

“Tourists’ Use of Restaurant Webpages” Revisited: The Hype Surrounding Web-based Marketing

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Abstract

This study revisits a 2005 paper by Litvin, Bloise, and Laird which centered on how frequently tourists view restaurant webpages before dining and before embarking on their trip, and whether that ultimately led to purchase behavior. Due to the nature of rapidly changing technological advances, increasing internet use, and the advent of user content sites such as Yelp or Tripadvisor as well as the popularity of the aforementioned publication, the study was replicated and the topic was re-examined. Analysis showed an increase in tourists’ use of restaurant webpages, but not to the extent predicted.

Introduction

A call for replications

When research is performed and published, the scope of what we know increases. The findings may be astounding at best, disappointing at worst. Whether the study turns out to be groundbreaking or not matters less when one considers that academic research builds off previous research in the field or in related areas. One author makes a conclusion about one area of interest, and more often than not, another future author uses that conclusion to support his or her own work. Since nearly all new work is based on findings of the past, it is important that what has already been done is accurate. Academic research, unlike so many other things, does not reach a specific time where the findings are no longer relevant, become outdated, or are disproven. Rather, a researcher can continue to use resources as long as he or she deems fit, even many decades after publication. This thought is reason enough to support the need for replication studies, but it seems logical that most researchers, who seek to publish their findings, prefer to use their time and money exploring new topics rather than updating what has already been done.

Just because replications are not commonplace does not mean that they are not important for the work of academic research. Multiple authors in many different fields urge the need for updated research. Works such as Hunter's (2001) "The Desperate Need for Replications" and Singh, Ang, and Leong's (2003) article entitled "Increasing Replication for Knowledge Accumulation in Strategy Research" stress the growing need to update academia's arsenal of knowledge. This sentiment is indeed present outside of the realm of business and hospitality research as well. A diverse example is Siefried's (2010) "Odds are it's Wrong: Science Fails to Face the Shortcomings of Statistics" from *Science News*.

Perhaps most relevant to the study at hand though is from the tourism area itself. Per Smith *et al.* (2009:91):

“Virtually all research papers published in the various tourism journals include a ‘Limitations and Future Research’ section that discusses issues related to generalizability of the research as presented. These limitations range from the study’s highly explorative nature, the limited sample size employed, the use of convenience sampling that left the author uncomfortable suggesting with confidence that his/her results reflect a broader population as well as myriad other concerns. Since other authors rarely follow up on these potential shortcomings, over time these papers, sans the additional suggested research, become part of our knowledge foundation; cited by others as justification of their own research.”

This paper will revisit a study published in 2005 that, like so many others, has never been replicated, but which should be. Replicating this earlier research could either confirm that the research is valid for present social conditions, or it could show changes that may have occurred during the decade following the research in question.

“Tourists’ use of restaurant webpages” Revisited

Litvin, Bloise, and Laird (2005), examined the effectiveness of the internet as a marketing tool specifically in the area of restaurant marketing. Their study “Tourists’ Use of Restaurant Webpages: Is the Internet a Critical Marketing Tool?” was specifically interested in how tourists use the internet as a tool to choose restaurants for their trips. A questionnaire was distributed to 140 tourists in Charleston, SC asking both where they ate the previous night and how they chose

that venue. The questionnaire also asked questions which measured Domain Specific Innovativeness for restaurants to explore how that variable influences internet usage.

The results that surfaced were quite interesting. According to the study, no respondent (out of the 138 analyzed) stated that their dining decision was influenced by the specific restaurant's webpage, just one reported visiting any restaurant webpage at all, and only one reported using an internet dining guide. In addition, just three respondents were influenced by other sources related to the web. The authors concluded that although (due to the responses of other questionnaire items) about eighteen percent of respondents used the internet to research restaurants before embarking on their vacation, only about three percent actually let that research influence their ultimate decision.

The research concluded that while a fair amount of would-be restaurant patrons had used the internet as a research tool when planning a dining experience, their final decision to purchase the experience was hardly influenced by web-based factors. These findings provided incentive for food and beverage marketers to ignore internet marketing and focus on other promotional areas. As indicated by the study at the time of publication, it was rare for restaurant webpages to be used as an influential information source, and even rarer for that information to truly impact purchase frequency.

The above findings show one very important reason this study needs to be replicated. If things have changed in the decade since Litvin, Bloise, and Laird's (2005) work was published, and restaurant patrons are now looking to the web more frequently for consumer information, then food and beverage marketers should be advised as such, and must adjust their methods to these changes.

As mentioned above, research replications are not a common occurrence in the world of writing for publication. With limited time and other resources available, it is not realistic (nor is it necessary) to perform replications of every study ever published. Instead, these efforts should be focused on those works considered “seminal.” According to a recent search of Google Scholar (2015) Litvin, Blose, and Laird’s 2005 publication has now been cited a total of 45 times. These citations include other important articles such as Litvin, Goldsmith, and Pan’s (2008) “Electronic word-of-mouth in hospitality and tourism management,” Zhang, Ye, Law, and Li’s (2010) “The impact of e-word-of-mouth on the online popularity of restaurants: A comparison of consumer reviews and editor reviews,” Law, Leung, and Buhalis’ (2009) “Information technology applications in hospitality and tourism: A review of publications from 2005 to 2007,” and Horng and Tsai’s (2010) “Government websites for promoting East Asian culinary tourism: A cross-national analysis” which have been cited 850, 133, 112, and 97 times respectively. In sum, the effects of Litvin, Blose and Laird (2005) have been multiplicative. It is publications such as these that have been cited numerous times and are subject to changing environmental trends (see below) that need attention in the form of revisits. By focusing on such seminal works, efforts will be well purposed to ensure accuracy in our body of literature.

In particular, Litvin, Blose, and Laird’s research has been used in Stockdale and Borovicka’s (2007) “Developing a model for supporting quality in restaurant websites: a pilot study.” The authors sought to develop an evaluation framework for restaurants to more objectively view their online presence. This publication cites Litvin, Blose, and Laird (2005) in multiple places throughout. The authors even question the conclusion in their literature review. When a publication relies so heavily upon a citation, it stands that the accuracy of the latter depends upon the accuracy of the former.

The World Wide Web: A growing tool

At the time of the research to be replicated, the internet was indeed becoming a well-used, trusted, and growing source of information worldwide. In just a short amount of time the web went from nothing to amazing, dial-up to high speed, and in-home to mobile. The facts at the time of the original research showed that just over 140 million people in the US were online (Bloise *et al.*, 2005). That number is dwarfed by the now nearly 250 million people connected (The World Factbook). Internet usage continues to grow as a part of Americans' day-to-day activities. As this usage grows, according to Palmer and McCole, (2000) the more the internet acts as a valid source of information for travelers and impacts their purchase decisions. The authors mentioned that the food and beverage industry is no exception to this trend. Now, in 2015, the internet has an even bigger effect on Americans' lives and choices.

In addition to internet usage growing in general, the number of mobile devices is also steadily growing. The CIA World Factbook states that in 2012 there were an estimated 310 million cellular phones being used in the United States alone. Although not all of these devices have access to the internet, a large portion of them do, especially compared to usage in 2005. Mobile internet use could change the way consumers currently make purchase decisions in the hospitality sector. Particularly when traveling, tourists may be more likely to use the internet to choose restaurants when it is as easily accessible as a mobile phone or other portable electronics.

Perhaps just as important as the number of people using the web and the frequency with which it is used, is the type of information available to those who look for it. Ford *et al.* (2012) does a nice job at describing how information availability, with regards to the hospitality industry, has changed. He writes in his book that there is information provided by both the

service provider and by the consumer. The company webpages, according to Ford, now offer more visual information such as graphics to give potential customers a better idea of their service. There has also been a large change in the area of information provided by past or current customers. Ford provides a list of websites available for consumers including TripAdvisor.com, Yelp.com, and OpenTable. In addition he states that as demand for these types of sites continues to rise, more will emerge.

Hypothesis

The purpose of this current research is to replicate Litvin, Bloise, and Laird (2005) to extend that work by testing the variables in a more technologically advanced society. By updating the research method and including new relevant variables we will attempt to either validate or bring up-to-date research which has already been performed on the topic. We propose:

A replication of the previously performed study will show a change in consumer behavior in the form of the internet having an increased influence on restaurant selection by tourists.

Research Method

In order to obtain a sample of the desired population, a research assistant distributed a questionnaire to individuals in the downtown Charleston, SC area on random week days and weekends in 2015 using a modified mall intercept approach. The assistant approached possible respondents at random and asked them to take and complete a short questionnaire for research purposes. The goal for data collection was to gather responses from a sample of the population which is described as all visitors to the Charleston area. As such, distribution took place in areas

of downtown Charleston that receive high traffic from tourists. In order to reduce response bias connected to the heart of this study, participants were given mail-in forms with a return envelope. An option to complete the questionnaire online, it was concluded, could produce bias in favor of those with an affinity to complete tasks online. Thus the decision to employ the mail-in survey format.

Data collection was concluded, and it was determined that 66 questionnaires had been collected and completed. Each was screened to ensure that each respondent was a visitor to the Charleston area at the time of distribution. One response was omitted as it was completed by a Charleston local leaving 65 useable responses.

To open the questionnaire, respondents were asked to recall the name of the restaurant where they last ate dinner in Charleston and whether the patronage was mostly tourists, locals, or a mix of the two. The next question asked what influenced them when choosing to eat at this restaurant. Multiple answers were permitted. Potential responses included: "I have eaten there before," recommendation, guide book listing, found on internet, advertisement in magazine/newspaper, dining discount coupon, dining guide at hotel, menu book at hotel, saw the restaurant earlier, looked good, and decided to return, was walking/riding by, saw the restaurant and decided to go in, and other. If respondents indicated that they were influenced by the internet, they were given further options including restaurant's webpage, internet dining guide, user content website (TripAdvisor.com), mobile app, and other.

The next set of questions asked specifically whether the respondent used the internet to search restaurant choices *before coming to Charleston*, if they have eaten or plan to eat at one of the restaurants they researched, which online platforms they used (as in the previous question), and whether they performed this search using a mobile device.

Assuming most participants have used the internet to search for restaurants in some capacity and at some point in the past, the next question asked respondents to rank the following from most used to least used: restaurant's web-page, internet dining guide, and user content websites. The next question gauged preference for restaurants that cater mostly to tourists, mostly to locals or a mix of the two. Questions followed asking the frequency the respondents eat out, vacation frequency, and the purpose of their current trip.

The next question set included twelve questions measured on a Likert scale meant to measure summed scales including restaurant innovativeness, perceived knowledge, and opinion seeking. Questions were answered on a scale from 1-5 where 1="strongly disagree" and 5="strongly agree." Questions in this set also included level of internet "savviness" and internet usage.

The final section of the questionnaire collected demographic information which defined the dataset. (See Appendix 1) Using this information, demographics were compounded. Gender, however, was misbalanced with 72.3% of respondents being female. This is likely due to females responding to the survey more frequently instead of their male partners. In general, most respondents received some level of higher education with 10.8% receiving a high school diploma, 15.4% attending some college, 44.6% receiving a degree from a 4-year university, and 29.2% holding a graduate or professional degree. Age had a fairly wide spread with a range from twenty-four to eighty years of age. The range had a median of 59.5, a mean of 56.6, and a standard deviation of fourteen.

Household income was selected out of three choices: lower to lower-middle, middle, and upper-middle to upper. Half (51.6 %) of all respondents indicated they fell into the "middle" household income level. The dataset was skewed toward the "upper" level with 43.8% of

respondents indicating such. The final demographic category, home city, also doubled as a screening question. Respondents were asked to indicate their home city in order to ensure they were tourists and not locals. Using this information, it was determined that respondents came from twenty-two different states, District of Columbia, and one Canadian province. The three most common home states for the sample were (in order) South Carolina, North Carolina, and Michigan.

Research Findings and Discussion

An analysis of the data showed the changes which have taken place in the decade since research on this topic was previously published. Although internet usage by tourists in selecting a restaurant has increased significantly from the original study to the current one, the usage rate found was rather low compared to what was predicted. In Litvin, Bloise, and Laird (2005) it was shown that less than three percent of respondents indicated any internet source as an influence on their restaurant selection. Further, eighteen percent of the sample acknowledged using the internet to search for restaurants before coming to Charleston. In the case of the current research, these numbers have grown. Of the 65-person sample, twelve responses indicated “found on the internet” as a factor which influenced their previous night’s restaurant selection. This amounts to the nineteen percent of the sample. Of these responses, five had used the restaurant’s web-page, two used an internet dining guide, four used a user-content website, and four used other internet sources with “Google search” being the most common answer.

As for the topic of searching the internet *before* coming to Charleston, twenty-five respondents (38.5%) indicated that they had done so. Specifically, fifteen had used both

restaurants' webpages and user-content sites and eight used an internet dining guide.

Interestingly, twenty-one of these twenty-five (84%) respondents used a mobile device to perform this search, an option not available at the time of the original research. This is supportive of the assumption that the rise of mobile web connectivity has led to greater internet usage in finding restaurants before visiting the location. The last finding in this section deals with final purchase decision which in all likelihood is of the utmost importance to web marketers. Of the twenty-five respondents who had searched the internet for restaurants before taking their trip, twenty-one (95.5% with three answers missing) have eaten or plan to eat at one or more of the restaurants they researched. Thus, it seems searching in advance leads to a great percentage of purchase. In all, the number of respondents who either searched the internet before coming to Charleston *or* marked "found on the internet" as influencing their most recent restaurant selection was 30 (46.9%) out of 64 (one answer was missing) valid responses. This number dwarfs the quite insignificant findings of Litvin, Blose, and Laird (2005). (See Appendix 2)

The data were also skewed in favor of those traveling for pleasure. Of the 63 valid answers, sixteen (25.4%) stated their purpose of travel as visiting friends and relatives and 38 (60.3%) as vacation. Only nine (14.3%) respondents indicated their purpose of travel as either meetings and conventions or business, and of these nine, four respondents mentioned searching the internet before coming to Charleston and not one mentioned that the internet influenced their selection. Age did seem to have a slight effect upon usage. As mentioned in the previous section, the mean age for the sample was 56.6 years. Using this number as a boundary, the variable was recoded into two options, 56 and younger and older than 56. The data were slightly skewed towards those older than 56 (56.9% fit into this category). Of those respondents 56 years

and younger, sixteen (57.1%) searched the internet for restaurants before coming to Charleston. This is compared to just nine (24.3%) of those aged older than 56 who did so.

Interestingly, internet savviness (which was measured with agreement/disagreement with the statement “I consider myself to be quite internet-savvy”) did not seem to significantly affect the variable representing selection influence. However, the data did show a relationship between internet savviness and whether or not respondents searched the internet before coming to Charleston. Here, twenty-five respondents (38.5%) either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “I consider myself to be quite internet-savvy.” Out of these twenty-five savvy respondents, 14 (56%) searched the internet before-hand. This is compared to only sixteen percent who disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement and 38.1% who were neutral about the statement.

As previously mentioned, participants were asked to describe their travel frequency by stating the number of vacation trips they have taken in the last twelve months. The sample had a mean of three and a half vacation trips, median of four trips, and a standard deviation of one and eight tenths. This was recoded to a new variable of frequent travel and infrequent travel with the lowest through four trips being considered infrequent and more than four trips being considered frequent. Of the frequent travelers, not one indicated that the internet influenced their selection and four (25%) had searched the internet for restaurants before embarking on their trip. This is compared to twelve frequent travelers (25%) whose previous restaurant selection was influenced by the internet and twenty-one frequent travelers (42.9%) who searched the internet for restaurants before their trip. It seems that those who travel less frequently are more likely to plan their meals before taking embarking.

The final two variables tested (apart from demographic concerns) were domain specific innovativeness and affinity for opinion seeking. Although it was thought that these two variables would influence whether or not they used the internet to look for restaurants as they had in Litvin, Bloise, and Laird (2005), neither seemed to affect the sample's usage in a significant way. This could be due to a number of limitations discussed in the subsequent section including limited sample size.

Limitations

It is important to note that a few limitations are present with this research which may have impacted the results. Firstly, the sample was taken only from visitors to Charleston, SC's downtown area. It could well be that the very nature of Charleston as a destination influences the main topic in question. Furthermore, the sample indicates that Charleston is more weighted towards vacation travelers and VFR than towards business purposes. Replicating this study in a different city which sees more business travel may conclude with different results.

Another limitation could exist with the survey instrument itself. For this research, the questionnaire was designed to be as similar as possible to the one used in Litvin, Bloise, and Laird (2005). The two questions aimed at the heart of the study leave an opening. They are effective in discovering if participants searched the internet for restaurants before coming to Charleston and if the internet had influenced their decision to choose their most recent restaurant selection. What is left out is if the internet had influenced their decision to select any of the restaurants they ate at during their trip. Perhaps a more inclusive way of measuring this variable would be to ask the question with regards to their trip as a whole and not just about one restaurant selection.

Finally, the sample in this research is lacking in size. With 65 valid responses, this falls short of even half the sample size of the original research being replicated. Significant findings were hard to come across with such a small sample. Statistics found here which were not significant may have been of more importance with a sample size as large as in the original research (138) or larger would have been more sufficient for statistical analysis.

Conclusion

In short, the hypothesis tested in this research was not disproven. With a percentage increase in both respondents whose previous restaurant selection had been influenced by online resources and respondents who had searched the internet before coming to Charleston, it seems that the hypothesis is supported by these data. This knowledge has implications for more than just the sake of the research. The more information restaurant managers have about their patrons and how they were discovered, the better they can alter their marketing efforts to most effectively and efficiently reach the most potential diners. In particular, the proclivity of certain groups (demographic, travel purpose, travel frequency) to search the internet for restaurants could be used to a dining venue's advantage. In addition to marketing plans, the marketing budget could be better proportioned to match how customers chose to dine with them.

However, it must be noted that although the numbers are supportive as such, the results were slightly unexpected. Due to the high influence of the online world in society's day-to-day activities, it was assumed that the results would be much more telling. As mentioned earlier, US internet usage has all but doubled in the ten years since Litvin, Bloise, and Laird (2005) first collected data on the subject. With this information, and with personal knowledge on the extent of the World Wide Web today, it was thought at the time the current research was being planned

that nearly every respondent would have used the internet in their search for restaurants.

Although the data show that usage has widely increased over the original research, the findings are far from monumental. Where it was thought that the change over time would result in many more than half of respondents using the internet in some way to find restaurants on vacation, the actual results as explained above were much slighter than that. This conclusion brings up a new point as to the importance of replicating research to ensure its accuracy. As much as it should not be assumed that versed research is as accurate as it was when published, it should also then stand that one must act with caution when making assumptions about the current state of the topic. This is again why so many authors have urged researchers to replicate influential works. When accomplished, there is little chance for loss as the research will either be confirmed as is or updated to make what is known of the topic more definitive. Either way, the benefits should not be undervalued, for an accurate body of literature leads to better research in the future.

Further research on the subject may include a look at how an area's tourists compare to locals when selecting restaurants. It may be interesting to find what differences emerge, as well as impactful to restaurants when examining their marketing strategies. Whether a restaurant caters mostly to local diners or mostly to visitors could then have an influence on those marketing efforts. It may also be advisable to perform a similar study in an array of different cities. The results of the current research can only be considered accurate for activity in the Charleston, SC area. In order to create a more generic, national, or global conclusion, it would be crucial to obtain data from different types of cities in different geographical regions to get a better sample of the population. Finally, future research could also include a more detailed analysis of which genres of restaurants are more greatly found on the internet (full service versus

limited service). Other factors that may influence the data include the entire price of the chosen restaurant, the time of dining, or the location of the establishment just to name a few.

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Appendix 1

Table 1		Demographics	
		Number	Percentage
Gender	Male	18	27.7%
	Female	47	72.3%
Education	High School	7	10.8%
	Some College	10	15.4%
	Four Year College Degree	29	44.6%
	Graduate/Professional Degree	19	29.2%
Household income level	Lower to Lower-Middle	3	4.7%
	Middle	33	51.6%
	Upper-Middle to Upper	28	43.8%

Appendix 2**Table 2****Key Findings**

	Previous decision influenced by internet	Previous decision <u>not</u> influenced by internet
Searched before trip	7	18
Did <u>not</u> search before trip	5	35