

**Encouraging Adoption and Usage of eWOM:  
The Factors Contributing to Employee Brand Advocacy**

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## **Abstract**

Social Media platforms offer businesses new ways to strength customer relationships, create brand awareness and develop loyal customers. Electronic word of mouth (eWOM) initiatives such as visually enriched content makes marketing messages from employees more entertaining and appealing for customers. Employee's within the Irelands Food and Drink Industry enjoys enthusiastic social media skills and expertise, it makes sense for them to inspire and act as brand advocates. This study is driven by three primary research gaps in the existing literature on the social media use by employees within SMEs in the food and drinks industry in Ireland. Firstly, do employees in SMEs in the food and drinks sector promote their business through electronic word of Mouth (eWOM) initiatives? Secondly, do employers in SMEs in the food and drinks sector motivate and encourage employee brand advocacy? Finally, does eWOM initiatives drive employee brand advocacy? While social media seems to gain popularity as a marketing channel amongst business in the food and drinks industry in Ireland, many scholars noted a significant gap between research and practice.

This paper includes the four explanatory variables, employee motivation, employer motivation, eWOM Adoption & Usage and Employee Brand Advocacy. Data from usable questionnaires was collected from SMEs in Ireland. A total of 70 companies were contact; 40 companies completed the survey, resulting in a response rate of 43%. Out of the 40 companies, 38 companies used social media, and two did not use social media. The main findings confirms that employer motivations does lead to eWOM Adoption & Usage. In addition, the findings indicate eWOM initiatives drives employee brand advocacy. However, employees themselves are not motivated to use eWOM for their businesses.

**Keywords:** Social Media, eWOM, Employee Brand Advocacy, Employee Motivation, Employer Motivation

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

The adoption of technologies, including social media, by businesses has been well documented in the literature. In Ireland, the Central Statistics Office (CSO) indicate the use of social media by Irish enterprises was the second highest in the European Union in 2017. The CSO notes that 68% of Irish enterprises, employing 10 or more people, used some type of social media such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube compared with an average of 47% in the European Union (CSO, 2017). Another study from Ipsos MRBI 2016 survey (RTE, 2016) indicates those that have a social media account, daily usage is highest on Facebook at 72%, followed by Instagram at 56%, Twitter at 39%, Google+ at 20% and LinkedIn at 11% (RTE, 2016). With Ireland's digital ad spend at 31% in 2016, an increase of 2% from 2015 demonstrates the increased commitment amongst businesses for online marketing (Annicelli, 2017).

Many reports both nationally and internationally indicate that businesses will increase their digital marketing budgets for the foreseeable future:

- 70% of Irish Marketers Plan To Increase Marketing Budget Given To Social Media - Marketing Institute and Edelman Social Survey Results (Edelman and Ireland(MII), 2016).
- By 2021 marketing leaders will spend 75 per cent of their budget in digital channels, (Salesforce, 2016).
- The 2016-2017 survey confirms the third consecutive year of budget increases (Gartner, 2016).
- 72% plan on increasing their marketing budgets in 2016 (Econsultancy and Cloud, 2016).

This increase in online marketing budgets highlights the need for researchers to understand how employees within SMEs perceive, accept and use social media. This study contributes to the social media and IS literature in the context of employee's adoption and usage of social media for the food and drinks industry in Ireland.

The food and drinks industry in Ireland contributes €26 billion to the national economy and is one of Ireland's most essential indigenous manufacturing sectors, accounting for employment of around 150,000 people (Bordbia, 2016). It encompasses over 600 food and drinks business throughout the country, which export 85% of our food products to more than 160 countries worldwide. This industry is facing a market opportunity that is the desire of almost every other business sector (Teagasc, 2017). The world's population will grow by 1 billion in the next fifteen years. Food supplies is expected to increase by a remarkable 50% during that timeframe. Consumer-facing technology is also central for the industry. The food and drink businesses who use mobile apps and digital media engages with vast numbers of customers about the aspects of their products and real time analytics are used to offer customers personalised products (Deloitte, 2018).

The social media behaviour of employees represents an opportunity for businesses. With the increased personal use of social networking sites, it is becoming apparent that every employee on social media has a relationship with key stakeholders, be they colleagues, current or future clients, suppliers or potential job candidates. This reality motivates the desire to have employees intermingling in positive and productive ways in relation to their employers brand (Cervellon and Lirio, 2017). Employee branding is a process whereby employees internalise the company brand image and project that image to customers, and other stakeholders (Miles and Mangold, 2004). Employees are the company's face in social media and that reputation is built there on a person to person basis (Rokka et al., 2014).

Hence, if content that is found on social media is perceived as valid, the message receivers will develop a positive approach towards the products related to these reviews. By understanding the effectiveness and impact of persuasive electronic word of mouth (eWOM) messages, employees can create more effect marketing campaigns (Fulgoni and Lipsman, 2017).

### **Research Question**

This paper examines the factors that lead employees to adopt and use eWOM initiatives for SMEs within Ireland's food and drinks sector. Is there a commitment from employers to motivate and encourage social media use amongst its workforce? Another consideration is whether the adoption and usage of eWOM encourages employee brand advocacy. Based on this three research questions were developed:

1. Do employees in SMEs in the food and drinks sector promote their business through eWOM initiatives?
2. Do employers in SMEs in the food and drinks sector motivate and encourage employee brand advocacy?
3. Does eWOM initiatives drive employee brand advocacy?

### **2.0 Food and Drink Industry Ireland**

According to the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM), the agri-food and drink sector accounted for 10.7% of Ireland's exports and 8.4% of total employment (2015 data). In 2016, Irish agri-food and drink exports increased by an estimated 2% to approximately €11.15 billion, according to Bord Bia, the Irish Food Board (IFP, 2016).

Ireland is a suitable location for innovation. Business need to have the confidence to spend on innovation and deliver the increase in exports as part of Ireland's targeted in Food Harvest 2020. The opportunity is vast and Ireland should take it (Deloitte, 2018). However, the smallest business will require marketing to help promote their products and their product story to the consumer. The tools used will vary, but can include: website, social media, leaflet/flyer, business cards, recipe leaflets (Bordbia, 2014). How these businesses are adopting social media is of interest to this study.

The European Commission TRADEIT project has developed a network of bakery, dairy and meat-producing SMEs, food networks, associations, researchers and technology providers. The project aims to support traditional food producers by sharing new knowledge, technologies and best practice on product, process and operational innovations. Consumers are increasingly aware of the value of food from high-quality sources, and the benefits of purchasing locally, this has resulted in a growing artisan and local food sector (Commission, 2015). Fáilte Ireland, through its Food Strategy 2014-2016 has sought to change the perception that Ireland is a producer of great ingredients to that of a nation with an authentic cuisine. The food expectations of tourists have increased in recent years, driven by intense social media activity around unique food and drink experiences. A key objective of Ireland's food strategy is to support networks and businesses in creating compelling food and drink imagery and videos for use across online marketing campaigns (Failte, 2018).

Despite the increasing quality of food and drink, as well as the new experience offerings, Ireland has a limited world reputation in this area. Perceptions globally of the quality of Irish food in particular lag far below the reality (Failte, 2018). Businesses can maximise their businesses brands by using social media to tell their stories. However, most Irish food and beverage businesses spend less than 3% on research and development and many spend less

than 1% (Deloitte, 2018). The online presence for food businesses may be found across numerous social media platforms, with Facebook being the most vital to-date. The main reason for food businesses to build an online presence is to nurture a dialogue between employees and customers, as well as to build customer relationships on a deeper, more emotional level (Rokka et al., 2014).

There are many businesses within the following sectors in the Irish food and drink industry: bakery (149), beef (50), beverages (191), confectionary (58), dairy (121), eggs (29), food ingredients (non-dairy) (29), horticulture (48), lamb (1), meat offal's (1), pigment (64), poultry meat (11), prepared foods (398), sea foods (224) and speciality meats (21). For this study, the interest in artisan food businesses in particular bakery, confectionary, dairy, beverages, prepared foods and horticulture, mainly because their products are made by hand using traditional methods focusing on providing farm to fork type foods with locally sourced products that benefit the consumer, small scale growers and producers, and the local economy.

The nature of these businesses is where employees are expected to stand behind the products and their quality and to recommend these products to consumers. Employees possess robust social media skills and expertise, it seems normal to inspire them to act as brand advocates online (Rokka et al., 2014). The businesses are encouraged to prepare well-crafted marketing messages and post only high quality content on social networking sites. The power has been taken from those in business by the individuals and communities that create, share and consumer blogs, tweets, Facebook entries, movies, and pictures. Communication about brands occurs with or without permission of the business in question. It is now up to businesses to decide if they want to get serious about social media adoption and usage and help their employees to participate in this communication or continue to ignore it (Barreda et al., 2015, Kietzmann et al., 2011).

### **3.0 Social Media - eWOM Initiatives**

Social media is an online platform people use to share opinions, experiences, insights, perceptions and various media, including photos, video and music with each other. There are several aspects to social media, Social media enables active participation in the form of communicating, creating, joining, collaborating, working, sharing, socialising, playing, buying and selling, and learning within interactive and interdependent network (Turban and King, 2012, Tuten and Solomon, 2013).

Although inexpensive to implement, social media requires research to identify which approach makes sense for the industry, organisation, line of business, and the commitment to employ the human resources necessary to support the implementation and continued social media effort (Andzulis et al., 2012, Lanz, 2010). Some organisations implement social media for their business from a bottom up approach, concentrating their efforts on newer, younger members of the staff especially recent college graduates (Guinan et al., 2014). However, an employee expert in social media, may have sufficient authority to influence senior management in the business (Davis, 2016). This role may be strategic in evolving competence, but also commitment through a flawless strategy on social media and a communication campaign.

Current research suggest many benefits for businesses in adopting and using social media, these include; attract new customers (Michaelidou et al., 2011), build brand awareness (Castronovo and Lei, 2012, Lee and Youn, 2009), strengthen customer relationships (Yoon et

al., 2013, Rapp et al., 2012, Davis, 1989, Kirtiş and Karahan, 2011, Ridings and Gefen, 2004), and increase sales (Georgios Tsimonis and Dimitriadis, 2014).

Food SMEs, representing the majority of the manufacturers in the SME sector, have an important role within the European economy. Food SMEs are a little conservative in allocating resources for process innovation, scarcity of financial resources within food SMEs prevent them from exploiting technical/technological related opportunities (Farrelly and Mitchell, 2017). SMEs have their own struggles: energy costs are high; business regulatory costs and staff costs (as opposed to take home pay) are on the rise; and a small domestic market (Deloitte, 2018). Despite the many advantages to using social media, cited in the literature is the many challenges that businesses particularly SMEs received by adopting and using this technology. SMEs face many challenges due to the cost of conducting business, limited resources, funding, and poor implementation of technology, which may have a drastic effect on SMEs' performance. Finally, the lack of consistent and optimal use of digital tools (Failte, 2018) (Dahnil et al., 2014, Meadows, 2009, DJEI, 2011). Companies need to be sensitive to other social media challenges with regards to reputation management and they need to discuss the underlying limitations of managing their employees, who in most cases are their business voice online (Fournier and Avery, 2011). In the face of the growth in social media, managers are still unclear as to how it can be used to benefit their businesses (Ang, 2011).

In contrast to traditional word of mouth (WOM), eWOM messages, which can be defined as: "Any positive or negative statements made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet" (Henning-Thurau et al., 2004, p. 39). With social media, the daily conversations between customers and business allow opinion leaders to create and promote profiles relating to products and services of brands. Users can share their comments through written messages, videos, picture, or even applications. This visually enriched content makes eWOM more entertaining and appealing. Also, social media websites which can be integrated with social media can help promotes the dissemination of eWOM message with a vast number of people (Dessart et al., 2015, Holmes and Lett, 1977).

If online content is perceived as valid, the message receivers will develop a positive approach towards the product/services related to these reviews. Therefore, the message is perceived as credible (Fulgoni and Lipsman, 2017). Indeed, consumers consider WOM as a more reliable source of information than messages from sales representatives and marketers (Murray, 1991). Consumers trust and depend on more readily on the opinions from their family and friends than from promotional sources and businesses. Finally, eWOM information can be produced by almost every user on the Internet; therefore credibility and quality of this information has now become more critical (Xu, 2014).

Persuasive eWOM message refer to the type of online message, specifically recommendations that are perceived as from credible sources, these messages signifying explanatory power in the acceptance of online information (Fulgoni and Lipsman, 2017). Argument quality refers to "The persuasive strength of arguments embedded in an informational message" (Sundaram et al., 1998 p.811). Do employees have persuasive strength in the content messages that they post on their business behalf? Do these eWOM initiatives lead these employees to be brand advocates? Positive WOM, whether online or offline, is likely to increase consumers purchase intentions for innovative products (Dichter, 1966). In contrast, negative WOM (NWOM) is likely to dissuade potential buyers from

considering a particular product or brand, thus damaging the company's reputation and financial position (Holmes and Lett, 1977).

The food and drink industry can use social media to build brand loyalty. By creating brand-specific online destinations like fan page, users of social media can visit the brand social media sites any time they wish. This approach is quite convenient because it allows businesses to impart information about their products, new initiatives and collect customer information. Business that use traditional marketing techniques should recognise the importance of eWOM communications and incorporate it into their overall marketing strategy. By understanding the effectiveness and impact of persuasive eWOM messages, marketers can create more effect marketing campaigns (Ang, 2011, Fulgoni and Lipsman, 2017). Indeed, brand awareness will greatly influence the generation of word of mouth and the consumer intention to try the brand, however, ensuring employees in the food and drink industry are aware of their business brand and the story that their employers want told is vital for the success on their eWOM efforts (Barreda et al., 2015, Gensler et al., 2013, Hootsuite, 2014).

#### **4.0 Employee Brand Advocacy**

Social media has produced valuable opportunities for eWOM conversations. eWOM messages from friends and colleagues are commonly seen as more significant and trustworthy than social media blasts from business social media pages. Therefore, a content message shared by employees, by one recent measure, achieves eight times more engagement than content shared by brand channels, and is re-shared twenty five times more frequently. When employees share messages, firms not only expand their social media reach, they also get measurably better results (Holmes, 2015). This paper explores whether employees adopt and use eWOM message for the promotion of their employer's business and, if so, whether it leads to employees becoming brand advocates.

With the revolving changing of technology and advancement in social media, employees have significant power in the online marketplace. Employee voice can be directed and used for business reputation building and competitive advantage (Schwartz, 2016). Businesses' competence and commitment to social media, as well as customer engagement are important factors of social media usage in sales (Davis, 2016). Employees are perceived to affect a company's reputation and brand through their behaviour online in and outside of their job roles, how organisation practices such as internal branding, leadership and recruitment play a part in controlling the company's reputation and brand through their employees (Rokka et al., 2014).

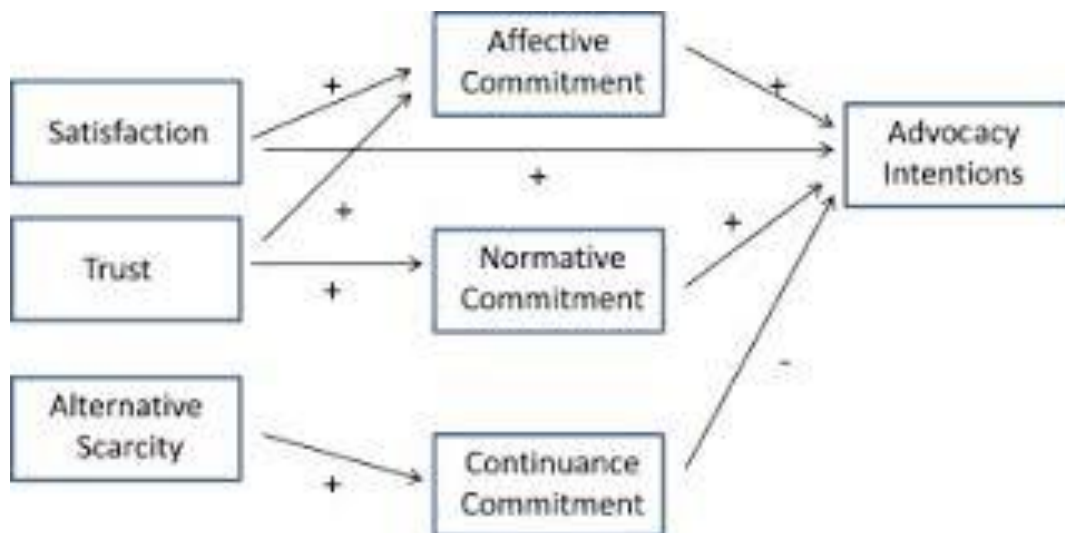
Employees tasked with social media need to know the different types of social media interactions that are likely to occur on different types of social media platforms sites. This understanding is important when considering how communication takes place on these sites. Employees need to understanding the types of communication, social relevance and intended audience of user-generated content posted on these platforms, this is vital for successful interactions with users. Training employees about suitable social media responses helps employees to understand that their communications has a potential impact on the business brand (Dahl, 2015, Schwartz, 2016). Companies need to be careful in deciding which platform to adopt and, in particular, defining the groups of employees raking responsibility for social media actions and activities and making sure that their engagement is active (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010).

When employees talk privately about their brands or the industries in which their business function, their comments often have more credibility with their network of acquaintances than when they speak about them in professional contexts (Keeling et al., 2013). However, the extent to which companies can direct employee identification online and hence create a favourable brand reputation with its stake holders is unknown (Balmer and van Riel, 1997). How employees engage with social media for their employee is of interest for this study. Engagement from an experience perspective is “a collection of experiences that comprise social media user beliefs about how a site fits into his or her like” (Calder et al., 2009 p. 322) . This paper examines whether the adoption and usage of eWOM initiatives encourages employees to be brand advocates.

Considering the employees who have social media duties as part of their job role, how satisfied and motivated are these employees to undertake these duties? In customer marketing relationships, satisfaction is only one of a number of relational constructs that will affect important customer behaviour including customer retention, willingness to enhance the relationship, price sensitivity and advocacy (Morgan and Hunt, 1994, Fullerton, 2005, Bansal et al., 2004). Job satisfaction can be defined as “a pleasurable or positive emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one’s job experiences” (Locke, 1976 p.1300). Employee well-being and satisfaction is particularly important to generate natural positive online WOM (Rokka et al., 2014). Employees who identify and understand the preferred brand image and feel psychologically safe and satisfied in their job roles are likely to use the business voice systems in a way that is consistent with the business guidelines and goals (Schwartz, 2016). Employees’ time and involvement in reputation building can be a double-edged sword (de Chernatony, 1999). Business success is often linked with how well their employees have internalised the brand and the company values. For this research, elements from marketing relationships is gathered and applied in the context of employee marketing relationships affect advocacy is considered.

The conceptual model (see Figure 1) presents, from a customer point of view, the effects of satisfaction, trust and commitment on advocacy and highlights the important role that motivation plays in the formation of a customer’s willingness to act as an advocate on behalf of a service organisations with which they do business (Fullerton, 2003). Within the literature, there is a lack of research regarding the factors that facilitate or hinder social media adoption in organisational contexts (Ngai et al., 2015). This research applies this model to employees within SMEs in order to evaluate whether employee adoption and usage of eWOM leads to employee brand advocacy.





**Figure 1: Model of The Effects of Satisfaction, Trust and Commitment on Advocacy (Fullerton, 2003)**

Businesses can engage their employees as a means to boost employee productivity, satisfaction and loyalty. Employing internal social media (e.g., groups, pages) can nurture stronger employee engagement, however, a minimum of trust based employee engagement must exist to establish these tools successfully (Davis, 2016). Employees are required to establish an environment that is conducive for positive word of mouth (PWOM) to propagate. Additionally, marketing employees must understand how WOM works in the marketplace and learn to manage it effectively (Sundaram et al., 1998). Businesses can use social media to build brand loyalty. In building a strong brand, the organisations employees are particularly critical because when the source of customer value creation shifts from physical products to services, frontline staff are responsible for delivering on promises and predominantly shape customer brand perceptions (Ang, 2011, Berry, 2000). If employers expect employees to use social media technology, they need to come up with ways to overcome the potential apathetic motivation of the employees that might exist even if the employees are extrinsically or intrinsically motivated—especially for employees who are not in marketing and sales positions (Hansen and Levin, 2016).

## **5.0 Technology Adoption and Usage Models Theories**

It is recognised that SMEs have limitation and acceptance barriers when adopting a new technology, however, social media has changed the way people conduct business (Dahnil et al., 2014, Durkin et al., 2013). Social media technologies have the possibility to transform how we work because the technology is built around improving the customer relationships not just heightening efficiencies (Guinan et al., 2014). Many theories are associated with the adoption and usage of technology. These theories were developed through the review, mapping and integration of five dominant theories and models, viz: the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA), the Theory Acceptance Model (TAM), the Motivational Model (MM), the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) and Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT).

### **5.1 Theory of Reasoned Action/ Theory of Planned Behaviour**

The Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) was developed in 1967. Throughout the early 1970s the theory was reviewed and expanded by Ajzen and Fishbein. By 1980 the theory was used to study human behaviour and develop appropriate interventions. In 1988, the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) was added to the existing model of reasoned action to address the

inadequacies that Ajzen and Fishbein had identified through their research using the TRA (Ajzen, 1985, Ajzen, 1991, Fishbein and Ajzen, 1977). Both theories hypothesize that an individual's intention to perform the behaviour in question is a determinant of that behaviour. Intentions are "indications of how hard people are willing to try, of how much of an effort they are planning to exert, in order to perform the behavior" (Ajzen, 1991, p. 181). Therefore, the person's attitude toward the behaviour and the subjective norm determines the intention. Attitude toward the behaviour raises to the degree to which a person has a positive or negative evaluation of the behaviour in question. Subjective norm denotes to the perceived social pressure to accomplish or not to accomplish the behaviour (Grandón et al., 2011).

### ***5.2 Technology Acceptance Model***

The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) (Davis, 1989) was created to clarify computer usage behaviour. The original TAM suggests the purpose for using a technology is subjective to the user's perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness of a technology. Perceived usefulness should relate to the adoption of information technology for an extrinsic task, and the user's trust that the technology will increase their job performance. Perceived usefulness was a significant reason in determining whether a user revisits the website. Perceived ease of use can also be stated as the point to which a user trusts a specific technology is effortless to use (Davis et al., 1989, Shang et al., 2005, Davis, 1989, Castañeda et al., 2007). This research examines TAM and how perceived usefulness and ease of use give rise to SMEs adopting SM technology.

TAM generally focuses on the individual usage of a computer with the concept of "perceived usefulness", and neglects the essential social processes of information development and implementation (Riffai et al., 2012). TAM ignores the social influence on adoption of technology, so it has limitations in being applied outside of the workplace. As the intrinsic motivations are not addressed in TAM, the ability of TAM to be apply in a customer context where the acceptance and use of information technologies is not only to achieve tasks but also to fulfil the emotional needs is limited (Taherdoost, 2018). Criticisms of the TAM regarding social influences has led to the development of competing theories and models addressing technology adoption and use (Lee et al., 2006).

### ***5.3 Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology***

Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT) (Venkatesh et al., 2003) purports to clarify user intentions in employing a particular information system and their usage behaviour. The UTAUT model embraces four main concepts: performance expectancy, effort expectancy, social influence, and facilitating conditions, which are direct factors of usage intention and behaviour. The key moderators for this model include gender, age, voluntariness, and experience. Prior to the existence of UTAUT, TAM was the widely used utilised theory to study IS/IT adoption within the IS discipline (Dwivedi et al., 2008, Venkatesh et al., 2003, Williams et al., 2009).

### ***5.4 Motivational Model (MM)***

Motivation theorists often categorise motivation into two different classes: extrinsic and intrinsic motivation as the different causes that lead to action. First, intrinsic motivation, which denotes to the motivation to do something due to inherent satisfaction, has been known as one critical factor that influences the learning process. Thus, intrinsic motivation is an important motivator that affects learning, adaptation, and competencies and is necessary for human development. Intrinsic motivation would be a powerful source of behavioral drive when a person has opportunities to decide his or her behaviors autonomously (Ryan and Deci, 2000). In contrast to intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation refers to doing

something because it leads to a valued outcome such as improved job performance, pay, and promotions (Deci, 1972, Lawler Iii and Porter, 1967).

### ***5.5 Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology 2 (Venkatesh et al., 2012)***

The UTAUT2 (Venkatesh et al., 2012) incorporates all the constructs and the following moderators of the UTAUT model: gender, age and experience. The UTAUT2 drops the moderator voluntariness, but include three new constructs, namely: hedonic motivation, price/value and habit. The extensions in the UTAUT2 produced considerable improvements in the variance described in behavioural intention and technology use. This paper considers the fundamental aspects of the UTAUT2.

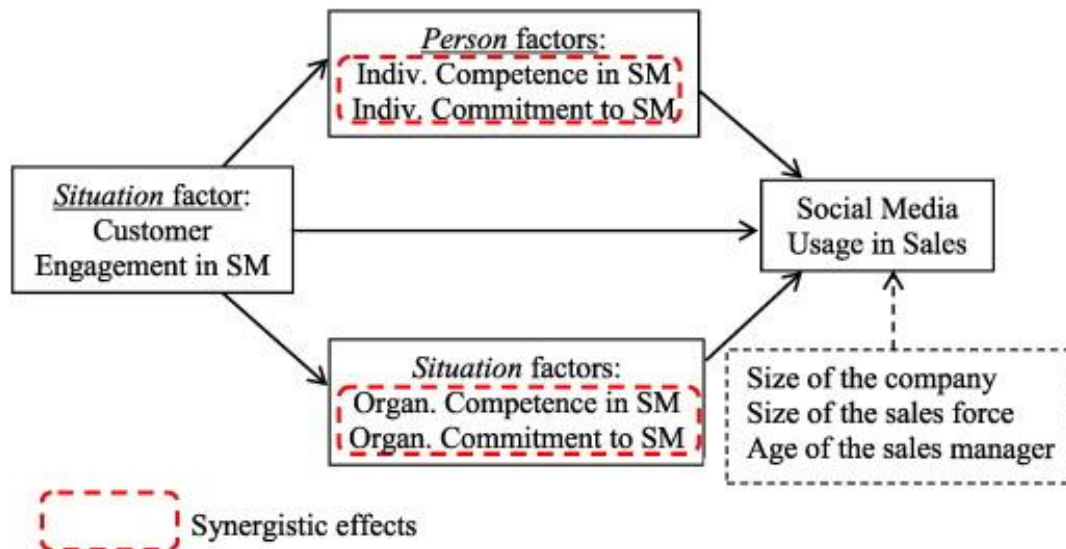
The key modification between UTAUT and UTAUT2 is the construct variables. UTAUT2 adds new constructs (hedonic motivation, price value, and habit) in order to apply the UTAUT in a consumer context (Lian, 2015, Venkatesh et al., 2012). The UTAUT2 model is an extension of UTAUT which has been developed for an organisational contexts and tested in longitudinal field studies of employee technology acceptance (Arnaboldi and Coget, 2016; Fischer and Reuber, 2011; Rapp et al., 2013).

Two key constructs from this theory are of importance: Effort Expectancy and Hedonic Motivation. Effort Expectancy is a construct used in UTAUT and relates to the level of ease associated with the use of social media (Venkatesh et al., 2003). Post studies has addressed limitations of UTAUT2, adding additional constructs such as trust (Alalwan et al., 2017), general privacy/system related privacy (Morosan and DeFranco, 2016) and social commerce constructs (Sheikh et al., 2017).

Will the social media technology provide advantages to employees within the food and drink industry in performing certain activities? The second construct, Hedonic Motivation, relates to the degree to which the employee finds pleasure from using a technology (Brown and Venkatesh, 2005, van der Heijden, 2004). This research reviews an employee's level of pleasure in using social media technology, as well as the employee's motivation to using social media. The main significance of the above models is the constructs that are used. Behaviour intention and usage of technology has been investigated through TPB, TAM, UTAUT and UTAUT2.

### ***5.6 Conceptual Framework (Guesalaga, 2016)***

Individual competence in social media results as the individual becomes proficient and familiar with the social media tools (Guesalaga, 2016). In addition, the individual commitment to social media is the extent to which an individual actively engages in social media. These two factors should positively relate to the organisation use of social media. However, some research (Guesalaga, 2016) ignores important constructs, such as perceived value of social media, or ease of use, both of which have been studied under the TAM framework.



**Figure 2: Conceptual Framework (Guesalaga, 2016)**

## 6.0 DESIGN, METHODOLOGY AND APPROACH

This research avails of qualitative and quantitative methods and applied elements from the (UTAUT2) model, and (Fullerton, 2003) model to a random sample of SMEs with the food and drinks sector. Other areas of interest come from the marketing literature. The pilot study examined the following constructs: Employee Motivation, Employee Habit, and eWOM intention and usage. Data from online questionnaires were analysed using partial least squares structural equations modelling (PLS-SEM) software SMART-PLS. Partial least squares (PLS) was used to test these constructs because there is quite a number of interaction terms and PLS is capable of testing these effects (Chin et al., 2003).

The primary research consists of an online survey with SME employees in order to understand their adoption and usage of social media. Businesses were selected based on their registration with Bord Bia. To be eligible for selection, each company must have fewer than 50 employees and an annual turnover and/or balance sheet of less than €10 million (Enterprise, 2007).

A total of 70 companies were contacted; 40 companies completed the survey, resulting in a response rate of 43%. Out of the 40 companies, 38 companies used social media, and two did not use social media. The survey considered employees, employees and marketing professionals who maybe tasked with social media duties. Of those surveyed, 76% were employees, 24% were SME owners and none was marketing professionals. Only one survey per business was provided to avoid bias, and those with the most responsibility for social media were asked to complete the survey.

The sectors from the foods and drinks industry surveyed were: bakery, beverages, confectionery, dairy, prepared food and horticulture. Businesses were contacted by phone to identify the person who is tasked with managing the business social media efforts and permission was sought to email the survey to this individual. The participants' responses were measured on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (i.e., strongly disagree) to 5 (i.e., strongly agree), except for the use behaviour which was measured on a five-point scale range from 1 (i.e., never) to 5 (i.e., many times)

Constructs are assessed using SMARTPLS, answering the following research questions:

- Do employers in SMEs in the food and drinks sector motivate and encourage employee brand advocacy?
- Do eWOM initiatives drive employee brand advocacy?
- Do employees in SMEs within the food and drinks sector promote their business through eWOM initiatives?

## 7.0 FINDINGS

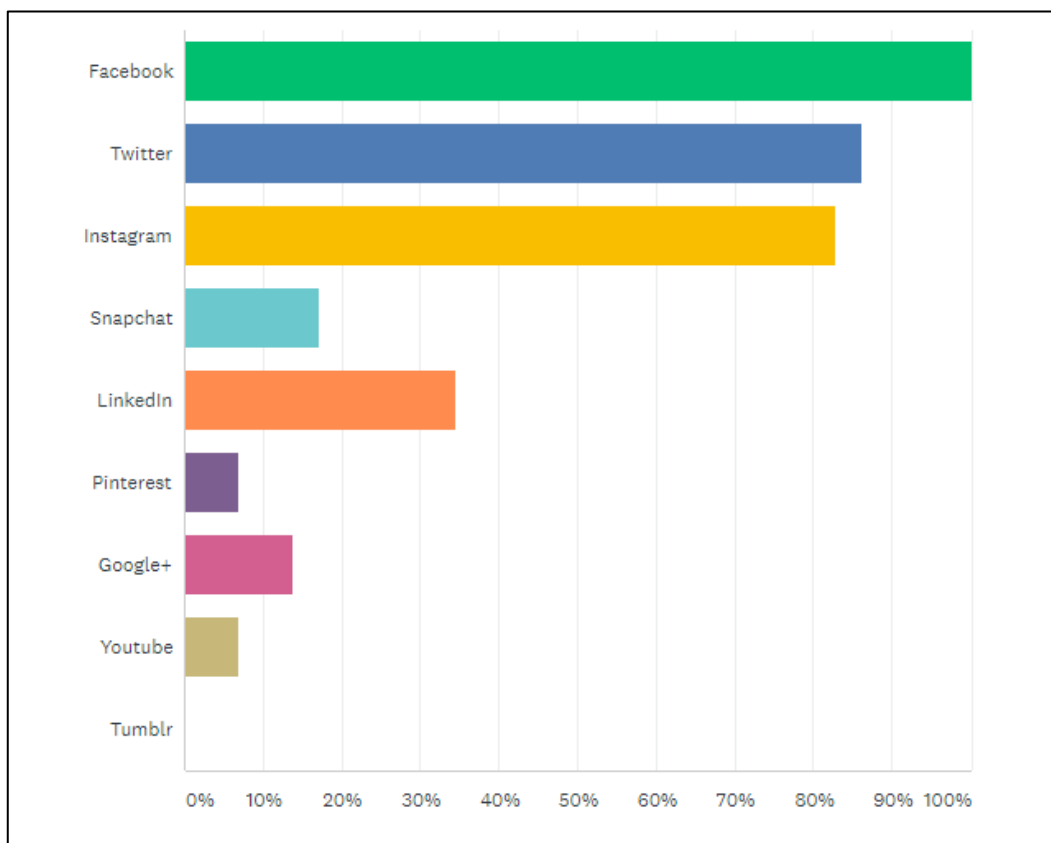
Of the 40 companies participating in the research, only two did not use social media, primarily because:

- “Employees do not have the time to work with Social Media”
- “Cost of using Social Media marketing initiatives like paid advertising is expensive”
- “Social Media is not necessary for my business”.

Breakdown of the respondents’ profiles is included in Table 1.

Respondents’ Profiles				
Gender	50% male		50% female	
Age	36-50 years	26-35 years	18-25 years	51 years
	58%	30%	4%	1%
Employees	0-10 employees	11-30 employees	31-60 employees	101 employees
	43%	25%	23%	10%
Length of Service	Less than 5 years	5-10 years	10-20 years	more than 20 years
	28%	28%	40%	5%

**Table 1: Respondents’ Profiles**

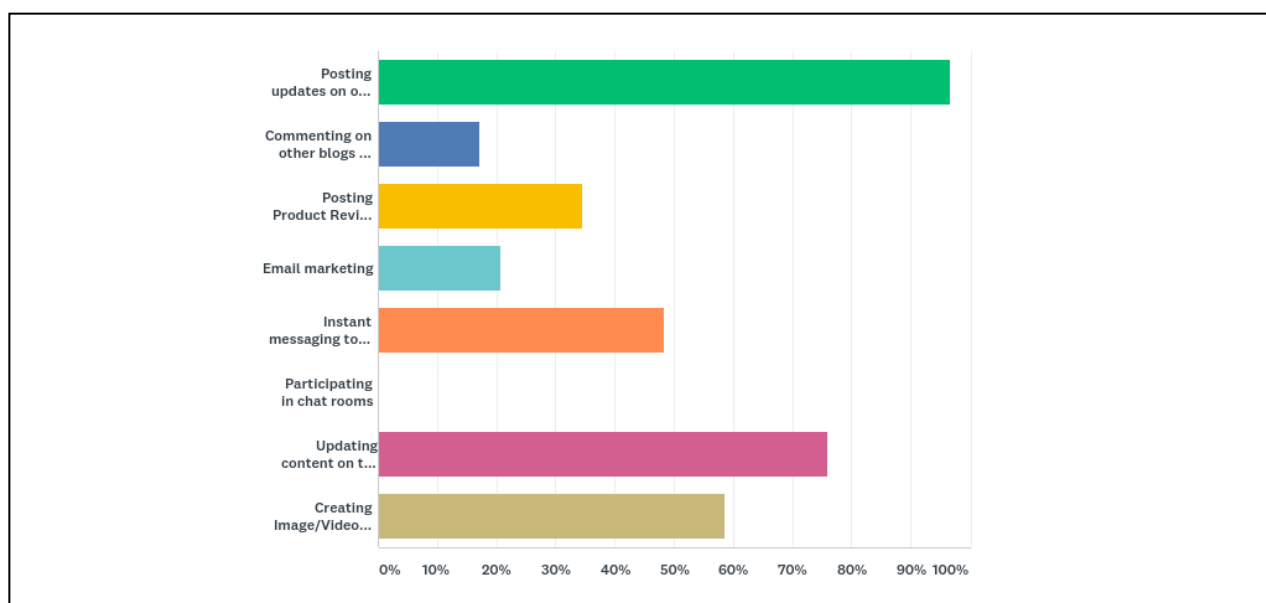


**Figure 3: Social Media Applications Adopted and Used by Firms within Ireland’s Food and Drink Industry**

Figure 3 outlines the social media applications used by SMEs in the food and drink industry of Ireland. The reasons the businesses use social media include:

- 93% - Raise profile of the business
- 79% - Inform customers about products
- 79% - Generate new customers
- 79% - Generate brand awareness
- 44% - Develop loyal customers
- 41% - Keep up with competition
- 38% - Engage in conversations with customers.

Many business are investing in their social media presence (see Figure 4) because they appreciate the need to engage in existing social media conversations in order to protect their brand reputation (Lee and Youn, 2009).



**Figure 4: Reasons Social Media is Adopted and Used by Firms within Ireland’s Food and Drink Industry**

When asked, “*I intend to continually use Social Media*”, the majority of the respondents - 91% (Agree/Strongly Agree) with this statement. When asked, “*My employer has a business SM strategy*”, and over whelming 73% Strongly Disagree/Disagree with the statement, with 9% stating neither agree, nor disagree. If there is no social media strategy or policy employed in a business, then the expectation for employees to use social media is challenging (Guinan et al., 2014). A successful brand strategy in social media purposes for cultural resonance with equally customers and employees and seeks to realise ways to be invited into people’s everyday lives (Fournier and Avery, 2011).

Another finding is that 59% Strongly Disagree/Disagree with the statement “*I am allocated enough time in my job to work with SM*”, with 27% stating they neither agree nor disagree. Concerning the cost of using social media, time is the biggest factor that businesses incur. Social media integration means it is difficult to quantify the return from such activity (Rapp et al., 2013). Within SMEs employees are balancing different job tasks including social media, they are expected to live the business brand online (Manto and M., 2001). A high

percentage of employees, 91%, believe their businesses should increase their time on social media. This finding is also relevant in the literature, as having an employee with the relevant skills and time is significantly important to realising the firm's online strategies. There are issues with assigning social media activities to employees (Poba-Nzaou et al., 2016). Employee engagement with social media occurs when employees feel trusted and supported by the management (Liu et al., 2018).

Finally, 48% of employees Strongly Agree/Agree with the statement *"I often feel disappointed on our business SM pages because the community does not respond to my eWOM messages"*, with 23% stating they Neither Agree Nor Disagree.

When asked *"Which of the below positions closely confirms your role in this business"*, 71% were employees within the SMEs and 29% were employers, and none were marketing professionals. The following questions were posed to the employers *"I encourage staff to be creative with electronic word of mouth (eWOM) posts on SM"*; 33% of employers Agree with this statement, however an alarming 45% stated Neither Agree nor Disagree, with 22% disagree the statement. Another statement posed to the employers was *"I provide my staff with incentives for achievements made on SM"*, 78% totally disagreed. Finally, *"I have encouraged staff to undertake SM training/ courses"*, 67% Strongly Disagree/Disagree with this statement. In order for staff to be able to work with social media, training is required. A lack of understanding and knowledge social media means firms find it perplexing to ensure its use benefits the firm (Stockdale and Standing, 2006). Companies exhibited difficulty in articulating their social media objectives, due to their lack of understanding of social media as a marketing channel (Keegan and Rowley, 2017). However, 67% of employers believed *"My staff and I have a really good working relationship"*.

## **7.1 SMART-PLS Results**

The constructs assessed included Employee Motivation, Employer Motivation, eWOM Adoption and Usage, and Employee Brand Advocacy. For this study, survey questions were adapted (Ali, Nair, & Hussain, 2016); Figure 5 displays the constructs of interest aligned to the survey question and Smart-PLS indicator. The online survey was composed of close-ended questions. Although PLS-SEM is not sensitive to data normality, it is still recommended to examine the data to detect outliers and assess its distribution (Hair et al., 2013). Partial least squares (PLS) was used to test this model because there are a number of interaction terms and PLS is capable of testing these effects (Chin et al., 2003).

The pilot findings confirm that employer motivations does lead to eWOM Adoption & Usage. Reviewing the data in Tables 2, 3, and 4, as well as Figure 5, the respondents tended to associate high Employee Brand Advocacy, Employer Motivation. The findings indicate eWOM initiatives drives employee brand advocacy. Considering the Employee Motivation low result of .469, which does not exceed the .70 minimum requirements for validation. From this study, three indicators did not meet the requirements. The first low indicator EM2 result of .578 assessed *"A specific person is available for assistance with Social Media difficulties"*. Rules need to be created for employees to use in responding to social media message and companies invite trouble if they fail to develop policies governing employee use and to monitor what is said about the business on social media (Culnan et al., 2010). The second indicator EM3 assessed *"I complete tasks from start to finish. The results of my efforts on Social Media are clearly visible and identifiable"* provided a low result of .625. Lastly, the indicator EM5 is at .0647, which assessed *"Customers regularly comment, like and share eWOM messages on our business SM pages"*. These findings signify the difficulties employees face in working with social media; it is demotivating for employees when the



community is not engaged with the firm’s social media efforts. Reasons may include employee’s message, lack of time and expertise of employees using social media (Rapp et al., 2013), and the competitiveness of owned social media posts in consumers timelines (Chang et al., 2018).

In Table 2, Employee Motivation cross tested under Cronbach’s Alpha produces 0.822, rho\_A the result 0.837, Composite reliability result of 0.860 however, the AVE the results is 0.469. Still, the constructs were previously validated in various studies (Gupta et al., 2008, Kijsanayotin et al., 2009, Zhou et al., 2010), and composite reliability is considered a more suitable criterion of reliability in the context of PLS-SEM than AVE (Hair et al., 2013). Further research on the construct Employee Motivation is required and further testing with the PLS software. In reviewing the indicators associated with eWOM Adoption & Usage construct, three indicators did not pass the minimum .70 requirement, achieving only .581. The first indicator EWOM5 result of .494 “I intend to use Social Media in the next few years”, secondly indicator EWOM6 result .496 “I am comfortable using Social Media”, lastly EWOM7 “I view Social Media positively” Further research on the construct EWOM Adoption & Usage construct is required.

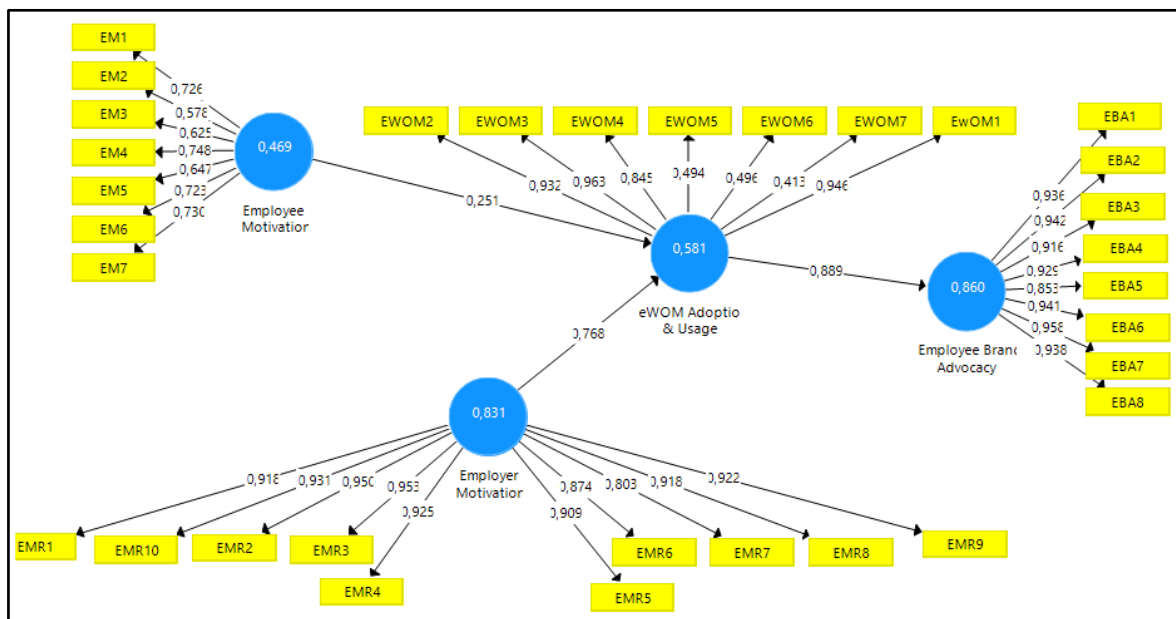


Figure 5: Proposed Model Total Effects, Outer Weights/Loadings and AVE Test

	Cronbach's Alpha	rho_A	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Employee Brand Advocacy	0.977	0.979	0.980	0.860
Employee Motivation	0.822	0.837	0.860	0.469
Employer Motivation	0.977	0.978	0.980	0.831
eWOM Adoption & Usage	0.875	0.951	0.898	0.581

Table 2: Construct Reliability and Validity



	Employee Brand Advocacy	Employee Motivation	Employer Motivation	eWOM Adoption & Usage
Employee Brand Advocacy	1.000			
Employee Motivation	<b>0.494</b>	1.000		
Employer Motivation	0.911	<b>0.517</b>	1.000	
eWOM Adoption & Usage	0.889	0.648	0.897	1.000

**Table 3: Latent Variable Correlations**

	Employee Brand Advocacy	Employee Motivation	Employer Motivation	eWOM Adoption & Usage
Employee Brand Advocacy	0.927			
Employee Motivation	<b>0.494</b>	<b>0.685</b>		
Employer Motivation	0.911	<b>0.517</b>	0.911	
eWOM Adoption & Usage	0.889	<b>0.648</b>	0.897	0.762

**Table 4: Discriminant Validity – Fornell-Larcker Criterion**

Construct	Question	Indicator
<b>Employee Motivation:</b>	I have the resources necessary in work to use Social Media	EM1
	I believe Social Media is essential for my job	EM2
	I complete tasks from start to finish. The results of my efforts on Social Media are clearly visible and identifiable	EM3
	A specific person is available for assistance with Social Media difficulties	EM4
	Customers regularly comment, like and share eWOM messages on our business SM pages	EM5
	It takes a lot of effort posting eWOM messages on my employers SM pages, as the community is disengaged	EM6
	Learning to operate Social Media is easy for me	EM7
<b>Employer Motivation:</b>	My employer encourages me to be creative with electronic word of mouth (eWOM) posts on SM	EMR1
	I am allocated enough time in my job to work with SM	EMR2
	My employer provides me incentives for achievements made on SM	EMR3
	My employer frequently discusses with staff their goals and objectives for SM	EMR4
	My employer has encouraged staff to undertake SM training/ courses?	EMR5
	My employer rarely gives me feedback on how well I am doing on SM	EMR6
	My employer and I have a really good working relationship	EMR7
<b>eWOM Adoption and Use:</b>	I try to be creative when crafting eWOM posts for my employer to encourage a response from the community.	EWOM1
	I believe the quality of my eWOM messages on my employers SM pages could be improved if I had more time to work with SM	EWOM2
	I believe eWOM messages can influence our business customers intention to purchase	EWOM3
	I would respond(constructively) if my contacts criticise my employer	EWOM4

	brand products or services on social media	
	I intend to use Social Media in the next few years	EWOM5
	I am comfortable using Social Media	EWOM6
	I view Social Media positively	EWOM7
<b>Employee Brand Advocacy:</b>	With my personal SM account I follow my business SM pages	EBA1
	I speak positively about my business on my personal SM accounts	EBA2
	I praise the achievements of my employer on my personal SM accounts	EBA3
	When I have criticism for my employer, I refrain from sharing it online	EBA4
	I behave on my personal SM accounts in a way that is consistent with my employer brand values	EBA5
	I recommend my employer brand products and services to my contacts on my personal SM accounts	EBA6
	On my personal SM pages I like content posted by my employer	EBA7
	I share links from my personal SM pages to my employer SM pages	EBA8

**Table 5: Construct, Survey Questions and Smart PLS Indicator**

## 8. CONCLUSION

### 8.1 Practical Implications/ Social Implications/ Originality Value

This pilot paper provided a small sample to the different sectors of the food and drinks industry. The key contribution to literature is the confirmation that eWOM initiatives promote employee brand advocacy. Employers motivate their employees to use social media resulting in adoption and usage of eWOM. However, employees will not adopt and use eWOM from their own motivations. The main reasons employees that adopt and use eWOM initiatives is: to raise the profile of the business, inform customers about products, Generate new customers, and generate *brand* awareness.

Further research on the employee motivation and eWOM adoption and usage construct is required. More analysis is also required and an increase in sample is needed to truly test the model, as with a small sample, with vast number of indicators is limited by the software. Finally, 50% of employees Strongly Agreed/Agreed with the following statement “*I often feel disappointed on our business SM pages because the community does not respond to my eWOM messages*”, and 22% neither agree? Nor disagree. Social media training and assistance is required to motivate employees to avoid this disappointment.

The findings confirms that eWOM initiatives drive employee brand advocacy. However, the survey results indicate a lack of understanding and knowledge and encouragement of social media by employer, which in turn, makes it harder for employees to adopt and use this technology.

Future research is needed to include additional constructs in the area of employee engagement with social media, social media communities. Businesses that do not use social media cited that employees do not have the time, skills or budget to work with social media. Also, as 25% of employers managed the social media for their businesses, research on motivation for them to continue to adopt and use social media.

This study is not without its limitations. Online surveys cannot accommodate follow-up questions to open-ended questions. Hence, richer data could be extracted through the use of face-to-face or telephone interviews. Increasing the sample size of this survey and further

analysis with SMART-PLS will provide a more in-depth analysis. Finally, additional constructs such as Social Media Communities and Employees Experience and habit provide for interesting findings. Food and drink companies do not have a choice when it comes to eWOM initiatives: people will talk about the companies online in any case. It is up to the company to decide whether they want to participate in the dialogue or if possible, try to facilitate and influence the ongoing discussions with the help from their employees (Rokka et al., 2014).

Future research should focus on constructs relating to employee brand advocacy such as employee endorsements, employee sharing and employee culture. Also, future research could consider the difference between employee personal use and work use of social media. In addition, noting the disappointment employees face when the online community is not engaged, research on social media communities as a motivating factor for the adoption of eWOM should be considered. Final areas to address for the employer is to identify relevant initiatives that can encourage employee brand advocacy.

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