ABSTRACT

The advent of web 2.0 has brought significant changes in the shopping behaviour of customers. Particularly interesting and important is the rise of Internet enabled word of mouth communication, suitably referred to as Electronic Word of Mouth (E-WOM). With the growing use and popularity of online modes of communication, E-WOM is increasingly complementing the traditional word of mouth communication, in shaping purchase decisions of consumers.

The current dissertation is based on online consumer reviews, which arguably constitute the most effective channel for consumers' voice. The importance of reviews has been highlighted in both academic research and industry reports. In an industry report, for instance, it was reported that consumer reviews are the most trusted source of information for consumers, next only to the direct recommendations made by family and friends. Similarly, based on a survey of consumers from USA and Canada, it was reported that 88% of consumers have read online reviews to evaluate a local business and about 40% of them do so on a regular basis. Likewise, based on a survey, it was reported that reviews impact purchase decisions for 93% of consumers. Furthermore, it was found that two-thirds of consumers were willing to pay more if they were assured of a better experience. It has therefore become imperative for businesses to monitor online reviews written for its product(s). Correspondingly, it is important for academic researchers to understand the mechanism underlying the influence of reviews on readers.

Extant literature in the field of online review influence has several important gaps. First, it has not examined the possibility of change in impact of drivers of influence

over time, as more reviews are posted. Second, temporal changes in the behaviour of online reviewers and the corresponding impact on review influence has not been examined. And third, topical composition of reviews and its impact on review influence has not been considered.

Research studies conducted as part of this dissertation intend to address these gaps. In first study, using an exploratory paradigm, temporal changes in impact of drivers of influence have been observed. Likewise, in second study, temporal changes in content creation behaviour of online reviewers have been noted. Further, using a predictive modelling approach, the importance of content creation behaviour as an early signal for predicting influential reviewers has been established. And in third study, a novel framework, based on Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA), a popular topic modelling method has been proposed and tested to explore topical composition of a set of reviews and determine the impact of individual topics on review influence. Online review data from Yelp was used in all three studies. Findings from the studies have important implications for theory and practice, and have been discussed.