

PRIMARY RESEARCH

Friend or the Foe: An Islamic Ethical Perspective on the Online Consumers Reviews

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Abstract. The advent of internet has enabled the marketers to expand their reach globally. But at the same time, it opens avenues for manipulative practices to the unknown customers by the unknown sellers. Companies not only make false promises and sponsor bloggers and key opinion leaders to obtain incentivized online reviews, but also involve their employees to act as pseudo customers to praise the goods and services. These acts of deception, cheating and manipulative practices are targeted to persuade innocent and uninformed customers to make a purchase decision. These acts are condemned by the customers who raise their voice online and offline in the form of negative WOM resulting in bad reputation and negative perception. Scholars and practitioners alike have been increasingly concerned about such practices. Islam has clearly set rules of business and strictly prohibited such acts of deception and manipulation. This paper is an attempt to review and synthesize literature on the topic and develop a link between Islamic teachings and issues faced by marketing professionals in the present era. Three focus group interviews followed the literature review to get the insights from industry professionals, scholars, academicians and practitioners. The participants of focus groups unanimously agreed with the fact that consumers should not be exploited by creating and sharing fake information and the companies should refrain from exaggeration and false claims. The findings from focus group interview have been analyzed in the light of literature and the views are mentioned at the end of the paper.

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INTRODUCTION

"When Muslim merchants travelled to distant lands, the inhabitants of those lands were impressed by the traders' social and business conduct and so became curious about their beliefs. Many of these inhabitants subsequently became Muslims" (Rice, 1999).

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'Business Ethics' is an active topic of discussion among researchers and academics. Researchers and practitioners have found a link of religion and faith with ethics in business practices (Arli, 2017; Mele & Fontrodona, 2017; Musa, 2015; Saeed, Ahmed, and Mukhtar, 2001). With ever increasing penetration of the internet in our daily life, particularly in the use of e-commerce, the consumers as well as practitioners are facing numerous challenges related to security, privacy, product quality and ethical issues (Flavián & Guinalú, 2006; Grabner-Kraeuter, 2002; Koehn, 2003; Miyazaki & Fernandez, 2001; Naqvi, 1981; Roman & Cuestas, 2008). Despite the enormous potential of e-commerce, the emerging concerns about privacy issues, information security and ethical conduct in online interactions cause anxieties for online consumers. As the competition gets fierce and customer expectations escalate, the marketers need to be cognizant of such ethical challenges because these may cause dissatisfaction and lack of trust for the consumers (Anderson Simester, 2014). Research suggests that ethical factors pertaining to privacy and security significantly impact the customers' readiness to make an online transaction (Adam, Aderet, & Sadeh, 2008; Flavián & Guinalú, 2006).

Many of the conventional off-line techniques used for managing interpersonal influence are also implemented in the nascent field of Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM). However, in doing so, marketing professionals are sometimes found transgressing and going beyond the ethical boundaries (Litvin, Goldsmith & Pan, 2008). The companies try to cultivate opinion in their favor through bloggers and online review posters (Stanton, 2017). It may help them gain advantage for a short time; however, in the longer run, if the product or service would fail to meet the customers' expectations, they may not only discontinue using the product, but would most likely say negative word of mouth about that company and/or its products (Singh, 1990). Sometimes, consumers may act more intensely and spread a negative eWOM if they find companies involved in any unethical or suspicious practices, which is not beneficial for the companies in the long run (Carrigan & Atallah, 2001). Some researchers raised questions on marketing ethics and emphasized that marketers should seek to act as socially responsible stakeholders (Beekun & Badawi, 2005; Gaski, 1999; Thorpe & Roper, 2017).

Research that investigates online retailers' manipulative practices and consumers' perceptions of ethical behavior of online retailers, particularly from Islamic perspective, is still in the beginning and, therefore, requires exploration in order to help researchers and practitioners demarcate a well-defined boundary between the ethical practice of managing eWOM (Buttle, 1998; Carrigan & Atallah, 2001) and its abuse (Flavian & Guinaliu, 2006; Palmer, 2014; Roman & Cuestas, 2008). Many of the studies conducted in past to analyze consumers' perceptions about the ethical behavior of online retailers are of a conceptual nature and from the perspective of Western moral philosophies. (Maury & Kleiner, 2002; Song & Paul, 2016; Stead & Gilbert, 2001). A little attention has been paid to the ethical implications of eWOM from an Islamic perspective.

Islam is the fastest growing religion of the world (PEW Forum, 2011) and the second largest religion (Kettani, 2019). This makes Muslims a major market for the multinational corporations. Therefore, it is important to study the nature and implications of eWOM

from Islamic perspective. Based on these, the current study attempts to highlight the role of eWOM in shaping the opinions of potential consumers and the ethical issues facing the marketers in specific and businesses in general to deal with the dilemma of increasing fraud and deception in e-commerce, particularly from Islamic perspective. Research that investigates online retailers' manipulative practices and consumers' perceptions of ethical behavior of online retailers has been studied across the globe. However, this area requires further exploration as majority of the previous studies have been conducted in Western settings not to be generalized in an Eastern society particularly a Muslim society.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Word of Mouth Marketing

Past research has found that personal sources and voices have been the strongest source of information for consumers (Filieri, 2015). The interpersonal influence in the form of Word of Mouth (WOM) is regarded as the most important information source when a consumer is making a purchase decision (Lehnert, Craft, Singh, & Park, 2016; Litvin, Goldsmith & Pan, 2008). Particularly, the intangible goods and services cannot be evaluated before their use or consumption (Mitra, Reiss & Capella, 1999; Patti & Chen, 2009). Tourism and hospitality services as well as products sold online are considered as high-risk purchases (Cunningham, N., & De Meyer-Heydenrych, 2018; Yang, Sarathy, & Lee, 2016). In these type of transactions interpersonal influence may be significantly important at the decision making stage (Stanton, 2017).

Some early researchers defined Word of mouth (WOM) as the process that allows consumers to exchange information and opinions about specific products, brands, companies and services (Carl, 2006; Dichter 1966; Engel, Kegerreis & Blackwell 1969; Hawkins, Best & Coney, 2004). Westbrook (1987: 261) defined WOM more generally, to contain "all informal communications directed at other consumers about the ownership, usage, or characteristics of particular goods and services or their sellers." An essential characteristic of WOM is the perceived impartiality or bias of the source of the message. Thus, WOM may impact purchase decisions either positively (Silverman, 2001; Engel *et al.*, 1969; Richins, 1983) or negatively (Bolting, 1989; Singh, 1990; Tybout & Hauser, 1981). Research in last decades suggests that the WOM by the key opinion leaders significantly reduces brand promotional expenses in existing markets (Keller, 2007). Negative WOM has also been found to inhibit a brand's acceptance and to spoil its reputation in the targeted markets (Bolting, 1989).

Online Consumers' Reviews

The advent of internet has enabled the consumers to have virtual interactions with millions of product users across the globe (Goldsmith, 2006). Word of mouth shared online at discussion forums or review websites is termed as e-WOM (Dellarocas 2003; Park & Lee, 2008). In contrary to the nature of conventional WOM, which is limited to a few acquaintances, the digital form of WOM (eWOM) becomes large-scale, anonymous and has

a global reach (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006). Thus, eWOM offers new ways of capturing, analyzing, interpreting, and managing the potential influence of WOM. E-WOM has many forms such as posted reviews, star ratings, blogs and independent review websites (Park & Lee, 2008). Online consumer reviews (OCRs) posted online by other users have gained importance as a source for discovering product quality by the potential consumers (Banerjee, Bhattacharyya, & Bose, 2017; Filieri, 2015). OCRs are the user generated information based on the opinions, experiences and evaluation by the users of products and services (Banerjee, Bhattacharyya, & Bose, 2017; Godes & Mayzlin, 2004; Salehan & Kim, 2016). Such reviews may provide a strong sense of the product based on users experience, add to the consumer's overall image about the company, reduce pre-purchase anxiety (Song & Paul, 2016), mitigate any potential risks (Mitra, Reiss & Capella, 1999; Miyazaki & Fernandez, 2001) and alleviate post-purchase dissonance (Yeo, Goh & Rezaei, 2017). The WOM in the form of online reviews remains available on the websites in abundance which offers unmatched scalability and speed of transmission (Kawaf & Istanbuluoglu, 2019; Salehan & Kim, 2016).

Research in the recent past suggests that companies not only regularly upload their product related information online and engage with the customers, but also sponsor chats on the discussion forums, such as USENET (Mayzlin, 2006). Firms also pursue their consumers to spread positive WOM about their products and rate their experiences with other consumers (Godes & Mayzlin, 2004). As the new internet technologies carry a huge potential to deceive or mislead the consumers, some companies even cleverly manipulate online reviews in an attempt to influence consumers' decisions making in their favor (Dellarocas, 2006; Dichter, 1966; Stanton, 2017). Such marketing practices sometimes create blurredness between WOM and commercial messages (Buttle, 1998; Lindgreen & Vanhamme, 2005).

Unethical Practices in Marketing

Owing to the increasing competition and in the race to 'maximize the profits' the businesses have been involved in unethical practices. Since, the responsibility of attracting new customers and enhancing business lies with the marketing personnel, they are the most vulnerable part of the chain (Saeed *et al.*, 2001). Marketing has the primary role of creating value for the customers and society at large. However, lack of proper training on ethical aspects of business, increasing pressure from the business owners and greed to grow in career are few reasons that compel marketers to get involved in the unethical practices (Barry & Shaw, 1992; Saeed *et al.*, 2001). Thus, the profession of marketing becomes derailed from its majestic role of contributing to consumers' life by adding value. It has moved to an awkward position of contributing to the vicious and extravagant side of consumerist and capitalist societies (Fineman, 1999).

Marketers, sometimes use tactical methods to prompt consumers to generate positive WOM (Graham and Havlena 2007). One of such techniques is online 'stealth marketing' which help marketers to promote eWOM and create a 'buzz' about their product. Kaikati and Kaikati (2004) described the practice of stealth marketing as "employing tactics that engage the prospect without them knowing they are being marketed" (Neisser 2004: 4; Thorpe

& Roper, 2017). The most noticeable of these practices is through company employees pretending as consumers and posting favorable comments online. Li and Hitt (2008) observed dubious consumer reviews during the early stages of a product launch. In an attempt to analyze the situations when companies and their employees anonymously posted online reviews, Dellarocas (2006) and Mayzlin (2006) found that they purposefully do it to praise their products and to enhance product awareness. Thus the marketers manipulate the consumers apparently in innocent way (Graham & Havlena, 2007) which is prohibited in Islam (Al-Ukhuwa, 1938, pp. 42).

Deception is a deliberate attempt that is performed by manipulating information in some way (Anderson & Simester, 2014; Masip, Garrido, & Herrero, 2004; Xiao & Benbasat, 2011). Past research shows that marketers were involved in deceptive practices primarily in the domain of advertising and personal selling (Lagace, Dahlstrom, & Gassenheimer, 1991; Robertson & Anderson, 1993; Roman & Ruiz, 2005; Xiao & Benbasat, 2011). These deceptive practices have been found to be illicit, unethical, undesirable and intolerable to the consumers (Jones, 1991; Roberts, 1996) and may result in decline in customer satisfaction and brand loyalty (Anderson Simester, 2014; Darke & Ritchie, 2007; Oliver, 1999; Roman & Ruiz, 2005). Deceptive practices in e-commerce happen when the online vendor or retailer tries to portray an unreal image to customers with the intent to persuade the customers and influence their purchase decisions (Hu, Bose, Koh, & Liu, 2012). Such impression or belief among consumers based on deception may have an adverse impact on consumers' evaluation of the company and its products (Anderson & Simester, 2014; Limbu, Wolf & Lunsford, 2011; Xiao & Benbasat, 2011). When customers' expectations are not met, they either express their dissatisfaction in the form of negative WOM or discontinue the relationship and switch to the competitors (Roman and Cuestas, 2008; Singh, 1988). Singh (1988) discussed that voicing negative WOM could be considered as a form of Customer Complaining Behavior (CCB) But, the negative reviews are hidden from the website so that the future customers do not see it. Considering such negative actions a threat, marketers tend to gain favor of some customers by offering them additional benefits. Company employees are also involved in generating positive WOM or eWOM.

Customers give a considerable weight to the ethical practices of the company during a purchase decision (Adam *et al.*, 2008; Cooil Keiningham, Aksoy, & Hsu, 2007; Creyer, 1997; Grabner-Kraeuter, 2002; Lehnert *et al.*, 2016). Past research has found an influence of ethical or unethical practices on attitudes, such that the vices develop negative attitudes and the virtues convert them in favorable attitudes (Folkes & Kamins, 1999; Reeder & Brewer, 1979; Rydell & McConnell, 2006). It has also been found that concerns regarding companies' ethical behavior are related to the privacy and information security that could be the the major obstacles to online shopping behavior (Ahuja, Gupta, & Raman, 2003; Miyazaki & Fernandez, 2001). Gaski (1999) raised questions on marketing ethics and emphasizes that marketers should seek to act as socially responsible stakeholders.

Online environment is more vulnerable to the deceptive practices as it is difficult to detect deception online as compared to the face to face communication (Anderson & Simester, 2014). In a recent research, it was found that nearly 10% of goods sold are subject to online

review manipulation (Kumar, Venugopal, Qiu, & Kumar, 2018; Schuckert, Hu *et al.*, 2012). There are deterrents that uncover and penalize fake reviews, including fines for businesses that publish fake reviews. In 2013, Samsung was fined \$340,300 for hiring people to write fake positive reviews about their products, and to post negative ones on their competitors (Munzel, 2015). A website, *reviewskeptic.com* with approximately 90% accuracy, was developed by Cornell University researchers to identify fake hotel reviews. Amazon deleted incentivized reviews that seemed to have higher ratings than the average review (Anderson & Simester, 2014).

Islamic Perspective on Marketing

Accepting the Muslim faith implies submission to Allah's will. There is a reward if Muslims undertake all their activities according to the Divine principles given in the Holy Qur'an and in the teachings of Holy Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Everyday activities such as eating, drinking, socializing, buying, selling, promoting, and manufacturing are considered as acts of worship if they are according to Sharī'ah principles (Saeed *et al.*, 2001). The principles and rules equally apply to doing business as much as they apply to personal cleanliness and purification.

The last few decades have witnessed the development of a new market for business, commodities, advertising, media and other consumer segments identified as 'Islamic' market (Golkarksel & McLarney, 2010; Jamaluddin, 2003). The marketing scholars as well as practitioners have recently been inclined towards emergence of "Islamic" fashion, leisure spaces, coffee shops, media, and brands (Saeed *et al.*, 2001). Recently, Nike has introduced *hijāb* for ladies in sports, which is the evidence that the Muslim consumers are increasingly affecting the marketing landscape. Similarly, *ḥalāl* food industry, due to its transparency and evidence based practices, has captured a large share of market in not only the Muslim majority countries, but also in the areas where Muslims are in minority. Islam teaches Muslims to live modest lives and abstain from showing-off and unnecessary consumption. Therefore, the Muslim consumer behavior is different from the Non-Muslim consumers. That is the reason Islamic marketing is on the rise (Sandikci, 2011).

Today, the Islamic perspective on business and commerce is gradually gaining impetus and significance. By virtue of the oil reserves, and several other factors, many Muslim countries, particularly in the GCC region, are becoming the most wealthy consumer markets in the world (Saeed *et al.*, 2001). The globalization of the world economy requires the multinational organizations to understand the Islamic perspective on business and learn which factors shape the attitudes and behaviors of Muslim consumers. The companies having strong acquaintance with the Islamic norms can serve the needs of the Muslim consumers and capture a distinctive position in the Islamic marketplace (Sacharow, 1995).

Religion and spiritual based beliefs enhance moral responsibility and drive ethics in business dealings (Arli, 2017). Religion also shapes behaviors (Graafland, Kaptein, & Schouten, 2006; Lee, McCann, & Ching, 2003). Islamic teachings make it mandatory rather than voluntary goal of a Muslim to spread the good among society and avoid harming others (Dusuki & Abdullah, 2007; Osman, 1995). Prophet (PBUH) further said "seeking earnings is a duty

for every Muslim and it is a form of worship" (Ali, 2011; Ali, 2005; Beekun & Badawi, 2005, p. 133; Beekun, 1997). While religion says fair trade is an obligation, researchers argue that ethics and profits are inherently correlated (Primeaux & Stieber, 1994). Islam teaches and binds the Muslim traders to follow ethical boundaries, and the actions and decision making in Islamic society is anchored in ethics (Glaachi, 2000; Naqvi, 1981).

According to Islamic teachings, the aim of business should be serving the community, value creation (Freeman, 2000) and welfare of the society (al-Ghazali, 2006; Karns, 2008). *Ihsān* (kindness, generosity and giving approach towards others) is one of the foundations of Islamic ethics. We can relate OCRs as giving useful product information in the shape of WOM as *ihsān* provided there is no forgery and deception involved (Ibn-Miskawayh, 1968, pp 99100). This becomes an '*ibādah*' if the intention is to guide people and save them from buying a harmful or useless product. Prophet (PBUH) said that "He who removes a distress, Allah blesses him in this world and the hereafter." Prophet (PBUH) also said "saying a truthful word is a *ṣadaqah*". *Ṣadaqah* is some kind of a sacrifice in the name of Allah for which Allah and Prophet (PBUH) promised a reward for Muslims. Allah says in Qur'ān that "He that doeth good shall have ten times as much to his credit. Hence, a fair evaluation and sharing of information about a product can earn a Muslim heavenly reward from Allah (Beekun, 1997).

Islam puts focus on the society. Any act of the businesses or sellers to harm society such as forged online reviews can be categorized as misleading causing harm to the uninformed customers. This, according to Islamic teachings, has a punishment, as Qur'ān says (2:279) About hiding the information such as the flaws of a product, the Qur'ān (11:85) says, "Nor withhold from the people things that are their due."

Islam has laid down principles regarding anyone's privacy (Saeed *et al.*, 2001). It requires its followers to have respect for the rights of all others and aims at preventing wrongdoing against the universe as a whole. While Islam tends to promote business activity, it prohibits transactions and earnings based on others' exploitation and mischief in the marketplace involving deception, manipulation and unethical engagement (Ali *et al.*, 2013; World Assembly of Muslim, 1984). Islamic view on corporate ethics is similar to the notion of 'Stakeholders Theory' which suggests that the concern for profits is the result rather than the driver in the process of value creation for the society (Freeman, Wicks, & Parmar, 2004, p. 364; Karns, 2008). Thus, the contemporary literature about the business and marketing ethics is congruent with the Islamic teachings and findings from the contemporary research scholars fully compliment and endorse the teachings of Islam about business ethics (Thorpe & Roper, 2017). It has several implications for the business, marketers and the society at large (Luckmann, 1967).

In Islamic belief system, any such act that involves deceiving someone to make money is considered as *ḥarām* (prohibited), and the livelihood earned through such practices would be deprived of Allah's *barakah* (Blessings) (Ahmad, 1995, p. 114; Uygur, 2009). Ali (2005) summarized the saying of Prophet (PBUH) as, "The best of people are those who benefit others." This means that the Muslim marketers shall always keep sanctity of the privacy of the customers' data available to them. If this is followed in true spirit, the consumers

will develop more faith on such companies and would be willing to do business with them (Laroche et al. 2001).

Manipulating the information or circumstances is a form of exploitation and is condemned in Islam (Raghib, 1995; Saeed *et al.*, 2001). Islam does not permit Machiavellian promotional behavior and condemns all types of false declarations (*kadhb*), baseless accusations on the competitors and false customer testimonies (Qur'ān 43:19, 80; 33:19, 58; 58:1719; 102:8; 100:8; 3:14). There is "no harm in praising qualities actually present in the products if the purchaser could not otherwise be aware of them" (Al-Ukhuwa, 1938, p. 24). However, it is unfair to praise a product for the attributes that it does not possess (Al-Ukhuwa, 1938, p 23). For the traders making false claims about their goods, the Prophet (PBUH) said that "anyone who swears to persuade the customer to buy will also be deprived of Allah's blessings" (*Ṣaḥīḥ* al-Bukhari, 3:296). Prophet (PBUH) explicitly condemned all manipulative promotional practices saying that, "One who cheats (*ghash*) is not one of us" (An-Nawawi 2:770). Propagation of false demand and supply through media is discouraged by Islam (Saeed *et al.*, 2001). All these appeals fall in to the category of coercive (*ikrāh*) approaches intended to compel the customers to make a buying decision when the customer is not willing to buy (Stanton, 2017; Tyser, Demetriades, & Effendi, 1967, p. 149150). Islamic teachings allow freedom of decision making and prohibit from coercive approaches (Qur'ān 23:7; 24:33). The underlying rationale for this prohibition is to stop all means which will lead to fraud and deception.

Even the contemporary business scholars such as Peter Drucker (1974, p. 60) and Cowan (2018) discussed that "profit is not the only purpose of the business organizations." Business people are concerned about their market repute considering their integrity as a social capital (Ali *et al.*, 2013). Such practices may cause damage to the repute of the companies along with causing harm to the consumers. Therefore, further investigation should be aimed at identifying the potential impact of deceptive practices and ways to overcome this impact. Scholarly discussions and focus group discussions may open more avenues for discussion on the topic and might help identify some course of action to curb these practices and highlight flaws in the system. The findings may also be helpful for the marketing professionals, business owners and the scholars to benefit from. The next section discusses the methodology in which further probe was conducted involving participants from various walks of life.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

There are different methodologies used in the past research. Most recent is the text mining approach (Usai, Pironti, Mital, & Aouina Mejri, 2018). Text mining method to analyze consumer text data regarding associated sentiments has proven to be a promising approach (Aggarwal, 2011; Költringer & Dickinger, 2015). Content analysis is conducted using NVIVO, version 11 to identify the most commonly used words in the data (Hu *et al.*, 2012). Sentiment analysis is used to identify the positive and negative language in the text (Schumaker, Jarmoszko, & Labeledz, 2016), using a classical text mining method (Balahur, Hermida, &

Montoyo, 2012). The method consists of employing a technique of machine learning and natural language processing performed by NVIVO. The most used words can be represented through word cloud.

This paper is based on an exploratory research. The methodology comprises two portions. Firstly, a detailed literature analysis was conducted. After the thorough synthesis of literature, three focus group discussions were held comprising 15 academicians, 7 university students and 3 business professionals, respectively. The participants included academicians and business students from Riphah International University - Islamabad, CIIT Islamabad, International Islamic University Islamabad and Arid Agriculture University, Rawalpindi. The objective of the discussions was to get the views on the marketing practices involving deception, exaggeration, false promises, their implications on consumers and the Islamic view point on such practices. The participants were required to discuss various aspects of word of mouth and on-line consumer’s reviews. Ethical concerns from consumer’s point of view were also discussed. The participants also included a mufti and professionals from Islamic banking industry to discuss and validate Islamic teachings quoted in the study. The discussion points and findings of the focus group discussions are enlisted in the table below.

TABLE 1
Common Themes Identified as a Result of the Focus Group Discussions

Common Themes	General View	Islamic Teachings
Deception and exaggeration are harmful.	It is harmful for the individual consumer as well as for the society. The trust factor is important. Such practice may end up in a vicious cycle and every individual could suffer one or the same thing at one point in time or the other.	Deceiving anyone to sell a faulty product or convince one to buy an expensive product is as bad as committing a sin. It can be of different levels and depends on circumstances; however, in a nutshell, it is strictly forbidden in Islam.
Money earned through such practices can be categorized as unlawful.	It creates dis-balance in the society and mistrust among the consumers.	Money earned through such malpractices is <i>ḥarām</i> and deprived of Allah’s <i>barakah</i> .
The fake promise or swearing is harmful.	It cannot be hidden for long. As soon as consumers get to know about the reality of the faulty products, they do not only quit buying it, rather they spread a negative word of mouth.	A fake promise by the company or the swearing by the seller has been prohibited strictly. Anyone doing so, would be liable to a <i>kaffārah</i> for false swearing.

TABLE 1: Continue...

Common Themes	General View	Islamic Teachings
Asking customers or employees to give fake evidence (<i>shahādah</i>) (or review) online.	This falls in to category of deception which is a crime. Customers may take the company to the court for legal resolution, particularly if the harm is of large scale.	Telling a lie is forbidden in Islam. Anyone doing so would be deprived of Allah's mercy and blessings.
Marketers should refrain from such practices.	As a consumer, one should fulfil the responsibility of letting the company and other potential customers know about any such malpractice.	Islam strictly prohibits from practices that are not based on truth and justice.
Competition	If someone reduces the profit and increases sales volumes, he is compromising on his own profits. That is fine as long as the product is not faulty. But doing so, to let the competitors down is considered a bad practice.	Islam prohibits to say bad things about others, particularly if they do not exist. Islam even promotes keeping others' secrets as Allah has promised us to keep our secrets, if we keep others'.

The content analysis reveals that the participants unanimously agreed on importance of ethical business practices. Participants agreed that the boundary spanning role may cause the sales professionals to involve in malpractices like exaggeration and false promises to close the sales deals. It was emphasized by the participants that a marketer must not engage in the malpractices involving exaggeration, deception or any other practices that may cause any harm to the consumers. The malpractices may have serious consequences for the consumers as well as for the whole society. In addition, there could be severe repercussions for the companies as well as the brands can suffer a huge reputation loss. The participants agreed that internet has opened more avenues for communication. However, since this communication takes place among strangers, concerns could be about authenticity and credibility of the information being shared online (Palmer & Stoll, 2014). It was therefore agreed that business should make positive use of this medium to inform and educate the customers and create value for the customers and not to gain undue advantage of the naïve customers by manipulating information, unduly praising their faulty products and saying negative things about the competitors.

DISCUSSION

With increasing penetration of the internet in our daily life particularly in the use of e-commerce, the consumers as well as practitioners are facing numerous challenges related

to online markets. E-WOM has a powerful interpersonal influence, but companies should neither ignore, nor abuse it by indulging in any unethical practices to deceive others. This should rather be utilized for the companies benefit such as positive image (Folkes & Kamins, 1999; Mascarenhas, 1995), developing and nurturing relationship with consumers and to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the firm's marketing strategies (Anderson & Simester, 2014; Litvin, Goldsmith & Pan, 2008). Most of the ethical concerns related to e-commerce are similar to those of traditional brick-and-mortar store. Consumers are increasingly becoming aware of review manipulations and are paying more attention to the text of the review and noticing any positive/negative sentiments (Bambauer-Sachse & Mangold, 2013; Román & Cuestas, 2008). Online platforms have made it easy, on one hand, to buy and sell products. However, the chances of deceit have also increased as the buyers and sellers are anonymous and there is little face-to-face interaction involved. Therefore, it is vital for businesses to refrain from malpractices to avoid disobedience to Allah (SWT) as also distrust and negative WOM by the customers.

The current study attempts to highlight the role of eWOM in shaping the opinions of potential consumers and the ethical issues facing both marketers in specific and the businesses in general, to deal with the dilemma of increasing fraud and deception in e commerce, particularly electronic WOM. It also indicates the implications in Islamic perspective. The study suggests that Islamic teachings strongly discourage deception in the business dealings and require Muslim marketers to be fair in approaching their customers and avoid using exaggeration and false promises (Al-Ukhuwa, 1938, pp. 42). Islamic teachings also encourage the buyers to provide truthful feedback to other potential customers rather than blaming competitors or unnecessarily promoting a company's products or services for personal gains. Since this study is one of the few studies providing Islamic perspective on eWOM, future research may extend the implications of Islamic ethical ideology in other domains of marketing. It is clear from the themes identified that the business professionals, academicians and Muslim scholars alike discourage use of such practices in marketing which might cause harm to the consumers.

Islam prohibits from exaggeration and exploitation (Chapra, 2001; Metwally, 1980). Islamic justice system ('*adl*) emphasizes on a high standard of honesty, straightforwardness and reliability in all marketing activities (Qur'ān 23:51; 6:114115; 2:167168). Marketing activities have to be totally free from misrepresentation, cheating and falsehood (Niazi, 1996). Islam prohibits from using the promotional techniques such as fear, sexual or emotional appeal, false research claims and pseudo testimonials (Saeed *et al.* 2001). The items for sale should either be free from defect, or any problems should be disclosed and manifested either by verbal assurance, written confirmation or word of mouth (Niazi, 1996, p. 197; Tyser *et al.*, 1967). The one who sells his inferior goods with false oaths and swears would face a painful punishment in the life hereafter (*Ṣaḥīḥ* al- Bukhari, 3:301).

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This research has some limitations such as this is mainly a theoretical research with limited number of participants in the focus group discussions. Empirical test based on hypotheses related to such topics would further clarify the concept. Considering the scope of this paper, only ambiguous practices in marketing have been discussed. Implications of unethical practices in other fields of business such as Human Resources, Finance and Supply chain can also be brought in to discussion. This paper discussed the possible manipulations in online marketing norms such as online reviews. However, there are several other ways consumers get affected, out of which pricing strategies are one of the key elements. Discussions should be held at the intellectual forums in the light of Islamic teachings on the pricing strategies. Future research may also focus on the other aspects of e-commerce such as privacy, information security and risk mitigation, in the light of ethical principles laid down in the Islamic teachings.

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