

# The impacts of food vlog attributes on para-social interaction and customers' response behaviours

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**Nurul Iman Abd Razak**  
**Muhammad Izzat Zulkifly\***

Faculty of Hotel & Tourism Management,  
Universiti Teknologi MARA, Selangor

\*izzatzulkifly@gmail.com

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## Abstract

In the era of globalization that we live in today, technology is not a new thing in our daily life. Foodservice industry today relies on many kinds of technologies for different functions such as ordering, producing, delivering, and even presenting the menu. Foodservice industry grabs this opportunity to evolve especially in the marketing aspects since it is very important to gain customers worldwide and expand the businesses in this new era of modernization. E-commerce is recognized as one of the initiatives to reach customers and gain better information. Online reviews such as food vlogs are parts of e-commerce which are believed to be the current trend among customers. This conceptual paper seeks to understand the food vlog's attributes that lead to para-social interaction and its impacts on customers' recommendation adoption. This area of study is rarely discovered in Malaysia thus it will provide a new knowledge specifically the para-social interaction in relation to the foodservice industry. It will also help the vlogger communities to identify the most influential attributes that keep people watching and believing in their contents and consequently visit the restaurants or consume the food the vloggers' review.

## Keywords:

E-commerce, vlog, attitude homophily, para-social interaction, recommendation adoption.

## 1 Introduction

E-commerce is shortened from the words 'electronic commerce' and it starts being a phenomenon since the 21st century until today (Svatošová, 2015). It is believed to be one of the efficient ways to communicate with customers, employers, and even business partners with low cost needed by reducing the inventory, proper planning of marketing processes and delivery processes (Brončková and Bernátová, 2005; Svatošová, 2015). Online reviews such as food vlogs are parts of e-commerce and it is one of the biggest trends among content creators these days.

There are many platforms or channels created for food reviews but there are very few studies concerning the usage of a vlog as a medium for food reviews and a channel to spread information. Currently, vlog seems to be the best platform for advertising and video reviews, thus, this present study will investigate the impacts that vlog reviews have on customers' behavior response. Vlog is shortened from the words 'video blog' which consists of audio-visual content and video sharing platform for users to share their excitement and activities with other people. They connect with each other by commenting and subscribing to their favorite channels to gain and share the experience and knowledge (Kim, 2017). This platform is fast becoming the best channel to express a feeling using facial expressions and communication skills for viewers to get the exact messages. Food reviews on vlogs look more real, loaded with a tempting sensation, thus creating endless possibilities to garner the attention of customers to try out the foods. Unlike TV commercials, magazines, or newspapers, vlog, with the ubiquity of the Internet nowadays has more reachability potential as the geographical dispersion is virtually reduced (Nugraha & Setyanto, 2018).

Vlog is more interesting and attractive than the usual blog platform. The message delivery is more effective because the facial expressions, voice tone, emotions, and body language help to give more effects on the content itself. It is also supported by the previous study from Lon (2012) which stated that vlog is an effective way to communicate to customers because the audience tends to believe with the speakers' emotions and tone while presenting the product they review.

The effectiveness of online reviews relies on the attributes of the medium selected. According to Brewer (2017), cited from Yeap, Ignatius, and Ramayah (2014), the attributes on the review refer to the characteristics or features that can be used for users as the guidelines and exposure to share their experience, complaints, personal opinions and thoughts about the products that have been reviewed. Thus, the attributes can also be applied in the vlog usage since the online concept is practically similar to the restaurant website reviews. The past studies highlighted on how the reviews from online consumers affect the consumer behaviors (Gretzel & Yoo, 2008), but there are limited studies highlighting the different attributes that act as the antecedents of para-social interaction (PSI) to influence the behavioral intention (recommendation adoption) later. At this point, it is very important to define para-social interaction. Para-social interaction

refers to a one-sided relationship between users and the persona in a social media context. It also refers to the intensity of the relationship between users and the hosts to another level such as a role model, counselor, comforter, or also as a friend on social media. Customers also tend to seek any advice or guidance from the persona when they achieve the para-social interaction state.

## **2 Literature Review**

### **2.1 Appearance attributes: Physical attractiveness and social attractiveness**

Appearance attributes consist of physical attractiveness and social attractiveness. According to Have (2017), the appealing look of vloggers refers to physical attractiveness. Physical attractiveness refers to the hosts as some attractive figures that influence the audience to watch their vlogs more often. For example; the physical attractiveness of the hosts would be the way they are dressed, the appealing and presentable appearance in front of the camera. Based on the study by Lee and Watkins (2016), physical attractiveness is described as an element of PSI that influences online customers. They also stated that physical attractiveness is positively related to para-social interaction. Physical attractiveness is also categorized as a sense to like and appreciate the presentation of beauty (Sokolova & Kefi, 2019). Furthermore, trust and credibility can also be reflected through the physical appeal of the hosts and the products, hence it is considered as selling point when it comes to physical attractiveness (Sokolova and Kefi, 2019).

Meanwhile, the social attractiveness is referred to the amiability of the speaker's personality which gives impacts on the audience's attitudes and further influence them on the decision making (Sharma, 1990; Chaiken, 1979; Sokolova & Kefi, 2019). The audience tends to have an interest and positive relationship with the hosts when they feel that the hosts can make good contact with them even though it is only through social media. According to Sokolova and Kefi (2019), social attractiveness can also be defined as the tendency of people to befriend someone as their teammates and a new colleague or in the context of social media; it can be defined as the possibility of people to elect a social figure as their reference and social partner. Along with physical attractiveness, social attractiveness is also believed to be one of the PSI's antecedents whether it happens traditionally through television and radio, or through modern approach via social media (Rubin & McHugh, 1987; Lee & Watkins, 2016; Kurtin et al., 2018; Sokolova & Kefi, 2019).

### **2.2 Video quality: Content, video graphic, and credibility**

#### *2.2.1 Content*

According to Brewer (2017), one of the most important functions for any website is the content, particularly to determine the validity of information sources. Food vlogs' contents must be informative and useful to users. According to Bleier, Harmeling, and

Palmatier (2018) cited from Lim and Ting (2012), the primary cognitive element of online customer experience is informativeness, which is defined as resourceful and helpful information to customers. The helpful information guides customers to make decisions as well as to avoid negative past purchase behaviors.

Previous researchers believed that helpful information must be meaningful and useful to the decision-making process where the decision-makers have the possibility to reduce uncertainties (Martin & Clark, 1996; Mohr & Sohi's, 1995; Adjei, Noble, & Noble, 2009). Equally important as the content needed in the video is the contact information. URLs of the food companies or tags on the food producers are helpful for the audience in case they want to visit the official websites or pages. This statement is supported by a previous study done by Stenhammar (2019) who claimed that there will be no benefits for the companies, producers and even the vlog creators if the contact information is not available in the video content.

### *2.2.2 Video graphic*

Other than the content, video graphic is also one of the major elements that need to be considered since it affects the audience's mood and interest to watch more from the channels. Video graphic is defined as "the computer technology that containing pictures, charts, videos, etc. often following by audio" (Webster's New World College Dictionary, 2014). There are several elements of video graphics that can influence the acceptance of the audience namely visual size, the length of the videos, video plot, script, text on the video, music, and audio (language used), acting and editing, etc. According to the study by Stenhammar (2019), there are advantages by using both visual and audio on the video. It is better than radio audio as vlog usage uses both, it helps the audience to understand better about the contents. Besides, the length of the video must not be too long or too short (Mahoney & Tang, 2016; Fahy & Jobber, 2012; Stenhammar, 2019). The slow pace of the video might cause boredom to the audience and waste their time with unnecessary information. A good video comes with organized plots and ideas to prevent confusion and lack of information gathered by the audience at the end of the video.

Moreover, the script, voice tone, and music included in the video are also essential in the video context because it creates an atmosphere for the video. For example; the upbeat music will produce a feeling of excitement among the audience while watching the video, while the voice tone influences the audience to get the real messages and the vibes. As stated by Stenhammar (2019) in his previous study, the video is also affected by the sound effects and voiceover. In addition, the languages used by the hosts and subtitles are other critical components to capture the interest of the audiences. The hosts need to identify their target audience and select a language to use based on the target audience. For some people, subtitles are needed and usually, English subtitles are used since it is a global language. A poor video graphic quality may appoint to the weakness of the hosts and lead to negative perceptions among the audience. Thus, for this study, it is important to highlight the video graphic effects on the viewers' behaviors.

### *2.2.3 Credibility*

Credibility is defined as the degree to which customers discern the plausibility of the reviews and information provided on food vlog channels (Flanagin and Metzger, 2007). According to Sokolova and Kefi (2019), the perception of the quality that has been communicated by other audiences is also related to credibility. It assumes that the general opinion can be trusted and believable based on the performance. Other than that, credibility can be created depending on how knowledgeable the person is in generating his/her ideas. It is supported by the studies by Hovland and Weiss (1951); McCroskey and Teven (1999); Sokolova and Kefi (2019) which stated that the experts who are knowledgeable and have the experience tend to be trustworthy and gain domain from the customers.

According to a prior study by Brewer (2017), the trustworthiness of an information source is often related certainly with information credibility. By garnering trustworthiness, a person is perceived to be honest and caring about the audience's choices thus influences customers' attitude and their purchase intention. According to Sokolova and Kefi (2019), the attractive and trustworthy sources that are believed coming from experts can persuade customers to buy products. Moreover, the credibility of the hosts is also reflected by the number of followers on their Twitter and Instagram accounts as reported by Jin and Phua (2014) and De Veirman et al., (2017). For vlog channels, the subscribers on YouTube and the viewers on Instagram's IGTV can be the guidelines for new customers to count on them. Hence, it is proposed that customers will have para-social interaction towards the hosts if only the information given on the vlog is credible.

## **2.3 Homophily**

### *2.3.1 Attitude homophily*

The term 'homophily' is defined as "a tendency for friendships to form between those who are alike in some designated respect" (Turner, 1993). Meanwhile, attitude is defined as a thought or feeling regarding something or someone, or also a way of behaving that is caused by certain circumstances. A person would love to know someone better or to hang out with someone that has similar interest with him/her, which also gives a reflection of the first impression on someone's thought and opinions. The same goes for vloggers who generate ideas to ensure everybody thinks the same way they do. The audience is more appreciative and gets attached to something that is similar to their situation and opinion. They are made to believe that "I am not the only one to think or feel like that" and by creating that feeling, it will lead to para-social interaction through para-social relationships.

As stated by Lee and Watkins (2016) in their study, people will interact frequently with someone who they believe share things in common with them. As stated earlier, one of persuasion facilitating factors is similarity. The similarity is believed to be the antecedent of trust and relationship. Customers tend to rely on the hosts who have

identical opinions, thought, and conditions because they believe that the hosts experience and act the same way. Furthermore, the earlier studies also have proven that homophily can improve communication between individuals (Ahlf, Horak, Klein, & Sung; 2018).

### *2.3.2 Demographic homophily*

Demographics is defined as categories created based on people's similar education background, social class, age, race, income, and etc. Besides, Eyal and Rubin (2003, pp. 80) described 'homophily' as "the degree to which people who interact are similar in beliefs, education, social status, and the like". Demographic homophily seems to be one of the factors to influence other people and gain trusts as proven by Barzily and Ackerman (2015) and Freeman (1996) in their studies, they found that children at school tend to make friends with someone that has similar demographic characteristics with them; age, height, school grades, IQ, gender, and more, faster than children who have dissimilar demographic characteristics with them. Based on the study, it is proven that demographic homophily has a relationship with trust and loyalty. For example, students' eating patterns would be different from career people, thus, they tend to discover food vlog – food street hunting, instant noodles challenges, and not an expensive food review at a fine dining restaurant. Therefore, for this study, it is proposed that homophily in vlog videos will give a positive impact on para-social interaction.

## **2.4 Para-social interaction**

Para-social interaction is defined as a one-sided relationship between users and the persona in the social media context. It also refers as the intensity of the relationship between users and the hosts to another level such as a role model, counselor, comforter, or also as a friend on the social media (Gleason et al., 2017; Perse & Rubin, 1989; Stern et al., 2007; Matthew, Yongdan, & Lida, 2019). According to Lee and Watkins (2016) who cited from Rubin, Perse, and Powell (1985, pp. 156-157), para-social interaction is also described as the relationship built between media users and media persona which involves "seeking guidance, seeing persona as a friend, imagining being parts of the favored program on social media, and eagerness to meet the persona on the social media". Moreover, the hosts who attain to create the antecedents which lead to para-social interaction from the media users will reduce the uncertainty and altogether ease them to influence and persuade the audience on their decision-making process.

Besides, academic research started to study about the PSI in modern media or also known as social media instead of traditional media (television and radio) since the concept is nearly the same but wider than traditional media. Based on a study by Stever and Lawson (2013), social media has the potential to create two-way communication between the persona and the social media users through comment spaces or chat box provided on the vlog platforms, unlike the traditional media with its one-way communication.

Furthermore, PSI term seems to be more applicable by using vlog as the perfect platform to study the antecedents and the effect on human purchase behavior. Thus, this study highlights food vlog usage since the visual elements on vlogs will enhance the clarity of expressing the experience, thought, and opinion by the vloggers (Pyle & Smith, 2015), especially when they are reviewing food. The static images of food might be dull and lifeless while video presentations on food look more tempting, alive, and real. According to Matthew, Yongdan, and Lida (2019), cited from Lee and Watkins (2016), the visual elements can help to increase the confidentiality and affection among customers towards the vloggers. They also stated that PSI is essential to influence the audience of vlogs. For this study, parasocial interaction (PSI) is the mediating variable and it is proposed to determine the dependent variable performance and give positive effects on the dependent variable (behavior intention – recommendation adoption).

### **2.5 Behaviour intention (recommendation adoption)**

Previous researches categorized behavioral response as the intention to buy the product or services, revisit the store, intention to recommend the product or services to others, or intention to spread positive word-of-mouth to other customers about the product and services (Baker, Grewal, & Levy, 1992; Hightower, Brandy, & Baker, 2002; Jang & Namkung, 2009; Brewer, 2017).

For this study, the researcher aims to understand the consumers' behavior responses (recommendation adoption) towards food vlog reviews and the effect of mediating variables on the relationship between the antecedent of PSI (attributes) and behavior intention. It is important to identify the antecedents of PSI that contribute to positive behavior intention. This behavior intention will be extended to recommendation adoption whether the audience adopts the suggestion by the vloggers or not. According to Brewer (2017), the customers' intention to enlist or follow the suggestion given by the hosts to make the decision-making process is referred to as recommendation adoption. It is the outcome that has been influenced by the PSI existent through the food vlog attributes.

## **3 Methodology**

Since the study is quantitative in nature; asking about people's opinions, feelings, and behavior, therefore the data will be collected through self-distributed questionnaires. The samples will be among Internet users who have already experienced watching food vlogs or customers who have already adopted vloggers' recommendations. The appropriate analysis will be conducted based on the main objectives of the study and hypotheses.

## **4 Conclusion**

This study will unequivocally contribute to two perspectives; practical perspective and academic perspective.

#### **4.1 Practical significance**

According to Brewer (2017), there is very little information within the scope of knowledge about the features that influence the online reviews environment. Thus, this study will look deeply into the factors that contribute to the decision making to make the purchase intention. The improvement of quality attributes will enhance the method used for this marketing technique (food vlog reviews) by understanding and discovering the reactions or customer behavior responses in this study. Moreover, this study can also create the opportunity for other food industry or companies to make collaboration with influential persons in the social media for their marketing strategies, hence altogether give the benefits for both parties.

Furthermore, this study is important for the researcher to identify the B2B (business to business) and B2C (business to customer) businesses for further effective attributes in the future since it involves two-way communication and customers' empowerment altogether. Previous research by Kim (2017) stated that consumers and brands can have two-way communications to know and understand each other better by using social networks such as *Facebook*, *Instagram*, *Twitter*, and *YouTube*. For this study, vlog reviews can be used as a communication tool to represent the brand and the comments from customers can be used as a reference for other new customers and of course the brand itself to produce better products and performance. This circumstance helps both parties to build relationships, learning about behaviors and personality, and also participating in conversation through social network platforms (Kim, 2017).

Moreover, this study will also be beneficial for customers since they can easily access vlog reviews or any other review websites after they have been improved by the vlog communities and also the vlog channels. Furthermore, since vlogging platforms seem to be efficient and effective to persuade customers, this study will help to expand the opportunity of vlog usage in society. According to Kim (2017), the audience notices the presenter's emotions, tone, body language, and communication skills while presenting the product will boost the audience's intention to buy the product.

#### **4.2 Academic significance**

From the academic perspective, there are few studies that particularly concern about the impacts of food vlog attributes on consumers' behavioral responses in terms of recommendation adoption as mentioned earlier in the previous section. Therefore, it is anticipated that this study contributes plentiful and useful information and knowledge to academicians seeking additional material for this field of study and adds value to the literature section. Moreover, this study helps to enhance the understanding of the attributes used to induce para-social interaction that leads to recommendation adoption.

One can learn and understand better the impacts of the attributes and the role of para-social interaction in our food industry in the context of marketing techniques. Above all that, there are little studies related to both vlog and para-social interaction in



this field. Para-social interaction appears to be an unfamiliar construct in this food industry, therefore, with this study, the researcher will analyze in detail para-social interaction and its role in the foodservice field so that other academicians can use it as new knowledge and improve the topic better.

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