



Research Article

The Impact of Social Media Platforms On Sichuan Consumers' Purchase Behavior in the Catering Services

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Abstract: The rapid advancement of digital technology has transformed the landscape of marketing, with social media platforms emerging as powerful tools for influencing consumer behavior. This study aims to examine the impact of social media engagement, content quality, and social proof on the purchasing behavior of consumers in the catering services industry in Sichuan, China. Recognizing the dynamic nature of the digital marketplace, the research adopts a quantitative approach, utilizing a structured survey to gather data from 390 participants who are active users of social media and potential consumers of catering services. Statistical analysis reveals a significant and positive correlation between all three independent variables—social media engagement, content quality, and social proof—and consumers' likelihood to purchase catering services. Specifically, higher levels of engagement, such as likes, comments, and shares, are found to enhance consumer trust and satisfaction, thereby increasing purchase intention. Furthermore, high-quality content, characterized by relevance, creativity, and informative value, positively influences the perceived value of catering services. Social proof, reflected through customer reviews, ratings, and testimonials, also plays a critical role in shaping consumer perceptions and decision-making, reinforcing trust in the service provider. The findings suggest that catering businesses can enhance their marketing effectiveness by fostering active engagement, producing consistently high-quality content, and leveraging positive customer feedback to build credibility. This research offers valuable insights for both academics and practitioners, enriching the existing literature on consumer behavior in the context of social media marketing within the catering industry. The implications emphasize the need for businesses to adopt integrated digital marketing strategies that not only attract but also retain customers through trust, value creation, and community engagement. By understanding these key drivers, catering service providers can more effectively navigate the competitive digital environment and strengthen their market position.

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1. Introduction

The catering industry in Sichuan underwent a remarkable transformation in 2024, marked by a vigorous recovery, innovative approaches, and various challenges. As the tourism sector rebounded dramatically—evidenced by Chengdu attracting an impressive influx of over 200 million tourists—local dining demand surged. In the first half of 2024, revenue in Sichuan's catering sector experienced robust growth, soaring approximately 15% year-over-year

[1]. Chefs ingeniously harnessed the power of social media platforms like Douyin and Kuaishou to showcase their culinary creations, fostering a new wave of online orders. One notable phenomenon was the soaring popularity of "cloud hotpot" kits, which saw sales increase by an astonishing 40% [2]. This vibrant catering landscape in Sichuan thrived on the delicate balance between cherished culinary traditions and cutting-edge innovations, utilizing digital tools to cater to the diverse and evolving needs of consumers. However, the industry also faced operational hurdles that required adept navigation. With its deep roots in local culture, the catering sector remained vital not only to Sichuan's economic health but also to its cultural identity [3]. As growth continued, a notable trend emerged: hybridization, which blended traditional methods with technological advancements and expanded outreach to global markets. The local specialty catering culture experienced a surge in consumption, leading to intensified market competition. The crowded field of participants was characterized by fierce rivalry, with numerous players vying for consumers' attention and loyalty. Among the challenges, severe homogenization prompted the industry to enter a crucial adjustment phase. During this period, enterprises began to prioritize operational quality and efficiency, recognizing the growing importance of these factors in an increasingly competitive landscape [4]. Looking ahead, a marked improvement in both product and service quality is anticipated. Compounding this focus on excellence, the demands for food safety have been elevated, with enhanced supervision and regulations ensuring that product quality becomes paramount. As these trends unfold, Sichuan's catering industry is poised to emerge stronger and more resilient than ever, thanks to the development of social media [5].

Research Objectives

This study explores Sichuan consumers' purchase behaviour in the catering services through social media platforms with the following objectives: To examine the influencing mechanisms of improving the Sichuan consumers' catering purchase behavior through social media based on the elements of social media engagement, content quality, and social proof. To offer respective suggestions for the catering industry on enhancing consumers purchase behavior through the value and quality development by social media.

2. Theoretical Foundation

Definition of Social Influence Theory on Social Media in Purchasing Behavior

Social Influence Theory, in the realm of social media, emphasizes the significant ways in which individuals are influenced by the opinions, behaviors, and actions of those within their social circles. When it comes to making purchasing decisions for catering services, this theory posits that consumers often rely heavily on the recommendations, reviews, and endorsements shared by friends, family, influencers, or other users across various social media platforms. The impact of social validation is particularly pronounced; a stream of positive feedback, likes, and shares can significantly bolster the perceived credibility and appeal of a catering service. As potential customers see their peers expressing enthusiasm for a particular provider, their trust in that service increases, ultimately raising the likelihood of making a purchase. This phenomenon underscores how digital interactions amplify social validation, profoundly influencing consumer preferences and choices in today's competitive marketplace [6].

Definition of Expectancy-Value Theory on Consumer Purchase Behavior

The Expectancy-Value Theory posits that consumers' purchasing decisions are shaped by their expectations regarding the outcomes associated with a product or service, as well as the significance they attribute to those outcomes. In the context of catering services, this theory suggests that consumers evaluate various potential benefits, including food quality, flavor

profiles, presentation, and the overall experience, which encompasses factors such as staff attentiveness and ambiance. Their purchasing choices are heavily influenced by the degree of confidence they have in achieving these desired outcomes and the value they place on them. Ultimately, the theory suggests that consumers engage in a thoughtful evaluation of a catering service's effectiveness and appeal before making a purchase, weighing perceived benefits against their personal preferences [7].

3. Definition of Terms

The purchase behavior of catering services through social media refers to how consumers interact with and make decisions regarding catering options based on their experiences and engagements on social media platforms. This behavior encompasses various factors, including how consumers discover catering services, the influence of social media content — such as photos, reviews, and testimonials — and the role of social media advertising in shaping preferences. When potential customers see appealing images of food, read positive reviews, or engage with posts that highlight special offers, they may feel more inclined to choose a particular catering service [8].

Social media engagement for a catering service refers to how the business interacts and connects with its audience on various social media platforms. This engagement is evident through likes, comments, shares, and messages, which reflect customer interest and participation. It involves creating compelling content, such as images of food, behind-the-scenes videos, or customer testimonials, to attract potential clients and encourage interaction. Effective engagement not only boosts brand visibility but also fosters relationships with customers, allowing the catering service to build trust and loyalty [9].

The quality of a catering service's social media content refers to how effectively it presents itself online through various types of content, including images, videos, and written posts. This quality encompasses several key aspects, including the visual appeal of food presentations, the clarity and engagement level of written descriptions, and the overall consistency of the brand's messaging. High-quality content should resonate with the target audience by showcasing the catering service's unique offerings and aligning with current trends and customer preferences [10].

Social proof in the context of a catering service on social media refers to the impact that the opinions, experiences, and behaviors of others have on potential customers. When a catering service shares testimonials, photos from events they have catered, or user-generated content featuring their dishes, it helps establish credibility and trust. Prospective clients are more likely to choose a service that has received positive feedback and demonstrates engagement from satisfied customers, as this reassures them about the quality and reliability of the catering [11].

4. Conceptual Framework

The proposed conceptual framework analyzes the impact of three independent variables—social media engagement, content quality, and social proof—on the purchase intention of catering services through social media platforms. Social media engagement encompasses the various interactions that occur between a catering service and its audience, such as likes, shares, comments, and direct messages. This level of engagement fosters a sense of community and builds relationships, which can enhance customer loyalty and interest in the service [12]. Content quality refers to the effectiveness and appeal of the content shared by the catering service. It includes aspects such as the visual presentation of food, the clarity and relevance of messaging, and the overall creativity in showcasing offerings. High-quality content is crucial as it not only attracts attention but also builds trust and credibility, increasing the likelihood that potential customers will consider making a purchase [13]. Social proof plays a significant role in shaping consumer behavior by reflecting the influence of others' experiences and opinions. This is evident in customer reviews, testimonials, and user-generated content that showcase positive interactions with the catering service. When potential clients observe evidence of

satisfaction from previous customers, it can significantly reinforce their intention to make a purchase [14]. Collectively, these three independent variables shape the overall perception of the catering service. The framework posits that effective social media engagement, combined with high-quality content and favorable social proof, creates a persuasive environment that encourages potential customers to engage with and select the catering service that best meets their needs.

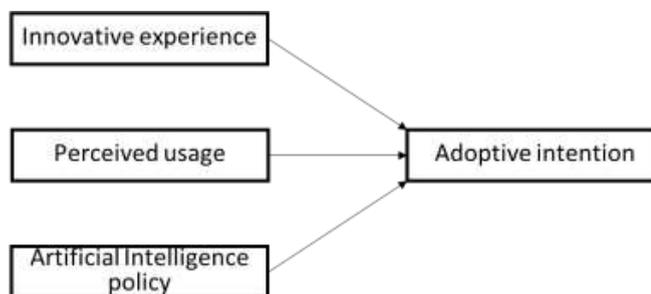


Figure 1. The Conceptual Framework

5. Research Restriction

When researching the impact of social media platforms on the purchasing behavior of consumers in Sichuan's catering services industry, several limitations may arise. First, accessing reliable and up-to-date data can be challenging, as much consumer behavior data may not be publicly available or may require permission from social media companies. Additionally, cultural factors unique to Sichuan could influence consumer behavior in ways that existing research does not fully capture, highlighting the need for localized studies. Another challenge is the rapidly changing nature of social media trends, which can make it hard to obtain timely insights that accurately reflect current consumer preferences.

6. Research Hypothesis

The Correlation between Social Media Engagement and Purchase Behaviour

This study examines the relationship between social media engagement and purchase behavior in the catering services sector. The hypothesis is structured around several key assertions. First, it suggests that increased interaction with social media content related to catering services could have a positive influence on consumers' purchasing intent. Specifically, as consumers engage more with social media posts—such as liking, sharing, or commenting on promotional content—they are more likely to consider these services for their catering needs. Additionally, the hypothesis indicates that certain types of engagement, such as sharing posts or participating in online discussions, may be stronger predictors of purchase behavior than passive engagement, such as simply viewing posts [15].

H1 There is no positive correlation between social media engagement and purchase behaviour in catering services through social media platforms in Sichuan.

The Correlation between Content Quality and Purchase Behaviour

By examining the relationship between content quality and purchasing behavior in the catering services sector through social media, several key assertions are formulated to support our hypothesis. It suggests that higher-quality content—defined by engaging visuals, informative descriptions, and authentic storytelling—leads to a greater likelihood of purchases among consumers. This hypothesis suggests that when catering services share high-quality content, it enhances consumers' perceptions of the brand, thereby fostering trust and credibility. Additionally, the hypothesis suggests that specific qualities of content, such as relevance, creativity, and emotional appeal, might have a significant influence on consumer engagement and

decision-making. Furthermore, it suggests that consumers are more inclined to share and interact with high-quality content, which, in turn, enhances brand visibility and affects their peers' purchasing decisions [16].

H2 There is no positive correlation between content quality and purchase behaviour in catering services through social media platforms in Sichuan.

The Correlation between Social Proof and Purchase Behaviour

In examining the relationship between social proof and purchasing behavior in the catering services sector through social media, several key claims can be formulated as hypotheses. This hypothesis posits that the presence of social proof—such as customer reviews, testimonials, and user-generated content—might positively influence consumers' purchasing decisions. Specifically, when potential customers observe positive feedback and endorsements from others, their confidence in the catering service increases, which in turn elevates the likelihood of making a purchase. Furthermore, the hypothesis suggests that the visibility of social proof, especially on social media platforms, enhances its impact. Consumers tend to trust recommendations from peers more than traditional advertising. It can also be proposed that both the quantity and quality of social proof—evidenced by the number of positive reviews and the perceived authenticity of user-generated content—significantly affect consumer trust and their subsequent purchasing behavior [16]

H3 There is no positive correlation between social proof and purchase behaviour in catering services through social media platforms in Sichuan.

7. Research Methods

Population and Sample

This research population of Sichuan consumers was selected to participate in a study examining their purchasing behavior of catering services through social media platforms. A sample of 390 was collected in June 2025 through the WeChat Survey Platform. This study's minimum research sample size is based on the study of Etikan Babatope [17]

1. The margin of error (confidence interval) – 95%
2. Standard deviation 0.5
3. 95% - Z Score = 1.96
4. Sample size formula = $(Z\text{-score})^2 * Std\ Dev * (1 - StdDev) / (\text{margin of error})^2$
5. $(1.96)^2 * 0.5(0.5) / (0.05)^2$
6. $(3.8416 * 0.25) / 0.0025$
7. $0.9604 / 0.0025 = 384$
8. 384 respondents would be needed for this study based on a confidence level of 95%

8. Research Model

Correlation Analysis

Correlation analysis serves as a valuable statistical method for assessing the relationship between various variables. The most commonly employed metric in this analysis is the Pearson correlation coefficient, which is denoted as (r), and it quantifies the strength of the association between two variables. Additionally, the significance of the correlation is represented by the P- value, which helps determine whether the observed correlation is statistically meaningful.

Correlation Analysis of Social Media Engagement and Purchase Behaviour

The correlation coefficient r between social media engagement and purchase behavior is 0.748, and $P = 0.000$ is less than 0.01. Thus, social media engagement significantly correlates with the purchase behaviour.

Correlation Analysis of Content Quality and Purchase Behaviour

The correlation coefficient r between content quality and purchase behavior is 0.761, and $P = 0.000$ is less than 0.01. Thus, content quality significantly correlates with purchase behaviour.

Correlation Analysis of Social Proof and Purchase Behaviour

The correlation coefficient r between social proof and purchase behavior is 0.744, and $P = 0.000$ is less than 0.01. Thus, social proof significantly correlates with purchase behaviour.

9. Research Result

The research findings indicate a positive relationship between social media engagement, content quality, and social proof (independent variables) and purchase behavior (dependent variable) in the catering services sector on social media platforms. Higher levels of social media engagement—such as likes, shares, and comments—significantly increase the likelihood that consumers will make a purchase. This suggests that when consumers actively engage with content related to catering services, their intention to purchase increases [18]. The analysis underscores the significant impact of content quality on influencing purchase behavior. High-quality content, which includes visually appealing images, informative descriptions, and authentic narratives, is associated with increased consumer interest and trust. Quality content not only captures attention but also encourages consumers to consider catering services more seriously [19]. Furthermore, the presence of social proof, such as customer reviews and testimonials, has a significant impact on purchasing decisions. Consumers who see positive feedback and endorsements from others are more confident in their choices, leading to a higher likelihood of purchasing catering services [20].

H1 There is a positive correlation between social media engagement and purchase behaviour in catering services through social media platforms in Sichuan.

H2 There is a positive correlation between content quality and purchase behaviour in catering services through social media platforms in Sichuan.

H3 There is a positive correlation between social proof and purchase behaviour in catering services through social media platforms in Sichuan.

10. Managerial Implications:

Social media platforms have a significant influence on how Sichuan consumers decide to purchase catering services. Managers need to understand this impact clearly. Engaging with customers on social media can boost their satisfaction. Responding to questions, addressing feedback, and creating personal interactions can make a big difference. To enhance how consumers perceive value, businesses should invest in high-quality visuals that effectively showcase their unique offerings. This includes attractive images of delicious dishes, positive customer testimonials, and behind-the-scenes looks that show the effort put into the services. Such content can make the catering experience feel special and desirable. Encouraging happy customers to share their positive experiences online can also help foster trust and a sense of community. This can influence new customers' choices and build a network of advocates for the brand, which can encourage more business. Regularly checking social media analytics provides managers with valuable insights into shifting customer preferences and behaviors. By examining engagement metrics and feedback, they can quickly adjust their strategies to meet customer expectations. Building a strong online presence and keeping a consistent brand image across social media are crucial for ensuring customer loyalty. By focusing on genuine engagement and emphasizing satisfaction and value,

catering services in Sichuan can foster purchases and cultivate long-lasting relationships with their customers.(21).

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