"Linking consumer characteristics to word-of-mouth-related behaviors and referral intentions in restaurants"

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LINKING CONSUMER CHARACTERISTICS TO WORD-OF-MOUTH-RELATED BEHAVIORS AND REFERRAL INTENTIONS IN RESTAURANTS

Abstract

This research aims at describing and validating differences in word-of-mouth-related (WOM) behaviors and referral intentions according to consumers' characteristics; demographic (gender/age), socio-economic (education), and consumption patterns (frequency of outdoor dining/restaurant type preferences). Thus, restaurant operators can better target their opinion leaders, and maximize WOM marketing potential. 221 valid questionnaires were collected from restaurant customers, covering consumer characteristics and basic WOM-related behaviors. Results concerning basic WOM-related variables conformed logically to relevant previous studies. Females, teenagers and youth, and quick-service restaurant (QSR) diners were more WOM-dependent for their outdoor dining decisions. Meanwhile, males, matures and QSR customers have been more active referrers for unpleasant dining experiences. University students showed less response for WOM referrals concerning unpleasant experiences, while being the more active referrers for unpleasant meal and foodservice encounters. It was also noted that the less the frequency of outdoor dining, the more dependent are consumers on WOM referrals, and the more referring to unpleasant dining experiences. Most available WOM-related literature spots mainly on WOM-related issues, such as its popularity vs. other types of media, and referral intentions responding to pleasant or unpleasant dining experiences. Differently, the current study concludes by determining restaurants' key opinion leaders; that is, most active WOM referrers and most WOM-sensitive segments, based on main consumer characteristics and behaviors. Thus, restaurant operators can better tailor and target their WOM-related marketing efforts.

Keywords	word-of-mouth, consumer characteristic, demographics, socio-economic characteristics, consumption patterns
JEL Classification	Z30, Z31, Z32, Z39

INTRODUCTION

This research aims at, not only shedding light on the already-settled WOM's significance and role, but also, and more essentially, drawing attention to describing variances among restaurant clients concerning their WOM behaviors and referral intentions. Such variances, in addition to determining major opinion leaders for restaurant clientele are spotted and rationalized based upon their demographic characteristics; that is, gender, age and education, in addition to major patronizing patterns and behaviors; namely, type of restaurant preferred, and frequency of outdoor dining.

Restaurant operators would thus be able to better address and target their clients, and recognize and maximize attention and care for customer groups that prove being more active referrers, since they constitute opinion leaders for their products and services, being the most

critical group and representing more relative importance among other customers. In addition, restaurant operators would thus be able to get the full potential of marketing and customer relation management activities.

The study commences with review of related literature on WOM's definition and importance, and its relationship to consumer characteristics. Afterwards, the research methodology is illustrated, and analysis and discussion of research findings and recommendations are presented. Therefore, the primary objective of this study is to investigate how WOM patterns differ by different consumer demographics.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1. Definition of Word of Mouth (WOM)

Richins and Marsha (1983) defined WOM as an act of telling at least one friend, acquaintance, or family member about the personal experience with a satisfactory or unsatisfactory product or retail establishment. These informal interpersonal communications are evaluative in nature, whereby consumers relate positive or negative information to others in the form of recommending or warning against patronizing a seller's operation (Richins, 1987).

In this context, WOM communication has been identified as a means for expressing satisfaction or dissatisfaction with a product experience (Gremler, 1994; Murray, 1991). Laczniak, DeCarlo, and Ramaswami (2001) argued that WOM communication is a popular marketplace phenomenon. Consumers frequently share their purchase experiences with people nearby after their consumption of a particular product and/or service. Swan and Oliver (1989) and Chu and Kim (2011) claimed that what consumers say to one another helps shape consumers' attitude, and becomes influential to others' future purchases and behaviors. It represents verbal communication between present customers and other people or other parties (Helm & Schlei, 1998).

Murray (1991) stated that in order to reduce the risk, customers seek to extend their information gaining activities when they estimate a service provider. Murray also supported that service clients usually take in mind the experience or point of view of other people, such as friends or family before they make a decision to pay for service. Moreover, Chaniotakis and Lymperopoulos (2009) supported that positive WOM provides consumer the capability to make more up-to-date choice, and has the advantage of decreasing the perceived risk of a current purchasing behavior. Williams and Hense (1991) noted that the importance of WOM communication is rising in the health care industry year by year. Hence, WOM has a noteworthy influence on customers' attitudes and behavior (Brown & Reingen, 1987). This kind of communication will strongly affect both short-term and long-term opinions of customers (Bone, 1995).

1.2. Importance of Word of Mouth Referrals

Consumer behavior and marketing studies have recognized the worthiness of interpersonal-generated information in influencing consumers' decision making (Chu & Kim, 2011; Bhayani, 2016). In the service industry, such as restaurants, because consumers may not understand a service fully before its consumption, they might seek WOM information from an experienced source, thus helping overcome the problems of low comparability and few search qualities associated with services (Bristor, 1990; Basri, Ahmad, Anuar, & Ismail, 2016; Özdemir, Tozlu, Şen, & Ateşoğlu, 2016). Several studies (Brown & Reingen, 1987; Swan & Olive, 1989; Chu & Kim, 2011; Chen & Lurie, 2013; Dhliwayo, 2013; Barreda, Bilgihan, & Kageyama, 2015) claimed that what consumers say to one another helps shape their attitude and becomes influential to others' future purchases and behaviors. Consumers imitate each other (Hawkins, Best, & Coney, 2004; Dellarocas, Fan, & Wood, 2004). Murray (1991) and Barreda et al. (2015) explained that this is because personal sources are viewed as more trustworthy. Moreover, WOM has been identified by Chang, Ko, and Leite (2016) as an influential means of communication in relevant studies. They studied the relationship between brand leadership, luxuries type and

availability, and consumers' WOM referral intentions. In a similar context, WOM impact positively the dimensions of brand equity (Virvilaite, Tumasonyte, & Sliburyte, 2015).

There is broad agreement among managers, marketing researchers and sociologists that customer interactions through WOM can have a major impact on consumer response to a product and the accompanying advertising (Arndt, 1967; Danaher & Rust, 1996; Herr, Kardes, & Kim, 1991). For example, over 40% of American consumers actively seek the advice of family and friends when shopping for services such as doctors, lawyers, and auto mechanics (Walker, 1995). WOM may play a more important role when the product in question is more risky or uncertain and when consumer's involvement with it is higher, and thus WOM has been found to be especially effective in driving the diffusion of new products than other media (Rogers, 1995) and in decision making regarding services (Murray, 1991). Specifically, as marketing and advertising managers have known for many years, WOM often complements and extends the effects of advertising (Bayus, 1985; Monahan, 1984).

WOM is now an indispensable constituent of interactive marketing, engaging consumers as vibrant representatives (Srivastava & Sharma, 2017). Consumers' positive WOM is now an essential tool that marketers utilize to develop and sustain business relationships with their consumers (Chu & Kim, 2011). Recently, various businesses seek to develop and organize online networks, and encourage clients' positive WOM referrals (Barreda et al., 2015). Moreover, on a larger scale, even destination marketers need to implement encouraging strategies for tourists to disseminate their tourist activities (Lee & Oh, 2017). More specifically, and in line with the current study's theme, Basri et al. (2016) assured that WOM is the eventual determinant for restaurants' success.

1.3. Comparing WOM with Other Media

Consumer decisions are much more affected by verbally disseminated information than other forms of marketing communications (Dzian, Triznova, Kaputa, & Supin, 2015; Shirkhodaie & Rastgoo-deylami, 2016). According to Day (1971),

it has been computed that WOM was nine times as effective as advertising at converting unfavorable or neutral predispositions into positive attitudes. Regarding consumers' intention to change brands, they are influenced by positive WOM seven times more than advertising via magazines and newspapers, four times more than personal selling, and twice more than radio advertising (Basri et al., 2016). In a USA-based study, Litvin, Blose, and Laird (2004) noted that tourists' restaurant selections were predominantly influenced by the WOM recommendations of opinion leaders, with surprisingly few decisions based on the influences of more formal media. In fact, studies suggest that favorable WOM is the ultimate product-service success factor (Murray, 1991; Price & Feick, 1984). Litvin, Blose, and Laird (2004) suggested that restaurant marketers seeking the tourist trade shift their emphasis from traditional marketing channels (advertising and public relations) to non-traditional interpersonal marketing strategies.

Smith and Vogt (1995) suggested, based on the results of their research, that heavy spending on advertising during the introduction of a new product creates favorable attitudes towards the brand of the product and reduces the impact of any subsequent negative WOM communication. The results from that study also indicated that negative WOM can be damaging to brand and advertising equity. Consumers, who encountered advertising relatively soon after being exposed to negative WOM, discounted heavily the advertisement and had less favorable emotions and beliefs towards it. When the advertisement makes the consumer talk about its theme and content then it creates WOM. In a case study article about a small hotel business (Stokes & Lomax, 2002) the owner applied WOM strategies not only to his customers but also to people that brought business to his hotel; the travel agents. He used small presents to show his gratification to travel agents for sending a certain number of customers to his hotel. This strategy was effective as the travel agents that received the gift send three times more people to the hotel and caused them to inform more customers about the hotel.

More specifically, Dhliwayo (2013), Dzian et al. (2015), Bhayani (2016), Özdemir et al. (2016), Shirkhodaie, and Rastgoo-deylami (2016), Srivastava and Sharma (2017) have determined the

reasons of the increasing significance of WOM over other means of communication. First, Consumers consider WOM as being more credible and less biased than other communication means of marketing. Besides, more specific kind of communication is needed, due to increasing consumers' and products' varieties, rather than identical advertising campaigns. Moreover, WOM is much less costly, and provides more long-lasting impact than conventional media.

1.4. Positive and negative Word of Mouth

Regarding positive WOM, researchers implied important implications. Generally, most previous studies indicated negative WOM is more effective than positive ones (Chen & Lurie, 2013). More specifically, dissatisfied consumer refers his experience to five to nine persons on average (Özdemir et al., 2016). For example, O'Neill, Palmer, and Charters (2002) studied wine tourism in Australia, and found that visitors' positive WOM recommendations boost wine sales when vacationing opinion leaders return home and tell others of their experiences. Shanka, Ali-Knight, and Pope's (2002) study of destination selection methods found that a majority of Western Australia travel decisions were based upon WOM communications. Morgan, Pritchard, and Pride (2002) studied Wales tourism marketing, and noted the potential of WOM as an effective tool for spreading the 'visit Wales' message.

On the other hand, negative WOM communication has received considerable attention since the 1970s (Singh, 1990). The major factor contributing to the interest in negative WOM communication is its detrimental impact on businesses. Negative WOM can have an overwhelming impact, since dissatisfied visitors spread unflattering comments related to their experiences (Crick, 2003; Morgan, Pritchard, & Piggott's, 2003).

Negative WOM is more influential than positive WOM (Singh, 1990). Dissatisfied customers are more likely to express their feelings to people than satisfied customers (Tax, Brown, & Chandrashekaren, 1998). Several researchers found that customers seemed to place more weight on negative information when evaluating products (Lau & Nga, 2001). For example, Richins and

Marsha (1983) found that dissatisfied customers might spread negative WOM 69communication to 11 acquaintances, while satisfied customers only tell 3 people. Similarly, it was reported that those with memories of poor services tell an average of 11 people while those with pleasant experiences tell only 6 (Taxet al., 1998).

Researchers indicated the reasons for the high influence of negative WOM. Huefner and Hunt (2000) suggested that negative WOM communication should be differentiated into two categories based on the intention of customers. First, it might be a form of retaliatory action against sellers – an aggressive complaint behavior with a specific intention to hurt a business. Second, it might simply be a communication mechanism to alert others of a customer risk. In addition, Sundaram, and other authors (1998) summarized the functions of negative WOM communication and categorized them into four dimensions: altruism, anxiety reduction, vengeance, and advice seeking. Altruism is to prevent others from experiencing the problems that they had encountered. Dichter (1966) suggested that once dissatisfaction occurs, a desire to prevent others from experiencing a similar fate prompts one to engage in negative WOM communication. It is believed that an individual is responsible for the welfare of people nearby thus relating his or her purchase experience in the form of recommendations or warnings. Anxiety reduction is to vent customers' anger through negative WOM communication. Additionally, dissatisfied customers who choose not to seek redress from the service provider might choose to share their experiences with their friends and family (Brown, 1997).

1.5. Consumer Characteristics and Word of Mouth

This research intends to investigate how WOM patterns differ by different consumer demographics. Demographic differences can be used in the design and placing of marketing communications. WOM is consumer-to-consumer advice, impartial, and sensitive to the needs of the receiver. As such, it is a powerful influence on consumption, particularly in those fields where trial is not possible (East et al., 2005). Demographic variables, such as income, gender, and education, have been proved to moderate the link between satisfaction and cus-

tomer behavior (Cooil et al., 2007). Some consumers are particularly active advisers in specific fields (opinion leaders) while others advise about a range of categories (Feick & Price, 1987).

Still, many current studies are directed towards rationalizing WOM through consumers' characteristics and social patterns. Bhayani (2016), for example, distinguished between family and friends, where the latter represent a good WOM referral source, while the former represents the main role of the purchasing decision itself. Moreover, Dzian et al. (2015) revealed that WOM is affected by the size of consumers' communication group. Baker, Donthu, and Kumar (2016) stated that WOM referrals are influenced by consumers' interpersonal characteristics, and that the intimacy of social relationships affects prospective consumers' response to WOM. Buttle and Groeger (2017), for instance, determined that consumers adjust their intercommunication behaviors according to the structure of their social networks. Similarly, Tourists' experience sharing patterns are reliant upon communication conditions; that is, what, how, and with whom they communicate (Lee & Oh, 2017). Additionally, Bhayani (2016), Chen (2017), Feng and Timon (2017) theorized, and proved, that a WOM's key influential motive is social acceptance and increased intimacy; particularly, whether consumers are socializing with friends, or else with strangers.

Demographic segmentation variables are the popular fundamental factors which can help a company find its objective groups (Hayes & Bloom, 2002). Although advertising and marketing practitioners have recognized the importance of demographic information, Sheth (1977) has noted that academic researchers in the area of consumer behavior have been reluctant to consider demographic variables in their explanations of behavior. When an organization faces different customer segments, it will also ascribe different levels of importance for service quality (Scott & Shieff, 1993).

Based on many previous studies, demographic factors distinguish market into groups on the basis of variables such as gender, age, income, family size, family life style, occupation, education, religion, race, generation, nationality etc. It is easier to measure than other variables by using demographic segmentation (Kotler & Armstrong, 2001).

In this research, the demographic factors that will be studied are gender differences, age, and level of education.

Gender differences. In relation to gender differences in purchasing behavior, several issues have been examined, including the link between gender and time spent on shopping (McDonald, 1994; Arndt & Gronmo, 1977), and gender's role in unplanned purchases (Granbois, 1968; Kollat & Willett, 1967). Female customers tend to accept more information and consume promptly, while males tend to concentrate on a part of the information in order to accomplish their aim (Kotler, Keller, Ang, Leong, & Tan, 2006). Gender is widely acknowledged as a moderator variable in marketing, and has recently been investigated as a moderator between satisfaction and co native loyalty by Evanschitzky and Wunderlich (2006).

Carl (2006) notes that work on market mavens shows that most mavens are women (Feick & Price, 1987; Higie, Feick, & Price, 1987). A study by Swanson et al. (2003) found that women were more likely to recommend attendance at a sporting event, but the authors cautioned that this might vary with the type of sport. Women's somewhat greater production of branded conversations corresponds with evidence on the total amount that men and women talk. Mehl et al. (2007) used portable recording to measure conversation in an unobtrusive way on mostly US population samples. They found that, on average, women used 16.200 words and men 15.700 each day. This difference was not statistically significant, but in the UK, Liberman (2006) found that women produced 8800 words to men's 6100 or 44% more.

Age level. According to Kotler et al. (2006), consumers' attitude and requirements usually change with age. Age segmentation influences consumers' decision when they got information, and it is an important condition for estimating service quality (Grazier, Richardson, Martin, & Diehr, 1986). Differently, the more vocal and active complainers tended to be younger customer as per Lama and Tang (2003). In another context, it has been stated that older customers tended to take private action to complain about their dissatisfaction more than younger customers (Sujithamrak & Lam, 2005).

In addition, information processing (Moskowitch, 1982) suggests that older consumers are less likely to seek new information (Wells & Gubar, 1996), but instead they rely more strongly on heuristic or schema based forms of processing (Wilkes, 1992; Yoon, 1997). Restricted information-processing capabilities cause older customers to be more prone to information overload and less able to process, comprehend and use information to select foods with preferred characteristics, which might change their reaction to satisfaction and loyalty (Walsh & Mitchell, 2005).

Education level. Education influences a person's thinking, decision making and even relating with others. In addition, education can strongly affect a person's preferences (Hawkins et al., 2001). Interest in consumer education is growing rapidly since a long time. The consumers of tomorrow will have gone through a very different consumer socialization process than the consumers of today, and this could lead to vastly different consumer expectations, attitudes, preferences and shopping habits (Bloom, 1976).

For example, education affects complaint-related behaviors (Morganosky & Buckley, 1987). Influence of socialization agents, such as consumer education, clearly played a significant role in influencing adolescent consumer decision-making styles (Shim, 1996). The more vocal and active complainers tended to be better-educated (Lama & Tang, 2003).Customer loyalty was also found to be positively and significantly related to customer education (Bell & Eisingerich, 2007).Moreover, customer education was found to be the strongest determinant of client loyalty (Eisingerich & Bell, 2006). Education has an extremely key role as it influences the insurance purchase decision (Ioncica et al., 2012). It has been stated that well-educated customers tended to take private action to complain about their dissatisfaction more than less educated customers (Sujithamrak & Lam, 2005).

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The current research can be classified as a descriptive and analytical study which is generally elaborated in hospitality research. A descriptive and analytical research comprises gathering the data in a convinced order to permit the researcher to answer questions or to test hypotheses which are classically collected through survey, or interviews (Gay & Diehl, 1992). Survey studies have the influence to attain information from population. Correspondingly, they permit the measurement of variables as well as the relationship among them (Gay et al., 2006). Thus, this research is concerned to be descriptive because it aimed at describing and validating differences in word-of-mouth-related behaviors and referral intentions according to consumers' characteristics. Furthermore, this study is also concerned to be an analytical one as it achieved a statistical analysis to the collected data in order to answer the research questions, achieve the objectives of the study, and to give valuable guidelines according to consumers' characteristics. For data collection, secondary data in this research were collected through academic journals, books, reports, conference proceedings, unpublished manuscripts, white papers, statistics and the Internet. Alternatively, primary data were collected using frequencies on survey which was the main instrument providing primary quantitative data, and was designed about opinion statements as a means of exploring respondents' perceptions in the restaurants.

Research Objectives

The current research aims at attaining the following objectives:

1. Descriptively exploring basic WOM-related behaviors and referral intentions of restaurant customers in Alexandria:

    a. WOM-dependence vs. other types of media.
    b. Response to others' satisfactory and unsatisfactory dining experience referrals.
    c. Referral frequency of respondents' satisfactory and unsatisfactory dining experience to others.
    d. WOM preferred communication means.

2. Describing and validating differences in those basic WOM-related behaviors and referral intentions according to the following consumers' characteristics:

    a. Demographic
        i. Gender.

ii. Age.
b. Socio-economic
i. Education.
c. Consumption patterns
i. Frequency of outdoor dining.
ii. Restaurant type preferences.

3. Helping restaurant operators better maximize and tailor WOM marketing potential, through rationally segmenting and targeting their opinion leaders, trendsetters, most active WOM referrers and most WOM-sensitive segments.

Research Questions

To attain those research goals, the following research questions have been set, to be further investigated and answered throughout scrutinizing the field study findings:

1. What are the basic WOM-related behaviors and referral intentions of restaurant customers in Alexandria, regarding the following axes:

   a. WOM-dependence vs. other types of media?
   b. Response to others' satisfactory and unsatisfactory dining experience referrals?
   c. Referral frequency of respondents' satisfactory and unsatisfactory dining experience to others?
   d. WOM preferred communication means?

2. What are the variances in basic WOM-related behaviors and referral intentions according to the following consumers' characteristics:

   a. Gender?
   b. Age?
   c. Education?
   d. Frequency of outdoor dining?
   e. Restaurant type preferences?

3. What restaurant operators can do to better maximize and tailor WOM marketing potential?

Population Characteristics

The target population for this study consisted of restaurants' customers in Alexandria city, Egypt. Therefore, a total number of 300 questionnaires

were distributed. Among those, 221 valid questionnaires were collected from restaurant customers in Alexandria, covering consumer characteristics and basic WOM-related behaviors, representing a response rate of 73.67%.

Scale Development

To assess restaurant customers' perception about their WOM-related behaviors and referral intentions, and in order to get to-the-point, meaningful research findings, the research's survey questionnaire has basically covered the following concerns:

1. WOM-dependence vs. other types of media.

2. Response to others' *unsatisfactory* dining experience referrals.

3. Response to others' *satisfactory* dining experience referrals.

4. Referral frequency of respondents' *unsatisfactory* dining experience to others.

5. Referral frequency of respondents' *satisfactory* dining experience to others, and

6. WOM preferred communication means.

7. Consumers' characteristics:

   a. Demographic (gender, age).
   b. Socio-economic (education), and
   c. Consumption patterns (frequency of outdoor dining, restaurant type preferences).

Due to its exploratory context, research methodology depended on frequencies of responses for spotting variances between consumers with diverse characteristics regarding their WOM-related behaviors, and validating and rationalizing recognized trends.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results have been based on associating WOM-related behaviors and referral intentions to surveyed consumer characteristics. Discussion aroused from respondents' comments to open

questions, researchers' rationalizing results, and previous studies.

3.1. Basic WOM-Related Behaviors and Referral Intentions

Basic WOM-related trends spotted in the literature review have been primarily assured throughout descriptive analysis of restaurant customers' responses, as provided in Table 1. This section provides thorough response to research questions 1.a, 1.b, 1.c and 1.d, as follows.

Research Question 1.a: *What are the basic WOM-related behaviors and referral intentions of restaurant customers in Alexandria, regarding WOM-dependence vs. other types of media?*

78.3% of respondents determined "referral from others" as being the effective way for convincing them to try a certain restaurant, as compared to other types of media. This result conformed to Day's (1971), who proved that WOM was nine times as effective as advertising. Alike, restaurant customers' selections were predominantly influenced by the WOM recommendations of opinion leaders, with surprisingly few decisions based on the influences of more formal media (Litvin, Blose, & Laird, 2004).

Research Question 1.b: *What are the basic WOM-related behaviors and referral intentions of restaurant customers in Alexandria, regarding their response to others' satisfactory and unsatisfactory dining experience referrals?*

Table 1. Basic WOM-related behaviors and referral intentions

Question		Freq.	%
1. What is the most effective way that makes you convinced about trying a certain restaurant?			
Referral from others		173	78.3
Other types of media		48	21.7
2. If a friend of yours had a bad experience in a specific restaurant, would you:			
Go and try out this restaurant?		85	38.5
Never try this restaurant?		136	61.5
3. If a friend of yours had a good experience in a specific restaurant, would you:			
Go and try this restaurant?		201	91.0
Doesn't matter?		20	9.0
4. How many people would you refer to a specific restaurant in case of you had a bad experience in that restaurant?			
once to thrice		44	19.9
four times to six times		54	24.4
seven times to nine times		16	7.3
10 times and more		107	48.4
5. How many people would you refer to a specific restaurant in case of you had a good experience in that restaurant?			
once to thrice		80	36.2
four times to six times		75	33.9
seven times to nine times		8	3.7
10 times and more		58	26.2
6. If you tried experience in a specific type of restaurant, how would you refer it to others?			
6.1. Face to face talking	Yes	176	79.6
	No	45	20.4
6.2. Chatting on the net	Yes	94	42.5
	No	127	57.5
6.3. Telephone conversation	Yes	93	42.1
	No	128	57.9
6.4. Family gathering	Yes	167	75.6
	No	54	24.4
6.5. Friends' gathering	Yes	168	76.0
	No	53	24.0

Moreover, 61.5% of respondents declared that they would never try a restaurant for which they received unfavorable referral from others. This is consistent with previous studies indicating that negative WOM can be damaging to brand and advertising equity, and has detrimental impact on businesses (Smith & Vogt, 1995; Crick, 2003; Morgan et al., 2003). Several researchers also found that customers seemed to place more weight on negative information when evaluating products (Lau & Nga, 2001). More clearly, 91 % of respondents responded actively to positive WOM; that is, they would try a restaurant for which they received satisfactory referral from others, rather than ignoring the referral.

This result goes in line with that of O'Neill et al. (2002), Shanka et al. (2002), and Morgan et al. (2002), which confirmed that Australia's visitors' positive WOM recommendations boost sales, and that a majority of Western Australia and Wales travel decisions were based upon WOM communications. Chaniotakis and Lymperopoulos (2009) supported that positive WOM provides consumer the capability to make more up-to-date choice, and has the advantage of decreasing the perceived risk of a current purchasing behavior.

Research Question 1.c: *What are the basic WOM-related behaviors and referral intentions of restaurant customers in Alexandria, regarding referral frequency of their satisfactory and unsatisfactory dining experience to others?*

Most respondents (48.4%) also decided that they were to refer to 10 or more other people about a restaurant where they had unsatisfactory experience. This is why researchers such as Smith and Vogt (1995), Crick (2003) and Morgan et al. (2003) who discussed that negative WOM damages brand image, wastes advertising impartiality, and has overwhelming influence on businesses. Such a frequent referral is due to that once dissatisfaction occurs, a desire to prevent others from experiencing a similar fate prompts one to engage in negative WOM communication (Dichter, 1966).

Whilst, most of them; 70% responded that they would refer good dining experiences to 6 other

people as a maximum. These findings coincide with relevant literature. Negative WOM is more influential than positive WOM (Singh, 1990); and dissatisfied customers are more likely to express their feelings to people than satisfied customers (Taxet et al., 1998). For example, Richins and Marsha (1983) found that dissatisfied customers might spread negative WOM communication to 11 acquaintances, while satisfied customers only tell 3 people. Similarly, it was reported that those with memories of poor services tell an average of 11 people while those with pleasant experiences tell only 6 (Tax, Brown, & Chandrashekaren, 1998).

Research Question 1.d: *What are the basic WOM-related behaviors and referral intentions of restaurant customers in Alexandria, regarding WOM preferred communication means?*

The most indicating result was that most respondents prefer to refer their dining experiences via means that assure the most spreading and circulation possible; that is, through face-to-face conversations, and family and friends gatherings. These multi-person WOM communication channels were preferred to individual channels such as chatting on the net and telephone conversations.

3.2. Associating Consumer Characteristics to WOM-Related Behaviors and Referral Intentions

In the next part, consumer characteristics are linked to the previous discussed variable based on figures presented in Tables 2, 3 and 4 Varying WOM referral intentions and behaviors conforms to many previous studies, which declared that demographic factors distinguish market into groups, based on variables such as gender, age, income, family size, family life style, occupation, education, religion, race, generation, nationality; etc. It is easier to measure than other variables by using demographic segmentation (Kotler & Armstrong, 2001). The following part provides in-depth response to research questions 2.a, 2.b, 2.c, 2.d and 2.e.

Table 2. Associating WOM-related behaviors to consumers' characteristics

Respondents' characteristics	Freq.	%	1. How convinced to try a restaurant…				2. If told about a bad experience…				3. If told about a good experience…			
			Referral from others		Other types of media		Go and try out restaurant		Never try this restaurant		Go and try this restaurant		Doesn't matter	
			Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
1. Gender														
Male	139	62.9	105	75.5	34	24.5	60	43.2	79	56.8	127	91.4	12	8.6
Female	82	37.1	68	82.9	14	17.1	25	30.5	57	69.5	74	90.2	8	9.8
2. Age														
Less than 20	134	60.6	104	77.6	30	22.4	58	43.3	76	56.7	122	91.0	12	9.0
From 20 to 30	27	12.2	22	81.5	5	18.5	5	18.5	22	81.5	23	85.2	4	14.8
From 30 to 40	20	9.0	13	65	7	35	8	40.0	12	60.0	19	95.0	1	5.0
From 40 to 50	5	2.3	2	40	3	60	0	0.0	5	100.0	5	100.0	0	0
50 and more	35	15.8	32	91.4	3	8.6	14	40.0	21	60.0	32	91.4	3	8.6
3. Education														
College students	118	53.4	91	77.1	27	22.9	52	44.1	66	55.9	108	91.5	10	8.5
B.Sc.	103	46.6	82	79.6	21	20.4	33	32.0	70	68.0	93	90.3	10	9.7
4. Frequency of outdoor dining														
Once a week	84	38.0	61	72.6	23	27.4	35	41.7	49	58.3	75	89.3	9	10.7
Twice a week	51	23.1	40	78.4	11	21.6	23	45.1	28	54.9	46	90.2	5	9.8
Once a month	29	13.1	24	82.8	5	17.2	10	34.5	19	65.5	26	89.7	3	10.3
< once a month	57	25.8	48	84.2	9	15.8	17	30	40	70	54	94.7	3	5.3
5. Restaurant type preferences														
Quick Service	136	61.5	118	86.8	18	13.2	49	36.0	87	64.0	124	91.2	12	8.8
Family Dining	45	20.4	35	77.8	10	22.2	17	37.8	28	62.2	39	86.7	6	13.3
Classic	40	18.1	20	50	20	50	16	40.0	24	60.0	38	95.0	2	5.0

Table 3. Associating WOM referral intentions to consumers' characteristics

Respondents' characteristics	Freq.	%	4. Referral frequency to others concerning unsatisfactory dining experience							
			Once to thrice		4 times to 6 times		7 times to 9 times		10 times and more	
			Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
1. Gender										
Male	139	62.9	28	20.1	28	20.1	9	6.5	74	53.2
Female	82	37.1	16	19.5	26	31.7	7	8.5	33	40.2
2. Age										
Less than 20	134	60.6	24	17.9	42	31.3	7	5.2	61	45.5
From 20 to 30	27	12.2	5	18.5	5	18.5	5	18.5	12	44.4
From 30 to 40	20	9.0	6	30.0	4	20.0	1	5.0	9	45.0
From 40 to 50	5	2.3	0	0	2	40.0	0	0	3	60.0
50 and more	35	15.8	9	25.7	1	2.9	3	8.6	22	62.9
3. Education										
College students	118	53.4	18	15.3	36	30.5	5	4.2	59	50.0
B.Sc.	103	46.6	26	25.2	18	17.5	11	10.7	48	46.6
4. Frequency of outdoor dining										
Once a week	84	38.0	20	23.8	23	27.4	6	7.1	35	41.7
Twice a week	51	23.1	9	17.6	12	23.5	6	11.8	24	47.1
Once a month	29	13.1	4	13.8	8	27.6	3	10.3	14	48.3
< once a month	57	25.8	11	19.3	11	19.3	1	1.8	34	59.6
5. Restaurant type preferences										
Quick Service	136	61.5	27	19.9	31	22.8	8	5.9	70	51.5
Family Dining	45	20.4	11	24.4	10	22.2	3	6.7	21	46.7
Classic	40	18.1	6	15.0	13	32.5	5	12.5	16	40.0

Table 4. Associating WOM referral intentions to consumers' characteristics

Respondents' characteristics	Freq.	%	5. Referral frequency to others concerning satisfactory dining experience							
			Once to thrice		4 times to 6 times		7 times to 9 times		10 times and more	
			Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
1. Gender										
Male	139	62.9	54	38.8	42	30.2	5	3.6	38	27.3
Female	82	37.1	26	31.7	33	40.2	3	3.7	20	24.4
2. Age										
Less than 20	134	60.6	52	38.8	45	33.6	4	3.0	33	24.6
From 20 to 30	27	12.2	7	25.9	9	33.3	1	3.7	10	37.0
From 30 to 40	20	9.0	6	30.0	10	50.0	1	5.0	3	15.0
From 40 to 50	5	2.3	1	20.0	4	80.0	0	0	0	0
50 and more	35	15.8	14	40.0	7	20.0	2	5.7	12	34.3
3. Education										
College students	118	53.4	49	41.5	35	29.7	4	3.4	30	25.4
B.Sc.	103	46.6	31	30.1	40	38.8	4	3.9	28	27.2
4. Frequency of outdoor dining										
Once a week	84	38.0	28	33.3	34	40.5	2	2.4	20	23.8
Twice a week	51	23.1	17	33.3	18	35.3	1	2.0	15	29.4
Once a month	29	13.1	13	44.8	5	17.2	2	6.9	9	31.0
< once a month	57	25.8	22	38.6	18	31.6	3	5.3	14	24.6
5. Restaurant type preferences										
Quick Service	136	61.5	49	36.0	47	34.6	5	3.7	35	25.7
Family Dining	45	20.4	15	33.3	18	40.0	1	2.2	11	24.4
Classic	40	18.1	16	40.0	10	25.0	2	5.0	12	30.0

Research Question 2.a: *What are the variances in basic WOM-related behaviors and referral intentions according to restaurant customers' gender?*

Gender-based WOM-variances spotted in this study relate directly with many studies assuring that gender is widely acknowledged as a moderator variable in marketing, and has recently been investigated as a moderator between satisfaction and co native loyalty by Evanschitzky and Wunderlich (2006).

WOM-dependence vs. other types of media. Female restaurant customers prefer WOM referral rather than other types of media, compared to males. This may be due to females' more inclination to be involved in social activities and verbal communication with families and colleagues, and having more leisure time than males busy by work and earning the living.

Responding to negative dining experience referrals. Females showed higher tendency for respond by not patronizing such a restaurant, conforming to the previous result; that is, more affected by

WOM referral. Whilst, males, may be due to nature, have been more willing to try the restaurant despite of the negative referral.

Those implications further assured the study results by Kotleret al. (2006) indicating that female customers tend to accept more information, while males tend to concentrate on a part of the information in order to accomplish their aim. Besides, it was implied that most market enthusiasts are women, women were more likely to recommend attendance at events, and that they proved greater production of branded conversations (Feick & Price, 1987; Higieet et al., 1987; Swanson et al., 2003; Carl, 2006).

Responding to positive dining experience referrals. No differences have been spotted in this concern, mostly due to that positive referrals are less sensitively received than negative ones.

Referral frequency for unsatisfactory dining experience to others. Males and females were almost even in this interest. Only males were slightly higher than females; 53.2% and 40.2% respectively,

in telling 10 or more persons, possibly due to that men are those who "pay".

Referral frequency for satisfactory dining experience to others. Again, no gender-based differences existed, confirming the implication that positive referrals are less sensitively perceived than negative ones.

Research Question 2.b: *What are the variances in basic WOM-related behaviors and referral intentions according to restaurant customers' age?*

WOM-related variance concerning to customers age conforms to several studies specifying that consumers' attitude, decisions and requirements; and their estimation of service quality usually change with age (Grazieret et al., 1986; Kotler et al., 2006).

WOM-dependence vs. other types of media. Teenagers (less than 20 years old), youth (20-30 years old), and matures (>50 years old) are more dependent upon WOM as outdoor-dining-related information source. Youth and teenagers are by nature more sociable and immediate concerning transferring experiences, particularly through social networks and university-centered friendships. Similarly, in was referred that the more vocal and active complainers tended to be younger customer as per Lama and Tang (2003). Moreover, matures' reliance upon WOM rather than media is attributable to their accumulated experience.

Responding to negative dining experience referrals. Nearly half teenagers, mid-aged (30-40 years old), and matures showed to be neglecting negative referrals and willingness to try. In this context, teenagers are well-known for willingness to try, whereas mid-aged and matures are usually affected by more forcing factors, such as family preferences, and price and affordability. This rationalization goes in line with that of …, which stated that older consumers rely more strongly on heuristic or schema based forms of processing (Wilkes, 1992; Yoon, 1997).

Responding to positive dining experience referrals. No age-based variances have been spotted, supporting the notion that positive referrals are less sensitively perceived than negative ones.

Referral frequency for unsatisfactory dining experience to others. Ages ranges of 40-50 years old, and matures were the most to refer unfavorable experiences to 10 or more persons. This is attributable to that such customers' check average is usually higher than others, and that they are more likely to dine out with their families, thus intensifying the inconvenience, and cost of unsatisfactory experiences.

Referral frequency for satisfactory dining experience to others. Age ranges were almost even concerning this issue, with no justifiable, valid trend that can be thus stated. Such finding assures the less inclination of restaurant customers to refer to favorable dining encounter.

Research Question 2.c: *What are the variances in basic WOM-related behaviors and referral intentions according to restaurant customers' education?*

WOM-related variances due to education have been sufficiently proved. Education affects complaint-related behaviors and a person's relating with others (Morganosky & Buckley, 1987; Hawkins et al., 2001; Sujithamrak & Lam, 2005).

WOM-dependence vs. other types of media. Both college students and graduates were more WOM-reliant. This is due to that cultural levels, and restaurants' consumer-targeting activities are mostly the same for those two categories.

Responding to negative dining experience referrals. Unlike the majority who responded by not trying that restaurant, the exception has been college student; almost half of them decided to go and try it out inspire of the negative referral. This is mostly attributable to that their eagerness for trying new involvements rises above worry from unfavorable WOM. This result consolidates with a previous implication that teenagers' discomfort from the negative referral, and their aspiration to try has been almost alike.

Responding to positive dining experience referrals. Once more, no education-based differences have been realized concerning the reaction to positive referrals concerning a restaurant, owing to the insignificance of such situation.

Referral frequency for unsatisfactory dining experience to others. College students were more active referrers of unsatisfactory dining experiences than graduates. This is mainly linked to that students are naturally more mingling and socializing with others, with much more "crowded" communities throughout and university-centered friendships and social networks.

Referral frequency for satisfactory dining experience to others. Assuring the previous notion concerning the insensitivity to positive referrals, respondents did not provide a specific trend to distinguish between college students and graduates.

Research Question 2.d: *What are the variances in basic WOM-related behaviors and referral intentions according to restaurant customers' frequency of outdoor dining?*

WOM-dependence vs. other types of media. An inverse relationship has been spotted; that is, WOM-dependence increases for those who dine out less. This result makes sense and has its own logic. The fewer someone dines out, the more inconvenience he gets as a result of unsatisfactory experience, particularly considering that those who dine out less do so due to family responsibilities, job and work-times-related workloads, and disposable income and affordability of outdoor dining. That would have driven such customers to seek relevant WOM referrals before trying a restaurant.

Responding to negative/positive dining experience referrals. The latter implication induced about frequency of outdoor dining has been further ascertained. An inverse relationship has been also spotted concerning customers' response to dining experience referrals. The fewer is the frequency of outdoor dining, the more likely the response to referrals to be logic and reasonable; that is, patronizing restaurants enjoying favorable recommendations, and avoiding those with negative referrals.

Referral frequency for unsatisfactory dining experience to others. Additional assurance has been herein provided; that is, the fewer someone dines out, the more inconvenience he gets as a result of unsatisfactory experience, and eventually, the more people he refers that inconvenience to.

Referral frequency for satisfactory dining experience to others. Inactive response to referrals concerning satisfactory dining experiences has been further confirmed, since such referrals did not vary according to outdoor dining frequency.

Research Question 2.e: *What are the variances in basic WOM-related behaviors and referral intentions according to restaurant customers' restaurant type preferences?*

WOM-dependence vs. other types of media. QSR diners were the most WOM-dependent among other restaurant types' customers, possibly due to that QSR customers are mostly teenagers and youth, who are by nature more socializing and mingling, and have richer communication environments. This was followed by family restaurant customers have been less WOM-dependent, mostly since their dining choice criteria includes certain specifications and facilities, such as menu variety, availability of kid menu and kids' corner, and affordability.

The least WOM-dependent were classic restaurant clients, who typically have specified dining choices, and are mostly loyal, repeat customers, where they guarantee the quality, being recognized, and satisfying their ego.

Responding to negative dining experience referrals. Respondents reported majority's agreement to avoiding the restaurant with unfavorable WOM referral, representing no valid distinction between restaurant-type preferences.

Responding to positive dining experience referrals. The normal trend prevails, where no differences have been spotted concerning responding to positive dining experience referrals.

Referral frequency unsatisfactory dining experience to others. QSR customers proved being the most WOM-dependent among others, since results presented that they were also more active referrers of unsatisfactory dining experience to 10 or more people.

Referral frequency satisfactory dining experience to others. Finally, providing more support to the insignificance of WOM referrals of satisfactory dining experiences, no distinctive variance has been found among respondents according to their restaurant-type preferences.

CONCLUSION

The following practical implications provide feasible and handy practices for restaurant operators and marketers, and foodservice personnel to boost their WOM-related marketing efforts. The next section comes in direct response to *Research Question 3, which states "What restaurant operators can do to better maximize and tailor WOM marketing potential?".*

Marketing endeavors should consider that WOM patterns vary according to consumers' inherent characteristic, such as females' sociability, teens' and youth's immediate and public exchange of experiences through acquaintances and social networks, less-frequent diners' sensitivity to inconveniences, and matures' higher meal check average. Restaurant marketers seeking the tourist trade shift their emphasis from traditional marketing channels (advertising and public relations) to non-traditional interpersonal marketing strategies.

To provoke favorable WOM referrals, restaurant operators have to provide unique products and services to intrigue your customers' attention and potentially make them talk about them with others. People usually talk about exciting and new products or services. Satisfying all inquiries, no matter how insignificant, and quietly and efficiently dealing with complaints as enthusiastically as responding to positive comments encourages supporting recommendations and help avoid negative referrals. Managers should also identify activities that stimulate consumers' positive WOM referrals.

Restaurant management has to locate and show appreciation for your opinion leaders, such as those who call or visit your business repeatedly to acquire updates about products or services, or those who send a letter of praise. These were two examples of how you can track them down. Also, these people are usually the innovators and they are characterized by curiosity, activism and indulgence. These characteristics make them trendsetters regarding products and services.

Besides, restaurant operators should feed loyal customers with more information about the offered products and services through e-mail, electronic newsletters, brochures and special invitations to events. In addition, websites should be "WOM-friendly". It is necessary to use the internet to nurture electronic WOM by placing phrases like "Share to timeline", "Send this page to a friend", "You think your friend might be interested in this page? E-mail your friend about it!" prominently in the business web page.

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