Antecedents to Evaluating the Brand Image of Orkut as a Social Networking Society: An Exploratory Study on Indian Youth

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ABSTRACT

Social networking sites are perceived as interactive forums that enable users to manage their relationships through technology. The usage of social networking sites is dependent upon the brand image it connotes to the user. These forums modify social and self image of user and help in enhancing their social interactions. The research was targeted towards comprehending Indian youth’s brand perception of Orkut as a social networking forum. The results indicate that most youth used Orkut for maintaining contact with their friends and acquaintances. Six variables related to brand image of Orkut: quality, self identity, group identity, status, values and national heritage were used for understanding youth’s attitude towards Orkut. There was no difference between the two genders on the six variables. Multiple regression analysis results suggest that Indian youth’s attitude towards Orkut was most influenced by self identity and values.

Keywords: Brand Image, Collectivist Society, Indian Youth, Orkut, Social Networks

INTRODUCTION

Technology and telecommunication systems have brought about a change in the nature of interactions not only between company and customers but also between customers. The impact is visible as Internet is recognized as an agent that has restructured and redefined relationships. Internet and World Wide Web are used as channels to disseminate information flow amongst various participants. Relationships in social systems and communities give identification and recognition to individual. Technology’s intrusion in social life of individuals led to its being used as a mediator that brings people together through World Wide Web. Putnam (2000) states that Internet provides a forum for individuals and communities to associate and develop relationships and social capital.

The change in social fabric of the community is visible across the world. Growing industrialization coupled with proliferation of new technologies has impinged on human relationships. The strains of urban life, changing work environments and amalgamating global boundaries are redefining the character of our social relationships. Toffler (1970) opined that
new technologies, urbanization and globalization were set to alter the fabric of individuals’ social existence. We see a trend where our relationships have broken the barriers of physical form and have extended to a virtual world, finding an expression through Internet. Research posits that social networking forums on the Internet are becoming a popular medium for building relationships beyond the restrictions of physical presence (Boyd, 2004; Ellison et al., 2007; Lewis, 2008; Richardson & Hessey, 2009). Face-to-face associations are on a decline but memberships to social networking websites are mounting. Walther et al. (2008) state that social networking sites are not reliable for building long lasting relationships as they are devoid of social cues. However, even though they are ‘faceless’, they entice the individual to establish presence through social networking sites. Richardson and Hassey (2009) found that social networking sites are “lineage of communication technologies” and have altered the social organization of individual’s life. No doubt communication through Internet cannot be equated with the face-to-face interactions and is inadequate in establishing relationships (Stefanone & Jang, 2008) however; its role cannot be undervalued in today’s society.

The individuals’ choice of using social networks is based upon its ability to enhance social relationships and improving their self image. The research was directed towards understanding Indian youth’s perception regarding social networking societies, especially Orkut, and how they evaluated it in their life. The youth comprise of the net-savvy generation and are willing to adopt new technologies. It was assumed that understanding their attitude towards social networking sites can help marketers and theorists in using these forums for promoting products and ideas. The youth are more susceptible to technical advancements than the older generation. Understanding their attitude and behaviour can enable marketers in using social networking sites for selling products and building relationships with their customers.

Primary research was conducted on university students in India, through e-questionnaire. The research was administered using the items identified by Strizhakova et al. (2008) for measuring the meaning of branded products in developing countries; it was modified to measure the Indian youth’s perception towards Orkut as a social networking brand. The preference for social networking sites would be dependent upon how well the social forums on the Internet fit into the lifestyle of the individuals, the attributes which enhance those personal aspirations would be given more importance. The motivation to be a member of a social networking forum would be based upon the brand evaluation which enhances the individuals’ image amongst their friends and acquaintances.

The first section of the research paper focuses on the relevance of social networking sites and their utility for individuals in building relationships. The second section deals with the research methodology and findings. It is followed by the discussion and implications. The purpose of the research was to examine the perceptions of Indian Youth towards social networks as signifying a brand image and their role as mediators to nurturing relationships.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Internet is a force that has restructured our relationships with the outer world. Preece (2006) states that sociability may be understood as an ability to interact and socialize with others and social interaction websites offer the feasibility to users to interact online with other users. Yang et al. (2007) define a social network as a structure consisting of nodes, depicting individuals or organizations that are bound with each other through a specific relationship. The nature of these relationships may be financial transactions, sharing hobbies, an interest, business, airline routes and friendships.

Social networking sites gained prominence in recent years (Lipsman, 2007), and enable individuals’ to “publish personal information in a semi-structured form and to define links to other members with whom they have relationships of various kinds” (Finin et al., 2005). “A
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