



Online reviews: The effect of cosmopolitanism, incidental similarity, and dispersion on consumer attitudes toward ethnic restaurants



Lu Zhang^{a,*}, Lydia Hanks^b

^a The School of Hospitality Business, Michigan State University, Broad College of Business, 645 Shaw Lane, East Lansing, MI 48825, United States

^b Dedman School of Hospitality, Florida State University, United States

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ABSTRACT

The current study examines the joint effect of incidental similarity, dispersion, and individuals' cosmopolitanism on customers' attitude and purchase intention in the context of online reviews. A $2 \times 2 \times 2$ experimental design is conducted with incidental similarity and dispersion being manipulated and cosmopolitanism being measured. The results indicate that customers high in cosmopolitanism tend to have a more positive attitude towards a restaurant after reading a set of positive reviews written by reviewers with different ethnic backgrounds (i.e., low similarity condition) compared to the reviews written by people with similar ethnic backgrounds. Customers low in cosmopolitanism show a similar attitude and purchase intention across conditions. Further, this pattern is only significant when dispersion is high (vs. low). The theoretical and managerial implications are discussed.

1. Introduction

Ethnic restaurants have increased in popularity in recent years; however, an inability to attract customers from outside of the ethnic market has been listed as a major constraint that limits the growth of ethnic businesses (e.g., Altinay, 2008; Altinay & Altinay, 2006). If ethnic restaurants only stay within their communities and attract only customers from the same ethnic backgrounds, their business growth is largely restricted (Altinay, 2008). Therefore, it is important to understand which factors influence mainstream customers' attitudes and purchase intentions toward ethnic minority businesses and products. Prior research has examined a number of factors that influence consumers' decisions to dine at ethnic restaurants. For example, Liu and Jang (2009) found that for American customers who dine at Chinese restaurants, perceptions of food quality, cleanliness, and service quality are significant predictors of satisfaction and behavioral intentions. In addition to the traits of the restaurant itself, individual-level traits of the customers have also been found to interact with elements of the restaurant to impact customer outcomes. For example, Clemen et al. (2013) found that a customer's social status influenced the customer's behavior in relation to choosing ethnic restaurants for dining out experiences. Food neophobia, or a reluctance to try or eat new foods, can play an important role in cuisine choice as well, particularly when a guest is not familiar with the culture from which the cuisine originates (Hwang & Lin, 2010); however, the way online reviews influence customers' decision in terms of ethnic restaurants

remains under researched even though the importance of online reviews has been recognized by practitioners.

When selecting a restaurant, online reviews are a key source of information for potential consumers (e.g., Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010; Libai et al., 2010; Van Doorn et al., 2010), and for an ethnic restaurant that is attempting to attract mainstream customers, it is important to understand the ways in which individuals process and understand the information on review sites. In addition to reviews posted on specific restaurant websites, sites such as Yelp, UrbanSpoon, and TripAdvisor host thousands of reviews of various restaurants, providing consumers and guests with opportunities to rate their experiences with services and products, leave comments, and inform others. For a potential customer, these review sites provide a wealth of information and are a key tool in the decision-making process (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010). Several different elements can influence the way in which a potential customer processes and uses the information presented on online review sites to decide where to eat.

In this study, three factors that influence potential customers' processing of online review site information about ethnic restaurants were examined. The first, cosmopolitanism, refers to the degree to which a person is willing to engage with other cultures, to appreciate and consume cultural differences, and to exhibit personal competence toward other cultures (e.g., Cleveland & Laroche, 2007; Nijssen & Douglas, 2008; Thompson & Tambyah, 1999). The second, incidental similarity, pertains to the match of certain traits between the customers who read the reviews and the ones who write the reviews. Third, the impact of review

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: luzhang@msu.edu (L. Zhang), lhanks@fsu.edu (L. Hanks).

dispersion, or the level of agreement/disagreement among online reviewers about goods or services, was investigated (Lee & Cranage, 2014). Specifically, we examined how the interaction of these factors impacts consumers' attitudes toward the restaurant and intent to dine in. How do focal customers process online reviews written by authors with different cultural backgrounds? To what extent do they tend to have more trust in people with similar backgrounds? How does the consensus among reviewers impact focal customers' perceptions and evaluations? The aim of the current study was to answer these questions, and the findings of this study provide practical implications for owners of ethnic businesses regarding how to attract mainstream customers.

2. Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

2.1. Online Reviews

Consumers have limited direct information regarding the quality of services provided by hospitality firms; therefore, they often rely on external sources such as online customer reviews (Viglia et al., 2016). Online reviews have gained increased attention from both researchers and practitioners. In hospitality, researchers have shown that online reviews have the potential to move markets by driving consumers' purchasing patterns (e.g., Tsao et al., 2015) and influencing lodging performance (e.g., Anderson, 2012; Tsao et al., 2015; Viglia et al., 2016; Ye et al., 2009). For example, Tsao et al. (2015) examined review valence and review quantity. The results of their study indicated that positive reviews are more effective than negative reviews in enhancing booking intentions and that increasing the number of reviews can magnify the impact of valence on booking intentions. In addition, the impact of online reviews on restaurant performance has been examined. Overall customer reviews, along with guest served per labor hour, and food quality have been identified as major drivers of restaurants' financial performance (Kim et al., 2016). Moreover, researchers in other areas such as services marketing have investigated the impact of online reviews in industries such as online retailing (e.g., Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006) and entertainment (e.g., Moon et al., 2010).

2.2. Cosmopolitanism

According to Merton (1957), a cosmopolitan is a person who maintains a broad network of personal contacts outside the immediate community, as opposed to a localite whose contacts and interests are centered in the local community. Konrad (1984, p. 209) extended this definition and suggested that "cosmopolitanism" refers to an individual's willingness and ability to be "at home in the cultures of other peoples as well as their own." Reinvigorated in the context of globalization, transnational mobility and multiculturalism, discussions of cosmopolitanism are characterized by several perspectives and a lack of consensus (Bookman, 2013). In sociology, cosmopolitanism can either be conceptualized as a philosophy of world citizenship and a political project (rooted in Kant's political theory) (Binnie et al., 2006), or as an intellectual or aesthetic disposition (Hannerz, 1996). In marketing, some researchers have characterized cosmopolitan consumers as those who perceive themselves as citizens of the world rather than of the nation (e.g., Beckmann, 2001), while others have defined a cosmopolitan as an expatriate who adapts to the lifestyles of another culture without wholly abandoning his or her own (e.g., Thompson & Tambyah, 1999). Despite the ambiguity of the definition, researchers generally agree on the behaviors of cosmopolitanism. That is, people high in cosmopolitanism tend to demonstrate a willingness to engage with

other cultures, to appreciate and consume cultural differences, and to exhibit personal competence toward other cultures (e.g., Cleveland & Laroche, 2007; Nijssen & Douglas, 2008; Thompson & Tambyah, 1999). They not only want to observe other ways of being but also to engage with people from other cultures, to participate in life in other places, and to obtain an understanding of the nuances of other cultures (Cleveland & Laroche, 2007).

Consumer cosmopolitanism is considered a major socio-psychological construct underlying consumer preference for foreign vs. domestic products/brands (Parts & Vida, 2011). As consumers, cosmopolitans tend to be more acculturated to the global consumer culture, and they are more likely to consume products from other cultures and places (Alden et al., 1999; Cleveland et al., 2009; Thompson & Tambyah, 1999). The ubiquity of the Internet and international television has made consumers increasingly aware of goods and services that originate from other cultures. As indicated by Marshall and Boush (2001), information exchange and communication between individuals of different cultures make them more informed and thus reduce the levels of cognitive prejudice that negatively influence their attitudes toward foreign brands. Nijssen and Douglas (2008) also suggested that consumers' foreign experiences foster consumer social-mindedness and world-mindedness, which increase positive feelings toward foreign brands. Unlike consumers who believe that it is preferable to buy domestic products (e.g., Nijssen and Herk, 2009), cosmopolitans understand and appreciate other points of view. As such, they are more likely to place a high value on the opinions of goods and services offered by native users and tend to be more open to experimentation despite the potential risks (Yoo & Donthu, 2005). For example, a cosmopolitan consumer who discovered a Venezuelan restaurant would be willing to not only try the food, but also to place value on the opinions of the restaurant from Venezuelan customers. Therefore, we predict that when customers read online reviews of ethnic products or services, consumers who are high in cosmopolitanism are more likely to have a positive attitude toward online reviews written by reviewers with different ethnic backgrounds. The similarity between the reader and writer of online reviews is another factor that is particularly relevant for ethnic restaurants due to the ways in which mainstream customers process information about ethnic restaurants. In the next section, we review the literature on incidental similarity and its effect on customer evaluations.

2.3. Incidental Similarity

When a potential customer seeks opinions regarding whether or not to purchase a good or service, the credibility of the opinions becomes important. Often, consumers seek opinions from those whom they deem credible, such as friends, family, and coworkers; however, in an online review situation, it is difficult to determine the credibility of the reviewer, as comments and ratings of products are often submitted anonymously (Xie et al., 2011). In this case, the focal consumer must evaluate the veracity and credibility of the review without knowing the reviewer personally. Prior research has shown that customer opinions and evaluations can be influenced by incidental similarity (Burger et al., 2004). This concept can be defined as "chance similarities between individuals that provide little relevant information" (Zhang, 2015, p. 635), such as sharing the same name or the same birthday. For example, Burger et al. (2004) found that when asked to perform a task, people were more likely to comply when they believed they shared a birthday with the requestor. The idea that objects or individuals sharing the same attribute tend to be grouped and perceived as a unit originated in

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