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## ONGOING RESEARCH

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Editor’s Note

I am very pleased to introduce you the following distinguished academics who are new members of the Review Committee of *TMC Academic Journal*: Mr. Robert Jeyakumar Plamel Nathan (Multimedia University, Malaysia), Dr. Prabhakar SVRK (Institute for Global Environmental Strategies, Hayama, Japan), Dr. Shivani Raswan Pathania (Singapore), Assistant Prof. Dr. Vincent Reyes, Jr. (Policy and Leadership Studies Group, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore), and Associate Prof. Dr. Qimin Yang (Harvey Mudd College, USA). My warmest congratulations go to all current and new reviewers. I am always grateful for the positive and overwhelming response of the academics who have agreed to be our reviewers given their very tight working schedules.

The first article in this issue discusses a very important socio-economic aspect, i.e. consumer protection, in the context of Romania. According to the United Nations, consumers are entitled to enjoy the eight consumer rights. However, many deficiencies in the functioning of the market have prevented consumers from enjoying such rights. This article examines factors affecting consumer protection in Romania, especially after it joins the European Union. The topics of examination in the second and third articles focus on education, but in two different settings and contexts. The second article explores how teachers in Singapore “make sense” of educational reforms with regard to the use of ICT. The theoretical framework of this study has been built on the Actor-Network Theory (ANT). The third article examines the experiences of post-secondary students in Hong Kong with regard to being mentees and mentors. The findings propose that students have positive experience after completing the peer-mentorship programme. They found the programme help them obtain friendship and networking opportunities. The fourth article diverges from education. It touches on a sensitive issue regarding the “concept and role of vicarious liability within the medical negligence context”. The author argued that “such liability should cease to exist” since the plaintiff is usually in the disadvantageous position since “doctors are rarely held primarily accountable for medical misadventures”; and “the burden of proof is almost entirely on the plaintiff”. Finally, this issue also includes a report of an ongoing research study by young researchers. This ongoing research study examines the correlation between ease of use, usefulness, perceived risk and product attributes and intention to purchase online. The authors have adopted structural equation modelling to uncover the influence of these variables on intention to online purchase.

Always, my special thanks go to all members of the Advisory Board and the reviewers who have continuously assisted and supported me in many ways given their time constraints and other commitments.

Lastly, my heartfelt appreciation goes to the management for their strong support for research initiatives, and the colleagues who have always shown interest in the journal. I look forward to receiving your manuscripts and constructive feedback for improvement.

Dr. Huong Ha  
Co-Editor in Chief
Bio-data of Authors

Mr. Rengasamy Natarajan Balamurugan is an Assistant Professor at PSG Institute of Management who has a passion to teach, share knowledge with others, parenthood approach and committed. He is an MBA graduate from Madurai Kamaraj University in 1999. He has obtained PG Diploma in Cooperative Management, Diploma in Hotel Management and Certificate in Teaching Course from Stamford College, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia and presently doing PhD at Bharathiar University.

He has experience in industry in marketing, hospitality and export organisations for six years. He has chalked up valuable academic experience in teaching Marketing, Consumer Behaviour, International Business, Strategic Management and other Business & Management related courses for eight years in various business schools including Stamford College, Malaysia, TMC Academy, Singapore and MDIST University, Uzbekistan. He has taught for more than 30 different nationalities. This international exposure and experience has translated itself into the high level of confidence that he possesses in terms of teaching the subjects. He has research interest in consumer behaviour and invention of new teaching pedagogy.

He is a core committee member of Active Learning Program Service (ALPS), active member of Centre for Pedagogy Research at PSGIM, member of Coimbatore Management Association (CMA), Editorial Board member of leading journals. He has enriched by attending Faculty Development Program (FDP) in Management at IIM-Indore, Workshops at PSGIM, IIM-Kozhikode, International Management Institute (IMI)-Delhi, national & international conferences at IIM-Ahmadabad, IFIM Business School-Bangalore and CASA E-Leader Singapore. He has published research papers in various national and international journals.

Dr. Cristina Mihaela Barbu (PhD) is a Lecturer, and she holds a doctorate degree in Analytical Chemistry – Environmental Protection from the University of Craiova, Romania. The title of the Doctoral Thesis is: The analytical control of Jiu River and Olt River waters. The determination of heavy metals using ICP - MS and AAS (Atomic absorption spectroscopy); For 14 years she has been teaching Environmental Management, Economy and Environmental Protection at the Spiru Haret University. She published articles in the field of environmental protection, analytical control of waters, analytical control of air, and soil. Her competence areas are: sustainable development, environmental management, environmental protection technologies (water, air and soil), source pollution reduction and waste minimization, environmental education and sustainable development, environmental strategies and policies.

From 2010 to 2013 she was editor, Co - editor, Guest editor of Scientific Journals and Editor in Chief to Journal of Environmental Management and Tourism. Also, is member of the Journal of Applied Economic Sciences; member of the Journal of Research in Educational Sciences, member of the Association for Sustainable Education, Research and Science – ASERS, member of The World Scientific and Engineering Academy and Society – WSEAS.

Ms. Irina Catalina BARBU holds a Master's Degree in Project Management from National School of Political Science and Public Administration, Romania. She is a graduate of the Faculty of Communication and Public Relations. In March 19th - 25th, 2012, she was Deputy Chief Editor of “The Daily BISMUN". The BISMUN Conference is
the biggest and most important MUN conference in Romania and it takes place every year, at the Palace of Parliament, Bucharest. "The Daily BISMUN" is the official newspaper of the BISMUN Conference. During July - October 2012, she was Reporter at the Europa FM radio station, and in March 20th - 26th, 2013, she was Editor in Chief of "The Daily BISMUN".

Mr. Lee Tse Yan Alexander graduated with a double major in pharmacology & toxicology and human & molecular biology from University of Adelaide. Alexander went on with traineeship in environmental toxicology research in Australia. During his traineeship, he also studied part time in counselling psychology and accountancy. After returning to Hong Kong, he continued to work as research assistant in The Hong Kong Polytechnic University and University of Hong Kong. Alexander then later worked as a lecturer in cognitive and counselling psychology in The Hong Kong Polytechnic University before he decided to leave the academic field to run his own business for eight years.

Recently, inspired by a visiting professor from the US, he decided to return to work again in research and tried to gain entry into a postgraduate research programme. He is currently a consultant providing technical and clinical support for R&D department in a medical & pharmaceutical supply company as well as a research project consultant providing technical and statistical support for various research projects conducted by tertiary institutions.

Over the past few years, Ms Kwok Sin Tung has been teaching a variety of students, including Higher Diploma students, undergraduate students, and adult learners. Ms Kwok is currently a Senior Project Officer at the Industrial Liaison Office in the Technological and Higher Education Institute of Hong Kong (THEi), who is responsible for identifying applied research opportunities, assisting different operation units to develop fund applications, formulating research ethics and biosafety guidelines, promoting conduct of research, planning and organising training seminars and workshops, and providing secretarial support in the Research Committee and the task force on longitudinal study. With the pedagogy and skills acquired, Ms Kwok held workshops in THEi, to educate staff on basic principles of applied research.

Ms Kwok is engaging in various research activities with staff in THEi, the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, the City University of Hong Kong, the University of Hong Kong and the University of Queensland. Her research interests include overweight and obesity, physical and psychological health, and intervention studies.

Besides actively engaging in research activities, Ms Kwok serves in the board committee of Hong Kong Food Science and Technology Association (HKFSTA) as a Public Relation Officer. She is also the Chief Editor of the newsletters of the HKFSTA, responsible to provide seasonal updates on research and consultancy opportunities to the members and other stakeholders. In addition, Ms Kwok is the member of the Editorial Board of the Universal Journal of Public Health.

Dr. Vicente Chua Reyes, Jr. is with the Policy and Leadership Studies Group of Nanyang Technological University (NTU). He heads the Doctor in Education Programme at NTU. Vicente is a Fellow of the Centre for Chinese Studies of the Republic of China (Taiwan), the National Taiwan Normal University (NTNU) and also of the Institute of Education, University of London (IoE-UoL). He has experience in educational settings.
spanning the Philippines, Indonesia, Spain, Italy, Australia, the UK and the US. Aside from working as a senior bureaucrat, he also used to be a Teaching/School Principal. Trained as a political scientist, he obtained his PhD from the National University of Singapore, specializing in public sector reforms. He has an MA (Honours) from the University of New South Wales in Sydney in the area of educational networks of reform. Vicente’s current research interests are in the political economy of education reform and the impact of corruption.

Mr. Mahendran Sathish is an Assistant Professor at PSG Institute of Management. Sathish graduated from University of Madras with the rank holder status. He did his Post Graduation in Business Administration, specializing in marketing from Anna University, Chennai. He had done M. Phil from Periyar University and his Project had won the “Best Thesis” award at the university level. Currently he is pursuing his PhD from Anna University, Chennai. He has undergone 3 months exclusive faculty development program at Indian Institute of Management Indore. Beside he is an alumni of IIM Indore. He is one of the two South-Indian academicians to have completed 4th level certification of Strategic Management Forum, India (SMFI). This course will be conducted by the top institutions in the country. He attended exclusive workshop on Case teaching methodology, which is conducted by Harvard Publishing House and hosted by IIM Bangalore. He equips himself in premier institutions like IIM’s, IIT’s and MDI by attending the FDP/MDP/Conferences. He teaches foundation and advanced courses like Sales Force Management at PSGIM. He has participated in more than twenty international conferences and presented papers in various top Business schools like IIMA, IIMB, IIMC, IIMI, IIMK and IITB etc., He has published more than 30 articles and research papers in various national and international journals. He won two State first awards in Management Activity (Blake and Tackle), and won three District Awards, and Fifteen Intercollegiate Competition Awards. He held managerial positions at Share Khan and ICICI Prudential and gained significant grounding on managerial practice. He is member of professional bodies like Sales Management Association (SMA) UK, Strategic Management Forum of India (SMFI), Coimbatore Management Association and Higher Education Forum (HEF).

Associate Professor Dr. Mihaiul Cristian NEGULESCU holds a Bachelor Degree, Master Degree and a PhD. at Spiru Haret University, Faculty of Financial Accounting Management, Romania. He is member of Scientific Council of European Centre of Managerial Studies in Business Administration – CESMAA, also he is member of Faculty Council and director of Accounting, Finance and International Business Department. He holds a doctorate degree in Management from the University of Craiova, Romania. The title of his doctoral thesis is The Quality of Human Resources and Professional Performance. For 5 years, he has been teaching Management, Human Resources, Management in public sector, Strategies and personnel policies, Freight logistics at Pitesti University, Faculty of Economics, and from 2009 he has been teaching Management, Human Resources Management, Funded International Project Management at the Spiru Haret University from Craiova, Romania. He has published articles in the field of: project management, human resources management, comparative management, management of transport, company management, environmental management, etc. His areas of competence are project management, human resources management, comparative management, management of transport, company management, environmental management. Since 2010 he has been a member of the World Scientific and Engineering Academy and Society (WSEAS).
Mr. **Royalu Sivasubramanian Sathyanarayanan** is an Assistant Professor at PSG Institute of Management. An MBA graduate from Vellore Institute of Technology, Sathyanarayanan R.S. started his career as a Process Executive in Infosys, Bangalore where he managed customer relationship for British Telecom, UK. Later on he entered academics teaching Marketing and brand management in some of the top institutes in India such as ICFAI, Hyderabad and XIME, Bangalore. He has a teaching career spanning 7 years across various functional areas in Marketing. His interests are Brand Management, CRM and Social Media Marketing. He has published several articles/Cases on brand and marketing management at national level. He has also participated in several workshops on Case teaching and writing, Marketing research and Entrepreneurship.

Mrs **Deanna To** has been a dedicated advocate of vocational education and training for more than 20 years. She is currently an Assistant Executive Director in the Vocational Training Council (VTC).

Mrs To obtained a BSc degree in Computing Science at the University of Aston in Birmingham in 1984 and later she completed her Master of Education at University of Bristol in 1999.

Mrs To has solid contributions in IT professional education. She led a team of IT staff to provide trainings for industries, secondary school teachers, kindergarten teachers and school heads during 1988 - 2004. She also developed IT infrastructure network for school campus during 1998 - 2000.

Mrs To is highly commended for her efforts to set up a senior secondary school for the VTC in 2003 and she was appointed the first Principal of the School during 2004 to 2008. She has strong passion in promoting students’ learning and positive school culture.

Being the Academic Director (Student Development) of the VTC during 2011-2013, Mrs To worked with her team to develop the Structured Whole Person Development programme which is now embedded in the VTC’s curriculum for all level of study. The programme aims to enhance students’ self-confident and self-image, improve their emotional intelligence, equip them with transferable skills and positive attitudes and values. She seeks donation and scholarships to provide a wide range of projects for student development.

**Dr. Wong Wai Ning Kris** has more than 20 years of clinical experience acquired from working in the Hospital Authority and through private practices. He also has more than a decade of experience in academic teaching and programme development in vocational training and education. Currently in THEi, Dr. Wong is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Science and Technology and a committee member of the Institute Council of THEi, assisting in the formulation and implementation of effective policies to develop and govern the Institute.

In terms of applied research and consultancy work, Dr. Wong is currently the principal investigator of four R&D projects and co-investigator of another two projects. The amount of research grant secured is around 4.9 million in AY2012/13. Currently, Dr. Wong is the editorial board member of two peer-reviewed Journals namely, the Universal Journal of Public Health and the American Journal of Applied Psychology.
Dr. Wong always works closely with the industries, as well as both local and international academic and professional bodies. Dr. Wong is the Chairman of Electro-Physical Therapy Specialty Group of the Hong Kong Physiotherapy Association, the Founder Member of the International Quantitative Fluoroscopy Forum and the member of International Society for the Study of Lumbar Spine. Besides, Dr. Wong, being invited by the HKCAAVQ, serves as sector specialists to validate related programmes in the areas of health care and beauty. Moreover, Dr. Wong has been appointed as an expert by the GuangDong Occupational Skill Testing Authority to facilitate benchmarking between Vocational Assessment and National Vocational Qualification in Hong Kong and Mainland China. Dr. Wong is also a technical delegate appointed by the International Professional Standards Network (IPSN). He is involved in the vocational qualifications benchmarking among Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Hong Kong and Japan.
Bio-data of Reviewers

Dr. Fara Azmat is a senior lecturer in School of Management and Marketing at Deakin University. Her areas of research interest are social responsibility of small businesses; corporate social responsibility in developing countries; international governance, particularly governance of emerging economies; poverty; and sustainable development. Fara’s PhD and professional work has focused on issues of social responsibility, within the framework of sustainability. She has published her work in highly ranked peer-reviewed journals such as the Journal of Business Ethics, European Management Journal, International Journal of Public Administration, Contemporary South Asia, and International Review of Administrative Sciences. She has also presented at numerous international conferences and is a reviewer of a number of journals.

Dr. Huong Ha is currently in charge of the MBA and undergraduate business programme at the University of Newcastle (Singapore). She was the Dean of TMC Business School and Director of Research and Development, TMC Academy (Singapore). She holds a PhD from Monash University (Australia) and a Master’s degree in public policy from Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore. She was a recipient of a PhD scholarship awarded by Monash University, a Temasek scholarship awarded by the National University of Singapore and a scholarship awarded by the United Nations University/ International Leadership Academy, and many other professional and academic awards. She has many years of working and teaching experience in tertiary educational institutes/ universities, manufacturing, marketing research and business consultancy/ development in Australia, Singapore and Vietnam. She has been an invited member of the CYBERLAWS 2010, 2011, 2012 and 2013 conference committees, dealing with the technical and legal aspects of the e-society; the International Advisory Board of South Asia Association in Criminology and Victimology (India); the Chinese American Scholars Association Board (USA), and many others. She has been a reviewer of many journals and international conferences, such as Thunderbird International Business Review, International Journal of e-Education, e-Business, e-Management and e-Learning, International Journal of Environment and Sustainable Development, CYBERLAWS Conferences, African Journal of Marketing Management, International Journal of Consumer Studies, Academy of Management Annual Meeting 2010 and ANZAM Conference (2013), etc.

Ms Olivia Tan Swee Leng was a Legal Counsel of Kuala Lumpur Regional Centre for Arbitration (KLRCA) and she was in-charge of the Domain Name Dispute Resolution, for both .com from Asian Domain Name Dispute Resolution Centre (ADNDRC), my cases at KLRCA and Mediation/Arbitration case management. She obtained her Bachelor of Law Degree with honours in 1993 from University of London (UK) and completed her CLP in the year 1996. She was the book prize winner for Civil Procedure Paper and General Paper awarded by the Certificate of Legal Practice Board (Malaysia) in the year 1996. She continued to pursue her Master at Law at the National University of Malaysia (UKM) in the year 2002. She practiced as an advocate and solicitor in Malaysia in the area of Corporate Litigation, Intellectual Property (Trademark), Banking and Conveyancing. In 2002, she ceased legal practice to lecture Company Law, Business Law, Law of Taxation and Commercial Law papers at a private institution in Malaysia as a Senior Lecturer in Law and headed the Department of Admission and Records as a Deputy Registrar in the year 2006. She has completed her final stage of Ph.D (Law) at National University of Malaysia and is expected to submit her thesis by Dec 2013. Currently she
is attached to Multimedia University in Malaysia as a lecturer for Business Law, Corporation Law, Law for Engineers, Cyberlaw and Industrial Relations.

Professor Sue L. T. McGregor, PhD, is a Canadian home economist (40 years) with a keen interest in transdisciplinarity, integral studies, moral leadership and transformative practice. Having worked in higher education for over a quarter century, she is currently in the Faculty of Education at Mount Saint Vincent University, Nova Scotia, Canada. She is one of the lead architects for the university's recently launched interuniversity doctoral program in educational studies. She is a The Atlas Fellow (transdisciplinarity), was recently appointed Docent in Home Economics at the University of Helsinki, and is the Marjorie M. Brown Distinguished Professor (home economics leadership). In 2009, she was awarded the TOPACE International Award (Berlin) for distinguished consumer scholar and educator in recognition of her work on transdisciplinarity. She has delivered 34 keynotes and invited talks in 12 countries, published over 140 peer-reviewed publications, and written nearly 20 book chapters and eight monographs. She has published four books: Creating Home Economics Futures (2012, co-edited with Donna Pendergast and Kaija Turkki), Transversity (2011, with Russ Volckmann), Consumer Moral Leadership (2010), and Transformative Practice (2006). Dr. McGregor is affiliated with 20 professional journals and is Associate Editor of three journals, including the newly launched Transdisciplinary Journal of Engineering and Science (2010). Sue has 20 years' experience with consumer policy analysis and development with the Canadian federal government and a burgeoning interest in governance. She is a Principal Consultant for The McGregor Consulting Group (founded in 1991) http://www.consultmcgregor.com.

Mr. Robert Jeyakumar Plamel Nathan received his Bachelors in Business Administration (Hons.) majoring in Marketing with Multimedia; and Masters of Philosophy (Management) from Multimedia University, Malaysia. Prior to joining the academia, he worked as System Analyst for Siemens Semiconductor AG (now known as Infineon Technologies AG), a semiconductor manufacturing company based in Munich, Germany. He specializes in Manufacturing Statistics and Data Analysis and has conducted statistical, data mining and enterprise knowledge management systems trainings in Infineon plants in Asia, Europe and North America. He is currently attached to Multimedia University, Malaysia as Senior Lecturer under the Faculty of Business. He conducts Marketing, Research Methodology and Leadership courses. Robert also does corporate trainings for executives on leadership, workplace communications and is passionate in empowering staffs in workplaces to create winnable relationships in workplaces and at home. Robert participates in academic research projects in Malaysia, Singapore, Australia and Middle East. His research interests include Marketing and Information Technology; Electronic Commerce; Leadership and Organizational Behaviour; Student Internet Users; Usability and Ergonomics; Online Social Community; and Occupational Safety & Health. Robert holds an Adjunct Lecturer position with the University of Newcastle, Australia in Singapore where he delivers modules on Marketing and General Management.

Dr. Prabhakar SVRK (PhD) is a Task Manager and Senior Policy Researcher, Institute for Global Environmental Strategies, Hayama, Japan. Currently, Prabhakar works on a variety of issues relevant to climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction. Specific topics include mainstreaming climate change adaptation concerns into sectoral development plans and policies, adaptation metrics, identifying and characterizing
adaptive policies, risk insurance, promoting adaptation in the post-2012 climate regime, and training needs assessment for capacity building. Earlier, as JSPS Post-Doctoral Fellow working at Kyoto University, he conducted several research projects on climate change implications for disaster risk management in South and East Asian countries.

Prabhakar has more than 17 years of experience in participatory research and development with international and national research and developmental organizations such as ICRISAT, IARI, CIMMYT-RWC, UNDP, NIDM & Kyoto University wherein he was responsible for conception, execution and implementation of a variety of research and developmental projects covering natural resource management, climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction. He obtained his PhD in Field Crop Management from the Indian Agricultural Research Institute, New Delhi in 2001. He authored several peer reviewed publications and is currently a contributing author to the 5th Assessment Report of IPCC.

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Dr. Shivani Raswan Pathania is a Law Graduate from Guru Nanak Dev University, Punjab, India and has pursued double Masters in international law (LL.M) with a gold medal from Guru Nanak Dev University, Punjab, India and Sociology (M.A) from Pondicherry University, India. Recently, she has been awarded Doctorate of Laws (Phd) by Guru Nanak Dev University, Punjab, India for her remarkable work in international law on the topic “Cross Border Terrorism in India: A Study with Reference to International Regime”. She has been called to the Bar Council of Punjab & Haryana High Court, Punjab, India in 2005. She is also eligible to teach in national universities after clearing National Eligibility Test for Lectureship (NET) in Law by University Grant Commission (UGC). She has written many articles, which are published in national and international journals of repute. She started her legal career as a civil law practicing lawyer in a law firm Mahajan & Associates, Punjab, India. Further, in Singapore, she joined Gurbani & Co. as a Legal Executive in handling and assisting in various commercial claims, maritime claims, indemnities and damages. Besides this, she is also into lecturing various law courses both diploma and degree students in Singapore as an adjunct lecturer. Among the various law modules, she lectures Juvenile Justice to Police Officers of Diploma in Management and Police Studies, Commercial Laws of University of New Castle and Monash College, Australia, Criminal Law of University of London, Business law and Legal Aspects in Hospitality and Tourism of Cambridge International Examination, UK. Currently, she is pursuing her Masters in Maritime Law, National University of Singapore, Singapore. She believes that in today's competitive world, qualifications are of utmost importance. She also confers that the education is the manifest of perfection in every man. Therefore, it is desirable that the right to education is translated into reality.

Dr. Vicente Chua Reyes, Jr. is with the Policy and Leadership Studies Group of Nanyang Technological University (NTU). He heads the Doctor in Education Programme at NTU. Vicente is a Fellow of the Centre for Chinese Studies of the Republic of China (Taiwan), the National Taiwan Normal University (NTNU) and also of the Institute of Education, University of London (IoE-UoL). He has experience in educational settings spanning the Philippines, Indonesia, Spain, Italy, Australia, the UK and the US. Aside from working as a senior bureaucrat, he also used to be a Teaching/School Principal. Trained as a political scientist, he obtained his PhD from the National University of
Singapore, specializing in public sector reforms. He has an MA (Honours) from the University of New South Wales in Sydney in the area of educational networks of reform. Vicente’s current research interests are in the political economy of education reform and the impact of corruption.

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Consumer Protection in Romania

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Abstract

The most common definition for consumer protection is that consumer protection consists of laws and organizations designed to ensure the rights of consumers as well as fair trade competition and the free flow of truthful information in the marketplace. Amongst the social protection policies that are promoted by each and every state, the policy concerning the protection of the consumer has to be considered an independent component, with its own objectives, priorities and tools, a component that is well integrated amongst the other policies of the state.

Even in the conditions of a real market-led economy, many deficiencies in the functioning of state mechanisms were identified. Their correction would adjust, at least on a theoretical level, the position of various economical actors on the market. The institutional reform that was carried out in Romania after 1990, has also integrated the field of consumer protection, when the establishment of national system for protecting the consumers became not also of great necessity, but also mandatory in order for Romania to be accepted in the European Union. Various new institutions with specific tasks, which had not existed before 1989, were established in Romania.

The purpose of the article is to show if, after joining the European Union, anything has changed in Romania, after applying the consumer protection laws.

Keywords: consumers, consumer protection, consumer protection policies, Romanian Consumer laws, European Union consumer protection laws

INTRODUCTION

The social-humanist mixed market economy is a theoretical construction, a sui-generis combination of the specific characteristics of market economy and those of social economy. According to the late Constantinescu (1997), the fundamental criteria of mixed market economy are:

- Economic efficiency,
- Social efficiency,
- Ecological efficiency, all of these being mutually correlated.
This type of economy tends to answer, as palpable as possible, to the humans' rights to live, to be free to work, to carry a decent living, to have a decent house/home, as well as to each nation's right to develop in every field of modern evolution. Social-humanist mixed market economy is an open economy that combines the social and economic interests with the international ones.

Dobrescu (2006) said that consume represents the final sequence (the cycle being: production, circulation, repartition and consume) of the economic activity, which means the use of the economic assets (merchandise or services) by people or by the state, in order to satisfy their individual or collective needs. Băbăiţă, Duţă and Imbrescu (2005) argue that if the economica asset is used in order to produce other economical assets, then consume is productive, and if it is used to satisfy certain individual needs, then it is final consume.

As Cişmaş (2004) underlines, consume is also a social fact, because it reflects tradition, systems of values, habit, or rituals. Auto consume represents the individual consume that is produced in the person's own household; especially in rural areas, auto consume often represents an important part of the individual or the family's total consume. Individual or private consume refers to the person who uses an economic asset in their own interest. Public consume consists of more services (such as the educational, administrative, public illumination etc) that are addressed to several persons or the entire community (society).

According to Didier (1994), the behavior of the consumer represents an ensemble of attitudes with the objective of satisfying – to the highest possible level – the needs and necessities of the individual. According to Kotler (2003), the behavior of the consumer is correspondent with the exits of a system whose entrances are the general economic situation, the quality of the economic asset, the utility of this one, the presentation, the possibility to choose, traditions, habits and the individual's culture.

Morariu, and Pizmas (2001) consider that the society we live in is a consume society. Consume is an important part of each and everyone's life, and it absorbs an important part of one's time and money. This consume society changes very fast, therefore some kind of education in this area is a necessity. We all buy, we are all consumers, but not all of us know how to choose the products that are best for us or that satisfy our needs best. The voices that make the rights of the citizens heard, in their quality as consumers, belong to the associations for the protection of consumers.

Baciu (2009) argues that with the development of science, art and technology, trade and markets, consumers started to face more complex products. By means of communication and information, commercial advertising, consumers get in contact with the market, in which the operator (manufacturer, distributor, retailer) has absolute control. With a great economic power, it requires products on the market, determining the consumer to buy them, whether or not they are according to his needs. The market is no longer the place where the consumer expresses his needs, enabling manufacturers to know and satisfy them, but became the means by which professionals accumulate as much capital as possible.
THE SYSTEM OF CONSUMER PROTECTION ON A GLOBAL SCALE

According to Morariu, and Pizmas (2001) the ideas on protection and on the rights of consumers in the world have evolved along four steps, which will be shortly described:

1. The first step is defined by two remarkably important events for their time: in 1906, the United States of America introduced the law concerning the control of medicine and meat products (at the same time, the Federal Trade Commission was founded, and anti-monopoly laws were adopted). In 1924, in Wembley (England), one of the first codes of ethical conduct in advertising was published: Wembley Code of Ethics, adopted by the Associated Advertising Clubs of the World.

2. The second step began in the early thirties and identifies with the reforms of president Franklin D. Roosevelt, who imposed the testing of products on an increasing scale (at the same time, across the ocean, the European countries were busy with planning World War II).

3. The third phase contains the end of the Second World War, and continues until the end of the seventies. This step is defined by extraordinary moments of the evolution of the consumer: in 1957 the Consumers’ Association of Great Britain is founded, then the European Consumers’ Bureau (Bureau Européen des Consummateurs), and, finally, in 1960, the International Organization of Consumers Unions is founded in Hague – an organization which, for the first time, reunited all the organizations that protect the rights of consumers.

The most important moment of this third step was the year 1962, when President J.F. Kennedy of the United States, issued the Consumer’s Bill of Rights. This document has never had the power of a law, but it caused a social movement that had, as an objective, the recognition of four fundamental rights of the consumer:

- The Right to Security
- The Right to be informed
- The Right to choose
- The Right to be listened to

4. The fourth phase begins in the early eighties and represents a period when the science of consumer’s behavior is evolving, as an immediate result of the development and deepening of market research in this area.

In 1985, the concept of consumer rights was endorsed by the United Nations through the United Nations Guidelines for Consumer Protection, which expands them to include the eight basic rights.

1. The right to choose. Within reason, consumers have the right to be assured that a selection of quality products and services are available for them to purchase at competitive prices. It means that a consumer should have the opportunity to select the goods or services that he or she wants to purchase.

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2. *The right to safety.* Consumers have the right to expect protection from hazardous products and services purchased in the marketplace, particularly if used properly for their intended purpose. Consumers have protection from the sale and distribution of dangerous goods and services.

3. *The right to be informed.* Consumers have the right to receive adequate information about products on which to base buying decisions. Reliable sources exist to inform consumers about products or services.

4. *The right to be heard and the right to voice.* Consumers have the right to equal and fair consideration in government policy-making situations, as well as prompt treatment in administrative courts or legal communities. In other words, consumers have a right to complain when there are problems or concerns. They have the right to speak up, to be heard, and to expect positive results. Through this right, both business and government are expected to respond to consumers.

5. *The right to redress or remedy.* Consumers are afforded an opportunity to have a hearing to voice dissatisfaction such that a resolution is reached and the complaint is settled satisfactorily.

6. *The right to environmental health.* Consumers should be protected from the devastating effects of air, earth, and water pollution that may result from the performance of daily marketplace operations. Consumers have the right to live and work in an environment that does not threaten the well-being of present and future generations.

7. *The right to service.* Consumers may expect convenience, the right to be treated with respect, an appropriate response to their needs and problems, and good quality design and workmanship in a product. Additionally, consumers may expect a courteous manner while in a store or other establishment even if a purchase is not made. Service means access to essential goods and services to include adequate food, shelter, clothing, health care, education and sanitation—basic needs that should be available to all consumers.

8. *The right to consumer education.* Consumers are extended the right to continuing consumer education that supports the benefits and enjoyment of other specific rights. Consumers have the right to some form of training and mastery of knowledge and skills needed to make informed decisions in the marketplace.

**Consumer Protection Today**

Consumer protection represents an ensemble of dispositions which appeared as a result of a public or private initiative, and its main objective is to ensure and constantly ameliorate the respect of consumers’ interests.

The United Nations, through its resolution 39/248 from April 1985, has established a series of directory principles for framing the policy and legislation for consumer protection. The principles outlined by the UN Organization and recommended to all the governments of the member countries, are addressed to the state administration.
One of the areas of the programs for consumer protection is ensuring the quality of goods and services that are offered for selling within the market. Within the market, consumers are informed through advertising and the labeling system.

The European Union is preoccupied with consumer protection, a matter that no government can ignore, but the Programs they adopt vary from a country to another. In European Union\(^2\), Consumer information seeks to ensure that consumers are able to compare the prices for the same product within a country and are as well informed as possible on price differences between the Member States\(^3\). The indication of the prices of the products represents an important means of information and protection of consumers. A Directive imposes the indication of the price per unit of measurement of all products sold in the shops, thereby giving the consumer a clear idea of the unit cost of the product in question and enabling him or her to compare different products and to make the best choice [Directive 98/6]. The selling price and the unit price must be unambiguous, easily identifiable and clearly legible. They must relate to the final price of the product and must refer to the quantity declared in accordance with national and European provisions.

The main aspects of the protection of consumer’s economic interests:

- EU policies shall ensure a high level of consumer protection (art.38 Charter of Fundamental Rights, approved in December 2000)

- The economic interests of consumers are protected in the European Union Member States through several directives which are approximating the rules of the following contracts: Distance contracts; Distance contracts for financial services; contacts negotiated away from business premises; purchase of the rights to use immovable properties on a timeshare basis; sale of consumer goods and associated guarantees; package travel. The position of consumer in air transports and in financial services has been also regulated through several European directives

- Prohibition for the trader to exploit his position of power in relation to a consumer: prohibition of unfair terms in consumer contracts (Directive 93/13); prohibition of unfair commercial practices (Directive n.2005/29/CE)

- Right for the consumer of an effective administrative or judicial protection. Interim Measures (also by way of summary procedure). Recognition of the role of the consumer association aimed at protecting collective interests. Cooperation between national authorities responsible for the enforcement of consumer protection laws (Regulation n.2006 of 2004)

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\(^2\) [http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:9qOSJfVq1Zh0J:www.europedia.moussis.eu/books/Book_2/d11/01/\%3Fall\%3D1+&cd=1&hl=ro&ct=clnk&q=ro]

According to the Communitary Program regarding consumer protection, the consumers have the following rights:

- The right to health and security protection;
- The right to public interests protection;
- The right to reclaim prejudice;
- The right to be informed;
- The right to be represented.

Stanciu, Mihailescu, Preotesi, and Tudor, (2005) wrote that, beginning with 1985, the European Commission has adopted a series of unitary quality criteria, as an integrant part of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). Within CAP, regulations that foresee the use of special labels and quality certificates have been introduced, in order to thoroughly inform the consumers upon the quality of goods, and the basis for regulating the methods of biologically producing agrarian and alimentary goods has been set. Furthermore, the legal framework for protecting and controlling of denominations was created.

Directives of the European Union concerning consumer protection:


4. **Directive 94/47/EC** of the European Parliament and the Council of 26 October 1994 on the protection of purchasers in respect of certain aspects of contracts relating to the purchase of the right to use immovable properties on a timeshare basis


In the period 2007-2013, the consumer protection policy will greatly support the EU in facing the challenges of growth, of jobs, and the need to renew relationships with the citizens. The European Union will know if it has fulfilled its mission if, until 2013, it can credibly prove to all EU citizens that they can shop anywhere in the EU – from the shop
in the corner to the Internet, having the certainty that they are effectively protected, either against dangerous products, or against dishonest salespeople. It should also be able to prove to all retailers, but in particular to the small and medium-sized enterprises, that they can sell anywhere by following a single set of basic rules.

**CONSUMER PROTECTION IN ROMANIA**

The consumer is, according to the law, any natural person, or group of natural persons composing an association, who acquires, obtains, uses or consumes products or services, outside his trade or profession (FLASH EUROBAROMETER 333 “Consumers’ rights in Romania”, June 2012.).

The notion of ‘consumer’ means any natural person who, in contracts covered by the Directive 93/13, is acting for purposes which are outside his trade, business or profession.

The European Court of Justice, in judgment *Cape Snc* (22 November 2001 n.C-541-542/1999) has stated that consumer is only a physical person and cannot be extended to companies.

As a result of the long transition years and the legal void that existed not only before the nineties, but also after them, Romanian consumers have to bear attempts to their security, health and rights even now.

After 1990, a series of compulsory regulations for consumer protection, in accordance with the international and European regulations in the field, but also with the actual conditions in our country, have been issued.

The most important normative acts in Romania, that have the objective of regulating the behavior of the consumer, are (Patriche, and Pistol, 1998):

1. According to the Government’s Decision no. 805 of 1990, The General Direction for Consumer Protection was founded, within the Department for Regulating Commerce and Tourism, of the Ministry of Commerce and Tourism.


   In conformity with this law, the citizens have, as consumers, the following rights:

   - the right to be protected against the risks of purchasing a product or receiving a service which may compromise their life, health or safety or which may negatively affect their rights or legitimate interests;
   - the right to have access to complete, precise and correct information regarding the essential characteristics of the products acquired and the services provided so that the decisions he takes in this respect best correspond to his needs, as well as the right to get proper education in his quality of consumer;
• the right to have access to markets which provide a wide variety of quality products and services;
• the right to compensation, by legal means, for damages generated by the inadequate quality of products and services;
• the right to join in consumers associations for the purpose of defending their interests.


8. *The Government’s Writ no. 23/1995 on instituting the system of marking cigarettes, tobacco products and alcohol;*

9. *The Government’s Writ no. 31/1995 on regulating the regime of producing, circulating and commercializing pharmaceutical products;*

10. *The Government’s Decision no. 665/1995 on replacing, repairing or compensating for the products that have quality deficiencies.*

According to Government’s Writ no. 99, of August 29, 2000, article 4, the consumer is a person who buys, purchases, uses or consumes products or services. Apart from the rights listed above, in accordance with Law no. 11/1994, the law grants the consumer certain rights, concerning the contracts he makes with the economical agents. These rights are:

• The right to make decisions when purchasing products or services, without being imposed stipulations that can favor the use of abusive techniques of selling or techniques that can influence the consumer’s option.

• The right to benefit from a clear and precise editing of the contract stipulations, including of those that concern the quality characteristics and the guarantee conditions, the right indication of the price or cost, and the exact establishment of credit and interest conditions.

• The right to be absolved of paying products and services that have not been asked for and accepted.

• The right to be compensated for the damages caused by products or services that are not in accordance with the contractual stipulations.
The right to benefit from the services that come with the product, when necessary, as well as from the spare parts, on a medium duration of the product use (a duration which is settled in the technical normative documents, established by the producer, or settled on by the concerned parts).

The right to pay, for the products and services the consumer benefits from, the settled amount, the increase of the initially established price being possible only with the consumer’s permission.

The right to claim for reparation or free replacement of the products and acquired services, as well as to claim compensation for the losses suffered as a result of the deficiencies discovered within the guarantee or validity terms.

After the expiration of this term, consumers can ask for reparation or replacement of the products that cannot be used for their purpose, as a result of deficiencies that had been hidden during their medium use period.

In 1993, Romania signed the Agreement for Adhesion to the European Community. As a result of adhering to this Agreement, Romania is obliged to tune its national legislation to the Communitary one. Points 10 and 11 of article 70 refer to protection of life and health of the people, article 75 refers to agroindustrial standards and ways to appreciate the conformity, and article 93 refers to consumer protection (Stanciu et al., 2004).

The current Romanian institutions that are concerned with consumer rights protection are (Stanciu et al., 2004):

1. The National Authority for Consumer Protection,
2. The Associations for Consumer Protection,
3. The Consultative Comissions for consumer protection,
4. The Interministerial Council for Quality Inspection and Armonizing Technical Regulations,
5. The Interministerial Committee for Supervising Product and Services Market and Consumer Protection.
6. Other authorities with expertise in the field:
   - *LAREX* founding member of the Association of Accredited Laboratories of Romania;
   - *TRAPEX System*, through which PHARE countries avoid commercializing of products that hold serious and immediate danger for the health and security of consumers on their territory;
   - *The Association for Standardizing of Romania (ASRO)*, which supervises the activity concerning adopting and respecting the quality standards for products and services that are distributed on the national territory;
National Association for Consumer Protection and Promotion of Programs and Strategies from Romania.

Stanciu, Mihăilescu, Preotesi, and Tudor (2005) considered that the formative and educative strategies imply parents and educators, but also media professionals, in order to formulate and apply the ethics of communication. As a result, educators and parents have to facilitate an easy and opportune access to the information concerning the negative effects that violent messages sent through electronic mass-media have.

In Romania, a large share of the grocery market is frequently in the hands of only a handful of supermarkets. This has a great impact on the protection buyer. It is obvious that, after the integration in the European Union, the Romanian consumer has much more various possibilities to choose from. At the same time, along with the rising education level, the buying power has also grown, and the Romanian consumer now has the possibility to satisfy much more costly and sophisticated needs. On the other hand, the producers, in order to satisfy these complex needs, are trying to seduce the consumer through more and more subtle ways. As a result, the marketing departments have consistently developed in Romania. Along with the growing of the consumers’ exigencies, relations marketing can only come to the benefit of the clients. Even if Romanians have learnt how to react, there are still producers, companies, economic agents who have to make efforts in order to obtain a civilized and modern commerce. The effects of applying the consumer protection laws in Romania:

1. Especially after joining the EU, the consumers have understood that they are in control, that they have advantages they didn't use to have before, and competition grew bigger. Consumers are now much more informed, more responsible and they need viable choices, exact information, a transparent market and trust, based on an efficient protection and solid rights.

2. Once these laws have been applied, the well-being of consumers in Romania has grown, regarding the prices, choices, quality, diversity, accessibility and security of products. The well-being of consumers is a central pylon of a highly efficient market.

3. The consumers have understood that they are efficiently protected against risks and threats that they cannot prevent as individuals. A high level of protection against these threats is essential for building the thrust of consumers.

After the first evaluation of the European Commission in 1997, Romania has made notable progress towards harmonizing the legislation and the politics, being after 8 years of preparing the adhesion, quite close to the European standards.

The most important steps made in Romania were:

a) Preventing the merchandising of dangerous products. Establishing common essential criteria regarding the packaging, labeling and security of products reassures European consumers that the purchased products are highly qualitative. The CE tag used in the European Union represents a way of assuring the consumers that the products are in conformity with the European quality standards.
In order for the products to respect the high level of protection of consumer health and security, the general rule stipulates that the producers have the obligation to introduce on the market only secure products that present no risks, when using them in normal conditions. In order to do this, producers have to take into consideration:

1. the characteristics of the product, such as composition or packaging
2. the effects of the product on other products, when it is foreseeable that they will be used together.
3. product presentation, labeling, instructions regarding the proper use or disposal of the product
4. the categories of consumers that are exposed to a high level of risk when using the product, especially children.

b) Establishing a number of specific sector stipulations, which take into consideration the sensitive character of some products.

- For a large range of food products, a series of specific regulations have been established, regulations that harmonize the essential exigencies regarding labeling, additives, inspection, hygiene control and products destined for specific types of alimentation. Romanian consumers now know the lists of ingredients, the ways of using the product and expiration dates for prepackaged food products.

- Pharmaceutical products should be accompanied by an explaining note that presents the using conditions, contraindications and possible side effects.

- Cosmetic products are also under very strict European legislation, especially regarding the used substances: coloring agents, preservatives, UV filters.

   A list of approximately 400 substances that cannot be found in these products has been published. The mandatory labels offer the consumers the necessary information.

- The toys for children under 14 are given special attention. There are European regulations that minimize the physical risks for children. The dimensions of the toys (and of their detachable components) are taken into consideration, so as not to be inhaled or swallowed.

- The packages and labels on toys, as well as the instructions for use have to draw attention on the risks that can appear and how to avoid them. The CE tag has to exist either on the package or on the toy and has to be in conformity with the European laws.

- The CE tag also has to exist on home appliances. These products are also under very strict regulations regarding their security, especially their physical, mechanic or electric properties.
c) Prevention, sanctioning and responsibility for faulty products. Except the inspections made by the public authorities, the vigilance of the consumers is the best tool for preventing risks.

When a product is considered dangerous, the authorities that supervise the market can take any measure imposed by the urgency and gravity of the situation, such as suspending sales or withdrawing the product from the market. The European regulations obligate the respective authorities to create systems of information change with the European Commission. Any abuse or the absence of the CE tags on the toys (or their package) or home appliances constitute a contravention of the European regulations and can be sanctioned in conformity with the legal procedures established by each member country.

d) The protection of the consumers' economic interests, especially regarding misleading advertising, consumer credit, incorrect terms of contracts, price indication.

The following actions of our country in this area include more priorities:
1. A better monitoring of markets, consumers and of the national policies regarding consumer protection.
2. A better enactment regarding consumer protection.
3. An increase of the methods of applying the legislation.
5. Placing the consumers in the centre of other policies and regulations of the EU.

CONCLUSION

Due to the education received during the communist ages, and to the transition period that Romania has gone through for many years, due to the present social situation, Romanians have been left with a certain lack of trust in the institutions of the state, including in the ones that are supposed to ensure their protection against the mentalities and misconceptions of workers from different fields.

Most of all, the state institutions that deal with consumer’s rights should be educating and properly informing the consumer, so that he could knowingly choose and, thus, become a responsible consumer. The long years of socialist ideology have rather pleaded for discouraging any initiative to promote quality in the different areas of social life. The consumer protection regime in Romania with regard to commercial activities has been strengthened in recent years.

But the role of state institutions, NGOs, agencies, is to change the mentality of the Romanian citizen: the one of the consumer, who, for the benefit of everybody, should no longer accept that he is obliged to consume everything, but become an active person, and also the mentality of the producer-salesperson chain, which, in the 21st century should have a correct attitude. Most of the time, the salesperson takes advantage of the consumers that come from poor backgrounds, and offer them low-quality products. The one who loses in this equation is, most of all, the consumer, as low-quality or counterfeited products endanger his life and health. The right to be protected against products, processes or services that threaten one’s health and life represents the right to security.
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Sense-Making of Teachers in the midst of Information Communication Technology (ICT) Reforms in Schools: An Exploratory Study in a Singapore Context

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Abstract

This qualitative research inquiry attempts to explore how school teachers cope with the incessant and seemingly endless transformations that occur in schools. The central phenomenon to be studied focuses on how school teachers “make sense” of educational reform as it occurs in their local contexts. In order to do this, an exploratory case study of two target schools that took part in policy reform initiatives directed at ubiquitous use of Information Communication and Technology (ICT) would be the locus of this inquiry. Using Actor-Network Theory (ANT) as an analytical frame, for the Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and interviews, this inquiry investigates and builds emerging explanations to school teachers’ sense-making experiences in periods of reform.

Keywords: Information Communication and Technology (ICT), Singapore, Reform, Policy, Teachers, Sense-Making

INTRODUCTION

This qualitative research inquiry attempts to explore how school teachers situated within the island city-state of Singapore cope with the incessant and seemingly endless transformations that occur in schools. This article attempts one general question: How do Singapore school teachers make sense of the introduction of ubiquitous Information Communication Technology (ICT) usage in schools? The central phenomenon to be studied focuses on how school teachers “make sense” of educational reform as it occurs in their local contexts. In order to do this, an exploratory case study of two target schools that took part in policy reform initiatives directed at the use ICT would be the locus of this inquiry. Using findings from Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), interviews and observations, this inquiry investigates and builds emerging explanations to school teachers’ sense-making experiences with the introduction of ICT in schools.

This exploratory inquiry is divided into four sections. The first section provides the theoretical lens from which the main question would be pursued. This introductory part also includes a description of the Singapore context with an emphasis on how ICT has become a pervasive policy initiative in Singapore. The second section elaborates on the

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methodological approach taken for this inquiry. An explanation of the scope and limitations of this exploratory qualitative case study is also included in this section. The third attempts to explore sense-making by focusing on how teachers perceive changes and continuities on their identity, analysing their emerging sense of agency and emphasising on the varying sense of ownership that teachers experience. The fourth and final section provides a reflection on the future trajectories that teachers face as ICT becomes a pervasive component of teaching and learning in schools.

**SENSE-MAKING EXPERIENCES: IDENTITY, AGENCY AND OWNERSHIP**

This inquiry assumes that schools, as loosely-coupled systems, (Weick, 1976) experience great complexity during reforms. Within a context that is driven by hyper-reforms, the introduction of ICT forces teachers to undergo “fundamental disjunctures” (Appadurai, 1990, p. 33), where skills and knowledge that they have acquired clash with new technologies. This inquiry argues that teachers who find themselves in these disjunctures undergo sense-making experiences consisting of creating meaning that is constantly modified through their social and contextual interactions (Schmidt and Datnow, 2005). For this exploratory inquiry, the meaning making encounters of the teachers in the midst of reform are viewed from the perspectives of identity, agency and ownership. Identify formation emerges as one of the fundamental reactions to these experiences. School teachers who find themselves in these periods of uncertainty realize that the “establishment and maintenance of identity is a core preoccupation in sense-making” (Weick, 1995, p. 20). Furthermore, this inquiry posits that as these teachers—who can also be referred to as policy actors—navigate through various waves of education reform disjunctures they make choices that either empower them or disempower them. In a word, their sense-making experiences impact on their sense of agency. Aside from identity and sense of agency, the inquiry also affirms that whilst attempting to make sense, teachers also experience decisions that impinge on their sense of ownership. Policy actors, and in this inquiry—school teachers—in the midst of sense making “are able to provide accounts of this activity, which then become the measures by which they are evaluated and made sense of by others” (Koyama, 2011, p. 23). These theoretical assumptions continue current debates on how educational innovations impact teacher's positioning (Ketelaar et al., 2012).

**SINGAPORE CONTEXT**

Understanding the wider context of Singapore is important in order to discover the rationale for the need to undertake school reforms. Investments in education and training are intrinsically linked to the economic developments that the nation-state has pursued. Singapore today enjoys a high GDP per capita at around US$ 52,631.53 (SGD $65,048 end of 2012) (Singapore Statistics, 2013). This remarkable economic progress is matched by the nation’s commitment to education investments. For instance from 1997/98 to 2011/12, the government’s recurrent expenditure in education averaged a steady increase of almost 7.5% (Ministry of Education—Planning Division, 2012). Singapore’s levels of educational attainment can be compared with international benchmarks and more importantly also reflect a balanced spread within the key ethnic groups within the country.² The 1996 Third International Math and Science Study (TIMSS) acknowledged that Singapore was one of

² The main ethnic groups for the Singapore resident population (this includes Singaporean citizens and Permanent Residents) are Chinese (74.1%), Malays (13.4%), Indians (9.2%) and Others (3.3%). More information can be obtained from the Singapore Department of Statistics 2011.
the top performing countries in 3rd and 4th grade Mathematics (Mullis et al., 1997) and the best performing country in 8th and 9th grade Science (Beaton et al., 1996). In the 2003 version of TIMMS, Singapore emerged once again as one of the top-performing countries in 8th and 4th grade Science and 8th and 4th grade Mathematics (Martin et al., 2003) and Progress in International Literacy Study (PIRLS) indicated that Singapore was one of the top three performing countries in its 2006 report (Mullis and Martin, 2007).

In the 2009 Singapore Education Statistics report, the secondary school completion rates for all the ethnic races in the nation averaged 97% (Ministry of Education, 2009). Guided by an elite corps of technocrats and leaders (Hill and Lian, 1995; Vasil, 1984), Singapore has been able to amass significant amounts of capital both economic and human, to merit for the nation consistently top rankings as one of the world’s most prosperous and competitive nations (Garelli, 2007; World Economic Forum., 2009). Today, the nation-state has received accolades as the world’s most globalized country (Kearney and Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2007). Singapore has also been identified as a best performer in the 2010 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (Gurria, 2010):

Out of 65 countries and economies that took part in PISA 2009, Singapore students ranked fifth in Reading, second in Mathematics and fourth in Science. Singapore also had the second highest proportion (12.3%) of students who are top performers in all three domains. (Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 1)

Without a doubt, the current phenomenal economic and education progress experienced by Singapore is a far cry from the vulnerable entrepot city-state that it was some forty years ago. However, with the dawn of the 21st century, Singapore faces different sets of vulnerabilities brought about by the forces of globalisation and competition from such rapidly developing economies as China and India. Burbules and Torres identified the 21st century education problematic as a needed paradigm shift in “educational aims that have more to do with flexibility and adaptability” rather than the standardization that characterized the earlier industrial phase and greater harmony among peoples and among nations (Burbules and Torres, 2000, p. 22). The Prime Minister spoke about this when he identified education as an “effective strategy” which will enable us to survive and to thrive in a changing world (Lee, 2006).

SYSTEM-WIDE REFORM: ICT POLICY AND IMPLEMENTATION IN SINGAPORE SCHOOLS

ICT has been identified as one of the “key contributors to Singapore’s economic success” particularly in the manner that is has been strategically aligned and deployed “with the needs of the economy and society, as well as the coordinated efforts arising from the national ICT plans” (Koh and Lee, 2008a, p. 167). Singapore has initiated two ambitious master plans (i.e. mp1 and mp2) and has most recently jumpstarted a third master plan (i.e. mp3) all of which were designed to harness the benefits of ICT in harmony with the development objectives of the nation (Koh and Lee, 2008b). Much has also been written as insightful reflections of the experience of ICT in education. From a cross-national comparative perspective, Law underscored that “systems need to make leadership and teacher professional development initiatives promoting a strong school-based culture of support, professional collaboration, and shared decision-making a priority area” towards the goal of bringing about “21st – century-oriented pedagogical uses of ICT in schools” (Law, 2009, p. 37). In a Singaporean context, the ICT experience as driven centrally from the Ministry of Education (MOE) has been the continued provision of “top-down support for
ground up initiatives from schools for routine ICT integration into the curriculum, but continues to adopt some form of centralized, top-down approach for novel integration of ICT into the curriculum that pushes the frontiers of teaching and learning” (Koh et al., 2009, p. 188). It is this seeming paradox: a move towards decentralization in education, yet a pronounced top-down approach in ICT policy implementation and how this impacts the role of school teachers that this inquiry intends to investigate.

A specific policy innovation that has taken place within the general policy framework of the ICT master plans is the re-branding of the so-called incubator schools into Leading Experimentation And Development or LEAD ICT@Schools Scheme in 2006. This programme supported schools “that conduct research on emerging ICT-based pedagogies” and those “that want to experiment with existing ICT-based pedagogies at a significant scale” (Koh and Lee, 2008b, p. 72). Sixty-seven schools were selected to spearhead this innovation. After the launch of LEAD ICT@Schools, another ICT policy innovation followed suit in 2007: FutureSchools in Singapore or the FS@SG. These schools were targeted to “push the frontiers of teaching and learning practices at a school-wide level, fully harnessing ICT to bring about engaged learning” (Koh and Lee, 2008b: 72). Five schools chosen to be part of FS@SG performed the vanguard role of being “test beds” in the “seamless journey” of ICT in everyday school life” (Wong, 2007). Schools that have chosen to participate in these policy innovations received “additional funds for ICT implementation” (Koh and Lee, 2008a, p. 181).

Research on teachers' perceptions of ICT in schools has yielded very interesting perspectives. In a five year study that encompassed 8,000 participants and twelve schools\(^3\), empirical evidence reveals what teachers perceive as three obstacles in using ICT for learning and teaching: “(1) ICT-based lessons are time-intensive; (2) time allocated in the timetable for the lessons is insufficient; and (3) the use of ICT is not required in national examinations” (Tan et al., 2010, p. 3). Completed and on-going empirical studies that have been made in an attempt to measure the effectiveness of ICT in Singapore schools have identified the need to do more focused research into ICT-enabled pedagogy (Looi and Hung, 2004) and some have also attempted to evaluate effectiveness from a policy and pedagogy perspective (Lim, 2007). However, this exploratory inquiry focuses on school teachers' responses to reforms by specifically using ICT policy innovations in schools as the focal point of the inquiry. The initial questions are designed to illuminate discussion in relation to how established “institutions” – represented by the school and educational bureaucracy -- or the introduction of innovative “ideas”, sometimes referred to as “policy paradigms” (Hall, 1993) – represented by recurrent education reform discourses -- impact on how policies facilitate or coincide with changes (Lieberman, 2002). This exploratory inquiry attempts to explore school teachers' responses to ICT reforms by focusing on their sense-making experiences.

**METHODOLOGY**

The inquiry is designed as a retrospective study of current ICT initiatives. The exploratory inquiry is primarily qualitative focusing on building explanation from the ground that have been found to be of practical and theoretical usefulness in educational research (Wilson, 1977). This inquiry conducted case studies of two schools that are heavily-involved in on-

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\(^3\) The 2009 Instrumentation and Baseline Study was designed to evaluate the implementation of IT Master Plan 3 and its impact on Singapore schools. The study was undertaken by a team from the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.
going ICT integration programmes in Singapore. These schools were purposefully selected as a theoretical sample -- they represent two examples of leading-edge efforts of schools that explore the interaction of ICT in teaching and learning. These schools are situated in the East, West, South, and North areas of Singapore. A total of four (4) FGDs and ten (10) interviews with selected school teachers were completed from 2012 till 2013. The targeted inquiries for school teachers (who were heavily invested in the integration of ICT into teaching and learning) were designed to explore the dynamics of education reform as seen from perspectives of school stakeholders in the midst of periods of reform (Mintrom and Vergari, 1998). These were recorded in audio tapes and transcribed into working transcripts as part of this exploratory inquiry. An extensive review of documentation of the reform experiences prepared by the MOE, the target schools themselves and external studies made by researchers were used to triangulate the findings from this exploratory inquiry.

Table 1: Summary Statistics of selected schools applying ICT policy innovations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Student Population</th>
<th>Staff Strength (not including management)</th>
<th>ICT Innovations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acme Primary School</td>
<td>1,200</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>One-to-One Computer Access to Allow for Integration of Various Primary School Courses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zenith Secondary School</td>
<td>1,500</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>One-to-One Computer Access to Encourage Greater Engagement Among Secondary School Students</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Role of Researcher

One of the characteristics of qualitative inquiry is for researchers to be “the research instruments” (Frankel and Devers, 2000, p. 120). It is thus important at the outset for the researcher to be fully transparent and to be aware of “how their own characteristics and biases may shape the research results” (Frankel and Devers, 2000, p. 121). Thus, it is necessary to succinctly describe the role of the researcher.

A former school teacher, Chief of Staff in an educational bureaucracy, School Principal, and as a Research Scholar investigating school transformations, I have personally experienced school reform and the many challenges it presents to school leadership in a Philippine, Australian and American context. Apart from my on-going work as an academic specialising on teaching and researching education policy and transformations in Singapore, I also work as a consultant to various international education reform initiatives. The impetus for this inquiry stems from my involvement with Singapore-wide ICT initiatives (from 2009 till the present) and the many issues that school leaders face in making sense of reforms.

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4 In order to honor the confidence of those persons who were interviewed in the course of this research, their names, and complete job designations are omitted here. Nonetheless, where data source is reported from an interview, the interviewee is identified by their position.

5 In order to preserve the anonymity of the schools their actual names are not provided.
In the conduct of this current study, my chief role was that of a participant-observer. I visited the two target schools as researcher, academic supervisor to teacher trainees undertaking practicum and as an independent facilitator of local and international guests keen on finding out ICT developments in a Singapore context. Aside from the FGDs and interviews, I also participated in classroom observation activities and informal chats with different school personnel. All throughout the data-gathering exercise, I was constantly liaising with the school leaders, middle managers and teachers. The perspectives I have acquired, as a bureaucrat from a central office in a school system, as a leader in a specific school setting and as an active researcher-practitioner on issues of reforms provide me with some familiarity and appreciation of the myriad concerns involved in policy transformations in schools. The professional background I have acquired made me somewhat of an “insider” in this inquiry allowing me to have greater access, interpretation and appreciation of the value of “shared experiences” as well as much more nuanced “understanding and clarity of thought” (Labaree, 2002, p. 103). The FGDs and interviews allowed for constant, active communication and engagement between myself as critical researcher and the school leaders paving the way for emerging “co-constructed identities” and “lived experiences” during the conduct of this inquiry (Mertkan-Ozunlu, 2007: 456). Much more importantly though, in order to ensure that I as researcher and research instrument with an insider advantage maintain a critical stance, I consciously practised “uncomfortable reflexivity – a reflexivity that seeks to know while at the same time situates this knowing as tenuous” (Pillow, 2003, p. 188). Consequently, in pursuing this exploratory qualitative inquiry the insights derived do not necessarily arrive at “comfortable, transcendent endpoint” but are in fact “messy” and “may not always be successful” (Pillow, 2003, p. 190).

**Data Analysis**

A fundamental assumption that this inquiry makes is that schools or broadly speaking educational organizations are loosely-coupled systems (Weick, 1976). Adding to the internal complexity of school organisation are fluctuating external factors that impinge on the operations and functions of schools. The forces of globalization and Knowledge-Based-Economies (KBEs), with its mantra of flexibility and adaptability are just some of the overpowering external factors that have altered how schools and educational systems function. Within the Singapore context this complication is greatly heightened when relatively untested educational reform efforts are introduced to an already complex system. The targeted inquiries attempt to interrogate the dynamics of the intersection of policy change and a key agent in educational organizations: school teachers.

Consistent with the national goals of Singapore to use ICT as an “external wing to compete in the global marketplace” (Information Communication Technology Working Group (ICT-WG), 2012, p. 3), schools and school leaders are seen to play key roles in pushing for ubiquitous ICT use in schools. Schools participating in the LEAD@ICT programme, such as those covered in this exploratory study, are seen to play the vanguard role in creating an “external wing” leveraging on ICT in the Singapore education system. Thus, the key goal for school teachers is to play the important role in providing the direction and creating the conditions for students to use ICT in a meaningful way.

The inquiry made preliminary systematic attempts to identify how certain policies get adopted/modified/rejected as norms in the school organization, in a word the policy cycle that occurs in schools (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998). The questions also attempted to explore relationships that transpire between policy diffusion – in this case, ICT innovations -- from the perceptions of school teachers. Investigation was made about the convergence
and divergence of various coalitions (Sabatier, 1988) networks (Mandell, 1999; Lieberman and Grolnick, 1996) and communities (Wenger, 1998; Busher et al., 2007) of teaching professionals experiencing reforms in schools. Questions were designed to discover what school teachers perceived in relation to four broad aspects that usually acquire great significance during periods of reform, namely: (a) Familiarity with ICT, (b) Perceptions of what an ICT-integrated classroom looks like, (c) Impact of ICT in Teaching and Learning and (d) Challenges of ICT in Classrooms as these transpired whilst pursuing ICT innovation. Table 2 presents the areas of inquiry explored during the interviews and FGDs for this exploratory study:

Table 2: Areas of Inquiry for the FGDs and Interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General Areas of Inquiry</th>
<th>Specific Areas of Inquiry</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ICT Familiarity</td>
<td>How familiar are the teachers with new and emerging technologies? How much does technology play a part in their professional and personal lives? How comfortable are the leaders with technology?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions of an ICT-integrated Classroom</td>
<td>What does an ICT-integrated classroom look like? What are the characteristics of this type of classrooms? What kind of teaching methodologies should one find in these types of classrooms?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact of ICT in Teaching and Learning</td>
<td>How has ICT made an impact on the teaching and learning practices in classrooms and in schools? How has ICT influenced the way that teachers learn? How has ICT influenced the way students learn? From the perspective of school leaders, how should ICT impact teaching and learning?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenges of ICT in Classrooms</td>
<td>From the point of view of school teachers? What are the biggest challenges of ICT in classrooms? What are the challenges that ICT pose to the way that teachers teach? What issues have arisen in relation to ICT and student learning?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


After conducting content analysis of interviews and FGD transcripts of the various school leaders from the two selected schools, a preliminary analytical map was formulated. Attempts at qualitative research produce insightful thick descriptions (Easterby-Smith, 1995) of issues and concerns that occur in schools, consistent with suggestions of Low and Chong about the need to explore these amongst school leaders in a Singapore context (Chong and Low, 1991). The content analyses produced numerous concepts: These are notions or ideas that consistently surfaced out of the narratives of the different respondents across individual characteristics of the different types of teachers and also across group characteristics (the different schools). With content analyses, explanations of the phenomenon under investigation beliefs, knowledge and practices of school teachers during periods of reform are developed through the process of abduction: generating “inference from observed facts” (Richardson and Hans Kramer, 2006, p. 499). In attempting to do pattern-matching (see for example (Yin, 2003; Goetz and LeCompte, 1984), specific categories linking several of the concepts were subsequently identified. From the numerous concepts that surfaced during the extensive content analysis of FGDs and interview transcripts those that occurred most frequently were streamlined into fifteen. These were
carefully re-read and then arranged and synthesized to fall within three linked categories. Propositions were then raised about these categories: How are they related to each other? What causal linkages connect these categories with one another? What hierarchical linkages can be inferentially derived from them? Through an iterated process of abduction, these six linked categories were then synthesized and led to three components of sense-making experiences. This process of abstraction becomes the basis for building explanation through “specifying conceptual relations” derived from the entire qualitative data analytical experience (Wasserman et al., 2009, p. 378). Table 3 captures what the inquiry has generated from exploratory notions of school leaders’ experiences of sense-making of policy reform, implementation and the accompanying issues and challenges.

Table 3: Insights derived from Interview Transcripts and FGDs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sense-Making Experiences with the Use of ICT</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Concepts (Derived from content analyses of interviews or FGD transcripts)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Teachers’ Emerging Identities**          | • Teachers as Facilitators  
• Teachers Roles from Content Provider to Manager of Content for Students  
• Reflective Teacher  
• Prevalence of Frontal Teaching even within ICT-enhanced classrooms  
• Persistence of Traditional Use of Classroom environments |
| **Sense-Making Experiences with the Use ICT Reforms in Schools** | • Collaboration among Teachers as a Form of Professional Development  
• Teacher’s Ability to Cater to Differentiated Learning for Students  
• Teacher’s Ability to use ICT to extend students’ classroom  
• Difficulty in monitoring what students actually learn  
• Increasing issues of cyberwellness |
| **Teachers’ Sense of Agency**              | • Teacher’s Enthusiasm to form Professional Learning Communities  
• Teacher’s actively pursue learning by modelling ICT use  
• Teacher’s champion ICT innovation and initiatives  
• Connectivity problems that hamper ICT usage  
• Preparation for High-Stakes Tests override authentic ICT learning |

Note. From “Report on a Case Study of Policy Learning and ICT Reforms in Education,” by V. Reyes, 2013, p. 18
Discussion: Sense-making in the midst of policy change

Given the national push for LEAD@ICT schools to perform their roles as “external wings” in leveraging on ICT to push their schools to fly greater heights what were the experiences of these school teachers in the midst of all these? What factors do they deem most important, most problematic and most complex as they attempted to implement ICT policy innovations? The analyses of the interviews, FGDs and observations produced illustrative accounts of how school teachers make sense of their experiences in the midst of change. These accounts are analogous to studies of the learning trajectories of school teachers reflecting on their roles in learning processes within periods of change. Insights from this qualitative inquiry reveal that the selected school teachers’ sense-making experiences revolved around three key categories: identity, sense of agency and sense of ownership.

Teachers’ Emerging Identities

Selected respondents in this exploratory inquiry have revealed that in the midst of ICT reform the role of teachers undergo transformations. On the one hand, respondents from both Acme Primary and Zenith Secondary identify the persistence of some traditional teachers who cling on to frontal type of teaching in the midst of ICT-enhanced classrooms (Ms. M from Acme Primary, May 2013 and Mr. L from Zenith Secondary, June 2012). On the other hand, a greater number of teachers in these two schools – as indicated by the respondents – have transformed their roles from purveyor of knowledge towards a more facilitative role:

For me I would say that the whole ICT initiative itself is actually moving from teacher-centered and approaching towards more student-centered pedagogy, so actually in a way, the whole process itself is not an easy process and, involves a lot of patience and then also we have to facilitate the process itself how the evolution actually take place, over here. I see how teachers’ roles evolved from initially like single, source of authoritative knowledge with content, to now become slowly, less -- how to say -- maybe less authoritative, but at the same time also become the main facilitator for the students’ learning (Mr. L. of Zenith Secondary, June 2012).

Teachers’ Sense of Agency

Respondents selected for this exploratory inquiry indicated that teachers’ sense of agency have undergone changes under the influence of ICT reforms in schools. Some are of the opinion that the fast-paced and seemingly never ending changes brought about by ICT disempower some teachers. Specifically, with the advent of one-to-one computing for both Acme Primary and Zenith Secondary, teachers have expressed difficulties in monitoring what goes on in the classroom and what students actually learn (Mrs. F., from Acme Primary, May 2012 and Mr. C from Zenith Secondary, July 2013). Most respondents however from both Acme Primary and Zenith Secondary posit that quite a number of their colleagues have become empowered by the possibilities that ICT bring along with it. A specific area which manifests empowered teachers can be gleaned from the surge of collaborative learning among teachers in both schools:

I think for me well, enhancement of, teaching and learning and all that engagement I mean I’m struggling with having to say, well this is how, the current generation of students learn and work. And we collaboratively bring it,
to them, or that we draw them to, us. I mean, that sometimes is a little bit like, you know, do we, and sometimes some people will consider or reduce ourselves to their level, or that, technology must be able to really just enhance, you know, draw them out of whatever their lack of motivation or whatever it is to impacts their learning. What I think is good about technology would be, collaboration as a form of professional development for us teachers. If we think about the future of technology as living in the cloud, then I think, that has great opportunity far beyond the classroom type learning, it’s not just me and my teacher colleagues here, but we have other collaborators, all over the place to create content. So I think that, that is one potential for collaborative learning (Mrs. T of Zenith Secondary., June 2012).

Teachers’ Sense of Ownership

The FGDs and interviews of selected participants from Acme Primary and Zenith Secondary have revealed how ICT reform impacts on teachers’ sense of ownership. Some school teachers express that the introduction of ICT have somehow increased their perceived levels of isolation from the demands of learning. Whereas, most of the ICT initiatives promote innovation and collaboration among students, some teachers have indicated how the persistence of a high-stakes testing culture diminishes the efficacy of ICT (Mrs. N of Acme Primary., May, 2013). However, there are teachers who have reported that ICT serves as a powerful platform for communities of learning to emerge:

So I mean the professional learning in terms of sharing among colleagues, I think to be a little bit more innovative, not that we’re not innovative. But we’re trying to use a different platform now, to, you know, to guide the students in their learning. So it really, you know, causes the teachers to sit in our learning community and think, really, how then should I use this different platform, in terms of designing our teaching and our pedagogies, and also I think that that our learning circle, that community that we had, where we, we had time set aside for discussion, as a whole and also, when we, within our own departments, when there’s -- you know-- sharing within our department about how one teacher use it for this, in this way, another teacher uses it that way, and the sharing of, applications and resources, really is also more of a resource bank, sometimes in terms of the podcast and the iTunes use and things that they use (Mrs. K. from Zenith Secondary, June 2012).

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES: TEACHERS’ SENSE-MAKING IN PERIODS OF REFORM

This exploratory inquiry on the perceptions of selected school teachers provided an interesting snapshot of issues and challenges in the midst of reform. School teachers in periods of reform provide insights on their sense-making experiences that centre around three key categories: (1) Emerging sense of a teacher’s identity; (2) A growing sense of agency among teachers and (3) an increasing sense of ownership among teachers. These experiences reported by the respondents to this exploratory inquiry prove to be fraught with tensions and contradictions. Perhaps one way for school teachers to “make sense” of the seeming paradoxes of school reform would be to strike a balance between “deep learning” as these are mandated by wide-scale change enacted in the discourse of ICT reforms in schools and “adaptation” emanating from the desire to preserve some school teachers believe is what works and to keep to the “tried and tested” approaches.
Indeed one of the serious challenges that face the city-state and one of its key institutions – MOE and its schools -- in preparing the nation for an uncertain future is the extent of learning and change that it is willing to undertake. Recognizing the entrenched traditional mindsets inherent in the education system and the need for creativity and innovation, the system itself must have the capacity to engage in learning which implies that “the organization’s members are induced to question earlier beliefs about the appropriateness of ends of action, and to think about the selection of new ones, to revalue themselves” (Haas, 1991, p. 73). One may argue that the extent of organizational learning required is not merely adaptation which is “muddling through” (Haas, 1991: 75) or “incrementalism where subsequent policy decisions are carried out as a mechanical continuation of previous decisions” (Van Meter and Van Horn, 1975, p. 465) but a deep change that is willing to re-evaluate core beliefs (Sabatier, 1988). Gopinathan points out a more profound extent of the necessary changes.

At the school level, change, while it is occurring, is not yet fundamentally changing pedagogy and practice. Teachers having to cope with large classes, a content dominated curriculum and high stakes examinations have taken on initiatives like thinking skills but rather than allow for a reconceptualisation of practice have, in many cases, bolted on acceptable elements and routinised procedures—a technique-oriented view of creativity prevails. (Gopinathan, 2007, p. 67)

What is required by the education system and the schools is a bold attempt to embrace new paradigms and to attain “deep learning” (Ng, 2005, p. 5). Achieving learning and not mere adaptation requires grappling with the fundamental issue of whether it would be “possible to bring about changes in teachers’ beliefs, values, and attitudes concerning such matters as epistemology, the roles of teachers, and the nature of teaching and learning” (Tan and Gopinathan, 2000, p. 10). It must be pointed out that in order for systemic wide change to occur—one that is encapsulated in the lofty goals of ICT in teaching and learning in schools -- “educational innovation is first and last about teachers and students, where they begin, what they experience, and where they end up” (Luke et al., 2005, p. 26). In facing the challenges, uncertainties and complexities that forces of globalization bring with it, Singapore’s deliberate attempts to become a “learning organization” while steadfastly adhering to shared core values puts great pressure on how school teachers make sense of it all in the midst of school reform.
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Learning and Assessment: Students’ Responses to a Peer-Mentorship Programme at a Hong Kong Vocational Education Institute

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Abstract

The present research examined post-secondary students’ experiences on their roles as mentees and as mentors in the peer-mentorship programme offered by a vocational education institute in Hong Kong. It aimed to explore students’ overall and learning experiences in the programme, thereby providing views as to how the programme can be improved. The investigation was conducted using a qualitative approach. The research samples consisted of 16 participants and three focus group interviews were organized to gather students’ responses. All the transcripts were analysed against the research questions. The study found students to be positive about their overall experience in the peer-mentorship programme and to be fond of the friendship and networking opportunities. As mentees, their learning experiences were generally positive but students found some of the skill training modules to be too challenging. As mentors, consistent with previous studies, both time constraints and insufficient mentor training were two major drawbacks. Documented academic recognitions and rewards, institutional support, along with more cross-campus interactive activities were some of the improvements that these students would like to see in the future development of the programme.

Key words: Peer-Mentorship; Mentoring; Whole Person Development; Vocational Education

INTRODUCTION

Peer-mentoring has gained popularity worldwide over the past few decades. Popular programmes such as “Big Brothers/Big Sisters of America” have convinced the educators
of its effectiveness in helping students achieve better academically and interpersonally (DuBois et al., 2002). Peer-mentoring not only preserves the advantages of traditional mentoring, its democratic and "boundaryless" nature also builds a positive and supportive environment (Mavrinac, 2005). Educational researchers and scholars believe peer-mentoring to be capable of helping students adjust to new learning environment, transforming them through fostering self-directed learning and mutual sharing of experience (DuBois et al., 2002; Mavrinac, 2005; Heirdsfield, Walker and Walsh, 2008b; Colven and Ashman, 2010).

The past studies have shown that peer-mentoring can improve mentees” learning skill and academic performance (King et al., 2002; Rodger and Tremblay, 2003; Colvin and Ashman, 2010; Adam, Skalicky and Brown, 2011). This pedagogy eases the transition of secondary school students into tertiary education (Mavrinac, 2005; Heirdsfield et al., 2008a; Colvin and Ashman, 2010), increases the sense of belonging and relationship building (DuBois et al., 2002; King et al., 2002; Colvin and Ashman, 2010; Beltman and Schaeben 2012), enhances their goal setting skills (King et al., 2002; Colvin and Ashman, 2010), and enriches the overall personal growth and cultivates positive value (DuBois et al., 2002; King et al., 2002; Mavrinac, 2005; Beltman and Schaeben, 2012).

The outcomes and success as well as the sustainability and future development of peer-mentoring programme do not only lie with mentees; mentors also play a central role. Though the benefits for mentees have well been established and thoroughly studied, researchers have recently been interested in the impact of a mentoring programme on mentors, in addition to growing interest in their competence and experience of mentoring (Leung and Bush, 2003; Heirdsfield et al., 2008a; Heirdsfield, et al.. 2008b; Colvin and Ashman, 2010; Beltman and Schaeben, 2012). Past studies have found that mentors do benefit from mentoring peers, gaining self-satisfaction, an increased sense of self-worth, improved interpersonal competence, and foster professional development (Leung and Bush, 2003; Heirdsfield et al., 2008b; Adam et al., 2011).

With the above factors in mind, a peer-mentorship programme was introduced as part of the students” development activities at the Hong Kong Institution of Vocational Education (HKIVE). It aims to create a supportive, self-directed learning environment within campuses and equip students with skills to enhance personal growth and development (Vocational Training Council, 2012). In addition, it must bring out the students” potential, teaching them to take initiative in learning, actively reflecting upon their learning experience, build interpersonal competency, in addition to skills such as goal setting and execution (Vocational Training Council, 2012).

Unlike previous studies focused on only one of the roles (usually either mentors or mentees), the present study intended to study students” experiences as mentees and as mentors. This is also the first peer-mentorship programme in Hong Kong’s vocational education and training that focus on whole person development. The present study aimed to explore students” experiences, their expectation before and after joining the peer-mentorship programme, what they like and dislike as well as if there is anything students like to see to further improve and refine the programme.

PEER-MENTORSHIP PROGRAM – IVELITE

IVElite, as a newly developed peer-mentorship program in HKIVE, represents the seven attributes the peer-mentorship programme aimed to deliver: Initiative, Value,
Empowerment, Learning, Independence, Teamwork, and Engagement. It employed an outcome-based education approach to stimulate students’ self-directed learning, maximise their potentials, to empower them to be leaders, and to prepare them to meet the workforce with a positive attitude and value. Using a peer-mentoring model, students were encouraged to communicate and share their learning with each other, thereby facilitating a learning atmosphere with ample sharing of knowledge and experience among peers. It was through this peer interaction, along with various activities organisations as well as team building and teamwork, the programme enhanced students’ personal growth and development as well as interpersonal competence.

The programme began at the start of 2010 academic year. It was developed and introduced by the Student Development Discipline Office of Vocational Training Council (VTC). The programme was an open programme, inviting all HKIVE students who were interested to freely enrol.

At the beginning of the programme, the first group of students acted as mentees and were trained by the programme’s project officers. Training was conducted through regular workshops and meetings where skills (such as team building, goal setting and activities organisation, self-learning and reflection, conflict and crisis management, etc.) were transferred to students. Students later joined together to form a team and asked to practice the acquired skills by organising activities around the campus. Activities can be anything from political to recreational, from academic to social activities, whichever each team decided. Programme’s project officers would observe and provide assistance to each team where necessary. Project officers would also regularly evaluate student performance during workshops, meetings, and activity organisation according to a set of intended learning outcomes stated by the students. Both evaluations were constructively aligned against each other to provide students with information about their performance during meetings and the organising of activities. During these workshop trainings and organising activities, students were asked to constantly reflect upon their decision and own performance on each action of each step, this self-reflection facilitated students’ goal setting and goal attaining, encouraging carefully constructed steps as well as task focusing and prioritising skills.

After completing the first year of IVElite, these mentees were then asked to participate in the programme for the second year. Based on their gained experience from the first year in the programme as mentees, students would act as mentors in the second year to guide the newly enrolled students. As new mentors, they were coached by the programme’s project officers. Further training (four training workshops) on becoming a mentor was provided to educate these former mentees so that they were well-equipped to provide the same guidance that they received from project officers during the first year of IVElite. Other than the four additional workshops for mentorship training, students also participated in all the same mentee training workshops as a refreshment of the skills acquired when they were mentees during the first year of the programme. Periodic meetings between mentors and project officers would also be conducted to monitor students’ progress as mentors and assisted them in resolving any particular difficulties they encountered while mentoring newly enrolled mentees.

RESEARCH METHODS

The present study was conducted using a qualitative approach and focus group interviews were organized to gather students’ responses to the research questions.
Prior to the collection of any data from the participants regarding their IVElite experience, an approval was granted from the Student Development Discipline Planning Office to use students’ responses for this research. Since the present study was interested to investigate students’ experiences as mentees (first year in IVElite) and as mentors (second year IVElite), thus only student mentors in the programme were invited to participate.

All student mentors were solicited and invited via email to participate in focus group interview regarding their perception, experience and expectation of the IVElite programme. The reason of using a focus group interview approach over group discussion is because the present study was intended to gain specific insight into students’ experiences of IVElite, their expectation of joining IVElite as well as their liking and disliking of the programme while also allowed further exploration, if any, of other interesting areas about IVElite.

Out of 74 student mentors, sixteen mentors (10 males and 6 females) across different HKIVE campuses agreed to participate. The response rate was 21.62%. Three focus group interview sessions were organised and conducted by research assistants who were independent of IVElite. All interviews were conducted in spoken Cantonese language. The interviews were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed in Chinese. The transcripts were then translated into English for further analysis. To ensure validity of the translations, two experienced research assistants separately checked the contents using a point-to-point approach. After validity was obtained, the English version of the transcript was then put forward for analysis.

A content analysis was used in the present study. The main task of the content analysis was to determine the presence of certain words or concepts within texts or sets of texts based on several research questions (Palmquist, Carley and Dale, 1997). Four main research questions the present study intended to examine were asked and they are:

1) What were the students’ experiences in IVElite?
2) What did the students learn from IVElite, and how could the learning be applied to their everyday life “day-to-day living”?
3) What did the students like the most, and what did they dislike the most?
4) What improvements and refinements would the students like IVElite to provide?

The further analysis of the interview transcripts was to quantify and analyse the meaning(s) of such words and concepts, matching against the research questions. The identities of participants in this study were not known to the researchers. There were no identifying files related to the participants that needed to be destroyed or deleted.

ANAYTICAL RESULTS

As Mentees

A multidimensional approach in the peer-mentorship programme, which focuses on providing learning support and guidance, and social and orientation activities for mentees, helps to reduce academic stress and improve self-esteem and confidence in student mentors, enhancing the students’ learning techniques and promoting more positive engagement (Fowler, 2004 and Drew et al., 2000 as cited in Heirdsfield et al., 2008b).
The mentorship programme also provides students with many other benefits. For students who are reluctant to ask questions or to approach academic staff with their concerns; mentors act as a more approachable alternative, possessing backgrounds similar to the students”. In fact, one of the key traits of peer-mentoring is to gather students of similar demographics, characteristics, interests, and area of study (Fowler, 2004 as cited in Heirdsfield et al., 2008b; Terrion and Leonard, 2007). That is especially important for students who are introverted in nature and transitioning into a new environment; having a peer mentor providing support and bridging the gap between newly enrolled students and the faculty can be particularly beneficial to help them “open up” (Colvin and Ashman, 2010) and alleviate transitional stress and anxiety (Rodger and Tremblay, 2003).

The present peer-mentorship programme was intended to not only allow students to interact with each other academically and socially, but also to provide students with knowledge and learning experiences outside of their academic course requirements, and to enable their overall personal growth and development.

**Overall Learning Experiences**

The overall learning experiences of the students were positive as many students particularly favoured the learning experiences of organising activities on campus. They used words such as “attractive”, “fruitful”, “special inside”, and “different from others” to describe the IVElite as a uniquely attractive peer-mentorship programme, offering a great wealth of learning experiences that was not seen in other programmes offered.

“…… we had to organise activities by ourselves on campus and it was very attractive because we had no such experience before…… experienced difficulties and come up with the ideas and make decision together in organising the activities on our own. I learnt so much in the programme ….. was different from the other programmes……” (Student G)

“…… the activities were student-oriented. We have to manage the activities…… took a main role to plan and to execute the project which was the most special part of IVElite which made it stood out from other student programmes……” (Student C)

The students were also able to point out some specific learning modules within the peer-mentorship programme. The programme provided a unique learning experience that the students perceived to be useful and applicable to their academic and personal development. Some students even reported the learning experience was beyond their expectations.

“I want to organise an activity for others at first, so I enrolled in this programme. I did not expect to gain anything from programme. After joining the programme, I learnt that was not easy to organise an activity. It involved many things: what was the goal before starting an activity; what behaviour should be performed to attain the goal; which methods should be used to assess the activity……I learnt to ask „WHY” and considered the expected outcome before doing something. I have changed my mind-set on performing tasks…… reflect(ing) myself and ….. learn through experience…… no reflection, nothing can be gained in the next project.” (Student A, B, C and D)
“I was the only one in my class to join (the programme). I expected to make my life full as well as making friends and organise activities just like other programme…… I did not expect what could be learnt in the programme. It was out of my expectation after the programme started, we had to attend workshops and the programme is formal and serious, it provided us a learning process and gave us more than we expected and that surprised me.” (Student E)

“So far, IVElite has fulfilled my expectation ……. I really learnt a lot of useful things from IVElite, for example, communication skill and how to run a meeting, etc……” (Student F)

Though many students appreciated the learning modules offered by the peer-mentorship programme, they experienced difficulty and felt discouraged by some of the more challenging learning modules like Intended Learning Outcome (ILO) and rubrics setting in particular. There were students who felt that the skills acquired during the programme were not marketable.

“…… what I don’t like in IVElite, it should be ILO. Because it is time consuming to set an appropriate ILO. Even we thought the ILOs were well set, but in the view of the project officers, they thought the ILOs were not well set and might have negative influence to the activities. It is difficult for us to set a correct ILO……” (Student C)

“…… I have learnt a lot of useful things from IVElite…… However, I can hardly demonstrate the learnt skills during job interview. So I think the learning may not help me in job or academic interviews.” (Student F)

**Friendships and Sharing Experiences**

Consistent with many previous studies, one of the greatest benefits associated with peer mentoring is the building of friendships and networking opportunities (Heridsfield et al., 2008a; Heirdsfeld et al., 2008b; Colvin and Ashman, 2010; Beltman and Schaeben, 2012). Many students claimed to expect making more friends and learning new things before joining the programme. Besides gaining friendships and opportunity to learning new things, they treasure their times together and sharing their experiences.

“(My expectation of) joining IVElite was to make new friends…… I like gathering with my close friends. The happiest thing was gathering with them in the activities because we built our friendships there….. we encountered the difficulties when organising activities, we treasured what we gained and the sense of success. It was a good experience of our life in IVElite. I believe this is what we want to obtain in IVElite.” (Student C and I)

“…… I liked to get together with my teammates during meetings or activities because we would share our experiences in IVElite. We had good communications and pleased to share with each other.” (Student E)

“The IVElite programme is amazing. I made friends with peers from different disciplines and hence team spirit as well as self-confidence was developed through cooperation with teammates.” (Student H)
“Building trust and understanding among teammates in the meetings. We shared the same experiences and memories in the training camp.” (Student K)

Coming hand-in-hand with this broadening friendship network is the improvement of communication and interpersonal skills (Heirdsfield et al., 2008b). Peer-mentorship programme provided students with the opportunity to develop interpersonal and communication skills as well as social networking, which is vital to enhance the connections between students and to enhance the different aspects of their tertiary education experience (Beltman and Schaeben, 2012).

“What I like is that I made friends with teammates having different characters. I learnt how to cooperate with different people which made me more mature.” (Student D)

“…… I learnt to get along with different people and…… to accept others’ view as well as inviting the inactive members to share their views…… we learnt to build rapport among people of different characters in a team…… and when conflict arises…… to provide positive and constructive feedbacks instead of negative criticism.” (Student B and C)

However, many students still perceived themselves to be struggling, and believed that they needed to continue working on their communication and interpersonal skills.

“I expected to learn how to break the ice with strangers. I am still improving the skill…. I am still learning how to do better of the communication skill…..” (Student O)

“Friendship was built among teammates. In order to maintain a good relationship, some members might scare to express their objection against the others”idea preventing conflict happens.” (Student J)

Many students were hoping for more activities to be organised among members of different campuses so that they could meet and share experiences across different campuses since they had only met each other once at the beginning of the programme, during the Kick-Off Camp in the first year, when they were mentees.

“More cross-campus activities should be organised to enhance the communication of IVElite members among different campuses…… providing more opportunities for all IVElite members to get together…… it would be a good chance to share the learning with other members……” (Student B, C and E)

“…… it would be great if more joint campuses workshops can be organised for us. I don’t mind attend the workshops on Saturday.” (Student G)

**Personal Growth and Development**

One of the programme highlights was to foster personal growth and development. The
building up of new friendships enabled the students to gain communication and interpersonal skills. Through this experience, it provided the students with the opportunity for personal growth and development. In the present study, the students found improvements in themselves across many aspects of personal growth and development. The students perceived themselves to have more initiative, and independence, along with a greater sense of self-awareness.

“After joining IVElite, my friends told me that I was different from the past and became more proactively, enthusiastically, and bravely to express my views.” (Student P)

“…… I enhanced my self-awareness and learned to be a more forward-looking person.” (Student K)

One of the subset of personal growth and development IVElite intended to achieve was to raise the sense of autonomy among students in which students were particularly fond of. The freedom to organise activities and to make all the decisions along the way was welcomed by many students. Through organising activities, the students in the peer-mentorship programme learnt to choose and define a goal before executing actions toward achieving the decided goal. The process was done by mentees under the guidance of mentor. They were well aware of the fact that this was a learning process to become more independent, reflective, and self-regulating, gaining initiative and autonomy through goal setting, planning, and organising activities (Noom, Deković and Meeus, 2001).

“…… I wanted to experience the operation in organising activities. Also, I wanted to become mature and less reliance on others……” (Student D)

“…… my project team went to visit an elderly centre and we considered many factors…… (we learnt) to perform various tasks after discussion and (decisions were made)……” (Student E)

“I like most (about this peer-mentorship programme) was the high degree of autonomy in organising project. We could make our own decision to organise any activities we want… this was the only programme that provided such a high degree of freedom to students. That is what I like the most…” (Student F)

**A Sense of Belonging**

The peer-mentorship programme aimed to foster the students’ engagement in group activities for their home institution; hence, it has a positive effect on their sense of belonging (Heirdsfield et al., 2008a). The present study was pleased to see that the students were positive and proud of being members of the programme.

“I would not mention that I am studying in IVE, but tertiary education. Also, I would not mention to my classmates, who think joining student programmes is boring, that I joined IVElite. But now, I don’t mind to tell them that I’m not free because I have to attend IVElite meeting.” (Student G)

“I was introduced IVElite through class visit. I was impressed by the word IVElite which is composed of a word “Elite”. I expected I would become elite
after joining the programme. And I was new to IVE and would like to join a student programme, so I chose IVElite. ….. [the programme allowed us to] possess the sense of belonging…… and cooperation with other members for the project.” (Student E and F)

The sense of belonging could be unconscious or conscious. Students expressed that they or other members just kept attending the programme meetings despite not knowing what to do. They were unaware of the underlying reason for attending the programme meetings but they thought they should be there. Others said that they attended the workshops or meetings just to show their support even if they cannot make any significant contribution.

“…… they didn’t know what they were doing (as a mentor in second year)…. maybe they were confused with their role ….. many mentors stay in the IVElite (programme) for the second year maybe due to friendships…… They just thought they should be there but didn’t know why…….” (Student G)

“…… my teammates absented from the trainings or meetings, I have to keep attending to show support to IVElite …..” (Student F)

As Mentors

Mentoring practice provides the student mentors with opportunities to be aware of their abilities and reflect upon the learning experiences when they were mentees. Such self-awareness led to improved self-esteem and confidence, and in turn, a better self-regulated approach to learning (Beltman and Schaeben, 2012). In the subsequent years, the mentoring experiences also helped students improve their communication skills and interpersonal competence (King et al., 2002; Heirdsfield et al., 2008b). Together with university experiences, it further strengthens personal growth and development, which is a valuable asset for students as they embark on their future career.

Students in the programme grew from mentees into mentors, and through this experience, they were able to gain insight. As a result, they became more self-aware and more able to reflect upon their own development progress. Moreover, they may be able to assist and guide the mentees better, knowing what is needed from their experiences as the mentees.

“…… (being) a mentor, I have to take responsibility to assist mentees. I was assisted in the past and thus I would like to take this opportunity to assist the new participants…… (through experience as mentee), mentors give mentee encouragement (on project opinion and decision making), mentee performs better……” (Student D)

The Role of Mentors

Some students were confused with their roles of being mentor.

“…. I heard from the teammates that they didn’t clear of their role… they had a mission of running a project and activities in the first year (as mentee); however, in the second year, they didn’t realise what have to be done…time was important factor to build rapport between mentors and mentees. However, it
was difficult to implement to do so…. project officers said, “Be serious in meetings and trainings; be easy in causal gathering.” but some mentors were not skilful to do so.” (Student G)

In line with the previous studies (Leung and Bush, 2003; Heirdsfield et al., 2008a), the mentor’s perception as well as their personal quality played a critical role in successful mentoring. Terrion and Leonard (2007) suggested mentors should possess four desirable characteristics and they are understanding and empathetic; (2) accessible to meet mentees’ need; (3) good communication skills; (4) enthusiasm. Schwartz et al. (2011) further added that students’ personal quality as well as their interpersonal characteristics also played a critical role on the efficiency of mentoring. In the present study, all student mentees from the first year will automatically be promoted as peer mentors without any particular selection criteria. Though four workshop sessions were provided in guiding students in becoming mentors, there is no guarantee that they can efficiently lead newly recruited mentees. Thus, screening may be necessary in the future for the programme to ensure consistent practice and hence consistent success of the peer-mentorship programme (Heirdsfield et al., 2008a).

Nevertheless, student mentors in the present study were more concerned with whether the relationship between mentors and mentees should be casual or formal.

“Different mentors have different views towards the role of mentors. Some claimed that the role of mentors should be serious whereas others thought it should be at ease.” (Student F)

Heirdsfield et al. (2008b) suggested that mentor training plays the crucial role of keeping mentors, who are key persons in the continuation of peer-mentorship programmes. Peer mentorship programmes must provide sufficient training and coaching to newly promoted mentors so that they can successfully carry out the mentorship role instead of viewing mentoring as a backup support within the peer-mentorship programme.

“…… (the role of mentors) was not clearly defined. We know we bear a role of mentor but we don’t clearly know how to do. Although training was provided, it was insufficient…… we are not skilful to help mentees and not confident to help mentees… more training materials such as lecture note with guidelines should be provided instead of verbal sharing… and the training started late after mentees were recruited, we would be better if sufficient time is allowed to prepare and practice…… but now we are confused and not confident to help mentees……”.

Insufficient mentor induction training, as complained by the student mentors in this study, may confuse mentors about their role and they might not know what to do. Students may then feel frustrated, resulting in self-doubt and loss of focus.

“The orientation for mentees was not perfect this year because we were in-charge of it. We were not capable to handle (and organise) the orientation (for mentee)…..” (Student A and C)

Repetitiveness of the Programme

Many students wished to have new activities and learning experiences during the second
year as they were automatically promoted to be the mentors.

“Perhaps, it is because we, the mentors, are repeating the practice of the first year in IVElite and our expectations drop in the second year because IVElite programme is repeating the practice of the first year…… we can anticipate the next activity and training workshops more or less the same.” (Student C)

The programme was perceived to be important in refreshing the memory of those learning to be mentors, so that they can guide newly recruited mentees better and in a more knowledgeable manner. Such programme structure perhaps should have been clearly stated to student mentors so that they do not feel such repetitiveness to be unnecessary and time wasting.

**Time Management**

Most previous studies showed that many mentors experienced difficulty with time management. These difficulties arose in scheduling meetings to allow for maximum attendance, guiding students, and keeping track of their progress (Heirdsfield, 2008b). Schwartz, Rhodes and Herrera (2012) raised that time can be a major factor affecting the outcome of mentorship programme. For some students, fulfilling the learning requirements of the programme as mentees and guiding future mentees in subsequent years as mentors required much more time than anticipated.

“Timing is a factor. Members were busy in preparing their study, especially during exam weeks and thus we were not free to attend the programme meetings during those period…… the balance of time devoted to study and IVElite is an issue which I feel annoyed till now…….” (Student A)

“…… what I don’t like (about the programme) was the meetings were held too long…… the meetings were very time consuming which made me got stomach ache. I don’t mind the meetings took long but I felt bad about my stomach ache……” (Student B and D)

“……we are very busy and have attended IVElite meeting from 5:30 p.m. to almost 9:00 p.m. at least once a week. We feel exhausted from the prolonged meetings after school… but I think it is worth.” (Students F)

The time constraint could also be created by the students as they were taking on too much at a time, and/or wanted to achieve multiple goals without being selective and prioritising tasks.

“…… we had limited time…… we had to study, prepare tests, and exam as well as academic project. We had not enough time to prepare orientation for mentee already…… on the other hand, we were planning to co-organise an activity with other two campuses but we could not compromise a time for meeting and the plan was cancelled finally……” (Student C)

However, such drawbacks also provide ample opportunity for students to learn about time management, raising their organisation skills (Heirdsfied et al., 2008b) as well as improving their sense of autonomy (Noom et al., 2001). Having said that, should students require to absent from class to guide mentees in peer-mentorship programme activities,
that may post academic stress on participating students while causing teachers’ to have negative attitude toward mentorship programme (Schwartz et al., 2012).

**Level of Support from Institution**

Insufficient support from the institution was another concern raised by the students.

“…… it would be much better if more resources and support can be added … mentees suggested a method to promote IVElite by sticking signage on the wall of washroom in campus but it was banned by campus secretariat. The project would run better if we got support from them……most of the teachers lack confidence in the performance of students in IVE and do not take student programme seriously. On the contrary, members of IVElite are taken seriously as [Executive Director of the Vocational Training Council of Hong Kong] attended our sharing session of student learning project. We feel we are respected……” (Students G)

“…… is not a well-known programme currently, even my teachers do not realise what it is…. perhaps they are not interested to know what the student programmes are…. I hope IVElite will be well-known programme and teacher will be impressed that I am one of the mentors in IVElite and show understanding to my absence from lessons because of handling IVElite matters.” (Students F)

Lack of understanding and inconsistency among institution management support on peer-mentorship programme may hinder students’ further participation and the level of their engagement. Class teachers’ lack of understanding and knowledge as well as interest in peer mentoring can affect mentors’ closeness with their mentees and mentors’ motivation in participating mentorship programme in the expense of missing classes (Schwartz et al., 2012). Such discouragement and associated impacts can post an undesirable effect on the overall success of the programme. Future development of the programme should seek for more support and such support should be consistent on all levels of the institution management.

**The Materialistic Rewards and Recognitions**

Three students raised the issue regarding the level of recognition for their participation and commitment to the peer-mentorship programme.

“…… the most important part (in studying) is academic performance which reflects in transcripts; however it seems that the performance in IVElite is not a matter……” (Student A)

“…… my willingness of attending the meetings dropped due to no substantial received…. substantial gained is more important to me….no evidence prove my contribution, I am not able to show how much soft skills I have learnt……” (Student F)

“…… comparing to other programmes, the awards given to members of IVElite are not attractive… records of voluntary services and …. [participation] in module activities……” (Student G)
Heirdsfield et al., (2008a) found that besides enhancing personal and professional growth as well as self-satisfaction and self-worth, students were positive about the programme on other outcomes, including the award of several certificates, which could improve their curricula vitae. Although it seems materialistic for the students to seek a documented academic recognition for their contributions in the peer-mentorship programme, such as transcript indication or certificate of awards, it is not without reason when considering the time and level of commitment is required to participate in the programme.

“…… IVElite has engaged much of our time and effort for extra-curricular activity. So we are less likely to spare time and effort for other programmes. In consequences, our experience of participation in other extra-curricular activity shown in non-academic transcript would be limited to IVElite only. Comparing with other students joining several programmes, their experience of participation in several extra-curricular activities would seem more fruitful.”

(Student F)

The award of certificate and recognition of students’ contribution may not only foster the students’ further engagement and continuous development of the peer-mentorship programme, teachers and institution management may have more positive attitudes toward mentoring, hence giving more encouraging support toward students.

**FINDINGS SUMMARY AND RESEARCH LIMITATIONS**

The present study intends to investigate students’ experiences in the newly launched peer-mentorship programme. Students’ experiences as mentees and as mentors were both investigated. In response to the research questions, students’ experiences were generally positive. They believed that their learning initiative, self-regulation, and autonomy were improved as reflected by the dialogue in the transcripts. They were pleased with the learning and skills acquired but were frustrated with some challenging learning modules. Students were able to accurately articulate the acquired learning and skills they gained from the programme. However, it was expressed that the knowledge and skills gained were not easily marketable and may not be fully displayed in future job interviews.

Students were particularly fond of the peer-mentorship programme providing them with opportunities for networking and meeting new friends as well as providing them with a platform to exchange ideas and share their experiences of the programme. Students found that their communication and interpersonal competency has improved. They were able to identify their weaknesses and would not shy away from improvement. The present study revealed that new friendships and sharing learning experiences were able to enhance the sense of belonging and enhance engagement among students during activities.

Time constraints and insufficient mentor training were two of the major issues of concern that students have raised. Insufficient mentor training was particularly concerning considering that it would hamper the overall quality and future sustainability of the programme. More training should be provided to better educate student mentors in effective mentoring technique. Other recommendations include formal appraisal and recognition such as the issuing certificates or awards of attendance, more cross campus activities, active promotion of the programme, as well as increased support from institution management. These adjustments may strengthen the programme and facilitate
its future development.

One limitation of this study is that it is cross-sectional in nature. To overcome this limitation, future research needs to adopt a longitudinal approach. A possible longitudinal study could involve both qualitative and quantitative data to examine mentors’ and mentees’ subjective experience and objective learning outcomes. Another major limitation of this study is that the current study only focused on one mentorship programme within HKIVE, one of the vocational education and training institutes in Hong Kong. Future research should expand to include more vocational education and training as well as other post-secondary / tertiary institutes.

CONCLUSION

Mentors and mentees in peer-mentorship programme have learnt from one another. IVElite enhances students’ personal growth and development, particularly their initiative, independence, autonomy, sense of belonging and communication skills. The current study is unique as it has taken place in one of the largest vocation education and training institute in Hong Kong, where there has been almost no research into youth peer-mentoring and its impacts on whole person development. Findings from the current study enables better peer-mentoring programmes to be designed, which are tailored to fulfilling the needs and expectations of mentees as well as mentors.

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Reference List


ON-GOING RESEARCH

Consumer Behavior towards Online Shopping
A Study with reference to Coimbatore City

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Coimbatore, India

Abstract

With the advent of internet, the popularity of online shopping has caught the attention of many. Many studies have been done in developed nations to know the attitude and behavior of consumers towards online shopping. For instance, previous studies on online shopping behavior found that ease of use, usefulness, perceived risk and product attributes have significant influence on intention to buy. However the study of these attributes and its influence on intention to buy is not clear as only limited attention is paid in India encompassing these variables and its influence on intention to buy. Through this study, we investigate how these variables interact with one another and influence buyer's intention to buy. Using structural equation modeling, we uncover the influence of these variables on intention to buy. Research and managerial implications are provided

Keywords: Online shopping, perceived risk, ease of use, usefulness and product attributes.

1. INTRODUCTION

Online shopping refers to the process of purchasing products or services via the Internet (Na Li and Ping Zhang, 2002). The process consists of five steps similar to those associated with traditional shopping behavior. In the typical online shopping process, when potential consumers recognize a need for some merchandise or service, they go to the Internet and search for need-related information. However, rather than searching actively, at times potential consumers are attracted by information about products or services associated with the felt need. They evaluate alternatives and choose the one that best fits their criteria for meeting the felt need. Finally, a transaction is conducted and post-sales services provided. Online shopping attitude refers to consumer’s
psychological state in terms of making purchases on the Internet (Li and Zhang, 2002). The penetration rate of Internet users in Asia was just higher than Africa, as at 30 June 2010, according to the Internet World Statistics (2010). No doubt that the Internet has been influencing our lives deeply in which it plays an important, indispensable and irreplaceable role (Guo and Noor, 2011).

Online shopping has become a popular and easy way for customers. This new innovative type of shopping brings a great number and also wide range of merchandise to consumers; it also offers a huge market and numerous business opportunities (Guo June and Noor, 2011).

Online consumer behavior became a contemporary research area with an increasing number of researches. The research articles which are available in various journals and conference proceedings in the fields of management information system and marketing management identifies that researchers bring theories from classical consumer behaviour research, such as behavioral learning (Skinner, 1938), personality research (Folkes 1988), information processing (Bettman 1979), and attitude models (Fishbein 1967).

The Internet has brought a sweeping revolution in the way we shop or buy products today. With the advent of internet, online shopping becomes popular and most preferred by certain segment of consumers for products like travel, books, music, gadgets etc. Though Internet penetration and online shopping is highly evolved in developed nations, in India, the story is different. Internet penetration is very low in India with only 8.4% of the population online according to a study conducted by McKinsey in 2012. The poor infrastructure and lackadaisical approach of our political system is nearly crippling the growth of internet penetration in our country. E-commerce accounts for less than 1% of retail sales compared to 4% in Brazil (Upasna, 2012).

Despite the dampeners, the country offers enormous potential. According to McKinsey report 2012, E-commerce in India is projected to reach $2 billion in sales by 2015. It is estimated that India will have 38 million active online shoppers by then. In 2011, investors pumped $305 million in e-commerce in India. Today companies have entered this online space to tap its enormous potential. Players like flipkart, Amazon e-Bay to name a few are very active in this space. These players are very aggressive in attracting young population by offering convenience, choice, better bargain and speed of buying (Upasna, 2012).

On the demand side, consumers are time pressed. With more and more consumers becoming increasingly familiar with internet and its benefits, online shopping is gaining popularity and preference among the set of consumers who seek better value proposition when compared to offline shopping in terms of information, convenience, cost, and choice. Besides, youngsters today are not afraid of experimenting with new ways of shopping which has also led to the popularity and growth of online shopping in India.

2. RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

With online shopping grabbing the eyeballs of many, understanding variables that influence the intention to buy through online needs more attention. This will help companies in identifying variables that play a major role in influencing customer's
intention to buy there by helping them in crafting strategies which drives consumers to prefer online shopping. For instance, if an online retailer understands that perceived risks are high in certain categories that influence consumer’s intention to buy, retailers can craft strategies to minimize perceived risks and drive consumers to buy through online.

Earlier studies paid much attention to this topic in developed nations where internet penetration is high and consumers are highly evolved. For instance, Vellido et al. (2000) extracted nine factors associated with user’s perception of online shopping. Among these factors the risk perception of users was demonstrated to be the main discriminator between people buying online and people not buying online. Other discriminating factors were: control over and convenience of the shopping process affordability of merchandise, customer service and ease of use of the shopping site. Jarvenpaa and Todd (1997) proposed a model of attitudes and shopping intention towards Internet shopping in general. The model included several indicators, belonging to four major categories; the value of the product, the shopping experience, the quality of service offered by the website and the risk perceptions of Internet retail shopping. Consumer’s attitude towards online shopping affects their buying decisions. McKechnie et.al (2006) proposed that the application of the TAM model is useful but some more links to be added to the existing TAM Model.

However little attention is paid in India where internet penetration is significantly low and consumers are not so evolved in this space. Hence a need for such as study is identified by the researcher to see how far these variables are relevant in India and how much they influence consumer’s intention to buy.

3. OBJECTIVES

This study aims to:

1. Study the attributes that influence customers’ intention to buy online
2. Study the highest influencing attributes on intention to buy online
3. Identify the relationship of demographical factors that influence online shopping
4. Understand the customer satisfaction level of online purchase

4. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Luarn and Lin (2003), the explosive growth of the Internet usage provides a great number of potential consumers to E-marketers. Whether the marketers can convert their potential customers into real ones and retain them depends to a very large extent on the service they offer and the perceived customer satisfaction of consumers.

Childers et al. (2001) analysis found that convenience and navigations were reliable predictors of ease of use, and shopping enjoyment. Besides enjoyment is a strong and consistent predictor of attitude in terms of interactive shopping.

Davis (1986) defined perceived usefulness as, the degree to which a person believes that buying a particular product or service will enhance his satisfaction. Pavlou (2003) proved in his research that perceived usefulness is positively related to the intention to purchase online. Davis (1989) defined perceived ease of use as, the degree to which a person believes that particular medium would reduce his effort.
Consistent with this goal-orientation perspective, consumers more likely to buy on the Internet are likely to be time-starved (Bellman, Lohse and Johnson 1999).

Pavlou (2003) online purchase intention can be defined as a situation where a consumer is willing and intends to make online transactions. Purchase intention can also be defined as a consumer’s intention to build an online relationship and have transactions with a Web retailer (Zwass, 1998).

Novak et al. (1999), proved in the research factors like product varieties, mismatch between actual and delivered, sense of intangibility making impact intention to purchase online. Sherry et al. (2007), stated that delivery time and search time are the prime factors that affect intention to buy online, besides negotiation is the another factor which make greater impact on online shopping. Bellman et al. (1999) revealed in their research the demographical factors are influencing positively towards purchase intention. Gender impact on Internet usage has also been analyzed from different perspectives by different researchers.

Gefen et al. (2003) revealed that build online trust in an environment that lacks the typical human interaction that often leads to trust in other circumstances advances our understanding of these constructs and their linkages to behavior. Dowling and Stalin (1994), identified that perceived risk for a specific product is a combination of a fixed component, the product category risk (PCR), and a variable component, the product specific risk (PSR).

Kim et al. (2008), consumers’ perceived risk can also be defined as a consumer’s belief about potential uncertain negative outcomes from the E-transaction. Rice (1997) adds that enjoyment of the online shopping experience is an important determinant of retaining the online shoppers trust and perceived risks.

Wu (2003) found that the attributes like convenience, accessibility of global brands, attractive rates and offers, had a significant relationship with attitude toward online shopping. Nysveen and Pedersen (2004) found that intention to purchase online depends on factors like time saving, less travel of distance, easy payment, customization of products.

Mauldin and Arunachalam (2002) is identified that certain attributes like long deliver time, speed of the internet, more searching time for a specific product, no negotiation are closed related intention to purchase the products through online. Hoffman and Novak (1996) revealed that attributes like less variety, any time shopping, physical evidence are impacting on online purchase intention.

McKnight et al. (2002) is identified that most researchers agreed on trusting believes positively influence the trusting intention to buy. Much has been made over the last decade about the e-commerce revolution, to the point where it has and still is the most commented business phenomenon. However, as Rosenbloom (2003) aptly comments, the e-commerce revolution is at best an e-commerce evolution.

Tonita et al. (2004) found that in online shopping context consumer evaluate their internet shopping experience in terms of perception regarding product customization,
form of payment, delivery terms, service offered, risk involved, privacy, security, personalization, and enjoyment.

Taylor (1974) revealed that the central problem of consumer behavior is choice. Perception of risk is one pivotal aspect of consumer behavior because risk is often perceived to be a painful in that it may produce anxiety. The amount of risk perceived in a particular situation and the risk will be affected by the individual consumers.

Reichheld and Schefter (2000) revealed that customer trust as the primary factor for customer commitment and loyalty. In addition to that customer satisfaction and perceived value as additional explanatory variables used in this study, and the results are proved that customer show attitude and commitment towards purchase loyalty.

Swaminathan et al. (1999) identified that the trust in a vendor is likely to affect the customer's perception of vendor's reliability and is therefore identified as an antecedent of an electronic exchange.

The earlier studies revealed that certain attributes making impact on intention to purchase through online. But there is no research to consider those factors with the focus of specific demographical area. So after identifying those factors the researcher created the theoretical framework by considering all 20 attributes for the research.

5. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Based on the literatures it is proved that the following variables are influencing online purchase intention. Such as Time saving, Travel is not much required, Customers’ interest on e-shopping, Product delivery takes longer time, High searching time, Impact of Internet speed, Preference of e-shopping in future, Possibility of shopping experience by 24x7, Easy payment assistance, Attractive offers, Online shopping may not have much cost benefits, Product can be customized, Negotiation is not possible, Purchase is possible from anywhere, Access to Global brands, Lack of physical evidence, More brand choices, Actual product varies than delivered, Less varieties available to view on website, Product intangibility makes customer difficult to choose.

Figure 1: Theoretical Framework: Attributes influencing on Online Shopping
The consumers facing attributes are taken as a base to study the influence of these attributes on online shopping. Using factor analysis, the researcher grouped these attributes under various dimensions. Then using SEM, the researcher proposes to identify the dimensions that have the highest influence on intention to buy. Finally, the implication of the study on retailer is proposed based on the outcome of the study.

6. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research design is exploratory in nature and data has been collected through structured questionnaire. The respondents were selected from various educational institutions and corporate around Coimbatore City. The sample size 198 was determined by using G3 software and valid respondents were 186. A pilot study was conducted from 21 respondents and necessary modification had taken place based on the feedback from pilot study. Convenience sampling followed as unavailability of list of Online Shoppers. Visual PLSS is a software used for doing structural equation modeling to test cause and effect relationship between the latent variables (constructs), intra construct relationship (between indicator variables) using partial least square (PLS) algorithm.

Based on the literature the following four research hypothesis were framed

- H1: Ease of use leads to online purchase intention
- H2: Usefulness leads to online purchase intention
- H3: Product Attribute to online purchase intention
- H4: Perceived Risk to online purchase intention

The authors have employed Jackknife re-sampling algorithm (non-parametric method of estimating the standard error creating a pseudo population with the help of samples of sample), and Factor Analysis techniques to analyze the collected data. The reliability and validity of the models have also been explored. The preliminary results show convergent validity and discriminant validity of the model.

7. PROFILE OF THE RESPONDENTS

7.1 Demographical data of the respondents

The study has been conducted in Coimbatore City among 200 respondents based on G3 software and valid respondents were 186. Demographical data of respondents obtained including the following: gender, age, occupation and income. Only the respondents those who purchased for at least two times through online considered.

The majority of the respondents are between the age group of 20 and 25 (81.7%) which can be used to predict that most of the online shoppers belong to this age group. While taking gender into consideration, 53.2 % of respondents are male while 46.8% belongs to female category. As this study was conducted to focus on the corporate and college people, the percentage of respondents are more in these groups, i.e., 47% and 41% respectively. Most of the respondents fall under income group of less than Rs.10, 000 per month (45%).
7.2 Satisfactory level in online purchase

About 59.7% of respondents have agreed that they are satisfied with the online purchase as they have experienced. More than 30% of respondents say that they are highly satisfied towards online shopping. Only a very few number of respondents have voted neutral. This satisfactory analysis depicts the level of ease and satisfaction that is enjoyed in online services.

7.3 Frequency of online purchase

The majority of the online purchases happen once in a month. More than 51% of users do online shopping once in a month. Over 33% users say that they purchase more than once in a month. It evidences that customers are comfortable and aware of online purchase, which will increase in future over the traditional shop purchases. 5% of customers buy products through online every week. 10% of customers say that they are interested in purchasing more than once in a week due to ease of online purchase.

7.4 Amount spent for online purchase in a year

Money spent for the online purchase is been calculated for a period of one year. More than 76% of respondents spend less than Rs.10,000 in a year for online purchase. This is due to the risk involved in every transaction through online. Though risk persists, 2.7% people spend more than Rs.30,000 in a year for online purchases.

7.5 Products group purchased through online shopping

Online buying is carried over for many product types varying from books, music to tickets. The analysis shows that consumers prefer buying the products online which is more intangible. Travel & vacations and books are most preferred product/service by most of the online consumers.

Computer peripherals are also preferred by most of the people because of the reduction in transportation cost of those products. Most of those products are home delivered by the e-tailers. Entertainment industry also grows with the help of internet. Booking tickets for movies, parties and shows happens over online which in turn give steady growth for the internet based companies.

8. PRELIMINARY FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

It has been found that factors like perceived risk, ease of use and product attributes are positively correlated with online purchase intention. Among these variables, product attributes is the major factor that leads to high purchase intention for online shopping.

- Ease of use construct is positively correlated with the intention towards online purchase, i.e., when the ease of use increases the intention to purchase online also increases.

Usefulness is negatively correlated with intention to purchase.
Product attributes which consist of factors like time saving, less or no travelling, product customization, and access to global brands is positively correlated to intention to purchase.

Perceived risk is positively correlated with intention to buy.

It has been identified that most of respondents are satisfied with online shopping. Only few of respondents are not satisfied with the online shopping. The reason being, the delivery delay and defective products shipped etc. The online retailers should make sure that they deliver products with quality at the promised time, which will ultimately increase the customer satisfaction.

Gender influence has very little impact on a consumer’s intention to purchase online. Almost equal percentage of male and female prefer online shopping. Other factors like income, age does not play a significant role.

9. MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

The present study confirms that perceived risk, ease of use and product attributes of online shopping has a major influence on consumer’s intention to buy. Hence online retailers should try and reduce perceived risks among consumers. This can be achieved through giving money-back-guarantee, offering quality merchandise, secured online transactions and improved customer service. Online retailers can also use Cash on Delivery as a mechanism to reduce perceived merchandise delivery risks and perceived merchandise quality risks. Rating of merchandise by consumers, credentials from consumers would also reduce perceived risks significantly. The retailer should also focus on better packaging that can reduce product tampering.

Retailers should also focus on aspects like delivery of right products at customer’s doorsteps to prevent mismatch of merchandise ordered and merchandise delivered. Consistent delivery on these aspects will surely improve the image of online retailer and also reduces perceived risks of consumers significantly. Using mass media, retailers can convey or highlight few aspects such as safety of transactions, reliability of products, ease of delivery, merchandise quality and cash back guarantee which in turn will improve web traffic to an online retail store.

It is also critical for online retailer to make the web more user-friendly. Online consumers should find the web easy to navigate. Retailers should provide adequate information about merchandise, facility to compare the merchandise on various dimensions such as price, features, likes, etc., would help consumers in making a better choice. A well organized web layout, neat arrangements of merchandise under different categories, more choices at various price points, better visuals would enhance the chances of conversion rates and also improve web footfalls. Encouraging consumers to opt-in for receiving product related e-mails, offers would also drive traffic to the portal. This also helps in up-selling and cross-selling of products.

Better customer service in terms of quick response to customer queries, better handling of customer complaints would improve the image of online retailer.
10. CONCLUSION

Through this study, the researcher has attempted to study different consumer variables that influence consumer’s intention to buy online. However, the researcher did not attempt to study the moderating, intervening, and extraneous variables that may influence consumer’s intention to buy. There is a scope to study variables which moderate consumer’s intention to buy. The analysis is based on the data collected only from a particular city. It would be valuable to further test these variables across other cities. The researcher has made no attempt to study specific high involvement product categories in this study. It would be interesting to extend this study across low and high involvement product categories and measure the effect of these variables on intention to buy.

In this research, an attempt has been made only to study consumer variables. There is a scope for researchers to study retailer’s attributes and its influence on intention to buy. Hence the scope is huge. It is useful to incorporate other perspectives of analysis that allow a depth understanding of various relationships among different variables and its influence on intention to buy.
Reference list


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Dr. Huong Ha
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