



Restaurant experiences triggering positive electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) motivations

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ABSTRACT

This study empirically examined which restaurant experiences trigger customers to engage in positive electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), where the quality of restaurant service (food quality, service quality, atmosphere, and price fairness) is the antecedent of eWOM communication. The results of this study suggest that (1) restaurants' food quality positively influences customers to spread positive eWOM, motivated by their desire to help the restaurant; (2) satisfactory restaurant experiences with service employees triggered positive eWOM, motivated by the need to help the restaurant or to express positive feelings; (3) a superior atmosphere in restaurants elicited positive eWOM motivated by a concern for others; and (4) price fairness in restaurants did not drive restaurant customers toward eWOM. Additionally, this study investigated sources of positive eWOM and types of eWOM media used among opinion leaders in the restaurant industry to enhance the practical implications of the study regarding online marketing. Because of the small number of opinion leaders in the study sample, specifying who the opinion leaders were (the source of eWOM) and the type of eWOM media the opinion leaders used had no effect. Further discussion and implications are provided in the text.

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1. Introduction

Word-of-Mouth (WOM), informal communication between consumers over particular products or services, is considered one of the most important sources of information at the point of purchase because WOM has a powerful impact on customers' actions (Litvin et al., 2008). With the advancement of Internet technologies, World Wide Web-based WOM (eWOM or electronic word-of-mouth) has become widely available. Today, customers are able to publish their thoughts, opinions, and feelings about products and services online either by directly emailing the organization concerned or by writing on blogs (Schinler and Bickart, 2005). Thus, eWOM extends customers' choices for gathering information about products and services from other customers. In other words, the electronic environment serves as an innovative venue for gathering reliable information. Unlike traditional WOM, eWOM spreads more widely and rapidly due to eWOM's unique characteristics. In particular, eWOM is directed at multiple individuals, is anonymous and is available at any time (Litvin et al., 2008). Consequently, the potential impact of eWOM on customers' decision-making processes can be more powerful than the impact of traditional WOM.

As the importance of eWOM increases, understanding customers' eWOM behavior has become more useful to managers, especially marketing professionals. To investigate the specifics of eWOM behaviors, researchers studying online consumer psychology have focused on how eWOM influences customers' decision-making processes. However, fundamental and essential studies regarding who spreads eWOM and what media they use have not yet been undertaken. Further, researchers have not yet studied customers' motivations for disseminating eWOM feedback online, even though understanding these motivations could enhance managers' and corporate decision-makers' ability to encourage eWOM. Therefore, this eWOM study intended to explore who writes and disseminates eWOM, what type of eWOM media is used, why customers decided to engage in eWOM and what motivates customers to do so.

According to a study on consumer behavior, consumption experiences produce influences that act as powerful sources of human motivation (Westbrook, 1987). Sundaram et al. (1998) suggested that consumption experience and motivation are closely related in the process of WOM transmission. In particular, consumers' underlying motivations to engage in WOM differ depending upon the nature of the consumption experience. In essence, WOM and eWOM have significant conceptual similarities in terms of interpersonal influence (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004); therefore, the idea that different motivations for WOM can be generated from different consumption experiences is applica-

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ble when investigating eWOM communication motivations as well.

The impact of eWOM in the hospitality industry is especially strong. Intangibles such as restaurant services cannot be evaluated before the consumption experience; therefore, purchasing intangible products and services brings a higher risk, so customers are more dependent on the interpersonal influence of eWOM (Lewis and Chambers, 2000). Despite the significant impact of eWOM in hospitality-related industries, especially in the restaurant segment, little research has been done to investigate eWOM in this field. Moreover, there has been no study devoted to identifying who engages in eWOM and with what type of media, and no study has investigated what drives restaurant customers to use eWOM to communicate about their restaurant experiences with others. Understanding the motivation for positive eWOM communication is especially important for business owners because positive eWOM communication may increase customers' intent to purchase. According to a study done by Dichter (1966), positive WOM is likely to increase customers' purchase intentions for new products because it reduces the risks involved in the purchase. Another study showed that positive WOM can help create a favorable image of the company and its brand and can eventually reduce promotional expenditures (Arndt, 1967; Sundaram et al., 1998). Moreover, the unique characteristics of eWOM communication may leverage the power of positive eWOM to influence customers' decision-making processes. Understanding what motivates customers to spread positive eWOM may enhance the ability of managers to restructure their restaurants in a more customer-oriented way in order to elicit eWOM and, as a result, increase customer visits. Finally, identifying the sources of positive eWOM in the restaurant industry would be helpful for restaurant managers who want to direct their promotional efforts more efficiently. Through opinion leaders who initiate eWOM, restaurant managers are empowered to disseminate an image of the restaurant to potential clients.

Therefore, the primary objectives of this study were to: (1) propose a theoretical model that focuses on the relationships between restaurant experience and the motivation to engage in positive eWOM; (2) empirically examine which restaurant experiences trigger customers to engage in positive eWOM; and (3) investigate the sources of positive eWOM and the types of eWOM media used among opinion leaders in the restaurant industry.

2. Literature review

2.1. Word-of-mouth (WOM) and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM)

Word-of-mouth is a process that allows consumers to share information and opinions about a specific product, brand, or service in order to direct buyers toward or away from the product, brand or service (Hawkins et al., 2004). During the early days of WOM studies, Arndt (1967) defined WOM as face-to-face communication about products or companies between people who were not commercial entities. Similar to Arndt (1967), Harrison-Walker (2001) defined WOM as "informal, person to person communication between a perceived noncommercial communicator and a receiver regarding a brand, a product, and organization, or a service." Despite the fact that the two definitions were written several decades apart, the definitions of WOM have remained very nearly the same, suggesting that the term has been settled in the minds of academics and practitioners.

With the advancement of Internet technologies, increasing numbers of consumers are using the Internet to seek information about a product or a company, and eWOM has emerged as a result. Litvin et al. (2008) developed the definition of eWOM from the tra-

ditional concept of WOM: "all informal communications directed at consumers through Internet-based technology related to the usage or characteristics of particular goods and services." The definition delineated by Litvin et al. is somewhat broad; a more focused definition limiting the extent of the eWOM category and specifying the extent of eWOM providers and receivers was provided earlier, in 2004, by Hennig-Thurau and two other researchers. Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) defined eWOM as "any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company which is made available to multitude of the people and institutes via the Internet."

The differences between WOM and eWOM are found primarily in the media used; WOM is typically face-to-face and eWOM is online. With the advancement of technology, the physical place in which this type of communication takes place has changed from face-to-face to cyberspace. This change of medium underscores the distinct difference between traditional WOM and eWOM, which has to do with scope. The high accessibility of eWOM means that it can reach millions of people, will exist for a long period of time, and can be found by virtually anyone interested in the particular products or companies. Furthermore, because the distinctive characteristics of eWOM allow web users to develop virtual relationships and communities, united groupings of critics are able to exert power over a company. On the other hand, if eWOM information is posted anonymously online, traditional WOM communication becomes more credible. WOM is an effective means of disseminating an opinion because it is usually given face-to-face in conversation between people who are familiar with each other and share some credibility as acquaintances or friends. Body language and voice intonation can also reinforce the message. For example, who can forget a negative restaurant review that includes a tongue sticking out in disgust or a positive one that includes eyes rolled heavenward in remembered ecstasy (Mazzarol et al., 2007).

2.2. eWOM opinion leaders and the media

Traditional WOM originates from opinion leaders, people who are "interested in particular product fields and who make an effort to expose themselves to mass media sources and are trusted by opinion seekers to provide knowledgeable advice" (Litvin et al., 2008). Usually, opinion leaders have more experience with or knowledge about a product category through direct exposure to the product or research about it. In addition, opinion leaders are more likely to display innovative behavior than opinion seekers and tend to show a higher level of involvement with the product category (Henderson and Lyons, 2005).

In their study on dimensions of opinion leadership in different product categories, Myers and Robertson (1972) noted that opinion leaders have more interest in or knowledge about certain products and are more likely to discuss those products with others. They also found that opinion leaders have social leadership and active social involvement, which empowers them to influence other, rather than being influenced. However, while opinion leadership is related to knowledge, interest, and discussion, it does not significantly depend on social leadership or innovative behavior.

Any person can be a WOM opinion leader for an opinion seeker: close friends, family members, relatives, acquaintances or even strangers (Litvin et al., 2008). However, the scope of WOM's influence on purchase decisions is relatively small in comparison to the impact of eWOM. The greater scope of influence is related to the unique characteristics of eWOM communication. Moreover, at a minimum, eWOM leadership requires computer competency on both sides (Henderson and Lyons, 2005).

According to a study done by Henderson and Lyons (2005), within the computer-mediated environment eWOM opinion leaders have specific characteristics that differentiate them from

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