



Consumer Conformity Behavior in Virtual Communities; a Study of Generation “Y” Consumers in Sri Lanka

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1 INTRODUCTION

Consumer behavior is considered to be a major concern for marketers in making their business a success. Apparently, social influence is a major determinant of consumer behavior. This is reflected in consumer decision making where social norms and interpersonal considerations influence behavior intentions (Sages and Grable, 2008). Also some of the marketers use interpersonal influence in their persuasive communications (Choubtarash *et al.*, 2013). The change of consumer behavior based on social influence can be called consumer conformity, which is defined as compliance with group norms, susceptibility to group influence, and behavioral changes in consumption due to a reference group (Sages and 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 new kinds of communities. But 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 *et al.*, 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 eWOM (Electronic Word of Mouth). eWOM is defined as "the informal communication directed at other consumers about ownership and characteristics of particular goods and services and/or their sellers" (Tseng and 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 *et al.*, 2015).

In conformity behavior, groups can moderate the strength of normative and informational influences to explore the processes that underlie social influences on consumer behavior. It is evident that previous research has measured consumer conformity using task / situation characteristics, personal characteristics, brand characteristics and group characteristics. However online consumer conformity is a relatively unexamined area (Park and Feinberg, 2010). Therefore, the main objective of this study is to examine consumer conformity behavior in virtual communities. Further, few studies have been done to examine the impact of factors such as self-esteem, personal involvement, sense of belongingness and community expertise on online conformity (Park and Feinberg, 2010) despite the fact that eWOM has been



examined as an antecedent of the same. Hence, this study specifically focuses on examining the impact of these variables on consumer conformity behavior in virtual communities.

2 METHODOLOGY

The study was mainly guided by the positivist research paradigm and the study was quantitative in nature. As the study attempts to examine the association between several determinants and consumer conformity, descriptive, single cross sectional (survey) design was adopted as the major research design. All variables were operationalized using established scales and a structured questionnaire was used as the instrument for collecting data.

Unit of analysis of the study was generation Y consumers who belong to at least one virtual community in Sri Lanka. Sample size was 200 individuals representing both males and females subject to generation Y age groups. The sample was selected using the convenience sampling technique. Accordingly, the researcher used convenience sampling method due to the absence of a sampling frame.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Prior to the analysis, data were tested for reliability and validity. Cronbach’s alpha was greater than 0.7 for all variables ensuring internal consistency. Further, AVE values were greater than 0.5, composite reliability values were above 0.7, thereby convergent validity was established. As all skewness and kurtosis values were in between the +2 and -2, it was concluded that data was normally distributed (Malhotra, 2006). Therefore, a regression analysis was applied to test the research hypothesis.

Below table represent the significant values of five independent variables. The significant values of eWOM, Personal Involvement, Sense of belongingness and Community Expertise are 0.000 which is less than the alpha value of 0.05. So there is significant impact of those factors on consumer conformity behavior in virtual communities with special reference to generation Y in Sri Lanka. The significant value of self-esteem 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 Y in Sri Lanka.

Table 1: Predictors: (Constant), eWOM, Self-esteem, Personal Involvement, Sense of belongingness, Community expertise. Dependent Variable: E-formity

Model	Mean Square	F value	B Value	R square	Sig.
eWOM	46.488	111.287	0.612	0.360	.000 ^a
Self esteem	.261	.400	0.060	0.002	.528 ^a
Personal Involvement	43.811	101.590	0.572	0.339	.000 ^a
Sense of belongingness	21.343	39.181	0.460	0.165	.000 ^a
Community Expertise	42.098	95.697	0.759	0.326	.000 ^a



According to the R square value consumer conformity behavior in virtual communities is explained by the eWOM and according to the eWOM, Personal Involvement, Sense of belongingness and Community Expertise have strong positive impact on consumer conformity behavior.

4 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 on 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 and Feinberg, 2010). In western counties, consumers have individualistic behavior. Therefore, if they value themselves they do not depend on others' behavior (Sages and Grable, 2008). But Asians like to depend on others' ideas, because Asian countries have collectivistic behavior (Sages and Grable, 2008; Venkatesan, 1966).

According to the findings it can be recommended to emphasize more positive WOM (word of mouth) 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 consumers. Companies can create virtual community groups to achieve their marketing objectives. According to the research findings consumer conformity

behavior does not depend on self-esteem. Therefore marketers don't consider self-esteem under the concept of consumer conformity behavior. Due to efficiency and effectiveness of the internet, consumers personally engage with virtual communities to search for information and it impacts on the conformity behavior as well. Marketers can provide more information through the community groups to motivate customers. But it is necessary to identify their information requirements before providing 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 that they are belong to the relevant virtual community it increases 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 is necessary to provide and share actual expertise knowledge through the virtual community groups, such as the desire to fit in or value socially acceptable information. Marketers can build trust through the virtual communities using expert knowledge. Trust is important in relationships because it allows the free flow of information without reservation.

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