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Digital content marketing as a catalyst for e-WOM in food tourism

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ABSTRACT

Using the Use and Gratifications Theory (UGT), this paper explores how the social impact of Digital Content Marketing (DCM) in food tourism leads to electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) communication. Specifically, this paper investigates how DCM can generate social impact, and in turn, it explores how this social impact can lead to e-WOM. A sample of 707 Chinese tourists completed an online survey. The data was analysed using structural equation modelling. Positive associations were found between content entertainment (CE) and Informational Social Impact (ISI) and between self-expression (SE) and Normative Social Impact (NSI). Content information (CI) and social interaction (SI) had a positive relationship with both NSI and ISI. NSI and ISI positively influenced e-WOM. Social impact played a mediating role between DCM and e-WOM. This study provides a theoretical basis for further investigation of DCM in food tourism, adds to the literature on Social Impact Theory, and will likely drive further research into e-WOM in food tourism.

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1. Introduction

Food tourism has increased with the growing popularity of the leisure lifestyle (Okumus et al., 2018). Food tourism has been described as culinary tourism, gastronomy tourism, and gourmet tourism (Ellis et al., 2018). Unlike general tourism, food tourism posits that tourists can obtain unforgettable, unique and cultural experiences through food tourism resources or food experiences (Chen and Huang, 2018). The majority of research on food tourism has focused on food attraction, festival food experiences, and the promotion of local food, while other research has investigated the decision-making processes of food tourists (Chen and Huang, 2018). Among the factors found to influence tourists' participation in food-related consumption are value, experience, and brand loyalty (Ellis et al., 2018). Rapid developments in mobile information technology mean that more tourists prefer use mobile social media to seek information for their decision-making (Ashley and Tuten, 2015); this has prompted marketers to consider online marketing to reach their target audience (Kilgour et al., 2015). Nevertheless, there is a dearth of research on digital marketing in food tourism, especially research on DCM via mobile social media. DCM is assumed to be an essential element of digital marketing in food

tourism (Mkono and Tribe, 2017), but this assumption has not been empirically investigated. Therefore, given the growing importance of DCM across other facets of the leisure industry, not to mention the growing use of interactive technology in general, research in this area is important.

Highlighting DCM's potential, research conducted by Statista (2017) revealed that global DCM revenue increased from \$87.2 billion USD in 2009 to \$144.8 billion USD in 2014, and will to grow to \$313.4 billion USD in 2019. DCM has attracted attention in recent years because it is a crucial part of digital marketing. Nevertheless, the academic concept of DCM does not yet have a unified and accepted definition (Du Plessis, 2017). This study uses Pulizzi's (2012) definition, which defines DCM as a new on-line marketing strategy for emphasising high quality content to meet target audiences' demand and increase consumers' awareness of products or services. Moreover, DCM focuses on communication with target consumers rather than sales (Jefferson and Tanton, 2015) to strengthen the brand's emotional connection with customers (Ashley and Tuten, 2015). This strategy seeks to build long-term relationships with consumers and maintain their customer following via word-of-mouth (Ashley and Tuten, 2015).

This study extends Social Impact Theory and e-WOM by introducing DCM in food tourism and including four dimensions of UGT. Also, the study expands Social Impact Theory to verify that normative and Informational Social Impact have a mediating role in the relationship between DCM and e-WOM. Through implement-

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ing this new model, enterprises or marketers can use mobile social media to subtly produce informative, interactive and emotional content that has a social impact, thereby inspiring e-WOM, and thus influencing tourists' food tourism decisions.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate the impact of DCM via mobile social media to stimulate e-WOM in food tourism. The aims of this study are: (1) to explore the relationship between DCM and social impact, and in turn, elucidate the relationship between social impact and e-WOM; (2) to examine the mediating effect of social impact on the relationship between DCM and e-WOM in food tourism.

2. Literature review

2.1. Food tourism

Food tourism describes travel for the primary purpose of food-seeking, and it is a type of cultural anthropology that seeks to understand the interaction between tourists and destinations through food as a medium (Ellis et al., 2018).

Previous food tourism research studies have mainly focused on food attractions, festival food experiences, and local development (Chen and Huang, 2018). Ryu and Jang (2006) created a new model to predict the intentions and perceptions of tourists in food tourism. Subsequently, more studies focused on food consumption and food tourism. Food tourism research has focused on a variety of constructs, including the relationships and interactions between food tourism and personality characteristics, satisfaction and loyalty, tourists' perceived value, satisfaction, intentions and behaviours, tourists' cognitions and intentions, and food preferences and food images (Ellis et al., 2018). Nevertheless, most of the marketing research on food tourism has focused on promotional strategies across different destinations and analysed official pamphlets, websites and other promotional approaches (Yousaf and Xiucheng, 2018). In recent years, market researchers identified that tourists glean information from technological communication channels; consequently, they are paying more attention to e-WOM in food tourism (Litvin et al., 2018).

2.2. Mobile communication technology

Since the mobile Internet began to replace fixed Internet access, the tools used and the ways consumers search for information have become increasingly mobile (Litvin et al., 2018). Now, mobile Internet users vastly outnumber desktop users (Litvin et al., 2018). Some scholars have found that consumers use three connected devices at least several times per day from three different locations, and most of these devices are mobile devices. These mobile devices are mainly used for social media, video, games, or information searches (Litvin et al., 2018).

Some contemporary scholars have identified significant changes in tourist behaviour with the evolution of mobile Internet technology (Mkono and Tribe, 2017). These changes have affected the nature of interactions between tourism organisations and customers (Mkono and Tribe, 2017). Tourism information is among the most researched topics on the Internet (Lamsfus et al., 2015). Moreover, tourists' decision-making is increasingly being done via social media (Mohammad Arif and Du, 2019); tourists have become more flexible, less loyal, more critical, and more willing to listen to others' voices (Lamsfus et al., 2015). In fact, some scholars have identified a trend where tourists are relying more on social media to find information regarding others' experiences and to make travel decisions (Van Laer et al., 2018). By increasing the sharing of content and opinions on social media, private travel experiences have become more available to potential tourists (Mkono and Tribe, 2017). Thus, DCM is likely to be important in this context.

2.3. Digital content marketing (DCM)

DCM is a new marketing concept; it is the most rapidly growing content marketing strategy in recent years; nevertheless, research on DCM has mainly looked at customer durables, packaged goods, and services (Hollebeek and Macky, 2019). During the era dominated by fixed Internet access, digital content was mainly disseminated via desktop computers or laptops through e-newsletters, video, quizzes, whitepapers, infographics, and other formats. However, since entering the era of the mobile Internet, DCM has tended to interact with users of mobile social media or mobile applications through video, live streaming, and long-form content to achieve the purpose of disseminating content (Hollebeek and Macky, 2019). Some scholars have found that there is a significant difference between customer mobile searching and fixed Internet searching behaviour (Wang et al., 2019). Specifically, when customers search for content using a desktop or laptop, it is mostly for formal purposes, such as job-related content. The search time is relatively long, and the location is fixed. Search tools are usually websites or search engines. In contrast, customers use mobile Internet to search for mostly informal purposes, such as life-related content, and the time spent searching is fragmented and at a various location, with apps being the primary search tool (Wang et al., 2019). Regarding lifestyle content in food tourism, content is mostly searched by tourists via social media or apps during their spare time (Mohammad Arif and Du, 2019).

Lieb (2012) argued that DCM is neither about promotion nor sales, but a way to attract audiences using content. Notably, DCM enables target audiences to actively share and follow information through emotion, information, and entertainment, instead of filtering or ignoring traditional advertisements (Halvorson and Rach, 2012). Later, Jefferson and Tanton (2015) contended that DCM uses unobtrusive value propositions rather than directly encouraging customers to purchase products. Theoretically, DCM is the comprehensive application of relationship marketing theory, marketing communication, and integrated marketing communication for understanding relationship building and group behaviour (Cronin, 2016). However, regardless of the DCM conducted, content should appeal to the target audience and provide value to increase interaction with the brand. That is, DCM aims to promote consumption by disseminating ongoing, valuable content to target audiences (Kilgour et al., 2015). More recently, marketers have used DCM and story-telling methods in brand promotion because consumers are more willing to search for products when marketers share valuable content with them (Du Plessis, 2017). Some scholars contend that the motivation for DCM is mainly to cultivate long-term relationships between consumers and brands, strengthen brand loyalty, and improve brand awareness (Naidoo and Hollebeek, 2016). This study uses the definition that DCM is required to create and distribute valuable content in digital marketing to attract, capture, and engage target audiences for the purposes of motivating target customers to act (Pulizzi, 2012).

Although DCM research is new, there has been some progress in evaluating the importance of DCM in driving consumer behaviour (Du Plessis, 2017). Nevertheless, DCM research in food tourism has been scarce.

2.4. Electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM)

E-WOM constitutes a key source of information for tourists' decisions (Mellinas and Reino, 2019). Tourists usually choose destinations according to information they find via e-WOM (Simpson and Siguaw, 2008). Additionally, tourists like to become involved in e-WOM by sharing their experiences (Rosenbloom, 2013). E-WOM is formally defined as 'all informal communications directed at consumers through Internet-based technology related to the usage

or characteristics of particular goods or services, or their sellers' (Litvin et al., 2008). Increasing numbers of scholars have explored how e-WOM promotes tourism planning behaviour and tourists' decision-making processes (Mellinas and Reino, 2019). The subject has been studied from multiple viewpoints, including the content of e-WOM, the communication platform of e-WOM, and the motivations for e-WOM (Mellinas and Reino, 2019). Furthermore, tourism marketers have realised the advantages of e-WOM communication (Huang, 2012). Accordingly, tourism marketers use e-WOM as an online marketing tool to promote products and services (Huang, 2012).

Nevertheless, research on the relationship between DCM and e-WOM has been scarce, particularly in food tourism. Instead, most studies about e-WOM in tourism have focused on how e-WOM affects other factors, but analysis of the factors affecting e-WOM in tourism is lacking.

The literature review highlights that there is insufficient research on the mechanisms of mobile social media content marketing that influence e-WOM in food tourism. Thus, this study explores what factors in DCM compel customers to promote e-WOM. Consequently, the proposed focal research question is: How does DCM via mobile social media lead to e-WOM in food tourism?

3. Theoretical framework and hypotheses development

3.1. Use and Gratifications Theory (UGT)

In recent years, some scholars have proposed that brand content media has gone beyond advertising, implanting and sponsorship (Baetzgen and Tropp, 2013). In particular, mobile social media with brand information provides information, entertainment and social content (Baetzgen and Tropp, 2013). In social media research, scholars have used UGT to explain people's functional, hedonic and authentic motivations (Plume and Slade, 2018). UGT is the primary theoretical method to study individuals' motivations for using specific media and to explain their reasons for using specific media channels. Additionally, UGT helps to elucidate motivation for consuming social media content (Plume and Slade, 2018). Drawing on UGT, some research has investigated various social media behaviours, including the sharing of news and images (Sung et al., 2016), and other researchers uphold that UGT can be used to stimulate content generation and for content interpretation (Rubin, 2009). Most research has identified the main facets of UGT as information seeking, entertainment, socialising, self-expression and impression management (Plume and Slade, 2018). Given the broad application of UGT for examining motivations to consume social media content and its role in understanding the impacts of content marketing on relationship building and group behaviour (Plume and Slade, 2018), this study considers UGT as the theoretical basis for making sense of content information (CI), content entertainment (CE), social interaction (SI), and self-expression (SE) in DCM for food tourism.

3.2. Social impact theory

Some scholars have used Social Impact Theory to understand how others influence consumers' emotions, attitudes and behaviours (Cheung et al., 2015). Social Impact Theory has two dimensions: Normative Social Impact (NSI) and Informational Social Impact (ISI) (Bearden et al., 1989). NSI refers to acting in accordance with the expectations of the group and using social pressure to influence people's behaviours, disregarding their own preferences to avoid social exclusion; ISI means that social pressure can be internalised from acceptance of others' opinions and behaviours (Bearden et al., 1989; Chu and Kim, 2011). These two dimensions can affect consumer intentions simultaneously or unilat-

erally (Cheung et al., 2015). Some research has observed that some social media users follow group opinion, viewing group opinions as an accepted norm (Kwahk and Kim, 2017), while some people form their opinions or make their decisions based on information on social media (Kuan et al., 2014).

3.3. DCM and social impact

To date, some researchers have used UGT to explain the antecedents of DCM (Hollebeek and Macky, 2019). Some investigators even believe that the combination of UGT and social impact theory can be used to understand users' behaviours on social media more comprehensively, because these theories consider users' behaviours from internal and external perspectives, respectively (Liu et al., 2019). Therefore, this study assumes that UGT could help to explain food tourists' motivations and attitudes towards mobile social media content from content information, content entertainment, social interaction, and self-expression factors. In turn, these motivations and attitudes could potentially generate social impacts.

3.3.1. Content information (CI)

Some scholars have argued that social media is a channel for transmitting targeted impacts to group members and stimulates interaction among group members through CI (Fischer and Reuber, 2011). Previous research has confirmed that tourists are accustomed to collecting information about destinations through social media to guide decision-making (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010). Before decision-making, tourists are usually affected by others' opinions within a specific group, which has been found to impact the decisions and opinions held by most of the group (Sparks and Pan, 2009). When tourists search for travel information through social media, they will be affected by their reference groups, such as individuals (e.g., influencers) or organisations (e.g., tourist communities) (Chung and Han, 2017). For example, a member of a community might post information on social media about food travel, and another member from this online community might adopt this information, forming the same expectations about food travel as the person who posted the information. Building on this idea, identification occurs when tourists make decisions that are consistent with the information provided by the reference group (Chung and Han, 2017). Compliance occurs when tourists conform to the expectations of others within a group due to seeking acceptance from the group (Hsu and Lu, 2004). Therefore, the content information about food travel posted by a member of a community on social media is likely to lead to identification and compliance from other members of this community. Since identification and compliance are the main manifestations of NSI (Chung and Han, 2017), the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1a. CI has a positive relationship with NSI in food tourism.

When people need to augment their knowledge to find information that is beyond the scope of their reference group, they need to source that information from outside the reference group (Hsu and Lu, 2004). Some scholars have pointed out that when people cannot get enough CI from their reference group, their demand for CI will increase, and they will be involved in creating informational impact (Chung and Han, 2017). Also, consumers tend to take the initiative to choose the CI that meets their specific needs, rather than passively absorbing information (Hur et al., 2017). This process increases consumer demand for an increase in CI quantity (Hur et al., 2017). For example, tourists often try to obtain more information when they perceive that the information provided by the reference group is not enough to meet their requirements. When they search for more information to assist in their decision-making, this CI will exert informational impacts

(Bearden et al., 1989). Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1e. CI positively affects ISI among food tourists.

3.3.2. Content entertainment (CE)

Some studies have conducted exploratory content analyses of the entertainment content characteristics of various brands on social media. Most brands have used brand entertainment on social media platforms (Zhang et al., 2010). Some studies have found that brand entertainment provides continuous sensory immersion, building an emotional connection between entertainment content and the audience to provide affirmation and build group identity (Dahl et al., 2009). Moreover, some researchers have found that entertainment information creates and disseminates content through endorsement or peer imitation of the content, such that consumers participate in group behaviours (Xu et al., 2017). Hence, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1b. CE positively influences NSI in food tourism.

Initially, research on the relationship between entertainment and ISI focused on online advertising. For instance, the informational impact of entertainment content in Internet advertisements has been studied, and it was found that the entertainment value of Internet advertisements had both informational impact and informational value that were directly related to consumers' preference for advertising content (Goldsmith and Lafferty, 2002). Later research established that tourists who find reliable and complete information from social media are more likely to seek information and entertainment on social media in future (Hur et al., 2017). Some scholars have emphasised that entertainment content can lead to an increase in entertainment motivation among tourists; this entertainment motivation has a positive association with ISI for information sharing (Hur et al., 2017). The following hypothesis can therefore be made:

H1f. CE positively impacts ISI in food tourism.

3.3.3. Social interaction (SI)

Knowledge transfer needs to occur through SI (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). Some studies have proposed that the virtual community is an appropriate space to transfer knowledge, and people's opinions and knowledge in virtual communities can be easily aggregated and accessed, with the result that the adoption of knowledge is efficient and effective (Kim et al., 2011). Previously, most of the research on social media using UGT has explored the two-way interaction between the customer and brand; this two-way interaction constitutes the channel for knowledge transmission to facilitate communication (Quinn, 2016). Notably, DCM can help consumers gain a better understanding of products or services (Hollebeek and Macky, 2019). The interaction between consumers can affect their perceptions of products or services, especially consumers who are motivated by SI. In the tourism context, tourists are likely to communicate with others to meet their social needs (Yoo and Gretzel, 2008).

According to Social Impact Theory, NSI and ISI can estimate intention to adopt knowledge (Deutsch and Gerrard, 1955). Moreover, the adoption of knowledge is through SI within virtual communities. Consequently, considering SI as a factor, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1c. SI has a positive impact on NSI among food tourists.

H1g. SI positively impacts the influence of ISI among food tourists.

3.3.4. Self-expression (SE)

People are increasingly expressing themselves through social media, resulting in a higher value being placed on self-expression

than ever before (Orehek and Human, 2016). The purpose of SE among individuals who are susceptible to social norms is to seek commonality with other members of the social group (Wooten and Reed, 2004). Consumers with common interests, passions and values for specific brands are regarded as 'brand tribes' (Ruane and Wallace, 2015). In the brand tribe, group members use social media to express themselves to ensure their peers do not ignore them. Some scholars believe that a direct relationship exists between consumer SE and normative impact (Ruane and Wallace, 2015). Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1d. SE has a positive impact on NSI for food tourists.

Social media platforms are among the most effective channels for brands and consumers to accurately express their personalities (Orehek and Human, 2016). Compared with other traditional media, SE is among the unique and distinctive features of social media, which is a powerful motivation for participating in online activities (Lee and Ma, 2012). SE refers to the extent to which individuals try to control others' impressions of them (Choi et al., 2015). Most social media platforms encourage users to show their personality through personal images, information, graphic design and other content to positively influence how others perceive them (Choi et al., 2015). Also, some scholars contend that among the main motivations for users to participate on social media is that users can express themselves to the outside world through the provision of specific information (Choi et al., 2015). Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1h. SE positively impacts ISI among food tourists.

3.4. Social impact and e-WOM

With the emergence of the Internet and social media, social impact takes on new meaning via electronic social impact (Tanford and Montgomery, 2015). In a social network context, people can easily share their opinions and ideas, which are likely to result in a particular social impact (Kwahk and Kim, 2017). Due to the perceived credibility of social network members on social media, their choices can influence other members' opinions and decisions (Cheung and Thadani, 2012). Some members even follow the choices and reviews of most people in a social media group or rely on the opinions and reviews of influencers rather than using their own judgment (Miller and Brunner, 2008). Some scholars have confirmed that information disseminated through social media is credible and useful within a specific group, leading members to have a positive attitude towards e-WOM (Kwahk and Kim, 2017). Tourists are likely to refer to dominant comments about products on the Internet or social media (Mauri and Minazzi, 2013). Besides, in the decision-making process, tourists seek social recognition through purchasing products or using brands, and they may actively spread such recognition within online social networks (Tanford and Montgomery, 2015). This finding suggests that NSI may promote the spread of e-WOM. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2a. NSI has a positive effect on e-WOM in food tourism.

Kwahk and Kim (2017) argued that ISI is the process in which people evaluate the success of consumer experiences based on the experience of other group members within a social network group. To make the best choice, people may try to obtain more information to enhance their confidence in their attitudes, and this information may have a positive impact on customers' intentions to purchase or spread e-WOM (Lee et al., 2011). Through informational impact, there is a phenomenon termed 'social contagion' in marketing research, which affects awareness of a product or service. Word-of-mouth through different channels is among the

predominant means of this social contagion (Iyengar et al., 2015). In social networking, customers affected by ISI obtain information and guidance from their knowledgeable contacts when considering purchasing options, which will lead them to engage in e-WOM (Tanford and Montgomery, 2015). Some research confirms the importance of ISI on customers' trust and communication about CI on social media (Chu and Kim, 2011). Hence, ISI can enhance consumers' trust and increase the spread of e-WOM. Therefore, the resultant hypothesis is:

H2b. ISI has a positive impact on e-WOM in food tourism.

3.5. Social impact mediating effect

DCM is a strategic way to cultivate and influence customers' recognition of content and promote their trust through the sharing of content on digital platforms (Hollebeek and Macky, 2019). It is necessary to create content that can stimulate customers' recognition and encourage customers to participate in interactions that generate positive e-WOM or influence customers' purchasing behaviour. Hence, to maximise the effectiveness of DCM, content transformation should mediate the digital content and positive e-WOM or stimulate purchasing behaviour.

Social impact can play a mediating role in customers' perception and behaviour in online social interactions (Dholakia et al., 2004). Moreover, the individual's perception of others' social groups shapes their perceptions of others' susceptibility to being influenced by media content (Chia, 2010). Additionally, social impact plays an important mediating role in peer-to-peer communication via media effects (Chia, 2010). Aside from people's subjective perception of others, their open communication with others is the mediating effect of social impact in media and peer influences (Chia, 2010). Furthermore, some scholars have found that social tie strength, NSI and ISI could predict the transmission of opinions on social networks (Chu and Kim, 2011). Thus, social impact is an intermediate bridge to connect media and customers, and social impact can connect media and peer communication influences in the field of marketing research. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3. Social impact mediates the relationship between digital content marketing and e-WOM. NSI has a positive, mediating effect in the relationship between CI and e-WOM (H_{3a}), CE and e-WOM (H_{3b}), SI and e-WOM (H_{3c}), and SE and e-WOM (H_{3d}). ISI has a positive mediating effect in the relationship between CI and e-WOM (H_{3e}), CE and e-WOM (H_{3f}), SI and e-WOM (H_{3g}), and SE and e-WOM (H_{3h}).

4. Method

4.1. Sample and data collection

An online survey was designed and conducted in China. In 2018, China was the world's largest source of outbound tourists, with a strong demand for outbound tourism and a consumption of more than \$120 billion USD (MCTCN, 2019). According to the Data centre of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism in China, the number of outbound tourists in China reached 149.72 million in 2018, up 14.7% year-on-year (MCTCN, 2019). In 2018, food surpassed shopping for the first time and became the most important element for Chinese tourists travelling abroad (CTA, 2018). An exclusive survey shows that more than 90% of Chinese tourists are willing to search for local specialty food during their trip (CCA, 2018).

This study used a non-probability convenience sampling approach. The participants were over 18 years of age from China, who expressed an interest in food and travel, were mobile social media users, and had travelled or planned to travel for food. Participants

were eligible to participate in this investigation if they answered yes to the following question: 'Do you know what food tourism is?'. Recruitment information about this study was advertised for a month via three virtual tourism communities on WeChat, and five Chinese travel influencers forwarded and shared the questionnaire in their Moments via WeChat. This study adopted the Chinese online investigation software, WJX, predominantly used for surveys in China, and it has an established validity to edit electronic questionnaires.

4.2. Respondent profiles

In total, 707 questionnaires were distributed and recovered, with a recovery rate of 100%. Table 1 depicts the demographics of the respondents in this research. The proportion of men was slightly higher than that of women (1.25:1), the age range was younger (91.6% under 45 years old), and the proportion of single people was slightly higher than those who were married (1.37:1). The sample was highly educated (52.8% were university graduates or above), and the majority were full-time employees (47.8%), with an annual income of less than \$50,000 AUD. Most participants used mobile apps (91.5%), and 25% of participants used social media for more than 2.5 h per day. The percentage of participants who had experience in food travel was 68.5%.

4.3. Measures

Measurement items for each construct are from existing sources. Drawing on previous research, the reliability and validity of the scales were established.

Plume and Slade's (2018) Sharing of Sponsored Advertisements on Social Media scale was used to measure advertisement quality. The scale has a high factor loading of 0.80–0.96 and a Cronbach's alpha of 0.814–0.969. This scale can measure CI, CE, SI and SE. The social impact scale was sourced from Kwahk and Kim's (2017) scale, which addresses both NSI and ISI on consumers' purchase decisions via social media, with higher factor loadings of 0.625–0.829 and a Cronbach's alpha of 0.895–0.897. To assess e-WOM communication, Yang et al. (2015) scale was selected, which has a relatively strong factor loading of 0.778–0.884 and a reasonable Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha = 0.91$). Items in this scale examine positive e-WOM among consumers.

Respondents rated their perceptions for each item on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree' (Kwahk and Kim, 2017). A professional translator translated statements into Chinese before being cross-checked by another translator to ensure content validity.

To avoid other factors that affect latent variables, this study introduced gender, income, social media usage, and food tourism experience as control variables. Tourists may differ in their intentions towards food tourism due to gender, income, food tourism experience, and social media usage, which is why these demographic factors have been used as control variables in this research (Horng et al., 2012).

5. Data analysis and results

This study used partial least square structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) to test all hypotheses using the two-step approach of AMOS (Analysis of Moment Structures) Version 24.0 (Hair et al., 2014). The first step tested the reliability and validity of all constructs using a measurement model, and the second step examined the proposed hypotheses in the structural model. Notably, this study adopted the multiple mediation method via bootstrapping with 2000 samples. It applied the bias-corrected percentile of 95% for calculating each mediating effect through the 'estimating

Table 1
Demographic profiles of respondents.

	Variable	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	393	55.6
	Female	314	44.4
Age	18–24	301	42.6
	25–34	183	25.9
	35–44	163	23.1
	45–54	40	5.7
	55–64	18	2.5
	66 or over 65	2	0.3
Marital status	Single	403	57.0
	Married or in a domestic partnership	294	41.6
	Divorced/separated	10	1.4
Education	High school or below	71	10.0
	Some college	263	37.2
	University	270	38.2
	Graduate school or above	103	14.6
Employment	Employed full time	338	47.8
	Employed part time	45	6.4
	Unemployed	21	3.0
	Student	267	37.8
	Retired	18	2.5
	Self-employed	10	1.4
	Others	8	1.1
Yearly income	0–20,000	419	59.2
	20,001–50,000	204	28.9
	500,001–100,000	50	7.1
	100,001–150,000	22	3.1
	Over 150,00	12	1.7
Food tourism experience	Yes	676	95.6
	No	31	4.4
Time consumed on social media	Less than 30 min	52	7.4
	31 min–60 min	133	18.8
	61 min–90 min	145	20.4
	91 min–120 min	115	16.3
	121 min–150 min	82	11.6
	More than 150 min	180	25.5
	Total	707	100

user-defined estimand' approach to test multiple mediation pathways (Cheung and Lau, 2008). The heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT analysis) in variance-based structural equation modelling was used to test common method bias in this study (Henseler et al., 2015).

5.1. Measurement model

The measurement model had a satisfactory fit with the goodness-of-fit indices (CMIN = 549.506; DF = 168; CMIN/df = 3.27; AGFI = 0.904 > 0.90; TLI = 0.967 > 0.90; CFI = 0.974 > 0.90; RMSEA = 0.057 < 0.08, SRMR = 0.027 < 0.08) (Hair et al., 2014). The reliability of the measures (as seen in Table 2) was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, construct reliability, and average variance extraction (AVE); each factor was higher than 0.70, 0.60, and 0.50, which demonstrated sufficient convergence effectiveness for these constructs (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Table 3 illustrates that there was no redundancy or multicollinearity violations with the correlations, which all were less than the 0.90 cut-off range of between 0.613 and 0.871 (Hair et al., 2014). Besides, the discriminant validity was tested using the method that all construct AVE estimates are higher than their corresponding squared inter-construct correlation estimates (see Table 3) (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). To further assess the discriminant validity, HTMT analysis was tested for common method bias in this study as well. In the case of PLS-SEM, the HTMT coefficient should be less than the threshold of 0.90 (Henseler et al., 2015).

All tested HTMT coefficients in this study (Table 4) were below 0.90, which further confirmed the discriminant validity.

5.2. Structural model

The structural model and hypotheses were assessed. The structural model was a good fit (CMIN = 662.722; DF = 255; CMIN/df = 2.599; AGFI = 0.911 > 0.90; TLI = 0.967 > 0.90; CFI = 0.972 > 0.90; RMSEA = 0.048 < 0.08, SRMR = 0.042 < 0.08) (Hair et al., 2014). Based on an evaluation of the theoretical model, the result of path coefficient estimation (Table 5) was determined. Hair et al. (2014) used the standardised path coefficient at significance levels of * $p < .10$; ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$ for path model estimation to explain how to use this standard to establish significance. Some scholars also developed standardised path coefficient significance at † $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$, and they defined a path coefficient in the range of 0.05 and 0.1 as reflecting marginally significant effects (Pritschet et al., 2016). This study used the standardised path coefficient significance levels of † $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. In addition to H_{1b}, H_{1h}, the hypotheses H_{1a}, H_{1c}, H_{1d}, H_{1e}, H_{1f}, H_{1g}, H_{2a}, H_{2b} were supported.

5.3. Mediation

By setting the 'Perform bootstrap' and 'Bias-corrected confidence intervals' using the multiple mediation method in AMOS software, and by defining the path and product formula of each

Table 2
Instrument items and reliability indices.

Instrument	Items	FL	α	CR	AVE
Content Information (CI)	The content about food tourism on the social media page is efficient to get information.	0.873	0.924	0.916	0.785
	The content about food tourism on the social media page provides the latest information.	0.909			
	The content about food tourism on the social media page satisfies my needs.	0.875			
Content Entertainment (CE)	The content about food tourism on the social media page is fun.	0.870	0.924	0.914	0.780
	The content about food tourism on the social media page is exciting.	0.894			
	The content about food tourism on the social media is attractive.	0.886			
Social Interaction (SI)	The content about food tourism on the social media page can resonate with me.	0.876	0.918	0.909	0.770
	The content about food tourism on the social media page can stimulate me to engage the sharing.	0.890			
	The content about food tourism on the social media page can meet my expectation to interact with like-minded people.	0.866			
Self-Expression (SE)	The content about food tourism on the social media page can meet my expectation to present my personality.	0.900	0.921	0.915	0.783
	The content about food tourism on the social media page can make me gain a sense of belonging.	0.897			
	I feel that other people think I am friendly.	0.856			
Normative Social Impact (NSI)	It is important that other people like the content about food tourism on social media to me.	0.887	0.931	0.922	0.798
	Celebrities think a certain content about food tourism on the social media page is great, and so do I.	0.896			
	Key Opinion Leader thinks a certain content about food tourism on the social media page is great, and so do I.	0.896			
Informational Social Impact (ISI)	When I am not sure what is good or bad about the content regarding food tourism on social media pages, I would refer to look for more information related to this content.	0.870	0.889	0.870	0.691
	When I am not sure what is good or bad about the content regarding food tourism on social media pages, I will refer to others' real experience of that.	0.799			
	I would like to make a comprehensive information evaluation on this food. Tourism's content before decision-making.	0.823			
E-WOM (PW)	I encourage my friends or others to go through this content as to food tourism on social media.	0.901	0.923	0.917	0.786
	I recommend this content about food tourism on social media to someone who seeks my advice.	0.860			
	I recommend this content as to food tourism to someone on social media actively.	0.897			

Table 3
Correlations between variables.

	CR	AVE	MSV	MaxR(H)	ISI	CI	CE	SI	SE	NSI	PW
ISI	0.870	0.691	0.513	0.875	0.691	0.503	0.513	0.475	0.376	0.421	0.440
CI	0.916	0.785	0.759	0.918	0.709**	0.785	0.759	0.618	0.475	0.477	0.479
CE	0.914	0.780	0.759	0.915	0.716**	0.871**	0.780	0.731	0.610	0.542	0.582
SI	0.909	0.770	0.745	0.910	0.689**	0.786**	0.855**	0.770	0.745	0.674	0.651
SE	0.915	0.782	0.752	0.918	0.613**	0.689**	0.781**	0.863**	0.782	0.752	0.691
NSI	0.922	0.797	0.752	0.922	0.649**	0.691**	0.736**	0.821**	0.867**	0.797	0.646
PW	0.916	0.785	0.691	0.919	0.663**	0.692**	0.763**	0.807**	0.831**	0.804**	0.785

Notes: CR= construct reliability, AVE= average variance extracted, MSV= maximum shared variance, MaxR(H)= maximal reliability of constructs; the diagonal elements are the AVEs (bold and italicised); the lower-left triangle elements are correlations and the upper-right triangle elements are the squared correlations between constructs. All correlations are significant at 0.001 level (two-tailed).

Table 4
HTMT analysis results.

Constructs	CI	CE	SI	PI	NSI	ISI	PW
CI							
CE	0.875						
SI	0.787	0.855					
PI	0.695	0.780	0.865				
NSI	0.694	0.736	0.822	0.871			
ISI	0.714	0.719	0.692	0.618	0.649		
PW	0.701	0.768	0.809	0.831	0.802	0.676	

Note: the lower-left triangle elements are discriminant validity coefficients (HTMT, heterotrait-monomethod).

path used in estimating the values, each independent mediating effect can be obtained (Cheung and Lau, 2008; Hair et al., 2014). The results in Table 5 indicate that H_{3e} and H_{3d} were supported, while H_{3a}, H_{3c}, H_{3f} and H_{3g} were marginally supported (Fig. 1 and Table 6).

6. Discussion

According to the path test results, CI, CE, SI and SE were identified as positive predictors of NSI or/and ISI, while NSI and ISI were positive predictors of e-WOM. These findings indicate that the model used was effective for predicting positive e-WOM resulting from DCM. This result seems consistent with theoretical expectations and the results of previous research.

6.1. DCM and social impact

As expected, CI was a predictor of NSI and ISI. This finding echoes previous research findings that CI produced by community members may lead to identification and compliance by other members of the community, resulting in NSI (Chung and Han, 2017); CI on social media can meet the information needs of users, leading to ISI (Sparks and Pan, 2009). Interestingly, this study found that the path coefficient between CI and ISI was almost twice as large as the path between CI and NSI. Perhaps, tourists are

Table 5
Significance testing results of the model path coefficients.

Hypothesis	Path	Path Coefficients	pValues	Significant Levels	Hypothesis Support
H _{1a}	Content Information -> Normative Social Impact	0.159	.013	*	SP
H _{1b}	Content Entertainment -> Normative Social Impact	-0.091	.280	NS	NO
H _{1c}	Social Interaction -> Normative Social Impact	0.256	.001	**	SP
H _{1d}	Self-Expression -> Normative Social Impact	0.629	.000	***	SP
H _{1e}	Content Information -> Informational Social Impact	0.312	.000	***	SP
H _{1f}	Content Entertainment -> Informational Social Impact	0.202	.036	*	SP
H _{1g}	Social Interaction -> Informational Social Impact	0.203	.024	*	SP
H _{1h}	Self-Expression -> Informational Social Impact	0.041	.527	NS	NO
H _{2a}	Normative Social Impact -> Electronic WOM	0.224	.038	*	SP
H _{2b}	Informational Social Impact -> Electronic WOM	0.151	.001	**	SP

Note: NS = no significant, NO = no support, SP= support; Standardised path coefficient significant at †p < .10, *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001, source from Hair et al. (2014) and Pritschet et al. (2016).

Table 6
Results of the social impact mediating effect.

Hypothesis	Mediating variable	Independent variable	Dependent variable	Direct effect	Indirect effect	Total indirect effect	Total effect	Hypothesis support	Mediating effect
H _{3a}	Normative Social Impact	Content Information	E-WOM	-0.009	.036†	.083*	0.074	MS	MC
H _{3e}	Informational Social Impact	Content Information	E-WOM		.047**			SP	CM
H _{3b}	Normative Social Impact	Content Entertainment	E-WOM	0.154	-0.020	0.010	0.164	NO	NM
H _{3f}	Informational Social Impact	Content Entertainment	E-WOM		.030†			MS	MC
H _{3c}	Normative Social Impact	Social Interaction	E-WOM	0.123	.057†	.088*	0.211	MS	MC
H _{3g}	Informational Social Impact	Social Interaction	E-WOM		.031†			MS	MC
H _{3d}	Normative Social Impact	Self-expression	E-WOM	.360**	.141*	.147*	.507**	SP	PC
H _{3h}	Informational Social Impact	Self-expression	E-WOM		0.006			NO	NM

Note: NO= no support, MS= marginal support, SP= support; MC= marginal complete mediation, CM= complete mediation, PC= partial complete mediation, NM= no mediation; Standardised path coefficient significant at †p < .10, *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001 (Bouncken et al., 2015; Hair et al., 2014; Pritschet et al., 2016).

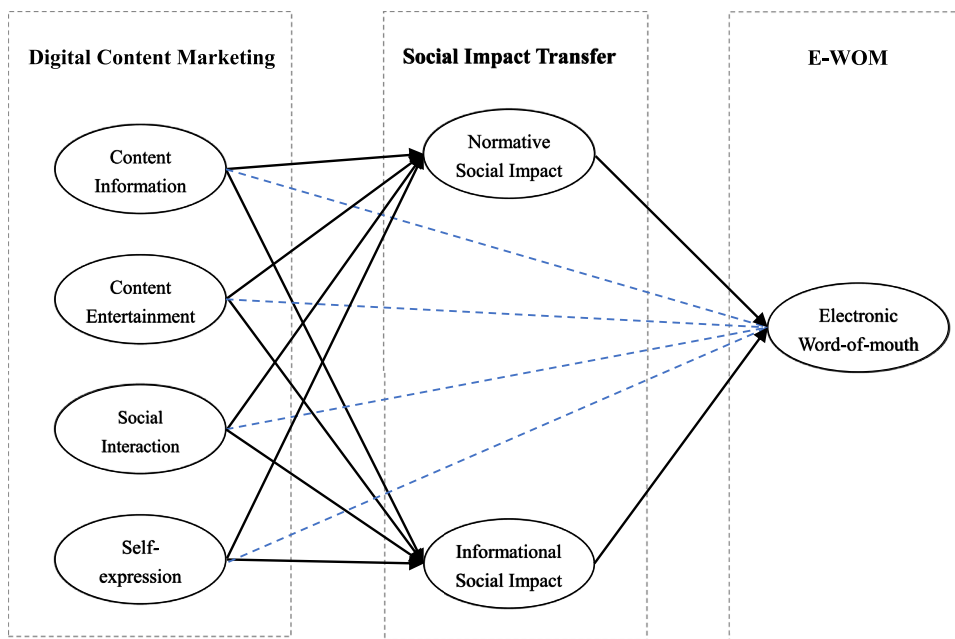


Fig. 1. The proposed conceptual DSE model.
Note: The dashed lines indicate mediating indirect effects.

inclined to use information for their independent analysis, thereby avoiding conformity with other food tourists. Therefore, CI may have a lesser impact on NSI. At the same time, tourists may decide to obtain additional information to judge information already acquired, so CI may have a more significant influence on ISI. Another explanation is that tourists' subjective destination preferences may weaken their attitudes towards others and increase the likelihood

of seeking alternative information sources. This explanation would partly account for the weak NSI of CI and strong ISI.

The hypothesis about a positive relationship between CE and ISI using the proposed theoretical model was supported. This result is consistent with some previous studies. Previously, some scholars have demonstrated that within social networks, informational impact is the process in which consumers determine their successful

experiences when using specific products (Lee et al., 2011). In the network environment, the ISI on customer cognition is a learning process (Kim and Srivastava, 2007). More specifically, customers form their views about a product or service by observing early adopters' interactions and communications about their experiences within their online social networks. CE can promote the experience of interaction and communication to form ISI (Zhang et al., 2009). The results of this study show that CE drives ISI among tourists. However, this research found that although entertainment content is adopted to attract target tourists, it may not have NSI among tourists. Instead, CE in food tourism requires marketers to establish an emotional connection with tourists. However, according to the current results, it may not be possible to form group identification in food tourism through entertainment information or to generate conformity among target tourists.

Regarding the relationship between SI and social impact, the results support a positive relationship between SI and NSI. This finding accords with the theoretical assumption that NSI can be used to estimate willingness to receive content knowledge (Deutsch and Gerrard, 1955), and that this content transfer needs to occur through SI (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). Since the virtual community is an appropriate knowledge transfer space, people can easily acquire knowledge and CI through communication, which is a form of SI (Kim et al., 2011). Specifically, SI facilitates knowledge acquisition in virtual communities, leading to NSI. Also, this study demonstrates that SI can result in ISI via mobile social media; this confirms Kim and Srivastava's (2007) research finding that within the network environment, the process of influencing customer cognition is a learning process. This process will also influence information social impact. SI provides opportunities for this learning process. This finding is consistent with research that consumers determine their views on products or services by observing early adopters' interactions and communication experiences in their online social networks (Zhang et al., 2009). Notably, SI can fuel both NSI and ISI.

This study reveals a significant positive correlation between SE and NSI. In food tourism, tourists' SE through mobile social media plays a vital role in NSI, with the highest path coefficient: The content of DCM stimulates tourists' SE, which has a significant social normative impact. This research supports the idea that social media platforms enable users to express their personalities via personal images, information, and other content, to exert social impact (Choi et al., 2015). It also demonstrates that SE is a strong motivator for consumers to participate in online activities (Lee and Ma, 2012). Nevertheless, there was no significant relationship between SE and ISI in this study. Even though self-expression can be considered a unique and distinct feature of social media and a strong impetus for people to participate in online activities (Lee and Ma, 2012), people express themselves to the outside world through social media platforms, thus influencing others' impressions of them (Choi et al., 2015). However, in the context of DCM in food tourism, while DCM in food tourism is helpful for tourists to express themselves through mobile social media platforms, it does not influence ISI. The reason for this finding might have something to do with the search for informational content. Tourists may be more concerned about the functionality of the contents of food tourism DCM (Hur et al., 2017), and there may be relatively little attention paid to whether others share their opinions. This explanation is supported by the high and significant direct path coefficient of relevant CI and SI in the theoretical model.

6.2. Social impact and e-WOM

Social impact has become a powerful force in tourists' decision-making (Mauri and Minazzi, 2013). Therefore, with the increase in

people's online behaviours, e-WOM has become the main factor affecting tourists' decision-making (Murphy et al., 2007). This study supports the idea that both NSI and ISI have a direct positive effect on e-WOM among food tourists.

In social psychology, NSI can lead to conformity. People openly agree with the opinions of the majority without changing their true opinions, or they are influenced by others –resulting in attitude change (Kelman, 1958). This study shows that conformity and compliance can lead to the spread of e-WOM, supporting previous research that NSI may result in e-WOM communication (Tanford and Montgomery, 2015).

The positive relationship found between ISI and e-WOM is consistent with previous studies on ISI that examined people's decision-making, except that this study concretises people's decision-making to e-WOM effects (Kuan et al., 2014). This result supports the idea that consumers hope to obtain information and guidance from their knowledgeable contacts when researching and considering purchasing options, which will assist them when engaging in e-WOM (Tanford and Montgomery, 2015). This means that ISI is among the important factors involved in producing e-WOM.

This study demonstrated that both normative and informational social influences impact e-WOM communication about food tourism.

6.3. Social impact as a mediating effect

6.3.1. NSI mediating effects

Among the forms of social impact, the mediating effect of NSI on CI and e-WOM is marginally significant in this study. This finding indicates that NSI plays a marginal mediating role between DCM, CI and e-WOM, and it supports some scholars' suggestion that group norms in virtual communities play an intermediary role in consumers' information expectations and consumers' decision-making (Dholakia et al., 2004).

For SI and e-WOM, NSI has a marginally significant mediating effect in food tourism, which supports previous research findings that if customers have collective consciousness, they are more likely to interact and exchange information about the views of friends and relatives on social media, form a consensus with them, and then disseminate it (Yang, 2013). That is, the social impact of norms may help tourists form their internal views and share them.

Also, this study found that NSI has a partial mediating effect on SE and e-WOM. SE has a strongly significant direct effect on e-WOM, which is the only direct effect in the theoretical model of this study. However, compared with the mediating effect, the direct effect is stronger; the effect of e-WOM directly caused by SE is stronger than that caused by the mediation of NSI. This result shows that the SE of tourists through DCM can directly result in strong e-WOM effects, which will also lead to a certain degree of NSI, thus leading to e-WOM. The results of this research are also consistent with those of previous research. As mentioned, because the flexibility of social media effectively connects consumers and merchants, consumers can provide merchants with attitudes and opinions on products or services through social media. Also, consumers will form a consensus on the feedback of merchants, thus influencing the attitudes of other consumers in a specific group (Habibi et al., 2014).

Nonetheless, the mediating effect of NSI on CE and e-WOM was not significant. This finding suggests that NSI does not play an intermediary role in the relationship between CE and e-WOM. Consequently, the results of this study are inconsistent with previous studies. Previous studies have shown that entertainment information can compel people to participate in group behaviours to spread content (Xu et al., 2017). This result can be explained in terms of the normative impact from conformity psychology, which

leads to imitation among peers - this explanation does not apply to the mediating effect of NSI on CE and e-WOM in food tourism.

6.3.2. ISI mediating effects

As expected, ISI played a mediating role in the relationship between CI and e-WOM. This finding supports previous studies that social impact has become a powerful force for tourists' decision-making and that most tourists refer to social media before making decisions (Mauri and Minazzi, 2013).

Also, ISI had a marginally significant mediating effect on the relationship between CE and e-WOM. This finding provides support for previous studies that tourists who collect information from professionals on social media are more inclined to enjoy entertainment. This finding might be because tourists seek quality information and are more inclined to disseminate information that they deem credible (Hur et al., 2017).

In this study, ISI played a marginal mediating role in the relationship between SI and e-WOM. This finding supports previous studies; the information adoption model takes the information usefulness assessment as the intermediary of the information adoption process, thus explaining how interactive information affects people on digital communication platforms. This finding also explains how the credibility of the information source, experience, or professional knowledge will influence the resultant social contagion that leads to e-WOM (Erkan and Evans, 2016).

In terms of ISI, this study found that ISI had no mediating effects on SE and e-WOM, while the direct effect between SE and e-WOM was significant. This result reveals that SE can directly lead to the spread of e-WOM without the mediating effect of ISI. This finding is contrary to the previously proposed hypothesis. The reason for this phenomenon may be that the motivation for SE is identity expression and self-improvement, or to obtain material or spiritual satisfaction, which is a kind of self-empowerment (Bumgarner, 2007). In the DCM process of food tourism, tourists can obtain the satisfaction of SE. Also, expressing this satisfaction through e-WOM communication can lead to the realisation of SE behaviours and directly affect e-WOM communication (Bumgarner, 2007). For individuals who influence social media, such as influencers, their e-WOM effects may have a greater impact, affecting the attitudes and behaviours of consumers (Wang and Fesenmaier, 2003). The effect on ISI, however, is less dramatic.

7. Implications

7.1. Theoretical implications

Since DCM is an important marketing strategy, this study has built an analytical framework from the perspective of UGT by analysing different dimensions of DCM and integrating Social Impact Theory. This study considered social impact to have a mediating role and examined the possibility of DCM for e-WOM diffusion. Through the structural equation modelling analysis, the mechanism by which DCM promotes e-WOM was through positive social impact, including NSI and ISI. A model that integrates multiple theories was formed—UGT and Social Impact Theory were used to understand how DCM affects consumers' e-WOM, providing a new understanding of consumer e-WOM behaviour on social media. This study expanded marketing theory and provided a new theoretical model to elucidate how DCM via social media influences e-WOM through social impact. The four dimensions of UGT assists in understanding how DCM content affects audiences and e-WOM in food tourism on social media. Furthermore, the study demonstrated that UGT is suitable for the study of DCM. There was clarification for the important role of DCM via mobile social media on e-WOM, and validation of the DCM influence on e-WOM

through social impact. Therefore, this study provides a better understanding of the DCM mechanisms that impact e-WOM on social media and outlines a theoretical basis for guiding the implementation of DCM strategy. Additionally, this study contributes to the literature on food tourism. The model extends previous research into digital content marketing and food tourism because it functions as a bridge to study food tourism from a digital marketing perspective.

7.2. Practical implications

Unlike traditional advertising, customers willingly seek interesting content, or take the initiative to search for information regarding products and services via mobile social media (Cronin, 2016). For marketers, a tool that assists them to understand the main features of DCM, such as dialogue and communication, storytelling, and stimulating customer interaction and participation, is important as these features are precisely in line with consumers' needs when seeking information through mobile communication (Du Plessis, 2017).

Given in the practice of DCM, content is a key factor, marketers should pay careful attention to the characteristics of the audience and the quality of the information content they create. Good content will assist managers to not only attract audiences, but also helps DCM to create NSI and ISI. Marketers need to carefully focus on content production in digital marketing, such as sourcing the most efficient and up-to-date information to satisfy the target tourists' information requirements. In the process of content production, the importance of content entertainment to result in ISI should be given full priority. Marketers need to create content while also considering the entertainment aspects of the content. Notably, it is particularly necessary for marketers to pay attention to their interactions with their target audience because the content interaction can assist marketers in knowing the audience's needs. Moreover, importantly, interaction generates a powerful social impact (including NSI and ISI to achieve e-WOM diffusion for products or services) (Huang, 2012). SI can not only influence NSI and ISI to a certain extent, but it can also lead to effective e-WOM effects through the two different social impacts. The role of DCM is extraordinary. Marketers should ensure that the content generated can facilitate engaging interactions with their target audience. Therefore, this study suggests that destination marketers and managers should create and enhance interactive content about food tourism for their target tourists in order to engage and actively promote food tourism products or destinations through e-WOM with the goal to stimulate the willingness of target tourists to visit. At the same time, marketers should use mobile social media to engage and interact with their target audience to avoid and monitor the occurrence of negative e-WOM effects in real-time. In addition to the emphasis on interaction, DCM actions should focus on helping their target audience to achieve greater SE because this research found that, in DCM, respondents attached great importance to SE. In fact, among all factors, SE played an important role in generating NSI. For example, marketers should subtly organise their content about food tourism on social media, thereby meeting the target tourists' expectation to share their personalities with the rest of the group, and therefore, give them gain a sense of belonging (Plume and Slade, 2018).

Social impact plays an important role in the link between DCM and e-WOM. Both NSI and ISI can directly lead to the spread of e-WOM. Also, most instruments of DCM need to generate e-WOM effects through social impact. In promoting the DCM of food tourism, managers should employ Informational Social Impact to encourage tourists to post positive comments which will then impact other tourists' decision-making to stimulate the spread of positive e-WOM. This is important, given that friends, family

and other tourists are the most influential information sources for tourists (Huang, 2012). Also, ISI needs special attention to assist the audience in forming a positive consensus to facilitate the spread of positive e-WOM; this is because consumers, such as tourists, prefer to actively seek information rather than passively receive information (Hur et al., 2017).

Finally, to engage consumers, digital content should be concise, vivid and interesting, using big data analysis based on the real interests of users. Therefore, marketers or managers should follow the principle of content integration and interactivity (Kwahk and Kim, 2017).

8. Limitations and future research

There are several limitations of this study. First, this study only employed a quantitative research method. A mixed-methods sequential exploratory strategy would yield richer data, particularly considering the exploratory nature of this research area. Second, the proposed model does not consider moderation effects. Future research should consider some factors as potential moderating variables. As the study was conducted in only China, the generalisability of these findings is limited; therefore, future research in other countries seems warranted. Finally, future research could help to elucidate why the CE of DCM does not create NSI in food tourism contexts, and whether it could result in social impact with moderating factors.

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