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**The influence of social media marketing on brand loyalty
in the restaurant industry**

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this research is to look into the effectiveness of social media marketing activities (social media reviews, informativeness, interactivity, trendiness) on brand loyalty through brand engagement and brand reputation acting as mediators.

Design/methodology/approach: This research follows a quantitative approach where a fully structured questionnaire was disseminated online and reached 261 participants.

Findings: It was observed that social media marketing is effective at building brand loyalty through social media marketing activities i.e., social media reviews, informativeness, and trendiness with engagement being deemed a significant mediator bridging the gap between SMMA and loyalty.

Originality/value: This research confirms the increasing significance of social media marketing as a marketing channel. Additionally, it supports marketers in the restaurant industry by recommending effective social media marketing activities which may be implemented in their social media strategy to increase loyalty in their business.

Keywords/Abbreviations: Brand loyalty (BL), social media marketing activities (SMMA), engagement, social media reviews, interactivity, informativeness, trendiness.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to establish a foundation for the remaining chapters of this research project by outlining the key themes, the research objective and hypothesis, the practical relevance and the dissertation's structure.

Brand loyalty can be defined as the level of the customer's attachment towards a particular brand determining how inclined a customer is to switch brands if the brand changes a product's price or features (Aaker, 1991). This dissertation aims to bridge the gap between social media marketing activities and brand loyalty by investigating the relationship between these variables with brand reputation and engagement acting as mediators between these two variables.

Brand loyalty is an important aspect in the customer journey since loyal customers can spread positive word of mouth and are more economic than acquiring new customers. Loyal customers are also more likely to spend more and stay around longer, creating customer lifetime value (Kotler, P. and Armstrong, G., 2017). Variables such as trust, customer satisfaction, and brand love play an important role in building and maintaining brand loyalty.

This is more so important in the restaurant industry since services contribute to more person-to-person interactions, presenting more opportunities for loyalty to prosper but also a higher perceived risk since customers tend to search for information or resort to personal channels beforehand (Gremler, D.D. and Brown, S.W., 1998; Murray, K.B., 1991).

Brand reputation and engagement are instrumental factors towards building brand loyalty and act as mediators between loyalty and social media marketing activities. Engagement refers to the measure of involvement between a social media user and the content being displayed which through brand identification and satisfaction increases brand loyalty (Evans, D., 2010; Munnukka, J. et al., 2017). On the other hand, brand reputation is the invaluable asset of the

brand's representation, relying on the brand's previous activities and results (de Chernatony, L., 1999). Reputation reinforces consumer habits by having the brand look more appealing and attracting a large market share, resulting in a loyal customer base (Stathakopoulos, V., 2004). Social media has been deemed an effective tool towards generating loyal customers as it allows for engagement between customers and the brand and in turn maintain its reputation by sharing information and resolving queries and complaints.

Various brands use social media marketing as a primary marketing strategy with the intention of interacting with customers through various social media platforms. Restaurant owners use social media as a marketing tool to build relationships with customers, grow revenues, and increase customer satisfaction, primarily by acquiring new customers and increasing loyal customers (Bennett, T. M., 2017).

In spite of the various social media marketing activities used to grow a brand's loyal customer base, this study will be specifically assessing four of these variables i.e., interactivity, social media reviews, informativeness, and trendiness. From the research presented in the second chapter of this dissertation, it can be deduced that when it comes to building brand loyalty, these four variables are highly perceived to comprise the main effective SMMA in this regard.

1.1 Research objectives and hypotheses

The objective of this study is to explore whether the perceived social media marketing activities mentioned above are effective in increasing brand loyalty. As part of this research, the relationship between brand loyalty and its antecedents i.e., brand reputation and engagement will be analysed and confirmed and the perceived SMMA will be tested against these antecedents to answer the following research question:

Which social media marketing activities are most effective in increasing brand loyalty in the restaurant industry?

This research question will be answered by testing the below hypotheses:

H1A: Trendy content on a restaurant's social media is statistically significant to engagement.

H1B: Informativeness on a restaurant's social media is statistically significant to engagement.

H1C: Social media reviews on a restaurant's social media is statistically significant to engagement.

H1D: Interactivity on a restaurant's social media is statistically significant to engagement.

H2A: Informativeness on a restaurant's social media is statistically significant to the brand's reputation.

H2B: Social media reviews on a restaurant's social media is statistically significant to the brand's reputation.

H2C: Interactivity on a restaurant's social media is statistically significant to the brand's reputation.

H3: Brand engagement is statistically significant to brand loyalty in the restaurant industry.

H4: Brand reputation is statistically significant to brand loyalty in the restaurant industry.

1.2 Practical relevance

With social media marketing becoming a major digital marketing channel, most brands opt to implement social media marketing in their marketing strategy to reach customers and promote their products.

The research will provide a more thorough understanding of which social media tools can be used to increase engagement and brand reputation, and ultimately increase brand loyalty, and will in turn guide marketing managers in the restaurant industry on how to direct their social

media marketing strategy by recommending social media activities that can act as effective tools to build customer loyalty.

1.3 Dissertation outline

The first chapter briefly introduces the objective of this study and provides a general overview of the topic being explored whilst the literature review draws attention to existing theoretical literature on restaurant brand loyalty and social media marketing. Afterwards, the methodology chapter proceeds to explore the data collection instrument, the data collection process, and the philosophical standpoint whilst the following fourth chapter analyses the findings from the questionnaire¹ which are compiled and presented in the form of histograms and tables created with SPSS. Statistical tests such as correlation, a regression model, and tests for reliability were also used. Chapter 5 then discusses the findings compiled in the previous chapter and compares them with the theoretical research presented in the literature review. Finally, the last chapter concludes this study with some observed limitations, further suggestions for future research, and an evaluation of the predominant results.

	<i>SMMAs</i>	<i>Definition</i>
1	Interactivity	The extent to which a restaurant’s social media allows customers to share content and views with the restaurant and other SM users.
2	Informativeness	The degree to which a restaurant’s social media offers accurate, useful, and comprehensive information.
3	Trendiness	The extent to which a restaurant’s social media provides trendy content.
4	Social media reviews	The degree to which a restaurant’s social media offers recommendations and previous experiences from customers.

Table 1: Perceived SMMA dimensions in the restaurant industry

¹ A copy of the questionnaire is found in the Appendix of this dissertation.

Chapter 2: Literature review

2.1 Brand loyalty and its importance in the service industry

Brand loyalty can be defined as a deep commitment held by a consumer in repurchasing a preferred product/service on a consistent basis in the future, irrelevant to any situational influences and marketing attempts at potentially causing a switch in behaviour (Oliver, R. L., 1999).

Acquiring loyal customers is a major challenge faced by many firms. Many organisations aim at not only trying to attract and satisfy their clients but also at building long-term relationships with them. There are various attributes as to why acquiring customer loyalty is an important goal desired by every business, mainly due to its correlation with increased long-term profitability. Loyal customers also create value for organisations by mentoring other customers, spreading favourable word of mouth, increasing value cocreation, and assisting in coproduction (Yacout, 2010). Favourable word of mouth gives businesses the opportunity to acquire new clients at lower costs, increasing the brand's competitive advantages, preventing customer losses, and securing revenue streams, which in turn makes it easier to reach new customers. Loyal customers are also less expensive to serve since they already know the product well and require less information (Han, H. and Ryu, K., 2009).

Whilst customer loyalty is an important element in all industries, it is especially important in the service industry. Service loyalty is the degree in which a consumer demonstrates repeated purchasing behaviour from a service provider (e.g., a restaurant), has a favourable attitude towards the business, and does not consider other providers when the need for this service arises. There are three main reasons as to why loyalty is more valuable in the service industry. Firstly, services contribute to more person-to-person interactions, presenting more opportunities for loyalty to prosper (Gremler, D. D. and Brown, S. W., 1998). Secondly, due to

a higher perceived risk in the service industry, customers tend to search for information or resort to personal channels (e.g., friends or family who are loyal customers) before acquiring a service (Murray, K.B., 1991). Finally, according to Emir (2016), brand loyalty is also significantly influenced by a service provider's favourable ambience, which is a risk-reducing device (e.g., there would be less tendency to switch restaurants).

Gremler and Brown (1996) explored service loyalty and the factors influencing its development, stating that there are several elements which influence customer loyalty. They expressed that loyalty usually starts to grow when a level of satisfaction has been achieved and found that familiarity, care, friendship, rapport, and trust are five specific relationship dimensions which impact service loyalty. The conclusion drawn by this study was that loyalty also benefits the customer since a favourable service leaves the customers with a sense of complete satisfaction, an understanding of what can be expected from the service provider, a feeling of reliability in the provider, an acquired friendship with the staff, time efficiency from not having to look for a provider, and many forms of special treatment.

Social media marketing is a digital space enabling customers to promote goods and services. It is also a tool used to connect and build relationships with consumers, as social media marketing activities have been proven to have a positive effect on brand loyalty. According to Ismail (2017), this platform serves as a two-way communication channel, allowing for more engagement and a sense of equality between consumers and brands.

After analysing 57 articles, Jai et al. (2021) categorise brand loyalty into the following: increased interaction with brands, intention to repurchase, attachment (referring to the liking or emotional attachment of brands), positive word of mouth, the willingness to pay more for brands, favouring brands over others, trusting the brand, commitment towards the brand, and unwillingness to switch the brand. As a result, service providers have put emphasis on

establishing a loyal customer base by identifying and refining these key elements leading to loyalty and then accordingly delivering superior value in the services they offer (Han, H. and Ryu, K., 2009).

2.2 Antecedents of customer loyalty and their applications in the restaurant industry

The restaurant industry is highly competitive, and its environment is constantly changing. Due to this increased competition, customers are being provided with more alternatives when purchasing food and with the option to choose from these available alternatives according to their preference. In order to have a strategic competitive advantage and increase profitability, firms focus on delivering more value to consumers by ultimately retaining existing customers.

Guests with a higher level of loyalty are likely to spend more money on food and make quicker decisions when ordering. Loyal guests are also likely to be less sensitive to prices, spread positive word of mouth, and have an increased tolerance towards the quality of the food and services provided (Kim, W. G. et al., 2007).

In their study on brand loyalty in fast food restaurants, Rehman et al. (2012) identify brand social responsibility, brand knowledge, brand name, product quality, and word of mouth as contributors towards building trust with the brand and possibly brand loyalty should the service provider gain the customers' trust.

According to a model based on clarifying the strength and relationship between customer satisfaction and loyalty, brand trust and involvement act as mediators between satisfaction and loyalty on the internet. The authors further states that the relationship between these two variables must be stronger on the digital marketplace due to perceived risks and security issues (Castañeda, J. A., 2011).

On another note, service quality and food quality are also two important variables in restaurants. Kristiawan et al. (2021) define service quality and food quality as attributes and features that

rely on the product or the service's effectiveness in meeting the customers' needs. Saricam (2022) states that tangibles, reliability, and assurance have a direct impact on service and food quality, ultimately increasing satisfaction and in turn customer loyalty. Researchers such as Lai (2015) have in fact identified a positive connection between service quality and customer loyalty whilst confirming that positive service quality increases the customer's desire of acting as a reference customer.

Price perception and the physical environment were also deemed by Han and Ryu (2009) as elements which generate customer loyalty in this industry. Décor, artifacts, and spatial arrangement, along with ambient conditions, all influence price perception, and in turn loyalty both directly and indirectly since price perception has been shown to be a major predictor of consumer satisfaction. In fact, Han and Ryu's study (2009) emphasises the importance of physical surroundings, along with price perception and client satisfaction, in terms of building loyalty. The authors also state that any established correlations between such elements provide academics with insight on why customers intend to return to a restaurant and spend more than originally anticipated and suggest the brand to others.

As can be observed, brand engagement and brand reputation are important antecedents towards building brand loyalty. Both go hand in hand and are generated through brand trust, brand love, and customer satisfaction, acting as an ideal framework towards building loyalty. For this reason, this study will thus have engagement and reputation act as mediators when testing social media marketing activities against brand loyalty.

Samarah et al. (2021) found that customer engagement indicates brand trust. According to their study, brand trust is essential for any transactional relationship between the customer and the brand to evolve into customer engagement with said brand. Verma (2021) adds that customer

engagement also indicates brand love and that antecedents such as affection and passion are in fact important constructs for both brand engagement and even brand reputation.

Maintaining a good reputation is crucial for every brand to create and sustain brand trust and brand love. The better the brand's reputation is, the higher the consumer's level of trust in the brand (Shah Alam, S. and Mohd Yasin, N., 2010). It can also be argued that brand reputation is a more important concept in the service industry and that a good brand reputation is an essential indicator of brand love. This is due to the fact that customers often feel emotionally attached to brands which have a favourable reputation (Choi, L. et al., 2021). Brands which accommodate to the customers' needs increase satisfaction within their community, directly improving the brand's image and reputation (Selnes, F., 1993).

Fernandes and Moreira (2019) additionally found that customer satisfaction facilitates brand engagement and thus acts as another antecedent to brand loyalty. However, despite brand trust, brand love, and customer satisfaction being important indicators of brand loyalty, they are not included in the model shown in Figure 1 on page 34 of this dissertation due to the lack of research proving the direct correlation between them and the listed SMMAAs. Nevertheless, since these variables are strongly tied to brand loyalty, they will still be further explained in the upcoming subsections along with brand engagement and brand reputation.

2.2.1 Brand love

Brand love is one of the antecedents of brand loyalty playing a critical role in the competitive restaurant industry and can be defined as a satisfied customer's extent of passion and emotional attachment in relation to a brand.

More importantly, Huang Chao-Chin (2017) discovered that brand love and brand trust mediate the relationship between brand experience and brand loyalty. Unal and Aydın (2013) identified brand image and social self as effective variables of brand love and in turn brand loyalty and

positive word of mouth. Brand loyalty as a result of brand love is also present in the restaurant industry, especially with customers seeking hedonic value rather than utilitarian value (Pan, H. and Hong-Youl Ha, 2021).

2.2.2 Brand trust

Trust has been acknowledged as another important antecedent for direct and indirect customer commitment leading to loyalty when brands create strong emotional bonds with customers (Veloutsou, C., 2015). This form of relationship has also been explored by Huang (2017) who states that brand trust is mainly acquired with sensory experience and requires long-term development, often leading to attitudinal loyalty. Delgado-Ballester and Munuera-Aleman's commitment-trust theory (2001) also identifies trust as a crucial factor in the development of a continuing desire to sustain a relationship over time. This theory states that trust and satisfaction have distinct roles in predicting future intentions for customers with low and high relational needs. When it comes to the restaurant industry, Kwon, J.-H. et al. (2021) state that brand trust is especially important in this sector since the industry involves high levels of interaction with consumers and the formed consumer-brand relationship heavily relies on this positive interaction. Satisfied customers communicate positive word of mouth with peers, spreading brand trust and forming a positive attitude towards the restaurant. This leads to enhanced behaviour responses and better brand loyalty.

2.2.3 Customer satisfaction

Kotler and Keller (2006) define customer satisfaction as the consumer's feeling of pleasure or disappointment as a result of comparing a product's perceived performance to its expectations. In the restaurant industry, customers would be satisfied if the experience with the provided food and service meets their perceived expectations. Therefore, customer satisfaction, along with brand trust and love, is another important contributor of brand loyalty in this industry. These

three elements depend on a number of aspects such as food quality, service quality, and the price. Client satisfaction also depends on the restaurant's location and atmosphere.

In such a competitive food industry, businesses need to make customer satisfaction a primary goal in order to have repeated purchases (Namkung, Y. and Jang, S. C., 2007). Since food is the major constituent of any restaurant, there is a direct correlation between the food quality and customer satisfaction as favourable food quality is more likely to entail repeated visits to that restaurant. This is also confirmed by Gustafsson et al. (2005) who state that satisfied customers are also less likely to switch to different brands, thus directly increasing the retention rate. Andaleeb and Conway (2006) add that customer satisfaction is essential to avoid having dissatisfied customers spreading negative word of mouth and making complaints to the restaurant.

The key to customer satisfaction lies within identifying and anticipating the consumer's needs and being able to meet them. Satisfied customers are also the outcome of providing a service with a high level of quality and guarantee and they are thus more likely to visit the same restaurant again. In a study on the influence of service quality and client satisfaction on consumer loyalty in restaurants, Karani et al. (2019) prove that there is indeed a significant correlation between customer satisfaction and brand loyalty. They confirm that customer satisfaction leaves a positive impact on the consumers' behaviour due to their increased likelihood in recommending the restaurant to others and revisiting the restaurant. Brand loyalty as a result of customer satisfaction can be slowly built over time and over multiple favourable encounters.

2.2.4 Brand engagement

As social media platforms strengthen the engagement from communities of individuals with similar interests, they can be seen as an opportunity to reach and create relationships with consumers. Customer engagement is an essential component in the overall brand experience since it further facilitates brand loyalty (Jai, T.C. et al., 2022). It refers to the underlying connection between a brand and its customer where the consumer is seen as an equal partner rather than a target.

In a marketing context, engagement can be considered as a measure of involvement between a social media user and the content or activity displayed on a social media platform. Social media engagement is essential for a restaurant to attain brand collaboration and advocacy and can be built by producing social media content relating to lifestyle, passion, and aspects on the food and/or service which are relevant to the customers and which may increase their revisit intention (Evans, D., 2010).

Other influential factors towards building customer engagement include shared consciousness of kind, shared rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral obligation from the members of the community. According to Laroche et al. (2012), these three factors additionally contribute to brand use, which is also directly related to brand trust and further leads to brand loyalty. Therefore, when exploring the relationship between customer engagement and loyalty, research shows that customer engagement facilitates loyalty, and is further strengthened when various different social media platforms are used (Munnukka, J. et al., 2017).

It was also observed by Jayasingh (2019) that informativeness as a result of social media is essential for customer engagement since customers are able to be more participative on social media brand pages and use them as sources of information on a particular brand. Many social media users tend to follow brands to obtain information about a product prior to purchasing it

by for example looking at customer reviews. Therefore, social media allows for constant communication between the brand and the users.

Dolan et al. (2019) further substantiate Jayasingh's study (2019) after discovering that favourable content further contributes to engagement due to increased shares and likes. According to Dolan et al. (2019) such content can include photos, videos, and text which are trendy, interactive, entertaining, relevant to the brand, and appealing to the target social media users.

Another important contributor to customer engagement, along with informativeness, has to be interactivity. In fact, Schreiner et al. (2019) describe interactivity as another social media marketing element and one of the main content characteristics leading to engagement where interactive elements such as asking questions or requesting feedback are used.

Social media thus provides users with a platform to freely share their reviews following their experience with a particular brand. Other potential customers can in turn look at these reviews should they be interested in a specific product and decide accordingly whether to purchase a product/service or otherwise (Evans, D., 2010). Therefore, social media reviews and eWOM (electronic word of mouth) comprise another important means of facilitating and strengthening customer engagement (Srivastava, M. and Sivaramakrishnan, S., 2020).

2.2.5 Brand reputation

Chernatony (1999) defines brand reputation as a collective representation of a brand's previous activities and results that influence its potential to achieve valuable outcomes to various shareholders. According to Chernatony (1999), a favourable reputation is a valuable intangible asset, providing a brand with a sustained positioning advantage and encouraging higher confidence in the stakeholders' anticipations for the future of the brand.

Knipp (2009) lists six functions of brand reputation: orientation, release, quality assurance, identification, prestige, and trust. In essence, Knipp (2009) states that a reputable brand ensures trust by minimising any doubts which new customers might have on a product or service. Additionally, reputation demonstrates personality and status, giving the brand a unique image in a very competitive market, and allowing the brand to charge higher prices as can be observed with reputable high-end brands.

In addition to Knipp (2009), Jurisic and Azevedo (2011) also mention how a long-term brand reputation can prevent brand switching and high churn rates, facilitating brand loyalty. They add that a long-term brand reputation can be attained by forming a good relationship between the brand and the customers and that the brand needs to therefore ensure that it connects with its customers and improves customer satisfaction. Bharadwaj et al. (1993) also emphasise the importance of brand reputation since it acts as an important indicator of the quality and value of the product or the service being offered when other key buying criteria cannot be easily assessed (e.g., new customers who have not yet visited a restaurant or tried its food, and thus cannot easily assess the quality of its products and services, can be more familiarised in this regard by for instance looking at the restaurant's reputation on social media).

Data collected by Correia et al. (2017) from three online car brand communities further proves that brand reputation is effective in increasing brand loyalty and further emphasises the importance of interactions when forming and strengthening customer-brand relationships. Kuo-chien (2013) further substantiates Correia et al.'s findings (2017) by stating that along with product and service quality, one of the most important factors of brand loyalty is the quality of the relationship between the brand and the client.

Correia et al.'s findings (2017) also show that a strongly reputable brand can positively and significantly facilitate brand loyalty due to the reputation strengthening the brand's perceived

equity. Gounaris and Stathakopoulos (2004) also confirm that reputation can influence the consumers' attitude by making the brand more appealing and in turn generate a larger market share and stronger loyalty. Therefore, research shows that in addition to the favourable brand engagement-loyalty correlation, which was explored in the previous subsection, there is also a very positive connection between brand reputation and brand loyalty.

Social media platforms can be extremely useful in maintaining a good reputation for a brand. Evans (2010) explains that social media can help generate long-term success by maintaining CSR (corporate social responsibility), solving any disputes, and providing customer service. Similar to brand engagement, eWOM can also be instrumental for brand reputation. Along with Evans (2010), Choi (2020) further confirms that social media reviews can be used by customers as important sources of information prior to making a purchase. Additionally, eWOM also increases trust towards a brand and has a statistically positive effect on a brand's hedonic and functional image (Chakraborty, U. and Bhat, S., 2018). Ho Kevin and See-To Eric (2018) also highlight the importance of social media reviews for brand reputation. They note that social media reviews have a significant impact on a brand's reputation since they build brand integrity and facilitate brand identification and brand trust.

In addition to social media reviews, credibility was also observed by Herbig and Milewicz (1995) to be a crucial antecedent of brand reputation. Herbig and Milewicz (1995) additionally confirm that credible advertisements bring a positive attitude towards the brand's image and reputation. When testing the relationship between interactive communication content and a brand's reputation, Liu and Shrum (2002) additionally observed that interactive content was perceived to be more credible and that stakeholders felt more connected with the brand when this was the case. In other words, they found that credible interactive content influences the consumers' attitude towards the brand and acts as a pathway between the brand

and the consumers. Therefore, with credibility being an important antecedent of brand reputation, it can also be deduced that the more credible the advertisements and the interactive content, the better this is for the brand's reputation.

2.3 Using social media marketing activities as a tool to build brand loyalty

Social media marketing is adopted by various brands as a primary marketing strategy with the aim of interacting with customers through various social media platforms. As social media is continuously gaining more popularity, restaurant owners are using this digital platform as a means to establish relationships with customers and as a marketing channel. Bennett (2017) states that restaurants who use social media are able to increase revenues and customer satisfaction mainly by drawing in new customers and increasing loyal customers.

Bennett (2017) therefore confirms that brands which are active on social media can strengthen the relationship between the customer and the brand, increasing both brand trust and brand loyalty. This is further substantiated by Laroche et al. (2013). According to their study, it is possible to facilitate brand trust and loyalty through social media by increasing the feeling of community, showcasing utility, sharing information, and reinforcing the social bond between users.

Ibrahim and Aljarah (2021) developed an integrative SOR (stimulus-organism-response) model to test how SMMAAs strengthen brand loyalty whilst also exploring the mediator role of some dimensions which affect the customers' relationship i.e., brand trust, satisfaction, and commitment. From this model, Ibrahim and Aljarah (2021) found a positive correlation between these mediators, SMMAAs, and brand loyalty.

RAED (2017) additionally lists five dimensions of SMMAAs: entertainment, interaction, trendiness, customisation, and WOM (word of mouth). In the context of social media, RAED (2017) explains that these dimensions enable a positive experience with a brand and make the

customer's experience more holistic. RAED's study (2017) additionally shows that SMM also acts an antecedent between brand love and brand loyalty. Kim and Ko (2012) confirm the effectiveness of these five dimensions by stating that they are influential as customer equity drivers and provide an efficient channel for communication. It is also worth noting that users additionally tend to trust information obtained from social media when it is retrieved from the brand's original webpage and use social media sites to share positive experiences and engage with the brand (Nisar, T.M., 2016).

This continues to confirm how much brand engagement in relation to social media is affected by the customers' trust and commitment towards the brand. Dessart (2017) states that when customers effectively connect and consistently engage with a brand repeatedly in the long term, trust is more likely to foster and customers are more likely to commit to the brand and maintain a relationship with it. This will in turn generate brand loyalty since as previously observed, both commitment and trust are antecedents of brand loyalty.

Since a positive relationship between SMM and brand loyalty has already been established, as can be observed from the existing research mentioned throughout this chapter, this dissertation will thus draw its focus on testing specific SMMA and their effectiveness in increasing brand loyalty.

2.3.1 Interactivity

For social media marketing (SMM) to be effective, content-driven interactive media is required to bridge the gap between the brand and the community (Evans, D., 2010). Social media interactions change the way brands and customers communicate with each other and are an important motivator for the creation of user-generated content.

Rafaeli et al. (2007) define interactivity as the degree to which users can participate in altering the form and content of a particular environment in real time and list speed, range (the number

of possible actions at a given time), and mapping (the way in which human actions are connected to actions in a given environment) as three ways to measure interactivity. When applying the term to customer-brand relationships, Liu and Shrum (2002) define interactivity as the extent to which the brand and the customer act on each other through a communication medium, messages, and the way these efforts are synchronised. They also list three dimensions of interactivity: active control, two-way communication, and synchronicity.

Since according to Tatar and Eren-Erdoğan (2016), interactivity refers to a timely two-way communication channel between a brand and a consumer, social media is a useful medium for creating interactions since consumers can easily ask questions and exchange opinions on or with the brand and between other customers. Interactions also facilitate brand engagement which as observed earlier in this chapter, creates trust and customer satisfaction. Interactivity is an important communication element on social media platforms. Consumers may easily interact with, for instance, a restaurant's content by liking, sharing, simply checking in, or contacting the brand directly (Ariel, Y. and Avidar, R., 2015).

According to a model by Tatar and Eren-Erdoğan (2016), which is based on building brand trust and loyalty in hotels, a clear website, website security, active and updated social media tools, interactivity, and collaboration with similar websites have a positive effect on brand trust and lead to higher brand loyalty. Tatar and Eren-Erdoğan (2016), along with Jan et al. (2020), also suggest designing a 24/7 online chat, responding to queries in a timely manner, and making previous customer reviews available to the public as ways for the service industry to be more interactive with its customers. They also recommend resolving problems quickly and privately in order to further strengthen the customers' trust and confidence and limit negative word of mouth.

2.3.2 Informativeness

When consumers use social media to seek information, they can be lead to a brand's social media page. Information seeking can thus be interpreted as the ability to inform users about product alternatives, allowing them to make the best possible choice (Lee, J. and Hong, I.B., 2016). It is also worth noting that since many social media pages include informative ads amongst the various provided information, social media users can now seek and obtain information even from ads that match their needs (Noguti, V. and Waller, D. S., 2020).

The uses-and-gratification approach is used to explain how consumers process advertising messages in light of their needs and motives for using a particular medium. Brands can acquire favourable opinions and facilitate customer gratification when customers see that any posted content about a product or service is providing useful information, (Ha, L. and McCann, K., 2008).

As a result, social media users view ads as more valuable if they are provided with an accurate representation of what they can expect from a brand since this allows them to make smarter decisions when choosing which brand to revisit. Lee and Hong (2016) confirm that informative ads on social media platforms capture the users' attention and help them associate the ad with a positive image whilst also encouraging them to engage with the ad and share it. In the context of a restaurant brand, information which can be communicated via ads includes photos/videos showcasing the promoted food/meals, prices, contact details/location, updates on changes occurring in the restaurant and overall information about the restaurant. According to Wijaya et al. (2021), a menu catalogue can also be very attractive in the consumers' eyes.

Together with service quality, trust, and digital technology, ease of use was also found to have a significant effect on customer satisfaction and purchase intention (Juliana, J. et al., 2021). It can be deduced that the easier it is for the customer to navigate a social media page and find

the required information, the higher the satisfaction towards the brand's digital presence. This in turn increases the chances of the customer visiting a restaurant and becoming a loyal customer.

2.3.3 Trendiness

Besides being an interactive channel and a source of information on brands, social media can also act as a medium for trendiness, providing current news and hot discussion topics (Godey, B. et al., 2016). Cheung, M. L. et al. (2021) describe trendiness as the degree to which information on a brand's social media page (e.g., updates, recent news, and trending hot issues on a brand) is current and in style.

Consumers are very likely to follow brands on social media to stay updated on the most recent trends and buy similar products. The trendier the information, the more successful the content is at increasing the interaction between brands and customers through social media platforms (Ramadan, Z. et al., 2018). Updates on trendy information include current and innovative discussion topics about brands initiated by marketers or consumers.

Trendy topics create a positive perception of the brand and increase the likelihood for repeated transactions. Man et al. (2020) found trendy posts to have a significantly positive effect on customer brand engagement and in turn brand loyalty. They also observed that trendy information increases brand trust within consumers since they are constantly updated on new ideas initiated by the brand, brand-related information, and product reviews..

According to a social trends report conducted in 2022, social media trends with the highest engagement rates involve TikTok being used as a marketing platform. This report in fact reveals that TikTok ads are regarded by consumers as highly entertaining. Other trends which are bound to keep viewers engaged according to this report include short videos such as Instagram reels and responding to queries in real time. Bragg et al. (2021) add that Instagram ads in

relation to food and beverages are deemed by adolescents as more trendy, artistic, and appetising than traditional ads, making it more likely for them to engage with an ad and visit the restaurant.

2.3.4 Social media reviews

Social media ratings and reviews are very widely used across all age groups in the United States, Canada, and Europe. They give customers the opportunity to share their level of satisfaction with a brand. According to Evans (2010), social media reviews enable brands to listen to their consumers, thus allowing the product or service to further satisfy the customer's needs. As observed earlier in this chapter, customer satisfaction increases the likelihood of positive word of mouth via good reviews, creating a loyal customer base for the brand.

In fact, the findings made by Sumitha and Beegam (2014) show that customers' reviews are very effective in building brand loyalty since customers view brand-related information provided by previous consumers as a more reliable source of information. Therefore, customer reviews also facilitate and increase brand trust. Bennett (2017) further confirms this by stating that consumers are more interested in the recommendations made by other customers since they minimise any uncertainties about the brand.

Chatterjee (2001) deems social media reviews as very instrumental in effecting other potential consumers' purchase intention and describes them as a form of digital word of mouth. Yoo et al. (2013) identify eWOM as a mediator between intrinsic and extrinsic motives and personal and social site identification, all of which lead to e-loyalty. EWOM was also associated with a higher level of level of credibility and empathy and is regarded as more relevant to customers than sources of information created by the brand itself (Godey, B. et al., 2016).

According to Chu and Kim (2011), social media reviews can be analysed from three perspectives: opinion seeking, opinion giving, and opinion passing. Customers with a high level

of opinion-seeking behaviour lean towards searching for information and advice from previous customers prior to making a purchase decision. On the other hand, consumers with a high level of opinion-giving behaviour (opinion leaders) use social media as an interface to communicate their opinions and influence others' attitudes and behaviours.

In conclusion, this chapter proved that there is indeed a significant relationship between the perceived SMMA's and brand loyalty's antecedents, notably brand engagement and brand reputation. Furthermore, this chapter confirmed that there is also a link between these mediators and brand loyalty, additionally inducing an indirect relationship between the four SMMA's and brand loyalty as well.

The next chapter will outline the methodology used in this study in an attempt to answer the research question and test the hypotheses on whether in the context of the restaurant industry, these four perceived SMMA's are statistically significant to two antecedents of brand loyalty i.e., brand engagement and brand reputation. Additionally, the next chapter will describe how these two antecedents were used as mediators between the four SMMA's and brand loyalty and how the relationship between these mediators and brand loyalty itself was further explored.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

Since the main objective of this study is to investigate whether SMMAAs increase brand loyalty within the restaurant industry, four SMMAAs i.e., interactivity, informativeness, trendiness, and social media reviews were tested against two previously analysed antecedents of brand loyalty in the context of the restaurant industry. The two antecedents, comprising brand engagement and brand reputation, were additionally tested against brand loyalty in an attempt to confirm that there is indeed a significant positive relationship between them.

As a result, the following hypotheses were created and tested in the restaurant industry to provide an answer to the research question and are further represented in the conceptual model shown in Figure 1 on the next page:

H1A: Trendy content on a restaurant's social media is statistically significant to engagement.

H1B: Informativeness on a restaurant's social media is statistically significant to engagement.

H1C: Social media reviews on a restaurant's social media is statistically significant to engagement.

H1D: Interactivity on a restaurant's social media is statistically significant to engagement.

H2A: Informativeness on a restaurant's social media is statistically significant to the brand's reputation.

H2B: Social media reviews on a restaurant's social media is statistically significant to the brand's reputation.

H2C: Interactivity on a restaurant's social media is statistically significant to the brand's reputation.

H3: Engagement is statistically significant to brand loyalty in the restaurant industry.

H4: Brand reputation is statistically significant to brand loyalty in the restaurant industry.

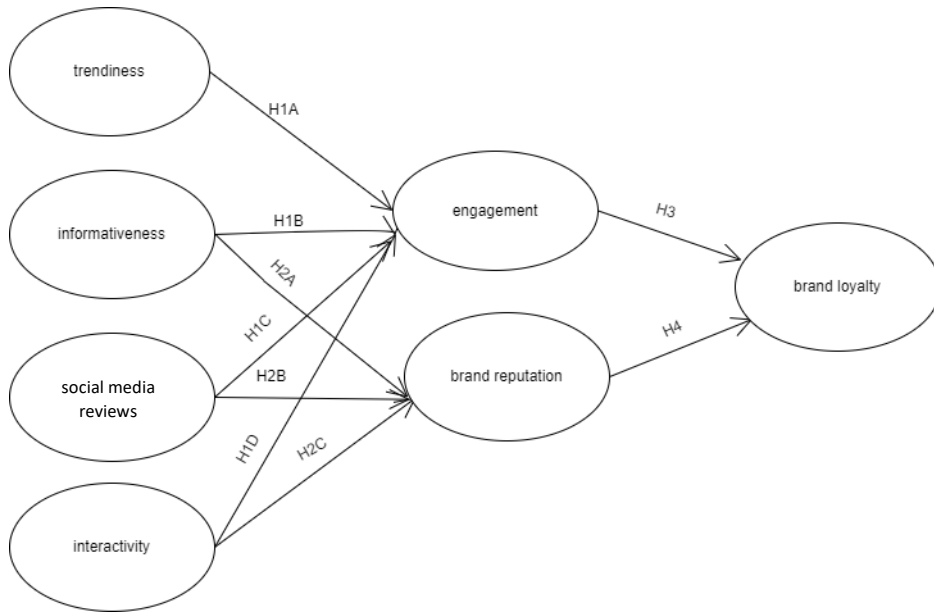


Figure 1: Conceptual model

These hypotheses are based on existing theories relating to SMMA and brand loyalty such as those explored by Ismail (2017) and Kim and Ko (2012). Testing and verifying these hypotheses allowed for such theories to be further developed and for additional investigation on whether the tested SMMA are still applicable today.

3.2 Research type

3.2.1 A philosophical standpoint

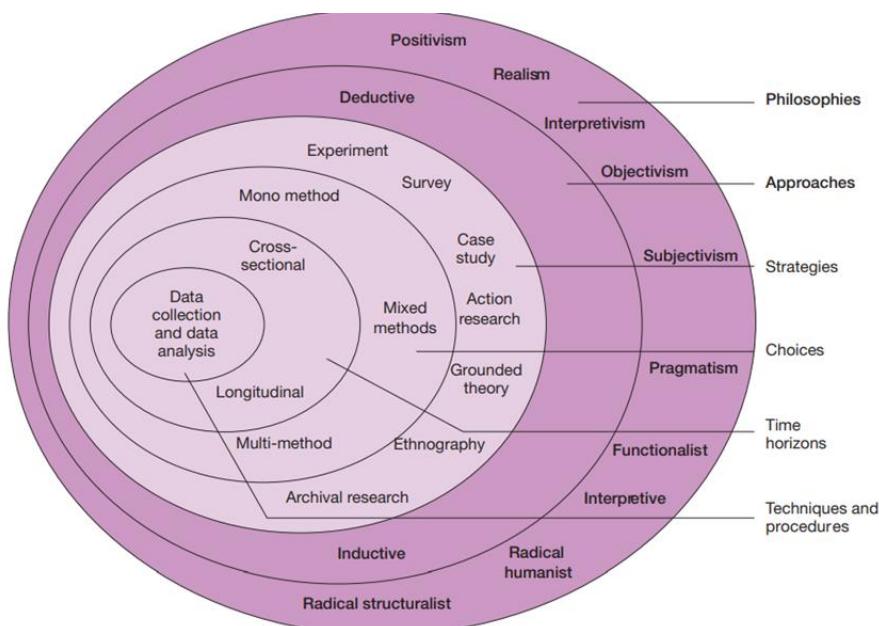


Figure 2: Research onion
Source: Saunders et al., 2009

The research onion shown in Figure 2, adapted from Saunders et al. (2009), can be used to break down the methodology used for this dissertation. From an epistemological perspective, the positivist approach was considered the most appropriate philosophical approach that fit this study since numerical data was used to compare a large sample representing society as a whole. In fact, Crossan (2003) confirms that as opposed to post-positivist methodologies, which aim to explain and analyse phenomena in-depth from a qualitative perspective, positivism adopts a quantitative approach to exploring phenomena.

On the other hand, an interpretivist approach was not deemed ideal to answer the research question since the research would have heavily relied on the researcher's interpretation. Statistical tests therefore allowed for the results to be based on concrete facts and interpreted accordingly. Saunders et al. (2009) further point out that since the positivist approach is value-free, the researcher remains external to the process of data collection and the data collected cannot be altered. Therefore, by taking a quantitative approach, and by additionally keeping the questionnaire anonymous, the data collected for this study remained independent from researcher bias.

3.2.2 The methodological technique

Saunders et al. (2009) distinguish between deductive and inductive approaches. Taking a deductive approach entails using existing theories to create the research question and establishing the main variables prior to data collection. An inductive approach on the other hand refers to exploring the data for common themes after this has been collected and answering the research question accordingly. This study followed a deductive approach since the hypotheses and the theoretical framework were established and formulated from the start.

A monomethod quantitative method was required since multiple variables were being tested against each other. This provided the means to gather data and validate the conceptual model

using a statistical analysis, which in this study's case, tested the relationship between brand loyalty and the SMMAAs employed by the restaurant industry to retain its customers. A qualitative method was not deemed ideal to answer the research question since a substantial number of responses would have been required for the research to be reliable along with a statistical representation to analyse the results accordingly.

Several strategies such as experiments, surveys, and case studies were considered. However, a structured questionnaire was regarded as an optimal tool for data collection since a large sample of data was still required for the data to be valid and reliable. It also helped identify and compare which social media tactics are most effective by allowing for a comparative analysis of the consumers' perceptions on the perceived SMMAAs and their effect on brand reputation and engagement.

The questionnaire was distributed across social media, more specifically in social media groups. Additional target respondents included international survey exchange groups, friends and family, and academics and students at the place of work. This was done to ensure that the sample was equally representative with regard to age, education, and locality. The questionnaire was also created online for ease of access and completion. Since the data was collected in a consistent manner, it was ensured that all the questions were expressed clearly in order to be equally understood by all participants.

The structured questionnaire comprised close-ended questions. Likert scales based on the Likert-type scale response anchors (Vagias, Wade M., 2006) were used to indicate the level of agreement with the questions on a scale from 1-7. They made the questionnaire easier to follow, increasing the response rate and facilitating more accurate data, and allowed for a more reliable and direct data analysis and coding process. The questionnaire was also kept brief to minimise the chances of participants exiting from the survey prior to fully completing and submitting it.

3.3 Research design

3.3.1 Target population

The research intended to gather a minimum of 200 respondents and the individuals needed to be both social media users and loyal to at least one restaurant in order to be eligible for this study. In fact, the questionnaire started with two filter questions to ensure that the respondents were indeed qualified to be part of this research. These included asking the respondent whether they use social media at least once a week and if they consider themselves to be loyal towards any restaurant in particular. Both of these questions needed to be answered positively for the participants to then be led to the actual questionnaire. When answering the questions, the participants were also asked to refer to the restaurant(s) towards which they felt loyal.

3.3.2 Sampling frame

Due to time constraints, the convenience sampling technique was adopted to reach a larger sample in a shorter period of time, whereby the participants were chosen at random on the basis of being social media users and loyal to at least one restaurant.

3.4 Data collection

The main motive behind using a questionnaire for data collection was to gather a large sample which answered the same set of consistently-structured questions. Keeping the questionnaire anonymous additionally allowed the research to be value-free.

The data collection process lasted one month in an attempt to reach as many people as possible and the questionnaire was divided into six sections comprising six different scales, the reliability of which was confirmed due to having been adapted from previous research as shown in Table 2 below. As can be observed from this table, the scales ranged from a Cronbach's alpha of 0.804 to 0.97, further ensuring the reliability of the questionnaire.

Variables	Measurement	Source
Brand loyalty $\alpha = 0.86$	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A. I would rather stick with restaurants I like than visiting new ones. B. I consider myself loyal to a restaurant. C. I have certain restaurants that I always visit. D. I feel confident in a brand that I always buy. 	<i>(Ismail, A.R., 2017)</i>
Brand reputation $\alpha = 0.87$	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A. The restaurants I like have a reputation for being good. B. Other people have told me that the restaurants I like are reliable. C. The restaurants I like have a reputation for being unreliable. D. The restaurants I like have a reputation for performing well. E. Other people have told me that the restaurants I like are not worth visiting. F. I have heard negative comments about the restaurants I like. 	<i>(Lau, G.T. and Sook, H.L., 1999)</i>
Engagement $\alpha = 0.81$	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A. I watch videos on the social media page of this restaurant. B. I view pictures on the social media page of this restaurant. C. I read the restaurant's posts, user comments or product reviews. D. I engage in conversations on the brand's social media page. 	<i>(Van Asperen, M. et al., 2018)</i>
Trendiness $\alpha = 0.83$	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A. Content shown on the restaurant's social media page has the newest information. B. Using and engaging with the restaurant's social media is very trendy. 	<i>(Kim, A.J., and Ko, E., 2012)</i>
Social media reviews $\alpha = 0.804$	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A. Social media reviews are credible. B. Social media reviews provide valuable information for my purchase decision. C. Social media reviews have an effect on the restaurant experience. 	<i>(Guan, S. et al., 2017)</i>

<p>Informativeness $\alpha = 0.97$</p>	<p>A. The restaurant's social media page offers accurate information on the restaurant's food and services. B. The restaurant's social media content provides useful information about the restaurant. (Address, phone, pictures, prices etc.) C. The information provided by the restaurant's social media page is comprehensive.</p>	<p>(Yadav, M. and Rahman, Z., 2017)</p>
<p>Interactivity $\alpha = 0.87$</p>	<p>A. Conversation or opinion exchange with others is possible through the restaurant's social media. B. It is easy to provide my opinion through the restaurant's social media. C. On the restaurant's social media page, it is easy to share information.</p>	<p>(Kim, A.J. and Ko, E., 2012)</p>

Table 2- Sources and reliability of scales acquired for questionnaire

The questionnaire also contained two negatively-worded questions which were not included in the scales since most of the scales were positively worded. This was done to reduce the tendency of respondents selecting positive responses more frequently without reading the question well (acquiescence bias). Should this have occurred, the respondent's questionnaire response would have been omitted from the sample to ensure that the data remained valid and reliable as possible.

Furthermore, the questionnaire included an open-ended question enquiring whether there are any additional social media marketing activities, other than the four tested SMMA's, which reinforced the intention of revisiting a restaurant. This question was inserted in an attempt to discover any other SMMA's deemed effective in building brand loyalty, allowing for possible further investigation in the future.

3.5 Measurements

The questionnaire successfully reached 304 individuals out of which 21% were not eligible due to not meeting the requirements needed to participate in this study i.e., being both a social media user and a loyal customer towards at least one restaurant.

67% of the respondents were female whilst 33% were male. This disparity between male and female respondents created a limitation in the study since the data was not equally representative between genders. 61% of the respondents were employed individuals, 20% employed students, 17% unemployed students, and 3% retired individuals. With regard to the highest level of education completed, 41% of the individuals obtained a Master's degree, 34% obtained a Bachelor's degree, 20% obtained a post-secondary education, and 2% obtained a secondary school education. Most of the respondents were 16-26 years old (34%) and 38-48 years old (24%), followed by 49-58 years (20%), 27-37 years (17%), and 61-83 years (4%).

As previously explained, a large and representative sample was needed to improve the reliability of the data and represent the sample as a whole. The presented data shows that the sample was well representative since it reached both female and male respondents, various age groups, different employment statuses, and different levels of education.

3.6 Data analysis

In order for data to be interpreted, it must first be analysed and understood. Quantitative analysis techniques make it possible to explore patterns and trends in the data by using tools such as tables, graphs, and statistics. According to Saunders et al. (2009), quantitative analyses make it possible to compare variables and prove hypothesised relationships within a proposed model.

The data was collected via Google Forms and exported into Microsoft Excel, where it was analysed by using SPSS. Additionally, the data was refined by removing incomplete

questionnaires, the questionnaires deemed ineligible on account of the first two filter questions, and any questionnaires containing responses clearly showing that the negatively-worded questions were misread since it meant that the data for that particular respondent was unreliable.

The hypothesised relationships were tested using conventional hypotheses tests and by conducting a multiple regression model to further evaluate the relationships. The statistical analyses not only show the significance of the hypotheses, but also take into consideration the correlation of the SMMA's with brand loyalty, ultimately confirming which activities are effective and need to be prioritised.

3.7 Ethical considerations

In order to ensure that the research was not subject to any ethical issues, a number of considerations were taken and approval was obtained from University of Malta's Research Ethics Board. The form description, which is displayed to the participants prior to answering the questions, contained a clear explanation of the purpose behind the research. Should there have been any queries from the participants, the contact details were also included in the form description for ease of communication. No question required any sensitive information and the participants were ensured that the data gathered from the questionnaire would be solely used for the purpose of the research and then deleted. The participants were also informed that their identity would be kept anonymous and that they were free to exit the questionnaire at any point.

Although the response rate exceeded initial expectations, this study could have further benefited from an even higher response rate as a larger sample size would have continued to substantiate the validity of the data. This moderately sufficient response rate thus constituted one of the limitations of this study.

3.8 Conclusion

Following dissemination across social media groups and among peers, the questionnaire successfully reached 261 participants. and the data was then analysed using SPSS to determine whether there was indeed a link between the perceived SMMA's and two antecedents of brand loyalty (i.e., brand engagement and brand reputation).

Prior to the questionnaire's dissemination, the results were expected to provide further confirmation of the positive relationship between the two antecedents and brand loyalty and further substantiate the effectiveness of the perceived SMMA's towards building brand loyalty in the restaurant industry. The following chapter will analyse the results obtained from the questionnaire and confirm whether these initial expectations were in fact met.

Chapter 4: Results

As explained in the previous chapter, the data was refined prior to its analysis by removing the questionnaires which did not meet the eligibility criteria following the first two filter questions.

BR3, BR5, and BR6 were recoded as different variables on SPSS due to being negatively worded: BR3_r, BR5_r, and BR6_r. This reverse scoring approach transformed the data illustrated in Table 3 since responding a negatively worded question with ‘strongly agree’ entailed a negative behaviour towards brand loyalty.

Reverse scoring approach
1 = 7
2 = 6
3 = 5
4 = 4
5 = 3
6 = 2
7 = 1

Table 3: Reverse scoring approach

Since every scale included multiple items, a mean average was taken on the following variables: brand loyalty (BL), brand reputation (BR), brand engagement (BE), interactivity (IN), trendiness (TR), social media reviews (SMRe), and informativeness (IN). The values for the figures were inputted for each variable as shown in Table 4 and tested for normality with the Shapiro-Wilk test.

Likert scale values

1= strongly disagree

2= disagree

3= slightly disagree

4= neutral

5= slightly agree

6= agree

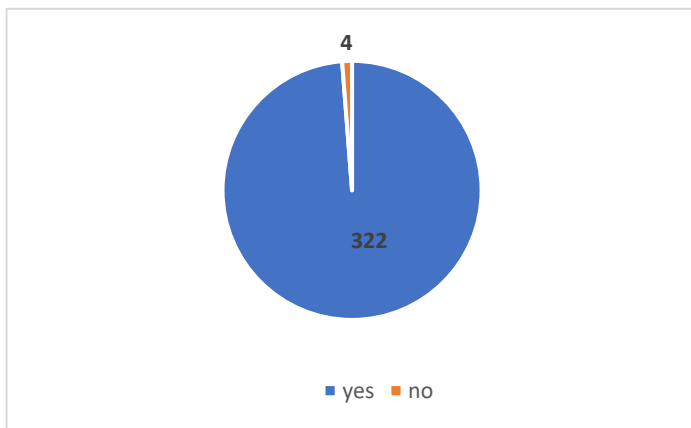
7= strongly agree

Table 4: Likert scale values

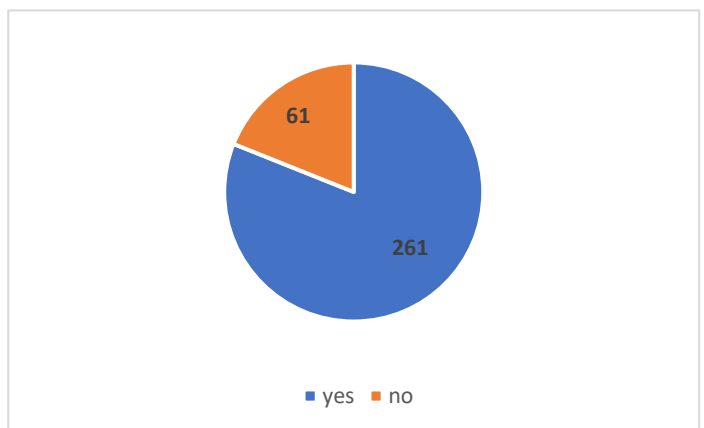
In order for the participants to meet the requirements and be a part of the sample, the following two filter questions were added at the start of the survey:

Question 1: Do you use social media platforms at least once a week?

Question 2: Do you consider yourself a loyal customer towards any restaurant in particular?



Question 1



Question 2

The questionnaire reached 326 respondents. However, four participants failed to respond positively to the first question and 61 participants failed to respond positively to the second question. This could be due to the fact that these participants feel more inclined towards trying new restaurants than sticking to one in particular.

Prior to conducting any further tests, all the scale variables were tested for normality with the Shapiro-Wilk test.

Testing for normality

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov ^a			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Brand loyalty	.232	261	<.001	.877	261	<.001
Brand reputation	.276	261	<.001	.865	261	<.001
Engagement	.165	261	<.001	.944	261	<.001
Informativeness	.157	261	<.001	.929	261	<.001
Trendiness	.180	261	<.001	.922	261	<.001
Social media reviews	.203	261	<.001	.901	261	<.001
Informativeness	.263	261	<.001	.881	261	<.001

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

Table 5: Normality tests

Table 5 shows that significant values for all the variables were less than 0.05. As a result, brand loyalty, brand reputation, engagement, informativeness, trendiness, and social media reviews do not follow a normal distribution and require parametric tests.

Brand loyalty across genders

H_{01} : There is no statistical difference between the means of brand loyalty between genders.

A Mann-Whitney U Test, illustrated in Table 6 and Figure 3, was conducted to assess whether there is a statistical difference between the means of brand loyalty between males and females. The null hypothesis is accepted since the p value is 0.722, thus proving that males and females do not display different behaviours when it comes to loyalty in the restaurant industry.

Hypothesis Test Summary

	Null Hypothesis	Test	Sig.^{a,b}	Decision
1	The distribution of BL is the same across categories of GENDER.	Independent-Samples Mann-Whitney U Test	.722	Retain the null hypothesis.

a. The significance level is .050.
 b. Asymptotic significance is displayed.

Table 6: Distribution of brand loyalty across genders

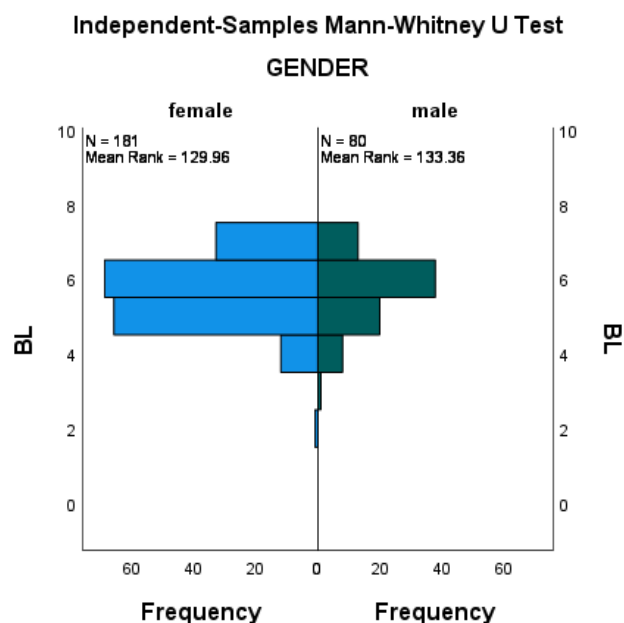


Figure 3: Bar graph displaying brand loyalty means between genders

Brand loyalty across generations

H2: *There is no statistical difference between the means of brand loyalty between different generations.*

Hypothesis Test Summary

	Null Hypothesis	Test	Sig. ^{a,b}	Decision
1	The distribution of BL is the same across categories of AGE.	Independent-Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test	.739	Retain the null hypothesis.

a. The significance level is .050.

b. Asymptotic significance is displayed.

Table 7: Distribution of brand loyalty across generations

A Kruskal-Wallis test, illustrated in Figure 4, was also conducted to assess whether there is a statistical difference between the means of brand loyalty between different generations. The null hypothesis is accepted since the p value is 0.739, thus proving that participants with different ages do not display different behaviours when it comes to loyalty in the restaurant industry.

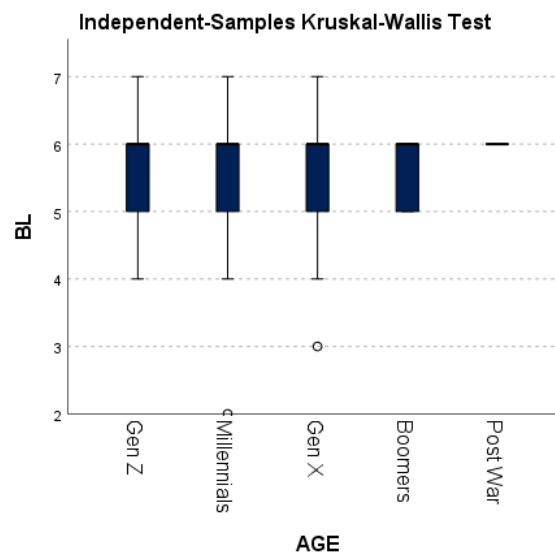


Figure 4: Kruskal-Wallis test: Brand loyalty across generations

As can be observed from Figure 5, the participants' ages varied and were therefore categorised into the following: Generation Z (10-25 years), Millennials (26-41 years), Generation X (42-57 years), Boomers (58-76 years), and Post War (77-94 years).

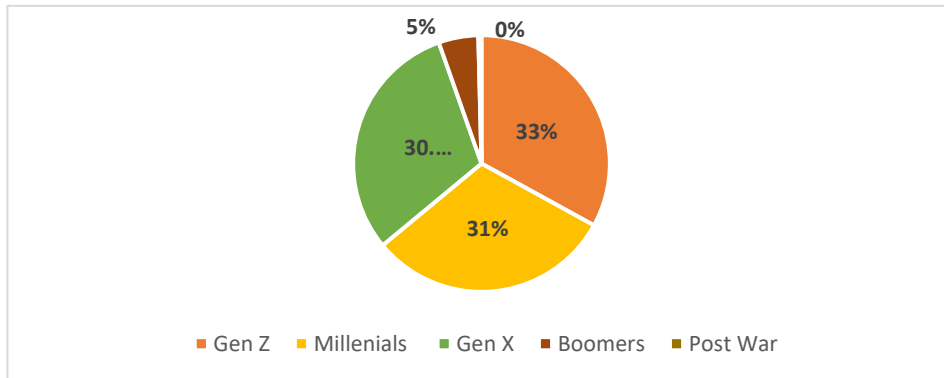


Figure 5: The participants' ages

Interestingly enough, the majority of the participants used social media for up to four hours daily as per Figure 6 below. This rise in social media use along the years further shows that social media marketing is increasingly becoming a useful marketing channel.

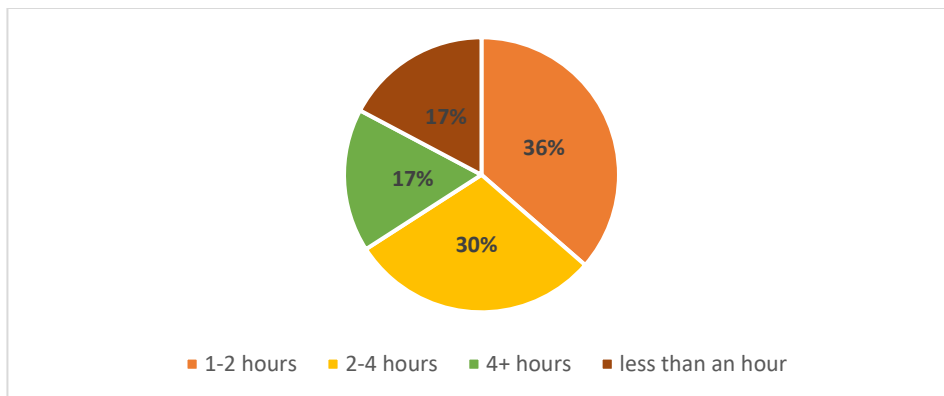


Figure 6: Social media use daily

Descriptive statistics on all variables

Table 8 represents the participants' behaviour and attitude towards the variables being tested in the hypothesised conceptual model displayed in Figure 1. The means for the variables range from 4.75 to 5.58 indicating that an average number of the participants displayed a positive attitude with regards to the items in the scales illustrated in Table 2.

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Brand loyalty	261	2	7	5.67	.894
Engagement	261	1	7	5.59	.726
Brand reputation	261	3	7	5.67	.832
Informativeness	261	1	7	4.75	1.419
Trendiness	261	1	7	5.18	1.194
Social media reviews	261	1	7	5.04	1.263
Informativeness	261	2	7	5.58	.976
Valid N (listwise)	261				

Table 8: Descriptive statistics for all variables

Figure 7 displays a positive attitude towards brand loyalty in the restaurant industry as an average number of the participants felt that they would rather stick to restaurants they like than visit new ones, thus displaying a loyal behaviour towards at least one restaurant.

Testing for reliability

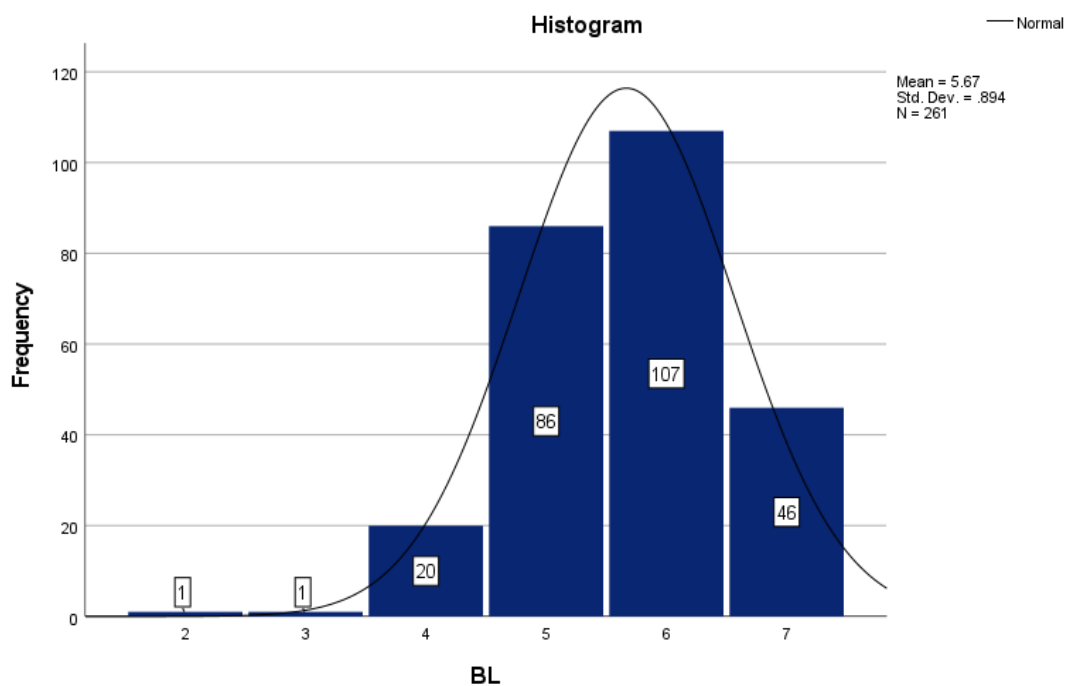


Figure 7: Histogram displaying descriptive statistics for brand loyalty

In order to objectively measure the reliability of the scales, Cronbach's alpha provides a measure of internal consistency describing the degree to which all the items in a test measure the same concept or construct in order to objectively assess the reliability of the scales (Tavakol, M. and Dennick, R., 2011). Due to slight changes in the structure of the sentences, there was a slight shift in the reliability. Nevertheless, the variables were still deemed to be reliable as shown in Table 9.

Variables	Reliability
Brand loyalty	0.801
Brand reputation	0.845
Brand engagement	0.808
Interactivity	0.854
Trendiness	0.799
Social media reviews	0.801
Informativeness	0.887

Table 9: Reliability analysis for all variables

Correlation across variables

The Spearman test shown in Table 10 on the next page was conducted in order to test the correlation between the perceived SMMA and the mediators (i.e., brand engagement and brand reputation) and the correlation between the mediators and brand loyalty since not normally distributed continuous variables are being tested against each other.

		BL	BR	BE	IN	TR	SMRe	IF
BL	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.103	.150*	.206**	.190**	.236**	.187**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.097	.015	<.001	.002	<.001	.002
	N	261	261	261	261	261	261	261
BR	Correlation Coefficient	.103	1.000	.127*	.150*	.033	.213**	.207**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.097	.	.040	.015	.591	<.001	<.001
	N	261	261	261	261	261	261	261
BE	Correlation Coefficient	.150*	.127*	1.000	.237**	.287**	.227**	.304**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.015	.040	.	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001
	N	261	261	261	261	261	261	261
IN	Correlation Coefficient	.206**	.150*	.237**	1.000	.441**	.498**	.341**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	.015	<.001	.	<.001	<.001	<.001
	N	261	261	261	261	261	261	261
TR	Correlation Coefficient	.190**	.033	.287**	.441**	1.000	.397**	.402**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.002	.591	<.001	<.001	.	<.001	<.001
	N	261	261	261	261	261	261	261
SMRe	Correlation Coefficient	.236**	.213**	.227**	.498**	.397**	1.000	.485**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	.	<.001
	N	261	261	261	261	261	261	261
IF	Correlation Coefficient	.187**	.207**	.304**	.341**	.402**	.485**	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.002	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	.
	N	261	261	261	261	261	261	261

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 10: Spearman correlation matrix

Hypothesis testing

Correlation between social media marketing activities and engagement

Trendiness

H1A₀: Trendiness (trendy content) on a restaurant's social media is not statistically significant to engagement.

The null hypothesis was rejected since the significant value was less than 0.05, being <0.0010 . The correlation coefficient was 0.287 indicating that there is a weak but positive relationship between trendiness and engagement on social media platforms.

Informativeness

H1B₀: Informativeness on a restaurant's social media is not statistically significant to engagement.

The null hypothesis was rejected since the significant value was less than 0.05, being <0.0010 . The correlation coefficient was 0.304 indicating that there is a weak but positive relationship between informativeness and engagement on social media platforms.

Social media reviews

H1C₀: Social media reviews on a restaurant's social media is not statistically significant to engagement.

The null hypothesis was rejected since the significant value was less than 0.05, being <0.0010 . The correlation coefficient was 0.227 indicating that there is a weak but positive relationship between social media reviews and engagement on social media platforms.

Interactivity

H1D₀: *Interactivity on a restaurant's social media is not statistically significant to engagement.*

The null hypothesis was rejected since the significant value was less than 0.05, being <.0010.

The correlation coefficient was 0.237 indicating that there is a weak but positive relationship between interactivity and engagement on social media platforms.

Correlation between social media marketing activities and brand reputation

Informativeness

H2A₀: *Informativeness on a restaurant's social media is not statistically significant to brand reputation.*

The null hypothesis was rejected since the significant value was less than 0.05, being <0.0010.

The correlation coefficient was 0.207 indicating that there is a weak but positive relationship between informativeness and brand reputation on social media platforms.

Social media reviews

H2B₀: *Social media reviews on a restaurant's social media is not statistically significant to brand reputation.*

The null hypothesis was rejected since the significant value was less than 0.05, being <.0010.

The correlation coefficient was 0.213 indicating that there is a weak but positive relationship between social media reviews and engagement on social media platforms

Interactivity

H2C₀: *Interactivity on a restaurant's social media is not statistically significant to brand reputation.*

The null hypothesis was rejected since the significant value was less than 0.05, being 0.015. The correlation coefficient was 0.150 indicating that there is a weak but positive relationship between interactivity and brand reputation on social media platforms.

The correlation coefficients display that although restaurants which are interactive on their social media platforms are effective in both improving a brand's reputation and increasing engagement, it is more effective in increasing engagement on a social media platform.

Correlation between mediators and brand loyalty

Brand engagement

H3₀: *Brand engagement is not statistically significant to brand loyalty in the restaurant industry.*

The null hypothesis was rejected since the significant value was 0.015, meaning that there is in fact a relationship between brand engagement and brand loyalty in the restaurant industry. A correlation coefficient of 0.150 proves that this relationship is weak but positive.

Brand reputation

H4₀: *Brand reputation is not statistically significant to brand loyalty in the restaurant industry.*

The null hypothesis was accepted since the significant value was higher than 0.05, being 0.097. This implies that there is no relationship between brand reputation and brand loyalty in the restaurant industry.

Since the correlation between brand reputation and brand loyalty was found to be insignificant, the SMMAAs were only deemed effective in increasing loyalty through social media engagement. Informative content was deemed as the most effective SMMA in increasing brand loyalty since it had the highest correlation coefficient ($r= 0.304$). This was followed by trendy content ($r= 0.287$), interactive content ($r= 0.237$), and social media reviews ($r=0.227$).

The regression models

Despite the Spearman correlation matrix being an effective technique quantifying the strength and direction between two variables, it may not always be the most reliable measure due to multicollinearity. This statistical concept entails correlation between the variables themselves, which in this case comprise the four perceived SMMAAs: trendiness, informativeness, social media reviews, and interactivity.

A regression model allows for a more reliable result in predicting brand loyalty, brand engagement, and brand reputation from the perceived SMMAAs (McCormick, K. and Salcedo, J., 2020).

Regression Model 1: Testing the relationship between the perceived SMMA and brand loyalty

Variables Entered/Removed^a

Model	Variables Entered	Variables Removed	Method
1	Social media reviews	.	Stepwise (Criteria: Probability-of-F-to-enter <= .050, Probability-of-F-to-remove >= .100).

a. Dependent Variable: Brand Loyalty

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.213 ^a	.046	.042	.876

a. Predictors: (Constant), Social media reviews

ANOVA^a

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1 Regression	9.474	1	9.474	12.359	<.001 ^b
Residual	198.526	259	.767		
Total	208.000	260			

a. Dependent Variable: Brand Loyalty

b. Predictors: (Constant), Social media reviews

Excluded Variables^a

Model	Beta In	tb	Sig.	Partial Correlation	Collinearity Statistics		
					Tolerance	VIF	Minimum Tolerance
Interactivity	.046 ^b	.637	.525	.040	.722	1.386	.722
Trendiness	.095 ^b	1.447	.149	.090	.846	1.183	.846
Informativeness	.051 ^b	.726	.469	.045	.755	1.325	.755

b. Predictors in the Model: (Constant), Social media reviews

Coefficients^a

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	95.0% Confidence Interval for B		Correlations			Collinearity Statistics	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Zero-order	Partial	Part	Tolerance	VIF
1												
(Constant)	4.904	.223		21.945	<.001	4.464	5.345					
Online Reviews	.151	.043	.213	3.516	<.001	.066	.236	.213	.213	.213	1.000	1.000

a. Dependent Variable: Brand Loyalty

To examine this hypothesis and investigate the relationship between the four perceived SMMAAs and brand loyalty, a multiple linear regression was carried out using the Stepwise procedure. The R² value was 0.046, which shows that 4.6% of the variation in brand loyalty can be explained by the model containing only social media reviews.

Multiple linear regression showed a significant relationship between social media reviews and brand loyalty ($F(1,259) = 12.359, p < 0.01$), indicating a significant positive relationship between these two variables ($t = 3.516, p < 0.01, \text{Beta} = 0.213$). On the other hand, no significant relationship was found between interactivity and brand loyalty ($t = 0.637, p > 0.05, \text{Beta} = 0.046$), no significant relationship was found between trendiness and brand loyalty ($t = 0.095, p > 0.05, \text{Beta} = 0.095$), and no significant relationship was found between informativeness and brand loyalty ($t = 0.726, p > 0.05, \text{Beta} = 0.051$). The regression equation is $BL = 4.904 + 0.151 * OR$, where BL is brand loyalty and SMRe is social media reviews.

These results disprove the research hypothesis since not all perceived SMMAAs were proven effective in increasing brand loyalty.

Regression Model 2: Testing the relationship between the perceived SMMA's and engagement

Variables Entered/Removed^a

Model	Variables Entered	Variables Removed	Method
1	Trendiness	.	Stepwise (Criteria: Probability-of-F-to-enter <= .050, Probability-of-F-to-remove >= .100).
2	Informativeness	.	Stepwise (Criteria: Probability-of-F-to-enter <= .050, Probability-of-F-to-remove >= .100).

a. Dependent Variable: Brand Engagement

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.312 ^a	.097	.094	.691
2	.354 ^b	.125	.118	.682

a. Predictors: (Constant), Trendiness

b. Predictors: (Constant), Trendiness, Informativeness

ANOVA^a

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	13.326	1	13.326	27.876	<.001 ^b
	Residual	123.808	259	.478		
	Total	137.134	260			
2	Regression	17.169	2	8.585	18.462	<.001 ^c
	Residual	119.965	258	.465		
	Total	137.134	260			

a. Dependent Variable: Brand Engagement

b. Predictors: (Constant), Trendiness

c. Predictors: (Constant), Trendiness, Informativeness

Coefficients^a

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	95.0% Confidence Interval for B		Correlations			Collinearity Statistics		
	B	Std. Error	Beta			Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Zero-order	Partial	Part	Tolerance	VIF	
1	(Constant)	4.608	.191	24.135	<.001	4.232	4.984						
	Trendiness	.190	.036	.312	5.280	<.001	.119	.260	.312	.312	.312	1.000	1.000
2	(Constant)	4.087	.261	15.640	<.001	3.572	4.601						
	Trendiness	.142	.039	.233	3.625	<.001	.065	.219	.312	.220	.211	.820	1.220
	Informativeness	.138	.048	.185	2.875	.004	.043	.232	.284	.176	.167	.820	1.220

a. Dependent Variable: Brand Engagement

Excluded Variables^a

Model	Beta In	t	Sig.	Partial Correlation	Collinearity Statistics			
					Tolerance	VIF	Minimum Tolerance	
1	Interactivity	.119 ^b	1.788	.075	.111	.781	1.280	.781
	Social media reviews	.081 ^b	1.261	.209	.078	.846	1.183	.846
	Informativeness	.185 ^b	2.875	.004	.176	.820	1.220	.820
2	Interactivity	.087 ^c	1.301	.194	.081	.755	1.325	.703
	Social media reviews	.011 ^c	.156	.876	.010	.714	1.400	.692

a. Dependent Variable: Brand Engagement

b. Predictors in the Model: (Constant), Trendiness

c. Predictors in the Model: (Constant), Trendiness, Informativeness

To examine this hypothesis and investigate the relationship between the four perceived SMMA and brand engagement, a multiple linear regression was carried out using the Stepwise procedure. The R² value was 0.125, which shows that 12.5% of the variation in brand engagement can be explained by the model containing trendiness and informativeness.

Multiple linear regression showed a significant relationship between the SMMA; trendiness and informativeness with brand engagement ($F(2,258) = 18.462, p < 0.001$), indicating a significant positive relationship between these SMMA and the mediator: ($t = 3.625, p < 0.001, \text{Beta} = 0.233$) for trendiness and ($t = 2.875, p = 0.004, \text{Beta} = 0.185$) for informativeness. On the other hand, no significant relationship was found between interactivity and brand engagement ($t = 1.301, p = 0.194, \text{Beta} = 0.087$), and no significant relationship was found between social media reviews and brand engagement ($t = 0.156, p = 0.876, \text{Beta} = 0.011$). The regression equation is $BE = 4.087 + 0.233 \cdot TR + 0.185 \cdot IF$, where BE is brand engagement and IF is informativeness.

These results disprove the research hypothesis since interactivity and social media reviews were not deemed effective in increasing engagement.

Regression Model 3: Testing the relationship between the perceived SMMA's and brand reputation



Variables Entered/Removed^a

Model	Variables Entered	Variables Removed	Method
1	Informativeness	.	Stepwise (Criteria: Probability-of-F-to-enter <= .050, Probability-of-F-to-remove >= .100).

a. Dependent Variable: Brand Reputation

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.178 ^a	.032	.028	.820

a. Predictors: (Constant), Informativeness

ANOVA^a

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	5.733	1	5.733	8.520	.004 ^b
	Residual	174.267	259	.673		
	Total	180.000	260			

a. Dependent Variable: Brand Reputation

b. Predictors: (Constant), Informativeness

Excluded Variables^a

Model	Beta In	t	Sig.	Partial Correlation	Collinearity Statistics		
					Tolerance	VIF	Minimum Tolerance
1 Interactivity	.034 ^b	.514	.608	.032	.880	1.136	.880
Trendiness	-.094 ^b	-1.395	.164	-.087	.820	1.220	.820
Social media reviews	.119 ^b	1.697	.091	.105	.755	1.325	.755

a. Dependent Variable: Brand Reputation

b. Predictors in the Model: (Constant), Informativeness

Coefficients^a

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	95.0% Confidence Interval for B		Correlations			Collinearity Statistics	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Zero-order	Partial	Part	Tolerance	VIF
1												
	(Constant)	4.817	.295	16.303	<.001	4.235	5.399					
	Informativeness	.152	.052	2.919	.004	.050	.255	.178	.178	.178	1.000	1.000

a. Dependent Variable: Brand Reputation

To examine this hypothesis and investigate the relationship between the four perceived SMMAAs and brand reputation, a multiple linear regression was carried out using the Stepwise procedure. The R² value was 0.032, which shows that 3.2% of the variation in brand reputation can be explained by the model solely containing informativeness.

Multiple linear regression showed a significant relationship between social media reviews and brand reputation ($F(1,259) = 27.876, p < 0.01$), indicating a significant positive relationship between these two variables ($t = 2.919, p < 0.01, \text{Beta} = 0.178$). On the other hand, no significant relationship was found between interactivity and brand reputation ($t = 0.514, p > 0.05, \text{Beta} = 0.034$), no significant relationship was found between trendiness and brand reputation ($t = -1.395, p > 0.05, \text{Beta} = -0.094$), and no significant relationship was found between social media reviews and brand reputation ($t = 1.697, p > 0.05, \text{Beta} = 0.119$). The regression equation is $BR = 4.817 + 0.152 * IF$, where BR is brand reputation and IF is informativeness.

These results disprove the research hypothesis since only informativeness was deemed effective in reinforcing brand reputation.

Summary of findings

The Spearman correlation matrix showed that brand engagement is the only mediator effective in building brand loyalty. Additionally, the social media marketing activities which displayed a positive correlation with engagement included trendiness, social media reviews, and informativeness, indirectly acting as effective brand loyalty tools through brand engagement.

The three regression models suggest a significant positive relationship between: (i) social media reviews and brand loyalty; (ii) the SMMA's trendiness and informativeness and brand engagement; and (iii) informativeness and brand reputation. These findings answer the research question by confirming that from the four hypothesised social media marketing activities, social media reviews, trendiness, and informativeness are the only social media marketing activities which can essentially be implemented by the restaurant industry to increase loyalty. It is also worth pointing out that a structural equation modelling technique was also considered to assess these relationships but was deemed needless since regression models were used instead. The above findings are represented clearly in Figure 8.

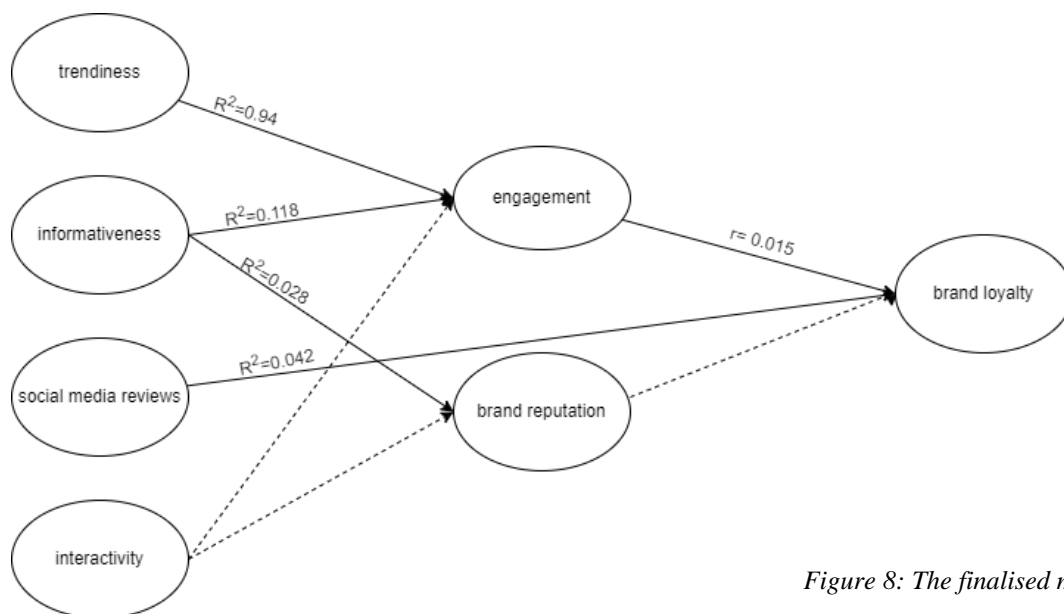


Figure 8: The finalised model

Chapter 5: Discussion

5.1 Brand loyalty in the restaurant industry

As observed in the literature review, brand loyalty is a very important part of the customer journey in the restaurant industry since loyal customers bring a number of advantages over new customers. The descriptive statistics showed that participants were more inclined to visit restaurants with which they were acquainted rather than visit new ones and felt that there were restaurants which they tended to keep visiting. 19% of the participants who initially opened the survey stated that they did not feel loyal towards any restaurant in particular. These participants may exhibit risk-seeking behaviour and prefer switching brands and trying new restaurants rather than revisiting the same restaurants regardless of their experience with the previous restaurant. In fact, according to Jung and Yoon (2012), although customer satisfaction is typically related to brand loyalty, satisfied customers may still be inclined to switch brands and keep exhibiting switching behaviour.

It was also concluded that both female and male individuals from every age group exhibited equally loyal behaviour towards restaurants. This finding contradicts the research carried out by Munaf et al. (2009) who despite confirming that gender is an insignificant aspect towards loyal behaviour, then stated that age together with personality are key predictors towards building brand loyalty.

When participants were asked what contributed to staying loyal towards restaurants, most responded with offers, special events, accessible parking, pet friendly restaurants, live entertainment, accessibility via food delivery apps (e.g., Wolt), and special dishes of the day.

5.2 Brand reputation and its repercussions on brand loyalty

Brand reputation was previously described as the stakeholders' perception of a brand, in this study's case restaurants, and as an intangible asset based on a brand's previous activities. According to Chernatony (1999), it fosters increased trust in the stakeholders' expectations for the restaurant's future prospects.

The Spearman correlation test showed that brand reputation is an insignificant factor contributing to brand loyalty in the restaurant industry as opposed to the findings made by Gounaris and Stathakopoulos (2004) and Kuo-Chien (2013). It can therefore be deduced that although individuals responded positively towards choosing reliable restaurants with a reputation for performing well, it does not mean that individuals may want to visit the restaurant again.

One of the studies mentioned in the literature review, i.e., Correia et al. (2017), confirmed a positive correlation between these variables in the context of the automotive industry . This study specifically analysed the effects of brand reputation on brand attachment and brand loyalty on brands such as Tesla, Toyota, and Volvo. When comparing the nature of this industry with the restaurant industry, several differences can be observed, mainly automobiles being part of the product industry and automobiles being high involvement goods as opposed to restaurants which have a huge role in the service industry and constitutes a utilitarian good (food). This shows that brand reputation might not be a predominant factor in reinforcing brand loyalty in the service industry, but on the other hand is a highly important factor to consider when buying a hedonic product with a long lifetime value.

It is also possible that brand reputation may be more effective in acquiring new customers rather than retaining customers since one may initially feel more inclined to dine in a new restaurant after finding out that it also has a reputation of performing well. Nevertheless, as previously

observed, acquiring new customers does not always entail that the customer will revisit the restaurant and become a loyal customer. The findings made by Kohet al. (2009) show that strengthening the brand reputation in multinational restaurants indirectly enhances the restaurant's financial performance by improving the value performance and generating new customers.

However, in accordance with the previously explored research by Ho Kevin, and See-To Eric (2018), the collected data showed that individuals were more inclined to visit a restaurant when they come across positive comments by previous visitors and hear other individuals mention that the restaurant is worth visiting as this increased their trust in the brand. This increase in brand trust builds on the brand's integrity and further enforces its reputation.

5.3 Effective social media marketing activities in building a brand's reputation online

As previously observed, a favourable reputation is desired by all brands in all industries as this allows brands to charge higher prices and increase sales and profitability since customers view their products as more desirable and valuable (Knipp, V.A., 2009). Since consumers are also more likely to trust the brand and spread positive word of mouth, which are both antecedents of brand loyalty (Choi J. 2020), it seems that brand reputation may indeed be indirectly effective for brand loyalty via these two antecedents, further adding to the research showing that brand reputation does not in fact have a direct correlation with brand loyalty.

When testing out the effectiveness of social media activities only informativeness was deemed effective out of the four perceived SMMA's. Liu and Shrum (2002) additionally confirmed that interactivity is also helpful in maintaining a brand's reputation online as interactivity makes the content seem more credible and social media users in turn feel more connected with the brand. This contradicts the findings made in this research since interactivity was deemed not significantly related to brand reputation. Social media reviews were also perceived by Godey

et al. (2016) to be effective in maintaining the brand's reputation since they provide a source of credible word of mouth. However, this hypothesis was also rejected.

These findings show that it might be possible for a restaurant's reputation to not be significantly impacted by the way the restaurant handles its social media but rather dependant on other factors such as corporate social responsibility. The findings made by Khojastehpour and Johns (2014) confirm that integrating a corporate social responsibility program in a business's operations is a core element in establishing and sustaining a favourable business reputation which gives the brand a sustainable competitive advantage in its industry. This can be done through social media as previously confirmed by Evans (2010).

Nevertheless, informative content on social media platforms was found to be successful in building a restaurant's reputation by influencing the user's attitude towards the brand. Participants answered positively to finding that the restaurants towards which they felt loyal contained useful accurate, comprehensive, and easily obtainable information on the restaurant's food and service. In agreement with the findings made by Ho Kevin and See-To Eric (2018), consumers feel that they were able to trust a brand even more when it was informative and openly shared details about the food and service offered. This increased trust in the brand builds on its integrity and enforces its identification, further strengthening the restaurant's reputation in the industry.

5.4 Brand engagement and its influence on brand loyalty

Most brands use social media as a channel to communicate with customers, share content, and advertise their products by ultimately building engagement on several platforms. Brand engagement was described by Evans (2010) as a measure of involvement between a social media user and the content or activity displayed on a social media platform. It is essential for restaurants to have engaging social media pages as the brand will appeal to more customers and

in turn lead to profitability, increase the likelihood of word-of-mouth referrals, and generate brand loyalty.

This mediator is an important construct for brand loyalty as it allows the brand to interact and build a relationship with its consumers. From the findings made in this study, it can in fact be deduced that brand engagement reinforces loyalty within the industry and bridges the gap between social media marketing and brand loyalty. This further substantiates the research carried out by Laroche et al. (2012), which stated that through brand engagement, social media makes it possible to foster relationships between: (i) the brand and the customers; (ii) the customer and the brand; and (iii) the customers themselves, building brand trust and favouring brand loyalty.

The participants responded positively to watching videos, looking at photos, and reading content shared on restaurants towards which they felt loyal. This confirms previous findings made in the literature review. Evans (2010) established that brands which used social media to share content relating to lifestyle, passion, and aspects on the product facilitated brand engagement and brand advocacy and in turn increased the likelihood of having customers return to that brand. In the case of the restaurant industry, individuals were interested in restaurants sharing content related not only to the food and service being offered but also to related topics of interest such as recipes.

Although the responses were positive towards all the items in the scale for engagement as seen in Table 1, data proved that participants reacted more to statements A,B,C where the user consumes the restaurant's content, indicating that social media users are more likely to contribute to passive engagement than active engagement. This is further confirmed by Van Asperen et al. (2018) who found that despite spending time on social media, the majority of the

respondents in his research displayed passive behaviour where they enjoyed viewing content rather than contributing, by writing comments for example.

5.5 Effective social media marketing activities in increasing online engagement

From the findings made in this study, it was observed that informativeness and trendiness were both effective in increasing engagement across social media platforms. This is also confirmed by Jayasingh (2019) who concluded that informativeness was an important determinant in building customer engagement since searching and receiving information about a brand allows the consumer to engage with a social media page. Furthermore, informative content is more likely to be shared with peers than ads/sponsored posts, increasing engagement between consumers whilst spreading brand awareness and in turn increasing the chances of acquiring new customers.

The second regression model also showed that trendiness is a significant social media marketing activity which facilitates building brand loyalty in the restaurant industry. Additionally, the participants answered positively to finding content as trendy if it contained new information about the products and services which are offered by the restaurants, they were considering visiting. This finding corresponds with the conclusions made by Ramadan et al. (2018) which confirm that consumers are more inclined to follow brands on social media if the brand provides regular updates about itself and shares trendy information. As previously observed via Man et al. (2020), trendy content includes current and innovative topics about brands initiated by both marketers and consumers. It can include innovative videos, creative ads, and short clips such as TikToks which resonate with social media users and initiate a positive perception of the brand in the consumer's mind. This makes it more likely for repeated visits to occur and significantly affects engagement, facilitating loyalty.

Although social media reviews were found to be effective in reinforcing brand loyalty, the first regression model showed no impact from social media reviews in increasing engagement. In addition, interactivity was also found not to be significant with increasing engagement as opposed to the conclusions drawn by Schreiner et al. (2019) which stated that interactive elements such as questions or asking for feedback encouraged engagement on social media platforms. The ineffectiveness of these variables in increasing engagement could be due to the reasons provided by Van Asperen et al. (2018) which are that social media users tend to show passive behaviour and may therefore be more inclined to enjoy the content without interacting with it (e.g., writing reviews after visiting a restaurant).

Other antecedents for engagement which are worth further investigation in the future include frequent social media updates, content which incentivises participation, and creative content (Ashley, C. and Tuten, T., 2015).

5.6 Social media marketing and how it can be implemented in restaurants

The findings showed that social media platforms are being used by all ages and have been growing in popularity, with 17% of the participants stating that they spend up to four hours on social media every day. This makes social media platforms a very effective marketing channel since it increases an ad's potential reach over other traditional marketing channels and makes it possible for relationships between the brand and consumers to occur (Zarella, D., 2009).

5.7 Social media reviews as a social marketing activity and its implications on brand loyalty

As previously explained by Evans (2010), reviews on social media pages are very helpful as they provide the means for consumers to voice their level of satisfaction. They provide the brand with useful feedback so that it offers products and services which are more suited to the consumers' needs. Although social media reviews were not deemed as an effective tool towards

building engagement or strengthening a restaurant's reputation, the first regression model shows that they are effective in building brand loyalty.

The responses show that the participants believed in the credibility of social media reviews. In the questionnaire, they responded positively towards believing that reading social media reviews prior to visiting a restaurant affects the overall restaurant experience and provides valuable information on which restaurant to visit. This substantiates the remarks made by Bennett (2017), who concluded that consumers see reviews as a reliable source of information, therefore increasing brand trust and reinforcing brand loyalty.

As observed in the literature review, Chatterjee (2001) also confirms that customer reviews are very effective in generating brand loyalty, stating that they can be seen as a credible source of eWOM which highly influence other consumers' purchase intention. For instance, a customer who has already visited a restaurant and comes across positive reviews regarding other food items offered by that same restaurant may be more inclined to revisit the restaurant and become a loyal customer.

5.8 Interactivity on social media platforms

Interactivity was the only social media marketing activity deemed ineffective towards building brand loyalty. This opposed the findings made by Liu and Shrum (2002) who observed that interactive content was perceived to be a more credible source and made stakeholders feel more connected with the brand. Tatar and Eren-Erdoğan (2016) also confirm this in their findings as they mention that interactivity is as an important quality for a website to resonate with clients and increase brand trust, ultimately building loyalty.

Although interactivity was not effective in increasing the revisit intention, the above research shows that it is an effective tool in keeping social media users involved on a brand's social media page or website. In fact, according to Ariel and Avidar (2015), interactivity, together

with responsiveness and synchronicity, play an important role in the communication process on social media platforms. Another study investigating the influence of presence, interaction, and responsiveness on the strength of brand relationship, showed that interactivity particularly improved the perceived partner quality (Karampela, M. et al., 2020). Furthermore, interactive components on social media platforms enhance branding elements and increase buying intentions (Ye, B.H. et al., 2019).

The findings made in this study show that although all the first and second regression model did not deem interactivity to be an effective social media marketing activity in increasing loyal customers both directly and indirectly through engagement, it is a useful tool in making the digital journey of a customer on a restaurant's social media page more interesting and in increasing the likelihood of a customer visiting the restaurant.

5.9 Implementing social media marketing activities as part of a social media strategy

The objective of this research was to identify which social media marketing activities are effective in building brand loyalty in the restaurant industry. The findings made in this study showed that informative and trendy content increased engagement between restaurants and customers, and along with social media reviews, were proven to increase the revisit intention.

A brand can increase its loyal customers by implementing these activities in its social media strategy. In the context of the restaurant industry, this can include sharing information on the restaurant, the food, the prices, and the restaurant's background, incorporating FAQs, and posting trendy content. By posting trendy content, a brand can change the perception of its social media platform to one which is current and in style. This can be achieved by including updates, recent news, and trending hot issues concerning the brand and using short videos such as Instagram reels and TikToks to keep users engaged and increase the interest in revisiting the brand. In the restaurant industry, trendy activities can include creating food contests, sharing

short recipes, and collaborating with social media influencers on food products. Such activities are bound to increase engagement and spread information and awareness about the restaurant.

Customers should be encouraged to leave positive reviews on restaurants' social media page since the participants expressed that they enjoyed reading other customers' comments and the findings confirmed that this reinforced brand loyalty. A brand should also use reviews as a means of communication by replying to both positive and negative reviews as this makes the customers feel appreciated and cared for, forming a positive relationship and in turn increasing the customers' possibility of returning.

Research by Ashley and Tuten (2015) shows that restaurants are more likely to increase engagement if they are active on social media and frequently update their content by making it more creative and appealing to the target audience. Additionally, research by RAED (2017) identified entertainment, interaction, trendiness, customisation, and WOM as social media marketing activities which create a more holistic social media experience with the brand and act as antecedents of brand loyalty. Entertainment includes sharing content that is enjoyable and interesting including funny videos and memes (BİLGİN, Y., 2018). TikToks and Instagram reels containing live videos and Q and A's which have been previously described as trendy are also entertaining as they keep viewers engaged (Social trends, 2022).

At the end of the questionnaire, the participants were asked whether there were any social media activities besides interactivity, social media reviews, trendiness, and informativeness which reinforced their intention of revisiting a restaurant. Among the mentioned social media marketing activities, the participants mostly mentioned entertaining/funny content, social media polls, giveaways, videos, having the menu available online, and including photos of the offered dishes. An individual specifically stated that food reviews or posts shared by influencers tended to encourage revisiting a restaurant.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

6.1 Summary of findings

The research was developed on reliable data since a moderately sufficient sample was gathered based on highly reliable scales retrieved from previous existing research. From the data collected, it can be concluded that most individuals display loyal behaviour towards the restaurant industry where the participants felt more inclined to visit restaurants they had already tried and which they were satisfied with. Additionally, male and female individuals from different age groups did not exhibit different loyalty behaviour.

The findings confirmed that engagement is an effective mediator bridging the gap between social media marketing and brand loyalty. After the statistical tests were applied on the collected data, it was observed that the social media marketing activities which were effective in increasing the customers' revisit intention were informativeness, trendiness, and social media reviews. These findings relate to the research question which was put forward in Chapter 1.

6.2 Limitations

The main limitation of the study was the moderately sufficient participation in the questionnaire, mainly due to the individuals not falling under the criteria required to participate in the questionnaire i.e., being a social media user and a loyal customer towards any restaurant. Despite meeting the initial expectations, a larger sample size would have been ideal to further enhance the accuracy and reliability of the research and have an even more representative population.

Furthermore, since the research was based on quantitative data, the findings do not contain in depth information about the subject being discussed. This further limited the research from

providing additional insights on the customers' points of view in relation to the explored social media marketing activities and on how social media convinces them to revisit restaurants.

6.3 Recommendations for future research

Based on the above findings and limitations, further research with a qualitative design would be optimal to meticulously explore the subject and gather more in-depth information on the use of social media marketing as a means to increase loyal customers.

Several individuals mentioned entertaining content (e.g., funny videos and memes) as another convincing social media activity other than informativeness, social media reviews, and trendiness. These participants expressed that content which had a degree of entertainment increased their interest in revisiting a restaurant. Entertainment could therefore be considered as a potentially effective social media activity in increasing brand loyalty and future research can eventually be carried out to test whether this variable is indeed effective in this regard. RAED (2017) also lists entertainment as one of the five dimensions of SMMA in terms of increasing loyalty. This was also confirmed by Kim and Ko (2012) and Bilgin (2018).

It would also be interesting to expand the research by retesting the hypotheses in a different industry such as retail or financial services since consumers following brands in different industries may have different inclinations as to why they follow and are loyal to the brands in these sectors. Such research would identify whether brand reputation and interactivity, which were deemed ineffective in the restaurant industry, are perhaps effective in building brand loyalty in other industries and whether social media reviews together with informative and trendy content remain equally effective in building brand loyalty in other industries.

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Appendix

Dear Participant,

My name is Michela Bonavia, and I am a student at the University of Malta pursuing a Master of Science in Strategic Management and Digital Marketing. I am currently conducting a research study titled "The influence of social media on customer loyalty in the restaurant industry". The purpose of this study is to investigate the influence of social media marketing activities on brand loyalty in the restaurant industry.

Your Participation:

Any data gathered during this research will be utilised only for the purposes of this study. Should you choose to participate, you will be asked to fill a 5-minute online questionnaire.

At no point will you be asked for your name or any other personally identifiable information. Participation in this study is entirely optional; you may accept or refuse participation without giving any reason. Furthermore, you are free to withdraw from the study at any time and without explanation. Moreover, all information acquired through this questionnaire will be stored and used under strict confidentiality.

Participant's Consent:

- I certify that I have read the information above on the study's nature, my involvement, and data handling.
- I've had the opportunity to inquire about the study, and all of my inquiries have been satisfactorily addressed.
- I accept that if I have any more questions, I may contact Michela Bonavia on michela.bonavia.18@um.edu.mt or Dr Joe Schembri .
- I agree to participate in this research study.

Thank you for your time.

Best Regards,
Michela Bonavia

1) Do you use social media platforms at least once a week?

- Yes
- No

2) Do you consider yourself a loyal customer towards any restaurant in particular? *

(Do you find yourself revisiting a restaurant/ food establishment more than once and favouring the brand over others.)

- Yes
- No

brand loyalty

- 1 – Strongly disagree
- 2 – Disagree
- 3 – Somewhat disagree
- 4 – Neither agree or disagree
- 5 – Somewhat agree
- 6 – Agree
- 7 – Strongly agree

I would rather stick with restaurants/ food establishments I like than visiting new ones. *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

strongly disagree strongly agree

I have certain restaurants that I always visit. *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

strongly disagree strongly agree

I consider myself loyal to a restaurant. *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

strongly disagree strongly agree

I feel confident in a restaurant that I always visit *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

strongly disagree strongly agree

I am more likely to visit a restaurant again if I am not satisfied with the food and service provided. *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

strongly disagree strongly agree

Brand reputation

- 1 – Strongly disagree
- 2 – Disagree
- 3 – Somewhat disagree
- 4 – Neither agree or disagree
- 5 – Somewhat agree
- 6 – Agree
- 7 – Strongly agree

The following questions refer to any restaurant in particular you feel loyal towards.

The restaurants I like have a reputation for being good *

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly agree

The restaurants I like have a reputation for being unreliable *

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly agree

Other people have told me that the restaurants I like are not worth visiting. *

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly agree

Other people have told me that the restaurants I like are reliable. *

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly agree

The restaurants I like have a reputation for performing well. *

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly agree

I have heard negative comments about the restaurants I like. *

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly agree

Social media engagement

- 1 - Strongly disagree
- 2 - Disagree
- 3 - Somewhat disagree
- 4 - Neither agree or disagree
- 5 - Somewhat agree
- 6 - Agree
- 7 - Strongly agree

The following questions refer to any restaurant in particular you feel loyal towards.

I watch videos on the social media page of this restaurant. *

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	strongly agree

I view pictures on the social media page of this restaurant. *

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly agree

I read the restaurant's posts, user comments or product reviews. *

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	strongly agree

I engage in conversations on the restaurant's social media page. *

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	strongly agree

I am more likely to follow a restaurant on social media if it shares unuseful and non-engaging content. *

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	strongly agree

Interactivity

- 1 – Strongly disagree
- 2 – Disagree
- 3 – Somewhat disagree
- 4 – Neither agree or disagree
- 5 – Somewhat agree
- 6 – Agree
- 7 – Strongly agree

The following questions refer to any restaurant in particular you feel loyal towards.

Conversation or opinion exchange with others is possible through the restaurant's * social media.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly agree

It is easy to provide my opinion through the restaurant's social media. *

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly agree

On the restaurant's social media page, it is easy to share information. *

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly agree

Trendiness

- 1 – Strongly disagree
- 2 – Disagree
- 3 – Somewhat disagree
- 4 – Neither agree or disagree
- 5 – Somewhat agree
- 6 – Agree
- 7 – Strongly agree

The following questions refer to any restaurant in particular you feel loyal towards.

The content of the restaurant's social media page contains the newest information regarding products and services being offered *

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly agree

Using and engaging with the restaurant's social media is very trendy. *

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly agree

Online reviews

- 1 – Strongly disagree
- 2 – Disagree
- 3 – Somewhat disagree
- 4 – Neither agree or disagree
- 5 – Somewhat agree
- 6 – Agree
- 7 – Strongly agree

The following questions refer to any restaurant in particular you feel loyal towards.

The restaurants' social media reviews are credible. *

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly agree

The restaurant's social media reviews provide valuable information for my purchase decision. *

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly agree

Social media reviews have an effect on the overall restaurant experience. *

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly agree

Informativeness

- 1 – Strongly disagree
- 2 – Disagree
- 3 – Somewhat disagree
- 4 – Neither agree or disagree
- 5 – Somewhat agree
- 6 – Agree
- 7 – Strongly agree

The following questions refer to any restaurant in particular you feel loyal towards.

The restaurant's social media page offers accurate information on the restaurant's food and services *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Strongly disagree Strongly agree

The restaurant's social media content provides useful information on the restaurant. (Address, phone, pictures, prices etc.) *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Strongly disagree Strongly agree

The information provided by the restaurant's social media page is comprehensive. *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Strongly disagree Strongly agree

Besides *interactivity, online reviews, trendiness and informativeness*, is there any social media marketing activity in particular which reinforces your intention of revisiting a restaurant? ex. funny content, giveaways etc.

Your answer _____