




Affinity in Adversity: Examining Brand Love and Online Customer Engagement in the Restaurant Industry

Afinidade na Adversidade: Examinando o Amor à Marca e o Envolvimento *Online* do Cliente na Indústria de Restaurantes

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Abstract

Previous studies have investigated brand love in restaurants but have not considered the dynamics of online reviews about restaurant brands. To fill this gap, this study aims to understand how consumers with a high level of love towards restaurant brands defend them in the face of negative reviews on social media. This research, carried out in a Brazilian context, adopts a qualitative approach, analysing 3,979 customer reviews sourced from Instagram through sentiment and categorical content analysis. From the dimensions of brand love, the results showed that customers who love restaurant brands react to negative reviews about them on social media, expressing their positive emotional connection with the companies and acting as their defenders. The study shows that for the restaurant segment, it is relevant to have consumers who love the brand once they help mitigate the effects generated by negative comments online. Furthermore, the research highlights how brand love manifests in restaurant brands' digital context.

Keywords: Brand Love, Restaurant Brands, Negative Reviews, Social Media, UGC, Customer Engagement.

Resumo

Estudos anteriores investigaram o amor à marca em restaurantes, mas não consideraram a dinâmica das avaliações *online* sobre marcas de restaurantes. Para preencher esta lacuna, este estudo tem por objetivo compreender como os consumidores com elevado nível de amor à marca de restaurantes as defendem frente a avaliações negativas nas redes sociais. Esta pesquisa, realizada no contexto brasileiro, adota abordagem qualitativa, analisando 3.979 avaliações de clientes, provenientes do Instagram, por meio de análise de sentimento e de conteúdo categorial. A partir das dimensões do amor à marca, os resultados mostraram que os clientes que amam as marcas de restaurantes reagem às avaliações negativas sobre elas nas redes sociais, expressando sua conexão emocional positiva com as empresas e agindo como seus defensores. O estudo mostra que, para o segmento de restaurantes, é relevante ter consumidores que amam a marca, uma vez que eles ajudam a mitigar os efeitos gerados por comentários negativos *online*. Além disso, a pesquisa evidencia como o amor à marca se manifesta no contexto digital das marcas de restaurantes.

Palavras-chave: Amor à Marca, Marcas de Restaurantes, Avaliações Negativas, Redes Sociais, CGU, Envolvimento do Cliente.

1. Introduction

Adopting brand love strategies for restaurant brands can help increase customer commitment to the brand (Shen et al., 2021). Furthermore, considering that the restaurant sector is highly competitive (Chang, 2013), building a brand for which consumers feel a high level of emotional involvement is an alternative to generate recommendations and positive associations, making the brand a viable option to be considered by new customers, maintain a favourable brand image, among other aspects (Batra et al., 2012).

Analysing brand love in Chinese restaurants, the study by Shen et al. (2021) found that this construct results from high perceived value and satisfaction. The study also highlights that restaurant managers must realise that having emotional ties with consumers is relevant, as this affects revisit intention and loyalty. The investigation by Song et al. (2019), which examined the relationship between brand love and loyalty in a restaurant, concluded that both aspects are positively related. In this sense, the study recommends that customers' emotional experiences need to be considered to generate brand loyalty. From the same perspective, Milan et al. (2021) argue that the consumer's experience with the brand interferes with brand love and loyalty and that this experience comprises sensory, affective and behavioural aspects.

It is clear, then, that brand love in restaurants is considered a management tactic that can increase customer loyalty through the emotional bond between brand and consumer. In addition to loyalty, one of the results of marketing activities aimed at developing brand love concerns greater resistance on the part of consumers to negative information about the brand, with which the level of emotional involvement of these individuals is high (Batra et al., 2012).



In the social media environment, where there are both positive and negative comments about different brands, brand love works as a strategy to mitigate the negative repercussions caused by unfavourable reviews (Vernuccio et al., 2015; Zhang et al., 2020; Wallace et al., 2021). Thus, brand love is an effective tactic to mitigate these negative repercussions on social media, as the presence of the consumer who defends the brand can help reverse this situation without the company's direct intervention (Roy et al., 2021). Furthermore, advantages can also be obtained for service recovery, which is crucial for a company's success, especially in the restaurant segment (Zhu et al., 2023).

In the field of Marketing and Tourism, some investigations proposed to study brand love applied to restaurants (Trivedi & Sama, 2020; Junaid et al., 2020a; Junaid et al., 2020b; Khan et al., 2021; Shen et al., 2021). However, customers' reaction to negative information is not the focus of any of them. In addition, it was noted that such studies were not developed based on an analysis of consumer sentiment about brands on social media.

In this scenario, it is believed that it is essential to understand the use of the brand love strategy for restaurants, considering that the current consumption logic is primarily based on reviews on social media (Kim et al., 2016; Appel et al., 2019). Whether in situations of positive or negative projection of a brand on social media, brand love can avoid the costs necessary to maintain the brand's image through the explicit defence of customers with a high level of emotional involvement with the restaurant. In the literature on online restaurant complaints, no studies were found addressing the brand love construct (Shin & Larson, 2020; Kim & Velthuis, 2021; Meyer-Waarden & Sabadie, 2023). Therefore, this research aims to fill this gap by providing evidence that having customers with high emotional involvement is relevant to reversing negative perceptions of restaurant brands on social media. Thus, the study brings brand love as a new strategy to solve or minimise this problem.

This study also aims to advance the understanding of the brand love construct in the context of online restaurant brand communities, which is a topic that lacks research (Matute et al., 2019; Algharabat et al., 2020; Paruthi et al., 2023). In this sense, we intend to contribute to the literature on brand love in hospitality by investigating online comments about a restaurant, an essential element in the tourism production chain (Sparks et al., 2003; Skinner et al., 2020).

Given this context, the present study aims to understand how consumers with a high level of love for restaurant brands express their defence of them in the face of negative reviews on social media. For that, a case study was carried out (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2001) of a Brazilian restaurant brand in a moment of brand expansion. The choice of the restaurant was due to the recognition of the brand at a national level and the occurrence of negative repercussions generated on social media by new consumers and food critics after the opening of a business unit of the brand in the gastronomic centre of the city of São Paulo, Brazil.

Through sentiment analysis and categorical content analysis, the present study allows the understanding of the strategies adopted by restaurants in a moment of brand expansion to face the image crisis and mitigate its effects through the defence of consumers with a high level of emotional involvement with the brand. In addition, it presents contributions to the literature related to the management strategies adopted by the restaurant segment and helps in understanding the factors that reveal the emotional bond between consumers and the brand.

Next, the present study is organised as follows: the theoretical framework is presented, which discusses brand love on social media and online complaints about restaurants. Next, the methodological procedures that guided the execution of the study are presented, the case report of the restaurant is analysed in the research, and the results of the investigation are obtained, as well as its main conclusions and recommendations.

2. Brand Love and Consumer Behavior on Social Media

The relevance of developing customer-based brand equity is one of the main theoretical approaches of brand equity theory. According to Keller (2001), a brand with high brand equity can create positive attitudes and relationships with the target audience, the so-called brand resonance. In this sense, brand love can be one of the strategies to make customers express such aspects, considering the positive emotional bond between consumers and brands (Batra et al., 2012).

The present study adopts the definition of brand love provided by Batra et al. (2012, p. 3-5), who consider it as a consumer-brand relationship that comprises aspects of: "great quality/qualities; strongly held values and existential meaning; intrinsic rewards; self-identity; positive affect; passionate desire and a sense of natural fit; emotional bonding and anticipated heartbreak; willingness to invest; frequent thought and use; and length of use". For the authors, these elements represent ways to transform merely appreciated brands into beloved brands, creating positive emotional connections between customers and the company.

Based on the conceptual premises of Batra et al. (2012), when the consumer feels love for the brand, managerial benefits may arise for the organisation that this brand represents. It is possible to highlight that consumers start to speak favourably about it, to show



openness to try new products, in addition to becoming brand defenders, reacting to negative information and reducing harmful implications that may surface about the company (Du, Bhattacharya & Sen, 2007; Wallace et al., 2014; Nagar & Kour, 2018; Bairrada et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2020; Kennedy & Guzmán, 2021).

Research by Zhang et al. (2020, p. 426) demonstrated that brand love can help companies mitigate the undesirable consequences caused by a failure to deliver products or services, explained by what the authors called the effect “love is blind”. This term refers to the customer's greater tolerance of negative situations in which a brand may be involved. On the other hand, research by Kennedy and Guzmán (2021) demonstrated that consumers who love the brand respond more positively when the organisation is involved in negative scandals, as in the case of a transgression. In the context of a coffee shop, the research carried out by Polat and Çetinsöz (2021) revealed that brand love interferes with brand equity and impacts brand loyalty. In this sense, the study reinforces that the positive emotional bond between brand and customer is important for the competitiveness of companies, especially in the services segment.

These results are corroborated by the study by Ahluwalia et al. (2000), who had already demonstrated that brand love could lead to positive reviews by the consumer even when exposed to negative information about the brand in addition to research by Nagar and Kour (2018) and Bairrada et al. (2019), who investigated consumer responses to brands involved in scandals and demonstrated that customers respond more favourably to such information when love for the brand is high and that there is a positive relationship between brand love and resistance to negative information, respectively.

In digital consumption, the concern with brand love is also present. Research has already proposed to examine how brand love operates on social media, given that almost all consumer brands are present in the digital environment (Voorveld, 2019) and that the way consumers behave in the virtual market is influenced by technology (Lamberton & Stephen, 2016). As social media have become a vital marketing and communication channel for companies (Appel et al., 2019), consumers have started to engage with brands' virtual pages and actively participate in them (Matute et al., 2019; Algharabat et al., 2020; Paruthi et al., 2023). The research by Ballester et al. (2023) showed that customers engage with the restaurant brand on social networks such as Instagram. This is because consumers communicate with the brand through their posts, which can influence their intention to visit the establishment.

The research by Vernuccio et al. (2015) found that the way people identify with the virtual social group has important effects on brand love, impacting brand attachment and positive reviews. In addition, Palazon et al. (2019) argue that relationships with other community members increase brand love. The findings by John et al. (2016) indicate an online endorsement effect, as it was seen that when a user likes a brand on social media, their friends tend to like it too. In addition, being able to express yourself on the virtual pages of brands encourages customers to love them (Algharabat, 2017) since brand love mediates the relationship between consumer engagement and identification with the brand in the digital environment (Wallace et al., 2021). In the hotel sector, Bilal et al. (2022) state that brand love in social media depends more heavily on virtual interactions and the quality of information.

In view of this, brand love stimulates brand defence behaviour. In other words, customers with high positive emotional involvement with the brand tend to defend it when necessary (Sawaftah et al., 2021). Theoretical discussions about brand defence in the marketing field are not new, as Keller, in 2007, already highlighted its importance and efficiency (Keller, 2007). Nowadays, social media plays a fundamental role in the logic of consumption, which makes brand defence even more relevant. This is because, as Wilk et al. (2020) argue, in this digital age, companies need to understand how consumers defend their brands online to monitor them. According to Wilk et al. (2021), it is important that the customer express brand defence, as this is a way of strengthening the relationship between the consumer and the company. In addition, customers who defend the brand have higher purchase intentions, recommending it and referring it to other potential consumers (Choi et al., 2021).

It is clear, therefore, that the most recurrent aspect of generating brand love in the digital sphere is consumer interaction, that is, engagement with the brand on social media and dialogue with other customers. From this, users express their opinions about the brand, both positively and negatively, making other consumers also participate in the discussion. In the case of negative comments on social media, it is believed that brand love can act as a strategy to mitigate them since brands, including restaurant brands, are subject to online complaints.

2.1 Unveiling Dissatisfaction: Exploring Online Complaints in the Restaurant Sector

According to Nebreda et al. (2020), the study of customer complaints is one of the main research areas in consumer dissatisfaction. In the restaurant segment, understanding the customer's perception when there is a failure in the service can, among other things, help in the development of strategies for managing these failures, thus reducing consumer dissatisfaction and the likelihood of complaints (Kamran & Attiq, 2011; Jang et al., 2013; Ro, 2015; Cho et al., 2016). According to Sudhagar (2018), any customer complaint must be dealt with immediately to recover the quality of service. For Rodríguez-López et al. (2023), it is essential to keep customers satisfied, as this influences the restaurant's brand equity.



From the point of view of the consumer journey, dissatisfaction can occur at different times of the experience with a given product or service (Bagherzadeh et al., 2020), using different channels to express dissatisfaction with the failure that occurred, including social media (Melancon & Dalakas, 2018).

Fernandes and Fernandes (2017) investigated the factors that can cause dissatisfaction from negative online comments for hotel and restaurant services. They identified the attribute 'customer care' as the one that has the most significant relationship with consumer dissatisfaction and highlighted the importance of knowing the negative manifestations on social media as a resource for these companies to understand what triggers consumer dissatisfaction and reassess their recovery strategies. In addition, Premordia and Gál (2021) add that the quality of service, cleanliness of the restaurant, price and quality of food are items that can leave customers dissatisfied, culminating in the attitude of posting negative comments. Ahmad and Guzmán (2023) found that food quality has the potential to generate customer dissatisfaction and online complaints.

Additionally, Hwang and Mattila (2020) found that dissatisfied customers complain online because it is more convenient. In the authors' view, restaurants must try to minimise negative reviews on social media since they spread quickly and impact the brand's performance and reputation. In this way, restaurants need to monitor consumer complaints on social media to minimise their negative impact on the company (Li, 2019) and act in a way to personalise the response to the consumer, humanising the feedback, given that automatic and generalist responses from the company may imply that the brand does not value them (Stevens et al., 2018).

From this perspective, Chen et al. (2021) suggest that restaurant managers be aware of negative customer reviews, as consumers, in general, are becoming increasingly dependent on online reviews, and when reading such comments, they may develop unfavourable perceptions even without having met the product or service offered. Therefore, these authors must monitor and manage such posts to remain in the market.

In this sense, it is believed that brand love can help deal with customer complaints on social media. In the context of restaurants, the study by Alshreef et al. (2023) demonstrated that brand love significantly increased positive online comments. Therefore, the research shows that restaurant brands must engage customers through social media and other digital means. From the same perspective, Ahmad and Guzmán (2023) argue that restaurant brands should monitor customer comments to learn about their concerns and minimise possible negative consequences. Additionally, Anbumathi et al. (2023) indicate that companies should work to receive positive reviews, as this can lead to the development of emotional bonds between customers and brands.

Considering that restaurants may fail to deliver customer service, it is important to have effective methods to interact with customers on social media when negative reviews associated with dissatisfaction occur. Thus, having customers with a high level of engagement with the brand can help mitigate the effects of reviews published on social media, as these individuals act as brand defenders (Batra et al., 2012; Bairrada et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2020). Furthermore, satisfying customers and making them brand lovers can positively impact the restaurant's competitiveness (Salomão & Santos, 2022; Tan et al., 2023) and brand loyalty (Nyamekye et al., 2023). According to Ismail et al. (2022), restaurant satisfaction depends on the service experience and brand personality. Thus, the authors point out that restaurant managers should consider these aspects to improve customer satisfaction, which can influence obtaining loyal customers and attracting new ones. Finally, in this scope, brand love strategies can be helpful for managers in the restaurant segment to deal with dissatisfied customers and their expressions on social media.

3. Methodology

3.1 Case study approach

This study uses the qualitative exploratory case study approach (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2001) and applies the single-case study method oriented with a focus on the process of the observed phenomenon of consumers' defensive reaction to brand reviews (Langley, 1999). As Çakar and Aykol (2021) pointed out, most studies adopt this approach regarding the case study method in the hotel and tourism research field. A similar procedure was applied by Miller (2008), which involved an analysis of a restaurant.

As Yin (2001) highlighted, the case study allows for retaining empirical evidence to generate relevant research results. In this sense, it is believed that this method can help in understanding brand love in restaurants due to the empirical observation of how customers express love for the restaurant brand on social media and, from this, examine how brand love can contribute to managing restaurants in times of crisis, as in the case of negative online reviews. In addition, the case study is applicable when little is known about a particular subject (Eisenhardt, 1989). This condition is part of this research, bearing in mind that the literature on brand love still has gaps in understanding the defence of restaurant brands on social media.



3.2 *Camarões Restaurant: case report and considerations*

The choice of Camarões Restaurant as the object of study for this investigation emerges from observations evidenced in academic research and by the market dynamics of the restaurant segment in which Camarões is inserted. Interestingly, investigations into the construction, differentiation and positioning of tourist brands in northeastern Brazil, specifically in the city of Natal, located in the state of Rio Grande do Norte, Brazil, demonstrated the shrimp product as a symbol of differentiation for the local gastronomy, being often emphasised by strategies to promote the Natal destination at regional, national and international levels.

In this scenario, the Camarões Restaurant draws attention due to its favourable position and regional and national importance for residents and visitors to the Natal destination. Inaugurated in 1989, the brand is Top of Mind local and was recognised in 2015 as one of the 10 best restaurants in Brazil by travellers on the TripAdvisor platform, one of the largest travel platforms in the world (Camarões, 2022). In 2022, Camarões ranked 9th out of 1,618 restaurants in Natal, with nearly 14,000 traveller scores classifying it as 'excellent' (TripAdvisor, 2022).

Along this trajectory, Camarões restaurant professionalised its offer, expanded its operation and consistently developed a brand of affection recognised by resident consumers and tourists. Silva et al. (2017) confirmed this issue by showing that customers perceive love for this restaurant's brand since elements such as mystery, sensuality and intimacy are offered. However, in 2021, its expansion faces a new challenge: positioning in more competitive gastronomic markets, strongly impacted by the dynamics of evaluation by critics and the general consumer public.

As a brand strongly associated with tourism and with a favourable reputation among local consumers and tourists, the restaurant maintains regional characteristics and a specific menu of seafood and crustaceans in its first unit outside its origin location. At its inauguration, the physical unit occupied space in a prime address in the city of São Paulo, with a structure of 350 seats and a total area of 1400 meters. The opening also received attention from national gastronomic critics, which reflected evaluations among newspapers, specialised magazines and gastronomic influencers.

Among criticisms and evaluations, the publication of the page "O Crítico Antigourmet" (<https://www.instagram.com/ocritico.antigourmet/>) stands out, managed by a Brazilian who graduated from an important gastronomy college that evaluates restaurants based on his consumption experience. The content highlights the negative perception of the owner of the page regarding the attributes of the restaurant's products and service, its general delivery and aspects such as the length of the menu, quality of the dishes, service, price and general concept of the brand for the newly opened unit.

By the time this research was carried out, the profile had 61.7 thousand followers and the post about the Camarões restaurant had 6,781 public comments. In this context, the present study proposes to analyse how consumers with a high level of love for the Camarões restaurant brand expressed defence of it in the face of negative reviews on social media. It is believed that the restaurant can attest to its relevance during a competitive scenario with the support of the customers themselves, who, because they have a high level of love for the brand, tend to express themselves favourably to the company, which can positively influence the perception of other potential customers.

Additionally, the analysis of the case of the Camarões restaurant through the theoretical lens of brand love can provide subsidies to understand how an initially regional and cultural restaurant manages to reach other audiences with the help of customers who express love for the brand on social media, even when facing negative online reviews.

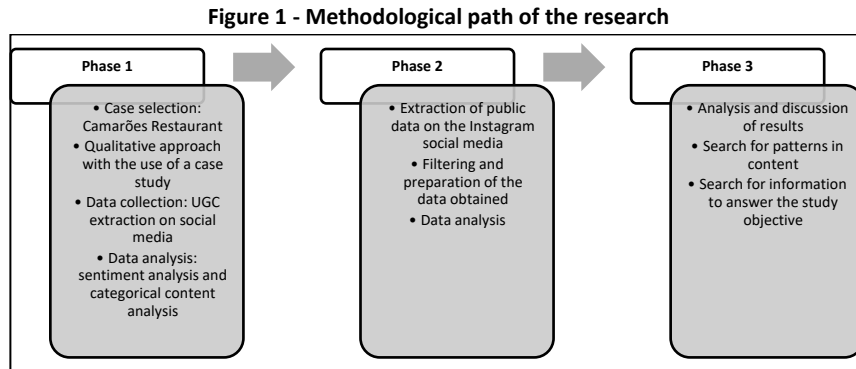
3.3 *Data collection and analysis*

The data used for this study are characterised as User Generated Content (UGC) on social media, which, for Santos (2022), is defined as any text, data or action performed by users of online digital systems, published and disseminated by the user and that produces an expressive or communicative effect individually or in combination. According to Duan et al. (2016), this data type has become the main source of information for consumers and entrepreneurs. In addition, the UGC can provide relevant information about the performance of services in restaurants (Bilgihan et al., 2018; Perez-Aranda et al., 2018; Uthaisar et al., 2023).

These are public comments extracted from Instagram using Python software. Online data extraction was a method applied in the study by Vu et al. (2017), which examined the behaviour of restaurant tourists. For this research, we considered the post in which the critic negatively evaluates a Camarões Restaurant branch in São Paulo, Brazil. The post in question was published on June 14, 2021 (<https://www.instagram.com/p/CQHK8mqBvHG/>). 6,781 comments were collected regarding this publication, with total interactions existing until the research analysis's beginning, covering the period between June and September 2022. Of this total, only the primary comments to the post were analysed, that is, those that were made directly. Therefore, 3,979 primary comments were reached, all included in the study analyses.



Data extracted from Instagram were analysed in two stages, using sentiment analysis and content analysis techniques, as shown in Figure 1. At first, using Python, comments were classified into positive, neutral and negative, in addition to generating word clouds with the most frequent terms associated with each type of comment, as Saura et al. (2023) recommended. Sentiment analysis can provide depth in understanding how people deal with crisis events and the context in which they express themselves (Gaspar et al., 2016). In addition, this analysis technique contributes to understanding consumers' feelings in online reviews about restaurants (Gan et al., 2016).



Source: The authors (2022).

Next, the categorical content analysis was carried out based on the results obtained from the three groups of comments. For that, analytical categories supported by the literature on brand love and brand defence were established to offer subsidies for analysing the empirical results. Table 1 details the categories and respective items observed among the comments analysed in the research.

Table 1 - Research analytical categories

Analysis Category	Observed Items	Source
High quality of the restaurant brand	Check whether users' comments express their perceptions about the restaurant brand's attractive qualities, such as performance, trust, appearance, among others.	
Intrinsic rewards of the restaurant brand	Analyse, from user comments, possible psychological states, such as happiness and pleasure, that are generated using the product (e.g. restaurant dishes).	
Restaurant brand self-identity	Identify, in the collected comments, expressions of identification of the customer with the restaurant brand, as well as expressions of feelings involving consumer and brand.	
Positive effect of the restaurant brand	Analyse the existence of positive emotional terms in user comments, such as statements of deep feelings about the restaurant brand.	Batra et al. (2012)
Passion for the restaurant brand	Observe the existence of comments that express a strong desire for the restaurant brand, feelings of love for the brand or affective and positive speeches regarding the brand.	
Emotional bond with the restaurant brand	Examine comments that express that the restaurant brand is unique and irreplaceable for the customer, revealing that there is a strong union between customer and brand.	
Frequency of thought and use of the restaurant brand	Exploit customer feedback to see if they make repeat purchases from the restaurant brand.	
Length of restaurant brand use	Investigate user comments to understand how long they have been customers of the restaurant brand; identify expressions that reveal the duration of their relationship with the restaurant brand.	
Reaction to negative reviews of the restaurant brand	Analyse user comments to identify manifestations of brand defence, such as positive and favourable statements about the restaurant brand.	Batra et al. (2012); Wallace et al. (2014); Nagar e Kour (2018); Bairrada et al. (2019); Zhang et al. (2020); Kennedy e Guzmán (2021).

Source: The authors (2022).



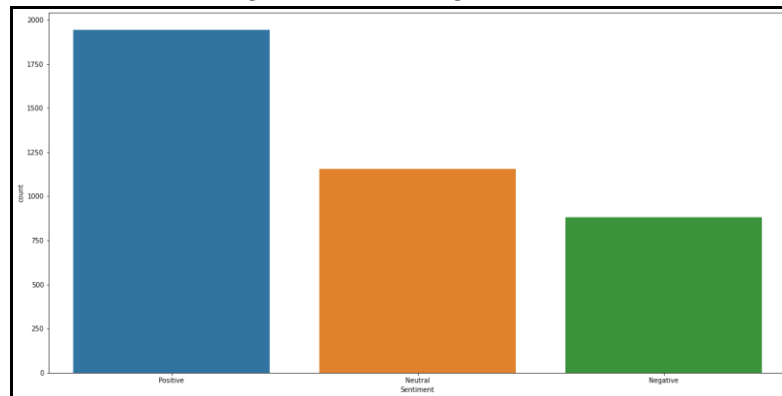
It is important to emphasise that two elements of brand love listed by Batra et al. (2012) were observed in the present study in an aggregated form. This is the case of the category *strongly held values and existential meaning*, which was included in *Restaurant brand self-identity*, given that both consider the customer's identity with the company as an important predictor of brand love, and the category *willingness to invest*, which was incorporated into the *Frequency of thought and use of the restaurant brand*, since both imply expenditure of time and money by the consumer in relation to beloved brands (Batra et al., 2012). In addition, according to Table 1, the analytical categories were adapted considering the object of study investigated (restaurant) to bring the brand love construct closer to the research context. The results obtained and discussion are presented.

Results

To understand how consumers with a high level of love for restaurant brands express their defence of them in the face of negative reviews on social media, the present study first sought to classify the public comments expressed in the case of the restaurant under analysis. The classification made it possible to understand the nature of the statements made by consumers of this establishment.

Figure 2, below, presents the overall rating of primary comments to the critical post about the brand in positive, neutral, and negative. It can be seen that there are predominantly 1,944 positive comments (blue bar), 1,154 neutral (orange bar) and 881 negative (green bar). Positive comments represent 48.86% of the total, while neutral comments represent 29% and negative comments 22.14%. Therefore, most of the users' manifestations are positive concerning the publication analysed about the restaurant.

Figure 2 - Overall rating of reviews



Source: Survey data (2022).

Observing Figure 2, it appears that, in addition to the predominance of positive comments, the number of negative comments is even lower than the neutral comments. Given this, it can be inferred that there is a high level of love for the brand on the part of customers in relation to the analysed restaurant, considering that the amount of positive and neutral manifestations substantially exceeds the number of negative comments related to the evaluation of the restaurant.

Next, an attempt was made to analyse the content of the three classification groups of the identified primary comments. For the group of comments classified as positive in relation to the post about the restaurant brand, it is possible to notice, in Figure 3, references to specific aspects, such as the taste of the dishes, the atmosphere of the restaurant, the quality of the service, people, the dishes itself and the shrimp product. In addition, the presence of the word "want" is verified, which can indicate the desire of customers to consume the restaurant's dishes; the word "love" reveals the customers' emotional bond with the brand; and the term "know", indicating that consumers know the brand. It should be noted that the most prominent words in the figure are those mentioned most often, while the smaller words indicate a lower frequency of repetition.

Figure 3 - Most cited words associated with positive comments



Source: Survey data (2022).



for all 10 comments is equal to 0.0, representing the neutrality of the sentiment. Based on the subjective values, the comments have objective content.

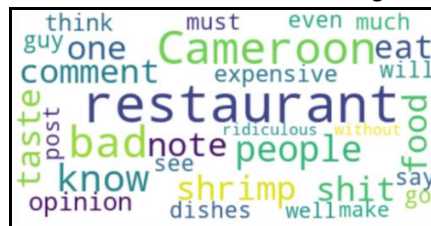
Table 3 - Likes, polarity and subjectivity (neutral comments)

Number	Comments	Likes	Polarity	Subjectivity
1	<i>You talk a lot without understanding anything!</i>	0	0.0	0.0
2	<i>Well, there are people who are not used to eating shrimp!</i>	1	0.0	0.0
3	<i>Gonna cry?</i>	153	0.0	0.0
4	<i>Don't know how to evaluate. Dislike for you</i>	0	0.0	0.0
5	<i>My experience was totally different from that. I like and recommend Camarões</i>	854	0.0	0.6
6	<i>This was the biggest joke of 2021!</i>	1	0.0	0.0
7	<i>What clowning this criticism</i>	416	0.0	0.0
8	<i>Note 2 for your criticism!</i>	574	0.0	0.0
9	<i>Note 2 for your profile!</i>	333	0.0	0.0
10	<i>No Northeastern will accept the criticism</i>	0	0.0	0.0

Source: Survey data (2022).

When examining the most recurrent terms linked to negative comments, it is possible to see negative positions in relation to the price, the restaurant's atmosphere and the food's quality. There are also negative associations with ratings of the restaurant as bad, ridiculous, and despicable (see Figure 5). Thus, it is observed that some restaurant attributes were mentioned in both positive and negative comments, with changes in the customers' assessment of them.

Figure 5 - Most cited words associated with negative comments



Source: Survey data (2022).

As examples of negative comments, the following are highlighted: 1) "Pity note for the half-baked blogger"; 2) "Delete it is ugly!"; 3) "Then you know to have bad taste". It is important to note that the term "bad" appeared 263 times; the word "shit" was cited 250 times, and "expensive" was mentioned 117 times. Thus, it is possible to see that some negative manifestations also mention the critic who evaluated the restaurant, considering that the comments are directed to the profile that made the post about the establishment.

Table 4 shows the analysis of likes, polarity and subjectivity for the negative comments. As with the neutral comments, some negative comments were directed at the critic responsible for the post analysed, with a high number of likes. Of note is the sixth comment (1,017 likes), which expresses a customer's opinion of criticising the critic's position, considering the restaurant's brand to be a family member. In addition, this comment received the most likes of all the comments analysed. It is also worth mentioning the third comment, with 825 likes, which reinforces the lack of credibility that customers perceive concerning the publication under investigation. The polarity in all cases is negative, representing the negative sentiment expressed in the comments. Based on the subjectivity values, the comments have subjective content, as most values are close to 1.

Table 4 - Likes, polarity and subjectivity (negative comments)

Number	Comments	Likes	Polarity	Subjectivity
1	<i>Too bad! It is really deplorable. Note 3, for this review</i>	119	-0.64	0.78
2	<i>First time I've seen someone talk badly about Camarões</i>	534	-0.69	0.66
3	<i>Boy you went to the wrong restaurant</i>	825	-0.5	0.9
4	<i>Who asked the opinion of this idiot?</i>	0	-0.8	0.8
5	<i>So bad that the line is turning around the block!</i>	383	-0.69	0.66
6	<i>Speaking badly about Camarões is the same as cursing my family. With all due respect, but you are wrong</i>	1,017	-0.38	0.57
7	<i>Ate wrong. Camarões is everything</i>	1	-0.5	0.9
8	<i>Poor and poorly made criticism, like the owner of the profile.</i>	232	-0.46	0.70
9	<i>Weak, you don't know anything about food</i>	0	-0.37	0.62
10	<i>Bad criticism</i>	1	-0.69	0.66

Source: Survey data (2022).



Finally, considering the analytical categories related to the demonstration of emotional involvement of consumers with the restaurant brand (see Table 1), examples of phrases commented by customers that could represent each element of the brand love construct were sought (Batra et al., 2012). To select them, searches were carried out in the database based on words related to each category of analysis. For example, a person often uses the word “wonderful” when a positive emotion arises towards a brand (category *emotional bond*). Then, it was verified how many times the terms used for the searches (highlighted) were mentioned in the comments. The results can be seen in Table 5.

Table 5 - Comments associated with analysis categories

Category	Examples of comments	Frequency of highlighted words
High quality of the restaurant brand	"...Camarões is a <u>high-quality</u> restaurant..." / "...The dishes? Each more <u>delicious</u> than the other..."	quality (221); high quality (10); delicious (44)
Intrinsic rewards of the restaurant brand	"In Camarões we are always <u>HAPPY</u> ..." / "...Camarões will always be wonderful: food, service, <u>care</u> , <u>attention</u> ..."	happy (49); care (35); attention (60)
Restaurant brand self-identity	"...Camarões' purpose is to be faithful to <u>Potiguar</u> cuisine... <u>almost a cultural heritage</u> ..." / " <u>Camarões is a Potiguar</u> , and we are damn <u>proud</u> of it..."	potiguar (202); cultural (5); proud (31)
Positive affect of the restaurant brand	"...Going to Camarões is a <u>feeling of well-being</u> and <u>happiness</u> ..." / "...Excellence, <u>affection</u> , love that attracts happiness..."	feeling (14); well being (3); happiness (6); affection (14)
Passion for the restaurant brand	"Camarões is <u>wonderful</u> , for sure one of the <u>best</u> restaurants in Brazil... I <u>love</u> it..." / "...it occupies a place in the <u>heart</u> of the potiguar..."	wonderful (106); best (585); love (182); heart (10)
Emotional bond with the restaurant brand	"...In addition to the <u>wonderful food</u> and <u>unique</u> flavour, the service is <u>impeccable</u> ..." / "...feel love in the form of <u>unique</u> flavours..."	wonderful food (20); unique (18); impeccable (90); feel (34)
Frequency of thought and use of the restaurant brand	"I wonder what explains the fact that Camarões is <u>always crowded</u> ?..." / "I always go to Camarões and leave there counting the hours to <u>come back again</u> !..."	always (114); crowd (30); come back (32); again (61)
Length of restaurant brand use	"... <u>Since</u> I understand myself, Camarões is the best restaurant I know..." / "...I go to <u>many years</u> ..."	since (57); go to (115); years (84)
Reaction to negative reviews of the restaurant brand	"...I'm an eternal <u>fan</u> , that's why I advertise and <u>defend</u> ..." / "... <u>zero grade</u> for the supposed food <u>critic</u> ..."	fan (81); defend (73); zero grade (32); critic (175)

Note. The numbers in parentheses in the third column indicate the number of times the term was cited.

Source: Survey data (2022).

The expressions through the comments highlighted in Table 5 allow us to visualise how brand love's dimensions are manifested within the analysed case. Some analytical categories present greater evidence, given the more significant amount of some specific terms. With regard to the *High quality of the restaurant brand* category, for example, it is noticed that many comments made to the evaluation of the analysed restaurant emphasise this attribute of the brand since the term “quality” was mentioned 221 times. For the *Restaurant brand self-identity* category, the results revealed accentuated references to cultural issues, emphasising regionality, as the term “Potiguar”, which designates the gentile of the brand's state of origin, was mentioned 202 times.

The *Passion for the restaurant brand* dimension also stands out, as a considerable number of words are linked to this element of brand love, such as “wonderful”, mentioned 106 times; “best”, cited 585 times; and “love”, with 182 occurrences. Regarding the *Frequency of thought and use of the restaurant brand* category, the predominance of the term “always” (114 times) stands out, indicating a significant frequency on the part of consumers. Therefore, the information reveals that some elements of brand love have a greater impact on customers of the observed restaurant. Next, the main findings of the study are discussed.

5. Discussion

Bearing in mind that the objective of the present study is to understand how consumers with a high level of love for the restaurant brand express defence of the brand in the face of negative reviews on social media, the reaction to negative reviews dimension should be analysed more isolatedly.

First, it was seen that there are comments that directly mention the act of defending the brand, as the word “defend” has 73 occurrences. There is also the presence of customers who consider themselves fans of the restaurant, as the term “fan” was mentioned 81 times. Thus, it is correct to say that customers of the investigated restaurant express defence on social media by saying positive things about it, even when exposed to negative reviews. These results coincide with research by Batra et al. (2012) and Ahluwalia et al. (2000).



Secondly, there are comments directed at the critic who negatively evaluated the restaurant on social media. That is because the term “critic” was cited 175 times; in addition, some customers do not perceive credibility in the criticism about the brand, as the words “zero grade” appear 32 times. Therefore, there is resistance to negative information from restaurant customers, resulting from a high level of brand love (Batra et al., 2012). These findings also corroborate the study by Bairrada et al. (2019), which proves a positive relationship between brand love and resistance to negative information.

Third, considering the dominant number of positive comments regarding the restaurant's brand (1,944), it is believed that customers who expressed defence form a kind of online community willing to manifest their positive emotional involvement with the brand when it suffers negative reviews in the digital environment. This is consistent with the findings by Vernuccio et al. (2015). Thus, it is inferred that this customer engagement is mediated by brand love – in line with Wallace et al. (2021) and Bilal et al. (2022).

The results obtained from the present study make it possible to understand how consumers with a high level of love for the restaurant brand express defence about them in the face of negative reviews on social media. The dominance of manifestations favourable to the analysed brand represents the strong positive emotional bond existing between the company and the customer. This, in turn, demonstrates brand defender behaviour when exposed to negative information about it, indicating that brand defence is influenced by brand love (Wallace et al., 2014; Nagar & Kour, 2018; Zhang et al., 2020; Kennedy & Guzmán, 2021).

By showing how this occurs in the context of social media, the investigation makes it clear for restaurant brands operating in the digital environment the relevance of having customers with a high level of brand love. Online complaints about restaurants damage the company's performance and reputation (Hwang & Mattila, 2020), so these customers can help mitigate unfavourable comments by acting as brand defenders (Wilk et al., 2020; Wilk et al., 2021). There is, therefore, a useful strategy to minimise the negative impacts arising from these complaints (Li, 2019) since consumers, especially in the virtual environment, give importance to these comments (Chen et al., 2021; Ballester et al., 2023).

In addition to observing how customers of the analysed restaurant express love for the brand, it is important to reflect on how the company develops its brand building so that its consumers have this high level of positive emotional involvement with the company (Polat & Çetinsöz, 2021). Considering the assumptions of brand resonance, which refers to the nature of customers' relationship with the organisation, the study's findings show that the restaurant brand manages to generate this perception in customers. This is because, as described by Keller (2001), attitudinal attachment – which includes expressions of love for the brand – is one of the dimensions of brand resonance, an aspect that was notorious in the research results.

However, it is not possible to state that the restaurant brand acts actively to maintain the status of a brand loved by its customers. Based on the present investigation, it was seen that the consumers themselves play this role by assuming the posture of brand defenders, reinforcing their positive emotional relationship with the company. Therefore, the restaurant acts reactively in this regard. This may be a consequence of the brand positioning, which, as it is already consolidated (Silva et al., 2017), makes people interested in it without additional efforts on the restaurant's part.

5.1 Theoretical Implications

The research complements studies that addressed brand love in the context of restaurants (Song et al., 2019; Trivedi & Sama, 2020; Junaid et al., 2020a; Junaid et al., 2020b; Khan et al., 2021; Shen et al., 2021) by showing how the construct manifests itself in the social media scenario. Thus, from a theoretical point of view, the investigation contributes to observing how the dimensions of brand love are presented in the digital context of restaurant brands. It is also possible to point out a contribution towards a better understanding of how restaurants can reverse negative perceptions in a virtual environment through their brand lovers.

The main theoretical contributions of this article can be divided into four points. Firstly, the research contributes to social media and marketing studies, as it investigates the reaction of customers who have a positive emotional involvement with restaurant brands in a digital environment. Much of the literature on online restaurant complaint management indicates that the company should carry out this task (Stevens et al., 2018; Li, 2019; Hwang & Mattila, 2020; Chen et al., 2021). In contrast, this research has shown that customers themselves (brand lovers) can play this role. Secondly, this research used sentiment analysis in customer comments on social media, a trend in research using UGC as a database, especially in tourism and hospitality, as Lu and Stepchenkova (2015) pointed out.

Thirdly, this study provides theoretical support to understand how the concept of brand love is applied in the context of online restaurant customer engagement, focusing on resistance to negative information, which is one of the elements present in this construct (Batra et al., 2012). Fourthly, this research contributes to the field of hospitality studies, as it helps to understand how



brand lovers express brand defence in the restaurant segment, a unit that is part of the tourism production chain. In this sense, this study expands the research on restaurant brand defence in a digital context. The restaurant sector is highly competitive, and customers can easily switch establishments if dissatisfied (Tan et al., 2023). However, it is believed that viewing brand defence online can make customers feel attracted to the restaurant, as many people turn to online reviews before consuming products or services (Chen et al., 2021; Choi et al., 2021).

5.2 Practical Implications

In managerial terms, the study provides a subsidy for formulating strategies restaurants can adopt while undergoing brand expansion. The new environment in which the company will settle is often very competitive. Therefore, it is necessary to have some resources that favour the brand's success in this new location. As revealed by the results of the research, the support of the customer who loves the restaurant's brand can be an effective mechanism for this situation since this consumer tends to emphasise the positive characteristics of the brand, to express an emotional bond with it and to defend it in the face of negative reviews on social media.

In addition, the logic of consumption is increasingly impacted by online opinions. In this sense, having this type of customer is essential for restaurant brands that want to remain firm even in challenging circumstances in the virtual environment. When a brand undergoes negative reviews on social media, potential customers can make equally negative judgments about the company, preventing effective consumption. However, brand-loving consumers can change these thoughts, as they emphasise the positive aspects of the brand, thus making the restaurant more attractive to potential customers.

In view of this, some of the managerial contributions obtained from this research stand out. Firstly, it is recommended that restaurant managers or professionals responsible for managing the establishment's social media constantly monitor customer comments on these platforms to check the sentiment expressed by consumers (positive, negative or neutral). As shown in the sentiment analysis carried out in this study, the ideal is to have positive or neutral comments. In this way, it will be possible to analyse in which aspects the restaurant has positive comments and in which it has negative evaluations, helping to identify strengths and weaknesses and investing in improvements (Alshreef et al., 2023).

Secondly, the restaurant must offer conditions to convert ordinary customers into brand lovers, as these customers defend the brand in adverse situations, as demonstrated in the results of this research. In this sense, it is essential to invest in marketing strategies so that customers think frequently about the brand, as frequent thinking is one of the antecedents of brand love (Batra et al., 2012). To this end, it is suggested that the restaurant invests in digital marketing, social media communication and creative customer evaluation requests in face-to-face and online orders.

Finally, it is also recommended that the restaurant invest in strategies to retain brand lovers since keeping customers is cheaper than winning new ones. We therefore believe it is important to offer rewards to these customers, such as discount coupons and congratulate them on commemorative dates. In addition, customers should be made to feel that they are unique and important to the restaurant. This can be done through special promotions and courtesies for in-person and delivery orders. It is also suggested that the establishment's official social media be used as a tool to develop and strengthen positive emotional bonds with consumers, as it is from this that they will be able to play the role of brand defenders (Wilk et al., 2020; Wilk et al., 2021).

6. Conclusions

Highlighting conclusive aspects emerging in the data analysis makes it possible to return to the research objective, which is to understand how consumers with a high level of love for the restaurant brand express defence about them in the face of negative reviews on social media. The study's findings allow us to conclude that when a restaurant goes through a moment of crisis, as is the case with negative reviews in the digital environment, its effects can be minimised with the help of customers who have an intense love for the company's brand. These consumers act defensively, making positive comments about the brand while effectively expressing their emotional connection with the restaurant.

In addition to expressing their love for the restaurant's brand, the results showed that customers' positive emotional involvement with the company predominates. They also express themselves in a way that they react to the profile that gave rise to the negative reviews about the restaurant. This issue was proven by revealing the existence of many comments directed at the individual who criticised the restaurant, indicating that consumers are resistant to negative information on social media about the brand they love, which is a consequence of a high level of brand love.

Using the single case study method is one of the research limitations. It is believed that, despite having achieved the objective of the research from the analysed case, it is not possible to reach generalisations regarding the application of brand love. However, it is believed that the single case study has relevant advantages that were applied in this research. Firstly, through this method, it is



possible to gain a deeper understanding of the subject under investigation (Gustafsson, 2017). In this sense, it was possible to understand the defence process of brand lovers when a restaurant receives negative reviews on social media. Secondly, the single case study can be generalised if its results are applied to another (Mariotto et al., 2014). Thus, it is hoped that this research will serve as a basis for other complementary research to verify similarities and differences.

Another limitation is the absence of analysis of secondary comments to the critical publication about the investigated restaurant. Observing these comments, the research could have presented additional perspectives on the users' manifestations. However, this limitation is only valid if the content of the secondary comments can complement the results.

For future research, it is recommended that studies be carried out that investigate the antecedents and consequences of brand love in restaurants in the specific context of social media. With this, it will be possible to investigate component factors and results explained in the public's perception in the virtual environment about brand love strategies in restaurants. Finally, we suggest analysing the problem discussed here from the brand-building perspective to verify how restaurants develop their brands to generate loving customers, which was not evident in this research.

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Credit author statement

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