

The Role of Perceived Value and Gratitude on Positive Electronic Word of Mouth Intention in the Context of Free Online Content

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The present research aims to examine the connection between perceived value and positive e-WOM intention, the moderating role of business model knowledge, and the mediating role of gratitude in the relationship. The data was collected through self-administrated survey procedure and analysed with hierarchical regression analysis to assess relationships between the constructs. The study contributes to the limitation of literature regarding electronic word of mouth and its antecedents in the context of free online content.

Key words: *Positive e-WOM intention, perceived value, gratitude, business model knowledge.*

Introduction

One popular way to attract new customers in the virtual world is by providing free content (Foubert, Heerde, & Datta, 2015). Customers may enjoy the free trial service for a certain period at no charge, or limited features of the service with the option to subscribe. Freemium, a combination of free and premium is a business model that allows content providers to generate income from both subscribers and advertisers (Halbheer, Stahl, Koenigsberg, & Lehmann, 2014). The success of the business model is frequently examined by customers' purchasing behaviour, that is, the willingness of consumers to pay for the content (Lin, Hsu, & Chen, 2013; Wagner, Benlian, & Hess, 2014; Wang, Yeh, & Liao, 2013). However, Anderson (2009) found that only 5% of users have willingness to pay for premium features who will compensate for the rest of the non-paying users. This indicates the importance of investigating the contribution that the non-paying users might have to service providers other than merely financial support. Acquiring new users in online environments is very important

while having customers who are willing to induce other potential users is a huge advantage for content providers. Service providers would gain opportunity to yield significant income by attaining more users since large number of users would increase the probability to obtain more premium users. Besides, having many users may be beneficial to the service providers as a marketing force.

Word of mouth (WOM) refers to informal communication between individuals regarding valuations of goods and services rather than formal communication to companies or people (E. W. Anderson, 1998). WOM plays an important role in shaping consumers opinion toward products in markets as consumers regard word-of-mouth as more reliable than any type of marketing campaign by firms (de Matos & Rossi, 2008). According to a survey, 91% of consumers search for information in online reviews and blogs before ordering new products or services, and 46% of them are influenced by that information (Cheung & Lee, 2012).

Although most studies regarding electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) explore its effects (Cheung & Lee, 2012), several research projects have examined precursors of positive e-WOM intention within various contexts. Ha and Im (2012) highlight the role of website design quality and satisfaction in e-WOM communication engagement as predictors of positive e-WOM intention. Yoon (2012) emphasizes on in-store shopping experiences. In a meta-analytic study, de Matos and Rossi (2008) find that WOM activity is influenced by satisfaction, loyalty, quality, commitment, trust, and perceived value. However, limited studies have been conducted to examine antecedents of positive e-WOM intention in the context of free online content. Given the importance of e-WOM in attracting potential consumers, examining antecedents of positive e-WOM may give insights for service providers to form effective marketing campaigns.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the relationship between perceived value and positive e-WOM intention as well as the mediating role of gratitude and moderating role of business model knowledge in the relationship. Prior research emphasises the importance of incorporating more potential moderators into the value-intention framework to provide a rigorous explanation of the framework (Wang et al., 2013). This research contributes to the existing literature by providing explanation regarding antecedents of positive e-WOM intention in the context of free online content marketing.

Literature Review

An outline of the key concepts of positive electronic word of mouth intention, perceived value, gratitude and advertising business knowledge are presented.

Positive e-WOM Intention

Scholars in social psychology and marketing have studied WOM interaction in a mutual setting, consisting of a WOM-opinion provider and the receiver (Ryu & Han, 2009). WOM frequently occurs between family members and friends (e.g., strong ties), but can take place between people without close relationships. This is generally referred to as weak ties, for instance, with neighbours and colleagues (Bansal & Voyer, 2000). With the advent of the internet, traditional WOM has been brought to the online environment, namely, electronic WOM, or e-WOM. The most popular definition of e-WOM is “any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet” (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004, p. 39). This definition indicates that e-WOM allows consumers to spread opinions about products via various media on the internet to other people they may not know in person and may affect others’ decision-making process.

Online content is more of service than product (Lin et al., 2013) which makes e-WOM communication essential in an online content transaction (Ferguson, Paulin, & Bergeron, 2010). Compared with physical products, services are claimed to be more abstract, unstandardized, and difficult to evaluate (Bansal & Voyer, 2000; Sweeney, Soutar, & Mazzarol, 2014). Therefore, compared with physical products, consumers rely more on WOM before adopting services in order to get support from fellow consumers. Although it is acknowledged that negative WOM creates significant impact (Mizerski, 1982), other studies show that positive WOM happens three times as often as negative WOM (East, Hammond, & Wright, 2007). In addition, positive e-WOM is considered as a powerful message in influencing consumers’ decision making process (Sweeney et al., 2014).

Perceived Value

Perceived value is “the consumer’s overall assessment of the utility of a product based on perceptions of what is received and what is given” (Zeithaml, 1988, p. 14). Consumers’ perceived value is rooted in equity theory which suggests that the consumers in a transaction will feel equitably treated if their ratio of outcome to input is relatively fair (Oliver & DeSarbo, 1988). In other words, the concept refers to the difference between the maximum prices that consumers are willing to spend for a product and the actual amount of money paid (Kuo, Wu, & Deng, 2009). In online context, a consumer’s perceived value is defined as an evaluation of perceived benefits and perceived sacrifice of the consumer toward online content (Wang et al., 2013).

Perceived benefit is commonly applied to purchasing behaviour, specifically, to a person’s perception of the advantage he or she gains by executing the buying action. D. J. Kim, Ferrin,

and Rao (2008) define perceived benefits as “a consumer's belief about the extent to which he or she will become better off from the online transaction with a certain website”. Davis (1989) argues that, in terms of users’ acceptance of information technology, perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use are significant factors in relation to current and self-predictive future usage. The model is well-known as the technology acceptance model (TAM). Later, H.-W. Kim, Chan, and Gupta (2007) extend TAM and propose value-based adoption model (VAM) by incorporating perceived sacrifice as an important part to measure adoption intention of technology users. Zeithaml (1988) suggests that both monetary and non-monetary are included in the concept of perceived sacrifice.

The role theory concerns behaviour of individuals within context and various processes as well as the cause and effect of the behaviour (Biddle, 1979, p. 4). As stated by Mills and Morris (1986), customers and clients of service providers play an essential role in the production of service output. Role theory explains the relationship between perceived value and positive e-WOM intention. Customers who perceive that they have obtained high value are more likely to become attached to the service provider and seek to endorse others to become loyal to the particular institution (McKee, Simmers, & Licata, 2006). Previous studies found that consumers’ valuation of service content influences word-of-mouth activity (de Matos & Rossi, 2008; Hartline & Jones, 1996). Therefore, we propose:

H1: Perceived value positively influence positive e-WOM intention

Gratitude

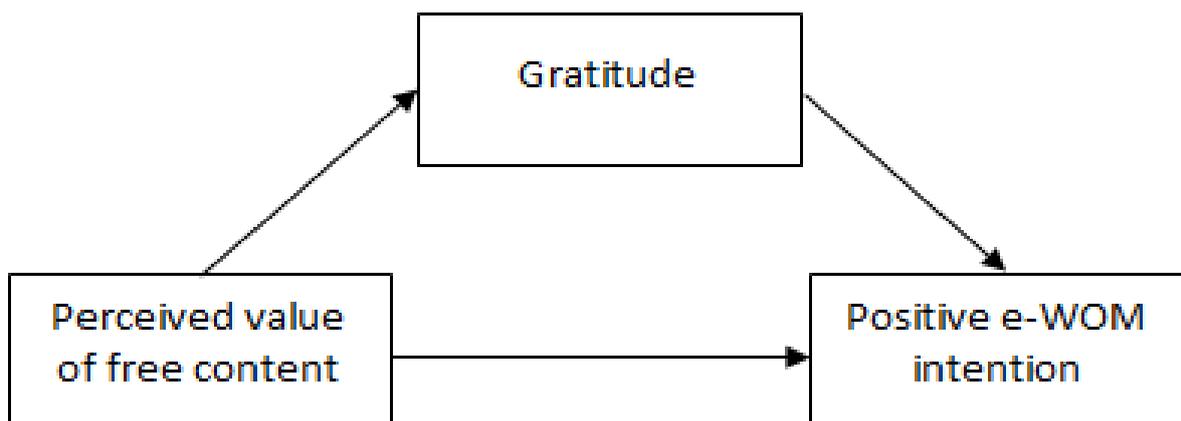
Gratitude as an emotion comprises of three components: i.e., appreciation toward a person or a thing, a sense of goodwill for a person or a thing and a tendency to do something based on that appreciation and goodwill (Fitzgerald, 1998). Two key aspects of gratitude are affective and behavioural. The affective aspect refers to a sense of gratitude created when people place themselves to be a receiver of deliberately delivered benefits, while behavioural aspect regards gratitude as a psychological force to return the favour (Emmons & McCullough, 2004). Consumers tend to recognize and appreciate extra efforts made by companies in order to market their products and thus feel gratitude toward the firms (Morales, 2005).

Gratitude differs from reciprocity to some extent (Raggio, Walz, Godbole, & Folse, 2014). Whilst reciprocity associated with appreciation and acknowledgement of perceived benefits, gratitude itself acts more as the underlying motivator of reciprocity (Raggio et al., 2014). Moreover, Palmatier, Jarvis, Bechkoff, and Kardes (2009) elaborate gratitude in two forms. First, behaviour of a person which resulted from a long time period of being mingled with certain behaviours. Second is reciprocal behaviour as a consequence of the person’s feelings of gratitude.

Molm (2010, p. 119) defines reciprocity as the “process of giving benefits to another in return for benefits received, in one of the defining features of social exchange and, more broadly, of social life”. In relationship marketing research, previous studies show that kindness and extra efforts by firms to deliver high value product generate consumers’ gratitude (Morales, 2005; Palmatier et al., 2009). Gratitude and positive WOM are also deemed to be correlated in prior research (Soscia, 2007). In the context of free online content, consumers would express their gratitude after they perceive positive value of the free services from a company. Afterward, consumers with high feeling of gratitude are more likely to show intention to disseminate positive e-WOM. We propose that:

H2: Gratitude mediate the relationship between perceived value and positive e-WOM intention.

Figure 1. Mediating role of gratitude in the link between perceived value and positive e-WOM intention



Business Model Knowledge

In the virtual world, companies must deal with consumers who hold a free mentality (Lin et al., 2013) which is a result of two conditions. First, consumers’ interpretation that all contents from the internet should be free and thus they hesitate to respond positively to the content providers. For example, by purchasing the product or recommending the product to other people. Second, consumers’ understanding about how a business model operates leads them to a specific behaviour. For instance, consumers’ beliefs that contents are provided for free because the firm already receives big income from advertisers. This is consistent with Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM) which suggests that consumers with sufficient knowledge about persuasion tactic of companies are more difficult to be approached compared with consumers with limited knowledge (Friestad & Wright, 1994).

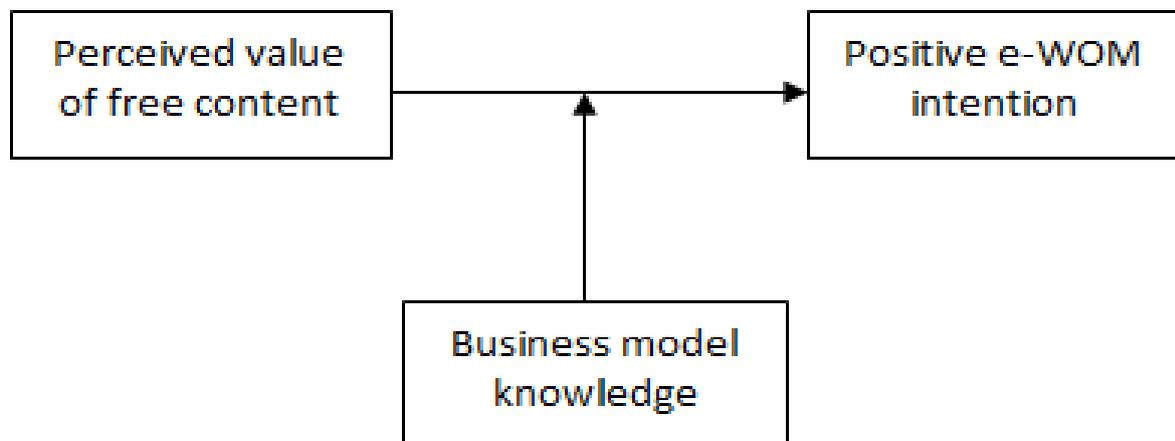
Perceived knowledge about the free content business model may lead consumers to believe that it is not necessary to positively reciprocate to the service providers. Consumers are inclined to believe that service providers are financed by advertisers. Therefore, they believe that they have paid the price by paying attention to advertisements and by giving data such as demographic and personal data (Lin et al., 2013). The impact of perceived value on positive WOM intention may vary depends on consumers' knowledge about the companies' business model.

Therefore, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H3a: Compared to people with high knowledge about the business model, people with little knowledge would have a higher tendency to spread positive WOM about the services provided by the company if they perceive the value of the free content is high.

H3b: There is no difference in positive eWOM intention between people with high and little knowledge about the business model if they perceive the value of the free content is low.

Figure 2. Moderating role of business model knowledge in the link between perceived value and positive e-WOM intention



Method

Sampling

This is a quantitative study attempting to examine the correlation between one variable and another. Data will be collected through online purposive sampling. Respondents are adults who will be selected based on their experience with the free music website (i.e. users who had downloaded free songs over the last month). The purpose of the criteria is to avoid having inexperienced users involved in the study.

Procedure and Material

A hyperlink to the online survey was advertised on social media. Consumers who were interested to voluntarily participate selected a hyperlink which directs them to an online survey portal. The respondents were asked to complete the self-administered questionnaires by choosing the response that best describe their level of approval with the statements. The usage of online questionnaires was based on two reasons. First, targeted respondents of this study are people who are familiar with a specific free music website. Second, online survey is considered to have several advantages including a relatively low cost, extensive reach, quick data gathering, and convenience (Chu & Lu, 2007). The collected data will be analysed with SPSS software to determine the relationships in the research model, hierarchical regression will be used. The data collection was conducted in a month.

Measures

Measures of each variable in this study are adopted from previous relevant studies.

Perceived value. Measures for perceived value are adopted from Wang et al. (2013) to examine overall perception of consumers toward online content. The four-item scale has been used before to measures the construct in the context of online music.

Positive e-WOM intention. The three-item construct of positive e-WOM describes the extent to which a consumer's intention to give positive information to other consumers about a certain service provider via the internet. The items were adapted from Maxham (2001).

Gratitude. The three-item scale is used to capture the feeling of gratitude of free online consumers towards service provider. The items are adapted from Palmatier et al. (2009).

Business Model Knowledge. A three-item scale is adapted from Tutaj and Van Reijmersdal (2012) to measure perceived business model knowledge of consumers. These items represent consumers' perception regarding how a business model works.

Results and discussion

One hundred and ninety-five respondents submitted their responses to the online questionnaires, however, 19 respondents did not finish the questionnaires, leaving 176 respondents that can be used in the analysis.

Descriptive statistics

Descriptive analyses were conducted. Cronbach alpha of perceived value ($\alpha = .92$), positive WOM intention ($\alpha = .95$), gratitude ($\alpha = .92$) and business model knowledge ($\alpha = .79$) exhibited that internal consistency of the scales are reliable (Hinton, McMurray, & Brownlow, 2014). The variables in the data (i.e., perceived value, WOM intention, gratitude and business model knowledge) were inspected for normality by examining their skewness and kurtosis as well as their graphical histogram views. The results did not confirm any violation toward normality principles in the data. Correlation table of all variables is presented in Table 1.

In addition, there is no significant difference between male respondents ($M = 4.67$, $SD = 1.77$) and female respondents ($M = 4.33$, $SD = 1.85$); ($t(174) = 1.22$, $p = .22$) in influencing the intention to spread positive eWOM. Similarly, age did not correlate with eWOM intention ($r(174) = .07$, $p = .33$).

Table 1: Summary of intercorrelation, means and standard deviations of variables

Measure/centrality	1	2	3	4
Value				
WOM	.278**			
Knowledge	-.409**	-.306**		
Gratitude	.547**	.386**	-.146*	
Mean	5.064	4.443	4.012	4.988
SD	1.452	1.827	1.491	1.521

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Hypotheses Testing

Hypothesis 1

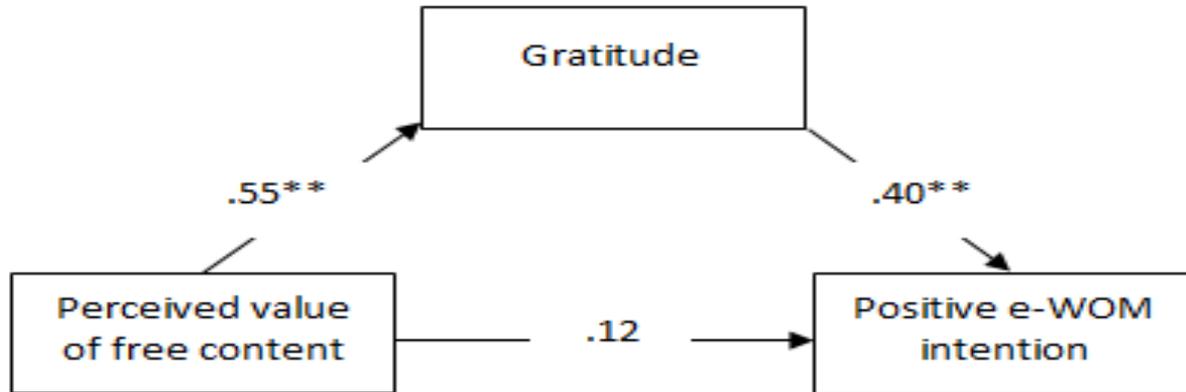
In order to test whether perceived value influences the intention to spread WOM, correlation analysis was performed. As seen in Table 1, the correlation between the variables is significant at 0.288. As predicted, since the relationship between perceived value and WOM intention is positive, it is suggested that when consumers perceive that the value of the free online content is high, they have a higher tendency to disseminate positive WOM about the service.

Hypothesis 2

Bootstrap mediation analyses (Process Model 4; Hayes, 2013) was performed to investigate the mediating role of gratitude in the relationship between perceived value and positive e-

WOM intention. The results show that the indirect effect of perceived value on eWOM intention was significant as exhibited by the mediation index ($b = .23$, $SE = .08$, $95\% CI = .11, .42$). This confirms the second hypothesis which states that there is a mediating role of gratitude in the relationship between perceived value and positive e-WOM intention. The mediation is illustrated in the following figure.

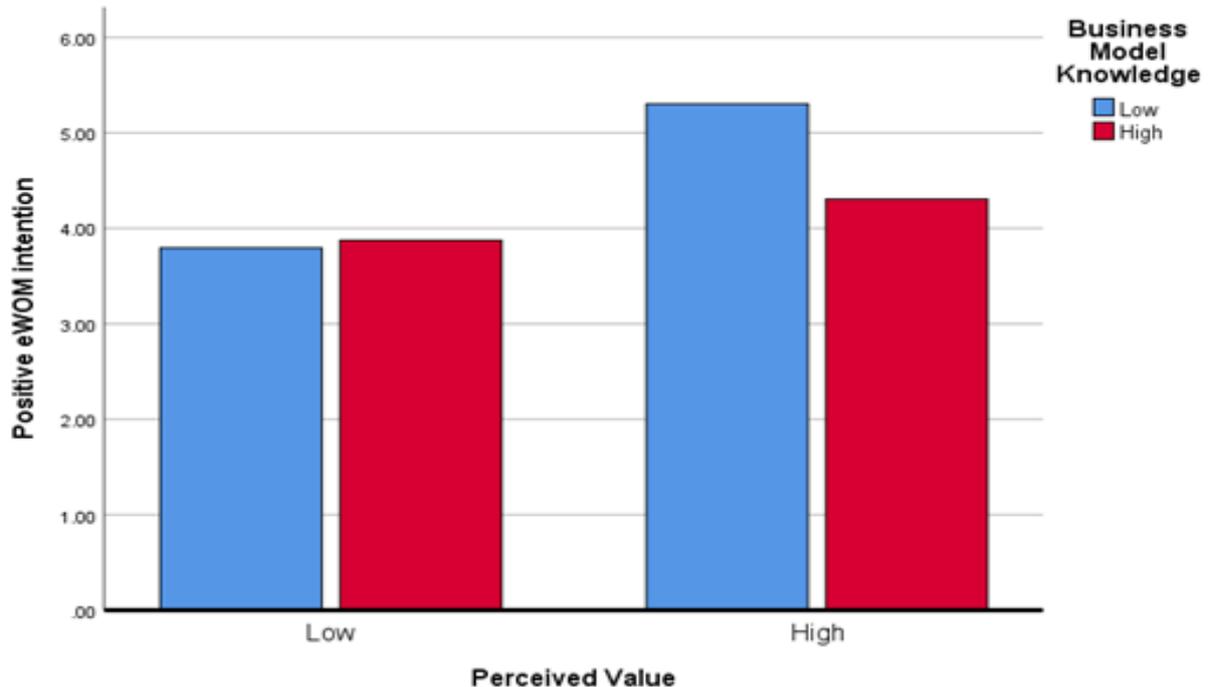
Figure 3. The mediating role of gratitude



Hypothesis 3

A two-way ANOVA was conducted to test the moderating role of business model knowledge in the association between perceived value and eWOM intention. Since the perceived value and the business model knowledge are continuous variables, they were converted to dichotomous variables ($SD - 1$ and $SD + 1$) through median split procedure before being analysed. The results showed that the interaction effect of perceived value and business model knowledge on positive eWOM intention was marginally significant ($F(1, 172) = 3.62$, $p = .059$). There was also a significant main effect of perceived value on positive eWOM intention ($F(1, 172) = 11.73$, $p < .01$). However, the main effect of business model knowledge towards positive eWOM intention ($F(1, 172) = 2.61$, $p = .11$) was not significant. It is concluded that business model knowledge moderates the relationship between perceived value and positive eWOM intention. The following figure depicts the moderating role of the business model knowledge.

Figure 4. The moderating role of business model knowledge



To test the hypotheses 3a and 3b, two independent sample t-tests were conducted. The results revealed that when the respondents highly valued the free content service, their intention to spread positive eWOM is higher if they have lower ($M = 5.30$, $SD = 1.67$) rather than higher knowledge about the business model ($M = 4.30$, $SD = 1.87$); ($t(91) = -2.61$, $p < .05$). In contrast, among those who lowly valued the free content service, there is no difference in intention to spread positive eWOM between people with higher ($M = 3.87$, $SD = 1.73$) or lower knowledge about the business model ($M = 3.79$, $SD = 1.61$); ($t(81) = .17$, $p = .84$).

Conclusion

This research contributes to the existing literature in two ways. First, it suggests that people who value a company's free content service do not always have high inclination to spread positive eWOM in the virtual world. In this respect, this study confirms the moderating role of business model knowledge in the relationship between perceived value and positive eWOM intention. The present study verifies that when people have high perceived value of a free content service, people with low level of knowledge regarding the business model would have a higher tendency to spread positive eWOM compared with those who have high level of business model knowledge. Conversely, people who have relatively low levels of perceived value do not differ in terms of positive eWOM intention, both for those with low and high level of business model knowledge.



Second, this study contends that gratitude mediates the relationship between perceived value of free content services and intention to disseminate positive eWOM. As predicted, this study postulates that perceived value positively relates to gratitude which positively influences positive eWOM intention. Consistent with previous literature, this study confirms that perceived value has a positive influence towards positive eWOM intention. However, when gratitude was included in the research model as a mediator, the direct link between perceived value and positive eWOM intention disappeared. This exhibits that gratitude is an important aspect in the relationship.

Despite its contributions, the present study has several limitations. First, this study was a correlational research project which is limited in terms of explaining causality of variables. Future study may conduct experimental research as the method would better off in explaining causality and avoiding any other plausible explanations. Second, this study recruited respondents without any sampling frame. This may cause sampling bias. For example, any variations in respondents' experiences with the company who provide the free content service may occur. In this condition, the respondents' responses to the survey may be influenced mostly by their varied prior experiences, which could lead to varied responses.

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Appendix – Constructs

Perceived value

- Compared to the fee I need to pay, the use of this music provider services offers value for money
- Compared to the effort I need to put in, the use of this music provider services is beneficial to me.
- Compared to the time I need to spend; the use of this music provider services is worthwhile to me.
- Overall, the use of this music provider services delivers me good value.

Positive e-WOM intention

- I will spread positive WOM about this music provider service
- I will recommend this music provider service to my friends.
- Given my experience with this music provider, I would not recommend their service to my friends
- If my friends were looking for a music service, I would tell them to try this music provider

Gratitude

- I feel grateful to this music provider
- I feel thankful to this music provider
- I feel appreciative to this music provider

Business model knowledge

- The aim of giving the free content is to sell products
- The aim of giving the free content is to influence people's opinion
- The aim of giving the free content is to make people like certain products
- The aim of giving the free content is to give information about certain products