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THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MOTIVATIONAL FACTORS ON STUDENTS' DECISION TO DINE IN AT FAST FOOD RESTAURANTS: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

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Abstract:

This conceptual paper examines social motivational factors influencing students' dine-in decisions in the fast food industry. This paper aims to synthesize existing literature to explain the key concepts and relationships driving student dine-in behaviour. It focuses on five key social motivational factors, such as social influence, socialization, social enjoyment, group belonging, and Fear of Missing Out (FoMO). Rather than analysing primary empirical data, this paper reviews and

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integrates previous studies to develop a clearer understanding of how social motivations shape dine-in behaviour among university students, particularly in non-urban campus settings such as UiTM Dungun. The discussion highlights the importance of these factors for fast food operators in understanding socially driven consumption patterns. Finally, this paper provides a conceptual framework and propositions to guide marketing strategies, the design of dining environments, and future empirical research.

Keyword:

Dine-In Decision; Fast Food Restaurants; Social Motivational Factors; University Students; FoMO



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Introduction

The fast-food service industry is widely known for its convenience, fast preparation, and affordability, making it a staple choice for university students (Li et al., 2022). Continuously, the habit of dining in among students has increased significantly, with several choices of fast-food restaurants (Chai & Cheah, 2024). Beyond simply consuming food, contemporary dining settings feature aesthetic and modern designs that attract university students looking for a specific atmosphere. This demand is profoundly shaped by social elements that serve as the main motivational factors influencing and driving individuals to dine in rather than choose takeout or delivery (Asghar et al., 2023).

University students frequently utilise fast-food outlets as informal social spaces to support relationship building, leisure time, and personal expression (Asghar et al., 2023). While previous studies have examined overall fast-food consumption behaviour, limited attention has been paid to how modern social motivational factors specifically influence the choice to dine in. As mentioned by Chen et al. (2024), contemporary dining habits are increasingly driven by environmental attractiveness (such as social media sharing or "Instagrammability"), spending quality leisure time with friends, and the psychological impact of the Fear of Missing Out (FoMO). In order to close this gap, this paper seeks to explore students in rural campus set up, where the primary purpose to connect and socialise with friends is fast-food outlets due to a lack of alternative dining choices.

By identifying these factors, restaurateurs can finally construct their restaurant layout and to be more market approach in satisfying students' expectations. As revealed Yuan et al. (2023), visually engaging interiors, group-friendly seating, and trend-led promotions are examples of practical adjustments that can significantly boost customer engagement and at the same time enhance the overall dining experience.

Background of the Study and Problem Statement

Fast-food outlets serve as familiar spots where students meet-up, collaborate on group assignments, and catch up with friends. Because of this, undertaking student dining habits requires looking beyond basic food quality and price to examine the social drivers behind choosing to eat in rather than take away option. These social motivations involve peer engagement, bonding, and a sense of group belonging that fulfil emotional needs for connection (Tan & Omar, 2019); Zulkifli & Hassan, 2022).

Two main notable gaps persist in the existing literature:

1. **Overemphasis on Functional Attributes:** Past research has primarily dived into the operational side of the fast-food industry such as price, food quality and speed of delivery (Hashim et al., 2021). Without having to deny that those factors are important, it only narrowed down the focus where more powerful factors such as social motivational factors like share enjoyment, group belonging and the fear of missing out from the groups are left out. Due to this reason, the fact that these social dimensions cannot afford to be left ignored.
2. **Contextual Limitations:** As previous research focussed on urban settings, where a wide variety of restaurants and dining spaces available for the students to choose, students from non-urban or rural campus in contrast, possess far fewer options of entertainment and dining options, making fast-food restaurants the primary social hubs for students (Li et al. 2022; Mwakatage et al., 2023). This is where the gap existed and mostly remain unexplored.

This paper addresses these gaps by proposing a conceptual framework that examines how specific social motivational factors influence student dine-in decisions.

Conceptual Objectives

To establish a conceptual model mapping the relationships between social motivational factors (social influence, socialisation, social enjoyment, group belonging, and Fear of Missing Out) and student dine-in decisions at fast-food restaurants.

To propose a theoretical basis for identifying which social motivational factor exerts the most dominant influence on dine-in choices.

Literature Review & Theoretical Foundations

Dine-In Decisions in Fast Food Restaurants

A dine-in decision suggests a consumer's decision to consume a meal within a restaurant's physical atmosphere rather than choosing takeout and food delivery options, in which is heavily influenced by experiential value, comfort, and opportunities for face-to-face interaction (Ryu & Han, 2010). Kim & Moon (2009), and Heung & Gu (2012), suggested that restaurant atmospherics, layout, and the physical service scape profoundly shape customers' emotional responses and behavioural intentions. This is agreed by Min & Min (2011), and Tan & Omar (2019), revealed that the Fast-food spaces have transformed from quick-transaction environments into casual social platforms where young adults gather to bond and pass time between commitments.

Social Motivational Factors

Social motivational factors represent the variables that drive consumption choices to fulfil interpersonal and psychological needs rather than basic physiological hunger. This paper conceptualises these motivations into five key dimensions:

Social Influence

As mentioned by Cialdini & Goldstein (2004), individual's attitude and behaviours as reflected by social influence, are shaped by reference groups and peers (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). Additionally, consumers frequently follow to group preferences in order to gain social acceptance or maintain relationships (Bearden et al., 1889). In a dining context, Restaurant selection is strongly guided by peer recommendations and shared preferences (Matzler et al., 2014). Moreover, Dinc (2024) revealed that potential customers are drawn to visit restaurants recommended by their trusted influencers, followed by searching for information, assess existing options endorsed by trusted online personalities.

Socialization

Warde & Mertens (2000), stated that dining out is a main social hub for interaction, communication, and building relationship. This is strongly backed by Jian et al. (2019) and Kusumaningrum & Alamsyah (2024) in which demonstrated that students' consumers dining environments facilitate comfortable communication and group gatherings yield higher satisfaction and stronger behavioural intentions.

Social Enjoyment

In social enjoyment aspect, Gallarza-Granizo et al. (2020) demonstrated that companionship and shared experiences, derived the value of dining, including the pleasure, entertainment and laughter, while casual atmosphere of fast-food outlets fosters group interaction, amplifying emotional satisfaction beyond utilitarian meal fulfilment. In addition, social interaction and sharing dining experiences on social media enhance customers' enjoyment and overall satisfaction (Chen et al., 2024). This shows that not only food is valued through dining experience but also provides a memorable social experience to the customers.

Group Belonging

Tajfel & Turner (1979) proposed Social Identity Theory where group belonging is defined as an individual's need for group attachment, acceptance, and identification within a social circle. Meanwhile, Baumeister & Leary (1995), and Yang et al. (2014), found that, to affirm the choices made, young consumers frequently align their choices with group norms. In relation, university students were more likely to choose food recommended by members of their own social group than those from an out-group (Gleaves et al., 2024). This indicates that a sense of group belonging strengthens conformity to group norms and influences food-related decisions.

Fear of Missing Out (FoMO)

Przybylski et al. (2013) stated that, fear of missing out or (FoMO) can be defined as a psychological apprehension that others are enjoying rewarding social experiences in one's absence. Meanwhile, Hodgkinson (2019) and Kaur et al. (2020) suggested that FoMO drives individuals to take part in trending activities to remain socially relevant, intensified by visually driven social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok. In addition, Taylor & Strutton (2016) initiated that, in order to encourage dine-in behaviours over solitary takeout options, fast-food spaces often offer aesthetic interiors or viral menu items to leverage FoMO and plays an important role in shaping food and beverage consumption behaviour. And Ahn (2024) identified that FoMO influences consumers' anticipated emotions and purchase intentions towards restaurants promoted through social media, suggesting that individuals may visit restaurants to avoid missing socially meaningful experiences. Similarly, Harwinda et al. (2024) demonstrated that FoMO significantly affects consumer loyalty and purchase intentions in the beverage industry, highlighting the influence of social media trends on consumption decisions. Furthermore, Dinh and Lee (2024) found that FoMO encourages consumers to share consumption experiences online, reinforcing the role of social visibility in modern food and beverage consumption.

Critical Literature Review Synthesis and Development of the Conceptual Framework

Looking back on past research, a clear shift appears on how the researcher and restaurant operator understand students' fast-food dining behaviours, while early studies focussed mainly on practical factors like price, food quality, and speed (Chai & Cheah, 2024; Li et al., 2022), more recent work shows that students are increasingly driven by social and experiential motivations (Min & Min, 2011; Tan & Omar, 2019).

The proof from literature at hand confirms that fast-food restaurants are now functioning as modern social spaces rather than eating places. With existing developed theories such as Social Influence Theory (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004) and Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) help explain why peer pressure and group norms play such a big role in where students choose to eat (matzler et al., 2014; Gleaves et al., 2024). Altogether, Warde & Mertens (2000) and Chen et al. (2024) revealed that socialisation and shared enjoyment are important for emotional satisfaction and repeat visits by customers. Furthermore, studies on digital anxiety and social visibility demonstrate that the fear of missing out pushes consumers towards trendy, visually appealing spots (Przybylski et al., 2013; Taylor & Strutton, 2016).

By bringing these different strands of research together, this study makes it clear that practical factors alone cannot fully explain why university students choose to dine in.

Conceptual Framework and Research Propositions

Based on the literature, this paper proposes a conceptual framework where five social motivational factors serve as independent constructs influencing the dependent construct: The Dine-In Decision.

Conceptual Framework

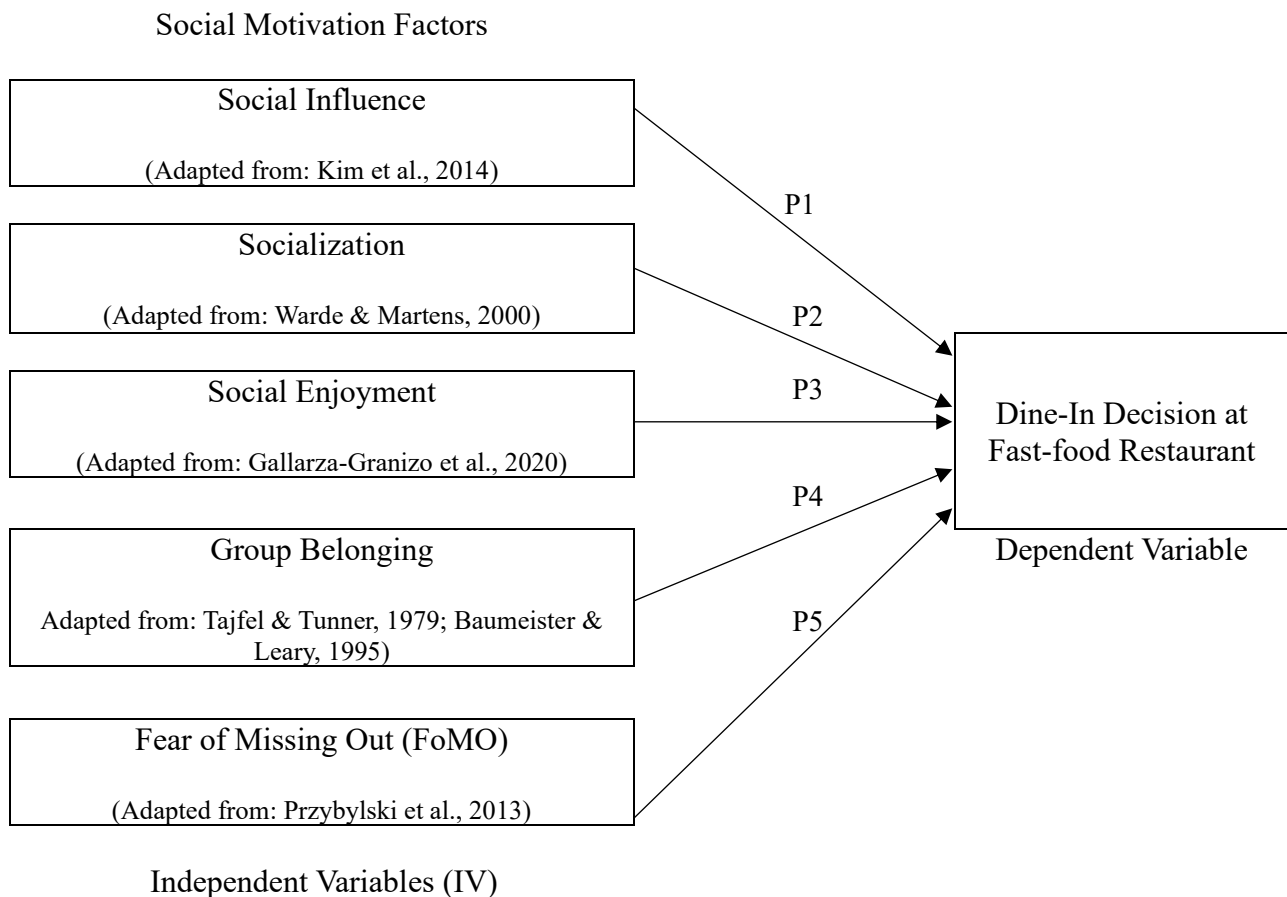


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

In order to test the research framework, the proposed conceptual framework hypotheses as follows:

Research Propositions

- P1:** Social influence positively influences students' decisions to dine in at fast food restaurants.
- P2:** Socialization positively influences students' decisions to dine in at fast-food restaurants.
- P3:** Social enjoyment positively influences students' decisions to dine in at fast-food restaurants.
- P4:** Group belonging positively influences students' decisions to dine in at fast-food restaurants.
- P5:** Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) positively influences students' decisions to dine in at fast-food restaurants.

Methodology of Literature Review

This conceptual paper uses a structured literature review approach to synthesise existing research and establish the theoretical foundations of the proposed conceptual framework. To thoroughly explore student behaviour in the fast-food industry, a broad search was conducted across major academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar.

The literature selection was guided by a few clear processes:

- Targeted Keyword search: The researcher used combined search strings covering terms like “university students,” “fast-food consumption,” “dine-in decisions,” “social motivation,” “Fear of Missing Out (FoMO).”
- Thematic Screening: This study prioritised peer-reviewed empirical studies, theoretical reviews and conceptual papers published over the last two decades, paying close attention to recent shifts in consumer habits and digital social trends (2010 to 2024).
- Critical Synthesis: Rather than simply summarising past findings, the researcher analysed the themes closely to contrast traditional practical drivers (like price, speed, and food quality) with emerging social and digital motivators.

This analytical process revealed important gaps in the literature, particularly regarding non-urban campus dynamics and social motivations. These insights directly shaped the five core concepts and the proposed relationships that form the foundation of our conceptual framework.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this conceptual paper contributes to the growing body of literature on consumer behaviour by highlighting the role of social motivational factors in shaping university students dine-in decisions at fast-food restaurants. The paper proposes a conceptual framework that integrates five key social motivational factors, such as social influence, socialisation, social enjoyment, group belonging, and FoMO, which act as determinants of students dine-in behaviour. As far as previous studies are concerned, functional attributes are emphasised; food quality, price and service quality are named as a few examples. However, this paper suggests that dining decisions among university students can be influenced by social and psychological motivators. This perspective is particularly relevant where fast food restaurants often function as important social gathering spaces, particularly for non-urban campus environments.

Furthermore, based on the proposed framework, a few practical implications are identified to suit fast food operators and marketers. One implication is that it can help fast food operators come up with better designs for engaging dining layouts. Other than that, it can also assist in implementing group-based promotional strategies, as well as creating a more memorable social dining experience. Lastly, by integrating visually appealing restaurant layouts and designs, interactive social spaces, and social media-driven marketing campaigns, customer engagement may be strengthened and enhance the overall dine-in experience among young consumers.

Recommendations for Future Research

In order for future researchers to validate this conceptual model. Structural equation modelling (SEM) or multiple linear regression analysis needs to be conducted in the empirical studies. Deployment of a probability sampling method is recommended across different higher

educational institutions for a more diverse demographic that can be tested. Other than that, students from urban and rural areas can be comparatively designed so that it can clarify the strength of these social motivational factors after alteration in geographic context.

Empirical examination by future researchers is highly recommended as this paper is indeed conceptual in nature, and by using quantitative methods against the proposed framework, the strength and significance of each proposed relationship can be tested accordingly. In addition, future studies can be undertaken by identifying which of these factors is the most influential on students' decision to dine in at fast food restaurants. Furthermore, exploring potential moderating and mediating variables is well encouraged for future researchers to be able to recognise those factors such as restaurant atmosphere, personality traits of the students, perceived value of the product offers, social media engagement, or other demographic characteristics in providing more comprehensive and in-depth understanding of customer dine-in behaviour.

Such comparative studies would create the findings more broadly applicable and offer fresh understandings into how different environments shapes socially driven dining habits. Future research could also explore how emerging new digital trends, shift gsocial media platforms, and changing lifestyles continue to influence student dining choices over time.

Ultimately, by constructing on a strong theoretical foundation, this paper extends the researcher understanding of the social side of student dining in fast-food restaurants. As a stepping stone for future empirical research, the proposed conceptual framework offers valuable insights for both academics and industry practitioners as they adapt the shifting social motivations of young consumers.

Research Implications and Significance

This conceptual paper contributes to the fast-food literature by looking beyond traditional practical factors and focusing on psychological and digital drivers. This study's implications spans into three main areas:

Theoretical Implications

This paper bridges a gap in consumer research by shifting attention away from basic operational features like pricing and speed of service toward social and psychological motivators. By drawing on Social Influence Theory, social Identity Theory, and modern perspectives on digital anxiety, the model offers a clearer approach to understand why students choose to dine-in. Particularly, it highlights how fast-food outlets become important social hubs in non-urban campus settings, laying a solid foundation for future research into student lifestyles.

Practical (Managerial) Implications

Meanwhile, for fast-food operators, store designers and marketers in student-heavy or non-urban areas, the findings offer practical guidance. Because dining decisions are shaped by social enjoyment and group belonging, businesses need to react and move past simple transactional service. Restaurateurs can apply these insights by:

- Designing and creating flexible layouts and group-friendly seating that easier for students to hang out and connect.
- Creating appealing interiors, good lighting, and shareable spaces that encourage visitors to take photos and post them online.
- Initiate trending promotions and marketing campaigns that tap into the fear of missing out (FoMO) to encourage repeat visits.

Methodological Implications

From a methodological view, this conceptual paper provides a clear roadmap for future empirical research. By organising existing literature into five distinct independent variables and testable propositions, the framework offers a structured path toward quantitative approach and validation. Suggesting tools like Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) or multiple regression as well as probability sampling provides future researchers a concrete foundation for testing relationships, exploring mediating factors, and comparing urban and non-urban student populations.

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