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# Factors Influencing Word of Mouth Behaviour of Restaurant Industry in Pakistan

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## Abstract

The purpose of this research paper was to study the factors that influence word of mouth (WOM) behavior with the crucial role of relationship quality. WOM is a free form of advertisement or promotion which is shared by customers with one another. It is triggered by an event the customer experiences. WOM marketing is nowadays considered as the most valuable source of marketing. The cheapest source of promotion for restaurants is WOM. WOM plays a crucial role in the services industry because services are difficult to assess as they are experiential in nature. A detailed review of the literature was conducted in order to find out the factors that influence WOM behavior. A self-administered questionnaire was used to collect the data from the customers of restaurants including students. For data collection, 400 questionnaires were distributed out of which 328 questionnaires were used for the analyses. Structured equation modeling was used for the analysis of the model. The results depict that food quality, price fairness, perceived value, and personal interaction quality does improve WOM behavior through the mediation of relationship quality. Whereas the physical environment has a negative impact on customer satisfaction. This study will help the restaurateurs to create something unique and distinctive for the customers in order to enhance the WOM intention of the restaurant industry.

**Keywords:** commitment, consumer behavior, customer satisfaction, trust, restaurant relationship quality, restaurant industry, word of mouth (WOM), electronic word of mouth (eWOM)

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## 1. Introduction

Word of mouth (WOM) is a type of informal communication in which the customers give their opinion to other customers about a particular good or service which impacts the latter's purchase decision (Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2008). WOM is based on customers' perceptions about the good or service which they have consumed. It might cast a significant impact on purchase behavior of other customers and entice them into buying that particular good or service (Jalilvand, Salimipour, Elyasi, & Mohammadi, 2017). In a survey by Balter (2008), it was estimated that WOM communications that took place in one day were approximately 3.4 billion out of which 2.3 billion were about brands. WOM is an important element for the success of the services sector which persists on a strong relationship between the customer and the services provider (Brown, Barry, Dacin, & Gunst, 2005). In studies conducted by Jalilvand and Samiei (2012a & 2012b) it was reported that WOM does affect the perception of tourists in the selection of their desired destination. Other researches included effects of customer complaint service in restaurant industry (Heung & Lam, 2003); superior service quality for competitive advantage (Gounaris, Stathakopoulos, & Athanassopoulos, 2003; Kandampully & Suhartanto, 2000; Mei, 1999); effect of WOM, service quality, physical environment, food quality and price on consumer purchase decision (Basri, Ahmad, Anuar, & Ismail, 2016). But only a few types of research have been conducted about the factors that impact the WOM behavior in the restaurant industry.

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The success of every industry is dependent on the customers and how satisfied they are from the goods and services the industry provides. The restaurant industry is wholly dependent on the satisfaction of the customers. In Asian countries, the restaurant industry contributes a lot to the services sector (Boo, 2011). Newly established restaurants depend mostly on WOM due to lack of promotional budget (Mangold, Miller, & Brockway, 1999). Due to high competition in the restaurant industry, it is really challenging for the restaurants to survive without a good image. For survival, it is essential to know the needs and wants of the customers and then to fulfill them accordingly. WOM helps restaurants with a small budget to sustain in the competitive industry. It is difficult to evaluate the restaurant industry because it is experiential in nature. A customer may be able to make any comment to others and decide to re-visit a restaurant only after experiencing it (Wirtz & Chew, 2002).

Therefore, the purpose of this research paper was to find the factors that influence WOM behavior of the restaurant industry in Pakistan. The restaurant industry is flourishing in Pakistan. In Pakistan the standard of living is improving and with the passage of time there is a significant increase in the number of female workers. Females are working in order to financially support their families. The number of female employers is also rapidly increasing in Pakistan. Owing to these reasons more and more women tend to cook less at home and prefer eating outside. (Safi & Awan, 2018)

In this study, it is investigated which factors affect the relationship quality that in turn affects the WOM intention of customers (Jalilvand et al., 2017; Meng & Elliott, 2008; Palmatier, Dant, Grewal, & Evans, 2006). This study investigated whether food quality, physical environment, personal interaction quality, perceived value, and price fairness influence the restaurant relationship quality which in turn increases the WOM intention in Pakistan.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Word of Mouth (WOM)**

WOM is basically a type of commitment by the customers towards the organization which they portray by sharing their experiences with other people hither and thither about the different goods or services of the organization utilized by them. Through this commitment, the customers develop a long term relationship with the organization. WOM is the most powerful and authentic form of communication which might be helpful for the customers in making a good decision about a good or service worthy of buying for them (Silverman, 2001). It is an inexpensive source of communication in which the information about a good or service is transmitted by oral means (Dean & Lang, 2008). In a study by Katz, Lazarsfeld, & Roper (2017) it was found that WOM can be more effective than newspaper and magazine seven times; personal selling four times and radio advertising two times; for switching the brand. WOM is an outcome of customers' expectation regarding the consumption experience (Ha & Jang, 2010). WOM is more crucial in services industry as services might cast a larger and more instant influence on consumers, therefore, also involving greater risk (Jalilvand, Pool, Vosta, & Kazemi, 2016; Mokhtaran, Fakharyan, Jalilvand, & Mohebi, 2015).

In the case of the restaurant industry, positive WOM would indeed boost the selection of a particular restaurant by customers whereas negative WOM would result in the avoidance of a particular restaurant. According to some previous studies there are some elements which are considered important like food and drink, service, cleanliness and hygiene, value for money and ambiance etc. Customers usually talk about these elements in order of their importance (Cousins, Foskett, & Gillespie, 2002). Online reviews about a particular restaurant are considered highly worthy as millions of people can be seen relying on them. Online reviews are known as electronic WOM (eWOM). EWOM is a type of communication which can spread more rapidly to even number consumers than WOM as it involves millions of people, is long lasting and easily accessible (Jeong & Jang, 2011). In a survey by Kasabov (2016), it was

found out that Chinese customers consider eWOM as a credible source of information which intrigues more and more customers to engage in eWOM and this information significantly effects customers' purchase decisions.

## **2.2 Food Quality**

People's improving standard of living makes them more status and brand conscious which seduce them eating outside and paying more for good food. The selection of restaurants depends mostly on the quality of food (Soriano, 2002; Knutson & Patton, 1993) which is even more important than price, convenience, value and cleanliness (Mattila, 2001). It also impacts customers' satisfaction (Bitner & Hubbert, 1994). In order to meet customer needs and demands, restaurant staff should base their food quality on customer wants and desires which are very important to be fulfilled (Peri, 2006). Food quality may be represented by freshness which is comprised of aroma, juiciness, and crispiness (Péneau et al., 2006); taste (Cortese, 2003), hygiene (Sulek & Hensley, 2004), variety in menu items, presentation (Kivela, Inbakaran, & Reece, 1999) and temperature (Namkung & Jang, 2007). The satisfaction and loyalty of the restaurant customers can be increased through good food quality (Andaleeb & Conway, 2006; Clark & Wood, 1999). In a study, it was found that a happy customer shares his experience with 5 people whereas 10 people come to know about the bad experience of an unhappy customer (Mangold et al., 1999). So we can hypothesize that:

**H1:** Food quality has a positive relationship with customers' satisfaction in the restaurant industry in Pakistan

## **2.3 Physical Environment**

Physical environment means the physical things or the tangibles present at the restaurant, not only the overall environment (Bitner, 1990). The physical environment may include the ambiance, atmosphere, and décor (Sloan, 2004). In the hospitality industry physical environment plays an important role in growing the profits and market share (Ha & Jang, 2012; Han & Ryu, 2009). The physical environment should be such that the customers should become accustomed to it, feel comfortable and make memorable dining away from home. Customers usually prefer to pay a high price when they feel a sense of pleasure and feel themselves in a safe and healthy environment (A. Yüksel & F. Yüksel, 2003). The physical environment can play an important role in the restaurant industry (Ryu, Han, & Kim, 2008; Wakefield & Blodgett, 1996). Customers usually fulfill their appetite when the environment is friendly and luxurious (Walker, 2013). According to research, the overall satisfaction of the restaurant industry can be enhanced through the physical environment (Garbarino, & Johnson, 1999). The perceived service quality can be enhanced through the physical environment in the restaurant industry (Stevens, Knutson, & Patton, 1995). The factors such as nutrition quality, physical environment quality, entertainment quality, food quality, and service quality increase the overall satisfaction of customers (Anwar & Gulzar, 2011). So we can hypothesize that:

**H2:** Physical environment quality has a positive relationship with customers' satisfaction in the restaurant industry in Pakistan

## **2.4 Personal Interaction Quality**

Services industry persists on the interaction and relationship between the customer and the firm (Harker & Egan, 2006). Firms should try to develop a long-term relationship with the customers which helps to develop trust between the customer and the firm (Yu & Dean, 2001). Nowadays a days, an effective tactic used in the restaurant industry to develop an interactive communication with the customers is through collecting feedbacks on food and service quality which in turn helps to grab customer satisfaction (Jayachandran, Sharma, Kaufman, & Raman, 2005; Parsons, 2002). Through customer feedback form, the restaurant also gets customer's contact number through which they develop a permanent long-term communication with the buyer which helps to increase customer loyalty as well as improve the relationship quality (Vesel & Zabkar, 2010). Customers feel more satisfied when the restaurant provides good

relationship benefits, like discount and different offers, and would like to visit it again and again. Personal interaction quality and physical environment can increase customers satisfaction (Chen, 2012). Information is the main element of relationship building which tells the seller about the needs, wants and desires of the buyers. Therefore, fulfilling them accordingly may increase customer satisfaction and improve WOM intention (Payne & Frow, 2005). So we can hypothesize that:

**H3:** Personal interaction quality has a positive relationship with customers' satisfaction of the restaurant industry in Pakistan

## **2.5 Perceived Value**

Perceived value is actually the trade-off between the price and benefits – the benefits that they receive from the consumption of good or service minus the actual price they pay for the good or service (Ryu et al., 2008). The customer assesses the utility that he receives through a good or service by the give and takes relationship (Zeithaml, Berry, & Parasuraman, 1996). Perceived value is usually the comparison between the cost of the product and the opportunity cost (Rust & Oliver, 1993). Cost also determines the perceived value, if the cost is high then the perceived value for the good or service will also be high. If the perceived value is fulfilled then the customer is likely to share the experience with other customers and would increase WOM intention (Bowen & Shoemaker, 2003). So we can hypothesize:

**H4:** Perceived value has a positive relationship with customers' satisfaction in the restaurant industry in Pakistan

## **2.6 Price Fairness**

Price fairness means that the price the firm is offering is justifiable with the good or service quality and is reasonable (Xia, Monroe, & Cox, 2004). Customers evaluate price fairness through previous prices and most importantly the price of the competitors (Bolton, Warlop, & Alba, 2003). Customers usually set a benchmark for price fairness that can be past prices, competitors' prices and prices other customers pay, etc. (Briesch, Krishnamurthi, Mazumdar, & Raj, 1997). Customers usually relate the value to the price of the good or service which in turn can change the satisfaction level (Anderson, Fornell, & Lehmann, 1994). If a company offers fair price than the customer gets satisfied and gets loyal towards the company that in turn increases the brand image. While on the other hand price unfairness can lead to negative WOM (Campbell, 1999). Price fairness has a strong relationship with customer satisfaction (Kaura, 2012; Herrmann, Xia, Monroe, & Huber, 2007). So we can hypothesize:

**H5:** Price fairness has a positive relationship with customers' satisfaction of the restaurant industry in Pakistan

When a customer is satisfied with a good or service, his loyalty increases which in turn increases the repurchase of the good or service and subsequently the WOM intention (Getty & Thompson, 1995). So we can hypothesize:

**H6:** Customers' satisfaction is positively related to WOM intention in the restaurant industry of Pakistan

## **2.7 Relationship Quality**

The three main elements of relationship quality are satisfaction, trust, and commitment (Walsh, Hennig-Thurau, Sassenberg, & Bornemann, 2010)

*2.7.1 Customer satisfaction:* Customer satisfaction is whether the customer has gained utility in the good or service and has the requirements of the customer been fulfilled (Deng, Lu, Wei, & Zhang, 2010). Satisfied customers engage in positive WOM whereas dissatisfied customers engage in negative WOM (Oliver, 1999). A company's present, past, and future are dependent on customer satisfaction (Boulding, Kalra, Staelin, & Zeithaml, 1993). The main element of customer satisfaction is the perceived quality (Bitner & Hubbert, 1994). Brand trust also increases customer satisfaction (Delgado-Ballester & Munuera-Alemán, 2001). So we can hypothesize:

**H7:** Customer satisfaction has a positive relationship with the trust of the restaurant industry in Pakistan

If a customer is satisfied with the good or service he is committed towards its purchase irrespective of competition or other situational factors (Vieira & Slongo, 2008). So we can hypothesize:

**H8:** Customer Satisfaction has a positive relationship with the commitment towards the restaurant industry in Pakistan

**2.7.2 Trust:** Trust is the basis of any relationship especially before and after the experience (Singh & Sirdeshmukh, 2000). Trust implies that the customer holds an opinion about the firm that it will understand his needs and will satisfy them. Sometimes the customers trust the persons who are interacting with them while at other times they trust the organization as a whole (Miller, & Jensen, 2007). Trust can enhance customer commitment to the company (Vieira & Slongo, 2008). So we can hypothesize:

**H9:** Trust has a positive relationship with the commitment towards the restaurant in industry Pakistan

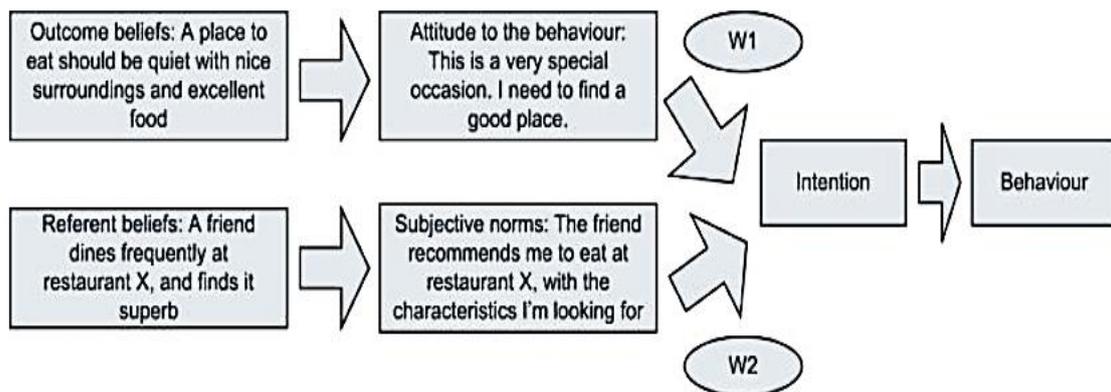
When trust in a company increases it also increases customer satisfaction and commitment which will also help to improve the WOM intentions of customers (Jalilvand et al., 2017). So we can hypothesize:

**H10:** Trust has a positive relationship with WOM intention of the restaurant industry in Pakistan

**2.7.3 Commitment:** The most important element of relationship quality is commitment (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, & Gremler, 2002). Commitment is considered to be an attachment to the firm (Beatty et al., 1996). A loyal customer is more attached to the firm. Switching is not easy for loyal customers. The ultimate goal of commitment is WOM (Fullerton, 2003). So we can hypothesize:

**H11:** Customer commitment has a positive relationship with WOM intention of the restaurant industry in Pakistan

The concept that people change their decision of eating out in a particular restaurant due to WOM is backed by the theory of reasoned action (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). The theory of reasoned action studies the individual's behavior. This theory basically tells how a certain individual will behave in a certain situation based on previous or pre-existing attitudes and behavioral intentions. The theory of reasoned action relates to our study based on the model proposed by Ajzen and Fishbein (1980).



**Source:** Fishbein and Ajzen (1980)

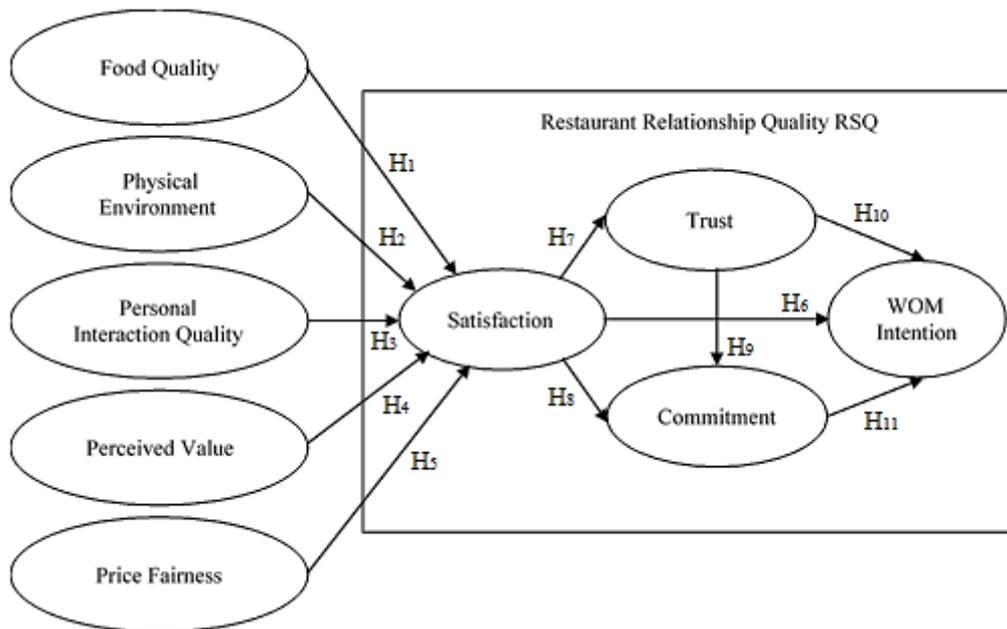


Figure 2.1: Schematic Diagram

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Data Collection Technique and Sampling Size

This study involves a quantitative research method for the collection of data. The survey was conducted for the purpose of gathering the data. For the testing of hypotheses, a questionnaire based on customer-restaurant relationships were filled out by the respondents. Convenience sampling technique which is a part of non-probability sampling was used for the selection of respondents. Measurement scales were adopted from different researches for designing the questionnaire. In this study 5-point, Likert scale was utilized for the measurement of items that range from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree. The questionnaire items were adapted from the following sources:

Table 3.1: Measures

Variables	Source
Food quality	(Namkung & Jang, 2007)
Physical environment quality	(Meng & Elliott, 2008)
Personal interaction quality	(Vesel & Zabkar, 2009)
Perceived value	(Chen et al., 2012)
Price fairness	(Hassan, Hassan, Nawaz, & Aksel, 2013)
Satisfaction	(Walsh et al., 2010)
Trust	(Cassab & MacLachlan, 2009)
Commitment	(Fullerton, 2005)
WOM intention	(Jalilvand, Samiei, Dini, & Manzari, 2012)

#### 3.2 Population

*3.2.1 Descriptive statistics of demographics and variables:* Data were collected from different restaurants and universities. A structured questionnaire was distributed among the respondents and was asked to spare 10 minutes to fill it up. 400 questionnaires were distributed out of which 328 questionnaires were completely filled. As far as the descriptive statistics of the respondents are concerned, out of 328 responses, 102 respondents were males (31.1%) and 226 were females (68.9%). The overall analysis of the descriptive statistics of the respondents is given in Table 3.2.1.

Table 3.2.1: Descriptive of Respondents

Category	Range	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	102	31.1%
	Female	226	68.9%
Age	15-20	88	26.8%
	21-25	192	58.5%
	26-30	33	10.1%
	31-40	15	4.6%
Employment Status	Unemployed	209	63.7%
	Employed	119	36.3%

Table 3.2.2: Descriptive of variables

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Food quality	328	1.00	5.00	3.6885	.79634
Physical environment quality	328	1.00	5.00	3.6951	.82282
Personal interaction quality	328	1.00	5.00	3.4756	.84999
Perceived value	328	1.00	5.00	3.6006	.79544
Price fairness	328	1.00	5.00	3.4977	.86944
Satisfaction	328	1.00	5.00	3.6230	.90217
Trust	328	1.00	5.00	3.6199	.88587
Commitment	328	1.00	5.00	3.3902	.96250
WOM intention	328	1.00	5.00	3.6921	.94120

### 3.3 Measures

Researcher adapted a well-established 32 item instrument to elicit customer responses towards WOM and its predictors. Smart PLS-SEM has been used to estimate the proposed structural model. Researchers suggest calculating Cronbach’s alpha or composite reliability (CR), average variance extracted (AVE) and heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratio to establish reliability and validity of the instrument. The overall calculated value of Cronbach’s alpha ( $\alpha=0.90$ ) shows that the reliability of the instrument is established. However, the calculation of reliability for each construct separately is preferable. PLS-SEM calculates CR, AVE and HTMT ratio using PLS-Algorithm procedure. In PLS-Algorithm, CR and AVE calculated under the head of convergent validity; while HTMT ratio is calculated under the head of discriminant validity. The following Table 3.3.1 shows the calculated values of Factor Loadings, CR and AVE.

Table 3.3.1 Reliability and Validity of the Instrument

Items	Factor Loadings	CR	AVE
Commitment		0.887	0.723
CO1	0.858		
CO2	0.891		
CO3	0.801		
Food Quality		0.907	0.619
FQ1	0.718		
FQ2	0.825		
FQ3	0.780		
FQ4	0.856		

FQ5	0.759		
FQ6	0.774		
Physical Environment Quality		0.880	0.648
PEQ1	0.827		
PEQ2	0.841		
PEQ3	0.798		
PEQ4	0.751		
Price Fairness		0.902	0.697
PF1	0.818		
PF2	0.855		
PF3	0.861		
PF4	0.805		
Personal Interaction Quality		0.879	0.708
PIQ1	0.844		
PIQ2	0.865		
PIQ3	0.815		
Perceived Value		0.874	0.698
PV1	0.838		
PV2	0.833		
PV3	0.835		
Satisfaction		0.901	0.752
SA1	0.844		
SA2	0.877		
SA3	0.881		
Trust		0.903	0.757
TR1	0.882		
TR2	0.860		
TR3	0.868		
Word of Mouth		0.934	0.825
WOM1	0.901		
WOM2	0.911		
WOM3	0.912		

The calculated value of CR and AVE shows that reliability and convergent validity is established (See Table 3.3.1). Composite Reliability and Average Variance Extracted should be greater than 0.70 and 0.50 respectively. Moreover, researchers suggest calculating HTMT Ratio to measure discriminant validity. Discriminant validity represents that each of the constructs measures a different concept from the other variables. Table 3.3.2 below shows that discriminant validity is established as the calculated value of HTMT ratio is less than 0.90.

Table 3.3.2 HTMT Ratio

Sr. No	Constructs	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1	COM	0.851								
2	FQ	0.597	0.787							
3	PV	0.603	0.556	0.835						
4	PIQ	0.657	0.653	0.608	0.842					
5	PEQ	0.542	0.742	0.491	0.600	0.805				
6	PF	0.582	0.532	0.648	0.604	0.489	0.835			
7	SA	0.639	0.696	0.647	0.652	0.546	0.645	0.867		
8	TR	0.723	0.712	0.653	0.663	0.614	0.639	0.774	0.870	
9	WOM	0.717	0.669	0.660	0.614	0.524	0.613	0.704	0.716	0.908

#### 4. Findings

To estimate the proposed structural model, the researcher applied PLS bootstrapping procedure with 5000 iterations. PLS bootstrapping procedure calculates standardize root mean square (SRMR) to evaluate model fitness. The calculated value of SRMR, i.e. 0.090 indicates that the model is a good fit. Figure 4.1 below shows the model extracted through PLS-bootstrapping procedure.

The model extracted through PLS bootstrapping indicates that all the proposed antecedents of satisfaction i.e. FQ ( $\beta=0.396$ ,  $p=0.000<0.01$ ), PIQ ( $\beta=0.165$ ,  $p=0.003<0.01$ ), PV ( $\beta=0.208$ ,  $p=0.000<0.01$ ) and PF ( $\beta=0.230$ ,  $p=0.000<0.01$ ) have positive and highly significant impact on satisfaction except PE. Because PE is significant at more than 5% ( $\beta=-0.062$ ,  $p=0.229>0.05$ ). Moreover, the model shows that FQ is the most significant driver of customer satisfaction in the restaurant industry. In turn, satisfaction shows positive and highly significant impact on trust ( $\beta=0.774$ ,  $p=0.000<0.01$ ), commitment ( $\beta=0.197$ ,  $p=0.004$ ), and word of mouth intention ( $\beta=0.300$ ,  $p=0.000<0.01$ ). Resultantly, trust and commitment depict positive and significant impact on word of mouth intention. The findings of this study also show that satisfaction has both a direct and indirect effect on WOM through the mediation of trust and commitment.

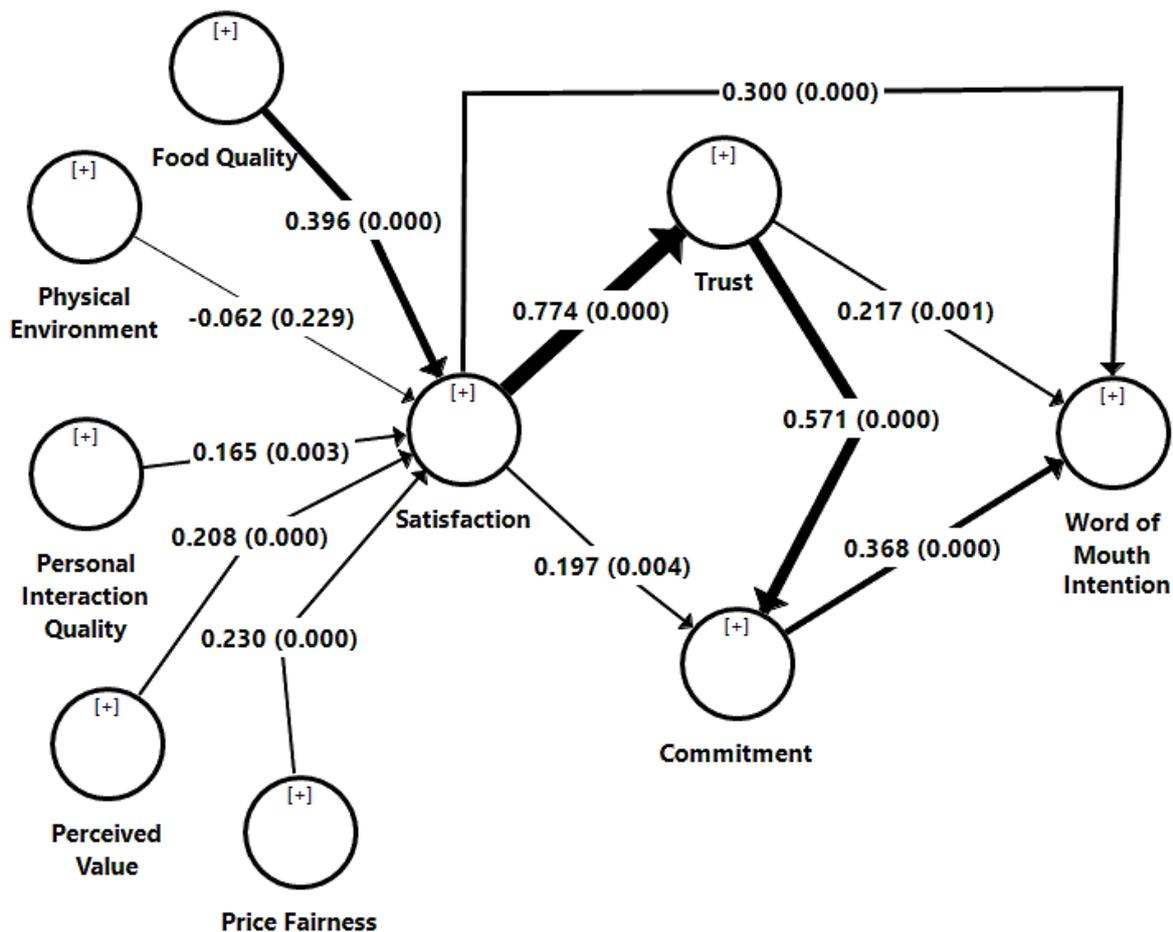


Figure 4.1: PLS Model

Also, researchers calculated the coefficient of determination, i.e.  $R^2$ . The calculated value of the coefficient of determination presents the amount of variance generated by the independent variable into a dependent variable. Table 4.1 shows the calculated value of  $R^2$  for the current model, i.e. COM=0.539, SA=0.632, TR=0.599, and WOM=0.631. Furthermore, to cross-validate the coefficient of determination, researchers suggest calculating Stone-Geisser

Q<sup>2</sup>. The calculated value of Q<sup>2</sup> should be greater than zero to establish the predictive relevance of the structural model.

Table 4.1 Values of R<sup>2</sup> and Q<sup>2</sup>

Constructs	R <sup>2</sup>	Q <sup>2</sup>	Effect
Commitment	0.539	0.385	Large
Satisfaction	0.632	0.448	Large
Trust	0.599	0.492	Large
Word of Mouth	0.631	0.443	Large

Small: 0.0<Q<sup>2</sup> effect size<0.15; Medium: 0.15<Q<sup>2</sup> effect size<0.35; Large: Q<sup>2</sup> effect size>0.35

The current study was aimed to examine both the direct and indirect effect of satisfaction on WOM through trust and commitment. We examined the role of trust and commitment both as parallel and sequential mediators between the relationship of satisfaction and WOM intention. To test whether mediation exists or not, this paper follows the guidelines of Shrout and Bolger (2002), Preacher and Hayes (2008), and Zhao, Lynch, and Chen (2010). They criticized Baron and Kenny's (1986) casual-step approach to test mediation and proposed to calculate variance accounted for (VAF). VAF is defined as the extent to which indirect effect absorbs the total effect. The following Table 4.2 shows the calculated values of direct, indirect, total effect and VAF.

Table 4.2 Mediation Analysis: Trust and Commitment as Mediators

Sr. No	Mediation Path	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect	Total Effect	VAF	Mediation
1	SA-TR-WOM	0.300**	0.168**	0.468**	0.359	Partial
2	SA-COM-WOM	0.300**	0.072**	0.372**	0.200	Partial
3	SA-TR-COM-WOM	0.300**	0.403**	0.703**	0.573	Partial

No Mediation: 0.0<VAF<0.20; Partial Medium: 0.20<VAF<0.80; Full Mediation: 0.80<VAF<1.0

\*\* Highly Significant at .01 level of significance

\* Significant at .05 level of significance

The first two, mediation paths show (See Table 4.2) trust and commitment as parallel mediators; whereas path three measures the role of trust and commitment as sequential mediators. The results of mediation analysis show that both trust and commitment (as parallel mediators) partially mediate the relationship of satisfaction and word of mouth intention as the calculated values of VAF, i.e. 0.359 and 0.200, respectively, are greater than 0.20 and less than 0.80. Moreover, trust and commitment show sequential partial and complimentary mediation between the relationship of satisfaction and word of mouth intention. This sequential mediation shows that satisfaction with the services increases trust level among customers that trigger commitment with the particular services. That in turn positively influences word of mouth intention.

## 5. Discussion

The aim of this paper was to find out the factors that influence WOM behavior of restaurant industry in Pakistan. This study shows that quality and price fairness are the most important constructs of WOM behavior in which relationship quality plays a crucial role. This study confirms that food quality ( $\beta=0.396$ ,  $p=0.000<0.01$ ) is an important factor of customer satisfaction which in turn influences WOM behavior. According to a survey conducted by Cousins, Foskett, and Pennington (2011) it was found that customers were more concerned about what they pay for; which means customers can overlook poor personal interaction quality but they cannot overlook poor food quality. The second factor is price fairness ( $\beta=0.230$ ,  $p=0.000<0.01$ ) In Pakistan people consider the prices before dining out. The third factor is the perceived value ( $\beta=0.208$ ,  $p=0.000<0.01$ ). The fourth factor is personal interaction quality ( $\beta=0.165$ ,  $p=0.003<0.01$ ). It seconds the results of the various previous studies that by increasing the customer satisfaction services industry like the restaurant industry becomes more successful. Hypothesis 2 is rejected in this study as it shows that the physical environment

doesn't have a positive relationship with customer satisfaction rather it has a negative relationship with it ( $\beta=-0.062$ ,  $p=0.229>0.05$ ) The most significant element of trust among customers is customer satisfaction ( $\beta=0.774$ ,  $p=0.000<0.001$ ). Whereas commitment is also influenced by satisfaction of the customers ( $\beta=0.197$ ,  $p=0.004<0.005$ ). Trust of the customers in the restaurant also leads towards the commitment towards the restaurant ( $\beta=0.571$ ,  $p=0.000<0.001$ ). However WOM is influenced the most with commitment ( $\beta=0.368$ ,  $p=0.000<0.001$ ), then is influenced by satisfaction ( $\beta=0.300$ ,  $p=0.000<0.01$ ) and lastly by trust ( $\beta=0.217$ ,  $p=0.001<0.005$ ). This study does not support the study of Han and Ryu (2009) according to which people prefer the physical environment while dining out. Our study rejects the hypothesis and concludes that the physical environment does not increase customer satisfaction rather may decrease it. The reason behind the rejection of this hypothesis can be that people usually associate a good environment with the price and assume that prices are usually high. They assume that good infrastructure requires money and restaurant management usually get it by charging high prices to the customers. Pakistani people are really price conscious, hence, their satisfaction gets decreased by a good physical environment due to their assumption about charging high (Xiao, Yang, & Iqbal, 2019). This study shows that all the three elements (satisfaction, trust, and commitment) of RSQ together trigger the WOM behavior. The sequential mediation shows that satisfaction with the services increases trust level among customers that trigger commitment with the particular services. That in turn positively influences word of mouth.

Table: 5.1: Hypotheses Summary

Hypotheses	Results
Food Quality-Satisfaction	Accepted
Physical Environment-Satisfaction	Rejected
Personal Interaction Quality-Satisfaction	Accepted
Perceived Value-Satisfaction	Accepted
Price Fairness-Satisfaction	Accepted
Satisfaction-WOM	Accepted
Satisfaction-Trust	Accepted
Satisfaction-Commitment	Accepted
Trust-Commitment	Accepted
Trust-WOM	Accepted
Commitment-WOM	Accepted

## 6. Conclusion

As the standard of living of Pakistani people has been gradually improving since the past few years, the trend of eating is also on the rise. Some of the factors that were determined, which influences WOM behavior, RSQ plays an important and crucial role. This study confirms the previous studies that food quality may be represented by freshness which is comprised of aroma, juiciness, and crispiness (Péneau et al., 2006); taste (Cortese, 2003), hygiene (Sulek & Hensley, 2004), variety in menu items, presentation (Kivela, Inbakaran, & Reece, 1999) and temperature (Namkung & Jang, 2007). It delineates that food quality is a significant predictor of customer satisfaction. Price fairness is another significant predictor of customer satisfaction and it also goes in line with previous studies of (Gagić, Tešanović, & Jovičić, 2013; Kaura, 2012; Herrmann, 2007). This study confirms that price fairness can enhance customer satisfaction in the restaurant industry. Personal interaction quality and perceived value as proposed by (Vesel & Zabkar, 2009; Ball, Simões Coelho, & Machás, 2004) were also confirmed in this study that they do have an influence on customer satisfaction in the restaurant industry. These two constructs are the basis of developing a strong relationship between the customer and the restaurant. Employees' interaction in service industry plays a vital role in gaining a competitive advantage over rivalries and achieving differentiation for

developing value to customers. This study rejects the previous studies about the physical environment as stated by (Garbarino, & Johnson, 1999) that overall satisfaction is increased through the physical environment. This study develops a new result by showing that physical environment quality in Pakistan has a negative relationship with customer satisfaction. In this study, it was also proved that customer satisfaction affects trust which then affects commitment and lastly it affects the WOM behavior of customers which supports the previous study of (Walsh et al., 2010). When a customer gets satisfied, the customer develops the relationship of trust with that particular firm which enhances WOM behavior. Similarly when a customer is satisfied and develops trust then the customer gets committed with that firm which again influences WOM behavior.

## **7. Managerial Implications**

This study will be helpful for the restaurants' management to improve their relationship with the customers and to create loyal customers by satisfying their needs. As the economy is growing, so is the services sector, which intensifies the competition among restaurants. Therefore, the only way to survive is by providing service excellence. Most of the customers rely on the information gathered from friends, family, and people in the neighborhood as it is considered a trustworthy source. Hence the restaurants should provide high quality in order to encourage the guts of people towards positive WOM. So the managerial implications can be:

The restaurateurs should focus on the quality of food rather than on the menu items as it increases the level of customer satisfaction. Hence the kitchen staff should be provided with essential training on how to consistently deliver healthy, tasty and mouth-watering food. The quality of food cannot be judged until it has been experienced by eating it. WOM mostly depends on both tangibles such as food and intangible services. To develop customer loyalty, the restaurateurs should provide something unique and distinct to them, which can be achieved through establishing a good relationship between the customer and staff, such as by gathering feedback.

Personal interaction quality is among one of the most important factors for maximizing positive WOM. Better interaction between customer and staff can lead to trust, emotional attachment, commitment, and satisfaction which will, in turn, maximize positive WOM intention. This study will also help restaurateurs to provide training to the staff for developing good communication skills, the way in which the staff can communicate in a friendly and trustworthy manner.

The perceived value should also be considered for maximizing positive WOM. Customers enjoy their meal when they get better services and are should be willing to pay more for perceived value. So the perceived value can be enhanced by providing free gifts, discount vouchers and sometimes surprises. However, the surprises shouldn't be so often that it becomes a norm for the customers to consider revisiting a restaurant and they start expecting surprises with every meal.

Relationship quality should also be maintained for positive WOM. Restaurants should keep their promises in order to develop trust among customers.

In the world of competition, it becomes difficult for the restaurants to retain their customers as customers get confused among the competitors. WOM is the best, convenient and inexpensive way of spreading awareness about a specific restaurant to several customers. Hence the restaurateurs should manage WOM by enhancing the relationship among potential customers.

Restaurateurs should adopt the marketing strategy accordingly based on the age group it has to target, theme, interior, etc. of the restaurant. Marketers should focus more on youngsters as they are the main customers of restaurants (Namkung & Jang, 2010). The pricing strategy should also be kept accordingly as a substantial proportion of people who love to eat

outside consists of middle-class people. Therefore, the focus should be a lower price which may attract more customers.

## **8. Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

In this study convenience sampling was used hence its findings could not be generalized to all the customers of restaurants. Other researchers can study this model in different services industries. Future researchers can also focus on the eWOM i.e. online reviews as the internet plays an important role in spreading the information among larger masses at a much faster pace.

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