# Handbook of Research on Technology Applications for Effective Customer Engagement

Norazah Mohd Suki Universiti Utara Malaysia, Malaysia



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# Handbook of Research on Technology Applications for Effective Customer Engagement

Norazah Mohd Suki (Universiti Utara Malaysia, Malaysia)

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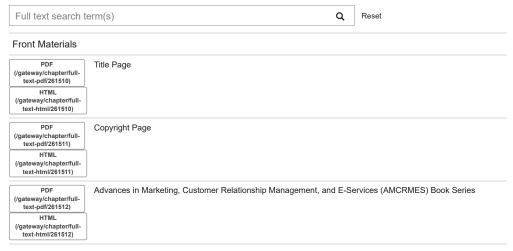
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In the challenging digital economy, bridging the gap between the external stakeholder and business entities through effective applications of technology carries more importance than ever before. By building a strong online presence and maintaining a long-lasting relationship with valuable customers through high-quality customer experience, companies continue to thrive during this digital age.

The Handbook of Research on Technology Applications for Effective Customer Engagement is a pivotal reference source that provides vital research on the utilization of the best research practices for consumer satisfaction and loyalty. While highlighting topics such as target marketing, consumer behavior, and brand equity, this publication explores the applications of modern technology in marketing as well as recent business activities of international companies. This book is ideally designed for business professionals, practitioners, marketers, advertisers, brand managers, retailers, managers, academics, researchers, and graduate-level students.

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### **ABSTRACT**

This chapter investigates the effects of trust dimension (competence, benevolence, and honesty) on parasocial interaction (PSI) of a Malaysian travel community through the usage of social media platforms. This study utilized a non-probability purposive sampling approach targeting Malaysians who use FB to interact and share their travel activities using self-administered online survey approach. Based on 142 respondents, the data were analyzed using multiple regression. The findings suggest that all three dimensions under trust are significant in predicting PSI among Malaysian FB travel community. The limitation of the study is that the majority of the samples were females and limited to only one FB community group.

### INTRODUCTION

The technological development from Web 1.0 to Web 4.0 has changed the way people generally interact, search, collect, share, and consume information (Casaló, Flavián, & Guinalíu, 2011). Technological advancements also lead to further development and emergence of online communities, which enables better community interactions based on shared interests, including smart online travelers (Choi, Kim, Cha, Suh, & Kim, 2019; Fauzi & Abdul-Latif, 2019).

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Smart online travelers are "travelers who use the Internet to research their trips and to engage with communities of travelers" (Choi et al., 2019, p. 888). They rely on online communities as their platforms to source for travel-related information, communication, and knowledge-sharing needs (Choi et al., 2019; Yoo, Goo, Huang, Nam, & Woo, 2017). Among the online activities involved are travel information sharing, expression of travel opinions and guidance, as well as sharing of pictures and videos (Choi et al., 2019). Reviews of travel destinations and travel products are also often done using these platforms (Fauzi & Abdul-Latif, 2019).

Online travelers can promote many different travel-related topics through active participation and mutual collaboration within their online community (Casaló et al., 2011). With active participation from community members, the level of social interaction within the communities may improve (Silvia, Enrique, & Buzova, 2017). Potential or actual travelers can obtain support as a form of interpersonal interaction (Ballantine & Martin, 2005) in addressing travel-related challenges through online travel communities (Tsiotsou, 2016).

Affective responses, for instance, intimacy, friendship, and empathy can emerge from the frequent and consistent interaction between members with shared interests. This phenomenon is conceptualized as "parasocial interaction" (Klimmt, Hartmann, & Schramm, 2006 cited from Choi et al., 2019), which initially describes a one-direction interaction between a media consumer and a media persona (Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985). The interactions between online group members were proposed to be similar (Ballantine & Martin, 2005).

PSI can be beneficial as it can be used for predicting the behaviors and attitudes of users towards media usage (Kim, Ahn, & Kim, 2017). Previous studies have identified PSI's influence on users' interaction with online communities (Silvia et al., 2017), nurturing positive attitudes toward communities (Voorveld, Neijens, & Smit, 2009) and predicting consumption-related behaviors (Ballantine & Martin, 2005).

Though there are many potential and advantages of PSI, this concept has received lesser attention among researchers primarily in the travel management literature (Choi et al., 2019). Despite the importance of PSI to online communities, there are a limited number of studies that addressed PSI within the context of online travel communities. Following Choi et al. (2019), this study examines PSI from the context of online travel community.

By following Choi et al. (2019), this study adopted the trust theory (Casaló et al., 2011) in explaining PSI in online travel community context. Previous studies have agreed that trust is vital in forming interpersonal relationships online (Wu & Chang, 2005) with identified dimensions of competence, benevolence, and honesty (Choi et al., 2019). It can be suggested that PSI relationship can be formed through induced affective responses as a result of users' needs being fulfilled by communities' activities (Chiu & Huang, 2014).

More research that delve into facet of consumer behavior in the digital economy is deemed necessary (Ling Chang, Ling Tam, & Suki, 2016; Nathan, Fook Chiun, & Suki, 2016; Suki, 2013a; 2013b; Suki, 2016; Suki & Abang Sulaiman, 2016). Besides, there is a limited number of studies on online travelers and their online travel communities. Due to this, online travelers may not be able to understand and fully realize the potentials of online platforms and communities. This study examines the development of interpersonal interactions in a particular online travel community and attempts to provide empirical evidence that the dimensions of trust, which are competence, honesty, and benevolence of an online travel community is positively associated with PSI.

The findings of this study are expected to contribute to the tourism literature by recognizing trust as a predictor of PSI in the area of tourism. Moreover, the results can be useful for managers of online travel

communities by showing the importance of promoting PSI interaction, as it is the essential motivation for intention to use, attention, exposure, length of view time, and media affinity (Silvia et al., 2017).

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The fast development of technology today has led to modernization and innovation. It can create a significant impact on people's lives and cultures. Through technology-based communication, consumers can communicate with each other only with a click of a button. A community can be quickly established as consumers interact daily and continuously, especially when there have common interests. This often leads to social and intimate connection. Among the social media sites popularly used by the current generations include FB, Twitter, and Youtube (Fauzi & Abdul-Latif, 2019; Rasmussen, 2018; Silvia et al., 2017). Using these platforms, consumers can learn, seek information, exchange ideas and experiences, and participate in an online dialog and discussion.

### **Parasocial Interaction**

In 1956, Horton and Richard (cited in Rasmussen, 2018) introduced the PSI concept, which describes the perceived interaction as an intimate relationship between the audience and media personalities. PSI can be seen as a one-sided and mediated interaction that affects the consumer and persona's relationship. Parasocial interaction describes an immediate psychological response that transforms into a parasocial relationship (Rasmussen, 2018).

The increasing number of social media users has become the reason for boosting the existence of parasocial interaction in a community. Through online interaction, consumers can develop intimate relationships after a while. In other words, the sentiments of companionship and closeness between the community members can exist. According to Choi et al. (2019), PSI forms a perception that is based on a verbal and nonverbal interaction que, for instance, the attitudes, gestures, and conversation style, among many others.

Online social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, blogs, and virtual communities allow users to have connections with brand representatives, celebrities, and even other users (Choi et al., 2019; Chung & Cho, 2017; Rasmussen, 2018). Previous studies tested the concept of PSI and found that interactivity produced by functional website features provides users with a feeling of interpersonal interaction (Keng, Ting, & Chen, 2011).

Similarly, in traditional media, PSI can be promoted through various parasocial cues in online communities, such as through the design and presentation of textual and graphic materials, the valence of the website content, and the characteristics of a persona (Kim et al., 2017). Such elements of interactive websites cause online users to feel that they are communicating with a person, not merely just with a machine.

### **Trust**

The concept of trust is based on the willingness and faith of an individual towards others in the reliability of their verbal or nonverbal statement. It is a perception that encompasses their belief in which it tends to develop a mutual understanding and strong bonding between them. The term trust is a crucial

component of all human relationships, especially in creating intimacy and bonding between community members. Trust requires a high commitment to ensure that the relationship is healthy and meaningful. Trust can be developed even when an infrequent interaction occurs, known as weak ties (Levin, Cross, Abrams, & Lesser, 2002).

Trust is a significant element in consumer decision-making, mainly when internet usage is involved (Hansen, Saridakis, & Benson, 2018). Trust is 'an attitude of confident expectation in an online situation of risk that one's vulnerabilities will not be exploited' (Corritore, Kracher, & Wiedenbeck, 2003). A recent study found that the perceived level of trust has a significant effect on travelers' intention to use new technology to purchase travel-related product and services (Zhang, Omran, & Cobanoglu, 2017).

Trust can build a close relationship even if they were strangers and never met when they keep on serving in a proper manner. It is also one of a meaningful situation in developing and strengthening the social relationship as the members could trust each other. A trustor should act in a consistent, sincere, reliable, and honest manner when contributing to a community (Chen, 2006). This trustor should be able to fulfill their word and promises appropriately. The concept of trust is based on three dimensions, which are competence, benevolence, and honesty (Choi et al., 2019). Other studies identified other dimensions of trust, including integrity, ability, and informativeness (Kim, Nam, & Kim, 2019).

### Competence

Competence describes a person's belief that a trustee has the appropriate capability, skills, and knowledge to cope with a problem effectively to satisfy a trustor's need (Benbasat & Wang, 2005). Competence can be attributed to individuals, social groups, or institutions as the person possesses the ability to perform the task given (Klieme, Hartig, & Rauch, 2008). In developing social interaction, it requires the person to have social and emotional competencies. These could be formed by other aspects such as self-awareness; ability to recognize emotions, self-management, and motivation; skills in managing the emotion, social awareness and behavior, empathize with other in different contexts and situation; and decision making as the person should able to make any decision by taking into account on every possible consequence (Llorent, González-gómez, Farrington, & Zych, 2020).

H1: Competence has a positive relationship with Parasocial Interaction

### Benevolence

The concept of benevolence is described as the altruistic attitude and behavior of an individual that will not intentionally harm other people even when they have the opportunity to do so (Levin et al., 2002). It is a perception that the trustee cares about the trustor to the extent of putting the trustor's interests first ahead of the trustee's own (Benbasat & Wang, 2005). Any persons with benevolence will consider their every action and are very concerned with their outcome to ensure that others are not harmed. These persons are also willing to consider giving all helpful information as long as it is not harmful. Benevolence can bring people together and create a good and healthy social relationship.

H2: Benevolence has a positive relationship with Parasocial Interaction

### **Honesty**

Honesty is the central point of trust and trustworthiness (Bellucci & Park, 2020). Honesty describes an individual's belief that the trustee will keep his/her promises (Casaló, Flavián, & Guinalíu, 2007). It is also called integrity, and it suggests that a person should act in a consistent, reliable, and honest manner to ensure it develops trust within their social relationship (Huang & Chen, 2006; Oliveira, Alhinho, & Rita, 2017). A person that shares truthful and honest information tends to help in boosting the trust between people, resulting in a good reputation and positive development of a social and mutual relationship.

H3: Honesty has a positive relationship with Parasocial Interaction

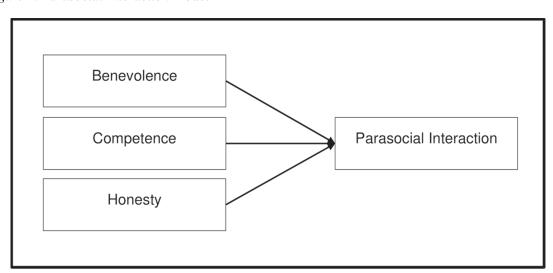


Figure 1. Parasocial Interaction Model

### RESEARCH METHODS

Using a non-probability purposive sampling approach, this study targeted Malaysians who used social media, particularly FB, as a platform to interact and share their travel activities as well as information. The respondents' criteria are Malaysian persons who are members of a travel community group on FB named Kaki Travel Malaysia, with a total number of 230,000 followers<sup>1</sup>. Group members are granted permission to read, share, and comment on the bulletin feeds of that particular group. The members are allowed to post any related traveling and tourism experience freely.

### **Measurement Instruments**

This study adopted a self-administered online questionnaire approach, which consists of multiple choices and closed-ended questions. It consisted of four main sections; the dual-language questionnaires were first measured by eight demographic questions such as education, employment, and income group. The second section was a qualifying question to ensure the potential respondent is engaged with the FB travel group. The subsequent sections covered the competence, benevolence, honesty, and parasocial interaction

dimensions adapted from Choi et al. (2019) which were measured by 23 items using the 5-point Likert Scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, and 5 = strongly agree.

The items were derived from existing management and information literature and were adjusted by two tourism experts to suit the study's context. The Malay translation of the items was verified by a Malay language expert to ensure the meaning of the items was according to the context and free of grammatical errors.

### **Sampling Procedure**

FB is one of the most popular social media platforms that people use to interact (Fauzi & Abdul-Latif, 2019). FB has a powerful influence, which possesses an account of 85% of internet users worldwide. FB is the biggest social network platform, with an estimated 2 billion active users (Feng, Wong, Wong, & Hossain, 2019). Users can make new friends and exchange information, especially among those with similar interests. FB has gained popularity among youth by introducing a new way of social interaction and sharing process, enabling the users to maintain and extend the development of social connections (Feng et al., 2019).

This platform provides a wide range of features, including status update, wall update, giving comments and likes, reading news feed, messaging in private or chatting in groups, posting photos or videos, forming groups, and playing games (Feng et al., 2019). The existence of such a digital platform leads to the change in how people generally communicate, share and exchange ideas or opinions, and even in sharing their experiences (Mariani, Styven, & Ayeh, 2019) including in tourism (Fauzi & Abdul-Latif, 2019).

Following previous studies (Fauzi & Abdul-Latif, 2019; Ismail & Abdul-Latif, 2019), the questionnaire was created using Google Form, and the link was distributed directly to 250 potential respondents who are the members of Kaki Travel group. Using the FB platform, the researchers approached and the potential respondents were messaged directly. This was done so that the targeted respondents were aware of the questionnaire sent to them. The total number of potential respondents who did not respond to our requests was 105, giving a response rate of 58%. The researchers took approximately one month to complete the data collection.

### Sample Profile

The total number of respondents obtained was 145. Three respondents were non-Malaysian and were excluded from the analysis. The sample size is acceptable following the formula N>50+8m (where m = the number of independent variables) as provided by Tabachnick and Fidell (2007, p.123). Table 1 below displays the sample profile.

Table 1. Sample Profile

	Frequency	Percentage (%)	
Gender			
Male	41 29.6		
Female	101	70.4	
Total	142	100.0	
Age Group			
18 - 21	11	7.7	
22 - 25	92	64.3	
26 - 30	22	15.4	
31 - 35	7	4.9	
36 - 40	3	2.1	
41 - 45	4	2.8	
46 - 50	1	.7	
51 - 55	1	.7	
61 - 65	2	1.4	
Total	142	100.0	
Employment	·		
Civil Servant	22	15.5	
Unemployed	17	12.0	
Self-employed	14	9.9	
Student	56	39.4	
Private Sector	33	23.2	
Total	142	100	
Monthly Income (RM)			
Below than 1000	78	54.9	
1001 – 2000	37	26.1	
2001 – 3000	17	12.0	
More than 3000	10	7.0	
Total	142	100	

Of the 142 respondents, 70.4% were female. The majority age group was the 22-to-25 years old segment (64.8%). Although most of the respondents were employed (48.6%), the students appeared to be a considerably broad category (39%). Respondents aged from 18 to 30 years old appeared to be the largest group (88%), while respondents aged from 31 years old and above totaled 22%. More than half (54%) earned an income of less than RM 1,000 per month, followed by the next category of RM 1,000 to RM 2,000 at 26%. Only 7% of the respondents earned more than RM 3,000 per month. The majority of the respondents (58.5%) participated in domestic tourism between two to three times in the last five months. The total percentage of the respondents whom most of the time or always engaged FB travel

community for their travel input appeared to be at 32.4%. While the majority (67.6%) of the respondents who rarely or sometimes engaged FB travel community for their travel input. Refer to Table 2 below.

Table 2. The statement of the respondents' frequency towards their engagement in Facebook travel community

Statements	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Rarely	44	31.0
Sometimes	52	36.6
Most of the time	28	19.7
Always	18	12.7
Total	142	100

### **RESULTS**

### **Construct Validity**

The correlation matrix revealed the presence of many coefficients scoring .5 and above. The KMO value was .880, and the Bartlett's Test of Sphericity reached statistical significance. All scales were then subjected to principal components analysis with the Direct Oblimin rotation method. A total of six items were discarded from benevolence (2), competence (1), and parasocial interaction (3). Distinctive four components were revealed from the analyses, and all were found to be unidimensional, which explained 71.85% of the variance.

### **Reliability Analysis**

Cronbach's alpha was used to measure the internal consistency of the scales. The minimum Cronbach's alpha of .70 is considered acceptable (Devellis, 2003; Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). In this study, the Cronbach's alpha estimated for competence was .758 (three items), benevolence was .791 (three items), honesty was .799 (three items), and parasocial interaction was .685 (three items). It is common to obtain Cronbach's alpha of less than .5 of scales with items less than 10 (Pallant, 2010). As such, it is recommended by Briggs and Cheek (1986) to report the inter-item correlation for scales with low alpha scores. The inter-item correlation of parasocial interaction items was found to be between .3 and .5 as recommended. All constructs were deemed to have reliability. Refer to Table 3.

*Table 3. Descriptive Statistics* 

Variables	Mean	Std. Deviation	Cronbach Alpha
Competence	3.81	.609	.758
Benevolence	3.86	,663	.791
Honesty	3.79	.664	.799
Parasocial Interaction	3.85	.610	.685

### **Correlations**

The correlation analysis was used to describe the strength and direction of the linear relationship between four variables, namely competence, benevolence, honesty, and parasocial. As shown in Table 4, parasocial interaction is strongly positive and significantly correlated (p < .000) with all of the independent variables.

Table 4. Correlation

	Parasocial	Benevolence	Competence	Honesty
Parasocial	1	.580**	.612**	.602**
Benevolence	.580**	1	.475**	.652**
Competence	.612**	.475**	1	.550**
Honesty	.602**	.652**	.550**	1
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).				

### **Multiple Regression**

Multiple regression analysis was conducted to test if benevolence, competence, and honesty predicted parasocial interaction. On our first attempt, we identified an item with a Mahalanobis distance value exceeding its critical value, the result of the regression indicated the three predictors explained 52.2% of the variance ( $R^2 = .522$ , F (3.139) = 52.721, p<.000).

### **Hypotheses Testing**

The causal relationship of the constructs was assessed using regression analysis are summarized below:

H<sub>1</sub>: Benevolence has a positive relationship with Parasocial Interaction

The results of this study show that the relationship between benevolence and parasocial interaction is supported; as a result, it shows that benevolence has a beta value of .303 with a significant p-value of .000. With the significant value of .000, H<sub>1</sub> is supported and accepted.

H<sub>2</sub>: Competence has a positive relationship with Parasocial Interaction

The results suggest that the relationship between competence and parasocial interaction is supported as the beta value obtained for competence is .219 with a p-value of .005. H<sub>2</sub> is supported and accepted.

H<sub>3</sub>: Honesty has a positive relationship with Parasocial Interaction

The results show that the relationship between honesty and parasocial interaction is supported. The beta value obtained for employee performance is .323, with a significant p-value of .000.  $H_3$  is supported and accepted as the p-value is .000.

In the regression analysis, the beta coefficients are used to explain the relative importance of the three independent variables in terms of contribution to the variance in parasocial interaction. Based on the results, honesty ( $B_3 = .323$ , p = .000) carried the heaviest weight, followed by benevolence ( $B_1 = .303$ , p = .000) and competence ( $B_2 = .219$ , p = .005). The results are similar to previous research (Choi et al., 2019). Refer to Table 5.

Hypothesis	Standardized parameter est.	Sig.	Conclusion
H1: Benevolence has a positive relationship with Parasocial Interaction	.303	.000	Supported
H2: Competence has a positive relationship with Parasocial Interaction	.219	.000	Supported
H3: Honesty has a positive relationship with Parasocial Interaction	.323	.000	Supported

Table 5. Regression Analysis Results

### **DISCUSSIONS**

The findings suggested that all of the trust dimensions have positive effects on PSI among FB travel community. The findings suggest that online travel users would most likely use an online travel community platform with group members who are honest, benevolent, and competent in their online activities, knowledge, suggestions, and opinions. The findings also support previous research (Fauzi & Abdul-Latif, 2019) that the use and reliance of social media by tourists have increased.

The present findings support previous research on the importance of trust in online travel communities (Casaló et al., 2011; Choi et al., 2019; Fauzi & Abdul-Latif, 2019). Though all of the three dimensions are very significant, honesty appears to have the highest effect on PSI, followed by benevolence and competence. This suggests that the users believe that the information they obtained from the community is honest, sincere, and genuine.

The findings are in line with Choi et al., (2019), which suggested that any persons who join travel communities believe that the platforms can provide honest and reliable support, inspiration, and knowledge. The findings indicate that most of the respondents were involved in some travelling activity for the last five months, which may suggest that they shared honest opinions and recommendations based on real experiences.

The findings also support previous research that online travel community members are likely to experience intimacy and friendship when interacting with other members. This is perhaps more apparent to those who display concern for others' interests and needs, and are willing to offer possible solutions to problems (Choi et al., 2019). Though previous studies found altruistic motivation where users or contributors in online travel communities were willing to help without any expectation of any rewards (Wang & Fesenmaier, 2004) however, it is interesting to note that managers of such platforms can also

offer rewards or incentives to encourage more interaction, "encourage helpful, useful information-sharing, particularly problem-solving and solution-providing" (Choi et al., 2019, p. 900). These monetary or non-monetary rewards can be obtained from strategic sponsorships or as an extension from own current products or services involving coupons, discount vouchers, gifts, or virtual recognition (Choi et al., 2019). Managers of such platforms could also design their online platforms in a way that it appears to be visually tasteful, user-friendly, and mobile.

### **CONCLUSION**

People tend to spend more time with community members, especially when they have a lot in common. These situations may have resulted in a deeper friendship relationship since users keep on interacting and getting more familiar with each other. Long-term PSI can be developed when a media consumer keeps on viewing, listening, joining, and interacting with the media figure. Based on the PSI mean score of 3.851, it can be suggested that most respondents do agree that PSI does occur in their online travel community.

### LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

There are several limitations to this study. First, though this study attempted to identify the relationships between the variables within the social media context, the findings might only apply to specific community groups. Future studies should expand to include more community groups within FB. Second, this study has a limited number of willing respondents. Future studies should attempt to get higher numbers of respondents. To note, arguably, online survey tends to have a low response rate, and it was estimated to be 11% lower than any other survey platforms (Saleh & Bista, 2017). Third, this study used a purposive sampling method, which may affect the number of potential respondents. This is because different age groups are not well represented as most group members were in the age range of 18 to 44 years old. This age group is known to be actively utilizing FB as a form of social interaction. Finally, the model used in this study did not include travel satisfaction and community satisfaction. Perhaps future studies should utilize the full model (Choi et al., 2019) within the same context and perspective.

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## **ENDNOTE**

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