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Influence of Social Media on Consumers' Food Choices

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Abstract

Social media is known as a social networking platform that allows all users either on application or website to share and create content. It can be a very convenient social platform for users to share and find information regarding food. With this social media application and the advanced digital environment, users' opportunity to share and search for food has widened. This study emphasises on identifying the relationship of audio and visual appearance, information sharing and delivery, and how peer pressure factor can influence food choices through social media. An online query form for obtaining all the dataset was distributed to students in UiTM Puncak Alam as our population. Data were analysed using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) (V22) and results were obtained and described using descriptive statistics and Pearson Correlation test. In total, 350 data were obtained from the total number of population selected. This study shows that audio and visual appearance are the most influential factors in people's food choices.

Keywords: Audio visual appearance, information sharing, peer pressure, social media, food choices

1. Background of the Study

To date, changes in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) are already evidenced through social media (Hearn, Collie, Lyle, Choi & Foth, 2014). Social media is basically a platform that connects people together no matter where they are. Even though people often relate social media with meeting new people, it is more about connecting friends and family, and meeting new acquaintances (Australian Communications Consumer Action Network, 2007). Thus, according to Giustini (2006), social media is also known as consumer-generated media.

Quinn Thomas (2015) stated that social media has not necessarily transformed the beliefs of people right away, but more to enable them to transform their beliefs slowly. Thus, numerous activities can be done easier than before and it will not be surprising that in the future, social

media will play a bigger role in affecting social behaviour in the society. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) stated that engagement on social media has grown significantly among teenagers and adults aged between 20 to 45 years old. Rideout, Foehr and Roberts (2010) also reported that young adults spend almost 11 to 12 hours a day with technology and media. The availability of the Internet gives the opportunity for individuals to use social media without the need for physical meetings.

Food choices are the choices made by the consumers on the type of food that they are triggered to buy due to several factors. One of the obvious reasons is because of biological determinants such as hunger, appetite and taste. However, they also can be caused by economic determinants such as cost, income and availability. In terms of economy, choices mostly depend on the individual's income or socio-economic status. Low-income groups have been identified to have more imbalanced diet and low intake of fruits and vegetables (De Irala Estevez et al., 2000).

Social determinants such as culture, family, and peers also can be a factor. Social environment can influence the food choices of a person whether they realize it or not. Feunekes et al., (2003) stated that the way people influence others' food choices may not be limited to only one type and they are not necessarily aware that their food choices are influenced by the people around them. The attitudes, behaviour and knowledge about food can also contribute to the factors of the food choices.

There is a relationship between social media and food choices among the community (Zeitell-Bank & Tat, 2014). Social media has the ability to influence and give impact on people who use it either for good cause or vice versa. The relationship between social media and food choices is based on the way people use social media as a platform for information sharing or communication about food specifically. Most people around the world basically use their social media to interact with other people on food intake, dietary guideline and suggestions – all of which can impact their food choices. Hence, the way people use social media in their daily life is very important.

Throughout the decades, the Internet has changed how the individuals, communities and organisations share, create and consume information. Tat et al. (2014) indicate that this familiarity with Internet development such as social media could affect both individuals and society as a whole. With advanced technology, social media can be considered as the main source of media that influence people's food choices because the food that is advertised or shared on social media can affect the way the consumers select their food (Belitz & Frank, 2010).

Furthermore, the food and beverage industry has also increased their usage of social media lately (Perumal, Krisnan & Abdul Halim, 2017). This development eases the work of everyone especially for people in foodservice industry to set up their own page in promoting or advertising their goods or foods on platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram or any other social sites (Perumal, Krisnan & Abd. Halim, 2017). Belitz and Franks (2010) believed that viewing food advertisement on social media would increase people's appetite no matter what kind of food they are viewing. This is especially true because people tend to eat more when they are watching food advertisement on social media (Tan & Loo, 2014). It was proven that social media can impart huge influence and tackle generation Y's food choices especially due to the increment of technology in this generation (Hanan & Ab. Karim, 2015).

There are several studies done on consumers' food choice that is affected by social media. Wong et al. (2014) have studied the influence of social media on the health of adolescents and young adults, while Halford, et al. (2003) pointed out that the exposure of television (TV)

advertisement is related to food and would affect children's eating behaviour. Other than that, some researchers found that there are a million posts using the hashtag *#foodporn* regularly used in Instagram posts. It shows glamorous, presentable and delicious food with its location tagged (Hoogstins, 2017). Thus, it has become a trend to find food pictures on social media. In relation to this, the current study intends to look into the relations between social media and the food choices people make (Nguyen et al., 2017), recognising the impact of social media on people's food decision making such as their food intake pattern, nutritional requirements and health condition etcetera.

Hence, the objectives of the study include: (i) to examine the audio-visual appearance of social media on food choices among social media users; (ii) to examine the information sharing and delivery of social media on food choices, and (iii) to determine the relationship of peer pressure of social media on food choices among social media users.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Audio-Visual Appearance of Social Media

Social media exposes its users with stimulation especially on sight and hearing senses. Audio visual plays a huge role as sight and hearing play a part in influencing a person's decision making (Halford, Gillespei, Brown, Pontin & Dovey, 2004). Social media such as Instagram, allows its users to post photos and videos on its site making its usage of photo editing more appealing. This way, people can make their food posts appear to be more attractive and might cause other users of Instagram to perceive that the food is delicious. Taste, smell and appearance are among the main individual-level factors that influence students' food choices (Murimi et al., 2016). Tan and Loo (2014) found that the element of social roles or images is one of the critical elements to be taken into consideration when university students are targeted by advertisements of food using social media, while Hong et al. (2017) found that consumers value neither the good nutrition nor the cosy sentiment. Instead, they enjoy instant meals, frozen food, and junk food that are easily available at convenience stores because eating these foods is interesting.

2.2 Information Sharing and Delivery of Social Media

Information sharing and delivery are very important as people can only know about something when the information has been successfully sent to and received by them. In relation to social media, it is undeniable that social media is at the peak of the moment in terms of information sharing and delivery. Nowadays, everything is merely one-click away to get shared throughout the globe. According to Dahl et al.(2016), social media has become popular as a communication tool and has potential to play a major role in shaping the social norms through the effectiveness in information sharing. On another note, Belitz et al. (2010) contended that people who watch unhealthy food-related television advertisements are expected to consume more food (healthy and unhealthy) than those who watch healthy advertisements. Rutsaert et al. (2013) wrote that the online information environment has evolved from Web 1.0 where users only used the internet for searching and seeking for information to Web 2.0, a world where they can independently generate and spread information. Meanwhile, Shan et al. (2015) found that it is clear that to a certain extent, social media has succeeded to penetrate organisations' long-established query and complaint services.

2.3 Peer Pressure through Social Media

Peer pressure is inevitable when living in a society. It can influence someone whether they realise it or not. The same can be said when it comes to social media. When colleagues or friends share their lifestyle on social media, it will trigger one to do the same, as one does not want to feel left out. Zhao, Grasmuck and Martin (2008) described that social media gives the opportunity for users to control how they present themselves to their social network and how others perceive them to be. Zhao et al. (2008) found that among college-aged women, most of the time spent on Facebook is due to frequent physical appearance comparisons. Besides that, Vaterlaus et al. (2015) found that food-related posts on social media can influence young adults on their appetite and their food choices. This influences their choices of food to be consumed.

2.4 Impact of Social Media on Food Choices

Social media has been widely used all across the globe nowadays. It would be so bizarre and outdated to find anyone not using social media at least once in their life. According to Fuchs (2017), the term "social media" became popular in describing the types of World Wide Web (WWW) applications such as Twitter, video-/image-/file-sharing or other kinds of applications that can be shared with others in the past years. Pfeffer et al. (2014) stated that within hours, negative opinions about certain companies can be shared through thousands or millions of people. It is defined as an online firestorm as the sudden discharge of large quantities of messages may contain negative words of mouth (WOM) and complaint behaviour against a person, company or group in social media networks. These messages usually contain intense indignation without pointing to actual specific criticism. It is identified that social interaction can influence food choices and portions among young adults (McFerran, Dahl, Fitzsimons & Morales, 2010).

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This research focuses on how social media can actually influence people's food choices. Since the main objective of this research is to analyse whether social media affects people's food choices or not, this research uses a quantitative approach in which the method used to collect all the required data was by distributing questionnaire.

3.2 Unit Analysis

The respondents were among the students at Universiti Teknologi MARA; the samples were students that have a social media account, be it Twitter, Instagram or Facebook. Having one of the social media accounts is enough to determine that the respondents are familiar to social media. Thus, data for this study were collected individually through distribution on social media. This method was to ensure that the questionnaire was answered by the people who are familiar with social media. The questionnaire was disseminated through social media and answered individually in order to provide an accurate response from the respondents. The platform for distribution was via Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

3.3 Population and Sampling

This research was conducted by using the population of students at UiTM Puncak Alam that had the estimated number of 18,455 students. According to Krejcie and Morgan (1970), for that number of students, a sample size of 350 respondents is sufficient.

3.4 Instrumentation

An online-questionnaire or network sampling was used and distributed through social media for one week in November 2018. Then, it was reposted for another week in early December and boosted again on the same media until a total of 350 respondents were reached. Data were collected between November 2018 until January 2019. The questions made were specifically designed to acquire participants' level of social media connection and how it affects their food choices. Participants of this survey were encouraged to answer frankly and honestly. The questionnaires used 5 Likert scale rating between strongly disagree to strongly agree. All items had been screened in pilot study which resulted to 0.7 above.

3.5 Data Collection Process

The questionnaire was distributed through social media platform in which data were collected from the respondents who were the users of social media and thus, very familiar with it. Through this network sampling, respondents were drawn through random selection of links in a network. This eased the work to gather all the data needed for this study since this method is related with the selected topic on social media (Shone, 2015). The questionnaire was prepared in English, proof read and reviewed by a language expert. The data were later analysed using SPSS software version 22.

4.0 Findings and Analysis

4.1 Demographics

Table 1 shows the demographics and background of the respondents. 350 respondents participated and more female students (n=246) answered this questionnaire compared to their male counterpart (n=104). The table also shows that females consisted 70.3% of the total respondents who answered the questionnaire.

Table 1: Respondents demographic (n=350)

No	Items	Total	Percent (%)
1	Familiarity with Social Media	350	
2	Start using social media		
	Elementary	62	17.7
	Secondary	239	68.3
	University	49	14.0
3	Male	104	29.7
4	Female	246	70.3
5	Age		
	18-21 years	74	21.1
	22-25 years	246	70.3
	26-29 years	13	3.7
	30 and above	17	4.9
6	Education level		
	Diploma	69	19.7
	Degree	258	73.7
	Masters	20	5.7

	Others	3	0.9
7	Marital status	Single	338
		Married	12
			96.6
			3.4

From the table above, the most dominant age range is from the group of 22 to 25 years old which is 70.3% from total sample population. Meanwhile, 18 to 21 years old is the second age group that uses social media the most with 74 out of 350 that is 21.1%. This is followed by 30 and above with 17 respondents or 4.9%, and lastly, 26-29 years old age range only consists of 3.7% out of the 100% and this might indirectly prove that this age range uses social media the least.

Education level of the respondents shows that Degree students are the highest number with 258 out of 350 respondents. That value makes 73.7% out of the total percentage. The second highest group is the Diploma students with 69 respondents which makes 19.7% out of the total percentage. The Master's Degree students make 5.7% with 25 respondents out of the total 350. Most of the respondents are single, 338 (96.6%) from 350 total respondents, while the remaining 12 respondents are married, which is 3.4% out of the total respondents.

Familiarity with social media means that the respondents are familiar with the social media. All of the respondents (100%) are familiar with the social media. This means that all of the respondents are already familiar with the social media. As for the question of how long the person has been using the social media the table shows that most of the respondents have started using social media since their secondary school with 239 respondents or 68.3% of all respondents. This is followed by the group that have started using social media since elementary school with 62 respondents or 17.7% out of the total respondents and lastly, those that have started using social media at the university level with 49 respondents or 14.0% out of the total data.

Table 2 summarises the number of hours the respondents spend per day on social media usage. Most of the respondents spend more than 3 hours on social media with 165 respondents (47.1%). Meanwhile, 112 or 32.0% of the respondents spend 1 to 3 hours on social media, 54 or 15.4% of the respondents spend 30 minutes to 1 hour on social media, 17 respondents spend 15 to 30 minutes on social media per day and only 2 respondents spend none of their time on the social media per day.

As for the most preferred social platform, Instagram is the most preferred social media with 212 respondents (57%). Facebook comes second with 87 respondents (23.4%), while Twitter was preferred by 50 respondents (13.4%). This is followed by others with 23 respondents (6.2%).

The reason for using the social media are primarily for watching video with 281 (23.5%) of the total percentage. Socialising is at the second place with 273 respondents or 22.9% out of the total percentage. This is followed by chatting with 184 or 15.4% respondents at the third place, listening to music with 172 (14.4%) respondents, shopping with 144 (12.1%), downloading music/video 110 (9.2%), uploading music/video with 22 (1.8%) and lastly, 8 respondents (0.7%) use social media for blogging.

Table 2: Respondents familiarity with Social Media (n=350)

No	Items	Total	Percent (%)	
1	Familiarity with Social Media	350	100	
2	Start using social media	Elementary	62	17.7
		Secondary	239	68.3
		University	49	14.0
3	Duration spent per day	None	2	0.6
		15-30 minutes	17	4.9
		30 min-1 hour	54	15.4
		1 – 3 hours	112	32
		More 3 hours	165	47.1
4	Preferred social media platform	Facebook	80	22.9
		Twitter	46	13.1
		Instagram	204	58.3
		Others	20	5.7
5	Reasons for using Social Media	Downloading music/video	110	9.2
		Uploading music/video	22	1.8
		Blogging	8	0.7
		Watching a video	281	23.5
		Chatting	184	15.4
		Listening to music	172	14.4
		Socializing	273	27.9
Shopping	144	12.1		

4.2 Factors Influencing Food Choice

This section covers the first independent variable in the framework which is audio and visual. Audio and visual refer to how the audio and visual relate to food posts on social media influence respondents' food choices. Respondents were asked on how a certain audio and visuals characteristics on the social media influence their food choices.

As seen in Table 3, the highest mean score was recorded by the option visual quality influences food choices. The mean score is 4.24 (M=4.24, sd=0.86) with standard deviation of 0.86. With that mean score, it is clear that the videos shown in the social media influence the food choices among the social media users the most. This information can be used by any food businesses to focus their promotions on the social media by using videos as a lot of social media users are influenced the most with the videos shown in the social media.

Table 3: Mean Audio and Visual (n=350)

No	Items	Mean	Std Deviation
Audio and visual			
1	Audio quality influence food choice	3.75	0.93
2	Visual quality influence food choice	4.24	0.80
3	Still images influence food choice	4.04	0.82
4	Videos influence food choice	4.23	0.75
5	GIF's influence food choice	3.41	1.06
6	Colours of photos influence food choice	4.06	0.91
7	Colours of videos influence food choice	4.08	0.86
8	Clarity of the sound on video influence food choice	3.77	1.09
9	The way host eating influence food choice	3.99	0.93
10	Food appearance affect appetite	4.13	0.79
11	Sound of people eating influence food choice	3.23	1.11
12	Model in advertisements influence food choice	3.19	1.16
13	Attractiveness from sound of people eating	3.31	1.24
14	Uniqueness of food	4.05	0.82
15	Creativeness of food	4.10	0.76

4.3 Information Sharing and Delivery

Information sharing and delivery refers to how the information shared and delivered on food posts through social media can influence your food choices. The table below shows which specific advantage of information sharing and delivery through social media is the most effective in influencing the food choices among social media users.

From Table 4 below, it is found that "Information can be shared to a wider population" is the most influencing factor with a mean score of 4.48 (M=4.48, sd=0.60) and standard deviation of 0.60. This finding proves that the ease of sharing the information to a wider population by using social media is the most influencing factor when it comes to the food choices among social media users. This is undeniably true, as sharing information on social media is at one's fingertips.

Table 4: Information shared and delivered influence my food choices (n=350)

No	Items	Mean	Std Dev.
Information sharing and Delivery			
1	It is easy to share info on food	4.47	0.61
2	Information shared to wider population	4.48	0.60
3	Information shared domestically	4.36	0.67
4	Information shared globally	4.41	0.65
5	Information delivered to wider population	4.38	0.67
6	Information of food made me want to try	4.26	0.75
7	Information of food hinders me from trying	3.76	0.90
8	Information of food made me crave	4.11	0.81
9	Information of food made me being selective	3.70	1.03
10	Information of food made me avoid the food	3.53	1.14
11	It is easy to find info on food	4.25	0.69
12	Social media deliver info on food	4.20	0.71
13	Social media deliver knowledge on food	4.11	0.74
14	Number of shared info on social media affects my purchase intention	4.07	0.84

4.4 Peer Pressure

Peer pressure refers to how the peers around you influence your food choices by posting pictures and videos on food through social media. In this section, the study intends to investigate which peers give the highest impact to the food choices among the social media users.

Table 5 below demonstrates that the factor “Most of my friends use social media” as the most influencing factor as it has the highest mean score of 4.61 ($M=4.61$, $sd=0.61$), with the standard deviation of 0.61. This result indicates that the number of friends using the social media influences the food choices of social media users the most. This result can also be supported by the facts that any factors involving friends are relatively higher compared to family and relatives as shown in the tables above.

4.5 Impact on food choices

This section covers the dependent variable which is the impact of social media on food choices. Respondents have been asked three different independent variables prior to this section of questionnaire. In this section, the respondents were asked how the social media ultimately affects their food choices after all of those independent variables.

The results obtained from this section are quite underwhelming as the social media ultimately just impact the food choices of social media users with 4.06 as their mean score ($M=4.06$, $sd=0.86$), with the standard deviation of 0.86. This shows that social media indeed has an impact towards the food choices of the social media users. This has been, ultimately, how social media impacts most of the social media users’ food choices.

Table 5: Peer Pressure influence food choice

No	Item	Mean	Std Dev
Peer pressure			
1	Most of my friends use social media	4.60	0.61
2	My friends post pictures of food	4.12	0.83
3	My friends post videos of food	3.94	0.95
4	My family use social media	3.97	1.00
5	My family posts pictures of food	3.39	1.09
6	My family post videos of food	3.27	1.15
7	My friends influence my food choice through social media	3.83	0.89
8	My family influence my food choice through social media	3.39	1.08
9	My relatives influence my food choice through social media	3.49	1.07
10	My friends recommend food through social media	4.00	0.84
11	My family recommend food through social media	3.40	1.11
12	My relatives recommend food through social media	3.37	1.15
13	My friends shared their experience trying food on social media	4.00	0.89
14	My family shared their experience trying food on social media	3.36	1.15
15	My relatives shared their experience trying food on social media	3.42	1.27

Impact on food choices			
1	Social media impacts my food choice	4.06	0.87
2	Social media influence my food choice	4.01	0.89
3	Social media changed my eating pattern	3.48	1.10
4	Social media changed the way I choose food	3.65	0.99
5	I felt hungry when I see food on social media	4.00	0.91
6	I want to eat the food right away whenever I see it on social media	3.69	1.10
7	I always select the food I saw on social media	3.50	1.10
8	I always choose food I saw on social media	3.50	1.04
9	I am curious to try food on social media	4.00	0.85
10	Numbers of views on social media affect my food choice	3.81	1.07

4.6 The relationship between audio visual, information sharing and delivery and peer pressure with food choices

Table 6 below shows the outcome of Pearson's Correlation test conducted between audio and visual, with the dependent variables and its impact on food choices. The results revealed that the relationship is $R=0.71$. Sekaran (2016) stated that if the values lie between 0.60 and 0.79, it is considered as moderate high correlation or specifically, there is moderately high correlation between audio and visual, with social media users' food choices. As for information sharing and delivery, there is $R=0.55$ relationship with social media food choices. Values that lie between 0.40 and 0.59 and is considered as moderately correlated (Sekaran, 2016), thus showing information sharing and delivery to be moderately correlated with food choices. Peer pressure results reveal that Pearson Correlation is $R=0.60$ which is moderate high correlation. This value clarifies that peer pressure has 60.0% significant relationship with the social media users' food choices.

Table 6: Results of Pearson's Correlation and its Indication

Independent Variables	Pearson Correlation (Impact on Food Choices)	Indication
Audio and Visual	0.71**	Moderately High Correlate
Information Sharing and Delivery	0.55**	Moderately Correlate
Peer Pressure	0.60**	Moderately High Correlate

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

5.0 CONCLUSIONS

Based on the analysis conducted, it can be concluded that the results show that the factors which are audio and visual, information sharing and delivery, and peer pressure are related to social media users' food choices. As a conclusion, social media does have an influence over social media users' food choices especially because of audio and visual quality, the information shared and delivered on social media, and peer pressures among social media users.

For the demographics, this study found that most participants who answered the questionnaire are females compared to males. The most dominant age range for this study is between 22

to 25 years old. It shows that most students use social media. From the findings on the educational level, most of the respondents are Degree students meaning they have either Diploma or STPM compared to other education levels. The findings also show that the respondents are mostly single and all respondents are familiar with social media. Furthermore, most of the respondents started using social media when they were in secondary school. Moreover, the duration of time spent on social media per day is 3 hours and most respondents use Instagram due to the highest number of preference on this social media platform. Other than that, the researchers also found that most of the respondents prefer to watch video on their social media since the result shows that the purpose of using social media is mostly for watching video followed by socialising, chatting, listening to music etcetera.

In this study, the relationship between an audio and visual appearance on social media that can influence food choices is examined. Based on the analysis conducted, the respondents agreed that this factor does influence their food choices especially when they watch videos played on social media. It shows that people are easily influenced to change their food intake or choices by watching videos on social media. According to Tan and Loo (2014), the element of social roles or images is one of the critical elements to be taken into consideration when university students are targeted of an advertisement of food using social media. These studies support the findings of the current study really well as the results show that there is a moderately high correlation between the audiovisual factors and the people's food choices. When watching the videos, they also consider the audio and visual quality presented on the video, and also the way the food is presented on screen affects the appetite the person who sees it. People are more attracted to try and eat the food when there is some uniqueness on the food that they never try or see before but people are less attracted to the sound of people eating. Their food choices are also less influenced by the models that advertise the food. Other than videos, people are also influenced by the images of food posted on social media with the clarity of colours that make the photo look tempting and more vibrant. How the food looks when they see it is a crucial phase where it will determine whether the food presented is eye-catching or not due to the phrase 'you eat with your eyes first'.

Information about food shared and delivered on social media has relationship with food choices. The information shared with a wider population has the highest advantage when using social media in posting food pictures. It can be considered as the most influencing factor in delivering and sharing information about food. According to Dahl et al. (2016), social media has become popular as a communication tool and has the potential to play a major role in shaping the social norms through the effectiveness in information sharing. This study found that information sharing and delivery has its own role in influencing people's food choices. Based on the result, it is undeniable that all the information shared and delivered on social media regarding food is the factor that contributes to the impact on food choices among social media users. The respondents agreed that they can find information about food on social media since it can be shared and delivered globally to a wider population.

Aside from that, this study also analyses the relationship between peer pressure in social media on people's food choices. It was found that most of the respondents are very familiar with social media since they all use it. Interestingly, the number of respondent's friend is higher than the respondent's family and relatives. This indicates that friends may affect people's food choices more compared to family and relatives.

Lastly, the relationship between social media factors on its users' food choices. The result obtained shows that all of the respondents agreed that social media impacts their food choices and their food selection. Vaterlaus et al. (2015) found that food-related posts on social media can influence young adults' appetite and their food choice. This statement also supports our findings where food-related posts can indeed influence the social media users as stated

above. Users are always attracted whenever they see food advertisement or food pictures posted on social media. Other than that, their curiosity in trying the food posted on social media is the main reason why it may influence their food choices.

Therefore, it can be concluded that the social media platform does influence and impact its users' food choices. The majority of the respondents knows and understands what the factor that influences their food choices is. In this study however, there is no negative or positive impact on people's food choices since it is based on personal and individual preferences. Thus, it can be a very usable and a reliable result to be used by food business or food establishment as a reference in promoting their product.

As a conclusion, the results of this study show that all the respondents agreed that the audio and visual appearance on food through social media has substantially positive relationship with social media users' food choices. The video played on social media and food appearance are the characteristics that contribute to social media users' food choices. Hence, the way food is displayed on social media also influences users' food choices since it is related to people's desires and wants.

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