An Empirical Study Of Online Social Influence Marketing With Reference To Customer's Product Purchase Decision And Product Recommendation

* *Monika Sharma*
** *Deepshika Kalra*

INTRODUCTION

In recent times, people have started getting influenced by each other -- online, in small groups, through peer pressure, reciprocity or flattery - which has given rise to a whole new form of marketing, called **Social Influence Marketing (SIM).** It is defined as marketing to the network of peers that surround and influence the customer across social platforms like different Social Media (Online & Offline). The rise of SIM has made us realize that the social Web and the mainstream Web are converging and that digital marketers need to deliver better value exchanges to consumers and allow for influence, more directly. Online social influence marketing is practiced using various online social media tools like consumer opinions posted online through blogs, recommendations done by known people or unknown people through online social networks such as 'Orkut', 'Facebook' ,'Twitter' etc. It also includes anonymous consumer reviews sites, branded web sites, online video advertisements (e.g. done though 'Youtube') and online banner advertisements. This paper attempts to determine how much Online Social Influence marketing has been able to influence customer's product purchase decision and whether customers really trust these online social media in terms of peer reviews and other influential sources, which makes them believe these online social media, in order to make a product purchase decision. A chi - square test has been carried to find out the association between customer's purchase decision and the role Online Social Media has played in terms of influencing the customer and determining customer's trust in Online Social Media. The researchers have also investigated whether customers further recommend products to other people using Online Social Media tools.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The following are the objectives of the present study:
❀ To determine whether respondents' get influenced by influencers using Online Social Media, when product purchase decision is concerned.
❀ To obtain the respondents' order of preference, as to which Online Social Media influences them the most for their product purchase decision.
❀ To determine whether respondents' trust other influencers on Online Social Media, when product purchase decision is concerned.
❀ To determine whether respondents' would act as influencers and be willing to recommend products to other people through the use of Online Social Media.

RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

Following hypotheses were used to solve the problem to meet the objectives of the study:
1. H_0: Consumer's product purchase decision is equally influenced by Known friends through Online Social Networks and Unknown people (friendsters) through Online Social Networks.
H_1: Consumer's product purchase decision is not equally influenced by Known friends through Online Social

* *Assistant Professor,* Management Education & Research Institute, 53-54 Institutional Area, Janakpuri, New Delhi-110058. E-mail : ms0580@gmail.com
** *Faculty of Management,* Management Education & Research Institute, 53-54 Institutional Area, Janakpuri, New Delhi-110058. Email : deepshika_ishan@gmail.com

Networks and Unknown people (friendsters) through Online Social Networks.

2. H_0: **Product recommendation given by Known friends of Online Social Networks is equally trusted, as is product recommendation given by Unknown people of Online Social Networks.**

H_1: **Product recommendation given by Known friends of Online Social Networks is not equally trusted, as is product recommendation given by Unknown people of Online Social Networks.**

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In order to understand the present study, some of the important terms associated with Online Social Influence marketing using online social media tools are explained below.

Harvard psychologist Herbert Kelman, 2004, says, **Social influence** occurs when an individual's thoughts or actions are affected by other people. Social influence takes many forms, and can be seen in conformity, socialization, peer pressure, obedience, leadership, persuasion, sales, and marketing. He identified three broad varieties of social influence:

1. **Compliance** is when people appear to agree with others, but actually keep their dissenting opinions private.

2. **Identification** is when people are influenced by someone who is liked and respected, such as a famous celebrity, or a favorite uncle.

3. **Internalization** is when people accept a belief or behavior and agree both publicly and privately.

(Morton Deutsch and Harold Gerard, 1955) believe that there are two psychological needs, which lead people to conform to the expectations of others. These include, firstly, our need to be right (Informational Social Influence) and secondly, our need to be liked (Normative Social Influence). Informational influence is an influence to accept information from another as evidence about reality. Informational influence comes into play when people are uncertain, either because stimuli are ambiguous, or because there is social disagreement. Normative influence is an influence to conform to the positive expectations of others. In terms of Kelman's typology, normative influence leads to public compliance, whereas, informational influence leads to private acceptance. **Influencer marketing** (also **Social Influence Marketing**), is a form of marketing that has emerged from a variety of recent practices and studies, in which, focus is placed on specific key individuals (or types of individuals), rather than the target market as a whole. It identifies the individuals that have influence over potential buyers, and orients marketing activities around these influencers. **Influencers** may be **potential buyers themselves,** or they may be **third parties**. These third parties exist either in the supply chain (retailers, manufacturers, etc.) or may be so-called value-added influencers such as journalists, academics, industry analysts, professional advisers, and so on. Influencer marketing is increasingly being practiced in a commercial context and comprises of four main activities:

❋ Identifying influencers, and ranking them in order of importance;

❋ Marketing to influencers, to increase awareness of the firm within the influencer community;

❋ Marketing through influencers, using influencers, to increase market awareness of the firm amongst target markets. Influencer Marketing is enhanced by a continual evaluation activity that sits alongside the four main activities. Influencer Marketing is not synonymous with word of mouth marketing (WOM), but influence may be transmitted in this manner. Thus, WOM is a core part of the mechanics of Influencer Marketing. Exactly, what is included in Influencer Marketing depends on the context (B2C or B2B), and what the medium of influence transmission is (online or offline, or both). But it is increasingly being accepted that companies are keen to identify and engage with influencers.

USING ONLINE SOCIAL MEDIA TOOLS TO IDENTIFY INFLUENCERS

The first step in Influencer Marketing is to identify influencers. Influencers are specific to discrete market segments, and are used as conduits to the entire target segment. Market research techniques can be used to identify influencers, using pre-defined criteria to determine the extent and type of influence. Keller and Berry proposed five attributes of influencers.

❋ **Activists:** Influencers get involved with their communities, political movements, charities and so on.

❋ **Connected:** Influencers have large social networks.

Table 1(a) : Old Marketing Versus New Marketing

Components	Old Marketing	New Marketing
Marketing mindset	Use one-way, one-sided communication to tell a brand story.	Nurture dialogue and relationships; be more transparent, earn trust, build credibility.
Brand equity	Brand recall is holy grail.	Brand value is determined by customers: How likely are customers to highly recommend the good or service?
Segmentation	Group customers by demographics.	Group customers by behavior, attitudes, and interests-what's important to them.
Targeting	Target by demographics, especially for media buying.	Target according to customer behavior.
Communication	Broadcast style: create and push message out for customers to absorb.	Digital environment for interactive communication through search and query, customer comments, personal reviews, or dialogue.
Content	Professional content created and controlled by marketers.	Mix of professional and user-generated content, increasingly visual.
Virality	A nice feature, but popularity too often driven by flashy presentation rather than content.	Virality based on solid content about remarkable products or features that will get people talking and forwarding e-mail.
Reviews	The experts weigh in.	Users review and vote on everything.
Advertiser/ Publisher role	Publisher establishes channel and controls. Content to gather an audience for the advertisers who sponsor channels or programs.	Build relationships by sponsoring (not controlling). Content and interaction when, where, and how customers want it.
Strategy	Top-down strategy imposed by senior management drives tactics.	Bottom-up strategy builds on winning ideas culled from constant testing and customer input.
Hierarchy	Information is organized into channels, folders, and categories to suit advertisers.	Information is available on demand by keyword, to suit users.
Payment	Cost per Thousand (CPM): Emphasis on cost; Advertisers buy with the idea that share of voice = Share of mind = Share of market.	Return on Investment (ROI): Invest in marketing for future growth and profitability based on measurable return.

❀ **Impact:** Influencers are looked up to and are trusted by others.

❀ **Active Minds:** Influencers have multiple and diverse interests.

❀ **Trendsetters:** Influencers tend to be early adopters (or leavers) in markets.

Various online social media tools, including web services, can be used to crawl social media sites for users that exert influence in their respective communities. The social influence marketing firm then asks those influencers to try client products/services and discuss them on their respective social networks.

❀**Social Media & Its Forms: (Godes, David, and Dina Mayzlin, 2004)** describe Social media, or consumer-generated media or consumer-generated content as a term that's used to describe any kind of text, image, audio, or video clip that is uploaded to the Internet by ordinary people, and can be easily shared and located by other people. Social media is different from the articles, programs and broadcasts created by professional journalists, photographers, broadcasting networks, or by authority figures and experts that have a special privilege or position that makes it more likely that they will have an automatic audience. Social media is realized on the Internet in a wide range of formats. Written or textual forms of social media are typically found on blogs, web forums, email discussion lists, message boards, and consumer reviews and complaint sites; photographs are displayed as images on Flickr or other image sharing sites; audio broadcasts are created as podcasts; and consumers who create video clips can upload them on YouTube, or other video sharing sites. Social media have been modernized to reach consumers through the internet. Social media have become appealing to big and small businesses. Credible brands are utilizing social media to reach customers and to build or maintain reputation. As social media continues to grow, the ability to reach more consumers globally has also increased.**Larry Weber (2007)** believes that the social web is a new world of unpaid media created by individuals or enterprises on the Web. It has started playing a major role in brand promotion and influencing customer's thinking about making a purchase decision .These new strategies, which have the capacity to change public opinion every hour-

if not every minute include:

❀ **Reputation Aggregators** are search engines such as Google, Yahoo, Ask, and Microsoft's new Live. They aggregate sites with the best product or service to offer and usually put things in order of reputation.

❀ **Blogs** (a contraction of *web logs*) are online journals, where people can post ideas, images, and links to other web lasts or sites.

❀ **E-communities** are generally advertising supported, although some are free; they focus on professional media such as trade magazines. Examples include BusinessWeek.com, SmartMoney.com, and FastCompany.com.

❀ **Social Networks** are places where people with a common interest or concern come together to meet people with similar interests, express themselves, and vent.

TRENDS IN SOCIAL INFLUENCE MARKETING

As Social Influence Marketing (SIM) becomes more mature in coming years, differentiating between good and bad SIM is getting easier. In next few years, every campaign, every marketing effort and even every digital business transformation activity (where digital is used to transform core business processes) will need a social influence component. It will be a year in which companies realize that social influence must be harnessed strategically to transform a company's brands, its relationships with their customers -- and their businesses too. With those broad themes as a guide, some upcoming trends expected to look for in near future for SIM are:

1) Social Media Usage Will Result In More Influence: As social media adoption climbs exponentially, so too will the influence - conversations in a social context will have brand affinity and will affect purchasing decisions. Don't try to exert pressure in practicing social influence marketing. Organizations should allow the online social community to shape and evolve their brand. Marketing efforts should be focused not only to individual customers, but also to the entire community of customers. Technology has and will play a major role is getting customers closer to the companies. Participating in a conversation online, sharing an opinion, and influencing a purchasing decision explicitly or implicitly are becoming second nature for more and more consumers. The only thing that will prevent these messages from spreading is that a lot of this influence happens in small communities within the boundaries of the social networks and ,therefore, goes unobserved. Social network analysis vendors will help us peek into the boundaries and as a result, marketers will pay more attention to Social Influence Marketing.

2) The Focus Will Shift To Influencers: There will be an attempt to identify who are these people that influence your customers and how does their influence actually work? We haven't known how to reach these people and these have been typically ignored. The effort is to find out who these key, social and peer influencers are, as they continue to get most attention. This thought will come into sharper focus, as reaching the influencers gets easier via the social graph and the plethora of technology vendors that make targeting easier. Different influencers will matter at different stages of the marketing funnel, too. For example, at the point-of-purchase, friends and family may matter the most in determining what a consumer buys, while at the awareness stage, key influencers, like the bloggers, carry more weight. A definite way would be found out to put a valuation on each consumer's potential influence for specific product categories .Thus, **relationships will be and are the focus, and platforms are the means** by which social influencers will drive the sales.

3) Bottom - Up Branding Will Experience Growth : Most brand managers are used to defining their brands in relative isolation of the marketplace -- or they do extensive customer research and see it as their jobs alone to define the brand or the manifestation of the brand in different forms. That's going to change as consumers define the brands by the sheer volume of their opinions. They'll be shaping the brands more than the brands will be shaping them. As a result, in order for them to be remembered, brands will be forced to deliver much stronger value propositions to their customers. Cute advertising won't be enough, as the focus shifts to value exchanges. If you're a brand manager, you can either fight this, or treat it as an opportunity to take your career in a different direction.

4) The Portable Social Graph Will Fuel Marketing Innovation: Arguably; the most successful manifestations of the social graph we've seen so far are in the news feeds and activity streams that reside on social platforms like Orkut, Facebook and Twitter. New innovations are expected to rise, which will harness the social graph imaginatively, especially at the awareness and consideration stages of the marketing funnel. The early implementations of Facebook Connect, which extends users' connections with their Facebook friends to other sites, barely utilizes the surface of

what's possible. For example, imagine an online social network user's personal profile being used for targeting content and advertising. And imagine this happening across the Web, and not just on the social network, where the profile resides.

5) Not Just Friends, But Friendsters, Will Start To Matter: There have been a lot of debates about whether a person's *"real"* friends matter in a social graph -- call it the tension between friends and friendsters. In coming years, we're going to realize that loose ties (like the friendsters of yours on Facebook) are as valuable as your strong ties (close friends) because they're the ones that bring new ideas into your world and share your opinions with people who are further removed from you. You'll be less conflicted about them and you'll share more of your life with them.

6) Social Influence Research Will Become More Important Than Social Measurement: This will be possible when we do not focus on measurement, but on meaning. To think in terms of social as a channel that should be measured like TV, print, radio or digital is missing the point. Rather, the greatest value in social for marketers is going to be in the real-time insights that it provides. We call this Social Influence Research and it is going to drive marketing campaigns, product development and customer service programs. There's going to be an evolution from measuring sentiment to understanding opinion and synchronizing it with the Net Promoter scores. This is because marketers care about opinion much more than they do about sentiment.

7) Marketers Will Organize Around Social Influence Marketing: In today's organizations, SIM is everyone's stepchild. It is part public relations, part direct response, part brand marketing, part customer intelligence and part sales support, just to name a few categories. That will change in coming years, as marketing organizations discover the benefits in approaching it holistically. Budgets will be put behind SIM, and it will be treated as the third dimension of marketing with its own team, objectives and initiatives. This will also force corporations to rethink how they are organized, including agencies, which will need to organize around it. Niche social media consulting firms will find it harder to compete as SIM goes mainstream.

8) The Intranet Will Join The Web: By virtue of buying media for our clients, building massive Web sites and designing intranets too, we have a unique perspective on all things digital. And something we've learned in the last few years is that the boundaries between the corporate Web site and the intranet are blurring. An organization's employees want to collaborate and share knowledge with peers who work outside an organization too. An organization's intranet is going to need to encourage and allow for that kind of collaboration- if one wants to be competitive in this economic environment with fewer employees having to do more work. The best ideas can come from anywhere and the best people will look for others like them to collaborate with. They may be in your company -- but they may not be. If they aren't, top management should give employees the tools to reach other people.

9) An Organization's CEO Will Get On Social Network Sites : It's finally going to happen this year -- CEOs are going to succumb to the pressure from employees and join Facebook, or at the very least, LinkedIn. If he (or she) is smart, he'll be on a blogging or micro-blogging service too, sharing his perspective in an authentic fashion. Why does this matter? Because by doing this, he is going to finally realize that social is not a fad; it is fundamentally changing how we relate and interact with each other and with brands online. He is going to want to get on board. It also means that, if you're not already, you had better get on board yourself, or you'll be left behind.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

It was decided that a study using primary data would be appropriate to investigate the objectives. The instrument used to collect the data was a questionnaire and the said study was conducted during the **period of April to June 2010.**

❋ **The Study:** The present study comprises of an empirical investigation in which an attempt has been made to determine the existing scenario of Social Influence marketing on respondents (internet users) in terms of the affect it has on their product purchase behavior & judge the reliability of these online social media's for product recommendation either done through known or unknown people.

❋ **Population:** Universe of this research were the people who are internet users of Delhi.

❋ **The Sample:** Sample size comprising of 200 voluntary respondents were chosen using Stratified random sampling method. The respondents included post- graduate students, people from academia & industry. Respondents were in the age group of 18-25 years and 25 -60 years.

❈ **Tools for Data Collection:** After reviewing relevant literature on the subject, a structured questionnaire was developed. The questionnaire was implemented on a 5 point Likert scale (1= Strongly agree & 5= Strongly disagree). All the filled up questionnaires were selected for statistical analysis. The questions incomplete in any respect were rejected at this stage & all valid responses were scored & tabulated.

❈**Techniques Used For Data Analysis :** For the purpose of testing the hypotheses, the non-parametric test analysis technique such as Chi-Square test (also **chi-Squared** or χ^2 **test**), which is an important non-parametric test was used as a test of independence in this case. It enables us to explain whether or not two attributes are associated. And other descriptive statistics such as frequency and percentage analysis and cross tabulation were also used.

## ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Results were tabulated and analyzed by using appropriate statistical techniques mentioned in the research methodology. The results from the statistical analysis and the objective-wise analysis of the study are present in this section. All the numerical results of the percentage analysis were rounded off.

❈**Respondents' Influenced By Influencers Using Online Social Media (Social Networks) For Products Purchase Decision :** Data to determine whether respondents' get influenced or not by influencers, using Online Social Media regarding products purchase decision, was captured and analyzed using percentage analysis and Chi-Square test with the following null and alternative hypotheses:

1. H_0: **Consumer's product purchase decision is equally influenced by Known friends through Online Social Networks and Unknown people (friendsters) through Online Social Networks.**
H_1: **Consumer's product purchase decision is not equally influenced by Known friends through Online Social Networks and Unknown people (friendsters) through Online Social Networks.**

<p align="center">Figure 1 : Consumer Sentiments On Key Values Of Online Social Media</p>
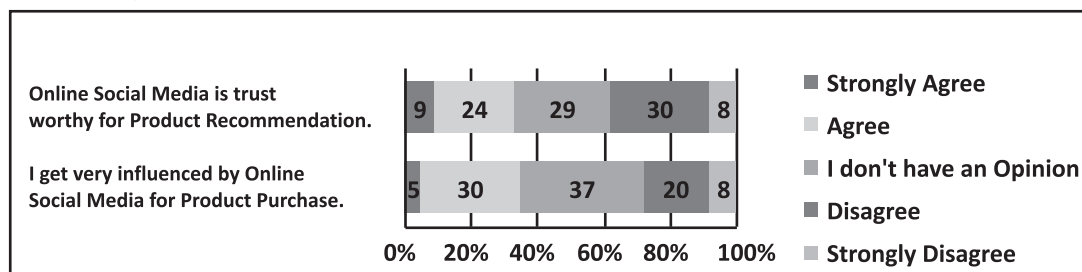
Source: Primary

<p align="center">Table 1(b): Cross Tabulation: Influence Of Online Known Friends Vs. Influence Of Online Unknown People, Regarding Product Purchase Decision Through Social Networks</p>

Influence of Online Known Friends	Influence of Online Unknown People					
		Excellent	Very Good	Good	Fair	Poor	Total
	Excellent	0	0	8	8	16	**32**
	Very Good	0	0	16	28	8	**52**
	Good	0	0	8	36	32	**76**
	Fair	0	0	4	8	20	**32**
	Poor	0	0	0	0	8	**8**
	Total	**0**	**0**	**36**	**80**	**84**	**200**
	Chi- Square(Significance at 5% Level) = 36.6						

Degree of Freedom   = **(C-1) (R-1)**, **C** - No. of columns, **R**- No. of rows
= (5-1) (5-1), 4*4=16

❈**Interpretation:** Chi-Square result from Table 1(b) indicates that the calculated value of hypotheses (36.6) is greater than the table value (26.6) given at 5% level of significance with 16 as degrees of freedom. Hence, ***H_0 is rejected and***

H₁ is accepted at 5% level of significance. Thus, the respondents do not get equally influenced by Known friends through Online Social Networks and Unknown people through Online Social Networks.

❋**Respondents' Trust On Other Influencers Using Online Social Media (Social Networks) For Product Recommendation :** Data to determine whether respondents' trust other influencers using Online Social Media like Social Networks when product recommendation is done, was captured and analyzed using percentage analysis and Chi-Square test with the following null and alternative hypotheses.

1. H_0: **Product recommendation given by Known friends of Online Social Networks is equally trusted, as is product recommendation given by Unknown people of Online Social Networks.**

H_1: **Product recommendation given by Known friends of Online Social Networks is not equally trusted, as is product recommendation given by Unknown people of Online Social Networks.**

Table 2: Cross Tabulation: Trust On Online Known Friends Vs. Trust On Online Unknown People, Regarding Product Recommendation Through Social Network

		Trust on Online Unknown People					
		Trust Completely	Trust Somewhat	Can't say	Don't trust much	Don't trust at all	Total
Trust On Online Known	Trust Completely	4	4	0	0	20	28
	Trust Somewhat	4	0	40	60	20	124
	Can't say	0	4	8	24	0	36
	Don't trust much	0	0	0	8	4	12
	Don't trust at all	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Total	8	8	48	92	44	200
	Chi- Square(Significance at 5% Level) = 61.4						

❋**Interpretation:** Chi-Square result from Table 2 indicates that the calculated value of hypotheses (61.4) is

Figure 2 : Influence On Customer's Product Purchase Decision By Different Online Social Media
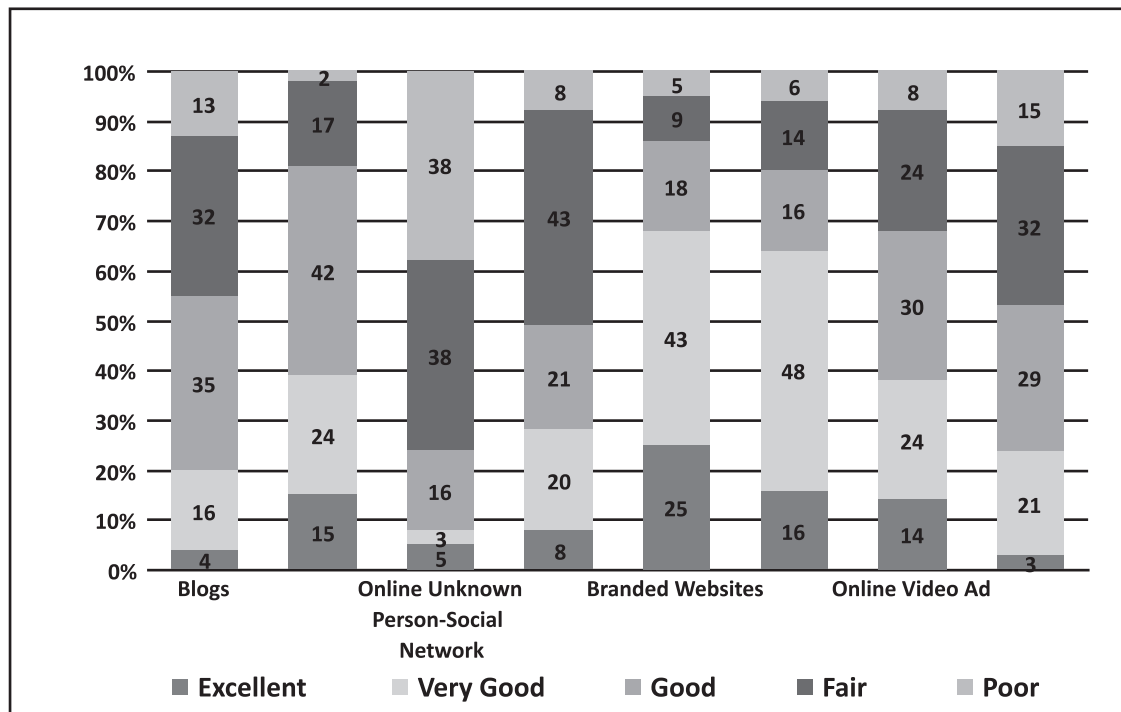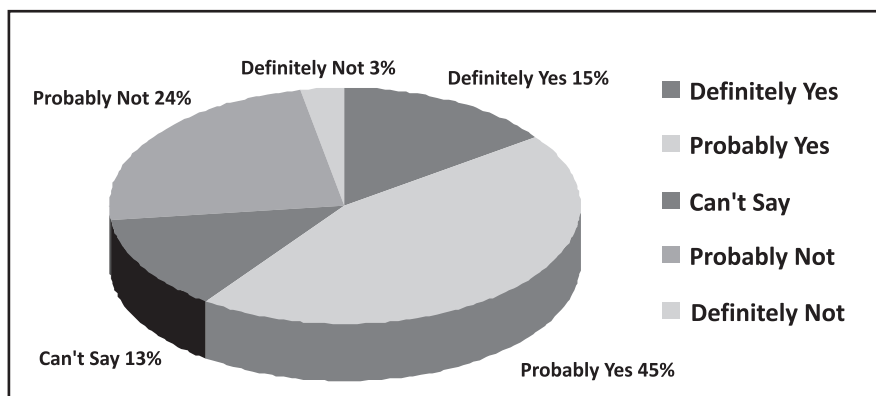

Source: Primary

significantly greater than the table value (26.6) given at 5% level of significance, with 16 as degrees of freedom. Hence, *H₀ is rejected and H₁ is accepted* at 5% level of significance. Thus, the respondents do not equally trust product recommendation done by Known friends and Unknown people through Online Social media (Social Networks).

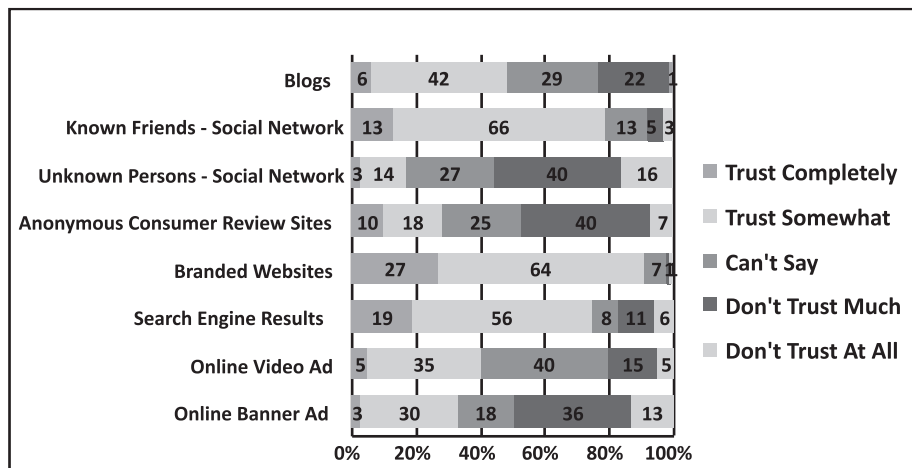**Figure 3 : Customer's Trust Level on Online Social Media for Different Products**
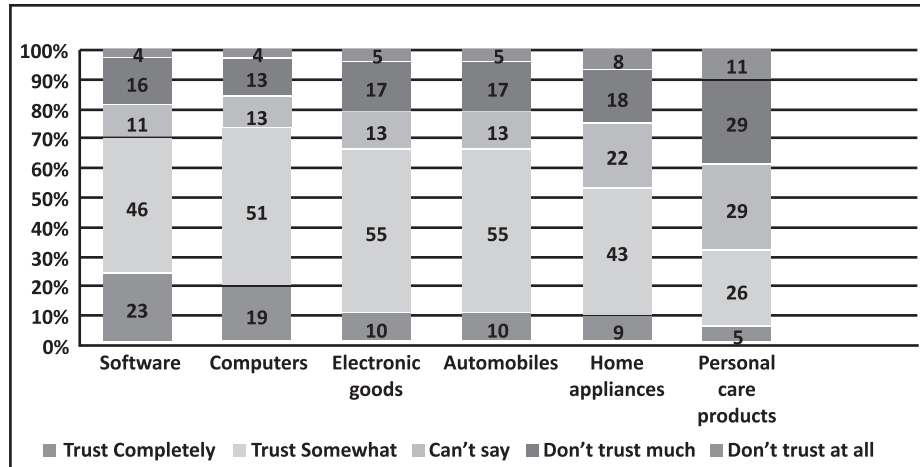
Source: Primary

Figure 4 : Customer's Perception About Doing Product Recommendation Using Online Social Media

Source: Primary

Figure 5 : Customer's Trust Level On Different Online Social Media w.r.t Product Recommendation

Source: Primary

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

❋ **Hypotheses One** clearly indicates that the respondents (customers) do not get equally influenced by Known friends through Online Social Networks and Unknown people through Online Social Networks. By percentage analysis, it was also found that influence of Known friends (to purchase a product through Online Social Networks), is better as compared to influence of Unknown people on Online Social Networks.

❋ **Hypotheses Two** clearly indicates that the respondents (customers) do not equally trust product recommendation given by Known friends and Unknown people through Online Social media type- (Social Networks).By percentage analysis, it was also found that customers trust known friends more on Online Social Networks, when product recommendation is given by them as compared to recommendation given by Unknown people on Online Social Networks.

❋ In general, it was seen through percentage analysis that Online Social Media type- Branded websites have been able to create an excellent influence with regards to product purchase decision with highest score of 25% in this category, over all other Online Social Media.

❋ Through percentage analysis, the researchers also found that Online Social Media type- Search engine results, have been able to influence customers under the category of *"Very good influence"* with regards to product purchase decision with the highest score of 48 % over all other Online Social Media.

❋ Online Known friends through Social Networks have been able to influence customers under the category of *"Good Influence"* with regards to product purchase decision with the highest score of 42%.

❋ It was also seen that customers completely trust Branded Websites, (an Online Social Media type) with regards to product recommendation, having the highest score of 27%.

❋ Known friends through Online Social networks had been able to generate considerable trust for product recommendation with the highest score of 66% under the category of *"Trust Somewhat"*. Branded websites came next with a second highest score of 64%, and Search Engine results earned the third highest score of 56%.

❋ It was also observed that the customer's perception about recommending a product through Online Social Media has been considerable high. 15% customers agreed to definitely recommend the product using Online Social Media, 45% customers agreed to probably recommend, 13% customers did not have an opinion on this, 24% would probably not recommend a product using Online Social Media, and 3% customers said that they would definitely not recommend a product using Online Social Media.

❋ Regarding specific categories of products, which customers would recommend using Online Social Media, it was noticed that software products gain the highest score of 30% , which would definitely be recommended through Online Social Media by customers. Subsequently, computers and automobiles share the next position with a score of 20% for definite recommendation by customers using Online Social Media, followed by electronic goods with a score of 19%.

❋ Personal care products and home appliances recorded the least appeal in terms of being recommended online with respective low scores of 6% and 9%.

CONCLUSIONS

The following conclusion can be drawn from the study:

❋ The survey shows that consumer's influence and trust in Online Social media is on the rise.

❋ Branded websites are the most trusted Online Social media for product recommendation followed by Search Engine results.

❋ Consumers continue to trust more, the opinions of other consumers (online) whom they know, rather than trusting opinions of consumers whom they don't know.

❋ In addition to trust, consumer perceptions on the value of influence of Online Social Media and product recommendation through Online Social Media are generally positive. Approximately, 30% of the consumers in Delhi acknowledged a very good influence of Online Social Media on product purchase decision of consumers and 24% of the consumers agreed that Online Social Media is extremely trustworthy for product recommendation.

❋ Variations in consumer trust for product recommendation and influence on product purchase decision through Online Social Media have implications in the best way to engage consumers in a fragmented media world.

❀ What's more, understanding the value that consumers see through Social Influence Marketing on product purchase decision- and the levels of engagement they feel-can help marketers to best appeal to the marketing interests of their audience. This paper outlines just some of the variations of Online Social Influence marketing on consumer trust, influence and perceptions about Online Social Media in consumer's product purchase decision and product recommendation.

SCOPE FOR FUTURE RESEARCH
The present study is limited to a particular geographic region. Therefore, the authors suggest that the scope of this study can be enhanced in the future from regional level to the national level and more consumers from different demographic profiles can be involved.

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