

FoMO Style and Users' Responses to Viral Culinary Content on TikTok: A Netnographic Study in Medan City

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine how TikTok users interpret viral culinary tourism information and how FoMO Style shapes participation in culinary tourism experiences in Medan City, Indonesia. Employing a qualitative netnographic approach, this study explores digital interactions, meaning construction, and behavioral patterns within the TikTok ecosystem. Data were collected from June to November 2026 through digital observation of viral culinary content, semi-structured interviews with 10 purposively selected TikTok users, and supporting interviews with culinary content creators and business owners as contextual informants. The digital corpus consisted of four viral culinary TikTok videos from two creator accounts, including comments, captions, #21 tags, audience interactions, and archived digital documentation. Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis framework and interpreted through Media System Dependency Theory and FoMO Style perspectives. The findings reveal that TikTok functions as a digital information environment where culinary tourism meanings are constructed through algorithmic exposure, social validation, creator credibility, and personal evaluation. Repeated FYP exposure increases users' awareness and curiosity, while comments, likes, shares, and creator recommendations influence credibility assessment. However, viral popularity does not automatically determine culinary value, as users continue to consider taste, price, accessibility, service quality, and actual experiences. FoMO Style emerges as a social mechanism encouraging participation through trend awareness, digital belonging, identity expression, and engagement with shared online experiences. Nevertheless, users also demonstrate skepticism, avoid overcrowded destinations, prioritize quality, or visit without producing digital content. This study extends Media System Dependency Theory by showing that TikTok-mediated culinary tourism is shaped by the interaction of algorithmic visibility, social validation, personal interpretation, and offline experiences.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid growth of social media has transformed how consumers discover and evaluate tourism destinations. Among digital platforms, TikTok has emerged as one of the most influential sources of tourism information because its recommendation algorithm rapidly disseminates short-form videos based on users' interactions. In the culinary tourism sector, this algorithm has accelerated the emergence of viral restaurants and cafés, making TikTok an important platform through which consumers encounter, interpret, and share culinary experiences. Culinary destinations receiving extensive exposure on TikTok frequently experience substantial increases in public attention and visitor traffic through food reviews, user-generated content, and recommendation-based storytelling, particularly among Generation Z and young adults who increasingly rely on social media before selecting culinary destinations [1], [2].

The culinary tourism industry has been one of the sectors most significantly influenced by this digital transformation. In this study, *viral culinary tourism* refers to culinary destinations that receive unusually high visibility on TikTok within a relatively short period. Operationally, destinations are considered viral based on a combination of indicators, including high video views, frequent hashtag usage, extensive creator coverage, high user engagement (likes, comments, and shares), repeated appearance on the For You Page (FYP), and observable increases in visitor numbers reported by business owners or credible local media. These indicators emphasize that virality reflects not merely popularity but the interaction between algorithmic dissemination, public engagement, and observable tourism responses [3], [4], [5]. The increasing popularity of viral culinary destinations has generated growing academic interest in understanding how digital information shapes tourism behavior.

Nevertheless, consumers' decisions to visit viral culinary destinations are unlikely to be determined by social media popularity alone. Rather, they are shaped by multiple considerations, including food quality, price, accessibility, novelty, peer recommendations, destination reputation, and viral exposure on social media. Instead of replacing traditional evaluation criteria, TikTok exposure may complement these factors by increasing destination awareness, reducing information uncertainty, and enhancing perceived social relevance [6], [7].

One psychological mechanism frequently associated with digital participation is Fear of Missing Out (FoMO). [8] define FoMO as ¹⁸ pervasive apprehension that others may be having rewarding experiences without one's participation, encouraging individuals to remain continuously connected to social media and online activities. Subsequent studies have demonstrated that FoMO is associated with intensive social media use, digital participation, and consumption-related decision-making [9], [10], [11]. While FoMO represents a psychological state characterized by anxiety over being excluded from rewarding experiences, this study conceptualizes FoMO Style as a relatively stable lifestyle orientation in which individuals intentionally participate in viral digital trends to express identity, maintain social visibility, and obtain recognition within online communities [12], [13]. Within the context of culinary tourism, FoMO Style is reflected when individuals

intentionally visit restaurants or cafés that have become viral on TikTok, document their experiences, and reproduce digital content by uploading reviews, photographs, or videos that further amplify online visibility.

The interaction between TikTok information exposure and FoMO Style can be more comprehensively understood through Media System Dependency Theory (MSDT) proposed by [14]. MSDT argues that media influence becomes stronger when individuals increasingly depend on media resources to understand their environment, make decisions, and guide their behavior. This dependency relationship is dynamic and intensifies under conditions in which media become the primary source of relevant information [15]. Subsequent studies further demonstrate that media dependency affects cognitive, affective, and behavioral outcomes, particularly when audiences perceive media as more useful than alternative information sources [16], [17], [18]. TikTok represents a contemporary manifestation of this dependency relationship by providing continuously updated recommendations, user-generated reviews, algorithmically personalized content, and interactive communication among users. These characteristics reduce information uncertainty before individuals visit culinary destinations and position TikTok as a trusted source for evaluating where to eat. Consequently, repeated exposure to viral culinary information may strengthen users' dependency on TikTok as a primary information resource.

Through continuous interactions with creators and online communities, users receive social validation regarding popular culinary destinations. Such validation may reinforce FoMO-related motivations, encouraging participation in trending culinary experiences, visitation to destinations discussed online, and subsequent reproduction of similar content through reviews or videos, thereby sustaining the cycle of digital virality. This phenomenon is particularly relevant in Medan City, the capital of North Sumatra Province, which is recognized for its multicultural culinary heritage and dynamic food service industry. According to *Medan Municipality in Figures 2024* published by the Central Statistics Agency (BPS), Medan is Indonesia's fourth-largest city and serves as the primary economic and tourism gateway in western Indonesia, supported by a highly diversified urban economy [19].

Furthermore, BPS reported that the Accommodation and Food Service Activities sector was among the fastest-growing sectors of Medan's economy, reflecting the increasing contribution of culinary businesses to urban tourism and local economic development. At the national level, BPS also recorded 5.28 million food and beverage service establishments in 2024, indicating the rapid expansion of Indonesia's culinary industry and its growing importance within the tourism sector [20]. Against this background, numerous restaurants, cafés, and street-food businesses in Medan have gained substantial public attention after becoming viral on TikTok, attracting both local residents and domestic tourists through user-generated content and algorithm-driven recommendations. Accordingly, Medan provides an appropriate empirical setting for examining how TikTok-mediated information is interpreted, socially validated, and translated into culinary tourism behavior. Previous studies consistently demonstrate that social media exposure, electronic word-of-mouth, and user-generated content influence destination image, consumer preferences, and travel

decisions [21], [22], [23]. Likewise, FoMO has been associated with tourism participation, online engagement, and consumption behavior [9], [12].

These limitations indicate the need for further investigation into the relationships among TikTok information exposure, users' information responses, FoMO Style, and culinary tourism behavior [3], [4], [5]. Accordingly, this study offers several theoretical and practical contributions to the existing literature. Theoretically, it extends the application of Media Dependency Theory by examining TikTok as a primary information source that shapes users' responses to viral culinary content and subsequently influences behavioral intentions [24], [25]. Finally, by investigating how users receive, interpret, and respond to viral culinary information on TikTok, this research contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the interaction between digital communication, consumer psychology, and social media-driven tourism behavior, while offering practical implications for culinary businesses seeking to design more effective digital marketing strategies [21]. However, several important gaps remain. First, relatively few studies have operationalized viral culinary tourism using observable digital indicators such as video views, creator coverage, hashtag frequency, engagement, and visitor growth. Second, previous research has primarily examined direct associations between social media exposure and consumer behavior without sufficiently explaining how users progress from information exposure to cognitive interpretation and behavioral responses through the mechanism proposed by Media System Dependency Theory.

Third, the role of FoMO Style as a socially oriented manifestation of FoMO remains underexplored, particularly in the context of culinary tourism in Indonesian metropolitan cities such as Medan. Addressing these gaps, this study extends Media System Dependency Theory by examining how dependency on TikTok as an information source contributes to users' interpretation of viral culinary information and how this process is associated with social validation, FoMO Style, visitation behavior, and content reproduction. Rather than positioning FoMO Style as an independent psychological construct, the study conceptualizes it as the behavioral manifestation through which media dependency and social validation are translated into observable tourism-related practices. Empirically, the study contributes evidence from Medan City and enriches the literature on digital communication, consumer behavior, and culinary tourism in emerging urban destinations. The findings are also expected to provide practical insights for culinary businesses and tourism stakeholders in designing more effective social media communication and digital marketing strategies.

2. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design using a netnographic approach to explore how users interpret viral culinary information disseminated through TikTok and how FoMO Style is associated with culinary tourism participation in Medan City. Netnography is a qualitative approach adapted from ethnography to examine digital interactions, meanings, cultural practices, and behavioral patterns within online communities [26]. This approach was considered appropriate because TikTok functions not only as a social media platform but also as a digital cultural space where users produce, interpret, and circulate culinary information through videos, comments, hashtags, and interactive engagement [26],

[27]. The research was conducted within the TikTok digital environment from June to November 2026. The digital observation focused on viral culinary content related to destinations in Medan City, Indonesia. Culinary destinations were classified as viral based on a combination of indicators, including repeated appearance on the TikTok For You Page (FYP), high audience engagement through likes, comments, and shares, frequent use of related hashtags, creator coverage, and public visibility indicated by increased consumer interest.

Digital content was identified through several search strategies, including keyword searches using terms such as “makanan” and “tempat healing,” location-based searches using “Medan” and “Sumatera Utara,” observation of FYP recommendations, and snowball discovery from related videos and creator networks. The inclusion criteria for digital content were: (1) TikTok videos discussing culinary destinations located in Medan City; (2) content uploaded within the observation period; (3) videos demonstrating public engagement through interactions such as comments, likes, or shares; and (4) content related to food experiences, recommendations, reviews, or culinary visits. Content unrelated to culinary tourism, duplicate uploads, private accounts, and videos without sufficient contextual information were excluded. [28], [29]. The researcher conducted observations using a research account to minimize the influence of personal viewing history on TikTok recommendations. However, because TikTok’s algorithm provides personalized content based on previous interactions, algorithmic personalization was acknowledged as a potential factor influencing the observed content. To reduce this limitation, content identification was not based solely on FYP recommendations but was complemented with keyword searches, location-based searches, and creator-based exploration. The digital corpus consisted of four TikTok videos from two creator accounts related to viral culinary destinations in Medan City. Additional digital materials included video descriptions, hashtags, comments, audience interactions, and archived screenshots or documentation of relevant content. The complete digital archive consisted of screenshots/digital documents, comments analyzed, and hashtags monitored.

The primary participants consisted of 10 TikTok users selected through purposive sampling, comprising five university students and five members of the general public. Participants were selected because they had experience accessing viral culinary content on TikTok and had visited culinary destinations based on information obtained through the platform. The inclusion criteria for TikTok users were: (1) actively using TikTok for at least one year; (2) having interacted with culinary content from Medan City through viewing, liking, commenting, or sharing activities; and (3) having visited at least one viral culinary destination discovered through TikTok. To enrich the interpretation of findings, supporting informants consisting of culinary content creators, culinary business owners, and communication scholars were involved as contextual informants rather than ordinary netnographic participants. Content creators were selected based on their experience producing culinary-related TikTok content, while business owners were selected based on their experience managing culinary businesses that had received TikTok exposure. Communication scholars were included as expert informants to provide theoretical and

contextual perspectives regarding digital communication, media dependency, and online behavior. Participant characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant Characteristics

Code	Age Range	Gender	Category	Interview Mode
P1	23 Years	Female	University student	WhatsApp
P2	24 Years	Female	University student	WhatsApp
P3	25 Years	Female	University student	WhatsApp
P4	27 Years	Male	TikTok user	WhatsApp
P5	20 Years	Male	TikTok user	WhatsApp
P6	21 Years	Male	TikTok user	WhatsApp
P7	24 Years	Male	University student	WhatsApp
P8	26 Years	Female	TikTok user	WhatsApp
P9	27 Years	Female	University student	WhatsApp
P10	24 Years	Female	TikTok user	WhatsApp

Data collection involved digital observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Interviews were conducted through WhatsApp based on participants' availability and focused on TikTok information exposure, interpretation of viral culinary content, social validation, FoMO-related experiences, and motivations for visiting culinary destinations. Document analysis was conducted using archived TikTok content, screenshots, captions, hashtags, and supporting tourism documents.

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis framework [29], consisting of data familiarization, initial coding, theme development, theme review, theme definition, and final reporting. The identified themes were interpreted through Media System Dependency Theory to understand users' reliance on TikTok as an information source and through FoMO Style to explain how social visibility, trend participation, and digital self-presentation relate to culinary tourism behavior. The trustworthiness of the study was maintained through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability criteria proposed by [30]. Credibility was strengthened through source triangulation between TikTok observations and interview data while member checking was conducted to confirm participants' interpretations [31]. Dependability was maintained through documentation of research procedures, coding processes, and analytical decisions. Ethical principles were applied by obtaining informed consent, protecting participant identities through anonymization, and using only publicly available TikTok content for digital observation. [32], [33], [29].

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Results

3.1.1 Reception and Interpretation of Viral Culinary Tourism Information on TikTok

The findings reveal that TikTok functions not only as an entertainment platform but also as an information environment through which users discover, evaluate, and interpret viral culinary tourism destinations in Medan City. The reception process demonstrates that users do not passively accept viral culinary information; instead, they actively evaluate digital content through algorithmic exposure, creator credibility, audience responses, and personal expectations regarding culinary experiences. The thematic analysis identified the main theme of “TikTok as a Digital Information Environment for Constructing Culinary Tourism Meaning”, consisting of four subthemes: (1) algorithmic exposure through the For You Page (FYP), (2) social validation through digital communities, (3) credibility evaluation of culinary content, and (4) expectation formation before visiting viral destinations.

Table 2. Themes and Evidence of Users' Reception and Interpretation of Viral Culinary Information

Main Theme	Subthemes	Data Source	Illustrative Evidence	Theoretical Relevance
TikTok as a digital information environment	Algorithmic exposure through FYP	TikTok observation; User interviews (U01–U10)	Users reported encountering culinary recommendations repeatedly through FYP recommendations. Several users explained that repeated appearances increased their awareness of particular destinations.	Supports Media Dependency Theory regarding reliance on media as an information source.
Social validation in evaluating viral culinary information	Comments, likes, and user experiences	TikTok comments; User interviews	Users examined comment sections before deciding whether viral culinary content was trustworthy. One user stated: “I do not immediately believe one video; I usually compare several videos and read comments first” (U03, TikTok user).	Demonstrates the role of social validation in shaping interpretation of media messages.
Creator credibility and content evaluation	Trust toward food creators	Creator interviews (C01–C05); User interviews	Participants considered creator reputation, review style, and previous content consistency when evaluating culinary recommendations.	Explains how media dependency is moderated by perceived source credibility.
Expectation and post-visit evaluation	Confirmation or disconfirmation of digital expectations	User interviews; Business-owner interviews	Some users reported that viral popularity matched their expectations, while others experienced differences between online representation and actual culinary quality.	Highlights interaction between digital exposure and real consumption experience.

The observation of TikTok content indicated that viral culinary information was primarily constructed through repeated exposure, visual attractiveness, creator narratives, and audience interaction. Videos containing attractive food presentation, crowded locations,

positive reviews, and high engagement were more likely to receive attention from users. However, virality was not interpreted as an automatic indicator of quality. Users frequently compared multiple information sources before forming conclusions.

One participant explained *"If only one account says that the food is good, I do not immediately believe it. Usually, I watch several other videos, read the comments, and then decide."* (U03, TikTok user). This statement indicates that users engage in a verification process before accepting viral culinary information. The decision-making process involves comparing creator messages with collective evaluations expressed through comments and interactions. Thus, TikTok operates as a social information environment where meanings are collectively negotiated rather than individually constructed.

Evidence from user comments also demonstrated diverse interpretations of viral culinary content. Positive comments generally emphasized curiosity, recommendations, and interest in visiting destinations, whereas several users expressed skepticism regarding exaggerated promotional content. Some comments questioned whether viral restaurants provided experiences consistent with the expectations created by TikTok videos. These contradictory responses demonstrate that digital popularity does not automatically generate universal acceptance. Interview findings further showed variation among participants regarding their experiences after visiting viral culinary destinations. Several users stated that their expectations were confirmed because the food quality, atmosphere, and uniqueness of the location matched the information presented on TikTok. However, other participants reported disappointment because the actual experience differed from online representations, particularly regarding taste, price, waiting time, and crowded conditions. Two participants stated *"The place looked very interesting on TikTok, but after visiting it, the taste was ordinary and the waiting time was quite long."* (U07, TikTok user). Conversely, another participant emphasized the importance of culinary quality over popularity *"I usually do not visit only because something is viral. The taste and price are still the most important factors for me."* (U09, TikTok user).

These findings indicate that TikTok exposure does not replace traditional evaluation criteria such as food quality, affordability, accessibility, and convenience. Instead, digital visibility functions as an additional source of information that shapes initial awareness and expectations. Evidence from content creators also revealed that viral culinary content is influenced by strategies of visual storytelling, audience engagement, and trend participation. Content creators described the importance of producing attractive videos and maintaining interaction with followers to increase visibility. Meanwhile, business owners indicated that TikTok exposure contributed to increased public awareness but did not guarantee long-term customer loyalty because consumers continued evaluating actual service quality after visiting. From the perspective of Media Dependency Theory, these findings demonstrate that users' reliance on TikTok emerges because the platform provides easily accessible, continuously updated, and socially validated information about culinary destinations. However, the degree of dependency varies among users depending on their trust in creators, previous experiences, and personal preferences.

Furthermore, the findings extend Media Dependency Theory by showing that information dependency is connected with FoMO Style through social participation

processes. Repeated exposure to viral culinary content, combined with positive social validation, may encourage users to participate in trending experiences, visit popular destinations, and sometimes reproduce similar content. Nevertheless, not all participants reproduced digital content after visiting. Several users visited viral destinations for personal experiences without uploading videos or reviews, indicating that participation in culinary tourism does not always result in digital content production. Overall, the findings demonstrate that TikTok-mediated culinary tourism behavior emerges through a complex interaction between algorithmic exposure, information dependency, social validation, personal evaluation, and actual consumption experiences. Viral culinary destinations are therefore constructed not only through digital popularity but also through users' continuous interpretation and negotiation of meanings within online and offline environments.

3.1.2 TikTok Information Shaping Interest and Visitation Decisions

The following are findings regarding how TikTok shapes interest and visitation decisions.

Table 3. TikTok Information Shaping Interest and Visitation Decisions

Main Theme	Subthemes	Data Source	Illustrative Evidence	Theoretical Relevance
TikTok-mediated construction of culinary tourism decisions	Curiosity generated by repeated exposure	TikTok observation; User interviews (U01–U10)	Users reported that repeated appearance of culinary destinations on FYP increased awareness and curiosity toward particular restaurants or cafés.	Supports Media System Dependency Theory by demonstrating reliance on TikTok for environmental information.
Social validation and trend participation	Comments, peer experiences, and creator recommendations	TikTok comments; User interviews; Creator interviews	Users evaluated destinations through comments, reviews, and creator credibility before deciding to visit.	Users evaluated destinations through comments, reviews, and creator credibility before deciding to visit.
Digital self-presentation and content reproduction	Uploading photos/videos after visits	User interviews; Creator interviews (C01–C05)	Some visitors documented their experiences to share with online communities, while others visited without producing content.	Relates to FoMO Style as participation in digital trends and identity expression.
Expectation confirmation and culinary evaluation	Satisfaction, disappointment, and quality assessment	User interviews; Business-owner interviews (B01–B02)	Some visitors reported that viral popularity matched their expectations, whereas others considered taste, price, and service more important than online popularity.	Demonstrates that digital exposure interacts with, rather than replaces, traditional consumption evaluation.

The findings indicate that TikTok information contributes to the formation of culinary tourism interest through a gradual process involving exposure, interpretation, social evaluation, expectation formation, and post-visit assessment. Rather than directly determining visitation decisions, TikTok functions as an informational and social reference point that shapes users' curiosity, perceived relevance, and willingness to experience viral culinary destinations. The analysis identified the main theme of "TikTok-Mediated Construction of Culinary Tourism Decisions", consisting of four subthemes: (1) curiosity and trend participation, (2) social validation and peer influence, (3) digital self-presentation through content reproduction, and (4) expectation confirmation after visitation.

The TikTok observation showed that viral culinary destinations gained visibility through repeated appearances on the For You Page (FYP), attractive visual presentation, creator storytelling, and high audience interaction. However, the observed content also revealed that virality was constructed through multiple elements rather than through popularity alone. Videos with high engagement generally contained combinations of appealing food visuals, positive reviews, crowded locations, and recommendations from creators. User interview data further demonstrated that repeated exposure to TikTok content encouraged curiosity and consideration of visiting particular destinations. For example, one TikTok user explained *"Usually, when a place appears repeatedly on my TikTok For You Page and many people talk about it, I become curious and want to experience it myself. It feels like I am missing out if I have not visited a place that everyone is currently discussing."* (U03, TikTok user).

This statement illustrates how repeated digital exposure may contribute to FoMO-related motivations. However, participants did not interpret viral popularity in identical ways. Several users explained that TikTok recommendations served only as an initial reference, while the final decision depended on additional considerations such as food quality, price, location, and convenience. A different participant emphasized *"I look at TikTok for recommendations, but I still consider the taste and price. A place being viral does not always mean the food is suitable for me."* (U07, TikTok user). This finding indicates that viral status functions as an additional attraction rather than a replacement for conventional culinary evaluation criteria. Analysis of user comments also revealed both positive and critical responses toward viral culinary destinations. Positive comments frequently expressed curiosity and intentions to visit, while critical comments questioned exaggerated reviews, overcrowding, waiting times, and differences between online presentations and actual experiences.

These contradictory responses demonstrate that digital popularity remains negotiated among users rather than universally accepted. The interviews also revealed differences between users' expectations before visiting and their experiences after visitation. Several participants reported that their expectations were confirmed because the culinary quality, atmosphere, and uniqueness of the destination corresponded with TikTok representations. However, some participants experienced disappointment after visiting viral locations. Three participant stated *"The place looked very attractive in TikTok videos, but after visiting, the food was ordinary and the queue was too long."* (U09, TikTok user).

This evidence suggests that TikTok exposure primarily shapes initial expectations, while actual evaluation occurs through direct consumption experiences. Therefore, digital hype and culinary satisfaction represent related but distinct processes. Content creator interviews further demonstrated that viral culinary tourism involves strategic content production. Creators explained that they considered visual appeal, storytelling elements, audience interests, and shareability when producing culinary videos. A content creator stated *“When reviewing a viral culinary place, I do not only focus on the food. I also consider whether the place has an interesting story and visual experience that people will want to watch and share.”* (C02, content creator).

This finding shows that culinary experiences on TikTok are shaped by the logic of digital storytelling, where destinations become attractive not only because of their products but also because they provide materials for online narratives. Nevertheless, not all visitors reproduced their experiences through digital content. Several users explained that they visited viral culinary destinations for personal enjoyment without uploading videos or reviews. Four participant stated *“I visited because I wanted to try the food myself, but I did not upload anything because I do not usually create content.”* (U05, TikTok user).

This evidence demonstrates variation in FoMO Style expression. While some individuals participate in viral trends through content production and social recognition, others participate only through personal consumption experiences. Business-owner interviews also indicated that TikTok visibility increased public awareness and customer interest, but sustained visitation depended on actual service quality, taste consistency, affordability, and customer satisfaction. A business owner explained *“TikTok can bring many new customers, but if the product quality does not meet expectations, they may not return.”* (B01, culinary business owner).

From the perspective of Media Dependency Theory, these findings demonstrate that TikTok becomes influential because users rely on the platform to obtain updated information about culinary trends. However, the influence of TikTok is mediated by users' evaluation processes, social validation, personal preferences, and direct experiences. The findings extend previous studies on social media and tourism behavior by demonstrating that TikTok-mediated visitation decisions are not simply outcomes of exposure. Instead, they emerge through the interaction between media dependency, social validation, FoMO Style, and actual culinary evaluation. In this context, FoMO Style functions as a mechanism through which users participate in socially meaningful culinary experiences, while post-visit evaluation determines whether digital expectations are confirmed, modified, or rejected.

3.1.3 FoMO Style Motivation in Viral Culinary Tourism

The findings indicate that FoMO Style provides an interpretative framework for understanding why some TikTok users participate in viral culinary tourism experiences. In this study, FoMO Style is understood not as a direct psychological cause of visitation decisions, but as a socially oriented tendency in which individuals participate in popular digital trends to maintain social relevance, experience shared activities, and express personal identity within online communities. The emergence of FoMO Style was identified through several interconnected practices, including monitoring trending culinary destinations,

comparing personal experiences with others, seeking social recognition, and participating in digital storytelling. The thematic analysis identified the main theme of “FoMO Style as a Social Mechanism of Participation in Viral Culinary Tourism”, consisting of four subthemes: (1) perceived need to participate in emerging culinary trends, (2) social comparison and digital belonging, (3) self-expression through culinary content sharing, and (4) negotiation between digital popularity and personal evaluation.

Table 4. FoMO Style Motivation in Viral Culinary Tourism

Main Theme	Subthemes	Data Source	Illustrative Evidence	Theoretical Relevance
FoMO Style as a social mechanism of participation	Participation in emerging culinary trends	TikTok observation; User interviews (U01–U10)	Users described curiosity toward destinations repeatedly appearing on FYP and discussed by online communities. Comments such as “adding this to my wishlist” and “I must try this place” reflected users’ desire to participate in shared experiences.	Extends FoMO from individual psychological concern into socially constructed digital participation. Supports the role of social validation within Media Dependency Theory.
Social comparison and digital belonging	Comparing experiences with peers and online communities	TikTok comments; User interviews	Some users uploaded videos or photos after visiting viral destinations to share experiences and receive responses from their networks.	Relates to FoMO Style as participation in digital trends and identity expression.
Digital self-expression and recognition	Producing and sharing culinary content	User interviews; Creator interviews (C01–C05)	Some users questioned viral claims, avoided crowded places, or prioritized taste and price over popularity.	Demonstrates that FoMO Style interacts with personal evaluation rather than replacing rational decision-making.
Negotiation between virality and personal judgment	Skepticism, disappointment, and quality evaluation	User interviews; Business-owner interviews		

The analysis of TikTok observations showed that FoMO-related expressions frequently appeared within interactions surrounding viral culinary content. Users’ comments indicated curiosity, anticipation, and intentions to participate in trending experiences. Expressions such as “*I must try this place*,” “*Adding this to my wishlist*,” “*Finally visited*,” and “*Don’t miss this place*” reflected how viral culinary destinations were socially constructed as experiences worth pursuing. However, these expressions did not necessarily indicate that all users accepted viral content without evaluation. Comment analysis also revealed critical responses questioning whether online representations accurately reflected actual culinary experiences. Several users discussed concerns regarding expensive prices, crowded locations, long waiting times, and differences between promotional videos and real experiences. These findings demonstrate that FoMO Style emerges through negotiation

between attraction toward trends and individual evaluation. Interview findings further illustrated how FoMO Style operated among TikTok users. Several participants explained that repeated exposure to other users' experiences increased their curiosity and encouraged them to visit destinations that were widely discussed online. Five participant stated "*At first, I was not really interested in trying the food, but after seeing many people post videos about the place, I became curious. I felt like everyone already knew about it, while I had not experienced it yet.*" (U03, TikTok user).

This statement indicates that social comparison contributed to the participant's motivation to experience a destination that had become part of an ongoing digital conversation. The motivation was not solely related to the food product itself but also to the desire to understand and participate in an experience shared by others. Nevertheless, not all participants interpreted viral popularity positively. Some participants expressed distrust toward highly promoted culinary content and preferred to evaluate destinations based on personal preferences.

Six participant explained "*Sometimes viral places are too exaggerated on TikTok. I prefer checking reviews from different people because popularity does not always represent quality.*" (U06, TikTok user). This finding demonstrates that FoMO Style does not operate uniformly among users. While some individuals seek participation in trending experiences, others maintain a more critical position by verifying information before making decisions. The role of social recognition was also identified through interviews regarding content production after visiting viral destinations. Some participants considered documentation through photos and videos as part of the culinary experience itself. A participant stated "*When I visit a place that is trending, I usually take pictures because I want to share my experience. It feels good when friends recognize the place or respond to my post.*" (U04, TikTok user). Similarly, content creators explained that viral culinary experiences are often evaluated not only based on taste but also on their potential to generate engaging digital narratives. A content creator explained "*When creating culinary content, I consider the food, atmosphere, and whether the place has an interesting story that viewers can connect with.*" (C02, content creator).

These findings indicate that FoMO Style involves both consumption and communication practices. Users may visit destinations partly because they want to experience what others are experiencing, while content creators contribute to maintaining the visibility and symbolic value of those destinations. However, content reproduction was not experienced by all visitors. Several participants explained that they visited viral culinary destinations for personal enjoyment without producing digital content. Seven participant stated "*I visited because I wanted to try the food, but I did not upload anything because I usually keep my experiences private.*" (U08, TikTok user). This contradictory evidence highlights that participation in viral culinary tourism does not always result in digital self-presentation. FoMO Style may encourage participation, but individual preferences determine whether participation is expressed through online sharing or personal consumption.

The interviews with business owners also indicated that TikTok popularity created increased awareness among potential customers, but continued consumer interest depended

on actual culinary experiences. A business owner explained “*TikTok can attract visitors, but they will only return if the taste and service meet their expectations.*” (B01, culinary business owner). This finding confirms that digital popularity and culinary evaluation represent interconnected but distinct processes. Viral exposure may generate initial interest, while actual experience determines satisfaction and future behavioral responses. From the perspective of Media System Dependency Theory, these findings demonstrate that TikTok becomes an important information resource because users depend on the platform to identify current culinary trends and evaluate socially relevant experiences. Through repeated exposure, user interactions, and creator recommendations, TikTok provides a framework through which culinary destinations acquire social meaning.

Furthermore, the integration of FoMO Style and Media Dependency Theory explains that users’ participation in viral culinary tourism emerges through a process involving information dependency, social validation, personal interpretation, and experiential evaluation. TikTok provides the information environment, digital communities provide validation, FoMO Style explains the desire for social participation, while direct culinary experiences determine whether expectations are confirmed or rejected. Therefore, viral culinary tourism should not be understood merely as a consequence of digital popularity. Instead, it represents a dynamic process in which culinary destinations gain meaning through interactions between algorithmic visibility, social influence, individual motivations, and real-world consumption experiences.

3.2. Discussion

3.2.1 FoMO Style and Users’ Responses to Viral Culinary Content on TikTok: A Netnographic Study in Medan City

The findings of this study indicate that FoMO Style represents a salient and recurring pattern in explaining how TikTok users interpret and participate in viral culinary tourism experiences in Medan City. Within the qualitative perspective of this study, FoMO Style is not understood as a statistically tested mechanism or a direct determinant of visitation behavior. Instead, it represents an interpretive concept describing how individuals participate in viral culinary trends through the interaction of digital information exposure, social meanings, identity expression, and perceived belonging within online communities. Demonstrate that users’ responses toward viral culinary content develop through a gradual process involving information exposure, interpretation, social validation, personal evaluation, and behavioral participation. TikTok initially functions as an information environment through its algorithm-driven recommendation system, particularly the For You Page (FYP), which repeatedly presents users with similar culinary content. Continuous exposure increases users’ awareness and curiosity toward particular destinations. However, information exposure alone does not automatically generate visitation decisions. Users actively evaluate the credibility, relevance, and attractiveness of culinary information through various indicators, including creator reputation, views, likes, comments, testimonials, and experiences shared by other users.

This process demonstrates that TikTok users are not passive recipients of digital information but active interpreters who construct meanings through interactions within

digital communities. Viral culinary tourism therefore does not emerge solely from the visibility of culinary products but from the interaction between algorithmic recommendation systems, user interpretations, and collective meanings developed through online engagement. These findings can be explained through Media System Dependency Theory [14] which argues that media influence becomes more prominent when individuals depend on media resources to achieve specific goals, including understanding their environment, orienting their actions, maintaining social relationships, and constructing personal meanings. In this study, TikTok dependency occurred through several interconnected dimensions.

First, TikTok functioned as a source of understanding. Users depended on TikTok to obtain information about emerging culinary destinations, including food characteristics, prices, locations, atmosphere, and visitor experiences. Short videos, reviews, and creator explanations helped users reduce uncertainty and develop initial perceptions regarding whether a culinary destination was worth visiting. In this dimension, dependency was primarily informational because TikTok provided resources for interpreting the rapidly changing culinary environment. This finding is consistent with previous studies emphasizing the relationship between FoMO and social media engagement. [9] explain that FoMO is strongly associated with individuals' tendency to monitor social activities and participate in experiences that receive considerable attention within online networks. Similarly, [12], [34] argue that FoMO in contemporary consumption behavior is closely connected with identity construction, social recognition, and the desire to maintain relevance within specific social groups.

Second, TikTok dependency appeared through the function of orientation. Users utilized TikTok content as a guide for determining where to eat, which destinations were currently popular, and which experiences were considered socially relevant. This dependency was not limited to TikTok as a platform but also involved specific actors within the platform, particularly food creators whose expertise, presentation style, and previous reviews influenced users' perceptions of credibility. Thus, creators became important mediators of culinary information within the TikTok ecosystem. This phenomenon supports the argument of [1], [21] that social media has fundamentally changed consumer behavior by strengthening user engagement, electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM), and participatory communication.

Third, TikTok dependency involved entertainment and play. Culinary videos were not consumed solely for practical decision-making but also for enjoyment, curiosity, and digital exploration. The visual characteristics of TikTok, including attractive food presentations, storytelling strategies, and creative editing, transformed culinary discovery into an entertaining activity. As a result, users frequently engaged with culinary content even before developing concrete plans to visit a destination. Similarly [35] highlight that digital content and online experiences significantly influence tourists' perceptions and decision-making processes. Fourth, TikTok dependency was related to social belonging. Users interpreted viral culinary destinations through interactions with online communities. Comments, likes, shares, and discussions provided social validation regarding whether a destination represented a meaningful and desirable experience. In this process, dependency extended beyond the platform itself to include peer comments, digital communities, and

collective interpretations that strengthened the symbolic value of viral destinations. Fifth, TikTok dependency contributed to identity construction. Some participants perceived visiting and documenting viral culinary destinations as a way to express personal interests, maintain social visibility, and participate in contemporary digital culture.

Through uploading reviews, photographs, or videos, users became both consumers and producers of information, contributing to the continuation of culinary trends through user-generated content. Therefore, TikTok dependency in viral culinary tourism can be understood as multidimensional, involving informational, habitual, social, and situational forms of reliance. Informational dependency occurs when users seek culinary recommendations, habitual dependency emerges through repeated FYP exposure, social dependency develops through online communities and peer validation, while situational dependency appears when users search for current culinary trends or travel references. These findings extend Media Dependency Theory by showing that the influence of TikTok is not derived only from the information provided but also from algorithmic processes and collective meanings constructed through digital interactions.

The role of FoMO Style becomes more apparent when examining how users interpret and respond to viral culinary trends. However, FoMO Style should be conceptually distinguished from conventional FoMO. Conventional FoMO refers to an individual's psychological concern that others may be experiencing rewarding events without personal involvement [36]. In contrast, FoMO Style refers to a broader digital consumption orientation in which individuals participate in viral experiences to maintain social relevance, express identity, and remain connected with online communities.

FoMO Style also differs from related concepts such as social comparison, conformity, bandwagon effects, self-presentation, electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM), symbolic consumption, and trend participation. Social comparison explains how individuals evaluate themselves relative to others, whereas FoMO Style concerns the motivation to participate in experiences perceived as socially meaningful. Conformity refers to behavioral adjustment based on group pressure, while FoMO Style involves voluntary participation associated with maintaining connection and relevance. Similarly, bandwagon effects describe following popular choices because many others adopt them, whereas FoMO Style emphasizes the personal meaning attached to participation.

Furthermore, self-presentation and content production represent possible expressions of FoMO Style rather than its core definition. Some users shared culinary experiences through TikTok uploads, while others visited viral destinations without producing digital content. Likewise, e-WOM explains how information circulates among users, whereas FoMO Style explains why individuals may feel motivated to participate after encountering socially validated information. Symbolic consumption describes the social meaning attached to consumption experiences, while FoMO Style explains the orientation that encourages participation in such meaningful experiences.

The findings indicate that FoMO Style becomes visible through the interaction³⁵ of repeated TikTok exposure, perceived popularity, social validation, personal curiosity, and the desire to participate in shared experiences. Comments observed on TikTok, such as “*I must try this tomorrow*,” “*Adding this to my wishlist*,” and “*Don’t miss out*,” illustrate how

users interpret viral culinary destinations as experiences associated with current digital conversations. These expressions indicate that users evaluate culinary experiences not only through individual preferences but also through their relationship with online communities.

The interview findings further support this interpretation. One participant explained *“When I saw many people posting the same place, I became curious because it seemed like everyone already knew about it. I wanted to experience it myself.”* (U03, TikTok user). This statement does not demonstrate that TikTok directly caused visitation but illustrates how digital visibility and social meanings contributed to the participant’s interpretation of the experience. At the same time, contradictory findings demonstrate the boundaries of FoMO Style. Several participants questioned viral popularity and prioritized food quality, price, convenience, and personal preferences. Some avoided highly viral destinations because of overcrowding, while others visited viral locations without creating digital content afterward. These findings indicate that FoMO Style is not a universal explanation for culinary tourism behavior but rather one interpretive dimension that interacts with practical considerations and individual evaluations.

The findings further suggest that FoMO Style transforms culinary tourism into a form of symbolic participation. Participants described that visiting viral culinary destinations was motivated not only by culinary curiosity but also by the desire to experience what others had experienced, participate in contemporary trends, and share personal narratives. The act of visiting, photographing, reviewing, and uploading culinary experiences creates a continuous cycle of digital participation in which users contribute to the reproduction of viral trends. This finding supports previous research emphasizing that social media has transformed consumer behavior through user engagement⁸ electronic word-of-mouth, and participatory communication. Unlike studies that primarily examine the direct relationship between social media exposure and consumer decisions, this study provides a qualitative interpretation of how users negotiate digital information, social validation, and personal meanings before participating in viral culinary experiences.

The relationship among TikTok exposure, media dependency, social validation, FoMO Style, visitation, and content reproduction should therefore not be interpreted as a tested mediation model. Instead, it represents a conceptual framework derived from qualitative findings. TikTok exposure provides information resources; media dependency explains users’ reliance on these resources; social validation strengthens perceptions of relevance and popularity; FoMO Style represents the orientation toward participating in socially meaningful experiences; visitation represents behavioral engagement; and content reproduction contributes to the continuation of viral culinary narratives. Overall, this study demonstrates that viral culinary tourism in Medan City is constructed through the interaction between technological systems, digital communities, and individual meanings. TikTok does not simply determine culinary decisions through exposure alone. Rather, users actively negotiate information, social expectations, culinary evaluations, and personal identities within an algorithmic environment. FoMO Style provides an interpretive lens for understanding why some users transform digital encounters into participation, while Media Dependency Theory explains how TikTok becomes an important communication resource in shaping contemporary culinary tourism experiences.

4. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to understand how selected TikTok users respond to viral culinary tourism information and how FoMO Style is interpreted within the context of culinary participation in Medan City. Using a netnographic approach, this research examined how algorithmic exposure, digital interactions, social validation, and personal meanings shape users' perceptions and behaviors toward viral culinary destinations. The findings indicate that viral culinary participation among selected TikTok users was constructed through the interaction of repeated exposure, social validation, symbolic consumption, and FoMO-oriented motivations. The findings demonstrate that TikTok functions not only as an entertainment platform but also as an important information environment for discovering culinary destinations. Users actively evaluated viral content through algorithmic recommendations, creator narratives, engagement indicators, and peer comments before developing interest or visitation intentions. Culinary decisions were shaped by both functional considerations, such as food quality, price, accessibility, and personal preferences, and symbolic meanings associated with popularity, participation, and digital identity expression.

FoMO Style emerged as a recurring interpretive pattern explaining why some users participated in viral culinary trends. Rather than representing a statistically tested causal mechanism, FoMO Style serves as a conceptual lens describing participation in socially visible digital experiences to maintain connectedness, express identity, and engage with contemporary trends. This study provides a contextual application of Media System Dependency Theory by illustrating how users rely on TikTok, creators, recommendation systems, and online communities for information, orientation, social belonging, and identity construction. Practically, culinary businesses and content creators should utilize TikTok through authentic communication, transparent sponsorship disclosure, accurate product representation, avoidance of fabricated virality, and respect for consumer autonomy. This study is limited by its focus on selected TikTok users and digital materials in Medan City, purposive sampling, potential recall bias, researcher interpretive subjectivity, personalized algorithmic exposure, absence of direct algorithm analysis, limited creator and business-owner perspectives, unstable viral trends, and lack of longitudinal post-visit observation. Future research should employ mixed methods, comparative designs, and longitudinal approaches to further examine digital tourism behavior. Overall, these findings are context-specific and require quantitative and comparative testing before broader generalization.

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