

Factors that Influence Consumer Word-of-Mouth Promotion among Mobile Telecommunication Service Users in Malaysia

Abdul Kadir Othman^{1*}, Mohd Khirzan Badzli A Rahman², Mohamad Rifdi Mohd Amin³,
Mohd Faizal Mohd Isa⁴, Mohd Zulkifli Abdullah⁵

^{1,2} *Institute of Business Excellence, Universiti Teknologi MARA, 40450 Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia*

³ *Wisma Dominos, No 4, Jalan Kontraktor U1/14, Hicom-Glenmarie Industrial Park, 40150 Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia*

⁴ *Department of Human Resources Management, School of Business Management, Universiti Utara Malaysia, 06010 Sintok, Kedah, Malaysia*

⁵ *Faculty of Business and Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA Puncak Alam, 42300 Puncak Alam, Selangor, Malaysia*

Email: abdkadir@uitm.edu.my

**Corresponding author*

Abstract

Competing in the new era of business that is characterized as highly volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous, mobile telecommunication companies need to offer competitive products with competitive price. Since telecommunication services are quite synonymous, it is quite difficult to outperform others especially in the service offering. Having consumers who are willing to engage in extra role behaviour; i.e. word-of-mouth promotion, is regarded as an advantage for the company. The present study is undertaken to investigate factors that contribute to users' word-of-mouth promotion pertaining to telecommunication services. Data were collected from 405 telecommunication post-paid and prepaid users using online survey throughout Malaysia using convenience sampling technique. However, using factor analysis and normality test, the data collected were valid and representative of the population. Based on the results of multiple regression analysis, service quality, service availability and promotional packages play significant roles in determining users' word-of-mouth promotion. Price was found to be a non-significant predictor of users' word-of-mouth promotion. There are two main implications of the findings; first, mobile telecommunication service providers should focus on these three factors to promote their services to bigger audience. Second, price should not be used as a basis to compete with others since users do not consider price as an important factor that influences users' positive word-of-mouth promotion.

Keywords: service quality; service availability; promotional package; price; word-of-mouth, ambassador

Introduction

Conducting businesses in the present market condition characterized as volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous requires organizations to not only satisfy customers but also engage them so that they are willing to act as the ambassador for them in promoting the company to others. The concept of 'customer as an ambassador' is relatively a new concept in the marketing field but it has gained popularity since its inception a few years ago (Aoki, Tudor, Borders, & Lester, 2020). Being an

ambassador, a customer is willing to promote the brand name of the company by spreading positive word-of-mouth to others. When customers are willing to engage in this behaviour, companies save a significant amount of expenditure in promoting the company's brand itself.

Mobile telecommunication service providers are competing in the oligopolistic market characterized as imperfect competition dominated by a few major players in the industry (Latimaha & Bahari, 2016; Nawaz, & Akram, 2021). The three major players in the telecommunication industry in Malaysia are Maxis Bhd with 38.1% market share, Celcom (Axiata) with 33.7% market share, and Digi telecommunications with 28.2% market share. Others are Telekom Malaysia, U Mobile and TIME dotcom with small percentages of the market share (Hajar, Ibrahim, Darun, & Al-Sharafi, 2020). The six major players are competing with each other to enlarge their market share mostly by introducing new packages of the telecommunication service that can attract users to switch from their current telecommunication service providers. This competition will result in frequent changes in market dominance.

In mobile telecommunication service industry, companies are spending a lot to attract, grow and retain customers/ users (Daniel, 2019; Hajar et al., 2020). Various strategies have been used by these companies ranging from offering special packages, enhancing the level of customer service provided, improving the existing service levels, offering special rates for services subscribed and others. However, the actual factors that contribute to users' willingness to stay loyal and engage in word-of-mouth promotion are not clear. Scarcity of studies in this area of studies has triggered the researchers' motivation to conduct this research project in order to determine the factors that contribute to users' willingness to engage in word-of-mouth promotion for mobile telecommunication service providers.

Literature Review

In establishing customer relationship, Qahri-Saremi and Montazemi (2019) and Ismagilova, Slade, Rana, and Dwivedi (2020) have emphasised on the importance of several factors that affect customer word-of-mouth promotion, including quality, satisfaction, value, trust, price perception, commitment, alternative attractiveness, attitude toward purchase intention, subjective norms, switching costs, prior switching experience, and variety seeking. However, not many researchers have examined all these factors that influence customer word-of-mouth promotion for mobile telecommunication service providers (Han, & Ryu, 2012; Mehrad, & Mohammadi, 2017). For that reason, this study is specifically conducted to gain a deeper understanding on whether price, promotion, service quality and service availability affect customer word-of-mouth promotion for mobile telecommunication service providers in Malaysia.

Nowadays, customers always consider the price of a product or service offered by a telecommunications company and compare it to the prices offered by other similar service providers before subscribing. Alzoubi and Inairat (2020) and Munyanti and Masrom (2018) mentioned that in the telecommunications industry, service providers offer a primary contract at an attractive price to ensure that their customers continue to use their service for the specified duration of time, which may include repetitive transactions defined as part of the customer retention strategy. Additionally, an observation regarding recent issues in Malaysia's mobile telecommunications industry justified the conduct of this study. Intense competition between mobile service providers such as Maxis Bhd, Digi telecommunications, and Celcom, which has resulted in ongoing price wars, has posed a significant obstacle to the industry's growth (Putit & Abdullah, 2019).

According to Putit and Abdullah (2019), Maxis Bhd has lost over one million subscribers since 2015. According to the report, Maxis Bhd lost about 400,000 subscribers in the first quarter of 2016. This trend continued in the second quarter, when 149,000 subscribers left Maxis Bhd, followed by another 203,000 in the third quarter of 2016, when Maxis Bhd was no longer recognised as Malaysia's market leader in mobile telecommunications. This resulted in a significant decline in the market share of Maxis Bhd by 7%. According to experts, this situation occurred because of the

company's slower response to market changes compared to its competitors. Additionally, it was heavily reliant on Maxis Bhd's brand reputation through a high price, rather than offering customers more attractive packages. Additionally, Hajar et al. (2020) mentioned that between 72 and 78 percent of Maxis Bhd customers would be enticed by the plans and lower prices offered by competitors such as Digi telecommunications, Celcom, and U-Mobile. Customers who are satisfied with the price of the service will engage in positive word-of-mouth promotion (Mukerjee, 2018; Nguyen, Tran, & Huynh, 2019). The discussion leads to the development of the first hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Attractive price (subscription fee) of the mobile telecommunication service influences customer positive word-of-mouth promotion.

Furthermore, service quality is a significant issue that telecommunication service providers face when competing for customers' purchase attention. The breadth of network and internet coverage, customer service, and after-sales service are all examples of service quality. The quality of a service is distinct from that of a product. This is due to their intangible nature of services, their perishability, and their concurrent and heterogeneous production and consumption (Hole, Pawar & Bhaskar, 2018). It is particularly challenging for mobile telecommunications service providers to consistently deliver high-quality service, as market composition and competitive characteristics are constantly changing.

This competition is not only about ensuring network quality through significant investment in network extension and upgrade efforts, but also about acquiring and retaining customers through direct and indirect price reduction efforts. Aburayya, Marzouqi, Alawadhi, Abdouli, and Taryam (2020) defined quality as the degree to which a product or service meets or exceeds a consumer's expectation. Traditionally, customer perceptions of a service quality have been quantified immediately after the service has been consumed. Indeed, the consumer's perception of service quality at the point at which he or she next decides whether or not to purchase the service may be a more accurate predictor of repeat purchasing behaviour (Rita, Oliveira, & Farisa, 2019). Customers who are satisfied with the quality of service will engage in positive word-of-mouth promotion (Mukerjee, 2018; Ryu & Park, 2020). The discussion leads to the development of the second hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: Excellent quality of the mobile telecommunication service influences customer positive word-of-mouth promotion.

Moreover, promotion is an important element that makes customers interested in buying a product or service offered in the market. Promotions can come in a variety of ways; tangible and intangible. In Malaysia, telecommunications service providers conduct their own promotional activities for products and services through service packages including unlimited internet, family plans, and bundle packages. Promotion is one type of stimulus that serves as an additional incentive for consumers to purchase a product or service. Promotion is intended to expedite the selling process and increase sales volume by providing additional incentives (Goyal, 2019). Customers who are satisfied with the promotional packages will engage in positive word-of-mouth promotion (Hanaysha, 2021; Ryu & Park, 2020). The discussion leads to the development of the third hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: Interesting promotional package of the mobile telecommunication service influences customer positive word-of-mouth promotion.

Finally, service availability is one of the issues that telecommunication service providers in Malaysia are currently facing (Rahim, Abdul-Rahman, & Mahmud, 2021). Some of their products

and services are not accessible to all customers, implying that their products are not for everyone, for instance, consider the availability of 4G network coverage in Malaysia. Not all areas are covered by 4G network coverage, and most of the time, 4G network coverage is only available in big cities with a large population. Apart from that, when new mobile phones such as the iPhone are launched, customers are typically racing to get the latest iPhone mobile device packages with current telecommunications plans. However, most customers are unable to obtain these new device packages due to lack of inventory. Customers who are satisfied with network/service availability will engage in positive word-of-mouth promotion (Mukerjee, 2018; Oraedu, 2020; Ryu & Park, 2020). The discussion leads to the development of the fourth hypothesis:

Hypothesis 4: Availability of the mobile telecommunication services influences customer positive word-of-mouth promotion.

The telecommunications service providers should recognise the factors that have a significant influence on the customers' word-of-mouth promotion. The factors include promotion, service quality, and service availability. Moreover, the mobile telecommunication service suppliers will gain shoppers' loyalty and they will not move to a different telecommunication service provider. Through past studies, it has been gathered that the foremost distinguished factors influencing customer word-of-mouth promotion for this business sector are price, promotional packages, service quality, and service availability.

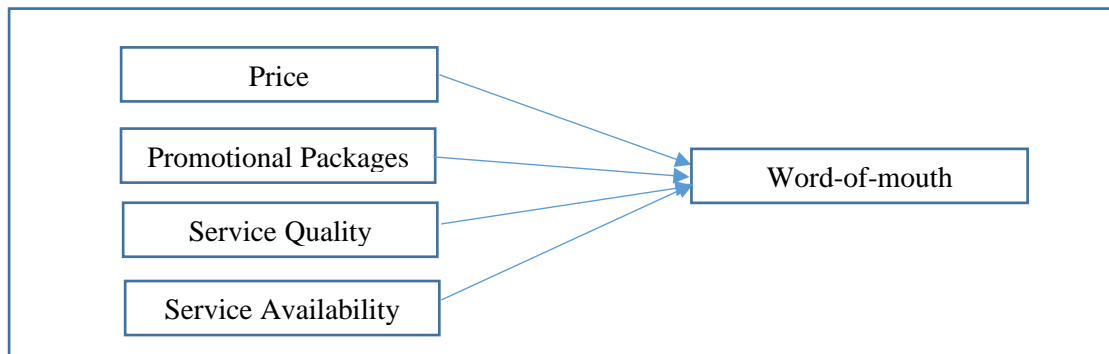


Figure 1: Research Framework

Methodology

This study uses correlational research design since its objective is to uncover variables that are related in such a way that a change in one variable will result in changes in another. As the research focuses on customer word-of-mouth promotion towards mobile telecommunications services in Malaysia, which requires answers to most of the questions about this research, such as types of telecommunication service delivery plans. The researcher believes that correlational research method is the most appropriate method to gain information to complete this research.

Four hundred and five samples were conveniently selected among millions of mobile telecommunication users since the researcher used a non-probability sampling technique. The justification for choosing 405 samples in this study is simply to gain more accurate results and there would probably be less error of the parameters estimated. In addition, in selecting the research samples, demographic factors such as age, gender, educational levels, income, and others were considered to ensure the representativeness of samples. The questionnaire items were developed based on the existing research instrument related to the topic of interest (Refer Table 1). The questionnaires were distributed online using Google Form. The form was distributed via emails, WhatsApp groups, Facebook, and Instagram. Those who answered the survey were those who are willing to provide honest feedback on the matters concerned.

In this study, the data gathered were statistically analysed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences version 25 (SPSS 25) to examine the data distribution, to perform descriptive analysis, to determine the reliability of data and test the hypotheses.

Table 1: Research Instrument Source

Variables	Sampled Items	Sources
Price (2 items)	Price is the most important factor when subscribing to this telecommunication service provider.	Kollmann (2000)
Promotional packages (5 items)	The conditions and terms of the packages are attractive.	Rowley (1998)
Service Quality (5 items)	The offered value-added services are easy to use.	Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry (1988)
Service Availability (4 items)	I get adequate customer support from my telecommunication service provider.	Bedeian (1971) & Sjolander (1992)
Word-of-mouth promotion (3 items)	I would recommend this telecommunication service provider to those who seek my advise about such matter.	Defever, Pandelaere, & Roe (2011)

Results and discussion

Demographic profile of respondents is meant to examine the distribution of data. From the descriptive analysis as shown in Table 2, it was found that majority of respondents (246 or 60%) were in the age range of 19 and 25 years old. It is followed by those aged between 26 and 35 years old (33.3% or 135). These two groups are the active and sensitive telecommunication service users. Female users were represented by 314 users or 77.5% while male users were represented by 90 users or 22.5%. Malay users constitute the largest respondent group with 389 users or 96%. Majority of the respondents were having tertiary educational qualification with 358 users or 88.4%. Regarding the employment status, students formed the majority of respondents with 182 users or 44.9% while private sector employees were the second largest group with 153 users or 37.8%. Pertaining to the monthly income received by respondents, in conjunction with the employment status, majority of respondents received less than RM1,200 (202 or 49.9%). it was followed by those receiving between RM1,201 and RM3,000 (117 respondents or 28.9%). A total of 21 respondents or 5.2% received between RM3,001 and RM5,000. In terms of the period of using the telecommunication service, majority of respondents have used the service between 1 and 3 years (86 respondents or 86.2%), followed by those using the service for more than 10 years (84 respondents or 20.7%). A sum of 74 respondents or 18.3% had been using the service between 3 and 5 years, followed by those using the service between 7 and 10 years (71 respondents or 17.5%). Some users are loyal users most probably among the older generation and the rest are considered as new users.

Most respondents preferred postpaid service that were represented by 243 or 60% of them. Only 162 respondents or 40% were prepaid users. The most popular telecommunication brand among the respondents is Celcom that was represented by 120 users or 29.6%, followed by Maxis Bhd that constituted 88 users or 21.7%, U Mobile was represented by 77 users or 19%, and Digi telecommunications was represented by 57 users or 14.1% of the total respondents. The distribution is more or less resemblance the market share held by each telecommunication service companies in Malaysia.

Table 2: Respondents' Profile

Variables	Description	Frequencies	Percentages
Age	< 18 Years Old	8	2.0
	19 – 25 Years Old	246	60.7
	26 – 35 Years Old	135	33.3
	36 – 45 Years Old	13	3.2
	46 Years Old	3	.7
Gender	Male	91	22.5
	Female	314	77.5
Race	Malay	389	96.0
	Chinese	2	.5
	Indian	2	.5
	Others	12	3.0
Educational Levels	Secondary Education - (SRP / SPM / STPM/ A-Level)	43	10.6
	Tertiary Education - (Diploma / Bachelor / Master / PhD)	358	88.4
	Others	4	1.0
Employment Status	Student	182	44.9
	Government Sector	34	8.4
	Private Sector	153	37.8
	Retiree	2	.5
	Unemployed	34	8.4
Income	Below RM1,200	202	49.9
	RM1,201 – RM3,000	117	28.9
	RM3,001 – RM5,000	55	13.6
	RM5,001 – RM7,000	21	5.2
	Above RM7,001	10	2.5
Period of using the telecommunication service	1 Year	34	8.4
	1 – 3 Years	86	21.2
	3 – 5 Years	74	18.3
	5 – 7 Years	71	17.5
	7 – 10 Yeas	56	13.8
	More than 10 Years	84	20.7
Type of service	Prepaid	162	40.0
	Postpaid	243	60.0
Brand subscribed	Celcom	120	29.6
	Digi telecommunications	57	14.1
	Maxis Bhd	88	21.7
	U Mobile	77	19.0
	Others	63	15.6

Table 3: Results of Factor Analysis for the Dependent Variable

		Component 1
I would recommend this telecommunication service provider to those who seek my advice about such matter		.910
I would encourage friends and relatives to use this telecommunication service provider		.900
I say positive things about this telecommunication service provider to others		.872
% variance explained		71.091
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.793
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	896.393
	df	6
	Sig.	.000
MSA		.737-.926

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Factor analysis with principal component extraction method was performed to examine the dimensionality of the items measuring the dependent variable that is positive word-of-mouth. As shown in Table 3, the KMO value is .793 and the Bartlett's Test of Sphericity is significant ($p < .001$), which indicate that the correlation matrix is sufficient to proceed with factor analysis. The MSA values are within the range of .737 and .926, indicating that the sampling is sufficient for each item used to measure the variable. The three items used to measure the variable formed a uni-dimensional component as conceptualized by the previous authors.

Table 4: Results of Factor Analysis for the Independent Variables

		Component			
		1	2	3	4
Service quality					
The offered value-added services are easy to use		.827			
I found that the variety of value-added services provided are easy to use		.794			
The offered value-added services are up-to-date		.787			
My present telecommunication service provider offers enough variety of pricing schedule		.626			
My present telecommunication service provider's call quality (voice clarity) is very good		.563			
Promotional packages					
The conditions and terms of the packages are attractive		.767			
The offer gives me more voice call time		.752			
Overall, I am satisfied with the promotional package offered by this telecommunication service provider		.734			
I will remain with the network because of the promotional packages		.690			
The offer gives me more data bundle		.688			
Service availability					
I get adequate customer support from my telecommunication service provider				.793	
It is easy to report complaint to my telecommunication service provider				.776	
The speed of complaint processing is satisfactory				.774	
Staff are friendly when I subscribe this telecommunication service provider				.769	
Price					
Price is the most important factor when subscribing to this telecommunication service provider					.843
I compare the prices of other telecommunication service providers before I choose one					.837
% variance explained		19.8	19.3	18.7	9.5
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.					.888
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square			3252.326	
	df			120	
	Sig.			.000	
MSA					.602-.952

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.

A principal component factor analysis with varimax rotation was performed to examine the dimensionality of items measuring the important factors that contribute to telecommunication users' word-of-mouth promotion. Table 4 shows that four factors were extracted as originally conceptualized with the percentage of variance explained more than 67%. The KMO value is .888 that is above the threshold value of 0.6 and the MSA values are ranging from .602 to .952, indicating sampling adequacy. The first component represents service quality with five items extracted explaining 19.8% of the variance. The factor loadings are in the range of .562 and .827. The second factor reflects promotional packages that contain five items explaining 19.3% of the variance. The factor loadings range from .689 to .767. The third factor constitutes four items that measure service availability. The factor loadings are in the range of .69 and .793. the fourth component contains two items measuring price with loadings of .837 and .843. All items are valid to measure the respective components in this study.

Table 5: Results of Reliability and Correlation Analysis

No	Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1	Price	4.33	.81	(.632)				
2	Service Quality	4.13	.66	.168**	(.833)			
3	Service Availability	3.90	.80	.132**	.531**	(.861)		
4	Promotional Packages	4.03	.77	.243**	.571**	.581**	(.831)	
5	Word-of-mouth Promotion	3.87	.82	.128**	.504**	.474**	.560**	(.862)

Notes: **. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed); Cronbach's alphas in the parentheses along the diagonal; N=405

Table 5 presents the results of reliability and correlation analysis. The reliability results are derived from the value of Cronbach's alphas and are presented in the parentheses along the diagonal. All variables have the Cronbach's alpha values higher than the threshold value of 0.7 as suggested by (Nunally & Bernstein, 1995), indicating the items are reliable to measure the intended variables. Although the Cronbach's alpha value price is 0.632, it is still acceptable since the number of items for the variable is only two (Sideridis, Saddaawi, & Al-Harbi, 2018). From the results of correlation analysis, all independent variables are significantly correlated with the dependent variable with the lowest correlation between price and word-of-mouth promotion ($r=.128$; $p<.01$) and the highest correlation between promotional packages and word-of-mouth promotion ($r=.560$; $p<.01$), indicating the potential influence of these factors on the dependent variable. The highest mean score is recorded by price ($M=4.33$; $SD=.81$) while the lowest mean score is shown by word-of-mouth promotion ($M=3.87$; $SD=.82$), denoting that user perceived price as an important factor that they consider while using the telecommunication service. On the other hand, the score on word-of-mouth promotion is moderate indicating that users are moderately willing to say positive things about the telecommunication services to others.

Table 6: Results of Multiple Regression Analysis

Variables	Std Beta Coefficients
Price	-.014
Service Quality	.228**
Service Availability	.156**
Promotional Packages	.342**
R	.615
R ²	.379
Adjusted R ²	.373
F value	60.963
Sig. F value	.000
Durbin Watson	1.932

Notes: ** significant at the 0.01 level

To confirm the findings of the correlation analysis, a multiple regression analysis was performed. Table 6 shows the results of the analysis. The R^2 of .379 indicates that 37.9% of the variance in the regression model is explained by the four independent variables, which is sufficient to explain the users' behaviour in the form of word-of-mouth promotion. The regression model is significant ($F(4, 400)=60.963$; $p<.001$). The results also indicate that the strongest predictor of word-of-mouth is promotional package ($\beta=.342$; $p<.01$), followed by service quality ($\beta=.228$; $p<.01$), and service availability ($\beta=.156$; $p<.01$).

Promotional package is the strongest predictor because when users are happy with promotional packages offered by the telecommunication service providers, they will engage in positive word-of-mouth behaviour (Goyal, 2019; Hanaysha, 2021; Ryu & Park, 2020). They have the strong points to recommend and encourage their friends, relatives and others to subscribe the chosen brand. Therefore, telecommunication companies should offer service packages that users prefer so that they will engage in positive word-of-mouth behaviour.

Service quality is another significant predictor as satisfied users will engage in positive word-of-mouth behaviour (Mukerjee, 2018; Ryu & Park, 2020). Service quality in this case comprises the perceived added values that are attached to the telecommunication service offered. The phrase "value for money" applies in this situation (Aslam, Arif, Farhat, & Khursheed (2018). As different users will perceive values differently, telecommunication companies that can offer services that are well appreciated by the users will enjoy greater economic gain.

Service availability is the third significant predictor of word-of-mouth behaviour (Mukerjee, 2018; Oraedu, 2020; Ryu & Park, 2020). Service availability is related to the supporting service offered by the telecommunication companies including the readiness of customer service agent to assist users when there are issues pertaining to the services. Complaint channels, fast resolution of complaints, and friendliness of the staff will contribute to users' willingness to engage in word-of-mouth behaviour. Therefore, telecommunication companies must ensure their service agents are equipped with all the necessary competencies and the right attitudes to serve customers.

Price is not a significant predictor and it has a negative relationship with word-of-mouth promotion. When users perceived that price is an important factor for choosing the telecommunication service, they will not engage in word-of-mouth behaviour because price is considered as a sensitive issue among many users as it can be considered as one of the important factors of switching (Grigoriou, Majumdar, & Lie, 2018). In telecommunication industry, the price charged by the companies is quite comparable, thus, making it ineffective marketing strategy. In the economic term, price is considered as having perfect elasticity (Chouhan, Sridhar, & Rao, 2021). A slight change in price will drastically change the demand for the service. Companies that compete based on price will obtain a temporary economic gain but will suffer losses in the long run when competitors start adopting the same strategy and with better offer.

Conclusion

Competing in the current volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous business environment urges the companies to develop various strategies using the available resources including their satisfied customers. Satisfied customers will engage in positive word-of-mouth promotion to share their satisfying experience with their friends, relatives and others. In telecommunication companies, the offered services are quite identical, making it difficult to outperform the competitors. The present study was undertaken to investigate the factors that contribute to users' positive word-of-mouth promotion and the findings indicate that service quality, service availability and promotional packages are the significant predictors that lead to users' word-of-mouth promotion. Price is not a significant predictor of the said behavior. Telecommunication companies need to focus on these factors if they want users to promote their services to other potential customers.

Ensuring value-added service, offering easy to use promotional packages, and having service agent readily available to assist customers will make users to engage in this voluntary behavior. Although

this study managed to collect the required data from 405 telecommunication users, the sampling technique used was convenience sampling, which is the least preferred sampling technique. Future research should use better sampling techniques to ensure generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, the present study only considered four independent variables that only explained 37.9% of the variance. Therefore, future studies should include other important factors such as engagement programs, retention programs and others to increase the explained variance in the model. Nevertheless, the present study has contributed significantly to the body of knowledge in the field of marketing especially regarding the predictors of word-of-mouth promotion.

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