

Social Media, Destination Framing and its Impact on Culinary Heritage Tourism from the Traveller's Perspective

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Abstract

The study explores how the framing of culinary heritage destinations influences travellers' perceptions, with a particular focus on social media platforms. Qualitative research was conducted through in-depth, face-to-face, and semi-structured interviews with twelve participants in Malaysia with active social media accounts. The research findings highlighted the significant role of social media and emphasised the importance of utilising effective platforms and strategic framing to promote culinary heritage destinations and traditional foods. The study further suggests that framing culinary heritage destinations within a social media context can influence travellers to visit these destinations for their culinary offerings.

Keywords: Culinary heritage; Destination frame; Social media; Tourism

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1.0 Introduction

In today's digital landscape, social media has dramatically transformed how travellers discover, experience, and share their journeys. This shift is particularly significant in the realm of culinary heritage tourism, where a destination's diverse and rich gastronomic traditions have become central to the tourist experience (Ismail & Abdul Latip, 2024). Culinary heritage tourism, defined as travel with the specific intent of exploring and enjoying the food and beverages unique to a region, has grown in popularity as modern travellers increasingly seek authentic and immersive cultural experiences (Hjalager & Richards, 2002).

Moreover, social media plays an important role in shaping travellers' perceptions and decisions regarding culinary destinations. Platforms such as Instagram and Facebook continuously expose users to curated images, reviews, and stories that create specific narratives about destinations. These narratives influence not only travellers' expectations but also their choices of where to visit through the formation of the destination image portrayed to the public (Javed et al., 2020).

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Destination framing within the context of social media involves emphasising certain features of a location while possibly omitting others. This selective portrayal can significantly influence how travellers perceive and choose their destinations (Hunter, 2016). For instance, a location depicted as a culinary hotspot, filled with vibrant markets, traditional cooking classes, and delectable street food, is likely to attract food enthusiasts eager to explore its offerings (Mkono & Tribe, 2017). Conversely, if these culinary aspects are not highlighted, the same destination might seem less appealing to those specifically interested in culinary tourism, leading them to choose other locations.

However, there is a significant gap in understanding how these social media portrayals influence travellers' intentions to visit destinations highlighted as significant culinary heritage sites. The issue lies in the potential for some destinations, despite having rich culinary heritage products, to be inadequately framed on social media, which hinders their ability to reach their full potential. This research seeks to address this issue by exploring the impact of social media framing on travellers' intentions and how it affects their perceptions of, and decisions to visit, culinary heritage destinations.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Culinary heritage and tourism

Culinary heritage food plays a vital role in shaping the tourism industry by offering visitors a unique opportunity to immerse themselves in the local food culture (Galati et al., 2023). In the context of Malaysia, with its rich and diverse ethnic and cultural background, culinary tourism takes on even greater significance. It serves as a gateway for tourists to explore and experience the vast array of traditional dishes and cooking styles that reflect the country's multicultural identity (May et al., 2021). The influence of culinary tourism on the economy cannot be overstated, as it represents a substantial contribution to the nation's overall economic landscape (Yong et al., 2022). Furthermore, it serves as a cornerstone of the local economy, influencing various sectors and contributing to the growth and sustainability of businesses involved in food production, hospitality, and tourism services (Wondirad et al., 2021). By leveraging its unique culinary heritage, a destination can position itself as a desirable destination for travellers seeking an authentic and immersive cultural experience (Yong et al., 2022).

2.2 Social media and tourist behaviour

In the rapidly evolving landscape of today's world, the impactful integration of social media into the fabric of our daily lives has become immensely significant (Zhu et al., 2023). This pervasive influence extends its reach not only to the tech-savvy millennials and younger generations but also resonates deeply with adults and the elderly (Zanzaizman et al., 2024). Social media has transcended its role as a mere platform for interaction and now plays a vital role in facilitating communication, information acquisition, and social connectivity. It is not surprising that an increasing amount of information is now sought through digital platforms, marking a noticeable shift away from traditional printed materials such as newspapers, magazines and books.

Social media has become essential for promoting tourism products and destinations, allowing travellers to share their experiences and influence others through user-generated content (UGC) (Zheng, 2023). Platforms such as Instagram and Facebook help destinations gain visibility, especially lesser-known places, through real-time sharing of photos, videos, and reviews. UGC has proven to be a more trusted and authentic source of information compared to traditional advertising (García-Carrión et al., 2023; Li et al., 2021). Additionally, tourism businesses can directly engage with their audience, creating stronger connections and improving customer relationships (Zanzaizman et al., 2024). Despite challenges such as managing negative feedback and the risk of overtourism, social media remains a powerful tool in shaping tourism trends and influencing travel decisions (Kim et al., 2017). This highlights the importance of studying culinary heritage through the lens of social media from a traveller's perspective to better understand how to promote and sustain heritage through innovative techniques.

2.3 Culinary heritage destination image

The image of the destination is a crucial factor that significantly influences tourists' decision-making process and behaviour. Thus, it contributes to the importance of destination framing (Yilmaz et al., 2020). Gastronomy tourism, a rapidly expanding sector within the travel industry, provides destinations with a unique platform to showcase their cultural distinctiveness and diverse culinary offerings, setting them apart from their competitors (Yong et al., 2022). By leveraging their gastronomic attributes, destinations can effectively communicate their cultural identity while simultaneously appealing to the evolving tastes and preferences of an increasingly diverse traveller demographic (Sio et al., 2024). In order to maintain a competitive edge and establish a strong destination image, it is imperative for destinations to proactively identify and emphasise the attributes that contribute to their unique identity (Yilmaz et al., 2020). This requires a strategic approach that involves highlighting the distinctive gastronomic features, culinary traditions, and local flavours that encapsulate the essence of the destination.

For prospective travellers, the process of forming a perception of a destination's image involves seeking relevant information that enables them to align their personal preferences and interests with the specific cultural and culinary offerings of the destination (Sio et al., 2024). This alignment allows travellers to develop a holistic impression of the destination's image, thereby influencing their travel intentions and decision-making processes (Yilmaz et al., 2020; Yong et al., 2022). Nevertheless, the task of identifying and projecting the desired destination image through its gastronomic characteristics is a multifaceted challenge that necessitates a comprehensive exploration of the attributes emphasised by destination stakeholders and authorities (Yilmaz et al., 2020). By integrating the perspectives derived from social media and the representation of a destination's culinary heritage, a deeper understanding of the intricate relationship

between food, culture, and the destination image can be achieved, as supported by previous scholars (Asif & Fazel, 2024; Zhu et al., 2023). This holistic approach allows for a more nuanced comprehension of how a destination's unique culinary heritage contributes to shaping its overall image and appeal, thereby providing valuable insights for tourism stakeholders, policymakers, and industry professionals (Kim et al., 2017; Sio et al., 2024).

3.0 Methodology

The study used a qualitative research approach with purposive sampling and conducted face-to-face interviews using a semi-structured interview protocol (Aspers & Corte, 2021). These interviews took place in various states across Malaysia to ensure the representation of different geographical areas and enhance the generalisability of the findings. The study included 12 active participants, all aged 18 years or older, who were active on social media. Their responses were integral to the data analysis.

The interview protocol was carefully designed and validated with input from five field experts. It consisted of open-ended questions aimed at exploring participants' perceptions of social media framing, their intentions to visit culinary heritage destinations, and the factors influencing their travel decisions. The questioning began with general inquiries about participants' social media usage, followed by more specific questions about how they interact with travel-related content, particularly posts related to culinary heritage. Probing questions were used to gather deeper insights into how social media content affects their destination perceptions, such as, "What types of social media posts influence your interest related to heritage food?" and "How does seeing culinary heritage online impact your decision to visit specific destinations?"

The data was collected, transcribed, and analysed using NVivo software to facilitate thematic analysis. This involved identifying and coding key themes and patterns within the data to draw meaningful conclusions. The use of NVivo enabled a systematic approach to data management and interpretation, ensuring a thorough and accurate analysis of the interview content. The interview data has been validated through triangulation and expert review.

4.0 Findings

In the analysis, four significant findings emerged from the interview sessions conducted with the 12 respondents. This sample size was deemed sufficient as data saturation was achieved. These findings led to the identification of four distinct themes within the study context, which are discussed in detail below.

4.1 Social media and destination framing

The informants generally agree that social media provides a platform for culinary heritage destinations to engage directly with audiences and share their unique food cultures. It assists in information sharing and developing the destination's frame, shaping how a location is perceived and appreciated by potential visitors. The findings highlight social media's pivotal role in indirectly promoting destinations and traditional foods, which is also supported by previous studies (Sio et al., 2024; Zanzaizman et al., 2024). Individuals can leverage their devices to collectively promote locations at no cost, effectively sharing messages with a global audience and enhancing the reach and impact of the promotion. Social media exposes people to various foods and their origins, encouraging them to visit such places and creating curiosity and a desire to experience them firsthand. People often decide what to eat and which new foods to try based on what they see on social media, influencing their dining experiences and preferences. Thus, social media benefits destinations that lack exposure and are not well-known by providing publicity and potential traffic, as supported by other studies (Wondirad et al., 2021). Social media is a powerful tool for promoting and framing destinations to attract potential visitors, significantly enhancing a destination's visibility and appeal when employed effectively. Collectively, these insights emphasise the importance of social media in promoting and preserving traditional foods and destinations, ensuring broader exposure, engagement, and interest in culinary heritage and cultural locations.

By using our phones, we can promote the location through the collective efforts of society for free. The message can be effectively shared with a global audience, "Informant 5".

Social media exposes people to foods and their origins, which encourages them to visit those places "Informant 1".

When traditional food programs are advertised on social media, the attraction and sharing happen more frequently, drawing in many visitors, "Informant 10".

4.2 Information sharing and destination framing

Through discussions with informants, several key insights about the role of social media in information sharing and destination framing have been revealed. Social media platforms offer more interactive search results with features like videos and music, making the experience both easy and entertaining. One advantage is that social media provides up-to-date information, in contrast to guidebooks, which may only be published semi-annually or annually, thus risking outdated information. This is also highlighted by previous studies (Zheng, 2023; Zhu et al., 2023). Thus, social media plays a vital role in helping users discover new foods and places, such as the must-try dish Asam Pedas in Melaka, which many people actively search for online. This engagement contributes to a destination's framing

in relation to culinary heritage. These insights underscore the importance of social media in providing timely, engaging, and relevant information, effectively framing and promoting destinations alongside their unique food cultures.

If we use social media, the search results are more interactive. For example, TikTok provides videos with music and other features, making it easy and entertaining for me, "Informant 11".

Information on social media is also up-to-date and latest, unlike guidebooks which might be published every 6 months or once a year. Therefore, the information could be outdated, "Informant 10".

Social media plays a role in helping us find information about foods we've never tried and places we haven't visited. For example, in Melaka, Asam Pedas is a must-try dish that people often search for on social media "Informant 11".

Young people prefer foreign foods and trends from social media, often overlooking local traditional cuisine. Thus, focusing on social media is crucial "Informant 2".

4.3 Culinary heritage destination's influence on travelers

The findings highlight the importance of using effective platforms and strategic framing to promote and preserve culinary heritage. It is crucial to provide accessible information and exposure to draw attention to and underscore the significance of culinary heritage. Promoting national or local food is essential as some of it shares cultural ties with neighbouring countries like Malaysia and Indonesia. It contributes to the preservation and celebration of traditional cuisine, as supported by previous scholars (Ismail & Abdul Latip, 2024). When used effectively, social media can significantly promote and showcase destinations to attract potential visitors (Yılmaz et al., 2020). In addition, the findings revealed that traditional culinary tourism should be clearly positioned as a key product for each state or district, as not all states or districts currently emphasise their culinary heritage as a significant tourism product.

Given the surging popularity of culinary tourism, it is imperative for all states or districts to actively promote their local cuisine as a primary attraction. By doing so, they can effectively tap into this lucrative market and draw more visitors. These insights highlight the critical need for strategic information sharing and thoughtful framing in promoting traditional foods, positioning culinary heritage as a vital component of cultural tourism. Embracing this approach not only enhances the visibility of local dishes but also fosters a deeper appreciation for the rich culinary traditions that define each state, ultimately contributing to sustainable tourism growth and community engagement.

Yes, to make traditional foods famous and preserved, there needs to be a platform where information about these foods is accessible and exposed to users. Effective framing of this information is crucial to capture attention and highlight the significance of the traditional foods, "Informant 8".

Promoting Malaysian food is crucial as it's shared with countries like Indonesia. It highlights our connection to traditional cuisine, "Informant 5".

Traditional culinary tourism should be clearly framed as a key product for each state. Not all states highlight their traditional foods as significant tourism products, but all should promote their local cuisine as a key attraction. Nowadays, people are more interested in food when travelling, with food hunting becoming a major trend in the tourism industry, "Informant 9".

4.4 Underframe destination and loss of potential

The discussion highlights a significant gap in the promotion of culinary heritage across different states or districts. Not all states prioritise their culinary heritage as vital tourism products, with some focusing more on other aspects of their attractions. For instance, while states like Penang, Melaka, and Kelantan in Malaysia prominently feature their culinary heritage, Pahang's local dishes, for example, do not receive the same level of promotional attention. Instead, Pahang's tourism marketing often emphasises its nature and highland attractions with very minimal exposure to its culinary heritage products, which left culinary heritage products behind. Similar situations occur in other states or districts as well. This disparity results in some traditional foods being underrepresented and less frequently showcased on diverse social media feeds. Although different destinations may have specific tourism products they wish to highlight, a balance and better visibility for other tourism products of the destination should not be overlooked. Ensuring that culinary heritage receive appropriate recognition can enhance the overall tourism experience and foster greater appreciation for the unique culinary heritage of each region.

To address this issue, a more balanced approach to promoting traditional foods is essential, ensuring they receive the visibility and recognition they deserve alongside other attractions. Elevating local heritage foods can attract a broader range of travellers, including those who may not be interested in other currently promoted tourism products. This shift not only opens up new possibilities and opportunities for tourism but also contributes to the preservation of the region's culinary heritage.

Not all states highlight their traditional foods as significant tourism products. All states should promote their local cuisine as a key attraction. Nowadays, people are more interested in food when travelling, with food hunting becoming a major trend in the tourism industry, "Informant 9".

Some states or tourist locations did not highlight their traditional foods, even if they have them. The promotion often focuses on other aspects. For example, Pahang's traditional food isn't as emphasised as a major attraction compared to places like Penang, Melaka,

and Kelantan. While all states have their traditional foods, not all are fully promoted as key attractions. This lack of emphasis means there isn't enough sharing to appear frequently on diverse social media feeds, "Informant 8".

The lack of content showcasing local Malaysian traditional food results in limited exposure to the public, "Informant 9".

5.0 Discussion

The findings of this study highlighted the role social media played in promoting culinary heritage destinations and traditional foods. Platforms like TikTok, Facebook, and Instagram provide opportunities to engage with audiences, share distinctive food cultures, and influence perceptions of destinations among potential visitors. These platforms allow for the creation and dissemination of engaging content, such as videos and music, which can make the promotion of culinary heritage destinations both accessible and enjoyable. Unlike traditional guidebooks that could become outdated quickly, social media offers timely and relevant information for potential travellers.

One advantage of social media is its capacity to reach a global audience at little or no cost, as users can promote destinations by sharing posts. This grassroots approach exposed a broader audience to various traditional foods and their origins, potentially fostering interest in experiencing these foods firsthand. The visual and interactive nature of social media content could also influence dining decisions and preferences, encouraging individuals to try new foods they encounter online.

Furthermore, the study emphasised the importance of effective platforms and strategic framing for promoting and preserving culinary heritage. By providing accessible and engaging information, social media can help ensure wider exposure and interest in culinary heritage and cultural locations. This is particularly relevant for promoting Malaysian food and contributing to the preservation and appreciation of heritage food. However, the study identifies an imbalance in the promotion of heritage foods across different states or districts, resulting in some foods being less represented on social media.

To address this, there may be value in promoting traditional foods from all states or districts, ensuring they receive appropriate visibility alongside other attractions. Coordinated campaigns that highlight the unique culinary offerings of each state or district could utilise social media's potential to reach and engage a wider audience. By considering culinary heritage as an important product of locals, tourism authorities might leverage the growing interest in food tourism to attract more visitors. This approach can enhance the visibility of culinary heritage and support its preservation as part of cultural heritage.

5.1 Study limitation and future research direction

This study had certain limitations that should be noted. First, the focus on specific social media platforms may not encompass all available digital marketing strategies for promoting culinary heritage. Additionally, the qualitative nature of the research may limit the generalisability of the findings to broader populations. While the sample size provided valuable insights, it might not have fully represented the diverse range of opinions and experiences across different demographics. The study also primarily relied on self-reported data, which could have introduced some biases.

Future research may consider exploring a broader range of digital marketing strategies beyond social media to identify additional avenues for promoting culinary heritage. Expanding the sample size and including a wider demographic could enhance the applicability of the findings. Comparative studies across various regions or countries may also provide insights into effective practices for promoting traditional foods. Finally, examining the long-term effects of social media promotion on visitor behaviour and culinary tourism growth could further contribute to understanding this area.

5.2 Implications of study

The academic implications of this study highlighted the necessity for further research on the strategic use of social media in tourism marketing, particularly in the context of culinary heritage. It suggested a need for deeper exploration into how different social media platforms could be optimised to target specific demographics and cultural segments. Academics can investigate the long-term effects of social media campaigns on destination popularity and visitor satisfaction, as well as how these platforms can be integrated into broader tourism marketing strategies.

Practically, this study offered valuable insights for tourism authorities and marketers. It underscored the importance of utilising social media to its fullest potential by creating engaging and up-to-date content that resonates with a global audience. Tourism boards should consider implementing coordinated social media campaigns that highlight the unique culinary offerings of each state, ensuring that underrepresented regions receive adequate promotion. By leveraging the power of social media, tourism authorities can attract more visitors, enhance the visibility of traditional foods, and contribute to the preservation of culinary heritage. This balanced and strategic approach to promotion could ultimately drive greater interest and investment in culinary tourism, benefiting local economies and preserving cultural identities.

6.0 Conclusion

This qualitative study highlighted the role of social media in framing culinary heritage destinations and promoting traditional foods from the traveller's perspective. Social media platforms like TikTok, Facebook, and Instagram provided avenues for sharing unique food cultures and shaping destination images. The study stressed the need for a balanced approach to promote traditional foods across all Malaysian states, addressing disparities in their current representation. Effective use of social media can enhance visibility and global

interest, and drive culinary tourism. For tourism stakeholders, these findings emphasised the need for strategic social media campaigns to preserve culinary heritage and bolster local economies.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This paper addresses the gap in how social media framing impacts travellers' decisions to visit culinary heritage destinations. It offers insights for better marketing strategies, supports sustainable tourism by promoting lesser-known areas, and contributes to academic research on social media's role in tourism.

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