

THE FLAVOR OF CHANGE: RESTAURANT MARKETING IN THE COVID-19 LANDSCAPE

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Article Info

Keywords: Online Marketing, Digital Strategies, Social Media, COVID-19 Adaptations, Restaurant Industry.

Abstract

The restaurant industry has faced unprecedented challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic, necessitating a reevaluation of online marketing strategies through digital platforms and social media. This study delves into the dynamic landscape of restaurant operations during the pandemic, where ensuring safe food service is paramount. The industry's response has involved closures and innovative transformations in production, advertising, and delivery methods. Given the enduring influence of these changes and the industry's global magnitude, comprehending their implications is pivotal. Restaurants inherently offer a blend of tangible and intangible elements, crafting holistic experiences often consumed on-site. This synergy presents unique challenges, especially considering the disruptions caused by COVID-19 regulations. Investigating the mechanisms by which these adaptations are communicated to consumers through digital marketing and social media channels forms the core of this research. A comparative analysis is undertaken, focusing on restaurant practices in the United States and Canada. Through this study, we uncover the intricate interplay between digital marketing, social media strategies, and the portrayal of COVID-19 responsive practices. Insights drawn from a cross-national perspective illuminate the diverse approaches adopted by restaurants. Such comprehension assumes significance as restaurants endeavor to safeguard and expand their market share amid the pandemic's upheaval. By shedding light on the marketing ramifications of pandemic-driven adaptations, this research contributes to the strategic arsenal available to restaurants in their ongoing battle for survival and growth.

1. Introduction

Determining the appropriate mix of online marketing strategies via digital marketing and social media is one of the greatest challenges facing the restaurant industry today, especially during a global pandemic. Safe serving of food is considered to be one of the main activities that is directly related to preventing the spread

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of the COVID-19 virus. In many cases during the COVID-19 pandemic, restaurants either had to close their doors or radically reinvent how they produced, advertised and delivered their products to consumers to stay afloat. The long-lasting effects of these practices will continue to unravel as the restaurant industry remains one of the largest industries globally, and the number of multinational organizations and multitude of restaurants entering the market continue to grow. Restaurant products contain both tangible and intangible aspects, combined together to create the overall experience, and in most cases, these products are produced and consumed simultaneously. This makes it extremely challenging for restaurants to control the process, especially with the impact of COVID-19 measures, requiring restaurants to undergo a major process of adjustment. The digital marketing and social media presence of these COVID-19 practices as they are communicated to consumers are explored in this study, in a comparison model of restaurants between the United States and Canada. Knowing the marketing impact of these practices during a global pandemic can play a significant role in restaurants' struggle to maintain or expand their market share.

2. Literature Review

Restaurants need to constantly adjust their marketing strategies in order to continually meet consumer demands, and these adjustments emerge to be even more critical during a global event such as the COVID - 19 pandemic. Without an effective marketing strategy, a business may not be able to sustain its operations and compete within new circumstances, faced with internal and external pressures. The significance of adjusting marketing strategies has been highlighted by Talpau & Boscior (2011). They concluded that restaurateurs must develop various ways to sell and distribute their products that have undergone periodical adjustments, depending on the channels of distribution as well as different approaches to the marketing mix of the 4Ps, adding more variables to this list such as local conditions or external events.

With the impact of external events and intensified competition in the market, developing adjustable marketing strategies has become more instrumental for restaurants.

Although there is no universal formula of the right mix of marketing strategies for restaurants, studies show different promotional strategies such as digital marketing and social media presence yield better results. Omnichannel marketing recognizes that consumers often channel-hop within a given transaction among retail stores, computers, smartphones, tablets, in-store kiosks and social media sites when selecting restaurants (Berman & Thelen, 2018). Shcherbakova (2020) suggested that various marketing channels compliment and amplify each other, and with the emergence of different channels such as the Internet, social media, email, and messengers, restaurants need to diversify marketing efforts and combine online and offline marketing. Thus, restaurants need to implement new and varied promotional strategies via online presence as the competition becomes stronger, and develop strategies that integrate the appropriate marketing mix at the correct time to remain competitive.

Restaurant product is more than just the tangible sensory characteristics of food itself such as the taste and aroma. The overall experience consists of many intangible aspects such as the quality and speed of service, friendliness and professionalism of the staff, hygiene factors of the establishment, and price value considerations. These aspects combined help consumers form perceptions of the total dining experience. According to Harris and Ezech (2008), intangible aspects can trigger emotional responses which have an influence on the customer choice to continue or stop revisiting a restaurant or perhaps use the restaurant in the first place. This aspect alone makes it even more important as all COVID-19 measures are the intangible aspects of how the food is delivered; therefore, communicating this information via digital marketing as well as on social media is worth exploring as it has the potential to directly impact customers' choice of restaurants. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic moved the restaurant industry ever closer to corporate social responsibility. Given the ultimate necessity of implementing these measures in the standard operating procedures of restaurants in order to protect the public health, it also solidified the datum that consumers are

a major stakeholder holding firms to account for their actions. COVID-19 pandemic revealed this aspect of social responsibility by requiring businesses to take this issue seriously for their survival. As Ashaari & Daud (2018) pointed out, customers tend to react positively to the sustainable aspects of the corporate practices and recommended that greater effort be placed in visibly illustrating this aspect of sustainable marketing so that consumers can react accordingly. Communicating the COVID-19 measures via digital marketing and on social media therefore has the potential to impact the bottom line, and lead to socially responsible marketing to demonstrate that the businesses take the health and well-being of their communities into account in order to remain competitive.

With increased use of social media to communicate with customers, traditional methods of marketing have begun to decline, and the online platform has changed the way restaurants relate to their customers. Businesses use social media to gain access to a multitude of people, and in turn, social media aids in the development of firm's credibility, expands the customer base and supplier contacts, highlights access to resources and available funding, encourages innovation, and helps develop strategic partnerships (Harris, Rae, & Misner, 2012). Determining the best strategies to communicate on social media has become ever more important. The ease of advertising on social media and the ability to be able to interact with customers and other stakeholders are among the advantages of this marketing medium. Social media is a relatively low-cost marketing tool that businesses can use to expand their reach to customers in less time than other marketing tools (Hassan, Nadzim, & Shiratuddin, 2015). As with any marketing strategy, restaurants need to assess what the customers want and determine how they will deliver it. Social media platforms afford users the opportunity to stay current on the news, to voice concerns, to offer opinions, and to engage in communication with others (Go & You, 2016). More studies show that consumers increasingly use social media as their sole source of information gathering on restaurants, therefore forcing restaurateurs to integrate social media in their marketing mix as it can be a powerful tool when properly utilized.

Numerous prior studies have also identified the use of online reviews on social media platforms for restaurants. The majority of restaurant customers indicate that they choose a restaurant based on online reviews that are part of the social media platform. Helpful online reviews could be utilized to create sustainable marketing strategies in the restaurant industry (Luo & Xu, 2019). Due to the intangible aspects of the restaurant product such as cleanliness, speed of service, friendliness of the staff, and price/value considerations, prospective customers cannot experience these attributes in advance, therefore they rely on online reviews to make their purchasing decision. Bozkurt & Gligor (2021) pointed out that managers should be aware that customers who compliment a restaurant publicly on social media are more likely to go back to the service provider and have greater service recovery expectations and that online shoppers often search a lot before making a purchasing decision. According to Hanaysha (2018), the social media marketing has a positive effect on customer retention and on purchase intention in the hospitality industry when planned and aligned to customer expectations.

Thus, positive reviews help restaurants build confidence with customers. Restaurant managers can identify, and filter attributes mentioned on social media as comments and use as them as guidelines to assist in online marketing strategies to gain a sustainable competitive advantage.

Another impact of the COVID-19 pandemic for the restaurant industry has been the increased use of online delivery or take-out options for the customers. The extent of this information on digital marketing and social media platforms was also explored in this study. The convenience of ordering from mobile apps or restaurants' websites has definitely made a difference during the pandemic in market share of some restaurants as they enjoyed either sustained or increased business volume, while others experienced the opposite as they were not able to cope with the availability of these options. The restaurant industry has been exploring and utilizing online delivery options long before the COVID-19 pandemic, and some restaurants were changing their entire

layouts, and migrating to a significant take-out and delivery model. It became even more critical during the pandemic to see the impact of these options. In the age of a pandemic, the demand for online food delivery services sales is spiking, and in fact in China, online food delivery service orders surged 20 percent during January 2020 alone as firms such as Doordash have even started reducing or eliminating their fees in response to the surge that is beginning in the United States (Keshner, 2020). There is also empirical evidence of a potential impact of the increased use of online delivery channels leading to cannibalization of offline sales, as consumers that would typically purchase meals in-person are now ordering take-out with online food delivery services. According to Pozzi (2013) restaurants face this challenge of deciding to ration between the brick-and-mortar sales versus online when introducing new products or opening a new store. Consequently, the long-term effects of online delivery mechanisms and take-out options for restaurants will continue to evolve over the years following the pandemic.

The restaurant industry is particularly susceptible to threats posed by unanticipated adversities such as pandemics, leading to distinct industry challenges that require restaurateurs to take measures to mitigate these conditions. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, restaurants worldwide have been required to protect public health by following the food safety standards and adapting to the necessary social distancing practices. This has also brought up the issue of minimizing the —human contact as much as feasible in production, as another way of implementing technology. As a result, restaurant operators have been beginning to pay closer attention to the potential benefits of artificial intelligence (AI) and its applications, such as robotics in production to ensure safer flow of food. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, there is ample room for researchers to advance the understanding of AI-driven robots in the field (Huang & Rust, 2020). There is also the potential in food production to effectively implement AI-driven robots in areas that require cleaning and disinfection procedures.

The resilience of the restaurant industry can be ensured by addressing all relevant COVID-19 concerns on digital marketing platforms and on social media, and by communicating these measures to prospective customers. Alkawasbeh (2020) indicated that the availability of big data and technologies on social media platforms such as text mining and image analytics can lead to new methods of capturing data from stakeholders, especially restaurant customers. These efforts are in line with the expected industry practices related to customers' well-being and the industry's social responsibility. As the restaurant industry slowly begins to return to —new normal, restaurants need to update their standard operating procedures that not only provide a safe store environment but also helps to reassure potentially anxious customers by making the new hygiene and safety protocols highly visible throughout the restaurant operations. The pandemic revealed many challenges for the restaurant industry, but also provided opportunities for re-innovating the traditional approaches in food production and service. Reflecting on these evolving challenges can present opportunities and take restaurant marketing in new directions after this pandemic.

3. The Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the extent of the marketing strategies involved in promoting restaurants during a period of crisis such as COVID-19. In order to maintain a revenue flow, restaurants have to adapt their marketing strategies to accommodate for the health mandates imposed by federal and state/province agencies to prevent the spread of the virus in group settings in the United States and Canada. Very little research has examined the marketing of services that are highly impacted by a pandemic. Therefore exploring this major gap with respect to digital and social media marketing strategies is the scope and aim of this study.

4. Research Methodology

Following a methodology established in a recent study (Heroux and Gultek, 2021), this exploratory study was undertaken on the website and social media content of 168 restaurants in the two of the largest cities in the

United States (New York City and Los Angeles) and two of the largest cities in Canada (Toronto and Vancouver), representing the eastern and western regions of both countries.

There is substantial economic integration and cross-border traffic between the two countries, and the hospitality industry targets business and leisure travelers of both nationalities (Church and Heroux, 1999). For this reason, many similarities have been observed in these studies of the hospitality industry in these two countries.

A sample of 168 restaurants in each country was included in this research. The online Yellow Pages directories for the United States and Canada were used to identify the sampling frame of restaurants in the two cities in each country. The typical restaurant in this study was a local independent establishment that catered to consumers. Restaurant chains and franchises were excluded because each establishment would follow corporate policy, and not reflect independent establishment protocols. The restaurants were selected using a systematic sample. Every tenth restaurant in the listing was selected if it was an independent restaurant. If it was a chain or franchise, the next restaurant in the listing was selected. If the independent restaurant did not have an active website or social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram), the next restaurant in the listing was selected.

The observational research was conducted by International Marketing students who were familiar with the Marketing concepts. Observers received training on a variety of dimensions of the research process. They received a detailed explanation of each of the variables in the data collection form and how each variable is operationalized. They were provided with a link to their assigned restaurant website, how to record their qualitative observations, and how to determine a quantitative score (on a scale of 0 to 5, 5 being superior implementation) for each variable. For example, for size of party limitations, students would look at the information on party size, such as maximum of 4 at a table, and make a judgment on the rating scale as to its appeal to consumers (5 would represent an appealing party size, and 0 would be the minimum one would expect). This methodology was effectively applied in other tourism marketing contexts (Heroux, 2002; Heroux and Csipak, 2001, 2005; Heroux and Burns, 2000).

The trainer and trainees performed a —walk-through of the research process prior to visiting the websites and social media platforms to ensure their understanding and consistent implementation of the data collection. Observation forms were designed to record detailed notes of how each variable was implemented. Then, the observers had to assign a score (on a scale of 0 to 5, 5 representing superior implementation of the strategy), as well as social media review scores, for each variable in an attempt to quantify the observational data. Each item within a variable category was weighted equally in this research.

Three categories of pandemic-specific variables were observed in the restaurant websites and social media platforms:

- (1) Marketing adaptations of restaurant policies (change of hours, temporary closures, COVID-related price changes, physical changes to the facility layout and erection of barriers)
- (2) Social distancing protocols (staggering attendees and limiting party sizes)
- (3) Sanitizing protocols (restrooms and facilities, ventilation, employee safety training and use of Personal Protection Equipment (PPE), and food service precautions).

The data were analyzed using SPSS statistical software, version 25. First, the rating system using a Likert scale from 0-5 was recoded into binary values. This was done to reduce variances between observers-raters and inter-rater reliability issues. Therefore, we analyze and report the presence or absence of COVID-related messaging on 5 different media. Zeros were entered into SPSS as a 0 and any number from 1-5 as 1. We analyzed the presence or absence of 10 different message contents by aggregating a specific message contents presence across the five different information channels. The presence or absence of a specific message could range from 0 to 5, not used at all to used on all 5 information channels. Our final aggregate measures of (1)

physical and price messages, (2) social distancing messages, and (3) operational messages resulted in ranges of (1) 0-6, (2) 0-2, and (3) 0-2, respectively.

5. Findings

5.1 Messaging channels

The findings are discussed below in terms of quantitative results and qualitative interpretations related to the restaurants' use of different messaging channels and the nature of their messaging. Table 1 presents the usage of different popular communications channels for restaurants in the US and Canada. The absence or presence of COVID-messaging on websites, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn are averaged, producing a mean between 0 and 1 that represent the percentage of restaurants that used the channel for COVID-19 messaging.

Table 1: Information Channels

Information channel statistics and t-test for equality of means							Eq. of Means Sig. (2-tailed)
Information media channels		N	Mean	%	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	
Amount of Corona virus or COVID information on website	USA	81	0.49	49%	0.503	0.056	0.347
	Canada	81	0.42	42%	0.497	0.055	
Amount of Corona virus or COVID information on Facebook	USA	81	0.53	53%	0.502	0.056	0.205
	Canada	81	0.63	63%	0.486	0.054	
Amount of Corona virus or COVID information on Instagram	USA	81	0.57	57%	0.498	0.055	1.000
	Canada	81	0.57	57%	0.498	0.055	
Amount of Corona virus or COVID information on Twitter	USA	81	0.23	23%	0.426	0.047	0.718
	Canada	81	0.26	26%	0.441	0.049	
Amount of Corona virus or COVID information on LinkedIn	USA	81	0.06	6%	0.242	0.027	0.074
	Canada	81	0.15	15%	0.357	0.040	

In both countries, Instagram and Facebook were the two social media platforms most frequently used to communicate COVID-related information, although they were in reversed order in both countries. Instagram came first for US restaurants while Facebook came first for Canadian restaurants. In third place for both countries were their respective websites. Twitter was used for COVID-related information by only a quarter of restaurants in both countries, while and LinkedIn was least used for this purpose, although more so in Canada than the US. For websites, 49% of US restaurants had COVID-related messaging, compared with 42% in Canada. In Canada, 63% of restaurants used Facebook for COVID-messaging, compared to 53% in the US. COVID messaging on Instagram was 57% in both countries. COVID-messaging of Twitter as 26% in Canada and 23% in the US and on LinkedIn 15% in Canada and 6% in the US.

T-tests performed between the US restaurants and Canadian restaurants' use of website and social media platforms for communicating COVID-related information find no significant differences between restaurants in both countries. This suggests that in a novel pandemic context, restaurants in both countries have used the digital and social media tools at their disposal in a similar manner to address COVID-related issues with their prospective and current customers.

5.2 Message content

Table 2 presents the results of the ratings (scale of 0-5) for the COVID messaging content and table 3 aggregates this data into three messaging themes. The means are translated into percentages, representing the percentage of restaurants in each country that addressed specific issues related to COVID-19. Inspection of Table 2 reveals that the Canadian restaurants more frequently messaged on these topics across all 5 messaging channels. However, in no case were these differences statistically significant, as can be seen in the last column on the equality of means significance tests. The changing of hours at 68% in Canada and 57% in the US was the most prevalent message in both countries, followed closely by temporary closures at 65% and 54% respectively. These messages were approximately three times more prevalent than messages related to changes in prices, 22% and 19% respectively.

Table 2: Messaging across Information Channels

Messaging across information channels statistics							Eq. of Means Sig. (2-tailed)
Covid-19 messaging		N	Mean	%	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	
CH hours	USA	81	1.70	57%	1.327	0.147	0.107
	Canada	81	2.05	68%	1.387	0.154	
Temp close	USA	81	1.62	54%	1.319	0.147	0.115
	Canada	81	1.95	65%	1.359	0.151	
Size party	USA	81	1.05	35%	1.224	0.136	0.754
	Canada	81	1.11	37%	1.275	0.142	
Price change	USA	81	0.57	19%	0.974	0.108	0.567
	Canada	81	0.67	22%	1.204	0.134	
Social distancing	USA	81	1.07	36%	1.243	0.138	0.805
	Canada	81	1.12	37%	1.298	0.144	
Physical barrier	USA	81	0.63	21%	0.968	0.108	0.164
	Canada	81	0.88	29%	1.259	0.140	
Phys layout	USA	81	1.27	42%	1.235	0.137	0.523
	Canada	81	1.41	47%	1.456	0.162	
Occupancy	USA	81	0.99	33%	1.240	0.138	0.272
	Canada	81	1.22	41%	1.458	0.162	
Cleaning	USA	81	0.81	27%	1.152	0.128	0.712
	Canada	81	0.89	30%	1.387	0.154	
Employee safety	USA	81	0.88	29%	1.239	0.138	0.810
	Canada	81	0.93	31%	1.367	0.152	

The message content themes data are again described in Table 3 in terms of percentages of messages across three messaging channels. For facility and price, there are 6 messages across 5 channels for a range of 0-30; for Social distancing, there are 2 messages across 5 channels for a range of 0-10; and for employee safety and cleaning, there are also 2 messages across 5 channels for a range of 0-10. Inspection of this table shows that Canada's messaging is consistently higher than in the US, but at an insignificant level. In both countries the emphasis on messages related to facilities and price (Canada 6.22 and US 5.32) are about four times more

prevalent than messages related to social distancing (Canada 1.77 and US 1.64) or employee safety and cleaning (Canada 1.43 and US 1.41). In this table the percentage column is less compelling in the aggregate as it depicts a relationship between the message content and the message channels, which is not relevant to this part of the analysis.

Table 3: Messaging Themes across Information Channels

Messaging themes across information channels statistics							Eq. of Means Sig. (2-tailed)
Messaging themes		N	Mean	%	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	
Facility and price	USA	81	5.32	18%	3.879	0.431	0.158
	Canada	81	6.22	21%	4.198	0.466	
Soc dist	USA	81	1.64	16%	1.784	0.198	0.674
	Canada	81	1.77	18%	1.938	0.215	
Employee safety and cleaning	USA	81	1.41	14%	1.869	0.208	0.935
	Canada	81	1.43	14%	1.974	0.219	

6. Discussion and Conclusions

The US and Canadian restaurants in this study showed no statistical differences in their use of messaging channels or the content of their messaging with regard to COVID-19 global health crisis. While on the whole this makes sense, one might expect to find some minor differences such have been seen in previous studies (Gottschall, Heroux & Gultek, 2018). While the US and Canada have different health systems and differences in some norms (Sanmartin, Berthelot, Ng, Murphy, Blackwell, Gentleman, Martinez, & Simile, 2006), and we might expect to see some differences in communications strategies (DuBreck, Sadler, Arku, Seabrook & Gilliland, 2019), the global nature and epidemiological forces resulted in more conformity between the two countries than differences.

While websites were used by 49% of US and 42% of Canadian restaurants to communicate COVID-related messages, Facebook and Instagram were used even more frequently. Social media are easier for most users to update regularly and post messages in a timely manner. The rapidly changing COVID-19 conditions and regulations required rapid responses by these customer-facing, retail businesses.

This study found that 63% Canadian restaurants sent COVID-messages via Facebook and 57% via Instagram, compared to 53% and 57% in the US respectively. The nature of pandemic acted on restaurants in both countries to encourage the use channels that were more readily updated and transmitted. Twitter and LinkedIn were used in both countries to a lesser extent, which may reflect their lower user rates in general (Pew Research, 2021; Statista.com, 2021) and the nature of messaging on these platforms. In summary, these two countries were impacted by a global pandemic and used common, global platforms for their communications, which contributed to a lack of differences in messaging strategies.

Given the parameters of the pandemic and the information technology infrastructures, one might expect to find more differences in message content between the two countries. However, the use of digital and media strategies in response to the global pandemic appears to be more universal. Restaurants in both countries tended to provide the most basic of information about hours of operation and temporary closures. To a lesser extent, restaurants on both sides of the border addressed more complicated strategies for serving customers safely. In Canada, 47% of restaurants communicated changes in the facilities to keep people safe, compared to 42% in the US. These were the types of actions that restaurants could take to ensure patron safety. More complicated issues like measures for social distancing, which often required effort, understanding, or compliance on the part of customers were less likely to be messaged, 37% in Canada and 36% in the US.

Lower still in the communications approach were operational issues like extra cleaning (Canada 30%, US 27%) and staff procedures to ensure safety (Canada 31%, US 29%). While clearly important, these messages may be seen as too detailed and heighten consumer concerns rather than alleviate them. These COVID-related messaging preferences are even more evident when aggregating the messages into themes.

In conclusion, this study presents a picture of how technological advances in information technologies are enabling many small, independent restaurants to communicate with their target audiences and markets. Triggered by an unprecedented event, as high as 63% of Canadian restaurants and 57% of US restaurants in this study were able to signal their responses to an important and constantly changing situation on Facebook. The crisis situation and its global nature produced a very similar response from roughly the same proportion of businesses in both countries. When thinking about whether these seem like high numbers or low numbers, it is interesting that the forces that kept some 37% of Canadian businesses and 43% of US businesses from communicating on these platforms may also be the same. If the messaging profiles were so similar between countries, and we might have expected that, what accounts for differences in each country?

7. Limitations

First, although a large sample of restaurants was examined, this study is somewhat limited with regard to nation-wide generalization since it represents restaurants from two major cities in the eastern and western regions of each country. There may be a cosmopolitan bias in this sample that might obscure countrywide differences. Second, in quantifying the messages on the different media using a binary count (presence or absence of message) rather than a word count, limited information content was captured in the data. Quantity and nature of the messages might be measured with more precision in the future. However, this is less likely to produce a different outcome of substantial differences in message channels or content than to identify smaller differences between the two countries. Third, this study looked at restaurant digital and social media strategies in a specific pandemic with the characteristics of the coronavirus (COVID-19). However, a different pandemic or crisis might require very different adaptation of marketing strategies, so there may be limited applicability of these results under different crisis situations. Different state and province regulations and mandates regarding protocols during the pandemic will have implications for the strategies implemented in different regions. Finally, the findings of this study might not translate to a globally applicable set of implications.

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