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Master's Degree Program in
Data-Driven Marketing

**How user-generated content (UGC)
influences restaurant reservations**

Gabriel Derisio da Costa

Master Thesis

presented as partial requirement for obtaining a Master's Degree in Data-Driven Marketing

NOVA Information Management School
Instituto Superior de Estatística e Gestão de Informação

Universidade Nova de Lisboa

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by

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Julho, 2025

STATEMENT OF INTEGRITY

I hereby declare having conducted this academic work with integrity. I confirm that I have not used plagiarism, any form of undue use of information or falsification of results along the process leading to its elaboration. I further declare that I have fully acknowledged the Rules of Conduct and Code of Honor from the NOVA Information Management School.

Lisboa, 2025

Gabriel Derisio da Costa

DEDICATION

In honor of my sister Ana Paula Ferreira, whose late-night study sessions at her desk lit a spark in me. Her quiet determination lit the flame of knowledge in me.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like first to thank my dear wife Jéssica Mendonça, my son Jorge Derisio, and my parents Adelino da Costa and Leila Derisio for their support. I thank my grandmother, Rosa, for teaching me to love Portugal. I also thank my friends Aline Derisio, Ana Carolinna, and Almir Mendonça for their encouragement. In gratitude to the teachers who taught me, I will continue my journey, sharing my knowledge. Finally, I will never forget Ogum, who was and will always be walking by my side.

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the process and level of influence of user-generated content (UGC) on communication between companies and people in digital media. Consumers who connect online motivate companies to explore new ways to maximize word of mouth marketing through virtual tools, such as viral marketing. UGC is present in customer posts on social media, in shares about their positive experiences with a company's products or services, in reviews and comments on e-commerce sites, and also in unboxing videos, which are videos of customers unpacking products and sharing their earnings on video platforms, and which can create excitement around product launches, testimonials and success stories. In short, user-generated content plays a fundamental role in the digital age, shaping brand perceptions and influencing purchasing decisions. Many corporate Instagram posts or other social networks still follow a static pattern, focused only on the company's point of view, without incorporating the user's voice. In this context, this paper evaluates through a model of experimental design whether restaurant reservations are affected by consumer credibility in UGC content compared to an Instagram post. Our study used a single-factor (user-generated content vs. traditional media methods) scenario-based, between-subjects experiment. A total of two hundred and five Brazilian participants were recruited via social media voluntarily. The reviews on Google proved to be essential for transforming brand communication into something more collaborative and authentic, but they do not motivate the purchase intention based on consumer confiability. Although mediation is not proven in the research, it is clear that there is more purchase intent in reviews than in Instagram posts. This type of user-generated content turns the audience into active participants in building brand value and digital presence.

KEYWORDS

UGC; word of mouth marketing; Instagram; digital marketing.

Sustainable Development Goals (SDG):



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1. INTRODUCTION

This thesis investigates the process and the level of influence of user-generated content (UGC) on communication between companies and consumers in digital media. With the exponential growth in internet penetration and smartphone usage, digital platforms have fundamentally transformed the way people interact, seek information, and make purchase decisions. In this evolving scenario, traditional advertising models are being challenged by more participatory, consumer-centric strategies, in which users themselves become co-creators of brand narratives (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Shuqair et al., 2024).

UGC refers to any form of content created and shared voluntarily by consumers rather than companies. This includes online reviews, personal blog posts, videos, photos, social media content, and testimonials. These spontaneous contributions often carry an aura of authenticity and emotional resonance that branded content struggles to replicate (Liu et al., 2012; MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989). Some research has demonstrated that user content can shape brand perception, stimulate emotional responses, and influence purchase intention more effectively than corporate advertisements, particularly in digital environments saturated with content (Martins et al., 2019; Hsu & Lin, 2015).

Companies have increasingly recognized that consumer trust is not built solely through high-budget campaigns, but through social proof and perceived credibility. This makes UGC a powerful asset for digital marketing, not just for its reach but for its capacity to generate relational and emotional value (Zhao, Wang & Wu, 2024). For instance, images and reviews shared by real users—amateur in form but rich in detail—have been found to activate brain regions associated with emotional processing and reward, according to neuroscience studies (Marmolejo-Ramos et al., 2015). The credibility has significant effects on UGC, and other emotional triggers contribute to the phenomenon of emotional contagion on social media, where users unconsciously mirror emotions perceived in others' content, thereby enhancing engagement and influencing decisions (Zhuang et al., 2025; Shuqair et al., 2024).

Despite the growing interest in UGC, many corporate social media strategies remain focused on broadcasting content from the brand's perspective. These approaches often neglect the dialogic potential of digital platforms, treating audiences as passive receivers rather than active participants (Zhu et al., 2022). Studies suggest that this limits engagement and underutilizes the interactive capacity of digital marketing tools (Lin & Wang, 2006). UGC, on the other hand, fosters a sense of community and mutual trust by making the consumer's voice visible in the communication process.

This study focuses specifically on how UGC influences consumer behavior in the context of experiential purchases—namely, restaurant reservations. Previous studies have shown that experiential consumption, such as dining out, is particularly sensitive to social influence and

emotional cues (Pham et al., 2019; Zhu et al., 2022). And UGC varies depending on different market segments (Zhao et al., 2025). Visual content, such as food photography shared on social media, can enhance the appeal of a restaurant by triggering sensory and emotional responses. When such content is generated by real users rather than advertisers, its impact is amplified by perceived authenticity (Choi & Rifon, 2007).

The theoretical background for this research draws from several key models. First, the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and Expectation-Confirmation Model (ECM) provide a framework to understand how perceived usefulness, satisfaction, and value influence behavioral intention (Hsu & Lin, 2015; Bhattacharjee, 2001). Second, the advertising value model by Ducoffe (1995) highlights the importance of informativeness, entertainment, and credibility in shaping attitudes toward the ad. These models are further supported by theories of emotional contagion and flow, which explain how emotional resonance and cognitive absorption enhance the consumer's experience and likelihood of engagement (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988; Martins et al., 2019).

UGC also plays a central role in eWOM (electronic word-of-mouth), which is driven by consumers' motivations for social interaction, altruism, status enhancement, and enjoyment (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). In contrast to traditional advertising—which is often perceived as intrusive or manipulative (Liu et al., 2012)—UGC is voluntary and perceived as unbiased. As such, it serves as a powerful mechanism for peer-to-peer influence in the consumer journey.

This study aims to examine the impact of UGC on consumers' intention to make restaurant reservations, comparing it to traditional media formats such as branded Instagram posts. Specifically, it investigates whether perceived credibility mediates the effect of content type on purchase intention and whether gender moderates this relationship. By focusing on UGC within the restaurant industry, the research addresses a relevant and understudied area, studying the factor that credibility acts as a cognitive filter through which consumers evaluate the value and relevance of content (Zhuang et al., 2025; Zhao et al., 2025).

Ultimately, the contributions of this study are to empirically test the comparative effectiveness of UGC versus traditional media in influencing consumer behavior, to examine the mediating role of credibility in this relationship, and explore gender as a moderating factor, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of how different consumers interpret and respond to digital content.

By identifying these dynamics, this research seeks to support the development of more effective, consumer-centric marketing strategies that leverage the power of authentic, emotionally resonant, and participatory digital communication.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 UGC AND THE SHIFT IN CONSUMER INFLUENCE

User-generated content (UGC) refers to any digital material—such as reviews, photos, videos, or testimonials—created and shared by consumers rather than brands (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). As consumers gain greater control over brand narratives in digital environments, companies are increasingly challenged to compete not just with one another but with the voices of their audiences. Unlike traditional advertising, UGC is perceived as more authentic, emotionally resonant, and aligned with real consumer experiences (Choi & Rifon, 2007; Jia et al., 2023).

The rise of UGC parallels the decline of one-way, top-down brand communication. Today, platforms like Instagram, Google reviews, and YouTube enable individuals to publish persuasive content that shapes others' decisions. Research has shown that such content—especially when rich in visual detail or grounded in personal storytelling—can outperform branded content in influencing perceptions and behaviors (Martins et al., 2019; Hsu & Lin, 2015). These participatory forms of media allow consumers to become active contributors to a brand's digital presence and perceived value.

This shift is particularly relevant in the context of experiential consumption, such as restaurant reservations, where visual cues, peer validation, and emotional resonance play a major role (Pham et al., 2019; Zhu et al., 2022). Therefore, UGC emerges as a unique vehicle of influence that goes beyond functional information, appealing to the sensory and emotional dimensions of consumer behavior.

The effectiveness of UGC can be partially explained by psychological mechanisms such as emotional contagion and cognitive absorption. Emotional contagion refers to the phenomenon in which individuals unconsciously mimic the emotions expressed by others, especially in social media environments (Zhao, Wang & Wu, 2024). This emotional resonance is often stronger when content is amateur in form—i.e., unfiltered or seemingly spontaneous—because it aligns with the viewer's sense of realism and social relatability (Marmolejo-Ramos et al., 2015). For instance, photos taken by real customers of food dishes activate emotional and reward-related brain regions more intensely than branded content.

Additionally, the concept of flow, originally proposed by Csikszentmihalyi (1988), helps explain why UGC can lead to immersive consumer experiences. Content that aligns with a user's interests, emotions, and needs can lead to higher engagement and decision commitment. In this way, emotional and cognitive involvement act as mediators between exposure to UGC and behavioral outcomes such as restaurant choice or brand preference.

Thus, the ability of UGC to evoke both emotion and immersion positions it as a potent tool for influencing consumer behavior in ways that surpass the effects of conventional advertisements.

2.2 CREDIBILITY AS A MEDIATOR

A central component in the impact of UGC is credibility, defined as the perceived believability, trustworthiness, and relevance of the message (MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989; Liu et al., 2012). Research has shown that consumers tend to evaluate UGC as more credible than brand-generated content due to its perceived lack of commercial bias and its connection to “real” experiences (Ducoffe, 1995; Bentivegna, 2002). When users perceive content as credible, they are more likely to engage with it emotionally and behaviorally.

From a theoretical standpoint, the Advertising Value Model suggests that credibility, along with informativeness and entertainment value, significantly shapes attitude toward ads and ultimately purchase intention (Ducoffe, 1995). UGC excels in credibility because it is rooted in first-hand experience and peer-based sharing. Moreover, TAM-based models in mobile commerce also confirm that trust is a crucial component in driving consumer engagement, especially when linked with perceived usefulness and satisfaction (Hsu & Lin, 2015; Lin & Wang, 2006).

These findings support the idea that credibility serves as a mediating mechanism between UGC and consumer decision-making. A consumer is more likely to reserve a restaurant table after seeing a credible, relatable, and emotionally engaging review than after seeing a well-designed but impersonal branded post.

Hypothesis 1 is that user-generated content (vs. traditional media) leads to higher purchase intention. The literature consistently supports the idea that UGC drives behavioral intentions more effectively than traditional brand messaging. Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) show that electronic word-of-mouth amplifies the impact of marketing by leveraging peer influence, while studies like Zhao et al. (2024) demonstrate that emotionally charged UGC can drive rapid and persuasive engagement. In contrast, brand-centric posts—especially when overproduced—tend to be perceived as less credible, and thus less effective at generating behavioral outcomes such as reservations or purchases.

Hypothesis 2 is that credibility mediates the relationship between content type (UGC vs. traditional media) and purchase intention. The perception of authenticity and trustworthiness in UGC forms the psychological bridge between content exposure and consumer action. When the content is perceived as credible, it increases the consumer's willingness to act, whether through booking a table, sharing the post, or recommending it to others. This supports the mediating role of credibility in consumer decision-making (Liu et al., 2012; MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989).

2.3 INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES: GENDER AS A MODERATOR

While content type and credibility are important predictors of purchase intention, individual characteristics may influence how consumers process this information. Gender, in particular, has been shown to affect how people evaluate digital content. For example, women tend to exhibit greater sensitivity to emotional and social cues, while men may rely more on informational content (Chen & Dhillon, 2003). These cognitive and emotional differences can shape how consumers perceive credibility and make purchase decisions in response to UGC or branded content.

Moreover, the interplay between gender and media type may affect the degree to which credibility influences intention. Research in e-commerce and advertising psychology often notes that women are more susceptible to relational and trust-based messaging, whereas men may prioritize perceived utility (Lin & Wang, 2006). Therefore, examining gender as a moderator allows for a more nuanced understanding of how UGC operates across demographic segments.

Hypothesis 3 is that gender moderates the mediating effect of credibility on the relationship between content type and purchase intention. By testing this moderated mediation pathway, this research extends previous models by accounting for individual-level variability in the processing of UGC. It allows us to explore whether the persuasive strength of credibility differs across gender, thus enabling more tailored and effective marketing communication strategies.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 INITIAL MODEL

The choice of Model 4 (Hayes, 2018) for this study was based on its ability to capture the complex relationships between the variables involved, especially in the context of mediation and moderation analysis. This model, widely used in the academic literature, offers a robust approach to testing hypotheses involving mediating and moderating variables simultaneously, allowing a deeper investigation of the interactions between the factors that influence the phenomenon in question.

In this model, UGC is the independent variable (X), while restaurant reservations serve as the dependent variable (Y). Consumer credibility (M) functions as a mediator, meaning that UGC affects reservations primarily by increasing consumers' trust in the restaurant. A potential moderator (W) could also be included in the model, although it is not specified in the current data set.

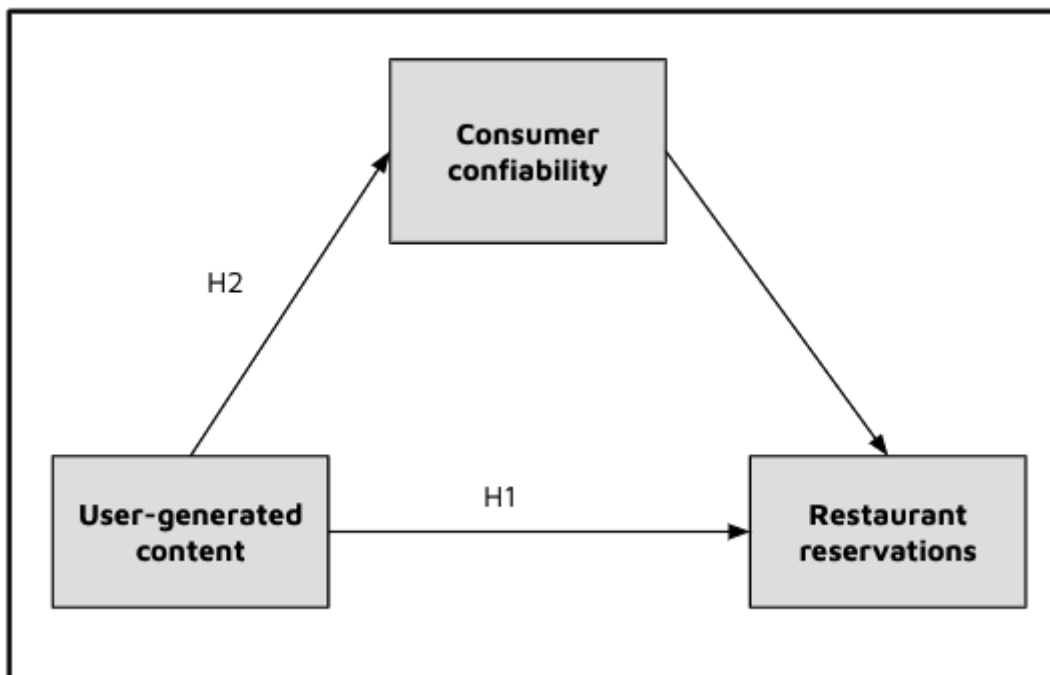


Figure 1. Initial Model

The first hypothesis is that user-generated content (vs. traditional media methods) increases (vs. decreases) restaurant reservations. In the second hypothesis, the effect of user-generated content and restaurant reservations is mediated by consumer confiability.

In this model, user-generated content is the independent variable, restaurant reservations are the dependent variable, and consumer confiability is the mediator.

3.2 COMPLEMENTARY MODEL

In the complementary Model 8 (Hayes, 2018), UGC functions as the independent variable (X), while restaurant reservations represent the dependent variable (Y). Consumer confiability (M) mediates the relationship between UGC and reservations, suggesting that the influence of UGC occurs partly through the increased trust it generates among potential customers. Additionally, gender (W) moderates this process, meaning the strength or direction of the effects may vary depending on the consumer’s gender.

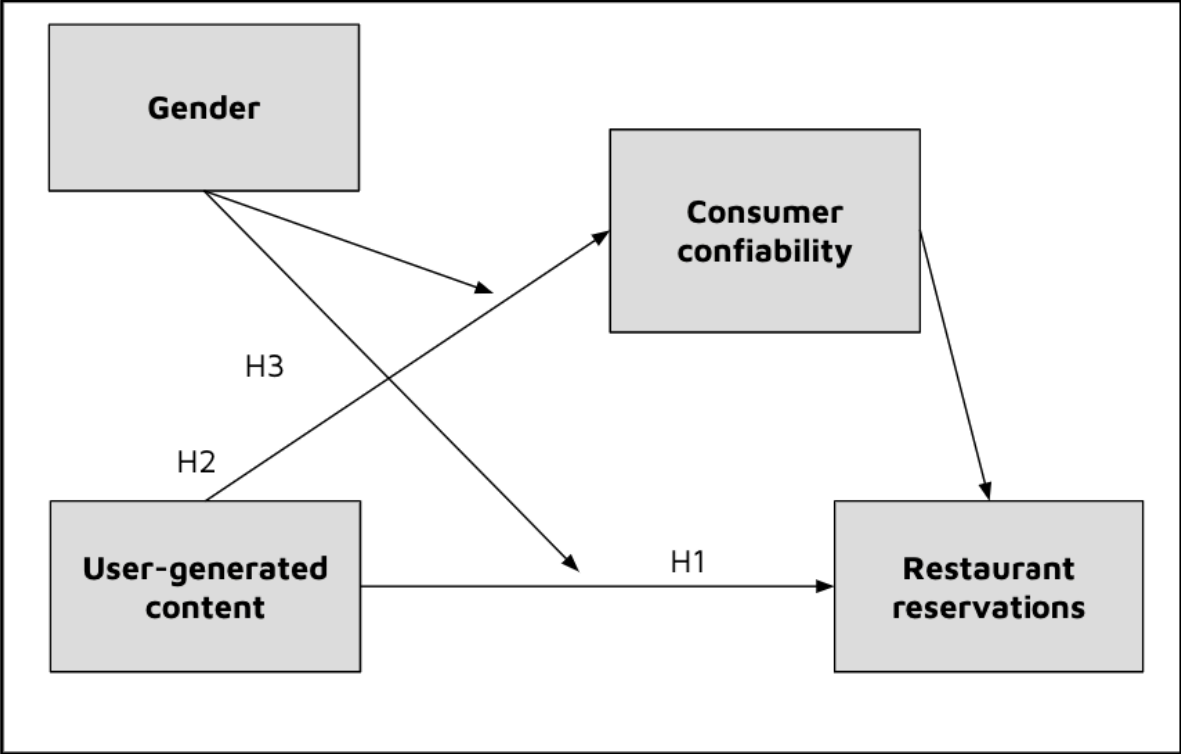


Figure 2. Complementary Model

The first and second hypotheses follow those of the previous model. The third hypothesis is that gender moderates the mediating effect of consumer confiability on restaurant reservations.

4. EMPIRICAL STUDY

Our theoretical framework makes several predictions that we empirically test. First, we investigate how user-generated content increases (vs. decreases) restaurant reservations which may result in a purchase intention measured from likert scales (ranging from 1 to 7), with anchors ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” (Hsu and Lin, 2015, Kumar et al., 2009). Second, investigating the credibility of the media (user-generated content vs. traditional media methods). Advertising credibility refers to “consumers' perception of the truthfulness and believability of advertising in general” (MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989). Third, we explore whether gender moderates the mediating effect of consumer reliability on restaurant reservations.

We test these predictions through an experimental study. The design and procedures were preregistered (AsPredicted #228621).

In SPSS software, the dataset was first cleaned by removing survey previews, incomplete responses, and participants who did not consent to participate. Participants who failed the attention checks were also identified and excluded from the main analyses, although their responses were retained in the dataset for record-keeping purposes. Following the cleaning process, composite scores were created by calculating the average of the items corresponding to each construct. Lastly, the experimental scenarios were reorganized and consolidated into a single column to facilitate analysis.

4.1 VARIABLES

The variables chosen for the questionnaire were:

Measure	Items	Source
Credibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CRED1 - I feel that smartphone advertising is convincing. • CRED2 - I feel that smartphone advertising is believable. • CRED4 - I believe that smartphone advertising is a good reference for purchasing products. 	(Liu et al., 2012, Yang et al., 2013)
Purchase intention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PI1 - I find purchasing product/service advertised to be worthwhile. • PI2 - I will frequently purchase product/service advertised in the future. • PI3 - I will strongly recommend others to purchase product/service advertised. 	(Hsu and Lin, 2015, Kumar et al., 2009)

Table 1. Variables

4.2 DATA

Our study uses a single-factor (user-generated content vs. traditional media methods) scenario-based, between-subjects experiment. A total of two hundred and five Brazilian participants were recruited via social media on a voluntary basis. We excluded participants who failed the attention check ($n = 13$), leaving the final sample including 192 participants (60.2% female, 39.8% male; $M_{age} = 36.99$; $SD_{age} = 14.18$).

Valid	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Man	66	39.8	39.8	39.8
Woman	100	60.2	60.2	100.0
Total	166	100.0	100.0	

Table 2. Gender

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Your age (in years)	166	19.00	74.00	36.99	14.18
Valid N (listwise)	166				

Table 3. Age

4.3 PROCEDURES

The experiment used vignette scenarios as stimuli, a method commonly employed in research examining new technologies (Jörling et al., 2019). The experiment used vignette scenarios as stimuli, a method commonly employed in research examining new technologies (Jörling et al., 2019). The experiment used two scenarios as stimuli. Participants were randomly assigned to view a scenario. The first scenario simulates a text-based review posted about one restaurant on Google, following the typical structure of a user-generated rating. The reviewer has a photo, real name, and verification that says he is a good reviewer. On a descriptive narrative and the author's personal experience. The content consists of a paragraph with neutral and straightforward language, containing observations about the experience at the restaurant and rating the place on a scale of 1 to 5, with the highest score being the atmosphere, quality of service, and food. He also describes in detail what he ate and his experience at the restaurant. An important factor is that he has real photos of what he ate and, in a way, amateur photos, taken by himself on his phone, which helps our limbic structures, which are also associated with emotional processing and reward (Marmolejo-Ramos, F et al., 2015).

The second scenario features a visual post designed for the social media platform Instagram. The communication is highly visual, including graphic elements such as vibrant colors, bold typography, and illustrative icons. The central image displays an alert message accompanied by a short and engaging caption, using emotional and direct language. The post is made by the advertising company, and no longer by a consumer, and has greater visual and emotional appeal, in line with common engagement strategies on social media.

The survey was translated from English to Portuguese using a double translation (Pavone et al., 2023). The complete stimulus of the experiment is presented in Appendix A.

4.4 MEASURES

We assessed all variables using a seven-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Our primary dependent variable, purchase intention, was measured using three items adapted from Hsu and Lin, 2015, Kumar et al., (2009) ($\alpha = .86$). To capture the media credibility, we measured credibility using three items adapted from Liu et al., 2012, Yang et al., (2013) ($\alpha = .77$). To validate our experimental design, we included two additional measures. First, participants completed a manipulation check to verify their recognition of the agent type (user-generated content vs. traditional media methods). Second, they evaluated the scenario's realism to ensure external validity. We concluded the survey by collecting demographic information. All measures have reliabilities greater than the recommended threshold of 0.7 (Dhillon et al., 2003) (see Table 3).

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.86	3

Table 4. Reliability Statistics

4.5 ANALYSES

To investigate if user-generated content (vs. traditional media methods) increases (vs. decreases) restaurant reservations (H1), we conducted an independent samples t-test. User-generated content (X) served as the independent variable— coded as 0 = Instagram post vs. 1 = UGC –, and purchase intention orientation as the dependent variable (Y). To explore the mediating role of perceived credibility on restaurant reservations (H2), we used PROCESS Model 4 with 5,000 bootstrapped samples and a 95% confidence interval (Hayes, 2018). User-generated content served as the independent variable (X); credibility as the mediator (M); and purchase intention as the dependent variable (Y). To investigate the moderation effects of gender moderates the mediating effect of consumer confiability on restaurant reservations. (H3), we conducted a two-way ANOVA. The perceived purchase intention (Y) served as the dependent variable, and the agent and the type of skill as factors.

To examine whether the type of media (user-generated content vs. traditional media methods) moderates the indirect effect on purchase intention via credibility, we conducted a moderated mediation analysis using the PROCESS macro (Model 8, Hayes, 2018) with 5000 bootstrap samples and a 95% confidence interval (CI). The user-generated content (X) (coded as 0 = Instagram post, 1 = UGC) was used as the independent variable, credibility (M) as the mediator, purchase intention (DV) as the dependent variable, and gender (W) as the moderator.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 MANIPULATION CHECKS

Results show that the manipulation worked as intended. Results from an independent samples t-test revealed that participants that views Google review showed higher agreement with the statement that view Instagram post (i.e., “user-generated-content”) ($M_{\text{instagram}} = 2.67, SD = 1.93; M_{\text{google}} = 5.99, SD = 1.55; t(167,67) = -12.48, p < 0.001$). Similarly, participants that views Instagram post indicated a higher level of agreement with the statement that the image was from an Instagram post (i.e., “instagram post”) ($M_{\text{instagram}} = 6.22, SD = 1.37; M_{\text{google}} = 2.38, SD = 2.00; t(137,21) = 14.45, p < 0.001$). Additionally, the results indicate that our experiment offers an ecologically valid service encounter ($M = 5.20; SD = 1.66$) (Pavone et al., 2023).

Question	Scenario	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Considering the image previously presented, to what extent do you agree with the following statement? – My image referred to a review on Google	INSTAGRAM	91	2.67	1.93	.20
Considering the image previously presented, to what extent do you agree with the following statement? – My image referred to a review on Google	GOOGLE	80	5.99	1.55	.17
Considering the image previously presented, to what extent do you agree with the following statement? – My image referred to a post on Instagram	INSTAGRAM	91	6.22	1.37	.14
Considering the image previously presented, to what extent do you agree with the following statement? – My image referred to a post on Instagram	GOOGLE	80	2.38	2.00	.22

Table 5. Scenario

Question	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Considering the situation described in the previous images... – I agree that the situation is...	179	1	7	5.20	1.66
Valid N (listwise)	179				

Table 6. Checks

						t-test for Equality of Means					
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances				Significance				95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
Question	Assumption	F	Sig.	t	df	One-Sided p	Two-Sided p	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Considering the image previously presented, to what extent do you agree with the following statements? – My image referred to a review on Google	Equal variances assumed	14.55	<.001	-12.30	169	<.001	<.001	-3.32	.27	-3.85	-2.78
	Equal variances not assumed			-12.48	167.67	<.001	<.001	-3.32	.27	-3.84	-2.79
Considering the image previously presented, to what extent do you agree with the following statements? – My image referred to a post on Instagram	Equal variances assumed	20.38	<.001	14.79	169	<.001	<.001	3.84	.26	3.33	4.36
	Equal variances not assumed			14.45	137.21	<.001	<.001	3.84	.27	3.32	4.37

Table 7. Checks II

5.2. MAIN EFFECT

5.2.1. PURCHASE INTENTION

As predicted, there was a significant main effect of media type on purchase intention. Participants that viewed Instagram post ($M = 4.58$, $SD = 1.53$) reported lower purchase intention compared to that view Google review ($M = 5.08$, $SD = 1.37$; $t(173) = -2.27$, $p = 0.012$). These findings support H1, demonstrating that user-generated-content, compared to traditional media, increases the purchase intention.

Scenario	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
INSTAGRAM	91	4.58	1.53	.16
GOOGLE	84	5.08	1.37	.15

Table 8. Purchase Intention

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means				95% Confidence Interval of the Difference			
	F	Sig.	t	df	Significance		Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
					One-Sided p	Two-Sided p				
Equal variances assumed	1.52	.22	-2.27	173	.01	.02	-.50	.22	-.94	-.07
Equal variances not assumed			-2.28	172.82	.01	.02	-.50	.22	-.93	-.07

Table 9. Purchase Intention II

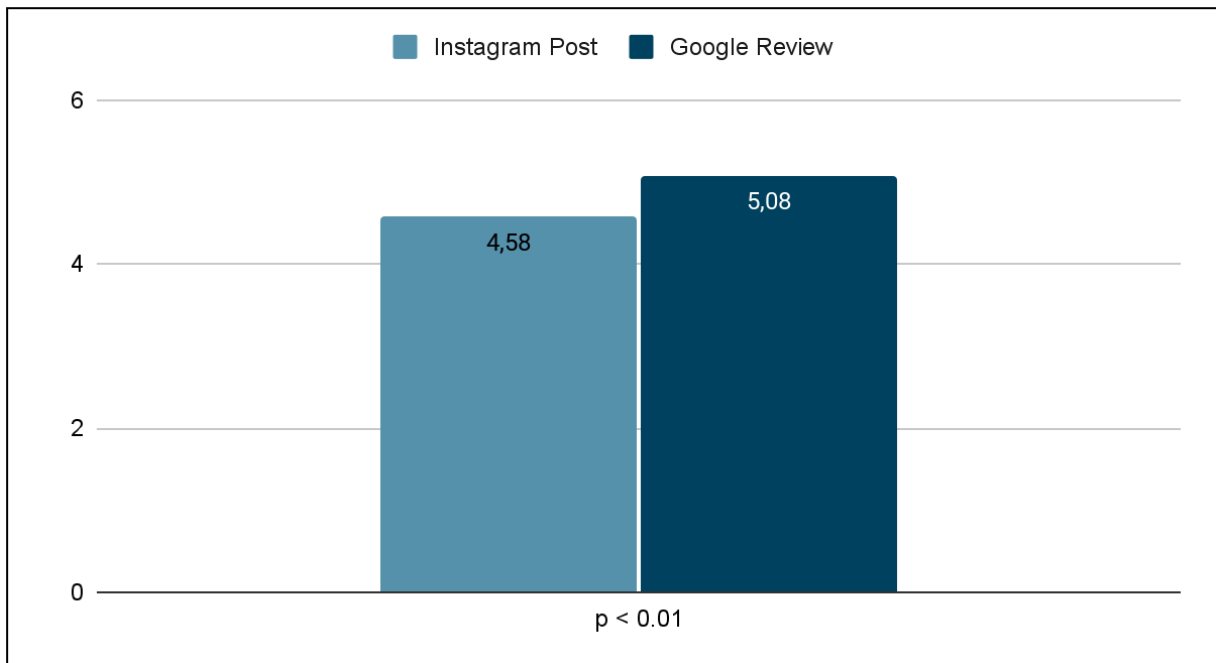


Figure 3. Purchase Intention Graphic

5.3. MEDIATION EFFECT

5.3.1. CREDIBILITY

First, we assessed the effect of agent type on perceived empathy (the mediator). The overall model predicting perceived empathy was significant ($R^2 = 0.063$, $F(2,967) = 1.095$, $p < 0.001$). Media type had a significant effect on perceived empathy ($\beta = 0.2173$, $SE = 0.21$, $t(296) = 1.046$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that participants interacting with Instagram post perceived high credibility compared to Google review.

Next, we examined the effect of media type and credibility on purchase intention (the dependent variable). The overall model was significant ($R^2 = 0.6119$, $F(2,120) = 135.5672$, $p < 0.001$). The credibility emerged as a significant predictor of perceived customer orientation ($\beta = 0.82$, $SE = 0.05$, $t(120) = 16.0719$, $p < 0.001$). In contrast, the direct effect of media type on perceived customer orientation was not significant when controlling for perceived empathy ($\beta = 0.32$, $SE = 0.14$, $t(120) = 0.23$, $p = 0.45$, suggesting that the effect of media type on purchase intention is not mediated by credibility. The analysis of the indirect effect of media type on purchase intention through perceived credibility not demonstrating an indirect effect (Effect = 0.17, BootSE = 0.17, 95% CI [-0.16, 0.51]). Credibility is not mediating (H2).

```

Run MATRIX procedure:

***** PROCESS Procedure for SPSS Version 4.2 *****

Written by Andrew F. Hayes, Ph.D.      www.afhayes.com
Documentation available in Hayes (2022). www.guilford.com/p/hayes3

*****

Model : 4
Y : PI
X : SCENARIO
M : CRED

Sample
Size: 175

*****
OUTCOME VARIABLE:
CRED

Model Summary
sq      MSE      F      df1      R      df2      R-
p
      .0793      .0063      1.8834      1.0955      1.0000      173.0000      .2967

Model
      coeff      se      t      p      LLCI      ULCI
constant      5.0842      .1439      35.3410      .0000      4.8003      5.3682
SCENARIO      .2173      .2076      1.0467      .2967      -.1925      .6272

*****
OUTCOME VARIABLE:
PI

Model Summary
sq      MSE      F      df1      R      df2      R-
p
      .7822      .6119      .8534      135.5672      2.0000      172.0000      .0000

Model
      coeff      se      t      p      LLCI      ULCI
constant      .3969      .2776      1.4295      .1547      -.1511      .9449
SCENARIO      .3218      .1402      2.2954      .0229      .0451      .5986
CRED      .8225      .0512      16.0719      .0000      .7215      .9235

***** DIRECT AND INDIRECT EFFECTS OF X ON Y *****

Direct
Effect      effect      se      of      X      on      Y
      Effect      se      t      p      LLCI      ULCI
      .3218      .1402      2.2954      .0229      .0451      .5986

Indirect
Effect      effect(s)      of      X      on      Y:
      Effect      BootSE      BootLLCI      BootULCI
CRED      .1788      .1732      -.1620      .5197

***** ANALYSIS NOTES AND ERRORS *****

Level of confidence for all confidence intervals in output:
95.0000

Number of bootstrap samples for percentile bootstrap confidence intervals:
5000

----- END MATRIX -----

```

Figure 4. Mediation Effect

5.4. MODERATION EFFECT

5.4.1. GENDER

Results of the two-way ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of the media ($M_{\text{instagram}} = 4.58$, $SD = 1.53$ vs. $M_{\text{google}} = 6.05$, $SD = 0.90$, $F(1, 167) = 3.947$, $p = 0.049$). The main effect of gender is significant too ($M_{\text{masculino}} = 4.67$, $SD = 1.34$ vs. $M_{\text{feminino}} = 4.89$, $SD = 1.56$, $F(1, 167) = 0.576$, $p = 0.449$). Is no there significant two-way interaction between media type and gender on purchase intention ($F(1, 167) = 0.024$, $p = 0.877$).

In this case of gender, Instagram post has not as significantly more Google review ($M_{\text{instagram}} = 4.50$, $SD = 1.34$ vs. $M_{\text{google}} = 4.93$, $SD = 1.32$; $F(1, 167) = 12.385$, $p < 0.001$). And not there was a significant difference between types of media ($M_{\text{instagram}} = 4.64$, $SD = 1.68$ vs. $M_{\text{google}} = 5.14$, $SD = 1.40$; $F(1, 167) = 0.422$, $p = 0.517$).

Scenario	Gender	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
INSTAGRAM	Man	4.50	1.34	40
INSTAGRAM	Woman	4.64	1.68	51
INSTAGRAM	Total	4.58	1.53	91
GOOGLE	Man	4.93	1.32	27
GOOGLE	Woman	5.14	1.40	53
GOOGLE	Total	5.07	1.37	80
Total	Man	4.67	1.34	67
Total	Woman	4.89	1.56	104
Total	Total	4.81	1.48	171

Table 10. Gender

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	11.385 ^a	3	3.795	1.764	.156
Intercept	3669.432	1	3669.432	1705.778	<.001
SCENARIO	8.490	1	8.490	3.947	.049
Gender	1.239	1	1.239	.576	.449
SCENARIO * Gender	.051	1	.051	.024	.877
Error	359.247	167	2.151		
Total	4322.000	171			
Corrected Total	370.632	170			

a. R. Squared = .031 (Adjusted R Squared = .013)

Table 11. Gender II

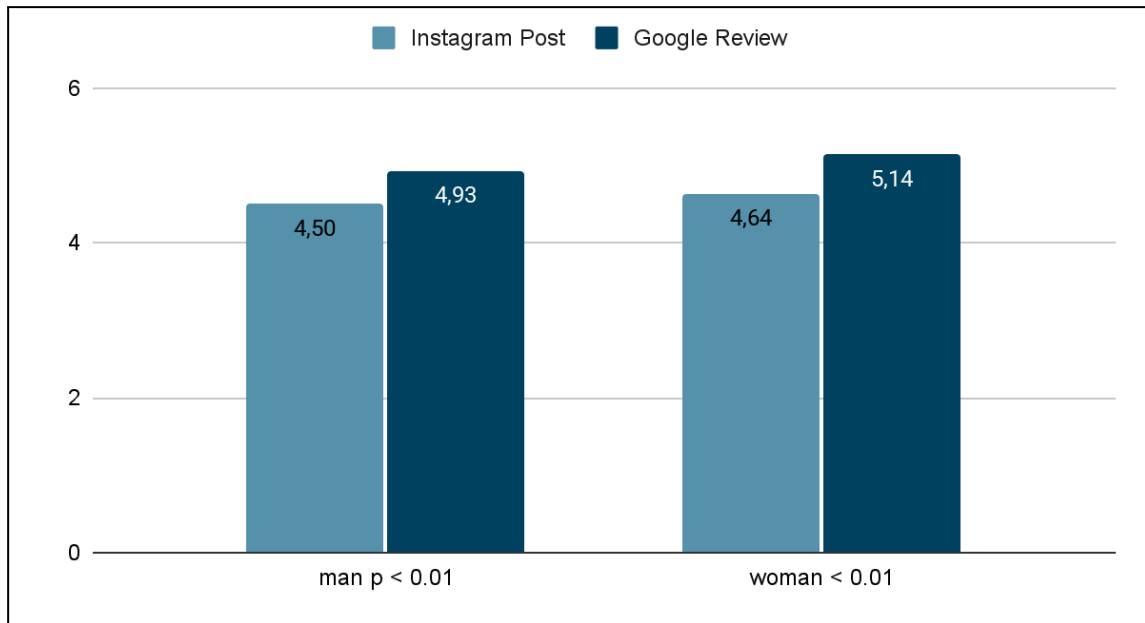


Figure 5. Gender Graphic

5.4.2. MODERATION MEDIATION

Results show that the interaction between media type and gender is not significant ($\beta = 1.699$, $\text{BootSE} = 0.438$, $p = 0.698$, $95\% \text{ CI} [1.034, -0.695]$). In gender, the effect of mediatype on perceived credibility is not significant ($\beta = 0.3715$, $\text{BootSE} = 0.178$, $p = < 0.001$, $95\% \text{ CI} [-0.050, 0.654]$). In fgender, the effect was also significant, with Instagram posts having more influence than Google review ($\beta = 0.3016$, $\text{BootSE} = 0.226$, $p < 0.001$, $95\% \text{ CI} [-0.075, 0.818]$). When examining the indirect effect of media type on perceived purchase intention through perceived credibility, we not found a significant indirect effect ($\beta = 0.196$, $\text{BootSE} = 0.223$, $95\% \text{ CI} [-0.244, 0.630]$) and gender ($\beta = 0.544$, $\text{BootSE} = 0.324$, $95\% \text{ CI} [-0.604, 0.679]$). As in the prior studies, the direct effect of media type on perceived purchase intention was not significant ($\beta = 0.141$, $\text{BootSE} = 0.395$, $p < 0.001$, $95\% \text{ CI} [-0.634, 0.934]$), which suggests a not mediation.

```

Run MATRIX procedure:

***** PROCESS Procedure for SPSS Version 4.2 *****

      Written by Andrew F. Hayes, Ph.D.      www.afhayes.com
      Documentation available in Hayes (2022). www.guilford.com/p/hayes3

*****

Model   : 8
  Y     : PI
  X     : SCENARIO
  M     : CRED
  W     : Gender

Sample
Size: 171

*****
OUTCOME VARIABLE:
  CRED

Model Summary
      R      R-sq      MSE      F      df1      df2      p
      .0846      .0072      1.9095      .4016      3.0000      167.0000      .7521

Model
      coeff      se      t      p      LLCI      ULC
I
constant      5.0121      .4779      10.4876      .0000      4.0686      5.955
6
SCENARIO      -.1048      .7398      -.1417      .8875      -1.5654      1.355
8
Gender      .0462      .2919      .1584      .8743      -.5300      .622
4
Int_1      .1699      .4381      .3879      .6986      -.6950      1.034
9

Product terms key:
Int_1      :      SCENARIO x      Gender

Test(s) of highest order unconditional interaction(s):
      R2-chng      F      df1      df2      p
X*W      .0009      .1504      1.0000      167.0000      .6986

```

Figure 6. Moderation Effect

```

*****
OUTCOME VARIABLE:
PI

Model Summary
      R      R-sq      MSE      F      df1      df2      p
      .7941      .6307      .8246      70.8608      4.0000      166.0000      .0000

Model
      coeff      se      t      p      LLCI      ULC
I
constant      .1742      .4045      .4308      .6672      -.6243      .972
8
SCENARIO      .4415      .4862      .9081      .3651      -.5184      1.401
5
CRED      .8350      .0509      16.4206      .0000      .7346      .935
4
Gender      .1019      .1918      .5313      .5959      -.2768      .480
6
Int_1      -.0700      .2880      -.2429      .8083      -.6387      .498
7

Product terms key:
Int_1      :      SCENARIO x      Gender

Test(s) of highest order unconditional interaction(s):
      R2-chng      F      df1      df2      p
X*W      .0001      .0590      1.0000      166.0000      .8083

***** DIRECT AND INDIRECT EFFECTS OF X ON Y *****
Conditional      direct      effects      of      X      on      Y
Gender      Effect      se      t      p      LLCI      ULC
I
1.0000      .3715      .2262      1.6425      .1024      -.0751      .818
2
2.0000      .3016      .1785      1.6892      .0931      -.0509      .654
0

INDIRECT EFFECT:
SCENARIO      ->      CRED      ->      PI

Conditional indirect effects of X on Y:
      Gender      Effect      BootSE      BootLLCI      BootULC
I
1.0000      .0544      .3246      -.6042      .679
1
2.0000      .1963      .2232      -.2443      .630
8

Index of moderated mediation (difference between conditional indirect effects):
      Index      BootSE      BootLLCI      BootULCI
Gender      .1419      .3954      -.6346      .9341

***** ANALYSIS NOTES AND ERRORS *****

Level of confidence for all confidence intervals in output:
95.0000
Number of bootstrap samples for percentile bootstrap confidence intervals:
5000

----- END MATRIX -----

```

Figure 7. Moderation Effect II

6. THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

This study offers some theoretical contributions to the fields of consumer behavior, digital marketing, and communication science. First and foremost, it strengthens the understanding of how user-generated content (UGC) influences purchase intention in the specific context of experiential services, such as restaurant reservations. While prior research has established the persuasive power of UGC in product-focused environments (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Zhao et al., 2024), this study extends the application of UGC theories to the service sector, where the decision-making process is often more emotionally driven and intangible.

By incorporating perceived credibility as a mediating variable, the study deepens the conceptual understanding of how and why UGC impacts behavioral intention. Rather than assuming a direct link between exposure and action, this research identifies credibility as a psychological mechanism that underlies the persuasive power of user-generated content. This finding aligns with and expands upon earlier theories of advertising effectiveness (Ducoffe, 1995; Choi & Rifon, 2007), offering empirical evidence that credibility acts as a cognitive filter through which consumers assess content value and relevance.

The inclusion of gender as a moderating factor contributes to the personalization literature within digital marketing. The results suggest that responses to UGC versus traditional content may vary across demographic groups, particularly by gender. This offers a more nuanced understanding of how different consumers engage with social content, extending prior studies that focused predominantly on uniform responses (Shuqair et al., 2024).

The study integrates multiple theoretical frameworks—such as the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), the Expectation-Confirmation Model (ECM), and the Advertising Value Model—to explain user behavior in digital environments. This interdisciplinary approach demonstrates that consumer interactions with UGC are shaped by both emotional and cognitive evaluations, bridging gaps between models that have historically been applied in separate research domains. This study contributes methodologically by employing an experimental design that simulates real-life exposure to both UGC and traditional branded content. This enhances the ecological validity of the findings and encourages future researchers to explore multi-method approaches when investigating social media effects.

7. MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

This research provides actionable insights for marketing professionals, particularly those working in the hospitality and food service industries. The findings highlight the superior effectiveness of UGC over traditional brand-generated content in driving consumer intention to book services such as restaurant visits. This suggests that marketers should actively encourage, curate, and highlight authentic user contributions in their digital strategies.

Businesses should invest in strategies that facilitate the generation of UGC, such as encouraging guests to share their experiences on social media, implementing hashtags, and running content-sharing campaigns. Rather than focusing exclusively on polished brand materials, marketing teams can achieve greater reach and impact by amplifying the voices of satisfied customers. Attention should be paid to credibility cues within digital communication. Restaurants and service providers can enhance credibility by displaying real customer reviews, highlighting authentic photos, or showcasing behind-the-scenes experiences. Verified profiles, user tags, and real-time stories add to the perceived authenticity of content and therefore increase its effectiveness.

The study's results suggest the importance of audience segmentation, particularly by gender. Since different demographic groups may respond differently to emotional versus factual content, content strategies should consider these variations when planning digital media campaigns. For example, UGC strategies could be tailored to appeal to emotionally driven segments (such as women who value peer experiences) while traditional formats might be reserved for more utility-focused audiences.

Companies should consider content diversity in their social media presence. A combination of UGC, influencer collaborations, and branded messages can create a richer content ecosystem that appeals to a broader range of users and decision-making styles. Tools such as content calendars and sentiment analysis may support this diversity while maintaining brand consistency. Marketers must understand that digital credibility cannot be forced—it must be earned. Building trust through transparency, responsiveness, and community engagement is essential for long-term brand equity in a digital world increasingly driven by peer influence and social validation.

8. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Despite its contributions, this study has some limitations that open avenues for future research. First, the sample used in the experiment may not fully represent the diversity of consumers across different regions, age groups, or socioeconomic backgrounds. Future studies should consider larger and more diverse samples to increase the generalizability of the findings. The study focused exclusively on Instagram content and restaurant services. While this provided a clear and manageable scope, future research could explore other platforms (e.g., TikTok, YouTube) and service types (e.g., travel, wellness, events) to determine whether the effects of UGC and credibility differ across contexts.

The experiment used a static, one-time exposure to content. However, in real-world settings, consumers are exposed to multiple content pieces over time, influenced by interactions, algorithms, and social dynamics. Longitudinal studies or simulations could offer richer insights into how UGC builds cumulative influence and how users' trust evolves across digital touchpoints. While credibility was identified as a mediator, other potential psychological mechanisms—such as empathy, social identity, or aesthetic appeal—were not examined. Future work could include these variables to create a more comprehensive understanding of why certain content resonates more deeply with consumers.

The gender-based moderation explored in this study could be expanded to include other psychographic or cultural variables, allowing researchers to explore how different mindsets, values, and digital behaviors influence the interpretation of UGC versus traditional advertising. This research represents a step forward in understanding the dynamics between UGC, credibility, and behavioral intention. By building on its limitations, future studies can continue to refine strategies for more personalized, authentic, and effective digital communication.

9. CONCLUSIONS

This study explored how user-generated content (UGC) influences restaurant reservations by examining the roles of perceived credibility (as a mediator) and gender (as a moderator). The findings confirmed the first hypothesis, demonstrating that UGC significantly increases consumers' purchase intention when compared to traditional advertising formats, such as Instagram posts created by companies.

Participants exposed to user-generated Google reviews reported a higher intention to visit the restaurant than those who viewed visually appealing but company-authored Instagram content. Although UGC had a direct effect on purchase intention, the second hypothesis—that perceived credibility mediates this relationship—was not supported. The indirect effect through credibility was not statistically significant, suggesting that while credibility may be important, it does not fully explain how UGC influences consumer decisions in this context. The third hypothesis examined whether gender moderates the mediating effect of credibility.

The results showed no significant interaction effect, indicating that gender does not significantly alter the relationship between media type, credibility, and purchase intention. These results emphasize the power of authentic user voices over brand-controlled messaging in influencing consumer behavior. For marketers, this suggests that encouraging and showcasing real consumer experiences may be more effective than producing highly curated promotional content. Future research could expand on these findings by exploring other moderating variables, different types of experiential products, or the long-term impact of UGC on brand loyalty.

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APPENDIX A - QUESTIONNAIRE (TRANSLATED)

INTRODUCTION:

Dear Participant, This survey is being conducted as part of an academic research project at NOVA Information Management School in Lisbon, Portugal. Please read the scenario provided carefully and answer the following questions. Please remember that your participation in this survey is voluntary, which means that you are free to participate or not, as well as to withdraw at any time. However, your answers are very important, completely anonymous and will be used only for academic purposes. There is no risk involved in answering any of the questions.

Informed Consent Form

I declare that I am 18 years of age or older and agree to participate in this survey. I declare that I have been informed that my participation in this study is voluntary and that I can withdraw from this survey at any time without penalty, and that all data is confidential. I understand that I will evaluate the responses and that this study does not pose any serious risks.

- I agree to participate.
- I do not agree to participate.

PART I - UGC / INSTAGRAM POST:

Note: Below, the respondent will be presented with a random UGC review and Instagram post, and the next questions will be about them.

First, look at the restaurant review below.

Gabriel Arantes
Local Guide · 858 comentários · 6.190 fotos

★★★★★ 4 meses atrás

Refeição no local | R\$ 120–140

Simplemente incrível!
Sabe aquele restaurante que desde o momento que você chega, até o momento de ir embora, você se sente bem e à vontade!?
Pois é, este é o Villares O Costellone.

Ambiente extremamente aconchegante e ainda conta com uma área externa totalmente pet friendly. A equipe que trabalha na casa é super bem treinada, todos muito educados, solícitos e gentis. O cardápio conta com uma variedade de carnes e o tradicional peixe pintado na brasa deles. Experimentei o cupim, estava simplesmente sensacional, no estilo churrasco gaúcho, pedimos uma meia porção que estava super caprichada e em complemento pedimos o arroz Biro Biro que também ataca uma delícia.


Inclusive o dono, um senhor de meia idade fica andando no estabelecimento, com um sorriso no rosto e interagindo nas mesas, na hora que fomos embora ele nos deu algumas balinhas. Com certeza recomendo e voltarei em outras oportunidades.

Estacionamento: Vallet 15 reais.

Comida: 5/5 | Serviço: 5/5 | Ambiente: 5/5

Pratos recomendados
Cupim Crocante Maravilhoso

Opções de estacionamento
Estacionamento descoberto pago




villaresocostellone · Seguir
Churrascaria Villares "Ocostellone"

villaresocostellone Deliciosa, macia e suculenta!
NÃO precisa de mais nada, não é mesmo?
É só vir pro "OCOSTELLONE" e se deliciar 🍷
*Cardápio completo nos destaques.

- ✓ Peça pelo @rappibrasil
- ✓ Delivery 📞 2979-4024/2977-6487
- ✓ Whatsapp 📞 94071-9705
- ✓ Retire no restaurante *Av. Luiz Dumont Villares, 542 Jardim São Paulo.

#villaresocostellone #deliverysp #sovem #restaurantessp #cupimcrocante #costela #maminha #jantar #choppgelado #siemana #gastronomy #zonanortesp #paradalingua #jardinscopulo #santana #ilamaria #viaguiherme #churrascaria #almoço #rappibrasil #znsp #2022 #santanasp #rappi #carnesnobre #delicia #petfriendly #bomretrosp #amigo #familytime

133 sem · Ver tradução

27 curtidas
21 de agosto de 2022

Adicione um comentário...

First, take a look at the restaurant's Instagram post below.

PART II - VARIABLES:

Note:

Rating from 1 to 7:

- 1. I completely disagree*
- 4. I neither agree nor disagree*
- 7. I completely agree*

A - CREDIBILITY:

Taking into account the image presented above, to what extent do you agree with the following statements?

1. I believe this post is convincing.

Note: Question based on criteria "CRED1 - I feel that smartphone advertising is convincing." do artigo Ducoffe, 1995, Liu et al., 2012.

2. I believe this post is true.

Note: Question based on criteria "CRED2 - I feel that smartphone advertising is believable" do artigo Liu et al., 2012, Yang et al., 2013.

3. I believe this post is a good reference for choosing where to eat at a restaurant.

Note: Question based on criteria "CRED4 - I believe that smartphone advertising is a good reference for purchasing products" do artigo Liu et al., 2012, Yang et al., 2013.

B - PURCHASE INTENTION:

Taking into account the image presented above, to what extent do you agree with the following statements?

4. I believe that going to the mentioned restaurant is worth it.

Note: Question based on criteria "PI1 - I find purchasing product/service advertised to be worthwhile" do artigo Hsu and Lin, 2015, Kumar et al., 2009.

5. I would go to the mentioned restaurant in the future.

Note: Question based on criteria “PI2 - I will frequently purchase product/service advertised in the future” do artigo Hsu and Lin, 2015, Kumar et al., 2009.

6. I will highly recommend others to go to the mentioned restaurant.

Note: Question based on criteria “PI3 - I will strongly recommend others to purchase product/service advertised” do artigo Hsu and Lin, 2015, Kumar et al., 2009.

PART III - CHECKS:

Note:

Rating from 1 to 7.

7. To confirm your attention, please select option three in this question.

PART IV - DEMOGRAPHICS:

8. How old are you?
9. What is your gender?
 a. Male
 b. Female
 c. Other
10. Your educational level:
 a. None
 b. Completed elementary school
 c. Completed high school
 d. Completed college
 e. Completed postgraduate studies
 f. Completed doctorate
11. Your income:
 a. Less than 1 basic salary
 b. Between 1 and 5 basic salaries
 c. Between 5 and 10 basic salaries
 d. More than 10 basic salaries
 e. I prefer not to answer

Note: These first three questions are important to understand whether genders, ages and social classes behave differently when consuming this type of content.

Thank you for your contribution!

12. Did you encounter any difficulties in completing this questionnaire? Do you have any questions or suggestions? If so, please list them. (OPEN)



NOVA Information Management School
Instituto Superior de Estatística e Gestão de Informação

Universidade Nova de Lisboa