

Online marketing strategies and their influence on customer purchase decisions in a tourism-oriented restaurant district: Evidence from Intramuros, Manila

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INTRODUCTION

Digital technologies have transformed restaurant marketing through social media, influencers, SEO, online reviews, user-generated content, and targeted advertising. These strategies are particularly important in tourism-oriented areas such as Intramuros, Manila, where visitors rely on digital platforms to discover and evaluate dining options.

This study examines how online marketing influences customer purchase decisions in a selected Intramuros restaurant using the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) and Engel-Kollat-Blackwell (EKB) Model. UGT explains consumers' use of digital media to satisfy informational and emotional needs, while EKB describes the decision process from need recognition and information search to evaluation, purchase, and post-purchase behavior. Together, these theories explain how digital engagement can translate into actual dining decisions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital marketing uses social media, influencers, user-generated content, SEO, and targeted advertising to engage consumers (Chaffey, 2022; Dwivedi et al., 2023). Guided by the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), consumers actively use digital content to satisfy informational and emotional needs (Katz et al., 1973). The Engel-Kollat-Blackwell (EKB) Model explains purchase behavior through five stages: need recognition, information search, evaluation, purchase, and post-purchase behavior. Visual appeal, social proof, and influencer credibility further shape purchase intentions, particularly among tourists who rely on online information when exploring unfamiliar destinations (Breves et al., 2019; Awuor et al., 2023).

METHOD

The study employed a quantitative descriptive research design to examine the influence of online marketing strategies on customer purchase decisions. A structured questionnaire based on UGT and the EKB Model was developed and pilot-tested for clarity and reliability.

The study involved 110 respondents aged 18–50 years, selected through stratified random sampling. To qualify, respondents must have visited the selected restaurant and been exposed to its online marketing activities. These criteria ensured that responses reflected actual customer experiences and interactions with the restaurant's digital presence.

Online marketing strategies were assessed through media use motivation, qualification sought, active participation, media performance, and satisfaction. Customer purchase decisions were measured according to the EKB stages of need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase, and post-purchase behavior. Responses were collected using a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 4 (Strongly Agree). Data were analyzed using percentages and weighted means.

FINDINGS

Results indicate that digital platforms play a central role in restaurant discovery and customer decision-making. Facebook (59%) emerged as the primary platform influencing respondents, followed by TikTok (27.9%). Most digitally influenced consumers belonged to the 18–24 age group, highlighting the importance of visual and video-based social media among younger diners.

Consumer trust was strongly influenced by visual content and social proof. Among the factors examined, online reviews received the highest weighted mean (3.52), followed by visual content (3.39), media motivation (3.31), and active participation (3.04). Respondents strongly agreed with the influence of the first three factors, while active participation received an “Agree” interpretation. These results suggest that attractive restaurant-generated content can create initial interest, while reviews and peer-generated content provide credibility that supports the final purchase decision.

Online marketing also influences customers throughout the EKB decision-making process. During need recognition, appealing food photographs and videos can trigger cravings or interest in visiting the restaurant. This leads to information search, during which potential customers examine menus, ratings, reviews, prices, and location information online.

During the evaluation of alternatives, customers compare the restaurant's price, atmosphere, accessibility, and perceived experience with competing establishments. Easily accessible information can reduce uncertainty and facilitate the purchase decision. After dining, satisfied customers may post photographs, reviews, recommendations, and other user-generated content. This post-purchase behavior creates a continuing marketing cycle in which previous customers' experiences become information sources for future customers.

The findings support the Uses and Gratifications Theory, demonstrating that consumers actively seek digital content that satisfies their informational and emotional needs. High-quality food visuals attract attention, while reviews and peer-generated content provide social validation and reduce perceived uncertainty.

The findings also correspond with the EKB Model, as digital platforms facilitate the customer's progression from awareness and information search to evaluation, purchase, and post-purchase engagement. Rather than functioning solely as advertisements, online platforms become part of the customer's overall decision-making environment.

For restaurant managers, the findings emphasize the importance of investing in high-quality visual content and actively managing online reviews and ratings. Marketing efforts may particularly capitalize on Facebook and TikTok, while customers can be encouraged to share authentic photographs, reviews, and dining experiences. Interactive campaigns, including polls, contests, and other engagement activities, may further strengthen relationships between the establishment and its online audience.

For tourism stakeholders, restaurant digital marketing can also be integrated into broader destination branding strategies. In heritage tourism districts such as Intramuros, restaurants contribute to the overall visitor experience. Their online representation therefore influences not only individual establishments but also tourists' perceptions of the destination's dining environment.

IMPLICATIONS OR CONCLUSION

The study concludes that online marketing significantly shapes customer purchase decisions in tourism-oriented restaurants in Intramuros. Visual content, online reviews, user-generated content, and accessible information influence consumers throughout the decision process, from initial awareness and evaluation to purchase and post-purchase sharing.

Consistent with UGT and the EKB Model, customers actively seek, evaluate, and share digital information, making online presence an integral part of the dining experience. Restaurants should therefore prioritize authentic visual content, accurate information, customer feedback, and user-generated content to strengthen engagement and credibility. Tourism stakeholders may also integrate local restaurants into digital destination branding to enhance the overall heritage tourism experience.

Future studies may examine multiple restaurant categories and destinations and apply inferential statistical methods to further determine the relationship between digital marketing strategies, purchase behavior, and sales performance.

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