THE DETERMINANTS OF ELECTRONIC WORD OF MOUTH' INFLUENCE IN ALGERIAN CONSUMER CHOICE: THE CASE OF RESTAURANT INDUSTRY

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Abstract

In contemporary hospitality marketing, online opinions are well known as one of the key factors, given the influence they have on customers' purchasing decisions. For restaurant choice, it seems that consumers trust the electronic word of mouth more than advertising itself. The paper aims to determine the characteristics of word-of-mouth (Content and Source) that most influence its use by online social networks members. In addition, Receiver Experience is suggested as a moderator. In order to carry out this study, we conducted an online survey with a sample of 250 Facebook users. To test our hypotheses, we adopted the structural equation modelling with the PLS approach. Results confirm that Facebook users trust the information given by known persons and place more importance on the polarity of the reviews than other electronic WOM determinants.

Key words: Electronic word of mouth; Polarity; Source Credibility; Receiver Expertise; Restaurant Industry.

JEL Classification: M31, L81, D83

Introduction

The Internet is a very important tool for companies. It is an effective way to reinforce their brand image, stay in touch with their customers and promote their products. This media can replace several traditional marketing communication tools and can enhance brand visibility (Cossette-bacon, 2010). Until a few years ago, companies were waiting for a positive word of mouth to appear spontaneously, the company could only observe it. While today with the advent of the Internet, it has become something that can be influenced, companies can work with those who want to talk about them and make their ideas reach a wide audience, it is now possible to measure and follow these conversations (Sernovitz, 2012).

Ever since the development of computer systems and the Internet, viva voce or word of mouth has been called many things. These include viral marketing of "e-mail marketing", "internet word of mouth", "word-of-mouth marketing" and electronic word-of-mouth (E-WOM). Furthermore, the notion of "buzz marketing"

is emerged as a novel marketing approach based on traditional word of mouth and strongly resembling the concept of viral marketing (Goyette, Ricard, Bergeron, & Marticotte, 2010). Historically, consumers have always commented on their purchases and consumption on the Web - among other things - in personal or commercial spaces. Amazon has thus built its success and originality with a space dedicated to customers' opinions, sometimes very critical, about the products distributed by the website (Stenger & Bourliataux-Lajoinie, 2014).

WOM or E-WOM works as well as advertising. Moreover, its result remains more relevant than that generated by advertising campaigns. The company that has been referred by a client benefits from excellent notoriety. The customer who comes to her by word of mouth is an already won customer. Several studies indicate that E-WOM influences the buyer's decision-making process (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, & Walsh, 2004) especially the product (Senecal & Nantel , 2004) or service choice (Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012).

Theoretical background

In an online environment, the receiver is confronted with a diversity of opinions, recommendations and experiences on products and services (Dellarocas, 2003). In addition, these reviews contain different information and come from anonymous sources, making it difficult for the receiver to identify the most useful and relevant reviews in order to adopt them and make a decision.

To date, we see that Algerians are massively adopting online social networks in order to communicate and exchange opinions, ideas and information. The favourite social networks of Internet users who connect from Algeria are ranked according to these figures. In first position comes Facebook with an average of 59.34% of the time Algerians spent on social networks. YouTube comes in second place with an average of 34.59%. Pinterest closes the top 3 with barely 3.36%. Twitter occupies fourth place with only 1.94%. Mark Zuckerberg's other network, Instagram, on the other hand, only scores 0.59%. Finally, the social network that captivates Algerians the least in this ranking is Reddit. Internet users spend 0.07% of their time there (Lyes, 2020). Also, as regards the restaurant industry in Algeria, there are about 8,000 traditional restaurants, 18,000 fast food companies and 600 bars (Bureau Business France, 2017).

Based on a synthesis of the literature review and an empirical study, we will reply to the following research question: What are the determinants of electronic word of mouth (review content characteristics, review source characteristics and receiver expertise) that influence its use by Algerians in the restaurant sector? The major purpose of our paper is to measure the effect of E-WOM determinants (review content, review source, receiver expertise) on its use as well as to identify which determinant has the most influence on the use of E-WOM. The objectives of this paper were to: (1) Describe the traditional and Electronic WOM and the difference between them; (2) determine the effect of review content and source credibility on E-WOM' use; and (3) verify the moderating effect of receiver expertise on the relation (review content and E-WOM use). The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 describes the development of the word of mouth concept, and then present relevant literature review and hypotheses. Section 3 explains methodology. Section 4 presents the main results, discussions thereof. Section 5 concludes as well as implications and directions for future research are outlined.

Development of the Word of Mouth Concept toward Electronic Word of Mouth

Interpersonal communication can be achieved face-to-face, i.e. through informal exchanges and conversations with those around you (friends, colleagues, family members etc.). This is called traditional word of mouth, which is a valuable channel for exchanging information between two consumers about brands or products (Vernette, 2016). It consists of real conversations between consumers; companies take part in these conversations, but never engage in any manipulation and they never in any way undermine the underlying honesty (Sernovitz, 2012). According to Westbrook, this is post-purchase behaviour and constitutes the transmission of informal communications to different consumers about the use, ownership or features of specific goods, services and even their sellers (Quang-Tri, 2013). Two types of traditional word of mouth can be distinguished: spontaneous word of mouth, which is a communication initiative taken by individuals without direct intervention of a brand or company, and assisted word of mouth, which involves, for example, including information or offering transmission elements on web pages or in emails to promote and simplify spontaneous recommendations (Viot, 2006).

The increasing number of Internet users has largely favoured electronic word-of-mouth, called E-WOM, which is described as an exchange of opinion based on the effect or experience with goods/services through an interactive tool that is the Internet. It facilitates access to information, it improves the quality of information because consumers can compare sources and finally it allows structuring and organizing the information (Dosquet, 2017). This is the digital version of the classic word of mouth (Bathelot, 2019) and is considered an important source for consumers when making a purchasing decision. Certain associated research have also shown that electronic messages are an excellent way for customers to get information about certain products and reduce the uncertainty related to online shopping (Abălăesei & Sandu, 2015).

One of the unique characteristics of E-WOM in comparison to classic face-to-face word-o-mouth is the fact that the former can be easily evaluated, so we can quantify and observe the electronic word-of-mouth and most importantly control it. The sellers have the power of control how people can provide feedback, which influences WOM indirectly in their favour (Baber, Thurasamy, & Malik, 2016). Based on this information we conclude that the main difference between face-to-face WOM and E-WOM is the extent of the impact of comments and the speed of communication. Currently, it is no longer necessary to exchange information by word of mouth and there is no need for all parties involved to be in the same place at the same time; thus, thanks to social media, it is easy to communicate the appreciation of a product or service to several people at once (Pettigrew, 2017).

Determinants of Electronic Word-of-Mouth Use and Hypothesis Proposition

Researchers use a variety of theoretical frameworks to study communication in an online context. However, studies in the field of E WOM can be classified into two levels: the market level and the individual level (Lee & Lee, 2009). At the individual level, researchers view E WOM as an influencing process, where the message (content) between sender (source) and receiver can change decisions to purchase a product or service (Park & Lee, 2008 ; Cheung et al., 2009). Most of the research focuses on analysis at the individual level as well as this study.

Online opinions' Content: Today, content produced by Internet users occupies more space in Google's indexes than content produced by companies. Clearly, it is the consumer who dominates. They immortalize the experiences they find interesting to share: by photo/video or commentary etc. (Pommeray, 2016). Users share content on brand both with other members of the virtual community and with the brand, but also with their own Facebook friends. Indeed, the objective for users in sharing is to build, enrich and develop their relationship with the community. Information that has a positive tone or causes anger will be more shared than that initiating sadness (Haikel-Elsabeh, 2014).

Most consumers do not give importance to merchant-produced content; User-generated data sources eg. online reviews and comments are usually perceived as more trustworthy and, therefore, more useful than information produced by marketers (Purnawirawan, De Pelsmacker, & Dens, 2012). The content shared by consumers is then identified and structured by a curator in order to write its own content from an editorial angle. In the end, this reworked and argued content is made available to Internet users on sharing platforms, relayed on social networks or published on the author-curator's website (Truphème & Gastaud, 2017).

The polarity defined as the property of the magnet or a magnetic needle to move towards the poles of the world (Grand Robert, 2005). It is therefore a "state of a system in which any two points have different characteristics (opposite or distinct)" (Hajok & Lerin, 2016). The polarity of the WOM can be either positive or negative. Indeed, WOM's message can focus either on the strengths and advantages of the product or on its weaknesses and problems (Hamouda & Srarfi Tabbane, 2014). Polarisation of word-of-mouth describes whether the discussions were positive or negative, more reflective of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with a product or service (Quang-Tri, 2013). Thus, we suggest the following hypothesis:
- H1: E-Wom use is significantly influenced by review polarity;
- H2: E-Wom use is significantly influenced by review intensity

Source credibility: The credibility of the personal source of information is defined as the perceived ability of the source of the message or the perceived motivation to provide accurate and precise information (Smail & Sidmou, 2017). The notion of credibility, in an online context, has been the subject of numerous studies. Tseng and Fogg (1999) have defined it as the amount to which a person can perceive the reference as credible, true or based on real facts. However, E-WOM comes from individuals who are foreign and who do not essentially have expertise in the product category. Therefore, the anonymous and, above all, improbable nature of the source means that a person may perceive some of the information on a website as credible and doubt the other information on the same website (Ezzahi & Jazi, 2018). The credibility of information available on the Internet depends on the appearance of the site, the organization of the information on the site and the functionality of the interface (Ben Zin El Abidine, 2015). Rieh and Belkin, (1998) highlighted seven characteristics of the information that affect the judgment of credibility on the Web: source, content, format, presentation, update, accuracy, loading speed (Bonaro, 2013). However, credibility is not necessarily a source-specific attribute. In order to evaluate the credibility of the merchant website, the customers should mainly count on the website's capability to achieve the necessary task without reference to exposure, partner opportunism, expectations of mutual loyalty or good intentions inferred from the site. (N'Goala & Cases, 2012). Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

- H3: E-Wom use is significantly influenced by source expertise;
- H4: E-Wom use is significantly influenced by source trustworthiness.

Receiver expertise: Prior experience and consumer knowledge is an important factor in information processing and decision-making online. Several studies demonstrate the role of receiver expertise in information processing and decision-making (Cheung, Xiao, & Liu, 2012; Dano & Hanulákova, 2016; Meyer, 2000). Prior knowledge can act as a moderator between the quality of the information and the adoption of the message, i.e. the more knowledge consumers have in the product category or in surfing the Internet, the easier it is for them to judge the message and its quality (Bansal & Voyer, 2000) . Hence, we suggest the following hypothesis:

- H5a: Receiver expertise has a moderating effect on review polarity and E-WOM use;
- H5b: Receiver expertise has a moderating effect on review intensity and E-WOM use.

Material and Methods

Conceptual Framework

The paper aims to determine the characteristics of word-of-mouth (Content and Source) that most influence its use by online social networks members. Further, receiver experience is suggested as a moderator between (Review content and E-WOM' use). Therefore, and based on the literature review mentioned above, this research proposed the conceptual framework illustrated in Chart 1:

Chart 1 Proposed model
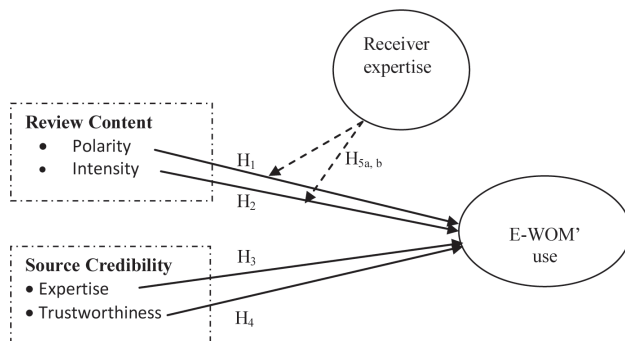
Source: Designed by the authors

Measurement Scales

The study questionnaire was composed of 3 important parts. The first part was dedicated to the introduction while the second part was reserved for questions related to the subject and the last part was devoted to personal questions. To measure the variables in our model presented in Chart 1, we used Likert measure which is scaling from 1 to 5 (strongly disagree to strongly agree) comprising a set of items taken from previous studies and adjusted to the context of our study. These items were formulated based on the relevant scales already validated. The variable E-WOM use was measured using a scale proposed by Baber, Thurasamy, & Malik (2016). For the intensity content and the polarity content, we have referred to the scale proposed by Goyette, Ricard, Bergeron, & Marticotte (2010). The Source credibility with its two dimensions trustworthiness and source expertise was adapted from Abdennadher (2014). Finally, we have posed a simple question for measuring receiver expertise.

Data Collection

We opted for the non-probability sampling method specifically that of convenience sampling, given the absence of a database containing the list of online social networks users in Algeria, so a sample of 250 Facebook users was selected. The most appropriate data collection method for our study is an online survey because it allows data collection from a large population and ensures the reliability of the results obtained because electronic communication between members was assessed. The administration period of the questionnaire lasted from March 17 to April 20, 2019. After eliminating the invalid questionnaires (40 questionnaires), we received a return of 210 valid questionnaires.

Data Analysis Method

Several statistical methods have been developed to analyze the data, including structural equation modeling (SEM), a technique for estimating observed dependency relationships in a set of concepts and constructs, which includes two approaches: ISEREL and PLS (Wong, 2013). For our research, we have opted for the PLS approach, which is described as flexible modelling and is particularly suitable for exploratory research, where the theoretical framework is weak (Fernandes, 2012). This approach is most consistent and meets the needs of our study in order to answer the different questions, to verify the hypotheses of this research and to test the theoretical relationships through a unique technique. The data collection and the descriptive analysis are carried out using Sphinx Version 5 software while SmartPLS Version 2 software is used for hypothesis verification as well as data processing.

Results and Discussion

Demographic Profile

We will present in this section the results of the descriptive analysis related to the socio-demographic features of the sample: gender, income, age, CSP, education level as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Sample descriptive statistics

Characteristics		Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	109	51.9
	Female	101	48.1
Age	18- 25	73	34.8
	26-40	107	51.0
	41-65	30	14.2
	More than 65 years	0	0
Income	Less than 18000 DA	15	7.1
	18000- 25000 DA	49	23.3
	25001-50000 DA	43	20.5
	More than 50000 DA	32	15.2
	No income	71	33.8
Frequency of social media use	Less often	65	21.8
	Every few weeks	83	27.9
	2-3 times a week	68	22.8
	once a day	62	20.8
	Several times a day	20	6.7
Occupational category	Student	69	32.9
	Employee	92	43.8
	merchant	39	18.6
	pensioner	10	4.8
Education	Illiterate	0	0
	Middle education	59	28.1
	High education	151	71.9
Total		210	100

Source: Sphinx V5 outcomes, authors' own adaptation

Our sample is composed of approximately equal proportions of men (51.9%) and women (48.1%) mainly in the age group (26-40 years) with a percentage of 51%. As for the distribution by socio-professional category, our sample is quite heterogeneous. The interviewees belong to all social classes. In addition, we find that the category of respondents with no income is the most consistent with a percentage of 33.8%. To conclude, our respondents have a higher level of education for the most part.

Measurement Model Assessment

To examine the measurement model, it must be testing the reliability and the validity of different constructs. Reliability refers to the degree to which the instruments used consistently measure the studied construct. Table 2 presents the results obtained for construct reliability, which clearly shows that the constructs are reliable, according to the results all the constructs exceed the critical thresholds of 0.6 (Cronbach's α) and 0.7 (Composite Reliability CR) and this according to Wong's proposition (2013).

Table 2 Measurement model summary

Constructs	Items	Laodings	AVE	CR	α	R²
Polarity			.7951	. 9311	.7225	.0000
	Pol1	.703				
	Pol2	.871				
	Pol3	Removed				
Intensity			v	. 9121	.8327	.0000
	Int1	.965				
	Int2	.895				
	Int3	Removed				
Source expertise			.7042	.8767	.8437	.0000
	SE1	.873				
	SE2	.875				
	SE3	.764				
Trustworthness			. 6600	.8534	.8661	.0000
	TR1	Removed				
	TR2	.845				
	TR3	.878				
	TR4	.777				
Receiver expertise	RE	Single Item	-	-	-	.0000
E-WOM' use			.6616	. 8539	.7916	.4197
	Wom1	.734				
	Wom2	Removed				
	Wom3	.701				
	Wom4	.800				
	Wom5	.779				

Source: SmartPLS V2 outcomes

Table 2 also presents the results obtained for the average variance extracted (AVE). According to Bagozzi and Yi (1988), it must exceed the critical threshold (AVE>0.5) and which therefore reflects a satisfactory convergent validity. It is also confirmed if the values of all items are equal to or greater than the recommended threshold of 0.70 (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). After applying the PLS algorithm, we established that 04 items had values less than 0.70 which led us to delete them and 14 items were taken as indicated in Table 2.

Structural Model Analysis

Table 3 shows the discriminatory validity test. The values shown in bold in the diagonal of the correlation matrix are $\sqrt{AVE}$. To test the discriminating validity between two constructs, the correlation between these two elements must be compared by calculating the square root of their respective AVEs. For example, $\sqrt{AVE}$ for Polarity is 0.8916, $\sqrt{AVE}$ for intensity is 0.9333, and both exceed the correlation

of 0.2616. In conclusion, the items in the measurement scale are generally valid and reliable and therefore allow the structural model to be tested.

Prior to testing the hypotheses, it is essential to confirm the adjustment of the structural model that was estimated by calculating the goodness of fit (GoF) index. According to Henseler and Sarstedt (2013), this index is represented as follows:

$$GoF = \sqrt[]{AVExR^2} \quad and \quad GoF > 0,30$$

Table 3 Assessment of convergent validity

Constructs		Correlation					
		1	2	3	4	5	6
1	Polarity	.8916	-	-	-	-	-
2	Intensity	.2616	.9333	-	-	-	-
3	Source expertise	.3486	.0536	.8391	-	-	-
4	Trustworthness	.4104	.1940	.3108	.8124	-	-
5	Receiver expertise	.1734	.2010	.1746	.4222	1.000	-
6	E-WOM' use	.4793	.1839	.2919	.4129	.2838	.8133

Source: SmartPLS V2 outcomes, authors' own adaptation

After the calculations, we obtained GoF= 0.63, which leads us to conclude that the fit quality of the structural model is good and it is therefore possible at this stage to test the research hypotheses. Table 4 illustrates the Standardized path coefficients (β), Standard deviation (STDEV) and T Statistics for all relationships in this study model.

Table 4 Assessment of path coefficients

	Original Sample (O)	Sample Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (STDEV)	Standard Error (STERR)	T Statistics (|O/STERR|)
Intensity -> E-WOM' use	.0439	.0491	.0792	.0792	.5543
Polarity -> E-WOM' use	.1973	.1962	.0999	.0999	1.9751
Sour Exper -> E-WOM' use	.0670	.0725	.0964	.0964	.6956
Trustworth -> E-WOM' use	.4795	.4796	.1100	.1100	4.3598

Source: SmartPLS V2 outcomes

By a two-tailed t-test where the significance level is set to 5%, if the T Statistics is greater than 1.96 the path coefficient is significant (Chin, 1998). The results reveal that Polarity (β=0.1973; p<0.05) and Trustworthiness (β=0. 4795; p<0.05) have a positive and significant influence on E-WOM use. Therefore, H_2 and H_4 are accepted.

However, Intensity (β= 0.0439; p>0.05) and Source Expertise (β=0.0670; p>0.05) indicate that there are no significant influences on E-WOM' use. Thus, H1 and H$_3$ are rejected.

Evaluation of the Moderating Effect of Receiver Expertise

Moderation relationships refer to situations in which dependent and independent variables relationships change according to the level of a third variable (the moderator). For the Hypothesis 5a, we cannot test it because there is no direct effect of intensity on E-WOM use (H1 is rejected). The T statistic for multiplication (Polarity*Rec Exp-> E-WOM' use) gives a value of 0.3297<1.96 (the critical value of the variable of T student at a threshold α=5%) which proves that there is no moderating effect of Receiver Expertise on the relationship between the variable Polarity and E-WOM use. Thus, the hypothesis H5a is rejected. The results of testing moderating effect is given in Table 5.

Table 5 Testing Moderating effect

	Original Sample (β)	Sample Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (STDEV)	Standard Error (STERR)	T Statistics (| O/STERR |)
Rec Exp -> E-WOM' use	-.0675	-.0735	.2804	2804	v
Polarity*Rec Exp -> E-WOM' use	.1260	.1381	.3823	.3823	.3297
Polarity -> E-WOM' use	.1333	.1239	.2414	.2414	.5523

Source: SmartPLS V2 outcomes

Conclusion

In contemporary hospitality marketing, online opinions are well known as one of the key factors, given the influence they have on customers' purchasing decisions. For restaurant choice, it seems that consumers trust the electronic word of mouth more than advertising itself. The main purpose of this article is to increase knowledge about how electronic word of mouth works, especially the factors that influence E-WOM adoption including the review content (intensity and polarity) and source credibility (expertise ant trustworthiness) in a restaurant industry context.

According to the descriptive analysis of the empirical study, the clients in our sample are most often aged 25 to 40 years because they are generally the most connected on Facebook. According the study results, we also conclude that restaurant consumers have integrated digital social networks into their purchasing behaviour and decision. The results illustrate that consumers before proceeding to the act of purchase consult the opinions and comments left by the other online community members, which can influence their purchase decision. Moreover, in case of negative reviews they prefer to do further research. This explains the influence of the polarity of comments on the use of electronic word of mouth, since if the opinions are positive or negative it more reflects satisfaction or dissatisfaction with a restaurant service, which can have an impact on the consumer's choice. Therefore, Facebook' users have a tendency to trust the opinions presented, especially if they come from known persons such as friends. Otherwise, For our sample there is no relationship between intensity content, source

expertise and electronic word of mouth adoption, which means that consumers are not interested in how much others like or dislike a restaurant; there is only a need to find one online review to evaluate the restaurant and make a choice.

On a managerial level, this study can be useful for restaurant managers, marketers and community managers as it allows them to fully understand the WOM's communication and its importance and to clearly identify consumers' expectations and needs in order to attract them, influence their purchase, ensure their satisfaction and thus their loyalty. Consequently, in an online context, it is important to encourage satisfied people who have visited the restaurant recently to post reviews on online social networks. It is also important to reassure Internet users and create trusting relationships on the Internet. Online opinions, when considered useful, influence Internet users' purchasing decisions. They are therefore part of the search for commercial information like other traditional sources of information and represent a major challenge for restaurants. Despite its managerial interests, this study presents a set of limitations that open the way to many research perspectives. Sample size and convenience sampling is an important limitation of the research. This does not allow us to generalize the results to all Algerian customers; it is recommended to calculate the sample size according to the number of Algerian users with a Facebook account. Moreover, the study carried out only concerns restaurant services. It would be useful to conduct new research for other types of services with larger samples.

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