



Public Perception and Persuasive Verbal Communication of Audience Engagement at Consumer Exhibitions in Brunei Darussalam

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received Sep 28, 2024

Revised Nov 02, 2024

Accepted Feb 02, 2025

Keywords:

Persuasive language,
Verbal communication,
Audience Engagement,
Consumer Exhibition,

Conflict of Interest:

None

Funding:

None

ABSTRACT

As Brunei Darussalam aims to promote a highly skilled and educated society, understandably effective verbal communication may play a crucial role in enhancing audience engagement and influence consumer behaviour in their purchasing decision. This research explored the impact of public perceptions and persuasive verbal communication towards audience engagement at consumer exhibitions in Brunei Darussalam. Through qualitative approach, the study employed a phenomenological design in gathering data through semi-structured interviews at the consumer exhibitions. The analysis revealed five themes: (1) interpersonal communication including friendliness, forcefulness and limited interaction, (2) promotional and interactive tactics were the important factors for exhibitors to consider to significantly enhance audience engagement. Moreover, public expected exhibitors to implement (3) informative language and product knowledge where they desired to receive clear and concise information about products or services offered. The key strategies that would contribute to audience engagement include (4) communication attributes where confidence, tone of voice, clarity and politeness must be practised by exhibitors and understanding the (5) influence of first impressions and branding including the perception of company values, word of mouth, visual design, credibility and persuasion. The findings provided insights into how persuasive verbal communication and audience engagement can be enhanced during consumer exhibitions, underscoring the need to adopt effective communication strategies that caters to the audience's level of understanding and emotional comfort.

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1. Introduction

Audience engagement plays a significant factor in the success of consumer exhibitions, where public perceptions and verbal communication values are essential to consumer behavior. Effective engagement attracts attendees to visit exhibitors' booths and build longer lasting relationships that can encourage brand loyalty (Kumar & Shah, 2018). Understanding public perception would cover the attitudes attendees hold about a brand that can influence their interaction and decision-making. Hence, according to Petty & Cacioppo (2012), it is important for exhibitors to effectively present themselves in their values that could resonate with the attendees through persuasive verbal communication that enhances their communication clearly, highlighting product benefits and building credibility for their message receiver.

In relation to Brunei's Wawasan 2035, one of the aims is to focus on ensuring that people are "educated, highly skilled and accomplished" (Prime Minister's Office, 2019). With that, in our daily lives, communication has become significantly important to be refined in any way and anywhere we go. High quality of communication skill may be needed, especially in this context, where verbal communication is the main key point in keeping engagement active (Božić, 2024). In Brunei Darussalam, although there is lack of specific statistics provided for the number of organised events per year or past existing research conducted, it is believed that there are consumer exhibitions accessible for the public to attend in a certain time depending on the venues and time of the month per year. Understandably, Brunei is indeed aiming to organise more events that could also boost the country's economic growth (Mohamad, 2024). Prior to that, it enables the sellers to persuade the public to purchase their products/services and provides an easy accessibility for consumers to communicate with them during physical consumer exhibitions.

Despite that, when attending such events organised in Brunei, it is vitally important for the event organisers or exhibitors to apply their persuasive verbal communication skill to grab customers attention and interests. Persuasion refers to the process of persuading, influencing or convincing people to change their minds (Bushra Ni & Rashid, 2019). Communicators tend to use persuasion in effectively transmitting their messages to their audience, with hopes that the information received shall be comprehensive and confident. Persuaded by the message, it shall be beneficial for any of both parties, the sender and receiver, in this context, the exhibitor and consumer.

Nonetheless, understanding the interest and demands of the audience are essential too in ensuring the impactful of persuasiveness (Božić, 2024). As communication involves the act of setting thoughts and ideas into words, sharing own perspectives may also reflect as transmitting messages. The sender may understand what the messages are, but the audience may not get it. Hence, knowing the audience would involve understanding them and how they perceive the messages (Mccarthy, 2023). That would include understanding whether they are interested in the message portrayed, or getting audience's attention, and exploring the strategies that the exhibitors implement while conveying persuasive verbal communication during exhibitions.

According to Pinder (2023), about 47% of event organisers reported that their biggest challenge during event planning and execution process was communication issues. With that, verbal communication may play a significant role in terms of consumer events, where it serves a platform for business to share information and for consumers to ask questions/receive answers (Kharouf et al. 2020). With reference to that, communication may be a challenge for the exhibitors in Brunei especially during the execution of events. There could be several potential barriers that can affect effective communication between exhibitors and attendees during exhibitions. Exhibitors may encounter communication issues such as language barriers, unclear messaging, or managing crowds. As Bruneians are generally known to be respectful, this trait may also influence how exhibitors' approach and interact with the public, requiring them to be mindful of ethnicity when engaging with diverse audiences (Commisceo Global Consulting Ltd., 2020).

There may also still be limitations of understanding the role of consumer exhibitions in providing a physical platform for businesses to communicate with their consumers more actively. As stated by Sharma (2024), in assessing an event's impact, over 82% of B2B marketers view audience engagement as a vital key performance indicator (KPI). This indicates that audience engagement is significant in ensuring that exhibitions are successful, where exhibitors are communicating with the public/consumers.

Furthermore, there may also be a lack of comprehensive understanding of how different techniques and strategies of persuasive verbal communication may have an impact or influence engagement with the audience. According to Ogah & Abutu (2022), capturing the audience's attention is challenging because the essence of every message is its power to persuade and motivate people to act. It is, however, important for the communicators to be able to effectively persuade their target audience. Moreover, this emphasises that persuasive communication can profoundly influence the thoughts, feelings, and attitudes toward the message (Ogah & Abutu, 2022). Communicating with the public may be challenging during events, because the way people communicate may not reach the audience.

It is believed that it is not sufficient for the communicators to only rely on just providing information without having effective persuasive verbal communication in engaging with the audience. Greco (2018) stated that a major challenge in persuasive communication is that changing attitude does not always lead to changes in behaviour, as merely providing information about products or situations may not be enough to influence actual actions. Although there may be lack of previous research conducted based on this context, this research paper aims to explore more about how exhibitors communicate with the consumers and getting their attention in ensuring there is an engagement between them.

The main aim is to study the impact of public perceptions and persuasive verbal communication towards audience engagement at consumer exhibitions in Brunei Darussalam that includes identifying the influencing communicative factors that would result to an active audience engagement at consumer exhibitions, examining public expectations prior to attending exhibitions and the experiences they may have faced when communicating with the exhibitors as well as exploring the key strategies of public perceptions and persuasive verbal communication that would contribute to the audience engagement.

This research is important in studying the importance of public perceptions and persuasive verbal communication to ensure active engagement with the audience at consumer exhibitions. With the findings found towards the end of this study, it could contribute to numerous benefits in terms of practical and theoretical perspectives.

The Management, or in this context would be the organizers or promoters, could enhance their communication skills and techniques with their audience and how impactful verbal communication is. Understandably, each organisation may have its own unique ways of communicating with their consumers, however, their choice of verbal communication may differ in accordance with what consumers would expect when they visit their booths. Moreover, this study will contribute to the gap of Brunei's limitation of study in the context of consumer exhibitions.

Essentially, it could enable them to effectively persuade their consumers that may lead to better audience engagement in future exhibitions. Theoretically, this study could also contribute a better understanding academically towards how persuasive communication may have a huge influence on audience engagement. To imply the theory of persuasiveness, AIDA Model and Aristotle's theory may be applied in terms of persuasiveness and effectively grab customers' attention.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Audience Engagement

The term "audience engagement" may be referred to how consumers interact cognitively, emotionally or affectively with businesses, in which these engagement experiences would allow the businesses to stimulate audience loyalty, attentiveness and their thinking development (Broersma, 2019). Assumingly, audience engagement could lead to consumers acting based on their experiences, which then suggests how their behaviour reacts to it. With that, the audience may do things such as purchasing certain products promoted or interacting with the exhibitors. Therefore, engagement may be vital as a process of value creation in connection to public discourse (Steensen et al., 2020).

It is important to understand the interest and demands of audience to ensure persuasiveness and the impactful message is delivered. Subsequently, there are several factors that can be considered in ensuring the effectiveness of communication such as the environment and contextual setting (Božić, 2024). These factors shall be looked up into by message senders to effectively engage with their audience.

2.1.2 Factors affecting audience engagement

As understanding the audience may also be important by the exhibitors, to relate, an audience may interact with the event organisers, other attendees during the event itself, which this engagement is designed thoughtfully to meet the expectations of the audience to be able to participate and experience enjoyably throughout the event (Setiawan et al., 2022). With that, organisers must be able to keep up with today's trend especially in providing the best experiences for their audiences, in which some motivational factors should be considered prior to that.

Event setting may be one of the factors that would affect the audience engagement, in which it could relate to how the organizer creatively uses the settings and spaces. The experience for audience could start from their walk to the venue, and how the setting could set the mood for them (Brown & Ratzkin, 2011). Although it may be a formal or informal event, there should be a motivational factor that would also attract the audience. The motivational drivers of this engagement could be such as entertainment (in what way can audience feels an enjoyment while attending the event), information (what messages can be delivered to the audience such as brand product, promotion, etc.) and remuneration (what audience can get from organizer), in which all these could increase the level of engagement towards the audience and their motivation in participating or to interact prior to attending the event (Bayraktar, 2022).

Additionally, physical environment setting may also play an important role towards audience engagement, simply because how it could affect consumer satisfaction based on the physical image and experience, they may get prior to attending any events. A good image on the physical environment setting may also lead to customer brand loyalty through positive feedback and how they may perceive comprehensive quality (Seo et al., 2015). Getting people's attention could also be one of the factors in which an appropriate start of interaction may get audience to participate in something, in a way they can be entertained and well-persuaded prior to the communication process with them (Jensen & Buckley, 2014). Despite these factors, there may also be strategies that can be implied in enhancing the audience engagement.

2.1.2 Implication of strategies in audience engagement

According to Tarifi & Bakhsh (2024), most organisations are continuously trying to find innovative approaches in engaging with their audience to strengthen their loyalty in today's highly competitive business market with several efforts and strategies in meeting their audience's personal preferences, needs or behaviours. This could be done by creating meaningful and interactive experiences that may relate to the audience which may be able to build strong emotional connections that could encourage them to come back again in the future. With today's advancement in technologies, such as augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR), may also be able to create engaging experiences that allow audience to participate prior to the interaction which could provide deeper experiences and satisfaction for them (Muharam et al., 2024). Furthermore, another effective strategy that can be implemented is to give back to consumers, where engagement could be boosted through reward system (Garg et al., 2021)

During the exhibition, the organisation may offer prizes to be won or chances to join in a lucky draw campaign, for the audience to feel the excitement in participating during the activity or the interaction. In that way, it will increase the audience engagement where they feel like they are appreciated by the organisations. These strategies could be important in ensuring that the audience feels welcome, not only by persuasion but also to understand what the audience really wants and how their expectations can be met. With that, it is vital to explore further the perceptions of the public on how they view the audience engagement during consumer exhibitions.

2.2 Public Perceptions

As explained by Szmigin & Piacentini (2018, as cited in Kallier Tar & A Wiid 2021), perception is further explained as the process where a person chooses, manages and construes a stimulus through senses prior to exposing the said stimuli. Therefore, people tend to only perceive what they want to, based on their own opinion and what could have influenced their choices, whichever may make sense to them. Understandably, each person may have different opinions on things and significantly, perceptions do have a strong impact on communication (Weintraub et al., 2015). According to Valenzuela (2020), perception is also further described as a multisensory in which understanding the function of sensory information may be essential in customer experience. Therefore, it is important to further understand how the process of perception works, which could have an impact on our daily communication. As per indicated in Weintraub et al. (2015), the three-step process includes selection (we only focus our attention to what we can get and what we feel is important at the time), organisation (once we select, we shall categorise based on what we have received that makes sense to us), and later be interpreted (where we process what we have selected and organised based on its meaning in our opinion).

To add up, public perceptions tend to have an impact towards the organizations based on how the public views them. In such a way, what the public experiences during the exhibitions may be positive or negative, where they can also convey the information to others. For example, consumer A attends the exhibition and feels like everything is to her liking and further informs her other friends to come over and experience the same thing. Her opinion of the exhibition may have a huge impact on the success of the exhibition as her perception of it does give positive feedback and more attendees. Despite the processes mentioned previously, it is also vital to understand further the factors that could influence one's perception clearly.

Factors that would influence public perceptions would be such as gender, age, personal experiences, culture and many more (Weintraub et al., 2015). However, judgements and feelings may also be shaped by factors of people's awareness and how it can determine the behavior deliberately of making choices. Mentally, people's behavioral responses may influence the way they behave and how it could have an effect towards what they perceive of an information (Ferguson & Bargh, 2004). With that, all these factors may play a significant role in how they would affect one's perception towards in this context, how persuasive verbal communication is

being used prior to engaging with the audience at a setting. It is also important to understand the motivational factor that would cause perception and behavior to work the way it is. Additionally, each person does have its own unique way of perception and how it may be influenced by own belief; based on social (family, friends or other social references) or cultural (shared beliefs from a whole society) and personal factors (personal purchasing habit or behavior) (Shukla, 2022). It is however vital for organizations to understand thoroughly of what public perceptions are, as they are typically based on their experiences and may also be considered as a feedback. Hence, how consumers view things may also be affected by how organizations represent themselves.

2.3 Persuasive Verbal Communication

Originally from a Latin word, Persuasion is typically used by communicators referring to the process of persuading or convincing people in changing their minds (Bushra Ni & Rashid, 2019). As it is a crucial strategy in influencing one's decision-making process, it may also be interpreted as a communication tool for both sender and receiver (Mallappiang et al., 2023). Persuasion may also be beneficial for receiver, in which with the increase of knowledge, they may be able to recognise and understand what the sender is trying to portray and perceive (Eisend & Tarrahi, 2022). In a communication context, usually it is one of the main requirement for message sender to persuade as it attracts consumers' attention and increase their interest in getting to know more of an information that tends to be delivered (Greco, 2018). Persuasion is also used as the people's voice or the public communication technique by the speaker, in which it encourages the listener towards the transformation purpose of beliefs and behaviours or means the process of changing people's attitudes based on the message delivered (Nejad & Sharifi, 2016). Ultimately, verbal communication serves various functions in our daily lives in which it would allow us to structure our thoughts clearly by defining reality through experiences or ideas, followed by organizing them into categories to think and shape our own attitudes evolving around the world based on how we perceive it (Vleugels, 2019). When interacting and communicating with others, persuasion is used as one of the crucial strategies in influencing one's decision (Mallappiang et al., 2023).

Critically, persuasion may indeed be a powerful technique in engaging with the audience. It additionally could act as more than just an information tool and would be one of the key elements that would affect decision-making (Close, 2016). Persuasion often involves having a clear objective and sending a message with intention of achieving it. In a way, effective communication is crucial to accomplish the said objective. Ethically, it is essential for message receivers to retain their free will, otherwise possibly changes into coercion rather than genuine persuasion (Dainton & Zelle, 2004).

The term rhetoric, the classical interpretation from Aristotle's theory, is believed to be an effective approach in understanding the contemporary interpretation of persuasion. He emphasized the three appeals of ethos, pathos and logos that would make messages persuasive, of credibility, passion and logic that shall be balanced in ensuring the effectiveness of persuasive communication (McCarthy & Hatcher, 2002). According to his theory, artistic or inartistic could also be the available strategies of persuasion. Artistic, the proofs that are produced by the message sender and those that are not produced would be inartistic (Griffin, 2011). To illustrate the said statement, proofs such as visualization and interactive elements are artistic, meanwhile audience feedback and statistics of a database are inartistic. Furthermore, despite being able to persuade consumers through the application of persuasive verbal communication, it is also important to have a physical platform to enable engagement and communication to take place.

2.4 Consumer Exhibitions

Exhibitions may be subcategorised as part of events, in which they cover several activities such as exhibitions, fairs and festivals, retail events and many more. Consumer Exhibitions are typically one of the platforms used in communicating with the audience actively. Generally, exhibitions are organized in allowing the public to attend while exhibitors offer and promote their products/services. (Abou-Shouk et al., 2018). Typically, exhibitions may also be referred to as trade shows, it brings the people of the targeted market towards a location where physical businesses tend to exhibit their products and promote their services (Gottlieb et al., 2014).

2.4.1 Consumer Exhibitions as part of communication tool

Exhibition venues play an important role in promoting a business, where venues may also act as the communicative platform for both consumers and exhibitors. This platform enables consumers to actively participate and interact with the exhibitors, in a way that the experience may have an impact towards the value and loyalty of each other (Abou-Shouk et al., 2018). It provides a location where companies can persuade their consumers with their offerings and any other information (Setiawan et al., 2022). Although the process of planning an event may be complicated, with costs and resources to be considered, the outcome of the event may be enormous in terms of the effectiveness as a communication tool, hence it is essential to understand its importance on today's choice of communication for both consumers and organisers (Gerritsen & Olderen, 2020). It has been said that while exhibitions provide a platform for interactions between both speaker and listener, physical explanation of products/services are bound to happen, while communication tools including advertising, sales promotion, and public relations may also be employed in various ways (Juegel et al., 2023). In that way, this will provide conveniences for both to further understand about the products/services offered and how the speaker can easily convince the listener.

In this context, the researcher aims to focus on consumer exhibitions in Brunei that provide a platform to enable interactions between exhibitors and audience which may include food bazaars, retail exhibitions related to any products or services offered by any organizations or any awareness roadshows. Understandably, open events that are involving public in Brunei must comply with rules and regulations that have been set by the Ministry of Home Affairs, where all events may also need to obtain an approval or a license before the event date starts, under the Public Entertainment Act, Chapter 181. Failure to do so, may be fined not exceeding \$10,000 for the first offence (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2022).

2.5 Theoretical Framework

There are two theories that will be discussed under this section. The researcher has chosen AIDA Model and Aristotle's Rhetoric Theory in Persuasion where it is believed that these theories can be applicable and most suitable to be implied in this research topic.

2.5.1 AIDA Model

According to Hadiyati (2016), AIDA Model was first introduced by E St. Elmo Lewis in 1898. The concept was a result based on consumers' perception, in which its abbreviation defines as Attention, Interest, Desire and Action; typically used in marketing and advertisement to ensure consumer involvement towards a certain technique. Although the model was introduced long time ago, however, it is believed that the model is still implemented widely by most organizations especially to identify the consumer behaviour that can improve and reach company's goals today (Purbaningsih et al., 2022).

AIDA model is based on one of the strategies in persuading consumers, where its aim is to get the attention of potential consumers, to be able to increase their interest and desire of wanting it, which could result them to take action by purchasing the promoted products (Rawal, 2013). It has also been said that this AIDA model is a part of the Hierarchy of Effect Theory, in which it describes the purchasing decision making process with its three components of cognitive, affective and behavioural. With these components, cognitive may be based on information received, which could affect their emotions and how they may impact to the way they behave (Singa Metili, 2023).

Understanding this model could also help event organisers to further persuade their consumers, not only with their advertisement, but to also have an insight into what their consumers may perceive of such an interest in their products/services. Prior to that, it is essential to learn in-depth of what this model can offer, as it may build a strong relationship between seller and buyer, as well as to increase consumers' satisfaction (Singa Metili, 2023). According to Pramita & Manafe (2022), this model as a process of personal selling can be defined in its stages as follows:

a) Attention. In gaining consumers' attention, messages sent to them must be attractive in a way it can be remembered and appreciated, by providing such an impact to target mainly for influencing their interest in purchasing. In this context, while consumers walk around the event space, the seller must get their attention based on a promotion of product that could attract them.

b) Interest. After gaining their attention, the influence factor shall increase their interest based on the features of products/services, that means any information provided must cause them to be more curious. In this case,

after getting their attention, a seller must be able to persuade them of more information for the product promoted, and how it could be beneficial for them if they are purchasing it.

c) Desire. While consumers are increasingly interested in the product, they must now be impressed and convinced to meet their best needs, where they shall have a sense of belonging and high motivation factor in purchasing. In addition, the seller must have a strong factor on why the consumer should purchase the product. This is where persuasive verbal communication may come in-depth, for the consumer to be convinced.

d) Action. Prior to the success of persuasion, this stage tends to identify whether the consumer will purchase the product and how effective the persuasive communication used is, as it indicated the decision-making process of the purchase made.

2.5.2 Aristotle's Rhetoric Theory in Persuasion

Aristotle's Rhetoric has already been written for more than two millennia ago, according to Jamar (2002), where it had explained persuasion for a public context and its approach towards analysing the subject, breaking it down in-depth to each component to enable further understanding of possible information. In the application of consumer market, Aristotle's Rhetoric may also play a huge role, particularly in advertising or marketing where there are semiotics and iconology (Lee, 2018). As the theory focuses on persuading consumers based on the messages aimed to them that may also have an impact on the change of behaviour of the receivers, the process may involve the receiver's cognitive and affective process. The aim is however similarly like the previous theory discussed, in which gaining loyalty tends to also be one of them, as well as to be able to communicate effectively with the consumers (Ogah & Abutu, 2022).

In achieving the aim, it is essential for message senders to fully understand the concept of the theory and its mix as believed by Aristotle, McCarthy & Hatcher (2002) as follows:

a) Ethos or also known as credibility. The message sender, or hereby the seller, must be able to appear through confidently and controllably, indicating that the message is credible for the receiver to believe. Typically, the establishment of words used may influence credibility, and positive body language may be essential as well. In this context, the seller must be able to persuade their buyers of the beneficials of the products they sell.

b) Pathos. Referring to emotional appeal, the seller should be able to persuade their buyers in which it may relate to them emotionally. This however may need a strong emotional factor to be able to succeed. The usage of visual can also be one of the ways in getting people's emotional reaction towards the message portrayed.

c) Logos. With reference to the seller's logical argument, consumers may need to be persuaded by facts or statistics prior to accepting the message received. Seller must be able to provide evidence or testimonials/feedback from previous consumers, in that way potential consumers can be confident in purchasing the product.

2.6 Research Gaps

Prior to writing the literature review and further exploration of the subject, the researcher concludes that there were limited resources available online specifically for this research topic, such as limitations on the past research paper that could be related to persuasive verbal communication, audience engagement and consumer exhibitions in Brunei. Despite that, the researcher hopes that with this research, it will enable readers to further understand how public perceptions and persuasive verbal communication may have an impact towards audience engagement in consumer exhibition in Brunei Darussalam.

3. Methodology

This research study utilised a qualitative approach to further explore public perceptions and to gain in-depth insight into their experiences or opinions through a non-numerical data analysis (Ugwu & Val, 2023). The researcher implemented a phenomenology design that focused on human phenomenon elements involving how they perceived their live experiences (Gill, 2014). In this case, live experiences were based on the public's experiences prior to attending the consumer exhibitions and the interactions being made throughout the event. With that, it enabled the researcher to further understand and gain more insights into what the public may have experienced; whether the exhibitors employed persuasive verbal communication, or the strategies used in ensuring that there was an engagement between each other that affected the audience's decision-making.

Additionally, this also recognised the importance of audience engagement through the interpretation of public perception.

3.1 Study Population

Prior to designing this research study, a purposive sampling technique was used to obtain specific information needed. According to Shaheen et al. (2019), this sampling technique will allow the researcher to observe the potential participants first before selecting them that would be compatible in answering the in-depth questions prepared. By having specific targeted participants, it was convenient for the researcher to obtain information related to the study, despite each participant may have a different viewpoint towards the questions asked. However, with this technique, it may also limit the participants to a specific group of individuals drawn for this study.

The criteria considered for the participants were those who are aged between 20 – 40 years old, attending events with their family, partner or friends; both male or female and in this case; a consumer who purchases products. The reason for this selection, specifically the event attendees, was because as they are experiencing the live event, it allowed the researchers to explore their perceptions during the event and understand how communication may be important in this context. The participants throughout the data collection were 10 participants that attended consumer exhibitions. According to Marshall et al., (2013), a sample size of 10 participants can be appropriate for exploratory studies and can allow for in-depth insights. Each participant may have different preferences and interests, as those who prefer food vendors may have different perceptions of retail exhibitions.

3.2 Methods

The process of collecting data in this study was based on the primary data collection through semi-structured interview sessions with ten (10) participants from event attendees. Although the collection time was a longer period than secondary data, primary data would be more accurate as the researcher was actively involved throughout the process of collecting the data needed for the study. Hence, with phenomenology qualitative approach, it allowed the researcher to explore what the public perceived from the experiences they have faced while attending the exhibition, based on the usage of persuasive verbal communication techniques from the exhibitors (Badil et al., 2023).

The semi-structured interviews were flexible and allowed the researcher to question more in-depth or with follow-up questions based on the participants' answers during the interview session (Saunders et al., 2019). However, there were challenges in conducting interviews as it was time-consuming, and participants may also feel reluctant to provide honest feedback (Adams, 2010). Despite that, it enabled the researcher to further understand what the participants felt and perceived throughout attending the event. It was also quite difficult to acquire participants as there could be refusal of participation where they felt it was not a compulsory contribution (Brandt & Zaidman, 2022).

The semi-structure interview was conducted in an English language, however where the participant may not be comfortable, Malay language was also used where it was translated during the transcription. The questions asked include their expectations, experiences and perceptions throughout the event and how it could relate and affect the engagement between the audience and exhibitors. The interview sessions took place roughly about 5 – 20 minutes or depending on the participants' answers and were conducted at the selected consumer exhibitions. The information collected could be significant for this research study or any other future studies related to this communication-based, and how it could benefit the event organisers to implement and understand their audience better. The reason of choosing only semi-structured interview was to maintain clarity in the study design which would make it easier to manage and interpret data. This has allowed the researcher to enhance the overall quality of research in-depth findings and insights that could align well with the objectives of research study.

3.3 Data Analysis

In addition to the semi-structured interviews conducted, the researcher ensured that the findings will be credible as well as reflecting the participants' experiences. Prior to the interview, the researcher asked for the participant's permission to record the interview session, as well as taking notes while collecting the data. This enabled the researcher to tally the data collection, as well as to track any assumptions that may interrupt the process and analysis. After the semi-structured interview, the researcher conducted a transcription process and

subjected to a thematic analysis using Nvivo software, where it was categorised according to the themes and coded accordingly.

4. Results

The findings from the semi-structured interviews were organized into several key themes using NVivo software according to the research questions. A total of 5 themes were found that could provide insights into the role of public perceptions and persuasive verbal communication in audience engagement during consumer exhibitions in Brunei.

4.1 Interpersonal Communication

The first theme that derived is interpersonal communication, where three (3) subthemes were found to be categorised under the theme including friendliness, forcefulness and limited interaction.

4.1.1 Subtheme 1: Friendliness

One of the most expressed factors from participants was friendly interpersonal communication from exhibitors. Many have highlighted the importance of exhibitors being friendly, which would make them easily approachable. They agreed that having a friendly behavior could also set the tone for the interaction, where it could create a welcoming environment and encourage positive audience engagement.

Several participants shared that friendliness behaviour translated into a warm and accommodating manner where exhibitors were available to assist them when someone showed interest:

“For vendors, I think it's the friendly communication. Like not too overly friendly, like in your face, but more accommodating, like if they see you seeing their products, they're there to assist you or they're there to help.”- Kim

Another participant, Roy has also emphasised that friendliness must not be underestimated, stating “Friendly is definitely the top of the priority... Friendly is equivalent to kindness and politeness.”, which highlighted that it is a form of respectful communication that would create comfort for the attendees. Additionally, participants agreed that being friendly would also reflect that the exhibitors would make them more interested in knowing more about their products and services where they can ask questions freely without feeling pressured or judged. As shown in excerpts below:

“I like friendly, a mixture of friendly and informative. So, you can like ask questions like a friend, you know, without actually thinking what to say.”- Athera

“I really like a really warm, friendly, not too cold, very warm welcome and very informative. They know what they're selling.. then they know how to persuade me to buy it in a good way.”- Amirah

4.1.2 Subtheme 2: Forcefulness

Forcefulness was another factor that emerged from interpersonal communication where several participants reported feeling uncomfortable and disengaged when exhibitors were being aggressive and pushy.

“In terms of force way, like they force you to buy something, that one I would be more likely to avoid.”, - Farah

“If they're like too pushy for you to like come to their booth even though you already say no.... that's a major turn down and turnoff.”- Athera

“If the sellers are being too pushy trying to promote their products.... you're definitely not promoting the products, but you're just being desperate. That discourages me from engaging those types of vendors.” – Roy

Attendees would appreciate it if the exhibitors could read their body language and adjust accordingly to avoid the feeling of discomfort.

“They have to be more conscious about their surroundings... If they know that the customer already feel uncomfortable right, they have to change straight away like how they want to engage with that customer. If they know they are being forceful, perhaps tone it down.” – Amal

“Force pulling is not necessarily a good idea”. – Dan

4.1.3. Subtheme 3: Limited Interaction

The third subtheme identified by the participants is limited interaction, which may arise due to overcrowding or understaffing. Most participants expressed their frustration when booths were overcrowded or lacked sufficient employees that could attend them.

“The booth has a lot of people but they don't have enough staff.. It actually demotivates me or discourages me to go to that booth because I feel like I'm just wasting my time, just waiting for me to be served.”- Farah

“Usually if they have too many people lining up, I would usually avoid that.” – Kim

“Sometimes, if you think vendors are famous, viral, long queue, can't really control then automatically turn off. Half an hour, double queue and then definitely move on to the next.” - Jack

4.2 Theme 2: Promotional and Interactive Tactics

Another important factor to be considered emphasised by the participants is the use of promotional and interactive tactics that would attract them to engage further including promotional offers, free giveaways and interactive elements such as lucky draws.

“For me, if there's promos in the booth, like buy two free one or like freebies, so I think that's what makes it engaging, or like free samples. So basically it's just the promotions.” - Hana

“Firstly, I would always see the deals they offer that usually attracts me to engage with the booth.”- Amirah

Two participants agreed that special deals could attract them and may play an important role for them to decide before engaging and stopping by the exhibition booth. Not only promotional offers, but other participants also agreed with other tactics to be implemented.

“It's particularly because usually they have some sort of attraction using the Lucky Draw events and they have sometimes when it comes to shops, well-known shops, they usually do have a discount when they're coming for the expo so I guess that's what attracts me the most.”- Roy

“I think another one would be like giving free popcorn. But freebies must be related to their product as well. So that we remember it more and then it's familiar to us. So I think that would increase brand awareness, brand familiarity, and brand identity as well.” – Farah

“If we pay with pocket, let's say, we are entitled to a discount of \$2. That method is very effective because especially the Bruneians like discounts or promotions. Like to hear less discounts, buy one, free one, try to get involved with the IT system.” - Jack

“If the area is too crowded, I would say I would go away from that area. So if that thing is already crowded, right? So you go there, you want to find these items, but then hard to find salesperson because it's too overcrowded.” – Amal

4.3 Theme 3: Informative Language and Product Knowledge

Another theme that emerged was the importance of informative language and product knowledge for the exhibitors, especially when the brand or exhibitor is unfamiliar to the public.

“Sometimes, if the company is something new, for myself, I would be asking questions, like what company is this, what services do you offer?” - Jack

“Persuasiveness is very important. Somehow customers who never knew about the product would gain interest.” - Dan

“Definitely informative communication style because as a first-time client, It really helps to have someone explain what they're doing or what they're selling.” – Kim

“I just expect them to be informative of what are the prices of the product, what promotion they have.” - Hana

Most participants agreed that they would expect the exhibitors to provide clear information about their business that would set the tone for the audience to engage and be interested. In this context, being informative may not just be about answering inquiries but would also spark curiosity for the attendees to know further about the products and services offered.

“Yeah, to have knowledge about whatever they're selling. Because it's pointless if you ask them questions, they say, oh, I need to ask my this, I need to ask my that. So, too much reference at the end of the day. You don't get the answer straight away.” – Amal

“To have knowledge about the product or services they offer. And then, so that they can answer any question.” - Athera

In addition to being informative, participants have also highlighted the importance for the exhibitors of having knowledge of their products and services offered. They agreed that it would be easier to communicate with the exhibitors if the employees have proper product knowledge where they can answer any inquiries efficiently.

“Giving education to your customers is one thing for your product, but understanding more about your consumers' issues would solidify your sales.” – Dan

“You can be not persuasive if you have, if you equip well enough with information, some people will open up their minds.” - Jack

4.4 Theme 4: Communication Attributes

Another theme that emerged from the participants is the effective communication attributes, where several key subthemes as their expectations include confidence, tone of voice, clarity and politeness, reflecting the audience's interest in communicating with the exhibitors.

4.4.1 Subtheme 1: Confidence

A recurring attribute among most participants was the significant importance of having confidence in communication where it could create credibility and reliability.

“If you're not confident with selling, so I am not confident with buying.” - Athera

"If you're not confident on your product, then I would be more, I will be reluctant to buy it." - Farah

"If you are not confident enough, then how could you persuade the customer." - Dan

While other participants also highlighted the importance of having confidence in the way exhibitors know what they are doing, what they are promoting and the way they present themselves.

"I guess it's the confidence and the way how you project yourself by body language, presenting yourself as the exhibitors or vendors because you're not just presenting you but you're presenting where you're working with or if that's your shop, then definitely people will judge you." – Roy

"Of course they need to be confident, so you have to be really engaging with your customers. That's how you draw them to your booth." – Amirah

"They need to be confident. They really know what they're doing. They're very passionate about what they're selling." - Missy

"They need to be confident in how they present themselves, including their items. They need to know what they are selling, basically. You definitely need to know your stuff and that's how you can confidently tell the consumers what you have to offer."- Amal

4.4.2 Subtheme 2: Tone of voice

Participants also agreed that tone of voice will be another significant factor in shaping good attributes for the exhibitors, in the way they speak that could affect how attendees feel when approaching their booth. A warm and friendly tone of voice would make the audience comfortable, while negativity may create a barrier in communication.

"The tone of voice must be warm, very friendly. So once you're being friendly to a customer, the customer will feel like it's very comfortable to communicate with them and to get to know your products." – Amirah

"I feel like for me, I'm very sensitive to people's tone when they speak. If they sound condescending or they don't want to talk to you, it kind of turns me off from their booth." – Kim

4.4.3 Subtheme 3: Clarity

Participants also emphasised clarity as another component of a communication attribute. This is because attendees would expect exhibitors to deliver information in a clear and relatable manner about their products.

"Clarity is also important, especially I'm the type of person who, you know, if you sell something, I need to know first how it is relatable and applicable and also usable to my life." – Farah

"If I don't understand what they're saying so I kind of just leave with a 50-50 mindset, whether it's worth it or not." – Kim

Therefore, these statements would suggest that unclear message will only discourage the intention of the attendees to understand more about what the exhibitors are trying to deliver.

4.4.4 Subtheme 4: Politeness

Politeness reflects respect for the audience and may contribute to a positive experience. It may serve as the foundation for mutual respect as people want to be treated in a kind way and it could also enhance further engagement.

"I would say they know how to speak to the customer politely, not really judging on whatever you said and they take into account what you asked for." - Amal

"It's very, I would say, as a seller or a vendor, they need to, oh yeah, politeness is definitely a thing. Yeah, there you go. Being kind and polite to consumers." - Roy

4.5 Theme 5: Influence of First Impressions and Branding

Another dominant theme that emerged was the influence of first impressions and branding. When interviewed, participants highlighted several subthemes that may contribute to their decision of engaging with exhibitors.

4.5.1 Subtheme 1: Perception of company values

Participants have highlighted how their perception of company values shaped by their reputation could influence their interest and trust.

"You will know if they all have the same attitude. That means that is the SOP given by the company to tell the staff to do so. So in a way, if they are too engaging that means the company is asking them to do." - Hana

This indicates that how the employees behave would reflect professionalism and reliability. Participants have also agreed that poor branding or bad reputation may play a role in public perception, preventing attendees from visiting the exhibitors' booth. As highlighted,

"At first, I would come to her booth because it was viral at that time. And then after the controversy or drama, I'm less likely to actually go to her stall because it feels like the controversy is just a way to get attention. It's not genuine." - Farah

"So before that pop-up, there was a scandal between her and the company, so it kinda reflects how we see her brand. It doesn't look like it's a legit or there's something they are hiding." - Kim

With that, it shows how important it is to have a good reputation for companies to sustain engagement and long-term loyalty. Not only that, but with clear branding, it may also give customers confidence in the products. As noted by participant, Dan *"It is important now to have a good reputation for a company. If it's being tarnished, your image of company, then you basically influence your customer not to take, not to purchase your product or services."*

"So basically I would say you have to maintain good reputation, good image, good communication skill." - Amal

"Definitely branding as a way of how they present their company. Because I feel like if they have a branding, that means they understand what they're selling and what they stand for." - Kim

4.5.2 Subtheme 2: Word of Mouth

Word of mouth also emerged as a dominant theme of branding and first impressions, where participants highlighted its significance in influencing behavior.

“They have to be trustworthy. Word of a mouth, for example. People say it's good and I'm willing to check it out.” – Missy

“I firmly believe that word of mouth is a very effective form of marketing, in terms of confidence, clarity, the way you project yourself to customers is a free service of marketing.”- Dan

5. Discussion

5.1 Important factors in audience engagement

With regards to the important factors to consider in engaging with audience at consumer exhibitions, several themes have emerged where most participants have agreed and highlighted during the semi- structure interview sessions. One of them would be interpersonal communication, where participants constantly highlighted the importance of how the exhibitors communicated and presented themselves during the exhibition. One of the subthemes categorized under this theme was friendliness, the most expressed factor of effective interpersonal communication. They believed friendly exhibitors would indicate a warm welcome which would promote audience engagement, where this also aligns to existing literature suggesting that interpersonal warmth could significantly improve customer experience. (Baker et al., 2002).

The participants declared that friendly interactions would encourage them to ask further questions without feeling judged and making it easier to communicate as friends. It has also been agreed that having a friendly attitude could show as a form of respect for the exhibitors, creating comfort for the attendees. Hence, it is important for exhibitors to consider training their employees in having a friendly approach that could balance professionalism with approachability. In this way, it could enhance audience engagement and potentially increase sales, as attendees noted a greater interest in products/services they offer when the engagement felt genuine and accommodating.

Despite being friendly, another factor that needs to be considered by the exhibitors would be the avoidance of forcefulness. Participants have expressed feeling discomfort with any aggressive selling tactics which could result in disengagement. This finding resonates with research on consumer behavior, which shows that high-pressure sales tactics often backfire, leading to negative perceptions of the brand (Smith & Johnson, 2021). This issue was often highlighted where being forceful would make attendees avoid going to the booth, therefore, it would not allow any engagement to be made with them. Exhibitors must be able to recognize the importance of reading attendees' body language and to adjust their approach accordingly, in ensuring more positive engagement experience.

The excerpts stated by the participants not only seem ineffective, but with this tactic it could damage the exhibitor's image and, in this sense, being forceful would only drive attendees away and not attract their attention. This could also suggest that emotional intelligence and adaptability in communication are important to be known by exhibitors, as the key takeaway of being persuasive shall be respectful and subtle to attendees' comfort level to allow them to engage more rather than push them away.

Furthermore, the frustration expressed by participants in the findings regarding limited interaction arises due to overcrowding or understaffing would result in attendees feeling neglected, ultimately would affect their willingness to engage. This is because, when there are too many people in a limited space, it would make it harder for attendees to go around and visit the booth. Not only that, given that when the booth is understaffed, attendees would feel like they are wasting time waiting for it to be attended by salesperson. Eventually, participants felt that these would discourage them from engaging in the booth and pursue another booth with lesser crowd. It is believed that this could be the major barrier to audience engagement as they would feel easily discouraged in communicating with exhibitors, hence it is an important factor for the companies to take into consideration when being in an exhibition. This echoes findings from event management literature, which highlights the importance of adequate staffing and space management in enhancing visitor experiences (Martins et al., 2020). To address this issue, it would be suggested that exhibitors must plan by ensuring

adequate staffing and possibly implementing crowd control measures, to ensure engagement and making attendees feel valued.

Another theme found in the findings was promotional and interactive tactics where most participants agreed that attractive promotional offers such as discounts and freebies could significantly influence their decision to approach exhibition booths. This finding confirms the effectiveness of promotional strategies in attracting consumer interest, as highlighted in marketing research (Aghighi, 2015). Exhibitors should be able to implement this strategy by designing attractive promotions that could resonate with their target audience, additionally integrating interactive elements such as games or free giveaways that could enhance visitor experiences. In this way, it could make the visit to booths more memorable, where it not only attracts the attendees but could also create excitement for them to stay longer at the booth.

5.2 Public expectations before attending consumer exhibitions

In answering the second research question, one of the recurrent factors that emerged in the findings was informative language and product knowledge. Participants have expressed their desire to receive clear, concise information about the products or services, particularly from unfamiliar brands. This need for clarity underscores the role of informative language in building trust and credibility, as consumers are more likely to engage with knowledgeable exhibitors (Samuel & Kamal, 2020). With that, undeniably it is important for companies to prioritise training to their employees in ensuring they have a deep understanding of the products and services offered, that could eventually simplify better communication and enhance customer confidence in their purchasing decision.

Another theme that emerged from the participants in occurrence to the second research question is communication attributes, where several subthemes can be categorized such as confidence, tone of voice, clarity and politeness, which could reflect the attendees' interest in communicating with the exhibitors. Participants have highlighted the importance of having confidence in exhibitors where they could be perceived as more credible, enhancing their possibility of improving their sales. This finding aligns with research suggesting that confidence can significantly influence consumer perceptions and decision-making (Liang et al., 2022). While exhibitors are confident, attendees will most likely purchase their products or services. As one of the participants has mentioned, if the exhibitor is not confident, they would be reluctant to buy it.

In addition, participants also noted that tone of voice significantly impacts their comfort level during engagement. A warm, friendly tone was associated with positive experiences where attendees would feel comfortable and welcoming, while negativity could discourage engagement as it creates a barrier in communication (Bahrain et al., 2023). This finding suggests that exhibitors should be mindful of their verbal delivery, as it can shape customer perceptions and interactions.

Exhibitors should consider incorporating tone training into their staff development programs, ensuring that team members can effectively communicate warmth and approachability through their voice. While toning their voice, it should also emphasise clarity and politeness in enhancing both customer experience and engagement, whereby during exhibitions, first impressions may matter significantly. Participants have expressed frustration with unclear messaging, such as not knowing what the promotions are or what products they are offering. Hence, clear messaging may help to avoid the risk of misunderstandings, where exhibitors can convey their message in a straightforward manner, encouraging easy engagement and decision-making process. With politeness, as Brunei is seen to be a respectful country, this attribute contributes to a positive experience where it could leave a lasting impression, making attendees more likely to return to the brand in the future (Saxena, 2017). Exhibitors must ensure their employees are well-equipped with training and skills in engaging with attendees respectfully and clearly, tailored to what are needed and expected of them to foster meaningful connection

5.3 Strategies contributing to audience engagement

To further discuss, answering the final research question of how the key strategies of public perceptions and persuasive verbal communication will contribute to audience engagement. In building strong connections with potential customers, most participants highlighted the influence of first impressions and branding which focuses on company values, word of mouth, visual design and credibility. During the interview, participants highlighted how their perception of company values shaped their reputation may easily influence their interest and trust. That includes previous bad or good reputation, where people tend to talk about it and eventually

affect their mindset of whether to support or avoid the products, in any manner. Reflection of professionalism and reliability may also affect their decision, as it indicates whether the attendees would want to pursue engaging with the exhibitors. Therefore, this finding aligns with the research indicated that a positive reputation could significantly improve consumer behavior and brand loyalty (Kumar & Sathish, 2021). As per mentioned previously, with good experience will result a strong brand loyalty, hence it is important that exhibitors are to practice a good company reputation.

With that, exhibitors must prioritise building and maintaining a positive brand image, to ensure good relationship with their customers allowing positive audience engagement during exhibitions. This would also involve consistency of communication of their values and missions, especially when people tend to influence others through word of mouth, where this remains one of the most persuasive elements that could impact consumer behavior. Participants indicated that recommendations from sources could significantly impact their willingness to engage with exhibitors. Hence, when customers have good experiences from an exhibitor, they will influence others by sharing their experiences and this would eventually bring more crowds to the exhibitor. This highlights the importance of influencing customer testimonials and encouraging satisfied customers to share their experiences (Liu et al., 2020). Post-event feedback surveys could effectively gather insights and encourage attendees to share their experiences and thoughts. This could allow exhibitors to recognize positive feedback that can further motivate satisfied attendees to spread their experiences, or any negative feedback that could be improved for future exhibitions.

Another factor that has been highlighted by the participants on their perception is the importance of visual design involving the booth setup and staff visual that would attract their attention and contribute to audience engagement, where they agreed that a well-designed booth can significantly enhance engagement. Research shows that visual elements can influence consumer perceptions and behavior (Neve et al., 2021). It can indicate that a lasting first impression can be made through the design of a booth that effectively communicates the brand's value, as agreed by participant P9. As mentioned, although the product is unfamiliar or unknown, when the booth is designed nicely it can easily attract the eyes and eventually get their attention to visit the booth. This will result in active audience engagement and allowing attendees to further inquire about the products. Additionally, with a well-designed booth, it will come with a good staff visual too, in ensuring enhanced audience engagement. As highlighted by Amirah, when the employees are well-dressed and organised, this factor could affect the decision for attendees to engage with them. This could show attendees that the company is well-prepared and holds a value where they would want to present to the public. Therefore, it is vital for exhibitors to invest in professional booth design that could reflect their brand identity while also focusing on being visually appealing in general, including the use of color schemes, graphics, organised displays in drawing attendees' attention.

Furthermore, the final factor that emerged during the semi-structured interview was the credibility and persuasion of exhibitors in contributing to audience engagement. This theme highlights the need for exhibitors to build trust for the attendees through effective persuasive verbal communication. Participants have emphasised the importance of being convincing, especially for the new customers, where they are not familiar with the products, hence they would need to know more about what is being offered. This aligns with research on persuasive communication, where it suggests that credibility may significantly influence consumer decision-making (Kumari & Maan, 2022). With that, exhibitors should focus on developing strategies for persuasive communication that can highlight their expertise and what attendees can benefit from buying their products. For instance, providing previous testimonials could also be one of them, where new customers could eventually see what they can expect from purchasing the products. Not only that, but exhibitors may also share success stories or implement storytelling where they could demonstrate the effectiveness of the products, without being forceful. It could provide potential customers with the ability to see what others have benefited from the product, where they could be more likely to engage and consider making the purchase (Mandung, 2024).

5.4 Discussion based on theoretical framework

The role of public perceptions and persuasive verbal communication towards audience engagement at consumer exhibitions is significant, especially in Brunei context. The insights derived from the semi-structured interview have been categorised into five key themes: interpersonal communication, promotional and interactive tactics, informative language and product knowledge, communication attributes and first impressions and branding. This discussion will further explore how these themes align with the theoretical framework of AIDA model and Aristotle rhetorical appeals of Ethos, Pathos and Logos.

5.4.1 AIDA Model

As mentioned in previous literature review, AIDA model outlines the stages where a customer goes through a purchasing decision making process which is Attention, Interest, Desire and Action. Theme 5, the influence of first impression and branding highlights the importance of visual appeal in terms of booth set-up and staff, where first impressions could be crucial in attracting attendees' attention. For instance, a statement agreed by participant Dan, "If it's visually appealing, then you get instant interest to visit the booth". Not only that, but branding will also play a significant role in capturing attendees' interest, where the company's reputation will influence their perception on how well the company present themselves. Once exhibitors have captured attendees' attention, they should be able to gain their interest.

With that, participants have highlighted the importance of theme 3, informative language and product knowledge, where they would be more likely to engage if they were to receive clear, concise information about the products offered. As stated by participant Athera, "To have knowledge about the product or services they offer. And then, so that they can answer any question." Understandably, attendees would lose interest once they ask questions but are not answerable by the exhibitors, hence this would potentially make them lose customers. Additionally, the use of persuasive language may also enhance interest, as quoted by participant Dan, "Persuasiveness is very important. Somehow customers who never knew about the product would gain interest.". This statement indicates that with effective persuasiveness, it can gain more curiosity and for the attendees and encourage them to inquire about the offers.

Furthermore, with desire, it is important for exhibitors to consider turning the interest in attendees into a willingness for them to make the purchase. This aligns with theme 2, promotional and interactive tactics, where strategies such as discounts or interactive elements like lucky drawing, games could significantly contribute to generating more desire for the attendees in purchasing. As stated by participant Hana, "For me, if there's promos in the booth, like buy two free one or like freebies, so I think that's what makes it engaging, or like free samples. So basically, it's just the promotions." This reflects how promotional offers could improve the perceived value of the products and enhance the desire to purchase them in return for discounts or free giveaways. The final stage of AIDA model is action, where a purchasing decision is to be made by the attendees. This could be aligned with theme 1, interpersonal communication where the way exhibitors interact could influence their decision to act. Positive interpersonal communication characterised by friendliness may encourage attendees to engage further. Additionally, the avoidance of forceful tactics may be crucial where participants agreed that it could lead to feeling discomfort and would provide them with a negative experience eventually will stop them from making a purchase.

5.4.2 Aristotle Theory

Aristotle's theory of rhetoric; Ethos, Pathos and Logos may also play a vital role in persuasive communication. For ethos, it could be aligned with theme 4, communication attributes, where it is important for the exhibitors to build credibility, in a way of feeling confident and improving product knowledge. As stated by participant Athera, "If you're not confident with selling, so I am not confident with buying." This highlights that confidence could build trust and reliability for the exhibitors, where they can effectively present their products with proper knowledge in a well manner.

Furthermore, for pathos, it could also be aligned with theme 1; interpersonal communication, where emotional connections can affect consumer behavior. Participants emphasised that friendliness and warmth may result in positive interaction, hence giving them a feeling of comfort and easy communication with the exhibitors. Meanwhile, for logos, it also can be aligned with theme 5: influence of first impressions and branding, as logical reasoning is important in persuading attendees. The power of word of mouth could eventually make the attendees check out the exhibitors, given that they have a good reputation. This could come from a good experience from another customer, who would eventually talk about it to others. Therefore, understanding these models could create a more engaging and persuasive experience that can attract attendees' attention along with building and maintaining long-term relationships.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this research has provided valuable insights into the impact of public perception and persuasive verbal communication on audience engagement at consumer exhibitions in Brunei Darussalam. Through qualitative approach of the semi-structured interview with event attendees, several key themes have emerged

that highlighted between exhibitors and consumers that resulted on effective engagement strategies. Five (5) themes have emerged in the findings including interpersonal communication, where it was emphasised on the importance of friendliness, avoidance of being forceful and limited interaction. Promotional tactics also emerged as crucial contribution to audience engagement, where it could significantly influence attendees' decision to visit the booths and make purchases. Other than that, interactive elements such as free giveaways or promotional offers can also enhance engagement experience, giving audience a positive experience and making them more likely to explore the booth longer. Understandably, implementing a clear and informative language could also contribute to being persuasive where participants agreed that it could be one of the factors that they are more likely to engage with the exhibitors. This clarity could also help to avoid any misunderstandings and to encourage attendees to engage with them confidently. Therefore, it is important for exhibitors to implement training programs for their employees specifically in providing them a platform to understand their products further.

While this study offers significant insights, its limitations include a small sample size and focus primarily on verbal communication at consumer exhibitions context. Therefore, future research could expand the sample and explore non-verbal communication elements as well as the influence of digital platforms such as Instagram. To conclude this research study, understanding and implementing effective verbal communication strategies could be crucial for exhibitors to enhance audience engagement at consumer exhibitions that can build trust and meaningful long-term relationships with attendees, ultimately consumer loyalty.

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