions. This perceived uncertainty further leads to a higher level of perceived risk, including financial, functional, and psychological risks, thereby increasing consumers’ apprehension toward online shopping. As perceived risk intensifies, it contributes to trust erosion toward online reviews, sellers, and e-commerce platforms. Reduced trust significantly increases consumer indecision, resulting in purchase delay, hesitation, and in some cases, cart abandonment. The study empirically validates the proposed eWOM-induced purchase dilemma model and confirms its effectiveness in explaining how ambiguous online reviews lead to consumer hesitation and delayed decision-making.

Furthermore, the results indicate that relevance of content, clear technical explanations and reviewer expertise are the most influential factors in evaluating online reviews, while demographic characteristics of reviewers have minimal impact

7. CONCLUSION.

The present study examined how review ambiguity in electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) influences consumer indecision in online shopping. The findings confirm that ambiguous, inconsistent, and unclear online reviews significantly increase perceived uncertainty among consumers. This uncertainty elevates perceived risk, which subsequently leads to trust erosion toward online reviews and sellers. Reduced trust ultimately results in consumer indecision, purchase hesitation, and delay. The empirical results validate the proposed eWOM-induced purchase dilemma model and demonstrate its strong explanatory power in understanding online consumer behavior. Additionally, the study highlights that content

relevance, clarity of explanation, and reviewer expertise are the most critical factors influencing consumers' evaluation of online reviews, whereas reviewer demographics have minimal effect. Overall, the study contributes to the growing literature on eWOM by explaining the psychological mechanism through which review ambiguity leads to purchase dilemma. Future research may extend this study by incorporating moderating variables such as consumer involvement, product type, or digital literacy to better understand boundary conditions of the model. Researchers can also apply Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) for deeper validation of mediation effects. Comparative studies across different e-commerce platforms or countries could provide cross-cultural insights. Longitudinal research may examine how repeated exposure to ambiguous reviews influences long-term trust and loyalty. Additionally, experimental studies could explore how review format, rating systems, or AI-generated reviews impact consumer perception and decision-making

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