



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Sensory preference manipulation in unique cuisine: viral trends on social media

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**Abstract:** This research explores the phenomenon of sensory preference manipulation in unique cuisines on social media, particularly TikTok. The main focus of this research is to understand how drastic changes in food form, visual manipulation and misleading marketing strategies can influence consumers perceptions and responses to unusual consumers perceptions and responses to unusual foods. Qualitative methods were used to analyze viral content, user comments and virality patterns through the TikTok platform. Findings show that changes to the shape, color, taste and ingredients of food can significantly attract consumer's attention and create strong visual sensations. Visual manipulation and misleading marketing strategies amplify the virality effect by creating a discrepancy between the expectation and reality of the product, which triggers emotional responses and high engagement on social media. This research provides new insights into how social media algorithms accelerate the spread of viral content and its impact on culinary trends. The implications of these findings suggest that sensory manipulation can be an effective tool in digital marketing strategies, with great potential to influence consumer perceptions and increase the popularity of unconventional foods.

**Keywords:** Sensory manipulation, viral culinary, social media, Tiktok, Marketing Strategy, Consumer perception.

**Abstrak:** Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi fenomena manipulasi preferensi sensorik dalam kuliner unik di media sosial, khususnya Tiktok. Fokus utama penelitian ini adalah untuk memahami bagaimana perubahan drastic pada wujud makanan, manipulasi visual dan strategi pemasaran yang menyesatkan dapat mempengaruhi persepsi dan respons konsumen terhadap makanan yang tidak lazim. Metode kualitatif digunakan untuk menganalisis konten viral, komentar pengguna dan pola viralitas melalui platform Tiktok. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa perubahan pada bentuk, warna, rasa dan bahan makanan secara signifikan dapat menarik perhatian konsumen dan menciptakan sensasi visual yang kuat. Manipulasi visual dan strategi pemasaran yang menyesatkan memperkuat efek viralitas dengan menciptakan perbedaan antara ekspektasi dan realitas produk, yang memicu respons emosional dan interaksi tinggi di media sosial. Penelitian ini memberikan wawasan baru tentang bagaimana algoritma media sosial mempercepat penyebaran konten viral dan dampaknya terhadap tren kuliner. Implikasi dari temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa manipulasi sensorik dapat menjadi alat efektif dalam strategi pemasaran digital, dengan potensi besar untuk mempengaruhi persepsi konsumen dan meningkatkan popularitas makanan yang tidak lazim.

**Keywords:** Manipulasi sensorik, kuliner viral, media sosial, Tiktok, Strategi Pemasaran, Persepsi konsumen

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## 1. Introduction

In today's digital era, social media users are competing to show something unique to the public. The uniqueness is used to provoke the attention of many people which has an impact on views and reputation for the creator. This can be seen from the onion coffee trend, which was originally a trend in China, then followed by one of the coffee cafes in Jakarta (Fitria, 2024). This coffee attracted the attention of netizens in the country because it was considered unusual. Many people are curious about the taste, especially celebrities who focus on the culinary world, not a few of them feel strange. Catfish jelly also boomed in 2023 after being uploaded by one of the celebrities who has a branding that likes to cook in a strange way (Ashari, 2023). Until now, many people have tried to experiment with catfish but with different food models, such as matcha catfish, ekpresso catfish and others. Thus, it is clear that the manipulation of the usual into the unusual is being done to create viral culinary innovations, regardless of public acceptance. Based on this phenomenon, this study aims to understand how the manipulation of sensory preferences can influence consumers' perceptions of unusual foods.

Existing research has not fully considered viral food that only displays uniqueness without considering taste preferences that are not prevalent on social media. So far, research on food on social media has focused on three aspects: first, the impact of social media on consumer decisions (Malbasa, 2018), second, the foodstagramming phenomenon, and third, viral food and its popularity. The first aspect is the significant impact of posting food on social media on individual decisions. Usually a food vlogger will explain the taste, menu type and address to the audience. The second aspect is that the phenomenon of foodstagramming, which is the practice of sharing photos of food widely on platforms such as Instagram, not only highlights the visual uniqueness of food but also influences consumers' decisions in food selection (Wong et al., 2019). The third aspect is that young people and middle-income groups are more likely to purchase viral food compared to other market segment groups (Muhammad et al., 2024). Thus, existing research has not addressed the manipulation of sensory preferences for viral foods that seem unusual on social media.

This research aims to provide insight into how changes in form, visual manipulation and misleading marketing strategies in unusual foods can influence consumers' sensory preferences on social media. This research will use foods that have gone viral on Tiktok to illustrate the impact of these manipulations on consumer perception and response. Three aspects will be discussed in detail in this paper, namely, changes in form, visual manipulation and misleading marketing strategies. First, changes to the appearance of food can stimulate taste buds and create different flavor perceptions. Second, visual manipulation of food can increase visual appeal, which can influence perceptions of food quality and value. Third, misleading marketing strategies can manipulate consumers' expectations of food and also influence their sensory preferences. By mapping these three domains, this research provides a deeper understanding of how sensory preferences can influence consumer responses to unusual foods, and the implications for marketing strategies, in this case using tiktok media to make these foods viral.

The paper is based on an argument that the manipulation of sensory preferences in foods that are not common on social media, especially Tiktok, has great potential to increase the virality of culinary content. In the case of this food, what is done is to manipulate sensory preferences for food. Changes occur in ingredients, colors, shapes, and flavors that are presented through attractive visuals. This is done to attract attention and get a response from social media users, which also involves the audience's psychology. For example, videos featuring experiments with ice kpi bawang or agar-agar catfish have significantly increased interactions and followers on accounts evoking such content on TikTok. Users often respond with comments or curiosity, increasing the virality and popularity of the food. Thus, the strategy of using TikTok to manipulate food sensory preferences not only creates a strong viral effect, but also illustrates how social media platforms can significantly influence culinary trends.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Sensory Preference Manipulation**

The term sensory preference manipulation is not specifically found in existing literature. This term is deliberately placed by researchers to draw on the phenomenon of viral food trends that exist on social media today. However, research conducted by Spence (Spence, 2019) that discusses the relationship between color and taste in the context of multisensory perception. He noted that many commentators initially assumed that there was no relationship between color and taste, but empirical evidence suggests that over the past 80 years, color in food and beverages often influences multisensory perception of taste. In another review Spence and his colleague Levitan (Spence & Levitan, 2022) suggest that in addition to associating color with certain tastes and aromas, consumers also associate the color of cutlery, packaging and even the color of the dining environment can also affect multisensory perception of taste.

### **2.2. FoodMo**

Experiencing the feeling of “fear of missing out” (FOMO) is a common phenomenon when people browse social media. The feeling of missing out on price opportunities will arise for people who FOMO (Singh & Banerjee, 2024). In the context of food trends, the term FOMO becomes “FOODMO” which refers to the fear of missing out on the latest food trends (Fiedler, 2023). In a book written by Jonah Berger that something goes viral is caused by six factors: social currency (shared experiences about food), triggers (food trends caused by pop culture), emotion (food that evokes strong emotions is more likely to be shared), public (food that is easy to see or photograph is more likely to go viral), practical value (information about good places to eat or recipes that are easy to follow are often shared), stories (eating experiences that are packaged in the form of interesting stories are more likely to spread (Berger, 2013).

### **2.3. Sosial Media**

Social media plays a very important role in promoting culinary trends. Platforms like TikTok allow users to share interesting visual content, which can then quickly go viral. This engaging visual content often involves visual manipulation, such as the use of filters, editing and creative presentation (Godara & Dev, 2021). A study conducted by (Chen et al., 2024) explored the phenomenon of foodstagramming and how this practice influences consumers' food choices. They found that attractive visuals can influence perceptions of product quality and value. Creative and unique presentation approaches can increase exposure on social media and trigger emotional responses from consumers, increasing the potential to go viral.

Existing research has not specifically addressed the manipulation of sensory preferences for viral foods that appear unappetizing on social media. Most studies focus on the general impact of social media on consumer decisions or the popularity of viral foods, but do not explore how visual manipulation and marketing strategies specifically influence consumers' sensory perceptions. This research offers a new direction by focusing on three main aspects: changes in food form, visual manipulation and misleading marketing strategies. Using examples of viral foods on TikTok, this research aims to provide deeper insights into how sensory preferences can influence consumers' perceptions and responses to unusual foods and the implications for marketing strategies. The research will also delve deeper into the psychological impact of unique visual presentation and how social media algorithms influence the spread of viral content, which in turn influences the culinary treasure among young people.

## **3. Method**

This research is based on a qualitative research philosophy that uses interpretative methods to understand how food is manipulated by a group of people to get popularity, which actually does not get a positive response from the community, but because of the algorithm of social media, it makes its existence viral in the middle of society. This qualitative method is used to examine the subjects and concepts used by people who make food weird.

We focused on depth rather than breadth and looked for rich and deep narratives that quantitative methods missed. This topic helped us to understand the complexity of the phenomenon under study.

Data was collected through the TikTok social media platform. The analysis will focus on content featuring unique foods, comments from users, number of views, number of likes and how many people share the video to understand the virality pattern.

TikTok was the primary data collection medium, with its large repository and relevant visual content. This technique allowed the collection of image screenshots, creator content, videos of unusual food and comments from social media users. Ethics are very important in this process. This research only uses public domain data, intellectual property rights, images, content used, under fair use. Another thing is to uphold ethical integrity when this research uses digital data for research. Data from social media will be analyzed using content analysis to understand how unique foods are presented, user reactions and virality patterns. The researcher will look for patterns in the way the food is promoted and how the audience responds.

#### 4. Results

This article focuses on the manipulation of sensory preferences in unique cuisines that go viral on social media, particularly TikTok. These manipulations include changes in form (shape, color, taste and ingredients), visual manipulation and misleading marketing strategies. This research aims to understand how these alterations affect consumers' perceptions of unconventional food. The details are explained in the following findings:

##### 4.1. Sensory Manipulation

Unique culinary phenomena on social media that go viral often utilize very significant changes to the visual and sensory aspects of a food. These changes include a variety of elements, such as the ingredients used, the shapes and colors presented, to the unusual flavors, deliberately modified to present a visual and emotional appeal to the audience. This can be seen from the table below:

**Tabel 1. Showcasing various cuisines that have been transformed for virality**

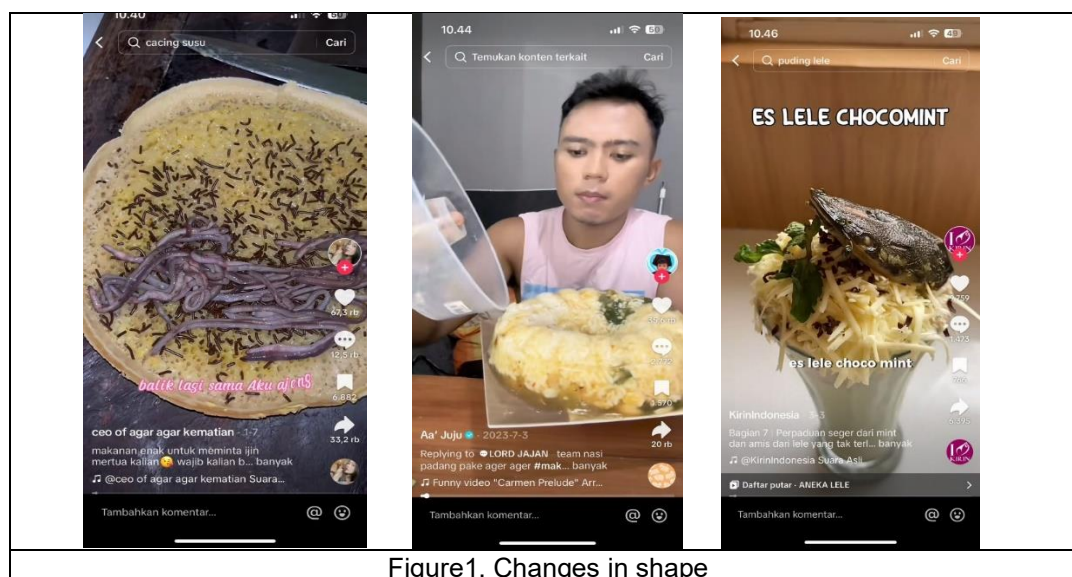


Figure1. Changes in shape

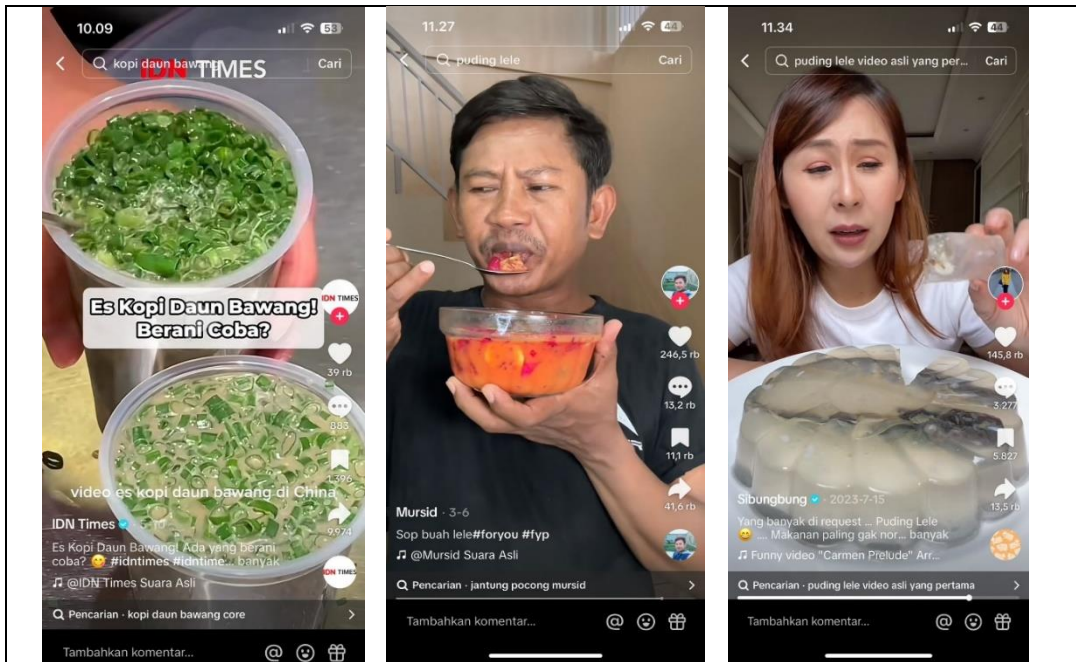


Figure 2. Changes in taste

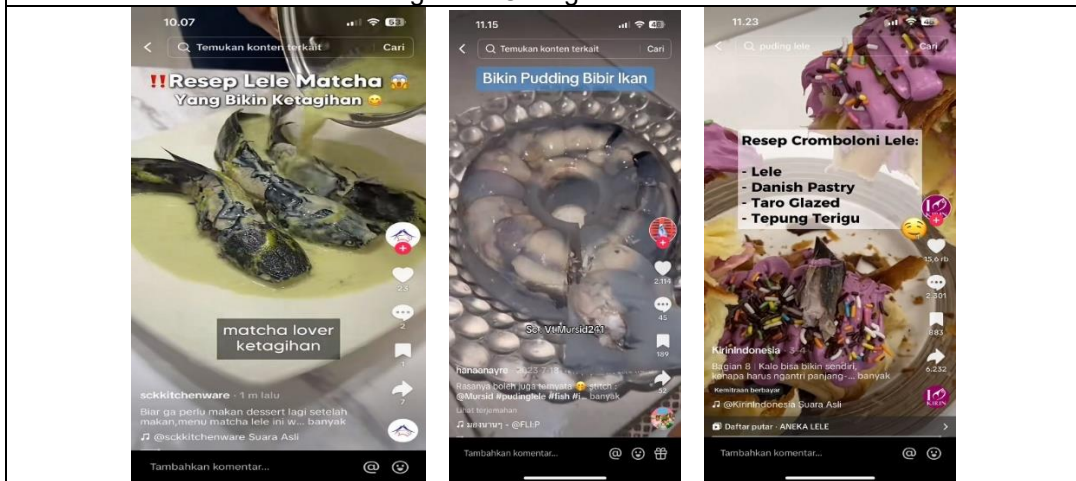


Figure 3. Changes in materials

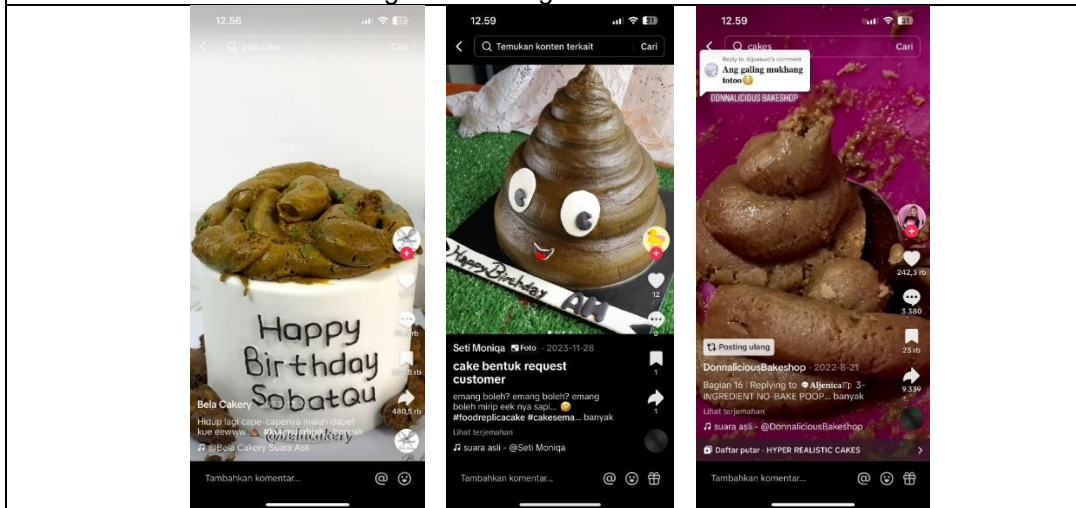


Figure 4. Changes in color

From Table 1, it can be seen that common forms of food are changing into uncommon ones on social media. These changes include ingredients, shape, color and taste. It is not known who first created this trend, but strange foods often go viral on social media. For example, unusual ingredients are now often used to create uniqueness. Cakes that are usually made with flour, eggs and butter are now augmented with catfish to provide an unexpected element. In terms of color, cakes that are supposed to give a sense of art, beauty, and luxury are transformed into unusual designs such as feces-shaped cakes that attract attention for their shocking appearance. In terms of shape, unique foods are often highlighted with shapes that are different from the norm. For example, martabak, which usually uses sweet or savory food toppings, is now replaced with worm toppings to give an extreme and unique impression. In terms of taste, culinary delights that used to have traditional flavors are now transformed into experimental flavors to highlight uniqueness and creativity. Overall, these changes reflect trends in social media where uniqueness and creativity are often the main factors in attracting attention and going viral.

#### 4.2. Visual Manipulation

Visual manipulation is one of the strategies often used to attract attention and the power to try unique cuisines for audiences. By creating visual aspects, this content will get both curious and negative reactions. This audience reaction is utilized by social media algorithms to increase the viral cycle that continues to repeat itself. This can be seen from the following table.

**Tabel 2. Negative Reaction to Visual Manipulation Video**

No	Account	Comments	Caption
1	@wylinn  @daniel_is_awesome21  @anii_ajahh @hryueen_  @vifil_e  @jjaem8  @hylyhchaa	“lele digoreng aja gw ga doyan apalagi pudding lele” “aku nonton nutupin pake komen”  “dia yg makan gw yg muntah”  “gue yg fobia kodok merinding njirr litany”  “ager-ager kodok mungkin wajar buatmu mba, tapi aku teh enggaaa”  “lu normal gak sih anjj”  “jualan tanpa saingan dan tanpa pembeli	Manipulation of taste
2	@luvforeverrr @wiwitgobot05  @urlove.meely @ferrakurniasari  @rizqohh @reallusia19 @xyzjax_	“siapa yang ngide dijadiin topping anjj”  “aliran sesat”  “kak, kamu kenapa, aneh lo bentuknya.	Manipulation of shapes

		<p>“njir gw pobia cacing langsung merinding sebadan ngeliat ini</p> <p>“gw yang phobia cacing”</p> <p>“gw yg baru liat cacing aja udah lari, ini di makan</p> <p>“lama-lama gw alergi pudding”</p>	
3	<p>@lonjwiinhwng</p> <p>@nanzmc122</p> <p>@rdndrgtra27</p> <p>@nis_nisak</p> <p>@inyekinyekkumayan</p> <p>@nataadinda_</p> <p>@.171119</p>	<p>“warnanya itu loh kok bisa sama e*k”</p> <p>“jadi keinget, kebelet berak, masuk wc, ternyata cuman kentut, tetap cebok”</p> <p>“bejir mana ad ijo ama merah nya”</p> <p>“gw lagi makan kok muncul kue tai”</p> <p>“tarok satu yang asli ngga ngaruh”</p> <p>“langsung overthinking dan tidak ada niat untuk mencoba”</p> <p>“Kalian kemakan ga sih. Klu aku kyk nga ngga”</p>	Manipulation of color
4	<p>@hooman_badut</p> <p>@punyamassandiii</p> <p>@no_name_11990</p> <p>@nggkpenting</p> <p>@crechika</p> <p>@pecintakulitkriuk</p> <p>“je.laime_habibie</p>	<p>“tolong jangan nodain matchaaaa”</p> <p>“menerima semua matcha tapi ini ga dulu”</p> <p>“jangan yang gasuka matcha, matcha lovers liat pun kabur”</p> <p>“udah pas makan bayangin aja lagi makan lele sambel ijo”</p> <p>“Dengan kita yang pecinta matcha garis</p>	Manipulation of materials


		<p>keras kalo suruh rasa kita ni gak mau”</p> <p>“matcha loverssss: engga dulu mbaaa, lu sendiri dulu gih”</p> <p>“gw yg suka matcha aja mau dikasih 100 triliun gabakal gw makan, warna nya aneh”</p>	
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From Table II above, it can be seen that the manipulation of the form displayed by the producers has drawn a lot of negative criticism from social media users. This criticism is mostly related to the mismatch between expectations and the reality of the product, as well as the use of unusual ingredients. This is related to the psychology of social media users, that they will be emotionally provoked when they see things that are not in accordance with the norm of a food. The more comments that are directed at the food, the more the algorithm works to make the food viral. This creates a cycle where negative responses increase the visibility of the product on social media platforms.


### 4.3. Misleading Marketing Strategies

Marketing strategies play an important role in generating interest in unusual culinary products on social media. Producers present benefits and positive testimonials to increase appeal, so that many people try them. However, this approach does not always work as expected. This is because consumers' expectations sometimes focus not only on the novelty of the food, but also on how good it tastes. Claims that are not supported by clear information trigger criticism. But on the other hand, this criticism will also create a rapid virality cycle. The table below will show an overview of marketing strategies

**Tabel 3. Marketing strategy and backlash**

No	Producer account	Comments	Description
1	 <p>@brewandelse</p>	<p>“bikin video pas karyawan nya Cobain gaa!!!</p>	<p>The producer provides the caption “benefits of spring onions”, but does not provide a clear source of information.</p>



<p>2</p>	 <p>@kirinindonesia</p>	<p>“yg bener aja”</p>	<p>The producer promoted a video of a sponge cake made with catfish. The sponge cake was tasted delicious by all employees.</p>
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The data in Table III shows that producers are trying to show that their products contain health benefits and recognition from their immediate environment that their products are delicious. However, comments from netizens show the opposite. Comments come from the experiences of several people who have tried or seen reviews of several celebrities who have tried it and comments that come from individual observations that see that the ingredients are not as expected. These direct experiences from consumers and the influence of celebgram reviews show that while manufacturers try hard to promote their products in a positive way, the reality on the ground is often different. This consumer dissatisfaction is amplified by social media algorithms that accelerate the spread of negative reviews, making the negative information more viral and influencing public perception of the product.

## 5. Discussion

This research explores unusual viral food trends through changes in form (shape, color, taste and ingredients), visual manipulation and deceptive marketing strategies. The research shows how drastic changes in the form of a food can attract consumer attention and create hype. The colors used also tend to be striking or unusual, such as the fecal-shaped cake whose lifelike color creates a visual surprise. In addition, experimental flavors that are different from the traditional and unconventional ingredients also attract the attention of the public at large. These changes have made viral food trends an ever-growing phenomenon that generates great interest among the public. This uniqueness is presented virtually which creates visual manipulation. This plays an important role in food presentation and influences flavor perception. This virtual presentation changes the appearance of the food significantly, creating an interesting and appetizing visual effect. Visual manipulation can be seen in the examples of catfish jelly, worm martabak and feces-shaped cake, where the unusual appearance of these foods attracts consumers' attention and curiosity for strong visual sensations. Therefore, visual manipulation through virtual presentation plays an important role in food marketing strategy.

The uniqueness that is highlighted on social media is used to achieve views from the audience. The algorithm system used by social media allows videos that appeal to some people to show themselves to people who like the same things. The sharing feature on social media also allows the video to appear on the pages of people who follow each other. For

example, when someone is bothered by an unusual food but likes the video, the algorithm will suggest more videos about that food. When the video is shared, other people who see it and share similar concerns increase the chances of the video going viral. As a result, video creators who feature weird and quirky content often get greater exposure and can become sudden celebrities. Thus, the uniqueness of content on social media plays an important role in attracting attention and increasing creators' popularity quickly and widely.

### **5.1. Psychological Impact of Unique Visual Presentations**

Perceptions of multisensory influence consumer purchase intentions. Research shows that the multisensory experience presented by e-customization systems can significantly influence consumer purchase decisions. In addition to focusing on sales, the purpose of the content that makes the food unusual is the desire to achieve its own satisfaction from influencing the audience. In analyzing the impact, this can be seen from two sides, namely the content creator who presents unique content and the audience with curiosity and feeling satisfied when consuming the content. Edward Thorndike (Thorndike, 1911) explains the stimulus response theory where a pleasant condition will be repeated, and unpleasant will be stopped. This explains the netizen response to the absurd food content. For content creators, they will feel a happy stimulus from consumer responses, and some will take further actions such as creating new, unusual ideas.

From the side of consumers or social media users, they tend to feel satisfaction and pleasant sensations and also feel disgusted at the same time. Lazarus' theory explains this phenomenon in the appraisal of emotion & adaptation theory. There are three stages in the interpretation of content by consumers, namely cognitive appraisal, physiological response, and action. In passing through these stages, consumers are triggered in things that appeal to them, even if they are unusual. The different emotional reactions of each consumer trigger Action as the final process in interpreting the content. Some consumers just enjoy it, and some consumers are triggered to try it. The unique visual presentation of the food triggers curiosity for some people, both from content creators to increase their social media traffic and consumers who fulfill their stimulus and curiosity (Lazarus, 1991).

### **5.2. Social Media Algorithm**

Social media user behavior has recently become more diverse with the emergence of diverse and unique content. Algorithms play an important role in displaying content to consumers and become a reference for content creators in coming up with ideas. However, in some circumstances the algorithm is not only triggered by one individual, but also on viral content that is watched by many other users. In addition, features such as sharing posts and the number of likes obtained on one piece of content, have an effect on other users even if they do not pay attention to the content (Narayanan, 2023).

Virality in content according to Arvind Narayanan also triggers users to view content that is not their focus. However, it often appeals more to users' curiosity, such as unique food content that goes viral. Algorithms play an important role in increasing user reach. In addition, content creators gain a large audience due to viewers making efforts to go viral, such as sharing posts. In looking at the content virality market, several other content creators are trying to make the same thing, namely making unusual food. So that social media traffic is filled with similar posts but diverse in packaging. Therefore, algorithms play an important role in presenting content in this phenomenon, so that trends increase over a period of time.

### **5.3. Effective Marketing Strategy**

The effectiveness of marketing strategies on content can be different, starting from the target market and also consumer needs. One of the content strategies in food uses interesting visuals, and also unique compositions. In addition to affecting taste, food content also often features visual experiments that are different from the norm. Unique culinary content marketing strategies serve different purposes, first as food sales content to consumers. In this case, consumers are given interesting and unique visuals as well as the absurd. The visual impact on the food provides curiosity to try it, rather than the composition

that is inside (Bastos, 2019). Therefore, this marketing strategy aims to sell goods and services as a result.

Second, the marketing strategy is aimed at increasing attention or engagement in the social media space. Generally, some content creators do not only focus on culinary matters, but seek attention from activities that are carried out outside the norm. One of them is unique and strange culinary according to the general public. Therefore, the effectiveness in creating visual food content is higher, because it arouses the curiosity of consumers who want to try or just watch it (Li & Xie, 2019).

## 6. Conclusion

This research reveals how the manipulation of sensory preferences in unique cuisines that go viral on social media influences consumer perception and response. The research found that drastic changes in form, visual manipulation and misleading marketing strategies contribute significantly to the virality of food on platforms such as TikTok. Visual uniqueness and experimental flavors, while unusual, have the power to capture attention and attract intentional interactions on social media.

This research makes an important contribution to the understanding of how the manipulation of sensory preferences can influence consumer decisions and marketing strategies. By identifying and analyzing changes in the shape, color, taste and ingredients of food, as well as how visuals influence consumer perception, this paper offers a new perspective on the virality of culinary content. The findings add to the knowledge of the foodstagramming phenomenon and the impact of psychology and unique visual presentation, which can provide valuable guidance for marketers and creators in social media.

This research is limited to analyzing content collected from TikTok, which does not cover the entire spectrum of viral cuisine across platforms. In addition, the primary focus on unconventional food and visual manipulation may influence virality, as may cultural trends or broader social dynamics. Further research is needed to explore how these additional factors may influence consumer perceptions and responses to viral food across different social media contexts.

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