

Insight into Blog Retailers

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Each day, the Internet becomes home to thousands of new blogs. Many bloggers have taken advantage of the success of their personal websites by selling products that appeal to their readers, i.e., potential customers. This project will be used to understand this fairly new online subculture by examining the emergence of blogs as a novel online retail format, identifying factors influencing customer patronage, and focusing on a case study of nine Singapore-based blog retailers. The purpose of this research is to elucidate the dynamics of blog retailing, for which considerably less research has been performed when compared with blogging in general. An analysis of a select group of blog retailers highlights the factors that they use to enhance customer patronage and the tactics that they employ to acquire and retain customers. This information will be valuable for a significant portion of Internet users who either visit or own blogs. The contribution of this research is significant in terms of providing insights into blog retailing from the retailers' perspective and also the utilization of blog retail as a relatively new online business platform.

Keywords: Blog retailing, online shopping, customer relationships, e-trust, internet retail.

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Introduction

The Internet and e-commerce have introduced new ways of marketing and shopping. There has been a dramatic increase in online retailing in the past decade,

with worldwide e-commerce sales reaching US \$1.95 trillion in 2016 (eMarketer, 2016; Mulpuru, 2008). Given the attractiveness of this industry, major online retailers, such as Amazon and eBay, are facing strong competition as consumers are inundated with a myriad of similar offerings from which to choose (Grabner-Kraeuter, 2002). This has led to online retailers examining various means to influence online shopping behavior. Online retailing comprises retailing formats, such as registered websites, eBay, Yahoo auctions, and many others (Dubosson, Osterwalder, & Pigneur, 2002). Amongst all of these formats, blogs (abbreviated from the term “web log”) have emerged as one of the most popular (Thevenot, 2007). According to Sifry (2007), since 2007, 120,000 new blogs are being created every day, joining the 70 million blogs that already existed.

Blogs as a New Online Retail Format

Blogs are websites that resemble *online diaries*, where *bloggers* (abbreviated for “blog owners”) create their personal web pages in text, videos, or other multimedia in order to attract readers (McCorkle, McCorkle, & Payan, 2014; Leight & Leight, 2008). Blogs are often viewed as more personal and interactive than traditional websites, as they allow two-way conversations between bloggers and blog readers (Lawson-Borders, & Kirk, 2005). Traditional websites do not facilitate two-way conversations between readers and webmasters, while blogs provide a space that enables readers to post comments and engage in online conversation using functions, such as a comment box (McCorkle et al., 2014). Blogs also provide permalinks that lead to other blogs or websites (Brady, 2005). These permalinks allow interesting ideas on blogs to be hyperlinked from one website to another, enabling a blog to be spread all over the Internet. Therefore, blogs are turning into the new medium, or the new word-of-mouth, that helps bloggers reach out effectively to readers (Hsu & Lin, 2008).

From a technological perspective, blogs can be defined as virtual diaries that utilize hosted blogging systems, such as blogspot.com and [LiveJournal.com](http://livejournal.com) (McCorkle, et al., 2014). Blogs can also usually be identified by their URL, such as the aforementioned blogspot.com and [LiveJournal.com](http://livejournal.com), which indicate their hosted domains and differentiate themselves from most conventional e-retail websites (Lim, Diaz and Dash, 2013). Two examples of blogs are <http://spreesgalore.livejournal.com/> and <http://shopjenith.blogspot.sg/>. Unlike traditional websites, the content of blogs can be updated without requiring programming expertise, as programming is done automatically via the blog publishing software. Hence, content on blogs can be updated quickly and frequently (Lahm, 2011). The functions on blogs can also be created using plug-ins, instead of programming. For example, plug-in functions, such as chat boxes and comment areas, can be easily created by downloading the appropriate plug-in and installing it within

a short time to allow readers to chat and comment on the blog's content (Lim et al., 2013).

Unlike a traditional website, bloggers often express themselves in the form of online personal diaries with reflections, product reviews, comments, and hyperlinks on their blogs. Most bloggers spend a lot of time passionately discussing product and service information on blogs and this generates credibility (Marken, 2008), as readers view blogs as an unbiased or impartial source of information (McCullagh, 2008). With the rising popularity of blogging, some bloggers have capitalized on the popularity of their blogs by using them as a platform to sell goods to their readers (<http://www.blogtoplist.com/>). In this paper, we use the term blog retail to cover all online retail shops that are facilitated through hosted blogging technologies as their main trading platform (Campbell, Fletcher, & Greenhill, 2009).

For cash-strapped bloggers, blogs offer a cost-effective retail format compared to other online methods (<http://www.retailblogmarketing.com/>), as they have low set-up costs (Lang, 2005). Blog hosts, such as Blogspot, Wordpress, and LiveJournal allow free sign-up for individuals for a blog account, while others, such as realblogvideos.com, charge a minimal fee (Wordpress, 2017). Blog retailers sell everything from clothes and handcrafted fashion accessories to home-baked muffins (Campbell, Fletcher, & Greenhill, 2009; Goh, 2011), and these have been very popular throughout Asia. According to LiveJournal, a Singapore-based host domain for blog retail, an estimated 480,000 people visit blog retail sites every month with the intention to shop. Transactions on these blog retail sites were expected to reach a value of US \$96 million at the end of 2013. This will represent approximately 6% of Singapore's total e-commerce volume for 2011 (Goh, 2011), while also becoming one of the fastest growing retail platforms on the Internet (Leight & Leight, 2008).

While there is a substantial body of work on blogs in general, limited attention has been paid to blog retailing in detail. Most studies on blogs or blogging focus on the study of blog readers and bloggers for leisure purposes only (e.g., Hsu and Lin, 2008; Navarro, 2016; Ho & Lee, 2015; Kulmala, Mesiranta, & Tuominen, 2013; Anaza & Zhao, 2013). This provides limited insight into the perspective of the blog retailers who use their blogs as a business platform. While it is important to understand blogging or blog phenomena from the customers' perspective, the retailers' point of view is crucial for understanding the blog retail business. Specifically, this research aims to identify the factors that blog retailers regard as critical in creating and enhancing customer patronage. The contribution of this research is significant in terms of providing insights into blog retailing from the retailers' perspective and also the utilization of blog retail as a relatively novel online business platform.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. This paper begins with a review of literature, summarizing the factors that influence customer patronage in blog retail. The paper then discusses the method for collecting and analyzing data.

Next, the findings are presented. We conclude with a discussion of the results, limitations of the study, managerial implications, and future research directions.

Relevant Literature

The majority of the extant literature on blogs can be categorized into two categories: use of blogs as a non-retail format; and bloggers who use blogs for leisure purposes only. The first category focuses on blogs as a non-retail format in the context of public relations (Porter, Sweetser, & Chung, 2009), word-of-mouth effects (Li & Du, 2011; Hsu, Lin, & Chiang, 2013), blog usage (Liao, To, & Liu, 2013; Wu, Kao, & Lin, 2013), and knowledge-sharing behavior (Chai, Das, & Rao, 2011). The second category focuses on the perspective of bloggers (or blog owners) who utilize blogs for leisure purposes only (e.g. Hsu & Lin, 2008; Navarro, 2016; Kulmala et al., 2013; Anaza & Zhao, 2013).

The overall purpose of this article is to elucidate the landscape of blog retailing, particularly how blog owners use blogs as a platform for business. From the perspective of this paper, relevant studies are those that focus on: (1) blogs used as a business platform; and (2) blog retailers who use their blog for business purposes. For the aim of this paper, these two categories within blogs or blogging literature are not relevant to this research. With limited studies to draw insights into blog retail, this paper will also include studies on online retail to obtain insights into the research area. Extant literature on online retail is seen as relevant here, as blogs constitute one of the online retail formats.

Factors Influencing Customer Patronage

Given the highly competitive online retail environment, it is critical to elucidate factors leading to customer patronage in the blog retail business. Customer patronage is defined as a consumer's choice to be involved in online transaction(s) with a particular online store (Barkhi, Belanger, & Hicks, 2008; Pan & Zinkhan, 2005). In simpler terms, it refers to the customer's choice to visit and purchase from a particular online store (Forsythe & Shi, 2003). An understanding of factors leading to customer patronage is important, as it enables marketers to identify criteria for attracting customers to patronize their online store. A review of the literature reveals the following five factors to be important in influencing patronage in blog retail. They are: (1) e-trust (Kim & Stoel, 2005; Wang & Head, 2007); (2) credibility; (3) interactivity (Kim, Fiore, & Lee, 2007); (4) website design (Keng & Ting, 2009); and (5) the use of hyperlinks (Campbell, Fletcher, & Greenhill, 2009). The following paragraphs will elaborate on each factor in detail.

E-Trust

Within online shopping environments, e-trust is viewed as the key differentiator in determining success or failure in online retailing and a precursor to customer patronage (Bhattacharjee, 2002; Urban, Sultan, & Qualls, 2000). E-trust may be defined as the belief or expectation that a given promise can be delivered and that the seller is not attempting to take advantage of the consumer's vulnerability (Amit & Zott, 2002). Empirical research on the relationship between e-trust and customer patronage is not new. Scholars, such as Bhattacharjee (2002), have empirically demonstrated that e-trust has a positive impact on attitudes as it pertains to purchasing over the Internet. An explanation of this effect is provided by Kim, Ferrin, and Rao (2008) and Grewal, Munger, Iyer, and Levy (2003). They explained that the trust factor is more important online than in traditional retail due to its ability to mitigate some effects of perceived risk that exist online. Perceived risk is defined as a consumer's perceptions of uncertainty and evaluations of possible undesirable outcomes (Dowling and Staelin, 1994). Perceived risk in online transactions can come from the inability to examine products prior to the online purchase transaction, the lack of face-to-face interaction with the seller, or the release of personal information to complete the online purchase transaction (Grewal et al., 2003), resulting in uncertainty when transacting online. Perceived risk is frequently cited as one of the deterrent factors that discourages customers from purchasing online (Pavlou & Fygensen, 2006; Luhmann, 2000). E-trust is essential in online retail because it is able to mitigate the effects of perceived risk in online transactions (Vos, Marinagi, Trivellas, Eberhagen, Skourlas, & Giannakopoulos, 2014). E-trust is often described as a "risk reliever," which means that it has the ability to bolster assurance and confidence, which in turn makes customers feel safe transacting online (Luhmann, 2000; Vos et al., 2014). Similarly, for blog retailing, e-trust is critical because blog retail exists online and involves online transactions, so potential customers are vulnerable to risks that exist on the Internet (Yousafzai, Pallister, & Foxall, 2003). As such, e-trust constitutes the key differentiator in determining the success or failure of a blog business, and is one of the most essential drivers of customer patronage (Reichheld & Shefter, 2000; Urban et al., 2000).

Credibility

Credibility refers to the extent to which blog readers believe that the blogger provides an honest opinion on a given subject (Lafferty & Goldsmith, 2004; Weerkamp & Rijke, 2012). Credibility is shown to be influential in affecting attitudes (Lafferty & Goldsmith, 2004; McGinnies & Ward, 1980) and customer patronage (Bailey, 2004; Saxena, 2011). Gathersuccess (2008) and Robins and Holmes (2008) suggest that credibility is an important factor in the success of blog retail because customers find credible information to be useful and trustworthy, and thus will rely on it to make purchase decisions (Wathen & Burkell, 2002; Saxena, 2011). Information available in

the online environment is virtually limitless. Bloggers are given a large degree of freedom to produce blog content of varying quality, with some being viewed as more credible than others (Weerkamp & Rijke, 2012). Readers are unable to provide quality checks on this content, and therefore rely on credibility cues from bloggers, such as feedback from other customers and factual evidence provided by the blogger, to decide whether the information presented to them is credible. If the customer finds that the information presented on the blog is not credible, they will move on to the next blog site (Robins & Holmes, 2008).

Past literature suggested some strategies for enhancing credibility, including the use of a genuine voice when writing product reviews on blogs, even if it means admitting that competitors' products are superior (Gathersuccess, 2008). Such reviews indicate impartiality, honesty, and enhance trust, leading to customer satisfaction and patronage (Wright, 2006). According to Ba and Pavlou (2002), the use of feedback can also be an effective means to enhance a blog retailer's credibility. Such a system provides blog customers with the ability to comment on their buying experience, and when good feedback is given to the blog retailer, it constitutes a signal of credibility to potential buyers. Consumers value sites that provide credible information that they need, and there is an increased likelihood that they will buy from these blog sites (Chiang & Hsieh, 2011). Hence, credibility on blogs is a powerful influencing factor on customer patronage of the blog (Pavlou & Dimoka, 2006) and an essential predictor of positive economic outcomes for a company.

Links

Bloggers and customers usually want to share their product reviews and experience with other bloggers and customers (Marken, 2008). This can be done using permalinks and trackbacks, which are unique features of blogs. A permalink is a static address (link) to a blog entry or other parts of a blog (Du & Wagner, 2005). Blog readers can follow permalinks in a blog entry to be directed to another blog concerning a similar topic, and as a result, easily gain access to a collection of blog entries (Ngu, 2014). A trackback is also a static address (link) that allows consumers' opinions or comments posted on a blog to be connected to another blog entry (Morimoto & Trimble, 2012). Both permalinks and trackbacks enable bloggers and customers to link a blog entry with other blogs, creating interconnectivity between them (Ngu, 2014). This inter-connective nature enables readers and potential customers to be directed from one blog to other blogs easily (Cho & Huh, 2010), building a network between blogs.

Why would a blog retailer utilize permalinks to direct potential clients to another blog site, since there is a chance that the potential client will click away to another blog site, and may never return (Drèze & Zufryden, 2004)? The reason is because blog retailers utilize this as a form of collaboration with other blog retailers

and a potent method to generate traffic and ultimately, customer patronage (Lim et al., 2013). Supporting this is a study on online browsing behavior, conducted by the Graphic, Visualization and Usability Center (1998). The study reported that 88% of Internet users find websites via links from other websites, and they rely heavily on links for Internet navigation. Therefore, the utilization of permalinks to link between blogs is an effective way of driving traffic to a blog site. The traffic generated provides the blog site with potential customers, from which actual customers will develop (Ennew, Lockett, Blackman, & Holland, 2005).

Interactivity

Interactivity is the key to the success of blog retail (Huang, Chou, and Lin, 2008; Ho and Lee, 2015). Interactivity is defined as the degree to which users perceive their experience as a simulation of an interpersonal interaction (Thorson and Rodgers, 2006). Interactivity on a blog can be achieved through its unique, interactive features, such as the comment box function (Vrana & Zafiroopoulos, 2010). Using the comment box, both bloggers and customers are able to express their opinions on a product review that they read on the blog, facilitating communications and discussions between bloggers and customers. This allows readers to be part of a conversation on the blog and interact with others (Gathersuccess, 2008). Such interactive conversations enable blog retailers to create a bond with their customers (based on listening and responding appropriately), and this process could make a difference in a customer's mind, resulting in a positive attitude and customer patronage (Goodfellow & Graham, 2007 and Lu & Hsiao, 2007). In order to promote interactivity, blog retailers need to act as service providers to their blog readers by contributing to discussions and answering inquiries by blog readers (Hsu & Lin, 2008). It was also found that the factors that drive readers to a blog site are the friendliness and enthusiasm of the blog host (blog retailers) in sharing their opinions, social orientation, and community membership (Hsu & Lin, 2008 and Huang et al., 2008). Consequently, interactivity generated within blogs is an important factor in managing a successful blog retail business

Blog design

Blog site design refers to the visual appearance and audible applications on a blog site. It includes the correct uses of colors, animation, pictures, text, format, and sound (Collier & Bienstock, 2006). Research on the effects of blog site design has found that it is a critical element in building customer satisfaction and customer patronage (Schenkman & Jönsson, 2000). The appearance of the blog site is the retailer's way of presenting the company to its customers (Bramall, Schoefer, & McKechnie, 2004). It helps to create customers' overall impression of the blog site (Bramall et al., 2004; Kang,

2010). Another study also confirmed that customers use the appearance of a blog as a cue to form judgments about the blog site (Kang, 2010).

A customer's navigation through the blog will start from the initial interaction with the landing page, continue to blog entries, and eventually end at the check-out page. This entire interaction with the blog will create useful cues for customers regarding the formation of their judgment towards the blog. Based on this judgment, they will decide whether or not they like the blog site, and essentially, whether they will stay or leave. Therefore, blog site design represents a critical factor in creating an overall impression of the blog site (Bramall et al., 2004; Kang, 2010). It also plays an important role in user satisfaction (Lindgaard & Dudek, 2003) and customer patronage (Schenkman & Jönsson, 2000)

Methodology

As the research area is relatively new, it is crucial to gain an in-depth understanding of the research area via an exploratory study. Due to the exploratory nature of the study, the use of the multiple case study approach was chosen because it offers an ideal methodology when a holistic, thorough investigation is requisite (Gerring, 2004). It also enabled the researcher to explore the phenomena under study through a replication strategy, as subsequent cases were selected to confirm/disprove the patterns identified in initial cases (Rowley, 2002). A multiple case study approach generates richer theory (Eisenhardt, 1989), and allows generalization of theory across industries (Saunders & Thornhill, 2003). Due to the exploratory nature of the study, semi-structured interviews were deemed as the appropriate data collection method, as it allowed flexibility in probing (Dearnley, 2005) and encouraged collection of more information from the interviewer (Whiting, 2008).

The sampling frame included blog retailers who have been managing their blog business for at least a year. This criterion would also exclude bloggers who manage blogs for non-business purposes. This criterion is set because the aim of the research is to investigate the blog retail strategies of bloggers. Without some form of experience in 'retailing' conducted by bloggers through their blog, they would not have the expertise in the area of blog retailing in terms of blog marketing, and customer service for clients, customers, or companies.

The blog sites were identified through a blog directory website. The blog retailers were then contacted based on the contact information that was posted on the website. They were then invited to participate in the study. Thus, the self-selection sampling technique was utilized, as blog retailers that expressed interest in the study were invited to participate. A total of nine blog retailers, selling different products,

were involved in the study (see Table 1). Blog retailers were then interviewed mainly using telephone (Skype) and face-to-face interviews. Face-to-face interviews took approximately an hour and were held at a café. Interviews were voice-recorded and transcribed.

A protocol with open-ended questions was developed and used in all of the interviews to facilitate cross-case analysis (Eisenhardt, 1989). This approach is best suited for the exploration of blog retail because it offers questions that are designed to elicit the interviewee's opinion on a topic by allowing flexibility for new questions to be brought up as a result of what the interviewee says (Louise & While, 1994). This can increase the validity of the study because the collection of data from this type of interview is rich in explanation and analysis (Louise & While, 1994). These questions were aimed at identifying factors that blog retailers regarded as essential in creating and enhancing customer patronage and loyalty.

Table 1. Profile of participants

Blogger	Products/services sold	Year established	Position
A	Fashion apparel	2007	Owner
B	Fashion accessories	2007	Partner
C	Fashion apparel	2006	Owner
D	Digital books	2006	Owner
E	Gifts	2007	Owner
F	Website design	2008	Partner
G	Fashion apparel	2007	Owner
H	Fashion accessories	2007	Partner
I	Fashion accessories	2006	Owner

Data Analysis and Results

Within-case and cross-case analysis methods were used. Within-case analysis involves identifying all statements relating to blog retailing in the transcripts (Trochim, 1989). Cross-case analysis comprises identifying similarities and differences across cases in order to gain a greater and comprehension of the processes involved (Spiggle, 1994; Trochim, 1989). Firstly, each case was analyzed to gain a better understanding of each retailer's strategies. As suggested by Trochim (1989), phrases and statements that were related were then grouped together and headings given to each group to identify

the constructs. The results indicate that there are six retail strategies utilized by bloggers in driving customer patronage:

1. *E-Trust.*

The most mentioned precursor to customer patronage was e-trust. From the blog retailers' perspective, e-trust constituted an important prerequisite for a successful blog retailing business. Blog retailers employ different tactics in building e-trust with their customers. Six blog retailers indicated that e-trust is built through comments/testimonials left by previous customers and the amount of past sales history that is posted on the blogs. Blog Retailer E stated, *"We invite customers who have done business with us to leave comments or feedback about our service or products. They also rate our customer services. These ratings and testimonials serve as input into building trust with potential customers."* Thus, customer testimonials and sales history were used by most retailers to build e-trust of new customers because it is an important element in facilitating business transactions online.

Security and privacy measures are also recognized as a method of building e-trust by a few blog retailers. Blog Retailer H emphasized their security payment process as a vehicle to build e-trust, and stated that, *"In dealing with security issues, we do not request credit card information. We use the simple method of electronic transfer instead. We send out the goods once we receive the payment. A confirmatory email is sent to them once goods have been sent out which also tells them the postage transaction number. We also make use of DHL services for overseas postage so that customers can track their products with DHL/post office."* It is also interesting to note that most blog retailers interviewed did not provide a credit card facility for their customers, but preferred to use PayPal or bank electronic transfer instead. This may be due to the security and privacy concerns that the blog retailers have relating to credit card payments online. Security and privacy measures through the use of electronic transfers or PayPal instead of credit card payments is recognized as a means of building trust for the two bloggers. Supported by Kuhlmeier and Knight (2005), security on the Internet can be achieved by ensuring that the privacy of the buyer's information is maintained and that credit card information is never disseminated beyond the immediate needs of the buyer-seller interaction. In addition, in a Business Week survey poll, it was found that 78% of respondents mentioned security and privacy concerns as the main reasons for their reluctance to purchase on the Internet, and that they would purchase products online only if security and privacy were guaranteed (Green, Yang, & Judge, 1998). Hence, the appropriateness of blog retailers in handling customers' security and privacy concerns can have an impact on customers' intentions to patronage a blog retail.

Another important tactic used by blog retailers in generating e-trust was the utilization of refund policies. Blog retailers need to ensure that customers receive the merchandise that they expect to receive, based on the online presentations or pictures.

Retailers C, D, G, and H had introduced refund policies to their retail business in building e-trust. As indicated by Retailer D, *"I introduced a 'no-questions-asked' refund policy. This showed how confident I am with the sales of my digital books."* The rationale for having a refund policy in place is that customers perceive a high risk when it comes to buying online, as they are unable to physically examine the product prior to purchase and also have concerns about the possibility of receiving defective or mis-specified goods (Ribbink, Riel, Liljander, & Streukens, 2004). Introducing refund policies increases assurance and helps customers feel more comfortable and secure when shopping online (van Birgelen, Ghijsen, & Semeijn, 2005). It can overcome feelings of doubt and risk, and create trust in the form of a 'psychological contract' that the products delivered will meet their expectations (van Birgelen et al., 2005). Therefore, by introducing refund policies that favor the customers, customers are able to overcome this perceived risk and are able to feel at ease to buy from the website. However, it is interesting to note that some blog retailers commented that some customers tend to abuse this policy. *"For example, some of them intentionally downloaded the digital books and asked for a refund straight after."* (Retailer D)

2. *Credibility.*

Retailer D viewed honesty and truthfulness in information presented to customers as one of the most essential ingredients in successful blog retail. The blog retailers assert that a genuine voice should be used when writing a review of a product on blogs, even if it means admitting that a competitor's product is better. This leaves the reader with the impression that the reviews given are unbiased and impartial, resulting in an increase in the reader's trust as a natural consequence (Wright, 2006). For example, according to Retailer D, *"...honesty is the best policy and it is also the best way to create trust in customers about your products. I always give straightforward answers to my readers or customers. Even if I make a mistake, I apologize."* Retailer D also added that honesty must not only be present in answering blog readers' questions, but it is also important in a product review or blog post. Retailer D commented, *"Even when I blog about a product review, I am very genuine in commenting. I make sure to point out the weakness of the product if I found any."* These findings support prior observations by Wright (2006), who reported that the use of a genuine voice - one which gives straight and passionate answers to even the hardest questions - creates credibility.

3. *Links*

Blogs are linking machines, and bloggers love to link (Wright, 2006). Usage of links is found to be the most popular method of advertisement for blog retailers. According to Retailer G, *"I find that links are a very effective way of generating free traffic to my blog. I am collaborating with nine other blogs/sites aiming to gain more traffic to my*

blog. Links are a free form of promotion and other bloggers are also willing to collaborate to generate more traffic to each of our sites." Thus, links are utilized by the retailers as a marketing tool in driving new customers or traffic to their blog site. In line with Wright (2006), hyperlinks on fellow blogs enable their visitors to access the owner's blog, opening a huge door to audiences who might be interested in the owner's content.

Links can also create a positive image and promote the blog for the blog retailer. Retailer D indicated that, "Putting up links of other blogs on my tagboard not only allows me to promote traffic to my blog, it also allows building of my reputation in the blogging industry. This is because customers/readers can see which blogger you are linked up to and when they see your blog linking with other blog experts, they see you in a different light. Links allow building of reputation based on other people's brand." Thus, the retailers view links as a marketing tool, not only for driving traffic to the blog site, but also in creating a positive image of their blog by linking to other blog sites.

4. Interactivity

Blogs offer a location for customers to comment and for companies to listen to what customers have to say (Lu and Hsiao, 2007). Results show that five of the retailers indicated that they encouraged customers to come forward to interact through content written on the blogs. According to Retailer D, "I invite people to comment on my blog post to induce my readers to respond. For example, I would ask for their opinion about something/a product on my blog post. There was one time when I wrote on one of my blog entries that I will reveal a secret in the next blog entry if I receive seven emails asking for it. However, in my next blog entry, I would then tell them that I need one more email to reveal my secret. This excites blog readers to come forward to interact with me. I ended up with 78 people responding to my post. The response is so good that people e-mail me to tell me their life stories about themselves and so on." Thus, creating interaction on blogs is one way in which the blog retailer builds a relationship with his or her customers. This is in accordance with a report by Wright (2006), which suggests that a successful blogger should always seek interactivity with readers by asking what their readers think and inviting them to comment. This will result in free customer feedback and a reputation for caring, which can also enhance communication and interactivity, ultimately leading to rapport-building with the reader that results in customer patronage (Hallur, 2006).

5. Incentives

Results show that the retailers utilize incentives as a method of inducing customers to purchase in higher quantities and to keep existing customers loyal. This issue was supported by Retailer G, "Discounts are given to customers who buy in bulk. This is a sales promotion technique to make customers buy more. Free membership is also given to customers who order above a certain amount in a single transaction. Membership will entitle

customers to receive discounts in their next purchase and allow them to buy a product range that is exclusively available to our members. Free membership is introduced to create customer loyalty, so that customers will keep coming back to our blog shop." Providing free trials is also a way of offering incentives to customers to induce them to purchase. Trials precede liking and eventually lead to purchase intention. Offering free trials for a limited period or of a limited quantity is a good marketing strategy to create a routine in their customers' minds and can eventually make the product necessary for them (Smith & Swinyard, 1982). For example, Retailer F provided evidence of this, "Our company offers free trials to our customers because we are selling services to them. The fact that service is intangible and with our company being relatively new, free trials of web hosting and CMS test runs allows customers to try out before buying." Thus, incentives such as discounts, free memberships, and free trials are cited as the most common ways of promotion for these blog retailers.

6. *Blog Site Design*

Over half of the retailers indicated the endeavor to create some form of "uniqueness" for their blog. Retailer F shows his commitment in creating a unique layout for the blog, "A unique site design means a lot to the success of my blog business. A unique blog design allows my customers to easily recognize my blog. In addition, a good site design also serves as a way to show some professionalism to my customers in order to build our corporate image as well as corporate branding." So, creating individuality or uniqueness in a blog is regarded as a way of exhibiting professionalism and corporate branding to customers. Wright (2006) suggests a few other methods to create individuality using blog site design, which includes catering blogs to specific content, designing one's own layout of a blog, using a unique font, or designing a unique banner (Wright, 2006). The key idea is to make the blog unique and so that it leaves a memorable impression in the customer's mind.

Discussion and Recommendations

The results of this study provide valuable insights into blog retailing practices. The results suggest that blog retailers viewed building of e-trust as a major marketing strategy in blog retailing. This is in line with research on other e-commerce platforms, such as e-auctions and other online websites (Amit & Zott, 2002; Bhattacharjee, 2002) which have found that establishing online patronage is dependent on first generating consumer e-trust. Further supporting this finding is a study by Reichheld and Shetter (2000) on website buyer behavior, which found that e-shoppers ranked e-trust as their most crucial attribute in selecting an e-retailer. Bhattacharjee (2002) also reports that

online trust is a customer's priority in e-commerce, an antecedent to commitment, and an essential factor of relationship marketing. In this sense, it is of paramount importance for all blog retailers to establish trust to gain a competitive advantage (Reichheld & Scheffer, 2000). Some strategies used by the blog retailers cited in this study included the use of testimonials by past customers, sales history, and security measures (through the use of bank electronic transfers or PayPal instead of credit card payments). Introduction of refund policies is another strategy identified by blog retailers in creating e-trust. Some of the refund policies cited by the blog retailers include full money-back guarantee and no-questions-asked refund policies. These strategies were found to be efficacious in increasing e-trust, not only in this study, but also in related studies (Patton & Josang, 2004). Pichler (2000) found that since customers have no opportunity to see and feel products, or to evaluate a product in detail prior to making a purchase, some are left feeling vulnerable. However, by having a refund policy in place, customers can feel more assured and secure with purchasing on blogs, which reduces perceived risk. Other studies suggested different means of developing e-trust using branding, competitive pricing, money-back guarantees, website features, multiple contact points, website transactions, and fulfillment of orders (Newholm, Mcgoldrick, Keeling, Macaulay, & Doherty, 2004). Since e-trust was found to be an important element in e-commerce, including blog retail, it is crucial for blog retailers to focus their efforts on gaining e-trust from their customers using these suggested strategies. Future studies should also investigate other strategies that blog retailers can utilize to develop e-trust.

Credibility is another essential factor identified in successful blog retail. According to McCole (2002), credibility implies truthfulness and honesty in the information presented and the ability of retailers to keep promises. One strategy identified in this research that is used to create credibility in blogs is the use of honesty and truthfulness in information presented in blogs. Supported by Wright (2006) and Reichheld and Sheffer (2000), to enhance credibility, a *genuine voice* should be used when writing product reviews on blogs, even if that means admitting that competitors' products are superior. Such reviews indicate impartiality, honesty, and enhance credibility, leading to customer satisfaction and loyalty. Thus, blog retailers should invest considerable effort in addressing factors that contribute to credibility. Future studies can also consider exploring other strategies or ways in which retailers can develop credibility of their blogs. Some strategies cited in the online retail literature include celebrity endorsements (Spry, Pappu, & Cornwell, 2011), recommendations, and feedback systems (Xiao & Benbasat, 2007). These were found to lead to higher credibility and a favorable attitude towards the website. These factors, however, have not yet been tested in the blog retail context. Future research could explore if these strategies are indeed effective within the context of blog retail.

Other tactics cited by blog retailers in driving customer patronage include the utilization of links or hyperlinks, creating interactivity on blogs, unique site design, and incentives. Interestingly, the use of incentives, such as discounts, free

memberships, and free trials emerged as important sales promotion tools that lead to an increase in blog retail sales. The major implication of this result for blog retailers is utilizing incentive programs, such as free postage, discounts, free memberships, and free trials as a critical stimulus to encourage customer patronage, thereby gaining a competitive advantage (Kim & Kim, 2004). This factor has not emerged as a crucial determinant of online customer patronage in extant research. For example, Kim and Kim (2004) found that incentive programs did not play a critical role in stimulating online purchase behavior. One possible explanation for the difference in these results may be due to the different customer group that blog retail attracts. Future studies can explore the differences in terms of consumer behavior and characteristics between blogs and other e-commerce platforms. Other research on e-commerce, however, reported that incentive programs increase Internet usage (Ray, 2001) and word-of-mouth referrals (Ray, 2001). For example, Ahrens, Coyle, and Strahilevitz (2013) found that providing larger incentives appears to generate higher referral motivation. Explained from a behaviorist perspective, incentives, such as monetary rewards, can constitute an effective extrinsic motivator because people who are rewarded for a behavior are likely to create a routine in their minds and eventually shape referral behavior (Buhler, 1992). Further research can be conducted to investigate the effectiveness of incentives in enticing blog patronage from the perspective of customers.

Limitations

There are limitations of the study that should be considered. Firstly, the participants in the study are mostly based in Singapore and may not represent blog retailers based in other countries, as culture and lifestyle may differ among countries. Further, this study was conducted with a limited number of subjects, and thus the results should be interpreted with caution. Finally, the subjects were self-selected, and therefore a bias existed.

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