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Web-Celebrity Restaurants: A Vacuous Money Harvester? Behind The Rise of a Dining Phenomenon

Group Members: Yingxi Chen[Shenzhen Senior High School (group)], Xinyi Du(Shenzhen Middle School), Yixin Chen[Shenzhen Senior High School (group)], Yijun Gu(Vanke Meisha Academy), Yunjia Ma(Vanke Meisha Academy), Nanhao Zhou(Basis international ShenZhen)

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Many people in western cultures are familiar with restaurants that achieve fame and acclaim via Yelp, Instagram, or some other internet/social media platform. We conceptualize such restaurants with the term “Web-celebrity restaurant.” At these restaurants, customers often line up to enter from before opening to closing time. How did this phenomenon arise? What are the effects of such a phenomenon on society? Is their existence merited? For the sake of answering these questions, our group examined three highly-rated restaurants in three categories: a dessert restaurant called “Kong”, a Chinese snack restaurant called “Yum Bean”, a Japanese food restaurant called “Fuji Happy”. Ratings were drawn from the Yelp-like restaurant review app known as Da Zhong Dian Ping, or DZDP.

Wang checks her phone as an impending message pops out on the top of her phone’s screen, a tweet about the web-celebrity restaurant termed Kong. Scrolling over the tweet, stricken by the exquisite photos provided under the comments, Wang becomes interested in this restaurant. “It’s my turn to visit here.” She says.



Figure 1

People are lining up in front of a web celebrity restaurant waiting for their meal.

Shot by Yingxi Chen

Dessert Restaurant (“Kong”)

As the data provided by DZDP suggests, Kong has accumulated about 1900+ comments from customers. Separating comments into categories, we found that about 89.1% people praised Kong as a successful restaurant. 8.5% of people held a neutral opinion about Kong, seeing it as a restaurant which is slightly lacking terms of service, environment and/or food. Finally, 2.4% of people considered Kong as an inferior establishment, stating that it’s not

worth the money to eat there.

Methodology

After gathering comments about this restaurant from DZDP, we interviewed the restaurant's manager, as well as five additional random people who were dining there at the time.



Photo of Kong's desert excerpted from DZDP Shot by Totoro

"The site is located 50 meters near Shixiabei metro station, which is extremely convenient. I really enjoy the scenery here, where I can see all the Skyscrapers in Shenzhen. What's more, the dishes here look great!" Totoro, a frequent user in DZDP said.

Photo excerpted from DZDP Shot by Totoro

Interview with Kong restaurant manager, Xiao Wen

In order to address the divergent nature of reviews of Kong, our team organized an interview with Xiao Wen, who has been running the restaurant for four years, trying to find out more about the service they provide to the customers.

Interviewer: "What are some of the things that your restaurant does best?"

Xiao Wen: "We aim to elegantly decorate the desserts before they are served to the customers. Strong presentation can catch the eyes of a customer."

Interviewer: "What are some of the services your restaurant lacks?"

Xiao Wen: "We have put in a lot of effort to make our services top-tier."

Interviewer: "At what times do most of the customers visit your restaurant?"

Xiao Wen: "Because our restaurant is located in an office building, most people come here during the afternoon."

Interviewer: "Do you try to market your restaurant on the internet?"

Xiao Wen: "Yeah, we've thought about it. Maybe later we'll expand our presence online."

Interview with five random customers of Kong

Apart from the interview with Xiao Wen, we also randomly selected five customers of Kong to answer our interview questions.

One customer works in the same building in which the restaurant is located, mentioning that she does not come to web-celebrity restaurants often. She frequents the restaurant mainly because of the convenient location. Since the restaurant provides an attractive environment,

she claims she can finish her work with greater efficiency.

The other four customers heard of Kong from their friends' social media posts. They mention the appealing environment and the aesthetically-pleasing appearance of the food. That said, they did note some weaknesses, such as the subpar taste of the food, the slow service (waiting 30 minutes for food service), and the short business hours relative to nearby restaurants.

Chinese Snack Restaurant (“Yum Bean”)

The Chinese snacks restaurant, Yum Bean, has 1225 comments on DZDP, with an average rating of four out of five, which means it is in the top 2% of snack restaurants in Shenzhen, China.

Methodology

Initially, we collected the comments about this snack restaurant from DZDP. Then, we randomly selected eight of the restaurant's patrons.

Those customers answered several questions about the quality of the food, fulfillment of expectations, the restaurant's interior design and how the customer initially found out about the restaurant.

One of our interviewees came to the restaurant with high expectations after hearing of it on the social media app “Xiaohongshu”. Fortunately, the food was satisfactory, and she had positive comments about the restaurant.

We also interviewed a regular customer, who notes that the food, in fact, was subpar during her last visit, so she may be taking her business elsewhere.

Another couple said “Although we are quite unsatisfied with the food, we will come again because they have a great air conditioner. However, we think the color of furniture in the restaurant should be changed to a color that matches their spicy specialty.”

Three out of eight interviewees indicated they were dissatisfied with the food. Two of them were just passing by and were drawn by the many people in the restaurant but felt the restaurant was not worth the money.

Japanese-Style Restaurant (“Fuji Happy”)

Methodology

Our team visited the Japanese-style celebrity restaurant called “Fuji Happy” and randomly interviewed customers of different ages about different aspects of the restaurant.

We asked a marketing expert's opinion on the web-celebrity restaurant phenomenon. We also asked one of our students who went to a celebrity restaurant regularly.

Interview with customers

During our interview, one student said: “I don't often go to such a restaurant because even though restaurant is very good and popular, the price is a little bit high and the food isn't very good.” Another young lady said: “I will often search celebrity restaurants and bring friends or colleagues to eat. I think the environment and atmosphere of these restaurants is very suitable for dinner, and the service is good.” However, a middle-aged woman said, she usually only comes once to these establishments; there is no need to come often because she wants to enjoy different environments.

Results

Web-Celebrity Restaurants are a phenomenon that owes its popularity mostly to word-of-mouth recommendations by family and friends (61.9%, according to an online survey conducted by our team with 21 participants) and social media awareness (52.38%).

According to the research we've done so far, restaurants receiving high ratings on DZDP often do not reflect the reality of customers. According to our survey, only 57.14% of respondents said that these restaurants fulfilled their expectations, the rest feeling that their experiences were unsatisfactory. Still, we need to figure out why there is a discrepancy between online data and the interview results and what is the mechanism behind it.

Discussion

Companies today can easily increase the perceived value of their products and services through marketing campaigns, which in turn raise customers' willingness to pay premium prices. Perceived value increases through the "extended product", adding value to the product through an elevated experience. In the case of a restaurant, this refers to the feeling of eating at a celebrity restaurant, when customers can tell friends, raise their self-esteem, and increase the satisfaction of eating there.

Web-celebrity restaurants thus rely on "extended product" strategies for existence. Distinct from some other conventional restaurants, web-celebrity restaurants largely control online data regarding their restaurants online by uploading appealing photos and eliminating the ratio of bad comments. According to Perhona Long, a student who visits Web-celebrity restaurants once a week, "Every time I went there, they would tell me to write good comments for them. Sometimes, they will reward me with a free drink if I did it." This underscores the arbitrary and inauthentic nature of online comments, suggesting that an overreliance on online reviews may be misleading.

The "extended product" strategy is indeed effective, drawing the attention of many potential customers. Our results indicate that although the food does not often measure up to the hype, many customers find the environment to be positive and are likely to visit the restaurant again. Others, who focus exclusively on food, denounce the restaurants, asserting that the food is not as tasty as suggested online.

Conclusion

The presence of web-celebrity restaurants in modern society presents mixed feelings in many customers who are uncertain whether to applaud their existence or avoid them entirely. This process warrants further research and inquiry. The quality and taste of the food juxtaposed with the "extended product" marketing strategy may be a profitable one for many restaurants, although the merits of such a strategy is up for debate.