

The food and beverage (F&B) industry is experiencing a radical transformation driven by technological advancements. From artificial intelligence (AI) to online food delivery and the pervasive influence of social media, the way restaurants operate and interact with customers has changed dramatically. These digital innovations have not only reshaped marketing strategies but also impacted service quality, a key determinant of customer satisfaction and business success.

Technology in the spotlight

The Covid-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of digital platforms in the F&B sector. With social distancing measures and lockdowns in place, restaurants had to quickly pivot towards online engagement, contactless services and tech-driven solutions. In Malaysia, revenue losses of up to 90% during the movement control orders highlighted the urgency for digital transformation. Platforms such as Grab and FoodPanda became lifelines for restaurants while AI-powered automation helped businesses streamline operations and enhance customer experiences.

This shift to digital solutions presents both opportunities and challenges. While technology enhances efficiency and expands customer reach, it also raises concerns about service consistency, food quality during delivery and the loss of human touch in hospitality services. How do these elements affect service quality? Our study explores the intricate relationship between technological integration and customer satisfaction in the Klang Valley's F&B industry.

The social media revolution

Social media has become a powerful marketing tool for restaurants. Platforms like Instagram, Facebook and TikTok not only help businesses showcase their offerings but also engage directly with customers.

User-generated content, online reviews and influencer collaborations significantly impact brand perception. Studies have shown that customers trust peer recommendations more than traditional advertising, making social media a crucial factor in shaping service expectations.

However, the rapid spread of information on these platforms is a double-edged sword. While positive reviews can boost a restaurant's reputation, negative feedback can spread just as quickly, impacting business credibility. Our research examines how social media influences service quality by shaping customer perceptions and expectations in the digital age.

AI: The new face of hospitality?

AI-driven innovations are redefining customer service in the F&B industry. Chatbots and virtual assistants handle reservations and enquiries while smart kitchen technologies optimise food preparation processes. AI-powered analytics provide valuable insights into customer preferences, allowing restaurants to personalise offerings and improve service delivery.

Yet, despite its advantages, AI lacks the emotional intelligence of human service staff. Hospitality is built on personal interactions and a fully automated experience may not resonate with all customers. Our study investigates whether AI enhances or detracts from service quality and how businesses can strike the right balance between automation and human engagement.

Online food delivery: Convenience versus quality

The demand for online food delivery (OFD) services has surged, offering consumers the convenience of enjoying restaurant-quality meals at home. However, maintaining service quality in a delivery setting presents challenges. Factors such as delivery speed, packaging and food presentation significantly impact customer satisfaction.

Customers expect the same quality and experience from a delivered meal as they would in a dine-in setting. Any lapse in service — such as delayed delivery, incorrect orders or compromised food quality — can affect a restaurant's reputation. Our research evaluates the impact of OFD services on service quality, exploring how businesses can maintain excellence despite logistical hurdles.

Understanding the consumer's perspective

To gain deeper insights, our study surveyed 385 individuals in the Klang Valley, analysing their experiences and expectations regarding social media influence, AI integration and online food delivery. Key findings suggest that:

Social media plays a crucial role in setting service expectations, with visually appealing content and online reviews influencing customer choices. AI-driven services improve efficiency but must be complemented by human interaction to enhance overall customer experience.

Online food delivery services need to address concerns related to food presentation, delivery timing and accuracy to sustain service quality.



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Striking the right balance

Technology is an enabler, not a replacement, for high-quality service in the F&B industry. Restaurants that successfully integrate digital tools while preserving the essence of hospitality will thrive in this evolving landscape. The key lies in blending innovation with personalised service — leveraging AI for efficiency, using social media for engagement and ensuring that online food delivery maintains the same standards as dine-in experiences.

As the F&B industry continues to evolve, businesses must remain agile, embracing digital transformation while staying true to the core principles of great hospitality. By understanding the interplay between technology and service quality, restaurants can adapt to the future without losing the human touch that defines exceptional dining experiences.

"Great minds think alike" and "birds of a feather flock together" are some popular idioms used to describe how individuals with similar characteristics tend to associate with one another. An anthropologist might argue that this tendency stems from primal survival instincts, where group behaviour was necessary for survival. In today's context, these ingrained social tendencies continue to influence human behaviour, including that of consumer behaviour, where individuals often look to others within their social group for what to buy or which brands to support.

Scholarly works suggest that consumer groups are formed based on two likely reasons. First, individuals develop a self-image and tend to band together with others who share similar identities. For instance, individuals who identify as zero-waste advocates would likely join online communities promoting sustainable living, reinforcing their self-image as environmentally sustainable consumers. Second, consumer groups may emerge when others perceive a group of individuals as sharing similar traits. For example, fans of luxury brands are often stereotyped by the public as materialistic and status-driven consumers.

Shared identities within consumer groups could lead to the formation of bounded communities. Such shared identities have, for instance, sparked somewhat friendly brand rivalries — Star Wars fans versus Trekkies, Apple enthusiasts against Android users, or coffee lovers versus tea aficionados.

Clichés aside, such consumer groups are at times vital as they raise awareness on cultural, political and social issues, shaping brand perceptions and purchasing behaviours in pursuit of the "greater good". In 2023, the rise of the "deinfluencing" phenomenon saw influencers using social media to



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discourage their followers from purchasing products deemed unnecessary. For a while, this social media trend steered consumers away from overspending and impulse buying and instead, encouraged them to reflect on their purchases.

Nonetheless, it is worth noting that when group memberships form, such social groupings tend to make comparisons with one another. The challenge arises when these groups perceive themselves as superior to others. This "holier-than-thou" attitude can create opposing views, beliefs, ideals and principles, forming an "us versus them" state of mind. An Ipohite like myself would strongly believe that no Michelin-star restaurant could beat a humble bowl of shredded chicken noodle soup (kai si hor fun) from Ipoh — and with my fellow Ipohites, will

contend with anyone who dares challenge this belief, sparking an intense debate.

But should consumption be polarised, based on two distinct consumption identities?

Inevitably, social media has further deepened consumer polarisation by facilitating interactions among consumers and enabling the formation of like-minded online communities. What may seem like harmless banter can escalate into two extremes, leading to division, particularly when sociopolitical elements may subtly influence how businesses choose to position themselves.

Polar opposite views can create social pressures, instilling fear in those who have different viewpoints. This removes the likelihood of diverse views and compels consumers to support a dominant form of consumption.

However, one might ask: Is there a need for a "winning side" to emerge? And is it so appalling to remain moderate?

If dominant consumer groups have the propensity to instil the fear of individual expression, are they still equated with the idea of "great minds think alike" or would it suggest the notion that conformity comes at the expense of independent thinking and critical reflection?

Perhaps the key takeaway here is that the intersections between social media and consumption do not have to result in clear divides. And perhaps the real question one should be asking is not whether a winning side is needed, but how one can ensure that the values of empathy, respect, tolerance and critical thinking can continue to guide our identities as consumers.

WHAT OUR SCREENS ARE EATING: YOUTH IDENTITY AND THE RISE OF DIGITAL FOOD CULTURE

In the age of algorithms and attention spans measured in seconds, food has taken on a surprising new role in youth culture. No longer just about nourishment or even taste, food has become a kind of digital performance — one that reflects how young people today express themselves, signal values and form communities online.

This shift was on full display in 2020, when millions of users — many of them teenagers or young adults — began posting videos of themselves whipping instant coffee into a frothy Dalgona drink. The phenomenon wasn't just about caffeine; it was about routine, creativity and, most of all, belonging. Across borders and time zones, young people were engaging in a shared ritual, shaped entirely by what they were seeing on their screens.

Today, that dynamic has only intensified. Scroll through TikTok, Instagram Reels or YouTube Shorts and you'll quickly encounter a stream of food-related content: aesthetic meal preps, chaotic snack hauls, elaborate food hacks or "What I Eat in a Day" montages soundtracked by trending audio. In these digital spaces, food isn't just consumed — it's curated, narrated and broadcast. For many young people, it plays a central role in how they construct identity in public.

Several factors contribute to this. First, social media platforms are fundamentally visual and food — with its textures, colours and rituals — makes for compelling content. A well-composed lunchbox or a slow-motion cheese pull appeals to both the senses and the algorithm. What performs well online is often not what's practical or traditional but what's eye-catching: rainbow bagels, pastel smoothie bowls and ramen "hacks" that prioritise spectacle over substance. In this context, food becomes aestheticised, shaped by trends rather than heritage or personal preference.

But these performances are not always shallow. In fact, food can serve as a meaningful medium for storytelling. For diasporic or culturally hybrid youth, sharing recipes or food routines can be a way of reconnecting with tradition, family or language.

For others, especially those navigating mental health or body image, food content offers a controlled space to explore rituals of self-care or community — sometimes even solidarity. Posting what you eat isn't just about showing off; it's often about finding one's people.

At the same time, the rise of digital food culture brings contradictions. Social media invites constant comparison and the seemingly harmless act of sharing meals can, for some, contribute to anxiety around lifestyle and appearance. "Clean eating" and aesthetic meal planning, while popular, can also mask pressures to conform to narrow wellness ideals. Just as beauty filters distort our perception of physical appearance, curated food content can distort what healthy eating looks like — or feels like.

There's also the question of authenticity. As food becomes content, cultural traditions may be reduced to clickable formats. A traditional dish might be altered to suit international tastes or to fit into 30-second videos. This isn't always a bad thing — after all, cultural exchange is inevitable — but it does raise questions about representation. When Malaysian foods like nasi lemak or kuih become part of global TikTok trends, who tells the story? And what gets left out?

On the flip side, digital food content can be surprisingly political. Many young creators use their platforms to advocate for sustainability, food justice or ethical consumption. The rise of zero-waste cooking, plant-based diets or budget-conscious meal planning reflects a generation that wants its values to align with its habits. In this way, food becomes soft activism — accessible, personal and shareable.

This digital food culture also reshapes physical habits. While older generations might have turned to cookbooks or family traditions, younger people are increasingly learning to cook — or eat — through short videos, influencers and trends. Group chats and Discord servers often replace family kitchens as spaces for recipe swapping or food advice. Even the act of eating alone is transformed when shared via a "mukbang" livestream or a TikTok duet.

What ties all this together is the idea that food, for today's youth, is less about consumption and more about communication. In a world where identity is increasingly constructed online, what you eat — and how you present it — becomes a way to speak about who you are. Whether it's a heritage dish, a viral snack trend or a humble cup of instant noodles, food tells a story. And in the hands of young creators, it often tells it well.

As observers — whether educators, marketers or policymakers — we would do well to pay attention. These shifts in digital food culture are not frivolous. They reveal much about how younger generations navigate values, tradition, technology and belonging. They remind us that even something as everyday as a meal can become a marker of identity in a screen-saturated world. In the end, the question is no longer just what young people are eating but how and why — and increasingly, for whom.



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Kluang may not be the most popular city in Johor but, for me, it is my hometown. That sense of local pride was recently validated when Kluang was named Malaysia's Happiest City in the 2024 Malaysia Happiness Index. To anyone who has experienced its rhythm, the title makes perfect sense. Life here moves with a gentler pace, where warm greetings are exchanged on the street and the day is measured in simple pleasures: a strong cup of kopi, charcoal-toasted bread with kaya and the bustling familiarity of the morning market.

In recent years, this former agricultural hub has transformed into a cherished weekend escape. Kluang has become a favourite getaway not only for Singaporeans but also for urbanites from Kuala Lumpur, thanks to the ETS train service which offers a direct and comfortable connection. They disembark not just at a new destination but into an atmosphere defined by warmth, heritage and a deeply rooted food culture.

more than coffee: kluang's journey as the happiest city in malaysia

Like many Malaysian towns, Kluang sees its young people drawn to Singapore, where competitive salaries, a higher currency exchange rate and diverse job opportunities beckon its youth. Yet, this dynamic has forged a unique weekend ritual. Every Friday evening, the buses and trains leading back to Johor are filled with familiar faces returning home. By Saturday morning, the local coffee shops are pulsing with life, animated by the clatter of cups and the lively chatter of reunited families and friends. This weekly homecoming is a core part of Kluang's identity, fuelling the local economy and ensuring the town remains vibrant.

Heritage, culture and great food combine to create Kluang's unique charm. At its heart is the iconic Kluang Railway Station Coffee Shop, where the aroma of coffee has remained unchanged for nearly a century.

Yet, Kluang's culinary appeal extends far beyond its famous brew. The local kopitiam (coffee shop) culture is built on a foundation of trust. In a typical kopitiam, you might grab a snack from the basket or place your order directly with the cashier. When it is time to pay, you simply tell the cashier what you had – no receipts, no digital scans – it is an honour system, a level of trust and community honesty that feels increasingly rare in the modern world.

The town is renowned for its Shanghai mooncakes and tau sah peng (mung bean biscuits) from century-old bakeries, where queues form early on weekends and even tour buses make pit stops so visitors can bring home these beloved local delicacies. A visit to the Kluang Coffee Powder Factory offers a sensory journey through the entire coffee-making process, from roasting to packaging, complete with a fresh, fragrant sample.

Nature provides a verdant counterpoint to the town's culinary delights. Gunung Lambak offers a refreshing climb with its trails now complemented by forest cafés, refurbished chalets and weekend bazaars that have revitalised the area. This harmony of nature, community and flavour offers a perfect balance, a place to unwind while stumbling upon authentic, everyday wonders.

Driving this newfound energy is Kluang's own younger generation. They are actively reshaping the town's creative landscape, organising vibrant street festivals, art bazaars and food fairs that feel less like commercial events and more like community celebrations. Their efforts are visible in the murals brightening old walls and the small galleries showcasing local talent, forging a new identity for Kluang, one that honours its past while eagerly embracing the future.

This growth is further boosted by Kluang's inclusion in the Johor–Singapore Special Economic Zone (SEZ) which positions the town as an emerging hub for logistics, tourism and agro-food industries. The SEZ aims to improve cross-border cooperation, attract investment and enhance connectivity, giving Kluang a strong advantage to benefit from new economic opportunities.

Kluang's Member of Parliament, Wong Shu Qi, says, "We are already seeing investment spill over into the district with both foreign and domestic investors expanding their operations here." New industrial parks, upgraded road and train networks, and improved digital infrastructure are among the developments that signal Kluang's transformation from a modest agricultural hub into an emerging regional growth centre. For residents, these changes promise better infrastructure, employment opportunities and an overall higher quality of life.

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Kluang has grown quietly but resiliently, building on its own strengths as more young people choose to build their lives here and as those who left return to retire or start new ventures. It is a place where economic potential is rising, yet the simple, heartfelt rhythms of community life remain undisturbed. The town is stepping confidently into a new chapter that masterfully blends tradition with opportunity. What truly makes Kluang – Malaysia's happiest city – special is not just its progress or scenery, but the spirit of its people.