Influence of Online Reviews on Culinary Tourism Intentions: The RED Platform Study

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Abstract
This study examines the influential role of social media reviews, particularly focusing on the prominent social media platform, RED. Through the application of the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) Model and Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), the research aims to dissect the mechanisms by which food-related review content shapes and influences the food-related purchasing intentions. An in-depth exploration is undertaken to highlight the complex dynamics of electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) and its impact in steering users towards or away from specific culinary tourism destinations. Moreover, an integrative approach is adopted to unveil the symbiotic relationship between digital content and users' level of food involvement. The interplay between these elements is analyzed to glean comprehensive insights into the multifaceted decision-making processes of food travelers. By establishing a comprehensive theoretical framework, this study aims not only to contribute significant academic insights but also to offer practical implications for industry stakeholders.
Keywords: Social Media Reviews, e-WOM, Online Reviews, Purchase Intention, Culinary Tourism

Introduction
In recent decades, the Internet has transformed lives, reshaping how people shop, share, and make decisions. This digital evolution, driven by social media and online reviews, has revolutionized marketing and consumer behavior.

Traditionally, product information was shared offline, relying on advertising and face-to-face interactions. However, electronic word of mouth (e-WOM), in the form of online reviews, has emerged as the dominant influence on purchasing decisions. Companies have recognized this shift and created platforms for consumers to share reviews, particularly on social media. Social media platforms have become powerful marketing channels, especially in sectors like restaurants. Simultaneously, food has gained importance in travel, with culinary tourism driving growth in the restaurant industry. This trend offers a unique advantage tied

to location and culture. In parallel, social media and network technology have elevated e-WOM, making online reviews a critical factor in product and service evaluation. Platforms like TripAdvisor and Yelp host millions of online reviews, highlighting their significance.

Despite some research on e-WOM, studies in China's culinary tourism sector are limited. This research aims to explore how digital e-WOM, represented by social media reviews, stimulates culinary tourism. The research will detail the research methodology, followed by a literature review covering culinary tourism, social media review platforms in China, the influence of social media reviews on purchase intention, the S-O-R model, the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), and food involvement. Subsequently, the research will present a proposed model for understanding the link between social media reviews and purchase intention.

A. Research Questions
    1. How do social media reviews impact tourists' food choices and intentions?
    2. What's the link between tourists' food involvement and their choices in a travel context?
    3. How do emotions, and peer influence affect tourists' food intentions, particularly with social media reviews?

B. Research Objectives
This research focuses on culinary tourism in the digital age of pervasive social media. It aims to reveal how social media reviews influence food tourists' choices and intentions, particularly their restaurant selections. The study is centered on the following objectives related to culinary tourism:
    1. Analyze the impact of social media reviews on tourists' food purchasing intentions.
    2. Examine the effects of different types of user-generated content (UGC) on tourists' food-related intentions.
    3. Investigate the connection between tourists' food involvement and their food choices.

Literature Review
A. Culinary Tourism
Culinary tourism, a niche within the broader field of tourism, revolves around the primary motivation to explore food-related experiences. This encompasses visits to primary and secondary food producers, participation in food festivals, dining at restaurants, and exploring specific locales renowned for their specialist food production (Ellis et al., 2018). While the integration of food and travel has a long history, the formal exploration of culinary tourism as a dedicated research area is relatively recent (Everett, 2016). It is a dynamic field that continues to evolve.

Over the last decade, culinary tourism has seen substantial global growth. China, in particular, has experienced remarkable expansion in this sector. This growth is driven by a thriving tourism industry and rising traveler interest (Future Market Insights, 2023). Chinese cuisine, known for its diverse dishes and flavors rooted in ancient philosophy, has captured global attention and piqued travelers' curiosity (Future Market Insights, 2023). Convenience in transportation and culinary media exposure, including television programs and social media, have further fueled traveler interest in local cuisines (Boutsioukou, 2018; Stalmirska, 2020).

Food has become an integral part of the travel experience, with travelers increasingly seeking authentic culinary encounters (Ketter, 2017). Exploring local cuisines provides gastronomic pleasure and cultural exploration opportunities (Kim and Eves, 2012). However, the motivations of culinary tourists remain somewhat unclear in tourism literature (Akyuz, 2019). Therefore, further exploration is needed to understand the interplay between travel and gastronomy, emphasizing how gastronomy enhances the tourist experience by offering opportunities to discover unique culinary offerings and enhance traveler satisfaction.

B. Social Media in China

With the advent of the mobile internet era, consumers are increasingly utilizing mobile tools and methods for information retrieval (Litvin et al., 2018). In leisure moments, tourists frequently explore life-related content in food tourism through social media or applications (Arif and Du, 2019). Moreover, social platforms are increasingly instrumental in tourists' purchase decisions (Arif and Du, 2019), with travelers becoming more adaptable, discerning, and susceptible to others' opinions (Lamsfus et al., 2014). A trend observed is the growing reliance of tourists on social platforms to gauge others' experiences and guide their own travel choices (Laer et al., 2018).

Although there is still some empirical research into social media apps for purchase intentions (Wang, 2015; Yang and Ha, 2021). Few studies have monitored the social media reviews in food tourism. Table 1 shows the top social media review apps in China.

Table 1
Top Social Media Apps in China

Apps	Description	References
WeChat	WeChat, launched in 2011, achieved the status of the world's largest standalone mobile app by 2018. WeChat boasts a massive user base of 1.3 billion monthly active users in Q1 2023. It enables users to share personal texts, images, videos, and other content in moments.	Thomala (2023b)
Douyin	Douyin (TikTok) has 700 million daily active users in China, with 54.7% being female. It offers short-video creation, sharing, search, and social interaction. Users can capture life moments like performances, dances, food, and travel, engaging through comments, likes, reposts, and private chats.	Fan (2023); iiMedia Research (2020)
Weibo	Weibo, similar to Twitter, has 252 million daily active users and 500 million registered users, with 54.6% being female. Users can openly share pictures and videos, receive comments, and engage in multimedia instant messaging through text, pictures, and videos.	Dixon (2023); Weibo (2020); Michelle and Uking (2011)
RED	RED, or Xiaohongshu, dubbed "China's Instagram," has about 163 million monthly active users in China (December 2022), with 70% being female. Users create and share user-generated content like photos, videos, and comments. It's a space to express perspectives and emotions on life, including food, shopping, beauty, and travel.	Xiaohongshu (2023); Thomala (2023a)

Despite emerging relatively late in the social media landscape, RED has experienced significant growth and presents ample potential for further expansion. This growth, particularly among the youth demographic, underscores its relevance in the evolving digital landscape, making it an ideal case study for exploring the dynamic interplay between online reviews on social media and consumer behavior in the context of food tourism (Thomala, 2023c).

Moreover, RED functions as a user-generated content (UGC) community, where users actively engage in the creation and sharing of content spanning various facets of life, including food, travel, beauty, and lifestyle. This inherent characteristic of RED aligns seamlessly with the research's central focus on the impact of user-generated content within the context of culinary tourism. RED serves as an abundant source of valuable content and reviews related to food and travel experiences, enriching the study's empirical foundation (Xiaohongshu, 2023).

Lastly, RED strategically targets young female users, which is particularly germane to this research. Given the study's specific emphasis on understanding the behavior of female internet users in the context of culinary tourism, RED offers an ideal avenue for investigating the preferences, choices, and interactions of this specific demographic cohort (Xiaohongshu, 2023). Consequently, the platform serves as an academically sound and contextually relevant choice for the study's investigative objectives.

C. Social Media Reviews and e-WOM

Social media review factors, a significant manifestation of electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM), have become increasingly integral to the tourism industry, reshaping how travelers plan their journeys and share their experiences, particularly influential in shaping culinary tourism choices. E-WOM, involving informal online discussions about products, services, and sellers, is a pivotal aspect of internet-based technologies (Litvin et al., 2008). These review factors influence intentions and decisions by reducing uncertainty, inspiring destination choices, and are widely incorporated into marketing strategies within the food tourism industry (Pan and Zhang, 2011; Gregoriades et al., 2021; Mudambi and Schuff, 2010). The effectiveness of online reviews hinges on factors like content quality, entertainment, information timeliness, likes to count and source credibility (see Table 2).

Table 2
Characteristics of e-WOM Affecting Perceived Helpfulness of Social Media

Factors	Details	References
Content Quality	Colour, composition, understandability, relevance, entertainment, content richness	Gambetti and Han (2022); Zinko et al. (2020); Oliveira and Casais (2019); Fang et al. (2016); Hussain et al. (2017); Bu et al. (2020); Moran et al. (2019)
Entertainment	Entertainment in a WOM message satisfies the audience's desire for escapism, diversion, aesthetic pleasure, and emotional release.	Ducoffe (1996); McQuail (1987)
Information Timeliness	Information timeliness denotes current and cutting-edge details about a product or service.	NELSON et al. (2005)
Volume of Likes	The total number of "thumbs up" on online reviews in RED can signify a consensus, prompting customers to trust the product or service without hesitation.	Bu et al. (2020)
Source Credibility	Source credibility is consumers' overarching perceptions regarding the credibility of review sources.	Chaiken (1980)
Vividness of Expression	Vividness of expression refers to the lively message conveyed by the messenger.	Sung et al. (2020)

D. Stimulus-Organism-Response Model
The S-O-R model, developed from Mehrabian and Russell's (1974) initial work and subsequent research, offers a comprehensive framework for understanding how e-WOM (electronic word-of-mouth) influences consumer behavior. It helps analyze how stimuli, like social media reviews, trigger cognitive and emotional processes, ultimately leading to behavioral responses. This model highlights the cognitive and emotional reactions provoked by e-WOM stimuli. In the context of culinary tourism, social media reviews can elicit various cognitive and affective responses in potential travelers, shaping their perceptions and choices. This aligns with this study's focus on RED's user-generated content and its impact on culinary tourism.

Furthermore, this model's applicability has been confirmed in various fields, including social media and the food industry. Researchers like Kim and Johnson (2016); Yan et al (2018); Ali (2021) have explored its relevance in understanding the relationships between stimuli, internal states, and behavioral responses in digital and food-related contexts. This body of literature emphasizes the model's effectiveness in investigating similar phenomena, such as the influence of RED reviews on culinary tourism behavior.

As shown in Figure 1 of the S-O-R model, Yan et al (2018) argued that mobile e-WOM content acts as a positive stimulant influencing brand awareness, association, customer loyalty, perceived quality, and attitude (organism). Consequently, these factors lead to consumer behavioral responses, particularly their purchase intention towards online fast-food establishments. This framework illustrates how mobile e-WOM efforts impact

consumer-based brand equity and consumer behavior towards fast-casual restaurants in Indonesia.
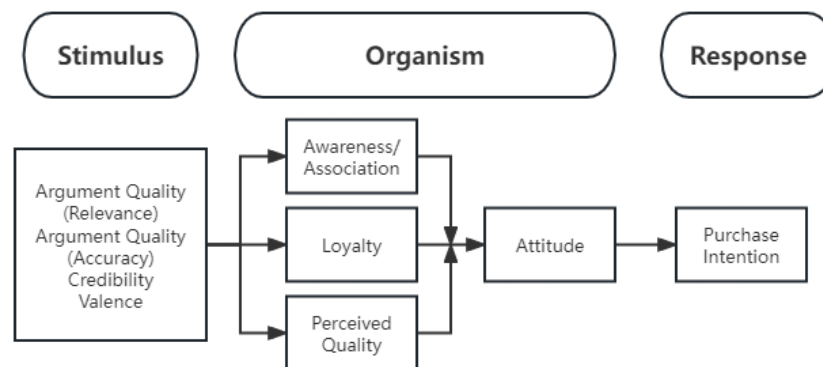

Figure 1. The S-O-R Model of e-WOM of Consumer's Purchase Intention in Food Industry (Yan et al., 2018)

E. Elaboration Likelihood Model
The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), introduced by Petty and Cacioppo in the early 1980s, serves as a valuable framework for studying the impact of social media reviews on culinary tourism on platforms like RED. ELM is rooted in human information processing theory, providing insights into how information processing influences purchasing decisions.

ELM offers two pathways of persuasion, the central route, and the peripheral route, which can significantly affect consumer behavior. The central route requires individuals to critically evaluate arguments within an informational message, leading to a thorough assessment of argument quality and relevance before forming a judgment about the behavior in question. Conversely, the peripheral route involves less cognitive effort, relying on cues related to the behavior, such as endorsements from previous users or expert approval, rather than the argument's quality itself (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986).

Previous research has extensively applied the ELM model to explore electronic Word-of-Mouth (e-WOM) in the tourism sector (Park and Kim, 2008). For example, Park and Kim (2008) used the ELM model to assess how review types and quantities influence purchase intentions. Gupta and Harris (2010) examined customer considerations and choices, while Lee et al (2011) focused on the quality and quantity of reviews needed to predict purchase intentions. This widespread use of the ELM model highlights its effectiveness in understanding the intricate dynamics of consumer behavior in culinary tourism influenced by social media reviews.

Sung et al (2020) applied ELM to examine how Korean restaurant customers, influenced by TV food shows, process information, and make decisions. Results showed information quality significantly affected attitudes towards restaurants. Regarding the peripheral route, source credibility had no impact, while vivid expression positively affected attitudes. Attitude towards a restaurant positively influenced visit intention (see Figure 2).
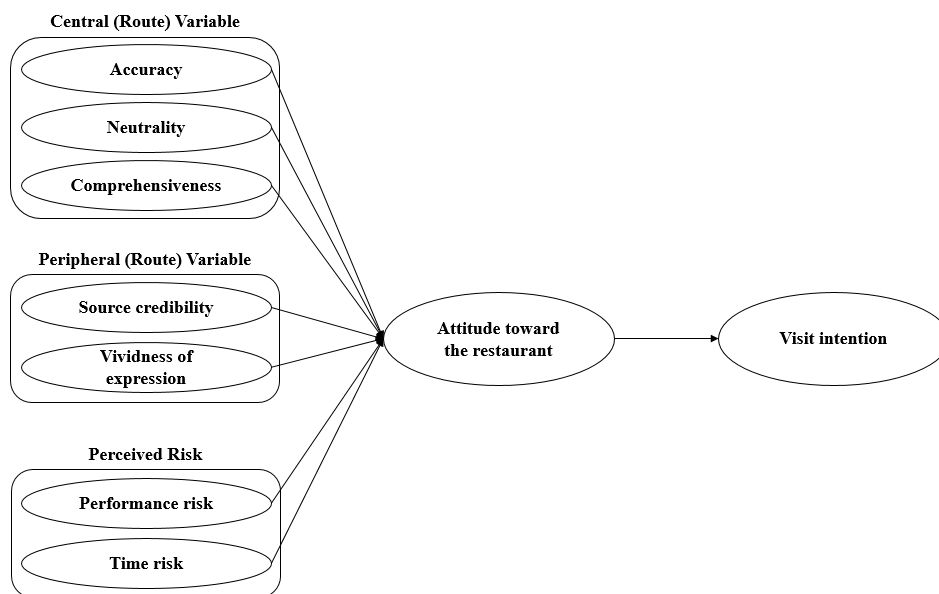
Figure 2. The ELM Framework of Consumer's Purchase Intention towards a Restaurant (Sung et al., 2020)

F. Product Involvement

As per Zaichkowsky (1985), product involvement means "the perceived relevance of an object based on inherent needs, values, and interests." Involvement is pivotal for comprehending consumer behavior by examining interactions with ads, products, and purchasing choices (Zaichkowsky, 1985).

Studies reveal that involvement significantly influences consumer attitudes and purchase behaviors (e.g., willingness to pay, purchase frequency) (Campbell et al., 2014; Prebensen et al., 2013). Aligning with the ELM, personal involvement levels dictate information reception and processing (Chung and Zhao, 2003). For instance, peripheral cues (e.g., source expertise) notably affect less involved individuals' attitudes but have a lesser impact on highly involved ones. Furthermore, Başaran and Yıldız (2022) contend that product involvement positively moderates the influence of advertising attitude on purchase intention (see Figure 3).
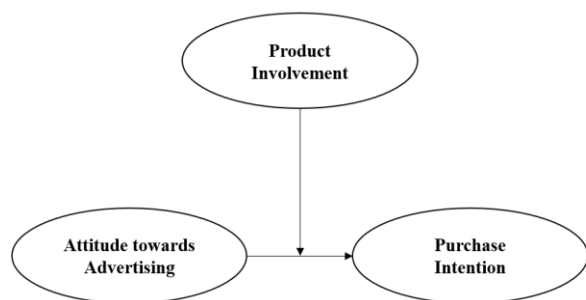

Figure 3. Product Involvement Moderates the Link between Advertising Attitude and Purchase Intention (Başaran and Yıldız, 2022)

However, previous research on S-O-R model and ELM framework did not take into account the concept of product involvement. Given the context of this study, where the product in the culinary tourism scenario is food, this research will introduce the factor of food involvement in the following sections.

Methodology

This research adopts a positivist approach and follows a streamlined three-step methodology: problem identification, literature review, and model development. The process of gathering relevant materials involved sourcing journal articles and conference proceedings from databases such as Emerald, Elsevier, Web of Science, Science Direct, and IEEE. Search terms were crafted based on the study's title and research questions, encompassing keywords related to social media, culinary tourism, and restaurant choices. After removing duplicates and applying exclusion criteria based on titles, abstracts, and keywords, 69 papers were retained for further analysis.

To ensure the selection of pertinent articles, a set of inclusion and exclusion criteria was defined. This ensured that only articles in English and Chinese, published between January 2012 and March 2023, and relevant to the research questions were included. Additionally, a manual search was conducted using the backward-forward search technique, and further studies were integrated based on references found in primary studies.

To assess the validity and relevance of the selected studies, a comprehensive quality assessment process was implemented. Five quality criteria were employed, and each study was categorized as high, medium, or low quality based on its adherence to these criteria.

Quality Assessment (QA)

1) Are the topics addressed in the paper relevant to this review?
2) Is the research methodology clearly described in the paper?
3) Is the data collection method adequately explained in the paper?
4) Are the data analysis steps clearly outlined in the paper?
5) Is the research context well-defined in the paper?

After a careful screening through quality assessment, 10 articles with were removed, resulting in a final selection of 59 articles. These selected articles were used to facilitate a comprehensive analysis of various aspects related to the impact of social media on restaurant choices in culinary tourism.

After a systematic review, it was found that 58 out of 59 studies used quantitative methods, mostly through surveys, and one study used a mixed-method approach. Social media platforms were the primary focus, with Facebook, WeChat, and Instagram each in the spotlight for multiple studies. Online shopping websites and online review platforms were also studied, with YouTube and Bilibili receiving attention in two cases. The ELM framework was the most frequently mentioned theory, followed by the S-O-R model. Only one study combined the S-O-R model with the ELM framework. Various other models were discussed in the remaining studies. The research topics were primarily related to E-commerce, followed by tourism and food consumption. However, there is a research gap in understanding online reviews on the RED social media platform, specifically using the S-O-R model and ELM framework.

In the model development phase, the research employed the stimulus-organism-response (S-O-R) framework, which conceptualizes the decision-making process as a combination of causes, interim factors, and eventual intentions. To gain a deeper understanding of social media reviews, the study integrated the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), thereby enhancing the potential outcomes of the S-O-R model. While traditionally not used in conjunction with S-O-R, this study creatively adapted the application of ELM from various domains to extract pertinent structures related to e-WOM.

Proposed Model

By integrating social media review factors, S-O-R model, ELM framework, and food involvement, this study presents a conceptual model. Figure 4 illustrates the impact of social media review factors on purchase intention within the context of culinary tourism on the RED social media platform.
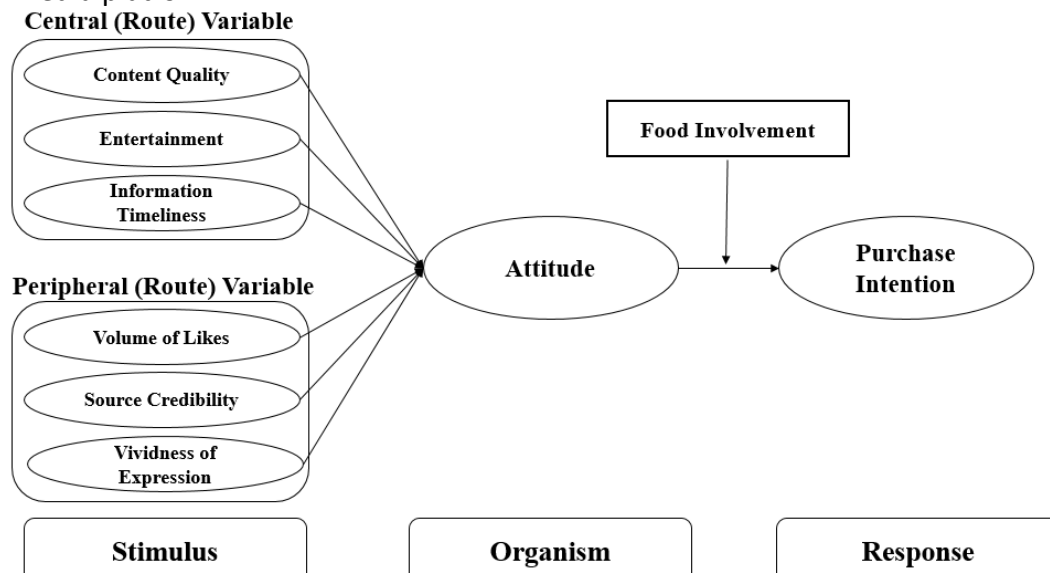

Figure 4. Proposed Model for Influence of Social Media Review Factors on Purchasing Intention

In the context of culinary tourism, central route variables (such as content quality, entertainment, and information timeliness) and peripheral route variables (such as volume of likes, source credibility and vividness of expression) found in social media reviews can profoundly impact a message's persuasiveness, serving as stimuli. These elements are vital when recipients interpret the information, resulting in attitude formation through persuasion or recommendations, a phenomenon referred to as the "organism". As a result, consumer attitudes play a pivotal role in shaping purchase intentions, with food involvement moderating this relationship.

This model highlights social media review's importance, categorizing it by its potential for triggering deeper cognitive engagement. This allows marketers to customize unique digital content strategies. It includes emotional response variables, like attitude, as crucial elements of the organism. Additionally, this framework proposes that the food involvement of message recipients, such as food tourists, acts as a moderating factor that can impact purchase intention.

Conclusion

Given the significance of e-WOM as a crucial marketing strategy, this research establishes a conceptual framework using the S-O-R model, encompassing diverse content dimensions, and incorporating the ELM. Additionally, this study examines the moderating influence of food involvement on emotional and behavioural processes. This work extends existing marketing theories and introduces a novel theoretical model, elucidating the impact of social media's digital content, exemplified by social platforms like RED, on purchase intention. Future studies should adopt a more comprehensive data analysis. This will broaden the academic scope and help researchers obtain more robust results.

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