



Exploring the factors of gastronomy blogs influencing readers' intention to taste

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ABSTRACT

In recent years gastronomy blogs providing an important channel for electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) to take place are quickly becoming a popular new source of reading material for blog readers. However, little is published to understand what factors from gastronomy blogs play critical roles in predicting readers' intention to taste local food and beverages. Based on reviewing previous studies, this study developed a research model containing three main categories of variables: (1) inspiring taste desire (i.e., experiencing appeal and generating empathy), (2) forming taste awareness (i.e., providing image, delivering knowledge and presenting guides) and (3) facilitating interpersonal interaction (i.e., social influence and cybercommunity influence), and suggested that these potential variables can influence readers' behavioral intention to taste directly. Data collected from 329 respondents in Taiwan were tested against the research model using the structural equation modeling approach. The results indicated that excluding delivering knowledge, all the other proposed variables (i.e., experiencing appeal, generating empathy, providing image, presenting guides, social influence and cybercommunity influence) were the critical components significantly influencing online readers' intention to taste, and the proposed model accounted for 70% of the variance. The findings of this study will not only help hospitality and tourism practitioners in understanding the perceptions of potential customers, but also provide insights into research on technology's influence on hospitality and gastronomy.

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1. Introduction

Gastronomy blogs are Internet gastronomic journals. Generally in diary form, a gastronomy blog usually contains description of the author or gourmet's experiences and reviews relevant to local food and beverages tasting. Local food and beverages refer to not only regarding locally grown produce, but should also contain food that demands raw material from outside the area, but that is processed locally (Nummedal and Hall, 2006). Today, gastronomy blogs are quickly becoming a popular new source of reading material for gastronomic fanatics and bloggers. Through gastronomy blogs, readers and writers can create a cybersocial environment that was not possible before. A survey, conducted by Technorati, a search engine that monitors more than 70 million online diaries now, and aimed at understanding the ranking of diverse blogging topics, revealed that the category involving food, beverage and some food-related topics, is ranked 3rd among the top 18 topics on blogging (Report from Technorati, 2008). In Taiwan, Internet users have been over 13 million and about 70% of whom are bloggers, as well as 45% blogs are updated every week (Report from FIND, 2007). Therefore, blogs have turned into a new form of mainstream of interpersonal com-

munication for millions of people use them to exchange and publish information, as well as establish relationships (Rosenbloom, 2004).

Advertisers have tried to influence word-of-mouth (WOM) for decades. The advent of the Internet has led to a WOM revolution (Dellarocas, 2003). The Web 2.0 applications, like blogs, have created very real impact for the hospitality and tourism industry (Litvin et al., 2008), because they, combined with electronic discussion facility providing a venue where participants come together to offer and seek information, have created an additional channel for product/service recommendations and endorsements between people who have never met, and thus they provide an important avenue for electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) to take place. With the number of blogs increase dramatically, people can share their feelings, photos, ideas, opinions and information on blogs, which, in turn, play considerable roles in eWOM networks (Thompson, 2007). Anecdotal publications have suggested that these online recommendations can be powerful in subsequent choice (Fong and Burton, 2006). Potential readers of gastronomy blogs are using recommendations and information from other gastronomers to make decisions.

Blogs, effective on spreading eWOM (Kaikati and Kaikati, 2004; Thorson and Rodgers, 2006), provide hospitality and tourism promoters with a brand new approach to promoting products, but has big potential to create enormous impact on hospitality/tourism promotion (Lin and Huang, 2006; Litvin et al., 2008). Although the

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growth rate of blogs is impressive, little research effort has been devoted to investigating the influence of gastronomy blogs, especially from the readers' perspective. Assessing gastronomy blogs from readers' perspective can be of great value to both researchers and practitioners. It can be useful to researchers in developing and testing theories relating to gastronomy blogs, enable researchers to justify gastronomy blogs as an effective way in the context of hospitality marketing, and help to understand the drivers behind gastronomy blogs to drive readers' behavioral intention. By developing such a study, restaurant executives will be able to better justify their web-based promotional activities, especially if they devote a significant portion of their organizational budgets to these activities, as well as to understand how to use gastronomy blogs as part of their business strategies for greater culinary destination promotion. Therefore, the main purpose of this study is to empirically explore the reasons why gastronomy blogs can influence blog readers' behavioral intention to taste local gastronomy.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. In the next section, a review on eWOM and research evidence about it, and then it is followed by descriptions of the research model and hypotheses based on the literature review. After that, we describe the research methodology succeeded by presenting the results of the data analysis and hypotheses testing. Finally, the implications and limitations of this study are discussed.

2. Theories and hypotheses

2.1. eWOM and research evidence

eWOM, based on Westbrook (1987), refers to all informal communications aimed at consumers through web-based technology regarding the usage or characteristics of particular products and services, or their sellers. This involves communications both from Business to Customer, and from Customer to Customer. The features of online consumer information sharing make eWOM different from traditional WOM in several ways: (1) while traditional WOM (face-to-face "verbal" communication) has momentary nature, eWOM exists in a "written" form in cyberspace which can be retrieved, linked, and searched, such that its effects last longer; (2) the transmission network in eWOM is much larger since more contributors and audiences are covered, and the reach of such transmission transcends small personal connections to the world of the Internet (Cheung et al., 2007); (3) eWOM breaks the limits on time and location, such that the asynchronous discussions are usually kept longer to allow other readers to read the messages at their own pace (Hoffman and Novak, 1997); and (4) savvy users of the Internet can manipulate online information by spreading eWOM so as to create authoritative web pages to influence readers' thoughts (Litvin et al., 2008). Due to the fact that consumers rely more and more on the Internet to search information, eWOM will undoubtedly influence their perception of purchasing products and services.

Recently, web user generated content (UGC) (including, but not limited to 'blogs') and eWOM have gained much attention by the researchers in the fields of hospitality and tourism. Akehurst (2009) explored the development of UGC and specifically the growing use of blogs in tourism. The author emphasized that such UGC may provide tourism organizations and enterprises with valuable market intelligence and ongoing market research opportunities. Carson (2008) examined different sources of UGC about travel to Australia's Northern Territory, and found that valuable data can be drawn from travel blogs. Similarly, from a perspective of marketing hospitality and tourism, Litvin et al. (2008) reviewed related studies on WOM, provided a conceptual model of eWOM, and encouraged future studies to measure the cognitive, affective, and behavioral

implications upon customer behavior created by eWOM. Some researchers have tried to understand blogs' marketing effects by qualitative data analysis. For example, Pan et al. (2007) analyzed travel blogs on Charleston, South Carolina using semantic network analysis and content analysis methods to ascertain what bloggers were communicating about their travel experiences. The findings revealed that the major strengths of the destination were its attractions and demonstrated that travel blogs are an inexpensive means to gather rich, authentic, and unsolicited customer feedback. In an Austria based study, Wenger (2008) investigated the content of blog entries to identify positive and negative perceptions of Austria as a tourism destination, and found a largely homogenous population of blog authors that had quite different demographic characteristics. The author suggested that the value of monitoring blogs may depend on locating blog authors who are more likely to influence key markets. On the other hand, up to now, only very limited studies tried to investigate blogs' influence from readers' perspective by quantitative data analysis. Among the relatively few studies, Huang et al. (2009) conducted a research to understand how advertisements in travel blogs influence bloggers' purchase decisions by applying involvement theory. Their standpoint was based on the fact that travel blogs normally carry many Internet ads, and the results demonstrated the positive impact resulting from the ad effect as well as the ad effect on bloggers' purchase intention. Additionally, Chen et al. (2009) explored the effect of travel blogs on behavioral intention to visit a tourism destination by proposing a conceptual model. The model suggested that four attributes of blog contents (i.e., novelty, reliability, understandability and interestingness) are important in the formation of playfulness of blogs usage. Through the mediation of playfulness of blogs usage, these attributes indirectly influences tourists' intention.

Blogs or electronic discussion boards, facilitating the formation of *virtual community*, are asynchronous channels that authors and readers can access at different times (Fong and Burton, 2006). Virtual communities, providing consumers with the ability to share experiences, exchange information, develop relationships with others on specific topics, are a good origin of eWOM for similar-minded people (Hagel III and Armstrong, 1997). Moreover, it is believed that posting comments on blogs or electronic discussion boards can help to convey a sense of customer satisfaction level in a more indifferent environment than can the company-sponsored sites (Bickart and Schindler, 2001). Nelson and Otnes (2005) conducted a study to explore the roles the virtual community plays in wedding planning. They found that discussion boards were used by brides to ask advice, opinions, and information, as well as to gain emotional support and friendship. The brides utilized the discussion board to exchange marketing-related information, recommend corporate websites and share experiences, thus building eWOM for other brides. They were really leaving some useful product/service recommendations for other customers with similar interests. An interesting example related to using blog to promote beverage was reported by Kaikati and Kaikati (2004). Dr. Pepper boosted a new dairy-based soft drink directed at the youth market by taking advantage of blogging. The company recruited young bloggers and their parents to their Dallas company headquarters for a new product introduction and a week of orientation to exchange for writing blog diary reports that could promote the new drink. The young recruits were compensated by promotional materials and free product samples. Likewise, Lin and Huang (2006) reported a case about the fact that an Internet blog website—I left my heart in Aegean Sea—established by a Taiwanese engineer, appeal to so many visitors, impressing them and even leading them to plan travel to Greece. The website thus significantly affects readers and indirectly promotes Greek tourism. According to Kozinets (1999), there are even discussion boards dedicated to discussions about fast-food restaurants such as McDonalds and Taco Bell. This speci-

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