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Abstract

The present study attempts to investigate the effect of customer engagement in social media on purchase intentions in the hotel industry in Malaysia. Four key motives of surveillance, social interaction, sharing of information and attraction are examined as antecedents to customer engagement in social media. The questionnaires used was administered to a convenience sample of 392 hotel customers from Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya, Malaysia, through a self-administered questionnaire. Structural Equation Modeling is used to analyse the data and five hypotheses were tested. The findings reported that surveillance, social interaction, sharing of information and attraction have significantly influenced customer engagement in social media. Customer engagement is positively correlated to the purchase intentions. Based on the findings, customer engagement strategies should focus on more on building reputation, information quality, attractive contents, effective communications, branding and word-of mouth-referrals.

Keywords: Social Media, Customer Engagement, Purchase Intentions

Introduction

Social media is gaining its popularity among hotel operators as one of the important platforms to market their facilities and establish relationship with customers. Social media platforms such as social networks (i.e., Facebook and LinkedIn), microblogs (i.e., Twitter), and content-sharing communities (i.e., YouTube and Instagram) are frequently used by travelers to share their travel and vacation experiences. For example, hotel operators have increasingly utilise Facebook, which is the largest social media community in the world, to provide latest information, actively and intimately interact with their target customers, and facilitate direct booking functions through their Facebook pages.

Customer engagement has been a domain of research interests with the rise of social media. The motivational factors that influence customer engagement in social media include content type, media type, and posting time (Cvikikj and Michahelles 2013); information gratification, fun and entertainment, social interaction value (De Vries and Carlson 2014); social benefits, economic

benefits, social enhancement, and entertainment (Gummerus, Veronica, Weman and Pihlström 2012). According to Chen (2017), customer engagement in social media serves as a crucial factor in arousing purchase intention among consumers.

A few research studies (i.e., Varkais and Neuhofer 2017; Dieck, Jung, Kim and Moon 2017; Phelan, Chen and Haney 2013) have investigated the customer engagement in social media in the context of hotel industry. Varkais and Neuhofer (2017) covered the content sources in social media and consumers' evaluation-decision behaviour. Dieck et al. (2017) reported that accessibility, trust, social influence and perceived benefits influenced perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness, which affected consumers' attitude and satisfaction, and ultimately continued usage intentions in the context of luxury hotels. Phelan et al. (2013) limits their investigations to hotel content features, property information and interactions in evaluating how hotels utilised Facebook to engage customers. Despite great attention given by hotel operators to drive social media presence, however the effectiveness of their customer engagement in social media on creating desirable consumer purchase behavioural outcomes remain ambiguous. Hence, we have identified that there is a paucity of literature addressing how effective the customer engagement in social media to drive purchase behavioural outcomes such as purchase intentions in the context of hotel industry in Malaysia.

Research Objective

This research conceptualizes surveillance, social interaction, sharing of information and attraction as the antecedents of customer engagement in social media, which directly affects purchase intentions. Hence, the primary objectives of this study are; 1) to investigate the effect of surveillance, social interaction, sharing of information and attraction on customer engagement in social media and 2) to analyse the influence of customer engagement in social media on purchase intentions.

The findings provide valuable information for hotels to develop more effective marketing strategies through the use of social media as a platform to interact with customers and extend hotel service delivery.   In the theoretical contribution, we are applying Uses and Gratifications Theory (U&G) in explaining the   four important needs gratification factors - surveillance, social interaction, sharing of information and attraction, relationships with customer engagement in social media and ultimately purchase intentions. Purchase intention is an important predictor to the purchase behaviour of the consumers (Ajzen 1991).

Literature Review and Hypotheses Development
Uses and Gratifications Theory (U&G)

The U&G was developed by Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch (1973a) to explain the relationships formed between the media and its audience, and how the active audience utilise the media to fulfill their needs and desires. The U&G theory accentuates the motives and gratifications drive audience's actions in relation to the media. For example, the information and engagement opportunities provided by the media can influence the audience or consumers' purchase intention of a product or service. Katz, Gurevitch and Haas (1973b) classified five categories of needs gratification factors - cognitive needs (acquiring information, knowledge and understanding), affective needs (enhance aesthetic, pleasurable and emotional experience), integrative needs (improving credibility, stability

and status), social integrative needs (strengthening contact with people and affiliation), and escape needs (tension release and diverting attention from unpleasant to pleasant).

Several past studies (i.e., Choi, Fowler, Goh and Yuan 2015; Aluri, Slevitch and Larzelere 2015) have applied the U&G theory to examine various gratification factors in social media usage and its influence on consumer behavioural in the context of hotel industry. For example, Choi et al. (2015) have studied the gratification factors of information, convenience, and self-expression as antecedents to user satisfaction and intention to purchase in the hotel industry. Aluri et al. (2015) have investigated the relationships between traveler gratifications (perceived informativeness, perceived enjoyment and perceived social interaction), satisfaction, and purchase intentions in the hotel industry. Thus, the present study will address the literature gap by covering the four important needs gratification factors by Katz et al. (1973b) which is the motives of surveillance (representing cognitive needs), social interaction (representing social integrative needs), sharing of information (representing integrative needs) and attraction (representing affective needs) in the aspect of sought gratifications. These motivational factors is correlated to customer engagement in social media, and subsequently purchase intentions in the hotel industry.

Surveillance

Social media has played important roles for its user to obtain Information and to self-education or better known as surveillance (Whiting and Williams 2013). According to Brodie, Ilic, Juric, and Hollebeek (2013), consumers are engaging in social media to fulfill their needs for information. Humphreys and Wilken (2014) claimed that the availability of information in social media have created new opportunities for surveillance and consumer engagement. If a brand post contains latest information, it will not only contribute to the valuable knowledge of its fans, but also stimulate or motivate fans' interaction (De Vries, Gensler and Leeflang 2012) and respond to posts (Cvijikj and Michahelles 2011). Hence, the following hypothesis will be examined in this respect:
H₁: Surveillance has a positive influence on customer engagement in social media

Social Interaction

Social interaction refers to the motive that encourage the social media users to communicate and interact with others (Whiting and Williams 2013). Social networking sites have more interactive features than other online communication platforms (Phelan et al. 2013). The interaction between customers in social media enables sharing of joyful or bad experiences from their hotel stay. Furthermore, the embedded social media channels on the hotel Web site enhanced travelers' social gratifications (Aluri et al. 2015). Whiting and Williams (2013) have applied U&G theory in their study, and reported that social media platform of Facebook is widely used by their respondents for interaction and socialising purpose which enhances engagement. Social interaction is essential factor in determining various affective and behavioural outcomes such as attitude and decision-making (Coyle and Thorson 2001). Therefore, the following hypothesis will be tested:

H₂: Social interaction has a positive influence on customer engagement in social media

Sharing of Information

Social media sites facilitate sharing of information between the users, as well as between the company and users. The role of information sharing in social media sites have enhanced customer engagement (Osatuyi 2013). For example, many hotels have leveraged on social networking presence to provide interactive information to their customers through hyperlinks on their web sites, which are directly connected to corresponding Facebook pages. In addition, visual aids, such as pictures and videos of the hotel, are incorporated into Facebook pages and browsed by customers (Phelan et al. 2013). Furthermore, customers could share information from their hotel stay experiences by giving comments, share photos and review ratings at social media. Hence, the social media platforms that encourages consumers to share their positive experiences can lead to consumers' purchase of products or services (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010). Ma, Lee and Goh (2014) investigated the influencing factors of news sharing intention on social media, and they found that self-perception of opinion seeking does not predict intentions of news sharing. Hence, opinion seekers or those who look for news or information on social media might not necessarily share news on social media. The following hypothesis will be tested:

H_3: Sharing of Information has a positive influence on customer engagement in social media

Attraction

The attraction in social media pages refers to the richness of a brand post's formal features (De Vries et al. 2012). Each social media platforms have their own uniqueness in attracting users or customers. For example, companies through Instagram have frequently advertised attractive pictures, while Twitter more towards posting short messages (Voorveld, Noort, Muntinga, and Bronner 2018). Fortin and Dholakia (2005) found that the more attractive the appearance of the social media websites, the more effective at enhancing consumer's attitudes toward a website. Therefore, to explore the relationship between attraction and customer engagement, the following hypothesis will be examined:

H_4: Attraction has a positive influence on customer engagement in social media

Customer Engagement

Customer engagement is defined as the intensity of individual participation and connection with the offers and activities of the organisation initiated either by the customer or by the organisation (Vivek, Beatty and Morgan 2012). Customer engagement involving a process of cognitive, emotional and behavioural Hollebeek (2011). Customer engagement can be measured through actions such as page views, click-through rates, and other measures based on the social media platform (Cvijikj and Michahelles 2013). Some common used parameters of customer engagement are "liking", "sharing", and "commenting" on brand pages (De Vries et al. 2012).

Purchase Intentions

Consumer purchase intentions refers to individual's willingness to purchase a certain product or service (Ajzen and Fishbein 1980). Purchase intentions is an effective tool in predicting buying process. Tiruwa, Yadav and Suri (2016) found that existed relationships between consumer

engagement on Facebook online brand communities and their purchase intention. Toor, Husnain and Hussain (2017) reported there is a significant effect of customer engagement on purchase intention in the context of social network marketing in Pakistan. They highlighted that interaction, communication and sharing of knowledge between consumers on products and services have enhanced customer engagement that leads to their purchase intention. The following hypothesis will be examined:

H_5: *Customer engagement in social media has a positive influence on purchase intentions*

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework comprising the four independent variables of surveillance, social interaction, sharing of information and attraction towards the customer engagement (as mediator) in social media. Subsequently, customer engagement is correlated to purchase intentions as dependent variable.

Methods

Research Design, Sampling and Measurement

Research design is a "master plan specifying the methods and procedures for collecting and analysing the needed information" (Zikmund, 1997, p. 48). The quantitative research method is used to identify evidence regarding cause-and-effect relationships between variables. Quantitative approach was selected to facilitate the requirements of this study where its goals to be objective, to effectively test the hypotheses and use the statistical models to explain what was observed. Large sample size of consumers is required to measure consumers' behaviour in order to yield meaningful responses and precision (Perner, 2011). Hence, this has justified the selection of quantitative approach through survey for large number of samples that need to be studied to test hypotheses, for example, 'how many' people have "similar characteristics and views" (Pellissier, 2008).

The population in this study were individuals aged 18 and above in Malaysia, who are hotel customers and had experienced four and five stars hotel stay in Malaysia for the past 6 months. We used Facebook as the target social media platform because it provides users with most content generation tools and it is the largest social media community in world. According to Hair, Black, Babin and Anderson (2010), a minimum sample size of 150 is required for Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) analysis for six constructs in the structural model. For this study, we have decided on a sample size of 392 to meet the requirement for SEM analysis. Pilot test was conducted to test the survey questionnaires on 30 respondents. Non-probability convenience sampling method was used to select the respondents as it provides flexibility to the researchers to access the sample and contributed to higher survey response rate. The survey using self-administered survey questionnaires consists of 27 items assessed by a six point Likert scale (1= strongly disagree to 6= strongly agree). The scale measured surveillance, social interaction, sharing of information, attraction, customer engagement, and purchase intentions. We have used the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22 to perform descriptive analysis, validity and reliability analysis. Subsequently, the AMOS version 24 was used to conduct the SEM analysis to test the hypothetical relationships between the proposed constructs.

Results
Profile of the Respondents
From the total of 392 respondents, majority respondents are female (51%), followed by male (49%). The respondents' monthly income comprising 8.5 percent earned less than RM1500, 16 percent of the respondents have an income between RM1500– RM3000. Furthermore, 31 percent of the respondents earned between RM3000-RM6000 and 29.5 percent of the respondents belong to the income group of RM6000-RM10000. Respondents with an income above RM 10000 comprises 15 percent. As for the respondents' age, 15 percent belong to the age group of 18-20, followed by 31.5 percent under the age group between 21 -38. Majority of 42 percent of the respondents under the age group of 39-49, and 11.5 percent belong to age group of 50 and above.

Scale Reliability and Factor Analysis
Prior to modeling the structural model, the assessment for unidimensionality, validity and reliability have to be carried out on the measurement model. The Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA), Cronbach's Alpha, composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE) results are shown in Table 2. In this study, the Cronbach's Alpha value for all constructs is greater than 0.7, which indicated a high level of internal consistency in the data (Pallant 2007). The values of CR for the six constructs were between 0.814 and 0.899, higher than the threshold level of 0.7. The CR values were 0.862 (surveillance), 0.899 (social Interaction), 0.832 (sharing of Information), 0.801 (attraction), 0.895 (customer engagement), and 0.814 (purchase intentions).
Validity refers to the ability of instruments to measure what it supposed to be measured for a construct. The convergent validity was achieved by checking all standardised values of factor loadings, which were above 0.5, the minimum acceptance level required (Hair et al. 2010). In this study, the AVE values were greater than 0.5, and achieved the minimum level required (Fornell and Larcker 1981). In summary, the reliability and validity findings have shown exist a significant confidence of the survey instrument quality.

Table 2: CFA, Cronbach's Alpha, CR and AVE results for the measurement model

Construct	Item	Statement	Factor Loading	Cronbach's Alpha	CR	AVE
Surveillance	S1	Good information on hotel services.	.682	.859	0.862	0.695
	S2	Keep-up-to date with latest information.	.774			
	S3	Offered customised information search.	.768			
	S4	Knowledge on the latest promotional information.	.807			
	S5	Help me to learn interesting hotel services.	.689			
Social Interaction	L1	Opportunity to know other customers.	.777	0.897	0.899	0.803
	L2	Hotel providers replied to customer posted feedback/comments/inquiries.	.835			
	L3	Enabled me to interact easily with other hotel customers.	.876			
	L4	Enabled opinion exchange with others on hotel services.	.821			
	L5	Easily connect to friends/others.	.685			
Sharing of Information	I1	Hotel update/post messages on daily basis.	.670	.828	0.832	0.555
	I2	Easily share information with others.	.765			
	I3	Provided latest hotel promotional information.	.837			
	I4	Quick access to information on the hotel services.	.697			
Attraction	A1	Content is useful.	.677	.800	0.801	0.502
	A2	Active functioning links.	.732			
	A3	Visual content is interesting.	.742			
	A4	Video content is attractive.	.682			
Customer Engagement	C1	I often browse Facebook.	.728	.892	0.895	0.789
	C2	I often read posts of hotel services posts in Facebook.	.809			
	C3	I often use the "like" option on hotel services posts in Facebook.	.862			
	C4	I often comment on hotel services posts in Facebook.	.877			
	C5	I often share hotel services posts in Facebook.	.678			
Purchase Intentions	P1	Increase my interest to purchase hotel services.	.724	.814	0.814	0.522
	P2	I am very likely to purchase the hotel services recommended by my friends in Facebook.	.699			
	P3	I intend to purchase the hotel services as marketed in Facebook.	.720			
	P4	I have positive purchase intentions on the hotel services.	.747			

Model Compatibility Testing

The structural model assessment and hypotheses results are shown in Table 3. Overall, the research model has achieved a good fit. For this study, the *Chi-Square* value is 698.707, which is greater than 0.05 as suggested by Barrett (2007). The ratio of x^2/df was 2.232, and this value is lower than the minimum threshold value of 3.0 (Byrne 2001). The absolute index with RMSEA of 0.056, achieved lower than 0.08 as recommended by Browne and Cudeck (1993). All the incremental fit indices were greater than 0.9, with IFI of 0.929, CFI of 0.928 and TLI of 0.919.

Table 3: Structure model assessment and hypothesis testing

Model fit indices			
Chi-square	698.707		
Degree of freedom	313		
Probability level	0.000		
RMSEA	0.056		
IFI	0.929		
CFI	0.928		
TLI	0.919		
ChiSq/df	2.232		
Hypothesized relationships	**Estimate**	***p* Values**	**Result**
H_1 Surveillance → Customer Engagement	0.261	***	Supported
H_2 Social Interaction → Customer Engagement	0.352	***	Supported
H_3 Sharing of Information → Customer Engagement	0.311	0.027	Supported
H_4 Attraction → Customer Engagement	0.147	***	Supported
H_5 Customer Engagement → Purchase Intentions	0.485	***	Supported

The normality assessment have confirmed that the data is normally distributed with value of skewness between -1.0 and 1.0, and kurtosis of between -3.0 and 3.0. Finally, the estimated path coefficients were formed, and the research hypotheses were examined.

Model Causality Testing

The final structural model is shown in Figure 1. Based on the hypotheses results shown in Table 3, the findings indicated that surveillance has significant positive effect (0.261) on customer engagement in social media. As a result, H_1 is accepted and the findings have supported the previous study by Humphreys and Wilken (2014). H_2 is also accepted and social interaction has significant effect on customer engagement (0.352). The correlation coefficient value between social interaction and customer engagement is the strongest compared to other constructs. Hence, the social interaction between customers and with hotels are considered as effective in stimulating social media engagement. Customers are satisfied with the prompt feedback and comments in social media by the hotels. The findings obtained are consistent with the previous studies by Whiting and Williams (2013).

The regression coefficient of the relationship between sharing of information and customer engagement in social media is significant (0.311). As a result, H_3 is accepted. The regression coefficient of the relationship between attraction and customer engagement is significant (0.147) and H_4 is accepted. However, the correlation coefficient value is very weak, and we can conclude that the visual or video content of hotel services in Facebook is not up to the expectation of the customers. Finally, customer engagement in social media had positive significant (0.485) influence on purchase intentions, and H_5 is accepted. The results have supported the previous studies by Tiruwa et al. (2016) and Toor et al. (2017).
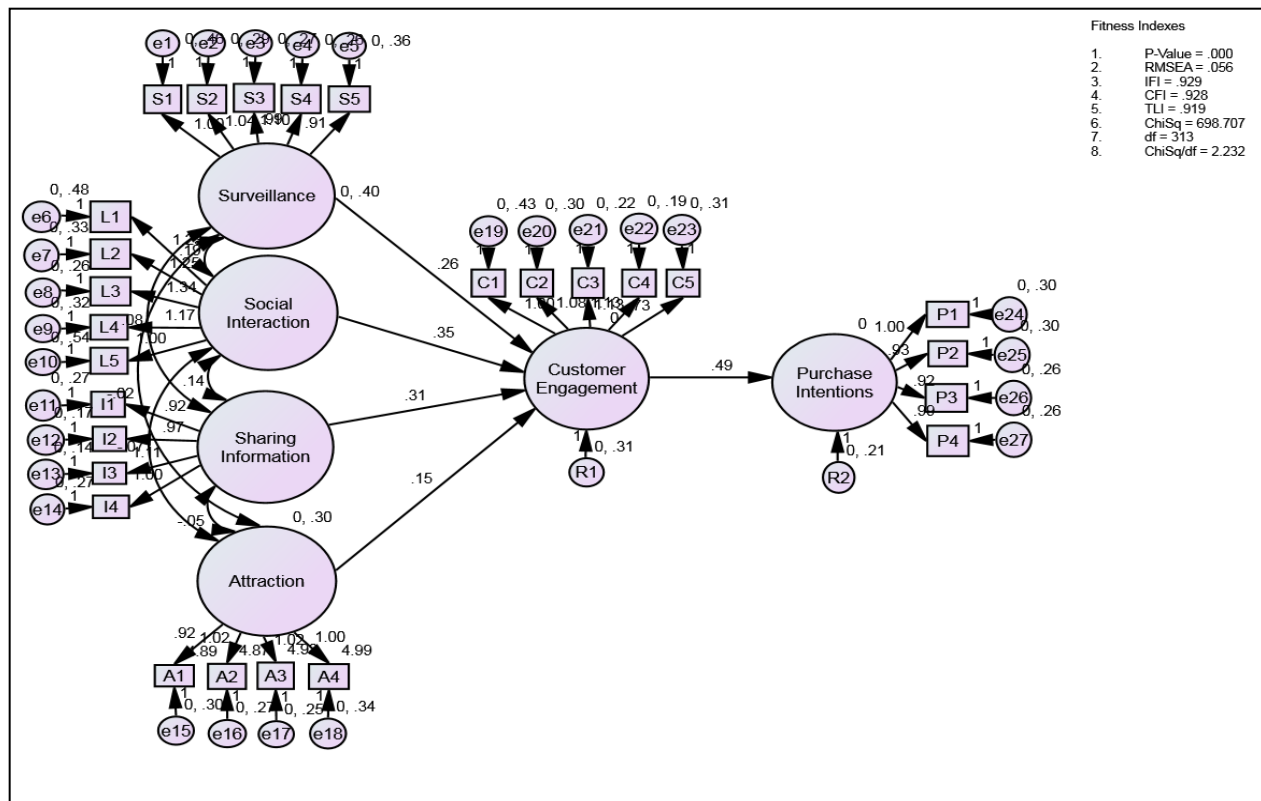

Figure 1: The structural model

Discussion

Our findings have several managerial implications for the Malaysian hotels. We can conclude that customer engagement in social media plays an important role in increasing purchase intentions on hotel industry in Malaysia. Hence, hotel managers should enhance the characteristic of their social media platforms through better reputation, information quality, communications, branding and word-of mouth-referrals (Kim and Park 2013). In the aspect of surveillance for information, customers usually will explore into different information channels within a social media platform to acquire information needed for their purchase decisions. Therefore, hotels are able to stimulate purchase intentions by providing an easy access to the search engines, channels of information, and information exchange processes in the embedded contents. Encouragement of participation in communities, forums, reviews and ratings will facilitate information seeking and interactions with

among customers. Social interactions could enhance customers' learning of services, and, in turn, hotels could develop new service ideas, processes and development.

Hotels should also utilise social media sites to enhance interaction with customers, facilitate different activities, update on events, sales promotional campaigns, and use surveys to engage customers. An active online presence is essential for hotels to amplify the effect of their social networking prowess and to sustain competitiveness in the market. There are various ways to stimulate communication between hotels and customers such as post questions, contests and welcome Facebook fans to generate ideas and opinions in an effort to further encourage customer engagement. Customers are likely to visit the page more frequently, pass referral information along to friends, and become more engaged in a hotel's virtual community.

Attraction in social media has become one of the biggest challenges for hotel operators to keep customers coming to their social media pages. More attractive visuals and photos or advertisements of the hotels with positive hotel stay experiences from endorsed celebrities or loyal customers to attract potential customer's attention in social media. For example, Facebook has featured animated reactions and GIF buttons to enhance the expressions of feelings in the platform. By adding visual indicators into pages, communities or forums may increase the feeling of social presence.

Furthermore, through customer engagement, the hotel's role to engage and co-create their brand in social media is important (Song and Liew 2018). Customers are more likely to engage with and purchase from reputable brands in the market. Social media is a useful platform to receive complaints, feedback and suggestions from hotel's customers. Hence, hotels should give more attentions to respond quickly to feedbacks received and assist customers in a timely manner to increase the chances that customer will choose their hotel.

In the aspect of theoretical contributions, we have validated four important needs gratification factors of surveillance-representing cognitive needs, social interaction-representing social integrative needs, sharing of information-representing integrative needs, and attraction-representing affective needs for customer engagement in the U&G by Katz et al. (1973b). In addition, we have further developed the U&G model through these constructs relationships, which are further drawn to the consumer behavioural outcome of purchase intentions. We have confirmed an integrated model of U&G and consumer purchase behaviour, which can be applied practically by the hotels and business practitioners to improve their customer relationship through effective social media engagement and competitiveness in the market.

Conclusion
This study contains some limitations and recommendations for future studies. We have focused our study on hotel industry in Malaysia, and specifically on four and five stars hotel services, as well as Facebook as it is the best-known social media platform. The replications of this study in other contexts such as other industries and other countries are recommended to achieve generalisability of the findings. Other social media platforms such as Twitter, LinkedIn and Instagram should be explored in future studies. Future research could also investigate the influence of customer

engagement in social media on other consumer purchase or post-purchase behavioural situations, such as actual purchase, repurchase intention or loyalty. We have used quantitative approach in the present study, which could be improved in the aspect of better quality presentation of data analysis by adopting mixed research methods of quantitative and qualitative.

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