The Effect of Affective Relationship Satisfaction on Word of Mouth Engagement in Hospitality Online Brand Community

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Abstract— One of the primary purposes of creating online brand community is to augment brand-related word of mouth engagement. However, limited studies have investigated the effect of relationship building on word of mouth engagement in the context of online brand community. Thus, this study aims to examine the association between affective relationship satisfaction and word of mouth engagement among members of hospitality online brand community. A web survey was administered to four prominent hospitality brand Facebook pages in Malaysia that yielded 255 valid responses. Based on Structural Equation Modeling with Amos 22.0 program, it was found that affective relationship satisfaction is significantly related to online and offline word of mouth. Additionally, online word of mouth was found to be a significant mediator in explaining offline word of mouth beyond the context of online brand community. Several theoretical and managerial implications are discussed based on the findings of this study.

Keywords— affective relationship satisfaction, word of mouth engagement, hospitality online brand community

I. INTRODUCTION

The topic word of mouth has been an interesting subject among marketing scholars and practitioners since 1940s with the earliest study by Berelson and Gaudet (1948). With the advancement of the Internet, the interest on the topic surge in the late 1990s that saw the transition from offline to online word of mouth (Kirby & Marsden, 2006). The Internet has made it possible for individuals to share their personal experiences, opinions and thoughts about a particular product or service at a global scale. Today, brand marketers are using the Internet to propagate consumer word of mouth engagement that is more effective and less
costly than the traditional mass media (Bianchi & Mathews, 2016). One of the ways is through creating online brand community on social networking site platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Among all, Facebook is considered as the most viable platform to influence consumers’ brand conversation as it has more than 2 billion users worldwide (Statista, 2017). Nowadays, it is common to see marketers promoting their brands with slogan ―Like us in Facebook‖ (Phua, Jin & Kim, 2017). According to Castronovo and Huang (2012), the success of a word of mouth marketing campaign greatly depends on the ability of brand marketers to stimulate consumers to spread their brand messages among their social circles. For this reason, there is an increasing investment towards implementing word of mouth marketing through social networking sites (Hudson, Huang, Roth & Madden, 2015) such as in Facebook page. However, the findings of recent several publication reports on word of mouth engagement in Facebook pages are not very encouraging. For example, Eyl (2013) investigated more than 60,000 brand Facebook pages and discovered that merely 0.2 percent of members are engaging in propagating brand messages. More recently, Rayson (2017) examined more than 880 million Facebook pages brand contents and reported that average number of engagement in terms of commenting, liking and sharing dropped by over 20 per cent since January 2017. Therefore, it is clear that though Facebook page can be an innovative way to stimulate brand conversation it is not an easy task. Brand marketers need to think beyond the conventional marketing method in order to reap the potential benefit of word of mouth marketing. Given the fact that Facebook page is created based on social relationship between members and brands, this study proposes word of mouth might be better explained from relationship marketing theoretical lens. A review of the word of mouth literature reveals that limited studies have examined the predictors of word of mouth in marketer-created online brand community such as Facebook page. This argument is supported by several systematic literature review conducted by Chan and Ngai (2011), Cheung and Thadani (2011), and Cantallops and Salvi (2014). For example, Chan and Ngai (2011) analyzed 94 peer-reviewed articles and revealed that limited studies have focused on the predictors of word of mouth especially in non-western countries and the hospitality industry context. Rather recently, Chen and Law (2016) reviewed 43 articles and found that limited word of mouth studies have been performed in countries originated from the Southeast Asian region. Considering the research gaps in the literature, this study aims to examine predictors of word of mouth engagement within the context of hospitality brand Facebook page in Malaysia. More specific, the primary interest of this study is to ascertain
whether members’ level of relationship satisfaction with brand in Facebook page has significant influence on their online and offline word of mouth engagement behaviors. It also determine whether online word of mouth function as a mediator in the model.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Today, there is an increasing trend of brand marketers leveraging on Facebook page to create online brand community for word of mouth marketing purposes. Dessart, Veloutsou and Morgan-Thomas (2015) define online brand community as a congregation of individuals who have similar interest on a particular brand beyond time and geographical limitations. Often, members display mutual realization, customs, and backgrounds with many of them have memberships in multiple online brand communities (Muniz & Schau, 2007). Managing online brand communities is quite distinct from offline ones where members are more deeply involved due to higher threshold of time and monetary expenses (Wirtz, Ambtman, Bloemer, Horvath, Ramaseshan, Klundert, Canli & Kandampully, 2013). Online brand communities tend to provide members with pleasure and precious experiences to encourage their initiatives in word-of-mouth communication (Zhang, Lu, Wang & Wu, 2015). This study focuses on online brand community created by hospitality brands in Facebook page in Malaysia. Yang and Matilla (2017) state that consumers of hospitality products or/and services are more motivated to share their consumption experience (traveling or dining) on Facebook with family, relatives and friends as a way to boost self-identification. In similar fashion, Kim (2016) reveals that they often share information on famous hospitality locations such as hotels, restaurants and places of attraction as a way to present one-self, social connectedness, and preservation of self-memory. Arguably, most people nowadays aim to gain social recognition from showing off brand experience to others on social networking sites, rather than having a memorable hospitality experience (Wang, 2017). This shows the viability of Facebook page as a medium to stimulate brand conversations related to hospitality products and services. In order to understand the topic under investigation better, the following sections provide the relevance literature on the principal constructs of this study: word of mouth and relationship satisfaction.

A. Word of Mouth Engagement

Based on the definitions provided by Hennig-Thurau (2004) and Goldenberg, Libai and Muller (2001), word of mouth engagement is referred to as members’ voluntary act of propagating positive brand messages through their large number of online and offline social networks as a result of Internet marketing practices. The definition clearly stresses the importance of both online and offline word of mouth in which the latter is being increasingly neglected by scholars. Both word of mouth
engagement components are unique in terms of their characteristics such as medium of interaction, form, format and diffusion (Huang, Cai, Tsang & Zhou, 2011; King, Racherla & Bush, 2014). However, despite of the dissimilarities, online word of mouth is considered as an extension of the offline word of mouth into the Internet environment (Cheung, Lee & Rabjohn, 2008). In the context of online brand community, online word of mouth constitute the members act of positively commenting, liking and sharing brand-related contents in Facebook page with other online social networks (De Vries & Carlson, 2014). On the other hand, offline word of mouth signifies members’ positive brand conversations related to the brand Facebook page contents that occur outside of the Internet world such as face-to-face and telephone conversations (Jahn & Kunz, 2012). This conceptualization of word of mouth engagement as a dual dimensional construct echoes the growing call for more empirical research on probing online and offline word of mouth as equally important outcome behaviors (Keller & Fay, 2016; Buttle & Groeger, 2017). Therefore, by abstracting word of mouth engagement into two separate but interrelated criterion constructs may enrich current knowledge on members’ word of mouth engagement formation inside and outside the hospitality online brand community.

B. Affective Relationship Satisfaction
Affective relationship satisfaction denotes members’ emotional feeling of satisfaction resulting from an overall evaluation of an exchange relationship (Ulaga & Eggert, 2006). The identification of the affective trait of satisfaction is mainly established on Oliver’s (1981) enhancement of the expectancy disconfirmation theory (Oliver, 1980). The main assumption behind the theory is consumer satisfaction is a psychological state of mind resulting from the evaluation of two sources of affect: (1) the surprise of discovering pre-consumption expectations disconfirmed by post-consumption experiences, and (2) pre-consumption feelings toward brand-related experiences. In relation to this study, members’ affective relationship satisfaction emerges as a result of the social relationship exchange between the hospitality brand and members within the online brand community. It is different from economic based satisfaction that measures satisfaction concept as an outcome of business transactions (Palmatier, Dant, Grewal & Evans, 2006). As noted by Chow and Shi (2015), satisfaction is regarded as a key ingredient in attracting and maintaining members to participate in marketer-created online brand community. In a travel based online brand community, Barreda, Bilgihan and Kageyama (2015) denote that members’ satisfaction as the collective assessment of gratifications linked with the relationship experience within the community. More recently, Clark, Black and Judson (2017) suggest that members tend to be satisfied with brands if they see themselves as a significant part of that online brand community. They also are more likely to integrate into an online brand community if they think the brands are meaningful to them. Although previous studies have broaden current understanding on members satisfaction in online brand community, the conceptualization of satisfaction from affective standpoint remains limited. Moreover, it is not clear whether they have captured the affective or cognitive component of member’s satisfaction. Thus, it is paramount to select the right measurement scale that appropriately captures the affective component attribute of members’ relationship satisfaction.

III. RESEARCH MODEL AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT
Grounded on Stimulus Organism Response (SOR)
theory (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974), this study conjectures that relationship experience derived from the hospitality brand online community acts as the stimulus component. On the other hand, members represent the organism component that is affected by the stimulus. The response component is signified by their behavioral outcomes as a result of their psychological state. Therefore, it is proposed that members’ relationship experience (stimulus) with the hospitality brands in online brand community would influence their affective relationship satisfaction (organism). Subsequently, this would contribute to their online and offline word of mouth engagement (response) about the hospitality brand-related contents. Figure 1.1 depicts the conceptual framework for this study.

Fig. 1. Conceptual Research Model
Note: CS: Affective Relationship Satisfaction, ON: Online Word of Mouth, OFF: Offline Word of Mouth

This study turns to recent word of mouth literature to facilitate further understanding on the proposed connection between affective relationship satisfaction, online and offline word of mouth engagement. In a study conducted by Barreda et al. (2015) on travel-oriented online brand community, they found that members’ satisfaction with the community platform (social networking sites) is positively and significantly associated to their positive word of mouth engagement and continuous usage intention. Their findings are based on 245 data collected from members of travel-oriented online brand community in the US. In similar vein, Cho and Shi (2015) examined the connection between functional and social value, satisfaction and positive word of mouth within the context of brand pages in China. They discovered that members’ satisfaction with the brand pages plays a significant role in influencing their positive word of mouth. Specifically, their research model showed that members’ satisfaction explains 56 per cent of the variance in their word of mouth engagement ($R^2 = 0.56$). Although both studies have found significant link between satisfaction and word of mouth engagement, they did not focused on members relationship satisfaction with the brands. Moreover, they did not considered the effect of online word of mouth on offline word of mouth. Keller and Fay (2012) argued that more consumers’ conversations about brands occur in the offline rather than online environment. Similar argument is put forward by Buttle and Groeger (2017) who discovered that two-thirds of total word of mouth affecting business performance still comes from offline word of mouth. In relation to the hospitality industry, Jalilvand (2017) indicated that offline word of mouth is far more influential in influencing tourists’ destination image as compared to traditional mass marketing media. Although offline word of mouth still plays an important role in influencing consumers’ purchase decision, limited studies have examined the link between online and offline word of mouth. Among the few studies, Groeger and Buttle (2014) found Facebook friends are more likely to have face-to-face conversations about brands they encountered online. In addition, Hu and Huang (2015) suggest that consumers’ online word of mouth engagement may function as significant mediator in social media platforms. But
different from this study, they focused on the mediating effect of online word of mouth on the link between firms’ crisis follow-up action and market value recovery. Based on the discussion, this study proposed the following hypotheses:

H1: Members’ affective relationship satisfaction is significantly associated with their online word of mouth engagement.

H2: Members’ affective relationship satisfaction is significantly associated with their offline word of mouth engagement.

H3: Members’ online word of mouth engagement is significantly associated to their offline word of mouth engagement.

H4: Members’ online word of mouth engagement significantly mediates the association between affective relationship satisfaction and offline word of mouth engagement.

IV. METHODOLOGY

An online survey using eSurv.gov was used to collect data from four prominent hospitality brand Facebook pages in Malaysia, namely McDonald (2750779 members), Kentucky Fried Chicken (2486167 members), AirAsia (2384386 members), and Pizza Hut (1589716 members). These hospitality brands were chosen since they were listed on the Top 10 most popular Facebook page in Malaysia (Socialbakers, 2018). As suggested by Dane (2010), a multi-stage stratified cluster sampling was employed to randomly select members of the stated hospitality brand Facebook page. As a result of the sampling approach, 255 valid responses were gathered and further analyzed. All of the measurement scale items were adapted from previous studies. Affective relationship satisfaction was adapted from a three-scale items developed by Lin, Wu and Tsai (2005). This measurement scale is anchored by 7-point Likert scale with higher score indicate greater level of affective relationship satisfaction. Online word of mouth was measured using three-item scale from the work of De Vries and Carlson (2014), whereas offline word of mouth was assessed by three-item scale adapted from Jahn and Kunz (2012). Both measurement scales were anchored with a 5-point Likert scale with greater scores signify higher frequency of word of mouth engagement. All scale items were slightly modified to fit into the context of the study. Descriptive analyses were executed to provide demographic information of respondent’s profile. Then, a principal factor analysis was performed to reduce the number of factors or items from each variable. The final results from this factor analysis were then used for further investigation using Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) with AMOS 22.0 program. It aims to find the most optimal model or a combination of the variables that fits well with the data (Kline, 1998).

V. DATA ANALYSES AND RESULTS

Most of the respondents were female (52.8%) as compared to male (47.2%). They were aged between 25-34 years old (46.38%) and followed by 18-24 years old (39.57). Majority of the respondents have completed their undergraduate degree and live in Selangor (31.9%), Kuala Lumpur (16.6%) and Pulau Pinang (14.0%). The respondents’ characteristics are rather similar with other studies by Barreda et al. (2015) and Cho and Shi (2015). A preliminary data analysis was conducted to check for univariate and multivariate outliers, data normality and common method bias. Thorough examination of the data did not reveal any significant problem related to the stated criterion. The reliability and validity of the measurement model was assessed using composite reliability (CR), average variance extracted (AVE) and Fornell and Larcker (1981) criterion. Table 1 shows that the CR and AVE was above the recommended threshold suggested by Segars (1997)
and Bagozzi and Yi (1981) respectively.

Summary Of the Measurement Model Assessment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Constructs</th>
<th>AVE</th>
<th>CR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Affective Relationship Satisfaction</td>
<td>0.708</td>
<td>0.906</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online Word of Mouth</td>
<td>0.927</td>
<td>0.941</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offline Word of Mouth</td>
<td>0.934</td>
<td>0.946</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: AVE = Average Variance Extracted, CR = Composite Reliability

Table 2 presents the Fornell and Larcker discriminant validity criteria that shows the intercorrelation between the square root of the average variance extracted (bold) of each construct and all other constructs. All the values on the diagonals were higher than the corresponding row and column values indicating that there was no problem with discriminant validity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Constructs</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Offline Word of Mouth</td>
<td>0.936</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Online Word of Mouth</td>
<td>0.929</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Affective Relationship Satisfaction</td>
<td>0.287</td>
<td>0.298</td>
<td>0.841</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on the modification index of CFA, the measurement model of exogenous and endogenous and the final model as the examination of the hypothesized model confirmed the constructs of Affective Relationship Satisfaction (CS), Online Word of Mouth (ON) and Offline Word of Mouth (OFF) of the hypothesized paths. In SEM, factor analysis and hypotheses are tested in the same analysis. SEM techniques also provide fuller information about the extent to which the research model is supported by the data. Goodness of fit indices for the 10 observed variables of CS, ON and OFF shows that the reading is good that it ranges from 0.224 to 0.974 for the significance standardized regressions weight. Standard error (SE) for each observation shows the goodness of fit and low-level reading from 0.031 to 0.175, and estimate (Square Multiple Correlation) of observation shows the contribution level to the latent variable (0.060 to 0.933). The standardized regression weight between CS and ON is 0.244, between CS and OFF is 0.224 and between ON and OFF is 0.918. The final model shows the model explained a substantial portion of the variance in all the endogenous variables (square multiple correlations) that indicates the two exogenous variables (CS and ON) jointly explained 10.3% variance in OFF. Finally, from the Structural Model the reading for GFI is at 0.948 (acceptable fit criteria) and RMSEA is less than 0.08. The measurement model has a good fit with the data based on assessment criteria such as GFI and RMSEA (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). Table 3 summarizes the goodness of model fit of CS, ON, OFF and the structural model. The structural models testing of endogenous variables (CDL and WIL) fulfill the GFI (GFI > 0.900) and RMSEA criteria (less than 0.08).

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model Fit Indicator</th>
<th>CS</th>
<th>ON</th>
<th>OFF</th>
<th>Final Model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>( \chi^2 )</td>
<td>7.729</td>
<td>14.329</td>
<td>17.773</td>
<td>71.454</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DF</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CMIN/DF</td>
<td>7.729</td>
<td>14.329</td>
<td>8.887</td>
<td>2.165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P</td>
<td>0.005</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GFI</td>
<td>0.985</td>
<td>0.978</td>
<td>0.965</td>
<td>0.946</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RMSEA</td>
<td>0.063</td>
<td>0.047</td>
<td>0.065</td>
<td>0.068</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2 indicates that members’ affective relationship satisfaction has a significant positive association with online \( (b = 0.24) \) and offline word of mouth engagement \( (b = 0.22) \). In addition, members’ online word of mouth was found to be
significantly and positively related to their offline word of mouth engagement ($b = 0.92$). Thus, hypotheses H1, H2, and H3 were confirmed.

To test for the mediation effect of online word of mouth, this study employed Baron and Kenny’s (1986) procedure. Table 4 displays the result of the mediation effect assessment, which shows online word of mouth function as partial mediator on the affective relationship satisfaction – offline word of mouth link. The findings are based on the evidence that the inclusion of online word of mouth as mediator in the research model lessen the path coefficient value ($b$) between CS and OFF from 0.311 to 0.257. As suggested by Baron and Kenny (1986), partial mediation transpire when the inclusion of a mediator significantly lessen the strength of the association between exogenous and endogenous constructs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hypothesized Path</th>
<th>$b$</th>
<th>Std. Error</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Direct Model</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CS $\rightarrow$ OFF</td>
<td>0.311</td>
<td>0.080</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full Mediation Model</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CS $\rightarrow$ ON</td>
<td>0.149</td>
<td>0.237</td>
<td>0.021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ON $\rightarrow$ OFF</td>
<td>0.940</td>
<td>0.256</td>
<td>0.022</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CS $\rightarrow$ OFF</td>
<td>0.257</td>
<td>0.091</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The findings provide support to the application of SOR theory in explaining the formation of word of mouth engagement within both online and offline context. As hypothesized, affective relationship satisfaction is significantly and positively associated to offline word of mouth via online word of mouth. This is consistent with the findings of Barreda et al. (2015) and Cho and Shi (2015) who discovered that members’ satisfaction with the brand pages plays a significant role in influencing their positive word of mouth. Additionally, it is confirmed that members who spread brand contents online are more likely to promote similar brand among their offline social networks. Online word of mouth also plays a significant role in enhancing the effect of members’ affective relationship satisfaction on offline word of mouth. In terms of theoretical implications, this study broadens our understanding on word of mouth development from relationship marketing viewpoint. Instead of focusing on online word of mouth, this study extends the current literature by examining the link from online to offline word of mouth. Moreover, this study fills in the research gap through measuring relationship satisfaction with hospitality brand from members’ emotional state. As for managerial implications, this study provides evidence that Facebook page can be a viable platform to stimulate consumers’ brand communications. However, hospitality brand marketers should first develop strategy to enhance members’ affective relationship satisfaction. They may provide multiple benefits such as by offering better brand interaction and information quality. As this study was based on Facebook, future research should consider other platform such as Twitter. Other relevance relationship-based constructs also should be considered to increase the explanatory power of the model.

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