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An empirical test of alternative models: A comparison between casual and fine dining restaurants

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ABSTRACT

This study builds on the efforts to systematize the effects of online reviews, trust, and attitude on behavioral intentions. Specifically, we report the direct and indirect effects of variables on behavioral intentions through different models that compare the two types of restaurants (casual vs. fine dining). Our findings provide ample evidence that trust and attitude are directly related to behavioral intentions when online reviews do not directly influence behavioral intentions for both restaurant types. The findings also show that the online review-attitude-behavior link of Model 4 is more stable and robust than in Model 3. In particular, the indirect role of online reviews on behavioral intentions enhances the effects of the attitude-behavior relationship in both casual and fine dining restaurants.

1. Introduction

Hospitality literature has indicated that the development of customer trust and attitude formation are widely recognized as key factors in predicting behavioral intentions and behavior (Chiang & Guo, 2021; Dedeoğlu & Boğan, 2021; Erkmen & Hancer, 2019; Hwang & Ok, 2013). From a theoretical perspective, numerous studies have endeavored to model the links between trust, attitude, and purchase intentions, particularly with "antecedent, mediating, and consequent" relationships (Khoa, 2021; Meuter et al., 2013; Ukpagi & Karjaluoto, 2018; Yeon et al., 2019). Researchers have also attempted to include antecedents and mediator variables such as service quality (Ham & Kang, 2010; Namin, 2017; Wall & Berry, 2007), value (Kang et al., 2015; Lin et al., 2020), and consumer characteristics (Lubbe, 2007).

A better understanding of restaurant choices based on "antecedent, mediating, and consequent" relationships can be obtained by considering the increasing popularity of online reviews, particularly in the hospitality sector. Cheng et al. (2019) and Xu (2020) highlight that a key characteristic of the digital economy is the importance that customers attribute to the role of online reviews. While the literature identifies online reviews as an antecedent or mediator in the relationships between trust, attitude, and behavioral (or purchase) intentions, our advanced approach using alternative models allows researchers to develop a complete understanding of online consumer reviews through theoretical soundness and effective model selection.

This study proposes four alternative models that examine how online reviews form consumer behavioral intentions. To implement this, we adopt Armstrong et al.'s (2001) notion that the role of the scientist should shift from advocating for a single hypothesis to evaluating several alternative models. We ensure objectivity by testing the evidence from the four alternative models on the roles of online reviews, trust, and attitude in comparing behavioral models. In addition, we adopt McKenzie's (1998) view that researchers can make judgments on how evidence relates to each alternative view. Thus, this study attempts to address this important gap by investigating how constructs are structured and which one of the structured alternative models can be applied as the optimal model in the restaurant industry.

We extend the previous research in two ways: First, from an alternative model choice perspective, this study contributes to existing knowledge by applying a structural equation analysis to test four alternative models of the determinants of behavioral intentions, particularly in the restaurant sector. Prior studies demonstrated that the selection of an alternative model is an appropriate way to predict the behavioral intention of individual customers who want to eat at fast-food restaurants (Brinberg & Durand, 1983). In addition, consistent with the hospitality consumption experiences that use an alternative approach in a holistic manner (e.g., Gracia et al., 2011; Prayag et al., 2015), the main advantage of our study is the ability to account for "antecedent, mediating, and consequent" relationships when theoretical justifications or the relationship links are complicated. Thus, we use

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models that reflect competing mechanisms in these relationships and determine the most appropriate one.

Second, the current research responds to Hwang and Ok (2013) by further investigating the comparison of two types of restaurants at least in the restaurant context. Since restaurants differ by taste, service, location, and physical characteristics, a better understanding of how online reviews impact the behavioral intentions of consumers can help managers to reduce uncertainty, and in turn, increase restaurant brand loyalty. Therefore, this study does not focus on theory development. Instead, it pursues an empirical approach to identify an alternative mechanism of behavioral intentions by unifying previous findings derived from published research and theoretical logic of the information process into a comprehensive model of behavioral intention in the restaurant industry.

2. Literature review and alternative models

2.1. Online reviews

Zhuang et al. (2018) stressed that firms must move towards less or no manipulation of online reviews. For example, although creating fake reviews could increase attraction, it eventually arouses consumer suspicion. Since consumers can witness read real consumption-related experiences and evaluations online, they often use reviews as the main source of information about specific services (Sparks & Browning, 2011). In this regard, this study conceptualizes online reviews as any positive or negative statement regarding actual customer experiences with a particular restaurant.

Given that customers tend to pay attention to messages that directly relate to them, the impact of online reviews can potentially reduce uncertainty and better aid their purchase decisions. The information provided in the literature suggests a U-shaped relationship between consumers' attitudes and their propensity to engage with brands (Hydock et al., 2020). For example, as online reviews become increasingly positive (i.e., going from neutral to more positive), consumer attitudes will positively improve (right side of the U). Conversely, as online reviews become increasingly negative (i.e., going from neutral to more negative), consumer attitudes will worsen (left side of the U).

In addition, online reviews assume the main antecedent position in our models because user-generated information in the form of online reviews directly helps information seekers and less-sophisticated consumers find needed information and favorably form attitudes toward the object of review (Bickart & Schindler, 2001; Thakur, 2018). Thus, examining online reviews might help to explain the roles of the two constructs (i.e., trust and attitude) on behavioral intentions (Cheng et al., 2019; Purnawirawan, Pelsmacker, & Dens, 2012).

2.2. Trust

While researchers from different disciplines agree on the importance of trust in the conduct of human affairs, there are many definitions of this concept due to different contexts and situations and considerable variation in the meaning of trust (Aljazzaf et al., 2010). For example, online researchers define trust as a willingness to believe in the various attributes of an other party (McKnight & Chervany, 2002). In addition, both cognitive trust and emotional trust have potentially asymmetrical effects on customer reliance on service providers in e-commerce (Komiak & Benbasat, 2004). Since the COVID-19 pandemic caused the focus of trust to subtly vary (Hakim et al., 2021), this study conceptualizes trust in a restaurant as the feeling of security that the consumer has in their interaction with the restaurant, reflecting the belief that the restaurant is taking care of them and doing whatever is necessary to meet their needs (Chao-Chin, 2017).

As a core component of service and relationship quality, it is proposed that positively framed information together with numerical rating details increase trust (Kim & Kim, 2020; Sparks & Browning, 2011). In addition, previous literature focuses on the direct role of trust in the hospitality context (Cheng & Jin, 2019), suggesting that behavioral intentions are the key outcomes of trust. However, we expect that trust may serve as a useful mediator to bridge a possible relationship between online reviews, attitudes, and behavioral intentions in addition to the direct role of trust on behavioral intentions.

2.3. Attitude toward a restaurant

Generally, attitude is defined as a psychological tendency expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). Furthermore, attitude is considered a summary of hypothetical factors representing overall feelings towards or evaluative judgments about a person, object, or issue (Zajonc & Markus, 1982). When applied to the restaurant sector, attitude also relies on the currently acceptable motivation (Liu et al., 2020). Consistent with these observations, this study conceptualizes the attitude toward a restaurant as a consumer's overall feelings towards a particular restaurant regarding its capacity to meet consumer needs with some degree of favor.

The value-attitude-behavior model is essential to better understand social psychology (Kang et al., 2015). In this regard, the logic is that if a consumer evaluates an object with a valuable product or service, they will form a favorable attitude toward that product or service, and in turn, their attitude may influence their behavioral intentions. In this study, value is closely linked to online reviews because consumers use online reviews to determine the value of a particular restaurant they have not experienced. Evidence of this is supported by Najar and Rather (2021), who found that consumer attitudes mediate the link between online reviews and behavioral intentions. Thus, we focus on the mediating role that attitudes toward a restaurant play in online reviews, trust, and behavioral intentions.

2.4. Behavioral intentions

Ajzen (1991) states that "intentions are assumed to capture the motivational factors that influence a behavior" (p. 181). If a consumer has a strong intention to take action (e.g., purchasing a product or visiting a restaurant), then behavioral intentions may be defined as a consumer's willingness to visit a particular restaurant. In addition, behavioral intentions are influenced by a consumer's propensity to trust, which could translate to their general willingness to trust restaurants (Harris et al., 2018; Jani & Han, 2011). While the relationship between purchase intention and its drivers is assumed to be positive, investigating the indirect role of key drivers may be significant to gain a complete understanding of behavioral intentions in the restaurant sector. In particular, Cronin et al. (2000) have highlighted the inter-relationships between model structures and behaviorally relevant variables when researchers consider alternative model explanations.

3. Four alternative models of behavioral intentions in the restaurant sector

As shown in Fig. 1, we propose four alternative models to better understand the conceptual relationships among the constructs of online reviews, trust, attitude toward a restaurant, and behavioral intentions. The main purpose of these alternative models is to develop a complete understanding of not only each construct but also how these constructs relate to each other and are subsequently linked to behavioral intentions. In this regard, the four alternative models commence with the online review stage.

3.1. The direct effects model (M1)

The direct effects model (M1) begins with the direct linkage between online reviews (OR), trust (TR), attitude (AT), and behavioral intentions

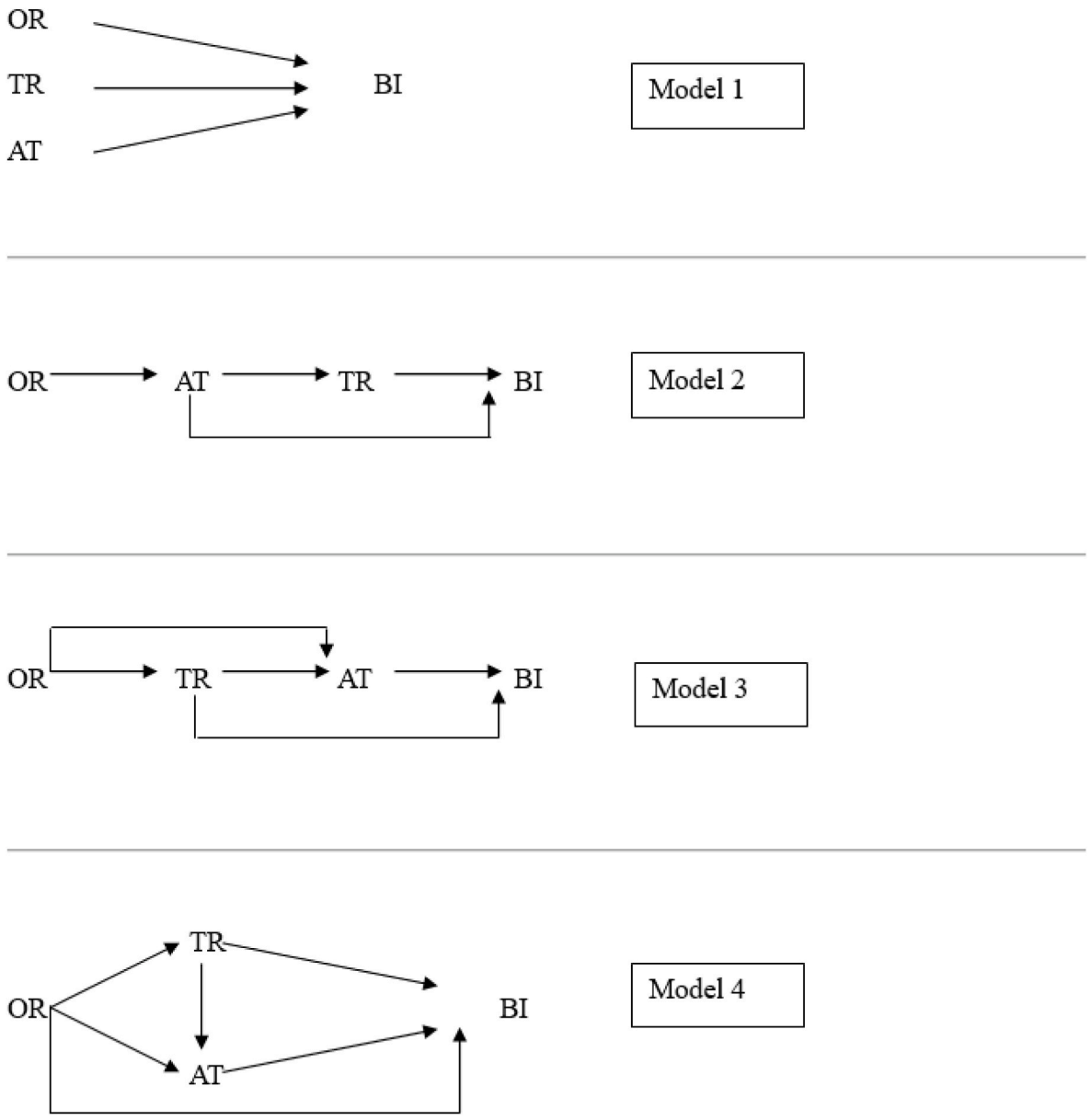

Fig. 1. Alternative models.
Note: OR=Online reviews; TR = Trust; AT = Attitude toward a restaurant; BI=Behavioral intentions.

(BI) to provide a base comparison. These variables have been shown to have a relevant effect on behavioral intentions. That is, OR, TR, and AT experienced together affect BI. Thus, M1 allows a direct effect for three independent variables (e.g., OR, TR, and AT) on the dependent variable (BI) and is called the direct effects model. These relationships are supported by previous studies as follows: OR-BI (Duan et al., 2008; Jiménez & Mendoza, 2013; Sparks & Browning, 2011); TR-BI (Agag & Ei-Nasry, 2017; Yoon, 2002); and AT-BI (Yoon & Chung, 2018; Youm et al., 2020).

3.2. The simple indirect influences model (M2)

The simple indirect influences model (M2) assumes no direct relationship between OR and BI. We propose M2 as it allows for an understanding of the indirect effects of OR on BI through AT and TR. More specifically, M2 indicates that OR, AT, TR and BI are experienced linearly with a loop from AT to BI. While the link of [AT → TR → BI] is proposed by Jung (2021) and Li et al. (2006), the indirect effect between OR and BI in M2 does not appear in previous works. In M2, both AT and TR indirectly influence OR and BI. Because there are two indirect variables to possibly predict consumer behavior, attention is then focused on the indirect role of AT and the theoretical justification for its broader use in the hospitality industry. The literature also supports the theoretical justification for the link [OR→ AT] (Hu & Yang, 2021; Lee & Ro, 2016; Zhang & Hanks, 2018).

3.3. The double mediation effects model (M3)

The sequences start with a model that allows for the AT-TR link to occur in the opposite direction to what it did in M2. Therefore, we propose the double mediation effects model (M3) that allows for the direct effect of TR on AT. Furthermore, an additional link included in M3 directly links OR to AT. More specifically, M3 indicates that OR, TR, AT and BI are experienced linearly with two loops, such as OR to AT and TR to BI. Thus, M3 suggests that OR can directly impact two outcomes (TR and AT), influencing BI. Consequently, these two outcomes serve as mediators (e.g., OR-TR-AT and TR-AT-BI linkages) when consumers

form their attitudes and make decisions.

When a consumer conducts a complex information analysis, the mediation role of trust is supported by the elaboration likelihood model. For example, prior studies identified the importance of OR as a vehicle for behavioral motivation because people have a strong motive for information quality regarding real experiences (Chang et al., 2020). In expanding on this theoretical approach, hospitality literature has theorized that the characteristics (i.e., volume, rating, and direction) of OR can result in establishing initial TR, and in turn, forming a favorable AT (Ong, 2012; Ukpagi & Karjaluoto, 2018).

Additional empirical justification for the TR-AT-BI link is supported by Lim et al. (2012), who highlighted the importance of the mediating role of AT. In particular, the theory underlying the OR-TR-AT-BI link is the stimulus-organism-response (SOR) theory. This framework suggests that external information sources stimulate specific cognitive and affective states, thereby inducing specific behaviors (Donovan & Rossiter, 1982). Therefore, according to the SOR theory, OR substitutes for stimulus (S), TR and AT substitute for organism (O), and BI substitutes for response (R). Our approach is also consistent with an extended SOR model (i.e., the input-process-output model) for predicting consumer behavior (e.g., Kim et al., 2020).

3.4. The proposed research model (M4)

Cronin et al. (2000) demonstrate that investigating the specification of the "antecedent, mediating, and consequent" relationships in a comparison of model explanations is critical. The proposed research model (M4) specifies three direct effects and is the most plausible model in this study on conceptual grounds. Although only one direct effect was added, five possible explanations appeared. The model suggests that TR and AT play two mediating roles regarding the effect of OR on BI and have three direct effects (e.g., OR-BI, TR-BI, and AT-BI). Specifically, M4 depicts two linear fashions, a loop from OR to BI, and a TR-AT linkage. Thus, the three proposed models (M1, M2, and M3) are nested in M4.

M4 may have more merit in circumstances where there is less ambiguous information. When an OR is directly linked to the appropriate restaurant information to simplify the decision process, these reviews may be an important predictor of TR. Thus, M4 is considered an optimal model in terms of being a good predictor of restaurant choice because consumers have a strong tendency to check an OR first, followed by establishing a trusting relationship (Huifeng & Ha, 2020).

From a theoretical perspective, the candidacy of M4 to be the best model is partially supported by the theory of reasoned action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). For example, the hypothesized link of OR-TR-AT is related to the acceptance-yielding-impact model of attitude formation (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1981). As these theoretical justifications have mainly focused on the direct link of information acceptance on attitude formation, the following question arises as to whether the indirect effect of an OR can be explained through these theoretical justifications because an OR can indirectly impact a consumer's motivational beliefs not clearly mentioned in textual or scoring reviews.

Regarding this question, in M4, AT is not only a significant predictor of BI but also plays a role as a mediator of the TR-BI link. A better understanding of the attitude-building process towards future restaurant visits is the most plausible explanation (Moon, 2021). In line with these observations, the OR-TR-BI link is also supported (Banerjee et al., 2017; Huifeng & Ha, 2020; Ong, 2012).

3.5. Restaurant segments

Some researchers identify restaurants by the type of service whereas others distinguish them by the cost of a meal (Park & Almanza, 2015). This study uses both perspectives in defining casual and fine dining restaurants. A common identification of a formal restaurant is the full-service restaurant, which refers to establishments that provide the ordered food to customers who are served while seated and pay after eating (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). However, the main difference between the two restaurant types is the average check price per person. The average check price for casual restaurants is around $20, including an appetizer and a glass of water, whereas the average check price for fine dining restaurants is greater than $30, including an appetizer, a glass of water, and a dessert with a cup of coffee, at least in the Korean restaurant context. In addition, fine dining restaurants generally serve high-quality food and offer exceptional service (e.g., well-trained staff and the restaurant's physical surroundings) (Ha & Jung, 2013).

4. Methods

4.1. Data collection

COVID-19's impact on the restaurant industry was fast and deep, so we selected the restaurant industry for our study because the recovery is now accelerating change and transforming hospitality (Ruggless, 2021). Data collection took place from late February to early March 2021 from all searchable restaurant properties (casual or fine-dining restaurants) in South Korea. We controlled participants under the following conditions: 1) people who read three or more online reviews of a particular restaurant they wanted to visit, and 2) people had visited the restaurant within the last two months despite the COVID-19 pandemic. We selected the sample using the following screening questions to control for these two criteria: 1) Have you read multiple customer reviews about a particular restaurant where you have wanted to eat? 2) Have you eaten at a restaurant within the past two months despite the COVID-19 pandemic?

Based on these criteria, we conducted a survey by collaborating with a professional online research firm in Korea. The firm's panel database contained around 32,000 potential customers who matched our criteria, from which we drew a random sample of 2500 individuals. The firm sent each individual an online questionnaire and offered an incentive for participation (i.e., receiving Starbucks vouchers worth US$ 5 once they had completed the questionnaire). One week later, emails were sent to non-responding panel members to encourage participation in the survey. The participants were asked to select the restaurant they had visited most recently and to answer the questionnaire based on their experiences at this restaurant. During the study period, respondents had visited a specific restaurant on average 1.8 times, and the list of restaurants they visited was as follows: casual dining restaurants such as VIPS, Alp Kitchen, Kitchen Lab, Vapiano, and Ugly Stove vs. fine dining restaurants such as Seoul Dining, Restaurant Toc Toc, Aeria, Il Pan, Weilou, and Exquisine.

Responses reflecting a total of 388 casual dining and 331 fine dining surveys were returned, which yielded a response rate of 28.7%. Some participants were removed after eliminating 21 casual dining surveys and 16 fine dining surveys due to incomplete responses. Therefore, the final sample size was 367 for casual dining restaurants and 315 for fine dining restaurants. The sample was representative of the Korean population in terms of gender, age, education, and income. Approximately 54% of the sample were female, and 72% were over 30 years old. Furthermore, 64% were married, 87% had completed at least college, and 51% had household incomes between US$ 30,000 and US$ 70,000.

A comparison between the early and late respondents regarding the four constructs indicated no significant differences ($p > .10$) (Armstrong & Overton, 1977). These results suggest that non-response bias does not appear in this study. In addition, we analyzed the *t*-test to find the sample difference between casual and fine dining restaurants. T-tests were used when four constructs of two restaurant groups were being compared. T-test results were significant ($p < .01$ for a one-tail test), suggesting a difference between the two groups. Finally, we also checked the multi-collinearity test. Tolerance levels of the constructs were higher than 0.10, which is the recommended cutoff (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007).

4.2. Measures

The four constructs were measured by 14 questions using a five-point Likert scale (ranging from "*strongly agree* = 1" to "*strongly disagree* = 5") adapted from published scales (see Table 1). However, these scales were partially modified to suit the purpose of this study. More specifically, the following three antecedent facets of behavioral intentions were measured: online reviews, with three items that were adapted from an item found in the studies of Cromption and McKay (1997), Senecal and Nantel (2004), and Sparks and Browning (2011); trust, with five items that were adapted from three items found in the study of Morgan and Hunt (1994) and two items found in the study of Park et al. (2021); and attitude towards a restaurant, with three items that were adapted from Simon and Peppas' (2005) study. Finally, behavioral intentions were measured by three items adapted from Han and Jeong (2013).

5. Results

5.1. Results of the measurement model

A two-step approach was used to test this measurement (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). The first step tested the overall model fit and validity using a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). After completing this step, the comparison among the four alternative models was tested using the CFA. Finally, the best model and the relationships among the four constructs were examined using AMOS 23.

As presented in Table 1, the CFA model provided a good fit for both data sets. The chi-square statistics were significant ($p < .01$), but highly sensitive to the sample size (Jöreskog, 1993). Sharma et al. (2005) recommended that both the comparative fit index (CFI) and the Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) should be used to evaluate model fits because these two indices perform best when the minimum sample size is at least 200. They also demonstrated that the TLI performs best when the size of factor loadings is 0.5 or greater. The CFI and TLI estimates were 0.97 and 0.93, respectively, for the casual restaurant sample and 0.96 and 0.92 for the fine dining restaurant sample. The root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) estimates were 0.056 and 0.058 for the casual and fine dining restaurant samples.

Composite reliability (CR) and the average variance extracted (AVE) for each construct were calculated using Fornell and Larcker's (1981) guidelines. The four constructs of the composite reliabilities ranged from 0.87 to 0.91 in the casual restaurant group and from 0.89 to 0.93 in the fine dining restaurant group. Factor loadings of the scale ranged from 0.67 to 0.85 (casual restaurant group, $p < .01$) and 0.69 to 0.87 (fine dining restaurant group, $p < .01$). The value of AVE ranged from 0.52 to 0.60 in the casual restaurant group and 0.55 to 0.67 in the fine dining restaurant group. These results exhibited excellent convergent validity.

Finally, discriminant validity was assessed using Fornell and Larcker's (1981) criterion. As shown in Table 2, the square root of AVE should exceed the correlations with other latent constructs, indicating an acceptable level of discriminant validity, and suggesting that discriminant validity is acceptable.

Table 2
Discriminant validity.

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	α
Casual restaurants							
1. Online reviews	2.43	.79	***.59***				.80
2. Trust	2.71	.89	.59	***.52***			.81
3. Attitude	2.63	.86	.60	.62	***.55***		.77
4. Behavioral Intentions	2.57	.89	.55	.58	.67	***.60***	.78
Fine dining restaurants							
1. Online reviews	2.44	.99	***.60***				.74
2. Trust	2.66	.98	.53	***.55***			.86
3. Attitude	2.45	.87	.62	.59	***.67***		.85
4. Behavioral Intentions	2.72	.89	.61	.64	.65	***.58***	.81

Note: Bold numbers on the diagonal show the AVE. α is Cronbach's Alpha.

5.2. Comparison of alternative models with path model results

The appropriateness of alternative models was first tested using model fit indices (Hair et al., 2010). Table 3 showed the comparison of alternative model fits to select the optimal model. The basic approach to compare the four alternative models was that three of the alternative models (M1, M2, and M3) are nested within M4. Thus, the χ^2 statistic for the larger model is subtracted from the χ^2 statistic for the smaller nested model. Furthermore, it is essential to compare the χ^2 statistic based on the difference between the degree of freedom in two or more alternative models (Chou & Huh, 2012). Finally, the best model was selected using the Bayesian information criterion (BIC) because the BIC is more useful in selecting a correct model than the Akaike information criterion (AIC) (Chakrabarti & Ghosh, 2011). For the BIC indices, smaller values indicate better models (Aho et al., 2014).

The fit indices for the four alternative models within the two types of restaurant groups were summarized in Table 3. M1 indicates a very poor fit for both groups: for the casual restaurant group $\chi^2(74) = 552.431$, TLI = 0.79 and for the fining dining restaurant group $\chi^2(74) = 604.847$, TLI = 0.76. However, these model fit indices and chi-square values were further supported by an improvement in fit indices and a decrease in chi-square values in M2.

Comparisons between M1 and M2 show a further substantial drop in the chi-square values of the two groups: for the casual restaurant group, $\Delta\ \chi^2(1) = 274.90$ ($p < .01$) and for the fine dining restaurant group, $\Delta\ \chi^2(1) = 260.05$ ($p < .01$). Specifically, the chi-square values based on the difference of degree of freedom (74–73 = 1) were statistically significant. These results suggest potential parameters for the stable improvement of the model.

Comparisons between M2 and M3 were further improved by the much better model fit resulting from an additional parameter of M3 as shown in the decrease in chi-square values: for the casual restaurant group, $\Delta\ \chi^2(1) = 38.54$ ($p < .01$) and for the fine dining restaurant group, $\Delta\ \chi^2(1) = 61.49$ ($p < .01$). The casual restaurant group's TLI (0.89) and RMSEA (0.07) were acceptable, and the BIC remarkably decreased.

Further support came from comparisons between M3 and M4. The results highlight the importance of both mediations and direct effects were further supported by an improved fit in the transition from M3 to M4: for the casual restaurant group, $\Delta\ \chi^2(1) = 70.76$ ($p < .01$) and for the fine dining restaurant group, $\Delta\ \chi^2(1) = 90.08$ ($p < .01$). For both restaurant groups, M4 had smaller BIC values, indicating that is the better model when compared to the other three alternative models.

5.3. Optimal model selection among alternative models

M4 is judged to be the optimal model in comparison to the alternative models. M4 shows a better understanding of not only each construct but also all four constructs (e.g., online reviews, trust, attitude toward a restaurant, and behavioral intentions) in relation to each other and the

Table 3
Model fit indexes for each model.

Models	χ^2	df	χ^2/df	TLI	RMSEA	BIC
Casual restaurants						
1. M1	552.431	74	7.46	.79	.11	735.497
2. M2	277.529	73	3.80	.85	.08	466.501
3. M3	238.985	72	3.31	.89	.07	337.805
4. M4	168.222	71	2.36	.93	.05	269.004
Fine dining restaurants						
1. M1	604.847	74	8.17	.76	.13	883.177
2. M2	344.788	73	4.72	.83	.09	528.871
3. M3	283.293	72	3.93	.86	.08	502.128
4. M4	193.209	71	2.72	.92	.06	428.797

subsequent drive of behavioral intentions. In particular, two restaurant data sets may provide ample evidence because M4 significantly fits the data better than the other three models. As noted earlier, the improved fit of M4 occurred because two or more additional parameters enabled M4 to absorb random errors (Pitt et al., 2002). The chi-square difference test for comparing alternative models is a useful model selection procedure to resolve this issue because it can determine whether one of these model structures performs better than the other (Punj & Hillyer, 2004). Our findings show that the chi-square differences between M4 and the other three models with one degree of freedom are also statistically significant at $p < .01$. Furthermore, this study focuses on the optimal model selection among the four alternative models; that is, the selection of the most effective model among the structured models already established in previous studies. In doing so, the BIC was implemented as it is useful in selecting a correct model. Therefore, M4 is the correct model in the current restaurant data.

5.4. Comparison of path estimates among alternative models

Four alternative models were tested using measures of online reviews, trust, attitudes toward a restaurant, and behavioral intentions. They were then compared according to the two restaurant types. As shown in Table 4 and Fig. 2, the analysis provides evidence that, regardless of the type of restaurants, online reviews in the fully nested condition of M4 did not significantly influence behavioral intentions and were more likely to correctly identify the indirect effect than the direct effect in the independent condition of M1. Thus, although restaurant customers often search for online reviews to establish purchase intentions (Jiménez & Mendoza, 2013), they consider online reviews conditionally applicable. These results are consistent with the idea that customers refer to a variety of information sources through online reviews (Zhang et al., 2010), however, the condition of referring to online reviews does not necessarily trigger their purchasing behavior. Our findings support previous studies that address the lack of relationship between online reviews and behavioral intentions at least in the fine dining restaurant context (Chung et al., 2019).

Consistent with the results of the other alternative models (M2, M3, and M4), online reviews had a more significant effect on trust and attitudes toward a restaurant than behavioral intentions. Previous studies that address the influence of trust on attitudes in online reviews also support our findings (Zablocki et al., 2019). Consequently, the mechanism of the alternative models was nested by the proposed constructs. Taken together, the results of this study provide strong evidence that there was little difference in the path estimates for the two types of restaurants.

As mentioned earlier, we highlighted that a better understanding of how online reviews impact behavioral intention can help restaurant managers. M4 provided ample evidence that the impact of online reviews, which managers consider important, does not directly drive consumer behavior in both data sets. The results of M4 were consistent with Bagozzi's coping framework (1992). That is, the impact of online reviews stimulates behavioral evoking through the reinforcement of trust and attitude toward a specific restaurant.

6. Discussion

This study reveals that M4 addresses the structural interrelationships among online reviews, trust, attitude towards a restaurant, and purchase intention as the best model compared to the other three alternative models in both casual and fine dining restaurant samples. The study demonstrates that the comparison of alternative models offers a considerable advantage for investigating models representing different structures, which can be obtained by modified model structures. Among the four alternatives, the information-attitude-behavior link (M4) is more stable and robust than the information-trust-behavior link (M3). Once consumers fully evaluate online reviews, they gain an adequate processing framework to easily link the attitude–behavior relationship. Thus, the indirect role of online reviews on purchase intentions can easily enhance the processing of the attitude-behavior relationship in both casual and fine dining restaurants.

6.1. Theoretical implications

The main advantage of the study is to generalize the justification for the results presented in previous research based on two types of restaurants. This study offers extensive testing of alternative models established by existing theories and previous studies. From comparing the four alternative models, M1 and M2 reveal two problematic aspects. Although these two models can explain a direct or indirect role for online reviews, trust, and attitudes toward a restaurant in behavioral intentions, the structural role of these models is problematic. Specifically, the first problematic aspect pertains to the role of the constructs. It is unnecessary to apply a construct from direct to indirect role, but the potential for explaining solid relationships with good model fits appeared limited in all samples. The second aspect pertains to the structural interrelationships among the four constructs. Both M1 and M2 built structural relationships based on several theoretical and empirical studies. The study's findings indicate that the relationship between these constructs must be robust regarding M1 and M2.

We sought to overcome these problems by proposing two additional models (M3 and M4) that included solid interrelations, enabling us to account for the robust model structure. Using this approach, we could both assess the acceptance of each model and directly demonstrate the value of the best model since M4 offers structural robustness to that of the other three alternative models. Thus, our findings suggest that the selected model can reveal differences regarding the interrelationships among the four constructs, at least in the context of restaurant choices in Korea.

According to the literature on attitude towards restaurants, consumers are motivated to search for online reviews to reduce risk and form a positive attitude towards a particular restaurant brand through more experience (Huifeng & Ha, 2020; Kim & Tanford, 2019). As we proposed the advantage of the study, this logical process is consistent with restaurant choices that are "antecedent, mediating, and

Table 4
Model estimates.

From		To	M1		M2		M3		M4	
			Casual	Fine dining	Casual	Fine dining	Casual	Fine dining	Casual	Fine dining
OR	→	BI	.18**	.15**					.08(ns)	.04(ns)
TR	→	BI	.30**	.17**	.19*	.01(ns)	.23**	.07(ns)	.22**	.14*
AT	→	BI	.52**	.76**	.58**	.85**	.55**	.80**	.50**	.78**
OR	→	AT			.73**	.84**	.50**	.62**	.49**	.61**
AT	→	TR			.68**	.76**				
OR	→	TR					.59**	.73**	.59**	.73**
TR	→	AT					.34**	.27**	.35**	.27**

Notes: *, $p < .05$; **, $p < .01$.
OR = Online reviews; TR = Trust; AT = Attitude toward a restaurant; BI = Behavioral intentions.

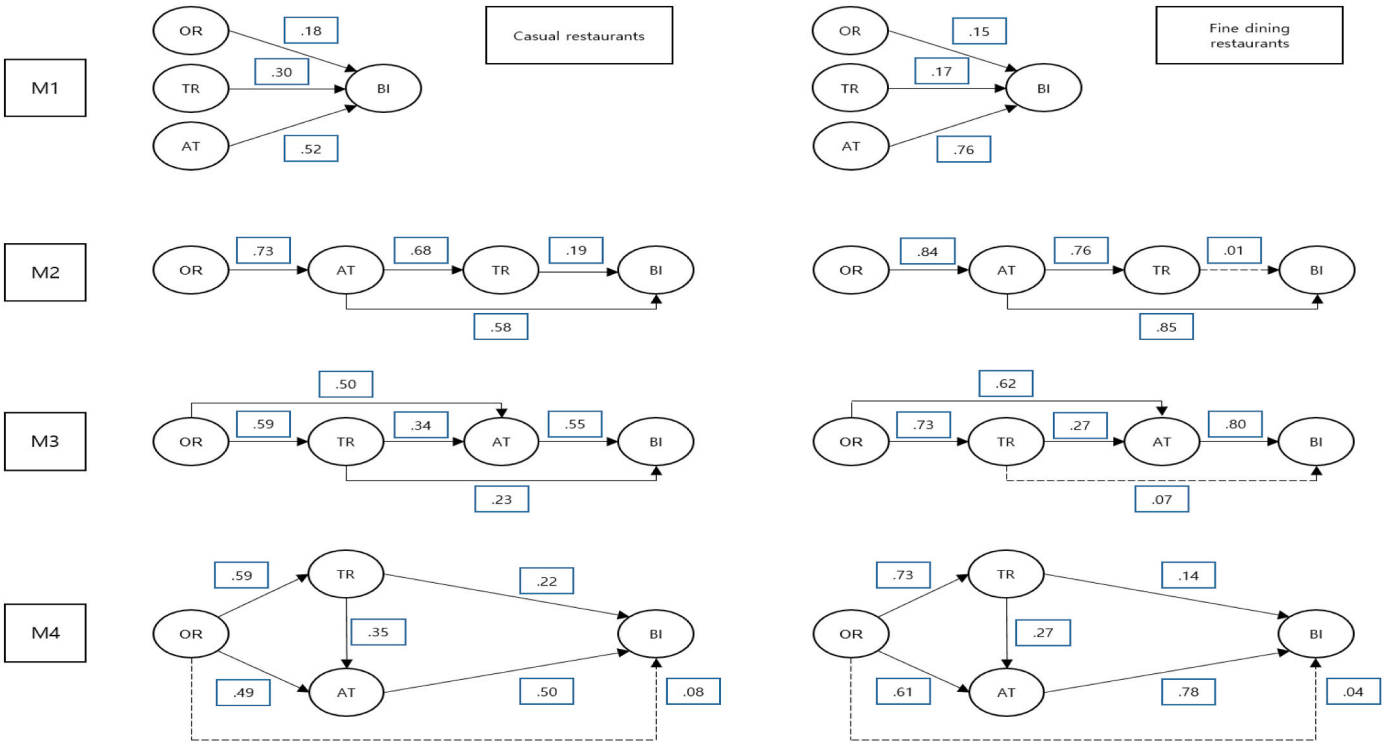

Fig. 2. Model comparisons.

consequent." In particular, attitudes toward a restaurant play mediating roles in the relationships between online reviews and behavioral intentions and between trust and behavioral intentions, thereby enhancing the indirect effect of online reviews and complementing the direct effect of trust in samples of both casual and fine dining restaurants.

Our findings are also consistent with and support the complex systematic process of a consumer's purchase behavior. In this regard, we answer the question posed by M4; that is, online reviews are indirectly linked to purchase intentions in all samples. Researchers attribute online reviews causing indirect effects over direct effects to the fact that the existence of any mediator between online reviews and purchase intentions is easier to bridge and complete the overall evaluation of the customers' decision-making (Chakraborty, 2019). However, there are also criticisms of the indirect effect of online reviews. For example, researchers agree that online reviews directly influence purchase intentions when the level of online reviews varies (Kostyk et al., 2017). Despite the inconsistent findings on the role of online reviews, evidence from these inconsistencies has often focused on factors that enhance the processing of the attitude–behavior relationship. For instance, online reviews may serve as retrieval cues for attitude, rendering them readily activated and highly accessible, hence increasing their potential for relatedness to behavior (Fazio, 1990:; Pierro et al., 2012). Thus, this study, which was based on the extensive processing of online reviews, contributes to the research on the conditions surrounding the link between attitude and behavior.

6.2. Managerial implications

This study is relevant to various approaches in the restaurant industry, offering different directives for two types of restaurants. In doing so, we use Fig. 2 to provide detailed explanations and managerial implications. In the case of a casual restaurant, the effect of trust on behavioral intention is stronger than that of a fine dining restaurant (see M2, M3, and M4). This difference can be explained by the trust in casual restaurants to safely serve customers food. Regarding this explanation, customer beliefs in restaurant services regarding safety are critical for increasing restaurant trust due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Cobe, 2020). That is, casual restaurant patrons expect that the service will be provided in safe and sanitary conditions. For example, for casual restaurant managers, placing sanitary tissues and bags on the table to store customers' masks is necessary to create a desirable link in the trust-behavior relationship.

Our findings further reveal that the online reviews-attitude-behavioral intention link is stronger in fine dining restaurants than in casual restaurants (see M3 and M4). Since the customers of fine dining restaurants tend to have higher expectations for the restaurant, there is a strong tendency to form a very favorable attitude through online reviews or e-WOM (Chiang & Guo, 2021). For casual and fine dining restaurant managers, favorable attitudes should be nurtured based on the information that convinces consumers to have a positive attitude. For example, a listing in the Michelin Guide or an introduction in a professional restaurant magazine (i.e., online articles or websites that introduce or evaluate a restaurant) can reinforce an objective and rational attitude, thereby resulting in triggering behavioral intentions. Alternatively, managers can build a community based on their competitive advantages, thereby fostering a support group to encourage potential customers' confidence.

Finally, there are managerial implications that are based on when trust and attitude comes into M4. In M4, since online reviews do not directly affect behavioral intentions, consumers primarily develop trust through online reviews, which affect the formation of favorable attitudes. When considering the order of the model itself, we suggest that improving attitude and trust through the online reviews of the two types of restaurants can enhance a restaurant's overall performance through an indirect route. Thus, we recommend that managers should empathize and communicate with customers through online reviews. Through this, empathy can help to build trust and can serve as a promotional opportunity.

6.3. Limitations and further research

This study provides robust evidence for the selection of a model among alternative models and the underlying structural approach. However, despite the advantages of the study, several limitations should be investigated in future studies. First, this study only focuses on comparing two types of restaurants, indicating a lack of generalizability. Therefore, future studies should assess all types of restaurants (e.g., fast food, restaurant franchises, etc.) to bring additional insights to this investigation. For example, are online reviews of a franchised restaurant equally effective for all franchises? If not, does a similar effect appear in other types of restaurants?

Second, this study focuses on selected factors that determine how online reviews, trust, and attitudes toward a restaurant drive behavioral intentions. We encourage future studies to examine further alternative factors. For example, how do restaurant service encounters interact with our proposed factors? Regarding the indirect effect of restaurant service encounters, is there a difference in roles in casual versus fine dining restaurants? Answering questions like these could substantially improve the theoretical understanding of alternative model comparisons and afford further important practical insights.

Table 1. Results of the CFA analysis.

Constructs	Casual	Fine dining
Online reviews (Composite reliability: Casual = .90; Fine dining = .91)		
The information in online reviews was relevant to my needs.	.75	.74
Online reviews of restaurant provide me with useful information.	.84	.77
I think the restaurant reviews were realistic.	.72	.81
Trust (Composite reliability: Casual = .87; Fine dining = .89)		
I think that this restaurant usually fulfills its commitments.	.68	.69
I think this restaurant is reliable.	.71	.69
This restaurant has sufficient experience in customer care to address special requests by customers.	.67	.78
Most of what this restaurant says about its products or services is true.	.76	.76
I have confidence in this restaurant.	.78	.78
Attitude toward a restaurant (Composite reliability: Casual = .91; Fine dining = .93)		
It is easy for me to build a relationship with this restaurant.	.71	.76
I feel comfortable visiting this restaurant.	.83	.83
This restaurant makes me feel that it will meet my needs.	.69	.86
Behavioral intentions (Composite reliability: Casual = .89; Fine dining = .92)		
I would select this restaurant to have dinner (or lunch).	.68	.70
There is a likelihood that I will dine at this restaurant in the future.	.85	.87
I will recommend this restaurant to my friends, family, or others.	.78	.85

Note: Casual restaurant: $X^2 = 168.222$; df = 71; IFI = 0.97; CFI = 0.97; TLI = 0.93; RMSEA = 0.056.
Fine dining restaurant: $X^2 = 193.209$; df = 71; IFI = 0.96; CFI = 0.96; TLI = 0.92; RMSEA = 0.058.

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