

Digital Bites: Unpacking UiTM Students' Appetite for Viral Food Trends Driven by Social Media

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Abstract: This study takes a closer look at how social media marketing shapes students' views on viral food trends at UiTM Shah Alam. The focus is on three major aspects—social media influence, pricing perception, and brand familiarity. Since university students are avid social media users, understanding their responses to digital food promotions can offer practical insights for marketers. Using a survey completed by 430 students, the study uncovers how content on platforms like Instagram and Facebook boosts curiosity and influences food trial decisions. The research also shows that students care deeply about perceived value for money, making price a decisive factor in their choices. Well-known brands, meanwhile, tend to earn more trust and engagement. The findings indicated the importance of well-targeted digital marketing strategies and underscore the potential of using brand power and cost appeal to drive student interest in trending food products. Future studies should widen the participant pool to explore whether these results hold for other demographics.

Keywords: *Brand Recognition, Consumer Behavior, Price Sensitivity, Social Media Marketing, Viral Food Products.*

1. Introduction and Background

Social media has revolutionized many industries, and the food sector is no exception. From mouth-watering food reels to viral dishes, today's consumers, especially the younger crowd, often discover new food products online rather than in person. These products leverage social media platforms for marketing, utilizing the visual and viral nature of platforms like Instagram and Facebook to captivate audiences and increase brand visibility (Hasan & Sohail, 2020; Schivinski et al., 2019). The growth of these viral food trends has led to changes in how consumers discover, share, and interact with food brands, ultimately shaping consumer behavior and purchasing decisions.

Specifically, students at UiTM Shah Alam have shown growing enthusiasm for these viral food trends. They constantly engage with such content and often get easily influenced by what their friends share and what influencers promote. The way these students perceive and interact with viral food content on social media can provide substantive input into the effectiveness of various marketing strategies. According to Salleh et al. (2021), students' choices regarding food are often influenced by what their peers suggest, what is trending on social media, and how attractive a brand appears to them. Building on this, Weber et al. (2023) note that smartphones now play a central role in how people discover and purchase food. Their findings highlight how prolonged exposure to food content on social media platforms can contribute meaningfully to the formation of consumer habits and decisions.

Despite social media's apparent impact on food purchasing decisions, there is a dearth of academic research specifically focused on university students' perceptions of viral food products. Most existing studies generalize young consumers without considering the unique characteristics and behaviors of university students, who may exhibit distinct consumption patterns due to their social environment and economic constraints. Several studies contribute to the understanding of social media's influence on consumer behavior. Among others, Onorati and Giardullo (2020) highlight the prevalence of sharing restaurant reviews on travel-oriented social media platforms, and Ali et al. (2022) examine the impact of social media features on the purchasing decisions of youth. Sankar (2019) demonstrates that the impact of social media on buying behavior is not one-size-fits-all. In other words, it can vary significantly depending on the platform. The current research highlights this noticeable gap, particularly in understanding how university students respond to viral food trends on social media. With the constant stream of food content flooding platforms like Instagram and TikTok, students stand out as a group of crucial audience group. Their frequent and active use of social media does not just make them

consumers—it makes them trendsetters who help shape how others perceive these food fads.

The role of social media in the food industry has become increasingly pivotal, serving as a primary marketing channel for promoting viral food products. Platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube have enabled food businesses to connect with a broad audience by displaying aesthetically appealing dishes, sharing recipes, and fostering customer interactions to build brand loyalty (Ao et al., 2023; Salleh et al., 2021). Despite its effectiveness, the specific impact of social media marketing on consumer behaviors, particularly regarding viral food products among university students, remains underexplored. Understanding the dynamics influencing consumer decisions, such as willingness to pay, taste perceptions, and purchase intentions, is crucial among the student population at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Shah Alam, Malaysia.

This study addresses the problem of limited understanding regarding the impact of social media marketing on the perceptions of viral food products among university students. It examines how various social media strategies, including influencers, hashtags, and product placements, affect students' perceptions of food quality, pricing, convenience, and brand recognition (Canet et al., 2021). The research aims to provide empirical evidence and actionable insights for food companies to enhance their social media marketing efforts. The findings aim to bridge the theoretical gap in understanding specific social media influences on consumer behavior and the practical gap in optimizing marketing strategies for the young adult demographic.

2. Literature Review

Social Media Marketing

In this era, social media marketing has become a cornerstone strategy for the food industry. Its ability to reach massive audiences and foster real-time interaction makes it a powerful tool for engaging customers. Research shows that platforms like Instagram and TikTok play a major role in shaping what people, especially young adults, want to eat. A visually striking food item can unexpectedly go viral in a matter of hours, sparking amazing trends and influencing buying decisions almost instantly (Chuang & Lin, 2021). As Ao et al. (2023) pointed out, features like polls, live streams, and interactive contests have increased brand visibility and deepened customer engagement, finally translating into stronger brand loyalty.

However, it is not just about flashy visuals—social media also affects how safe, healthy, and trustworthy people perceive a food product to be. Studies by Dwivedi et al. (2021), Martinez-Ruiz et al. (2023), and Salleh et al. (2021) all underscore the role of social media in building consumer trust. More than just a marketing channel, social platforms create communities where people connect over shared tastes and values. This aligns with findings from Faisal and Ekawanto (2022), who note that customers are more likely to follow and stay loyal to brands that reflect their interests and lifestyles. Additionally, Luong and Ho (2023) emphasize how peer influence and endorsements from popular content creators make consumers more open to trying new food items. Based on the above, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1: There is a significant relationship between social media marketing and the impact of the perception of viral food products.

Price

How people perceive price plays a major role in how they respond to viral food trends. Tan and Ng (2018) found that young adults, in particular, are often willing to spend more on food items that seem unique or high-quality, especially when those items gain popularity online. That “viral” status often gives products a perceived edge, making them feel more exclusive or worth the splurge. For brands, this means pricing strategies need to be carefully thought out. If a product feels fresh, exciting, and well-made, people are more likely to accept a higher price tag. Lee and Johnson (2022) echo this idea, noting that the appeal of novelty and perceived quality can drive up what consumers are willing to pay.

Interestingly, many buyers also use price as a shortcut when deciding if something is worth trying. Faisal and Ekawanto (2022) explain that consumers often link higher prices to better quality, even if they have not tasted the product yet. Nevertheless, how much weight they place on price can depend on how invested they are in the product. Konuk (2019) notes that consumers who are more engaged or interested in a food category tend to rely more on price as a sign of quality. On the flip side, those who know more about that product type may

not be as easily swayed by price alone. Luong and Ho (2023) reinforce this by showing that savvy buyers often consider other factors before jumping to conclusions based on cost. Finally, where and how the product is promoted—especially on different social media platforms—can subtly shape how much consumers are willing to spend. Based on these insights, the following hypothesis was developed:

H2: There is a significant relationship between the price of viral food products and the perception of viral food products.

Brand Recognition

When it comes to choosing what to eat, a recognizable brand name can go a long way. In the food world, brand recognition is not just about remembering a logo—it is about trust, familiarity, and comfort. Consumers are far more likely to try something new if it is from a brand they already know and associate with quality. Smith and Taylor (2022) point out that this sense of familiarity builds confidence, especially when it comes to products like food, where safety and quality are personal and immediate concerns. Hasan and Sohail (2020) found that when people recognize a brand on social media, they are more likely to follow through with a purchase. Viral content helps in this regard, turning ordinary products into memorable moments that stick in consumers' minds. Moreover, it is not just about visibility—research shows that a strong visual identity can help people recall a brand more easily, which in turn influences their buying decisions (Schivinski et al., 2019).

Faisal and Ekawanto (2022), along with Azzahara and Yafiz (2024), emphasize that brand strength is a major reason why some food items perform better than others online. It also helps companies stand out in a crowded space where consumers are flooded with choices. In short, people tend to stick with what they know, especially when that brand has earned their trust through consistent messaging and quality. Given these observations, the following hypothesis was proposed:

H3: There is a significant relationship between the level of brand recognition and the perception of viral food products.

The Impact of Viral Marketing

Viral marketing shares a similar core principle with word-of-mouth communication, which disseminates general knowledge, environmental information, and news (Puriwat & Tripopsakul, 2021). However, it is also known to be a highly effective and essential marketing strategy (Oraedu et al., 2020). This approach leverages the rapid and transformative spread of information characteristic of viruses, reaching vast audiences in a short period (Motoki et al., 2022). Viral marketing in the food sector accelerates consumer interest at an exponential rate through the leverage of social media's network effects, which ultimately enhances brand exposure. It has been confirmed that effective viral marketing strategies must utilize influencers, hashtags, and user-generated content to enhance product awareness and desirability significantly (Jiang et al., 2023). The visual and communal aspects of food consumption are amplified in digital spaces, where consumers are encouraged to share their experiences and participate in the broader food culture promoted by these viral campaigns. This phenomenon drives immediate product popularity and can establish long-term consumer relationships and brand loyalty.

3. Research Methodology

Research Design

A quantitative research approach is used in this study to get a clear and measurable understanding of how students at UiTM Shah Alam perceive viral food products. By focusing on numerical data, this research could assess how three key factors—social media marketing, pricing, and brand recognition—influence student opinions. A structured survey was primarily used to discover patterns and statistically analyze the connections between the variables (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Population and Sample

The population of this study is all students from Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Shah Alam. This campus was chosen because its student body reflects a wide mix of young adults who are typically very active on social media and responsive to digital marketing. With around 17,000 students enrolled, the sample size was calculated to ensure accuracy—a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error required at least 377 participants. To account for any drop-offs or incomplete responses, that number was intentionally increased

to 430 (Israel, 2013).

Sampling Technique

To make sure every voice had a fair chance of being heard, the study used stratified random sampling. The student population was grouped based on their faculty, like Engineering, Business, Arts, and Science. Students from each group were randomly selected in proportion to their faculty size to ensure the results would reflect the full diversity of the campus and reduce the chances of any one group being over- or under-represented (Lohr, 2019).

Data Collection Process

The survey was built using Google Forms and designed with user-friendliness in mind. It included clear, closed-ended questions using a 5-point Likert scale, along with some demographic questions to better understand who was responding. To reach as many students as possible, the survey link was shared through university emails and on social media platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram—places where students already spend much time (Groves et al., 2011). The survey ran for four weeks, giving students plenty of time to respond. Weekly reminders helped keep engagement up. Using an online format turned out to be especially effective—not only did it suit students' digital habits, but it also made the whole process faster, more flexible, and cost-effective compared to traditional paper-based surveys.

4. Results

Demographic Profile of Respondents

The demographic data collected from the 430 respondents reveal a diverse student population at UiTM Shah Alam. These demographic profiles provide a breakdown of respondents' faculty affiliation, age group, and gender, highlighting the diverse nature of the sample. The sample involved students from various faculties of the whole campus. This diversity ensures a comprehensive insight into the perceptions across different academic disciplines.

Table 1: Demographic Distribution of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Faculty	Art and Design	72	16.7
	Architecture and Engineering	71	16.5
	Computer Science	70	16.3
	Business	70	16.3
	Law	41	9.5
	Communication	37	8.6
	Theatre	39	9.1
	Applied Science	30	7
		430	100%
Age group	18 – 22	249	57.9
	23 – 27	180	41.6
	28 – 32	1	0.5
	32 and above	0	0
		430	100%
Gender	Female	239	55.8
	Male	191	44.2
		430	100%

An analysis of the respondents' faculties revealed that the Faculty of Art and Design had the highest representation, with 72 respondents (16.7%). The Faculty of Architecture and Engineering (n=71, 16.5%) follows the frequency. The Faculty of Computer Science and the Faculty of Business shared the same data, resulting in 70 respondents each (16.3%). The Faculty of Law (n=41, 9.5%), Faculty of Communication (n=37, 8.6%), Faculty of Theater (n=39, 9.1%), and Faculty of Applied Science (n=30, 7.0%) constituted the remaining respondents.

The survey targeted young adults and adults. The age range options for "young adults" were 18-22 years old and 23-27 years old, while the options for "adults" were 28-32 years old and above 32 years old. The majority of respondents fell within the young adult category, with 57.9% (249 respondents) being between 18 and 22 years old and 41.6% (180 respondents) being between 23 and 27 years old. There was minimal representation from the adult age groups, with only 0.5% (1 respondent) falling within the 28-32 age range and none falling above 32 years old. In terms of gender, the survey sample leaned slightly female, with 55.8% (239 respondents) identifying as female and 44.2% (191 respondents) identifying as male.

Descriptive Analysis

Table 2 provides insights into the specific marketing factors influencing student perceptions. The findings reveal that engaging content encountered on social media platforms, such as Instagram and Facebook, significantly impacts students' interest and willingness to try viral food products. Price also emerged as a crucial factor in shaping perceptions. The finding suggests that, although students in general are open to trying viral food products, their ultimate decision is significantly influenced by the perceived value for money. Products considered to offer a good balance between price and quality were met with higher acceptance rates among the respondents. Finally, brand recognition emerged as another critical determinant. Well-established brands tend to be viewed more favorably, suggesting that familiarity with a brand can significantly impact consumer behavior toward viral food trends.

Table 2: Overall mean score of the variables

		<i>N</i>	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
1.	Social media	430	1	5	4.316	.368
2.	Price	430	1	5	4.155	.519
3.	Branding	430	1	5	4.368	.444
4.	Perception	430	1	5	4.652	.305

Note: The items were measured on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree)

Regression Analysis

Regression analysis is a powerful statistical tool for constructing mathematical models that elucidate potential relationships and functional associations between variables. In this study, the research objectives and hypotheses were used in this analysis. The findings of the regression analyses are presented in the following table, providing a comprehensive overview of the results. The researchers employed multiple regression analysis to analyze all the independent variables (social media marketing, price, and brand recognition) simultaneously with the dependent variable (students' perception of viral food products), as presented in Table 3. The analysis yielded statistically significant positive relationships between each independent variable and the dependent variable, supporting the hypotheses (H1, H2, and H3) formulated earlier in the study. Hence, the regression analysis identified brand recognition as the factor exerting the strongest influence on student perception, followed by price and social media marketing. A detailed summary of the hypothesis testing is presented in Table 4.

Table 3: Summary of regression analysis

		<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β
1.	(Constant)	-.164	.134	
2.	Social media	.127	.042	.127**
3.	Price	.180	.058	.138**
4.	Branding	.748	.056	.668***

*Note: $r^2 = .795$, ** $p < .005$, *** $p < .001$.*

Table 4: Summary of Hypothesis Testing

	Hypotheses	<i>B</i>	Results
1.	H1: There is a significant relationship between social media marketing and the impact of the perception of a viral food product	0.127	Achieved
2.	H2: There is a significant relationship between the price of viral food products	0.138	Achieved

and the perception of viral food products			
3.	H3: There is a significant relationship between the level of brand recognition and the perception of viral food products	0.668	Achieved

Discussion

This research investigates the perceptions of UiTM Shah Alam students towards viral food products heavily marketed on social media platforms. The study specifically examines the influence of three key factors: marketing strategies employed on social media, pricing strategies, and brand recognition. The findings, as detailed in Table 3, provide statistical support for the hypothesis that these factors significantly predict student perceptions of viral food products. Furthermore, the analysis reveals that these factors collectively explain a substantial portion of the variance in student perceptions. This underscores the critical importance of marketers prioritizing these elements when crafting promotional strategies for food products within a university environment.

The first objective of this study was to determine the impact of social media marketing on students' perception of viral food products ($\beta = 0.127$, $p < .005$). This finding aligns with prior research by Zhang (2023), who demonstrated a significant influence of social media marketing on consumer behavior related to food products. Their study suggests that social media marketing strategies foster positive attitudes toward food items and purchase intentions. Similarly, Saom et al. (2023) provide further support, highlighting the positive contribution of social media marketing to consumer trust in food products. This trust is likely built through information sharing on the products' quality, safety, and health benefits. Additionally, Irshad et al. (2020) link social media marketing to increased consumer purchase intention, while Zheng (2023) emphasizes the significant role of social media platforms in promoting food-related practices. Collectively, these studies suggest that consumers are more likely to experiment with new food products endorsed by social media influencers or shared by their peers on these platforms.

The findings further support the achievement of the second objective, revealing a significant positive relationship between the price of viral food products and students' perception of them ($\beta = 0.138$, $p < .005$). Various factors, including cultural background, can influence this association between price and perceived quality (Faisal & Ekawanto, 2022). Building on prior research by Büyükdağ (2021), the study suggests that consumers often utilize price as a heuristic to assess food product quality. Furthermore, research indicates that highly engaged consumers are more likely to rely on price as a quality indicator compared to those with lower engagement levels. Therefore, marketers crafting pricing strategies, particularly for novel or unfamiliar products, should consider the target audience's level of involvement (Ao et al., 2023). Konuk (2019) further emphasizes this point, highlighting that consumer price assessments are shaped by the context in which products are presented. Schivinski et al. (2019) contribute by demonstrating that individuals with greater knowledge about a product category are less likely to rely solely on price as a quality indicator. Their research suggests that consumers perceive food items as higher quality when presented in upscale settings, even if the price remains constant compared to less luxurious environments.

The study's findings also support the achievement of the third objective, demonstrating a strong positive relationship between brand recognition and students' perceptions of viral food products ($\beta = 0.668$, $p < .001$). Brand recognition refers to the degree of consumer familiarity with a food product's brand, encompassing their ability to recall and remember the brand name and its associated products (Hasan & Sohail, 2020). Likewise, the study's findings align with prior research highlighting the positive influence of effective viral marketing initiatives on brand recognition among target audiences (Mustikasari & Widaningsih, 2018; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2020; Puriwat & Tripopsakul, 2021). The results also demonstrate that effective viral marketing can have a significant and positive impact on brand preference among targeted audiences. This finding is similar to those reported by Wang (2019) and Arici and Arici (2021), who highlighted the positive impact of viral marketing on customer-based brand equity and purchase intention. Finally, recognition refers to a consumer's ability to identify a brand name when presented with it (Azzahara & Yafiz, 2024). Moreover, Ao et al. (2023) further emphasize the potential of brand recognition to drive sales and expand market share. Therefore, this study highlights the crucial role of establishing brand recognition in promoting customer loyalty and maintaining a competitive edge, particularly within the food industry.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examines UiTM Shah Alam students' perception of viral food products, revealing their significant impact on student preferences. Social media platforms, particularly Instagram and TikTok, heavily influence students. These platforms serve as primary showcases for viral food products, where visually appealing and unique features capture students' attention and spark curiosity. Consequently, students perceive viral food products as trendy, exciting, and worthy of exploration. The power of social media in promoting these products cannot be understated, as it demonstrably shapes student perceptions and influences purchasing decisions. However, it is important to acknowledge that individual preferences and past experiences also contribute to shaping overall perception. In conclusion, the study highlights the substantial influence of social media and the desire to be part of current food trends on UiTM Shah Alam students' perception of viral food products.

This study is not without its limitations. First, the main limitation lies in the sample population, whereby the focus is on UiTM Shah Alam students, which reduces the generalizability of the findings. Future research should consider a broader scope, which includes students from a wider range of universities and geographical locations, to get a comprehensive understanding of student perceptions towards viral food products. Secondly, the study design could benefit from a more extensive data collection process. A wider variety of viewpoints could be captured through a more expansive data collection effort. Future research might consider employing alternative research methods, such as focus groups or in-depth interviews, to gather in-depth and complex data on students' perceptions. By analyzing student responses through these alternative methods, researchers could gain a deeper understanding of how students interact with and form their opinions on viral food trends. Addressing these limitations and pursuing further research in the recommended areas will ultimately contribute to a richer and more comprehensive understanding of student perceptions about viral food products.

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