



Visibility and Validation: A Dual Perspective on Google Maps Reviews in Lisbon

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how Google Maps reviews influence the digital reputation of restaurants in Lisbon. The city's pronounced tourist dynamism and the growing dependence of gastronomic establishments on platform-specific visibility justify the topic's relevance. A qualitative-exploratory research design was adopted. Twenty-one semi-structured interviews with restaurant owners and patrons were conducted, transcribed, and semantically mapped with Leximancer. Software-assisted concept extraction was complemented by thematic analysis to uncover narrative deep structures. Four thematic clusters emerged: Reviews, Place, Online, and Trust. Reviews operate as a semantic hub, connecting numerical ratings with visual signals. Place reflects the interweaving of physical experience and digital representation. Online refers to the strategic visibility practices of businesses, whereas Trust is frequently negotiated implicitly through photographs and rating scores. Comparative analysis indicates that customers use ratings primarily as heuristics, while proprietors interpret reviews as strategic data. This divergence reflects asymmetric participation patterns identified in previous studies on platform-based hospitality. Frequency analysis supplemented narrative mapping and confirmed the dominance of the review theme. Comparison with earlier research reveals consistent patterns alongside city-specific particularities. The discussion situates the results within social-proof and signalling frameworks and emphasises the consequences for digital reputation strategies. Recommendations include platform-specific training formats for SMEs and increased transparency requirements for Google regarding algorithmic logics. Future research should adopt multi-platform approaches and examine long-term effects of algorithmic change on visibility and trust.

Overall, the study contributes a differentiated perspective on the co-construction of digital reputation amid consumer action and entrepreneurial adaptation.

Keywords: Google Maps Reviews, Digital Reputation, Electronic Word-of-Mouth (e-WOM), Restaurant Owner, Restaurant Customer

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RESUMO

Este estudo analisa como as avaliações no Google Maps influenciam a reputação digital de restaurantes em Lisboa. O forte dinamismo turístico da cidade e a crescente dependência dos estabelecimentos gastronómicos da visibilidade nas plataformas justificam a relevância do tema. Adotou-se um desenho de pesquisa qualitativo-exploratório. Foram realizadas 21 entrevistas semiestruturadas com proprietários e clientes, transcritas e mapeadas semanticamente com o Leximancer. A extração de conceitos foi complementada por análise temática para revelar estruturas narrativas profundas. Quatro agrupamentos centrais emergiram: Avaliações, Lugar, Online e Confiança. Avaliações atuam como núcleo semântico, conectando classificações numéricas a sinais visuais. Lugar reflete a interligação entre experiência física e representação digital. Online refere-se às práticas de visibilidade estratégica. Confiança é frequentemente negociada implicitamente por fotos e pontuações. A análise comparativa indica que clientes usam avaliações como heurísticas, enquanto proprietários as interpretam como dados estratégicos. Essa divergência reflete padrões assimétricos de participação já identificados em estudos anteriores. A análise de frequência reforçou o mapeamento narrativo e confirmou a centralidade do tema das avaliações. A comparação com pesquisas anteriores revela padrões consistentes e particularidades locais. Os resultados são discutidos à luz das teorias de prova social e sinalização, com foco nas implicações para estratégias de reputação digital. Recomenda-se formação específica para PME e mais transparência da Google sobre lógicas algorítmicas. Pesquisas futuras devem adotar abordagens multiplataforma e analisar os efeitos de longo prazo das mudanças algorítmicas sobre visibilidade e confiança.

Palavras-chave: Avaliações no Google Maps, Reputação Digital, Boca a Boca Eletrônica (e-WOM), Proprietário de Restaurante, Cliente de Restaurante

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AI DISCLAIMER

No artificial intelligence was used to generate content, ideas, or arguments in this thesis. All conceptual work, analyses, interpretations, conclusions, and the overall structure of the thesis are entirely my own.

AI tools (e.g., ChatGPT) were used across all chapters solely to support language-related aspects, such as formulation suggestions, stylistic refinement, and grammar or spelling checks. The final wording, selection, and responsibility for all written content remain entirely with the author.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviation	Meaning
AI	Artificial Intelligence
e-WOM	Electronic Word-of-Mouth
ELM	Elaboration Likelihood Model
RO	Restaurant Owner
C	Customer

1 INTRODUCTION

In the restaurant industry, online reviews have become a crucial factor in influencing customer choices (Luca, 2011). Google Maps, by combining search, location, and reviews, plays a particularly central role in how dining decisions are made in cities like Lisbon (Xiang et al., 2015).

The credibility of online reviews is determined by factors such as the number of ratings, the perceived reliability of reviewers, and the extremity (Reyes-Menendez et al., 2019) of ratings. These quantitative indicators also influence customers' subjective experience of the platform, shaping their expectations, trust, and overall interpretation of Google Maps as a decision-making tool. This study explores these subjective dynamics through qualitative interviews with customers and restaurant owners.

Existing research often separates these perspectives, focusing either on consumer behavior or business strategy (Sparks & Browning, 2011; Zervas et al., 2021). This study takes a comparative approach, examining how both sides perceive and engage with the platform.

Rather than analyzing platform mechanics or review texts, the study focuses on how restaurant owners and customers experience Google Maps as a review and discovery tool in a shared ecosystem. At the same time, this ecosystem is evolving, and both customers and business owners are anticipating shifts in how visibility, trust, and influence are shaped in the context of digital changes (Filiari, 2016).

To explore these dynamics, the study uses 21 semi-structured interviews with restaurant owners and customers in Lisbon. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using Leximancer, a semantic-mapping tool that supports the inductive identification of key themes and concepts. By focusing on spoken narratives rather than reviewing content, the study captures how both groups subjectively experience and interpret the platform's role in the dining landscape.

The central research question is therefore:

What are the dominant discourses and narratives surrounding Google Maps reviews among restaurant owners and customers, contributing to the understanding of digital reputation in the restaurant industry?

This leads to two core research objectives:

- (1) Examine how restaurant owners and customers construct shared narratives around Google Maps reviews, with the aim of understanding digital reputation within Lisbon's restaurants.
- (2) To analyze divergences in the perceptions and engagement strategies of restaurant owners and customers toward Google Maps reviews, to identify gaps between consumer expectations and managerial responses in reputation management.

This study thus contributes to the literature by integrating both consumer and business perspectives on Google Maps reviews, offering new insights into how digital reputation is understood and managed in the restaurant industry. In addition to its academic relevance, the findings may be valuable for restaurant owners aiming to navigate platform dynamics and enhance their visibility and credibility. Key themes include differing expectations, trust-building mechanisms, and anticipated changes in platform behavior.

The remainder of this thesis is structured as follows: Chapter 2 reviews the relevant literature. Chapter 3 outlines the methodology. Chapter 4 presents the results of the semantic and thematic analysis. Chapter 5 presents the findings in the context of existing research. Chapter 6 concludes with a discussion of both theoretical and practical implications.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Role of Google Maps Reviews for Restaurants

2.1.1 Economic Effects of Google Maps Reviews on the Restaurant Industry

Google Maps reviews have increasingly shaped how restaurants are discovered and evaluated, with implications for visibility and competitive positioning (Phuangsuwan et al., 2024). However, detailed empirical evidence on direct revenue effects is more prominently found in earlier platform studies (Anderson & Magruder, 2012; Luca, 2011). Their dual role, as decision-making aids for customers and as performance signals for restaurant owners, makes them a central component of digital reputation management for both sides (B. Kim & Velthuis, 2021).

From a consumer perspective, online reviews help reduce the uncertainty associated with experience-based services like dining. They function as quality signals that inform expectations, guide restaurant choices, and influence perceived value. When ratings are high, customers show a greater willingness to pay and are more likely to choose a business over competitors (Luca & Reshef, 2021). However, this relationship is fragile: when customers perceive a mismatch between price and perceived quality, review scores can quickly deteriorate, affecting both trust and future traffic (Zhang et al., 2022).

From a restaurant owner's perspective, empirical studies underline the tangible financial effects of Google Maps reviews. A one-star increase can lead to revenue gains of 5–9% (Luca, 2011), while even half-star differences significantly impact table bookings during peak hours (Anderson & Magruder, 2012). These effects are especially pronounced for independent restaurants, which lack the brand recognition of chains and rely more heavily on online reputation for customer acquisition (Donati, 2022).

Beyond short-term revenue fluctuations, reviews significantly impact long-term brand equity and customer loyalty. High ratings attract repeat customers and strengthen a restaurant's standing in competitive local markets. Establishments with positive review profiles tend to invest more in active reputation management, monitoring feedback, responding to criticism, and integrating testimonials into marketing strategies (Filieri & McLeay, 2014).

Critically, reviews also shape the structure of competition. Platforms like Google Maps have increased transparency in the hospitality market, lowering barriers for high-quality but previously unknown businesses. This redistributes customer attention away from established brands and toward top-rated independents. In turn, lower-rated restaurants face declining

demand and a higher likelihood of market exit (Donati, 2022).

2.1.2 Google Maps as the Most Important Review Platform

Google Maps has become the most influential review platform in the hospitality industry, particularly because of its seamless integration with navigation and search. This dual function increases visibility for restaurants and simplifies decision-making for customers (Phuangsuwan et al., 2024). Unlike TripAdvisor, which focuses on travel planning, or Yelp, which is mainly app-based, Google embeds reviews directly into location-based search results, giving it a structural advantage in shaping consumer choices

From the customer perspective, this integration leads to “zero-click behavior”: users often rely on the summaries shown in search results without consulting other platforms (Edelman & Geradin, 2016). This streamlining accelerates decisions but narrows the information space. Google’s dominance reduces platform diversity and creates a situation where algorithmic design strongly influences which restaurants are discovered, compared, and ultimately chosen.

From the owner’s perspective, this dominance translates into growing dependency. Slight algorithmic changes can drastically alter customer traffic (Zervas et al., 2021). Visibility is increasingly tied to factors such as review recency, rating scores, and engagement frequency, producing a self-reinforcing loop: high ratings boost visibility, which brings in more customers and reviews, further strengthening the restaurant’s ranking.

Google’s platform design also affects review characteristics. Compared to platforms like TripAdvisor, reviews on Google are shorter and more numerous (Mellinas & Sicilia, 2024). This favors quantity over depth and appeals to casual users but may also reduce credibility and nuance. The generally higher rating averages on Google suggest a positivity bias (Escobar, 2021), potentially driven by broader participation and less critical engagement.

Yet this positivity comes with drawbacks. Despite Google’s advanced systems, the platform remains vulnerable to review inflation and manipulation. Fake or promotional reviews can distort a business’s reputation, with detection mechanisms still limited in scope (Barbado et al., 2019). For restaurant owners, this presents both an opportunity and a reputational risk: managing Google reviews becomes essential, but aggressive tactics can blur the line between legitimate reputation management and unethical manipulation (Mellinas & Sicilia, 2024).

2.2 Understanding Customer Perspective on Google Maps Reviews

2.2.1 Theoretical Framework for Customer Review Behavior

Electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) has significantly reshaped consumer decision-making, particularly in experience-driven industries such as hospitality (Litvin et al., 2008). Unlike traditional word-of-mouth, which is private and limited in scope, e-WOM is persistent, publicly visible, and often embedded directly into platforms like Google Maps. As a result, online reviews have become a dominant mechanism through which consumers assess restaurants, particularly when firsthand experience is lacking.

To explain how these reviews influence behavior, three theoretical models offer valuable insights: Social Proof, Signaling Theory, and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM). These three frameworks jointly explain the psychological logic behind Google Maps reviews. Consumers seek validation through social consensus, reduce uncertainty via quality signals, and navigate complex information with a mix of deep and shallow processing.

Social Proof Theory

According to Social Proof Theory (Cialdini, 1994), people tend to conform to the behavior of others in situations of uncertainty. In digital environments, reviews become key indicators of what is considered “normal” or acceptable. A high number of reviews and positive ratings serve as reassurance that a venue is popular and thus likely to meet expectations (Book et al., 2018). Worsfold (2006) found that consumers often avoid poorly rated restaurants not because of personal experience, but due to perceived social risk. Moreover, Google’s algorithm favors such popular businesses, increasing their visibility and further reinforcing their reputational advantage (Viglia et al., 2016).

Signaling Theory

Signaling Theory (Spence, 1973) offers a complementary explanation. Here, reviews act as signals that reduce information asymmetry. When consumers have no prior contact with a restaurant, they interpret review volume, rating average, and the presence of detailed comments as signs of quality (Lin & Kalwani, 2018). Verified or identity-linked reviews are perceived as more reliable, even when ratings are slightly lower, because they suggest real, traceable experiences (W. G. Kim & Park, 2017). In this sense, signals like review credibility can sometimes outweigh the actual star rating.

Elaboration Likelihood Model

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) explains how consumers process this information. Under the central route, customers engage deeply with content, reading long reviews, comparing arguments, or considering reviewer identity. Under the peripheral route, they rely on heuristics like overall rating or review quantity. Which route dominates depends on the individual's level of involvement and time pressure (Moradi & Zihagh, 2022). Research has shown that both content richness and visual layout influence whether a review is considered useful or not (Aghakhani et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2022).

2.2.2 Key Determinants of Customer Decision-Making on Google Maps

Building on the theoretical mechanisms of e-WOM, this section examines the specific factors shaping consumer behavior on Google Maps.

Unlike Yelp or TripAdvisor, Google Maps integrates location-based services with customer-generated feedback, ranking restaurants based on ratings, review volume, and algorithmic relevance (Mellinas & Sicilia, 2024). Three key factors drive consumer decisions: (1) rating metrics, (2) review content, and (3) reviewer credibility. These elements align with Social Proof Theory, Signaling Theory, and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), offering insights into how customers interpret and trust reviews.

The following sections explore how star ratings shape first impressions, review content deepens evaluation, and reviewer credibility influences trust.

Star Ratings on Google Maps:

Star ratings act as a heuristic shortcut, often shaping first impressions and filtering decisions (Filippas et al., 2018; Sung et al., 2023). Since dining quality is hard to assess upfront, ratings serve as proxies that reduce uncertainty (W. G. Kim & Park, 2017; Sung et al., 2023). Even small differences matter; ratings between 4.2 and 4.8 stars are seen as trustworthy, while a perfect 5.0 may raise suspicion of manipulation. Scores below 4.0 often signal inconsistency (Paget, 2024).

Volume reinforces trust. A 4.5-star rating based on 1,000 reviews appears more credible than one based on 50 (Li & Hecht, 2021), as users perceive social consensus as a trust cue (Book et al., 2018). Research suggests a minimum of 20–99 reviews is needed for a rating to be deemed reliable (Paget, 2024).

Platform effects also matter: Google ratings average 0.7 stars higher than Yelp for the same venues, a gap that has been associated with broader user participation and potential positivity

bias (Filippas et al., 2018). Many users rely on ratings without engaging with detailed content, especially under time pressure (Moradi & Zihagh, 2022).

Still, ratings compress distinctions, most restaurants cluster between 4.0 and 4.9, making it difficult to differentiate quality, ambiance, or service (Sung et al., 2023). Rating inflation further narrows interpretability and increases reliance on additional review dimensions (Aghakhani et al., 2023).

Review Content:

Textual reviews provide context and nuance that ratings alone lack. Features such as length, emotional tone, and specificity strongly shape perceived trustworthiness (Carbonell et al., 2019; Felbermayr & Nanopoulos, 2016; Mudambi & Schuff, 2010). While expressive language can enhance persuasiveness, overly emotional or vague reviews may reduce credibility (Zablocki et al., 2019).

Extremely positive or negative reviews often dominate initial impressions, but neutral, detailed content tends to be seen as more informative (Ullah et al., 2015). Despite being shorter on average, Google reviews convey meaning through volume and sentiment aggregation (Mellinas & Sicilia, 2024). User responses vary: some engage deeply with arguments, others scan for emotional cues (Felbermayr & Nanopoulos, 2016).

Recent and interactive reviews carry more weight. Those with likes, replies, or images gain higher visibility due to algorithmic ranking (Ganu, 2009). These signals boost social validation, but also open the door to manipulation.

The rise of biased or fake reviews undermines credibility, especially in competitive markets (Barbado et al., 2019). As authenticity becomes key, platforms must enhance detection systems (Gryka & Janicki, 2023; Sadman et al., 2020).

Reviewer Credibility:

Beyond review content, the identity of the reviewer plays a crucial role in shaping consumer trust. Users often rely on visible cues such as activity level, review history, or platform badges like the Local Guide status as indicators of reliability (Fileri et al., 2021; Thorson et al., 2010). Verified profiles with real names and photos reduce perceived anonymity and suggest greater accountability.

Research shows that consumers are more likely to trust contributors with a consistent track record of detailed, high-quality reviews than anonymous or one-time reviewers (Li & Hecht,

2021; Nguyen et al., 2020). Google reinforces this pattern by boosting the visibility of active reviewers in its rankings (Sadman et al., 2020). Businesses, in turn, tend to respond more frequently to well-established reviewer profiles, which further amplifies their influence (Barbado et al., 2019).

At the same time, reviewer credibility can be manipulated. Some businesses attempt to game the system through fake positive reviews or by discrediting competitors (Mayzlin et al., 2014). In response, Google has implemented AI-based fraud detection systems that analyze linguistic patterns and suspicious behavior to maintain review integrity (Gryka & Janicki, 2023).

2.3 Understanding the Restaurant Owner's Perspective

2.3.1 Online Reputation as a Strategic Asset

On platforms like Google Maps, customer ratings have evolved into a critical currency in the restaurant business. Owners increasingly view online reviews not as passive feedback, but as strategic levers for visibility, foot traffic, and long-term competitiveness. In Lisbon's dense hospitality landscape, maintaining a rating above 4.3 stars has become a baseline requirement for staying relevant in local and tourist-driven searches (Xiang et al., 2015).

To shape consumer expectations and drive engagement, many restaurant owners aim for a consistent digital presence across all platforms, through aligned aesthetics, brand voice, and up-to-date business information on websites, social media, and especially the Google Business profile (Hays et al., 2013). This coherence is not merely about branding; it serves to manage guest expectations in advance, increasing the likelihood that post-visit reviews reflect satisfaction aligned with the portrayed identity (Filiari & McLeay, 2014). The digital profile becomes an early decision touchpoint, shaping the customer journey long before arrival.

Increasingly, visibility on Google is influenced by how actively a business manages its profile. Restaurants that upload high-quality images, respond to reviews, and regularly update their details are rewarded in local search rankings (Xiang et al., 2017). This shift reflects a growing awareness of algorithmic logic, where online presence is optimized not only for users but for the platform itself.

However, such efforts are not equally feasible for all. Especially small and medium-sized establishments often lack the time, staff, or digital expertise to sustain active reputation management (O'Connor, 2010). This creates a gap between strategic ambition and operational capacity tension that is likely to emerge in the practical experiences shared by interview participants.

2.3.2 Proactive and Reactive Review Management

Within the hospitality sector, review management has evolved into a dual strategy: proactive engagement to shape future reviews and reactive responses to manage existing content (Wang & Chaudhry, 2017; Xie et al., 2017). In Lisbon's dynamic restaurant landscape, both approaches are applied, often simultaneously, but with differing levels of control and emotional cost.

Proactive efforts aim to influence both the tone and volume of incoming reviews. Many restaurant owners actively encourage satisfied guests to leave feedback, either by speaking directly at the table, using printed QR codes, or sending friendly follow-up messages after the visit (Sparks & Browning, 2011). These soft nudges, especially when timed right after a positive experience, have been shown to significantly increase review likelihood and positivity (Filiari & McLeay, 2014).

More strategically, some restaurateurs engage in digital storytelling through Instagram, user-generated content, and influencer collaborations to foster a shareable brand narrative. In trend-driven environments like Lisbon, this helps stimulate word-of-mouth and indirectly shapes the tone of reviews (Mariani et al., 2016; Tussyadiah & Pesonen, 2016). However, these proactive strategies often clash with the limited ability to predict outcomes: Google's opaque algorithmic mechanisms make it difficult to measure success (Cizreliogullari et al., 2019), creating a tension between effort and actual impact. This sense of unpredictability frequently leads to a feeling of limited agency, especially when carefully crafted campaigns fail to result in visible platform benefits.

Reactive review management, on the other hand, focuses on responding to existing reviews, particularly those that may damage a restaurant's reputation. Owners are increasingly aware that timely and thoughtful replies demonstrate professionalism and care, especially when addressing criticism (Xie et al., 2017). Personalized and empathetic responses can rebuild trust more effectively than generic templates (Zinko et al., 2021).

Yet, the reactive approach also involves delicate trade-offs. In some cases, owners feel compelled to defend themselves against reviews they perceive as unfair or manipulative. Striking the right tone becomes crucial; too emotional, and it appears unprofessional, too factual or defensive, and it may seem cold or dismissive to readers. This tension is amplified by the presence of a silent audience, as owners are not only responding to the reviewer but also performing for potential future guests (Surachartkumtonkun et al., 2021).

Another complicating factor is timing. While fast replies are generally appreciated, rushed or emotionally charged responses may backfire (Xie et al., 2017). Moreover, the platform offers little recourse for handling manipulative or false reviews. Although inappropriate content can be flagged, removal is rare. As such, public responses remain the primary line of defense, a situation that leaves many owners feeling exposed and powerless (Mei, 2023).

2.3.3 Navigating Platform Changes

Beyond active management, restaurant owners are increasingly preoccupied with the uncertainty surrounding platform governance. Google Maps' algorithmic opacity, the rise of AI-generated reviews, and shifting search priorities have created an environment where visibility can change overnight, with little to no explanation (Cizreliogullari et al., 2019).

In contrast to consumers, who may view such changes as minor interface adjustments, restaurant owners perceive them as existential threats. A sudden drop in search visibility or the emergence of fake or AI-generated reviews can have immediate consequences on bookings, foot traffic, and overall revenue (Mayzlin et al., 2014; Wang & Chaudhry, 2017). Accordingly, many operators now adopt a defensive posture: diversifying their digital presence, investing in SEO services, or simply hoping to adapt in time.

2.4 Lisbon's Restaurant and Tourism Landscape in Context

Lisbon has become one of Europe's most vibrant gastronomic hubs, strongly driven by its growing tourism sector. In 2024, the city recorded 6,539,997 international visitors, representing an increase of 5.5 percent compared to 2023 and a total growth of 14 percent since 2022 (Turismo de Lisboa, 2024). This continuous rise underlines Lisbon's relevance as an increasingly popular urban travel destination.

The growth in international arrivals directly affects the city's dense and competitive restaurant landscape. According to comparative data, Lisbon counts approximately 5,500 restaurants, making it the European city with the highest density of gastronomic establishments relative to population size, with around 1,089 restaurants per 100,000 inhabitants (Bounce, 2023).

Given this unique combination of high tourist influx and intense gastronomic competition, Lisbon provides a highly relevant setting for investigating how digital reputation is constructed and negotiated in the restaurant industry. Furthermore, the city serves as a representative case for other dynamic urban tourism destinations in Europe, offering insights that may be transferable to similarly structured metropolitan contexts.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Approach

The research uses qualitative exploratory methods to study dominant concepts and narratives between Lisbon restaurant owners and customers about Google Maps reviews while examining their digital reputation construction and interpretation on this platform. The platform stands out because it merges navigation and search capabilities to determine how online visibility and trustworthiness of local restaurants appear to users. The research adopted a qualitative approach to study the personal experiences and perceptions, and expectations of both groups in the fast-evolving algorithm-driven digital environment (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The research question required an open format to let participants think about their current practices as well as their future-oriented thinking. The research used semi-structured interviews to produce detailed findings that were specific to the context. The research method allows participants to express their strategies and interpretations, and concerns through unstructured conversations while maintaining thematic focus. The structured interview guide maintains participant consistency and research objective alignment (Kallio et al., 2016). The research method of semi-structured interviews works best for digital environment studies because it helps researchers understand how participants create meaning through their perspectives while platform dynamics and customer interactions evolve (Flick, 2018).

Interview Protocol and Procedure

The research study employed semi-structured interviews to gather information about present-day strategies and upcoming expectations for Google Maps digital reputation management. The interview structure includes four sections, which start with screening and warm-up, followed by two thematic blocks and end with closing reflections according to established methodological guidelines for semi-structured interviews (Guest et al., 2006; Kallio et al., 2016). The interview structure begins with a contextual foundation before advancing to extensive thematic investigation and participant-driven reflection.

The research questions emerged from the literature review and were grouped into two conceptual sections. Block 1 investigates how participants handle review elements through rating metrics and review content, and reviewer credibility, while explaining their digital reputation management strategies. Block 2 investigates platform developments and algorithmic shifts, and AI-generated content to understand participant readiness and expectations about future digital visibility and trust dynamics.

The thematic blocks derive their foundation from existing research about digital reputation and review behavior specifically regarding e-WOM strategic management (Fileri & McLeay, 2014; Wang & Chaudhry, 2017) and algorithmic visibility effects (Gryka & Janicki, 2023) and platform-based credibility standards. The structured approach maintained a logical sequence while providing enough freedom for participants to describe their present methods and future outlooks through their statements.

The interview guide for restaurant owners appears in Table 1, while Table 2 provides the adapted version for customers.

Table 1: Interview Guide based on literature (Own elaboration 2025).

Structure	Adapted Questions	Literature Basis
Screening	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Demographics: Restaurant type, size, years in operation, location 	Kallio et al. (2016); Flick (2018)
Warm-Up	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Role of Google Maps and online visibility in business success; customer acquisition channels 	Kallio et al. (2016); Flick (2018)
Block 1: Strategic Responses to e-WOM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How do you monitor and interpret your reviews? How do you respond to feedback? Do you have a strategy for encouraging reviews? What are your thoughts when seeing a review (with a screenshot)? 	Fileri (2016); Wang & Chaudhry (2017); Paget (2024); Gryka & Janicki (2023)
Block 2: Anticipating Future Trends	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Have you noticed changes in Google Maps review visibility? What are your expectations regarding algorithms, AI reviews? How are you preparing? 	Zervas et al. (2021); Gryka & Janicki (2023); Edelman & Geradin (2016)
Closing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is there anything else you'd like to add regarding Google Maps or online reviews? 	Kallio et al. (2016)

Table 2: Interview Guide based on literature (Own elaboration 2025).

Structure	Adapted Questions	Literature Basis
Screening	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Demographics: age, place of residence, frequency of going to restaurants or ordering food 	Kallio et al. (2016); Flick (2018)
Warm-Up	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do you usually look up restaurants online before visiting or ordering? 	Kallio et al. (2016); Flick (2018)
Block 1: Engagement with e-WOM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How do you usually discover new restaurants? How closely do you read restaurant reviews before visiting? Do you write reviews yourself? Do you think user reviews can actually influence restaurants? Can you recall a specific review that shaped your expectations? What role do photos or detailed descriptions play for you? 	Filieri (2016); Wang & Chaudhry (2017); Paget (2024); Gryka & Janicki (2023)
Block 2: Anticipating Future Trends	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Have you noticed any recent changes in how Google Maps presents restaurant reviews? What do you think about the idea of AI-generated summaries or keywords within Google reviews? Do you think algorithms or digital systems influence how people experience or judge restaurants, even before they visit? Could you imagine using AI tools yourself to write or summarize a restaurant review, or would that feel unnatural to you? 	Zervas et al. (2021); Gryka & Janicki (2023); Edelman & Geradin (2016)
Closing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is there anything else you'd like to add regarding Google Maps or online reviews? 	Kallio et al. (2016)

Although the wording differs slightly to reflect the respective perspectives, both guides are conceptually aligned and follow the same thematic structure.

Block 1 builds on literature that discusses how hospitality businesses respond to customer reviews, manage visibility through Google Maps, and engage in proactive or reactive communication strategies (Filieri, 2016; Luca & Zervas, 2016; Wang & Chaudhry, 2017). Topics in this section include monitoring and responding to reviews, encouraging satisfied customers to leave feedback, and interpreting the influence of rating metrics and reviewer credibility. For customers, this block explores how they discover restaurants, assess reviews, and perceive the influence of online feedback on expectations and trust (Paget, 2024; Filieri et al., 2021).

Block 2 addresses anticipated developments such as algorithm changes, AI-generated reviews, and the evolving role of visual and interactive content in shaping platform visibility (Gryka & Janicki, 2023; Zervas et al., 2021; Edelman & Geradin, 2016). Participants are asked to reflect on their expectations, preparedness, and perceived control over platform-driven changes. In the consumer version, this includes questions on the perceived influence of algorithms, the credibility of AI-generated content, and imagined future uses of digital review tools.

A small set of visual prompts, consisting of real Google Maps review screenshots, is embedded

into the interview to stimulate natural, scenario-based responses. These visual elements are intended to elicit practical reasoning and emotional reactions in ways that mirror stimulus-based methods in qualitative service and design research (Bagnoli, 2009).

The complete interview guide, structured according to thematic blocks and linked to the literature, is included in Appendix A. A tabular overview of the interview themes and their theoretical foundations is presented in Table 1 (restaurant owners) and Table 2 (customers).

3.2 Data Collection

The interviews in this study were conducted with two distinct participant groups: (1) restaurant owners, managers, or individuals directly responsible for managing a restaurant's presence on Google Maps, and (2) customers who actively use Google Maps to discover, evaluate, or review restaurants.

These two groups were chosen because they represent the core interaction on the platform: while restaurant owners actively shape their digital presence, customers drive visibility and reputation through their usage and feedback. Focusing on these directly involved actors allows for a meaningful comparison of expectations, behaviors, and perceptions within the same review ecosystem.

Participants were selected using a purposeful sampling strategy (Patton, 2002), with a focus on individuals who either play an active role in digital reputation management or regularly engage with platform-based review content. This dual approach was intended to capture insights from both the supply and demand sides of digital restaurant visibility.

The sample size was guided by the principle of data saturation across both groups. Saturation was assumed when no new themes or insights emerged from additional interviews, which typically occurs after 12 to 15 interviews per group in relatively homogeneous yet information-rich samples (Guest et al., 2006; Morse, 2000). All business participants had a visible, actively maintained Google Maps profile and had received regular customer reviews within the last 12 months. All customer participants had used Google Maps for restaurant decisions at least once in the past three months and had demonstrable familiarity with reading or writing online reviews.

Restaurant participants were identified via manual Google Maps searches, focusing on venues with recent review activity and high engagement. Contact was made via business email addresses and, where applicable, through direct messages on social media platforms such as Instagram or Facebook. C participants were recruited through social media posts, personal

referrals, and university mailing lists, with screening questions used to ensure relevance and engagement with the topic.

Efforts were made to ensure variation in terms of restaurant characteristics (e.g., casual, fine dining) and customer background, such as age, digital literacy, and frequency of review platform usage.

To ensure broader contextual variation, demographic characteristics of the restaurants were considered, including size (small: ≤ 30 seats; medium: 31–70; large: >70), years in operation (ranging from newly established to over a decade), and neighborhood context (e.g., tourist-dense areas such as Baixa-Chiado versus local residential areas like Campo de Ourique). On the customer side, variation was sought across different user types, including tourists, locals, frequent reviewers, and occasional customers.

All interviews were held in April and May 2025. Five interviews were conducted in person, while the remainder took place via Zoom, depending on participant availability. Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. All sessions were conducted in English and recorded with prior consent. Participants received a short overview of the study and gave verbal or written informed consent before the interview.

All data were anonymized during transcription and handled by the Declaration of [Helsinki \(2013\)](#).

3.3 Data Analysis

The interview recordings underwent verbatim transcription followed by anonymization procedures. The research team applied a two-step analysis method to review the transcripts.

The complete set of transcripts underwent processing through Leximancer software version 4.5 to reveal hidden concepts and pattern relationships in a method that ensures transparency and reproducibility. The software system uses algorithmic methods to minimize human bias when it identifies key concepts and groups them into themes through semantic proximity and co-occurrence analysis. The results presented conceptual maps that displayed thematic importance through color coding (red indicated high relevance and purple indicated low relevance and concept frequency through node size according to [Leximancer \(2018\)](#)). The maps functioned as the base structure for the results chapter.

The second step involved using inductive thematic analysis to interpret results while maintaining focus on participants' real-life experiences according to the six-phase model. The

researchers selected this framework because it provides flexibility to discover patterns and meanings within qualitative data. The data-driven pattern recognition from Leximancer received additional contextual interpretation through manual coding, which proved essential for the discussion chapter.

4 RESULTS

A total of 21 qualitative interviews were conducted with restaurant customers and restaurant owners who are either currently engaged with or have prior experience in Lisbon’s restaurant industry. Participants were between 22 and 55 years old, with approximately 50% falling within the 22–29 age range. The majority of interviewees are currently based in Portugal, primarily in Lisbon, while the remaining participants have at least visited the city and experienced its gastronomic landscape. The following table provides an overview of the demographic characteristics of the interview participants:

Table 3: Participants’ demographics (Own elaboration 2025).

#	Age	Gender	Country of Residence	#	Age	Gender	Country of Residence
C1	24	male	spain	C12	26	male	portugal
C2	27	female	germany	C13	27	female	portugal
C3	27	male	portugal	C14	38	male	portugal
C4	28	male	portugal	C15	33	male	portugal
C5	25	female	portugal	RO1	37	female	portugal
C6	55	female	portugal	RO2	33	male	portugal
C7	22	male	portugal	RO3	42	female	portugal
C8	48	male	portugal	RO4	40	male	portugal
C9	33	female	germany	RO5	31	male	portugal
C10	24	female	portugal	RO6	29	male	portugal
C11	46	male	germany				

4.1 Concept Identification and Central Terms

Leximancer was used to automatically extract and visualize core concepts based on semantic co-occurrence patterns in the interview transcripts. Each concept is classified by linguistic category, including:

- Word (e.g., reviews, people)
- Name General (e.g., Google Maps, Lisbon)
- Acronym (e.g., AI)
- Tag and Variable (context-specific identifiers or flexible terms)

Each concept is also quantified by two metrics:

- Hits: The number of times the term appears in the corpus
- Relevance Percentage: Its importance relative to the most dominant concept

Among the most prominent concepts were "reviews" (140 hits, 43% relevance), "people" (68 hits, 21%), and "Google Maps" (51 hits, 16%). Other notable terms included "Lisbon" and "AI" (both 18 hits, 6%). This points to a strong focus on user-generated content, platform experience, and emergent technological awareness in the dataset.

These concepts form the foundation for the semantic clusters and themes illustrated in the Concept Map (see Figure 1).

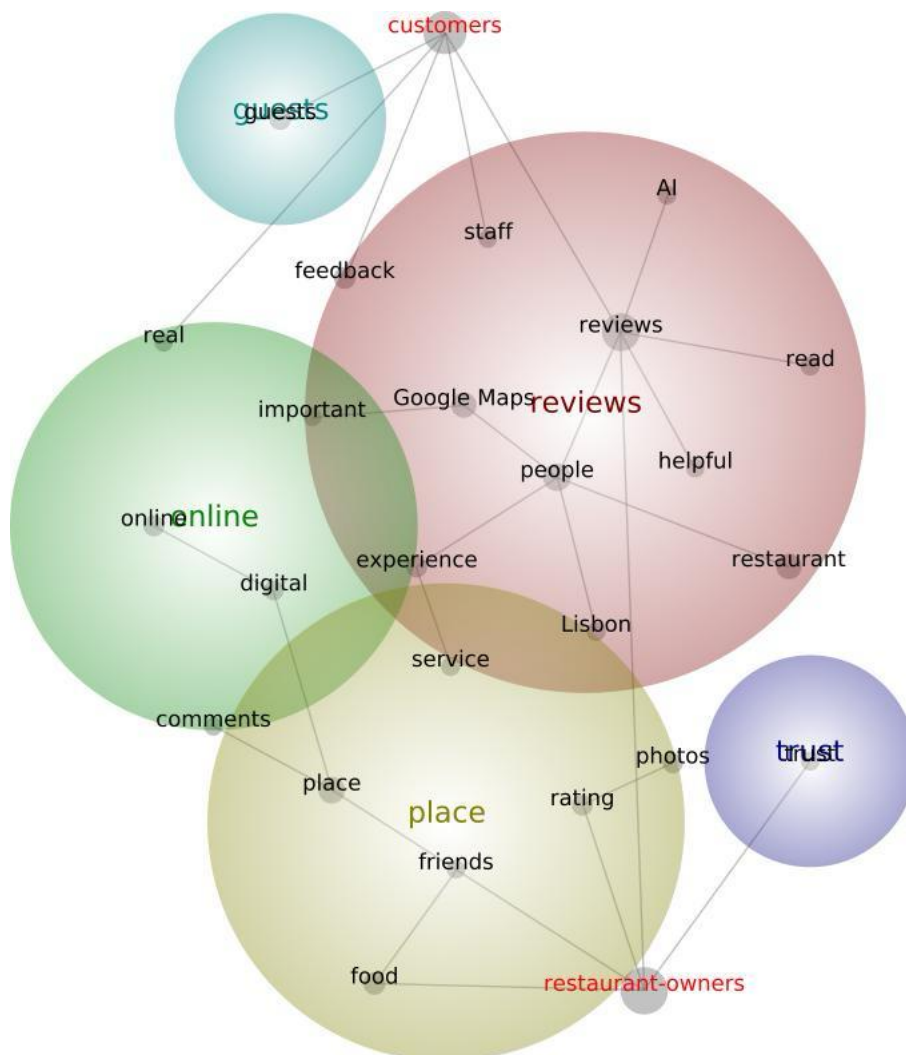


Figure 1: Concept Map (Leximancer Output 2025).

4.2 Thematic Clusters

Leximancer identified five dominant themes across the interview data: reviews, place, online, guests, and trust. Each theme groups together semantically related concepts and provides insight into the structure and focus of participants' narratives.

Reviews (312 hits)

The theme reviews were by far the most dominant. The review contained terms like feedback, helpful, Google Maps, read, and AI. Participants recognized reviews as practical decision-making tools (“I've read so many helpful reviews...”) as well as social activities for which they wanted to contribute (“I feel like I should contribute once in a while”). Customers experienced emotional responses when they felt seen by restaurant staff during their service experiences. The interviewees discussed how artificial intelligence (AI) will increasingly filter and present reviews in the future as they demonstrate growing understanding of algorithmic mediation.

Place (135 hits)

The theme places clusters around experiential terms such as food, service, photos, and friends. The theme describes how eating experiences in Lisbon affect people through sensory elements and physical elements. Participants mentioned that their overall impression and review behavior were influenced by three main factors, which included atmosphere and food quality, as well as visual documentation such as photos.

Online (79 hits)

Online represents digital engagement through terms which include important, comments, website, and impression. Participants displayed a critical understanding of digital visibility construction. Customers analyzed how restaurants present themselves online, which leads to initial perception changes before customers visit the restaurants. Guests (32 hits) This theme included the concept of guests and reflected the way participants perceived themselves regarding the hospitality they received. The authors use this framework to describe how customers position themselves as both guests and customers who require proper attention and care when evaluating service quality or social environment.

Trust (18 hits)

Although relatively isolated in the Concept Map, trust emerged as a recurring but linguistically peripheral theme. The theme of trust emerged in relation to photos and ratings, which shows that trust frequently manifests through visual and quantitative indicators instead of direct

statements. The semantically isolated nature of trust indicates that trust remains important, although customers rarely state it explicitly. Their core concepts are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4: Main Themes and Key Concepts

Theme	Total Hits	Key Concepts (Selection)
reviews	312	feedback, helpful, Google Maps, AI, read, people, restaurant, staff
place	135	food, service, friends, photos, rating, place
online	79	important, digital, comments, website, impression
guests	32	guests, customers, staff
trust	18	trust, rating, photos

4.3 Semantic Structure of the Concept Map

The Concept Map (see Figure X) offers a visual overview of how themes and concepts are semantically connected in the dataset. Hot-colored circles (e.g., red for reviews) represent more dominant themes, while colder hues (e.g., blue for trust) signify fewer central clusters.

(a) Reviews as a Semantic Hub

The theme *reviews* occupy a central and dense position in the map, reflecting their semantic dominance. It is closely linked to core concepts such as *Google Maps*, *people*, *helpful*, *restaurant*, and *read*. The density and position suggest that reviews are deeply embedded in customer discourse and intersect with many aspects of restaurant interaction. These connections imply that online reviews are not only functional but also emotionally and socially meaningful to customers.

(b) Online vs. Offline Clusters

A clear distinction is visible between online and offline experiences. The *online* cluster, represented in green, includes terms such as *digital*, *comments*, *real*, and *important*. These highlight how customers critically reflect on the digital dimension of their interaction with restaurants, including website impressions and comment sections. In contrast, the *place* cluster, rendered in yellow, contains experiential terms like *food*, *friends*, *photos*, and *rating*, pointing to the physical and social setting of dining. The proximity of shared concepts such as *experience*, *important*, and *Google Maps* to both clusters underscores the fluid boundaries

between digital discovery and physical experience.

(c) Trust as a Peripheral, Isolated Theme

The theme *trust* appears as a blue circle at the periphery of the map, showing only limited connectivity to the central themes. Its main associations are with *photos* and *rating*, suggesting that trust in restaurants is often inferred through visuals and numerical feedback rather than directly addressed in customer language. This observation is important, as it reflects the implicit ways in which trust is negotiated and understood in digital review environments.

(d) Divided Semantic Spaces: Customers vs. Restaurant Owners

Another striking pattern in the Concept Map is the clear separation between the semantic spaces associated with *customers* and *restaurant owners*. While *customers* are linked to relational and experiential concepts like *guests*, *feedback*, and *staff*, the *restaurant owners* are connected to more strategic and image-related terms such as *photos*, *rating*, *place*, and *food*. This spatial separation suggests that participants cognitively distinguish between these two actor groups, with limited perceived interaction. Interestingly, only the terms *service* and *experience* bridge this gap, indicating their potential role as connectors in the broader discourse.

(e) Other Noteworthy Observations

Finally, several peripheral yet meaningful patterns emerge from the Concept Map. The concept *AI*, though less central, appears in proximity to *reviews*, marking it as an emergent and forward-looking subtheme. Similarly, *Lisbon* is located near *experience*, reinforcing the geographic specificity of the findings and highlighting the importance of place-based narratives in shaping customer perception

5 DISCUSSION

To answer the research question “What are the dominant discourses and narratives surrounding Google Maps reviews among restaurant owners and customers, contributing to the understanding of digital reputation in the restaurant industry?”, the interview data were analyzed using Leximancer software. The resulting Concept Map revealed five dominant themes: Reviews, Place, Online, Trust, and Guests.

The theme Guests was excluded from further analysis due to its generic character. The remaining four themes were selected for in-depth discussion and are examined in separate analytical chapters: Reviews, Place, Online, and Trust.

Each chapter is structured around two analytical dimensions:

- (1) Shared narratives, i.e., concepts and interpretations that appear across both restaurant owners and customers, and
- (2) Diverging logics, i.e., contrasting priorities, perceptions, or meanings expressed by each group.

The thematic structure developed through Leximancer not only framed the overall discussion but also guided the analysis of the transcripts. The four themes and their underlying concepts served as analytical lenses to identify and select quotes that represent each group’s perspective.

In doing so, the selection was not limited to verbatim mentions of individual keywords; quotes were also included when they reflected a concept in context, even if not expressed in identical wording. This approach ensured that conceptual meaning was prioritized over lexical exactness, allowing for a more nuanced interpretation of how participants talked about phenomena such as feedback, credibility, or trust.

5.1 Shared Narratives on Visibility, Credibility, and Digital Experience

A cross-cutting theme in the empirical material is the strong alignment between restaurant owners and customers regarding the perceived importance and function of Google Maps reviews. Despite their differing roles within the platform economy, both groups share consistent narratives around visibility, credibility, and digital experience.

The dominant role of Google Maps as the key interface for decision-making is one of the most evident points of convergence. A restaurant owner put it plainly:

“Google is the number one platform, no doubt. Everyone uses it to decide where to go.” ~

ROI

This perception is supported by [Phuangsuwan et al. \(2024\)](#), who identify Google Maps as the most influential review platform due to its integration of search, navigation, and a customer feedback mechanism

From the customer side, Google's influence is equally pronounced:

“I treat the average rating like a filter that helps me narrow down my choices quickly.” ~ C1

“A combination of personal recommendations and digital discovery tools like Google Maps and Instagram guide my choices the most.” ~ C2

Together, these statements illustrate how Google Maps functions as both a visibility infrastructure and a decision shortcut. Rather than replacing traditional word-of-mouth, it amplifies it into a hybrid form of electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM), in line with [Luca \(2016\)](#). This reliance on platform cues aligns with Social Proof Theory ([Cialdini, 2007](#)), where aggregated user behavior reduces uncertainty in saturated environments.

Both groups also attribute a high degree of influence to star ratings, interpreting them as powerful symbolic signals. For consumers, numerical thresholds act as decision filters:

“If it's under 4.0, I start to question it.” ~ C2

According to [Aghakhani et al. \(2023\)](#), consumers rely heavily on seemingly small differences in ratings because platforms compress most business into a narrow review band between 4.0 and 4.9, making subtle cues more impactful.

Meanwhile, restaurant owners' express frustration over the blunt impact of such metrics:

“Sometimes people leave a one-star review because we couldn't meet a strange or impossible request, or because they were having a bad day. [...] But those reviews still impact your rating. And that rating is what most people look at first.” ~ ROI

These mismatching experiences between generalized ratings and individual experiences can destabilize overall platform credibility ([Zhang et al., 2022](#)).

Despite knowing that ratings can be misleading or biased, both sides acknowledge their decisiveness. According to the Elaboration Likelihood Model ([Petty & Cacioppo, 1986](#)), this reflects peripheral processing: when context is limited, star ratings serve as heuristics that guide judgment with minimal cognitive effort.

Another widely shared perspective is the feedback loop between customer expression and

operational change. One customer described reviews as

“a form of indirect pressure for restaurants.” ~ C11

This view is mirrored on the business side:

“We had to change our reservation policy after too many comments about waiting times.” ~

RO3

Here, reviews extend beyond image management and directly inform internal service design a dynamic also noted by [Chevalier & Mayzlin \(2006\)](#).

Emotional and relational dimensions also emerge strongly. Positive reviews are often framed as a form of appreciation:

“If the service truly impresses me, I might leave a positive review as a way of showing appreciation.” ~ C11

On the other hand, restaurant owners describe the emotional vulnerability tied to public feedback:

“I hope people remember there are real humans behind every restaurant. [...] When someone writes a thoughtful review, whether it’s praise or gentle critique, that really matters.” ~ RO2

In this sense, reviews act as social currency, enabling emotional exchange and recognition. But they also expose businesses to a form of platform-mediated fragility ([Sparks et al., 2013](#)).

Visual and spatial elements are another shared concern, especially regarding digital aesthetics and expectation management. One owner admitted:

“We prepare the food to be Instagram-friendly.” ~ RO5

This reflects a strategic adaptation to the visual logics of platform economies. At the same time, consumers confirm that images guide trust:

“I do trust the user photos on Google Maps of the food and the location.” ~ C2

[Mellinas & Sicilia \(2024\)](#) argue that Google’s interface, with its emphasis on visual cues and simplified summaries, encourages such user reliance while also fostering a positivity bias in review perception.

In line with [Zhao et al. \(2019\)](#), food images function here as symbolic markers, anchoring expectations and signaling authenticity.

Finally, a newer convergence emerges around algorithmic mediation and skepticism toward AI-

generated summaries. One consumer expressed discomfort:

“Sometimes the summaries feel a bit off, like they don’t match the vibe of the actual reviews.”

~ C7

Restaurant owners share this unease, particularly in the context of manipulation:

“It’s surprisingly easy to flood a listing with fake reviews, especially for small or new places.” ~ RO5

“You’re pretty defenseless as a small restaurant.” ~ RO4

These views reflect growing discomfort with opaque algorithmic systems (Gryka & Janicki, 2023), in which human judgment is filtered through automated interpretation, often without recourse or transparency. Donati (2022) further highlights how platform visibility is not simply earned through service quality but increasingly orchestrated through shifting and opaque infrastructural logics.

5.2 Diverging Logics in Trust, Participation, and Platform Control

Despite shared points of reference, restaurant owners and customers follow markedly different logics in how they engage with digital reviews and platforms.

One key divergence lies in participation behavior. While most customers actively consume reviews, they rarely contribute content themselves:

“Only in extreme situations.” ~ C5

For restaurant owners, this asymmetry poses a structural risk:

“If we feel a table had a particularly great experience, we’ll encourage them to leave a review.” ~ RO6

This imbalance reflects what Anderson and Magruder (2012) describe as asymmetric participation, where businesses rely on user-generated content that is consumed often but rarely produced unless prompted. This asymmetry has also been observed by Sparks & Browning (2011), who found that active encouragement significantly increases the likelihood of reviews.

Motivations also diverge. Consumers tend to use Google Maps because it provides a fast and convenient, all-in-one solution:

“Google Maps is my first stop because it is fast and has everything, I need in one place.

Location, reviews, pictures, and opening hours.” ~ C7

Restaurant owners, however, interpret reviews through a managerial lens:

“A review isn’t just an opinion—it’s data that influences how we run our business.” ~ RO6

This contrast reflects different interpretations of the same medium. While customers seek guidance and efficiency, owners view reviews as strategic feedback, aligning with Xie's et al. (2014) the understanding of reviews as digital assets. Wang & Chaudhry (2017) similarly emphasize that businesses use reviews both reactively and proactively to shape operations and branding.

Information preferences further highlight this gap. Consumers place higher value on visual cues or summary metrics:

“Photos are more important than what people write.” ~ C9

In contrast, owners rely more on written feedback to make sense of performance:

“A bad review without a text doesn’t tell me what went wrong, but a text review does.” ~ RO3

These different expectations reflect distinct processing routes: a peripheral route for customers (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), focused on quick, visual impressions; and a central route for owners, seeking actionable insights (Filieri, 2016). Aghakhani et al. (2023) further show that content richness and visual layout significantly influence the perceived usefulness of reviews.

Attitudes toward AI features also differ. Customers express cautious approval of AI-generated elements:

“AI tags like ‘good for brunch’ are helpful, but I double-check.” ~ C7

Restaurant owners, by contrast, feel disempowered by these automated layers:

“We have no idea how the summaries are made or what influences them.” ~ RO5

This reflects structural asymmetries in platform governance (Ziewitz, 2016), where algorithmic decisions shape visibility and framing, but without transparency or participation by those affected. Cizreliogullari et al. (2019) describe this as a form of “algorithmic opacity,” which undermines strategic planning for businesses.

The meaning of place is no longer confined to physical space. Instead, digital and physical dimensions increasingly merge.

For restaurant owners, the place is strategically constructed through presentation and visual appeal:

“We prepare the food to be Instagram-friendly.” ~ RO5

Here, physical space becomes a curated surface, designed for visibility within the platform logic.

Consumers, on the other hand, approach place through interpretation. They form expectations based on visual impressions, reviews, and algorithmic suggestions:

“I do trust the user photos on Google Maps of the food and the location.” ~ C2

Even when visual representations may not match the experience, they serve as decision-making triggers, aligning with Zhao et al. (2019), who describe food imagery as symbolic markers in digital ecosystems. Mellinas & Sicilia (2024) confirm that Google’s review interface privileges images over textual depth, reinforcing these dynamics.

The social context of place shows further divergence. For customers, peer orientation is central:

“I go where my friends go.” ~ C3

Owners, in contrast, see social groups as growth catalysts:

“One loyal group of friends can bring ten new guests.” ~ RO2

In this sense, social proof functions differently: for consumers, it’s about belonging; for businesses, it’s about reach.

While both groups rely on online content, their relationship to trust differs significantly.

Customers express a general reliance on online orientation tools, but with emotional filtering:

*“I’ve never been the type to rely on strangers’ comments online. I prefer direct experience.”
~ C6*

“If I’m going somewhere, it’s because someone recommended it to me personally – a friend, a colleague, someone I trust.” ~ C6

Trust, from this angle, emerges intuitively through social connection rather than strategic evaluation.

Restaurant owners, by contrast, approach trust as something that must be actively built and managed. Online visibility is closely tied to credibility, and public communication plays a key role:

“People trust it, maybe even too much.” ~ RO1

“We reply personally and tailored to the situation, because it builds trust.” ~ RO3

This aligns with the idea of reputational capital (Nguyen et al., 2020), where credibility is not assumed but created through tone, responsiveness, and digital presence. Owners understand trust as constructed authenticity, whereas customers perceive it as intuitive authenticity (Spence, 1973).

Leximancer further illustrates this divide: the concept of “trust” is tightly linked to owner-related terms such as reviews, service, and reputation management. In contrast, among consumers, it appears in more emotional, relationship-oriented contexts, not as part of a deliberate strategy.

6 CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore how restaurant owners and customers in Lisbon co-construct digital reputation through Google Maps reviews, with particular attention to shared narratives and divergent engagement strategies. Drawing on a thematic analysis of 21 semi-structured interviews, supported by Leximancer, the research identified four central themes: Reviews, Place, Online, and Trust, and examined them along two analytical dimensions: narrative convergence and divergence.

In response to the *first research objective*, the findings demonstrate that digital reputation is shaped through six shared narratives between restaurant owners and customers. Both groups recognize Google Maps as a key platform for visibility, using it not only for navigation but as a central space for making and influencing decisions. Star ratings function as powerful symbolic cues, despite doubts about their objectivity. Reviews act as a feedback mechanism with emotional resonance. Users and owners alike described them as deeply personal, ranging from validation to exposure. Visual content, particularly user-generated photos, emerged as critical for signaling trust. Finally, both groups expressed skepticism toward AI-generated content, perceiving it as inauthentic and detached from real experiences. These narratives reveal a collective understanding of how value and trust are constructed digitally.

Addressing the *second research objective*, the study uncovered seven distinct reasoning patterns that highlight structural differences between users and restaurant owners. Owners interpret reviews strategically, as actionable data for operational improvement and reputation building, whereas users approach them more passively, relying on visual and rating-based cues for convenience. This asymmetry extends to content creation. While customers consume reviews, restaurant owners must actively generate engagement to remain visible. Moreover, customers place higher trust in interpersonal signals than in algorithmic responsiveness, compelling owners to establish credibility through relational effort rather than platform-driven metrics. These findings expose unequal agency within the platform ecosystem, where customers benefit from effortless influence while business owners face a continuous demand to adapt and perform. In sum, this research shows that digital reputation on Google Maps is co-constructed through shared symbolic practices but shaped by divergent logics and unequal power dynamics. While the platform offers a common interface, customers and restaurant owners engage with it through fundamentally different modes, reflecting broader tensions in platform-mediated economies.

6.1 Theoretical Contribution

The majority of existing studies about digital reviews in hospitality focus on TripAdvisor by analyzing quantitative ratings and their influence on customer purchase decisions (Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006; Luca, 2016). The most popular review platform Google Maps, lacks sufficient academic investigation about its role as a space that unites digital visibility with feedback and reputation management.

This research studies the platform-mediated symbolic interaction space of Google Maps through the joint efforts of restaurant owners and their customers. The research delivers three essential theoretical contributions to the field.

The research supports Social Proof Theory (Cialdini, 2007) and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986) by demonstrating how ratings and images work as mental shortcuts to help consumers make decisions under low levels of involvement. Restaurant owners analyze these digital indicators to develop strategic responses that show how digital signals influence consumer perceptions and operational outcomes.

The research demonstrates how platform economies create unbalanced power dynamics between consumers and businesses (Ziewitz, 2016; Donati, 2022). Consumers have the ability to influence businesses with minimal work, yet businesses need to constantly adapt their operations and responses to maintain their online presence. The concerns of owners regarding fake reviews and AI-generated summaries demonstrate how algorithmic opacity (Cizreliogullari et al., 2019) and infrastructural dependency create broader challenges.

The research demonstrates that digital reviews function as both information tools and emotionally charged social practices. Customers employ reviews to both show gratitude and apply pressure on businesses, while owners face these reviews as moments when they become exposed. This finding supports the concept of reputational capital (Nguyen et al., 2020) since trust development depends on maintaining appropriate tones and showing responsive behavior while making relational efforts.

This research uses thematic analysis alongside platform theory to demonstrate that digital reputation emerges through social agreements between symbolic elements and algorithmic rules. The research presents an enhanced comprehension of trust and visibility development on Google Maps through interactive storytelling methods that extend beyond quantitative metrics.

6.2 Practical Contribution

The research results provide useful practical information to restaurant owners and industry stakeholders, and platform providers, because Google Maps has become a fundamental digital infrastructure for businesses to manage their reputation and visibility.

Restaurant owners view Google Maps primarily as a customer-focused platform that displays static listings and map information. The interviews show that businesses operate under different rules than customers when it comes to Google Maps. The platform has evolved into an algorithm-driven space that requires active strategic engagement from businesses instead of being a simple listing platform. Businesses that grasp the impact of response behavior and photo quality and update frequency on their visibility will gain better control over customer perception and loyalty.

The digital profile of a restaurant now holds equal importance to its physical address. Restaurants spend considerable resources on food quality, service, and ambiance, but frequently lack professional digital presence management skills and resources. The gap between customer-friendly Google Maps navigation and business logic understanding represents a widespread problem that affects many restaurant owners. Bridging this gap is essential.

The research provides multiple practical recommendations that can be applied in practice:

- (1) Platform-specific training for restaurateurs is needed, especially for small and medium-sized businesses. Practical guides should demystify how Google Maps works from review strategies and photo optimization to the algorithmic impact of timely responses.
- (2) Local marketing offices and hospitality associations can offer low-barrier resources, awareness campaigns, and advisory support to help restaurants navigate digital visibility more confidently.
- (3) Google itself should assume greater responsibility in increasing transparency: by clarifying algorithm dynamics, improving tools against fake reviews, and simplifying the process for flagging manipulative content.

In sum, this study shows that a passive presence is no longer enough. For restaurants, Google Maps must be seen not as a customer tool, but as a strategic arena. Those who fail to adapt risk falling behind, no matter how strong their offering inside the restaurant walls.

6.3 Limitations

This study provides valuable insights into how Google Maps reviews shape digital reputation from both the consumer and restaurant owner perspectives. However, several limitations should be acknowledged. The qualitative nature and limited sample size restrict the generalizability of findings. While joint analysis revealed shared and diverging narratives, a larger dataset might have enabled the generation of separate conceptual maps for each group, offering a more granular comparison.

Furthermore, the study captures a specific moment in time and reflects subjective, context-bound perceptions. As digital behaviors and platform dynamics evolve, these narratives may shift, especially with ongoing algorithmic changes or shifts in user expectations.

Lastly, the exclusive focus on Google Maps poses limitations when comparing the findings to broader review literature, which often merges insights from multiple platforms such as TripAdvisor, Yelp, or Booking.com. While interviewees emphasized the growing dominance of Google Maps, it remains challenging to fully isolate its effects from the wider ecosystem of digital reviews. Future research could benefit from a multi-platform approach to better reflect the complexity of online reputation environments.

6.4 Future Research

Future research should build on current findings by studying multiple platforms beyond Google Maps to analyze how different platforms affect digital reputation dynamics.

The study could achieve better results by analyzing larger datasets and performing separate Leximancer mappings for restaurant owners and consumers to produce clearer conceptual structures and stronger differences between shared and divergent narratives.

Research should examine how platform training and response template guidance affect digital visibility and customer behavior, and trustworthiness perceptions throughout time. Research designs that span multiple time points would enable the study of review management practices and algorithmic changes as they evolve.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Interview Transcripts (Participants: #RO1, #RO6, #C2, #C6, #C7)

total: 21 interviews (15 customers, 6 restaurant owners), 37 pages on transcript, 26.151 words

Interview: #RO1

A: Before we start, is it okay if I record this interview?

B: Yes, of course, no problem.

A: So, could you just briefly introduce your restaurant – like how long you’ve been open, how big your team is, and where exactly you’re located?

B: Sure. So, we’re in Santos – it’s become a pretty lively area in recent years, especially with younger people and creatives. We’ve been open for... almost seven years now, I think. It started small – just me and two others – and now we’re a team of ten. Five in the kitchen, five in the front of house. I actually trained in London, and when I came back, I didn’t want to just replicate what everyone else was doing. I wanted to take what I learned and create something of my own. The concept is this fusion between Mediterranean and Asian, but more about the atmosphere and feeling than strict rules, you know?

A: And how do guests usually find your place? Is Google Maps important, or do they come more through word of mouth?

B: Honestly... both. A lot of people find us through Google Maps – especially tourists or folks just visiting Lisbon for a weekend. People don’t really stroll around looking anymore; they go straight online. They type “restaurants near me” or “best food in Santos,” and that’s how they end up here. But we also get guests who were recommended by friends or someone who came here before, and now brings their partner or friends. That kind of organic thing still happens, and I really love that. I guess Google gives you that first touchpoint, but what makes people come back is... everything else. The food, the vibe, the people. That’s where the real connection happens.

B: Definitely. I mean, it’s not everything, but it’s huge. People trust it – maybe even too much. Like, I’ve had guests walk in and say, “Oh, you have 4.6 stars,” as if that’s the full story. And I’m thinking... sure, but look around, smell the food, feel the place. (laughs) But yeah – it’s become a kind of filter. If you’re not on there, or if your score drops, people just skip over you. Google is the number one platform, no doubt. Everyone uses it to decide where to go.

A: How do you and your team deal with the reviews you receive on Google Maps

B: We actually read all of them. Like, seriously – every single one. We talk about them in our team meetings, usually on Mondays. We’ll go over the good ones, the weird ones, the ones that sting a bit. Sometimes we even read them out loud – and yeah, sometimes we just laugh because they’re so random. But if someone mentions the music being too loud or the service being a bit slow, we take that seriously. Even if we didn’t notice it ourselves, it can be a useful mirror.

Reviews help us stay connected to what guests experience, especially now that I'm not always on the floor anymore.

A: And what's your reaction when you see a negative review?

B: Ugh... those are hard. I try not to take them personally, but it's not easy. Especially when it's just a one-star rating with no explanation. Like, what even happened? Did they actually eat here? Did something go wrong that we weren't aware of? And the worst part is, it drags your average down, and you can't really respond properly without context. Still, we always try to check – we'll ask, "Does anyone remember this table?" Sometimes, no one does. But you have to keep moving. Otherwise, you get stuck and start second-guessing everything.

A: Do you respond to reviews publicly?

B: Sometimes, yes. If someone writes something thoughtful – even if it's critical – and it feels respectful, then I usually want to respond. Say thank you, explain a bit of our side, maybe. But I don't answer all of them. I don't want to copy-paste generic replies – people notice that. So, we only reply when it feels right and we have something real to say.

A: Do you have any strategy to encourage positive reviews?

B: Not really, no. We don't push it. No cards on the table or anything like that. But if someone says, "This was amazing," then yeah – we might casually say, "Hey, if you feel like sharing that, we'd really appreciate it." But only if it feels natural. I'd rather have ten honest reviews than fifty forced ones.

A: Can you think of a review that really stayed with you?

B: Oh yeah. There was one that said, "Each dish felt like a poem, but the tables were too close together." I loved that. It felt... fair. They really saw what we were trying to do, appreciated it, and still gave a small piece of feedback. It wasn't about scoring points. It was personal. That's the kind of review I wish we got more often.

A: Have you noticed any changes in how Google Maps reviews are presented or how guests use them?

B: Definitely. It's way more dominant now. Like, five years ago, people were still checking TripAdvisor or food blogs. Now it's basically Google Maps and maybe Instagram. Also, Google started showing these little summaries like, "people mention the staff" or "good for dates," and sometimes I'm like... okay, didn't expect that one. But yeah, it's clear that the algorithm is shaping how we're seen even before a guest walks in.

A: And what do you think about AI or automatic review summarization?

B: I have mixed feelings. On one hand, if it helps clean out fake reviews or spam, that's great. But I'm also wary of reducing everything to keywords. Food is emotional. It's not something you can just summarize with "nice atmosphere" and "good wine." If people rely only on AI to understand a place, they might miss what really makes it special. So yeah... I'm a bit skeptical.

A: Are you doing anything to prepare for that kind of shift?

B: We're trying to stay true to our story. Whether it's through Instagram, how we talk to guests,

or even the design of the place, we want the experience to be consistent and memorable. I guess the hope is: if you build something strong and intentional, it'll come across no matter what Google changes. But it's not easy. You can't control everything.

A: Is there anything you'd like to add – anything that's important to you when it comes to Google Maps or online reviews?

B: Just that I hope people remember there are real humans behind every restaurant. We work hard, we care – and yeah, sometimes we mess up. But most of us are really trying to create something meaningful. So when someone writes a thoughtful review, whether it's praise or gentle critique, that really matters. It keeps the dialogue going. We don't always reply, but we always read. And we always care.

Interview: #RO6

A: Thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me today. To begin, could you describe your restaurant – what type of place it is, how large it is, and how long it's been running?

B: Sure. The restaurant, in its current form, has been running for about ten years since we took it over. In terms of size, we're a medium-sized operation. We have 12 employees, 60 indoor seats, and around 80 outdoor seats during the warmer months. So it's quite lively when it gets busy.

A: Sounds like a strong setup. Let's talk about Google Maps. What role does it play for your business? Do you see it as an important customer acquisition channel – especially for new guests?

B: That's an interesting question. For a long time, we didn't focus on Google Maps because we have a very loyal base of regulars. But especially in the summer, when tourist traffic increases, the impact becomes much more noticeable. Tourists often show up with clear expectations – some have already seen our menu or seasonal dishes on Google Maps. What's fascinating is that they'll stop in front of the restaurant and check the Google rating before even stepping in. If they spot a bad review, that's often a dealbreaker. They just move on.

A: That's really insightful – the idea that people pause right in front of the venue to verify the rating before they commit. Do you have a strategy for dealing with reviews – reading them, responding to them? Do you manage this yourself or do you have someone else handling it?

B: At the moment, I handle it myself. We don't have a formal strategy in place, but we are considering one. You can definitely see that reviews affect your performance, especially when people are just passing by and making a spontaneous decision. What we do sometimes is, if we feel a table had a particularly great experience, we'll encourage them to leave a review. And to nudge that along, we might say, "If you post it now, we'll treat you to a small dessert." That works well – people are happy and will often show you the review immediately.

A: So you're encouraging positive reviews on an ad hoc basis, rather than as part of a systematic campaign?

B: Exactly. We've never really had a structured plan for that. Usually, we react when something

negative comes in. If we get a bad review, we know we need to balance it out quickly with a few good ones – kind of like damage control. Then we might focus on collecting some positive feedback for a day or two.

A: That makes sense. How do you handle those negative reviews? Is it something you do instinctively, or do you have a set approach for responding?

B: We do have a general approach, yes. In many cases, when a review is negative, we can actually trace it back to a real incident – a table where something went wrong. We always try to respond – partly because it’s our customer, and we want to show we care, and partly because of public image. We’ll apologize, and sometimes we even invite the reviewer to come back – offer them a pizza on the house or something similar. Of course, it depends on the tone and the legitimacy of the complaint.

A: That’s very constructive. Let’s shift to the future. Have you noticed any significant changes in Google Maps – either in the app itself or in terms of its importance – over the past five years?

B: Definitely. The influence has grown tremendously. I wouldn’t say it’s huge for our loyal regulars, but the broader industry – especially those relying on tourism – is heavily shaped by Google Maps now. When we ask new customers how they found us, more and more say it was through the app. It’s becoming the number one source for spontaneous dining decisions.

A: And within the app – how has the interface or its algorithm changed in your view?

B: One thing we’ve noticed is how specific search queries have become. People no longer search just “Italian” or “Indian.” They’re typing in exact dishes, like “best vegan lasagna,” or filtering by dietary preference. Also, if you don’t meet a certain threshold – say, a rating below 4.3 – you just disappear. Google then expands the radius and shows options from neighboring towns instead. So even if you’re geographically close, you might not show up unless people really zoom in. That’s a huge shift in terms of visibility.

A: So algorithmic filtering and personalized queries are really reshaping discoverability?

B: Absolutely. That’s the direction it’s going.

A: Let’s talk about AI. Do you have concerns about how AI and automated filtering might influence reviews or visibility? What are your expectations?

B: Well, I think it will push restaurants to be more precise and transparent. Users want deeper insights – they’re looking for specifics, whether it’s vegan options or seasonal dishes. If we want to keep up, we have to present that information clearly, in a structured way that algorithms can recognize. I think the standard for restaurants is rising. There’s no way around it.

A: Have you had any experience with fake reviews or AI-generated ones? Are you concerned competitors might use AI to harm reputations?

B: So far, we haven’t had that problem. Personally, I trust that Google is building strong safeguards. Google Maps is a massive investment for them – and it’s free to use, so I’m sure they’re planning to monetize it more in the future. If it got flooded with fake reviews, it would hurt them more than anyone. That said, if I spotted a fake or malicious review, I’d report it. But I think the burden lies more on Google to maintain integrity.

A: Understood. Let's wrap with a final reflection. How do you prepare for the future – what can restaurants do to stay ahead as Google Maps and AI continue to evolve?

B: I think it starts with communication – being transparent across platforms. Sharing what we're offering, being active with updates like weekly specials, posting on social media. It's frustrating to put effort into designing a new menu, only to have it ignored because it's not visible. Google won't know unless we show them. And when prices change or dishes get updated, we need to ensure that our digital presence reflects that – otherwise, guests get outdated information and feel misled. It's all about maintaining an accurate, multi-channel presence.

A: So staying current, visible, and making sure AI has the right data to work with?

B: Exactly. The goal is to make it easier for both the customer and the algorithm to understand who we are and what we offer.

A: One last question – is there anything else you'd like to add that we haven't touched on?

B: Reviews are super important to us. A review isn't just an opinion—it's data that influences how we run our business.

A: Very insightful. Thanks again, Marco – this was incredibly helpful.

Interview: #C2

A: Can you briefly tell me a bit about yourself, for example where you live, your age group, and how often you dine out or order food?

B: I'm 27 years old and originally from Frankfurt. I lived in Lisbon for two years while doing my master's degree. During that time, eating out was a regular and significant part of my everyday routine. I would say I went out to eat or ordered food around four to six times per week, sometimes even more. Lisbon has this casual and very social food culture where it feels completely normal to grab a bite with friends after university or to spend a long evening eating outside. I didn't cook very much during the week to be honest. Dining out simply felt more convenient and enjoyable. Also, since prices are or were quite affordable compared to Germany, it never felt like I was spending too much.

A: Do you usually look up restaurants online before visiting or ordering?

B: Yes, absolutely. I always check online before trying out a new place. I mostly use Google Maps because it's convenient and shows me what is nearby. I usually check the rating, look at some of the pictures, and sometimes also opening hours or how busy the place is. Even if someone personally recommends a restaurant, I will still look it up myself to get a sense of the place. When I order food, I normally use apps like Uber Eats and I rely on their suggestions or filters. But if I am not sure, I still double-check on Google Maps. This behavior has become a habit and part of how I make decisions about food.

A: How do you usually discover new restaurants? Is it through Google Maps, social media, friends, or something else?

B: It really depends on the situation. A lot of the time I discover restaurants through friends,

either because they talk about them or we go together. Word-of-mouth is still really influential. But when I'm on my own, I often scroll through Google Maps. I zoom into a certain area of the city and filter by rating, or I just explore what visually catches my attention. I also use Instagram occasionally. When I'm in the mood for a certain type of food, I search hashtags like #lisboarestaurants or check out what local foodie accounts are posting. Sometimes I also discover places by walking around and seeing something that looks cool. Even in those cases I usually look the place up online before going in. So I would say that a combination of personal recommendations and digital discovery tools like Google Maps and Instagram guide my choices the most.

A: How closely do you read restaurant reviews before visiting a place?

B: To be honest, I don't dive deep into the reviews. I usually just check the star rating and maybe skim one or two recent comments if I am not completely sure. If the score is under 4.0, I become a bit cautious and try to understand why. But I rarely read through more than that. I care more about visual impressions. Pictures of the food and atmosphere give me more relevant information than long written texts. For me it's more about getting a general feeling of the place than reading individual stories.

A: Do you write reviews yourself and if so, what motivates you to do it?

B: No, I don't write reviews. I've never really felt the need to do so. Even when I have strong feelings about a restaurant, I usually just talk to my friends about it. Writing a public review always feels like one step too many. I guess if I had a really bad experience, I might consider leaving a warning, but that hasn't happened yet. So I would say I consume a lot of reviews but I don't actively contribute to them.

A: Do you think reviews like yours or those of others can actually influence restaurants?

B: Yes, definitely. Even though I don't write reviews myself, I know that reviews influence me and the people around me. If a restaurant has a bad score or a few very negative recent reviews, I will probably avoid it. I think that's how most people act. So reviews absolutely have an effect on restaurants, both in terms of visibility and their public image. I think restaurants are very aware of this. Some places in Lisbon were very proactive in responding to reviews or encouraging feedback, and that always left a positive impression on me.

A: Can you recall a specific review that really shaped your expectations or experience?

B: Yes, actually I do remember one. It was so dramatic that it stuck with me. Someone wrote something like: one of the worst dining experiences ever, there was a hair in the food, everything was greasy, and the hygiene was terrible. They even said something like may God punish this place for three generations. I know that sounds extreme, but that one review totally shaped my perception. I didn't go to that place, even though the photos looked okay. That comment alone changed everything. I guess when a review is emotional and intense like that, it leaves more of an impression than ten neutral ones.

A: How do you feel when you see a review that includes a photo or a detailed description? Does that change how you see the restaurant?

B: Yes, absolutely. Photos are probably the most important element for me when making a

decision. They give me a real and realistic idea of what to expect, especially when it comes to food presentation and atmosphere. I don't really trust professional photos from a restaurant's website, but I do trust the user photos on Google Maps of the food and the location. If the food looks oily or messy or just thrown together, I lose interest. On the other hand, if the pictures show fresh and clean presentation, I'm much more likely to go. Even if there are not many reviews, good pictures can make a strong impression. So yes, visual content shapes my decisions much more than written descriptions.

A: Have you noticed any changes in how Google Maps presents restaurant reviews, such as summaries or specific tags?

B: Not really. I know there are sometimes tags like great for groups or known for cocktails, but I usually don't pay much attention to them. They might be useful, but I normally focus on the rating and the pictures. I haven't seen any major changes recently. Or maybe I just use it in a very functional and quick way and ignore anything extra.

A: What is your opinion on AI-generated summaries or keywords in Google reviews?

B: I haven't really seen those myself yet, so I can't speak from direct experience. But the idea makes sense. If AI can highlight recurring themes like slow service or good vegetarian options, it could be very helpful. It would make it faster and easier to scan a restaurant without reading through dozens of reviews. But it needs to be accurate and not too generic. Otherwise it just becomes another layer of noise instead of something useful.

A: Do you think algorithms or digital systems affect how people experience or judge restaurants, even before visiting them?

B: Yes, definitely. Algorithms determine what we see first on platforms like Google Maps, delivery apps, or social media. If a restaurant shows up near the top of the list, it will get attention. If it's buried at the bottom, people probably won't even find it. That alone affects how restaurants are perceived. Also, when I see a high rating and good photos, I already expect a good experience. That expectation shapes how I perceive the food and service, even if it's just average. So digital systems play a massive role in shaping both perception and actual behavior.

A: Can you imagine using AI tools to write or summarize a review yourself, or would that feel strange?

B: No, I don't think I would want that. For me, food is something personal. If I ever wrote a review, I would want it to be in my own words. A restaurant experience includes taste, atmosphere, mood, and the people you're with. It's emotional. I don't think AI could really authentically capture that. So if I don't feel like writing something myself, I'd rather leave it unwritten than let an algorithm do it for me.

Interview: #C7

A: Can you briefly tell me a bit about yourself – for example, where you live, your age group, and how often you dine out or order food?

B: I'm 22 and currently living in Lisbon. I moved here for my studies. Luckily, my parents help

me financially, which I really appreciate because student life can be pretty tight. When it comes to eating habits, it varies. I usually eat out or order food about once or twice a week. Sometimes I have leftovers. Sometimes I am too tired or stressed to cook, so I order something. But if I am low on cash, I just eat pasta at home for days. Food is one of the few things I still allow myself to enjoy, even if it is not exactly budget-friendly. It is like my small way of treating myself, even when I know I should probably be saving.

A: Do you usually look up restaurants online before visiting or ordering?

B: Yes, basically always. I would say ninety-nine percent of the time. Google Maps is my first stop because it is fast and has everything I need in one place. Location, reviews, pictures, and opening hours. Sometimes, if I am looking for a certain vibe or something a bit more stylish, I also check Instagram. It helps me see if the place looks nice. Like if they have cozy lighting, cool decor, or plants. I really do not want to end up somewhere depressing, especially if it is for brunch or a meal out with friends. So yes, checking online has become part of the whole routine.

A: How do you usually discover new restaurants through Google Maps, social media, friends, or other ways?

B: Mostly Google Maps. I just open it and type restaurants near me, or I use the rating filter. But I also get influenced by TikToks or Instagram reels. If I see a cute café with aesthetic matcha and banana bread, I probably save it to check out later. And when a friend recommends a place, I look it up immediately to see pictures and reviews. So it is definitely a mix, partly tech and partly word of mouth.

A: How closely do you read restaurant reviews before visiting a place?

B: That depends. If it is a new area or a place I have never been to, I scroll through a bit. First, I look at the overall rating. If it is under 4.2, I start to question it. Then I read maybe two or three quick reviews. I do not dive deep or read long essays, but I want to catch the main points. Like if people were complaining about slow service, rude staff, or if the food was not as good as it looked online. It is more like a quick vibe check before deciding.

A: Do you write reviews yourself? And what usually motivates you to do so?

B: Sometimes I do. Not every time, but if the experience was either really good or really bad, I feel like leaving a review. Sometimes I am just bored, or I feel like giving back because I rely on reviews a lot myself. I usually write a short sentence or two. If I remembered to snap a photo before eating, I upload that too. It is nothing fancy, but it feels fair to contribute once in a while.

A: Do you think your reviews or those from others can actually influence restaurants?

B: Yes, I think they can. If people keep mentioning the same problem over and over, like cold food or rude service, the restaurant should hopefully take that seriously. It is like collective feedback. And on the flip side, when customers rave about a dish or the atmosphere, it definitely attracts more people. Reviews are kind of like public advice. Part feedback, part marketing. I do think they shape a place's reputation.

A: Can you recall a review you read that really shaped your expectations or influenced your experience?

B: Yes, I remember seeing one about a café that looked amazing in the pictures. All green plants and cozy lighting. But someone wrote that it was super loud, overpriced, and that people only went there for the Instagram vibe. I still went because I was curious, but the review was pretty accurate. It was okay, but definitely more about aesthetics than good food or service. So that comment helped me lower my expectations and avoid being disappointed.

A: How do you feel when you see a review with a photo or a detailed description? Does that affect how you perceive the place?

B: Definitely. I trust photos way more than just text. Especially the ones taken by real customers, not the polished promo shots. If the food looks messy but delicious, I am sold. But if the portion is tiny or the place looks dirty, I might skip it. Also, when reviews describe the vibe, like if the music is chill or the space is cozy, it helps me imagine what being there would be like. So yes, details and visuals make a big difference.

A: Have you noticed any changes in how Google Maps presents restaurant reviews, like summaries or tags?

B: Yes, I have seen those little tags recently. Like popular for cocktails or known for desserts. I actually use them a lot, especially if I am in a rush and want to get a quick sense of what the place is known for. It is not always accurate, but it gives a fast snapshot of what to expect.

A: What is your opinion on AI-generated summaries or keywords in Google reviews?

B: I think they are okay. They can be helpful when you just want a quick overview. But sometimes the summaries feel a bit off, like they do not really match the vibe of the actual reviews. So I use them to get a first impression. But I still read at least one real comment to see if it all lines up. It is useful, but not something I fully trust on its own.

A: Do you think algorithms or digital systems affect how people experience or judge restaurants, even before visiting?

B: Absolutely. If a restaurant comes up first in the list and has a 4.8 rating, I immediately think it must be amazing. Even if that is just because they paid for promotion or got lucky with early reviews. It creates this mental image of quality before you even go. And if a place has bad photos or a weird name, I might scroll past it, even if it is great. So yes, algorithms totally shape our first impressions and what we notice.

A: Can you imagine using AI tools yourself to write or summarize a review, or would that feel unnatural?

B: Maybe. If I am feeling lazy but still want to say something, I could imagine just speaking into my phone and letting AI turn it into a review. But it would need to sound like me. Casual and real, not robotic. I would be okay with that, as long as it keeps my tone and does not rewrite it in formal customer service speak.

A: Is there anything else you would like to share about how you use reviews when it comes to restaurants or food experiences?

B: One thing I always check is how restaurants respond to bad reviews. If they are rude or blame the customer, that is a red flag for me. But if they respond respectfully and try to make things

right, it makes me like them more. It is kind of like reading their personality. I think responses say a lot about how much a place actually cares.

Interview: #C9

A: Can you briefly tell me a bit about yourself, for example where you live, your age group, and how often you dine out or order food?

B: I am 33 and currently living in Berlin. Because of my job and lifestyle, I tend to eat out quite often, probably around three to four times per week. I also order food about once or twice a week, especially when I am working late or too tired to cook. It depends a bit on my schedule and mood, but overall, food and trying new places are a big part of my weekly routine.

A: Do you usually look up restaurants online before visiting or ordering?

B: Yes, almost always. When I go out to eat, I mostly use Google Maps to check places nearby, look at ratings, read reviews, and browse through photos. If I am ordering delivery, I use the delivery app, but even then I sometimes cross check things on Google. I like to be informed about where I am going.

A: How do you usually discover new restaurants, through Google Maps, social media, friends, or other ways?

B: I would say around sixty percent of the time I use Google Maps, especially with filters and the top rated tags. About thirty percent comes from friends' recommendations, and the remaining ten percent probably comes from Instagram or TikTok. Sometimes I see a reel or a post that catches my eye and I save it for later. But in my everyday life, Google Maps is definitely the most important tool I use to find restaurants.

A: How closely do you read restaurant reviews before visiting a place?

B: I read them pretty closely, but I am also selective. First, I check the overall rating and how many reviews a place has. If the score is high but only a few people have rated it, I become a bit skeptical. If the rating is over four point four and the place has a few hundred reviews, then I take a closer look.

I scan for keywords like friendly staff, slow service, great wine list, or not worth the price. I usually read three to five comments, just to get a general feeling. Especially when I plan to go with other people, I want to avoid surprises like chaotic service or a strange atmosphere.

A: Do you write reviews yourself? If yes, what usually motivates you to do so?

B: Yes, I actually write reviews fairly regularly. I am a Local Guide on Google, currently level six, and I enjoy it. I usually write reviews when I have had either a really good or a really bad experience. Sometimes I just want to give constructive feedback or highlight hidden gems.

It also feels like I am helping others who rely on these reviews just like I do. In a way, it is also a kind of personal documentation, like a small record of where I have been. It is also nice when restaurants respond, because it shows that they care and actively manage their online reputation.

A: Do you think your reviews, or those of others, can actually influence restaurants?

B: Definitely. I have seen examples where my review was liked or replied to, or where changes were made after multiple people pointed out the same issue. If you are a Local Guide, your review is also more visible and carries more weight. I think many restaurants know how important reviews are for their digital visibility and customer expectations.

A: Can you recall a review you read that really shaped your expectations or experience?

B: Yes. I remember one restaurant that had many compliments for the food, but lots of comments criticizing the slow service. I still went, but I was mentally prepared for a wait, and that helped. The food was worth it, but if I had not read the reviews, I might have been frustrated or left too early.

A: How do you feel when you see a review with a photo or a detailed description? Does that change how you perceive the place?

B: Absolutely. Photos are more important to me than what people write. But I do not mean the polished or professional ones. I trust real photos from guests more, even if they are a bit messy. They show what the food actually looks like.

Detailed reviews also help me understand what kind of place it is, for example whether it is casual, loud, cozy, overpriced, or something else. They paint a fuller picture, not just numbers.

A: Have you noticed any changes in how Google Maps presents restaurant reviews, such as summaries or tags?

B: Yes, I have noticed some changes, but they are subtle. Sometimes there are auto generated tags like popular for brunch or great cocktails. I find those helpful when I am browsing. They make the process quicker, especially when I do not want to read many long reviews.

A: What is your opinion on AI generated summaries or keywords in Google reviews?

B: I think they are useful, as long as it is clear that they are AI generated. It makes it faster to scan a restaurant's profile and find the parts that matter to me.

That being said, the quality varies. Sometimes the summaries feel a bit off or repetitive, as if they do not truly reflect the tone of what people actually wrote.

A: Do you think algorithms or digital systems affect how people experience or judge restaurants, even before visiting?

B: Yes, one hundred percent. The order in which restaurants show up on Google Maps, the star ratings, the first few reviews – all of that shapes your first impression before you even arrive.

A lot of people make quick decisions based on that digital information. So yes, I would definitely say that digital systems shape the dining experience in advance.

A: Can you imagine using AI tools yourself to write or summarize a review, or would that feel unnatural?

B: Actually, yes. I have already started dictating short notes into my phone and letting AI or voice recognition turn that into a review. It saves time and still sounds like me, especially if I edit it a little. I think it is just another tool that can help make the process easier.

A: Is there anything else you would like to share about how you use reviews when it comes to restaurants or food experiences?

B: Just that I really believe reviews can help the restaurant scene improve and grow, especially when people provide honest and balanced feedback.

It is not about complaining. It is about sharing your experience in a way that helps others. I also pay attention to how restaurants respond to negative reviews. If they reply professionally and show that they care, that makes a big difference in how I see them.

Interview: #C12

A: Can you briefly tell me a bit about yourself, for example where you live, your age group, and how often you dine out or order food?

B: I'm 26 years old, currently living in Lisbon, and I'm studying full time at the moment. Because of my schedule and the way student life is here, I'd say I go out to eat almost every day. Sometimes it's just a quick bite between classes, like grabbing a sandwich or a salad, and other times I go out for dinner with friends to relax and enjoy the evening. Cooking at home does happen, mostly on weekends or when I feel like slowing down a bit and having a cozy night in. Ordering food is something I do maybe once or twice a week. It really depends on how packed my day is or if I just feel like being lazy and watching something while eating at home.

A: Do you usually look up restaurants online before visiting or ordering?

B: Yes, pretty much always, especially when it's a place I haven't been to before. I usually start with Google Maps because it gives me a quick idea of what's around, how close it is, and whether it has good reviews. I also use Instagram to get a feel for the atmosphere and see how the food looks, since that's often a big part of what makes me want to try a place. If it's a familiar spot or something a friend highly recommends, I don't bother checking online as much – I just trust the recommendation and go.

A: How do you usually discover new restaurants – through Google Maps, social media, friends, or other ways?

B: Mostly through social media – especially TikTok and Instagram. I follow a few local food bloggers and Lisbon-based pages that post about new openings or cool spots. If something looks good or the vibe seems interesting, I save it to my list and usually try to go at some point. My friends and I also talk a lot about where we've been recently, so word of mouth definitely plays a role too. And then there are those spontaneous discoveries, like when you're walking around a neighborhood and a place just looks inviting – maybe it smells great or has a cozy terrace with lots of people. Those moments still happen and they're fun because they feel more like little adventures.

A: How closely do you read restaurant reviews before visiting a place?

B: I don't go super deep into them, but I always check the basics. First thing I look at is the overall rating. If it's below 4.5 stars, I start to feel a bit skeptical, unless someone has told me it's still worth trying. Then I usually scroll through a couple of recent reviews to see if people

mention things like bad service, small portions, or long wait times. But I don't spend more than a minute or two – I just want to get a general sense of what to expect and whether there are any red flags.

A: Do you write reviews yourself? If yes – what usually motivates you to do so?

B: No, not really. I don't write proper reviews on Google or anything like that. What I do instead is post a story on Instagram if the food looks amazing or if the place has a really nice vibe or design. It's more like sharing a cool moment or aesthetic than reviewing. I guess I see it more as a way of showing my friends where I've been or what I liked, rather than trying to influence strangers.

A: Do you think your reviews, or those of others, can actually influence restaurants?

B: Yes, definitely. I see it in my own circle – like we really pay attention to ratings, and we're quick to judge a place by its score. If a friend sends a place and says, "It's a 4.9," we're usually impressed before even looking at the details. And when something is under 4.5, we kind of joke that it's not worth it unless it's super hyped or famous. So yeah, reviews shape our decisions a lot. And I think restaurants are aware of that. They react to patterns, especially if people tag them on Instagram or leave comments on things like service or atmosphere. It creates pressure to stay consistent.

A: Can you recall a review you read that really shaped your expectations or experience?

B: Yeah, there was this one café that looked really beautiful online – like super Instagrammable with colorful plates and nice lighting. But one of the reviews said the food was bland and overpriced, and the place was more about aesthetics than taste. I went anyway because I was curious, and it turned out the review was totally right. Everything looked perfect, but it just didn't deliver on flavor or value. That experience made me a bit more cautious – I try to check both looks and substance now.

A: How do you feel when you see a review with a photo or a detailed description? Does that change how you perceive the place?

B: Yes, for sure. I trust guest photos a lot more than professional ones or anything posted by the restaurant itself. The messy, real-life pictures show what the food actually looks like when it's served, how the portions are, how crowded or relaxed the place is – those small things really matter. Same with detailed descriptions. If someone takes the time to write what they liked and didn't like, it feels more trustworthy. That kind of content definitely helps me make better choices, especially when I'm deciding between two similar places.

A: Have you noticed any changes in how Google Maps presents restaurant reviews – for example, summaries or tags

B: Not in a big way, but yeah, I think there are more tags now. Things like "vegan friendly," "cozy atmosphere," or "great cocktails" show up more often, and sometimes there's a little summary at the top of the reviews. I don't always read it closely, but when I'm in a rush or trying to compare options, it does help.

A: What's your opinion on AI-generated summaries or keywords in Google reviews?

B: I think they're useful if done right. When I'm short on time, it's great to see the main points without having to read through dozens of comments. But it needs to be accurate. If it generalizes too much or misses key issues, it can be misleading. So I like the idea, but I still prefer to glance at some real reviews just to be sure.

A: Do you think algorithms or digital systems affect how people experience or judge restaurants – even before visiting?

B: Totally. The way places are ranked or highlighted on platforms like Google Maps or even Instagram plays a big role. If something's on top of the list with high ratings and lots of positive comments, you automatically assume it's the best choice. That shapes expectations before you even walk in the door. And I think restaurants know that too – that's why SEO, good photos, and online presence are such a priority now. It can really make or break them.

A: Can you imagine using AI tools yourself to write or summarize a review – or would that feel unnatural?

B: Honestly, I don't really write reviews now, but if I ever did, I could see myself using AI as a kind of writing helper. Like if I had a good or bad experience and wanted to say something but didn't know how to phrase it, maybe the AI could help structure it or make it sound clearer. I'd still want it to feel like me, though – I wouldn't want a generic or robotic tone. But yeah, I think AI could be helpful if it makes the process easier.

A: Is there anything else you'd like to share about how you use reviews when it comes to restaurants or food experiences?

B: One thing I always look at is how the restaurant responds to negative reviews. If they take the time to reply politely, explain their side, or offer to make things right, that earns my respect. It shows that they care and take feedback seriously. On the other hand, if they're rude or just ignore complaints, it makes me doubt their professionalism. I think more and more people notice that now. It's not just about the food anymore – it's about how they treat customers and what kind of values they show online.