CONSUMER PREFERENCES FOR AYAM GEPUK: THE ROLES OF E-WOM, SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCE, PRODUCT QUALITY AND LOCATION

MAHADZAN, M.[1] – ABDUL LATIB, S. A.[1] – CHE AHMAT, N. H.[1*] – TUMIN, S. A.[1]

[1] *Faculty of Hotel and Tourism Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Penang Branch, Penang, Malaysia.*

**Corresponding author*
e-mail: hidayah.ca[at]uitm.edu.my

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Abstract. Originally from Indonesia, Ayam Gepuk has attracted consumer attention and become a nationwide culinary phenomenon. While the increasing popularity of Ayam Gepuk offers a great economic opportunity, a lack of empirical research has been found investigating how electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), social media, product quality, and location influence consumer preferences for the many Ayam Gepuk brands in Malaysia. Using a quantitative approach, an online survey was developed and distributed via social media platforms to consumers who have visited Ayam Gepuk restaurants. A total of 594 usable responses were analyzed using SPSS version 29, yielding important results. Most respondents visited Ayam Gepuk restaurants more than once, and the largest number visited with friends or family. The most popular brand is Ayam Gepuk Pak Gembus, followed by Ayam Gepuk Top Global and Ayam Gepuk Pak Raden. Multiple regression reported that eWOM, social media influence, product quality, and location significantly influenced consumer preferences for Ayam Gepuk. Location was also the strongest predictor among the variables. The findings contributed to the existing body of knowledge on consumer behavior related to food, particularly on Ayam Gepuk. Additionally, the findings offer valuable insights for foodservice operators and marketing practitioners to promote Ayam Gepuk throughout Malaysia. This study used convenience sampling on social media platforms; hence, the findings may be limited in generalizability. Future studies can use probability sampling methods (e.g., interviews) to gather rich data on consumer food preferences for Ayam Gepuk.
Keywords: *ayam gepuk, consumer preferences, electronic Word-of-Mouth, social media influence, product quality, location*

Introduction

The foodservice industry makes a significant contribution to the global economy by fostering social connections, promoting cultural diversity, and shaping lifestyle habits. It is largely driven by evolving consumer preferences, urban development, and the growing need for convenience and variety in dining options. The Malaysian economy grew by 5.6 percent in the first half of 2026, up from 4.5 percent in the same period last year, with the services sector, which includes the foodservice sector, a major contributor (DOSM, 2026). The foodservice industry is among the most rapidly expanding, supported by the richness of local cuisine, higher disposable incomes, and the growing trend of dining out. The fast expansion of Malaysia's foodservice industry provides opportunities not only for international franchises and technological advances but also for the revival and rising popularity of traditional cuisine. In Southeast Asia, traditional foods have become vital to business success, and Ayam Gepuk (also known as smashed fried chicken) is no exception. Ayam Gepuk, a traditional Indonesian dish, has gained popularity because it suits Malaysian palates and preferences (Hasram et al., 2025).

The increasing demand for Ayam Gepuk is evident in the rapid growth of many foodservice brands that now offer it on their menus. Ayam Gepuk Pak Gembus expanded from just a handful of stores in 2018 to over 80 branches across Malaysia by early 2025, covering key states such as Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, Negeri Sembilan, Terengganu, Kelantan, Pahang, Perak, Melaka, Johor, Kedah, and Penang (Rakyat, 2025). The brand's achievements further demonstrate this strong consumer interest, as Ayam Gepuk Pak Gembus earned five Malaysia Book of Records titles, including recognition as the largest Ayam Gepuk food chain, the highest sales value, and the most dishes sold within a year, highlighting its broad customer appeal (Juniper, 2025). The rising demand for Ayam Gepuk is influenced by several factors that shape consumer preferences, including word of mouth, social media, product quality, and convenient location (Hasram et al., 2025). Nevertheless, limited empirical studies have examined how the phenomenal rise in demand for Ayam Gepuk influences consumer behavior (Mohamed Apandi et al., 2026; Rismawati, 2025).

Digital platforms help escalate the virality of Ayam Gepuk. In fact, an Indonesian actress claimed that Ayam Gepuk in Malaysia is more delicious than the original Ayam Gepuk version from Indonesia (NST Entertainment, 2026). Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) is consumer-generated recommendations or evaluations of products and services disseminated through digital platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, and Threads. These online platforms strongly influence consumers' dining decisions, as many rely on others' recommendations before trying new restaurants (Ismail et al., 2024). Meanwhile, social media platforms shape consumer preferences by providing images of food, reviews, and viral content (Hasram et al., 2025; Ahmad et al., 2024). Besides eWOM and social media, product quality, particularly taste, freshness, and consistency, is a key determinant of customer satisfaction and loyalty (Rismawati, 2025; Kathiarayan, 2023). Serving a consistently high-quality smashed chicken dish, together with the crafted sambal, is important because Ayam Gepuk is the main product offered in the restaurants. For that reason, studying how product quality could influence consumer preferences is fundamental. Location also plays an important role, as restaurants situated near universities, residential areas, or city centres are more likely to attract regular customers. Consequently, it is important to study the gap in understanding how eWOM, social media influence, product quality, and location influence consumer preferences for Ayam Gepuk restaurants, as this can help foodservice operators develop effective strategies to remain competitive in Malaysia's growing industry.

Despite extensive research on the foodservice industry, few studies have examined eWOM, product quality, social media influence, and location, and how these factors may shape consumer preferences for Ayam Gepuk. Therefore, this study focused on two key objectives: (a) to investigate the role of eWOM, product quality, social media influence, and location in influencing consumer preferences for Ayam Gepuk, and (b) to identify the most influential factors influencing consumer preferences for Ayam Gepuk.

Literature review

Originating in Indonesia, Ayam Gepuk has become increasingly popular in Malaysia for its spicy flavor, which appeals to local palates and current food trends. Its appeal is further enhanced by customizable spice levels, making it particularly attractive to general consumers who seek authentic and bold dining experiences. Digital platforms provide a powerful channel for reaching potential customers, given Malaysia's large population of internet users. It helps accelerate the promotion of Ayam Gepuk when

consumers share their experiences eating it on social media, creating a ripple effect nationwide. The uses and gratifications theory by Katz et al. (1974) explains how and why consumers choose media, including social media, to inform their decision-making. Drawing on the theory, several studies have reported that social media influences consumer food choices and taste preferences. Rismawati (2025) reviewed 10 studies and found that digital marketing (e.g., the GoFood platform, social media) significantly influenced consumers' food purchasing decisions. Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) allows consumers to share their positive or negative feedback about products or services through digital platforms (Ismail et al., 2024), which includes online reviews, ratings, comments, and social media posts. It can influence consumer decisions (Mendoza-Moreira et al., 2025) and reach a wider audience while remaining accessible over time, unlike traditional WOM. In the foodservice industry, visual content on platforms (e.g., TikTok, Instagram, Facebook) has become highly influential because it showcases food appearance and quality and spreads rapidly across these platforms (Rismawati, 2025; Liu et al., 2024; Ngo et al., 2024). Studies have shown that eWOM significantly influences consumers' purchase intentions for food and beverages, particularly via social media platforms such as TikTok (Nazri et al., 2025).

Additionally, social media has become an important marketing and communication tool that influences consumer preferences. It enables users to create, share, and interact with content while providing businesses with an effective platform to promote their products (Philip et al., 2024). Influencer reviews, food images, and short videos often shape consumers' dining decisions by highlighting food quality, atmosphere, and location (Rahman et al., 2025). Social media positively influences how people perceive, choose, and consume food. Regarding Ayam Gepuk, social media has turned Ayam Gepuk into a viral food phenomenon across Malaysia. Other than social media influence, product quality is also a key driver of repeat purchases (Mohamed Apandi et al., 2026). Product quality refers to a product's ability to satisfy customer expectations through attributes such as taste, freshness, presentation, temperature, and consistency (Hartatik et al., 2024). Taste, presentation, and temperature have been identified as the strongest factors influencing consumer preferences (Kristiawan et al., 2021). Maintaining consistent product quality through effective quality management is essential for customer satisfaction and long-term business success through loyalty and repurchase behavior (Suryani et al., 2024; Naini et al., 2022). For Ayam Gepuk restaurants, consumers expect authentic flavors and consistent quality, making product quality a key predictor influencing purchase decisions (Mohamed Apandi et al., 2026).

Location also plays an important role in shaping consumer preferences. Convenient and accessible restaurant locations increase customer traffic and encourage repeat visits (Leong, 2018; Hanaysha, 2016). Research has shown that restaurants located near residential areas, universities, commercial centers, and transportation hubs are more likely to attract customers (Annisaa et al., 2022; Mahendra et al., 2021). The success of Ayam Gepuk restaurants situated in urban centers and student hubs is also influenced by the availability of online food delivery platforms for outside orders. Efficient delivery services and logistics further enhance convenience for online food ordering. Research on Ayam Gepuk restaurants indicates that accessibility and proximity remain important considerations for consumers when deciding where to purchase their meals (Hasram et al., 2025; Al-hasani et al., 2024). Overall, previous studies suggest eWOM, social media influence, product quality, and location are important factors influencing consumer preferences. Nevertheless, limited research has examined the combined effects of these

factors on consumer preferences for Ayam Gepuk restaurants in Malaysia. For that reason, this study addresses this gap by investigating how these determinants shape consumer preferences within the Malaysian foodservice industry.

Materials and Methods

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design to examine the associations among eWOM, social media influence, product quality, location, and consumer preferences for Ayam Gepuk in Malaysia (*Figure 1*). A quantitative approach was appropriate because it enabled the examination of relationships among variables and the testing of the research hypotheses (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). The study population includes all consumers aged 18 years and older who have dined at an Ayam Gepuk restaurant at least once. A sample size of 384 respondents was recommended for survey research for a large population (Krejcie and Morgan, 1970). Using a non-probability purposive sampling approach, this study sampled consumers who had dined at any Ayam Gepuk restaurant in Malaysia. An electronic bilingual-type of questionnaire was developed in Google Forms and distributed online via social media platforms (e.g., WhatsApp, Facebook).

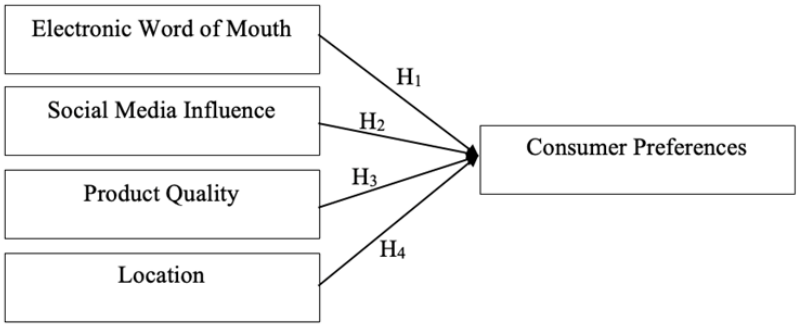


Figure 1. *Research model.*

The questionnaire items were adapted from previously established research. The development of the questionnaire followed procedural controls recommended by Kock et al. (2021). All items were measured using six-point Likert-type scales (1 = strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree). The instrument was pilot-tested with 35 consumers to evaluate reliability. The questionnaire has been approved by the Research Ethics Committee at the institution [BERC/11/2025(UG/MR/402)]. Data collection was conducted in December 2025. A total of 594 valid responses were used in the data analysis after data cleaning procedures. Data analysis was performed using SPSS software version 29.

Results and Discussion

Demographic profiles of respondents

Of the 594 respondents, 76.8% had visited Ayam Gepuk restaurant more than once, and only 23.2% were first-timers. Most of the sample was slightly dominated by females (59.1%), while males accounted for 40.9%. This suggests that Ayam Gepuk

consumption might be preferred by females more than by males (Mohamed Apandi et al., 2026). By region, the largest share of respondents was from the northern region (34.8%) and the central region (25.6%) of Malaysia. For dining companionship, most respondents preferred dining with their friends (42.1%) or families (39.7%). Interestingly, the most preferred Ayam Gepuk brand was Ayam Gepuk Pak Gembus (35.5%), followed by Ayam Gepuk Top Global (27.9%) and Ayam Gepuk Pak Raden (17.7%). Such findings indicated clear brand distinctiveness and support the popularity of Ayam Gepuk Pak Gembus throughout the country. The greater representation of respondents from urbanized states reflects the importance of location in consumer preferences, as individuals in these areas prioritize ease of access, proximity, and convenience due to fast-paced lifestyles, traffic congestion, and abundant dining options. Urban environments also increase exposure to digital marketing and online food trends, which may further intensify social media's impact on food choice (*Table 1*).

Table 1. *Demographic profile (N=594).*

Category	Frequency (*N*)	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	243	40.9
Female	351	59.1
Monthly income level		
<RM5,249	281	47.3
RM5,250–RM11,819	114	19.2
>RM11,820	22	3.7
Prefer not to answer	177	29.8
Current job		
Government	154	25.9
Private sector	233	39.2
Student	166	27.9
Others	41	6.9
Highest education level		
SPM	129	21.7
Diploma	329	55.4
Bachelor	63	10.6
Master	17	2.9
Doctoral	56	9.4
Dining companionship		
Alone	65	10.9
Family	236	39.7
Friends	250	42.1
Colleagues	36	6.1
Others	7	1.2
Preferred brand		
Ayam Gepuk Pak Gembus	211	35.5
Ayam Gepuk Pak Raden	105	17.7
Ayam Gepuk AG	49	8.2
Ayam Gepuk Top Global	166	27.9
Others	63	10.6
Region		
Northern	207	34.8
Central	152	25.6
Eastern	65	10.9
Southern	73	12.2
Sabah, Sarawak, Labuan	97	16.4

Correlation and common method bias

Pearson's correlation analysis revealed significantly positive relationships among all the independent variables ($p < 0.001$) (*Table 2*). Location was strongly correlated with consumer preferences ($r = 0.806$), followed by social media influence ($r = 0.760$), eWOM ($r = 0.735$), and product quality ($r = 0.636$). These findings indicate that eWOM, social media influence, product quality, and location are associated with greater

consumer preferences for Ayam Gepuk. This finding is consistent with previous studies in consumer behavior research related to positive correlations between digital influence factors and consumer decision-making in the foodservice industry (Ismail et al., 2024; Ngo et al., 2024). The researchers acknowledge the potential issues of common method bias in self-administered survey research; hence, they used Harman's single-factor test as a statistical control to evaluate the potential threat of common method bias (Kock et al., 2021). The first factor's result is 44.8% (below the 50% threshold), reflecting no issues with common method bias.

***Table 2**. A descriptive analysis and correlation output.*

Variables	Mean (*M*)	Standard Deviation (*SD*)	Correlation (*r*)
eWOM (α: 0.885)	4.85	0.882	0.735
Social media influence (α: 0.890)	4.62	1.001	0.760
Product quality (α: 0.893)	5.22	0.786	0.636
Location (α: 0.870)	4.91	0.838	0.806
Consumer preferences (α: 0.899)	4.88	0.890	

Multiple regression analyses

A multiple regression was used to assess the extent to which eWOM, social media influence, product quality, and location significantly predicted consumer preferences for Ayam Gepuk. Prior to interpreting the multiple regression analysis, the researchers conducted statistical assumption checks. Based on the scatterplot in *Figure 2*, the relationships between the independent variables and the dependent variable are linear, and the variance of the residuals is constant (homoscedasticity). The independence of observations was assessed using the Durbin-Watson statistic, which yielded 1.889 (ideally between 1.5 and 2.5). The normality of the residuals was confirmed by visual inspection of a histogram and a normal P-P plot, both of which demonstrated no severe skew or deviations from normality. Multicollinearity was assessed using Tolerance and Variance Inflation Factors (VIF); all tolerance values were above 0.10 (between 0.383 and 0.516), and all VIF values were below 5 (between 1.938 and 2.611), indicating no problematic multicollinearity among the predictors. Finally, evaluation of Cook's distance values (maximum value = 0.217) indicated that the model was not unduly influenced by severe outliers. The overall regression model was statistically significant, $F(4, 589) = 485.430$, $p < 0.001$, indicating that the predictors collectively explained a significant proportion of the variance in consumer preferences for Ayam Gepuk (see *Table 3*). The model accounted for 76.7% of the variance in consumer preferences ($R2 = 0.767$), suggesting a substantial explanatory power. This finding is consistent with a previous study on the food and beverage sector (Ngo et al., 2024), which also reported strong explanatory power when digital influence variables are combined with product-related and situational factors, often achieving R^2 values above 0.60. This also demonstrated that models incorporating online influence, product attributes, and contextual factors are effective in explaining consumer preferences and purchase intention in foodservice settings (Chua et al., 2020).



Figure 2. *Scatterplot.*

Table 3 displays the regression output for all the variables. Social media influence had a significant positive effect on consumer preferences ($\beta = 0.312$, $t = 10.104$, $p < 0.001$). Electronic word-of-mouth significantly and positively influenced consumer preferences for Ayam Gepuk ($\beta = 0.170$, $t = 5.325$, $p < 0.001$). Such findings support earlier studies that online reviews, social networking platforms, and digital communication significantly shape consumer perceptions and preferences (Ismail et al., 2024). Similarly, product quality had a significant positive effect on consumer preferences ($\beta = 0.126$, $t = 4.564$, $p < 0.001$). Although its effect was smaller than that of the other predictors, it remained significant. Mohamed Apandi et al. (2026) also found food quality to be an important predictor. Additionally, this study reported that location was the strongest predictor of consumer preferences ($\beta = 0.402$, $t = 12.530$, $p < 0.001$), among other predictors. This indicates that location is associated with higher consumer preferences for Ayam Gepuk. Such a finding aligns with previous studies (Hartatik et al., 2024; Annisaa et al., 2022; Chua et al., 2020), which highlight accessibility and convenience as critical determinants of restaurant choice, particularly in fast-casual and urban dining contexts. However, the finding that location is the strongest predictor contradicts the study by Mohamed Apandi et al. (2026), which reported product quality as the most important factor influencing Malaysian youth's purchase decisions. Perhaps most respondents in the current study were not first-timers and were aware of the food quality offered by Ayam Gepuk restaurants.

Table 3*. A multiple linear regression analysis between dependent and independent variables.*

Predictor	B	SE. B.	β	t-value	p-value	95% C.I.		CS	
						LB	UB	T	VIF
(Constant)	-0.086	0.126	-	-0.684	0.494	-0.333	0.161	-	-
eWOM	0.171	0.032	0.170	5.325	<0.001	0.108	0.235	0.388	2.578
Social media influence	0.278	0.027	0.312	10.104	<0.001	0.224	0.332	0.413	2.420
Product quality	0.143	0.031	0.126	4.564	<0.001	0.081	0.204	0.516	1.938
Location	0.427	0.034	0.402	12.530	<0.001	0.360	0.494	0.383	2.611

Note: LB=Lower Bound; UB=Upper Bound; CS=Collinearity Statistics; T=Tolerance.

Overall, the findings suggest that all four independent variables significantly explain consumer preferences for Ayam Gepuk in Malaysia, with location emerging as the most influential predictor. Based on the multiple regression output, all proposed hypotheses were supported ($p < 0.001$), demonstrating that eWOM, social media influence, product

quality, and location significantly affect consumer preferences for Ayam Gepuk in Malaysia. The findings are consistent with an earlier study that identified these factors as important determinants of food choice in both conventional and contemporary dining environments (Fauzi et al., 2023). Nevertheless, the stronger influence of location compared to product quality suggests that convenience and accessibility may outweigh intrinsic food attributes in shaping actual consumer behavior, particularly in urban contexts (Mohamed Apandi et al., 2026; Chua et al., 2020).

Conclusion

This research investigated the key factors influencing consumer preferences for Ayam Gepuk in Malaysia with particular emphasis on eWOM, social media influence, product quality, and location. The results show that all four variables have a significant effect on consumer preferences. The descriptive results showed that each construct had consistently high mean values, with product quality scoring highest. This shows how important flavor, cleanliness, freshness, and consistency are in achieving customer satisfaction. Furthermore, correlation and multiple regression analyses revealed that location is the most influential predictor of consumer preference, followed by social media influence, eWOM, and product quality. The regression model demonstrated strong explanatory power, indicating that these factors collectively account for a considerable portion of the variance in consumer preferences. Generally, the findings demonstrate that consumer preferences for Ayam Gepuk are shaped by the interplay among physical accessibility, digital communication, and food quality, rather than by a single factor. This study contributes to the literature by examining consumer preferences for Ayam Gepuk in Malaysia, an underexplored area. This research investigates a traditional Indonesian-inspired dish that has become increasingly popular among Malaysians. To the best of the authors' knowledge, no empirical study has examined the combined effects of eWOM, social media influence, product quality, and location on consumer preferences for Ayam Gepuk in Malaysia. Therefore, this study offers a more comprehensive understanding of consumer preferences throughout Malaysia. The findings suggest that consumer decisions are influenced not only by product quality but also by digital engagement and convenience. This study fills an important research gap and provides practical insights for traditional food businesses seeking to remain competitive in Malaysia's increasingly digital foodservice industry. Successful marketing and strategic collaboration with various stakeholders could promote Ayam Gepuk restaurants in Malaysia (Ishak and Jie, 2026). Moreover, Ayam Gepuk food operators should focus on maintaining authentic flavors and stringent hygiene standards while also effectively leveraging online platforms and selecting strategic locations to strengthen their competitive edge.

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Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involved with any parties in this research study.

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