An Exploratory Study on Consumer Engagement to Corporate Sponsored Links in Mauritius

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ABSTRACT

This pioneering exploratory study is focused on of the leading African economy Mauritius which is considered to be a gateway to African Markets by corporate. Research aims of the exploratory study to understand consumer perspectives to sponsored links and their engagement trusting belief in information and recommendations provided by the sponsor and its usefulness to the online buyers. To provide insight into consumer engagement for sponsored links and responsiveness of online consumers to company`s e-marketing efforts to create consumer awareness and consumer engagement to attract and win over the consumer in the highly competitive Internet marketplace in African continent by using Netnography qualitative research methodology. The research identifies the factors influencing the online consumer engagement and consumer behaviour provides a guide line to the sponsors around. An attempt has been made to identify online consumer motives in consumer engagement to help the e- marketers to optimize the utility of online marketing. The conceptual base of consumer engagement, consumer motives and corporate blogging are drawn through a literature review. The working definitions of "online consumer engagement," "online consumer motives" "corporate blogging" and "company's social media pages" are the result of critical literature review. The paper studies 5 principles of consumer engagement, consumer motives to find its utility in Mauritius. The paper discusses corporate blogging and company social media pages in Mauritian context. In addition to academic conclusions key managerial and corporate implications are discussed. The critical approach used in the research may serve as vital point of reference for future research into internet marketing, which will certainly be useful considering the current trends and growth of African Markets. The findings suggest online consumers are less impressed with corporate online communication and hence corporate needs to redesign e-marketing strategies.

Keywords: Online Consumer Engagement, Online Consumer Motives, Corporate Blogging, Brand Social Pages, Managerial and Corporate Implications.

I. INTRODUCTION

This pioneering exploratory research is focused on of the leading African economy, Mauritius, which is considered to be a gateway to African markets by corporate in modern business world. This exploratory research aims to understand consumer perspectives of sponsored links and their belief in information and recommendations provided by the sponsor and its usefulness to the online readers. To provide insight into consumer engagement for sponsored links by using NVivo qualitative research methodology. The study analyses the responsiveness of online consumers to company`s e-marketing efforts to create consumer awareness and consumer engagement to attract and win over the consumer in the highly competitive Internet marketplace in African continent. The research provides a contribution to the theoretical debate around the factors influencing the online consumer engagement and consumer behaviour. The paper identifies online consumer motives in consumer engagement to help the e- marketers to optimize the utility of online marketing. The paper proceeds with a literature review addressing the conceptual roots of consumer engagement and define working definition of "online consumer engagement, "various principles of consumer engagement with broader process, and constituent sub-processes in consumer engagement. The critical analysis carried out to provide a vital point of reference for future research into internet marketing, which will certainly be useful considering the current trends and growth of African markets. Recent business practice discourse, including reports on conferences, seminars, roundtables, blogs, and organizational reports, provides evidence of the increasing usage of the term "engagement" in the context of business relationships and branding (Appelbaum, 2001).Consumer engagement is seen both as a strategic imperative for establishing and sustaining a competitive advantage, and as a valuable predictor of future business performance (Sedley, 2008). Specifically, Neff (2007) views consumer engagement as a primary driver of sales growth, while Voyles (2007) suggests consumer engagement enhances profitability. Despite extensive use of the term consumer

engagement scholars are not unanimous in defining the term. Critical evaluation leads to the conclusion that Consumer Engagement is not possible without "participation" and "involvement. Marketing Science Institute (MSI) identifies "customer engagement" as a key research area contributing to enhanced academic insight into consumer behaviour in complex, interactive and/or co-creative environments which is the focal point of this research paper.

II.   LITERATURE REVIEW

Main motives for using the internet as a medium of communication for e- marketing by the consumers are information, entertainment, and social aspects (Stafford and Schkade, 2004). Similar findings have been reported by Shao, 2009; Courtois et al., 2009 in the recent research on user-generated media, the researchers have identified three more motives uses namely community development, self-actualization, and self-expression in addition to information, entertainment, social interaction. Based the motives five types consumers who responds to sponsored links are Directed information seekers, Undirected information seekers, Directed buyers, Bargain hunters, Entertainment seekers (Breitenbach and Van Doren (1998). The corporate and managers who use this form of medium for brand promotion needs to understand the motives of these five groups of respondents and select the target group and design e-marketing strategies accordingly based on this the first research objective is built. Ashley et al. (2011) suggested that the relationship marketing theory as the broader conceptual lens through which to examine customer engagement. Vargo (2009) refers to this notion as "a transcending view of relationships." Transcending relational perspective recognizes that consumer engagement is centered interactive experiences which takes place either through either online and / or offline. Consumer engagement represents a highly context-dependent, motivational state characterized by a specific intensity level at a given point in time.

Nolan et al. (2007). Involvement is one of the most important base of consumer engagement and involvement is induced by an incentive or condition and has compelling assets. Its response factors are searching, processing and decision-making. Durvasula and Akhter (1990) planned a blueprint that looks closely at involvement in terms of antecedents, state properties, measures, related constructs, and consequences, while Hansen (1985) suggested that involvement is just the customer's likeliness of a product in a certain category. Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) states that the involvement makes a user experience positive results within the product's expressive values. Rothschild (1984) describes involvement as an unobservable state of motivation, arousal or interest". Consumer purchase decision is a result of an involvement of online consumers so in an online brand promotion it is essential to know the factors which are influencing consumer involvement to enhance consumer involvement in an online promotion to increase market share of a company in the competitive markets. However, what is lacking in existing research is a detailed investigation of the different factors responsible for higher consumer engagement Corporate Blogs –Online communication to promote products, services are carried out through corporate blogs in addition to communication with potential consumers it is used to drive public relations, and communicate effectively with employees or shareholders. Blogs provide an effective and efficient platform to drive traffic through search engine and social media optimization. Blogs have done for content what the assembly line did for modern manufacturing.

Unfortunately, due to lack of a comprehensive corporate blog strategy, most corporate blogs fail to achieve desired goals. Corporate blog is a blog that is published and used by an organization, corporation, etc. to reach its organizational goals. The advantage of blogs is that posts and comments are easy to reach and follow due to centralized hosting and generally structured conversation threads. The purposes of blogs are for brand building, customer service, product development) and promotion. Corporate blogs are written by employees or company's business partners. Promotional blog is the most important component of corporate blogging such blogs are sponsored blogs, used for advertising and promotion of products or services. The use of social media by many companies have proved that many workers still hesitate to connect to them due to privacy, security and trust issues. However, company blogs remain the main portal where users can interact freely with the administration of the company by posting reviews and communicating events and posts.

III.   RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A. WORKING DEFINITIONS

- **CONSUMER ENGAGEMENT:** Consumer engagement in e-marketing is the processes of continuous interaction in which consumer is involved in communication with link sponsor or as well as with and other members of sponsored link. Consumer engagement is dynamic and multidimensional.
- **CORPORATE BLOGGING:** The tool used to promote products, services by corporate in e- marketing in addition to communication with potential consumers it is used to drive public relations, and communicate effectively with employees or shareholders
- **SOCIAL BRAND PAGES:** The communication processes   to potential consumers using social media platforms.

B. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- R1 – To find uses of sponsored links by the users and categories users per use. (Courtois et al., 2009 in the recent research on user-generated media, the researchers have identified three more motives namely community development, self-actualization, and self-expression in addition to information, entertainment, social interaction.)
- R2 –To identify factors responsible for consumer engagement. (Identification and management of factors affecting consumer engagement will lead to consumer loyalty Justina Malciute, Polymeros Chrysochou)
- R3 - To find relevance of sponsored links to online users. (Mismatch in the perceptions of sponsors and users has been reported about sponsored and non-sponsored links by Jansen.)

C. RESEARCH APPROACH

- The Survey used for data collection was conducted between September – December 2016 which was focused on the perception of users towards sponsored links Blogs and corporate social web pages. The data was collected through online survey with 600 respondents of two categories IT professionals and students in the age group of 18-25 years from Mauritius. Consumers spending more than 3 hours daily are the target group as the time spent on internet has direct relation with consumer Engagement.

- **NETNOGRAPHY:** These working definitions provide the foundation to guide the empirical research that examines consumer engagement in sponsored links and company blogs. Netnography qualitative research method is used. Netnography is a qualitative research methodology introduced by Kozinets in 990 , which adapts ethnographic research techniques to study of online communities (Kozinets, 1997).Number of studies have adopted netnographic methodology to investigate consumers' online discussions, and examine the behaviour patterns of online user groups (e.g. Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001). The empirical data is analysed using simple statistical data analysis techniques. This pioneering empirical study examines consumer engagement to sponsored links, various factors of consumer`s non-response to the sponsored links. Using netnographic methodology the research explores the conceptualization. The exploratory research findings are validated using graphical technique. The level of consumer engagement online corporate communication is a major determinant of online consumer behaviour. According to Bolfing (1998), involvement result is the customer's ultimate concern with a purchase or consumption experience. Holbrook & Hirschman (1982) says that involvement include experiencing several positive results such as the rewards inherent in the product and the product's expressive values.

- **DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS:** In Mauritius, Facebook represents a big part of digital time, with YouTube usage higher amongst the younger population (15-19 yrs.) With 500 000 Mauritian users, Facebook owns the biggest share of Social Network – used by 37% of the population. Google Plus reaches only 5%, Twitter 4% and Instagram 2%. 123,000 Mauritians have a LinkedIn account and we noted that the daily usage is less than 1% for the Mauritian population.

- **EMPIRICAL FINDINGS:** The research highlights consumer engagement as a responsive experiential process, based on online user engagement with sponsored links and /or other bloggers. This finding provides support for Brodie et al.'s (2011) fundamental theme addressing the responsive and interactive experiential nature of the engagement concept, and distinguishes consumer engagement from other relational concepts, including involvement and participation.. Consumer engagement is an interactive process, which may emerge as a result of online user`s information need and faith and trust in the sponsored links, The intensity of depends on factors likeuser`sconsumer need for information, entertainment quality used in communication, brand image faith .This observation provides evidence to support Brodie et al.'s (2011) principles which states that transient engagement states occur within broader, dynamic, iterative engagement processes.

D. ANALYSIS

Table:1 Number of Hours Spent on Internet Primary Research

SR NO	NUMBER OF HOURS SPENT	% OF TOTAL RESPONDENTS
1	Less than 1	3
2	1-3	37
3	4-6	32
4	6-9	19
5	More than 10	9

360 respondents Spending more 4 hours are used for study

Table:2 Factors taken into consideration by respondents before responding to sponsored communications

SR NO	FACTORS CONSIDERED TO ENGAGE WITH SPONSORED LINKS (CE)	% OF TOTAL RESPONDENTS
1	Entertainment	38
2	Trust in sponsors	22
3	Never forward	40

Table: 3 Participation in sponsored links

SR NO	PARTICIPATE ON SPONSORED LINKS	% OF TOTAL RESPONDENTS
1	Yes	46
2	No	54

Table:4 Percentage of Respondents engaged with Sponsored Business Links (360)

SR NO	USE OF SPONSORED LINKS	% OF TOTAL RESPONDENTS
1	Always	3
2	Some time	17
3	Rarely	41
4	Never	39

Table:5 Relevance of sponsored business link (360)

SR NO	RELEVANCE TO THE RESPONDENTS	% OF TOTAL RESPONDENTS
1	Not aware	7
2	No	49
3	Yes	44

Table:6 Trust in information on sponsored links(360)

SR NO	TRUST AND FAITH IN INFORMATION ON SPONSORED LINKS	% OF TOTAL RESPONDENTS
1	Yes	21
2	No	79

Table:7 Type of activities (166)

SR NO	ACTIVITIES ON SPONSORED LINKS	% OF TOTAL RESPONDENTS
1	Write Comments	24
2	Share Pictures and /or Videos	48
3	Participate in forums	16
4	Other	12

BLOGS

Table:8 Respondents opinion regarding company official blogs of the company (218)

SR NO	INTERACTION WITH COMPANY BLOGS	% OF TOTAL RESPONDENTS
1	No	72
2	Yes	28

Table:9 Purpose of Interactions with company blogs (61)

SR NO	PURPOSE OF INTERACTION WITH COMPANY BLOGS	% OF TOTAL RESPONDENTS
1	Information	80
2	Read other user`s comments	14
3	Post comments	3
4	Type Share their experience and reviews	3

Brand Social Pages

Table:8 Respondents who visit company pages on social networks Answer Options Percentage of respondents (218)

SR NO	VISIT TO COMPANY`S SOCIAL PAGES	% OF TOTAL RESPONDENTS
1	Yes	36
2	No	64

Table:9 Different uses of Brand social pages

SR NO	PURPOSE OF INTERACTION BRAND SOCIAL PAGES	% OF TOTAL RESPONDENTS
1	Write comments	24
2	Share pictures or videos	9
3	Participate in forums	8
4	Information	59

IV.   FINDINGS & IMPLICATIONS

The analysis shows that the user`s need for information is the starting point of interaction with the sponsored inks followed by learning, forwarding sharing, advocating, socializing. Consumer engagement process is highly interactive, experiential, and is based on consumer trust and faith reliability. The study also reveals that credibility of information they receive from the sponsored links is not very high which leads to conclusion sponsors must work on increasing their credibility to fetch best results from the sponsored links. In order to enhance the credibility of the potential consumers in the blogs there is strong need for long term corporate strategy for corporate blogs and other Medias of e-marketing. Entertainment is reported to be most important factor in consumer engagement which is in line with the study carried out by O'Brian & Toms found that a lack of fun can act as a barrier to shopping online. Without active participation and feedback on company blogs by the consumer through processes of consumer engagement blogs would not be able to create positive image in the minds of consumers those who visit those blogs. The current study found how users visit company pages in social networks to interact with them and reported that most respondents do not participate actively. Therefore, marketers using social media as tool for product promotion should increase their effort to increase consumer participation and consumer engagement. It is vital for the corporates which aims to use social media and blogging as a toll for product promotion to understand that the real power of these internet tools is within the users, and not with corporates. Consumer engagement is indispensable in e-marketing. The analysis identified important outcomes, which are responsible for consumer engagement. These outcomes include factors affecting consumer engagement and consumer perception about sponsored links including cooperate blogs and brand social pages. Based on research findings and interpretations we can build three different implications.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS: The research findings demonstrate the importance of understanding how consumers engage themselves with sponsored links Company blogs and social web pages. The research indicates that consumer engagement enhances loyalty and satisfaction, empowerment, connection, emotional bonding, trust and commitment. Thus, businesses need to listen to and "engage in engaging" consumers in online communications, which is commercially driven for creating brand image, brand loyalty and market share. As such, knowledge sharing, educating, and entertaining, become important tasks for marketers (Andersen, 2005 and Ramaswamy, 2009). Further managerial attention needs to be given to relevant variables used to consumer interaction and participation process, Kumar et al. (2010) extend the customer value management framework to "Total Customer Engagement Value," which represents an important advance in managerial thinking that has implications for managing online marketing.

CORPORATE IMPLICATIONS: Findings of the research are critical but doesn't discourage the corporates from using corporate blogs. A comprehensive cooperate strategy on e- marketing is the key for success. The research findings are in fact encouraging as indicate that corporate blogs are very vital for e – communication for the corporates

and strong situational analysis and critical review of the bogging strategy is essential in enhancing the contribution blogs in corporate successes.

ACADEMIC IMPLICATIONS: Based on the findings of the research academician may design conceptual module to enhance the involvement and participation of the potential online consumers. Consumer engagement is not the destination of e – marketing, conversion of consumer engagement into consumer behaviour to generate sales academicians can help the practitioners to build a conceptual frame to achieve organisation objectives.

CONCLUSION

Due to its exploratory nature, this research has several limitations, which provides opportunities to undertake further theoretical and empirical research in this emerging area. This exploratory study is carried out only in one nation Mauritius which is a relatively small economy. The study is based on only two professions students and IT professionals. The respondents are from age group of 18 -to 28 years. The use of internet is increasing exponentially, and this offers enormous opportunities to both academic research and business practice to utilise the medium effectively and efficiently for the benefits of corporates in particular and consumers in general. Deeper understanding of motivators of consumer engagement is essential to utilize e-communication as an effective tool in e-marketing. Trust and belief in the brand is the most important influence in consumer participation and involvement sponsored links. Continuous efforts are required to generate interest among users in sponsored links and encourage them to participate, involve existing and potential consumers in consumer engagement processes. High consumer engagement is need to be converted in to sale through corporate efforts.

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