


ONLINE CUSTOMER REVIEWS AND RESTAURANT OWNERS: ATTITUDES AND STRATEGIES

Abstract

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Purpose – This study aims to explore how restaurant owners perceive and utilize online customer reviews (OCRs), addressing a gap in existing hospitality research that has predominantly focused on customer perspectives and the hotel sector.

Methodology/Design/Approach – A qualitative research design was employed, involving in-depth interviews with 50 restaurant owners. The data were analysed using NVivo to uncover patterns in attitudes and usage of OCRs.

Findings – Restaurant owners generally recognize OCRs as valuable feedback and a reflection of their reputation. However, many struggle to use them effectively and express scepticism about the authenticity of certain reviews. Negative feedback about staff performance is often dismissed due to strong trust in their teams, though some owners use OCRs to monitor staff behaviour. A growing trend shows owners actively encouraging customers to post favourable reviews, sometimes offering incentives. *Originality of the research* – This study contributes original insights by shifting the focus from customers to restaurant owners and applying a qualitative lens to understand their attitudes and strategies regarding OCRs, an area that has been underexplored in hospitality research.

Keywords restaurant, online customer review, reputation management, fake reviews, social media

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INTRODUCTION

The growth of online consumer rating systems has significantly transformed the hospitality industry (Sann et al., 2021). Online customer reviews (OCRs), which include customer feedback on services, experiences, and products, have become an integral part of electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM). These online reviews, commonly posted on e-commerce websites, social media platforms (e.g. Facebook, Instagram, TikTok) and dedicated review sites (Booking.com, TripAdvisor, Google, Expedia, etc.), now play a crucial role in shaping customer behaviour and influencing business decisions (Kemp et al. 2020; Ghosh & Mandal, 2020).

For restaurant owners, OCRs offer both opportunities and challenges (Soltani-Nejad et al., 2024). They provide insights into customer satisfaction, service quality, and brand reputation, yet their strategic use by restaurants remains underexplored (Rejeb et al., 2023; Kim et al. 2016; Lepkowska-White et al., 2019). Previous studies show that OCRs influence customer decisions and are often perceived as tools for advertising and reputation management (De Pelsmacker et al., 2018; Roozen & Raedts, 2022; Kim & Velthuis, 2021). While social media enables restaurants to reach a broad audience at low cost, empirical research shows that many restaurant owners still adopt a largely passive approach, using OCRs primarily for image maintenance rather than as a strategic resource (Lepkowska-White et al., 2019, p. 342).

Research further suggests that engaging and entertaining content, rather than overt promotion, is most effective in stimulating positive e-WOM (Fox & Longart, 2016), and that OCRs may function as a cost-effective alternative to formal market research, offering valuable intelligence for operational adjustments, customer relationship management, and competitive strategy (Lepkowska-White & Parsons, 2019; Rejeb et al., 2023; Sparks & Browning, 2011). However, it remains unclear how restaurant owners perceive and utilize OCRs to guide decisions and build competitive advantage.

Although OCRs have been widely studied in relation to consumer decision-making and hotel management (Perez-Aranda et al., 2019; Proserpio & Zervas, 2017; Sparks et al., 2016), research focusing on restaurant owners is scarce. Existing studies often adopt a quantitative approach or prioritize the consumer perspective (Li et al., 2021; Kim & So, 2023; Lopes et al., 2024), overlooking the unique challenges faced by independent restaurants, which typically lack the resources and standardized policies of larger chains (Kim & Velthuis, 2021; Lepkowska-White & Parsons, 2019; Aureli & Supino, 2017). This gap is significant because online reputation can directly impact business survival in a highly competitive environment (Lopes et al. 2024). Taken together, these gaps point to a need for a deeper understanding of how independent restaurant owners experience, interpret, and operationally use OCRs beyond consumer choice and firm-level performance outcomes.

Against this broader backdrop of OCRs as strategic tools for reputation management, prior research shows that actively managing online reviews is associated with higher customer satisfaction, loyalty, and reputational outcomes (King et al., 2014; Kemp et al., 2020; Koc et al., 2023; Wang & Chaudhry, 2018; Nguyen & Coudounaris, 2015; Alrawadieh & Dincer, 2019; Rita et al., 2022; Soltani-Nejad et al., 2024; Ghosh & Mandal, 2020; Tan et al., 2025, Deng & Ravichandran, 2023; Jia et al., 2025).

However, most research focuses on hotels or consumers, leaving restaurant-specific strategies underexplored (Perez-Aranda et al., 2019; Proserpio & Zervas, 2017; Ye et al., 2011; Xie et al., 2014). By integrating perspectives on e-WOM and reputation management, this study seeks to provide deeper insights into how restaurant owners navigate the challenges and opportunities presented by OCRs. To address this gap, the study investigates three main research questions: (RQ1) What are the attitudes of restaurant owners toward OCRs? (RQ2) How do OCRs influence reputation management strategies? (RQ3) How do restaurant owners use OCRs to support operational and policy decisions?

These research questions aim to uncover the broader role of OCRs in shaping strategies and decisions, contributing to both academic literature and practical insights.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1 OCR and Reputation management

OCRs are a form of electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) as they represent customer-generated feedback that is shared publicly on digital platforms (Litvin et al., 2008). e-WOM encompasses a broad range of online consumer communications, including social media posts, forum discussions, and review platforms, all of which contribute to shaping perceptions of brands, products, and services (Kemp et al. 2020; Litvin et al., 2008). OCRs are particularly relevant in the hospitality sector due to their significant influence on consumer decision-making and business reputation (Zhang et al., 2010; Perez-Aranda et al., 2019; Sparks & Browning, 2011; Sparks et al., 2016; Wang & Chaudhry, 2018; Xie et al., 2014). Research shows that customers frequently rely on peer-generated content when choosing a dining establishment (Zhang et al., 2010; Sann et al., 2021; Rejeb et al., 2023). A scientometric review by Zheng et al. (2023) analyzes two decades of research on OCRs in hospitality and tourism, identifying emerging trends and research gaps that underscore the strategic importance of OCRs for reputation management. Since OCRs shape how businesses are perceived by the customers, they can also play a fundamental role in the reputation of a dining establishment.

Reputation management is the strategic process of monitoring, influencing, and responding to stakeholder perceptions through communication strategies, proactive engagement, and online presence (Proserpio & Zervas, 2017; Perez-Aranda et al., 2019). Peco-Torres et al. (2023) further highlight that effective online reputation management (ORM) requires integrating customer feedback with revenue management strategies, which stresses the importance of transparency and proactive communication in ORM for hospitality firms. According to Baka (2016, p. 160) it is defined as “a continuous process above and beyond the segregation between online and offline and it has to be treated as such by merging reputation management practices”. As OCRs directly impact a business’s public online and offline image, managing them effectively has become a crucial aspect of online reputation management in the hospitality sector. This includes examining changes in strategy and competitive dynamics, such as those between customers and businesses, managers and employees, and businesses and competitors (Proserpio & Zervas, 2017).

Research on OCRs and reputation management has largely focused on the consumer perspective, analysing how customers engage with and are influenced by online reviews (Perez-Aranda et al., 2019). In contrast, less attention has been given to how businesses such as restaurant owners, strategically respond to and manage these reviews (Perez-Aranda et al., 2024). Moreover, studies exploring the multifaceted role of OCRs in shaping restaurant owners’ strategies for online reputation management, employee monitoring, and customer engagement remain rare (Perez-Aranda et al., 2024).

Given the growing reliance on OCRs, a restaurant’s reputation has become an increasingly important factor for success, as (potential) customers heavily consider feedback when making dining decisions (Kim & Velthuis, 2021). A strong reputation can increase customer loyalty and confidence in a restaurant’s offerings, making reputation management a strategic priority for restaurant owners (Alrawadieh & Dincer, 2019). In this context, OCRs serve as a valuable tool, enabling restaurant owners to proactively shape their reputation, whether by encouraging customer reviews or responding to feedback once it has been posted (Kim & Velthuis, 2021). Kim and Velthuis (2021) distinguished between direct and indirect OCR (online) reputation management, where restaurant owners respectively ask customers directly to leave a (positive) online review or ask customers to answer upon an invitation (after their visit) to leave an online review. However, most restaurant owners do not have a clear strategy for managing their online reputation through OCRs (Lepkowska-White & Parsons, 2019; Aureli & Supino, 2017; Naatus, 2014). Aureli and Supino (2017) found that while there is considerable interest in using OCRs for reputation management (around 50% of their participants in the Italian hotel sector), proactive strategies are often underutilized. Restaurant owners are often hesitant to request positive reviews from customers, despite recognizing the potential benefits of improved reputation and higher visibility (Beuscart et al., 2016).

Nevertheless, the literature shows the importance of positive OCRs for the hospitality industry (Kemp et al., 2020). Next to online reviews, user-generated content (UGC) and encouraging OCRs can increase credibility and customer engagement, which can enhance a restaurant overall (online) reputation (Kemp et al., 2020; Nguyen & Coudounaris, 2015). However, it remains unclear how restaurant owners perceive the role of OCRs in reputation management and how they utilize these reviews to build competitive advantages. Fox and Longart (2016) already indicated that engaging and entertaining social media content effectively stimulates positive e-WOM for restaurants. Furthermore, research by Tengilimoğlu (2025) and Raedts et al. (2025) offers additional theoretical depth to the understanding of customer responses to service failures in the hospitality industry. Drawing on appraisal theory, Tengilimoğlu (2025) demonstrates, for example, that both apologies and compensation

significantly increase recovery satisfaction, which in turn reduces customers' intentions for revenge and increases forgiveness. The study further highlights that the severity of the service failure amplifies negative customer responses, making effective recovery strategies even more crucial. These findings underscore the importance of proactive and well-considered webcare and recovery policies for restaurant owners, especially in the context of managing OCRs and safeguarding reputation.

1.2 Restaurant owners' perceptions of OCRs

In the context of the hospitality literature, restaurant owners are typically understood as owner-managers of independent, non-chain restaurants who are directly involved in both operational and strategic decision-making within their establishments. Beuscart et al. (2016) explored the perceptions of restaurant owners regarding online reviews and examined the various impacts of OCR systems on the restaurant industry. Their study, based on interviews with 27 French restaurant owners (16 male and 11 female participants), found that many restaurant owners view OCRs as a harsh and hypocritical method of rating that raises doubts about their quality standards (Beuscart et al., 2016). However, their findings also show that managers use OCR systems as a tool for monitoring employees when managers are not physically present at the restaurant. This use of OCRs as an employee management tool can have implications for operational decision-making and personnel policies. Consequently, it can act as a driving force for making adjustments to employee performance or, even result in termination of employee's contracts. Beyond employee monitoring, research shows that social media engagement significantly influences restaurant performance and customer perceptions, reinforcing the strategic role of OCRs and UGC in reputation building (Li et al. , 2021). Similarly, Fissi et al. (2022) demonstrates how Michelin-starred restaurants adapted their Instagram communication strategies during crises to maintain brand reputation. The study by Kim and Velthuis (2021) also focused on the perspectives of restaurant owners towards OCR systems and their responses. They found that restaurant owners (based on qualitative research of 17 Dutch restaurant owners) are aware of online reviews and attach significant importance to them. The majority of Dutch surveyed restaurant owners actively monitor their reviews, with only a few checking them on a weekly basis, which emphasises the significance of online reviews. According to Kim and Velthuis (2021), restaurant owners utilize OCR systems to respond to reviews, promote their establishments, showcase their professionalism, and mitigate the impact of negative feedback on their reputation. However, their responses primarily revolve around operational personnel policies and objectives, demonstrating a thoughtful and measured approach (Kim & Velthuis, 2021). According to their findings, OCRs are often too subjective for personnel policies, and it is not easy to trace a specific employee (Kim & Velthuis, 2021). Lepkowska-White and Parsons (2019) came to the same conclusion in their study in which they analyse to what extent 18 (relatively small) restaurants in the north-eastern United States use social media as a monitoring tool for their staff policies. Their findings indicate that negative reviews trigger conversations with staff to find out what went wrong or to bring the team back into 'focus' (Lepkowska-White & Parsons, 2019). In addition, the literature shows that most restaurants share positive reviews with their employees to keep them motivated or to thank them for their efforts (Beuscart et al., 2016; Kim & Velthuis, 2021; Lepkowska-White & Parsons, 2019).

Beuscart et al. (2016) observed that relatively few restaurants leveraged online consumer review systems for marketing purposes, whereas Kim and Velthuis (2021) noted a considerable level of interest. These contrasting findings highlight the rapid ascent of OCR systems and their growing significance in the restaurant industry. Furthermore, restaurants struggle to manage online platforms and they often monitor them in a more 'passive' way (Lepkowska-White, 2017). This means that if they respond, they only respond to negative OCR so that it does not damage their reputation. Also, the study of Kim and Velthuis (2021) showed that restaurant managers often only respond to OCRs to minimise reputational damage. Lepkowska-White and Parsons (2019) found that only a few small restaurants are effectively monitoring social media and embracing it as a technological resource. Despite that social media is a low-cost option, scarcity of resources, time and online challenges stand in the way of collecting and using the information (Lepkowska-White & Parsons, 2019).

While there is consensus on the value of monitoring OCRs, there is variation in how actively restaurant owners engage with these platforms. These establishments face challenges in fully utilizing OCRs due to limited resources and time constraints (Lepkowska-White, 2017, Kim et al, 2016).

1.3 OCR and web reputation care

Web reputation care refers to the set of deliberate practices through which businesses monitor, interpret, and respond to online customer reviews in order to manage perceptions, relationships, and reputational outcomes in digital environments (Lopes et al., 2024). The literature shows the significant influence of e-WOM in the hospitality industry, with nearly 90% of customers considering it before making a final purchase decision (Rita et al., 2022). Managing web reputation by actively addressing customer feedback is, therefore, becoming increasingly important in this field (Perez-Aranda et al., 2024). Most restaurant owners monitor OCRs on a daily basis but their responses tend to be reactive rather than proactive (Beuscart et al., 2016; Kim & Velthuis, 2021). The OCRs allow them, for example, to monitor their operation and make improvements or adjustments possible (Lepkowska-White, 2017; Lepkowska-White & Parsons, 2019). Furthermore, the literature shows that the majority of restaurant owners indicate that they respond to the OCRs. The task of responding to OCRs is often assigned to one person of the staff (Lepkowska-White & Parsons, 2019; Lepkowska-White et al., 2019), however, formal guidelines on how to perform that task are often not available. Responding to an OCR depends often on the content of the review (Kim & Velthuis, 2021;

Lepkowska-White & Parsons, 2019; Lepkowska-White et al., 2019). Kim and Velthuis (2021) call this ‘deliberated reactivity’. Most restaurant owners respond to negative reviews, to defend their (online) reputation. Studies show that responding to negative OCRs is often experienced as very stressful, this goes for the reading and the responding part of the OCR (Kim & Velthuis, 2021). Often the response of a negative OCR starts with an apology for the problem and that they try to solve it (Roozen & Raedts, 2022). A few restaurant owners indicate that they try to establish a constructive dialogue with the customer who wrote the online review. By adopting this approach, they aim to demonstrate their sincere regard for the customer’s perspective while also leaving a lasting impression of professionalism (Beuscart et al., 2016; Kim & Velthuis, 2021; Lepkowska-White, 2017; Lepkowska-White & Parsons, 2019, Lepkowska-White et al., 2019). Webcare can also involve handling fake or unjustified OCRs, which can pose significant challenges for reputation management. Lopes et al. (2024) propose a framework for webcare strategies grounded in justice theory, emphasizing personalized and timely responses as critical for customer trust. Their study (Lopes et al., 2024) shows that offering compensation and redirecting complaints to private channels significantly improves booking intentions. Complementing this, the integrative review by Kim and So (2023) highlights that effective service recovery through strategies such as apologies, explanations, and fair compensation, can mitigate the negative impact of service failures and strengthen customer satisfaction and loyalty. Together, these insights underscore the importance of structured and evidence-based webcare policies in hospitality contexts. Furthermore, Kim and Velthuis (2021) indicate that Dutch restaurant owners are aware of negative ‘unjustified’ or ‘fake’ OCRs. Their findings show that restaurant owners often react to and address fake OCRs because the OCR – fake or unjustified – can always damage their reputation. However, it is not clear if restaurant owners often have experienced ‘fake’ and/or ‘unjustified’ (negative) OCRs and if they react differently i.e. if this influences their policy behaviour towards web care. Therefore, further exploration through additional studies is necessary to explore how restaurant owners manage their webcare policies and whether they view OCRs as an integral part of their customer service strategy.

2. METHOD

2.1 Research Design and Context

To address the three main research questions, we adopted a qualitative research design, as this approach allows for an in-depth exploration of restaurant owners’ experiences and strategies. Semi-structured interviews were conducted using a topic guide developed from prior studies (e.g., Kim & Velthuis, 2021; Beuscart et al., 2016; Lepkowska-White, 2017; Lepkowska-White & Parsons, 2019, Lepkowska-White et al., 2019; Aureli & Supino, 2017; Fox & Longart, 2016), and pre-tested with two restaurant owners for clarity and relevance. Interviews took place either face-to-face or via video call, depending on participant preference. All interviews were audio-recorded and fully transcribed. The study was conducted in Belgium (specifically targeting restaurants within 50 km of Brussels). Belgium is not only central to Europe geographically but also politically, as it houses major European Union institutions, making it a diverse hub for international tourism and business (Raedts et al., 2023). This diversity offers a rich environment to explore a variety of culinary practices and business models (Raedts et al., 2023). We used a convenience sampling method to recruit participants, focusing on mid-priced restaurants (with main dishes priced between 14-25 euros) that had garnered at least 40 online reviews on platforms such as Google, Facebook and TripAdvisor. This sampling criteria selection was based on previous studies on related topics (Kim & Velthuis, 2021). Out of the 120 restaurant owners initially contacted, 58 agreed to participate, resulting in a response rate of 48.3%. For those who did not participate or respond, the majority either cited time constraints or showed disinterest in participating. While we conducted 58 interviews in total, there were four interviews where additional individuals joined the interview unexpectedly. In four other cases, the interviews were cut short due to work-related interruptions, preventing us from collecting complete responses. After careful analysis, we chose not to include these eight incomplete or overlapping cases in our final sample of 50 participants.

Consequently, the final sample consists of 50 restaurant owners (33 male, 17 female), all holding decision-making authority at both the operational and strategic levels within their restaurants. Participants were aged between 22 and 65 years ($M = 43.0$; $SD = 11.3$) and had, on average, 13.26 years of experience as restaurant owners or managers ($SD = 9.24$, min. 3 years and max. 31 years). The average interview time was 52.79 minutes (the shortest interview lasted 23 minutes, the longest 1 hour 20 minutes). See Table 1 for a description of the sample and Appendix B for detailed information on the individual participants. Note that the numbering is not continuous due to the exclusion of eight in-depth interviews.

Table 1: Description of the sample ($N = 50$) *)

Gender	# Female	17
	# Male	33
Average score (SD)	Length of interview (minutes)	52.79 (14.87)
	Age (year)	43.00 (11.33)
	Experience in the sector (year)	13.26 (9.24)
	Overall satisfaction with their marketing activities (score 1-5)	3.74 (.82)

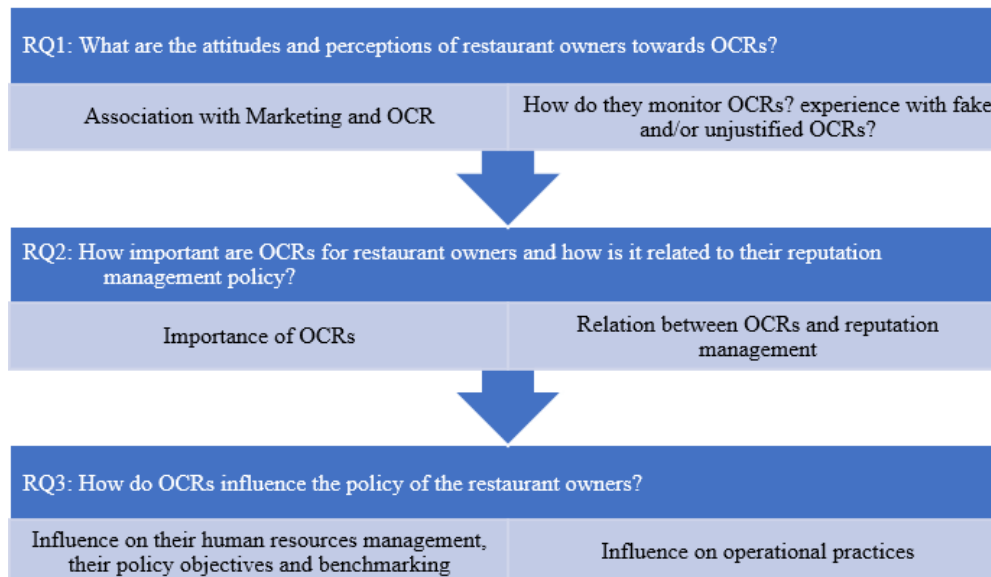
*) Detailed information about each participant is provided in Appendix B

We employed thematic analysis to examine the transcribed interviews, following the approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). To enhance reliability, each interview was coded independently by two researchers. Both coders systematically reviewed the transcripts and identified patterns, generating initial codes in a structured manner (see Appendix A for the coding scheme). After coding, the identified themes were organized and mapped to the research questions to ensure alignment between the data and the study objectives.

2.2 Interview guide

The interview guide was adapted from existing literature on qualitative interviews in similar settings (Kim & Velthuis, 2021). We tailored questions to focus on restaurant operations, digital review management, reputation and customer engagement, ensuring that the instrument was contextually relevant to our study. The semi-structured interview protocol consisted of different parts. After a short introduction (2 minutes) about the objective of the study and collecting general information about the participant (gender, age, experience as a restaurant owner), we asked the participants about their associations (a top-of-mind i.e. 2-5 words) about the word ‘Marketing’ and ‘Online Reviews’. Furthermore, we asked the participants about their attitude towards online review platforms (“Which platforms are you following? How do you monitor the OCRs? Do you read all the reviews? Do you answer OCRs? Experience with ‘fake’ and ‘unjustified’ OCR?”). Afterwards, we asked about their perception between OCR and their reputation (“Are they used for benchmarking? Reputation management objectives?”) Finally, we asked whether the participants utilise OCRs to make informal operational adjustments. This includes modifications to personnel policies as well as implementing varied treatments for customers, such as encouraging them to share their (positive) feedback through reviews. Furthermore, we explored the possibility of leveraging these reviews to adjustments in operational aspects i.e. menu offerings, modifications of portions, etc. In Figure 1 an overview of the research questions combined with the structure of the questionnaire is presented.

Figure 1: Overview of the in-depth interview research questions and related semi-structured interview questions



3. RESULTS

3.1 Overview and approach

Participants reported a relatively high level of satisfaction with their marketing activities ($M = 3.74/5$), which provides relevant context for interpreting their engagement with OCRs. The data were thematically coded in NVivo (v1.7.1). Themes were developed iteratively and systematically linked to the three research questions (see Appendix A for the coding framework). This section presents the findings organized around these three research questions, supplemented with cross-cutting insights that emerged during the coding and theme refinement process. Each subsection reports the results corresponding to one research question while also highlighting additional patterns that offer a broader understanding of participants’ attitudes and behaviours.

3.2 RQ1: What are the attitudes and perceptions of restaurant owners towards online consumer reviews (OCRs)?

Top-of-mind associations with marketing and OCRs

After the introduction, we asked our participants a top of mind (2-5 words) when they heard the word ‘marketing’ and afterwards the word ‘online customer reviews’. In total 217 words were associated with the word ‘Marketing’ and 203 with ‘online customer reviews’. In Figure 2A and 2B the word clouds are presented.

Figure 2: Word clouds of the participants (for Marketing (L) for OCRs (R))

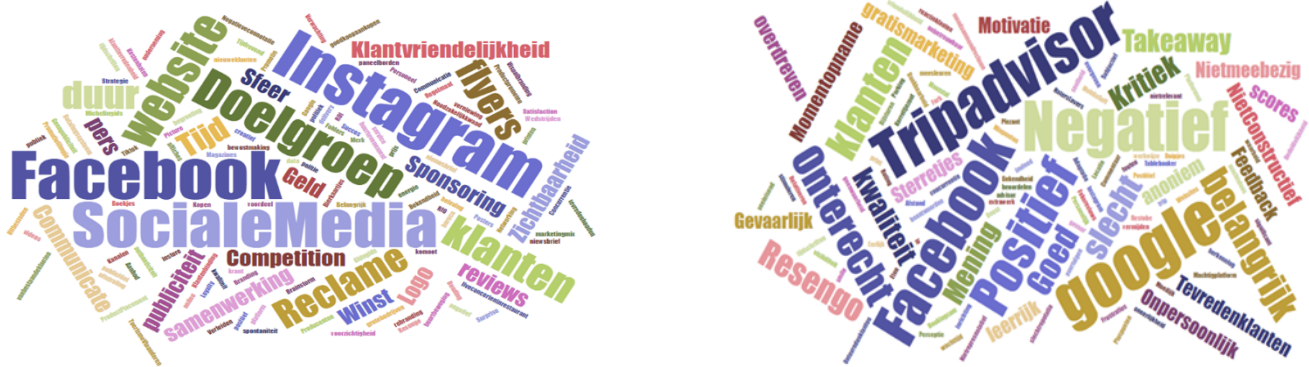


Figure 2, the Marketing word cloud, shows that restaurant owners primarily associate ‘Marketing’ with social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook, along with media, advertising and websites. These online activities take precedence in their minds, rather than focusing on budgetary considerations, in-restaurant - or personal activities. Delving deeper into the word cloud for OCRs, we notice the significance of ‘values’ and more ‘emotions’, encompassing both negative and positive aspects, good and bad, unjustified, critics, alongside the specific platform names of Google, TripAdvisor and Facebook.

Engagement with OCRs platforms (usage, reading and responding)

Furthermore, to answer the first main research question we analysed the data, used a framework of codes and applied them to the 50 interviews. The findings indicate that of the different interviews almost 48 of the 50 participants are (very) active on the platforms where customers can leave online reviews. Google (40 participants), TripAdvisor (32 participants), Facebook (27 participants) and Resengo (7 participants) are the most important ones. Of the 50 participants, 43 reported reading their OCRs, while 23 participants stated that they do so on a regular basis (at least once per week). Participants who did not read OCRs indicate they do not read their reviews because they have no time, and/or do not ‘trust’ the review (5 participants), it creates negative feelings (4 participants), and /or others reasons (8 participants).

Perceived credibility and trustworthiness of OCR platforms

Our findings show that many restaurant owners expressed ambivalence and skepticism regarding the credibility of online customer review platforms. For instance, Participant 57 stated, “I am very satisfied with the platforms when it comes to hotels, but when it comes to restaurants, I attach very little importance to them. I do question the credibility of those platforms.” Similarly, Participant 27 remarked, “Trustworthiness is a big question mark for me but I don’t know how they can fix that...” These perspectives highlight a broader pattern of distrust, suggesting that while OCRs are recognized as influential, their perceived reliability remains a concern for many owners.

This skepticism often leads to emotional responses and reluctance to engage with reviews. As Participant 28 explained, “I get a bad feeling about that because it’s about the power everyone has to write an online review. It’s hard to respond to that, or it makes little to no sense and you can write whatever you want, right?” Such comments illustrate how the perceived lack of control and objectivity in OCRs can discourage owners from actively participating in online review platforms.

These findings align with previous research (Kim & Velthuis, 2021), which also identified credibility concerns as a barrier to strategic engagement with OCRs in the restaurant sector. The ambivalence and distrust observed here suggest that efforts to improve transparency and authenticity in review platforms may be necessary to foster more positive and proactive engagement from restaurant owners.

Experiences with fake and unjustified reviews: Responses and emotional coping

The interview transcripts show that restaurant owners frequently encounter both fake and unjustified online customer reviews and adopt a range of response strategies. 39 participants indicated that they actively responded to OCRs. More than half of the participants (29 participants in total) indicated that they had ‘hired’ someone to respond to online customer reviews (OCRs). In most cases, this responsibility was assigned to a single person within the organisation (23 participants of the 29). However, the majority of the participants (18 in total) indicated that there was no formal or strict policy for responding to OCRs.

Almost one-third of the participants (18 participants) reported having experienced ‘fake’ reviews. However, the majority of them (16 participants) chose not to respond to these fabricated reviews. Similarly, more than half of all the participants (27 participants) mentioned their experience with ‘unjustified’ OCRs and again, the majority (19 participants) refrained from responding to or engaging with these reviews. For example, Participant 29 explained, “When we had just opened, our competitors were not so happy that we were doing better than them, so we often got fake reviews. Especially on TripAdvisor.” This highlights the competitive dynamics that can drive malicious online behavior. Restaurant owners described various coping strategies in responses to fake and unjustified reviews, ranging from investigating the reviewer’s identity to deliberately ignoring suspicious feedback. As Participant 4 explained, “I try to find the person on social media, and see if there is any relevance. And if I really notice this is really spam, then I just let it go. Then I don’t respond either.” This approach reflects a pragmatic

attitude, prioritizing emotional resilience over confrontation. The prevalence of fake reviews also led to skepticism regarding the authenticity of online feedback. Participant 25 noted, "There were a lot of people posting reviews that were not real... you say, yeah, that's just not possible with the service we offer." Some owners even observed manipulation of review scores within the industry, as described by Participant 20: "Some restaurants do that on their own site... they engage everyone and so you can manipulate that systematically actually." These experiences suggest that fake reviews are a significant concern for restaurant owners, influencing their trust in OCR platforms and shaping their engagement strategies. This aligns with previous research indicating that perceived review authenticity is crucial for effective reputation management (Kim & Velthuis, 2021).

Unjustified reviews were often perceived as emotionally burdensome. Restaurant owners reported feelings of frustration and helplessness when reviews were seen as inaccurate or unrelated to their actual service. For instance, Participant 56 remarked, "Especially at TripAdvisor, there are reviews on that platform that are not for me or have nothing to do with me." This sense of misattribution contributed to feelings of frustration and helplessness, as Participant 50 explained, "If it's wrong then it's wrong. You can never win that anyway... you will never gain from this situation."

Owners distinguished between fake and unjustified reviews, frequently attributing the latter to customer anger or misunderstanding. Participant 57 observed, "I don't think they were fake reviews, the customers were really angry, and the things they said... yes... they were totally NOT true." The emotional toll of such reviews was evident, with some owners choosing to disengage from online feedback altogether. As Participant 2 shared, "At the very beginning... I respond directly but... that doesn't help... with the reviews online we don't do it anymore... most of the time it's really unjustified and yes and there's no point in sending those customers a reply."

Overall, these findings highlight the emotional challenges associated with managing fake and unjustified online reviews. Restaurant owners' coping strategies ranged from selective engagement to complete avoidance, illustrating the complex interplay between emotional resilience and business pragmatism in online reputation management.

Response strategies to unjustified and negative reviews

Some restaurant owners adopted a proactive stance in responding to unjustified reviews, viewing engagement as an opportunity to humanize their business and clarify misunderstandings. Participant 35 described this approach: "If it's a negative review then I address it... especially when I find the review unjustified ... we find that the non-critical consumer ... sometimes customers think that a business is not personal, that that is an abstraction that they can write 'everything.'" By replying, owners sought to remind customers of the people and passion behind the restaurant, fostering empathy and potentially mitigating reputational damage. This constructive engagement reflects a strategic effort to balance transparency with professionalism, aiming to transform negative experiences into opportunities for dialogue and improvement.

Furthermore, owners described nuanced strategies for responding to reviews, differentiating between justified and unjustified feedback. For example, Participant 30 explained: "Employee X will sometimes respond if they are justified comments... If there are unjustified comments, for example about the quality, employee X will respond and hold them accountable." This approach emphasizes accountability and transparency, aiming to correct misinformation while maintaining professionalism. Participant 31 highlighted a tiered response strategy: "We thank the reviewers for a positive review, for negative but unjustified reviews we explain exactly what went wrong, and for negative and justified reviews we are looking for compensations for the customer." This demonstrates a commitment to fairness and customer service, adapting responses based on the nature of the feedback.

Participant 22 added: "If the reviews are unjustified and I checked with the staff and they say that's not true. Then I answer the reviewers with impunity and then you usually don't hear anything after that from the reviewer." This suggests that direct engagement can sometimes resolve misunderstandings, though not always elicit further dialogue. These strategies reflect a thoughtful approach to online reputation management, balancing corrective action with customer relations.

Customer threats and service recovery practices

16 participants reported experiences with customers who threatened to post negative online reviews after a visit. For example, participant 57 indicated that she had previously asked customers to leave the restaurant, despite the possibility that they might share negative feedback online. Some restaurant owners reported being threatened with negative online reviews if customers' demands were not met. Participant 57 described, "Customers I ask to leave always say: 'Beware I'm going to put it on TripAdvisor.' And then we say, 'By all means.'" This response reflects a pragmatic and confident attitude, suggesting that owners rely on the overall strength of their reputation and customer base to withstand occasional negative reviews. The frequency of such threats highlights the power dynamics introduced by OCR platforms, where customers may attempt to leverage reviews for personal gain or as a form of retaliation. Owners' willingness to confront these threats directly demonstrates resilience and a strategic approach to reputation management.

The interviews revealed that some customers use the threat of negative reviews as leverage to obtain free products or services. Participant 17 recounted, "Our staff member gave those two coffees for free" after a customer threatened to spread negative feedback. Similarly, Participant 55 observed, "They try to threaten me, but it's more about getting something for 'free'... Yes that has also become a bit of a sport." These experiences illustrate how OCR platforms can shift the balance of power, enabling customers to negotiate for compensation. Owners and staff often respond by offering small incentives to defuse tension and protect their online reputation, though this practice raises questions about fairness and the sustainability of such strategies.

In addition, participants 17 and 55 reported providing complimentary coffee to customers after the customers threatened to leave a negative online review.

These findings reveal that several restaurant owners attempt to pre-empt or mitigate negative online reviews by offering complimentary products or services, such as free coffee, to dissatisfied customers. This pragmatic approach aligns with the results of Tengilimoğlu (2025), who found that compensation alongside apologies plays a pivotal role in restoring customer satisfaction and reducing the likelihood of retaliatory behaviors, such as posting negative reviews. Tengilimoğlu (2025) further suggests that the effectiveness of such recovery efforts is particularly pronounced when the perceived severity of the service failure is high, emphasizing the need for tailored and adequate responses to customer complaints in the hospitality sector.

In response to these situations, six participants (participants 9, 16, 20, 23, 27 and 44) admitted to not anticipating or preparing for such incidents. They will try to solve the problem (if there is any), however, they indicated that is not always straightforward. Some owners expressed a clear boundary between legitimate complaints and unjustified negative reviews. Participant 44 stated, "If there is a problem we can solve that problem. If I think there is no problem, ... you can write as many negative and angry reviews as you like. I just find it low and rude." This perspective highlights a commitment to resolving genuine issues while refusing to be manipulated by threats or unfair criticism. Such attitudes reflect a broader trend among owners to maintain professional integrity and emotional resilience in the face of online reputation challenges.

Meanwhile, four participants (participant 3, 28, 57 and 49) admitted to becoming emotional (angry, sad, feeling hopeless, ...) when faced with such threats. However, the majority of the restaurant owners expressed their intention to respond constructively (participants 7, 10, 11, 15, 17, 26, 34, 40, 46, and 55), aiming to address the concerns and issues raised by these customers in order to mitigate the potential negative impact of the reviews. For example, participant 11 described a typical response: "Firstly, thank them for writing a review, afterwards mention that we are sorry that they didn't have a good experience and that we will definitely discuss it with the team and look for improvements... We do certainly hope that you will give us another opportunity." This approach demonstrates a commitment to professionalism, transparency, and continuous improvement, aiming to turn negative experiences into positive outcomes for both the business and the customer.

Emotional impact and psychological burden of negative OCRs

Throughout nearly every interview, restaurant owners expressed a spectrum of emotions, encompassing sadness, anger, and a sense of being treated unfairly, all in relation to negative OCRs. For example, participant 56 underscored the enduring challenge of defending themselves, with the reviews invariably remaining on the internet. The enduring nature of online reviews was a source of frustration for some owners. Participant 56 reflected, "Can't do anything about it. All has been declared, but you can't change it, it will be on the internet, and it will not disappear." This sentiment underscores the sense of helplessness that can accompany negative feedback, particularly when owners feel they have no recourse to correct or remove unfair reviews. The permanence of OCRs amplifies their impact on reputation and emotional well-being, highlighting the need for effective coping strategies and support mechanisms within the industry.

Based on these findings, we conclude that the answer to the first research question is positive: restaurant owners are actively monitoring OCRs. The majority of them demonstrate a proactive approach by reading and attempting to respond to these OCRs. However, there is no strict policy for responding to the OCRs. Nevertheless, there is often one specific staff member responsible for addressing online reviews. Additionally, the findings indicate that restaurant owners frequently encounter fake and/or unjustified reviews, as well as customers threatening them with negative reviews. In particular, negative online OCRs go hand in hand with (negative) emotions of restaurant owners.

3.3. RQ2: How do OCRs influence reputation management strategies?

Using OCRs in staff management and internal communication

Based on insights gathered from the interviews, it is evident that OCRs play an important role in shaping staff policies and, therefore, influencing reputation management strategies. 44 participants indicated that they rely on OCRs to shape and refine their staff policies. Moreover, 34 participants actively communicated positive comments from OCRs directly to their staff members, while 29 participants also shared negative comments (for improvement). These results suggest that several restaurant owners described actively sharing online customer reviews with their staff as part of internal communication and policy development. Participant 4 explained, "I actually forward almost all reviews (after bundling) through our WhatsApp internal communication. Both to the kitchen and staff with either big thumbs up and a compliment of 'bravo' or with a question of: 'Did something go wrong and please explain?'" This practice demonstrates how OCRs serve not only as external feedback but also as a tool for motivating staff, recognizing achievements, and identifying areas for improvement. By integrating OCRs into daily communication, owners foster a culture of transparency and continuous learning, aligning operational practices with customer expectations.

Using OCRs for staff monitoring and performance evaluation

Like participant 4, participants 7, 8, 20, and 24 use WhatsApp groups with their staff to share the (positive *and* negative) review information. Moreover, analysis of the interview transcriptions revealed that OCRs are not merely limited to policy refinement but also serve as a monitoring tool. 9 participants admitted to utilizing OCR as a means to monitor their staff performance.

However, the restaurant owners also indicated that based on the reviews they started monitoring a staff member, and only after more (negative) comments in reviews, they will start the discussion with the staff member, guiding personnel decisions. Participant 29 explained, "If it just happens once or twice then maybe I wouldn't care so much. I would maybe keep a bit of an eye on this employee myself. But if it happens several times I would (perhaps) discuss this with our employee." This approach reflects a measured response, using repeated feedback as a trigger for intervention. Similarly, Participant 18 stated, "Normally not, but yes if I received 5 negative reviews in total about the same person then, exceptionally." This threshold-based strategy helps owners distinguish between isolated incidents and patterns that require action. Participant 7 added nuance by recognizing the human element in service delivery: "It's usually something like this: 'the staff wasn't too friendly', but it is often written that they were really friendly and that the service was good. Yes, you are still ... working with people. They are not robots... I can understand that it's not always possible." This perspective highlights the importance of empathy and context when interpreting OCRs, balancing customer feedback with an understanding of staff circumstances.

Participants 18, 20, 25, and 53 acknowledged during the interview that they had terminated employees' contracts based on feedback received through OCRs. However, participants 40 and 53 explicitly mentioned discussing positive OCR feedback with their staff members, emphasizing transparency and fostering a culture of continuous improvement.

Competitive benchmarking through OCRs

The findings indicate that OCRs are also strongly related to restaurant owners' reputation management strategies (RQ2). 27 participants indicated that they actively monitor their competitors using OCRs. Restaurant owners who do not monitor competitors' OCRs cited several reasons for this behaviour: have no time (5 participants mentioned this), the absence of nearby competitors (three participants), lack of interest (eleven participants), and/or the perception that competitors' OCRs are not a valuable source of information.

The insights derived from restaurant owners who benchmark their competitors serve multiple purposes. Benchmarking competitors is often used as a means to improve one's own business practices, as indicated by 12 participants. For example, participants 17, 1 and 35 reported reading competitors' reviews and implementing insights in their own businesses. This suggests that restaurant owners use OCRs not only to assess their own performance but also to benchmark against competitors. Participant 17 explained, "I learned from this review that that is a need of our potential customers," after noticing positive feedback about a competitor's Sunday opening hours. Participant 1 shared a pricing strategy: "Suppose something is too expensive at another business according to customers, I will go a little below their price for my business." Participant 35 highlighted the adoption of popular offerings: "Sunday brunch is very well reviewed, ... we can also introduce this in our own business." These examples illustrate how OCRs inform competitive analysis and strategic adjustments, enabling owners to respond proactively to market trends and customer preferences.

Benchmarking (RQ2) is also used to compare and differentiate businesses from their competitors, as reported by four participants. Participants 18, 30, 32, and 43 indicated that after reading competitors' reviews, they adjusted their own policies by incorporating positive aspects of competitors' OCRs (such as new menu additions) and leveraging negative reviews of competitors to inform policy changes in their own businesses.

Ten participants (participants 6, 11, 17, 26, 30, 33, 35, 39, 55, 58) indicated that they were curious about their competitors' evaluations. These owners actively monitored competitors' online reputations by assessing review scores on platforms such as Google and analysing the average number of OCRs received. This enabled them to stay informed about negative feedback directed at competitors. Analysing competitors' negative reviews helped owners gain valuable insights, put their own negative reviews into perspective, and support continuous business improvement.

Overall the findings highlight the importance attributed to OCRs and reputation management within the restaurant sector.

3.4 RQ3: Utilizing OCRs to support operational and policy decisions of restaurants

Operational adjustments based on OCR feedback

For our last research question, we found that OCRs play a crucial role in facilitating operational adjustments for more than half of the restaurant owners in our sample (31 participants). In particular, six participants mentioned leveraging OCRs to guide menu changes, while eight participants relied on OCRs to inform modifications to certain dishes on the menu. Moreover, five participants used OCRs to adapt their customer treatment strategies. Furthermore, 15 participants reported using OCRs for other operational purposes.

Proactive strategies to encourage positive OCRs

In addition, almost a third of the restaurant owners in our sample described proactive strategies to encourage positive OCRs, including incentives and direct solicitation. Participant 43 recounted, "We used posters indicating if you liked it or if you didn't like it you can always leave a review and every month we select a customer and they will receive a breakfast for free at our restaurant." This approach leverages rewards to motivate customer engagement and generate positive feedback. Participant 33 admitted, "I shouldn't do it, but usually, I give a free order after a (positive) review. When there is a negative review, and the

customer is right, we pay the customer back.” These practices reflect a pragmatic approach to reputation management, balancing the desire for positive reviews with fairness in addressing legitimate complaints. The use of incentives, while effective, raises ethical considerations about the authenticity of reviews and the long-term impact on customer trust.

These findings highlight the proactive approach taken by restaurant owners who actively adapt their operational policies and practical guidelines in response to OCRs. Examples range from menu adjustments aimed at receiving positive feedback to instances where compensation is offered to incentivise the removal of negative reviews from online platforms.

3.5 Summary of operational adaptations and policy implications

Our qualitative analysis reveals that restaurant owners employ a range of strategies to manage OCRs:

- **Reactive strategies:** Most owners respond primarily to negative reviews, aiming to minimize reputational damage. Some only reply when a review is perceived as unjustified or fake.
- **Proactive strategies:** Approximately one-third of owners actively encourage customers to leave positive reviews, for example by displaying posters or offering small incentives such as a complimentary breakfast.
- **Staff management:** Positive reviews are shared with staff as motivation, while negative reviews are discussed to identify areas for improvement.
- **Benchmarking:** Several owners monitor competitors’ reviews and adjust their own policies based on insights gained from these external evaluations.

Our findings align with the literature, which has described reactive responses to negative reviews (Kim & Velthuis, 2021; Beuscart et al., 2016), proactive encouragement of positive reviews (Aureli & Supino, 2017; Fox & Longart, 2016), the use of reviews for staff management (Lepkowska-White & Parsons, 2019), and benchmarking against competitors (Nguyen & Coudounaris, 2015; Rejeb et al., 2023).

4. DISCUSSION

While qualitative research on the influence of online customer reviews (OCRs) on restaurant reputation management remains relatively limited (Sann et al., 2021; Kim & Velthuis, 2021), this study provides additional insights into how restaurant owners and managers perceive and integrate OCRs into their daily operations. The findings highlight the multifaceted role of OCRs, shaping not only customer-facing practices but also internal management routines and broader strategic considerations, including competitive positioning. Our results indicate that restaurant owners actively monitor OCRs, with Google, TripAdvisor, and Facebook emerging as the most influential platforms, consistent with prior research demonstrating the impact of these platforms on consumer decision-making in the hospitality sector (Perez-Aranda et al., 2019; Sann et al., 2021).

Importantly, this study extends previous work by showing that OCRs influence not only customer-business interactions but also internal strategic decisions, particularly regarding staff management, operational adjustments, and webcare strategies. These findings align with Kim & So (2023), who emphasize that social media engagement and brand communication can shape managerial decision-making, and with Lopes et al. (2024), who demonstrate that personalized and timely responses to online feedback enhance customer trust and booking intentions.

A key contribution lies in the nuanced understanding of how restaurant owners respond to OCRs in comparison to other hospitality businesses. Whereas prior research has largely focused on consumer-centered perspectives in the hotel industry (Proserpio & Zervas, 2017; Perez-Aranda et al., 2019 & 2024; Sann et al., 2021), fewer studies have examined restaurants and their use of OCRs as a tool for reputation management (Zhang et al., 2010; Kim et al., 2016; Kim & Velthuis, 2021). By adopting a qualitative approach, this study offers a perspective that captures the strategic reasoning behind restaurant owners’ engagement with OCRs. Unlike hotel managers, who often rely on standardized response policies, restaurant owners appear to favor a more personalized, hands-on approach to managing online feedback.

Drawing on insights from e-WOM and digital reputation management frameworks, our study highlights the broader competitive dynamics influenced by OCRs, including customer-business interactions, manager-employee relationships, and benchmarking against competitors. Managing OCRs often entails emotional labor and uncertainty, particularly when dealing with fake or unjustified reviews. Participant accounts revealed a recurring pattern of perceived injustice and helplessness, illustrating the subjective nature with which review platforms are sometimes experienced by restaurant owners.

CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that OCRs play a central role in guiding both operational and strategic decision-making in the restaurant sector. Restaurant owners actively monitor and interpret online feedback to refine internal processes, support staff development, adjust service offerings, and position themselves competitively. More than half of the participants reported using OCRs to benchmark competitors, while many leveraged reviews to implement concrete operational changes, including menu adaptations, service improvements, and workflow adjustments.

Overall, the findings underline that OCRs function not merely as evaluative tools of customer satisfaction but as strategic resources embedded in everyday managerial practices. Despite challenges such as emotional strain, fake reviews, and customer threats, restaurant owners demonstrate a strong commitment to engaging constructively with online feedback, underscoring the growing strategic importance of OCRs in contemporary.

Theoretical implications

This study initially adopted a deductive approach, drawing on the frameworks of Kim and Velthuis (2021) and Beuscart et al. (2016). However, the qualitative analysis revealed emergent patterns that extend existing theory. Notably, experiences with fake and unjustified reviews point to a recurring sense of helplessness among restaurant owners, highlighting the subjective and emotionally laden nature of OCR platforms. These negative aspects, previously observed in the word cloud (see Figure 2B), are now clearly identified in connection with these elements. This transition from a deductive to a partially inductive approach enriches current theoretical understandings of digital reputation management. Furthermore, the findings extend existing hospitality literature by demonstrating how OCRs are embedded in daily managerial routines. Beyond staff monitoring, restaurant owners actively disseminate OCR feedback through digital communication channels such as WhatsApp, fostering collective reflection and engagement. The proactive solicitation of reviews further expands existing theory on OCR usage, positioning restaurant owners as active reputation managers rather than passive recipients of online feedback.

Managerial implications

For restaurant managers, OCRs represent more than just a customer feedback mechanism, they are integral to decision-making and policy development. Our findings highlight the importance of actively monitoring OCRs and strategically responding to both positive and negative feedback. The use of platforms like WhatsApp to share reviews among staff could be seen as a practical approach to fostering a more responsive and engaged team. However, it is important to consider that staff members may not always be as inclined as owners or managers to actively monitor and engage with these reviews. Additionally, the practice of offering compensations to remove negative OCRs, although controversial, reflects a significant managerial tactic to safeguard a restaurant's online reputation. This aligns with broader service recovery research, which highlights compensation as a key distributive-justice mechanism for mitigating customer dissatisfaction (Kim & So, 2023). The strategies adopted by restaurant owners in our study (ranging from direct compensation to personalized apologies) are consistent with the recommendations of Tengilimoğlu (2025), who emphasizes the dual importance of monetary and non-monetary recovery methods in fostering customer forgiveness and minimizing revenge intentions. These insights highlight the necessity for restaurant managers to develop structured and context-sensitive recovery protocols, particularly in light of the emotional and reputational risks associated with negative online reviews. This is consistent with the review of Kim and So (2023) which stresses the importance of systematic and justice-oriented recovery frameworks in hospitality settings. These insights suggest that restaurant owners should develop more structured policies for engaging with OCRs, including strategies to handle fake or unjustified reviews and proactively manage their online presence. In practical terms, implementing such policies does not necessarily require complex or highly formalized procedures. Restaurant owners can, for example, designate a single person (either the owner and/or manager or a trusted staff member) as responsible for monitoring and responding to online reviews on a regular basis (e.g., weekly). This responsibility can be supported by a simple internal checklist that distinguishes between different types of reviews: (1) positive reviews, which can be acknowledged publicly and shared with staff as motivation; (2) justified negative reviews, which can follow a standard recovery routine including an apology, a brief explanation, and, where appropriate, compensation; and (3) fake or unjustified reviews, which may require factual clarification or, in some cases, deliberate non-engagement.

In addition, restaurant owners can integrate OCRs into routine internal communication, for instance by periodically discussing selected reviews during team meetings or via informal channels such as WhatsApp groups. By doing so, OCRs become a low-cost managerial tool for learning, staff development, and service improvement rather than a purely reputational threat. Furthermore, consistent with Fox and Longart (2016), the results suggest that flexible, relationship-focused social media communication and tailored content strategies are essential for generating positive e-WOM and, therefore, strengthening restaurant reputation. The use of compensations and personalized recovery strategies, while sometimes controversial, reflects pragmatic approaches to safeguarding online reputation. Consistent with service recovery literature, the findings suggest that structured, justice-oriented recovery protocols—combining monetary and non-monetary responses—can help mitigate reputational risks. Restaurant owners are therefore encouraged to develop clear policies for addressing fake or unjustified reviews and for proactively managing their online presence.

Limitations and future research

As with most qualitative studies, this research is subject to limitations related to sample size and contextual scope. Our findings give a first impression of the attitude of restaurant owners on social media platforms. Furthermore, this study focused exclusively on restaurant owners and managers located in Belgium, which may limit the generalizability of the findings, compared to Kim and Velthuis (2021) or Beuscart et al. (2016) (their participants were all located in one city). Furthermore, our participants were all restaurant owners and/or managers, if we had interviewed other staff members of the restaurant (waiters, kitchen, reception, etc.) we might have found different results on the attitude towards OCRs. Therefore, future research should include in-depth interviews with restaurant staff to explore their attitudes toward OCRs and their willingness to engage with customer feedback. Moreover, we did not look into systems, (cost-effective) methods to monitor OCRs that can enhance the operational efficiency of restaurants. Therefore, future in-depth qualitative studies should add questions about the implementation of social media, the monitoring aspects and exploring how restaurant owners (and other staff members) can effectively monitor and leverage the information available on social media platforms. By doing so, restaurants (with less than 8 staff members) could – perhaps – more benefit from OCRs on social media.

USE OF GENERATIVE AI

In preparing this paper, the authors used ChatGPT-4 (OpenAI) for language improvement. Following the use of this tool, the authors have reviewed and edited the content as necessary and take full responsibility for the content of the published article.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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