

Oswald Mhlanga / Tembi Maloney Tichaawa

Influence of social media on customer experiences in restaurants: A South African study

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine the influence of social media on customers' experiences in restaurants in South Africa. Using the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Municipality as a case study area, structured survey questionnaires were distributed at selected formal full-service restaurants to customers. The data analysis consisted of the experiences of respondents with different social media types and t-tests. The results indicated that on a 5 point Likert scale, customers who used Instagram in the 35 to 44 year age group recorded the highest mean experience score (4.69) whilst customers who used Instagram who were above 65 years of age recorded the lowest mean experience score (3.78). Customers who used Facebook and Instagram rated experiences of food and beverage, service, ambience levels and overall experiences significantly different ($p < 0.05$). Customers who used You Tube rated experiences of service quality significantly different ($p < 0.05$). There were no significant differences ($p < 0.05$) in the means calculated for customers who used Twitter, Trip advisor and other social media types. Consequently, restaurant customer experiences for food and beverage, service and ambience were influenced by Facebook and Instagram. The study concludes that, while social media usage continues to grow in South Africa, restaurateurs should market restaurants on any social media type but put more emphasis on Facebook, Instagram and You Tube because these social media types currently play a substantial role in influencing customers' experiences.

Key words: customers; restaurants; social media; experiences; statistical analysis; South Africa

Introduction

Brown (2016) avers that today's restaurant customers actively engage their peers through social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, advising them on their future purchase decisions. As a result, consumers are increasingly using social media channels to help choose restaurants (Liang, Ho, Li & Turban, 2011). For example, Pick (2014) claims that 54% of restaurant customers' buying behaviour is directly influenced by what others say about a restaurant, and 60% of customers would change their restaurant choice in response to negative feedback from within their social network. Put simply, social media in today's context outplays traditional marketing when it comes to driving the buying behaviour of restaurant customers (Brown, 2016).

According to Hsu, Liu and Lee (2010) social media has altered the dining experience, built a clientele base of food enthusiasts and created a new breed of restaurant customers: the impulsive social media obsessed, food blogger. Akar and Topcu (2011) concur that the food blogger is now armed with the authority to raise a restaurant's reputation or expose a restaurant's faults with a few keystrokes and amplified social media messages. Therefore, food bloggers are taking over the restaurant review scene, with social media as their prime tool of communication (Bronner & Hoog, 2013).

Oswald Mhlanga, M.Comm, Department of Hospitality, University of Mpumalanga, Mbombela, South Africa;
E-mail: osward.mhlanga@ump.ac.za

Tembi Maloney Tichaawa, PhD, School of Tourism and Hospitality, Faculty of Management, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa; E-mail: tembit@uj.ac.za

Although restaurants have little leeway in altering what consumers say about a restaurant experience on social media, they however have the opportunity to alter what the consumer perceives (Culnan, McHugh & Zubillaga, 2010). The idea of perception captures the notion of the importance of the appearance of the plate, and the food upon it (Al-Deen & Hendricks, 2011). Restaurants should ensure that the first impression of the restaurant facility, ambience, service and look of food is good beyond dispute (Barnes, 2010). As the post-modern restaurant customer pays attention to creation of their "self" image, the restaurant experience becomes an extension of this (Pick, 2014).

Similarly, restaurateurs need to understand why, and how, customers participate in the social media so as to improve customer experiences, and leverage the power of social media in their favour (Lee, Xiong & Hu, 2012). Leung, Law, Van Hoof and Buhalis (2013) claim that social media offer special solutions to the "problem" of the intangibility of restaurant experiences. According to Papasolomou and Melanthiou (2012), restaurant services cannot be evaluated before the experiencing of consumption; therefore, purchasing intangible restaurant services brings with it a relatively high risk, so that customers are dependent to a marked degree, on the interpersonal influence of social media.

In relation to such a context, Williams (2015) asserts that, because a consumer might not be able to understand a restaurant fully before experiencing what it has on offer, the consumer might seek advance information, by way of social media from an experienced source. Consequently, Duggan and Smith (2013) conclude that the social media have become an important source of information for restaurant customers in the contemporary era.

However, in spite of the growing international interest on the influence of social media on customer experiences in restaurants, limited research has been commissioned on this topic in South Africa. International studies on the influence of social media on customer experiences in restaurants might not be applicable to the South African restaurant subsector, since researchers such as Safko (2012) and Wollan, Smith and Zhou (2010) emphasize that social media and customer experiences should be interpreted in the light of their cultural context and should not be generalised to other countries. Furthermore, the popularity of social networks varies from one country to another due to different life styles, therefore different social networks might influence restaurant experiences differently in different countries (Li & Shiu, 2012). Consequently a study to determine the influence of social media on customers' experiences in restaurants in South Africa was conceptualised. The theoretical contribution relates to critically articulating the experiences from a developing context, where such findings could mirror similarities and differences and inform restaurateurs of strategic implications which could be useful for marketing and management endeavours.

Social media impact

Breed (2011) avers that positive comments that are made on social media are likely to increase customers' purchase intentions regarding the purchase of new menus, because such comments serve to reduce the risks involved in making the purchase. It turns out that restaurant customers are more likely to trust the messages and comments posted by other consumers on social media websites as compared with those reviewed by the restaurant websites (Pantelidis, 2010). Along the same positivistic lines, Sinclair and Vogus (2011) hold the view that positive comments that are made on social media can help create a favourable image of the restaurant in question and can help market the restaurant, which eventually, can lead to a reduction in the need for promotional expenditure. In juxtaposition, research conducted by the University of Kentucky (2011) shows that negative comments that are placed on social media sites might lead to a decrease in customers' purchase intentions relating to the product(s) and service(s) in question (University of Kentucky, 2011).

To express the enormity of the impact of social media, Daniel (2011) contends that 44% of first-time restaurant customers are driven to visit the restaurant involved by positive comments regarding it that they have read on social media platforms, and that 10% of the comments in question come from a previous restaurant patron. Ulusu (2010) showed that a satisfied customer would be likely to tell three other customers on social media about their dining experience. Contrary wise, Williams (2015) argues that one unhappy customer, on average, would tend to tell between 10 and 11 other people on social media of a bad experience that they had. Buscall (2015:1) finds that "one bad tweet or a negative comment on social media can lose your business up to thirty customers". Jasra (2010) concludes that a dissatisfied restaurant customer might not only go elsewhere, but that they will likely actively champion others to go elsewhere as well, by means of posting negative comments on a social media site.

Social media types and restaurant experience

Restaurant experiences are not only influenced by food but by social media (Pick, 2014). For many restaurant customers, social media is part of the appeal of dining out because it enables them to share their experiences with their online communities (Beese, 2011). So by encouraging customers to distribute images and messages about their meals, restaurants can enhance the customer experience to guests (Edwards, 2013). Social media also holds restaurants accountable for quality and consistency (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). When customers are encouraged to share their experiences with others, every dish counts and restaurants are incentivized to better understand the impact food presentation has on guests' perceptions of food quality (Berger & Schwartz, 2011). Consequently, social media significantly determines the level of restaurant experiences (Verma, Stock & McCarthy, 2012).

However, various scholars have been reporting contradictory findings regarding the influence of social media on customer experiences in restaurants. For the purpose of this study, social media types will be discussed in the context of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Youtube, Trip advisor and other social networks.

In a study by Brown (2016) it was found that the influence of social media on restaurant experiences depends on the age of customers. According to Brown (2016) various social networks have different levels of influence amongst different age groups. Brown (2016) noted that Instagram had a high influence on customers in the 35 to 44 year age group. Salomon (2013) argued that this might be because 35 to 44 year age groups tend to look for formal full service restaurants with good food and a high level of service and Instagram tends to provide a clear visual platform for this age group to evaluate the quality of food and level of service and hence make an informed choice. In another study by Brandau (2013) it was found that the reason why Instagram had a high influence on customers in the 35 to 44 year age group was because older members of Generation Y are more likely to share their restaurant experiences on Instagram.

Brown (2016) further found that Facebook had a high influence amongst male restaurant customers. According to Brown (2016) this is because males tend to look to the internet for advice and recommendations more often than asking their friends and family. The "experientialist" male diner looks for great food, great quality and great experience, and they love to share it via social media and Facebook tends to increase males' restaurant experiences because Facebook users can be a fan of their favourite restaurants and share their opinions and experiences with other fans. Therefore, restaurateurs should understand that the demographics of social media users influence customer (Brown, 2016).

In another study by Papasolomou and Melanthiou (2012) it was found that Facebook users rated their experiences of food and beverage, service, ambience levels and overall experiences significantly different ($p < 0.05$). Ulusu (2010) also found a significant difference in restaurant experiences of food and beverage, service, ambience levels and overall experiences for Facebook users. The reason for the significant differences might be attributed to the fact Facebook commands a huge following and is popular amongst restaurant customers and is a perfect medium for self-expression (Sheldon, 2008). According to Worldwideworx (2016) Facebook is now used by a quarter of all South Africans.

Research conducted by Dunphy (2014) found that customers over 60 years of age indicated Facebook as the social media with the greatest influence on their dining experience. However, according to Nielsen research (2009), majority of Facebook users are young and mostly college students. Additionally, Facebook users can be a fan of their favourite brands and share their opinions and experiences with other fans. Katherine (2013) also found that experiences of customers for food are influenced by Facebook. According to Katherine (2013), Facebook has the most influence on restaurant customers' experiences because it allows restaurant adverts to reach new audiences in a number of ways and Facebook adverts are effective because they can reach into audiences by location, age, and their behaviours (Buscall, 2015).

Elsewhere in relevant academic scholarship, Staff (2009) studied the influence of social media on restaurant experiences in Houston. Staff (2009) found that Twitter had the highest influence on restaurant sales. All restaurants that used Twitter as a social media tool to communicate ideas and news to their customers reported a 20% increase in sales whilst those restaurants that used Facebook reported an 11% increase in sales and those restaurants that used Instagram reported a 7% increase in sales.

Bossu (2011) confirms that, different Twitter users rated experiences of food, service and overall experiences significantly different. In another study, Barnes (2010) also suggest that different Twitter users rated experiences of food and beverage and service in restaurants significantly different. According to Barnes (2010) Twitter tends to have an influence on restaurant customer experiences because it is more conversational unlike other social networks.

In their studies on Instagram, Al-Deen and Hendricks (2011) and Fischer and Reuber (2011) note that, users rated their experiences of food and beverage, service, ambience levels and overall experiences significantly different. The reason for the significant differences were attributed to the fact that Instagram provides more visually appealing pictures which are quicker to apprehend than text. According to Buscall (2015), visual content gets 94% more total views and is 40% more likely to be shared on social networks.

In Wang's (2011) study on the influence of social media on restaurant experiences, he argued that, restaurant experiences are influenced by Instagram. He found Instagram as an important factor determining 25 to 34 year olds. A study by Kerwood (2015) shows that the level of brand engagement is higher on Instagram than on any other major social network. According to Kerwood (2015) the addition of '@mentions', relevant hashtags and location tags tend to increase restaurant follower-count and hence restaurant experience. Therefore, Brandau (2013) offers the argument that Instagram portrays clear picture visuals for restaurant customers to compare different picture menus offered by different restaurants.

In a study by Sinclair and Vogus (2011) it was found that Trip advisor had no significant influence on customers' experiences whilst a study by Junco, Heiberger and Liken (2011) noted that YouTube users rated experiences of service quality significantly different. In a study by Wollan et al. (2010) it was found that different You Tube users rated experiences of service quality significantly different.

Research methods

Design

South Africa, specifically the Nelson Mandela Bay Metropolitan Municipality located within the Eastern Cape Province was chosen to be the research site. Such an area was deemed appropriate for the study, given its cosmopolitan nature and the availability of a range of formal full service restaurants. In addition, the researchers considered that social media such as "facebook is popular all over the world and South Africa is no exception". As such the study adopted a case study design incorporating the quantitative approach. According to Veal (2011), a case study is an empirical enquiry that examines a modern-day occurrence within a real-life context.

The scope of the study was limited only to registered formal full-service restaurants. To identify such restaurants, the researchers obtained a list from local restaurant directories, relevant local government sources and the local bureau of chambers and commerce. The information gleaned was then verified against the criteria set out by Statistics South Africa (2014) for their classification as formal full-service restaurants. According to such a criteria, a formal full-service restaurant refers to an upmarket restaurant that offers table service with complete, varied menus, and multiple entrees for each meal period which might include soups, salads, and/or desserts. In addition, such restaurants provide customer seating with gastronomy, sophisticated service, elegant ambience, and liquor service (Mhlanga, Hattlingh & Moolman, 2013). A formal dress code is usually mandatory in such restaurants as emphasised by Feinstein and Stefanelli (2008). The audit process yielded 10 formal full service restaurants which were included in the main study.

Instrumentation

In an attempt to develop a valid survey instrument, various secondary data sources were consulted. This was followed by an exploratory discussion meeting (qualitative) that was held with restaurateurs concerned, to explore their views on the study. Such views were deemed important and informed the development of a structured quantitative survey that suited the local context of South Africa and Nelson Mandela Bay Metropolitan Municipality specifically. Key issues identified and contextualised included, caution in terms of questionnaire length, focus only on social media types and customer experiences, the need to increase socio-demographic profiles of the respondents with the view to assist restaurants with the current profiles of their customers and the need to exercise caution not to affect the customers' dining experience.

A self-administered questionnaire was customised to address the objectives and setting of the study. The key variables measured included demographic profiles of the respondents in terms of gender, age, monthly income and level of education. Dining attributes such as food quality, service quality and ambience were also included in the survey as proposed by Sulek and Hensley (2004) due to their ability to influence experiences. In the survey, restaurant guests were requested to rate the influence of the following social networks on their experiences, namely Facebook; Twitter; Instagram and other social media (namely Reddit and Snapchat); Trip Advisor and YouTube. The first four types of social media were selected, since the extensive literature review (among others, Duggan & Smith, 2013; Fischer & Reuber, 2011; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010) identified these as the most obvious social media types influencing restaurant customer experiences and they were the most popular social networks among South African restaurant consumers.

The independent variables were tested by requesting restaurant guests to rate the influence of social media on restaurant experiences. A five-point Likert scale was used. Since each point in the Likert scale

had a descriptor, a fully anchored rating scale (Johnson & Christensen, 2004) was applied. The five response alternatives for measuring customer experiences were "very low experiences – (1)", through "low experiences – (2)", "indifferent – (3)", "high experiences – (4)", to "very high experiences – (5)".

The study was voluntary and verbal consent was obtained from all the restaurateurs. Restaurateurs were assured that all information collected would be treated as anonymous and used for academic purposes only, besides sharing the findings with them.

Sampling procedure

The survey was administered to customers in formal full-service restaurants in the Nelson Mandela Bay Metropolitan Municipality. A proportional stratified sampling method (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013) was followed to determine an appropriate sample size. The sample size per restaurant in the study was thus calculated at 50 per cent of each restaurant's seating capacity to attain a 95 percent confidence levels in the results where the sample proportion p fall within 0.05 of the population proportion as recommended by Isaac and Micheal (1981) and used in similar studies such as that of Kivela, Inbakaran and Reece (1999). The researchers together with trained fieldworkers then applied the random sampling technique in targeting customers who had just completed their restaurant visit at the selected restaurants. The data was collected over a two months period and between Tuesdays and Saturdays, after 12:00 noon. Such days and timing were considered appropriate as they did not only suite the programmes of the restaurants which were surveyed, but also were considered to be the busiest times and days of the week.

Data analysis

The data was captured and analysed by means of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software version 22. Only variables that met the study objectives were included in the analysis.

Reliability and validity

In quantitative studies of this nature, reliability is acknowledged as the extent to which the data collection methods yield consistent or stable findings (Altinay & Paraskevas, 2008). According to Veal (2011), the Cronbach α coefficient is regarded as the most appropriate method to investigate the reliability of survey research where there is a range of possible answers and not only a choice between two items. Thus internal reliability was tested using this measure. Pallent contend that, a Cronbach's α coefficient which is higher than seven is acceptable. The findings in the current study reveal that, such Cronbach's α coefficient for the total index was high (0.8766), while moderate to high reliability coefficients were calculated for food quality (0.8619), service quality (0.8518), ambiance (0.8522) and overall dining experience (0.8399). The high alpha values indicate good internal consistency among the items. Pietersen and Maree (2007) describe validity as the extent to which an empirical instrument "measures what it is supposed to measure". In order to ensure content and face validity (Babbie, 2011), a literature study was undertaken and the survey instrument was scrutinised by statistical, academic and restaurant experts before the instrument was finalised.

Results and discussion

Table 1 reflects the experiences of respondents with different social networks. The table also reflects the means and standard deviations for respondents with different demographic variables. According to the table, 45.75% (N=183) were male whilst 50.25% were in the age group 45 to 54 years. Of the respondents, 42.75% had a tertiary diploma whilst 55.25% earned a monthly income in the R6,001

to R11,999 range. The results that half of the customers (50.25%) in this study fell in the age group 45 to 54 years and 55 to 64 years, vindicate the findings by Siegel (2002) who found that most of the customers in formal full service restaurants tend to be part of Generation X who have a high propensity to dine out and tend to prefer dining at full-service restaurants.

Table 1
Influence of social media on experiences of respondents by different demographic variables (n=400)

Demographic variables	N	%	Experiences									
			Facebook		Twitter		Instagram		You Tube		Other	
			Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Gender												
Male	183	45.75	4.49	0.83	4.20	0.91	4.26	0.65	4.19	0.71	4.13	0.63
Female	217	54.25	4.32	0.67	4.33	1.04	4.31	0.78	4.25	1.16	4.28	0.81
Age												
≤24	10	2.50	4.41	0.79	4.30	0.84	4.58	1.13	4.31	1.09	4.14	0.68
25-34	27	6.75	4.56	0.56	4.24	1.13	4.61	0.67	4.49	0.70	4.24	0.57
35-44	63	15.75	4.53	0.74	4.29	0.62	4.69	0.78	4.28	0.59	4.05	0.76
45-54	201	50.25	4.62	0.92	4.17	0.59	4.17	0.55	4.35	0.64	4.30	0.55
55-64	86	21.50	4.11	0.98	4.05	0.96	3.89	1.07	4.24	0.51	4.21	0.60
≥65	13	3.25	4.04	1.06	3.96	0.65	3.78	0.54	3.92	0.71	4.06	0.96
Monthly income												
≤R6,000	59	14.75	4.29	0.68	4.36	1.09	4.28	0.63	4.32	1.22	4.48	1.08
R6,001-R11,999	221	55.25	4.37	1.22	4.21	0.77	4.45	1.28	4.28	0.84	4.21	0.51
≥R12,000	120	30.00	4.45	0.57	4.44	0.54	4.53	0.61	4.39	0.69	4.09	0.70
Education												
No schooling	10	2.50	4.38	0.66	4.19	0.64	4.32	0.75	4.39	0.63	4.19	1.26
Primary school	7	1.75	4.26	0.99	4.32	0.93	4.38	0.90	4.41	0.91	4.22	0.68
High school	93	23.25	4.36	0.56	4.38	0.81	4.21	0.57	4.25	0.78	4.34	0.55
Tertiary Diploma	171	42.75	4.45	0.64	4.26	0.56	4.42	0.80	4.33	1.23	4.30	0.71
Tertiary Degree	96	24.00	4.41	0.70	4.47	0.60	4.55	0.74	4.46	0.56	4.28	0.58
Other	23	5.75	4.15	0.68	4.05	0.83	4.27	1.27	4.16	0.61	4.08	0.87
All	400	100	4.36	0.77	4.25	0.80	4.34	0.81	4.30	0.80	4.21	0.74

*"Very low experiences – (1)", "Low experiences – (2)", "Indifferent – (3)", "High experiences – (4)", to "Very high experiences – (5)".

Table 1 above further depicts the variable mean scores and standard deviations for the sample. The findings reveal that respondents' mean experience scores varied between 3.78 (customers who were above 65 years of age) and 4.69 (customers in the age group 35 to 44 years). Respondents in the age group 35 to 44 years recorded the highest mean experience score (4.69) whilst those who were above 65 years of age recorded the lowest mean experience score (3.78).

In terms of gender, males who used Facebook recorded a high mean experience score (4.49) whilst in terms of age, respondents in the age group 35 to 44 years who used Instagram recorded the highest mean experience score (4.61) (see Table 1). Respondents with a monthly income above R12,000 who used Instagram recorded the highest mean experience score (4.53). In terms of education, respondents with a tertiary degree who used Instagram recorded the highest mean experience score (4.55). The table further depicts that, overall, respondents who used Facebook had the highest mean experience score (4.36) whilst those who used other types of social media had the lowest mean experience score (4.21). Consequently, restaurant experiences vary amongst different types of media.

The findings regarding respondents in the age group 35 to 44 years who used Instagram recording the highest mean experience score well sync with the findings by Brown (2016) who found that the influence of social media on restaurant experiences depends on the age of customers. According to Brown (2016) various social networks influence the restaurant experience differently depending on

the age group. The results further confirm the findings by Brown (2016) who found that Instagram has a high influence on customers in the 35 to 44 year age group. Salomon (2013:410) reason that:

This might be because 35 to 44 year age groups tend to look for formal full service restaurants with good food and level of service because they provide a more suitable social environment for them and Instagram tends to provide a clear visual platform for this age group so that they can make an informed choice.

Furthermore, the findings regarding males who used Facebook recording a high mean experience score is consistent with those of Brown (2016) who found that Facebook tend to have a high influence amongst male restaurant customers. According to the author, male customers tend to look to the internet for advice and recommendations more often than asking their friends and family. The "experientialist" male diner looks for great food, great quality and great experience, and they love to share it via social media. Brown (2016) further suggests that Facebook tends to increase males' restaurant experiences because Facebook users can be a fan of their favourite restaurants and share their opinions and experiences with other fans. Consequently, the researchers in the current study hold the view that, restaurateurs should understand that the socio-demographic profiles of social media users influence customer experiences.

The National Restaurant Associations (2015) maintain that because of its visual effect to portray various restaurant attributes such as food, service and ambience, Instagram is a frequently used social media application in marketing research and restaurant customers tend to follow restaurants on Instagram. Thus, Instagram followers are the most engaged of any social media platform, therefore Instagram is the fastest growing photo-sharing social site that influences customer experiences positively if properly used.

In order to determine whether the differences in social media were significant in food and beverage, service, ambience levels and overall experiences in restaurants, t-tests for Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Trip advisor, YouTube, and other social media were calculated. Table 2 reflects the t-tests performed to determine whether there were any significant differences ($p < 0.05$) in food and beverage, service, ambience levels and overall experiences reported by the different social media.

Table 2
The significance of the difference in the means of different types of social media (n=400)

Types of social networks	Experiences						Overall experiences	
	Food and beverage		Service		Ambience		Mean	p-values
	Mean	p-values	Mean	p-values	Mean	p-values		
Facebook	4.38	0.0079*	4.41	0.0352*	4.23	0.0179*	4.43	0.0082*
Twitter	4.11	0.7208	4.29	0.3277	4.31	0.1062	4.26	0.4157
Instagram	4.53	0.0271*	4.46	0.0256*	4.50	0.0101*	4.51	0.0049*
Trip advisor	4.06	0.3251	4.19	0.1350	4.13	0.5939	4.17	0.3119
You Tube	4.29	0.0305	4.37	0.0284*	4.36	0.1502	4.23	0.2306
Other	4.06	0.5247	4.16	0.6823	4.09	0.4291	4.12	0.6703

* Indicates a significant difference ($p < 0.05$).

Facebook

It is clear from Table 2 that different Facebook users rated experiences of food and beverage, service, ambience levels and overall experiences significantly different ($p < 0.05$). The results are consistent with those of Pappasolomou and Melanthiou (2012) who found that Facebook users rated their experiences of food and beverage, service, ambience levels and overall experiences significantly different ($p < 0.05$). The reason for the significant differences might be attributed to the fact that Facebook commands a huge following and is popular amongst restaurant customers globally.

In another associated study, Ulusu (2010) also found a significant difference in experiences of food and beverage, service, ambience levels and overall experiences calculated for Facebook restaurant customers. According to Sheldon (2008) Facebook is a perfect medium for self-expression where individuals who employ this particular communication style are described as "social specialists" who can be both assertive and opinionated (Hartman & McCambridge, 2011). The expressive communication tends to increase the influence of Facebook on restaurant experiences. For scholars such as Ulusu (2010) it is for such a reason that Facebook is recognised as the most effective social advert platform for restaurants.

Previous scholarship on social media, has recorded a significant difference in Facebook membership between males and females (see Valensuela, Park & Kee, 2009), with women showing heavier usage on the social networking site (Nielsen, 2010). Therefore, Facebook has an influence on customers' experiences because it is a popular social network known for connecting with people and sharing their experiences on.

Twitter

Table 2 also reveals that there were no significant differences in the mean experiences of food and beverage, service, ambience levels and overall experiences calculated for different Twitter customers. The results deviate from the findings by Bossu (2011) who found that different Twitter users rated experiences of food and beverage, service and overall experiences significantly different ($p < 0.05$). Barnes (2010), also found that different Twitter users rated experiences of food and beverage and service in restaurants significantly different ($p < 0.05$).

According to Barnes (2010) Twitter tends to have an influence on restaurant customer experiences because it is more conversational in comparison to Facebook. Nonetheless, the reported differences could occur due to different sample characteristics (e.g. college students in Bossu's study, customers of different types of restaurant settings in Barnes' study, and customers of formal full service restaurants in the present study), and because of the different modifications of DINESERV instrument used in each of the studies mentioned.

Instagram

Table 2 reveals that different Instagram users rated experiences of food and beverage, service, ambience levels and overall experiences significantly different ($p < 0.05$). The results are in line with studies by Al-Deen and Hendricks (2011), and Fischer and Reuber (2011) who found that Instagram users rated their experiences of food and beverage, service, ambience levels and overall experiences significantly different ($p < 0.05$). The reason for the significant differences might be attributed to the fact that Instagram provides more visually appealing pictures which are quicker to apprehend than text posts for customers to view restaurant design, table surfaces, focal point art, lighting, ambience and service. Another reason for the significant differences might be attributed to the fact that visual content gets 94% more total views and is 40% more likely to be shared on social networks. Therefore, images are visual stimuli that whets the customers' appetite thereby influencing customers' experiences.

Furthermore, Instagram tends to have an influence on restaurant customers because it allows restaurant to design their content accordingly. According to Brandau (2013) Instagram portrays clear picture visuals for restaurant customers to compare different picture menus offered by different restaurants. Furthermore, Instagram does not have timeline editing. Therefore, every subscriber has an equal chance of seeing what other restaurant customers post about their experiences or what different restaurants have on offer.

Trip advisor

In terms of Trip advisor, Table 2 shows that there were no significant differences in the means ($p < 0.05$) calculated for customers who used it. The results are similar to studies by Sinclair and Vogus (2011) who assert that Trip advisor has no significant influence on customers' experiences. As such, customers' experiences are not influenced by Trip advisor.

YouTube

Different YouTube users rated experiences of service quality significantly different ($p < 0.05$) as seen in Table 2. The results are in line with previous studies that found experiences of service quality in a restaurant to vary according to YouTube (Junco et al., 2011; Wollan et al., 2010). Xiang and Gretzel (2010) argue that by using YouTube, computers and smartphones influence the experiences of service quality meal to a modern day restaurant customer. YouTube contains a myriad of videos that allow a viewer to learn informally of the level of service expected in a particular category of a restaurant. It serves as a virtual coffee restaurant where people can share ideas and gather with like-minded individuals to discuss the meal experience of a particular restaurant (Hartley, 2009).

However, there were no significant differences ($p < 0.05$) of food and ambience reported for customers using YouTube. This might be attributed to the fact that video downloads are expensive in South Africa since it requires customers to have more data bundles. Consequently, no significant differences ($p < 0.05$) of food and ambience reported for customers using YouTube.

Other social networks

In terms of other social networks, there were no significant differences in the means ($p < 0.05$) calculated for customers who used other social media. The results are similar to studies by Xiang and Gretzel (2010) who assert that other social media besides Instagram, Facebook and Twitter have no significant influence on customers' experiences. As such, customers' experiences are not influenced by other social networks. However, Daniel (2011) found that customer experiences in a restaurant are influenced by other social media such as WhatsApp. The reported difference could occur due to different type of social media used (e.g. WhatsApp and Google in Daniel's study, and Reddit and Snapchat in the present study).

Influence of social media on customers' experiences

Table 3 provides a summary of the influence of the various social media types under investigation on customers' experiences. According to such a table, it is evident that restaurant customer experiences for food and beverage, service and ambience were influenced by Facebook and Instagram. However, Twitter, Trip advisor and other types of social media did not have an influence on the experiences of customers for food and beverage, service and ambience. YouTube only had an influence on the level of service. Consequently, restaurant overall experiences are influenced by Facebook and Instagram.

Table 3
Influence of social media on customers' experiences (n=400)

Type of social media	Significant difference in means			
	Experiences			Overall experiences
	Food and beverage	Service	Ambience	
Facebook	√	√	√	√
Twitter	X	X	X	X
Instagram	√	√	√	√

Table 3 Continued

Type of social media	Significant difference in means			
	Experiences			Overall experiences
	Food and beverage	Service	Ambience	
Trip advisor	X	X	X	X
You tube	X	√	X	X
Other	X	X	X	X

√ indicates a significant difference.
 X indicates a significant difference.

Implications and concluding statements

The purpose of this research endeavour was to determine the influence of social media on restaurant customer experiences. As the literature review and the study findings have shown, social media is a powerful tool that can be used by restaurants in their integrated marketing communication campaigns since it enables them to influence customer experiences in an informal and more personal way. It provides a clear understanding that customer experiences for food, service and ambience are influenced by Facebook and Instagram whilst YouTube influences customer experiences for service. Therefore, restaurateurs must not just market restaurants on any social network but put more emphasis on Facebook, Instagram and YouTube because these social networks play a substantial role in influencing customers' experiences and influencing customer behaviour as well.

Since the influence of social media on customers' experiences vary according to gender, some scholars such as Shaw (2012) have argued that, men and women tend to have different attitudinal and behavioural orientations in their buying behaviour. Consequently, restaurants could segment their level of service on the basis of customers' gender and metro sexuality by using gender segmentation, differentiation and positioning strategies to target a specific gender.

Furthermore, since the influence of social media on customers' experiences vary according to age groups (see Table 2) participating restaurants may find it useful to tailor their offerings based on the age groups of customers. Customers in the 35 to 44 year age group who used Instagram recorded the highest mean experience score than customers in other age groups (see Table 1) the researchers recommend that restaurant managers consider attracting more customers in the 35 to 44 age group since they are easier to satisfy compared to other age groups. From the preceding points, restaurateurs can treat this age group as one market segment and develop a unified market strategy to attract more customers of this age group. Restaurant managers could therefore use different market segmentation strategies for different age groups. When a restaurant targets a specific group of customers differently, it is likely to exceed their expectations and ensure customer satisfaction in an accumulating manner (Shaw, 2012).

In addition, when choosing what to post on their Instagram page, a restaurant should only use high-quality, professional-grade photography. When choosing where to go for dinner, consumers will not only choose with their stomachs but with their eyes. If they go on a restaurant's Instagram page and the food looks unappealing, the likelihood of them choosing to go there decreases significantly. On the contrary, if a restaurant displays beautiful images of their dishes, consumers will be more likely to bring their business there. This clearly shows that visual semiotics is of importance to the consumer. Moreover video reviews are not yet fully accepted by consumers in South Africa, due to its newness and still very unyielding technological obstacles currently challenging this field.

The significant differences obtained in the means calculated for Facebook users who rated their experiences of food and beverage, service, ambience levels and overall experiences significantly different

($p < 0.05$) could enable restaurateurs to identify areas requiring improvement. The findings could also serve to remind restaurateurs not to underestimate the influence of social media on their (prospective) customers' experiences, in order that they might gain and sustain a competitive advantage over other restaurants. Therefore, restaurateurs should not only measure their (prospective) customers' experiences, but also the influence of social media on their (prospective) customers' experiences, because social media play a substantial role in influencing the latter's behaviour as well.

To improve the restaurant experience of their clientele, restaurant managers might be able to gain direction from the current research regarding the improvement of their service quality and of their strategic marketing plan. The most influential platforms in terms of mobilising restaurant consumers to share the details of their restaurant experiences are the social networks (e.g. Facebook) and video sharing (e.g. YouTube). The results that were obtained in this study should encourage restaurants to utilise the most effective social media channels available, and the information that is given here should inspire them to focus more on their marketing and communication efforts than they might previously have done.

Based on the results presented above, restaurants are advised to monitor the communication among their (prospective) customers on the restaurants' social media pages consistently, so as to gain insight into their restaurant-related expectations. Restaurant attributes, such as the quality and taste of food, and employee service, are frequently evaluated on such pages. Active social media network users are likely to post details of their personal thoughts and emotions regarding their dining experiences on sites that are frequented by a wide range of people, leading to the content of their posts having a potential influence on other site users (Sinclair & Vogus, 2011). Restaurants might be able to identify groups of consumers who are categorised by certain criteria, such as postings about the taste of particular food items, preferences for food presentation, and positive or negative opinions about new menu items. Such categorisation might aid restaurants in identifying the special interests of their members, and in finding additional niche segments in existing markets that they might, in future, be able to use to their advantage.

Furthermore, restaurants can develop new menus, or items based on such content, in order to meet the specific needs of each target group identified. The marketers of restaurant brands should provide numerous internet-based opportunities for members to share their experiences and to interact with others (Berger & Schwartz, 2011). For example, a restaurant might consider providing a personal space on its Facebook page for active followers to post their own dining experiences, to which other restaurant site followers could then provide their own feedback. Since the postings and reviews from a personal page are perceived as coming from trusted members of the community, other members would be likely to consider them to be more credible than are the comments on other review sites (Jasra, 2010). As a result, members might experience enhanced positive feelings about the community of like-minded people, and they might experience the enhanced hedonic benefits of participation in a forum-like setting (Duggan & Smith, 2013).

Although restaurant consumers appear not to be primarily driven to seek restaurant-related information by way of postings on Facebook pages, it is critical for restaurants to promote their menus, and to entice potential consumers to visit their restaurants through the use of such a platform. To entice consumers, the marketers of restaurants' social media pages might consider providing, by way of the latest newsfeeds and widgets containing updated information, and aimed at making unique impressions, special offers and interesting content relating to the elements identified as desirable by social media users (University of Kentucky, 2011). Given the number of users involved, restaurants could create social media pages that are geared towards retaining repeat patrons, and at initiating communication with future ones.

Moreover, restaurants might consider using a variety of tools, such as games, videos and various applications, in order to create opportunities for positive experiences when users of the social media site visit their page. When using such entertainment tools, consumer engagement comes from seeking out hedonistic experiences, which tends to be a basic desire of social media site users. Although the primary intention in visiting a site might be simply to play a game, or to watch a video, the marketing that is done on the site could promote the restaurant in question, and invite the users concerned to engage in interactive feedback with the business (Barnes, 2010). Accordingly, games or videos should be developed with the ostensible concept of entertaining members, while the primary aim of such an exercise is to share information about one or more restaurants while the members are active online.

Study limitations

Although the sample size of the study is representative, the following limitations should be noted when generalising the findings. Firstly, the sample was drawn from formal full-service restaurants only and at the expense of customers from other restaurant categories. Consequently, the findings of this study represent only the influence of social media on customers' experiences in formal full-service restaurants. Caution is therefore required when generalising the findings of this study to other segments of the restaurant industry and in other geographic areas, since a replication of this study in other types of restaurants or other such geographic areas might reveal different results. However, it is believed the results are a good indication of some of the influence of social media within restaurants across South Africa.

Secondly, only limited social networks that could influence customers' experience levels were investigated. Limited emphasis was also placed on the dimensions which could be reflective of the identified social media types. Lastly, the reliability of the study might have been negatively influenced by the decision to measure the influence of social media on restaurant customers' experience to a restaurant directly after their dining experience. O'Neil and Palmer (2001) warn that the influence of social media on customers' experiences in a restaurant might be different after the dining experience when compared to the time when a decision to return to a restaurant is made on social media.

References

- Akar, E. & Topcu, B. (2011). An examination of the factors influencing consumers' attitudes toward social media marketing. *Journal of Internet Commerce*, 10(1), 35-67.
- Al-Deen, H. N. & Hendricks, J. A. (2011). *Social Media: Usage and Impact*. Maryland: Lexington Books.
- Altinay, L. & Paraskevas, A. (2008). *Planning Research in Hospitality and Tourism*. Oxford: Elsevier Ltd.
- Babbie, E. (2011). *The Practice of Social Research* (9th ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Thomson.
- Barnes, N. G. (2010). *The fortune 500 and social media: a longitudinal study of blogging, Twitter, and Facebook usage by America's largest companies*. Society for New Communications Research.
- Beese, E. (2011). *The use and perceived effectiveness of e-marketing technologies in restaurants*. Paper Presented at the 9th Undergraduate Research.
- Bossu, C. (2011). Educating educators with social media. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 42(5), 115–116.
- Brandau, M. (2013). Study Reveals Instagram Best Practices for Restaurants. *Nation's Restaurant News*.
- Breed, J. (2011). *Changing the approach to customer satisfaction with social media*. Retrieved August 26, 2015, from <http://hasthagsocialmedia.com/blog/change-the-approach-to-customer-satisfaction-with-social-media/>.
- Berger, J. & Schwartz, E. M. (2011). What drives immediate and ongoing word of Mouth? *Journal of Marketing Research*, XL(VIII), 869–880.

- Bronner, F. & Hoog, R. d. (2013). Social media and consumer choice. *International Journal of Market Research*, 56(1), 51-71.
- Brown, R. (2016). *Restaurants, Instagram, and the Evolving Dining Experience*. Retrieved February 26, 2015, from http://www.olapic.com/restaurants-instagram-evolving-dining-experience_blog-p1aw-g1br-v1qs/.
- Buscall, J. (2015). *Content marketing trends 2016*. Retrieved February 26, 2015, from <http://www.repurpose.ly/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Content-Marketing-Statistics-2016-eBook-PDF-v.-1.5.pdf>.
- Culnan, M. J., McHugh, P. J. & Zubillaga, J. I. (2010). How Large U.S. Companies Can Use Twitter and Other Social Media to Gain Business Value. *MIS Quarterly Executive*, 9(4), 243-260.
- Daniel, K. A. (2011). *How Social Media is Changing Crisis Communication: A Historical Analysis*. MA thesis in Corporate and Organizational Communication, Fairleigh Dickinson University, Teaneck, NJ.
- Duggan, M. & Smith, A. (2013). Social media update 2013. *Pew Internet and American Life Project*. Retrieved August 16, 2015, from www.pewinternet.org/2013/12/30/social-media-update-2013/.
- Dunphy, J. (2014). *The power of visual content and image-based social networks*. Retrieved March 10, 2016, from https://hotelexecutive.com/business_review/3658/the-powerof-visual-content-and-image-based-social-networks.
- Edwards, G. (2013). *Why your restaurant needs social media*. Retrieved June 6, 2016, from <http://thesocialmediamonthly.com/why-your-restaurant-needs-social-media/>.
- Feinstein, A. H. & Stefanelli, J. M. (2008). *Purchasing: Selection and Procurement for the Hospitality Industry* (7th ed.). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.
- Fischer, E. & Reuber, A. R. (2011). Social interaction via new social media: How can interactions on Twitter affect effectual thinking and behaviour? *Journal of Business Venturing*, 26(1), 1-18.
- Hartley, J. (2009). The new economy, creativity and consumption. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 7(1), 5-7.
- Hsu, C. L., Liu, C. C. & Lee, Y. D. (2010). Effect of commitment and trust towards micro-blogging on consumer behavioural intention: A relationship marketing perspective. *International Journal of Electronic Business Management*, 8(4), 293-303.
- Isaac, S. & Michael, W. B. (1981). *Handbook in research and evaluation*. San Diego: Edits Publishers.
- Jasra, M. (2010). *History of social media*. Retrieved July 30, 2015, from <http://www.webanalticalworld.net/2010/11/history-of-socialmedia-infographic.html/>.
- Johnson, B. & Christensen, L. B. (2004). *Educational research: Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed approaches*. 2nd edition. Boston, MA: Pearson Education Inc.
- Junco, R., Heiberger, G. & Loken, E. (2011). The effect of Twitter on college student engagement and grade. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, 27, 119-132.
- Kaplan, A. M. & Haenlein, M. (2010). Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of social media. *Business Horizons*, 53(1), 59-68.
- Katherine, V. (2013). *Image is everything: Why People Are Hooked on Image-Based Social Media*. Retrieved May 12, 2016, from <http://www.trendreports.com/article/imagebased-social-media>.
- Kerwood, P. (2015). *Passionate advocate of social media, regularly hosts social media events across UK*. Retrieved June 10, 2016, from <https://twitter.com/pkerwood>.
- Kivela, J., Inbakaran, R. & Reece, J. (1999). Consumer research in the restaurant environment. Part 2: Research design and analytical methods. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 11(6), 269-286.
- Lee, W., Xiong, L. & Hu, C. (2012). The effect of Facebook users' arousal and valence on intention to go to the festival: Applying an extension of the technology acceptance model. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 31(2), 819-827.
- Leedy, P. D. & Ormrod, J. E. (2013). *Practical Research: Planning and Design* (9th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education Inc.
- Leung, D., Law, R., Van Hoof, H. & Buhalis, D. (2013). Social media in tourism and hospitality: a literature review. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, 30(1/2), 3-22.
- Liang, T.-P., Ho, Y.-T., Li, Y.-W. & Turban, E. (2011). What Drives Social Commerce: The Role of Social Support and Relationship Quality. *International Journal of Electronic Commerce*, 16(2), 69-90.

- Li, Y.-M. & Shiu, Y. L. (2012). A diffusion mechanism for social advertising over microblogs. *Decision Support Systems*, 54(1), 9-22.
- Mhlanga, O., Hattingh, Z. & Moolman, H. J. (2013). Expectations and experiences of customers in formal full service restaurants in Port Elizabeth. *African Journal for Physical, Health Education, Recreation and Dance*, 19(4), 1109-1120.
- National Restaurant Association. (2015). *Restaurant industry facts sheet*. Retrieved June 12, 2016, from <http://www.restaurant.org>.
- Nielsen (2009). *Twitter's Tweet Smell of Success*. Retrieved August 10, 2015, from http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/online_mobile/twitters-tweet-smell-of-success.
- Nielsen (2010). *State of the media: The social media report*. Retrieved June 2, 2016, from <http://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/reports-downloads/2011/social-media-report-q3.html>.
- O'Neill, M. & Palmer, A. (2001). Survey timing and consumer perceptions of service quality: an overview of empirical evidence. *Managing Service Quality*, 11(3), 182-189.
- Pantelidis, I. S. (2010). Electronic meal experience: a content analysis of online restaurant comments. *Cornell Hospitality Quarterly*, 51(4), 483-491.
- Papasolomou, I. & Melanthiou, Y. (2012). Social media: Marketing public relations' new best friend. *Journal of Promotion Management*, 18(3), 319-328.
- Pietersen, J. & Maree, K. (2007). Standardisation of a questionnaire. In K. Maree (Ed.), *First Steps in Research*. Pretoria: Van Schaik Publishers.
- Pick, T. (2014). *Statistics for 2014 (and 2015)*. Retrieved June 3, 2016, from <http://www.business2community.com/social-media/104-fascinating-social-media-marketing-statistics-2014-2015-01084935#r71zJeDOAMfCerp.97>.
- Safko, L. (2012). *The Social Media Bible: Tactics, Tools and Strategies for Business Success* (3rd ed.). John Wiley & Sons.
- Salomon, D. (2013). Moving on from Facebook Using Instagram to connect with undergraduates and engage in teaching and learning. *College & Research Libraries News*, 74(8), 408-412.
- Shaw, E. H. (2012). Marketing strategy: From the origin of the concept to the development of a conceptual framework. *Journal of Historical Research in Marketing*, 4(1), 30-55.
- Sheldon, P. (2008). The relationship between unwillingness-to-communicate and students' Facebook use. *Journal of Media Psychology*, 20(2), 67-75.
- Sinclair, J. K. & Vogus, C. E. (2011). Adoption of social networking sites: an exploratory adaptive structuration perspective for global organizations. *Information Technology and Management*, 12(4), 293-314.
- Staff. (2009). How tweet it is. *Restaurants and Institutions*, 119(4), 14.
- Statistics South Africa. (2014). Food and Beverages. *StatsSA Statistical Release P6420; November 2013*. Retrieved February 17, 2014, from <https://www.statssa.gov.za/Publications/P6420/>.
- Siegel, J. S. (2002). *Applied Demography: Applications to Business, Government, Law and Public Policy* (2nd Ed.). New Jersey: Pearson Education.
- Struwig, F. W. & Stead, G. B. (2001). *Planning, Designing and Reporting Research*. Cape Town: Pearson Education South Africa,.
- Sulek, J. M. & Hensley, R. L. (2004). The relative importance of food, atmosphere and fairness of wait: The case of a full-service restaurant. *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*, 45(3), 235-247.
- Ulusu, Y. (2010). Determinant factors of time spent on Facebook: Brand community engagement and usage types. *Journal of Yasar University*, 18(5), 2949-2957.
- University of Kentucky. (2011). *Social media policies and guideline*. Retrieved August 26, 2015, from <http://uknow.uky.edu/>.
- Valenzuela, S., Park, N. & Kee, K. F. (2009). Is there social capital in a social network site? Facebook use and college students' life satisfaction, trust, and participation. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 14, 875-901.
- Veal, A. J. (2011). *Research methods for leisure and tourism a practical guide*. UK: Prentice Hall.

- Verma, R., Stock, D. & McCarthy, L. (2012). *Customer preferences for online, social media, and mobile innovations in the hospitality industry*. Retrieved March 19, 2015, from http://scholarship.sha.cornell.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article_1047&context_articles.
- Wang, H. Y. (2011). Exploring the factors of gastronomy blogs influencing readers' intention to taste. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 30(3), 503-514.
- Williams, O. (2015). *2015 worldwide Internet, mobile and social media trends: get into 376 pages of data*. Retrieved January 23, 2015, from <http://thenextweb.com/socialmedia/2015/01/21/2015-worldwideinternet-mobile-social-media-trends-get-376-pages-data/>.
- Wollan, R., Smith, N. & Zhou, C. (2010). *The Social Media Management Handbook: Everything You Need to Know to Get*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.
- Worldwideworx. (2016). *South African Social Media Landscape 2015*. Retrieved April 11, 2016, from <http://www.worldwideworx.com/socialsa2016/>.
- Xiang, Z. & Gretzel, U. (2010). Role of social media in online travel information search. *Tourism Management*, 31(2), 179-188.

Submitted: 14/06/2016
Accepted: 20/02/2017