

The influence of m-marketing tools on consumer buying process: evidence from the dining sector

The influence of m-marketing tools

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper explores the potential impact of mobile marketing tools on consumer buying behaviour within the context of dining. The aim is to examine the influence of mobile marketing tools through their different functions on the stages of the consumer buying process. The study addresses a lack of relevant research with evidence from both customer and supplier perspectives.

Design/methodology/approach – The mobile tools that are found useful for dining were considered in this study. Qualitative interviews with marketers and consumer opinion leaders were conducted, given the limited extant research.

Findings – The results reveal that mobile marketing tools influence consumers' decision-making differently and their effect varies according to the customer type. Additionally, it shows that loyalty has a direct influence on mobile marketing effectiveness, as the decision-making process of loyal customers is more affected by mobile marketing tools than the non-loyal customers.

Research limitations/implications – The limitations are mainly based on the qualitative nature of this study and are relevant to the research context. Further research could examine these findings in different service and geographical contexts.

Practical implications – Marketing activity through the smartphone should focus on loyal customers and opinion leaders with the use of appropriate mobile tools.

Originality/value – The study provides empirical evidence on the variable influence of mobile marketing tools on consumer decision-making and develops a conceptual framework. It is also found that loyalty is an important factor that positively affects smartphone tools adoption.

Keywords Mobile marketing tools, Consumer decision-making, Customer loyalty

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Since the introduction of SMS in 2000, mobile marketing (thereafter, m-marketing) proliferated (McCorkle *et al.*, 2013). Following relevant technological developments and the subsequent introduction of smartphones, numerous functions can now be offered through a mobile phone, most of which can be used for marketing purposes. As mobile users increased, marketers began to apply mobile features in their marketing campaigns. Currently, mobile broadband networks cover 84% of the world's population, about 47% of which use the internet (ITU, 2016). In developing countries, 80% of the population is users of mobile phones (ITU, 2016). These figures highlight that the effectiveness of m-marketing depends on the adoption rate of mobile devices and Internet services, and the marketing activities performed through the available m-marketing tools. In addition, consumer attitudes towards those



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functions are highly influential. The smartphone, which has now replaced the traditional mobile phone device, has an advanced interface, and the capacity of continuous new applications to be used by consumers. Thus, it offers numerous opportunities for marketers, considering its increased capacity and adoption rate and usage (Andrews *et al.*, 2016). Moreover, there is a shift in online marketing from computers to mobiles. According to Nielsen (2014), consumers' use of smartphone web browsers has exceeded their usage of computer-based browsers in USA and the UK. However, most consumers showed little receptiveness towards m-marketing (Shankar *et al.*, 2016). Thus, while smartphone use is on the increase, consumer adoption of m-marketing tools seems to be low. This might be due to the likely negative consumer's attitudes and firms' scepticism about m-marketing effectiveness (Bart *et al.*, 2014). These trends present several challenges for marketers in terms of understanding the smartphone potential and subsequently develop appropriate marketing strategies. There are calls for further research about m-marketing in general and smartphone marketing in particular, especially on the effect of m-marketing on consumer shopping (e.g. Marriott *et al.*, 2017; Shankar *et al.*, 2016). There is also a lack of studies that explore m-marketing from marketers' viewpoint, and further research is needed in different service contexts (Kim and Law, 2015). Additionally, m-marketing may be more suitable for some products precisely the higher involvement ones (Bart *et al.*, 2014). In that respect, the dining sector could provide a useful context to examine the application of relevant m-marketing tools.

The purpose of this paper is to study the influence of m-marketing tools on the stages of consumer decision-making process. This topic is approached from a mobile tools' perspective and focuses on smartphone users who are interested in and receptive to m-marketing. In that respect, first, the paper identifies the mobile apps containing marketing functions and that have been found useful for a specific decision-making task (i.e. dining). Second, it examines consumer's acceptance of these services; and third, it explores the potential impact of each m-marketing function on the stages of the dining decision-making process. Usage behavioural patterns are examined from the perspectives of both consumers and marketers. Qualitative research method is employed considering the exploratory nature of this study and the limited research evidence on the topic. The dining sector in Lebanon is used as the geographic context, considering that it would provide new empirical evidence from a developing country. This study focused on smartphone apps and their functions that are relevant for marketing activity. It contributes to the literature by connecting relevant mobile apps with the stages of the consumer decision-making process. It presents new empirical evidence on mobile apps usage from the perspectives of both marketers and consumers. It is also found that the decision-making process of loyal customers is further affected by m-marketing tools than the repeat customers. It should be noted that in the current study, loyal customers are considered those showing psychological commitment to the restaurant brand (attitudinal loyalty), accompanied by repeat behaviour, whereas the repeat customers just repurchase the service (Thakur, 2018). Marketing strategies should address findings by focusing on loyal customers and opinion leaders with appropriate m-marketing functions at each stage of the consumer decision-making process.

The paper is structured as follows. The next section presents the conceptual background of this study, comprising a literature review of extant research and the theories that guided it. This is followed by the research method section where the data collection method, the sampling strategy, and the data analysis approach are explained. The next section discusses the findings. Finally, implications for further research and practice are noted and conclusions are drawn.

Conceptual background

M-marketing

M-marketing is considered as any marketing activity that can be performed through mobile technologies, following the definition of e-marketing provided by Frost *et al.* (2019).

M-marketing can be divided into two categories: push and pull marketing (Andrews *et al.*, 2016). Push m-marketing refers to the application of traditional marketing techniques directly to the phones of consumers. In contrast, pull marketing generates demand; it encourages people to request or seek a specific service on their own (Watson *et al.*, 2013). Push marketing is faced by continuous consumer resistance; e.g. negative perceptions associated with intrusion and annoyance (Andrews *et al.*, 2016). Watson *et al.* (2013) suggest that mobile users prefer to control the information they receive from firms. Thus, marketers need to emphasize permission marketing and build trust. Accordingly, pull marketing may help to resolve this problem. This has led researchers to consider the permission-based m-marketing, where consumers may opt-in or out of receiving the service, control the content, the message timing or the frequency (Watson *et al.*, 2013). Permission-based marketing activities address consumers' privacy concerns and they facilitate personalized communications with customers (Krafft *et al.*, 2017). Considering the evidence that email marketing campaigns are more effective when the recipients have agreed to opt-in (Frost *et al.*, 2019), it may be assumed that permission-based marketing is appropriate for push m-marketing activities, too. In that respect, the present paper does not focus on the segment that has a negative attitude towards m-marketing. Instead, the attention is centred towards the audience that has a positive attitude.

M-marketing provides several communication opportunities for marketers since it can be utilized for several purposes (Watson *et al.*, 2013). Following the increasing adoption and use of mobile phones, extant literature has examined extensively the factors that influence m-marketing acceptance and use by consumers (Marriott *et al.*, 2017; Newman *et al.*, 2018). Most of those studies are based on frameworks that are derived from the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980), the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991), the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) (Davis, 1989) and several TAM extensions, and the innovation characteristics (Rogers, 2003). The above studies either examined consumer attitudes towards m-marketing in general, regardless of mobile tools used, or examined specific m-marketing tools that were popular among users, such as SMS. Additionally, they have stressed the importance of social networking and location-based services and called for further research in those fields. Several of the above studies also proposed further research inquiry on the different m-marketing tools. Specifically, they suggest exploring the acceptance of m-shopping services, especially pull technologies, taking into consideration both the consumer and the retailer perspectives (Marriott *et al.*, 2017), and examining consumer usage behaviour of mobile apps (Newman *et al.*, 2018).

Similarly, there is a limited number of studies on m-marketing in the hospitality industry (Kwon *et al.*, 2013). Nyheim *et al.* (2015) investigated millennials' sensitivity to personalized advertising in a restaurant context and found that when the advertisements are personalized, consumers avoid them less. On the contrary, McCorkle *et al.* (2013) found no effect of personalization of SMS marketing on attitude. Tourists are an important target market in the hospitality industry for both hotels and restaurants. Therefore, several studies explored tourists or business travellers' attitude towards smartphone marketing (e.g. Kim and Law, 2015; Lu *et al.*, 2015). Key findings highlight usefulness, ease of use and compatibility as crucial antecedents of usage intention. In addition, location-based services are the type of mobile applications that tourists prefer (Verma *et al.*, 2012). Overall, the use of m-marketing tools by customers in the hospitality industry calls for further research.

M-marketing tools

There are various services offered through the smartphone. Our review of the relevant literature revealed that besides SMS (declining interest by researchers), only a small number of studies have explored specific mobile features (e.g. QR code, mobile loyalty apps and

mobile payment). In addition, research papers rarely distinguish clearly those mobile-specific functions that are relevant for marketing activity from all the functions offered through a smartphone.

Push m-marketing services include text messaging or Short Message Services (SMS), Mobile Display Advertising (MDA). SMS refers to text messaging through the mobile phone. Concerning SMS, [McCorkle et al. \(2013\)](#) concluded that content is an important factor that affects the way consumers perceive the message (e.g. informative, irritating, entertaining). MDA refers to advertising on cell phones, and it can be under different forms and shapes such as banner ads and videos ([Bart et al., 2014](#)).

Location-based Services (LBS) include both push (when the consumer's location will trigger an event) and pull (search related to a location and tracking service) apps. [Luhur and Widjaja \(2014\)](#) emphasized the increasing use of location-based services in the social media context. Whereas, [Gazley et al. \(2015\)](#) note that push LBS at the point of purchase may not result in positive outcomes.

Other pull m-marketing services include branded apps, Camera & QR Code, Call-to-Action (CTA), Mobile Loyalty Programs (MLP) and Mobile Payment (MP). In our study, we consider three such categories of mobile apps that are popular and can be used for marketing purposes: (1) mobile phone apps (the built in apps, such as SMS); (2) branded apps (those created by the supplier/restaurant); (3) third-party apps (created by intermediaries and social media; e.g. Zomato, Facebook). It should be noted that some mobile functions work in tandem to provide one service. For instance, to find and download a branded app, it's possible to scan a QR code using a QR code reader app which in turn uses the mobile camera.

Applications related to food are among the most developed applications according to Apple, this is due to the high demand for such apps reflected by the number of downloads ([Luhur and Widjaja, 2014](#)). Branded mobile apps can be considered a pull marketing tool as they are not intrusive. Hence consumers need to be aware of their existence in order to use them. Also, diners prefer to have all features and info related to restaurants available in one application ([Luhur and Widjaja, 2014](#)) (e.g. restaurants guides). Recent research on branded mobile apps, confirms their added value to the firm's brand equity ([Boyd et al., 2019](#); [Van Noort and Van Reijmersdal, 2019](#)). Further research is called on how information and entertainment content influence consumer decision-making ([Van Noort and Van Reijmersdal, 2019](#)). Built-in cameras allow users to take photos or videos and share them instantly with other mobiles. In addition, they can scan QR codes 'Quick Response' code ([Okazaki et al., 2013](#)). Similar to other mobile tools, QR codes did not get the necessary research interest, and the existing studies are undertaken in different sectors and countries ([Watson et al., 2013](#)). QR code is a pull marketing technology that is not intrusive and users have control over it. It should be noted that some smartphones do not have a built-in QR code reader; however, it's available as a third-party app. CTA tools include features of click-to-call (allows consumers to instantly call the restaurant to book or for inquiries from within the app), click-to-book (permits online booking through a dynamic form), or click-to-order (provides diners with the ability to order, pay online and get the food delivered) ([Brandau, 2012](#)). Several restaurants use MLP, considering that they may increase customer loyalty ([Ruggless, 2014](#)). Lastly, MP is supposed to be an efficient and secure alternative to the debit and credit card payment; however, despite the claim of some reports and research findings that this feature will become a primary payment method in the future, consumers' adoption rate revealed to be very slow (e.g. [Esfahani and Ozturk, 2019](#)).

Consumer decision-making process

The review of the above literature revealed that several studies have examined internal (i.e. psychological) and external (i.e. sociological) influences of consumer behaviour within

different research contexts of m-marketing. Some studies have also examined consumer use of mobile apps inside the store (e.g. [Grewal et al., 2018](#)). The use of mobile phone has been found to positively affect purchases in the store ([Grewal et al., 2018](#)). However, there is limited research evidence on the effect of m-marketing tools embedded by smartphones on consumer decision-making. Research has examined the general use of mobiles throughout three stages of the consumer decision-making process, namely information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase, as well as consumer purchase involvement for a number of high involvement products ([Holmes et al., 2014](#)). It was found that the use of mobile phone is higher at the initial two stages examined than the purchase stage, and proposed that future research should explore the use of mobile phones throughout the stages of consumer decision-making process within the context of different products ([Holmes et al., 2014](#)). Moreover, the need for further research on mobile shopper marketing throughout the pre-purchase, purchase and post-purchase stages of shopping cycle is noted ([Shankar et al., 2016](#)). A more recent study examined the influence of mobile shopping convenience factors through the stages of young consumers' purchase cycle ([Mahapatra, 2017](#)). Results show that the use of mobiles is much greater at the pre-purchase stage, especially for information search, than the other stages ([Mahapatra, 2017](#)). However, there is no research evidence of the influence of specific m-marketing functions on the different stages of the purchase decision-making process. The consumer buying behaviour model of Engel-Kollat-Blackwell is the most commonly used one to evaluate consumers' purchase decision-making process ([Mothersbaugh and Hawkins, 2016](#)), which is the underlying framework of the present study. The model breaks decision-making down into five discrete but interlinked stages, namely, problem/need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision, and post-purchase behaviour. It should be noted that consumers do not necessarily go through all stages or follow the same sequence ([Blackwell et al., 2006](#)). The detailed examination of the effects of mobile apps on the stages of consumer buying decision-making process would contribute to a better understanding of mobile shopping behaviour.

Research method

Data collection

The study employed qualitative research design to examine the perspectives of both marketers and consumers. The limited research on mobile-specific marketing tools, the lack of empirical evidence on the effects of mobile apps on the different stages of the purchase decision-making process, and the fact that a minority of smartphone users has positive attitude towards m-marketing, suggest the use of qualitative methods of data collection, which is a suitable methodological approach to relatively new or less researched contexts ([Easterby-Smith et al., 2015](#)). Data was collected through in-depth interviews that focused on the use of m-marketing functions during the dining decision-making. The study used two types of respondents that represent different perspectives, namely the dining service providers and the relevant customers, to get in-depth information and allow for comparisons to be made. Concerning dining categories, the classification of [Walker \(2014\)](#) was adopted in this study, i.e.: (1) fine dining, (2) casual dining and (3) quick service/fast-food restaurants, with the latter two being considered in this study. This was chosen to focus the study towards the middle class which represents the main consumers of such categories of restaurants. Fine dining was excluded as it's usually for high-class consumers. In casual or fast-food dining, atmosphere is more relaxed. Since some of the casual diners target upscale customers, they were divided into two categories: casual and upscale casual.

Suppliers

The selection of dining service suppliers was based on Zomato website (an advanced restaurant and food guide app). This ensured that the chosen restaurants chains have an

online presence. Firstly, an online search was conducted to identify the restaurants rated 3.5 and above (1–5 scale) by consumers. These ratings were considered as an indication that the respective restaurant chains are of above-average to high standard. This method provided a sample with a good representation of the dining service provider's side. Following this search, 14 restaurant chains were selected and their marketing departments/representatives contacted via their official Facebook page. Marketing managers/representatives from seven restaurant chains agreed to participate in the study. The interviewer made sure to consult a minimum of two restaurant Head-of-marketing from each category to create somewhat a balanced sample. Table 1 presents the criteria of restaurant choice.

Face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted in the marketers' office. The average duration of each interview was 45 min. The interviews were recorded and the transcripts were used for the analysis. The discussion guide comprised three sections: (1) the types of mobile apps that are adopted by restaurant chains' marketers, (2) the reasons for their adoption and (3) the role mobile apps play according to the interviewee's opinion in customers' dining decision-making. Interview questions were related to the dining decision-making for each of the mobile marketing tools noted in the previous section. The Critical Incident Technique was used to get an in-depth understanding of managers' experiences (Gremler, 2004). Thus, questions were probing the respondent to report an incident based on his own experience by recalling a successful and unsuccessful mobile campaign, and next to identify the reasons. This method supported the validity of answers (Gremler, 2004). In addition, towards the end of each interview, the interviewer presented a summary of the responses of managers previously interviewed and asked the next participant in the sample to comment, respectively. In addition, respondents were presented with opposite views based on literature and asked to comment (Miles *et al.*, 2014). In this way, interesting information was revealed that enriched the interpretation of results. It should be noted that were asked to identify an unsuccessful campaign, managers interviewed were reluctant to answer. Perhaps, they did not want to reveal a weakness.

Customers

The selection of customer participants was based on the following criteria: (1) they had to own a smartphone, (2) they were customers of the above restaurant chains and (3) they had to be playing an influential role in the dining decision-making process. Consequently, they were assumed to be opinion leaders within their group of friends who usually dine together (Mothersbaugh and Hawkins, 2016). In order to identify the participants with this role in their respective groups, a judgmental sample of respondents was selected based on personal

Type	Cuisine	Marketing position	Branches	Years in business
Up-scale casual dinner	American, Italian, Asian	Marketing and communication manager (UCD1)	4	2
Up-scale casual dinner	Lebanese	Marketing manager (UCD2)	6	10
Casual dinner	American, French	Head of communication (CD1)	15	>20
Casual dinner	American	Senior marketing specialist (CD2)	17	>20
Casual dinner	French, Italian, American	Marketing manager (CD3)	4	3
Fast food	American	Marketing manager (FF1)	18	>20
Fast food	Lebanese	Director of sales and marketing (FF2)	37	>20

Table 1.
Criteria of restaurant choice and the interview participants

contacts. Participants were asked to identify their role in the social group they belong to. In addition to these respondents, the sample included one foodie who is a blogger. This person was recommended by a marketer to be interviewed due to his influential role. Following the above method, six participants were identified. They were aged between 24 and 46 years old, and were of higher education level. Concerning the number of respondents, data collected until empirical saturation was reached (Boddy, 2016). Saturation occurred after the fourth interview, since the responses of the rest started to be similar to the answers already received.

The discussion guide of the interviews with customers was adapted from the guide used with marketers. Some additional questions were based on marketers' insights. These questions aimed to investigate how and when mobile tools are utilized. This improved internal validity and caused no problem to comparability between suppliers and customers. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken at respondents' homes. The Critical Incident Technique was adopted as with the interviews of marketers. Respondents were asked to recall recent experiences with mobile marketing, and once they had provided their opinions an opposite argument from the literature was presented by the interviewer to stimulate their reaction and explain their standpoint further (Miles *et al.*, 2014).

Data analysis

Data analysis followed the General Analytical Procedure (Miles *et al.*, 2014). This method consists of four steps: (1) data reduction, (2) data presentation, (3) conclusion depiction and (4) findings' validation. Data reduction was achieved by simplifying and abstracting the data generated from the transcribed interviews (Miles *et al.*, 2014).

This was done in two stages:

First, coding based on the initial categories of m-marketing tools considered in this study. Irrelevant data was dismissed, while data that revealed interesting facts were broadly summarized. In this way, participants' views and interpretation were recorded. Second, for each of the m-marketing tools, data was reduced further and coded based on respondents' adoption/non-adoption of each m-marketing tool and the theoretical frameworks of TAM (ease of use, usefulness) and the stages of the consumer decision-making (CDM) process. Consequently, data was displayed into several matrices pertinent to marketers and consumers, respectively. This process facilitated the identification of consistencies among data and the drawing of conclusions. Figure 1 illustrates the thought process of the analysis adopted in this study.

Moreover, the quality of research findings was assessed through transferability, authenticity/credibility, dependability, and confirmability tests, following the argument of Lincoln and Guba (1985). To improve transferability, restaurants were divided into three categories (Table 1, restaurant types), and within each, the eateries had the same standard. This would facilitate comparison and consequently generalization to similar restaurants would be possible. In addition, the number of participants increased through the addition of the food influencer to have contrasting views by interviewees (Miles *et al.*, 2014). Authenticity

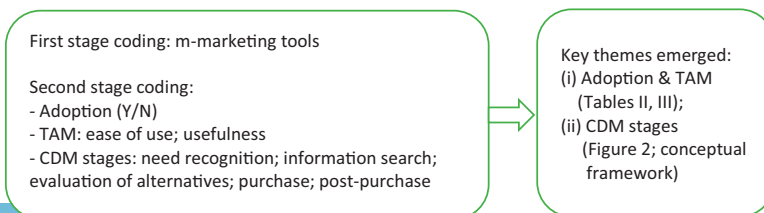


Figure 1. Data analysis process for each of marketers and consumers

is reflected by content-rich description (Miles *et al.*, 2014). Concerning dependability, the process of data collection was detailed so as to enable future investigators to repeat the work. Confirmability was tested by justifying every step of the research and providing alternative explanations of the observations. In addition, confirmability was further examined by two researchers who followed the same process of coding presented in Figure 1 and each of them developed the subsequent codes to identify the key themes that emerged from the analysis. Some differences observed in the subsequent analysis were resolved through discussion between the two coders to reach an agreement.

Results and discussion

In the following paragraphs, a presentation of results per m-marketing tool will take place, emphasizing on adoption, ease of use, usefulness, and its impact on the stages of consumers' decision-making process. Moreover, results will be presented for marketers and consumers interchangeably, for reasons of coherence, to enrich the results emerging and present a canvas of both stakeholders' views. An overview of key findings per function and stakeholder type appears in Tables 2 and 3, with respective suggestions aside to provide a better understanding.

M-marketing tools acceptance

The literature review identified the m-marketing tools that are available exclusively on smartphones and have been found useful in the context of the present paper. Concerning the adoption patterns of these tools, it is revealed that their adoption is relatively low by both marketers and consumers. In addition, both stakeholders' perspectives are in the same direction and they seem to complement each other. It is crucial to underline that all respondents confirm undertaking all searches related to food and dining through smartphones, while currently most online apps used in marketing are adapted to mobile. Consequently, the role of traditional m-marketing tools (i.e. SMS/MDA) and their impact on the dining decision-making process appeared less prominent. Even managers are rarely or have stopped using them. Apparently, there is a shift to mobile social media.

SMS: The SMS which could be the first m-marketing tool seems to influence loyal customers the most, as restaurants that target their own database of clients are satisfied with the results. In contrast, those who targeted third-party databases are not happy with the results. Interestingly, satisfied restaurants build their database using loyalty programs, which reveals why restaurants that did not emphasize or implement loyalty programs are those who rarely use SMS and who are not enthusiastic about it. For instance, one manager admits: 'not using SMS, as I do not have a significant database of loyal customers' (UCD1 marketer). The restaurants that are facing the same problem were identified, and it came out that the newly established ones are likely to have a limited database. The frequency of SMS could also be an additional factor, as one restaurant, for instance, sends one SMS every two months. It appears that managers' goal should primarily be to maximize the usefulness of the SMS content and to minimize irritating factors, such as repetitiveness and targeting the wrong audience.

MDA: Concerning mobile display advertising, answers were negative, as five restaurants rarely use this tool and two restaurants do not use it. Instead, managers made some recommendations if MDAs are to be used. Factors that may influence usefulness are related to target market, app type and banner type, as 'content' appears to have a moderating effect. The findings suggest that MDAs are more suitable to target the young generation. In fact, the youngest consumer participant is influenced by banners while playing games. However, he is likely to take action primarily when MDAs are placed on a food portal, such as Zomato.

M-tools	Adoption by managers	TAM – usefulness	TAM – ease of use	Suggestions
SMS	Rarely used: 4 out of 7; used: 3 out of 7	HIGH – for the well-established restaurants as they have an extended data base with loyal clientele	HIGH – though nowadays an obsolete tool	Emphasis on content of message rather than frequency/ repetition, linked with CRM
MDA	Rarely used: 5 out of 7; no use by the rest	MODERATE – effectiveness dependent on target market (younger vs older recipient), on app type (informative, offer announcement vs promotional) and banner type (purchases of high vs low involvement products/ services)	HIGH – when it takes the form of sponsored ads	Useful for special offers announcement and curiosity trigger
Branded M-app	Not used: 3 out of 7; willing to use: 3 out of 7; used by 2 out of 7	MODERATE – by including features that respond to consumers need HIGH – for market leaders having extensive database of loyal consumers	HIGH – conditional to services availability on app (online delivery service) and the attributes of the restaurants; facilitates restaurants to control and direct customers	Depended on type of restaurant and its features
Third party M-app	Used by all	HIGH – Zomato is used by all, since it includes everything related to dining. Instagram and Facebook accounts are also useful	–	Be active on both of specialized and social media outlets
QR code	Not used: 6 out of 7; used by 1; 1 non-user to adopt	LOW – consumers are not interested/triggered to use it	LOW – App not available by default on the phones	Do not use under the current situation
MLP/ MCC	Not used: 6 out of 7; used: by 1; coming soon: by 3	HIGH – for all restaurants, besides upscale ones, whose customers are not interested in this type of initiative	HIGH – Convenient to store database generated by consumers, with accurate feedback (Mobile Comment Card)	Very promising, especially its Mobile Comment Card (MCC) version
LBS (geo)	Used: 4 out of 7; not used by the rest	MODERATE – though mostly in malls/resorts	HIGH – though suppliers' trustworthiness may question its effectiveness	Suppliers may use a database of SMS or email addresses that is not geotargeted (Country) context dependent results
LBS (push)	Not used: 6 out of 7; 1 user	HIGH – would have an influence in malls and resorts (mostly)	–	
CTA	Used by all	HIGH – promising app, associated with existing review/booking platforms	HIGH	Effectiveness conditioned on usefulness of preexisting platforms (Country) context dependent results
MP	Not used: 6 out of 7; used by 1; 4 willing to use	LOW – consumers' avoidance due to lack of trust	LOW – introduced recently	

Table 2. Adoption of m-marketing tools by managers (empty cells: no responses; high to low: qualitative evaluation based on the results)

M-tools	Adoption by consumers	TAM – usefulness	TAM – ease of use	Suggestions
SMS	Rarely used: 5 out of 6	LOW – Nowadays an obsolete app	–	Influence loyal customers
MDA	No influence: 5 out of 6	HIGH – for younger generation, depending on content relevance LOW – for the rest of consumers; it may have an influence when MDA is in the form of sponsored ads offering something relevant	HIGH – young consumers are easily accessing MDA while playing games; preferred when takes the form of sponsored banner linked with respective Facebook page; conditional to banners' catchy degree and banners' relevance to consumers' needs at the time of exposure	More related to young generation
Branded M-app	Not downloaded: 5 out of 6	HIGH – When it includes mobile loyalty programs, ordering online and booking online	HIGH – for online ordering or booking and mobile loyalty programs; as consumers' familiarity with social media enhances ease of use/ access of restaurants' posts apparent on social networks LOW – for high-end restaurants as their target groups are not tech savvy and not interested in loyalty rewards	Depended on app's available services
Third party M-app	Used by all (restaurant guide)	HIGH – via Zomato for online ordering or booking	–	Related to the pre-existence of a review and booking portal
QR code	Not used or not aware: 5 out of 6	LOW – not interested/ triggered because it is an obsolete app, not built-in smart phones and no immediate benefits	–	Discount coupon may trigger use
MLP/ MCC	Not used: 4 out of 6	MODERATE – interest in a mobile comment card (that they rarely fill out, however)	MODERATE – promising, but rarely used	Highly relevant for special audience, i.e. foodies (i.e. MCC)
LBS (geo)	Used by all (5 out of 6 used abroad)	HIGH – via platforms, i.e. pre-existing review/ booking platforms, due to its high accuracy in cases of first visit	HIGH – though conditioned upon context, info content, and previous experience	Related to the pre-existence of a review and booking portal. LBS is context-specific (i.e. country size)

(continued)

M-tools	Adoption by consumers	TAM – usefulness	TAM – ease of use	Suggestions
LBS (push)	Would influence in malls: 4 out of 6	HIGH – for last-minute decisions and hesitant customers: if notifications inform them of a good offer; remind of a restaurant they know	–	Notification content crucial (informative, reminding) (Country) context dependent results
CTA	Used by all	HIGH – via pre-existing review/booking platforms	–	Related to the pre-existence of a review and booking portal
MP	Likely to be used: 5 out of 6	HIGH – not currently available BUT high intention to accept subject to safety (security issue)	–	Subject to future development

Table 3.

Similarly, another consumer said that he checks banners placed on Zomato. He considers that when he is using an app, it is for the service it provides; thus, he is annoyed when he encounters nonrelated banners. Some managers utilize MDAs to promote big events, while another one recommends this tool for high involvement products. Moreover, managers posit that informative banners and those that announce an offer or trigger curiosity are more efficient.

Moreover, managers differentiate between a MDA and a sponsored ad. It seems that the latter is preferred and adopted frequently. Some consumers' opinions support this insight. One female consumer, for instance, is influenced by sponsored banners as they drive her to 'like' the associated Facebook page, and consequently become a follower of the restaurant. Nevertheless, the majority are affected only if the sponsored ad offers something catchy or what they are exactly looking for. Another consumer said: 'I am influenced by sponsored ads during my search for alternatives for a special-occasion dinner, e.g. Valentine's day or marriage anniversary' (a 34-year-old married male). According to Longart (2015), eating out is a high involvement purchase. Blackwell *et al.* (2006) define customers' involvement as the actions consumers take to maximizing benefits and reducing risks. Consequently, it can be argued that the level of involvement in dining varies according to the occasion. From another standpoint, the reason consumers accept the restaurant-sponsored ads could be that eating out is usually a social event (Longart, 2015); consequently, placing an ad on social media related to dining is more adequate.

Social media thus play an influencing role in this context, since consumers use it to socialize. Restaurants are active primarily on Instagram and Facebook. According to one manager: '...the young generation may be shifting to Instagram [from Facebook]' (CD1 marketer). Encouraging customers to instantly share a photo or video appears to be the main aim of managers on social media, as it maximizes the reach of the post. One manager states: '...interacting with loyal customers and showing gratitude to them for their post, will encourage them to share more, and will increase their engagement' (UCD1 marketer). Two other managers argue: '...what drives the consumer to take an instant photo of food is the presentation of the platter' (UCD2, FF2 marketers). Additionally, props and unique decoration elements drive consumers to take pictures and sharing them. Most consumers appear to rarely share food photos publicly. Instead, they are substituting social media by sharing photos on WhatsApp with their family or friends.

Branded app: Managers revealed that upscale casual diners do not have a branded app, and are not planning to have one. As for the casual diners, one out of three restaurants has a branded app. Concerning the other two, one has an outdated app being reluctant to update, and the other doesn't have, but would consider developing one. [Luhur and Widjaja \(2014\)](#) noted that diners prefer to have all features and info related to restaurants in one application which facilitate comparison, thus, all restaurants in the present sample adopt third party apps such as Zomato and social media. From managers' viewpoint, influencing factors for branded app include the type/attributes of a restaurant, as for high-end restaurants a branded app is not recommended even if it includes a loyalty program. The possible reason, according to one consumer, is that '... the target audience is not tech-savvy and not interested in loyalty rewards' (a 46-year-old, married female). On the other hand, to be effective, a branded app has to be installed and used by consumers. Accordingly, five out of six consumers use primarily Zomato. The services that might drive consumers to download/use an app are online ordering or booking, and mobile loyalty programs. Findings are in line with [Lu et al. \(2015\)](#) who found that usefulness, ease of use, and compatibility have a significant influence on the adoption of tourism app. Some m-app can be included in the branded app such as the Mobile Loyalty Program. Nevertheless, we have separated the tools on the assumption that this is what generated the results of this study. Thus, we consider that the loyalty program is one of the features that can be included in a branded app.

QR code: The QR code adoption rate is found generally low. According to one manager: '...if the QR code triggers curiosity, it may be more efficient' (FF1 marketer). From a consumer perspective, feedback was not different; respondents confirmed not scanning QR code anymore. This result is in contrast with [Watson et al. \(2013\)](#), as their findings from a UK-based sample concluded that 87% of participants either have scanned or know what QR code is. Additionally, they state that there is evidence of future awareness and adoption. The reasons of non-adoption are that QR code is an old technology, and QR code scanner is not built-in in modern mobile phones. One consumer stated: 'I might be triggered to scan a code only if it offers immediate benefits, e.g., discount coupons' (a 31-year-old, single male). This argument is in line with [Okazaki et al. \(2013\)](#) and [Watson et al. \(2013\)](#).

MLP/MCC: Five out of seven marketers are planning to introduce a mobile loyalty program. Only upscale diners consider that this type of initiative will not interest their target audience. Thus, in light of the above discussion that highlights the role and challenges of customer loyalty programs, it can be assumed that many restaurants might go directly to MLP. Similarly, consumers, regardless of whether they use their loyalty card or not, are interested in this new technology. All participants (consumers) confirmed that they possess loyalty cards that they never use. It can be argued that those consumers are attitudinally loyal. Regarding mobile comment card (MCC), managers are likely to adopt it in the future, as it is convenient to store the database generated from reviewers and it provides accurate feedback since it is private. Hence, MCC is more likely to gather foodies' contacts, as they usually like to review.

LBS: Two location-based services types were recognized: geotargeting (location-based search) and push notifications. One manager argues: 'Geotargeted SMS would be useful if the suppliers are trustworthy, and since I do not trust the current providers, I am not using the service' (UCD1 marketer). In contrast, the manager of another restaurant is adopting it. Additionally, a third manager reveals that they will activate a push notification system starting 2018. In this regard, most of the remaining restaurants argue that push notification may be more effective in malls and resorts. This is in line with most consumer beliefs that cited the following adoption reasons: when restaurant choice is a last-minute decision, and they are hesitant; if the push notification informs them about a good offer; and, if it reminds them of a restaurant they know. However, respondents rarely use location-based search in Lebanon as it's a small country. In this regard, [Verma et al. \(2012\)](#) asserted that location-based

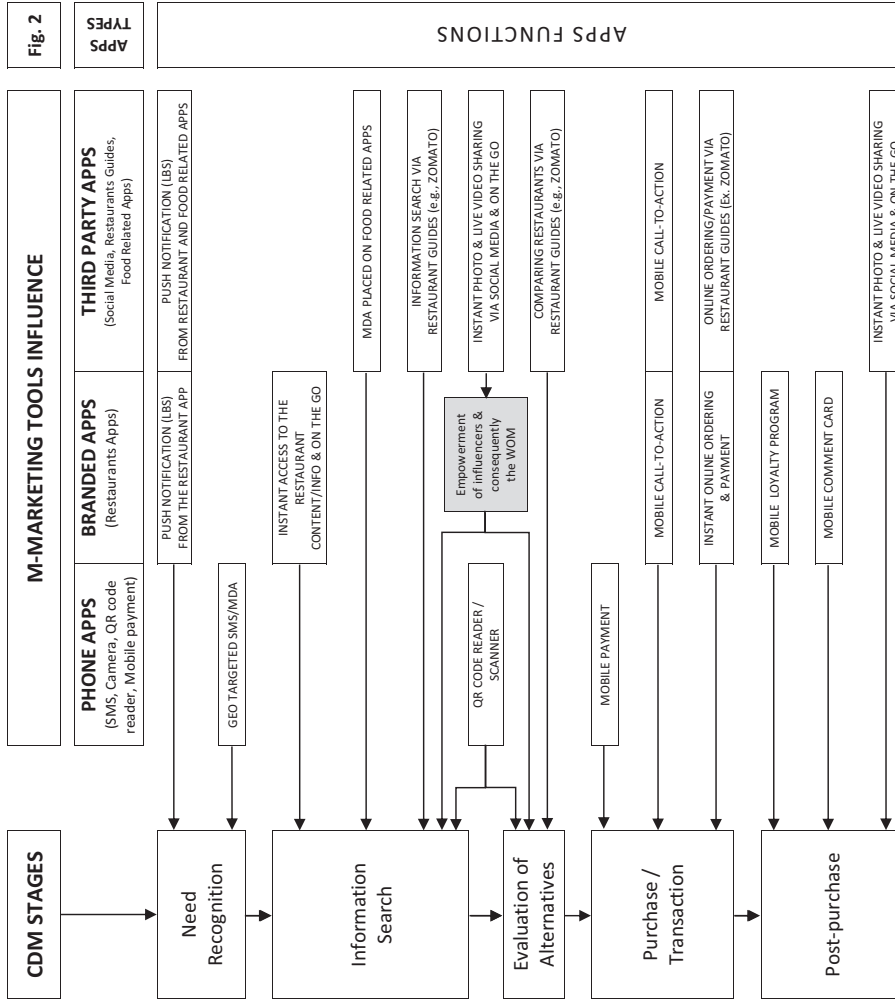


Figure 2. The influence of WOM and the m-marketing tools on dining decision-making

information and applications are favoured by tourists. Finally, the foodie stated that he uses LBS features on Zomato for its accuracy. This is not surprising because such individuals are the first to try new restaurants; subsequently, the location would be unknown to them.

CTA: Call-to-action tools got positive feedback from all managers, especially in connection with pre-existing review/booking platforms, which however precludes the existence of CTAs. One manager posits that those tools may increase sales, which is in line with Brandau (2012). On the other side, consumers confirm the usefulness of CTA, particularly via Zomato.

MP: Interestingly, mobile payment service was introduced in Lebanon in 2016. According to one marketer, the 'tap to pay' service is available, and one male consumer noted the iPhone 'wallet app'. Consumers avoid such services due to a lack of trust in the Lebanese security regulation. Nonetheless, according to a consumer: 'I might change my mind if I am convinced about its safety; and if the service is available everywhere' (a 28-year-old, married female). Consequently, it can be argued that perceived security and perceived usefulness are the primary barriers to adoption.

M-marketing tools impact on decision-making

Key themes that emerged in relation to CDM and the impact of m-marketing tools per stage are illustrated in Figure 2. Contrary to the previous section where results are presented and discussed strictly per m-marketing tool, in this section it was deemed more appropriate to reconstruct the CDM process and hence present and discuss the results per stage rather than follow a sequential tool-by-tool presentation. So, Figure 2 presents the influence of m-marketing tools on CDM and the new finding of WOM influence on CDM. The result of WOM influence is unexpected. It reveals that the effectiveness of the mobile tools used for marketing, regardless of their convenience, depends on the consumer's type and that the foodies or food influencers are the ones who use those apps the most. They were empowered by them which increased their influence. This explains why currently influencers are hired by renowned worldwide brands.

The influence of m-marketing tools in the consumer decision-making process appeared to be variable. According to one consumer: '... Word-of-Mouth (WOM) is the primary influence of my dining decision' (a 38-year-old, married male). In that respect, he noted: 'the influence of foodies, who post their opinion, reviews, and photos related to restaurants on their blogs or social media accounts'. Consequently, it can be argued that foodies are the primary initiators of WOM, which is amplified due to social media wide reach, as mobile social media, which allow consumers to share photos instantly or Livestream videos, may have propagated this trend further and faster. Hence, restaurants should consider foodies while planning their marketing strategy. Once they become loyal, foodies are likely to play the role of brand ambassadors. Somehow, the foodie participant acknowledged doing that, as new restaurants usually invite him, and after tasting, he decides whether to organize an outing with a large group of friends to try the restaurant officially or not.

Thus, it can be argued that the combination of social media platforms with the mobile camera and the convenience offered by smartphones, contributed in developing this trend. This process has probably empowered ordinary consumers as well. Consequently, this may have amplified WOM effect, which would undoubtedly impact the 'information search' and evidently the 'evaluation of alternatives' stages of a niche audience decision-making, since it reduces the set of alternatives that a diner may have. Longart (2015) found that positive WOM is crucial for including a new restaurant in the 'evoked set', which is the reduced size of alternatives. The views of the foodie suggest that ordinary consumers prefer to get a summary instead of reading everything related to restaurants. Nonetheless, despite its considerable influence, WOM is not the only factor, since personal beliefs have an impact, as highlighted in the TRA model.

Undoubtedly, the traditional mobile tools may still influence consumer's decision process. For instance, and as defined by consumer participants, SMS and MDA play the role of reminder when it promotes a previously tried attractive offer. It stays in mind during the planning stage of an outing. Therefore, the offering would be included in the 'evoked set of alternatives'. Consequently, a mobile message that takes into account all factors that increase effectiveness discussed in this paper would affect the process, as it will reduce the time between the 'need recognition' and the 'purchase' stages or perhaps eliminate the 'search' and 'evaluation of alternatives' stages. UCD1 marketer further notes SMS influence on the 'need recognition' stage: 'We use SMS occasionally, mostly, we do awareness campaigns, for instance, about an event, or to introduce a new service, or the opening of a new branch'.

Moreover, push notification is location-based and offers the ability to send instant messages, i.e. '... it can be a welcome message' (UCD2 marketer), to customers that are in proximity of a restaurant, at a particular time, requiring immediate action. Therefore, push notifications may stimulate impulse buying, as they can either remind the customer of a restaurant, or highlight a need that the customer was not aware of; then, he/she can quickly fulfil it, since he/she is close to the place. Hence, push notifications would influence the 'need recognition' stage, and will drive consumers to skip the search and evaluation stages. Or, at least, reduce remarkably the 'evoked set', which will lead directly to purchase.

Concerning QR code, [Okazaki et al. \(2013\)](#) note that consumers use QR codes primarily to access information and get promotional offers. This is confirmed by a consumer (a 34-year-old, married male): 'QR code is an old technology, in the past I used to download the app on purpose to scan a QR code and see the info it will provide; currently I may use it if it's to get an instant benefit, such as a discount code.' Hence, it can be argued that QR code may influence the 'information search' and the 'evaluation of alternatives' stages from a value-for-money perspective. Third party app, such as Zomato, is mainly used by consumers when they search for alternatives and evaluation. In fact, consumers consider food guides during their information search ([Longart, 2015](#)). They can open the app, find a restaurant, contact it instantly, and on the go. Such apps facilitate 'information search' and 'evaluation of alternatives'. In contrast, a branded app only assists in searching for information related to one restaurant. However, if the latter includes online ordering and loyalty program services available exclusively on it, it might have an influence on the 'post-purchase' stage. Since the loyalty program encourages them to repeat purchase, as CD3 marketer notes: 'Great tool to retain consumers in this very competitive industry'. Similarly, the Mobile Comment Card type of MLP influences the post-purchase stage: '... there is now a 'rate your visit' feature a link that leads you to a platform where you can rate your experience' (FF1 marketer). In addition, photo and video sharing also influence the post-purchase stage, as this is noted by a 46-year-old, married female: 'I do share photos when I'm having a dinner or lunch'. Branded apps that include online ordering and payment may impact the purchase stage. Moreover, mobile CTA apps would speed up and encourage purchase, 'For instance, I search for the restaurant website I click on the CTA tool and I call the restaurant instantly' (a 34-year-old, married male). Lastly, once all consumers adopt mobile payment, this would facilitate the in-store purchase.

Conclusions and implications

Conclusions

This study used the CDM process theory of Engel-Kollat-Blackwell to identify the influence of m-marketing tools on consumer buying process. It provided empirical evidence from the perspectives of marketers and consumers within the context of dining in a developing country. Some of the findings are in line with existing research, whereas some others are either in contrast or they present new evidence. It is also revealed that m-marketing tools influence consumer shopping differently and their effect varies given the customer type.

Specifically, concerning the adoption of each of the m-marketing tools under examination, SMS influences are confirmed. In addition, it is revealed that SMS is more effective with loyal customers, which is in line with the work of [Watson et al. \(2013\)](#), who emphasize the association between SMS effectiveness and company like and trust. MDA may be more suitable to target younger consumers, which is a new finding regarding the research context. Results on MDA confirm existing research findings that MDA is more effective for high involvement products ([Bart et al., 2014](#)). MDA is also differentiated from a sponsored ad, noting that the latter are more preferred. Additionally, MDA seemed to be more influential on food-related third-party apps. In general, the results revealed that consumers rely more on restaurant guide than branded apps. QR code low adoption result is in contrast with [Watson et al. \(2013\)](#) study conducted in the UK. LBS are rarely used in small countries and possible users are tourists, in line with the work of [Verma et al. \(2012\)](#). The results on branded apps and CTA are in line with existing research (e.g. [Brandau, 2012](#); [Luhur and Widjaja, 2014](#)). In addition, country culture-specific factors among others may explain the low adoption rate of MP.

Moreover, the results revealed the variable influence of m-marketing tools on the stages of the consumer decision-making process, which is illustrated through the conceptual framework. Specifically, LBS such as push notification and SMS/MDA through geographical targeting technologies influence the need recognition stage. Third-party apps such as Zomato and branded apps by the restaurants influence the information search stage. Mobile social media through the empowerment of dining influencers result in WOM communication that through photo and video sharing apps influence both the information search and the evaluation stages, respectively. Third-party apps influence the evaluation stage. The mobile functions that mostly influence the purchase stage are the online ordering/payment that can be available on both branded and third-party apps, the mobile CTA, and the MP. The post-purchase stage is mainly influenced by the branded app (MLP), mobile comment card, instant photo and live video sharing on the go. It is also shown that in some contexts, smartphones can speed up or shorten the process. This is an issue that should be noted in the smartphone era.

Finally, it is found that loyalty is an important factor that positively affects smartphone apps adoption. While the majority of the literature examines the factors that influence customer loyalty and its effects on intentions and behaviour (e.g. [Thakur, 2018](#)), our study highlights the characteristic and behaviour of loyal customers and their influence on m-marketing effectiveness. The decision-making process of loyal customers is more affected by m-marketing tools than the regular or ordinary customers. The participant who was identified as a foodie exhibits loyalty behaviour. This type of opinion leader is influential, since he reads, analyses and shares publicly the information related to restaurants. Additionally, he is the word-of-mouth initiator. Also, another two participants stated that they are loyal to a particular 'special offer' not to the restaurant itself. Repeat purchases occur for different reasons (e.g. lower prices than similar ones, convenient location). In contrast, loyal customers don't look for alternatives, as they believe that the product is superior to competitors' products ([Mothersbaugh and Hawkins, 2016](#)). This research identifies different types of users (loyal and repeat), which confirms the underlying theory (e.g. [Thakur, 2018](#)).

Implications for practice

The above findings may be important for practice. While it is difficult to conclude on which is the most effective m-marketing tool, the results of this study revealed that the potential influence of each of the m-tools examined differs given the stages of the CDM process. Thus, the effectiveness of the m-marketing tools depends on the CDM stage, as [Figure 2](#) illustrates. Marketing activity through smartphones should focus on building a database of loyal

customers, especially if the eatery is newly opened. Customer loyalty may be increased using mobile loyalty programs and mobile comment cards. For market leaders, a branded app that includes online ordering may also help in building the database, and may turn regular customers into loyal customers. Additionally, the restaurants should emphasize special occasions in their advertisements and messages (e.g. holidays), as the level of involvement in dining varies according to the occasion. Consequently, special events may increase posts efficiency. On the other hand, they should consider launching yearly package deals, and set menus that offer excellent value for money. Since such deals can lead some consumers to become loyal to the offer. When loyalty, occasions, and package deals are addressed adequately, smartphone marketing is likely to be more efficient. To grab the attention of the general audience, m-marketing message should promote something new with a call-to-action link. Findings may be applied in other industries that have similar characteristics. For instance, in the fashion industry, there are the so-called fashionistas, who are probably playing the role of foodies when it comes to fashion brands.

Limitations and further research

The limitations of this study are mainly based on the qualitative method used and are relevant to the research context. An important point is that a small number of in-depth interviews with marketers and consumers produced a disproportionately larger amount of raw data in the transcripts that resulted in several interesting findings. Concerning the consumer sample, it includes only users of m-marketing tools for dining (i.e. those having positive attitudes). Further research may address this limitation by examining consumer resistance towards m-marketing tools (i.e. concerning the non-users). The findings may not apply to lower standard restaurants. Most of the previous studies related to m-marketing are based on western markets that are usually more advanced in terms of technology such as Internet infrastructure/speed, and where the society has a different influence over consumers. Nevertheless, some components can still be applied to industries that have the same characteristics. Another limitation is the consideration of a single foodie. It would be helpful to examine the behaviour of other foodies. However, since the number of powerful foodies in Lebanon may not exceed ten; one participant may be acceptable. After all, in this study, the case of the foodie appeared during the interview with a marketer. Thus, it was not considered in the analysis as a separate stakeholder. Moreover, the mobile loyalty program, push notification and mobile payment are not implemented in Lebanon so far. Therefore, future studies are encouraged to re-evaluate related findings. Considering the reluctance of marketers to report an unsuccessful campaign, further research may address this limitation with the use of another qualitative method (e.g. indirect techniques). In addition, mobile social media appears to be taking over a significant part of smartphone marketing. Thus, further research could explore whether other industries are experiencing the same, since this research posits that social media may be more suitable for products related to social events and lifestyle. The conceptual framework in [Figure 2](#) could be further examined with subsequent empirical evidence.

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