Social Influence as a Driver of Online Food Delivery Satisfaction: Evidence from Kuala Terengganu, Malaysia

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Abstract
The rapid growth of online food delivery service (OFDS) has transformed Malaysia's foodservice industry, particularly in secondary cities such as Kuala Terengganu. While convenience and promotional deals are often highlighted as the drives for its adoption, the role of social influence in shaping customers' satisfaction remains underexplored. This study evaluates customer satisfaction with OFDS by examining three determinants: social influence, online deals, and time-saving orientation among consumers in Kuala Terengganu, Malaysia. Using a quantitative design, data were collected through an online survey of 375 respondents and analysed using SPSS 27, applying descriptive statistics, reliability testing, Pearson

correlation, and multiple regression. The results indicate that social influence is the strongest and only significant predictor of customer satisfaction, whereas online deals and time-saving orientation, though valued, do not significantly determine satisfaction. These findings suggest that in culturally cohesive communities, interpersonal trust and peer endorsement outweigh transactional incentives and efficiency. Theoretically, the study contributes to consumer satisfaction models by embedding social dynamics within digital service evaluation. Practically, it highlights the need for OFDS providers to prioritise social proof mechanisms—such as reviews, referrals, and influencer engagement—while maintaining competitive deals and delivery efficiency. This research extends the understanding of OFDS satisfaction in Malaysia and offers insights for both scholars and practitioners seeking to enhance customer experience in digital foodservice market.

Keywords:

Online food delivery system, customer satisfaction, foodservice, social influence, online deals, time-saving orientation, and Malaysia

1   Introduction

Online food delivery (OFD) represents a courier delivery system enabling customers to order food from restaurants, shops, or third-party platforms with direct delivery to their location. In recent years, orders have predominantly been placed through mobile applications, websites, or phone calls (Hendelmann, 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic significantly accelerated the adoption of online food ordering, as consumers recognized its convenience and safety advantages over traditional dining (Admin, 2023).

The surge in OFD service demand particularly benefited foodservice providers during Malaysia's Movement Control Order (MCO) implementation. Factors including increased internet accessibility, smartphone penetration, evolving consumer lifestyles, and time constraints have collectively driven OFD market expansion (Osman et al., 2024). Globally, OFD platforms have gained popularity by offering diverse cuisines and services, streamlining the ordering process by connecting customer requests with restaurants and delivery personnel, thereby creating new market opportunities and expanding potential revenues for food businesses (Abdullah, 2023).

The lockdowns in 2020 and 2021 marked the most significant period contributing to OFD's mainstream adoption, catalyzing rapid digitalization of food consumption patterns (Abdullah, 2023). Online ordering systems enable restaurants to receive and process orders digitally for either home delivery or takeaway, with customers navigating digital menus, selecting preferred items, and completing online payments. Although these systems existed pre-pandemic, their application and utilization increased dramatically as hospitality service providers integrated them to maintain operations within regulatory restrictions (Nelson, 2022).

Despite projections of continued exponential growth and increased demand for OFD platforms, customer satisfaction remains challenging to manage, particularly in regions such as Kuala Terengganu. Customer perceptions are primarily determined by service quality, delivery timeliness, food consistency, and digital user experience.

Understanding and optimizing these factors have become a priority for providers seeking to deliver superior service quality in highly competitive local markets.

Previous research, including by Liou et al. (2024), examined factors determining user intention to adopt platforms such as GrabFood and Food Panda in Malaysia. While informative, such research requires extensive sample representation and stringent methodological constructs, particularly regarding satisfaction measurement. Additionally, studies by Jalis et al. (2023) focused on motivational factors driving OFD usage among university students, providing empirical data about understudied populational behaviors. However, there remains a need for localized studies to understand satisfaction patterns among diverse customer demographics in specific localities such as Kuala Terengganu.

Based on this context, this research aims to evaluate customer satisfaction level with online food delivery services in Kuala Terengganu by identifying major influencing factors and determining current satisfaction level among users.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Customer Satisfaction in Online Food Delivery Services

Customer satisfaction has long been positioned as a fundamental construct in marketing and service research, often associated with customer loyalty, retention, and sustained profitability. In the context of online food delivery services (OFDS), satisfaction represents not only the degree to which food quality and service delivery meet expectations but also how the overall digital experience, peer validation, and value-added services influence perceptions (Hassan, 2020; Judge et al., 2020). Drawing from Expectancy-Disconfirmation Theory (EDT), satisfaction occurs when perceived service performance exceeds consumer expectations, while disconfirmation results in dissatisfaction. Within OFDS, this theory is complemented by Technology Acceptance Models and service quality frameworks such as SERVQUAL (Parasuraman et al., 1988), which highlight the multidimensional nature of satisfaction encompassing reliability, assurance, responsiveness, and empathy. Recent research indicates that OFDS satisfaction is shaped by both utilitarian factors (convenience, pricing) and experiential factors (social trust, online reputation), signaling a need for more nuanced frameworks (Liu et al., 2023). In Malaysia, although adoption rates of OFDS are high, the literature on satisfaction outcomes remains limited, particularly outside of major metropolitan regions like Kuala Lumpur or Penang. This underscores the significance of studying Kuala Terengganu, a secondary city with distinct socio-cultural characteristics that may produce unique satisfaction patterns (Jalis et al., 2023).

2.2 The Global and Malaysian OFDS Market Trends

Globally, OFDS has become one of the fastest growing segments in hospitality, propelled by digitalisation, smartphone penetration, and shifting consumer lifestyles (Abdullah, 2023). Statista (2024) projects the Malaysian OFDS sector to generate over

MYR4 billion in revenue by 2025, reaching more than 11 million active users. The COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated adoption, with platforms such as GrabFood and Foodpanda embedding themselves in consumers' daily routines (Osman et al., 2024). However, while urban adoption patterns have been widely studied, satisfaction dynamics in secondary cities remain underexplored. Kuala Terengganu, characterised by high internet penetration (DOSM, 2022) and community-oriented consumer behaviour, presents an ideal context for testing whether conventional satisfaction drivers hold the same influence in more culturally cohesive urban settings. This study therefore addresses a key empirical gap by situating OFDS satisfaction within the realities of a smaller but growing Malaysian city, extending generalisability beyond metropolitan-focused research.

2.3 Social Influence and Trust in Digital Consumption

Social influence refers to the effect of interpersonal relationships, social networks, and community norms on individual decision-making processes (Ambad et al., 2022). In digital foodservice markets, social influence manifests through electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM), online reviews, influencer endorsements, and peer recommendations. These mechanisms not only shape initial adoption but also reinforce or undermine satisfaction after service use (Ruslan et al., 2023). In collectivist societies such as Malaysia, trust and belonging are critical; consumers often rely on peer validation to reduce perceived risk in digital transactions (Liu et al., 2023). Jalis et al. (2023) found that OFDS usage among students in Terengganu was strongly moderated by peer networks, reinforcing the idea that interpersonal influence extends beyond adoption to post-consumption evaluation. This suggests that satisfaction is embedded within cultural context where interpersonal validation is highly valued. Theoretically, integrating social influence into satisfaction frameworks challenges traditional models that prioritise functional quality alone, providing a more relational and culturally sensitive interpretation of consumer behaviour. For secondary cities like Kuala Terengganu, where social ties remain strong, this factor is likely to outweigh purely transactional considerations.

2.4 Online Deals, Promotions and Perceived Value

Online promotional strategies such as discounts, vouchers, and loyalty programmes are frequently employed to attract OFDS customers. Literature consistently reports that promotions generate strong initial engagement by enhancing perceptions of value and reducing financial risk (Fikry et al., 2024). Malaysian consumers, who are relatively price-sensitive, have shown a strong preference for deals, particularly during economic downturns and inflationary pressures (Osman et al., 2024). However, the long-term impact of promotions on satisfaction is contested. Liu et al. (2023) argue that while promotions can increase trial and frequency of orders, they rarely secure loyalty without being complemented by reliable service quality. Jalis et al. (2023) also found that students valued promotions but prioritised order accuracy and timely delivery when evaluating satisfaction. This indicates that promotions may function as hygiene factors—necessary to attract users but insufficient to sustain satisfaction in the absence

of trust and service consistency. Theoretically, this distinction contributes to refining customer satisfaction models by differentiating between temporary motivational factors and enduring determinants of positive evaluation.

2.5 Time-Saving Orientation and Convenience

Convenience has historically been recognised as a major drive for food delivery adoption, aligning with lifestyle changes in urban and semi-urban areas where consumers balance professional and personal obligations (Nelson, 2022). In Malaysia, OFDS adoption is often motivated by time-saving benefits, such as avoiding traffic congestion, queues, and cooking preparation (Fikry et al., 2024). Ting et al. (2024) highlights that for many consumers, especially working adults and students, the ability to save time is one of the primary motivations for platform usage. Yet, emerging scholars suggests that convenience may increasingly be perceived as a baseline expectation rather than a differentiating satisfaction drive. Its absence produces dissatisfaction, but its presence alone does not significantly enhance satisfaction outcomes. These reframing challenges prior assumptions and suggests that convenience has become a minimum standard of digital service provision rather than a source of competitive advantage. For Kuala Terengganu, where consumers value efficiency but remain socially oriented, convenience may be secondary to social trust in shaping satisfaction outcomes.

2.6 Theoretical Framework and Research Gap

The theoretical foundation of this study is grounded in established models of consumer satisfaction, while extending them to account for the relational and cultural dimensions of digital service use. SERVQUAL (Parasuraman et al., 1988) emphasises five service dimensions—tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy— that influence consumer evaluation. While widely applied in hospitality research, SERVQUAL often assumes a linear relationship between service quality and satisfaction, overlooking the moderating role of social dynamics. Expectancy-Disconfirmation Theory (Judge et al., 2020) provides another useful lens by suggesting that satisfaction results from the comparison between expected and actual service performance. However, EDT focuses primarily on cognitive evaluation, underplaying the affective and relational dimensions of satisfaction that have become increasingly salient in digital environments.

In OFDS contexts, the integration of social influence into these traditional models reflects an important theoretical extension. Unlike service quality or functional convenience, social influence operates through trust, peer validation, and community belonging—factors not adequately captured by earlier frameworks (Liu et al., 2023). This study therefore responds to a theoretical gap by embedding social influence as a determinant of satisfaction alongside economic (deals) and functional (time-saving) variables. Critically, this responds to calls in hospitality and consumer behaviour research to incorporate cultural and social dimensions into satisfaction framework, particularly in collectivist and community-based contexts such as Malaysia (Jalis et al., 2023).

The research gap is twofold. First, while much of the OFDS literature focuses on adoption intention (Liou et al., 2024; Ting et al., 2024), relatively fewer studies examine post-adoption satisfaction outcomes. Satisfaction, however, is essential for ensuring platform sustainability, loyalty, and positive word-of-mouth. Second, the Malaysian literature remains heavily skewed towards metropolitan populations, overlooking secondary cities where consumption is influenced by stronger community bonds and different socio-economic conditions. By addressing these gaps, this study contributes not only empirical evidence from Kuala Terengganu but also a theoretical refinement of satisfaction models to incorporate social validation as a central determinant.

3 Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a quantitative research design to evaluate customer satisfaction with online foodservice delivery systems in Kuala Terengganu. A structured questionnaire was developed based on key constructs from the SERVQUAL model (Parasuraman et al., 1988) and relevant OFDS literature (Hassan, 2020; Jalis et al., 2023). The instrument consisted of 25 items covering dimensions including service quality, food quality, delivery timeliness, platform usability, promotional offers, and overall satisfaction. A 5-point Likert scale was employed for all closed-ended items, ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree.

3.2 Sample and Data Collection

The study population comprised residents in Kuala Terengganu, Malaysia who had used any online food delivery service at least once within the previous six months. According to current residential data from the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM, 2022), the approximate population size was 129,000 residents. Using the Raosoft Sample Size Calculator with a 95% confidence level, 5% margin of error, and 50% response distribution, the minimum required sample size was determined to be 375 respondents to ensure statistically significant and generalizable findings.

To achieve unbiased data collection and enhance representativeness, simple random sampling was employed. This method was selected because it provides all individuals equal selection probability, thereby minimizing selection bias and improving finding objectivity. It also ensures sample reflection of diverse demographic cross-sections including age, gender, income level, and educational background.

Data collection was conducted through an online questionnaire created using Google Forms, enabling ease of distribution and respondent accessibility. The questionnaire link was disseminated through popular social media platforms including WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram, commonly used by Kuala Terengganu residents. This digital distribution strategy enabled rapid response collection, improved cost efficiency, and ensured broader reach, including younger and tech-savvy individuals who are the primary OFDS users.

3.3 Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical research standards. All participants provided an informed consent before participating, and were informed about the study's voluntary nature, assured of anonymity and confidentiality, and allowed to withdraw at any point. Ethical compliance followed the Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) research guidelines to meet institutional and professional ethical research standards.

3.4 Data Analysis

IBM SPSS Statistics Version 27 was utilized for comprehensive quantitative data analysis. Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha, with values of 0.7 or higher considered acceptable for reliability. Pearson correlation analysis investigated relationships between independent variables and customer satisfaction. Multiple regression analysis was employed to determine the predictive power of independent variables on customer satisfaction.

4   Findings

4.1 Respondent Demographics

The demographic analysis revealed a predominantly female sample (70.2%, n=263) compared to males (29.8%, n=112). Age distribution showed the majority of respondents are in the 23-27 years category (43.2%), followed by 18-22 years (32.8%), 28-32 years (16.3%), and 33 years and above (7.7%). Educational background analysis indicated high education levels, with 57.6% holding Bachelor's degrees, 30.1% Diplomas, and 11.2% Pre-Diplomas as in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 375)

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	263	70.2
	Male	112	29.8
	Total	375	100.0
Age	18-22 years	123	32.8
	23-27 years	162	43.2
	28-32 years	61	16.3
	33 years and above	29	7.7
	Total	375	100.0
Education Level	Bachelor's Degree	216	57.6
	Diploma	113	30.1
	Pre-Diploma	42	11.2
	Others*	4	1.1
	Total	375	100.0

Monthly income distribution showed 38.4% earning RM1,001-RM3,000, 35.7% earning RM3,001-RM5,000, 16.8% earning above RM5,000, and 9.1% earning below

RM1,000. Racial composition reflected Kuala Terengganu's diversity: Malay (52.8%), Chinese (19.2%), Indian (18.7%), and Others (9.3%). Regarding OFDS usage frequency, 36.0% used the said services 2-3 times monthly, 29.3% several times weekly, 18.1% daily, 16.0% rarely, and 0.5% never.

4.2 Reliability Analysis

Cronbach's Alpha values demonstrated excellent internal consistency: Social Influence ($\alpha = 0.940$), Online Deals ($\alpha = 0.989$), and Time-Saving Orientation ($\alpha = 0.982$). All constructs exceeded the acceptable threshold of 0.7, indicating high measurement reliability.

4.3 Descriptive Analysis

Mean scores and standard deviations revealed that Online Deals achieved the highest overall mean (M = 3.65), with the statement "The value of online deals makes me feel satisfied with the overall service experience" recording the highest individual mean (M = 3.67, SD = 1.287). Time-Saving Orientation showed means between 3.53 and 3.62, while Social Influence has slightly lower means, with "Friends' recommendations affect my satisfaction" recording the lowest mean (M = 3.36, SD = 1.378).

4.4 Multiple Regression Analysis

Multiple regression analysis results showed an R value of 0.554, indicating a moderate positive correlation between combined predictors and customer satisfaction. The R^2 value of 0.307 demonstrated that 30.7% of customer satisfaction variance was explained by social influence, online deals, and time-saving orientation. The ANOVA results ($F = 7.851$, $p < 0.001$) confirmed the model's statistical significance.

Coefficient analysis revealed that Social Influence had a statistically significant positive effect on customer satisfaction (B = 74.403, $\beta = 0.934$, $p < 0.001$). However, Online Deals (B = 5.430, $\beta = 0.068$, $p = 0.240$) and Time-Saving Orientation (B = 0.092, $\beta = 0.001$, $p = 0.987$) did not demonstrate significant effects in the regression model.

5   Discussions

The present study sought to evaluate the determinants of customer satisfaction in online food delivery services (OFDS) in Kuala Terengganu, focusing on three dimensions: social influence, online deals, and time-saving orientation. The results reveal that among these factors, social influence emerged as the strongest and only significant predictor of satisfaction. This outcome confirms the study's objective to assess whether social dynamics play a critical role in OFDS adoption and satisfaction, particularly in the context of a medium-sized urban Malaysian setting.

Although mean scores suggested that customers valued promotional deals and time-saving convenience, these dimensions failed to demonstrate significant predictive power in the regression model. This outcome highlights an important distinction between perceived importance and actual determinants of satisfaction. Consistent with

Ambad et al. (2022) and Ruslan et al. (2023), the present findings reinforce the notion that peer endorsement, online reviews, and social trust mechanisms substantially shape consumer perceptions. In Kuala Terengganu's relatively close-knit social fabric, recommendations and shared experiences appear to carry more weight than cost incentives or efficiency alone. This resonates with earlier work by Jalis et al. (2023), who reported that students' adoption of OFDS was heavily moderated by peer networks, underscoring the cultural dimension of satisfaction.

The paradoxical finding that online deals scored highly on perceived importance yet failed to predict satisfaction may partly reflect methodological limitations. As the study relied on self-selected respondents in Kuala Terengganu, those most motivated by promotions could have been overrepresented. Furthermore, by limiting predictors to three variables, the model may have underestimated interactions between promotions and unmeasured constructs such as service consistency or trust. This aligns with Liu et al. (2023), who cautioned that monetary incentives encourage trial but seldom secure loyalty, especially when broader relational dimensions are not accounted for. Similarly, the time-saving orientation, though valued, may represent a baseline expectation rather than a differentiating factor of satisfaction. This finding supports Ting et al. (2024), who argued that convenience is increasingly perceived as a "hygiene factor" — necessary but not sufficient to elevate satisfaction.

From a theoretical standpoint, these findings extend the understanding of OFDS satisfaction by confirming that social influence is not merely a factor for acceptance but also a decisive determinant of satisfaction outcomes. The study thus expands upon prior models of customer satisfaction (Parasuraman et al., 1988; Judge et al., 2020) by embedding social dynamics within the evaluative process of digital services. This provides a more holistic framework for interpreting consumer behaviour in emerging markets where interpersonal trust and community validation remain highly salient.

6   Conclusion

This study contributes to the growing body of research on online food delivery services by demonstrating that social influence is the most significant determinant of customer satisfaction, surpassing the effects of online deals and time-saving orientation. Theoretically, the research advances the discourse by situating social influence as a central component within satisfaction frameworks, thereby confirming and extending previous studies (e.g., Jalis et al., 2023; Ambad et al., 2022). By showing that social trust and peer endorsement outweigh cost or efficiency factors, the study offers evidence that cultural and social dimensions must be integrated into digital consumer behaviour models, particularly in non-metropolitan Malaysian context.

The study also offers several practical contributions. For providers, these results underscore the necessity of embedding social influence strategies within Malaysia's broader digital economy agenda (e.g., the Malaysia Digital Economy Blueprint). Practical actions include developing transparent review systems that integrate with national digital ID authentication, designing tiered referral programmes tailored to community-

based networks, and engaging local micro-influencers who reflect the collectivist cultural norms of secondary cities. By operationalising social influence in ways that resonate with local trust structures, OFDS providers can move beyond transactional promotions to build a sustained community engagement. Promotions and time efficiency remain relevant, but they should complement rather than substitute for socially anchored strategies. Service providers operating in culturally cohesive markets like Kuala Terengganu must therefore reframe their strategies to move beyond transactional offers and towards community-based engagement.

In terms of academic contribution, this study confirms that traditional satisfaction drives, such as price and convenience, may be less influential in environments where social endorsement is central to consumer trust. This insight refines existing models of service quality and consumer satisfaction by embedding cultural and relational variables. Future research should adopt longitudinal and mixed-method approaches to further explore the dynamic role of social influence, including how it interacts with loyalty, switching behaviour, and digital trust over time. Expanding research across diverse Malaysian regions would also enhance generalisability and allow comparative insights into urban-rural consumer behaviour.

Ultimately, this study underscores that in an era of digital consumption, satisfaction is not only a function of efficiency and value, but also of belonging and trust. Recognising and operationalising this dimension are crucial for both advancing the theory and strengthening the practice in online food delivery service sector.

6.1 Limitations

This study is not without limitations. The cross-sectional design restricts its ability to establish causal relationships between the identified factors and customer satisfaction. The geographical focus on Kuala Terengganu also limits generalisability, as consumer behaviour in other Malaysian regions or larger metropolitan areas may differ. Furthermore, reliance on self-reported survey data introduces the possibility of response bias, particularly in relation to socially desirable answers. The study also examined only three predictors—social influence, online deals, and time-saving orientation—while other potentially relevant dimensions, such as service quality, digital trust, and food safety assurance, were not included. These limitations highlight the need for caution when interpreting the findings and suggest directions for broader, more comprehensive future research.

Future research should expand beyond survey-based approaches by employing mixed-method designs. In particular, qualitative interviews or focus groups could reveal nuanced cultural and emotional drives of satisfaction that quantitative surveys may overlook. Such approaches would also mitigate self-report bias and provide richer insights into how social influence operates in everyday decision-making. Longitudinal studies could further track how satisfaction evolves as Malaysia's digital economy matures and OFDS platforms diversify. Expanding geographical scope and incorporating

qualitative insights would further enhance understanding of customer satisfaction dynamics in Malaysia's diverse market context.

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