Identifying Online Opinion Leaders and their Contributions in Customer Decision-Making Process: A Case of the Car Industry in Thailand

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the characteristics of influential opinion leaders in online communities and their roles using word-of-mouth (WOM) in the consumer decision-making process focusing on the car industry in Thailand. The data were collected by conducting in-depth interviews with two influential online opinion leaders in the Thai car industry and a focus group of ten online community members. The results showed that to be an influential opinion leader, a person should have the following characteristics. An opinion leader should be knowledgeable and expert in the field, have strong motivation and passion about what he or she does and be honest and trustable. In addition, an opinion leader should be effective in communication, be audience-centered, and be open-minded. Moreover, an opinion leader should be socialized, responsive, confident, and unique. The results also revealed that WOM of online opinion leaders can effectively influence consumer decision making in car purchasing.

KEYWORDS: Opinion Leader, Blogger, Online Community, Word-Of-Mouth, Car Industry, Cars

Introduction

In the globalized world, the internet has become an important part of people's lives. It is also a crucial mean for businesses in communicating with consumers. Consumers, likewise, benefit substantially from the internet especially the flow of information. This allows them to effectively access information about products and services from a variety of sources that can be used in their purchase decision making.

Among the information sources available on the internet, weblogs or virtual communities are one of the most popular sources for consumers to wander for information they need. Weblogs can be a place where people exchange and share their opinions and ideas about specific issues, topics, products, and services in which they are interested (Nielsen Report, 2009). In addition, weblogs are a powerful marketing tool in communicating with the consumers (Huang, Chou, & Lin, 2010). According to Constantinides (2004), weblogs are used to develop marketing frameworks that can effectively communicate with consumers and convey marketing messages that impact their purchase decision. Weblogs provide up-to-date information that helps increase consumers' knowledge and understanding about products and services in which they are interested. This is needed in developing an effective purchase decision-making process.

Persons who usually stay active in sharing their opinions, comments, experiences, and expertise about products and services in the virtual communities can be called bloggers. Bloggers tend to have profound knowledge and understanding about a particular product and service in that they are interested and involved (Chen, Weng, Yang, & Tseng, 2018; Yang, Qiao, Liu, Ma, & Li, 2018).

Bloggers who can effectively influence their audiences' behaviors and decision makings by their words-of-mouth (WOM) can be regarded as opinion leaders (Stokburger-Sauer & Hoyer, 2009; Yamamoto & Matsumura, 2009). According to prior studies, opinion leaders can effectively use WOM to contribute significant impacts on future purchase decisions, attitudes, and behaviors of others (Bao & Chang, 2018; Zhang, Zhao, & Lyles, 2018).

In Thailand, online communities have increased significantly in their size and roles (Prueksuralai, 2014). Thai people at all ages, genders, and educational and income levels majorly receive information about products and services in which they are interested online especially from weblogs, reviews, and social media (Kongsuebchart & Suppaset-seree, 2018; Limkangvanmongkol & Abidin, 2018).

Like others, bloggers in Thailand tend to share their experiences and stories with others in the communities or groups who share the same interest. In turn, they ask and encourage others to do so and discuss issues and topics of their interest (Chaovalit, 2014; Limkangvanmongkol, 2018).

In this study, Thailand's car industry is spotlighted since it is one of the most important industries that generate a significant portion of the country's revenue (Ariffin & Sahid, 2018; Intarakumnerd & Techakanont, 2016). According to Yongpisanphob (2017), In 2017, Thailand was ranked twelfth in the world, fifth in Asia and first in ASEAN in terms of the number of vehicles produced, and the country was also ranked nineteenth in the world, sixth in Asia, and second in ASEAN in terms of domestic sales volume.

For consumers, purchasing a car is a time-consuming process that requires a substantial amount of quality information because a car is a high-involvement product due to its high value, product differentiation, brand perception, and high level of technology that requires advanced understanding (Kotler, 2012; McLeay, Yoganathan, Osburg, & Pandit, 2018). Hence, consumers are liable to seek insight information and knowledge by researching before making a purchase decision (Prasad & Saigal, 2019; Rezvani, Jansson, & Bengtsson, 2018).

All information available, especially from reference groups, would be gathered and used by consumers in their decision making to evaluate their alternatives for the best choices (Belgiawan, Schmöcker, Abou-Zeid, Walker, & Fujii, 2017; Kotler, 2012). Deutsch and Gerard (1955) classified reference groups into two main types which are informational and normative influences. For the car industry, since consumers need insight information about products and services for their decision making (Cherchi, 2017; Koo, Chung, & Nam, 2015), reference groups seem to have a significant informational influence on consumers (Liu & Bai, 2008). In addition, apart from the information provided by car producers, consumers can use information from other sources such as media, celebrities, and experts to minimize possible risk caused by purchasing a car that cannot fulfill their needs (Hawkins, Mothersbaugh, & Best, 2010). The advanced information technologies such as social media and weblog have a significant impact on people's car purchase intention (Wang, Yu, & Wei, 2012). They have been used as external sources for information to be referred to before making a purchase (Dahiya, 2015).

In the digital world where customers spend most of their time online, interacting

in social media, gaining information from weblogs, etc., trusted bloggers have a great influence on their followers. Therefore, car producers need to identify potential bloggers who can help them market their cars to consumers effectively. Moreover, it is important for them to know how these influential bloggers use their WOM to influence consumers' purchase decisions. The findings of this study would provide the businesses insight information that they can apply to develop competitive advantages over their rivals. They can use this information to develop effective marketing strategies that increase sales, revenues, and market shares.

According to prior research, even though there are many studies related to opinion leaders in online communities, the required characteristics of influential online opinion leaders and their roles using WOM in the product adoption process is still limited and has not yet been widely explored in the context of the car industry in Thailand. (Ackaradejruangsri, 2015; Claude, Malek, & Runnvall, 2018). Thereby, it is important for car producers, dealers, and marketers to identify the characteristics of influential bloggers and investigate how their WOM influences their followers' car purchase decision making.

Objectives

1) To identify key characteristics of influential bloggers who can be regarded as opinion leaders.

2) To analyze the impacts of their WOM on consumers' attitudes towards products and services as well as the decision-making process in car purchasing.

Research Question

1) What are the key characteristics of bloggers in online communities that shape them to be influential opinion leaders in the car industry in Thailand?

2) How does the WOM of opinion leaders impact the car purchase decision making of consumers in Thailand?

Research Benefits

The findings of this study are believed to contribute an important extension to the existing knowledge in the literature relating to key characteristics of online opinion leaders and the application of WOM and their roles in the context of the car industry in Thailand.

The results of this study are also expected to contribute useful practical contributions to businesses in the car industry in Thailand especially in the area of marketing. They can use the results as a guideline in indicating qualified opinion leaders who can potentially help them

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promote their products and services. The results can also be applied to developing effective marketing programs and strategies to drive their business success.

Literature Review

Definition of Opinion Leader

Opinion leaders are persons who have the expertise and profound knowledge in certain areas that can influence the attitudes and behaviors of other members in the communities. They play an important role in guiding consumers making a purchase decision (Sawmong, 2018). The process of influencing and shaping purchase decisions can also be called opinion leadership (Iyengar, Van den Bulte, & Valente, 2011). Opinion leaders help interpret, clarify, and simplify complicated messages and information in the communication process flow between senders to receivers as shown in the two-step flow communication presented in figure 1 below (Katz, Lazarsfeld, & Roper, 2017).
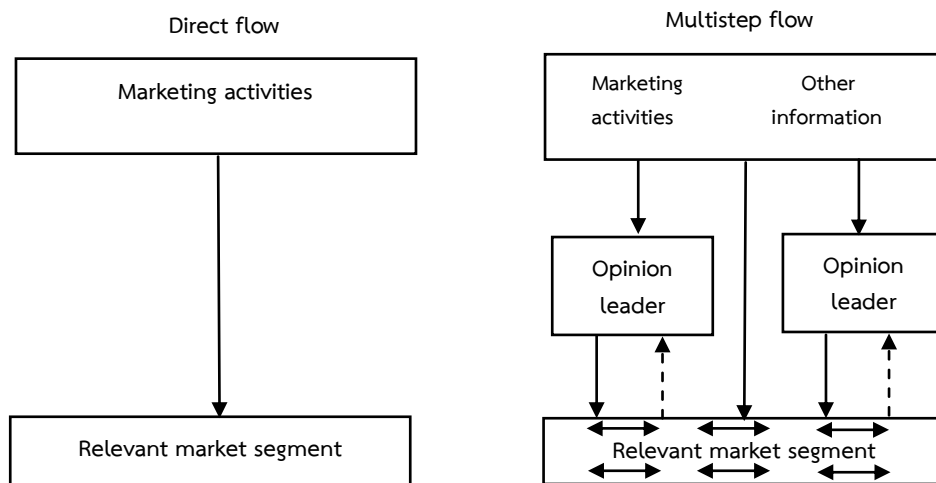

Figure 1 Two-step communication flow
Source: Katz et al. (2017)

Characteristic of Opinion Leader

In many communities, opinion leaders play important roles as a middleman who fills the gaps in communication and information flows. Researchers have identified key characteristics of opinion leaders in a variety of aspects such as high level of social engagement, social responsibility, innovativeness, professional, rich of experience and knowledgeable in particular fields, risk tolerance, etc. (Chen, Tsai, & Lin, 2017; Katz et al., 2017).

In addition, Hempel, Zhang, and Tjosvold (2009) revealed that other characteristics such as having a lot of life experience, having abundant of information sources, having insight knowledge in particular areas, keeping in contact with leading businesses in developing new technologies and innovations related to the area of interest, being active and involved in social activities related to their fields, having great vision and dynamic thinking, having a strong passion for what they interested in, and being keen and eager to learn and explore for new experience can be used to identify opinion leaders in the communities. Sangkeaw, Siripraseotsin, and Buranarach (2018) found in their research conducted among cyclists in Uttaradit province in Thailand that an opinion leader should have a high level of knowledgeability, extroversion, and self-confidence.

How to determine the characteristics of opinion leaders

According to Valente and Pumpuang (2007), there are methods and techniques used to determine the characteristics of opinion leaders. These methods are, for example, expert identification, snowball method, self-identification, etc. which are selected depending on the context and the availability of resources. Techniques such as observation, self-identification, interpersonal communication assessment, key roles identification, and grading, etc. are employed depending on the expected roles of opinion leaders in influencing others in the communities. These methods and techniques have been widely adopted and integrated together by scholars to develop guidelines to identify opinion leaders (Sangkeaw et al., 2018).

Word-of-Mouth (WOM)

Katz and Paul (1955) found that Word-of-Mouth (WOM) was the most important influencing factor in the purchase of household products. WOM is a form of informal communication used in marketing that people voluntarily convey messages about products and services to others, and that message transferring can influence audiences' purchase decisions (Baker & Donthu, 2018; Sweeney, 2018). Usually, WOM takes place in face-to-face situations. It can also be taken over the phone and on the internet either in the form of verbal or nonverbal (Brooks, Jr., 1957; Buttle, 1998).

For marketers, it is vital to be able to identify opinion leaders who can effectively use their WOM skills to help them market their products and services by driving consumers' purchase decision (Zhou, McCormick, Blazquez, & Barnes, 2019). In the context of research conducted in Thailand, WOM has been found useful and effective in influencing customer-decision-making

process in many industries, such as hotel, restaurant, clothing, smartphone, etc. (Angkul & Batra, 2019).

Purchase Decision Making

In making purchase decisions, consumers gather all available information around them especially from people around them (Bearden & Etzel, 1982). Consumers tend to listen, believe, and trust those who have a close relationship with them, such as family members, friends, and their other influential people and these people can be called a reference group (Choudhury, Mukherjee, & Datta, 2019; Schild, Ścigała, & Zettler, 2018). Information and opinions received from a reference group such as feedbacks, opinion, and experience are important resources used to develop purchase intention as shown in figure 2 (Kotler, 2012).
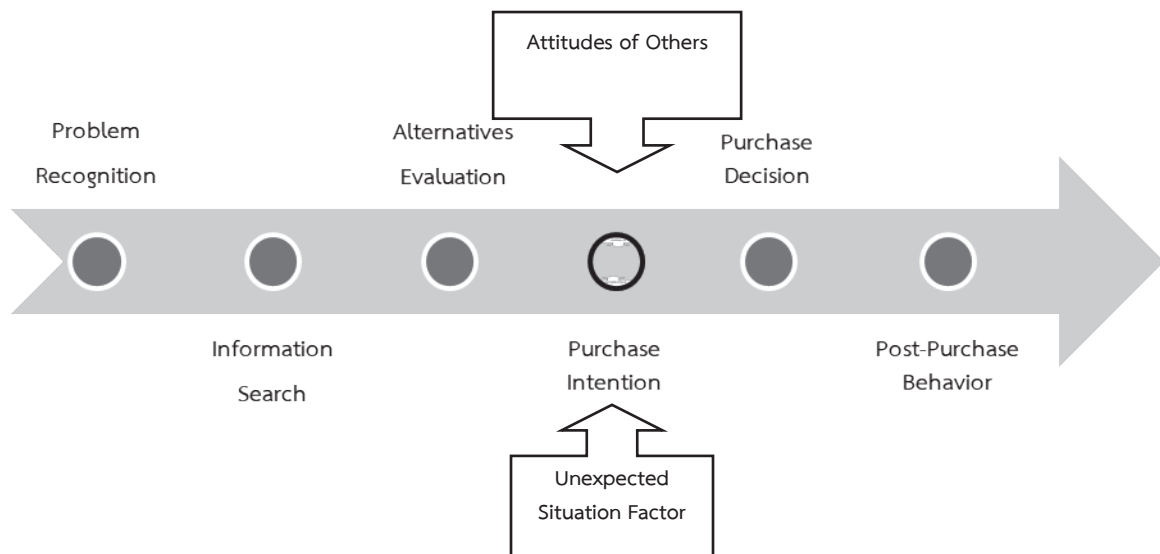

Figure 2 The five stage of purchase decision
Source: Kotler (2012)

Even though there have been several models of purchase decision-making process proposed in the literature, the five-step consumer decision-making process of Kotler (2012) is the most popular among scholars to employ as the primary concept in their studies (Gursoy, 2019; Roy, Dash, & Hossain, 2018). The model demonstrates that the consumer purchase decision-making process has five stages including problem recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision, and post-

purchase behavior at the final stage (Hettiarachchi, Wickramasinghe, & Ranathunga, 2018; Khatib, 2016; Kotler, 2012).

After consumers identify their problems and needs, they will search for relevant information needed in determining potential solutions to their problems and needs. Once they gather adequate information, they will create a list of potential alternative solutions. Before reaching the next stage, which is the purchase decision, there is an additional stage called purchase intention. According to Kotler (2012), purchase intention tends to be affected by the attitudes of others and unexpected situation factors. With the influences of the two factors, consumers can reach their purchase decision which is the choice of buying, putting on hold, or rejecting to buy products and services of their interest (Lautiainen, 2015; Munthiu, 2009). Finally, after the purchase decision is made, consumers will evaluate their decision whether it effectively satisfy them and help solve their problems. This final stage of this model is called post-purchase behavior. Consumers compare the result and actual performance of products and services bought to their expectation. If the product and service quality perceived exceeds their expectation, they tend to repurchase. Otherwise, they will return the products or will never repurchase again.

Methodology

In this study, a qualitative research method was employed. Qualitative research methods such as in-depth interviews and focus group discussion were considered appropriate for this study because, since this research aimed to explore for insightful information, they allowed the researcher to reach diverse and profound points of views contributed by the participants in details. This can develop a better understanding of the characteristics of online opinion leaders and the roles of their WOM on the car purchase decisions of online community members (Noyes, Popay, Pearson, Hannes, & Booth, 2008; Silverman, 2016).

Key Informants

Selecting the right informants is vital in conducting qualitative studies (Marshall, 1996). Purposeful sampling was an appropriate sampling selection method for this research. (O Nyumba, Wilson, Derrick, & Mukherjee, 2018). For in-depth interviews, after several observation and investigations, three bloggers who met the predetermined criteria which are (1) being recognized as an expert in car reviewing in the Thai car industry and (2) being followed by at least 200,000 people in an online community were identified and selected for initial approach. As for the focus group discussion, the researcher prescreened for ten participants who meet

two criteria which are either (1) having bought a car or having experienced in making a purchase decision on a car and (2) being a member in the online car community. According to O Nyumba, Wilson, Derrick, and Mukherjee (2018), ten participants is considered large enough to gain a variety of perspectives and twelve participants would make the group too difficult to manage.

Research Instruments

The researcher used semi-structured and open-ended questions covering the scope of the study to allow the natural flow of both the interview and discussion (Gibson & Brown, 2009). All the questions asked were developed and adopted from reviewing the relevant literature (Lin, Huang, Zhang, & Chen, 2019; Ma & Liu, 2014; Valente & Pumpuang, 2007).

The researcher recorded both the interviews and discussion by note taking and voice recording to ensure the accuracy of the data collected (Baker, Edwards, & Doidge, 2012). Even though the voice recording method is considered a sensitive tool in data collection, it effectively enables the researcher not to miss any crucial information and details given by the participants during the data collection process (Birks, Chapman, & Francis, 2008).

Before both data collections were conducted, the participants were informed about the study in details as well as the confirmation statement of anonymity. They were also asked for permission to conduct voice recording. In addition, they were informed that all information collected will be used only in this study and kept confidential.

Data Analysis

The collected data would be carefully reviewed before being summarized, coded, and themed to the common constructs, such as knowledge, motivation, etc. respectively (Saldaña, 2015; Sutton & Austin, 2015).

Research Results

For the in-depth interview, the researcher initially approached three leading car review websites of Thailand and requested for collaboration to conduct in-depth interviews with their well-recognized bloggers (Dworkin, 2012). However, only two of them responded back with the intention to participate in the study. The two websites allowed the researcher to meet with their bloggers in person to conduct the interviews in their offices located in Bangkok on Tuesday, 24th of July 2018 and Wednesday, 1st of August 2018. Both interviews took approximately one hour.

For the focus group discussion, the researcher found all ten qualified participants as planned. The group included six males and

four females. The discussion was held at a conference room of a university in Bangkok on Monday, 10th of September 2018. The discussion took approximately two hours.

To answer the first research question which is "What are the key characteristics of bloggers in online communities that shape them to be influential opinion leaders in the car industry in Thailand?", the findings are as follows.

In-depth interviews

The sample scripts in table 1 below indicate that opinion leaders in the car industry in Thailand should have the following characteristics: be experts in their fields, be an active learner, keen, eager to learn, and a good reader, be responsive to the inquiries & comments posted in their weblogs, have a strong passion and love to work in car areas, be honest to their audiences and followers, use simple language and have a sense of humor, have a well-organized writing format, be open-minded and always listen to others' opinions and comments, have a strong confidence in themselves, have effective presentation methods, be audience-centered, have blog differentiation.

Focus Group Discussion

The participants of the focus group also gave their opinions about the bloggers who have influence on their car purchase decision making that the bloggers should be active learners, be famous and well recognized, have strong passion in their industry, be knowledgeable and experts in the field, be rich of experience, and be sincere and down to earth.

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Table 1   Theming and coding of the characteristics of opinion leaders

Themes	Codes	Sample of Coded Text
Knowledge	Be expert in the field and knowledgeable	"…I can guarantee that all information about European cars given by me are absolutely reliable…" "…I have tested more than one hundred models of sports cars and I know all about them…"
	Be active learner, keen, and eager to learn	"…To have quality information to share with my audiences, I studied and read a lot from the websites of car manufacturers and other bloggers…" "…I also search from overseas websites for extra knowledge and information that is limited in our country…" "…You must be an active learner. You must know before others…" "…knowledge is out there. You have to walk at least a step faster than others to grab it…"
	Be a good reader	"…You have to read, read, read, and read…" "…I read all the articles about cars available on the inter-net. You have to be a good reader and active learner…"
Motivation	Have a strong passion	"I think cars are my thing. I am happy as long as I work within this industry…" "…To be really good at one thing, you have to love it…"
Trust	Be honest	"…you must tell the truth and must not lie…" "…there are not any reasons to lie…" "…Creditability is the key here. Without it, no one would listen to you…" "…It took years to brought me and my team here. Trust from the audiences is what we cannot afford to lose…"

Table 1 Theming and coding of the characteristics of opinion leaders (continued)

Themes	Codes	Sample of Coded Text
Communication Effectiveness	Use simple language and sense of humor	"…I use easy-to-understand language to make sure that my followers do not miss a thing…make it short and simple… If it's possible, make it humorous…" "…What is the point if they cannot understand what you are trying to say…Something funny can well entertain them and make them follow your work…"
	well-organized-communicational formats	"…write it well. Use proper words…" "…make the story interesting with a smooth flow of the story. Step-by-step…"
	effective presentation	"…I do not think people love to read only. They need something new. Something not boring like video, clips…" "…The world has changed. Writing is boring. I use live function so that we can see each other and do real-time interaction. I believe it is more effective than just posting reviews and comments…"
Audience-center	Audience-centered	"…When I answer a question from someone, I need to know his or her backgrounds and what they are really looking for so that I can really give them what they really need…" "…I don't just tell all my audiences the same thing. I do customize my opinion based on their personal needs so that they can make the right decision for their right car…"
Open-mindedness	Be open minded	"…You have to be open-minded…be open and accept new things…" "…You have to listen to them…Often that I use information from the comments to help others…"
Socialization	Be highly involved in social activities	"…You need to stay engaged with people. Attend all events as often as possible…" "…I go to meet and talk with those car people at meetings, rally, and party to make good connections and advertise yourself…"

Table 1 Theming and coding of the characteristics of opinion leaders (continued)

Themes	Codes	Sample of Coded Text
Responsiveness	Be highly responsive to the inquiries & comments posted in their weblogs	"…I reply to all comments as soon as possible and never leave any comments no replied…" "…I read all comments and answer all questions because they all are important to me…"
Self-efficacy	Have strong confidence and believe in themselves	"…You must believe in yourself and your knowledge; otherwise, how can you make people believe you…" "…Being confident is another key. You have to stay on your ground and make them follow you…"
Uniqueness	Differentiate from others	"…I need to be differentiated from others. Otherwise, I am not going to be attractive and stand out from others…" "…you cannot be just like others. You need something that differentiates you from others otherwise you will not survive in this intensive competition…"

The focus group discussion also reveals that the WOM of online opinion leaders have impacts on all stages of consumers' decision making on car purchasing.

(1) Information search: all participants agreed that they start searching for all needed information on the internet especially the car companies' official websites and other related websites such as weblogs where people share their opinions and experiences with other community members because it is the easiest and inexpensive way to receive the information they need.

(2) Alternative evaluation: six out of the ten participants agreed that information from bloggers significantly helped them evaluate their car alternatives before making their choice of car.

(3) Purchase intention: eight out of the ten participants agreed that the WOM of bloggers influences their car purchase intention.

Finally, all ten participants agreed and admitted that the WOM of the bloggers help them substantially in making car purchase decisions. However, eight of them insisted to conduct the drive testing before making their final purchase decisions mainly because

purchasing a car is a major purchase in their lives due to its high cost and value and long product lifetime.

Table 2 shows an example of statements extracted from the focus group discussion indicating the roles of WOM of opinion leaders on customers' car-purchase-decision-making process.

Table 2   The roles of opinion leaders' WOM on customers' car-purchase-decision-making process

Consumer decision-making Stage	Sample Statements
(1) Information search	For example, a 35-year-old female college lecturer said "…I always start looking for information about new car models released in the market from my cellphone because it is the most convenient way to do so…". A 26-year-old male office worker said "…Of course, I always look for car information on the internet. It is easy. I do not need to pay for anything. And they also have everything I need…". A 40-year-old male dentist stated "… I go to many weblogs to ask bloggers and others' opinions. It's fun and you get to learn from their real experiences and new concerns you never thought of…".
(2) Alternative evaluation	For example, a 47-year-old male business owner stated "….as I am an executive person, I have to meet other business people for business deals. I need a car that makes me look good and trustable. And since I have to pay a great deal for it, I need a car that can give me more than just a good look. So, I looked up on the internet and went through all reviews and comments posted on web boards in online communities. I needed information in detail about different types, models, and brands of cars to help scope down my alternatives. And their opinions and expertise could help me comparing potential cars that can fit my needs…"

Table 2 The roles of opinion leaders' WOM on customers' car-purchase-decision-making process (continued)

Consumer decision-making Stage	Sample Statements
(2) Alternative evaluation (continued)	Three female participants stated that information provided by bloggers, such as design, price, competency, fuel efficiency, and after-sales service, is very helpful for their alternative evaluation. For example, 30-year-old female Independent organizer said, "…I used the information on car-review websites. I read a lot of reviews from bloggers and car expert friends. Sometimes they give different comments that makes me confused. Their feedback from their audiences and followers help me to decide which of them I should listen to. As well as their personal profile, it is also very important to make them trustable. It is very useful to me. I used this information along with what I received from other sources to help me compare my choices of cars before I made decision…"
(3) Purchase intention	For example, a 34-year-old male office worker said "… It was hard to decide between the two cars. The opinions from the bloggers helped me decide…" A 27-year-old male banker said, "…the reviews of the bloggers on the car made me want to drive it myself…"
(4) Purchase decision	35-year-old female self-employed said, "…I didn't say I do not believe them. They are expert and know the car way better than I do. However, I still need to prove their words…" The A 47-year-old male business owner stated added, "… Actually, their feedbacks and comments already show how reliable they are. But I still need to do the test drive myself. My car is very pricy. I do not want to regret later…"

Table 2 The roles of opinion leaders' WOM on customers' car-purchase-decision-making process (continued)

Consumer decision-making Stage	Sample Statements
(4) Purchase decision (continued)	A 37-year-old male business owner stated claimed "...Sure, I listened to them, but it is just a part of it. If anything goes wrong, who would take the responsibility? I need to take care of myself. I need to try it myself before making my final decision..." A 31-year-old female restaurant manager said, "...I do not know much about cars. I want to feel it. The feeling is important. I want to make sure that I buy the right car. It is like buying a cloth that you have to try on and pose. You know what I am talking about..."

Discussions

The findings from the in-depth interviews with the two well-recognized bloggers and the focus group discussion are consistent with previous studies (Momtaz, Aghaie, & Alizadeh, 2011; Valente & Pumpuang, 2007). For example, Katz et al. (2017) stated that an opinion leader should be expertise, familiar, and knowledgeable in his or her field. They also added that an opinion leader should have good relationships with people and be highly involved in his or her field. Valente and Pumpuang (2007) found that opinion leaders provide effective communication to their communities. According to Himelboim, Gleave, and Smith (2009), an opinion leader should be keen and habitually access and gather information about products and services from all available sources. Chan and Misra (1990) argued that to be an opinion leader, a person should be open-minded to listen to others' opinion, have effective presentation methods, and be able to differentiate him or herself from others. Momtaz, Aghaie, and Alizadeh (2011) argued that an opinion leader should be an active learner who gets to know things in their interest ahead of others.

Even though many of these characteristics are consistent with previous studies, the findings still provided additional knowledge about the identification of opinion leaders focusing on the online community in the Thai car industry. Adding to the prior studies, opinion leaders should also be honest to their audiences and followers, use simple

language with a sense of humor in commu-
nication, use the well-organized format of
writing and other commutation styles, and
have audience-centered.

The findings from the focus group
discussion showed that WOM has a positive
impact on consumers' purchase decision-
making process which is consistent with
previous research (O'Reilly & Marx, 2011;
Villanueva, Yoo, & Hanssens, 2008). For
example, Nuseir (2019) found that electronic
WOM has a significant impact on online
purchase intentions. In the context of the
car industry, the findings of this research
indicated that the WOM of opinion leaders
helps online community members in com-
paring products and services by validating
information received from different sources.
The findings also showed that solid personal
backgrounds and effective communication
help confirm the creditability reliability of
bloggers and their information.

Limitation

The limitations found in this study
were that the number of experts participating
in the in-depth interview is too few since one
of the invited bloggers denied participating
in the in-depth interview. As for the focus
group discussion, since all participants
were recruited only in the Bangkok area,
the participants may not well represent a
good coverage of the population. Therefore,
these limitations may have prohibited the
generalization of the results.

Contributions

In academic terms, the findings
provided an important extension to the
existing knowledge in the area of opinion
leader, WOM, and purchase decision making.
Even though the concept of opinion leaders
has been studied widely in a variety of
contexts and industries, it is still limited in the
context of the Thai car industry. The results
expand the knowledge about the characteris-
tics of opinion leaders in this context as well
as the roles of their WOM on each stage of
the customer-decision-making process of car
purchasing in Thailand.

In practical terms, the findings can be
implemented by businesses and marketers
in the car industry, such as car producers,
car dealers, and their marketing teams as a
guideline in choosing the right opinion leaders
who can potentially help them market their
cars. The findings can also help the businesses
and bloggers who want to become a successful
opinion leader to have a better understand-
ing of how WOM of opinion leaders drive
customers to their final purchase. Therefore,
this allows businesses and marketers to
develop effective business and marketing
models that can fulfill the needs of their

customers. The bloggers can use the findings as a guideline to improve themselves by developing the skills and techniques needed to drive customer purchase intentions.

Recommendations

For future studies, to overcome the limitations, it is recommended that future studies should apply the findings to investigate further in the quantitative form of research for better generalization. In addition, the investigation of the characteristics of influential opinion leaders and the roles of their WOM on customer decision making can also be applied in other industries and contexts that have not yet been explored.

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