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Opinion: The online teens and what it means for marketers

The co-authors list down why online word-of-mouth is of significant importance while targeting this age group

by Anubhav Mishra & Sridhar Samu

Pooja, a 16-year-old teenager, from Pune, can't live without her smartphone. The very first thing she does in the morning, is to check the messages on WhatsApp, and interestingly, this is the last thing she does before she goes to bed. The mobile is her new digital companion which she uses to talk to her friends to discuss and decide what to buy, where to eat, and what's trending! The online world is the new home for today's 'always online' teenagers. How can marketers reach customers like Pooja in this digital age?

A lot of content on product experience is created or shared by teens on digital platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter and Instagram. For example, another teenager Riya, a movie buff always shares her views about the latest movies she watches on Facebook. And many of her friends trust her recommendation more than the reviews published in newspapers. This online information acts as an extension of the traditional word-of-mouth, where people share information with each other fact-to-face. The technology enables new online word-of-mouth (OWOM) where anyone can share his or her views with others on digital mediums. A very common example is the ratings and reviews available on e-commerce websites like Amazon or Flipkart.

The internet, social media and instant messaging apps are the new tools and toys in the hands of teens. Consider a group of teenagers who want to spend some fun time together on a Friday evening. A typical process will be like this, first the idea to have a get together is floated on WhatsApp, and then others share their views and suggest few places like bowling alley and restaurant for dinner. Then, online ratings and reviews may be cross-checked to reach the final choice. A Google search of the place will reveal the contact number of the place which shall be booked in advance. So, we notice an interesting opportunity to understand how online WOM influences teenager's decision making process?

To gain insights into teenagers' online WOM behavior, we (along with Dr. Satish SM, Indian Institute of Management Trichy, Dr. MoutusyMaity, Indian Institute of Management Lucknow) conducted our research and collected data from 800 teenagers (age group 12-18) from South and North India. A majority of the respondents reported having a Facebook

profile and email account, and they were regular users of messaging apps on phones. Interestingly, female teenagers reported higher usage of messaging apps than males, but a less percentage of the females created a profile on Facebook.

We speculate this could be to avoid online cyber bullying or harassment by others. Or, it could be to avoid conflicts with parents who may not have favourable views about online presence. So, this may encourage female teens to use private messaging apps to continue the communication and discussion about any topic with their friends (avoiding public scrutiny).

The results show that teenagers spend more time as they grow older. Sometimes, parents give phones to their kids as a safety mechanism, when teens start to venture out on their own with friends or peers. Also, the schools start giving assignments and projects in higher classes which encourages students to search on the Internet (e.g., project on green technologies). As teens spend more time online, they encounter more online WOM in terms of ads, ratings, reviews and recommendations. This promotes mirror effect, where teens start doing the same – like posting their reviews when they buy something online and use it.

Another important factor that influences the online WOM, is the effect of peer influence. Teenagers create and take pride in being part of a group. We can see such trends in schools. The peers in the group have strong influence on decision making. Like in earlier example, if the group leader have strong preference about a particular place, he or she can persuade others to meet at preferred place. Though, we find some dissimilarity based on gender. In India, the society is still predominantly dominated by males. This could explain our results where male teenagers reported to be strongly affected by group pressure. Whereas, female teens did not display such adherence to group norms. Female teens discuss and listen to others, but used relatively more independent thinking to take a decision. One can probably see similar behavior on Facebook. Specially male teens share the content or post comments on content posted by their friends, whereas female teens are very selective in sharing or posting comments. Therefore, we suggest that marketers who are interested in the teen segment, to have gender-based strategies and a strong online presence to catch them young!

(The piece has been co-written by Anubhav Mishra, assistant professor – marketing, Indian Institute of Management Ranchi and Sridhar Samu, senior associate professor – marketing, Great Lakes Institute of Management Chennai)

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