



Research Article

Relationship Between Word of Mouth (WOM) Communication and Brand Equity of Sport Products Among Consumers in Kuantan, Pahang

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Abstract

The main purpose of this study was to determine the relationship between word of mouth (WOM) communication and brand equity of sport products among consumers in Kuantan, Pahang. Four hundred and sixty-one consumers from Kuantan, Pahang participated in the study. Participants completed WOM communication questionnaires originally designed by Uslu *et al.* (2013), and the brand equity questionnaire originally designed by Yoo and Donthu (2001) and Lassar *et al.* (1995). The results showed high level of WOM communication of mean of 3.56 and (SD= .72) and the brand equity dimensions indicated highest mean on “perceived quality” 3.73 with (SD= .63). The *r*-value was ($p < .487$) and it indicated a significant positive relationship between WOM communication and brand equity. The findings of the study provide theory and understanding for marketers in influencing consumers to have positive WOM communication and brand equity towards sports brands.

Keywords: Word of Mouth (WOM); Brand Equity; Sport Product.

Introduction

Organizations need to maintain effective communication with their consumers to contribute to consumers' repurchase of their brands (Flores and Yapuchura, 2012). This is achieved through marketing (Flores and Yapuchura, 2012). In fact, marketers can create communication strategies to attract young consumers to buy their brand (Jamieson, 2014). Marketing communication involves personal and non-personal communication channels that include advertising, sales promotion, public relation and publicity, direct marketing, personal selling and word of mouth (WOM) (Jamieson, 2014).

The present study focused on WOM communication as one method marketers' use to convey messages about brands to consumers. WOM is a one-way communication that is used to inform, persuade and remind consumers directly or indirectly about products. WOM comes down to trust. This means that people believe or trust words they have heard from friends or previous consumers about specific products. This is because people rely on knowledge and experience to believe something. WOM communication is oral or person-to-person communication between a receiver and communicator.

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Previous studies have identified several aspects of WOM communication. They include the usefulness of WOM communication (Ennew *et al.*, 2000; Smith *et al.*, 2005; Mazzarol *et al.*, 2007), the channels of WOM communication (Keller, 2003) and the factors that affect the effectiveness of WOM communication (Anderson, 1998; Harrison-Walker, 2001; Mazzarol *et al.*, 2007).

Brand equity is based on the confidence level of consumers to stay loyal with sports brands and their willingness to spend money to buy sport products from that brand. A brand is more than a product as it has dimensions including brand awareness, brand associations, brand loyalty and perceived quality (Severi *et al.*, 2014). Brand equity leads to a long-term relationship between marketers and consumers. Consumers with awareness, about brand equity will repurchase the products again as it is hard for them to keep changing from one sports brand to another (Severi *et al.*, 2014).

In continuing the life span in the marketplace, marketers must strengthen their brand equity by focusing on various marketing strategies such as WOM communication. This is because positive WOM communication leads to positive consumers' perception towards a particular sports brand. Particularly, to succeed in current intense competition, marketers must maintain high quality sport products that can attract consumers to buy their products (Severi *et al.*, 2014). In other words, WOM communication is the key in influencing consumers purchasing decisions and has a significant relationship with brand equity (Virvilaite, *et al.*, 2015). In marketing concepts, consumers are the ones who are in control of spreading information regarding a particular brand (Virvilaite, *et al.*, 2015). If the consumer had a bad experience with the brand, then he or she can ruin the image of the sport products by telling others about the poor quality of that sports brand (Virvilaite, *et al.*, 2015).

WOM communication is an important tool which influences the way consumers purchase and use sport products making it an influential marketing tool for marketers (Sridhar and Srinivasan, 2012; Yadav and Pavlou, 2014). Positive or negative WOM communication can make the difference to a product's success (Yadav and Pavlou, 2014). Numerous researchers have conducted studies relating to a marketer's use of WOM communication (Yadav and Pavlou, 2014). However, there is no unanimous agreement towards the message characteristics of WOM communication (Virvilaite *et al.*, 2015). It has also been observed that researchers regard the importance of brand equity dimensions in different ways (Severi *et al.*, 2014). O'Connell (2012) found that the consumers were more likely to experience satisfaction from a shopping experience that involve rebate and subsequently, they were more likely to express intentions to engage in WOM communication about that particular sport products. Therefore, this study

focused on the relationship between WOM communication and brand equity of sport products among consumers and the influence of WOM communication on brand equity with the help of correlation.

WOM communication is one of the largest and most important tools for consumers and influence where they shop, what they were buying and how they evaluated the products (Little, 2015). Information that comes from family, friends and neighbors were more effective than advertisements and presentations (Little, 2015). Consequently, 92% of consumers mostly believe the recommendations of their friends and family members rather than from other advertising channels (Little, 2015). Nowadays, when it comes to buying decision-making, consumers need opinions and independent sources to rely on (Cop and Gumus, 2009) and WOM communication provides such information for consumers (Virvilaite *et al.*, 2015).

WOM communication depends on how frequent it is used, the numbers of the senders and to whom they spread the news about a particular brand. WOM does not stop at one person, but the consumers continually spread it further. Bush *et al.* (2005) found in their study that WOM communication has a significant effect on consumers' satisfaction regarding their purchasing-decisions. According to Winer (2009), WOM is a powerful marketing tool and is widely understood as a medium of communication and promotion. The marketers use WOM as the platform to promote their products or services because they believe the consumers will deeply believe the words that come out from friends and family.

Vaerenbergh and Holmqvist (2014) in their study found that consumers were hardly likely to spread positive WOM by using the second language. Previous research had shown that to decrease the bias in spreading WOM communication takes about a six-month period (Liao, 2007; Singh and Duque, 2012). The intentions of using WOM communication will be less impactful if the marketers do not use the consumer's native language.

Concept of Brand Equity

Brand equity is defined as commercial value that is determined by consumer perception about a brand name rather than the products or services itself (Buil *et al.*, 2013). Brand equity is important because it creates meaning for the brand in the consumer's mind and memory. When consumers feel satisfied or unsatisfied about the sport products, they will create one image for the brand either positive or negative respectively. Moreover, brand equity is evaluated as the consumer points of view (Battistoni, 2013). Consumers freely give their opinions about the brand. Even if a sports brand manufactured a product with low quality, because the consumers always purchase the products from that brand and are comfortable with it, they are still willing

to get the sport products from the brand compared to buying products from other prominent sport brands.

Furthermore, brand equity positively related to consumers purchase intentions. Empirical research proved that brand equity consists of several dimensions; brand awareness; brand associations; perceived quality; and brand loyalty. All the dimensions contributed to brand equity. The dimensions reflected consumers' views, feelings and actions towards the sports brand.

Brand Awareness

Brand awareness is known as the ability of the person to recognize and recall the trademark, logo, name or symbol of a brand. Brand awareness is important for consumers to identify a sports brand in a particular product category. Besides, it measures how well the potential consumers know about the brand.

Generally, consumers were aware of a sports brand if it was popular or well known. Familiarity is one of the factors that lead to brand awareness (Clow and Baack, 2014; Moisescu, 2009). Increasing consumer loyalty will reflect in stronger levels of brand awareness. This statement shows that there is an important relationship between consumer loyalty and brand awareness towards the brand.

Brand awareness is also divided into two dimensions, brand recognition and brand recall. Brand recognition occurs when the consumer is able to identify the brand when they see the logo or trademark of the brand (Keller, 2003). Next, brand recall is the ability of consumers to recall from their memory sport products from the brand. Consumers will store important information or impressions about the brand in their minds so that they can recall when needed (Wijaya, 2011).

Brand Association

Brand association is anything related to the brand that is in a consumer's mind and memory. Firms need to create positive elements for the brand, so the consumer will relate the brand to being positive. Besides, positive brand association helps the firms' entry into the market. Brand association also has a strong impact toward consumer behavioral and purchase intentions (Wang and Tsai, 2014).

Consequently, brand association is the evaluation made up by the consumers about the products of that sports brand. Brand association can be generated through peer-to-peer communication (Li and Bernoff, 2011). Consumers help marketers by spreading positive news about the products. This is caused by the satisfaction experienced by consumers towards the brand. They always have positive feelings about the sport products and they communicate this to other consumers.

Therefore, positive evaluation from the consumers can lead to greater profits and also save marketing costs (Keller, 2003). A marketer does not have to spend a lot of money on

promotional tools like advertising if the level of brand association is higher among consumers. Moreover, Allen Broyles *et al.* (2010) found that higher levels of brand association can increase market share. Assuming that brand association can occur when there is positive evaluation from the consumers that reflect exclusivity of perceptions.

Brand Loyalty

Brand loyalty is defined as consumer behavior that compels him or her to repeatedly purchase the products from a particular brand. Consumers who have positive feelings with a sports brand will not easily change to another brand (Liu, Chou and Liao, 2015). Brand loyalty results from satisfied consumers' positive perception of a product. Although there are a lot of well-known brands that enter the market from time to time, loyal consumers still consider the chosen brand as their preferred selection.

Consequently, brand loyalty is categorized into two, behavioral loyalty and cognitive loyalty (Li, 2008). First, behavioral loyalty is the action by consumers that motivates them to repeatedly purchase products from that brand. Statements from Customer Loyalty Statistics Edition (2017) observed that 17% of consumers spend more on companies that offered excellent service. Second, cognitive loyalty is perception, impression or thoughts by the consumers about the brand as their first choice.

According to Denoue and Saykiewicz (2009), loyal consumers will not be readily affected by their positive attitudes towards a brand regardless of changes in price. They have less price sensitivity compared to non-loyal consumers. Moreover, they were willing to pay for the sport products from that brand even though the price was higher than other products (Zehir, 2011).

Perceived Quality

Research conducted by Lee and Leh (2011) defined perceived quality as a consumer's judgment about the overall quality of products. Essentially, perceived quality becomes the factor that leads consumers to purchase specific products. Consumers need to feel confident towards products that are manufactured by the brand so that they can keep on repurchasing the products.

Perceived quality is based on consumer's satisfaction offered by a sports brand compared to others. It relates to a product's capability to fulfill consumer needs and wants. Marketers are able to charge price over the market rate based on the quality of the sport products. However, the marketers must increase their productivity and maintain their performance to compete with other competitors (Chernatony, 2010).

Concerning the current economic condition, consumers gradually change their purchasing habits. Actually, consumers have high price-sensitivity and try to spend less money to get high quality products. Wu *et al.* (2011) and

Jaafar and Laip (2012) found that perceived quality is the criteria that affects consumers purchase intentions towards private label products.

Relationship Between Word of Mouth (WOM) and Brand Equity

As studied by Virvilaite et. al (2015), vividness and usefulness of WOM communication messages characteristics have a positive impact on dimensions of brand equity. The relationship of vividness and usefulness of WOM statistically showed positive relations towards brand equity's dimensions, which were brand association, brand awareness, brand loyalty and perceived quality.

According to Jansen et al. (2009), WOM communication influences consumers brand awareness because WOM plays an important role in consumers' satisfaction of brands. However, the relationship between WOM, brand association and brand awareness were not evaluated even though their interrelationship has been proven. Previous study by Mazzarol et al. (2007) suggests that WOM communication is an indicator and the platform to achieve the competitive advantage in the marketplace. Positive relationship between WOM communication and brand loyalty occurred through positive WOM communication. However, the interrelationship between WOM communication, brand loyalty and brand association has not been evaluated.

Hanna et al. (2011) stated that active consumers play a vital role in creating, marketing and promoting the contents of a brand. In fact, loyal consumers can decrease negative WOM by spreading positive news about the products. The study by Hanna et al. (2011) proved that there is positive interrelationship between brand loyalty and brand image. A greater number of consumers that are satisfied with the brand would bring a greater more positive image towards that brand.

The present research had several objectives and they were listed as below.

- a. To identify the levels of WOM communication on sports brand.
- b. To examine the brand equity dimensions that influence sport consumers.
- c. To determine the relationship between WOM communication and brand equity of sport products among consumers.

Methodology

Following the suggestion of Malhotra (2004), the present used quantitative research method.

Sampling

The sample for this study consisted of 461 respondents. The sample for the study was selected from among the residents of Kuantan. Kuantan is an urban capital of Pahang and the

17th largest city in Malaysia with a population of 366,229 (Department of Statistic Malaysia, 2017). According to the Kuantan Municipal Council (2018), there are over 49 sport stores in Kuantan, which showed there was demand for sport products among consumers in Kuantan, Pahang. Respondents were chosen by a simple random sampling technique that allowed each respondent in a larger population to have an equal chance of being selected (DePersio, 2018) to participate in the study.

The 461 respondents involved in this study comprised of 34.3% (N=159) males and 65.2% (N=302) females. The age breakdown of the respondents was for the age group between 18 to 22 years old 53.1% (N=246), 23 to 27 years old 23.1% (N=107), 28 to 32 years old 14.9% (N=69) and 33 years old and above 8.4% (N=39).

The educational background of the respondents showed that 11.4 % were SPM holders (N=53), Diploma 44.3% (N=205), Bachelor 34.6% (N=160) and other educational background was 9.3% (N=43). The other educational backgrounds represented respondents with Masters and Doctorate degrees.

Instrumentation

A questionnaire was used as the main instrument for this study. The questionnaire consisted of three parts, which were parts A, B, and C. Part A focused on the demographic profiles of the respondents that consisted of age, gender, race, educational level, preferred sports brand, frequency of buying sport products and ways in purchasing sport products. Part B consisted of questions regarding WOM communication. Uslu et al. (2013) originally developed the WOM Communication used in the present study. Respondents registered their responses to the WOM communication questionnaire on a 5-point Likert type scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). Part C consisted of questions regarding brand awareness, brand association, perceived quality and brand loyalty. Part C used a questionnaire originally developed by Yoo and Donthu (2001) and Lassar et al. (1995). Respondents registered their responses on 5-point Likert type scale for all the brand equity measures and ranged from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The Cronbach's alpha coefficient correlation for the questionnaire was calculated as 0.96, which was highly acceptable.

The data analysis consisted of descriptive statistics and Pearson's correlation. Descriptive statistics was used to measure the means, standard deviations and ranks. Pearson's correlation coefficient was used to determine the relationship between WOM communication and brand equity of sport products among the consumers. Guilford's rules of thumb was used to classify the strength of a relationship between two variables (Guilford and Fruchter, 1973)

Result

Purchasing Style among Consumers

Preferred sports brands by respondents in this study was Adidas with 33.7% (N=156) followed by Nike 31.3% (N=145), Puma 14.9% (N=69), Under Armour 4.8% (N=22), New Balance 4.3% (N=20) and other preferred sport brands like Sketchers or Asics 10.6% (N=49). Most of the respondents used sport products in their daily life 49.9% (N=231), but some of them used sport products occasionally 49.7% (N=230). Furthermore, majority of respondents like to buy sport products at retail shops 67.2% (N=311) rather

than online stores 32.4% (N=150). Majority of respondents preferred Adidas sports brands rather than others such as Nike, Puma, Under Armour and New Balance. The respondents mostly use sport products like sports shoes or supplements in their daily life. Furthermore, they were more likely to purchase from the retail store rather than the online shop (Table 1). Table 2 & 3 show Sub-domains of WOM communication effectiveness among consumers in Kuantan, Pahang

Table 1: Purchasing Style among Consumers

	Product	Frequency	Percent
Preferred Sports Brand	Nike	145	31.3
	Puma	69	14.9
	Under Armour	22	4.8
	Adidas	156	33.7
	New Balance	20	4.3
	Others	49	10.6
Frequency in buying sport products	Daily Usage	231	49.9
	Occasionally	230	49.7
Ways in buying sport products	Online Store	150	32.4
	Retail Store	311	67.2

Table 2: WOM communication effectiveness among consumers in Kuantan, Pahang

	Mean	Standard Deviation
WOM Communication	3.56	0.72

Table 3: Sub-domains of WOM communication effectiveness among consumers in Kuantan, Pahang

Sub-Domains of WOM Communication	Mean	Std. Deviation
Generally regard my family, friends and neighbors as a good source of advice about mobile phones	3.65	0.907
Seek advice from my family, friends and neighbors when deciding to purchase a sport product	3.63	0.893
I frequently gather information from my family, friends and neighbors about a product before I buy it.	3.52	0.981
If I have little experience with the sport products, I often ask my family, friends and neighbors about the sport products.	3.71	0.840
When it comes to sport products, I trust the information I receive from my family, friends and neighbors more than I trust the information from media sources (radio, television, magazines, etc.)	3.29	0.984

Table 4: Brand equity dimensions that influence sports consumer in Kuantan, Pahang

	Mean	Standard Deviation
Perceived Quality	3.73	0.63
Brand Association	3.67	0.58
Brand Loyalty	3.67	0.70
Brand Awareness	3.62	0.65
Total Brand equity		

From the Table 4, the highest mean brand equity dimensions that influence consumers in Kuantan, Pahang is “perceived quality” which indicated 3.73 (SD=.63). Second is “brand association” with 3.67 (SD=.58). Next dimension is “brand loyalty” which indicated 3.67 (SD=.70) followed by “brand awareness” 3.62 (SD=.65).

Table 5: Relationship between WOM and brand equity of sport products

		Brand Equity	
WOM	Pearson Correlation	1	.481
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000**
	N	461	

** Correlation is significant at $p < 0.001$

Preferences for WOM communication and brand awareness of sport products were positively correlated, Pearson’s $r(461) = .487, p < 0.001$ (Table 5).

Discussion

The findings show that, WOM communication has an effective effect among consumers. Other than that, the dimension of brand equity that influence sports consumers was perceived quality. This is because consumers will emphasize the characteristics and quality of the sport products before purchasing it. Furthermore, the findings also showed that there is a positive and significant relationship between WOM communication and brand equity.

This study is in line with previous studies by Cop and Gumus (2009) that stated consumers trusted information that came from close family members more than advertisements and presentations. Furthermore, similar with a study by Little (2015) indicated about 92% of consumers believe opinions or advice from their family and friends rather than channels of advertising. As a result, WOM communication is an important channel in delivering the information regarding the sport products, which have been the subject of focus in this aforementioned study.

There were four dimensions in brand equity that influence consumers towards sport products; brand awareness, brand association, brand loyalty and perceived quality. All dimensions were contributes from word of mouth (WOM) communication towards sport products.

Based on the findings from descriptive statistics, the dimension of brand equity that influence sports consumers indicated highest mean is “perceived quality”. This is consistent with the previous study stated by Lee and Leh (2011) which consumers purchased the products relating to the quality of the sport products that make them confident to use. Moreover, this is in line with studies by Wu et.al (2011) which stated that perceived quality is one of the criteria affecting consumer’s purchase intention towards the sport products. This is because consumers will purchase the products in terms of product quality, color, form and appearance. Besides that, consumers will repurchase the

product that has superior performance in fulfilling their needs and wants.

Based on the findings, the result above indicated that word of mouth (WOM) communication was related to brand equity of sport products among consumers in Kuantan, Pahang which showed that it is significant and related. We can state that there is a moderate and positive relationship between WOM communication and brand equity. The current study is similar with previous studies by Virvilaite et al. (2015) which revealed that WOM communication and brand equity were statistically significant relations and the correlation manifested moderate relationship between the two variables. Moreover, consumers that had been satisfied with the sport products might spread positive WOM communication and bring greater positive image and perception towards the sports brand and products (Hanna et.al, 2011). This is parallel with the findings of present study in which WOM communication and brand equity were interrelated because positive WOM communication will lead to positive brand equity by consumers. The Researcher recommends for future study determining the differentiation level of effectiveness between traditional WOM communication and online WOM (eWOM) communication among the consumers due to technological advances.

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