

SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS AND ELECTRONIC WORD OF MOUTH: THE COMMUNICATION IMPACT ON RESTAURANT PATRONIZING.

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ABSTRACT

Innovative forms of digital communications using blogging, vlogging etc. has led to wider recognition and acceptance of social media influencer marketing by business entities. The purpose of this study is to explore the characteristics of electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM) generated by food blogging, that have an impact on consumers when they seek out the reviews by social media influencers to make dining decisions. More precisely, the study identifies four independent variables; Expertise of Source (EX); Popularity of Source (PO); Convenience of Information (CO) and Familiarity of Source (FA); and examines its impact on consumers' Intention to Purchase (IN). The study starts off with a discussion of coming of digital marketing communication, allowing traditional word of mouth marketing to evolve into electronic word of mouth. The study followed quantitative methodology and the data was gathered using self-administered questionnaires. 353 usable responses were received, and the data were statistically analyzed using SPSS. The results shows that the consumers' intention was strongly impacted by familiarity of source and convenience of information, while the correlation is low for expertise of source and popularity of source. The findings fill in the lack of studies in this area, specific to food and beverage industry in the geographical context and provides marketers a clearer picture of what is being valued by the consumers, when they seek out opinions by the social media influencers. This in turn helps their decision making when choosing food bloggers as part of their social media marketing strategy.

Keywords: social media, eWOM, social media influencer, food blogging, purchase intention, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

Communication and information technologies has witnessed phenomenal changes in the recent past and this has undoubtedly impacted the way business activities are undertaken. With more and more consumers adapting to the ease of the digital world, marketers embrace digital technology to pursue innovative ways to communicate and engage with the prospective consumers (Kim et al., 2021). Electronic communication channels, social media and word-of-mouth have become preferred channels to reach potential consumers more efficiently (Poturak & Turkyilmaz, 2018). It is estimated that the global number of social media users will grow to 3.29 billion users in 2022 and hence it is not a matter of surprise that marketers have turned their attention to social media as one of the most important marketing communication channels (Appel et al., 2020).

Traditional word-of mouth (WOM), which normally involved physical/face to face communications and interactions, has gradually transitioned into electronic word-of mouth (eWOM), thanks to internet revolution (Siddiqui et al., 2021). In eWOM, individuals use social media and other online platforms to share their experiences and opinions about different products and services that they have experienced (Shashikala et al.,2020). Many of them have developed a large following, and have the capability to influence potential consumers' attitudes and behaviors. They are considered as opinion leaders, or more aptly, 'social media influencers' (Vrontis et al., 2021). Statistics shows that around 50% of internet users follow and rely on influencer accounts in social media (Digital Marketing Institute, 2019). This has led to marketers engaging in 'influencer marketing', reaching out to influencers to promote their product in return for free products and other benefits (Harrison,

2017; Vrontis et al., 2021). It is not surprising that around 86% of marketers incorporated influencer marketing strategy in 2018 and it is expected that the trend is going to grow further (Rahal, 2020). This enables marketers to camouflage their advertisements through influencer endorsements and get the message out to the market more effectively (Hudders et al., 2020; Lee P-Y et al., 2021). Studies shows that around 82% of consumers would follow an influencer's suggestion, as they are perceived to be more knowledgeable and credible compared to corporate advertisements (Berger and the Keller Fay Group, 2016, Vrontis et al., 2021). Consumers also readily regard the opinion of an influencer, as it is usually the information they have searched for, rather than marketing advertisements that are being bombarded on them. However, with so many opinions available online, it is up to the consumer to decide which opinion they value or trust the most. Hence from a marketer's perspective, it is important to identify the factors that the consumers value most about the influencers, before engaging influencer marketing.

Food blogging has become very common these days where food connoisseurs and restaurant patrons write and review about their dining experiences on internet platforms, attracting and influencing the dining decisions of many food aficionados (Puspita & Hendrayati, 2020). Thus, blogging has indirectly become a valuable marketing and brand development tool in the food and beverage industry. Of late, it has become a common practice for restaurants and other food and beverage businesses to engage influential food-bloggers and use their audience to raise the visibility and acceptance of their products and services (Lee P-Y et al., 2021). This study investigates the distinct characteristics of eWOM created by food blogger turned influencers that may have an impact on consumers' intention to purchase, in the restaurant industry. The study was undertaken in southeast Asian context and the country chosen was Malaysia. Aiming at the population most engaged in eWOM, 353 university students and white-collar employees in and around cosmopolitan Klang Valley were studied to understand what characteristics of influencers influenced their purchase intention while deciding on what to eat and where to eat.

While there have been many studies conducted worldwide, exploring the impact of eWOM on purchase intention, very few focused on food and beverage industry. Majority of the studies focused on travel sector, examining travel intentions of consumers based on eWOM (Leong et al., 2021; Mohammed, 2016; O'Reilly et al., 2016; Reza Jalilvand et al., 2012; Shamhuyenhazva et al., 2016; Wang, 2016). Few studies were conducted in Malaysia on the topic, but again the focus of most of them was on its impact on travel intentions (Hua et al., 2017; Mohd Isa et al., 2019; Septianto & Chiew, 2018). A few of these have been specific to students in the country of Malaysia (Kwok et al., 2016), and none have looked into its effect specific to the food and beverage industry. Hence this study was undertaken with a focus on eWOM impact on restaurant sector in Malaysia. The study intends to address the following research questions:

1. What are the characteristics of eWOM that may have an influence on consumers' intention to patronize restaurants?
2. What is the nature of relationship between these influencing factors and intention to patronize?
3. Which factors influence the consumers' intention to patronize restaurants?

The conceptual model explores the impact of independent variables like Expertise of Source (EX); Popularity of Source (PO); Convenience of Information (CO) and Familiarity of Source (FA) on the consumers' Intent to Purchase (IN). The study is aimed to understand and analyze the impact of these independent variables on the consumers' intention to patronize. It is anticipated that the results will add to the pool of existing knowledge on eWOM from the perspective of the consumer, and through it, understand how marketers can utilize the knowledge to enhance their marketing strategies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is often a probability that a new product or service may not meet the consumer's expectations, or they are not very sure about it, and they may choose to alleviate that risk by seeking knowledge and information on user experiences from existing consumers of the product or service (Pihlaja et al., 2017;

Simonson & Rosen, 2014; Smith et al., 2005). Many studies establish that WOM plays a significant role in influencing a consumer's purchase decision-making process (Brown & Reingen, 1987; Wulff et al., 2015). Until recently, it was traditional WOM that influenced consumer's purchase decision making process where consumers reach out to close family and friends for opinions before they would make a purchase decision (Nam and Dân, 2018; Nielsen, 2012). The advent of the internet, and subsequently social networking sites, brought in significant changes in the way consumers made their decisions and how marketers implemented their strategy (Kwon et al., 2021; Siddiqui et al., 2021).

Digital marketing offers technology enabled ways for reaching out and engaging with target consumers (Kim et al., 2021) usually done so using emails, social media and eWOM (Poturak & Turkyilmaz, 2018). What sets apart WOM from eWOM is the medium used, the internet. While traditional WOM usually takes place between the existing known network of a consumer, eWOM is usually from unfamiliar sources (Bronner & Hoog, 2010; Cheung & Thadani, 2010; Xie et al., 2011). In fact, it is the social media which really contributed to the popularity of eWOM as it has now become an integral part of people's lives (Shashikala et al., 2020). Studies shows that prospective consumers believe that the information posted by other consumers are more credible than the advertisements or information posted by the marketers (Kwon et al., 2021). In Malaysia, the percentage of internet users have risen to 88.7% in 2020, compared to 87.4% in 2018. The most common medium for accessing the internet in Malaysia has been through smartphones, where 98.7% of Malaysia's internet savvy population relied on smartphone enabled internet access with WhatsApp and Facebook being the most frequently used social media platforms (Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, 2020).

An increasing number of consumers today rely on online restaurant and food reviews to collect restaurant information and opinions about the dishes served, before they head out to dine (Kwon et al., 2021). Many more take it to social media to share their own positive or negative experiences for others to read as well.

But very few academic studies were conducted in this geographical region, on this topic. A closer look at the few studies undertaken related to the food and beverage industry, most have explored a variety of perspectives related to eWOM (Leong et al., 2021; Park, 2017; Schuckert et al., 2016; Yang, 2016) but very few examined it from the perspective of influencers' qualities and abilities. Specific to Malaysia, among various studies conducted on eWOM (Leong et al., 2021; Septianto and Chiew, 2018; Wan Ismail et al., 2019), travel industry has been the one that's most prominent (Hua et al., 2017; Leong et al., 2017; Mohd Isa et al., 2019). Restaurants need to take advantage of these opportunities as eWOM has the capability to drive consumers in either direction and hence this study.

The influencers chosen to promote a brand should have a good fit with the product category or brand. Greater the attachment/fit an influencer has to a product, the higher the consumers' trust towards the influencer and thus, a positive influence on their intention to purchase (Nam & Dân, 2018, Vrontis, 2021). Normally marketers use celebrities to act as their brand ambassadors. But studies have shown that lesser-known online influencers could play a bigger role than celebrity ambassadors in swaying the consumer behavior through their reliable and credible channels (Appel et al., 2020; Hudders et al., 2021). Social media bloggers are perceived as being more credible, believable, knowledgeable, or better at getting product information across, resulting in 82% of consumers being 'highly likely' to follow the recommendations of an influencer; compared to only 73% of consumers listening to an average person's recommendations (Berger & The Keller Fay Group, 2016). But with so many voices on the internet, a consumer has to make judgements based on their own evaluation on the trustworthiness of eWOM sources.

Does the influencer's expertise on the topic have a major impact on consumer's purchase decision making? Study results are equivocal. In the case of electronic products, expertise was sought after but in the case of movies, games or books, influencer's expertise did not play an important role (Hu, et al., 2014; Lin et al., 2013). It may not be the quality of content

created but rather the quantity that might impact the consumer's purchase decision. In service sector, studies conducted in the travel and tourism industry shows that consumers chose to trust the opinions of real consumers who had previously visited and experienced the location (Coursaris et al., 2017; Mohammad, 2016). Studies also shows that influencers' expertise encourages consumers to more readily like and share the information leading to wider coverage (Chang & Lu, 2015). Some cross-cultural studies even shows that the level of impact of expertise on purchase intentions can vary between nationalities and cultural contexts (Cho & Chen, 2016). As the results of many studies shows equivocal results, it is essential to explore this relationship specifically in food and beverage industry in Malaysia. Hence the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: The level of the influencer's expertise positively influences the consumer's purchase decision

Influencers usually focus on a specific niche that they take interest in. Through their content, social status, expertise, and credibility, they are able to make a quicker connection with their followers and thus thought to be more trustworthy about their liking for a specific product (Appel et al., 2020; Vrontis et al., 2021). Consumers normally turn to eWOM when they are about to make a purchase decision (Shashikala et al., 2020). In the food and beverage industry, the number of online reviews has a significant effect on the restaurant's performance (Kim et al., 2016). It has been seen that the greater number of followers an influencer has / comments a post has, higher will be the impact on the consumers decision making (Hudders et al., 2021). When faced with multiple reviews, posts that receive more engagement, comments and are of better quality are considered more trustworthy, by the consumers (Chang & Lu, 2015; Lin et al., 2013). Studies carried out on popularity shows a variety of interconnecting factors that could influence the consumers' intent to purchase, rather than just the popularity element alone (Hudders et al., 2021; Vrontis et al., 2021). Some studies showed negative correlation between the popularity of the influencer and the consumers' intent to purchase (Romero et al., 2011). Popularity could just be a reason for

the consumer for reaching out for information from the particular influencer, rather than influencing the purchase decision. (Park et al., 2007; Romero et al., 2011). As there is no conclusive evidence on this relationship, that can be generalized across regions, we posit the following hypothesis:

H2: The popularity of the social media influencers positively influences the consumer's purchase decision.

The biggest advantage of eWOM is that its medium, the internet, is not limited by time duration, and hence the information will be available for extended periods of time. Information availability has never been as convenient as it has become, through the growing use of the internet and consumers often choose channels that provide them the quickest form of information (Bang et al., 2013; Gupta et al., 2004; Verhoef et al., 2007). There have been numerous studies carried out examining the effect of searching convenience on a consumers' decision making, but not many studies were conducted exploring the impact of the Convenience of Information (CO) on Intention to Purchase (IN), especially in the food and beverage industry. With the development of eWOM and ease of information availability, it would be interesting to see how often consumers were influenced to make a purchase if they have easy and ready access to information. This will be tested in the next hypothesis:

H3: The convenience of information availability has a positive influence on the consumer's purchase decision

When it comes to the element of trust, potential consumers primarily choose to trust people they know, followed by anonymous influencers and lastly corporate advertising (Nielsen, 2012). There are numerous studies showing that a consumer will always prefer the opinion of someone they personally know, over an anonymous source or advertisements (Brown et al., 2007; Cheung et al., 2007; Cheung et al., 2009; Schindler & Bickart 2012). It is also seen in studies that trust towards an influencer increases with familiarity (Hudders et al., 2021; Pihlaja et al., 2017). In the case of eWOM, consumers develop familiarity towards influencers over time even if the sources are not known to them earlier (Steffes

& Burgee, 2009). This familiarity can have a positive impact on intention to purchase. The strength of the relationship between the consumer and influencer decides the level of trust between them (Koo, 2016). In this study, the relationship between familiarity of eWOM source and purchase intention will be further explored. It is thus hypothesized that:

H4: The familiarity of the eWOM source positively influence the purchase decision.

METHODOLOGY

The study takes a positivist view and hence used quantitative methodology. As the study focused on users of social media who were impacted by eWOM, regions densely inhabited by white collar employees and students were primarily targeted. Convenience sampling was used as the authors felt that the representativeness of the sample is less critical with the wider generalizability of the study. Primary data was collected using self-administered

during the pilot study, edits were made to the questionnaire and the questionnaire was distributed to the identified sample. Cronbach's alpha was calculated to test the reliability produced satisfactory results of values above 0.70, indicating that the questionnaire has satisfactory internal consistency reliability and can be proceeded with data collection.

FINDINGS

A total of 371 responses were received, of which 353 were deemed valid for the study. 50.7% of the valid responses were male while the remaining 49.3% were female. Majority of the responses fell in the age range of 18-24, making up 83.9% of the participants. 22.4% of the respondents had formal education at foundation/diploma level, 62.6% had undergraduate degree and 15% had post graduate qualifications.

The correlation analysis gives a measure of the strength and direction of a relationship between two variables (Brace et al., 2016). For

Table 1. Correlation Analysis

		Independent Variables				
		IN	EX	PO	CO	FA
Dependent Variable	Pearson Correlation	1	.284**	.286**	.311**	.400**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000	.000	.000
IN	N	353	353	353	353	353

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

questionnaires. Questionnaire were adapted from existing literature and used deductive technique for item generation. The first section included basic demographic questions related to age, gender, and level of education. The second section consisted of a series of eighteen items, where the respondents had to indicate the extent to which they agreed with each statement based on a 5-point Likert scale. These items were arranged into five groups according to the variables under consideration.

The questions were aimed to understand the impact of the independent variables: Expertise of Source (EX); Popularity of Source (PO); Convenience of Information (CO); Familiarity of Source (FA) on the dependent variable, Intent to Purchase (IN). The questionnaire went through a pilot testing with 30 respondents. Based on the responses received

parametric data, the Pearson's correlation coefficient is the most widely used method for calculating correlation coefficients. To measure the relationship between the independent variables: Expertise of Source (EX); Popularity of Source (PO); Convenience of Information (CO); Familiarity of Source (FA) on the dependent variable, Intent to Purchase (IN), 2 tailed Pearson correlation analysis was undertaken. The results are shown in Table 1.

Based on the results, all the Independent Variables (EX, PO, CO, and FA) have a positive correlation with the dependent variable, IN. According to Brace et al. (2016), r values between 0 to .20 are weak, whereas those ranging between .30 to .60 are of moderate strength. Consequently, it can be deduced that although the correlation coefficients of all the IVs against the DV are

positive, they are at best of moderate strength. Multiple regression analysis was then applied to identify the group of independent variables which together have the most effect on, or power to predict, the score of the dependent variable (Brace et al., 2016). The dependent variable was regressed against the independent variables (EX, PO, CO and FA) and a significant model emerged. The adjusted R² value is considered herein as it takes into account the sample size and adjusts for any overestimation in the R² figure.

Table 2: Model Summary^b

R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Std. Error of the Estimate
.456 ^a	0.208	0.199	0.275
a Predictors: (Constant), FA, CO, EX, PO			
b Dependent Variable: IN			

The results show a R² of .208, which shows that the independent variables (EX), (PO), (CO), (FA) explains 20% of the variance in consumer's Intention to Purchase (IN). The *F* value is significant at *p* 0.000, meaning that the group of independent variables does create a significant effect on the dependent variable.

Expertise of Source (EX) and Popularity of Source (PO) do not contribute significantly towards influencing consumer's purchase intention. The table also shows that all the beta coefficients are positive. A positive beta coefficient implies that, for every 1-unit increase in the IV, the DV will increase by the beta coefficient value.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The results shows that familiarity of source has the strongest impact on intention to purchase. Familiarity of source has been a major influencer of intent to purchase since traditional marketing era (Nam & Dân, 2018; Nielsen, 2012). Hence it is not surprising that it would translate into eWOM, in the digital marketing era. Existing literature shows that consumers prioritize opinions of friends and family, followed by anonymous sources such as influencers and lastly marketing advertisements when it comes to making purchase decisions (Hu, 2015). Koo, (2016) emphasized the strength of a relationship, the stronger the ties, the higher the impact on the consumers' purchase intention. Familiarity in the digital context can be explained as 'following an influencer's account', 'appreciating their content', 'having similar

Table 3. Coefficients^a

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	Hypotheses
	B	Std. Error	Beta			
(Constant)	0.648	0.068		9.511	0.000**	
EX	0.038	0.021	0.099	1.798	0.073	Reject
PO	0.031	0.021	0.085	1.511	0.132	Reject
CO	0.074	0.021	0.179	3.468	0.001**	Accept
FA	0.100	0.024	0.250	4.198	0.000**	Accept
a Dependent Variable: IN						
** significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).						

At a confidence level of 95%, it was found that (FA) and (CO) are statistically significant predictors (in the order of significance), with a positive relationship to intent to purchase. In the case of EX and PO, the *p*-values are greater than 0.05 meaning that EX and PO are statistically insignificant predictors to intent to purchase. Hence, we conclude that Convenience of Information (CO) and Familiarity of Source (FA), have a significant impact of the Intent to Purchase (IN), while

food interests', 'having similar personalities', or deriving from traditional WOM route, 'knowing them personally'. The findings shows that convenience of information has a strong impact on purchase intention. Convenience has always played an important role in influencing consumers' purchase intentions since the days of traditional marketing, and in fact, it was a major factor in consumer switching to online platforms. Information available on internet is not time

restricted, making it available for extended period of time and is readily available even on the move, on various mobile devices. An interesting finding is that the popularity of the influencer does not play a key role in impacting consumer's intention to purchase, in the food and restaurant industry. Even though some studies reported a negative correlation between popularity of source and consumer purchase intention (Romero et al., 2011), results of most of the previous studies do not align with the current finding as they found a positive relationship between both variables (Chang & Lu, 2015; Cheung et al., 2012; Kim et al., 2016; Lin et al., 2013). The popularity of source may just be a channel to linking with the influencer, rather than a reason for impact, and therefore may only act as a mediatory factor. There can be many other variables that outshine just popularity when looking at the impact on consumers' purchase intention (Park et al., 2007). Similar to popularity of source, the study revealed that expertise of source also does not have an impact on consumers' purchase intention. The result is similar to some of the previous studies which found that expertise of source does not always impact the consumers' intention to purchase (Cheung et al., 2012; Lin et al., 2013). Even if expertise of a source may play a certain role, as in the case of popularity of source, there can be many other factors that are far more significant (O'Reilly et al., 2016). Normally consumers seek out expert advice when the risk in making a purchase decision is high. As with the restaurant industry, the risk involved is minimal when it comes to choosing what and where to eat and this could be a reason why expertise of source does not create a large impact on the food consumers intention to purchase.

The findings will be of immense help to the food and beverage marketers as it provides insights on what is being valued/not valued by the consumers, when they seek out opinions by the social media influencers. This will guide their decision making when choosing food bloggers as part of their social media marketing strategy and will help them in building sustainable relationships with influential food bloggers, leading to positive e-WOM creation.

The study has some limitations, and these may form grounds for further research. First, data

for this research was collected in a one-shot study. Even though care has been taken to have a representative sample, usage of convenience sampling and relatively small sample size might limit the generalizability of findings to a wider population. Future research may consider longitudinal research with a larger sample size to produce more insightful findings.

As studies carried out in relation to eWOM is fairly limited, the authors might have missed out possible variables from a general eWOM environment to one specific to the food and restaurant industry. This might have limited the scope of the study, which could be explored in future research. Although the authors ensured that all the respondents have had the experience of looking for food or restaurant reviews online to aid their purchase decisions, they did not consider whether every respondent 'followed' food bloggers on the social space. The outcome might have been different if the respondents were dedicated 'followers' of bloggers in the social space. This also could be examined in future studies.

CONCLUSION

In the fast-paced digital marketing world, it is inevitable for the marketers to identify all the ways possible to efficiently capture and retain their target market. Social media marketing now has an upper hand in many respects over traditional marketing communication channels and businesses are spending huge sums on ensuring their presence and visibility in social media. Not many studies were conducted in Malaysia, examining the consumers' reasonings towards trusting an influencer on food and restaurant choices, and hence this study was undertaken to examine the impact of food blogging and the resultant eWOM on consumers' intention to purchase. The research concluded that familiarity of source and convenience of information have a strong impact on the intention to purchase. While expertise of source and the popularity of the source have shown no significant correlation. It is suggested to further examine Convenience of Information (CO) and Familiarity of Source (FA) in more depth. For convenience of information, it can be further examined how the consistency and quantity of information could be of benefit. It would also be interesting to look at how influencers could achieve a better sense of familiarity amongst

their followers and how the information they provide can be made more convenient. Familiarity can be examined further, within the scope of 'social eWOM' and convenience of information, can be examined in relation to consistency in the eWOM delivery.

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