

## Engaging Travellers in the Context of Tourism SMEs: A Conceptual Paper

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### Abstract

*Social media (SM) provide opportunities for businesses and customers for collaborative engagement with each other. Studies have found that SM has a positive influence on the engagement of businesses with customers. On the contrary, evidences showed that it is viewed as an irrelevant platform to engage customers. Thus, the role of SM in engaging customers remains unclear, especially in the context of small medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). In addition, SM as an enabler of customer engagement was not well researched in the tourism context. The aim of this paper is to understand the use of SM to engage travellers in the context of tourism SMEs. This paper proposes an exploratory qualitative research using a five-stage research framework for theory development on a research design consisting of five stages: (i) pre-understanding, (ii) exploration of concepts, (iii) framework development, (iv) framework development and refinement, and (v) framework finalization. This study aims to develop an in-depth and advanced understanding of SM customer engagement and tourism SMEs. Additionally, the study provides implications in highlighting how tourism SME industry can lead develop customer engagement strategies, improving performance both domestically and globally*

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### 1. Introduction

In the tourism context, social media (SM) such as social networking sites (e.g. Facebook), microblogs (e.g. Twitter), content communities (e.g. Instagram), and review sites (e.g. TripAdvisor) are used among tourism firms (Cabiddu, De Carlo and Piccoli, 2014; Leung, Bai and Stahura, 2015). SM provides opportunities for firms to have interactive and two-way communication with their potential and current customers (Sawhney, Verona and Prandelli, 2005; Vivek, Beatty and Morgan, 2012; Lee and Choi, 2014; Hollebeek, Glynn and Brodie, 2014; Dijkmans, Kerkhof and Beukeboom, 2015;). Thus, the importance of SM in the tourism industry cannot be ignored (Cabiddu et al., 2014; Munar and Jacobsen, 2014; Cheng and Edwards, 2015; Dijkmans et al., 2015).

Customer engagement (CE) is an emerging concept in marketing (Hollebeek et al., 2014). It has received attention from both practitioners and academic researchers who are now recognising the importance of CE in building stronger firm-customer relationships for future growth (Kumar, Aksoy, Donkers, Venkatesan, Wiesel and Tillmanns, 2010). Studies have found that SM has a positive influence on the engagement of businesses with customers (Choudhury and Harrigan, 2014; Harrigan et al., 2015). On the contrary, evidences showed that it is viewed as an irrelevant platform to engage customers (Lipiäinen, 2015). Thus, the role of SM in engaging customers remains unclear, especially in the context of small medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and tourism. SMEs have an imperative role for the country's economic growth. In fact, SMEs in Malaysia make up by 99 per cent of business enterprises (Hashim, 2007). In addition, the tourism

industry is one of the most important sectors that contributes for Malaysia's economic and social development. Thus, this paper proposes an exploratory qualitative study aiming to understand at how these tourism SMEs use these SM to engage their travellers.

## 2. Background

The provision of a social platform enables firms to attract the attention of potential customers and establish a relationship with them where information can be exchanged and feedback obtained (Chathoth et al., 2014; Kao et al., 2016). SM can also help firms to ensure that their information reaches the target market using specific filters set by the different SM platforms, paid or organic posts. Firms can post information more efficiently by targeting the right audiences and in a timely manner (Bakshy et al., 2012; Agnihotri et al., 2017). The firms can thus have real-time, two-way communication with their customers in a personalised interactive manner (Moore, Raymond and Hopkins, 2015), although other studies have shown contrary findings where firms do not view SM as a relevant platform to engage customers (Lipiäinen, 2015). There is recent evidence that firms restrict the discussion to closed groups or direct communication at a personal level to counter the openness of SM platforms in the SME context (Guha et al., 2018). However, the authors' research used a qualitative approach in the SME context, which does not reflect tourism companies' communication with their travellers. Thus, the role of SM and how it is used for CE initiatives in tourism SME industry remains unclear. Moreover, SM, as a CE enabler, has not been well researched in the tourism context (Harrigan et al., 2017). There has been a call for future studies on how businesses create, track and measure CE on SM (Barger and Labrecque, 2013; Barger et al., 2016), for example, the type of SM that is used by the tourism SMEs, and how they use it to engage with their travellers.

Social travellers expect companies to be transparent and authentic in their dealings with them. They will engage with the company on their own terms such as how, when and on which social channel (Morgan et al., 2010; Wang & Owyang, 2010; Acker et al., 2011; Brown, 2012). They expect companies to listen and engage with them in a collaborative dialogue such as commenting on their Facebook posts and then being able to form a meaningful business-customer relationship with them (Leary, 2008). If the travellers feel that they can trust the companies and feel connected with them, they may become loyal and even advocates for the company (Greenberg, 2010). Therefore, this paper proposes a qualitative study to explore the use of SM to engage customers within the tourism context.

To achieve that, this study will adapt a five-stage research design process for theory and framework development outlined by Payne, Storbacka, Frow and Knox, (2009), Roberts and Palmer (2012), Frow, Nenonen, Payne and Storbacka (2015) and Zainal, McKechnie and Roberts (2017) (see Figure 1).

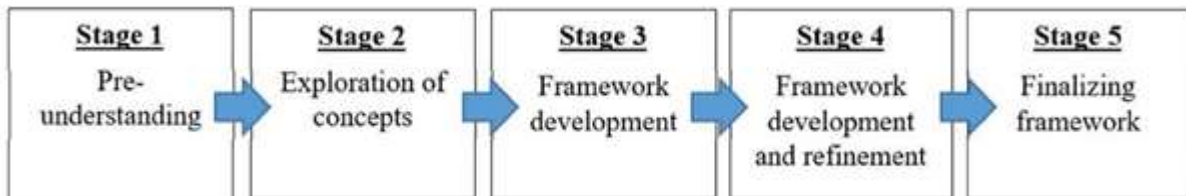


Figure 1 Five-stage research design process

The first stage solely focuses on reviewing the literature relevant to SM and customer engagement and this will be continuous throughout the five stages of the research process. The second stage then will explore the concept with expert interviews. These experts includes experts from SM consultancy companies in Malaysia, and tourism agencies (e.g. Ministry of Tourism Malaysia). Then, the study proposes to develop a preliminary framework based on the expert interview analysis in stage three. Stage four will then refine this framework using a case study within the tourism SME context using multiple methods (e.g. semi-structured interviews,

document analysis, and netnography). Nonetheless, it is necessary to identify tourism Malaysia SMEs who are actively using SM and that actively initiate engagement and respond to customer’s engagement. Lastly, the process will include gathering feedback from the case study participants to finalize the framework.

The sample of this study will be the companies that are classified as SMEs in Malaysian tourism industry, specifically those in the B2C context. In Malaysia, SME companies have been generally classified using the quantitative criteria including number of employees, total of paid up capital, total assets of the companies possess and sales turnover (Siaw and Rani, 2012). This definition covers all sectors, namely services, manufacturing, agriculture, construction, and mining and quarrying in Malaysia context.

Table 1 Categorisation of Malaysian SMEs

Category	Micro	Small	Medium
Manufacturing, Manufacturing related services, and agro-based industries	Sales turnover of less than RM300,000 or employees of less than 5	Sales turnover from RM300,000 to less than RM15 mil or employees from 5 less than 75	Sales turnover from RM15 mil to not exceeding RM50 Mil OR employees from 75 to not exceeding 200
Services and other sectors, primary agriculture, and information & communication technology	Less turnover of less than RM300,000 or employees of less than 5	Sales turnover from RM300,000 to less than RM 3 mil or employees from 5 to less than 30	Sales turnover from RM3 mil to not exceeding RM20 mil OR employees from 30 to not exceeding 75.

Source: SME Corp Malaysia (2020)

### 3. *Implications for Theory and Practice*

In conclusion, the results of this study will provide significant contribution to the academic perspective. There is some empirical research on these areas, nonetheless, it is difficult to understand the nature of the relationship by only empirically testing these conditions, hence the need to further explore the use of SM for customer engagement in the tourism SME context. Therefore, this study will develop an advanced understanding of this area. In other words, this theoretical contribution will help to develop theory in the SM, customer engagement, and SME literature.

From the practical perspective, findings of this exploratory study will provide rich insights about SM and customer engagement for the Malaysian SMEs in the tourism industry. The study will gather data from Malaysian tourism SMEs, therefore the results will have practical utility where tourism SME practitioners apply theory in real-life phenomena. Particularly, the derived theory will help practitioners of Malaysian tourism SMEs to develop a SM and customer engagement strategy which will engage social travellers and help them to enhance performance and competitive advantage, domestically as well as globally.

In order to be able to transfer the knowledge from theory to practice, this research will work collaboratively with the Malaysian tourism SMEs to further understand the relationship of SM and customer engagement in reality. It will enhance the relevance of research for practice thus the findings will be interesting and applied for SMEs' practitioners. In this way, this strategy will enable practitioners to transfer the knowledge from this research, which Van De Ven and Johnson (2006) emphasize in their paper. To ensure the validity and reliability, the study will cross check the findings with the chosen SME for this case studies. This is called data triangulation.

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