Early identification of customer engagement issues in relation to social media measurement

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Abstract

The digital world is testifying a rapid increase in the abundance of social media users. In response, businesses continue to invest significant efforts to pursue customer engagement through the lense of brand sites. However, uncontained communication across multiple products and service categories from various media elements are restricting the efforts of marketers and management. The literature found that entrepreneurs have trouble assessing the customers and prospects involved throughout promotional activities on brand sites. Consequently, before the field inspection, this study established the goal to discover whether SMEs in Malaysia go through similar barriers. Four SMEs in the state of Melaka were interviewed in the initial investigation phase. Next, the content of conversations recorded through Smart Recorder software was analysed using the chunked transcript. The findings show that the issue of measuring customer engagement does exist at the SME stage. Further, discussions, limitations and future studies are presented and detailed for the gaze of readers, industry parties, and scholars from the same or interested areas.

Keywords: customer engagement; social media; measurement; customer; interview; qualitative.

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Introduction

In 2020, over 3.6 billion people were using social media worldwide, a number projected to increase to almost 4.41 billion in 2025. Yet, the utilisation is more focused on social attraction (Cision, 2020; Statista, 2020) because shocking current stories and news give more audience satisfaction. For this focal reason, marketers usually take advantages of their centralisation on the social media platform. The page audiences are accompanied by a lot of postings for the constituent of confidence to the company's marketers that they are all prospects and can eventually turn into customers for the brand. As more and more customers become regular, they may be contributing companies with potential opportunities (Harmeling et al., 2017) including product review, information exchange, content generation and value creation (Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014; Wang & Kim, 2017).

The quest to understand the relationship between the measurement process in social media with the online customer engagement has increased in academic pathway (Md Jani & Zakaria, 2020). The industry world also pays massive alert on this matter (Marketing Science Institute, 2016; Forbes, 2016; Social Media Examiner, 2020). In consistent pattern, customer engagement has become a significant factor for measuring the impact and effectiveness of social media marketing efforts in an organisational context (Oh et al., 2015; Devereux et al., 2020) including small-scale industries. Customer engagement indicates a big role in increasing the company's concern over the quality of digital relationships with customers and future prospects that promise performance gains. Particularly in developing countries, however, the limitation of such research is prominent and need huge attention from scholars.

In response to the call for such a lack of research, this study conducted a comprehensive search and found works that were somewhat similar but focused on the use of social media (Ainin et al., 2015; Latiff & Safiee, 2015) and strategic use (Hassan et al., 2015). There is only one research in Malaysia that seeks to investigate the level of customer engagement measurement (Hashim & Fadhil, 2017) but it is specifically implemented for hotels in Malaysia. On the last path of search in 2020, continued efforts still did not find a study on the company's routine to measure customer engagement on social media channels. Two publications that are quite similar to the study domain only discuss the determinants of social media intake and its effects (refer to Basit et al., 2020; Ramachandran et al., 2020). Consequently, the question posed in line with the above problem reads, "Are Malaysian businesses receptive to the practice of measuring customer engagement on social media?". The next section discusses the objectives formed to solve the question by centring on Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in Malaysia.

Research Objective

Until today, there is no scientific discussion done in Malaysia on measuring customer engagement on popular social media sites. However, the measurement in social media is very much an obligation to businesses at every level. This paper dedicates relevant content to meet the demand for measuring customer engagement on social media. The focus on Malaysian context opens up more works in the same domain in the future. Ironically, it is one type of new research in the region and, to the extended scope, in developing countries. Accordingly, to acknowledge the provided question, the research will provide a sufficient early understanding of social media measurement on customer engagement from the Malaysian largest industry group, SME.

The remainder of the paper is structured into five sections. The next section notifies the affirmation of the study objective. The second section synthesises the literature review to explain the positive aspects of social media adoption in business relates to customer engagement. This part also illustrates the adopted theoretical background and the argument about views of measurement in the perspective of research and industry in Malaysia regarding customer engagement. The following two sections describe the applied methodology and findings that confirm the continuation of the next activity. The last two sections discuss the entire study from introduction to post-finding effects and explain the limitations and future studies for readers.

Literature Review

Recent studies have given the emphasis on business concerns for many social media branch such as adoption (Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2015), firm performance (Wang & Kim, 2017) reputation (Dorcak et al., 2017) and brand presence (Keegan & Rowley, 2017). When it comes to online business context, investigative work cannot avoid the most dominant element, namely the customer on social media platform. Marketing Science

Institute (2016, 2018), a research-based global organisation with a strong network of academics and leading companies has announced research on customers as their most important focus. For a profitable reason, customers are contributors who may provide firms with potential opportunities through a mutual collaboration called customer engagement (Harmeling et al., 2017).

Background theories for customer engagement in social media
Relationship marketing and User Gratification Theory (UGT) are two main theories mixed to be a pillar for this research works. These theories are applicable because of its ability to describe non-transaction elements of customer engagement that will persist throughout the life of the business. In the lens of both theories, brands and companies periodically refer to their concerted efforts to build and maintain relationships with customers (Filo et al., 2015; Forbes, 2016; Palmatier et al., 2018) in social media brand sites.

Relationship marketing theory takes into consideration the needs and the expectations of the customers (Radu, 2013). In 2018, Palmatier and colleagues have revealed evolutionary thinking regarding relationship marketing theory. It began with the institutional economic in the 1950s before revolving around exchange theory and dependency theory in the 1970s. Later in the period between the 1980s and 1990s, literature had widely discussed relational contracting theory, social exchange theory, and transaction cost economics, as well as trust-commitment theory. Eventually, these theories gradually formed the well-known resource-based view, followed by inter-firm relationship marketing in the 2000s until now.

UGT is applied to accompany relationship marketing to explain the reason why customers use brand sites to interact with the brand they are focusing on. This theory is useful for understanding behaviour in social media platforms as it is based on UGC analysis (Gogan et al., 2018) that requires active, goal-oriented customers and prospects in the context of this study. UGT can support customer motives using different media in brand content such as image, video, text, and emoticon elements. With the interactive nature of social media, UGT has become aware of the need for customers to select special channels; for example, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter to get relevant information (Athwal et al., 2019; Hossain, 2019). In summary, customers and prospects remain in the social media brand community and are willing to serve the company through the unification of the mixed theory of UGT and relationship marketing as mentioned at the beginning of the discussion. The following subsection will focus on the focal concept and the vital challenges for companies engaging in online ventures.

Social media as a platform to stimulate customer engagement
Although literature often portrays this concept as a multi-dimensional construct (Vohra and Bhardwaj, 2016; Kunz et al., 2017), this study concentrates on unidimensional behavioural aspect which appears to be dominant in online pathway (Bitter & Breitenecker, 2014; Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014; Carlson et al., 2018). The behavioural element on today's digital path is highly customer -centric which is an important key to business performance. The availability of behavioural data on social media has opened up new research opportunities (Oh et al., 2015) and it is one of the new dimensions of the large domain of social media interactive marketing.

Customer engagement is one of the important domain gains visible benefits from the use of social media, exchanging info between the key players namely brands, companies, customers and prospects. The success of social media mainly influenced by the behaviours of customers and prospects in the rapid information exchange avenue of multiple channels. In a proper marketing core, marketers and executives typically carry out three essential activities. They continuously advertise posts and share advertisements, information and campaigns available to viewers on brand sites. Hence, social media prospects endure an influx of ads and messages about products and services every time they are online. Thus, it is an opportunity for the marketing department as the more posts on the company's social media sites, the greater the probability of customers and prospects to obtain brand information. The consistency of the post also drives the growing interest of prospects to review the product and encourages customers to remain loyal to the brand. Marketers also need to frequently answer customer inquiries about the products and services offered (Clark et al., 2017; Vendemia, 2017). As a payoff, the use of proactive social media dedicated to increasing customer engagement indicates improved business performance (Kumar & Pansari, 2015).

The next session emphasises the focus of this study to measure this key construct on the path of social media. Measuring customer engagement on multi-channel brand pages is an example of further efforts for the field of social media use as widely discussed in the literature view.

Difficulties of measuring customer engagement in social media
Efforts to the social media leverage process are still on the verge of difficulties for most businesses. They face tribulations in optimising the use of this technology due to lack of business connections, limited awareness of tools, and lack of internet presence in a fully digital world (Digital News Asia, 2020). These shortcomings lead to weaknesses in their customer management systems on social media sites, especially in SMEs. Companies are hampered by the amount of text, audio, picture, video and animation that transpired in the eWOM environment utilising User Generated Content (UGC). With eWOM, people meet, discuss, and text each other to change the evaluation of a product or service (Wang et al., 2016) that makes companies unable to control their dialogue (Blazevic et al., 2013; Marketing Science Institute, 2018). In a more diminutive breaking point, companies have seen a lively eWOM conversation among customer, prospect and the community as a considerable challenge, accelerating changes of someone selection, review and even the decision to buy.

This kind of situation is also familiar in the daily micro-activities of Malaysian SMEs. The truth is, the management needs techniques to track customers and prospects on their respective platforms because they have to monitor cross-communication from multiple directions. Thus, several pieces of research have proven the urgent need to implement measurements on corporate social media platforms (Marzouk, 2016; Md Jani et al., 2020). Many companies intend to simplify their work of measuring customer participation through the presence of visible and traceable social media interface, as for now (Grosser, 2014). On the Facebook, for instance, these tangible measures are *like, comment, friend, friend request, share, brand sentiment, trackback, page view, brand mention, number of reach per advert* and much more. For long-term output returns, scholars recommend to the ranks of company administrators to implement intangible measures to evaluate social media work for greater improvement and performance (Barger & Labrecque, 2013; Grosser, 2014).

Even with the cooperation of social media, firms remain struggling to create strategic ways in the digital business (McCann & Barlow, 2015; Effing & Spil, 2016) that require ongoing evaluation of online customers. For many years, scientific studies in Malaysia have no evidence to describe the current situation of measurement practices by SMEs in Malaysia that focuses on customer engagement. However, the investigation conducted in 2020 has information used as a basis for this recent work. By applying a quantitative survey, it was clear that many SME companies abandoned the measurement of customer engagement activities (Md Jani et al., 2020). As many as 63.20% have raised problems to implement the measurement practice. This percentage is not a surprise even though managers considered social media as their popular computer-mediated marketing tool. Furthermore, several scholars from other countries have voiced similar concerns about the lack of measurement in companies (refer A. Hamid Shokery et al., 2016; Beier & Wagner, 2016). As a sequence, this study must be carried out to obtain a more in-depth fundamental confirmation of this issue in the context of SME Malaysia, which no literature has reported so far.

Methodology
This study uses a qualitative method to investigate whether the Malaysian SME faces the stated problem. Semi-structured interviews were conducted as a pre-test to confirm that the issue of measuring customer engagement in social media is indeed present among SMEs. Interviews enable useful engagement and follow-up questions (Bird, 2016) to access the views and perceptions of SMEs on research issues. The study sample is pointed to four companies located in Melaka to obtain the primary fieldwork data. These companies were selected on agreement, in addition, the location of their main office is located within less than 50 km from the study centre.

The aimed work requires the development of an interview protocol by following procedural steps suggested by Castillo-Montoya (2016). The construction of interview questions was implemented using a deductive and systematic process taken from literature, government agency reports, and industries. Examples of scientific databases involved are Science Direct, ProQuest, Scopus, and Web of Science. For the first search, this study

has applied the primary keywords to find the relevant area which includes "social media," or "online." The next searching applied the second-level keywords comprise of "measurement", "evaluation", "metric", and "indicator".

In the next step, this study has created an interview guide for pre-test interview session that could help focus and organise lines of thought and ask questions from participants (Bird, 2016). The list of questions is designed in both English and Malay languages for the convenience of the participants to respond fluently and easily. The interview consists of two aspects; first, on the use of social media consisting of the platforms used (for example, Facebook and Instagram), preparation before posting content on brand pages (for example, the creation and editing of text and images in advertisements) as well as the time consideration and techniques for posting implementation. In the second aspect, questions have provided the concern on measurement including the use of important metrics, action on analysis, the applied strategies and decision making and also the possible future indicators.

The guide was created to confirm the alignment between interview questions, research questions and the specific information related to the study objective (Patton, 2015). Basically, it was arranged hierarchically from a broader issue to get more data from the interviewees to specific questions to explore in detail (Cooper & Schindler, 2014). Two field experts from social media and business backgrounds were invited to confirm the interview instrument. The instrument evaluation process also received a suggestion from field experts consisting of two SMEs in Melaka. This effort has improved the structure, length, style, and understanding of the guidance documents.

The pre-test phase notably helped in correcting the sequence of items, the interviewees' understanding of the problems, the timing of interview sessions, the reliability of the recording tool, the way the interviewees gave answers, and to ensure the overall validity of the interview. The four industrial players that have confirmed their involvement as participants comprised of three service firms and one manufacturing firm. The following Table 1 presents their simple profile, labelled by P1 to P4.

Table 1: Interview participants

Participant (P)	Size	Sector	Establishment year	Duration in social media
P1	Small enterprise	Manufacturing	10 years	6 years
P2	Micro enterprise	Services	6 years	6 years
P3	Micro enterprise	Services	4 years	4 years
P4	Micro enterprise	Services	4 years	3 years

Interviews took place at the participants' preferred location. The material brought into the slot is the interview guide and also a checklist used to note after closing each item with the participants. Permission to record conversations were sought and later stored in four separate files labelled by the respective participants. The average time taken for each interview session was 30 minutes to an hour. Participants have provided good cooperation and response to allow completeness data collection for analysis in the next session.

Findings
The interview transcriptions were later analysed using Atlas.ti (v. 8) software and found in line with the aim to determine the problem of measurement side. The next paragraph will present the analysed informational segments from the chunked transcripts.

Table 2 shows the participants' responses to each keyword item in the interview guide in the meaning that they acknowledged and applied regarding the platform, posting matter, metric and strategy. They also claimed to have challenges in marketing and setting plan on increasing customer engagement. Although the four unfilled cells indicated that some participants left the analysis of current indicators or did not know their

future use, they have provided positive feedback that measurement practices to address social media customer engagement are vital for an SME that need effective action. Entirely, the initiative has explored early information on social media channels, the employed marketing guidelines, the status of measuring customer engagement, and the commonly used metrics, current measurement practices, and issues related to assessing customer engagement. The below section will discuss how these findings can link to the next continuation of this study.

Table 2: Area of responses from pre-test interview

	Area of question in the interview guide		Participant			
	Keyword	What responses expected from participants?	P1	P2	P3	P4
1	Platform used	They should inform the channel or other platform used for marketing in social media brand page.	√	√	√	√
2	Setting planning	They should explain preparation activities of materials for adverts, and campaigns before posting.	√	√	√	√
3	Implementing posting	They should state the approach to conduct posting with the consideration of time, and advertising methods.	√	√	√	√
4	Use of important metric	They should tell the common metrics in social media used currently to evaluate customer engagement.	√	√	√	√
5	Applying strategy	They should demonstrate the strategies applied to manage customer engagement.	√	√	√	√
6	Analysing metric	They should acknowledge the practice of measurement for customer engagement.	√	√	√	
7	Making decision	They should highlight the decision made after advert posting and metric analysis.	√	√	√	
8	Facing challenge	They should reveal the challenges faced along carrying out marketing in social media with customers and prospects.	√	√	√	√
9	Outlining future plan of social media use	They should propose the future plan of social media use in order to increase customer engagement.	√	√	√	√
10	Suggesting a future metric for customer engagement	They should recommend a future indicator for customer engagement.		√		√

Note: The grey cell shows there was no practice from the company

Discussions

This section draws attention to the objective of this study which is to examine an early identification of social media measurement practice on customer engagement amid Malaysian SMEs. An understanding of these measurement practices was investigated through interview sessions with four companies and produced initial findings as discussed in the previous section. Keyword 1 in Table 2 proves that social media such as Facebook

and Instagram to market the products offered has become routine for all four businesses involved. Accordingly, the marketer or manager makes the action of preparing the posting materials and methods to implement it. These were presented through keyword lines 2 and 3. The keyword 4 has proven that for now, all four companies use the metrics available on social media dashboards as expected by this study. Metrics used depends on their mission in the channels where among the most familiar are *like, share, comment* and *follow* as mentioned in many articles. In keyword 5, strategies appropriate to the scale and scope of business are also practiced. In contrast, not all participants analyse the data input received on the social media application panel. Without analysis, the management unit cannot make decisions systematically before moving on to the next level. Keywords 6 and 7 have displayed these mentions. This situation suggests the research in the current domain is still facing shortcomings, where companies must resolve the matter to bring effective results on the use of social media.

In a query on customer measurement challenges, keyword 8 reinforced all surveyed entrepreneurs faced problems as expected by the research. Among the challenge often encountered is the difficulty of finding leads from prospects in eWOM. They also find it is hard on keeping regular customers to promote brand adoption. By taking into account the horizontal challenges ahead, companies work tirelessly to outline the planning steps required before, during and after social media usage in their daily operations as illustrated by keyword 9. Ultimately, a reference to keyword line 10 shows two companies lacking the vision to provide recommendation metrics to evaluate customers engaging with their brand in the future. This study assumes marketers and executives, in this case, have felt enough with the metrics supplied in the application panel such as *like*, *share* and *follow*.

The outcomes of this initial interview have benefited this study in two parallel situations. Firstly, this result has confirmed the purpose of the effort held in identifying the presence of customer measurement problems in the context studied. As such, the work done contributes to an early validation pillar on customer measurement on social media brand sites. The second condition that is also crucial is the improvement of questions in the interview guide related to high-level and low-level questions, layman terms and arrangement of items. Recommendations from both academic and industry lines have increased the reliability and validity of the interview questions. The modified (final) interview guide became an essential tool to guide the researcher when interviewing future participants in the field study.

Limitation and future research
Limitation
The initial work of identification to the measurement practice to the customers in social media has succeeded in getting a signal to continue this research on a larger scale. However, subsequent studies need to overcome two constraints that need improvement when the current investigation implements the interview method. The first is the limitation to the participants' location where the four businesses are in the state of Melaka. This study, however, does not limit the sample of SMEs due to their large number and scattered throughout the geographical area of Malaysia.

The second limitation is the absent of sufficient resources in the Malaysian context due to the new nature of this study. Reasoning from this, the present paper requires a supporting element of quantitative techniques through surveys conducted earlier (refer Md Jani et al., 2020) and explained in the previous section on page 5. The statistical values in the survey have supported the problem of measuring SME practices in the present. Then the keywords of the survey question are utilised to conduct the interview. Further, the interview findings have yielded similar conclusions (the problem of customer engagement measurement exists among the SME industry).

Future research
As described in the "Discussion" section, positive findings from the analysis of pre-test interview data are indeed awaited so that actual research activities can be implemented and provide input to future scholars and the industry world. Since this study is one of the first to examine the conceptual aspects of measuring customer engagement in Malaysian literature, the knowledge gained from these initial interviews may assist future research in a similar domain. Scholars may extend aspects of measuring specific customer engagement on brand sites with the possibility of identifying new dimensions of posted brand content. The boundaries of the study can focus on the interaction of marketers or data managers with the audience through various media

such as video, animation and graphics that shape the content for the promotion of products and services. Picking up from where this study has ventured on Relationship Marketing and UGT theoretical backgrounds, the work of prospective researchers in similar facets may use different theories and models that can explain the aspects investigated.

Within the broader eWOM communities, SMEs are expected to deal with big data challenges that increased exponentially on the SNS dashboard. Using this insight, an effective measurement technique and meaningful metrics need to be prepared accordingly. More research needs to be done that balances the integration between useful qualitative metrics and visible quantitative metrics to address the challenges of bulk data in various forms. To that linkage, researchers may examine new metric features relevant to current customer measurement angles to support the construction of either an algorithm, a prototype or the most interestingly, its application.

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