

Determinants of electronic word of mouth in the restaurant industry: An evidence from Vietnam

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ABSTRACT

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The food and beverage industry in Vietnam has developed dramatically, resulting in a highly competitive market. To win the competition, the restaurant managers not only strive to increase customer satisfaction but also create customers' positive electronic Word-Of-Mouth (eWOM). This study aims to investigate the relationship between customer satisfaction, customer trust, customer loyalty, and eWOM. The quantitative method was implemented to examine the hypotheses in the research model. Data were collected from Ho Chi Minh City respondents using a convenient sampling method. Self-administrated questionnaires were delivered via the Internet for data collection. After data screening, 299 responses were qualified for analysis. Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) analysis was employed by SmartPLS software version 3.0. The measurement model test showed that one item of customer trust has a factor loading of less than 0.7 as a result, this item was removed from the research model. The structural model evaluation revealed the highly predictive accuracy of the model as all dependent variables have R² values above 0.5. A bootstrapping test with 5,000 subsamples also showed that customer loyalty significantly influences eWOM, but customer trust does not. Customer satisfaction directly and significantly impacts customer trust and loyalty but has little influence on eWOM. However, the relationship between customer satisfaction and eWOM is significant without the presence of customer loyalty and trust. The indirect effect test also determines the full mediation role of customer loyalty in the relationship between customer satisfaction and eWOM.

1. Introduction

The restaurant industry is an attractive sector with outstanding growth rates over the last decades (Yulisetiari, Subagio, Paramu, & Irawan, 2017). However, such a competitive market demands that restaurant managers strike every day to attract new customers as well as retain the current ones (Jalilvand, Vosta, Mahyari, & Pool, 2017). Restaurants have used a variety of strategies to promote their businesses, and word of mouth (WOM) appears to be an effective method, particularly for low-budget restaurants (Jalilvand et al., 2017). WOM is a form of informal communication between customers that has a significant impact on their purchasing decisions

(Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2008). WOM helps spread positive messages about a specific restaurant to new customers and attracts them to come and experience the services. Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM), a development of WOM, has become a powerful and popular means of disseminating information about products or services (De Vries, Gensler, & Leeflang, 2012). In the era of the Internet, diners tend to search for restaurant online reviews before choosing their service provider. Zhang, Zhao, Cheung, and Lee (2014) found that positive online comments create a positive impact on customer behaviors. Based on the psychological stages and emotions achieved through actual experiences at the restaurant, customers publish their thoughts and evaluations about products or services on the Internet (Jansen, Zhang, Sobel, & Chowdury, 2009). Positive online reviews can bring more customers to restaurant entrepreneurs, and negative reviews can help restaurants improve their service quality by correcting negative issues based on actual customer reviews (Stephen & Toubia, 2010). EWOM is found to provide such advantages and it also has different impacts on customers' behaviors in comparison with traditional WOM, so it is necessary to conduct more research on eWOM (Vermeulen & Seegers, 2009).

The effects of eWOM have been studied from many different aspects. Many researchers have identified the determinant factors of eWOM, such as customer satisfaction (Serra-Cantalops, Ramon-Cardona, & Salvi, 2018), customer loyalty (Pratminingsih, Astuty, & Widyatami, 2018), and customer trust (Shi & Chow, 2015). These factors directly and significantly affect the spread of information about products or services on the Internet. Other studies also identified that customers' online reviews were influenced by restaurant experiences (Jeong & Jang, 2011), which in turn was affected by the service environment (DeCelles, DeVoe, Rafaeli, & Agasi, 2019; Liang, Lin, & Liang, 2011). However, according to the eWOM literature review, there is a limitation in research on the antecedents of eWOM in the restaurant industry. Most of the research concentrates on the determinant role of service quality, customer satisfaction, or customer loyalty. Few studies look at the co-effects of customer satisfaction, customer trust, and customer loyalty on eWOM all at once. Thus, this study aims to determine the factors affecting customer eWOM behaviors. Specifically, it focuses on the relationship between customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, and customer trust in e-WOM, as well as examines the mediation role of customer loyalty and customer trust in the effect of customer satisfaction on eWOM in the restaurant industry. The proposed research model is presented in Figure 1.

2. Theoretical basis

2.1. Electronic Word-Of-Mouth

Customers' eWOM behaviors emerged in the 2000s via blogs, messages, or chat rooms, among other channels (Gretzel & Yoo, 2008). Along with the advancement of the Internet, eWOM has been utilized to increase accessibility to many potential customers (Abubakar & Ilkan, 2016). According to Litvin et al. (2008, p. 461), eWOM is "all informal communications directed at consumers through Internet-based technology related to the usage or characteristics of particular goods and services". Customers can share their experiences about the products and services of different businesses on online platforms to create valuable information for inexperienced customers. For example, customers can express their feelings, opinions, and comments about their experiences with a specific destination on many different social networks. Then, inexperienced customers who intend to visit the places may rely on this available online sharing to learn and make their own choices as they believe this information is useful for their decision-making (Ye, Law, Gu, & Chen, 2011).

Another definition proposed by Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, and Gremler (2004) relates eWOM with the positive or negative words from an individual about a product or company on an Internet forum. These statements describe the subjective experiences that customers had with the company's services. EWOM generally includes previous or current customers' comments about the service quality, product performance, or product impression of a product or service provider (Jeong & Jang, 2011). Studies have proved that eWOM has a direct effect on the travelers' decision to revisit (Abubakar, Ilkan, Al-Tal, & Eluwole, 2017) and ultimately affects the profits of businesses (Anagnostopoulou, Buhalis, Kountouri, Manousakis, & Tsekrekos, 2020). Therefore, eWOM has drawn much attention from managers in the service industry.

2.2. Customer satisfaction

The definition of customer satisfaction may have many different interpretations in the literature. Chen and Chen (2010) proposed that customer satisfaction is defined as the comparison of customers' feelings before and after experiencing service. This approach concentrates on customers' emotional states during the service-providing process. On the other hand, Zeithaml and Bitner (2003) stated that satisfaction is the assessment of customers about products and services in comparison with their needs. Customers evaluate a certain service and compare it with their expectations to determine their satisfaction level (Hansemark & Albinsson, 2004). Thus, the satisfaction of clients can be measured by their experience compared with the services provided by the businesses (Othman, Harun, De Almeida, & Sadq, 2020).

The relationship between customer satisfaction and customer trust has been demonstrated in many studies. According to Moliner, Sánchez, Rodríguez, and Callarisa (2007), customer trust is the result of customer satisfaction after using a particular service. The research employed by Song, Wang, and Han (2019) in Korea also found that feeling of satisfaction triggers positive impacts on the brand trust of coffee shops. Entrepreneurs who provide services that meet customer expectations and create positive experiences are more likely to gain the trust of customers (Song et al., 2019). Besides that, customer satisfaction is also identified as an essential motivator to build strong trust with customers (Bowden, Dagger, & Elliott, 2013). Therefore, customer satisfaction has become the basis for establishing customer trust in the relationship between clients and service providers (Hashim & Tan, 2015).

H1: Customer satisfaction has a positive effect on customer trust

Customer satisfaction can help promote good reviews about products and services on the Internet (Yang, 2017). Customers receiving services that fulfill their expectations tend to recommend them to their family and friends. Much research revealed that customers satisfied with products and services could be loyal promoters of positive eWOM (Lii & Lee, 2012; Tsao & Hsieh, 2012). The probability of customers spreading positive words about the business will be high if they are satisfied with the services (Yang, 2017). Customer satisfaction plays an important role in stimulating and promoting eWOM behaviors (Tsao & Hsieh, 2012). The higher the satisfaction level is, the more likely individuals are to make positive references to service providers on social media.

H2: Customer satisfaction has a positive effect on eWOM

Customer loyalty is defined as the practice of repeatedly using the same service or product from the same company. It can be affected by many factors, such as service quality, customer satisfaction, emotion, psychology, etc. Many studies have determined the effect of satisfaction on customer loyalty (Nyadzayo & Khajehzadeh, 2016). Akbari, Mehrali, SeyyedAmiri, Rezaei, and

Pourjam (2019) found that customer satisfaction is one of the most important factors affecting customer loyalty. In line with this point, a study conducted by Dam and Dam (2021) in the Vietnamese market also revealed a strong connection between customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. Customers satisfied with the services tend to repeat their buying behaviors as well as introduce them to their friends (Nguyen, Pham, Tran, & Pham, 2020). Moreover, if customers experience a service that fulfills their expectations and desires, they will come back for more (Bennett & Rundle-Thiele, 2004; Khadka & Maharjan, 2017). A greater satisfaction level can lead to an increase in customer loyalty (Yoo, Huang, & Kwon, 2015).

H3: Customer satisfaction has a positive effect on customer loyalty

2.3. Customer trust

In the social exchange process, trust is an essential element that improves interpersonal relationships (Chen, Lyu, Li, Zhou, & Li, 2017). Trust is the essential foundation of any social relationship, and it becomes more important in the service industry which contains many risks and a lack of certainty (Choi & La, 2013). Trust can be considered a perception of comfort in a relationship, and it depends on the reliability and integrity shown by the partners. Customer trust is only established when customers believe that they will receive the products or services from the providers as expected (Luhmann, 2018).

Customer trust has many definitions, and its effects on customer behaviors also vary depending on the discipline (Laparojkit & Suttipun, 2021). Chu and Kim (2011) identified trust as one of the most important factors affecting eWOM intention. Positive eWOM communication is more likely to increase if the customers have a high level of trust in the service provider (Qu, Kim, & Choi, 2017). Customers who have good relationships with service providers may provide positive reviews about them on the Internet. However, findings from research conducted by Tsao and Hsieh (2012) did not support this relationship. Customer trust in a product or service does not directly lead to customer willingness to spread eWOM unless customer commitment is present. Thus, the relationship between customer trust and eWOM is not consistent. To examine this relationship, the following hypothesis was proposed.

H4: Customer trust has a positive effect on eWOM

2.4. Customer loyalty

Gremler and Brown (1996) defined loyalty as the frequency with which a customer uses a service and expresses positive attitudes toward its provider. Although there are many service providers on the market, customers who are loyal to a specific company prioritize their favorites over others. Customer loyalty is also defined as the degree of certainty about service and the behavior of only using that service (Yoo, Lee, & Lee, 2000). Clients with loyalty to a service or a company seem to give high priority to that company and expose an enthusiasm for spreading useful information (Worthington, Russell-Bennett, & Härtel, 2010). Loyal customers are also willing to spend their time talking positively about their favorite company (Sotiriadis & Van Zyl, 2013). Evidence from the research of Walsh and Beatty (2007) showed a significant relationship between loyalty and eWOM. Individuals with psychological attachment to a specific service provider are more willing to share their positive experiences with others on the Internet (Son, Kim, & Jang, 2012).

H5: Customer loyalty has a positive effect on eWOM

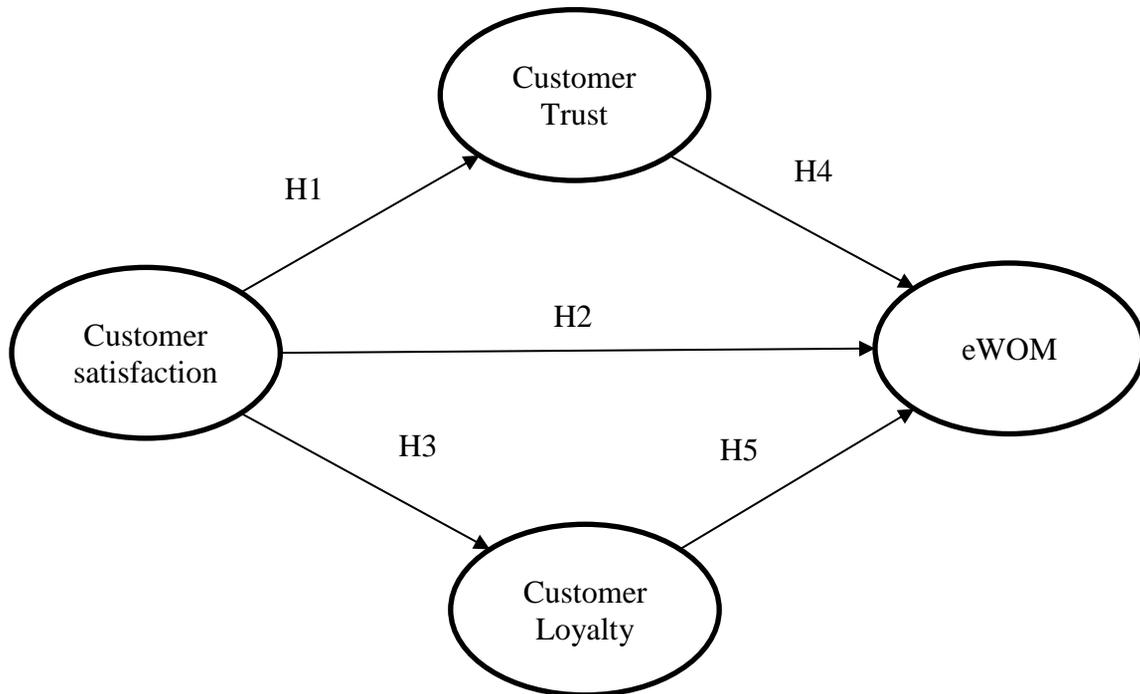


Figure 1. Proposed research model

3. Methodology

3.1. Measurement

Customer satisfaction was measured by 04 items adapted from Kim and Lee (2009); customer loyalty was measured using 04 items adapted from Lee and Kim (2012); customer trust was measured by 04 items adapted from Kim, Lee, and Yoo (2006) and eWOM was measured by 03 items adapted from Mohammed and Al-Swidi (2020). An example of an item used in our survey is “I am willing to let other Internet users know that I am a customer of this restaurant.”. All the items were rated based on the 5-point Likert scale in which 1 represents “strongly disagree” and 5 represents “strongly agree”.

3.2. Sampling and data analysis

An exploratory approach was employed with the quantitative method based on the primary data. For data collection, self-administrated questionnaires using Google Forms were sent to the respondents via the Internet. The respondents were informed about the purposes of research, confidentiality, and academic use of the data collected.

Data collection was conducted from April 2021 to June 2021, and 352 responses were returned. However, 53 of them were not qualified because respondents gave the same answer for all questions or some questions were left unanswered. Thus, the sample of 299 was used for PLS-SEM analysis by SMART-PLS 3.0.

PLS-SEM was proved to be more advantageous than CB-SEM in exploring, predicting, and identifying driver constructs (Hair, Risher, Sarstedt, & Ringle, 2019). The measurement model was evaluated by Cronbach’s Alpha, Composite Reliability (CR), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE), and the structural model was accessed by Fornell and Larcker’s criterion and Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio. A bootstrapping test with 5,000 subsamples was also used to determine the significance of each relationship in the model.

4. Results

4.1. Measurement model assessment

This study collected data from 299 respondents, with females accounting for 70.2%, males accounting for 28.1%, and 1.7% of respondents failing to specify their gender. All the respondents were living in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. The majority of respondents are under the age of 22, accounting for 79.3% of all responses. Thus, the data set may represent the young generation in Vietnam.

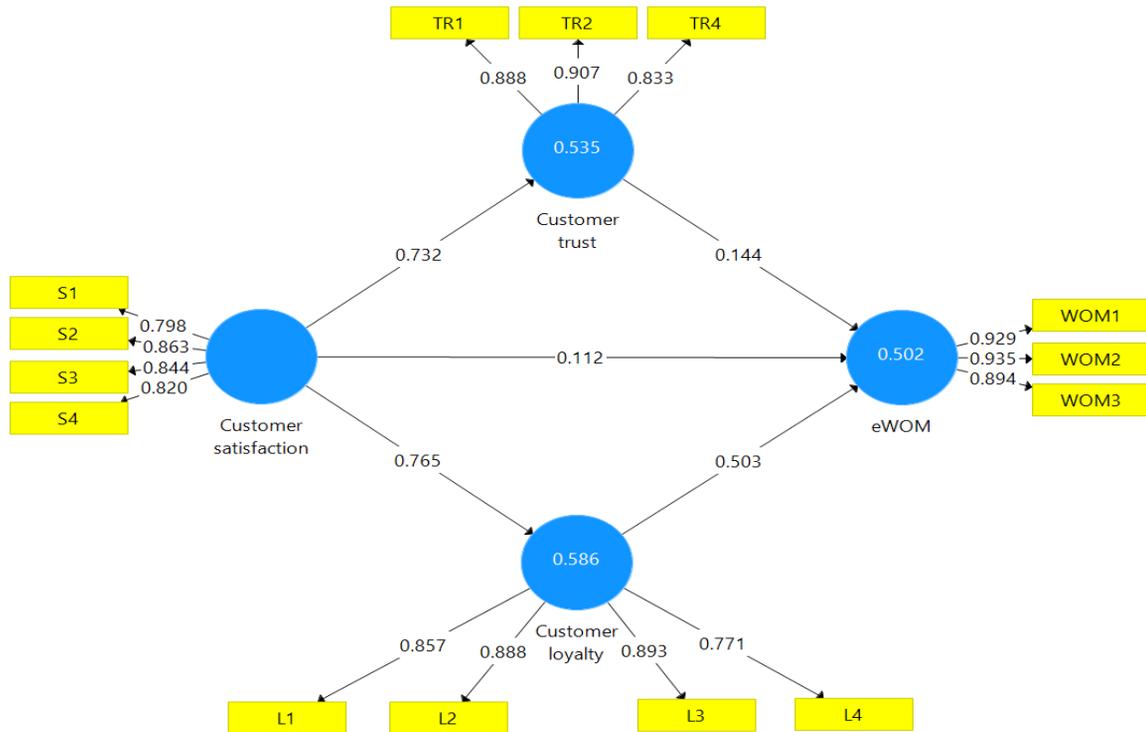


Figure 2. PLS-SEM analysis result

The research model was assessed from both measurement and structural perspectives. The results showed that all items had factor loading ranging from 0.771 to 0.936 which was higher than the threshold of 0.7 (Hair et al., 2019) except TR3 which had a factor loading of only 0.317. As a result, this item was removed from the measurement model (Figure 2). All remained variables had high reliability with Cronbach’s Alpha and CR coefficient ranging from 0.848 to 0.943 above the requirement of 0.7 (Hair et al., 2019). The AVE of each variable determined that convergent validity was achieved as all AVE values were greater than 0.5 (Hair et al., 2019).

Table 1

Reliability and validity test

	Cronbach’s Alpha	rho_A	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Customer loyalty	0.875	0.877	0.915	0.729
Customer satisfaction	0.851	0.851	0.899	0.691
Customer trust	0.848	0.848	0.908	0.768
eWOM	0.909	0.91	0.943	0.846

Source: Data analysis result

The discriminant validity of the measurement model was also examined by Fornell and Larcker's criterion. The square root of the AVE of one variable higher than its correlation with others would determine that discriminant validity is established (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). As can be seen in Table 2, all the variables in the research model were qualified with Fornell and Larcker's criterion. In addition, the HTMT ratio was also employed to assess discriminant validity. Analysis (Table 3) indicated all variables had an HTMT ratio lower than 0.9, which confirmed the discriminant validity of this model (Henseler, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2015).

Table 2

Discriminant validity - Fornell and Larcker's criterion analysis

	Customer loyalty	Customer satisfaction	eWOM
Customer loyalty			
Customer satisfaction	0.886		
Customer trust	0.855	0.856	
eWOM	0.777	0.68	

Source: Data analysis result

Table 3

Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) analysis

	Customer loyalty	Customer satisfaction	eWOM
Customer loyalty	0.854		
Customer satisfaction	0.765	0.831	
Customer trust	0.734	0.732	
eWOM	0.694	0.602	0.92

Source: Data analysis result

4.2. Structural model assessment

For structural model evaluation, this research implemented the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) and R^2 value. The VIF of all items in this research had a value less than 5.0 (Table 4), indicating that multicollinearity was not an issue in the structural model (Hair et al., 2019). Besides, customer trust, customer loyalty, and eWOM had R^2 values of 0.535, 0.586, and 0.502 respectively (Table 5). The R^2 values of all dependent variables were higher than 0.5 illustrating a high level of predictive accuracy (Hair et al., 2019). The research model could explain 53.5% of customer trust, 58.6% of customer loyalty, and 50.2% of eWOM.

Table 4

Collinearity statistics

		VIF
Customer loyalty	L1	2.266
	L2	3.168
	L3	3.334
	L4	1.633
Customer satisfaction	S1	1.623
	S2	2.399
	S3	2.244
	S4	1.835
Customer trust	TR1	2.582
	TR2	2.793
	TR4	1.654
eWOM	WOM1	4.012
	WOM2	4.227
	WOM3	2.302

Source: Data analysis result

4.3. Hypothesis testing

A bootstrapping test with 5,000 samples was employed in this research. Data analysis revealed customer satisfaction had a significant effect on customer trust and customer loyalty ($\beta = 0.732$, $\beta = 0.765$ respectively, and p -values < 0.05) while the relationship between customer satisfaction and eWOM was not supported ($p > 0.05$). Therefore, H1 and H3 are accepted and H2 is rejected in this research. The fourth hypothesis H4 is not supported as customer trust did not significantly influence eWOM ($p = 0.125 > 0.05$). However, the impact of customer loyalty on eWOM was significant ($\beta = 0.503$, $p < 0.05$), so H5 is confirmed. In addition, the mediation test also indicated the full mediation role of customer loyalty in the relationship between customer satisfaction and eWOM with an indirect effect coefficient of 0.385 ($p < 0.05$), while customer trust did not mediate the effect of customer satisfaction on eWOM ($p = 0.132$) (Table 6).

Table 5

Structural model analysis test

Paths	β	SE	P-Values	Decision
H1: Customer satisfaction -> Customer trust	0.732	0.034	0.000	Supported
H2: Customer satisfaction -> eWOM	0.112	0.092	0.227	Not supported
H3: Customer satisfaction -> Customer loyalty	0.765	0.025	0.000	Supported
H4: Customer trust -> eWOM	0.144	0.094	0.125	Not supported
H5: Customer loyalty -> eWOM	0.503	0.082	0.000	Supported

Note: Significant at the 0.05 level

Source: Data analysis result

Table 6

Indirect effect analysis

Paths	β	SE	P-Values	Decision
Customer satisfaction -> Customer loyalty -> eWOM	0.385	0.066	0.000	Supported
Customer satisfaction -> Customer trust -> eWOM	0.105	0.070	0.132	Not supported

Note: Significant at the 0.05 level

Source: Data analysis result

5. Discussion and implication

The research examined the relationship between customer satisfaction, customer trust, customer loyalty, and eWOM in an emerging market like Vietnam. After measurement model analysis, four items of customer trust were reduced to only three because of the low factor loading of item "I am concerned that the service performance will not be worth the money". Customer satisfaction was found to have a significant influence on customer trust. The finding is in line with research conducted by Bowden et al. (2013) and Song et al. (2019). Customers who receive a service that exceeds their expectations are more likely to develop trust in a company or service provider. Meanwhile, results also show that customer satisfaction directly drives restaurant customers toward loyalty, confirming the findings of Akbari et al. (2019) and Nyadzayo and Khajehzadeh (2016). A higher level of satisfaction can lead to more loyal behaviors among diners.

Supporting Sotiriadis and Van Zyl (2013) and Son et al. (2012), structural model testing has determined the significant relationship between customer loyalty and eWOM. Customers who consider themselves loyal to a restaurant are more likely to provide positive comments on the Internet. However, research findings also reveal an insignificant impact of customer trust on eWOM, providing a shred of evidence that supports the study of Tsao and Hsieh (2012). Among Vietnamese young customers, trust in a restaurant does not guarantee a commitment to eWOM behaviors.

Finally, this research discovers the full mediation role of customer loyalty in the relationship between customer satisfaction and eWOM. Direct effect testing showed that without the presence of customer trust and loyalty, customer satisfaction significantly relates to eWOM. This means the more customers are satisfied with the restaurant's service, the more likely they are to share their positive experiences and comments on the Internet. However, this relationship is not significant because of the interference of customer trust and loyalty. The indirect effect analysis found that customer satisfaction has a significant indirect effect on eWOM through customer loyalty but not through customer trust. Thus, customer loyalty is a full mediator in the impact of customer satisfaction on customers' eWOM. This result is understandable as the connection between customer satisfaction and customer loyalty has been established in customer service literature. Satisfied customers can achieve a positive psychological state that ties them to a specific brand or company. This attachment is called loyalty. Loyal customers are more likely to share their experiences with others, especially on social media (Son et al., 2012). For example, customers satisfied with restaurant services tend to have positive attitudes and form loyalty toward the restaurant. The attitudinal loyalty in turn motivates the customers to make good comments or ratings on the Internet.

Managers in the restaurant industry may benefit from the above findings in business management activities. EWOM is an undeniable factor that can bring more customers and profitability to restaurateurs. To increase eWOM behaviors among customers, restaurant managers

may concentrate on improving service quality to guarantee satisfaction can be achieved. For instance, restaurants can improve their food quality, atmospheric quality, and service staff to ensure all of the customers' needs are fully met. In addition, surprises can also be considered to create customer satisfaction. Restaurant managers can offer a special gift if the customers come to the restaurant on their birthday or anniversary.

Instead of focusing on trust, it would be wiser to invest more in customer loyalty programs to raise the level of loyalty among diners. The increase in customer satisfaction and loyalty can contribute amazingly to the widespread of customers' eWOM. For example, restaurants can issue member cards or loyalty cards that allow customers to accumulate reward points every time they visit the restaurant. With a certain amount of reward points, customers can receive a free meal or discount from the restaurant. This kind of promotion can establish a bond between customers and the restaurant and then increase customer loyalty.

This research also has a few limitations. Firstly, the study did not include customer-related factors such as perceived service quality, customer delight, customer experience, etc. in the research model. Future research should consider these variables in research on eWOM. Secondly, the relationship between customer trust and customer eWOM was not proved in this study, and the interaction between them remains inconsistent. Thus, scholars should reexamine this relationship in different sectors, countries, etc., to provide a better understanding of the correlation between these two factors. Thirdly, the convenient sampling technique deployed in this study may lead to some bias in determining the relationship between variables as the representativeness of the sample is not high. Later, research can use a more rigorous sampling method, such as the probability sampling technique in various contexts, to investigate the relationship between the constructs in this research model. Fourthly, the research used a small sample size which can reduce the reliability of the findings, thus future research may investigate larger sample sizes to improve the generalizability of the research sample. Fifthly, some other variables, such as service quality or perceived value, could be considered to expand the research model. Finally, because the data were gathered from a single source via self-administered questionnaires, the common bias variance (CMV) could be present. This may lead to a bias in the relationship among variables in the research model. Therefore, future research should consider implementing either procedural or statistical methods to control CMV issues or using combined research methods (both qualitative and quantitative methods) to increase the accuracy of results.

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