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Food influencers on Instagram: Unveiling the pathways to customer inspiration, perceived value, and eWOM

Blend Ibrahim ^{a,b,c}, Fatih Çelik ^d, Erose Sthapit ^{e,f} and Nripendra P. Rana ^{g,h,i}

^aDepartment of Tourism Management, Faculty of Tourism, Balikesir University, Balikesir, Türkiye; ^bApplied Science Research Center, Applied Science Private University, Amman, Jordan; ^cUniversity-Business Relations Research and Application Center, Istanbul Ticaret University, Istanbul, Türkiye; ^dDepartment of Marketing and Advertising, Trabzon University, Trabzon, Türkiye; ^eDepartment of Marketing, International Business and Tourism, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, UK; ^fSchool of Hospitality and Tourism Management, Sunway University, Selangor, Malaysia; ^gQueen's Business School, Queen's University Belfast, Belfast, UK; ^hHumanities and Social Sciences Research Center (HSSRC), Deanship of Scientific Research, Imam Mohammad Ibn Saud Islamic University (IMSIU), Riyadh, Saudi Arabia; ⁱSchool of Business, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Kollam, Kerala, India

ABSTRACT

This study employs the uses and gratifications theory (UGT) and the stimulus-organism-response (SOR) model to examine the influence of interacting with food influencers' Instagram pages on customer inspiration, perceived value (PV), and electronic word of mouth (eWOM). The study also examines how Instagram interaction enhances eWOM through the mediation roles of customer inspiration and PV, including the moderating role of gender in the relationship between Instagram interaction and two consumer outcomes (customer inspiration and PV). Data were collected from 381 participants (Generation Z) who actively follow food influencers' Instagram accounts in Jordan. The results indicate a significant positive relationship between Instagram interaction and customer inspiration, PV, and eWOM. In addition, customer inspiration mediates the effects of Instagram interaction on eWOM. The impact of gender on the relationship between Instagram interaction and PV is insignificant. In contrast, the moderating effect of gender on the relationship between Instagram interaction and customer inspiration is significant.

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Instagram interaction; food influencers; customer inspiration; perceived value; electronic word of mouth (eWOM); hospitality marketing

1. Introduction

In January 2023, food review influencer and TikToker Keith Lee shared a positive review of Frankensons Pizzeria in Las Vegas with his followers. The video quickly went viral, gaining over 31 million views. This led to a notable increase in the number of customers at the restaurant, particularly for their lemon pepper wings, which surpassed their sales from the previous four months in just two days (Cheong 2023). This story is a powerful example of the immense influence social media platforms (SMPs) and food influencers can wield in inspiring customers to dine out (Ibrahim, Hazzam et al. 2025; Sheng, Yang, and Feng 2020). As exemplified above, these manifestations of consumer inspiration are closely linked to

CONTACT Blend Ibrahim  blendreve@gmail.com  Department of Tourism Management, Faculty of Tourism, Balikesir University, Balikesir, Türkiye

post elements that trigger social engagement and interaction (Ki, Park, and Kim 2022; He, Liu, and Li 2023; Song et al. 2024). These actions have prompted researchers, including Böttger et al. (2017), to advocate for a deeper examination of this phenomenon and its contributing factors. Customer inspiration refers to a temporary motivational state in a customer that helps transition from receiving a marketing-induced idea to the inherent pursuit of consumption-related activities (He, Liu, and Li 2023).

The customer inspiration concept lies at the core of marketing strategies to strengthen the relationship between consumers and brands (Böttger et al. 2017; Oltra, Camarero, and San José Cabezudo 2022). Consumers' perception of inspiration is a context-specific phenomenon that can differ from one context to another (Ki, Park, and Kim 2022). Therefore, marketing scholars aim to deepen their understanding of how customer inspiration is shaped and developed (Kwon and Boger 2021; Oltra, Camarero, and San José Cabezudo 2022). While hospitality marketing studies have not fully explored the concept of inspiration in the context of social media, understanding its influence on tourists' decisions is crucial, particularly concerning dining experiences (Dai, Wang, and Kirillova 2022; Oltra, Camarero, and San José Cabezudo 2022). In the hospitality marketing field, studies on inspiration have primarily been examined in the context of travel (Khoi, Phong, and Le 2020), tourist decision-making (Dai, Wang, and Kirillova 2022), wellness tourism (He, Liu, and Li 2023), and green hotels (Kwon and Boger 2021). Besides a few exceptions, within the context of food influencer marketing, limited attention has been given to exploring the concept of customer inspiration (Izogo, Mpinganjira, and Ogba 2020). Several studies suggest that research on customer inspiration is essential for understanding its consequences and antecedents across different types of SMPs, such as Instagram, including different contexts, for example, the food influencer industry (Andonopoulos, Lee, and Mathies 2023; Dai, Wang, and Kirillova 2022), with a particular emphasis on this specific sector. Consequently, there are calls to strengthen the theoretical framework underlying the concept of customer inspiration through empirical studies (Dai, Wang, and Kirillova 2022; Izogo, Mpinganjira, and Ogba 2020).

Customer inspiration emerges in existing studies as a concept that profoundly impacts marketing. Customer inspiration is a fundamental factor associated with the motivational state that generates a desire or motivation to achieve consumption-related goals (He, Liu, and Li 2023). The concept of influencers is closely connected to customer inspiration as an external factor that exposes customers to new ideas and strengthens customer relationships (Andonopoulos, Lee, and Mathies 2023; Ki, Park, and Kim 2022; Tiwari 2024). In addition, food influencers have the potential to significantly impact the relationship between customers and brands, inspiring individuals to explore and try new restaurants (Alhothali and Aljefree 2023; Polat et al. 2024). However, there is a gap in the literature regarding the antecedents and consequences of customer inspiration in the food influencers area (Polat et al. 2024). Moreover, previous studies have highlighted the characteristics of influencers, such as interactivity, as drivers of customer–brand relationships, fostering inspiration (Sharma et al. 2022). This interactivity on SMPs is crucial in enhancing engagement, strengthening trust, and inspiring high tourism interest in SMPs (Abbasi et al. 2023).

Existing studies offer insufficient evidence to determine the impact of interactivity with food influencers on customer inspiration (Polat et al. 2024; Sharma et al. 2022). Despite the importance of interactivity and inspiration for businesses'

success on SMPs, existing studies have focused less on understanding how interactivity with influencers enhances customer inspiration and electronic word of mouth (eWOM) (Polat et al. 2024). For example, Ibrahim, Usman et al.'s study (2025) suggests that interactivity is crucial for engaging customers more deeply with brands on SMPs. In this current study, Instagram interaction is conceptualized and measured as consumers' purposeful engagement with food influencers' pages for information-seeking purposes – such as searching for dining-out information, reading influencers' tips and experiences, exploring reviews, and considering others' recommendations. These interactions capture cognitive and evaluative engagement rather than passive actions (e.g., simply liking a post). They directly reflect consumers' decision-making processes.

This study addresses the call for further empirical research on how companies can use brand interactivity to strengthen customer-brand relationships (i.e., inspiration, perceived value (PV), and eWOM) and on how these interactive strategies are designed and developed. Existing online marketing studies have rarely empirically assessed inspiration, and knowledge of the factors that create inspiration and how inspiration predicts consumer outcomes is limited (Ki, Park, and Kim 2022; Dai, Wang, and Kirillova 2022). In addition, few studies in the hospitality context have focused on examining the drivers of inspiration, for example, calls to action (comments or shares), brand content, content fragmentation, place attachment, green hotel brand experience, and consumers' cultural orientation (Kwon and Boger 2021; Oltra, Camarero, and San José Cabezudo 2022). However, recent hospitality marketing studies suggest examining several other attributes of social media content that trigger moments of inspiration for travelers (Dai, Wang, and Kirillova 2022; He, Liu, and Li 2023). In addition, existing hospitality marketing research has primarily focused on analyzing the effect of customer inspiration on customer outcomes, such as customer citizenship behaviors, pro-environmental intentions, and tourist engagement, often overlooking other potential consequences (He, Liu, and Li 2023). However, to the best of our knowledge, no existing studies have explored how customer inspiration influences eWOM or examined the role of customer inspiration as a mediator between motivation and customer brand outcomes.

Although prior research has shown that social media interactions can directly influence eWOM (Abbasi et al. 2023), such direct relationships alone do not explain *why* consumers are motivated to spread eWOM or *when* these effects are stronger. The uses and gratifications theory (UGT) and the Stimulus-organism-response (SOR) framework suggest that psychological mechanisms (e.g., customer inspiration and PV) and boundary conditions (e.g., gender) are critical in shaping consumer responses. Thus, this study extends prior work by investigating the mediating roles of customer inspiration and PV, as well as the moderating role of gender. More specifically, this study aims to fill this gap by identifying customer inspiration and exploring its role in tourists' restaurant choices. The study also examines how interaction with food influencers enhances customer outcomes, such as customer inspiration, PV, and eWOM. Moreover, this study explores the mediating role of customer inspiration and PV in the relationship between Instagram interactions and eWOM and the moderating role of gender in the relationship between Instagram interactions and customer outcomes (customer inspiration and PV). This study goes beyond confirming a direct effect by explaining the process (via mediators) and boundary

conditions (via moderators), thereby offering a more nuanced understanding of how and when Instagram interaction translates into positive customer outcomes.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) framework

The SOR framework is a behavioral model that elucidates the interplay between external environmental stimuli, internal organismic processes, and resulting consumer behaviors (Mehrabian and Russell 1974). SOR model posits that stimuli (S) – external factors or environmental cues – influence organisms (O), encompassing internal states such as perceptions, emotions, and cognitive responses. These internal states, in turn, drive responses (R), manifested as observable actions or behaviors (Aljarah et al. 2022; Kuo and Chen 2023). This study applies the SOR framework to examine how Instagram interactions with food influencers shape customer perceptions – specifically, customer inspiration and PV, and culminate in eWOM behaviors. In this study, Instagram interactions act as the stimulus (S), evoking internal organismic responses (O) in the form of customer inspiration and PV, which then elicit the response (R) of eWOM. The study's hypotheses (H1–H7) are based on the SOR framework. Specifically, H1, H2, and H3 suggest that interactions boost inspiration, PV, and eWOM. Additionally, H4 and H5 examine the direct effects of inspiration and PV on eWOM, while H6 and H7 examine the mediating roles of these internal states. Within this framework, the study aims to explore how stimuli, such as Instagram interactions, trigger organismic processes, such as inspiration and PV, ultimately leading to responses, such as eWOM. For instance, external cues can spark intrinsic motivation, which emerges internally but is often activated by environmental factors (Böttger et al. 2017). These cues may foster novel ideas and bridge deeper motivational states, as Oltra, Camarero, and San José Cabezudo (2022) noted. Although the SOR framework is well-suited to addressing the study's research questions, existing studies on social media marketing (SMM) impact on consumer behavior have often relied on single theories, limiting their explanatory depth (Fetais et al. 2023; Ibrahim et al. 2024). To overcome this, the present study integrates the UGT and the two-step flow (TSF) within the SOR model, providing a more nuanced lens to examine the interconnections among Instagram interactions, customer inspiration, PV, and eWOM.

2.2. Uses and gratifications theory

UGT emphasizes the audience's active role and how individuals select media to fulfill specific needs (Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch 1973). As individuals connect with media, they refine their expectations about how it can better meet their needs compared to other sources (Alhothali and Aljefree 2023). This study demonstrates that UGT effectively supports how individuals utilize food influencers on Instagram to satisfy diverse psychological and social needs (Alhothali and Aljefree 2023). This media consumption eventually impacts inspiration and a sense of belonging, and engagement subsequently influences their behaviors and actions. For example, Instagram users follow food influencers to fulfill diverse desires, supporting the UGT framework's fundamental principle: specific gratifications drive media consumption (Alam et al. 2024). Those who use Instagram to search for

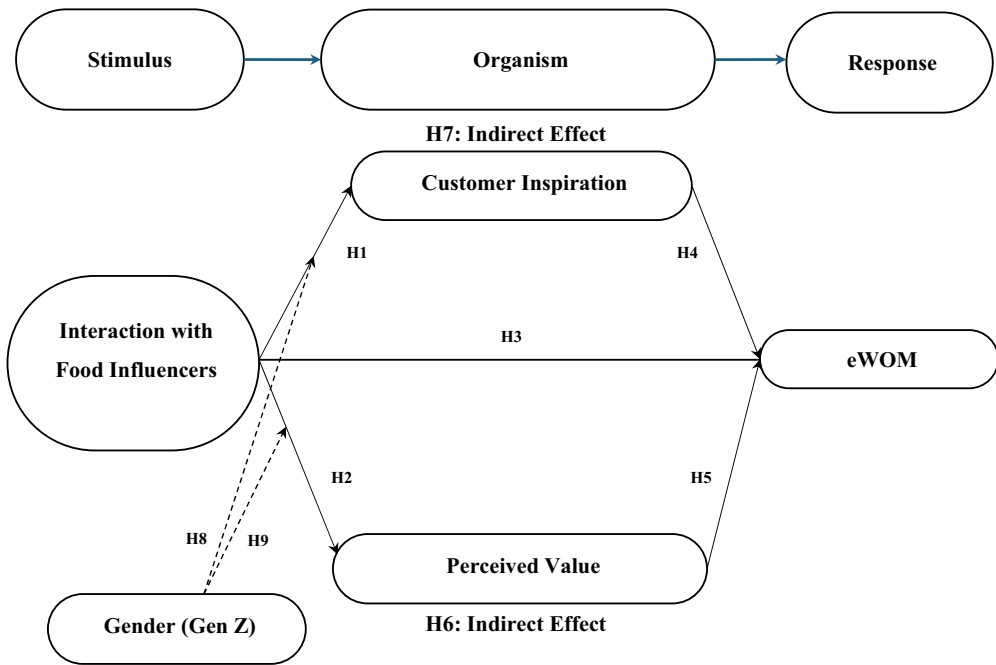


Figure 1. Conceptual model.

information about dining out often do so for informational gratification, looking for new recipes, dietary advice, or culinary trends (Cuykx et al. 2024). The UGT provides a fundamental understanding of how interacting with food influencers positively influences customer inspiration and how customer inspiration can mediate between interaction and eWOM. Figure 1 summarises the conceptual framework of this study.

3. Literature review

3.1. Instagram interaction

Interactivity in online marketing refers to ‘the degree to which two or more communication parties can act on each other, on the communication medium, and on the messages and the degree to which such influences are synchronized’ (Y. Liu and Shrum 2002, 54). This is based on the user’s perception of being in a two-way communication with an intermediary (Labrecque 2014). These interactions are characterized by their potential to assume either a positive or negative tone in various contexts, and they can encompass textual, visual, or auditory forms of engagement (Horng et al. 2024; Kim, Chung, and Fiore 2023). The significance of these interactions extends to acting as a robust conduit for brands to tap into potential customers and effectively promote their diverse offerings (Polat et al. 2023). Incorporating a broader scope, Instagram interactions encompass a wide array of social media engagements, playing a pivotal role in enhancing brand recognition, nurturing customer relationships, amplifying the visibility of products and services, elevating customer satisfaction, and cultivating a positive brand perception (Lee et al. 2022).

3.2. Customer inspiration

Inspiration has been widely investigated in psychology over the last two decades (Böttger et al. 2017; Thrash and Elliot 2004). Inspiration is defined as the process where a person grasps concepts or ideas that surpass their usual abilities (transcendence) due to external stimuli (evocation), leading them to express or actualize these newfound insights (motivation) (Thrash and Elliot 2004). In the realm of marketing, customer inspiration is ‘a customer’s temporary motivational state that facilitates the transition from the reception of a marketing-induced idea to the intrinsic pursuit of a consumption-related goal’ (Böttger et al. 2017, 116). In addition to the three key characteristics of inspiration mentioned above – transcendence, evocation, and motivation, it also includes two states: (1) the inspired-by state and (2) the inspired-to state (Thrash and Elliot 2004). The former refers to ‘appreciation of and accommodation to an evocative object’ (Thrash and Elliot 2004, 958). For instance, when influencers collaborate with restaurants and share their personal experiences, opinions, and emotions about food, they may experience inspiration (Ki, Park, and Kim 2022). In contrast, the latter ‘relates to the intrinsic pursuit of a consumption-related goal’ (Thrash and Elliot 2004, 958), such as when consumers are motivated to visit a restaurant after being influenced by such content. (e.g., going out for dining) (Böttger et al. 2017). For example, after an Instagram user interacts with an influencer, they may feel a strong urge to visit a place to dine that the influencer endorses, inspired by them (Sheng, Yang, and Feng 2020). Consequently, we can conceptualize food inspiration as a motivational state that drives a potential customer to realize new food ideas. In addition, this study focuses solely on the inspired state, as customers transition from being inspired by an idea promoted through influencer marketing efforts to being inspired to act on that idea (e.g., going out for dinner) (Böttger et al. 2017). Böttger et al. (2017) suggest that ‘the inspired-to component is intentional and may relate more strongly to behavioral consequences to actualize an idea’ (p. 121).

Existing studies suggest that antecedents of customer inspiration can be categorized into the thematic domains of source-related characteristics, individual-level differences, and overarching contextual factors. The first domain, about source characteristics, is notably extensive for influencers and includes perceived authenticity and credibility of the message source (including dimensions of attractiveness, expertise, and trustworthiness (Andonopoulos, Lee, and Mathies 2023; Ki, Park, and Kim 2022; Nguyen, Pham, and Truong 2025; Tiwari 2024) alongside the utilitarian and hedonic attributes of the content itself (Izogo and Mpinganjira 2020). This category further extends to marketing-specific stimuli such as robotic service novelty (Xie, Liu, and Li 2022), advertising vividness and social influence (Sheng, Yang, and Feng 2020), aesthetic design of short-form travel videos (Fang et al. 2023), and holistic brand experience (Kwon and Boger 2021). While such external stimuli provide the initial impetus, the emergence of inspiration is also profoundly shaped by individual-level dispositions. Specifically, traits like openness to experience consistently appear as a critical enabling factor in consumer and tourism research (Fang et al. 2023; Tsaur, Yen, and Lin 2022), a predisposition often complemented by consumer innovativeness (Yang et al. 2024) and, particularly within tourism contexts, an affective place attachment (Khoi, Phong, and Le 2020). These source-individual dynamics are, in turn, embedded within a broader context, where factors such as the perceived degree of social presence in online settings (Song et al. 2024;

Yang et al. 2024) and the accumulated social capital within brand communities (Cao, Lin, and Zhou 2022) likely serve as crucial facilitators of the inspirational process.

Customer inspiration produces both behavioral and attitudinal outcomes. Behaviorally, it drives impulsive buying (Yang et al. 2024), purchase intentions (Sheng, Yang, and Feng 2020), co-creation (Cao, Lin, and Zhou 2022), travel planning (Nguyen, Pham, and Truong 2025), and pro-environmental actions (Kwon and Boger 2021). Attitudinally, customer inspiration enhances brand affect and satisfaction (Hernani-Merino, Libaque-Saenz, and Davalos 2023), strengthens destination attachment (Tsaur, Yen, and Lin 2022), and fosters delight, transcendence, and loyalty (Böttger et al. 2017; Khoi, Le, and Tran 2021). These effects emerge through the inspired-by to inspired-to transition (Böttger et al. 2017; Song et al. 2024; Yang et al. 2024), yet their magnitude is shaped by boundary conditions such as individual traits (Fang et al. 2023; Tsaur, Yen, and Lin 2022), gender (Ki, Park, and Kim 2022; Fayyaz et al. 2025), and contextual factors (e.g., cultural orientation (Izogo and Mpinganjira 2020), brand type (Hernani-Merino, Libaque-Saenz, and Davalos 2023), service design (Khoi, Le, and Tran 2021) determine the strength, direction, and durability of these outcomes.

The investigation into customer inspiration spans diverse contexts, including e-commerce (Yang et al. 2024), SMM (Sheng, Yang, and Feng 2020), hospitality and tourism (Tsaur, Yen, and Lin 2022; Xie, Liu, and Li 2022), underscoring its centrality in explaining consumer motivation and engagement across digital and service settings. Nevertheless, research associating inspiration with influencer marketing remains limited. For instance, a qualitative study emphasizes the role of food influencers in reinforcing inspiration (Alhothali and Aljefree 2023). Although this mechanism has been explored in general (Ki, Park, and Kim 2022), and applied to contexts like wellness (Tiwari 2024), travel vlogs (Nguyen, Pham, and Truong 2025), and authenticity (Andonopoulos, Lee, and Mathies 2023), existing literature overlooks a critical dimension. These studies focus on broad, perceived influencer traits such as sincerity, attraction, professionalism, credibility, and authenticity. In doing so, they often overlook the dynamic role of direct consumer–influencer interaction and the unique dynamics inherent to the food-influencing context (Sharma et al. 2022). Consequently, the question of how interactions with food influencers trigger consumer inspiration and, in turn, drive eWOM behaviors remains unaddressed. The current research addresses to fill this gap.

4. Hypotheses formulation

4.1. Interaction with food influencers and customer inspiration

Ki, Park, and Kim (2022) suggest that interaction with influencers on Instagram and YouTube is one of the most critical factors that lead to consumer inspiration. They claim that influencers who provide high levels of interaction increase the tendency of their followers to perceive them as more inspired (Horng et al. 2024). One of the primary objectives of influencer marketing is to unlock users' imagination, expand their mental horizons, and inspire them to take action (e.g., eWOM) on products and services through Instagram (Sheng, Yang, and Feng 2020). From a digital psychology perspective, these interactions generate distinctive cognitive and emotional responses compared to traditional media, activating neural pathways associated with social cognition and reward

(Doheny and Lighthall 2023; Firth et al. 2019; Kircaburun et al. 2020), which helps explain why greater engagement fosters consumer inspiration.

Food influencers providing inspired content have a crucial impact, especially on young customers (Alhothali and Aljefree 2023). The existing UGT literature emphasizes the importance of inspiration as a key reason young adults follow influencers (Alhothali and Aljefree 2023). These customers, who are more interactive with influencers, are highly interested in the food and meal choices of others and use food as a means of addressing community issues and bonding (Ghosh et al. 2024; Polat et al. 2024). Prior mixed-method research has revealed that 65% of young customers believe that content shared by Instagram food influencers helped them choose a restaurant (Anjos, Marques, and Dias 2022). Based on the preceding discussion, we suggest that:

H1. Interaction with food influencers positively influences customer inspiration.

4.2. Interaction with food influencers and perceived value

PV refers to a customer's 'overall assessment of the utility of a product based on perceptions of what is received and what is given' (Zeithaml 1988, 14). Consumers' interactions with the brand on SMPs positively impact PV (Bozkurt et al. 2023). According to media richness theory, SMPs vary in the psychological presence and social connection they provide, which can enhance users' perception of value (Tseng et al. 2019; Wang et al. 2024). Interactions with food influencers on Instagram can increase PV by fostering engagement, relatability, and a sense of social connection (Polat et al. 2024).

Influencers, with their large follower base and credibility, are believed to be able to promote products effectively, create a sense of authenticity and trust, and be more persuasive through their interactions (Ghosh et al. 2024). When consumers interact with a food influencer on Instagram, they achieve the personal and social benefits of this interaction (i.e., PV) (Wang et al. 2024). Influencers' power of influence and interaction increases followers' expected value of suggested food or restaurants (Polat et al. 2024). Influencers sharing positive experiences or reviews about a particular food or beverage can attract and persuade their followers, positively impacting their perception of the product's value (Ghosh et al. 2024). When a food influencer shares their dining out experiences on Instagram, it may create a sense of relatability and trust among their followers (Zhou et al. 2021). This emotional connection can significantly enhance the PV of the restaurants or products that s/he promotes. As a result, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H2. Interaction with food influencers positively influences perceived value.

4.3. Interaction with Instagram food influencers and eWOM

eWOM can be considered positive or negative content about a product, service, company, or brand by users in the digital environment (e.g., the Internet and social media) (Abbasi et al. 2023). Customers frequently rely on information from other sources when deciding

what to buy, increasing the significance of eWOM for brands (Abbasi et al. 2023). Previous studies have demonstrated that interaction on SMPs, like Instagram, increases eWOM (Kanje et al. 2020). One mechanism that explains this is social proof, whereby user engagement metrics such as likes, comments, and shares act as visible signals of social validation, creating psychological pressure to conform to the group's perceived consensus (Samanta 2025). When followers observe high engagement on a food influencer's post, they are more likely to perceive the recommendation as trustworthy and, in turn, engage in eWOM (Samanta 2025). This effect is further supported by media psychology literature, which suggests that interactive digital environments stimulate cognitive and social reward pathways, thereby increasing users' likelihood of content sharing (Doheny and Lighthall 2023; Firth et al. 2019). Interactions with food influencers on Instagram foster engagement and social connection that ultimately stimulate positive eWOM (Anjos, Marques, and Dias 2022; Polat et al. 2024; Sharma et al. 2022). Accordingly, we propose the following hypothesis:

H3. Interaction with food influencers positively influences eWOM behavior.

4.4. Customer inspiration and eWOM

Several studies suggest that customer inspiration yields emotional, attitudinal, and behavioral outcomes (Ki, Park, and Kim 2022; Sheng, Yang, and Feng 2020). Among the core components of inspiration, the inspired-to is captured in behavioral intentions, such as a person's desire to suggest a product or brand to others (i.e., WOM) (Oltra, Camarero, and San José Cabezudo 2022). Thus, customer inspiration, a powerful marketing technique, is essential in shaping WOM (Böttger et al. 2017). The advent of customer inspiration on SMPs leads to positive eWOM behavior (Izogo and Mpinganjira 2020). In addition, Cheng, Wei, and Zhang (2020) identified that the power of a travel vlog to inspire is one of the causes positively influencing eWOM. The digital psychology literature highlights that inspiration is a motivational mechanism, linking interaction's cognitive and emotional effects with subsequent sharing behaviors (Doheny and Lighthall 2023; Firth et al. 2019). In the food or restaurant industry, potential customers who see influencers' Instagram posts may be inspired to visit the restaurant and try the food themselves. This can increase restaurant reservations, visits, and eWOM behavior (Ghosh et al. 2024). Based on the preceding discussion, we formulate the following hypothesis:

H4. Customer inspiration positively influences eWOM behavior.

4.5. Perceived value and eWOM

PV is a customer's overall judgment of a product's worth, and engagement with brands on social media can enhance PV and motivate customers to share their experiences with others (Bozkurt et al. 2023; Zeithaml 1988). In the hospitality, food, and restaurant contexts, PV has been shown to influence consumer behavior, with higher PV encouraging customers to share favorable experiences online and strengthen brand engagement

(Abbasi et al. 2023; Ahn, Choi, and Joung 2020). In addition, a recent meta-analysis also confirms that PV is a crucial antecedent of WOM (Blut et al. 2023). Thus, according to the above, there is a need for further examination in the context of social media influencers. The following hypothesis is proposed:

H5. Perceived value has a positive influence on eWOM behavior.

4.6. The mediating role of perceived value

In the context of Instagram, user interactions contribute to the formation of attitudes and beliefs about the endorsed content, which in turn influence PV (Wang et al. 2024). Interactions, such as likes, comments, and shares, act as stimuli that shape users' cognitive evaluations of content relevance and quality (Zhou et al. 2021). According to the SOR model (Mehrabian and Russell 1974), these interactions act as stimuli (S) that activate cognitive evaluation processes (O), ultimately driving eWOM behaviors as responses (R) (Aljarah et al. 2022; Kuo and Chen, 2023). PV functions as a cognitive mediator in this process, translating attitudinal responses into concrete eWOM behaviors.

Consistent with Abbasi et al. (2023), higher perceived value of social media content increases user engagement, subsequently facilitating eWOM behaviors. The UGT further explains that users interact with content to fulfill informational, social, and entertainment needs, thereby reinforcing PV and promoting participation in eWOM (Alam et al. 2024; Cuykx et al. 2024; Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch 1973). Complementing these mechanisms, TSF theory suggests that influencers act as opinion leaders who filter, interpret, and personalize brand messages, enhancing credibility, perceived relevance, and PV, which in turn encourages eWOM behaviors (Berry 2024; Uzunoğlu and Misci-Kip 2014). Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H6. Perceived value mediates the relationship between interaction with food influencers and eWOM behavior.

4.7. The mediating role of customer inspiration

The current study posits a direct and positive relationship between interaction with food influencers and eWOM. A mediating mechanism may also shape the relationship between food influencers' interactions and their outcomes. Consumer inspiration is considered a pivotal variable that could potentially mediate this association (Thrash et al. 2010). In the realm of social media, Ki, Park, and Kim (2022) proposed that the traits of influencers, such as attractiveness and credibility (personality-determined traits), as well as traits related to their content, such as closeness and interactivity (content-determined traits), serve as precursors to consumer inspiration. These traits are considered essential elements of customer-brand relationships.

Some studies confirm that consumer inspiration has various outcomes, including eWOM, purchase intention, and emotional responses (Abbasi et al. 2023; Oltra, Camarero, and San José Cabezedo 2022), as highlighted above. This study suggests

consumer inspiration mediates the relationship between interaction with Instagram food influencers and eWOM. Additionally, the findings of Oltra, Camarero, and San José Cabezudo (2022) anticipated this relationship by suggesting a causal model where consumer inspiration mediates the influence of Instagram food influencers on eWOM.

The SOR framework supports this mediating mechanism (Aljarah et al. 2022; Ibrahim, Hazzam et al. 2025; Mehrabian and Russell 1974), where Instagram interactions (S) elicit consumer inspiration (O), which then drives eWOM behavior (R) (Kuo and Chen 2023). Intrinsic motivation interacts with these external stimuli to enhance inspiration, in line with Böttger et al. (2017), while exposure to influencer content provides informational and emotional cues that trigger such intrinsic responses (Oltra, Camarero, and San José Cabezudo 2022). Furthermore, the UGT explains why individuals actively seek and engage with food influencers to fulfill psychological and social needs (Alhothali and Aljefree 2023; Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch 1973). Interaction with influencers allows users to satisfy needs for entertainment, information, and social connection, thereby increasing their likelihood of experiencing inspiration, which then mediates the effect on eWOM (Alam et al. 2024; Cuykx et al. 2024).

Complementing these perspectives, TSF (Katz and Lazarsfeld 2006) posits that influencers act as modern opinion leaders, filtering, interpreting, and personalizing brand messages before disseminating them to followers (Berry, 2024; Uzunoğlu and Misci-Kip, 2014). This mediated transmission enhances the perceived credibility and relevance of the content, thereby inspiring consumers and driving eWOM behavior. TSF thus provides a theoretical rationale for why the effect of Instagram interactions on eWOM is not direct but occurs through a psychological and affective-mediated process. Accordingly, based on these integrated theoretical frameworks, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H7. Customer inspiration mediates the relationship between interaction with food influencers and eWOM behavior.

4.8. The moderating role of gender

Gender is frequently examined as a moderating construct in the social media and influencer marketing literature (Polat et al. 2024). Existing studies consistently highlight behavioral differences between genders; for instance, females tend to be more socially oriented and seek more detailed information before making decisions, while males are often driven by more functional values (Deng et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2023). These differences can be explained through two primary theoretical lenses. First, from a sociocultural perspective, following influencers is a way for individuals to accumulate cultural capital, signal personal taste, and construct a social identity. This suggests that interaction's social and emotional aspects are highly significant (Bourdieu, 2018; Mears, 2023). In addition, social identity theory posits that individuals respond more positively to influencers of the same gender. Empirical evidence supports this, showing that female followers perceive same-gender influencers as more relatable, form stronger parasocial relationships with them, and consequently show higher engagement (Hudders and De

Jans, 2022). Building on this theoretical foundation, we propose that gender will moderate the effects of influencer interactions on customer inspiration and PV.

Regarding customer inspiration, the heightened social orientation and stronger parasocial bonds typically formed by female followers suggest their interactions are more likely to translate into a powerful motivational state like inspiration. While some research indicates the effect of interaction on inspiration may be unchanged by gender (Ki et al., 2022), the prevailing evidence on females' deeper social and emotional engagement supports a differential effect. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H8. Gender (male vs. female) moderates the relationship between interactions with food influencers and customer inspiration, such that female customers are more likely than males to experience inspiration through their interactions with food influencer content.

Similarly, these gender dynamics are expected to influence PV. Although existing studies rarely examine the differential effect of gender on the relationship between interaction and PV (Bozkurt et al. 2023; Shi, Chen, and Chow 2016), recent empirical evidence shows that value perception is indeed gender-sensitive (Fayyaz et al. 2025). This aligns with broader findings that female consumers are often more influenced by social and emotional cues (Chetioui et al. 2023; Sun, Leung, and Bai 2021) and that the enhanced relatability from same-gender influencers directly contributes to a higher assessment of value (Hudders and De Jans 2022). Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

H9. Gender (male/female) moderates the relationship between interactions with food influencers and perceived value, such that female customers are more likely than males to perceive higher value through their interactions with food influencer content.

5. Method

5.1. Sample and data collection

The population for this study comprises Jordanian consumers who used Instagram pages to search for dining-out information in the three months preceding data collection. The target sample consists of Jordanian followers of Instagram influencers who share authentic experiences, reviews, and insights about food products and offer restaurant dining recommendations. Additionally, they must be between 19 and 24 years old, representing Generation Z (Gen Z). In the Middle East, including Jordan, influencer marketing thrives and plays an increasingly crucial role in helping brands stay competitive (Khatu 2023).

The age group of young respondents is justified for several reasons. Instagram is the most popular among this age group. Gen Z individuals are digital natives who are highly active on SMPs (Aljarah et al. 2022). Additionally, this age group is the primary target audience for food influencers. Responses were gathered through an online survey hosted on SurveyMonkey, and the survey link was shared on Instagram and with personal contacts. The questionnaire had three main sections. The first section collected information about the applicants' demographic factors and consumer behaviors. The second section included screening questions to determine eligibility for participation in the study.

These screening questions included the following: Are you between 19 and 24? Are you proficient in the English language? Do you have an active Instagram account? Do you like and follow the Instagram pages of food influencers that offer food-related suggestions and reviews? Have you actively engaged with the Instagram pages of food influencers when seeking dining-out information, providing ratings, reviews, and recommendations? Do the posts, videos, reels, and stories on designated Instagram pages of influencers inspire you to visit a restaurant in Amman?

Only those who answered 'Yes' to the preliminary screening questions could respond to the study questionnaire. The last question in this section contained a question prompting respondents to remember the name of a food influencer they follow. In line with a previous study, an opinion survey was conducted to gather insights on food influencers in Jordan. The third section included scale items that assess four constructs within the proposed model: Instagram interaction, PV, customer inspiration, and eWOM. Only respondents fluent in English were included in the study to ensure consistency and validity. This criterion was applied because the survey items were initially developed and validated in English, and using English minimized the risk of translation bias or misinterpretation. Moreover, English is widely spoken among Generation Z in Jordan, particularly in online and social media contexts, which made it an appropriate and accessible survey language. Restricting responses to one language also enhanced comparability across participants and reduced variability caused by mixed-language responses. Before the survey began, all participants received information regarding the study's objectives and were informed of their right to decline participation or withdraw at any stage. The study adhered to ethical guidelines for research involving human subjects, and participant anonymity and confidentiality were maintained. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (Rp. 004.012.00 – 250,109-07). Data were obtained from an online data collection agency in Jordan, yielding 516 valid responses, of which 381 were used for final analysis.

5.2. Measures

In this study, we used a questionnaire to gather data. The applicants rated the measurement items on a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). We measured four items through Instagram interaction, adapted from Amaro, Duarte, and Henriques (2016). Furthermore, we measured PV using three items from Abbasi et al. (2023), customer inspiration using five items adapted from Böttger et al. (2017), and eWOM using five items adapted from Serra-Cantallops, Ramón Cardona, and Salvi (2020).

6. Results

6.1. Demographic profile of respondents

Most of the survey participants were female (51.2%), and the majority held undergraduate degrees (73.1%). A significant proportion of respondents reported using Instagram on a daily basis (72%). In addition, 11.5% indicated that they used Instagram three to four days per week, whereas 10% used it one or two days per week, and 7% stated that they used it

very rarely. Regarding respondents' interaction with food influencers' Instagram pages, most participants spent less than one hour on such pages (44.7%), followed by those who spent approximately one to two hours (38.5%).

6.2. Validity, reliability, and common method bias

The evaluation of the measurement and structural models was conducted in this study using AMOS 24.0 software and structural equation modeling (SEM). The analysis employed a confirmatory factor, and all model fit factors aligned with the cutoff values $CMIN2/df = 2.08 < 3.00$; comparative fit index (CFI) = $0.95 > 0.90$; Normed Fit Index (NFI) = $0.95 > 0.90$; root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = $0.050 < 0.08$. As per Hu and Bentler's (1999) model evaluation criteria, all indices were deemed acceptable. Furthermore, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was employed to evaluate the validity and acceptability of the scale items for the study constructs. All factor loadings were substantial and assessed above 0.60 (Hair et al. 2010), indicating strong convergent validity.

Based on the CFA results, one item was removed from the eWOM variable scale because its factor loadings was below 0.50. This study confirmed the constructs' reliability and validity using composite reliability (CR) and Cronbach's alpha. In Table 1, the Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the constructs ranged from 0.81 to 0.91, which is considered acceptable based on the suggestion of Hair et al. (2010) as it is above 0.70.

Table 1. Study measurements.

	Item	Factor Loading	Cronbach's Alpha
Interactions with food influencers (INSTA)			0.89
I interact on the Instagram pages of Influencers to search for dining-out information.	INSTA1	0.85	
I interact with the Instagram pages of Influencers to read about their experiences and tips on dining out.	INSTA2	0.89	
I interact on the Instagram pages of influencers to read people's reviews of dining-out information.	INSTA3	0.80	
I interact on the Instagram pages of Influencers to read the recommendations of others about dining-out information.	INSTA4	0.77	
Perceived value (PV)			0.81
I feel that dining-out information posted on the Instagram pages of Influencers is useful.	PV1	0.78	
I feel that dining-out information posted on the Instagram pages of Influencers is valuable.	PV2	0.76	
I feel that dining-out information posted on the Instagram pages of Influencers is important.	PV3	0.78	
Customer Inspiration (INSP)			0.91
I was inspired to go out for dinner, drinks, or take a snack.	INSP1	0.66	
I felt a desire to go out for dinner, drinks, or take a snack.	INSP2	0.85	
My interest in going out for dining, drinks, and taking a snack	INSP3	0.73	
I was motivated to go out for dinner, drinks, or take a snack.	INSP4	0.66	
I felt an urge to go out for dinner, drinks, or a snack.	INSP5	0.93	
eWOM			0.90
I am excited to post and share on the Instagram pages of Influencers about dining-out information I am interested in.	eWOM1	0.93	
I have written positive comments about dining-out information on the Instagram pages of Influencers.	eWOM2	0.68	
I have posted positive reviews about dining-out information on the Instagram pages of Influencers.	eWOM3	0.72	
I have uploaded images of dining out to influencers' Instagram pages.	eWOM4	0.92	
I became a follower of the Instagram pages of influencers to share content.	eWOM5*	–	

[Note: *Items dropped from the study].

Table 2. Discriminant validity.

Construct	CR	AVE	eWOM	PV	INSP	INSTA
eWOM	0.879	0.674	0.821			
PV	0.818	0.599	0.336***	0.774		
INSP	0.906	0.662	0.114*	0.221***	0.813	
INSTA	0.896	0.684	0.445***	0.139*	0.122*	0.827

Table 3. Assessing discriminant validity: heterotrait–monotrait ratio (HTMT).

Construct	eWOM	PV	INSP	INSTA
eWOM				
PV	0.366			
INSP	0.201	0.282		
INSTA	0.517	0.125	0.167	

The composite reliability (CR) values for these constructs ranged from 0.818 to 0.906, all exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.60 (Bagozzi and Yi 1988). These results show that the multiple items used to assess each construct have satisfactory internal consistency (Hair et al. 2010). Discriminant validity was evaluated following the guidelines proposed by Fornell and Larcker (1981), which involve comparing the correlation coefficients among constructs with the square root of the average variance extracted (AVE) values (Table 2).

The findings demonstrate that the square root of the AVE exhibited a higher magnitude compared to the correlation coefficients between the constructs. The heterotrait monotrait ratio (HTMT) was applied to measure discriminant validity (Henseler, Ringle, and Sarstedt 2015) (Table 3). The HTMT value is below the 0.85 threshold, indicating confirmed discriminant validity (Henseler, Ringle, and Sarstedt 2015) (Table 3). This finding serves as compelling evidence in favor of discriminant validity. From a statistical perspective, we assessed data normality, and it was confirmed that all the data subjected to analysis exhibited a normal distribution. To evaluate this, we calculated skewness and kurtosis for each specific variable, and the resulting values were all well within appropriate ranges. Skewness values ranged between -3 and $+3$, while kurtosis values fell within the suitable range of -2 to $+2$, as Hair et al. (2010) recommended. Given that all our data were collected from the same respondents, there is a potential concern regarding common method bias (CMB), as highlighted by Podsakoff et al. (2003). Harman's single factor was used as Podsakoff et al. (2003) proposed to determine if there was a CMB issue. Harman's single-factor test (Podsakoff et al. 2003) revealed that one common factor accounted for 34.7% of the variance, confirming that CMB is not a significant concern in the study.

6.3. Hypotheses testing

This study utilized SEM with Amos to evaluate the proposed hypotheses. The model fit results indicated that all indicators met acceptable values, suggesting a good model fit for the hypothesized structural model (CMIN2/df = 2.3 < 3.00; CFI = 0.97 > 0.90; NFI = 0.95 > 0.90; RMSEA = 0.06 < 0.08). The study investigated the relationship between Instagram interactions, customer inspiration, and PV. Table 4 demonstrates that Instagram interactions positively impacted both customer inspiration ($\beta = 0.13, p < 0.01$) and PV ($\beta = 0.16, p$

Table 4. Hypotheses results.

Direct relationships						
		Path	β	SE	p	Result
H1	Interaction	Customer Inspiration	0.13	0.04	0.00**	Supported
H2	Interaction	PV	0.16	0.05	***	Supported
H3	Interaction	eWOM	0.15	0.05	0.01*	Supported
H4	Customer Inspiration	eWOM	0.11	0.07	0.10 (Ns)	Not supported
H5	PV	eWOM	0.40	0.08	***	Supported

Mediation analysis					
Paths	Direct relationships		Indirect relationships		Result
	β		β	p	
H6: Interaction \rightarrow PV \rightarrow eWOM	0.15		0.064	***	Supported
H7: Interaction \rightarrow Customer Inspiration \rightarrow eWOM	0.15		0.04	***	Supported

Moderation analysis					
Paths	β	CI low	CI high	p	
H8: Gender * Interaction \rightarrow Customer Inspiration	0.23	0.06	0.40	0.0064**	Supported
H9: Gender * Interaction \rightarrow PV	0.13	-0.02	0.29	0.10 (Ns)	Not supported

[Note: ** $p < 0.010$; *** $p < 0.001$; * $p < 0.05$; Confidence Interval: CI; Not supported: Ns].

< 0.001), supporting H1 and H2. The study also found a significant relationship between Instagram interaction and eWOM, supporting Hypothesis 3 (H3: $\beta = 0.15$, $p < 0.05$). However, no significant relationship was observed between customer inspiration and eWOM (H4: $\beta = 0.11$, $p = 0.10$), providing no support for Hypothesis 4. In addition, the study showed a significantly positive impact of PV on eWOM (H5: $\beta = 0.40$, $p < 0.001$), thus supporting H5.

Mediation was tested using the bootstrapping procedure in AMOS with 2,000 bootstrap samples and a 95% bias-corrected confidence interval (Table 4). The results of the mediation analysis indicate that the indirect effect of Instagram interaction on eWOM through PV is statistically significant (H6: $\beta = 0.064$, $p < 0.001$), thereby supporting H6. Similarly, the bootstrapped estimates show that the indirect effect of customer inspiration in the relationship between Instagram interaction and eWOM is also statistically significant (H7: $\beta = 0.04$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H7.

Regarding the moderating effects (see Table 4), the results show that the interaction effect between gender and Instagram interaction significantly predicts customer inspiration ($\beta = 0.23$, $p < 0.010$). Therefore, H8 is confirmed. However, the interaction effect of gender on the relationship between Instagram interaction and PV is not significant ($\beta = 0.13$, $p = 0.1061$), and therefore H9 is not supported.

6.4. General discussion

This study examined the influence of interaction with food influencers on Instagram as a source of consumer inspiration, PV, and eWOM within the food influencer's context, focusing on Jordanian Generation Z as the study sample. First, the results indicate that Instagram interaction with food influencers predicts inspiration, supporting H1. This

supports studies suggesting that Instagram interaction drives inspiration (Ki, Park, and Kim 2022; Sharma et al. 2022). Intrinsic motivation, namely inspiration, is prompted by extrinsically derived motivation associated with the inception of novel ideas (Thrash and Elliot 2004). According to the model of inspiration transfer (Thrash et al. 2010), customer inspiration is a facilitator for the client's transition from states of stimulation to states of intention. Activities related to Instagram influencer marketing, such as interaction, can inspire customers toward a state of intent (Sheng, Yang, and Feng 2020).

Second, this study also unveils a positive and significant influence of Instagram interaction on PV (H2) and eWOM (H3). Food influencers can share engaging photos and videos of their dishes and culinary creations with a large audience of interested followers. Interacting with these influencers on Instagram can enhance customer–brand relationships. When influencers share their positive experiences with a restaurant brand with their followers, it encourages positive recommendations and eWOM from one person to another, which leads to increased sales (Ibrahim et al. 2024; Aljarah, Ibrahim et al. 2025; Polat et al. 2024).

Third, PV and customer inspiration were identified as predictors of eWOM behavior. The study's findings did not support the hypothesized relationship between customer inspiration and eWOM (H4). Despite prior literature suggesting that inspired consumers are more likely to share their experiences and recommendations online (Cheng, Wei, and Zhang 2020), the statistical results indicated a weak and statistically insignificant relationship. One possible explanation for this non-significant finding is that while customer inspiration may spark internal motivation or interest, it does not always translate into external behaviors, such as sharing opinions or content online. A further explanation may lie in Instagram interactions with food influencers, which are often focused on information-seeking rather than advocacy. Consumers may feel inspired but still view their inspiration as a personal or private experience that does not necessarily lead to public expression. Behavioral psychology suggests that intention–action gaps can prevent motivated individuals from translating internal inspiration into observable behaviors, due to inertia, social norms, or perceived barriers (Ajzen 1991; Sheeran 2002). In addition, platform-specific constraints or privacy concerns may further limit the expression of inspiration in eWOM behaviors. Cultural norms in Jordan may also discourage frequent public posting, reinforcing the context-dependency of inspiration. This divergence from earlier findings suggests that inspiration is not a universal predictor of eWOM but operates under specific conditions. Recognizing this nuance contributes to theory by highlighting that the SOR process may not always extend to externalized behaviors (Aljarah, Ibrahim et al. 2025). Future research could examine boundary conditions, such as cultural orientation, self-expression motives, or platform affordances, that determine whether inspiration translates into eWOM and online advocacy. The result supports (H5), suggesting a positive impact of PV on eWOM behavior. In other words, the greater the PV experienced by a food influencer on Instagram, the greater the number of followers who share their positive experiences online and foster positive eWOM behavior. This finding aligns with studies indicating a positive relationship between PV and eWOM (Blut et al. 2023).

Fourth, the findings of this study suggest that Instagram interaction indirectly affects eWOM through the mediation roles of PV (H6) and inspiration (H7). These outcomes are consistent with previous studies demonstrating that SMM is vital in fostering customer–brand relationships through the mediation roles of PV and customer inspiration (Dai,

Wang, and Kirillova 2022). This finding implies that the more users engage with food influencers on Instagram, the stronger the PV and inspiration they experience, ultimately leading them to a higher likelihood of engaging in eWOM. Our findings indicate customer inspiration mediates the relationship between Instagram interaction and eWOM. However, the practical and theoretical value of customer inspiration seems limited, given that the direct effect of Instagram interaction on eWOM is already significant. This suggests that while customer inspiration helps explain consumer behavior, the overall process could be simplified without changing the primary outcome. These results emphasize that Instagram interactions alone are a strong driver of eWOM, and the impact of customer inspiration may vary depending on context, content type, or consumer traits. Future research could examine additional mediators or situational factors that might better enhance the model's explanatory power.

Fifth, the study's results indicate that gender significantly affects the relationship between Instagram interaction and customer inspiration (H8). These results are consistent with studies demonstrating that interacting with influencers varies depending on whether the user is male or female (Ki, Park, and Kim 2022; J. Liu et al. 2023). In other words, the impact of Instagram interactions with food influencers on how inspired a customer feels differs for males and females. Lastly, the results showed that gender does not significantly impact the relationship between how users interact with food influencers on Instagram and the value they perceive from these interactions (H9). This finding does not align with studies indicating a difference in the relationship between social media interaction and customer outcomes (Deng et al. 2022; Sun, Leung, and Bai 2021). Whether the user is male or female, the PV increased from interacting with food influencers on Instagram remains relatively unchanged.

7. Theoretical implications, practical implications and limitations and Future research

7.1. Theoretical implications

Five main theoretical contributions are offered in this study. First, this study is the first to explore the mediating and interaction mechanisms of Instagram interaction, customer inspiration, PV, and the moderating role of gender—on eWOM in the context of food influencers. The results extend the existing literature on Instagram influencers in the restaurant context. Existing hospitality marketing studies indicate that social media interaction with a brand can be a powerful marketing tool to engage customers in more personalized and increased interaction through comments, likes, and shares (Abbasi et al. 2023; Veloso, Ieva, and Gómez-Suárez 2024). Although hospitality marketing literature has emphasized the significant influence of Instagram interaction on customer–brand relationships (Chetioui et al. 2023), its impact on the concept of customer inspiration remains relatively unexplored in food influencer marketing (He, Liu, and Li 2023). The results of this study enrich the existing SMM and hospitality marketing literature by discovering key antecedents and consequences of customer inspiration. In addition, this study provides an in-depth analysis of inspiring cases that have not been studied from an academic perspective to explain the power of food influencers on Instagram to strengthen customer inspiration (Polat et al. 2024).

Second, the present study contributes by advancing the concept of customer inspiration as a mediating factor between Instagram interaction and eWOM behavior. This contribution is noteworthy because previous research has primarily focused on the antecedents and consequences of customer inspiration, while neglecting its potential as a mediator (Sheng, Yang, and Feng 2020). In addition, previous hospitality marketing studies have been limited in their examination of the mediating mechanism between Instagram interaction and eWOM behavior, primarily customer inspiration (Dai, Wang, and Kirillova 2022; Oltra, Camarero, and San José Cabezedo 2022). This study addresses this gap by empirically providing a novel model for testing the impact of Instagram interaction on eWOM while considering the mediating role of customer inspiration.

Third, this study focuses on the younger generation (Gen Z) and followers of food influencers. This focus allows us to delve into the antecedents and consequences of PV on food Instagram influencers, a topic that has been neglected mainly in empirical studies (Ghosh et al. 2024; Polat et al. 2024). This study fills this gap by examining the vital link between Instagram interactions and eWOM behavior through PV in the food-influencer context.

Fourth, this study extends the existing literature on the SOR framework by reimagining Instagram interactions as stimuli that inspire individuals to make dining choices, thereby influencing their PV and ultimately shaping their customer responses, specifically eWOM, within influencer marketing. Consequently, this study illuminates promising avenues for future research to investigate the intricate dynamics of Instagram interactions with influencer-generated stimuli and their impact on followers' eWOM behaviors grounded in the SOR model.

Fifth, studies examining SMM's influence on inspiration through multiple theories are limited (Ki, Park, and Kim 2022; Oltra, Camarero, and San José Cabezedo 2022). Our study responds to recent calls for more empirical work that combines various theories and models to examine factors influencing customer inspiration in hospitality marketing and restaurant contexts (Ki, Park, and Kim 2022; Oltra, Camarero, and San José Cabezedo 2022). Within the SOR framework, we use UGT and TSF to examine the links among the proposed constructs in the study. Each theory plays a distinct and complementary role, contributing to a comprehensive recognition of the dynamic interaction between Instagram interaction, customer perceptions, and response. Beyond the SOR framework, UGT and TSF, rival theories may also shed light on the observed relationships. For instance, authenticity theory emphasizes that consumers respond more positively when they perceive influencers as genuine and authentic, which in turn fosters stronger affective and behavioral engagement (Audrezet, De Kerviler, and Moulard 2020; Napoli et al. 2014). Similarly, the parasocial interaction and trust perspective suggests that relational closeness and perceived trust toward influencers may drive consumers to share and advocate, even independent of inspiration or PV (Labrecque 2014; Lou and Yuan 2019). While our findings emphasize the mediating role of inspiration, integrating these rival perspectives underscores that alternative pathways – such as authenticity and trust – may also explain why specific interactions translate (or fail to translate) into advocacy behaviors. Future research could test these rival mechanisms in parallel to further validate and extend our model.

7.2. Practical implications

This study suggests valuable managerial recommendations for designing and executing interaction strategies for food influencers. First, marketing managers of influencers' pages should recommend different features and strategies for food influencers across Instagram to showcase its diverse visual features. For instance, marketers of Instagram food influencers can regularly respond to comments and increase interaction with followers. They should also encourage followers to send direct messages with questions or requests for recommendations, and to respond promptly and personally. In addition to creating value for influencers' Instagram pages, the page should be enriched with information and offer diverse content, including restaurant reviews, food preparation videos, personal stories about food experiences, and a variety of recipes.

Second, this study highlights the importance of interaction in encouraging eWOM and PV in influencer partnerships. Therefore, marketers can leverage the influence of food influencers to boost WOM marketing and user-generated content on Instagram. This could be done by increasing enthusiasm for publishing and sharing, uploading pictures of eating, and increasing interaction (Ibrahim et al. 2024; Ibrahim, Hazzam et al. 2025). For example, participating in restaurant events such as new openings or special menus, and the influencer directly participating in the experience via live broadcast or stories, providing detailed reviews and evaluations of dishes based on personal experience, and being honest in their opinions. They can use stories to provide quick snapshots of their restaurant experience, from entering the place to tasting the different dishes.

Third, when customers or followers actively engage with food influencers' Instagram content, influencers can increase their followers' PV and inspire them by creatively and authentically showcasing the restaurant's dishes, thereby encouraging positive eWOM. Marketers can generate inspiring content emphasizing unique aspects of the dining experience, such as behind-the-scenes preparation, chef stories, or customer testimonials. Inspiring content can motivate followers to share their experiences and recommendations, boosting WOM marketing. Influencers should be encouraged to actively share their followers' comments and feedback about the restaurant.

Although customer inspiration mediates the relationship between Instagram interaction and eWOM, the direct influence of Instagram interactions is also moderately powerful. Therefore, practitioners aiming to increase eWOM may achieve substantial results by enhancing consumers' active engagement with food influencers' Instagram pages – such as reading posts, exploring reviews, and considering recommendations – without necessarily prioritizing the cultivation of inspiration. This insight suggests straightforward strategies to encourage meaningful interactions that promote eWOM.

7.3. Limitations and future research

The limitations of this study should be acknowledged. First, this study concentrates on three main Instagram interaction outcomes: inspiration, PV, and eWOM behavior. Future studies could include other relevant outcomes, such as brand evangelism and loyalty (Polat et al. 2024). Although customer inspiration mediates the relationship between Instagram interaction and eWOM, its inclusion may add limited theoretical value. The

direct impact of Instagram interaction on eWOM is already significant, indicating that the overall model could be simplified without altering the results. Future research should investigate situations or conditions where customer inspiration plays a more vital role and explore other possible mediators that could better explain eWOM outcomes.

Second, the focus on specific Instagram content within the food industry should be expanded to make the findings more applicable across different contexts. Future research could include SMPs such as TikTok, X, YouTube, and Snapchat to identify potential differences. In addition, future research can examine other antecedents of inspiration, such as visual appeal, creativity, and content quality, across contexts like travel and tourism. Third, analyzing Instagram engagement across settings such as travel, blogging, and green influencers (Aljarah, Ibrahim et al. 2025) could provide more well-rounded insights. Fourth, this study examined inspiration and PV as mediators between Instagram interaction and eWOM, including the moderating role of gender. Future research might examine other potential links, such as the quality of customer–brand relationships, online brand engagement (Aljarah, López et al. 2025), and positive attitudes, factoring in elements like the type of online content, habits, generational differences, and age.

Fifth, only respondents fluent in English were invited to participate. Although English is widely spoken among this demographic, relying solely on English responses may have excluded potential participants and caused sampling bias. Additionally, some respondents could have overstated their English proficiency to avoid appearing incapable, which might have affected their understanding of certain items and introduced response bias. Future studies should address this by offering validated scales in English and Arabic to reduce language-related bias and increase inclusivity. Sixth, the findings of this study have limited generalizability since data were collected only in Jordan. Cultural norms and social media usage patterns could shape how Generation Z interacts with food influencers and expresses eWOM, making the results specific to this context. Future research should test the model in other cultural settings to improve transferability. Lastly, relying on online recruitment may have introduced sampling bias, as respondents were limited to active social media users who follow food influencers. This may affect how well the findings represent the broader consumer population. In addition, self-reported data may have introduced social desirability bias, as participants may have given responses they perceived as favorable rather than entirely accurate. Future studies could address this by using behavioral data, experiments, or mixed-method approaches.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Blend Ibrahim is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Tourism Management at the Faculty of Tourism, Balikesir University, Türkiye. His current research interests include digital marketing, social media marketing, tourism marketing, corporate social responsibility, consumer behavior, AI marketing and sustainable tourism. He has published in journals such as the International Journal of

Hospitality Management, Journal of Advertising, Internet Research, Journal of Sustainable Tourism, Computers & Education, Journal of Marketing Communications, Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing, Current Issues in Tourism, European Business Review, and The International Journal of Logistics Management.

Fatih Celik is an Associate Professor in the Department of Marketing and Advertising at Trabzon University, Trabzon, Türkiye. He completed his PhD from the Department of Public Relations and Publicity at Selçuk University, Türkiye, in 2019. His research interests include digital and social media marketing, influencer marketing, quantitative methods, systematic literature reviews, meta-analyses, and bibliometric analyses. His work has appeared in leading journals such as Journal of Advertising, Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing, International Journal of Consumer Studies, Current Issues in Tourism, International Journal of Human-Computer Interaction, and Business Ethics, the Environment & Responsibility.

Erose Sthapit is a Senior Lecturer at the department of marketing, international business, tourism, Manchester Metropolitan University. His research interests include memorable tourism experience, interactive value formation and sharing economy. He has published in high-ranking journals including Journal of Travel Research, Journal of International Contemporary Hospitality Management and Psychology & Marketing.

Nripendra P. Rana is a Professor of Digital Marketing and Systems and the Head of Department for International Business, Entrepreneurship, and Marketing at Queen's Business School of Queen's University Belfast, UK. He did his MBA as well as PhD from Swansea University, UK. His current research interests focus primarily on adoption and diffusion of emerging ICTs, e-commerce, m-commerce, e-government, digital and social media marketing, and role of artificial intelligence on consumer decision-making and behavior.

ORCID

Blend Ibrahim  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2410-765X>

Fatih Çelik  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3765-5284>

Erose Sthapit  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1650-3900>

Nripendra P. Rana  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1105-8729>

Statement of ethics

The study was approved by the /Brain Team (Beta) Science Association Institutional Review Board (Rp. 004.012.00 - 250,109-07). Permission was obtained from all respondents to collect data for this research via an informed consent form; participants were fully informed about the purposes of this research and how their responses would be used and stored.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

The author(s) used GenAI tools, including ChatGPT (OpenAI) and Gemini (Google), to enhance the clarity, language, and readability of this manuscript. After utilizing these tools, the author(s) thoroughly reviewed, revised, and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the accuracy and integrity of the final version.

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