Developing Tribe Marketing and Information Technology Competencies Skills (Tribe-IT Skills) for Virtual Entrepreneurs

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Abstract: *Entrepreneur ventures have high potential to add value on nation's economy. Additionally, dynamic changes of business environment resulting from the knowledge-based innovation and technological advancement could enhance entrepreneurial success. Utilisation of technology tools and applications have also infuses changes in business marketing approach, shifting the focus from an individual-based towards network of people-based who shared similar interest over brand, known as tribe marketing. While the extant literature shows that tribe marketing has benefited firms in many ways, studies on tribe marketing for entrepreneurs, virtual businesses in particular, are relatively scarce. This paper attempts to fill this gap. Due to huge potential of information technology or IT as a foundation for tribe marketing, this paper suggests the integration of Tribe formation and IT competency skills model for virtual entrepreneurs. Findings from the proposed study are expected to provide directions for entrepreneur to engage with consumer values and preferences of the tribes through the use of technology. Finally, it potentially contributes towards enrichment of virtual entrepreneurship competency literature with the integration of technology-related skills.*

Keywords: Tribe Marketing, IT Competency, Virtual Entrepreneurs

1. INTRODUCTION

Entrepreneurship contributes to the society in many ways, and its impacts could range from small to large scale on the nation's economy. Entrepreneurial socio-economic benefits could exist at both an individual and societal levels (Mwasalwiba, 2010). Recent studies reveal that vast financial assistance is allocated to support entrepreneurship development, and progressive effort is dedicated to promote entrepreneurship across economic performance including industrialised, developing and less developed economy (Cho and Honorati, 2014; McKenzie and Woodruff, 2013; Van der Sluis, Praag and Vijverberg, 2008).

The current dynamics of business environment as a result of knowledge-based landscape innovation and technological change have impacted the entrepreneurial success (Acs and Audretsch 2005). Innovativeness is important in crafting business strategies to achieve growth and profitability;

innovativeness thus represents the main characteristic that qualifies an individual to become an entrepreneur (Schumpeter, 1934). Thus, ownership of business, particularly small businesses, does not necessary mean the individual can simply be regarded as an entrepreneur. Instead, the creativity to lead innovative ventures at all levels in the business is a crucial characteristic of a successful entrepreneur (Demirbas, 2010). For example, an innovative entrepreneur ventures into a virtual business, as opposed to a conventional brick-and-mortar business. In this situation, technology offers opportunity for innovative entrepreneurs to enhance the economic performance of the business through technology utilisation.

Further, advancement of information technology (IT) infuses current trend in the market that encourages a movement from individualism towards a search for greater social bonds, particularly among virtual business community. This development introduces the concept of neo-tribes that led to the discovery of a new marketing element, known as 'tribe

marketing'. Tribe marketing consists of networks of people whose interactions focus on the interest over similar products or brands (Cova, 1997).

Past literatures have focused on engagement between firms and tribes (Silva and Santos, 2012; Mitchell and Imrie, 2011). However, review of literature indicates far too little attention has been paid to small businesses or entrepreneurs in creating their own clan of tribe marketing through technology utilization. This paper attempts to fill this gap.

While there are a large number of individuals having the ability to interact using social media such as Facebook, virtual entrepreneurs require other IT skills that enable them to benefit from IT, which specifically focuses on increasing their ability to market their business and products. Therefore, acquisition of the skill set of IT competencies among entrepreneurs is crucial to enable them implement innovative and dynamic business and marketing strategies with the use of IT applications and tools.

This paper aims to propose development of a tribal marketing and IT competency model for virtual entrepreneurs. Development of the model is based on previous literature and empirical evidences.

Findings of this study could provide directions for entrepreneur in engaging with consumer values and preferences of the tribes by using IT, and at the same time building relationships with them. This may empower entrepreneurs to achieve a sustainable competitive advantage by meeting consumer needs. The intention of this paper also is to stimulate thought and expand the body of knowledge in the emerging area of marketing and entrepreneurship from the lenses of technology utilization.

This paper is structured as follows. Section 1 introduces entrepreneur and marketing using Internet. Section 2 presents the literature review of the study. This is followed by discussion of the development of Tribe-IT skills model. The final section concludes the study with potential contributions and future studies.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Tribe Marketing

Tribalism is defined as networks of people gathering together for social interaction, often around consumption and brands (Cova, 1997; Dholakia,

Bagozzi and Klein Pearo, 2004; Johnson and Ambrose, 2006). Tribes are groups of consumers that share an emotional link particularly with a brand, but most importantly, with each other. This heterogeneous group of people is connected by using the social link of products and services to create their own clan (Mitchell and Imrie, 2010). Therefore, it is more important for a company to learn how to interact with a tribe than how to dominate markets (Cova and Cova, 2002). It is believed that the market segment that focuses on individualism has been accentuated by technological progress, in which with the networks, consumers are gathering together and share the same interest. This current trend is called neo-tribes (Cova, 1997; Dholakia et al., 2004; Johnson and Ambrose, 2006).

Online consumers appear to be more active, participative, resistant, playful, social and communitarian than ever before (Kozinets, 1999). They want to become influential participants in the construction of experiences (Firat, Schultz and Clifford, 1997). As a consequence, companies no longer communicate with these empowered customers; instead, they provide a forum for exchanging interests with them (McWilliam, 2000).

Silva and Santos (2012) developed Orbit View Model that illustrates the relationship between consumer and brand. Based on the model, there are four levels of relationship: corporate level, product level, experience level and tribal level. This paper focuses on tribal level because the other three levels have been widely discussed in marketing studies. At the tribal level, the consumers play the active part of the brand. They shared a common interest with other persons who also have the same brand. On the other hand, firms can benefit from the tribalism relationships with consumers. By engaging with consumers with strong emotional connection over the same brand, firms can take advantage of a tribe's existence and grow in the market. In order to develop the commitment between firms and consumers, firms need to support the tribe, feed the passion and integrate the tribe (Silva and Santos, 2012). The creation of fan pages, promotional marketing of word of mouth and online reviews for instance, could cultivate this relationship.

2.2. Formation of Consumer Tribes

The concept of tribe exists beyond national borders. Individuals can find and form their tribe with people that geographically dispersed but shared the same interest (Henderson, Guzmán, Huff, and Motley, 2013). The use of Internet for example, provides

connections among the tribe members. According to Goulding, Shankar and Canniford (2013), the formation of tribes is based on the elements of engagement, imagination and alignment. Engagement means that people do thing together in the communities. They learn and comply with the tribe rules. Initially, each member involves in the process of socialization that leads to process of commitment and adjustment in order to fully engage with other members. Second key process of tribe is imagination. Imagination enables communities to develop a shared self-image that connects with a collective social identity (Wenger, 2000).

Finally, the third key process in communities of practice is alignment. Alignment involves the coordination of individual activities with community that includes words, symbols, and way of doing things. Alignment is also the product of shared repertoires and mutual engagement.

These three elements of tribe formation have been tested in entertainment field (Goulding, Shankar, and Canniford, 2013). They posited that the advantage of tribe marketing requires a range of products and services to be ritualized experiences in order to enable consumer-to-consumer interaction, and for the development of acceptance value. If the market does not provide these products and services, then entrepreneurial ventures will emerge from the tribe to serve the needs of the tribe.

The above study describes that consumer tribes create the membership based on consumption of products or services that exist in the market. However, very few studies discussed about how the entrepreneur start-up business develop their own tribes (Holzweber, Mattsson, and Standing, 2015).

It is strategically important for entrepreneurial business development to build their tribe in order to have strong consumer market (Goulding et al., 2013). Align with this Holzweber et al. (2015) developed a model that include social cohesion between inner tribe and outer tribe (followers). This relationship is believed to generate strong customer response towards the brand; and in turns create the market. The model, which has been tested in Sweedish start-up design company, consists of six elements: design vision, social cohesion, icon, outer tribe, e-brand and market.

The model started with design vision where the company has an open dialogue with the tribe members that share experiences and emotions about iconic products. This sharing session creates strong echoes between inner tribes, and social cohesion among higher members of social capital. Consequently, that in turn creates trust among the tribes. Moreover, inner tribe is particularly crucial to make people emotionally involved in building the brand and market.

Nevertheless, the extant literature focuses more on engagement between firms and tribes (Cova and Cova, 2002; Goulding et al., 2013; Silva and Santos, 2012). Development of tribe marketing for individual entrepreneurs is limited. Although Holzweber et al. (2015) discussed the formation of tribes for entrepreneurs; their approach focuses on a group of inner tribes, who consists of founder of an enterprise and mentors with wide experience in branding development and marketing. Further, their model was developed in a design company that limits generalizability of findings to other population. Due to the importance of technology as a foundation for tribe marketing development particularly for virtual entrepreneurs, this paper suggests an integration of the Tribes formation model with the IT competency skills. The following section provides further elaboration on IT competency.

2.3. Competency Concept

Competency is regarded as clusters of related knowledge factors, skills, and attitudes that correlate to the individual's job performance (Naqvi, 2009). It arises from 'know how' of technology and production skills, and includes operational and functional skills with an emphasis on organisational efficiency (Lucarelli, 2004). This means that the higher the level of skills and knowledge possessed by people, the more new ideas and techniques can be developed in a process which can change production or services, and also improve the links between employees and clients. In this view, the concept of competency plays an important role in improving clients' benefits by increasing product or service reliability, client satisfaction and reducing costs (Lucarelli, 2004).

Bassellier, Reich and Benbasat (2001) define competence as an enabler, providing the means to a better performance. It is a set of "specific skills that employees are expected to demonstrate at each respective level as well as the skills that must be mastered for them to be considered for promotion to the next level" (Martone 2003, p. 24). Marcolin et al. (2000) recognises that competence is fundamental to performance, taking into account

the skills-based approach by looking for the fit between a user's abilities and the task at hand. Therefore, user competence is defined as 'the user's potential to apply technology to its fullest possible extent so as to maximise the individual's performance on specific job tasks'.

In literature, researchers refer to the idea that, 'competencies' must contribute in some way to performance and must be 'outcome-focused' (Boritz and Carnaghan 2003). Outcomes are the larger results of many detailed actions and the application of specific skills. Boritz and Carnaghan (2003) posit that competencies are the ability to 'do' rather than the 'know how' to do an activity. They further assert that knowledge on its own is not sufficient to represent competence. Thus, competencies include knowledge, skills, and attitudes, and in addition have been linked to actions associated with the business strategies of an organisation. For instance, competencies guide an individual to understand the skills and behaviours that ensure achievement of future personal and organisational plan and strategies (Guinn, 2000).

2.4. Information Technology (IT) Competencies

IT is not a self-contained system and in fact is emerging and changing continuously (Ndubisi and Kahraman 2005), making a strategic impact on business and the economy (Mohamed and Lashine 2003). In order to navigate the fast evolving field of of innovation-led business creation, IT may provide entrepreneurs the flexibility to innovate and a collaborative workplace culture where their vision and resources are designed to keep them energized and aligned on business goals. Thus, it is believed that to success in virtual business, entrepreneurs required a specific skill set of IT (also known as IT competencies) as skills needed for them to reinforce their objectives in business. For instance, McGowan and Durkin (2002) claimed technical ability with regards to internet and technology utilisation represents one of the crucial competencies for entrepreneurs in developing and maintaining relationships with customers.

IT competency is defined as a set of IT-related knowledge and experience that a knowledge worker/individual possesses (Bassellier, Reich and Benbasat 2001). These skills are believed to be important for entrepreneurs to create in optimal environment for innovation and productivity, especially in today's dynamic business environment.

From the organizational perspective, Tippins and Sohi (2003), describe IT competencies consisting of three different dimensions: IT knowledge (describes the degree to which an organisation understands the capabilities of existing and emerging IT), IT operations (refers to the IT-related methods, processes and techniques that may be needed if these technologies are to create values) and IT infrastructure (refers to artefacts, tools and resources that contribute to the processing, storage, dissemination and use of information). Vogel (2005) clarifies that IT competencies consist of two perspectives; an external focus on the value added to the client, and as representing the collective learning of an IT organisation. Vogel further explains that IT competencies are a higher order IT management skill of organising, mobilising, coordinating and integrating IT resources and IT capabilities to create value and competitive advantage. In conjunction with that, acquisition of IT competencies is crucial for entrepreneurs'' value creation and competitiveness.

From the marketing perspective, IT competencies among entrepreneurs allow businesses to develop highly tailored business and marketing strategies, as well as to utilize entrepreneur business activities, including budgets far more effectively (Hajipour, Bavarsad, and Zarei, 2013). The popularity of social media with the increased sophistication in technology and evolvement of e-business have primarily contributed to this development (Becker, Nobre, and Kanabar, 2013).Hence, it is undeniable that IT competencies represent one of the major factors impacting virtual business and marketing.

The next section discusses several elements of IT competencies that potentially enable entrepreneurs to introduce innovation in their businesses. Specifically in this study, IT competencies enable an entrepreneur to use IT tools and applications such as social media, copy writing and content management system in the implementation of IT for virtual businesses.

Social media

The popularity of social media along with the advancement of technology, have brought social media applications such as Facebook, Blog, Twitter, Instagram and etc. to the forefront of contemporary best practices (Becker, Nobre, and Kanabar, 2013). Social media refers to internet applications that enable user to create and exchange content virtually with the use of Web 2.0 (Kaplan and Haenlin, 2011).

Kahar et al (2012) found building and strengthening networking are major reasons for social commerce utilization by sample of Malaysian entrepreneurs. Hence, entrepreneurs who are equipped with the skills in utilizing this technology, have a greater opportunity to define his/her target market, and to track and measure customer interest and conversion. For example, skills in operating Facebook provide virtual and graphical features in advertising which will create capability and ability to enhance market target. Additionally, Twitter and Instagram create a group of supporter or known as 'follower' with similar interests with regards to subject shared virtually. The skill to effectively utilise these applications could enhance entrepreneurs' ability to market their product virtually.

Content management system

Content Management System (CMS) is an application that help organization to create, deploy, manage and store content on Web pages such as embedded graphics, photos, video, audio, and code (e.g., for applications). Entrepreneurs who developed skills in CMS have the ability to publish, edit and modify content (such as organize, delete and maintenance). Therefore, this application provides a platform for entrepreneur to market his/her product virtually in web catalogue. It also helps entrepreneur to index content, select or assemble content at runtime, or deliver content to specific visitors in a requested way, such as other languages.

Copy Writing
Further, the skill for copywriting could potentially present another essential element to create an effective online marketing. Copywriting is defined as the act of writing copy for the purpose of advertising or marketing business or products which involves strategically delivering words that get people to take some form of action.

According to Eisenberg, Eisenberg, and Davis (2003), this type of application performs the online functions equivalent of the conventional salesperson i.e. develops a rapport with web visitors, provides appropriate information, helps web visitors qualify their needs, presents the solutions that can provide based on those needs as well as assuring and inspires confidence, security and trust among web visitors.

In ensuring business and products are marketable and reached the target market, entrepreneurs need to have skills in applying the Internet applications so that communication in terms of web blog, marketing message, whether it is copywriting, search engine optimization, or social media marketing can be effectively implemented.

The above discussion presents the elements of tribe marketing and IT competency skills. The current study proposes integration of these elements for the development of contemporary entrepreneurs' tribe-IT skills, which potentially enhance the business performance of virtual entrepreneurs. The initial conceptual model for this study is presented in Figure 1 below.
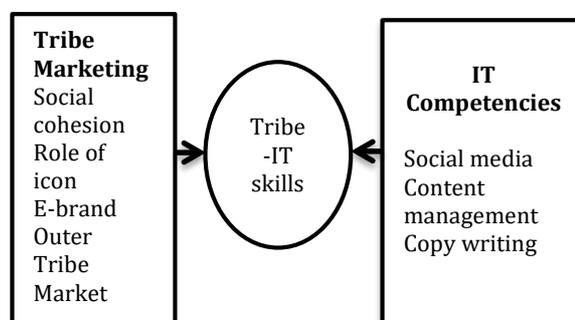

Fig. 1: Initial Conceptual Model of Tribe-IT Skills for Virtual Entrepreneurs

3. CONCLUSION

The paper briefly reviewed pertinent literature on entrepreneurship, tribe marketing and IT competencies. This study proposes a conceptual model of entrepreneurs' tribe–IT skills development to extend understanding of important elements for virtual entrepreneurs to develop both marketing and IT skills that could escalate their business performance. The proposed model will be further developed and refined through a qualitative study. Validity of the model can be tested through future quantitative studies. This study could potentially contribute towards further development of entrepreneurship competency literature with integration of technology-related skills.

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