SOCIAL MEDIA IN B2B RELATIONSHIP IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT
Although a few studies have argued the importance of improving our understanding the role of social media in the B2B environment, to date, there has been a lack of empirical academic research investigating the role and value of social media in relationship marketing within a B2B perspective. This study aimed to address the evident research gap through exploring the role of social media in B2B relationship marketing. A qualitative approach, specifically a two-phased structured interviewing technique was implemented with participants who currently work in corporate relationship marketing fields. Leximancer software was used to analyse collected data, due to its ability identify emergent concepts and provide thematic maps, clearly relate concept associations and reduce biases through objective contextual analysis. This research revealed that the reasons underlying why B2B companies utilise social media, include information sharing, communication, relationship development, and improving exchange efficiencies. A primary reason that companies tended to utilise social media in B2B relationship marketing was to assist in information sharing, which appears somewhat contrary to the conventional wisdom that the companies use social media for relationship purposes (i.e. developing relationships with the prospects, and maintaining or enhancing existing B2B relationships). This research contributed by investigating the social media phenomenon in a developing country context so as to provide comparative perspectives of social media adoption to traditional perspectives couched in western economies.

Keywords: Relationship Marketing, Business-to-business (B2B), Social Media, Information Sharing, Communication

Introduction
Business-to-business (B2B) interactions have traditionally been underpinned by the development and maintenance of personal relationships (Huotari et al., 2015). With the development of social media platforms, B2B marketers have begun to use Internet applications as a tool in relationship development and maintenance (Leek et al., 2003). The adoption of social media technologies, such as blogs, social networking sites, and collaborative projects has enabled and encouraged new forms of communication (Gentry, 2009; Greenberg, 2009; Curtis et al., 2010) and collaborative practices (Stenmark, 2008; Majchrzak, 2009; Yates et al., 2010) in the B2B environment.

However, technology itself is not the only reason for the rise of social media applications such as Twitter and Facebook (Huotari et al., 2015). Rather, social media are becoming popular because users desire to be more social and open in sharing their experiences with others (Chaffey et al., 2009). Hence, the evolution of technology underlies fundamental changes that challenge researchers to rethink and refine earlier theories of relationship marketing and assumptions of social media. Specifically, the evolution of social media involves transformative technological advancements (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Yates et al., 2010) that give rise to the need to understand the role of social media in B2B relationship marketing.
From the outset, social media were used more often and more extensively by B2C companies than by B2B companies although as social media have increased in importance, the number of B2B companies employing social media has risen (Katona and Sarvary, 2014).

However, studies of social media consider the B2C relationship to a much greater extent than the B2B relationship, possibly because B2B companies have been slower to adopt social media (Michaelidou et al., 2011). Among the reasons cited for slow social media adoption by B2B companies are the lack of evidence of similar cases using social media, difficulties in adopting new mental models and practices discerning the use of social media, and lack of understanding of the possibilities of social media (Kärkkäinen et al., 2011). Therefore, the present study aims to develop a clearer understanding of the role of social media in B2B relationship marketing in businesses that use social media.

Literature Review

• Relationship Marketing in the B2B Context
  Overall, the main aim of relationship marketing is to develop and maintain committed buyers who are profitable for sellers (Zeithaml and Bitner, 2000) and, concurrently, to reduce the effort and time the organisation spends on buyers who are less profitable. From the technological perspective and the practitioner’s viewpoint, relationship marketing enables sellers to use technology (Shoemaker, 2001) as one of key strategic resources to improve relationships with buyers (Berry, 2002). That is, by allocating seller resources to better enhance the depth of both potential as well as existing relationships and to further increase the profitable business transactions with buyers (Kracklauer et al., 2001; Verhoef and Donkers, 2001). This perspective sees relationship marketing as bridging the marketing exchange concept (Hasan, 2003), creating a strong need for sellers to fulfil buyers’ needs (Kohli and Jaworski, 1990). This perspective also recognises that loyal buyers can only be satisfied if the seller-buyer interactions are viewed within the context of an ongoing relationship instead of as one transaction (Piccoli et al., 2003).

  Hakansson and Snehota (1989, p. 187) state that particularly in the B2B context, ‘no business is an island’. In other words, most businesses in the B2B market are interdependent. Webster (1992) argues that businesses have moved toward relational exchanges in order to achieve and maintain competitive advantages. For instance, a buyer’s loyalty (and hence a seller’s level of profitability) can be attained through developing, maintaining, or improving long-term relationships between a seller and its buyers (Kracklauer et al., 2001; Ryals, 2003). Relational marketing may exist in various types of B2B relationships, including long-term relationships, partnerships, strategic alliances, network organisations, or vertical integration with buyers (Webster, 1992). However, sellers’ willingness to enter marketing relationships with buyers depends on sellers’ expectation that the relationships will create or add value to the sellers (Day, 2000).

• Social Media in the B2B Context
  As individuals and businesses become increasingly technology-savvy, social media sites have become some of the most visited sites on the internet (Weinberg, 2009). In addition to social networking sites, a variety of social media online platforms exist, including blogs, moblogs (websites containing images, photographs, digital audio or movies), company sponsored chat rooms or discussion boards, and product or service ratings websites. Millions of users have now integrated social media into their daily practices (Boyd and Ellison, 2007). Social media initially attained popularity among users for reasons, including entertainment, information seeking, and communication (Armstrong and Hagel, 1996), but have also become effective in reaching other users, promoting a particular topic, and enhancing communication strategies (Curtis et al., 2010). Grunig (2009) described the new digital social media as revolutionary forces that change the way people think about relationship practices.

  Marken (2007) stresses the importance of social media as technological tools where users with similar interests gather to exchange problems, ideas, and information relating to professional, personal, and business matters. Since the advent of social media, technological advancements have constantly influenced business relationships with many businesses now using social media to connect, engage, and develop relationships with prospects, clients, and referral sources (Gentry, 2009). Within a rapidly changing business environment (Lee 2016), social media have also become increasingly important communication tools for businesses (Curtis et al., 2010). For instance, businesses can now use social media to gain exposure and opportunities through valuable and meaningful communication (Gentry, 2009) as well as through immediacy and transparency of communication with other businesses.
(Greenberg, 2009). Salo et al. (2013), suggest that the role of social media for B2B organisations includes brand building, knowledge creation, collecting feedback, promoting products, and for recruiting purposes.

Method
Malaysia serves as the country of context for this study due to several reasons. Malaysia has a growing interest in social media (Google, 2018) with more than 75% of the population described as Internet users (internetworldstats.com, 2017). According to Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, of these Internet users, more than 95% have access to social media (MCMC, 2017).

This study data was collected via in-depth interviews as this method permits the researcher to get closer to the participants so as to elicit detailed information (Denzin and Lincoln 1994). Interviewees were recruited via chain referral sampling (Penrod et al., 2003) yielding a sample through participant referral (Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981). Interviews focused on employees who are involved in relationship marketing in the B2B environment and explored participants’ points of view, experiences, and perspectives regarding the use of social media in their companies. Thirty potential interviewees from a range of Malaysian industries, including ecommerce, finance, oil and gas, food and beverage, IT, and health care were approached with 12 agreeing to be interviewed. During interview these 12 interviewees were asked to recommend additional potential participants. This process was repeated until 19 participants had been interviewed, at which point data saturation was achieved.

Interviews were between 30 and 60 minutes in duration. Interview transcriptions were analysed using structured thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun and Clarke, 2006) through the qualitative software Leximancer (Smith, 2011), an analytic tool used for content analysis of textual data such as interview transcriptions (Smith, 2011). The automatic concept extraction of Leximancer provides an objective, unbiased, and automatic discovery while maintaining the researcher’s control over data exploration (Smith and Humphreys, 2006). Concepts that are closely located to one another within a cluster of text are regarded as having a strong relationship and can be grouped to form themes (Smith, 2011). On the resulting concept map, themes are displayed as circles and are located close to one another. The most important themes emerging from Leximancer concept maps appear in hot colours such as red and orange, with the intensity of the colour decreasing with a decline in the theme’s importance (Smith, 2011).

Findings

As illustrated in Figure 1, the Leximancer map generated from the interview data identifies several themes, including relationship, social media enigma, bilateral communication, unilateral communication, and information sharing. The strongest theme is bilateral communication followed by relationship, social media enigma, unilateral communication, and information sharing. These themes are presented as the reasons for B2B companies’ adoption of social media for B2B relationship marketing. The descriptions for each of these five themes are elaborated as below.

• Bilateral Communication
In the concept map, the red circle bilateral communication is the most important theme, suggesting the respondents’ perception of the importance of bilateral communication in B2B relationship marketing.
The concepts appearing in this theme are social media, interact, communicate, promote, and connect. This theme indicates that the primary reason for the companies’ use of social media for B2B relationship marketing is for bilateral communication, which includes interacting, communicating, connecting, and promoting. In relation to the concept interact, one of the respondents remarked:

The training taught us the Facebook layout and the use of it. For example, we can use Facebook to interact one-on-one or one-to-many. [The training] taught us how to upload photos and videos, and many more (Respondent 9).

The next salient concept that appears in the bilateral communication theme is communicate. The concept suggests that companies use social media to communicate with other businesses for the purpose of B2B relationship marketing, as Respondent 16 noted: ‘We always try to promote communicating with social media. [But] It depends on the level of [relationship] comfort with the [buyer]’. Another example provided by Respondent 2:

I think [the reason] the company is using social media for communicating [purposes] is to give information as quickly as possible. Compared to emails or phone calls, social media is [a] more effective way because most people nowadays are using social media at all times (Respondent 2).

The third concept in the bilateral communication theme is connect, which suggests that companies also use social media as a tool to connect with other businesses. For instance, Respondent 3 stated that ‘We want to develop our connections... We usually use social media to share information and knowledge.’ Another respondent commented:

So far, we mainly use Instagram, Twitter and Facebook. Yes, these are the mediums that we use to connect with the [buyers]. [We] rarely use Youtube. When we have a promotion, or maybe a soft-launch or teaser, we [use] Youtube (Respondent 8).

The last concept in the bilateral communication theme is promote, which implies that companies use social media for promotional purposes. In relation to this concept Respondent 3 stated, ‘We need social media to promote and to expand our [relationships]. [This will] put us in the place where people [will] see us. So, I think [social media] is helpful’. This was echoed by Respondent 18:

The company uses [social media] mainly [as a] marketing tool [which] we use to promote our channel... When we approach the bloggers, we need them to follow our channel... we need them to promote it. We [either] use our social media [or] put our information on the bloggers’ blogs.... (Respondent 18).

• Relationship

The second theme in importance is the theme relationship. In the concept map (Figure 1), the relationship theme is represented with a pale gold circle. On this basis relationship is the second most important reason why companies use social media as a B2B medium. For instance, Respondent 2 stated, ‘I think [the reason we] want to use social media [is] to enhance the relationship with another company’. Respondent 9 illustrated how companies use social media for B2B relationship marketing:

I think the benefit [of using social media] is [that] it can strengthen the relationships not only for the purpose of business negotiation, but also [for] getting to know [other companies]. [Social media] is also not limited to the company that we are dealing with, but [extends to] other competitors (Respondent 9).

Several respondents indicated that social media is used during different stages of relationship. For example, some respondents suggested that social media is useful when developing relationships with other businesses. Respondent 14 mentioned that ‘[The purpose of using social media] is to develop a relationship’. This was echoed by other respondent:

[The best time for using Facebook is when] starting [a relationship]. (Respondent 7).

Other respondents felt that social media plays a role not only in developing B2B relationships, but also in maintaining and enhancing the relationships:

[We use social media] more on maintaining and enhancing relationships. When we want to start the relationship, we still need to meet up physically because we cannot [communicate via] social media, not knowing the [customers] in person. So, the first meeting is [face-to-face], and then in order to sustain and enhance, we can use social media [to] get this done.... Is it the best time? For me, of course yes. Because I don’t have any choice, I cannot be travelling every month, I need to stay here. (Respondent 4).

• Social Media Enigma

The next salient theme for the role of social media in B2B relationship marketing in Malaysia is social media enigma, represented with the largest circle in pale green (Figure 1). The theme social media
enigma reflects ambiguity surrounding the reasons companies use social media when interacting with other businesses. In other words, companies use social media because they believe they need to do so, but the main reasons for using social media for B2B relationship marketing are unclear. Although the concept map indicates that social media enigma is the third most important theme, its location, between the two most important themes of bilateral communication and relationship, suggests that even though companies use social media for bilateral communication and for relationship with other businesses, understanding the role of social media in B2B relationship marketing is enigmatic. The theme social media enigma consists of three concepts: perceived need to use, attract and promote. The theme social media enigma is appropriate for the perceived need to use concept because businesses may use social media believing that such use is necessary, as in the case of connecting with potential buyers, although in some cases the reasons for using social media are not well understood by the businesses themselves. The following excerpts illustrate how companies use social media owing to their perceived need to use:

[The reason we are using social media is] because we want to attract clients and shareholders, we need to connect with more people, even more than other [companies do].... If we want to have [a face-to-face] meeting [with] other companies, we have to interact with the [employees] in the company. [Using] social networking [sites] is going to help us in connecting [with] each other; and our competitors do it. It is better than [face-to-face] (Respondent 3).

The next concept that exists in the social media enigma theme is attract, which implies that companies use social media with the perception that its use could attract other companies. Some businesses perceive social media as a mass marketing strategy or part of an integrated marketing communications plan throughout the B2B relationship, as mentioned by the following comments:

[The benefit the company gets from using social media is] that the company] can use social media [for] promoting the business [or] the product, [and] attracting the customer or client to come and do business with the company (Respondent 2).

We also use Twitter] but not that much because it [functions] more on [an] individual basis. [When we] communicate with a company using Twitter, it is a bit different because [the medium] is very general. Basically, Twitter is just a tagline to attract attention (Respondent 12).

The third concept that emerged in the social media enigma theme is promote, which appears not only in the social media enigma theme but also in the bilateral communication theme. The concept reflects that whilst sellers are making an effort to promote the business to a group of audiences, understanding the interaction role of social media for promoting the businesses is enigmatic. For instance, little effort is made by sellers to maintain the interaction or bilateral communication with their viewers, including their buyers.

• Unilateral Communication
The fourth theme generated on the concept map is unilateral communication, represented in light blue (Figure 1). Compared to most themes on the concept map, unilateral communication is located relatively closer to the concept of social media, illustrating the theme’s level of importance toward the latter. This positioning suggests that for B2B relationship marketing, unilateral communication is also an important social media.

The unilateral communication theme consists of four concepts: spread, fast, reach, and news. These four concepts suggest that companies use social media for one-way communication such as to forward updates and to reach consumers in a timely manner. They may also use social media to upload photos, or to convey messages as noted in the following excerpt:

All the workers can get access to it, but there are three people who [are] in charge of it [including me]. For this company, I think almost every day I check if we [have received] any messages [and almost] weekly I upload pictures and spread the latest updates through Facebook (Respondent 9).

The second concept appearing in the unilateral communication theme is fast, suggesting that speed is one of the reasons companies use social media as a unilateral communication medium. From this perspective, companies use social media for two reasons: to deliver the message quickly to consumers and to ensure the message is received quickly by consumers. For instance, Respondent 2 stated that ‘My company uses social media to promote [and] to give out information as fast as [we] can’ and Respondent 18 mentioned that ‘I think social media can create long term relationships with other companies. Social media can spread news fast.’

The third concept in the unilateral communication theme is reach. This concept reflects that companies use social media to reach other companies, as pointed out by Respondent 10, ‘Social media
is advantageous. It gives [us the ability] to reach [customers] speedily via sharing’. Another respondent uttered the following comment:

The company’s social media is open for all public to see. It is a Facebook page not a Facebook account. The objective is very clear [which is] to reach consumers [via] Facebook [and] to [attract] consumers to our website. Our website is the full breadth of our work (Respondent 16).

The fourth concept that appears in unilateral communication is news. This concept suggests that companies use social media for one-way communication that spreads information to users, as mentioned in the following comment:

Nowadays, using social media is one of the important mediums for any company especially in [the] broadcasting [industry]. Social media can spread the news faster than any other medium... I think [social media] is really important to [communicate] with other companies [such as] our subscribers. (Respondent 18).

• Information Sharing
A final theme that appears on the concept map is information sharing, represented by a dark blue circle (Figure 1). The theme consists of two concepts: information and share. In relation to the concept of information, Respondent 12 stated, ‘I myself use [social media] like sending bulletins to my colleagues, sharing information, communicating updates with my superiors and other colleagues’.

Other respondent insight on this matter:

[Social media is] effective. When it comes to sharing information, social media is a very good [medium]. Nowadays if [we] want to [go online via] Facebook, [we] can [do so at] anytime [and] get the information [from there]. Sometimes [we] do not know about something, but when someone shares then [we get to] know [the information] (Respondent 1).

The other concept that appears in the information sharing theme, share, illustrates that besides sharing information, companies also use social media to share updates and knowledge with other companies, as exemplified in the following comment:

Usually we use social media to connect with the company itself, the employees, and how [we] support each other, or share other information and knowledge with each other. That’s how we use it. I think it’s going well, very well, very good because we can interact at anytime, and then we can share information and knowledge or anything, any tip to enhance our skills of marketing. I think [information] is just, at [the] finger tips. So [using social media is] going to be very easy and accessible for all employees (Respondent 3).

The findings from this study demonstrate that role of social media in B2B relationship marketing in Malaysia is based around the themes of relationship, enigma, communication (bilateral and unilateral) and information sharing. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to explore this area. Prior literature reveals that studies relating to social media activities are segmented into specific areas, such as social media classifications, tools, and applications, with less emphasis on elements in the broad picture such as the role of social media. Additionally, many previous studies on the use of social media focus mainly on social networking sites, with only limited studies examining social media as a whole. Among these limited studies that take a broad perspective of social media, only a few integrate the studies with other broad research areas such as relationship marketing, and analyse the use of social media from the B2B perspective. Researchers such as Gilin and Schwartzman (2011), Stelzner (2011), Lehtimäki et al., (2009) have focused largely on the unidirectional marketing perspective—that is, from the perspective of a company to its individual customers.

**Conclusion**
The reasons businesses in Malaysia utilise social media are for relationship, bilateral communication, unilateral communication, information sharing, and due to social media enigma. The strongest reason is bilateral communication followed by relationship, social media enigma, unilateral communication, and information sharing.

• Limitation
Given that the context of the research is Malaysia, interviewees were recruited either through businesses in Malaysia or directly through the preceding interviewees. The small sample size of this qualitative study limits the sample-to-population generalisability of the research findings (Firestone, 1993). Nevertheless, this study is consistent with the thematic saturation recommendations made by Dick (1990), in which interviews are executed until data saturation is achieved. During the research process, it was found that some businesses had confidentiality policies that limited the information
employees could provide. These were mostly large corporations and their decision making procedures depended greatly on the outcomes of board meetings. Given these difficulties, this study was based more on small businesses which may potentially bias the research findings.

Nevertheless, this research remains as the first study of its kind within the Malaysian context, and its research findings are capable of informing future research that may be undertaken in other developing markets. The goal of this research is to explore social media's role in B2B relationship marketing in Malaysia and given that this is a relatively new research area many possible paths exist that may be pursued by future researchers. Given that demographic shifts and globalisation trends influence the understanding between nations (Cronin, 2003), cross-internationalisation studies between businesses in other Asian markets may also help to improve the understanding of social media roles in B2B relationship marketing within an Asian context.

• Future Research

One area of research that was not directly discussed in this study is the classification of social media (i.e. social media types and applications) based on industries or geographical locations, such as countries or sub-areas within a country. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) classified social media into types based on the level of 1) social presence/media richness and 2) self-presentation/self-disclosure. Each social media type or application may result in different, or possibly additional, social media roles for B2B relationship marketing. Within the B2B context, several areas offer opportunities for additional studies that were not the objectives of this research, such as corporate culture, pricing strategy, and branding. Social media offer a fruitful area for B2B research not only when with respect to relationship marketing strategies, but also in association with other business strategies. A basic assumption is that the use of social media enables complex communication, collaboration, and social interaction among the users (Kärkkäinen et al., 2011). Hence, research on social media in other B2B- associated areas will open the way for many future endeavours. In conclusion the findings from this study provide an initial understanding of the importance of social media in B2B relationship marketing in Malaysia.

References


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