

Uncovering Drivers of Customer/Audience Engagement and Media Trust on Mainstream Media

Zalfa Laili Hamzah^{1*} Izzul Zunnurain Darusamin²

¹ Faculty of Business and Economics, University of Malaya Kuala Lumpur

² Graduate School of Business, University of Malaya Kuala Lumpur

* zalfa@um.edu.my

Abstract: Mainstream media delivers social, economic, and political news that influences consumers/audience' attitudes and national development. However, recent statistics show that the average consumers/audience engagement with mainstream media is declining. In addition, mainstream media have been accused of biased reporting and overly aligned with political agendas, instilling widespread skepticism in their integrity and journalistic independence. Therefore, understanding consumers' motivations to continue using mainstream media can help media companies and broadcasters provide better service to encourage consumers' media consumption, which will improve its financial income generation. This study aims to uncover factors that influence customer engagement and media trust towards mainstream media in Malaysia. Data were gathered from 306 respondents. The questionnaires were distributed through the Internet, social media platforms, Telegram and Whatsapp messaging applications. The findings indicate that functional values, emotional values, information, journalists, and customer engagement explain news media trust. The findings provide a better understanding of customer engagement to media companies and help them improve customer engagement and trust towards mainstream news media.

Keywords: Mainstream Media, Media Trust, Customer Engagement

1. Introduction

Media trust and how it affects consumers' media consumption (use) has taken on new importance in today's world of abundant media options (Schranz, Schneider and Eisenegger (2018). However, the extent to which consumers trust news media and how much it matters for their use of mainstream or alternative media, how much they believe the news media, and how it affects their use of other media remains unclear (Strömbäck, Tsfati, Boomgaarden, Damstra, Lindgren, Vliegthart, and Lindholm, 2020). Mainstream media is defined as media that retains enormous influence, reaches the mainstream consumer, guides consumer opinions, and results in strong social influence in daily life (Mills, 2000). It covers newspapers, television news networks, cable news, and radio are generally considered mainstream media outlets. Alternative media refers to independently owned news and information websites, newspapers, magazines, and digital media outlets that cover the news from a particular perspective, whether it is that of a political minority, an ethnic group, or another autonomous community.

Mainstream media is responsible for delivering social, economic, and political news that influences consumers' attitudes and national development (Vraga et al., 2012). However, recent statistics show that the average consumers/audience engaged with mainstream news media is declining, which was attributed to consumer trust and confidence in the institutions of mainstream news media diminishing, affecting the companies' incomes generation (Onyanova, 2019; Tsfati

and Capella, 2003). In addition, mainstream news media have been accused of biased reporting and overly aligned with political agendas, instilling widespread skepticism in their integrity and journalistic independence. Therefore, understanding consumers' motivations to continue using mainstream media can help media companies and broadcasters to refocus and provide better service to encourage consumers' media consumption, which will improve its income generation and corporate reputation. Although many studies have analyzed sources of consumer trust in the media, drivers predicting customer engagement and media trust have mostly been ignored (Stubenvoll, Heiss, and Matthes, 2021). This study integrates literature in customer engagement and media trust to understand factors that improve media trust, particularly in the mainstream media context.

The notion of audience engagement has emerged as a fundamental topic in modern conversations about how news media companies interact with the public and develop long-term relationships (Steensen, Ferrer-Conill and Peters, 2020). Theory of audience engagement (Steensen et al., 2020) postulate that audience engagement with media will lead to building trust in media. However, no empirical research was undertaken to test this theory becomes the aim of this study. Understanding trust toward news media use is essential, as it leads to long-term consumer media consumption and improved perception of corporate reputation (Sterrett et al., 2019;). Previous studies have examined the role of contextual effects (Yamamoto, Lee, and Ran, 2016; Tsfati and Ariely, 2013), information news, journalist practices, and functional and emotional values (Williams, 2012) in influencing media trust in a different context, however, empirical investigation on the relationship between customer engagement and media trust is absent (Rather, 2019; Steensen et al., 2020). Thus findings from those studies cannot be generalized to the media industry (Schranz, Schneider and Eisenegger (2018).

Scholars found that mainstream news media lost consumer confidence and failed in its mission to provide accurate, fair, and balanced information for increasing customer engagement (Kohring and Matthes, 2007), in contrast to alternative media, dominated by citizen journalists and influential bloggers. Furthermore, consumer distrust of mainstream media resulted in financial difficulties, losses and losing its role as the primary source of information and news. As a result, a pressing need to uncover (1) factors that influence consumer engagement in mainstream media and (2) the role of consumer engagement in influencing customers towards mainstream media trust. The findings of this study will benefit media companies, journalists in understanding drivers in rebuilding and re-strategizing audience engagement and trust in mainstream media.

2. Problem statement

Mainstream media find it difficult to engage and retain consumers due to the rise of alternative media and the ubiquity of digital technology, which has fundamentally altered news reporting. The increasing use of alternative media results from questioning and doubting mainstream news (Hanitzsch and Berganza, 2012; Strömbäck et al., 2020). Rapid technological advancements and the rise of the digital era have transformed the landscape of the media industry, particularly among mainstream and alternative news media. The increasing use of the internet has also contributed to the growth of alternative media due to the easy access to vast amounts of online information platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Skype, Viber, Blogspot, and WordPress (Salman et al., 2011). Most Malaysians prefer reading news on social media platforms such as Facebook, blogs, and news portals to get instant news. However, despite the rise of alternative media, it is reported that traditional mainstream media remains relevant and complements the media industry. It is, therefore necessary to enhance and sustain mainstream media as a form of communication tool in this digital age to disseminate fast, reliable, accurate and authentic information to customers to rebuild customer trust.

Furthermore, consumers are exposed to much information and news from various mainstream and alternative sources in the digital era, and their demand for more transparent news is increasing (Newman, Nisbet, and Nisbet, 2018). Unfiltered and erroneous news and information from alternative media are often accepted, however, mainstream media information has been vetted and approved by relevant and authoritative parties before publication. This stands in contrast to alternative media, where anything can be published instantaneously without prior validation. However, current undertakings see confidence in mainstream media eroding as its reporting has been alleged to be unfair and biased towards the authorities and dominant political party (Zain, 2018). For instance, sugar-coated and fabricated news articles, sometimes sensational, are designed to be extensively circulated or spread for various intents ie; generate income, promotion, instantaneous publicity, criticize individuals, political movements, and control/manipulate feelings of fear among customers.

Scholars have suggested for future research to investigate factors that influence mainstream media trust (Strömbäck et al., 2020). Previous studies examined the role of selectivity of topics, facts, the accuracy of depictions, and journalist factors that influence consumer trust in the news media (Kohring and Matthes, 2007). While Kalogeropoulos, Suiter, Udris and Eisenegger (2019) found that the higher alternative media use, the lower consumption of mainstream media use. They developed media trust conceptualization and operationalization of a particular form of media trust and explored how media trust can be linked to consumer engagement with mainstream media, encompassing people's attention to mainstream media coverage. In another study, Williams (2012) discovered that news information, news delivery, and media corporations contribute to media trust. While, Rather (2019) examined the influence of customer engagement on customer trust in the services context. They found that persons who are more engaged with specific contexts are expected to be in more trusting and high-quality trust relationships with a company. Therefore, media scholars need to continue to analyze other factors involved in the consumers' decision to consume news, the additional determinants of news attention, and consumer engagement, which warrants more attention for future research.

Thus, this study is to examine the relationships between information news, journalist practices, functional values, and emotional values with customer engagement and media trust. These factors were highlighted by William (2012) and selected because they are the most frequently explored factors in the context of media trust and customer engagement (Vivek, 2012). In addition, some studies reported that Malaysian mainstream media received low levels of consumers, i.e., consumers purchased fewer newspapers or did not purchase them at all and prefer to watch mainstream media (Woo et al., 2015). The findings of this study are expected to help managers and policymakers strategize resource allocation to increase engagement and contribute to the literature on consumer engagement and media trust.

2. Literature Review

A. *Media Trust*

Media trust refers to the relationship between citizens (the trustors) and the media (the trustees) where citizens, in situations of uncertainty, expect that interactions with the news media will lead to gains rather than losses (Strömbäck, Tsfati, Boomgaarden, Damstra, Lindgren, Vliegenthart, and Lindholm, 2020; Schranz, Schneider, and Eisenegger, 2018; Yamamoto, Lee, and Ran, 2016). Trust is defined as the willingness or confidence in relying on another person based on his/her expertise, integrity, or intentionality of the above-mentioned person (Hess and Story, 2005). Morgan and Hunt (1994) define trust as a contributing element to a successful relationship between two parties. Trust stimulates cooperative behavior which could improve one's productivity, efficiency, and effectiveness. Kohring and Matthes (2007) define media trust as the ability of journalists to selectively cover and frame events in providing news on the political, financial, and social environment. Trusting media affects the patterns of consumers' consumption

of products, services, or media. However, when consumers mistrust news media, they tend to avoid using or consuming it. Tsfati and Cappella (2003) stated that low levels of trust prompt consumers to seek alternative news media.

This results in financial losses to the mainstream media companies.

B. Predictors of media trust

This study analyzes four factors predicting media trust: information, emotion, function, journalist, and customer engagement. Previous works investigated several factors in various contexts, namely emotional value, functional value, and information news, journalists. The selection of these factors is due to highly cited from past literature.

Emotional value is critical in building good journalism, especially in a mainstream media context. Emotions highly drive customer relationships, and it is becoming an essential dynamic in how news and information are produced by mainstream media and used by the people and consumers as journalism of mainstream media and society. Bitner (1992) suggested that emotion plays a vital role due to the more prominent role of the environment in the service sector. Since services are generally intangible, consumers cannot directly evaluate the quality of services relative to physical products. Therefore, consumers are more likely to rely on news information to build trust and engagement in the media industry. Thus, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Emotional value has a positive effect on media trust.

H2: Emotional value has a positive effect on consumer engagement.

Functional value signifies how a task is fulfilled, whether through physical, utilitarian, or functional performances. This value has two dimensions: quality and value for money (Sweeney and Soutar, 2001). They pointed out that functional value is a crucial driver for consumer choice. The functional value was considered one of the most significant values for consumers when purchasing (Wen and Noor, 2015). According to the consumer value theory, the functional value relates to individuals' rational and economic assessments of a product or service that reflect the perceived quality of use (Sweeney and Soutar, 2001). When applied to mainstream media, this evaluation refers to a consumer assessment of helpful, functional, and practical information influencing consumer attitudes (Carlson, Wylie, Rahman, and Woola, 2019). When consumers perceive news as meaningful, of decent quality, and consistent, it will influence their engagement and trust with the media. Thus, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H3: Functional value has a positive effect on media trust.

H4: Functional value has a positive effect on consumer engagement.

Flanagin and Metzger (2008) found that the trust in media is highly dependent on news messages or information, including the news source and the association of the journalist with a particular mainstream media organization who wrote and disseminated the news (Golan, 2010). Consumers have access to numerous sources of information; hence the credibility of news messages or information becomes one of the main issues consumers consider when searching for trustworthy news. Priority for getting credible and trustworthy information is a significant in shaping consumer and consumer perception on a particular media (Yamamoto, Lee, and Ran, 2016; Mehrabi, Abu Hassan, and Shahkat Ali, 2009). Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H5: Information news has a positive effect on media trust

H6: Information news has a positive effect on consumer engagement.

In understanding the role of a journalist, Hanitzsch and Berganza (2012) found that journalists' bad attitudes decrease consumer trust in news reporting. Journalists' criteria are including their performance, interpersonal trust, media ownership, and journalistic culture.

William (2012) defined a journalist as an interpersonal trust (person to person), signifying the trust between a news consumer and a news reporter. Their study focuses on exploring the relationship between the individual's level of media trust and news attention. William (2012) found that media trust is attributed by news information, a person who deliver the news (journalist), and media cooperation. While Diehl, Ardèvol-Abreu, and Gil de Zúñiga found that journalists play a significant role in influencing audience engagement and media trust. Thus, past studies demonstrate that there is a general feeling among journalists that engaging in media may exacerbate the public's perceptions of media bias and people engagement. Therefore, we develop hypotheses:

H7: Journalist has a positive effect on media trust

H8: Journalist has a positive effect on consumer engagement.

Concept of engagement is applied in many academic disciplines such as consumer behavior, marketing, political science, psychology, sociology, and organizational behaviors. Vivek (2002) defined consumer engagement as the intensity of a consumers' participation and reference to the organization's offerings and activities initiated by either the consumer or the organization. Hollebeek (2011) views customer engagement as the shaping of the consumers' state of mind via brand interactions involving certain levels of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral activities. Consumer engagement is closely related to trust in the Malaysian mainstream media. Highly engaged consumers are more likely to experience a boost in their self-esteem and a sense of empowerment from these interactions, which in turn makes them feel as though they are cared for and a part of the brand (Vivek, Beatty, and Morgan, 2012). Rather (2019) also reported that customer engagement is positively related to consumer trust. Therefore, highly engaged people and consumers will positively affect and trust Malaysian mainstream media more quickly than their lesser counterparts (Islam and Rahman, 2016; Habibi et al., 2014). Thus, it is hypothesized:

H9: Customer engagement positively influences media trust.

3. Research Methodology

A. *Sampling and data collection procedure*

The target population of this survey was defined as consumers aged 18 years old and above who watched or read Malaysian mainstream media for the past four weeks. The target sample size for this study is 360 (Hair et al., 1998). Those 18 and above are deemed suitable, as this group is the most commonly used minimum age to describe a generation. Roscoe's (1975) rule of thumb was used to determine the sample size range, between 30 to 500. A total of 306 valid responses were received and analyzed. A purposive and snowball sampling were used to distribute the questionnaire via email and social media to the target respondents via email, shared links on social media (Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram), and messaging apps Whatsapp and Telegram. Snowball sampling is often combined with purposive sampling, whereby participants are selected based upon their specific characteristics or membership of a group. The parameters of the target population are often unknown to the researcher, so a probability sample would be impossible (Parker, Scott, and Geddes (2019). Snowball sampling has advantages pertaining to cost and efficiency (Johnson, 2014). The minimum age for the respondents was selected due to the millennial generation's substantial purchasing power. The demographic profile of the sample is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Profile

Variables	Categories	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	140	45.8
	Female	166	54.2
Age	18-24	2	0.7
	25-34	192	62.7
	35-44	58	19.0
	45-54	40	13.1
	55-64	9	2.9
	65-above	5	1.6
Status	Employed (Government Sector)	141	46.1
	Employed (Private Sector)	114	37.3
	Self-Employed	14	4.6
	Unemployed	9	2.9
	Student	1	0.3
	Retired / Housewife	18	5.9
Education Level	Media Practitioner	9	2.9
	High School	26	8.5
	Diploma	49	16.0
	Bachelor Degree	170	55.6
	Masters	58	19.0
	PhD	3	1.0

Based on the Table 1, most respondents 166 (54.2%) were females, while 140 (45.8%) were male. Most of the respondents were 25-34 years old, at 192 (62.7%), followed by those 35-44 years old, at 58 (19.0%). In terms of status, 141 respondents (46.1%) work for the government, 114 (37.3%) work for the private sector, and 18 respondents (5.9%) were retired/homemakers, 14 (4.6%) were self-employed, 9 (2.9%) were unemployed, and media practitioners and one was a student (0.3%). In terms of education, majority of the respondents with 170 (55.6%), have Bachelor's Degree, 54 (19.0) possess Masters Degree, 49 (16.0%) possess high school diplomas, and 29 (9.5%) possess PhD.

B. Measurement Scales

This study used reliable and validated measurement scales validated in previous research. Four items for measuring information news were adapted from Kohring and Matthes (2007) and two items from William (2002); two items were adapted from Sthapit et al. (2019) and 3 items from Zhang and Zhou (2014) for measuring emotions; three items were adapted from Carlson et al. (2019) and two items from Ballester (2016) for measuring functional; five items were adapted from Gligor (2019) for measuring customer engagement, and five items from Rachbini (2018), Gligor (2019), and Islam and Rahman (2016) for measuring news media trust. The measurement scales used the 7-points Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The 7-point Likert scale was used as it is more accurate, easier to use, and better reflects a respondents' accurate evaluation compared to 5-point Likert scale (Dawes, 2008).

4. Results

This study used the SmartPLS 3.2.9 program, a partial least squares (PLS) structural equation modeling approach (SEM), to test the hypothesized relationships. PLS-SEM is a component-based approach that can predict critical target variables (Hair, Ringle, and Sarstedt, 2011).

A. *Measurement model*

Construct reliability was measured via Cronbach’s alpha and composite reliability (CR), average variance extracted (AVE), and factor loadings (see Table 2). The factor loadings were all significant and higher than 0.70 in all cases, and the CR, AVE, and α met the criteria required for construct reliability set in the literature (Hair et al., 2014).

Table 2. Measurement Model

Construct	Items	Loadings	Cronbach's alpha (α)	CR	AVE
Customer Engagement	CE1	0.839	0.901	0.927	0.717
	CE2	0.857			
	CE3	0.889			
	CE4	0.784			
	CE5	0.862			
Emotions	EMO1	0.87	0.936	0.952	0.798
	EMO2	0.921			
	EMO3	0.844			
	EMO4	0.92			
	EMO5	0.909			
Function	FUNCTION1	0.913	0.96	0.969	0.861
	FUNCTION2	0.925			
	FUNCTION3	0.947			
	FUNCTION4	0.934			
	FUNCTION5	0.92			
Information	INFO1	0.919	0.95	0.96	0.801
	INFO2	0.926			
	INFO3	0.935			
	INFO4	0.823			
	INFO5	0.93			
	INFO6	0.83			
Journalist	JOURNALIST1	0.889	0.952	0.963	0.841
	JOURNALIST2	0.929			
	JOURNALIST3	0.93			
	JOURNALIST4	0.93			
	JOURNALIST5	0.905			
Media Trust	TRUST1	0.946	0.966	0.974	0.88
	TRUST2	0.953			
	TRUST3	0.94			
	TRUST4	0.953			
	TRUST5	0.899			

Table 3 shows that all variables achieved discriminant validity based on the Fornell-Larcker criterion and the Heterotrait–Monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT). The square root of the AVE in each latent variable was compared with the other constructs to evaluate the discriminant validity. The square root of the AVE was higher than the correlation between any two latent constructs (Fornell and Larcker, 1981), which verified the discriminant validity.

Table 3. Fornell-Larcker Criterion

	1	2	3	4	5	6
A. Customer engagement	0.847					
2. Emotional values	0.628	0.893				
3. Functional values	0.618	0.743	0.928			
4. Information	0.598	0.703	0.716	0.895		
5. Journalist	0.575	0.649	0.621	0.791	0.917	
6. Media trust	0.674	0.765	0.717	0.706	0.635	0.938

Notes: Fornell-Larcker Criterion: Diagonal elements in bold are the square root of AVE, which is the shared variance within a construct. Off-diagonal elements are the correlations between constructs. Thus, to have discriminant validity, diagonal values should be more significant than off-diagonal values.

The Heterotrait-Monotrait ratios of correlations were also all below the cutoff criterion of 0.90 (Henseler et al., 2016), which further confirmed the discriminant validity (see Table 4). Moreover, all the items had the highest factor loadings in the construct that they were measuring. Thus, the reliability and validity of the models were found acceptable.

Table 4. Heterotrait–monotrait ratio (HTMT)

	1	2	3	4	5	6
A. Customer engagement						
2. Emotional values	0.675					
3. Functional values	0.654	0.782				
4. Information	0.638	0.743	0.751			
5. Journalist	0.612	0.686	0.649	0.832		
6. Media trust	0.717	0.801	0.743	0.735	0.661	

HTMT Criterion: Off-diagonal elements are the shared variance between the constructs. Discriminant validity, which measures the distinctiveness of a construct, is achieved if elements are lower than the cutoff score of 0.90. * p-value < 0.01

C. Structural model

The structural model in Figure 1 shows that R² values for customer engagement are 0.47 and media trust is 0.68, above 0.4, indicating predictive accuracy (Henseler et al., 2009). The Stone-Geisser criterion (Q²) values were above zero, indicating the models' predictive relevance (Henseler et al., 2009). The results confirmed that all the hypothesized relationships were supported, except H5 and H8 (see Table 5). The findings show that emotions had a significant positive direct effect on customer engagement and media trust ($\beta = 0.27, p < 0.01$; $\beta = 0.35, p < 0.01$). The results supported H1 and H2. The results also showed that functional value had a significant positive direct effect on customer engagement and media trust ($\beta = 0.25, p < 0.01$; $\beta = 0.17, p < 0.01$), confirming H3 and H4. However, the results demonstrated that information news had no significant relationship with customer engagement, but had significant positive direct effect on media trust ($\beta = 0.10, p > 0.13$; $\beta = 0.18, p < 0.02$). Thus, H5 was rejected, and H6 was supported. Significant positive direct effects were found between journalist and customer engagement ($\beta = 0.17, p < 0.02$) and between customer engagement and media trust; $\beta = 0.22, p < 0.01$, confirming H7 and H9. Journalists had no relationship with media trust ($\beta = 0.03, p > 0.31$); thus, H8 was rejected.

Table 5. Hypothesis testing

Hypotheses	Path	Loading	Std Dev	T-value	P-value	Result
H1	Emotions -> Customer Engagement	0.27	0.10	2.66	0.00	Supported
H2	Emotions -> Media Trust	0.35	0.09	3.93	0.00	Supported
H3	Function -> Customer Engagement	0.24	0.09	2.80	0.00	Supported
H4	Function -> Media Trust	0.17	0.08	2.21	0.01	Supported
H5	Information -> Customer Engagement	0.10	0.09	1.12	0.13	Rejected
H6	Information -> Media Trust	0.18	0.09	2.05	0.02	Supported
H7	Journalist -> Customer Engagement	0.17	0.08	2.10	0.02	Supported
H8	Journalist -> Media Trust	0.03	0.07	0.50	0.31	Rejected
H9	Customer Engagement -> Media Trust	0.22	0.06	3.72	0.00	Supported

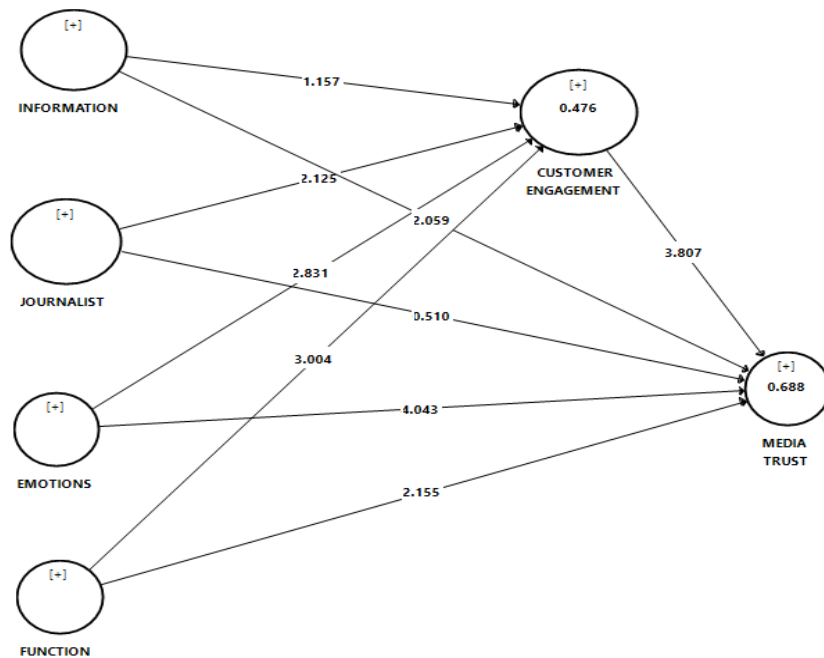


Figure 1: Structural Model

5. Discussion and Implications

This study elucidated the drivers influencing customer engagement and media trust of Malaysian mainstream media. The findings confirm that emotional value is vital in explaining media trust. The findings were consistent Witschge and Nygren (2009), Deuze (2016), and Peters (2011) who found that news content, emotional value, and media organization. This study also supported findings by William (2012) who found that customer engagement influences media trust.

Theoretically, this study has tested and validated the theory of audience engagement with news. Findings confirmed that information, emotional, functional values, have a significant positive relationship with media trust. In addition, the study confirmed that emotional values, functional values and journalist factors have positively affect customer engagement. Finally, customer/audience engagement is critical in building mainstream news media.

Managerially, findings of this study is vital to mainstream media companies and organizations or managers as it helps them understand factors influencing consumer engagement and improving media trust. The management can strategize in enhancing customer engagement and media trust by delivering reliable news information, designing consumer emotional values, functional values of news, journalist criteria. For example in delivering news information, media companies should provide adequate details, accurate and free from bias and non-partisan to increase audience perception towards accuracy. Other than that, information news should be provided with evidence of sources to boost audience confidence in journalists. With regards to audience emotional values, companies should ensure to provide and communicate clear messages and language consistently to different target audiences clearly to boost audience confidence towards the media companies. While journalists play a significant role as ambassadors to media companies, therefore, building trust becomes their top priority in providing news reporting with authenticity, transparency, consistency, diversity and positivity without any biases towards a particular political party.

This study faced several limitations. First, there are only four variables as drivers of mainstream media trust and customer engagement. Future research should examine other drivers, such as content, organization, selectivity of a topic, facts, and accuracy of news. Second, this study only investigated customer engagement as an outcome of media trust. In future research, a researcher should extend the conceptual framework by adding brand loyalty, brand commitment and corporate reputation as outcomes of media trust. By extending brand loyalty and brand loyalty in the current conceptual framework, it will help researchers to better understand ways in enhancing the corporate reputation of particular mainstream media organizations.

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