

Affective hospitality and local gastronomy: viral authenticity in small tourism businesses

Hospitalidade afetiva e gastronomia local: autenticidade viral em pequenos empreendimentos turísticos

Hospitalidad afectiva y gastronomía local: autenticidad viral en pequeños emprendimientos turísticos



Mônica Tatiana Bunese BUSARELLO 
Universidade do Vale do Itajaí (Univali)

Paula Carolina FERRETTI 
Universidade do Vale do Itajaí (Univali)

Fabiana ROEDER 
Universidade do Vale do Itajaí (Univali)

Ana Paula SOHN 
Universidade do Vale do Itajaí (Univali)

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Rafael Cunha Ferro

ABSTRACT

Digital media has become a powerful catalyst for increasing the visibility of tourist experiences, particularly in small-scale gastronomic businesses outside consolidated tourism circuits. This study aims to analyze how emotional contagion processes, mediated by authentic and spontaneous digital content, influence the construction of affective hospitality, visitor engagement, and symbolic recognition in local gastronomy. Grounded in the Theory of Emotional Contagion and articulated with studies on affective marketing, authenticity, hospitality, and virality, this qualitative and descriptive research adopts a single case study of Recanto Grünenberg, in Benedito Novo, Santa Catarina, Brazil, whose visibility expanded after a video featuring its hostess exceeded three million views. The methodology triangulated interviews with the managers, comments on viral Instagram video, Google Business reviews, and social media metrics. The findings show that the hostess's affective gestures, expressed through spontaneity, humor, proximity, and welcoming gestures, operates as digitally mediated hospitality, anticipating and extending the in-person experience. The study argues that emotions anchored in authenticity and local narratives become symbolic assets capable of strengthening bonds between hosts, visitors, and territories. Theoretically, the article expands the application of Emotional Contagion Theory in

KEYWORDS

Hospitality, emotional contagion, gastronomic tourism, authenticity, digital media.

hospitality and tourism studies by proposing the “affective character” as a strategic resource.

RESUMO

A mídia digital tornou-se um poderoso catalisador para ampliar a visibilidade de experiências turísticas, especialmente em pequenos negócios gastronômicos localizados fora dos circuitos turísticos consolidados. Este estudo tem o objetivo de analisar como os processos de contágio emocional, mediados por conteúdo digital autêntico e espontâneo, influenciam a construção da hospitalidade afetiva, o engajamento do visitante e o reconhecimento simbólico na gastronomia local. Fundamentada na Teoria do Contágio Emocional e articulada a estudos sobre marketing afetivo, autenticidade, hospitalidade e viralidade, esta pesquisa qualitativa e descritiva adota o estudo de caso único do Recanto Grüenberg, em Benedito Novo, Santa Catarina, Brasil, cuja visibilidade aumentou após um vídeo com sua anfitriã ultrapassar três milhões de visualizações. A metodologia triangulou entrevistas com os gestores, comentários do vídeo viral no Instagram, avaliações do Google Meu Negócio e métricas de mídias sociais. Os resultados mostram que a performance afetiva da anfitriã, expressa por espontaneidade, humor, proximidade e gestos acolhedores, opera como hospitalidade mediada digitalmente, antecipando e ampliando a experiência presencial. O estudo argumenta que emoções ancoradas na autenticidade e em narrativas locais se tornam ativos simbólicos capazes de fortalecer vínculos entre anfitriões, visitantes e territórios.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Hospitalidade, contágio emocional, turismo gastronômico, autenticidade, mídias digitais.

RESUMEN

Los medios digitales se han convertido en un poderoso catalizador para ampliar la visibilidad de las experiencias turísticas, especialmente en pequeños negocios gastronómicos fuera de los circuitos turísticos consolidados. Este estudio tiene el objetivo de analizar cómo los procesos de contagio emocional, mediados por contenido digital auténtico y espontáneo, influyen en la construcción de la hospitalidad afectiva, el compromiso del visitante y el reconocimiento simbólico en la gastronomía local. Fundamentada en la Teoría del Contagio Emocional y articulada con estudios sobre marketing afectivo, autenticidad, hospitalidad y viralidad, esta investigación cualitativa y descriptiva adopta un estudio de caso único del Recanto Grüenberg, en Benedito Novo, Santa Catarina, Brasil, cuya visibilidad se amplió después de que un video protagonizado por su anfitriona superara los tres millones de visualizaciones. La metodología trianguló entrevistas con los gestores, comentarios del video viral en Instagram, reseñas de Google Business y métricas de redes sociales. Los resultados muestran que la actuación afectiva de la anfitriona, expresada mediante espontaneidad, humor, proximidad y gestos acogedores, opera como hospitalidad mediada digitalmente, anticipando y ampliando la experiencia presencial. El estudio sostiene que las emociones ancladas en la autenticidad y en narrativas locales se convierten en activos simbólicos capaces de fortalecer vínculos entre anfitriones, visitantes y territorios.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Hospitalidad, contagio emocional, turismo gastronómico, autenticidad, medios digitales.

1 Introduction

Digital media has become a central tool for promoting and valuing tourist destinations, especially in peripheral contexts (Jorge et al., 2018). Digital marketing significantly influences

perceived service quality and destination sustainability, and indirectly affects visitor satisfaction and consumption propensity (Sharafuddin, Madhavan, & Wangtueai, 2024). The strategic use of short videos and social media posts enhances message reach (Sartika et al., 2025), promotes immersive experiences and highlights cultural elements (Fusté-Forné & Orea-Giner, 2024). These dynamics underscore the increasing centrality of social media as mediators of the tourist imaginary, enabling users to symbolically experience destinations even in digital environments.

In gastronomy, digital media amplifies promotion, with Instagram emphasizing local culinary experiences. The platform disseminates user-generated content with strong visual appeal (Yu & Sun, 2019). This communication is effective when paired with authentic, aesthetically engaging experiences, as high-emotional-content videos intensify visitation propensity (Chi et al., 2024). Sharing food practices on social networks is a significant strategy for small businesses to strengthen brands and promote symbolic recognition (Carvajal-Aparicio et al., 2024). Consequently, Instagram is a strategic resource for linking gastronomic narratives to territorial identities, thereby contributing to the valorization of local businesses and their sociocultural contexts (Yu & Sun, 2019; Fusté-Forné & Filimon, 2025).

Recanto Grüenberg, in Benedito Novo, Brazil, exemplifies how the virality of digital content expands a small business's reach. A spontaneous video featuring its hostess, Dona Darci, attracted customers motivated by affective ties and curiosity. Narratives centered on authentic figures generate greater emotional involvement, especially within the realms of food and hospitality (Fusté-Forné & Orea-Giner, 2024). In this context, the case is not limited to the promotional effects of viral content. Rather, it reveals how hospitality can be anticipated, perceived, and emotionally shared even before the visitor's physical arrival. Dona Darci's affective performance, marked by laughter, informality, affection, and proximity, manifests as a digitally mediated expression of hospitality. Her presence transforms the gastronomic business into a relational space in which food, memory, humor, and welcome are intertwined. Thus, the viral video does not merely advertise a place to eat; it communicates a promise of hospitality, inviting the audience to experience a form of belonging associated with local gastronomy, familial welcome, and affective recognition. This phenomenon raises a central question: how does emotionally impactful digital content, centered on charismatic and authentic local hosts, contribute to the construction of affective hospitality, strengthening symbolic bonds between visitors, gastronomic businesses, and peripheral destinations?

This study analyzes the case of Recanto Grüenberg based on the Theory of Emotional Contagion (Hatfield et al., 1994), examining how affective hospitality, expressed through authenticity, spontaneity, welcoming practices, and the hostess's digital performance, produces symbolic bonds and visitor engagement in a small gastronomic business located in a peripheral tourism destination. The theory explains why authentic and emotionally impactful videos, such as those featuring Dona Darci, engage the public and motivate sharing. Content evoking joy, empathy, or surprise activates emotional processes that reinforce consumption propensity and brand connection (Chi et al., 2024), especially when the emotion emitter is perceived as genuine (Fusté-Forné & Filimon, 2025). Emotional transmission can thus foster symbolic proximity between

consumers and small businesses, where charisma and authenticity become more persuasive than traditional advertising (Carvajal-Aparicio et al., 2024).

While studies highlight emotions and authenticity in gastronomic experiences (Lai et al., 2021; García-Carrión et al., 2023; Sartika et al., 2025), extant literature remains limited in exploring how authentic local figures, outside traditional-digital influencer circuits, catalyze emotional contagion and the valorization of gastronomic enterprises in peripheral or unconventional destinations. International research reinforces this discussion across diverse cultural realities, such as Asia (Yu & Sun, 2019; Lai et al., 2021) and Europe (Alonso et al., 2021; Kattiyapornpong et al., 2021), observing a clear shift from traditional celebrities to digital-influencers (Isevcan Ertamay & Güler, 2024), where even ordinary people gain relevance in promoting gastronomic tourism (Fusté-Forné & Filimon, 2025). To address this gap, the analysis of Recanto Grüenberg demonstrates how an entrepreneur's emotional performance, marked by authenticity and spontaneity, generates symbolic value, commercial attractiveness, and loyalty. The methodological strength lies in data triangulation: interviews with managers, Google Business presence analysis, and viral Instagram video comments. This integrated design captures both entrepreneur perceptions and consumer emotional manifestations, offering insights useful for future research in similar contexts.

This study aims to analyze how emotional contagion processes, mediated by authentic and spontaneous digital content, influence the construction of affective hospitality, visitor engagement, and symbolic recognition in local gastronomy. Specifically, it examines whether Dona Darci's presence, characterized by informal language, spontaneity, humor, and authenticity, operates as a symbolic expression of hosting capable of generating positive emotions, digital sharing, and tourist attraction. Unlike professional influencer strategies, this case highlights organic virality grounded in everyday hospitality practices, where welcoming gestures, family-like interaction, and emotional proximity become central elements in the symbolic positioning of a small gastronomic business. By doing so, this research broadens the understanding of affective communication in small tourism businesses by challenging professional, influencer-centered approaches, ultimately contributing to hospitality research by showing how affect, authenticity, and digital media can extend the host–guest relationship beyond the physical encounter.

2 Literature Review

In this study, hospitality is understood as a relational, symbolic, and affective phenomenon that goes beyond the mere provision of commercial services. It involves practices of reception, care, recognition, proximity, and interaction through which bonds are established between hosts and visitors. Camargo (2015) situates hospitality between social, symbolic, and commercial relations, showing that the act of welcoming cannot be reduced to a technical or operational dimension of service. Rather, hospitality emerges when the encounter between those who receive and those who are received produces meanings, expectations, gestures, and forms of reciprocity. This perspective is particularly relevant for small gastronomic businesses, where the experience

offered is not limited to food consumption, but also includes the atmosphere of the place, the personal presence of the host, the memory evoked by food, and the affective meanings attributed to the encounter. In such contexts, welcoming practices may transform an ordinary meal into a symbolic experience of belonging, familiarity, and emotional connection. Studies on hospitality and commensality reinforce this understanding by showing that food-related experiences can organize sociability, territorial identity, and affective belonging, especially when eating and being welcomed are connected to local culture, memory, and interpersonal relationships (Tavares et al., 2023; Gastal & Santos, 2024). Thus, hospitality is approached here as a process through which food, affection, place, and human interaction are articulated, allowing small gastronomic enterprises to produce not only satisfaction but also symbolic bonds and emotionally meaningful experience.

2.1 Small businesses, hospitality, and the power of shared emotions

In small gastronomic businesses, shared emotions become part of the hospitality experience because they are produced through direct contact, welcoming gestures, food-related memories, and the perceived authenticity of those who receive visitors. This perspective aligns with studies that understand hospitality and commensality as relational experiences shaped by sociability, territorial identity, memory, and affective belonging (Camargo, 2015; Tavares, Machado, & Valduga, 2023; Gastal & Santos, 2024). The scientific literature shows that consumer behavior in gastronomy is shaped by symbolic and emotional elements that go beyond food's nutritional value. El Haik-Wagner (2024), in an analysis of urban Chinese women's consumption of Western foods, highlights authenticity and affective performance as communicative and symbolic strategies, offering insights that can be applied to gastronomic contexts more broadly.

The Theory of Emotional Contagion (Hatfield et al., 1994) helps explain how authentic emotional expressions, from local hosts, can trigger behaviors like spontaneous sharing on social media. In tourism, this mechanism is amplified in digital environments, where positive emotions and perceived authenticity increase content virality and brand reach. Research converges on this point: high-arousal emotions foster sharing and visit intention (Berger & Milkman, 2012; Zhou et al., 2024; Liu, Wang, & Chang, 2023), while authenticity and empathy in local influencers strengthen emotional bonds and engagement (Isevcan Ertamay & Güler, 2023; Yönel Bas & Çakır, 2025; Poyoi, Gassiot-Melian, & Coromina, 2024).

Emotional contagion in social media has become a central mechanism in promoting tourist experiences. Gon's (2021) study shows that Instagram users co-create affective meanings by sharing images and hashtags about local experiences, contributing to the construction of a "shared locality" or localhood. Chi et al. (2024) demonstrate that videos with emotional framing generate more positive attitudes, greater sharing, and stronger visit intention. Both studies indicate that content capable of provoking pleasant and authentic emotions has greater potential for engagement and influence on public behavior. Thus, social media operates as a catalyst for emotional contagion, fostering symbolic connections between tourists and destinations.

In gastronomic tourism, involvement with social networks and content authenticity are

decisive in valuing local destinations (Sartika et al., 2025). Profiles that convey empathy, proximity, and cultural identity, as observed by Isevcan Ertamay and Güler (2023), and the emotional motivations identified by Masmoudi and Jmour (2024), such as nostalgia, cultural pride, and sensory pleasure, illustrate how authentic narratives from local entrepreneurs can go viral, attract new visitors, and foster co-created value in destinations. In this sense, shared emotions do not only support digital engagement; they also reinforce the perception of hospitality, since they anticipate feelings of welcome, familiarity, and affective proximity before a visitor's physical arrival.

2.2 Gastronomic tourism as an emotional and hospitality experience

Gastronomy is a central dimension of the tourist and hospitality experience, combining sensory, affective, relational, and cultural layers. In food-related contexts, hospitality is expressed not only through service delivery, but also through how visitors are welcomed, the meanings attributed to local food, the atmosphere of the place, and the interpersonal bonds created during the experience. This perspective is supported by studies that relate hospitality and commensality to sociability, territorial identity, memory, and affective belonging, as well as by research showing that culinary authenticity, perceived hospitality, and the physical environment enhance visitor satisfaction and behavioral loyalty (Camargo, 2015; Lai et al., 2021; Tavares et al., 2023; Gastal & Santos, 2024).

Chen & Lin (2024) show that nostalgic emotions mediate the relationship between perceived authenticity and purchase intention, while Nguyen et al. (2024) emphasize that positive emotions and cultural involvement are decisive for young people's participation in gastronomic tours. Social interaction and self-expression during food experiences also strengthen memories and bonds with destinations (Baş & Çakır, 2025), with elements such as nostalgia, authenticity, and identity acting as catalysts for revisits and recommendations (Soltani et al., 2020). From this perspective, gastronomic tourism involves more than the consumption of local dishes; it creates situations of encounter in which food, welcome, memory, and affective recognition shape how visitors interpret and value the destination.

Gastronomic experiences, through local meals, affective narratives, or authentic cultural expressions, often inspire spontaneous social media content, especially when they enable emotional connection and self-expression (Lai et al., 2021; Yu & Sun, 2019). The framing of gastronomic videos directly influences audience attitudes and intentions (Chi et al., 2024), while Instagram sharing helps align offerings with tourist desires (Gon, 2021; Carvajal-Aparicio et al., 2024). Thus, digital gastronomic tourism emerges as a hybrid space where emotion, authenticity, hospitality, and visibility intertwine to create tourist value.

Case studies such as the Las Ferias market in Bogotá (Montes-Guerra et al., 2024) show how valuing local gastronomy can transform commercial spaces into tourist destinations. Similarly, affective involvement and authentic narratives enhance the image and attractiveness of destinations (Soltani et al. 2021). A systematic review by Sotiriadis (2017) reinforces that tourist

behavior on social media is shaped by emotional content and peer experiences, highlighting the strategic potential of spontaneous engagement and the organic spread of destination image. In small gastronomic businesses, this process is especially relevant because digital narratives can communicate not only the food offered, but also the expected atmosphere of hospitality, proximity, and belonging.

2.3 Viral marketing and social media: the science behind sharing

Short-video platforms have become key to promoting gastronomic tourism, portraying dishes, ingredients, chefs, preparation methods, and immersive experiences often set in cultural or natural contexts that connect food to territory (Fusté-Forné & Orea-Giner, 2024). In food-related experiences, such content can communicate not only products and places, but also atmospheres of welcome, authenticity, and proximity. Collective sharing builds symbolic trust and digital legitimacy when user narratives are consistent (Dedeoglu et al., 2022).

Tourist content virality is strongly linked to high-arousal emotions such as joy, surprise, and admiration (Berger & Milkman, 2012). On TikTok, subjective well-being and parasocial interaction enhance visit intention, serving as mediators affective audiovisual stimuli (Zhou et al., 2024). Aesthetics, spontaneity, and authenticity are decisive for engagement (Liu et al., 2023), and platforms like Instagram play a central role in promoting gastronomic and heritage-rich places (Yu & Sun, 2019). Influencers and digital creators stimulate desire, identification, and consumption behavior (Hutchinson & Djafarova, 2024; Babalou et al., 2025).

Social networks symbolically communicate food and its territories. An analysis of over 2,000 Instagram posts on quality-certified Spanish cheeses identified six symbolic categories, with “product” as the most prevalent, followed by natural, cultural, and social heritage. These strategies combine social commerce and content marketing by associating food with broader territorial meanings (Fusté-Forné & Filimon, 2025). TikTok narratives center on shared gastronomic experiences that evoke authenticity and uniqueness, especially for younger audiences (Fusté-Forné & Orea-Giner, 2024). Images tied to symbolic values, products, people, and heritage enhance engagement, perceived value, and local identity (Putra, Putra, & Novianti, 2023), while visual cues in gastronomy capture immediate attention and elicit strong affective responses among Generation Z (García-Carrión et al., 2023).

Influencers act as bridges between destinations and audiences, with affective engagement and perceived credibility boosting e-WOM (Sartika et al., 2025; Mainolfi et al., 2022). Multilingual vlogs enable segmentation by language and culture (Katahenggam et al., 2023), and perceptions of innovation in food strengthen destination image and tourist behavior (Ghozali et al., 2024). Digital storytelling grounded in authenticity, through local dishes, traditions, and the people behind them, deepens emotional bonds, fostering engagement, sharing, and virality (Carvajal-Aparicio et al., 2024; Fusté-Forné & Orea-Giner, 2024). In this sense, viral gastronomic content can also

operate as an anticipatory form of hospitality, allowing audiences to imagine the experience of being welcomed before the actual visit.

2.4 Viral content, affective characters, and digitally mediated hospitality

Affective narratives anchored in charismatic characters strengthen memories and stimulate sharing. Digital celebrities and local influencers perceived as “real humans” deepen emotional bonds (Zhou et al., 2024; Isevcan Ertamay & Güler, 2023), although excessive exposure can erode authenticity and saturate a destination’s image (Yönel Baş & Çakır, 2025). Sustainable storytelling that balances visibility with cultural preservation is therefore recommended (Putra et al., 2023). In the context of small gastronomic businesses, however, affective characters may differ from professional influencers because their persuasive force is grounded less in planned image management and more in everyday gestures, spontaneous language, perceived sincerity, and proximity to local ways of life.

Positive attributes of local food, such as quality, novelty, and healthiness, drive spontaneous sharing, especially among first-time visitors (Soonsan et al., 2025). Authentic videos by gastronomic entrepreneurs, such as charismatic owners, hold strong viral potential, particularly in lesser-known destinations seeking visibility through affect, identity, and collective memory. In these cases, the protagonist of the content may become more than a communicator for the business; they can act as a symbolic host, embodying the values of welcome, care, humor, and familiarity that visitors expect to encounter during the physical experience.

Highlighting local figures on social media fosters authenticity and emotional engagement. User-generated content often prioritizes regional experiences over celebrity promotion (Gon, 2021), and in contexts such as cheese tourism, cultural heritage and local individuals are central to visual storytelling (Fusté-Forné & Filimon, 2025). Emphasizing these characters can yield marketing strategies that are more attuned to territorial identity and audience connection. From this perspective, the digital presence of a local host allows hospitality to be perceived, imagined, and emotionally anticipated before the visit. This interpretation is grounded in studies that approach hospitality as a relational experience between hosts and visitors, as well as in research showing that social media can mediate tourist experiences, strengthen affective meanings, and influence expectations and behavioral intentions through authentic narratives and user engagement (Camargo, 2015; Gon, 2021; Chi et al., 2024; Fusté-Forné & Orea-Giner, 2024). The affective character, therefore, operates as a symbolic bridge between digital engagement and the in-person hospitality experience, connecting food, place, memory, and host–visitor relationships.

3 Methods

This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive approach, structured as a single case study (Yin, 2015) focused on Recanto Grüenberg. The investigation seeks to understand how shared

emotions in digital media, based on the Theory of Emotional Contagion, contribute to affective hospitality, symbolic bonds, and visitor engagement in small gastronomic businesses. This approach supports an in-depth analysis of meanings, perceptions, and symbolic constructions in interview discourse and digital content reception (Marconi & Lakatos, 2017; Putra et al., 2023).

Data collection combined primary data from a semi-structured face-to-face interview with the managers, Dona Darci and her son Harley, conducted on May 22, 2025, at Recanto Grüenberg, with audio recording and authorization, and secondary data from Google Business and the viral Instagram video. The triangulation of direct reports, audiovisual records, user-generated comments, and platform metrics strengthened the validity and depth of the qualitative analysis (Yin, 2015; Marconi & Lakatos, 2017).

The interview script was organized into five thematic blocks grounded in the literature on digital media, affective hospitality, gastronomic experience, emotional contagion, virality, and symbolic identity. Each block contained two open-ended questions designed to elicit spontaneous accounts and reflections on the managers' experiences. The questions were formulated through followed theoretical triangulation, articulating concepts from emotional contagion theory, digital media, hospitality studies, and gastronomic and experience tourism.

Data were interpreted through content analysis (Bardin, 2016), following pre-analysis, coding, categorization and interpretation. The coding identified units of meaning related to authenticity, welcoming practices, affective bonds, virality, emotional contagion, and symbolic expressions of hospitality, allowing the study to examine how digital and in-person interactions shape affective hospitality, symbolic bonds, and visitor behavior.

The analysis of the viral Instagram Reels combined metrics from Instagram Business—accounts reached, total views, average viewing time, likes, shares, saves, comments, and follower conversion—with a qualitative examination of comments collected until June 4, 2025. Comments and emojis were systematized through content analysis (Bardin, 2016) and the emoji classification proposed by Kralj Novak et al. (2015), enabling the interpretation of emotional valences and symbolic meanings associated with the video (Gon, 2021; Chi et al., 2024; Sartika et al., 2025).

Figure 1 (p.10) contextualizes the video's performance through reach, engagement, and conversion metrics. These indicators supported the qualitative analysis by showing how the content circulated and how audiences responded prior to the thematic interpretation of comments and affective manifestations.

Content analysis (Bardin, 2016) of comments and the video was based on four dimensions derived from the interview script: (A) emotion and gastronomic hospitality experience, (B) emotional contagion and authenticity, (C) public reactions, and (D) identity construction. Pre-analysis included a floating reading, video observation, and data organization; coding grouped comments into the dimensions, while emoji analysis enriched affective interpretation.

For triangulation, 312 spontaneous Google Business reviews of Recanto Grüenberg (with an average rating 4.7 stars, up to June 4, 2025) were collected as user-generated textual data. Recent and complete messages expressing emotions, recommendations, or social media references were prioritized. Thematic content analysis organized the reviews into two a priori axes,

Affective Contagion and Digital Legitimacy, complemented by frequencies and selected excerpts (Figure 2; Table 1).

Figure 1 – Reels Insights: Engagement and Reach Metrics

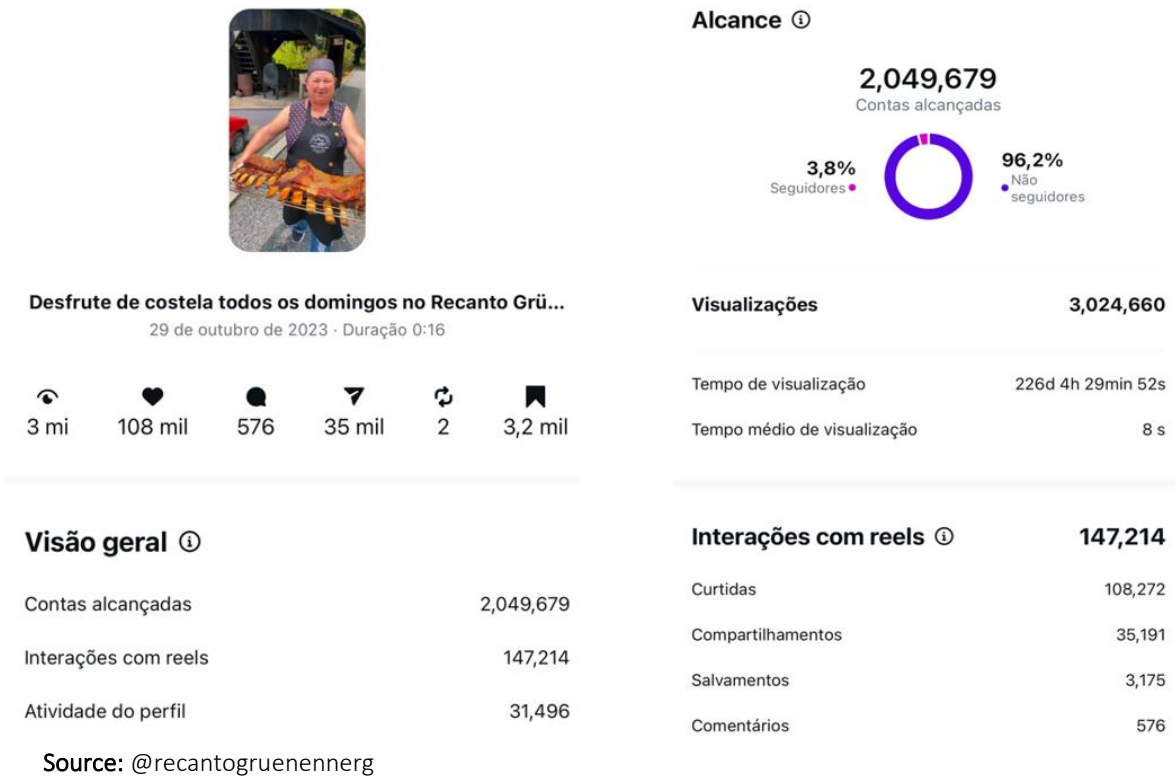
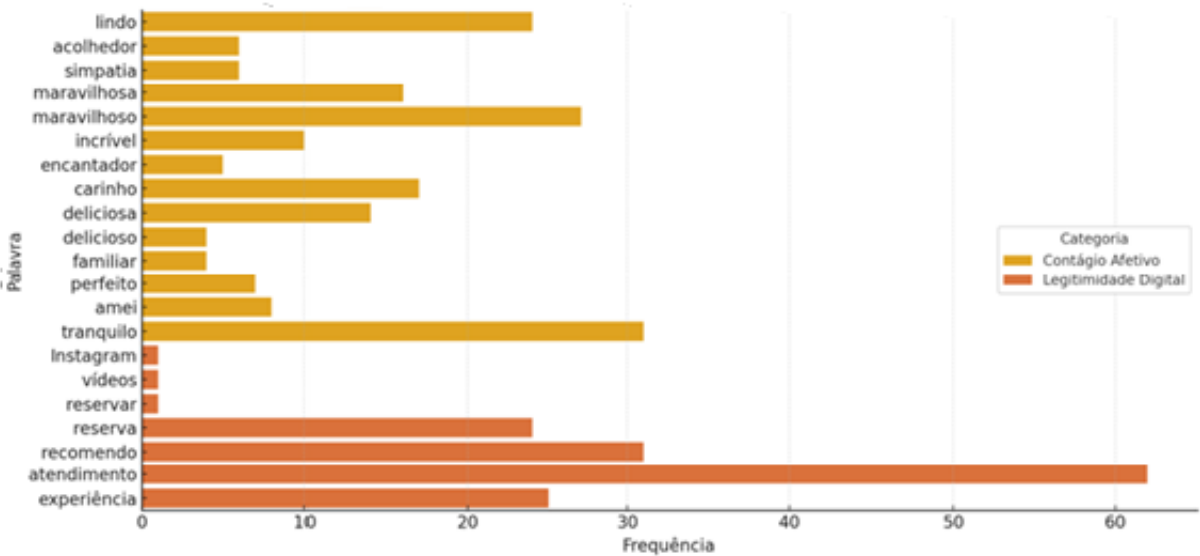


Figure 2 - Keyword Frequency by Google Business Category



Source: Authors’ elaboration (2026).

Table 1 – Evidence of Affective Contagion, Hospitality, and Digital Legitimacy in Spontaneous Reviews - Google Business

Comment (excerpt)	Evidence of Affective Contagion and Hospitality	Evidence of Digital Legitimacy
"We were very well attended... We felt very good, as if we were at a relative's house."	Warmth, well-being, and family-like familiarity.	Validates hospitality as a perceived competitive differential.
"Simply sensational!!! Excellent service, great food, and the place is beautiful."	Strong positive affect through "sensational," "excellent," and "beautiful."	Reinforces reputation based on real experience.
"Very welcoming and cozy. Beautiful place and wonderful food."	Empathy, comfort, sensory pleasure, and enchantment.	Confirms the expected image of welcome and quality.
"Very welcoming and the food is very tasty."	Emotional pleasure linked to welcome and taste.	Aligns the digital image with the in-person experience.
"We loved the service, wonderful colonial coffee. Everything very clean and fragrant."	Sensory affective contagion through love, fragrance, and pleasure.	Reinforces the promise of hospitality communicated online.

Source: Authors' elaboration (2026)

The screening and classification of terms were performed manually through interpretive reading and recurrence. Figure 2 shows that *atendimento* (service) and *experiência* (experience) are associated with digital legitimacy, while *tranquilo* (tranquil) and *maravilhoso* (wonderful) appear as markers of affective contagion. Table 1 illustrates how selected comments connect keywords and meanings to the theoretical categories.

3.1 Instrumental design: from the theoretical matrix to the questions

The interview script was developed from the theoretical matrix and research objectives, aligning questions with emotional contagion, authenticity, affective hospitality, gastronomic experience, digital virality, and symbolic identity construction. The five blocks ensured theoretical and empirical depth by connecting theory, method, and the practical experience reported by the interviewees.

The interview script was organized into five thematic blocks. Block A addressed emotion and gastronomic hospitality experience, exploring affective, nostalgic, sensory, and welcoming elements in the Recanto Grüenberg experience and their conversion into shareable content, including memory, nostalgia, and cultural identity in the digital sphere. Block B examined emotional contagion and viral videos, focusing on how Dona Darci's spontaneity and authenticity trigger sharing through stimuli such as joy, surprise, and empathy. Block C analyzed public reactions, assessing whether online affective bonds and expectations of hospitality translate into in-person visits and how visitors act as organic propagators of the brand on social media. Block D focused on visibility and identity, examining how virality affected audience attraction, business visibility, and

the symbolic personification of hospitality through Dona Darci. Finally, Block E addressed challenges and future strategies, exploring emotional impacts, potential symbolic wear, and ways of sustaining or adapting digital presence over time.

Table 2 – Relationship between Interview Blocks, Investigative Objectives, and Theoretical Foundations

Block	Theme/Dimension	Question Objective	Theoretical References
A	Emotion and Gastronomic Hospitality Experience	To understand whether an emotional, affective, sensory, and welcoming dimension is present in the offered experience, and how this translates into shareable content.	Soltani et al. (2021); Chen & Lin (2024); Baş & Çakır (2025); Camargo (2015); Tavares et al. (2023)
A	Memory, Nostalgia, and Identity	To explore elements of affective memory, nostalgia, and cultural identity activated digitally.	El Haik-Wagner (2024); Nguyen et al. (2024); Yu & Sun (2019); Gon (2021)
B	Emotional Contagion and Authenticity	To investigate whether the spontaneity and authenticity of videos favor emotional contagion.	Hatfield et al. (1994); Liu et al. (2023); Chi et al. (2024); Işevcan Ertamay & Güler (2024)
B	Elements of Virality	To analyze which stimuli (joy, surprise, empathy) make content more viral.	Berger & Milkman (2012); Zhou et al. (2024); Sotiriadis (2017); Babalou et al. (2025); Chi et al. (2024)
C	In-person Reactions of the Public	To verify whether the emotion and expectations of hospitality generated in the digital environment transfer to the in-person encounter.	Hatfield et al. (1994); Camargo (2015); Işevcan Ertamay & Güler (2023); Zhou et al. (2024); Hutchinson & Djafarova (2024)
C	E-WOM and Spontaneous Sharing	To understand the role of visitors as organic propagators of the brand on social media.	Mainolfi et al. (2022); Sotiriadis (2017); Lai et al. (2021); García-Carrión et al. (2023)
D	Digital Visibility and Audience Attraction	To analyze how virality changed the audience profile and increased business visibility.	Rodrigues et al. (2023); Poyoi et al. (2024); Babalou et al. (2025); Putra et al. (2023)
D	Identity and Symbolism Construction	To understand Dona Darci's symbolic role as a cultural character, local host, and affective expression of hospitality.	Camargo (2015); Masmoudi & Jmour (2024); Katahenggam et al. (2023); Tavares et al. (2023); Carvajal-Aparicio et al. (2024); Baş & Çakır (2025)
E	Symbolic Wear and Authenticity	To identify risks such as loss of spontaneity and fatigue from digital exposure.	Yönel Baş & Çakır (2025); Putra et al. (2023)
E	Future Strategies and Digital Adaptation	To analyze the interviewee's intention to maintain, adapt, or innovate her social media presence.	Sartika et al. (2025); Zhou et al. (2024); Sotiriadis (2017); Yu & Sun (2019); Babalou et al. (2025)

Source: Authors' elaboration (2026)

Table 2 demonstrates the coherence between thematic blocks, investigative objectives, and theoretical references. The adopted structure mapped the emotional, communicational, symbolic, and hospitality-related dimensions of the gastronomic experience. Blocks A and B address the genesis of affective hospitality and viral potential, while Blocks C and D explore audience transformation, expectations of hospitality, and the symbolic strengthening of the local host figure. Block E adds a critical and prospective dimension regarding symbolic wear and continuity strategies.

4 Empirical results

4.1 Instrumental design: from the theoretical matrix to the questions

The empirical data reveal that the hospitality experience at Recanto Grüenberg is shaped by emotional, affective, and symbolic dimensions, structured not only by gastronomy but mainly by the interpersonal connection fostered by Dona Darci as a local host. She views the restaurant as a space for emotional healing, where love and warmth are central ingredients: “My purpose is to welcome and infect with love.” This statement reveals hospitality as a relational and affective practice, in which welcoming is not restricted to service provision but becomes part of the experience’s symbolic value. It also aligns with studies highlighting the role of affective involvement, memory, and belonging in gastronomic and hospitality experiences (Camargo, 2015; Chen & Lin, 2024; Soltani et al., 2021; Tavares et al., 2023).

Emotion is central to her discourse. By affirming her mission “to spread her love,” Darci positions her actions beyond commercial service, engaging in practices of hospitality, care, empathy, and dedication. Many visitors arrive already impacted by social media videos, often greeting her with a hug, “imagined before arriving here,” illustrating the emotional contagion described by Hatfield et al. (1994). Her spontaneous laugh becomes a key emotional trigger: “My laugh is contagious, it’s a gift God gave me.”

Affective memories also mobilize the experience. Sundays at Recanto evoke a “collective nostalgia,” with customers embracing “as if they were from the same family,” recalling childhood memories. This resonates with El Haïk-Wagner (2024) and Nguyen et al. (2024), who identify nostalgia and cultural identity as drivers of tourist affectivity and loyalty. The restaurant is thus perceived as a familiar space, “like arriving at grandma’s house,” reinforcing hospitality as memory, affective recognition, and the symbolic reconstruction of domestic intimacy in a commercial gastronomic setting.

Authentic communication strengthens this emotional bond. Videos are recorded without a script, in collaboration with her son, “the only one who knows me.” This matches Liu et al.’s (2023) findings on spontaneous aesthetics in digital engagement. A notable example is her confusion of “pit smoker” with “pix smoker,” which generated humor, identification, and virality.

The emotional reach of these videos transcends geography. A Spanish couple traveled to meet her, wanting to confirm whether “the laugh was real.” This illustrates the affective transfer

from digital to in-person contexts, as studied by Hutchinson and Djafarova (2024). The resulting visibility diversified Recanto's clientele, including international visitors. Without strategic planning, Dona Darci became a symbol of affection and authenticity, "everyone's grandmother or aunt," aligning with Masmoudi and Jmour's (2024) view of authentic characters as symbolic destination markers.

Despite the benefits, she acknowledges emotional strain from constant exposure: "It's a lot of energy exchange, sometimes I need time just for myself," reflecting Baş and Çakır's (2025) warnings on symbolic wear. Still, she remains committed to authenticity: "the day I have to pretend, I'll stop... it has to come from the heart." She perceives her role as an affective mission "to evangelize with love... not with words, but with a gesture, a look, my energy," which supports Zhou et al. (2024) and Babalou et al. (2025) on authenticity and emotion as pillars for peripheral destination identity. The case shows that contemporary gastronomic hospitality can be fueled not only by typical dishes but also by life narratives, welcoming practices, affective bonds, and shared emotions.

4.2 Humor, spontaneity, and visual affect: analysis of the viral video

The viral video starring Dona Darci exemplifies the affective dynamic analyzed, linking Recanto Grünenberg's identity and hospitality style to its digital audience. Her naturalness, rural setting, and informal language triggered emotional reactions that extended beyond visuals to comments and emojis. This section examines three components—performance, audience comments, and emoji use—through four analytical axes: (1) Emotion and gastronomic hospitality experience; (2) Emotional contagion and authenticity; (3) Public reactions; and (4) Identity construction.

4.2.1 Emotion and gastronomic hospitality experience

Recorded outdoors, the video shows Darci before a rustic building, carrying a rib roasted since dawn, and exclaiming: "Think how delicious this is!" This blends visual, auditory, and affective stimuli, fostering emotional identification and anticipation of hospitality. Users react with joy, tenderness, nostalgia, or admiration, often recognizing themselves in the gastronomic scene or in Darci's charisma (Fusté-Forné & Orea-Giner, 2024). Digital messages with emotional appeal are key to eliciting affective responses (García-Carrión et al., 2023). The multisensory interplay of images, sounds, and narrative drives engagement (Liu et al., 2023) and can shape attitudes and behaviors (Chi et al., 2024).

Comments illustrate this effect: "this woman makes you want to hug her," "reminds me of my grandma," and "this place exudes quality of life." Such reactions confirm Chen & Lin's (2024) view that nostalgic emotions can be triggered by sensory cues such as taste and aroma, and echo Soltani et al. (2020) emphasis on authenticity and sensory richness as key to creating affective bonds with gastronomic destinations. In the present case, these bonds are also linked to the

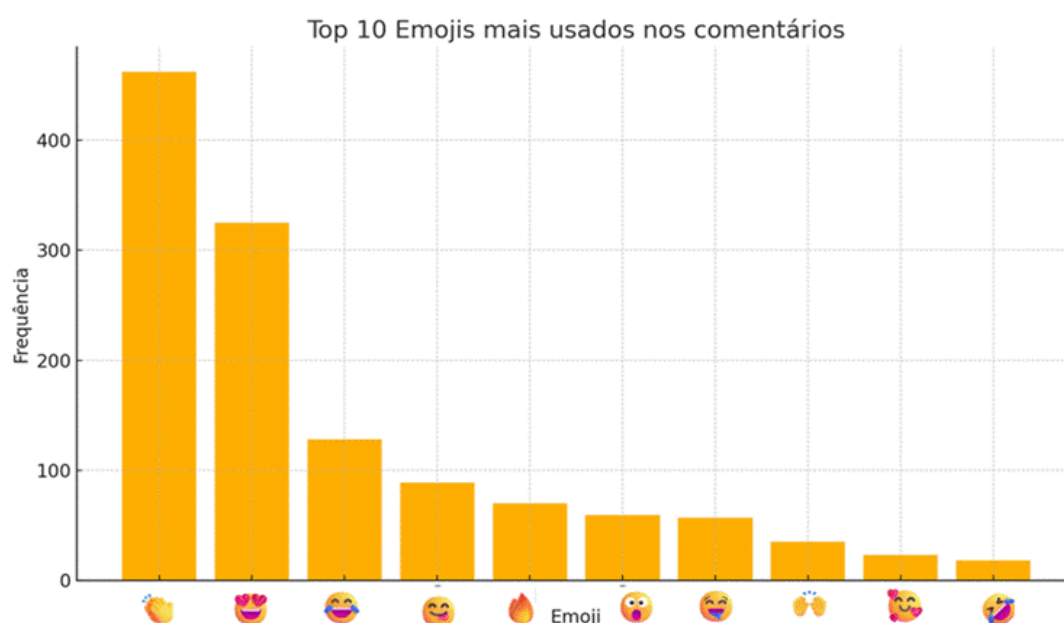
anticipation of being welcomed, since the comments associate Dona Darci's image with affection, familiarity, and the desire for personal encounter.

4.2.2 Emotional contagion and virality

With over two million accounts reached, three million views, 108 thousand likes, 34 thousand shares, and 31 thousand new followers, the video illustrates an organic virality process. These metrics confirm the effectiveness of short, authentic audiovisual content in eliciting immediate emotional responses (Chi et al., 2024). The high follower conversion rate suggests symbolic adherence beyond momentary engagement. In line with Fusté-Forné and Orea-Giner (2024), gastronomic tourism videos gain greater impact when they mobilize emotions and cultural values, fostering identification and lasting bonds with destinations.

Dona Darci's spontaneous performance, informal language, humor, and domestic aesthetics activate mechanisms of collective identification. Her unscripted speech, humorous tone, and perceived genuineness enhance shareability, while heart, applause, and laughter emojis accompany affective comments. The regional accent and homey setting reinforce authenticity, and the adoption of her catchphrase "Think how delicious this is! 🍷" evidences the retransmission of the emotional experience as replicable digital language. These dynamics align with the Theory of Emotional Contagion (Hatfield et al., 1994) and with Chi et al. (2024), who show that emotion-centered framing influences attitudes and behaviors on social platforms.

Figure 3 – Frequency of Emojis in Reels Comments



Source: Authors' elaboration (2026)

In this process, emojis function as emotional markers (Novak et al., 2015), classifiable by affective valence. Figure 3 displays the ten most common emojis in video comments, including

applause, heart-eyes, laughter, fire, and food icons, associated with positive emotions in the Emoji Sentiment Ranking. Analyzing emojis helps decode the audience's affective tone and responses to the content (Novak et al., 2015). These findings reinforce digital media as catalysts for anticipated affective experiences, including expectations of welcome and proximity, capable of mobilizing consumption, travel, and spontaneous sharing.

4.2.3 Public Reactions

Emotions elicited in digital environments often translate into concrete actions such as visitation, engagement, recommendation, and expectations of hospitality. Comments such as “I’m planning to go for lunch there one day” or “I’m going to Benedito Novo just to savor this wonder” illustrate how sensory and affective appeals are transformed into tangible behavioral intentions (Chi et al., 2024; Fusté-Forné & Orea-Giner, 2024). These comments also suggest that the desire to visit is not motivated solely by the food itself, but by the expectation of experiencing the atmosphere of welcome, humor, and affective proximity communicated by Dona Darci. Many users share the video by tagging friends and family, e.g., “I’ll take you there, love @mention”, revealing spontaneous brand propagation. Humor and empathy, as in “You could have done without this,” foster collective involvement, strengthening symbolic ties around the establishment (Isevcan Ertamay & Guler, 2024). This aligns with electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM), in which visitors act as organic promoters (Lai, Liu & Lu, 2021). According to Chi et al. (2024), such engagement intensifies when digital content influences attitudes and stimulates the desire to experience gastronomic destinations. In this case, the public reactions indicate that the viral content also anticipates a host–visitor relationship marked by affection, familiarity, and symbolic proximity.

4.2.4 Identity Construction

Dona Darci emerges as an affective symbol and symbolic host of Recanto Grüenberg, expanding the meaning of hospitality beyond the physical encounter. Comments such as “I wanted to know this place just to meet this charming lady 🥰” and “What a delightful accent 🇧🇷” indicate that her presence functions as an emotional reference (Fusté-Forné & Orea-Giner, 2024; García-Carrión et al., 2023). Her charismatic, spontaneous, and expressive performance personifies Recanto’s values, warmth, simplicity, affection, and welcome. This dynamic aligns with parasocial interaction theory (Zhou et al., 2024), wherein audiences form unidirectional emotional bonds with digital figures, as evidenced by affectionate and familiar comments despite the absence of personal acquaintance.

By articulating the four analytical dimensions, the video emerges as a mediator between digital and in-person gastronomic hospitality experiences, functioning as an emotional narrative rather than mere promotion. The combination of reach metrics, authentic content, and emotionally charged comments explains its role as a vector of emotional contagion. Dona Darci’s spontaneous and affective language operates as a symbolic catalyst, mobilizing memories, desires, and social interactions. In activating affective bonds, the content transcends promotional logic, embedding itself in a relational hospitality framework where consumption is driven by empathy, identification, welcome, and belonging. These findings reaffirm the role of social media in building

authentic narratives that generate significant engagement and strengthen the affective image of small gastronomic businesses as spaces of hospitality.

4.3 Affective contagion, hospitality, and digital legitimacy: visitor comments

The qualitative analysis of Google Business reviews revealed emotionally rich narratives marked by recommendations, references to social media, intentions to return, and perceptions of hospitality. The affective contagion described by Hatfield et al. (1994) appears in recurrent terms such as “charming,” “welcoming,” “tranquility,” “wonderful,” and “incredible,” which convey emotions and shape expectations and behaviors. Visitors thus become symbolic disseminators, enhancing the destination’s appeal through affective sharing and public validation of hospitality.

Digital legitimacy emerges through mentions of social media, especially Instagram, phrases such as “highly recommend,” and the valuing of “excellent service,” “homemade food,” welcoming practices, and familiarity. These comments both describe and endorse experiences, reinforcing trust among potential visitors. Social media engagement intensifies memory and operates as social certification (Sartika et al., 2025), while spontaneous testimonials influence third-party decisions through parasocial dynamics (Babalou et al., 2025). Mentions of social media as a source of discovery or prior validation confirm its role in reliability and symbolic reputation (Dedeoglu et al., 2022).

In rural destinations, digital marketing helps build image, visit intention, and territorial sustainability when based on authentic experiences and spontaneous testimonials (Rodrigues et al., 2023). Memorable gastronomic experiences and supportive interactions also drive satisfaction and behavioral intentions (Baş & Çakır, 2025). At Recanto Grünenberg, praise for food, family-like service, welcoming practices, and natural surroundings indicates emotional bonds expressed digitally, reinforcing authenticity, hospitality, and online reach. Legitimation stems less from review volume than from the emotional depth of narratives, which operate as symbolic assets. Triangulation with Google and social media comments supports interview findings (Yin, 2015).

Testimonials such as “Dona Darci and her son Harley make the stay even more special” illustrate digital content as affective and symbolic invitations to hospitality, confirming authenticity and the centrality of the host–visitor relationship. The alignment between discourse, performance, and reception strengthens the understanding of emotional contagion as a relational process connecting digital and in-person experiences (Hatfield et al., 1994; Zhou et al., 2024).

These findings align with evidence on emotional contagion, authenticity, and affective performance in digital gastronomic tourism (Yu & Sun, 2019; Lai et al., 2021; Kattiyapornpong et al., 2021; Alonso et al., 2021; Soltani et al., 2020). Dona Darci’s spontaneous presence shows that local personalities can act as symbolic assets, allowing emotional virality to emerge organically from genuine narratives.

To integrate interviews, viral video analysis, and visitor comments, an analytical matrix was developed with four axes: affectivity, authenticity, emotional recognition and public validation, and

emotional contagion and affective propagation. These axes emphasize relational processes linking the hostess's affective performance to digital and in-person reception.

Table 3 – Analytical Data Triangulation Matrix

Integrating Analytical Axis	Interview	Viral Video	Google Business
Affectivity as the basis of hospitality experience	The hostess conceives the restaurant as a space of affection and healing; her mission is “to welcome with love,” re-signifying the experience beyond consumption.	The expressive performance of accent, laughter, and affectionate tone transmits unscripted hospitality, activating affective memories.	References to the quality of interpersonal relationships and welcome, perceived as genuine and close.
Expressed and perceived authenticity in welcoming practices	Spontaneity is described as a relational practice (“I can only record with my son”); authenticity emerges from interaction with others.	Simple aesthetics, informal language, and absence of a script reinforce perceived authenticity as “natural” and “genuine.”	Authenticity is perceived and reinforced by adjectives such as “excellent,” “wonderful,” “tasty,” which socially validate the experience, including its sensory dimension (food, environment).
Emotional recognition and public validation of hospitality	Dona Darci is described as “everyone’s aunt or grandmother”; the business’s visibility is attributed to the affection she conveys: “they feel part of my life.”	Spontaneous virality, through the replication of phrases and affective symbols, indicates symbolic co-creation between the public and content.	Comments function as public validation of the hospitality experience (“highly recommend,” “saw on Instagram”), with social media mentions reinforcing the digital reputation and trust in the establishment.
Emotional contagion and affective propagation	There are reports of visitors emotionally impacted even before the visit; the hostess’s laughter is described as a “gift” that “reaches people before she does.”	Metrics show contagion: over 3 million views, thousands of likes, shares, and replicated phrases (“think how delicious...”), with expressive use of affective emojis.	Affective contagion is perceptible in reiterated words with strong emotional content, such as “incredible,” “charming,” and “wonderful,” which function as symbolic triggers for new visitors by reinforcing expectations of welcome, warmth, and familiarity.

Source: Authors’ elaboration (2026)

The triangulation of data, synthesized in the four thematic axes of Table 3, evidences a significant convergence among the hostess's accounts, the communicational performance in the viral video, and the spontaneous reviews published on Google Business. It is observed that affectivity not only structures the hospitality experience offered but also operates as a central language of communication, being perceived recurrently and significantly in different interaction contexts. Authenticity, in turn, emerges as a relational phenomenon, not self-produced, but co-created and recognized through spontaneity, welcoming, and non-professionalized aesthetics.

Emotional contagion, intensely activated in the digital environment, transcends the virtual sphere by influencing visitor behavior and shaping affective expectations of hospitality that are confirmed in the physical realm. Finally, the public legitimation of the experience, via comments, recommendations, and references to social media, consolidates a process of symbolic validation that connects personal narrative, collective engagement, and digital reputation. Thus, the integrated data analysis not only reinforces the internal coherence of the investigated phenomenon but also reveals the power of shared emotions in shaping significant hospitality and gastronomic experiences in peripheral contexts.

5 Empirical results

This study demonstrates that emotional contagion, when mediated by authentic and spontaneous digital content, can operate as a strategic vector for the construction of affective hospitality in small gastronomic businesses located outside major tourism circuits. The case of Recanto Grünenberg reveals how the hostess's performative authenticity, combined with symbolic elements of welcome, food, humor, affection, and local identity, enhances content virality while also strengthening emotional bonds among visitors, the business, and the territory.

The findings show that Dona Darci's charisma is not merely a promotional attribute, but a central component of the hospitality experience. Her typical recipes, preserved rural setting, spontaneous language, laughter, and welcoming gestures create a sense of familiarity that begins in the digital environment and is later confirmed in the in-person encounter. In this sense, the viral video does not function only as a marketing tool; it operates as an affective invitation, capable of anticipating the experience of being welcomed, recognized, and emotionally connected to a place.

Theoretically, the study extends the Theory of Emotional Contagion to hospitality and tourism contexts by showing how affective narratives led by non-professional local figures can produce symbolic value for small businesses and peripheral destinations. By proposing the concept of the "affective character," the article contributes to the understanding of hospitality as a relational and symbolic process that may also be digitally mediated. The affective character is not simply someone who appears in promotional content, but a host figure whose authenticity, emotional expressiveness, and proximity mobilize empathy, trust, and desire for visitation.

As a practical contribution, the results offer insights for entrepreneurs and gastronomy professionals interested in communication strategies based on hospitality, authenticity, proximity, and affect. Small gastronomic establishments can use digital media not only to advertise their products, but also to communicate ways of welcoming, narrating local identity, and building bonds with potential visitors. This is particularly relevant for businesses located in peripheral destinations, where emotional narratives and host-visitor relationships may become decisive symbolic assets.

The study also has limitations. Its empirical focus on a single case restricts generalization, and the qualitative approach does not measure direct correlations between emotions in digital content and objective business performance indicators. Future research may adopt quantitative,

comparative, and longitudinal approaches to examine the relationship among perceived hospitality, emotional contagion, authenticity, behavioral intention, and business sustainability. Other segments, such as accommodation, rural tourism, handicrafts, and community-based tourism, could also be explored to understand how affective hospitality is communicated and experienced in different contexts.

In conclusion, the study reaffirms that hospitality, when anchored in emotion, authenticity, and local narratives, constitutes a strategic symbolic asset in contemporary tourism and gastronomy. By shifting attention from professional influencers to the affective performance of authentic local hosts, the article advances the application of Emotional Contagion Theory in hospitality studies and offers an original contribution to debates on affective communication, symbolic marketing, and the relational nature of gastronomic experiences.

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SOBRE OS AUTORES

Mônica T. B. Busarello

Contribuições: conceituação, curadoria de dados, análise formal, investigação, método, validação, visualização, redação do manuscrito original e redação final (revisão e edição).

E-mail: monicatbu@gmail.com / ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0197-6323>

Paula C. Ferretti

Contribuições: conceituação, curadoria de dados, análise formal, investigação, validação, visualização e redação do manuscrito original.

E-mail: paulaferrettic@gmail.com / ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9291-4894>

Fabiana Roeder

Contribuições: conceituação, curadoria de dados, análise formal, investigação, método, validação, visualização, redação do manuscrito original e redação final (revisão e edição).

E-mail: fabiturismo@gmail.com / ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5790-7082>

Ana P. Sohn

Contribuições: conceituação, método, administração do projeto e validação.

E-mail: anasohn@univali.br / ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7319-8869>

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DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI AND AI-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

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