MOTIVATIONAL FACTORS OF ELECTRONIC-WORD-OF-MOUTH FOR SELECTED MALAYSIAN UNIVERSITIES THROUGH ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKS

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This thesis is dedicated to

My Beloved Family,

My Father, Mother

and My Wife

for Their Endless Love and Support.

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ABSTRACT

Higher education institutions (HEI) are trying to update their marketing techniques by using information technologies. By help of Online Social Networks (OSN), they can intercommunicate with the people who become members (virtual fans) of their page. However, the factors that motivate virtual fans to spread electronic-Word-Of-Mouth (eWOM) were yet to be identified by previous research. Also the current literature lacks of a model to show the correlation of motivation factors and eWOM. Thus the HEI also do not know how to effectively spread their eWOM messages by using their Virtual fans in OSN. This research studied the motivation factors for the virtual fans of universities to spread Positive and Negative eWOM messages of universities for developing the Virtual Fans Sharing Model (VFSM). This study identified the potential motivation factors for virtual fans of universities to spread Positive and Negative eWOM, and develop an instrument to measure these potential factors by reviewing the previous literatures. A survey has been conducted among virtual fans of three selected Malaysian HEI. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was used to find unobserved constructs in the context of this study. Three new constructs have been identified which were Positive Academic Altruism, Self-Enhancement and Negative Academic Altruism. The researcher used Structure Equation Model (SEM) to evaluate and revise the VFSM model which shows the correlation between the motivation factors for virtual fans of universities and eWOM. This research provides guidelines for the universities to use their virtual fans to spread their eWOM messages among their potential customers. By targeting the Institutional Self-Enhancement in eWOM messages, which ranked as first motivator for Positive eWOM, the universities can motivate their fans to spread Positive eWOM messages. On the other hand by providing online facilities for their virtual fans to solve and help them with their problems, the Vengeance, which was ranked as first motivator for Negative eWOM, would be controlled and may demotivate them to spread Negative eWOM against the university in OSN.

ABSTRAK

Institusi pengajian tinggi (IPT) sering berusaha untuk mengemaskini teknik-teknik pemasaran mereka dengan menggunakan teknologi maklumat. Dengan bantuan Rangkaian Sosial Atas talian (OSN), IPT mampu berinteraksi dengan individu-individu yang menjadi ahli (peminat maya) di halaman OSN mereka. Walau bagaimanapun, faktor-faktor yang mendorong peminat maya untuk melakukan sebaran Word-Of-Mouth secara elektronik (eWOM) masih belum dikenal pasti oleh penyelidik terdahulu. Literatur dalam bidang eWOM dan OSN terkini juga tidak menyarankan sebarang bentuk model untuk menerangkan korelasi antara faktor-faktor motivasi untuk eWOM. Oleh yang demikian, pihak IPT tidak mempunyai panduan yang jelas tentang cara untuk menyebarkan mesej eWOM secara berkesan melalui peminat maya di OSN. Kajian ini mengkaji faktor-faktor yang mendorong untuk memotivasikan peminat maya OSN IPT untuk menyebarkan mesej-mesej positif dan negatif eWOM bagi membangunkan model Perkongsian Peminat Maya (VFSM). Kajian ini juga mengenal pasti faktor-faktor motivasi yang berpotensi untuk peminat maya universiti menyebarkan eWOM yang positif mahupun negative. Melalui soroton literature, kajian ini telah membangunkan satu instrumen yang mengandungi faktor-faktor positif dan negative eWOM. Kajian selidik telah dijalankan di kalangan 442 orang peminat maya di tiga IPT yang terpilih di Malaysia untuk tujuan pengumpulan data. Analisis Faktor Penjelajahan (EFA) digunakan untuk mengenalpasti konstruk-konstruk baru dalam konteks eWOM melalui OSN untuk IPT. Tiga konstruk baru telah dikenal pasti iaitu *Positive Academic Altruism*, *Self-Enhancement* dan *Negative Academic Altruism*. Pemodelan persamaan struktur (SEM) telah diigunakan untuk menilai dan menyemak semula model VFSM yang menunjukkan korelasi antara faktor-faktor motivasi bagi peminat maya universiti dan eWOM. Kajian ini menyediakan garis panduan bagi pihak IPT untuk memanfaatkan peminat maya mereka bagi menyebarkan mesej eWOM. Dengan menyasarkan faktor motivasi eWOM positif yang utama iaitu *Institutional Self-Enhancement* dalam mesej eWOM, universiti boleh mendorong peminat maya laman OSN mereka untuk menyebarkan mesej eWOM positif. Selain itu, dengan menyediakan kemudahan dalam talian untuk menjawab persoalan-persoalan peminat maya, faktor *Vengeance* yang telah disenaraikan sebagai faktor motivasi utama untuk eWOM negatif, akan dapat dikawal. Dengan cara ini peminat maya laman OSN IPT tidak akan terdorong untuk menyebarkan eWOM negatif.

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LIST OF SYMBOLS

ALN	-	Altruism in Negative form
ALP	-	Altruism in Positive form
ANX	-	Anxiety
CSE	-	Advice Seeking
EFA	-	Exploratory Factor Analysis
EMC	-	Emotional Connection
eWOM	-	electronic Word Of Mouth
NeWOM	-	Negative electronic Word of Mouth
PeWOM	-	Positive electronic Word of Mouth
REV	-	Rewards
SEM	-	Structure Equation Model
SEN	-	Self Enhancement
VGN	-	Vengeance
WOM	-	Word Of Mouth

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

The rapid development of information Technology has significantly changed the ways in which communications are carried out. The fast-paced online technology developments we are facing in the first decades of the 21st century, together with the force of globalization, are likely to force to radical changes in the world of Online Marketing. The internet has brought the phenomena of, namely: blogs, products review websites, e-bulletins and newsgroups, discussion forums and, most recently, Online Social Networks (OSN) to a huge audience. A single word can literally travel around the world in seconds; while the traditional 'Word-Of-Mouth' now features on electronic devices, having been transformed to electronic-Word-Of-Mouth (eWOM) (M. K. O. Lee, Cheung, Lim, & Sia, 2006; Li & Du, 2011) (Li & Du, 2011).

Social networks are widely accepted in the world of marketing, with a multi-billion dollar market having emerged in the second decade of the 21st century (de Vries, Gensler, & Leeflang, 2012). With more than 50% of social networkers following brands on these networks, companies are investing in social media businesses accordingly (de Vries et al., 2012). Managers invest in the social networks not only to acquire new customers but also to create a robust relationship with customers and obtain feedback from them. This will ultimately enable them to provide better customer services and gain their loyalty (HBR, 2010).

The opinions of consumers provided over the internet plays an important role in consumer decision-making (T. Hennig-Thurau, K.P. Gwinner, G. Walsh, & D.D. Gremler, 2004). A survey conducted by eMarketer in 2011 investigated people who check online reviews, blogs and other sources of consumer feedback offline when buying new products. These numbers increased from 61% to 80% when people shopped online (C. M. Cheung & Lee, 2012). Checking the Brand Fan pages is one of the ways to collect information and reviews before the purchasing procedure. The fan pages are created by the brands on Online Social Network websites and are forums where customers can send their feedback and interact with the company by posting a 'Comment' and/or 'Like' the posts on the brands' fan pages (McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002). People who become online fans through company fan-pages on OSN receive information about them more frequently and tend to be loyal customers (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006).

Another momentous change occurred in the first decade of the 21st century; this time in the higher education sector. This is a sector which faces huge changes in governance, policy and structure all around the world. Globalization, privatization, diversification, decentralization and increased competition are some of the major changes materializing in the higher education era (Nicolescu, 2009). Operations of higher education institutions are directly affected by these environmental changes and will accordingly face forces for creating marketing plans (Maringe, 2006).

The education industry is among the most competitive industries due to an increasing number of educational institutes. In line with other industries, educational establishments need to communicate with prospective customers (students). Recent online technology developments create new opportunities for industries to develop effective relationships with both existing customers and also new potential customers. In fact, the changing nature of Online Marketing is perceptible in both information technologists' societies and the view of educational institutions. The educational institutions must keep in step with online technology changes, of which online marketing is a vital part, if they are to remain competitive.

Effective use of online technology in order to create relationships and interact with customers is a high priority for most industries due to the potential economic benefits for their industries. The emergence of eWOM has seen it become one of the most effective marketing techniques that is employed by brands to spread the positive message among Social Networks and hence create extra value for them. Higher education institutions are developing marketing plans to ensure their survival during the rapid changes occurring in their era. They can then benefit from these techniques if studies into eWOM determine that it is well-suited to this current era.

The participation of loyal 'fans' and other enthusiasts in eWOM is both important and critical for a successful campaign. This research attempts to discover the motivating factors encouraging university online fans to participate in the electronic-Word-Of-Mouth (eWOM) in virtual online communities. The university industry generally works with educated and up-to-date people who are most likely to use the latest technologies such as Online Social Networks (OSN). They then use this technology to spread the positive message concerning eWOM. This results in extra value being created for the educational institutions.

1.2 Research Background

The general concept of 'Word-Of-Mouth' has not effectively changed since its first known use in 1553 (Merriam-Webster Dictionary) in the meaning of Oral Communication. Arndt (1967) defined the term 'Word-Of-Mouth' (WOM) as a non-commercial oral communication among people in or out of a community, which may relate to brands, services and products(Arndt, 1967). Since then, an enormous number of research studies have been undertaken in this area through different disciplines. A review of previous studies and new emerging phenomena are discussed here to determine the requirements for future research.

1.2.1   Online Social Networking Opportunities

Never before have there been facilities such as web2 Online Social Networks (e.g. Facebook) by which companies can have detailed demographics of their fans updated and also obtain reactions of the virtual community to their contents. The OSN provides demographics of the companies' business fan pages. This data helps the companies to send targeted information to their community and analyse feedback through detailed demographics.

Facebook gives a very apt description of a popular function on its developers' webpage as follows: "The Like button lets a user share your content with friends on Facebook." When a user clicks the "Like" button on the contents, the user's friends on the online social network receive a story on their News Feed together with a link to the original content. This is an exceptionally useful feature to use in the eWOM marketing for businesses.

Traditional media are not the most influential sources of information for internet users these days, but rather, online reviews, suggestions and comments are more likely to be trusted by them (C. M. K. Cheung & Thadani, 2012). Purchasing behaviour is significantly affected by the user-generated contents on the web; predictions show more than 50% of retail sales will be directly influenced by web content by 2014 (C. M. K. Cheung & Thadani, 2012).

1.2.2   Changes faced by universities

Universities are currently experiencing increased online competition for students (Wilson, 2010). Potential students do not consider universities that do not appear to care about their needs and expectations; hence, a need has arisen for online techniques to be applied to inform the potential students about the university's duty of care policy towards them (Noel-Levitz, E-Expectations, 2010).

The online presence of the universities is widely argued, with the main concerns being the online contents and accomplishments (university business, 2005). A suitable understanding of potential students' needs, as well as a well-established online presence, increases the profile of the university among other competitors. This results in the university being more visible; thus, potential students can see this and consider the particular university. The right online contents and targeted marketing strategies will attract qualified potential students to the university; successes on both sides are then more likely (bell, 2009).

Using the potential of Online Social Networks (OSN) to spread the word is becoming extremely important in marketing strategies. By creating the right online content and spreading them over the OSN, universities can gain a more positive reputation and may thereby attract more potential students. Wasting the opportunity to use the potential of OSN to spread the positive message of eWOM may result in non-active educational institutes in virtual communities, which may ultimately decrease their desirability for future potential students.

There is currently a lack of information about the online presence of marketing strategies through social networks. The factors motivating fans to participate in the universities' eWOM campaigns have not been sufficiently studied. The knowledge of motivating factors encouraging online fans to participate in eWOM marketing campaigns will help universities to spread eWOM among potential students. It is hoped that this strategy will finally help them to acquire new students.

1.2.3   WOM and eWOM research

The importance and key role of electronic Word-Of-Mouth (eWOM) in online marketing strategies cannot be disputed. There is no need for sophisticated research to realize the importance of eWOM. However, the concepts of: 'How are people motivated to spread eWOM?' and 'Why do people engage in eWOM messages?' are

challenging questions; knowing the answers creates the advantages. The phenomenon of eWOM is complex and finding the working mechanism needs more research to be conducted.   (Word-of-Mouth Research: Principles and Applications DEE T. ALLSOP2007)

Many research studies have been undertaken to determine the motivational factors encouraging people to engage in spreading eWOM. There are some factors which have been discovered by the premier researcher, for example: Product Involvement, Self-Involvement, Other Involvement and Message Involvement were the four categories of Positive Word-Of-Mouth identified by Dichter (1966). Engel, Blackwell and Miniard (1993) modified the Dichter theory and added 'dissonance reduction' which discusses Intelligent Decision-Making by gathering sufficient information. Influential factors in the WOM involvement process by 1993 included: interest level, self-enhancement, helping people, fun and intelligent decisions.

Later on, by 1998, more research had been carried out by Sundaram, Mitra and Webster (1998). Positive and negative forms of WOM were discussed in the new research studies. The positive WOM motives were characterized as follows: altruism, product involvement, self-enhancement and helping the company (Institution). The negative motives in the new research comprised the following: negative altruism, anxiety reduction, vengeance and advice seeking.

Information technology commenced its boom during the 1990s and the first decade of the 21st century and changed the communication face accordingly. Virtual communities were born and grew rapidly; now they are everywhere and have become a social phenomenon affecting the way of communication between people (Rheingold 1993).

A utility-based motive typology framework was proposed by Balasubramanian and Mahajan (2001). Focus-Related Utility, Consumption Utility and Approval Utility respectively were identified as three types of social interactions utilities, based on online experiences. Walsh, Gwinner and Swanson (2004) argued that the market

mavens beside the opinion leaders may spread the word about products over the web and hence play a key role in peoples' decision-making regarding whether or not to purchase the products. They suggest new motives, such as: obligation to share, pleasure in sharing and desire to help.

It seems that many WOM motives were argued and researched both online and offline. However, as discussed later, the motivational factors were not identified in the context of Online Social Networks or in the context of virtual fans of universities in Online Social Networks. This research focuses primarily on the motivational factors of fans to spread the message of eWOM among their network of friends.

1.3 Problem Statement

According to the latest changes in information technology and the new opportunities provided for businesses and universities, it is expected that the virtual fans' participation in the eWOM process should be considered as one of the most important eWOM strategies. Despite the importance to businesses and universities of the virtual fans' motivating factors to participate in the eWOM process, a literature review reveals that minimum attention has been paid to this area by both businesses and academic communities alike. In other words, the motivators of virtual fans to participate in the eWOM process have not been studied in previous literature. Therefore, the lack of research about the virtual fans' motivators by which to participate in the eWOM process can be regarded as the first problem and is duly considered in this research.

Creating positive word of mouth among consumers is an essential and effective marketing strategy for businesses. This is especially so in the diversified media landscape of the 21st century (Bowman & Narayandas, 2001; Godes & Mayzlin, 2004; Liu, 2006), where digital media procedures play an important role in spreading eWOM among users (Huang & Chen, 2006). A business today without a plan to use the eWOM

strategy to spread positive words among online users will perceivably put itself at risk of losing potential consumers (Action, 2005). The concept of electronic Word-Of-Mouth (WOM) communication, together with its potential and effectiveness has received substantial attention among businesses and academic societies (C. M. K. Cheung & Thadani, 2012).

The potential power of eWOM in each category depends on consumers; if they are interested in the message, they will spread it among their online network. And if they don't wish to talk about it, then the message will soon expire. Virtual online fans are especially important when developing a suitable eWOM strategy for businesses that face high competition and are willing to spread positive words among consumers. Interestingly, the concept of virtual fans of businesses is rarely discussed or studied in literature. There is a research gap existing for, namely: the model of motivating factors encouraging virtual fans of businesses at Online Social Networks to participate in eWOM is not identified. Previous research studies into eWOM did not investigate the model for motivating factors among the virtual fans of universities in online social networks. In addition, there are no guidelines relating to use of the motivational factors in eWOM among the virtual fans of universities. Therefore, the second and third problems are, respectively: lack of research regarding the importance of the virtual fans' motivational factors to participating in eWOM; as well as a model of motivational factors in eWOM among the virtual fans of universities.

As will be discussed later, there are currently few studies relating to the motivating factors encouraging virtual fans of universities to participate in eWOM at Online Social Networks. The Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) has selected the following universities to act as research universities in Malaysia, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM), Universiti Malaya (UM), Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) and Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM). These universities have planned to acquire more students through marketing programs. Marketing units in these universities have been started up to use internet and Online Social Networks to promote the university products (e.g. University Curriculums, Seminars, Conferences and etc.). However, interviews conducted by the researcher with the university marketing unit shows specifically that there are a lack of guidelines

to produce online materials that motivate virtual fans to spread this among their social networks.

Therefore, this research will attempt to solve the following problems:

i. There is a lack of research concerning the motivational factors which encourage virtual fans of universities to participate in eWOM in OSN.

ii. There is a lack of research for a model to examine the motivational factors which encourage virtual fans of universities to participate in eWOM in OSN.

iii. There are no existing guidelines relating to the use of motivational factors in eWOM among the virtual fans of universities.

1.4 Research Aims

This research aims to identify the motivating factors encouraging virtual fans of universities in online social networks to participate in the eWOM process. The research in fact tries to construct a model of the motivators and provide a guideline of motivational factors in eWOM for the universities. Finally, the aim of this research is to provide guidelines for universities concerning motivational factors encouraging virtual fans of universities to participate in the eWOM process.

1.5 Research Objectives

Based on the problems that have been found in extant literature reviews, the research objectives of this paper can be determined as follows:

1- To identify the positive sharing motivators encouraging virtual fans of universities to participate in eWOM in OSN.

2- To identify the negative-sharing motivators of virtual fans of universities and assist universities to avoid and stop this negative sharing.

3- To propose a Virtual Fans Sharing Model (VFSM).

4- To provide guidelines for the universities to promote their products through their virtual fans on online social networks

1.6 Research Questions

According to the defined research objectives, this research study aims to answer the following questions:

1- What are the motivational factors which encourage virtual fans of universities to spread positive eWOM in Online Social Networks?

2- What are the motivational factors which prompt virtual fans of universities to spread Negative eWOM in Online Social Networks?

3- What is the model of motivational factors for the virtual fans of universities in Online Social Networks?

4- What are the guidelines for universities to promote their products through their virtual fans in Online Social Networks?

1.7 Significance of Study

Academic researchers have commenced a study of viral marketing practices in online communities in recent years. A considerable number of studies have been done and are still in progress to analyse the receiving, reading and sharing of messages in online communities; however, all previous studies are insufficient and still more research is needed in this area to discover the hidden dimensions of viral marketing and eWOM. (Camarero & San José, 2011). The market is moving towards eWOM

because the effectiveness of the traditional forms of advertising and communications for marketing purposes is predicted to reduce in following years(Nail, 2005).

This research, by discussing the motivating factors enabling virtual fans of universities to participate in eWOM, assists the marketing units of universities to consider the new online marketing strategies and consequently enhance their marketing efficiency through application of the new strategies.

Specifically, two main remarkable academic and practical advantages are counted as having a high significance for this research. The most notable advantages of this research include: enhancing the marketing capabilities and strategies of universities to manage eWOM among their virtual fans and augmenting eWOM marketing literature reviews by providing the VFSM model as well as guidelines for motivational factors in eWOM.

1.8 Scope of Study

Virtual fans of the universities are the main context of this research. Among all Online Social Network websites, Facebook is the most popular. Accordingly, this research is aimed towards consideration of virtual fans of the Facebook Fan page of universities. The scope of this research is centred on the Facebook fans of three public universities in Malaysia, namely: UTM, UPM and UM. These universities are among the top public universities and are also active on Online Social Network (Facebook).

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