

## Understanding the Blog Service Switching in Hong Kong: An Empirical Investigation

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### Abstract

*Blogs have become an increasingly popular form of displaying online content for general Internet users. Attracting new bloggers and retaining existing bloggers are crucial to blog service providers. In this study, we investigated several factors that affect bloggers' intention to switch their blog services. Based upon previous research on relationship marketing and the push-pull-mooring framework in migration literature, we interpreted three antecedents in terms of their push, pull, and mooring effects. An online survey was conducted to validate our research model. Findings suggested that satisfaction is the strongest factor toward switching intention, followed by attractive alternatives and switching costs. We believe that the implications of this study will provide valuable and important insights to both researchers and practitioners.*

*Keywords:* blog, switching cost, satisfaction, attractive alternative, push-pull-mooring framework

### 1. Introduction

Blogs, also known as weblogs, have become an increasingly popular form of displaying online content for general Internet users. These blogs are “frequently modified web pages in which dated entries are listed in reverse chronological sequence” [23, p. 1]. Many bloggers express personal feelings or opinions in their blogs [52]. According to the world famous blog tracking site Technorati (<http://technorati.com/about/>), there are more than 84.8 million blogs on the Internet.

Bloggers can install blog applications to open their own blogs, while many of them use blog services through certain online portals, which are recognized as blog service providers (BSPs). Blog services are thus regarded as a particular form of online services provided by BSPs. Currently, popular BSPs include LiveJournal, MySpace, Blogger, Xanga, and etc. [30]. Apart from a few fee charging BSPs (such as TypePad) or some that provide premium services, most of BSPs still provide free blog services [35]. For all BSPs' income goals, it is important to maximize their numbers of bloggers. Particularly, those BSPs that provide free services usually place advertisements on blogs. Therefore, the number of bloggers is closely related to their advertising revenue. Many BSPs are applying various tactics to attract new bloggers and to retain existing ones, including provision of easy registration procedures, various useful functions (e.g. uploading pictures, audios, videos, and etc.) and favorable interfaces.

Prior blog survey report indicated that around 43% of bloggers have more than one blogs [30]. Another study revealed similar results and began to notice the migration of bloggers between BSPs [1]. In the blogosphere, some BSPs are now providing migration tools to facilitate bloggers' switching process. For instance, WordPress.com has the function of importing blog archives from BSPs like Blogger, LiveJournal, and etc. Recent research on blogs is relatively rare. Researchers are just paying their attention on investigating bloggers' behaviors. Du and Wagner [17] examined the impacts of blog usage on students' learning. Ma et al. [35] explored the effects of cognitive style on bloggers' acceptance of blogs. Moon et al. [37] focused on bloggers' social interactions and explored their virtual social identity and life

satisfaction. However, no studies have shed light on bloggers' behaviors toward their blog services. In the service literature, online service switching has been arousing researchers' interest (e.g. [28]). Following this fashion, the key objective of this study is to examine the factors that drive bloggers' intention to switch their blog services.

The paper begins with a discussion of the relationship marketing literature and the push-pull-mooring framework in migration research. We then present our research model and hypotheses and follow with the analysis of data. We conclude the paper with a discussion of our findings and implications for researchers and practitioners.

## 2. Theoretical Background

In this study, we specifically examine the factors that drive bloggers' intention to switch their blog services. The research model is built upon literature on relationship marketing and the push-pull-mooring framework in migration research.

### 2.1. Relationship Marketing

Relationship marketing is an important research field in marketing literature [33]. The concept of relationship marketing was first introduced by Berry [7], and it refers to "*all marketing activities directed toward establishing, developing, and maintaining successful relational exchanges*" [38, p.23]. Prior studies not only discerned that long-term customer-firm relationships would generate much value to the company [45], but also that continuing customers would attract new customers through positive word of mouth [44]. It was suggested that acquiring new customers cost as much as five times more than retaining existing ones [41]; [46]. In this respect, customers' switching behaviors are a great threat to long-term customer-firm relationships [20].

Customer switching is one of the central concepts in relationship marketing, and it refers to the migration of customers from one firm to another [43]. According to Keaveney and Parthasarathy's [27] concern of customer "churn" in the online service context, customer service switching is different from customer service discontinuance. The latter suggests that customers stop using the service (e.g. stop using Internet), while the former indicates that customers continue to use the service but switch to another service provider. There are three main streams of research on understanding customers' switching behaviors [33]: 1) the outlined process model of switching decisions [47]; 2) the heterogeneous

characteristics between stayers and switchers [27]; and 3) the factors that drive customers to switch. The third stream has been attracting the most attention among researchers. Prior research on customer switching covers various areas, such as traditional service industries or service providers [26]; [6], mobile service firms [43], online brokerages [11], and Internet service providers [27]. Compared with relationship marketing in offline environment, research in online environment has just recently been attracting increasing attention [5]. In the similar line of research, Kim et al. [28] investigated customer switching intention of email services. They basically adopted the third research stream and provided factors that affect users' intention toward email service switching.

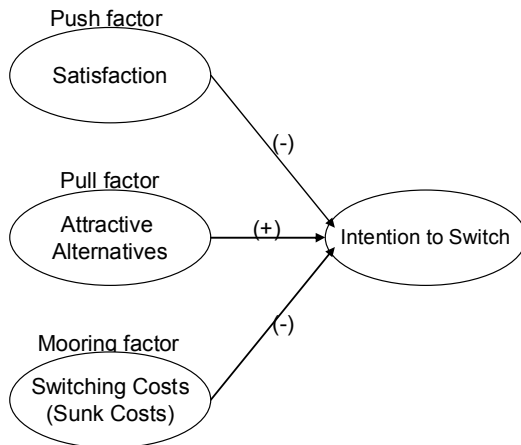
### 2.2. The Push-Pull-Mooring Framework

The push-pull-mooring (PPM) framework is the dominant paradigm in migration literature [6]. Migration means that people move from one place to another for a certain period of time [9]. The migrants can be refugees or voluntary ones [24]; [9]. As early as in 1885, Ravenstein introduced the "Laws of Migration", which is known as the foundations of the push-pull model. The PPM paradigm suggests that migrants' decision of moving from one geographic area to another is affected by push, pull, and mooring factors. Push factors are defined as the negative factors that drive people away from the original place [50]; [36]. Pull factors are the positive factors that attract people to the destination [36]. Due to the complexity nature of migration decisions, only push and pull factors are not sufficient [9]. Intervening obstacles or intervening variables were suggested to be considered [24]; [29]. In this regard, the notion of moorings was introduced and incorporated into the push-pull model [32]; [36]. Mooring factors are personal or social variables that can either hamper or facilitate the migration decision [36]; [6]. Research in migration could be individuals' migration decision or migration flows in a large scale [31]. Correspondingly, the push, pull, and mooring factors should be in individual level or in "macro" level [6]; [14].

Recently, the PPM framework was applied in other disciplines. Bansal et al. [6] stressed the analogy between migration and customers' switching behaviors in marketing literature. They unified various individual-level factors through PPM framework as to understanding service provider switching. In a similar vein, Lui [34] applied this framework on individuals' switching intention of IT service providers. She identified several constructs from prior studies on IT service switching, and fitted them into the categories of push, pull, mooring factors.

### 3. Research Model and Hypotheses

Figure 1 depicts the research model that we use to explain bloggers' intention to switch the blog service. Definitions and interrelationships of the constructs in the research model are addressed in this section.



**Figure 1. The research model**

Note: “(+)” denotes a positive relationship between variables, whereas “(-)” denotes a negative relationship.

#### 3.1. Blog Service Switching

As mentioned before, customer switching in online environment has been attracting much interest among researchers. Studies have investigated the email service switching, individuals' switching intention of mobile data service or Internet connection services [28]; [34]. Building upon this line of research, this study focuses on bloggers' switching intention on blog services. Blogs are usually a form of personal web site or personal web journal [15]; [23]; [52]. It is the blogger who mainly create and update his/her blog web site through the blog service provided by the BSP. Many bloggers like to name their blogs with a “My” prefix, or with their personal names entitled (e.g. “One’s Blog”), so as to show their ownership of blogs. In this sense, a blog (a virtual place for blogging) and a residence (a physical place for living) are comparable to some extent. Further, as Bansal et al. [6] addressed the existence of analogy between customers' service switching behaviors and migrants' behaviors, we believe that similar analogy exists between switching the blog service and the migration to another living place. In this study, we refer the blogger's intention to switch the blog service as the likelihood that the blogger will switch his/her current blog service to another one.

#### 3.2. Push Factors—Satisfaction

Satisfaction is an important concept in marketing and has attracted a great deal of research interest in the past few decades. Oliver [39, p. 29] defined satisfaction as “*the summary psychological state resulting when the emotion surrounding disconfirmed expectations is coupled the customer's prior feelings about the consumption experience.*” It was widely held that satisfaction positively affects consumers' repurchase intention [4]; [40]; [51]. In IS literature, satisfaction has been found to be the antecedent of IS continuance intention and consumers' loyalty [8]; [13]. Wang and Head [53] suggested that high level of satisfaction will help to build online customer relationships. Conversely, low level of satisfaction will result in the dissolution of a relationship [42].

Bansal et al. [6] suggested the negative influence of satisfaction on intention to switch service providers. Kim et al. [28] came to a similar conclusion in investigating users' switching intention on email services. Satisfaction is the push factor in this research model. It emphasizes individuals' emotional feelings toward the origin. Migration research has confirmed the push effects of satisfaction or dissatisfaction [14]. Therefore, we propose that bloggers' satisfaction with the blog service is the push factor in the research model. When the blogger holds a low level of satisfaction, there is a higher chance that he/she will be pushed away from the origin, and thus will have the intention to switch to another blog service. The following hypothesis is provided:

*H1: Blogger's satisfaction with his/her current blog service is negatively associated with his/her intention to switch the blog service.*

#### 3.3. Pull Factor—Attractive Alternatives

Rusbult et al. [49, p. 359] defined the quality of the alternatives as “*the perceived desirability of the best available alternative to a relationship*”. Previous research found that attractive alternatives have a direct influence on service repurchase intention and switching intention [3]; [21]; [28]; [48].

Attractive attributes of destination have positive effects on drawing the migrants [36]. In this study, the attractiveness of alternative blog services is the pull factor. We propose that if a blogger discovers attractive alternative blogs, then he/she will be likely to be pulled and to try the new blogs to better fulfill his/her blogging needs and thus form the intention to switch the blog service. Therefore, we provide the following hypothesis:

*H2: Blogger’s perception of attractive alternative blog services is positively associated with his/her intention to switch the blog service.*

**3.4. Mooring Factors—Switching costs**

Switching costs emphasize the costs that we face when we switch from the purchase of current service or product to another [16]. It reflects not only the economic costs but also the emotional and psychological costs [55]. Jones et al. [25] suggested three dimensions of switching costs: continuity costs, learning costs, and sunk costs, which are positively associated with repurchase intention. Switching costs have been determined to be significant factors affecting customer retention, and the higher the switching costs, the lower the likelihood of switching service providers [2]; [18]. In migration literature, migrants may not move to another place for the effects of some constraints or contextual factors, even when they are under strong push and pull influences [29]. Customers’ perception of switching costs is one of the mooring factors [6].

In this study, we chose sunk costs as the representative of switching costs. According to Jones et al.’s [25] research, continuity costs indicate the lost performance or opportunity after switching to a new service; learning costs refer to the costs involved in locating and learning to use the new services; and sunk costs capture customer’s perception of invested time or effort in using the services. With the rapid growth of Internet techniques, free and easy-to-use blog services, continuity or learning costs are less important when bloggers consider their decision of switching blog services. Taking these into account, we believe that when the blogger suffers great sunk costs while he/she switches the blog service, he/she will be likely to remain in the current relationship with his/her BSP and reduces the chance of him/her switching to a new one. As a result, we propose the following hypothesis.

*H3: Blogger’s perception of switching costs (sunk costs) to another blog service is negatively associated with his/her intention to switch the blog service.*

**4. Research Method**

In this study, an online survey was conducted to test the research model. Details about the measures, data collection method, and survey responses are discussed in the followings.

**4. 1. Measures**

All items of the four constructs are adapted from prior research [8]; [28]; [25]. Some modifications were applied to fit our specific research context. In this study, items used either seven-point Likert scales or seven-point differential semantic scales. Measures of constructs in the current study are listed in Appendix A.

**4. 2. Data Collection**

The target respondents are the bloggers who have been using blog services in Hong Kong. An online questionnaire was used for data collection in early June 2007. In order to reach a representative sample, posts contained the URL to this online questionnaire were distributed in many popular online forums and online blog communities of Hong Kong. A screen question “Do you have a blog” was required to answer before the questionnaire. Incentives of local supermarket coupons were also offered as lucky draw prizes.

**4. 3. Survey Responses**

A total of 126 usable questionnaires were collected. Details of the respondents are illustrated in Table 1.

**Table 1. Demographics of the respondents**

<u>Gender</u>	Male: 45 (35.7%) Female: 81 (64.3%)
<u>Age</u>	Below 18: 5 (4.0%) 19-24: 82 (65.1%) 25-30: 22 (17.4%) Above 30: 17 (13.5%)
<u>Blog Service Provider (primarily used)</u>	<u>Xanga</u> : 62 (49.2%) <u>MSN Spaces</u> : 11 (8.7%) <u>Yahoo</u> : 13 (10.3%) <u>Sina</u> : 18 (14.3%) <u>Others</u> : 22 (17.5%)
<u>Blog Experience</u>	Less than 1 year: 10 (7.9%) 1-2 years: 49 (38.9%) 3-4 years: 53 (42.1%) 5 or more: 14 (11.1%)
<u>Number of Days Using Blog per Week</u>	0-1 day: 19 (15.1%) 2-3 days: 34 (27.0%) 4-5 days: 32 (25.4%) 6-7 days: 41 (32.5%)
<u>Number of Owned Blogs</u>	1 blog: 55 (43.7%) 2 blogs: 47 (37.3%) 3 blogs: 14 (11.1%) 4 or more: 10 (7.9%)

<u>Education Level</u>	Secondary and High School: 10 (7.9%) Diploma or Relative Course: 10 (7.9%) University or Above: 106 (84.2%)
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Findings of this survey are similar with results of Pew Internet & American Life Project [30] and China Internet Network Information Center [1]. Specially, in Hong Kong, the number of female bloggers is nearly the double size of male bloggers. Many of the bloggers primarily use Xanga as their BSP. And many of them hold an education level of university or above.

### 5. Data Analysis

The research model was analyzed using Partial Least Squares (PLS). The PLS procedure [54] is a second-generation multivariate technique which has been widely used among researchers. Compared with other structural equation modeling (SEM) approaches (e.g. LISREL), PLS merely requires a small sample size, and is more suitable for theory development [12]. Thus PLS was chosen in this study, and PLS-graph version 3.0 for windows was used. Following the two-step analytical procedures [22], the measurement model was first examined and then the structural model was assessed.

#### 5.1. Measurement Model

To validate our measurement model, convergent validity and discriminant validity were assessed. Convergent validity shows the extent to which the items of a scale that are theoretically related to each other should be related in reality. Composite Reliability (CR) and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) are two indicators for measuring convergent validity. It is considered acceptable results when items with CR values are higher than 0.7 and items with AVE values are higher than 0.5 [19]. After deleting one item of attractive alternatives for its low factor loading, this research obtained CR values ranging from 0.803 to 0.949, and AVE values ranging from 0.683 to 0.862. In addition, all the remaining items have significant path loadings at the 0.01 level. Therefore, the convergent validity of our model is sufficient (Table 2).

**Table 2. Convergent validity of the measures**

Construct	Items	Loading
Intention to Switch (INT)	INT1	0.925

CR= 0.949, AVE = 0.862	INT2	0.952
	INT3	0.908
Satisfaction (SAT) CR= 0.944, AVE = 0.809	SAT1	0.894
	SAT2	0.909
	SAT3	0.894
	SAT4	0.901
Attractive Alternatives (AA) CR = 0.803, AVE = 0.683	AA1	0.616
	AA2	0.993
Switching Costs (Sunk Costs, SC) CR = 0.925, AVE = 0.712	SC1	0.780
	SC2	0.856
	SC3	0.868
	SC4	0.858
	SC5	0.854

Note: CR = Composite Reliability, AVE = Average Variance Extracted

Discriminant validity describes the degree to which the measure is not a reflection of some other variable. It is indicated by low correlations between the measure of interest and the measures of other constructs that are not theoretically related. If the square root of the AVE for each construct is greater than the correlation between constructs, then discriminant validity is confirmed [19]. Results of our study demonstrated that discriminant validity is sufficient, as shown in Table 3.

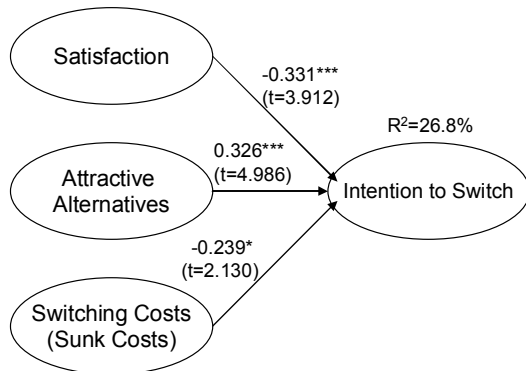
**Table 3. Correlation between constructs**

	INT	SAT	AA	SC
INT	<b>0.928</b>			
SAT	-0.335	<b>0.899</b>		
AA	0.383	-0.205	<b>0.826</b>	
SC	-0.136	0.264	-0.046	<b>0.844</b>

Note: Diagonal elements are square roots of the AVE

#### 5.2. Structural Model

The overall explanatory power, estimated path coefficients (all significant paths are indicated with asterisks), and associated t-value of the paths are demonstrated in Figure 2. Tests of significance of all paths were performed using the bootstrap resampling procedure.



**Figure 2. Results of the research model**

As the results show above, the structural model explains 26.8% of variance. Satisfaction has the strongest significant effect on intention to switch ( $\beta=-0.331$ ,  $t=3.912$ ). Attractiveness of alternatives is significantly associated with intention to switch ( $\beta=0.326$ ,  $t=4.986$ ). Finally, switching costs posit the negative impact on intention to switch ( $\beta=-0.239$ ,  $t=2.130$ ). In sum, all the hypotheses in the research model are supported.

## 6. Conclusion and Discussion

This study is one of the initial attempts to test a model of blog service switching intention that draws ideas from theories in relationship marketing and the push-pull-mooring framework. The results suggest that all the push (satisfaction/dissatisfaction), pull (attractive alternatives) and mooring (switching costs) factors are important in determining bloggers' switching intention. The findings of this study have several implications for both researchers and practitioners.

### 6.1. Theoretical and Practical Implications

This study extends the knowledge of researchers in several aspects.

- Prior research on blog is relatively rare, which does not match with the fast development of blogs. This research contributes understandings of the blogosphere by studying bloggers' switching behaviors.
- Research about switching behaviors of ITs is increasing. Recent studies have started to investigate switching behavior of online services, especially Internet service providers [27], switching intention on email services [28], and switching behavior of Web browsers [56]. We further test the influences of some factors in new Web-based IS context, blogs.

- This study follows the research stream of relationship marketing in online environment. The importance of customer switching in this field suggests that more attention is needed to understand bloggers' switching behaviors toward blog services.
- Finally, the push-pull-mooring framework was introduced in our study for the consolidation of constructs. We believe that it will enrich our understandings in both blog literature and relationship marketing.

Consistent with past literature, satisfaction, attractive alternatives and switching costs have significant push, pull, and mooring effects respectively, in determining bloggers' intention to switch their blog services.

Our findings also contribute important implications to the practitioners. The result suggests that bloggers' satisfaction toward their blog services is negatively influencing their switching intention. In order to retain registered bloggers, BSPs should keep track on their dynamics of satisfaction level toward the blog services provided. For instance, a BSP can set up a rating mechanism for bloggers to express their satisfaction level. Attractive alternative is also a strong factor affecting bloggers' intention to switch the blog service. This result implies that as other BSPs' blog services become more attractive, bloggers will have a greater likelihood of changing their blog services. Thus, BSPs should be very mindful as to new applications offered and improvements made by other BSPs and track the success of these changes. This awareness will help providers to keep track of blogger demands (which can change so suddenly) and not fall by the wayside as other BSPs achieve success. Regarding to the significant effect of sunk costs, BSPs should promote bloggers' involvement and time spent in their blogs. One suggestion is that BSPs could provide a ranking system in terms of the time spent on blogging. Forming blog communities are also recommended by encouraging the interaction between bloggers over their blogs. By doing so, bloggers will get more involved in their blogs.

### 6.2. Limitations and Future Research

In interpreting the results of this study, we must stress several limitations. Firstly, the analysis is based on 126 usable questionnaires collected. To increase the generalization of the result, a larger sample is suggested for further research. Secondly, the number of studies regarding blogs is limited; therefore, relevant references from previous work about bloggers' behaviors are difficult to gather. Thirdly, the structural model only explains 26.8% of variance. This indicates

that some important factors are not included in the research model. Moreover, we merely examined one of the dimensions of switching costs from Jones et al.'s [25] research in terms of our particular research context. Other dimensions in their study or dimensions from other researcher's typology (e.g. [10]) of switching costs may affect bloggers' intention to switch as well. Finally, some of the prior studies suggest the moderating effect of switching costs [28]. However, due to the small sample size of our study, we are unable to conduct the impact of switching costs as a moderator. By considering all these limitations, further research could be conducted to better understand the switching behaviors of blog services.

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## Appendix A

### Satisfaction [8]

How do you feel about your overall experience with the blog service?

1. Very dissatisfied/Very satisfied.
2. Very displeased/Very pleased.
3. Very frustrated/Very contented.
4. Absolutely terrible/Absolutely delighted.

\* (All items of this construct use 7-point semantic differential scales, from -3 to 3)

### Attractive Alternatives [28]

1. # I know that there are alternative blog services I can switch to.
2. There are other blog services that provide high service quality.
3. There are blog services I find more attractive than the one I am using.

### Switching Costs (Sunk Costs) [25]

1. A lot of energy, time, and effort has gone into using my blog service
2. Overall, I have invested a lot into using my blog service.
3. All things considered, I have put a lot into previous use of my blog service.
4. I have spent a lot of time and effort on my blog.
5. I have not invested much into using my blog service.

### Intention to Switch the Blog Service [28]

1. I am considering switching from my current blog service.
2. The likelihood of me switching to another blog service is high.
3. I am determined to switch to another blog service.

# Item 1 of Attractive Alternatives was deleted in the final research model according to low level of factor loading

\* If not noted, all items used seven-point Likert scales, from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).