

# THE ROLE OF ONLINE COMMUNITY ON CONSUMERS' PURCHASE DECISION-MAKING: A NETNOGRAPHY STUDY

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**Abstract:** *The prominence of online social media communities greatly influences consumer purchase decision-making, particularly in the hospitality and tourism industry. Online communities facilitate an avenue for knowledge accumulation and educating others, serve as a point of reference in assisting consumers' purchase decision-making, and pose a great challenge for service providers in crafting their marketing strategies. This study elucidates the role of the online community towards knowledge and information sharing, in which community members can learn, engage, and identify suitable accommodation from others' experiences. Based on netnography study, this research endeavored to explore an exhaustive and contextualized account through the interpretation of the meanings of the text in the form of consumers' comments on the sharing posts by the online community members. The data were analysed using thematic analysis, and five themes materialised from this study; social learning, hedonic value, subjective value, experiential value, and dissonance feeling. It is substantiated that online communities not only facilitate information and knowledge sharing but also become a platform for the members to express and share similar emotions and feelings from their consumption experiences, enabling the community members to satisfy affiliation and relatedness needs. This present study is inspired by the development of online communities, particularly in social media networks, that facilitate consumer purchase decision-making and behaviour from the lens of online community members' purchase experiences, specifically on hotel reviews, which should be taken seriously by the service providers. Further, this research contributes to scholastic and organizational proficiency in the Malaysian context by comprehending the exact grounds of the role of the online community in social media networks towards consumers' purchase decision-making.*

**Keywords:** *Online Community, Consumers' Purchase Decision-Making, Reference Group, Netnography, Consumer Culture*

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## Introduction

The influence of reference groups on consumer behaviour is not only significant but also incredibly diverse. As highlighted by Ding et al. (2020), these groups wield substantial sway over consumer preferences through mechanisms such as social comparison, direct social influence, and informational guidance. Moreover, they serve as potent signals of social identity and status, thereby exerting a profound impact on brand and product choices. This influence extends beyond mere preference shaping, encompassing aspirational emulation and dissociative distancing from less favourable groups, as elucidated by White & Dahl (2006). Recognizing and comprehending the dynamics of reference groups is imperative for marketers seeking to engage consumers and foster brand loyalty effectively. Prior literature found that social groups are an integral factor that affects consumer engagement in any consumption behaviour (Amaral & Loken, 2016; Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2012; Vigneron & Johnson, 1999; Zhang & Kim, 2013). Hence, consumers are eager to be accepted by the other social group members due to the construction of a social identity that enables them to share their passion with others indulged in similar consumption activities (Evans et al., 2013; Park, 2012).

In today's digital era, consumer decision-making processes have undergone a profound transformation, largely propelled by the rise of online communities and social networks. Traditional reference groups, once confined to immediate social circles, have now expanded into virtual spaces where individuals converge to share experiences, exchange opinions, and seek advice, including on matters of purchasing. This paradigmatic shift has spurred significant interest among marketers and researchers, prompting a deep dive into the intricate interplay between online communities and consumer behaviours.

Understanding the impact of both reference groups and online communities empowers marketers to craft strategies that resonate deeply with consumers' social identities, values, and aspirations, thereby fostering stronger brand relationships and driving business success in today's interconnected marketplace. Examining the influence of these entities on consumer buying decisions is paramount for marketers to grasp the fundamental drivers of consumer behaviour and devise effective marketing strategies. By harnessing the power of social influence, marketers can elevate brand engagement, boost conversion rates, and cultivate brand advocacy and loyalty among consumers, all while remaining adaptable to emerging market trends and cultural nuances in our increasingly globalized and digitalized world.

This paper delves into the intricate relationship between reference groups and online communities and their impact on consumer purchasing decisions. Employing qualitative netnographic analysis, the study aims to unearth the social influence mechanisms at play within the digital realm. Through the observation of interactions within online communities, particularly within reference groups, the research endeavours to uncover the motivations, social dynamics, and information-sharing patterns that underpin consumer decision-making processes.

## Literature Review

### Reference Group and Online Community

Reference groups are social groups that individuals use as reference points in forming their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours. Reference groups can be categorised into two main types: aspirational and associative (Kotler & Armstrong, 2020). Aspirational reference groups represent social groups that individuals aspire to join or emulate, while associative reference

groups consist of individuals with direct interaction or membership (Shareef et al., 2019). Both reference groups influence consumer behaviour, shaping preferences, attitudes, and purchase decisions.

A range of studies have highlighted the significant influence of reference groups on consumer purchase decisions. Sridhar et al. (2010) and Bearden and Etzel (1982) found that reference groups play a key role in shaping consumer behaviour, with Sridhar emphasising the role of opinion leaders and Bearden identifying differences in influence between publicly and privately consumed products. Childers and Rao (1992) extend Bearden's research by examining the impact of familial and peer-based reference groups on product and brand decisions, noting differences across cultures. Reza and Valeecha (2013) focused on the influence of social reference groups on the automobile-buying decisions of young executives, highlighting the importance of informational, utilitarian, and value-expressive influences. Rehman and Jamil (2016) add to this body of work by investigating the influence of income and occupation on consumers' susceptibility to reference group demands, particularly in the Indian context. These studies demonstrate reference groups' significant impact on consumer decision-making.

Reference groups, both in the form of online communities and traditional social groups, play a significant role in influencing consumer purchase decisions (Ding et al., 2020; Pentina et al., 2008; Sridhar et al., 2010). In online communities, the influence of reference groups is exercised through mechanisms such as social identification and norm internalisation (Pentina et al., 2008). This influence is further enhanced by the quality of arguments, source credibility, and tie strength in consumer-to-consumer communication (Amelina & Zhu, 2016). Additionally, consumers read online reviews to gain knowledge, shaping values, beliefs, and attitudes, then turn to influence their purchase decision-making and behaviour. The learning process, which consists of informational and experiential, enables consumers to learn and gain knowledge while considering their purchase decision-making, which is shared and exchanged by the other social group members. Key et al. (2013), in a netnographic study, found that consumers involved in online counterfeiting communities voluntarily complied with the group norms, apart from displaying their concern to other members by sharing reliable information and knowledge about counterfeit goods. Schau (2009) asserted that online community members have educational roles, as they change a consumer's perceptions towards certain products when making purchase decisions (Kelley & Alden, 2016; Luo et al., 2016). Information provided by the social group members plays essential roles in consumers' perceptions, attitudes, and purchase decision-making.

### **Online Community and Purchase Decision-Making**

With the advent of the internet and social media, online communities have emerged as influential consumer interaction and engagement platforms. Online communities, such as forums, social networking sites, and review platforms, serve as spaces where individuals with shared interests, hobbies, or identities gather to exchange information, opinions, and experiences related to products and brands (Pavlou & Gefen, 2004). These communities provide consumers with social validation, support, and guidance in purchasing decisions.

Research has consistently shown that online communities significantly influence purchase decision-making. Chen et al. (2014) found that the number and positivity of messages in a virtual community can impact purchase intention, with negative messages having a negative effect. (Gligorijevic & Luck, 2013) further emphasized the importance of personal and public information sources, such as user-generated content, over commercial sources. Kim and

Srivastava (2007) highlighted the role of social influence in e-commerce decision-making, with consumers often relying on the opinions of others before making a purchase. Lastly, Zhao et al. (2022) demonstrated the mediating role of brand identity in the relationship between community experience and purchase intention in online knowledge communities. Collectively, these studies underscore the significant impact of online communities on purchase decision-making.

Research indicates that online communities significantly influence consumer behaviour by providing social proof, peer recommendations, and user-generated content (Cheung et al., 2013). Consumers often rely on online communities to seek advice, read reviews, and gain insights into products and brands before purchasing. Furthermore, online communities facilitate social interactions and connections, fostering members' sense of belongingness and identification, thus creating social relationships. Hence, social relationships facilitated a learning process that encouraged the other group members to share and exchange information on their experiences in specific purchase behaviour and consumption activity, contributing to consumers' social needs fulfillment.

Social learning has been found to influence consumers' purchase decision-making and consumption practices. Hence, consumers believe that social groups enable them to satisfy individual relatedness, affiliation, and self-belonging needs. It represents the willingness of the social group members to exchange information and time to "educate" as well as share valuable information for the benefit of the other members. The social group members are willing to share and reveal their purchase and consumption behaviour and sometimes might inspire others to imitate their consumption practices and lifestyle. According to Salazar et al. (2013), people gain information from their observation surrounded by their social circle consumption practice and later make up cognitive learning. Therefore, integrating observation and cognitive learning generates reliable information to assist the consumers' purchase decision-making process. People can learn new information and behaviour by observing other people. When consumers observe others, they use observational learning and imitation to evaluate, select, purchase, consume, and post-purchase behaviour, affecting their attitude in both cognitive and affective dimensions. The process of diffusion of information is more active in a social group as those who are involved and share similar consumption practices in each group member could demonstrate their knowledge of one particular product, regarded as resources gained during the socialization process.

Social capital denotes the features of social structure, such as levels of interpersonal trust and norms of reciprocity, as well as mutual aid – resources for individuals that can facilitate collective action (Tzanakis, 2013). The social network created by counterfeit consumers is part of the resources as the consumers share similar consumption practices and values while enjoying the inherent benefits together. The establishment of this social network not only satisfied consumers' relatedness needs but also created knowledge resources that facilitated information sharing for their consumption practice. The creation of an online community contributed to the existence of group norms and values, which each member believed would provide benefits not only in terms of extrinsic. Therefore, the group members feel obligated to comply with the group norms and share reliable information with others (Key et al., 2013).

### **Consumer Culture Theory**

The study on reference groups, online communities, and purchase decision-making can be enriched by integrating Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) insights. CCT provides a theoretical

lens through which to understand the cultural dimensions of consumer behaviour and the broader societal influences shaping consumption practices. CCT scholars emphasize the significance of cultural meanings, rituals, and symbols in shaping consumers' experiences and interactions with products and brands (Waqas et al., 2021). Consumption is viewed not merely as an economic transaction but as a deeply social and cultural phenomenon embedded within broader societal contexts (Waqas et al., 2022). Reference groups and online communities are essential to consumer culture and help individuals negotiate their identities and affiliations in the marketplace. CCT highlights the power dynamics inherent in consumer culture, and understanding how reference groups and online communities mediate these dynamics can provide a more nuanced understanding of consumer decision-making processes. Incorporating insights from CCT can enhance practical implications for marketers by recognizing the cultural dimensions of consumer behaviour and informing strategies for fostering brand loyalty and engagement within diverse consumer segments.

Consumer culture could be defined as the system of commercially created images, signs, discourses, experiences, and objects that a particular social group uses to make sense of the environment and to position its identity and social experiences (Kozinets, 2001). Hence, consumer culture theory describes the interrelationship between the brand, which the meanings have been created by the consumer culture members, and consumer actions towards the branded content on social media (Arnould and Thompson, 2005), and those experiences, co-creation of meanings and actions as being driven jointly by the consumers which belong to a community (Geertz, 2008).

The present study illustrates how online community members recognise others' opinions and knowledge by sharing similar activities, interests, values, beliefs, and attitudes influencing their purchase decision-making. Additionally, this study aims to address the role of reference groups in the online community towards consumers' purchase decision-making and educational functions contributed by the community members. Hence, information sharing and exchange among the community members enables us to delve into how knowledgeable members could enhance their self-competence in demonstrating their knowledge to others through sharing consumption experience, besides fulfilling affiliation needs through the interaction between the other members. Indeed, when the consumers were strongly attached to others, the relationship offered emotional kinship, trust, and social support that made the relationship more valuable (Phua et al., 2017), thus contributing to consumers' psychological benefits. The accumulation of learning through the knowledge-sharing process among the social group members became a valuable resource for those involved in counterfeit consumption activity. The consumers felt connected and affiliated with others with similar interests, activities, and consumption practices, by which they felt that they were not being alienated, which satisfied their relatedness needs.

### **Methodology**

This study is conducted online observational setting as the community members known as netnography, a qualitative research technique. To explore human behaviour and learn about the social group's evolution, netnography generates a thick and rich narrative through grounded interpretations of consumer interactions able to provide a detailed representation of the lived online experience of cultural members (Kozinets et al., 2014). Moreover, netnography, adapts the ethnographic research method to observe consumers' online cultures without the researcher's participation or interference in the community members' activities (Kozinets, 2002).

### **Procedure and Platform Selection**

Netnography was accomplished through the interpretation of the meanings of the text in the form of consumers' comments on the sharing posts by the online community members. This study explored the role of reference groups through the online brand community on the popular social media platform, Facebook. Facebook has been chosen as a platform for this netnography study because this social media platform had more than 20.25 million active users in Malaysia in early 2023, and is the second-highest social network being used for consumers to engage with brands after WhatsApp (Meltwater, Global Digital Report, 2023).

According to Kozinets (2002), five criteria for choosing desirable online forums for netnography; (i) focused topic, (ii) high posting "traffic", (iii) high number of discrete message posters, (iv) detailed or descriptively rich data and (v) a high level of between-member interactions. Therefore, to select a relevant Facebook page, this study used these five criteria. First, only a Facebook page with more than 500k followers and members was included. Second, we monitored active page traffic by looking at the current posts made by the members and having active comments, which reflected high user engagement. Third, we only include Facebook pages or accounts that offer genuine reviews from the members and comments and post more to share information and knowledge on the product or services. After considering all the criteria, the Hotel Review Malaysia page has been selected, with 603k members. This group was created in 2020 and aims to share reviews, photos, and videos for hotels around Malaysia, including homestays, hostels, apartments, and Airbnb. Hence, this Facebook group has been selected due to genuine and honest reviews, including positive or negative reviews, and no paid review or advertisement from the hotel or homestay to ensure the untrue promotion will not deceive the members. The objective of the Hotel Review Malaysia group is to encourage information and knowledge sharing that benefit the group members. Additionally, a few characteristics illustrate how community identity is formed, such as members asking for advice, sharing stories and experiences, and helping others with purchase decision-making.

In this study, we followed member-to-member conversations sharing and seeking information on accommodation during the vacation or traveling, such as the positive and negative experiences, community members' satisfaction and dissatisfaction, price, and facilities offered by the hotels, resorts, homestay, and Airbnb in Malaysia.

### **Procedure and Platform Selection**

Hotel Review Malaysia's Facebook page was examined for 23 months between January 2021 and December 2022. The selection of time frame has been chosen as between 2021-2022, considering it was the post-COVID-19 or pandemic era; consumers are looking for the best places to travel to spend meaningful time with their family and friends, something they have been deprived during the pandemic COVID-19 (The Edge Malaysia, 2021). Hence, the hospitality and tourism industry demand spiked after the Movement Control Order period ended, and the hotel provider could not cater to this. causes many issues in terms of service quality and customer satisfaction. Thus, most of the online community members play their role in sharing and exchanging information with others based on their personal and consumption experiences while staying in some of the hotels, resorts, Airbnb, and homestay. This is the criteria for selecting the sharing posts, and three posts with a very high engagement rate (more than 500 comments, likes, and shares) have been selected for this ethnography study. After a detailed observation of the sharing posts, including the contents of the posts, which indicated an inclination to share information and knowledge with other community members in facilitating their purchase decision-making on choosing the right accommodation when

traveling. As suggested by the prior literature, highly engaging content was identified by observing consumers' elevated engagement with the content in the form of their comments, likes, and views (Hollebeek et al., 2017).

Archival data in the form of 7086 comments on hotel review content posted by the community members on the Hotel Review Malaysia page were collected, which indicated members' experience. Data were recorded by copying comments from the online community's Facebook page and pasting them on an MS Word document. This manual data extraction allowed real-time engagement with the cultural context, making it better than the data-mining programs (Kozinets et al., 2014). The objective was to explicate members' experiences, which led to others' purchase decision-making and knowledge sharing. Most of the members post photos of the hotel, resorts, or homestay to supplement their experiences staying in those hotels and encourage other members to share similar experiences they gained before and also to convince others in considering to stay or not staying, which indicates how their sharing post influence other social group members purchase decision making.

Observation guide questions have been developed to enable the researcher to concentrate on certain events, behaviours, or persons.

**Table 1: Selected content from January 2021 to December 2022**

<b>Content Review and Year of Sharing Post</b>	<b>Number of comments</b>	<b>Number of likes</b>	<b>Number of shares</b>
Review on a hotel at Port Dickson, August 2022	653	543	138
Review on homestay at Sekinchan, April 2021	3600	3500	1300
Review on homestay at Ulu Yam, September 2022	633	1000	665
Review on a resort at Pulau Redang, July 2022	2200	4400	4600

### **Data Analysis**

In this netnography analysis, social media user posts were studied to attain insight into customer experiences with the online community's content. Following Fujita et al. (2018), a sample of 4 sharing posts with more than 500 comments, which indicated highly engaging content, was chosen, and in total, 7086 comments were drawn which described consumers' feelings and beliefs about their interaction with the content on social media. Hence, those four posts have met the study's criteria as the reviews share positive and negative experiences, which have been identified to deliver useful information to other community members in assisting their purchase decision-making when considering staying at the hotel.

Three researchers carried out the analysis of the conversation, and both read the discussion iteratively. Data were coded into groups by looking for similarities and differences within and across the four transcriptions derived from the comments of sharing posts. The analysis ended once the saturation was reached when there was no new insight (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

The process started with naïve reading, which involved reading the posts and comments several times to grasp their meaning, as well as for the researcher to be familiar with the consumers' experience and to make sense of the data. The researcher extracted the 'significant statement'

from the transcription, which is potentially relevant and important to answer the research questions. Then, the researcher articulated meanings for each significant statement extracted by jotting down notes and ideas derived from the informants' exact words or own words or concepts from the literature and assigning the coded pieces of information to the research questions (Creswell, 2013), known as open coding. Coding refers to a classification system that identifies and labels the different segments of data to organize the information contained in the data (J. A. Maxwell & Chmiel, 2014). This involved identifying keywords, sentences, terms, and phrases relevant to the phenomenon of interest that emerged from the informants' significant statements. The inductive approach involved detailed readings of raw data to arrive at concepts, themes, or a model through interpretations made by the researcher (Thomas, 2006). Data with similar meanings were identified and coded into themes (Miles et al., 2014).

The three researchers discussed all emerging themes to allow for a holistic perspective. The interchange and discussion of interpretations helped the researchers define and redefine the direction of analysis to identify the emerging themes.

### **Findings and Discussion**

Five themes emerged related to the online community members' experiences and information sharing: social learning, subjective value, hedonic value, experiential value, and dissonance feeling, which reflected the role of the online community towards consumers' purchase decision-making.

#### **Theme 1: Social learning**

Most consumers found that an online community on social media facilitates a platform to exchange information, thus enabling them to share and gain knowledge on selecting the best hotel or accommodation to stay during their vacation or travel. These socialisation and interaction processes enhanced their knowledge in selecting the best place to stay according to their budget or preferences. For community members who have experience and love to travel, their satisfaction is derived from sharing and exchanging useful information on the accommodation with others. Hence, consumers involved in the online community sharing the same interests and activities such as vacation and leisure had satisfied their relatedness needs, as stipulated in the Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), since the existence of this social group provides social support for each member who shares similar interest and activities (W. Chen & Lee, 2013). This online community group enabled traveling members to extensively demonstrate their knowledge and skills in writing a good review and taking photographs during their vacations to others.

*“Going to PD, we need to do a lot of surveys and read lots of reviews... because most of the hotels are “too good to be true.” Luckily, having this group... too helpful.” (AN)*

*“Thank you for sharing your review. Luckily, I have not booked it yet... now I know why the review only 6 (star).” (IA)*

*“I’m grinning when read your review, viewing your photos and video. Feel being there too...so fun...thank you for your sharing.” (DA)*

*“Very nice... amazing. The room seems fine as long as it is clean and comfortable. The view and surroundings are so nice and not too crowded with people. I definitely*

*give it an A+++.* I'm the only one who gave you an emoji because your writing was entertaining." (FB)

The following excerpts described community members' role in helping others seek advice and information on non-related topics on vacation. However, the community members' responses to the questions posed in the others' comment sections indicated the willingness of others to share their experiences in using sunscreen as skin protection during vacation, together with a photo of the product and brand name as well as the store to purchase. This signifies an online community in social media that allows members to gain opinions and share information on the product purchase, thus influencing others to consider purchasing the recommended brand or product.

*"That is interesting... I would like to know if anyone could suggest any cream appropriate for the bodies and faces of mothers and children. I am an outdoor activity person, and usually, within half an hour, my skin experiences sunburn, and I call it "black and white" sunburn."* (CI)

*"Then, you need to find a sunscreen that has SPF 50+ onwards; the brand that I usually use is Watson sunscreen. That is the only one that is fitting for me."* (NR)

*"I'm using this (sunscreen). Usually, my children experience intense sunburn. But during this trip, I kept applying this sunscreen on them, and Alhamdulillah, it appeared to be better. The sunburn impact reduced"* (HA)

*" (You should) try Sunplay (sunscreen)...it has SPF 120."* (YS)

*"Sunplay is a good option, you may find it at Watson."* (TH)

## **Theme 2: Hedonic value**

The theme of hedonic value described how the community members pointed out the feeling of pleasure, excitement, enjoyment, fun, and happiness while spending their leisure time at the chosen hotels and resorts. Although some of the community members found it's not perfect, they could tolerate a few flaws and believe the pleasurable experiences contribute towards self-satisfaction. These positive emotional experiences generated hedonic values that led to consumer satisfaction being shared with community members.

*"There was so much to enjoy in W Village. It was mesmerising and amazing. It only took me a few steps from the door, and I could enjoy swimming in the sea. The sea view was awesome. There was no coral and not much fish compared to staying at L Redang."* (LSF)

*"The view was incredible! We went to Redang to watch the view and enjoy the panorama. I was unsure whether the beach opposing W Village was private, but this was the only resort with only ten rooms, so there were few people. We felt like we owned the beach. Redang sandbank was only beside this W Village."* (HA)

*"We were there last Sunday, 12th September. We stayed in a nice villa with an astonishing view. The room, too, was nice. But there was no TV channel because of*

*the blackout due to the minor renovation, but overall, everything was satisfactory."*  
(AN)

*"(When we) opened the door...and went down with the staircase, (we saw) a river... a crystal-clear one...the river was a private property...only those who checked in there could enjoy it. The courtyard (rental) was expensive, and you could set up a tent if you wished to. There were many fruit trees surrounding the house. If you are lucky and stay during a fruit season, you can enjoy the fruits without charge.*  
(FAR)

### **Theme 3: Subjective value**

The theme of subjective value is derived from the depiction of the worth of money that describes the worthiness of money spent by the community members. For instance, AN pointed out that the value of the money she had spent was worth it, although other members found it was not worth it, and she would find another homestay with the price rate. However, as for AN, she felt the value of the money that she spent was compensated by the enjoyment she gained, which was more important to her.

*"As for me, it was quite pricey. Perhaps we could find alternatives nearby the homestay...."* (NI)

*"Yes, it was costly compared to another homestay..."* (AN)

*"I would like and wish to stay there too, but I think it was not worth it. However, you seem to be having fun there."* (NI)

*"... Actually, it was worth it to stay here. I think a few things were lacking because the operators recently operated it. However, Alhamdulillah, I enjoyed it. The two things that bothered me were TV not functioning and the noise because of the renovation."* (AN)

As for ZY, the value of the money that consumers have to pay for is worth it since the resorts are exclusively for the guests that stay in that resort. She believes that spending more on vacation and accommodation would be worthwhile as the value she will gain is rewarding due to the personalization, unlike the cheaper one.

*"...It might be pricey since it was private, but it was well-justified. Long Beach has too many visitors and crowds, but it was a cheaper option. However, for those who prefer a private beach, you would love it here. Another choice with a private beach was M Resort- the orange chalet. The package is cheaper than W Village, but it is less popular. They offer a private beach, too.* (ZY)

### **Theme 4: Experiential Value**

The theme of experiential value describes the post-purchase behavior of the community members, which determines the level of satisfaction and dissatisfaction of the service provider, specifically the hotel, resort, homestay, and Airbnb. In this study, community members described their great experiences while staying at the chosen hotel and were satisfied with the excellent quality of the service provider. They revealed that they received excellent hospitality and shared their positive emotional experiences, reminiscing their memory while staying at that

resort. Additionally, positive experiential experiences generated hedonic value that led to community members' satisfaction, thus enabling them to share similar feelings and emotions with others in this online community platform. Most of the members shared similar interests and hobbies in leisure and traveling agreed that their decision to stay and choose the hotels, resorts, or homestay was the best decision and delivered great and experiences.

*"My whole family, miss W Village Redang Island, Terengganu. I agree with the excellent staff rating. W Village staff were wonderful, the kids' safety was good, and we did not have to worry about it."* (NB)

*"It was a great treat, and W Village is the best. We are missing (to visit) the place again. The place was private, and fewer visitors were there. The staff also knew whether we were having food or not. They were kind; we did not have to pay for the life jacket during the kayaking. They said it was our honeymoon gift. However, booking this place was problematic because it is typically fully booked."* (FW)

*"It was the best (experience). The facilities were complete. Last time, I could book and stay there because one of the guests cancelled the booking. It was my mere luck. So, I booked the slot immediately. As I entered the kitchen - the best area, I saw everything was provided. The premise was opened last July. Other aspects were flawless. The only issue that I encountered was the low water pressure. But it was a minor issue. Overall, it was a remarkable experience. (When I woke up) I saw the (river) water was clear. The operators know how to run the place effectively."* (SA)

*"(It was) the best experience. I brought the rice, cooking oil, and eggs, but I found everything was ready when I reached the orchard house. The owner furnished everything. I was delighted. I felt at home. The best part was that I went there during the fruit season to eat the mangosteen and experienced the autumn durian season."* (AI)

### **Theme 5: Dissonance feeling**

The theme of dissonance feeling revealed how the community members expressed dissatisfaction and regret about staying at the chosen accommodation. The community members described the hotel as delivering the worst experiences and regretting their purchase decision-making on choosing the hotel. Most of the community members pointed out the hotel management's lack of effort to improve the facilities, cleanliness, and services, which made them never consider coming back and staying again at this hotel.

*"This is our first and last staycation at this hotel. It was filthy and gross, and it did not deserve to be called a "paradise". Everything was horrific, from the room facilities to the swimming pool and breakfast buffet. For those who said it was fine, they have a high tolerance for cleanliness and hygiene. It was not because thousands of guests have stayed in that room before, but there was no initiative from the hotel management to clean up".* (SS)

*"I had a poor experience staying at this hotel, even for only one night. Only one elevator worked, breakfast was mediocre, and we stayed in a dusty room. Also, the air conditioner was leaking, and the mirror was subpar. It was such a sad*

*happening. I treated my siblings to stay there during Christmas, and most of the nearby hotels were fully booked, and this was the only hotel available.” (HN)*

All the emerging themes portrayed the community members' willingness to share and exchange information on their experiences choosing and selecting accommodation during vacation and traveling. The social learning theme describes how individual involvement in an online community contributes to relatedness, affiliation, and self-belonging needs. It represents the willingness of the social group members to exchange information and time to “educate”, as well as share valuable information for the benefit of the other members. For instance, the social group members exerted great influence on consumption practice, whereby they were transparent in revealing their lifestyles, financial abilities, and purchase behaviour. This social relationship facilitated a learning process that encouraged the other group members to share and exchange information on their experiences in choosing, selecting, and staying at any categories of accommodation such as budget hotel and homestay, luxury hotel and resort without discriminating financial means, social status as well socio-demographic differences, thus, contributed to members’ social needs fulfillment.

The theme of social learning denotes the features of social structure, such as levels of interpersonal trust and norms of reciprocity, as well as mutual aid – resources for individuals that can facilitate collective action (Tzanakis, 2013). The social network created by the online community is part of the resources as the consumers share similar consumption practices and values while enjoying the inherent benefits together. The establishment of this social network not only satisfied consumers’ relatedness needs but also created knowledge resources that facilitated information sharing for their consumption practice. The existence of an online community contributed to the existence of group norms and values, which each member believed would provide benefits not only in terms of extrinsic (ability to wear and purchase high-quality counterfeit goods) but also intrinsic (self-image enhancement and relatedness needs). Therefore, the group members feel obligated to comply with the group norms and share reliable information with others (Key et al., 2013). Thus, an online community group is a good platform for consumers to learn and gain new knowledge on the hospitality and tourism industry, which assists their purchase decision-making process.

Moreover, the participants of this online community felt obligated and responsible to share reliable information. Most of the community members are aware of their responsibilities to post honest, genuine reviews and not overclaim or exaggerate the services provided by the hotel provider. These socialisation and interaction processes allowed them to enhance their knowledge in selecting worthy accommodation. For the group members which has a high interest in leisure, vacation, and travel activities, the online community becomes the best platform for them to demonstrate their knowledge and expertise in writing, photography, and editing skills while sharing their experiences, which might attract other community members to read, view their post, thus, might stimulate their desire to book and stay at the recommended hotel. The theme of dissonance feeling described how group members shared their disappointment and frustration due to their unpleasant experiences while staying at a few hotels and homestays. Surprisingly, online communities facilitate information and knowledge sharing and emotional experiences such as frustration, anger, disappointment, and sadness during their stay, connecting those members with similar experiences.

Most of the community members learned how to search and find the best accommodation based on the review of the post shared by the members and the comments posted by the other group

members. According to Salazar et al. (2013), people gain information from observation surrounded by their social circle consumption practice and later make-up cognitive learning. Therefore, integrating observation and cognitive learning generates reliable information to assist the consumers' purchase decision-making process. People can learn new information and behaviour by observing other people. When the consumers observe the other's experiences through written posts, videos, and photos, they learn how to select and book based on the information and tips the other community members provide. Thus, informational and observational learning affect the consumers' attitudes in both cognitive and affective dimensions. The process of diffusion of information is more active in a social group as those involved in similar hobbies and interests, such as leisure activities, can demonstrate their knowledge on choosing the best hotels and vacation places, regarded as resources gained during the socialization process.

The theme of hedonic, experiential, and subjective values described by community members in this study gained more social and hedonic benefits, as their social group was supportive in helping them share plenty of information on accommodation and places to stay during their vacation. Instead of searching for information without a point of reference, this online community contributed strong social support by gathering more members that shared similar consumption practices. Additionally, when the consumers were strongly attached to others, the relationship offered emotional kinship, trust, and social support that made the relationship more valuable (Phua et al., 2017), thus contributing to consumers' psychological benefits. For example, consumers who share their inability to pay for luxury vacations often gained social support and were guided by other social group members who were more knowledgeable about recommending affordable hotels or accommodations within their financial means. Hence, the community members are willing to share and provide information through the comment section, which indicates a high level of engagement, thus contributing towards the fulfillment of one affiliation and relatedness needs. As a result, social capital outcomes enabled the consumers to have a sense of self-enhancement and life satisfaction (Ellison et al., 2014; Phua & Jin, 2011).

## Conclusion

To conclude, the emergence of online social media communities greatly influences consumer purchase decision-making. This study elucidates the role of the online community towards knowledge and information sharing, in which community members can learn, engage, and identify suitable accommodation from others' experiences. The emergent themes of social learning, hedonic value, subjective value, experiential value, and dissonance feeling described the role of the online community as not only to share information and knowledge but also become a platform for the members to share similar emotions and feelings from their consumption experiences, enable the community members to satisfy affiliation and relatedness needs. This present study is inspired by the development of online communities, particularly in social media networks, that facilitate consumer purchase decision-making and behaviour from the lens of others' purchase experiences, specifically on hotel reviews, which should be taken seriously by the hotel providers. To gain more insight into the influence of the online community, future studies might focus on sharing user-generated content to understand the role of reference groups in consumers' purchase decision-making and behaviour.

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