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THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON CUSTOMERS PERCEPTION OF FOODSERVICE ESTABLISHMENT'S BRAND IMAGE

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Abstract:

This study is conducted to study the influence of different social media attributes on customers' perception on foodservice establishment brand image, specifically in Dungun, Terengganu. This study is underpinned by the integration of Keller's Customer-Based Brand Equity Model and Information Integration Theory, which explain how customers evaluate and combine social media information cues and how these evaluations develop into brand associations that shape their perceptions of foodservice establishments' brand image. As Dungun is a semi-urban district, the social media activity is often overlooked even though the transition from the traditional marketing method to digitalization is apparent. This research article focuses on four independent variables which include user-generated content (UGC), influencer endorsement, brand-generated content (BGC), as well as visual appeal. This study utilizes quantitative, and cross-sectional research design with the data collected through a structured and 5-likert-scale questionnaire. To ensure the credibility of the questions, a pilot study involving 30 respondents was conducted, with the result of Cronbach's Alpha scores consistently from .806 to .893. G*Power was used to determine the sample size needed for this study, along with the utilization of SPSS version 29 for multiple regression analysis to identify which social media attributes are the most

significantly impacts the brand image of a food service establishment. The findings are expected to give insights to ethical and effective digital marketing strategies for foodservice establishments operators in similar semi-urban districts.

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Keyword:

Brand-Generated Content, Brand Image, Customer Perception, Influencer Endorsement, Social Media. User-Generated Content, Visual Appeal.



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Introduction

Dungun is a semi-urban district located in Terengganu, Malaysia, populated with 156,225 people (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2020). As it is far from a big city, it is important for this study to be conducted, as the researcher will be able to recognize how much social media attributes, such as user-generated content, influencer endorsement, brand-generated content, and visual appeal, help customers form their perception of the available food service establishments in Dungun.

In the current era of globalization, social media has become an integral part of our daily lives. Social media has revolutionized the way people communicate and share information across the globe (Bu Zhong, 2021), which has deliberately turned the way food service establishments choose to market themselves to the public. Traditionally, businesses relied heavily on conventional advertising methods, including printed advertisements displayed on utility poles, newspapers, television commercials, and radio broadcasts to promote their products and services (Maksic, 2023). According to global digital reports, as of 2025, there are approximately 5.04 billion social media users worldwide, representing about 62% of the global population. This significant growth has led many businesses to integrate social media into their marketing strategies (DataReportal, 2025). They are now using social media because it is, admittedly, a much lower-cost marketing tool that allows these businesses to reach a large audience.

The emergence of social media has reshaped marketing practices that have long been adopted by businesses. Compared with traditional marketing methods, social media marketing is more cost-effective and allows business owners greater control over their marketing activities. The advancement of technology and social media has created new marketing opportunities. In this

online environment, customers' perceptions are influenced by various forms of social media engagement and content. This study examines four key social media attributes that have been identified as influential in shaping customers' perceptions, namely user-generated content, influencer endorsement, brand-generated content, and visual appeal. The selection of these variables was based on a logical synthesis of previous literature. Subsequently, the study was underpinned by Keller's Customer-Based Brand Equity Model and Information Integration Theory to explain how the selected variables influence customers' perceptions of brand image.

The nature of social media provides businesses with greater exposure and wider audience reach. Nevertheless, customers may also be influenced by exaggerated or misleading viral content without directly experiencing the products or services. Despite the growing body of research on social media marketing, limited attention has been given to how customers integrate different social media information cues and subsequently transform these evaluations into perceptions of foodservice establishments' brand image. Furthermore, studies focusing on foodservice establishments in semi-urban districts such as Dungun and Terengganu, remain limited. Therefore, this study addresses both theoretical and contextual gaps by examining how four social media attributes influence customers' perceptions of foodservice establishments' brand image in an underrepresented semi-urban setting.

Dungun has a diverse range of foodservice establishments, with customers increasingly using social media platforms to seek information, share experiences, and evaluate foodservice establishments before making dining decisions. The availability of online reviews, user-generated content, and digital interactions allows customers to obtain credible information and form perceptions of foodservice brands (Filieri et al., 2021; Kim & Johnson, 2016). Furthermore, foodservice establishments actively utilise social media as a promotional platform to engage with customers, enhance brand visibility, and influence customer perceptions. This further stands as proof that Dungun has shown similar trends in the use of social media for customers to base their perception on and eventually evaluate the establishments of the food service. This research is expected to provide concise insights to help operators of food service establishments develop effective and ethical marketing strategies. The purpose of this study is to explore how social media is able to shape consumer perception as well as their decision-making processes in the context of the food service industry. Digital engagement has become integral to brand-customer interactions, prompting this research to provide practical insights for foodservice businesses on managing their online presence to drive revenue growth.

Therefore, this study aims to examine the influence of social media attributes on customers' perceptions of foodservice establishments brand image. Specifically, the objectives of this study are: (1) to examine the influence of user-generated content on customers' perceptions of foodservice establishments brand image; (2) to evaluate how influencer endorsement affects customers' perceptions of foodservice establishments brand image; (3) to examine the impact of brand-generated content on customers' perceptions of foodservice establishments brand image; and (4) to investigate the role of visual appeal in shaping customers' perceptions of foodservice establishments brand image.

Literature Review

Social Media Attributes

User-Generated Content

User-generated content (UGC) identifies any type of content, including comments, texts, images, videos, reviews, and social media shares, that is created and shared by an individual user as opposed to official organizations or news sources. The development of Web 2.0 information technologies has expedited UGC development by giving a boost to participatory communications in which consumers create, share, and react to digital content (Halim et al., 2023).

Different types of theoretical frameworks have been investigated to explain the development of UGC (Muntinga et al., 2011), including the prod usage concept or the COBRA (Consumption, Contribution, Creation) framework to account for different levels of consumer engagement and participation in web-based environments. In the COBRA framework, consumption denotes passive content consumption; contribution refers to interactive behaviors such as liking and commenting on other users' posts, and creation refers to active production and sharing of original content. By engaging in these activities, consumers begin creating their own content and receiving information for the brand from other users of the platform, making it almost as if you are persuading a user to buy this brand.

Prior research found that UGC influences consumers by increasing authenticity, ending with enhanced credibility & trust (Geng et al., 2021; Nielsen, 2020), mostly in hospitality and foodservice contexts. In comparison with the messages produced by brands, content shared by other consumers is frequently observed as more sincere and trusted and can affect clients' weekend assessments of a brand. Brand image, on the other hand, refers to how a brand is perceived by consumers in terms of various aspects of positive User Generated Content (UGC), including customer reviews and positive experiences in dining or restaurant recommendations that can enhance favorable associations. This mobilization of digital consumer-generated content for marketing research purposes, albeit becoming a more attractive option on account of its advantages such as being cost-effective, does not render irrelevant the lingering concerns regarding misinformation and thus, the overall credibility of this type of information source, which demand more attention in their manageability (Pasi & Viviani, 2020).

Influencer Endorsement

With the development of new technology, different digital communication strategies have been created, and marketing must further adapt, including Influencer Marketing. Influencer Endorsement is an act of using an online presence with an audience in order to recommend a service or product through social media networks (Yuliati & Huda, 2022). As stated with the concept of "Megaphone Effects", influencers act as intermediaries who spread brand-related messages by sharing recommendations and endorsements to their surrounding online communities (McQuarrie et al.). As a result, the increasing popularity of social media contributed significantly to the role of influencers by offering brands a platform to communicate more effectively with their audiences (Vrontis et al., 2021).

As influencers, you can begin to build a façade of relationship with your followers so trust, credibility, and relatability may increase. Utilising influencers, as opposed to previous marketing methods, arguably creates a more personal and authentic form of advertising owing to the strong relationships the influencer cultivates with their followership (Reinikainen et al., 2020). As a result, it is possible that consumers use influencer recommendations as an information source while evaluating brands and creating impressions (Boerman, 2020).

For the foodservice sector, influencer endorsement has evolved as a strategic marketing tool aimed at boosting brand recognition and affecting consumer assessments. Prior research has indicated that influencer partnerships lead to increased consumer engagement with audiences and an enhanced strength of response in the context (De Ciccio et al., 2020; Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Thus, influencer endorsement is possibly an important cue of social media information that can sufficiently impact customers' knowledge and subsequently create a brand image for a foodservice establishment.

Brand-Generated Content

Brand-generated content (BGC) is a major element of a brand's presence in the current digital landscape. BGC stands for content created and published by a company on its own website and other digital channels. These can consist of images, videos, product details, advertising messages, and narratives about brands that reflect the personality or soul of a business (Vasan et al., 2025). With consistent content and carefully framed messaging, brands can express themselves and influence how customers feel about their products and services. In the food service industry, BGC like menu presentations, food images, promotional videos, and customer experience highlights can arm customers with relevant information while enhancing the establishment's mental model of its offerings (Logan, 2023). Furthermore, by producing high-quality and informative content about the brand, companies could augment credibility, build connections with consumers, as well as help establish positive brand associations (Vasan et al., 2025).

Additionally, BGC provides foodservice businesses with an opportunity to directly relay their differences and brand attributes rather than solely depending on third-party sources. What follows is that sound social media brand communication can instead increase customer trust and even create perceptions about the establishment's identity and quality (El-Shihy & Awaad, 2025). This makes BGC a crucial medium of brand information that might affect consumer assessments and play a role in the shaping of the foodservice establishment brand image.

Visual Appeal

Visual appeal refers to the aesthetic characteristics of social media content that influence how customers perceive and engage with a brand's online presence. It involves the strategic use of colours, images, graphics, typography, and overall content presentation to create an attractive and meaningful digital identity (Khairun Nuha Roslin et al., 2025). Similarly, visual appeal can be reflected through webpage layouts, advertising designs, and visual elements that capture customers' attention and create favourable first impressions (Nuryani, 2025).

In the food service industry, visual appeal plays an important role as customers often rely on visual representations of food, dining environments, and brand experiences when evaluating establishments. High-quality images and professionally produced visual content shared through social media platforms can generate positive customer responses and enhance

perceptions of a brand (Li & Xie, 2020; Yu et al., 2024). Attractive visual presentations of food and restaurant atmospheres may also strengthen the connection between online brand representations and customers' expectations of the actual dining experience.

Furthermore, the visual attractiveness of social media content can influence customers' attention and emotional responses toward a brand (AlSokkar et al., 2024). Consistent and appealing visual communication allows food service establishments to convey their brand identity and create favourable associations among customers. Therefore, visual appeal serves as an important social media information cue that may contribute to the formation of customers' perceptions of foodservice establishment brand image.

Customer Perception

Customer perception refers to customers' overall evaluation and interpretation of a brand based on their experiences, expectations, and interactions with products, services, or brand-related information. It represents a multidimensional process involving both cognitive and emotional responses that influence how customers evaluate and develop impressions toward a brand (Singh, 2024). In the context of foodservice establishments, customer perceptions are shaped by various factors, including service experiences, product quality, and interactions with brand-related content.

Customer perception plays an important role in the formation of brand image, as customers' evaluations and impressions contribute to the overall associations they develop toward a foodservice establishment. Positive perceptions derived from satisfactory experiences and credible information sources can strengthen favourable brand associations and enhance brand image. Previous studies have highlighted that customer experience and service quality dimensions significantly influence customers' evaluations, satisfaction, and perceptions towards foodservice operations, demonstrating the importance of service encounters in shaping brand-related perceptions (Ali et al., 2025; Rather, 2019).

In the digital environment, customer perception is increasingly influenced by social media interactions, online information, and digital branding activities. Social media platforms provide customers with opportunities to engage with brands, access user-generated content, and evaluate brand credibility, which subsequently affects their perceptions of the brand (Rangrez, 2024; Chatragadda & S B, 2025). Therefore, customer perception serves as an important psychological process through which social media attributes influence the development of foodservice establishment brand image.

Accordingly, this study considers brand image as the outcome variable, where customers' perceptions formed through exposure to social media attributes contribute to the overall image associated with foodservice establishments.

Brand Image

Brand image represents consumers' overall perceptions and associations toward a brand, encompassing their beliefs, impressions, and evaluations based on interactions with brand-related information and experiences (Musyirifah Maliki et al., 2025). A strong brand image is important for establishing trust, strengthening emotional connections, and creating favourable associations that influence consumers' evaluations of a brand (Aaker, 2023). In the foodservice

context, brand image reflects how customers perceive the quality, credibility, and overall identity of a foodservice establishment.

A positive brand image is developed through consistent brand communication, effective marketing strategies, and actions that reinforce the brand's values and promises (Susilo & Wilujeng, 2023). It represents a valuable intangible asset that can differentiate a business from competitors and strengthen its position in the marketplace. Brand images are also shaped by various brand-related elements, including visual identity, product and service quality, and customer interactions, which collectively contribute to consumers' overall impressions of a brand (Rehman & Al-Ghazali, 2022).

In the digital era, social media has become an important channel through which brands communicate with customers and shape their perceptions. Social media attributes, including user-generated content, influencer endorsement, brand-generated content, and visual appeal, provide customers with information and experiences that may influence their evaluation of a brand image (Khairun Nuha Roslin et al., 2025). Therefore, understanding how social media attributes contribute to the formation of foodservice establishment brand image is essential, particularly in a competitive and increasingly digitalised foodservice environment.

The Underpinning Theory

This study integrates Keller's Customer-Based Brand Equity Model and Information Integration Theory to explain how social media attributes shape customers' perceptions of foodservice establishments' brand image. The theories are complementary because Information Integration Theory explains how customers evaluate and combine different information cues, while Keller's model explains how these evaluations develop into brand associations and brand image.

Keller's Customer-Based Brand Equity Model proposes that brand equity is created through brand knowledge, which consists mainly of brand awareness and brand image. Brand image refers to the associations stored in customers' memory, particularly those that are strong, favourable, and unique (Keller, 1993). In this study, user-generated content, influencer endorsement, brand-generated content, and visual appeal function as sources of brand-related information. These social media attributes may create associations concerning authenticity, credibility, quality, attractiveness, and the overall identity of foodservice establishments. Information Integration Theory explains that individuals combine multiple information cues when forming perceptions, attitudes, and judgments (Anderson, 1971; Anderson, 1981). Each cue is assigned a different value and weight according to its relevance, credibility, and usefulness. Therefore, customers may place greater importance on authentic reviews, trusted influencers, or informative brand content than on visual attractiveness alone.

Together, both theories provide a comprehensive foundation for this study. Information Integration Theory explains how customers process and integrate social media information, while Keller's model explains how the resulting evaluations form brand associations and shape customers' perceptions of foodservice establishments' brand image.

Conceptual Framework

Based on the integrated underpinning theories, the conceptual framework proposes that user-generated content, influencer endorsement, brand-generated content, and visual appeal influence customers' perceptions of foodservice establishments' brand image. Information Integration Theory explains how customers evaluate and combine these social media cues, while Keller's Customer-Based Brand Equity Model explains how the resulting evaluations form brand associations and shape overall brand image.

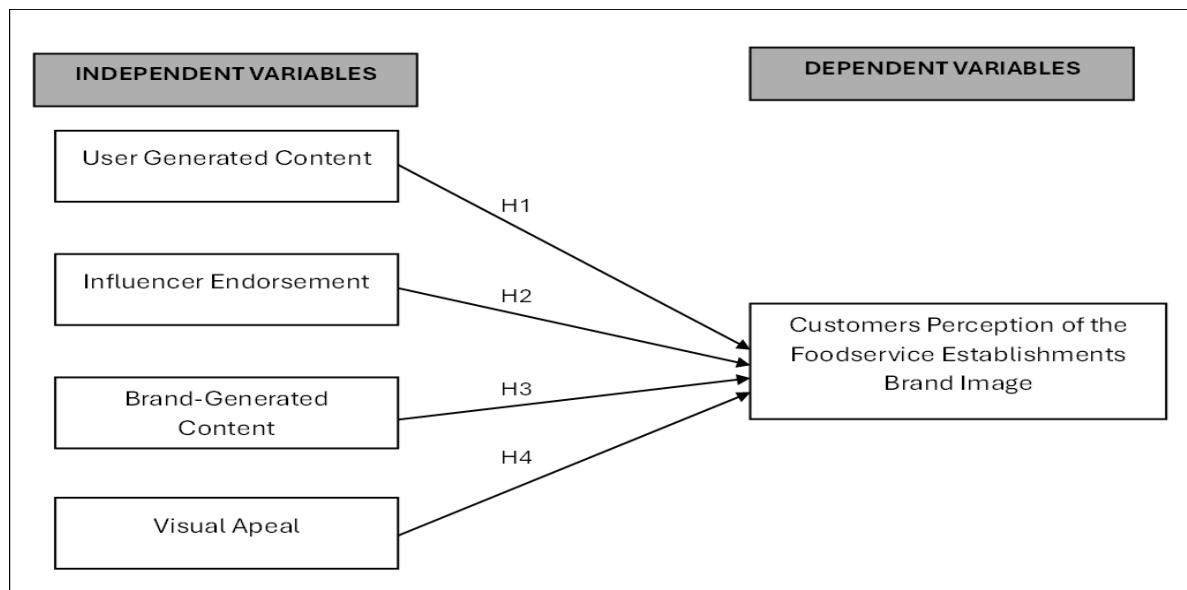


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of The Study

Research Hypotheses

Based on the literature reviewed and the proposed conceptual framework, the following hypotheses were developed:

H1: User-generated content has a positive influence on customers' perceptions of foodservice establishments brand image.

H2: Influencer endorsement positively influences customers' perceptions of foodservice establishments brand image.

H3: Brand-generated content has a positive influence on customers' perceptions of foodservice establishments brand image.

H4: Visual appeal positively influences customers' perceptions of foodservice establishments brand image.

Methodology

This study employed a quantitative cross-sectional research design to examine the influence of social media attributes on customers' perceptions of foodservice establishments. The independent variables investigated were user-generated content (UGC), influencer endorsement (IE), brand-generated content (BGC), and visual appeal (VA), while customer perception served as the dependent variable. The target population consisted of social media users in Dungun, Terengganu, who used social media platforms to search for information on

foodservice establishments. Based on G*Power analysis, the minimum required sample size was 129 respondents. However, a total of 151 usable responses were collected, thereby improving the reliability of the findings.

Data were collected through a structured online questionnaire distributed via Google Forms. The questionnaire consisted of demographic questions and measurement items adapted from previous studies. All items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Prior to the actual survey, a pilot test involving 30 respondents was conducted to assess the reliability of the instrument. The reliability analysis yielded Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.806 to 0.893, indicating satisfactory internal consistency for all constructs.

Data collection was conducted in November 2025. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were informed of their rights regarding anonymity, confidentiality, and withdrawal from the study at any time. The collected data were analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 29. Descriptive statistics were employed to summarise respondents' demographic characteristics and study variables, while multiple regression analysis was used to examine the influence of social media attributes on customers' perceptions of foodservice establishments.

Finding

A total of 151 respondents participated in this study. Female respondents constituted 55% ($n = 83$) of the sample, while males represented 45% ($n = 68$). The majority of respondents were aged 18-24 years (82.8%), followed by those aged 25–30 years (9.3%). In terms of educational background, most respondents held a bachelor's degree (65.6%), followed by Diploma holders (24.5%), indicating that the sample largely comprised young, educated social media users.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents

Variables	Category	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	68	45
	Female	83	55
Age	18 – 24	125	82.8
	25 – 30	14	9.3
	31 – 40	5	3.3
	41 – 50	3	2.0
	51 and above	2	1.3

Highest	High school/SPM	12	7.9
educati	Diploma	37	24.5
on	Bachelor's	99	65.6
level	Degree Master's	2	1.3
	Degree/PhD		
	Other	1	.7

Descriptive analysis revealed that all study variables recorded relatively high mean scores, indicating positive perceptions towards social media content related to foodservice establishments. Customer perception means values ranged from 3.95 to 4.11, indicating that social media positively influences respondents' perceptions of restaurants. Among the independent variables, Visual Appeal recorded the highest mean scores ($M = 4.07$ – 4.16), followed by User-Generated Content ($M = 4.07$ – 4.13) and Brand-Generated Content ($M = 3.95$ – 4.05). Influencer Endorsement showed comparatively lower mean scores ($M = 3.76$ – 3.79), indicating a moderate level of trust towards influencer recommendations.

Multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine the influence of social media attributes on customers' perceptions of foodservice establishments.

Table 2: Multiple Regression Analysis of Variables

Predictor R^2		Adj R^2	F Chang	Unstandard ized Coefficients (β)	Standardize d Coefficient (β)	Sig.	t
DV: Consumers' Perception of the Foodservice Establishments' Brand Image	.769	.763	121.769	.155		.409	.829
• User-Generated Content				.066	.421	<.001	6.247
• Influencer Endorsement				.053	.234	<.001	3.968
• Brand-Generated Content				.072	.232	.001	3.266
• Visual Appeal				.069	.098	.131	1.518

The overall model was significant, explaining 76.9% of the variance in customer perception ($R^2 = .769$, Adjusted $R^2 = .763$, $F = 121.769$, $p < .001$). The findings revealed that User-Generated Content was the strongest predictor of customer perception ($\beta = .421$, $p < .001$), followed by Influencer Endorsement ($\beta = .234$, $p < .001$) and Brand-Generated Content ($\beta =$

.232, $p = .001$). However, Visual Appeal did not significantly influence customer perception ($\beta = .098$, $p = .131$). These results suggest that consumers rely more on information shared by other users, influencers, and official brand content than solely on the visual attractiveness of social media posts when forming perceptions of foodservice establishments.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study examined the influence of four social media attributes, namely user-generated content (UGC), influencer endorsement, brand-generated content (BGC), and visual appeal, on customers' perceptions of foodservice establishments in Dungun, Terengganu. The findings revealed that UGC was the strongest predictor of customer perception, followed by influencer endorsement and BGC. These results suggest that customers place greater trust in information shared by other consumers, influencers, and official brand accounts when evaluating foodservice establishments. The findings are consistent with previous studies that highlighted the importance of online interactions, authenticity, and digital engagement in shaping consumer perceptions and behavioural intentions.

Among the variables examined, visual appeal did not have a significant influence on customers' perceptions of foodservice establishments when tested alongside the other social media attributes. Although respondents generally appreciated attractive social media content, visual aesthetics alone were insufficient to shape favourable perceptions of foodservice establishments. This finding may be explained by the semi-urban context of Dungun, Terengganu, where customers are likely to place greater importance on trustworthy information, authentic customer experiences, and recommendations from other consumers than on visually attractive social media content. Compared with consumers in highly urbanised areas, customers in semi-urban settings may rely more on electronic word-of-mouth, familiarity, and credibility when evaluating foodservice establishments. Consequently, informative and authentic social media content appears to have a greater influence on brand image than visual appeal alone, which is consistent with previous studies emphasising the importance of information credibility and authenticity in influencing consumers' brand evaluations.

The study contributes to the existing literature by extending the understanding of social media marketing in a semi-urban Malaysian context. Furthermore, the findings support the integration of Information Integration Theory and Keller's Customer-Based Brand Equity Model. Information Integration Theory explains how customers evaluate and combine different social media information cues, while Keller's model explains how these evaluations form brand associations and shape customers' perceptions of foodservice establishments' brand image.

From a practical perspective, foodservice operators should focus on encouraging positive customer reviews, collaborating with suitable influencers, and maintaining consistent brand-generated content to strengthen their online presence and brand image.

Despite its contributions, this study is limited to respondents in Dungun, Terengganu, and adopts a cross-sectional research design. Future studies may consider employing longitudinal approaches, expanding the geographical scope to include urban and rural areas, and incorporating qualitative methods to gain deeper insights into consumer perceptions and social media engagement behaviours.

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Ethics Statement: This study was conducted in accordance with ethical research standards. All procedures involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the Universiti Teknologi MARA. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. The data collected were used solely for academic purposes.

Author Contribution Statement: All authors contributed significantly to the development of this manuscript. Author 1 was responsible for data collection, questionnaire administration, and the initial drafting of the manuscript. Author 2 contributed to the conceptualization, methodology development, supervision of the study, and critical revision of the manuscript. Author 3 was involved in data analysis, interpretation of findings, and review of the results and discussion sections. Author 4 contributed to the literature review, manuscript editing, and final proofreading. All authors reviewed, approved, and agreed to the final version of the manuscript prior to submission.

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