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ROLE OF SOCIAL WORD-OF-MOUTH ON EMOTIONAL BRAND ATTACHMENT AND BRAND CHOICE INTENTION: A STUDY ON PRIVATE EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTES IN VIETNAM

Abstract:

Prospective students are increasingly using social media to gather information about the higher education institutes (HEIs) while seeking the experiences and recommendations from others to evaluate the HEIs in order to make enrolment decision. Although the electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) in social media is increasingly adopting in Vietnam, the association of social word-of-mouth (sWOM) in the higher education sector in Vietnam is an under-researched area. Accordingly, using users and gratification theory, this study aims to identify the role of sWOM in developing emotional attachment with the brands. This study has focused to examine the prospective students' interaction with sWOM to develop emotional attachment with HEI brands and thus brand choice intention.

Based on the survey of a sample of undergraduates in the private institutes in Vietnam, this study develops framework consisting of sWOM as independent variable, emotional brand attachment and brand choice intention as dependent variables, and social media interactivity, perceived information usefulness and sWOM credibility as mediating variables. The results were analysed using correlation and regression analysis. Structural Equation Modelling was adopted to measure the model fit of the framework. The results showed that sWOM has a significant impact on emotional brand attachment and brand choice intention in the higher education sector. Social media interactivity, perceived information usefulness and sWOM credibility strengthened the relationship among sWOM and emotional brand attachment. This paper offers a better understanding of how emotional brand attachment with social media affected is by sWOM and thus brand choice intention.

Keywords:

Social word-of-mouth, Emotional Brand Attachment, Higher Educational Institutes, Brand choice intention, Social media interactivity, Perceived information usefulness, SWOM credibility

JEL Classification: M31, M39

INTRODUCTION

The advent of social media has changed the way customers transmit word-of-mouth information via online platforms (eWOM) (Erkan and Evans, 2016). Social media platforms provide more opportunities for the members to share and obtain information presented by the other members in the social networking sites (Hajli, 2018). Social media users' evaluations and experiences have introduced a new form of eWOM communication, social word-of-mouth. sWOM is a new form of eWOM detailing evaluation by customers about a brand using social media (Hajli et al., 2014).

Customers' interaction with social networking sites has gained much attention in recent marketing literature (VanMeter et al., 2018). This is due to the new means of interaction and engagement between customers and brands via social media (Dimitriu and Guesalaga, 2017). Customers' emotional attachment with brands has become one of the key objectives of many marketing professionals (Blackwell et al., 2017). Emotional brand attachment can provide a strong form of behaviour and may be considered a proxy for the consumer-brand relationship (Dwivedi et al., 2018).

The positive implications of emotional attachment for consumer behaviour and sWOM are driving academic and practical interest explaining and manipulating the concept (Ramanathan et al., 2017). Despite the significant interest, the limited literature is available on sWOM and emotional brand attachment

Even though, social network sites have the capacity to facilitate eWOM in the marketplace; limited studies have been done to identify the importance of sWOM, specifically in the context of higher education (Teng et al., 2017; Wakefield and Bennett, 2018). Regardless of the fact that much of sWOM remains to be explored and clarified (VanMeter et al., 2018), it is clear that HEIs are wishing to gain benefits from social media. In the context of higher education, HEIs can build up brand personality and create an emotional connection with the prospective students via sWOM, which could lead to have a strong relationship with the institute's brand. When the students are emotionally attached to the institute's brand, they motivate to select a certain institute, not the others. This is advantageous to the institutes to attract more students. So, the key challenge becomes to encourage their students to attach with institutional brand-related activities (Schivinski et al., 2016).

While the availability of social media is now widespread and many industries are integrating social media into their communication strategies (Krebs and Lischka, 2017), limited marketing researches have been done to reveal the effects of sWOM on emotional brand attachment and brand choice intention relating to the higher education sector. Since the brand communities facilitate the sWOM and the effectiveness of attachment with brands, it is worth exploring for social media interactivity, perceived useful information and sWOM credibility. Understanding the effect of social media interactivity, perceived useful information and sWOM credibility towards emotional brand attachment, from the managerial perspective, may provide

additional insight into who owns a brand and the process by which brand value develops.

The current research addresses these gaps and explores the relationship between sWOM and emotional brand attachment, and consequently how those interactions relate to desired marketing outcomes.

Research Gaps and Contribution

The exact relationship among sWOM, emotional brand attachment, and brand choice intention in the higher education sector has remained unclear. Since the higher education sector has recognized the benefits of adopting social media, this research is focusing to explore the importance of sWOM for HEIs. Therefore, this study reviews the existing literature on sWOM while incorporating studies on branding to provide a comprehensive understanding of these constructs.

The mediating effect of social media interactivity, perceived information usefulness and sWOM credibility has not fully investigated. Thus, this study identifies the prospective students' perception of these mediating variables and their possible relationship among sWOM and emotional brand attachment.

This study is focusing on higher education sectors in Vietnam, an emerging country, which is different from the studies conducted in emerged countries, which were claimed as bias and lack of overarching or generalizable implications in emerging countries, since most of the studies on social media predominately limited to the emerged countries.

In terms of managerial contribution, the findings of this study can provide marketers with a frame of reference to understand the influence of sWOM in social media on consumers' brand choice intention. This allows marketers to understand the dynamics of sWOM, and thus to develop better marketing strategies. Moreover, the findings could help the marketers of the HEIs to identify the social influence of social networking sites (SNSs), develop their marketing strategies based on a social media perspective to distribute their information along sWOM to their students, and foster the prospective students' perception about institute brands and enrolment.

Research Question and Objectives

Specifically, this study aimed to examine the emotional attachment that the undergraduates develop towards their institutions' brands via sWOM and the intention in selecting a particular institute. Social media interactivity, perceived information usefulness and sWOM credibility were incorporated as mediating variables in developing the relationship among sWOM and emotional brand attachment.

The relationship between sWOM, emotional brand attachment, brand choice intention, social media interactivity, perceived information usefulness, and sWOM credibility has been formulated by using Uses and Gratification Theory (U&T).

Based on the identified research aims, the following research question has developed.

(i) What is the extent to which sWOM is related to emotional brand attachment, and brand choice intention in Vietnamese higher education sector?

There are two key objectives, which were formulated to address the research question.

(i) To evaluate the relationship among sWOM, emotional brand attachment and brand choice intention as perceived by undergraduates in Vietnam

(ii) To test the mediating effect of sWOM credibility, perceived information usefulness and social media interaction among sWOM and emotional brand attachment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Word-of-Mouth

eWOM behaviour within social networking sites has initiated the users' desire to establish and maintain social relations with the members in their personal networks (Hudson et al., 2015). Social networking sites have fostered the social connections with the members facilitating to share brand-related information and experience in making purchase decisions (Brown et al., 2007). Specifically, sWOM can deliver the product information, provide recommendations, give personal comments, and supplement professional knowledge to help the users to make purchases and the companies to promote their brands (Li and Du, 2011). sWOM shifted the communication from a company-to-customer mode to a customer-to-customer mode (Jansen et al., 2009).

Social Media Interactivity

Companies are generally embracing social media because of its potential for engagement and collaboration with consumers (Fortin and Dholakia, 2005). The consumers' interactivity with social media facilitates marketers to gain rich unmediated consumer insights, faster than ever before and can foster loyalty through networking (Smith, 2010). Social media interactivity is one of the key characteristics of the new media which is expected to not only transfer the information but also the manner in which affects consumers' opinions and attitudes (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). With the emergence of social media, a higher level of interaction can be probably seen within the social networking sites (De Vries et al., 2012).

Perceived Information Usefulness

Information usefulness is a user perception concerning the information reliability, existing comments or reviews on the internet are valuable or not because usefulness perception leads customers intention of information adoption (Coursaris et al., 2018). It helps for the user brand searching and purchasing process which helps them to make a better choice. When the users perceive the information shared on the social networking sites are useful, they get involved with suggested comments and opinions for decision making (Erkan and Evans, 2016).

sWOM Credibility

Consumers are increasingly turning to social networking sites to search for and share brand information (Jin and Phua, 2014). Social media has revolutionized the way consumers search for brands, seek reviews from current and past consumers, and eventually decide whether or not to purchase (Pfeffer et al., 2014). Credibility plays a key role in the social media environment where there is no face-to-face interaction (Filiari et al., 2015). The sWOM credibility positively leverages consumers' involvement with the brands in social media and minimize the perceived risk involved with the information shared on the social media platforms (Erkan and Evans, 2016).

Emotional Brand Attachment

Consumers' emotional attachment with the brands reflects the mental state towards the brand. According to Berry (2000, p. 134): "Great brands always make an emotional connection with the intended audience". Emotional brand attachment is the outcome of long-term relationships with certain brands. One of the things that motivate customers to choose and connect to a certain brand is emotions (Dunn and Hoegg, 2014). The emotional connection between customers and the brands could influence their decision to select brands (He et al., 2016). For this reason, marketers are trying to create an emotional attachment between their brands and their customers (Levy and Hino, 2016).

Drawing from prior research, Uses and Gratification Theory, this study designs a research framework to identify the possible relationship between sWOM, emotional brand attachment and other constructs.

Uses and Gratification Theory

Uses and gratification theory (U&G) applies to the communication studies as it focuses on the social and psychological factors consumers use in their quest to for satisfaction and motivation when communicating via telecommunication (Raacke and Bonds-Raacke, 2008). The U&G theory is useful in exploring how individuals communicate using various communication channels (LaRose and Eastin, 2004). The basic premises of U&G theory are that individuals are seeking out media to fulfil their needs and lead to ultimate gratification (Whiting and Williams, 2013).

While the U&G theory has been applied in the context of mass media, the rapid growth of social media has created medium in which a higher level of interactivity from users is required (Quan-Haase and Young, 2010). As the underlying assumption of U&G is that users are actively engaged in media usage, the theory has become increasingly relevant in studies of media channels that allow for consumer choice and interaction (Lee and Ma, 2012). U&G theory sees a medium as a source of influence on the feelings of the individuals (Ruggiero, 2000). Although applying U&G theory to consumer-brand interaction in the context of social media is limited (Ashley and Tuten, 2015), Dunn et al. (2010) identified that individual's social networking involvement fostered the feeling of confidence in managing relationships. The information construct of U&G theory represents the extent to which the social media content provides

resourceful and helpful information (Chung and Austria, 2010). Searching for and receiving information about the brands is one of the main gratifications of consumers' participation in online brand communities (Luo et al., 2011).

The conceptual framework in Figure1 reflects the research questions identified above.

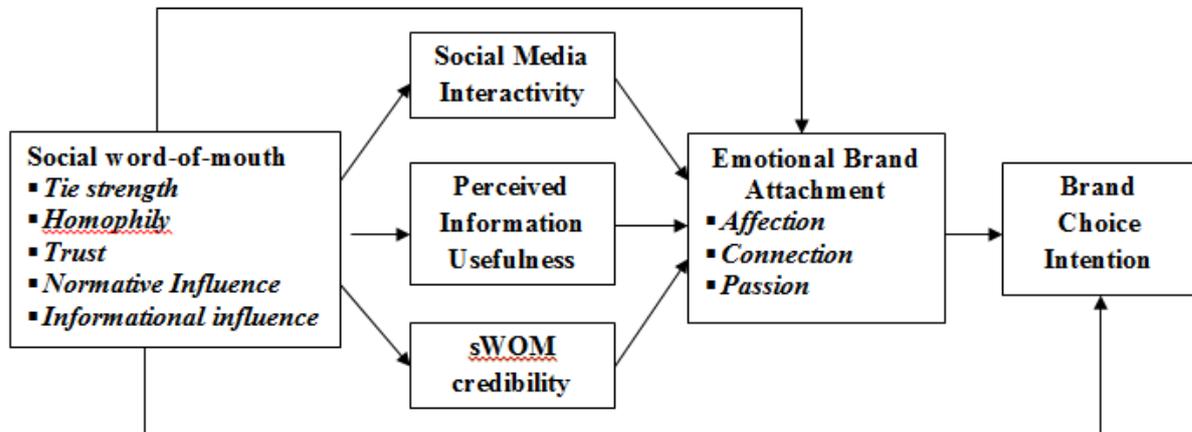


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

METHODOLOGY

In this study, only the quantitative approaches will be adopted and conform to the deductive approach. The present study is a descriptive research which is used to describe the topic of interest and finally, the causal relationship of the variables can be examined through hypothesis (Saunders et al., 2009). The research paradigm is based on positivism with the adoption of realist ontology that perceives reality to be objective and logical by observing causes or mechanisms driving effects in human behaviour (Neuman, 2014). In addition, the positivist perspective focus on the social pressures and situations operating on people to shape their attitude and behaviour that reflects in this empirical study.

The survey method was used to collect data since surveys are considered to be the most popular form of data collection method in quantitative studies (Saunders et al., 2009). The data collection instrument was a structured, self-administered questionnaire. The questionnaire comprised six sections which relate to sWOM, emotional brand attachment, brand choice intention, social media interaction, perceived information usefulness and sWOM credibility. Each section will be rated using 5 points Likert scale, where 1= strongly disagree, 2= disagree, 3= neutral, 4 = agree and 5=strongly agree. Data was collected from the sample of 100 undergraduates who are currently pursuing their higher studies in Vietnam private institutes. The sample was determined based on the purposive sampling technique.

Before applying statistical tools, first, reliability and validity tests were undertaken. Data were analyzed using SPSS (version 25) to perform a number of appropriate statistical techniques depending on the research question. Correlation and regression tests were used to identify how strongly selected variables were related to each other

or the degree of association between the two variables (Kothari, 2004) and to predict the value of the dependent based on the known value of the independent variable, assuming that average mathematical relationship between two or more variables (Malhotra et al., 2013). Exploratory and Confirmatory factor analyses were undertaken to reduce the bulk items into the manageable number avoiding scale items which were overlapping with other items in the same scale and to obtain the best fit. The present study mainly adopted SEM to obtain the best fit/confirmatory factor analysis using AMOS25.

FINDINGS

Cronbach's alpha was above 0.7, which indicates a satisfactory level of internal consistency (Cronbach, 1951). All the items loaded (> 0.5) on their intended scales and average variance extracted (AVE) was above 0.5 (Hair et al., 2005).

Table 1: Cronbach's Alpha and AVE results

	Cronbach Alpha	AVE
sWOM	0.770	0.804
Social Media Interactivity	0.702	0.794
Perceived Information Usefulness	0.727	0.788
sWOM Credibility	0.791	0.851
Emotional Brand Attachment	0.775	0.681
Brand Choice Intention	0.769	0.893

The correlation between sWOM, emotional brand attachment, and brand choice intention was tested according to the following hypothesis.

H1₀: No statistically significant correlation between sWOM and emotional brand attachment.

H2₀: No statistically significant correlation between sWOM and brand choice intention.

H3₀: No statistically significant correlation between emotional brand attachment and brand choice intention.

The sig-value for H1₀, H2₀, and H3₀ was observed at 0.000. Since, the p-value < 0.05 , the null hypotheses fail to be accepted. Therefore, we conclude, a statistically significant relationship exists between sWOM-emotional brand attachment, sWOM-brand choice intention, and emotional brand attachment-brand choice intention. The correlation between the previously mentioned variables was 0.614, 0.523, 0.649 respectively, indicating a moderate positive relationship among them. The R-Square and Adjusted R-square among sWOM and emotional brand attachment were 0.376 and 0.37 respectively. 37% of the variance in the sWOM was explained by emotional brand attachment.

Then, this study tested the relationship between sWOM and emotional brand attachment after including mediating variables (social media interactivity, perceived

information usefulness, and sWOM credibility) according to the hypotheses mentioned below.

H4₀: Social media interactivity does not mediate the relationship between sWOM and emotional brand attachment.

When the new predictor, social media interactivity, was included, the Adjusted R-square value changed 0.574.57.4% of the variance in the sWOM was explained by social media interactivity and emotional brand attachment. The Beta value (standardized) of new predictor (social media interactivity) has increased to 0.71 and it was significant (sig-value=0.000). Since, the p-value <0.05, fail to accept the null hypotheses. Therefore, social media interactivity could consider as the mediator among sWOM and emotional brand attachment.

H5₀: Perceived information usefulness does not mediate the relationship between sWOM and emotional brand attachment.

With new predictor, perceived information usefulness, the Adjusted R-square value was changed 0.451.45.1% of the variance in the sWOM was explained by perceived information usefulness and emotional brand attachment. The Beta value (standardized) of new predictor (perceived information usefulness) has increased to 0.69 and it was significant (sig-value=0.000). Since, the p-value <0.05, fail to accept the null hypotheses. Therefore, perceived information usefulness could consider as the mediator among sWOM and emotional brand attachment.

H6₀: sWOM credibility does not mediate the relationship between sWOM and emotional brand attachment.

When the new predictor, sWOM credibility, was included, the Adjusted R-square value was changed to 0.460. 46.0% of the variance in the sWOM was explained by sWOM credibility and emotional brand attachment. The Beta value (standardized) of new predictor (sWOM credibility) has increased to 0.72 and it was significant (sig-value=0.000). Since, the p-value <0.05, fail to accept the null hypotheses. Therefore, sWOM credibility could consider as the mediator among sWOM and emotional brand attachment.

The mediating effect of social media interaction, perceived information usefulness and sWOM credibility together among sWOM and emotional brand attachment has changed the Adjusted R-square value into 0.546 respectively. 54.6 % of the variance in the sWOM was explained by social media interaction, perceived information usefulness, sWOM credibility, and emotional brand attachment. The relationship between sWOM and emotional brand attachment was explained with a higher variance by including above mentioned mediating variables among sWOM and emotional brand attachment.

A structural equation model was developed with AMOS25. The conceptual model was modified by creating covariance and deleting some items. The table below shows the goodness-of-fit statistics of the CFA first-run (Base Model) and final-run (Final Model) of CFA.

Table 2: Model Fit Indices

Fit Index		Cut-off (Hair et al., 2014; Byrne, 2010)	Base Model	Final Model	
Absolute	P-value	p-value > 0.05	0.000	0.880	Acceptable
	Normed Chi-square (χ^2)	$0 < (\chi^2/df) < 2$	1.288	1.344	Acceptable
	RMSEA	= < 0.05	0.054	0.000	Acceptable
	Associated Close P	= > 0.5	0.332	0.990	Acceptable
	SRMR	= < 0.05	0.0737	0.043	Acceptable
	GFI	= > 0.90	0.791	0.957	Acceptable
	AGFI	= > 0.90	0.729	0.901	Acceptable
Incremental	NFI	= > 0.90	0.669	0.926	Acceptable
	NNFI (TLI)	= > 0.95	0.871	1.043	Acceptable
	CFI	= > 0.95	0.893	1.000	Acceptable
	IFI	= > 0.90	0.900	1.030	Acceptable

$$\chi^2=393.910 \quad DF=293 \quad \text{Normed Chi-square} = \chi^2/df = 393.910/293 = 1.344$$

CONCLUSION

The primary purpose of this study was to test the relationship between sWOM, emotional brand attachment and brand choice intentions perceived by undergraduates in Vietnam. In this process, the researcher has mainly focused on developing a conceptual framework including mediating variables which are social media interactivity, perceived information usefulness and sWOM credibility among sWOM and emotional brand attachment. The conceptual model was developed based on the critical review of previous literature and in consideration of the main research question and research objectives. Furthermore, six hypotheses were developed to demonstrate the relationship between the main constructs of the research model.

Through the examination of the role of social word-of-mouth using users and gratification theory, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the undergraduates' perception about the sWOM and its impact on the undergraduates' attachment to the institutes and to the selection process. Whilst, previous scholars have explored electronic word-of-mouth, the effect of sWOM in branding literature has not yet been studied.

The theoretical model and corresponding hypotheses were addressed the research objectives posed in this study. The outcome of the data analysis indicated that a relationship between sWOM, emotional brand attachment, and brand choice intention existed at a moderating level perceived by the undergraduates. Furthermore, the variance among sWOM and emotional brand attachment was able to explain with a higher percentage including social media interactivity, perceived information usefulness and sWOM credibility as mediating variables. Moreover, introducing modifications, the theoretical model was developed with overall goodness-of-fit to an acceptable level.

The application of U&G theory to examine the influence of sWOM on emotional brand attachment recognizes the interactive nature of social media and extends the use of the theory. Historically, U&G theory were used to understand why and how individuals actively seek out and use specific media to satisfy specific needs (Katz and Foulkes, 1962). As the underlying assumption of U&G is that users are actively involved in media usage, the theory has become increasingly relevant in studies of media channels that allow for consumer choice and interaction, such as social media (Ruggiero, 2000). The active nature of the undergraduates with social media enhances their emotional attachment with the institutes' brands and thus institutes choice intention. Therefore, it is reasonable that this study extends the application of U&G to determine the emotional attachment with the brands and engagement with sWOM.

IMPLICATIONS

This study raises some theoretical and practical implications. First, this study enhances the understanding of the antecedents of emotional brand attachment and its relationship with sWOM. Second, the study contributes to the support of U&G Theory. The proposed theoretical framework identifies determinants of sWOM, social media interactivity, perceived information usefulness, sWOM credibility, and emotional brand attachment and describes the manner in which each determinant affects the customer's brand choice process.

The study also introduces a model for assessing the students' perception with social media in higher education sector, and shows how these may be used to guide a systematic analysis of customer-brand relationships in any particular setting. Finally, the study contributes to a growing body of research on sWOM, emotional brand attachment in the general services sector. Moreover, it is among the few empirical works to specifically examine the impact of sWOM on the higher education sector. The empirical insights it provides will add to the existing body of literature on the various factors affecting emotional brand attachment and long-lasting relationships with brand choice intention.

The study results provide valuable insights and practical implications for policy makers and marketing managers in higher education institutions. Institutes need to connect with their students through excellent performance and a positive brand personality. A sustainable relationship is based on strong foundations built through unmediated personal, human-based connection, and not just on an advertising campaign. The essence of the sWOM that as experienced by the students for a long-term emotionally attached with institutes brands, will improve the rational objective judgment which, in turn, enhances efficiency during decision-making processes.

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