CHAPTER III RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The service industry perspective of relationship marketing and the prosperity of highly-interactive blogs inspired this study. The literature on blogs and relationship marketing respectively is vast. There are also works on using blogs to practice relationship marketing in different areas. The purpose of this study is to verify whether relationship marketing is a proper theory to be adopted by professional bloggers in the blogosphere. Since the research field is relatively new and the literature is not quite enough to illustrate the situation, more explorative information and findings are needed. The study used mixed methods strategy employing both qualitative and quantitative research methods to avoid insufficiency of merely using either one category of the methods. As stated, the study purpose is to examine the feasibility of relationship marketing in the blogosphere. It is of great importance to probe into the blog readers' attitudes, ideas, perceived value, expectations, and general mindsets, so to understand better about the overall situation and the background facing by the professional bloggers.

In this chapter, the research framework and procedure are explicitly explained. The results from pretest survey and focus group discussion are used for constructing the final round survey, and the results are rendered. Followed with the iteration of hypotheses, as for the examination of hypotheses, please refer to next chapter – data analysis.

3.1 Research Framework & Hypotheses

3.1.1 Research Framework

The first hypothesis is to assume that interactions between professional bloggers and

blog readers can help to meet blog readers' expectations or enhance their experiences of reading the blog, so there is a significant positive correlation between the blogger and blog reader interactions and fulfillment of readers' expectations. Besides the correlation between these two variables, interactions and expectations respectively are assumed to be related to the level of satisfaction toward the blog and the blogger. The second hypothesis is that there is a significant positive correlation between fulfillment of expectations and level of satisfactions, and the third hypothesis is that there is a significant positive correlation between interactions and level of satisfactions.

Word-of-mouth, as stated previously, is the ultimate level of customer loyalty indicated in the relationship marketing ladder of customer loyalty (Figure 2-7). Also, from the literature reviewed, suggested by Jones & Sasser's Xerox case study in 1995 & Bejour & Palmer's paper in 2005, highly satisfied customers are likely to engage in positive word-of-mouth. The last hypothesis of this study – there is a positive correlation between level of satisfaction and blog readers' willingness to spread word of mouth.

It is hypothesized that the blogger-blog reader interactions, blog readers' expectations on the bloggers/blogs, and blog readers' motivations to read the blogs influence their level of satisfaction toward the blog. If there are interactions, and blog readers' expectations and motivations are fulfilled, the level of satisfaction shall be high and so the loyalty toward the blog is formed. The indication of being loyal here is to spread word of mouth. The research framework is illustrated as following (Figure 3-1):
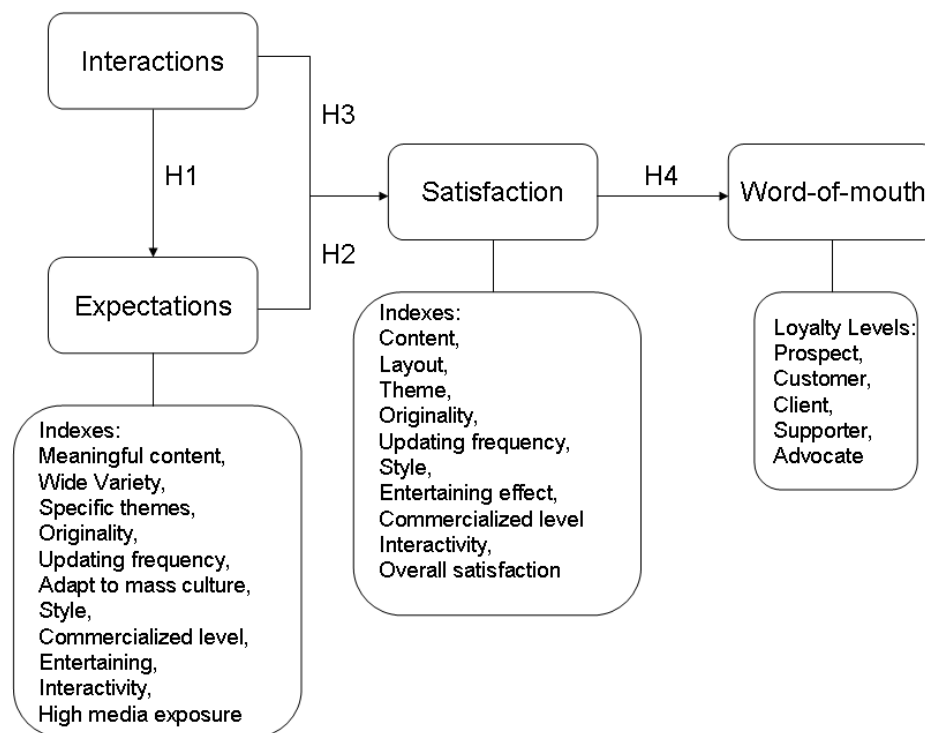
Figure 3-1: Research Framework

3.1.2 Research Procedure

The research procedure was divided into two major phases. In the first phase, an online survey was conducted to look into the demographic features of blog readers, blog readers' general attitudes about "blog", and most importantly, to narrow down the research scope to two most representative professional bloggers in Taiwan as the research targets. In the second phase, two sets of focus group discussions were implemented to capture more in-depth viewpoints about blogs in general and about the two target bloggers in particular. Some variables were pointed out during the discussions, and then another questionnaire was structured based on focus group discussion results. Several statements of different blog facets are listed to test blog readers' level of agreement and level of satisfaction upon these two blogs using 5-point Likert scale. The two research phases and the objects are illustrated below.
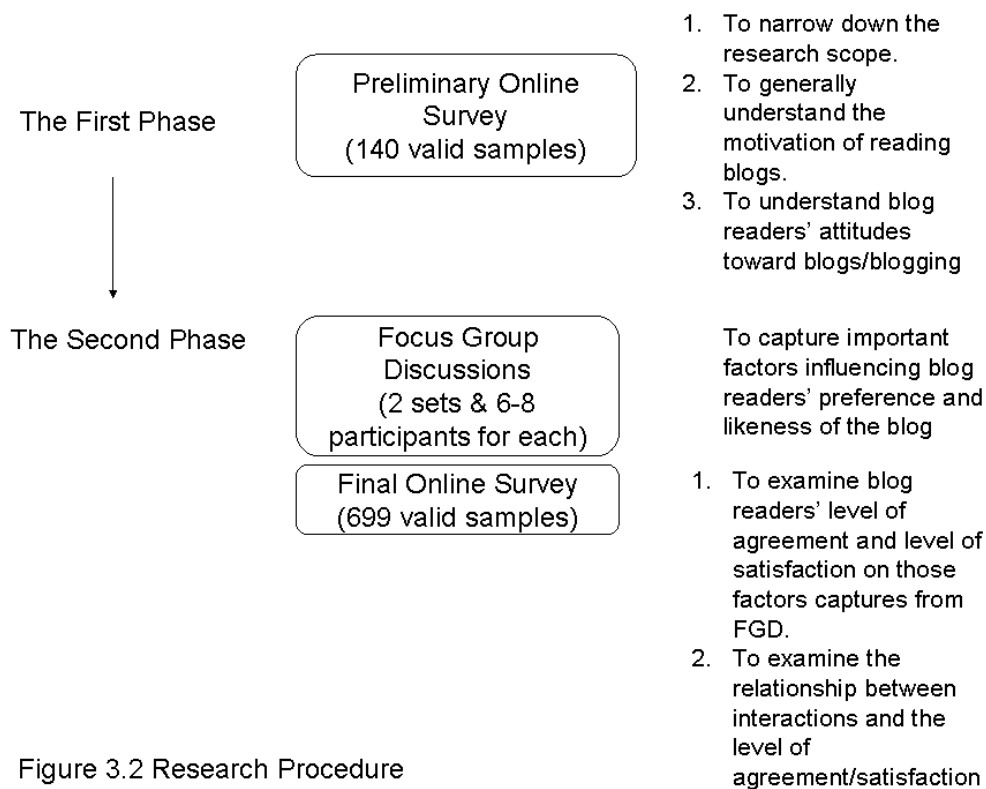
The First Phase

Preliminary Online
Survey
(140 valid samples)

1. To narrow down the research scope.
2. To generally understand the motivation of reading blogs.
3. To understand blog readers' attitudes toward blogs/blogging

The Second Phase

Focus Group
Discussions
(2 sets & 6-8
participants for each)

To capture important factors influencing blog readers' preference and likeness of the blog

Final Online Survey
(699 valid samples)

1. To examine blog readers' level of agreement and level of satisfaction on those factors captures from FGD.
2. To examine the relationship between interactions and the level of agreement/satisfaction

Figure 3.2 Research Procedure

3.1.3 Research Questions & Hypotheses

In the first phase:

RQ. Do blog readers expect interactions with bloggers?

In the second phase:

RQ. Can relationship marketing fit-in the filed of blogging?

H1. There is a significant positive correlation between blogger-blog reader interaction 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 positive correlation between level of satisfaction and blog readers'

willingness to spread word of mouth.

3.2 Pretest Survey

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

There are four sections in the questionnaire: demographic information, blog reading habits, blog managing behavior, and attitudes toward blogs. In the second section, nine professional bloggers and their publications are listed to examine the level of popularity by asking participants whether they've heard of these bloggers, their blogs, or their publications. In the last section, ten statements about interactions are listed to test participants' attitudes toward blogs/blogging with a 5-point Likert Scale. The criteria for choosing the nine listed professional bloggers:

a.   Based on the list of 100 most popular personal bloggers sorted by Blog Observer website.

b.   The first nine bloggers who have blog publications.

3.2.1 The sample

The online survey was conducted from November 27, 2008 to December 5, 2008. The sampling method adopted at this stage was snowball sampling. There were 147 samples collected and among which 140 were valid. Participants who left out more than 20 questions

unanswered are eliminated. The inclusion criterion: internet users who ever heard or read any blogs before.

3.2.2 Research Variables

Demographic Variables

Variables in this section are age, gender, marital status, educational background, occupation, and monthly income. Age is divided into five age groups: 1. under age 18; 2. 18 to 25; 3. 26 to 35; 4. 36 to 45; 5. 46 and above. Gender: 1. Male; 2. Female. Marital Status: 1. single; 2. married; 3. separated; 4. divorced or widowed. Participants are asked to identify their highest degree obtained as their educational background: 1. elementary; 2. junior high school; 3. high school; 4. college/university; 5. master; 6. doctor; 7. others. Occupations are further divided into 21 categories. Monthly income are divided into six levels: 1. under NTD 10,000; 2. NTD 10,001 to 30,000; 3. NTD 30,001 to 50,000; 4. NTD 50,001 to 70,000; 5. NTD 70,001 to 90,000; 6. NTD 90.001 and above.

Blog Reading Habits

In this section, participants are asked to identify their blog reading habits, such as average daily online hours, blog reading frequencies, most often visited blog service platform. To further understand the level of popularity of the nine bloggers listed, participants are asked to indicate bloggers, blogs, and blog publications they've heard before with multiple answers.

Average daily online hours: 1. less than 2 hours; 2. 2 to 4 hours; 3. 4 to 6 hours; 4. 6 to 8 hours; 5. 8 to 10 hours; 6. 10 hours and above. Blog reading frequencies are categorized into four options: 1. never read any blog; 2. one or two times; 3. surfing around sometimes; 4. have regular reading blogs. For the most visited blog service platform, 11 blog service providers are listed: 1. Yahoo! Kimo Blog; 2. Yam Blog; 3. Wretch; 4. udn Blog; 5. Sina Blog; 6. Chinatimes Blog; 7. PC Home Online Personal News Station Blog; 8. PIXNET Blog; 9. Roodo Blog; 10. Flickr Blog; 11. Blogger.com; 12. others. Then the nine bloggers, their blogs, and their blog publications are listed to examine the level of popularity.

Interactions

Indices for interactions in this section are comments or messages. At first, from pure blog readers' point of view, participants are asked if they ever commented or left messages on any blogs. If yes, do they expect replies from bloggers? Will they be more willing to comment or leave messages if the blogger does reply? Then as a blogger, whether they reply all comments or messages on their blogs? Do they think replying comments or messages would help their blogs' level of popularity?

Attitudes toward Blogs

From literature reviewed, ten descriptions about the blog are listed to test participants' general attitudes toward blogs. Their answer is valued with a 5-point Likert Scale: 1. strongly disagree; 2. disagree; 3. neutral; 4. agree; 5. strongly agree. Ten statements are:

1. Blogs are about sharing.

2. Blogs are interactive.

3. Blogs are two-way communication.

4. Blogs are personal.

5. Blogs are free participatory.

6. Blogs are communication platform.

7. Blogs are co-productions of bloggers and blog readers.

8. Blogs are continuous interactions between bloggers and blog readers.

9. Blogs are accumulations of dialogues between bloggers and blog readers.

10. Higher interaction frequency between bloggers and blog readers leads to higher level of satisfaction toward both the blog and the blogger.

3.2.3 Pretest Results

Sample Structure

Among all participants, 56.9% fall in the age group of 26 to 35, and 36.1% are among 18 to 25 years old. These two groups in total account for 93 percent of all participants. The gender distribution is 50% male verses 50% female, and over 90% are single. Fifty-two percent obtain master degree, and 42% are college/university graduates. There are 42.6% make a monthly income of NTD 30,001 to 50,000; 20.9% earn NTD10,001~30,000 monthly, and 27.9% have a income lower than NTD 10,000, which may be the 23% students and the 6.29% unemployment.

Blog Reading Habits

As for the average daily online hours, 27% are between 2 to 4 hours, 21% are above 10 hours, 15.9% fall in the group of 8 to 10 hours, and 15.2% are between 6 to 8 hours. More than half of participants are online for 6 hours and above per day.

Over 91.8% of participants get online to use email, and 84.2% use instant messengers (IM) like msn messenger, yahoo messenger, Skype, etc. Seventy-four percent use Internet to search for news and information, while 49.3% use Internet to download software, documents or videos, etc. There are 47.9% get online to surf blogs, and 24.6% for managing their own blogs. Only 0.7% hasn't heard of blogs. Among 99.3% people who heard of blogs before, 45.6% of them have regular reading blogs, and 35.5% would surf other blogs, 18.1% only visit blogs once or two. In general, there are over 70% of them are blog readers. Wretch and Yahoo! Kimo blogs are the first two most visited blog platforms.

Fifty-three percent agree that high blog traffic/flow will trigger them to read the blog, while 38.4 percent say they would not be influenced. As for the blogs with high level of popularity, 62.3% would want to read their blogs, while 30.4% would not be interested. When asked if they know the 9 listed blog publishers, 85.6% know WanWan, who is called "Blog Diva" in Taiwan. Fifty-five percent know Queen, and 47.3% know Onion Head (洋蔥頭).

When asked how they know the blog publishers listed above, 32% are through traditional media as newspapers, magazines, and TV reports, 29.1% read them while surfing blogs randomly, 20.2% are referred by friends or relatives, and 17.2% know them from the homepage of blog platform. From the result, it is shown that the traditional media still play an important role on getting new information even about Internet. Among the listed 9 blogs, WanWan's Comics Blog was known by 81.5% of participants, 52.1% know I am Queen, and 41.8 % know Onion Head Club (洋蔥頭酷樂部). Later, the publications of this bloggers are listed, and participants are asked to identify the books they heard before, Interestingly, WanWan, who have the most publications of four books, accounts for the 1st place and the 4th,

5th, and 6th places. However, Queen has only two publications which are the 2nd and the 3rd place respectively. Forty percent of participants know these publications from bookstores (including online bookstores). Still, 28.8% are through traditional media, and 29.5 percent randomly know from surfing the Internet. When asked about the purchasing of these publications, 84% never purchase any one of them, and for the rest who at least purchase one publication before, WanWan and Queen again account for the first six places.

Interactions

In all participants, 61.8% have commented on blogs before, 39% commented for five times and above, 18.4% commented 2 to 5 times. Among participants who have commented on blogs before, 54.5% were responding to the particular posts, and 23.4% were interested in the bloggers, 10.2% were just for fun and 8.6% were participating in activities held by the bloggers. There are 54.1% expecting replies from the bloggers, 70.5% think bloggers' reply would increase their willingness to leave comments, and 60.7% think bloggers should reply comments.

There are 53.2% participants have their own blogs, and 74.6% have only one blog, and the rest have two blogs and above. In majority, 53.6% have blogging history of 1 to 3 years, 21.7% are 3 to 5 years, 21.7% are less than one year, and 3% are more than five years. Wretch is again the mostly adopted BSP with 58.6% participants. The reasons for keeping a blog are recording lives (49.6%), sharing emotions, thoughts, and opinions (39.57%), communicating with friends (23.7%), feeling interesting to have one (11.5%), following the trend (3.6%), etc. Ninety-six percent have got comments from others before, and over 60% would reply each comment. More than 50% think replying comments can help their blog popularity.

General Attitude toward Blogs

In order to test the construct validity of the scale, a principal component analysis was applied, and the result is as following:

Blog Readers' Attitudes toward Blog Interactivity (Before Revision)

Variables	Component 1	Component 2
interaction continuity	0.76	0.04
interaction frequency	0.73	-0.24
co-production	0.73	0.06
sharing	-0.71	0.04
dialogue	0.67	-0.24
interactive	0.66	-0.08
free participatory	0.66	0.14
communication platform	0.65	-0.05
personal	0.19	0.84
two-way	-0.23	0.68
Eigenvalues	4.00	1.32
% of variance	39.95%	13.23%
% of variance in total	53.18%	

Principal component analysis with varimax rotation.

Table 3-1 Factor Analysis Before Revision

The table above is the rotated component matrix. There are two components extracted. The 1st component can explain 39.95% of variance (Eigenvalue=4.00), and the 2nd component can explain 13.23% of variance (Eigenvalue=1.32). The 2nd component was constituted by two variables, personal and two-way. Usually, a component should be constituted by more than three variables to represent a facet. Therefore, the two variables were deleted. Sharing,

the variable having factor loading under .400 in both component, was also deleted from the scale. Then another factor analysis and the Cronbach's alpha reliability analysis were applied again for the remaining seven variables. After elimination of the three items, there is only one component left, and the Cronbach's alpha increased from .55 to .86 (Eigenvalues=3.79).

Blog Readers' Attitudes toward Blog Interactivity

Variables	Component 1
interaction continuity	0.81
interaction frequency	0.80
co-production	0.76
dialogue	0.74
communication platform	0.72
free participatory	0.67
interactive	0.64
Eigenvalues	3.79
% of variance	54.16%
Cronbach's Alpha	.86

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Table 3-2 Factor Analysis After Revision

There are 82% of participants agree or strongly agree that blogs are interactive (M=4.01, SD=.77), and 90.5% agree that blogs are free participatory (M=4.09, SD=.8). There are 85.6% agree that blogs are communication platforms (M=3.96, SD=.85). Seventy-nine percent agree that blogs are co-products of bloggers and blog readers (M=3.93, SD=.83), and 81.9% agree that blogs continuous interactions between bloggers and blog readers (M=4.00, SD=.76).

There are 64.3% of participants agree that blogs are accumulations of dialogues between bloggers and blog readers (M=3.61, SD=.94), and 72.7% agree that higher interaction frequency leads to higher level of satisfaction toward both blogger and blog (M=3.80, SD=.90).

As a result, there is positive correlation between willingness to comment or leave messages and replying is instrumental for the level of popularity (r=.41, P<0.01), and there is positive correlation between expecting replies from blogger(s) and willingness to comment or leave messages (r=.50, P<0.01).

Through the pretest online survey, the research scope has been narrowed down to two professional bloggers: Wan Wan and Queen. The author also found that interaction indexes applied in this phase (comments or messages) were not sufficient to cover the overall interactions between bloggers and blog readers. Therefore, two sets of focus group discussions are carried out to find out more explorative information.

3.2.4 Brief Introduction of Target Blogs

Wan Wan's Comic Blog

It is a comic blog. Wan Wan is called "Blog Diva". Her blogging style caters to mass culture. She transforms trivial into interesting comics, and develops different themes and topics depends on what happens in her daily life.

I am Queen

Queen is known for her sharp words on discussing or even criticizing intimate relationships. Her assertion is feminism or some put "female chauvinism". Her postings are mostly related to the inner world of women, and analyzing situations and mindsets of both sexes.

3.3 Focus Group Discussions

In the second phase, two sets of focus group discussion were carried out. The two panels of focus group discussion were conducted on April 25, 2009 afternoon. It took around 50 to 60 minutes for each set. There are six participants in the first round, and 7 participants in the second group discussion. The inclusion criterion: must be blog readers of either Wan Wan's Comic Blog or I am Queen Blog. Ten sets open-ended questions were asked to explore deeper into blog readers' thoughts, mindsets, and attitudes about these two blogs and the professional bloggers, especially regarding interactions. The importance facets of blogs/blogging were extracted from the focus group discussion to construct the final questionnaire: content, layout, theme, originality, updating frequency, style, entertaining effect, interactivity, and overall satisfaction.

3.3.1 Focus Group Discussion Summary

Generally, participants get to know Queen's or Wan Wan's blog through two major channels: media exposure and word-of-mouth. Some participants first heard of these two professional bloggers or their blogs through on other media, such as BBS, newspaper, television programs or commercials, or their blog publications. Other participants knew their blogs upon friends' or other bloggers' recommendations or linkages. All participants keep

reading Queen's or Wan Wan's blog because they found it quite intriguing. Participants keep track of the blog by adding it into my favorite list, my friend list, blogroll or subscribing to RSS. Therefore, these participants are generally regular readers. When asked to identify what makes Queen and Wan Wan so popular, participants pointed out several facts, including high blog updating frequency, good content, focused themes, constant media exposures, and word-of-mouth effects among blog readers.

Since Wan Wan and Queen have become professional bloggers, they started to carry out product endorsements by appearing in TV/Internet commercials, writing blog posts to introduce or even promote certain products, or putting product linkages or product advertisements on their blogs. Sometimes they are sponsored to travel, provided with the latest products, and thus are requested to write articles about the sponsors. Participants in general can understand that bloggers need to make money out of their blogs, and so they would be more business like and may talk about products rather than updating their blogs with certain style of articles they usually post. Participants have quite different point of views upon this issue. Some have concerns about the phenomena since readers are first attracted by what Queen and Wan Wan have been famous for, their writing/drawing styles and original contents, but not those endorsements and advertisements which are referred to by one of the participants as "product placement". However, some think being more commercialized is a natural process to become a professional blogger and it is acceptable. One of the participants further indicated that it can be sort of guarantee for the continuation of the blog. Many emphasize that it is readers' choice to read or not to read those commercialized articles for product related introductions.

When asked about the participants' attitude toward interactions online or offline, they tend to regard interactions as positive things to do, but not necessarily a must. Interactions online, such as replying messages, comments, or emails left by readers, holding activities to give out free product trials or movie tickets, or having a poll about certain issues, etc, are encouraged by participants to develop deeper, closer relationship between bloggers and readers. Interestingly, participants tend to emphasize that they can understand Queen or Wan Wan may not be able to reply all those messages because there are simply too many; however, they enjoy reading those comments if the blogger does reply, and if participants leave messages, they hope and expect the blogger to reply.

Most participants think content and theme are key factors to become a successful blog. Readers are attracted to the blog majorly because they are interested in certain topics and the contents are good enough to retain readership. Beside these two factors, being original and creative can be crucial. To be successful, updating regularly and frequently is a must. Blogs are regarded as emotional outlets, platforms to share feelings, opinions, knowledge, or ideas, records of lives, and a way to look into others' lives.

3.3.2 Focus Group Discussion Result

After focus group discussion, factors that may influence blog readers' expectation and satisfaction were listed, and two 5-point Likert scales were constructed. The eleven factors for evaluating blog readers' expectations are: meaningful content, wide variety of topics, specific themes, originality, updating frequency, cater to mass culture, style, commercialized level, entertaining, interactivity, and high media exposure. The mean of these factors were labeled level of agreement in data analysis process. Indices influencing blog readers' satisfaction are:

content, layout, theme, originality, updating frequency, style, entertaining effect, commercialized level, interactivity, and overall satisfaction. The mean of these indices were labeled level of satisfaction in data analysis process.

3.4 Final-Round Survey

There are two major parts in the final questionnaire: the demographic information and two 5-point Likert Scales are formulated respectively in the second part to test the level of agreement and level of satisfaction. Also, blog readers were asked to identify the interactions between the professional blogger(s) and whether they have spread word of mouth before or are willing to do so. The survey applied purposive sampling. The inclusion criterion: blog readers of either the following two blogs: Wan Wan's Comic Blog or I am Queen.

3.4.1 The Sample

In order to reach the blog readers of Wan Wan's Comic Blog and I am Queen, the researcher used trackback function and comment function in both blogs to trace the blog readers and left messages on their own blogs inviting them to fill-out the questionnaire. The online survey was conducted from June 20, 2009 to July 5, 2009. There are 720 samples collected, and 699 of them are valid.

3.4.2 Research Variables

Demographic Variables

The demographic variables adopted in this study are age, gender, marital status, educational background, occupation, monthly income, and average daily online hours. There are seven age groups. Gender includes male and female. Marital statuses are

categorized into three groups: single, married, separated/divorced/widowed. Educational

background is indicated by highest degree obtained: elementary school, junior high school,

high school, college/university, master degree, doctoral degree, and others. Occupations are

divided into 20 categories, including various industries, and student, unemployment,

self-employment, retirement, etc. There are six monthly income groups: 1. under NTD 10.000,

2. NTD 10,001~30,000, 3. NTD 30,001~50,000, 4. NTD 50,001~70,000, 5. NTD

70,001~90,000, 6. NTD 90,000 and above. Average daily online hours are divided into six

groups: 1. less than 2 hours, 2. 2~4 hours, 3. 4~6 hours, 4. 6~8 hours, 5. 8~10 hours, 6. 10

hours and above.

Motivations

Motivation indicators are also derived from focus group discussion as blog readers' five

major reasons to read blogs: 1. to get relaxed, 2. to kill time, 3. to exchange information, 4. to

exchange opinions, and 5. to fulfill the curiosity of knowing what others' are doing.

Participants are asked to identify their motivations to read blogs, and multiple answers are

allowed.

Interactions

Interaction indicators in this study are initially derived from the four blogging gadgets in

chapter 2. After focus group discussion, the indicators are adjusted to: 1. comment/ leave

messages, 2. trackback, 3. participate in any online or offline activities held by the

professional blogs. Whether the professional blogger replies the comments or messages are

also counted in.   Participants are asked to indicate whether they have done those activities

listed above. There are "yes" and "no" for each activity; yes is coded as "2", when "no" is

coded as 1.

Level of Agreement

Expectation indicators are captured from focus group discussions as eleven facets of blogs which expected by blog readers: 1. meaningful content, 2. wide variety of topics, 3. specific themes, 4. originality, 5. updated frequently, 6. adapt to mass culture, 7. obtaining personal style, 8. commercialized level, 9.entertaining, 10. interactivity, and 11. high media exposure. This part applying a 5-point Likert scale that participants have to identify their level of agreement from 1. strongly disagree, 2. disagree, 3. neutral, 4. agree, 5. strongly agree.

Level of Satisfaction

As stated by Jones & Sasser (1995), higher level of satisfaction is more likely to increase customer loyalty. There are ten factors captured from focus group discussions to evaluate the level of satisfaction and further lead to the ultimate level of loyalty – word-of-mouth. The ten factors of satisfactions are: 1. blog content, 2. blog layout, 3. blog theme, 4. blog originality, 5. blog updating frequency, 6. blog style, 7. blog entertaining effect, 8. blog commercialized level, 9. blog interactivity, 10. overall satisfaction toward the blog. This part also applies a 5-point Likert scale that participants are asked to identify their level of satisfaction from 1. very unsatisfied, 2. unsatisfied, 3. neutral, 4. satisfied, 5. very satisfied.

Word-of-mouth

Participants are asked to indicate whether they have recommended the blog to others or have intention to do so. In this part, "yes" is coded 2, and "no" is coded 1.

3.4.3 Hypotheses

As indicated previous in the literature, interactions are of great importance in relationship marketing, and to achieve customer satisfaction, one must meet customers' expectations. In this study, expectations are represented by blog readers' perceived value on different facets of the blog. It is hypothesized that if there are interactions between the professional blogger and blog readers, blog readers' score on level of agreement upon the blog would be high.

Hypothesis I. There is a positive correlation between blogger-blog reader interactions and fulfillment of expectations.

Hypothesis II. There is a positive correlation between fulfillment of expectation and level of satisfaction.

Hypothesis III. There is a positive correlation between interactions and level of satisfaction.

The ultimate level of loyalty is defined in this study as to become advocate and to spread word of mouth. From previous literature review, it is suggested that higher level of satisfaction leads to customer loyalty. In this study, it is hypothesized that blog readers' score on level of satisfaction toward the blog is positively correlated to the indicator of word-of-mouth.

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