

The Influence of CGIs for Customer Engagement by SME Restaurants in Malaysia

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The emergence of the Internet and social media have a profound impact on Malaysian individuals and businesses alike. Statistics show that 75 percent of Malaysians are active social networking site users, who spends 8.5 hours a day on the internet with a daily average of 3 hours on social media alone. Furthermore, 9 out of 10 internet users use their smartphones to go online. Through social media, customers are now engaged in interactive communication throughout various stages of their purchase journey. Due to the rapid evolution of social networking and the ubiquitous usage of mobile devices, photo sharing on social media is becoming more popular. Moreover, in the current market where customers' attention span is very limited, photo images could be a significant influence on purchase decisions. On the other hand, the adoption social media by restaurant SMEs are quite low and have not kept up with social media of usage by Malaysians. Even though, social media may provide new opportunities, the shift of focus from traditional media to new formats of content, such as customer generated images (CGI), may be a daunting task for many restaurant SMEs. Many restaurant SMEs are still unable to harness the power of social media to engage with customers. Intensified with the food and beverage sector's reputation of high failure rate as well as the increased empowerment of customers to create and exchange content online, the influence of food CGIs may necessitate deeper insights from both industry and academia. Based on the uses and gratification theory, the conceptual framework of this research proposes that CGI characteristics such as informational, remunerative, entertaining and relational content play a role in customer engagement for restaurant SMEs. By examining the extent of influence by food CGIs content, this research could help restaurant SMES to embrace new opportunities in directing their integrated marketing efforts, in particular, expansion into online retail. The results of this study will offer deeper insights on the application of food CGIs for restaurant SMEs to engage with customers effectively, as well as contribute to the expansion of knowledge on social media marketing. Additionally, it would add to the academic understanding on the gratifications of consumer's behavior in generating visual content and posting pictures of their food within the Malaysian context.

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