Engaging Gen Y Through Social Network Sites

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ABSTRACT

Social networking sites are able to build on the interactive power of the Internet. This study attempts to discover the influence of social media on the present generation Y as consumers, their buying behaviour and to determine the roles that the social media plays as a popular medium to communicate a message. The findings of this research will provide clear and useful information to facilitate further research in similar fields of study. A set of questionnaire was administered to 200 students from ten selected institutions of higher learning in the Klang Valley. The respondents were asked about their current perceptions regarding their interaction with the social media websites and how these websites have influenced their purchasing behaviour which would enable further understanding about the social media. The respondents' responses show that, generally social media was used to seek useful information. They prefer to purchase in groups and the social media acts as a community platform to post and share their views. The respondents agreed that social media was more effective in finding information as compared to the use of the traditional mass media. Viral advertising in the form of videos are very appealing to them. Furthermore, social media also improves customers' service and business networking.

Keywords: *Social network, media, generation Y*

INTRODUCTION

Neff (2010) discovered that companies and brands now have Facebook pages with their own brand profiles just like any other Facebook member. Facebook fan pages for these brands engage consumers who have queries or who are loyal users. Binkley (2009) stated that in certain market such as fashion, 65 percent of online apparel sales are to women over the age of 35. The fastest growing segment of Facebook users are women over the age of 55. One of the trends referred to as Web 2.0 in which it calls for attention to shift the control of the media from the publisher to the consumer. Users today are not only viewing and interacting, they are also contributing and taking control of the content. Due to this, user-generated content has a great impact on traditional media.

Online users have expanded rapidly over the years from sites appealing to young tech-savvy innovators to sites that devote to just about any age or interest groups. The most sought after audience on the Internet continues to be young people, particularly young males who are hard to reach with traditional media where teens spend more time online than any other groups. A study by Friedman (2010) indicated that the largest Internet market in China has 400 million

users where 200 million of them have broadband. Kotler and Zaltman (1971) stated that social marketing combines social policy and marketing practices to achieve a set of social behavioural goals within a target audience. Borges (2009), Safko and Brake (2009), Handley, Meerman and Chapman (2010) noted that social media is concerned with communication and collaboration while social media marketing is concerned with marketing activities done via social media.

Social media marketing seeks to achieve marketing communication objectives through customers' involvement in various social media. Many large companies utilise social network tools to create good relationships with their customers. A key activity is to engage customers in improving the company's operations by soliciting ideas and discussing them. Social media acts as a huge suggestion box. The main objective is to increase the flow of interested visitors both to the physical and the virtual sites. By using special promotions and rewards, many companies are able to attract significant numbers of customers that would lead to improving revenue and profits since embarking on social media projects. In addition, utilizing social media for marketing, advertisement, customer service, market research and social entertainment are the major trend in social media. Harris and Rae (2009) reported that social media and networking are new technological skills that influence the way people exchange information so much so that social networking is quickly becoming a desirable job skill.

Leggatt (2010) found that in July 2010 there were over 700,000 and in February 2011, close to 850,000 small businesses with Facebook Fan pages, while LinkedIn's network exceeds 90 million members. In addition, almost 70 percent of all companies worldwide use some form of social networking to promote their company. Leggatt confirmed that social commerce results in significant monetary and strategic benefits to businesses. Moreover, over 40 percent of businesses globally found new customers via social networks and over 27 percent of companies invest in social networking in order to acquire and retain customers. Most Web 2.0 applications have a rich, interactive, user-friendly interface based on Ajax (Asynchronous JavaScript) and XML. The intent is to make Web pages feel more responsive by exchanging small amounts of data with the server behind the scenes so that the entire Web page does not have to be reloaded each time the user makes a change. This is meant to increase the Web pages' interactivity, loading speed and usability.

Web 2.0 tools and social networks are changing the way people communicate, collaborate, work and live. Companies are able to spread their messages, make contact with customers, and build relationships on Facebook. Since Facebook has more than one billion active users, companies can no longer afford to ignore the service as a major marketing channel (M.G., 2012). According to Turban, Sharda, Aronson and King (2011), since March 2010, there were more Internet visits to Facebook than to Google in US. Facebook's membership exceeded 750 million (worldwide in June 2012), aiming at $1 billion in annual revenue. Groupon, the leader in group-buying social shopping, had annual revenue of 4500 million in its second year. This prompted Google to offer 46 billion to acquire the sites in October 2010. However, Groupon rejected the offer. Meeker, Devitt and Wu (2010) stated that social network is the main way of communication, replacing email. Bernoff and Li (2008) claimed that about 25 percent of all Internet users are engaged in social activities and this percentage is increasing rapidly.

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010, p.59) define social media as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, which allows the creation and exchange of user generated content." Today, businesses also view social media as consumer-generated media. Social media is a communication mechanism that allows

users to communicate with thousands, and perhaps billions of individuals all over the world (Williams, Crittenden, Keo & McCarty, 2012).

This study offers some insights into the role of social media in influencing the generation Y's buying behaviour. The next section discusses literature review of the effectiveness of social media towards generation Y. Then, the methodology for this study is outlined. A section on findings first gives a brief profile of respondents followed by discussion on the factors that influence their behaviour. Finally, conclusions and recommendations are offered.

Problem statement

The aim of this study is to determine if the social media can be an alternative medium to influence generation Y buying behaviour in Malaysia. In the past, the traditional mass media was used by companies to promote their products and services. Some companies still use the traditional mass media such as newspapers, magazines, radio and television for their marketing strategy.

This study hopes to discover the effectiveness of social media as a marketing tool for companies and how the effectiveness of social media can be realised. Through the researcher's empirical experience in the advertising industry, it is very expensive and time consuming to build brands through advertising in the traditional mass media. This is because the charges are extremely high for their advertisement columns. The charges for print advertisement will depend on the number of columns and colours used.

Besides this, many processes are involved to produce an effective advertisement. It is even more expensive for companies to advertise via air time on television. Charges will depend on the various time slots selected. Due to the high cost involved, only large and financially rich companies are able to utilise this media. Many small-and-medium-size educational companies will have to resort to more affordable advertising and marketing media such as participating in road shows and exhibitions.

Alternatively, when using the Internet, companies would find the cost of advertising cheaper as compared to advertising through the traditional mass media. According to Catterall, Mclaran and Stevens (2002), time spent on preparation of an Internet advertisement is also shorter. This is one of the aspects that the study wants to put forward in this research study which deals strictly on the issues of the how effective social media is used to influence buying behaviour in this country.

Research questions

The research questions for this research study were designed as follows:-
1)   Can social media influence generation Y's buying behaviour?
2)   Can social media be an effective medium to communicate messages to generation Y?

Purpose of the study

The objectives of this research study are:
1.   To determine whether social media can influence generation Y's buying behaviour.
2.   To determine whether the utilisation of social media is a preferred medium to communicate messages to generation Y.

Significance of the project

The findings of this study will benefit people who are already in business regardless of whether they are marketers or advertisers. Marketers would benefit from this study through gaining information that might help them make their informed decisions. Information has been until now, made easily available through the social media. Companies could have a competitive advantage if they could brand themselves appropriately. Web and multimedia designers could have a better understanding of how to further enhance their websites or multimedia designs. This is due to the fact that this study will hopefully help them in their efforts in developing an effective way to influence and communicate messages to the generation Y. There is, therefore, increasing importance in providing continuity and customer commitment in a fast moving market place.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Facebook receives its income from companies that want to access members through marketing and advertising activities on the website (Lilley, Grodzinsky and Gumbus, 2012). There is a rapid increase in the usage of smartphones and tablets and this has also made social media much more important (Yang, 2012). According to Kaplan (2012), 90 percent of Americans currently have their own cell phones and a third of these are smart phones. The development of these devices is motivated by the need to have continuous access to the internet. This strong desire has become an important part of our lives (Kaplan, 2012). Social media affects the friends' attitudes towards the company or product. If the consumers write positive comments about certain brands, those brands benefit by the effect that the comments have on that consumers' friends (Seung-A, 2012).

Strategic Direction (2012) considers it a major advantage if customers can communicate with a company using Facebook as a marketing channel. Marketing in social media offers companies the opportunity to provide increased customer service (Strategic Direction, 2012).

Stephen and Tuobia (2010) define social commerce as a form of Internet based social media that allows people to participate actively in the marketing and selling of products and services in online marketplaces and communities. Dennison, Bourdage, and Chetuparambil (2009) stated that social commerce is the concept of word of mouth applied to e-commerce and it is the marriage of a retailer's products and the interaction of shoppers with content. Marsden (2009) definitions include social commerce's properties (such as word of mouth, trusted advice, buying with the help of friends). Wells, Burnett and Moriarty (2000) divided the various sources of messages that consumers can receive about an organisation's products into three major categories: the "planned" or "controlled", the "uncontrolled" and the "often unconsidered". Messages created by real customers reflect the genuine feelings of product users and as such are more credible and more effective than messages created by advertising agencies (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008).

Most members see Facebook as a free-service network; however, as Lilley *et al*. (2012) points out, they are still affected by advertising from companies. For example, banners and ads on Facebook encourage users to click on them, and spend money to buy the company's products.

According to Park and Cho (2012), a substantial amount of marketing information is spread through word of mouth. A study on social networking sites shows that 64 percent of users visit a site on the internet if they see that one of their friends did the same (Palmer & Koenig-Lewis, 2009).

In fact with the planned sources, most marketers and advertisers have full control over the key message, when and how the message will be presented and to their potential customers. The unplanned (and therefore "uncontrolled") sources of messages (word-of-mouth, gossip, internet chat-rooms, etc.) can be more influential than the planned sources (Bone, 1995). Definition of Web 2.0 offered by Kennedy *et al.* (2007) refers to a loose collection of "second generation" web-based technologies and services, many of which are designed to facilitate collaboration and sharing between users. Internet marketing tactics include banner advertising, sponsorships, pop-ups or unders, links, paid searches and so forth (Belch and Belch, 2007). But the Web 2.0 environment has provided organisations with a broad range of new tools and strategies for communicating with their customers, and marketers can capitalize on these developments in different ways by actively or passively engaging in the use of these applications as part of their overall marketing strategy. Constantinides and Fountain (2008) suggested how organisations can make use of web 2.0 applications as a means of reaching and informing customers and online opinion leaders (Bloggers, Podcasters, etc.) about their products, services and new market offers.

METHODOLOGY

A survey was conducted through the administration of questionnaire. Respondents were students from private institutions of higher learning in Malaysia. The questions asked touched on the following areas: a) respondent's personal characteristics and b) factors influencing perception of social media towards their buying behaviour and communicating messages. The investigated variables includes source of social commerce via social media. A total of 200 respondents, all of them fulltime students enrolled in Malaysian private institutions of higher learning participated in this study. The sample came from ten institutions of higher learning (Table 1).

The questionnaire consisted of 10 items along two categories; included basic usage assessment, factors associated with social media, personal behavioural tendencies and frequencies associated with social media applications. Responses were rated on a five-point Likert scale. On the basis of the questions related to behavioural tendencies and social media usage, two main constructs emerged. The first one concerned sense of community/emotional connection, includes questions such as being proud to tell people he/she is in a social media and part of the community. According to Mangold and Faulds (2009), consumers feel more engaged with products and organizations when they are able to submit feedback. This may come in the form of criticism, accolade, or helpful suggestions. But taken as a whole, this feedback contributes to a sense of community in which honest, open communications are encouraged and customer engagement is enhanced. Also, could not resist and tend to be logged on to social media apps first when connected to the Internet. The second part concerned everyday usage, including questions such as social media is part of their everyday activity to keep update on any current events and happening, and social media provides a good way to connect with people and getting first hand information besides any other media. In addition to the basic demographic questions, a few questions related to general computer and internet availability and usage patterns were included. Table 2 shows the respondents profile.

Table 1: List of Higher Educational Institutions and Number of Students Involved in the Research.

NO	Names of institutions of higher learning involved in the research	Number of students involved
1	New INTI International University	20
2	Selangor University (UNISEL)	20
3	Limkokwing University	20
4	New Era University College	20
5	KDU University College	20
6	Monash University	20
7	Segi University	20
8	Upper Iowa University (Malaysian campus)	20
9	Sunway University	20
10	Taylors University	20
	Total number of respondents	200

Table 2: Respondents' profile

Age	Frequency (N=200)	Percentage (%)
Above 18 and 19	91	45.5%
20 and 21	80	40%
22 and 23	18	9%
24 and above	11	5.5%

Monthly Family Income		
RM 1000 or less	1	0.5
RM 1001 - 2500	13	6.5
RM 2501 - 4000	12	6
RM 4001 - 6000	36	18
RM 6001 or More	138	69

Academic Qualification		
SPM	120	60
STPM/A-Level	10	5
Diploma	40	20
Bachelors degree	28	14
Others	2	1

A confirmatory factor analysis and comparison of means were conducted to examine the goodness-of-fit of the measurement model. These were carried out to establish the factors for respondents in selecting social media that influence their buying behaviour and as a medium to communicate messages.

RESULTS

The seven most commonly used social media in this study are Facebook, Twitter, Blogs, YouTube, LinkedIn, Flickr and Four Square. Respondents included Four Square for professional purposes. This is a web and mobile application that provides only registered users to connect with others and update their location. Facebook, Twitter, Youtube and LinkedIn are considered the most well known applications in this sample (Table 3).

Table 3: List of Preferred Social Media Applications Usage

NO	Social Media Application	Percentage of most preferred
1	Facebook	51%
2	Youtube	32%
3	Twitter	7%
4	LinkedIn	5%
5	Blogs	2%
6	Flickers	1%
7	Foursquare	1%
8	Others	1%

Overall, these results indicate the general use of Web 2.0 applications in the global population as a whole. Generally, Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn are considered the most used by thousands. Studies have shown that 88 percent of marketers are using social media and that they are spending over $60 billion annually on social media advertising (Gil-Or, 2010; Smith, 2011). Therefore, the widespread popularity of social media platforms has attracted advertisers and marketers. The widespread and growing usage of these social media specifically for marketing purposes has been highlighted in the findings of a number of surveys. This include the study by Stelzner (2010) who noted that these three applications, followed by blogs, were by far the tools used most extensively by marketers.

General tendencies and patterns

All respondents reported to have at least one computer and Internet access in their homes. The majority of respondents agreed that the home was the place where most of the daily internet usage takes place. All the participants spent more than 3.5 hours on the internet each day. Majority of the participants reported memberships in various social media sites, such as Facebook, Twitter LinkedIn and Youtube. The average Facebook user is active for 32 min a day and most log on to the site at least once every day (Park and Cho, 2012).

However the study discovered that Facebook is one of their favourite sites. The study showed that 51 percent of the respondents reported that they visited their Facebook account more than five times per day, and 55 percent of the participants admitted to have at least over 300 Facebook friends. Table 4 provides the descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations for basic usage patterns for social media.

Table 4: Respondents Usage Pattern for social media

	Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1	Communication Tool for Social Interaction	3.83	0.58	(0.74)				
2	Information seeking and Sharing	3.40	0.75	0.62 *	(0.82)			
3	Entertainment	3.46	0.54	0.45**	0.58 **	(0.80)		
4	Leisure Time	3.51	0.73	0.65 **	0.61	0.56 **	(0.84)	
5	Expression of Opinion	2.26	0.72	20.08	0.02	20.06	20.11	(0.86)

Notes: *Significant at p< 0.05, **p < 0.01; n ¼ 52; internal reliabilities (*a* coefficients) for the overall dimensions

Variables Influencing Respondents' Perception Towards Social Media

A comparison of means was performed to statistically analyze the responses from respondents to evaluate the order of importance of the criteria influencing the perception towards social media. Table 5 lists only the variables that influence respondents' perception. Generally, respondents were found to favour online shopping experience, online buying decision and trust built towards the products and services offered by the company with mean values of 4.58, 4.51 and 4.43 respectively. The lowest ranking variable influencing institution choice with a mean value of 3.9 was social media for entertainment. This supposedly is the least of the respondents' concerns, as they were all willing to gain alternative entertainment via others apps or websites.

The factors affecting respondents' perception are indicated in Table 6. Based on chi-square results, the study shows that eight items were significant in affecting the respondents' perception towards social media and also found to be significant at 0.1 levels. The eight items were seeking and sharing information, group purchasing, social forum, online community, viral advertising and promotion, online video, social experience and opinions, individual experience, enhance relationships, improvise customer service and creating business networking.

Table 5: List of Variables Influencing Respondents' Perceptions Towards Social Media

NO	Variables influencing perceptions of social media	Mean Value
1	Online Shopping Experience via social media	4.58
2	Online Buying Decision via social media evaluation	4.51
3	Build Trust via social media recommendation	4.43
4	Social Advertising & Promotion	4.38
5	Social Networking	4.25
6	Social Customers Service	4.16
7	Social Commerce	4.12
8	Social Media for Entertainment	3.9

Table 6: Chi-Square Results of Social Media Impacts on Generation Y Buying Behaviour Characteristics

Characteristics	Chi-square	Significance
Seeking and sharing information	1.978	0.046*
Group purchasing	1.835	0.044*
Social Forum	1.815	0.043*
Online community	1.805	0.041*
Viral Advertising and Promotion	1.766	0.036*
Online Video	1.745	0.038*
Social expression of opinions	1.727	0.035*
Individual experience	1.725	0.034*
Enhance relationship	1.722	0.033*
Improvise customer service	1.721	0.032*
Build business networking	1.720	0.030*

Statistically significant factors

Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to explore various aspects associated with the influence of social media on the target market to purchase a certain brand. The study found that prior to performing a purchase via the social media, the buyer preferred to seek and share information such as what products and service are offered and could be purchased. In this way, users can publish their own information, share it with others, and receive information about other people's lives. This leads to a form of collaboration which creates new content (Coulter & Roggeveen, 2012).

Through social media the target market also considers group purchasing offering discounts or special deals during a short time frame as important. The study suggests that group purchases are possible via social media. Group community platforms are able to connect people with each other and sometimes to experts to give advice and businesses are also essential for the target market. Forums and communities are effective, popular and useful for the generation Y. All these can be integrated into social media to allow personal messaging and status updates where one is able to create an increased sense of "group". This will facilitate purchasing decisions primarily by allowing members to share reliable and trusted information with one another. Ideas boards such as online suggestion and discussion boards to capture constructive

feedback, and user powered Q&A forums for customer supports are fundamental qualities considered important for generation Y communities.

In addition, generation Y is especially interested at viral advertising and promotion. The research shows that word of mouth advertising is effective. Whatever they like can spread very quickly at a minimal cost to the company's advertisers. This is in line with Clifford (2010), who states that social media increases customer loyalty. This is where the nature of location based marketing changes to be social, entertaining and rewarding; where advertisement comes as an add-on service. Generation Y also finds that online video advertisement appeals to them. This is consistent with the study by Turban *et. al.* (2012) who states that viral video is growing rapidly mainly due to the popularity of YouTube and similar sites. Online video is growing at nearly 40 per cent annually while TV viewing continues to fall. Furthermore, generation Y assumes that Twitter and some other micro blogging sites have also influenced their buying behaviour. This is because these sites provide lists of fans and friends where seller can reach out to them via strong word of mouth. According to Learnmonth (2011), Twitter is becoming a little more of a business. MacMillan (2010) stated that Twitter is already the world's third-largest social networking platform (about 200 million registered users) and may reach 1 billion followers in a few years. On the other hand, generation Y feels that social media will be more effective in promoting products as compared to the traditional media. This is in line with the study by Patel (2011) where a Nielsen study of iPhone users compared Apple's ads against similar TV ads.

In fact the study also discovers that generation Y is interested to express their opinions regarding their experience with products and services. This is supported by Gogoi's (2007) study that retailers know that customers, especially the younger and more Net-savvy ones, want to be heard and they also want to hear what others say about them. Increasingly, retailers are opening up their websites to customers, letting them post product reviews, ratings and in some cases photos and videos. Customer reviews are emerging as a prime place for online shoppers to visit.

The study also shows that the full view of generation Y is meant to help create individual customer experiences and improvise customer relations. It is found that these activities generate a considerable amount of data that needs to be analyzed. This is to ensure the management can conduct better marketing campaigns such as product design and service offered. By analyzing the information in social media, it can be used as a basis for marketing advertising strategies. Based on the study by Jayanti (2010), it was found that owing to customers untainted, unfiltered and unbiased nature, online consumer conversations have the potential to help marketers discover the right questions to conduct market research and to understand emerging issues, follow brand sentiments, benchmark companies against major competitors, detect damaging issues or rumours, spur product development, gather product suggestions, and discover alternate uses and enhancements volunteered by consumers. This analysis can provide organizations with a holistic view of consumer perceptions.

Generally, the study also shows that generation Y agreed that social media enhances good customers service. The study by Bernoff and Schadler (2010) stated that one angry tweet can torpedo a brand, but one tweet can correct a problem. Companies are afraid of the negative comments posted by social network members, but they see an opportunity to involve customers proactive to reduce problems by improving customers service (Baker 2010). According to Ogneva (2010), companies can improve customers' loyalty, make their own customers happier, and get more respect from customers. The findings of this research indicated that consumers' social media is a platform for building good business network. Overall, the respondents perceived the importance of good relationships between sellers and buyers. Respondents agreed

that social networking sites enable a new method of communication between different people. This is in line with the study of Bughin and Chui (2010) where social networking can be done by business either in public or in private social networks. They perceived that business network that is built on social relationships and can exist offline or online. Valentine (2010) elaborated that 57 percent of U.S. companies implemented enterprise social media for business purposes. This can fundamentally alter how businesses interact with employees, customers and partners. Commercial activities related to social networks are on the rise. There are an increasing number of companies engaged in business-oriented social networking, especially in the area related to marketing and operations. Hence, this creates good business opportunities through social network for business people.

Social media could be the next alternative business model for companies that allow them to track and trace users and to process their data. Today, social media are able to reach their members and even non members. This is due to the extensive web coverage where, social media has a potential connection with all web users.

LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

The limitations of this study include the respondents' self-report approach used in the survey. Self-report may results in the respondents providing socially acceptable responses rather than their actual views. The research was confined to a limited number of respondents from ten institutions of higher learning in the Klang Valley using convenience sampling to facilitate data collection. Greater geographical coverage would allow richer data where generalization on the findings can be done more accurately.
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