The Impact of Instagram Influencer Marketing in the Restaurant Industry

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ABSTRACT

When improving their offer, restaurants should also communicate adequately and draw the attention of the public, taking advantage of all available means of communication and opting for the most effective marketing techniques. Therefore, the main objective is to study the six dimensions that encompass a set of digital influencers' characteristics and to understand if this is actually a communication channel that positively impacts the Portuguese restaurant sector. Using a mixed-method approach, the authors combined a qualitative study based on a focus group with a survey for a quantitative study. Findings reveal that of the six dimensions of the research model, only one has no impact on the increase of potential clients. In this way, the remaining five are considered to be sufficiently differentiating to arouse consumer interest in visiting restaurants promoted by Instagram influencers.

KEYWORDS

Digital Marketing, Influencer Marketing, Instagram, Potential Customers Reach, Restaurants

1. INTRODUCTION

Visiting a restaurant is much more than eating out, it is the experience that it should provide, the surrounding environment, the feelings that arise from attending it, the taste of the food and the innovative concept that it may have, either by having lights and plants as decoration or by serving the dishes on wooden boards or by having a certain type of music for its visitors, for instance. So, as all restaurants are different and each one has a specific offer, this is a market where it is possible to innovate a lot that can provide consumers with incredible experiences.

However the research of how this type of establishment will attract attention and interest in them so that people want to know more about it (Galli, 2019) is still underexplored, specially concerning the new needs, expectations and greater demand from consumers who want to have an accessible and easy way to find information (Deloitte, 2017). This is why, with the evolution of digital marketing and the dispersion of social networks, comes the influencer marketing (Gross & von Wangenheim, 2018), which has been increasingly adopted by several brands and considered one of the best marketing techniques today simply because it is considered ideal for persuading potential customers (Woods, 2016). This tool consists in using digital influencers with a vast network of followers who act as brand ambassadors (Boerman, 2020) when they share through their social media photos with the products

and their opinions about them (De Veirman et al., 2017). In fact, influencer marketing is expected to grow from $8 billion in 2019 to $15 billion in 2022 (Sheth, 2020).

As it is considered one of the fastest-growing areas of advertising, restaurants are able to reach their target in a more efficient way (Paula, 2018). On the other hand, as Instagram is also a significantly growing platform and is becoming increasingly popular, it is considered the best choice when it comes to influencer marketing campaigns (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2020). The central objective of this study is to extend existing knowledge of this modern communication strategy, the influencer marketing through Instagram, in order to provide knowledge, and mainly to generate value for the society and the restaurant market. Moreover, specific objectives of this research are to verify whether the process of searching for a restaurant can be facilitated by digital influencers, what characteristics they must have in order to have weight in the decision to choose one to go, but also what the content they share needs to have in order to be classified as persuasive and to arouse interest in the desired audience. On the other hand, it is intended to clarify whether Instagram is indeed the best platform for finding new trends in restoration, as well as to make a comparison between the advantages and disadvantages of the restaurants' own communication channels and the influencers who promote them. In this way, by fulfilling the goals of this study, it will be possible to find out whether this is classified as a marketing tool that allows consumers to change their opinion about a restaurant and create the will to experience it. It is now necessary to establish the intrinsic issues of this research in order to achieve the objectives mentioned above. These issues are constructed taking into account the literature of this study and are considered the most relevant in order to reach more concrete and detailed conclusions concerning the main problem.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Word of Mouth (WOM)

WOM communication is the key to a successful company, which means customers have the will to influence others by sharing their positive experiences without being paid for it (Lopes et al., 2018). They share information amongst each other regarding vacations, movies, restaurants, politics or sports, through means like social media, blogs and emails, that only make the communication faster and easier (Berger, 2014). Also, it is a person to person communication, in which a receiver perceives a brand, a product or a service as non-commercial (Taghizadeh et al., 2013). This interpersonal communication can be defined as WOM and involves informal communications directed at other consumers about the ownership, usage, or characteristics of particular goods and services or their sellers (Westbrook, 1987; Berger, 2014).

Additionally, it is a strong and convincing force since customer needs drive it and it significantly grows as one tells a story to five people, each of them tells it to five more, and so on (Taghizadeh et al., 2013). In the service providers case, according to Nielsen's global trust in advertising report, 92% of consumers more easily believe in a friend's advice and 70% rely on consumers' opinions posted online (Sheth, 2020). Indeed, 59% of people stated that they usually share online content with others, which is seven times cheaper and more efficient than traditional media, so what companies need to do is to foster consumer-generated content in the hope that consumers will share it. Regarding this diffusion of information, consumers can send newspaper articles to their friends, YouTube videos to their family and restaurant reviews to their neighbours, for instance (Berger & Milkman, 2012).

Furthermore, product-related discussion (e.g., the Nikes were really comfortable), product-related content (e.g., Nike ads on YouTube), direct recommendations (e.g., you'd love this restaurant), mere mentions (e.g., we went to this restaurant), and online reviews are all ways of using WOM. This action has a crucial impact on consumer behaviour as well as in impression management, emotion regulation, information acquisition, social bonding and persuasion (Berger, 2014). It can also be defined in terms of direction – the contribution to the decision-making process -, valence – which

can be negative or positive - and volume – connected to the number of people to which the message is transmitted (Taghizadeh et al., 2013).

In addition, conversations between consumers lead to more than 3.3 billion brand impressions per day, which enhances product awareness (Berger, 2014). Considering McKinsey and Company (2010, p. 8) affirmation, "*word of mouth is the primary factor behind 20 to 50 percent of all purchasing decisions…and…generates more than twice the sales of paid advertising*" (Berger, 2014, p. 589), this is why it contributes to the increase of companies' market share as well (Taghizadeh et al., 2013).

Moreover, a study of almost 20,000 everyday conversations shows that having face-to-face or written communication have an impact on a brands' image. While the first is not so assertive and complete, the second is, since it is provided more time to think and construct a critical opinion about it (Berger & Iyengar, 2013). Also, the last one, related to "*any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet*" is usually called eWOM (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004, p. 39; Jin & Phua, 2014, p. 181). This can reach millions of consumers with its high accessibility, so virtually anyone with interest in a particular brand can easily found it. Consequently, it has a massive impact on the origin of virtual relationships and online communities that united, can empower the prestige of a certain firm (Babers & Hassanien, 2017). The differences between WOM and eWOM are mainly found in the media used, as with the development of technology, the physical place for this kind of communication has been changing to the cyberspace (Jeong & Jang, 2011).

On the other hand, customers want to positively spread their thoughts, opinions and feelings about products and services, which makes eWOM an innovative electronic place available at any time, oriented to multiple individuals with nothing but reliable information anonymously given. It is also becoming more important for marketing specialists to study eWOM customers' behaviours in terms of consumer experience and motivations, as it constitutes a source to decrease promotional expenses, to build a favourable image for the organizations, but also to achieve customer loyalty (Jeong & Jang, 2011).

Regarding the catering industry, positive eWOM can be constructed if a restaurant's food quality and service are considered high (Kim & Lennon, 2017; Kim, Kim & Lennon, 2018), as well as if there is an incredible felt environment, in other words, if there is an overall sublime restaurant experience. When this situation occurs, there is usually an altruistic behaviour in the consumers' minds and a desire to help the restaurant can arise. Nonetheless, intangibles bring a superior risk since they cannot be assessed before the consumption act, creating more dependence on the interpersonal influence of eWOM. This is why restaurant managers should take these factors into account and develop a more customer-oriented marketing approach, after trying to identify the sources of positive eWOM, mainly to increase customer visits and efficiently control their promotional efforts (Jeong & Jang, 2011).

2.2. Influencer Marketing

Over the years, the advertising industry has been suffering a lot of changes, so its path goes through find ways to get a higher return on investment. This is why a marketing tool which focus is based on special individuals rather than the whole target market has been increasingly used, the denominated influencer marketing, whose goal is to persuade potential buyers and lead marketing activities around influencers (Woods, 2016).

In accordance with Business Insider Intelligence, influencer marketing has expanded from $1.7 billion in 2016 to $8 billion in 2019, expecting growth of $7 billion in 2022, being this considered one of the fastest-growing areas of advertising and sponsorship (Sheth, 2020).

The spread of digital social media has led to a completely innovative bias, the named influencers, "*individual or a group of individuals who built their own audience through social media platforms*" (Gross & von Wangenheim, 2018). Also, they are defined as people with a solid base of followers as "*they blog, vlog and create short-form content like Snapchats or InstaStories and provide their*

followers with daily insights into their personal lives and opinions" (Veirman et al., 2017; Paula, 2018, p. 19).

A celebrity that posts a picture on Instagram with a Chipotle burrito in her hand or a user's friend that tweets an image with his Starbucks Frappuccino are both examples of influencer marketing, in which the only distinction is that the first is paid advertising, while the second is not. These contribute to influencer marketing being known as the virtual WOM (Woods, 2016).

Moreover, normal postings create a higher engagement in comparison to paid collaborations, and the same situation occurs with micro-influencers that register a higher engagement than macro-influencers. With this, it is possible to affirm that the content considered credible, personal, creative and different from the mass media has a bigger impact on the target audience (Martikainen & Pitkanen, 2019). Furthermore, influencers are the online opinion leaders that can shape others' perceptions with their appearance, personality, relationship with their audience or even their familiarity with a specific subject (Torres et al.*,* 2019). Indeed, digital influencers are hierarchical by their number of followers on social networks and this usually influences consumers' attitudes according to the likeability, attractiveness and reliability of each of them (Boerman, 2020).

In 2017, 63% of companies in the US increased their budget for influencer marketing (Gross & von Wangenheim, 2018), as by being connected to influencers, brands can reach their target market in a more efficient way (Paula, 2018) since they work as brand ambassadors when creating sponsored content like pictures of themselves with their products or tags (Boerman, 2020). In addition, there are many advertising agencies that their main focus are the influencers, where they usually take a fee out of the influencer's compensation for their services. Their jobs pass by helping them finding monetary opportunities, making contract negotiations between them and the brand, choosing wisely the most appealing influencer in order to keep the congruency and make the best fit for a certain campaign (Torres et al.*,* 2019). Additionally, the ability to identify the best influencers on social media can be a valuable source of success to several social, political and viral marketing campaigns (Bashari & Fazl-Ersi, 2020). Also, it can be noticed a massive increase in the number of the influencers available at these agencies mainly because of the significant rise of the influencer marketing budget as well as the profit this job has been giving. As an example, Niche, a Twitter influencer marketing agency affirmed that their number of influencers has grown from 6,000 to more than 24,000 in a year (Woods, 2016).

Keeping this in mind, influencer marketing can be part of a communication strategy with digital content creators who have the capacity to sustain a brand (Paula, 2018). In fact, the Swant's study (2016) affirmed that approximately 40% of the participants have bought an item they found on an influencer profile; and that, 20% of them confirmed they shared content they saw from an influencer on Instagram, Twitter, Vine or YouTube; but also that one-third of millennials follow an influencer on social media (Woods, 2016, p. 8).

Influencer marketing allows 11 times more return on investment than other traditional communication tools, but also 67% of marketers use influencers to communicate a product or a service and 59% apply these techniques for content promotion (Woods, 2016), as this is the most similar to a friend in terms of transmitting reliance in the message of a certain campaign (Sheth, 2020). Besides that, when there is paid advertising on social media, influencers usually add on their posts the #ad or #sponsored hashtags due to regulation questions in some countries (Woods, 2016) or to clarify their followers of what the content they are posting is about since sometimes it is difficult to recognise them as advertising (Coates et al., 2020). In fact, to show transparency, Instagram has implemented the "paid partnership with a brand" field for the "Instafamous" people inserted in a campaign to grow the commercial relationship with the consumers (Boerman, 2020).

Indeed, as it was mentioned above, Instagram is increasingly growing and becoming popular as a social network, so it is nowadays considered the best choice for influencer marketing campaigns. This conclusion comes from a survey made by Mediakix with a sample of 162 participants (2019) and the Influencer Marketing Report 2019 (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2020).

Thus, it is important to highlight the aspects that foment influencer marketing success, which is composed by humour, entertainment, the effort behind the posting, its visuality, the influencer himself and mainly, the authenticity. The posts that are seen as superficial and fake are consequently perceived as not engaging, and this is not the final outcome a brand desires, but positive WOM connected to personal experiences, opinions and recommendations that lead to brand admiration is (Martikainen & Pitkanen, 2019).

2.3. Restaurant Influencers

In accordance with the Medium Corporation, food influencers are those who provide recommendations through posts related to sweet and healthy recipes, convenience products like snacks and beverages, or restaurants (Dower, 2019).

Regarding the restaurant influencer marketing, it is being increasingly fundamental to use it in the promotion strategy in order to attract and engage with customers (Bhasin Tulsian, 2019). In fact, when the right influencer is chosen by a restaurant, with every $1 spent, $17.50 can be generated (Gutierrez, 2019). This is because influencers have already created a great level of trust with their followers, so when they provide a good opinion about a certain restaurant based on their own experience, their audience is more than likely to believe them (Bhasin Tulsian, 2019). Although it requires forbearance, effort and creativity to get influencers to share content related to a restaurant, this is considered the ideal marketing tool to reach the highest number of potential customers (TheFork, 2016). Indeed, influencers are extremely good at content creation, so restaurants could take advantage of that since they are an excellent source to promote brand awareness (Pina & Dias, 2021), which leads to the sales increase (Gutierrez, 2019).

Moreover, restaurants are using influencer marketing as this is a cheaper technique compared to other traditional means with the same goal of targeting the right customer base with significantly positive results. It depends on the relevance, size and budget of the restaurant, but digital influencers usually pay off. In the case of top restaurant chains that are placed in diverse geographic zones, perhaps the most known and expensive macro-influencers can be the best path to follow. However, for those which are located in only one particular area, micro-influencer marketing is the most affordable and optimal option, since these influencers offer a more localized precision as they have a niche following them that is geographically concentrated to catch the right audience to visit the restaurants in real-time (Bhasin Tulsian, 2019). Also, they could opt for splitting their budget across micro-influencers with more loyal followers and earn more conversions in a short term (Gutierrez, 2019). Nevertheless, every alternative raises visibility and credibility, whereas every type of influencers can add a link on their Instagram page to order food from a restaurant, provide specific offers or create discount codes for each campaign, quickly tracking and understanding the boost in the number of clients (Bhasin Tulsian, 2019).

Conversely, influencers also have a negative side in terms of harming a restaurant business if this tool is not used right. This happens because potential customers can only hear good things about a restaurant all over social media, having their expectations really high and getting more demanding, so if they decide to go there and do not get exactly what they expected, they can leave a lot disappointed with a very bad impression of it and not coming back at all (Bhasin Tulsian, 2019).

2.4. Hypotheses

The principal objective of this study is to analyse how the restaurant industry can be impacted by using influencer marketing as a communication channel. Therefore, it is possible to identify as a dependent variable the restaurant industry, more concretely, the reach of potential customers. On the other hand, as independent variables, there are the Instagram influencers, their knowledge on the diversity of restaurants existing in Portugal, their trust, the attention and care they deposit in the shared content, the paid partnerships they accept and the WOM they generate to their audience.

Hence, based on the literature review, the following assumptions were made. As an initial hypothesis, when influencers work as brand ambassadors by posting pictures of themselves with their products or tags, brands reach their target more quickly (Boerman, 2020). This is why influencer marketing based on digital content creators is infallible when it comes to supporting a brand (Paula, 2018). In addition, Instagram is the choice for influencer marketing campaigns since it was verified in a Mediakix study (2019) and in the Influencer Marketing Report 2019 (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2020). Indeed, the use of Instagram influencer marketing as a promoting technique may have an impact on the restaurant industry in terms of reaching potential customers (TheFork, 2016). The aim is to check whether the consumer goes to a certain restaurant after seeing a post on Instagram of an influencer related to it.

H1: The Instagram influencers are positively connected to the potential customers reach in the restaurant industry.

Secondly, influencers that are familiar with a specific subject mould people's minds (Torres et al., 2019), which is the case of Inês Brandling that created her Instagram page @lisboa.come to share several posts of food, when she felt the need of finding a restaurant to visit and started taking print screens of some she wanted to get to know (Red Bull, 2018). With this, the hypothesis is that the influencers who have knowledge of the existence of several restaurants and their associated concepts can influence the increase of potential customers in the restaurant industry.

H2: The restaurant knowledge of influencers is positively connected to the potential customers reach in the restaurant industry.

The opinion leaders usually called influencers shape others' opinions with their characteristics, such as appearance, personality and relationship with their audience (Torres et al., 2019). Also, they influence consumers' attitudes with their likeability, attractiveness and the trust they often transmit to their followers (Boerman, 2020). Thus, it is hypothesized that the trust influencers transmit can be, in a positive way, related to the potential customers reach in the restaurant industry.

H3: The trustful influencers are positively connected to the potential customers reach in the restaurant industry.

The humour, entertainment, the effort behind the posting, its visuality, the influencer himself and mainly, the authenticity are the main factors that contribute to influencer marketing success (Martikainen & Pitkanen, 2019). Furthermore, one example of these practices is the best Portuguese Instagram restaurant influencer, Inês Brandling, who always tags the restaurant in question in the content she shares and admits to take and post the most instagramic food pictures with the utmost care possible (Red Bull, 2018). It is therefore important to check whether care with the content that digital influencers share positively impacts the potential customers reach in the restaurant industry.

H4: The content care that influencers share is positively connected to the potential customers reach in the restaurant industry.

Besides this attention and care with their posts, influencers are called to add on their descriptions when they are ads or sponsored content (Woods, 2016), or to explain to their followers when these are considered as advertisement (Coates et al., 2020). Actually, Instagram inserted a section named "paid partnership with a brand" for influencers to fulfil when they are part of a marketing campaign in order to demonstrate transparency and increase their relationship with the consumers (Boerman, 2020).

Although normal postings commonly create a higher engagement in comparison to paid partnerships, it is important to retain that even so, the credible, personal, creative and the most different content from the mass media also has a greater impact on the target market (Martikainen & Pitkanen, 2019). So, if the paid partnerships shared by influencers are aligned with these features, they can be positively connected to the potential customers reach in the restaurant industry.

H5: The paid partnerships of influencers are positively connected to the potential customers reach in the restaurant industry.

Concerning Instagram, since it has the feature of watching videos and photos in this platform, it highly contributes to eWOM because it is allowed to see products and services as close to reality as possible (De Veirman et al., 2017).

The goal of influencer marketing connected to personal experiences, opinions and recommendations is to engage and generate positive WOM that lead to brand admiration (Martikainen & Pitkanen, 2019) and the proof of that is Inês Brandling, who is the main responsible for other Instagram restaurant accounts seeing their number of followers increasing at the moment she advertises them (Red Bull, 2018). As a result, it is important to realize whether WOM generated by influencers may have affected the potential customers reach in the restaurant industry.

H6: The WOM generation of influencers is positively connected to the potential customers reach in the restaurant industry.

4. METHODOLOGY

Achieving the objectives of this study requires an in-depth methodological approach. For this reason, it starts with a quantitative study by using the focus group technique to a group of influencers. Then, in order to gain more insights about the results, a quantitative study based on a survey was carried out. This section describes the methodological approach used in the two studies. Section 4.1 describes the procedures for the qualitative study and section 4.2 details the quantitative study.

4.1. Qualitative Study

With regard to the qualitative methodology, as it is not related to numerical representativeness but with the deepening of a particular problem, in which there is illustrative information to comprehend its various dimensions (Queirós et al., 2017), the focus group method was chosen as a mean of data collection. Also, because the goal is to understand in more detail whether Instagram influencers actually have any bearing on consumers' decision in the process of choosing a particular restaurant. As a result, the individuals who are real and regular consumers of restaurants who are always seeking for new eating out places, and that most closely follow influencers and the content they share were selected. Therefore, a focus group with six participants found through the Instagram platform who follow restaurant influencers, such as Inês Brandling and Andreia Lopes Costa, mentioned in the contextualization, will be conducted. This will be done online, through the Zoom platform, due to the current context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Additionally, it should be noted that, as it is not a situation of closed answers, the focus group will be structured a priori, taking into account the clarity and form of exposure of the questions, but also recorded in audio format. This method will be used for the following purposes: (i) To verify if the process of looking for a restaurant is time-consuming and what are the characteristics that must be shared about it in order to get to a final decision more efficiently; (ii) To find out if Instagram is actually a widely used mean to find a restaurant and why; (iii) To examine if influencers have some weight in the process of choosing for a restaurant and why, but also what they need to have to influence others; (iv) To understand what the content shared by influencers should have to change consumers' minds

in relation to a restaurant and create the will to go there; (v) To compare what are the advantages and disadvantages of looking for a restaurant through influencers and its own communication channels; (vi) To find out if influencers generate WOM and if, overall, this is considered a marketing tool that has a massive influence in the process of choosing for a restaurant.

4.2. Quantitative Study

Regarding the quantitative study, the method that is going to be developed is a survey. This was the chosen tool since it can be quantified, it is considered more efficient in terms of collecting a wide diversity of facts and an optimal source to reach more people, although it depends to some extent on the openness and availability of the respondents to answer the questions (Queirós et al., 2017). Moreover, the survey was constructed in the Google Docs platform, being asked to be fulfilled online in the most honest and truest way possible with the guarantee that the collected information is anonymous and confidential.

As a form of data collection in a deeper and more comprehensive way, it was intended to carry out closed-ended response surveys. This instrument was simultaneously aimed both at people who live in or have visited Portugal, as well as people who have already known some restaurants in the country. Also, it was available during the period of September 2020 and shared in several social media, such as Facebook, Messenger, Instagram, WhatsApp and through E-mail. Thereafter, SPSS and PLS were essential tools to analyse the survey results in order to get the data collected in an objective and systematic manner.

4.2.1. Population and Sample

The population of this research is represented by those who live or have ever visited Portugal, and at the same time, that like to eat at restaurants. As the population is quite large and it is not possible to collect the required data in time, a sample will be used. Thus, a probabilistic and convenience sampling method was chosen, i.e. all individuals in the population have an equal chance to answer the survey and the sample is considered accessible. It should be noted that this method effectively facilitates the collection of data, but should not be generalised to the population under study, as the sample may not be representative of it.

In order to try to approximate the data to the reality of the population, it is intended to obtain a sample that is as variable as possible regarding demographic characteristics such as age, gender, home country, the geographical area of residence or already visited in Portugal, the level of education and current occupation. Individuals were therefore questioned through the shared questionnaire in order to reach the necessary sample of 422 surveys in total, in which only 395 are considered valid because they meet the requirements of having already visited the Portuguese restaurants. Finally, it is possible to name that the sample in study will be the consumers of Portuguese restaurants.

4.2.2. Survey

As regards the construction of the survey, it consists of ten parts with a total of 28 questions. In the first part, people living in or having visited Portugal, who eat in restaurants and how often, they do so, are filtered. The next step was to understand whether respondents are following any influencer on social networks or on recommendation apps, as well as whether they have felt that the content shared by some of them has had some weight on their purchasing decision. In the third part, the topic of restoration begins to be addressed, first of all, by questioning which categories of influencers people follow, and then which content that is shared by food influencers they find interesting. Afterwards, the purpose was to understand if they have ever gone to a restaurant after seeing an influencer recommending it and on which platforms they saw it, but also if they follow any restaurant influencer.

In addition, from the fourth to the seventh part, examples are given of Instagram restaurant influencers' posts to be analysed, such as whether an influencer helps in the process of finding a restaurant and in what way, concerning his personal characteristics and the actions he decides to take

on his profile. In the eighth part of the questionnaire, a comparison is made between consumers' abilities and perceptions of the influencers and the restaurants themselves. On the other hand, in the ninth part, taking into account all the information available and answered until this part, the respondents were called to answer, in general terms, how much they like the idea of restaurants using influencer marketing as a communication channel and whether they would recommend it as a source of research for a restaurant to other people. Finally, the individual's personal data were requested. Furthermore, both ordinal and nominal scales were used, the ordinal scale measures the consumer's level of agreement, good and satisfaction with the statements displayed, on a scale from 1 to 7. The lowest value represents "Strongly disagree", "Much worse" and "Very dissatisfied" and the 7th "Strongly agree", "Much better" and "Very satisfied", respectively. Conversely, the nominal scales expose different and unique responses.

5. RESULTS

5.1. Qualitative Results

The qualitative study was selected in order to obtain a more in-depth and detailed perception of the subject of this research. Thus, a focus group was conducted to 6 individuals who have the habit of visiting Portuguese restaurants and use Instagram influencers to search for them. This took place on 8th October, lasted one and a half hours and consisted of open-ended questions. Also, it is possible to see in Annex A, in more detail, each of the answers to the focus group's questions divided into three parts – general questions, opinions about the influencers in analysis and lastly, a comparison between the influencer and the restaurant posts. Keeping this in mind, a general characterisation of the data collected will follow. The sample was constituted by individuals from 21 to 24 years old from Lisbon, Setúbal, Leiria and Aveiro, who are students that go to restaurants 3 to 4 times a month.

5.1.1. General Questions

(1) How do you choose a restaurant?

When there is a research on which restaurant to go, Zomato, TheFork and Google are the most used platforms to find aspects such as rating, location, space, menu and price. However, Instagram is the most used to see the most visited places in the city, new restaurant trends, great looking food, as well as the restaurant spaces.

(2) What are the characteristics you consider crucial that influencers must have to influence you to go to the restaurant?

Influencers' main function is to show the restaurants and good-looking food constantly, so they should have expertise in the area and share content with the location and tag of the restaurant in question. Also, respondents believe influencers should be dedicated and empathetic, someone who not only shares because he has a high number of followers, but who actually cares and interacts with them. Basically, they are an excellent way of getting to know many new places without any doubt.

(3) If restaurants started using Instagram influencers to promote themselves instead of their own communication channels, what is your opinion about that?

Looking for restaurants through Instagram influencers is better to find more innovative concepts and new trends because of its easier access. On the other hand, influencers are very good at getting people's attention at an early stage in order to look then for more about the restaurant in question. In

fact, if it is an influencer that has a high number of followers and more important than that, a good relationship with them, restaurants can gain from this because it can be a mean of promoting themselves through the relationship that has already been created before between the influencer and his followers.

Moreover, they find that even though there has to be proper management on the part of the restaurant when it adopts this strategy in terms of choosing the best influencers to promote it, this is, overall, a good marketing technique that works very well (Kinnunen et al., 2018). Consequently, they consider that using influencers as a way to promote a restaurant rather than their own communication channels would add value to it, and this is a reality they must take on today if they want to reach more people.

5.1.2. Opinions on Influencers

(1) Do you know these influencers? What do you think about their Instagram pages?

Inês Brandling and Andreia Costa are both known Instagram restaurant influencers who have attractive pages that show places they like with more sincere opinions than from the restaurant itself. Also, respondents consider that these influencers have vast knowledge in restaurants with different types of cuisine, spaces, concepts, which was gained through experience. Additionally, knowing that they are restaurant influencers makes them going directly to their Instagram pages in order to look for restaurants.

(2) What do you think about the photos they took?

The participants would go to the restaurants promoted in the posts because they can understand and appreciate the locals' concepts through the images shared. In fact, the influencers have care with the photos, which is proved by the edition they do to them in order to have a good view for the user. In addition, they prefer carousel photos since it allows to see the food looking great, the atmosphere of the restaurant and to have a more general idea of what it has to offer.

(3) What do you think about the post description?

Influencers write good descriptions in their posts with the main touchpoints about the restaurant, being the summary text form the most practical and visual to arise greater interest to the focus group players. They think influencers should use direct language with their followers too for people to relate to what is written, but also appreciate when they give a personal touch with specific details, considering the information provided correctly. Furthermore, they find the description helpful when it comes to understanding the restaurant concept better, and when they tag the restaurant page to find out more about it.

(4) What is your opinion about paid partnerships?

Individuals appreciate it when influencers assume that the content they share is paid or offered because they like honesty and do not classify it as negative since it is their job. That is, they do not see it as something that could harm the restaurant, they believe in their opinions because the topic is food, so they think the influencers would never share something they do not like and do not identify with, especially when they already have their own well-defined brand and status.

(5) Would you recommend to your friends/family to see the content they share on Instagram as a source of research for a restaurant?

The content shared by the Instagram influencers as a source of research for a restaurant would be recommended to the friends and family of the participants as their pages present several interesting suggestions they might enjoy like they were a restoration catalogue. They also add that Instagram is an excellent platform to share posts in an easier way.

5.1.3. Comparison Between the Influencer and the Restaurant Classification

(1) What do you think of these posts? Do you prefer any? Why?

When the two Instagram posts were shown, side by side, of an influencer and a restaurant, the respondents preferred the first one since they immediately understood what the restaurant offers through more appealing photos that showed both its dishes and atmosphere. Also, because the information provided seemed more honest, personal and complete by giving special tips to provide a better experience.

(2) Who do you trust the most?

Participants think it is of utmost importance that influencers respond to their public, giving individual attention to their followers and being the most available possible in order to create a higher empathy and connection with them. In fact, if influencers respond to everyone and clarify all the existing doubts, this leads to a significant increase in their confidence. Apart from that, because influencers show several restaurants with a more personalized opinion, they believe they understand better the consumer needs and therefore, trust them more than the restaurant itself that has to defend its own brand and products.

(3) In general, do you feel that Instagram influencers have any impact on your decision to go to a restaurant?

Finally, the intermediates state that influencers impact their decision to go to a restaurant in a positive way, naming them as a gateway to the restaurant itself, as it is shown in such an appealing manner through an influencer that they gain interest in knowing more about it. In other words, they classify this marketing tool as an excellent form for restaurants to make themselves known to the public, especially the new ones, which happens also because they consider Instagram a good platform to more easily have access to new trends.

5.2. Quantitative Results

The data collection of the quantitative study consisted of an online questionnaire, addressing the individuals living or that have lived/visited Portugal who usually go to restaurants. The data was collected between 9th and 18th September 2020, being the sample of the survey the customers of Portuguese restaurants. In the following points, the data will be characterised and analysed.

5.2.1. Sample Characterization

As explained in the previous chapter, the quantitative study sample is composed of 395 individuals. Of these, it can be seen that 39% of individuals go to a restaurant "more than 4 times a month", with 33% going from 3 to 4 and only 1% going less than once a month. As far as the gender is concerned, 65.8% are female and 33.9% are male. With regard to the age group, individuals aged between 18 and 25 years predominate (73.9%), followed by those aged between 26 and 30 years (9.4%).

5.2.2. Characterization of the Influencer Marketing Weight

In the survey, individuals were asked whether or not they followed influencers on social media or recommendation apps, which 95% affirmed they do. However, 25% said they never felt that an influencer had any weight on their purchase decision. Of the 95% of respondents who follow an influencer as it was mentioned above, the most followed categories are "travel" (71.4%) and "food" (62.8%), being the least followed "pet" (18.3%) and "interior" (20.7%). With this, it should be noted that, in this question, respondents were able to give more than one answer. Regarding the content shared by food influencers and taking into account, respondents could give more than one answer to this question, the content considered to be the most interesting one is "restaurants" with 79.5%.

5.2.3. Characterization of the Process of Searching for a Restaurant through Influencers

As to whether or not respondents went to a restaurant because they saw an influencer sharing content related to it, the majority (81.27%) replied yes. When it comes to the platforms used to find that content and keeping in mind respondents could choose more than one option to this question, of that 81.27%, the one with the largest use is clearly Instagram with 91%, being the least used Peoople and Pinterest with only 4%. Moreover, 60% of the sample follows a restaurant influencer either on social networks or recommendation apps.

Most individuals tend to agree with all the statements exposed (average always higher than 4), except for the second one which states that following influencers wastes time in the process of looking for a restaurant (3.4). However, the statements most respondents agreed with are about being inclined to visit a restaurant because an influencer recommended it (4.9), recommending using influencers as a source of research for a restaurant (4.8), the process of looking for a restaurant being time-consuming (4.4) and encouraging others to visit a restaurant because an influencer recommended it (4.4). On the other hand, with regard to this way of looking for a restaurant completely meeting their needs (4), the sample is more distributed, yet, the number of responses continues to correspond to "Strongly agree" (42%).

The benefits that could be gained, in general, by using an influencer as a source of research for a restaurant (4.8) would be much better, and the same situation occurs with respect to the process itself if restaurants used this marketing technique, rather than their own communication channels (4.7). At last, in terms of satisfaction, the majority of respondents are very satisfied (61%) if restaurants started using influencers as a communication channel (4.9).

5.2.4. Characterization of a Restaurant Influencer

Firstly there is an agreement that an influencer provides several (4.5) and different (4.9) options of restaurants to visit, that he makes his followers want to visit them (4.9), as well as he allows a better understanding of their concepts (4.2). Nevertheless, when it comes to an influencer who always shares the restaurants he likes the most (4), the sample is more distributed, having thus prevailed the number of responses that correspond to "Strongly disagree" (42%). Conversely, there is a disagreement on the statements "An influencer that is never available to respond to my comments makes me trust him even more" (2,3), "An influencer makes the process of choosing a restaurant slower" (2,8), "An influencer is not helpful in the process of choosing a restaurant to visit" (2,9), and with respect to an influencer not being able to respond as quickly as the restaurant he is promoting (3,8), this is relatively balanced with the disagreements.

Furthermore, respondents tend to agree with three of the statements exposed (average higher than 4). In the first place, the posting of nice and appealing pictures (4.6), then the attention and care in the description of the post (4.4) and the identification of the restaurant in question (4.3) positively influence the respondents to want to attend it. On the other hand, there is a disagreement in the statements "The information given by the influencer makes choosing a restaurant harder" (3.1"), as

well as the "An influencer that alerts in the description of his posts when they are paid partnerships makes me not want to go there" (3.6).

Lastly, in order to compare the actions taken between an influencer and a restaurant, the affirmations evaluated are "Provides correct information in the description of his posts", "Is always too busy to respond to the comments of his followers", "Gives confidence to his followers", "Does not have the knowledge to provide recommendations", "Offers individual attention to his followers", and "Does not understand the needs of his followers".

5.2.5. Hypotheses Testing

Instagram is significantly, positively and moderately associated with the potential customers reach ($r_s = 0.312$, $p < 0.001$) – H1. Therefore, and because the significance level is lower than 0.05, it is concluded that the null hypothesis is not rejected. The restaurant knowledge is also significantly, positively and moderately associated with the potential customers reach ($r_s = 0.436$, $p < 0.001$) – H2. Thus, it can be said that the null hypothesis is not rejected. The correlation of the variables in question in this hypothesis is presented with a Spearman's Rho value of 0.400 and a significance level of 0.000 – H3. Therefore, it is concluded that the null hypothesis is not rejected, and so that the trust is significantly, positively and moderately associated with the potential customers reach. As for content care it is also significantly, positively and moderately associated with the potential customers reach ($r_s = 0.466$, $p < 0.001$) – H4. So, it is also confirmed that the null hypothesis is not rejected. Paid partnerships have a null correlation with the potential customers reach ($r_s = 0.062$, $p = 0.235$) – H5. In view of this, and because the significance level is higher than 0.05, it is concluded that the null hypothesis is rejected. Finally, the results indicate that WOM generation is significantly, positively and moderately associated with the potential customers reach ($r_s = 0.591$, $p < 0.001$) – H6. Thus, the last hypothesis is confirmed.

5.3. Discussion

The main objective of this investigation was to ascertain whether Instagram influencers can affect the restaurant industry in a beneficial way, in the specific case of increasing potential customers. For this purpose, several criteria that had already been mentioned in studies outside Portugal and for industries other than catering were used. Consequently, the aim was to establish the same with respect to the particular characteristics of an influencer, more concretely, with regard to his Instagram account, his knowledge of restaurants, the trust he transmits to his followers, the care he takes with the content he shares, the paid partnerships he decides to accept and the WOM he generates. Having determined the various dimensions of the study, a model was developed to measure the impact of these on the consumer's intention to visit a restaurant. To achieve this, the use of both quantitative (questionnaire to people attending Portuguese restaurants) and qualitative (focus group with individuals using Instagram influencers to search for these restaurants) methodologies were used. The techniques used were based on literature review, however, this analysis revealed some general limitations regarding the questionnaire where the sample may not be representative of the population under study and the focus group may not be sufficiently large to take any further conclusions (Queirós et al., 2017). In order to overcome these limitations, a combination of the two types of analysis was conducted, having, on the one hand, the opinions of those closest to Portuguese restaurants and, more specifically, those who consult Instagram influencers to search for them.

Later on, data was analysed and statistically validated through Spearman's correlation, in which it could be inferred that all the criteria presented correlate positively with the increase in potential consumers in the restaurant industry, except for that related to paid partnerships. Thus, these variables have a positive impact on the industry, in which the most important one is the WOM that an influencer generates, followed by the care he takes with the content he shares, then his vast knowledge in several restaurants present a higher correlation, after that, the confidence he conveys to his public, and finally the fact of having an Instagram profile.

These results could be complemented with those of the focus group, where participants stated, regarding the most important variable, the WOM, since they recommend to their friends and family this way of looking for a restaurant as the influencers' pages are like a restaurant catalogue that integrates several suggestions that they are able to appreciate, but also by the ease that Instagram's platform makes available to its users an easy way of content sharing. Indeed, from the 395 survey respondents, 63% affirmed they would generate positive WOM in relation to this marketing technique.

Taking into account the care with the content that includes the photographs, the description of the post, the location and the tag of the restaurant, it is concluded that the influencers have it because they can perfectly pass on the concept of restaurants through quality images that demonstrate the dishes available and their environment. Also, through the descriptions that are appealing because they have, in a summarized way and with a direct language to the public, the main and more personal aspects that can make the reader want to visit the restaurant. In fact, 57% of respondents in the questionnaire consider that influencers share amazing pictures of restaurants and 51% say they pay attention to the description of their posts. Moreover, the information provided is considered correct and useful in terms of knowing more about the restaurant as it provides the chance to visit its page, which would not be possible if its Instagram profile was the first contact that consumers would have with it because they cannot immediately understand its offer. Therefore, 65% state that the content shared by influencers makes the process of choosing a restaurant easier.

With regard to the dimension of expertise in restaurants, the third most significant, this is considered vast, as 61% of respondents affirmed, due to the experience influencers have acquired over time. They know so many types of cuisine, spaces and concepts that make people go directly to their Instagram to look for one.

The restaurant influencers must be dedicated, empathic people who, regardless of their number of followers, are concerned with interacting with their followers, with 78% of the respondents saying that influencers who answer the comments on their posts increase the confidence transmitted. When compared to the restaurants they promote, they are considered more responsive and more honest, as they give a more personalised opinion, clarify all doubts and give individual attention to their audience, demonstrating themselves as available people. Thereby, a greater connection and trust is created with the influencers, that it costs more for the restaurant to achieve, so they understand better the needs of the consumer.

Concerning the platforms where it is possible to search for information such as rating, menu and prices, the most used is Zomato, however, due to its easy access to find new trends and innovative concepts in the restaurant business with the location, images of the food with an excellent look and the space of the restaurant, the choice falls on Instagram. On the other hand, it is important to justify the only rejected hypothesis of this investigation, i.e. the fact that paid partnerships have no impact on the increase of potential consumers in the catering industry. This is because it is the work of the influencers and people do not see it as something negative, on the contrary, they appreciate honesty and think that it is not something that harms the restaurant, as 51% of the participants state that the paid content does not make them lose the will to visit the restaurant. Since the topic is food, they believe influencers already have their status well defined with their audience, so they are not sharing it because they have been paid, but because they like it and identify with it.

In general, influencers are a reality that restaurants must adopt in order to reach a larger number of consumers since this is a marketing tool that works very well in the first stage of contact whose objective is to capture the attention in order to later gain interest in knowing more about them. Indeed, 60% of participants affirmed that they already follow an influencer of this category on social networks and recommendation apps, and also, although they may choose more than one option, the truth is that 80% of them selected the restaurants when asked about the most interesting content shared by food influencers.

Conversely, because the process of choosing a restaurant is often time-consuming, the influencers are an excellent alternative that speeds up this process, as 71% of the respondents stated. So, this

is a way to add value for restaurants, especially those that have recently opened, as they are taking advantage of the good relationship already created by the influencers with their public, not forgetting that clearly there will have to be good management when it comes to choosing the most appropriate ones to promote themselves. In fact, 61% of respondents said they would be very happy if this became an official channel of communication for restaurants since 81% of participants have actually been to a restaurant promoted by an Instagram influencer.

In short, the influencers impact the decision to go to a restaurant in a positive way, what could be withdrawn by the questionnaire, in which 65% claimed that the benefits they receive from using this source as a way to search for a restaurant would be much better. Thus, it can be concluded that this is a very creative and appealing way to promote oneself, being the influencers considered as a doorway to the restaurant itself.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1. Theoretical Contributions

After discussing the results and touching on the main points of this research, it is now crucial to compare them with the literature review to deepen the conclusions of this study.

Firstly, as regards the hypothesis with the greatest correlation between variables, WOM and the reach of potential consumers in catering, it can be confirmed that influencers generate it by sharing their personal experiences and opinions that lead to a high admiration for a brand (Martikainen & Pitkanen, 2019). Moreover, because they are Instagram influencers and this platform allows seeing images and videos with the products, i.e. by demonstrating the offer as close to reality as possible, it also leads to a greater generation of WOM (De Veirman et al., 2017). Thus, it is normal that Inês Brandling, one of the best restaurant influencers in Portugal, due to the excellent feedback that people give to her, she sees her profile gaining notoriety (Red Bull, 2018).

In second place comes the fourth hypothesis with greater relevance, whereas the effort behind the posts, the visual part and the authenticity are in fact proven as factors that contribute to the success of influencer marketing (Martikainen & Pitkanen, 2019). Therefore, it can be said that Inês Brandling is successful since she is careful with the content she shares, as she tags the restaurant she is promoting and does everything to take the most instagramic photos for her followers (Red Bull, 2018). On the other hand, expertise in the restaurant industry comes in third place, which proves what is mentioned in the literature review regarding the influencers shaping the minds of consumers if they are familiar with a particular subject (Torres et al., 2019). Moreover, this research shows that Instagram is actually the best platform to influencer marketing, as stated by the Influencer Marketing Hub (2020). Also, the use of Instagram influencers as a promotion technique has an impact on the catering industry too, increasing the reach of potential consumers (TheFork, 2016).

As for the only variable that has no impact on the market in question, it is bridged the statement related to the fact that regular content creates a higher engagement than paid ones (Martikainen & Pitkanen, 2019). Indeed, those that are considered to be credible, creative, personal and with a description that says it is advertising (Coates et al., 2020) in order to demonstrate transparency (Boerman, 2020), already have a positive impact on the relationship that the audience has with an influencer and, consequently, in the presented market.

Finally, it is important to mention that in this study, a comparison was made between the communication channels of the restaurant itself and the influencers that promote them. With this, it was possible to conclude that the fact that influencers are brand ambassadors who make a more quickly impact on the audience (Boerman, 2020), leads them to be part of an infallible technique when the objective is to promote a brand, in this case, a restaurant (Paula, 2018).

6.2. Managerial Implications

The main purpose of this study is to provide restaurants with a marketing tool to enhance the number of potential customers, understanding the extent to which Instagram influencers can impact this industry in a positive way. Keeping this in mind, Instagram influencer marketing presents several managerial implications to restaurants, since they might need to search for new trending ways to promote themselves, especially if they are newcomers in the market.

Bearing in mind that the restoration industry in 2017, in Portugal, recorded a profit of 5,454.2 million euros and has a significant growth trend (Statista, 2020a), it is important to find more and more ways to increase the will of going to restaurants. Indeed, based on the survey of this study, 72% of the 395 respondents, claim to visit a restaurant more than 3 times a month, which follows the statement regarding this sector having a very positive evolution.

However, due to the fact that consumers are increasingly demanding with new needs, choices, tastes and expectations they want to be satisfied by the offer of the market in question, there must be new ways to attract them. An example of this is the possibility of integrating digital influencers into the marketing strategy of restaurants, this being a fully proven reality that has a great impact on business, in terms of arousing interest and drawing attention to get to know more about them (TheFork, 2016). On the other hand, it should be noted that in fact, 75% of respondents stated that a recommendation by an influencer had a great weight in their purchase decision.

Finally, not discouraging all of their own communication channels to demonstrate more specific aspects such as the schedule, the possibility of making reservations, menus, events, among others, restaurants should also use Instagram influencers in order to reach more people and take advantage of the relationship they already have with their audience. Through this mean, they will be able to share other positive points, such as great looking food, the restaurant's decoration and special tips that, because they are more personal and unique, improve the experience of the final consumer, but also enhance the interaction, connection and perception of the restaurant itself. By doing so, restaurants will certainly see their rating, positive reviews and good WOM increasing, and consequently, their number of potential customers.

6.3. Limitations and Future Research

Due to the current paradigm of the pandemic, it was not possible to carry out the focus group in person, but in another context, it would have been preferable to do so in order to try to observe the behaviours of the participants when asked about their opinions regarding the influencers and the restaurants they promote.

As mentioned above, the hypothesis of paid partnerships having an influence on the catering industry was not verified. The remaining variables - WOM generation, care with content, knowledge in the area of restoration, confidence conveyed and Instagram -, although confirmed and positively correlated with the enhancing of potential consumers, it could not be concluded that this influence was strong but rather moderate. This was probably because, in the course of the questionnaire, respondents were asked to think of a restaurant influencer they knew and then consider the same for the rest of the survey; or if they did not know any, only two of this category were presented, so they could have been showing more and with greater differences in the content they share.

On the other hand, more criteria could be found concerning Instagram influencers, and the weight they have in choosing a restaurant. Another possibility would be to carry out a similar study for a specific type of restaurant, i.e. to focus on bars, cafes, pizzerias, Japanese, Indian or traditional Portuguese food, for example. Finally, it could be interesting to reverse the research approach and study the reasons that lead someone to follow a certain influencer, and so that try to create several consumer profiles with different needs.

In the future, a market other than Portuguese may be studied, such as French or English, which in 2017, had a higher turnover in the ranking of restaurants in the European Union. Probably they could have more significant inputs in terms of change and finding innovative marketing techniques

to reach more people, and thus up the number of potential consumers as suggested by Sadgui and Benchekara (2018).

Lastly, the same study could be carried out in a few years' time, when there is already a new perspective on influencers, Instagram platform and on the restaurants in Portugal. This channel of communication in this market could also be analysed due to changes in attitudes, tastes, behaviours and expectations towards them.

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