FACTORS AFFECTING CONSUMER CONFORMITY BEHAVIOR IN VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES; WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO GENERATION "Y" IN SRI LANKA

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to investigate the factors affecting to the consumer conformity behavior on virtual communities with special reference to generation Y in Sri Lanka. Data were gathered by using a structured questionnaire which was distributed among 160 respondents through the Facebook and 40 as a field survey. This study selected quantitative approach and considered as a single cross sectional design. According to the analysis, eWOM, personal involvement, sense of belongingness and community expertise are the factors that affect to the consumer conformity 1behaviour in virtual communities and one of the factors (self-esteem) is not significant. There are broad implications for e-formity in consumer behaviour. Retailers or manufacturers must realize that virtual communities and consumers' e-formity behaviour are a valuable source of helping or hurting the sale & promotion of their products.

Keywords: Virtual communities, consumer behaviour, electronic commerce

1. Introduction

Consumer behavior is one of the most important areas for marketers in making their business a success. The social influence is a one of determinants of consumer behavior is reflected in consumer decision making that incorporate social norms and interpersonal considerations as forebear of behavior intentions(Sages & Grable, 2008). Also some of the marketers use this interpersonal influence in their persuasive communications (Choubtarash, Mahdieh, & Marnani, 2013). The change of consumer behavior based on this social influence can be called as consumer conformity. Simply, consumer conformity is defined as compliance with group norms, susceptibility to group influence, and behavioral changes in consumption due to a reference group (Sages & Grable, 2008).

In the past, communities tended to be closed systems with relatively clear boundaries, stable memberships, and few linkages to other communities. We are now entering into an `age of open systems.' Mobility creates new communities and kinds of communities. The impacts of mobility are far less than those of information and communications technology. Cyberspace has become a new kind of social terrain, crowded with `virtual communities (Ruiz-Mafe, Tronch, & Sanz-Blas, 2016).Consumers are influenced by a variety of social networks, including but not limited to family, friends, acquaintances, neighbors, and social partners. One particularly powerful form of social networking is WOM. WOM is defined as "the informal communication directed at other consumers about ownership and characteristics of particular goods and services and/or their sellers" (Tseng & Hsu, 2010). Some virtual communities do both. Community members are allowed to interact over a shared passion through various means: message boards, chat rooms, social networking sites, or virtual worlds (Kananukul, Jung, & Watchravesringkan, 2015).

In conformity behavior groups can moderates the strength of normative and informational influences to explore the processes that underlie social influences on consumer behavior. Previous researches

measured consumer conformity using task / situation characteristics, personal characteristics, brand characteristics and group characteristics. But the online consumer conformity appears relatively unexamined (Park & Feinberg, 2010). Therefore this study primarily focuses on examining consumer conformity behavior in virtual communities. Under online conformity also studied the impact of eWOM factor (H. Park & Cho, 2012). But there is few researches conducted to measure the other factors impact on online conformity such as self-esteem, personal involvement, sense of belongingness and community expertise (Park & Feinberg, 2010). Therefore this study primarily focuses on examining consumer conformity behavior in virtual communities.

The main objective of this study is to examine the factors affecting on consumer conformity behavior in virtual communities with special reference to generation Y in Sri Lanka. Throughout this research, it attempts to study the impact on online conformity behavior with the five factors chosen for this study; eWOM, self Esteem, personal involvement, sense of belongingness and community expertise.   This study is to fulfill this research gap with the following specific objectives; the specific objectives were to examine the impact of eWOM, self-esteem, personal involvement, sense of belongingness and expertise on the consumer conformity in virtual communities.

2. LITERETURE REVIEW

2.1 Virtual Communities

Virtual communities are places on the web where individuals can discover and afterward electronically "talk" to others with comparative interests. Virtual communities assume a greater part in numerous aspects of a member's life –from shaping and keeping up companionship and sentimental connections, to learning, shaping opinions, buying, and expending products and services (Rothaermel & Sugiyama, 2001). Virtual communities can improve trust among individuals in this manner decreasing risk and empowering them for more prominent internet business cooperation. Also virtual communities can give repeated point of contact and increment the stickiness of a website (Hee-woong Kim, 2004).

The internet empowers a huge number of individuals worldwide to exchange information and direct business. Specifically, the internet's potential for multi-way data transformation (one-to-one, one-to-many, many-to-many) gives an instrument to shaping shared intrigue gatherings or communities (Prybutok, 2008).there is different type of virtual communities. Previous studies focus on the social media such as facebook, twitter, blogs or video sharing websites such as youtube (Park & cho, 2012; prybutok, 2008; Seyed Fathollah Amiri & Khatami, 2014; yoo, choi, choi, & rho, 2014).

Virtual communities can influence the individuals easily for their conformity behavior. Through the communities they exchange their prior experiences ideas or comments with individuals. Due to some factor it change the individual's dependability on virtual communities (Park & Feinberg, 2010).

2.2 Offline / Online Consumer Conformity

The consumer's decision of the purchase a product or a service is not defends only the quality of the product or a service but also be negatively or positively affected by the consumption choice of the other consumers. According to some observations some industries characterized by conformity in consumers' behavior such as beverage, electronic devices, sports and entertainment. Conformity is generally defined as the tendency that people have to comply with the group norms (Ghazzai, 2012). Previous studies in influences of offline conformity varied in components of conformity. Some studies consider about normative conformity (Phau, Sequeira, & Dix, 2009; Yoo et al., 2014) some other studies focused on informational conformity (Martin & Wentzel, 2007), and not many considered on both components (Ppark & Feinberg, 2010). Marketers and policy makers have an enthusiasm for finding when normative or informational systems impact consumer behavior. Such data may give

important contribution to the improvement of successful marketing activities and government communication programs.

Since the virtual community gives the individuals enthusiastic associations and belongingness as an informal organization, such interpersonal impacts are relied upon to exist and further impact the group members' demeanor toward themes (Park & Cho, 2012). Given the expanding at the same time of virtual groups and the potential force of these correspondence channels to impact consumer behavior, it is additionally critical to figure out what prompts to customer e-formity (Park & Feinberg, 2010).

2.3 eWOM

WOM is exchange the idea between consumers about the product, service, company, person or etc. This source is considered independent from business perspective (Mortazavi, Esfidani, & Barzoki, 2014). Normally WOM communication is valuable part of consumer decision making process. Early studies discussed this only normative perspective. But now it conduct studies under informational perspective of social influences of purchasing behavior as well (Park & Feinberg, 2010). WOM can be others satisfaction or a dissatisfaction about their previous experiences. People are engage with the WOM to satisfy their personal information needs (Hye Kyoung Kim & Song, 2010). When consumers take a decision they are influenced by various type of social networks, including but not limited friends, family, neighbors and other social partners. So WOM is one of the main powerful social networking. WOM is an informal communication method directed at other customers to particular product, brand, service or particular seller (Velázquez, Blasco, & Gil Saura, 2015).

Consumer can easily access and provide global information through internet at any time of the day. Through the internet people engage with virtual communities and exchange the experiences. Sometimes people use assumptions about personality, age, expertise because there are no visual cues for help customers to take idea about credibility of the source of communication (Prybutok, 2008). Virtual communities have ability to impact customers through successful WOM communication and they are able to create their own web sites for inform other consumers about their experiences of product, service or a brand. So the eWOM can be negative or a positive impact for a business. If people access the virtual communities to learn about the product, service or a brand, WOM communication is mostly affect for that (Park & Feinberg, 2010). To consider others ideas and recommendations. Simply it is not need to have community motivation (Truong & McColl, 2011). If consumers have high self-esteem they are not depend on others. So there is negative relationship between self-esteem and conformity behavior in virtual communities (Park & Feinberg, 2010).

2.4 Personal Involvement

The involvement construct is complex and has a wide range of features. Precursors of involvement might be close to Personal factors (needs, values, significance), stimulus factors (separation of options, content of communication), and situational factors (occasion, purchase/use). Hence, one can be involved with products, ads, or with buy choices (Michaelidou & Dibb, 2008). Conceivable results of involvement might be the measure of information search, the viability of an advertisement to initiate purchase, the relative significance of the product class, the perceived differences in product attribution, the inclination of a specific brand, the impact of cost on brand choice, and the time spent deliberating alternatives (Schaefer, Rumpel, Sadrieh, Reimann, & Denke, 2015).

Personal involvement is affect to the consumer conformity in virtual communities through the conformity motivation because high involvement means high risk in decision making and has been found to increase conformity. As per the previous studies that the more involved a consumer is with a product, the more likely they are to be interested in the ideas of other community members. Their knowledge and interest of a relevant product or a service encourage the need to search for more information and input (Park & Feinberg, 2010).

2.5 Sense of Belongingness

Sense of belonging is an idea identified with personal satisfaction, including an inclination that people matter to each other and to a gathering. Maslow suggested that Sense of belonging is an essential human need (Maslow,

1955). According to the Hargerty, sense of belonging is the experience of individual association in a system or environment with the goal that people feel themselves to be a fundamental part of that system or environment. Systems incorporate both relationship and associations; situations can be common or social. Besides, sense of belonging is made out of two measurements: valued involvement and fit (Hagerty, Williams, & Oe, 2002). A feeling of belongingness to a gathering makes a more durable environment (M. Kim, 2004). Witt and Alvaro and Crano declare that almost no feeling of belongingness to a group will evoke practically no trust in a group setting. These reviews propose that the more a consumer feels a part of the virtual community, the more likely they are to see that group as reliable (Park & Feinberg, 2010). According to the J. Park & Feinberg (2010) sense of belongingness is affect to the informational consumer conformity behavior in virtual community through the community trustworthiness.

2.6 Community Expertise

Communities of expertise are groups of professionals who share at least one basic trait. A gathering of crisis doctors could be a group, as could be the workers of an organization or the graduated class of a specific college (Erickson & Kellogg, 2003). Expertise and its' role in the consumer decision making process has been accepting expanding research consideration of late. As noted by a few researchers, expertise basically comprises of two sorts of knowledge. The first type deals with how knowledge is organized and processed, and incorporates the related elements of cognition, encoding, retrieval, and information utilization in the execution of a decision task. The second type manages the substance identifying with the choice issue (Wood & Lynch, 2002).

The apparent expertise of a virtual community is a crucial part of whether a consumer will hold fast to the group norms as far as informational conformity. The more expert the virtual communities seem, by all accounts, to be the more probable consumers are to follow the social norms of that groups. What is critical in this relationship is whether the consumer characteristics the learning or assessments of the virtual community to real expertise or to some other thought process, for example, the desire to fit in or give socially adequate information (The Region, & Europe, 2010). However there is a relationship between community expertise and the consumer conformity behavior in virtual communities. Community affect to the conformity through the community trustworthiness (Park & Feinberg, 2010).

3. Methodology

The main aim of this study is to investigate the factors impact on consumer conformity behavior in virtual communities with special reference to generation Y in Sri Lanka. Then it is expected to examine which factors highly impact on consumer conformity in virtual community and understand the consumer behavior with respect to generation Yin Sri Lanka.

Research Philosophy of the study is based on positivistic research tradition and a survey strategy has been subjected to test the effect of factors in consumer conformity behavior. According to the nature and the previous researches that similar to this research, this study selected quantitative approach. Design of the research can be identified as a single cross sectional research design which can be categorized under the cross sectional research design. Data was collected through a structured questionnaire under a natural environment setting using Facebook. The target population of this study can be identified as all the generation Y consumers in Facebook who are belonged to at least one virtual community in Sri Lanka. Sample size of 200 consists of both males and females subject to generation Y age groups and different income ranges. Accordingly, the researcher has used convenience sampling method considering ease of access to respondents and convenience to the researcher. In addition to the convenience, sampling method the researcher has employed judgmental sampling method to include each subset for the study to enhance the representativeness of the sample which consist the respondents from genders and age category.

The first aspect of the study to be measured is factors affecting conformity behavior in virtual communities. Therefore the respondents who are in the sample are asked to answer 35 statements by using five point likert type scales in order to the measure affecting five factors and conformity behavior.
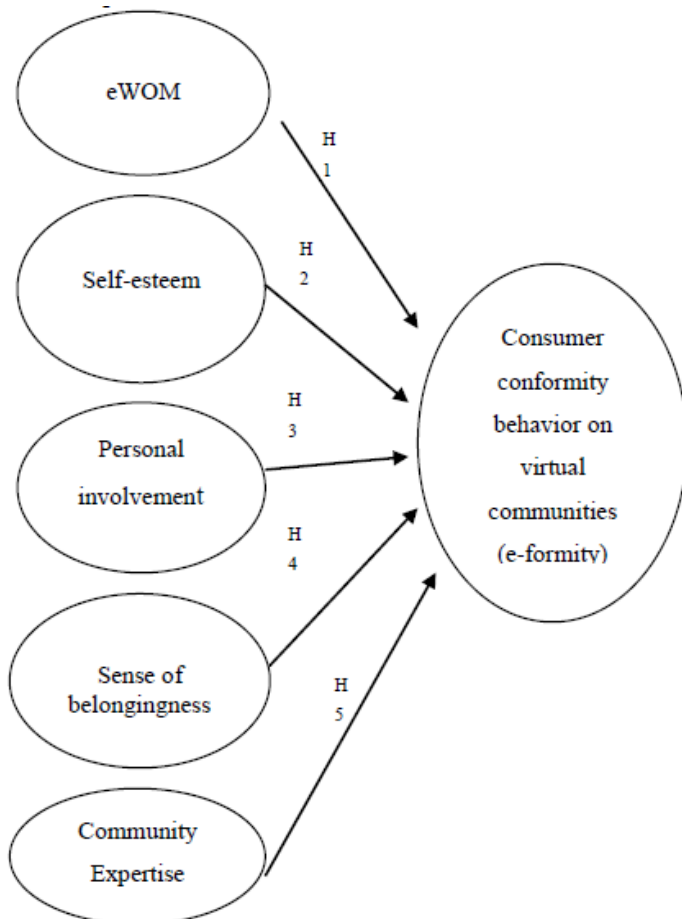
1 –Strongly Agree
2 –Agree

3 –Neutral
4 –Disagree
5 –Strongly Disagree

Base on the review of literature, the following conceptual model is developed for this study.

Figure 1 Conceptual Model

4. Results and Discussion

The research objectives were tested against the data collected; using mean scores and one way analysis of variance (ANOVA). Mean scores are used to determine the level of affect of five factors towards the online conformity behavior and ANOVA is used to determine whether there are any significant impact of the five factors on online consumer conformity behavior. Interpretation of central tendency is based on mean and mean of the eWOM, self-esteem, consumer involvement, sense of belongingness, community expertise and e-formity distributions are respectively 2.288, 1.96, 2.647, 2.342, 2.283 and 2.696. So it can be concluded that on average most of the respondents' online conformity behavior affected by this five factors. According to the skewness and kurtosis all the values were position in between the +2 and -2. So it can be conclude that data was normally distributed for all five factors of consumer conformity behavior (Malhothra, 2006). Therefore regression analysis applied to test the research objectives and research hypothesis.

According to the below Anova table, the significant value is 0.000 which is less than the alpha value of 0.05. So there is significant impact of eWOM on consumer conformity behavior in virtual communities with special reference to generation Y in Sri Lanka.

Table 1 Anova: eWOM

Model	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1 Regression	46.488	1	46.488	111.287	.000[a]
Residual	82.711	198	.418		
Total	129.199	199			

According to the below Anova table, the significant value is 0.528 which is greater than the alpha value of 0.05. So there is no significant impact of self-esteem on consumer conformity behavior in virtual communities with special reference to generation Yin Sri Lanka.

Table 2 Anova: Self esteem

Model	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1 Regression	.261	1	.261	.400	.528[a]
Residual	128.939	198	.651		
Total	129.199	199			

According to the below Anovatable, the significant value is 0.000 which is less than the alpha value of 0.05. So there is significant impact of personal involvement on consumer conformity behavior in virtual communities with special reference to generation Y in Sri Lanka.

Table 3 Anova: Personal involvement

Model	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	43.811	1	43.811	101.590	.000[a]
Residual	85.388	198	.431		
Total	129.199	199			

According to the Anova table, the significant value is 0.000 which is less than the alpha value of 0.05. So there is significant impact of sense of belongingness on consumer conformity behavior in virtual communities with special reference to generation Y in Sri Lanka.

Table 4 Anova:Sense of belongingness

Model		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	21.343	1	21.343	39.181	.000[a]
	Residual	107.856	198	.545		
	Total	129.199	199			

Conclusions and Recommendations

The final conclusion of this study is there is positive impact of eWOM, personal involvement, sense of belongingness and community expertise on the consumer conformity behavior in virtual communities (E-formity) with special reference to generation Y in Sri Lanka. But according to the findings there is no significant impact of self esteem and the consumer conformity behavior in virtual communities with special reference to generation Y in Sri Lanka.

Previous studies conclude that there is a negative impact of self-esteem on consumer conformity behavior in virtual communities (Park & Feinberg, 2010). In western counties they have individualistic behavior. Therefore, if they value themselves they are not depending on others' behavior (Sages & Grable, 2008). But the Asians like to depend on others' ideas because Asian countries have collectivistic behavior (Sages & Grable, 2008; Venkatesan, 1966).

According to the findings it can be recommended to emphasize more positive WOM communication practices through the virtual community groups such as Facebook, twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube and etc. as motivate the conformity behavior of certain product or service. At the same time negative eWOM communication practices can discourage the consumers. Companies can create virtual community groups to achieve their marketing objectives. According to the research findings consumer conformity behavior is not depending on self-esteem. Therefore marketers don't want consider more on self-esteem under the concept of consumer conformity behavior. Due to efficiency and effectiveness of the internet consumers are personally engage with virtual communities to search information and it impact to the conformity behavior as well. Marketers can provide more information through the community groups to motivate the customers. Need to identify their information requirements before provide the information. Sense of belonging is a concept related to quality of life, encompassing a feeling that individuals matter to one another and to a group. If people feel they are belong to the relevant virtual community it increase the consumer conformity behavior. Marketers can take the engagement of the consumers to the discussions and give value for their ideas. It can enhance the community trustworthiness as well. To enhance the relationship, the consumers expect the knowledge or opinions of the virtual communities. For that it needs to provide and share actual expertise knowledge through the virtual community groups, such as the desired to fit in or social acceptable information. Marketers can build trust through the virtual communities using expertise knowledge. Trust is important in relationships because it allows the free flow of information without reservation.

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