Customer Engagement with Digital Social Responsibility in Social Media: A Case Study of COVID-19 Situation in Thailand

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Abstract

COVID-19 pandemic has affected the lives of people and has forced businesses to develop different ways of doing businesses. Several businesses have implemented social responsibility activities. With social distancing keeping many people at home, online and digital platforms have become one of the most important mechanisms for businesses undertakings and implementing those social responsibility initiatives and activities – digital social responsibility (DSR). The purpose of this study is to examine the relationships of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) intentions and customer engagement with DSR in social media with attitude toward DSR as the antecedent during COVID-19 social distancing situation in Thailand. The study employs a quantitative research method where sampling method is followed by convenience sampling technique, and study data is collected through survey questionnaire with social media users who have experiences with firms' online social responsibility initiatives. Based the samples of 123 respondents, Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) has been used for analysis. The results show that attitudes toward DSR in social media significantly influence electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) intentions and have a significant effect on customer engagement with DSR in social media. The mediation analysis also revealed that eWOM intention partially mediated the relation between attitudes toward DSR in social media and customer engagement.

Keywords: Digital Social Responsibility, Customer Engagement, Electronic Word-Of-Mouth (eWOM), COVID-19, Thailand

JEL Classification Code: M10, M14, M31, M37

1. Introduction

In 2020, the COVID-19 has shocked the world and the COVID-19 pandemic has changed people's life and become the world agenda. In term of marketing perspective, the COVID-19 outbreak has necessitated an abrupt shift in how firms conduct their businesses and also changed consumers' attitudes and behaviors. According to Kantar Consultancy's research (Kantar, 2020), the study surveyed more than 25,000 consumers across 32 countries. The results reveal that media consumption has increased across all in-home channels. Web

browsing has increased by 70%, followed by TV viewing increasing by 63% and social media engagement increasing by 61% over normal usage rates. As a result of social distancing, lockdown, and curfew in some countries, people spend more of their time using social media. WhatsApp has seen a 51% increase in usage. Facebook usage has increased 37%. And, China experienced a 58% increase in usage of local social media apps including Wechat and Weibo (Kantar, 2020). In Thailand, during the COVID-19 crisis, use of LINE Call has increased 236% while LINE VDO Call use has increased 270%. Moreover, LINE Call via PC increased 264% in March (Bangkokpost, 2020).

Several businesses and brands were stepping up to take part in the relief effort. And consumers also expected some actions and communications form those businesses and brands. Based on the survey of 1,000 consumers on March, 2020 by 4A's Research Company (Pelosi & Calabrese, 2020), 43% of survey respondents said it is reassuring to hear from brands they know and trust, whereas 40% want to hear what brands are doing in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Only 15% said they do not want to hear from brands at this time. This survey result showed consumers

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have positive attitudes towards brand communication during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Social responsibility is one of the vital strategic movement for several firms and brands helping people to cope with this unprecedented situation. Kantar's research shows that consumers expect the brands they choose to look after their employees (78%), and 62% saying implement flexible working, supporting hospitals (41%) and being helpful to government (35%). Dr. David Nabarro, Special Envoy for COVID-19 for the World Health Organization (WHO) stated that "Brands must strive to be authentic, accountable, and audacious in their communications. They should lead where they can and work together with NGOs and governments, recognizing that they have the capacity to jointly enact solutions". According to Edelman - a global communications firm, conducted a survey of 12,000 consumers to understand how consumers are responding to brand's marketing during the crisis, with 90% of consumers state that brands should be willing to suffer substantial financial losses to ensure the well-being and financial security of others. 71% of those surveyed promised that brands and companies that placed their profits before people during the crisis would lose their trust forever. And, 65% of surveyed consumers indicated that their likelihood of purchasing a brand would subsequently be based on how well the brand responds to the crisis (Avery & Edelman, 2020).

Firms have implemented social responsibility practices in many ways such as offering free or lower-priced products, shifting factories over from making consumer goods to products needed to fight the crisis, providing basic necessities, bolstering affected employee benefits, lending support through products and services, donating to targeted areas. Not only traditional social responsibility is implemented but also digital social responsibility (DSR). Brands have begun to explore the potential of using social media for DSR. For example, JSTOR digital library that usually requires a subscription has announced that 6,000 of its eBooks and more than 150 journals are freely available to the public. HBO is offering 500 hours of programming available to those without subscriptions starting. Amazon lets you stream Arthur and other kids' shows for free. Apple Books offers 'stay at home' collection of free read along for kids, cozy mysteries, and audiobooks. Moreover, in order to support and make social movement in social distancing behavior, several brands redesign logos to signify social distancing such as McDonald's, Coca-Cola, Audi and Volkswagen.

Social media has played a vital role for firms and brands to communicate and undertake social responsibility practices. Nevertheless, A few studies have focused on the use of social media for DSR initiatives (Chu et al., 2020). Social media can be effective in DSR practices since consumers are able to write and share their opinions about firms' DSR initiatives, offering opportunities for businesses to participate in multi-stakeholder Dialogue. Best of our knowledge, there has been limited researches on factors influencing customer engagement and electronic work of mouth (eWOM) with DSR in social media especially in an unusual situation like COVID-19 pandemic and social distancing. Therefore, the purpose of our study is to examine the relationships of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) intentions and customer engagement with DSR social media with attitude toward DSR in social media as the antecedent during COVID-19 social distancing situation in Thailand. The rest of this paper is organized as follows; second section is the review of relevant literature concerning with digital social responsibility, customer engagement, and electronic work of mouth Third section describes the research method used for the data collection. Fourth section is the discussion of the main findings resulting from the analysis. Finally, in the fifth section discussion and conclusions are drawn together with limitations and future research directions in sixth section.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Digital Social Responsibility

Corporate social responsibility has been recognized as one of the strategic movements for businesses. While there is no universally accepted definition, CSR generally refers to a firm's activities, organizational processes, and status in relation to its perceived societal or stakeholder obligations (Galbreath, 2010). Previous researches have confirmed the effect of CSR activities on the attitudes and behavior of customers (Mohammed, & Rashid, 2018). Prior studies found that CSR has a positive effect on customer trust and loyalty, brand image and customer retention, customers' satisfaction and have confirmed the relationship between CSR and customer's attitudes and behaviors. There have been empirical studies which has shown evidence of benefits of CSR for businesses (Zahari et al., 2020) such as enhancing corporate image, improving customer satisfaction and loyalty, and job seekers' pursuit intention (Hoang et al., 2020). One of widespread definition of CSR came from Luo and Bhattacharya (2006), referring to a company's activities and status related to its perceived societal or stakeholder obligations. There have been some but limited attempts to study impacts made by online social responsibility initiatives and activities towards customers' attitudes (Chu et al., 2020; Fatma et al., 2020). As the digital transformation has changed people's life and behaviors, businesses have also realized an important of digital platforms for firms' social responsibility strategic undertaking –Digital Social Responsibility (DSR).

Despite the widespread use of social media in advertising practice, their role in DSR has not been well documented and are still based upon the evidence of the effects of offline CSR. Unlike offline CSR, DSR allows for customer to participate or collaborate with digital social responsibility activities

originated by businesses. Social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram offer multidirectional communication with high speed and low cost and enable consumers to create dialogs between themselves, firms, and firms' DSR programs. Digital platforms and social media allow businesses to create more customer-centric social responsibility programs which are more noticeable and relevant to consumers (Okazaki et al., 2019). As COVID-19 pandemic is one of the most severe unexpected factors catalyzing and forcing businesses into digital transformation. Digital social responsibility has become an effective strategic movement for businesses to help people to get through an extremely challenging time and the effective digital social responsibility allows business to stand out in unprecedented situation like COVID-19 pandemic, and connect with your customers on a level that ensures long-term loyalty, and potentially even brand advocacy even in difficult time.

2.2. Customer Engagement and Electronic Word of Mouth

According to Hollebeek (2011), there are several terms used to refer to customer engagement (CE) including consumer engagement, customer engagement behaviors, customer brand engagement, and engagement at a more general level. Van Doorn et al. (2010) provided the definition of customer engagement (CE) as customers' behavioral manifestations toward the brand or firm focus, beyond purchase, resulting from motivational drivers. Oviedo-García et al. (2014) stated that customer engagement refers to any possible incorporation among stakeholders rather than only between buyers and sellers. Social media offer possibilities for this involvement that cultivate trust, good will, and commitment to form relations between individuals and brands (Vivek et al., 2012). Although customer engagement has gained an intentions form scholars and practitioners, there is not the consensus definition of customer engagement.

Previous studies have found the link between social responsibility and customer engagement Jarvis et al., (2017); Chomvilailuk and Butcher (2018); Chu et al. (2020); Chae (2020); Hollebeek et al. (2014) define engagement in social media as a consumer's positively valenced brand-related cognitive, emotional and behavioral activity during or related to focal consumer/brand interactions. Social responsibility initiatives can induce customer engagement and lead to several behavioral responses such as repurchasing, word-of-mouth (WOM) and customer feedback. Customer engagement was found to have significant impact on customer loyalty which is a desirable outcome of businesses (Thakur, 2016).

In social media context, Chu et al. (2020) stated that customer engagement has been operationalized as customers' behavioral responses toward a brand such as WOM activities, posting comments, and writing reviews. eWOM refers to any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the internet (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Customers also share businesses' online messages with their social media friends and the general public. Fatma et al. (2020) found that CSR communication on social networking sites engages consumers and increases their eWOM intentions. Therefore, based on those relevant literatures, we proposed the research framework in the next section.

3. Conceptual Framework and Hypothesis Development

The research framework to examine the relationships of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) intentions and customer engagement with DSR social media with attitude toward DSR in social media as the antecedent was constructed based on previous relevant literature reviews. The proposed model for the research framework is illustrated in Figure 1.
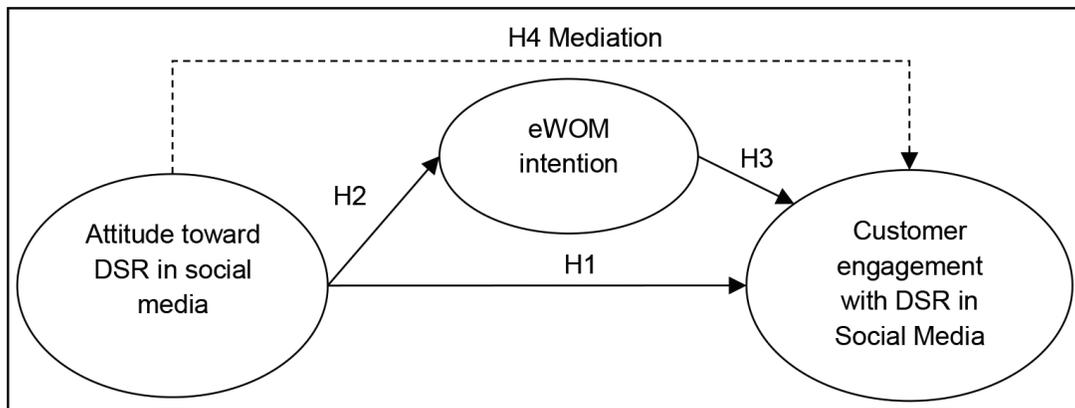

Figure 1: The conceptual framework and measurement model for the study

To test the relationship between CE, BS and BL the following hypotheses have been developed:

H1: *Attitudes toward DSR in social media will have a positive, direct impact on customer engagement with DSR in social media.*

H2: *Attitudes toward DSR in social media will have a positive, direct impact on eWOM intention.*

H3: *eWOM intention will have a positive, direct impact on customer engagement with DSR in social media.*

H4: *eWOM intention will mediate the effect of attitude toward DSR in social media on customer engagement with DSR.*

4. Research Methodology

4.1. Research Design and Data Collection

A quantitative method with online survey questionnaire was used to examine the proposed research hypotheses and test the proposed model. Structural equation modeling (SEM) using AMOS 20.0 was used to test and analyze the data. Approval and ethics clearance for the study was obtained from the Bangkok University Human Ethics Committee before consulting with experts regarding the questionnaire's development. At every step, the anonymity of the participants was considered and ensured. The methods described are in detail sufficient to understand the approach used and appropriate statistical tests which are applied. Social media users in Thailand were invited to participate in online surveys. The data was collected with a purposive sampling technique. In order to assure the respondents' eligibility, a preliminary screening questions was asked. The question was: during the COVID-19 pandemic and social distancing and lockdown situation, have you ever seen any firms' effort, initiatives, activities or campaigns to respond or help people coping with this situation via social media? Only those respondents who answered "yes" to the question were allowed to take part in the survey. At the beginning of the questionnaire, participants were provided with a definition of DSR along with examples of DSR in social media.

In detail, participants read: Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, limiting face-to-face contact with others is the best way to reduce the spread of COVID-19. Social distancing, lockdown, and curfew were used in order to lower the level of COVID-19 transmission. Several firms and brands implemented online social responsibility practices in social media and other online platforms – what we defined as Digital Social Responsibility (DSR). For example, JSTOR digital library that usually requires a subscription has announced that 6,000 of its eBooks and more than 150 journals are freely available to the public. HBO is offering 500 hours of programming available to those without subscriptions starting. Amazon lets you stream Arthur and other kids' shows for free. Apple Books offers 'stay at home' collection of free read-along for kids, cozy mysteries, and audiobooks. DSR is defined as any firms' social responsibility practices, initiatives and activities via digital platforms that you have noticed or involved. Then, Respondents were asked to recall and answer the survey questions on the basis of their perception of DSR initiatives in social media such as Facebook, and Twitter during COVID-19 situation. After data collection and screening, a total of 123 valid surveys were retained for analysis.

4.2. Questionnaire Development

The questionnaires consisted of three sections: (1) an initial screening question, (2) general information concerning demographic and behavioral aspects of respondents and (3) construct measurement items. Items were measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). In the proposed model, the independent variable, attitude toward DSR in social media was measured with five items adopted from Kang and Hustvedt (2014). eWOM intention was measured with four items adopted from Eberle et al. (2013). Customer engagement with DSR in social media was measured by ten items adopted and modified from Chu et al. (2020). The detail of constructs and measurement scales are shown in Table 1.

5. Results

5.1. Sample Profile

The data was collected with an online self-completed questionnaire format. Respondents were asked to recall their most recent experiences with any firms' effort, initiatives, activities or campaigns to respond or help people coping with the COVID-19 pandemic and social distancing and lockdown situation via digital platforms such as the organization's donation or grant of money to a charitable cause, volunteer efforts, or involvement in the communities in which it operates. Then they were asked to complete a questionnaire based on their perception related to those DSR initiatives or activities.

In total, 123 valid questionnaires were received as responses from survey participants for the data analysis. To analyze the demographic characteristics, descriptive statistics using SPSS were used. The findings as presented in Table 2 represent that 53.8% of the participants are females, whereas males accounted for 46.2% of the overall responses. The majority group of the respondents (35.4%) are aged between 26 and 35 years with postgraduate education level (49.6%) and spending more than 4 hours (55.6%) in social media daily.

Table 1: Questionnaire constructs and variables

Constructs	Items	Observed Variables
Attitude toward Digital Social Responsibility (DSR) in social media	DSR1	[Brand] is committed to using a portion of its profits to help the communities and societies via social media platforms during COVID-19 pandemic.
	DSR2	During COVID-19 pandemic, [Brand] gives back to the communities in which it does business via social media platforms.
	DSR3	The communities and societies benefit from [Brand]'s contributions through social media platforms during COVID-19 pandemic.
	DSR4	[Brand] integrates digital charitable contributions into its business activities during COVID-19 pandemic.
	DSR5	[Brand] is interested in corporate giving through social media platforms during COVID-19 pandemic.
eWOM intention	EW1	I will invite friends to learn more about [Brand]'s DSR on social media
	EW2	I will recommend [Brand]'s DSR on social media to my friends
	EW3	I will talk about [Brand]'s DSR on social media
	EW4	I will talk positively about [Brand]'s DSR on social media
Customer engagement with DSR in Social Media	CE1	Posting personal experiences related to [Brand]'s DSR activities
	CE2	Friending, liking or following [Brand]'s DSR activities
	CE3	Posting or sharing thoughts about [Brand]'s DSR activities
	CE4	Posting or sharing photos, videos, memes or gifs created by others that relate to [Brand]'s DSR activities
	CE5	Posting or sharing photos, videos, memes or gifs created by you that relate to [Brand]'s DSR activities
	CE6	Receiving messages or information from [Brand] regarding its DSR activities
	CE7	Forwarding someone else's discussion on [Brand]'s DSR activities to other people
	CE8	Joining groups dedicated to [Brand]'s DSR activities
	CE9	Creating a group dedicated to [Brand]'s DSR activities
	CE10	Attending a gathering regarding [Brand]'s DSR activities that you learned about through social media

5.2. Measurement Model

A confirmatory factor analysis was used to test the relationships between each construct and its retained items. The estimation involved the model overall goodness of fit test and separate tests for its significance in estimating the assumed relationships between the variables. Five constructs and twenty-eight individual items were included in this model. The main indicators of our measurement model are summarized in Table 3.

As is shown in Table 3, Cronbach's α that measures reliability of the variables in the model is within the range of 0.897 and 0.930 for all constructs and their respective subscales, which are above the minimum level of 0.7, confirming internal consistency of the model's constructs. Convergent and discriminant validity of the constructs

were estimated. Convergent validity was evaluated by three indices; namely, composite reliability (CR), which should be greater than 0.7; average variance extracted (AVE), which should be greater than 0.5; and all factor loadings, which should be greater than 0.7 (Awang, 2015). Four questionnaire items were deleted from the model since the factor loadings are less than 0.7 (CE6, CE8, CE9, and CE10).

Discriminant validity indicates the extent to which a given concept is truly distinct from other constructs. One criterion for adequate discriminant validity is that when the square root of Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for each construct is greater than the correlation between that construct and other constructs in the research model. The result of square root of AVE for each construct is more than the correlation between that construct and other constructs, confirming discriminant validity of all constructs.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics

Item	Description	Sample	(%)
Gender	Male	57	46.2
	Female	66	53.8
Age	18-25	38	30.9
	26-35	44	35.4
	36-45	25	20.7
	46-55	13	10.3
	More than 55 years	3	2.7
Education	Below undergraduate	5	4.2
	Undergraduate	57	46.2
	Postgraduate	61	49.6
Social media usage daily	Less than 1 hour	2	1.6
	1 hour - 2 hours	13	10.2
	3 hours- 4 hours	40	32.6
	More than 4 hours	68	55.6

Note: N = 123; missing data not shown and calculated in the table.

Overall, the testing results indicate a satisfactory level of construct validity in terms of convergent and divergent validity, implying that the research constructs are adequately fit for assessment of the structural model. The goodness-of-fit indicators for the revised measurement model above are: Chi-square = 159.8141; df = 87; CMIN/df = 1.837; GFI = 0.932; NFI = 0.941; TLI = 0.937; CFI = 0.929; RMSEA = 0.045. This demonstrated a good fit between the model and the data for the further structural model analysis.

5.3. Structural Model

The structural model was evaluated through test of the hypotheses underlying the proposed research model. The causal model was investigated through a path analysis conducted with the IBM Amos software (version 22). The goodness-of-fit indicators of this model are: Chi-square = 159.8141; df = 87; CMIN/df = 1.837; GFI = 0.932; NFI = 0.941; TLI = 0.937; CFI = 0.929; RMSEA = 0.045. All the indicators meet the cutoff values, suggesting a good model fit. Table 4 summarizes the results on test of hypotheses which indicate significance of the relationships between the variables.

The regression results reveal that attitudes toward DSR in social media have a significant positive direct effect on customer engagement with DSR in social media (β=0.29; SE=0.06; p<0.001; supporting H1), and eWOM intention (β=0.57; SE=0.07; p<0.001; supporting H2). The result of structural equation modelling also revealed that eWOM intention have a significant positive impact on customer engagement with DSR in social media (β=0.45; SE=0.04; p<0.001; supporting H3).

In order to test the mediating effect of attitudes toward DSR in social media to customer engagement through eWOM intention, a bootstrapping technique method was used. The results of mediation analysis with bootstrapping show that attitudes toward DSR in social media has a significant direct effect on customer engagement (0. 289; p < 0.001; 95% CI [0.122, 0.451]) and a significant indirect effect on customer engagement through eWOM intention (0.255; p<0.001; 95% CI [0.145, 0.408]) indicating that the partial mediation is confirmed. The results of mediation analysis with bootstrapping is summarized in the Table 5.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

COVID-19 pandemic has led to a significant change in the life of the people and their behavior as a consumer. COVID-19 disruption has proved to be a catalyst for digital transformation. In this period of time, digital social responsibility has played the vital role for businesses. Consumers indicated that their likelihood of purchasing a brand would subsequently be based on how well the brand responds to the crisis and they would like to hear any response to the COVID-19 pandemic by firms (Pelosi & Calabrese, 2020; Avery & Edelman, 2020). Our study investigates the relationships of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) intentions and customer engagement with DSR social media with attitude toward DSR as the antecedent. The results showed that attitude toward DSR in social media has a significant positive impact on customer engagement with DSR and eWOM intention. Our finding is consistent with the study of Chu, & Chen (2019) that CSR-related activities in social media significantly impacted eWOM intention.

The result of mediation analysis also reveals that eWOM intention mediates the effect of attitude toward DSR in social media on customer engagement with DSR. This finding is consistent with the previous study by Chu et al. (2020) and reconfirms the study of Ali et al. (2015) that digital social responsibility through social media is an effective mechanism to build good relationships with customers, employees, investors as well as other stakeholders. Particularly in times of crisis like COVID-19 pandemic, the most efficient and speedy way to implement social responsibility initiative is online. Consequently, businesses should carefully develop DSR strategies and plans to provide consistent information, satisfy the expectations of each stakeholder, and build public trust. Firms need to formulate DSR strategies that synchronize with the core value of bushiness and pay attention on the emergence of digital social responsibility as one of firms' strategic movement.

Table 3: Summary indicators of the measurement model

Constructs and items	Loading	t-value	SE	Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE
Attitude toward DSR	-	-	-	0. 930	0.877	0.770
DSR1	0.826	-	-	-	-	-
DSR2	0.935	24.183	0.046	-	-	-
DSR3	0.922	23.587	0.048	-	-	-
DSR4	0.889	22.156	0.048	-	-	-
DSR5	0.808	19.042	0.052	-	-	-
eWOM intention	-	-	-	0. 909	0.849	0.720
EW1	0.765	-	-	-	-	-
EW2	0.873	18.171	0.063	-	-	-
EW3	0.872	18.151	0.062	-	-	-
EW4	0.879	18.316	0.056	-	-	-
CE in social media	-	-	-	0. 897	0.788	0.620
CE1	0.721	-	-	-	-	-
CE2	0.822	15.791	0.069	-	-	-
CE3	0.857	16.473	0.070	-	-	-
CE4	0.765	14.668	0.072	-	-	-
CE5	0.812	15.596	0.068	-	-	-
CE6 (Deleted)	0.660	12.609	0.078	-	-	-
CE7	0.740	14.169	0.070	-	-	-
CE8 (Deleted)	0.530	10.079	0.086	-	-	-
CE9 (Deleted)	0.686	13.123	0.067	-	-	-
CE10 (Deleted)	0.555	10.563	0.076	-	-	-

Note: CE6, CE8, CE9, and CE10 were deleted since factor loadings are less than 0.7.

Table 4: Hypotheses testing

Hypothesis	Loading	t-value	Result
H1: Attitudes toward DSR in social media will have a positive, direct impact on customer engagement with DSR in social media.	0.289	7.958	Supported
H2: Attitudes toward DSR in social media will have a positive, direct impact on eWOM intention.	0.572	8.912	Supported
H3: eWOM intention will have a positive, direct impact on customer engagement with DSR in social media.	0.445	4.407	Supported

Notes: $*p < 0.05$; $**p < 0.01$; $***p < 0.001$.

Table 5: The results of mediation analysis

Hypothesis	Direct effect	Indirect effect	Result
H4: eWOM intention will mediate the effect of attitude toward DSR in social media on customer engagement with DSR.	0.289(***)	0.255(***)	Partial Mediation

Note: $*** = p < 0.001$; $** = p < 0.01$; $* = p < 0.05$.

7. Limitation and Further research

No study yet has analyzed the usage and importance of digital social responsibility especially (DSR) in the unprecedented situation like COVID-19 pandemic in Thailand. This study has made an effort to step forward in the area of DSR; we believe this can serve as a stepping-stone for future researches. Nevertheless, our study is not free from limitations. Firstly, the results of our study are based on a self-administered questionnaire and respondents' perception. The sample size of this study is quite small and collected in Thailand which limits the generalizability of the findings of this research in other countries. Further researches are recommended to collect larger sample size to provide more profound results. Secondly, the data are cross-sectional. The research did not assess the degree to which customers' attitude towards DSR changed over time. Further researches can do a comparative study to understand the degree of attitudes towards DSR during and after COVID-19 pandemic in order to develop richer insight. Thirdly, this research did not consider a wide variety of social media platforms. Future study can study the differences of DSR's efficiency in wide-ranging social platforms.

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