THE DETERMINANTS OF INFORMATION CREDIBILITY ON MGC SITES: TOURIST PERCEPTION ON RESTAURANT WEBSITES IN THAILAND

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INTRODUCTION

Information search is a necessary process for reducing the uncertainty and perceived risks of a trip to an unfamiliar destination (Fodness & Murray, 1999; Fuentes-Moraleda et al., 2022; S. C. Jang, 2013) and is considered essential in making wise choices when faced with various alternatives (Guo, 2001; Xiang & Fesenmaier, 2022). Information credibility is the initial factor to information adoption and behavioral intention (Balouchi et al., 2017; Erkan & Evans, 2016; Luo et al., 2018) and has been considered the strongest predictor for information adoption (Balouchi et al., 2017). Moreover, it has been indicated that information credibility is a key influencer affecting a user's choice of sources and judgement of the information adoption (Robson & Robinson, 2013)

Despite the great importance of online information credibility, research on the credibility of information on restaurant websites (MGC) and its determinants in the context is not widely conducted. Even though there have been a decent number of studies examining on the credibility of restaurants' online reviews (UGC), they have investigated in a general manner rather than investigating a perception of foreign customers in relation to local restaurants in destinations–in this case, Thailand, and mainly without considering factors of information credibility that impact customers' behavioral intention. They also applied source credibility concepts rather than information credibility concepts (Abedin et al., 2019; Anaya-Sánchez et al., 2019; Ayeh et al., 2013; Filieri, 2016; Hussain et al., 2017).

Understanding information credibility on marketer-generated content (MGC) is limited and research on websites' information credibility has been weighted intensively on some areas, such as health information (Rains & Karmikel, 2009; Song et al., 2019; Thon & Jucks, 2017). Most research in this field has employed inductive approaches, focused on factors and effects of information credibility (McKnight & Kacmar, 2007), and provided overwhelming verification lists to assess the credibility (Metzger, 2007). Metzger (2007) indicated that these had not been directly connected to investigate what factors people really use to determine online information credibility and they also noted that not all factors would apply to every context. Some factors are more or less helpful in evaluating credibility at different levels of websites. To close these research gaps, this study aims to explore determinants affecting perceived online information credibility on restaurant of British visitors searching for local restaurants in the destination, Thailand.

METHOD

Semi-structured interviews were employed to identify antecedents of online information credibility on restaurant websites. Interviews were conducted in a quiet room with a computer for completing a task. Participants, British visitors, were instructed to search for a Thai restaurant in Thailand to dine in. They were provided three simulated restaurant websites using a website builder (Wix.com). General information (e.g., background, menu descriptions, promotions, and pictures) was used and manipulated based on real restaurant e-commerce websites mentioned on Thai restaurant websites (located in Thailand). After selecting a restaurant, the following questions were prepared for the interview: 1) Have

you ever come across a suspect information on restaurant websites that you had perceived as untruthful? 2) Could you explain what made you feel unsure that the information on restaurant websites is untrustful? 3) Could you explain what characteristics of information on restaurant websites that you perceived to be credible? The prepared questions were used as a guideline to achieve goals of the study and varied depending on how the individual participants responded.

Appendix 1 illustrates basic characteristic of interview participants. The number of participants in this study was 16 participants, who were students and university staff, and customers from Thai restaurants in Southern England. Purposive sampling approach was applied because this technique helped the researcher to decide what needs to be known and set out to find people who can and are willing to provide useful information by their knowledge and experience.

Data were thematically analyzed, following a structured approach which systematically moved from open coding to axial and theoretical coding. NVivo 12 was used to manage and organize the data. Member checks and intercoder reliability were used to ensure the rigor and believability of findings.

FINDINGS

The interview results of this study found that Currency of Information, Factuality of Information, Language Quality, Information Coverage, (reader) Experience, and Verification by other sources were dominant factors that made participants feel that the information was credible (See Appendix 2).

Currency of Information was one of the main themes that interviewees relayed throughout the interviews and considered as the main factor in judging online information credibility on restaurant websites. Participant 10 said that he wanted to get more information when he was at an actual restaurant and wanted to see whether the promotion on the website still existed. This is because he had previous experience of out-of-date restaurant websites.

• *"the websites might not be updated. Some restaurant website may out of date. So we need to go there and see whether the promotion is still*

exist." (P10)

Factuality of Information was found to be one of the central factors in evaluating information credibility on restaurant websites when selecting a restaurant. One of phrases that participants frequently mentioned was unrealistic food pictures on restaurant websites.

• *"I didn't like the photos on the third one because it didn't look real. Food doesn't look like that" (P1)*

In addition, participant 5 mentioned that she had experience of advertising pictures looking different from actual dishes.

• *"Like you see the picture. It's like, Ah, it looks so nice. And then when you get the food it doesn't look like the picture" (P5)*

Language Quality helped participants to assess information credibility. In this regard, participant 2 reported that the selected restaurant had better English quality regarding language flows and grammatical errors:

• *"This site seemed to have the most fluent English of the three. For example, that there would be some grammatical errors. Slight grammatical errors"* (P2)

Participant 12 considered spelling mistakes as an issue of language quality

• *"I think for me the actual website is also like if I see like there are spelling mistakes on the website or like the design is a bit not so nice."* (P12)

Information Coverage

used to justify information credibility on restaurant webpages. Participant 2 reported that during the restaurant selection process, he eliminated choices with less in-depth information and narrow content.

• *"I deleted website less in-depth content, very immediate, Bish, bash Bosh shallow content"* (P2)

(reader) Experience

Some interviewees reported that they adopted and utilized their knowledge and experiences to evaluate the credibility of information on restaurant webpages and restaurant online review pages. As participant 6 worked as a graphic designer, she could identify whether pictures were over photoshopped

or not. Participant 5 had experiences eating Thai food at Thai restaurants in the UK and she knew menus provided in Thai restaurants and what Thai restaurant should look like.

- *"Yeah, like the pictures they put on there. Like, I work as a graphic designer as well. So I know how they take photos of food. I've seen how you photograph food.* (P 6)
- *"Maybe I have a bit of a knowledge of Thai food because I've experienced it in UK···I won't not trust the website. So I know what the restaurant is going to be looking like I know what they're going to sell"* (P 5)

Verifying using other sources

Participants preferred cross checking both visual information and verbal information from different sources, such as review websites, social media, and search engines rather than relying on an official restaurant website. For example, participant 4 used Instagram to check actual pictures and hashtag to see what people were saying about that restaurant.

- *"So no, they're not credible? Of course not. But when you go on Instagram, sometimes you can look at their tag pictures. So you can look at who's tagged this restaurant. whatever other people posted of their food, what does their food look like versus was professionally taken"* (P4)

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This pioneering study has critically identified factors determining British visitors' online information credibility on restaurant websites, were represented by six major themes affecting online information credibility on restaurant websites, including currency of information, factuality of information, language quality, information coverage, (reader) experience, and verification by other sources.

It has made a vital contribution to the literature on online information credibility of websites, especially related to MGC websites (e.g. restaurant websites) because previous understanding is limited. This research differs from previous studies in a number of ways. For instance, research on websites' information credibility has been weighted intensively on some areas, such as health care, finance and news reports (Fogg et al., 2003; Rains & Karmikel, 2009; Thon & Jucks, 2017).

Also, review articles in this particular area have provided extensive lists of determinants to assess the information credibility of websites (e.g., Metzger, 2007; Kakol, Nielek and Wierzbicki, 2017). Accordingly, they have found that some factors were more or less helpful in evaluating credibility at different levels of websites. This study provides significant factors affecting online information credibility on MGC websites including currency of information, factuality of information, language quality and information coverage. Thus, the results of this study offer compelling evidence to fill an important gap in the credibility literature regrading MGC websites. The limitation of this study is that the results might not be generalizable. Thus, this research idea should be broadened to include more respondents and use quantitative methods to enhance the current findings.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Characteristics of Participants

Participant ID	Gender	Age (yrs.)	Number of visits to Thailand	Frequency of eating Thai food	Participant characteristic
P 1	Female	21	0	About once a year	Student
P 2	Male	44	1	3–6 times a year	Restaurant customer
P 3	Male	42	1	At least once a month	Restaurant customer
P 4	Female	26	0	About twice a year	Student
P 5	Female	24	0	3–6 times a year	Student
P 6	Female	32	0	About twice a year	University staff
P 7	Female	57	0	About once a year	University staff
P 8	Female	28	0	N/A	Student
P 9	Male	31	0	N/A	Student
P 10	Male	23	0	3–6 times a year	Student
P 11	Female	35	0	At least once a week	University staff
P 12	Female	21	0	N/A	Student
P 13	Male	30	0	3–6 times a year	Restaurant customer
P 14	Male	36	0	3–6 times a year	University staff
P 15	Male	58	7	At least once a month	Restaurant customer
P 16	Male	21	0	About once a year	Student

Appendix 2. Theoretical Framework Emerging from the Study