FACTORS INFLUENCING COSMETICS PURCHASE INTENTION IN THAILAND: A STUDY ON THE RELATIONSHIP OF CREDIBILITYAND REPUTATION WITH THE PERSUASIVE CAPABILITIES OF BEAUTY BLOGGERS

Peerapatra Chaovalit[1]

Abstract: *The purpose of this study is to examine the factors affecting beauty bloggers' credibility and how credibility itself influences cosmetic purchase intentions of Thai people. As identified by Ohanian (1990), three variables impacting one's decision-making process (trustworthiness, expertise and attractiveness) are considered along with two additional variables determined by this researcher through focus group interviews to fit with and complement them. These are reputation and persuasive capabilities. Demographic factors of the respondents (age, gender, etc) were investigated as part as understanding differences, if any, in the cosmetic purchase intentions of Thai people. The Pearson Correlation analysis indicates that all independent variables have a positive relationship with purchase intention. Moreover, the results from the one-way ANOVA analysis show that the demographic factors variously affect the purchase intention of cosmetics of respondents.*

Keywords: *Beauty blogger, cosmetics, trustworthiness, expertise, attractiveness, reputation, persuasive capabilities.*

1. Introduction

There has been a significant increase in the number of internet users over the last decade. From 6 percent of the world's population in 2000 and 12 percent in 2012, the number has since jumped up to about 30 percent and is likely to keep rising in the years to come (Union, 2011). This growing trend is not just limited to the developed world but is global although the rise is faster in industrialized countries. At the end of 2010, 16 percent of the total households in the developing countries had internet access versus 66 percent in developing countries, a significant gap. In Europe alone, the rate of penetration frequently goes beyond 80 percent and more than 80 percent of all internet subscribers had a broadband connection.

Having broadband access is particularly telling as many of the most effective services and applications are only available with a high-speed internet connection (Union, 2011). Judging by the increasing number of internet users, it is safe to say that in the future more and more people will start posting their opinions online, including in developing countries.

Many of the opinions posted online pertain to brands. Unsurprisingly given the growing number of internet users, online comments –

and information - about a brand have been on the rise and will continue to spread. They will also be available more quickly (Technorati, 2010). One of the various tools available to express one's thoughts and criticize brands online is blogs (Technorati, 2010).

Broadly speaking, a blog (the term comes from the words 'web' and 'log') can be described as "a type of web page that contains chronologically arranged and brief information" (Hsu & Lin, 2008). It can be a diary, a series of books, a journal review, a news service or even a list of web pages which are linked to other web sites. In any case, it provides users with a simple way to create and publish their information and other materials online.

One significant feature of a blog, one that largely accounts for its widespread use, is that it can be operated very easily. This user-friendly characteristic of the blog means that more and more internet users are turning to blogs since they can easily circulate information and interact with other internet and blog users (the relative anonymity of users is also contributing to its popularity). Bloggers can share their stories, write blog posts, share likes and dislikes, express their opinions, provide suggestions, and report similar interests with their virtual communities without necessarily having to divulge their identity, which prompts them to express themselves more freely.

Activities taking place in the blogosphere obviously affect the external world as bloggers

[1]Peerapatra Chaovalit recently graduated from Assumption University, Graduate School of Business. This research was completed under the supervision of Dr. Aaron Loh.

can connect to the virtual community anywhere and anytime. In short, the blog has empowered bloggers. By voicing their opinions and discussing social and societal issues, they can forge political agendas, influence business activities and be the source of innovative business opportunities. Bloggers' influence on businesses is especially critical in respect of purchasing intention (Agarwal et al., 2008).

As blogging has become one of the most popular tools for recording individual feelings and stories and sharing opinions on any particular daily events, the literature on blogs is growing; a flurry of studies have shown that users' recommendations on blogs can be a powerful marketing tool to reach customers or, on the contrary damage a firm's reputation. Understandably so; since online activities are not conducted face to face, customers need useful and reliable information to support their purchase intentions and develop a better understanding of the products offered. This has made credible sources of information on products (or services) a key factor in terms of influencing buying behavior (e,g, Gefen et al., 2003 a; Hsiao et al., 2010; Pavou & Fytenson, 2006).

Admittedly, blogs encompass a very large variety of topics and no single study would be enough to cover all of them. This study thus focuses on a particular area. Specifically, it concentrates on blogs related to the cosmetic industry in Thailand, an area of particular interest to this researcher. This is also one of the world's leading industries in terms of sale volume and ability to attract viewers on line (Eze et al., 2012).

The cosmetic industry in Thailand has developed rapidly. As one executive from Shu Uemura, a brand under the l'Oreal Company, Thailand, pointed out, the sales volume is higher than in the past because of brand awareness and the tendency for people to use smart phones and the internet everywhere. Therefore, the cosmetic industry in Thailand (and elsewhere) is highly competitive, which makes it imperative for companies to have a solid understanding of their customers' needs.

One way for cosmetic firms to achieve this is to have access to customer feedback. No place lends itself to this task better than the website and social networks. They not only enable firms to develop their understanding of customer needs but also provide a huge opportunity for a firm to impact customers' purchase intentions, all the moiré as the internet and social networks keep growing. As Fan and Miao (2012) determined, today when people search for information about cosmetics they would like to buy, they increasingly tend to rely more on sources from the internet which can provide them with an abundance of information about cosmetics anywhere – in the comfort of their home and anytime. How reliable though is the information available on line? What credibility, if any, do customers give social networks? Does credibility affect customers purchasing intention?

This study seeks to address these issues. Credibility is at its core. After reviewing the concept relevant to this research and examining the methodology used to find answers to these queries, the findings are discussed. Recommendations are then made.

2. Literature Review
- Source Credibility
As Ohanian's, (1990) source credibility theory shows, people have more of a tendency to be persuaded when the source shows itself as a credible source (Hovland et al., 1953; Ohanian, 1991; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Sternthal et al., 1978). Source credibility is based on three components: expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness.

Expertise has been defined as "the perceived ability of the source to make valid assertions" (McCracken, 1989). In other words, the communicator is considered to be qualified enough to provide valid and accurate information or discuss a specific subject (Hovland et al., 1953). According to Ohanian (1990), the expertise dimension of source credibility comes down to five adjectives: experienced, expert, qualified, knowledgeable, and skilled. Research has shown that source expertise in the product or service has an impact on the receiver's purchasing decision and perceived trustworthiness (Smith et al., 2005).

Trustworthiness refers to an audience's belief that the communicator provides information in a sincere, fair, honest, and honorable manner (Nelson & Pearson, 1988; Ohanian, 1991). It thus stems from "the perceived willingness of the source to make valid assertions" (McCracken, 1989). Ohanian, (1990) described source trustworthiness with five key adjectives, honest, dependable,

sincere, reliable, and trustworthy, which can be used to determine whether a source is trustworthy.

Attractiveness, the third component of source credibility, has to do with social values and how they are perceived (McCroskey & McCain, 1974). Social values include personality, physical appearance, and similarity to the receiver (Baker & Churchill, 1977; Caballero & Solomon, 1984; Choi, Lee, & Kim, 2005; McGuire, 1958). Source attractiveness is a combination of similarity, familiarity, and likability. Besides, similarity is the likeness or sameness between the source and the receiver who receives the message. The customer is influenced by the message from someone with whom he/she feels he/she shares the same needs, lifestyle, interests, and goals. The second combination is familiarity. It refers to the degree of a source's knowledge through exposure (Belch & Belch, 2003).

- Reputation

Reputation is mostly regarded as a precursor of trust or behavioral intention. As determined by a number of empirical studies, reputation can affect trust or behavioral intention significantly (Casalo et al., 2008; Keh & Xie, 2009; Koufaris & Hamption-Sosa, 2004). Bloggers with different reputation levels influence the perceptions of readers in respect of particular contents quite differently (Hsu et al., 2013). Past studies have shown that customers count on information provided by reputable sources in their decision making processes (Lutz, 1985; Mackenzie & Lutz, 1989).

- Persuasive Capabilities

Persuasive capabilities is a word defined by the researcher as one component of an opinion leader's capabilities. Having persuasive capabilities, it is very easy for opinion leaders to convince people to accept new ideas/ concepts/ products. According to Hovland et al., (1953), persuasion is the process of changing or reinforcing attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors. It is something most people do or experience on a daily basis. Moreover, persuasion is not only about influencing people and getting what you want, it is also about understanding the psychology of why people think and act in certain ways.

- The Purchasing Process Theory

According to the Purchasing Process Theory, the purchasing process involves 3 phases: pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase (Frambach et al., 2007). This research, however, focuses solely on the pre-purchase stage.

In the course of this stage, customers gather information in order to understand the product in which they are interested and which they consider buying. To get complete information on the product, the consumer look at reviews from customers who have had previous experience with the product to be purchased (Hennig-Thurau & Walsh, 2003).

The pre-purchase stage can be sub-divided into 3 steps, namely, problem recognition, information search, and evaluation of alternatives. Problem recognition is the first step. The need can be generated by internal stimuli such as human's ordinary needs like starving, thirst and sex when they increase to a level high enough to develop into a drive. Also, the needs can be generated by external stimuli such as posters, billboard advertisements or discussions among friends.

While searching information, the second step, customers can get information from any kind of sources. These include (i) *personal sources* such as family, friends, neighbors, acquaintances, (ii) *commercial sources* such as advertising, salespeople, dealer web sites, packaging, displays, (iii) *public sources* such as mass media, consumer rating organizations, internet searches, or (iv) *experiential sources* such as handling, examining, and using the product. The relative influence of these information sources varies with the product and buyer (Miller & Washington, 2009).

The third step, the evaluation of alternatives, involves the selection of one of the alternatives discovered during the information search step. Each alternative must therefore be evaluated before the selection of one of them can be made (Miller & Washington, 2009).

- Purchase Intention

Purchase intention refers to an individual's intention to purchase a specific brand which he/she has chosen for him/herself after a confident evaluation (Laroche & Sadokierski, 1994; Laroche et al., 1996; Mackenzie et al., 1986). In order to understand one's purchase intention of a specific brand, there has to be an assessment and consideration of all brands available in the market (Teng et al., 2007). Purchase intention is also a measure of the willingness to buy a product Dodds et al., 1991). However, a brand with high awareness

and a good image can promote brand loyalty to consumers. The higher the brand awareness is, the higher the brand trust and purchase intention are to consumers (Aaker & Keller, 1990).

3. Research Framework and Methodology

On the basis of the concepts considered above and the objectives of this study, a conceptual framework articulating the relationship among the five independent variables used in this research was created. As shown in Figure 2 below, the variables include: trustworthiness, expertise, attractiveness, reputation, and persuasive capabilities and their respective affect on purchase intention.

Figure 2: Conceptual Framework
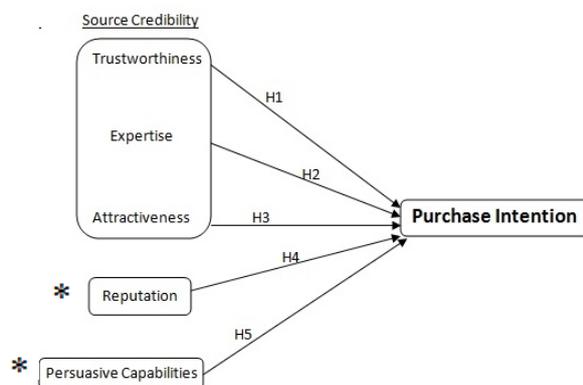
Source: Created by the researcher for this study.
*Refers to the variables derived from the focus group put together by the researcher.

Focus group questions were raised in order to come up with a number of variables; they included questions such as:
- Do beauty bloggers' characteristics have an effect on purchase intention?
- What characteristics would you believe when some products are recommended to you?
- How does the reputation of beauty bloggers affect purchase intention?
- How do the persuasive capabilities of beauty bloggers affect purchase intention?

Two more variables were identified after interviews were completed as interviewees' answers made it clear that 'reputation' and 'persuasive capabilities' were also factors influencing cosmetic purchase intention.

The first three variables (trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness) are grouped under a common heading, "source credibility."

Purchase intention is the dependent variable. The following six hypotheses were formed, based on the conceptual framework:

H1: *There is a significant relationship between trustworthiness and purchase intention.*

H2: *There is a significant relationship between expertise and purchase intention.*

H3: *There is a significant relationship between attractiveness and purchase intention.*

H4: *There is a significant relationship between reputation and purchase intention.*

H5: *There is a significant relationship between persuasive capabilities and purchase intention.*

H6: *There is a significant difference in purchase intention with regard to age among respondents.*

- Research Methodology

This study uses a qualitative approach based on questionnaires distributed to the target population; men and women 20-50 years old with experience reading Thai beauty blogs. A total of 400 questionnaires were distributed to the targeted respondents at two of the campuses of a Bangkok-based international university and at various metropolitan areas downtown Bangkok (e.g Asoke or Silom). They were also uploaded on a Thai cosmetics web board, named pantip.com, and one social network, facebook.com.

The questionnaire is divided into 4 parts. Part 1 consists of screening questions (3) designed to determine whether the respondents qualified for this study. Part 2 is about the source credibility, reputation, and persuasive capabilities of beauty bloggers with regard to purchase intention in Thailand. It includes 28 questions covering five main aspects of beauty bloggers: (i) their trustworthiness and its affect on purchase intention; (ii) their level of expertise and its affect on purchase intention; (iii) their attractiveness and its affect on purchase intention; (iv) their reputation and its affect on purchase intention; and (v) their persuasive capability and its affect on purchase intentions. Each question used the five-point Likert scale, with 1 meaning "strongly disagree", 2 "disagree", 3 "normal", 4 "agree", and 5 "strongly agree".

Part 3 which is about the respondents' personal information (gender, age, education level, etc), contains 5 questions.

Part 4 consists of an open question asking respondents to give their opinion and provide suggestions in an open-ended manner.

4. Results and Discussion

- Descriptive Analysis

From the compilation of the data collected in the questionnaire, the profile of the respondents is as follows: Thai females, 20-25 years old, who read Thai beauty blogs, have a bachelor's degree, currently work in offices and earn a monthly income of between 20,001-30,000 Baht. In other words, Thai females purchasing cosmetics in Thailand are young, enjoy a good purchasing power and are well-educated.

Hypotheses 1 to 5 were tested with the Pearson Correlation Coefficient and hypothesis 6 with ANOVA.

Hypothesis 1 (H1) testing shows there is a significant relationship between credibility as defined in terms of trustworthiness and purchase intention. The Correlation Coefficient level is .135, which means that there is a very weak positive relationship between credibility and purchase intention. This finding is consistent with the results from previous research (e.g. Doney and Canon, 1997; File et al., 1994; Holdford 2004; Miller and Baseheart, 1969; Niininen et al., 2007) in which it was determined that trustworthiness can easily built up on familiarity. Thus, the information conveyed from the source is likely to be used in purchase-decision making.

The result of hypothesis 2 (H2) testing indicates there is a significant relationship between credibility in terms of expertise and purchase intention. The Correlation Coefficient level is .210. There is a weak positive relationship between credibility in terms of expertise and purchase intention. The results are in-keeping with Brister's (1990) study which concluded that whenever a sender exhibits a high level of expertise, the receiver is more likely to think that the provided information is correct. Thus, in this particular case, the probability that the purchase decision will be influenced by the information conveyed by the sender is quite high. Gilly et al (1998) also determined that the sender's expertise positively affects the receiver's purchase intention. Expertise and know-how clearly lend credibility to one's assertions.

With a Correlation Coefficient score of .149, hypothesis 3 (H3) testing result confirms that there is a very weak positive relationship between credibility in terms of attractiveness and purchase intention. A number of studies have shown that consumers have a tendency to form positive stereotypes about attractive individuals. As compared to their unattractive counterparts, physically attractive communicating celebrities are more successful at changing beliefs (Baker and Churchill, 1977) and generating purchase intentions (Friedman et al., 1976).

The data from hypothesis 4 (H4) testing reveals that there is a significant relationship between blogger's reputation and purchase intention. The Correlation Coefficient (.180) indicates that there is a very weak positive relationship between reputation and purchase intention. A number of prior studies corroborate this finding, starting with Burgess et al., (2009) who argued that since blog posting is also a form of user-generated content (UGC), the influence exerted by a "credible" blogger is quite different from that, if any at all, exerted by a "not credible" one. This determination is consistent with the study of Hsu et al., (2013) in which it was found that, depending on their reputation, bloggers will influence the readers' perception of the respective content posted differently. Two earlier studies (Lutz, 1985; MacKenzie and Lutz, 1989) had similar conclusions as they showed that in the decision-making process consumers largely depend on information provided by reputable sources.

The investigation of hypothesis 5 (H5) reveals that there is a significant relationship between persuasive capabilities and purchase intention. The Correlation Coefficient score of .386 means that there is a weak positive relationship between persuasive capabilities and purchase intention, a result that is consistent with two prior studies focusing on E-WOM (Bansai and Voyer, 2000; Hennig-Thurau and Walsh, 2003). With the advent of web 2.0, e-WOM is becoming more persuasive and is playing a growing role in the purchase decision-making process. W-WOM typically takes the form of posted-views, mailbags, discussion forums, list services, personal e-mail, chat rooms, instant messaging, blogging, or twittering,

Hypothesis 6 (H6) results suggest that differences in purchase intention are caused by the various age levels among respondents. The researcher can conclude that Thai people between 20-25 years old who have read Thai beauty blogs are far more likely to purchase cosmetics. Thai people in this age group are a lot keener on reading blogs online than older

people since they are more socially interactive in online networks. They also read those far more frequently as they are easily motivated by beauty bloggers. On the other hand, people within the 41-50 age range are more pragmatic people. They generally want to see the real cosmetic product and try it before purchasing it. Moreover, they see beauty bloggers as a form of advertising that does not necessarily provide objective information about and a neutral evaluation of cosmetics but instead focus on boosting sales.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

This study aimed to identify the factors influencing cosmetics purchase intention among 20-50 years old Thai people. The hypothesis testing results provide some valuable information as to what prompts people in this particular age group to contemplate buying cosmetics. All the variables are related to cosmetic purchase intention.

The source credibility of beauty blogs is especially critical in giving credence to one's assertions on line. The attractiveness but more importantly the trustworthiness and expertise of the beauty blogger strongly also affect cosmetics purchase intention as do reputation and persuasive capabilities, the two other factors influencing cosmetics purchase intention.

Based on the above findings and discussion, the following recommendations can thus be made:

1. Beauty blogs should invariably be part of a firm's marketing strategy - Nowadays, a growing number of people surf the internet in search of product information as going on line to find out more about a particular product is convenient and saves time, especially in the case of those living in large and congested urban centers. Surfing the net is all the more expedient and beneficial when specific groups of people, the so-called bloggers, share their views on a particular product or service as is more and more the case today. The reviews they post on line have caught the interest of a large number of people who tend to rely on the information provided in those blogs as bloggers are often perceived to have credibility. Internet users have become much savvier than in the past. Therefore, monitoring and understanding of the factors influencing purchase intention is a must especially in the highly competitive Thai cosmetics industry. Trustworthiness, attractiveness, expertise, reputation, and the persuasive capabilities of beauty bloggers are the main features on which firms need to focus.

2. Beauty blogs should be monitored – As mentioned earlier, beauty blogs can affect a company's and product image both positively or adversely depending on their content. It is thus important for its long term credibility that a cosmetic company be in a position to select beauty bloggers carefully so that they became an effective part of its advertisement (or complement a company's advertising). Since there are lots of Thai beauty bloggers with various lifestyle, age, makeup style, the cosmetic company should therefore select beauty bloggers characteristics that are carefully based on the targeted population.

3. Beauty blogs should remain credible – As discussed in this study, beauty bloggers have a lot of visibility with many people following them and seeking reliable information from them. No Thai cosmetics firm can afford to by-pass beauty bloggers credibility issues. The information passed on to consumers should remain credible and blogs be treated as one of the most effective ways to drive up purchase intention.

4. Beauty blogs should also focus on niche markets - The Thai cosmetics industry has grown significantly over the past 10 years (Cuyvers et al., 2013). The steady annual growth of the sector (10-20% a year) is expected to continue in the years to come and competition likely to intensify as new players (both domestic and foreign) keep entering the market. With more firms entering the market and fiercely competing with each other, it is therefore especially critical for cosmetics companies, most notably smaller new entrants, to understand customers' wants and needs and carefully plan business strategies accordingly. One way for a cosmetic firm to respond to customer needs is to focus on niche markets, small markets with a specific demand requiring specific (customized) products. While there are many products addressing the general needs of customers, fewer, if any at all, cater to the special needs which some customers may have (admittedly, by its very nature, a niche market precludes large economies of scale). With the rapid expansion of blogs and the ever-growing enthusiasm of bloggers in resorting to them for product

information, understanding those special needs and meeting them with tailored products have become a lot easier.

5. The cosmetic industry should receive more government support – As a growing sector, both in terms of domestic consumption and employment and as a source of exports, the Thai cosmetics industry in Thailand should receive more support from the government. First, more government effort should be exerted to ensure consistent quality and high standards. This would not only protect consumers, it would also help branding Thai products and as reliable, high-quality cosmetics products. Natural and organic products in particular need to be subject to strict regulations protecting genuine ones from products making false claims in terms of organic content. If nothing else, higher sales volume as a result of heightened customer trust will put more money in the government coffers.

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