

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

According to *Internet World Stats*, until March 31, 2009, there are over 1.5 billion people using the Internet, which accounts for 23.8% of world population. In 2008, Taiwan ranked no. 17 among top 43 countries of highest Internet penetration rate (Miniwatts Marketing Group, 2008). In 2009, with the Internet penetration rate of 66.1%, Taiwan is among Asia Top 10 Internet Countries (Miniwatts Marketing Group, 2009).

Looking back to the Internet development history, World Wide Web (WWW) had been dramatically minimizing the distances and shortening the time spending on communication. Among various applications of web, weblog or blog is one of the most popular one nowadays. In the era of web 2.0, Internet users change their behavior gradually from passive information receivers to active information senders. Chris Taylor (2004) announced the heyday of blog, “Radio had its golden age in the 1930s. In the 1950s, it was television's turn. Historians may well date the golden age of the blog from 2004—when Merriam-Webster.com's most searched-for definition was blog”. “... [Blogs] they're simply the most explosive outbreak in the information world since the Internet itself” (Baker & Green, 2005). Certain environment triggered the growth in the number of bloggers who share information online and get responses from other Internet users, referred to as blog readers in this study. Some bloggers may take it further to become professionals, and even make a fortune or gain reputation along the way. Blogging then becomes a career.

While the importance of interaction applied in the virtual community has been drawing worldwide attention and discussions, "...blogging is also frequently characterized as socially interactive and community-like in nature" (Bonus, Herring, Scheidt & Wright, n.d.). Interaction, the very essential element and unique feature of blogs is also the core value of relationship marketing. Gummesson (1999) asserted that all marketing approaches can be understood as interaction within networks of relationships. To bloggers and blog publishers, who regard blogging as their career, blogs are products and blog readers are customers. The relationships between the professional bloggers and their blog readers are indispensable for the growth of the blog popularity and the sales of blog publications.

1.2 Rationale & Significances of the Study

In Taiwan, from 2006, there have been blog writers and celebrity bloggers who are fulltime bloggers and rely on incomes from blog derivative activities and sales of their blog publications. These bloggers are referred to as professional bloggers in this study. It seems blogging has become a new emerging business that people can totally depend on their blogs to make a living. It is like a dream job. However, without high level of blog popularity, and a great amount of blog readers behind the number of blog traffic, success itself is a dream. The level of blog popularity is accumulated by the visits of blog readers. The continuous relationships with blog readers are actually the most valuable asset of professional bloggers.

These professional bloggers would be invited to publish their blogs only if they are famous and already create a booming on the Internet. Yet, the sale of blog publications only is not able to sustain their lives as fulltime bloggers. The publication of blogs transforms these bloggers' identities from celebrities online to celebrities in real life. The phenomenon has

triggered the curiosity of other people who have not yet visit these blogs before, and may further make them new bloods of blog readers. Professional bloggers enjoy the fame and various moneymaking opportunities derived from their blogs, in return, they have to manage their blogs, keep continuous interactions and so the relationships with their supporters online, which are the origins of what they attain now and in the future.

As blogging becomes a social trend, a common phenomenon, and even an occupation, there should be a rule or a guideline to be followed. In blogosphere, thanks to the rise of web 2.0, the interactive feature facilitates the possibility to build relationships between bloggers and blog readers. In this study, relationship marketing is suggested to be applied and adopted in the blogosphere. Various relationship marketing theories and definitions stress on the development and maintenance of relationships. To form and strengthen a relationship, interactions, communications, and mutual benefits are basic requirements.

1.3 Research Purpose, Research Questions & Hypotheses Overview

1.3.1 Research Purpose

Ideally, the ultimate goal is to find the best combination of marketing methods or tools that can help professional bloggers managing and expand their readerships. However, there are too many different categories of blogs that different combinations of marketing tools and strategies must be applied. Moreover, the differences and similarities of these categories may further influence the effect of the methods and strategies adopted. To serve as the basis for future researches, the study aim to find the umbrella theory for the field.

This two-phase, sequential mixed methods study is first to obtain statistical, quantitative results as the vary foundation of the study. Follow up with focus group interviews to gather more qualitative, explorative results to structure a more focused survey. At last, survey is conducted to examine the hypotheses.

In the first phase, a pretest survey is conducted to test the correlation between level of blog popularity and sales of books, the correlation between blogger-blog reader interactions and level of blog popularity, and blog readers' perspectives on blogs/blogging. However, it is difficult to measure the blog popularity. Moreover, it is almost impossible to identify whether blog publication purchase are related to blog reading behavior. Therefore, the major goal of the first phase is revised to explore more information on interactions between bloggers and blog readers, also to narrow down the research scope to target at two professional bloggers: Wan Wan and Queen. In the second phase, qualitative focus group discussions are carried out to explore aspects of blogger-blog reader interactions, motivations to read blogs, and blog readers' expectations. Then based on the results of focus group discussions, the official survey is conducted to examine the significances of all hypotheses.

1.3.2 Research Questions and Hypotheses

In the first phase:

RQ. Do blog readers expect interactions with bloggers?

In the second phase:

RQ. Does relationship marketing fit-in the field of blogging?

H1. There is a significant positive correlation between blogger-blog reader interactions and fulfillment of expectation.

H2. There is a significant positive correlation between fulfillment of expectation and level of satisfaction.

H3. There is a significant positive correlation between interactions and level of satisfaction

H4. There is a significant positive correlation between level of satisfaction and blog readers' willingness to spread word of mouth.

1.4 Research Procedure Overview

The literature on blogs and relationship marketing respectively is vast. There are also works on using blogs to implement relationship marketing in different areas. However, the study tends to do the opposite, that is, to suggest the adaptation of relationship marketing on blogging. As mentioned in the previous section, the study is divided into two phases. They are briefly summarized below. Details regarding research methods are described in the third chapter – Methodology.

1.4.1 The First Phase

After preliminary literature review, a survey was conducted as a pilot study to generate information about blog readers' reading habits and their perspectives toward blogs/blogging in general and most importantly, to narrow down the research scale to two professional bloggers, Wan Wan and Queen, and their blog readers so that the study can be more focused.

1.4.2 The Second Phase

In the second phase, two sets of focus group discussion were carried out by recruiting 6 to 8 participants for each set who are readers of either the following two blogs: Wan Wan's

Comic Blog and I am Queen. Nine open-end questions (illustrated in the third chapter - Methodology) are asked to explore deeper into blog readers' thoughts, mindsets, and attitudes about these two blogs and the professional bloggers, especially regarding interactions. Some variables are captured during the process, and a questionnaire was structured based on focus group discussion results. Several statements of different blog aspects are listed to test blog readers' level of agreement and level of satisfaction upon these two blogs using 5-point Likert scale.

