Digital Culinary Consumer Cross-Verification:
A Comparison of Food Vloggers and E-WOM Credibility

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Abstract

This study explores how consumers develop trust in two digital sources—food vloggers and electronic word-of-mouth (e-WoM)—when choosing restaurants. Using a descriptive qualitative method, in-depth interviews were conducted with 18–35-year-old Malang residents who frequently dine out and use social media. Findings reveal that food vloggers effectively raise initial awareness through emotional storytelling and visuals; however, perceived endorsements limit their credibility. In contrast, e-WoM is seen as more trustworthy due to its basis in authentic, user-generated experiences. Trust is shaped by prior experience, the completeness of information, source independence, and review consistency. Consumers apply both emotional and rational evaluations and often cross-check information before making decisions. These insights support classical consumer behavior theories and offer practical guidance for culinary marketers to effectively integrate authentic user reviews with influencer strategies, thereby building sustainable digital trust.
Keywords: Consumer Behavior, Food Vlogger, E-WOM, Decision-Making, Consumer Trust

INTRODUCTION

The digital age has brought about a substantial change in consumer behavior, particularly in the ways that people form opinions, establish credibility, and make choices before making purchases (Price et al., 2016). This phenomena has a significant impact on the food and beverage business (Saryatmo & Sukhotu, 2021). In the highly competitive culinary industry, consumers no longer only rely on offline or direct recommendations from close friends and family. Instead, they use digital platforms and social media to actively look for references online (Park & Cho, 2012).

According to Briliana et al., (2020), the rise of food vloggers in the culinary industry's marketing community has altered how people consume information. Briliana et al,. (2020) added that food vloggers can establish a restaurant's reputation before customers ever set foot there by using visually appealing video and compelling personal stories. Their popularity keeps growing as more people have access to platforms like YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram, which make it possible for knowledge to be shared rapidly, widely, and interactively.

Electronic word of mouth (e-WoM), which includes reviews and opinions posted by other customers on digital platforms like Facebook, TripAdvisor, Google Reviews, and social media comment sections, is likewise becoming more and more popular among consumers (Reyes-Menendez et al., 2020). Electronic Word-of-Mouth (e-WoM) is generally perceived as more authentic than food vloggers, who are often associated with sponsorships or promotional collaborations, since e-WoM stems from honest, voluntary user experiences (Razzaq et al., 2023). The quality and consistency of e-WoM, however, frequently differ, which causes uncertainty in how trust is perceived (Lee & Hong, 2019).

The main issue is how consumers understand and compare trust between these two information sources: the persuasive visual and narrative assessments of food vloggers and the collective experience-based richness of e-WoM (Hutchinson et al., 2024; Babić Rosario et al., 2020). Each has pros and cons when it comes to influencing consumer decisions, especially when it comes to food intake, which is greatly influenced by perceptions of the setting, the meal's flavor, and its cleanliness

In keeping with this problem, the study's objectives are:
1. Explain Malang consumers' opinions about food vloggers' and e-WoM's reviews when selecting restaurants.
2. Examine the degree of consumer confidence in the two information sources.
3. Determine what aspects of food vloggers and e-WoM influence consumers' trust choices.
4. Gain insight into how customers make decisions about where to eat by considering the impact of online reviews.

The phenomenon of culinary consumption is still growing quickly in the city of Malang, which is one of East Java Province's economic and urban lifestyle growth hubs (Rahayu, 2024). The neighborhood is renowned for its keen interest in trying out new restaurants and its active following of culinary trends. According to Hwang et al., (2021), digital media influence has emerged as a significant determinant of consumer dining decisions. Few studies, nevertheless, have looked closely at how Malang consumers develop trust preferences for information from food vloggers as opposed to e-WoM.

Using a qualitative descriptive methodology grounded on consumer behavior theory, this study seeks to fully comprehend how consumers respond to these two categories of information sources through cognitive, affective, and conative processes. This study aims to characterize consumer trust preference patterns and pinpoint the critical elements that either amplify or diminish the impact of each information source on the decision to eat out by conducting interviews with representative informants.

Thus, the results of this study are expected not only to enrich academic literature on consumer behavior in the digital age, but also to offer practical insights for culinary business

players and digital marketers in designing more effective, relevant, and trust-based promotional strategies for their target audiences.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative method and a descriptive research design to better understand customer trust preferences toward two digital information sources when choosing restaurants: food vlogger reviews and electronic word-of-mouth (e-WoM). A qualitative approach was chosen because it effectively captures customers' personal experiences, perceptions, and complex thought processes that cannot be adequately measured through statistical methods (Lim, 2024).

The study was carried out in Malang City, East Java Province, which was chosen because of its expanding culinary industry and urban population that frequently uses digital media to find dining recommendations (Nurfitriya & Iskandar, 2020). This study's examination of the local social and cultural environment is crucial, aligning with the qualitative research principle of contextual sensitivity (Burnette et al., 2014)

The study's participants are Malang-based consumers who fit certain requirements: people between the ages of 18 and 35 who frequently use social media and look up lifestyle-related material online. These people read e-WoM (like TripAdvisor, Google Reviews, or social media), actively watch food vloggers, and eat out at least twice a week. Snowball sampling was used to find more qualified participants after purposive sampling was used to choose informants. The intended number of informants is four, in accordance with the data saturation principle, which states that data collection is enough when no new, important information is discovered (Guest et al., 2006).

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted to collect data, utilizing an interview framework derived from theories of consumer behavior. Both in-person and online interviews were done, and with the informant's permission, they were recorded for transcription. To enrich the data, interviews were complemented with additional materials such as social media comments, screenshots of online reviews, and excerpts from food vlogger videos (Nguyen et al., 2024). Open-ended questions intended to delve into informants' opinions, experiences, and perceptions of trust with regard to food vlogger and e-WoM evaluations were included of the 30- to 60-minute interviews.

In-depth interviews are the first of six steps in this analysis, which also includes data screening, data synthesis, pattern recognition, key element identification, and reporting the results. The study used source triangulation (comparing interview data, documentation, and content observation), member checking (verifying interview findings with informants), audit trail (methodically documenting the analytical process), and peer debriefing (talking with academic advisors or colleagues) to guarantee the credibility of the data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
How Social Media Users Interpret e-WoM and Food Vlogger

Informants viewed food vloggers as helpful for discovering new eateries, especially in visualizing ambiance and menu, as noted by Aisyah (26) and Rizky (28), who used TikTok and YouTube for inspiration. This supports the stimulus-input stage of consumer behavior theory (Chitturi et al., 2022) where external cues shape initial perceptions.

However, Denaya (29) and Singgih (25) questioned vloggers' objectivity due to endorsement bias. Consequently, many informants cross-checked information through e-WoM sources like Google Reviews and peer input, reflecting a preference for authentic, diverse information sources (Rajagopal,2019; Trinh & Nguyen, 2019).

Consumer Trust Level in e-WoM and Food Vloggers

Informants appreciated food vloggers for their engaging content but remained cautious about credibility. Aisyah (26) and Rizky (28) emphasized the need for cross-checking, with Rizky noting the influence of netizen comments. Denaya (29) and Singgih (25) saw vloggers as initial exposure, but trusted peer-based reviews more. This aligns with Di Virgilio & Antonelli (2017) and Reyes-Menendez et al., (2019), who found e-WoM more credible due to its perceived authenticity. Trust in electronic word-of-mouth (e-WoM) stems from the perceived reliability of consistent feedback, the authenticity of shared experiences, and the impartiality of the reviewers (Lee & Hong, 2019; Cheung & Thadani, 2012)

Factors Influencing Consumers' Trust Preferences

Trust in food vloggers and e-WoM is shaped by several key factors:

a. Information completeness: Aisyah (26) valued content covering location, pricing, and full menus, aligning with trust competence (Wang et al., 2022);
b. Credibility and independence: Denaya (29) favored peer reviews over sponsored content, highlighting integrity;
c. Review consistency—Rizky (28) trusted aligned narratives and questioned conflicting ones (Cheung & Thadani, 2012)
d. Personal experience—Singgih (25) relied more on trusted peers after facing misleading promotions.

These findings underscore the importance of authenticity, neutrality, and relatable experiences over mere visual appeal (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017)

Stages in the Decision-Making Journey

The decision-making journey followed a structured pattern:

a. Initial Attention: sparked by emotionally engaging food vlogger content (Balanay et al., 2024)
b. Information Verification: through Google Reviews, peer comments, and friend input; and
c. Expectation Filtering: where individuals matched insights with personal preferences and past experiences.

This reflects models by Chen & Dermawan (2020) and Tayal & Bharathi. S (2021), emphasizing that modern decision-makers actively cross-verify information—balancing logic and emotion to reduce risk and ensure alignment with personal taste.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that modern diners rely on selective, cross-verified digital sources rather than a single reference. Food vloggers effectively capture initial attention through emotional and visual appeal but face trust issues due to sponsorship bias. In contrast, e-WoM is perceived as more authentic, grounded in real experiences without promotional influence. Trust is shaped by review consistency, source independence, information completeness, and prior experience. Decision-making involves both rational and emotional validation. These insights support classical behavior models and highlight the need for businesses to combine influencer content with genuine user reviews to build lasting digital trust.

This study is limited by its focus on consumers in Malang City, which may not reflect broader consumer behavior in other regions. The small sample size and qualitative nature of the research limit generalizability. Additionally, the study only explores food vloggers and e-WoM, excluding other digital marketing influences.

This study shows the importance of building digital trust by combining attractive influencer content with honest user reviews. Culinary business owners and digital marketers should balance promotions with real customer feedback to better influence choices. Social

media platforms are encouraged to improve transparency—like labeling sponsored posts—and support more authentic peer reviews. In the culinary field, inviting happy customers to share their experiences and using e-WoM in marketing can boost credibility and loyalty. Academically, the study supports classic consumer behavior theory in the digital era and highlights cross-checking information as key to building trust. Future research can look into how trust forms across different platforms, cultural differences, and the impact of micro vs. macro influencers on dining choices.

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