

## Conference Paper

# Understanding the Implications of a Trending Popular Culture: The Online Food Review

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### Abstract

Online food reviews as a part of popular culture instigated by the propagation of the Internet are increasingly used by food industries to help consumers in creating decision making: "to buy or not to buy". Some food industries are moving out from classical ways of word-of-mouth and printed or digital advertisements into online food reviews similar to content reviews of restaurants, hotels, films, music, and also Applications. The study uses qualitative exploratory methods and Focus Group Discussion to examine consumers' behaviors in making a decision before eating what and where. The findings suggest that consumers are also influenced by the quality of information, ratings, and services. Findings indicate that consumer involvement in online food reviews provide challenges that able small and big food industries overcome the barrier arising from the lack of doing business in popular culture.

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

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## 1. Introduction

Popular culture is rapidly changing with the invention and diffusion of various forms of electronic communication media like the Internet. At the same time, trends create a sense of uniformity in popular lifestyles. In ([16], 15) questions the role of food in popular culture. He finds that eating plays 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 the origins 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 adopt this practice to make it easier for them to take orders and deliver food for customers. In [22] defines popular culture:

In cultural studies, popular culture refers to what people do with the resources provide 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 about the ways to create and circulate mass cultural texts, objects, and performances and how those are received by individuals in their everyday lives. They emphasize the transformation of mass artifacts into meaningful expressions of personal identity and social belonging... (8).

What is the position of restaurants in popular culture? The owners of restaurants run the food industries with their resources: means of production and mode of production, to quote Karl Marx’s coinage. The Internet is paving the way for the availability of online food review websites, while they are creating, producing and sharing taste, the taste of food. Sociologically, taste is constructed and distinguished by different situations, different from group to group of people. Popular culture manipulates that representation – the processes by which meanings are produced and exchanged through shared sign systems – including signs, texts, images, or picture that represents or depicts something else ([22]: 11, 67).

Food and cooking could bring social cohesion and social images that refer to certain groups or cultures and to a certain extent create new groups and culture within the society [17]. 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. Signs, texts, images or pictures are available as one stop service at online food review websites or application. Moreover, online food review has taken another turn in 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 from distinctive backgrounds with shared interest in food.

The marriage between new technology and desire to share common interests has brought about new popular cultures. Online food reviews that have taken their debut as another tool of popular culture now have important implications in real restaurant business. This popular culture needs to be understood by restaurant operators in order to survive. For those reasons, the writers are interested to understand and explore the topic of online food reviews and look at the possible managerial implications they have in culinary business.

## 2. Literature Review and Discussions

### 2.1. Electronic Word of Mouth (E-WOM)

Social media and the web have given access to everybody and anybody to communicate their life experiences online. They may not only share the information with close relatives and friends but also with the rest of the world. Traditionally known as word-of-mouth information sharing, with the advent of new technology the concept of Electronic-Word-of-Mouth evolved (Zhang, 2010), [7]. Others dubbed this as Word-of-Mouse [5, 18]. 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, chat rooms, 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 discover based application, such as Foursquare and Yelp, have seen more use on mobile devices than desktops, which are translated into an even rapid access [21].

In [14] alerts us that word of mouse is, in a sense, an amplified form of word of mouth, due to the productivity of exchanging information in the electronic medium; in addition, the archiving feature can be more challenging for businesses to overcome bad reputation. In the words of Facebook creator Mark Zuckerberg, "people influence people", [12] emphasizes on people's reliance on the opinions and endorsement (and research) of friends, peers and colleagues. Therefore, the role of traditional advertising and marketing campaigns in many sectors is overshadowed by online networking. When someone shares their opinion, whether it is good or bad, about certain products or companies, it has a viral effect that spreads at a greater speed 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 imponderable.

### 2.2. Understanding Online Food Review

As early as 1995, Amazon.com provided an option for its customers to post their opinions on a product and these reviews are regarded as one of the most successful features of the Amazon site [4]. 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 exclusively dedicated as platforms for sharing opinions on any specific types of products or services. Online reviews are available for many categories of products and services, including hotels, restaurants, books, electronic goods, and games. By giving easier access for consumers to spread

their words, various opinion websites have produced 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 [19] – of food lovers, the information needed can be accessed directly through established food review websites or applications.

Yelp.com is among the most researched review websites 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>).

It helps information seekers to easily navigate for reviews. The website prides itself 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.

### 2.3. The Implications of Online Food Review

New trends have heralded the rise of 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 insatiable hunger 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 should 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 unexpectedly turn up with that deal-breaker review.

When writing an online review, certain factors of the experience create precedent over the others. A research was conducted by [15] 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 [2] 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 reasons behind users' taking time to provide reviews for which they get no financial rewards. Lack of research on this issue has created the need for further research on the topic. Another drawback is the loss of control by website management over the information on display. 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 that the wiser choice is to adopt the trend of providing review section on the restaurant's website. Another step 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 [8] 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 arises as to the way a potential customer actually perceives online food review. A research was conducted by [9] on the effect of negative online consumer reviews on product attitude. The research reveals that the coexistence of positive and negative online consumer reviews might influence the product attitude which later on affects sales. A research on online shoppers by [20] corroborates with the findings in which the quantity of positive reviews affect 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 [10, 11] that the number of reviews affects the restaurants' average rating, Website management and software developers are advised 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 [1] showed an increase in the rating, even an extra half-star rating enables to sell out 19 percentage points of restaurant reservation more frequently, with larger impacts when alternate information is more scarce. In [10, 11] also found that a one-star increase in Yelp rating leads to a 5-9 percent increase in revenue. This indicates that online reviews have impact on the restaurant industry and suggests that online consumer reviews substitute for traditional forms of reputation. In addition, Anderson presents 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, [10] conducted a research on Yelp.com and found that there is a restaurant which likely commit review fraud when its reputation is weak, i.e. when it gets few reviews, or it has recently suffered from bad reviews. However, chain restaurants (which benefit less from Yelp) are less likely to commit review fraud. Furthermore, when there is an increase competition, restaurants become more likely to receive unfavorable fake reviews. In [2] states that any unfavorable reviews by either legitimate users or by biased interested parties may result in dwindling sales. Additional finding indicates that negative information found in a review is generally considered to be more credible [9]. In other words, negative WOM communications are more credible than positive WOM communications [3]. Clearly this is a concern for management. This, however, can be a warning for restaurant management that creating bogus positive reviews do not necessarily fix the underlying problems of the existing negative reviews. Better use of energy and time can best be applied to correcting the cause of the existing negative reviews.

### 3. Conclusions and Suggestions

Previous research has indicated the growing trend in online food reviews and the ensuing implication they have on restaurant management. In essence, for restaurant businesses to survive in this era of rapid spreading and ubiquitous 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 customers demand, think is lacking, or approve 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.

Presently, the number of research on online review, especially online food review, is meager. Further studies are needed to find out why people spend time to write reviews; are people more willing to write reviews when they get a high or a low value experience? Equally interesting is to see a comparison between Eastern and Western cultural perception on factors diners consider important when reflecting on their dining experiences.

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