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Managing the uncontrollable: Empirical studies of user-generated content online

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Preface

I tend to believe that I can do just about anything, until I have tried and failed multiple times. This belief summarizes the journey of completing this thesis.

It was in 2007, right after completing a Master's degree in Marketing, that I started thinking about doing a PhD in Marketing. Given that I had enjoyed my time working on the Master dissertation, I was convinced that I had found something more suitable for my capabilities than all the other stuff that I had done before. However, at that point, I had probably already held more professional degrees than what was necessary for job markets. Many told me to get a real job for a couple of years before (continuing) lingering in universities. Others told me that with my somewhat obscure scientific background, without a decent training in business studies, it would be very difficult, if not impossible, to pursue an academic career in marketing. The word "difficult" to me is just as honey to the bees. Determined, I started looking for opportunities that combine my interests in marketing and social issues, particularly about animal welfare.

After much consideration, in 2008, accepting the offer of the PhD position in Amsterdam Business School, I relocated to the Netherlands from Scotland. Very soon, however, after failing to deliver what was expected from me for many times, after a rather tough start with much struggle, I reached my first epiphany in life: just because you like something, doesn't mean you should be doing it. Obviously, just because I love the subject so much, it doesn't mean I should be doing research about it.

Somehow, after five years, this ride has now come to a periodic end with this thesis. The project starts with a focus on corporate social responsibility and ethical consumption. The final thesis, however, is somewhat distant from that starting point and has nothing to do with animal welfare. This is one of the many unexpected adventures that I gradually learned to enjoy in doing research; you don't always get to research what you love or what you set to investigate, but you learn to love the subject that you're working on. The adjusted research focus may be just as much fun, if not better. The thesis focuses on user-generated content online, about which I am sincerely passionate. I started surfing, writing blogs, participating in discussions, and reviewing products (bad-mouthing mostly) online since I was still a kid. Much has changed over the years. Observing internet users is a little bit like observing myself through a scientific lens. Not everyone gets to do that with their research topics, for which I consider myself very lucky.

Someone once told me that doing a PhD is like banging your head on a great wall and trying to break a hole in it. I hope, with this thesis, I have left a scratch on the wall, at the very least.

Hsin-Hsuan Lee, November 2013, Amsterdam