

From Drive-Thru to Trust: The Impact of CSR and Social Media Advertising on Customer Retention in the QSR Sector

Kun Peng Xia¹, Yong Yu Lee¹, Ann Xuan Khoo^{1*} , Joanne Xing Yi Lim¹, Joey Wan Teng Low¹, Joey Rui Yu Then¹, Keerthana A/P Kalyselvan¹, Darshini J.², A. J. Ali¹, Daisy Mui Hung Kee¹ 

¹Universiti Sains Malaysia, Jalan Sg Dua, 11800 Minden, Pulau Pinang, Malaysia

²International School of Business and Research (ISBR) Business School, Bengaluru, Karnataka 560100, India

*Corresponding Email: khooannxuan@gmail.com

ARTICLE INFORMATION

Publication information

Research article

HOW TO CITE

Xia, K. P., Lee, Y. Y., Khoo, A. X., Lim, J. X. Y., Low, J. W. T., Then, J. R. Y., ..., & Kee, D. M. H. (2025). From drive-thru to trust: social media advertising effectiveness The impact of CSR and social media impact customer retention, with brand value advertising on customer retention in the alignment and customer-organization QSR sector. *International Journal of Tourism and Hospitality in Asia Pacific*, 8(2), 218–236.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.32535/ijthap.v8i2.4014>

Copyright© 2025 owned by Author(s).
Published by IJTHAP



This is an open-access article.

License:

Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike
(CC BY-NC-SA)

Received: 18 April 2025

Accepted: 19 May 2025

Published: 20 June 2025

ABSTRACT

As corporate social responsibility (CSR) and digital engagement become increasingly influential in shaping consumer behavior, brands must align with customer values while fostering meaningful connections. This study investigates how McDonald's perceived CSR climate and social media advertising effectiveness impact customer retention, with brand value alignment and customer-organization relationships as mediating variables. Data were collected from 121 McDonald's customers in Malaysia and analyzed using path analysis in R. The results indicate that CSR climate ($\beta = -0.234$, $p > 0.05$) and social media advertising effectiveness ($\beta = -0.050$, $p > 0.05$) do not directly influence retention. Instead, both factors positively affect brand value alignment ($\beta = 0.536$ and $\beta = 0.419$, respectively; $p < 0.001$), which subsequently enhances customer-organization relationships ($\beta = 0.219$, $p < 0.01$) and, in turn, strongly drives customer retention ($\beta = 0.828$, $p < 0.001$). The model explains 59% to 67% of the variance in key outcomes ($R^2 = 0.590-0.672$). This study offers a unified framework linking CSR and digital marketing to retention outcomes and provides practical insights for fast-food brands aiming to build loyalty through value-based and relational strategies in emerging markets.

Keywords: Brand Value Alignment; Corporate Social Responsibility; Customer-Organization Relationships; Customer Retention; Social Media Marketing

INTRODUCTION

In an era marked by heightened consumer awareness and accelerated digital transformation, organizations are compelled to adopt multifaceted strategies to sustain meaningful customer relationships. Among these strategies, corporate social responsibility (CSR) and social media marketing have gained significant prominence as organizations seek to align their operational practices with evolving societal expectations and consumer preferences. The quick-service restaurant (QSR) industry, in particular, has become a focal point for these developments, as it operates at the intersection of mass consumer interaction, ethical consumption, and digital engagement. While extensive literature has addressed CSR and social media effectiveness independently (e.g., [Sung & Lee, 2023](#); [Sung et al., 2022](#)), the synergistic effects of these organizational initiatives on customer behavior, specifically customer retention, remain underexplored. This gap is especially pronounced in emerging markets, where socio-cultural dynamics and digital behaviors diverge markedly from Western contexts.

The Malaysian QSR sector offers a compelling setting for investigating these dynamics. Malaysia's unique multicultural composition and expanding middle class have cultivated a diverse consumer landscape in which traditional values coexist with modern consumption habits ([Zakaria et al., 2021](#)). Furthermore, the country's exceptionally high social media penetration rate—among the highest in Southeast Asia ([Muniasamy et al., 2018](#))—positions it as an ideal environment to examine the influence of digital marketing initiatives on consumer engagement. Simultaneously, increasing consumer expectations regarding corporate ethics and environmental responsibility have elevated the importance of CSR in shaping brand perceptions and loyalty. This socio-economic context provides fertile ground for exploring how consumer perceptions of CSR and digital communication strategies intersect to shape long-term customer relationships in an emerging economy.

This study aims to develop and empirically test a comprehensive model of customer retention by examining how CSR perceptions and social media advertising effectiveness influence retention through the mediating roles of brand value alignment and customer–organization relationships. The objective is to provide a more integrated understanding of the mechanisms through which contemporary marketing initiatives affect long-term customer behavior, particularly in emerging markets. This research addresses a critical gap in the literature, where CSR and digital marketing efforts are often examined in isolation, resulting in a fragmented understanding of their effects on customer outcomes.

The study makes several key theoretical contributions. First, it proposes and validates a dual-pathway model that integrates CSR climate and social media advertising effectiveness as antecedents of customer retention, thereby advancing existing frameworks by offering a more holistic perspective. Second, it introduces perceived brand value alignment as a central mediating construct—an area that has been underexplored despite its pivotal role in linking organizational actions to customer responses. Third, the research contributes to relationship marketing literature by empirically confirming the role of customer–organization relationships as a critical mediator, reinforcing the importance of emotional and relational bonds in driving customer retention.

From a practical standpoint, the findings challenge the conventional assumption that CSR and social media marketing directly influence retention. Instead, the results demonstrate that these influences are indirect, operating through deeper psychological mechanisms—namely, value alignment and relational quality. This insight underscores

the need for managers to focus not merely on promotional or ethical initiatives in isolation, but on fostering authentic connections and shared values with their customer base.

Furthermore, the study responds to recent scholarly calls for research situated in non-Western contexts (Connell et al., 2022). Conducted in Malaysia, a culturally rich and collectivist society, the study highlights the moderating role of cultural context in shaping the effectiveness of global marketing strategies. This contextual focus enhances the generalizability of relationship marketing theory and provides culturally relevant insights for organizations operating in emerging markets, where consumer behavior is often shaped by local norms and communal values.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study synthesizes multiple theoretical perspectives to construct a comprehensive framework for understanding customer retention in the context of modern business practices. Specifically, it draws upon stakeholder theory (Jamali, 2008), relationship marketing theory (Ahmed et al., 2019), and social identity theory (Ashforth & Mael, 1989) to explain the interplay between organizational initiatives and customer behavior. Stakeholder theory offers a foundational lens through which to examine how organizations manage their relationships with diverse stakeholder groups, including customers, by addressing their expectations and values. Relationship marketing theory extends this perspective by elucidating the mechanisms through which trust, commitment, and satisfaction are cultivated over time, ultimately fostering long-term relational bonds. Complementing these views, social identity theory provides insights into how customers' identification with an organization's values and social purpose influences their attitudes, engagement, and loyalty. Collectively, these theories offer a multidimensional understanding of how value alignment and relationship quality contribute to sustained customer retention.

Cultural Context and Market Considerations

The theoretical framework of this study is situated within the distinct cultural and market context of Malaysia, which provides unique boundary conditions for examining the relationships between our focal constructs. Malaysia's cultural characteristics, particularly its high collectivism and power distance (Tehseen et al., 2021), significantly influence how customers interpret and respond to organizational initiatives. In collectivist societies, organizational activities are evaluated not merely through individual utility but through their broader social implications (Hoxha & Ramadani, 2023). This cultural orientation suggests that CSR initiatives may carry heightened significance in shaping customer perceptions and relationships.

The Malaysian QSR industry presents distinctive characteristics that make it particularly suitable for examining our theoretical propositions. First, the industry operates at the intersection of global standardization and local adaptation, creating tension between international brand values and local cultural expectations (Kraak et al., 2019). Second, Malaysia's rapidly evolving consumer landscape, characterized by increasing affluence and environmental consciousness, has intensified stakeholder expectations regarding CSR (Yeo et al., 2018). Third, the country's high social media penetration rate—exceeding 80% of the population—has transformed how brands engage with customers, making social media effectiveness a critical strategic consideration (Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, 2023).

Moreover, the QSR sector in Malaysia faces unique challenges in managing customer relationships due to the intersection of traditional values and modern consumption patterns. The industry must navigate complex stakeholder expectations regarding halal compliance, environmental sustainability, and community engagement, while simultaneously managing digital transformation initiatives (Rahman & Ahmad, 2024). These contextual factors necessitate a nuanced examination of how theoretical relationships manifest in this specific setting. In particular, customer loyalty and satisfaction are influenced not only by service efficiency and technological integration but also by cultural sensitivity and ethical business practices. As digital platforms increasingly mediate customer interactions, restaurants are compelled to adopt strategic communication methods that align with local norms and preferences. Furthermore, competition within the sector continues to intensify, requiring businesses to differentiate themselves through personalized engagement, value-driven marketing, and consistent service delivery. These dynamic conditions present both challenges and opportunities for the industry, warranting empirical investigation into how fast-food brands can effectively foster sustainable customer relationships in Malaysia's evolving socio-economic landscape (Sung & Lee, 2023).

Hypotheses Development

Direct and Indirect Effects of CSR

CSR has become a cornerstone of strategic management in contemporary business environments, reflecting a growing societal emphasis on ethical conduct, sustainability, and social accountability. As stakeholder expectations continue to rise, organizations are increasingly expected to go beyond profit maximization and demonstrate their commitment to broader societal and environmental concerns (Jian et al., 2024). In this context, perceived CSR climate—defined as stakeholders' collective perception of an organization's dedication to social and environmental responsibilities—has emerged as a critical determinant of stakeholder attitudes and behaviors.

This perception holds particular relevance in the QSR industry, where issues such as ethical sourcing, waste reduction, employee welfare, and community engagement are increasingly shaping consumer preferences and expectations. Customers today are more inclined to support brands that reflect their values, especially in sectors with visible societal footprints. As such, CSR is not merely an ethical imperative but a strategic asset capable of influencing customer decision-making and loyalty.

Drawing from relationship marketing theory, CSR initiatives can affect customer behavior by enhancing the emotional and relational bonds that customers form with brands. When customers perceive that a brand is genuinely committed to CSR, they are more likely to trust the organization, perceive it as credible, and develop a sense of relational commitment (Aljarah et al., 2020; Fatma & Khan, 2023). These perceptions foster a deeper emotional attachment, which serves as a foundation for long-term customer–organization relationships.

Additionally, CSR contributes to value alignment—a psychological process through which customers perceive a congruence between their personal values and those of the brand. Research indicates that strong CSR perceptions positively influence this alignment, reinforcing a customer's belief that the organization shares and supports their ethical and social ideals (Jensen et al., 2018). This congruence enhances emotional engagement and strengthens loyalty by creating a shared moral and ideological space between the brand and its customers.

Complementing this perspective, social identity theory suggests that individuals seek affiliation with entities, such as brands, that reflect and validate their personal and social identities. Organizations that engage in socially responsible practices can become symbols of the values that customers aspire to embody. As a result, customers are more likely to maintain relationships with brands whose CSR activities resonate with their self-concept and social identity, thereby contributing to customer retention through identity-based loyalty mechanisms.

Taken together, these theoretical insights and empirical findings suggest that CSR exerts its influence on customer retention not solely through direct outcomes but also by shaping the psychological and relational infrastructure that underpins customer–brand interactions. Based on this integrated theoretical framework, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- H1: Customers' perceived CSR climate of the brand positively affects customer retention.
- H2: Customers' perceived CSR climate of the brand positively affects their perceived brand value alignment.
- H3: Customers' perceived CSR climate of the brand positively affects the customer–organization relationship:

Social Media Advertising and Customer Engagement

The rapid proliferation of social media platforms has significantly reshaped the landscape of marketing communications and customer engagement. As digital spaces increasingly serve as primary points of interaction between organizations and consumers, social media advertising effectiveness has emerged as a key construct in understanding customer perceptions. It refers to customers' evaluations of how effectively an organization's social media efforts meet their informational, emotional, and relational needs (Hussain et al., 2022; Lok et al., 2024). This effectiveness is not merely about visibility or promotional frequency, but rather about how well the content resonates with audience expectations and contributes to meaningful brand experiences.

From the lens of relationship marketing theory, social media functions as a vital tool for building and nurturing long-term customer relationships. Effective social media communication—characterized by responsiveness, relevance, and relational value—can enhance trust, foster engagement, and build emotional connections between customers and organizations (Ibrahim & Aljarah, 2021). Through tailored content and interactive features, brands can personalize communication, offer immediate support, and reinforce relational bonds that extend beyond transactional interactions.

Simultaneously, social identity theory offers an additional layer of explanation for how social media advertising contributes to customer loyalty. As consumers interact with brand content that reflects their personal or social values, their identification with the brand is reinforced. This identification strengthens when customers perceive that the brand represents values and ideals consistent with their self-concept. Such value congruence not only deepens emotional attachment but also encourages customers to form a sense of belonging or affiliation with the brand community. This dynamic is especially salient in the QSR industry, where rapid content dissemination, lifestyle positioning, and cultural narratives are commonly integrated into social media strategies to foster community and repeat engagement.

Moreover, effective social media advertising creates multiple touchpoints for sustained interaction, contributing to the development of robust customer–organization

relationships (Ibrahim et al., 2024; Sabeh et al., 2024). By enabling ongoing conversations, customer feedback loops, and user-generated content, organizations can position themselves as responsive and human-centric. This relational richness, in turn, enhances perceived relational quality, leading to stronger emotional commitment and ultimately, higher levels of customer retention. Given these theoretical and empirical insights, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- H4: Customers' perceived social media advertising effectiveness positively affects customer retention.
- H5: Customers' perceived social media advertising effectiveness positively affects their perceived brand value alignment.
- H6: Customers' perceived social media advertising effectiveness positively affects the customer–organization relationship.

The Mediating Role of Value Alignment and Relationships

The concept of value alignment refers to the degree of congruence between customers' personal values and their perceptions of an organization's core values and practices (Voorn et al., 2020). This alignment plays a crucial role in shaping how customers evaluate and engage with brands. According to social identity theory, individuals are more inclined to develop and maintain relationships with organizations whose values resonate with their own, as such alignment reinforces their self-concept and fosters a sense of belonging. When customers perceive that an organization reflects their values, they are more likely to view the brand as an extension of their identity, leading to stronger emotional connections and enduring loyalty (Cambra-Fierro et al., 2018).

Value alignment not only deepens emotional affiliation but also acts as a psychological bridge that supports the formation of customer–organization relationships. These relationships are a central focus of relationship marketing theory, which posits that long-term engagement is cultivated through trust, mutual commitment, and satisfaction. These relational dimensions serve as critical mediating mechanisms that translate marketing activities and perceived value congruence into favorable customer behaviors (Sayil et al., 2018). When such relationships are established, they help create psychological switching barriers, making customers less likely to consider alternatives, even in highly competitive markets, thereby strengthening retention (Teoh et al., 2024).

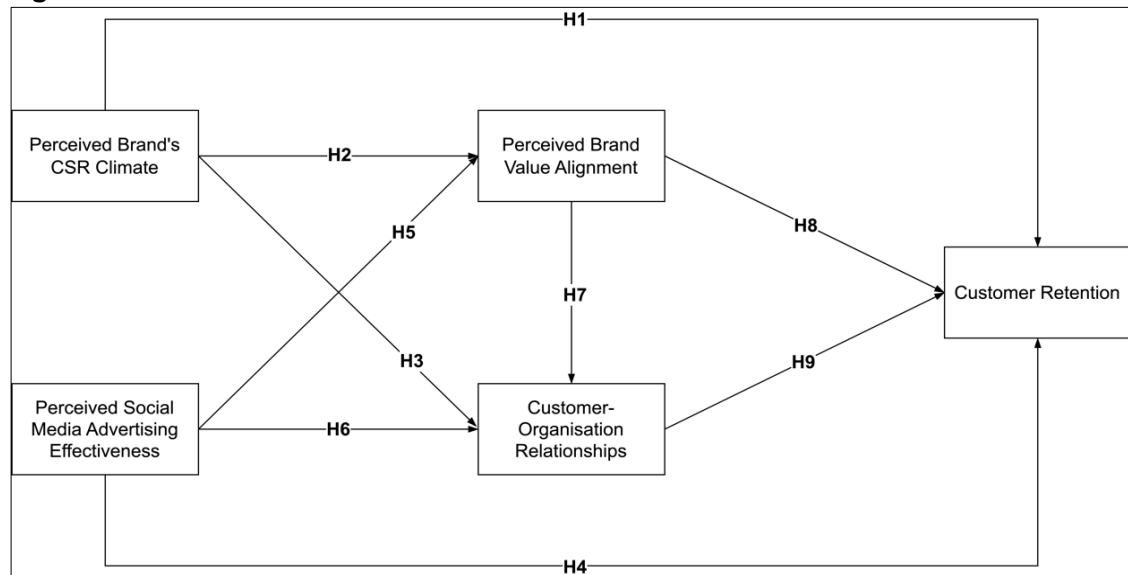
The synthesis of these two theoretical perspectives—social identity theory and relationship marketing theory—offers a robust framework for understanding how organizational values and relational quality jointly influence customer retention. Perceived value alignment initiates the customer's emotional and cognitive attachment to the brand, while the strength of the ongoing relationship solidifies this attachment into repeat behavior and loyalty. Given the centrality of these mechanisms, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- H7: Customers' perceived brand value alignment has a positive effect on customer–organization relationships.
- H8: Customers' perceived brand value alignment has a positive effect on customer retention.
- H9: Customer–organization relationships have a positive effect on customer retention.

Conceptual Framework

An overview of the study's framework is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Theoretical Framework



RESEARCH METHOD

Data for this study were collected through a structured, self-administered survey distributed to customers of McDonald's restaurants across various locations in Malaysia. A total of 121 valid responses were obtained, representing the final sample for analysis. Respondents were selected based on their recent experience with the brand, ensuring relevance and reliability in their feedback.

To measure customers' perceptions of the brand's CSR climate, a three-item scale adapted from [Shen and Zhang \(2019\)](#) was employed. An example item from this scale is: "McDonald's is very concerned with customers' benefits." The construct aimed to capture consumers' assessment of the brand's commitment to social responsibility and ethical practices.

Perceived social media advertising effectiveness was measured using a five-item scale developed by [Hanaysha \(2018\)](#), designed to assess the extent to which McDonald's social media advertisements fulfill customers' informational and engagement needs. A sample item includes: "The social media advertisements for McDonald's are very attractive."

To evaluate brand value alignment, a three-item scale by [Leijerholt et al. \(2022\)](#) was utilized. This construct reflects the degree of congruence between customers' personal values and those perceived to be represented by the brand. A representative item is: "I am proud of the values of McDonald's, which are expressed on the internet."

The customer–organization relationship was assessed using the scale developed by [Jin et al. \(2023\)](#), which includes items measuring trust, satisfaction, and perceived organizational competence. An example question is: "McDonald's has the ability to accomplish what it says it will do."

Lastly, customer retention was measured with a four-item scale from [Hanaysha \(2018\)](#), capturing customers' future behavioral intentions and loyalty toward the brand. A sample item is: "In the future, I will continue to visit McDonald's."

RESULTS

Respondents' Demographic Profiles

Table 1. Respondents' Profile Summary (N=121)

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Female	85	70.25
Male	36	29.75
Location		
Johor	25	20.66
Kedah	3	2.48
Kelantan	1	0.83
Melaka	32	26.45
Negeri Sembilan	2	1.65
Pahang	3	2.48
Perak	10	8.26
Perlis	4	3.31
Pulau Pinang	21	17.36
Sabah	1	0.83
Sarawak	15	12.40
Selangor	2	1.65
Oversea	2	1.65
Employment Status		
Full-time	25	20.66
Part-time	4	3.31
Student	92	76.03
Educational Level		
PT3	2	1.65
SPM	25	20.66
High School Diploma or Equivalent	21	17.36
Bachelor's Degree	71	58.68
PhD / Doctorate Degree	2	1.65
Monthly Income		
B40 (RM5,249 or below)	99	81.82
M40 (Between RM5,250 to RM11,819)	12	9.92
T20 (RM11,820 or above)	10	8.26

Note. N = 121. Age is a continuous variable and is therefore not presented in this table. The mean age is 22.331 years with a standard deviation of 8.223 years.

Table 1 shows the demographic profile of the respondents. Most of the respondents are female, accounting for 70.25% (N=85), while 29.75% (N=36) are male. In terms of location, the highest number of respondents are from Melaka (26.45%, N=32), followed by Johor (20.66%, N=25), Pulau Pinang (17.36%, N=21), and Sarawak (12.40%, N=15). Other locations include Perak (8.26%, N=10), Perlis (3.31%, N=4), Kedah and Pahang (each 2.48%, N=3), Negeri Sembilan, Selangor, and Oversea (each 1.65%, N=2), while Kelantan and Sabah have the lowest representation with 0.83% (N=1) each. Regarding employment status, the majority are students (76.03%, N=92), followed by full-time employees (20.66%, N=25) and part-time workers (3.31%, N=4). In terms of educational level, most respondents hold a Bachelor's Degree (58.68%, N=71), followed by SPM (20.66%, N=25), High School Diploma or equivalent (17.36%, N=21), and a small portion with PT3 and PhD/Doctorate degrees (1.65%, N=2) respectively. For monthly income, the majority fall into the B40 category (RM5,249 or below) with 81.82% (N=99), followed

by M40 (RM5,250 to RM11,819) at 9.92% (N=12), and T20 (RM11,820 or above) at 8.26% (N=10).

Preliminary Analysis

Table 2. Mean, Standard Deviation, and Zero-order Correlation Matrix

Variables		1	2	3	4	5
1	CSRC	0.839				
2	SMAE	0.604***	0.865			
3	BVA	0.718****	0.652***	0.865		
4	COR	0.723***	0.657***	0.698***	0.803	
5	CR	0.533***	0.534***	0.676***	0.787***	0.891
Means		3.950	4.140	3.887	4.076	4.074
Standard Deviation		0.803	0.692	0.844	0.738	0.840

Note. N = 121. Abbreviation: CSRC = Brand's Corporate Social Responsibility Climate, SMAE = Social Media Advertising Effectiveness, BVA = Brand Value Alignment, COR = Customer-Organization Relationships, CR = Customer Retention. *** p < 0.001.

Prior to hypothesis testing, preliminary analyses were conducted to assess the psychometric properties of our measures and examine relationships among study variables. The results were summarized in Table 2. Reliability analyses revealed strong internal consistency for all measures, with Cronbach's Alpha coefficients ranging from 0.803 to 0.891, well above the conventional threshold of 0.70. The examination of zero-order correlations revealed significant positive associations among all study variables ($p < 0.001$), with correlation coefficients ranging from moderate to strong (0.533 to 0.787). The strongest correlation was observed between customer-organization relationships and customer retention ($r = 0.787$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting a robust association between these constructs. Brand's CSR climate showed substantial correlations with both brand value alignment ($r = 0.718$, $p < 0.001$) and customer-organization relationships ($r = 0.723$, $p < 0.001$), indicating potential mediation pathways. The descriptive statistics indicated that respondents generally held positive perceptions across all constructs, with means ranging from 3.887 to 4.140 on a five-point scale. Social media advertising effectiveness received the highest mean rating ($M = 4.140$, $SD = 0.692$), while brand value alignment showed the lowest mean score ($M = 3.887$, $SD = 0.844$). The standard deviations suggested reasonable variability in responses, supporting the appropriateness of our data for subsequent analyses.

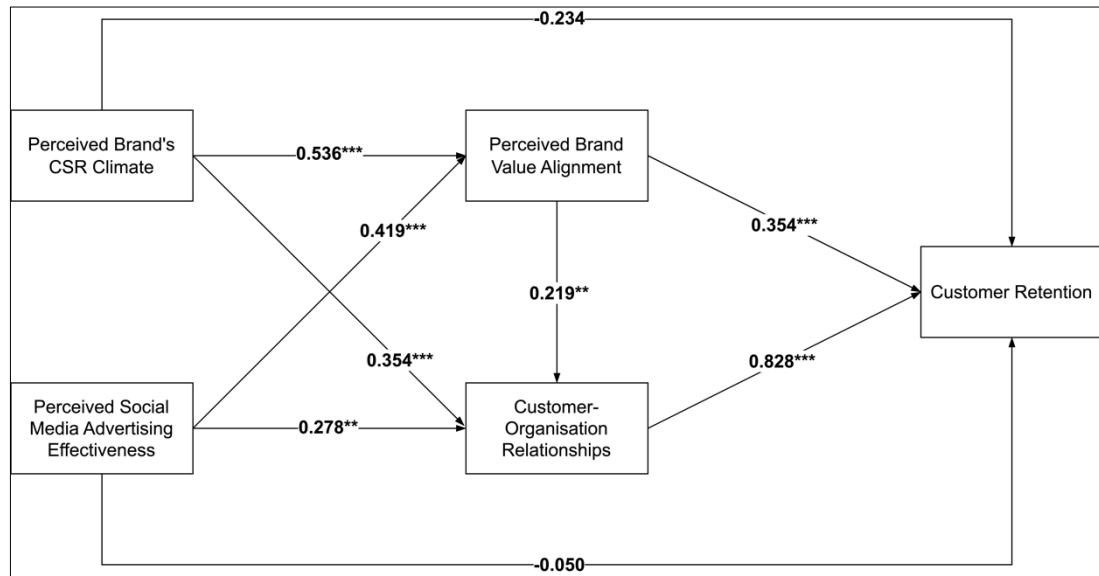
Hypothesis Testing

Table 3. Path Analysis Results

Variables		BVA	COR	CR
1	CSRC	0.536***	0.354***	-0.234
2	SMAE	0.419***	0.278**	-0.050
3	BVA		0.219**	0.354***
4	COR			0.828***
R ²		0.590	0.625	0.672
F Value		85.043	64.995	59.431
Durbin-Watson Statistic		2.015	2.030	2.145

Notes. N = 121. Abbreviation: CSRC = Brand's Corporate Social Responsibility Climate, SMAE = Social Media Advertising Effectiveness, BVA = Brand Value Alignment, COR = Customer-Organization Relationships, CR = Customer Retention. ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001.

Figure 2. Tested Theoretical Framework with Path Coefficients



To test the proposed hypotheses, path analysis was conducted using R. The empirical results of the analysis are presented in Table 3, and the tested theoretical framework is illustrated in Figure 2. The analysis revealed several significant pathways through which customer retention is influenced by the focal constructs. The model demonstrated strong explanatory power, with R^2 values ranging from 0.590 to 0.672, indicating that a substantial proportion of variance in customer retention was accounted for by the variables under investigation.

The path coefficients showed significant positive relationships between both antecedent variables—CSR climate and social media advertising effectiveness—and brand value alignment. Specifically, CSR climate exhibited a strong positive effect on brand value alignment ($\beta = 0.536$, $p < 0.001$), while social media advertising effectiveness also had a significant influence ($\beta = 0.419$, $p < 0.001$). These findings provide robust empirical support for H2 and H5, affirming the critical roles that CSR initiatives and digital advertising strategies play in enhancing perceived value congruence between organizations and consumers.

In addition, both antecedent variables demonstrated significant effects on the customer–organization relationship. CSR climate yielded a substantial positive effect ($\beta = 0.354$, $p < 0.001$), and social media advertising effectiveness contributed a moderately strong impact ($\beta = 0.278$, $p < 0.01$), thus supporting H3 and H6. These results highlight the capacity of organizational initiatives to foster meaningful relational bonds, which are foundational to sustained engagement and loyalty.

Further analysis of mediating pathways revealed that brand value alignment had a significant positive effect on both customer–organization relationships ($\beta = 0.219$, $p < 0.01$) and customer retention ($\beta = 0.354$, $p < 0.001$), providing empirical support for H7 and H8. These mediating effects suggest that alignment between brand and consumer values plays an important role in strengthening customer loyalty through emotional connection and shared identity. Notably, the strongest effect in the model was observed in the path from customer–organization relationships to customer retention ($\beta = 0.828$, $p < 0.001$), offering compelling support for H9 and reinforcing the centrality of relationship quality in influencing long-term retention outcomes.

However, the direct effects of CSR climate and social media advertising effectiveness on customer retention were not statistically significant. Specifically, CSR climate exhibited a non-significant negative coefficient ($\beta = -0.234$, $p > 0.05$), and social media advertising effectiveness demonstrated a similarly negligible direct effect ($\beta = -0.050$, $p > 0.05$). These results indicate that H1 and H4 were not supported, suggesting that the influence of CSR and social media efforts on retention is indirect, operating through the mediators of value alignment and relational quality rather than through direct paths.

In terms of model robustness, statistical diagnostics confirmed the validity of the findings. The Durbin–Watson statistics, ranging from 2.015 to 2.145, indicated independence of residuals, ruling out concerns of autocorrelation. Moreover, the high F-values associated with the model (ranging from 59.431 to 85.043, all $p < 0.001$) verified the overall model specification and significance. Collectively, the model's fit indices, significant path coefficients, and diagnostic tests provide comprehensive support for the theorized mechanisms, effectively illustrating how organizational actions in CSR and advertising translate into customer retention through value alignment and relationship development.

DISCUSSION

This study contributes significantly to the theoretical understanding of customer retention mechanisms and offers actionable insights for practitioners, particularly within emerging markets. The findings reveal intricate, multi-pathway processes through which organizations can foster sustainable customer relationships via value alignment and relational strategies.

Theoretical Implications

The Central Role of Value Alignment in Customer Retention

The results strongly highlight the mediating role of perceived brand value alignment in translating organizational initiatives into customer outcomes. The significant positive effects of both CSR climate ($\beta = 0.536$, $p < 0.001$) and social media advertising effectiveness ($\beta = 0.419$, $p < 0.001$) on brand value alignment support this mechanism and validate H2 and H5. These findings extend social identity theory by illustrating how CSR initiatives and digital marketing foster psychological connections through shared values, rather than merely transactional engagement.

This aligns with and builds upon prior work that emphasized direct effects of CSR (Ahmad et al., 2021; Saldivar & Zolfagharian, 2021), showing instead that value congruence plays a pivotal mediating role. Moreover, the ability of effective social media campaigns to communicate and reinforce these shared values underscores their broader function beyond information dissemination, helping to construct emotional and cognitive resonance between customers and brands.

Enhancement Effects through Customer–Organization Relationships

Beyond value alignment, the findings demonstrate that customer–organization relationships serve as a key mechanism linking organizational initiatives to customer loyalty. CSR climate ($\beta = 0.354$, $p < 0.001$) and social media advertising effectiveness ($\beta = 0.278$, $p < 0.01$) both positively influence these relationships, supporting H3 and H6. Additionally, brand value alignment significantly enhances customer–organization relationships ($\beta = 0.219$, $p < 0.01$), affirming H7 and revealing a sequential mediation process: from initiative, to alignment, to relationship, and ultimately to retention.

Moreover, brand value alignment was also found to directly impact customer retention ($\beta = 0.354$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H8. This reinforces the idea that when customers

perceive a strong alignment between their own values and those of the brand, they are more likely to remain loyal, even independent of relationship quality. The dual role of value alignment—as a driver of both relationship quality and direct retention—highlights its pivotal importance in contemporary retention strategies.

The most substantial path in the model—from customer–organization relationship to customer retention ($\beta = 0.828$, $p < 0.001$)—offers compelling support for H9. This reinforces theoretical propositions from relationship marketing theory, which emphasize that strong interpersonal bonds and emotional attachment serve as psychological barriers to customer switching (Kankam, 2020). The model suggests that such relationships are reinforced both directly by organizational behavior and indirectly through shared values, confirming the complementary nature of multiple marketing mechanisms.

Clarifying the Role of Direct vs. Indirect Pathways

Interestingly, the study found no significant direct effects of CSR climate ($\beta = -0.234$, $p > 0.05$) or social media advertising effectiveness ($\beta = -0.050$, $p > 0.05$) on customer retention, leading to the rejection of H1 and H4. This finding emphasizes the importance of indirect pathways and suggests that customer retention is best achieved through carefully cultivated mediating mechanisms. The results highlight that simply investing in CSR or digital campaigns is insufficient—what matters is how these initiatives translate into perceived alignment and relationship quality. This supports a more nuanced view of customer retention, where value-based and relational constructs act as critical conduits between organizational action and consumer behavior.

This research also offers important contextual insights by validating the proposed model within an emerging market context, specifically Malaysia. The strong, statistically significant relationships observed—particularly those involving value alignment and customer–organization relationships—highlight the relevance of culturally attuned marketing strategies in collectivist societies. In such environments, where interpersonal relationships, social identity, and value congruence are emphasized, strategies focused on relationship building may yield particularly high returns.

The study suggests that frameworks developed in Western markets, such as social identity theory and relationship marketing theory, can be successfully applied in emerging markets—provided they are adapted to local cultural and social dynamics. Incorporating cultural values, such as collectivism, trust, and social harmony, into CSR communication and brand messaging can make these efforts more resonant. Future research should explore cultural dimensions such as power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and long-term orientation (Connell et al., 2022), which may further refine these relationships and increase their generalizability across different emerging economies.

From a practical standpoint, organizations operating in emerging markets should not merely replicate Western retention strategies but instead develop integrated, culturally informed approaches. These should include the use of CSR to communicate authentic social commitment, the strategic use of digital platforms to build community and alignment, and deliberate relationship-building efforts tailored to local expectations and values.

Managerial Implications

Strategic Integration of CSR and Marketing Initiatives

The findings offer important practical guidance for managers seeking to enhance customer retention in emerging markets. The results suggest that managers should focus on developing integrated marketing strategies that simultaneously address value alignment and relationship building. Rather than treating CSR initiatives and social media marketing as separate functions, organizations should develop coordinated approaches that leverage both channels to build meaningful customer connections (Ahmad et al., 2021). This integration is especially crucial in culturally diverse markets, where consumers often assess brands not only by their products but also by their ethical and social commitments.

The strong mediating role of value alignment suggests that managers should pay particular attention to communicating organizational values effectively through both CSR initiatives and social media channels. This might involve developing more sophisticated messaging strategies that explicitly connect organizational activities to customer values, particularly in contexts where cultural values play a significant role in consumer decision-making. Furthermore, employing consistent brand narratives, incorporating local cultural elements, and engaging in two-way communication can foster trust and emotional engagement, leading to deeper customer loyalty and sustained competitive advantage in the long term.

Building Sustainable Customer Relationships

The significant role of customer-organization relationships in driving retention suggests that managers should invest in relationship-building initiatives that go beyond traditional marketing approaches. This might involve developing more personalized communication strategies, creating opportunities for meaningful customer engagement, and establishing feedback mechanisms that demonstrate organizational responsiveness to customer concerns (Teoh et al., 2024). In addition, fostering a sense of community through loyalty programs, exclusive content, or co-creation opportunities can further enhance emotional connections with the brand.

The findings also suggest that managers in emerging markets should pay particular attention to cultural factors when developing relationship-building strategies. The strong relationships observed in the Malaysian context suggest that relationship-building initiatives may be particularly effective in collectivist cultures where social bonds play a crucial role in consumer decision-making. Therefore, integrating culturally sensitive elements into customer engagement efforts, such as language preferences, communal values, and locally relevant narratives, can significantly enhance the effectiveness of relationship marketing and promote long-term customer loyalty.

Digital Marketing Strategy Optimization

The findings regarding social media advertising effectiveness provide valuable insights for digital marketing strategy. The results suggest that social media initiatives should focus not just on promotional content but on building value alignment and strengthening customer relationships (Aljarah et al., 2020). This might involve developing more sophisticated content strategies that emphasize shared values and community building rather than purely transactional messages. Organizations should consider leveraging user-generated content, storytelling, and interactive formats such as polls, live sessions, or comment-driven discussions to foster greater engagement and brand intimacy. These strategies can humanize the brand and create a sense of belonging among followers. Moreover, aligning content with socially and culturally relevant themes can increase resonance, particularly in emerging markets where consumers are highly responsive to

brand authenticity and alignment with local values. By creating digital experiences that prioritize meaningful engagement, brands can enhance trust and loyalty, ultimately contributing to sustained customer retention and long-term competitive advantage.

CONCLUSION

This study offers a comprehensive examination of customer retention mechanisms within the QSR sector in an emerging market context. Anchored in stakeholder theory, relationship marketing theory, and social identity theory, the research explores how customers' perceptions of a brand's CSR climate and social media advertising effectiveness influence retention outcomes. Rather than exerting direct effects, these factors operate through two critical mediators: perceived brand value alignment and customer–organization relationships.

The results reveal that customer retention is not solely a consequence of CSR or digital marketing activities in isolation. Instead, retention is achieved through the psychological congruence between customer and brand values, which in turn strengthens the relational bonds between the customer and the organization. These findings provide a more integrated theoretical model that advances current understanding of how customer loyalty is built in service-oriented, digitally mediated environments.

In highlighting the mediating roles of value alignment and relationship quality, this study extends prior literature by demonstrating that emotional and cognitive alignment are vital pathways for translating organizational initiatives into sustained behavioral outcomes. Moreover, the Malaysian QSR context underscores the influence of cultural factors, particularly collectivism and relational orientation, on the effectiveness of these pathways. In culturally diverse and community-centered markets, CSR initiatives and social media strategies are most effective when they resonate with shared social values and foster authentic emotional engagement.

From a practical standpoint, the findings offer actionable guidance for managers. Firms operating in similar emerging market environments should integrate CSR messaging with social media communication to present a cohesive and authentic brand narrative. In addition, relationship-building strategies that are culturally attuned, such as community involvement, personalized digital interaction, and trust-based messaging, can significantly enhance customer retention by reinforcing value congruence and emotional loyalty.

In sum, this research contributes both theoretically and practically by demonstrating the centrality of value alignment and customer–organization relationships in customer retention strategies. It advocates for a culturally sensitive and psychologically informed approach to marketing in emerging economies, where emotional resonance and social values often shape long-term consumer loyalty more than transactional appeals alone.

Future Research Suggestions

This study opens several promising avenues for future research on customer retention mechanisms, particularly in the context of emerging markets. Given the cross-sectional design employed, future studies could adopt longitudinal approaches to explore how brand–customer relationships evolve over time. Tracking changes in value alignment and relationship strength across various customer touchpoints would provide deeper insights into the durability and transformation of customer loyalty mechanisms.

Comparative cross-cultural studies could further illuminate how cultural values and norms shape the dynamics of CSR, social media marketing, and customer retention. Such research could assess whether collectivist or individualist orientations, for example, moderate the impact of brand value alignment and relationship quality on retention outcomes. Integrating cultural dimensions such as power distance, uncertainty avoidance, or long-term orientation may enrich current theoretical frameworks and inform more context-sensitive strategies.

Emerging technologies also present exciting opportunities for advancing this field. Future research might examine how AI-driven personalization, augmented reality experiences, or blockchain-enabled transparency initiatives influence value alignment and relational trust in digital marketing environments. These technologies could potentially serve as new mechanisms for fostering customer engagement, particularly among tech-savvy or younger demographic segments.

Further studies may also investigate the differential effects of specific CSR initiatives, such as environmental sustainability, community development, or ethical labor practices, on customer perceptions of value congruence. Additionally, exploring which types of social media content strategies (e.g., storytelling, user-generated content, influencer collaborations) are most effective in strengthening customer–organization relationships would contribute valuable insights to the literature.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors gratefully acknowledge the contributions of informants, colleagues, and all individuals who supported this research through their insights and engagement. Their involvement greatly enriched the quality and depth of this study.

DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS

The authors have declared no potential conflicts of interest concerning the study, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

REFERENCES

- Ahmad, N., Naveed, R. T., Scholz, M., Irfan, M., Usman, M., & Ahmad, I. (2021). CSR communication through social media: A litmus test for banking consumers' loyalty. *Sustainability*, 13(4), 2319. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13042319>
- Ahmed, K., Islam, S., Noor, N. A. M., Rahman, K. M., & Ahmed, F. (2019). Toward a theoretical framework of relationship marketing in the business context. *Management Today*, 31(2), 209–226. <https://doi.org/10.22598/mt/2019.31.2.209>
- Aljarah, A., Emeagwali, L., Ibrahim, B., & Ababneh, B. (2020). Does corporate social responsibility really increase customer relationship quality? A meta-analytic review. *Social Responsibility Journal*, 15(6), 28-49. <https://doi.org/10.1108/SRJ-08-2018-0205>
- Ashforth, B. E., & Mael, F. (1989). Social identity theory and the organization. *Academy of Management Review*, 14(1), 20-39.
- Cambra-Fierro, J., Melero-Polo, I., & Sese, F. (2018). Customer value co-creation over the relationship life cycle. *Journal of Service Theory and Practice*, 28(3), 336–355. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JSTP-01-2017-0009>
- Connell, C., Marciniak, R., & Carey, L. (2022). The effect of cross-cultural dimensions on the manifestation of customer engagement behaviors. *Journal of International Marketing*, 31(1), 32–48. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1069031X221130690>

- Fatma, M., & Khan, I. (2023). How do bank customers' perceptions of CSR influence marketing outcomes: Their trust, identification, and commitment?. *Sustainability*, 15(7), 6000. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su15076000>
- Hanaysha, J. R. (2018). Customer retention and the mediating role of perceived value in retail industry. *World Journal of Entrepreneurship, Management and Sustainable Development*, 14(1), 2–24. <https://doi.org/10.1108/WJEMSD-06-2017-0035>
- Hoxha, S., & Ramadani, R. (2023). The impact of collectivistic values and psychological needs on individual performance with conscientiousness acting as a moderator. *Sustainability*, 15(14), 10746. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su151410746>
- Hussain, A., Ting, D., & Mazhar, M. (2022). Driving consumer value co-creation and purchase intention by social media advertising value. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 800206. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.800206>
- Ibrahim, B., & Aljarah, A. (2021). The era of Instagram expansion: Matching social media marketing activities and brand loyalty through customer relationship quality. *Journal of Marketing Communications*, 29(1), 1–25. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527266.2021.1984279>
- Ibrahim, H., Gulati, C., Ee, C. G., Chok, C., Dong, S. S., Ananda, D. A. P., Kushwah, D., Choudhary, D., Jain, A., Maron, A. R., Musyaffa', S., & Kee, D. M. H. (2024). Analysis of the factors affecting customer preference towards McDonald's. *International Journal of Tourism & Hospitality in Asia Pacific*, 7(1), 113–125. <https://doi.org/10.32535/ijthap.v7i1.2907>
- Jamali, D. (2008). A stakeholder approach to corporate social responsibility: A fresh perspective into theory and practice. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 82(1), 213–231. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-007-9572-4>
- Jensen, B., Annan-Diab, F., & Seppala, N. (2018). Exploring perceptions of customer value: The role of corporate social responsibility initiatives in the European telecommunications industry. *European Business Review*, 30(3), 246–271. <https://doi.org/10.1108/EBR-09-2015-0104>
- Jian, O. Z., Baliyan, M., Gadi, P. D., Azman, S. B., Yusoff, S. B. M., Nadzri, S. N. B. M., ..., & Kee, D. M. H. (2024). The role of sustainability perception in consumer behavior: A study of packaging, ingredients, and brand awareness in the soft drinks industry. *International Journal of Accounting & Finance in Asia Pacific*, 7(2), 274–288. <https://doi.org/10.32535/ijafap.v7i2.3251>
- Jin, J., Mitson, R., Qin, Y. S., Vielledent, M., & Men, L. R. (2023). Enhancing young consumer's relational and behavioral outcomes: The impact of CEO activism authenticity and value alignment. *Public Relations Review*, 49(2), 102312. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2023.102312>
- Kankam, G. (2020). Customer retention at Republic Bank in Ghana: A marketing perspective. *Journal of Economics and Business*, 3(4), 1472-1478. <https://doi.org/10.31014/aior.1992.03.04.293>
- Kraak, V., Patiño, S. R.-G., Renukuntla, D., & Kim, E. (2019). Progress evaluation for transnational restaurant chains to reformulate products and standardize portions to meet healthy dietary guidelines and reduce obesity and non-communicable disease risks, 2000–2018: A scoping and systematic review to inform policy. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 16(15), 2732. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph16152732>
- Leijerholt, U., Biedenbach, G., & Hultén, P. (2022). Internal brand management in the public sector: The effects of internal communication, organizational practices, and PSM on employees' brand perceptions. *Public Management Review*, 24(3), 442–465. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2020.1834607>
- Lok, Y. H., Oh, Z. J., Chaudhary, M. K., Azhar, N. A. B. K., Aziz, N. Z. B., Azman, N. A. B., Hassan, N. H. B., Rohaani, M., Kumari, N., & Kee, D. M. H. (2024). A case study: How social media advertisement influences consumer behavior toward a

- fast-food restaurant. *International Journal of Accounting & Finance in Asia Pacific*, 7(2), 260–273. <https://doi.org/10.32535/ijafap.v7i2.3250>
- Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC). (2023, October 10). *Internet Users Survey 2022*. Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC). <https://www.mcmc.gov.my/en/resources/statistics/internet-users-survey>
- Muniasamy, M., Hashim, H., Lim, C., Junazli, N., Choo, S., & Low, K. (2018). Would you like a free mammogram? Effectiveness of utilizing WhatsApp as a social marketing tool in improving uptake for a free mammography service in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. *Journal of Global Oncology*, 4, 54s–54s. <https://doi.org/10.1200/JGO.18.29100>
- Rahman, M. M., & Ahmad, Z. (2024). Lifelong learning and technologic advancement in the halal industry: Navigating the digital age embracing technological advancements for lifelong learning. In *Embracing technological advancements for lifelong learning* (pp. 186–216). IGI Global. <https://doi.org/10.4018/979-8-3693-1410-4.ch009>
- Sabeh, H. N., Gulati, C., Aronkar, P., Lim, J. Y., Liew, Q. Y., Lim, L. H., ..., & Kee, D. M. H. (2024). An empirical study of the factors affecting university students' satisfaction towards Foodpanda mobile application. *Asia Pacific Journal of Management and Education*, 7(1), 97–112. <https://doi.org/10.32535/apjme.v7i1.2936>
- Saldivar, R., & Zolfagharian, M. (2021). An empirical examination of consumer CSR expectations: attribution, satisfaction, referral, and willingness to pay a premium. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 38(7–8), 800–829. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0267257X.2021.2000474>
- Sayil, E. M., Akyol, A., & Golbasi Simsek, G. (2018). An integrative approach to relationship marketing, customer value, and customer outcomes in the retail banking industry: A customer-based perspective from Turkey. *The Service Industries Journal*, 39(5–6), 420–461. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02642069.2018.1516755>
- Shen, J., & Zhang, H. R. (2019). Socially responsible human resource management and employee support for external CSR: Roles of organizational CSR climate and perceived CSR directed toward employees. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 156(3), 875–888. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-017-3544-0>
- Sung, K. S., Tao, C. W., & Slevitch, L. (2022). Do strategy and content matter? Restaurant firms' corporate social responsibility communication on Twitter: A social network theory perspective. *Tourism and Hospitality Research*, 23(2), 200–212. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14673584221103177>
- Sung, K., & Lee, S. (2023). Interactive CSR campaign and symbolic brand benefits: A moderated mediation model of brand trust and self-congruity in the restaurant industry. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 35(1), 216–237. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJCHM-08-2022-1027>
- Tehseen, S., Deng, P., Wu, B., & Gao, Y. (2021). Culture values and entrepreneurial innovativeness: A comparative study of Malaysian ethnic entrepreneurs. *Journal of Small Business Management*, 61(6), 2622–2655. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00472778.2021.1934848>
- Teoh, K. B., Lee, J. L. J., Volkha, R., Dahir, M. H. B. A., Zamri, M. S. A. B., Azian, N. H. B., ..., & Kee, D. M. H. (2024). Investigating the strategies employed by fast-food restaurant to establish sustainable customer relationships. *International Journal of Tourism & Hospitality in Asia Pacific*, 7(2), 203–216. <https://doi.org/10.32535/ijthap.v7i2.3252>
- Voorn, R. J. J., Van der Veen, G., Van Rompay, T. J. L., Hegner, S. M., & Pruyn, A. T. H. (2021). Human values as added value (s) in consumer brand congruence: A

- comparison with traits and functional requirements. *Journal of Brand Management*, 28(1), 48-59. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41262-020-00210-w>
- Yeo, A. C. M., Lee, S. X. M., & Carter, S. (2018). The influence of an organisation's adopted corporate social responsibility constructs on consumers' intended buying behaviour: A Malaysian perspective. *Social Responsibility Journal*, 14(3), 448-468. <https://doi.org/10.1108/SRJ-05-2016-0082>
- Zakaria, N., Wan-Ismael, W. N. A., & Abdul-Talib, A. N. (2021). Seriously, conspicuous consumption? The impact of culture, materialism and religiosity on Malaysian Generation Y consumers' purchasing of foreign brands. *Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing and Logistics*, 33(2), 526-560. <https://doi.org/10.1108/APJML-07-2018-0283>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR(S)

1st Author

Kun Peng Xia is currently an undergraduate student at Universiti Sains Malaysia.

2nd Author

Yong Yu Lee is currently an undergraduate student at Universiti Sains Malaysia.

3rd Author

Ann Xuan Khoo is currently an undergraduate student at Universiti Sains Malaysia.

Email: khooannxuan@gmail.com

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-7072-9710>

4th Author

Joanne Xing Yi Lim is currently an undergraduate student at Universiti Sains Malaysia.

5th Author

Joey Wan Teng Low is currently an undergraduate student at Universiti Sains Malaysia.

6th Author

Joey Rui Yu Then is currently an undergraduate student at Universiti Sains Malaysia.

7th Author

Keerthana A/P Kalyselvan is currently an undergraduate student at Universiti Sains Malaysia.

8th Author

Darshini J. is currently an undergraduate student at International School of Business and Research (ISBR) Business School

9th Author

A. J. Ali has been a senior lecturer at the School of Management, Universiti Sains Malaysia since 2003. He received his PhD from the University of Groningen, the Netherlands, with a thesis entitled "The intercultural adaptation of expatriate spouses and children". He is now attached to the Department of International Business and has been teaching courses and conducting research in International Human Resource Management, International Management, International Business, Business Communication, and Organizational Behavior.

Email: aneesali15@yahoo.com

10th Author

Daisy Mui Hung Kee is an Associate Professor at the School of Management, Universiti Sains Malaysia. Her areas of interest are in Human Resource Management, Organizational Behavior, Work Values, Leadership, Entrepreneurship, and Psychosocial safety climate. Her current program of research focuses on Leadership and Psychosocial safety climate. She holds a PhD in Business and Management from the International Graduate School of Business, University of South Australia. She was the secretary of the Management Case Study Journal, Australia (2004-2006). She was the recipient of the Merdeka Award 2006 from the Australia Malaysia Business Council of South Australia (AMBCSA) by former South Australia Governor Sir Eric Neal (2006). The award recognizes the Most Outstanding Malaysian University students in South Australia. She earned her MBA from the School of Management, Universiti Sains Malaysia. She was awarded to the Dean's List for being one of the top MBA students (2003). Presently, she is an active academic and researcher supervising a number of MBA, MA, and PhD candidates with working experience across diverse industries. She has published a good number of journal papers during the course of her career. She has conducted a series of training sessions related to motivation and research at USM under the Professional and Personal Development (PPD) workshop.

Email: daisy@usm.my

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7748-8230>