



Dual Roles of Ghost Kitchen Website Informativeness and Perceived Personalization on Positive eWoM

الأدوار المزدوجة للمعلوماتية والتخصيص المدرك لمواقع المطابخ الشبكية في الكلمة المنطوقة الإلكترونية الإيجابية

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Abstract

المخلص

Ghost kitchens are restaurants without dining areas. Their primary goal is to sell and transport meals ordered online via their delivery service. Consequently, they usually do not have an open storefront. As a result, this paper explores the dual roles of website informativeness and perceived personalization of ghost kitchens in positive electronic word-of-mouth (eWoM). Besides, this paper examines the mediation effect of emotional value and the moderation function of website confidence. Data was obtained from 365 ghost kitchen website customers in Egypt. Data was analyzed using ADANCO-PLS v. 2.4 to test hypotheses and verify model fit. The findings demonstrated a significant and positive impact of website informativeness of ghost kitchen and perceived personalization of these websites on emotional value. Besides, emotional value significantly and positively affected positive eWoM. Further, emotional value partially mediated the nexuses between positive eWoM and both website informativeness and perceived personalization. Moreover, findings confirmed that the more customers trust ghost restaurant websites, the more emotional benefits they will experience and be able to spread positive word-of-mouth about these websites among friends and relatives online. This paper recommended that ghost kitchen operators invest in creating highly informative and user-friendly websites enhance personalization features to cater to individual customer preferences, and focus on building strong website trust through transparent practices and high-quality service. These strategies are crucial for enhancing customer satisfaction and fostering positive eWoM, which can significantly impact website reputation and customer acquisition in competitive online food delivery markets.

تُعتبر المطابخ الشبكية في جوهرها بمثابة مطاعم بدون مناطق مخصصة لتناول الطعام. هدفهم الأساسي هو بيع ونقل الوجبات المطلوبة عبر الإنترنت من خلال خدمة التوصيل الخاصة بهم. على هذا النحو، عادة لا يكون لديهم واجهة مفتوحة للبيع المباشر. نتيجة لذلك، يستكشف هذا البحث الأدوار المزدوجة لمعلوماتية مواقع الويب والتخصيص المدرك للمطاعم الشبكية في الكلمة المنطوقة الإلكترونية الإيجابية. علاوة على ذلك، يختبر هذا البحث التأثير الوسيط للقيمة العاطفية والدور المعدل للثقة في هذه المواقع. تم الحصول على البيانات من ٣٦٥ من عملاء مواقع المطابخ الشبكية في مصر. تم تحليل البيانات باستخدام ADANCO-PLS v. 2.4، وذلك لاختبار الفروض المقترحة، والتحقق من مدى ملاءمة النموذج. أظهرت النتائج وجود تأثير معنوي وإيجابي للمعلوماتية والتخصيص المدرك لهذه المواقع في القيمة العاطفية. إلى جانب ذلك، فإن القيمة العاطفية أثرت بشكل معنوي وإيجابي في الكلمة المنطوقة الإلكترونية الإيجابية. علاوة على ذلك، فإن القيمة العاطفية توسطت جزئياً في العلاقة بين الكلمة المنطوقة الإلكترونية الإيجابية وكل من معلوماتية مواقع الويب والتخصيص المدرك. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، أكدت النتائج أنه كلما زاد ثقة العملاء بمواقع المطاعم الشبكية، زادت الفوائد العاطفية التي ينتظرونها، بالتالي زادت قدراتهم على نشر أحاديث إيجابية شفوية حول هذه المواقع بين الأصدقاء والأقارب عبر الإنترنت. يوصي هذا البحث بأن يستثمر مشغلو المطابخ الشبكية في إنشاء مواقع ويب غنية بالمعلومات وسهلة الاستخدام، وتعزيز ميزات التخصيص لتلبية تفضيلات العملاء الفردية، والتركيز على بناء ثقة قوية بمواقع المطابخ الشبكية من خلال ممارسات شفافة وخدمة عالية الجودة. تعتبر هذه الاستراتيجيات حاسمة لتعزيز رضا العملاء وتعزيز الكلمة المنطوقة الإلكترونية الإيجابية، والتي يمكن أن تؤثر بشكل كبير في سمعة هذه المواقع واكتساب العملاء في الأسواق التنافسية لتوصيل الطعام عبر الإنترنت.

Keywords: Ghost kitchen websites, positive eWoM, website confidence, informativeness, restaurant industry

الكلمات الدالة: مواقع المطابخ الشبكية، الكلمة المنطوقة الإلكترونية الإيجابية، الثقة في المواقع، المعلوماتية، صناعة المطاعم

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1. Introduction

The restaurant industry has long been characterized by high levels of competition, which has led to the development of innovative business models aimed at enhancing operational efficiency and profitability (Giousmpasoglou et al., 2022). Among these innovations, ghost kitchens, also known as virtual, dark, or cloud kitchens, represent a significant transformation within the industry (Kulshreshtha & Sharma, 2022; Cheng et al., 2023; Jiang et al., 2024). Ghost kitchens have emerged as a new business model that is reshaping the hospitality sector (Khan, 2020). These kitchens gained traction in 2010 with the rise of online food delivery platforms, and their popularity surged during the COVID-19 pandemic (Riviera, 2019; Pookulangara et al., 2023).

The evolving digital landscape has been crucial in facilitating this trend (Kulshreshtha & Sharma, 2022; Pookulangara et al., 2023), as evidenced by the significant increase in food delivery services during COVID-19, which established ghost kitchens as a major trend in the global restaurant sector (Hakim et al., 2022). Typically, platforms specialized for delivery services operate these commercial food preparation facilities specifically for delivery-only meals (Lee, 2020), eliminating dine-in amenities and direct customer-staff interactions (Cai et al., 2022). Ghost kitchens represent a strategic shift towards simpler, more minimalistic food service operations, characterized by lower capital investment, reduced operational costs, and fewer staff requirements (Hakim et al., 2022).

The popularity of ghost kitchens has made meal delivery the fastest-growing segment of the restaurant industry (Singh, 2019). This evolution has compelled restaurateurs to compete not only on the basis of price and quality but also for supremacy in last-mile delivery (Kelso, 2020). Ghost kitchens respond to these competitive pressures by scaling and streamlining delivery operations through the use of batch-prepped ingredients, expedited hand-offs to couriers, and flexible staffing arrangements (Loizos, 2019). According to Parikh et al. (2021), website characteristics play a crucial role in web-based system adoption in the ghost kitchen context. Content accuracy and informativeness significantly influence customer trust and engagement. These websites serve as a critical medium for accessing precise information essential for decision-making and fostering positive electronic word-of-mouth (eWoM).

Existing literature explores the impact of digital touchpoints, such as website design, customer reviews, and website experience, on customers' purchase intentions. For instance, Hakim et al. (2022) found that customer experience and the quality of food delivery websites positively influence customers' intention to pay for ghost kitchens. They also noted the significant roles of website content and restaurant presentation in customer decision-making. Pookulangara et al. (2023) emphasized the need for visually appealing websites, improved customer interfaces, and attractive content on landing pages to enhance customers' perceptions of trust in ghost kitchens.

Additionally, Kulshreshtha and Sharma (2022) found that courteous employees and customer support significantly impact generation Z customers' purchase decisions in ghost kitchens. Using prospect theory, Cai et al. (2022) discovered that ongoing trust in ghost kitchens is positively influenced by personal and societal benefits but negatively impacted by societal risks. Similarly, Pookulangara et al. (2023), based on the theory of consumption value, identified that customer perceptions of innovation, utility motivations for price and food variety, and hedonic motivations positively influence trust in ghost kitchens. Giousmpasoglou et al. (2024), in systematic literature reviews, provided insights into employees' working conditions, agreements, turnover, and exploitation in the context of ghost kitchens. Recently, Leung et al. (2024) demonstrated that customers show higher purchase intentions for virtual kitchens when they attribute virtual kitchen adoption to external reasons, such as labor shortages.

In this paper, the Egyptian context was chosen to study the ghost kitchen phenomenon due to the rapid growth of the online food delivery market (Kahil et al., 2025), driven by changing consumer behavior and increased reliance on online websites (Kamal et al., 2022). Egypt is one of the emerging markets that have witnessed a significant expansion of this business model (Kahil et al., 2025). For example, The Food Lab website has emerged as a cloud kitchen offering services to multiple websites, allowing emerging and independent restaurants to enter the market without massive infrastructure investments (Kamal et al., 2022). Similarly, Fresh Food Market website offers unique ghost kitchen

website experiences, capitalizing on the growing demand for high-quality, ready-made meals. These examples reflect how Egyptian firms have adapted to global shifts in the hospitality sector (Kahil et al., 2025). Hence, this makes them a critical model for studying the factors influencing the success and spread of this concept in dynamic economic contexts.

Accordingly, the current study develops three main objectives as follows: a) eliciting the effects of informativeness and perceived personalization of ghost kitchen websites on emotional value; b) determining the nexus between emotional value and positive eWoM towards ghost kitchen websites; and c) verifying the effect of website confidence in the nexus between emotional value and eWoM. Figure 1 illustrates the dual roles of personalization and informativeness of ghost kitchen websites in enhancing positive eWoM. It also shows that customers' emotional values, derived from the perceived personalization and informativeness of these websites, will increase their motives to spread positive eWoM among their families, coworkers, and classmates. Furthermore, customer confidence in ghost kitchen websites may strengthen or weaken the effect of their emotional values on spreading positive eWoM.

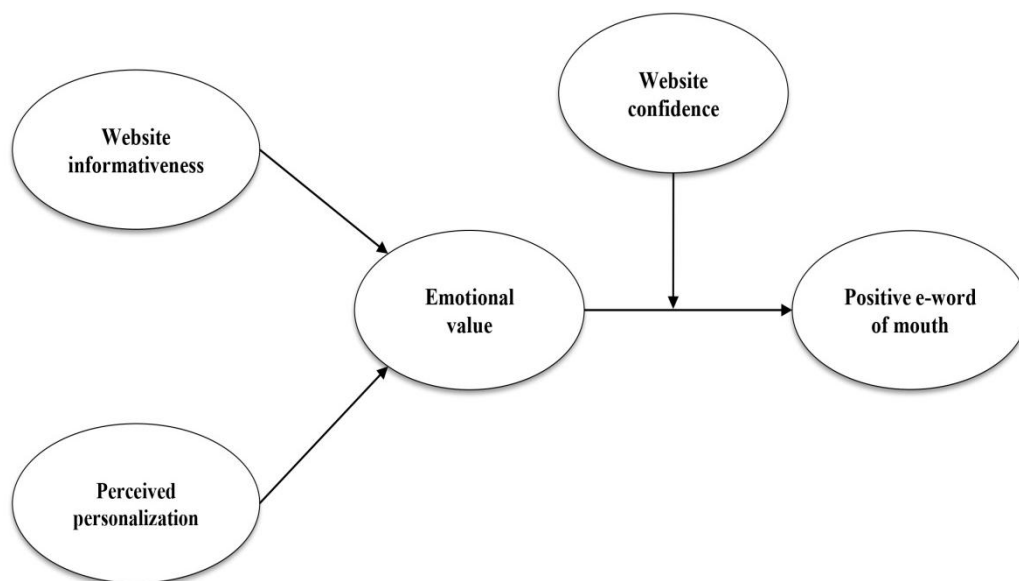


Figure 1. Research model

2. Literature review and hypotheses development

2.1. Ghost kitchens

Ghost kitchens (known as cloud, dark, and virtual restaurants) are gaining global popularity (Khan et al., 2023; Pookulangara et al., 2023). These entities operate exclusively on a delivery basis, functioning as fulfillment centers for meal deliveries and virtual restaurants not open to the public (Shapiro, 2023). Ghost kitchens accept orders solely through online systems and do not offer dine-in facilities (Jones et al., 2024). They utilize a central kitchen to prepare food for delivery directly to customers' doorsteps, focusing entirely on takeaways and virtual websites (Vaughan, 2022). Lacking a storefront, dining room, waitstaff, or public presence, ghost kitchens are optimized purely for food delivery through services like GoFood, GrabFood, and ShopeeFood (Festivalia & Swantari, 2022). As such, a single operator manages multiple mini-restaurants from one kitchen, unbeknownst to customers (Shapiro, 2023). By eliminating the need for large physical spaces and dine-in services, ghost kitchens offer a cost-effective alternative, significantly reducing variable costs and reflecting trends reshaping the restaurant industry as delivery becomes mainstream (Gouveia, 2021).

Ghost kitchens operate in various ways: as independent restaurateurs like Unfurl and Virt websites, extensions of established websites (e.g., Bowl Restaurant Farnesa by Chipotle) or standalone entities partnering with renowned restaurants or third-party businesses, exemplified by Kroger's partnership with Kitchen United and Chick-fil-A's shared ghost kitchen with DoorDash, with orders placed through websites, online food delivery (OFD) platforms, web portals, or via phone

calls (Pookulangara et al., 2023). Hakim et al. (2023) identified six models of ghost kitchens: independent, shell-type, franchises, virtual kitchens in standard restaurants (different menu), virtual kitchens in standard restaurants (similar menu), and home-based dark kitchens. For instance, Uber Eats collaborates with brick-and-mortar restaurant owners to develop delivery-only menus and websites.

Major restaurant websites have also adopted this model, adapting to safety concerns during COVID-19 by launching virtual websites from their existing kitchens or partnering with other restaurants as host kitchens. Notable examples include it's Just Wings (operating out of Chili's), Wow Bao (utilizing partner kitchen programs), and Famous Dave's (leveraging existing Granite City kitchens and other host kitchens). This model enhances in-store business volumes, diversifies revenue sources, and reduces operational costs, emerging as cost- and labor-effective strategies in a slim-margin industry (Chen & House, 2022).

2.2. Website informativeness

Website informativeness refers to a website's ability to inform customers about product choices, encompassing key attributes such as information timeliness, accuracy, usefulness, and completeness. These characteristics—being up-to-date, accurate, useful, complete, and well-presented—are critical determinants of perceived website information quality (Lin, 2007). Richard and Chebat (2016) define website informativeness as the degree to which a website is resourceful, informative, and useful. Website capability to deliver relevant content influences customers' feelings of security, reducing confusion and discomfort. According to Chakraborty et al. (2003), information cues' type and frequency significantly impact perceived website informativeness. In the ghost kitchen context, website informativeness reflects how customers find the provided credible and useful content. It is crucial for customers to find necessary information easily and swiftly; otherwise, they may turn to competitors (Akhundova, 2022).

Additionally, when perceived as useful, websites foster positive attitudes among customers, enhancing their willingness to engage (Pavlou et al., 2007). This reduces resistance to change and facilitates system adoption. According to signaling theory, website informativeness meets customer needs, cultivating trust in systems and favorable perceptions of its usability. Previous studies emphasize the importance of a unified approach to the construct of website information, which comprises three dimensions (Montoya-Weiss et al., 2003): information utility, assessing the usefulness of information for task completion; information timeliness, concerning information currency; and information accuracy, encompassing content correctness and integration.

2.3. Perceived personalization

Personalization involves tailoring marketing messages based on customer demographics, preferences, context, and content by utilizing their personal information. Gaber et al. (2019) define personalization as a company's ability to recognize and treat its customers as individuals through personal messaging, targeted banner ads, or other personalized interactions. Personalized recommendations that align with customer needs can significantly reduce search effort and time, enhancing customer experiences (Kim et al., 2021; Yoon & Lee, 2021). Big data empowers organizations to gain a deeper understanding of customer demand, behavior, and satisfaction (Li et al., 2018). Leveraging computer algorithms significantly enhances the potential for customization, leading to adaptive and personalized services that generate unique experiences and improve customer satisfaction (Reinartz et al., 2019; Santos & Gonçalves, 2021).

Additionally, organizations can make extensive predictions (Yeomans et al., 2019). Studies have demonstrated that perceived personalization is a critical factor in customer trust in online platforms (Martínez-González & Álvarez-Albelo, 2021; Su et al., 2022) and can positively influence customer attitudes toward recommended content (Shanahan et al., 2019; Yoon & Lee, 2021). Personalized recommendations are utilized by a wide range of commercial organizations, particularly comprehensive retail platforms. For instance, Amazon and Taobao provide personalized product

recommendations to reduce customers' search burden and streamline the purchasing process (Liu et al., 2021). The hospitality industry, including ghost kitchens, follows this trend.

With the rise of online food delivery platforms, vast amounts of data related to customer feedback, preferences, and dining experiences are generated (Lim et al., 2022). Customers use this information to choose their meals but face challenges in manually processing large volumes of user-generated content (Abbasi-Moud et al., 2021). Consequently, various personalized recommendations have been proposed. Ghost kitchens aim to extract customer preferences and provide tailored recommendations (Pesce et al., 2019). These personalized recommendations leverage data from online browsing cookies and habit records to assess customers, generate customer groups, identify demand areas, and optimize marketing periods (Stylos et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2024; Yu et al., 2020).

2.4. Emotional value

The successful adoption of products or services is significantly influenced by customer perceptions of the functional value they provide (Walsh & Singh, 2022). Recent research has explored this influence from customer perspective (Singh et al., 2021). Walsh and Singh (2022) conceptualize perceived value as comprising five dimensions: emotional, social, conditional, epistemic, and functional. Within the context of ghost kitchens, emphasis is placed on emotional value, which significantly impacts the purchase and consumption of goods and services (Oyedele & Simpson, 2018; Singh et al., 2021). The potential of ghost kitchen websites to evoke feelings of pleasure has highlighted emotional value as a critical dimension of perceived value.

Prior research have increasingly recognized emotion as a fundamental aspect of perceived value, including studies focusing on online and self-selection technologies (Chen et al., 2018; Singh et al., 2021; Zeithaml et al., 2020). Social identity theory further posits that perceived emotional value is linked to an individual's identity salience, particularly when they experience positive emotional reinforcement from engaging with specific ghost kitchen offerings or digital experiences (Oyedele & Simpson, 2018). Website design plays a crucial role in shaping customers' perceptions of emotional value. Initially focused on visual design, web design has evolved to prioritize customer convenience by integrating analytics and structuring information effectively. Design objectives are to engage customers, facilitate interaction, and enhance conversion rates and behavioral metrics. The visual appearance of ghost kitchen websites—including layout, images, and overall design—significantly impacts customer perceptions (Yu et al., 2020). Wobbrock et al. (2021) indicated that visual elements influence online credibility judgments and can generate positive attitudes toward advertisements. Photographs and other visual elements attract customers and shape their perception of the service (Espigares-Jurado et al., 2020; Lourenço et al., 2020). Thus, this paper hypothesizes that:

H1a. Website informativeness positively affects emotional value.

Emotional value refers to an individual's feelings toward a particular event or scenario, which can impact their sentiment (Pookulangara et al., 2023). Individuals "acquire" emotional value by associating specific feelings with certain experiences, including the consumption of products and services (Lin & Huang, 2012). The motivation to use OFDS is driven by various consumption values (Alavi et al., 2016). Emotional value has been shown to positively influence customers' selection of organic foods (Lin & Huang, 2012) and local food (Rousta & Jamshidi, 2020). The positive nexus between emotional value and attitude is well documented in the literature (Baek & Oh, 2021). Additionally, evidence supports the relationship between hedonic motivation and attitude when ordering food through OFDS (Jun et al., 2021).

Customers exhibit a clear preference for receiving content that is personalized and aligns with their interests. Personalized advertisements target customers individually, enhancing the relationship between advertisers and customers (Saadeghvaziri & Hosseini, 2011). Personalization allows ghost kitchens to offer foods and services tailored to customer preferences and requirements, fostering cognitive and emotional trust in online vendors. Unlike traditional restaurant service providers (Saadeghvaziri & Hosseini, 2011), which can establish trust through face-to-face interactions such as greeting, seating, food ordering, and ambiance, ghost kitchens rely on personalized services to build

initial trust (Su et al., 2022). When customers receive personalized service, they are more likely to feel satisfied and develop trust in ghost kitchens. Additionally, personalized experiences create a perception of benevolence, indicating ghost kitchens' genuine intent to cater to unique customer preferences, enhancing website trust (Jiang et al., 2024). Thus, this paper hypothesizes that:

H1b. Perceived personalization positively affects emotional value.

2.5. Positive electronic-word-of-mouth

Positive eWOM has evolved significantly alongside the rapid growth of social networking platforms, transforming the Internet into a dynamic space for customers' feedback and interaction (Ali et al., 2020). Traditionally, WOM was primarily perceived as face-to-face communication, but the advent and expansion of online networks have given rise to eWOM as a distinct mode of communication (Soliman et al., 2022). Cheng and Zhou (2010) define eWOM as the dissemination of positive or negative opinions, experiences, and recommendations about products or services by current or former customers through the Internet, reaching a wide audience. eWoM has become a critical factor in customer decision-making processes, influencing potential customers' perceptions and purchase intentions (Yan et al., 2018). The impact of eWoM is amplified in digital platforms, where customers rely on reviews and feedback from other customers to make informed decisions (Babić Rosario et al., 2020).

In the ghost kitchen context, positive eWoM can play a significant role in shaping website reputation and credibility (Cai et al., 2022; Line et al., 2024). As customers share their positive experiences with others online, it can attract new customers and encourage repeat purchasing (Previte et al., 2019). With research indicating that positive online reviews can significantly boost sales and customer loyalty (De Maeyer, 2012). Emotional values, as a component of perceived value, are closely linked to eWoM (Previte et al., 2019). When customers experience positive emotions during their interactions with a ghost kitchen, they are more likely to share their experiences with others (Jiang et al., 2024). Positive emotional experiences, such as satisfaction, joy, and pleasure, can lead to an increased likelihood of engaging in positive eWoM (Septianto & Chiew, 2018; Serra-Cantallops et al., 2020). Therefore, this paper assumes that:

H2. Emotional value positively affects positive e-WoM.

Website verbal and visual stimuli are fundamental to the design and functionality of any website (Bleier et al., 2019; Jeannot et al., 2022). Cai and Xu (2011) emphasized the critical role of these elements in shaping the layout and effectiveness of e-commerce sites. Coursaris and Van Osch (2016) found that both verbal and visual stimuli positively influence customer perceptions of digital offerings within the food industry (Atwal et al., 2019). With the widespread adoption of Web 2.0 technologies, information quality has become increasingly crucial in determining how customers engage with online content and the types of content that elicit favorable responses (An et al., 2021; Trehan & Sharma, 2021; Yuan et al., 2019). Customers assess the quality of recommendations based on factors such as information richness, accuracy, and authenticity (Yu et al., 2020). Pleasant emotions elicited by browsing a website can lead to favorable attitudes (Jeannot et al., 2022).

When customers share positive experiences, these sentiments can enhance the perceived informativeness of a website, making customers more likely to view it as a valuable resource (Lee & Hong, 2016). Encountering positive electronic word-of-mouth (e-WoM) generates emotional value, fostering a sense of connection and trust, making customers more receptive to personalized content and interactions (Rajaobelina et al., 2022). Trust is essential for ensuring customer preferences for service providers and strengthening their relationship (Yuan et al., 2020). Higher levels of trust improve customers' attitudes toward online platforms, making their products and services more preferred (Shi et al., 2021; Su et al., 2022). This enhanced emotional engagement through positive e-WoM can lead customers to feel that the website offers a more tailored and personalized experience (Loureiro & Bilro, 2020). Therefore, this paper purposed that:

H3. Emotional value mediates the nexus between positive e-WoM and a) website informativeness and b) perceived personalization.

2.6. Website confidence

The concept of customer confidence has garnered significant attention from researchers across various fields (Anuwitchanont, 2011; Al-Majali, 2020). Confidence is considered one of the most influential factors in customer behavior, playing a critical role in the nexus between companies/websites and their customers, (Anuwitchanont, 2011). Customer confidence aims to build long-term, strengthened relationships between customers and products (Laroche et al., 2012). Confidence is described as “*the willingness of the average customer to rely on website ability to perform its stated functions*” (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001, p. 82). Website confidence is characterized by website values’ consistent promise to customers (Al-Majali, 2020). This confidence is a critical factor influencing customer intention, significantly affecting attitudinal loyalty and behavioral loyalty (Anuwitchanont, 2011). Website confidence can significantly impact the effectiveness of positive electronic word-of-mouth (Cheung et al., 2009). When customers have high confidence in websites, their positive emotional experiences are more likely to translate into positive eWoM (Serra-Cantalops et al., 2018). A stronger website confidence can amplify the effects of emotional value on eWoM by reinforcing customers’ willingness to share their favorable experiences and recommendations (Seifert & Kwon, 2020). Thus, this paper proposes that:

H4. Website confidence moderates the nexus between positive emotional value and e-WoM.

3. Methods

3.1. Research context and instruments

Ghost kitchens in Egypt have become a growing model in the hospitality sector, responding to the increased demand for food delivery services through digital platforms without the need for physical restaurants. This model relies on lowering operational costs by eliminating the need for seating and helping food and beverage entrepreneurs enter the market with fewer resources than traditional restaurants. In Egypt, using ghost kitchens is on the rise due to the rapid growth of the food delivery market and the proliferation of specialized apps (e.g., Elmenus and Talabat), making it essential to understand their impact on the tourism sector and the local economy. A prominent example of ghost kitchens in Egypt is The Food Lab, one of the country's first cloud kitchen incubators, providing an integrated platform for emerging restaurants without massive infrastructure investments. This model allows restaurants to operate different brands from a single kitchen, enhancing operational efficiency. Another example is Fresh Food Market, which delivers high-quality meals through a central kitchen serving different areas without multiple branches.

As such, these sites were selected to examine the relationship between informativeness and perceived personalization of ghost kitchen websites, given their prominent role in providing a digital-based dining experience and online interaction with customers. These websites provide detailed information about menus, offers, and delivery times, which affects customer perceptions of service quality and its suitability to their needs. Additionally, these websites rely on interactive user interface designs and personalized content that enhance customer experiences, potentially influencing customers’ propensity to post positive online reviews. Through the mediating role of emotional value, this paper seeks to understand how customer experiences with these websites leads to positive emotional attachments that enhance their digital engagement, affecting ghost kitchen websites’ reputation and expansion in the Egyptian market.

The questionnaire survey was employed as a key data collection strategy in this quantitative investigation. Six primary parts comprised the questionnaire form. Study objectives, voluntary nature of participation, participant anonymity, the confidentiality of their personal information, and response characteristics were all covered in the first part, which served as a brief introduction. The second part assessed ghost kitchen website informativeness; the third part recorded perceived personalization; the fourth part looked at emotional values of these websites; the fifth part assessed positive eWoM; and the last part examined website confidence. Each item on measurement scales was modified from prior

studies. Website informativeness was assessed using four items derived from Parikh et al. (2021). Perceived personalization was measured with five items modified from Yang et al. (2024). Four items were employed to gauge emotional value, as cited by Walsh and Singh (2022). Positive eWoM was assessed using three items developed by Soliman et al. (2022), while four items were employed to gauge website confidence adapted from Al-Majali (2020). A 7-Likert scale was employed in this paper, ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree.

3.2. Sampling and data collection

The research population consists of domestic customers of ghost kitchen websites in Egypt, specifically The Food Lab and Fresh Food Market website users, who describe a key segment of customers relying on these digital platforms for online food ordering. This category was chosen for several reasons. First, the rapid growth of food delivery services in Egypt and the increasing reliance on ghost kitchens contributes to this. Second, these platforms play a role in enhancing the online ordering experience by offering diverse menus and personalized services. The total number of customers using these platforms is estimated to be 20 thousand, although there are no official statistics, making these sites among the most widespread in the industry. Due to the difficulty of reaching all potential customers, a convenience sample method was used to select study participants, with 600 questionnaires distributed to customers who had previously used these platforms. While this sample may not be representative of all ghost kitchen customers in Egypt, it provides crucial data on customer behaviors and attitudes toward digital personalization and emotional value. Therefore, it helps analyze the impact of these factors on spreading positive online word of mouth and enhancing trust in these sites within the Egyptian market. Using Google Form link, a total of 368 of the distributed forms were filled out and sent back, yielding an approximate response rate of 61.33%. After survey forms were reviewed and returned, 365 legitimate forms were left for analysis. Three forms were omitted due to incompleteness or insincerity issues. This sample size far surpasses the recommended minimum sample size (ten times the number of arrowheads pointed to a latent construct), which makes it enough for analyzing the suggested model (Hair et al., 2017). Hence, the existing sample size is adequate for further analyses.

3.3. Data analysis

To investigate the study's hypotheses, partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) with ADANCO-PLS v. 2.4 was employed. Both outer and inner models were evaluated using the PLS-SEM analytic techniques recommended by Hair et al. (2017). A number of statistics, including Cronbach alpha, composite reliability, and heterotrait-monotrait, were employed to establish construct reliability and validity (Jhantasana, 2023). This technique is suitable because it deals with data that is not normally distributed and has large sample sizes (Fassott et al., 2016), in addition to conducting complex models that focus on testing mediation and moderation (Lin et al., 2024; Memon et al., 2021). Because self-rated surveys permit some common variance among indicators, they pose a risk to data integrity (Kock et al., 2021). This study decided to take some preventative action to lessen the problem. To promote truthful and precise responses, this study guaranteed participants' anonymity and the privacy of their personal data.

4. Results

4.1. Respondent profile

This study's sample consisted of target respondents drawn from a variety of demographic categories (see Table 1). As such, 69.6% of respondents were female, and their age was between 25 and 34 years old (53.7%). Regarding education level, most respondents (68.8%) graduated. Further, respondents' usage of e-menu "ghost kitchen websites" was anchored between 40.5% of them having frequent usage and 28.5% of them having never used them.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics

Characteristics	Category	N = 365	
		Frequency	%
Gender	Male	111	30.4
	Female	254	69.6
Age (years)	Less than 25	54	14.8
	25-34	196	53.7
	35 and more	115	31.5
Educational level	Graduate	251	68.8
	Non-graduate	114	31.2
E-menu website usage	Frequently	148	40.5
	Seldom	113	31
	Never	104	28.5

4.2. Outer model estimation

To demonstrate construct validity and reliability, the existing study employed a number of statistical outputs (see Table 2 and Figure 2). First, composite reliability was greater than 0.70, indicating that all measurements had internal consistency and reliability (Memon et al., 2021). Next, the significance of outer loadings with values greater than 0.70—aside from BCD4, which had a value of 0.066 and was thus excluded (Hair et al., 2017)—and average variance extracted values with values greater than 0.50—which confirmed all measures' convergent validity—were examined to assess convergent validity (Memon et al., 2021). At last, no heterotrait-monotrait ratio across constructs was found to be higher than the HTMT 0.90 criterion, indicating robust discriminant validity (see Table 3).

Table 2. Reliability and validity

Constructs	Code	Items	Indicator loadings	Composite reliability (CR)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
Website informativeness	WIF1	Ghost kitchen websites (e.g., The Food Lab and Fresh Food Market) would give me quick and easy access of menu information.	0.853	0.922	0.748
	WIF2	Information obtained on ghost kitchen websites (e.g., The Food Lab and Fresh Food Market) would be useful.	0.875		
	WIF3	Information obtained on ghost kitchen websites (e.g., The Food Lab and Fresh Food Market) would be helpful.	0.872		
	WIF4	Ghost kitchen websites (e.g., The Food Lab and Fresh Food Market) are functional for me to choose menu items.	0.860		
Perceived personalization	PPZ1	Personalized recommended services on ghost kitchen websites (e.g., The Food Lab and Fresh Food Market) match my needs.	0.838	0.919	0.695
	PPZ2	I think ghost kitchen websites (e.g., The Food Lab and Fresh Food Market) enable me to order menu items that are tailor-made for me.	0.830		
	PPZ3	Overall, ghost kitchen websites (e.g., The Food Lab and Fresh Food Market) are tailored to my mood situation.	0.829		
	PPZ4	Ghost kitchen websites (e.g., The Food Lab and Fresh Food Market) make me feel I am a unique customer.	0.859		
	PPZ5	I believe ghost kitchen websites (e.g., The Food Lab and Fresh Food Market) are customized to my needs.	0.813		

Emotional value	EMV1	I like browsing available options on ghost kitchen websites (e.g., The Food Lab and Fresh Food Market) to get new ideas about what to eat.	0.814	0.858	0.602
	EMV2	I have fun interacting with ghost kitchen websites (e.g., The Food Lab and Fresh Food Market).	0.787		
	EMV3	Browsing available options on ghost kitchen websites (e.g., The Food Lab and Fresh Food Market) provides me with a lot of enjoyment.	0.770		
	EMV4	Ghost kitchen websites are entertaining.	0.732		
Positive eWoM	PWM1	I get advice about ghost kitchen websites (e.g., The Food Lab and Fresh Food Market).	0.801	0.854	0.661
	PWM2	My friends share their personal experiences about ghost kitchen websites (e.g., The Food Lab and Fresh Food Market) with me.	0.810		
	PWM3	I get positively about ghost kitchen website (e.g., The Food Lab and Fresh Food Market) advantages.	0.827		
Webiste confidence	BCD1	I trust ghost kitchen websites (e.g., The Food Lab and Fresh Food Market) that appeared in social media.	0.856	0.803	0.564
	BCD2	I rely on ghost kitchen websites (e.g., The Food Lab and Fresh Food Market) that appeared in social media.	0.870		
	BCD3	Ghost kitchen websites are honest websites (e.g., The Food Lab and Fresh Food Market) that appeared in social media.	0.873		
	BCD4	Ghost kitchen websites (e.g., The Food Lab and Fresh Food Market) that appeared in social media are safe.	0.066		

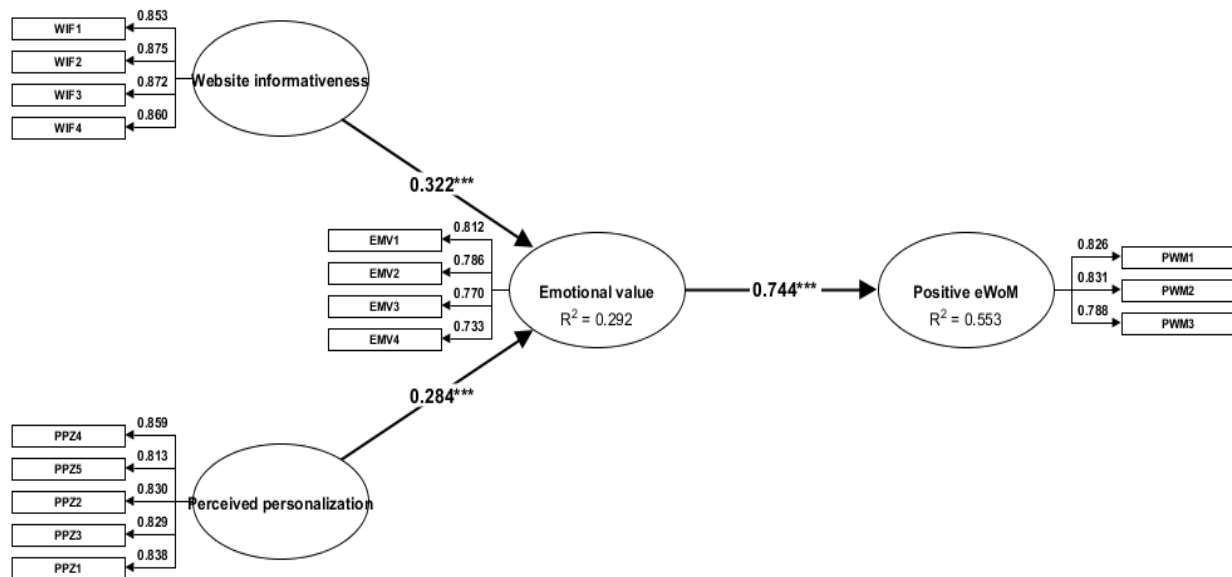


Figure 2. Measurement model findings

Table 3. Discriminant validity (HTMT)

	Construct	1	2	3	4	5
1.	Website informativeness					
2.	Perceived personalization	0.563				
3.	Emotional value	0.584	0.661			
4.	Positive eWoM	0.762	0.583	0.636		
5.	Website confidence	0.718	0.463	0.466	0.633	

4.3. Inner model estimation

Prior to examining the postulated hypotheses, model fit was asserted by checking the effect size for each path between independent and dependent variables and the coefficient of determination (R^2) for independent variables clustered in dependent variables (Memon et al., 2021). The effect size values presented in Table 4 indicated that effect sizes (f^2) were acceptable because they exceeded the 0.02 threshold, and R^2 values explained 29.2% of the variance in emotional value and 55.3% of the variance in positive eWoM, which is more than the permissible limit (10%). Results confirm that the inner model has a reasonable fit for the hypotheses proposed to be tested (Hair et al., 2017). Findings confirmed (see Table 4) that emotional value was positively affected by website informativeness ($\beta = 0.322$; $t = 5.454$, $p < 0.001$) and perceived personalization ($\beta = 0.284$; $t = 5.171$, $p < 0.001$). This supports hypotheses H1a and H1b. Likewise, emotional value positively affected positive eWoM ($\beta = 0.744$; $t = 25.742$, $p < 0.001$), accepting H2.

Next, the mediating role of emotional value and the extent of its role, whether it is a full or partial mediation, were investigated (Memon et al., 2021). As such, Table 4 findings proved that website informativeness positively affected positive eWoM through emotional value ($\beta = 0.239$; $t = 5.137$, $p < 0.001$), accepting H3a. Similarly, perceived personalization positively affected positive eWoM through emotional value ($\beta = 0.211$; $t = 4.970$, $p < 0.001$), accepting H3b. This evidences that emotional value partially mediated the nexus between positive eWoM and its antecedents (i.e., perceived personalization and website informativeness). On the other hand, two-stage approach was employed to verify the moderation effect of website confidence (Fassott et al., 2016). In Stage 1, findings showed that website confidence positively affected positive eWoM ($\beta = 0.421$; $t = 11.277$, $p < 0.001$), as well as Stage 2 findings confirmed that emotional value positively affected positive eWoM ($\beta = 0.668$; $t = 20.671$, $p < 0.001$). Accordingly, Table 4 results indicated that the interaction term “emotional value \times website confidence” positively affected positive eWoM ($\beta = 0.186$; $t = 3.661$, $p < 0.01$).

Table 4. Paths testing findings

	Paths	β	t-value	p-value	f^2	Supported?
H1a	Website informativeness \rightarrow Emotional value	0.322***	5.454	0.000	0.095	Yes
H1b	Perceived personalization \rightarrow Emotional value	0.284***	5.171	0.000	0.074	Yes
H2	Emotional value \rightarrow Positive eWoM	0.744***	25.742	0.000	0.894	Yes
H3a	Website informativeness \rightarrow Emotional value \rightarrow Positive eWoM	0.239***	5.137	0.000	-	Yes
H3b	Perceived personalization \rightarrow Emotional value \rightarrow Positive eWoM	0.211***	4.970	0.000	-	Yes
Stage1	Website confidence \rightarrow Positive eWoM	0.421***	11.277	0.000		
Stage2	Emotional value \rightarrow Positive eWoM	0.668***	20.671	0.000		
H4	Emotional value*Website confidence \rightarrow Positive eWoM	0.186**	3.661	0.004	-	Yes
<i>Overall model assessment</i>		Emotional value			Positive eWoM	
R^2		0.292			0.553	

Interpreting the interaction term, high- and low-level slopes were conducted. Figure 3 findings showed that the more customers' confidence in ghost kitchen websites, the more emotional benefits they will experience and be able to spread positive word-of-mouth about these websites among friends and relatives online. This confirms that H4 was supported, which proves that website confidence strengthened the positive nexus between emotional value and positive eWoM.



Figure 3. Moderation analysis findings

5. Discussion

This paper confirms that website informativeness and perceived personalization significantly enhance emotional value, which in turn drives positive eWoM. Additionally, website confidence moderates the relationship between emotional value and positive eWoM, highlighting the importance of website trust in amplifying the effects of customer satisfaction on word-of-mouth recommendations. Findings reflected the positive relationship between website informativeness and emotional values, emphasizing the importance of detailed and relevant information in enhancing customer satisfaction and emotional engagement (Parikh et al., 2021). This finding underscores the value of providing comprehensive information and functionality in ghost kitchen websites, which aligns with the views of Parikh et al. (2021), who highlighted that well-organized and informative websites contribute to a more engaging customer experiences.

The significant effect of perceived personalization on emotional value corroborates research by Yang et al. (2024) and Walsh and Singh (2022), who argue that personalization fosters a deeper emotional connection by catering to individual preferences and needs. This result suggests that ghost kitchen website that offer tailored recommendations and customization options are more likely to enhance customers' emotional experiences, which is consistent with Yang et al. (2024). The strong positive effect of emotional value on positive eWoM is in line with Soliman et al. (2022) that links positive emotional experiences with the likelihood of sharing favorable opinions. This supports the hypothesis that customers who derive emotional satisfaction from ghost kitchen websites are more inclined to recommend them to others, contributing to positive eWoM.

The partial mediation of emotional value in the relationships between website informativeness and positive eWoM, as well as perceived personalization and positive eWoM, highlights its critical role in shaping customer experiences and influencing word-of-mouth behaviors. This finding is consistent with the literature indicating that emotional value acts as a key driver of eWoM (Walsh & Singh, 2022). The moderation effect of website confidence on the relationship between emotional value and positive eWoM suggests that customers with higher confidence in websites are more likely to engage in positive eWoM. This aligns with the findings of Al-Majali (2020), which emphasize that website trust enhances the impact of positive experiences on eWoM. This underscores the importance of building strong website confidence to amplify the effects of emotional value on customer recommendations.

6. Conclusion and recommendation

This study underscores the critical role of website informativeness and perceived personalization in fostering positive electronic word-of-mouth (eWoM) for ghost kitchens. By highlighting the mediating effect of emotional value and the moderating influence of website confidence, the findings provide a comprehensive understanding of how digital interactions shape customer perceptions and behaviors in the context of online food delivery. Specifically, the results confirm that informative and personalized websites enhance customers' emotional value, which, in turn, drives positive eWoM. Furthermore, the study demonstrates that strong website confidence amplifies the emotional benefits experienced by customers, thereby encouraging them to share favorable recommendations online. In light of these insights, ghost kitchen operators must prioritize strategies that enhance customer engagement and satisfaction. First, website informativeness should be a core focus. Ghost kitchen websites must ensure that menus and related content are comprehensive, accessible, and updated regularly. Providing clear and concise information about food options, ingredients, and promotions improves user satisfaction and encourages repeat usage by fostering trust and reliability. Second, investing in personalization technologies is essential for creating tailored user experiences. By leveraging AI and data analytics, ghost kitchens can offer personalized recommendations, dynamic menus, and mood-based content that align with individual customer preferences.

Third, building and maintaining website confidence is vital. Operators should prioritize transparency in operations, consistent food quality, and responsive customer service. Actively promoting positive customer reviews and testimonials further bolsters trust and positions websites as reliable and customer-focused. Additionally, fostering emotional engagement through innovative website features can significantly enhance customer loyalty. Incorporating elements like gamified ordering processes, curated culinary experiences, or interactive content adds an enjoyable and entertaining dimension to the user experience, creating lasting emotional value. Finally, encouraging positive electronic word-of-mouth (eWoM) is crucial for expanding customer bases. Operators can design social media campaigns and referral programs that incentivize users to share their experiences. Offering discounts, loyalty points, or exclusive perks for referrals not only motivates customers to spread the word but also strengthens website advocacy. By implementing these recommendations, ghost kitchen operators can effectively enhance their digital presence, boost customer satisfaction, and achieve sustainable growth in the evolving and competitive market.

6. Limitations and future studies

The use of convenience sampling in this study limits the generalizability of the findings, suggesting that future research should adopt random sampling techniques to improve sample representativeness. Additionally, the focus on domestic customers of Egyptian ghost kitchens constrains findings' applicability to other regions or countries; hence, future studies should incorporate diverse geographical contexts to broaden its generalizability. Moreover, the reliance on self-reported data may introduce biases such as social desirability or recall bias, so integrating additional data sources, such as behavioral data, could offer a more comprehensive insight into customer experiences. Future research could examine other potential moderators and mediators, such as customer loyalty or website reputation, to further understand emotional value and eWoM dynamics in the ghost kitchen context.

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