

BE-ci 2016 : 3<sup>rd</sup> International Conference on Business and Economics, 21 - 23 September, 2016

# Examining the Relationship between Psychological Empowerment, Relationship Quality and Online Word of Mouth in Brand Facebook Page

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## Abstract

<http://dx.doi.org/10.15405/epsbs.2016.11.02.4>

This study examines the link between psychological empowerment, relationship quality and word of mouth in a brand Facebook page. It is intended to help brand marketers establish and apply successful relationship marketing strategies in the online environment. Successful implementation of relationship marketing in social networking sites will contribute to favorable consumer behaviors such as positive word of mouth. Based on the data collected from 10 hospitality brand Facebook pages, Partial Least Square (PLS) analysis was used to examine the structural interrelationship between psychological empowerment, relationship quality and online word of mouth. The empirical findings of this study were threefold. First, higher consumer psychological empowerment resulted in higher relationship satisfaction. Second, greater relationship satisfaction led to higher relationship commitment and relationship trust. Third, better relationship quality (relationship satisfaction, relationship commitment and relationship trust) contributed in greater positive online word of mouth.

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**Keywords:** Psychological empowerment; Relationship quality; Online word of mouth; Brand Facebook page.

## 1. Introduction

The subject of consumer-brand relationship (CBR) has gained substantial interest from both marketing scholars and brand marketers. This is due to the expectations that establishing a successful

CBR would yield towards favorable consumer behaviors such as loyalty and positive word of mouth. It has been demonstrated that it is far less expensive to retain a customer than to acquire a new one. As a customers' relationship with the company lengthens, companies can increase profits by retaining current consumers (Reichheld and Sasser, 1990). The longer a consumer stays in the relationship with a brand, the more profitable to the brand marketer. Therefore, brand marketers should allocate more marketing budgets to retain existing consumers under the relationship marketing strategy (Sheth and Parvatiyar, 1995).

One of the building blocks of a successful CBR is relationship quality. In establishing a relationship marketing strategy, it is imperative for brand marketers to foster a quality relationship with their consumers. Often, it engages stimulating consumers' affective states throughout the duration of the CBR. Brand marketers are turning to social networking sites such as Facebook to create such emotional state that is by active participation and interaction (Treadaway & Smith, 2009). Although enormous amount of study related to relationship quality exists in relationship marketing literature, limited studies have been conducted on examining the effect of psychological empowerment on relationship quality in hospitality brand Facebook page. Additionally, previous studies in relationship marketing have focused more on service organizations such as banking, insurance, retailing, hospital, professional associations, and hotel (e.g. Palmer, 1995; Crosby & Stephens, 1987; Reynolds and Beatty, 1999; Peltier, 1998; Gruen et al., 2000; Kim et al., 2001).

The purpose of the study is to examine the effect of psychological empowerment on relationship quality, specifically relationship satisfaction in brand Facebook page. It is hypothesized that the greater the perceived individual psychological empowerment, the better the relationship satisfaction between brand Facebook pages and their members. Moreover, it is assumed that the multidimensional relationship quality is interconnected, where relationship satisfaction would lead to relationship commitment and relationship trust. As the relationship quality intensify, it is expected to have a positive significant effect on members' behaviors indicated through positive word of mouth.

## **2. Literature Review**

### *2.1 Psychological empowerment*

Consumer empowerment refers to the notion of transferring the balance of power from businesses that are normally in control to the habitually powerless consumers (Hoffman, Novak and Peralta, 1999). In the current study, psychological empowerment is defined as perceived individual control of expressing feeling and/or thought in the online environment. Thomas and Velthouse (1990) proposed that individual psychological empowerment is exhibited through four cognitions namely meaning, competence, self-determination and impact. Meaning refers to the value of one's work objective or drive. Competence is one's belief in his/her ability to perform the work. Self-determination is an individual's autonomy in having choice in regulating his/her work, behaviors and processes. Impact is the level to which an individual thinks his/her actions can influence work results or other people

behaviors. The advancement of social networking sites has contributed to an increase in consumer empowerment (Constantinides, 2007), specifically the power to express their feeling and thought. For example, the SNS would allow consumers to give opinion and share their experiences with others. This gives them meaningful purpose of helping others within the online community. Also, it would be easy for them to speak their mind using SNS, as they have the ability and confidence to use such technology. They perceived they have the autonomy to express their feelings without any major restrictions. By having such power, they believe they could exert influence to organization and other people.

## *2.2 Relationship quality*

Fournier (1998) defined brand relationship quality as an overall evaluation of the depth and strength between consumer and brand, a construct that is multi-aspect in nature. Although the indicators differ depending on each study's particular setting, researchers commonly conceptualize brand relationship quality as a construct composed of three key components namely satisfaction, trust, and commitment (e.g. Baker, Simpson & Sigauw, 1999; Dorsch, Swanson & Kelly, 1998; Garbarino & Johnson, 1999; Smith, 1998).

### *2.2.1 Relationship satisfaction*

Relationship satisfaction has been recognized as one of the essential elements of relationship quality. It is referred to as individual's positive emotional state developed throughout the period of a relationship working affiliation with their consumers (Anderson, Fornell & Rust, 1997). It is linked to psychological factors, such as partner fulfilling promises, which is created through repeated positive experiences when using a product or service (Oliver, 1999). To have a successful business relationship, it is important that brand marketers enhance consumers' relationship satisfaction over the course of their relationship.

### *2.2.2 Relationship commitment*

Drawing on Moorman et al., (1992) conceptualization of commitment in the context of social exchange, consumer affective commitment is defined as a consumer's enduring desire to maintain a valued relationship with a seller. Consumers' affective commitment has long been regarded as a key construct in seller-buyer relationship literature (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Zeithaml et al. (1991) highlighted the role of consumer affective commitment in the services relationship marketing literature. They indicate that consumer relationships with businesses are fostered on a basis of mutual commitment. Affective commitment is linked to the feelings of a consumer towards a brand (Anderson & Weitz, 1992) and determines the consumers' desire to continue the relationship in the future (Johnson et al., 2006).

### *2.2.3 Relationship trust*

Trust, as an essential element in relationship initiation and maintenance, is a foundational concept of the relationship marketing perspective (Anderson & Narus, 1990; Dwyer, Schurr, & Oh, 1987).

According to Wilson, Strausb and McEvily (2006), affective trust relates to reciprocal emotional ties, concerns, and care between partners. It is the confidence one places in a partner described by feelings of safety and perceived strength of the relationship. Affective trust is distinctly more enclosed to personal experiences with the partner than cognitive trust. The principle behind affective trust is dependence on a partner based on emotions. As emotional connections between partners intensify, trust may venture beyond that which is justified by available knowledge as in cognitive trust (Johnson & Grayson, 2005).

### *2.3 Online word of mouth*

WOM is increasingly crucial for brand marketers due to its effect on purchase decision by consumers (Gajendra et al., 2012; Soares et al., 2012). Park and Lee (2008) referred online word of mouth as any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or business, which is made available to a multitude of people via the Internet. It is an informal communication between individuals related to the usage or characteristics of particular goods and services, or their sellers that is uniquely different from communications through mass media Goldsmith (2006). This study focuses on positive online word of mouth, which is defined as the act of spreading favorable statements that relate to a brand's product or service.

## **3. Research Model Development**

### *3.1 Conceptual framework*

Based on the suggestion put forward by Ulaga and Eggert (2006), the current study applied Fishbein and Ajzen's (1975) cognition, affection and conation theory. This provides a theoretical guidance in examining whether members' cognitive perceptions of psychological empowerment are related to their emotional states of satisfaction, trust, and commitment that eventually lead to their word of mouth behaviors.

### *3.2 Hypotheses development*

#### *3.2.1 Psychological empowerment, relationship satisfaction, relationship commitment and relationship trust*

According to Langer (1983), consumer perceived empowerment could have encouraging continuing effects on overall happiness and satisfaction. Morgan and Hunt (1994), successful consumer-brand relationship requires commitment and trust. In their study related to the automobile tire retailers, they found that relationship trust has a significant positive effect on relationship commitment. Drawing from this study, Garbarino and Johnson (1999) conducted a study on 401 customers of a professional theater and found that customers with high relational orientation are unlikely to be committed in a relationship in a situation where trust is not established. Hennig-Thurau (2002) surveyed 336 respondents regarding their relationship with their service providers; found that relationship satisfaction has a positive influence on relationship commitment. A high level of satisfaction provides the customer with a repeated positive reinforcement, thus creating commitment-inducing emotional bonds. In a more recent

study, Caceres and Paparoidamis (2005) stated that customers who are satisfied with relationship with their company are likely to be committed and have higher levels of trust in the relationship. Additionally, they discovered that greater levels of relationship trust contribute to higher relationship commitment. Therefore, it is hypothesized that:

*H1. Psychological empowerment has a positive influence on relationship satisfaction.*

*H2. Relationship satisfaction has a positive influence on relationship commitment.*

*H3. Relationship satisfaction has a positive influence on relationship trust.*

*H4. Relationship trust has a positive influence on relationship commitment*

### *3.2.2 Relationship satisfaction relationship commitment, relationship trust and online word of mouth*

It is suggested that satisfied consumers in the relationship with brand social networking sites may help to develop profitable behaviors such as positive word of mouth engagement. A study on online collaborative platform found that satisfaction with a virtual community increased the level of consumer participation in that community which subsequently influenced word of mouth engagement (Casalo, Flavian & Guinaliu, 2010). A high level of satisfaction leads the satisfied consumers to spread positive word of mouth about the businesses offerings (Carpenter and Fairhurst, 2005).

A study conducted by Chu and Kim (2011) on 363 college students found that trust was positively associated with consumers' online word of mouth behavior. Hau and Kim (2011) also reported that trust toward others significantly influenced consumers' intention to share information in online community. Pentina, Zhang & Basmanova (2013) extends brand relationship theory to the context of the social networking sites Twitter with a cross-cultural American–Ukrainian respondents. Their results confirm the important role of trust in the context of social media by supporting positive effects of trust in Twitter on its members' intentions to continue using the social network platform in the future and to recommend the platform to their friends.

Affective commitment has been reported to be a strong and positive influence on word of mouth behavior (Harrison-Walker, 2001). When consumers emotionally attached to the brand, they may participate in word of mouth for the reasons of comfort and reassurance or simply because they believe in the brand (Tuskej, Golob & Podnar, 2013). A study on consumer-organization service relationship by Fullerton (2011) found that affective commitment is the most significant determinant of consumer willingness to give favorable recommendations about the service provider as opposed to normative and continuance components of commitment. Based on the discussion, it is hypothesized that:

*H5. Relationship satisfaction has a positive influence on online word of mouth.*

*H6. Relationship commitment has a positive influence on online word of mouth.*

*H7. Relationship trust has a positive influence on online word of mouth.*

## **4. Methodology**

### *4.1 Sampling and data collection*

Brand Facebook page was selected as the appropriate representative of brand social networking sites due to its popularity worldwide. In particular, 10 most popular hospitality brands in Malaysia Top 200 brand Facebook page were chosen as the research setting. Currently, there are 18 brands related to the hospitality industry in the Malaysia Top 200 brand Facebook page with estimated total members of 10,228,884. The study did not include the remaining 8 hospitality brands, as from our observation they were considered inactive. Based on the definitions of hospitality (see Ditmer, 2002; Lashley & Lee-Ross, 2008), the hospitality brand was categorized into 4 sectors: foodservice, transportation, entertainment, and lodging.

Based on a confidence interval of 95%, and an error margin of +5% the minimum sample size was established at 384 (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970). However, Bryman's (2008) suggested that increasing the sample size could reduce sampling error. Thus, a sample size of 500 was considered appropriate for this study. Based on the total number of fans, the four categories of hospitality brand Facebook pages are proportionally stratify to determine the number of samples for each category. As a result of systematic random sampling, the sample size of 500 for the study is represented by 238 members for foodservice, 170 for transportation, 62 for entertainment, and 30 for lodging.

A web survey on eSurv.org was used to collect the data. Three waves of invitation link were sent to the selected samples via their Facebook. After one week, a total of 271 responses were received out of the 500 sent to the target respondents. However, 36 questionnaires were invalid and were excluded from further data statistical analysis. Thus, total valid questionnaires were 235, representing 47 percent response rate. Based on the sample size calculation using G\*Power analysis (Faul et al., 2009), 235 respondents were adequate to achieve statistical test power of more than 0.80 for this study. This was grounded on 0.05 significance level and effect size of 0.15.

#### 4.2 Measures

All items were rated on a 5-point agreement scale anchored by 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree except online word of mouth, which was rated on a 7-point frequency scale (1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree). Psychological empowerment was assessed with a 4-item scale adapted from (Spreitzer, 1995). Relationship satisfaction was measured using a 4-item scale derived from (Lin, Wu & Tsai, 2005). Relationship commitment was measured using a 4-item scale adapted from (Turri, Smith & Kemp, 2013). Relationship trust was assessed with a 4-item scale derived from (Johnson & Grayson, 2005). Online word of mouth, the consequences of relationship quality was measured using a 3-item scale adapted from (Jahn & Kunz, 2012). All items were slightly modified to suit the context of the current study. Additionally, 7-item social desirability by Fisher and Fick (1993) was included to address common method variance.

#### 4.3 Data analysis

Partial Least squares (PLS) a second-generation multivariate technique was used to test the developed research model (Fornell and Cha, 1994), which can simultaneously evaluate the measurement model (the relationships between constructs and their corresponding indicators), and the structural model with the aim of minimizing the error variance (Chin, 1998; Gil-Garcia, 2008). Smart PLS Version 3.0 (Ringle et al., 2005) was used to analyze the data. Also following the suggestions of (Chin, 1998; Gil-Garcia, 2008), bootstrapping method (5000 resampling) was applied to determine the significance levels for loadings, weights, and path coefficients.

### 5. Results

#### 5.1 Descriptive statistics

The descriptive analysis indicated that 48.5 per cent of the respondents were male and the remaining female. In terms of age, majority was in the age between 18 – 24 years (75.70%). Most of the respondents surveyed were Malay (67.2%), followed by Chinese (17.4%), Indian (2.1%), and others (13.2%). In relation to education level, a majority of the respondents (77.9%) have either Diploma or Bachelor's degree. Most of the respondents are active members of the hospitality brand Facebook page with 41.3 per cent of them visited or browsed the hospitality brand Facebook page at least twice a month.

#### 5.2 Testing the measurement model

As suggested by Hair et al. (2010), factor loadings, composite reliability and average variance extracted to assess convergence validity. The recommended values for loadings are set at  $> 0.7$ , the average variance extracted (AVE) should be  $> 0.5$  and the composite reliability (CR) should be  $> 0.7$ . Based on previous study (e.g. Zhang & Bartol, 2010), psychological empowerment is measured as a second order reflective constructs. Thus we followed the method suggested in the literature in PLS which is the repeated indicator approach to model the second order factors in the PLS analysis. From table 1 it can be seen that the results of the measurement model exceeded the recommended values thus indicating sufficient convergence validity. Next, discriminant validity is assessed using the Fornell and

Larcker (1981) method. The criterion used to assess this is by comparing the AVE with the squared correlations or the square root of the AVE with correlations (refer Table 2), The criteria is that if the square root of the AVE, shown in the diagonals are greater than the values in the row and columns on that particular construct than it is concluded that the measures have discriminant validity. From table 2, it can be seen that the values in the diagonals are greater than the values in their respective row and column thus indicating the measures used in this study are distinct. Thus the results presented in Tables 1 and 2 demonstrate adequate discriminant and convergent validity for the measurement model.

**Table 1.** Factor loadings and reliability

First Order Constructs	Second Order Construct	Items	Loadings	AVE	CR
Relationship Satisfaction		RSATIS1	0.818	0.708	0.906
		RSATIS2	0.852		
		RSATIS3	0.858		
		RSATIS4	0.837		
Relationship Commitment		RCOMMIT1	0.899	0.807	0.926
		RCOMMIT2	0.913		
		RCOMMIT3	0.881		
Relationship Trust		RTRUST1	0.911	0.828	0.935
		RTRUST2	0.931		
		RTRUST3	0.889		
Online Word of Mouth		ONWOM1	0.958	0.927	0.975
		ONWOM2	0.969		
		ONWOM3	0.962		
Meaning		MEANING1	0.898	0.813	0.929
		MEANING2	0.926		
		MEANING3	0.881		
Competence		COMPET1	0.873	0.794	0.921
		COMPET2	0.927		
		COMPET3	0.873		
Self Determination		SELFDET1	0.914	0.851	0.945
		SELFDET2	0.945		
		SELFDET3	0.908		
Impact		IMPACT1	0.911	0.79	0.918
		IMPACT2	0.916		
		IMPACT3	0.838		
	Psychological Empowerment Benefit	Meaning	0.685	0.534	0.821
		Competence	0.743		
		Self-Determination	0.746		
		Impact	0.747		

**Table 2.** Inter-construct correlation

Constructs	1	2	3	4	5
1. Online WOM	<b>0.963</b>				
2. Psychological Empowerment Benefit	0	<b>0.658</b>			
3. Relationship Commitment	0.342	0.035	<b>0.898</b>		
4. Relationship Satisfaction	0.298	0.125	0.514	<b>0.841</b>	
5. Relationship Trust	0.339	0.07	0.593	0.651	<b>0.91</b>

Note: Diagonal elements are the square root of the AVE of the reflective scales while the diagonals are the correlations between constructs



### 5.3 Testing the structural model

Using a bootstrapping technique with a re-sampling of 5000, the path estimates and t-statistics were calculated for the hypothesized relationships. It was found that psychological empowerment benefit ( $\beta = 0.125$ ,  $t = 2.093$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) was positively related to relationship satisfaction. In terms of the interrelationship among the dimensions of relationship quality, it was discovered that relationship satisfaction has a positive significance effect on both relationship commitment ( $\beta = 0.223$ ,  $t = 2.417$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and relationship trust ( $\beta = 0.651$ ,  $t = 11.483$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Also, it was found that relationship trust has a significant effect on relationship commitment ( $\beta = 0.448$ ,  $t = 4.338$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Focusing on relationship commitment as an endogenous construct, the standardized beta ( $\beta$ ) value indicated that relationship trust ( $\beta = 0.448$ ) has more impact on the endogenous construct as compared to the relationship satisfaction ( $\beta = 0.223$ ). Based on the results of  $R^2$  both relationship satisfaction and relationship trust explained 38 per cent variance for relationship commitment. Additionally,  $Q^2$  was satisfactory at 0.293. In relations to the correlation between the dimensions of relationship quality and online word of mouth, it is found that relationship satisfaction ( $\beta = 0.166$ ,  $t = 2.12$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), relationship trust ( $\beta = 0.163$ ,  $t = 1.863$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), and relationship commitment ( $\beta = 0.257$ ,  $t = 3.349$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) all have a positive significant effect on online word of mouth. Thus, based on the two-stage PLS analysis, all 7 hypotheses (H1 – H7) were supported (refer Table 3).

**Table 3.** Summary of the structural model measurement analysis

	Hypothesis	Std. Beta	Std. Error	t-value	F <sup>2</sup>	R <sup>2</sup>	Q <sup>2</sup>	Decision
H1	Psychological Empowerment -> Relationship Satisfaction	0.125	0.127	2.093*	0.02	0.505	0.34	Supported
H2	Relationship Satisfaction -> Relationship Commitment	0.223	0.092	2.417**	0.046	0.380	0.293	Supported
H3	Relationship Satisfaction -> Relationship Trust	0.651	0.057	11.483**	0.731	0.423	0.344	Supported
H4	Relationship Trust -> Relationship Commitment	0.448	0.103	4.338**	0.187	0.380	0.293	Supported
H5	Relationship Satisfaction -> Online WOM	0.166	0.078	2.12*	0.023			Supported
H6	Relationship Commitment -> Online WOM	0.257	0.077	3.349**	0.056	0.150	0.134	Supported
H7	Relationship Trust -> Online WOM	0.163	0.088	1.863*	0.019			Supported

Note: Significance level: t-value > 1.645\* ( $p < 0.05$ ), t-value > 2.33\*\* ( $p < 0.01$ ), based on one-tailed test.

## 6. Discussion and Conclusion

This study attempts to examine the relationship between psychological empowerment, relationship quality and online word of mouth. Based on the analysis, all of the hypothesized relationships are found to be significant at  $p < 0.05$  (one-tailed).

Psychology empowerment was found to have a positive effect on relationship satisfaction. This is similar to Langer (1983) pointing out the importance that brand marketers should emphasize on providing consumers the power to express their thought and feeling in brand SNS in order to enhance

their relationship satisfaction. Relationship quality with its dimensions: relationship satisfaction, relationship commitment and relationship trust is the heart of a successful CBR. The conceptualization of relationship quality as a higher-order construct offers brand marketers with a valuable instrument to assess CBR quality from three critical aspects: relationship satisfaction, relationship trust and relationship commitment. Relationship satisfaction was found to have the strongest significant effect on relationship trust than relationship commitment. Also, relationship trust was found to have a positive significant effect on relationship commitment. These results are parallel with past findings from (Morgan and Hunt, (1994) and Garbarino and Johnson (1999) suggesting that it is imperative for brand marketers to focus their efforts in successfully handling CBR quality in brand SNS due to its favorable effect on members' behaviors. In this study, it was evidenced that better relationship quality contributed to greater positive online word of mouth in the brand Facebook page.

The current study has several limitations, thus any attempt to generalize the findings should be taken with caution. The findings of this study are mainly based on the cognitive-affective-conative theoretical expectations. It is interesting to examine whether the relationship between psychological empowerment, relationship quality and online word of mouth still remain significant if the theory is reversed such as in affective-cognitive-conative theoretical framework. Also, further study is warranted to extend the current results into other industry where comparison analysis can be made. With respect to the cultural differences, future study should consider the effect of different cultural values on the levels of psychological empowerment and relationship quality.

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