

Social Media and Brand Engagement in the Age of the Customer

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Abstract: Social media environment has tremendously changed the landscape of marketing communication. Thanks to the development of Internet that creates marketers' opportunity to tap the potential customer—Generation C and build a meaningful brand engagement with them. This paper will highlights the special ongoing issues pertaining to the growth of social media, mobile social, brand engagement and Generation C as basing to create firms' sustainable competitive advantage. Marketers need to understand the real behaviour of customers, especially Generation C in order to formulate marketing communication strategies that suits with their lifestyles.

Keywords: Social media, mobile social, brand engagement, Generation C

1. INTRODUCTION

'In this age of the customer, the only sustainable competitive advantage is knowledge of and engagement with customers.'

David M. Cooperstein,
Forrester Research, writing in 'Competitive Strategy in the Age of the Customer', 2013

The Internet has changed the world since it was established as a research network in terms of both network technology and services offered for more than forty years ago (Internet Society, 2015). Since then, it has developed to rapidly promote vast innovation, diverse network development, changed firm's communication and information sharing with business partners (Omar et al., 2011), and increased user engagement to more than 3 billion people online (Internet Society, 2014) particularly in the Asian region. Asia has 1,405,121,036 Internet users than any other part of the world (Table 1) and is also the fastest-growing digital region with internet users growing almost four times faster than the general population (Kemp, 2015). This paper will overview the special issues pertaining to the growth of social media, Generation C and brand engagement in social networking sites.

2. SOUTHEAST ASIA AS THE LAND OF OPPORTUNITY

Table 2 depicts Indonesia, Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia and Thailand are Southeast Asia's most promising large Internet markets (Anh-Minh, 2013) and amongst the most active in the world with average users spend more than 5 hours every day using the Internet (Kemp, 2015). According to Nielsen (2014), the increasing of connected device ownership, availability of high-speed connectivity and evolving online offerings in Southeast Asia further contributes to the significant factors in driving the growth of online shopping. This in return becomes the foundation for a booming online retail sector, with the number of consumers making online purchases increasing significantly in the past two years since 2012 across Southeast Asia (Nielsen, 2014).

Consequently, this situation leads to a huge market potential and opportunity for firms' online businesses survive against its competitors by allowing crucial continuous improvement of the firms' competitive position in the market. Thus, it will strengthen the firms' motivation to sustain the competitive advantage of e-business as Southeast Asia is one of the most diverse and fast changing regions in the world (Anh-Minh, 2013). Similarly, based on new data from GlobalWebIndex (GWI), Southeast Asians are more likely to engage with brands than anywhere else in the world using the social media platforms (Greene, 2014) because of the

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highest average daily web use (McGrath, 2015) and this motivate marketers to promote their brands

using various social networking platforms in Southeast Asia.

Table 1. The internet users and 2014 population statistics for Asia.

World Regions	Population (2015 Est.)	Internet Users (Dec. 31, 2000)	Internet Users (Latest Data)	Penetration (% Population)	Growth (2000-2015)	Users % of Table
Africa	1,158,353,014	4,514,400	318,633,889	27.5 %	6,958.2 %	10.3 %
Asia	4,032,654,624	114,304,000	1,405,121,036	34.8 %	1,129.3 %	45.6 %
Europe	827,566,464	105,096,093	582,441,059	70.4 %	454.2 %	18.9 %
Middle East	236,137,235	3,284,800	113,609,510	48.1 %	3,358.6 %	3.7 %
North America	357,172,209	108,096,800	310,322,257	86.9 %	187.1 %	10.1 %
Latin America ^a	615,583,127	18,068,919	322,422,164	52.4 %	1,684.4 %	10.5 %
Oceania ^b	37,157,120	7,620,480	26,789,942	72.1 %	251.6 %	0.9 %
World Total	7,264,623,793	360,985,492	3,079,339,857	42.4 %	753.0 %	100.0 %

Including Caribbean^a and Australia^b

Notes. Adapted from *Internet Usage Statistics: The Internet Big Picture* by Internet Worlds Stats, 2015. Retrieved from <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>

Table 2. Southeast Asia internet use, population data and Facebook statistics.

Southeast Asia	Population (2014 Est.)	Internet Users, (Year 2000)	Internet Users (Jun 30, 2014)	Penetration (% Population)	Users % Asia
Brunei	422,675	30,000	318,900	75.4 %	0.0 %
Cambodia	15,458,332	6,000	927,500	6.0 %	0.1 %
Indonesia	253,609,643	2,000,000	71,190,000	28.1 %	5.1 %
Laos	6,803,699	6,000	850,425	12.5 %	0.1 %
Malaysia	30,073,353	3,700,000	20,140,125	67.0 %	1.5 %
Myanmar	55,746,253	1,000	668,955	1.2 %	0.0 %
Philippines	107,668,231	2,000,000	44,200,540	41.1 %	3.2 %
Singapore	5,567,301	1,200,000	4,453,859	80.0 %	0.3 %
Thailand	67,741,401	2,300,000	20,100,000	29.7 %	1.5 %
Timor-Leste	1,201,542	N.A.	13,217	1.1 %	0.0 %
Vietnam	93,421,835	200,000	41,012,186	43.9 %	3.0 %

Notes. Adapted from *Internet Usage in Asia: Internet Users, Facebook Subscribers & Population Statistics for 35 Countries and Regions in Asia* by Internet Worlds Stats, 2014. Retrieved from <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats3.htm#asia>

3. THE SOCIAL MEDIA LANDSCAPE

The social media landscape has matured significantly from the evolution of the Internet marketing environment. Social media refers to means of interactions among people taking place in real time in which they create, share, and exchange information and ideas in virtual communities and networks by using internet-based technologies (Schiffman & Wisenblit, 2015; Abeyasinghe & Alsobhi, 2013). The definition shows that the Internet development clearly contributes to the significant growth of various types of social media platforms including Facebook, Instagram and Twitter that tapped into consumers' life. Moreover, the social media revolution has given consumer around the world the most powerful voice (Kerpen, 2015) and powerful sources for news updates, online collaboration, networking, viral marketing and entertainment (Boundless, 2015). In particular, social media are considered to be actively fast-moving domain, cheap and interactive channels for reaching targeted audiences (Valentini, 2015) and also one of the most frequently recommended marketing strategies by experts across all industries (Scott, 2014). In addition, social media platforms enable business people engage with their customers in real

situation and to understand their behaviour (Coles, 2011). In a nutshell, social media is the media people used to be social and building relationships among them.

David Jr. (2015), stated that social media in Malaysia has grown due mainly to the ease of Internet connection especially the broadband (Eleventh National Plan, 2015) and this open up the opportunity for the big companies such as McDonald's, KFC, AirAsia, MayBank, RHB have heavily invested in social media. Meanwhile, Subramaniam (2014), mentioned that the adoption of social media in Malaysia, particularly has shown significant growth in the last few years with Facebook is currently the most visited social media website along with Yahoo, Google, YouTube and Blogger. In addition, Gibson (2009) stated that by 2016, 2.6 million younger Malaysians will be newly-active consumers on news online, belongs to a variety of social networks, acquiring vast information with the sense of global culture.

4. MOBILE SOCIAL IS THE HOTTEST DIGITAL TREND

Another significance of the latest trend in technology environment is the emerging of mobile social devices.

Mobile devices is a portable, wireless and handheld computer computing devices with compact and lightweight design such as a tablet computer, e-readers and smartphones. Figures for mobile devices are continuing to trend upwards (Incite Group, 2015) as users spend more time using Facebook and Twitter on mobile devices compared to traditional computer or laptops (Dube, 2012). According to comScore (2014), the Media Prima Group was ranked number one for the Top 20 Web Properties Visited from Mobile Devices in Malaysia in September 2014 with 1,956,000 unique visitors with 87 percent of them comes from Android smartphones. This key insight could play a crucial role in future marketing strategies and tactics, especially in terms of brand engagements' development in Malaysia. According to USTelecom Media (2014), users who connect to social networking sites via mobile devices such as smartphones engage more actively with brands by reading, commenting, liking or sharing the content of the brands compared to PCs.

Massie (2015), stated that \$101.37 billion to be spent on ads served to mobile phones and tablets worldwide on 2016 represents a nearly 430 percent increase from 2013. In addition, the growth in mobile ad spending is being driven by consumer adoption of mobile devices where many consumers are accessing the Internet mobile-first and mobile-only especially emerging and developing markets like China, Indonesia, India and Brazil (Massie 2015).

5. FACEBOOK IS STILL POPULAR AMONG NETIZENS

Undoubtedly, public are constantly being bombarded by other latest and biggest growth, social network platforms, particularly Pinterest, Tumblr,

Instagram (Chaffey, 2015). However, Facebook remains as the most popular social media platform in the world (Table 3) and still standing its ground especially in Malaysia. In less than a decade, Facebook has very shaped the social media landscape with more than one billion users, and has become an integral part of the lives of many consumers (Kabadayi & Price, 2014). Facebook is the most commonly used site by university students as it was originally designed for them to communicate virtually with their friends at their own university and with others across the country (Bufardi & Campbell, 2008). Facebook is a game changer especially creating the followers' interaction and suitable for B2C marketers as it is easier to personalize fan page like posting the comments and share the related stories regarding the firms' products and brands (O-SYSTEMS, 2015).

Facebook takes a different approach by default, users who are part of the same "network" can view each other's profiles, unless a profile owner has decided to deny permission to those in their network (boyd & Ellison, 2008). Indeed, when a consumer comments on a brand's Facebook post, in addition to his or her friends on his or own profile, anyone who views the brand's post can also see the comment, even though the consumer does not know those viewers personally (Kabadayi & Price, 2014). Facebook is currently the most visited social media website in Malaysia. According to David Jr. (2015), there are 10.4 million Facebook users in Malaysia of which 3.5 million are youth aged between 18 and 24. In addition, there are more than 8.7 million (out of 10 million) are accessing Facebook via mobile on a daily basis, and more than 14 million (out of 15 million) on a monthly basis (David Jr., 2015).

Table 3. Top 10 Most Popular Social Networking Sites in the World

Rank ^a	Social Networking Sites (SNS)	Estimated Unique Monthly Visitors ^b (mil)
1	Facebook	900
2	Twitter	310
3	LinkedIn	255
4	Pinterest	250
5	Google Plus+	120
6	Tumblr	110
7	Instagram	100
8	VK	80
9	Flickr	65
10	Vine	42

^aBased from eBizMBA, Compete, Quantcast and Alexa Ranks as at 1st May 2015

^bEstimated Unique Monthly Visitor = a person who visits a Web site more than once within a specified period of time (monthly)

Notes. Adapted from *Top 15 Most Popular Social Networking Sites – August 2015* by eBizMBA. Retrieved from www.ebizmba.com/articles/social-networking-websites

6. THE AGE OF THE CUSTOMER - GENERATION C

The age of the customer is the idea that consumers are more empowered, particularly on the accessibility of information about products and

services using the Internet. Nowadays, firms that effectively engaging with empowered customers will clinch to the top, regardless of the industry (Eisenhauer, 2012) such as Generation C. This highly connected generation will live "online" most of life

their daily activities such interaction and communication that identifies them in the converged online and offline atmosphere (Friedrich et al., 2010). Generation C or Gen C who live their life with the Internet (thinkwithGoogle, 2013) have now become a powerful new force in business environments. Known as YouTube generation, Gen C comprises of people in the age group between 18 to 34 years old with heavy social media usage compare to another groups. According to (Solis, 2012), Gen C is not an age group but more on attitude, mindset (Borum, 2014) and lifestyle segment which portrays a connected society based on their interests and behaviour.

Gen C are on their way to change the world with their broad of digitally connected personalities (Taylor & Frye, 2015). Interestingly, 90.8 percent of them admitted that they engaged with a brand online regularly, at least once a month (Fabiano, 2014; Pastino, 2014). Therefore, they devoted themselves to the social media as part of their daily life and shared experiences of others to guide their actions for resolution especially on related products and brands. In addition, if particular brands manage to engage with them, they will become the firm's best customers as they are the biggest spenders, vocal supporters and the most influential opinion formers. (thinkwithGoogle, 2014,). Firms' survival depends on how they create an establishment of a more symbiotic relationship with their target customers – Gen C as it shows that how the status of consumers has evolved from the recent years from being passive to more proactive behaviours. In the era of "The Internet of Me" (Accenture, 2015), marketers need to embrace the opportunity to engage with Gen C by building their experience with brands by encouraging them to share their impressions and critiques about firms' brands and respond to their reviews in a sincere manner (Jensen, 2014). Because once they engaged with the firms' brands, they become loyal and thus become the advocates for the firms' brands.

7. BRAND ENGAGEMENT OVER SOCIAL MEDIA

Interest in brand engagement mushrooming as the development of the Internet which creates an interaction between consumers and the brands. Phipps (2009), stated that brand engagement involves the interactive process of creating a stronger sense of self which motivate customers to become more proactive and productive. In another context, brand engagement in social media basically refers to the human touch process that focuses on emotional connections which gives customers a sense of ownership of the brands, creating a closer relationship with the selected brands based on

personal values and aspirations, and two-way personal communication between a brand and consumers (Abramovich, 2012; Lindstrom, 2014; Nickels, 2014; Robles, 2014) over social media. Previous study by Hollebeek et al. (2014), stated that although the concepts of customers engagement and brand engagement are different in terms of concepts designations such as names, however, both concepts are reflecting a highly similarity of conceptual scope because the main focus which creates brand engagement is mainly between the interaction of customer towards the brands which appeared in the specific social media platform such as Facebook.

In short, engagement is the interaction between people (customers) and brands using social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter which defines engagement as likes, comments and shares, and @replies, retweets and mentions respectively (McGurk, 2014). Lea (2012) stated that, firms which devote and engage with their customers using social media will have more loyal customers who spends 20 percent to 40 percent more on that brand or firm's products. Therefore, to create utmost engagement between customers and brands in social media, firms need to be good listeners and create conversations in a genuine and human way with their customers. These include answering their questions and solve their problems related to the products, supporting and praising their ideas towards the brands.

Another method to create brand engagement is through brand engagement campaign. The latter encourages both loyal fans or customers and perhaps the potential new customers to like, share, comment on and contribute to that brand's narrative which is less like commercials (Corstie-Massay, 2014). One good example is Qatar Airways. According to Vahl (2014), Qatar Airways posts a number of promotional pictures about football or soccer for their fans using Facebook (Figure 1). Fans are very responsive to questions and posts on the company's page and frequently change their cover promotional photo to promote something new Vahl (2014). Marketers need to emphasize on what engages your audience and change the promotional cover photo often as this is a key to customers' attraction towards the brands and eventually participate themselves in an online conversation.



Fig. 1 Qatar Airways Commercial in Facebook
 Source: <http://www.socialmediaexaminer.com/10->

8. CONCLUSION

The great paradigm shift of social media is well ongoing not only in the world but also in Malaysia. Nowadays, social media become central to marketers overall marketing communications effort to stay connected and engaged with their customers for continuing loyalty. Therefore, smart marketers need to understand further how to acquire most of these new tools in order to give them a competitive advantage over their rivals. Meanwhile, the emerging of mobile media applications via smartphones and heavy users among Gen C clearly defines the new element of marketing communication platform which creates potential brand engagement between Gen C and the brands itself. Thus, marketers should focus on mobile applications more than ever before. Facebook is still relevant as a prominent social networking site in the world of social media tools, especially to B2C with data domination, measurement and engagement in term of ad delivery. Marketers absolute challenges will be the need to engage meaningful and purposeful with their customers in order to sustain the brands' growth and survival as customer nowadays are really cautious with their purchasing behaviours that suite to their lifestyles. The future is uncertain to social media. Thus, marketers need to highlight some kind of tangible benefits to their customers otherwise they will lose in the battle of red ocean market that slowly swept them away from the industry. This paper has the potential for future expansion in terms of the empirical investigation of the impact of social media on brand engagement.

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