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From Clicks to Carts: How Social Media Shapes Food Purchase Behaviour in Klang Valley

Norliza Saiful Bahry^{a*}, Syukrina Alini Mat Alini^b, Mohammad Zaim Mohd
Salleh^c, Nur Liana Kori^d, Azmi Mat^e

^{abcd}*Department of Entrepreneurship and Marketing Studies, Faculty Business and Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA, 42300
Puncak Alam, Selangor, Malaysia*

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ABSTRACT

The study investigates the impact of social media on food purchasing behavior in Klang Valley, Malaysia, emphasizing hashtags, social media influencers, and culinary festivals. Data were gathered using a quantitative research approach using an online survey administered to 100 respondents selected via convenience sampling. The results indicate that social media influencers and food festivals significantly influence consumer food purchasing behaviour, whereas hashtags exhibit no significant direct effect. The regression model accounted for 57.9% of the variance in purchase behaviour, highlighting the significance of credibility and experiential involvement in customer decision-making. These results indicate that although hashtags increase visibility, they serve mainly as discovery instruments rather than persuasive strategies. Conversely, influencers and culinary festivals act as significant catalysts for trust, engagement, and purchasing intentions. The research indicates that food marketers have to emphasize partnerships with influencers and experiential platforms while using hashtags as ancillary tactics. Future studies may investigate cultural differences, long-term consequences, and innovative technology like AI-driven customization and virtual reality in influencing customer behavior.

1. Introduction

The rise of social media has significantly transformed how consumers interact with food brands, especially since the early 2010s. Platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube have popularised food photography and influencer marketing, which began shaping food choices, with trends like avocado toast gaining widespread appeal (O'Connell, 2023; Jeff Butler, 2019). In Malaysia, the transformation started

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around 2015-2017, paralleling the rise in smartphone and internet utilisation, which facilitated the rapid spreading of local food trends. People began visiting eateries showcased on these platforms, influencing purchasing decisions (Tazeen & Mullick, 2023). Social media websites have become an essential source of information as well as recommendations for customers and can impact consumer purchasing behavior and decision-making (Reyes-Menendez, Saura & Filipe, 2019). Prior research highlights that external cues, such as hashtags, influencers, and events, can influence attitudes, intentions, and consumer behaviour. (Leong, Meng, & Alex, 2022; Lim, Tan, Yeo & Tan, 2024). Hashtags serve as identifiers on the internet that improve discoverability and foster a sense of collective enthusiasm over culinary experiences (Wangshu & Guanhua, 2020). Building on this digital engagement, social media influencers utilise their charisma and credibility to alter consumer behaviour, as consumers often emulate the actions of influencers (Chan, 2022). Food festivals also function as experiential marketing platforms, offering online visibility and offline sensory encounters that strengthen the connection between customers and brands, hence stimulating purchasing behaviour (Belenioti, Gkarane, & Vassiliadis, 2017). However, beyond these event-driven experiences, food choices are rarely straightforward; selecting an appropriate diet can be deemed a complex decision, shaped by intertwined psychological, cultural, and social variables (Köster, 2009). Thus, examining consumer purchasing behavior in the food domain becomes crucial, as it provides insights into how both external stimuli, such as festivals, and internal factors, such as individual preferences, jointly influence decision-making. Although prior research has examined this area, the findings remain limited, and the rapidly evolving nature of social media and consumer purchasing behaviour renders many earlier studies less current and relevant (Yang & Wong, 2022). Therefore, this study aims to investigate the impact of social media on food purchasing behavior in Klang Valley, focusing on how visual content and social media strategies affect consumer's choices.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Food Purchasing Behaviour

Food purchasing behavior refers to the behaviors consumers exhibit when acquiring products and services over time (Priyabrata Roy, 2022). These behaviors encompass various factors, including changing consumer preferences, market conditions, technological advancements, economic shifts, and cultural influences (Praveen, 2024). Analyzing these purchasing patterns allows businesses to better predict future demand and adapt their strategies to remain competitive and relevant in the industry. One notable emerging trend is “experiential spending,” where individuals prioritize spending on experiences rather than physical products. This shift is particularly pronounced among millennials and Generation Z, who value experiences that create lasting memories (Abdulaziz, 2024). As highlighted by Warde and Martens (2001), consumers are increasingly focused on spending in areas such as travel, dining at unique restaurants, and attending live performances and events. The rise of social media has further amplified this trend, as individuals feel a strong urge to share their experiences with their audiences, thereby reinforcing their personal identity. Consequently, businesses are adapting by creating unique, emotionally engaging, and socially satisfying experiences associated with their products and services (Reinartz, 2019). This establishes a cycle in which shared content drives increased purchasing behavior, influencing food trends and customer demand.

2.2 Hashtags Usage on Social Media

Amalina Mohd and Norsimaa Mustaffa (2023) highlight that hashtags aid individuals in making informed dining decisions by providing access to real reviews, ratings, and photos of food. For example, searching for #StreetFoodKlang can direct users to popular eateries based on community suggestions and imagery. Hashtags can also trigger FOMO (the fear of missing out). Tags like #MustTryKL or #ViralFood generate excitement, compelling consumers to try trendy dishes, especially limited-edition items. This urgency can significantly influence their choices of what and where to eat (Stefanie Kurniadi, 2024). Additionally, food-related hashtags offer genuine reviews and authentic images, helping buyers make better decisions and avoid misleading advertisements or menu descriptions. This allows for quicker and more informed choices when dining (Yi Li, David Pereira & Hafzan Yusoff, 2024). According to a Statista (2024) survey, 67 percent of respondents tried a new restaurant or food after seeing it on social media. In addition, companies that are using targeted hashtags on most platforms like Instagram and TikTok are receiving increased customer engagement and sales (Aubrey, Mary, et al., 2022). The deliberate use of hashtags at food festivals can successfully engage audiences and stimulate participation and sales, as users often search for specific tags related to events or food items (Hanaysha, 2022). This indicates that incorporating social media methods, especially hashtag campaigns, into food festival design is not solely promotional but can strategically influence customer participation and purchasing behaviour. Empirical data suggests that food-related hashtags alter customer preferences and actively influence purchasing behaviour, supporting the idea that an increase in these hashtags can enhance food consumption choices. The relationship between hashtags and engagement is more complex than a mere numeric correlation. Celuch (2021) believes that whereas hashtags increase visibility, overly lengthy or inadequately formulated descriptions might reduce interaction, underscoring the need of quality over quantity in digital marketing. Collectively, these findings highlight a significant deficiency: whereas current research confirms the influential capacity of hashtags, there is a lack of understanding regarding the ideal equilibrium among hashtag quantity, organisation, and contextual pertinence in fostering enduring food purchasing behaviour.

H1: There is a positive relationship between the Hashtag usage and Food purchasing behavior

2.3 Social Media Influencers

A social media influencer is someone who actively posts on platforms like Instagram, TikTok, or YouTube and has a large following. Chan (2022) describes how social media influencers are empowered to alter consumer purchase behavior because of their fame, trustworthiness, knowledge, prestige, or relationship with their viewers. These influencers share opinions, advice, or personal experiences, influencing their followers' choices on what to buy or where to eat (Charles Alves de Castro, 2021). This marketing technique involves promoting and selling products or services through social media personalities, known as "influencers," who can significantly shape a brand's image. (Hill et al., 2020). Social media has simplified access to information, especially about food. Platforms like Instagram and TikTok allow food influencers to promote trends effectively (Yogesh Dwivedi, 2021). A captivating image can turn a simple dish or restaurant into an overnight sensation, driving significant traffic and business. Additionally, these networks enable users to exchange recipes and stories, creating a community atmosphere and helping define food preferences (Guild, 2024). Real-time recommendations can greatly impact consumer decisions, making it easier to locate the next best food spot in Klang Valley. Influencers also offer helpful details about dining options and showcase lesser-known food establishments, adding a sense of novelty (Shankar and Yashwanth, 2023; Maderazo et al., 2024). Their enticing photos and videos inspire followers to try new food trends or visit specific locations. By sharing details about price, location, and taste, influencers streamline the decision-making process, turning dining into an enjoyable and

thoughtful experience. Research conducted by Deyo, Jessica (2023) shows that over 70% of people trust recommendations from influencers more than traditional advertisements. In Klang Valley, influencers frequently promote local restaurants, food products, and trends to their followers, leading to a ripple effect where more people are encouraged to try these recommendations (Ng, Wei Chien, et al., 2023). The increasing dependence on influencers for reliable recommendations shows their significant influence in developing consumer purchasing patterns, indicating that social media influencers not only generate awareness but also actively influence purchasing decisions. According to İpekoğlu, & Enser (2024), influencer marketing, a very effective digital strategy, influences consumers' food and beverage preferences through 'influencers' which can be described as the contemporary opinion leaders on social media. Thus, establishing a hypothesis regarding the relationship between influencer marketing and food purchasing behavior.

H2: There is a positive relationship between social media influencers and food purchasing behavior.

2.4 Food Festival

Food is currently the second most marketed commodity on social media (van der bend et al., 2022) and food festivals have emerged in many countries as a way to promote food consumption patterns that are deemed beneficial for various reasons (Organ, Koenig-Lewis, Palmer, & Probert, 2015). In the era of social media, food festivals tend to generate a substantial online hype, with attendees sharing their experience, photos, and reviews, which can create more interest in particular foods and influence the consumption patterns of others who have not physically attended the festival. Some festivals aim to encourage consumption of food produced locally rather than that obtained through global supply chains (Hall & Sharples, 2008). Food festivals serve as an intriguing platform for facilitating behavior change. A qualitative study conducted by Belenioti, Gkarane & Vassiliadis (2017) revealed the importance of social media in reaching and engaging consumers in the food festival industry by attracting existing and new customers.

Carvache-Franco et al. (2023) found that the Bahrain Food Festival had several motivating factors that had a significant impact on engagement and led to consumer behavior. These dimensions included discovering about local food, art and entertainment, socializing, and seeking out new experiences. Food festivals also provide individuals with an opportunity to connect with new acquaintances, as they facilitate social gatherings (Yeoman et al., 2021). The communal aspect of these gatherings fosters an environment where individuals feel at ease experimenting with novel cuisines, sharing their experiences, and purchasing items they might not typically consume. This approach emphasizes the perspective that food festivals serve as both cultural celebrations and commercial venues that significantly influence customer engagement and spending behavior. Consequently, based on a previous study, the subsequent hypothesis is proposed:

H3: There is a positive relationship between the influence of food festivals and food purchasing behavior.

Therefore, based on these insights, the study proposes a conceptual framework that integrates food hashtags, food festivals, and social influences as the key determinants of consumer food purchasing patterns. The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) is a prevalent framework for forecasting and comprehending human behaviour in diverse contexts. Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), formulated by Ajzen (1991) as an extension of the Theory of Reasoned Action, asserts that behaviour is directly impacted by behavioural intentions, which are determined by three fundamental components: attitude towards the behaviour, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control. The theory is consistent with the proposed conceptual framework, as hashtag usage influences consumer attitudes, social media impact embodies

subjective norms, and food festivals improve both attitudes and perceived behavioural control, collectively driving behavioural intention and ultimately affecting food purchasing behaviour.

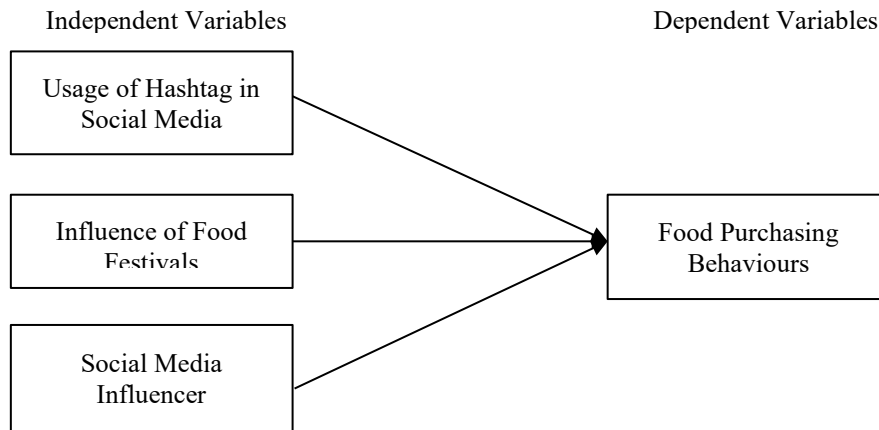


Figure 1: The Conceptual Framework of the Independent Variables (IV) and Dependent Variable (DV)

3. Research Method

The objective of this study is to investigate the impact of social media on food purchasing behavior in Klang Valley, focusing on how visual content and social media strategies affect their choices. 100 respondents in Klang Valley were approached and selected using a convenience sampling procedure. This method was selected for its practicality and accessibility to participants, which are consistent with the study's constraints in terms of time and resources. An online survey was implemented to gather data, which was disseminated via email and social media platforms. The survey comprises closed-ended queries that employ a five-point Likert scale to analyze responses extending from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." SPSS software was employed to analyze the data in order to address the research questions.

4. Results

This section presents the results related to the profiles of respondents, descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, and multiple regression. Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of the study participants. The demographic information of the 100 participants reveals that the majority are female (73%), which reflects an imbalance in gender distribution in the sample, and are aged between 31 and 35 years old (48%), suggesting that middle-aged adults participate in this study. Most respondents are employed and spend more than 4 hours on social media each day (47%). Among the four social media platforms indicated, TikTok and Instagram have the highest usage rates, with 78% and 69%, respectively. The demographic distribution indicates that the sample comprises individuals who actively participate in social media. These variables could potentially influence their views on the impact of hashtag usage, social media influencers, food festivals, and their food purchasing behavior.

Table 1. Demographic Information

VARIABLE	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
GENDER		
Males	27	27%
Females	73	73%
AGE		
18-20 years old	3	3%
21-25 years old	37	37%
26-30 years old	12	12%
31-35 years old	48	48%
OCCUPATION		
Employed	84	84%
Students	8	8%
Unemployed	8	8%
DURATION SPENT ON SOCIAL SMEDIA PER DAY		
Below 1 hour	9	9%
1-3 hours	44	44%
4 hours and above	47	47%
PREFERED SOCIAL MEDIA		
Instagram	69	69%
TikTok	78	78%
X (Twiter)	27	27%
Facebook	34	34%

Table 2 presents the results of the study's descriptive statistics, including skewness, kurtosis, and Cronbach's alpha values. A normality test was conducted to assess the shape of the distribution, and the skewness and kurtosis results were reported. The normality test indicated that the data were generally distributed, as the skewness and kurtosis values for each variable fell within the range of ± 3 (Coakes, 2013). Additionally, reliability analysis was performed by calculating Cronbach's alpha values for each variable, and the findings demonstrated that the scale exhibited excellent internal consistency, which shows that all variables exceeded 0.7 and above.

Table 2. Normality Test

	Skewness	Kurtosis	Cronbach's Alpha
Hashtags Usage	-.045	-.643	0.912
Social Media Influencer	.364	-.616	0.936
Food Festival	-.094	-.087	0.916
Food Purchase Behavior	-.094	-.754	0.905

Table 3 presents the Pearson correlation coefficients among the study variables: hashtag usage, food festival, social media influencer, and food purchase decision. The results indicate that all variables are significantly correlated at the 0.01 level. Specifically, hashtag usage shows a moderate positive correlation with food festival ($r = .480$, $p < 0.01$), social media influencer ($r = .578$, $p < 0.01$), and food purchase

behavior ($r = .550$, $p < 0.01$). Similarly, food festival is positively associated with influencer ($r = .532$, $p < 0.01$) and purchase ($r = .604$, $p < 0.01$).

Notably, the strongest correlation is observed between social media influencer and food purchase behavior ($r = .701$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that influencer activities exert the most substantial influence on purchase behavior compared to other variables. These findings demonstrate that hashtags usage, food festivals, and social media influencers are all positively related to consumer purchasing behavior, with influencer marketing emerging as the most significant predictor.

Table 3. Pearson Correlation analysis

Variables	hashtag	foodfestival	influencer	Purchase
Hashtag	1			
Foodfestival	.480**	1		
Influencer	.578**	.532**	1	
Purchase	.550**	.604**	.701**	1

** . Pearson Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level

Multiple regression analyses were conducted to examine the relationship between hashtags, social media influencers, and food festivals in relation to food purchase behavior. The results of this analysis are summarized in Table 45. The analysis indicated no collinearity issues, as the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values were all below ten and the tolerance values were less than 1.0 across the three independent variables. The R^2 value of 0.579 suggests that 57.9% of the variation in food purchase behavior can be explained by hashtags, social media influencers, and food festivals. Additionally, another 10.4% of the variations in purchase behavior can be attributed to other factors. The F-test results were significant, with a p-value of < 0.05 (0.000), confirming that the linear model is valid overall. The findings indicated a significant positive relationship between food purchase behavior and both social media influencers ($\beta = 0.288$, $p < 0.05$) and food festivals ($\beta = 0.466$, $p < 0.05$). However, no significant relationship was found between hashtags and food purchase behavior ($\beta = 0.142$, $p > 0.05$).

Table 4: Multiple Regression Analysis

	Standardised Coefficients (Beta)	T	sig	Tolerance	VIF
Hashtag	.142	1.696	.093	.624	1.601
Social Media Influence	.288	3.564	.001	.673	1.487
Food Festival	.466	5.366	.000	.582	1.717
R2	0.579				
Adjusted R2	0.565				
F change	43.946				
Sig F Change	0.000				

5. Discussion

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This study's findings reveal significant insights into the factors influencing food purchasing behavior in relation to social media influencer, hashtag usage, and the influence of food festivals. The regression model had significant explanatory strength, with hashtags, social media influencers, and food festivals collectively explaining 57.9% of the variance in food purchasing behavior. This indicates that digital engagement and event-driven activities significantly influence customers' food-related decisions. The lack of multicollinearity enhances the dependability of these findings.

This study reveals that social media influencers significantly affect food purchasing behavior ($\beta = 0.288$, $p < 0.05$). This result aligns with other research, highlighting that influencer credibility, authenticity, and relatability significantly influence customer trust and purchasing intentions (AlFaris & Alkhathlan, 2022; Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019). Supported by İpekoğlu, & Enser (2024), indicate that social media influencers involved in food and beverage consumption significantly impact conventional food and beverage culture. Influencers frequently serve as opinion leaders, disseminating product information and crafting narratives that appeal to audiences, therefore influencing consumer preferences. In the food industry, influencer evaluations, lifestyle representations, and endorsements offer compelling signals that bolster consumer trust in their purchase choices.

Food festivals emerged as the most significant predictor of purchasing behavior ($\beta = 0.466$, $p < 0.05$), underscoring the influential importance of experiential marketing. Recent empirical evidence shows that food festivals and comparable experiential events influence consumer behavior through immersive sensory and cultural involvement. According to Kwiatkowski et al. (2021), consumers are primarily motivated by opportunities for cultural exploration and the discovery of new culinary experiences. The findings from Almalki (2023) further supported that cultural exploration served as the primary motivation for visitors' participation in the Saudi Feast Food Festival 2022 (SFFF 2022), highlighting the central role of cultural immersion in shaping consumer engagement at food festivals. Data from the Bahrain Food Festival indicates that attendees are driven by various factors, including the desire to sample and learn about local cuisine, appreciate art and entertainment, participate in social interactions, and pursue novelty and escapism. This highlights the immersive quality of such events and clarifies why food festivals serve as a significant predictor of consumer purchasing behavior (Carvache-Franco et al., 2023). By fostering memorable experiences, these events enhance consumers' perceptions and influence buying intention. In this context, food festivals serve as cultural and marketing venues that combine pleasurable experiences with consumer decision-making processes.

Notably, hashtags did not significantly affect purchasing behavior ($\beta = 0.142$, $p > 0.05$). Although hashtags are commonly used to boost content exposure and classify trends, the lack of a direct correlation with purchasing decisions indicates that these tools function largely as discovery instruments rather than persuasive techniques. Previous research has demonstrated that although hashtags may improve brand visibility, they cannot guarantee consumer engagement or conversions without additional initiatives like influencer endorsements or interactive marketing (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Kumar, Qiu, and Kumar (2022) further supported that trademarking hashtags significantly increased social media engagement in online brand communities, indicating that hashtags serve as an effective tool for boosting visibility and interaction. Nonetheless, the gap among these data suggests that, although hashtags can enhance online engagement and brand recognition, they do not necessarily result in actual purchasing behavior. This result corresponds with the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), which asserts that superficial indicators such as hashtags may constitute peripheral methods of persuasion, although do not substantially influence decision-making unless paired with more credible or compelling information.

These results illustrate the importance of credibility and experience in influencing consumer behavior. Social media influencers and food festivals serve as primary, compelling factors that substantially drive purchasing decisions, but hashtags alone are insufficiently influential. From a management standpoint, food industry marketers should emphasize partnerships with influencers and allocate resources to experiential platforms like festivals, utilizing hashtags as supplementary rather than primary promotional instruments.

6. Conclusion and recommendation

This study concludes that social media influencers and food festivals significantly influence consumer food purchasing behavior, whereas hashtags, despite their popularity as digital marketing tools, do not have a notable direct impact on purchasing decisions. The regression analysis indicated that influencers and experiential platforms, such as food festivals, exhibit greater credibility and persuasiveness in fostering consumer trust, engagement, and purchase intentions as well as behavior. Conversely, hashtags serve mainly as instruments for content discovery and enhancing brand visibility, rather than as persuasive tools that can directly affect consumer choices. The findings highlight the importance of credibility and immersive experiences compared to superficial engagement strategies in shaping food purchasing behavior.

Future research could expand on this study by exploring multiple possibilities. Researchers ought to explore the variability of hashtag effectiveness across diverse cultural contexts, food categories, and target demographics, as generational and regional differences may influence consumer responses to digital cues. A longitudinal study could investigate the effects of sustained hashtag campaigns, in conjunction with influencer endorsements or interactive strategies (such as challenges and giveaways), on purchasing behavior over time. Third, qualitative methods like interviews or focus groups may yield more profound insights into consumers' perceptions of hashtags, influencers, and festivals, explaining the psychological and emotional mechanisms that inform their decisions. Future studies may incorporate emerging digital marketing tools, including AI-driven personalization and virtual reality-based food experiences, to evaluate their impact on the effectiveness of existing digital and experiential strategies.

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Conflict of interest statement

The authors agree that this research was conducted in the absence of any self-benefits, commercial or financial conflicts, and declare the absence of conflicting interests with the funders.

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