



A Case Study of Brand Communication and Relationship Management in a Vietnamese Seafood Restaurant

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Abstract: This study explores the operational mechanisms of brand communication and relationship management within Vietnam's small and medium-sized restaurant sector. Focusing on "A Seafood Restaurant" in Lao Cai Province, Vietnam, as a single case study, the research collected qualitative data through semi-structured interviews based on the "5E stakeholder framework" (owner, managers, head chef, experts, and customers). The researchers conducted thematic analysis and a triangulation test. The findings reveal a dynamic, three-stage cyclical process: in the "information exposure and initial awareness" stage, customers primarily establish initial trust and purchase motivation through word-of-mouth recommendations and social media, although current social media management tends to rely on passive exposure; in the "consumption process and trust accumulation" stage, on-site "customer interaction" (such as guidance during ordering and attentive service) and "relationship management" (such as promptly addressing negative feedback and improving processes) are critical to solidifying brand loyalty; finally, in the "relationship deepening and cyclical diffusion" stage, a positive physical dining experience translates into positive electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), driving secondary dissemination. The study's conclusions align with the "communication-based relationship model," confirming that managing small and medium-sized restaurant brands involves more than one-way promotion; rather, it relies on the interplay between interactions at physical touchpoints and relationship repair mechanisms. Based on these findings, the study offers practical recommendations for local restaurant operators regarding brand communication and customer retention.

Keywords: Brand Communication, Relationship Management, Customer Loyalty, Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM,) Vietnamese Seafood Restaurant.

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1. Research Background

Vietnam's foodservice industry has experienced remarkable growth over the past decade, driven by sustained economic development, urbanization, and the rapid expansion of the tourism sector. According to the Vietnam Foodservice Market Report 2024 (iPOS & Nestlé Professional, 2024), the industry reached VND 688.8 trillion in market value in 2024, representing a 16.6% increase over the previous year. This rapid expansion has positioned the foodservice sector as one of Vietnam's most dynamic industries while simultaneously intensifying competition among restaurant brands. Consequently, restaurants are increasingly required to develop strategic capabilities that strengthen brand positioning and sustain long-term competitiveness. The industry's rapid growth has also introduced significant managerial challenges. In addition to rising operating costs and fluctuations in food ingredient prices, restaurant businesses must continuously respond to changing consumer preferences and increasingly diversified market demand. The iPOS and Nestlé Professional (2024) report indicates that Vietnamese consumers place greater emphasis on balancing price and quality when selecting restaurants, while operators face persistent pressure to maintain profitability amid escalating costs. These environmental changes underscore the need for restaurant firms to adopt more adaptive, customer-oriented management strategies.

Within this context, brand communication has become a critical strategic capability for restaurant businesses. Effective brand communication goes beyond promotional messages; it includes how a brand expresses its identity, communicates its values, creates meaningful customer touchpoints, and fosters ongoing relationships with consumers. Previous studies have argued that consistent brand communication contributes to stronger brand recognition, customer trust, and relationship development, all of which support sustainable competitive advantage (Aaker, 1996; Keller, 2013). Despite the increasing economic significance of Vietnam's restaurant industry, existing research has primarily focused on consumer behavior, service quality, customer satisfaction, and marketing performance. Comparatively little attention has been devoted to how restaurant brands communicate through everyday service interactions and organizational practices. Scholars have paid limited attention to the dynamic processes through which customer touchpoints facilitate relationship building, especially in the context of Vietnamese restaurant operations. To address this research gap, the present study adopts a qualitative case study approach by investigating Restaurant A, a Vietnamese seafood restaurant. The study examines how brand communication is enacted through operational practices and customer touchpoints, while exploring customers' perceptions and lived experiences throughout the dining

journey. By providing an in-depth analysis of organizational communication practices in a real-world setting, this research contributes to a richer understanding of brand communication and relationship management in the foodservice industry and offers practical implications for restaurant brands operating in increasingly competitive markets.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Tourism Development and Restaurant Brand Competition in Lao Cai Province

Lao Cai Province, in northern Vietnam along the border with Yunnan Province, China, is one of the country's most strategically important regions for geography, commerce, and tourism. As a major transportation hub in northwestern Vietnam, Lao Cai serves as a critical gateway connecting the Chinese and Southeast Asian markets. Within the province, Sa Pa has emerged as a nationally recognized mountain tourism destination, attracting substantial numbers of both domestic and international visitors throughout the year. Tourism growth has directly stimulated the expansion of the local foodservice market. According to the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism of Vietnam (2024), Lao Cai received 789,147 visitors in August 2024 alone, including 65,525 international and 723,622 domestic tourists, representing a 12.5% increase over the previous month. By August 2024, cumulative tourist arrivals had reached 5,627,059, reflecting a 14.35% increase compared with the same period in 2023. The continuous growth of tourism has substantially increased demand for dining services and accelerated the diversification of restaurant offerings within the region.

As the restaurant market becomes increasingly competitive, businesses must establish distinctive brand identities and effective communication strategies to enhance market visibility and attract diverse customer segments. For restaurants operating in tourism-oriented destinations such as Sa Pa, brand strategy is particularly important because customer evaluations are influenced not only by food quality but also by cultural experience, service interactions, and the overall brand image created throughout the dining journey. Understanding how restaurant brands develop and communicate these strategic elements therefore provides valuable insights into sustainable competitiveness within Vietnam's rapidly evolving hospitality industry.

2.2 Branding Characteristics of Seafood Restaurants

Seafood restaurants have distinctive operational characteristics because their products are perishable and dining is an experiential consumption. Freshness and food quality are particularly critical, as customers' evaluations of seafood restaurants are highly sensitive to ingredient quality and taste, both of which directly influence customer

satisfaction and behavioral intentions (Namkung & Jang, 2007). Beyond food quality, seafood dining frequently occurs within social contexts such as family gatherings, celebrations, and business meals. Consequently, customers evaluate not only the meal itself but also the overall dining atmosphere, service interactions, and environmental experience. These experiential elements substantially affect revisit intention and customer loyalty (Han & Ryu, 2009).

Moreover, seafood restaurants operate under considerable uncertainty because product availability and procurement costs are influenced by seasonal supply and market fluctuations. Managers must therefore balance ingredient quality, pricing strategies, and customers' perceived value in order to maintain competitiveness. From a strategic perspective, relying solely on product quality is no longer sufficient for sustainable differentiation. Porter (1985) argued that competitive advantage is achieved through differentiation strategies that create unique value beyond functional products. Within the restaurant industry, differentiation increasingly derives from the integration of product quality, service experience, spatial design, and brand communication into a holistic customer experience.

Aaker's (1991) brand equity framework provides a useful lens for understanding this process. Brand equity comprises multiple interrelated dimensions, including brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality, brand loyalty, and other proprietary brand assets. In restaurant settings, brand awareness reflects the extent to which customers can readily recognize a restaurant among competing alternatives, while brand associations emerge through signature dishes, service experiences, and memorable dining occasions. Perceived quality encompasses evaluations of food, service, and the physical environment, all of which contribute to customer satisfaction and trust. Collectively, these dimensions shape customers' overall perception of restaurant brands and influence the formation of long-term brand equity. Accordingly, the competitiveness of seafood restaurants has gradually shifted from a product-oriented model toward an experience-oriented model, in which competitive advantage is created through the integration of product quality, service interaction, consumption context, and brand communication. Building upon this perspective, the present study focuses specifically on brand communication and relationship management as the central mechanisms through which Restaurant A constructs its brand and develops customer relationships.

2.3 Brand Communication and Relationship Management in the Foodservice Industry

Brand communication and relationship management in the foodservice industry are highly contextual and characterized by continuous, real-time interactions between service providers and customers. Because service production and

consumption occur simultaneously, customers' actual experiences during the dining process constitute a central component of brand contact. Accordingly, restaurant brand communication extends beyond firm-initiated promotional messages and is embedded in service encounters, customer participation, and everyday interactions throughout the dining experience.

The development of digital media has further transformed brand communication from a predominantly one-way process into a more interactive and participatory form. Customers are no longer merely recipients of brand information; they also actively contribute to brand-related content through online reviews, social media sharing, and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) demonstrated that consumers use online opinion platforms to share their experiences and evaluations with other consumers, highlighting the active role of customers in contemporary communication processes. Thus, brand communication increasingly involves interactions among firms, customers, and broader online communities rather than communication originating solely from the organization.

In the physical service environment, customer experiences are also shaped by the interaction between customers and the service setting. Bitner's (1992) servicescape framework emphasizes that physical surroundings can influence customers' and employees' perceptions and behaviors. In addition, Grönroos (1994) conceptualized marketing within service contexts as an interactive process in which customer relationships are developed through ongoing interactions rather than through isolated promotional activities. From this perspective, restaurant brand communication is enacted not only through explicit marketing messages but also through the physical environment, employee–customer interactions, service processes, and other customer touchpoints encountered during the dining experience. Relationship development represents another important dimension of restaurant brand management. Unlike one-time promotional communication, relationship management emphasizes developing and maintaining ongoing exchanges between organizations and customers. Morgan and Hunt's (1994) commitment–trust theory identifies trust and relationship commitment as fundamental mechanisms underlying successful relationship marketing. In the restaurant context, repeated service experiences and interactions can gradually strengthen customers' familiarity with a brand and contribute to the development of trust, commitment, and longer-term relational outcomes.

Based on the above theoretical perspectives, this study conceptualizes brand communication and relationship management in the foodservice context through four interconnected analytical dimensions. First, digital communication refers to the use and integration of social

media and other digital channels to communicate brand information consistently and strengthen brand awareness. Second, word-of-mouth communication focuses on customers' sharing of restaurant-related experiences and evaluations, particularly through eWOM, which can influence the information environment surrounding consumer decision-making (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Third, service encounter interactions examine how the physical environment, service processes, and employee–customer interactions shape customers' perceptions and experiences (Bitner, 1992; Grönroos, 1994). Fourth, relationship development concerns the processes through which trust, commitment, and ongoing interactions contribute to the development of longer-term customer relationships (Morgan & Hunt, 1994).

These four dimensions are not treated as independent communication activities but as interconnected processes through which a restaurant communicates its brand identity, creates customer experiences, and develops relationships with customers. This framework therefore provides the analytical foundation for examining how Restaurant A enacts brand communication and relationship management through its everyday operational practices and customer touchpoints.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative single-case study design to investigate how Restaurant A develops and enacts brand communication and relationship management from the perspectives of multiple stakeholders. Semi-structured interviews served as the primary method of data collection, allowing the study to maintain a consistent thematic structure while providing sufficient flexibility for participants to elaborate on their experiences, perceptions, and interpretations. This approach is particularly appropriate for exploring complex organizational processes and context-dependent phenomena that may not be adequately captured through standardized research instruments (Patton, 2015; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). To reduce the potential for single-perspective bias, the study adopted an adapted 5E stakeholder framework, encompassing Employer, Employee, Engineer, Expert, and End-user perspectives. The framework was used as an analytical sampling structure rather than as a rigid categorization scheme. Interviews focused on participants' perceptions of brand positioning, brand identity, brand equity, customer experience, communication practices, and relationship management. Incorporating perspectives from organizational decision-makers, operational personnel, external experts, and customers enabled the study to examine the focal phenomenon from multiple organizational and customer perspectives.

3.2 Case Selection

This study adopts Restaurant A as the focal case based on its contextual relevance, representativeness, and accessibility of qualitative data. First, its unique operational context provides significant analytical value. Unlike conventional seafood restaurants situated in coastal regions, Restaurant A operates in an inland tourism city where fresh seafood must be transported over long distances. Consequently, its brand strategy is shaped not only by product quality but also by local tourism dynamics and regional market conditions. Second, its long-term business sustainability demonstrates organizational resilience. Since its establishment in 2014, the restaurant has maintained stable operations within a highly competitive industry characterized by high business turnover, suggesting that its managerial practices warrant in-depth investigation. Third, it represents a typical independent small and medium-sized restaurant. Rather than possessing the abundant resources of national restaurant chains, Restaurant A relies on flexible decision-making and locally embedded management practices. This characteristic enables the study to capture authentic organizational processes that are representative of many independent foodservice businesses in Vietnam. Finally, the feasibility of data collection supports this case selection. The owner and managerial staff granted extensive research access, allowing the researcher to conduct in-depth interviews, participant observation, and on-site documentation. This accessibility enhances the richness and credibility of qualitative evidence and aligns with case study research principles that emphasize contextual depth and multiple sources of evidence (Yin, 2018).

3.3 Business Profile

Restaurant A is an independent seafood restaurant established in 2014 in Lao Cai Province, northern Vietnam. Although located in an inland city, the restaurant differentiates itself by sourcing and transporting fresh seafood daily from Vietnam's coastal regions. This practice, together with a diverse seafood menu, has contributed to the restaurant's local brand recognition. The restaurant operates approximately 100 dining tables across outdoor seating areas, an indoor dining hall, and private air-conditioned rooms, and employs 28 staff members. Its spacious and comfortable dining environment and relatively large operating scale make it a representative medium-sized independent restaurant within the local Lao Cai market. According to Restaurant A's unpublished internal operational records (October 2025), the restaurant generated approximately VND 2.7 billion in monthly revenue (approximately NTD 3.4 million). Average daily revenue ranged from VND 70 million to VND 80 million on weekdays and exceeded VND 100 million on weekends, with the highest sales concentrated during dinner and late-night dining periods. These operational indicators provide an

important contextual basis for examining the restaurant's business model and brand management practices.

The restaurant's revenue structure further illustrates its strategic positioning. Seafood dishes accounted for 41.4% of total revenue, followed by shellfish specialties (22.7%), hot pot dishes (14.3%), beverages (13.6%), and other items, including rice and porridge dishes (8.0%). Seafood and shellfish products collectively accounted for 64.1% of total revenue, demonstrating that seafood-related offerings constitute the restaurant's core product portfolio and an important basis of its market positioning. The combination of specialty seafood products and diversified complementary offerings also reflects the restaurant's strategy of meeting different customer needs while maintaining a distinctive seafood-oriented brand identity. (Owner interview and Restaurant A internal operational records, October 2025).

3.4 Purposive Sampling of Respondents

Respondents were selected using purposive sampling based on their direct involvement in, knowledge of, or experience with Restaurant A's operations and brand-related activities. The sampling strategy was designed to obtain information-rich perspectives from stakeholders occupying different positions within and outside the organization. To facilitate systematic identification and reporting of interview data, participants were assigned role-based codes. Consistent with the adapted 5E stakeholder framework, the following codes were used: EO for the owner/founder, EM for the manager, EC for the chef or technical personnel, EX for the external expert, and EU for end-users or customers. These codes were designed to protect participant identities while allowing readers to distinguish the perspectives represented in the analysis. The respondent composition was as follows Table 1.

Table 1. *Respondents Profiles and Roles in the Study*

ode	Participant Role	Analytical Contribution
EO1	Owner/founder	As the founder and principal decision-maker, EO1 provided insights into the origins of the restaurant, brand positioning, core values, strategic priorities, and the development of its overall business strategy.
EM1	Manager	Responsible for personnel management, training, and daily operations, EM1 provided insights into how brand communication and relationship management are implemented through service processes and customer touchpoints.
EC1	Chef/technical personnel	Responsible for menu development, kitchen operations, and quality control, EC1 provided insights into how product quality and food preparation practices contribute to the enactment of brand value.
EX1	External expert	An academic and practitioner with expertise in foodservice and tourism management and currently serving as Deputy Head of the Department of Foodservice and Tourism Management at a vocational college in Lao Cai Province. EX1 provided an external perspective for evaluating the restaurant's branding and management practices in relation to local industry conditions.
EU-C1, EU-C2	Chinese customers	Represented international customers and provided direct accounts of their perceptions of brand positioning, brand identity, service interactions, and customer experience.
EU-V1, EU-V2	Vietnamese customers	Represented local customers and provided perspectives on brand recognition, perceived value, service experience, and relationship development.

A total of eight participants were recruited for in-depth semi-structured interviews. The inclusion of both organizational and external stakeholders enabled the study to examine brand communication and relationship management as multidimensional processes rather than relying exclusively on managerial accounts.

3.5 Interview Procedures and Data Coding

Semi-structured interviews were conducted using an interview guide organized around the major analytical

domains of brand positioning, brand identity, brand equity, brand communication, and relationship management. The semi-structured format allowed the researcher to maintain comparability across interviews while pursuing emerging issues that were particularly relevant to individual participants' roles and experiences (Patton, 2015; Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

All interviews were transcribed for subsequent analysis. To enhance the transparency and traceability of the qualitative evidence, interview excerpts were assigned a structured

citation code consisting of the participant code, interview question number, and transcript line number. For example, EU-C1-Q3-L15 indicates that the quotation was provided by Chinese customer 1 (EU-C1), in response to Question 3 (Q3), at line 15 (L15) of the interview transcript. This coding system enabled the researcher to systematically trace each empirical quotation to its original source while maintaining participant confidentiality. It also facilitated cross-participant comparison and strengthened the transparency of the analytical process.

4. Data Analysis and Findings

Drawing on the literature reviewed and the interview data, this study identified four interrelated subthemes within the broader domain of brand communication and relationship management: word-of-mouth communication, social media communication, customer interaction, and relationship management. These themes were used to examine how different stakeholders perceive the mechanisms through which Restaurant A communicates its brand and develops customer relationships.

4.1 Word-of-Mouth Communication

The interview findings indicate that Restaurant A's brand diffusion has developed largely through customers' positive dining experiences and interpersonal recommendations. During the restaurant's early development, customers were frequently acquired through recommendations from friends and relatives (EU-C1, EO1, EC1), suggesting that brand awareness initially accumulated through relatively organic forms of local word-of-mouth communication.

Participants consistently linked recommendations to food quality and the overall dining experience (EU-C2, EX1, EC1, EM1). Customers also reported consulting Google Maps and online reviews as supplementary sources of information when evaluating the restaurant (EU-C1, EU-C2, EU-V1). However, word-of-mouth appeared to function primarily as a mechanism for reducing uncertainty during the initial restaurant-selection process. Ultimately, decisions to revisit were determined more strongly by customers' own dining experiences (EU-C1, EU-C2, EU-V2).

Negative word-of-mouth could also constrain consumption intentions, particularly when negative evaluations appeared consistent across sources (EU-V2). From the managerial perspective, Restaurant A responded to negative feedback through public apologies, direct communication, and operational adjustments intended to reduce the potential effects of negative evaluations (EO1, EX1, EC1).

These findings are broadly consistent with the eWOM literature, which emphasizes the role of online consumer experiences and evaluations in shaping the information available to other consumers and influencing their decision-making processes (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). However,

the present findings suggest that, within this case, online reviews function primarily as an initial information and risk-reduction mechanism, whereas the actual dining experience remains central to subsequent loyalty and repeat-purchase decisions.

4.2 Social Media Communication

Customers reported using multiple digital platforms—including Facebook, TikTok, Google Maps, Zalo, and WeChat—to obtain information about the restaurant, its food offerings, and customer evaluations (EU-C2, EU-V1, EU-V2). From the organizational perspective, Restaurant A also uses multiple platforms to generate basic market exposure and communicate restaurant-related information (EO1, EM1, EC1). This reflects the broader movement toward multichannel communication in contemporary marketing practice.

Some customers indicated that they continued to follow the restaurant's social media accounts after dining there, allowing communication to continue beyond the immediate consumption experience (EU-V1, EU-C2, EU-V2). Nevertheless, participants generally perceived the restaurant's current social media presence as primarily promotional and traffic-oriented rather than as a clearly structured brand communication strategy (EU-C1, EU-C2, EU-V1, EU-V2, EX1).

Participants also identified limitations in the informational completeness and strategic consistency of the restaurant's online content. In particular, EC1 emphasized the importance of ensuring that online food photographs accurately represent the dishes served in the restaurant. Consistency between digital representations and actual products was perceived as important for maintaining customer trust.

Overall, the findings suggest that Restaurant A's current social media activities remain largely exposure-oriented and reactive, with limited evidence of a systematic content strategy designed to communicate a distinctive brand identity. Social media therefore functions primarily as a supplementary communication channel rather than as an integrated strategic mechanism for long-term brand relationship development.

4.3 Customer Interaction

Customer interaction emerged as a critical brand touchpoint extending beyond the basic process of ordering food. In particular, interactions with service personnel helped customers develop confidence in unfamiliar seafood products and facilitated their understanding of menu options (EU-V2, EC1). Participants reported that immediate responses to customer questions and additional acts of service—such as assisting customers with children and providing complimentary ice cream—could enhance the

overall dining experience (EX1, EC1).

EC1 further suggested that increasing ingredient visibility, allowing customers to observe and select seafood directly, could strengthen perceptions of product quality and authenticity. Such practices indicate that customer interaction can function not only as a service activity but also as a mechanism for communicating product value and building trust.

However, the current interaction pattern was perceived as predominantly reactive rather than proactive. Participants noted that first-time customers, particularly international visitors, could benefit from more proactive guidance during the early stages of the dining journey (EU-C2, EU-V2). The restaurant has also established online customer-service mechanisms through which feedback is collected and subsequently incorporated into service improvements (EM1, EC1).

These findings are consistent with Grönroos's (1994) view of service marketing as an interactive process in which customer relationships are shaped through ongoing interactions. In the context of Restaurant A, customer interaction therefore represents an important mechanism through which service experiences are translated into brand perceptions and relational outcomes.

4.4 Relationship Management

Relationship management at Restaurant A encompasses three interconnected practices: problem response, customer communication, and continuous improvement. When operational problems occurred, such as billing errors or inconsistencies in food taste, the management responded through direct customer contact, compensation, and

adjustments to operating procedures (EO1, EM1, EC1). Customer feedback was consequently incorporated into quality-control and service-improvement processes.

The restaurant also attempted to prevent service deterioration during peak periods through advance staff allocation and preparation of ingredients (EM1, EC1). Nevertheless, high customer volumes during peak periods continued to place pressure on response speed and service consistency (EM1, EC1).

From the customer perspective, effective problem resolution and timely responses contributed to perceptions of trust and relationship continuity. From the organizational perspective, complaint handling and subsequent operational adjustments represented important mechanisms for maintaining customer relationships.

These findings are consistent with the commitment–trust theory of relationship marketing, which identifies trust and commitment as central mechanisms underlying successful relational exchanges (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). In Restaurant A, however, relationship management appears to be developed primarily through responsive problem solving and continuous operational improvement, rather than through a formalized customer relationship management program. This distinction highlights the contextual nature of relationship management in an independent restaurant setting.

4.5 Integrated Analysis of Brand Communication and Relationship Management

Table 2 summarizes the four subthemes, their core characteristics, positive manifestations, potential challenges, and analytical implications.

Table 2. *Integrated Analysis of Brand Communication and Relationship Management Subthemes*

Subtheme	Core Characteristics	Positive Manifestations	Potential Challenges	Analytical Implications
Word-of-mouth communication	Experience-driven communication	Friend and family recommendations, customer sharing, and positive evaluations	Negative evaluations may influence initial restaurant selection	Functions as an important source of initial awareness and trust
Social media communication	Supplementary exposure and information extension	Multiplatform exposure and continued access to restaurant information	Limited strategic planning and weak articulation of distinctive brand characteristics	Currently functions primarily as a supplementary communication channel
Customer interaction	Real-time response and menu guidance	Immediate responses, menu explanations, and personalized assistance	Limited proactive guidance for first-time and international customers	Influences customer experience, confidence, and trust formation
Relationship management	Feedback-driven improvement	Direct responses, apologies, compensation, and operational adjustments	Service stability may be affected during peak periods	Supports customer retention and the maintenance of trust

4.6 Stakeholder Differences in Perceptions of Brand Communication and Relationship Management

To further examine differences across stakeholder groups, the interview data were categorized into three broad

perspectives: customers, internal organizational participants, and external perspectives. This comparison enables the study to identify both convergent and divergent perceptions regarding the four subthemes.

Table 3. Stakeholder Differences in Perceptions of Brand Communication and Relationship Management

Subtheme	Stakeholder Perspective	Participants	Main Perceptions	Analytical Implications
Word-of-mouth communication	Customer	EU-C1, EU-C2, EU-V1, EU-V2	Friend recommendations, online reviews, and personal dining experiences	Word-of-mouth is primarily grounded in customers' actual dining experiences.
	Internal	EO1, EM1, EC1	Customer recommendations, interpersonal referrals, and organic promotion	Brand diffusion is largely generated through customers' spontaneous sharing.
	External	EX1	Friend recommendations and negative evaluations	Word-of-mouth can facilitate recommendations but may also amplify negative perceptions.
Social media communication	Customer	EU-C1, EU-C2, EU-V1, EU-V2	Google Maps, Facebook, TikTok, and generally limited or ordinary social media content	Social media primarily serves as an information and supplementary reference source.
	Internal	EO1, EM1, EC1	Facebook, TikTok, WeChat, promotional content, and the importance of accurate representation	Social media currently emphasizes basic exposure and information dissemination.
	External	EX1	Limited strategic clarity, insufficiently visible information, and an emphasis on crowd-related imagery	Social media content lacks a clearly articulated strategy and distinctive brand characteristics.
Customer interaction	Customer	EU-C2, EU-V2	Menu inquiries, food explanations, service assistance, and ordering guidance	Interaction facilitates customers' understanding of menu items and improves the dining process.
	Internal	EM1, EC1	Immediate responses, listening to customer opinions, subsequent adjustments, and trust building	Customer interaction also functions as a mechanism for feedback-based improvement and trust development.
	External	EX1	Immediate responses, menu recommendations, and assistance with children	Personalized interaction enhances the overall service experience.
Relationship management	Customer	EU-V2	Service responsiveness and consistency between communication and actual experience	Relationship development is associated with interaction quality and trust formation.
	Internal	EO1, EM1, EC1	Complaint-handling procedures, proactive apologies, customer feedback, and process adjustments	Relationship management is primarily enacted through problem resolution and subsequent improvement.
	External	EX1	Management responses and apologies following negative evaluations	The restaurant demonstrates a willingness to respond to and manage negative feedback.

4.7 Cross-Stakeholder Synthesis

The cross-stakeholder comparison reveals that participants differed in their emphases according to their organizational roles, consumption experiences, and observational positions.

Nevertheless, several recurring patterns emerged across the stakeholder groups.

First, word-of-mouth was consistently associated with actual dining experiences. Customers emphasized personal

experience and online reviews, whereas internal participants emphasized customer referrals and organic recommendations. The external expert similarly recognized the importance of positive recommendations while highlighting the potential influence of negative evaluations. Second, social media was widely recognized as an important information source but was not yet perceived as a fully developed strategic branding mechanism. Customers used multiple platforms to obtain information, while internal participants focused primarily on promotional exposure. The external expert, however, identified a lack of strategic clarity and distinctive brand content.

Third, real-time customer interaction emerged as a central component of the dining experience. Customers valued menu explanations and assistance, while internal participants emphasized responsiveness and using feedback to improve service. The external expert similarly highlighted the importance of personalized service interactions. Finally, relationship management was closely associated with problem resolution, responsiveness, and continuous improvement. Internal participants described procedures for handling complaints and adjusting operations, while customers emphasized service consistency and responsiveness. These findings suggest that relationship management within Restaurant A is enacted less through formalized relationship marketing programs than through everyday service recovery and operational practices.

The findings indicate that Restaurant A's brand communication and relationship management are not separate organizational activities. Rather, they form an interconnected process in which customer experience generates word-of-mouth, digital platforms extend communication beyond the physical restaurant, service interactions shape brand perceptions, and problem resolution builds trust and supports relationship continuity. This process highlights the importance of integrating communication, service encounters, and relationship practices to understand brand development in an independent restaurant context.

5. Conclusion

The interview findings reveal that the four dimensions of brand communication and relationship management—social media communication, word-of-mouth communication, customer interaction, and relationship management—are closely interconnected rather than functioning as independent activities. Participants frequently described these dimensions in combination when reflecting on their experiences with Restaurant A. For example, customers often first encountered information about the restaurant through social media or word-of-mouth, while subsequent customer interactions and service responses influenced their perceptions of the restaurant and their willingness to share

their experiences with others. Based on these recurring patterns in the interview data, this study developed an interpretive process model illustrating how the four dimensions are interconnected across customer contact, consumption, interaction, and subsequent relationship development (see Figure 1). Importantly, the model represents an analytical pattern emerging from the qualitative data rather than a statistically tested causal model.

5.1 Information Exposure and Initial Awareness

At the initial stage of customer contact, social media communication (e.g., platform exposure and presentation of food and restaurant information) and word-of-mouth communication (e.g., recommendations from friends and relatives and online reviews) emerged as the primary channels through which customers obtained information about Restaurant A. When recalling their restaurant-selection processes, participants frequently referred to external information and the experiences shared by other customers. At this stage, communication appears to serve two related functions: reducing information uncertainty and generating initial consumption interest. Social media and word-of-mouth provide prospective customers with preliminary information about the restaurant, its food offerings, and the experiences of previous customers. These forms of communication consequently contribute to the formation of initial awareness and a preliminary basis for trust. This finding aligns with the broader view that communication plays an important role in establishing connections between organizations and stakeholders. Duncan and Moriarty (1998) conceptualized marketing relationships as communication-based processes in which messages, stakeholders, and interactivity jointly contribute to developing brand relationships.

5.2 Consumption Experience and Trust Development

Once customers enter the physical consumption environment, the dining experience becomes a central mechanism for shaping brand perceptions. Customer interaction, including menu consultation, real-time service, and personalized assistance, transforms relatively abstract brand promises into concrete service experiences. At the same time, relationship management, including problem response, compensation, and process improvement, becomes particularly important when service failures or customer concerns arise. These two dimensions work together to shape perceptions of responsiveness and service quality and, in turn, contribute to the development and reinforcement of customer trust. The findings therefore suggest that brand communication does not end when customers enter the restaurant. Instead, communication continues through employees' behaviors, service encounters, problem-solving practices, and other customer touchpoints. In this sense, the

physical service environment functions as an important extension of the restaurant's brand communication process.

5.3 Relationship Development and the Cycle of Brand Diffusion

Positive interaction experiences and effective service recovery may further strengthen customer trust and increase willingness to revisit. When customers perceive that the actual dining experience meets or exceeds their expectations, they may subsequently become informal advocates for the restaurant by sharing their experiences and recommending it to others. This process creates a potentially self-reinforcing cycle: consumption experience → evaluation → subsequent communication.

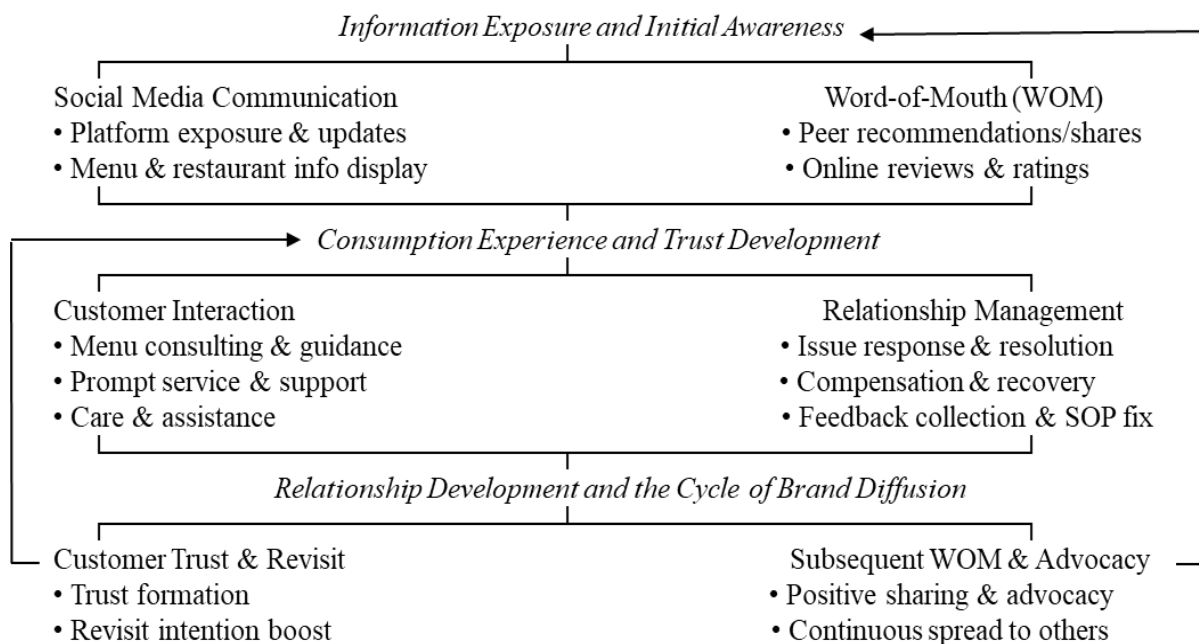
A positive consumption experience can generate favorable evaluations, which may subsequently lead to word-of-mouth recommendations and further exposure among prospective customers. In this way, an individual customer's experience may extend beyond the immediate consumption context and

contribute to the continued diffusion of the restaurant's brand. The findings therefore suggest that word-of-mouth should not be viewed solely as an external promotional outcome. Rather, it can be understood as a post-consumption communication mechanism that emerges from customers' accumulated experiences with the brand.

5.4 An Integrated Process of Brand Communication and Relationship Management

Taken together, the findings indicate that Restaurant A's brand communication and relationship management can be understood as a three-stage experiential process consisting of (1) information exposure and initial awareness, (2) consumption experience and trust development, and (3) relationship development and continued brand diffusion. Figure 1 illustrates the relationships among these stages and the four major dimensions identified in the qualitative analysis.

Figure 1. The Brand Communication and Relationship Management Process Emerging From the Case Study



The model indicates that brand communication is not confined to the initial dissemination of information. Rather, its effectiveness appears to depend on the accumulation of subsequent customer experiences, interpersonal interactions, and relationship-management practices. In particular, the findings suggest that initial communication creates awareness, service encounters translate communication into experience, relationship management responds to problems and reinforces trust, and positive experiences may subsequently generate further word-of-mouth communication. This interpretation extends the

communication-based relationship perspective proposed by Duncan and Moriarty (1998), who argued that communication is not simply a mechanism for transmitting promotional information but a foundation for relationship development through multiple stakeholder touchpoints and interactive processes. Their model emphasizes the importance of messages, stakeholders, and interactivity in creating brand relationships. In the context of Restaurant A, the present findings further suggest that these communication processes are embedded in everyday service operations. Consequently, brand communication and

relationship management should not be treated as separate managerial functions. Instead, they operate as mutually reinforcing processes in which digital exposure, word-of-mouth, customer interaction, and service recovery jointly shape customer perceptions and subsequent relational outcomes. The study suggests that the sustainability of restaurant brand relationships depends not only on the effectiveness of initial information exposure but also on the quality of subsequent service interactions and the organization's capacity to respond to customer concerns and continuously improve its operations. The case therefore demonstrates how brand communication can extend from pre-consumption information exposure to the actual service encounter and, ultimately, to post-consumption communication and relationship development.

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