UNDERSTANDING THE IMPLICATIONS OF A TRENDING POPULAR CULTURE: THE ONLINE FOOD REVIEW

Imanuella R. Andilolo
Department of Management, Faculty of Economics and Business, Universitas Mataram
imanuelita@gmail.com

Ikma Citra Ranteallo
Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Udayana
ikmacitra@outlook.com

Abstract

Online food reviews as a popular culture instigated by the propagation of the Internet are an increasing media form used by the consumers to help in decision making: “to buy or not to buy”. Consumers are increasingly relying on Electronic Word of Mouth (E-WOM) or Word of Mouse to help them in their decision making. The willingness of consumers to post their food experiences online and create interactions with others through shared interest has been the catalyst of this new form of popular culture. These readily available information on food experiences through online food reviews have been used by potential consumers as a decision making tool. Understanding the implications of this new form of decision making tool is paramount to the survival of businesses, specifically the restaurant industry. Online reviews are available for many categories of products and services, including hotels, restaurants, books, electronic goods, and games. This popular culture is also becoming the catalyst behind the creation of online review websites and applications. This paper looks at the phenomenon surrounding online food review and its managerial implications on restaurant industry. The study uses qualitative exploratory methods.

Keywords: online food review, restaurant industry, popular culture, decision making, consumer

BACKGROUND

Popular culture is rapidly changing with the invention and diffusion of forms of electronic communication like Internet. In the same time, trend creates a sense of uniformity on way of life. Fabio Parasecoli (2008, 15) questioned on what is the role of food in popular culture. He found eating is the key role in our survival since infancy as a physically intense and complex emotional significance. Meanwhile hunger and the desire for incorporation and appropriation, together with sexual drives, are arguably at the origin of consumption in all its expressions.

Desire for food drives mind, eye, nose, and tongue to grasp at its enchanter. Popular culture gives rise to shared enjoyment at a mere of a “click”. “Culture of click” refers to the ways of life in ordering available goods, in this sense food, by simply an online clicking. Restaurants also run these practices to make it easier to order and deliver food for customers. Stacy Takacs (2015) defines popular culture:
In cultural studies, popular culture refers to what people do with the resources provided by the cultural industries and institutions in their society; how they make sense of and use those resources. (243)

...how does popular culture differ from regular culture, or, rather, what is the value of retaining the adjective “popular” given the collapse of the categorical boundaries discussed above? The quick answer is that the designation “popular” reminds us of our focus—people and their practices of creation, interpretation, and agency...in practice, most studies of “popular culture” are really studies of the ways that mass cultural texts, objects, and performances are created, circulated, and received by individuals in their everyday lives. They emphasize the transformation of mass artefacts into meaningful expressions of personal identity and social belonging...(8)

How does restaurant reside in popular culture? The owners of restaurants run the food industries with their resources: means of production and mode of production in Karl Marx’s school of thought. Internet is paving the way for the availability of online food review websites, while they are creating, producing and sharing so called taste. Taste on food. Sociologically, taste is constructed and differs from situation to situation, group to group. Popular culture manipulates that representation – the processes by which meanings are produced and exchanged through shared sign systems – included sign, text, image, or picture that stands for, or depicts, something else (Takacs, 2015:11, 67).

Food and cooking could bring social cohesion and social images that refer to certain groups or cultures and to certain extent create new groups and culture within the society (Ranteallo & Andilolo, 2016). This unifying interest in food creates pockets in the society whereby knowledge, information and experience are exchanged and shared. This phenomenon has been the catalyst behind the creation of review applications and websites. Sign, text, image or pictures are available as one stop service at online food review websites or application. Moreover, online food review has taken another turn into the realm of reality show. A series called “Say It To My Face” aired on FYI is produced based on negative reviews given to a restaurant by a selected online reviewers. They represent a group of people with distinctive backgrounds with the common shared interest in food.

The marriage of new technology and desire to share common interests has brought about new popular cultures. Online food review having begun its journey as another tool of popular culture has now given important implications to real restaurant businesses. This popular culture needs to be understood by businesses in order to survive. For those reasons, the writers are interested in seeking to understand and explore the topic on online food review and look at the possible managerial implication it has on business.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND DISCUSSIONS

A. Electronic Word of Mouth (E-WOM)

Social media and the web have given access to everybody and anybody to communicate their real life experiences online. This information sharing may not only be consumed by close family and friends but also with the rest of the world. Traditionally known as word-of-mouth information sharing, with the evolving information technology the concept of Electronic-Word-of-Mouth evolved (Zhang, 2010; Jeong 2011). Others dubbed this as Word-of-Mouse (Riedl, Konstan, and Vrooman 2002; Henning-Thurau et al. 2004). In the rise of the electronic era, information gathering has become as easy as a click of a button. An opinion can spread online very rapidly, and numerous forums, chatrooms, and social
networking sites have enabled the sharing of experiences in an increasing number of ways. Social networking sites, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Google+, and discovery-based application, such as Foursquare and Yelp, have seen more used on mobile devices than desktops, which translate into an even rapid access (Strout, 2014).

McMahon (2016) alerts us that word of mouse is, in a sense, an amplified form of word of mouth, because information exchange is so prolific in the electronic medium, and thanks to archiving, it can be even more challenging for businesses to overcome a bad reputation. As with the more traditional word of mouth, word of mouse is built on a solid reputation, and it must be carefully maintained. In the words of Facebook creator Mark Zuckerberg, “people influence people”. Mathewson (2010) emphasized how we rely heavily on the opinions and endorsement (and research) of friends, peers and colleagues. Therefore, the role of traditional advertising and marketing campaigns for many sectors is taking a back seat to the social influence created by online networking. When someone shares their opinion, good or bad, of a particular product or company, it has a viral effect that spreads with greater momentum than any 30-second ad could generate. Because many of us spend more time in front of our computers and mobile devices than our TVs, the power of ‘word-of-mouse’ marketing is immeasurable.

B. Understanding Online Food Review

As early as 1995, Amazon.com provided an option for its customers to post their opinion on a product and these reviews are regarded as one of the most successful features of the Amazon site (Harmon, 2004). Over the years, there has been an increasing number of company websites that provide comment or review sections on products or services they sell online. There are also numerous websites solely dedicated as opinion platforms for any specific type of products or services. Online reviews are available for many categories of products and services, including hotels, restaurants, books, electronic goods, and games. By making it easier for consumers to spread their words, and facilitating access to such opinions, various opinion websites have shown a profound effect on consumer purchase decisions (Zhang, 2010).

Online food review websites are media platform that connect potential diners with many other diners. With the ease of internet access in many parts of the world, potential customers have easy access to information on food experiences by previous customers at any particular restaurants around the globe. All a potential customer has to do is to Google the name of a restaurant in mind or an area where they planned to dine for a list of restaurants, and view the number of star rating that particular establishment has along with the comments or reviews provided on that website. For a savvy internet searcher or for those that belong to an imagined community – a community that exists only because people believe they exist, or insist they exist (Salaman, 1997) – of food lovers, such needed information can be accessed directly through established food review websites or applications.

Yelp.com is among the review websites most researched on the topic of online food review. It was founded in 2004 and has more than 102 million reviews by the end of Q1 2016 (http://www.yelp.com/about). Its user-friendly interface guides both reviewer and information seeker easily to any reviews. The website boasts as “the best way to search for everything from the tastiest burger to the most renowned cardiologist in the area”. The areas that are intensively covered are cities in the United States of America. However, the website also offers other country locations for reviews, namely Japan and several European countries.
Like many other online companies, Yelp.com provides a sense of community by obligating to-be-reviewers to sign up before admitting a review online. Moreover, it has successfully taps into consumer demand for rapid information.

C. The Implications of Online Food Review

New trend signals new opportunities and threats for businesses and industries. Ability to adapt to any changes in trend is paramount to the survival of businesses. With the prolific use of social networking and people’s continuous need for rapid information, online food review has gained a foot hole and is one of the reasons that instigated the rise of a new popular culture. It is a culture where the members share a social identity in the love of food. Many people are driven to share their experiences with their imagined communities. The effect of this shared experience can have a profound impact on businesses and industries. Restaurant managements must realize that ordinary diners are increasingly becoming online critics. Thus, equality and consistency in service throughout must be taken into account by management in the running of daily business activities. Since any ordinary customer may be the one with that deal breaker review.

When writing an online review, certain factors of the experience take precedent over the others. A research was conducted by Pantelidis (2010) of 2,471 customer comments regarding three hundred London restaurants on an online restaurant guide. The research aimed to identify the factors based on its importance in a dining experience. A preference structure model was generated in the order of importance to a diner when reflecting on their experience, namely food, service, ambience, price, menu, and décor. It must be taken into consideration that this research was conducted in a Western culture setting, which might give a different set of priorities if conducted elsewhere.

Furthermore, there is a growing tendency for company websites to provide a review or comment section as a strategic tool. Research on online book review by Chevalier et.al (2003) provides an insight into the challenges of having comment or review sections on company website. They argue for the potential ineffectiveness of such strategy. One such drawback is the unclear reason behind users to take the time to provide reviews for which they are not in any way compensated. Lack of research on this issue stipulates the need for further research on the topic. Another drawback is the loss of control by website management over the information displayed. That being said, there are numerous websites and applications solely dedicated to online reviews and online food reviews. Food lovers’ blogs and social networking are among the go-to-sites for food information and dining experience. Therefore, it seems the wiser choice is to adopt the trend of providing review section on the restaurant’s website. Another step further is to kindly request diners to provide comments on the website for management improvement. People tend to become kinder and generous with their comments when there is a genuine human interconnection. This is corroborated by the study conducted by Jurafsky (2014) on consumer sentiment expressed through online food review on Yelp.com as a powerful new tool for studying consumer attitudes. The results demonstrate that portraying the self, whether as well–educated, or as a victim, are indicative of the importance of human interaction on online food review.

A question arise as to how does a potential customer actually perceive online food review? A research was conducted by Lee et.al (2008) on the effect of negative online consumer reviews on product attitude. The research finds that when positive and negative online consumer reviews coexist, the difference in the number of positive and negative online
consumer reviews might influence the product attitude. Thus, affect on sales. A research on online shoppers by Sheng-Hsien (2009) corroborates with findings that review quantity positively affects the purchasing intention of online consumers. Large number of reviews is perceived as an indication of product popularity and hence increases the purchasing intention of consumers. This is further corroborated by Luca (2012, 2016) that consumer response to a restaurant’s average rating is affected by the number of reviews. Suggestion for website management and software developers is to provide a user-friendly interface to simplify and speed the process of posting reviews to increase the participating intention.

Most online food reviews use a star rating system ranging from 1–5 stars. A research by Anderson (2011) showed an extra half-star rating causes restaurant reservation to sell out 19 percentage points (49%) more frequently, with larger impacts when alternate information is more scarce. Luca (2012, 2016) also found that a one-star increase in Yelp rating leads to a 5-9 percent increase in revenue. Clearly showing the impact of consumer reviews on the restaurant industry and suggests that online consumer reviews substitute for more traditional forms of reputation. He presented two additional findings: (1) consumers do not use all available information and are more responsive to quality changes that are more visible and (2) consumers respond more strongly when a rating contains more information.

To shed further light on whether there are economic incentives behind a business's decision to leave fake reviews, Luca (2015) conducted a research on Yelp.com and finds that a restaurant is more likely to commit review fraud when its reputation is weak, i.e. when it has few reviews, or it has recently received bad reviews. However, chain restaurants (which benefit less from Yelp) are less likely to commit review fraud. Furthermore, when restaurants face increased competition, they become more likely to receive unfavourable fake reviews. Chevalier (2003) stated that any unfavourable reviews by either legitimate users or by biased interested parties may result in depressed sales. Additional finding indicates a review that includes some negative information is generally considered more credible (Lee, 2008). In other words, negative WOM communications are more credible than positive WOM communications (Crowley, 1994). Clearly this is a concern for management. This, however, can be an indication for management that creating bogus positive reviews do not necessarily fix the underlying problem of the existing negative reviews. Better use of energy and time can best be applied to correcting the cause of the existing negative reviews.

**SUMMARY**

Previous researches have indicated the growing trend in online food review and the ensuing implication it has on restaurant management. In essence, for restaurant businesses to survive in this era of high speed, easily accessible information by many potential customers, it is wise to pay attention to online food review. Online food reviews must be taken as a point of reference insofar as to what the customer demands, thinks is lacking, or approves of. Moreover, management must also be on the lookout for fake online reviews. As online food reviews on a particular restaurant can be found in several sites apart from the restaurant’s personal website, management may consider assigning a website manager with the task of monitoring online food reviews and replying to the reviews. Rule of thumb: If you don’t have anything nice to say, don’t say it.

At present, there are only limited researches conducted on online review, especially online food review. Further studies are needed to find out why people spend time to write reviews; Are people more willing to write reviews when they experience a high or a low
value experience? Also interesting to see a comparison between Eastern and Western cultural perception on factors diners consider important when reflecting on their dining experience.

REFERENCES


Popular culture (also called mass culture and pop culture) is generally recognized by members of a society as a set of the practices, beliefs, and objects that are dominant or prevalent in a society at a given point in time. Popular culture also encompasses the activities and feelings produced as a result of interaction with these dominant objects. Heavily influenced in modern times by mass media, this collection of ideas permeates the everyday lives of people in a given society. Therefore, popular