eWOM influence on Customer Value and Brand Love

Studying brand love is vital for hospitality establishments because it helps them understand their customers' feelings and perceptions toward their brands, especially with the growing number of hospitality brands. However, previous hospitality research has neglected the relationship between customer value and brand love. Therefore, the influence of customer value on brand love of fast-food restaurants with a moderating role of electronic word of mouth is discussed.

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1. Brand Love Theory

Brand love is the extent to which a satisfied customer feels emotionally attached to a brand [1]. Brand love consists of a collection of emotions, behaviors, and perceptions customers organize toward a brand [2]. When customers fall in love with a brand, they become devoted fans who spread positive word of mouth about the brand, have good opinions to convey, and are less likely to purchase competing products [3]. As a result, brand love is a strong predictor of essential outcomes like customers' willingness to make repeat purchases, the number of times they recommend a product to others, and their ability to ignore poor reviews [4]. Sternberg's [5] theory of brand love highlighted three components of excellent brand love: intimacy, passion, and commitment.

According to Hernandez Ortega and Ferreira [6], intimacy is the familiarity and closeness between a customer and a brand due to frequent, positive interactions. Brand intimacy can also be defined as the extent to which customers believe a brand cares about them and is eager to understand and meet their requirements [7]. A brand can accurately capture the wants and preferences of customers by communicating with them [8]. In addition, intimacy is the perception of bonding, connection, and closeness in a romantic relationship [9]. For instance, brand love intimacy refers to people creating an emotional connection with a brand, similar to how they might interact with an individual. This connection can be so strong that it builds brand loyalty and advocacy. Brand love intimacy emphasizes the need for marketers to develop an emotional relationship between their customers and their brand instead of focusing solely on product attributes and prices [10]. Therefore, several crucial components of brand love intimacy include trust, emotional connection, understanding, and shared values.

The passion component of a love relationship is defined as physical attraction and related sensations that drive romanticism in love [9]. Sternberg [5] said that passion is the romantic core of a relationship and shows strong feelings of attraction and longing. In contrast to the transient nature of passion, intimacy is based on accumulating knowledge [8]. Satisfying demands for self-esteem, nurturing, succulence, affiliation, obedience, domination, or self-actualization can lead to the perception of passion [5][11]. Customers' passion for a brand is stoked by experiences that leave them feeling strongly about the product or service [9][12]. While developing brand experiences, restaurateurs should arouse the visitors' multisensory emotions to arouse their affection for their establishments. Tangible and intangible factors, such as color, music, temperature, aroma, lighting, layout, design, personality, emotion, and texture, can arouse passion for a restaurant brand [13].

In contrast to intimacy and passion, commitment is a cognitive aspect of love that converts the encounter into a powerful and long-lasting partnership [9]. In Sternberg's [5] triangular theory of love, commitment refers to a person's moral obligation to a relationship, and moral commitment is an individual's conviction regarding maintaining a relationship. Ünal et al. [14] also defined brand love commitment as a psychological status of customers that is positively connected with attitudes toward the brand and a willingness to maintain a valued association with it. Customers' repeated desire to purchase a restaurant's goods and services demonstrates the restaurant's brand commitment [15]. Moreover, Sternberg [5] argued that these three factors work in tandem to generate brand love.

2. Customer Value and Brand Love

Fast-food restaurants' success depends on their ability to provide superior value to their customers [16]. Hence, customer value has been extensively explored and has attracted increased attention from academics and restaurant practitioners [17][18][19]. In the context of management and marketing, restaurants that highly emphasize customer value will have a sustained competitive edge [20]. According to Zeithaml et al. [21], customer value is an evaluation of benefits and sacrifices. Benefits are described as a combination of physical and service features [16]. Sacrifices are the money, time, and effort for having a particular product or a service [19]. Customer value quantifies the degree to which a customer perceives more benefits than drawbacks [22]. So, to provide value, restaurants must maximize customer benefits while minimizing customer sacrifices [23].

Babin et al. [24] stated that consumption activities could yield utilitarian and hedonic values. Utilitarian value is described as an entire evaluation of functional benefits that includes four factors: price reduction, service, time savings, and product selection [25]. As an efficient and functional value, utilitarian value is rational and aligned with the objectives [26]. Hedonic value based on emotional motivation refers to the excitement or joy that occurs while customers are involved in a shopping environment and examining a product. The emotional and irrational aspects are more vital than when customers obtain anything through shopping [27]. For instance, the aesthetics of a restaurant imply that the shopping procedure is pleasant or that customers can escape monotony by having a pleasant purchasing experience [28]. Therefore, utilitarian and hedonic values are essential to comprehending customers' evaluations of the customer experience, as they persist as an underlying presence throughout the consumption phenomena [16].

3. The Moderator (eWOM)

The development of the internet has extended the concept of word-of-mouth (WOM) communication to online content known as eWOM, which can rapidly reach massive audiences [29]. The eWOM is all internet-based customer communications regarding using certain restaurants' products or services [30]. The eWOM is also defined as any positive or negative comment from prospective, current, or past customers about a product or restaurant and is made available to many individuals and organizations via the Internet [31]. Fast-food restaurant chains benefit from eWOM because it helps them to attract and retain customers, build a positive brand image, influence customer decision-making, be a cost-effective marketing tool, and allow real-time monitoring and response to customer feedback [1][2][3][4][5][6][7][8][10][13][14][18][19][20][21][22][24][25][27][28][29][30][31][32][33][34][35][36][37][38][39][40][41][42][43][44][45][46]. Customers of restaurants are more likely to do research in advance if they have little way of knowing the quality of the establishment's offerings until after they have made a purchase [45]. For this reason, restaurant reviews provide the information necessary for a customer to decide which restaurant to visit in advance. In general, eWOM comprises feedback from current or prior customers on restaurant value elements such as product quality, service quality, product impressions, price, dining experience, and reliability [16][46].

Customer value is thought to directly affect behavioral outcomes (e.g., eWOM) in most conceptual and empirical contributions to value research [47][48][49]. Customers' perceptions of value have a positive and statistically significant impact on electronic word-of-mouth and brand loyalty, as demonstrated by previous research [47]. According to Hollebeek et al. [48], perceived value is a crucial factor in customers' eWOM engagement, suggesting that customers' engagement behaviors follow their perceptions of value. In other words, customers are inclined to engage in behavioral intents when they perceive high levels of value in their consumption experiences. Based on this perspective, customer participation consists mainly of participation in eWOM-related actions, such as initiating and sharing reviews, suggestions, and referrals [30]. eWOM engagement is correlated with hedonic value because the sense of value through emotional and affective experiences may be antecedents of attitudes and behaviors. Regarding utilitarian value, online customers' searches for helpful information, creation of content, and willingness to trade content with other users are very helpful in promoting engagement and figuring out how engaged customers are in eWOM [49]. So, there is a direct link between customer value and eWOM since value includes both cognitive and emotional aspects.

Brand love results from positive feelings and experiences with a brand that generate favorable perceptions toward that brand [1][50]. With a positive attitude, customers are more likely to invest in long-term connections with the brand and spread the word about it to others [3][51]. Previous research has demonstrated that when customers receive good eWOM reviews, their brand love increases [32]. Customers like to get brand information via eWOM because they view it as genuine and authentic [52]. Karjaluoto et al. [32] examined brand love as a predictor of WOM, whereas Pillay [52] examined brand love as an outcome of eWOM. Studying eWOM's role as a potential antecedent of brand love will help restaurants encourage the spread of positive eWOM, which may increase customer loyalty and retention.

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