

The effect of online reviews on restaurant visit intentions: applying signaling and involvement theories

Reviews on
restaurant
visit intentions

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to investigate the effect of online reviews on consumers' intention to visit restaurants, with the moderating role of involvement.

Design/methodology/approach – The research framework was built on signaling theory, message appeals and involvement theory. To test the proposed framework, three experiments were conducted online with real customer samples. T-tests, ANOVA and SPSS PROCESS macro were used for data analysis.

Findings – The results revealed that online reviews with higher online ratings and emotional appeal led to higher restaurant visit intention. Review appeal significantly moderated the effect of online ratings on restaurant visit intention. Customers with low restaurant involvement were more impacted by emotional comments than by functional comments.

Research limitations/implications – The present study extends our knowledge on the effects of online reviews moderated by levels of customer involvement. By combining signaling theory with involvement theory, it adds value to the literature on customer online behavior, especially in the foodservice context. The present study has limitations that might provide opportunities for future research. It used evaluations (TripAdvisor scores) and only positive reviews (texts), so customers' intentions considering negative reviews could not be examined. The level of hedonism concerning consumption in restaurants and prior knowledge regarding restaurant reviews was not controlled for. It is possible that the level of hedonism perceived and prior review knowledge may moderate the customers' intention to visit the restaurant.

Practical implications – The present study shows the importance of online comments for the promotion of restaurants that have low evaluation scores. It is essential that restaurant owners and managers encourage potential customers by using comments to elaborate on their marketing strategies and promotion. At the same time, they should invite customers to share their emotional experiences, and not just their views on service efficiency (a functional aspect). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the use of the internet and mobile devices has become more prominent. Managers could therefore use emotional messages on the restaurant's website or apps to attract customers with low restaurant involvement. Also, a system to identify the involvement of customers with restaurants could be implemented online or on mobile devices to present specific messages. The present study also recommends the use of online tools as virtual tours, photographs taken from different angles, smiling faces, floor plans and sittings and pre-determined emotional expressions.



Also, the restaurant could promote lives on cooking different dishes to motive customer's interaction and comments. These would help to increase customers' visit intentions.

Originality/value – This study extends knowledge about the effect of restaurant online reviews (both ratings and appeals) moderated by the level of customer involvement. The present study also adds value to the customer online behavior literature showing that customers with low involvement are more sensitive to emotional content as they use the affective route to process information rather than the central route.

Keywords Online review, Message appeal, Restaurants, Signaling theory, Involvement theory, Experiment

Paper type Research paper

摘要

在线评论对餐厅到访意愿的影响：运用信号理论和参与理论

研究目的 – 本研究旨在探索以顾客参与度作为调节变量,关于在线评论对餐厅到访意愿的影响。

研究设计/方法/途径 – 本文以信号理论, 信息诉求, 参与理论来建立研究框架。为测试提出的理论框架, 本研究进行了三个在线消费者实验。T-检验, 方差分析, 和SPSS PROCESS 来作为统计方法。

研究结果 – 研究发现评论分值越高, 运用感情诉求往往导致更高度的到访意愿。评论的诉求形式显著调节了评分对到访意愿的影响。对于参与度较低的顾客, 情感诉求比功能性诉求更加能影响顾客意愿。

研究原创性/价值 – 本研究对餐厅在线评论(评分和诉求种类)对顾客到访意愿影响, 以及如何被消费者参与度所调节贡献了新知识。本研究对消费者在线行为做出了贡献, 发现参与度较低的顾客对和情感有关的内容更敏感, 相对于中央路径, 由于此类顾客更倾向于情感路径来处理信息。

关键词: 在线评论, 信息诉求, 餐厅, 信号理论, 参与理论, 实验法

文章类型: 研究型论文

1. Introduction

The global restaurant industry had a worth of \$1.2tn in 2020 (Global Industry Analysts, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has had a drastic effect on the sector. The year-on-year decline of seated restaurants worldwide was a staggering 22% as of April 25, 2021 (Lock, 2021). Social distancing and general caution in public places have meant that consumers have been dining out less and less. To prevent the spread of COVID-19, customers are ordering takeaways via the internet or smartphone. As a result, the use of technologies and communication strategies to attract customer attention has become more crucial than ever. For example, companies such as TripAdvisor (restaurants), Booking.com (hotels) and Decolar.com (air transport and hotels) feature on their online platforms a large group of businesses that can be evaluated by customers using online ratings or comments.

Customers' evaluations and comments have worked as a signal for others making their purchase decisions as they consider the alternatives on the same online platform. Previous studies have shown that online reviews ratings and comments both have significant influences on hotel choice (Yen and Tang, 2019) and restaurant choice (Jeong and Jang, 2011; Zhang *et al.*, 2010). Online ratings are scores generated by websites from customer evaluation, and online comments are short texts expressing customers' experience with a company (Mariani *et al.*, 2019). Online review comments can be functional or emotional. The former report on service efficiency (Parikh *et al.*, 2017), and the latter express feelings about the service experience in the restaurant through effective words (Standing *et al.*, 2016). Another essential variable in explaining customer behavior is involvement with the product. According to the involvement theory, customers respond according to the importance they place on a product, which then influences the purchase intention (Laurent and Kapferer, 1985).

Previous authors have pointed out the need to investigate the effect of online reviews (ratings and comments) using customers' involvement level as a moderator in the context of online purchases (Walther *et al.*, 2012). The present study addresses this research gap by applying signaling theory, message appeals and involvement theory to investigate the effect of online reviews moderated by restaurant customers' involvement level on restaurant visit intention through experimental designs. It complements the literature by bridging signaling and involvement theories to understand online customer behavior in the restaurant industry. The findings also provide meaningful insights that restaurant managers might use to manage their online reputation and to attract their target market.

2. Literature review and theoretical framework

2.1 Signaling theory and online ratings

Signaling theory is useful for describing behavior between two parties – a sender and receiver. This highlights the fact that people involved in the communication process can interpret the message from a different perspective or according to their interests – the meaning of information may have a different import for the sender and the receiver. In essence, the signaling theory shows that when communicating, people try to reduce information discrepancies between themselves (Spence, 2002).

Signaling theory has been applied to investigate different business areas, for instance, to understand entrepreneurship behavior, organizational stakeholders' behavior and employees' and employers' behavior (Connelly *et al.*, 2010). However, studies that are designed to understand the impact of online information, such as ratings and customer comments, still demand comprehension. An increasing number of users have started to use these connectivity resources to choose tourist destinations, hotels and restaurants according to their expectations and personal preferences (Kwon *et al.*, 2021; Moro and Esmerado, 2020).

According to Zhang *et al.* (2010), online ratings and comments obtained from specialized websites can influence restaurant selection. Zhang *et al.* (2010) state that, because the industry is now saturated by these business models, restaurants are facing intense competition, so managers need to improve their online attractiveness. Vermeulen and Seegers (2009) argue that online reviews by customers significantly increase the awareness of hotel managers that they have to improve on-site service, and that positive ratings can further improve clients' attitudes toward them. Kim and Park (2017) point out that the higher the number of evaluations online, the better the restaurant performance. Using signaling theory and the empirical evidence of the impact of online ratings, the first hypothesis is proposed:

- H1. Online restaurant reviews with higher ratings will generate greater restaurant visit intention than those with lower ratings.

2.2 Advertising message appeals and online reviews

Advertising and message appeals are communication strategies that companies use to attract the attention of customers. Advertising may focus on products' functional attributes or use emotional approaches to entice the customer (Gong and Cummins, 2020). According to the elaboration likelihood model (ELM; Petty *et al.*, 1983) and affect–reason–involvement (ARI) model (Buck, 2000), individuals engage in processing information in different ways. The former posits that individuals engage in central and peripheral modes of persuasion. The former points to a more substantial emotional involvement with the message, leading to a more profound emotional elaboration. In an online context, attracting customers' interest is

a difficult task given the amount of information that is available when customers are looking for a product/service to purchase. To encourage them, businesses use online ratings and incentivize customers to share their experiences writing short online posts.

Unlike online ratings, comments are messages that customers post online to share their experiences. Some researchers have described these messages as electronic word of mouth (eWOM) (Mariani *et al.*, 2019). The post, it can be functional, focusing on the evaluation of the service, or textual, wherein customers relay their experience using their own words. These can reveal their feelings about the product or service (Standing *et al.*, 2016). According to the ARI model, emotional messages are more potent than functional ones because they arouse customers' emotions. Previous studies have shown the power of emotional content in advertising (Gong and Cummins, 2020; Holbrook and O'Shaughnessy, 1984). However, its efficacy in terms of the nature of the online review requires further investigation.

According to Kim and Park (2017), the number of online reviews garnered by a restaurant has a significant positive impact on its performance. Studies have suggested that eWOM is a source of credible and useful information (Mariani *et al.*, 2019; Park and Kim, 2010). The main research findings have revealed that online reviews and comments have a significant influence on people's choice of hotel (Yen and Tang, 2019) and restaurant (Jeong and Jang, 2011; Zhang *et al.*, 2010). Zhang *et al.* (2018) noted that cosmopolitan consumers have more favorable attitudes toward ethnic restaurants when they read online reviews posted by customers of an ethnicity that is different from the cuisine being served. According to Jeong and Jang (2011), restaurant service quality, ambience and pricing are all components of eWOM, and influence customers' visit intention.

Even though such information is helpful, it is also essential to consider the functional and emotional nature of online comments. Functional comments usually cover food quality, service efficiency, restaurant ambience or price (Parikh *et al.*, 2017). Emotional comments refer to those in which consumers express their feelings about such attributes in their own words (Standing *et al.*, 2016). These have a substantial impact on consumer evaluations (Bui and Kemp, 2013). Based on the argument that online comments with emotional content have a greater influence than functional content comments (Walther *et al.*, 2012), the study proposes that online reviews with an emotional appeal will have a greater effect than functional content comments:

H2. Online restaurant reviews with an emotional appeal will generate higher restaurant visit intention than those with a functional appeal.

The literature provides evidence that clients give more credence to online comments made by clients other than experts (Chen and Bei, 2010), and that the type of information (emotional vs functional) has different effects on consumer evaluation (Bui and Kemp, 2013). Therefore, we argue that online comments interact with the evaluation score presented by the website:

H3. There are significant interaction effects between online ratings and review appeal on restaurant visit intention.

2.3 Involvement theory

Involvement theory has come to assume more prominence in the marketing and advertising fields. It explains how individual differences can influence the consumer's purchase and communication behavior (Laurent and Kapferer, 1985). A simple definition of involvement is the perceived importance or relevance of a product or a purchase decision to consumers

(Petty *et al.*, 1983). Low involvement means that a product or a purchase is unimportant or irrelevant to the consumer, while high involvement means the opposite (Mittal, 1995). In the advertising literature, the degree of consumer involvement has been widely recognized as being relevant to customers' decision-making processes, including message processing, cognitive response and advertising persuasiveness (Buchholz and Smith, 1991; Chang, 2010; Petty *et al.*, 1983).

Involvement theory has also received increasing attention in the hospitality and tourism fields as not only an antecedent influencing purchase intention (Huang *et al.*, 2010; Park and Kim, 2010) but also a moderator in the mechanism of hospitality and tourism marketing (Gabbioneta and De Carlo, 2019; Lu and Chi, 2018; Rasty *et al.*, 2013). In the context of internet advertising, Rasty *et al.* (2013) found that involvement significantly moderates the relationships between travel advertising content design, advertising attitude, advertising effect and purchase intentions. Also, in a destination context, Gabbioneta and De Carlo (2019) concluded that news involvement significantly increases the positive influence of news media coverage on destination image formation. In a restaurant context, Lu and Chi (2018) used an experimental design to reveal that high-involvement diners express better attitudes and higher purchase intentions, regardless of the diner type or menu cues.

The present study argues that restaurant involvement is likely to moderate the effects of online restaurant reviews on consumers' visit intention. Specifically, when consumers are highly involved with eating out, differences between online restaurant reviews may be less significant. On the other hand, when consumers are less involved with eating out, this may not be quite the case. The final hypotheses are proposed:

- H4. Restaurant involvement significantly moderates the effect of online ratings on restaurant visit intention.
- H5. Restaurant involvement significantly moderates the effect of online review appeal on restaurant visit intention.

We conducted three online experiments to test the proposed framework as shown in Figure 1. Study 1 investigated the main effect of online rating on restaurant visit intention, testing H1. Study 2 added review appeal as another manipulated variable, where we examined H1–H3. Study 3 added involvement as a moderator and tested H1–H5.

3. Study 1

3.1 Design and participants

Study 1 involved a one-factor (online rating: high vs low) experimental design. The participants in all the three studies were contacted via a social network and invited to answer an online questionnaire through a research link that was available for three months. The qualified respondents were Brazilians who had visited restaurants in the past three months, and usually check online reviews before visiting the restaurant or ordering food in that place.

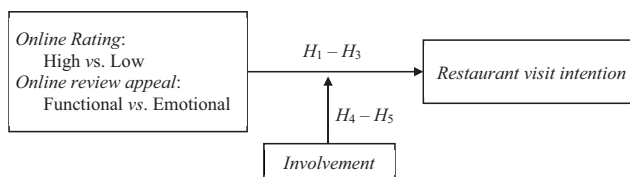


Figure 1.
Research framework

The total number of respondents was 72; 39 (54 %) were male and 33 (46 %) female, with an average age of 29.1 and a monthly average income of \$687.32. According to the Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (IBGE, 2021), average monthly income in Brazil was \$484.60. All were assigned to one of two online review conditions using a between-subject experimental design.

3.2 Stimuli, procedure and dependent measures

All study stimuli were designed using a casual dining restaurant as an example. These are the most common type of restaurant in the city of São Paulo, Brazil where the data were collected. Study 1 designed two online restaurant reviews with different ratings: 4.5 represented a high rating and 2.5 a low rating (Appendix 1). Participants were asked to imagine that they were searching TripAdvisor for restaurant information when they saw a casual restaurant's review. The participants were randomly assigned into one of the two groups to view a single restaurant review. They then completed an online survey consisting of manipulation check questions, demographic questions and a dependent variable. The latter was measured using three items adapted from Ha *et al.* (2016; Appendix 3). Each item was measured using a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). The assumptions for a *t*-test – independence, normality and homogeneity of variance – were all met (Hair *et al.*, 2010).

3.3 Results

To check the manipulation of online rating, the participants were asked to answer a seven-point Likert scale item: “The restaurant presented on TripAdvisor is high-rated” (Ha *et al.*, 2016). The *t*-test result revealed a significant main effect for an online rating on the check ($M_{\text{high}} = 5.32$, $M_{\text{low}} = 4.54$; $t = 2.98$, $p < 0.05$), indicating that this manipulation worked as expected.

The *t*-test showed a significant main effect with regard to online ratings (high vs low). As expected, consumers who viewed the online review with a higher rating expressed a higher visit intention than those who read the online review with a lower rating [$M_{\text{high}} = 5.80$, $M_{\text{low}} = 3.94$; $t(70) = 5.47$, $p < 0.001$; Cohen's $d = 1.31$]. This confirmed *H1*.

3.4 Discussion

Studies in the field of hospitality have shown that customers seek information online to evaluate and select tourist destinations or hotels (Gao *et al.*, 2018). According to the results of Study 1, online ratings had a significant effect on restaurant visit intention, corroborating previous studies on the choice of hotels and restaurants based on online platforms (Yen and Tang, 2019; Hlee *et al.*, 2019). Study 1 provided a basis for Study 2, in which review appeal (emotional vs functional) was added as another manipulated variable.

4. Study 2

4.1 Design and participants

Study 2 used a 2 (online rating: high vs low) \times 2 (review appeal: functional vs emotional) experimental design. Participants were recruited online using the same method as Study 1. The total sample in Study 2 was 123 (54 % female, average age = 33.7, average monthly income = \$530.80). Participants were assigned to one of the four online review conditions in a between-subject experimental design.

4.2 Stimuli, procedure and dependent measures

The procedure was the same as in Study 1. We designed four online restaurant reviews (Appendix 2) for four conditions: high/emotional, high/functional, low/emotional and low/functional. The two conditions of review appeal were added to the two online rating conditions we designed in Study 1. The emotional appeal highlighted effective words and emoticons (emotional human expressions using symbols), while the functional appeal emphasized words relating to service efficacy. Study 2 used the same dependent measure as Study 1.

4.3 Results

The online rating manipulation check showed a significant main effect for online rating [$M_{\text{high}} = 4.19$, vs $M_{\text{low}} = 1.17$; $t(121) = 3.99$, $p < 0.001$]. To check review appeal manipulation, the participants were asked to answer a seven-point Likert scale item: "The customer comments show positive emotions about the restaurant" (Edell and Burke, 1987). The t -test result revealed a significant main effect for review appeal on the check [$M_{\text{emotional}} = 5.60$, vs $M_{\text{functional}} = 5.47$; $t(121) = 2.02$, $p < 0.05$]. The manipulation check results indicated that both manipulations worked successfully.

The 2 (online rating: high vs low) \times 2 (review appeal: functional vs emotional) ANOVA results showed a significant main effect for online rating ($F = 22.53$; $p < 0.001$; partial $\eta^2 = 0.13$) on restaurant visit intention, but no main effect for review appeal ($F = 5.65$; $p < 0.05$). Therefore, $H1$ and $H2$ were supported. As with Study 1, the participants who viewed the online review with a higher rating expressed a higher intention ($M = 5.96$) to visit the restaurant than those who read the online review with a lower rating ($M = 5.37$). The results also revealed a significant interaction effect between online rating and review appeal ($F = 4.43$, $p < 0.05$; partial $\eta^2 = 0.03$). Therefore, $H3$ was confirmed. As Figure 2 shows, when the restaurant online rating was relatively high, customers' intention to visit remained high, regardless of the review appeal. When the restaurant's online rating was relatively low, customers showed a higher intention to visit in response to emotional appeal reviews (vs functional; $M_{\text{emotional}} = 5.50$, $M_{\text{functional}} = 4.66$; $F = 4.42$, $p < 0.05$).

4.4 Discussion

As Study 1, Study 2 also proved that online ratings had a significant influence on restaurant visit intention. However, message appeal (functional vs emotional) did not have a main effect on restaurant visit intention. Study 2 successfully identified the interaction effects between online rating and review appeal on restaurant visit intention, complementing

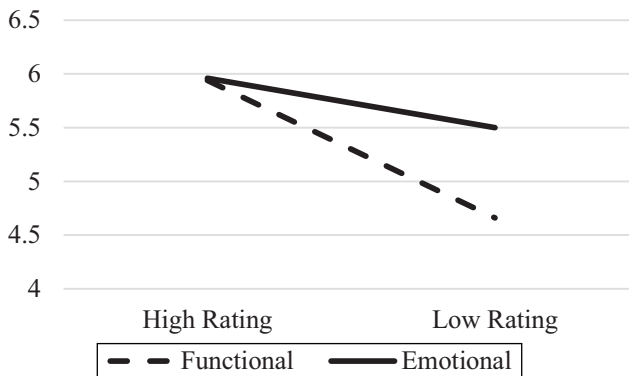


Figure 2.
The interaction effect
between online rating
and review appeal

previous studies that have shown the isolated effects of both variables on consumer evaluation (Chen and Bei, 2010; Bui and Kemp, 2013).

5. Study 3

5.1 Design and participants

Study 3 used the same 2 (online rating: high vs low) \times 2 (review appeal: functional vs emotional) experimental design as Study 2. Participants were recruited online using the same method as Studies 1 and 2. The total sample in Study 3 was 166 (54 % female, average age = 28.2, average monthly income = \$575.98). They were assigned to one of the four online review conditions in a between-subject experimental design.

5.2 Stimuli, procedure and dependent measures

Study 3 used the same procedure and the same stimuli as Study 2. In addition to the dependent measure used in Studies 1 and 2, it included involvement as a moderator variable, and it was measured using three items borrowed from Laurent and Kapferer (1985). The items are listed in Appendix 3.

5.3 Results

The online rating manipulation check results showed a significant main effect for online rating ($M_{\text{high}} = 6.59$ vs $M_{\text{low}} = 2.63$; $t = 25.93$, $p < 0.001$). The review appeal manipulation check results also showed a significant main effect ($M_{\text{emotional}} = 5.18$ vs $M_{\text{functional}} = 4.62$; $t = 2.12$, $p < 0.05$). Both manipulations were successful.

The 2 (online rating: high vs low) \times 2 (review appeal: functional vs emotional) ANOVA results revealed a significant main effect for online rating ($F = 96.33$; $p < 0.001$; partial $\eta^2 = 0.37$) and a significant main effect for review appeal ($F = 3.35$; $p < 0.1$; partial $\eta^2 = 0.02$) on restaurant visit intention. Therefore, $H1$ and $H2$ were confirmed. Specifically, participants who viewed reviews with higher online ratings ($M = 5.50$) and with emotional appeal ($M = 5.50$) expressed higher visit intention than those who read reviews with lower online ratings ($M = 3.81$) and with functional appeal ($M = 4.48$). The results also indicated a significant interaction effect between online ratings and review appeal ($F = 6.14$, $p < 0.05$; partial $\eta^2 = 0.04$), supporting $H3$. As Figure 3 shows, when the online rating is low, there was no

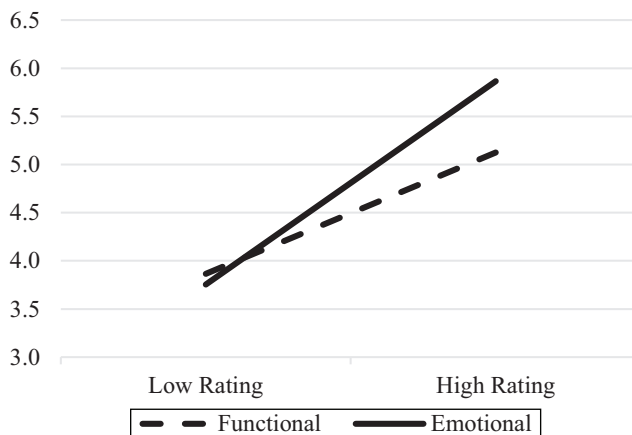


Figure 3.
The interaction effect
between online rating
and review appeal

difference in restaurant visit intention between the two types of review appeals ($t = 0.41, p > 0.1$). When the online rating was high, reviews with emotional appeal ($M = 5.87$) evoked higher restaurant visit intention than those with functional appeal ($M = 5.13, t = 3.52, p < 0.01$).

PROCESS macro model 1 was used to test the proposed moderating effects in the research framework ($H3$ and $H4$). The results revealed a significant moderating effect of involvement on the relationship of review appeal and visit intention ($B = -0.34, t = -1.95, p < 0.1$). This confirmed $H5$. However, involvement failed to moderate the effect of online rating on restaurant visit intention, so $H4$ was rejected. As Figure 4 shows, people with low restaurant involvement (<4.89) were more impacted by emotional than functional comments. Those with high involvement could not tell the difference between emotional and functional comments.

5.4 Discussion

Study 3 supported the moderating effect of involvement on the relationship between review appeal and restaurant visit intention. Specifically, online reviews with emotional appeal worked only for customers with low restaurant involvement (in accordance with the ARI model; Buck, 2000), using emotional comments to reduce the asymmetry of information (in accordance with signaling theory; Spence, 2002).

6. Discussion and conclusions

6.1 Conclusions

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the effect of online rating (low vs high) and review appeal (functional vs emotional) on restaurant visit intention, moderated by the level of customer involvement. A research framework was developed based on signaling theory, message appeal and involvement theory. Three experiments were conducted online to test the hypotheses. Table 1 summarizes the hypothesis testing results.

Study 1 tested the main effect of online ratings on customers' intention to visit a restaurant. The results showed that, in general, customers tended to use available information to increase their knowledge of products and services (as per signaling theory) before making a purchase decision. This finding is consistent with the previous online rating studies in the hospitality field (Zhang et al., 2010).

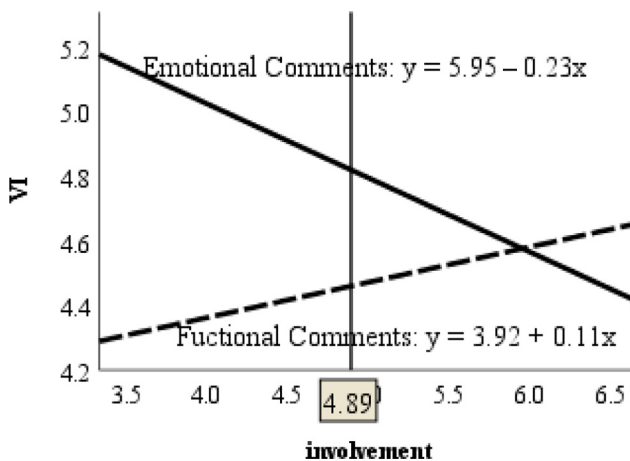


Figure 4.
The moderation of
involvement on the
effect of review
appeal

Study 2 investigated the interaction effects between online ratings and review appeal. Compared to these previous findings (Spence, 2002; Gavilan *et al.*, 2018), our findings extended the comprehension of such phenomenon by considering the emotional content of the customers' comments and controlling the individual's involvement in the third experiment. The significant interaction between online ratings and review appeal suggested that emotional comments tend to favor restaurants with low ratings, because this reduces uncertainty. In other words, limiting information incongruence through positive emotional comments enhanced customers' intention to visit the restaurant. Therefore, positive emotional comments appear to be a more effective signal for customers when they decide to buy products or services from a company that is not as comprehensively evaluated.

Finally, Study 3 revealed a moderating effect of such involvement on the relationship between review appeal and restaurant visit intention. The results were congruent with previous studies on the moderating role of involvement in customer evaluations and purchase intention (Lu and Chi, 2018; Rasty *et al.*, 2013). However, involvement did not interfere with the relationship between online ratings and visiting intention. A possible explanation for this may be that some customers were more suspicious about ratings provided by companies than customers' comments.

Our findings go beyond these previous studies showing that customers with low restaurant involvement were more influenced by emotional than functional reviews, even when the restaurant was low rated. In other words, it is not the number of reviews that count but also the content of the review and the level of involvement that influence the customer's behavior. This suggests that such customers use information as a signal to infer expectations of the restaurant, but they then turn to ARI to make the decision. In contrast, individuals with high restaurant involvement base their decision on ELM, ignoring the emotional aspects of the message.

6.2 Theoretical implications

From a theoretical perspective, the present study extends our knowledge of the effects of online reviews moderated by levels of customer involvement. By combining signaling theory with involvement theory, it adds value to the literature on customer online behavior, especially in the foodservice context.

To enhance the external validity of the findings, the three experiments were conducted in a specific sequence. The first experiment tested the signaling theory and proved that ratings served as signals to customers making online judgments. The second experiment built on that reasoning by adding review appeal and showed that the content of the reviews (functional or emotional) also served as signals to customers and influenced their evaluation through its interaction with online ratings.

The third study advanced and combined the signaling and involvement theories. It complemented the literature by indicating that customers' online responses depended on their level of involvement with restaurants and on the content of the reviews. Customers

Table 1.
Summary of
hypothesis testing

Hypotheses	Study 1	Study 2	Study 3
<i>H1</i> : higher online rating → higher visit intention	Supported	Supported	Supported
<i>H2</i> : emotional appeal → higher visit intention		Rejected	Supported
<i>H3</i> : online rating × review appeal → visit intention		Supported	Supported
<i>H4</i> : involvement × online rating → visit intention			Rejected
<i>H5</i> : involvement × review appeal → visit intention			Supported

with low restaurant involvement were more sensitive to emotional than functional messages. From a broad theoretical perspective, when looking for products online, customers with low involvement were more likely to be influenced by customers' emotional reviews rather than by functional ones.

6.3 Practical implications

The present study shows the importance of online comments for the promotion of restaurants that have low evaluation scores. It is essential that restaurant owners and managers encourage potential customers by using comments to elaborate on their marketing strategies and promotion. At the same time, they should invite customers to share their emotional experiences, and not just their views on service efficiency (a functional aspect).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the use of the internet and mobile devices has become more prominent. Managers could therefore use emotional messages on the restaurant's website or apps to attract customers with low restaurant involvement. Also, a system to identify the involvement of customers with restaurants could be implemented online or on mobile devices to present specific messages.

The present study also recommends the use of online tools as virtual tours, photographs taken from different angles, smiling faces, floor plans and sittings and pre-determined emotional expressions. Also, the restaurant could promote lives on cooking different dishes to motive customer's interaction and comments. These would help to increase customers' visit intentions.

6.4 Limitations and future research

The present study has limitations that might provide opportunities for future research. It used evaluations (TripAdvisor scores) and only positive reviews (texts), so customers' intentions in light of negative reviews could not be examined. In addition, the level of hedonism concerning consumption in restaurants and prior knowledge regarding restaurant reviews was not controlled for. It is possible that the level of hedonism perceived and prior review knowledge may moderate the customers' intention to visit the restaurant. The study did not investigate mediating variables that may explain the effects of online reviews, for example, attitude toward the review (Leung *et al.*, 2017), processing fluency (White *et al.*, 2011) and trust (Kusumasondjaja *et al.*, 2012). Future study might explore possible mechanism of online review influence. The data of our study was collected on social media from real customers. The validity of this data collection method may be questionable. Thus, we recommend collecting data using different sources to strengthen the findings of future studies. Finally, we surveyed only one type of restaurant. The customers' responses to others may have varied. In light of these limitations, we recommend that future studies investigate negative online reviews from customers and positive and negative reviews by experts, and control for the level of hedonism aroused and customers' gender. In addition to this, researchers might include other variables, such as reviews and rating sites trustworthiness, trust in restaurant service, quality and website recommendations.

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Appendix 1

Reviews on restaurant visit intentions

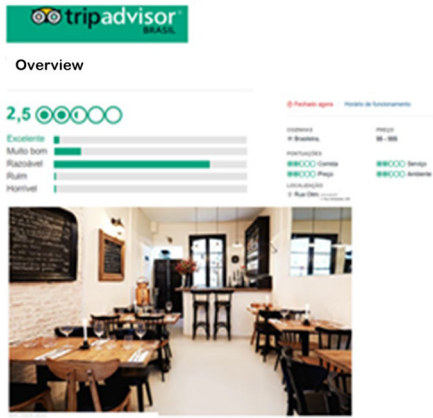
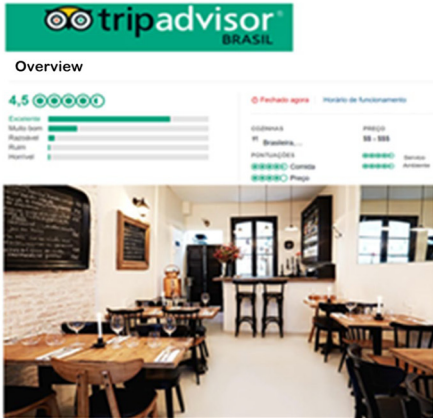


Figure A1.
Study 1 stimuli
(online rating: high vs low)



The service in the restaurant is warm and cozy. The servers are kind and gentle, not to mention the wonderful dishes!!!



Loved meeting the place \o/

How do I define this restaurant? Warm and cozy. The attendants are very hospitable and polite! Worth remembering that the dishes are to die for!

Wonderful experience!



The service in the restaurant is warm and cozy. The servers are kind and gentle, not to mention the wonderful dishes!!!

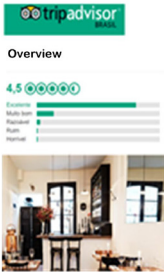


Loved meeting the place \o/

How do I define this restaurant? Warm and cozy. The attendants are very hospitable and polite! Worth remembering that the dishes are to die for!

Wonderful experience!

High & Functional



The service in the restaurant is fast and efficient, everything well organized. The servers are well trained and know the menu very well.



Definitely a great restaurant, nice atmosphere, service and perfect food.

Low & Functional



The service in the restaurant is fast and efficient, everything well organized. The servers are well trained and know the menu very well.



Definitely a great restaurant, nice atmosphere, service and perfect food.

Figure A2. Study 2 experiment stimuli

Appendix 3

Reviews on
restaurant
visit intentions

Constructs and measurement items

References

Intention to visit the restaurant

[Ha et al. \(2016\)](#)

I would certainly go to this restaurant

I would consider visiting this restaurant

I would like to visit this restaurant

Involvement

[Laurent and Kapferer \(1985\)](#)

Even when I am alone, going to restaurants is very important to me

Going to restaurants is important for my social life

The choice of a restaurant is an important issue for me

Table A1.
Measurement items

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