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Marketing Sport Coaching Services on Social Network Sites: An Examination of Social Influence and Country-of-Origin Effect

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Marketing Sport Coaching Services on Social Network Sites: An Examination of Social Influence and Country-of-Origin Effect

Social network sites have been used to market a variety of products and services. The aim of this paper is to examine the marketing of sport coaching services on social network sites. A Facebook page of a fictitious sports coaching service was set up. The control group (n=51) was exposed to a page with only minimal information on the coaching service. Experimental group 1 (n=51) was presented with additional information on the wall page consisting of 'likes' votes and positive comments about the coaching service. Experimental group 2 (n=51) was presented with additional information on the nationality of the sports coach. The findings suggested that social influence on social network site could affect consumers' perceived quality and purchase intention for sports coaching services. However, information on the nationality of the sports coach did not statistically affect the perceived quality and purchase intention for the sports coaching service.

Keywords: social influence; purchase intention; perception of quality; social network sites; sports coaching

Introduction

Many sports coaches operate as independent contractors or sole proprietorships. Since advertising on mass media can be prohibitively expensive, sports coaches have traditionally use word-of-mouth to market their services. With the growth of social network sites, sports coaches can now leverage on the internet to reach a wider network of potential consumers through word-of-mouth (Duan, Gu, & Whinston, 2008; Sandes and Urdan, 2013; Yaylı and Bayram, 2012).

Commercial organisations believe that advertising on social networking sites can be effective as marketing messages are sent to specific targets based on interests and demographics (Ridings, Gefen, & Arinze, 2002). Specific to sports, members can use online platforms to seek out others with similar sports interests and share information on the learning of new sports (O'Reilly, Berger, Hernandez, Parent, & Seguin, 2012). As

such, this suggests that marketing sports coaching services on social network sites can be viable.

The purpose of this study is to examine the marketing of sports coaching services on social network sites in Singapore. A national survey in 2011 on sports participation in Singapore found that only 5% of the adult population engage a sports coach or instructor. In contrast, 32% of the respondents engaged a sports coach for their children (Singapore Sports Council, 2011). As sports coaching for children seems to be more popular in Singapore, this study will focus on this demographic segment.

Literature Review

Parents support their children in learning a sport in a variety of ways. They not only provide instrumental support such as financing for equipment and fees, but also emotional support (Jowett and Timson-Katchis, 2005; Wiersma and Fifer, 2008). As such, while the child is the user of the sport, it is the parent who is the purchaser of the sport (Green and Chalip, 1998). Parents can thus have an influence on the decision to participate in sports.

From the parents' perspective, there are many benefits associated with a child learning to play a sport. Besides developing fitness through physical activity, a child can learn life skills, make new friends and develop self-confidence. However, these benefits are more likely to be achieved when a competent sports coach is engaged. Sports coaches can foster an environment that focuses on developing skills rather than simply winning in competitions. In such an environment, children are more likely to enjoy sports and learn something through sports (Neely and Holt, 2014; Smoll, Cumming, & Smith, 2011; Wiersma and Fifer, 2008).

Consequently, parents who attach importance to the benefits of sports are more likely to be involved in the decision to engage sports coaches (Green and Chalip, 1998;

Jowett and Timson-Katchis, 2005; Smoll, et al., 2011). In such a purchase situation where there is a high level of personal relevance, it becomes important for parents to form a reasoned opinion and to devote the cognitive effort required to evaluate the choices available (Dawes and Brown, 2005; Petty, Cacioppo, & Schumann, 1983). Parents will thus seek out information extensively in making their purchase decision.

However, the decision-making process of parents in selecting sports coaches is not well understood (Green and Chalip, 1998; Wiersma and Fifer, 2008). Learning a sport can be similar to other academic endeavours. The literature in higher education choices suggests that information such as the content of the course, the reputation of the coaches and the learning experiences of students may be important in the decision-making process (Veloutsou, Lewis, & Paton, 2004). However, as education, or coaching service in this context, is an intangible and non-standardised product, it will always be difficult to evaluate its quality and suitability. Hence, any decision will necessarily involve accepting an amount of uncertainty (Briggs and Wilson, 2007; Mazzarol, Soutar, & Thein, 2000; Warwick and Mansfield, 2003).

In particular, given that current sports accreditation systems do not adequately reflect the quality of the sports coaches, the level of uncertainty can be much higher (Duffy et al., 2011). To reduce the level of perceived risks in such a decision, decision-makers may rely more on word-of-mouth rather than advertisements (Briggs and Wilson, 2007; Pampaloni, 2010; Yaylı and Bayram, 2012). Word-of-mouth is perceived to be more credible as the motivation for sharing the information lies in wanting to help fellow consumers in making a choice (Kozinets, De Valck, Wojnicki, & Wilner, 2010). Hence, many decisions in education are made on the advice of family and friends who have direct experience with the education provider (Simões and Soares, 2010). This

perhaps explains why sports coaches have primarily depended on word-of-mouth in marketing their service.

With the growing use of social network sites, consumers are able to communicate with each other remotely at their convenience through comments and sharing. Social networking sites are defined as web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users whom they share a connection, and view and traverse their list of connections (Boyd and Ellison, 2008). Members share information with each other on social network sites. Specific to marketing communications, members are not only receivers of the marketing message but can also create shared meaning of the brand with other members on the social network site (Deighton and Kornfeld, 2009; Kozinets, et al., 2010). As such, social network sites allow members to raise brand awareness, influence brand image, and state their preferences for specific brands. Through this medium, brand related information is disseminated rapidly among one's social network (Ridings, Gefen, & Arinze, 2002).

The sports industry has in general embraced social network sites. Sports organisations and sports events have leveraged on the platform to communicate with spectators and fans (Lee and Leng, 2016; Parganas, Anagnostopoulos, & Chadwick, 2015; Wallace, Wilson, & Miloch, 2011). Specific to sports coaching services, social network sites can allow members to seek out others with similar sports interests and share information on the learning of new sports (O'Reilly, et al., 2012).

Given that members of a social network site are likely to know each other, there will be a high level of trust between members of a social network site (Ridings, et al., 2002). Therefore, positive information of a product on a social network site is likely to be translated into positive word of mouth (Sandes and Urdan, 2013; Yaylı and Bayram,

2012). On the other hand, negative information can also be translated into negative word of mouth, which garners more attention due to negativity bias (Sandes and Urdan, 2013; Sen and Lerman, 2007). This suggests that social network sites can be a source of social influence.

It has been established that social influence has an effect on purchase intention as consumers rely on the perception and judgment of other people (Bearden, Netemeyer, & Teel, 1989; Deutsch and Gerard, 1955). Social influence is generally categorised into informational and normative social influence. Informational influence occurs when one receives and accepts information from others as evidence of reality. When a consumer knows little about the product, information from a reference group will become more credible and thus more easily accepted. Exposure to information can affect the evaluation of the product, with positive information leading to more favourable behaviour (Burnkrant and Cousineau, 1975; Pincus and Waters, 1977). Normative influence, on the other hand, refers to one's tendency to conform to the positive expectations of others. It is defined as the belief as to whether significant others approve of the behaviour and the extent to which the individual is motivated to comply with them (Deutsch and Gerard, 1955).

More recently, it has been demonstrated that the effect of social influence on purchase intention can be extended to the online environment (Duan, et al., 2008; Sandes and Urdan, 2013). Specific to social network sites, high levels of interaction with posts including 'like' votes and shares can positively influence purchase intention (Beukeboom, Kerkhof, & de Vries, 2015; Richard and Guppy, 2014). While ratings by itself may not affect purchase intention, the conversational human voice including comments on social network sites can positively affect purchase intention through social influence (Beukeboom, et al., 2015; Chew and Leng, 2014; Duan, et al., 2008). A recent

study suggests that such conversational human voice can even mitigate the negative impact of negative comments (Sandes and Urdan, 2013). As such, it is expected from the above review that social influence on social network sites can have an effect on the perception of quality and purchase intention on sports coaching services.

H1a: Social influence on social network sites has a positive effect on the perception of quality of sports coaching service

H1b: Social influence on social network sites has a positive effect on the purchase intention of sports coaching service

The above review has also suggested that given the intangible nature of coaching services, consumers may need to rely on extrinsic cues as an indication of the quality of service. The literature has suggested that there are several extrinsic cues that can affect the perception of quality including brand name, store name and country of origin. In particular, it was found that country of origin and brand name can affect the perception of quality of sports products (Han and Kwon, 2009). In this study, only Country of Origin will be examined as other variables like brand name and store name are not relevant for sports coaching services.

Country of Origin effect occurs when consumers attribute weightage to the country of origin in the consumer decision making process. Consumers may develop a positive image of a country's ability to produce a specific product category of goods due to its location, climate, natural resources or history, especially in the absence of other product information. Consequently, consumers will perceive that products from the specific product category from the country will likely be of high quality. However, this is a complex process as Country of Origin effect can vary across demographic

segments (Chand and Tung, 2011) and product category (Balabanis and Diamantopoulos, 2004; Usunier and Cestre, 2007).

In addition, many of the studies on Country of Origin effect were based on products and not services (Han and Kwon, 2009; Javalgi, Cutler, & Winans, 2001; Lin and Chen, 2006). There is only a small number of studies examining Country of Origin effect in coaching services. For example, it has been found that nationality is a factor in the selection of an executive coach (Gray, Ekinci, & Goregaokar, 2011). Specific to sports coaching, the nationality of the coach and other demographic variables were found to have limited effect on the initial impression of sport coaches among university athletes (Manley et al., 2008). Extending from this, it suggests that Country of Origin can affect the perception of quality and purchase intention in sports coaching services.

H2a: Country of Origin has an effect on the perception of quality of sports coaching service

H2b: Country of Origin has an effect on the purchase intention of sports coaching service

Method

Participants

On approval from the university's institutional review board for ethical research practice, the study proceeded with identifying potential participants. In the latest national survey on sports participation, badminton was ranked as one of the more popular sports in Singapore with about 4% of the respondents playing the sport (Singapore Sports Council, 2011). Thus, badminton coaching service is selected for this study.

Parents with children enrolled in badminton coaching programmes at various sports centres in Singapore were approached for their participation in this study. Only one parent for each child was required to participate in the study. The parent was briefed on the research and informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. A total of 153 respondents agreed to participate in the study. These respondents were randomly categorized into Control Group, Experimental Group 1 and Experimental Group 2. In each group, there were 51 respondents.

Procedures

Facebook was selected as the platform to conduct the study as it was a popular social network site in Singapore. A Facebook page for a fictitious badminton coaching service was set up. Respondents in the control group were exposed to the wall page consisting of information on the services provided by the coach and his past achievements. Respondents were given about 5 minutes to read the information on the Facebook page.

Respondents in both Experimental Group 1 and Experimental Group 2 were exposed to the same wall page as the control group but with additional information. In Experimental Group 1, the wall page included “likes” votes and positive comments for the coaching service by students and their parents. Examples of such comments are “My son really enjoyed the coaching session!” and “Great professionalism demonstrated by the coach!” These comments were adapted from comments found in real Facebook accounts that offered badminton coaching services. The purpose of adding the comments was to test whether these comments affect perception of quality and purchase intention.

In Experimental Group 2, the wall page included a statement that the coach was a Chinese national. The purpose of adding the nationality of the coach was to test

whether there was any Country of Origin effect on the perception of quality and purchase intention.

Badminton is a sport that is dominated by China. The country won the last three Olympic Gold Medals in the Men's Singles with Chen Long in Rio 2016 and Lin Dan in London 2012 and Beijing 2008 (Badminton World Federation, 2016). In addition, in the 2016 Olympics, China won 3 medals in all Badminton competitions tying with Malaysia for most medals won in the sport. In the earlier Olympics, it won the most medals in Badminton; 8 medals in 2012 London Olympics; 8 medals in 2008 Beijing Olympics; 5 medals in 2004 Athens Olympics and; 8 medals in 2000 Sydney Olympics (Badminton World Federation, 2016; Wikipedia, 2016b). In the World Badminton Championships, of the 17 players who have won more than three medals, 13 athletes were from China (Wikipedia, 2016a). Hence, given its success in the sport, China seemed to be an appropriate country to test for country of origin effect for badminton coaches.

Measures

Respondents from all groups were asked to complete a survey instrument after being exposed to the Facebook wall page. The survey included measures on perception of quality, purchase intention and informational influence.

To test for perception of quality of the coaching service, a single item 15-point scale ranging from extremely low quality to extremely high quality was used. This scale was originally used in studies examining perception of product quality in offline contexts (Burnkrant and Cousineau, 1975; Pincus and Waters, 1977). More recently, the scale was also used in a study examining the effectiveness of marketing sports products on social network sites (Chew and Leng, 2014).

While perceived quality has been found to be correlated with purchase intention, they are conceptually different. Perceived quality is the consumer's evaluation of a product's overall excellence or superiority while purchase intention is related to buying behaviour (Tsotsou, 2006). Specific to studies on Country of Origin effect in services, it has been suggested that Country of Origin effect has a stronger effect on quality perception when compared to purchase intention (Javalgi, et al., 2001). As such, a separate measure of purchase intention is necessary.

In this study, purchase intention was measured using a 4-item scale with a 7-point Likert scale adapted from earlier studies (Coyle and Thorson, 2001; Prendergast, Ko, & Yuen, 2010). The scale was found to be reliable in earlier studies with Cronbach's alpha coefficient above 0.81 (Coyle and Thorson, 2001; Prendergast, et al., 2010). The scale for this study was found to be reliable with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.97. The items are as follows.

- (1) It is very likely that I will enrol my child for the coaching service.
- (2) I will use the coaching service the next time my child wants to learn badminton.
- (3) I will definitely enrol my child for the coaching service.
- (4) Suppose that a friend called you last night to get your advice in his/her search for a badminton coach. Would you have recommended him/her to enrol with the coach?

As consumers are susceptible to varying levels of informational influence, it is necessary to control for such differences in the study (Girard, 2010). To measure Informational Influence, a 4-item scale with a 7-point Likert scale adapted from earlier studies was used (Girard, 2010; Park and Lessig, 1977). The scale for this study was found to be reliable with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.84. The items are as follows.

- (1) I would search information on various coaching services from websites.
- (2) I seek information from those who work in the sports industry on the standard of coaching service offered compared to others.
- (3) The enrolling of my child with a coach is influenced by whether top athletes of similar age are students of the coach.
- (4) My choice of enrolling my child is influenced by other parents' word of mouth or some evaluation reports from an independent testing agency (e.g. online reviews).

Results

Perception of Quality

To test for H1a and H2a, a one-way between-groups analysis of covariance was conducted to compare the perception of quality across the control and experimental groups. Respondents' Informational Influence scores were used as the covariate in this analysis. Preliminary checks were conducted to ensure that there was no violation of linearity and homogeneity of regression slopes. There was a significant relationship between Informational Influence and Perception of Quality, $F(1, 149) = 48.92, p < .01$. The relationship was strong as indicated by the partial eta squared value of .25.

After adjusting for Informational Influence, there was a significant difference in the scores for Perception of Quality between groups, $F(2,149) = 13.40, p < .01$, partial eta squared = .15. The adjusted marginal means as displayed in Table 1 show that respondents in Experimental Group 1 ($M = 10.79$) reported the highest level of perceived quality when compared to the Control Group ($M = 8.97$) and Experimental Group 2 ($M = 9.30$). Bonferroni corrected post hoc comparisons for the adjusted means showed that there was a significant difference between the Control Group and

Experimental Group 1 ($p < .01$), but no significant difference between the Control Group and Experimental Group 2 ($p > .05$).

The analysis show that H1a was supported. Social influence had an effect on perception of quality of sports coaching services. However, H2a was not supported. Country of Origin had no effect on the perception of quality of sports coaching services.

Purchase Intention

To test for H1b and H2b, a one-way between-groups analysis of covariance was conducted to compare the purchase intention across the control and experimental groups. Respondents' Informational Influence scores were again used as the covariate. Preliminary checks conducted indicated no violation of linearity and homogeneity of regression slopes. A significant relationship between Informational Influence and Purchase Intention was found, $F(1, 149) = 70.93, p = .00$. The relationship was strong as indicated by the partial eta squared value of .32.

After adjusting for Informational Influence, there was a significant difference in Purchase Intention between groups, $F(2,149) = 11.24, p < .01$, partial eta squared = .14. The adjusted marginal means as displayed in Table 2 show that respondents in Experimental Group 1 ($M = 5.20$) reported the highest level of purchase intention when compared to the Control Group ($M = 4.28$) and Experimental Group 2 ($M = 4.54$). Bonferroni corrected post hoc comparisons for the adjusted means showed that there was a significant difference between the Control Group and Experimental Group 1 ($p < .01$), but no significant difference between the Control Group and Experimental Group 2 ($p > .05$).

The analysis show that H1b was supported and that social influence had a positive effect on purchase intention of sports coaching services. However, H2b was not

supported as Country of Origin did not affect the purchase intention of sports coaching services.

Discussion

The findings from this study showed that social influence on social network sites can affect both the perception of quality and purchase intention of sports coaching service even after controlling for informational influence. The experimental group which was exposed to positive comments from members in the social network site reported significantly higher scores in the perception of the quality and purchase intention when compared to the control group, hence supporting H1a and H1b.

These findings are congruent with other studies and underline the importance of social influence on social network sites as a source of influence on perception of quality and purchase intention. Sports coaching service is no exception as respondents indicate significantly higher levels of perceived quality and purchase intention when they are exposed to social influence on social network sites. This suggests that sports coaches should leverage on social media to market themselves. They should encourage their current and past students to be members of the social network site as this helps to create positive word-of-mouth and can positively influence perception of quality and purchase intention. In addition, sports coaches can also leverage on social network sites to cultivate a long-term relationship with their students. This is one of the key advantages of using social network sites as a marketing medium.

The findings also showed that there appeared to be no Country of Origin effect with China as the country of origin. In purchase situations where consumers do not have sufficient information to make a decision, they will need to depend on other cues. Country of Origin effect was hypothesized in this study to have an effect on the decision to engage sports coaches. While the adjusted means for the measures of perceived

quality and purchase intention for respondents exposed to the information of the coach's nationality (i.e. Experimental Group 2) was higher than the control group, it did not reach statistical significance. This suggests that respondents were not dependent on the Chinese nationality of the badminton coach in making a decision on sports coaching services.

In part, this may be due to the respondents in this study who have already enrolled their children with sports coaches. As such, they may have more information on sports coaching services and may need to rely less on the coach's nationality to determine the quality of the coaching services. This information could be from their experiences with the current coach, their observation of other coaches or information shared with other parents on the ability of the sports coaches. Hence, future research should examine whether respondents who have less experience in engaging sports coaches are affected by information on a coach's nationality in their decision-making process.

It is also noted that Country of Origin effect can vary across countries and demographic segments (Chand and Tung, 2011; Usunier and Cestre, 2007). Respondents in Singapore may not associate China as particularly strong in badminton. While China has clearly dominated the badminton world, two neighbouring countries, Indonesia and Malaysia, have also done well in the sport. For example, the current top ranked players in the Men's Singles and Men's Doubles are from Malaysia. In particular, the top ranked player in the Men's Singles, Lee Chong Wei, is also a three-time silver medallist at the Olympics. As such, the Country-of-Origin effect may be diminished due to the relative success of other countries, especially when they are closer to Singapore. Future studies examining the Country-of-Origin effect with coaches from these countries may add further insights in this area.

There are several limitations in this study. Firstly, it did not consider the gender of the parent as a variable. Secondly, the study did not examine for differences between parents with children of different age groups. As there could potentially be differences, future studies should examine the marketing of sports coaching services on social network sites across these demographic segments. Finally, this study examined only one sport, badminton. As there might be differences across sports, particularly between individual and team sports, future studies should be conducted to examine for variability across sports.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study found that social network sites can be effective in marketing sports coaching services. Respondents reported higher levels of perceived quality and purchase intention when exposed to positive comments on this medium. These findings suggest that sport coaches can leverage on this medium in marketing their service. They should encourage their students to be active members on their social network sites to create positive word-of-mouth and positively influence the decision of potential consumers.

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Table 1

Estimated Marginal Means of Perceived Quality with Informational Influence as

Covariate

	Unadjusted Mean	SD	Adjusted Mean	SE
Control Group ^a	8.77	2.27	8.97	.26
Experimental Group 1 ^b (with comments)	11.00	1.92	10.79	.26
Experimental Group 2 ^c (with nationality)	9.29	2.21	9.30	.26

^a*n*=51, ^b*n*=51, ^c*n*=51

Table 2

Estimated Marginal Means of Purchase Intention with Informational Influence as

Covariate

	Unadjusted Mean	SD	Adjusted Mean	SE
Control Group ^a	4.15	1.29	4.28	.14
Experimental Group 1 ^b (with comments)	5.34	1.10	5.20	.14
Experimental Group 2 ^c (with nationality)	4.54	1.16	4.54	.14

^a*n*=51, ^b*n*=51, ^c*n*=51