

The Extent of Social Media Marketing Influence on Food Service Business Operations

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the extent of social media marketing (SMM) influence on the business operations of food service MSMEs in Solano and Bayombong, Nueva Vizcaya, focusing on customer acquisition, sales performance, brand awareness, and customer retention, as well as its relationship with organizational demographics. A quantitative descriptive-correlational design was employed, with data collected from 33 establishments using a structured questionnaire and analyzed through frequency distribution, weighted mean, Spearman's rank-order correlation, and Kruskal–Wallis H test. The results revealed that SMM has a high level of influence across all operational dimensions, particularly in brand awareness and customer acquisition, and that its effectiveness is not significantly associated with most demographic variables, indicating that outcomes depend more on strategic implementation than firm characteristics. However, the study identified challenges such as limited technical skills, time constraints, and budget limitations. The study concludes that social media marketing is a vital and cost-effective tool for enhancing MSME performance and recommends strengthening digital marketing capabilities and adopting consistent strategies to maximize its impact.

Keywords: Customer acquisition, sales performance, brand awareness, customer retention, challenges encountered

INTRODUCTION

Today, social media has become more than just a means for people to communicate with each other; it has been embraced as an effective business promotion tool, a way to engage customers, and a tool to grow a company's operations across industries, including the food service industry. Based on the concept of Web 2.0, Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) defined social media as Internet-based applications that depend on the ideology and technology of Web 2.0 to create and share user-generated content. This classic definition emphasizes social media marketing as an interactive, participatory platform where companies are no longer mere broadcasters but also co-creators of brand stories. Social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter are essential digital marketing channels used by food service companies to share their values, reach new customers, and maintain relationships with existing customers (Wasik, Primasari, & Setiawan, 2025; Islam & Sheik, 2024).

This ubiquity of social media marketing in the food service industry is supported by growing empirical evidence documenting its measurable effects on many aspects of business. As highlighted by Jamil et al. (2022), the benefits of social media marketing include improving customer engagement and strengthening the connection between brands and their consumers, which can lead to further advantages that positively affect overall business performance. However, social media is particularly effective in the food and beverage industry because the visual and experiential nature of food products provides high-quality images, videos, and customer reviews that can act as rich information cues that facilitate consumer discovery and drive purchasing intent (Kim & Kim, 2021; Shandy, Mulyana, & Harsanto, 2023). Furthermore, digital and social media marketing has clearly influenced sales growth and market expansion over the last 15 years, according to Motilal et al. (2026).

Two other operational dimensions greatly influenced by social media marketing activities are brand awareness and customer retention. Aaker (1996) found that brand awareness, defined as how well a brand is perceived as distinct and accessible in consumers' minds, is consolidated through repeated, consistent brand exposure. Building on this, Laradi et al. (2026) showed that creative and engaging branded content can build emotional trust and brand attachment, ultimately leading to customer loyalty and repeat sales in social media. To determine the relative strength of the influence of social media marketing activities on the three brand equity dimensions of awareness, image, and loyalty, Wasik et al. (2025) analyzed 600 brand followers on the three main platforms and concluded that social media marketing activities were particularly influential on brand awareness, which is the first dimension among the three brand equity dimensions. Gouda and Halim (2025) also found in the hospitality industry that sustainable social media posts, including both user-generated and firm-created content, play a crucial role in strengthening customer loyalty in the long run when they align with consumers' values and expectations.

Although the positive impact of social media marketing has been documented, the research literature remains limited, especially regarding the overall effects of social media marketing beyond specific outcome measures. In a systematic review of social commerce studies, Wibowo et al. (2021) noted that most studies focus on specific behavioral outcomes, such as purchase intention or satisfaction, rather than the overall impact of social media marketing on business performance across multiple dimensions. Moreover, the extent to which research has been conducted in developed contexts or in large hospitality establishments has led to a "study deficit" in understanding how online engagement translates into success in small and micro food service businesses in emerging and provincial economies.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quantitative descriptive-correlational research design to investigate the extent of social media marketing influence on food service business operations and to determine the significance of the relationship between respondents' demographic profile and their perceived level of social media marketing effectiveness. The descriptive component of the design was used to systematically describe the demographic and organizational characteristics of participating food service establishments and to quantify the level of social media marketing influence across the four operational dimensions of customer acquisition, sales performance, brand awareness, and customer retention. The correlational component was used to statistically assess the relationship between organizational demographic variables and perceived SMM influence, enabling the researchers to determine whether these profile factors constitute meaningful differentiating variables in SMM effectiveness.

The descriptive-correlational design does not establish causal relationships between variables; rather, it examines the degree and direction of association between the demographic profile and SMM influence dimensions. This methodological boundary is appropriate given the study's cross-sectional design and the exploratory nature of the SMM relationship within the specific Nueva Vizcaya context. Future studies using longitudinal or experimental designs could build on these correlational findings to investigate causal mechanisms.

Theoretical Framework

The study is based on Media Richness Theory (MRT), proposed by Daft and Lengel (1986), a fundamental theory for understanding how media affect consumer behavior and business outcomes in the food industry. Media Richness Theory states that media differ in their ability to convey information and minimize equivocality (ambiguity and uncertainty in complex tasks or messages). Daft and Lengel (1986) identify the following characteristics of a medium as being more "rich": (1) The ability to provide immediate feedback, (2) The ability to transmit multiple cues at the same time (visual, auditory, and textual), (3) The use of natural language rather than numerical codes, and (4) The ability to personalize. For tasks that require some degree of ambiguity, a complex message, or nuanced interpersonal understanding, richer media ought to be more effective.

MRT is relevant to the food service industry, especially because food products are experiential and sensory-dependent, and the richness of the communication medium is an important factor in consumers' decision-making. In the case of food and beverage SMEs, Shandy et al. (2023) explicitly employed MRT and found that several social media platforms with high information richness (large amounts of information, high-quality visual information, and interactive responsiveness) significantly influenced brand equity and business performance. The structural equation model validated the theoretical model, which states that providing MSMEs with high-quality, abundant social media content leads to positive consumer impressions, which in turn increase brand discovery, boost consumer confidence, and ultimately improve business results.

Social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok are some of the most prolific sources of information on the Internet – they also deliver visual cues (high-resolution food photography, short video format), natural conversational language (captions, comments, responses, and direct messages), real-time interactive feedback (likes, comments, shares, and direct messages), and personalized content recommendations via algorithm-driven delivery systems. Developing the idea of "digital aesthetic fit" that "aesthetic coherence will enhance the richness signal and quicken the consumer's brand associations" (Gun, 2024), I embedded this property in the F&B sector. With limited resources, food service MSMEs have a ready alternative in social media marketing to highlight brand quality, stimulate consumer engagement, and achieve high impact at lower cost.

In this study, MRT is defined as four signal receiver feedback loops corresponding to four operational dimensions investigated. Firstly, the abundance of content shared on social media, whether via company photos, reviews or promotional posts, is an acquisition signal that influences customers' initial awareness and first-visit actions (customer acquisition). Second, the interactivity and informativeness of social media marketing content, including online promotions, discounts, and responsive interaction, stimulate purchase and transform attention into transactional activity (sales performance). Third, repetitive, high-richness exposures create more brand familiarity and positive brand associations in consumers' memories (brand awareness), consistent with Aaker's (1996) model of awareness-driven brand equity. Fourth, social media's participatory and relational aspects (two-way communication, personalization, community-building activities) create the emotional bond crucial for repeat patronage (customer retention), as explained by Gouda and Halim (2025).

In S. Sarkis et al. (2025), MRT is validated as an application for the food and beverage industry, and it is shown that media richness, measured as the number of social media ads, the amount of eWOM, and the level of involvement with digital influencers, has a significant influence on customer responsiveness in discovery, inquiry, and purchase. They found that eWOM had the strongest effect ($\beta = 0.453$), consistent with MRT's prediction that eWOM is a socially credible, natural-language, personalized informational signal. These theoretical and empirical foundations combine to make MRT the most suitable lens for understanding the relationship of social media marketing and business operations in the context of a business that is the subject of this study: MSMEs in the food service sector.

Research Paradigm of The Study

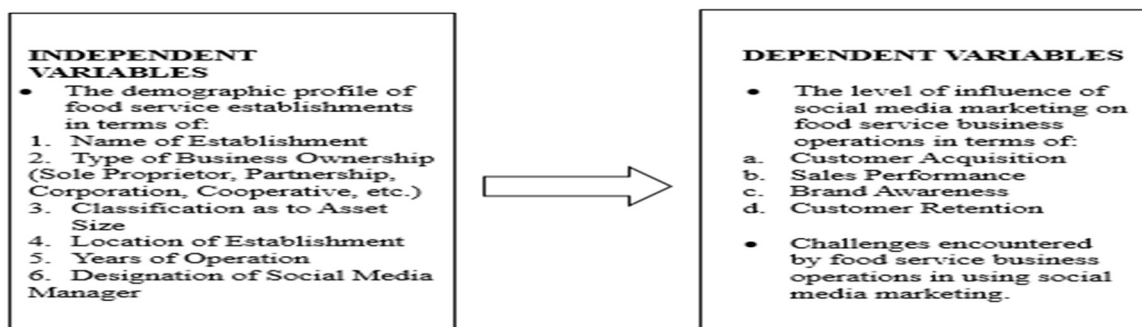


Figure 1 illustrates the research paradigm of this study, which depicts the conceptual framework governing the relationship between the study's independent and dependent variables. The independent variable consists of the demographic profile of food service establishments, including the name of the establishment, type of business ownership, classification by asset size, location, years of operation, and designation of social media manager. These organizational characteristics are examined as potential differentiating factors that may influence how social media marketing is implemented and perceived across different enterprise configurations.

Research Setting

The study was conducted in the municipalities of Solano and Bayombong, which serve as the primary commercial and administrative centers of Nueva Vizcaya province in the Cagayan Valley region (Region II) of the Philippines. Both municipalities host a substantial number of food service establishments — ranging from small eateries, cafeterias, and family restaurants to fast-food outlets and specialty dining establishments — that cater to diverse consumer populations, including local residents, students, government employees, and inter-provincial travelers.

Bayombong is the provincial capital of Nueva Vizcaya and serves as the center of government, education, and commercial activity in the province. Solano, located approximately 15 kilometers from Bayombong, functions as a major commercial and trading hub, characterized by high foot traffic, active public markets, and a concentration of commercial establishments along its main thoroughfares. Both municipalities are served by major road networks connecting Nueva Vizcaya to the greater Cagayan Valley region and Metro Manila, contributing to their commercial vibrancy and diverse consumer base.

Data Gathering Tools

The primary data-gathering instrument for this study was a structured survey questionnaire designed to measure the extent of social media marketing influence on food service business operations among MSMEs in Solano and Bayombong. The researchers developed the questionnaire based on a thorough review of relevant literature, including Shandy et al. (2023), Santos et al. (2024), and Manalo (2020), and aligned it with the study's objectives, theoretical framework, and operational definitions.

The instrument was organized into two major sections. The first section gathered data on the demographic and organizational profile of the respondent establishment, including: the name of the establishment; the name and designation of the respondent (owner or authorized representative); type of business ownership; location; years of operation; asset size classification (micro, small, or medium); and whether the business owner personally manages the establishment's social media accounts. These profile variables were operationalized in alignment with the independent variable construct of the study's research paradigm.

The second section measured the perceived level of social media marketing influence across five subscales: (a) customer acquisition (5 items); (b) sales performance (5 items); (c) brand awareness (5 items); (d) customer retention (5 items); and (e) challenges in social media marketing (5 items). Each item was rated using a four-point Likert scale with response options: 4 = Strongly Agree, 3 = Agree, 2 = Disagree, and 1 = Strongly Disagree. A four-point scale was deliberately chosen over a five-point scale to eliminate the neutral midpoint, compelling respondents to express a directional opinion on each item and enhancing the instrument's sensitivity and discriminatory power (Dörnyei, 2003). This scaling approach is consistent with that employed by Santos et al. (2024) in their comparable study of Philippine MSME social media marketing.

Statistical Treatment of Data

The gathered data from the survey questionnaires were sorted, coded, and entered before being subjected to statistical analysis that was suitable for the study's aims. Frequency counts and percentages were used to describe the respondents' demographics and the attributes of their businesses. The weighted mean was used to determine the extent to which social media marketing affected respondents' ability to acquire new customers, improve sales performance, build brand awareness, retain customers, and the challenges FBOs face in using social media to market their businesses. The Kruskal-Wallis H test was used to determine if there is a statistically significant difference in the influence of social media marketing amongst the selected demographic groups. The inferential test was evaluated at the 0.05 level of significance.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The majority of respondents were sole proprietors (75.8%) while 18.2% indicated they were partnerships or corporation. For asset size, more than half indicated they were micro enterprises (66.7%). These results imply that food service establishments joining the study were comprised mainly of small-scale and lightly capitalized businesses. More than half of the respondents (51.5%) had been in operation for three years or less implying that several businesses joining the study were relatively new or start-ups. Regarding location, majority of the respondents were from Solano (60.6%) while the rest were from Bayombong (39.4%). The majority also indicated they personally handled their social media accounts (60.6%).

Social media marketing was found to have very high positive influence on food service establishments. An overall mean of 3.56 was noted for customer acquisition, followed by sales performance ($M = 3.48$), brand awareness ($M = 3.46$), and customer retention ($M = 3.44$). With an overall grand mean of 3.49 or interpreted as Strongly Agree, the respondents recognized social media marketing as instrumental in acquiring and engaging customers.

Means ranged from 3.21 to 3.58 for sales performance. The respondents Strongly Agreed that active and regular social media marketing improves sales ($M = 3.48$). Being consistent on social media received the highest mean among the items under this dimension ($M = 3.58$). Social media was also Strongly perceived to increase brand awareness ($M = 3.46$), specifically on public awareness and regularly posting on social media. Customer retention had an overall mean of 3.44, with regular feed updates and connecting with customers were also noted as instrumental in engaging customers. The respondents were not as supportive that social media can encourage customers to visit the business again which earned an overall mean of 3.21.

Even with the positive noted influence of social media on business, majority of the respondents agreed that there are challenges with implementing social media marketing. An overall mean of 3.18 was computed for this section, interpreted as Agree. Finding time to simultaneously manage social media took the highest mean ($M = 3.70$), followed by limited technical skills to handle social media ($M = 3.24$). Limited or no budget were noted, along with some of the earlier factors, as challenges to social media marketing. Not regularly posting on social media and inability to keep up with trends were also among the challenges articulated by the respondents.

The inferential results revealed no significant relations between asset size and years in operation with any of the dimensions of social media marketing influence. Similarly, the null hypothesis could not be rejected for the Kruskal-Wallis H test, which implied that there were no significant differences in perceived social media marketing influence among business owners and non-owners who manage their social media. Thus, perceived social media marketing influence was equal among all types, sizes, ages, and management of food service establishments.

DISCUSSION:

The ownership profile is broadly representative of the MSME landscape in emerging provincial economies in the Philippines, as also noted by Santos et al. (2024), who found that small food enterprises in rural Philippine settings are largely owner-operated and rely primarily on social media for their promotional activities.

Their structural equation modeling results revealed that even micro-scale businesses that maintain abundant social media content create measurable consumer impressions, thereby leveling the competitive playing field with larger rivals. This is corroborated by Felix et al. (2016), who argued that social media platforms are accessible to businesses regardless of their financial capacity, enabling even micro-enterprises to build strategic marketing presences.

The data also indicate that even long-established businesses (7 years and above) are actively engaged in social media marketing, which departs from traditional assumptions that older enterprises rely more heavily on offline promotional channels. This pattern may be explained by the accelerating digitalization of consumer behavior in provincial Philippine contexts, where even established businesses have adapted to the growing preference for online discovery and engagement (Ramos & Flores, 2021). The relatively young operational profiles of most respondents also suggest that social media-enabled entrepreneurship has emerged as a significant market-entry pathway in Solano and Bayombong.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Food service MSMEs must improve their social media marketing. Recommendations include consistently creating social media content, engaging with customers and clients, providing social media training, and monitoring progress.
- Business Owners: Managers should create a social media calendar and post 3-5 times a week on social media. They should use social media to acquire customers. This includes sales promotion, loyalty and rewards programs, reviews and feedback, and regular posting. Owners should train or manage their business's social media accounts for at least 2 hours a week.
- Marketing Practitioners: Marketing teams should develop acquisition strategies. These may include social media marketing strategies for sales promotions, awareness, and customer engagement. Suggest setting measurable key performance indicators. For example, aim for a 15% increase in inquiries from social media posts within 6 months. This could include increasing the engagement rate by 10% and reach by 20%. KPIs should be measured every quarter.
- Future Entrepreneurs: Entrepreneurial business owners should create social media accounts within the first month of operation. Use low-cost strategies to market your business, such as organic social media posts, customer reviews and referrals, and community engagement. Ensure you post at least 3 times per week and engage with your customers consistently.
- LGUs: Local Government Units should train owners of Solano and Bayombong MSMEs on digital marketing and social media at least twice a year. Train at least 50 owners of food service businesses each year. Training should include how to create social media content, use social media analytics, engage with customers, and understand social media trends. A learning assessment should follow training.
- Customers and Community: Support local food businesses. Leave them reviews, recommendations, and feedback, and engage with their posts on social media. Community organizations can encourage members to support local businesses and engage safely with business owners online.
- Future Researchers: Replicate this study in other municipalities and provinces in 3-5 years. The same research methods can be used but can vary. Future researchers can use qualitative methods such as interviews and focus groups. Studies can also be conducted on factors affecting customer satisfaction, loyalty, success of influencer marketing and marketing, metrics that effectively measure ROI, and which social media platforms are most effective.

AI DECLARATION STATEMENT

AI-supported tools helped with grammar and structure in creating this article. No AI tools were used to collect, analyze, or interpret data; all authors are credited for their academic contributions.

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