

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN BUSINESS-TO-BUSINESS RELATIONSHIP MARKETING

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Abstract—The evolution of internet has made social media one of the most important media for business-to-business (B2B) commerce. Despite the increasing trends of social media utilization among businesses, studies into social media is limited and place greater focus on the business-to-consumer (B2C) relationships rather than on the B2B relationships. Hence, the objective of this study is to assess the role of social media in B2B relationship marketing. This paper outlines one main research question and four research sub-questions through the review of related literatures. The study plans to utilize a qualitative approach, specifically two phases of in-depth structured interviews with a minimum of 25 participants during each phase. The participants will be chosen among employees who work in relationship marketing fields in Malaysia. The value of this research will lie in its analysis through the use of Leximancer software. Leximancer allow researcher to generate concept maps automatically, thus reducing potential researcher bias.

Index Terms—Social Media, Business-to-business (B2B), Relationship Marketing.

I. INTRODUCTION

Knowledge about the role of social media in B2B context is considered important for developing relationships among businesses [1, 2]. Business can utilize social media, such as Facebook and LinkedIn, to interact with other businesses, develop relationships and trust, and identify prospective partners [3]. Even though the awareness of the potential impacts of social media in a corporate environment is essential, studies into social media are very limited and consider the B2C relationship to a much greater extent than the B2B relationship. One of the possible reasons which lead to this limitation is because the adoption of social media among B2B companies have been slower compare to the social media adoption among B2C companies [4]. Consistently, the Google time-line trends show a growing B2C interest in social media from 2004, whilst the interest in B2B social media started to emerged only in 2010 [5].

II. RELATIONSHIP MARKETING

Relationship marketing comes in many different forms [6]. In general, relationship marketing can be divided into activities which are 1) B2C; relationships associated with consumer goods and services, and 2) B2B; relationships often related to the supply chain [6]. Consistently, Möller and Halinen argue that there are two types of relationship marketing theories exist which are 1) market-based relationship marketing and 2)

network-based relationship marketing [7]. A comparative analysis of relationship marketing research reveals that it is misleading to discuss a single relationship marketing perspective without reference to the fundamental differences. The distinction between the two types of relationship marketing theories is that market-based relationship marketing is more consumer-oriented (B2C) and network-based relationship marketing is more interorganizationally-oriented (B2B). The former involves comparatively simple exchange relationships and presumes a consumer market context; whereas, the latter concerns complex relationships and presumes a network-like business context. This research will focus on relationship marketing in the B2B context. Therefore, a network-based relationship marketing perspective will be utilized for this research.

Within the form of B2B, relationship marketing may also exist in various types of relationships including in long-term relationships, partnerships, strategic alliances, network organizations, or vertical integration with their buyers [8]. The explanation of each type of these relational exchanges is detailed in Table I.

TABLE I. EXPLANATIONS OF RELATIONAL EXCHANGES

Type of Relational Exchange	Explanation
Long-term Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Develop when a buyer is satisfied with a service or product received from repeated transactions with a seller [9].• Can be successful for sellers and buyers as long as both parties continuously obtain benefits out of their relationship [10].• The characteristics include sharing a corporate culture, connecting closely to one another, and investing idiosyncratically [11].• The incentives or the outcomes include increasing performance, increasing support, and decreasing costs [12].
Buyer-seller Partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Refer to the relationship collaboration between a seller and a buyer [13].• As long as the interactions between a seller and a buyer are balanced and the desired outcomes of the partnerships are achieved, the seller and the buyer will invest in their partnerships [14].• The collaboration may help both parties in developing high levels of cooperation and trust [13].• The success depends on various collaboration aspects such as planning, coordination, communication [15], accommodation, degree of

receive elsewhere, the seller will develop a strong foundation in maintaining and enhancing relationships with its buyers [28].

III. SOCIAL MEDIA

The history of computer networked communication began with the launch of electronic mail (e-mail) in 1971 [29], years after the development of relationship marketing concept. Forty years after the arrival of e-mail, Computer Mediated Environments (CME) then developed, allowing rapid communication within user's networks in various forms such as text, pictures, and video [30]. CME is defined as a dynamic distributed network, together with associated software and hardware, which consumers as well as businesses use to (1) interactively access and provide content such as "machine interactivity", and (2) communicate through the medium such as "person interactivity" [31]. Social media represents a subdivision of CME. Since their existence, social media have expanded extensively to millions of users, many of whom have integrated social media into their daily practices [32].

Social media initially attained popularity among users for various reasons including entertainment, information seeking, and communication [33]. Now, social media are known for their effectiveness in reaching other users, promoting a particular topic, and enhancing communication strategies [34]. Grunig described the new digital social media as revolutionary forces which change the way people think and relationship practices [35]. According to Weinberg, social media gather users with similar interests throughout the world to communicate using technological tools such as wikis, forums, blogs, user-generated sites, video sharing sites, pictures, and podcasts [36]. The descriptions of each type of social media are detailed in Table II.

Type of Relational Exchange	Explanation
	sharing, and competitiveness [16].
Strategic Alliances	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Refer to businesses which makes a significant investment in the process of developing a long-term collaboration, and achieving individual as well as mutually strategic goals [17, 18]. • Cover both formal as well as informal joint ventures [19]. According to Wilson and Moller, strategic alliances derive from synergistic combinations of the entities' investments in resources, efforts, and time [20]. • Often characterized by strategic advantages [19], compatibility of goals [21], communication, work coordination, planning, conflict resolution [13], commitment and interdependence [14].
Network Organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Refer to two or more organizations which participate in long-term relationships. • The level of networks depends greatly on the quality, quantity, and the type of interactions between businesses [22]. • A tight network is often characterized by a formal joint venture, whereas a loose network is usually characterized by an informal agreement [19]. • Factors which determine the position of an organization in a network include the organization's power, domain, and position in other networks. • Direct competition exists when there is total overlap between the organization domains [22].
Vertical Integration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Refer to a type of diversification which combines business lines in a way that allows a business to use the outputs of a business line as inputs for another business line [23]. • Also defined as the total internalization of technologically distinct processes by a single business [24]. • Forward integration relates to a business which sets up its own distribution channel whereas backward integration describes a business which relies on other independently owned businesses [25]. • Benefits include risk reduction [26] and restrain businesses from the ability to adapt to with competitive conditions [27].

Source: Developed for this research

Relationship marketing not only comes in various forms and types [6], but also in different levels [28]. According to Berry, relationship marketing entails three implementation levels of varied and with various impacts on sellers' competitive advantages. The higher the level of relationship marketing a seller practices, the higher the level of sustainable competitive advantages the seller will achieve [28]. To further illustrate this point, the first level of relationship marketing depends greatly on the pricing strategies such as pricing incentives for ensuring a buyer's loyalty level. However, the possibility to develop a competitive advantage for the seller with a pricing strategy is low as price is the most easily imitated element of the marketing mix. At the next level, relationship marketing depends mostly on social bonds such as the personalization and customization of the relationships. According to Berry, in addition to providing a seller with a competitive advantage, social bonds can also provide the seller with the buyer's loyalty especially when its competitive advantages are weak [28]. An aggressive pricing strategy, however, may still be an important element in the second level framework. The final level of relationship marketing depends greatly on delivering solutions to buyer's essential problems. According to Berry, when a seller can offer target buyers with value-adding benefits which are more expensive or difficult to

TABLE II. DESCRIPTIONS OF SOCIAL MEDIA TYPES

Type of Social Media	Description
Blogs and Micro-Blogs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blogs are websites which allow a writer to share personal experiences as well as insights on a particular topic, and interact with readers through logs and comments [2, 37]. • Micro-blogs are another form of blog except that the content of these blogs are limited to a specific number of characters and are commonly text-based [37]. • Comments and logs could be in the form of text, image, audio or video [2, 38].
Social Networking Sites	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Refer to websites which allow users to create a profile page, meet virtually, connect, share information, communicate, and develop relationships with other users whom they might or might not know in the real world [37-40]. • Built with particular orientations for a specific group of users [38]. • Some researchers view all social media websites as social networking sites with different features such as video or photo-sharing features [32]
Virtual Game Worlds	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Virtual game worlds are online applications which resemble the real world in 3D form. • Bound by only the game rules, users can create, interact or have their own possessions with others in the virtual game worlds by using picture or personalized human-like character [38, 41].
Collaborative Projects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be classified into two main types: social bookmarking sites and wikis [2]. • Social bookmarking sites are websites which help people to manage and store collections of links. Users can share these bookmarks with other users using the links stored online. • Wikis are open content sites which allow users to continuously edit and modify. In wikis, users interact during the process of content collaboration [2, 37, 38].
Feedback Dedicated Sites	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Includes websites which allow users to share, post, read, respond, review, and discuss experiences, opinions, and thoughts on various topics [42]. • Online websites and forums dedicated for product or service reviews are the two most common forms.
Content Community Sites	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Refer to websites which allow users to share materials modified from pre-existing work [38]. • Typical media content shared include text-based, photo-based, video-based, and slide-based [2]. • Unlike social networking sites, the creation of profile page is not one of the requirements [2].
Virtual Social Worlds	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Similar to virtual game worlds where both types of social media replicate a three dimensional environment. • No rules refraining users from the range of possible interactions. • Exceptions of the rules are only for basic physical laws such as gravity [2, 43].

Source: Developed for this research

IV. RESEARCH FOCUS

The main objective of this study is to explore the role of social media in B2B relationship marketing. The focus of this research can best be divided into several sections. Firstly, in order to achieve the research objective, it is important to provide greater insights on the reasons **why** businesses use social media for the purpose of B2B relationship marketing. Even though studies illustrate that there are many possible reasons of slow social media adoption among B2B-typed of companies; to date, there are still limited studies exploring the reasons why businesses use social media especially in B2B relationship marketing. Even though B2B companies hold more generous social media policies, social media uptake was

lower in B2B than B2C companies in 2010 [44]. Some of the few reasons of slow social media adoption by B2B-typed of companies [4] include the lack of understanding the possibilities of social media, difficulties of assessing the financial gains from social media, difficulties in adopting new mental models and practices needed for the adoption, and lack of evidence of similar cases using social media [44].

Secondly, it is also essential to comprehend **what** social media businesses use for B2B relationship marketing. Even though businesses have now started to penetrate the online social networks and offer direct links from corporate websites to social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter [2], little is known about what social media businesses use for the purpose of B2B relationship marketing. Social media is similar to relationship marketing in the sense that both come in many different types. Social media exist in the forms of blogs, micro-blogs, social networking sites, virtual game worlds, collaborative projects, feedback dedicated sites, content community sites, and virtual social worlds [2, 38]. As of 2009, social networking sites alone consisted of more than 150 sites on the web [45], and among all of the social media users, a majority of them believed that businesses should interact with their consumers through social networking sites [46].

Finally, it also vital to better comprehend **how** and **at what stages** of the relationship do businesses use social media in B2B relationship marketing. The utilization of social media in a business environment may not merely conform to the utilization of social media in the public setting. Compared to other environments, the corporate environment has always put more emphasis on a tight policy control by the top management [47]. The nature of a business tends to be less democratic regarding information ownership and has traditionally taken a top-down approach [48]. However, the nature of public setting, including social media, has always been bottom-up driven [48] and information ownership has always been dominated by the users [49]. The time associated with using social media in business context, such as when developing, maintaining or enhancing B2B marketing relationships, is also not well understood. Additionally, there is limited knowledge relating to the association of social media utilization with types or stages of B2B marketing relationships. According to Webster (1992) relational marketing may exist during various stages of B2B relationships including during long-term relationships, partnerships, strategic alliances, network organizations, or vertical marketing relationships with buyers.

Given that the main purpose of this research is to explore the role of social media in the area of B2B relationship marketing, the following overarching research question is developed:

- RQ: What is the **role** of social media in B2B relationship marketing?

Based on this overarching research question, four research sub-questions have been derived. The research sub-questions are illustrated as the following:

- RSQ1: **Why** do businesses use social media in B2B relationship marketing?
- RSQ2: **What** social media do businesses use in B2B relationship marketing?
- RSQ3: **How** do businesses use social media in B2B relationship marketing?

- RSQ4: At what stages of the relationship do businesses use social media in B2B relationship marketing?

V. METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach specifically two phases of in-depth structured interviewing techniques will be implemented for this research. The objective of performing the first phased interviews is to obtain detailed information of whether or not the companies use social media as a mean of relationship marketing between their companies and other companies. The objective of second phase interviews is to verify information received from the preliminary interviews.

For each phase, the interviews will be undertaken to a minimum of 25 employees, each with approximately 30 minutes to 60 minutes length. The first phase of the interviews will be undertaken to employees, from different organizations, who work in relationship marketing fields. The second phase of the interviews will be executed to consumers of companies from the first phased interviews. In other words, the participants for the second phased interviews are employees of companies which have relationships with the companies from first phased interviews. The interviewees will be chosen based on their knowledge, ability and willingness to communicate about the issues being examined [50]. The potential interviewees will be chosen from a range of industries company sizes. The reason for interviewing participants from a range of industries and sizes is that this research is exploratory in nature and as such investigating responses from a range of industry types and sizes will add depth to the investigation.

In order to ensure that the research questions of this research are addressed, a structured interview guide will be used as a basis of discussion during both phases of the interviews. For the first phase interviews, the interview guide includes questions on respondent's information, respondent's company information, general information relating to the company's use of social media, companies' future plan pertaining to the use of social media (if the companies currently not using social media), information on *what* social media do the companies use, information on *how* and *why* the companies use social media, and additional comments towards social media. To ensure the credibility of data across the interviews, the findings from the first phased interviews will then be the basis in creating another structured interview guide which will be used during the second phased interviews.

The value of this research will lie mainly in its analysis. This research will be analysed using analytics software named Leximancer. Leximancer allows researcher to automatically map out themes, concepts, and relevant relationships from the interview transcriptions into visually compelling concept maps, thus reducing potential researcher bias [51].

In this exploratory research, Malaysia was chosen as the country of context. Malaysia was chosen because it has shown 1) high interest growth in relationship marketing and social media, 2) high number of internet users, 3) high rate in internet penetration, and 4) considerable growth in social media usage. Google time-line trends show that Malaysia has one of the highest rate of growth in relationship marketing and social media [5]. Additionally, within the Asian region, Malaysia is listed as having one of the highest number of internet users and the highest rate of internet penetration. Finally, statistics shows that the level of internet adoption among Malaysians has been high every year since 2008; more than 50% of the

population described as internet users [52]. Among these internet users, nearly 90% have access to social media [53] and more than 50% have an active social media profile [54]. In Malaysia, online activities are prominently represented by social media, with social networking activities accounting for more than 70% of online activities and nearly 80% of users' time spent online [55]. As such, Malaysia is an appropriate country of context for this study.

VI. CONCLUSION

This paper serves as a research proposal. The objective of this research is to explore the role of social media in B2B relationship marketing. This paper has given background information about the research topic and identified the research focus in the literature. The relevant literature, research methodology and methods were also presented in this paper.

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