PERCEIVED HEALTHINESS AND PURCHASE BEHAVIOR FROM TIKTOK FOOD REVIEWS: A STUDY ON GENERATION Z

Khanh-Thu Nguyen*
School of Economics and Management, University of Hyogo, 8-2-1 Gakuen-nishimachi, Nishi-ku, Kobe, Hyogo, 651-2197, Japan
ngkhthw@gmail.com

Abstract: Nowadays, social media can play a role in how people make decisions, including those related to food consumption. TikTok, a popular platform among Generation Z, features food review content that appeals to this user base. Existing studies have demonstrated that food reviews on TikTok can impact Gen Z's purchase intention, yet it remains unclear whether this influence extends to actual purchase behavior. In addition, although food healthiness is an important concern, little is known about how Gen Z forms their perception of healthiness through social media and whether this perception shapes their behavior. Therefore, this study explored the influence of TikTok food review content on Gen Z's perceived healthiness and purchase behavior, while examining whether their food purchases are based on healthiness. Survey data were gathered from a global sample of Gen Z participants (n = 153) in December 2024. SPSS analysis suggested that restaurant-related factors in review content can significantly influence purchase behavior, with slight evidence of gender-based differences in perceived healthiness. These results offer implications for the social media food marketing literature and managing Gen Z's preferences in related content.

Keywords: Food reviews, Generation Z, Perceived healthiness, Purchase behavior, Social media marketing

1. Introduction

In today's world, social media can play a role in how young people access information and make decisions. This extends to food consumption, with TikTok as one such platform (Potvin Kent et al., 2024). A popular genre of TikTok content has been food reviews, in which creators share their opinions on food-related products or service providers (Vo et al., 2024). This content has also received attention from Generation Z (1997-2012), who make up a large part of TikTok's user base (Sattora et al., 2024; Vo et al., 2024). As digital natives, Gen Z's purchase and dietary behavior are both under digital influence (Alqahtani et al., 2025; Rosnerova et al., 2025). Although Gen Z has health awareness, they still have the highest consumption of fast food and soft drinks compared to older generations (Alqahtani et al., 2025). Therefore, questions are raised about whether TikTok promotes healthy or unhealthy food consumption among Gen Z.

Existing research has demonstrated how TikTok review content can shape viewers' food-related decisions. Factors influencing purchase intention have also been identified, including food- (e.g., virality) and reviewer-related attributes (e.g., expertise) (Vo et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2024). While these studies offer insights into what drives intention, it remains unclear whether the identified factors can lead to actual purchase behavior. In addition, although food healthiness is a crucial concern, how Gen Z's perception of healthiness is formed through social media and whether it influences their behavior has not been closely examined. These literature gaps call for an investigation into the connection between TikTok, perceived healthiness, and purchase behavior.

Therefore, this study looks into whether and how TikTok food review content influences Gen Z's perceived healthiness and purchase behavior, and whether their purchases are based on healthiness. The findings can enrich literature on social media's food marketing and potentially raise awareness about its role in shaping food consumption.

2. Literature Review

2.1 *Conceptualization of Perceived Healthiness*

Experts define "healthiness" of food differently. Some link it to nutrition, while others emphasize the overall diet (Plasek et al., 2020). Consumers also have their own definition of "healthiness", often relying on intuition (Liñán et al., 2019). Thus, this study conceptualizes "perceived healthiness" as consumers' subjective evaluation of how healthy a food is, ranging from unhealthiness to healthiness.

The perceived healthiness of food can be shaped by both internal and external factors. Internal factors are naturally present within consumers, while external factors come from a product's characteristics and how it is presented by makers, sellers and advertisers (Liñán et al., 2019). In the TikTok food reviews context, perception of healthiness can be influenced by consumer-related (internal) factors and content-related (external) factors.

2.2 *Internal Factors*

In this study, internal factors are categorized into age, gender, nationality, and watching frequency. With age, older individuals are more critical of calorie amounts in food healthiness (Serrano-Gonzalez et al., 2021). For gender, women have rated certain foods as more unhealthy than men (Bärebring et al., 2020). Nationality differences among Gen Z led to varying views on the healthiness of the same food (Meyerding & Ahrens, 2024). Frequent exposure to healthy food content can result in healthier consumption (Hawkins et al., 2024), suggesting changes in perceived healthiness. Accordingly, the first hypothesis is formed as follows.

H1. Perceived healthiness differs significantly by age groups (a), gender (b), nationality groups (c), and watching frequency (d).

2.3 *External Factors*

In this study, external factors are categorized into food, reviewer, restaurant, and entertainment. Food can shape perception of healthiness with its appearance (Hagen, 2021). Reviewers' personal attributes can make their health claims more convincing (Jenkins et al., 2020). Restaurants can offer cues about how healthy their food is (Kim et al., 2013). Entertainment can influence health-related perception through the delivery of information (Kato et al., 2017). Accordingly, the second hypothesis is formed as follows.

H2. Food (a), reviewer (b), restaurant (c), and entertainment (d) factors significantly influence perceived healthiness.

2.4 *Hierarchical Relationship among External Factors, Perceived Healthiness, and Purchase Behavior*

People are more likely to buy food they perceive as healthy, especially if they are health-conscious or have higher education and income levels (Ali & Ali, 2020). However, even when food is not seen as healthy, some still purchase it, though in this case, driven by other food values such as taste (Paakki et al., 2022).

In the case of Gen Z, the literature presents a nuanced picture. They are willing to purchase healthier food, yet face certain barriers in doing so (e.g., budget constraints, familiarity with industrialized products) (Chen et al., 2024). Accordingly, the third hypothesis is formed as follows.

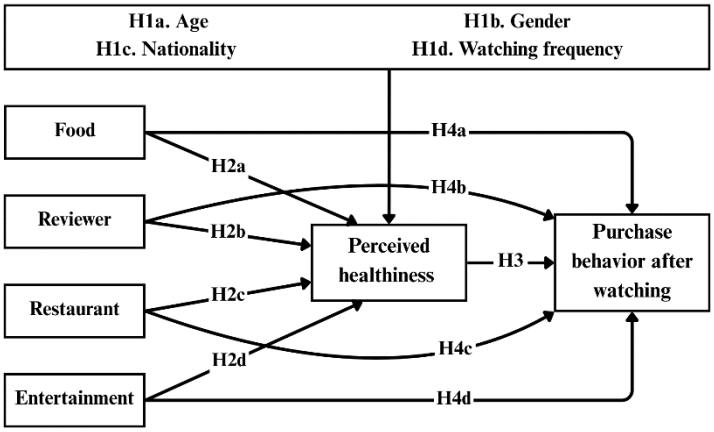
H3. Perceived healthiness significantly influences purchase behavior.

Drawing connections between external factors, perceived healthiness, and purchase behavior, a hierarchical relationship can be established in that order. When food is perceived as healthy, external

factors can drive purchase by reinforcing this perception, making perceived healthiness the mediator. By contrast, when food is perceived as unhealthy, external factors may still lead to purchase by portraying compensative food values for Gen Z (e.g., taste, price, or convenience) (Alqahtani et al., 2025). In this case, external factors can have a direct relationship with purchase behavior.
Specifically, food attributes in reviews may shape purchases by suggesting potential deliciousness (Wang et al., 2024). Reviewers can promote the purchasing of foods through recommendations built on their personal attributes (Potvin Kent et al., 2024). Restaurants can attract Gen Z purchases through opportunities for social media sharing (Budiman & Dananjoyo, 2021). Entertainment (e.g., storytelling) in advertising can increase Gen Z's purchase intention (Tabassum et al., 2020). Accordingly, the fourth hypothesis is formed as follows.

H4. Food (a), reviewer (b), restaurant (c), and entertainment (d) factors significantly influence purchase behavior.

Figure 1 summarizes all hypotheses.



Source: The Author
Figure 1: Theoretical Model

3. Method

This study adopted a quantitative method. A questionnaire was initially developed based on existing literature (Luong & Ho, 2023; Wang et al., 2024), which contained only six items due to limited prior research. To expand, exploratory interviews with 15 participants aged 20-22 (11 female, 4 male) from nine different countries were conducted (Creswell, 2009). Combining both sources, 22 items for external factors were identified and measured on a five-point scale ("very unimportant" to "very important"), while "perceived healthiness" was on a three-point scale ("unhealthy" to "healthy") and "purchase behavior" was on a five-point frequency scale ("never" to "daily"). After development, three regular viewers of TikTok food reviews and one expert commented on the questionnaire.

Data was collected in December 2024 via Google Forms, distributed across Instagram, Facebook, and Reddit. Of 236 responses, 153 were retained after removing invalid, biased, or overrepresented data, meeting the minimum 5:1 respondent-to-item ratio (Memon et al., 2020).

Data analysis was performed using SPSS 30.0. Descriptive statistics confirmed normality of scale items (skewness ±3, kurtosis ±10) (Kline, 2011). Reliability analysis led to the removal of one "food" item and three "reviewer" items, resulting in Cronbach's alpha values above 0.6 and corrected item-total correlations around or above 0.3 (Hair et al., 2010). Next, independent t-tests and one-way ANOVAs were used to examine perceived healthiness across internal factors. Finally, a series of linear regression analyses was conducted to explore the relationships among external factors, perceived healthiness, and purchase behavior. Significance was set at $p < 0.05$ for strong evidence and $p < 0.10$ for weak trends (Ganesh & Cave, 2018).

4. Results

4.1 *Descriptive Analysis*

Participants came from 37 countries, grouped into four regions: Southeast Asia (34.6%), Other Asias & Australia (27.5%), Europe (21.6%), and Americas & Africa (16.3%). The majority were aged 18-22 (67.3%), female (68.6%), and students (95.4%). While most watched TikTok food reviews either monthly (34.0%), weekly (32.7%), or daily (21.6%), this did not consistently lead to purchases: 37.3% bought less than once a month, 25.5% monthly, 32.0% never, and a few did so weekly or daily. The overall perceived healthiness was below average (M= 1.75, SD = 0.712).

4.2 *Comparison Analysis*

The t-test showed a marginal gender difference in perceived healthiness, with males (M = 1.90, SD = 0.778) rating higher than females (M = 1.68, SD = 0.672), $t(151) = 1.783$, $p = 0.077$. ANOVA results revealed no significant differences across age groups, $F(2, 150) = 1.59$, $p = 0.208$; nationality groups, $F(3, 149) = 2.10$, $p = 0.103$; or watching frequency groups, $F(3, 149) = 2.08$, $p = 0.106$. Thus, H1b was marginally supported, while H1a, H1c, and H1d were not supported.

4.3 *Regression Analysis*

Multiple regression showed that external factors did not significantly predict perceived healthiness, $F(4, 148) = 0.617$, $p = 0.651$, with an adjusted R^2 of -0.010, indicating no meaningful explanatory power. None of the individual predictors reached statistical significance (all $p > 0.05$). Thus, H2a-H2d were not supported.

Simple regression found no significant effect of perceived healthiness on purchase behavior, $F(1, 151) = 0.610$, $p = 0.436$ (adjusted $R^2 = -0.003$). Thus, H3 was not supported. Hierarchical regression indicated a significant effect of external factors on purchase behavior, $F(4, 148) = 2.473$, $p = 0.047$, but with low explanatory power (adjusted $R^2 = 0.037$). Only the restaurant factor emerged as a significant predictor ($\beta = 0.209$, $p = 0.014$). After adding perceived healthiness, the model became marginally significant, $F(5, 147) = 2.094$, $p = 0.069$, with slightly lower explanatory power (adjusted $R^2 = 0.035$). Thus, H4c was supported, while H4a, H4b, and H4d were not supported.

Taken together, regression results suggest that perceived healthiness did not act as a mediator between external factors and purchase behavior.

5. Discussion

Gen Z generally viewed food in the content as unhealthy, while external factors had no significant influence on their perceived healthiness. They may not actively prioritize healthiness in food (Alqahtani et al., 2025), reducing external impact on their perception. Among internal factors, only gender showed marginal differences. Females' healthiness ratings were lower than males', aligning with past findings (Bärebring et al., 2020).

Regarding food purchases, TikTok food reviews influenced Gen Z to some extent, since most respondents reported buying food after watching. Only the restaurant factor significantly predicted purchase behavior, reflecting Gen Z's emphasis on the overall dining experience (Budiman & Dananjoyo, 2021). Whether tested independently or with external factors, perceived healthiness neither predicted nor mediated purchase behavior. As prior research suggests, Gen Z's food consumption is driven more by other factors than healthiness (Alqahtani et al., 2025; Chen et al., 2024).

Theoretically, this study contributes to the literature on social media's food marketing by providing new items for content-related factors through exploratory interviews. Restaurant emerges as the only

significant predictor of purchase behavior, pointing to a potential theoretical direction of exploring Gen Z's priorities in food purchasing through social media reviews.

Practically, the findings suggest an ethical need to promote healthier food on TikTok, possibly through a gender-specific approach. Content creators and food businesses may also consider focusing more on portraying the dining environment to better attract Gen Z.

6. Conclusion

Despite being an audience of TikTok food reviews, Gen Z perceives the featured food as unhealthy. Their purchase decisions are not based on healthiness but on other factors. This reflects social media's influence in shaping young people's food-related preferences.

The study has several limitations. First, brief interviews during survey development may have overlooked relevant external factors, limiting the model's explanatory power. Second, the small sample size restricted analyses, only allowing external factors to be tested using average values rather than their individual items. Third, convenience sampling caused uneven nationality representation, requiring broader continental groups that may not fully portray cultural distinctions or the wider Gen Z population.

Future research could include more in-depth interviews to identify additional influencing factors. A larger, randomly selected sample would also enable more detailed analysis and improve the generalizability of results.

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