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# **Exploring the Food-Related User-Generated Content and the Relevant Impact on User Engagement Behaviour**

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## **Abstract**

Both conventional and emerging digital media formats have contributed to an increase in food interest, especially the growing trend of amateur mobile food photo-sharing. The trend demonstrates the significance of thoroughly comprehending user engagement behaviours on food-related user-generated content. The present study examines the social media sharing of food-related user-generated content and relevant impacts on user engagement behaviour. The qualitative data in the study were obtained through in-depth interviews, which were subsequently subjected to thematic analysis. Moreover, digital food culture, food-related content, and user engagement behaviour were the major themes revealed from the thematic analysis, which demonstrated the importance of user-generated content for Malaysian food retailers and marketers. This study contributed to the existing knowledge corpus by extensively analysing the dynamic interaction between digital food culture, sharing food-related user-generated content on social media platforms, and corresponding impacts on user engagement behaviour.

## **Keywords**

Digital Food Culture, Social Media Platform (SMP), User-Generated Content (UGC), Food-Related Content, User Engagement Behaviour

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## **1.0 Introduction**

An increasing trend in food interest has been observed in conventional media, such as cookbooks and televisions (TVs), and emerging digital media, including YouTube, Instagram, and other social media platforms (SMPs) (Andersen et al., 2021; Spence et al., 2015). Contemporarily, a more positive trend is observed due to the availability of mobile photo-sharing services, such as Instagram, which encourages amateur daily food photography (Lewis, 2018). Social media users adopt multiple hashtags, including #foodporn and #foodie, on visual media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, Tumblr, and Pinterest (Lupton, 2020). Furthermore, modern food images are part of an online economy. Individuals can digitally create, remove, and consume images. Online users also actively engage in wider social relationships and cultural meanings, which obscure the boundaries between private and public spheres (Taylor & Keating, 2018). Camera phones and social media with pictures are also highly popular among youths, as visual content is becoming increasingly crucial in how individuals communicate in the digital era (Peng & Jemmott, 2018).

Digital photos have significantly increased in past decades, with approximately 80 billion photos in 2000, followed by a trillion in 2015 (Andersen et al., 2021). Instagram photos with the #food hashtag are elevated from 0.8 million in 2013 to 250 million in 2018 (Xiong et al., 2023). In addition, more than four billion active SMP users worldwide spend at least two hours daily on SMPs, connecting with peer groups and browsing shared content (Jabeen et al., 2023). Creative content also inspires consumers to imitate and

follow, which reinforces the consumers' intentions to engage with uploaded content (Cheung et al., 2022). According to Dolan et al. (2019), the most positive and active social media engagement behaviour (SMEB) involves users initiating unprompted, positive, and active contributions to social media communities. A moderate level encompasses users positively and actively contributing to existing content on social media brand pages. Comparatively, a minimum degree includes users consuming content without actively reciprocating or contributing.

Past scholars appraised the contributing SMEB factors and implications (Gambetti et al., 2012; Leckie et al., 2016). Certain academicians also assessed brand-related engagement behaviours (Hollebeek et al., 2014; Pentina et al., 2018). However, digital food culture has been studied chiefly in terms of food photography sharing. Nevertheless, creating, sharing, and browsing food-related user-generated content (UGC) remained ambiguous to businesses and consumers. As such, the research question was developed as follows:

- What are the major themes of digital food culture on food-related UGC creation and relevant user engagement behaviours?

The present study examined food-related UGC sharing on SMPs and relevant impacts on user engagement behaviour to determine the primary themes in digital food culture.

## **2.0 Literature Review**

### **2.1 Digital Food Culture**

Digital culture extends beyond cyberculture, information society, and the latest media (Feldman & Goodman, 2021; Thumim, 2012), which collectively emphasises the impact of digital technologies on culture (Feldman & Goodman, 2021; Lupton, 2020; Thumim, 2012). The advantages and limitations of digital technologies shape individuals' daily lives through various aspects similar to the impacts of electricity and printing (Thumim, 2012). Digital culture is also inextricably linked to consumerism and neoliberalism, which promotes accountability for an individual's well-being and being positively self-oriented via conveyed messages and the broadened scope (Lupton, 2020). In addition, technological advancements have enabled individuals to integrate dining experiences into their respective social lives (Wong et al., 2019). Technological advancements allow consumers to actively participate in creating food content on SMPs, especially the younger generation, who tend to photograph and share personal meals with online followers, friends, and family rather than passively consuming food content (Feldman & Goodman, 2021; Ibrahim, 2015; Lupton, 2020). Hence, the interaction of individuals with food types, eating behaviours, and personal physiques in digital food culture distributes more decentralised power in SMPs (Feldman & Goodman, 2021).

Individuals redefine personal identities through constant social media engagement (Andreallo, 2019; Ibrahim, 2015; Senft & Baym, 2015), with self-portrait photographs or selfies as a standard self-expression and identity formation approach in the digital sphere. Selfie locations demonstrate a shift towards visual interactions among individuals who frequently engage in selfies (Andreallo, 2019; Senft & Baym, 2015). Selfies also significantly define a generation and transform the conventional interpretation of visual communications (Andreallo, 2019). Specifically, food selfies play a vital role in the digital food culture of sharing experiences and creating memories (Ibrahim, 2015), as food and mealtimes are symbolic images of daily life. This scenario allows for online communication and social sharing, creating familiarity and a sense of space and time (Lupton, 2020). Thus, individuals employ food to document and communicate

personal consumption and experiences in daily moments and routines (Ibrahim, 2015) through images to validate the experiences and invite the perception of other individuals (Feldman & Goodman, 2021; Lupton, 2020). In summary, image exchanges are part of the digital culture, with food conveying universal appeal, desire, comfort, and spirituality (Ibrahim, 2015).

The latest SMP technologies have transformed how individuals integrate dining experiences into social lives, as reflected in the popular trend of "foodstagramming" (Atanasova, 2016; Wong et al., 2019). Capturing and posting food images on social media before consuming meals becomes a norm (Atanasova, 2016; Wong et al., 2019), which serves as a ceremonial conduct not unlike praying before a meal (Atanasova, 2016). Atanasova (2016) discovered that individuals engaging in short rituals before eating reported higher food enjoyment than counterparts who directly consumed the food without any rituals. The findings corresponded to the phrase "we eat first with our eyes," which is believed to have been coined by Apicius, a Roman gourmand from the first century (Delwiche, 2012; Spence et al., 2015).

Digital food trends convert food enthusiasts into amateur influencers (Lupton, 2020; McBride, 2010), which leads to various food photographs and reviews posted on SMPs (Ibrahim, 2015) and subsequently influences consumers' food perceptions and relationships (McBride, 2010; McDonnell, 2016; Mirzoeff, 1999). The selfie generation engages in online social eating activities with personal cameras and relevant hashtags (Ibrahim, 2015), which ensures the subject is more pertinent to the audience (Andreollo, 2019; Ibrahim, 2015; Senft & Baym, 2015). For instance, the top hashtag, namely #food, was ranked as the 25th most popular tag in 2014 among the top 100 Instagram tags (Ibrahim, 2015). According to Agrawal (2023), users upload approximately 80 million photographs daily to personal Instagram accounts, whereas 350 million are uploaded to Facebook daily (Branka, 2023). Instagram also ranks images based on popularity (Agrawal, 2023; Branka, 2023; Ibrahim, 2015; Stout, 2023). Simultaneously, Twitter users disseminate approximately 140 million tweets (Stout, 2023). Therefore, a food enthusiast or foodophile is socially acceptable due to the prevalence of visual aspects in contemporary hypermedia and multimedia, wherein the act of witnessing produces higher significance than a simple belief (McBride, 2010; McDonnell, 2016; Mirzoeff, 1999).

## **2.2 User-Generated Content (UGC)**

Social action theory developed by Max Weber (1881-1961) can be categorised into four dimensions, namely instrumentally rational, value rational, traditional, and affectional actions, to understand the UGC's role in shaping social reality (Joas & Beckert, 2001). Social action theory posits that social reality is constructed through ongoing individual interactions and negotiations, with UGC produced on digital platforms allowing users to create and share personal content and contribute to the construction of social reality. Accordingly, UGC has become a crucial component of commercial platforms in a monetised economy owing to the emergence of social networks, image sharing, and video archiving, which promotes online consumer autonomy and user empowerment. Users create UGC for various reasons, including performing queries, complaints, criticism, and sarcasm to retailers (Peeroo et al., 2017). Digital food cultures also provide alternative self-presentation channels to digital media users by exchanging visual and verbal food-related content (Ibrahim, 2015). Nonetheless, extensive UGC shared by friends or associates on social media also leads to anxiety, such as the fear of missing out (FOMO) in the social circle among peers who have missed the opportunity to experience UGC.

Consumers not only receive product information but are also actively involved in creating and distributing relevant information based on personal knowledge, tastes, and experiences to offer advice and interact with product or service providers (Khokhar et al., 2019). Therefore, UGC posted by friends or acquaintances on social media channels is considered valuable and trustworthy advice, which significantly impacts purchase behaviours (Andersen et al., 2021; Voramontri & Klieb, 2019). Lahath et al. (2021) delineated that the UGC is perceived as trusted information generated from the experiences of families, friends, or other individuals followed on social media, which serves as one of the most contentful and influential information sources for customers' and retailers' decision-making. Numerous commercial platforms have also incorporated UGC (Andersen et al., 2021; Voramontri & Klieb, 2019). In summary, the UGC dynamic spurs higher consumer autonomy and user empowerment in the digital landscape. Previous research demonstrated that product reviews published on third-party websites were perceived as more credible than reviews posted on retailer websites (Floyd et al., 2014). In addition, the impact of third-party reviews on purchase decisions (especially e-commerce) was more significant than the total amount of reviews (Floyd et al., 2014; Peeroo et al., 2017; Singh & Chakrabarti, 2020). The product credibility was further enhanced by customers' high ratings and positive comments or reviews (Flanagin et al., 2014).

### **2.3 User Engagement Behaviour**

Customers are no longer restricted to a passive role in commercial relationships due to the emergence of extensive SMPs (Malthouse et al., 2013). Users have been transformed from passive content observers into active participants who produce various content through online conversations, interactions, and behaviours. Respectively, the interactive attributes of social media are the primary factor (Dolan et al., 2019), which facilitates collaboration between customers and retailers to co-create value and competitive strategy and engage in the brand innovation process (Bijmolt et al., 2010). Specifically, SMPs like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, and YouTube allow retailers and businesses to engage consumers actively (Cao et al., 2021). Individuals' participation in producing, contributing to, or consuming the product or business-related information in a social network are examples of engagement behaviour (Dolan et al., 2019; Muntinga et al., 2011). The engagement level tends to vary from fundamental types, such as on an SMP page, to more complex formats, including co-creation activities or writing reviews (Dolan et al., 2019; Malthouse et al., 2013; Muntinga et al., 2011).

The consuming type denotes the fundamental online content engagement, which indicates participation without actively contributing to or producing the discussed topic. Contrarily, the contributing type involves moderate involvement, including interactions between users and content and interactions among users. Meanwhile, content creation has the highest degree of engagement, which involves actively developing and releasing content for other users to consume and contribute to (Muntinga et al., 2011). The engagement behaviour may associate with brand-generated or peer-generated content (Cao et al., 2021). Previous studies examined the impact of media richness and content reliability on consumers' engagement behaviours and highlighted relevant impacts on consumption, contribution, and creation behaviours (Cao et al., 2021). Certain scholars also investigated consumer engagement with luxury fashion business content on SMPs, wherein customers followed, liked, commented, or shared the content (Kumar et al., 2016; Pentina et al., 2018).

Furthermore, several researchers assessed the interaction among social media users by commenting on peers' posts or responding to peers' purchase reviews (Habibi et al., 2016; Schau et al., 2009). While UGC

integration into various commercial platforms is gaining momentum and existing studies have primarily evaluated digital food culture in terms of sharing food photography, the creation of food content and sharing and perusing processes remain unclear to both food retailers and consumers. Therefore, the present study explored the underlying themes or core concepts concerning digital food culture and the relevant user engagement behaviour.

### **3.0 Methods**

#### **3.1 Research Design**

The study appraised food-related UGC and user engagement behaviour by discerning significant themes through in-depth interviews with food retailers. This method was chosen to gain rich, detailed insights into how food retailers navigate the digital landscape and contribute to the emerging food culture on social media regarding food-related UGC creation and user engagement on SMPs. Relevant opinions and experiences of food retailers directly involved in the food industry were pivotal to improving data richness and accuracy.

#### **3.2 In-Depth Interview**

In-depth interviews with food retailers were conducted in Penang and Putrajaya from 1st to 30th September 2023. The locations were selected strategically to provide a representative sample, ensuring the findings would be relevant and generalisable to Malaysia's broader food retail industry. Penang, renowned as an Asian "food paradise" (Hassan et al., 2020), offers a rich tapestry of culinary traditions and a vibrant food scene. In contrast, the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur, represented by Putrajaya, is the most urbanised state in Malaysia. This urban-rural dichotomy was crucial to capture a comprehensive picture of the food retail landscape in Malaysia, as urban population growth significantly influences food demand, altering eating habits and reshaping the food landscape (Ali & Abdullah, 2012).

The choice of in-depth interviews as the primary data collection method was rooted in the need to acquire context-rich information about food retailers' perceptions and experiences. This qualitative approach allows researchers to delve deeply into an individual's understanding of a specific topic, issue, or process and the corresponding significance they attach to it (Rutledge & Hogg, 2020). Therefore, this study adopted an in-depth interview approach to explore unexpected themes and capture the complexity of valuable human experiences in food retail's dynamic and culturally embedded field.

Besides, this study used convenience sampling to recruit ten food retailers. While this method may introduce potential bias, it was chosen for its practicality and efficiency in assessing participants willing to share their experiences. Additionally, efforts were made to ensure diversity in the types of food retailers included, ranging from traditional hawkers to modern restaurant owners, to mitigate potential limitations of this sampling method. Furthermore, three mock interviews were performed to test the feasibility of the interview and improve the interview protocol.

The food retailers were approached based on their willingness and ability to participate. Before each interview, participants were briefed on the research objectives, ensuring informed consent and establishing rapport. This step was crucial in creating an atmosphere of trust, potentially leading to more open and honest responses. The interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent, a practice that allows for accurate transcription and analysis while enabling the interviewer to focus entirely on the conversation. Meanwhile,

the decision to conduct interviews in either English, Malay, or Mandarin reflects the multilingual nature of Malaysian society. It allows participants to express themselves in the most comfortable language, potentially yielding richer data.

Each interview lasted 45 to 60 minutes, which strikes a balance between gathering comprehensive information and maintaining participant engagement. The interviews were transcribed in their original languages and organised manually in Microsoft Word. This approach preserves the original meaning of responses and prevents errors that might occur when translating the complete interview (Barnes, 1996). It also allows for nuanced analysis that considers cultural and linguistic contexts. Moreover, English translations were generated for parts of the analysed interviews to highlight emerging themes. This selective translation approach balances the need to access findings with preserving original meanings.

### **3.3 Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis was performed to discover emerging themes to address the study objectives. This method was chosen for its flexibility and capacity to provide a rich, detailed, and complex account of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A competent thematic analysis interprets and makes sense of the data (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). In the current study, the significant patterns were constructed with six key phases serving as a guide, namely familiarising with the data, developing initial codes, searching for common themes from the codes, reviewing the themes, labelling and defining the themes, and finally, reporting the results (Byrne, 2022). In the initial phase, researchers immersed themselves in the data by reading the transcripts repeatedly. Afterwards, researchers systematically coded interesting characteristics across the entire dataset. By adopting the inductive approach, the analysis allowed codes to emerge from the data rather than fitting them into a pre-existing coding frame. Then, the researchers collated codes into potential themes. Wherein all data relevant to each potential theme is gathered. This phase involved looking for patterns and relationships between codes and considering how different codes might combine to form overarching themes. Furthermore, another crucial phase is to check if the themes worked in relation to the coded extracts and the entire dataset. Researchers refined themes, which sometimes meant collapsing two themes into one, splitting a theme into separate themes, or discarding initial themes. Subsequently, researchers conducted ongoing analyses to refine the specifics of each theme and generate clear definitions and names. Ultimately, a final analysis of selected extracts was conducted to refine the significant themes of digital food culture on food-related UGC creation and relevant user engagement behaviours.

### **4.0 Result**

This study conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with ten participants holding crucial positions at restaurants or cafés, including owners, founders, content creators or hostesses, co-founders or partners, and assistant managers. The participants ranged from 19 to 55 years old, with three holding tertiary qualifications, representing various life experiences and professional stages in the sector. Table 1 presents general information on the participants, including the three participants selected for mock interviews. After conducting in-depth interviews with ten participants, the thematic analysis was initiated to examine and interpret the collected data systematically. The early phases of data analysis employed a thematic approach consisting of familiarising with the data, generating initial codes, and identifying themes among the codes. Furthermore, several phases for thematic analysis were integrated to fulfil the study objectives. The datasets were subsequently perused and scrutinised to highlight potential codes. This systematic coding comprises organising and retrieving crucial data components relating to the research objectives to discover emergent themes (see Table 3). Themes are patterns essential to the study scope (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017), which serve as ideas and explanations based on participants' experiences. In the current study, the finalised themes

were digital food culture, food-related UGC, and user engagement behaviour. Besides, several sub-themes emerged, connected to food aesthetics, appeal, creativity, and current trends.

#### **4.1 Theme of Digital Food Culture: Food-Related Content and User Engagement Behaviour**

Posting and sharing food content evolve as an act of active engagement in the broad landscape of food-related UGC, which exhibits a common passion for dining experiences. Participants provided valuable insights into corresponding perceptions and behaviours regarding the digital food culture. Specifically, food photography was perceived as beyond capturing food pictures to attract customers. Food-related content creation involves the creative process of developing unique posts. Social media trends and behaviours also shape the landscape of food-related discussions. User engagement on SMPs fosters a sense of belonging, with collaboration and influencer engagement guiding relevant discussions and content creation. Hence, the codes underscored the dynamic nature of engagement in the digital food culture. Figure 1(a) depicts the word cloud with the most frequently utilised words to describe the digital food culture, such as "food picture", "share", "review", "take", and "post". The digital food culture introduces a different strategy to prepare and present food on various digital media, including blogs, video blogs (vlogs), Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, promotional platforms from technology companies, online discussion forums, and applications and devices (Lupton, 2020). Likewise, the rapid adoption of professional-quality digital photography and user-friendly platforms for image sharing promote amateur photography on SMPs (Lewis, 2018), which provides value to audiences for more significant engagement (Dolan et al., 2019). In addition to previous studies, the theme discovered that digital food culture is about creating a sense of community and belonging through shared experiences and passions. Understanding the dynamics of engagement in the digital food culture can uncover new opportunities for food enthusiasts, influencers, food retailers and businesses to connect and collaborate, ultimately enriching the overall dining experience.

#### **4.2 Theme of Food-Related Content**

##### **4.2(a) Visual Appeal and Food Presentation**

Aesthetics and creativity are vital attributes in food presentation on SMPs, emphasising visual components' importance in shaping users' interactions with food-related UGC and the impact of food presentation patterns on digital food culture. Several participants highlighted the significance of food presentation as the first connection point with the audience, wherein food businesses should prioritise food presentation to engage diners with a smooth transition from visual appeal to scent and taste. A participant also elucidated the uniqueness and beauty of a dish, especially in the digital realm where food is frequently photographed. Appearance serves as the single engagement component when sensations of taste and smell cannot be transmitted through a screen. Other participants also expressed that appearance significantly elicited the desire to photograph dining moments before being shared on SMPs. Figure 1(b) illustrates that the most frequently employed words are "share", "food", "looks", "viral", and "aesthetics", which shaped the current theme. Food aesthetics significantly impacted the desire to consume, food types, consumption behaviour, food taste, and willingness to pay (Delwiche, 2012; Machin et al., 2021; Spence et al., 2015). Modern food photography dominates printed and social media with sensual and styled food images (Machin et al., 2021). The finding of the theme on food-related content suggested that aesthetics and creativity in food presentation are crucial in driving user engagement and consumption behaviour on SMPs. By investing in visually appealing food presentations, food retailers and businesses can tap into the desires of their audience and create a lasting impact in the digital food culture.

#### **4.2(b) Prevalent Food Delivery Application (FDA)**

The thematic analysis also revealed that participants frequently mentioned the presence and usage of FDA in the food-related UGC context. FDAs provide consumers with convenient delivery options, alternative food selections, and ease of use. Notably, high-quality food photography integrated into FDAs enhances the visual appeal of dishes, encouraging customers to explore various food options. Additionally, participants also highlighted the popularity of FDAs, particularly "GrabFood" and "Foodpanda", among customers and businesses. As depicted in Figure 1(c), the frequently used codes include "delivery", "FDA", "Grab", "popular", and "food". The codes underscore the integral role of FDAs in the food industry. Several food retailers also emphasised that FDA reviews and comments significantly impact their business. Building on this, Zolkiffli et al. (2021) proposed improvements to FDA providers, including the ability to upload meal photos for information sharing, extending feedback periods, and incorporating notifications of minimum purchase rules. By uploading photos of delivered food, customers can access preliminary information, such as portion size, comparisons between actual food and published menus, and pricing, thereby enhancing their overall experience. The theme emphasised the importance of FDAs in shaping the food industry's online landscape.

#### **4.3 Theme of User Engagement Behaviour**

##### **4.3(a) Trending SMPs**

The theme of user engagement behaviour in digital food culture is related to the leading SMPs. A SMP is a collection of web-based applications that enable UGC creation and sharing (Cao et al., 2021). The participants highlighted the emergence of certain SMPs and their significant impact on the consumption of food-related content. The choice of platform, in turn, influences user interaction and food-related content, including visual aesthetics, sharing patterns, and engagement. Moreover, users can effortlessly switch between different SMPs, allowing food-related content to reach and influence a broader audience. A participant noted that TikTok videos are particularly effective in contemporary digital food culture, enabling food retailers to boost audience engagement when the food-related UGC goes viral, with more users photographing and sharing it on SMPs. Some participants mentioned that customers often tag food retailers on Instagram and Facebook while sharing food-related UGC. As shown in Figure 1(d), the most frequently mentioned words were "Facebook", "platform", "media", "social", and "TikTok". The findings suggest that engagement behaviour consists of two primary components: SMPs and user engagement behaviours, which is consistent with previous studies. The theme highlighted the interplay between SMPs and user engagement behaviours, wherein food retailers can develop targeted strategies to increase engagement and drive business growth in the digital food culture.

##### **4.3(b) The Influence of Food-Related Content on SMP Exposure**

The visual appeal of food posts shared on SMPs frequently attracts users' attention and prompts interactions with the content by liking, commenting, and sharing. The interaction increases the reach and exposure of food-related posts, which results in a more positive feedback cycle. Several participants underscored the importance of food photography in influencing consumer behaviour, as most food images or videos would be shared on SMPs. Resultantly, potential consumers would be inspired to explore the restaurant. Participants also delineated that restaurants struggled to effectively explain offerings without food photography content, indicating visual content's power. Figure 1(e) illustrates the most commonly utilised words, namely "food", "people", "review", "social", and "attract". According to Liu et al. (2022), food and physical evidence are standard features of user-generated photographs that complement online restaurant

reviews. Reviewers typically post prepared and available dishes or food under preparation on dining tables. Photos of plated meals are more prevalent, although images of the preparation process become increasingly pivotal in consumer selections, which posits the importance of exposure in shaping consumers' engagement behaviours towards food-related content. The availability of such content significantly impacts user engagement and enables users to explore relevant experiences across multiple SMPs actively. The theme indicated that the strategic use of high-quality food-related content, particularly food photography, is essential for restaurants to increase their online visibility, drive engagement, and attract potential customers through high exposure to SMPs.

#### **4.3(c) The Roles of Food-Related Content Creators and Influencers**

Food influencers and content creators can alter consumers' minds, preferences, and food choices with interesting content. Notably, influencers employ social media to develop and expand personal networks of followers. A participant noted that users generally browse and save food review posts in the evening before planning for visits when available. The behaviour could be extended to requesting a partner or friend to join the individual on a food trip based on a recommendation from an influencer or food reviewer. The participants also agreed on the power of food-related content creators and influencers. Individuals remain interested in exploring recommended restaurants despite the awareness of commercial collaborations. Figure 1(f) portrays the most frequently employed words, such as "influencer", "media", "certified", "content", and "blogger, to describe the theme. The findings aligned with previous studies, which have shown that food bloggers review and describe food items and services, influencing readers' decisions (Mainolfi et al., 2022). The growth of social media allows food bloggers or influencers to reach a larger audience and impact readers' decisions.

#### **4.3(d) Food Stock Management**

A recurring issue in the food industry is balancing culinary creativity with the requirement of waste reduction. Effective quantity management plays a crucial role in this balance, ensuring that food businesses fulfil consumer demands while preventing surplus, which may contribute to food waste. To address this challenge, several participants agreed to reduce food waste by participating in food donation and charity initiatives, distributing surplus food to needy individuals and supporting the community. In addition to waste reduction, the participants acknowledged the necessity of serving fresh and high-quality meals. Participants recognised that optimising distribution routes and logistics could assist in ensuring customers attain positive dining experiences. Most participants were also aware of food waste's broader environmental, social, and economic consequences. The most common words employed to express this theme (see Figure 1(g)) were "waste", "prepare", "staff", "food", and "delivery", highlighting the key areas of concern. To tackle these issues, certain participants suggested including the actual portion size in food photography on SMPs or FDAs, ensuring viewers and consumers can precisely evaluate the food amount during consumption decisions. Effective food surplus management can be achieved by harnessing the outreach and engagement potential of SMPs. Consistent with previous research, SMPs have been shown to be highly effective in generating interest and stimulating discussions on a wide range of topics (Šálková et al., 2023). The findings of this theme suggested that SMPs can be particularly valuable in promoting awareness and engagement around critical issues such as food waste reduction and sustainable consumption practices.



**Figure 1: Word Clouds for the Theme of Digital Food Culture: Food-Related Content and User Engagement Behaviour (a), Theme of Food-Related Content: Visual Appeal and Food Presentation (b), Prevalent FDA (c), Theme of User Engagement Behaviour: Trending SMPs (d), The Influence of Food-Related Content on SMP Exposure (e), Roles of Influencers and Content Creators (f), Food Stock Management (g)**

## 5.0 Discussion and Conclusion

The study assessed the impact of digital food culture on food-related UGC creation and corresponding influences on user engagement behaviour. Digital food culture, food-related UGC, and user engagement behaviour were the major themes emerging from thematic analysis. The theme of digital food culture discussed the food-related UGC and user engagement behaviour, whereas food-related content delineated visual appeal and food presentation with the popular FDA. The user engagement behaviour theme encompassed the trending SMPs, the influence of food-related UGC on social media exposure, and the roles of influencers and content creators in food stock management. The extensive usage of digital technologies signifies transformed food consumption patterns and descriptions, which led to lower trust in professionals' advice (Lupton, 2020). The findings on digital food culture also revealed that consumers actively shared food content, which fostered a passion for food experiences. Social media trends simultaneously influenced food photography, with user participation generating a sense of connection and elevating the demand for valuable food content.

Visuals more effectively convey emotions and aesthetics than words and aid comprehension (Machin et al., 2021). The study results highlighted that food presentation on digital media, particularly SMPs, was significantly influenced by aesthetics and creativity. The visual appeal of food is crucial as sensory experiences are absent through screens. The focus on appearance drives users to share personal food experiences with modern photography dominated by stylised images. Furthermore, FDAs, online-to-offline platforms, capitalise on consumers' high usage of smartphones, mobile internet, and navigating services (Tandon et al., 2021). The FDA plays an integral role in food-related UGC by offering convenience and

delivery options. Popular platforms, such as GrabFood and Foodpanda, significantly impact the food industry. The study participants also provided several recommendations, including allowing users to upload photos, extending feedback periods, and improving notifications on minimum purchase rules to provide valuable information. As such, FDAs transformed SMP users' interactions with food content through convenience, visual integration, and feedback, subsequently boosting user engagement.

Recent engagement metrics, such as Facebook "like", allow users to approve SMP content with only one click. Moreover, a post with multiple likes is deemed intriguing and popular, enhancing the ability to generate more likes and engaging consumers. Comments and shares also increase the reach and popularity of a post (Moran et al., 2020). The study results demonstrated that food retailers employed TikTok videos and UGC on SMPs to reach more audiences by determining users' engagement behaviours for higher exposure to food-related UGC. In addition, engaging food posts on SMPs attracted more audiences, expanded content reach, and significantly influenced consumer behaviours. Food photography, user-generated photos, and positive online restaurant reviews enhanced user engagement behaviours to promote active participation across multiple SMPs. The interview findings were also aligned with previous scholars discovering that food influencers and content creators significantly impacted users' food choices through engaging content on social media (Mainolfi et al., 2022). Users' engagement behaviours thrive on captivating content, vibrant communities, positive food choices, and pertinent recommendations, influencing how SMP users interact with food online and offline. Likewise, the participants underscored the significance of balancing culinary creativity with food waste reduction, which posited the requirement for efficient food stock quantity management. Food retailers also suggested accurate portion sizes in food photography and leveraging SMPs for managing surplus.

The current study revealed that digital food culture significantly influenced food-related UGC and user engagement behaviour, which emphasised the visual appeal, FDAs, leading SMPs, media exposure, the roles of influencers and content creators, and the requirement to balance culinary creativity with food waste reduction in the modern food sector. The present study also underscored the importance of visual presentation in capturing users' attention and satisfying visual hunger. This study provided significant practical implications for food retailers and marketers to leverage food-related UGC in marketing strategies to target and engage the target audience effectively.

## **6.0 Implication**

The study findings provided significant managerial and practical implications for food retailers and marketers in Malaysia. Notably, high engagement levels with food-related UGC suggested that UGC could serve as a valuable marketing tool to reach a wider audience. Food retailers and marketers could leverage UGC by encouraging customers to share personal experiences on SMPs and creating shareable content resonating with the target audience. Moreover, this study revealed that SMPs satisfied Malaysian users' visual hunger for food-related content. The significant number of likes, shares, and views on various SMPs evidenced the high engagement and interest in food-related UGC. In addition, this respective user engagement behaviour propounded that the visual presentation of food-related content, such as photos and videos, significantly attracted and maintained users' attention. Food retailers and marketers could integrate UGC into marketing strategies to elevate brand awareness and loyalty among the target audience by sharing visually appealing content. The findings also highlighted the importance of visual aesthetics, FDAs, and leading SMPs in influencing consumer behaviours and engagement in the food industry. High-quality food

photography and efficient quantity management are pivotal to fulfilling consumer demands and contributing to environmental sustainability. The shift in consumer perceptions and behaviours towards food in the digital era also reinforces the significant influence of digital food culture.

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**Table 1: Demographic Information of Participants for Study**

Participant	Gender	Age	Education	Position
A	Male	38	SPM	Founder
B	Male	30	Diploma	Owner
C	Male	38	SPM	Owner
D	Male	19	Diploma (undergoing)	Waiter/Content Creator
E	Male	38	Degree	Co-founder/Partner
F	Male	55	Degree	Owner
G	Female	30	Diploma	Owner
H	Male	29	Degree	Co-founder/Partner
I	Male	34	SPM	Owner
J	Female	22	SPM	Assistant Manager

**Table 2: Illustration of Key Concepts for Digital Food Culture, Food-Related UGC, and User Engagement Behaviour**

Participant	Incident	Codes	Categories	Themes
A	Because the <i>camera eats first</i> , and then only people eat. I believe this is very important. My café is on the second floor, and we miss out on foot traffic; we've lost location. It's quite rare for people to walk in here spontaneously. So, <i>fewer people will come if the food photos and visuals shared on social media aren't appealing</i> .	Food photography, camera eats first, visual appeal, food presentation on social media	Food photography, posting and sharing food content, UGC, food-related content creation, social media trends and behaviours, user engagement on SMPs, collaboration, and influencer engagement	Food-related content and user engagement behaviour
D	Every time food arrives, they want to update. They <i>take pictures to share and enhance their stories</i> . To beautify the highlight feed, Instagram has a section where you can create highlights when you make stories. So, you can add food emojis, like desserts. When people click on that icon, it shows only their <i>food-related stories</i> , like today's food, tomorrow's food, and so on. It's like they have followers, and they do it that way. Moreover, when <i>posting content on social media</i> , some people <i>make videos</i> .	Posting and sharing food content, sharing food updates, food-related stories, making videos		

G	We encourage our customers to promote us by <i>taking pictures of our food</i> . This way, we <i>get free marketing</i> . We welcome <i>UGC</i> like they always <i>tag us on Instagram or Facebook</i> when they <i>share our food photos</i> .	UGC, free marketing, sharing and tagging on SMPs		
C	In terms of the <i>business</i> itself, we also must <i>create food content, take videos, and post pictures</i> . I am not good at it, but we also have a TikTok account for business. <i>TikTok</i> is indeed <i>popular</i> , but it requires a lot of editing, and the younger generation is good at it. You need to <i>create content, edit videos, and add music</i> . It <i>requires creativity</i> . Previously, TikTok was less common; most people used Facebook. I also have done <i>Facebook ads</i> to boost our posts so that they appear frequently.	Food-related content creation, using the SMPs for businesses, the evolving social media trend		
E	I have noticed that people <i>trust Google Reviews</i> more than Facebook. So, before going to a restaurant, people <i>google out</i> , sit in front of the restaurant, and google the restaurant. And they see what is in the reviews. If <i>reviews</i> said something like, "Ouch, waiting 1 hour, I won't come back!", "I wait" or "Staff not friendly" people will not go in. So, you can get the whole history of the restaurant, and people get to know this restaurant right this way. I think <i>it helps</i> , maybe not directly, but <i>indirectly and in the long run</i> .	Reviews, trust, pre-visit Google search		
I	The <i>trend of sharing food content</i> is famous and very influential. It has a significant impact on us. Chinese people mostly go for " <i>XiaoHongShu</i> ", whereas Malay people prefer TikTok, and some are active on Instagram and Facebook. People create posts, share food stories, and so on. Many people do so. I found out people like Google Review. They will search for food on Google instead. Google is a straightforward way. Search on Google for food or restaurants nearby, and the recommendations will pop out, but Facebook cannot do this.	Social media trend, sharing viral food content, user activities on social media		
F	Sometimes, if they <i>take photos</i> , they share them on Facebook and other SMPs. They <i>shared and tagged us</i> . We know because of the notifications. It <i>triggers us</i> , then we know. So, if the photos are very nice, we <i>will reshare them on our page</i> , too.	User behaviour on social media, resharing UGC and interaction		
H	I think more people started to know us during our third or fourth month in business because some people <i>shared about us on social media</i> , especially for <i>posts engaged by influencers</i> with <i>high exposure</i> . Initially, we hired <i>food bloggers</i> and <i>influencers</i> to help market our food.	Collaboration, influencer engagement, exposure		

**Table 3: Demonstration of Themes Development**

<b>Codes</b>	<b>Categories</b>	<b>Themes</b>
<p>Customers take photos of food. Post food content on Instagram. Write Google Review. Keep an eye on these posts. First-time visitors tend to take food photos and share food photography on SMPs. Positive comments can boost sales. Some customers might misunderstand the negative reviews. Search in Google for recommendations for lunch in a particular area. New customers normally take food photos and post the food photos after having meals. Leave comments. People come because of the reviews. Bad reviews will have a serious impact on business. Scroll the phone before sleep. Screenshot the post. Show the posts for foods. Food content posted High viewership. Number of times viewing it. Update food pictures on Instagram and Facebook. View food photos and give reviews. Food photography. The camera eats first. Personal sharing on Instagram. Non-paid promotion. Share food photos. Tag and use hashtags for food content. Food photography presentation. Food photo sharing. People love to take pictures. Like, view, and share food content. It is not active but view the food content posted. Make free advertising. Negative feedback and comments. Food reviews. Take a video of food. Viewing the food photography. Voting for favourite food. The old generation seldom takes food photos. Girls like to take food photos. Share and tag. Paid posts. Food information</p>	<p>Food photography, posting and sharing food content, UGC, food-related content creation, social media trends and behaviours, user engagement on SMPs, collaboration, and influencer engagement</p>	<p>Food-related content and user engagement behaviour</p>

<p>Sharing food photography among friends, family, or peers. Share food posts through SMPs. Food-related post. Personal link. Food posts shared by someone trusted. Take food pictures and then share and create food content. Create food-related posts. Editing posts. Create food-related videos with music. Join Ads to boost created posts. Share for free. General comments are sometimes subjective. Respond to feedback. Vendors can defend themselves. Search on Google first. Food post. Share on WhatsApp status. Free marketing. Photoshoot food pictures and videos. Most honest reviews. Paid reviews. Lived-video. Reviews from customers. Food content must be picture-oriented. People want to see food pictures. Creating a vibe on SMPs Create a norm to take food photos. Capture moments. Make Tiktok videos. Inform or announce through Tiktok. Invite audiences to leave a review. Discovered cafés from Tiktok. Focus on Tiktok marketing. Showcase people enjoying the food. Show people eating food up. Conduct some interviews with customers. Café hunting. Showcase eating. Customer feedback. When food arrives, they want to update and take pictures to share. Enhance stories. Beautify Instagram highlight feed. Create highlights when making stories with food emojis. Click on the icon, and it shows only food-related stories. Post food content.</p>		
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<p>Create videos to gain followers.          Watch and save posts.          Saved post and visit next time.          The customer will not start eating until all dishes ordered arrive.          Customers like to take pictures when all the food is on the table.          The table gets filled with food.          Keep the audience engaged.          Consistently produce content for posting.          Plan content in advance.          Collaborate with food reviewers.          Hired influencers with many followers and ensured the food reviews aligned with the goal.          Share dessert-focus experiences.          Positive feedbacks.          Some people share food posts.          Customers can share negative things about your foods.          They will share if the food is good; some do not.          Some send to the group or share in WhatsApp status.          Reshare good reviews.          The review speaks for itself, e.g., can buy.          We might not know if the food posts are shared.          Read reviews and comments are more genuine.          Create short videos for food.          Straight away to give reviews &amp; expression.          Old trend - live on Facebook.          Live-streaming.          Broadcast the viral food item.          Information sharing.          Get the likes and shares.          Some people want to be the first to share.          Happy or not, satisfied or not, people tend to post and share it.          They tagged us, and we got the notifications, then reshared the nice photos to the Facebook page.          Posts for catering and events. People who like the food will take photos and share them.          There are many food reviews, and not all reviews are genuine.          Reviews shared by friends are the most trusted.          People want to look at photos.          UGC.</p>		
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<p>Take pictures of food frequently.          Enjoy taking food photography.          Screenshot and reshare the food content.          Offer complimentary service for those who take a picture.          Share and tagging.          Food retailers also take pictures from reviews and food reviewers.          Food content is widely shared and gets a lot of shares and attention.</p>		
<p>Presentation.          Looks appealing.          Share photos of well-presented dishes, appealing foods, and popular food items.          Post and share stories for viral food.          Viral food items.          Visual appeal.          Plating.          Appealing.          Famous.          Unique.          Looks nice.          Aesthetics.          Food looks better, and people like to take the photo.          Popularity requires creativity.          Present the fashion.          Share as a way to de-stress.          Ambience.          Food culture plays a role.          Food presentation.          Viral trend.          The food decoration.          Value-added features than competitors.          Colourful.          The food must be excellent.          Clean the plate.          Flowering for coffee.          Popular food item.          New idea.</p>	<p>Food aesthetics and appeal, creativity, trends</p>	<p>Visual Appeal and Food Presentation</p>
<p>Grab Food &amp; Food Panda.          The most mainstream FDA platforms.          Grab food is more popular.          FDA.          Food delivery.          Link for business.</p>	<p>Popular food delivery platforms, food delivery services</p>	<p>Prevalent Food Delivery Applications (FDAs)</p>
<p>Google Review.          Familiar platform: Tiktok, "XiaoHongShu".          SMPs: Facebook, Instagram.          Facebook marketing.          SMPs.</p>	<p>Major SMPs, platforms popularity, emerging platforms, cross-platform engagement, social media evolution</p>	<p>Trending SMPs</p>

<p>Famous SMPs have many audiences, such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Google Review, WhatsApp status, and TikTok. Facebook is universal. Instagram has a lot of young people and is more personal. TikTok videos and marketing are genuine. Thorough reviews are usually shared over platforms like YouTube &amp; TikTok. Utilising social media as a marketing platform. Google Review is more trusted. Promote and advertise over social media. Too many things on social media. Media advertising during Ramadan. Facebook Ads. Post food photos on Google Review. The primary social platform used is Instagram. Hit 3.2k likes on Facebook Ads. Instagram and Facebook used to be the most popular platforms. SMPs evolve. The current trend is TikTok.</p>		
<p>Exposure. Famous. Influential. Boost sales. Viral. Advantageous. Increase exposure. Attract attention. Grow business. Lead to competition. New trend. Short-lived impact. It might cause temporary harm. Reach more people. High exposure. Many cafés go viral. Sales increased. Try out new food. One-time visit. Switch when viewing another food-related video. Informative. Trust. Pros. Reach out faster. Create a sudden surge. Helpful. Attract more customers.</p>	<p>Social media exposure and influence, trends and impact, consumer behaviour, challenges, and risks, the role of social media, collaboration, and win-win situation</p>	<p>The Influence of Food-Related Content on Social Media Exposure</p>

<p>Current trend. Crowded. Impact reputation. Subjective. Costly. It is not affordable to hire food reviews or influencers. People still want to try to follow the influencers. Powerful. We need to be extra cautious. People nowadays like to spot mistakes. One mistake can bring down an entire business. Food reviews are essential. The power of going viral. Negative reviews will impact sales. People like to imagine what food is like. Food postings help a lot. Competition becomes more challenging. Same viewers and audiences. The traditional way of advertising will come back. Sales go up. The crowd becomes larger. More people will order the food. Pros are more than cons. Attract crowds. Expand networking. Helpful. It is not a fast food chain. Fast-growing. Grab attention. Good trend. Both ways, for end users and retailers, something terrible and not right can go viral. Direct and indirect relationships. Short-term and long-term. Some people see whatever posts are shared, and they come to try; some just read. People trust numbers and get to know the restaurant from the history of reviews. It helps indirectly in the long run, with some direct, lived engagement. People want to know what is happening. Bad reviews bring ratings down. To be ready for viral. Pros come with cons. First, to try it out.</p>		
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<p>Effective but must be consistent. Blast on social media. Create an unpredictable trend. The effect of social media. Competitive. Genuine or not authentic. The collaborative relationship between retailers and customers for a win-win situation. To get new customers. Change in customer demographics. Beneficial. Free promotion. Boost visibility. Food items have gone viral and reached larger audiences. Prevalent. Highest engagement. Production and chain become faster. A current food trend.</p>		
<p>Influencers with high exposure. Hired bloggers and influencers. Food bloggers. Most are Gen Z. Incorporate with food bloggers. Certified or not certified food reviewer. Younger people. Influencers. Mutual friends on SMPs. Young generation's perspectives - 20s. Food influencer. Content creator. Followers. The people, but not influencers. The networks.</p>	<p>Influencer and content creator, generational views, food review, social media, and the network</p>	<p>Roles of Food-Related Content Creators and Influencers</p>
<p>Prepare larger quantities. Excess, keep, sold out the next day. Leftover. Charity. Overcooking. Staff foods. Prepared in advance for hot items. Donate if not sell. Staff foods. Food waste is unavoidable. Partnership with charity company. Surplus. Discard. Prepare more for the viral food items. Thrown away the extra foods. Stocks can last for a few days. Salad, the inedible portion, like vegetables, is usually wasted.</p>	<p>Food preparation and quantity management, food donation and charity, quality maintenance and distribution, food waste reduction, operational adjustment, shortages and ordering</p>	<p>Food Stock Management</p>

<p>Event leftover.  Maintain food quality.  Promote only menu food items on SMPs.  Prepare more.  Prepare just enough.  Do not keep overnight.  Distribute to employees.  For frozen ingredients, prepare them when people order them.  Prepare a lot of viral food items.  Minimising food waste.  Only discard a small percentage of prepared foods.  Staff consume it instead of wasting it.  Wasting food is a sin.  Believe in sharing and giving back.  Less food waste.  The plates returned clean.  Excessive food.  Extend operating hours.  Promote via WhatsApp status and Instagram.  Partnership with Lalamove for delivery services.  Avoid food waste.  Provide delivery options.  A balance between food supply and quality.  If wrongly prepared, we will give it away.  Impose charges for extra rice requested.  Stock management.  Special promotion.  Excesses will be a challenge.  Stock management is crucial.  We offer lower prices if excess.  Limit the stock.  Control wastage.  Avoid excess.  Shortages.  Underestimated.  Foods run out.  Maintain a well-balanced food supply.  Remove items from the menu for those no longer available.  Provide made-to-order service to minimise food waste and shortages.  Ordering system.  Refer to the chart or report provided by delivery companies for more accurate estimation.</p>			
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Tarikh : 20 Januari 2023

Prof. Madya Dr. Nur Hisham Ibrahim  
Rektor  
Universiti Teknologi MARA  
Cawangan Perak



Tuan,

**PERMOHONAN KELULUSAN MEMUAT NAIK PENERBITAN UiTM CAWANGAN PERAK  
MELALUI REPOSITORI INSTITUSI UiTM (IR)**

Perkara di atas adalah dirujuk.

2. Adalah dimaklumkan bahawa pihak kami ingin memohon kelulusan tuan untuk mengimbas (*digitize*) dan memuat naik semua jenis penerbitan di bawah UiTM Cawangan Perak melalui Repositori Institusi UiTM, PTAR.

3. Tujuan permohonan ini adalah bagi membolehkan akses yang lebih meluas oleh pengguna perpustakaan terhadap semua maklumat yang terkandung di dalam penerbitan melalui laman Web PTAR UiTM Cawangan Perak.

Kelulusan daripada pihak tuan dalam perkara ini amat dihargai.

Sekian, terima kasih.

“BERKHIDMAT UNTUK NEGARA”

Saya yang menjalankan amanah,

**SITI BASRIYAH SHAIK BAHARUDIN**  
Timbalan Ketua Pustakawan

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*Setuju.*

*27.1.2023*

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