

A Conceptual Study on The Influence of Social Network Services and Electronic Word of Mouth on Food Purchase Intention During a Pandemic

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Abstract

Global Covid-19 pandemic has swept the world by surprise in late 2019 and not even one life escapes the impact of the challenges it brings with it, be it directly or indirectly. The way we lead our lives, the way we act, and the way we conduct our transactions have change tremendously to new norms. This study's goal is to create a framework to explore the virtual world mechanisms through investigation of social networking services and electronic word of mouth influences on online users' food purchase intention. Via electronic word of mouth, information is being shared among social networking services' users and this conceptual framework aspire to investigate the impact of this pandemic on food purchase intention. The underpinning theory to be used is the stimulus-organism-response model with two dimensions of electronic word of mouth, online users state of mind, and response in the form of purchase intention. The data collection is proposed to be collected via emails and WhatsApp in three months period, where the data will be analyse using structural equation model to test confirmatory factor analysis and the model fit. This study includes theoretical implications for future as well as practical implications for stakeholders- SNS users, food vendors, SNS providers, policy makers.

Keywords: conceptual paper, electronic word-of-mouth, social networking services, stimulus-organism-response, Covid-19.

Introduction

Although the whole world has been experiencing tumultuous events in the past two years due to the pandemic Covid-19, the human race is still facing various degree of challenges in daily life. Within in a short time span, governments all over the world have attempted to mitigate the spread of the virus via multiple measures such as social distancing, mandatory masks and face shields, bans on social gatherings, and instructions to avoid crowded spaces. One of the extreme measures imposed in many countries, namely, lockdowns are to curb and flatten the infection curve (Amoah & Amoah, 2021; Anh & Gan, 2020; Kashyap & Raghuvanshi, 2020). After some time being in lockdown, people have somewhat adjusted to this unexpected life as the new norm in different aspects of life (Adisa et al., 2021; Bressan et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2021; Tan & Sia, 2021; Thelwall & Thelwall, 2020).

According to the World Bank, the Agricultural Commodity Price Index as of July 16, 2021 was 30% higher than in January 2020, which indicates that along with the surging price is a strong demand for food ("Food Security and COVID-19", 2021). Although people are restricted to their homes during the pandemic, food are still being bought via alternative ways. Among the amplified norm that exists before and becomes bigger during the pandemic is online food

purchases (Ammar et al., 2020; Ben Hassen et al., 2021; Marinković & Lazarević, 2021; Tan & Sia, 2021). As people face intermittent lockdowns and are prohibited to venture out of home, people use social networking services (SNS) to fulfill daily meals and cravings by ordering food online. In the midst of all the choices available, some refer to reviews and feedback from previous purchasers to determine if the food desired is good enough. Previous studies have churned plenty findings on online purchasers to understand the factors and motivations of choices made in the social networking services (SNS) and the influence of electronic word of mouth (eWOM) (Bilal et al., 2021; Gharib et al., 2020; Laato et al., 2020; Salem & Alanadoly, 2021).

However, with exception of few studies (Brewer & Sebby, 2021; Guo et al., 2021) there is a dearth of studies conducted in the context of food purchase intention in online setting during the pandemic from the stimulus-organism-response (SOR) model perspective. From this aspect, researchers could substantiate the importance of SNS and eWOM in influencing online users in food purchase intention. Two main gaps are identified after the review of existing literatures. First, despite abundant studies that have analyzed Covid-19 pandemic and its effects on online users (Adisa et al., 2021; Amoah & Amoah, 2021; Anh & Gan, 2020; Bressan et al., 2021; Kashyap & Raghuvanshi, 2020; Liu et al., 2021; Tan & Sia, 2021; Thelwall & Thelwall, 2020) there is a lack of research examining the impact of the pandemic on eWOM and SNS uptake in food online purchase intention in Malaysia (Ben Hassen et al., 2021; Brewer & Sebby, 2021; Guo et al., 2021; Marinković & Lazarević, 2021). This area of study is deemed imperative because food is a human race necessity and it is widespread practice in lockdown situation to rely on online purchase to get needed supplies delivered to households.

Other studies have examined eWOM during pandemic in the realm of commerce (Mohammad Mahmoudi et al., 2016), clothing chain (Hendri & Budiono, 2021), public health (Niwa et al., n.d.), economy (Pallin & Regfeldt, 2021), brand (Easa & Kaakour, 2021), and investment (Pallin & Regfeldt, 2021), but not in food purchase intention. Secondly, our conceptual framework will draw on extant literature, and narrow it further to uncover the effects of the pandemic on food purchase intention for SNS users in Malaysia.

The aim of this current paper is to produce a conceptual framework which plans to investigate the current Covid-19 pandemic influence on SNS users' willingness to disseminate information on food purchased online and its impact on other SNS user's food purchase intention. The organization of this paper is as follows. First, reviews on the existing literature on the main model applied for this conceptual framework. In the second section contains the hypotheses, development, methodology, and the summary of findings in several aspects. Final section covers the limitations and opportunities for future research.

Literature Review

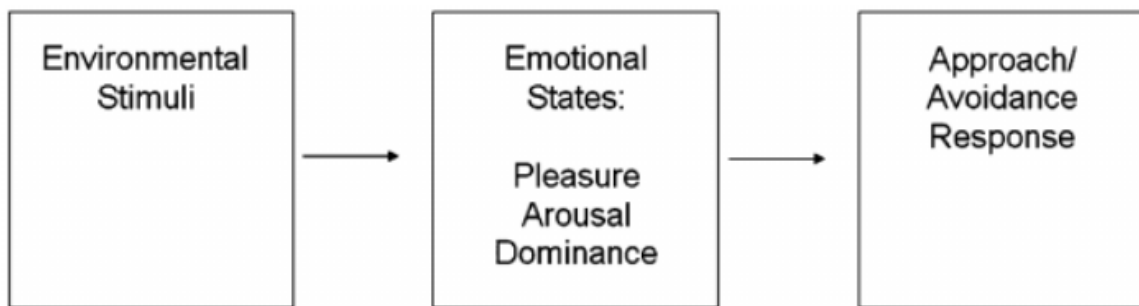
For a start, academic databases such as Emerald, Elsevier, Science Direct, and Wiley Online Library were searched using keywords like SNS, eWOM, Covid 19, SOR framework, and SOR model. This method is adapted from Zhang and Benyoucef (2016) and Cheung and Thadani (2012) literature review work. Journals were also checked to supplement for this work in the aforementioned areas.

This study is based on stimulus-organism-response (SOR) model as a decision-making process framework that takes into considerations the causes, the interim factors, and the final act of the target group (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974). This model has proven to support the tenet that each of people's surrounding has an influence on his or her internal state and behavioral response of people's experience (Faryabi, 2012; Lenoir et al., 2014; Mohammad Mahmoudi et al., 2016). Studies encompassing various factors of SNS purchase intention from different theories have been shared such as theory of planned behavior, user generated content theory,

theory of reasoned action, and others, nevertheless, more beneficial results could be explored through the SOR model (Kwon et al., 2016; Nikić, 2012) .

The first pillar of the framework is the stimulus portion. As seen if Figure 1, it displays the components of an SOR model, which are made up of environmental stimuli, emotional states, and approach/avoidance response. According to other SOR models, the emotional states are also similar to the organism component of the model (Kawaf & Tagg, 2012).

Drawing from other literatures, electronic word of mouth (eWOM) is found to be prevalent as an antecedent to purchase intention in SNS (Albayrak & Ceylan, 2020; Ismagilova et al., 2021). Meta-analysis research by Ismagilova (2021) has identified 16 significant relationships providing behavior. And that study supports the findings of Albayrak and Ceylan (2020) which confirms 16 relationships are significant which are information usefulness and source trustworthiness as having the highest and positive correlation for eWOM with purchase intention in SNS.



The Mehrabian-Russell model of environmental influence.

(Source: (Attiq, 2015))

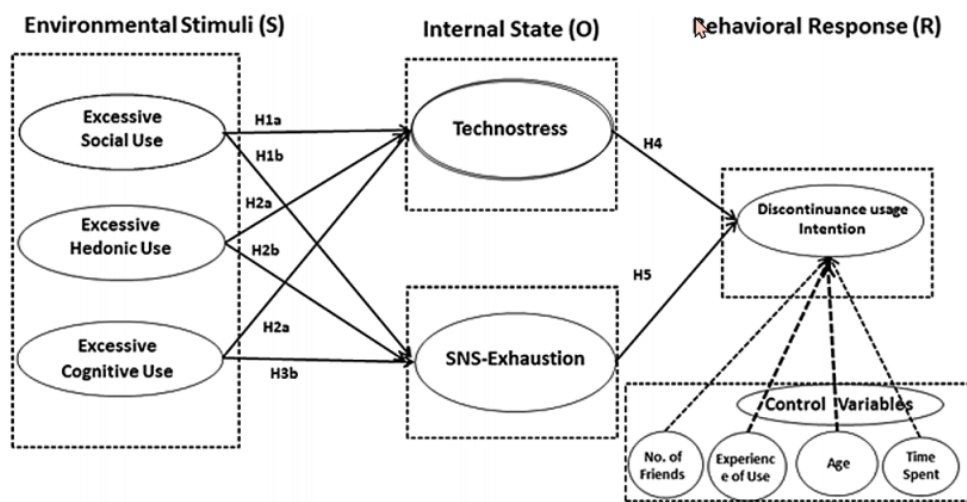
Figure 1: Mehrabian-Russell model of SOR framework

Based on several insights from eWOM researches, there are conflicting motivations that result in the act of information sharing with peers, families, and strangers. Motives which include self-enhancement (Magalhaes and Musallam, 2014), opinion seeking (Nagy et al., 2017), brand attitude (Rialti et al., 2017), incentives (Yoo et al., 2013), and customer satisfaction (Luarn et al., 2015) are multiple number of reasons that influence eWOM decision. Therefore, to test the SOR model for this current proposal, the eWOM factor prioritized has the strongest correlation with purchase intention highlighted by Ismagilova et al (2021). The authors ranked information usefulness as possessing the robust relationship with eWOM, hence becomes the organism aspect of this framework. Additionally, there are findings that institute eWOM as a ubiquitous form of communication in the cyberworld and become lucrative influence on SNS users (Farzin & Fattahi, 2018b)

When the individual is exposed to a stimulus, the internal state (i.e. – the current condition of SNS users state of mind in pandemic Covid-19), will react and produce a response in the form of purchase intention or non-purchase intention by other SNS users (Liang & Lim, 2021). For this current paper, the conceptual framework has the organism postulated as an internal factor an individual is experiencing – which refers to the current pandemic Covid-19. The study will gauge the respondent’s feeling on the current pandemic situation as a measure of the current state of being (Chang et al., 2020; Laato, Islam, Farooq, et al., 2020; Laato, Islam, Islam, et al., 2020; Rohman et al., 2021). For more than nineteen months into the pandemic since December 2019 novel coronavirus breakout in Wuhan (Wu et al, 2020), people are bound to feel the burden of the pandemic on own mental being (Chakraborty et al., 2021; Litt et al., 2021; Xia

et al., 2021). Hence, this current proposal places SNS users' condition in Covid-19 pandemic as the organism factor in anticipated framework.

The final section of the framework is the response behavior of the SNS users. According to the framework model, after being exposed to a stimulus, the organism will elicit a response depending on the internal state he or she possesses. In this proposed model, the designed response is the purchase intention of a food product found online by SNS users. Relationships of various factors have been discussed ranging from social media usages to sports team games' purchase intention (Achen, 2019), brand image and purchase intention (Farzin & Fattahi, 2018a), shared content and envy type in relation to purchase intention (Lin, 2018), luxury fashion brand and purchase intention (Wallace et al., 2020), brand fan pages in Facebook and purchase intention (Hsu, 2020), eWOM and purchase intention (Bilal et al., 2021), social media marketing and purchase intention (Moslehpour et al., 2021) and abundant others.



(Source: (Luqman et al., 2017))

Figure 2: Research model for Facebook discontinues usage intentions based on SOR paradigm

In Figure 2, Luqman et al (2017) have empirically investigated the non-response behavior of Facebook users and proved how high usage of Facebook have negative impacts on the continuance of mentioned applications sometime by applying the SOR model. It is argued that SOR model takes into consideration that human beings are not machine and in the end are susceptible to environment and internal factors which will produce either negative or positive response (Kawaf & Tagg, 2012).

The dynamic interaction of the external and internal factors of the SNS users proves that it will initiate a response that induces some type of intention. The SOR model is suitable for this study due to its extensive application in previous research (Grace et al., 2015; Kawaf & Tagg, 2012; Luqman et al., 2017). Yet, studies on food preference in SNS as a direct impact of eWOM during the Covid-19 pandemic are sparse, which propels the build of the framework presented herein. Based on SOR model, this paper proposes a research framework for the role of eWOM in Covid-19 pandemic for online food purchase intention specifically for Malaysia SNS users.

Research model and hypotheses development

Stimulus (S)
eWOM

Internal State (O)
SNS users during Covid-19

Behavioral Response (R)
Food Purchase
Intention/Avoidance

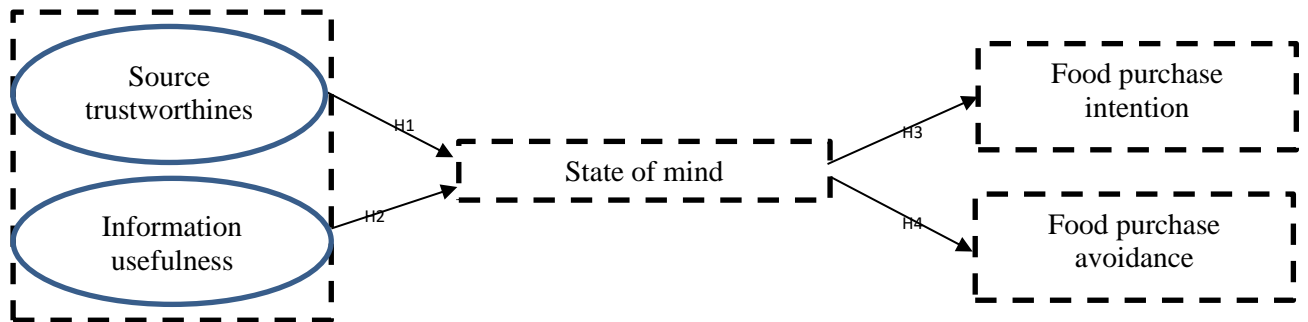


Figure 3: Theoretical framework based on SOR paradigm

Figure 3 is developed based on prior discussions. The first eWOM dimension that is labeled as source trustworthiness is related to perceived quality of the bearer of news that brings the information to the recipients in SNS (Albayrak & Ceylan, 2020; Ismagilova et al., 2021). These studies placed source trustworthiness as one of the highest important attributes of eWOM and purchase intention. Hence, SNS users place importance on the ability to trust first in order to induce purchase. Based on this, the following hypothesis is developed:

H1. Source trustworthiness positively impact SNS users state of mind.

The next dimension of eWOM that also ranks highly is information usefulness as found by Albayrak and Ceylan (2020) and supported by Ismagilova et al (2021). SNS users rely heavily on searches done online to verify decision making for products or services, especially for new buyers or new items. To perform a decision making, purchasers have own criteria they consider (Hansen & Lee, 2013; Y. Hsu et al., 2013; Lin, 2018; Mohammad et al., 2020; Rattan, 2014; Todri & Adamopoulos, 2014), which they fall back automatically to own desires, preferences, wants, and references. Conversely, to have additional information that is useful could propel casual shoppers to convert intention from just looking to actual buying (Liat & Shi Wuan, 2014; Shen, 2012; Y. Zhang et al., 2020). The dimension of eWOM that could influence the SNS users state of mind can be tested on the quality of information received them. Therefore, the next hypothesis is developed:

H2. Information usefulness can positively impact SNS users state of mind.

For the direct effects on purchase intention, this paper proposes two possible behavioral responses to reflect that SNS users are open to either result depending on each own state of mind in this Covid-19 pandemic. There are many factors that would tip the SNS users in either direction (Ahmadi et al., 2019; Benson et al., 2019; Chetioui et al., 2020; Farzin & Fattahi, 2018b; Lin, 2018) and the scenarios are far and wide. To measure the current state of mind in relation to the pandemic, this paper proposes to adapt Dundee Stress State questionnaire (Cavalcanti et al., 2013; Litt et al., 2021; Ng et al., 2016) to analyze how the respondents are feeling while facing this pandemic. Correspondingly, food is essential to all human beings, and the feeling of helpless in the house could ease a tiny bit with the opportunity to purchase food online and alleviate the need to venture outside to buy needed rations. Thus, the third hypothesis is established as follow:

H3. SNS users state of mind positively impact purchase intention.

The avoidance purchase behavior is another possible response to SNS users toward online food purchase. It has been reported that Malaysians' mental health has been in decline since the onset of the pandemic, where there are increased depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms, especially for the ones with difficult financial situations (Wong et al., 2021). Studies also have shown that stressed mind, emotions, and eating disorders have significantly affect food preferences (Leigh Gibson, 2006; Luxardi & Marchiol, 2015; Oliveira & Cordás, 2020; Werthmann et al., 2016). Likewise, Luxardi and Marchiol (2015) and Shriner (2010) stated that stress could cause bias of food perception and food related behavior in harmful and unhealthy ways. Moreover, due to eWOM informative dispersal nature, not only stress, negative bias could also be experienced by consumers when reading label claims on products and items (Salnikova & Stanton, 2021). Given the above, it can be concluded that because of SNS usage and eWOM in the pandemic situation, SNS users could become prone to avoid online food due to the factors aforementioned. Taken these de facto reasons into considerations, the final hypothesis is suggested:

H4. SNS users state of mind negatively impact purchase intention.

Methodology

In correspondent to the restricted movements obligatory to the society, we propose to collect data through online surveys in order to verify the SOR model hypotheses. There are 86 percent penetration rates of active SNS users in Malaysia (Müller, 2021) and there is no known or equal chance of SNS users to be selected for the survey. Hence, this study proposes to use non-probability snow ball sampling method. In tandem with the current situation, the effective ways to contact potential respondents are through email and WhatsApp application that is used widely in Malaysia as form of communication. This study will start with limited contacts of colleagues, families, friends, and acquaintances, with special requests to assist the study in passing the survey along to their circle of friends, families, and relatives. It is in this way, the hope is to have reach at least 300 respondents, to ensure ample size of data collected.

To measure the data content validity, the construct for this survey will be adapted from previous studies. The scale of source trustworthiness and information usefulness will be adapted from two studies (Hannah & Lybecker, 2010; Zhang & Benyoucef, 2016). The state of mind construct will be adapted from Dundee Stress State Questionnaire (DSSQ) which measures the stress level (Cavalcanti et al., 2013; Olaya-Figueroa et al., 2020). The last scale which is for purchase intention construct, the questions will be adapted from two studies on SNS purchase intention (Benson et al., 2019; Farzin & Fattahi, 2018b).

All items will be measured using a seven-point Likert scale with options to select from (1) "strongly disagree" to (7) "strongly agree". The way the survey will be conducted is a staggered stage with an initial e-mail and WhatsApp survey blast, followed by three reminder rounds with interval of 3 weeks in between. This data collection is expected to collect more than 300 surveys in a period of 3 months. Consequently, the data will be processed and analyzed to test the measurement and structural model. The software to be used is AMOS (version 24.0) due to its robust capability in performing regression during the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and testing the measurement and structural model simultaneously (Hair et al, 2010).

Conclusion

This conceptual paper certainly has limitations. First, this proposal does not specify which SNS platforms that are being used by the users. Therefore, no specific features are being examined to assist to refine improvements for better usage. Second, only two dimensions of

eWOM are picked for testing the level of credibility of messages shared, albeit it has the highest correlations with purchase intentions from other previous studies. However, more dimensions could be added to ascertain conclusive results in the future. This paper also suggests email and WhatsApp to be utilized for disseminating surveys, nevertheless, other forms of application could also be included to help spread the coverage. Finally, this paper is proposed after nineteen months from the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. Admittedly, there is a possibility that the purchase intention for food products are not the same from the beginning. Hence, for such a study, time would be of essence to be carried out urgently in the future.

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