Brands beware! Consumer discontent is contagious

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Since the inception of corporate marketing, consumers have always been encouraged to be loyal to brands. Consumer loyalty rewards brands with increased profits, allowing the companies to reinvest in product research and enhance service delivery, which ultimately leads to improved consumer experience.

Therefore, it is not surprising that sales and marketing are some of the most resource-intensive divisions within an organisation, geared towards driving business profitability. Simply put, consumers have been encouraged and moulded to develop affinity, attachment and, to a larger extent, "love" for brands. In turn, companies reciprocate by developing products and services that are beneficial, functional and aligned to consumers' cultural and ethical beliefs.

But is that it? Do consumers merely possess the capacity to be loyal and love the brands that serve them?

Absolutely not. Of concern, one's ability to love is as much as one's ability to hate. This extends beyond a social context and into the spheres of consumer behaviour as well.

A cause for worry is that recent consumer research in the US has shown an increase in consumer aggression when issues concerning products and services arise. Furthermore, the percentage of consumers who seek revenge on organisations have increased threefold since 2020, with venting via social media as the most common method.

Consider the following classic example of a case study on consumer complaints: In 2009, Dave Carroll and, by extension his band Sons of Maxwell, posted a country music video on YouTube titled *United Breaks Guitars*, where he sardonically detailed his experience of United Airlines' mishandling of his guitar. Long story short, the incident questioned the service quality of United Airlines and caused significant damage to its brand reputation, which many believed resulted in a sharp decline in stock prices shortly after the incident.

Could such pessimistic consumer behaviour and attitude stem from social media influence? Or perhaps it is due to society's decaying morals? Or is it because brands are unable to deliver on their promise, causing dissatisfaction?

First and foremost, it must be acknowledged that consumer awareness has been heralded as a consumer right, which motivates consumers to express dissatisfaction on various communication channels. Such consumer-centric strategies are imperative as they encourage consumers to interact with organisations, enabling real-time responses.

However, what is most concerning is when consumer dissatisfaction is expressed through complaints as it can significantly damage one's brand reputation. So, what makes a complaint so compelling yet intimidating?

Unbeknown to many, "complaining consumers" is very much a social phenomenon. When an individual makes a complaint to people within their own social circle, the most common response is agreement. By nature, humans possess a tendency to lean towards consensus in the occurrence of a complaint — individuals feel the need to mirror the emotional state of the people they are interacting with.

Gradually, the social circles who are aware of the complaint expands. Unconnected individuals would develop social connectedness to one another on the basis of discontentment and complaints. This not only builds negative perceptions towards the brand and tarnishes its reputation but also fuels brand hate. Consequently, such hatred could escalate to the point where consumers punish brands by seeking revenge and participating in boycotts.

So, what can brands do to respond to consumer hostility? A probable first reaction by companies is to introduce mechanisms to facilitate consumer forgiveness, typically in the form of remuneration or a formal apology. However, there is a need to question: "What if consumer complaints represent a complex territory in brand management, requiring advice and strategic insight from the rightful experts?"

If organisations are hesitant to invest in engaging with such strategic customer-centric professionals, then there is a need to heed the wise words of the marketing guru, Philip Kotler, who exhorts: "Companies pay too much attention to the cost of doing something. They should worry more about the cost of not doing it."

Negative consumer behaviour and attitude are intricately woven with brand performance, social media influence, and societal dynamics and pressures. Given that, customer relationships are no longer a mere extension of marketing or customer experience. Instead, managing customer complaints has evolved into a task that requires strategic planning, one that requires close monitoring and listening to both brand image and consumer sentiments.

Certainly, brands need to recognise that being able to decipher both positive and negative sentiments are vital to their survivability and success. Today's dynamic business environment, thus, demands that brands appease both loyal and discontented consumers. After all, brands can make use of such challenging circumstances to foster deep yet profound connections with their consumers.

Unravelling the expectations of Gen Z interns in the hospitality and tourism industry

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For first-time internship aspirants, they cannot help but wonder if choosing the right company to intern with will eventually lead to fruitful employment. The reality may sink harder than it seems, but sometimes employment may not be the primary goal of interns. One of the pathways in the momentous journey towards completing their course is undergoing a few months of internship with a company of their choice or following the recommendation of their institution's internship counsellor.

In the current age of career inclinations fuelled by the success of content creators or the flexibility of gig economy jobs, members of Generation Z are becoming highly unmotivated at the thought of working in a structured environment and crave the sense of work freedom that they see many others have achieved. Despite internships being a training ground for the students to practise their knowledge and skills, those embarking on their internships are choosing a company that could give them their desired working hours, a high allowance, independence, or possibly all of these. Are these students being demanding or are they mistaken in their expectations, especially considering that they are applying for an internship, which is a temporary work-based learning experience before completing their studies? There is no right or wrong answer, but in some ways, companies have to start paying attention to the gaps in expectations which may be attributed to the generational thinking gaps. Although more research could be conducted on the mindsets of those working in the hospitality industry and comparisons made between Generation Y and Generation Z, a number of studies have pointed out significant findings that can be further discussed.

Interestingly, the current supervisors and managers in the hospitality and tourism industry are increasingly from Generation Y, who are not far off in age from Generation Z. Despite the small age difference, a paradigm shift exists between Generation Y and Generation Z. According to Grossman (2018), the members of Generation Y are avid team players who make decisions based on collaborative discussions. In the hospitality and tourism workforce, being a team player is a desirable trait as it helps with determining quick and effective solutions to issues that can easily occur from recurring people-centric interactions. Dulin (2008) asserted that Generation Y members seek positive interpersonal relations in the workplace. On the other hand, Generation Z members are known to be sceptics who find it hard to trust others due to their age advancement in a time of financial and political crises, as reported by *The Wall Street Journal* (2018). Presumably, Generation Z members may find it difficult to thrive in a team environment due to their lack of trust in others to guide them, despite having supervisors who earnestly want to train them and harness their potential. Research by Adecco (2016) supports the "individualistic" trait that Generation Z members possess, in terms of the reluctance to engage in teamwork and a preference for independent tasks rather than being micromanaged. This signals a potential misalignment in workplace values between the supervisory cohorts of Generation Y and the intern cohorts of Generation Z.

Moving forward, in order to entice young aspirants to pursue a career in the hospitality and tourism industry, their internship stint must be a motivational experience. The popular saying "No Pain, No Gain" may not apply to Generation Z interns because this generation does not like intense pressure just to succeed as they value self-worth and self-respect (Sakdiyakorn, Golubovskaya & Solnet, 2021). Hospitality talent managers can leverage the aspect of "self-worth" by highlighting the work and leisure opportunities at their establishment during "open days" or interview sessions. Work and leisure opportunities like dining discounts, accommodation discounts, work trips and wellness programmes are highly attractive to potential interns when choosing a specific establishment. Not to mention, the prospect of working internationally as a full-time employee at the establishment's overseas properties may entice young aspirants to pursue a hospitality career in the near future. To support the "individualistic" trait of Generation Z interns, allowing them the flexibility to opt for departments based on their interests could lead to a motivational experience for the interns and present the establishment in a positive light.

Additionally, hospitality institutions have a pivotal role to play in preparing students to embrace the hospitality workforce. Embedding internships in the curriculum is definitely essential, but developing a sustainable approach to assisting the industry in retaining talent is an ongoing obligation. The key point is inevitably the development of soft skills in the service mindset, interpersonal communication and workforce readiness. In this way, Generation Z students will blossom as future hospitality professionals, not conforming to the norms but transforming themselves into dynamic individuals through their internships. E

Malaysian education and the Capture of Malacca

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It is about the Malaysian education system, again. The causes for its decline are complex, ranging from the change of medium of instruction from English to Bahasa Malaysia, the lowering of recruitment criteria for teachers, their unattractive salaries and the lack of career prospects, the juggling of three languages at vernacular schools, an overemphasis on grades, lip service to extracurricular activities and government inertia in the face of talent poaching (including top students) by our neighbour. Rather than delve deeper into these maladies, I want to approach the issue differently. I am going to give the reader a glimpse of how the decline occurs. Using a common historical fact, I will illustrate how teaching and assessment might fail to meet international benchmarks.

Malaysians who completed their secondary education at public schools would be familiar with the Capture of Malacca in 1511 by Alfonso de Albuquerque. We would have memorised the year of this watershed battle and contrived to spell "Albuquerque" correctly. Truth be told, many of us were probably bored by it, having encountered the topic twice — in lower secondary and upper secondary. Is it wrong to repeat the Capture of Malacca in the curriculum?

In 1956, a team of cognitive psychologists at the University of Chicago, led by Benjamin Bloom, devised a learning framework that would guide the design of curriculum and assessment strategies. Focusing on the cognitive domain, the learning outcomes would vary from the ability to "remember", "understand" and "apply" to "analyse", "create" and "evaluate". Logically, the learning outcomes should ascend in difficulty as students progress through the programme. If a student is expected to "remember" and "understand" in primary and lower secondary, the student should be able to "apply" and "analyse" in upper secondary.

If we say a lower secondary student should remember the year of the Capture of Malacca and understand its historical significance, we can test these outcomes through multiple-choice questions (MCQs). By upper secondary, however, the learning outcomes should include some elements of analysis. MCQs should not be the only test. The teacher might wish to supplement this with an essay question, perhaps along the lines of: To what extent did the Capture of Malacca influence the political development of the Malay Peninsula in the 16th century? Among other things, students could discuss the cusp of colonialism in Southeast Asia, the rise of the Johor Sultanate, the various attempts to recapture Malacca and Johor's alliances with other Malay states and the Indonesian archipelago. However, if an exam question asks: Identify the important events and main personages in the Capture of Malacca — analysis and critical thinking are not required. Cleverly arranged, an assemblage of facts will guarantee top marks.

Unfortunately, in the age of ChatGPT, this sort of assessment is largely meaningless.

Assuming that one revisits the Capture of Malacca at an undergraduate level, how should this topic be assessed? At the tertiary level, we certainly want to see more nuanced analysis with competing views and comparative approaches. Perhaps the instructor could set a group assignment with the title: Critically evaluate the legacy of colonialism in Malaysia, starting from the Capture of Malacca. The question is quite broad, since there were several colonial powers in the Malay Peninsula — the Portuguese, Dutch and English. Moreover, the question could be analysed politically, economically and socially. Comparisons with some Asean countries would be a plus, seeing that Spain ruled the Philippines, the French were in Indochina and the Dutch had control of Indonesia.

The problem is, students who largely "remember" and "understand" aren't adept at analysis. Thus, they would be hard-pressed to "analyse" at the level expected of undergraduates. Critical analysis has to be taught, fast! And some students learn faster than others. With the democratisation of education, tertiary educators now manage far more students from a broader band of competence. In reality, the swim or sink philosophy has to be mediated by the provision of life jackets and lifebuoys. This is complicated by the frustrating parental assumption that, whatever academic shortcomings their children might have, they will fix them at the university!

In short, the Malaysian education system lags behind partly because of the unimaginative way we teach and the pedantic way we assess students. Now, transpose this problem to virtually every subject at every level of primary and secondary school in the state school system over the course of 30 years. The outcome? A large majority of intellectually docile young people who aren't equipped for the challenges of the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

Of course, the issue is far more complicated and filled with edu-speak. I simplify. Because why would the reader want a tedious and technical diatribe against the education system? Besides, to quote Albert Einstein: If you can't explain it simply, you don't understand it well enough. E

Gigging in the fast lane: Malaysia's food delivery riders navigate a risky road

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Malaysia's streets are alive with the buzz of motorcycles and scooters zipping through traffic to deliver meals to hungry customers. But behind the convenience of our favourite food delivery services lies a hidden danger that is largely ignored. From physical risks to financial uncertainty, the life of a gig economy food delivery rider is anything but simple.

In April 2023, Malaysia's Minister of Transport Anthony Loke disclosed a deeply concerning set of statistics regarding food delivery riders in the country. Between 2018 and May 2022, 112 food delivery riders lost their lives on Malaysian roads, with an additional 82 sustaining serious injuries and 1,082 suffering minor injuries. These figures are profoundly alarming, equating to almost one courier death nearly every week in Malaysia.

The data is not only concerning but also highly illuminating, as it is a rare insight into a subject that is largely undocumented. Globally, it is almost impossible to find publicly available data on road accidents involving couriers. Most countries do not segregate the data for this large and burgeoning sector. The situation is further complicated by the lack of information from the food delivery platform companies themselves.

There is a pressing need for greater transparency and accountability within the food delivery industry, particularly in the context of road safety. The lack of clear and comprehensive data hampers efforts to understand the full scope of the problem and develop effective strategies to protect those working within this vital sector of the economy. It is a matter that warrants serious attention from researchers, governmental bodies and food delivery platform companies.

While road traffic accidents are a prominent concern, the physical risks in the food delivery gig economy are far more comprehensive. Research has illuminated various occupational hazards, such as musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs), which have become increasingly prevalent. These disorders, often overlooked, are a stark reminder of the toll this type of work can take on the body. Behavioural risks further complicate the picture. Troubling riding practices, such as speeding and mobile phone usage while on the road, have emerged as significant concerns in the courier gig economy. These behaviours not only endanger the riders themselves but also pose risks to other road users.

Recent studies from around the world have already begun to unravel the unique challenges faced by gig economy food delivery riders, which are marked by their transient, flexible and often freelance nature. Financial instability, for example, is another substantial concern. The precarious and time-sensitive nature of gig work can lead to financial insecurity, creating a high-pressure environment. In the relentless and fast-paced world of food delivery, where time literally translates to money, this pressure often manifests in a surge of risky behaviours, further exacerbating the physical risks. Furthermore, the mental well-being of gig workers cannot be ignored either. The challenges of burnout, high job demands and low job control contribute to psychological risks, creating a work environment that can be mentally taxing. The need for support and understanding in this area is paramount yet often neglected.

Of course, the question of responsibility within the gig economy, particularly in the food delivery sector, also presents a challenge. Is the onus of safety and well-being solely on the individual rider, or does it extend to broader systems, encompassing employers and policymakers? The answer, it seems, requires a more nuanced and collaborative approach, one that involves all stakeholders in crafting comprehensive solutions. Despite the extensive research and understanding of the health risks faced by gig workers, there remains a conspicuous gap in the development of actionable strategies and interventions.

There is an urgent need to bridge this gap, focusing on practical solutions to the complex health and safety risks inherent in the food delivery gig economy. Of course, promoting healthier behaviours and enhancing road safety should form part of this approach, as should the focus on mental health strategies to prevent burnout, along with mental health support and stress management training. But we need to address the systemic conditions to protect the health and safety of couriers, which requires more than individual efforts. Fair working conditions and robust regulations are essential to mitigating risks.

Malaysia's delivery riders are part of a global community facing similar health, safety and financial issues. The next time a delivery rider brings a meal to your doorstep, consider the risks he or she has navigated to get there. It's time to take the wheel and drive forward research, policy and interventions that protect these vital workers. The streets of Malaysia, and indeed the world, deserve nothing less. E