The Effect of Online Restaurant Reviews on Diners' Visit Intention: A Comparative Analysis of Expert vs. Peer Reviews

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ABSTRACT

Taking advantage of restaurant review websites enables customers to exchange each other's information and opinions toward their restaurant experience. Online reviews have been an influential role for decision-makers, yet little is known about the impact of diners' evaluation and adoption. The purpose of this study is to determine how online restaurant reviews affect customers' decisions to choose a restaurant. Online users who have experienced restaurant review websites will be participated for its empirical investigation and collected data will be analyzed using structural equation modeling. It is expected that reviews with reliable articulation and more recent and sufficient information will contribute to customers' visit to restaurants. The study findings will help restaurateurs construct proper marketing strategies to encourage diners' intentions to visit and to minimize negative online reviews.

Keywords: *online restaurant reviews, argument quality, information quality, source credibility, information usefulness, visit intention*

INTRODUCTION

Within the past decade, the Internet has become one of the most effective and commonly used communication media (Lagrosen, 2005; Namkung, Shin, & Yang, 2007; Woisetschläger, Hartleb, & Blut, 2008). This new paradigm has revolutionized the way people share and acquire knowledge due to its low transaction cost, lack of geographical restrictions, and easy access to abundant information (Jepsen, 2007; Porter, 2001; Rabjohn, Cheung, & Lee, 2008).

For better dining experience in which consumption experience is heavily intangible and heterogeneous, customers are willing to refer to online reviews to avoid potential risk or uncertainty over food/service quality as well as to gain additional information (Bearden, Netemeyer, & Teel, 1989; Bickart & Schindler, 2001; Cash, 2005; Heskett, Sasser, & Schlesinger, 1997). These reviews are a readily accessible and prevalent form of eWOM (i.e.,

electronic word-of-mouth) and are, in fact, a determinant to customers' purchase intentions and actual behaviors (Chatterjee, 2001; Park, Lee, & Han, 2007; Bai, Law, & Wen, 2008).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

An online review is an interactive venue to share product or service information (Bei, Chen, Rha, & Widdows, 2004) and to voice personal opinions either as recommendations or complaints regarding previous experiences (Chatterjee, 2001; Park et al., 2007). There are two different restaurant review systems: peer-created reviews (e.g., dine.com, Urbanspoon.com, and yelp.com) and expert-created reviews (e.g., Michelin Guide). The reviews by peers or users are perceived to be trustworthier than those provided by marketers or experts toward a specific product or services in terms of its individual relevance (Bickart & Schindler, 2001; Chiou & Cheng, 2003; Huang & Chen, 2006; Smith, Menon, & Sivakumar, 2005) although peer reviews are perceived to be less professional (Mitchell & Dacin, 1996).

Information quality or argument quality and source credibility have proven to have direct influences on customers' perception toward usefulness in the virtual platform. When an individual perceives online reviews for restaurant products or services as highly informative and credible, he/she will consider it as a useful source and incorporate it into his or her purchasing decision (Olshavsky, 1985; Cheung et al., 2008).

As stated, online reviews appear to play an influential role in customers' decision-making process because they provide indirect experiences with products and/or services (Bickart & Schindler, 2001; Gretzel & Yoo, 2008; Park et al., 2007). However, little is known about how customers evaluate and adopt online reviews. Therefore, it is worthwhile to explore the extent to which online reviews influence information seekers' willingness to visit the restaurant.

The purpose of this study is to investigate how online restaurant reviews affect customers' decisions to choose a restaurant. Specifically, this study aims to 1) examine the extent to which information quality and source credibility influence diners' usefulness perception, and 2) evaluate the determining role of the information usefulness on diners' visit intention. This study further plans to test which type of online restaurant reviews encourages customers to adopt the information.

METHODOLOGY

Data collection and participants

In order to corroborate the proposed relationship, a survey will be employed. Survey participants will be randomly selected among individuals who have visited restaurant review websites. Before the data collection, an approval to use human subjects will be obtained from

Institutional Review Board at the institution where the researchers work. Invitation letters to encourage participation in the study will be sent directly to potential survey respondents.

Instrument development

Validated measures will be adopted from previous research. In the first section of the questionnaire, information quality (i.e., relevance, timeliness, accuracy, and comprehensiveness) will be assessed. The relevance will be evaluated on appropriateness and applicability of reviews (Citrin, 2001). Timeliness (i.e., current, timely, and up-to-date), accuracy (i.e., accurate, correct, and reliable) and comprehensiveness (i.e., sufficiently complete the needs, include all values, and include sufficient breadth and depth) will be constructed with three items adopted from Wixom and Todd (2005).

Source expertise and trustworthiness (Wu & Shaffer, 1987) will be modified and assessed with two items each. The questions for source expertise are: "People who left online reviews in XXX are knowledgeable in evaluating quality of food and restaurants" and "People who left online reviews in XXX are experts in evaluating quality of food and restaurants." Source trustworthiness will ask if they are trustworthy and reliable.

Usefulness of online reviews will be adopted from Bailey and Pearson (1983)'s three items: valuableness, informativeness and helpfulness. The purchase intention scale will evaluate participants' intention to visit the restaurant with the following questions: "I would dine out at the restaurant", "There is likelihood that I would eat at the restaurant", and "I would try the restaurant."

At last, demographic and general questions (e.g., gender, age, education levels, income levels, extent of usage) will be asked. Participants' 'Webographics,' measuring Internet usage behavior of web users, will be adopted from Namkung et al. (2007)'s study. All items will be measured on 7-point Likert scales ranging from "1" being "Strongly disagree" to "7" being "Strongly agree" except demographic and general questions.

Pilot study and data analysis plan

A pilot study will be administered targeting 50 college students at a Midwestern university, and they will fill out the online questionnaire. Reliability of measurements will be evaluated using Cronbach's alpha. The instrument will be revised based on the results and feedback from the pilot test.

Structural equation modeling (SEM) will be used to investigate the proposed relationships among variables. For the following step, the moderating effect of the types of reviews will be tested using multiple group comparison technique. Finally, descriptive statistics will be used to report participants' demographic and general information.

CONCLUSION

The main findings will be that first, the information quality and source credibility of online reviews have a positive effect on the usefulness of information. Next, the usefulness of online reviews will have a positive effect on diners' visit intention. Finally, customers using peer-created reviews will be affected by the credibility of information whereas customers using expert-created reviews will be affected by the expertise of information. The results will draw managerial implications to construct proper marketing strategies including reliable articulation, more recent and sufficient information, and the increase of restaurant awareness to bring out more customers' visit to restaurants.

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