THE ROLE OF BLOGS AS EXPAT CONSUMERS SOURCE OF INFORMATION: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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Abstract:

The study examines the role of blogs as a source of information to expat consumers of products and services. A pre-designed questionnaire was used to collect the primary data from the respondents (experiences). Data were collected from sixty two respondents residing in and around the Emirates of Sharjah and Dubai of the United Arab Emirates. The collected data was analyzed with the help of statistical tools such as averages, percentages, factor analysis and Students t-test and structural equation model. Objectives of the study are: to know the reasons why expat consumers of products and services are motivated to use blogs as a source of information, to know whether the expat consumers of products and services share their opinions and experiences with other bloggers and to know the respondents' future intentions towards blogging. The study revealed the following: The majority of respondents have not only the motivation to blog, but also to continue blogging because they use blogs: as a platform to express their thoughts on the views ventilated by fellow bloggers, to make enquiries about products and services in which they are interested, help them to share information on medical issues and are keen to motivate others to blog.

Keywords: *Expat consumer, blog, blogging, information, products, services*

Introduction

Marketing and the marketing communications mix are changing. New insights, new tools, new opportunities, and new challenges have emerged since the dawn of this century. Firms need to move their focus beyond the 'one way' tell medium of traditional broadcasting. Moving from 'tell campaigns' to 'listening campaigns' requires constant customer dialogue nurtured and integrated across many media.

Consumers have not only always educated each other more about products and services, but have also believed and trusted each other's opinions more than any communication campaign. Marketers have since long acknowledged the importance of Word of Mouth, and now this is being facilitated by technology using online modes.

The consumer group: 'The New Online Generation' who likes technology, who gets the required information from online sources, has sent a clear message to the marketing community and the proponents of traditional mainstream media. Marketers now realize that online medium has become indispensable and can no longer be treated as 'the other medium' supplementing the traditional media. Firms need to use their experience with online technologies and tools to reinvent the whole corporate marketing function. The accelerated pace of evolution of Internet and progression of Consumer Generated Media, has resulted in the increased usage of blogs as one of the trusted sources of information.

Blogs are now acquiring the status of a principal communications channel for companies to link with their customers, a powerful tool that companies cannot afford to take a hands-off attitude towards them. A blog is a Web page operated by millions of ordinary people who have become content creators. It is a corporate or personal online journal with reflections, expression of emotions, comments and opinions, presentation of ideas and often hyperlinks that are provided by the writers. They display in chronological order the postings by individuals with links to comment on specific postings. Blogging is a commitment; it takes a lot of time. Some blogs are confined to a fixed audience; say the employees and managers of a single company. Other times, blogs are public, available for reading by anyone.

The recent popularity of blogging brings us to some interesting questions. What makes people to blog? In other words, what motivates them to adopt this new tool? What impact does it have on marketing communications for products and services? Do the bloggers have an intention to continue blogging in the future?

Literature Review

A few studies have been undertaken to understand the experiences of consumers using blogs as a source of information and an attempt has been made to review the studies undertaken by different scholars in the following pages.

Niederhoffer K., Mooth R., Wiesenfeld D., and Gordon J.(2007) conducted a study to understand the role of Consumer Generated Media in CPG(Consumer Packaged Goods) new product launches, to help marketers capitalise on it for communication planning and launch management purposes. They found that talking about something that is new, different and relevant to others brings an emotional and social benefit to the creator of CGM. The findings of their research suggest that buzz is something CPG marketers should consider in developing new product communication plans. Given its rapid proliferation, even marketers who work in traditionally low buzz categories should pay attention to what consumers are saying.

Chung Yuan S. H. L., Chung Yuan H.L.L, and Chung Yuan Y.T.Z. (2007) conducted a research study to examine the relationship between the motivations of bloggers and their intention and conducts of blogging. Most bloggers perceived the attractiveness or importance of intrinsic blogging rewards higher than those extrinsic rewards. The findings indicate that bloggers with higher total motivation scores on rewards have higher levels of blogging intention.

Esteves J. (2008) conducted a study to find out whether blogging was a silly diversion or a major competitive trend. His extensive research revealed that blogging is a new metric for corporate leadership, now at the same level as the latest increase of your market share or how substantial your corporate return on investment is. Blogging is not something that would be nice to think about, but something you have to think about.

Chien L.H., Chia C.L. and Yuan D.L.(2010) conducted a study to explore consumers' views on enterprises conducting relationship marketing through micro-blogging. The result of this study shows that consumers' satisfaction has positive influences on commitment, trust, sense of community, and behavioral intentions. The influences of corporate images on commitment and trust are supported, but the influences on behavioral intentions must go through the mediators, commitment and trust.

Maurya M. (2011) conducted a research study to find out the increasing usage of blogs for marketing communications and the stumbling instances of marketers when using this tool. According to him, certain sections of target customers refer more to word of web than word of mouth; and if the web lets them down, the wrath is going to be severe and long lasting. Blogosphere needs to be understood first and then used for effective communication. He finds that though blogging is already entrenched, the roots will take time to expand.

Sepp M., Liljander V., and Gummerus J. (2011) conducted a social media and gratifications research by studying the perceived gratifications of 12 experienced private bloggers from Estonia. They found that the bloggers sought process, content, and social gratifications from blogging activities. The content gratifications of enlightening others, advertising, and promotion, and the social gratifications of communication, image management, and vanity, were new to blogging. Bloggers' gratifications were found to evolve over time, leading to blog changes.

Doyle J.D., Heslop L.A., Ramirex A. and Cray D.(2012) conducted a study to investigate trust in bloggers, in a framework involving characteristics of bloggers and blogs and blog reading outcomes. They found that trust formation is predicted by engagement knowledge of the blogger, unique reading experiences, and belief that the blog improved the market space. Blogger authoritative knowledge negatively impacted trust intentions. Positive experiences from blog reading mediate relationships between blog and blogger characteristics and intentions to trust.

Zhao L. and Lu Y.(2012) conducted a study which examined how network externalities, in terms of perceived network size and perceived complementarity, enhance micro-blogging service users'' perceived interactivity, and how such perception of interactivity, in turn, influences their satisfaction and continuance intention. Perceived interactivity contains four dimensions: control, playfulness, connectedness, and responsiveness. The results indicated that the four dimensions of perceived interactivity are significantly affected by perceived network size and perceived complementarity.

Among the four dimensions of perceived interactivity, control, playfulness, and connectedness are positively related to micro-blogging service users'' satisfaction, which further significantly impacts their continuance intention.

Thus, a review of literature shows that no study has been conducted involving the relationships of motivations behind blogging and the behavior of bloggers towards products or services; and the intentions towards blogging.

Objectives Of The Study
The aim of this study is to examine the motivational factors of the bloggers (expat consumers), their behavior depicted by its usage as a trusted source of information for products or services, and their future intentions towards blogging.

To develop a holistic analysis of the stated research problem, the following objectives have been developed for the study. The objectives of the study include:
• To know to what extent expat consumers of products and services use blogs as a source of information.
• To know whether the expat consumers of products and services share their opinions and experiences with other bloggers
• To know the respondents future intentions towards blogging

Research Design And Methodolgy
A pre-designed questionnaire on a five point scale was used to collect the primary data from the respondents (experiences) residing in and around the Emirates of Dubai and Sharjah. The questionnaire was framed to elicit the experiences of the respondents. Being an exploratory study it was decided to collect data using convenience sampling and hence respondents were chosen using convenience sampling. Out of the 75 questionnaires distributed, 62 respondents provided complete information and were used as sample for this study. The collected data was analyzed with the help of statistical tools such as averages, percentages, factor analysis and Students t-test. Gender and Employment status of the expat respondents were used for carrying out the above analysis.

Sample Profile
Demographic information reported on the study indicated the following and are presented in Table -1

Male respondents represented 40% of the sample, while female respondents represented the remaining 60%, with 23% percent being under 25 years of age, 71 % between 25 to 40 years of age and 6% over 40 years. The report also indicated that 80% of the respondents to be married and the remaining 20% to be single.

The majority of the sample have completed a bachelor's degree and about 27 % have done their masters and the remaining 10% of the respondents are diploma holders. The income levels of the respondents were 27 % of the sample getting up to AED 5000 per month, while 44 % earned between AED 5001 and 10, 000, and 30 % of the respondents earned over AED 10000 per month.

Table – 1 Sample Profile

S. No.	Demographic Characteristics	Percentage
	Age Group	
1.	Age- up to 25	22.58%
	Age- 26-40	70.96%
	Age- 41-50	6.45%
	Gender	
2.	Male	40.32%
	Female	59.67%
	Marital Status	
3.	Married	80.65%
	Single	19.35%
	Education	
4.	Diploma	9.67%
	Degree	59.67%
	Masters	27.41%
	Income	
5	Less than AED 5000	26 %
	AED 5001-10000	44 %
	Above AED 10001- 15000	30 %
	Connection to social networks	
6.	Less connected	17.74%
	Moderately connected	51.61%
	Highly connected	30.65%
	Frequency of blogging	
7	once a week	58%
	once a fortnight	24%
	once a month	18%
	Time spent on blogging	
8	One hour	74%
	Two hours	14%
	More than two hours	10%

Blogging habits of Respondents reported on the study indicated the following:

The majority of the respondents appear to be moderately connected to social networks: Fifty eight percent of the respondents' blog at least once a week: About three-fourths of the surveyed respondents indicated that they spend an hour blogging during each session.

Results of Factor Analysis

To identify and analyze the role of blogs as expat consumers' source of information 25 variables were identified for this study at the time of initial finalization of the questionnaire.

In order to extract the various factors that indicated the motivational factors of the bloggers, the bloggers behavior depicted by its usage as a trusted source of information for products or services, and the intention of continuing to blog, a Principal Component analysis was applied on all the 25 statements included in the interval scale. Retaining only such of those factors which had Eigen values greater than one (as suggested by Kaiser), we can infer that in total five factors have emerged. These five factors put together have explained 83.944 % of total variance. The results are presented in Table2

2. Factor Dimensions

Only such of those variables that had loadings > 0.50 have been included in the process of extracting individual factors from the analytical results. The results are presented in table 2. Thus, variables A to F constituted factor I. A close look at all the variables in the Factor I impelled the researchers to identify a common name. The factor was then conceptualized as "Motivation to blog - Related Factor". Variables G to N constituted factor II. A close look at the items in Factor II guided the researcher to conceptualize this factor as Search for Information -Related Factor. In a similar way, variables O to R formed factor III. This was grouped under the heading "Sharing products information -Related Factor" Factor IV is related to "Sharing service information - Related Factor" and comprised variables S to V. Finally, variables W, X and Y were all grouped under the heading "Interest to continue blogging and motivate others to blog - Related Factor

Table 2: Principal Component Analysis for the Variables

Factor	Initial Eigen values		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
A	15.650	62.601	
B	1.799	7.195	
C	1.406	5.625	
D	1.129	4.516	
E	1.002	4.006	
F	.586	2.342	86.287
G	.522	2.088	88.374
H	.487	1.947	90.322
I	.400	1.599	91.921
J	.338	1.353	93.274
K	.289	1.155	94.430
L	.244	.976	95.406
M	.227	.909	96.315
N	.205	.821	97.135
O	.137	.549	97.685
P	.129	.517	98.202
Q	.108	.434	98.635
R	.086	.342	98.978
S	.076	.303	99.281
T	.056	.225	99.506
U	.044	.176	99.682
V	.037	.149	99.832
W	.017	.068	99.899
X	.013	.053	99.952
Y	.012	.048	100.000

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

The major outcomes of the factor analysis are presented below: Receive peoples' comment on what the respondents post (Factor loading 0.893), Willing to comment on what other bloggers say about products (Factor loading 0.872) and Willingness to receive comments on what the respondents post about services (Factor loading 0.854) appear to be the primary reasons which motivate the respondents to blog: Convenience of blogs to search for information about products (Factor loading 0.941) , and services (Factor loading 0.888), seem to be the primary reasons for the surveyed

respondents to use blogs as a source of information before they buy products or services. By Blogging respondents are able to share information about useful personal products (Factor loading 0.847), ready to cook mix products (Factor loading 0.820) and health products (Factor loading 0.819). It is also by blogging respondents share information on the symptoms of a disease/ disorder that may be experienced by someone (Factor loading 0.843), and information on how elderly people get good results from going to Health Club (Factor loading 0.835). Recommend others to join blogging (Factor loading 0.883), keen to spend more time blogging in the future (Factor loading 0.877) and intend to continue blogging (Factor loading 0.860) indicate the interest of the respondents not only to continue blogging but also motivate others to blog.

Table- 3: Identification of Factors Related to Expat Consumers Blogging Behavior

FACTOR NAME	ITEM NUMBER	VARIABLES	FACTOR LOADINGS
Factor-1 Motivation to Blog - Related Factors	E	Receive peoples' comments on what I post	0.893
	C	Willing to comment on what other bloggers say about products.	0.872
	B	The blog is the space where I express what I feel about services	0.863
	F	I would like to receive people's comments on what I post on my blog about services.	0.854
	D	I am willing to comment on what other bloggers say about services.	0.842
	A	The blog is the space where I express what I feel about products.	
Factor-II - Search for Information Related Factors	J	It is convenient to search for information about services by blogging.	0.941
	I	It is convenient to search for information about products by blogging	0.888
	K	Blogging helps me to extract information behind products that interest me.	0.869
	H	Blogging helps me to explore more information about services	0.845
	G	Blogging helps me to explore more information about products.	0.837
	N	Used to looking for information on services by reading blog articles those are frequently quoted.	0.825
	L	Blogging helps me to extract information behind services that interest me	0.789
	M	Used to looking for information on products by looking at blog articles those are frequently quoted.	0.758
Factor III-Sharing products information - Related Factor	O	I like to share information about a personal product that I find useful.	0.847
	R	I like to share information on **ready to cook mix** that I find useful.	0.82
	Q	I like to share information about a health product that I find useful.	0.819
	P	I like to share information about a particular family product that I find useful	0.729
Factor IV-Sharing Services information - Related Factor	S	Share information and my views on the symptoms of a disease/ disorder that may be experienced by someone.	0.843
	V	Share information on how **elderly people are getting good results** from going to Health Club.	0.835
	T	I like to share information and my views on the positive outcomes of a medical treatment.	0.822
	U	I like to share information on how to better control a disease or disorder that might be experienced by someone	0.801
Factor V -To continue and motivate others to blog - Related Factor	Y	I wish to recommend others to join and blog.	0.883
	X	I am keen to spend more time blogging in the future	0.877
	W	I intend to continue blogging	0.86

Hypothesis Testing

In order to test whether blogging behavior of the sample respondents differs according to Gender, an independent t-test was applied on all the 25 variables (of the interval scale). Significant differences were noticed among the male and female respondents in three out of the twenty-five variables on which the test was applied. The results where significant differences have been noticed are presented in the Table – 4

H1: The blogging behavior of the respondents as a source of information with regards to services is independent of the Gender. Interpretation: The analytical results of the t-test on Item H (blogging helps to explore more information about services) shows a mean value of 3.24 for male and 3.92 for female respondents which signifies that there exists a difference in their opinion towards exploring the blogs for more information about services. Since the p-value 0.026 < 0.01 (at 5% level of significance), hypothisis1 is rejected.

Table – 4
Results Of Students T-Test

ITEM	GENDER	N	MEAN	S.D	P
H	Male	25	3.24	1.268	0.026
	Female	37	3.92	1.064	
I	Male	25	3.16	1.106	0.012
	Female	37	3.89	1.075	
J	Male	25	3.2	1.118	0.032
	Female	37	3.81	1.05	

H 2: Convenience for the respondents to search for information about products by blogging is independent of the Gender Interpretation: the analytical results of the t test on Item I (It is convenient to search for information about products by blogging.) shows a mean value of 3.16 for male and 3.89 for female respondents which signifies that there exists a difference in their opinion with regard to convenience of blogging to search for information about products. Since the P-value 0.012 < 0.01 (at 5% level of significance), hypothesis 2 is rejected.

H 3: Convenience for the respondents to search for information about services by blogging is independent of the gender Interpretation: The analytical results of the t test on Item J (It is convenient to search for information about services by blogging.) shows a mean value of 3.20 for male and 3.81 for female respondents which signifies that there exists a difference in their opinion with regard to convenience of blogging to search for information about services. Since the P-value 0.032 < 0.01 (at 5% level of significance), hypothesis 3 is rejected.

In order to test whether blogging behavior of the sample respondents differs according to employment status an independent t-test was applied on all the 25 variables (of the interval scale). Significant differences were noticed among the employed and the not employed respondents in five out of the twenty-five variables on which the test was applied. The results where significant differences have been noticed are presented in the Table – 5

H1: Convenience for the respondents to search for information about products by blogging is independent of the Employment status Interpretation: The analytical results of the t test on Item I (It is convenient to search for information about products by blogging.) shows a mean value of 3.41 for employed and4.13 for not employed respondents which signifies that there exists a difference in their opinion with regard to convenience of blogging to search for information about products. Since the P-value 0.030 < 0.01 (at 5% level of significance), hypothesis 1 is rejected.

Table – 5
Results Of Students T-Test

ITEM	Employment Status	N	MEAN	S.D	P
I	Employed	46	3.41	1.222	0.030
	Not Employed	16	4.13	.619	
J	Employed	46	3.39	1.201	0.036
	Not Employed	16	4.06	.574	
N	Employed	46	3.02	1.183	0.049
	Not Employed	16	3.69	1.014	
Q	Employed	46	2.98	1.390	0.012
	Not Employed	16	3.94	.854	
W	Employed	46	3.26	1.290	0.024
	Not Employed	16	4.06	.854	

H2: Convenience for the respondents to search for information about services by blogging is independent of the Employment status Interpretation: The analytical results of the t test on Item J (It is convenient to search for information about services by blogging.) shows a mean value of 3.39 for employed and 4.06 for not employed respondents which signifies that there exists a difference in their opinion with regard to convenience of blogging to search for information about services. Since the P-value 0.036 < 0.01 (at 5% level of significance), hypothesis 2 is rejected.

H3: Looking for information on services by reading blog articles those are frequently quoted. is independent of the Employment status Interpretation: The analytical results of the t test on Item N

(Looking for information on services by reading blog articles those are frequently quoted) shows a mean value of 3.02 for employed and 3.69 for not employed respondents which signifies that there exists a difference in their opinion with regard to looking for information on services by reading blog articles those are frequently quoted. Since the P-value 0.049 < 0.01 (at 5% level of significance), hypothesis 3 is rejected.

H4: I like to share information about a health product that I find useful is independent of the Employment status Interpretation: The analytical results of the t test on Item Q (I like to share information about a health product that I find useful) shows a mean value of 2.98 for employed and 3.94 for not employed respondents which signifies that there exists a difference in their opinion with regard to I like to share information about a health product that I find useful. Since the P-value 0.012 < 0.01 (at 5% level of significance), hypothesis 4 is rejected.

H5: I intend to continue blogging is independent of the Employment status Interpretation: The analytical results of the t test on Item W (I intend to continue blogging) shows a mean value of 3.26 for employed and 4.06 for not employed respondents which signifies that there exists a difference in their opinion with regard I intend to continue blogging. Since the P-value 0.024 < 0.01 (at 5% level of significance), hypothesis 5 is rejected.

Future Intentions of Respondents towards Blogging
In order to test the respondents' future intentions towards

blogging, Structural Equation Modeling technique with help of SAS software (9.0 Version) was applied. Four hypotheses: Motivation to blog predicts the future intentions towards blogging, Search for information predicts the future intentions towards blogging, Sharing product information predicts the future intentions towards blogging and sharing service information predicts the future intentions towards blogging were tested. The factors correlation matrix was used as an input in the model. The model is estimated using maximum likelihood method. Only H2 Search for information with t – value > 2.0 is found to be significant in predicting the future intentions of respondents towards blogging. The results are presented in Table-6 given below:

Table – 6: Results of the Structural Equation Modeling Technique

Hypothesis	Statement	Standard Error	Coefficient	t-value	Significance in predicting the Respondents future Intentions towards blogging
H1	Motivation to Blog predicts the future intentions of the respondents towards blogging	0.1411	-0.0954	-0.6312	Not significant
H2	Search for Information predicts the future intentions of the respondents towards blogging	0.1426	0.5186	**3.6373**	**Significant**
H3	Sharing product Information predicts the future intentions of the respondents towards blogging	0.1415	0.2	1.4139	Not significant
H4	Sharing Service Information predicts the future intentions of the respondents towards blogging	0.1352	0.2658	1.966	Not significant

Future intentions of respondents towards blogging = -0.0954*Motivation to Blog + 0.5186*Search for information + 0.2000*Sharing product information + 0.2658*Sharing Service Information + 1.0000 E1

Std Err   0.1411 b1   0.1426 b2   0.1415 b3   0.1352 b4
t .value   -0.6312   3.6373   1.4139   1.966

Discussion
On the basis of different analyses that were carried out, the following picture emerges: The majority of the respondents appears to be moderately connected to social networks: Fifty eight percent of the respondents' blog at least once a week: About three-fourth of the surveyed respondents indicated that they spend an hour blogging during each session.

Factor analysis of the data clearly grouped the statements included in the interval scale into the following five factors: Motivation to blog– Related Factors, Search for Information

-Related Factors, Sharing Product Information - Related Factors, Sharing Service Information - Related Factors and Interest to continue and motivate others to blog -Related Factors. These five factors put together have explained 83.944 % of total variance and further analysis of the five factors (based on factor loading) gave an insight about the importance attached to the variables within the factors by the respondents in the following manner: Receive peoples' comments on what the respondents post, Willingness to comment on what other bloggers say about products and to receive comments on what the respondents post about services appear to be the primary reasons which motivate the respondents to blog: Convenience of blogs to search for information about products , and services seem to be the primary reasons for the surveyed respondents to use blogs as a source of information before they buy products or services. By Blogging respondents are able to share information about useful personal products, ready to cook mix products and health products. It is also by blogging, respondents share information on the symptoms of a disease/disorder that may be experienced by someone and information on how elderly people get good results from going to Health Club, recommend others to join blogging, keen to spend more time blogging in the future and intend to continue blogging indicate the interest of the respondents not only to continue blogging but also motivate others to blog.

Application of the t-test on all the 25 variables (of the interval scale) to test whether the blogging behavior of the sample respondents differs according to Gender showed significant differences among the male and female respondents in three out of the 25 variables on which the test was applied. On the basis of the t-test it was concluded that the blogging behavior of the respondents towards exploring the blogs for more information about services, convenience of blogging to search for information about product and services, are dependent on gender.

Application of the t-test on all the 25 variables (of the interval scale) to test whether the blogging behavior of the sample respondents differs according to Employment status, showed significant differences among the employed and not employed respondents in five out of the 25 variables on which the test was applied. On the basis of the t-test it was concluded that the blogging behavior of the respondents towards looking for information on services by reading blog articles those are frequently quoted, convenience of blogging to search for information about product and services, sharing information about a health product that they find useful and intention to continue blogging are dependent on the Employment status. Application of Structural Equation Modeling technique was applied on four factors to find out the future intentions of the respondents towards blogging showed only one factor- search for information with a t-value of 3.7363 to be significant in predicting the future intentions of the respondents towards blogging.

Hence, it will be profitable if the organizations segment their market both on the basis of gender and employment status of their consumers to get a better understanding as to how and to what extent their consumers use blogs as a trusted source to search for information. This will help the organizations to provide the relevant information about their products and services to their consumers for their consideration before purchase and can also get the views and reactions of their consumers.

Limitations And Future Research
Firstly any survey based method, including that adopted in this study, involves measurement error. In other words, the elicitation of a scale measurement, respondent's ability to accurately report their level of agreement with the survey statements (Kelli Bodey, Debra Grace, 2006). However, efforts were made to design the administered tool to be simple, easy to understand and respond to convenient sampling was used to collect the data from seventy five residents living in and around the Emirates of Sharjah and Dubai.

Regarding future research, it is suggested that more samples from other Emirates can be taken for study. Further, separate studies can be undertaken on services and products.

Conclusion
The study clearly shows that expat consumers have started to not only use blogs but also are keen to continue blogging to search for information about products and services before making a purchase and are keen to share information about products and services with fellow bloggers. This provides an effective platform for organizations to be informative and disclose all possible details about their products and services to their consumers to enable the consumers to consider and evaluate their offerings before purchase and also gives an opportunity to the consumers to motivate fellow bloggers by sharing information and experiences with them.

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