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Influence of Electronic Word-Of-Mouth on Restaurant Choice Decisions: Does It Depend on Gender in the Millennial Generation?

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Abstract: Given the exponential growth of eWOM, especially among the millennial generation, an analysis of the consultation behaviour of online opinions is essential to better understanding the decision-making process. The aim of this proposal is to analyse how the motivations towards eWOM consultation contribute to the final adoption of eWOM, especially in the restaurant context, exploring the relationship chain "motivations to consult eWOM—intention to consult eWOM—adoption to consult eWOM". Moreover, studying the moderating effect of gender in this chain is argued. Based on a sample of 341 millennials with experience in reading online reviews and visiting restaurants, a causal model was estimated through PLS estimation in the geographic area of Ecuador. The results confirm that millennials' motivations influence directly their intention to consult eWOM and indirectly on eWOM adoption. In addition, gender does not show a significant effect on the chain of effects. Given that virtual platforms have the potential to influence men and women equally, the communication efforts of restaurants focused on this target audience and carried out on social media must focus on aspects other than gender.

Keywords: gender; eWOM reviews; motivations; millennials; restaurants

1. Introduction

Currently, the food industry has found new communication channels via social media [1]. In this online context, individuals classified as millennials have become one of the most relevant generational cohorts in the hospitality sector [2]. Therefore, observing their behaviours is of particular academic and practical interest. In this age group, notable changes in tastes and gastronomic preferences are observed [3]. For example, these consumers are looking for healthy foods, they want to experiment with different flavours and spend twice as much as other generations [4]. Several investigations have analysed the behaviour of millennials when booking or contracting various services, such as accommodation, tourist packages, trips, and cultural activities, among others [5]. However, their behaviour relating to restaurants still presents an interesting research opportunity [6,7].

Without differentiating between generations, previous studies have been carried out on the motivations that guide consumers to consult restaurant experiences shared by other users on various virtual platforms [8]. This interaction influences consumer decisions since the information generated is understood as reliable, credible, and of high quality [8]. For this reason, the study of electronic Word-of-Mouth (hereinafter eWOM) has been a prolific field of research over the last decade [7,9,10].

eWOM is the bilateral and informal dissemination of information between consumers via the Internet [11]. This behaviour has been the subject of various studies in the restaurant

sector. For example, there is eWOM research in fast food establishments [2] that analyses culinary preferences and menu choices using technology [3] or dining behaviours [12]. However, eWOM is a phenomenon that is too complex to be investigated in a disaggregated way or from merely descriptive questions. On this issue, the literature has highlighted, among others, the motivation to consult eWOM [13], the intention to consult [14], and the adoption of eWOM [15]. In addition, previous research indicates that gender plays a significant role in social network experiences and sharing behaviour as the changes that technological advances are bringing about in consumer expectations and perceptions may differ between genders [6]. These findings highlight the importance of exploring how gender factors may influence members of the millennial generation's decisions in the stage prior to choosing a restaurant. In this context, the priority of the present study is to investigate these specific gender-related aspects during the crucial phase preceding restaurant choice for members of the millennial generation.

In addition to the importance of eWOM behaviour for the millennial generation, Ecuador was chosen to deepen the knowledge of its cultural particularities that may influence restaurant purchase and reservation decisions [16]. This developing country shows specific cultural habits and preferences that differ from other countries, making the study relevant and specific to this setting [17]. Previous research argues that the Ecuadorian population shows different behaviours based on socioeconomic, cultural, and technological factors compared to developed countries such as the United States or the European Union [18]. For example, economic conditions, internet access rates, technology adoption, and consumption preferences vary significantly [19]. Finally, it is also important to note that these relationships have not yet been investigated in Ecuador, which is considered a developing economy [20].

In terms of gender research, it is true that many studies have focused on developed countries, such as the United States, Canada, and several European countries [21]. This could be due to a variety of reasons, such as the availability of resources, research infrastructure, and accessibility to study populations. By investigating Ecuador, this study brings a valuable, less-explored perspective to the existing literature. This allows us to examine how gender dynamics in a developing country may influence millennials' interactions with online restaurant reviews [22].

In order to address these particularities, the following research questions are posed: [1] How do motivations influence the intention to consult eWOM? [2] What effect do these eWOM consultations have on the purchase decision? and [3] Does gender moderate these relationships? To answer these questions, two research objectives were established. Firstly, we sought to verify the chain of effects "motivations to consult eWOM → intention to consult eWOM → adoption of the eWOM consulted", differentiating between convenience, risk and social motivations, following the classification successfully tested by Kim et al. [23]. Secondly, in order to deepen the understanding of the role played by millennials' eWOM consultations, the moderating character of gender in this sequence of chain relationships was analysed.

This study contributes to the literature by filling gaps in the understanding of how Ecuadorian millennials use eWOM in the restaurant context. By highlighting the uniqueness of this demographic group in this specific geographic setting, this study can provide valuable insights that proceed beyond simple extrapolations of previous research. Therefore, the choice of millennials in Ecuador is justified by the combination of their technological affinity, post-pandemic changes, cultural relevance, and contribution to the academic literature and local business practices.

2. Theoretical Framework and Hypothesis

Theoretical studies define eWOM behaviour as information related to a product, service, brand, or company that is transmitted or exchanged between people over the Internet. The influence of eWOM on consumers is increasing in the online environment [24,25]. It is important to highlight the substantial evolution of electronic media that allows users to disseminate

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information, seek alternatives, and even reduce risk [26]. In this sense, eWOM behaviour is any informal exchange of opinions between consumers through the Internet that refers to positive or negative evaluations of their shopping experience [27]. These opinions have an influence on the purchasing process or on the online booking process [28]. The interaction of eWOM behaviour, together with the advancement of communications in various virtual channels, has strengthened the study of eWOM from an academic and business viewpoint [14].

The literature highlights that when consulting eWOM, users are mainly looking for the perceived credibility of reviews in the online environment and the usefulness they offer for making purchasing decisions [29]. Consumers who actively search for information in different digital channels are influenced by the messages of other consumers, considering them credible and useful. For this reason, the eWOM consulted has a great impact on the members of a virtual community where consumption experiences and information related to the acquisition of products or services are shared, as in the case of a platform concerning food and drink or restaurant services.

The millennial generation, also known as Generation Y or digital natives [30], and even the yo-yo generation [31], represent individuals born approximately between 1980 and 2000 [32]. They are regular users of social media and pioneers in activities related to digital marketing [33]. Their consumption patterns are especially different from other older generations [34]. For example, when it comes to food, it has been researched that many millennials do not prepare their food at home and tend to show high consumption and visits to websites that offer menus, such as restaurants and bars [12,35]. Their shopping experiences are assessed on the quality of the food/drink and service, the friendliness of the staff, the ambiance of the establishment, and the speed of service [36,37]. However, it is essential to remember that these trends are general and may vary among individuals. Because of these characteristics, the millennial generation has been considered a lucrative, high-value, and growth-enhancing customer group for the foodservice industry [2].

The next sections provide an overview of how millennials actively participate in the search for information and experiences in the virtual realm. As influential digital consumers, the creation and consumption of eWOM may directly impact their purchasing decisions.

2.1. Effects of Motivations to Consult eWOM on Intention to Consult eWOM

One of the most widely shared contributions in the literature on the motivations for consulting eWOM is that of Kim et al. [23], which has been supported by several previous research studies, such as the work of Chen et al. [38], Engelbertink and van Hullebusch [39], Hussain et al. [40], Mendoza-Moreira and Moliner-Velázquez [41], Moliner-Velázquez et al. [25,42], and Vajjhala and Ghosh [43]. Their classification is made up of the following three dimensions: convenience, social, and risk reduction.

Convenience motivation includes the costs of the opportunity, which refers to the mental effort involved in searching for information prior to purchase [44] and the monetary cost of not reading reviews [45]. Customers with little purchasing experience are the most likely to seek information to feel confident in purchasing the product [46].

Social motivation is focused on seeking information about different purchase experiences, allowing the individual to identify with a group, feel like they belong to it, and achieve some social integration [8].

Finally, risk reduction motivation refers to the belief that these consultations can minimise risks such as functional (quality and service), social (family and friends), financial (price), or physical risks (possible bodily harm) [47]. In short, the search for information is carried out with the purpose of mitigating discontent or financial or time loss due to having made a poor choice [29]. In this way, comments on the various virtual platforms are used to reduce the risk that lies in the conditions of intangibility, inseparability, variability, and perishability that characterise the services.

To the best of our knowledge, there is a lack of studies about the effects of motivations to consult eWOM at the pre-purchase stage in the restaurant context. Some studies

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have analysed the relationship of these motivations with the purchase decision and the consumer's cultural profiles (see, among others, e.g., Santo & Marques, [48]). Kim [49] highlights how consumers are motivated to consult eWOM about restaurants to know different experiences and services. However, there is no empirical evidence on the effect of consultation motivations on the intention to consult eWOM. Based on the above arguments, the motivations of convenience, social, and reduction risk could be important antecedents of the intention to consult eWOM (Figure 1):

Hypothesis 1 (H1). *Convenience motivation positively affects the intention to consult eWOM.*

Hypothesis 2 (H2). *Social motivation positively affects the intention to consult eWOM.*

Hypothesis 3 (H3). *The risk reduction motivation positively affects the intention to consult eWOM.*
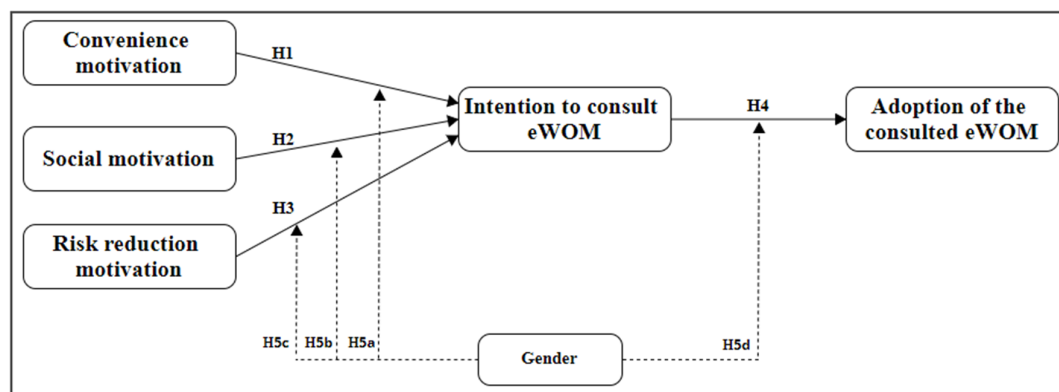

Figure 1. Model proposal and hypotheses.

2.2. Effect of Intention to Consult eWOM on Adoption of eWOM

The adoption of eWOM refers to a psychological action and relates to the influence that reviews or/and online comments have on consumers. These opinions can also have an impact on the consumer purchase decision process [50]. The literature has analysed the relationship between the intention to consult the eWOM and the adoption of EWOM consultation in services and hospitality, but there is a gap in this behaviour among millennial consumers in the restaurant experience. Several studies indicate that consumers read the reviews that are shared online, considering factors such as the quality of the message and the perceived usefulness [51]. These factors increase the confidence of digital media users in the recommendations they find on various virtual platforms, indirectly influencing the intention to repeat the purchase [52]. Consequently, this interaction of customers within the context of food and drink services is important to the success of the business due to the significant influence that customers exert over others on social media [53].

Millennials are highly interactive in their use of social media, either as active consumers or passive consumers of the information they consult. This implies that the comments consulted can influence the adoption of eWOM information prior to purchase [44]. Consumers' evaluation of online reviews can change based on the levels of credibility consumers perceive of the recommendations [5]. Considering that the credibility of the eWOM is the degree to which a review is perceived as either credible or true, various works indicate that when consumers read online reviews, they make evaluations of the credibility of the message, which determines to what extent an individual learns and adopts the message received [24]. In this way, a reader who thinks that the review received is truthful, real, and authentic can have more confidence in adopting and using eWOM comments to make purchasing decisions [54]. Cheung et al. [55] also demonstrated that the intention

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to consult eWOM, associated with the perceived credibility of the eWOM, has a positive effect on the adoption of the eWOM consulted. Consequently, it is assumed that the greater the consumer's intention to consult eWOM, the greater the influence of this information on the purchase decision (Figure 1):

Hypothesis 4 (H4). *The intention to consult eWOM has a positive effect on the adoption of the consulted eWOM.*

2.3. Role of Gender in eWOM Consultations

The literature on gender differences in Internet use has evolved, and recent research has shed light on these patterns in specific contexts, highlighting cultural influences on these dynamics [56]. In a study conducted in cities across the United States, different forms of communication and information processing approaches were observed between women and men in the digital environment [57]. In Italy, it was found that men's and women's preferences in restaurant choice are influenced by country-specific factors, such as perceived healthiness, quarantine procedures, and perceived hygiene [58]. In another study conducted in a European context, Šerić & Vernuccio [59] highlighted the differences in information-processing between women and men, providing a more detailed perspective on how these patterns may vary across regions. This underscores the need to take cultural particularities into account when exploring how gender impacts food-related decisions and eWOM consultation. In addition, privacy and risk dynamics during e-commerce transactions have been found to differ between women and men, with concerns being more pronounced for women [60]. These cultural variations have also been corroborated in studies exploring the emotional and approach differences in digital shopping [61].

While there have been cross-cultural studies that reveal similarities in the perceptions of millennials in different countries, there is a lack of empirical evidence in Latin America and, specifically, in Ecuador regarding the influence of millennials' gender in restaurants [16]. The absence of research in the region suggests the need to address this knowledge gap and understand how gender dynamics affect interactions with eWOM in the Ecuadorian context.

Our study, thus, makes a significant contribution by analysing how the motivations for consulting eWOM, the intention to do so, and the adoption of the eWOM consulted may vary between millennial men and women in Ecuador, considering the cultural specificity of this context. Therefore, the last group of hypotheses related to the moderating effect of gender is formulated as follows (Figure 1):

Hypothesis 5a (H5a). *Gender moderates the influence of convenience motivation on the intention to consult eWOM.*

Hypothesis 5b (H5b). *Gender moderates the influence of social motivation on the intention to consult eWOM.*

Hypothesis 5c (H5c). *Gender moderates the influence of risk reduction motivation on the intention to consult eWOM.*

Hypothesis 5d (H5d). *Gender moderates the influence of the intention to consult eWOM on the adoption of the eWOM consulted.*

3. Methodology

3.1. Measurement Scales and Data Collection

In order to verify the proposed theoretical model, an empirical investigation was carried out based on the information from a structured questionnaire aimed at consumers from the millennial generation. This questionnaire was organised in sections as follows: engagement with eWOM, the frequency of visiting restaurants, frequency of consulting

eWOM, motivations for consulting eWOM, motivations for sending eWOM, the adoption of eWOM, and socio-demographic data. Measurement scales were adapted from the literature to this study's context. A 7-point Likert scale was used. Motivation to consult eWOM was measured using the following three scales proposed by Kim et al. [23]: convenience (7 items), social (8 items), and risk reduction (2 items). The intention to consult eWOM was measured with three indicators proposed by Gvili & Levy [62], while three items were adapted from Yan et al.'s [63] proposal to measure the adoption of eWOM.

The fieldwork was carried out using non-random convenience sampling, with participants invited to voluntarily complete the questionnaire online [64]. The publication of the final questionnaire took place in the second week of July 2020 through platforms such as Facebook (455.0.0.0.35), Twitter (v9), and the instant messaging application WhatsApp (2.23.12.75). The selection of participants was based on specific criteria, including age (between 20 and 40 years old) and experience in reading online reviews and comments, as well as visits to restaurants in the geographical scope of Ecuador. These criteria were chosen with the purpose of focusing on the millennial generation and individuals familiar with the dynamics of consulting online restaurant reviews in the Ecuadorian context. Regarding the gender proportion in the sample of 341 valid and complete responses (41.6% male, 58.4% female), it is important to note that, although not equal, the study design sought to reflect the gender distribution in the target population. The choice of this proportion was based on practical and logistical considerations, as well as on the demographic representation of the target audience in a specific geographic setting. The average age across the sample was 29.2 ($\pm$4.6) years old. Of the respondents, 32% were full-time employees, while 41% were students. Regarding the robustness of the model, it is important to note that the sample size, n = 341, exceeds the recommended threshold of 200 [65]. Furthermore, more than 12 observations were obtained for each observable variable and latent construct (23 + 5 = 28), thus exceeding the minimum of 10 recommended by Hair et al. [66].

With respect to the economic context, an income of USD 400 per month was included as a general indicator of the socioeconomic level of the sample. However, it is crucial to recognise that the cost of living and needs vary by region and individual circumstances. In the Ecuadorian context, USD 400 per month may be considered sufficient for some but insufficient for others, depending on factors such as location, monthly expenses, lifestyle, and financial responsibilities.

3.2. Data Analysis

The data analysis technique to test the relationships proposed in the theoretical model was partial least squares (PLSs), which is suitable to predict the adoption of the consulted eWOM based on the intention to consult eWOM [67]. SmartPLS 4.0.8.7 software with a Bootstrap resampling procedure (10,000 subsamples were randomly generated) was used to test the hypotheses [68], treating all constructs as reflective. The existence of measurement invariance (MICOM) was validated as a step prior to the estimation of the multigroup analysis (MGA) to study the moderating capacity of gender.

4. Results

4.1. Measurement Model and Metric Invariance

The reliability of the scales was assessed using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability. For all the scales, both values were greater than 0.70 and considered adequate [67]. To verify the convergent validity of the constructs, the average variance extracted for all the constructs was greater than 0.50. In addition, the factor loadings associated with each item reached the minimum value of 0.6 and were 99% significant (Table 1).

Table 1. Reliability and convergent validity of the measurement scales.

Constructs	Items	Loadings	α	CR	AVE
			0.901	0.922	0.629
	CM1—For quicker information on restaurants.	0.726 ***			
	CM2—To save time before making a restaurant reservation.	0.817 ***			
Convenience motivation	CM 3—Why does it make it easier for me to search for restaurant information from home or work.	0.823 ***			
	CM 4—Why is it the easiest way to obtain information.	0.804 ***			
	CM 5—To be able to compare them with others.	0.745 ***			
	CM 6—To find low prices.	0.813 ***			
	CM 7—To get a better price.	0.819 ***			
Social motivation			0.911	0.928	0.616
	SM1—To verify if others perceive the same as me.	0.794 ***			
	SM 2—Why do I like comparing my evaluation with others.	0.793 ***			
	SM 3—To feel better by verifying that I'm not the only one having issues with the services.	0.813 ***			
	SM 4—To feel part of a virtual community.	0.740 ***			
	SM 5—To enjoy interacting with other people.	0.783 ***			
	SM 6—To know if there are new things.	0.749 ***			
	SM 7—To know what topics are being discussed about restaurants.	0.829 ***			
	SM 8—To find solutions to the problems I encounter when booking a restaurant.	0.777 ***			
			0.805	0.911	0.836
Risk reduction motivation	RM1—To make the best decision about a restaurant	0.917 ***			
	RM 2—To benefit from others' experiences.	0.912 ***			
			0.841	0.904	0.758
Intention to consult eWOM	IC1—I often read recommendations from friends on products or services on social media.	0.853 ***			
	IC2—I enjoy reading on social media about experiences other people had with products or services I'm interested in.	0.884 ***			
	IC3—When I interact on social media, I'm open to receiving opinions from other people about interesting products or services.	0.875 ***			
			0.849	0.909	0.769
Adoption of the consulted eWOM	ACE1—I tend to agree with the opinions and comments of people who write about a restaurant.	0.810 ***			
	ACE 2—Overall, I follow recommendations from comments and opinions about restaurants	0.913 ***			
	ACE 3—The comments and opinions made about a restaurant motivate me to decide to book it.	0.904 ***			

α = Cronbach's alpha; CR = composite reliability; AVE = average variance extracted; *** $p < 0.01$.

To verify discriminant validity, the criterion of Fornell & Larcker [69] was used. As shown in Table 2, all correlations between the latent constructs were less than the square root of the AVE (values in bold in Table 2).

Table 2. Discriminant validity of the measurement scales—Fornell & Larcker.

	Convenience Motivation	Social Motivation	Risk Reduction Motivation	Intention to Consult eWOM	Adoption of the Consulted eWOM
Convenience motivation	**0.793**				
Social motivation	0.726	**0.785**			
Risk reduction motivation	0.757	0.761	**0.915**		
Intention to consult eWOM	0.598	0.513	0.529	**0.871**	
Adoption of the consulted eWOM	0.725	0.693	0.690	0.535	**0.877**

The discriminant validity values obtained from the heterotrait–monotrait ratio were lower than the maximum allowed value for all variables of 0.90 [70], as shown in Table 3, which confirms the discriminant validity of the measurement scales.

Table 3. Discriminant validity—heterotrait–monotrait ratio (HTMT).

	Convenience Motivation	Social Motivation	Risk Reduction Motivation	Intention to Consult eWOM	Adoption of the Consulted eWOM
Convenience motivation					
Social motivation	0.789				
Risk reduction motivation	0.889	0.875			
Intention to consult eWOM	0.682	0.575	0.641		
Adoption of the consulted eWOM	0.827	0.782	0.828	0.628	

Potential common bias issues were also checked since the same respondent had to assess both independent and dependent variables. Specifically, the correlations between

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the latent constructs shown in Table 2 (off-diagonal values) are lower than 0.9 [71], and the VIFs obtained are lower than 3.3 as follows: VIF convenience motivation = 2.672; VIF social motivation = 2.718; VIF risk reduction motivation = 3.008; VIF intention to consult eWOM = 1.000), which confirm that they are not problems of collinearity [72].

To contrast the possible moderating effect of gender, a multigroup analysis was carried out. According to Henseler et al. [73], it is necessary to verify the existence of a measurement invariance beforehand. For this, MICOM was applied through the following three stages: (1) configuration invariance (Step 1); (2) compositional invariance (Step 2); and (3) the equality of the composite mean values and the variances (Steps 3a and 3b). Regarding the first step, both groups presented the same measurement configuration, the same items, and the same nature of the latent constructs. Compositional invariance (Step 2) was established when the common factor model scores used the male group weightings and did not differ from those created using the female group weightings when carrying out the one-tailed permutation test. In the test, none of the original correlation values (C), which are at 5%, should differ significantly between the samples. In this study, the compositional invariance of the model was confirmed since all the c were within the 95% confidence interval (Table 3). Finally, in steps 3a–3b, we first tested for the equality of means and then for the equality of variances using the nonparametric permutations test [67]. In this case, it was possible to verify the equality of means and variances, so the invariance of the measure was the total (Table 4).

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Table 4. Measurement invariance test (MICOM).

Constructs	Step 1. Configural Invariance?	Step 2. Compositional Invariance		Partial Measurement Invariance?	Step 3a. Equal Variances?			Step 3b. Equal Means?			Full Measurement Invariance?
		C = 1	Confidence Interval		Difference	Confidence Interval	Equal?	Difference	Confidence Interval	Equal?	
Convenience motivation	Yes	0.999	(0.996; 1.000)	Yes	0.072	(−0.220; 0.212)	Yes	−0.053	(−0.512; 0.486)	Yes	Yes
Social motivation	Yes	0.997	(0.994; 1.000)	Yes	0.053	(−0.221; 0.215)	Yes	−0.079	(−0.400; 0.382)	Yes	Yes
Risk reduction motivation	Yes	0.999	(0.995; 1.000)	Yes	−0.044	(−0.218; 0.215)	Yes	0.047	−0.450; 0.424	Yes	Yes
Intention to consult eWOM	Yes	1.000	(0.998; 1.000)	Yes	−0.086	(−0.217; 0.211)	Yes	−0.034	(−0.414; 0.39)	Yes	Yes
Adoption of the consulted eWOM	Yes	1.000	(0.996; 1.000)	Yes	0.017	(−0.219; 0.213)	Yes	0.123	(−0.464; 0.419)	Yes	Yes

4.2. Analysis of the Structural Model and Moderating Effect

With regard to the fit of the estimation of the structural model, the R^2 values were 0.376 and 0.286, which meant that 37.6% and 28.6% of the variability for the intention to consult eWOM and the adoption of the eWOM consulted, respectively, reached the minimum explanatory level (>0.10) proposed by Falk & Miller [74], which is explained by the model. These values indicate a substantial and moderate consideration, which suggests that the adequate explanatory power of the independent variables can be considered moderate based on Chin [75]. The f^2 values associated with the motivations were 0.11 (convenience), 0.07 (social), and 0.08 (risk reduction), and this means a small effect on the intention to consult eWOM. On the other hand, the intention to consult eWOM had a large effect on the adoption of eWOM consulted ($f^2 = 0.40$).

The structural coefficients, together with the significance levels associated with causal parameters, allowed us to conclude that the following: (i) convenience motivation and (ii) social motivation positively and significantly influence the intention to consult eWOM; (iii) risk reduction motivation does not have a significant relationship with the intention to consult eWOM, and (iv) the intention to consult eWOM positively and significantly influences the adoption of the eWOM consulted (Table 5).

Table 5. Structural model estimation.

Hypothesis	Path Coefficient	t-Value	*p*-Value	Result
H1: Convenience motivation → Intention to consult eWOM	0.425 ***	4.635	0.000	Supported
H2: Social motivation → Intention to consult eWOM	0.110 **	1.671	0.047	Supported
H3: Risk reduction motivation → Intention to consult Ewom	0.123	1.391	0.082	Rejected
H4: Intention to consult eWOM → Adoption of the consulted eWOM	0.535 ***	9.858	0.000	Supported

** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

In this study, gender was considered a moderating variable of a categorical nature. To evaluate its impact, multigroup analysis was used. The results revealed that there were no significant gender differences (see Table 6). Consequently, it is concluded that the proposed relationships did not appear to differ depending on the consumer's gender.

Table 6. Multigroup analysis estimation (gender).

Hypothesis	Path Coefficient FEMALES	Path Coefficient MALES	Difference Paths	Henseler MGA	*p*-Value	Results
H5a: Convenience motivation → Intention to consult eWOM	0.378 ***	0.509 ***	0.131	0.231	0.482	Rejected
H5b: Social motivation → Intention to consult eWOM	0.048	0.217 **	0.169	0.112	0.249	Rejected
H5c: Risk reduction motivation → Intention to consult eWOM	0.205 *	−0.012	−0.217	0.119	0.222	Rejected
H5d: Intention to consult eWOM → Adoption of the consulted eWOM	0.540 ***	0.530 ***	−0.01	0.467	0.817	Rejected

* $p < 0.10$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

5. Discussion

Previous research has addressed the impact of eWOM on restaurant selection and customer satisfaction from a variety of perspectives. For example, Singh et al. [76] point to the significant influence of eWOM on restaurant choice, especially highlighting the impact of customer reviews, online offers, and website usability. This finding is complemented by our research, which identified convenience motivation and social motivation as a positive relationship between the dining experiences and eWOM consulted, suggesting that a positive experience can increase eWOM. In addition, Uslu [37] highlighted the importance of service quality and restaurant ambience on customer satisfaction and eWOM. However, Line et al. [9] raised doubts about the validity of the current methods for measuring eWOM, highlighting the need for more sophisticated approaches.

In this context, our study represents a significant contribution to the field of eWOM research, especially when considering the online restaurant selection behaviour of the millennial generation. Contrary to the research by Vajjhala and Ghosh [43], this work focuses

specifically on the gastronomic sector and focuses on a developing country in the form of Ecuador. We explore specific variables such as consultation, risk, and social motivations, eWOM consulted, eWOM adoption, and its influence on foodservice purchase decisions in diverse cultural and socioeconomic contexts: aspects that have not been extensively investigated in the previous literature [18]. Taken together, our research contributes to a more complete and contextualised understanding of the role of eWOM in restaurant choice, enriching the existing body of knowledge in this field.

This study sought to delve deeper into the dynamics of the millennial generation around motivations to use eWOM in the restaurant context. Specifically, this study focused on the Ecuadorian context, where the influence of eWOM queries in the purchase decision process, particularly in the restaurant sector, is a relevant phenomenon [77]. The analysis focused on the chain of relationships, "motivations to consult eWOM → intention to consult eWOM → adoption of the eWOM consulted", with an additional emphasis on the moderating role of gender.

Convenience motivation is a key factor that influences consumers' decision to consult product and service reviews online [78]. According to the literature, convenience motivation is related to the ease and speed of obtaining relevant information about products and services [79–81]. This study supports the idea that convenience motivation is an important determinant of the intention to consult eWOM [82]. The empirical results highlight the significant influence of convenience motivation to consult eWOM on the intention to search for information online, which is in line with Kim et al. [23]. The incursion of perceptual costs, such as the mental effort to process information and the consideration of the opportunity cost of minimising the risks associated with a potential bad purchase or restaurant reservation, was evident [44]. These findings highlight the importance of the practicality and accessibility of eWOM information in making online purchase or repurchase decisions [28], which is a specific and relevant dynamic in the Ecuadorian context.

Social motivation also emerged as an influential component in the intention to consult eWOM, highlighting the need to belong to and participate in the virtual community. These findings reinforce the notion of a strong sense of belonging to the group and the inherent desire to participate and learn about the experiences of other consumers in the restaurant environment [37,42]. This social element is a crucial conditioning factor when making online consultations, strengthening the social function of consumption in the specific context of Ecuador [83]. Following the approach of the study by Harrington et al. [84], Ecuadorian millennial consumers, as in other contexts, demonstrated that they enjoyed interacting with their peers, sharing shopping experiences, and cultivating a sense of virtual community. The results of our study support this perspective by confirming that social motivation explains the consumer's need to secure acceptance and gain the approval of others, particularly in products linked to social prestige.

The relationship between the motivation to reduce risks and the intention to consult eWOM in Ecuadorian millennial consumer behaviour offers an interesting perspective in the local context [85]. Contrary to the theory of the four types of risk, which include functional, social, financial, and physical risks [47], the research results show that they do not play a significant role in the purchase decisions of this generation in Ecuador [86]. This finding contradicts previous research suggesting the importance of risk reduction as a key motivator in purchase decisions [26,87]. In the specific context of Ecuadorian millennial consumers, the lack of influence of this motivation could be due to consumers relying on the information available online [88] and not seeing the need to mitigate the potential risk when making decisions based on other users' opinions [89]. Finally, although risk reduction motivation has been identified as an important factor in other decision situations [26], this study did not find a significant relationship between this motivation and the intention to consult the eWOM.

Consistent with previous research [90], our results support the idea that the motivations for consulting eWOM have a significant impact on the intention to search for and use these messages, especially in the specific context of Ecuadorian millennial consumers [91].

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This finding indicates that, as in other studies, consumers feel the need to participate in the virtual community of online reviews and comments to inform their restaurant reservation or purchase decisions [92]. In addition, it highlights that the intention to consult eWOM not only influences consumers' decisions to seek information but also has a significant impact on the adoption of the messages and comments consulted [40]. This pattern aligns with the idea that interaction and participation on eWOM platforms go beyond the simple search for information, directly affecting the final decision to book or purchase a restaurant [93].

In the Ecuadorian context, the absence of gender moderation in the relationships raised reflects homogeneity in the way men and women of the millennial generation consider and use online reviews and comments when making restaurant reservation decisions. These findings suggest that, despite the gender differences identified in other contexts and studies [56,57], in the specific area of restaurants in Ecuador, the motivations for consulting eWOM, the intention to do so, and the adoption of the messages consulted do not show significant variations between genders. This finding may be linked to specific cultural and social characteristics of the Ecuadorian context [17,18], where the millennial generation shares similarities in the way they perceive and use online reviews, regardless of gender. In this sense, it highlights the importance of considering the cultural and regional context when interpreting the results of research on consumer behaviour, as these dynamics can vary significantly.

6. Conclusions

The findings derived from this research offer valuable and practical insights for the local Ecuadorian setting and, at the same time, enrich the overall understanding of how variables such as gender influence interactions with online reviews in different developing contexts. This study allows the further investigation of millennials' eWOM behaviour from the receiving consumer approach in the context of restaurants. Although this topic has been studied in the literature in different areas, it has not been applied to this sector, and there are still questions to be investigated, not only about the effect of the eWOM consulted on the purchase decisions for this type of service, but also in the geographic area of a developing country such as Ecuador. In the restaurant reservation process, the motivations that influence the intention to consult eWOM are related to convenience and the social factor. However, the motivation that the consumer may have to reduce the risk of their decision is not relevant when explaining their intention to consult the opinions of others. Just as social factors are relevant motivators for purchasing intentions [48], the desire to learn about the experiences of other consumers does not seem to be a significant factor in the restaurant reservation decision-making process.

Finally, this study advances the understanding of consumer behaviour, particularly in the millennial generation, by investigating how sociodemographic variables, such as gender, influence the intention to consult eWOM. Gender has not been found to be a significant factor in the motivation to seek eWOM and make decisions based on it in the restaurant context [94–96]. These findings align with previous research [97], which suggests a consistent trend in millennial consumer behaviour in terms of adopting eWOM-based recommendations, regardless of gender. In addition, the importance of consumer motivations has been highlighted as a key factor in eWOM adoption, supporting the central idea of this study.

7. Implications

The academic value of this study lies in several key areas. First, it contributes to the existing body of knowledge on consumer behaviour in the digital context, focusing specifically on the millennial generation and their interaction with eWOM in the dining industry. By exploring how motivations affect the intention to consult eWOM and how this influences restaurant booking decisions, this study provides valuable insights into the factors that influence purchasing decisions in a digitised and highly connected environment.

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In addition, this study addresses a gap in the literature by examining the role of gender in these relationships, which expands our understanding of how different segments of the millennial population behave online and make purchasing decisions. This focus on gender provides a unique and valuable perspective on consumer dynamics in the digital age.

In terms of practical implications, by focusing on the Ecuadorian millennial generation, this study is directly applicable to restaurant owners and managers in that country. While acknowledging that virtual platform management and online feedback monitoring are already widespread practices, this study offers a strategic approach to further capitalise on eWOM behaviour. Although these practices are common, this study suggests a strategic orientation that is specific to the Ecuadorian context. This strategic approach is especially relevant in the post-pandemic context, where the forms of communication between companies, consumers, and the community itself have evolved. Findings on the convenience and social motivations of the Ecuadorian millennial generation can be used to personalise content on virtual platforms, highlighting aspects related to convenience and social experience when promoting menus, special promotions, or online events. This approach can allow industry professionals to tailor their digital marketing strategies more effectively to the specific preferences and behaviours of millennial consumers in Ecuador.

The widespread practice of disseminating online reviews after the customer experience stands out as a powerful tool for building credibility and trust in the online community. Although restaurant managers and owners already implement these strategies, this study highlights the need for their more precise and contextualised adaptation. It offers specific recommendations for the millennial target audience in Ecuador, providing restaurant industry professionals with the ability to make decisions and develop business strategies with a more tailored, effective approach. It suggests implementing loyalty or rewards programmes that incentivise millennial customers to actively participate after their restaurant experience by offering them discounts, exclusive benefits, or cumulative points for sharing comments and reviews online. This approach not only strengthens the connection between millennials and restaurants but also encourages more active engagement and a long-term relationship with the establishment.

The evolution of restaurant reservations, driven by the use of virtual platforms, is a phenomenon highlighted in this study. It reveals that the millennial generation, with their acute technological prowess and access to various digital applications, regularly performs online inquiries to make informed decisions before frequenting a restaurant. Convenience motivation and socialisation are the key drivers of this behaviour, providing millennials with stability, confidence, and reliability when faced with various options. Consequently, it underscores the need for restaurant managers, whose target audience is this generation, to strategically focus their communication efforts exploiting virtual platforms. Using the information gathered on the preferences and motivations of the millennial generation to adapt offers and promotions is an effective strategy. For example, implementing special discounts on dishes or services that are aligned with the motivations identified in this study can enhance the attraction and loyalty of millennial customers.

The study highlights that the intention to consult eWOM leads to the adoption of messages on various platforms, influencing restaurant purchase or reservation decisions [98]. The effective management of online comments and reviews can motivate consumers to actively participate after their experiences, generating a positive and progressive influence on the spontaneous choice of a restaurant by other consumers [76]. This highlights the importance for restaurant managers to implement careful feedback management, as the opinions expressed can have a significant impact on customer perceptions and behaviour, even if they have not directly interacted with the product or service [37]. It is crucial to ensure that virtual platforms are intuitive, fast, and accessible to ensure a positive online experience for millennials [99]. Optimising the ease of booking, online menu navigation, and review visibility can contribute to a more satisfying interaction.

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8. Limitations and Future Lines of Research

The results of this study should be interpreted with caution due to several limitations. First, the pandemic that the planet has experienced since the end of 2019 was the main limitation in this study since this caused problems in the collection of data and information. In addition, it is important to consider that our sample was limited to people from a single geographic location, which could have introduced some bias in the selection of participants. For future studies, we recommend broadening the geographic scope of the sample to include consumers from different regions. Also, it would be beneficial to increase the sample size to obtain more representative and generalisable results.

Second, the choice of a convenience sampling method had an impact on the generalisability of the findings; however, the results are still informative for restaurant managers. Given this and considering that research is the first step towards creating new projects, it is recommended to focus efforts on future research regarding direct approaches to the preferences of the female gender, minors, and older adults.

Third, there are other variables that were not part of this study that would be useful to address, such as regional cultures and comparisons with other Latin American countries. It is also suggested to explore the impact of several additional variables on the purchasing behaviour of the millennial generation in the context of the restaurant industry. Among these variables are specific promotions aimed at this demographic group, the role of influencers in decision making, the impact of culture and family influence on dining preferences, as well as other marketing variables like brand perception and the price of the products and services offered to stand out. In addition, it would be interesting to investigate the effect of the distance of a restaurant on consumers' consultation and adoption of eWOM. Analysing how geographic proximity to the restaurant influences the frequency and type of eWOM consulted, as well as its impact on purchase decisions, could provide a more complete understanding of the factors influencing online consumer behaviour in the context of the restaurant industry.

Finally, other moderating variables could be investigated, such as the frequency of visits to restaurants, income, and employment status, for a more holistic understanding of this industry and type of establishment. The authors should discuss the results and how they can be interpreted from the perspective of previous studies and the working hypotheses. The findings and their implications should be discussed in the broadest context possible. Future research directions may also be highlighted.

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