Emojis and Users' Brand Engagement in Instagram. The Case of Eco-Friendly Restaurants

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Abstract
The aim of this research is to examine the drivers of followers´ behavioural engagement with eco-friendly restaurants on Instagram. In addition, the present study explores the influence of followers´ behavioural engagement on word of mouth (WOM) and intention to visit the restaurant, paying special attention to the moderating effect of consumers' attitudes towards the use of emojis in the posts. The research model was tested on 491 female followers of the Instagram account operated by the establishment. Following the validation of measurement scales, the hypotheses are tested using structural equation modelling (SEM) with AMOS software. It was found that behavioural brand engagement was positively affected, with similar intensity, by the perceived enjoyment provided by, and the perceived originality of, brand-generated content posted on Instagram. In addition, behavioural brand engagement was found to drive positive WOM and visiting intentions, and WOM had a significantly higher effect on females who have positive attitudes towards emojis. Brand-generated content (BGC) characteristics (perceived enjoyment and perceived originality) increase followers' brand engagement. Managers should focus on BGC characteristics and the communication style of their messages to strengthen follower-brand relationships. This research can help restaurant owners/managers understand the drivers and outcomes of followers´ behavioural engagement with brands (FBE) on Instagram and the role of emojis on customer behaviours.

1. Introduction

The effects of COVID-19 were felt in all sectors, and its consequences were widespread; in the hospitality sector, restaurants increased their use of social networking sites (SNSs) to communicate with their clients (Li et al., 2021; Santiago et al., 2022). In parallel, visuals-based social media, with their potential for engaging and building relationships with followers, have attracted growing interest from scholars and managers (Apaolaza et al., 2021).

Customer engagement is well-known to be important for successful tourism companies' performance (Bilro et al., 2018, Ho et al., 2022). The customer engagement literature features

discussions on its conceptualisation and components. For instance, Hollebeek et al. (2014) proposed it as a three-dimensional construct with cognitive, emotional and behavioural dimensions. Based on cognitive–affective–behaviour theory (Oliver, 1999), previous studies (e.g., Kumar and Pansari, 2016) have argued that, of the three dimensions, only behaviour is directly observable, while it is the most important driver of company performance. Behavioural brand engagement has been argued to be a key success factor in influencing purchase decisions (Kumar and Pasari, 2016; Barari et al., 2021). The present study draws on the stimulus-organism-response (S-O-R) model (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974) to analyse the specific effects of behavioural brand engagement in the context of social-media-based restaurant marketing campaigns. Given the recent development of social media, restaurants are now taking advantage of their visuals-based material to engage with, and hold the attention of, their clients/potential clients. Thus, visual content is now firmly positioned as an effective communication tool in the restaurant industry.

While many studies have investigated BGC (brand-generated content) (Rietveld et al., 2020; Overgoor et al., 2022; Zhang and Su, 2022), very few researchers have evaluated customers' perceptions of the attributes of the content (Hwang et al., 2020; Casaló et al., 2021) and how they impact on followers' engagement (Ballester et al., 2021). Two important gaps in the research into customer engagement behaviours on visuals-based social media can be identified. First, most previous studies examined only user-generated content (Park et al., 2021; Ray and Bala, 2021; Lasmi et al., 2021; Oliveira and Casais, 2018), while the impact of BGC on customer engagement has been less studied (a gap in the BGC research in, specifically, the restaurant sector, seems to exist (Bilro and Loureiro, 2020)). Second, most relevant research into visual content has examined feature and density complexity (Overgoor et al., 2022), message attributes (Zhang and Su, 2022) and message modality (Rietveld et al., 2020), while customers' perceptions of brand content have been overlooked. The relationship between BGC and followers' engagement behaviours is, today, one of the top trending subjects (Yaris and Aykil, 2022), as customer engagement behaviours have been shown to drive financial returns (Beckers et al., 2018). The present study assesses whether behavioural brand engagement on SNSs affects the benefits companies receive both online (positive WOM) and offline (visit intentions); it also analyses the antecedents of behavioural brand engagement on SNSs from the perspective of the attributes of brand-generated content (originality and enjoyment).

In addition, the moderating effect of followers' attitudes towards informal communication styles featuring emojis are analysed. In the current digital market scenario, emojis are gaining popularity and have become well-regarded communication tools (Arya et al., 2018). As emojis are visual elements, they are a good fit for SNSs strongly reliant on visual material, for example, Instagram. Although emojis have proliferated, in the marketing field little research has taken place into the phenomenon. The few studies that have addressed emojis can be classified into three research lines: 1) the use brands make of emojis (e.g., Das et al., 2019); 2) how customers use emojis (e.g., Derks et al., 2018), and 3) types of emojis and their emotional effects on customers/readers (e.g., Novak et al., 2015). In short, previous research has focused essentially on the use of emojis versus non-use of emojis in communication contexts (Wang et al., 2023), and not specifically on customers' attitudes towards the use of emojis.

Past research has shown that the user's gender influences the way (s)he shares information on social media and makes purchase decisions (Karatsoli and Nathanail, 2020). However, past studies analysing gender differences have mostly compared men and women, highlighting that women spend more time on social media (Twenge and Martin, 2020) and are more likely to recommend products or services that have satisfied them (Li et al., 2011). Consistent with these findings, and that women use Instagram to pursue personal health goals such as healthy eating (Djafarova and Bowes, 2021), and tend to develop closer relationship with brands (Rialti et al., 2017), the aim of this research is to explain female followers' interactions with brand-generated content by eco-friendly restaurants on social media.

To bridge these gaps in the literature about follower-brand relationships, the present research also examines the moderating effect of female Instagram followers' attitudes towards emojis on the influence of the characteristics of brand-generated content on FBE, and on the impact of FBE on their word-of-mouth activities and intentions to visit a specific restaurant. Thus, the study has three aims. First, to assess how perceptions of Instagram followers of the enjoyment and originality of BGC act as drivers of behavioural brand engagement on Instagram. Second, to examine the consumer behaviours (positive WOM and visit intentions) derived by restaurants when consumers increase their behavioural brand engagement with content posted on Instagram. Third, to examine the moderating impact of attitude towards emojis on WOM and visit intentions towards eco-friendly restaurants.

While research into customers' behavioural intentions towards restaurants has been undertaken (e.g., Ryu and Lee, 2017; Konuk, 2019), scant attention has been paid to the importance of brand-generated content for explaining social media followers' behavioural intentions towards eco-friendly restaurants (Ballester et al., 2022). Hence, there is a clear need for a deeper understanding of female followers' engagement with eco-friendly restaurants.

This study aims to identify ways to enhance, in the long-term, the relationships between brands and their followers; our proposal is that restaurant companies can achieve this enhancement by increasing their customers' behavioural brand engagement on their Instagram platforms by posting BGC on their Instagram accounts. The remainder of the study is set out as follows. We first discuss the relevant theoretical background, then we develop the study hypotheses. The data collection and measurement validation processes are then discussed. Finally, we present the study's result, implications for academics and managers, the study's limitations and some possible future research avenues.

2. Literature review

2.1 The S-O-R model

The stimulus-organism-response (S-O-R) model is used in the present study as a conceptual framework to explain followers' reactions to BGC. The model proposes that followers' perceptions of the attributes of BGC influence their behavioural brand engagement on Instagram, and that this FBE affects their online and offline response behaviours. Mehrabian and Russell, (1974), argued that the stimulus (S) is processed by organism (O), and that (O) provokes positive/negative responses (R). In this research we operationalise "stimulus" as the attributes of brand-generated content, "organism" as behavioural brand engagement and the consumer responses as positive WOM and visit intentions. The S-O-R model has been applied in both offline (e.g., Mody et al,, 2017; Olaoke et al., 2020) and online (e.g., Bigne et al., 2020, Casaló et al., 2021) contexts. Previous studies into visuals-based social media, such as Facebook and Instagram, have used the model as a basis from which to examine consumers' responses in the context of brand posts published on social networks (e.g., Islam and Rahman, 2017; Casaló et al., 2021). In the present study the aim is to obtain a more profound understanding of how the S-O-R framework operates when it is applied to Instagram, the largest visuals-based SNS and the moderating effects of attitude to emojis on the S-O-R relationships.

2.2 Behavioural Brand Engagement (Organism)

Customers engage with Instagram brand accounts in various ways (Ho et al., 2022). The visually orientated nature of SNSs, in this case Instagram, makes them ideal places for customers to engage with brands (Romero and Molina 2011). It is known that followers' engagement enhances companies' financial performances: thus, they must understand what causes customers to engage with the material they publish on SNSs (Beckers et al. 2018).

Unsurprisingly, the concept of customer engagement has become a central research topic for both academics and practitioners in the field of online marketing. Previous research has described CE as multi-dimensional (Rather and Hollebeeck, 2021). Specifically, Hollebeek et al. (2014) suggested it has three dimensions, cognitive, emotional and behavioural. In this study, in line with prior customer engagement-based research (Badenes-Roche et al., 2019; Onofrei et al., 2022), we focus on the behavioural perspective. Harmeling et al. (2017) and Shin and Perdue (2022) argued that the best way to assess customer engagement is to measure its behavioural dimension, given that this is the only dimension directly observable (Kumar and Pansari, 2016). However, despite the considerable efforts that have been put into achieving a deeper understanding of customer engagement behaviour, this remains a challenging task (Ho et al., 2022). This study focuses on the behavioural dimension of customer engagement to achieve a richer understanding of its antecedents and consequences.

2.3 The antecedents of Behavioural Brand Engagement (Stimulus)

The intangibility of restaurant services has made social media key for developing brand-customer relationships, which in turn can result in consumer engagement (Meire et al., 2019; Cheng et al., 2021). Restaurant managers recognise that visually focused SNSs, in this case, Instagram, provide valuable touchpoints through which to improve follower-brand relationships; moreover, BGC has been shown to be a key element in the financial performance of brands operating on SNSs (Castillo‑Abdul et al., 2020). In the present study, following Liang et al., (2020), we regard BGC as content that commercial entities publish on the web to promote their goods/services and to persuade their followers to interact with their SNS accounts. BGC positively influences follower engagement (Cheung et al., 2020). In today's social media environment, as consumers have become exposed to a huge range of service alternatives, firms publish BGC to enhance their connections with their followers (Kaur et al., 2020). It has been recognised that all posted material can have important effects, particularly commercial communications (Kim and Kim, 2021). Regarding the attributes of branded content, our research focus is on the perceived enjoyment and originality of material published by commercial entities (Ballester et al., 2021; Casaló et al., 2021; Hwang et al., 2020). The choice of these variables is consistent with previous literature; they have been shown to be two of the most important in the study of social media (Hussein et al., 2021; So et al., 2021).

2.3.1 Perceived enjoyment

The theory of uses and gratifications proposes that customers' motives for using social media can be hedonic, utilitarian and/or social (Cowan et al., 2021). Based on previous studies that argued that visuals-based social networks fulfil their users' hedonic gratifications (Triantafillidou and Siomkos, 2018), the present study analyses the hedonic gratification that followers derive from interacting with a brand's Instagram account. In this research we regard hedonic gratifications as similar to perceived enjoyment. In line with Van der Heijden (2004), we regard perceived enjoyment as the amount of entertainment a system provides its users. Prior literature has argued that perceived enjoyment is crucial in the development of customer-brand relationships in social media (Casaló et al., 2017). Perceived enjoyment, in the context of this research, is understood as the fun/relaxation followers obtain from the brand-generated content that an eco-friendly restaurant publishes on its Instagram account (Seol et al., 2016). Visuals-based SNSs are potent web-based tools able to help companies increase their consumers' enjoyment (Muntinga et al., 2011). Sogo (2013) showed that brands can increase how often their followers' use their accounts by providing them with enjoyable experiences. In this respect, enjoyable brand posts are valuable because they increase followers' involvement with their content (Rehnen et al., 2017). Similarly, Cheung et al. (2020) argued that enjoyable experiences create a sense of customer-brand intimacy. Thus, by providing enjoyable brand content, companies can influence their

followers' brand preferences and improve long-term brand-follower relations (Ilich et al., 2020). Thus, we propose the following:

> **H1:** *The perceived enjoyment that consumers derive from the BGC that a restaurant posts on its Instagram account positively affects their behavioural brand engagement.*

2.3.2 Perceived originality

Traditionally, brands try to differentiate themselves, and connect with their customers, by publishing original ads. Indeed, originality is a fundamental component of advertising. Due to the high competition in the restaurant sector, differentiating oneself from one's competitors is important, and original ads have been shown to contribute in this regard (Rosengren et al., 2020). Extensive research about the effects of originality has demonstrated its importance; however, its subjective nature means that perceptions of originality can vary greatly depending on the context (Rosengren et al., 2020). Thus, and taking account of the increasing importance of brand-generated content as a communication tool in tourism and hospitality, a deeper understanding of what followers perceive to be original is needed. Casaló et al., (2020) proposed that perceived originality is the extent to which material published on SNSs is seen by their audiences as innovative, sophisticated and unusual. Mundambi and Schuff (2010) highlighted that, in the social media context, followers expect original content. Previous marketing research has found that the perceived originality of online content improves follower responses, for example, through increased satisfaction (Casaló et al., 2017), closer brand-customer ties (Mohsen et al., 2018) and positive consumer responses (Mazerant et al., 2021). Moreover, Feng and Xie (2019) noted that originality is a primary driver of audiences' perceptions of ad creativity, which is highly related to customer engagement (Ashley and Tuten, 2015). Thus, bearing in mind that originality increases the element of surprise, and that consumers will, consequently, be more willing to follow a brand, and the online material it posts, a logical conclusion is that producing original content will have a positive effect on behavioural brand engagement on Instagram. Therefore:

> **H2**: *The perceived originality of the BGC that a restaurant posts on its Instagram account has a positive effect on behavioural brand engagement.*

2.4 Impact of Behavioural Brand Engagement on customer outcomes (Response)

2.4.1 Behavioural Brand Engagement and positive WOM

In the present study, following Harrison-Walker (2001, p.63), we define WOM as "informal, person-to-person communication between a perceived non-commercial communicator and a receiver regarding a brand, a product, an organization, or a service". This study focus on positive word of mouth. We understand positive WOM to be followers' recommendations for an eco-friendly restaurant, made to others. Past research has reported that spreading positive WOM enables companies to acquire new customers. Therefore, identifying the antecedents of followers´ WOM towards eco-friendly restaurants is imperative if restaurateurs want to achieve competitive success in this growing and competitive market. The WOM-focused literature has tended to analyse the causes and consequences of engaging in WOM. While some WOM-focused studies have argued that brand engagement motivates consumer to engage in WOM (e.g., Vivek et al., 2012; Kanje et al., 2020; Naumann et al., 2020), other studies have argued that WOM has an impact on customer brand engagement (Al-Htibat and Garanti, 2019; Know et al., 2022). In the present study, we propose that SNS followers who are engaged with brands tend to share their experiences with others online. Thus, in line with Kanje et al. (2020) and Beckers et al. (2018), it is postulated that customer brand engagement is linked to better outcomes, for example, positive WOM. On the basis of these points, we propose:

H3: *Behavioural brand engagement encourages consumers to engage in positive WOM.*

2.4.2 Behavioural Brand Engagement and visit intentions

In today's increasing competitive restaurant sector, characterised by a huge number of options, visit intentions have emerged as an increasingly important concept, and have been described as a critical challenge for tourism companies (Moliner et al., 2018). Restaurant industry clients have different underlying reasons for their visit intentions (Huifeng and Ha, 2021). Previous hospitality-focused research has demonstrated that an effective way to trigger customers' behavioural intentions (e.g., commitment, loyalty and visit intentions) is by engaging with them in an online context (Cheng et al., 2021). When customers engage with brands in social media it increases their knowledge (Hernández-Lara and Serradell-López, 2018): SM are, today, among the main information sources drawn on by their audiences/users, and have been shown to shape their behavioural intentions. (Bai et al., 2019). Previous research has indicated that favourable SNS experiences are important drivers of tourists' intentions to travel to a destination (Boley et al., 2018), and increase purchase intentions (Chang and Hsu, 2022). Due to its interactive nature, behavioural brand engagement generates follower-brand links, which followers might want to continue with in later days (Dwivedi, 2015), through recommendations and visit intentions (Vivek et al., 2012). Therefore, in line with Alnsour and Al Faour (2020), who showed that brand community engagement evoked through social media significantly increases visit intentions, we propose that intention to visit a restaurant can be strengthened by behavioural brand engagement in Instagram.

H4: *Behavioural Brand engagement prompts consumers to develop positive visit intentions.*

2.4.3 Positive WOM and visit intentions

WOM prompts customer responses (including purchase intentions), which can help to differentiate brands and enhance competitive advantage (See-To and Ho, 2014). Putri and Agus, (2019), in a significant study, showed that WOM increases purchase intentions. Prior tourism-focused research has proposed that web-based destination brand experiences can have a positive effect on tourists' intentions to recommend and visit destinations (Jiménez-Barreto et al., 2020). In particular, WOM has been found to be highly influential in restaurant selection (Wang et al., 2021). Therefore, we expect that when an Instagram follower invests time in recommending a restaurant, (s)he will be more likely to visit the restaurant. Thus, we propose:

H5: *Positive WOM positively affects consumers' visit intentions.*

2.5 Moderating effect of consumers' attitudes towards emojis

Unlike traditional communications channels, social media allow brands to adopt an informal communication style, which makes the audience perceive the messages transmitted to be friendlier (McShane et al., 2021). In a time where social networks are highly pervasive in our daily lives, brands develop new ways to interact with their customers. Popular among these are emojis (McShane et al., 2021). In this study, we consider emojis to be pictorial representations of facial expressions, animals or objects used in online communications (Bai et al., 2019).

The emotion as social information (EASI) model (Van Kleef, 2009) has been applied to analyse the use of emojis in digital marketing communications. The premise of the EASI model is that expressions of emotions provide information to customers that can influence their behaviours (Van Kleef, 2009). Several studies have shown that using emojis in messages enriches the communication

between sender and recipient (McShane et al., 2021), and that the recipients, in consequence, better understand the meaning of the posts (Park et al., 2013). In particular, emojis have become valuable SNS-based signals for the service sector (e.g., restaurants), given that choosing a restaurant is a hedonic behaviour (Li et al., 2019). Smith and Rose (2020) demonstrated that service brands use emojis tactically to create warmth and add an emotional tone to their communications, and to reduce ambiguity (Kaye et al., 2016). While the vast majority of the results of earlier studies have provided strong evidence that emojis add value, some authors have shown that the use of emojis is not always perceived as appropriate (Cavalheiro et al., 2022). However, we have found no empirical evidence in the academic literature about the influence of followers' attitudes towards emojis on the relationships between antecedents and consequences of behavioural brand engagement. To bridge these research gaps, the following RQ is posed:

> **RQ1:** *Does behavioural brand engagement formation and its effects differ between followers who have a positive attitude towards emojis and those who have a negative attitude?*

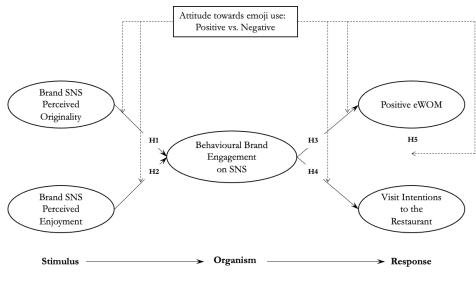The conceptual framework used in this work is shown at Figure 1.

Figure 1. **Model Research**

Source: Authors

3. Methods

This section describes the work's data collection and methodological approach. The aim is to examine the moderating effects of female Instagram followers' attitudes towards emojis on the influence of BGC characteristics on FBE, and on the impact of FBE on their word-of-mouth activities and intentions to visit a specific restaurant.

3.1 Research design

The data used to conduct this research were gathered via an online questionnaire. We collaborated with the account manager of an eco-friendly restaurant located in Madrid (Spain) to ensure that the respondents were followers of its Instagram account. We focused on this restaurant because: (a) collaborating with a well-known restaurant allowed us to measure the research variables using a

sample of real customers; b) it has an active official Instagram account with a large and increasing number of followers (144,000, March 2023); c) the followers are mostly young women. While it is recognised that data gathered from an individual example is limited, in that it is difficult to replicate the relevant results, this approach allowed us to undertake a thorough analysis (Sørensen et al., 2020). Previous studies examining SM in the context of restaurant services have analysed individual cases: Opazo (2012) used data gathered about the El Bulli restaurant to examine the antecedents of innovative behaviours; Sørensen et al., (2020) examined experience value creation in the context of a themed establishment; Royo-Vela and Camassima (2011) drew on data gathered from the Zara Facebook page to assess viewers' participation (active and passive) in its online community; and Murillo et al. (2020) drew on data gathered about a Veepee firm to examine WOM behaviours in the context of branded mobile apps. Thus, following the lead of these studies we focused on an eco-friendly restaurant. A result of the increasing enthusiasm among customers for organic products has created an eco-friendly movement in the restaurant industry (Rodríguez – López, 2020). It is known that people are becoming gradually more interested in eating healthily, and green restaurants are very active on Instagram, spreading and emphasising their commitment to organic, locally produced, ecologic food.

The first step in the data gathering was to insert, for a period of 7 days (April 2021), a link to the survey on the establishment's Instagram account. Females tend to attach more importance to the use of Instagram (Herzallah et al., 2022), to follow healthier eating practices (Shin and Mattila 2019), choose healthier food (Ree et al., 2008) and place more emphasis on recommendations made about diet (Fagerli and Wandel, 1999). The selection of a sample of women is also congruent with emoji use. Previous authors have identified gender differences in terms of frequency of use of emojis (Prada et al., 2018), the context of the use of emojis (Chen et al., 2018) and perceptions of the use of emojis (Rodriguez-Hidalgo et al., 2017). Regarding frequency of use, Bai et al. (2019), following Prada et al. (2018), showed that women use emojis more frequently than men. In this study, we propose that BGC is a crucial communication tool and analyse how emojis are employed in BGC to enrich customer-brand relationships. This eco-friendly restaurant includes text and emojis in all its posts; the most common use of the emojis is to capture the feelings of the consumers about the food and the overall restaurant experience.

A total of 521 valid questionnaire were obtained. The sample profile shows that 93.70% of the respondents were women. This result is consistent with the fact that Instagram-based followers of the eco-friendly restaurant are mostly young women, which is reflected also in the backgrounds of followers of similar restaurants. Therefore, the final sample consisted of 491 women followers of the brand on Instagram, with a sampling error of 4.5. Nonetheless, to ensure that the sample was sufficiently large, we followed the recommendations of Soper (2022). Assuming an effect size of 0.30, a significance level of 5%, a statistical power of 80% and, on the basis that five constructs were analysed, the statistical software indicated that the minimum number of participants necessary to test the proposed model was 200. Thus, the sample is sufficiently large. The highest proportion were 24 years and younger (n=229, 46.6%), the next being in the age range 25 to 34 (n=210, 42.8%); the others were 35 years and above (n=52, 10.6%). They were generally omnivores (n=347, 70.7%), but 20.2% were vegetarians and 4.7% were vegans. A total of 68.22% had visited the establishment in the past (n =333, 67.8%), and 88.19% claimed to have high Instagram use experience.

3.2 Measurement

To measure the concepts we used scales previously employed in the academic literature. The questionnaire contained 4 sections. Section 1 includes questions regarding Instagram use (i.e., Instagram experience and attitude towards emojis). We measured followers' attitudes towards emojis following Huang et al. (2008), using the statements: "In my comments and the title of my Instagram posts I use many emojis to express my feelings or emotions"; "I like when my friends use emojis in

their comments to express their feelings or emotions"; and "I like when brands use emojis in the titles of their posts to convey feelings or emotions". In section 2 and 3 we measured the proposed variables. Specifically, followers' perceptions about the enjoyment and originality of the restaurant's BGC were measured by adapting Nambisan and Baron's (2007) and Moldovan et al.'s (2011) scales, respectively. Hollebeek et al.'s (2014) scale was used to assess behavioural brand engagement. As to follower-brand behavioural outcomes, we measured positive WOM following Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) and Zeithaml et al. (1996), and visit intentions by adapting the scales of Zabkar et al. (2010) and Huang and Hsu (2009). Finally, section 4 included sociodemographic information (e.g., age, type of diet and how often the respondents visited the restaurant). Table 1 lists the items, measured using seven-point Likert-type response formats, where 1 is "strongly disagree" and 7 is "strongly agree", employed in this research.

Table 1. **Measurement Scales**

Items	Mean	SD	Skew	Kurtosis
Perceived Enjoyment (Nambisan and Baron, 2007)	5.51	1.07	-0.61	1.09
Visiting X Instagram account is funny and pleasant.				
Visiting X Instagram account entertains me and stimulates my mind.				
I have great enjoyment when visiting X Instagram account.				
Perceived Originality (Moldovan et al., 2011)	5.51	1.18	-0.96	1.86
Publications on X Instagram account are original.				
Publications on X Instagram account are innovative.				
Publications on X Instagram account are creative.				
Followers' Behavioural Brand Engagement (Hollebeek et al., 2014)	4.79	1.38	-0.37	0.04
X Instagram account is one of the brands I usually use when I use restaurant Instagram accounts				
I spend a lot of time using X Instagram account, compared to other restaurants' Instagram accounts.				
Whenever I'm using restaurant Instagram accounts, I usually use X Instagram account.				
Positive WOM (Caroll and Ahuvia, 2006; Zeithaml et al., 1996)	5.68	1.37	-1.26	2.07
I have recommended X to lots of people.				
I 'talk up' X to my friends.				
I try to spread the good word about X.				
Visit Intentions to the restaurant (Zabkar et al., 2010; Huang and Hsu, 2009)	5.72	1.27	-1.00	1.20
If had to decide again I would choose X again.				
I will more frequently visit X.				
X would be my first restaurant choice over other restaurants.				
Notes: X = Superchulo eco-friendly restaurant; SD = standard deviation				

Source: Authors

4. Results

4.1 Validation of the measurement scales

The first step taken was to confirm the reliability of the scale measuring attitude towards emojis (Cronbach's alpha value 0.85); thereafter, we constructed a summed scale to classify customers into two segments. We considered followers with positive attitudes towards emojis on Instagram as those with a mean value equal to, or above, 5 (n = 278), and followers with negative attitudes towards emojis as having a value below 5 (n = 213). Next, we addressed reliability and validity through a confirmatory factor analysis (using the proposed multi-item constructs), using AMOS 28.0 software. The results of the analysis confirmed that the two samples had very satisfactory fit. In the sample of followers with

positive attitudes towards the use of emojis, the relationship X^2/df was 1.738, close to the maximum threshold of 2 recommended by Bentler (1989). The CFI value was 0.971, higher than the minimum 0.9 recommended by Bentler (1989). The RMSEA value was 0.052, lower than the maximum of 0.08 suggested by Bollen and Long (1993). In the sample of followers with negative attitudes towards the use of emojis, the values obtained also conformed to the limits suggested in the academic literature (X^2/df = 1.817, CFI = 0.966 and RMSEA = 0.062). Tables 2 and 3 confirm, for the two samples, the reliability/validity of the results obtained. The measures of reliability, Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (CR), exceeded the 0.70 threshold. The AVE values are 0.5, or over. As all the parameters are statistically significant, it can be concluded that the scale items have acceptable convergent validity. The results also confirmed the discriminant validity of the samples. Table 4 shows that the square roots of the AVEs exceed the correlations between the constructs.

Table 2. **Analysis of reliability and validity of measurement scales for followers with positive attitude towards emojis use.**

Variables	L_i	E_i	Reliability		Validity	
			Cronbach's alpha	Composite Reliability	Average variance extracted	Convergent validity
Perceived Enjoyment			0.85	0.84	0.63	
PE1	0.83	0.32				t = 14.16***
PE2	0.75	0.44				t = 12.80***
PE3	0.83	0.35				-
Perceived Originality			0.79	0.81	0.59	
PO1	0.73	0.47				t = 12.16***
PO2	0.74	0.45				t = 13.38***
PO3	0.83	0.31				-
Followers' Behavioural Brand Engagement			0.77	0.82	0.60	
FBE1	0.78	0.40				t = 9.86***
FBE2	0.73	0.47				t = 9.57***
FBE3	0.82	0.33				-
Positive WOM			0.92	0.92	0.80	
WOM1	0.91	0.17				-
WOM2	0.87	0.24				t = 21.30***
WOM3	0.89	0.20				t = 22.31***
Visit Intentions to the Restaurant			0.83	0.81	0.59	
VI1	0.77	0.41				-
VI2	0.75	0.44				t = 11.01***
VI3	0.78	0.39				t = 11.64***

Notes: *Significance level: ***p < 0.01.*

L_i: Standardised loading; E_i = (1- R²): error variance; CR=$\frac{(\Sigma L_i)^2}{(\Sigma L_i)^2 + \Sigma\,var\,(E_i)}$; AVE=$\frac{\Sigma L^2}{\Sigma L + \Sigma\,var\,(E)}$.

Source: Authors

Table 3. **Analysis of reliability and validity of measurement scales for followers with negative attitude towards emojis use.**

Variables	L_i	E_i	Reliability		Validity	
			Cronbach's alpha	Composite Reliability	Average variance extracted	Convergent validity
Perceived Enjoyment			0.90	0.89	0.73	
PE1	0.87	0.24				t = 15.76***
PE2	0.84	0.30				t = 14.96***
PE3	0.86	0.26				-

Perceived Originality			0.83	0.86	0.68	
PO1	0.85	0.28				t = 14.03***
PO2	0.78	0.39				t = 12.62***
PO3	0.84	0.30				-
Followers' Behavioural Brand Engagement			0.85	0.88	0.71	
FBE1	0.86	0.26				t = 10.46***
FBE2	0.63	0.60				t = 6.791***
FBE3	0.96	0.08				-
Positive WOM			0.95	0.95	0.86	
WOM1	0.97	0.06				-
WOM2	0.85	0.27				t = 21.09***
WOM3	0.95	0.09				t = 31.27***
Visit Intentions to the Restaurant			0.88	0.86	0.67	
VI1	0.81	0.34				-
VI2	0.81	0.35				t = 11.45***
VI3	0.84	0.29				t = 12.09***

Notes: *Significance level: ***p < 0.01.*

L_i: Standardised loading; $E_i = (1- R^2)$: error variance; CR=$\frac{(\Sigma L_i)^2}{(\Sigma L_i)^2 + \Sigma\ var\ (E_i)}$; AVE=$\frac{\Sigma L^2}{\Sigma L + \Sigma\ var\ (E)}$.

Source: Authors

Table 4. **Analysis of discriminant validity.**

	Attitude towards emoji use	PE	PO	FBE	WOM	VI
PE	positive	**0.80**	0.73***	0.60***	0.57***	0.66***
	negative	**0.86**	0.74***	0.49***	0.46***	0.70***
PO	positive		**0.77**	0.60***	0.55***	0.56***
	negative		**0.82**	0.49***	0.34***	0.69***
FBE	positive			**0.78**	0.47***	0.55***
	negative			**0.84**	0.42***	0.53***
WOM	positive				**0.90**	0.76***
	negative				**0.93**	0.58***
VI	positive					**0.77**
	negative					**0.82**

Notes: The square roots of the AVEs of each construct are on the diagonal, in bold, and correlations between pairs of constructs are above the diagonal; Significance Level [***]p = <0.001.

Source: Authors

4.2 Structural equations modelling

A covariance-based structural equation modelling (CB-SEM) approach was used (via AMOS 28.0 software) to assess the measurement properties and test the proposed conceptual model. CB-SEM is appropriate for this study because the proposed model focuses on theory testing and confirmation using a large sample size (One and Puteh, 2017). We first estimated the model (without moderating effects) using structural equations modelling (H6). Goodness of fit was seen to be acceptable (X^2 = 273.177; df = 82; X^2/df = 3.331; CFI = 0.961; RMSEA = 0.069), and all the proposed hypotheses were confirmed. Thereafter, a multigroup structural analysis was undertaken (for the two groups) to identify moderating effects. Table 5 displays the groups' standardised structural parameters and the critical ratios of the between-groups differences in terms of attitude (positive and negative) towards using emojis. Attitudes towards emojis moderated the effects of behavioural brand engagement on visit intentions to the restaurant, directly, and indirectly through positive WOM (H6 supported). The remainder of the hypotheses were also tested (H1 to H5 supported).

Table 5. **Results of the multigroup analysis**

Model Relationships	Positive attitude towards emoji use (standardised coefficients)	Negative attitude towards emoji use (standardised coefficients)	Critical Ratio
H1: PE → FBE	0.38***	0.36**	-0.40
H2: PO → FBE	0.40***	0.35**	-0.71
H3: FBE → WOM	0.54***	0.52***	0.67
H4: FBE → VI	0.30***	0.54***	2.36**
H5: WOM → VI	0.60***	0.29***	- 3.21***

Notes: Significance level: ***p = <0.001; **p = <0.01; Critical ratio for the differences between parameters. *t*=1.96 for **p<0.05 and *t*=2.58 for ***p<0.01.

Source: Authors

The results obtained from the tests of the hypotheses (Figure 2) of the proposed model showed that, for the two groups, BGC published on Instagram strongly influences followers' behavioural brand engagement. Perceived enjoyment had a positive effect on FBE, supporting H1 (0.38 in followers with positive attitudes towards emojis vs 0.36 in followers with negative attitudes towards emojis) and the perceived originality of the BGC had a positive impact on FBE, being H2 supported (0.40 positive attitudes towards emojis vs 0.35 negative attitudes towards emojis). No significant between-groups differences were observed in behavioural brand engagement formation.

Second, behavioural brand engagement was seen to significantly impact on positive WOM, supporting H3 (0.54 positive attitudes towards emojis vs 0.52 negative attitudes towards emojis - similar intensity for both groups), and on visit intentions, H4 supported (0.30 positive attitudes towards emojis vs 0.54 negative attitudes towards emojis; in this case, it had a significantly higher effect on the negative attitude group). Third, the effect of positive WOM on visit intentions was also significant for both groups, being H5 supported (0.60 positive attitudes towards emojis vs 0.29 negative attitudes towards emojis; in this case, it had a considerably higher effect on the positive attitude group).

The study results, therefore, demonstrated that followers' attitudes towards emojis significantly moderated the impact of FBE on their intentions to go to the establishment (RQ1), directly and indirectly. Specifically, the direct effect of behavioural brand engagement on visit intentions was significantly higher among followers with negative attitudes towards emojis (0.30 positive attitude vs. 0.54 negative attitude), and the indirect effect, through positive WOM, was significantly higher among followers with positive attitudes towards emojis (0.32 positive attitude vs. 0.15 negative attitude), due to the higher effect of positive WOM on the visit intentions of followers with positive attitudes towards emojis (0.60 positive attitude vs 0.29 negative attitude). Therefore, the results showed that followers' perceptions of the characteristics' of posts influenced behavioural brand engagement (the intensity of the effect was the same for both groups, that is, with positive and negative attitudes towards emojis). In addition, it was found that behavioural brand engagement influences consumers behavioural outcomes in terms of both the brand's Instagram account and the restaurant, with significant differences being seen between followers with positive and negative attitudes towards the use of emojis; for the positive attitude group the effect of behavioural brand engagement on visit intentions operates both directly, and indirectly through WOM, with similar intensity (0.30 direct, and 0.32 indirect), but for the negative group the effect of behavioural brand engagement on visit intentions was mainly direct (0.54 direct, and 0.15 indirect).
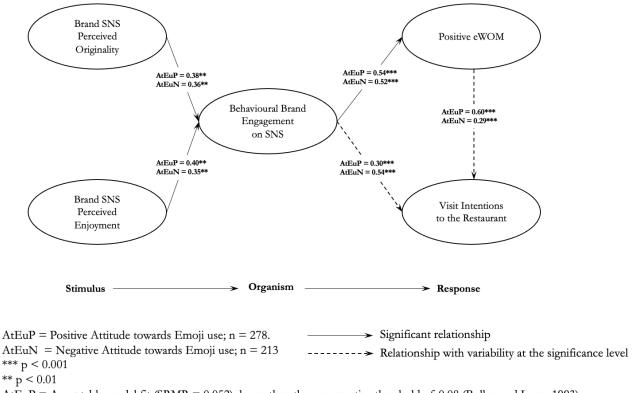
Finally, the variables explained a significant proportion of the variance in both samples. Specifically, the variance explained for visit intentions was $R^2 = 0.64$ among followers with positive attitudes towards the use of emojis, and $R^2 = 0.54$ among followers with negative attitudes towards the use of emojis, and the variance explained for behavioural brand engagement was $R^2 = 0.51$ among followers with positive attitudes, and $R^2 = 0.44$ among followers with negative attitudes.

Figure 2. **Multigroup Model**

AtEuP = Positive Attitude towards Emoji use; n = 278.
AtEuN = Negative Attitude towards Emoji use; n = 213
*** p < 0.001
** p < 0.01
AtEuP = Acceptable model fit (SRMR = 0.052), lower than the conservative threshold of 0.08 (Bollen and Long, 1993).
AtEuN = Acceptable model fit (SRMR = 0.022), lower than the conservative threshold of 0.08 (Bollen and Long, 1993).

Source: Authors

5. Discussion

The present study, grounded on the S-O-R model, proposes that long-term relationships between followers and brands can be enhanced by the increased FBE evoked when brands post BGC on their Instagram accounts. We have distilled four main findings from the research. First, a key contribution made by the study is the support it gives to the role played by BGC as an antecedent of FBE. It was found that perceived enjoyment and originality directly affect FBE. Thus, when followers experience enjoyable and original brand content their behavioural engagement with brands on Instagram increases. This reinforces the notion that originality and enjoyment are both related to strong behavioural engagement. This outcome supports prior research that proposed that original/enjoyable material posted on the Instagram platform creates stronger brand-follower links (Mohsen et al., 2018), longer-term brand-follower links (Ilich et al., 2020) and increases customer-brand engagement (Ballester et al., 2021).

Second, the study revealed the importance of FBE in terms of followers' behavioural intentions. On the one hand, behavioural brand engagement increased followers´ visit intentions. This finding is in line with previous research that demonstrated that positive experiences enjoyed by consumers on SNSs are important predictors of their intentions to go to a company´s physical store (Boley et al., 2018). On the other hand, FBE increases consumers' diffusion of positive WOM, supporting the proposal made by Beckers et al. (2018) that Instagram-based behavioural brand engagement is linked to performance outcomes, that is, brand recommendations.

Third, we found that positive WOM posted by followers strongly influences other followers´ visit intentions towards the restaurant; thus, it appears that direct WOM reinforces behavioural intentions (Tien et al., 2019) and has a positive effect on purchase intentions (Putri and Agus, 2019). These results demonstrate the importance of WOM in restaurant selection (Wang et al., 2021). Belanche et al. (2020) demonstrated that consumers' intentions to engage positively with a brand's Instagram account were reinforced by consuming information on the account.

Last, the research showed that followers' attitudes towards emojis directly moderate the relationship between FBE and visit intentions, and indirectly through positive WOM. Behaviourally engaged followers who held positive attitudes towards emojis (vs negative attitude towards emojis) developed higher visit intentions to the restaurant through positive WOM. Nonetheless, it was seen that behavioural brand engagement had a stronger direct effect on intentions to visit the restaurant among followers with negative attitudes towards emojis. Therefore, WOM had a greater effect on intention to visit the restaurant among engaged followers with positive attitudes towards emojis (vs negative attitudes towards emojis). Instagram allows the posting of emojis and, therefore, its users are particularly adapted to this style of communication. In summary, consumers' attitudes towards emojis were shown to have a moderating effect on the impact of Instagram-based behavioural brand engagement on visit intentions to the restaurant. An underlying reason for this result, achieved in an examination of an eco-friendly restaurant, may be that organic food experiences have high hedonic value; as previous authors have noted, communicating through emojis creates higher positive affect when the hedonic value of the product/service experience is high (Das et al., 2019).

6. Conclusion

A strong brand-follower relationship is essential for the economic well-being of eco-friendly restaurants. In this regard, restaurant Instagram accounts can play a critical role. This study explores the effects of BGC attributes on FBE, which in turn affects customers' online and offline behaviours. Posting original and enjoyable content increases followers' behavioural engagement. Enhanced FBE drives positive WOM and visit intentions, increasing restaurants' profitability. The present research also addresses the moderating effect of followers' attitudes towards emoji use. The results showed that the effect of WOM on offline behaviours, such as visit intentions, is stronger for followers with a positive attitude towards emojis. In other words, visual content, including emojis, might significantly impact on the follower-brand long-term relationship.

The present study has theoretical and practical implications, that may interest academics and practitioners. As for the theoretical implications, this study can provide new insights for scholars into the S–O-R model applied to BGC in Instagram within the eco-friendly restaurant industry. The results of this study can be applied to three main theoretical streams. Unlike previous studies into behavioural brand engagement (i.e., Barari et al., 2021; Shin and Perdue, 2022), the present research showed that customers' perceptions of BGC fosters follower-brand behavioural engagement; in particular, we explore the effects of perceived enjoyment and originality (stimulus), which contributes to the recent literature on behavioural brand engagement (Kumar, 2023). It is also an interesting finding that the effects of follower-brand behavioural engagement (organism) are not limited to online customer responses, as they were seen also to influence offline behaviour. Moreover, the results of this study showed that the relationships between outcomes of behavioural engagement can be mutually supportive, as WOM reinforces visit intentions. In line with the social information model (EASI), we expected and observed that followers' attitudes towards emojis moderated the relationships between behavioural brand engagement and follower-brand behavioural outcomes in terms of both the brand's Instagram account and the restaurant. For followers with positive attitudes towards the use of emojis, the effect of behavioural brand engagement on visit intentions operates both directly, and indirectly

through WOM; for followers with negative attitudes towards the use of emojis, the effect of behavioural brand engagement on visit intentions is mainly direct. This may be because consumers regard eco-friendly restaurants as highly hedonic (emojis elicit greater positive affect with highly hedonic experiences) (Das et al., 2019).

Among the managerial implications of this study are the insights it provides into the proper management of official brand Instagram accounts in terms of the characteristics of BGC, and its highlighting of the importance of emoji use by brands in a broad communication channel, in this case, Instagram. First, our findings underlined the impact of the originality and enjoyment of BGC on behavioural brand engagement, which in turn drives follower-brand behavioural outcomes. Followers' perceptions of the originality and enjoyment of a post's BGC, among other aspects, form their experience of the brand's Instagram account, and that overall experience influences their behavioural brand engagement; firms are recommended to post material that encourages followers to engage with their brands. The Instagram platform has a visuals/aesthetic focus, so companies should post visuals-based materials to enhance their followers' belief in the originality/enjoyment of the published content. This study shows that, if followers perceive brand content to be enjoyable and original, their engagement with the brand increases, which improves follower-brand behavioural outcomes. Our first recommendation for restaurant managers is, thus, to upload photos with backgrounds and settings that will enrich their followers' views of the enjoyment/originality of the material they publish. Restaurant managers should devise social media strategies that display their products in an original way (e.g., showing the food's ingredients in the photo, including a photo carrousel which sets out how to follow recipes, step by step), and use personalisation to generate pleasure and surprise. Restaurants should focus on influencing females' attitudes towards visiting restaurants through Instagram, because they use SNSs to take decisions. Second, the findings indicated that using an informal communication style, that is, emojis, can reinforce the relationship between behavioural brand engagement and followers' behavioural outcomes. Brands should embrace emojis as a key part of their tactical communications. In initial steps towards confirming the value of emojis in brand communications, these findings show that emojis can help transmit the brand's messages. An effective approach would be to include emojis that relate to ingredients, emotions and places; this approach might convey emotions/meanings that will foster online company-follower social interactions. Overall, it is suggested that image content plays a key role, not only in the photos that eco-friendly restaurants post, but also in the text provided, because emojis are a pictorial representation of the general message.

This study has limitations. First, we examined only Instagram. The great majority of research focuses on single SNSs (Santiago et al., 2022), and this study follows this line. As BGC is prominent on other platforms, future research might replicate the study with other types of SNS (i.e., Facebook, Pinterest, TikTok). Second, as people are gradually showing more interest in eating healthily (Rodriguez-Lopez, 2020), we focused on an eco-friendly restaurant. However future studies might investigate whether differences arise based on food type and restaurant type (family style, bistro, fine dining). Third, the followers are mostly female. Further examinations might analyse more balanced samples; this approach might help in an assessment about whether gender affects consumers' perceptions, emotions and behaviours, and provide more scope to generalise the results. Similarly, this research focuses on emojis in general. Future research might assess how particular emojis, for example, facial expressions, food ingredients and flags, affect outcomes.

Acknowledgment

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