

## **Customer Perception of Corporate Communication via Weblogs: A Case Study on a Budget Airline**

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### **ABSTRACT**

It is evident that the advent of new media has transformed the way corporations communicate with their stakeholders. Stakeholder engagement using weblogs, Facebook, Twitter and others are now the norm rather than the exception. Current research bears evidence that several businesses such as the airlines and hotel industry are using weblogs to promote their brand and foster a community of business travellers. In the Malaysian context, AirAsia is the first local budget private airline to use weblog to undertake every single transaction with its customers, thereby making it pertinent to evaluate how customers perceive AirAsia's weblog services. Three hypotheses which were tested are as follows: there is a positive correlation between customer perception of ease of use and effectiveness of the weblog's publishing system; there is a positive correlation between customer perception of interactivity and effectiveness of weblog's comment system and finally, there is a positive correlation between customer's perception of trustworthiness and effectiveness of weblog's blogroll and hyperlinks. This study used the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) based on previous studies by Sledgianowski & Kulviwat (2009); Ilie et. al. (2005) and Chiou (2004) to examine a weblog's effectiveness. To achieve the objective of this study, quantitative non-probability purposive sampling method was used to adequate representation of the sample respondents. The survey was conducted with a random sample (n=333) of Malaysian Facebook social media users of AirAsia. The dependent variable (represented by the weblog publishing system, comment system and blogroll and hyperlinks) was measured against the independent variable (represented in the ease of use, interactivity and trustworthiness) using Pearson's correlation test. Results indicated that a significant positive correlation exists between all independent and dependent variables.

**Keywords: Corporate communications, customer perception, weblog effectiveness**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Social media has altered the relationship between corporations and their internal and external publics (Ilhator, 2001). Wright (2001) suggested that it has become an essential tool in developing and sustaining relationships between an organisation and its publics, especially when both have access to online media. Mack et al. (2007) added further that social media allows customers to easily find online opinions to help them make purchase decisions. Strother et al. (2008) reported that among the many social media applications, weblog is the fastest growing communication vehicle and a number of corporations in the travel industry like airlines and hotels are using weblogs to promote their brand and establish customer relationship which will eventually enhance the credibility of the corporations itself. According to McKinsey Quarterly (2009), the heaviest users of Web 2.0 applications enjoy benefits such as increased knowledge sharing and more effective marketing strategies and these benefits often have a measurable effect on the business.

Wattal et al. (2009) are of the view that the key feature in the acceptance of a particular technology lies in the ease of its usage. This view is supported by Sleggianowski and Kulviwat (2009) who pointed out that it should be free of effort. Holtz (2006) and Breakenridge (2008) felt that the ability to share, discuss and contribute information frequently especially among those who share similar viewpoints through interactivity has become critical. Yang and Lim (2009) defined the user's perceived trustworthiness for a weblog as a result of the expertise, professionalism and reliability exhibited by the host organisation. Furthermore, this is co-related to the weblog's ability to influence one's level of confidence towards the information provider. According to Sledgianowski and Kulviwat, a higher level of perceived trustworthiness towards a particular weblog will certainly encourage a user to accept and use the weblog.

The operational definition of customer perception of weblog effectiveness in this study was based on the factors that significantly affect the users' intention to use the weblog through its perceived ease of use, perceived interactivity and perceived trustworthiness. The operational definition of a weblog for this study was based on its features such as weblog publishing system, comment system and blogroll and hyperlinks. Customer perception of a weblog depends, in part, on the stimuli given by the customers (Foxall et al., 1998), and customers' behaviour towards the weblog is shaped by their perception (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975). A survey of nearly 1,700 businesses by McKinsey & Company (McKinsey Quarterly, 2009) found that using Web 2.0 technologies can lead to increased communication and productivity, more successful marketing strategies and enhanced products.

O'Riley (2007) who first introduced the concept of Web 2.0 defined it as a network platform, spanning all connected devices while Murugesan (2007) indicated that Web 2.0 harnesses the Web in a more interactive and collaborative manner, emphasising peers' social interaction and collective intelligence, and presenting new opportunities to leverage the Web and engage its users more effectively and easily. This technology allows for collaborative writing, content sharing, social networking, social bookmarking and syndication (Thackeray et al. 2008). Dye (2007) further pointed

out that social media has created a new generation of individuals whose identities are defined by their connections and the content they produce online.

Strother et al. (2008) declared that the weblog is one of the most dynamic and fastest growing personal communication vehicles on the internet with an increasing number of corporations, AirAsia included, who use it effectively to engage with their customers. AirAsia's weblog allows customers to upload their travel experience entries, share travel information and interact with other users as well. It provides weblog publishing software for users to publish their travel experiences as it consists of a title box and a content box. AirAsia's publishing software consists of several multimedia options such as links, videos and the ability to add images. The permalink in AirAsia's weblog allows users to add comments to a particular entry. Apart from its permalinks and comment links, AirAsia's weblog provides a blogroll in its sidebar and a hyperlink that is attached to the entry allowing users to link to other weblogs or websites to obtain more information.

### ***1.1 Problem Statement***

To date, there has been no research conducted on customer perception of the effectiveness of AirAsia's weblog. Although AirAsia has achieved its status as the number one budget airlines in Asia with more than one million customers and growing, it still needs to study customer perception of its weblog system. This is necessary to improve the system further and enhance customer satisfaction which is vital for its continued success.

## **2 LITERATURE REVIEW**

The customer according to Koontz (2001) is the actual or prospective purchaser of products or services. Assael (1998) has aptly defined customer perception as the selection, organisation, and interpretation of marketing and environmental stimuli into a coherent picture while Goldstein (2010) defined perception as a conscious sensory experience. Foxall et al. (1998) have stated that customer perception is the process of recognising, selecting, organising and interpreting stimuli in order to make sense of the world around us. Customer perception of a weblog, according to Foxall et al., depends in part on the stimuli that are given meaning by the customer while different perceptions of a weblog can account for different attitudes and behaviour towards it.

According to the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), a user's perception of a particular technology will influence or affect that user's acceptance of that technology as well as their intention of using it. TAM explains that one's behaviour and the intent to behave is a function of one's attitude toward the behaviour and their perceptions thereof. Sledgianowski and Kulviwat (2009) further explained that the user's computer usage behaviour and computer usage is affected by behavioural intentions, beliefs, and attitude of the end user. In the social media application context, the user's perception is an influential factor in the successful adoption and acceptance of the weblog. The

way the user uses the weblog is determined ultimately by his or her perception of a weblog (Lui et al., 2006). However, Lui et al. added that before any value can be derived from a weblog, the user must first participate in the weblog.

O'Malley and McGraw (1999) noted that a particular technology or system will only be adopted, accepted, and perceived as effective if the user perceives that the technology or system is able to enhance his or her job performance and it is easy to use. This suggests that the perceived effectiveness of a technology or system is dependent on the perceived characteristics of the technology. The user's perception of a particular technology's usefulness and its ease of use are determined by the user's acceptance and intention to use it (Davis, 1989).

Based on the findings and analyses of researchers like Bandura (1982), Lepper (1985), David et al. (1989), Schmallegger and Carson (2008), Gangadharbatla (2009) and Sledgianowski and Kulviwat (2009), one of the factors that influences users' intention to use and accept a particular weblog is the perception that it is easy and simple to use, effortless to learn, and the software operating steps are easy to remember. Sledgianowski and Kulviwat have shown that 'perceived' ease of use has a significant positive effect on user's intention to use a technology. According to Holtz (2006), the weblog should give the users a voice to express their opinions and communicate with many other users who share a common interest. Based on the findings pertaining to analyses perception of ease of use of technology, the following hypothesis was derived:

*H1: There is a positive correlation between customer perception of ease of use and effectiveness of weblog's publishing system.*

Nardi et al. (2008) claimed that the weblog should not only support rich information but also be highly interactive while Schuff et al. (2009) said that it should support a two-way interaction through a feedback mechanism which is in fact a distinguishable feature of Web 2.0 social media facility (Chen, 2009). Similarly, Ilie et al. (2005) stressed the importance of having sufficient users defined by a common interest who have adopted an innovation (critical mass) within the context of an interactive communication media. Interactivity should be measured using the number of functional features (Sundar et al., 2003) which include feedback system, audio and video downloads. However, the most obvious form of weblog in tourism appears to be travellers sharing personal travel stories and online recommendations in the form of diaries or product reviews. This feature allows weblog users to share experiences and communicate with others by providing feedback. Breakenridge (2008) is of the view that customers nowadays want to communicate directly or interact with the corporation and other users to seek product information and ask questions regarding its services.

According to Schmallegger and Carson (2008), tourism weblogs provide commentary and personal thoughts as well as allow users to express their opinions and post comments. In addition, Yang and Lim (2009) have stated that an effective weblog relies on a two-way symmetrical communication that involves utilising organisation-

public dialogue. This brings mutual betterment for both parties allowing the sharing and discussion of ideas and perspectives freely. Based on the findings pertaining to interactivity of use of technology, the following hypothesis was derived:

*H2: There is a positive correlation between customer perception of interactivity and effectiveness of weblog's comment system.*

Besides perceived ease of use and perceived interactivity, Yang and Lim (2009) claimed that effectiveness is also defined as the trustworthiness of the weblog. Nicholson et al. (2001) have defined trust as the confidence in the other party's reliability and integrity while Shankar, Urban and Sultan (2002) defined two types of trust which exist, namely, offline trust that involves an organisation's relationship with its customers and online trust involving an organisation's business activities in the electronic medium and in particular, its website. Marcella (1999) has suggested that the object of offline trust involves a human or an entity (organisation) while online trust involves technology. Some degree of commonality exists between online and offline trust which may include product quality and an organisation's reputation as stated by Shankar et al.

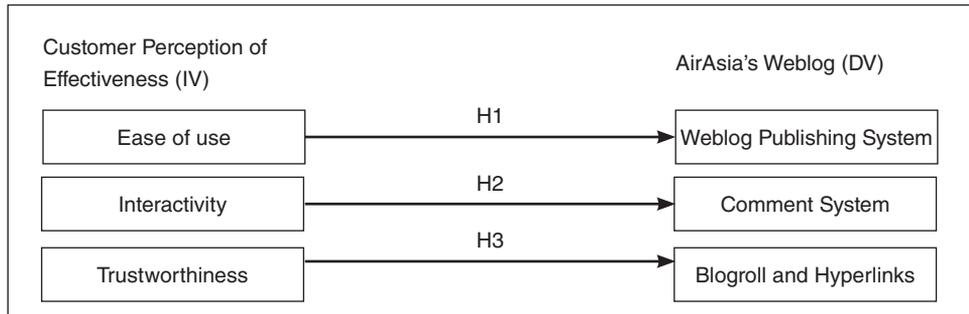
Yang and Lim (2009) felt that perceived trustworthiness of the weblog is a result of the expertise, professionalism and source credibility which enhances reliability of the content. According to Yang and Lim (2009), there are four dimensions of trust in the corporate weblog, namely, competence, dependability, integrity and transparency. Competence refers to the ability of a party to perform his or her duties and obligations with capability (Huang, 2001) and it includes characteristics such as professional conduct or expertise (Gabarro, 1978; Yang and Lim, 2009; White, 2005). As for trust in dependability, this refers to a relational partner's reliability based on predictability, consistency or responsibility in action and words (Gabarro, 1978; Yang and Lim, 2009). Integrity on the other hand, refers to the blogger's characteristics of concern, care or understanding of their relational partners (Yang and Lim, 2009).

The final dimension of trust is transparency and this refers to a relational partner's perceived willingness to share ideas and information freely, frankly and honestly (Gabarro, 1978; Yang and Lim, 2009). Transparency is also an important dimension as weblog visitors generally want to engage in direct and candid or honest communication with the organisation (Yang and Lim, 2009). In summary, perceived trustworthiness in a weblog refers to the provider's ability in performing their fiduciary responsibility to influence users to use a particular site (Sledgionowski and Kulviwat, 2009) and in creating member loyalty to use its services leading to a greater direct effect on the intent to use that weblog. Based on the findings pertaining to trustworthiness of technology, the following hypothesis was derived:

*H3: There is a positive correlation between customer perception of trustworthiness and effectiveness of weblog's blogroll and hyperlinks.*

The conceptual framework of this research on customer perception of the

effectiveness of AirAsia's weblog communication technology which was adapted from the TAM model is shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Research conceptual model: customer perception of the effectiveness of AirAsia's weblog

### 3. METHODOLOGY

A quantitative approach was used to collect data about customer perception of the effectiveness of AirAsia's weblog. Respondents were selected using non-probability purposive sampling because the research respondents must meet certain characteristics and criteria, namely, the respondents must be a) Malaysians; b) customers of AirAsia; and c) users of AirAsia's social media. According to Wimmer and Dominic (2006), "a purposive sample is a sample deliberately chosen to be the representation of a population, and it also includes subjects or elements selected based on specific characteristics or qualities, eliminating those who fail to meet these criteria." As such, the selection of the sample for this study was criteria-based instead of mathematically-guided. A total of 2,000 Malaysians were registered in the fan list of AirAsia's Facebook (2010). According to Israel (1999), if the size of the population is 2,000, an appropriate sample size should be set at 333 to achieve the precision rate of  $\pm 5\%$  which is often regarded as sufficiently accurate.

The questionnaire used for this study contained 35 questions separated into seven sections as follows: demographic information of the respondents (5 items), perceived ease of use (5 items), perceived interactivity (5 items), perceived trustworthiness (5 items), AirAsia's weblog publishing system (5 items), AirAsia's weblog comment system (5 items), and AirAsia's weblog blogroll and hyperlinks (5 items) respectively. All questions were adapted from past research. Questions on customer perception required responses on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" which were based on previous studies by Sledgianowski and Kulviwat (2009) and Iiie et al. (2005).

To test the reliability of the research questionnaire, a pilot test was conducted to measure Cronbach's alpha value for all of the measurement items. 30 respondents were recruited from the same research sample frame for the pilot test and were later

removed from the final research findings. According to Bruin (2006), a reliability coefficient of 0.70 or higher is considered as acceptable in social science research. In the pilot test, the Cronbach's alpha score for customer perception of effectiveness of ease of use for AirAsia's weblog publishing system was 0.905; customer perception of effectiveness of interactivity of the weblog comment system was 0.887; customer perception of effectiveness of trustworthiness of weblog blogrolls and hyperlinks was 0.872. All Likert scale items were found to be reliable based on the pilot test.

The self-administered questionnaires were distributed to the sample group based on the number of subscribers found in the fan list of AirAsia's Facebook (2010). The questionnaire was emailed to subscribers of AirAsia's Facebook page through the Facebook's message feature. Respondents were informed that their participation was voluntary and were required to email the questionnaire back to the researcher upon completion. A reminder email was sent to the respondents to encourage them to participate in this research. A total of 865 questionnaires were emailed out to Malaysian subscribers in two phases. In the first phase, 500 questionnaires were emailed to selected research respondents, followed by another 365 in the second phase. A total of 350 recipients responded and out of this the first 333 responses were selected as per the sample size recommendation of Israel (1999). Data obtained from the 333 respondents were analysed using SPSS Version 16 and subjected to Pearson's correlation statistical analysis.

#### 4. FINDINGS

The sample (n= 333) comprised of 177 (53.2%) females and 156 (46.8%) males from a wide range of age. 88.9% of the respondents were below 30 years of age while the balance 11.1% was between the age of 31 to 40 years. Table 1 contains the demographic details of the respondents. All respondents were frequent users of AirAsia's airline services and were Malaysian citizens.

**Table 1.** Demographics

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	156	46.8
Female	177	53.2
<i>Age</i>		
Below 30	296	88.9
31-40	37	11.1

Variable	Frequency	Percent
41-50	0	0
51 and above	0	0
<i>Visit frequency</i>		
Almost every day	20	6.0
About 2-3 times a week	37	11.0
About once a week	80	24.0
1-2 times a month	59	17.8
Rarely	137	41.2

\*Note: The sample size (n) is 333

#### 4.1 Hypothesis Tests

Questions concerning relationships between independent and dependent variables can be resolved using correlation analyses. In this study, Pearson's correlation was used to determine the correlation between the independent and dependent variables, and the coefficient of determination was used to determine the proportion of variability in the dependent variable that can be explained by the independent variable.

Hypothesis 1 (H1) states that there is a positive correlation between the customer perception of ease of use and the effectiveness of AirAsia's weblog publishing system. Perceived ease of use is the independent variable while weblog publishing software is the dependent variable.

In Table 2, Pearson's  $r$  value of 0.784 indicates a statistically significant and positive correlation ( $r = 0.784$ ,  $n = 333$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). The positive relationship indicates that perception of ease of use would predict a high score on the weblog publishing system. Based on Cohen's (1988) convention for interpreting effect size, a correlation of 0.784 suggests a strong, positive relationship.

Coefficient of determination can be computed by squaring Pearson's  $r$  value from the correlation i.e.  $0.784^2 = 0.614$ . This coefficient implies that 61.4% of the changes or variability in the dependent variable is caused by the independent variable. The remaining 38.6% is either due to error or other variables not considered in the equation. Based on the overall findings, H1 is supported.

**Table 2.** Pearson’s correlation between perceived ease of use and AirAsia’s weblog publishing system

**Correlations**

		ease	Publish
ease	Pearson Correlation	1	.784**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	333	333
Publish	Pearson Correlation	.784**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	333	333

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Hypothesis 2 (H2) states that there is a positive correlation between the customer perception of interactivity and the effectiveness of AirAsia’s weblog comment system. Perceived interactivity is the independent variable while weblog comment system is the dependent variable.

In Table 3, Pearson’s r value of 0.850 indicates a statistically significant and positive correlation ( $r = 0.850, n = 333, p < 0.001$ ). The positive relationship indicates that customer perception of interactivity would predict a high score on the weblog comment system. Based on Cohen’s (1988) convention for interpreting effect size, a correlation of 0.850 suggests a strong, positive relationship.

Coefficient of determination can be computed by squaring Pearson’s r value from the correlation i.e.  $0.850^2 = 0.722$ . This coefficient implies that 72.2% of the changes or variability in the dependent variable is caused by the independent variable. The remaining 27.8% is either due to error or other variables not considered in the equation. Based on the overall findings, H2 is supported.

**Table 3.** Pearson’s correlation between perceived interactivity and AirAsia’s weblog comment system

**Correlations**

		interact	comment
interact	Pearson Correlation	1	.850**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	333	333
comment	Pearson Correlation	.850**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	333	333

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Hypothesis 3 (H3) states that there is a positive correlation between the customer perception of trustworthiness and the effectiveness of AirAsia's weblog blogroll and hyperlinks. Perceived trustworthiness is the independent variable while weblog blogroll and hyperlinks is the dependent variable.

In Table 4, Pearson's  $r$  value of 0.673 indicates a statistically significant and positive correlation ( $r = 0.673$ ,  $n = 333$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). The positive relationship indicates that perception of trustworthiness would predict a high score on the weblog blogroll and hyperlink system. Based on Cohen's (1988) convention for interpreting effect size, a correlation of 0.673 suggests a moderate, positive relationship.

Coefficient of determination can be computed by squaring Pearson's  $r$  value from the correlation i.e.  $0.673^2 = 0.452$ . This coefficient implies that 45.2% of the changes or variability in the dependent variable is caused by the independent variable. The remaining 54.8% is either due to error or other variables not considered in the equation. Based on the overall findings, H3 is supported.

**Table 4.** Pearson's correlation between perceived trustworthiness and AirAsia's weblog blogroll and hyperlink system

#### Correlations

		trust	blogroll
trust	Pearson Correlation	1	.673**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	333	333
blogroll	Pearson Correlation	.673**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	333	333

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

## 5. DISCUSSION

The findings on customer perception of ease of use and the effectiveness of the web publishing system are supported by O'Malely and McGrow (1999) who argued that a particular technology or system will only be adopted, accepted and perceived as effective if users perceive that the technology or system is able to enhance his /her job performance and is easy to use. Similarly, findings on customer perception of interactivity and the effectiveness of the comment system support Yang and Lim's (2009) view that an effective weblog relies on a two-way symmetrical communication. Odden (2008) highlighted that not having such a feature will cause the weblog to underperform.

In comparison with customer perception of ease of use and interactivity,

the correlations between perceived trust and blogroll and hyperlinks were lower (0.673). Trustworthiness as a construct has several dimensions such as competence, dependability, integrity and transparency (Yang and Lim, 2009). Due to the multidimensional nature of trustworthiness, there is a possibility that customers may have perceived each dimension differently. Hence, the sum effect of the stronger and weaker perception of the four dimensions could have resulted in relatively lower, positive correlation compared to the other two variables (perceived ease of use and interactivity). Trust, according to Shankar et al. (2002), be it online (technology) or offline (overall entity/organisation) has an influence on product quality and organisation's reputation.

As such, the lower correlation scores on trust implies that more offline efforts, in particular, the four dimensions proposed by Yang and Lim (2009) are needed to strongly impact the online trust (technology/ weblog). According to Aaker (1991), trust is one of the the factors that influences brand image which in turn impacts brand equity, and trust is vital for the long-term viability of service industries such as the travel industry. Chiou (2004) also revealed that the customer's perceived trustworthiness of an internet service provider has a significant direct effect on their intention to use and remain loyal to the service.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, this study was able to meet all the three research objectives put forward by testing the proposed research hypotheses. The analysis of AirAsia's weblog in this research can benefit other corporations in helping them understand better ways to utilise a weblog effectively. It will also aid them in learning more about their customers' opinions towards their weblogs, thus giving them the opportunity to make improvements. At the same time, their customer perception of the effectiveness of the weblogs can be enhanced. As such, corporations operating in Malaysia would find this research extremely helpful in providing a better understanding of the ways to effectively utilise weblogs as their corporate communications tool. These corporations will be able to successfully fulfil the demands of its social media users and influence more users to use and participate in their weblogs where corporate information to their publics can be directly and easily accessed.

### ***6.1 Research Limitations and Recommendations for Future Studies***

As with most research, this study is not devoid of limitations. Firstly, the focus of the current study has been narrowed down to concentrate only on the Malaysian context, thus excluding foreign users of AirAsia's social media from the study. As such, this research was unable to determine the perception of effectiveness of all of AirAsia customers towards its weblog, regardless of their nationalities. In order to gain an unbiased and global analysis of customer perception of AirAsia's weblog, it is important to include the international users of AirAsia's social media. Similar studies in the future should consider including all the users of AirAsia's social media as respondents.

Secondly, this research employed a quantitative approach, which although convenient, did not allow the respondents to provide in-depth information such as their own opinion about AirAsia's weblog. To have a better understanding on customer perception of the effectiveness of AirAsia's weblog, future studies should combine both quantitative and qualitative research approaches to acquire an in-depth insight into customer perception of AirAsia's weblog.

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