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Exploring Viral Marketing Strategies in the Restaurant Industry: A phenomenological study

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Abstract

This study explores the impact of viral marketing on the restaurant industry, employing a phenomenological, qualitative approach. In-depth interviews with restaurant operators revealed social media's pivotal role, highlighting its cost-effectiveness and broad reach. The research investigated various viral elements, including campaigns, visuals, and hashtags, as well as influencer marketing and word of mouth. Findings emphasize viral marketing as a potent brand promotion tool, underscoring the importance of building connections and trust through personalized content. This study offers practical insights for restaurant entrepreneurs, advocating adaptable marketing strategies. Future research should further explore the interplay among social media, word of mouth, and influencer marketing in this dynamic sector.

Keywords: Viral Marketing; Social media; Cost effectiveness; Brand awareness

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1.0 Introduction

Viral marketing, often likened to word-of-mouth (WOM) communication, serves as a cost-effective strategy for promoting products, reaching potential customers, and enhancing brand awareness (Puriwat & Tripopsakul, 2021). The extensive use of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram provides significant insights into customer interaction behaviours in service sectors (Kanimozhi & Chenniaapan, 2023). This phenomenon makes viral marketing an indispensable tool for disseminating online advertisements.

In the contemporary era of social networking, advertisements have to be more creative, interactive, and cost-effective. Viral marketing is a leading modern marketing trend, enabling businesses to reach large audiences at lower cost, enhance brand awareness, and achieve higher conversion rates (Çakirkaya & Afşar, 2024). While mobile phones enable rapid information spread, the saturation of

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digital content demands unique and impactful delivery. Marketers face the challenge of making their advertisements stand out amidst fierce competition for consumer attention.

Customers' thoughts and feedback on a product or service posted on online platforms foster electronic word of mouth (E-WOM) or viral communication (Donthu et al., 2021). For small and medium enterprises (SMEs), particularly in the food sector, strategic planning that balances costs and effectiveness is crucial. This necessitates insights from restaurant operators on the operational impact of viral marketing, the factors driving its use, methods for content creation, and metrics for success. Marketers must continually adapt strategies by tracking trends and understanding evolving customer needs.

In light of this, the study aims to explore the implementation and effectiveness of viral marketing towards restaurateurs in Selangor, Malaysia. Four research objectives are guiding the direction of the study; 1) to explore the application of viral marketing in the marketing of the restaurants, 2) to investigate the methods that the restaurants' marketer uses to create viral content and the measurement method's used to gauge the successful viral content, 3) to identify the best social media tool to market the restaurants, and 4) to uncover the impact of viral marketing used by the restaurants in term of cost-effectiveness, brand awareness and customers patronization.

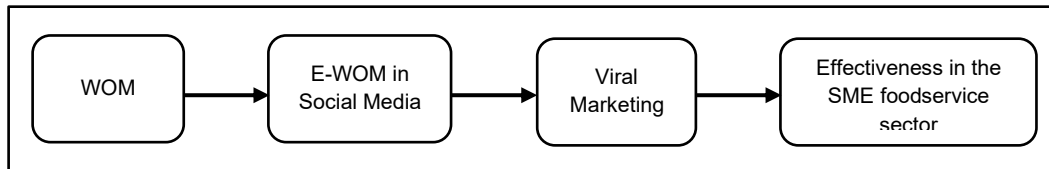


Figure 1: Summary of the study's context

This research aims to address knowledge gaps in the practical aspects of viral marketing from restaurateurs' perspectives. Figure 1 illustrates the visual summary of the study's context. Additionally, it aims to provide insights and guidance to entrepreneurs looking to adopt viral marketing, drawing on restaurateurs' experiences to reach customers through effective advertising. Moreover, the study seeks to prompt readers to take corrective action to address the identified deficiencies in advertising strategies. The primary objective of this phenomenological study is to investigate the implementation and effectiveness of viral marketing among restaurateurs in Selangor. In this context, viral marketing is a strategy that leverages existing social networks to promote a product.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Viral marketing

Unlike traditional word-of-mouth, eWOM serves as a guiding beacon, helping consumers make wise online purchasing decisions and navigate the limitless digital terrain, reaching a larger audience with unprecedented speed and scale (Ngo et al., 2024a). Viral marketing has emerged from technological innovation, participatory culture, and changes in customer psychographics and behaviour. It involves marketing a product or service to consumers through their network of relationships (Çakirkaya & Afşar, 2024). Businesses are leveraging social media platforms to run engaging, viral marketing campaigns that help them attract large numbers of prospects at low cost. Compared with traditional advertising, viral marketing can generate higher levels of consumer awareness and purchase intentions (Puriwat & Tripopsakul, 2021). Numerous academics have investigated the effectiveness and efficiency of viral content, arguing that viral marketing approaches are less expensive and offer more precise customer targeting than traditional marketing strategies (Singh et al., 2025). However, the effectiveness of viral marketing initiatives in shaping customer behaviour remains debated in the marketing world (du Plessis, 2022). Thus, investigating the influence of viral marketing on social media is necessary, as it leverages the marketing potential of restaurant businesses. Thus, exploring the impact of viral marketing on social media is necessary, as it leverages restaurants' marketing potential in the industry.

2.2 Social Media

In the digital age, people increasingly use online platforms for information access, such as social media, websites, and blogs (Ngo et al., 2024b). Recent social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, allow users to create and share personal content, such as images and videos. Not only do customers rely on social media platforms for product information (Chivandi et al., 2020), but restaurant owners also use them to communicate with their followers and peers, seeking their feedback and thoughts (Cheung et al., 2021). On the other hand, social media has become an essential means of communicating with key stakeholders for business-to-business (B2B) firms, opening new possibilities for E-WOM across various platforms with distinct functional attributes and catering to diverse segments of society (Bourguignon et al., 2025). This phenomenon has created new channels of communication and involvement between businesses and consumers, transforming the landscape of eWOM in the current economy.

2.2.1 Social media marketing

Baber and Baber (2022) define social media marketing (SMM) as the promotion of websites, products, or services through online social platforms to reach wider communities. SMM helps marketers generate excitement and inform customers about organizational news. This shift focuses from "selling" to "building connections", which is crucial for repeat purchases and brand loyalty. Besides, engagement behaviour has emerged as an important performance metric in B2B digital and social media marketing, as it supports the development and maintenance of connections while driving better sales and profitability (Balaji et al., 2023; Lim & Rasul, 2022). Additionally, engaged clients become loyal customers, which every business believes is more inclined to support the brand over time in terms of lifetime value. Undoubtedly, social media has become a global phenomenon, offering SMEs ideal platforms for engaging with online audiences and attracting prospective customers to their businesses (Sharabati et al., 2024). Little is known about how businesses use social media platforms for various purposes and how they efficiently drive interaction across contexts. According to Bourguignon et al. (2025), existing research is oddly silent on whether firms should adopt marketing strategies for each platform and which communication techniques promote higher engagement in different contexts, even though each platform has distinct functions and strengths and is likely to attract a wide range of customers. Indeed, understanding which content strategy works best for each channel is highly beneficial to restaurateurs.

2.2.2 The application of social media marketing

Viral marketing heavily relies on social media. Although the rapidly evolving technological landscape necessitates that SMEs adopt digital marketing to maintain industry relevance, many still encounter challenges with resources, skills, and technology when implementing social media marketing strategies (Alharthey, 2023). In the restaurant sector, operators use social networking sites (SNSs) for aesthetics (Gambetti & Han, 2022), while diners seek information and share experiences (Kim & Jang, 2018). Therefore, restaurateurs widely adopt SMM for its efficiency and cost-effective reach (Han et al., 2023), fostering transparency and brand identity through engagement, such as photo contests (Dossena et al., 2021). This aligns with the recent study by Sharabati et al. (2024), who found that engaging with customers on digital channels to understand their behaviour and preferences enables organisations to deliver better experiences and services, as well as to market more effectively. Consequently, this viral marketing application demonstrates how effectively it can leverage social media to influence attitudes and purchasing preferences.

3.0 Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach to explore restaurateurs' perspectives on viral marketing. The qualitative approach is the most appropriate, as it aims to comprehend complex human lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this case, the researchers used the phenomenological research design to evaluate restaurateurs' actual experiences and viewpoints on viral marketing through extensive, in-depth interviews. Moreover, when identifying the key traits proves challenging, the qualitative method provides an opportunity for exploration and is beneficial (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The research used a purposive sampling method to select participants with expertise relevant to the research questions, focusing on a specific group deemed suitable for the study. In this instance, the selected participants were restaurateurs who have utilized social media as a platform for their advertising efforts. This ensured that the participants could provide rich case studies regarding viral marketing strategies.

Semi-structured interviews were used to explore participants' perceptions and opinions. Open-ended questions facilitated in-depth insights and clarifications, fostering interaction and new ideas. This approach enhances interview validity by ensuring a thorough understanding of the topic. The interviews lasted from 35 to 47 minutes and were conducted at the participants' food establishments at their convenience. Researchers digitally recorded all sessions and transcribed verbatim.

The data analysis began with a thorough immersion in the collected textual and audio recordings to extract pertinent insights. The researchers utilized a six-phase theme analysis methodology, as delineated by Braun and Clarke (2006). This involved iteratively reviewing the data against the research's purpose and key questions to identify emergent themes and patterns. Information was then systematically categorized into cohesive categories. Subsequent steps involve assessing identified patterns and relationships within and between these categories, gauging the relative importance of different themes or variations in the study. Lastly, the researchers interpreted the data to yield meaningful findings, using the derived themes and rich descriptions.

4.0 Findings

In this study, all five participants were based in Selangor, from different districts: two from Klang, two from Shah Alam, and one from Sekinchan. The interview included two types of restaurants: those operating for more than a year and those operating for less than a year. All restaurants have maintained their own Facebook pages with over 1,000 followers. Some of the participants were featured on television (TV) programs like *Jalan-Jalan Cari Makan (JJCM)*, *Malaysia Hari Ini (MHI)*, *Majalah 3*, and *Selamat Pagi Malaysia (SPM)*. Additionally, some restaurants received celebrity or popular page reviews, such as *Siakap Keli*, *Cempedak Cheese*, and *Oh! Bulan*. Table 1 presents the participants' demographic profiles. Meanwhile, Table 2 displays the themes derived from the data.

Table 1: Participants' profile

Informant	Place	Reviews
R1	Seksyen 7, Shah Alam	JJCM
R2	Kampung Jawa, Klang	Cempedak Cheese
R3	Jalan Kota Raja, Klang	Siakap Keli
R4	Pasir Panjang, Sekinchan	SPM
R5	Warung Lejen, Seksyen 27	MHI, Majalah 3, Oh! Bulan

Table 2: Themes developed from the data analysis

Themes	Description
<i>Application of viral marketing in the marketing of restaurants</i>	
Television programme	Preview of the Food Channel programme
Social media (FB Personal, FB Ads, and Instagram)	Build followers, target customers, promote products, and reviews
Influencer marketing	Help in promoting a source of reviews
Word-of-mouth	Suggestions from peers through social media interaction
<i>Methods used to create viral content</i>	
Campaigns	User-generated content
Picture	Attractive
Copywriting	Gain interest and curiosity
Video	FB Live
Name of menu	Catchy
Hashtag	Act as a search engine
<i>Methods used to gauge successful viral content</i>	
Range	Number of likes, shares, and views of videos
<i>Best social media tool</i>	
Facebook	User-friendly, high rate of spread and reach, well-organized
<i>Impact of viral marketing used by the restaurants</i>	
Cost-effectiveness	Cheaper than traditional marketing
Brand awareness	The brand becomes stronger and widely known
Customer patronization.	Related to good services and the quality of the food
Positive and negative reviews	Reviews that influenced people

The findings of this study were summarized as shown in Figure 2. This study's distinctive contribution is the observation that conventional television programs remain an important primary source for digital viral marketing. Furthermore, this study emphasizes the importance of creativity, particularly in catchy, intriguing menu names, as a vital aspect of viral content generation. The creative design of the menu name adds to viral marketing literature by driving customers' interest into buying intentions and digital sharing. Despite the popularity of social media platforms such as TikTok, this study surprisingly indicates that Facebook remains the best platform for local SME restaurateurs to build trust and establish organized connections with customers.

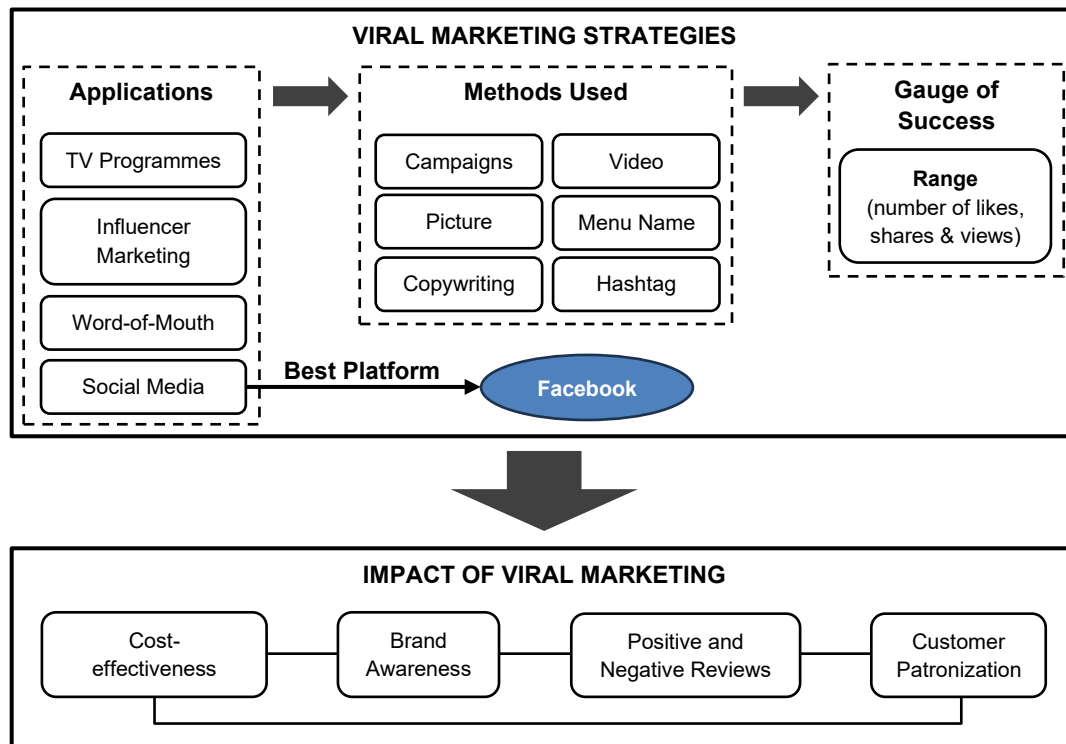


Figure 2: Summary linking of viral marketing strategies, mechanisms, and outcomes

5.0 Discussion

5.1 Application of viral marketing in the marketing of restaurants

Restaurateurs primarily integrate viral marketing through social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, which are crucial for brand identity and customer connection. These platforms offer affordability, spreadability, and reach for campaigns and follower growth. During interviews, participants highlighted various reasons for leveraging social media, including building followers, targeting customers, sharing content, disseminating reviews, and promoting services.

While acknowledging the rise of E-WOM, some restaurateurs still value traditional WOM through offline, personal information exchange, creating buzz and influencing purchasing decisions (Oliveira et al., 2020). However, given the ubiquity of social sharing, E-WOM has become a crucial variable in consumer behaviour models for the hospitality and service industries (Line et al., 2020), amplifying a restaurant's popularity and information dissemination. To explain the application of WOM, the participant stated that,

"...word-of-mouth is when you tell people about something interesting, and you want your circle of friends, or your family relatives, or your colleagues to know about that, so you pass the messages around..." (R1)

Besides, influencer marketing is instrumental for restaurateurs, leveraging opinion leaders such as celebrities and popular Facebook pages like *Siakap Keli* and *Oh! Bulan* is to reach broader audiences. This strategy leverages influential individuals and platforms to enhance brand awareness, shape reputation, and boost a restaurant's survival in a competitive market (Li et al., 2022). Two participants mentioned:

"...I use Facebook or Facebook Ads with Instagram. I will promote my restaurant and things that we sell. All that we have, service that we provide, and we need to choose our customers." (R4)

"...popular pages like Cempedak Cheese, Siakap Keli. If they post something, it will totally become a hit." (R2)

Finally, participating in popular TV programs is a powerful strategy for boosting a restaurant's brand and attracting customers quickly. Referral marketing on shows like *Jalan-Jalan Cari Makan (JJCM)*, *Majalah 3*, *Selamat Pagi Malaysia (SPM)*, and *Malaysia Hari Ini (MHI)* significantly enhances brand awareness across broad Malaysian segments, with restaurateurs affirming its power. Some participants asserted that appearing on these programs is among the most robust and effective ways to elevate their restaurant's status. This aligns with Dossena et al. (2021)'s findings, emphasizing that TV offers insights into product and service quality and engages in competent discussions and knowledge-sharing about various eateries. As a participant said:

*"...TV programmes are very effective in marketing. My page only had 800 or 1,000 followers before. However, after *Majalah 3* came by, my followers increased to 40,000 in one night. Many new customers are coming that night."* (R5)

This research demonstrates that traditional media marketing remains significant in the foodservice sector, despite new social media marketing trends that promote digital virality, particularly among SME restaurateurs in rural areas.

5.2 Methods used to create and gauge viral content

Restaurateurs must leverage creativity to produce viral content, utilizing campaigns, copywriting, images, videos, menu names, and hashtags. The restaurateurs used the term "reach" as a measure of viral content success. This statement aligns with it, as it is driven by increased broadband, social media, and online communities (Puriwat & Tripopsakul, 2021). Viral campaigns are designed to be creative and shareable, often evoking emotions or offering free value. Success hinges on surprise, humour, and curiosity, with user-generated content boosting effectiveness, providing free marketing, and fostering participation. This interactive approach drives digital engagement (Dabas et al., 2021). The participants did mention that,

"We have a selfie contest. It opens to customers who dine in our restaurant. Just take a selfie and tag our restaurant. The customer who receives the most likes and comments will be chosen as the winner. Moreover, the price is a free meal." (R4)

Other than that, effective copywriting is crucial for online marketing, demanding appealing, surprising, or curious content. Restaurateurs often learn this through templates or self-study. Well-chosen words positively influence purchase intentions, strengthen brand connections, and reinforce consumer-brand relationships (Sabri, 2021). Furthermore, attractive pictures are imperative for viral content. Appealing visuals, particularly of food or customers enjoying meals, entice sharing. The power of visuals in viral content mirrors the brain's superior ability to retain visual information (Li et al., 2022). This study further refines the nature of E-WOM applications by highlighting the importance of live-streamed content as a trust-building mechanism between the restaurateurs and their customers.

Video marketing emerges as a potent tool for engaging and sharing content, leveraging platforms like Facebook Live, YouTube, Instagram, and Snapchat. With millions watching daily, personalized videos, such as food preparation or interactive cooking classes, significantly boost brand awareness and customer attraction (Dabas et al., 2021) and are likely to go viral. The following excerpt evidences this:

"...do you know how many people view the video? We stream our sessions live on Facebook at times we believe will reach the highest number of online viewers. We had around 7,000 views. We do strategize the duration of time on our posting and our videos being posted on the Facebook page." (R1)

On the other hand, the restaurant menu is the heart of restaurant operations, functioning as a key communication and promotional tool. While most restaurateurs focus on digital marketing content, these findings underscore the importance of using catchy, intriguing menu names to spark customer interest. This is because unique menu names created curiosity about the products' identity, which influences customer attention and prompts sharing. Le et al. (2023) supported the statement that a well-designed menu, even with subtle changes, can influence customer attention and dish purchases, making it a vital marketing aspect. As mentioned by the participant:

“...For food, name it with something catchy. Meaning, when people hear the name, they will have a thought about it, although the name of the product does not mean the exact thing...” (R5)

Strategic use of hashtags simplifies content discovery on social media and enhances customer reach. Restaurateurs employ brand hashtags for unique promotion and campaign hashtags during sales or contests. For example, #bestrestaurantinShahAlam attracts local searches. Hashtags offer insights into ambush marketing and serve as a tool for focusing, collating, and curating discussions across diverse audiences (Burton & McClean, 2021).

5.3 Best social media tool

Restaurateurs widely favour Facebook for marketing due to its user-friendly interface, high content spread, extensive reach, and efficient organization. This preference enables them to connect with a large audience. Beyond its cost-effectiveness, Facebook amplifies E-WOM, creating a viral effect for restaurants (Ruita et al., 2025), and is a popular tool for enhancing businesses' brand awareness and reputation (Baber & Baber, 2022). The participants agreed by saying that,

“...Facebook is the best. Because when you read the page, or you explore about FB Advertisement, you can reach so many people to like your page” (R1)

“...Facebook is easier for sharing, likes, and viewing. This makes it easier to spread information to others. When a post receives a high number of likes, it is more likely to appear on other users' newsfeeds.” (R5)

Furthermore, the findings highlight a meaningful distinction in the utility of social media platforms. Facebook Ads help restaurateurs organize posts and target a broad audience cost-effectively via homepage promotion. While platforms like Instagram and TikTok are used for self-expression, Facebook prioritises sharing information and connecting with real-life friends (Kwok et al., 2022), highlighting its unique strength in building trust (Han et al., 2023). Therefore, restaurateurs prefer Facebook for its user-friendly features, broad reach, and viral marketing effectiveness in fostering customer connection and brand awareness. Significantly, the findings refined the understanding of E-WOM by showing that virality works best when it is linked to existing social networks rather than to unknown worldwide viewers for local restaurants.

5.4 Impact of viral marketing used by the restaurants

This research aimed to uncover the impact of viral marketing on restaurants in terms of cost-effectiveness, brand awareness, customer patronization, and online reviews. While rising demand on platforms like Facebook increases advertising costs, social media's shift to active participation solidifies it as an essential, cost-efficient strategy for public exposure and consumer engagement (Han et al., 2023). Viral marketing remains more economical than traditional methods, reducing overall marketing expenses (Çakirkaya & Afşar, 2024). The participants stated:

“...when you want to target more people, it will cost you more. You have to make a budget out of it.” (R4)

Furthermore, viral marketing significantly enhances brand awareness by rapidly spreading advertisements through customer sharing. The nature of viral marketing, spreading like a virus, ensures widespread brand recognition. Satisfied customers naturally share their positive experiences with others, thereby building brand awareness and credibility (Eric & Paramita, 2020). Viral advertisements, unlike directly shared content by advertisers in other online formats, rely on peer-to-peer sharing influenced by the content's appeal. This requires the message to be highly effective to generate positive consumer reactions (Puriwat & Tripopsakul, 2021). The participants said:

“...when people go online to find the best restaurant, they are likely to come across our brand. This reflects strong brand awareness—especially among those searching for authentic Johorean cuisine. By simply searching for “original popular Johorean cuisine,” our name appears, reinforcing our presence and reputation.” (R1)

Customer patronization, however, is more influenced by the quality of services and products than by viral marketing. Positive experiences with good service and food quality encourage customers to return or recommend the restaurant (Dabas et al., 2021). Dining out today is driven not merely by the need for meals, but by a desire to experience new cuisines and cultural variety. This creates a challenge for restaurant owners to market these varied experiences effectively.

Finally, online reviews significantly have both positive and negative effects on restaurateurs in gaining customer insights. Positive reviews attract more customers and cut promotional costs, whereas negative reviews pose a threat, potentially leading to customer loss (Puriwat & Tripopsakul, 2021). How restaurateurs respond to reviews is crucial; negative replies will worsen situations, while positive impressions will encourage customer return. This indicates that E-WOM in viral marketing significantly impacted restaurateurs' ability to gain customer feedback through online reviews, as one of the participants had this to say:

“...it can be helpful and harmful. We have to prepare. Customers will get it viral even if it is just a small mistake.” (R2)

6.0 Conclusion

The shift from traditional to online promotion underscores the growing significance of viral marketing for restaurants. This study examined restaurant owners' perceptions, motivations, content creation practices, and methods for measuring the success of viral marketing, reaffirming its value—particularly for small, independent eateries. The findings offer practical applications for restaurateurs beyond

Selangor comparative insights, with implications for improving advertising strategies in the digital space, where viral marketing in urban centres leverages 'uniqueness' and 'fear-of-missing-out (FOMO)' to capture fast-paced consumers. In contrast, rural or peri-urban strategies should prioritise 'community storytelling' and 'heritage' to market their restaurants as 'destination dining' locations. On the other hand, this study offers support programmes led by the government to encourage 'Digital Marketing Cooperatives', through the SME Digitalisation Grant, for instance, which provide social media marketing skills in order to achieve greater viral success and remain competitive in the market. However, the study is limited by its small sample size, comprising only five Malay restaurant owners from a restricted geographic area in Selangor (Klang, Shah Alam, and Sekinchan). Future research should expand the scope to include a broader range of locations and ethnic backgrounds to gain a more comprehensive understanding of viral marketing dynamics across Malaysia. While this study focuses on qualitative insights, researchers recommend a quantitative approach to statistically validate the most effective viral marketing tools among the SME restaurateurs. Specifically, future studies would benefit from adopting a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative interviews with a quantitative survey to achieve a deeper, broader understanding. At the same time, adopting stratified random sampling would ensure a more representative cross-section of the industry, encompass diverse ethnic backgrounds, and cover urban, suburban, and rural contexts across various states in Malaysia.

Paper Contribution to the Related Field of Study

This qualitative study offers valuable insights for restaurant operators by providing a more profound understanding of viral marketing. It enriches the existing body of literature by capturing restaurateurs' perceptions and illustrating the practical application of various viral elements and digital platforms. The findings reveal the dual nature of viral marketing, presenting both opportunities and challenges. It underscores the importance of building customer connections and trust. From a practical standpoint, the study offers actionable guidance for restaurant entrepreneurs and marketing managers seeking effective, adaptable promotional strategies in the dynamic, competitive foodservice landscape.

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