



Can Restaurant Marketers Create Positive Electronic Word-of-Mouth Through the Use of Social Media?

*An Explorative Study Investigating the Influence
of Consumer Communications via Social Media*

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Abstract

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This dissertation is concerned with the exploration of the effect social media is having on consumer-to-consumer communications, otherwise known as word-of-mouth. It is known that word-of-mouth communications are highly influential in shaping consumer behaviour but never before has there existed a media platform where word-of-mouth can be conveyed and received and with widespread reach and effect. Word-of-mouth used to have a reach that could be measured in single or double digits. Now word-of-mouth can reach hundreds, thousands, or perhaps even hundreds of thousands with unprecedented speed.

This study explores the social phenomenon with respect to restaurants as, being predominantly a service high in experience qualities, word-of-mouth recommendations are considered particularly influential. The research investigates whether or not restaurant marketers can create positive word-of-mouth through social media and, if so, what types and styles of communications work best in getting their message to spread. It also examines from the consumers' perspective, aiming to understand their motivations in spreading electronic word-of-mouth concerning restaurants, whether the message is marketer-generated or consumer-generated. Although considered relevant, the investigation of the effect of negative word-of-mouth was considered outside the scope of this research. Instead the study aims to explore whether or not restaurant marketers should include efforts to create positive word-of-mouth, as part of an integrated marketing communications program. The research was qualitative in nature. It adopted the use of four in-depth interviews with marketers of Dublin-based restaurants, a consumer focus group (of six participants) and two subsequent in-depth interviews with restaurant consumers who were considered to be active on social media. It was found that restaurant marketers can create positive word-of-mouth through social media and should include efforts to do so as part of their marketing activities. It was also found that certain types of individuals hold tremendous power in online settings. Targeting these influential individuals with communications they deem interesting can lead to the spreading of such communications to large audiences. This dissertation concludes by making ten recommendations to restaurant marketers, outlining the best approach to take in creating positive word-of-mouth through social media.

Declaration

The author declares the work being submitted in this dissertation is wholly his own and that all materials consulted and ideas garnered in the process of researching the dissertation have been properly and accurately acknowledged.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Word of mouth (WOM) has been defined as “the transfer of information from one customer (or a group of customers) to another customer (or group of customers) in a way that has the potential to change their preferences, actual purchase behaviour, or the way they further interact with others” (Libai, Bolton, Bugel, Ruyter, Gotz, Risselada and Stephen, 2010). It has been long established that WOM is the most powerful form of communication in influencing consumer behaviour (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955). A recommendation from a trusted friend is considered more reliable for a number of reasons: the friend knows your tastes; the friend can discuss options with you openly (as opposed to attempting to sell you one particular option); the friend provides their opinion voluntarily and has no incentive to suggest one brand over another (Fogel, 2010). Previous work has found that some individuals possess more influential power than others and these types of individuals – *Mavens*, *Connectors*, and *Salesmen* (Gladwell, 2000) – are explored in this study. WOM is thought to be particularly influential in the services marketing arena. Research has shown that consumers rely more heavily on WOM recommendations for services in an effort to reduce the higher levels of perceived risk they experience as a result of the uncertainty inherently associated with service purchase decisions (Lovelock and Wirtz, 2010).

It could be argued, however, that one of the most significant developments in marketing thought in recent times has been an increasing emphasis on understanding the enormous shift that has taken place from traditional WOM (taking place offline) to electronic WOM (taking place online). The ways in which consumers communicate with each other have changed dramatically over the past decade, and the same is true concerning how consumers recommend the purchase and consumption of brands and products. As a result of the

“unlimited reach of the Internet to share opinions and experiences on a one-to-world platform rather than a one-to-one platform” (Dellarocas, 2003), WOM marketing has evolved into an important discipline and has become a central strategic element of an integrated marketing communications program (Obal, Burtch, and Kunz, 2011).

Researching this social phenomenon is of extreme importance as it can provide “for rigorous empirical tracking of diverse types of social media use and their effects on individuals, firms and societies” (Bolton, Parasuraman, Hoefnagels, Migchels, Kabadayi, Gruber, Loureiro, and Solnet, 2013). Insufficient research has thus far been devoted to the electronic WOM that is taking place on social media (Bolton et al., 2013). This is particularly the case when one considers that Generation Y consumers (those born between 1981 and 1999) have grown up in a digital world and are heavy users of social media (Prensky, 2001; Wesner and Miller, 2008). This dimension is deemed as significant as sociologists have long since established that social change originates from changes in cohorts of younger people (Ryder, 1965), leading to the assumption that the online social media phenomenon maybe here to stay.

This exploratory study examines electronic WOM regarding restaurants. The study was conducted in Dublin (Ireland), involving interviews with restaurant marketers currently using social media, to explore how the practice has become a central component of their integrated marketing communications program. It also involved a focus group, and subsequent interviews, with restaurant consumers, to explore their use of social media in the context of conveying and receiving influential electronic WOM. Specifically, the study set out to investigate if restaurant marketers can stimulate positive electronic WOM through social media and, if so, what types and styles of communication are most effective

in achieving this outcome. It also examines the most likely triggers of positive electronic WOM during and after a consumers' restaurant experience.

The chosen research methodology is discussed in chapter 3, which is followed by a detailed discussion of the research findings in chapter 4. The author believes this study has contributed to the literature in a number of ways, discussed as conclusions in chapter 5, a chapter which also contains recommendations for restaurant marketers. Firstly, a discussion relating to the existing body of knowledge relating to WOM and electronic WOM is presented in chapter 2, which is later used for comparative purposes when discussing the findings of this study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

For more than a century, positive WOM has been studied by academics and sought by practitioners in an effort to promote products, services and brands among consumers. French sociologist Gabriel Tarde reported that conversations are “the strongest agent of imitation, of the propagation of sentiments, ideas, and modes of actions” (Tarde, 1898). Marketers are still struggling to understand the dynamics of WOM in a consumer behaviour context, despite the fact that there has been much research devoted to the topic. The reason why the topic has been given so much attention in academic research is because a number of key characteristics impact greatly on a brand’s marketing success (Graham and Havlena, 2007).

It has long since been established that WOM messages are known to change the receiver’s behaviours and attitudes towards products, services and brands (Merton, 1968). Positive WOM is known to reduce consumers’ perceived risk at the evaluation stage of the purchase decision making process (Woodside and Delozier, 1976), and achieves this outcome in various forms like reducing functional, time, psychological and social consumer risk (Settle and Alreck, 1989). As well as reducing risk, positive WOM also has other benefits to consumers such as having a sense of enthusiasm, confidence and optimism, a sense of relief and an improved opinion of the firm (Sweeney, Soutar and Mazzarol, 2008). When the sentiments expressed are positive, it has been suggested that WOM enhances the consumer’s potential to purchase the product being talked about (Peterson, 1989). Positive WOM can accelerate a new product’s development and brand’s acceptance and can significantly reduce a brand’s promotional expenses (Graham and Havlena, 2007).

WOM is believed to be the most influential source of information for the purchase of many products and services, and is considered to be many more times powerful than traditional marketing efforts, like advertising or personal selling (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955). This is because WOM messages are perceived as being from a trusted, unbiased third party (Mizerski, 1982). Gladwell (2000, page 32) suggests that WOM “is – even in this age of mass communications and multi-million dollar advertising campaigns – still the most important form of human communication”. He also adds “there are plenty of advertising executives who think that precisely because of the sheer ubiquity of marketing efforts these days, WOM appeals have become the only kind of persuasion that most of us respond to anymore.” That said, the literature falls far short of suggesting that traditional forms of marketing communications, like advertising for instance, are now considered ineffective. Keller and Fay (2009) report that a large proportion of WOM communications make reference to advertising campaigns and that such communications may be more effective than those where advertising is not mentioned. Similarly, Trusov, Bucklin, and Pauwells (2009) found that WOM can enhance the effect of traditional marketing, particularly when that activity serves to stimulate WOM (e.g., promotions). These observations underpin the need for marketers to adopt an integrated approach to their marketing communications programmes.

WOM is seen to be more effective when it is sought by the receiver (Gremler, Dwayne, Gwinner, and Brown, 2001) and consumers display a greater propensity to act on the WOM message when they need reassurance before making a purchase (Sweeney et al., 2008), therefore context is seen to be an important characteristic. Time availability can have a bearing too, in that, when consumers have a limited time to evaluate alternatives during

their purchase decision process, their intention to purchase can be increased greatly through WOM (Sweeney et al., 2008).

Much attention has also been given, in the marketing literature, to the types of people who engage in spreading WOM. It is known that consumers communicate, not just information, but something about themselves when they relay WOM messages (Wojnicki and Godes, 2008). Consumers who engage in WOM as senders obtain social and economic value from the activity (Balasubramanian and Mahajan, 2001). Many of those engaging in WOM as senders of the message are often referred to as opinion leaders and are seen to be of extreme importance in the WOM process (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955). According to Solomon, Bamossy, Askegaard, and Hogg (2010) consumers who engage in WOM as senders do so for a number of potential reasons.

- They are highly involved with a type of product or activity and get pleasure in talking about it.
- They might be knowledgeable about a product and use conversations as a way to let others know about it, in an effort to enhance their ego and impress others.
- They might have genuine concern for someone else and be motivated by concern that they make the right purchase decision.
- They might be looking to engage in product-related conversations as a way to reduce uncertainty they might have themselves.

Gladwell (2000) suggests that WOM remains very mysterious, however, as, although people pass on all kinds of information to each other all the time, it is only on rare occasions that such an exchange ignites into, what he calls, a “social epidemic”, where it seems everyone is talking about the same subject. “The success of any kind of social epidemic is heavily

dependent on the involvement of people with a particular and rare set of social gifts” (Gladwell 2000, page 33), describing three kinds of people he calls *Connectors*, *Mavens*, and *Salesmen*. *Connectors* are “gregarious and intensely social” and have “raw transmission power”, as a result of knowing and being connected to a large number of people. *Connectors*, he proposes, have a “special gift for bringing the world together” (Gladwell, 2000, page 56) and possess tremendous power, having the ability to present exposure opportunities to a product or a brand, a principle he posits holds true for, among others, restaurants. The word “Maven” comes from Yiddish and is defined as “a person with good knowledge or understanding of a subject” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2013). According to Price, Feick and Guskey (1995, page 258) “a *Maven* is a person who has information on a lot of different products or prices or places. This person likes to initiate discussions with consumers and respond to requests...they like to be helpers in the marketplace.” How these *Mavens* interact on an interpersonal level with the WOM receiver is also of importance in how the message is interpreted and perceived. Gladwell (2000) suggests that *Mavens* tend to present their case so emphatically, as a result of their strong motivation to help, that the receiver usually takes his advice. *Salesmen*, Gladwell (2000, page 73) proposes, seem to have “some kind of indefinable trait, something powerful and contagious and irresistible that goes beyond what comes out of their mouth, that makes people who meet them want to agree with them. It’s energy. It’s enthusiasm. It’s charm. It’s likability”. The implication here, in terms of the influence of *Salesmen* is, that non-verbal cues are as or more important than verbal cues. Characteristics in presentation of the message like enthusiasm, story-telling ability (and “the way it’s told”), non-verbal communication (body language), intensity of voice, and conviction of the sender can enhance or detract from the strength of the message received and the resulting consumer’s decisions (Sweeney et al., 2008).

Gladwell (2000, page 67) adds “*Mavens* have the knowledge and the social skills to start word-of-mouth epidemics...The fact that *Mavens* want to help, for no other reason than because they like to help, turns out to be an awfully effective way of getting someone’s attention”. In concluding the roles of each Gladwell (2000, page 70) says: “In a social epidemic, *Mavens* are data banks. They provide the message. *Connectors* are social glue: they spread it. But there is also a select group of people – *Salesmen* – with the skills to persuade us when we are unconvinced of what we are hearing, and they are as critical to the tipping of WOM epidemics as the other two groups.”

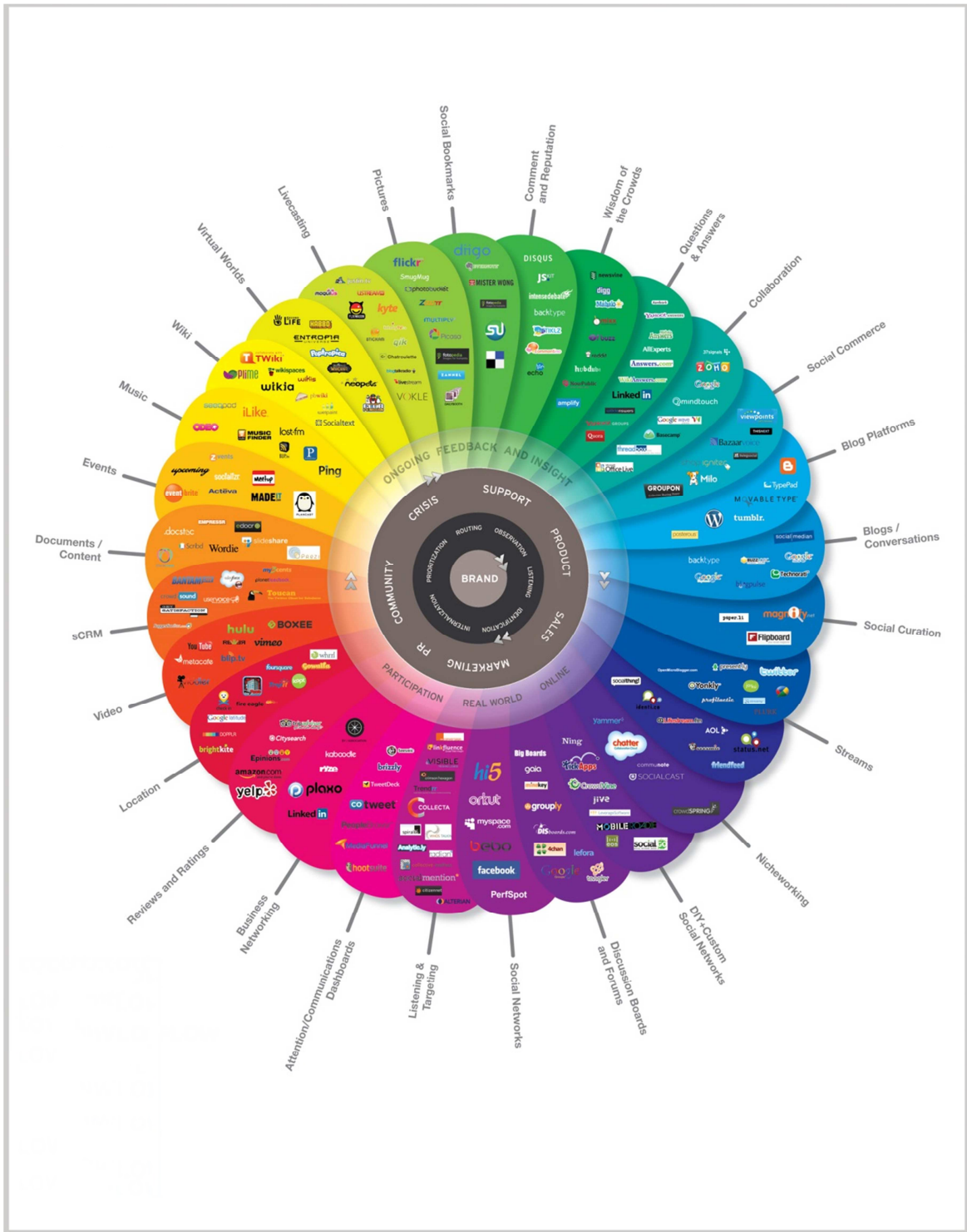
2.1 Social Media and e-WOM

Much of the literature on the topic discusses WOM in the traditional sense, involving people conveying messages to others through the spoken word (Sweeney et al., 2008; Graham and Havlena, 2007; Peterson, 1989; Mizerski, 1982; Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955). However, with the advent of the Internet and social media, as well as taking the traditional form, WOM also takes place electronically. Prendergast, Ko, and Yuen (2010, page 3) make a distinction between traditional WOM and electronic WOM (e-WOM), that takes place through social media, suggesting that “e-WOM diffuses faster than traditional WOM; since there may be hundreds, thousands, or even millions of people receiving and potentially spreading an initial message through e-mail or other Internet-based media”. In relation to the potential reach of WOM, according to one study, unhappy customers are likely to share their grievance with at least nine other people, and 13% of these disgruntled customers will go on to tell about thirty people of their negative experience (Walker, 1995). This research supported earlier work by Reichheld (1990), who suggested that an unhappy customer is

likely to tell nine or ten people about their bad experience. Relating specifically to negative WOM, these studies put forward the potential reach of WOM in a world that does not include social media.

Given the global consumer adoption of the Internet and the revolutionary proliferation of social media, it is surprising that Keller and Berry (2006) reported the notion that 90% of all WOM is taking place off-line, when Keller and Libai (2009) later found that online social talk generates around 3.3 billion brand impressions every day. Solis and Jesse (2013) provide an overview of the enormous array of social media channels where these brand impressions and online conversations are taking place by presenting, what they call, *The Conversation Prism* (presented as Table 2.1 on the following page). Considering some statistics regarding just one of these social media channels, Facebook, it is hard to deny the scale of the enormous shift that is taking place and how this is affecting WOM in a marketing context. According to Sibley (2012), 510,000 comments are posted on Facebook every sixty seconds; 56% of people are more likely to recommend a brand after becoming a friend on Facebook; and 33% of US online consumers have made a purchase based on recommendations from friends on the social platform. The average global Facebook user has 130 friends, and there are more than two billion posts liked or commented on each day, with more than 50% of active users logging on every day (Carter and Levy, 2012). The user adoption rate of Facebook is incomparable with any other medium. Webb and Romano (2010) reported how,

TABLE 2.1: THE CONVERSATION PRISM



(Source: Solis and Jesse, 2013)

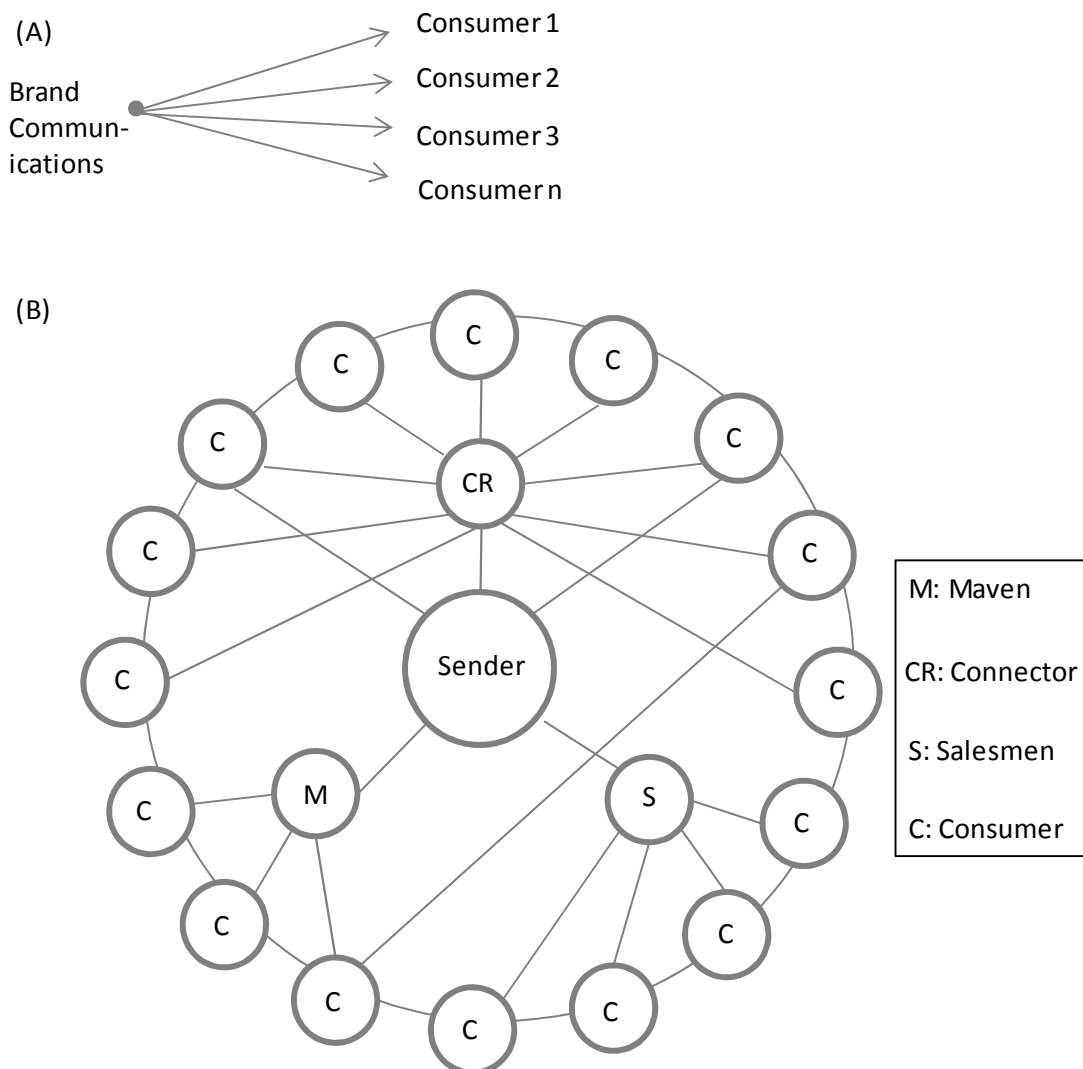
to reach 50 million users, it took print 100 years, radio 38 years, television 13 years, and the Internet as a whole 4 years. Facebook reached 100 million users in less than 9 months and, in October 2012, reached the one billion user mark (Facebook.com, October 2012).

It might be easy for the reader to gloss over these statistics, but pondering on them for a moment tells us that the reach of consumer generated e-WOM is no longer measurable in single or double digits, as was the case with traditional WOM. The potential for consumer e-WOM messages to reach hundreds, thousands, or perhaps even millions is not impossible (Carter and Levy, 2012). It has to be acknowledged that the consumer landscape has radically changed in recent times due to the “distinct phenomenon” that is the Internet and social media (Steffes and Burgee, 2009). Consumers now actively provide information on products and services: “The digital innovations of the last decade made it effortless, indeed second nature, for audiences to talk back and talk to each other” (Deighton and Kornfeld 2009, page 4). It is fair to say that the Internet and its social media communities have “injected steroids” into the WOM process by providing an organised platform with a reach like never before (Kliatchko, 2008). The result is that WOM, and more specifically e-WOM, is of more importance now, to marketers and consumers alike, than at any time in history (Brown, Broderick, and Lee, 2007).

However, greater reach is not the only change social media has introduced to the WOM arena, the speed at which e-WOM is distributed has greatly changed too. Research by Dellarocas (2003), which now seems to have been ahead of its time, helps to further develop the distinction between traditional WOM and e-WOM, by suggesting that WOM is generally the “process of sharing information between small groups of two or more interested parties. Whereas, e-WOM harnesses the bi-directional communication properties

and unlimited reach of the Internet to share opinions and experiences on a one-to-world platform rather than a one-to-one platform” (Dellarocas, 2003, page 1415). WOM is no longer one-to-one, as in the traditional sender and receiver sense, but many-to-many, as multiple people participate in electronic conversations simultaneously (Libai, Bolton, Bugel, Ruyter, Gotz, Risselda, and Stephen, 2010). A comparison of these different communication models is presented in Table 2.2.

TABLE 2.2: ONE-TO-MANY (A) AND MANY-TO-MANY COMMUNICATION (B) MODELS



(Source: Adapted from Fogel (2010) and Chaffey and Smith (2009) using concept of Mavens, Connectors, and Salesmen as put forward by Gladwell (2000)).

2.2 A Generation of “Digital Natives”

It has been suggested that the power in marketing message generation, and acceleration of such messages, has shifted from producers to consumers as a result of the Internet and social media (Goldsmith and Horowitz, 2006). Audiences are no longer just receivers of media content but are simultaneous co-producers of the content through engagement with social media and other Internet-based platforms (Kliatchko, 2008). Marketers have lost much of the control they once had over the marketing message, but now participate in a “conversation” about the brand (Deighton and Kornfeld, 2009).

Although this can be the case among groups belonging to any generation, it is particularly of relevance to Generation Y consumers, or those born after 1981 (Brosdahl and Carpenter, 2011). Members of this generation have become known as “digital natives”, rather than digital immigrants (Prensky, 2001). This generation is the first to have grown up in a digital world; digital technology and social media profoundly affects how they live and communicate with others (Wesner and Miller, 2008). Within this generation there has been a widespread adoption and use of social media (Sultan, Rohm, and Gao, 2009), resulting in 55% of the global Facebook audience being aged 34 or younger (Socialbakers.com, 2013). Bolton et al. (2013) propose that consumers belonging to Generation Y, students and relatively recent entrants to the workforce, are more likely than older age groups to prefer social media for interactions with acquaintances, friends and family. A key reason for their heavy social media usage is their need to interact with others (Palfrey and Gasser, 2008). As a result, they are more likely to value the opinions of others communicated through social media (eMarketer, 2011). It has been suggested that social networks, such as Facebook, have the potential to increase young people’s social capital as their identities are shaped by

what they share about themselves (Christofides, Muise, and Desmarais, 2009). Specifically relating to Facebook, a “need for popularity” is thought to be a possible reason for information sharing (Ellison, Steinfeld, and Lampe, 2007).

Generation Y consumers tend to share a “hyper-connected” characteristic, and are likely to co-create content and share their experiences on social media at any given time, through the use of mobile networks (Bolton et al., 2013). Six hundred million active Facebook users interact with others on the social network through mobile devices each day (Facebook.com, October 2012). Many individual social media users “check-in” through mobile devices on social networking sites like Facebook and Foursquare, to announce to their network that they are visiting a certain business, a facet of the e-WOM phenomenon that is thought to have specific implications (Obal et al., 2011). It is widely accepted that when people merely observe other people’s behaviour, large-scale imitation behaviour result can occur (Earls 2007), meaning that widespread, incidental WOM communications regarding individual consumer behaviour can lead to “herd behaviour”, information dissemination, and collective action (Macy and Willer, 2002; Bikhchandani, Hirshleifer, and Welch, 1992).

In consideration of the widespread adoption of social media (Sultan et al., 2009), brands that aim to stimulate conversations and engagement, that build relationships and look to co-create content and value, with Generation Y will reap the most rewards (Peres, Shachar, and Lovett, 2011). These rewards are considered to be long term. Sociologists have long since proposed that “social change originates from changes in cohorts of young individuals with common experiences” (Ryder, 1965, page 843), meaning that the use of social media by Generation Y consumers as a medium for consumer communications may be leading to changes in social norms and behaviour at societal level (Bolton et al., 2013).

Noting Gladwell's (2000) observations discussed earlier, regarding the role of *Connectors*, *Mavens* and *Salesmen* in the creation of social epidemics, the potential effect of individuals in traditional, offline WOM is limited (Watts, 2007) compared to that of those who engage in e-WOM. Increasingly it is becoming apparent that, in many cases, a small number of individuals have the potential to influence a large number of others and with widespread effect (Libai et al., 2010). In this context, the pertinent question is; can marketers influence these powerful individuals so as to create widespread and highly influential e-WOM marketing campaigns?

2.3 Social Media and e-WOM Marketing

Much of the research suggests that the rise in importance of e-WOM, in a consumer behaviour context, is as a result of a general mistrust in marketer-generated communications. In fact, research by Thomas, Mullen, and Fraedrich (2011, page 38) explicitly confirm this by saying: "With the growing criticism of the advertising industry, increased difficulty in targeting markets due to fragmented audiences, and technological threats to TV advertising (e.g. TiVo and the Internet), firms are looking for new ways to create a "buzz" for their brands without being manipulative".

Although marketing academics recognised the importance of the phenomenon of WOM more than half a century ago, proposing, for example, that WOM affects the majority of all purchase decisions (Sweeney et al., 2008; Settle and Alreck, 1989; Woodside and Delozier, 1976; Merton, 1968) it has largely been conceptualised as a naturally occurring phenomenon. However, these theories of informal, naturally occurring WOM were created

in a marketing world where the Internet and social media did not exist (Brown, et al., 2007; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Dellarocas, 2003). The Internet's accessibility, reach, and transparency have now made it possible for marketers to influence and monitor e-WOM like never before (Kozinets, 2010). As a result of the Internet, e-WOM has become of strategic importance through the use of social media marketing and interactive integrated marketing communications (Fogel, 2010; Spiller, Tuten, and Carpenter, 2011). Social media now presents a unique opportunity to achieve unprecedented depth and reach in marketing efforts (Obal et al., 2011).

In an effort to create e-WOM, increasingly in recent times, marketers have been engaging in "seeding campaigns", which has been defined as "a campaign in which the product is placed among influential consumers so that they can communicate favourably about it to other consumers" (Balter, 2005, page 51). As well as targeting influential individuals, or *Connectors* (Gladwell, 2000), on social media sites like Facebook and Twitter, another popular way to do this has been to target influential bloggers, or *Mavens* (Gladwell, 2000), because blogs have become "second only to newspapers as a trusted information source" (Brown et al., 2007, page 355). However, some research on seeding campaigns carried out by Kozinets, de Valck, Wojnicki, and Wilner (2010) would suggest that WOM carried out in this way is not always as powerful. Firstly, as the blogger (who is the opinion leader in this context) is specifically targeted to act out the role of a type of "consumer-marketer hybrid", the traditional social contract is violated, creating great tension. The e-WOM that is generated can sometimes be seen as unnatural. Rettberg (2008) suggests that blogs constitute a social network that is not only about the sharing of information, but also about building trust, friendship, and alliances. The research by Kozinets et al. (2010) suggests that

the sender/receiver relationship, in the context of blogs, is personal. This proposes that, not only could this approach damage the blogger's relationships with his/her readers but, if the receivers of the e-WOM message feel it is contrived or marketer-generated, there is the likelihood that they will not place a great deal of trust in it, or at least not to the same extent as in organic, consumer-generated e-WOM.

However, some recent marketing campaigns would suggest the contrary. For instance, "when RCA Records wanted to create a buzz around Christina Aguilera, they hired a team of young people to swarm the Web and chat about her on popular teen sites". The result of this guerrilla marketing campaign was that the album quickly went to number one in the charts (Solomon et al., 2010). Anecdotally one could wonder if it was as a result of marketer-induced WOM that helped create the social epidemic that seen the book *50 Shades of Grey* become a best seller. A recent newspaper article reported that "despite being derided by critics for its appalling writing" it has become the "best-selling book in Britain since records began, surpassing Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows with sales of 5.3 million copies" (Telegraph.co.uk, October 2012). These examples might indicate that marketer-generated WOM is actually just as powerful as its consumer-generated counterpart. Supporting this view, Gladwell (2000) proposes that it is, in fact, possible to start a WOM epidemic by observing, what he calls; the law of the few. The law of the few, he explains, means that, if a marketer is interested in starting a WOM epidemic, he must devote his resources solely on finding and reaching the three groups of highly influential people he describes (*Connectors, Mavens, and Salesmen*), who hold enormous social power. He describes the need to tinker with the presentation of the information, to improve its "stickiness" or make the message "remark-able" (Godin, 2005), in order to make the

information capable of sustaining interest (Fogel, 2010). In an effort to achieve this, marketers are increasingly investing much of their time, energy and budgets into, not only sparking, but also tracking consumer conversations about their brands online (Carl, 2009). When monitoring social media conversations, marketers need to consider the venues of such conversations, how often the conversation occurs, who is involved in the discussion, and what level of influence they have (Fogel, 2010). A recent report suggested a rising level of sophistication in terms of social media monitoring, listing nine firms as providing “industry-leading platforms”: Nielsen, Converseon, Radian6, Cymphony, Visible Technologies, Alterian, evolve24, Dow Jones, and Collective Intellect (Hofer-Shall, 2010). It has been suggested that the availability of data obtained from social media monitoring will be as transformative for the social sciences as Galileo’s telescope was for the physical sciences (Baker, 2009).

2.4 The Strength of Weak Ties and the Role of Homophily in e-WOM

The intensity of the relationship, otherwise known as tie strength, is thought to have an influence in the effectiveness of the WOM message between consumers (Bansal and Voyer, 2000). Sometimes consumers can distrust the WOM message as a result of the poor perceived credibility and expertise of the sender (Sweeney et al., 2008). Research into traditional, offline WOM by Brown and Reingen (1987) found that information received from strong tie connections are more influential than those received from weak tie connections. In other words, the suggestion here is that the level of intensity of the relationship between individuals can greatly affect the level of influence of WOM (Steffes and Burgee, 2009). In contrast to this idea, the sociologist Granovetter’s (1973) previous

research is considered seminal as it proposed that weak ties can play a pivotal role in explaining a wide range of social linking behaviours and can be critical to the dissemination of information. In describing this apparent paradox, Granovetter was the first to use the phrase: the strength of weak ties. Gladwell (2000, page 54) concurs with Granovetter's thinking, suggesting that weak ties, or acquaintances, "represent a source of social power, and the more acquaintances you have the more powerful you are". Donath and Boyd (2004) explained that social media sites, like Facebook and Twitter, increase the number of weak ties in an individual's network and such sites allow these weak ties to be maintained more easily than would normally be the case in offline settings. Social media sites, therefore, have provided a mechanism whereby the influential power of weak ties is strengthened, meaning that weak ties have much more power than in traditional, offline WOM (Libai et al., 2010).

Related to tie strength is the concept of homophily. Rogers (1983) suggests that homophily is the level to which individuals share similar attributes, interests, and characteristics (for instance age, gender, education and social status). Research into WOM suggests that homophily can greatly affect the outcome. This refers to the extent to which the sender and receiver share similar backgrounds, opinions, likes and dislikes, and the rapport, trust and mutual respect they share, are considered to be important if the conveyed WOM is to be effective in shaping consumer behaviour (Gilly, Graham, Wolfinbarger, and Yale, 1998). Prior perceptions and attitudes held by the WOM receiver regarding the product or brand can have an influence on agreement with the WOM message (Sweeney et al., 2008), also illustrating that if individuals share similarities in opinions, WOM conveyed will likely have considerable influence.

However, as e-WOM is often shared among senders and receivers who are largely anonymous to each other, perhaps without complete knowledge of each other's likes and dislikes, some may question the influencing effect of messages conveyed in light of this theory. Although certain types of people (*Mavens, Connectors, and Salesmen*) play an important role in the WOM process (Gladwell, 2000), historical research suggests that their influence is limited to family and friends with whom they share similarities, whereas it is now accepted that the Internet greatly extends the potential scope of their influence (Lyons and Henderson, 2005). Gladwell (2000) questions the role of homophily in WOM effectiveness, asking that, if people are intrinsically similar, are they likely to inform each other of things they don't already know. However, more recent research on e-WOM would suggest that, homophily is still important and that similarities are made easier to establish through social media. Obal et al. (2011) found that social networking sites allow users to find people with similar interests and demographic characteristics based on information found in their user profiles. They state that users can be more judicious about the information they gather and can assess the sender's credibility and knowledge in a particular area by viewing their social media profile, status updates, product reviews, and 'tweets'. Other research would appear to agree with this, proposing that investigating similarities is made easier by the same online means, compared to offline WOM, as social networking sites allow users to more easily view each other's personal information and "identify those who might be useful in some capacity" (Ellison et al. 2007, page 1162). In so doing, users tend to have a lot of information at their disposal as "many consumers share a great deal of information about themselves on social media sites" (Fogel, 2010, page 57).

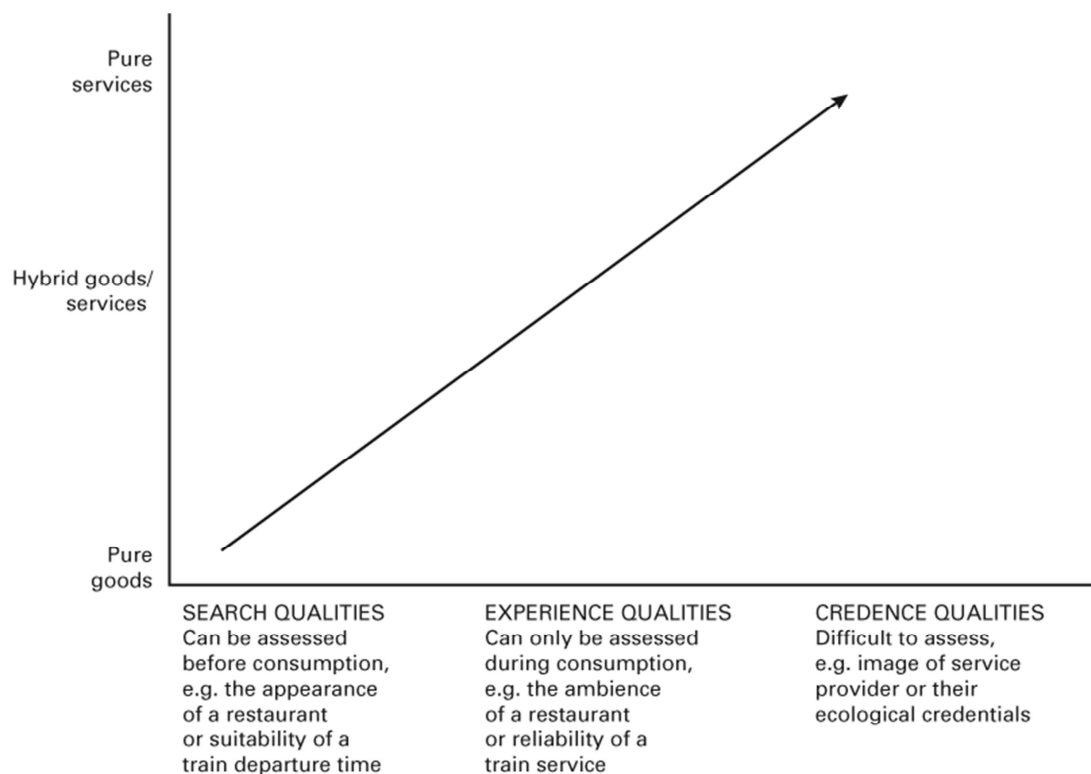
However, it is thought that it is not always the sender/receiver relationship that is of relevance. Brown et al. (2007) argues it is forum content, rather than characteristics of the individual members, which demonstrates similarity of interests. The suggestion here is that individual consumers interact with the forum rather than the individual when processing information delivered online, and the driver is the perceived held beliefs of that forum and the motivation to comply with that belief. Brown et al. (2007) also links his insights to Festinger's theory of social comparison and its premise that individuals implicitly assume that similar people have similar needs and preferences, suggesting that greater similarity in an e-WOM context derives from interests of the forum and not necessarily those of the individual. He argues this is what leads to the message being perceived as credible and persuasive, and that this matching also serves to enhance tie strength (Brown et al., 2007). In this way, homophily is thought to be still important in e-WOM conveyed through social media, but tie strength is considered less so, as weak ties can still have considerable influence. People are often influenced by others with whom they share similarities but not a strong relationship (Obal et al., 2011). Obal et al. (2011, page 38) propose that "similarity of a weak-tie source is most important for experience products, as users will look for useful advice from similar individuals who have already experienced that product". This leads to the suggestion that e-WOM may be more influential in some industries than in others.

2.5 Restaurants and e-WOM

Marketing research and theory has long since established that WOM has particular relevance in the marketing of a service experience, like that of a restaurant experience. The first implication to consider, in this context, is that services that are high in experience and

credence qualities are harder to evaluate prior to a consumer's purchase, leading to an increased reliance on WOM recommendations (Lovelock and Wirtz, 2010). Nelson (1970) was the first to distinguish between product categories with reference to how consumers evaluate them prior to purchase. He suggested that some products can be evaluated by search qualities, in that, they can be touched, felt or tasted prior to purchase. Most physical products fall into this category. Others, he said, need to be experienced to be evaluated; for instance, a meal in a restaurant. Darby and Karni (1973) introduced a further level of complexity by introducing a third category of services that are high in credence qualities, having benefits that are even hard to evaluate after they have been experienced, like a care service or a complex surgical procedure. Table 2.3 illustrates this as a continuum of evaluation, as offered by Lovelock and Wirtz (2010).

TABLE 2.3: CONTINUUM OF EVALUATION



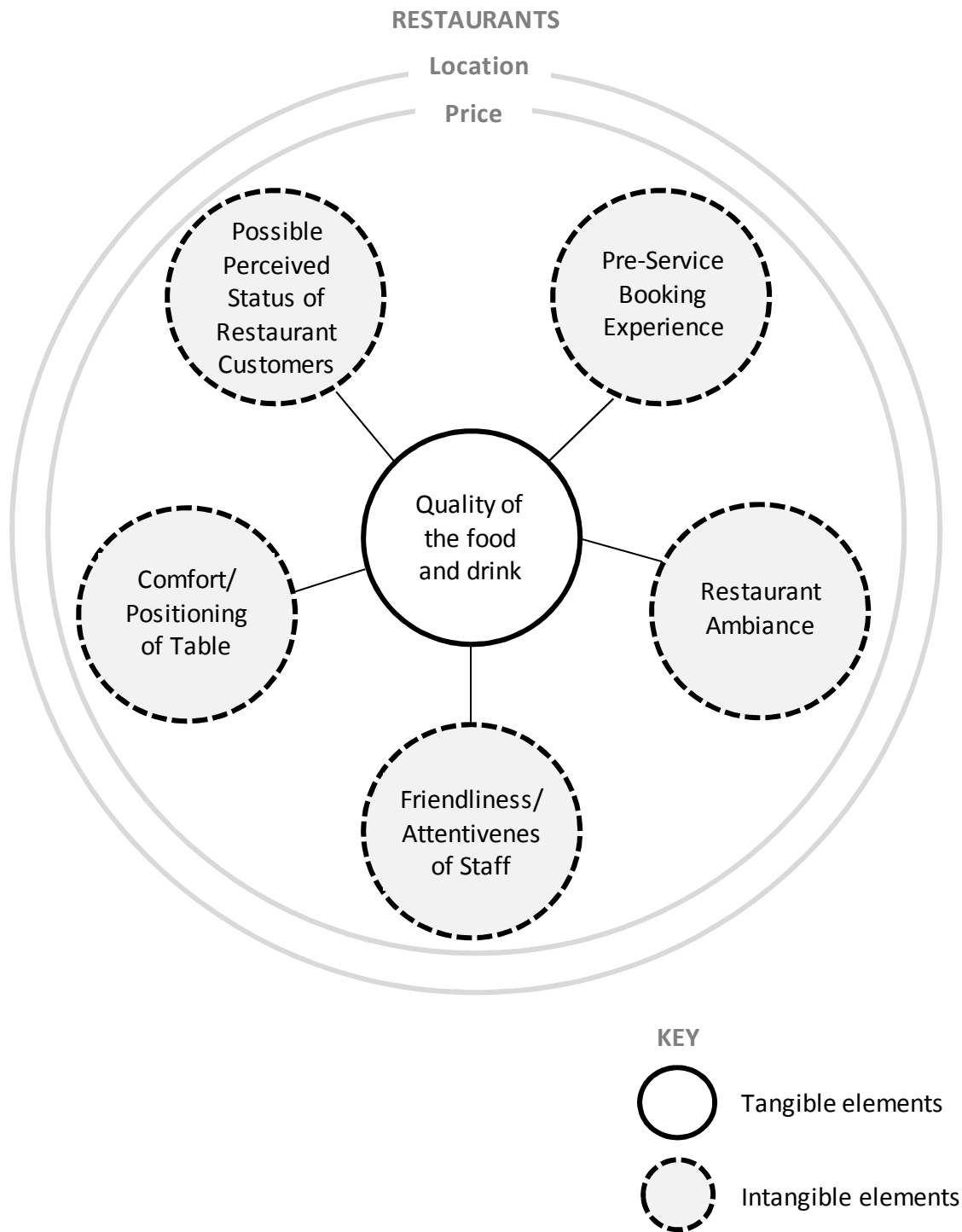
(Source: Lovelock and Wirtz, 2010)

Again adding to the complexity of pre-purchase evaluation is the fact that services are intangible and cannot be touched, felt, seen or experienced before they are purchased. This concept was initially developed by Shostack (1977) who suggested that even tangible products themselves usually have an intangible element to them. She introduced *The Molecular Model* which outlines the concept of products having value-adding service dimensions attached, to enhance their value proposition. She also suggested that some product offerings contain more of these value-added service dimensions, with some offerings only containing service elements, therefore being more intangible in nature than others. Table 2.4 illustrates how *The Molecular Model* might apply to a restaurant marketing application.

Mitra et al. (1999) explicitly studied the types of messages consumers were influenced by the most as they sought information for search, experience, and credence services. They found that consumers of experience services tended to rely mostly on WOM recommendations received from personal, trusted sources. As a result of the intangible nature of a restaurant experience, and the fact that it is high in experience qualities, consumers tend to put much emphasis on WOM recommendations (Wilson, Zeithaml, Bitner, and Gremler, 2012). According to Zeithaml (1988), WOM is the most important source of information when evaluating this kind of service, as it is more credible than other forms of communication, like advertising for instance, and is less biased. The real challenge from a restaurant marketing perspective is that the service experience is difficult to communicate prior to purchase and, for this reason, consumers tend to seek WOM recommendations for restaurants to reduce the reasonably high levels of perceived risk they

experience in its various forms (financial, psychological, social, etc.) (Lovelock and Wirtz, 2010).

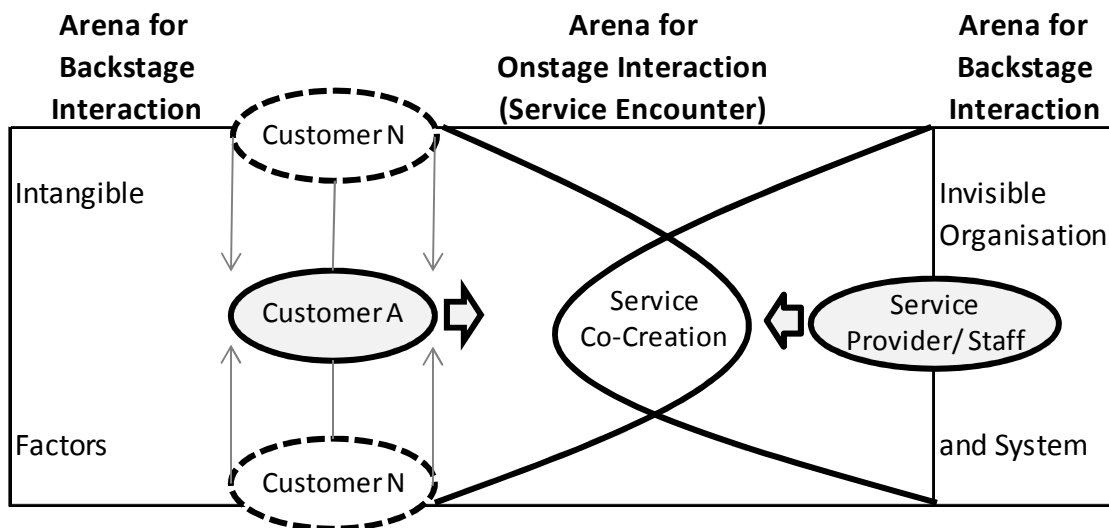
TABLE 2.4: A RESTAURANT APPLICATION OF THE MOLECULAR MODEL



(Adapted from Shostack, 1977)

In addition to the intangible nature of a service, like a restaurant experience, is the idea that services are inseparable (Wilson, et al., 2012), meaning that services are produced and consumed at the same time, leading to the notion of co-production. Customers play an important role in enhancing their own service experience, leading to their post-purchase satisfaction (Palmer, 2011), as do the role of other customers, a concept encapsulated in *The Servuction Model*, originally put forward by Langeard, Bateson, Lovelock, and Eglie (1981) and presented as Table 2.5.

TABLE 2.5: THE SERVUCTION MODEL



(Source: Langeard et al., 1981)

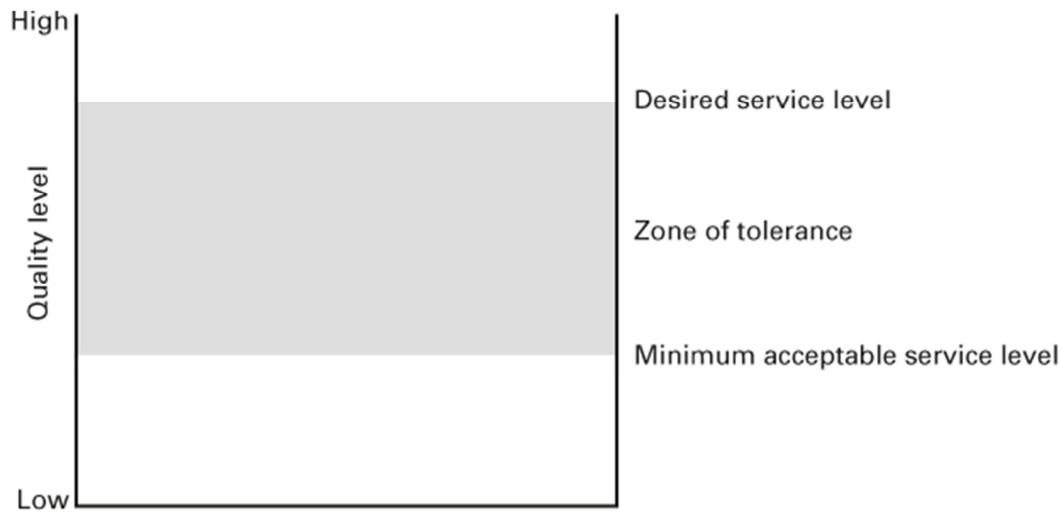
Services are essentially performances and what happens in real time is thought to be of importance. The concept of dramaturgy, as introduced by Fisk and Grove (2001), developed this idea, suggesting that a service experience, like that offered by a restaurant, has many

parallels with drama. The restaurant *stage* is the facilities, interior layout and atmosphere. The *actors* are both the visible front of house waiting staff and the invisible supporting kitchen staff. Each have *roles* to play, much like is the case in the production of a drama, and each have a *script*, or expected behaviours and process to adhere to. The quality of this real-time performance directly affects the perceived quality of the experience and the exchange of value; “a product that provides a high level of consumption benefits relative to costs could be said to be of relatively high value” (Palmer, 2011, p. 286). Quality is commonly influenced by a philosophy of “conforming to requirements” (Crosby, 1984), but the most pertinent question in a restaurant marketing context is ‘whose requirements should be satisfied?’ The answer, though, is obvious. The primary objective of marketing is to satisfy *customer needs* profitably. Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985) make the point that only customers can judge service quality – all other judgements are considered irrelevant. Therefore, the real question should be: ‘what is the service in the mind of the customer?’ The issue here is that, the level of satisfaction experienced by the customer, will likely determine their resulting level of motivation to engage in conveying positive WOM.

The customer’s overall positive perception of service quality results in their satisfaction, which can be defined as “a summary psychological state experienced by the consumer when confirmed or disconfirmed expectations exist with respect to a specific transaction or experience” (Getty & Thompson 1994, page 7). It has been suggested that service quality, as perceived by the customer, is a vital antecedent to satisfaction and resulting positive WOM (Cronin & Taylor, 1992). Within this concept lies another dimension, the “suggestion that customers have different levels of quality that fall within a zone of tolerance and are

motivated by unexpectedly high levels of service quality, which in turn produce delight” (Palmer, 2011, page 288).

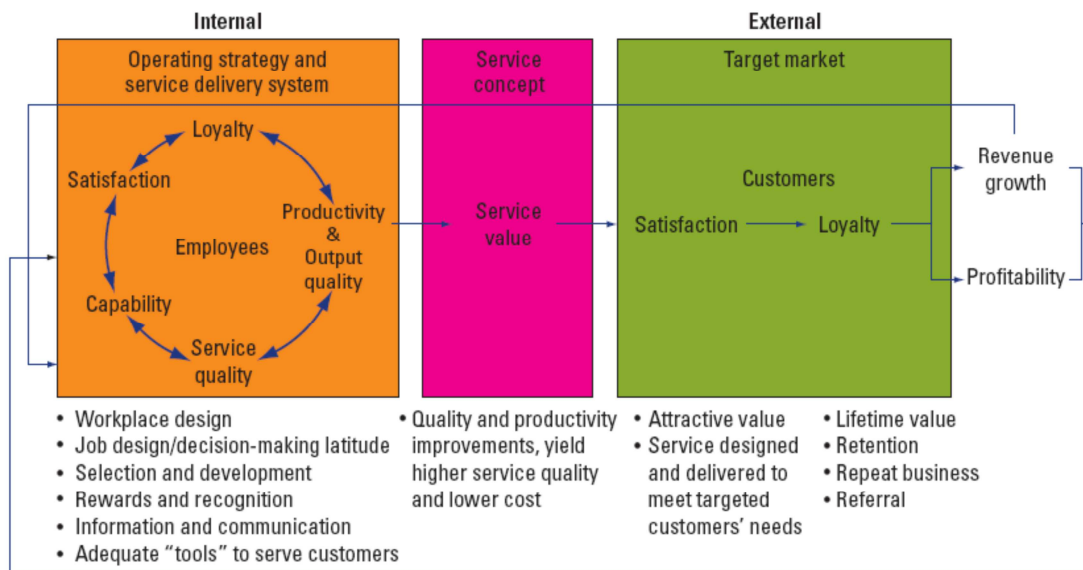
TABLE 2.6: CONSUMER'S ZONE OF TOLERANCE



(Source: Palmer, 2011)

The customer’s perception of the actual service quality received is deemed to have a direct relationship with that customer’s propensity to convey positive WOM. Heskett, Jones, Loveman, Sasser & Schlesinger (1994) established a direct link between employees and customers, suggesting that positive interactions between both sets of people, aided by an appropriate service design, result in customer loyalty, positive WOM referrals, business growth and profitability (see *The Service Profit Chain* presented as Table 2.7). Specifically relating to e-WOM, Libai et al. (2010) agree with the notion that positive e-WOM, resulting from delivering and exceeding customer expectations, leads to reduced costs and increased profits, underpinning the importance to restaurants of customers recommending the experience to others.

TABLE 2.7: THE SERVICE PROFIT CHAIN



SOURCE

Reprinted by permission of *Harvard Business Review*. From Putting the service-profit chain to work. By Heskett, J.L., Jones, T.O., Loveman, G.W., Sasser Jr., W.E., & Schlesinger, L.A. (March–April), p. 166. Copyright © 1994 by the Harvard Business School Publishing Corporation; all rights reserved.

(Source: Heskett et al. (1994), cited in Lovelock and Wirtz, 2010)

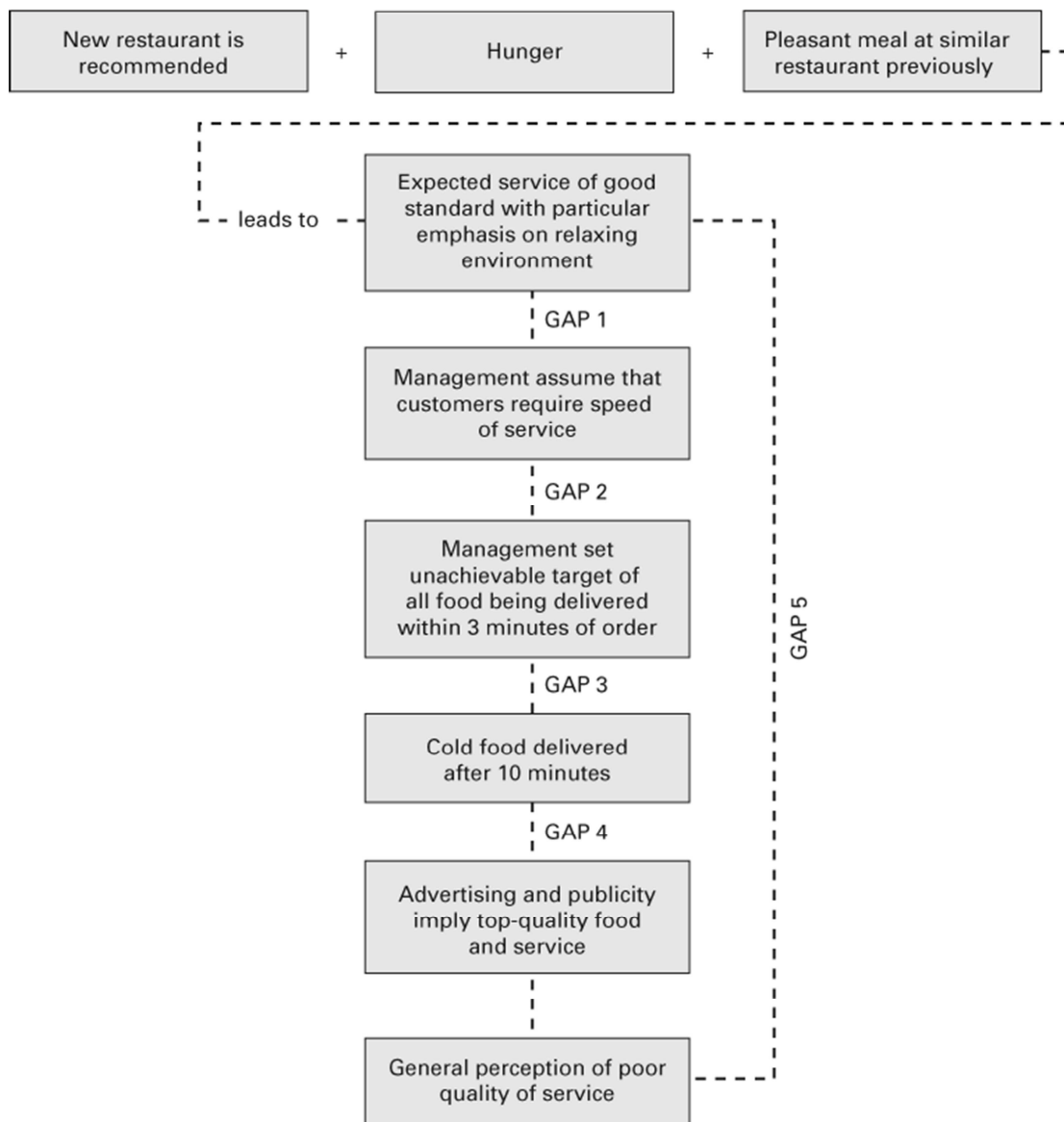
It is vital that service-minded, customer-oriented restaurants analytically assess their overall service quality, with the main focus being put on looking at how their customers evaluate service quality. Parasuraman et al. (1985) provide a useful analytical framework for assessing service quality, known as The GAPS Model. It identifies 5 gaps where there may be a shortfall between expectations and perceptions of actual service delivery, as shown below.

Gap	Gap Described
1	The gap between customer expectations of service quality and management's perceptions of those expectations
2	The gap between management perception of customer expectations and service quality specifications and standards
3	The gap between service quality specifications and actual service delivery
4	The gap between actual service delivery and external communications/promises (including WOM)
5	The gap between customers' perceived service received and expected service

The customer's perceived evaluation of the quality of their restaurant experience (positive or negative) leads to any resulting WOM they convey being positive or negative, therefore influencing the purchase behaviour of other consumers (Parasuraman et al., 1985). In this context, WOM is thought to play a highly significant role in the marketing of a restaurant, as more than 80% of consumers trust WOM recommendations for services, according to research by Nielsen (Libai et al, 2010). Table 2.8 shows an example of how this GAPS model of service quality might apply to a restaurant scenario.

Consumers now regularly share information about restaurants through Yelp and other review communities (Fogel, 2010) like Trip Advisor and Menu Pages. Many consumers use these reviews to inform their own choices and make their purchase decisions (Fogel, 2010). According to Nielsen (2009) 70% of consumers trust the advice given through online reviews more than advertising, further illustrating the importance to restaurants of satisfied customers posting positive reviews on these sites. In this context, the research referred to earlier regarding e-WOM also holds true (Obal et al., 2011; Brown et al., 2007; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Dellarocas, 2003) in that, in addition to customer reviews posted on

TABLE 2.8: GAPS MODEL EXAMPLE AS APPLIED TO RESTAURANT SERVICE QUALITY



(Source: Lovelock and Wirtz, 2010)

these official review sites, consumers are also likely to be influenced by more casual positive comments posted on the social media profile pages of people they are connected to. As stated previously, users can establish whether or not the reviewer has credibility in their eyes by doing a simple background glance at the person’s profile and status updates (Obal et al., 2011; Ellison et al., 2007). In light of this it is assumed that if someone is looking for

advice for a new restaurant, they can easily identify individuals in their online network that are knowledgeable in this area. Although Fou (2008) criticised marketers' attempts to influence the consumer conversations that take place on social media sites, suggesting that these conversations should happen naturally when customers experience high levels of satisfaction, it is necessary to note that positive e-WOM is of extreme importance in restaurant contexts, as restaurants with limited promotion budgets depend mostly on positive WOM (Longart, 2008). In consideration of this, marketers of restaurants might benefit from an understanding of what triggers customers to engage in conveying e-WOM online.

It has been suggested that a consumer's positive experience with a product or brand is not usually enough to stimulate positive WOM (or e-WOM) about it (Gremler, Dwayne, Gwinner, and Brown, 2001). Some academics argue that products need to be interesting to be talked about (Sernovitz, 2006; Hughes, 2005). In fact, Hughes (2005) went as far as saying that interesting is not quite enough, that experiences that are unusual, outrageous, or remarkable generate the most conversation. The more the consumer experience fits this description, the more likely the consumer is to engage in immediate e-WOM (Berger and Schwartz, 2011). In addition to this, consumers who are exposed to emotional events most likely feel an urgency to affiliate, a concept commonly referred to as the "sharing of emotion" (Rimé, 2000). Specifically investigating restaurant patronage, and building on previous research (Turley and Chebat, 2002; Bitner, 1992), Babin, Lee, Kim, and Griffin (2005) explored how the restaurant service environment can positively affect key marketing outcomes such as sales, value, satisfaction, and resulting positive WOM (offline) for restaurant patronage in Seoul. He found that both utilitarian (for instance, quality of the

food and drink) and hedonistic (for instance, feelings linked to the customer's emotional response to the experience) attributes needed to be present for customers to experience satisfaction and feel compelled to convey positive WOM. He added that efforts aimed at making the environment more entertaining pay off in higher customer satisfaction. However, Longart (2008) conducted a study in London, also in the offline WOM arena, investigating the possible triggers of positive WOM after a consumer's restaurant experience, and found that the actual service environment and ambiance was only insignificantly correlated to positive WOM. A possible reason for the difference in findings could be the variance of the prevailing culture of both locations within which the respective studies were conducted (Hofstede, 2001).

Rosen (2009) suggests that consumers love to talk about things that are different and surprising. In fact, some studies relating to this found that the intensity of the surprise is directly correlated to the WOM frequency (Derbaix and Vanhamme, 2003). Longart's (2008) study found that the use of surprises by restaurants was a useful tactic in driving positive WOM and interestingly reported that surprises given to customers before their meal, like an unexpected course or a complimentary drink, influenced the generation of positive WOM more significantly than those given after their meal. Perhaps unsurprisingly, he found that there was a direct correlation between the quality of the food and drink and resulting positive WOM. He also noted only a moderate correlation between value for money, and, as a separate characteristic, service, and positive WOM.

A compelling body of evidence exists regarding the dynamics and influence of WOM (Keller and Fay, 2009; Trusov et al., 2009; Sweeney et al., 2008; Wojnicki and Godes, 2008; Graham and Havlena, 2007; Gladwell, 2000; Gremler, 1994; Settle and Alreck, 1989; Woodside and Delozier, 1976; Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955). However, although some research exists in the area of e-WOM communicated through social media (Kozinets, 2010; Libai et al., 2010; Prendergast et al., 2010; Deighton and Kornfeld, 2009; Steffes and Burgee, 2009), much more work is required to develop the knowledge of both marketing academics and practitioners in the dynamics of this rapidly developing social phenomenon. Even less is known about e-WOM concerning restaurants, with the only two previous research studies specific to the area of WOM for restaurants omitting to focus on e-WOM (Longart, 2008; Babin et al, 2005). Although these studies are insightful, they both refer to the fact that the investigation of e-WOM was outside of the scope of their studies, a fact they both present as limitations in their research. There is an increasing consumer reliance on e-WOM when choosing a restaurant, as a result of the service being high in experience characteristics (Obal et al. 2011; Lovelock, 2010; Zeithaml, 2001; Mitra et al., 1999; Nelson, 1970).

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

This research study is aimed at providing some meaningful insights into the area of e-WOM, specifically relating to restaurants. Its purpose is to test the existing theories and previous research in the area of WOM to ascertain if these assumptions hold true in the online environments where e-WOM is communicated. Building on the assumption that, as a result of limited marketing budgets, restaurants rely heavily on positive WOM (Longart, 2008), and now e-WOM (Fogel, 2010; Obal et al., 2011; Sullivan, 2010), this study also investigates whether or not it is possible for marketers of restaurants to use social media in order to generate positive e-WOM and, if it is possible, explore the types and styles of communication that is most effective in achieving this. It will also seek to provide an understanding of what triggers customers of restaurants to convey e-WOM through social media, either on their own social media profiles or in giving reviews to review websites like Trip Advisor, Menu Pages or Yelp, and whether they have a tendency to convey this e-WOM during or after their restaurant experience. The research objectives, specific to this study, are detailed below.

Research Objective 1	To investigate if restaurant marketers can stimulate positive e-WOM through the use of social media, as part of an integrated marketing communications program.
Research Objective 2	To examine the types and styles of communication that work best in achieving positive consumer e-WOM, given that the Internet and social media is a 'distinct phenomenon' (Steffes and Burgee, 2009).
Research Objective 3	To explore the most likely trigger(s) of positive e-WOM during and after a consumer's restaurant experience.

This chapter provides a description and explanation of the chosen research methodology of this study. It also provides a justification for the chosen research methodology, including reasons why other research methods were considered but deemed inappropriate. In terms of who actually has the answers to these questions, it was envisaged that marketers of restaurants using social media, as part of their marketing communications program, have useful insights to offer. It was also thought that customers of restaurants, who are also active in communicating on social media, could offer insights from the other perspective, in helping to answer these research questions. The actual methods of selection of these organisations and individuals are detailed in *sample selection* section later in this chapter. Firstly, an overview of the research process and methodology is presented, follow by a discussion justifying that methodology.

(i) Research Philosophy



From the perspective of an interpretivist research philosophy, using an inductive research approach. From an ontological standpoint the research is socially constructed and subjective. Epistemologically, the meanings derived from the research is subjective as it entails the explanation of a social phenomenon that is likely to change. The research aims to focus on the reality behind the details and explain the subjective reasons motivating actions. Through an axiological lens, the researcher is seen as being part of research and cannot be separated from it, further leading to the subjectiveness of the outcome. In this way, the research is value-bound.

(ii) Research Design



The research is exploratory by design, as little is known about the social phenomenon under investigation. Insights are gathered from considered 'experts' through the use of qualitative methods. The research design also includes a use of grounded theory and, in a small way, netnography, in attempting to uncover meaningful insights. Where relevant, some secondary sources will be used to supplement the learning, mainly through referring to relevant Internet/social media statistics and newspaper articles. From a time horizon perspective, the study is cross-sectional as it considers the social phenomenon (of e-WOM regarding restaurants) at a particular time. The study is considered to have a low reliability value, as repeating the research might not yield identical results. However, the study is considered to be high in validity, as a result of the opinions of the highly knowledgeable participants involved.

(iii) Sample Selection



The study used non-probability sampling, using the researcher's judgement. Two samples were selected; marketers of restaurants and consumers of restaurants. The corresponding sampling techniques used were; snowballing (for restaurant marketers) and self-selection (for restaurant consumers).

(iv) Negotiating Access and Research Ethics



a) Strategy to gain access - Adequate time is allowed to plan and prepare for access. Researcher is very familiar with the organisations and individuals involved in order to display a genuine interest in them and to display an understanding of context. A use of existing and new contacts is used, sending them an introductory e-mail providing an explanation for the study, followed by overcoming any further concerns the participants might have. Benefits to organisations involved are provided, namely that participating restaurants have full access to the research findings on completion. Credibility of the researcher and trust is established early.

b) Research ethics - A deontological view was taken regarding research ethics. A recognition of the Social Research Association's Ethical Guidelines. Research included for privacy, volunteering, optional withdrawal, informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity for all participants.

(v) Data Collection



The research makes use of semi-structured, in-depth interviews with marketers of restaurants who use social media and a focus group with consumers who eat in restaurants at least once per month and who have active social media profiles. Following the focus group, the research included two separate further in-depth interviews with two of the focus group participants who appeared particularly knowledgeable. Establishing personal contact and rapport was important, as was the researcher's opening comments, appearance and behaviour. The questions asked were open and probing in style, adding to the exploratory nature of the study. Adequate time was given to complete (with interviews ranging from 30-60 minutes and the focus group lasting 50 minutes). Consideration was given to location being conducive to an open discussion, free from interruptions. The focus group and all interviews were recorded and immediately after transcribed verbatim.

(vi) Data Analysis

The first stage of analysis involved the researcher personally transcribing the focus group and all interviews immediately after their conclusion (30 hours in total). The research then involved an inductive analysis approach to the qualitative data collected. Meanings from the data were summarised, categorised and structured, according to identified themes, relating directly back to the research objectives. Specifically, discourse analysis was adopted as the chosen inductively-based analytical procedure to analyse the qualitative data.

3.1 Research Philosophy

“A research paradigm is a philosophical framework that guides how scientific research should be conducted” (Collis and Hussey, 2009, page 55). Some authors argue that the choice of research methods is of secondary importance to questions regarding the research paradigm. Guba and Lincoln (1994, page 105) note: “Questions of method are secondary to questions of paradigm, which we define as the basic belief system or world view that guides the investigation, not only in choices of method but in ontologically and epistemologically fundamental ways.” The choice of research philosophy, therefore, is deemed important and should be well reflected on so as to defend it in relation to alternatives that could have been adopted (Johnson and Clark, 2006). The over-arching philosophy of this research study is one of interpretivism, which puts emphasis on “conducting research among people rather than objects”, with the purpose being “for the researcher to understand differences between humans in our role as social actors” (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2009, page 116). It follows an inductive approach which is “a study in which theory is developed from the observation of empirical reality; thus general inferences are induced from particular instances” (Collis and Hussey, 2009, page 8). Deldridge and Kirkpatrick (1994, page 37) note the importance of “immersion (by the researcher) in the research setting, with the objective of sharing peoples’ lives while attempting to learn their symbolic world”. It is significant that these authors make reference to the “symbolic world” as rooted in the world of interpretivism is symbolic interactionism, where individuals derive a sense of identity from interaction and communication with others. “Through this a process of interaction and communication the individuals respond to others and adjusts his or her understandings and

behaviour as a shared sense of order and reality is ‘negotiated’ with others”. (Saunders et al. 2009, page 290).

This is closely aligned with the phenomenon of e-WOM, occurring through social media, where ‘interaction and communication’ is thought to shape behaviour (Libai et al., 2010). In order to understand this interaction and communication, it is necessary to “enter the research world of the research subjects and understand their world from their point of view” (Saunders et al., 2009, page 116). It is thought that a positivist approach would not be suitable for this study, as this is a paradigm that originated in the world of natural science and is based on the “assumption that social reality is singular and objective, and is not affected by the act of investigating it” (Collis and Hussey, 2009, page 56). In reality, the social phenomenon of e-WOM is not singular and objective but multi-faceted and subjective (Kozinets, 2010). Therefore, instead of adopting the quantitative methods of the positivist philosophy, the interpretivist’s approach seeks to “describe, translate and otherwise come to terms with the meaning, not the frequency of certain more or less naturally occurring phenomenon in the social world” (Van Maanen, 1983, page 9).

In breaking down this research philosophy, consideration needs to be given to three philosophical constituents – ontology, epistemology, and axiology (Bryman and Bell, 2011). “Ontology is concerned with the nature of reality” (Saunders et al., 2009, page 110) and from this perspective, it is the researcher’s assumption that, as a social reality, the meanings derived from this research are socially constructed, subjective and may change. There exists no one right answer to the questions being explored as “each person has his or her own sense of reality and there are multiple realities” (Collis and Hussey, 2009, page 59). “Epistemology concerns what constitutes acceptable knowledge in a field of study”

(Saunders et al. 2009, page 112) and through this lens it is the researcher's view that the most appropriate stance to take is one that allows the exploration of the reality behind the details of e-WOM and the subjective meanings motivating actions to seek, convey and react to e-WOM in a restaurant experience setting. Finally, axiology concerns itself with values. Herron (1996) argues that our values are the guiding reason of human action and that this not only affects the behaviour of those under research but that the researcher's own values are demonstrated at all stages of the research process. In this context, it is assumed by the researcher that this research is value bound and that the researcher cannot be separated from the research but is a part of what is being researched. This idea is thought to further add to the subjective nature of the study.

3.2 Research Design

This research is an exploratory study into the social phenomenon of e-WOM. It is thought that exploratory studies are extremely valuable in finding out "what is happening; to seek new understanding; to ask questions and to assess phenomenon in a new light" (Robson, 2002, page 59). Saunders et al. (2009) also add that exploratory research is useful when the precise nature of the problem is not understood and clarification of understanding is required. A descriptive or explanatory study is considered unsuitable as both require an understanding of the social phenomenon (Bryman and Bell, 2011), which is not fully available due to the social phenomenon under investigation being relatively new. Keeping within an interpretivist paradigm, this study uses qualitative methods to explore the reality, utilising a consumer focus group (of six participants), followed by two additional in-depth

interviews with two of the focus group participants, as well as four in-depth interviews with restaurant marketers (these specific research instruments will be discussed later in the chapter).

The study uses a grounded theory approach which, according to Goulding (2002), is particularly helpful in predicting and explaining behaviour, with the emphasis being on developing and building theory. Existing theoretical assumptions regarding WOM are further developed, in the light of the fact that these consumer communications are now increasingly taking place online (Libai et al., 2010), and new theories are presented relating to e-WOM, occurring through social media. The study also uses, in a small way, netnography, the online equivalent of ethnography. Whereas the purpose ethnography is to “describe and explain the social world the research subjects inhabit in the way in which they would describe it” (Saunders et al., 2009, page 149), netnography refers to a marketing research method that explores computer-mediated communications in connection with market-related topics (Kozinets, 2010). Further research by Kozinets (2006, page 279) proposes that “netnography is faster, simpler, timelier, and much less expensive than ethnography...It is also more naturalistic and unobtrusive”. This method is used in the study to explore e-WOM, within the social media world in which it is communicated. However, although taking a netnographic approach, this aspect of the study is somewhat limited with reference to time as it is cross-sectional, studying the social phenomenon of e-WOM at a particular time, thereby providing an insightful ‘snapshot’ rather than providing an understanding of the development of change occurring that a longitudinal study might offer (Saunders et al., 2009). Some secondary sources, such as newspaper articles and social media statistics, are also referred to as “such secondary sources can provide a useful source

from which to answer, or partially to answer” (Saunders et al., page 256) research questions and also help in providing a contextualisation of the data (Collis and Hussey, 2009).

The study is considered to have a low reliability value, as repeating the research might not yield identical results (Bryman and Bell, 2011). However, under an interpretivist paradigm reliability is of little importance, much less so than under a positivist paradigm (Collis and Hussey, 2009). On the other hand, the study is considered to be high in validity, which refers to whether or not a study “demonstrates or measures what the researcher thinks or claims it does” (Coolican, 1992, page 35). This is a result of the opinions gathered being from highly knowledgeable participants. It is also assumed that the study has a high generalizability quality, as it is felt that the research results could be applied to cases or situations beyond those examined in the study (Collis and Hussey, 2009). Gummesson (1991) argues that interpretivists may be able to generalise their findings from one setting to a similar setting, a concept initially proposed by Normann (1970) who suggested that it is possible to generalise from a very few cases, or even a single case, as long as the study captures the interactions and characteristics of the phenomenon under investigation.

3.3 Sample Selection

“A sample is the segment of the population that is selected for investigation...it is a subset of the population” (Bryman and Bell, 2011, page 176). In a positivist study, a random sample is chosen, so as to provide an unbiased subset of the population (Collis and Hussey, 2009). However, for this to be possible a sampling frame needs to exist, which is a “record of the population from which a sample can be drawn” (Collis and Hussey, 2009, page 209). As a

result of an inability to specify a sampling frame, probability (or random) sampling was not possible or considered appropriate, so non-probability sampling methods were used in selecting a sample for this study. As the research was exploratory in nature, an in-depth study, focussing on a small sample, was used to provide an information-rich analysis in order to gain theoretical insights (Saunders et al., 2009).

In terms of the sample size deemed appropriate, Patton (2002) suggests that this is dependent on the research questions and that it is more a question of what needs to be found out, what will be useful, what will have credibility and what can be done within the available resources, than it is about specifying an actual number prior to undertaking a research project. With reference specifically to the collection of qualitative data, previous authors recommend continuing to collect additional interviews until data saturation is reached, or until repeat interviews reveal little (if any) new insights (Saunders et al., 2009). This was the approach taken with this research study.

This study involved gaining insights from two perspectives (restaurant marketers and restaurant customers), so two separate samples needed to be selected. Snowball sampling was used to select the restaurant marketers' sample, as it "is associated with interpretivist studies where it is essential to include people with experience of the phenomenon being studied in the sample" (Collis and Hussey, 2009, page 212) and participants were chosen who were marketers of restaurants, familiar with the everyday use of social media for marketing purposes. The organisers of *Dine in Dublin*, a website (Dine in Dublin.ie, 2013) and twice annual event supporting and promoting Dublin-based restaurants, was contacted and subsequently proposed restaurants who actively use social media websites to promote their business and who would be willing to participate. All restaurants selected were located

within the Dublin 2 area and were judged by the researcher as being of similar quality and price. *Dine in Dublin* also helped in selecting the sample of consumers required for the study. They posted a request on their Facebook page (Dine in Dublin Facebook Page, 2013), asking for participants to the consumer focus group. Therefore, the actual method used to select the consumer sample was self-selection where, as a result of participant's interest and opinions about the research questions, individuals were allowed to identify their desire to take part in the research (Saunders et al., 2009). Participants were screened in that there were two qualifying criteria (1) they must eat in a restaurant at least once per month, and (2) they must have an active presence on social media. Although these screening questions were asked of them, as they selected themselves through a social media website (Facebook) on a restaurant-interest page they chose to follow (*Dine in Dublin*), there was a reasonably high chance that they would meet the criteria.

3.4 Negotiating Access and Research Ethics

At a starting point to gaining physical access to participants, which can take weeks or even months to arrange (Buchanan, Boddy, and McCalman, 1988), planning of the focus group and interviews started two months before access was gained. Familiarity with the organisation (for the restaurant interviews) was important, as was background research to gain an understanding of the context in which the organisation was operating in (Saunders et al., 2009). Robson (2002) suggest that gaining access and cooperation from organisations when undertaking research is a matter of developing relationships. Linked to this was the researcher's ability to gain credibility in the eyes of the organisation under investigation (Saunders et al., 2009). As mentioned previously, existing contacts of the researcher (*Dine in*

Dublin) were used and new contacts were made. An introductory e-mail was sent to all participants, ahead of their participation, outlining the purpose of the study and their involvement in it. Regarding the restaurants selected for interview, it was also necessary to overcome organisational concerns, mainly surrounding confidentiality and anonymity, as restaurants did not want to be sharing 'commercially sensitive' information with their competitors. A useful approach to gaining access was the promise of something of value being given to each restaurant participant in return for their involvement (Johnson, 1975). This took the form of a commitment to give full access to the findings, including conclusions and recommendations, of the study.

From an ethical perspective, the study took a deontological approach which asserts that "the ends served by the research can never justify the use of research which is unethical" (Saunders et al., 2009, page 184). All participants took part on a voluntary basis, giving their informed consent, and had the option to withdraw at any time, with the study also respecting their privacy, confidentiality and anonymity (Collis and Hussey, 2009).

3.5 Data Collection

This study utilised a consumer focus group and a series of semi-structured, in-depth interviews as a primary method of collecting data, which can be very helpful to "find out what is happening (and) to seek new insights" (Robson, 2002, page 59) and are deemed most appropriate as part of an exploratory study (Saunders et al., 2009; Cooper and Schindler, 2008). Within the semi-structured interviewing approach, the researcher had a schedule of the main issues and topics that needed to be discussed with the respondent,

but the respondent had the freedom to respond to the questions in the way that made most sense to them (Fisher, 2007), thereby encouraging a natural, free-flowing discussion. It was important for the researcher to appear knowledgeable in the area of social media as this is known to “demonstrate your credibility, assess the accuracy of responses and encourage the interviewee to offer a more detailed account of the topic under discussion” (Saunders et al., 2009, page 328). Interview locations were chosen that were convenient for the participants and that provided for an interview without interruptions. Opening remarks were chosen carefully, so as to set the scene for the interviewee and put the respondent at ease. The researcher made a conscious effort to demonstrate a genuine interest in the interviewee and the role in the organisation (Ghauri and Gronhaug, 2005) and provided early assurances regarding the use of confidential information and anonymity (Healey and Rawlinson, 1994). Open questions were used to facilitate depth in the discussion and minimise bias (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, and Jackson, 2008). Long questions, or questions made up of two or more questions, were avoided (Robson, 2002) and, where specific terminology was used, care was taken to ensure the researcher and the interviewee had the same understanding (Easterby-Smith, et al., 2008; Ghauri and Gronhaug, 2005). (Please see Appendix 1 to see the list of questions asked in the consumer interviews and focus group and Appendix 2 for the list of questions asked in the restaurant marketer interviews.) The researcher remained neutral and avoided any comments or non-verbal communications that might indicate bias (Saunders et al., 2009). While the researcher explored and probed for explanations and meanings without the projecting his own views, reasonable time was given for respondents to develop their responses, (Easterby-Smith, et al., 2008; Ghauri and Gronhaug, 2005). All interviews were audio-recorded, after permission was given by the

interviewee (Bryman and Bell, 2011) and immediately afterwards transcribed to enhance the trustworthiness of the data (Robson, 2002).

A consumer focus group was facilitated by the researcher, where the feelings and opinions of a group of restaurant-goers, who were also active social media users, were brought together to discuss the phenomenon of e-WOM regarding restaurants that is taking place on social media. "Focus groups combine interviewing and observation, but allow fresh data to be gathered through the interaction of the group. They can be used in an interpretive methodology" (Collis and Hussey, 2009, page 155). Authors vary in relation to the optimum number of participants for a focus group. Collis and Hussey (2009) recommend focus groups involving five to ten participants. Morgan (1998) proposed that typical group size should be six to ten, while Blackburn and Stokes (2000) found that discussions involving groups of more than eight were difficult to manage. Most authors note the need to allow for a fifty per cent 'no-show' when organising a focus group (Bryman and Bell, 2011; Saunders et. al, 2009; Collis and Hussey, 2009). With these recommendations in mind, the researcher planned the focus group for this study around thirteen confirmed participants, with the actual focus group involving six, with two individuals agreeing to a follow-up interview having demonstrated an in-depth knowledge of the subject matter under exploration. This method was useful in allowing the researcher to develop an understanding of, not just what people feel about e-WOM regarding restaurants, but also why they feel the way they do (Bryman and Bell, 2011). Much of the approach for the focus group mirrored that of the interviews with the obvious difference being that the researcher facilitated a group discussion as opposed to a one-to-one discussion. Participants were selected as a result of their commonly shared interest (social media engagement regarding their restaurant

patronage) and were encouraged to share their opinions about this shared interest without any pressure to reach a consensus (Krueger and Casey, 2000). The focus group benefitted from a snowballing effect, where group members' views stimulated other participants to voice their own opinions (Collis and Hussey, 2009). This helped to produce "data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group" (Morgan, 1988, page 12). After permission was given from each participant, the discussion was video recorded and immediately after transcribed.

3.6 Data Analysis

The literature proposes two approaches to analysing qualitative data; deductive analysis and inductive analysis. Yin (2003) proposes a deductive approach may be used when the researcher has made use of existing theories to formulate the research objectives, using the theoretical propositions that helped to devise the framework to help organise and direct the data analysis. The same author also suggested that, with this method, the main variables, components, issues and themes need to be identified in the research project, as well as the predicted and presumed relationships with them. Although this study did build on existing extensive research regarding WOM, and much less extensive existing research regarding e-WOM, thereby using a deductive data analysis approach, it also involved the use of an inductive approach to data analysis. As little is known about the social phenomenon under investigation, data was collected and then explored to see which themes or issues needed to be followed up on or concentrated on (Straus and Corbin, 2008; Schatzman and Strauss, 1973; Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

The first stage of the data analysis involved the researcher transcribing the focus group and each of the six interviews involved in the study immediately following their conclusion, using the audio (for interviews) or video (for the focus group) recordings. (See Appendix 3 for a sample transcript from one of the restaurant marketer interviews and Appendix 4 for a sample transcript from one a restaurant consumer interviews). This corresponds with the guidance from Kvale (1996) who suggested that the process of analysing qualitative data should begin at the same time as collecting these data, as well as continuing immediately afterwards. Involving approximately thirty hours, the transcribing of the qualitative data verbatim helped the researcher to fully understand the respondents' opinions and to visualise the phenomenon through their eyes. Each focus group or interview was saved as a separate word-processed file, with a filename chosen to protect confidentiality and anonymity that the researcher could easily recognise (Saunders, et al., 2009). As the data was analysed after each focus group or interview, the opportunity was afforded for the researcher to test previous insights and compare them against subsequent respondents' opinions (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, and Allen, 1993), thereby permitting flexibility to the research process.

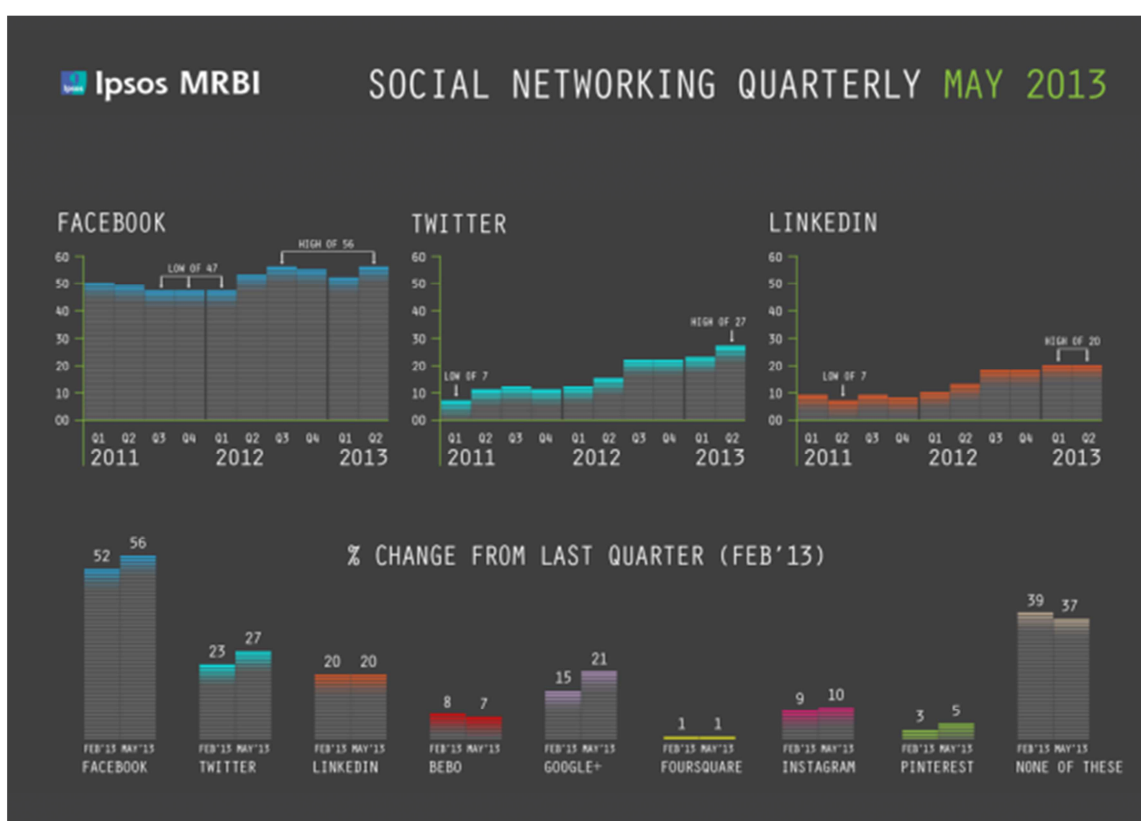
After transcribing the data, summaries of the data were produced, compressing or condensing long statements into briefer statements, in which the main sense of what was being said was rephrased into fewer words (Kvale, 1996). From this summarised data, themes that linked back to the research objectives were then identified and highlighted (using a specific colour-coding for each theme), and the data were categorised into "meaningful chunks" (Saunders et al., 2009, page 492), allowing the researcher to draw conclusions and recognise relationships. (See Appendix 5 for further details regarding the

data analysis process that applied to the consumer data analysis. The same process was applied to the restaurant marketer data collected.)

Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Findings

Social media, and specifically social networking websites like Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn, has become a primary channel of communication for Irish consumers. Five of the top ten most visited websites in Ireland are social networking websites (Alexa.com, 2013). According to the market research agency Ipsos MRBI (2013), 56% of the Irish population are active users of Facebook, 27% are active users of Twitter, and 20% are active users of LinkedIn, as Table 4.1 shows.

TABLE 4.1: TOP 3 SOCIAL NETWORKING WEBSITES IN IRELAND



(Source: Ipsos MRBI, 2013)

Specifically relating to Facebook, the most popular social networking site, Irish users are 53% female, 47% male, with the largest active groups aged 18 to 24, and 25 to 34, accounting for 22% and 29% of users respectively (Socialbakers.com, 2013). This supports the commonly held theories relating to Generation Y consumers and their heavy use of social media (Bolton et al., 2013; Peres et al., 2011; Sultan et al., 2009).

The most interesting statistics, from a consumer behaviour perspective, relate to the use of these social networking websites to convey and receive e-WOM. The average Irish Facebook user has 268 'friends' (Abbott, 2012), more than twice that of the global Facebook average. Irish Facebook users 'like' 133 million items, 'post' 81 million comments, sends 77 million personal messages, and uploads 24 million photos each month (Abbott, 2012).

Exploring the nature of this social phenomenon is of importance to marketing practitioners, as it is known that consumer-to-consumer communications can significantly influence future purchase behaviour (Obal et al., 2011). This study is of importance to marketing academics too, as it challenges the large body of knowledge that exists regarding traditional WOM, with respect to these consumer communications occurring electronically in online environments. Specifically, this study investigates e-WOM regarding Irish restaurants, aiming to answer the three research questions outlined in the previous chapter, under which headings the findings are presented.

4.1 Research Question 1: Can restaurant marketers stimulate positive e-WOM through social media, as part of an integrated marketing communications program?

The first question this study was attempting to answer concerned whether or not it was possible for restaurant marketers to stimulate positive e-WOM through social media. Without exception, the restaurant marketers interviewed as part of this research each independently agreed that the use of social media for generating positive e-WOM is, not only possible but, an essential aspect of their marketing communications program. In particular it was found that engaging with Generation Y consumers is of specific importance to Irish restaurants, as a result of their heavy use of social media. One restaurant marketer interviewed said:

“We find the most active people on social media are aged 18-25 and 25-30...Most 18-30 year olds are heavily engaged in social media, so restaurants that aren’t engaging with social media will die, they need to be heavily active in it.” (Restaurant B)

In line with Longart’s (2008) observation, regarding the reliance of restaurants on positive WOM (in the traditional sense) as a result of limited marketing budgets, one restaurant marketer described the generation of e-WOM through social media as “absolutely fundamental”. The same respondent also stated:

“Social media has revolutionised marketing for restaurants and smaller companies in general. It is the bedrock of your ability to communicate on a larger scale, of getting people to talk about you and of monitoring what they are saying.” (Restaurant D)

The same restaurant held a recent event to launch a newly revamped food and cocktail menu, inviting 80 online journalists, bloggers, and influential people on Twitter to attend. She described as “incredible” when discussing the level of online sharing of comments, photos and recommendations from the attendees that resulted, estimating the online reach of the e-WOM for this single event of being between 50,000 and 100,000 people. Interestingly, she also mentioned how these influencers have since become “really supportive” and how “useful relationships” have been developed where these people continue to share content posted by the restaurant on their social media pages. She suggested that if these people like the content the restaurant is posting through social media, “they talk about it”. This was a sentiment held by another restaurant respondent (*Restaurant A*) who suggested that by doing “something clever” on social media the restaurant is investing in its future, as the new followers gained will be a resource for sharing content and spreading e-WOM. Another restaurant described how they “piggy-back” on promotional events hosted by affiliate organisations responsible for promoting businesses in the city and partner with them in hosting similar events in their restaurant. This restaurant marketer described such an event she hosted involving restaurant bloggers, also emphatically made a case for how this method was effective in generating positive e-WOM:

“I think when these social media influencers come to a tasting event like this they tend to have a huge positive effect for us because they are very social media savvy and they are immediately on their smartphones spreading the word quickly.”
(Restaurant C)

While the affiliate organisations mentioned could be likened to the *Salesmen* described by Gladwell (2000), whose responsibility it is to persuade consumers, the influential bloggers might be likened to *Mavens*, “have the knowledge and social skills to start word-of-mouth epidemics” (Gladwell, 2000, page 70). It was found, when discussing the level of influence of restaurant bloggers with the consumers involved in this study, that these people are the perceived experts in food and their recommendations to visit a restaurant come with a sense of authority. Agreeing with previous research (Obal et al., 2011; Brown et al., 2007; Gilly et al., 1998) homophily was important in this context, with one consumer respondent (*Consumer E*) saying that if a blogger he respected, as a result of similarities in tastes and preferences, liked a particular restaurant; he knew he would like it also. Respondents also expressed a tendency to share positive blogger restaurant reviews with their online friends, if they shared similar tastes and, therefore, trusted their opinions.

“If it was a blogger whose opinion I trust, I would (share it). If it was retweeted into my timeline from someone I don’t follow, then I would probably ask questions from others and look to try it myself before I would recommend it. I wouldn’t have to know them personally, but if it was somebody whose blog I read regularly and I have tried other places they have recommended and seen for myself that they were good, then I trust their opinion. Reviews from a blogger I don’t follow, I would be a bit more cautious of, although they would probably make me want to try the restaurant being talked about myself.” (Consumer A)

This was a view shared by all of the consumer respondents in this study, agreeing with Brown et al. (2006, page 355) who suggested that blogs have become “second only to newspapers as a trusted information source”. In supporting the view of Obal et al. (2011), it

was found that tie strength was not deemed as being of the same level of importance as is the case with traditional WOM, as all respondents were unanimous in stating it as unnecessary that they knew the blogger personally or had a close personal relationship with the individual for their review to be influential. What was deemed more important was that the blogger shared a similar taste in restaurants as the reader. In contrast to previous work by Kozinets et al. (2010), who suggested that when recommendations from bloggers are marketer-generated they are less effective, there was sufficient evidence in the data produced from this study supporting the idea that restaurant marketers who target these restaurant-*Mavens* (Gladwell, 2000) are engaging in a worthwhile exercise as it tends to produce e-WOM that is immediate, wide-reaching, and influential.

Individual social media users were also observed as having the potential to share content generated by restaurants to large audiences through their online conversations. One such consumer respondent (Consumer A) was found to have a reach that far exceeded what might be viewed as being the traditional social network. Her online reach was quite considerable through four social networking sites – Twitter (3,061), Facebook (2,700), Instagram (691), and Pinterest (438). She acknowledged how she regularly shared social media content from restaurants, if she deemed it as interesting and of being described as such by her online friends, saying that she would “retweet” it so other people can also see it. This individual could be described as a *Connector* (Gladwell, 2000), as a result of the enormous online social power she holds. She also resembles the description of the “hyper-connected”, Generation Y consumer, who shares a large proportion of her WOM electronically (Bolton et al., 2013; Peres et al., 2011; Sultan et al., 2009). Not only did this respondent state how she might talk about a restaurant as a result of interesting content

that restaurant posted on their social media pages, but her description of how she spreads e-WOM through her mobile smartphone device during her restaurant experience provides an insight into her heavy use of social media:

“I usually post each course as I have it. And, if I like the menu I would post a picture of the menu, or if I like the décor I will post about that. I post a picture of the food at each course and then after I have eaten it I will post on Instagram and Twitter before the next one comes. I would do this especially if the food looks really good, I would take a photo and post it. But sometimes the food doesn’t look that good but tastes great, so I would talk about it.” (Consumer A)

The data produced evidence to support the idea that targeting these *Connectors*, with content they deem as interesting enough to share, results in influential positive e-WOM that is wide-reaching. This is because this type of person is “gregarious and intensely social” and possesses, what Gladwell (2000) calls, “raw transmission power”. One restaurant (Restaurant A) noted how it is working towards segregating these people into specific groups and tailoring messages specifically to suit them. This restaurant respondent described these influential social networkers, who were also fans of the restaurant, as being “high profile customers” and “real friends”. Targeting these individuals with tailored messages was seen as worthwhile as a result of their online social power.

It was apparent from the data that restaurants can generate e-WOM through social media, as part of an integrated marketing communications program, as long as they posted interesting content targeted at social media influencers. Consistent with the findings of Libai et al. (2010), restaurants that targeted interesting content at the small number of people on social media who have the potential to influence a large number of others, tend to generate

e-WOM and with widespread effect. This notion of communications being considered “interesting” gives rise to the thought that not all social media content generated by restaurants are shared in equal proportions and raises a question regarding the communication style most likely to “ignite WOM epidemics” (Gladwell, 2000).

4.2 Research Question 2: What types and styles of communications work best in stimulating e-WOM through social media?

Although the restaurant marketers interviewed as part of this study all expressed their opinion that their strategic marketing communications should deliver the same brand message online as it does offline, they also described how their social media marketing communications need to be quite different in style, if they were to be effective in generating e-WOM. In this way, what they described was in harmony with the “distinct phenomenon” the Internet and its social media platforms are, as described by Steefes and Burgee (2009). One of the restaurant respondents said:

“Our social media is still in tune with our brand values but I guess it’s much more conversational and one-to-one and, I’m loathe to use the word casual, but more casual than our offline marketing communications.” (Restaurant D)

One of the key differences between the offline and online marketing communications of the restaurants interviewed was regarding the level of planning for both. Regarding their social media marketing communications, the restaurants reported either a lack of planning or a planning process that was week-to-week, instead of it being quarterly or annually as would be the case with their offline marketing. They each described how social media is a much

more “instinctive” medium than any other, resulting in a need to be “fluid and flexible” in their communications. One restaurant expressed how it would be a waste of their time to plan further than a week in advance as a result of their need to react to events or subjects arising in the media when generating interesting content on social media. Another key difference that was found between online and offline marketing, in the context of generating e-WOM for restaurants, was getting the balance right between posting content that was promotional but at the same time engaging and interactive. A common theme running through the data suggests that communications that are sales-driven and overtly promotional in style do not tend to generate e-WOM on social media. One respondent suggested that their audience does not tend to respond to the straight “buy this” type of communication. Many of the restaurant marketers interviewed argued that social media is more about developing relationships than it is a means of constant promotion. This promotional/interactive balance is seen to be important, if the content is to be deemed interesting enough to be shared online.

“It needs to be a mix in style – maybe 30% sell and 70% interact. Obviously you would like to be selling your restaurant all the time but that’s not what social media is all about. It’s about relationships and talking and conversations and being interesting. That’s what is going to get you results.” (Restaurant A)

This supports Deighton and Kornfeld (2009), who proposed that marketers have lost much of the control they once had over the marketing message but now participate in a “conversation” about the brand. The same restaurant described how it recently launched a new summer cocktail menu and, instead of creating an advertisement to support the launch, it asked its Facebook friends to get involved by assigning names to the new

cocktails, with a free meal being awarded to the person deemed to have come up with the best name, as judged by the restaurant. The result of this was that, not only did all their followers and friends have exposure to this message, but many interacted with it and shared with their friends, thereby creating what the respondent described as a “viral nature” to the campaign. This opinion, regarding the need for restaurants to create social media communications that were interactive in style, was echoed from the consumer perspective, with respondents insisting they would “unfriend” and “unfollow” a restaurant on Facebook and Twitter if the content that restaurant posted regularly looked like advertising.

“They need to be giving you information that is relevant to you; that you might find useful. A promotional advertisement saying “look at our restaurant” is probably not likely to get my attention and make me share it. But a relevant message about what the restaurant has going on Friday night, when I might be planning a Friday night with friends, might be interesting and might make me share it with my friends, saying “why don’t we try this”.” (Consumer D)

In supporting this idea, research by Ipsos MRBI (2013) reported that 45% of people who have “liked” a brand on Facebook have subsequently “unliked” a brand. The main reasons for unliking are boring content (35%), posting too frequently (31%), irrelevant content (30%), repetitive content (28%) and because the brand was only liked to access a one-time offer (26%).

This theme was consistent with previous research (Kliatchko, 2008; Goldsmith and Horowitz, 2006) in supporting the view that the acceleration of marketing messages has shifted from producers to consumers as a result of social media and that audiences are no longer just

receivers of media content, but simultaneous co-producers of content through social media engagement. It also supports the observation of Thomas et al. (2011) who suggested there is a growing criticism of advertising, leading to the need for marketers to create “buzz” without being manipulative.

It was also found that communications through social media generated by restaurants was very personal, with most restaurant marketers feeling the need to personally sign-off on posts. This idea of social media communications being personal was deemed to be important, as was the need for restaurants to develop their own personality and strive to communicate this personality through their social media content. It was found that generic, promotional communications are least likely to be shared by social media users, whereas restaurants that added a “personal touch” to their content are more likely to be shared.

“Some restaurants put a personal touch to their social media content, especially ones that are family run, so they are sort of tweeting aspects of their family life, maybe talking about the whole family sitting down to a meal prepared in the restaurant. So, I would retweet pictures like that, you know, content that gives a bit of an insight into the background of the restaurant.” (Consumer A)

Reference was made in numerous interviews, from both the restaurant and the consumer perspectives, that content had to be interesting to be shared. This matched with previous research (Sernovitz, 2006; Hughes, 2005) but particular attention needed to be given to what was deemed interesting specifically in the context of a restaurant generating content on social media. As might be expected, the study revealed that people who follow restaurants on social media sites, like Facebook and Twitter, are passionately interested in the production of “good food”. They displayed a tendency of being interested in getting an

insight into the background of the restaurant. This could be manifested in photos and profiles about the team in the kitchen, or in other “behind the scenes” content regarding how the restaurant sources their food from suppliers, for instance. In this way, content that was seen to be “telling the story” behind the restaurant was considered interesting. In addition to content about the restaurant, as a result of the audience also enjoying cooking at home, they expressed a strong preference for receiving and sharing content that offered interesting seasonal recipes using unusual ingredients. One consumer respondent (*Consumer A*) described how she recently shared a recipe (to her Twitter following of 3,061 people) for an “elderflower fritters” desert dish posted on a restaurant’s Facebook page adding that, as a result of the ingredient being very seasonal and the dish being very unusual, the content grabbed her attention.

Humour was another attribute of the content that made it inherently sharable.

“In terms of the types of communications that get the most engagement and re-tweets it tends to be the funnier, off-the-cuff posts or tweets where we are having a bit of fun. Like “we have spotted a strawberry in the shape of a heart” or a something like that.” (Restaurant D)

Many of the other restaurant marketers interviewed also suggested that people tend to interact with and share content that was humorous and that displayed the restaurant’s personality. This was also found to be the case when interviewing consumers, with one consumer talking about a restaurant she followed, saying she regularly shared their daily post containing a picture of a humorous message written on a blackboard outside the restaurant. This idea might lead to the conclusion that social media content should be entertaining, to increase its propensity to be shared and therefore lead to the generation of

e-WOM, a concept that does not explicitly appear in the literature to date. Another concept absent from the literature is that one of the motivations driving a social media user to share content from a restaurant was the notion that the content might be of benefit to their online friends.

“For me to share that (social media content) with my friends, I wouldn’t really be doing so for the benefit of the restaurant, I would be sharing it for the benefit of my friends.” (Consumer C)

Although not explicitly discussing how social media content needs to of benefit to the friends of the its initial recipients, previous relating research has relevance in this context, suggesting the need to tinker with the presentation of information to improve its “stickiness” (Gladwell, 2000) and that messages need to be “remark-able” (Godin, 2005) so as to make the information capable of sustaining interest (Fogel, 2010) and of spreading online.

The data also suggests that competition-type content had a tendency to be shared and that this style of communication was particularly useful in increasing the size of the audience on social media.

“I would share something if there was something to gain by it. Like, if a restaurant was running a competition to win a free meal with your friends or something and they were looking for you to share the content, I would do it.” (Consumer H)

Many of the restaurants discussed how competitions are still the most effective type of communication in increasing audience size and encouraging content to spread on social media.

“In terms of adding new Facebook likes, anytime we run a competition, we would add anything between 50-100 new followers in one day. That’s quite substantial.”

(Restaurant D)

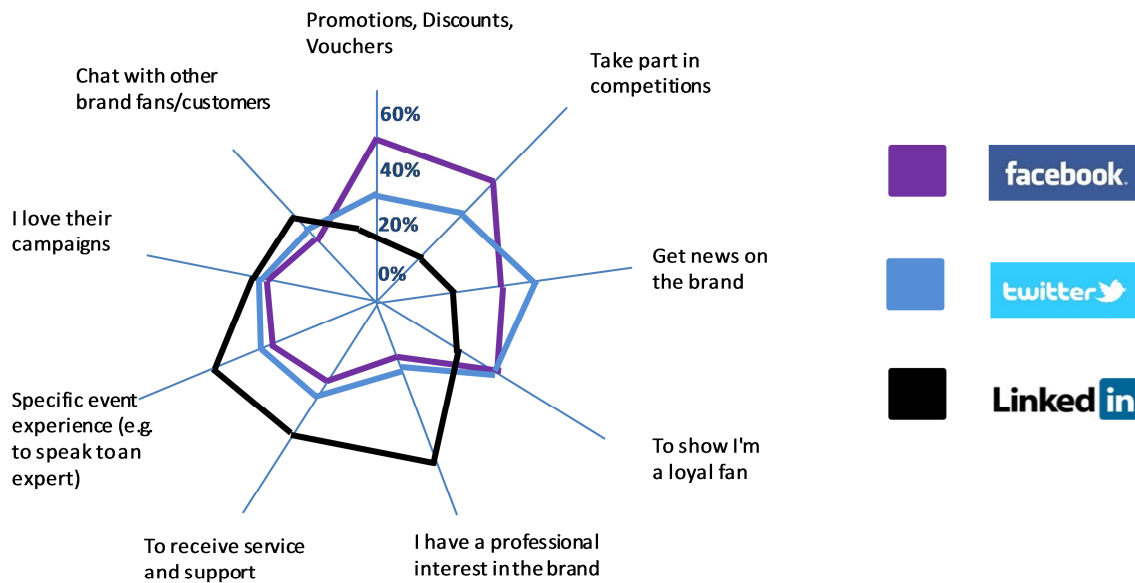
From another perspective, the data suggested the need for restaurant marketers to use competitions sparingly. If a restaurant is constantly promoting competitions, this can negatively affect the image of that restaurant as it could lead to consumers wondering why the restaurant feels the need to be constantly offering free food in an attempt to win customers. Another negative affect, and specifically relating to the content being remarkable and capable of sustaining interest (Fogel, 2010; Godin, 2005), could be that the content is no longer interesting enough, leading to the audience ignoring the message.

“You just need to be careful to keep the content interesting. People share them but if you only use competitions it becomes too predictable and people will tire of it.”

(Restaurant A)

The study also revealed that the communication style may differ depending on the actual social media site within which the message is initially generated. This extends the idea that, not only does the communication style need to differ between offline and online mediums, but within social media a specific style and tone of voice should be adopted for specific social media platforms, to suit that of the individual forum. This matches with Brown et al. (2007) who suggested that individual consumers interact with the forum and, as a result, content needs to comply with the style of that forum. Research by Ipsos MRBI (2013) suggested that social media users interact with brands for different reasons, depending on the social networking site being used, and that brands need to adapt their communication to suit the channel (see Table 4.2).

TABLE 4.2: IPSOS MRBI "REASONS TO CONNECT WITH BRANDS ON SOCIAL MEDIA CHANNELS"



(Source: Shaw, 2013)

The social media forum also affects the frequency of messages permitted, from the consumer’s perspective. Many of the restaurant marketers interviewed described how the frequency of their message generation differs between, for instance, Facebook and Twitter.

“Generally we would post twice a day on Facebook. That usually works for us in terms of not wanting to bombard people. Then Twitter tends to be a bit more frequent, we don’t link the two. I think they are quite different; I’ve never been a fan of the linking. Facebook is more considered, whereas Twitter is much more immediate in impact and you can get away with posting a lot more there because people are following so many people that you are not necessarily catching everything.” (Restaurant D)

This opinion was shared from the consumer perspective. Some respondents explained how receiving messages too frequently from a restaurant could be a source of irritation, especially if the content “clogged up” the individual’s newsfeed so that all they could see is content from that particular restaurant. The data suggested that restaurant marketers need to stagger social media content, so that messages are generated at intervals throughout the day or week, instead of posting a large number of messages all at once. In addition to the concept of social media users feeling bombarded with content, was the notion that if a restaurant was producing large amounts of content and posting numerous daily messages, the question of whether this content can continue to be interesting enough is raised. In this context, the generation of interesting content is considered to be of more importance than the frequency of the messages transmitted. It is also apparent that restaurant marketers need to post content regularly enough so as to sustain the interest of the receiver, leading to the idea of finding a balance between posting too often and not often enough.

“Content that is interesting or that makes you laugh, you are more likely to share. But you probably will not share it if they post too much because the likelihood is, at that rate, they will not be able to produce content that is interesting enough. And I suppose as well, if a restaurant does not post often enough they are probably not going to get noticed. So it’s probably about striking a balance between not posting too often that you annoy people, and posting enough so that you get noticed. But I still think it’s the content that matters and how interesting it is.” (Consumer E)

Finally, relating to the type and style of restaurant-generated social media communication that gets the best response in generating e-WOM, the time of the day or week the content is posted was explored. Restaurant marketers noted how they do not post important

content they wish to be shared on Mondays, Tuesdays, or Wednesdays, as these tend to be the days that get the worst response. Thursdays appeared to be the strongest day for the sharing of content posted by restaurants. However, although the consumers interviewed suggested they are more receptive to noticing and sharing social media content regarding restaurants as it is getting closer to the weekend, many described their consumption of social media in a way that was not consistent with the view shared by the restaurant marketers interviewed. Most consumers noted how they engage in social media conversations “every evening”. Also, as a result of the mobile nature of social media, many consumers described how they are likely to engage in online conversations at any time during the day or week.

“I think maybe I am more active on social media in the evenings or as it is getting closer to the weekend, and I am starting to think about where I might go and what I might do, I might be more interested in content regarding restaurants. But, on the other hand, I would often check in to my social media on my smartphone whenever I am waiting around for something, like waiting for a train or a bus. So I suppose in that sense I could be active on social media at any time of the day or week.”

(Consumer D)

The mobile nature of social media, and the hyper-connectedness of the modern consumer, particularly the generation Y consumer, leads to social media having the potential to communicate with people at any time. This not only means that content generated by restaurant marketers has the potential to be shared at any time, but user-generated content, taking the form of influential e-WOM, has the same potential. This idea raises another question relating to the generation of positive e-WOM messages by individual

consumers and, more specifically, regarding the possible triggers for engaging in the creation and spreading of such messages regarding a consumer's restaurant experience.

4.3 Research Question 3: What is most likely to act as a trigger of positive e-WOM during and after a consumer's restaurant experience?

Much of the data from this study suggested that positive e-WOM arising from a consumer's restaurant experience tended to come from the actual service experience exceeding their expectations, as opposed to a restaurant's efforts to explicitly encourage positive online comments. In this context, it was observed that restaurants could still aid the generation of positive e-WOM but that, in doing so, the creation of a heightened restaurant experience for the consumer was seen as the primary driver. One restaurant marketer (*Restaurant A*) interviewed commented how they include messages such as "like us on Facebook" on the menu in the restaurant, but such messages are thought to have a minimal effect in driving positive e-WOM. Most restaurant marketers interviewed discussed the importance of customers enjoying the "whole experience" if they are to be motivated to engage in spreading positive e-WOM about the restaurant. Regarding individual aspects of the restaurant experience, restaurant marketers highlighted the importance of both food and service in particular.

"Service is critically important, so the people who engage with the customers are most important, I would say. So, if you have happy, competent, professional people who are good at what they do and engage with the customer, you are more likely to have happy customers who are inclined to give good reviews. We regularly train all

our staff because this is so important. Then obviously the quality of the food that's there is important too, whether it be a croissant or the fish of the day, the food has to be good and presented nicely. The food has got to be good, but it's the people that make the difference. They encourage customers to go that extra mile and post reviews through giving excellent service.” (Restaurant B)

These thoughts were shared by the consumers interviewed also, leading to the assumption that both quality of the food and quality of the service were important aspects in driving positive e-WOM, with quality of the service and the interaction of the restaurant staff with customers being deemed to be of the most importance.

“It would have to be a combination of both food and service. So if both were really, really good, once I have left the restaurant I would say something like “had a really great meal at such and such a restaurant, great food, great service, can't wait to go back”. And then, if people are asking me for a recommendation at a later stage, then I would recommend they go to that restaurant. If the food is great and the service is mediocre, then it might be just ok. If the food is great but the service is terrible, then they are missing the point – you can't have great food and bad service and I won't talk positively about the experience. If the food is not good but the service is good, then it's a bit of a shame. I would like to recommend it, but I am not going to because the food wasn't what it should have been. So, I suppose it has got to be a combination of both before I will feel comfortable recommending it.” (Consumer A)

It was also learnt that restaurant consumers are more likely to spread e-WOM about restaurant experiences they consider to fall below their expectations (resulting in negative e-WOM) or those they consider to exceed their expectations (resulting in positive e-WOM).

There was no tendency evident from the data suggesting that consumers engage in e-WOM to discuss restaurant experiences they consider to be “mediocre”.

“In my experience, people usually talk about really good or really bad experiences, they don’t usually talk about an experience that was just ok. So, we try to create really good experiences that people will talk positively about.” (Restaurant A)

This observation links with Palmer’s (2011) thoughts relating to a consumer’s zone of tolerance and their perception of service quality. The suggestion here is that consumers tend to be motivated by unexpectedly high levels of service quality, which in turn leads to delight and the spreading of positive e-WOM. This aligns with the findings of Babin et al. (2005), whose study was conducted in Seoul, observing how both utilitarian (for instance, the quality of the food and drink) and hedonistic (for instance, feelings linked to the customer’s emotional response to the experience) attributes need to be present for customers to experience high levels of satisfaction and feel compelled to convey positive e-WOM. This study did not find, as Babin et al. (2005) did, that the service environment had a significant impact as a primary driver of e-WOM. In line with Longart’s (2008) study conducted in London, the physical restaurant environment and ambiance was not seen as being important in driving e-WOM. This might lead to the assumption that some service attributes contribute more in triggering e-WOM than others in different regions, suggesting that perhaps culture plays a significant role in this context (Hofstede, 2001), although further research is required to explore this assumption.

Supporting research regarding the affect surprises have in triggering e-WOM (Rosen, 2009; Longart, 2008; Derbaix and Vanhamme, 2003), there was evidence in the data to support the idea that a correlation does exist between surprises (for example, a surprise food course

or a complimentary drink) given to consumers during their restaurant experience and their propensity to convey positive e-WOM. A cautionary note needs to be made, however, regarding the frequency of such surprises. It was found that, if surprises were given too often to restaurant customers, they could lose their affect as acting as a trigger for e-WOM in that they become an expectation rather than an actual 'surprise'.

“When you surprise people, they usually give you great WOM online, both on review websites and on their own social media pages. But we wouldn’t do that too often. I suppose it wouldn’t be a surprise if you were doing it all the time and people don’t generally talk about things they expect.” (Restaurant A)

Consumers interviewed expressed an opinion supporting this notion, describing how surprises offered to them during their restaurant experience might make them feel “more valued”, as the restaurant is seen as going “above-and-beyond” their expectations, making their experience feel “more personal”. Surprises should not replace the essential aspects of the restaurant experience (particularly quality of the food and service), as consumers also described how a surprise alone would not compel them to convey positive e-WOM, but might be considered “the icing on the cake”.

“I wouldn’t say that just because they gave me something for free that I would recommend it, but if they provide great service and great food, it is always nice to get a little treat from them. But, it wouldn’t make me recommend them, unless the whole experience was really good. If the food was good and the service was good, I might talk positively about it. But if they gave me a free glass of Prosecco or a couple of nice chocolates to bring home, that would kind of tip my experience to the point where I would definitely talk positively about it.” (Consumer A)

Finally, the specific social media channels used to convey e-WOM during and after the consumer's restaurant experience is worthy of note, as there were conflicting reports on the level of influence of e-WOM, depending on the channel. It was found that social media users place higher levels of trust in e-WOM that is conveyed through a person's own social media profiles (on websites like Facebook and Twitter) as opposed to reviews posted on review websites (like Trip Advisor, Menu Pages and Yelp). During the restaurant experience, consumers had a tendency to post photos of the food served, if it "looked great", accompanied by a comment describing how good the food tasted, if the food was found to "taste great". In this sense, the quality of the food, in both taste and presentation, is seen as an important trigger of immediate e-WOM during the restaurant experience. Consumers tended to use the "check-in" feature on social media websites (such as Facebook and Foursquare), to announce to their online network that they were eating in a specific restaurant. There was evidence to support the idea that this type of e-WOM was influential on the consumer behaviour of the recipients, where context played a role.

"I was in a restaurant recently and I checked-in on Facebook and I shared a photo and a comment about the great food I was eating in the restaurant, it was a few weeks ago. One of my online friends was in the area and was looking to try a new restaurant. She commented back to me on Facebook saying that I put the restaurant into her head and so she tried it, within minutes of my post!" (Consumer D)

This serves to support the observation of Earls (2007) who suggested that when people merely observe the behaviour of others, imitation behaviour can occur. It also reinforces the theories relating to "herd behaviour" and "collective action" (Macy and Willer, 2002; Bikhchandani, et al., 1992), which suggest that observing the behaviour of others can have

an influencing effect on consumer behaviour. This line of thinking was also supported by data gathered from the restaurant marketers' perspective.

"But what we find happens increasingly is that people are checking in on Facebook and, it's a bit like a swarm of bees, people will go to places they see other people checking into." (Restaurant B)

From both the restaurant marketer and the restaurant consumer perspectives, e-WOM conveyed through reviews posted on review websites were not trusted to the same extent as e-WOM conveyed through a consumer's own social media pages. Restaurant marketers described how they monitored reviews posted on review websites, but did not completely trust the source of the review as a result of the anonymity of the reviewer. It was alleged that competing restaurants at times post fake positive reviews about their own restaurant and negative reviews about other restaurants, in an attempt to influence consumer purchase behaviour in their favour. In exploring this further, the researcher found secondary data to support the practice (not relating specifically to a restaurant, but relating to an Irish hotel chain), although more research is required to explore how widespread the practice might be.

"One of the State's largest hotel chains planned a campaign involving "a bank" of people aimed at generating false positive reviews on the influential Trip Advisor website. Internal communication seen by The Irish Times indicates that the Carlton Hotel Group encouraged dozens of employees and other nominees to post positive reviews of the chain's 10 hotels to Trip Advisor." (Pope, 2012)

More evidence was found of this from the United Kingdom, where the *Telegraph* reported “a businessman set up a fake restaurant with glowing reviews in a bid to expose the apparent failings of the Trip Advisor website, prompting baffled customers to be led down a backstreet alleyway” (Johnson, 2013). The creator of the fictitious restaurant “Oscar’s” added:

“There are many businesses that have had grudge reviews listed on Trip Advisor, mostly from a rival. Many of these are so blatant, any person doing a short check would see that they are obvious.” (Johnson, 2013).

Consumers interviewed described how they might read comments posted on review websites, but that such reviews might only act as an initial indicator of the quality of the restaurant and, as such, only have a minimal influence on their choice of restaurant. Comments posted on a person’s own social media pages were seen as more credible as the person’s identity is known, and similarity of tastes and preferences can be determined.

“I just have read so much about people going on and giving really bad reviews and they are clearly a competitor of a particular restaurant just trying to make the place look bad. So, for that reason, I might have a quick glance to see what the majority are saying and then I would ask people I trust their opinion through Twitter and blogs before I would form my opinion.” (Consumer A)

It was also found that local, Irish consumers have a much higher tendency to convey positive e-WOM through their own social media channels than they do to post comments on review websites. The data suggested that tourists are more likely to convey and possibly trust

review websites, like Trip Advisor, as a result them not having a network of friends and acquaintances, although further research is required to confirm this assumption.

On a final note, it was found that none of the restaurant marketers interviewed used a specific social media monitoring platform, to track e-WOM regarding their restaurant. They each said they monitored online comments and conversations, but did so in a non-systematic manner, performing weekly manual searches on websites such as Google, Facebook, Twitter, Trip Advisor, and Menu Pages.

Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

The exploration of the triggers and effects of positive e-WOM is an exciting area of research and illustrates that new social media requires a shift in marketing thinking. Consumers have become highly active partners, serving as customers and co-producers of influential communications, being highly connected with a widespread network of many other consumers. Specifically relating to restaurants, this study has discussed existing theoretical assumptions relating to WOM with respect to e-WOM and the phenomenon that is social media. In doing so it has added to the literature in a number of key areas, presented below as conclusions. Arising out of these conclusions, recommendations for restaurant marketers are then discussed.

5.1 Conclusions from the research

This study has shown that restaurant marketers need to consider placing social media at the heart of their marketing program and adopt an integrated approach, which uses social media in unison with more traditional marketing methods. It has provided evidence to support the notion that restaurant marketers can create positive e-WOM through social media, and that social media has become a fundamental aspect of a restaurant marketing strategy. Many restaurant marketers work with limited promotional budgets and rely heavily on positive e-WOM to promote their business. As a result of the low promotional costs attached to social media, as compared with more traditional marketing communication methods, it was reported that social media has revolutionised marketing for small restaurant businesses. Despite this, it was found that restaurant marketers are not

investing the same amount of time into strategically planning their social media marketing activities as they do with more traditional marketing efforts.

Although many social media channels exist, and many more are appearing, most of the social media audience in Ireland is currently engaging in e-WOM on three main channels; Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn. A higher social media adoption rate was noted among Irish consumers, as compared to average global statistics (for example, the average Irish Facebook user having 268 friends compared to 130 friends globally). Further research should consider the influencing factors behind this and, in particular, consider cultural aspects that might be adding to the apparent increased desire to engage in social conversations online. Matching the global trend, more than half of the social media audience in Ireland is currently made up of consumers belonging to Generation Y, perhaps heralding a possible sociological shift that will likely effect other generations, including subsequent generations. This idea possibly proposes the need to embrace social media as it is likely to penetrate into further cohorts of the population and become an even more accepted channel of communication in the future.

It was found that a small number of individuals hold much of the social power and influence. The study identified the market *Mavens* as being influential bloggers. The *Connectors* are those individual social media users who have enormous power as a result of the size of the online network. The *Salesmen* are affiliate organisations, promoting the local area with promotional activities and events. These individuals possess the power to ignite e-WOM epidemics. The study also revealed that consumers are influenced by social media users they share similarities with, regarding the style of restaurant or type of food they liked. However, the level of influence was not diminished if the relationship held with the e-WOM

source was weak, proposing that weak ties on social media can have a strong influence on consumer behaviour and restaurant choice.

Concerning the creation of social media content by restaurant marketers it was found that a tone of voice that was overtly promotional in nature had a lower tendency to create e-WOM. Social media content that is interesting (as defined by the audience), remarkable, considered of value (like recipes using seasonal ingredients) and personal is more likely to be shared by consumers. Consumers showed a tendency to share humorous content, or content that told the story behind the restaurant brand. In this way, content that contained stickiness and was capable of containing interest was more likely to be shared by means on e-WOM. It was also noted that the tone of voice and frequency of posted social media content needs to differ, according to the acceptable, expected norms of the social media channel in question, and that a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to social media communications will, most likely, be less effective. Restaurant marketers proposed that posting social media content at specific times of the week tended to receive the best response in terms of generating e-WOM (i.e. Thursday afternoon). Although restaurant consumers confirmed they may have a higher level of attentiveness to social media posted by a restaurant closer to the weekend, they also discussed how much of their social media consumption is now through mobile connected devices (such as a smartphone), and is likely to take place at any time of the week.

With respect to the actual consumer restaurant experience, the study revealed that Irish restaurant consumers are not likely to convey positive e-WOM if the quality of the food and service (including interaction with the restaurant staff) fell below their expectations. If these core elements were present, however, other experience element, such as ambiance, value

for money and surprises offered to them (like a complimentary drink or a surprise food course) were likely to tip their experience, leading to delight and a higher propensity to convey positive e-WOM as result. In a similar vein, consumers showed a lower tendency to convey e-WOM regarding a restaurant experience they considered mediocre, suggesting how they tended to feel compelled to talk about experiences that either greatly exceeded or fell below their expectations.

Many consumers discussed a declining level of influence in reviews posted on official review websites, such as Trip Advisor and Menu Pages. Although reviews posted here may still influence to a point, many consumers seek other confirmation from more trusted sources they may share similarities with before making a decision to visit a particular restaurant. On both sides, restaurant marketers and restaurant consumers, the opinion was widespread that such review websites were rife with fake reviews. For this reason, consumers are more likely to trust a recommendation from a blogger or from another individual in their own online social network, than they are to trust a recommendation from a largely anonymous source on a review website. Restaurant marketers, however, placed a great deal of importance in monitoring reviews placed on these review websites and seemed to place a lesser degree of importance, or perhaps expertise, in monitoring online conversations that take place on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter.

5.2 Recommendations for Restaurant Marketers

Given these findings, the author makes the following ten recommendations to restaurant marketers who are interesting in creating positive e-WOM through social media.

1 Plan the social media strategy	This study revealed there is a need to remain "fluid", "flexible", and perhaps more "casual" with social media marketing, compared with traditional marketing communications, but also suggests social media marketing is of strategic importance to restaurants and warrants a strategic focus to planning.
3 Go where your audience go	Although there is a need to keep up to date with new social media platforms and constantly scan for new opportunities to engage online, there is also a need to use time wisely. Restaurant marketers should prioritise the most important channels for their business in engaging with their audience and focus their efforts on those channels (i.e. Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Trip Advisor, Menu Pages).
3 Adapt tactics by channel	As with any marketing channel, specific communication tactics are required to suit different social media channels and their respective audiences. The tone of voice and frequency of communications need to be adjusted for the social media platform (i.e. Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn).
4 Identify the influencers	This study has shown that certain individuals hold more influential power on social media than others. It identified these influencers regarding restaurant choice as being trusted bloggers (<i>Mavens</i>), highly connected consumers with wide-reaching social networks (<i>Connectors</i>), and affiliate organisations (<i>Salesmen</i>). Restaurant marketers should identify these individuals and tailor social media communications to suit them, as they have the power to ignite e-WOM epidemics.
5 Give the content "stickiness"	Social media content must be interesting and remark-able (as defined by the audience), if it is to be shared. Competitions are a useful way to grow a social media audience, but over-use leads to predictability of the communications and the content being considered uninteresting. Content that uses humour and tells the story behind the restaurant brand is likely to get the best response, as is content that is giving something of value (e.g. recipes using seasonal ingredients).
6 Monitor online conversations	As well as monitoring reviews on official review websites (i.e. Trip Advisor, Menu Pages, etc.) restaurant marketers should monitor online conversations taking place on social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. This study has shown these conversations are more influential than reviews posted on official review websites. A higher level of sophistication is recommended in this regard, adopting a systematic approach that uses a social media monitoring platform (e.g. Radian6, Nielsen, etc.)

**Adapt the social media
7 strategy to include mobile**

Although this study identified specific days and times considered best when posting social media content, it also identified a trend towards a mobile consumption of social media. Restaurant marketers should monitor daily and weekly peaks in the social media activity of their audience, but also aim to create and post content for mobile consumption, which can be consumed and shared at any time and from any location.

8 Food and service must be core

This study revealed the most likely triggers of positive e-WOM, resulting from a consumer's restaurant experience, as being the quality of the food and the quality of the service (in equal proportions). If these core experience elements do not meet the customer's expectations, positive e-WOM is less likely to occur. Other elements of the restaurant experience (i.e. ambiance, value for money, surprises offered) help to tip the experience towards exceeding the customer's expectations, leading to delight and a higher propensity to convey positive e-WOM.

**Create a memorable
9 restaurant experience**

It was found that restaurant customers tended to show a higher tendency to convey e-WOM when their experience either fell below or exceeded their expectations. Consumers are less likely to convey and engage in online conversations about mediocre restaurant experiences. In an effort to encourage positive e-WOM, restaurant marketers should seek to create a memorable consumer experience that exceeds customer expectations.

10 Be transparent

Restaurant marketers need to establish and develop a relationship with the key influencers in their audience. This study has revealed the best approach to this revolves around authenticity, openness, honesty and being personal with the creation of social media content. Not only are there serious ethical concerns surrounding the posting of fake reviews (positive or negative), but due to the transparency of social media, restaurant marketers need to be accountable for their social media activities. The exposure of an unethical social media strategy could potentially cause damage to a restaurant brand.

5.3 Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

This study was conducted in Dublin and, although the findings are considered to be high in validity and possessing a generalizability quality, further research outside of Dublin would

confirm if sub-cultures have an impact. Future research should also consider the role culture plays in influencing e-WOM, perhaps including a cross-cultural element, replicating similar research in other countries. The study considered positive e-WOM only and its' potential to be harnessed as part of a restaurant marketing strategy. Future research could also include negative e-WOM and explore whether restaurant consumers show a high propensity to convey and be influenced by positive or negative e-WOM. This study was explorative in nature (as it needed to be to uncover previously unknown insights). Future research, however, could adopt a quantitative methodology to track actual reach of specific communications. Finally, this study did not investigate the actual return on investment (ROI) gained from positive e-WOM in the specific circumstances of the restaurant marketers being interviewed. Future research could aim to calculate ROI of restaurants engaging in social media marketing and compare their profitability against restaurants not engaging in social media marketing. This would move towards establishing a correlation between positive e-WOM and profitability.

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Appendix 1: Consumer Interviews and Focus Group

Semi-Structured Questions

1. What social media channels do you use?
2. What do you like about social media as a channel of communication?
3. Do you follow/like restaurants on social media? Why?
4. Are there one or two restaurants you are a real fan of, whose social media content you would regularly share?
5. If a restaurant posted content on their social media pages, would you share it with your friends?
6. What type of content are you most likely to share (i.e. advertisements, competitions, humour, interesting information, etc.)?
7. Is there a certain time of the day or day of the week when you are more likely to share content with your online friends?
8. Does it matter to you how often a restaurant posts content?
9. Would you post details about your restaurant experience while you experience it?
10. Would you post details about your restaurant experience after you experience it?
11. If you read a really positive restaurant review from a blogger, would you share it with your online friends? Would you want to visit that restaurant?
12. Do you give reviews on the review sites (i.e. Trip Advisor, Menu Pages, etc.) or just post to your own social media pages?
13. What would compel you to spread positive word-of-mouth online, through social media, about your restaurant experience?
14. If a restaurant gave you a surprise (like a complimentary drink), do you think you would be more likely to give a positive comment online about that restaurant?

Appendix 2: Restaurant Interview – Semi-Structured Questions

1. What is the split between your offline and online marketing activities?
2. Does the style and tone of voice differ between your online and your offline marketing communications?
3. How important is social media to your marketing program?
4. How much of your marketing activities are conducted through social media?
5. What social media channels do you use? What is the reach of each your social media channels?
6. Do you advertise on social media sites? Which ones? Response rate? Viral rate?
7. How do you engage with your audience through social media?
8. What types of social media communications get the best response (views, likes, shares, etc.)? Do you measure the effectiveness of your social media activity? How?
9. How often do you post in each of your social media pages?
10. Do you find a particular time of the day/week gets the best response?
11. Do you plan your social communications?
12. Do you monitor what people are saying about your restaurant on social media?
How?
13. What triggers online WOM for you during/after a customer's restaurant experience?
(e.g. quality of food/drink, atmosphere, service level, surprises given, etc.)

Appendix 3: Interview 1 – Restaurant A

Tuesday, 18th June 2013 (Started 13:00, Concluded 14:00)

Restaurant A is a busy restaurant in the centre of Dublin city. Their Marketing Director (the interviewee) uses social media extensively to promote the restaurant and encourage online word-of-mouth. They mostly engage with their audience through Facebook and Twitter, where they have a reach of 18,766 and 2,173 respectively (as of 18th June 2013). The interviewee has won two awards for their work as a social media marketer and has been shortlisted in a number of others.

This interview took place in the restaurant during lunch. However, the restaurant was particularly quiet as a result of it being sunny and warm outside, resulting in people spending their lunchtime outside rather than inside. As a result of the restaurant not being busy, the interview lasted just under one hour and was completely uninterrupted. The interview was audio recorded (after permission was obtained from the interviewee) and, immediately after, transcribed as follows.

Gavin: What is the split between your online and offline marketing?

Interviewee: Our marketing is mostly online, in fact we are online constantly. We only engage in offline marketing on a seasonal basis, like we are doing a promotion with the Sight Seeing Bus at the moment to attract tourists and we might take out an ad with a particular magazine to support that for instance. But every week we are contact by another magazine or newspaper looking for us to advertise with them and, if you were to get into them all, you would run out of money fairly quickly.

Gavin: Based on that, do you find you get a better ROI online?

Interviewee: In relation to ROI, yes, online is better. Online, you can directly target people who are actively looking to book a restaurant. Offline marketing is only useful for brand recognition, people will see your brand and or your logo and that's it. If you know what you're doing online you can tailor your communication to show how big your restaurant is

and that can be just targeted to someone who is looking to book for a large group, for instance. Whether you use LinkedIn or Facebook or Google AdWords for that, you are basically taking marketing to the next level where you have already found out what people want and you are literally putting relevant information in the face.

Gavin: So, in that way, would it be fair to say that you are therefore tailoring your marketing on an individual level rather than putting a message out to larger groups and hoping someone responds?

Interviewee: Absolutely.

Gavin: Talking specifically about social media then, how important would social media be in the context of your overall online activities?

Interviewee: Very important. It's about being where your customers. Fair enough, probably not every customer is on social media, but most are. And most of our target audience are, like most of our Facebook friends would be females aged 25-40...like, if you come in here on a Saturday night mostly what you will see is women aged 25-40 and these are the people who are on social media. They like to check-in on Facebook, they like to 'like' a brand, they like to link up with us because they like to hear about what we are selling, they are interested in us. These people talk to us on social media because they want to interact with us, they don't just want us to be constantly shoving advertisements in the face all the time.

Gavin: That's interesting that you mention the word 'interact' as opposed to advertisement-style communications. How do you do that? How do you interact with your audience through your social media channels?

Interviewee: Well, for instance we have launched a new cocktail menu. Now I could take two approaches with that. I could contact a magazine, like Hot Press for instance, stick a couple of photos in an ad with them. Or, I could put three or four photos up on Facebook, tell our network we don't have any names for these cocktails yet and ask them to propose names for them, get them involved. We could give a free meal with cocktails to the person (and their friends) who comes up with the best name or something like that. Taking an A4 ad in the magazine would cost us at least a thousand Euros. Whereas, going the social media approach, and including some highly targeted advertising to support it (on social media)

would cost us maybe two hundred Euros and be more effective. Not just will our followers and friends see this and interact with it, but their friends will see it too and will, most likely, interact with it, so it goes viral, which is what every brand wants.

Gavin: That's very interesting, and along similar lines, do you find you have supporters on social media, people that help spread the word for you?

Interviewee: Yes, very much so. But we also have a couple of other types of people. Perhaps new people that have just discovered us and want to ask questions. Or then we have the 'serial freebies' who are entering every competition just to win the prize and you can spot these people a mile away.

Gavin: And, how do you deal with these people?

Interviewee: Well, they don't really bother us. We view these people as not doing any harm, in fact they are doing a job for us. By them 'liking' and 'sharing' our posts they are spreading the word. They are still interacting. But then we do have, what we call, our 'high profile customers' on social media. These are the people that are here every week and when they see a post about a new dish or cocktail they say 'oh, Monica your waitress told me about that last week, I can't wait to come in and try it'. You know, they know us, they know the staff. I suppose these could be termed our real 'friends'. If you really wanted to, you could segregate these into a specific group and tailor messages specific to them but we don't do that at the moment.

Gavin: Just getting back to something we touched on earlier, regarding advertising and 'interactive' messages, would the style and tone of voice differ between the two?

Interviewee: Oh yes, they would definitely differ. Anything online through social channels is personal, very personal. I would sign all my posts and try to put a personality behind the brand. I would try to ask people a question, or if they ask us a question, I would give them 'my response' to it. Or I might say something like "I got a great colour on Portmarnock beach yesterday...speaking of which our lobster is on special at the moment!" and post a funny picture with it. People generally respond and interact with funny stuff. I think humour is important in social media. You have to try to make it personal and show a bit of your

personality. It's very hard to do that offline. You know, if you are interacting with a brand on social media, it's not really the brand you want to interact with it's the people behind it.

Gavin: So, in that way, would you say it's about relationships and trying to start conversations then?

Interviewee: Oh definitely, yes. It's all about developing relationships with customers. You know, I seen it happen before with other restaurants that, everyday another special is posted or another sales promotion is posted. You know, people will get tired of that, they will 'unlike' you. They'll say "I want to hear about your restaurant but I don't want you to be selling to me all the time". You need to make the content interesting for your social media audience and you need to get people involved.

Gavin: So, are you more talking about the frequency of social media communications and being careful not to bombard people or is it that you don't want to be pushing too much 'sell, sell, sell' – type communications?

Interviewee: Both. In terms of frequency, I would never post more than once or twice a day and sometimes I would give it a break for a day or two. And, you know, it would be a mix in style – maybe 30% sell and 70% interact. Obviously you'd like to be selling your restaurant all the time but that's not what social media is all about. It's about relationships and talking and conversations and being interesting. That's what's going to get you results.

Gavin: I see you have nearly 19,000 likes on Facebook. How did you build such a following? Was it through Facebook advertising or was it organic growth?

Interviewee: To be honest a good mix of both. We engage in everyday conversations on social media but we would also do Facebook advertising, sponsored stories, promotions and competitions. But every communication we put out there has an objective. It might be to direct traffic to our website, or grow our following on Facebook or Twitter. It might be to support a new product launch. Every time we do something online, we would ask ourselves "OK, right, what do want to achieve for ourselves with this?" And, you know, anytime I do something good through social media I am growing our reach for the future. It's not like an offline advertisement were it runs and that's it. If I do clever stuff on social media you're investing in the future in a way as well.

Gavin: You mentioned Facebook advertising, sponsored stories, promotions and competitions. Out of those, which tends to get the best response in terms of people spreading your message and it going viral?

Interviewee: Competitions. And information that is, how could I put it.....interesting I suppose. Perhaps a recipe for guacamole that maybe people can use. You know, if they are having friends around they might share it and say "I might try this out this weekend". And competitions, people usually share. Who doesn't want a chance to eat in a good restaurant for free? And the more competitions you do the more you attract the serial freebies, which is no problem, you just need to be careful so as you keep the content interesting.

Gavin: So, would you think it is important not to overuse competitions then?

Interviewee: Yes, definitely. People share them but if you only use competitions it becomes too predictable and people will tire of it.

Gavin: What social media channels do you use?

Interviewee: Facebook, Twitter and Google+. But Facebook and Twitter are the big ones, Google+ is slowly coming up behind them. LinkedIn is up there with them but I don't really use it as much, it is very specific in what it does. I would probably use it for a tailored communication to businesses for Christmas parties, for instance. It is useful for targeting the right type of people in organisations with adverts, like human resource people in a company who might be organising the company Christmas party.

Gavin: And would the communications' style be different for each social media channel?

Interviewee: Yes, it has to be really. LinkedIn is very professional and communications needs to be very 'matter of fact'. Facebook is very social and probably image based. Twitter is very short pieces of information, much more interactive and a lot less like advertising. Now I do have most of my Facebook posts going up on Twitter as well. But Twitter is on my phone and I am regularly interacting with people. I might be on the bus on the way to or from work and I'd open the restaurant page and interact with people with short comments in a kind of conversation kind of way. I'm not looking to advertise on Twitter, just interact. But I'm obviously very careful about what I say.

Gavin: Are you the only one that uses social media for the restaurant?

Interviewee: Yes, unless I'm away and then the General Manager will look after it.

Gavin: Do you have a social media policy in place?

Interviewee: No, we don't really have a policy. I mainly look after it myself, so we don't really see a need for a policy.

Gavin: Have you found that posting at a particular time of the day or day in the week that gets the best response?

Interviewee: Yes, Thursdays and Sundays. Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Saturday I wouldn't really get much interaction. Thursday, I think, is the best.

Gavin: Why is that, do you think?

Interviewee: I don't know really. Thursday, people are probably looking forward to the weekend and wondering what they will do, so maybe that's why they are interested in talking about going out to a restaurant. Friday I think people are busy at work trying to get things finished off and then most go out straight after work. Monday to Wednesday, I think, people are in work and probably don't want to be there, but they're busy and probably haven't time for personal social media – they are dead days usually for us on our social media. Sunday is a lazy day, I think people have time and they are probably interested in talking from home on their i-Pad or laptop. And Saturday they are hung-over from Friday and not interested.

Gavin: Can I just bring you back to something you mentioned earlier for a moment? You mentioned that you have specific objectives for each social media communication. Do you have a specific plan for your social media activity?

Interviewee: No, not really. Well, we would plan, but it would be on a weekly basis. I would meet with the other managers and the owners and we would talk about what we should do that week. Like, we will look at what we have, like our new summer lobster menu or our new cocktail menu and we would plan to talk about that. Or we would think about what event or happening that week that we can tie in with and talk about, like concerts or

father's day, or communions and confirmations, and look to talk to people who might be interested in them. You know, I might have maybe four things I want to target in a given week and I would decide what channels is best to use for each, whether it is online advertising, a Facebook post, or a Twitter conversation. But we would also have a look at what we did the previous week and see how well it did. So, I suppose there is no real structure to it, it's on a week-to-week basis.

Gavin: Would you think there is an advantage to that, not being rigid with your scheduling like you might have to do with offline marketing communications?

Interviewee: Yes, we are lucky with how small we are. Like, we are spending small amounts of money on social media, I suppose if you were with a bigger company who might be spending thousands, they are going to want to know where people go when the click on a link and how long they stay. These analytics are built into Google and Facebook and I do print off a small report each week to see what's working for us, but I suppose I could tailor this and be a bit more specific with our reporting. Like I could look at how many people went on the contact us page on a given day or I could look at the phone system and see how many calls we got on a given day that I try something on social media. But I suppose we don't really have the resources to do that, to be honest. But I think being small makes us a bit more nimble and we can come up with interesting content that is current and interesting from week-to-week. Although, it is something we are looking into. We would like to plan our annual social media communications and calendar events and activities for the whole year and we are thinking about taking on an intern to do a bit of work on this for us. A calendar like that, showing the rugby season or father's day or mother's day, communions and others could be useful in our management meetings when we could say 'right, this is what is coming up for the next month', or 'the next two months' and we could probably make our social media communications even better. Like for something like Christmas you really need to plan your activities six months in advance.

Gavin: When customers visit your restaurant and give a review to a review website (like Trip Advisor or Menu Pages), do you monitor what people say about their experience in your restaurant?

Interviewee: Yes, every week. I monitor the main review websites. The main ones are Trip Advisor, Menu Pages, Yelp and Who's Who. I print off every review for everyone to read at the weekly meeting. It's nice to see the reviews that are four and five star, but if there is a week were the standard drops we would ask 'what happened here? Something has gone wrong.' And usually if that does happen there might be a few reviews that might be all around the same thing and maybe we would have known it was going to happen. Like recently a staff member hurt his arm and wasn't able to come to work, the service level dropped because we were short staffed on that particular busy night. But it is definitely something that restaurants have to do now, you have to know what customers are saying about their experience. I know another restaurant that is constantly receiving terrible reviews and you just ask the question 'do they not monitor these comments?'

Gavin: So that monitoring relates to the review websites, but what about the comments people might make on their own social media pages, do you monitor them?

Interviewee: I would look at it but I wouldn't interact with it. I would do kind of manual searches on Facebook and Twitter using keywords relating to the restaurant. If someone is talking nicely about us, I might just 'like' it, but I wouldn't do anything else. I don't know, me personally, I just think if I comment directly back to them they might consider it an invasion of their privacy.

Gavin: So, you don't use a social media monitoring software?

Interviewee: No, I just do searches myself. And I have some Google Alerts set up as well, but that's it.

Gavin: The last question I have is an important one, so I don't want to gloss over it. What, do you think, makes people get on their smartphone during, or any other device after, their experience and spread positive WOM to their social media networks?

Interviewee: If they are really enjoying their experience, like they are loving what they are eating and they having a bit of fun with the staff, they are more prone to go online and talk positively about us. And then we would have some communications in the restaurant on the menu saying 'like us on Facebook' or sometimes I will put something up on the chalk-board saying 'take a photo of your cocktail, post it on Facebook and tag us and the best photo gets

a cocktail free'. So you'll have incentives for people to go online and spread positive WOM. But it is sometimes hard to make people do it.

Gavin: So, with regard to their experience, and the likelihood that they will spread positive WOM online, what is most important? Is it the quality of the food? The service?

Interviewee: It's a mixture...their overall enjoyment. The food has got to be good. But the interaction with the staff is really important too and the fact that they are having a bit of fun. Now, if you see a table and there is a couple having a conversation and looking to have a quiet, intimate meal, you wouldn't go over to them and try to have fun. And these are probably not likely to be taking photos and sharing them. But for those, like a group of girls out to have fun, the interaction with the staff can help them enjoy their experience more. But it's not about going up to them and saying 'oh don't forget to like us on Facebook', it's about creating an overall enjoyable experience and, if you do that, there is a good chance that people will talk positively about you online. You could incentivise people, you know tell them 'if you talk about us positively online we'll give you free food' but, if you do that, you have to consider how people will view your brand. Like, they might ask 'why do they have to ask people to talk positively about their restaurant?' You know, people will start to think that there's something wrong if you are trying to force them to talk about you.

Gavin: Just finally, if I could ask you one last question related to that. I came across a piece of research that suggested that giving a surprise to customers, like a free drink for instance, before or after their meal is likely to lead to them spreading positive WOM. Would you agree with that regarding online WOM on social media?

Interviewee: Oh yes, for sure. Like, when you surprise people, they usually give you great WOM online, both on review websites and on their own social media pages. But we wouldn't do that too often. I suppose it wouldn't be a surprise if you were doing it all the time and people don't generally talk about things they expect. But we would do it with our known, regular customers, those we have a relationship with. You know, people that might be eating here regularly, or people I recognise as being friend on Facebook. It's all about developing relationships with people. A couple of weeks ago we had a couple in celebrating their anniversary, they were regulars. So we sent them down a bottle of Prosecco and we gave them their starter with our compliments. A few days later I saw a fantastic review from

them on Trip Advisor. But, you know, you don't do these things to incentivise people to give you positive reviews. You just try to do the right thing; develop good customer relationships and create a really enjoyable and memorable experience for customers and usually the positive reviews will follow. A small gesture that doesn't really cost much might have a big effect on their experience. But it's about the whole package; the quality of the food, the interaction with the staff and the overall enjoyment. Like, if you go to a restaurant and it's a bit cold, the food is ok but not great and the staff is, maybe not rude but, not very friendly, customers are not likely to speak positively about their experience on their social media pages or try to find you on Facebook and interact with you. In my experience, people usually talk about really good or really bad experiences, they don't usually talk about an experience that was just ok. So, we try to create really good experiences that people will talk about.

Gavin: That's all really interesting, thank you. Is there anything else you want to add or are there any other questions you think I should have asked?

Interviewee: No, I don't think so. I think I've told you pretty much everything about my thoughts of WOM and social media and I've given you all the information about what we do here with social media.

Gavin: Well thank you for your time and your openness. I will be happy to share my research work with you once it's completed.

END OF INTERVIEW

Appendix 4: Interview 4 – Consumer A

Wednesday, 10th July 2013 (Started 11:15, Concluded 11:45)

Consumer A is a food blogger (blogging about baking) and could be termed a heavy user of social media. For an individual social media user, she has a considerable reach across a number of different social media platforms; Facebook (2,700), Twitter (3,061), Instagram (691), Pinterest (438). It was as a result of her passionate interest in food and her heavy use of social media that resulted in her selection as part of the research sample. Consumer A was due to attend the consumer focus group held one week previous but, at short notice, cancelled her attendance due to an unforeseen occurrence. In place of her non-attendance at the focus group, she agreed to this in-depth interview instead.

This interview took place in a private room of the researcher's home. The interview was audio recorded (after permission was obtained from the interviewee) and, immediately after, transcribed as follows.

Gavin: My first question was going to be "what social media channels do you use?" But, we have already discussed that before pressing record, when you outlined the channels you use and the reach you have with each (as above). So, could I ask you then, what do you like about social media, as a channel of communication?

Interviewee: I suppose you can get the information instantly. So, if you're in town and you want to go somewhere to eat, you could ask for a recommendation for a particular type of restaurant, or even in general, and within a couple of minutes you are going to have a few people respond with recommendations. So, because it is instant, it is a really handy way to find useful information from others.

Gavin: Do you follow/like restaurants on social media?

Interviewee: I follow a good few of them, yes.

Gavin: And why is that? Why do you follow these restaurants?

Interviewee: I like to keep up to date with restaurants that provide seasonal menus and see what dishes they are offering this week. Also, I like to know if they have any events on.

Gavin: Are there any of these restaurants that you would say you are a real fan of, whose social media content you would regularly share with your online friends?

Interviewee: Yes, probably a great one would be Eastern Seaboard in Drogheda. They would be on that offer seasonal food and local produce and their menu is regularly changing, so I do like to keep an eye on what they have on.

Gavin: And with that particular example, their content obviously interests you, but are you likely to share it with your online friends?

Interviewee: Oh yes, if it is a dish that I think I would like, and they have a bakery too, so that's why it would interest me. So, if they had a new cake that they are offering in the bakery, I would retweet that so that my friends can also see what they are offering.

Gavin: That's interesting. In the focus group I conducted last week, somebody else commented on Eastern Seaboard's social media activity, so I must have a look at them in a little more detail. Related to that, can I ask you, what type of content are you most likely to share?

Interviewee: I suppose if they were using an unusual ingredient, that would be interesting and worthy of sharing. So, maybe sticking with the Eastern Seaboard example, just last week they spoke about a new dish they were offering using elderflower, which would be a very seasonal ingredient. Just the previous week I had made an elderflower cordial, but they were offering an elderflower fritters desert dish, which I thought was very interesting. You know, that's something that is very unusual and quirky. It's the kind of thing that will grab my attention and I will see it and retweet it so other people can see it.

Gavin: What about if a piece of content was funny, for instance, would you share that?

Interviewee: Oh yes. I don't like sharing content from some restaurants who might constantly post unoriginal tweets that they have just retweeted. Like from other people who have visited the restaurant saying "we had a great meal, blah, blah, blah..." I wouldn't share that kind of content. But, there is another restaurant I like in town called Il Primo and

each day they put a new message on their blackboard outside and they are generally quite humorous, which they post and I would retweet. Or just, a lot restaurants put a personal touch to the social media content, especially ones that are family run, so they are sort of tweeting aspects of their family life maybe talking about the whole family sitting down to a meal prepared in the restaurant. So, I would retweet pictures like that, you know, content that gives a bit of an insight into the background of the restaurant.

Gavin: The participants of the focus group said something similar actually. It was said that people might share content relating to a “sneak behind the kitchen door” or something like that.

Interviewee: Yes, something like that could interest me also.

Gavin: Would you share a social media advertisement for a restaurant?

Interviewee: If they were advertising a special offer, it was a restaurant I have eaten in and I think it would be good value for people, well then I probably would share it. But generally I wouldn't share that kind of thing because if you retweet an advertisement and somebody goes and has a bad experience, I don't want to feel responsible for them. I wouldn't feel right in recommending somewhere and when they go they pay the money for something they don't enjoy.

Gavin: So, would it be the case then, that you would only recommend a restaurant if you were confident it was good?

Interviewee: Yes. So if I know I have eaten there a few times and had a good experience I would share it. But if it is a restaurant I have not eaten in and they put up something like an early bird special, I wouldn't feel confident enough to pass it on.

Gavin: Is it that you wouldn't like to put your name to it?

Interviewee: Yes, pretty much. People don't get to go out that often these days and if they do choose a restaurant a spend that week's luxury money budget on a meal it is really disappointing if it is not good, they feel like they have wasted their money.

Gavin: Is there a certain time of the day or day of the week that you are more receptive to noticing and sharing social media content from restaurants?

Interviewee: Yes, probably in the evening time, maybe from 7pm onwards. There is certainly a more social aspect to Twitter then, when everyone is finished work for the day or finished minding the kids or whatever and they are sitting down to relax. I just find at that time of the day it's a little bit more social.

Gavin: And would there be any particular days of the week?

Interviewee: I would say probably Thursday, Friday and Saturday would be good days for me. The other days of the week I am kind of still in weekday mode and busy, so from Thursday on you're starting to get into the weekend and are kind of in better form.

Gavin: Does it matter to you how often a restaurant posted content?

Interviewee: Yes, I think they need to post regularly. I would say daily, because otherwise you would lose interest in them. If they are not posting on a regular basis you kind of miss them in your stream then and you might miss out on important stuff that they post. Even if it was just a silly little tweet in the day, at least you now they are still there in the background. But if they only posted once a month or once a fortnight you might tend to miss it then.

Gavin: That's interesting. And what about the other side of it, could they post too much?

Interviewee: Oh yes. If they are going to post a good few things then they need to stagger it throughout the day. Some restaurants obviously only have an hour of social media time a day and they sit down and post an hour's amount of stuff and the result is that it just clogs up your stream, so you will just 'unfollow'. Because, if they do that, you are seeing it all together, that's the only thing you can see in your stream and you might miss out on what other people are saying, so they need to stagger it.

Gavin: And, let's say they do stagger it. Could it, at a certain stage, reach a point when they are posting too much daily content? Would that bother you?

Interviewee: No, it wouldn't bother me, not if they were doing it right. Because it is a 'social media', so they need to be social. No obviously, they are running a business and there are going to be promotional business tweets, but if they mix that in with social tweets like the likes of an Instagram post showing somebody sitting in the sun having a coffee or something, that's fine. They need to get that balance right. Although they are a business, I think the ones that really do it well incorporate a bit of a social or even a family aspect to it, so you are getting an insight into the background of the restaurant.

Gavin: So, it's not all them promoting themselves then?

Interviewee: Yes. So, they can post incessantly so long as it is not constantly about this special offer or something like that. If they mix it up with a bit of social as well, and they do it right, I don't think they can post too much.

Gavin: So, for you, is it more about the social quality of the content rather than the quantity or frequency of the content?

Interviewee: Yes, and as well as that, it's about not just constantly posting one-sided content, it's about engaging with different people. I like to follow these different conversations. That's also what I mean by being social.

Gavin: If you were in a restaurant, would you post content on social media on your smartphone about your experience while you are experiencing it?

Interviewee: Yes, I usually post each course as I have it. And, if I like the menu I would post a picture of the menu, or if I like the décor I will post about that. I post a picture of the food at each course and then after I have eaten it I will post on Instagram and Twitter before the next one comes. I would do this especially if the food looks really good, I would take a photo and post it. But sometimes the food doesn't look that good but tastes great, so I would talk about it. But you have to remember I am a freak, I am a food blogger and that's what we do!

Gavin: So, if the food looked good and tasted good you would post?

Interviewee: Yes, but if the service wasn't good I wouldn't. The service would have to be good too because I wouldn't want people to go there on my recommendation if the service wasn't good as well.

Gavin: So you talk about your restaurant experience on social media while you experience it. What about after your experience, what is likely to make you talk positively about your experience on your social media channels? Would it be the food or the service?

Interviewee: It would have to be a combination of both food and service. So if both were really, really good, once I have left the restaurant I would say something like “had a really great meal at such and such a restaurant, great food, great service, can’t wait to go back”. And then, if people are asking me for a recommendation at a later stage, then I would recommend they go to that restaurant.

Gavin: So between food and service, is there one that is more important than the other when it comes to you recommending a restaurant?

Interviewee: Well if the food is great and the service is mediocre, then it might be just ok. If the food is great but the service is terrible, then they are missing the point – you can’t have great food and bad service and I won’t talk positively about the experience. If the food is not good but the service is good, then it’s a bit of a shame. I would like to recommend it, but I am not going to because the food wasn’t what it should have been. So, I suppose it has got to be a combination of both before I will feel comfortable recommending it. Now, anybody can have a bad day and I could have a bad course, or whatever, and if the restaurant tries to rectify it that is acceptable. But if I have been a couple of times and something has been lacking on both occasions then I would be thinking there is something wrong.

Gavin: If you read a positive restaurant review from a blogger, would you share it with your online friends?

Interviewee: If it was somebody whose opinion I trust, I would. If it was retweeted into my timeline from someone I don’t follow, then I would probably ask questions from others and look to try it myself before I would recommend it.

Gavin: So, would you have to know the blogger?

Interviewee: I wouldn’t have to know them personally, but if it was somebody whose blog I read regularly and I have tried other places they have recommended and seen for myself

that they were good, then I trust their opinion. Reviews from a blogger I don't follow, I would be a bit more cautious of.

Gavin: If you have seen a positive restaurant review from a blogger you trusted, and you hadn't already been to that restaurant yourself, would it make you want to try it?

Interviewee: Yes, definitely.

Gavin: Do you post reviews on the review sites, like Trip Advisor or Menu Pages?

Interviewee: No and I would never act on a recommendation I read on those website because I know they are rife with bad reviews. I know these reviews are not completely reliable. I might look at the average ratio of reviews but I wouldn't put much faith into individual reviews. I might look at the overall rating and then go and seek a recommendation from someone I trust afterwards.

Gavin: So, it might influence you to a point but not altogether?

Interviewee: Yes, it might influence me to go and ask someone I trust "have you tried this place and what did you think?" before I make my decision, but I wouldn't choose to go their solely on the basis of a review on those sites. There tends to be such extremes in the tone of the comments and reviews tend to be at one end or the other of the spectrum. Some are saying the food was great, other are saying they were hospitalised by the food! There doesn't tend to be a lot of middle ground on there, I think, not enough solid and reliable information to make an informed decision.

Gavin: Why do you feel that way about these sites?

Interviewee: I just have read so much about people going on and giving really bad reviews and they are clearly a competitor of a particular restaurant just trying to make the place look bad. So, for that reason, I might have a quick glance to see what the majority are saying and then I would ask people I trust their opinion through Twitter and blogs before I would form my opinion.

Gavin: That is interesting, because those thoughts have arisen from both sides of my research so far, from restaurants and consumers. Just getting back to what might compel

you to give a restaurant a positive recommendation through social media for a moment; if a restaurant was to give you a surprise, like a complimentary drink or something like that, would that make you more likely to speak positively about your experience online?

Interviewee: Yes, but only if the food and the service was good. I wouldn't say that just because they gave me something for free that I would recommend it, but if do provide great service and great food, it is always nice to get a little treat from them. But, it wouldn't make me recommend them, unless the whole experience was really good.

Gavin: So, if the food was good and the service was good and they gave you a little treat, would you be more likely to talk about that restaurant positively online?

Interviewee: Yes, it would. If the food was good and the service was good I might talk positively about it, but if they gave me a free glass of Prosecco or a couple of nice chocolates to bring home, that would kind of tip my experience to the point where I would definitely talk positively about it. But, if I am honest, if the food and the service is good, I am probably going to talk about it online anyway, because I am big into social media and food. Maybe for people who are not as big into both as me, a complimentary surprise or treat would encourage them to comment positively about their experience.

Gavin: Is there anything else you think I should have asked?

Interviewee: I suppose the whole area of restaurants handling negative comments online appropriately. You know, not ignoring them but handling them quickly. And if they feel they are not totally in the wrong they really should do something to minimise the damage that negative comments cause. WOM on social media is a lot bigger than WOM in the flesh. You know, I have over 3,000 followers on Twitter. A bad comment from me might influence a lot of people. A restaurant needs to have system in place to quickly handle a negative comment.

Gavin: Previous research on WOM found that people share their experiences with up to nine or ten people, but you could share your experience with over 3,000 people!

Interviewee: Yes, absolutely. I know a lot of restaurants don't feel like they want to be on the likes of Twitter or Facebook but, even if they are not on these social media channels, people

are still talk about them online. So it is better for them to be there and present, addressing both positive and negative comments, showing that they know how to make people happy and that they are much more interested in their customers.

Gavin: So, your view is that the conversation is happening anyway, the restaurant is better to be a part of it?

Interviewee: Yes. But it is really important that they have a system in place to deal with what people are saying. If I see a restaurant handling a customer comment badly, I will just unfollow them, because that is not the way to treat customers, especially in a public timeline.

Gavin: That was very interesting. Thank you again for your time and your thoughts.

END OF INTERVIEW

Appendix 5:

Consumer Focus Group & Interviews - Data Analysis Process

Each transcript was analysed (focus group and in-depth interviews), themes identified and colour coded. Relevant excerpts from the transcript were then organised under the headings of the identified themes, directly relating to the research questions. This approach was taken for both the restaurant marketer and restaurant consumer research. Below shows the process, as applied to the consumer research aspect of the study.

Category	Theme	Colour Code
A: RO1	Social media channels and why	Green
	Restaurant following and why	Yellow
	Sharing of social media content from restaurants	Pink
B: RO2	Style of communications	Pink
	Frequency and timing of communications	Blue
	Reactions to reviews (bloggers, review websites, strong/weak ties, similarity of tastes...sharing, purchase behaviour, etc.)	Black
C: RO3	Posting of WOM during/after restaurant experience, what channels and why	Orange
	Experiential aspects that trigger positive E-WOM	Grey

RO: Research Objective

Cat A/ Research Objective 1

(i) Social media channels and why?

“Mostly Facebook and Twitter for me. I might use a bit of Pinterest from time to time.”

(Consumer D)

“I’d say it’s mostly Facebook and Twitter.” *(Consumer G)*

For an individual social media user, she has a considerable reach across a number of different social media platforms; Facebook (2,700), Twitter (3,061), Instagram (691), Pinterest (438). *(Consumer A)*

“I suppose you can get the information instantly. So, if you’re in town and you want to go somewhere to eat, you could ask for a recommendation for a particular type of restaurant, or even in general, and within a couple of minutes you are going to have a few people respond with recommendations. So, because it is instant, it is a really handy way to find useful information from others.” *(Consumer A)*

(ii) Restaurant following and why?

“Well there would be one or two restaurant I really like, so I follow them through social media. But they tend to be ones I have recently discovered I ones I want to visit. I wouldn’t be the type to ‘like’ and ‘share’ everything I see from them but if it was something interesting I would.” *(Consumer D)*

“I follow a good few restaurants. I like to keep up to date with restaurants that provide seasonal menus and see what dishes they are offering this week. Also, I like to know if they have any events on.” *(Consumer A)*

“Yes, I follow some restaurants on Facebook. There are not many though, I probably follow restaurants that I like having eaten there or they’ve come recommended...someone could have ticked to say they ‘like’ something and I might have maybe gone into the restaurant page myself to say what they have liked about it. And if the menu looks nice or the restaurant in general looks nice I might tick the ‘like’ button myself to follow that particular restaurant to see what happens.” *(Consumer B)*

(iii) Sharing of social media content from restaurants?

“I would share something if there was something to gain by it. Like, if a restaurant was running a competition to win a free meal with your friends or something and there were looking for you to share the content, I would do it.” *(Consumer H)*

“But apart from competitions, I would share interesting content like a nice recipe or if they were holding a nutritional seminar or something like that. I think it’s kind of the added value of it that would interest me, you know, if they were giving you something of value. And for me to share that with my friends, I wouldn’t really be doing so for the benefit of the restaurant, I would be sharing it for the benefit of my friends. So I only tend to share content I think my friends will like...For me it needs to have the novelty factor too and be quirky or funny on some way. Or if it is really good photos, I tend to share them. For instance, there is a restaurant I really love in Drogheda called the Eastern Seaboard and the photos they post on their Facebook page are just so beautiful that they deserve to be shared.” *(Consumer C)*

“They need to be giving you information that relevant to you; that you might find useful. I promotional advertisement saying “look at our restaurant” is probably not likely to get my attention and then share it. But a relevant message about what the restaurant has going on Friday night, when I might be planning a Friday night with friends might be interesting and might make me share it with my friends, saying “why don’t we try this”.” *(Consumer D)*

“I think it needs to be content that means something to the people it is targeted at, something they will find interesting. And if the content is good, and enough people find it interesting, you kind of get the ripple effect where it gets shared to a lot of people.” *(Consumer E)*

“Yeah, and it becomes like some of the stuff on Twitter that just spreads like wildfire, you know, it’s sent to you by one of your friends, then you pass it on to your network and it just goes viral.” *(Consumer G)*

“Yes I share content from restaurants. Probably a great one would be Eastern Seaboard in Drogheda. They would be on that offer seasonal food and local produce and their menu is regularly changing, so I do like to keep an eye on what they have on...if it is a dish that I

think I would like, and they have a bakery too, so that's why it would interest me. So, if they had a new cake that they are offering in the bakery, I would retweet that so that my friends can also see what they are offering." (*Consumer A*)

"I suppose if they were using an unusual ingredient, that would be interesting and worthy of sharing. So, maybe sticking with the Eastern Seaboard example, just last week they spoke about a new dish they were offering using elderflower, which would be a very seasonal ingredient. Just the previous week I had made an elderflower cordial, but they were offering an elderflower fritters desert dish, which I thought was very interesting. You know, that's something that is very unusual and quirky. It's the kind of thing that will grab my attention and I will see it and retweet it so other people can see it." (*Consumer A*)

"I don't like sharing content from some restaurants who might constantly post unoriginal tweets that they have just retweeted. Like from other people who have visited the restaurant saying "we had a great meal, blah, blah, blah..." I wouldn't share that kind of content. But, there is another restaurant I like in town called Il Primo and each day they put a new message on their blackboard outside and they are generally quite humorous, which they post and I would retweet. Or just, a lot restaurants put a personal touch to the social media content, especially ones that are family run, so they are sort of tweeting aspects of their family life maybe talking about the whole family sitting down to a meal prepared in the restaurant. So, I would retweet pictures like that, you know, content that gives a bit of an insight into the background of the restaurant." (*Consumer A*)

"If they were advertising a special offer, it was a restaurant I have eaten in and I think it would be good value for people, well then I probably would share it. But generally I wouldn't share that kind of thing because if you retweet an advertisement and somebody goes and has a bad experience, I don't want to feel responsible for them. I wouldn't feel right in recommending somewhere and when they go they pay the money for something they don't enjoy." (*Consumer A*)

"If I know I have eaten there a few times and had a good experience I would share it. But if it is a restaurant I have not eaten in and they put up something like an early bird special, I wouldn't feel confident enough to pass it on. People don't get to go out that often these days and if they do choose a restaurant a spend that week's luxury money budget on a meal

it is really disappointing if it is not good, they feel like they have wasted their money.”
(Consumer A)

Cat B/ Research Objective 2

(i) Style of communications

(See transcripts above)

(ii) Frequency and timing of communications

“I think maybe I am more active on social media in the evenings or as it is getting closer to the weekend, and I am starting to think about where I might go and what I might do, I might be more interested in content regarding restaurants. But, on the other hand, I would often check in to my social media on my smartphone whenever I am waiting around for something, like waiting for a train or a bus. So I suppose in that sense I could be active on social media at any time of the day or week.” *(Consumer D)*

“I can’t honestly say there is a specific day or time that would suit me. I am so busy with work and the kids and everything that I would look at my Facebook page whenever I can, whenever I get a spare minute.” *(Consumer F)*

“It would bother me if they were posting ten times a day and all you can see when you open up your page is postings relating to one restaurant, it would clog up my newsfeed and it would probably annoy me.

“Too much content would bother me, especially if it is pointless, or if it is pointless to me. It has to be interesting content, they need to be engaging you with something relevant to you. I think quirky or cool photos probably do it more for me, they probably catch my eye the most.” *(Consumer C)*

“I think that goes back to something we spoke about earlier that the content must be interesting. So, for me, it doesn’t matter how often a restaurant was to post as long as the

content is interesting. The content is probably what matters. But I suppose the question is; can they post really interesting content if they are posting tens time a day?" (Consumer D)

"Content that is interesting or that makes you laugh you are more likely to share but you probably will not share it if they post too much because the likelihood is, at that rate, they will not be able to produce content that is interesting enough. And I suppose as well, if a restaurant does not post often enough they are probably not going to get noticed. So it's probably about striking a balance too between not posting too often that you annoy people, and posting enough so that you get noticed. But I still think it's the content that matters and how interesting it is." (Consumer E)

"With Facebook for instance, when I scroll down through my newsfeed, if it catches my eye I will look at it and share it if it's interesting enough. I'm not sure it matters to me how often they post." (Consumer G)

"Probably evening time is best for me, maybe from 7pm onwards. There is certainly a more social aspect to Twitter then, when everyone is finished work for the day or finished minding the kids or whatever and they are sitting down to relax. I just find at that time of the day it's a little bit more social." (Consumer A)

"I would say probably Thursday, Friday and Saturday would be good days for me. The other days of the week I am kind of still in weekday mode and busy, so from Thursday on you're starting to get into the weekend and are kind of in better form." (Consumer A)

"I think they need to post regularly. I would say daily, because otherwise you would lose interest in them. If they are not posting on a regular basis you kind of miss them in your stream then and you might miss out on important stuff that they post. Even if it was just a silly little tweet in the day, at least you now they are still there in the background. But if they only posted once a month or once a fortnight you might tend to miss it then." (Consumer A)

"If they are going to post a good few things then they need to stagger it throughout the day. Some restaurants obviously only have an hour of social media time a day and they sit down and post an hour's amount of stuff and the result is that it just clogs up your stream, so you will just 'unfollow'. Because, if they do that, you are seeing it all together, that's the only think you can see in your stream and you might miss out on what other people are saying,

so they need to stagger it...It wouldn't bother me (how much content they post), not if they were doing it right. Because it is a 'social media', so they need to be social. No obviously, they are running a business and there are going to be promotional business tweets, but if they mix that in with social tweets like the likes of an Instagram post showing somebody sitting in the sun having a coffee or something, that's fine. They need to get that balance right. Although they are a business, I think the ones that really do it well incorporate a bit of a social or even a family aspect to it, so you are getting an insight into the background of the restaurant. They can post incessantly so long as it is not constantly about this special offer or something like that. If they mix it up with a bit of social as well, and they do it right, I don't think they can post too much...and as well as that, it's about not just constantly posting one-sided content, it's about engaging with different people. I like to follow these different conversations. That's also what I mean by being social." (*Consumer A*)

"I only usually go on Facebook in the evening times anyway, that's sort of my hour in the day. The day is done, I'm relaxing, my husband is watching something on TV and it's my time when I can do whatever I want to do, and I tend to go on Facebook then. So, I tend to be receptive in the evening, that's when I am on Facebook and I'm relaxed." (*Consumer B*)

"If there was one that was posting all the time, that could get a bit tedious and a bit boring. It would fill up my newsfeed and clutter it. But I have noticed that with any of the restaurants that I like. If it did happen, I would probably hit the 'dislike' button. Posting too often and cluttering my newsfeed would be a reason for me to switch off my 'like' for that restaurant. What tends to happen is that you scroll through it too fast because you see it too often and you think "oh, here we go again" and you scroll straight past it rather than actually noticing and paying attention to it, if it's too much." (*Consumer B*)

(iii) Reactions to reviews from those who share (bloggers, review websites, strong/weak ties on social media, similarity of tastes...sharing, purchase behaviour, etc.)

"I would never act solely on a recommendation I read on those website because I know they are rife with bad reviews. I know these reviews are not completely reliable. I might look at the average ratio of reviews but I wouldn't put much faith into individual reviews. I might

look at the overall rating and then go and seek a recommendation from someone I trust afterwards. It might influence me to go and ask someone I trust “have you tried this place and what did you think?” before I make my decision, but I wouldn’t choose to go their solely on the basis of a review on those sites. There tends to be such extremes in the tone of the comments and reviews tend to be at one end or the other of the spectrum. Some are saying the food was great, other are saying they were hospitalised by the food! There doesn’t tend to be a lot of middle ground on there, I think, not enough solid and reliable information to make an informed decision.” *(Consumer A)*

“I just have read so much about people going on and giving really bad reviews and they are clearly a competitor of a particular restaurant just trying to make the place look bad. So, for that reason, I might have a quick glance to see what the majority are saying and then I would ask people I trust their opinion through Twitter and blogs before I would form my opinion.” *(Consumer A)*

“I think there is a lot of rubbish put up on Trip Advisor where people go on and slate a restaurant for little or no reason. People can go on and give a comment and maybe have not even been in a particular restaurant. That’s just my view anyway, there seems to be no regulation whatsoever on Trip Advisor. Like there was one review I heard reported on in the news, where Pichet restaurant was given a terrible review and, when they followed it up, they found that the person who gave the review hadn’t even been in the restaurant when they said they were. I think comments you see on a person’s one social media pages are more credible because you know the people, I think they are more honest, you know who they are and what kind of restaurants they might like. And I suppose they are not hiding behind the anonymity that exists on the review websites where fellas can call themselves made up names.” *(Consumer G)*

“You see, do you know what I have a real problem with? On the likes of Trip Advisor, everybody hides behind their identity. So, if “Johnny the Whistle-blower” posts a really bad review and nobody knows who he is, that really bugs me. I’m thinking, “if you have got something to say, put your hand up, be counted and say it”. If somebody feels that strongly about something, one way or the other, they shouldn’t be hiding behind something when

they say it. I hate the anonymity aspect of the likes of Trip Advisor, it really bugs me.”
(Consumer G)

“Regarding individual reviews on the likes of Trip Advisor; I think you have to take each review with a pinch of salt. I suppose fakes reviews can happen but if you have lots and lots of reviews for a restaurant you would have to expect that the majority of them are genuine.” (Consumer E)

“I’m sure the majority of reviews are genuine and if you have hundreds of four and five star reviews, it usually means the restaurant is good. I think the fake reviews are very much in the minority. What is useful in that regard is the graph that Trip Advisor present, showing you how many reviews a restaurant has got over a period of time and whether they have gone up or down or if a trend exists. I think this information is useful.” (Consumer C)

“If it was a blogger whose opinion I trust, I would (share it). If it was retweeted into my timeline from someone I don’t follow, then I would probably ask questions from others and look to try it myself before I would recommend it...I wouldn’t have to know them personally, but if it was somebody whose blog I read regularly and I have tried other places they have recommended and seen for myself that they were good, then I trust their opinion. Reviews from a blogger I don’t follow, I would be a bit more cautious of, although they would probably make me want to try the restaurant being talked about myself.” (Consumer A)

“I follow a couple of bloggers that I like who are doing the restaurant network. You know, you find a blogger you like, somewhere who maybe has similar tastes to you and you kind of develop a bit of relationship with them. Their reviews are often very useful.” (Consumer C)

“It would depend on who the blogger was and if they had similar tastes and opinions as me. If we tend to like the same things than yes it would influence me. I would probably think; “if he likes it then I will probably like it”. And I think I would probably be thinking the same myself in terms of sharing the content; I will probably share it if I feel my friends will like it too.” (Consumer E)

“I think the popular blogs tend to have a sort of community around them, where people can read the content and comment on it themselves. And, when these people are all into restaurants, the conversation has credibility to it and is more meaningful.” (Consumer D)

Cat C/ Research Objective 3

(i) Posting of SM WOM during/after restaurant experience. What channels and why?

“I usually post each course as I have it. And, if I like the menu I would post a picture of the menu, or if I like the décor I will post about that. I post a picture of the food at each course and then after I have eaten it I will post on Instagram and Twitter before the next one comes. I would do this especially if the food looks really good, I would take a photo and post it. But sometimes the food doesn’t look that good but tastes great, so I would talk about it. But you have to remember I am a freak, I am a food blogger and that’s what we do!”
(Consumer A)

“I would go onto Facebook on my iPhone and do my check-in and write something like “yum” or “having a beautiful meal”. Yes, I do tend to do that if I am eating somewhere and it is really nice.” *(Consumer B)*

“I probably would check-in and share content during my meal if there was a competition to do so in the restaurant. Something like “post a picture of your experience on Facebook this evening and the best photo wins a free round of cocktails for your table”, I might do it then. But I wouldn’t really do it socially.” *(Consumer H)*

“I was in a restaurant recently and I checked-in on Facebook and I shared a photo and a comment about the great food I was eating in a restaurant, it was a few weeks ago. One of my online friends was in the area and was looking to try a new restaurant. She commented back to me on Facebook saying that I put the restaurant into her head and so she tried it, within minutes of my post!” *(Consumer D)*

“I was up in Johnny Fox’s there recently, and I hadn’t been there for ages. I ordered this big platter and when it came it looked gorgeous on the plate. So I took a photo of it before and after I ate it and posted it on Facebook, just for the fun. So I suppose if something comes out of the kitchen and it looks amazing, you might share it.” *(Consumer G)*

“I would talk about my restaurant experience afterwards, especially if it was a positive experience. As I said earlier, I think restaurants are having a hard time at the moment and, if they deserve it, I like to help them out with positive comments, if they have done well. And

it is more about the service than it is the food. I mean, the food has to be good of course, but if the people are really genuine and accommodating and they try to make the experience great, that will probably make me talk positively about it online.” (*Consumer C*)

(ii) Experiential aspects that trigger WOM

“It would have to be a combination of both food and service. So if both were really, really good, once I have left the restaurant I would say something like “had a really great meal at such and such a restaurant, great food, great service, can’t wait to go back”. And then, if people are asking me for a recommendation at a later stage, then I would recommend they go to that restaurant...If the food is great and the service is mediocre, then it might be just ok. If the food is great but the service is terrible, then they are missing the point – you can’t have great food and bad service and I won’t talk positively about the experience. If the food is not good but the service is good, then it’s a bit of a shame. I would like to recommend it, but I am not going to because the food wasn’t what it should have been. So, I suppose it has got to be a combination of both before I will feel comfortable recommending it. Now, anybody can have a bad day and I could have a bad course, or whatever, and if the restaurant tries to rectify it that is acceptable. But if I have been a couple of times and something has been lacking on both occasions then I would be thinking there is something wrong.” (*Consumer A*)

“The food would come first. Obviously service is really important too, you know, I nice smiley waiter who is helpful. I suppose all the other aspects of the experience do drift in eventually and it would matter overall. But I could forgive other aspects if the food was really good.” (*Consumer B*)

“I think any gesture like that (a surprise) from a restaurant is always lovely, especially if it has already been a nice experience. So, yes it might. For example, we went to a lovely restaurant in Portugal there recently called The Princess Garden and it was great. The food was amazing, the staff were amazing, and the restaurant was lovely. We also had the most amazing Norwegian gin and tonic, the best I have ever had in my life, and you could tell that these had been made with love. Then at the end of the meal they offered us complimentary

liquors, which I just thought was the icing on the cake...yes, I have recommended that restaurant to my Facebook friends.” (Consumer B)

“I wouldn’t say that just because they gave me something for free that I would recommend it, but if provide great service and great food, it is always nice to get a little treat from them. But, it wouldn’t make me recommend them, unless the whole experience was really good. If the food was good and the service was good I might talk positively about it, but if they gave me a free glass of Prosecco or a couple of nice chocolates to bring home, that would kind of tip my experience to the point where I would definitely talk positively about it.” (Consumer A)

“I think a surprise given to me would make me talk about the restaurant favourably on my social media, it would make me feel more valued, as long as it meant something to me. And it probably doesn’t have to be big, small gestures can be good. But the fact that they go above-and-beyond for me would make me feel like a valued customer. I suppose that sort of thing can make your experience more personal.” (Consumer D)

“Its attention to detail that can do it too. I was in Jamie’s Kitchen there a couple of weeks ago and they really do it well, they just ask all the right questions. When I ordered desert they asked me “would you like sauce on your ice-cream” and I said “yes, please!” Then they said “would you like hot or cold milk in your coffee” ...”oh hot!” You know, all the little extras I would normally have to ask for were asked of me. It was like they read my mind!” (Consumer C)