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THE EFFECT OF PRICE DISCOUNT AND FREE GIFT ON ONLINE ENTREPRENEURS' BUSINESS PERFORMANCE IN SOCIAL COMMERCE

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Abstract: *Marketing is one of the two main activities in social commerce (s-commerce) where this type of e-commerce is dominated by sole entrepreneurs. Marketing requires a large allocation of cost while financial resources of the online entrepreneurs are limited. Thus, they need to focus on the most effective marketing strategy. Studies pertaining to the effect of marketing tools for online entrepreneurs' business performance in s-commerce are rather limited. As such, this study assessed the relationships between marketing tools (price discount and free gift) and online entrepreneurs' business performance in the s-commerce platform. The findings of this study may serve as guideline for online entrepreneurs, apart from adding to the body of knowledge in the fields of entrepreneurship, marketing, and s-commerce.*

Keywords: Price discount, free gift, online entrepreneur and s-commerce.

1. Introduction

One of the supporting tools for s-commerce success is marketing (Busalim & Hussin, 2016; Turban, King, Lee, Liang, & Turban, 2015). In the marketing field, s-commerce has been regarded as virtual market, where Web 2.0 or social media serve as a one-to-one direct marketing tool to support customers in decision-making and purchasing behaviour (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008). By performing promotional and marketing activities via social media, businesses, particularly entrepreneurs, can gain benefits, such as awareness, increased traffic, increased networking and viewers, better return on investment, and a boost in sales (Jones, Borgman, & Ebru Ulusoy, 2015; Stephen & Toubia, 2010).

As entrepreneurs constantly face scarcity in resources (Kim et al., 2013), many have focused on specific strategy (Kumar et al., 2004). Hence, it is crucial to identify the specific strategy, where online entrepreneurs can focus on that strategy to succeed in business endeavour (Pansiri & Temtime, 2010; Turban et al., 2015). As most s-commerce activities are linked to marketing activities, it is reasonable to concentrate in this field. Furthermore, marketing is vital for business success (Kotler & Armstrong, 2012; Margolis, 1963; Phonthanukitithaworn, Ketkaew, & Naruetharadhol, 2019; Theng & Boon, 1996).

In marketing activities, promotion have emerged as the most vital and effective tool to increase sales (Balaghar, Majidazar, & Niromand, 2012; Margolis, 1963; Theng & Boon, 1996), where price discount and gift offering are types of sales promotion highlighted in s-commerce studies (Hassan et al., 2015; Phonthanukitithaworn et al., 2019) and are mostly applied by online entrepreneurs in the Facebook (Chandon et al., 2000; Orzan et al., 2013). Nonetheless, the relationships of price discount and gift with online entrepreneur success have not been empirically tested within the s-commerce context. As such, this study examined the effect of price discount and free gift on online entrepreneur success.

To the researchers' knowledge, this study is one of the first to empirically assess the impact of sales promotion on online entrepreneur business performance within the context of s-commerce. The findings serve as a platform for future research work pertaining to online entrepreneurs, marketing, and s-commerce segments.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. The next section presents the literature review on s-commerce, online entrepreneurs, and online marketing tools as success factors in s-commerce, along with Attention, Interest, Desire, and Action (AIDA) model. After that, the study methodology is described, and this is followed by presentation of research result and discussion. Finally, this study provides the study conclusion and recommendation for future endeavour.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Introduction to S-commerce

The s-commerce is a new emergence of digital commerce (Busalim & Hussin, 2016; Liang et al., 2012). Basically, s-commerce is about running e-commerce activities via social media platform, especially SNSs, including Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. To date, a significant trend is emerging as businesses have begun upgrading e-commerce to s-commerce as they believe that such platform may harness their business position by improving their operation and profit (Al-Badi & Al-Qayoudhi, 2014; Grizane & Jurgelane, 2017; Kim & Park, 2013; Liang & Turban, 2011; McCann & Barlow, 2015). Through SNSs, sellers interactively communicate and reach customers at a lower cost and within shorter time, along with less technical skills (Ainin et al., 2015; Ferrer et al., 2013; Gamboa & Gonçalves, 2014; Kim et al., 2013; Liang & Turban, 2011). The presence of s-commerce has overcome the absence of human and social elements, which have been claimed as the biggest hurdles in e-commerce (Hsu, 2008).

The s-commerce derives from the collaboration of social website features, including social media and social networks. It is known as digital commerce application that connects Web 2.0 technologies with social media (Huang & Benyoucef, 2013). The basic idea underlying the concept of s-commerce is the use of social media to run e-commerce activities for selling and buying products and services online (Pansiri & Temtime, 2010; Sau-ling LAI, 2010). The three elements in s-commerce are e-commerce, social media, and Web 2.0 technologies (Sau-ling LAI, 2010), where information communication technology is applied to amalgamate commerce and social activities.

2.2 Online Entrepreneur

Entrepreneur is the founder, owner, and manager for small business (Stam et al., 2014; Zhao et al., 2010). The Internet has encouraged entrepreneurs to run online business. Within the context of s-commerce, entrepreneur is one who gains income from commercial activity via SNS, regardless individually or registered firm (Hashim, Nor, & Janor, 2016). In this study, online entrepreneur is defined as the founder and owner of business, who independently conducts commercial activity using SNSs to reap profit.

One can become an online entrepreneur instantly if he/she wishes to run business (Wigand, 2006). This explains why micro online entrepreneurs or customer-to-customer (C2C) business model has overwhelmingly superseded other types of e-commerce model (Zalatar, 2012). Online entrepreneurs contribute to bigger financial figure, whereby profits derived from s-commerce have reported to be five times higher than that obtained from the B2C model (WeiWei & Yue, 2015). Interestingly, studies have found that, entrepreneurs who adopted s-commerce seemed to adhere to the trending online business indulgence without properly identifying the crucial success factors of s-commerce (Ahmad et al., 2018; Grizane & Jurgelane, 2017; Hassan et al., 2015; McCann & Barlow, 2015).

2.3 Marketing Tools as Entrepreneur's Success Factor in S-Commerce

Marketing is integral for every business as it generates sales, which later, turns to profitable business (Kotler & Armstrong, 2012). Marketing is a success factor for small businesses, particularly in developing countries (Margolis, 1963; Stefanovic, Prokic, & Rankovic, 2010), and this is no exception for online business. Ineffective marketing strategy is among the top factor for small businesses to fail (Theng & Boon, 1996). The importance of marketing in s-commerce is highlighted when e-commerce and e-marketing are declared as the two main activities in s-commerce (Busalim & Hussin, 2016; Turban et al., 2015), while Facebook has been the most favourable marketing media in s-commerce (Hassan et al., 2015; Stelzner, 2016).

In marketing activities, sales promotion is the most vital and effective tool to gain competitive advantage (Balaghar et al., 2012; Margolis, 1963; Theng & Boon, 1996). Sales promotion is simply defined as a temporary bargain used to raise instant sales (Blythe, 2005). Sales promotions refer to collective of various temporary marketing efforts either to stimulate immediate purchase or to increase sales of product(s) (Blythe, 2005; Kotler, 1988). In this study, sales promotion denotes temporary incentive made by business owners to inspire potential buyers to make instant purchase, thus increasing sales volume. Since the promotion lasts for a short period, people tend to respond positively as their mind is set that the price is below the market price (Stanforth, Lennon, & Shin, 2001).

McDonald (1987, as cited in Abdul Jamak et al., 2014) revealed that 80% of well performing small businesses resulted from the capability of entrepreneurs in offering promotions. The importance of promotion is clearly emphasised in the third step of the AIDA model, in which promotional tools should be used to inform and convince people to purchase the product (Hassan et al., 2015; Ismail et al., 2009). This notion strongly justifies the need to assess marketing activities, which may lead to s-commerce success.

In offline context, the theory of promotion emphasises on increasing sales within short period (Jallow & Dastane, 2016). Thus, entrepreneurs should apply various sales promotion tools, such as price reduction, free gift, coupon, and contest (Hassan et al., 2015; Hopkins, 2012; Jallow & Dastane, 2016; Stanforth et al., 2001) to increase sales. Since sales promotion tool addresses different specific aims and target audience, business owners must wisely learn before deciding on which promotion tool(s) to be deployed especially when resources are in scarcity (Barringer & Ireland, 2008; Blattberg & Briesch, 2010; Kotler & Armstrong, 2012), besides ascertaining its fruitfulness. The contribution of sales promotions has been empirically supported (Balaghar et al., 2012). Brown (1974, as cited in Kotler, 1988) found that sales promotion could result in higher sales than advertising (Margolis, 1963). Amongst the tools for sales promotion applied by entrepreneurs in Facebook are price discount and free gift (Chandon et al., 2000; Orzan et al., 2013). In the apparel industry, gift with purchase strategy or free gift is a common method (Stanforth et al., 2001).

2.4 Attention, Interest, Desire, and Action (AIDA) Model

The AIDA model was adopted in this study to link sales promotion variables and s-commerce success. The AIDA model stems from the theory of communication introduced by E. St. Elmo Lewis in 1898 (Hassan et al., 2015). The AIDA model is a classical marketing model that is widely applied in marketing strategies for conventional and online marketing methods (Hassan et al., 2015; Jallow & Dastane, 2016). Nonetheless, the applicability of AIDA in social media marketing for small business is still untapped (Hassan et al., 2015). Hassan et al., (2015) claimed that many entrepreneurs have yet to notice the power of social media for effective marketing.

The AIDA model offers guideline about promotion and strategy to achieve promotion objectives (Jallow & Dastane, 2016). The steps embedded in this model to ensure the efficacy of promotional strategies are Attention, Interest, Desire, and Action – the AIDA model. Hassan et al., (2015) applied the AIDA model as marketing and sales strategies in social media by applying all the four steps. First, grasp public attention on the existence of the product. Second, create interest amidst potential customers to know more about the product. Third, create desire among customers to purchase as the product satisfies their demands. Finally, create facilities for customers to take action in making the purchase.

Within the e-marketing domain, studies conducted by Hassan et al., (2015) seem to be the closest to describe online entrepreneurs' business performance in s-commerce. With particular emphasis on the Desire step, they discovered that price discount and free gifts were often deployed as sales promotion activities but seek further empirical investigation. Both variables were also noted in other studies as the widely applied sales promotion tools for businesses in the Facebook (Chandon et al., 2000; Orzan et al., 2013). Hence, this study empirically assessed these sales promotion types (price discount and free gifts) to examine their correlation online entrepreneurs' business performance in s-commerce.

2.5 Price Discount and Free Gift

Price discount refers to the price reduced below market price for a temporary period (Blattberg & Briesch, 2010; Combe, 2006). As such, this study refers price discount as the degree of an entrepreneur's inclination to offer their products at a price lower than the market price. In retailing, price discount is the key of promotion, which enables most businesses to increase their sales (Blattberg & Briesch, 2010; Foubert et al., & Rolef, 2017). Sometimes discounts are offered for the purpose of clearing outdated stock and reducing overstock (Turban et al., 2015). The discount depth contributes to store traffic, which in turn, escalates sales and profit (Blattberg & Briesch, 2010; Turban et al., 2015). Customers favour price reduction over free gift promotion in reaping price-saving benefit (Foubert et al., 2017; Stanforth et al., 2001).

Price discount, particularly offered during special occasion, is effective in increasing sales volume (Balaghar et al., 2012). In the Facebook platform, discounts offered by a business increase the "Likes" by viewers, thus promoting better sales (Kwok & Yu, 2016). Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that the price discount variable contributes to s-commerce success.

Price discount has been empirically proven to successfully increase sales and profits, hence lead to business success (Foubert et al., 2017; Jallow & Dastane, 2016; Kuzic, Fisher, & Scollary, 2002; Turban et al., 2015). In Malaysia, price discount is amongst the most influential factor that can increase sales volume for retailer (Jallow & Dastane, 2016). Foubert et al., (2017) asserted that when discount is offered to a national brand (compared to private brand), business owners experience very strong purchasing effect, mainly because during this discount period, the price is inexpensive to price-sensitive buyers. Facebook has facilitated in boosting sales for discounted items as the promotion is instantly dispersed. For instance, Protect & Gamble had sold 1,000 units of pampers within an hour of launching big discount in the Facebook (Turban et al., 2015). This proves that business owners can make extra sales by using the discount strategy in Facebook.

The second sales promotion type highlight in this study is free gift. Free gifts refer to the degree of an entrepreneur's inclination to offer his/her customers a gift upon product purchase. A business owner often applies non-price promotion approach, such as free gift or premium promotions, to replace price promotion (Darke & Chung, 2005; Foubert et al., 2017). This strategy applies the concept whereby gift is awarded when a consumer makes a purchase. The gift can be related or non-related to the product. In the eye of consumers, two products are purchased for the payment of one (Stanforth et al., 2001).

According to Goldsmith and Goldsmith (2002), online apparel buyers sought secure, quick, and fun buying experience when purchasing apparel via online platform. Darke and Chung (2005) asserted that each sales promotion type offers a different perception among customers for product quality. For instance, price reduction of a product is associated with negative customer perception towards the product quality. Meanwhile, giving away free gifts does not affect the consumers' perception towards product quality. Therefore, offering gifts increases the volume of transactions among quality-conscious customers.

Free gifts aid online apparel sellers to increase sales (Kim & Kim, 2004). Free gift has been proven to have a significant correlation with sales performance (Ahmad et al., 2015; Jallow & Dastane, 2016). Hence, it is reasonable to assume that offering free gifts to items sales can intensify the desire amongst customers, as this gives them the enjoyment in purchasing. Similar with price discount, once an entrepreneur posts free gift information, the promotion news will spread widely just in a few seconds, thus increasing the possibility to hike sales.

3. Method

3.1 Sample and Data Collection

This study assessed Muslim apparel businesses conducted via Facebook, as Muslim apparels and fashions are dominating online sales and are amongst the most purchased items online (Mohamad, 2020; The Edge Market, 2020). To measure business performance, entrepreneurs should be in operation on s-commerce for at least 2 years. In total, 306 questionnaires were gathered from 104 and 202 online and offline respondents, respectively. After discarding questionnaires that did not meet the following criteria: (1) less than 2 years of experience in entrepreneurship, and (2) selling products other than Muslim clothing and apparel, missing value, and outlier; only 169 questionnaires were analysed.

3.2 Measures and Validity

The dependent variable employed in this study is online entrepreneur's business performance, which was measured using two items retrieved from Ainin et al., (2015) and a global item. As for the independents variables; price discount (3 items) and free gift (3 items), the items were constructed based on prior work (see Combe, 2006; Foubert et al., 2017; Hassan et al., 2015; Jallow & Dastane, 2016; Stanforth et al., 2001). The items were checked for content validity. This study had sought two academicians from two public universities in Malaysia, who are experts in s-commerce and entrepreneurship domains, to gain their opinions and advice on the suitability of the items used to measure the constructs. The questionnaire was refined based on their feedback. Next, a pilot test was conducted prior to the actual data collection process by involving 30 respondents. No refinement was made as no issue was highlighted.

Data obtained from the pilot study were analysed using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) to measure the reliability of the instruments. The Cronbach's Alpha values (0.783 for price discount, 0.971 for free gift, and 0.985 for s-commerce success) were accepted as reliable, as prescribed by Hair et al., (2007). This study had employed the IBM SPSS Statistics version 22.0 and the SmartPLS3.0 software packages for data analysis purposes.

4. Results and Discussion

This study applied descriptive analysis to present the details of respondents' profile and business demographic. Table 1 presents the details of demographic profile for this study. Most of the respondents were 21-30 years old (43.2%) while the least were more than 60 years old (1.2%). More female entrepreneurs (78.1%) were involved in this study than males. Most of the respondents had completed secondary school (40.8%), followed by those who had completed primary school (35.5%). Only 1.8% of the respondents had earned a degree and 3.0% had never attended school. Interestingly, most of the respondents had entrepreneurship experience for 2-4 years (58.6%) and the number of respondents gradually decreased as the years of entrepreneurship experience increased. The least respondents (3.6%) had 14-16 years of entrepreneurship experience.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents

Demographic	Category	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Age	Below 20	8	4.7
	21-30	73	43.2
	31-40	57	33.7
	41-50	20	11.8
	51-60	9	5.3
	Above 60	2	1.2
Gender	Male	37	21.9
	Female	132	78.1
Ethnicity	Malay	161	95.3
	Chinese	6	3.6
	India	0	0.0
	Others	1	0.6
	No response	1	0.6
Education level	Never attended school	5	3.0
	Primary school	60	35.5
	Secondary school	69	40.8
	Certificate/diploma	32	18.9
	Degree	3	1.8
Entrepreneurship experience	2 - 4 years	99	58.6
	5 - 7 years	36	21.3
	8 - 10 years	20	11.8
	11 - 13 years	8	4.7
	14 - 16 years	6	3.6

Table 2 tabulates information pertaining to business demographic. Most of the business establishments can be classified into two groups; less than 4 years (40.8%) and 4-6 years (30.8%). More than half (59.2%) of the respondents ran their business operations on full-time basis, while the rest (40.8%) were operating on a part-time basis. Many respondents sold more than one type of Muslim apparel product. The product items sold based on frequency are listed as follows: shawl (32.7%), *baju kurung* or *kebaya* (21.0%), *jubah* (17.1%), prayer clothing (13.8%), *baju Melayu* (11.7%), and others (3.6%). A majority of the respondents (67.5%) had registered their business with the Securities Commission Malaysia (legal business registration); while 31.4% of the respondents claimed that they would do so later.

Table 2: Business Demographic Profile

Demographic	Category	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Year of establishment	Below 4 years	69	40.8
	4-6 years	52	30.8
	7-9 years	20	11.8
	Above 9 years	28	16.6
Mode of business	Full time	100	59.2
	Part time	69	40.8
Business registration status	Registered	114	67.5
	Will register later	53	31.4
	No response	2	1.2
Type of product sold	<i>Baju kurung</i> or <i>kebaya</i>	70	21.0
	Shawl	109	32.7
	Prayer Clothing	46	13.8
	<i>Jubah</i>	57	17.1
	<i>Baju Melayu</i>	39	11.7
	Others	12	3.6

Table 3 presents the results of path coefficients, p-value, and t-value for this study. As this study had positive direction for variables such as price discount and free gift with online entrepreneurs' business performance, one-tailed test was applied at t-value 1.28 ($p < 0.1$). Results provided empirical evidence that price discount \rightarrow online entrepreneurs' business performance was significantly positive with its path coefficient at 0.303 ($p\text{-value} = 0.001$). Next, the path coefficient for free gift \rightarrow online entrepreneurs' business performance was weak at -0.030 ($p\text{ value} = 0.368$), thus the relationship was insignificant.

Table 3: Path Coefficients and Significance Testing Results

Coefficient Path	Path coefficients	P Values	Significant
Price discount \rightarrow online entrepreneurs' business performance	0.303	0.001	Yes
Free gift \rightarrow online entrepreneurs' business performance	-0.030	0.368	No

This study had empirically tested the relationships of price discount and free gift with online entrepreneur's business performance in the context of s-commerce. The study results have verified that price discount is significant to the business performance of online entrepreneurs. This is in congruence with other empirical studies that contended price discount increased sales and profits (Foubert et al., 2017; Jallow & Dastane, 2016; Kuzic et al., 2002; Turban et al., 2015). This study supports competitive pricing as an antecedent for success. This is consistent with the AIDA model, where promotion strategy (special discount) generates desire, thus leading consumers to change their status from "like" to "want" in order to own the product (Hassan et al., 2015). This suggests that price discount is indeed an effective sales promotion strategy that can influence customers' interest, which in turn, leads to purchase of the product.

As practical implication, based on the study outcomes, Malaysians are mostly price-sensitive consumers. Price discount was the most preferred strategy amongst retailers in Malaysia to benefit from extra sales (Jallow & Dastane, 2016). Price discount escalates sales volume, thus expanding the profit for online entrepreneurs. The practical implication put forward here is that entrepreneurs should use price discount as their sales strategy to enhance their business sales particularly in the market that customers are price sensitive. Online entrepreneurs should grab the opportunity of doubling, or even tripling, their sales during festive season, wedding fever, payroll weeks, and other important events, wherein people shop in flocks to purchase new apparel collection. Purchases and sales substantially escalate during the abovementioned season. In addition, indirectly by doing this strategy, customers will keep following the entrepreneur's post on Facebook while waiting for upcoming offers.

While this study revealed the insignificant correlation between free gift and online entrepreneur business performance. Jallow and Dastane (2016) reported that free gift had positively influenced purchase among Malaysian buyers. The result did not support the idea that free gift increased sales (Darke & Chung, 2005). The first possible explanation to this unsupported relationship is that offering free gift reflects payment for two products under one price, especially when the gift is unsold or an outdated product that the seller wishes to get rid of from the stock. Customers do not feel this benefits them, but more on sellers' side. Second, the free gift offering may not be desired by the customer, thus failing to intensify purchase intention among them.

5. Conclusion

This study had determined the relationships between marketing tools (price discount and free gift) and online entrepreneurs business performance within the context of s-commerce. In light of the sales promotion factors, pricing strategy, particularly price discount, emerged as the most fruitful strategy in s-commerce platform, when compared to free gifts offering. Hence, entrepreneurs should place emphasis on pricing strategy in promoting sales.

This study has limitation where this data gathered from one single respondent type - the entrepreneurs themselves. Therefore, future research may assess perceptions from other parties. Customer perceptions should be weighed in as well, as they are equally as essential as the entrepreneurs in the context of s-commerce. This should offer better explanation about the factors that contribute to online entrepreneurs in the s-commerce platform. Additionally, doing so may verify the consistency of perceptions between entrepreneurs and consumers.

Finally, as this study empirically revealed pricing strategy, emerged as the most fruitful strategy in s-commerce platform but it should be noted that price discount is temporary in nature. Online entrepreneurs should alternate it with other suitable marketing activities. This study did not examine the other marketing strategies related to financial aspect such as free delivery and instalment payments. Thus, it is recommended for next research agenda to study on the relationships of these two strategies with online entrepreneurs' business performance.

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