



Online review as a catalyst for brand awareness - a study in the restaurant industry

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The number of online reviews has increased drastically since 2014 if Tripadvisor statistics (Statista 2014) are to be believed, starting at 200 million and passing 1 billion by 2021. At the same time, 90% of consumers look at online reviews before visiting a store (Jensen 2023). In the restaurant world, online reviews are for some an opportunity to make a name for themselves, for others a source of concern.

The purpose of this research is to provide restaurants with suggestions for improving their online review strategies to increase brand awareness. To do this, the researcher seeks to understand the impact of online reviews and their influencing factors on brand awareness in the restaurant sector. Above all, the objective was to understand this through the eyes of restaurant professionals, in order to explore and find best practices for leveraging them.

This leads to the main research question of how professionals perceive the impact of online reviews on brand awareness. Two subsequent questions were concerned with the factors that professionals consider to be most influential in improving brand awareness through online reviews, and the strategies professionals employ to effectively leverage online reviews to increase brand awareness.

A qualitative method was used for this research. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with two professionals in different positions at Restaurant X to explore in depth their views, ideas, practices and feelings. Thematic analysis is used to collect and analyse the data.

The results show that a distinct brand image, a relevant assessment of online reviews, and managing their valence, volume and trustworthiness play an important role in increasing brand awareness. Finally, the conclusion offers suggestions for foodservice professionals based on the results obtained.

Keywords: Brand awareness, Restaurant industry, Online reviews, Online review influential factors, Restaurant practices

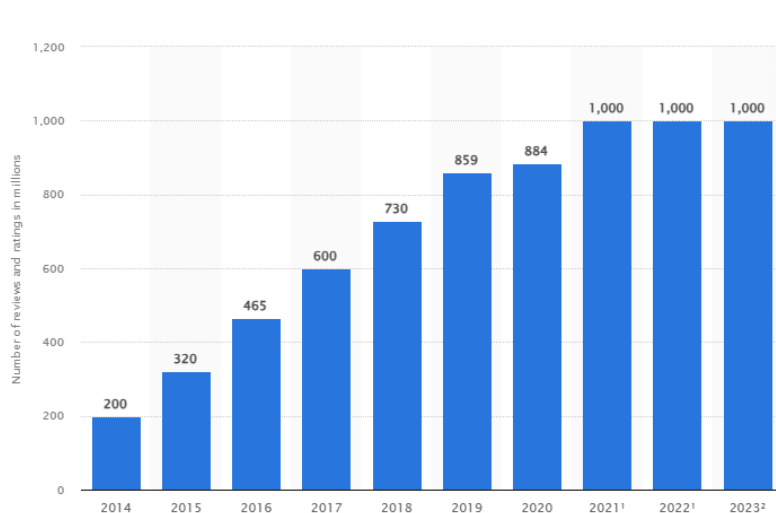
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1 Introduction

The prevalence of electronic word-of-mouth has grown over time. A study carried out by Power Reviews (2023) on 8,153 American consumers revealed that 77% of online shoppers consult online review sites before making a purchase, and that 74% consider online reviews to be an excellent source of information about a product or service they have never bought before. The same trend also applies in the hospitality sector: according to figure 1 from Statista Research Department (2024), the number of online reviews on TripAdvisor has risen drastically since 2014, when it was just 200 million, exceeding one billion by 2021.

Figure 1: Total number of user reviews and ratings on Tripadvisor worldwide from 2014 to 2023 (in millions)
(Statista 2024)



Online reviews are now being used as tools to support marketing strategy, and it's proven that they have even more impact than company-provided sources of information (Flanagin & Metzger 2000). Simply because there is more trust between consumers (Jacobsen 2018). What is more, people considering buying in the hotel and restaurant sector are showing greater interest in online reviews due to the nature of the offer. As many hospitality services, such as tourism experiences or catering options, cannot be evaluated in advance, potential customers rely heavily on the comments of others to make their decisions (Abubakar & Ilkan 2016). Indeed, according to Jensen (2023), 90% of consumers have a look at online reviews before a potential visit to businesses. As a result, it is essential for professionals in a variety of fields to fully understand the myriads of factors that determine how consumers perceive online reviews written by others. While a great deal of research has been carried out into the impact of online

reviews on sales, there is still much to be learned about their influence on brand awareness. Studying how online reviews influence initial brand recognition, in addition to their impact on actual purchases, could provide valuable information for professionals (Zablocki, Schlegelmilch & Houston 2019).

The degree to which a specific audience recognizes a brand is known as brand awareness. Creating and maintaining brand awareness as part of equity is vital to marketing efforts to promote a company (Podolsky 2023). As Keller (2008) pointed out, brand awareness plays an essential role in building brand equity. Indeed, in today's competitive foodservice landscape, where consumers exert greater influence and choice, establishing strong brand awareness is crucial (Keller 1993). Moreover, it is commonly observed that service companies with a strong brand image are better equipped to compete, leveraging their reputation to secure advantageous business deals and, ultimately, higher profits (Hyun & Kim 2011). According to Park (2009, 18-20) this is what Keller (2003) and Aaker (1996) see as the potential of brand awareness. According to Park (2009, 18), Aaker (1996) sees brand awareness as a fundamental element in linking other associations to a brand, which ultimately promotes brand loyalty, stimulates sales and ensures competitive advantage. Similarly, Park (2009,20), mentioned that Keller (2003) interprets brand awareness as a part of brand recall, in which initial exposure to a brand or its attributes creates an impulse that is then retrieved when the consumer encounters the brand again. According to Keller, (2008) this initial phase is of the utmost importance as it leads to brand recognition and subsequently fosters strong loyalty, thus reducing advertising/sales ratios. This study seeks to understand whether online reviews play a role in this impulse and more specifically which factors in online reviews play this influence.

It turns out that many factors in online reviews exert an influence on consumers and their purchasing decisions. Factors such as the number of comments and the ratings awarded are part of what experts call volume (Jooa & Yeongbae 2020). Other factors, such as favorable, unfavorable or neutral comments, are part of the valence of the review (Jooa & Yeongbae 2020). Finally, other studies show that the trustworthiness of a review have a very strong impact on the consumer's consideration of it (Salo & Karjaluo 2007). All these elements of online reviews need to be taken into account to fully understand their influence. Each element brings a certain degree of influence on the consumer. For example, according to Suharto, Yuliansyah and Suwanto (2021), positive and reliable online consumer reviews improve consumers' understanding of a brand.

1.1 Research purpose

Numerous studies have examined the characteristics of online reviews and their impact on consumer reactions, focusing primarily on purchase outcomes. However, there is still little research exploring how the specific characteristics of online reviews influence consumer

behaviours towards brands. Aware of this gap, Zablocki et al. (2019) studied consumer attitudes towards the brand when exposed to online reviews. The researcher acknowledges that while his model provides more insight into consumer brand attitudes, it neglects other factors that contribute to brand value, such as brand awareness. Furthermore, existing research on online reviews and their effects on consumer brand perception often focuses on brand equity (Chakraborty 2019; Ahmad & Guzman 2021). While brand awareness is a component of brand equity, it represents only a fraction of the broader field generally examined in brand equity studies.

In order to narrow down the research, the researcher decided to explore the attributes of online reviews and their influence on brand awareness in the restaurant sector. Through a number of academic studies, it has been identified that the goods and services offered by restaurants are considered singular goods, meaning that their value can only be tested after purchase. This particularity makes online reviews even more useful and informative for consumers, and therefore tells restaurant professionals to be even more vigilant with online reviews. In addition to their usefulness, online reviews re-shape restaurant reputations. In the past, restaurant reputations were built and impacted by expert reviewers; today, this expert role is partly entrusted to so-called common consumers (Kim & Velthuis 2020). This emerging threat underscores the urgency for professionals to comprehend and manage online reviews. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to offer restaurant professionals actionable suggestions on leveraging online reviews to enhance brand awareness.

1.2 Research objectives and questions

Understanding the stakes for professionals, the researcher has as a first objective to grasp the opinion of professionals in the restaurant industry on online reviews and their impact on brand awareness. The researcher would also like to explore the strategies and tactics employed by professionals with online review to impact brand awareness. However, in order to achieve this objective, it is needed to identify the key factors influencing brand awareness through online reviews. Which leads to these research questions:

How do professionals perceive the impact of online reviews on brand awareness?

- What factors do professionals consider to be most influential in improving brand awareness through online reviews?
- What strategies do professionals employ to effectively leverage online reviews to increase brand awareness?

To better understand the impact of online reviews on brand awareness in the restaurant sector and answer the research questions, interviews were conducted with the staff of restaurant X.

Restaurant X is mainly coveted by tourists, for whom the use of online reviews is quite common to find out about unfamiliar places. A more elaborate description of the restaurant can be found later in the introduction. The direct experiences and perspectives of restaurant employees provide valuable context and understanding of how customer feedback influences day-to-day operations, strategies and overall reputation. By speaking directly to those who interact with customers and manage the restaurant's online presence, this study aims to uncover the practical, real-world implications of online reviews, offering insight that goes beyond quantitative data alone.

1.3 Research structure

The first part focuses on secondary data, i.e. all the insights from literature review related to the subject and which meet the objectives. In this part, to have a more holistic collection, the researcher divides it so that a theme is described in its generality and then described in the context of the restaurant industry. The first theme provides an understanding of brand awareness and contextualizes it within the dining industry, while the second discusses online reviews and the factors influencing them and adapts them to the dining industry. Then, the researcher links the two main themes by talking about online reviews and their impact on brand awareness in general and in the restaurant industry. The secondary data concludes with a theme on the use of online reviews by restaurants. This last theme allows the researcher to make a transition to the second part of the data collections, the primary data. Indeed, understanding restaurants' practices with online reviews enables the researcher to better think through and visualize the interview questions for the qualitative research. To better understand how the primary data will be collected and studied, the researcher dedicates a section to methodology. Finally, the primary data are analysed and interpreted in the "Findings" section. The research concludes with suggestions for professionals in the dining industry as well as limitations and recommendations for future research.

1.4 Restaurant X

Restaurant x is part of the Y group, which in addition to restaurant X has a total of seven other restaurants. The Y Group is a Finnish private family business that began operations in Helsinki in 1994. Restaurant X was founded in 2005 and is centrally located in Helsinki. (A&S Ravintolat 2023.)

The theme of the restaurant and its dishes is rural Finland, offering dishes combining wild Finnish meats and fishes such as reindeer, elk, bear, or arctic char with traditional Finnish vegetables and berries (Restaurant Savotta 2023). Each dish is well researched and propose fine food, which makes it not far from fine dining. Only certain characteristics of fine dining are not present, such as the white napkins and tablecloths or the menu made entirely by the chef, making it then closer to casual dining (Toast n.d.). The restaurant owes its uniqueness to its

excellent service, and to the highly immersive experience it offers its clientele under the theme of old rural Finland; the staff are dressed in traditional garb, the background music is Finnish tango, the decor in one of the town's oldest buildings is rustic in style, and their dishes and much of their alcohol promote Finnish flavours. As for prices, they are a little lower than those of fine dining restaurants, but a little higher than the average of other casual dining restaurants, i.e. a price range varying from around 50 to 80 euros for the menu and main courses from 25 to 60 euros. (Restaurant Savotta 2023.)

Occupying a central position and consistent with their theme, the restaurant's main customer base is tourists. Peak seasons such as Christmas and summer are therefore the busiest times for the restaurant, and what makes the restaurant a must-try for brave tourists is its dish featuring bear meat. Apart from these customers, the restaurant is also popular for hosting large groups of people (corporate or tourist groups), privatizing part of the restaurant for the occasion. These special evenings are often booked through the y group's sales department. (Restaurant Savotta 2023.)

The restaurant takes particular care with its brand image to appeal to tourists, and this is one of the reasons why it is popular on online review sites. The restaurant generates the most reviews on Google, with a total of 1421 and an overall rating of 4.4 out of 5 (Google maps n.d.) followed by Tripadvisor, with a total of 1349 reviews, an overall rating of 4 out of 5 and a "Traveller choice 2023" award (Tripadvisor 2024). Finally, the restaurant is the most present on DinnerBooking, a site that not only generates online reviews, but also enables consumers to make easy reservations at the restaurant of their choice. The restaurant generates 927 reviews on this site and an overall rating of 5.5 out of 6 (DinnerBooking 2024). The restaurant uses DinnerBooking's services not only to monitor its customers' reservations, but also to send an email at the end of each experience, encouraging customers to leave feedback and a rating. The reviews on each of the sites are fairly heterogeneous, most of them excellent, ranging from 4 to 5 out of 5, complimenting the service, atmosphere and flavors of the dishes. However, some of the reviews, which are not in the majority, are very critical, pointing either to high prices or a bad experience with the service. Most positive or negative reviews are answered by the restaurant on Google and DinnerBooking (Google maps n.d.; DinnerBooking 2024).

The researcher has worked for this restaurant for two years, especially during peak seasons. This allows him to keep in touch with them. The restaurant is not the subject of a case study for this research, for reasons of confidentiality and because the researcher no longer works there, but is fully involved in the qualitative research through interviews with two of the restaurant's employees.

2 Literature review

2.1 Brand awareness and its relevance in the restaurant industry

Brand awareness, a crucial marketing concept, quantifies the extent of a customer's or customer base's familiarity with a brand or product (Kopp 2022). It is imperative for a company to direct its marketing endeavors towards enhancing brand awareness among consumers. Doing so not only sets the company apart from its competitors but also augments sales, fosters word-of-mouth promotion, and consequently facilitates the acquisition of new customers. (Singh, Rana & Parayitam 2022.) However, the concept of brand awareness is multifaceted and subject to various definitions and research. Notably, Keller (2008) and Aaker (1991) are pioneers in this domain, each offering distinct perspectives on the definition, contextualization, and identification of brand awareness. Their theories on brand equity serve as fundamental frameworks for subsequent research in this area.

Both Keller (2008) and Aaker (1991) place brand awareness within the broader category of branding strategy which is brand equity. Brand equity can be observed on the firm, the product, or the customer level often referred to as Customer-based Brand Equity (CBBE). Both scholars utilize the CBBE approach to measure brand equity from the consumer's standpoint, a perspective also employed in this research, which focuses on gauging brand awareness through online reviews. (Keller 1993; Aaker 1991.)

For Aaker (1991), brand awareness is an integral component of brand equity, which he defines as the shared resources and obligations of a brand. Next to brand awareness, according to Park (2009, 18), Aaker identifies other elements of brand equity such as brand loyalty, perception of quality, brand association in relation to the quality perceived and brand resources. Conversely, Keller (1993) conceptualizes Customer-Based Brand Equity as a dynamic consumer response resulting from the retention of brand knowledge. He delineates brand knowledge into two primary categories: brand awareness and brand image. Brand awareness, the initial phase, entails rudimentary knowledge of a brand, whereas brand image represents a more developed cognitive process associated with conscious awareness (Hoyer & Brown 1990).

In this research, the focus lies solely on brand awareness, although it is crucial to acknowledge the interplay between awareness and image, as one can influence the other, a detail that

warrants further exploration. Following Keller's framework (2008), brand awareness can be subdivided into brand recognition and brand recall. Brand recognition is explained as simply the consumer's confirmation when he sees a brand, of a previous memory where he has already been exposed to that brand name or logo, so it's the brand name that is given as a cue and helps the customer to remember it. Brand recall, is referring to the customer's memory of certain significant aspects of the brand, such as its usefulness or the brand's category. Without giving its name, the consumer is expected to find this brand in his memory thanks to these given markers in the memory. (Hoyer & Brown 1990.)

In the context of this study, it's essential to assess whether exposure to certain online comments triggers a memory in consumers that subsequently influences their brand recall. This marker in the memory, also seen as an impulse (Keller 1993 & 2003 cited in Guzman, Veloutsou & Pappu 2017, 455) is valuable for this research as it gives room to explore whether exposure to certain online comments leave a marker memory with the consumer and make him recall the brand (Guzman et al. 2017). It is paramount not to overlook brand recall, which, according to Aaker's pyramid (1991) on awareness, is the penultimate step before reaching the peak consumer awareness following complete unfamiliarity first and brand recognition thereafter. In other words, brand awareness, or more specifically, brand recall, increases the likelihood that a consumer will include the brand in his or her set of considerations and purchasing list. (Aaker 1991.)

Aaker's (1991) and Keller's (2008) models of brand equity underscores the importance of brand awareness in ascending the hierarchy of consumer preferences (Hoyer & Brown 1990). Improved brand awareness, particularly through enhanced brand recall, heightens the likelihood of consumers considering the brand in their purchase decisions, underscoring its significance in competitive markets such as the restaurant industry.

The dining industry is very much affected by the increase in competition. The consumer has the power, with more choice of food, price, and service style, so it is necessary for a restaurant to stand out from the crowd and reinforce its brand equity. (Kandampully & Hu 2007.)

Brand awareness marks the inception of a customer's journey with a brand, emphasizing the importance of enhancing brand awareness within the restaurant sector. Moreover, Hyun and Kim (2011) posit that brand awareness serves as the cornerstone of brand equity in the restaurant industry. Furthermore, it is suggested that brand awareness in the fast-food realm directly impacts revenues (Kim & Kim 2004).

Through research on this industry and its correlation with brand awareness, the researcher found out that brand image plays a pivotal role, potentially augmenting brand awareness. Brand image emerges as a critical factor influencing brand awareness, enabling brands to strategically attain their objectives, uphold their reputation, and foster consumer loyalty (Foroudi, Palazzo

& Sultana 2021). Foroudi et al.' (2021) study illustrates how customers' perceptions of brand quality can significantly impact their satisfaction levels, anticipations, and overall brand perception. Findings indicate that customers are inclined to return to restaurants with a robust brand image, thereby generating positive word-of-mouth. Consequently, restaurant managers should consider both customer happiness and brand image as influential variables in shaping revisit intentions and online review comments.

According to Kim and Kim (2004), various factors influence a restaurant's brand image, including frequented dining areas, appropriate sound levels, affordability, prompt service, convenient locations, differentiated offerings, value for money, courteous staff, cleanliness, ambiance, and a variety of events. Additionally, research conducted by Park (2009) identified and validated several characteristics crucial for measuring brand image in the restaurant industry, specifically in casual dining establishments. These include the freshness and tastiness of food, menu variety, convenience, affordability, serving size adequacy, cleanliness, reputation, style, ambiance, comfort, service quality, and unique features. By considering these factors, it becomes easier to assess their impact on potential customers when reflected in online reviews.

2.2 Definition and contextualization of online review

Online reviews, considered the evolution of traditional word-of-mouth, are part of the broad spectrum of electronic word-of-mouth and can be found on review sites, blogs, social networking sites, and forums (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010). The aim of these platforms is to enable consumers to exchange a wealth of information, much of their opinion, about their experience of a product or service or with a brand, also known as user-generated content (Filiari & McLeay 2013; Kaplan & Haenlein 2010). Online reviews, to be more specific, are described by Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh and Gremler (2004) as any comment, favorable or unfavorable, from potential, current or previous customers concerning a product or company, which is published online and accessible to many people and organizations. They usually consist of a written account of the customer's experience with the product or service, together with a rating of the experience, product, or service. Some reviews may be supported by photos of the product or service. (Hennig-Thurau & Walsh 2004; Woo, Sutherland & Ki Lee 2021.) According to Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004), the reasons behind the need to share one's experience online through reviews are that consumers are looking for social contact, aiming to encourage purchase, but above all to warn a future customer, simply out of concern for others. It is true that online reviews help consumers or potential consumers to save time in their purchasing decisions, and to be surer and more confident about the quality of the product or service (Hennig-Thurau & Walsh 2004). A kind of comparison is made between these reviews to gauge whether or not the product or service is worth buying.

2.3 Factors in online reviews affecting customer decision-making process:

A great deal of research has been carried out into the attributes of online reviews, their influence and the link they have with the perception of information, which in turn influences the customer's purchasing decision (Filieri & McLeay 2013; Jacobsen 2018; Sen 2007; Woo et al. 2021; Zablocki et al. 2019).

2.3.1 The notion of trust

The first factor listed, and one of the most general ones affecting customer reaction to other online reviews attributes, is the notion of trustworthiness. The trustworthiness of an online reviews makes it more persuasive and can therefore have a direct impact on the purchasing decision (Jacobsen 2018.) To ensure a reviews' trustworthiness, (Lopez & Sicilia 2014), which studies the influential determinants of electronic word-of-mouth, found that the credibility of the source played an important role. Indeed, it was found that the influence of electronic word-of-mouth depends on the reliability of the source, just like offline word-of-mouth. Electronic word-of-mouth is more influential when the perceived credibility of the source is higher than when it is lower (Lopez & Sicilia 2014.) Perhaps the two characteristics that would enhance review credibility would be related to the type of site where reviews are written, as well as the author of the review. According to Flanagin and Metzger (2000), it has been suggested that websites run by third parties may have greater credibility than content created by marketers. Bickart and Schindler (2001) claims that third-party websites that allow customers to share their ideas are more credible and relevant than corporate websites, and therefore have greater influence. However, Senecal and Nantel (2004) asserts after their research that the type of website would have no influence on the effect of online reviews. This finding is of interest to this research, as it turns out that some online review websites reveal the identity of the reviewer and provide data on the author to reinforce the reliability of the source of the comments. This makes it possible to determine whether website users can identify with this person. In addition, some review platforms award statues and badges to contributors to recognize their contributions and highlight the reviews of the most active authors. (Mellet, Beauvisage Beuscart & Trespeuch 2014.) It is therefore very relevant for this study to identify if restaurants target those important customers and whether their comments improves the credibility of reviews and drives consumers to visit a restaurant.

2.3.2 The notion of valence

It was also detected that the nature of the information in the review, i.e. its valence, i.e. whether the review is positive or negative, is an influential factor for the customer (Lopez & Sicilia 2014). According to Lopez and Sicilia (2014), positive comments increase the impact of electronic word-of-mouth on decision-making. Moreover, there is a strong correlation between the quantity of positive messages and attitude towards the product, and positive perceptions

also influence sales (Lopez & Sicilia 2014). East, Hammond and Lomax (2008) finds that the likelihood of making a purchase is more strongly increased by positive reviews than decreased by negative ones; and Ye, Law and Gu (2009) admits that the quantity of positive reviews significantly increases sales. Confirmation bias, which encourages people to look for facts that confirm a conclusion they have already drawn, provides an explanation for this phenomenon (Chevalier & Mayzlin 2006).

However, some of these assertions regarding the weak impact of negative reviews on customer purchase decisions are contradicted by Sen (2007). She carried out her study about the valence on two types of products, utilitarian and hedonic, and asserted that consumer behaviour and the existence of negativity bias affect their perception and make them focus more on negative than positive comments, especially for utilitarian products. Ahluwalia (2000) stated that a negativity bias involves two things: firstly, during processing, it gives more weight to negative information than to positive information, and secondly, there is a stronger believe in negative information than positive information. Zablocki et al. (2019) found that customers' information-seeking activity and the information they use to make decisions are influenced by brand type. Negative ratings are heavily weighted when evaluating practical brands based on utilitarian standards. Positive evaluations are favoured in the case of emotional or lifestyle brands, as they are evaluated on an emotional level. (Zablocki et al. 2019.) This provides more information for current research based on restaurants. A restaurant should therefore define its brand image in order to understand the effect of reviews (in this case valence) on the customer's intention to visit the restaurant or not. More importantly, this would enable the researcher to understand whether valence really has an impact on brand awareness.

2.3.3 The notion of volume

Another factor that determines the influence of online reviews is their volume. More precisely, volume is the number of online reviews posted about a restaurant brand, a product and the rating given to a brand, service or product. (Godes & Mayzlin 2004.) According to Zhang, Ye, Law and Li (2010), Cohen and Golden (1972) stated that product with many online reviews can better inform consumers. Many studies, however, fail to show any discernible impact of volume on brand awareness or purchase intent. (Lopez & Sicilia 2014.) Kostyra, Reiner, Natter and Klapper (2016) show that volume simply acts as a modulator of the valence of online reviews and has no direct influence on consumer decision making. However, Lopez and Sicilia (2014) set out to fill this gap and demonstrate whether the quantity of Internet reviews influences consumers' purchasing decisions. They based their findings on Liu (2006) assertion that the main informative function of electronic word-of-mouth volume is to increase product knowledge. Thus, a consumer is more likely to inquire about a product if the volume of electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) is greater. The study concludes that the amount of information gathered influences the impact of e-WOM on decision-making. (Liu 2006.) The more consumers have

access to opinions about a good or service, the greater the influence of e-WOM on their ability to make decisions.

2.4 The role of online reviews in the restaurant industry

Given that many products and services in the hospitality sector, such as travel goods or catering services, are not available until the point of consumption, potential customers in this sector are generally more interested in Internet reviews. Thus, individuals tend to turn to Internet reviews that disclose information on service quality and value for money in order to reduce the sense of risk and better judge a potential customer's future experience through the experience of others. (Woo et al. 2021; Abubakar & Ilkan 2016.) A great deal of research has sought to define and mainly categorize the restaurant in the types of goods to better analyse them in relation to online reviews. According to Abubakar and Ilkan (2016), the restaurant is classified as an intangible service, while Lee and Koo (2012) places it in a broader category, that of hedonic products. Reviews of hedonic products are more focused on the customer's personal experience, which already affects the credibility of a review if compared to a review of the content of a specific or utilitarian product, which involves a more objective and rational examination, such as product attributes. On the other hand, according to Kim and Velthuis (2020,676), Karpik explained that the products and services in a restaurant are classified as singular good. He defines singular goods as follows: There are multidimensional meaning that their value cannot be determined by a single criterion, such as price; there are uncertain meaning that their value is only known after purchase; and there are incommensurable indicating that they cannot be classified or aligned on a single dimension. This would cause cognitive impairment in the buyer, leading him or her to give greater weight to internet reviews when making decisions about a single product whose quality is highly questionable. (Karpik 2010 cited in Kim & Velthuis 2020, 676.)

2.5 Factors in online reviews affecting customer's visit and purchasing intention in restaurant.

According to a study by Pan and Hong-Youl (2021), online reviews are directly linked to consumers' intention to visit, while other studies have concluded that they are also linked to the intention to purchase the services a restaurant offers (Woo et al. 2021). A number of studies have investigated which sources of influence in online reviews would generate these visit or purchase intentions.

2.5.1 Pictures, source of reviews and type of platforms foster trustworthiness.

It turns out that the element of trustworthiness in online reviews is a fundamental element in creating consumer recognition and favouring purchasing-decision (Lee & Turban 2001). Woo et al. (2021) research shows that the perception of trustworthiness is mediated by the images added to these online reviews, specifically food images, which would mediate the impact of online reviews on consumer purchase intentions. Bearing in mind that the products served are singular good where their value is uncertain until the point of purchase (Karpik 2010 cited in Kim & Velthuis 2020, 676), the notion of trust through images makes great sense. This statement is supported by other authors, such as Woo et al. (2021), who believes that photos of products or services in the hospitality sector posted on online reviews are a very useful visual effect for creating trust among consumers.

According to Salo and Karjaluoto (2007), given the crucial importance of reviewer authenticity, consumers often try to discern whether reviews are accurate or not, and the perceived credibility of reviewers can vary depending on the types of sources that provide feedback, such as a reviewer's profile or the type of platform for reviews (Baltescu 2022). Baltescu (2022), which measures the trustworthiness of online restaurant reviews, revealed that the best-known online platforms have the highest level of trust. Moreover, on review platforms, a consumer can see the popularity of restaurants thanks to the number of views or visits, and this popularity is important to take into account, especially for the kind of clientele such as leisure tourists who may lack time to decide on a restaurant and may not know the country well. (Baltescu 2022; Guzman et al. 2017.)

2.5.2 Rating system

Still in the search for reliability in online reviews, volume would play an important role in making online reviews competitive. More specifically, the rating system also plays an important role. Woo et al. (2021) findings indicate that purchase intentions vary considerably according to price and rating level. Indeed, customers tend to have higher purchase intentions for reviews that are well rated and inexpensive, indicating that there is a correlation between price and rating. However, Gavilan, Avello and Martinez-Navarro' (2018) study shows that, even though purchase intentions may vary according to price, high ratings are more successful in driving customer purchase intent than low ratings. In fact, ratings are a high-level indicator that takes into account a variety of experience-related factors and indicates overall consumer satisfaction (Woo et al. 2021). Thomas, Wirtz and Weyerer (2019) claims that since high ratings include a positive assessment, they have a significant influence on how potential customers consider their purchases.

2.5.3 Content of the reviews

The visual appearance and source of the online review, and the rating of an online review, are key factors in making an assessment and a decision, but what about the comments themselves? Are they part of the assessment? The Woo et al. (2021) study shows that when travellers read a restaurant review on the Internet, they are most interested in the comments section. The content of the review contains a wealth of useful information to help the consumer make a decision. The offer, which is considered the most important choice variable, is followed by the environment of the establishment, value for money and the social experience (Baltescu 2022; Wang, Kim & Kim 2021). In addition, through a survey, Jeong and Jang (2011) investigated how dining experiences led to favourable electronic word-of-mouth among customers. The results showed that favourable electronic word-of-mouth was positively influenced by environment, food quality, service quality and price fairness. Another study conducted by Gao, Tang, Wang and Yin (2018) sought to determine ways of quantifying the competitive advantage that restaurants possess through Internet reviews. It turned out that environment, average price including a link to the quality or diversity of the dish, and level of service quality were all useful comparison factors (Gao et al. 2018). The content of online reviews is a very vague research topic containing many variables, which also differs according to each consumer's perception, and would therefore require whole research on this topic alone.

2.6 Online reviews impacting brand awareness

Many studies have been carried out on the attributes of online reviews and their impact on consumer reactions (Jacobsen 2018). However, this research are most often based on the purchase as an end result of the influence of online reviews. Few academics make a direct link to the brand and more specifically brand awareness, even less so in the restaurant world.

According to Chakraborty (2019, 143), Buil, Chernatony and Martinez (2013) and Rios and Riquelme (2010) found out that when customers read multiple brand reviews on the Internet and try to evaluate them in order to form an opinion about the brand, this has an impact on the dimensions of brand equity. Indeed, this is what is most often researched among the few investigated, the impact of online reviews on brand equity (Bruhn, Schoenmueller & Schäfer 2012; Chakraborty 2019; Chakraborty & Bhat 2018; Ahmad & Guzman 2021). Among the brand equity dimensions one can identify brand awareness, but this is only a small part of what is generally studied in brand equity research. It is therefore important to take a closer look at it and make it a whole research topic to complete this gap. The various research studies also talk about user-generated content, of which online reviews are a part, therefore they sometimes avoid focusing on third-party websites (which have online reviews as the basis of their model), but rather on other social media such as Facebook. For example, Schivinski and Dabrowski (2015) studies the impact of user-generated social media brand communication on CBBE

(consumer-based brand equity), using Facebook for its research. It turns out that this type of communication has a positive effect on customer awareness, as customers perceive it as reliable and trustworthy (Schivinski & Dabrowski 2015).

The notion of reliability is often discussed in terms of its influence on customer awareness. This is what Suharto et al. (2021) asserted after their study on the direct effect of customer reviews on brand awareness. According to Suharto et al. (2021), reviews, which are reflections and experiences published by customers on the Internet, are a source of information for new customers. Positive, reliable consumer reviews on the internet will raise awareness of companies that have been discovered and developed based on comprehensive data (Suharto et al. 2021). What is more, the reliability of a review is for some linked to the theory of source credibility, which boosts brand awareness among customers. Chakraborty and Bhat (2018) observed the attitude of consumers during an exchange of reviews on Facebook about the new IOS9.3.2 update and found that one of the reviewers was very convincing and even reliable when talking about this update. As a result, Chakraborty and Bhat (2018) concludes that source credibility impacts customer brand awareness, and in their case, it was a leader perceived as knowledgeable and active in the online review or brand community who could influence other consumers and increase brand awareness.

The credibility of the source, according to these studies, can be an important factor in ensuring that an online review will play on a potential consumer's memory when looking for a restaurant. The same applies to the number of online reviews, i.e. the volume. It turns out that the more reviews there are on a brand, positive or negative, the more likely the brand is to be remembered and integrated into overall awareness (Vermeulen & Seegers 2009). To be more precise, Vermeulen and Seegers' (2009) study was based on Roberts and Lattin's (1991) model of consumer decision-making. Known as the consideration set, awareness plays a crucial role in this model. This model describes the process by which consumers progressively reduce their options into smaller mental sets before making a decision called the awareness set. This awareness set consists of options that consumers can recall in specific circumstances. Given that the starting point of this process is a universal set containing all possible choices, Vermeulen and Seegers (2009) deduced and set out to prove that a large volume of reviews played a positive role on Roberts and Lattin's (1991) model in the context of hotels and booking rooms. Their findings show that reading a hotel review online increases the likelihood that a customer will, on average, consider booking at the hotel being reviewed. In addition, increased hotel awareness offsets the effect of poor reviews, which diminish consumer attitudes towards reviewed hotels.

Another study by Bruhn et al. (2012) also confirmed that the valence of an online review would have no consequential effect on brand awareness. In fact, for Bruhn et al. (2012), unfavourable user-generated communication in social media can improve brand awareness, and positive user-

generated communication is not always necessary to increase awareness. However, the study was made on a set of three different industries, tourism, telecommunications and pharmaceuticals and the results are an average made on the results of the three industries. When Bruhn et al. (2012) delved deeper into each industry, they noticed that valence would have some influence on customer awareness in the tourism sector. He concludes that the impact on brand awareness seems to be industry specific.

2.7 The impact of online reviews on customer brand awareness in the restaurant industry

As mentioned earlier in the current study, restaurants offer singular, multidimensional goods, i.e. their value cannot be determined by a single criterion (Karpik 2010 cited in Kim & Velthuis 2020, 676). According to Ahmad and Guzman (2021, 2827), Brown and Swartz (1989) stated that online reviews of services, unlike utilitarian objects, cover a wide range of topics, because customer experiences are truly multiform. This intrigued Ahmad & Guzman (2021), who wanted to look into the matter a little further and investigated whether unfavourable Internet reviews of particular aspects of service quality (Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry 1998 cited in Ahmad & Guzman 2021, 2831) had a greater impact on an organization's brand equity than others. It turns out that negative comments on the restaurant's atmosphere (its physical appearance and that of the staff), the speed and efficiency of service and the individual attention given to each customer have an adverse effect on brand equity (Ahmad & Guzman 2021).

However, other studies have looked at the effect of the valence of online reviews on brand awareness in the restaurant industry, and again show that negative reviews do not have a very great impact on this attitude. (Bruhn et al. 2012) On the other hand, positive comments about a brand would have a positive impact on awareness (Brzozowska-Wos & Schivinski 2019). Brzozowska-Wos and Schivinski (2019) used the CBBE (customer-based brand equity) model for their study. According to them, in the case of the Internet restaurant outlet, positive online reviews have an impact on all CBBE variables, while a negative EWOM does not affect brand awareness. Moreover, a restaurant's brand awareness increases when it is suggested on an internet platform. This is because the reputation of the favourable online review helps customers to remember the brand. As a result, when a customer searches for a good restaurant online, he or she will easily remember and recognize the name of the establishment (Brzozowska-Wos & Schivinski 2019).

As mentioned above, it is difficult to find research that focuses exclusively on customer awareness of a restaurant through online reviews. However, the closest research is also that which centres on the online popularity of restaurants, specifically on the interest generated by online reviews in consumers visiting a restaurant's web page. Zhang et al. (2010) studied the direct impact of the volume of online reviews, i.e. the quantity and rating given to the experience, on the number of visits to the restaurant's web page. They believe that certain

dimensions of the experience, such as service, food quality and environment, have a positive effect on the click-through rate. According to the results of Zhang et al.' (2010) study, the popularity of online restaurants was significantly predicted on the basis of user ratings of food flavour, ambience and service. In addition, the study shows that the quantity of customer reviews about a restaurant can significantly increase consumer interest in the company's homepage. Jooa and Yeongbae' (2020) study supports these findings by evaluating the share of customer visits to the restaurant as a function of the valence and volume of online reviews, demonstrating a positive correlation between EWOM volume and the share of visits made by consumers.

When it comes to rating the experience, Zhang et al. (2010) looked at the ratings given by professional publishers versus those generated by consumers. The results show that the ratings generated by professional publishers have a negative impact on intentions to visit the restaurant's website. This proves once again that the credibility of the source has an impact on consumers, and that a review written by a consumer is considered more reliable than one written by a professional publisher, which is perceived as a form of advertising (Zhang et al. 2010; Chen & Xie 2008). Jooa and Yeongbae (2020), which focused solely on consumer ratings, also indicate that there is no discernible direct relationship between star rating and share of customer visits in the restaurant sector. They compared this study to those carried out in the hotel world, and says its results are contrary to those found in that industry. They explained this by the disparity in consumption and preference between foodservice and lodging. Compared to hotel stays, restaurant outings are generally less risky (i.e., a smaller percentage of money is spent on purchases) and more frequent (Jooa & Yeongbae 2020).

2.8 Restaurants using online reviews as a tool

Online reviews are a useful tool for consumers who need to be reassured before making an economic choice. It was also explored that in the restaurant world, reviews are very important, because the restaurant industry offers unique products and services, one of whose characteristics is uncertainty meaning that the customer can only assess their value once they have made their purchase (Karpik 2010 cited in Kim & Velthuis 2020, 676). It is partly for this reason that online reviews are highly regarded, but also to save time when searching for restaurants. It has also been shown that online reviews have more impact than firm-generated content (Flanagin & Metzger 2000), as they have more credibility, more relevance and are more empathetic (Zhang et al. 2010; Chen & Xie 2008; Lopez & Sicilia 2014). The study conducted by Hollenbeck, Moorthy and Proserpio (2019) on the hospitality industry even proved that the best-rated hotels on Tripadvisor also spend less on advertising. Online reviews can therefore be put to real use in marketing strategy. Throughout the numerous literary reviews studied for this current research, many authors propose solutions to marketers, restaurant owners or marketing

managers about using online reviews for marketing purposes, all based on their research and findings.

When it comes to overcoming the valence, especially negative online reviews, there is a certain way to respond to boost consumer confidence and maintain a positive brand image (Ahmad & Guzman 2021). Some researchers, such as Ahmad and Guzman (2021), emphasize the importance of managerial responses to negative Internet evaluations, stressing the value of accommodating versus defensive responses. Indeed, accommodative responses work particularly well when dealing with unfavourable evaluations that are trustworthy. Brands can mitigate the adverse effects of negative reviews on their brand equity by admitting fault, expressing regret and providing details of remedial action (Kim & Velthuis 2020).

To reinforce the credibility of online reviews, photos have also been shown to have a positive effect on credibility (Woo et al. 2021). Woo et al. (2021) therefore advised that to ensure a more reliable online presence, marketers should strive to encourage or reward customers to provide photographic reviews of their restaurants. It is also advisable to take care with the presentation of dishes, as images of the meal can be used in online reviews to convince or discourage potential buyers from making a purchase. It was also pointed out earlier that the source of the online review would have an impact on the reliability of the reviews, and that, some review authors have a convincing ability, (Chakraborty & Bhat 2018) which they may have through their comment but also through their profile type on online review platforms. Consequently, it was advisable to choose platforms that give contributors a variety of accolades, badges and statuses. These are widely used methods that tend to highlight certain contributors and give more weight to the comments of authors who contribute most frequently. Platforms that provide author details reveal the personality of each reviewer, making it easier for website visitors to identify with that person (Mellet et al. 2014).

Finally, it was previously found that a greater number of reviews (positive or negative) would increase consumer awareness of a brand (Vermeulen & Seegers 2009). But also, that some of the content of online reviews, targeting certain features of the service obtained, are more interesting in the eyes of the consumer, who will recall the restaurant more easily thanks to these reviews (Vermeulen & Seegers 2009). Consequently, Chakraborty (2019) encouraged restaurant owners or staff to teach customers to submit more instructive and truthful reviews. In addition, marketers can organize consumer education campaigns to educate their existing customer base and enable them to submit informed reviews.

These many recommendations are relevant because they derive from studies and factual evidence about consumer attitudes to online reviews. However, this is more of a theoretical application, and applying this advice in reality is proving difficult for restaurants. First of all, not all restaurants need online reviews to promote themselves. According to Breuscart et al.

(2016), this depends on systemic elements such as a restaurant's location and longevity. In fact, a restaurant located close to a popular destination will be less affected by online reviews than one further away; moreover, a restaurant with a solid reputation will be more resistant to the negative effects of reviews. Because of their experience and rotation, restaurants with high ratings in guidebooks often downplay the importance of Internet reviews (Breuscart et al. 2016). According to interviews conducted by Kim and Velthuis (2020) with restaurant owners on their perception of Internet reviews, online consumer reviews are recognized as a particularly useful navigational aid for customers unfamiliar with their establishment, including tourists. In this sense, online reviews have changed the dynamics of competition in the restaurant sector.

Secondly, lack of time, money, knowledge or familiarity with the Internet and E word of mouth, and above all animosity towards reviews that may be perceived as overly critical or judgmental, creates reticence among professionals (Breuscart et al. 2016). On the one hand, some personnel managers regard OCRs as ineffective tools, finding them too subjective to be used to assess performance and change operational practices. In order to do so, comments must be meaningful, repeated, detailed and suggest very minor, low-cost modifications. (Kim & Velthuis 2020.) On the other hand, many establishments regard online reviews as a harsh and inconsistent means of evaluation. Restaurant managers find it hard to accept the verdicts generated by online ratings and reviews, as they run counter to the quality standards they had previously accepted as true. While a small percentage of those surveyed point to a positive turning point for the sector, the majority don't seem willing to play along. Finally, some managers reject the validity of online assessment platforms and believe that professional experience, combined with financial gain and the direct benefits of satisfied customers, is the only way to be recognized. There is a correlation between insufficient digital literacy and widespread disdain for online assessments. While some blame their schooling, others point the finger at their generation. They often don't pay attention to the names of the OCR websites, and don't really know how they work. (Kim & Velthuis 2020.)

Nevertheless, in general, restaurant managers understand that online reviews have a major impact on the reputation of their brand and the choice of potential customers, including their awareness (Breuscart et al. 2016). In order to enhance their brand's reputation, some restaurants respond to OCRs with professionalism and mitigate the damaging effects that bad reviews can have on their reputation. Responses vary according to the valence of the comments, and each has a purpose: responses to positive reviews are a way of giving back to reviewers and thanking them for their time, while responses to negative reviews should focus on consideration, apology and problem-solving to show real motivation to improve. (Ahmad & Guzman 2021; Kim & Velthuis 2020.) These responses to negative reviews, improves customer satisfaction with service recovery by identifying their preferences for problem-solving or emotionally focused communications, (Bhandari, Tsarenko & Polonsk 2007 cited in Hill

Cummings & Yule 2020, 1694) and consequently enhances the online reputation of these restaurants. To ensure impeccable reputation management, some restaurants invest heavily in maintaining their online presence and reputation on online review sites (Breuscart et al. 2016).

A restaurant's reputation can be a goal, and this is also how online reviews are used, for set goals. Some businesses focus on their ranking, others on their labelling or others on the possibility of being listed in a tourist guide. For example, according to the Breuscart et al. (2016) study, which interviewed a number of restaurateurs about their use of online reviews, one restaurant manager works hard to maintain positive relations with her customers and encourage them to leave comments on TripAdvisor. As a result, her restaurant has received over 300 reviews, with the aim of appearing in guidebooks, obtaining recommendations from the local tourist office and being awarded titles such as "master restaurateur". Other companies are beginning to personalize their approach to rankings, giving priority to some over others. Certain rankings have a major influence on a company's chances of being included in customer shortlists. Professionals may focus on important rankings in order to comply with ranking criteria and raise their profile. (Pollock, D'Adderio, Williams & Leforestier 2018.) Finally, others set goals such as topping the list of all restaurants in a city. According to Kim and Velthuis (2020), one of these interviewees eventually achieved this lofty goal. However, it was observed that this manager did not employ a precise strategy to achieve it, his only solution being hard work. On the other hand, setting goals through online reviews can help motivate teams. To boost morale, positive reviews are shared with staff members via group chats, for example. Negative reviews, on the other hand, are discussed with staff members with the aim of strengthening the team. (Kim & Velthuis 2020.)

3 Methodology

The study uses qualitative research to explore the opinions and feelings of selected employees of restaurant X towards online reviews and their characteristics. It is also used to understand the restaurant's operational practices towards the latter. Qualitative research is best suited to this investigation, as the aim of this thesis is to gain an in-depth understanding of online reviews' impact, and to do so from a professional perspective. Indeed, when it comes to drawing conclusions from fieldwork, i.e. a theory derived from observations and interviews conducted by the researcher outside a laboratory, qualitative research is particularly effective. (Patton 2023.)

What's more, the researcher wished to receive unexpected insights and enrich his knowledge gained from secondary data, so did not prefer to ask participants to choose from predetermined answers, as quantitative approaches do (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2019).

Indeed, drawing on studies carried out by Kim and Velthuis (2020) which uses the qualitative method to understand the perception of Amsterdam restaurant professionals towards online reviews, the researcher understood that open questions and surveys allow participants to respond with their own words and expression, better reflecting their experience (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2019). It is true, as stated in the previous sections, that much research based on quantitative methods lists many recommendations for professionals to master and use online reviews. However, it has been shown in interviews conducted by Kim and Velthuis (2020) that, in practice, the use of online reviews can sometimes be tedious due to contextual factors.

3.1 Data collection

In his qualitative research, the researcher decided to use semi-structured interviews as her primary method of data collection. As she wanted to avoid prepared questions and focus on the natural flow of the discussion, this was the most appropriate method. Moreover, according to Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (2019), semi-structured interviews offer several advantages: They allow participants to share detailed viewpoints, capturing authentic perspectives on their opinions, attitudes and experiences, as well as their contextual interpretations. The informal, relaxed conversational setting encourages openness and honesty. In addition, researchers enjoy a certain flexibility, adapting questions and directions on the fly, facilitating exploration, probing and clarification.

All in all, the researcher developed two questionnaires, each different due to the different roles of the participants and their relationship with their consumer. Nevertheless, both questionnaires are structured in the same way, i.e. they refer to the main themes addressed in literary reviews, such as: Brand awareness and brand image, online reviews, and their various influencing factors: trustworthiness, valence and volume. Each question is structured so that there is first a fixed question, and then interrogative words like How or Why to understand their opinions and best practices. Finally, each fixed question is justified by theories, findings or recommendations from the research of the academics mentioned in the literature review section.

3.2 Participant selection and ethical considerations

In order to ensure a more holistic understanding of the subject and obtain different points of view on online reviews, the researcher decided to interview one person from management and one person on the front line of restaurant X. The first participant interviewed is the customer relations and development manager of restaurant X, named employee 1 in this research, and the second, one of the waitresses at restaurant X, named employee 2.

Employee 1 has worked for the restaurant for around 7 years, and in addition to sometimes overseeing service, his main responsibilities include regularly consulting and responding to online reviews, as well as setting objectives within the team, training staff and making operational decisions based on online reviews. Indeed, the researcher felt that Employee 1's expert viewpoint could provide accurate information on how the restaurant perceives and uses online reviews strategically as a brand awareness tool. In addition, the viewpoint of an expert and a manager could provide industry best practice, offering a more complete understanding of the subject.

As for the choice of employee 2, she has been working for the restaurant for about 10 years, as a waitress and sometimes as a butler. Although she has the role of a waitress in the dining room, which implies daily customer service and taking care of big group, it varies as she sometimes plays the role of butler, which involves welcoming and seating guests. As a waitress, in addition to offering impeccable service to customers, she is also responsible for guiding them and answering their questions about the restaurant's culture, cuisine, history and, above all, location. As a waitress, it was essential for the researcher to have the opinion of someone who works on the front line, i.e. directly in contact with customers, and who also applies the decisions of the employee 1 based on his analysis of online reviews. Being on the front line, customer reviews can be very important for waiters and waitresses, being a tool for evaluating their performance. From their direct experience with customer feedback and commentary, the researcher therefore believed that a waitress or a waiter would also be very receptive to reviews and also have a unique opinion on the subject.

The participants were contacted and asked for their permission to take part in the interview. The interview with the manager was conducted online, via video call, while the interview with the employee 2 was conducted face-to-face. Both interviews were recorded to avoid note-taking and thus allow the researcher more freedom and naturalness in her conversation. The recording was approved by both participants, and their confidentiality and privacy respected. Indeed, at the start of each interview, the researcher clearly explained how the interviews would be used, and how the recordings would be kept. In other words, the interviews would be anonymous, and the restaurant and its location would not be named, or any identifications would remain vague to avoid any traceability. As for recordings, only the researcher was able to listen to them, and they were kept in her personal storage space. Finally, participants are represented as neutrally as possible, without judgment and with respect.

3.3 Conducting the interviews

First of all, two weeks before the interviews, each interviewee was given the opportunity to decide on the date and format of the interview (i.e. online or offline), and the location where it would be conducted if offline, so that it would be convenient for everyone and each of them would feel as comfortable as possible. Finally, the subject of the interview was also given two weeks in advance, as well as the duration of the interview, to enable them to be better prepared.

At the start of each interview, in addition to ethical formalities, the researcher gave an introduction, explaining her choice to interview these people, what their contribution to the research would be, and finally gives a background explaining the objectives and research questions, and defining and contextualizing each term of the research topic to ensure a better understanding of the interview questions.

The interview with employee 1 was conducted online, through a Google meeting. During the interview with employee 1, the order of the questions was not respected, as sometimes the interviewee answered several questions by answering one question. The interview thus resembled a dialogue, as the interviewee was free to elaborate on his answers, while the interviewer's role was to make it sound like a conversation, while keeping an eye on the subjects covered in his original version of the interview. During the interview, the researcher avoided biasing the interviewee's answers by not giving her opinion based on literary research. What was sometimes challenging was to keep the interview on track and avoid going off-topic, so the interviewer had to find the right moment to interrupt or bounce back and guide the researcher as naturally as possible so as not to restrict the interviewee too much. Also, when an answer to a question lacked elaboration on the part of the interviewee, the researcher tried to stimulate the interviewee by giving key questions or reformulating the questions.

As for the interview with employee 2, it took place face-to-face in a secluded area of a cafe, during off-peak hours to encourage better listening and speaking. The interview proceeded differently than with employee 1, employee 2 having more time on her hands, preferred to go through all the questions in order and work out the answers. On the other hand, to avoid the interviewee repeating herself, as soon as an answer covered another question in addition to the one asked, the interviewer eliminated the one that had been answered. As in the interview with employee 1, the researcher avoided giving her own opinion, so as not to bias the interviewee.

3.4 Data analysis

The two interviews were very rich in information and yielded a great deal of useful data for answering the research question. For this reason, the researcher decided to use thematic analysis to analyse the data. This method is a popular technique in the analysis of qualitative data, suitable for interview transcripts. Its application involves finding, examining and presenting repeated patterns of meaning. (Braun & Clarke 2006.)

To do this, it is first necessary to transcribe the interviews, then to become familiar with them, and finally to start coding them. The first part of coding creates preliminary labels that highlight significant aspects of the data in relation to the research question. Then, to organize the data as a whole, these labels are grouped into broader themes. Finally, all that remains to be done is to define these themes for a complete analysis, and to make the link between each of them and, above all, with the research question. (Dye n.d.)

4 Findings

Flanagin and Metzger (2000) mentioned in its research that online reviews have a greater impact on consumers than content created by marketers. Some understand this and invest heavily in maintaining their online reputation (Breuscart et al. 2016). This is the case of Restaurant X, which in addition to its marketing department, assigns a person to the role of Customer Relations and Development Manager, in charge of monitoring and managing these comments in particular. Restaurant X takes online reviews very seriously, not only at managerial level, but also at other levels of the organization. Whether it's looking after their brand image, measuring potential customer awareness, improving their reputation, or changing some of their processes, online reviews are often at the heart of these strategies. And the restaurant's fairly realistic understanding of these through each of the factors, valence, volume and trustworthiness, proves that these strategies are achievable.

4.1 The role of distinctive brand image in driving customer awareness & online engagement

It was noted at the beginning of the research that brand image was one of the factors influencing brand awareness, as it served to maintain corporate reputation (Foroudi et al. 2021). The Y group understands this, which is why their main mission is to offer excellent service and a unique experience to their customers. Each restaurant in this group applies this brand image and adapts it to the style of the restaurant. Restaurant X must immerse its customers, mainly tourists, in a totally "rural Finnish" experience, offering impeccable service and a unique experience through typical decoration and dress, warm, friendly and professional service, and typical dishes and beverages well prepared to meet the restaurant's standing. However, the emphasize has to be on the service. Indeed, according to the employee 1, about

half of their review covers the level of customer service, the experience with the food comes afterwards, depicting them that they shall pursue their effort with the service level as a priority. The employee 1 and 2 are well aware that the better they are in this area, the happier customers will be, and the more they will post this experience in their reviews. Indeed, the employee 2 point out that if the food was a 5 out 5, yet the service was very mediocre, customer would not leave a good review or a review at all. Whereas, if a customer experienced some defaults in the food or the waiting time, “a lot can be saved with the level of service”. Jeong and Jang (2011) explained that a restaurant will be recalled by a customer if he or she is exposed to online reviews that reflect certain characteristics of the service received, making the review more interesting and eye-catching. That said, the researcher notes that this is one of Restaurant X's objectives; their target being tourists wishing to immerse themselves in Finnish culture, it's vital that online reviews expose these unique features that Restaurant X offers specific to Finnish culture. Thanks to the reputation that Restaurant X has built up, hotels start recommending the restaurant when customers are looking for something typical and unique. Whether online or face-to-face, the staff at Restaurant X are gauging the strength and potential of these recommendations for their customers.

4.2 Assessing the impact of online reviews on brand awareness

According to Breuscart et al. (2016), a restaurant with a high-traffic location and a well-established reputation was less affected by online reviews. The researcher must refute this argument by observing the attention that restaurant X pays to online reviews. Indeed, the restaurant is touristy, centrally located and has an established reputation, but on the contrary, it now measures, controls and uses online reviews more than ever before, as wanting to be number 1 in the minds of tourists takes work. At every hierarchical level, the restaurant grasps that online reviews are widely used by tourists, and that therefore, even if a tourist is in Helsinki and visits the restaurant only once, his or her experience “will reflect on a future customer” (employee 2). As the employee 2 observes, on many occasions, customers arrive at the restaurant for the first time with either a very specific idea in mind: they want this type of food and show the photo of the dish they found on the reviews, and which was recommended. This is sometimes very pleasing for the staff, who understand that the restaurant has made a name for itself through virtual word-of-mouth, even if it is sometimes complicated to meet customers' expectations, as these dishes are seasonal, and the online reviews used are a little over 6 months old. The website where the reviews are viewed plays a big part in this process. For example, Google mixes up the dates of online reviews, if not used properly, which sometimes doesn't reflect the actual restaurant image. Indeed, even today, customers sometimes come to the restaurant and avoid taking water. This can be explained by the fact that a few years ago, the price of water was quite high, and was the subject of criticism in

online reviews, which sometimes judged the restaurant to be a tourist trap. Today, this image of tourist trap remains in the back of the head of Restaurant X, but is fairly well mastered, in part due to the attention paid to online reviews. The employee 1 has learned something since he started in this position: for him, a happy customer will share his or her experience with a few of his or her friends, whereas if his or her experience went badly, he or she would share it with twice as many. To further control the spread of customer comments, and to quantify potential customers and their awareness of the restaurant, the latter uses a key metric offered by the online review site DinnerBooking. If a customer makes a reservation through DinnerBooking, at the end of their experience, they will receive an email to evaluate it, asking them whether they would recommend the restaurant to two of their friends.

According to the study in Kim and Velthuis (2020), some restaurants don't have a good relationship with and understanding of the potential of online reviews; for them, they are more frustrating than useful. For restaurant X, online reviews are a valuable tool, despite using it for forecasting potential customers, both positive and negative, offer a chance to assess themselves, challenge themselves, change and elevate their reputation.

4.3 Leveraging review valence to enhance brand awareness

During the interview, the researcher collected the opinions of each employee on the valence of online reviews and its impact on brand awareness. For them, the valence of reviews influences potential customers to recall or not the restaurant, overturning the statement in Bruhn et al. (2012) which confirms that it would have no consequent effect on brand awareness. To be more precise, it is clear to them that positive online reviews attract tourists to the restaurant or raise awareness of the restaurant. Negative reviews, on the other hand, depend on the type of comments. A justified and objective negative review will have more impact on a potential customer than a negative review with either no comment or very little explanation, or an overly subjective comment. Restaurant X's online reviews are very heterogeneous. Fortunately, most of them are excellent, but the few that remain can be very pejorative. This disparity is nevertheless important for them, as it proves that these reviews are not erroneous or doctored, accentuating their reliability. Whether positive or negative (and justified) review, each is regularly scrutinized and used wisely and strategically by the various levels of the organization. On a front line level, positive reviews, especially those targeting directly a waitress or waiter, are taken as appreciation and are therefore a great source of motivation, encouraging staff to continue their efforts. Negative reviews are used to pinpoint a recurring problem, and waitresses or waiters use them as supporting evidence in discussions with colleagues, or in meetings with managers. However, the employee 2 points out that sometimes staff are assigned to other restaurants in the Y group or restaurant X receives additional staff from other restaurants in the group, and that in such cases, their performance is likely to be affected by this temporary change. Indeed, working in a restaurant where one does not usually

work can lead staff to make more mistakes than usual. In such cases, it is not necessary to follow negative reviews, as they would not fully reflect their ability as waiters, due to contextual factors.

Restaurant X is one of those restaurants that listens to its customers and changes some of its processes when negative reviews point to the same problem, echoing the finding of Breuscart et al. (2016), which explained that comments had to be meaningful, repeated, and detailed to bring about internal change. As a matter of fact, as soon as a problem is recurrent, the employee 1 will contact all the staff, starting with the dining room, the kitchens and their managers, in order to give a rundown and address the problem. More than that, the researcher observed that instead of using the word reviews, the manager uses the word feedback, because that's how he sees them. He even sees them as “golden opportunity to make things better”. And not just in operational terms, but also in terms of reputation. Every week, the employee 1 takes a look at the reviews on DinnerBooking and Google and responds to most of them. Along with Breuscart et al. (2016) strategy to improve their brand reputation, the employee 1 shows professionalism in responding to negative reviews, using the accommodative response method (Ahmad & Guzman 2021; Kim & Velthuis 2020). Accommodative responses must demonstrate empathy, but above all a genuine desire on the part of the employee 1 to do everything in its power to correct the error highlighted. To do this, the employee 1 uses a predefined template and personalizes it according to the case, then, depending on the extent of the dissatisfaction, he may spend minutes to an hour on the phone with the customer and end up offering compensation (a gift card or a glass of champagne) to make up for it, before passing on the information to the rest of the staff.

With all its operational practices and responses to online reviews, Restaurant X also wants to preserve an important factor in the eyes of its customers: its trustworthiness.

4.4 Best practices for increasing review volume and maintaining trustworthiness

Generating around 100 online reviews a month in all, the restaurant is aware that maintaining this volume helps convince customers to visit the restaurant. However, their aim is to keep these reviews as spontaneous as possible, as they need to be perceived as realistic and convincing in their trustworthiness. Chakraborty (2019) recommended that restaurants educate customers to write truthful reviews. Consequently, the review, which must be “an organic desire” (employee 2) on the part of the customer, is encouraged by subtle methods employed by the restaurant. First of all, on the front line, indirectly encouraging customers to write online reviews means offering them an impeccable experience. By impeccable experience, we certainly mean the service, which must be highly professional and clean in keeping with the restaurant's image (i.e. reflecting Finnish culture), but there are also many details that are easily overlooked. Indeed, paying attention to the order of cutlery, the cleanliness of textiles,

regularly tidying the bar, checking that the toilets lack nothing are details that the staff, especially during rush hour, can forget but that a customer can easily distinguish. By making sure that everything is impeccable, they put all the chances on their side that a customer will think that the restaurant deserves a positive online review. At an operational level, as explained above, the use of DinnerBooking enables them to ask customers for their opinions and evaluate their experience without being intrusive. In fact, waiters and waitresses are trained to take email addresses over the phone when a reservation is made using this method, to record them on DinnerBooking and generate the email at the end of their experience. Otherwise, either the customer enters their e-mail address when booking directly on DinnerBooking, or the sales department does so for larger groups.

Also, the restaurant wants to emphasize its authenticity, and to this end they need to encourage customers to take photos. This ties in with the idea of Woo et al. (2021), who explained that photos of products or services posted in online reviews have the effect of increasing confidence among potential customers, partly because the value of these products will only be known after purchase, creating a need in consumers to reassure themselves through photos (Karpik 2010 cited in Kim & Velthuis 2020, 676). So, to enchant customers and make them want to take photos, the restaurant relies on traditional dress, decoration and presentation of dishes or cocktails. This requires a great deal of rigor, especially for the dishes and cocktails, where staff are trained to give them a beautiful visual appearance. In addition, the employee 1 manager explains that a Hashtag is discreetly printed on each menu, and that they are planning to use a polaroid to create Momentum for customers.

Finally, Chakraborty and Bhat (2018) explained that some reviewers are more convincing than others and Suharto et al. (2021) announced that the source of the review, if deemed reliable, would have more influence on consumers. Restaurant X has repeat customers who sometimes show their loyalty by writing online reviews. The restaurant is aware that these customers are important, and that it goes without saying to make commercial gestures to thank them for their loyalty. Indeed, by booking these customers on DinnerBooking, the employee 1 can identify whether they are regulars and do its best to commend them, by dropping by the restaurant when they are there, to offer them a glass of champagne or some other gesture. The same goes for the waiters and waitresses, who usually recognize some of them and go out of their way to offer them an exceptional experience. The restaurant really wants to make these customers understand that they are important, because they are, but also to reinforce their loyalty and to foster a positive word-of-mouth. Indeed, these customers, having had several experiences in the restaurant, have a good understanding of the restaurant's image and can convey an accurate message in the electronic word-of-mouth.

5 Conclusion: discussion, limitations, and recommendations

This study was carried out to help professionals in the restaurant industry better understand online reviews, and more than that, to adopt them to improve their customer brand awareness strategies. By dissecting the characteristics of brand awareness and identifying the main factors influencing online reviews, the researcher was able to develop relevant themes to address during interviews with restaurant X.

5.1 Discussion

After analysing the interview responses, it is possible to draw some conclusions and suggest tips for restaurant professionals on how to use online reviews to make customers aware of their brand and subsequently generate visits. One general piece of advice emanates from all the research; considering that 90% of consumers prefer to look at online reviews before deciding on a potential visit (Jensen 2023), and that online reviews have far more impact on the consumer than firm-generated content (Flanagin & Metzger 2000), every restaurant needs to use online reviews. Using them as feedback to improve restaurants performance but also using them to save one's reputation, as ignored or unanswered online reviews could have reputational consequences that are hard to make up for.

In order to make the best usage of them, a restaurant must go through several strategic dimensions, the first of which is to ensure that it has a distinct brand image and that it is reflected in online reviews. To do this, a restaurant needs to understand its customer base and its needs, and by doing so it can sharpen its image. With the right brand image, customers who visit the restaurant will be happy, potentially leading to the desire to write a review that highlights all their expectations that have been met. The next customers looking for the same brand attributes will be attracted by these reviews and potentially want to visit the restaurant.

It is also recommended that restaurants measure the impact of online reviews on brand awareness, in the form of key performance indicators, which can then be shared within the teams to help them understand the impact of customer online reviews and keep them on track. To do this, it has been seen that restaurant X uses the "happy customer" key indicator "would you recommend it to a friend" (employee 1), but this can be done in other ways; for example by including a button in the booking perhaps called "from online reviews" indicating how customers have heard of this restaurant and comparing it to the overall average grade in each online review site or to the number of positive reviews over a given time. Key performance indicators can also indicate which aspects of the experience are generally appreciated or criticized, so that the team can improve or continue its efforts on specific dimensions. Creating key performance indicators enables a restaurant to improve its operations but also to motivate its teams, and the content of online reviews should also be used with this in mind. Sharing good

reviews, to boost teams, will help a restaurant do its very best and indirectly generate more online engagement and therefore more brand awareness.

The penultimate point is to use the valence of online reviews as a tool for reputation management. Ideally, one person should be assigned to manage online review responses. Then, the first focus should be on sorting online reviews, negative online reviews should be relevant and informative enough, and should not be too subjective or lacking in arguments, positive reviews are all good to take to give a response. Subsequently, positive reviews should be replied to, so as to thank customers for taking the time to write and compliment the restaurant. As for negative reviews selected in advance, the response should follow the accommodative response method (Ahmad & Guzman 2021; Kim & Velthuis 2020), i.e. admitting the fault, sincerely apologizing for it and, above all, showing the desire to correct it by providing details of corrective action.

Finally, once one has understood the importance and impact of online reviews for one's business and has devised a strategy to control and introduce them into one's activities, it is crucial to ensure that reviews remain, and even increase, while retaining their relevance and organic aspect. The researcher therefore advises professionals to do this subtly and avoid giving customers the feeling of being forced to write a review. To achieve this, a restaurant needs to bear in mind that visually, everything in a restaurant counts in influencing customers' wishes to leave a review. Many details, such as cleanliness, well-prepared tables ready to receive guests, clean and well-equipped toilets or even having a tidy bar, will make a good impression on customers and, above all, will not dissuade them from leaving a review and a positive one. What is more, directing customers to leave a comment can be done without appearing intrusive by offering them this option by email, at the end of their experience, this highlights the restaurant's professionalism and will not present customers with a *fait accompli* unlike when it's asked face-to-face. Finally, some restaurants have "regulars", customers who come to the restaurant frequently, who understand the restaurant's image and like to talk about it on online reviews. These customers are precious and treating them accordingly is necessary. By doing so, a restaurant not only works on its brand loyalty, but also increases its chances of getting a relevant review from a customer who respects the restaurant, its service, and its products.

5.2 Limitations and recommendations

There are several limitations to this project. Firstly, certain constraints are linked to the theoretical part and its specific focus. There is limited literature on the impact of online reviews on brand awareness, especially when different factors (valence, volume, content, trustworthiness) are compared with brand awareness itself. Often, research is based on the purchase decision and not on the relationship with the brand, and if it is on the relationship with the brand, it is mainly on brand equity, and in these cases brand awareness is only a tiny part of the research. Because of this, part of the dissertation is obliged to analyse the factors

in online reviews that have an influence on customers' purchase decisions, so that it can then be applied to the literature insights on brand awareness, which are thinner on the subject. Then, when it comes to the restaurant industry, which is even more narrowly focused on the subject and the findings in terms of review literature, there is still little mention of brand awareness and brand recall action, but rather this is translated into restaurant visits, revisits (brand loyalty) or click-through rates on restaurant websites. It would therefore be interesting for future research to be based on other aspects of brand equity that may have more literature on them, such as brand loyalty, perception of quality and brand association in relation to the quality perceived (Aaker 1996, cited in Park 2009, 18).

Admittedly, having a large body of literature research on the influence of online reviews on the consumer's purchase decision and intention to visit helped the researcher construct the interviews for the professionals. However, another limitation was the methodological constraints caused by the lack of time, which could have helped the subject to go into greater detail and focus on consumers and their relationship with the brand. Indeed, the involvement of a mixed-method, quantitative and qualitative, i.e. a survey of customers' relationship with restaurant X based on online reviews and a comparison with the latter's opinions and best practices could have helped the researcher validate or improve the restaurant's practices and could be a method employed for future research.

Finally, there are also limitations in terms of external validity and transferability: the output of this research may encounter difficulties if it is transferred to restaurants that are not in the same category as restaurant X, or that do not have the same systemic elements (location or establishment of the brand) (Breuscart et al. 2016) or the same customer base. It is important that future research introduces other, different restaurants, with a different online presence and a different strategy towards online reviews from that of restaurant X. As a result, a comparative qualitative analysis can be made, and the result could be used for a wider range of restaurants.

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Appendices

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Appendix 1: Interview with Customer Relations and Development Manager (employee 1)

I. Background

1. Tell me briefly about your role and your duties in Restaurant X and Group Y.

II. Brand awareness and Brand image:

2. Do you think it's important to work on your brand image in order to generate more brand awareness among potential customers? Why or why not?
3. What factors affect your brand image?

III. Online reviews :

4. Are you looking to have these brand image factors discussed in online reviews to attract more customers?
5. Do you integrate online reviews into your marketing strategy? Why?

IV. Influential factors in online reviews:

Notion of trustworthiness through, pictures, source of reviews and type of platforms:

6. The restaurant x happen to be quite popular on Google maps and Tripadvisor, both of which generate around 1400 online reviews. Which one do you prefer to have online reviews on? Why or why not?
7. How the firm use Tripadvisor, Why and How?
8. Do you identify certain reviewers as more convincing than others? If so, do you have a strategy for highlighting these reviewers?
9. In your opinion, do images shared on online reviews play an important role in customer awareness? If so, what are the practices to get visitors to generate more photos of their experience when they write an online review?

Notion of valence: positive or negative reviews:

10. In general, do you think that the valence of reviews (positive or negative) plays an important role in brand recognition? Do you think there's a direct link between the

valence of reviews and consumers' intentions to visit?

11. In your opinion, what elements of the experience (service, atmosphere, quality of the food) discussed in online reviews convince potential customers the most?
12. Do you respond to online reviews? If yes, which online reviews deserve an answer in order to enhance your reputation? What strategy is employed when answering the comment?

Notion of volume:

13. Do you encourage customers to write online reviews? If yes, do you educate them on how to write the review?
14. Restaurant X has been awarded "Traveller choice in 2023", by Tripadvisor, were you aiming at this award? If yes, why, and how did you reach this goal?
15. Do online reviews help you setting goals within your team, in this case Restaurant X's team? What kind of goals do online reviews help you to set?
16. What type of online reviews make you change your operational practices?

Appendix 2: Interview with waitress (employee 2)

I. Background

1. Tell me briefly about your role and your duties in Restaurant X

II. Brand awareness and Brand image:

2. From your perspective, what factors do you believe contribute to the overall brand image of the restaurant?

III. Online Reviews:

3. Do you think it's essential for these elements of the restaurant's brand image to be reflected in online reviews to attract more customers? Why or why not?
4. How do you view online reviews? Do you read them often and take them into account to improve your performance?
5. Can some online reviews be a source of motivation for you? Why or why not?
6. Have you noticed whether customers refer to online reviews before coming in? How do they express this?

IV. Influential factors in online reviews:

Trustworthiness:

7. How much impact do you believe the inclusion of images in online reviews has on customer awareness? Did you ever encourage customers to post pictures? And if yes, what type of pictures?
8. Do you identify certain reviewers as more influential or credible than others? If yes, have you applied any tactics to spotlight these reviewers?
9. Considering the abundance of online reviews on platforms like Google Maps, TripAdvisor, and DinnerBooking, which platform do you think holds more significance for the restaurant? Why?

Valence:

10. Are there any negative comments that worry you about convincing potential customers not to visit the restaurant?
11. From what you can remember, do customers share with you why they came to the restaurant? What were the highlights (service, atmosphere, food) that drew them here?

Volume:

12. As part of the service team, do you believe there's value in actively encouraging customers to write online reviews? If yes, how do you think we could effectively guide them in writing these reviews?