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Consumer Engagement with Restaurant Brands on Instagram: The Mediating Role of Consumer-related Factors

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Abstract

Purpose- Consumers' digital engagement can bring various benefits to both brands and consumers. Besides, few studies investigated the outcomes of engagement with restaurant brands on Instagram. Therefore, this study examines the effect of consumer engagement with restaurant brands on consumer-related factors (namely, consumer's brand knowledge, perceived enjoyment, and consumer social interaction) and brand-related factors (namely, e-WOM and brand reputation), as well as the mediating role of consumer-related factors.

Methodology- The sample consisted of 394 Instagram followers of restaurant/coffee shop brands, and Covariance-Based Structural Equation Modeling (CB-SEM) and bootstrapping were used to assess the hypothesized relationships.

Findings- The results show that consumer engagement with restaurant brands on Instagram enhances brand-related outcomes as well as consumer-related outcomes. Moreover, consumer-related factors partially mediate these relationships.

Practical implications- The findings of this study provide insights for restaurant managers and digital marketers to stimulate consumer-brand engagement.

Originality/value- This research is among the first that examines the effect of consumer engagement with restaurant brands on consumer- and brand-related outcomes on Instagram. The context of the study is Iran, which adds to the literature on consumer engagement that mainly focuses on developed countries.

Keywords: Consumer Engagement; Instagram; Consumer Knowledge; Consumer Social Interaction; e-WOM; Brand Reputation.

1. Introduction

Social media platforms have leveraged consumer-brand connections (Bazi *et al.*, 2020; Harrigan *et al.*, 2018; Kang *et al.*, 2014; So *et al.*, 2021) and enabled a higher level of consumer engagement with brands (Sashi *et al.*, 2019). Consumer engagement (CE) is “a consumer’s positively-valenced brand-related cognitive, emotional and behavioral activity during or related to focal consumer/brand interaction” (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2014, p. 254). Social media create an interactive space for consumers to connect with brands through consuming, contributing and creating content (Muntinga *et al.*, 2011). Marketing managers use social media to promote the company’s products/services and to establish stronger connections with its customers (Tang *et al.*, 2019). CE is a source of competitive advantage and a key performance indicator for digital marketers focusing on customer relationship management (Hao, 2020). Consumer engagement with brands on social media pages (hereafter CEB) has attracted the attention of scholars and practitioners in various fields in recent years (e.g., Bazi *et al.*, 2020; Filieri *et al.*, 2021; Hao, 2020; Hou and Pan, 2023; Kang *et al.*, 2014), and some studies have been conducted on CE and its outcomes (e.g., Harrigan *et al.*, 2018).

Studying CE with restaurant brands on social media like Instagram is important because restaurants are increasingly using these platforms to showcase their products to their followers and to attract new customers. Moreover, Instagram is one of the fastest-growing Social Networking Sites (SNSs) with over a billion users and one of the most popular social media platforms for teens and younger adults (18-34) (Statista, 2022).

CE brings various benefits to brands and consumers. It helps businesses improve relationship quality (Gómez *et al.*, 2019), enhances textual (Chu *et al.*, 2019) and visual e-WOM (Filiari *et al.*, 2021), and fosters perceived brand love (Bazi *et al.*, 2023). On the other hand, CEB enhances consumers' social-psychological, hedonic values (Kang *et al.*, 2014), functional, social, and entertainment values (Touni *et al.*, 2022), and increases their empowerment (Brodie *et al.*, 2013).

Although some travel & tourism studies have explored the outcomes of CE (Ballester *et al.*, 2023; Dijkmans *et al.*, 2015; Harrigan *et al.*, 2018; Kim and Chae, 2018; Yost *et al.*, 2021; Zhang *et al.*, 2021), few studies have investigated the factors that mediate its effect on brand reputation and e-WOM. Identifying the factors that potentially mediate a relationship is important to understand the conditions under which the effect of a construct like CE is more likely to occur. By unveiling the explanatory power of mediating factors, scholars can provide a more nuanced understanding of the impact of CEB.

Drawing upon the literature on CE, scholars discuss the importance of constructs like content aesthetic quality (Bazi *et al.*, 2023), consumers' brand knowledge (Bazi *et al.*, 2020), enjoyment (Kang *et al.*, 2014; Muntinga *et al.*, 2011), and social interactions (Onofrei *et al.*, 2022). Marketing studies on brands observe that consumers interact with each other and socialize by sharing branded information and experiences on brand pages (Kim and Ko, 2012). By doing so, more people can improve their knowledge about a product or brand (Muntinga *et al.*, 2011).

Furthermore, they reveal that hedonic motives such as entertainment or enjoyment are important motives for CEB (Bazi *et al.*, 2023; Kang *et al.*, 2014; Muntinga *et al.*, 2011).

Drawing upon this literature, we expect that the effectiveness of CE in achieving brand-related outcomes may depend on the capacity of restaurant brands to enhance consumer enjoyment, consumer's brand knowledge, and social interactions. Thus, the second contribution of this study is to examine the mediating role of consumer knowledge, enjoyment, and social interactions in the relationship between CEB and brand-related outcomes.

Moreover, few studies have focused on the impact of CEB on consumer-related and brand-related outcomes in developing countries and in the restaurant industry. The restaurant industry constitutes an important sector in the hospitality industry and has some peculiarities that can affect the impact of CEB. For example, customer experience with restaurant brands is more multidimensional, and the industry is composed of several small businesses, sometimes family-owned, who often do not have a presence on SM. Furthermore, most studies on CE are based on developed countries such as the US, UK, South Korea, and Australia, while little research has been conducted on CEB in developing countries. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many restaurants in Iran have turned to offering online ordering and delivery services through SNSs, specifically Instagram. Therefore, another contribution of this study is to examine the effect of CE with restaurant brand pages on brand-related outcomes as well as consumer-related outcomes in a developing country, Iran.

The theoretical foundation of this study is Social Exchange Theory (SET). SET suggests that people (and brands) engage in social interactions based on the expectation of receiving benefits in return for their actions. This theory can be applied to CEB based on their expectations of receiving certain benefits from these relationships. For example, a consumer may engage with a

brand by following it on SNSs, leaving positive comments, or forwarding its posts to others, with the expectation of receiving benefits such as discounts, rewards, or recognition from the brand.

2. Literature review

2.1. *Consumer Engagement with Social Media Brand Pages (CEB)*

CE is a multidimensional psychological concept encompassing the customers' cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses with a brand, which goes beyond purchasing (So *et al.*, 2014). Cognitive engagement refers to the consumers' mental activation through interacting with brand pages; the emotional dimension refers to the emotions and feelings arising in a particular consumer/brand interaction, while the behavioral dimension is defined as the consumer's effort and time spent interacting with brand pages (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2014). With regard to Muntinga *et al.*'s (2011) Consumers' Online Brand-Related Activities model (COBRA), the behavioral component can comprise consuming (e.g., reading, watching), contributing (e.g., liking, commenting), and creating content (e.g., generating brand-related content).

Several studies have investigated the antecedents and consequences of CE in different fields, and found that diverse factors can motivate consumers to engage with brand pages, for example, seeking information, entertainment, and fun (Bazi *et al.*, 2023; Mainolfi *et al.*, 2022), parasocial interaction and community identification (Tsai & Men 2013). Other studies focused on the type of content that generates stronger engagement, such as the use of rational or emotional appeals (Dolan *et al.*, 2019), or aesthetically pleasing content (Bazi *et al.*, 2023). In addition, studies show that CEB can bring various benefits to brands, such as fostering purchase intention (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2014), brand loyalty (Bazi *et al.*, 2023), brand satisfaction (Brodie *et al.*, 2013), brand love (Bazi *et al.*, 2023), and e-WOM (Chu *et al.*, 2019). It can also bring benefits to consumers, such as consumer empowerment (Brodie *et al.*, 2013).

In the travel and tourism sector, scholars revealed that CE influences brand trust and commitment (Kang *et al.*, 2014), emotional attachment to a destination (Filieri *et al.*, 2021), brand loyalty (Shin, 2023), self-brand connection and brand usage intention (Harrigan *et al.*, 2018), customer–brand identification (Song *et al.*, 2019), customer-perceived values (i.e., functional, social, and entertainment) and customer-brand relationship strength (i.e., commitment, self-connection, and intimacy) (Touni *et al.*, 2022), firm performance (Yost *et al.*, 2021), brand financial growth (Kim and Chae, 2018), and corporate reputation (Dijkmans *et al.*, 2015).

Regarding investigating CEB on Instagram, Phua *et al.* (2017) found that Instagram users have the highest brand community engagement and commitment (compared to Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat). Rietveld *et al.* (2020) demonstrated that brand-generated content containing visual, emotional and informative appeals and arousal images influences CE. Tafesse and Wood (2021) found that follower count and content volume are negatively associated with follower engagement, whereas followers' counts are positively associated with it. Filieri *et al.* (2021) showed how CE with a destination sometimes is associated with a declaration of love towards it, spreading positive emotional e-WOM.

2.2. *Social Exchange Theory*

Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964) suggests that people analyze the potential advantages and downsides of a relationship. They then choose to assist or please the other person in proportion to the favorable outcomes they expect in return. When consumers engage with a brand page, they obtain several benefits, such as relevant information about the brand's

offerings, sales promotions, deals, and the like. Receiving this information benefits the users and motivates them to interact with brands on social media (Bazi *et al.*, 2020). On the other hand, brands can benefit from engaging consumers with their pages. For example, they can analyze information about their followers to better understand their target segments, their needs, their preferences, and the like. Furthermore, this exchange between consumers and brands can lead to an ongoing relationship, which can bring various benefits such as a stronger connection to the brand, brand loyalty, advocacy, and willingness to recommend the brand to their friends and family. Therefore, CEB can provide a reciprocal exchange of benefits between consumers and brands, and investigating these benefits will help brands improve their relationship with consumers.

3. Hypotheses Development

3.1. Consumer's Brand Knowledge

Consumer knowledge plays a significant role in the decision-making process. Before buying, consumers tend to seek comprehensive information about the products/services available in the market so that they can choose the best alternative that meets their needs. Alba and Hutchinson (1987) stated that consumer knowledge consists of two parts: familiarity and expertise. Familiarity corresponds to the early phases of a consumer's learning process, whereas expertise relates to the later, more advanced levels of understanding. Consumer's brand knowledge can help consumers evaluate product healthiness (Li *et al.*, 2000), and restaurant quality (Naderi *et al.*, 2018). It can also lead to a willingness to pay (Cordell, 1997), and adoption of technological innovations (Lin and Filieri, 2015).

Consumers engage with brand pages to increase their knowledge about the brands and their products/services (Bazi *et al.*, 2020). On the brand pages, consumers can find various information about the characteristics and features of products/services, prices, and other consumers' experiences/recommendations (Bazi *et al.*, 2020). When consumers engage with a brand page, such as reading comments, watching, liking, sharing brand-related posts, and commenting on them, they can learn from others' experiences about the product/service (Kang *et al.*, 2014; Muntinga *et al.*, 2011), they can become more knowledgeable of the brand and its products/services (Cheung *et al.*, 2020). Obtaining various information helps consumers make better decisions. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H₁: CEB positively influences consumers' brand knowledge.

3.2. *Consumer Social Interactions*

Consumer social interactions indicates one-to-one and one-to-many communications among consumers. The original purpose of social media platforms like SNSs was to enable individuals to connect with other people and maintain these relationships (Tsai and Men, 2013). Individuals are social beings by nature and tend to interact with others to meet their need for social interactions. For example, by using SNSs and participating in virtual brand communities, they can keep in touch with their friends as well as develop new social ties and make friends (Zhong, 2014), or connect with like-minded people (Wodzicki *et al.*, 2012). In addition, CEB helps consumers talk with other followers and improve social ties (Aluri *et al.*, 2015). For instance, reading comments under a brand post gives followers the opportunity to respond to others' comments and start a conversation. By reading other followers' comments, consumers may reply to them to simply establish a connection or to seek more information about their experiences.

Lee and Chun (2016) also found that if people read comments similar to their own opinions, their willingness to speak to others will increase. Even by forwarding brands' posts to their friends or mentioning their friends' names in comments, consumers could invite them to visit that restaurant/coffee shop. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H₂: CEB positively influences consumer social interaction.

3.3. *Consumer Perceived Enjoyment*

Perceived enjoyment refers to "the extent to which fun can be derived from using the system as such" (Van der Heijden, 2004, p. 697). Consumers browse brand pages on social media for entertainment and enjoyment motives (Bazi *et al.*, 2023; Muntinga *et al.*, 2011; Tsai and Men, 2013). Their perceived enjoyment makes them continue interacting with brand pages (Shi *et al.*, 2016). People may even experience hedonic pleasure by reading others' posts (Park *et al.*, 2014). In addition, scholars show that content quality can enhance CE through customer enjoyment and entertainment (Bazi *et al.*, 2023). Therefore, we hypothesize as follows:

H₃: CEB positively influences consumer perceived enjoyment.

3.4. *e-WOM*

e-WOM refers to online feedback, including ratings, from individuals who claim to have purchased or used a company's products/services, encompassing positive, neutral, or negative sentiments (Filiari, 2015). e-WOM can influence information adoption and purchase intention (Filiari, 2015), firm's financial performance (Raguseo and Vitari, 2017), and brand equity (Sun *et al.*, 2021). Owing to the impalpable nature of experiential goods (e.g., restaurants, hotels, etc.), consumers' comments are particularly important in purchasing those goods (Liu and Park, 2015),

and if these comments are credible and useful, they can influence consumer trust, satisfaction and online platforms' continued usage (Filiberti *et al.*, 2020).

Previous studies investigated several triggers and motives of WOM. For example, Moore and Moore (2005) found that consumer-to-consumer interactions can influence positive WOM, and consumers are more likely to share a brand's promotional posts with their strong ties (Choi, *et al.*, 2017). When interacting with others, consumers may talk about the brand and its products/services or share their experiences of using the product/service with others. Furthermore, when a person experiences a product/service or learns about it, they tend to talk with others about that product/service (Berger and Schwartz, 2011).

On the other hand, Park *et al.* (2014) revealed that entertainment value influences the intention to share some information about the brand. Hu *et al.* (2022) and Shin *et al.* (2018) also found that perceived enjoyment influences e-WOM. Similarly, Yesiloglu *et al.* (2021) revealed that enjoyment and external rewards can motivate consumers to create brand-related content. Finally, Piehler *et al.* (2019) showed that consuming brand-related content (e.g., reading or watching posts) can influence e-WOM. Therefore, we hypothesize as follows:

H4: Consumer knowledge positively influences e-WOM.

H5: Consumer social interactions positively influences e-WOM.

H6: Consumer perceived enjoyment positively influences e-WOM.

H7: CEB positively influences e-WOM.

3.5. *Brand Reputation*

Brand reputation is defined as “the overall impression of what stakeholders think, feel, and talk about a brand” (Rust *et al.*, 2021, p. 22). A restaurant's/coffee shop's reputation can be a

significant criterion for consumers when choosing a restaurant/coffee shop (Chang, 2013). Communications on social media can impact corporate reputation (Kietzmann *et al.*, 2011). Given the intrinsic experiential essence of the restaurant industry, consumers are motivated to derive insights from other consumers' experiences (Kang and Namkung, 2016) and interact with the brand page before making a decision. Dijkmans *et al.* (2015) also demonstrated that users' (non-customers) engagement in SNSs activities affects corporate reputation.

SNSs have provided a platform for spreading e-WOM (Shin *et al.*, 2018). Besides, by using SNSs, consumers can also share their own experiences or other information by leaving comments, forwarding brand-related content to their friends, or posting them on their own pages. When consumers engage in e-WOM activities on brand pages, for example, by re-sharing brand-related content, more consumers will be reached and can form an impression about the brand. Sharing brand-related content is a contributing type of engagement (Muntinga *et al.*, 2011), in which the consumer makes a statement about their (positive) attitude towards the company in front of their network members. By resharing a brand-related content, consumers implicitly stress the quality of the brand to their networks, which can increase brand reputation. Furthermore, another form of engagement is user-generated posts containing branded hashtags. As consumers increasingly share brand-related content using the brand's hashtag, the brand's visibility in SNSs search results rises, potentially leading to a trending status. This heightened visibility and support contribute to an enhanced reputation for the brand. Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H₈: CEB positively influences Brand Reputation.

H₉: e-WOM positively influences Brand Reputation.

Figure 1 exhibits the research framework:

Figure 1.

3.6. *The Mediating Role of Consumer-Related Outcomes*

This study also examines the mediating role of consumer-related outcomes between CEB and e-WOM, and brand reputation. To gain a deeper understanding of how CE affects consumer behavior, it is crucial to identify the factors that may mediate this relationship. By exploring the role of factors potentially mediating this relationship, we gain a more nuanced understanding of the impact of CEB and the conditions under which it is more likely to occur. In previous studies, several variables have been investigated as mediators in the relationship between CE and behavioral outcomes. For example, Loureiro *et al.* (2017) indicated that brand love acts as a mediator in the relationship between CE and positive e-WOM. Touni *et al.* (2022), investigated the mediating role of customer-perceived values in the relationship between CEB on Facebook and consumer-brand relationship strength.

Scholars emphasize the significance of concepts such as consumers' brand knowledge (Bazi *et al.*, 2020), enjoyment (Bazi *et al.*, 2023; Muntinga *et al.*, 2011), and social interactions (Muntinga *et al.*, 2011; Onofrei *et al.*, 2022) in the field of CEB. According to the literature, consumers communicate with each other and share brand-related information and experiences on brand pages (Kim and Ko, 2012; Lee and Chun, 2016), which can enhance their knowledge of a product/service or brand (Bazi *et al.*, 2020; Muntinga *et al.*, 2011). Additionally, scholars suggest that entertainment and enjoyment are key factors that motivate consumers to engage with brand pages (Bazi *et al.*, 2023; Muntinga *et al.*, 2011).

As mentioned before, CEB can have various effects on consumer behavior and brands. Therefore, examining the mediating role of consumer's brand knowledge, consumer perceived enjoyment, and consumer social interactions in the relationship between CEB and brand-related outcomes can help businesses and marketers better comprehend the complexity of engagement and develop more effective strategies to engage consumers with brands on SM. However, there is no research investigating the mediating role of these factors. Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H₁₀: Consumer knowledge mediates the effect of CEB on e-WOM.

H₁₁: Consumer social interactions mediates the effect of CEB on e-WOM.

H₁₂: Consumer perceived enjoyment mediates the effect of CEB on e-WOM.

H₁₃: Consumer-related outcomes along with e-WOM mediate the effect of CEB on brand reputation.

4. Research Methods

4.1. Sampling and Data Collection

The target population of this study consists of Iranian Instagram users who are active followers of Iranian restaurant/coffee shop brand pages. The sampling method was purposive. The pages of the restaurants/coffee shops that appeared in the first results of the Instagram search were selected. This criterion enabled authors to identify the restaurants with the highest frequency of activity on Instagram. In total, about 45 Iranian restaurant/coffee shop pages were selected to favor the generalizability of the findings. An invitation message was sent to the followers with some visible engagement activities (i.e., liking or commenting). After assessing the face validity of the questionnaire by four marketing academics, a pretest was undertaken with

50 responses. After the revision of some questions, an online questionnaire, including 28 items, was sent to the followers of these restaurant/coffee shops.

A screening question measured the level of the respondents' engagement with those pages. Hence, before filling out the questionnaire, respondents were asked about their activities on the brand page, and if they did not answer this question, they were removed from the survey. The questionnaire link was sent to about 680 followers, and 411 responses were received, of which 394 were valid. Data was gathered from mid-August to the end of September 2022. As shown in Table I, most of the respondents were female (52.8%), had a bachelor's degree (50.3%) , and were between 25 to 44 years (81.2%).

Table I

4.2. Measurement Scale

All measures were adapted from existing studies, as shown in Appendix A, and modified to fit the context of restaurant/coffee shop brand pages on Instagram. All items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from '1= completely disagree' to '5= completely agree'. Three marketing scholars -who were fluent in both English and Farsi- were engaged to examine the validity of the questionnaire.

4.3. Data Analysis

A CFA was run with all measurement items using AMOS 24.0 to examine the construct validity. Regarding consumer engagement, the items loaded on a single factor with strong internal consistency. The scale also demonstrated good reliability and validity based on

Cronbach's alpha, CR, and AVE values. Therefore, combining the multidimensional scale into a single unidimensional construct is empirically justified and provides a parsimonious representation of the engagement construct in this study.

5. Results

5.1. Measurement Model Assessment

As shown in Table II, the model fit indices -including CFI (0.961), RMSEA (0.049) and SRMR (0.0428)- are acceptable, and the values of SMC (>0.4), CR (>0.7) and AVE (>0.5), confirmed convergent validity of the measures. CB-SEM was used to examine the hypotheses. Table III displays the correlation coefficients between variables as well as discriminant validity.

Table II

Table III

5.2. Structural Model Assessment

The model was analyzed by using CB-SEM and bootstrapping technique with 2,000 resamples and 95% confidence intervals. As shown in Table IV, hypotheses 1, 2, and 3 are supported (H₁: $\beta = 0.479$, $p < 0.001$; H₂: $\beta = 0.383$, $p < 0.001$; H₃: $\beta = 0.594$, $p < 0.001$). Therefore, CEB positively influences consumer knowledge, consumer social interaction, and consumer perceived enjoyment. In addition, the effects of consumer knowledge, consumer social interaction, consumer perceived enjoyment and CEB on e-WOM are positive (H₄: $\beta = 0.138$, $p < 0.05$; H₅: $\beta = 0.153$, $p < 0.01$; H₆: $\beta = 0.358$, $p < 0.001$; H₇: $\beta = 0.191$, $p < 0.01$). Besides, CEB

and e-WOM have significant and positive effects on brand reputation (H₈: $\beta = 0.421, p < 0.001$; H₉: $\beta = 0.179, p < 0.01$).

Table IV

Besides, according to Table V, H₁₀, H₁₁, and H₁₂ are supported, and consumer knowledge, consumer social interaction, and consumer perceived enjoyment have a partial mediating role in the relationship between CEB and e-WOM (H₁₀: $\beta = 0.070, p = 0.023$; H₁₁: $\beta = 0.060, p = 0.005$; H₁₂: $\beta = 0.218, p = 0.001$). As shown in Table V, consumer-related outcomes along with e-WOM have the serial mediating effect in the relationship between CEB and brand reputation (standardized indirect effects = 0.112), supporting H₁₃. To evaluate the strength of the mediation effect, the Variance Accounted For (VAF) value was used. Since the value of VAF is between 0.20 and 0.80, consumer-related outcomes partially mediate the relationship between CEB and e-WOM and brand reputation.

Table V

6. Discussion and Conclusions

6.1. Conclusions

This is one of the first studies that investigates the outcomes of CE with restaurant brands on Instagram in a developing country, Iran. This study contributes to the growing body of research on consumer-brand engagement in the travel and tourism industry (Ballester *et al.*, 2023; Hao, 2020; Li and Wei, 2021; So *et al.*, 2021). This research also fills the gap in the literature on the

mediating effects between CEB and specific brand-related outcomes such as e-WOM and brand reputation.

The results show that CE with restaurant brands increases consumer knowledge about the brand, perceived enjoyment, and consumer social interactions. The mediating role of consumer-related factors, namely consumer's brand knowledge, consumer social interaction, and consumer perceived enjoyment, in the relationship between CEB and brand-related outcomes are also affirmed.

Moreover, the findings demonstrate that the more consumers engage with restaurant brands, the higher their willingness to e-WOM, which increases brand reputation. Furthermore, the results also reveal that CEB fosters e-WOM when consumers become knowledgeable about the brand, enjoy branded content, and interact with other consumers. In summary, when the brand can create an SNS community of customers who engage with its content, they will be more likely to recommend or discuss the brand with others to enhance its reputation. Overall, the study highlights the importance of engaging consumers with brand pages to increase consumers' knowledge of the brand, perceived enjoyment, and social interactions, which can ultimately lead to e-WOM and brand reputation.

6.2. *Theoretical Implications*

This study responds to the call for more research on the different consequences of CE with hospitality brands on social media (Touni *et al.*, 2020). Tourism & hospitality scholars have studied the outcomes of CEB, such as customer-brand identification (Song *et al.*, 2019), self-brand connection and brand usage intention (Harrigan *et al.*, 2018), brand attachment (Kang

et al., 2014), firm performance (Yost *et al.*, 2021), brand financial growth (Kim and Chae, 2018), corporate reputation (Dijkmans *et al.*, 2015), brand advocacy (Ballester *et al.*, 2023), and action loyalty (Zhang *et al.*, 2021). Drawing on social exchange theory, this research developed an original framework for the outcomes of CE with restaurant brands on Instagram, considering the mediating role of consumer knowledge, enjoyment, and social interactions.

CEB can increase consumer awareness and knowledge about the restaurant's brand and products, which empirically confirms the results of Zhang *et al.* (2017). For example, when consumers watch or read brand-generated content, they can become aware of the restaurant brand, or they can gain further information about the menu, dishes, or the ingredients used in the products. They also can learn from others' experiences by reading comments, which can help them make better purchase decisions. Previous studies have found that CEB can lead to learning from others' experiences (Kang *et al.*, 2014) and increasing awareness about the brand/product/service (Cheung *et al.*, 2020), and consequently, better decision-making (Filiari *et al.*, 2021).

CEB can also foster consumer enjoyment. Recent studies show that entertainment is a determinant of customer engagement with luxury brands on social media (Bazi *et al.*, 2023). Our study shows that consumer enjoyment can also be an outcome of engagement, which indicates that consumers enjoy reading, liking, commenting, or sharing restaurant's SNSs posts. Other studies reveal that reading comments and reviews of other users (Park *et al.*, 2014) and sharing food photos (Lin *et al.*, 2022) influence enjoyment. On the contrary, Cheung *et al.* (2020) found a non-significant relationship between entertainment and CEB. In addition, Yang *et al.* (2017) also found that the quality and format of brand-related content can lead to enjoyment.

Besides, the greater the CEB, the greater the consumer interaction with others. This result may be due to the fact that when a consumer leaves a comment under the brand's posts, other followers may interact with them by replying to their comments. Moreover, in order to gain others' attentions, some consumers may leave comments under the entertaining content or share it with their friends to interact with them (Piehler *et al.*, 2019). In addition, reading like-minded comments will increase a tendency to start a conversation with those who posted the comments (Lee and Chun, 2016). The finding of this research aligns with previous studies showing that CEB can improve social ties (Aluri *et al.*, 2015). On the other hand, consumers may also share the restaurant's posts with their friends and invite them to try that restaurant. Therefore, by engaging with the brand page, consumers can improve their relationships with others.

The results show that CEB can bring positive outcomes to restaurant brands such as e-WOM and brand reputation. According to Li and Wei (2021), consumer-brand engagement can encourage consumers to recommend the brand to others and give them advice. The findings of this study confirm the results of previous studies in other contexts showing that engagement with online brand community can influence e-WOM (Wu *et al.*, 2018).

Moreover, when consumers get exposed to brand-generated posts, they tend to like those posts or forward them to others. Liking, sharing, and commenting, as forms of engagement, can help the content become more visible to others. Accordingly, the more followers engage with the brand content, the higher the perceived importance and popularity of a brand to those who watch or read the brand posts. These findings support the results of Dijkmans *et al.* (2015) in suggesting consumer digital engagement can enhance brand reputation. While very limited studies have examined the relationship between engagement and brand reputation (e.g., Dijkmans *et al.*, 2015; Li *et al.*, 2013), there are some studies with findings close to the results of

this research. For example, Schivinski and Dabrowski (2014) found that user-generated content can lead to increased customer perception of the brand (i.e., brand attitude and brand equity).

Furthermore, consumer knowledge can affect e-WOM. When consumers gain information about a brand and its offerings on Instagram, they are more likely to tell others about it. If consumer knowledge about a brand/product/service increases, consumers are likely to act as opinion leaders for the brand, and share brand information (Bilgihan *et al.*, 2014).

Another finding of this research is the positive influence of social interactions on e-WOM, which is in line with the findings of Bigne *et al.* (2018) stating that consumer interactions on SNSs can lead to e-WOM. When people talk to each other, they may consciously or unconsciously convey information about a brand/product/service to others. For example, when a consumer reads others' comments, they may ask their opinions about the brand/product/service, and it is obvious that information, either positive or negative, will be shared in this kind of conversation.

Moreover, consumer-related outcomes can influence e-WOM. Consumer perceived enjoyment can lead to the spreading of e-WOM. When consumers read or watch entertaining content, they may tend to forward it to others. In line with this finding, Park *et al.* (2014) found that entertainment value leads to a willingness to share content in online investment communities. Shin *et al.* (2018) also showed that entertaining advertising can influence e-WOM by using hashtags on SNSs in the context of SPA brands.

Finally, the more people participate in commenting on brand posts and spreading e-WOM, the more they will believe this is a well-reputed company. For instance, when consumers leave comments under the brand posts and reply to others' comments, the volume of comments will

increase, making that post more visible, which positively influences brand reputation (Ji *et al.*, 2017).

6.3. *Practical Implications*

The findings of this study are of importance for restaurant businesses that use social media as their main marketing channels. Since CEB can benefit both brands and consumers, and regarding the mediating role of consumer-related factors, marketers should focus on encouraging consumers to engage with brand pages to increase their reputation. According to the results, CEB has a direct effect on e-WOM and brand reputation. When followers engage with the brand pages (e.g., by liking or sharing a post), this causes the post to be viewed by people who are not followers of the brand (i.e., observers). The popularity of posts increases their number of views, and, consequently, the number of page followers. In addition, CEB indirectly influences e-WOM and brand reputation, through the mediating role of consumer-related outcomes. Consumer knowledge, perceived enjoyment, and social interactions can encourage consumers to spread e-WOM and help the brand become popular on Instagram.

This study recommends marketers to provide informative and reliable content about the brand/products/services or even about hot topics and trends. They should also encourage their current customers to share their experiences with others and give them the opportunity to review their products/services. When a page can provide comprehensive and accurate information, it will become a reference for consumers. Besides, collaborating with expert bloggers will also persuade consumers to adopt information (Mainolfi *et al.*, 2022). On the other hand, since entertaining content fosters brand loyalty (Bazi *et al.*, 2023), brands should try to make consumers happy by providing creative and entertaining content and holding contests. Besides,

encouraging consumers to leave comments or post stories and photos about the brand can make the audience feel happy. Even if consumers leave negative comments, and in response, the brand asks them to come up with a solution, other consumers may appreciate the way the brand treats its consumers (Mariani and Borghi, 2021). In addition, the restaurant industry has a high potential to attract audiences by presenting aesthetically pleasing photos and videos about food and desserts, which can also stimulate sensory experiences. People with high food involvement feel particularly good when they see this type of content.

Benefiting from celebrities and influencers can also help the brand to please audiences (Bazi *et al.*, 2023). Besides, regarding social interaction, brands should provide conditions so that consumers can communicate with each other through CEB. For example, brands can hold value co-creation initiatives like contests in which they ask their followers to forward brand posts to their friends or mention them in comments in exchange for some rewards.

6.4. Limitation and Future Research

This research has some limitations. First, in this research, the positive aspect of CEB and its positive outcomes were examined. Future studies should investigate the negative aspects of CEB or even fraudulent engagement and their outcomes for brands and consumers. Second, the sampling was purposive in both selecting brand pages and respondents. In addition, the respondents were selected based on their visible engagement activities, which excluded the followers who did not have any observable activities on the brand page. Therefore, future research should sample respondents with different levels of engagement.

Future research could also focus on different restaurant/coffee shop categories to assess their impact on engagement. For example, it is likely that luxury restaurants, due to their higher

level of involvement, may generate a higher level of engagement on SNSs compared to fast food or 'all you can eat' restaurants. Furthermore, future research could assess the relationships tested in this study in another context. For instance, scholars revealed some cultural differences in the engagement of Asian and Western consumers with brand pages on SNSs (Tsai and Men, 2017). This research was conducted in a developing country, Iran. Therefore, it would be interesting to conduct cross-cultural research on customer engagement to validate its results in different cultural contexts.

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