THE EFFECT OF EWOM ON PURCHASE INTENTION: EVIDENCE FROM E-COMMERCE SITES

AĞIZDAN AĞIZA İLETİŞİMİN SATIN ALMA NİYETİNE ETKİSİ: E-TİCARET SİTELERİ ÜZERİNE BİR ARAŞTIRMA

Ahmet DURMAZ[*]**, Mehmet YÜKSEL**[**]

[*]   National Defence University, Barbaros Naval Science and Engineering Institute, adurmaz@dho.edu.tr

[**] National Defence University, Barbaros Naval Science and Engineering Institute, myuksel@dho.edu.tr

ABSTRACT

Everyday more companies prefer direct marketing with direct marketing channels, creating exclusive relationship between producer and consumer. Often this advantage comes with a risk/opportunity: electronic word of mouth (eWOM). Whether this cost can be turned into a profit or not, it falls to firms to pay proper heed to these words coming from communities. Those words are also the main concept of our study, showing the importance of eWOM on purchasing intentions. To accomplish this goal, an online research was done targeting the consumer population frequently uses leading e-commerce sites. An online survey applied to the target population in order to measure the antecedents of eWOM and its relationship between purchase intention. The results are greatly coherent with theoretical model and previous studies. According to results, consumers pay great attention to strength, rating and consistency of recommendations while evaluating the review credibility of the eWOM. Further, credible arguments regarding the products affect consumers' purchasing intentions in positive way.

Keywords: *Electronic word of mouth, Credibility, Rating, Consistency, Argument Strength, Purchase Intention.*

Jel Codes: *M31, A13*

ÖZ

Her geçen gün daha fazla şirket doğrudan pazarlama araçlarını kullanarak doğrudan pazarlamayı tercih etmekte, tüketici ve üretici arasında özel ilişkiler kurmaktadır. Bu uygulama şirketlere çeşitli faydalar sağlarken, yönetilmesi gereken bir risk/fırsatı da beraberinde getirmektedir: Elektronik ağızdan ağıza iletişim (ewom). Bu risk/fırsatı kâra dönüştürülmesi, bu topluluklardan gelen cümlelere dikkat eden işletmelerin sorumluluğundadır. Bahsekonu kelimeler aynı zamanda çalışmamızın temelini oluşturmakta, ewom'un satın alma niyetindeki önemini göstermektedir. Bu hedefi yakalayabilmek için, e-ticaret sitelerini sıkça kullanan hedef nüfüs üzerine online bir araştırma yapılmıştır. Ewom'un öncüllerini ve satınalma niyeti ile arasındaki ilişkiyi ölçmek için hedef nüfüsa online bir anket uygulanmıştır. Sonuçlar, konsept modelimizle ve önceki çalışmalarla büyük ölçüde uyumludur. Sonuçlara göre tüketiciler ewom'un itibarını değerlendirirken bahsekonu yorumların gücüne, değerlendirme notuna ve tutarlılığına büyük ölçüde dikkat etmektedir. Ayrıca tüketicilerin, itibarı olduğunu düşündükleri yorumlar tarafından, bahsekonu ürünler hakkındaki satın alma niyetlerinin müspet yönde etkilendiği tespit edilmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Ağızdan Ağıza İletişim, Güvenilirlik, Derecelendirme, Tutarlılık, Argüman Gücü, Satın Alma Niyeti.*

Jel Kodları: *M31, A13*

1. INTRODUCTION

The internet has become the new way of life for many people to get their news, book reservations, acquire information for school or job and especially do research. Recommendations are important sources for those people who intrigued by online shopping (Ho and Dempsey, 2010:1000).

Online consumer reviews, a type of product information that produced by users based on personal experience, can be easily influenced by users' personal preferences and their usage patterns. Whether online consumer reviews varies from short to long or from subjective to objective, these reviews have two main roles: providing information about the product/service and making positive or negative recommendations for

the potential buyers. Experienced users write consumer-oriented product/service information, including the evaluations of the advantages and disadvantages of the product/services by posting reiews on e-commerce sites. These personal opinions and experiences leave substantial effect on readers in evaluating products and making final purchase decisions (Lu, Chang and Chang, 2014:259).

Although the rapid growth of e-commerce interactions and the exponentially increasing number of consumers who use interactive media (social media, communities, complaint websites etc.), literature doesn't provide sufficient data on how consumers make purchase decisions during online shopping (Haubl and Trifts, 2000:4). As a result of growing popularity of

e-commerce, the concept of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) emerged in marketing literature (Gauri, Bhatnagar and Rao, 2008:89). Word-of-mouth communication (WOM) is a notion that defines the information sharing between consumers about products and services. Development of network technologies and their significantly easy usage have transformed the conventional face-to-face WOM into network-mediated WOM (eWOM). Consumers can write their product experiences and read other consumers' product evaluations on different platforms such as retailers' websites, brand community, complaint websites, consumer blogs and other online platforms, consequently giving way to eWOM (Lee and Koo, 2012:1974).

EWOM communications have unprecedented scalability and speed of spreading. Especially compared to positive eWOM, negative eWOM also has a strong impact on customers' purchase decisions. It is obviously clear that online complaint messages against an enterprise may be rapidly go viral and become a deterrent to existent consumers that may cause damage to the enterprise's reputation (Chang and Wu, 2014:206). Many firms attempt to find incentives to create purchasing intentions for products and services in their customers and potentional customers. In this context, eWOM emerges as either incentive or deterrent for those purchase intentions, especially for e-commerce sites (Fu, Bin, Xie, Liuli and Yu, 2011:38).

In pursuit of figuring out how eWOM effects consumers in making their purchase decisions, this paper utilizes an empirical experiment to measure the direction and strength of this effect. In order to test this focal effect, a research was conducted on the consumers who frequently uses leading e-commerce sites. Literature research led us to several antecedents and they were used as independent variables in defining eWOM, which will be explained in following section. Additionally, detailed causal effects of proposed hypothesis are explained. In third section of this paper, information on the methodology and sampling procedures of research is given. Fourth section consists of results of the structural equation modelling. This study concluded with discussions made on the results derived from the statistical analysis according to the literature.

2. THEROTICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

Poring over the literature, yielded some evidence about the antecedents of electronic word-of-mouth. Mainly focusing on credibility, many authors regard strength, rating and consistency dimensions of e-wom seriously. Thereby, four hypotheses are proposed in this paper and explained in the following passages.

Recommendation rating can be defined as the overall rating given by previous users on a product or service.

The online community forums allow users to evaluate the products or services by giving a high or low rating score according to their perception on the items. High rating indicates that other customers are agreed or satisfied with the product, whereas low rating means a negative reaction to disgruntlement (Cheung, Luo, Sia and Chen, 2009:18). According to Lis (2013:130-132), high recommendation ratings influence customers positively about the review credibility. Price and Hersh (1999:912) are also propose that if the recommendation rating is high, perceived eWOM review credibility will be high too. If numerous users leave a positive rating to an eWOM message, it means that the majority accept and believe the content of the message and that increases the credibility of the comment (Fang, 2014:75).

H1: Recommendation rating has a positive effect on Perceived eWOM Review Credibility.

Argument is a piece of information that is appropriate to determining the true merits of the position taken (Petty, Priester and Brinol, 2002:176). Argument strength is related with the quality of the review information. It is the extent to which an argument in a certain review evaluated by consumer is as persuasive or valid in supporting its position. Previous studies shows that argument strength has a direct effect on customers, especially in online environments. If customer comments are perceived to be valid arguments, potential customers will develop a positive attitude towards that comment and consider it as a credible information source or vice versa (Cheung et al., 2009:15). Even though consumers have tendency to be convinced during purchasing, they need an incentive to fulfill this process. Park, Levine, Westerman, Orfgen and Foregger (2007:83) propose this enticement as *argument strength.* High argument strength alters consumers attitude positively about credibility of that particular eWOM review (Park et al., 2007:83). Previous research has proven the effect of argument strength on review credibility in online communication contexts. It is believed that readers judge the credibility of online recommendations based on the argument strength of the eWOM message (Cheung et al., 2009:15).

H2: Higher Argument Strength has positive effect on Perceived eWOM Review Credibility.

If certain ewom recommendations are coherent with other customers' experiences regarding the relevant product or service, these recommendations have consistency (Cheung et al., 2009:33). In online consumer discussion forums, the reviews are usually submitted by numerous experienced customers. Consumers who plan to buy product or services from online web sites acquire opinions from these forums and compare the consistency between the recommendations. If the recommendations are consistent with the opinions of other forum users, the customer is likely to rate the review credibility of this

recommendation more highly, because people prone to follow normative opinions (Zhang and Watts, 2004:99-100).

H3: Recomandation Consistency positively affects the Perceived eWOM Review Credibility.

Today, most of the consumers use internet to search products or services whether they buy immediately on the website or later in-store. During the search process, consumers consider credible opinions of other consumers than sellers or experts opinions. Therefore, consumers search sources that have high credible information. Purchase intention is defined as

willingness to purchase a product in the future (Sher and Lee, 2009:138-140; Xia and Bechwati, 2008:5-6) and during this willingness period, a credible information is very precious for consumers. Hence, review credibility which is formed with consumer comments, affect the purchase intention of potential customer (Yaylı and Bayram, 2012:58-60). Lafferty and Goldsmith (1999:109) also provide similar evidence between the review credibility purchase intention.

H4: Perceived eWOM Review Credibility has positive effect on Purchase Intention.

Figure 1: Conceptual Model
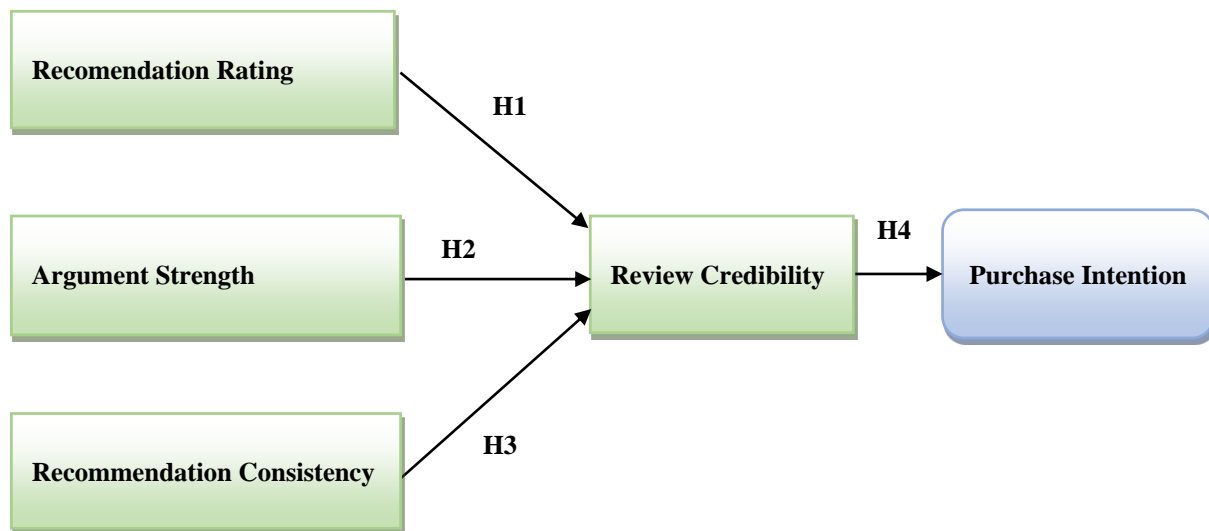
3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Sample and Data Collection

In order to target e-commerce site users in Turkey, a web-based survey was utilized on the designated sample. Online surveys have several superiorities over paper-based equals. First, the sample is not restricted to a single or local geographical location at online surveys; second, online surveys are cheaper and the last advantage is about faster participant responses (Yoo, Sanders and Moon, 2013:673). Target population of this research consists of personas who visit or make purchase from e-commerce sites few times a year. Hence, customers of three leading e-commerce companies were targeted and requested to respond the survey. The online review systems of these websites were used to gather the desired data. Convenience sampling method was used during the collection of data. Responders were requested to input relevant demographic data, then answered totally 20 questions (Table 1) according to 5-likert scale ranging from, "1-

strongly disagree to 5-strongly agree". 330 responses were gathered in total. According to Hair et. al (2010:635), the sample size has to be higher than 100 with five or less variables for structural equation modeling. So the research has a highly acceptable sample size.

3.2. Measures

Following the implications from literature, we formed structural equation (Figure 1) in order to reveal the effects of perceived review credibility on the purchase intentions of the e-commerce users. The measures used in questionnaire were compiled from different references, shown in Table 1. *Argument strength*, *recommendation rating* and *recommendation consistency* scales were taken from Cheung et.al (2009:21); *Perceived eWOM Review Credibility* scale was adapted from Cheung et.al. (2009:21) and Qiu et al. (2012:642) and *Purchase Intention* was adapted from the studies of Dodds et al. (1991318) and Lu et al. (2014:265).

Table 1: Measures and Items

Construct and Measurement Item	Reference
Argument Strength $\overline{\text{X}}$=4,01 σ=0,84	Cheung et al. 2009
Review arguments are convincing.	
Review arguments are strong.	
Review arguments are persuasive.	
Review arguments are good.	
Recommendation Rating $\overline{\text{X}}$=3,97 σ=0,85	Cheung et al. 2009
Based on review rating, review was found to be favorable by other audiences.	
Based on review rating, review is highly rated by other audiences.	
Based on review rating, review is good.	
Recommendation Consistency $\overline{\text{X}}$=4,20 σ=0,81	Cheung et al. 2009
I think reviews are consistent with other reviews.	
I think reviews are similar to other reviews.	
I think reviews contradict with each other.(R)	
Perceived eWOM Review Credibility $\overline{\text{X}}$=4,19 σ=0,74	Cheung et al. 2009 Qiu et al. 2012
I think review is factual.	
I think review is accurate.	
I think review is credible.	
In general, I think the consumer review I read about the product is trustworthy.	
In general, I think the consumer review I read about the product is reliable.	
Purchase Intention $\overline{\text{X}}$=3,93 σ=0,88	Dodds et al. (1991) Lu et al. (2014)
If i were going to buy this product, I would consider the ratings regarding this product.	
At the ratings shown, I would consider buying this product.	
It is possible that I would buy this product.	
If I am in need, I would buy this (product).	
Likelihood of purchasing this product is high.	

3.3. Non-Response Bias

Non-response bias occurs when participants' responses significantly differ from non-respondents (Menachemi, 2010:5). In order to test whether non-response bias present, t-test was conducted between the early and late respondents with regard to the answers they give to the questionnaire. Early respondents were designated from the first 50 participants and late respondents from the last 50 participants. We encountered no trace of significant difference between the early and late respondents. Thus, the research does not have response bias problem (Lages, Jap and Griffith, 2008:312).

3.4. Common Method Variance

All measures are gathered from same source, thus testing the common method variance was compulsory. Common Method Variance (CMV) refers to the amount of false covariance shared among variables because of the common method used in data collection (Malhotra, Kim and Patil, 2006:1865). Measurement errors might occur if common method variance is not tested. This can threaten the validity of the conclusions and produce a false explanation for the observed correlation (Podsakoff, Mackenzie, Lee and Podsakoff, 2003:879). In this study, correlational marker technique is used in order to assess the common method variance

(Lindell and Whitney, 2001:116-118). Technique measures the partial correlation between marked variable and the others. When partial correlation removed observed correlation might alter. If so, researcher can conclude that common method variance is present. The results show no alteration of observed correlation. In addition, sample was tested with Harman's single factor test (Harman, 1976:129) for further investigating the issue. According to Podsakoff&Organ (1986:533), if common method bias present, single factor will emerge from factor analysis of all items. The unrotated factor solution resulted in no single major factor that explaining the majority of the variance. Consequently, common method variance will not be a problem in this research.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Characteristics of Sample

The majority of the respondents was between 18 and 35 years old (73,6%), had a bachelor's degree (57%). In general, e-commerce site usage frequency shows that few times a week usage is highly dominant throughout the sample (50,1%). Site usage frequency question was based on both visit and purchase. Detailed information of the participants is presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Demographic Profile of the Sample

	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	144	43.6
Female	186	56.4
Age		
18-25	132	40.0
26-35	111	33.7
36-45	81	24.5
46-55	6	1.8
E-Commerce Site Usage Frequency		
Every Day	66	41.6
Few Times a Week	159	49.9
Few Times a Month	90	7.0
Few Times a Year	15	1.5
Education		
Elementary School	8	2.4
High School	33	10.0
Associate Degree	54	16.4
Bachelor's Degree	188	57.0
Master's Degree	43	13.0
Ph.D. Degree	4	1.2
Total	**330**	**100**

4.2. Data Analysis

The data which produced from survey was analyzed with confirmatory factor analysis to ensure that items loaded on focal variables. No unexpected results were encountered and all items were loaded on their relevant latent variable. Next, LISREL statistical analysis package program was used to test theoretical model and WarpPLS statistical program was used to test validity and reliability of the factors. Finally, the relationships suggested in the hypotheses were analyzed. During the hypotheses testing process, Chi-square test, Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Normed Fit Index (NFI), Incremental Fit Index (IFI) and Root Mean Squared Error of Approximation (RMSEA) were used to test the model's goodness-of-fit (Lee and Jeyong, 2014:53).

4.3. Validity and Reliability Tests

Reliability: Cronbach's alpha (CRA) value is commonly used to evaluate the internal consistency of measures. Values equal to and higher than 0.7 are generally considered adequate (Hair et al., 2010:123). Inter-item reliability (Cronbach's Alpha) values of the items were examined to control reliability of the research model. Cronbach's alpha values are between 0.763 and 0.91 which means an acceptable internal consistency for all constructs (Hair et al., 2010:125).

Validity: Construct validity consists of convergent validity and discriminant validity. Convergent validity was investigated through composite reliability, average variance extracted and factor loadings. Composite reliabilities of the items are greater than 0.6 (Bagozzi&Yi, 1988:80) and AVE values are greater than 0.5. In addition, all loadings have 0.01 and 0.05 significance levels, resulting in convergent validity for all constructs (Lee and Jeyong, 2014:53). In order to assess discriminant validity of constructs, Fornell&Larcker (1981:41) criterion was used. Square root AVE values of each variable have to be greater than correlations between the constructs. As relevant data shown in the Table 3, the model seamlessly has discriminant validity. Consequently, research model is theoretically meaningful and statistically acceptable. Convergent and discriminant validity test shows that research model has acceptable construct validity.

Table 3: Correlations among Latent Variables with Square Root of AVEs

	Cronbach α	AVE	Arg.Str.	Rec.Rat.	Rec.Cons.	Rew.Cre.	Purc.Int.
Arg.Str.	0.850	0.690	**0.831**	0.606	0.419	0.608	0.515
Rec.Rat.	0.893	0.824		**0.908**	0.436	0.579	0.494
Rec.Cons.	0.763	0.679			**0.824**	0.486	0.381
Rew.Cre.	0.910	0.735				**0.857**	0.619
Purc.Int.	0.900	0.716					**0.846**

Note: Square roots of average variances extracted (AVEs) are shown on diagonal.

AVE: Average Variance Extracted.

4.4. Structural Equation Model

Covariance based structural equation method (CB-SEM) returned following results; Chi-Square=287.26 and df=163 with Chi-Square/df=1,762; RMSEA = 0.062, p- value= 0.000; NFI = 0.96; CFI = 0.98; RMR = 0.035. As a result, the measurement model fits well with the data and goodness-of-fit statistics suggest that model fits are acceptable (Tabachnick and Fidel, 2001:715-920; Steiger 2007:895; Kline, 2005:276; Brown, 2015:73; Kelloway, 1998:114; Hu and Bentler, 1999:2). Acquired and threshold values are demonstrated in Table 4.

Table 4: Results of Fit Measurements

Fit Index	Value Acquired	Thresholds
Ki kare (χ^2)/ sd	1,762	≤ 3 Perfect Fit
RMSEA	0,062	$\leq 0,07$ Good Fit
RMR	0,035	$\leq 0,05$ Good Fit
CFI	0,98	$\geq 0,95$ Perfect Fit
NFI	0,96	$\geq 0,95$ Perfect Fit

Figure 2: Standardized Solution Output from LISREL
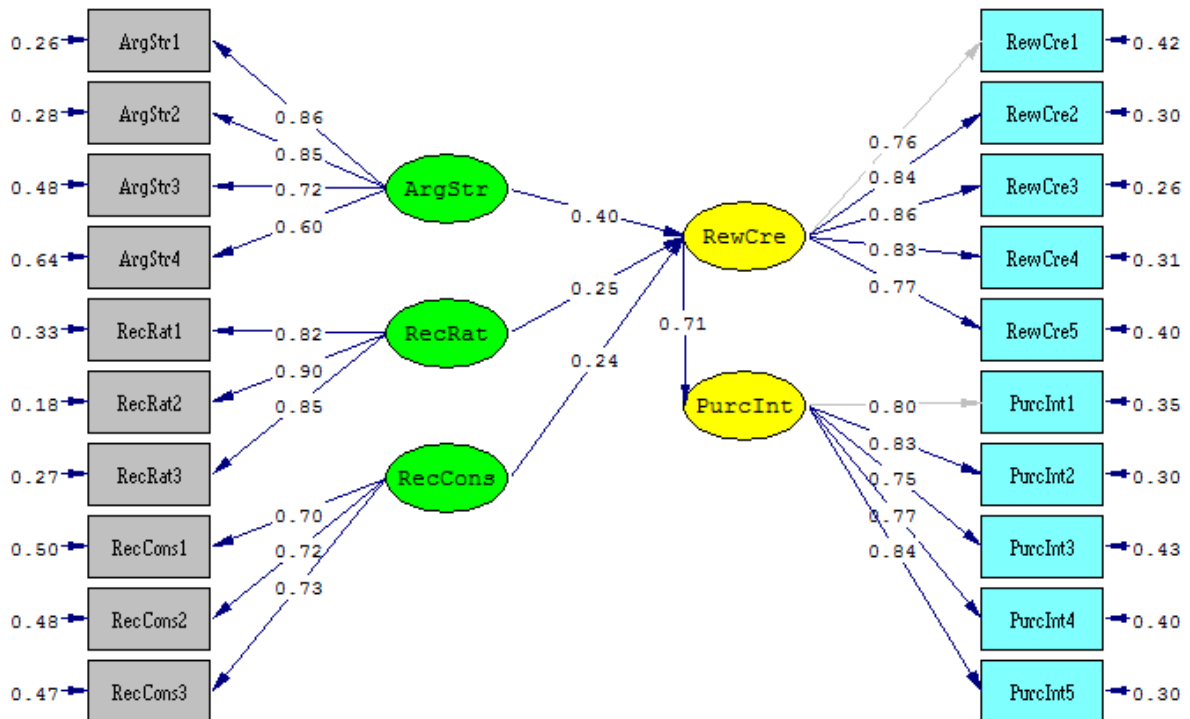
Chi-Square=287.26, df=163, P-value=0.00000, RMSEA=0.062

Table 5: Results of Structural Model

Structural Path	Path Coefficients	t-value	Hypotheses
Rating-Review Credibility(H1)	0.25**	2.72	Supported
Strength - Review Credibility (H2)	0.40**	4.15	Supported
Consistency- Review Credibility (H3)	0.24**	2.89	Supported
Review Credibility – Purchase Intention(H4)	0.71**	8.66	Supported

NFI = 0.96, IFI = 0.98, CFI = 0.98, GFI = 0.87, RMSEA = 0.062 **p < 0.01.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

5.1. Discussion

The literature review implicates positive relationship between recommendation rating and perceived eWOM review credibility with generally less than 0.35 beta coefficients. In our study, Perceived eWOM Review Credibility is positively influenced by recommendation rating, similar to the findings of with Lis (2013:132), Price and Hersh (1999:912) who also point out that recommendation rating provides Perceived eWOM Review Credibility for consumers. With path coefficient of 0.25, our study is coherent with the previous findings. Consequently, hypotheses 1 is supported.

According to literature, readers judge the credibility of online recommendations based on the argument strength, so strength has a positive effect on credibility (Cheung et al., 2009:15). Analysis results verify the literature according to the path coefficients acquired. Previous studies emphasize that argument strength has linear and positive effect on credibility. Results shows that argument strength has similar effect on perceived eWOM review credibility but with an excessive one. It can be based cultural differences or attitudes of participants to variable.

Cheung et al. (2009:33) and Zhang and Watts (2004:99-100) support that recommendation consistency has positive effect on perceived eWOM review credibility. Analysis results are congruent with the previous studies. The results prove that recommendation consistency has a significant and linear role for building up perceived eWOM review credibility.

Yaylı and Bayram (2012:58-60) and Lafferty and Goldsmith (1999:109) accentuate robust effect of perceived eWOM review credibility on purchase intention in their studies. On the other hand, our results have a remarkable beta value (0.71), supporting their findings consequently. Results not only shows that perceived eWOM review credibility has direct effect on purchase intention, but also demonstrates the important role in creating purchase intentions.

5.2. Conclusion

In addition to many factors that influence the decision making process of consumer in traditional trade, interpersonal networks' features have been combined today via online communities.

Online communities allow people to obtain information about products or services. These communities can be useful for firms to understand their current/potential customers' expectations by analyzing the comments or recommendations. Determining the purchase intention factors of consumer will offer competitive advantages in today's tough trading environment. This study paves a road for firms to achieve these competitive advantages using eWOM as opportunities.

On the other hand, this paper offers important contributions to the eWOM research and purchase intention studies. A comprehensive analysis was made about eWOM and the antecedents of purchase intention of consumers in online environment. Results indicate that recommendation rating, argument strength and recommendation consistency affect Perceived eWOM Review Credibility considerably. Further, Perceived eWOM Review Credibility has a massive impact on purchase intention.

As the first empirical research made in Turkey on the effect of eWOM on purchase intention, this study provides essential but primal contribution to the literature. This paper will shed light on the following researches that will be made on the subject.

5.3. Limitations and Further Research

Although the paper's positive contributions to literature, it has a number of limitations that should be taken into consideration. Four variables were used to determine the effects on purchase decision. EWOM hosts a wide spectrum of research fields for researchers, including psychological aspects which can be suitable candidates to be the antecedents of eWOM. In addition, instead of purchase intention, brand loyalty or brand love can be used as dependent variables for further research, according to contemporary situations.

Another concern is about the variety of products or services. Consumers who participated in the research were requested to answer the questions according to the final purchase they had made. Thus, survey questions measured the general view of consumers to eWOM about all kind of services or products. If a survey were prepared targeting a particular product or sector, researchers could have different results from research.

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