

**When Likes Turn into Dislikes: How Negative Reviews from Food Vloggers Shape
Consumer Perception in the Restaurant Sector: The Mediating Role of Brand
Loyalty in Western Province, Sri Lanka**

S. S. J. Patabendige^a, P. S. S. Senarathna^b, M. Dhuvveshan^{c*}

^{a,b,c} Department of Marketing Management, Faculty of Commerce & Management
Studies, University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka

^{*}dhuvveshan08@gmail.com,

ABSTRACT

The rapid expansion of social media has significantly transformed consumer decision-making in the restaurant sector, where food vloggers increasingly function as influential opinion leaders shaping public perceptions of restaurants. Through platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, Facebook, and Instagram, food vloggers share dining experiences that can strongly influence audience attitudes toward restaurants. While positive reviews often enhance restaurant visibility and reputation, negative reviews can spread rapidly across digital networks and potentially damage brand image. However, despite exposure to negative online content, some consumers continue to patronize certain restaurants, suggesting the presence of moderating or mediating psychological factors. This study therefore examines the impact of negative reviews from social media food vloggers on consumer perception in the restaurant sector in the Western Province of Sri Lanka, with

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particular emphasis on the mediating role of brand loyalty. A quantitative research design was adopted using a structured online questionnaire administered to 384 respondents who actively engage with food vlogger content. The findings reveal that negative reviews significantly influence consumer perception of restaurants, while brand loyalty partially mediates this relationship, indicating that loyal customers are less likely to alter their perceptions or behavioral intentions despite negative online evaluations.

Keywords: Negative Reviews, Social Media Food Vloggers, Consumer Perception, Brand Loyalty, Restaurant Sector, Western Province, Sri Lanka

1 INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of social media has significantly transformed how consumers search for information and evaluate service experiences, particularly in the hospitality and restaurant sectors. Social media platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, Facebook, and Instagram have enabled the emergence of digital content creators who influence consumer opinions and purchasing decisions (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Among these creators, food vloggers have become influential opinion leaders who share restaurant experiences through video reviews, often evaluating aspects such as food quality, service standards, hygiene, and ambience. These reviews are widely consumed by audiences seeking authentic dining recommendations and have become an important source of information during the restaurant decision-making process (Jin & Phua, 2021). As a result, food vloggers play a growing role in shaping consumer perceptions and attitudes toward restaurants in the digital environment.

The influence of food vloggers can generate both positive and negative outcomes for restaurants. Positive reviews often enhance restaurant visibility, attract new customers, and strengthen brand image by highlighting favorable dining experiences (Briliana & Ruswidiono, 2020). Conversely, negative reviews may damage a restaurant's reputation by drawing attention to poor service, food quality issues, or hygiene concerns. Due to the viral nature of social media platforms, such content can spread rapidly and reach large audiences, thereby influencing consumer perceptions and behavioral intentions (Berger & Milkman, 2012). Prior studies suggest that negative information often has a stronger psychological impact than positive information because consumers tend to give greater weight to unfavorable experiences when evaluating service quality (Lee & Chen, 2020).

However, consumer responses to negative reviews are not always uniform. In many situations, consumers continue to patronize restaurants even after being exposed to negative online content. This suggests that additional psychological or relational factors may influence how consumers interpret and respond to negative information. One important factor is brand loyalty, which refers to a consumer's emotional attachment and commitment to a particular brand developed through repeated positive experiences (Kumara & Gupta, 2022). Loyal customers may be less likely to change their attitudes or behaviors in response to negative reviews because prior satisfaction and trust can act as a protective mechanism against unfavorable information (Nguyen et al., 2024).

Although research on online reviews and influencer marketing has grown significantly in recent years, much of the existing literature is concentrated in developed markets such as the United States, Europe, and East Asia (Jin & Phua, 2021; Lee & Chen, 2020).

Consequently, limited empirical attention has been given to understanding how negative reviews from social media food vloggers influence consumer perceptions in developing economies, particularly within the South Asian context. In Sri Lanka, the increasing popularity of food vloggers alongside the rapid expansion of social media usage has created a digital landscape where restaurant reputations can be strongly shaped by influencer-generated content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). However, there remains a lack of empirical evidence explaining how consumers interpret such negative reviews and whether relational factors, such as brand loyalty, play a mediating role in shaping consumer responses. Given this gap, the present study aims to examine the impact of negative reviews from social media food vloggers on consumer perception in the restaurant sector in the Western Province of Sri Lanka, while also investigating the mediating role of brand loyalty within this relationship.

Research Problem

Although digital reviews have become a dominant source of information in restaurant decision-making, the growing influence of social media food vloggers has introduced new complexities in how consumers interpret online evaluations. Food vloggers frequently publish experiential reviews that highlight both positive and negative aspects of restaurant performance. While negative reviews are often assumed to discourage consumers from visiting a restaurant, consumer behavior does not always follow this expected pattern. In many cases, restaurants continue to attract customers even after receiving widely circulated negative reviews on social media platforms. This inconsistency raises an important question regarding the extent to which negative digital content actually shapes consumer perceptions and behavioral intentions in the restaurant sector.

Existing literature on online reviews primarily focuses on developed markets and often examines consumer responses to written reviews rather than video-based influencer content (Lee & Chen, 2020). Moreover, prior studies tend to assume a direct relationship between negative reviews and unfavorable consumer perceptions, overlooking the potential influence of relational factors such as brand loyalty. Brand loyalty, which reflects consumers' emotional attachment and trust toward a brand, may influence how individuals interpret negative information and whether they alter their perceptions accordingly (Kumara & Gupta, 2022). Despite the rapid growth of food vlogger culture in Sri Lanka, empirical evidence explaining how negative food vlogger reviews influence consumer perceptions, and how brand loyalty may shape this relationship, remains limited. Addressing this gap is essential for understanding consumer responses to digital influencer content in emerging restaurant markets.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the impact of negative reviews from food vloggers on consumer perception in the restaurant sector.
2. To examine the impact of consumer perception on brand loyalty in the restaurant sector.
3. To examine the direct relationship between negative reviews from food vloggers and brand loyalty.
4. To examine the mediating role of consumer perception in the relationship between negative food vlogger reviews and brand loyalty.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Social media food vloggers negative reviews

The increasing popularity of social media platforms has transformed the way consumers obtain information about restaurants and evaluate dining experiences. Among the various forms of digital influence, social media food vloggers have emerged as important opinion leaders who share restaurant experiences through video-based reviews. These reviews typically include personal evaluations of food quality, service standards, ambience, hygiene, and overall dining satisfaction. Because such content is presented in a visual and experiential format, audiences often perceive food vloggers as more authentic and relatable compared to traditional advertising (Jin & Phua, 2021). Consequently, food vloggers play an influential role in shaping consumer perceptions and attitudes toward restaurants.

While positive reviews may enhance restaurant visibility and reputation, negative reviews can significantly affect how consumers interpret restaurant performance. Negative food vlogger reviews often highlight unfavorable dining experiences such as poor service, low food quality, or hygiene issues, which may influence consumer trust and expectations (Lee & Chen, 2020). Due to the interactive nature of social media platforms, such content can rapidly spread among audiences and influence consumer decision-making processes (Berger & Milkman, 2012). The impact of negative food vlogger reviews is not determined solely by the presence of criticism but also by specific characteristics of the content. Prior research suggests that the influence of negative online reviews is shaped by factors such as virality, credibility, engagement, and content specificity, which determine how widely the content spreads, how trustworthy it appears, and how strongly audiences respond to it

(Filieri, 2015). These dimensions collectively shape the overall influence of negative food vlogger reviews on consumer perceptions.

Virality

Virality is the measure of how quickly any content available online gains widespread exposure among users by means of user interaction and sharing. For social media food vloggers, virality becomes a measure of how extensively any negative review of theirs is exposed to potential customers. Content that achieves virality tends to attract a lot of attention as it is often associated with an evoking of some sort of emotional response in viewers be it surprise, anger, or dissatisfaction, which prompts them to distribute it further (Berger & Milkman, 2012). Thus, viral negative reviews become more influential than those made only for the vlogger's followers. For service businesses, such as restaurants, viral negative reviews tend to have quite an impact on brand image and consumer trust because of the increased credibility of the viral information (Filieri, 2015).

Credibility

Credibility refers to the degree to which audiences perceive the food vlogger and their review as trustworthy, reliable, and unbiased. In digital environments, the credibility of a content creator significantly influences how consumers interpret and respond to online information (Jin & Phua, 2021). When viewers perceive a food vlogger as knowledgeable, honest, and experienced in evaluating restaurants, their opinions are more likely to shape consumer attitudes and perceptions. Credible reviewers often present balanced evaluations, provide clear explanations of their experiences, and demonstrate transparency in their

reviews, which strengthens audience trust. Conversely, if a vlogger is perceived as biased or overly promotional, the influence of their review may decline. In the context of negative reviews, higher credibility increases the likelihood that audiences will accept the criticism as accurate and incorporate it into their evaluation of the restaurant (Lee & Chen, 2020).

Engagement

Engagement refers to the level of interaction between audiences and social media content, typically measured through likes, comments, shares, and discussions generated by the review. High engagement indicates that viewers actively interact with the content, which increases its visibility and influence within digital platforms (Dessart, Veloutsou, & Morgan-Thomas, 2015). In the context of food vloggers, negative reviews that generate substantial engagement often stimulate discussions among viewers who share similar experiences or opinions about the restaurant. Such interactions can reinforce the credibility and perceived importance of the review, as consumers may interpret high engagement as social validation of the criticism. Consequently, highly engaged negative content can significantly influence consumer perceptions because interactive discussions may strengthen the perceived relevance and seriousness of the issues highlighted in the review (Filieri, 2015).

Content specificity

Content specificity refers to the level of detail and clarity provided in an online review regarding the experience being evaluated. Reviews that contain specific information about food quality, service performance, pricing, hygiene, or dining environment are generally perceived as more informative and persuasive than vague or general statements (Lee &

Chen, 2020). Detailed explanations allow audiences to better understand the context of the criticism and evaluate whether the issue is relevant to their own expectations. In the context of food vlogger reviews, specific descriptions supported by visual evidence, such as showing the food preparation process or service interactions, can increase the perceived authenticity of the review. As a result, highly specific negative reviews may have a stronger influence on consumer perceptions because they provide concrete information that reduces uncertainty in the decision-making process (Filieri, 2015).

Consumer perception

Consumer perception refers to the process through which individuals interpret, organize, and form meaningful impressions about products or services based on available information and personal experiences. In service industries such as the restaurant sector, consumer perception plays a crucial role in shaping attitudes, expectations, and behavioral intentions toward a brand (Solomon, Marshall, & Stuart, 2018). Because restaurant services are largely experiential and cannot be fully evaluated before consumption, consumers frequently rely on external information sources, including online reviews and social media content, to form their perceptions prior to visiting a restaurant.

With the increasing use of digital platforms, online content created by influencers and reviewers has become a key factor influencing how consumers evaluate restaurants. Reviews posted by food vloggers can shape expectations regarding food quality, service reliability, hygiene standards, and overall dining experience (Jin & Phua, 2021). Negative reviews, in particular, may create uncertainty and reduce perceived service quality by drawing attention to unfavorable experiences shared by others (Lee & Chen, 2020). As a

result, such information can influence consumer perceptions and subsequently affect decision-making regarding restaurant visits.

However, consumer perception is not solely determined by online information. Individual experiences, brand familiarity, and emotional attachment to a restaurant may influence how consumers interpret negative content. Therefore, understanding the factors that shape consumer perception is essential for explaining how digital reviews influence consumer attitudes in the restaurant sector.

Brand Loyalty as a Mediating Variable

Brand loyalty refers to a consumer's consistent preference and commitment to repeatedly choose a particular brand despite the presence of competing alternatives. In the restaurant sector, brand loyalty is often developed through repeated positive dining experiences, perceived service quality, and emotional attachment toward a restaurant brand (Oliver, 1999). Loyal customers typically demonstrate stronger trust and favorable attitudes toward the brand, which can influence how they interpret external information such as online reviews and influencer opinions. As a result, brand loyalty can play an important role in shaping consumer responses to negative digital content.

Previous studies indicate that loyal customers are less sensitive to negative information about brands they trust because their prior experiences and emotional connections act as psychological buffers (Ahluwalia, Burnkrant, & Unnava, 2000). When consumers have established loyalty toward a restaurant, they may perceive negative reviews as isolated incidents rather than reliable indicators of overall service quality. Consequently, loyal

customers are more likely to maintain positive perceptions and continue patronizing the restaurant even when exposed to unfavorable reviews (Kumara & Gupta, 2022).

Previous empirical research further suggests that the influence of negative electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) is not uniform across consumers but depends on the strength of their existing relationship with the brand. Studies have consistently shown that exposure to negative online reviews increases consumers' perceived risk, reduces trust, and adversely affects brand evaluations and behavioural intentions (Cheung & Thadani, 2012; Erkan & Evans, 2016; Filieri, 2015). However, these effects are considerably weaker among consumers who have developed strong brand loyalty. Ahluwalia et al. (2000) demonstrated that loyal consumers tend to resist attitude change by relying on their accumulated positive experiences and emotional attachment rather than solely on externally generated negative information. Similarly, recent evidence indicates that brand loyalty enhances consumers' resilience to negative online information by strengthening trust and commitment towards the brand (Nguyen et al., 2024). Within the context of influencer-generated restaurant reviews, these findings imply that loyal consumers are less likely to immediately accept or internalize negative food vlogger reviews, instead evaluating such information in light of their prior experiences with the restaurant. Collectively, these empirical findings provide strong support for considering brand loyalty as an important mechanism through which negative influencer-driven eWOM influences consumer perception.

Building upon these empirical findings, brand loyalty can be viewed as a mediating mechanism through which consumers interpret and respond to negative influencer-generated eWOM. While negative reviews may influence how consumers evaluate a

restaurant, the presence of strong brand loyalty can reduce or alter this influence. Therefore, examining brand loyalty as a mediating variable is essential for understanding how consumers interpret negative food vlogger reviews and how restaurant brands can sustain favorable perceptions despite exposure to negative online content.

Research Gap and Theoretical Contribution

Despite the growing body of literature on electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), influencer marketing, and online consumer reviews, several important gaps remain. First, most existing studies have primarily examined text-based online reviews or general social media influencer marketing, with relatively limited attention given to video-based reviews created by food vloggers, particularly those conveying negative evaluations of restaurants (Cheung & Thadani, 2012; Erkan & Evans, 2016). Second, previous research has largely focused on the direct effects of negative eWOM on consumer attitudes and behavioural intentions, while providing limited empirical evidence on the psychological mechanisms through which consumers process and respond to such information. Although brand loyalty has been widely recognised as an important outcome of consumer–brand relationships, its role as a mechanism linking negative influencer-generated eWOM with consumer perception remains insufficiently explored, particularly within the restaurant sector. Furthermore, existing empirical evidence has been predominantly generated in developed economies, with limited attention devoted to emerging markets such as Sri Lanka, where increasing social media adoption and the growing popularity of food vloggers have fundamentally transformed consumers' restaurant decision-making processes. Addressing these gaps, the present study integrates influencer-driven negative eWOM with brand relationship theory

by examining the mediating role of brand loyalty in the relationship between negative food vlogger reviews and consumer perception. In doing so, the study extends the current understanding of how consumers interpret negative influencer-generated content within the context of an emerging economy and contributes to the growing literature on digital consumer behaviour and restaurant marketing.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework was developed based on the synthesis of prior literature examining negative electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), influencer marketing, consumer perception, and brand loyalty. Existing studies suggest that negative influencer-generated reviews influence consumers' evaluations of restaurants, while brand loyalty may alter how such information is interpreted by consumers (Cheung & Thadani, 2012; Jin & Phua, 2021; Nguyen et al., 2024). Accordingly, the framework proposes that negative food vlogger reviews influence consumer perception, with brand loyalty acting as a mediating mechanism in this relationship.

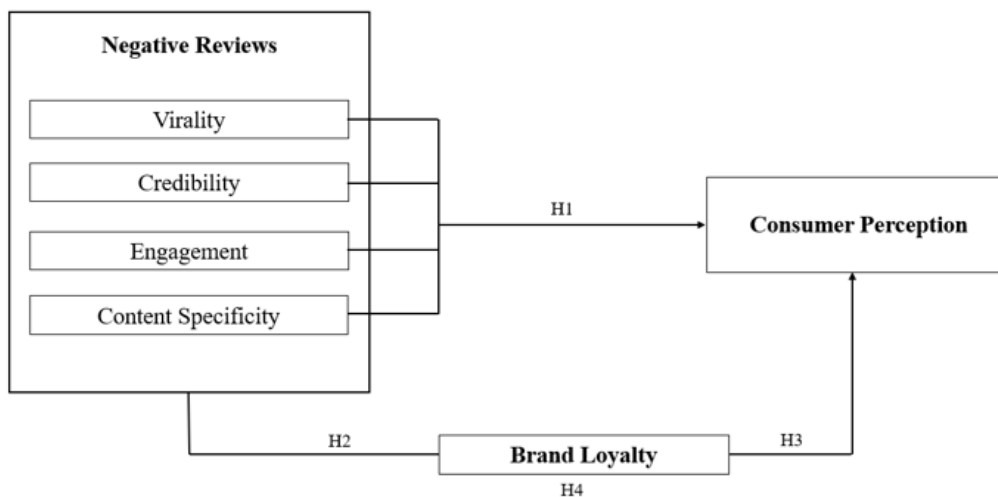


Figure 1 : Conceptual Framework

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Methodological Approach and Design

This study adopts a quantitative explanatory research design using a deductive research approach to examine the influence of negative reviews from social media food vloggers on consumer perception in the restaurant sector. The study further investigates the mediating role of brand loyalty in this relationship. The research model is grounded in theories related to electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) and consumer loyalty, which suggest that online reviews can shape consumer attitudes and perceptions toward brands.

A structured survey method was employed to collect data from individuals who actively follow food vloggers and use social media platforms to obtain restaurant information. The quantitative approach enables the testing of hypothesized relationships between variables through statistical analysis, allowing the study to identify the extent to which negative food vlogger reviews influence consumer perceptions and how brand loyalty mediates this relationship.

Population, Sample, and Sampling Technique

The target population for this study consisted of social media users in the Western Province of Sri Lanka who follow food vloggers and use online content to evaluate restaurant experiences. The Western Province was selected because it represents the largest concentration of restaurants and the highest level of social media usage in Sri Lanka,

making it a suitable context for examining digital influencer impact on restaurant perceptions.

The required sample size was determined using the sample size recommendations of Krejcie and Morgan (1970), which suggest that a minimum of 384 respondents is sufficient for large populations to achieve a 95% confidence level with a 5% margin of error. Accordingly, the study targeted 384 respondents. Data were collected through an online survey, yielding 355 responses, of which 335 valid questionnaires were retained after data screening and data quality checks. A non-probability convenience sampling technique was adopted because the study specifically targeted social media users who actively follow food vloggers and possess relevant experience in using such content for restaurant-related decisions.

Data Collection and Instrumentation

The questionnaire was developed by adapting measurement items from previously validated scales reported in the literature to ensure content validity. Negative food vlogger reviews were measured using four dimensions: virality, credibility, engagement, and content specificity, with items adapted from Berger and Milkman (2012), Filieri (2015), and Jin and Phua (2021). Brand loyalty was measured using established items reflecting consumers' commitment, preference, and intention to continue patronizing a restaurant, adapted from Oliver (1999) and Nguyen et al. (2024). Consumer perception was measured using items assessing respondents' overall evaluation, trust, and attitudes toward restaurants following exposure to food vlogger reviews, adapted from Solomon et al.

(2018) and Lee and Chen (2020). All constructs were measured using multiple items on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Data Analysis Techniques

The collected data were analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the demographic characteristics of respondents and provide an overview of the sample profile. The reliability and internal consistency of the measurement scales were assessed using Cronbach's Alpha coefficients.

To examine the relationships between variables, regression analysis was conducted. The mediation effect of brand loyalty between negative reviews and consumer perception was examined using mediation analysis procedures, allowing the study to assess whether brand loyalty transmits or reduces the influence of negative reviews on consumer perception. Statistical significance was evaluated using standard significance levels and confidence intervals to ensure the robustness of the results.

4 DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The Cronbach's alpha was calculated to evaluate the internal reliability of the assumptions derived from the study's factors. Exploratory factor analysis determined whether each research statement aligned with the predicted factors. The validity and reliability of the research model were examined through confirmatory factor analysis. Additionally, the study's hypotheses were tested using the simple linear regression. To assess the mediating effects of brand loyalty PROCESS Model was utilized. The analysis was conducted using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) 25.0 software.

Sample Characteristics

The sample consisted of respondents from the Western Province. The majority of respondents were within the age group of 18–34, reflecting the highest social media usage segment. Both male and female respondents participated, ensuring balanced representation.

Table 1 Gender Analysis

Gender	Percentage (%)
Male	41.9%
Female	58.1%

Table 2 Age Analysis

Age Group	Percentage (%)
18–24	78.6%
25–34	20.3%
35–44	1.0%

Reliability and Validity

The reliability of the study variables was assessed using SPSS software, with Cronbach's alpha coefficient employed to evaluate the internal consistency of the measurement scales. Cronbach's alpha is widely used in behavioral research to determine whether the items within a construct consistently measure the same concept. A threshold value of 0.70 or

above is generally considered acceptable for establishing reliability of research instruments.

The reliability analysis results indicate that the measurement scales used in this study demonstrate satisfactory internal consistency. Among the independent variable dimensions, Virality recorded a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.805, Credibility showed 0.740, Engagement reported 0.833, and Content Specificity indicated 0.817. All these values exceed the recommended threshold of 0.70, confirming that the indicators used to measure the independent variable, negative reviews from social media food vloggers are reliable and internally consistent.

Regarding the other constructs in the study, Consumer Perception, the dependent variable, recorded a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.697, which is marginally acceptable and still within the acceptable range for exploratory research. The mediating variable Brand Loyalty recorded Cronbach's alpha value of 0.739, exceeding the minimum threshold and indicating satisfactory reliability.

Overall, the reliability results suggest that the measurement items used for all constructs demonstrate acceptable levels of internal consistency. Therefore, the scales used to measure the study variables are considered reliable and suitable for subsequent statistical analyses.

Table 3 Reliability Results

Construct	No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Negative Reviews of food vloggers	16	0.915
Consumer Perception	4	0.697
Brand Loyalty	4	0.739

The table 4 shows that the overall KMO value and the Bartlett's Test (sig) value, KMO test variables are greater than 0.5 and Bartlett test of all variables are also significant because the obtained 95% significance P Value 0.000 is less than the benchmark value 0.05. Therefore, it can be said that the operationalization measure of the current study had a standard and an acceptable validity level.

Table 4 Validity Results

Construct	df	KMO	Approx. Chi Square	Significance
Negative Reviews of food vloggers	16	0.853	1074.568	0.000
Consumer Perception	4	0.697	261.917	0.000
Brand Loyalty	4	0.688	339.167	0.000

Coefficient

Prior to hypothesis testing, Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships among the key constructs in the study. Correlation analysis helps determine

the strength and direction of associations between variables and ensures that the variables are appropriately related before proceeding with further statistical analysis.

The results of the correlation analysis indicate that the dimensions of negative reviews from social media food vloggers (virality, credibility, engagement, and content specificity) are positively and significantly correlated with consumer perception. Specifically, virality shows a moderate positive correlation with consumer perception ($r = 0.414, p < 0.001$). Similarly, credibility demonstrates a positive and statistically significant relationship with consumer perception ($r = 0.511, p < 0.001$). Engagement also reveals a significant positive association with consumer perception ($r = 0.411, p < 0.001$), while content specificity records a moderate positive correlation with consumer perception ($r = 0.505, p < 0.001$).

Furthermore, the independent variable dimensions exhibit strong interrelationships with each other, indicating that these constructs collectively represent different aspects of negative food vlogger reviews. For example, virality shows strong correlations with credibility ($r = 0.671, p < 0.001$), engagement ($r = 0.744, p < 0.001$), and content specificity ($r = 0.760, p < 0.001$). Similarly, engagement demonstrates a strong association with content specificity ($r = 0.768, p < 0.001$).

Overall, all correlation coefficients are positive and statistically significant at the 0.001 level, suggesting meaningful relationships among the study variables. These results confirm that the variables are sufficiently associated with regression and mediation analyses for hypothesis testing.

Table 5 Coefficient results of the research mode

	Relationship	R Square	P Value	Coefficient	Status
H1	NR ← CP	0.513	0.001	0.701	Accepted
Note. NR: Negative Review, CP: Consumer Perception					

Reporting Result of the Mediator

The Mediator analysis will be done by using SPSS 25 Process v3.0 Andrew F. Hayes model as the Mediator effect of brand loyalty toward relationship between negative reviews from social media food vloggers and consumer perception in the restaurant sector.

Table 6 Model summary mediator analysis

Model	R	R²	F	df₁	df₂	p
1	0.754	0.569	505.906	1.000	382.000	0.000

The model exhibits adequacy with an R-square value of 0.754, indicating that approximately 75.4% of the variance in "Average Consumer Perception" is explained by the average of independent variables and the mediating variable, brand loyalty. This substantial R-square value signifies a strong ability of the model to predict and account for variations in the dependent variable.

Furthermore, the model's validity is robust, supported by a significant F-statistic of 505.906 with a p-value of .000. The F-statistic assesses whether the overall model is statistically significant, and in this case, the extremely low p-value suggests that the model is highly

significant. This underscores the collective influence of the independent variables (virality, credibility, engagement, and content specificity) and the mediating variable (brand loyalty).

In conclusion, the model demonstrates both adequacy and validity, indicating its effectiveness in explaining and predicting the variations in Average consumer perception among restaurants sectors.

Direct Effect of X on Y

Effect	SE	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
0.2283	0.0602	3.7931	0.0002	0.1099	0.3466

Indirect Effect(s) of X on Y

	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
BdlOM	0.2496	0.0588	0.1290	0.3631

With a direct effect of 0.2283 ($p = 0.0002$), the relationship between the independent variable (X) and the dependent variable (Y) was found to be highly significant. This indicates that negative food review has a direct positive impact on consumer perception, even without considering the mediating variable.

Through the mediator brand loyalty, the mediation analysis revealed a strong indirect effect of negative review on consumer perception. Specifically, the indirect effect was 0.2496 with a bootstrapped standard error of 0.0588. The bootstrapped 95% confidence interval

ranged from 0.1290 to 0.3631, which does not include zero, indicating that the mediation effect is statistically significant and reliable.

Overall, the mediation analysis provides strong evidence that negative review significantly influences consumer perception both directly and indirectly through the mediator brand loyalty, suggesting the presence of a meaningful mediation mechanism in the relationship.

5 DISCUSSIONS

The findings of this study demonstrate that negative food vlogger reviews significantly influence consumer perception within the restaurant sector, confirming that influencer-generated negative electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) remains an important determinant of consumers' restaurant evaluations. The present study is supported by research conducted previously by Cheung and Thadani (2012), Erkan and Evans (2016), and Filieri (2015) in terms of the fact that negative online reviews affect consumers' attitudes, trust and behavioral intentions due to the increase of risk and decrease of confidence associated with brands. As well, according to Jin and Phua (2021), influencer-generated content significantly influences consumers' product/service evaluation due to source credibility. Nevertheless, the current study provides more detailed insights into the problem and proves that in the context of the Sri Lankan restaurant industry consumers do not perceive negative food vlogger reviews literally but their opinions about the restaurant are formed based on the existing relationship with the restaurant.

Mediation analysis additionally showed that brand loyalty acts as partial mediator of the relationship between negative food vlogger reviews and consumers' perception. This

means that despite the fact that the negative reviews keep influencing consumers' perceptions, their influence is lower in those consumers who have high level of loyalty to the restaurant. The results of the study are supported by the research done by Ahluwalia et al. (2000) which states that the committed consumers are less sensitive to negative publicity due to the pre-existing emotional ties and the positive experience of the consumers with the brand. In his turn, Oliver (1999) stated that the brand loyalty is the sign of the strong commitment, which allows the consumers to hold the favourable attitudes even in case of exposure to competing or unfavourable information. The results of the research can be related to the modern scientific literature which suggests that the loyal consumers are less likely to change their attitudes just because of the negative information posted online since their trust and satisfaction give them additional confidence in the brand (Nguyen et al., 2024).

The findings also contribute to the growing literature on influencer marketing and electronic word-of-mouth by extending existing knowledge to the context of negative food vlogger reviews within the Sri Lankan restaurant sector. Previous studies have predominantly examined positive influencer endorsements, text-based online reviews, or general social media eWOM (Cheung & Thadani, 2012; Lou & Yuan, 2019). In contrast, the present study demonstrates that consumer responses to negative influencer-generated content are shaped not only by the information itself but also by the strength of consumers' existing brand relationships. By incorporating brand loyalty as a mediating mechanism, this study provides a more comprehensive understanding of how consumers interpret negative influencer-generated information in an emerging market context, thereby

extending the application of eWOM and brand relationship literature to restaurant marketing.

From a managerial point of view, the research findings have a number of important implications for the management of restaurants and digital marketing professionals. Because negative vlogger reviews of the food play an important role in shaping the consumer image of the establishment, it is necessary to constantly monitor digital channels and react professionally to any negative content appearing online. Most importantly, since brand loyalty plays an important mediating role in the research model, efforts to strengthen consumer relationships, improve services quality and increase consumer satisfaction can diminish the negative impact of reviews through increasing the level of customer loyalty. Rather than limiting oneself to managing one's reputation through reactive measures, restaurant managers need to focus on building customer trust and engaging with their consumers emotionally.

6 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

There are many limitations of the study. The first limitation is that due to the use of convenience sampling in the Western Province, the results cannot be generalized to any other population or region. Secondly, cross-sectional design makes it difficult to track consumer perception over a period of time. Lastly, the study is based on the analysis of negative reviews, while there has been no comparison made between the positive and neutral reviews in terms of their impact on consumer behavior. Future research may use longitudinal designs to investigate the dynamic nature of consumer perception and loyalty.

7 CONCLUSION

This study examined the influence of negative food vlogger reviews on consumer perception in the restaurant sector and investigated the mediating role of brand loyalty among consumers in the Western Province of Sri Lanka. It was found that the negative reviews of food vloggers have significant impacts on consumer perception, showing that the increasing influence of influencer driven eWOM has been recognized in restaurants. Additionally, from the mediating analysis, the partial mediating role of brand loyalty on the relationship between negative reviews and consumer perception was confirmed, which means that while negative reviews have significant impacts on consumer perception, their impacts get weaker among loyal customers.

The present study filled an important gap in literature by going further than previous studies, as it analyzes the effects of negative influencer reviews in addition to traditional online reviews and positive influencer marketing.

The results are also useful from a managerial perspective. Relationship building with the customer, provision of quality services, and ensuring customer loyalty can help in mitigating the impact of negative online reviews and make the brand more resilient in an increasingly digitized world. In conclusion, this paper is helpful to eWOM as well as restaurant marketing literature because it shows that the reaction of consumers towards negative reviews posted by influencers is affected by the relationship they have with the brand.

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