

Building relationships on Instagram: Enhancing customer engagement and visit intentions in restaurant**Muhannad Alboji^{a*}, Sabri Öz^a, Bahattin Gökhan Topal^b and Turgut Gökçek^a**^a*Department of Business, Faculty of Business, İstanbul Commerce University, Türkiye*^b*Ostim Teknik Üniversitesi, Türkiye***CHRONICLE***Article history:*

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*Keywords:**Instagram**Social Media Marketing**Online Engagement**Interaction**Behavioral Intention**Restaurant Industry***ABSTRACT**

The study examines how Instagram interactions impact customer response in the restaurant context using the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) framework. It explores how interactions on Instagram influence customers' intention to visit a restaurant, online engagement (OEG), and customer involvement (CI). The study highlights the significance of Instagram as a platform for effective interaction and relationship-building with customers, emphasizing its role in the hospitality industry. The study focuses on restaurant pages on Instagram, utilizing structural equation modeling to analyze data from a sample of 242 Instagram users in Turkey who are restaurant customers. The findings reveal that social media (SM) interactions are positively and significantly related to OEG, CI, and visit intention (VI). Furthermore, the results suggest that OEG and CI mediate the relationship between social media interactions (SMI) and VI, supporting the hypotheses concerning the indirect relationships between these variables. This research contributes to understanding SM dynamics and provides insights for restaurant marketers to enhance customer engagement and drive business growth.

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1. Introduction

Social media marketing (SMM) has revolutionized the way businesses interact and engage with their customers (Ibrahim et al., 2024), particularly in the hospitality industry (Polat et al., 2024). Among these platforms, Instagram is a powerful tool for creating brand stories and fostering customer relationships (Polat et al., 2023). This study focuses on the role of Instagram interactions in stimulating audience response, using the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) framework to understand the dynamics involved. The SOR model, proposed by Mehrabian and Russell (1974), emphasizes the impact of external stimuli, such as social media interactions (SMI), on human emotions and cognitive states, leading to specific behavioral responses (Ibrahim & Aljarah, 2021). In this context, interactions on Instagram with restaurant pages are considered stimuli influencing customers' external environment. These interactions, represented by online engagement (OEG) and customer involvement (CI), are akin to the organism in the SOR framework, driving customers' visit intention (VI) to a restaurant. The significance of Instagram in the restaurant industry cannot be overstated. Studies reveal that a strong Instagram presence is crucial (Polat et al., 2023), as a significant percentage of the new generation tends to avoid restaurants with a weak presence on the platform (Hutchinson, 2020). Recognizing this, many prominent restaurant brands have actively enhanced their presence on Instagram, leveraging it as a platform for effective interaction and relationship-building with customers. In today's massive media, the hospitality industry relies heavily on SMM to enhance companies' brand positioning and promote their products/services with a competitive advantage (Polat et al., 2024). Posting experience and creating Instagrammable content through social media platforms (SMP) is standard practice for businesses within the industry. Crafting compelling stories around their brand

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address muhannad.alboji@istanbulticaret.edu.tr (M. Alboji)

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encourages customer interaction and involvement. Therefore, SMM is considered the essential success component in various contexts, such as accommodation and coffee, restaurants, and healthcare. In recent years, people have traveled worldwide to explore and share different food and restaurants (Ibrahim, 2023), sometimes prioritizing the food experience over its taste (Fantozzi, 2017). For instance, among various authors, the effect of SMI and social media (SM) activity on these contexts has been increasingly studied (Polat et al., 2023), while Kim and Ko (2012) illustrate the SM connection to attracting customer behavior, examined in high-level fashion brands. Therefore, private research has emphasized the limited understanding of SMM's significant role in the restaurant and food sector and has called for further study (Ibrahim & Aljarah, 2023). Thus, this research paper developed a model structure that explores the role of restaurant SMI on the OEG and CI and their influence on customer's VI and the restaurant business. With 2.4 billion active accounts, Instagram has shifted the hospitality company's direction and activities (Mortensen, 2024).

The surge of SMP has made it increasingly challenging for ordinary users to keep up with the growing variety of content (Anderson, 2021). As a storytelling platform based on visual content, Instagram has become an essential component of the SMM strategy and is presented as a brand identity and a customer source in the hospitality industry (Ibrahim & Aljarah, 2023). However, limited studies have explored Instagram's power in such a context, while recent studies have only partially illuminated SM's role (Gligor & Bozkurt, 2021). For instance, Leung et al. (2015) examined customer interaction on Facebook and Twitter hotel pages (now called X) within a similar framework. This aligns with Ibrahim and Aljarah (2021), who identified a gap in exploring Instagram's role in SMM across several industries. Similarly, the present study highlights that Instagram is pivotal in fostering customer–brand relationships.

The current SMM study aims to provide a clear understanding of the direct and indirect impact of SMI on customers' responses and the role of OEG and CI as mediators affecting customers' future behavioral actions. The model in this study was based on previous research studies, including Gligor and (2021) study on Perceived Brand Interactivity and Ibrahim (2022) study on the effect of content sources on OEG. Despite the extensive research on the role of SMM in the hospitality industry, only some studies have investigated the impact of SMI on customer behavior within the restaurant context.

This study seeks to fill gaps in the existing literature by addressing specific research questions (**RQ**).

RQ1: How does customer interaction on Instagram restaurant pages affect OEG, CI, and VI?

RQ2: What are the impacts of OEG and CI on customer VI?

RQ3: Does OEG and CI play a significant mediator role in the relationship between SMI and VI?

This study contributes to the SMM literature in the hospitality industry. Firstly, we built a theoretical model to examine and understand the critical role of SMI in restaurant brands. This study will overcome the previous limitations by clearly explaining the significant role of SMI in the context. Secondly, we examine SMI's direct impact on OEG, CI, and VI, as well as indirectly on VI, through the mediation role of OEG and CI separately. By doing so, the comprehensive model provides a new view of SMI's impact on customer-brand relationships within the restaurant sector.

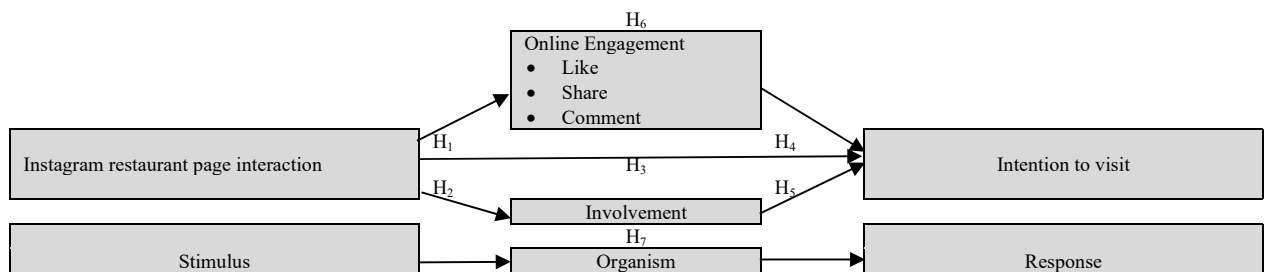


Fig. 1. Conceptual research model

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Stimulus–organism–response model

The origin model of the SOR model explicates the impact of external motivational factors as stimuli that evoke human emotions and cognitive states, such as an Organism audience, which directs audience behavior in a particular manner as a response. (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). Hence, the SOR approach elucidates the correlation between the SOR model and the individual, which mediates the relationship between stimuli and response. To the extent acknowledged, this research study is among the

few that focus on examining the role of Instagram interaction in stimulating audience response by applying the psychological SOR framework. The framework's conceptualization in this study is illustrated in Figure 1. This study posits that interactions with restaurant pages and influencers on Instagram serve as stimuli that influence the customer's external environment. Mediators, represented by OEG and CI, can be likened to the driving force, analogous to the organism in the SOR framework. The response behavior within the study context is the VI of the restaurants.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Instagram pages interaction

SMP tools allow restaurant brands to have continuous, round-the-clock online interaction to cultivate a mutually beneficial relationship with customers (Ibrahim et al., 2021). According to Lagrosen and Lagrosen, (2016), as described in their literature, companies and brands are increasingly transitioning from being profit-centric entities in their interactions and relationships (business-to-customer (B2C)) to adopting a more humane approach in their interactions and relationships with customers. This shift entails moving beyond viewing customers solely as sources of profit, as traditionally seen in profit-focused companies (Ding & Tseng, 2015). Which called human-to-human (H2H) relationships. This is particularly true on the Instagram platform, which provides brands with numerous practical advantages. Studies indicate that approximately 30% of the new generation avoid restaurants, according to their Instagram page (Hutchinson, 2020), underscoring the platform's significance (Ibrahim et al., 2021). Consequently, many prominent restaurant brands, such as Taco Bell, Starbucks, and McDonald's, are actively enhancing their presence on Instagram. (Hutchinson, 2020). Kim and Ko (2012) highlight interaction as one of the most impactful pillars of SMM activities, with Instagram being a leading platform for effective interaction that strengthens the bond between the brand and its customers (Kim & Lee, 2019). As many-to-many interactions or relationships SMP such as Instagram, each business has multiple audiences; likewise, each person is connected to multiple other businesses and friends (DevX, 2024). Promoting electronic word-of-mouth (Polat et al., 2024) and encouraging brand innovation and competition within such platforms, particularly in the hospitality and restaurant sectors. In recent years, SMI has significantly influenced customers' expectations and perceptions of brands. (Kang et al., 2019). Cheung et al. (2020) note that brands that engage in constant interaction have a broader impact on customers directly. Customers are more inclined to interact with brands that demonstrate understanding and attentiveness to their needs (Gligor & Bozkurt, 2020), which fosters emotional engagement (Walmsley, 2016). Numerous marketing studies have extensively employed theories and models to explore the interaction dynamics of brand pages on SM. Interaction is commonly defined as the followers' ability to communicate and build brand relationships directly (Labrecque, 2014). Jin et al. (2019) define interaction as the level of communication between the brand and the customer that forms emotional bonds and fosters lasting relationships. On SMP, interaction is not limited to verbal or textual communication but also encompasses all brand-related activities, including content and associated interactions (Gligor & Bozkurt, 2021).

Schivinski and Dabrowski (2015) demonstrated that customers perceive information on SMP as more trustworthy than traditional marketing tools. Consequently, many customers rely on SMP as a primary search engine to obtain accurate and sufficient brand information, free from boundaries or restrictions (Aljarah et al., 2022). In this era, interaction is considered a fundamental condition for success for any brand based on customer satisfaction. (Labanauskaitė et al., 2020; Obermayer et al., 2022; Valeri & Baggio, 2021). Previous studies have found that interaction on brand Instagram pages positively influences customer behavioral intention (BI) (Bozkurt et al., 2020; Koay et al., 2021) and enhances the emotional customer experience (Chen & Qasim, 2021). SMP enables brands to create and narrate their brand stories and principles, captivating customers and fostering loyalty (Kang et al., 2019). As a result, companies of all sizes leverage their official SMP accounts to accelerate their expansion. (Ibrahim & Aljarah, 2021). Interaction has been, and remains, the foremost strategy for attracting potential customers and retaining existing ones (Miller et al., 2009; Okazaki & Taylor, 2013). It is regarded as a value-adding method to customer and company relationships. (Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016). This is done to satisfy customer egos and social needs (Maslow, 1981) by connecting individuals with similar interests to interact (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Moreover, recent research by Jun and Yi (2020) Highlights how brands can seize new opportunities to interact with customers through content and communication on Instagram and other SMP, fostering online and physical interactions with customers to enhance brand familiarity (Johns & English, 2016).

Much research has delved into the influence of SMI on customer BI. To the author's knowledge, this is the first study that has explored these relationships within such a framework. While previous research has investigated the relationship in various industries, such as the fashion industry (Kim & Ko, 2012), the hospitality industry (Ibrahim & Aljarah, 2018), and others, this study specifically focuses on the impact of interaction on restaurant VI. However, most studies have only partially illuminated SM's role (Gligor & Bozkurt, 2021) or focused explicitly on platforms like Facebook (Kuo & Chen, 2023). This study aims to overcome these limitations by examining Instagram interactions with brand pages, which is anticipated to yield distinct results. A prime example of influencer success, especially in the food industry, is MrBeast, known for his highly viewed content on YouTube and a record-breaking number of subscribers. (Leskin et al., 2024), Exceeding 256 million, Jimmy Donaldson, known as MrBeast, began his journey in 2012 (Donaldson, 2012) and has become one of the most prominent SM top-tier influencers globally. In 2020, he ventured into a new type of virtual restaurant as Sato (2023) reported that it operates entirely online, from the ordering platform to meal delivery, with MrBeast's burgers prepared in other restaurant kitchens.

Through SM, MrBeast's Burger has expanded to 1,700 restaurants, highlighting the significant impact of SM content on customer behavior (Sato, 2023).

3.2 The role of Instagram in Restaurant context

Over the past decade, people have been consistently exposed to a vast amount of content on Instagram and other SMPs, with sharing online content becoming increasingly mainstream across these platforms. (Schouten et al., 2021). Engaging with followers on SMP, particularly on Instagram, is considered a fundamental part of daily activities for Instagram users. (Lin et al., 2018). As of 2024, Instagram boasts approximately 2.4 billion users worldwide (Mortensen, 2024) who visit the platform multiple times daily, resulting in millions of content being shared daily. Instagram is a unique platform that involves storytelling through photo and video media sharing. It provides users, or Instagrammers, with many tools to create shareable content (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2018) that can directly evoke positive emotions in customers. Instagram is particularly renowned as one of the most popular platforms for food inspiration (Demarest, 2020). In observing the global food and beverage trend, we have noted the rise of cloud kitchen restaurants, a concept heavily reliant on SMM across all SMP, with Instagram emerging as a critical platform and portfolio for the sector. A cloud kitchen refers to a central kitchen that exclusively provides food for delivery, such as takeaway meals, without offering dine-in services. Orders are typically received online only (e.g., Yumist, Spoonjoy, Box8, ITiffin, MrBeast's burger) (Choudhary, 2019), with the concept associated mainly with fast food. As a result, food and beverage marketers and dining establishments are investing significantly in Instagram to target their customers and promote their products (Perreault & Mosconi, 2018; Tuten, 2008). SMP has transformed the communication style between companies and their customers (Sommerfeldt et al., 2012). Giles (2002) emphasized that Instagram offers a powerful tool for the food and beverage industry to craft stories around their brand, enabling them to establish a psychological two-way relationship with customers. However, many companies have struggled to achieve this (Lovejoy et al., 2012). A standard piece of advice in the realm of Instagram and SMM is to create unique and distinctive content to capture customers' attention. This advice aligns with previous studies indicating that unexpected and surprising stories and unique and unconventional items tend to be more shareable (Berger & Iyengar, 2013; Moldovan et al., 2011). From a theoretical standpoint, restaurants and food and beverage companies also gravitate toward this trend (Philp et al., 2022). In recent years, numerous studies have focused on assisting content creators and marketers produce attractive content to captivate audiences and customers (Ibrahim & Aljarah, 2021). However, standing out on Instagram and other SMPs requires heavy investments (Philp et al., 2022). For instance, over 64 thousand pictures and videos are posted on Instagram per minute, an estimated 95 million per day (Wise, 2023).

The competitive nature of the food and beverage industry on SMP led to the emergence of creating "Instagrammable" food as a marketing trend. This trend refers to the millions of posts featuring visually attractive dishes widely shared on Instagram (Philp et al., 2022). Restaurants have seriously recognized the power of Instagram and other SMPs, understanding that customers often rely on these platforms for restaurant reviews, advice, and menus before deciding on their dining options, effectively treating them as search engines. (Kusumasondjaja & Tjiptono, 2019; Lepkowska-White, 2017; Ruiz-Mafe et al., 2018), which has made them the number-one information source for the Z generation. Moreover, a well-maintained Instagram account has been found to receive more favorable ratings, increase restaurant business valuation (Kim et al., 2015), and enhance sales and market share value (Needles & Thompson, 2013) according to Zhu et al. (Zhu et al., 2020). Instagram's 2022 trends report indicates that younger generations seek food experiences beyond just-food (Instagram, 2023). Consequently, many restaurateurs and food and beverage companies have adjusted their menus to achieve the ideal visual appearance, emphasizing the uniqueness of their food to promote their restaurant's Instagram account (Lee, 2017), sometimes without prioritizing the taste of the food (Fantozzi, 2017).

3.3 Online engagement (Like, share and comment)

Despite several studies discussing customer engagement (CEG) due to the popularity of SMM (Hudson & Thal, 2013), there still needs to be a clear consensus definition for CEG (Dessart et al., 2015). Early literature on SMM describes CEG as a psychological factor (Bowden, 2009) that drives customers to engage with brand content. CEG is defined as a communicative interaction between the audience and brands positively influenced by emotional and cognitive behaviors (Hollebeek et al., 2014). Additionally, CEG has been classified into three main components in the brand context: cognitive, emotional, and behavioral (Cheung, et al., 2021). They also found that these three components significantly impact BI, emphasizing CEG's vivacious and significant role in marketing (Obilo et al., 2021). Some prior studies on engagement discuss audience OEG behaviors, which encompass online activities such as liking, sharing, and commenting on brands' content on SMP (Gummerus et al., 2012). They categorize OEG into three levels: minimum, medium, and maximum engagement. With its 500 million daily users, Instagram encourages more effective engagement when content receives more likes and comments. Instagram offers various tools and techniques to support audience participation by creating and sharing content. (Ibrahim et al., 2020). The number of likes has been shown to increase BI (Rabbanee et al., 2020). Moreover, the social exchange theory suggests that people are more likely to share personal information when surrounded by others who engage in similar behavior, leading to increased social interaction. (Zhou & Fan, 2019). For instance, audiences are motivated and involved by content shared by tourism agencies, making them more inclined to visit such destinations in the hospitality industry. (Huerta-Álvarez et al.,

2020). Although previous research examines OEG as a mediating factor between brand activity and brand loyalty (Samarah et al., 2021), it can be argued that OEG significantly mediates the relationship between SMI and VI.

3.4 Involvement

In recent years, CI has gathered significant interest, with experts and researchers linking involvement to numerous theories and frameworks in various contexts, highlighting its considerable impact on SMM (Andrews et al., 1990; France et al., 2016; Hollebeek et al., 2014). CI is often defined as an individual's excitement, indicating interest and ongoing concern about a particular product or brand (Bowden, 2009; France et al., 2016; Zaichkowsky, 1985). Bian and Haque (2020) define it as a scale of attentiveness or customer excitement perceived from a specific product or brand, suggesting that the more curious customers are, the more involved they are. For example, when customers are highly interested in a brand, they are willing to invest in exploring it (Gligor & Bozkurt, 2021). Therefore, Laroche et al. (2012) emphasize that SM communities are built to foster involvement. According to De Vries and Carlson (2014), the higher the interaction between customers and a brand, the greater their level of involvement with that brand. Involved customers believe and value a specific brand as meeting all their needs and desires (Gligor & Bozkurt, 2020; Merrilees & Fry, 2003), leading them to develop a one-to-one relationship with that brand (Labrecque, 2014). A study in the banking industry found that well-involved customers are more likely to remain loyal to their bank even after a service failure (Colgate & Norris, 2001). Involved customers are more likely to put themselves in a defensive position when facing negative word-of-mouth about their brand (Ashley & Varki, 2009). Involvement is a mental situation that affects decision-making assessments (Mittal & Lee, 1988) and can be characterized by the connection between needs and interests (France et al., 2016; Zaichkowsky, 1985). CI encompasses cognitive, emotional, and behavioral factors (Hollebeek, 2011), as involved customers are less inclined to explore and experience other brands. While previous research examines CI as a moderating factor (Gligor & Bozkurt, 2021), we argue that CI positively mediates the relationships between SM interaction and the intention to visit the food and beverage industry.

3.5 Intention to visit

VI, derived from BI (e.g., purchase, visit, repurchase) (Ibrahim et al., 2021), is widely discussed in several industries and can be explained as an individual's desire for future behavioral action (Warshaw & Davis, 1985). Purchase and word-of-mouth intentions are considered essential factors of BI (Oliver, 1999). Prior literature emphasizes that the more valuable the perceived, the stronger the BI (Wu et al., 2014), which is measured by actual behavior (Lusby, 2021). According to the SOR model theory, BI is the response to a cognitive effect. (Vivek et al., 2012). Numerous theories and studies suggest that this BI stems from conscious thinking. The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) is a well-known psychological theory in this view (Ajzen, 1991). Depending on TPB, people intend to behave according to three main factors: (1) Attitude toward the behavior (involves thinking of the behavior's feelings and consequences), (2) Social pressure toward the behavior (involves thinking of social approval or disapproval), and (3) Behavioral control (thinking about the ability to conduct the behavior considering external factors) (Kidwell & Jewell, 2010). VI is the individual's readiness or willingness to visit a specific destination. (Bigné et al., 2001) Shortly. Ibrahim and Aljarah (2018) indicated that SM significantly impacts customers VI. Pleased customers are more likely to review and help others visit the same restaurant, contributing to the concept of VI (Bigne et al., 2018; Park et al., 2019). Thus, Zaenab et al. (2019) emphasize the importance of electronic Word-of-Mouth influence on customers' VI. People nowadays tend to consume new experiences and places due to the power of SM. Recent research reveals that SMI increases customer brand loyalty and BI (Kim & Ko, 2010, 2012).

Previous studies have examined the relationship between BI and SM interaction in various contexts. For example, Kim and Ko (2010, 2012) examined the role of SMP interaction in the intention to purchase in high-end fashion contexts with a new interaction idea. A study in China and Hong Kong by Cheung, Pires, Rosenberger, Leung and Ting (2021) states that interaction supports two-way communication with customers and their intended consumption. Ibrahim and Aljarah (2018) examined the link between SMP interaction and the revisit intention of the tourism industry in Northern Cyprus. This study will discuss the restaurant's intention to visit as the dependent variable, with Instagram account interaction as the independent variable, considering the impact of the mediator (OEG and CI).

4. Hypothesis Development

4.1 Instagram Interaction and online engagement

In prior studies on SM, numerous researchers have examined the effect of SM interaction on OEG (Hudson & Thal, 2013). These studies consistently agree on interaction's positive and significant role in OEG (Gummerus et al., 2012; Obilo et al., 2021). Instagram provides various tools and techniques that support the relationship between Instagram interaction and OEG (Ibrahim et al., 2020; Rabbanee et al., 2020). Additionally, other authors have noted that the more interaction content receives, the higher the OEG it achieves (Cheung, Pires, & Rosenberger, 2020; Cheung, Pires, Rosenberger, et al., 2020; Samarah et al., 2021; Zhou & Fan, 2019). Indeed, studies have indicated that interactions lead to OEG (Mollen & Wilson, 2010). Based on this, we propose the following hypotheses:

H₁: *Instagram interaction with restaurant pages has a positive impact on online engagement.*

4.2 Instagram Interaction and Involvement

A variety of studies illustrate CI as the feelings perceived throughout the brand's interaction with customers (France et al., 2016; Gligor & Bozkurt, 2020), which provides companies with additional deep-rooted values (Zaichkowsky, 1985). Furthermore, a study by Kang et al. (2019) suggest that Instagram's interaction and storytelling encourage customers' feelings of involvement and consumer behavior. Despite the lack of personal relationships between a specific brand or influencer, robust SM interaction gives customers a sense of involvement with that entity (Jun & Yi, 2020). In addition, customers prefer associating with more interactive influencers who provide easily accessible two-way communication with the audience (Jun & Yi 2020) . It mentions the relationship between SM and consumer relationships with brands, which means that customers feel strongly involved through interpersonal interaction with brand SM (Labrecque, 2014).

Moreover, several authors have discovered the relationship between SM interaction and involvement in different contexts (Dwivedi & McDonald, 2018; Huerta-Álvarez et al., 2020; J. Kim et al., 2012). For example, a study analyzing Facebook content in global brands points out that some local businesses use SM interaction better than international and big brands, which results in more involved customers (D.-H. Kim et al., 2015). Based on this, we hypothesize:

H₂: *Instagram interaction with restaurant pages has a positive impact on involvement.*

4.3 Instagram Interaction and intention to visit

Few studies have explored the link between online interaction and VI. For instance, Ibrahim and Aljarah (2018) examined the relationship between SMP interaction and revisit intention in the tourism industry in Northern Cyprus. Other authors have discussed the impact of destination pictures on customers' VI. An influencer article by Veen and Song (2014) demonstrated that influencers significantly influence customers' VI. Moreover, SM's clearer information and familiarity lead to higher intentions to visit customers (Chen & Lin, 2012; Hao & Ryan, 2013; Jeong et al., 2012). Based on this, we propose the following hypothesis:

H₃: *Instagram interaction with restaurant pages positively impacts the intention to visit.*

4.4 Online engagement and intention to visit

In the context of business, OEG refers to how customers express their appreciation of SMP. It reflects the effort to listen to and understand customers' needs and desires through the provided content. Therefore, OEG can serve as evidence of customer interest. Harrigan et al. (2017) noted that the tourism industry observed an increase in customers' VI due to OEG. Additionally, Huerta-Álvarez et al. (2020) highlighted that engaging with content related to a specific country motivated customers to VI that country. Furthermore, academic research on SM influencers by Al Khasawneh et al. (2021) demonstrated that high likes, comments, and shares lead to a higher VI. Based on the study by Gligor and Bozkurt (2021), which examined the impact of perceived brand on SMP, engagement was found to influence VI positively. These discussions lead us to develop our hypothesis:

H₄: *Online engagement with restaurant pages positively impacts the intention to visit.*

4.5 Involvement and intention to visit

Academic researchers have concluded that involvement is an internal, personal feeling of interest that reflects on the customer's decision-making process and BI, such as the VI (Bowden, 2009; France et al., 2016; Gligor & Bozkurt, 2021). Various authors have examined the relationship between involvement and VI in the tourism sector. Lee and Beeler (2009) found a remarkable impact of participation on customers VI. Wang and Wu (2011) noted that involvement increases customers' willingness to visit a specific destination. On the other hand, Ibrahim et al. (2021) found that the more customers are involved through a coffee brand's account on Instagram, the more likely they are to have the VI that coffee shop. Based on these findings, we posit That the more customers are involved through a coffee brand account on Instagram, the more VI they have to that coffee (Ibrahim et al., 2021). Based on these findings, we posit:

H₅: *Involvement with the restaurant page positively impacts the intention to visit.*

4.6 The Mediating Role of Online Engagement

Although some literature has examined the link between SM interaction and VI, few studies have applied the mediator role of OEG to understand the link clearly. Hur et al. (2017) pointed out that OEG significantly mediates the link between SM content interaction and customer VI through travel-related pages. Recent articles highlight the positive impact of interacting with ad content on behavioral VI, as discussed by Alalwan (2018), Algharabat et al. (2018), and Jung et al. (2016). In the context of OEG, Alalwan (2018) and Rabbane et al. (2020) have demonstrated the impact of interacting with different types of content on customer BI. Therefore, in the SM world, OEG mediates the connection between SM interaction and the intention to purchase, visit, and other BI. Building on the above explanation, we posit the following:

H₆: *Online engagement mediates the relationship between Instagram restaurant page interaction and the intention to visit.*

4.7 The Mediating Role of Involvement

A limited body of literature examines the mediating role of involvement in the relationship between Instagram interaction and VI within the food and beverages industry. Several studies suggest that well-prepared content and an SM account establish a two-way connection with customers, fostering a high level of involvement that translates into a greater VI (France et al., 2016; Song & Zinkhan, 2008). In hospitality, Ibrahim et al. (2021) highlight that customers interacting more with coffee shop SM will have a stronger VI than specific coffee brands. Similarly, Leung et al. (2015) emphasize this relationship within hotel SM accounts. Therefore, we posit that CI is an effective mediator, enhancing our understanding of the presented correlation. Consequently, we hypothesize the following:

H₇: *Involvement mediates the relationship between Instagram restaurant page interaction and the intention to visit.*

5. Methodology

5.1 Data collection

This research study aims to investigate food and beverage SMM. To validate the model structure presented in this research, we target non-Turkish individuals in Turkey and those who have visited Turkey, aged 18 years and older, with an active Instagram account for exploring foods and restaurants. Given the broad scope of this population, a survey was conducted online using various channels, and the convenience sampling method was employed. To ensure the desired quality of results, we applied four screening questions to classify the respondents. We targeted foreign respondents for two reasons. Firstly, A dramatic growth in foreign tourists rate of 10.4% in 2023 compared with the previous year, with 49.2 million tourists (Onğun, 2024) and 4.5 million foreign hosts nationwide (IOM, 2024). Secondly, the food and beverage industry is considered an important foreign currency source, with a minimum of 22% to 23% of the country's tourism income recently (Alkin, 2022). To do so, we examine the relation among the variables through Instagram, which has an incredible impact on customers' food behavior (Demarest, 2020).

5.2 The Research Instrument

The study will utilize the results obtained from the research survey as the primary data source. The survey started with an introductory page with all the required information and confidentiality details. An online survey has been opted for its effectiveness and suitability compared to other data-collecting methods and to enhance the applicability of the study results (Lefever et al., 2007). Ibrahim (2022) suggests that online surveys may boost response numbers. This survey was presented in Survey Monkey as a user-friendly platform to encourage participants. A survey link was distributed through SMP, such as WhatsApp students and other foreign groups. Out of the 454 participants, 119 did not meet the inclusion criteria, and 84 did not complete the study. Those participants were takes around 5-3 minutes to complete the survey. The survey will be structured into three stages, serving as a funnel to enhance the reliability of the results. The initial stage will involve screening questions to exclude respondents who did not match the study criteria. It was previously confirmed as a reliable method (Ibrahim, 2021; Ibrahim et al., 2021). The study requirements include an engaged individual who interacts with a food Instagram account—followed by a demographic stage, including personal background information and SM use. Culminating in the scale stage primarily comprises variable questions using a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 7 (strongly disagree). This stage includes five SMI questions from Gligor and Bozkurt (2021), nine OEG questions from Ibrahim (2022), five CI items from Gligor and Bozkurt (2021), and three items from Žabkar et al. (2010).

5.3 Pilot Study

A sample of 30 participants will be selected to ensure the question statements and language are easily understandable and align with the intended meaning. This sample will also help ensure that all questions suit the target audience. Any necessary edits identified during this process will be promptly addressed.

Measurement model: Validity, reliability, and common method bias

Table 1
Measurement model of study

	Item	Loading	Cronbach's
Social Media Interaction			
			.94
There is a two-way communication with (X brand) restaurant page	SMI1	.86	
(X brand) restaurant page listens to what I have to say	SMI2	.90	
(X brand) restaurant page encourages me to communicate directly with it	SMI3	.95	
(X brand) restaurant page would respond to me quickly and efficiently	SMI4	.94	
(X brand) restaurant page allows me to communicate directly with it	SMI5	.71	
Online Engagement			.76
<i>Like</i> : I will click "like" on the posts about the product and service from (X brand) restaurant page	OEG1	.73	
<i>Like</i> : I intend to press "like" on the posts about the product and service from (X brand) restaurant	OEG2	.61	
<i>Like</i> : I anticipate that I will press "like" on the product and service posts from (X brand) restaurant	OEG3	-	
<i>Share</i> : I intend to share the posts about the product and service from (X brand) restaurant page	OEG4	.79	
<i>Share</i> : I expect to share the posts about the product and service from (X brand) restaurant page	OEG5	.66	
<i>Share</i> : I will share the posts about the product and service from (X brand) restaurant page	OEG6	-	
<i>Comment</i> : I intend to comment on the posts about the product and service from (X brand) restaurant page	OEG7	.68	
<i>Comment</i> : I will write a comment on the posts about the product and service from (X brand) restaurant page	OEG8	.62	
<i>Comment</i> : I expect to comment on the posts about the product and service from (X brand) restaurant page	OEG9	-	
Involvement			.83
(X brand) restaurant brand means a lot to me	CI1	.90	
(X brand) restaurant brand is significant to me	CI2	.68	
For me personally, (X brand) restaurant brand is important	CI3	.85	
I am interested in (X brand) restaurant brand	CI4	.65	
I am involved with (X brand) restaurant brand	CI5	-	
Intention To Visit			.93
If had to decide I would choose (X brand) restaurant brand	VI1	.88	
I would (more frequently) visit (X brand) restaurant brand	VI2	.84	
(X brand) restaurant brand would be my first restaurant choice over other restaurants	VI3	.92	

Table 2
Discriminant Validity

	CR	AVE	VI	OEG	CI	SMI
VI	0.915	0.783	0.885			
OEG	0.764	0.462	0.331***	0.680		
CI	0.843	0.581	0.685***	0.264***	0.762	
SMI	0.949	0.790	0.448***	0.172*	0.263***	0.889

Note: ** p < 0.010; *** p < 0.001; *p < .05

6. Result

6.1 Sample Characteristics

Two hundred forty-two valid responses were obtained through the survey. The demographics results reveal that 45% of the respondents belonged to the 18-25 age group, 24.8% were in the 26-35 age group, and the remaining 30.2% were from other age groups. Most respondents are well-educated, with 63.6% having attended college for two years or more and 20.2% holding a master's degree. According to the survey results, 45% of the respondents are students, and 31.4% are employed or business owners. The survey also revealed that nearly seventy-seven participants are from Asian countries, and 14% are from African countries. Additionally, 73.6% of the population lives in Turkey, 43.8% of which reside as students, and 88% of which earn less than 30,000 Turkish lire. Regarding time spent, 64% spent up to 3 hours, while 36% spent over 3 hours.

6.2 Hypothesis Testing

The study utilized AMOS-structural equation modeling (SEM) to test the hypotheses. All model fit indicators showed satisfactory values, indicating a good fit for the hypothesized structural model (CMIN2/df = 1.73 < 3.00; CFI = .92 > .90; NFI = .93 > .90; RMSEA = .06 < .08). SEM was used to test the study's hypotheses, as presented in Table 3. The research hypothesized that SMI affects OEG, CI, and VI in H1, H2, and H3, respectively. As shown in Table 3, the results confirm the significance of three hypotheses: H1 ($\beta=.21$, $p \leq 0.001$), H2 ($\beta=.21$, $p \leq 0.01$), and H3 ($\beta=.23$, $p \leq 0.001$). Therefore, Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3 were supported. The study suggests that OEG and CI are positively associated with VI. The study confirms these relationships between OEG and CI and VI – H4 ($\beta=.59$, $p \leq 0.001$), CI – H5 ($\beta=.12$, $p \leq 0.01$), and VI ($\beta=.23$, $p \leq 0.001$). Thus, Hypotheses 3, 4, and 5 were also supported.

The mediation results were tested using Model 4 of PROCESS SPSS (Version 3.3), developed by Andrew (2013) (see Table 3). The 95% bias-corrected bootstrapped confidence interval (CIL) (N = 5000) was estimated (Preacher, Rucker, and Hayes, 2007). The results showed that the indirect effect of SMI on VI through OEG is statistically significant (H7a: $\beta = .1239$, CI [.080, .170]), thus supporting Hypotheses 6. The bootstrapped results also indicated that the indirect effect of SMI on VI through CI was statistically significant (H8a: $\beta = .0252$, CI [.010, .0425]). Thus, hypothesis 7 was supported.

Table 3

Results of the study

Hypothesis:	β	P-value	Result	
Direct Effect				
H1: SMI → OEG	0.21***	0.000	Accepted	
H2: SMI → CI	0.21**	.0036	Accepted	
H3: SMI → VI	0.23***	0.000	Accepted	
H4: OEG → VI	.59***	0.000	Accepted	
H5: CI → VI	.12**	.0080	Accepted	
Note: *** P < 0.001, ** P < 0.01,				
Mediation: Indirect Effect				
H6: SMI → OEG → VI	0.1239	0.080,	0.170	Supported
H7: SMI → CI → VI	0.0252	0.010	0.045	Supported

7. Discussion and implication

7.1 General Discussion

Despite the recognition of SMM as a fundamental aspect of the restaurant industry, there is still a lack of research on the impact of customer-brand interactions on consumer behavioral action. To address these literature gaps, we developed an integrative model supported by the SOR framework to investigate how SMI impacts customers IV in such a context. This study also aimed to discover the OEG and CI mediating the link between SMI and VI. In this research, SMI and the mediators focused on Instagram, the restaurant's pages, and its effect on VI. This study found that VI was affected positively by SMI, which is in line with the results of recent studies (Bozkurt et al., 2020; Ibrahim et al., 2021). Our results were extended to previous articles, which expose the impact of SMI on VI in various contexts, such as the fashion industry (Kim & Ko, 2012), the hospitality industry (Ibrahim & Aljarah, 2018), and the effect of Facebook interaction on visiting coffee shops (Ibrahim, 2021). At the same time, prior studies have explored the mediating role of OEG and CI in this context. Some have suggested that the OEG factor can influence customers' BI through SM (Ibrahim et al., 2021; Rabbanee et al., 2020). This study affirms the significant impact of OEG on customers' intent to visit through SM.

Conversely, some studies highlight the effects of CI on VI by utilizing SMP (Gligor & Bozkurt, 2021; Ibrahim et al., 2021; Ibrahim & Aljarah, 2021). The present work confirms the significant effect of CI on VI. It illustrates the significance of OEG and CI in the restaurant industry, which fosters a positive long-term relationship between the brand and customers. Although there is a growing trend in the Instagram business, few studies have focused on examining the interaction effect of Instagram on VI, and this research paper explores the impact of restaurant Instagram pages' interaction on all variables (OEG, CI, and VI). SMI meets customers' needs and desires, which enhances customer satisfaction (Maslow, 1981) through SM content and two-way communication (Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016). That fosters customers' loyalty and involvement. The more customers are involved on the restaurant's page, the more attached they become to that restaurant (Ibrahim et al., 2021). Customers used OEG to reward the efforts invested in the restaurant's Instagram page, showcasing valuable content. OEG supports the link that leads to VI. The SM algorithm system automatically boosts the more engaging content, making it go viral, which enhances customers' VI (Rabbanee et al., 2020).

7.2 Practical implication

The study indicates that SMI substantially impacts customer VI in the food and beverage sector, and it suggests that CI and OEG have significant mediating functions between SMI and VI, which aims to improve SM use in the food and beverage sector. First, the study highlights that SMI stimulates customer behavior; thus, Instagram interaction enhances VI behavior directly or indirectly by increasing CI and OEG. Therefore, marketers and managers should create engaging SM content that aligns with their customer's interests and needs. This can encourage direct communication with the brand and build a stronger relationship with customers. For instance, restaurant brands should invest in trendy and valuable content to attract customer interaction. Since SM is part of the customer's daily routine, specifically Instagram (Lin et al., 2018), Instagram goes beyond being just an SMP to being storytelling-based. Instagram is the most food-inspirational SMP (Demarest, 2020). Restaurant marketers and managers should use it efficiently to create ongoing, engaging content that motivates customers' emotions and encourages them to take action. Second, the study reveals the importance of building a long-lasting relationship between customers and restaurant brands. Customers who are emotionally involved with a brand are more likely to visit. Thus, marketers should focus on involving customers in all operations and giving them meaning behind the brand and product/service. Restaurants can utilize Instagram engagement to boost customer interaction, generate positive word-of-mouth, and enhance CI, adding value to their brand. Third, within the restaurant business, SMM can be measured through CI and OEG. SMI, supported by CI and OEG, motivates customers VI. As a result, restaurant marketers should prioritize developing a continuous SM strategy that aligns with the restaurant's goals and enhances OEG. The restaurant's Instagram account needs captivating content to attract customers and encourage present and future VI. The study highlights the significant effect of OEG on the link that leads to VI. OEG, likes, shares, and comments affect customers' emotions and behavior, and marketers and managers should direct their SMM efforts to build an extensive network of shareable content that encourages VI. For instance, marketers and managers should concentrate on the restaurant's SM accounts to establish two-way communication with stakeholders to improve their responses.

8. Limitations and recommendation

The present study, like any other, has limitations and highlights future opportunities. Our study examined the effect of SMI only on the Instagram platform, although Instagram is the primary venue for restaurants. Future studies may test the relationship between SMI and VI on several SMPs (e.g., Snapchat, TikTok) (Ibrahim et al., 2021; Jin et al., 2019, 2021). The study was conducted in a highly touristic country (Turkey, mainly in Istanbul). Therefore, our findings cannot be generalized to countries with different backgrounds. Future research could examine this model in various countries or compare the differences in impact with other countries (Ibrahim et al., 2021; Ibrahim & Aljarah, 2021). In our study of the link between SMI and VI, we only considered two influencing factors, overlooking the importance of OEG and CI as crucial variables in SMM. Future researchers should explore the impact of additional factors on customers' VI, such as perceived quality, brand trust, and so on (Ibrahim & Aljarah, 2021). We focused specifically on the restaurant sector within the hospitality context. Therefore, future scholars may apply these principles across various industry sectors (Ibrahim et al., 2021; Ibrahim & Aljarah, 2021). This study solely focused on firm-generated content and did not consider the impact of the content information shared on the restaurant's SM page. Hence, future research could incorporate content information such as content format, type, language, and goals to understand SMI's effect better. 6-Participants were asked in the survey to name the restaurant brand they follow the most on Instagram, which may lead to variations in the cuisine types and the scale of the brands. Future researchers may consider narrowing the scope of restaurants for more generalized results. Our study investigates the influence of SMI, OEG, and CI on VI. To maximize restaurant profitability, we recommend that future studies examine actual visiting behavior.

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