

6. Assessing the Impact of *Kitchen Nightmares* through TripAdvisor

Abstract

Drawing on 5,608 customer ratings and reviews scraped from TripAdvisor, the chapter assesses how the restaurants appearing on *Kitchen Nightmares* Italy are doing after the airing of the show. Based on ad hoc statistical analysis of reviews and rating scores, we observe that the show has a very limited impact on the restaurants' visibility, reputation, and quality on TripAdvisor; reviews do have a boost thanks to *Kitchen Nightmares*, but only in conjunction with the airing of the show. However, scores are disconnected from the programme airing date, and display a paradoxical relationship with reviews: the more the reviews, the lesser the score. Finally, through a qualitative analysis of customers' reviews, we highlight a particular tension, namely, that, on the one hand, the show enhances the restaurant's conditions while, on the other hand, it sets high expectations for both customers and restaurant owners.

Keywords: reality, cooking show, scraping, ratings, customer review, audience.

Admittedly, this chapter stems from a combination of the authors' passion for reality television shows, and for the show *Kitchen Nightmares* in particular, and a scientific curiosity about the possible social impact this and similar programmes might have. This is not odd in consumer culture research; consider, for example, Schouten and McAlexander's seminal article *Subcultures of consumption* (1995), which consists in an ethnographic study of a Harley Davidson community of which the authors were active members. For those who might not know it, *Kitchen Nightmares* is a food reality show hosted by the famous chef and TV star Gordon Ramsay. In this show, chef Ramsey visits real restaurants that go through serious business troubles (due to, for example, bad management, poor quality of food, or simply bad

luck) and offers his help to revitalise them. Initially, the show was set in UK (the first episode was aired in 2004 on Channel 4), then it landed in the US (first season 2007), and subsequently became a global franchise with local editions (see for instance *Pesadilla en la cocina* (first season 2012), the Spanish version of the programme hosted by chef Alberto Chicote).

Our personal fascination for the show grew from watching the Italian version of the programme: *Cucine da Incubo* (first season 2013), hosted by the five-Michelin-starred chef and co-host of *MasterChef Italia* Antonino Cannavacciuolo. At the end of each episode, the very same questions haunted us: *How about the restaurant now? Did chef Cannavacciuolo (and the show in general) really help the restaurants' owners to sort out their business troubles? Has the owner been able to maintain the high quality standards set by chef Cannavacciuolo?* By randomly checking some comments on YouTube or TripAdvisor it is possible to get some answers, albeit very scattered and contradictory ones (for instance, some claim that the restaurant is better now while others state exactly the opposite). We started wondering, therefore, whether digital methods could help us to answer more systematically the aforementioned questions and, in turn, answer a broader and interesting scientific question: *What is the social impact of Kitchen Nightmares? More generally, what is the social impact of a reality show that aims at having a positive impact on society? Does it redistribute value within the social or simply extract value from it?*¹

The topic of reality television has been long covered by consumer culture and sociological literature (Rose and Wood, 2005; Parmentier and Fischer, 2015; Canavan, 2021), which, among other things, has reflected extensively on its social impact. Contributions span from analysis on how reality shows reconfigured TV audiences (introducing new ways of consuming TV contents, like co-viewing (Doughty et al., 2011)) or second-screen (Stewart, 2020) to discursive representations of key social issues like authenticity (Rose and Wood, 2005), gender (Negra et al., 2013; Herkes and Redden, 2017), and social class (Allen and Mendick, 2013). Some scholars focused on healthy nutrition (Phillipov 2013) and the identitarian (Rimoldi, 2015) and even therapeutic (Grosalik and Lerner, 2020) function of reality programmes; others critically reflected on the exploitation of

1 This question is not trivial; in fact, a show like *Kitchen Nightmares* would be impossible to air without the active collaboration of the restaurant owner as well as her family and staff, not to mention the significant amount of emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) required (and sometimes explicitly demanded) from those people. Consider, for example, how the host – and the show script – constantly exhorts participants to explore and express their deep emotions or psychological status (e.g., anger, frustration, aggressivity, depression, anxiety, etc.).

“emotional labour” (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2008) or “amateur labour” (Seale, 2012) in these kinds of shows. Regarding *Kitchen Nightmares* in particular, the literature focused more on its cultural impact, studying, for example, the representation of food waste (Thompson and Haigh, 2017) or the emergence of a new “culture of incivility” (Higgins et al., 2012), rather than its social one (Dajem and Alyousef, 2020). Moreover, to our knowledge, no research, to date, has tried to assess the social impact of *Kitchen Nightmares* by taking advantage of digital and computational methods. It should be noted, however, that several past contributions have focused on analysing Tripadvisor data with computational techniques (Van Laer et al., 2019; Alexander et al., 2019) or, more specifically, on the effect of extra digital reputation events on Tripadvisor reviews (Li et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2015).

Methodology and Ethical Considerations

To answer the aforementioned research question, we took advantage of TripAdvisor, by far one of the most popular platforms in the hospitality industry, which, among other things, gathers a lot of useful information on restaurants worldwide, along with consumers’ ratings and reviews (Galov, 2023). In order to get data from TripAdvisor we built an ad hoc web scraper. Different from API calling, scraping consists in developing an ad hoc script – in our case we used the software Python –programmed to “grab” specific digital entities (e.g., the title of a blog post, the comments below a blog post, etc.) directly from the HTML code of a target webpage (Weltevrede, 2016). Although scraping is not a “prohibited technique” in social research, it is still a controversial one, which needs to be managed conscientiously and ethically (Landers et al., 2016; Bainotti et al., 2021). To do that, it is important not to break three “golden” rules, that is, the researcher must not use a scraper to: 1) bypass platforms’ restrictions or blocks; 2) disguise the non-human identity of the collector of data; 3) access content protected by privacy settings or passwords (Caliandro 2021; see also Fiesler et al., 2016). In our research, we followed all these rules, since we collected only publicly available data using a full-fledged automated scraper. Moreover, in our analysis, we presented our results in numerical and aggregated form – thus respecting the privacy of the single users (Markham and Buchanan, 2012, see also Chapter 5). Furthermore, although public, we omitted the names of the restaurants and TripAdvisor’s posters in the presentation of results. Lastly, all the comments displayed

are part of customer reviews that have been translated into English from Italian – something that makes it more difficult to trace back the actual users posting them.

Data Collection and Techniques of Analysis

Firstly, we downloaded all the available Italian language reviews for all those venues (41) that featured in the last six editions of the Italian edition of *Kitchen Nightmares*; that is, from Season 2 (2014) to 7 (2019). We excluded the first and the current seasons (Season 8) because the former was aired too early (2013) and the associated reviews were very sporadic, whereas the latter was ongoing at the time of the data collection, and this could have led to incomplete data. We obtained the list of the restaurants, segmented by season, through Wikipedia (*Cucine da incubo (Italia)*²). Out of 41 venues, only 28 have TripAdvisor pages (although some of those appear to be inactive, or have very low activity). Ten of these restaurants are now out of business. Out of those 28 TripAdvisor pages, we gathered 5,608 reviews, which span a time frame of 11 years, from March 2011 to March 2022. As we shall see, these reviews are not evenly distributed in time and space: some venues have hundreds of reviews while others have just a few. Moreover, reviews tend to have a somewhat bell-shaped distribution, with the central years of the show (roughly from 2015 to 2018) having the lion's share of reviews, while other years have much less. While we cannot claim any strong empirical evidence for our specific data, we suspect that this distribution is pretty common across TripAdvisor: reviews are unevenly distributed across venues and have been in a slow but steady decline since the late 2010s (Singh, 2019).

To analyse our data, and thus assess the impact of the TV show, we have plotted the time series of reviews and controlled for any effect of *Kitchen Nightmares* on: a) the distribution of reviews (which has been useful to evaluate the impact of the show on the restaurants' visibility and reputation); and b) the review scores (which have been useful to determine the impact of the show on the quality of food and service of the restaurants – as perceived by clients). Furthermore, we separated reviews that mention the show *Cucine da incubo (Kitchen Nightmares)* or the show's host "Cannavacciuolo" from those that do not. We assumed, as

2 [https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cucine_da_incubo_\(Italia\)#Stagione_1](https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cucine_da_incubo_(Italia)#Stagione_1).

a starting hypothesis, that users posting reviews that explicitly mention the show got to the venue because of the show, and so that they will behave in a different way from users that, in their reviews, mention neither the show nor the host. Eventually, to estimate the effect of the TV show, we tracked whether reviews mentioning keywords connected to the show produce a higher (or lower) evaluation of the venue. Furthermore, to assess whether reviews mentioning the show produced different narrations in respect to others, we investigated the content of reviews using both quantitative text analysis and qualitative content analysis, by focusing on the sentiment, topic, and narration style of the comments taken into account. The qualitative analysis of comments gave us further clues to the motives behind specific increases or decreases in the number of reviews and review scores.

Before proceeding with the presentation of the results, a word of caution is needed: as we have previously claimed, venues are highly unequal in terms of reviews; so, while we are not striving for statistical significance, as our goals are purely descriptive, it should be said that some venues have contributed much more than others to the final results. In addition, for some analysis (i.e., analysis of reviews' scores) only those venues (13) with more than 200 reviews have been considered.

The Distribution of the Reviews

The analysis of the number of reviews obtained by each restaurant participating in the show is a simple but nonetheless important one. In fact, it gave us an insight into whether the programme really helped the restaurants to increase their visibility and reputation (either good or bad). In fact, one can consider the number of reviews as a proxy of both the attention of users towards the restaurants and the flow of clients.

As we can see from Fig. 6.1, reviews are unevenly distributed in time, with the “central” years of our time frame sorting far more reviews than years before or after. The monthly average of review scores (Fig. 6.2) seems to have an inverse shape, compared to review distribution (Fig. 6.1), meaning the more reviews all venues have, the lower the average monthly reviews are. As we can see from looking at the y-axis of Fig. 6.3 – and as we previously anticipated – the distribution of reviews is strongly unequal, as the top four venues account for one third (36%) of reviews.

Review distribution for 28 venues in 11 years

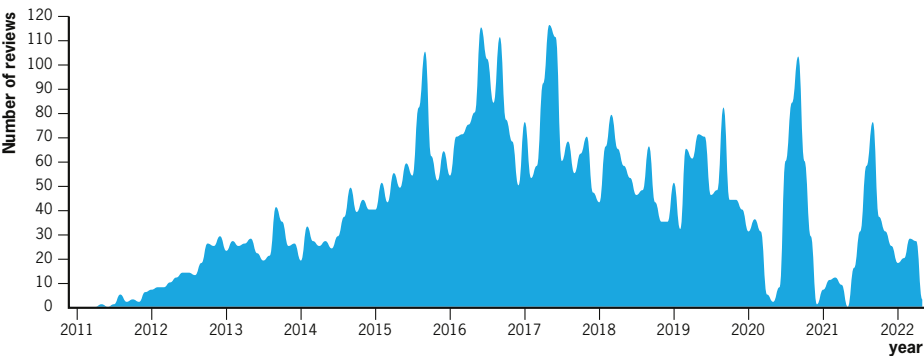


Fig. 6.1. The vertical axis shows the number of reviews for all (28) venues.

Monthly average score for 28 venues

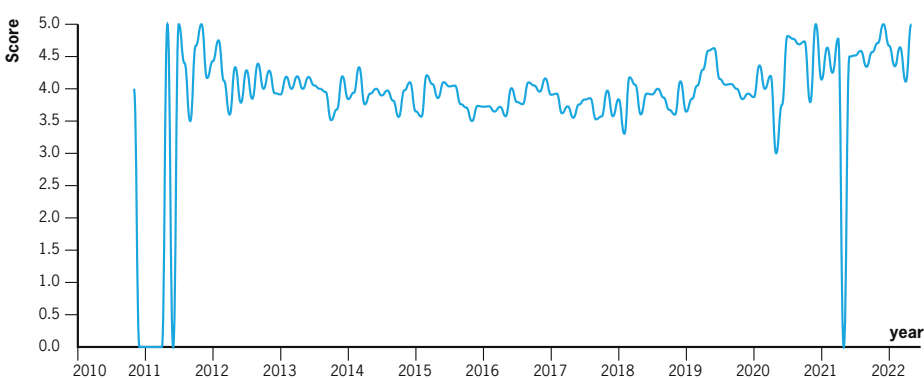


Fig. 6.2. The vertical axis shows the monthly average score for all (28) venues

Looking at the distribution of reviews, it seems that the effect of the TV show is, at best, ambivalent. On the one hand, if we consider the two months following the venue being featured in *Cucine da Incubo*, there seems to be a boost in reviews: being featured on the TV show led to an increase of reviews by, on average, 13%, as compared to the average of all other two months periods. On the other hand, the boost appears to be short-lived, as all venues do not experience a sizable increase for a longer period. They may have other “spikes” (perhaps connected to reruns) but, in general, reviews seem to follow their own, descending, trend. We can therefore conclude that the show does help restaurants to increase their visibility and reputation, but only for a very limited span of time.

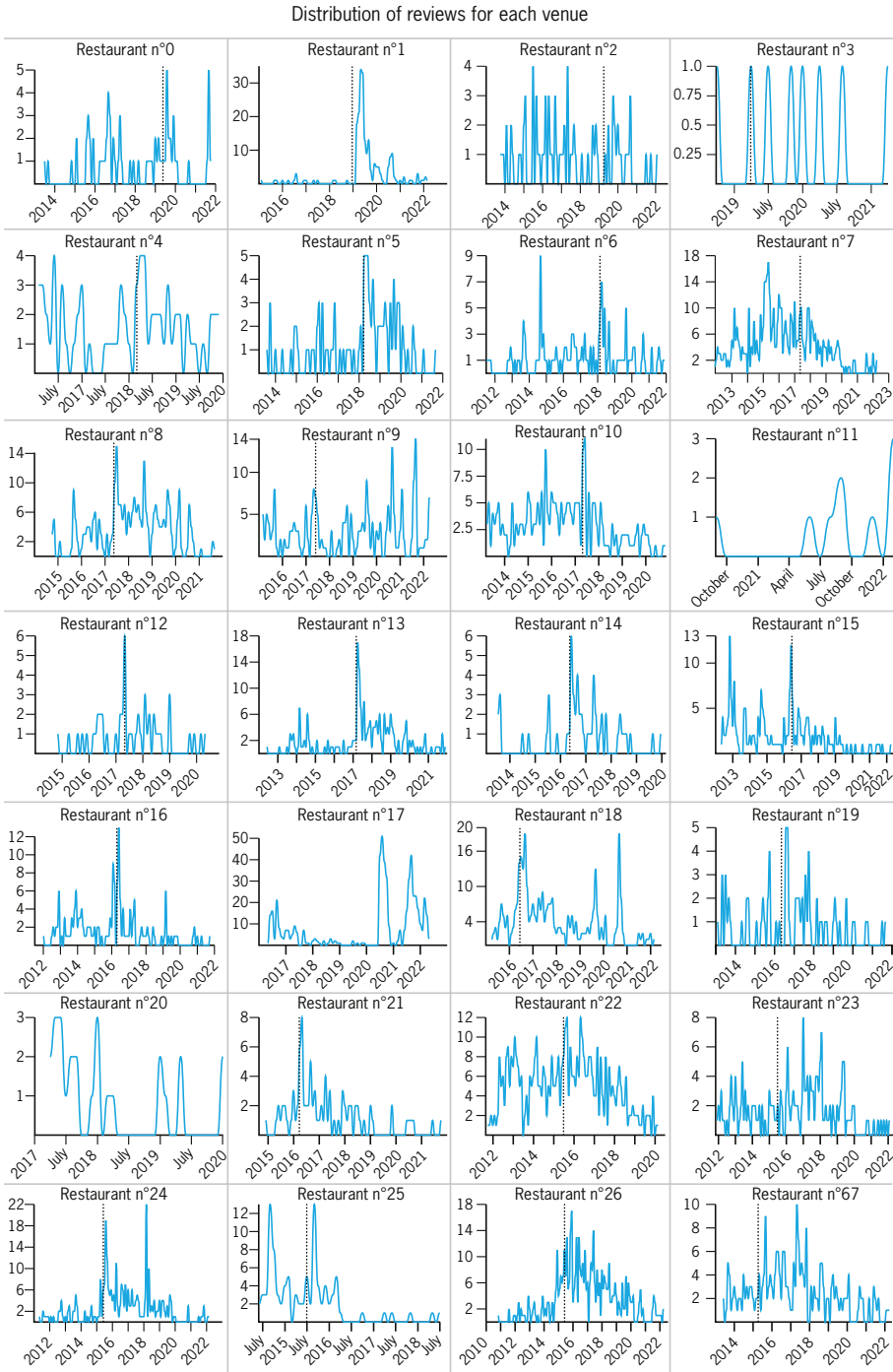


Fig. 6.3. These graphs report the number of reviews for each month. The dashed line marks the day on which the restaurant featured on the TV show (venue names have been anonymised).

The Distribution of Review Scores

The analysis of the review scores adds further useful insights: a) it says something more about the reputation of the restaurants (is it good or bad?); and b) review scores can be considered as a proxy of the quality of food and service provided by the restaurants. If we consider the top 13 venues, looking at the trends of scores in the two months following the original airdate, there seems to be little appreciable difference between that period and the average of other two months periods. The difference in scores is always in the realm of zero point something (0.01 on average), with only two cases having a difference that is larger than one point. In general, review scores seem to be disconnected from the airdate, as can be seen in Fig. 6.4. If a venue was performing in a given direction, meaning that its scores were increasing or decreasing, it seems as though its appearance on the show did not alter in any significant way the trend of the reviews. This can be explained if we look at Fig. 6.3 and Fig. 6.4, where we see a paradoxical relation between the number of reviews and review scores, as they seem to be in counterphase to each other, meaning: the more reviews a restaurant has, the lesser the score. This may be due to an effect at the platform level: essentially, we need to account for the fact that TripAdvisor is losing traction. This is because, in 2022, the market niche became oversaturated with competitors, as opposed to the 2010s when TripAdvisor had a virtual monopoly (Anselmi et al., 2021). Furthermore, we may also need to account for an “exposition” effect, due to the fact that the airdate seems to increase the number of reviews but not the average score. Essentially, what seems to happen is that small venues (just like those selected for the TV show) experience a small(ish) number of reviews, which are, probably for the most part, from regular customers. As the attention on the restaurant increases, reviews increasingly come in from casual customers who may have less of an emotional connection with the venue and hence be more inclined to assign lower scores. Assuming that reviews are declining (and scores are going up, as per Fig. 6.4) this may be due to the same effect: aficionados (i.e., those who have an emotional investment in the venue) crowding out casuals. This is partly confirmed if we zoom in and consider only those reviews featuring keywords connected to the TV show: there seems to be no sizable effect on scores for both reviews featuring the keywords, which, on average, feature a score of 3.7 points, and those without the keywords, which feature a score of 3.9 points.

In conclusion, it may be argued that the overall impact of the show on the restaurants' scores is modest. In fact, we discovered that review scores

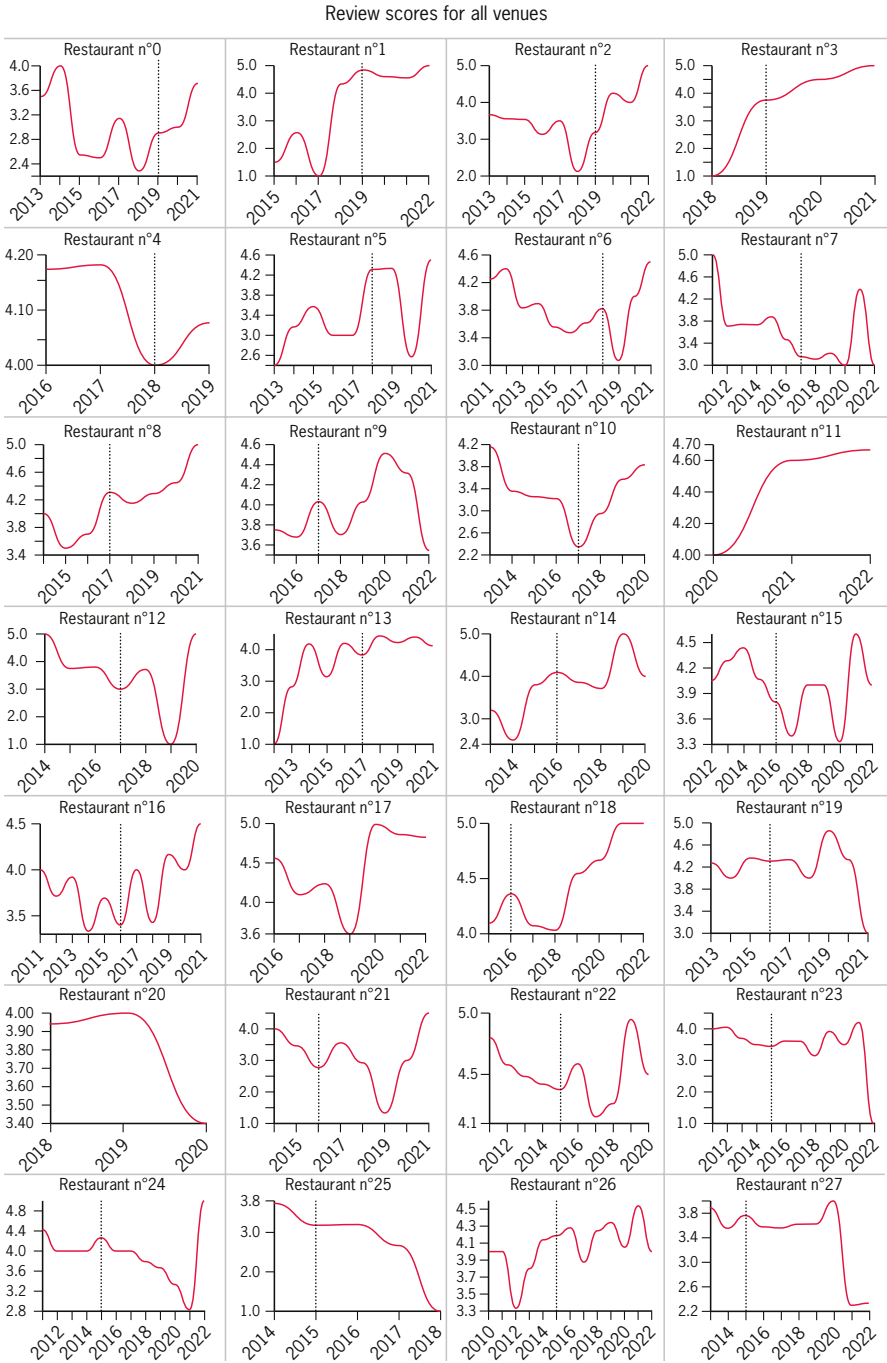


Fig.6.4. These graphs report the average score for each month; the dashed line marks the day on which the restaurant featured on the TV show (venue names have been anonymised).

seem to be rather disconnected from the airdate of the show. Moreover, our analysis points to a somewhat paradoxical result: the more reviews a restaurant has, the lower the score it gets. Arguably, this is due to a mediatic overexposure of the restaurant – something that is not necessarily good for small businesses. In conclusion, we can say that there is no appreciable effect of *Kitchen Nightmares* on restaurants' scores.

Qualitative Analysis of Comments: Sentiment, Topics, and Storytelling

In this last section, we present a qualitative analysis of customers' reviews. This was carried out on a small sample of 200 comments (over 5,608), a number we reached through saturation (Weber 2005). All the comments taken into consideration were posted on TripAdvisor after the airing of the show. The manual and qualitative analysis of users' comments has been very useful for giving context to the quantitative results presented above. Customer reviews helped us better understand "what went wrong"; that is, why restaurants are still in dire straits notwithstanding the intervention of chef Cannavacciuolo. Before showing the results, a further specification is due: although the exploration of comments took advantage of quantitative techniques (namely, quantification of coding categories and automated text analysis), the analysis itself is eminently interpretative, since it focuses specifically on the narrative aspects of customers reviews (e.g., narrative structures, recurrent patterns of storytelling, etc.) (Georgakopoulou, 2021).

Firstly, let us give a general overview of our dataset. As the sentiment distribution shows (Fig. 6.5), customers' evaluations of restaurants are very polarised: 53% are negative and 47% are positive, and there is no neutral sentiment. We also see that most of these evaluations focus primarily on the quality of the food (64%) offered by restaurants, and, secondarily, on management (29%).

The fact that we have a large share of positive reviews does not contradict the quantitative analysis demonstrated in the previous paragraphs. In fact: a) the present analysis was carried out on a small sample of comments, extracted without probabilistic techniques and purposes; and b) the statistical analysis of scores shows the existence of a peak of positive reviews, which nonetheless are disconnected from the programme airdate. Reading the comments, it is possible to confirm some of the previously articulated hypotheses. Most of the positive comments seem

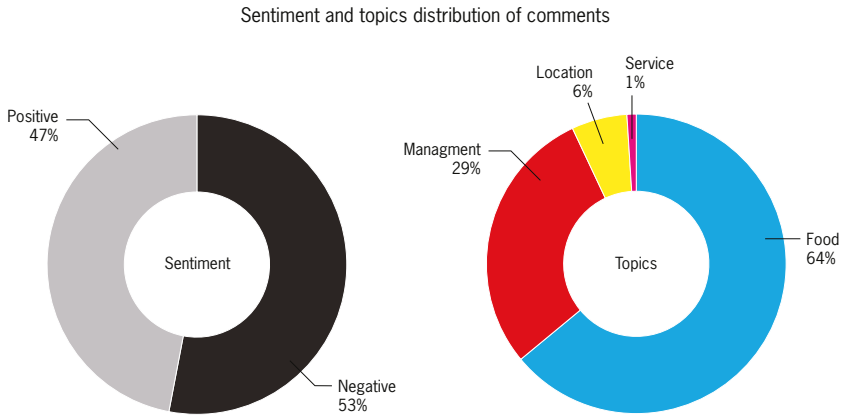


Fig. 6.5. The figures show the results of the manual sentiment and content analysis made on our sample of customer reviews (n= 200).

to be written by regular customers, while negative ones appear to be posted by new customers brought to the restaurant by the TV show. In particular, this result seems to confirm the existence of what we have called the “exposition effect”: something that is well exemplified by the following comments:

[Positive Comment]. To be honest we were afraid about the fact that Cannavacciuolo dropped by the Restaurant. We were so in love with that restaurant and its owners, that we feared that Cannavacciuolo might revolutionise the place, that we wouldn’t recognise it anymore. Last Saturday, driven by the desire to eat a delicious paella, we finally took the courage to step into the restaurant. The restaurant has been renovated, but not that much: the good old paella, delicious and abundant as always. The Catalan cream: delicious as always

[Negative Comment]. I went to this restaurant after watching the episode of *Kitchen Nightmares* on TV. Such a delusion: no trace of the menu devised by Chef Cannavacciuolo. Everything was bad: food, service, cleanliness

Nonetheless, the main question remains: *what went wrong after the departure of chef Cannavacciuolo?* To answer this question, we explored more thoroughly the grammar, vernacular, and storytelling of customer reviews (i.e., narrative structures and plots) (Van Laer et al., 2019), with a particular focus on negative ones.

The Grammar and Vernacular of Reviews

Shifting the focus from topics to narrations, it is interesting to notice how consumers' comments are articulated through common patterns of storytelling. This, in turn, seems to be shaped by the platform's grammars and vernaculars – and this occurs independently from the sentiment. First, the comments exhibit a structure that seems driven by the grammar of TripAdvisor. In the comments section, TripAdvisor invites users to rate, through an ad hoc rating interface, the “food,” “service,” “value,”³ and “atmosphere” of the restaurant the user wishes to review. For each of these variables, the user can assign a specific score on a scale from 1 to 5. Similarly, TripAdvisor offers an interface in which the reviewer can specify the reason why she was at the restaurant, by ticking one of the following boxes: “families,” “couples,” “solo,” “business,” “friends” (see Fig. 6.6). Curiously, although reviewers rarely fill out such digital forms, they do provide the information required in written form within their comments. Indeed, most of the reviews we analysed do specify the reason why the reviewer was at the restaurant and with whom, and they also provide ample feedback on the “food,” “service,” “value,” and “atmosphere” of the restaurant.⁴

In addition to this grammar, it is possible to observe a very distinctive vernacular. Most of the comments do not sound like generic customer complaints or expressions of satisfaction; rather, the reviewers tend to assume the tone and stance of the food critic. Specifically, when expressing their evaluations of the restaurant (even very negative ones), users make an effort to keep a polite, detached, and neutral tone of voice. Moreover, they try to offer “technical” comments about the whole experience at the restaurant (e.g., “the meat wasn’t cooked properly”; “the premises were not clean enough; the owner didn’t valorise the location”; etc). The presence of this review vernacular can be seen more extensively in the following comment:

Nice place in a good location. It is a pity that the owners didn't learn anything from Chef Cannavacciuolo. The staff was quite rude and unprofessional. We ordered ravioli, risotto, and octopus: not very good. The fish-fry contained too big chunks of squid, very difficult to eat. Also the shrimps were not good and too salty, plus, they seemed frozen. The cost was average. We booked a table at 8:30 pm and the restaurant was empty.

3 That is the balance between the cost of the meal and the quality of the food.

4 See how our grounded categories in Fig. 6.5 resonate with the standard categories provided by TripAdvisor.

Recensioni (175)

Controlliamo le recensioni

Scrivi una recensione

Valutazione

☐ Eccellente

☐ Molto buono

☐ Nella media

☐ Scarso

☐ Pessimo

Periodo dell'anno

☒ Mar-Mag

☐ Giu-Ago

☐ Set-Ott

☐ Dic-Feb

Lingua

☐ Tutte le lingue

☐ Italiano (17)

☐ Inglese (3)

☐ Portoghese (1)

Tipo di viaggiatore

☐ Famiglie

☐ In coppia

☐ Da solo

☐ Affari

☐ Amici

Quando i consigli non servono!!!!

Avuto visto questo ristorante nel programma "Cucine da Insieme" cambiameli solo grazie allo Chef Cannavaccuolo...trovandoli in zona per ignorare la vostra propria il menu...ma di quel menu mi sa che non vi è più traccia...un piatto su tutto la linea: pochi servizi, pulizia. Totale delusione, presumeteci come a ciò che vi aveva lasciato il grande Chef Antonino!!!!

Mostra meno

Data della visita

Qualità/prezzi

Servizio

Cibo

Fig. 6.6. This figure shows the form provided by TripAdvisor to evaluate a venue as well as a customer review. It was randomly extracted from our dataset and carefully anonymised. It is a good example of how the grammar of TripAdvisor shapes customers' writing style: *When advice is wasted. I saw the restaurant on TV (on Kitchen Nightmares) as well as Chef Cannavacciuolo renewing it. I was nearby for business reasons and I decided to try the menu that Channavacciuolo proposed in the programme ... that menu wasn't there anymore ... epic fail: courses, service, cleanliness. Such a delusion, you have been pretentious to go back to your pre-Cannavacciuolo state.*

Customers started arriving around 10:00 pm. We ate outside: unfortunately the many scooters passing by were very annoying and unhealthy

Probably, TripAdvisor's users "learn" this vernacular through a *memetic process* (Caliandro and Anselmi, 2021), in which they copy each other's writing style (Nicoll and Nansen 2018). It is also likely that such vernacular is borrowed from *Kitchen Nightmares* itself and other popular food shows (e.g., *MasterChef*). Of course, however interesting this question might be, to establish the exact source of this vernacular exceeds the scope of this chapter – most likely, it is a combination of the two.

The Storytelling of Negative Reviews

Let us focus more specifically on the storytelling of the negative reviews, since these are more helpful in revealing what went wrong after Cannavacciuolo's departure. All the reviews present the same narrative structure comprising an "introduction," "discussion," and "conclusion." In the introduction,

users clarify why they decided to visit the restaurant. The main motive is curiosity: users decide to visit after seeing the restaurant on TV. The most recurrent phrases, which we automatically extracted from the dataset, are explicit: “after watching an episode of *Kitchen Nightmares*” (freq. 10); “an episode of *Kitchen Nightmares* with chef” (freq. 9); “after watching the episode with Cannavacciuolo” (freq. 8); “we were curious after watching an episode of *Kitchen Nightmares*” (freq. 8). In the discussion, customers review the “food,” “service,” “value,” and “atmosphere” of the restaurant. As mentioned earlier, users tend to focus more on the quality of the food, which they commonly find very low and/or mediocre – something that they did not expect after watching the TV show. In the conclusion part, users usually discourage other customers from visiting the restaurant and/or blame the owners for not having taken advantage of chef Cannavacciuolo’s good advice. The following excerpt exemplifies a typical comment:

We ate at the restaurant with some friends, after watching the show of chef Cannavacciuolo. After an endless wait the menus came. The menu was disappointing, the choice was limited. There were very few vegetarian dishes. We asked the staff for clarifications but they replied very rudely: “all we got is on the menu!”. The food, in general, was not good. Small plates and super high prices. In particular the prices of beverages were very high. What can I say? The restaurant is deeply disappointing in all aspects, I do not recommend it.

Another interesting narration consists of customers reflecting on what some of them explicitly refer to as “the Cannavacciuolo cure” (*la cura Cannavacciuolo*). More specifically, users try to reckon what actually changed in the restaurant after chef Cannavacciuolo improved the menu, refurbished the venue, and gave the owner an injection of self-esteem. In this regard, two main sub-narrations emerge: a) “nothing changed”: the restaurant went back to its pre-Cannavacciuolo status; b) “a missed opportunity”: the owner tried to follow Cannavacciuolo’s suggestions, perhaps for a while s/he stuck to them, but ultimately s/he did not manage to keep to the right path for long. But why do reviewers have the impression that “nothing changed” or the “owner missed” a good opportunity? It is possible to find some clues by delving further into consumers’ storytelling. Both explicitly and implicitly, users direct their attention to a particular tension between the “Cannavacciuolo cure” and the “*Kitchen Nightmares* effect” (something similar to the previously discussed “exposition effect”). In fact, although “the cure” had the positive effect of enhancing the restaurant’s conditions, the

TV show had the negative effect of setting too high expectations, for both customers and owners, as emerges from the following comment:

After watching the episode of *Kitchen Nightmares*, out of curiosity, we decided to dine in this restaurant. We went there with high expectations, after the intervention of the great chef Cannavacciuolo. The location is not bad, but they didn't do an excellent job with the refurbishment. The menu is pretty long, but we focus on the daily specials, believing that they are made out of fresh products. We get orecchiette with cream of eggplants, octopus with potatoes, and sea bass. The plates come early but they do not look like the plates we saw on TV. The orecchiette are not super tasty, but the octopus is fresh. The sea bass is fresh as well, but it comes along with a plate of flavourless peas and green beans – they remind me of those served in school canteens. Overall the restaurant is not so bad, but for sure is not anymore the one that appeared on TV. Maybe it has been so in the past, but not now, and you can see that from the dish presentation, the menu, and the division of labour among the staff.

On the one hand, customers go to the restaurant thinking of having a “Cannavacciuolo-like” food experience – something they will never get, even if the restaurant performs well (“Overall the restaurant is not so bad, but please do not expect any wow effect due to Cannavacciuolo's intervention”). On the other hand, the show “pushes” the owners to set very high culinary standards, which they struggle to maintain in the long run (“now they just make pretentious small plates at high prices”). In fact, these comments led us to think about something that is also evident when one watches the show: most of the owners, at the moment they ask for Cannavacciuolo's help, have serious financial issues (e.g., endemic lack of clientele, debts, etc.). These kinds of issues are usually very difficult to sort out, and certainly cannot be solved by simply revising the menu or refurbishing the premises of the restaurant. Moreover, frequently, the owners seem to lack basic cooking and/or management skills – fundamental issues that cannot be magically solved by simply participating in an episode of *Kitchen Nightmares*. As another user points out:

For sure, the Cannavacciuolo “cure” had a positive impact on the menu, which is rich, varied and oriented towards cold dishes: the dishes we had were good but not exciting. The premises have been nicely refurbished; although one can see here and there some bags, boxes, and a vacuum cleaner. What is totally missing is the hospitality and the attention for the

client. In general the service can be deemed indecent. The only working-hard person was a very young waitress. Instead, the young owners loiter around, doing nothing: they just sit there playing with their smartphones, unconcerned of what is going on in the restaurant (we waited 20 minutes for the beverages); plus they always seem super annoyed. It is a real shame, they have a place with a very good potential, plus they could exploit the media coverage the restaurant had. Rather than incompetent, it seems to me that they are lazy and unconcerned. They seem masochistic, as if someone obliged them to be there. Beware guys, the food business is not a game.

Conclusion and Implications

We started this chapter asking the following question: *What is the social impact of Kitchen Nightmares? More generally, what is the social impact of a reality show that aims at having a positive impact on society? Does it redistribute value within the social or simply extract value from it?* To answer this question, we turned to TripAdvisor, and analysed the reviews and rating scores of the restaurants that participated in the Italian edition of *Kitchen Nightmares*. To answer our main questions we used the number of reviews received by each restaurant as a proxy of visibility and reputation, while the rating score was a proxy of quality (globally intended: “food,” “service,” “value,” and “atmosphere”). Based on our statistical analysis of reviews and rating scores, we can conclude that the show has a very limited impact on the restaurants’ visibility, reputation, and quality. On the one hand, reviews do have a boost thanks to *Kitchen Nightmares*, but only in conjunction with the airdate of the show – soon after, they follow a descending trend. On the other hand, scores are disconnected to the programme airdate; moreover, they reveal a paradoxical relation with reviews: the more the reviews, the lower the score. Finally, we conducted a qualitative analysis of customer reviews, focusing on their grammar, vernacular, and storytelling structure. This analysis was very useful for contextualising the results of the statistical analysis, in so far as users’ accounts helped us to understand what went wrong after the departure of chef Cannavacciuolo. Following the users’ storytelling, we discovered a particular tension between the *Cannavacciuolo cure* and the *Kitchen Nightmares effect*: on the one hand, “the Cannavacciuolo cure” has a positive effect, enhancing the restaurant’s conditions; on the other hand, the TV show has a negative effect, setting too high expectations for both customers and restaurant owners – expectations

that are always frustrated on the side of customers, and never fully met on the side of owners. Furthermore, one should also consider that the serious financial, cooking, and management issues that the restaurant owners find themselves in not easily solved by simply participating in one episode of a reality show.

Therefore, to give a more straightforward answer to the research questions, we can argue that, despite its noble intent and its (temporary) effectiveness, *Kitchen Nightmares* has scant impact on society. It seems that *Kitchen Nightmares* extracts more value from the restaurants than the value the restaurants gains from the programme; and the same goes for society at large. In fact, these are not just “single” restaurants participating in the show, but rather a complex network of social actors comprising owners, family members, friends, restaurant staff, customers, platforms, and platform users. All these social actors seem to work hard to increase the visibility, reputation, and quality of the programme, and not vice versa.

Of course, the empirical research we presented in this chapter is not without limitations. First, we focused exclusively on the Italian edition of *Kitchen Nightmares*; future studies might try to concentrate instead on the UK or US editions of the show, which are older and so offer the opportunity to obtain more data. Second, we relied on a single digital source, TripAdvisor. In our case, this source turned out to be incomplete: only some of the restaurants featured by *Kitchen Nightmares* had a TripAdvisor page. To overcome this problem, future research should try to conduct a cross-platform analysis, taking into consideration, for instance, Google Reviews and Yelp. Finally, in the future, a cross-national analysis could be useful for understanding whether the limited impact of *Kitchen Nightmares* on a restaurant’s destiny is only an Italian phenomenon or a more global one.

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