

## CLICKS TO CRAVINGS: HOW SOCIAL MEDIA SERVES AS THE CULINARY COMPASS FOR SRI LANKAN YOUTH'S FOOD CHOICES

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### ABSTRACT

*Sri Lanka's food industry is changing, and young people are using the internet more and more to get food recommendations as a result of the economic crisis of 2021. This has caused many food companies to move to virtual marketing. The impact of social media marketing (SMM) versus traditional media marketing (TMM) on the food purchasing behavior of Sri Lankan youth (18–30 years old) is examined in this study, which looks at the effective marketing strategies for this demographic given the widespread use of social media among young people. Two hypotheses were investigated using quantitative methods: H<sub>0</sub>, which states that there is no significant difference in purchasing decisions between youth exposed to TMM and SMM, and H<sub>1</sub>, which states that young Sri Lankans prefer SMM. Using R software, the analysis validated H<sub>1</sub>, showing that there is a stronger positive relationship ( $r = 0.5413$ ) between SMM and youth food purchases than there is with TMM ( $r = 0.1108$ ). A significant difference in conversion rates was noted for youth exposed to SMM ( $p < 0.001$ ), but not for TMM ( $p = 0.1913$ ), according to Welch's t-test. This study shows empirically that SMM influences young Sri Lankan consumers' food choices more than TMM does, highlighting the significance of digital marketing tactics for this group. These findings have an impact on companies and marketers who want to attract and keep young customers in the rapidly changing digital landscape.*

**Keywords:** Food industry, Marketing, Social media marketing, Traditional marketing, Youth

### 1. Introduction

Globalization has made a vast variety of culinary experiences accessible to people all around the world, allowing people to easily access other cuisines. This global trend has led to significant expansion in the food industry in Sri Lanka. On the other hand, the country has experienced severe economic difficulties, such as a lack of foreign currency. Sri Lanka saw a startling 93.7% increase in food inflation in August 2022 (CN & Namboodiripad, 2022). Restaurant demand has decreased as a result of rising ingredient costs forcing them to raise their pricing. The restaurant business has been negatively impacted by power outages, fuel shortages, and gas shortages caused by political and economic upheaval. As a result, a lot of food-related firms have switched their marketing

spending from traditional techniques to more affordable social media channels. Social media marketing has become a new trend among the food industry worldwide using new marketing techniques like influencer marketing (Bermoy et al., 2021).

The purpose of this study is to compare the effects of social media marketing vs traditional marketing, with a particular focus on young Sri Lankan consumers' food industry purchasing decisions. There is a clear research vacuum in spite of Sri Lanka's food industry's impressive growth and the critical role that marketing plays in this environment. The body of research hasn't been able to conclusively determine whether social media marketing or traditional marketing is better at influencing young people's food shopping decisions. This knowledge gap is significant since it deprives companies of precise direction regarding the best marketing tactics.

The objective of this study :

- Evaluate the impact of conventional marketing (TMM) and social media marketing (SMM) on food purchases of young Sri Lankans using quantitative methods.

This study is guided by two research questions:

- Is there a significant difference in the purchase conversion rates among Sri Lankan youth exposed to social media marketing compared to those exposed to traditional media marketing?
- What is the relationship between the impact of social media marketing and traditional media marketing on purchase conversion rates among Sri Lankan youth?

## **2. Literature Review**

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic in Sri Lanka, consumer behavior has changed significantly, and e-marketing methods are now used more frequently. The study focuses on how e-marketing tactics affected customer behavior during the pandemic, paying particular attention to the organic food sector because of the notable rise in consumer demand in this space. The study's goal is to thoroughly investigate how e-marketing technologies have affected consumer behavior in the COVID-19 pandemic environment, specifically in Sri Lanka's organic food industry (Jayamaha, 2022).

Social media has gained popularity as a platform for businesses to advertise their goods and services. The effectiveness of social media marketing in comparison to conventional marketing strategies has come under inspection because of this change. Based on academic articles this literature review will explore the advantages of social media marketing over conventional marketing. One benefit of social media marketing is that it has a wider audience than conventional marketing strategies. Social media platforms offer a bigger audience than traditional media outlets. Businesses may access a wider and more varied audience thanks to social media platforms, which can be utilized to efficiently target different customer demographics (Zheng Xiang, 2015).

Food is seen by travelers as a primary travel inducement because it provides experiences that are distinctive, instructive, and life-changing. Nevertheless, it was discovered that

DMOs in the research region were not adequately conveying these elements via their web platforms. The present study offers significant contributions to the fields of theory and practice by delineating seven fundamental attributes of food experiences in the context of tourism and proposing avenues for enhancing the promotion of these experiences, particularly through digital media, within the Sri Lankan tourism domain (Dawson et al., 2023).

Also, social media marketing is typically less expensive than conventional marketing strategies. Social media advertising expenditures are often cheaper than those for traditional forms of advertising and can yield a higher rate of return. Moreover, social media platforms provide stronger targeting capabilities than conventional marketing techniques, enabling businesses to target particular consumer demographics (Ghose & Ipeiritis, 2011) more precisely.

Real-time interaction with customers and prospects is another benefit of social media marketing. Social media enables quick responses to customer questions and issues, which can strengthen bonds and promote brand loyalty (Liang & Turban, 2011). Also, social media platforms give companies the chance to work with customers and take their comments into account when developing new products (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004).

Brand recognition and awareness can also be improved through social media marketing. According to a study by Schivinski & Dabrowski (2014), social media marketing helps brands become more well-known, especially for small enterprises. Moreover, social media platforms include metrics to gauge interaction, impressions, reach, and other key performance indicators (KPIs), which can assist companies in tracking the success of their marketing initiatives (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

Social media is a hybrid method of promotion, as it allows for peer-to-peer communication as well as use as an integrated market communication tool. A study posted in the Cornell Hospitality Quarterly showed that treating customers as friends yielded better results compared to “sales-focused” communication. They also found that photos and text were more effective than video at gaining interest – which would seem counterintuitive and needs to be investigated (Kwok & Yu, 2012).

Traditional marketing has been in practice for a long time. Mass media tools such as newspapers, radio advertisements, and TV advertisements. TV advertisements increased in popularity with the booming consumption and production in the 1970s. The competition in the industry led many food companies like Kentucky Fried Chicken, McDonald’s, Kellogg’s, and Sunny D to create new TV advertisements regularly with new offers. The traditional marketing methods mainly focused on changing customer perspectives on the products to increase the consumption of certain products. The aspects of customer review and customer satisfaction were not given enough importance in the traditional marketing methods. A famous technique of digital media marketing used by many companies like Amazon and Alibaba is Search Engine Optimization (SEO). SEO helps companies filter the target groups and showcase the advertisements and products in the recommended section. This is used in social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Google. Companies also invest in third-party search engines that have a Pay Per Click system (PPC), in which each advertisement viewed by customers generates

profits. Email marketing is also used by companies in which previous customer emails are stored with the permission of the customer and new offers and product advertisements are sent to the customers through email. Viral marketing is also used by some companies where the companies create trends about the new product on social media platforms such as TikTok and Facebook (Durmaz & Efendioglu, 2016).

The literature review suggests that there is a strong correlation between social media marketing and food purchases by youth. Youth are more responsive to food advertisements that are advertising tasty, low cost and easily obtainable food be it advertised in social media or traditional media.

In an effort to close this significant knowledge gap, this study provides insightful information to food sector companies looking to draw in and interact with younger consumers.

### **3. Methodology**

The impact of social media versus traditional marketing on young people's food purchases in Sri Lanka is a research vacuum that this study fills (Bhandari, 2022). 385 individuals, ages 18 to 30, were chosen using convenience sampling in accordance with Krejcie and Morgan. 426 respondents were given a questionnaire with 25 questions, including multiple-choice and Likert scale items. Because it was accessible, convenience sampling was used, considering the possibility of low response rates. In light of Ayoobkhan's research (Ayoobkhan, 2016), this age range was selected.

#### **3.1. Limitations and assumptions**

One limitation of this research is the sample of the focus group only being 500 people. This small sample cannot be accurate enough to represent the entire population of Sri Lanka aged between 18-30. Another limitation is that the marketing catered towards these youngsters will not all be food industry-related.

One assumption made for this research is that the sample will represent most of the qualities in the population. Another assumption is that data given by the individuals in the sample is honest. The final assumption is that individuals in the sample encounter food-related marketing regularly.

#### **3.2. Ethics**

The study follows all the ethical requirements of conducting research with the help of participants. All personal details of the participants are kept highly confidential and anonymous. Informed consent will be taken from the participants before the survey. The participants are ensured that they will not face any harm or distress because of the study.

#### **3.3. Data analysis**

The quantitative data collected from the sample is analyzed using Welch's t-test, and Pearson Correlation to identify the level of influence of both social media marketing and traditional marketing on the purchasing behavior of youth.

The objective of the study was to Quantify and compare the impact of Social Media Marketing (SMM) versus Traditional Media Marketing (TMM) on the food purchases of youth aged 18-30 in Sri Lanka. To achieve this objective, the following hypothesis will be used.

- Null Hypothesis (H0): There is no significant difference in the purchase conversion rates among Sri Lankan youth exposed to social media marketing compared to those exposed to traditional media marketing.
- Alternative Hypothesis (H1): The purchase conversion rates among Sri Lankan youth exposed to social media marketing are significantly higher than those exposed to traditional media marketing.

To test this hypothesis researchers used Pearson's Correlation and Welch's t-test (independent t-test).

**Pearson correlation analysis:** The Pearson Correlation Analysis is done to assess the strength and the direction of the relationship between two variables. These values range between 1 to -1. The formula is given below (Pearson, K., 1896).

$$r = \frac{\sum(X_i - \bar{X})(Y_i - \bar{Y})}{\sqrt{\sum(X_i - \bar{X})^2 \sum(Y_i - \bar{Y})^2}} \dots\dots\dots \text{Equation 1}$$

In this formula:

$X_i$  and  $Y_i$  represent the individual values of the Exposure (TMM/SMM) and Actual purchase influenced by either TMM or SMM.

$\bar{X}$  and  $\bar{Y}$  represent the means of the X and Y variables, respectively.

$\sum$  represents the sum of the specified values.

**Welch's t-test (individual t-test):** When the variances of two independent groups differ, Welch's t-test is utilized to compare the means of the groups. Welch's t-test formula accounts for these different variances and yields a more trustworthy comparison. This test is a reliable statistical tool since it is useful when it is not possible to assume equal variances.

$$t = \frac{(\bar{X}_1 - \bar{X}_2)}{\sqrt{(s_1^2 / n_1) + (s_2^2 / n_2)}} \dots\dots\dots \text{Equation 2}$$

In this equation:

$t$  is the t-statistic.

$\bar{X}_1$  is the mean of the Exposure (TMM/SMM).

$\bar{X}_2$  is the mean of the Purchase (TMM/SMM).

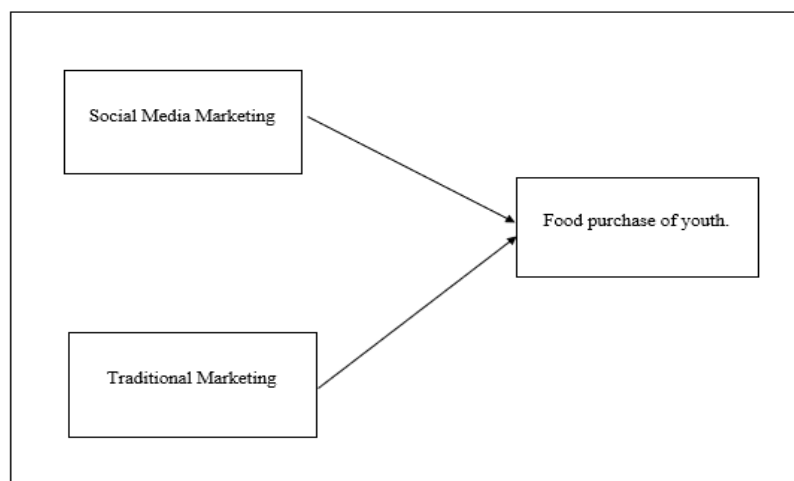
$s_1^2$  is the variance of the Exposure (TMM/SMM).

$s_2^2$  is the variance of the Purchase (TMM/SMM).

$n_1$  is the sample size of the Exposure (TMM/SMM).

$n_2$  is the sample size of the Purchase (TMM/SMM).

### 3.4. Conceptual framework



**Figure 1. Conceptual framework.**

This conceptual diagram gives an outline of variables and their influence on each other. This is used for empirical research purposes by the researchers of the team to examine the impact of SMM and TM on purchases among youth in Sri Lanka's food industry. This helps the researchers to analyze all the influencing variables and provide a framework on how to interpret the analysis. The conceptual diagram proposes that the independent variables of the research (SMM and TM) influence the dependent variable (purchase among youth).

### 3.5. Operationalization table

The operationalization of the research is given below.

**Table 1. Operationalization.**

<b>Concept/ Construct</b>	<b>Operational Definition</b>	<b>Measurement Variable</b>	<b>Scale/Type</b>	<b>Question Asked</b>	<b>Variable Assesed</b>
<b>Exposure to Food-related Social Media Marketing</b>	Rating of the respondent's exposure to food-related social media marketing.	Likert scale: 1 (very low) to 5 (very high)	Ordinal	"On a scale from 1 to 5, please rate your exposure to food-related social media marketing."	SMM
<b>Exposure to Food-related Traditional Media Marketing</b>	Rating of the respondent's exposure to food-related traditional media marketing.	Likert scale: 1 (very low) to 5 (very high)	Ordinal	"On a scale from 1 to 5, please rate your exposure to food-related traditional media marketing."	TMM

<b>Likelihood of Purchase after Exposure to Social Media</b>	Rating of the likelihood of making a purchase after exposure to social media marketing.	Likert scale: 1 (very low) to 5 (very high)	Ordinal	"On a scale from 1 to 5, please rate how likely you are to make a purchase after being exposed to social media marketing."	SMM
<b>Likelihood of Purchase after Exposure to Traditional Media</b>	Rating of the likelihood of making a purchase after exposure to traditional media marketing.	Likert scale: 1 (very low) to 5 (very high)	Ordinal	"On a scale from 1 to 5, please rate how likely you are to make a purchase after being exposed to traditional media marketing."	TMM
<b>Purchase due to Social Media Marketing</b>	Identification of whether the respondent made a food purchase in the past due to exposure to marketing on social media.	Categorical: Yes, No	Nominal	"Have you made a food purchase in the past due to exposure to marketing on social media?"	Purchase of food
<b>Purchase due to Traditional Media Marketing</b>	Identification of whether the respondent made a food purchase in the past due to exposure to marketing on traditional media.	Categorical: Yes, No	Nominal	"Have you made a food purchase in the past due to exposure to marketing on traditional media (e.g., TV, radio, billboards)?"	Purchase of food

#### 4. Results/Analysis and Discussion

##### 4.1. The Alpha of the Cronbach

Overall Cronbach's Alpha for the study sample was 0.6943, indicating the reliability of the survey data used. A Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of more than 0.7 is generally regarded as excellent, showing data reliability and internal consistency. The resulting number shows a good degree of reliability even though it is somewhat below this level. This suggests that there is internal consistency in the survey questions, especially those concerning the influence of traditional media marketing (TMM) and social media marketing (SMM) on young Sri Lankans' food purchasing behavior. The complex and multidimensional character of the research topic, as well as the numerous elements impacting the purchasing decisions of the questioned demographic, may be responsible for the marginal divergence from the optimal range. Although the value falls outside of the ideal range, it does not materially affect the trustworthiness of the data, which emphasizes the significance of carefully interpreting the survey results in light of this constraint. Subsequent studies may examine improving the survey tool to improve internal consistency. The individual dimensions and their alpha values are given below.

**Table 2. Cronbach's Alpha.**

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Alpha value</b>
<b>SMM (Social Media Marketing)</b>	0.7439
<b>TMM (Traditional Media Marketing)</b>	0.7046
<b>Purchase of Food</b>	0.643

#### **4.2. Respondent demographics**

The demographics of the respondents are detailed below. With the majority of respondents being from the western province. The percentage between both female and male respondents is almost equal with only a 1.8% difference. More than half of the respondents are employed. The majority of the respondents are aged between 21-30 years.

**Table 3. Respondent demographics.**

<b>Demographic</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
<b>Male</b>	51.4%
<b>Female</b>	48.6%
<b>Western Province</b>	30.8%
<b>Central Province</b>	14.8%
<b>Southern Province</b>	19.7%
<b>Northern Province</b>	4.9%
<b>Eastern Province</b>	4.9%
<b>North Western Province</b>	9.9%
<b>North Central Province</b>	4.9%
<b>Uva Province</b>	4.9%
<b>Sabaragamuwa Province</b>	3.9%
<b>Employed</b>	57.7%
<b>Unemployed</b>	42.4%
<b>Age between 18-20</b>	24.4%
<b>Age between 21-24</b>	36.2%
<b>Age between 25-30</b>	39.4%



### 4.3. Pearson correlation analysis

This study's correlation analysis looked at the connections between purchasing behavior and marketing exposure, highlighting the differences between traditional media marketing (TMM) and social media marketing (SMM) in terms of how marketing influences young Sri Lankans' dietary preferences. The results of the test are shown below.

**Table 4. Pearson correlation.**

Variable Pair	Correlation to the Exposure of TMM and SMM	P-Value	Lower CI	Upper CI
<b>Social Media Marketing</b>	0.5412624	< 2.2e-16	0.4700032	0.6055118
<b>Traditional Media Marketing</b>	0.1108172	0.02216	0.01597615	0.20368199

A statistically significant and reasonably substantial positive connection ( $r = 0.5413$ ,  $p < 2.2e-16$ ) was found between likely purchase behavior and exposure for the SMM using Pearson's product-moment correlation. This research emphasizes the significant influence of SMM in influencing young Sri Lankans' food choices by indicating that exposure to SMM enhances the likelihood that they would make food purchases.

The correlation for TMM, however, was noticeably lower ( $r = 0.1108$ ,  $p = 0.02216$ ). This finding suggests a positive association, albeit one that is much weaker. Among the same population, exposure to TMM appears to have less of an effect on influencing food shopping decisions.

These results highlight the significant difference between SMM and TMM's efficacy in reaching and influencing Sri Lanka's youth market. In an ever-evolving digital ecosystem, businesses and marketers should prioritize digital marketing techniques, particularly via social media, to engage and attract the younger audience, according to the strong association found with SMM. The weaker association with TMM, however, suggests that conventional marketing techniques might need to be modified in order to connect with this particular demographic more effectively. In summary, this study offers significant perspectives for food industry marketers, especially those aiming to satisfy the tastes of younger Sri Lankan customers.

### 4.4. Welch's t-test (independent t-test)

Within the context of influencing young Sri Lankans' food choices, Welch's t-test results show significant variations in the association between Exposure and Purchase behavior for both Traditional Media Marketing (TMM) and Social Media Marketing (SMM). The results of the Welch's t-test are shown below.

Table 5. Welch's t-test.

Marketing type	t-value between exposure of SMM and TMM	Degrees of freedom	P-value	95% CI (Lower)	95% CI (Upper)	Mean of X	Mean of Y
<b>Social Media Marketing</b>	6.1307	816.53	1.361e-09	0.36079 62	0.70063 81	3.817	3.286
<b>Traditional Media Marketing</b>	-1.3078	839.9	0.1913	- 0.22894 50	0.04584 64	3.317	3.408

The t-test, starting with TMM, yields a p-value of 0.1913 and a t-statistic of -1.3078. Given that the p-value is higher than the traditional significance level of 0.05, it may be concluded that the means of TMM's exposure and purchase do not differ statistically significantly. This result suggests that exposure level has no discernible impact on the likelihood of young Sri Lankans purchasing food in the setting of TMM. It is also supported by the 95 per cent confidence interval, which spans -0.2289450 to 0.0458464, that the means of Purchase and Exposure for TMM are reasonably near. Consequently, it seems that TMM might not have as much of an impact on this group's food purchases.

For SMM, however, the results reveal a more pronounced disparity. The t-test produces a very significant p-value of 1.361e-09 along with a t-statistic of 6.1307. This suggests that for SMM, the means of Exposure and Purchase differ significantly. The 95 per cent confidence interval, which ranges from 0.3607962 to 0.7006381, highlights how significantly these two variables differ from one another. Higher exposure is positively correlated with a higher probability of young Sri Lankans making food purchases in the context of SMM. This finding emphasizes how significantly SMM influences the way they choose to eat.

In conclusion, these t-test results show that, of the two marketing channels, SMM significantly influences young Sri Lankans' food-buying behavior more than TMM does. This observation highlights how crucial digital marketing tactics are for businesses and marketers looking to interact with and draw in this group in Sri Lanka's quickly changing digital environment, especially when it comes to social media.

## 5. Conclusion and Implications

In conclusion, the researchers reject the null hypothesis (H0). There is evidence that shows social media marketing significantly impacts youth food purchases in Sri Lanka when compared to Traditional media marketing. The study's conclusions offer insightful information about how well marketing channels influence young Sri Lankans' dietary preferences. In the context of the food sector, the study contrasted the effects of traditional media marketing (TMM) and social media marketing (SMM) on purchase behavior.

The outcomes show how the two marketing channels differ significantly from one another. Social media marketing (SMM) demonstrated a strong and highly significant link between exposure and food purchases, whereas traditional media marketing (TMM) did not reveal any statistically significant difference in the influence of exposure on food purchases. This demonstrates how important SMM is in influencing young Sri Lankans' food choices.

#### Implications:

- **Digital Dominance:** The report emphasizes social media marketing's dominance in the digital sphere. To effectively engage and attract younger consumers, food industry companies should focus their digital marketing tactics, particularly through social media platforms.
- **Adaptation for Traditional Media:** Although TMM might not be as successful as SMM, it is still important to consider. Conventional marketing channels must think about modifying their approaches to better appeal to the younger audience.
- **Strategic Marketing:** Using this data, businesses and marketers in Sri Lanka's food sector can customize their marketing campaigns, concentrating on social media marketing (SMM) to connect with and impact the younger demographic.
- **Future Research:** To better understand the subtleties of how digital marketing affects food choices, more research is encouraged. This includes examining the impact of particular social media platforms and content kinds.

In summary, this research adds to the changing marketing environment in Sri Lanka's food sector. The evidence firmly backs up the claim that SMM greatly outperforms TMM in influencing young people's decisions to buy food. These findings have applications for businesses and marketers who want to meet the changing needs of young Sri Lankan consumers in the digital age. Prospective Studies: It is recommended that more studies be conducted to examine the subtleties of how digital marketing affects dietary decisions, including the impact of particular social media platforms and

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