The Impact of Customer Experience on E-Word of Mouth in the Local Cafe Industry in Sri Lanka

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This research examines the impact of customer experiences on electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) within the thriving cafe industry of Sri Lanka. In the scope of digital marketing, understanding and leveraging e-WOM is crucial for enhancing customer engagement and securing a competitive edge. However, with its growing importance, there is a notable lack of empirical study on how various aspects of the customer experience namely, the physical environment, aesthetic appeal, and service quality, affect e-WOM, particularly in Sri Lanka. A thorough review of existing literature highlights this shortage, indicating a significant opportunity for focused research to uncover the dynamics between customer experience facets and e-WOM.

Grounded in a positivist research philosophy, the study embraces a deductive approach to test hypotheses derived from established theories. Utilising a cross-sectional survey design, the research captures data from 391 participants through a carefully constructed questionnaire, based on prior academic work. This questionnaire investigates various dimensions of customer experience that potentially influence e-WOM, ranging from environmental aesthetics to service responsiveness. The sampling strategy employed was convenience sampling, aimed at efficiently collecting data from respondents who frequent cafes, ensuring that the sample was representative of typical cafe consumers. Data collection was executed through online platforms and direct interactions to widen the research's scope and enhance the reliability of the findings. For data analysis, the study employed SPSS software, utilising regression analysis techniques to explore the strength and significance of the relationship between the studied variables.

The results of the analysis reveal a strong positive correlation between the quality of customer experience and the likelihood of customers engaging in

e-WOM. Each individual dimension of customer experience (environment, aesthetic experience, and service quality) independently demonstrated a significant positive impact on e-WOM. These findings underscore the critical importance of holistic customer experience management in cafes, suggesting that enhancing these aspects can significantly encourage positive e-WOM.

Managerially, the findings of this study are invaluable, offering clear strategies for cafe owners and marketers to enhance customer experience and effectively promote e-WOM. The empirical results of this study contribute significantly to the limited scholarly resources on e-WOM within Sri Lanka's café industry. By providing these insights, the study lays a solid foundation for future research and offers practical approaches that can be employed immediately. These strategies are particularly crucial in the digital age, where online word-of-mouth can significantly influence public perception and consumer behaviour. Implementing the recommended changes could improve customer satisfaction, increase loyalty, and ultimately, bring greater business success to the competitive cafe market.

However, the research recognises limitations in its design, primarily the study's cross-sectional nature, which may not capture evolving trends over time. To address these issues, future studies are encouraged to adopt a longitudinal approach. Such an approach would allow researchers to track the progressive impact of customer experience improvements on e-WOM over extended periods. This continuous study may give more precise insights, allowing café owners and marketers to successfully refine digital marketing efforts. Longitudinal data enables businesses to better understand the long-term effects of their customer experience strategies, respond to changes in consumer behaviour, and improve overall business success in the dynamic café industry.

Keywords: *Customer Experience, Environment, Aesthetic Experience, Service Quality, E-word of Mouth, Café Industry*