



Content Analysis of Facebook Food Community  
Meaning in a Time of Crisis

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**Abstract**

*Social media offer innovative opportunities for people to feel and stay socially connected in difficult times. This study aims to understand how people use their cooking mishaps during the movement control order (MCO) period due to the COVID-19 pandemic to seek emotional support and a sense of belonging to an online food community. Content analysis revealed three major sharing motivations: (i) social and relational, (ii) emotion articulation and (iii) information sharing. This research reveals that by opening up about their cooking mishaps and showing their vulnerability, users feel much more connected to the rest of the community members. The humorous way of posting has also deepened the connection between members, who maintain strong protective feelings for members of the community. This study highlights that people share information online during difficult times to cope with distress and stay connected with others.*

**Keywords:** Community Identification, Emotions, Interaction, Knowledge Sharing, Social Media

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The advent of the Internet and social media technologies has changed not only our everyday lives but also our daily experiences. Social media sites have become popular resources for users to post their cooking recipes and experiences and seek cooking tips from others who have knowledge of cooking (Lee et al., 2014). In this environment, user-generated content (UGC) has received significant scholarly attention (Zarezadeh et al., 2018). UGC is created and distributed online through online citizens themselves (Hollenstein and Purves, 2015). Social media sites depend heavily on the participation of users who influence others through their online actions (Althoff et al., 2017). UGC on social media has promoted information exchange and is therefore a powerful source of word-of-mouth (WOM) information (Chung et al., 2015). UGC is considered more effective than any other online resource as it is produced by members of the network and thus deemed trustworthy (Yoo and Gretzel, 2011).

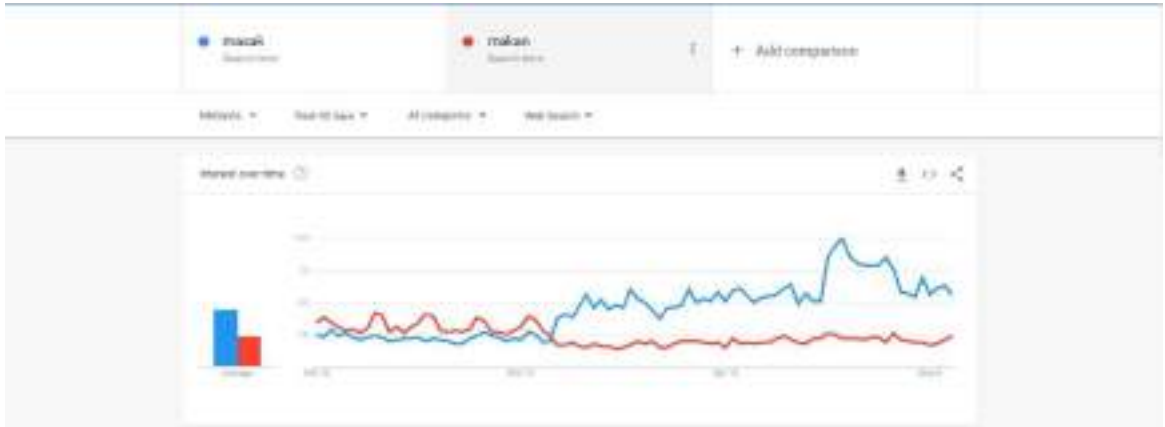
The food reflects cultural identity (Kah et al., 2020). For example, Malaysia is well-known for its unusual or exotic food. According to Perry (2017), Malaysia is a food lovers' paradise and Malaysians in general enjoy the diverse culinary heritage of its multicultural society. In addition, according to Lee (2017), Malaysian food culture comes from an assortment of sources representing a variety of regional gastronomies. The term describes a variety of national dishes that make up the unique heritage cuisine of the country, which is based on the country's various ethnic groups including Malays, Chinese and Indians. The variety of food compels food lovers to upload food images on social media to share with others.

Recently, the phenomenon of uploading photos of food has become a trend in social media communities across the world. Social media sites such as Facebook and Instagram are used to share these pictures. Furthermore, food photos on social media have become increasingly popular as many people upload pictures of the dishes they eat and cook (Razak et al., 2020). Consequently, social media sites have become places where people can voice their opinions about food (Reinhard et al., 2021). According to Ibrahim (2015), as a major aspect of advanced culture, food photos act as general images of social sharing and, by extension, human solidarity. People who share food photos on social media are often called 'foodies', 'food grammars', or 'digital food influencers' (Goodman and Jaworska, 2020; Yozukmaz et al., 2017).

Foods have social and cultural value, distinguished by the quality of the product and the historical culinary culture of the country, where direct experience and relationships play an important role. Sthapit et al. (2017) stated that food production and sharing help to channel emotions and behaviour and the use of food could be considered positive and sustainable. In this highly connected age, food has found its way to social media or, otherwise, social media have found food. Food discussions in online social networks are centered around recipe sharing, restaurant and dining experience reviews. Social media is reshaping the relationship of the contemporary society with food (Goodman and Jaworska, 2020). It is important to note that social media are not individual tools, but rather a constellation of tools and technologies that support peer-to-peer conversations and UGC. Bakardjieva (2005) stated that dimensional experience is also a time of sharing and nurturing social relationships online and offline. Social media do not just provide information but also connect users while giving them information.

According to Hawks et al. (2020), more discussion on food-related behaviour interaction with social media is needed. People have different views of their activities, such as whether to upload pictures to pass the time or to indicate their situation. Although food is an essential part of daily life, how users use food and social media in times of crisis has not been investigated. Before the government's movement control order (MCO) intended to stop the spread of COVID-19; data from Google Trends for Malaysia has shown that the keyword 'makan' (eat) has a consistent search word trend. However, starting from March 18, 2020, there is a sharp increase of word search 'masak' (cook) in Malaysia (Figure 1). This could indicate a shift in the role of food production from consumer to food producer among Malaysians from this point onward.

Food photos on social media are generally intended to be visually appealing. This has created the 'Instagrammable' culture with photos on social media are that must look pretty and be enviable images (Razak and Mansor, 2021). However, during the MCO period, 'ugly' or failed food photos make their way to social media. During this period, social media users have started to share their cooking failures and cause a rise in the number of 'ugly' food photos shared. This contradicts the previous nature of Instagrammable culture with 'ugly' photos were considered undesirable and unpopular before the MCO period. This is an interesting phenomenon to look at.



**Figure 1:** Comparison of the word trend between ‘masak’ (cook) and ‘makan’ (eat) between February and May 2020.

Source: Google Trends (Accessed 14 May 2020)

Cooking is a chore for women and not many of them frequently make cooking posts on social media (Szabo, 2015). During the MCO, both women and men are more active in posting their food photos and joining food-related social media groups to share food photos and get online support like cooking tips from members. Maintaining physical community during the MCO period is a challenge (Kumaravel et al., 2020). Thus, online social support is more important than before (Elmer et al., 2020; Razak et al., 2020). Social media could reduce isolation and increase opportunities to seek social support (Giallonardo et al., 2020). Online food communities could serve as a support system especially during restricted physical communication.

This study aims to understand a social media phenomenon focusing on failures among a food community viewed from communication studies. The study uses content analysis of Malaysian amateur cooks’ cooking failures as posted to the Facebook group that asks, ‘Masak Apa Tak Jadi Hari Ni’; the literal translation is ‘What have you tried but failed to cook today?’

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This segment explains the UGC principle in food and how this shapes users’ cooking experience. The motivations that cause people to share UGC on social media are also discussed.

## **UGC in Food Experience**

People utilize social media for many reasons. Whiting and Williams (2013) noted at least seven motivations for social media utilization namely social gratifications, information seeking, pass time, entertainment, relaxation, communication utility, and convenience utility. In terms of social gratifications, this form of social media utilization can be further classified into another four main social motivations namely social influence, social interaction, bonding social capital and bridging social capital development (Raji et al., 2020). These social motivations determine the content that users would generate and no one social media platform can retain users just for one specific content. It is hard for one social media platform to make users stay because they seek specific content (Raji et al., 2020). Social media users are gravitating towards bridging and bonding social capital that creates a sense of belonging to a particular group with similarity among its members.

Today, social media permit people to share information and become the ‘media’ themselves for collaboration. Li et al. (2019) found that social media offered significant intercultural interaction not only in traditional communication but also in a “new social neighbourhood” for social acculturation.

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) stated that social media involve an ‘internet-based application built on the ideological and technological foundation of Web 2.0 and that allows the creation and exchange of user generated content (UGC)’. However, Leonardi (2009) emphasised social media by focusing people’s attention on what the technology itself does or does not do as a substitute for the technology that represents the context in which the organisations are embedded. Considering all these evidence, social media are a form of electronic communication such as a website or application in which users can create online communities to share anything and everything. Meanwhile, UGC can be understood as content that is posted on social media and considered to be useful electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) among internet users through sharing and interacting with each other.

People use social media sites such as Facebook and Instagram to maintain contact with others for social exchange purposes. Using a hashtag (#) and geo-tagging their food experience has socially connected people who have similar food interests (Mejova et al., 2016). These activities are well supported

by Stepaniuk (2015), who stated that pictures posted on social media might be one of the factors that engage social media users in cognitive, affective, and behavioural activities. In 2018, the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) reported that 61.8% of Malaysian internet users shared their content online. This demonstrates that Malaysians are already accustomed to and comfortable with sharing content online.

The interconnectivity of consumers through social media such as reviews or recommendations may generate confidence in e-commerce. In social media, the users' interaction helps social media users build or reject trust in providers. Socialisation of users applies directly by social interactions among users and indirectly by supporting product involvement (Lim et al., 2017). The interaction on this platform generates social support, which in turn is generated through social media, thereby affecting confidence (Tajvidi et al., 2020). In addition, more positive comments, replies and higher ratings lead to a higher level of trust in the content (Neirotti et al., 2016). Reviews are presented to influence the attitude and intention of consumers with respect to the impression created about a product or service (Kudeshia and Kumar, 2017).

UGC influences the developers of its content as well as those exposed to it; not only are the individuals subjected to UGC affected, but the content creators are also affected. Those who post online tend to build a sense of ownership with the online community they frequently visit (Yang et al., 2017). Molinillo et al. (2020) stated that active engagement in an online group enhances the feeling of belonging and allows users to share their experiences with others. Social connections generated through social media greatly influence users' confidence (Cho and Son, 2019). Therefore, it is important to understand users' content sharing behaviour to understand how this behaviour supports users during the MCO period.

### **Motivations behind UGC Creation and Sharing**

The motivation for creating and sharing UGC has psychological drivers. Information sharing behaviour initially began with e-WOM (Yang, 2017). Motivation also can be classified into extrinsic and intrinsic needs; the need for recognition (extrinsic) and the need to feel a sense of belonging (intrinsic) (Wang et al., 2017). Baym (2010) found that self-centric motivation motivates persons to share content, including social and emotional support. Wang et al. (2017) suggest that food sharing motivation on social media can be categorised

into psychological (social approval, social interaction, reassurance) and functional (archiving and sharing information) benefits.

Social media usage also can be explained by psychological ownership theory (Karahanna et al., 2015). Psychological ownership suggests that we are attached to an object (Van Dyne and Pierce, 2004). That object becomes part of our extended self through engagement in certain activities, and a strong link is formed (Belk, 1988). Therefore, the use of social media by individuals fulfils a psychological desire, which is one of the main motivations behind the use of social media (Karahanna et al., 2015).

Information sharing on social media allows users to control what they share. The content created can be an extension of themselves and provide a sense of belonging. Social media use allows people to establish and sustain relationships based on their desire to belong (Chen, 2017). The current discussion on social media emphasises the motivation to use social media and the food consumption in tourism. More discussion of the cooking experience at the domestic level is needed, especially as a coping mechanism in difficult times.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The public Facebook group, Masak Apa Tak Jadi Hari Ni (MAJTH), has received more than 10,000 posts to date. It was created by a Malaysian user on 19 March 2020 as an online amateur cooking community. Less than one week after the page opened, the site had gained more than 1 million followers. Users mostly post humorous photos of their cooking mishaps. This paper opts for an interpretivist approach. This approach gives a deeper understanding of reality as socially interpreted by humans as social actors. In this paper, the method was to understand the meaning of texts and actions for a specific phenomenon and provide explanations to the objective of the paper. A single Facebook group was chosen to frame the discussion because the characteristics of social media platforms and contents are dynamic and vary depending on the context (De Veirman et al., 2017).

Social media contents are dynamic in which social media postings change quickly over the course of conversation time. The selected Facebook pages were observed for three months between March and May 2020. This period was chosen because it was the best time to observe an emerging social

media phenomenon during the MCO period that is the excitement of cooking failures. In the middle of May 2020, more experienced cooks have started to share their cooking know-how on this particular Facebook page. The participation of expert cooks in this online amateur cooking community is further discussed in the findings. On 10 June 2020, the Malaysian government started the Recovery Movement Control Order (RMCO) where people are allowed to go out to eat. Fewer people were cooking, but the Facebook group continue gaining popularity and more experienced and professional chefs have started joining the MATJH's conversation. Then, the amateur cooking Facebook group changed into an 'expert' cooking community and has started to lose its 'fun' appeal. The community became more knowledge-centric than a fun community.

Content analysis is used to gather information over two weeks of observation between 20 April and 9 May 2020. This period was chosen as this Facebook group has gathered much attention because Malaysia's prime minister mentioned the Facebook group in a nationally live televised speech in relation to government remedial actions towards COVID-19. After this mention, the site quickly gathered more followers and started receiving unwanted attention and revealing conflicts among users. This short period of attention reflects and provides general descriptions of the contemporary landscape of Malaysian online behaviour, especially in the cooking community. All the posts were posted in the Malay language and later translated into English by the researchers.

## **FINDINGS**

Three main themes emerged from the analysis: (1) social and relationship building, (2) emotion articulation and (3) information sharing.

### **Social and Relationship Building**

This group of users mainly shared their cooking experience to build relationships with the other group members and socially connect with them. Food is a common conversation topic among Malaysians. During the MCO period, restaurants cannot operate as usual, and people are spending more time at home, so many have tried cooking and baking for the first time. The following quotations from members indicate that they feel connected to other members of the group and ask others to join their adventures in cooking mishaps:



*Luckily, it didn't burn. Haven't baked for a long time always laughing hard at friends' cooking...😂😂😂.... anyway, all of you are the best and cool...😊😊😊😊 [Anonymous 8, Female, 9 May 20]*

*I'm horrified while typing this. Imagining the bitter taste+burnt+[expensive] price of the ingredients, oh my gosh... Do you want to try it? Come and join me. Let's be sad together. haha [Anonymous 86, Male, 9 May 20]*

*Good thing to join this group is...No matter how the outcome is, you have a place to post it! P/S: this is my 1st post here😊 [Anonymous 87, Female, 8 May 20]*

Figure 2 shows a post from a group member who offers advice for chopping onions.



*Figure 2.* User shares a humorous way to grind onions without crying.

Source: Facebook group Masak Apa Tak Jadi Hari Ni Official (Accessed 9 May 2020)

The members also used this group to ask questions as if they were asking them of their mother or family members. This can be seen from several posts:

*This is yesterday's story, excited to make chiffon cake. The egg yolks and flour are okay, but the egg whites didn't increase in volume when whipped ♀□ ♀□ continue to whip, until I'm tired but it's still the same (I forget to snap photos😊). OK, it's a waste to throw the mixture away since it uses five eggs 😊 I blend the egg yolk mixture even though the egg white didn't rise and put it in the oven with the hope that the cake will rise😊 but 😞😞😞😞 it looks like a pudding cake instead 😞😞😞. Anybody know why egg white didn't rise?? [Anonymous 91, Female, 2 May 20]*

*Assalamualaikum and good morning... I'm not a cook. The three-spice mix is cinnamon, star anise and cardamom... or ... Cinnamon, star anise and cloves???*  
 ♀□ ♀□ ♀□😊 ♀□😊 ♀□😊 ♀□ [Anonymous 129, Female, 8 May 20]

*I want to make crème caramel... and want to use [plastic] containers like this one. I see people selling crème caramel in this kind of container but why when I do the same does the container melt 😞😞😞 or did I get the technique wrong ? [Anonymous 154, Female, 7 May 20]*

*Hi guys, please advise on making cookies. I have followed the recipe step by step, but the result is frustrating [Anonymous 241, Female, 7 May 20]*

Some members also have become surrogate mothers to other members by answering questions about cooking. This group was initially created to share humorous experiences. However, at some point, comments began to turn negative. To keep the relationships positive, members post to remind people to be kind:

*There are many posts in this group of cooking fails (makanan masak tak jadi). If someone cooked and failed, don't be rude to her; maybe she really failed when cooking and is not asking for thousands of likes. She shares her cooking mishap to live on this page, not for all of you to be rude to her. For those who are rude, it would be better to leave this*

*group and join a “rude” page . I hate to read comments from people who say those who share their cooking mishap do so to collect thousands of likes; people are now scared to post anything on this page because of these nasty people [Anonymous 233, Female, 7 May 20]*

*I think the admin created this page for laughs and stress release, right? The page name is ‘What have you tried but FAILED to cook’ [Masak apa TAK JADI], right?? I don’t think people intentionally waste food, so let them post their cooking fails in this page. Why are people being ruder each day? Are you who like to slander, curse and insult other people perfect? If you don’t like the page, you should leave it... no need to make so much noise... WHERE ARE YOUR MANNERS? ♀ □ [Anonymous 266, Female, 9 May 20]*

### **Emotion Articulation**

Posting images and recipes is also considered a means of communicating emotions. Emotions that users try to convey can inspire others to feel the same way. The cooking experience is thought to bring a sense of happiness and joy to users. In addition, by posting recipes and cooking failures, users gain satisfaction from their interactions. They hope to make other people happy with their posting. Posting also can be a consolation for them. Therefore, the cooking experience and photo sharing can be for both altruistic and self-efficacy reasons, as discussed below:

*I had this for over 40 years... Mom’s cooking is still the best... [Anonymous 112, Female, 8 May 20]*

*This is the third time I have made a moist chocolate cake during the MCO 😊😊😊. I followed recipes from Mr. Google and also recipes from friends... I also watched YouTube to see how’s it made because the cake still didn’t turn out like what I expected... the taste is ok...often when I make it, it will be gone in less than one day, but I still cannot take any orders ...later when you’re eating you will talk about me huh..*

*because I like this cake 😊😊😊 I won’t give up... failing three times doesn’t mean I won’t get a perfect cake next time... I will do my best until I get it right 🍌🍌🍌 [Anonymous 188, Female, 9 May 20]*

*FIRST – full blossomed... SECOND – not blooming. I'm only left with an empty container...hokeyyyy...I am determined not to do this anymore... but to critics that are going to say 'this is intentional', get out of here...when it happens to you then only will you understand WHAT IS MEANT BY FAILURE... [Anonymous 198, Female, 7 May 20]*

*Let's try... try until you get it right... even though you fail at what you cook, in the end when you keep trying it will be a success... practice makes perfect. Even though we are being criticised... think positive for our own improvements... in the end you will succeed...☺ [Anonymous 231, Female, 9 May 20]*

### **Information Sharing**

Information sharing is another reason to post on social media. Respondents exchange information about their recipe to inform others' decision making. The exchange of recipes is altruistic as users take their time and energy to provide free information that benefits others in the group. Most tend to share their own unique takes on Malay cuisine. This sentiment is illustrated in the following posts:

*Whoever is trying to make kek batik [Malaysian dessert] but gets a hard cake, here I share a recipe so you can get it right next time [followed by her recipe] Good luck [152, Male, 9 May 20]*

*Yesterday I saw someone ask how to make kek batik not hard. So, I felt called to share the recipe ... Insyaallah all the time I make this; it was so soft, never used an axe to cut it ... Hehe. Don't get mad.... This recipe came from a neighbour... It's been a long time. She gave the recipe to my mother when we were still young. Even kek batik was not yet popular at that time ... Here is the recipe ... How to make it in pictures. Enjoy all [Anonymous 242, Female, 9 May 20]*

*Assalamualaikum...I'm gonna show you how to make tepung pelita [Malay kuih]. I feel sorry to see 'my little sisters' failed to bake this... I have made this tepung pelita recipe and sold it for over 35 years ... hopefully it benefits you [Anonymous 280, Female, 8 May 20]*

Members try to influence other members to avoid mistakes by sharing their own fool-proof recipes. This gives users a sense of accomplishment by seeing others cook their cakes and gain success.

## **DISCUSSION**

The motivation behind posting cooking mishaps and recipes is mainly for psychological support from users of the same Facebook group. It is driven by the altruistic experience of UGC (Baym, 2010). Sharing cooking mishaps provides consolation for the sharer and the viewers during this difficult time that endures crisis. The post is filled with encouragement from the posters and viewers, based on the comments and likes received. Altruistic motives are important drivers, as supported by Yoo and Gretzel (2011) and Wang et al. (2017). Humans also feel a need to belong (Molinillo et al., 2020).

UGC allows for a sense of belonging to a community, a circle of people who share the same interests and similar experiences, in an attempt to socialise and find happiness. Molinillo et al. (2020) highlighted these aspects of social media. Having similar cooking experiences fulfils the desire to feel a sense of belonging among the members of Facebook groups.

Information sharing is intended to educate and inform the members of the Facebook group. By sharing recipes and cooking mishaps, the users strengthen their own position in the online community (Chen, 2017). They develop psychological ownership with the rest of the members of the community, as evidenced by the use of 'friends' and 'my little sister' and also the need to protect members of the community from mean-spirited comments.

Food-related content is utilised as a tool to gain social approval. Social media are used as feedback-seeking platforms to interact by commenting on the post, liking the post and sharing the post. Social media communities such as Facebook groups act as surrogate family members to help users get through the isolation and nurture the need to socialise during the MCO period. Emotional bonding is prevalent in this amateur cook Facebook group. Therefore, encouraging users to share their cooking mishaps brings emotional benefits to the users.

## **CONCLUSION**

Food can become an important catalyst as a conversation opener and communication tool that connects people socially. This study reveals that people exchange information about cooking mishaps to connect with others, to convey their emotional state, and to share information. This study reveals several factors that influence UGC creation and sharing, as discussed in the previous literature. Users find comfort in online food communities during difficult times. Through the display of one's mishaps, an alliance is built between and among the users in the same online community. Members of the community feel the need to protect other members from offensive comments.

This study extends the current understanding of UGC sharing. Earlier research on UGC focuses on the viewer of the content. However, this study highlights the content creator's point of view, especially online sharing behaviour during a crisis. This study can open up a discussion about cooking therapy as a coping mechanism. However, it is also worth noting the study's limitations. Due to a large number of posts and comments, this study must exclude comments associated with the discussed posts from this study. Comments on social media or feedback-seeking behaviour is another realm of knowledge regarding online behaviour. This study also focuses on the Malay-speaking online food community, which cannot be generalised across cultures since certain internet terms and food cultures exist only in Malaysian culture. Future research can address the social media food experience on different platforms and food-wasting discussions resulting from cooking mishaps.

A critical question raised by this study worth for future study is whether failed end products has glorified food wastage. Another question is on the authenticity of the cooking failure, whether it was genuine or the social media users intentionally 'failed' the end products so they can make a 'feel-good' post about it. Regardless of their motives, it also would be interesting to see different ways of how failed end products had been repurposed and interpreted by social media users. Findings from the study are expected to have significant implications for the food industry and agricultural sector in Malaysia such as the use of social media to teach consumers about food wastage and start a food frugality movement. Particularly to cope with the global and Malaysia agricultural sector suffering as it is unable to meet the food demand during the COVID-19 pandemic due to climate changes and restricted labour in the sector.

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## **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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