

Food Safety Awareness and Purchase Behavior Among Gen Z Consumers in Social Media-Based Food Commerce

Mohd Hafiz Mohamad Zahari¹, Kian Lam Tan¹, Ahmad Rais Mohamad Mokhtar²

¹School of Digital Technology, Wawasan Open University, Malaysia

²Faculty of Business and Management, Universiti Teknologi Mara, Malaysia

*Corresponding author: mhafizmz@wou.edu.my

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ABSTRACT:

The growth of social media-based food commerce has transformed food purchasing behavior, particularly among Generation Z consumers. However, concerns regarding food safety remain significant due to the increasing presence of informal food vendors on digital platforms. This study examines the influence of food safety awareness on purchase behavior among Generation Z consumers in social media-based food commerce, with perceived risk and trust in seller as mediating variables. A quantitative survey was conducted among 100 respondents in Penang, Malaysia, and the data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The findings revealed that food safety awareness significantly influenced perceived risk and trust in seller, while trust in seller emerged as the strongest predictor of purchase behavior and significantly mediated the relationship between food safety awareness and purchase behavior. The study highlights the importance of trust in shaping online food purchasing decisions and provides insights for promoting safer digital food commerce environments.

Keywords: food safety awareness, Gen Z, purchase behavior, social media food commerce, trust in seller.

1. Introduction

The rapid advancement of digital technology has transformed consumer purchasing behaviour and created new opportunities for businesses to engage customers through social media platforms. Social media applications such as Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok have evolved beyond communication and entertainment tools into important commercial channels where products and services are actively marketed and sold. Within the food industry, the emergence of social media-based food commerce has enabled

informal food vendors to reach consumers directly through visual content, influencer endorsements, user-generated reviews, and interactive digital engagement. This development has contributed to the rapid growth of informal digital food markets, particularly among Generation Z consumers who are highly active on social media and frequently rely on digital platforms for information, entertainment, and purchasing decisions (Goggin et al., 2022; Tran et al., 2021).

Despite the opportunities created by social media food commerce, concerns regarding food safety and consumer protection have become increasingly important. Unlike conventional food establishments that operate under formal regulatory frameworks, many social media food vendors function independently with limited oversight and varying levels of compliance with food safety standards (Chua et al., 2023; Murray et al., 2022). Consequently, consumers may face risks associated with food contamination, improper handling practices, inadequate storage conditions, and insufficient disclosure of ingredients or allergens. These concerns are particularly relevant in social media-based food commerce environments where purchasing decisions are often influenced by visual presentation, seller reputation, and peer recommendations rather than direct inspection of food products.

Despite the growing popularity of social media food commerce, concerns regarding food safety remain largely unresolved. The absence of consistent regulatory monitoring and food safety verification mechanisms creates uncertainty regarding food preparation practices, hygiene standards, and product quality. As consumers increasingly rely on social media platforms for food purchases, understanding the factors that influence their purchasing decisions becomes essential for protecting public health and promoting responsible food consumption. This issue is particularly important among Generation Z consumers, who frequently engage in digital purchasing activities and may be more susceptible to social influence and trust-based evaluations when purchasing food online.

Food safety awareness plays a critical role in helping consumers evaluate potential risks and make informed food purchasing decisions. Previous studies have demonstrated that individuals with greater food safety awareness are more likely to recognize food-related hazards and adopt safer consumption practices (Kuo et al., 2020; Nayak & Waterson, 2019). However, increased awareness does not necessarily result in more cautious purchasing behaviour, particularly

among younger consumers who are highly familiar with digital environments. In social media food commerce settings, consumers may continue purchasing food despite recognizing potential risks if trust in the seller, convenience, or social influence outweigh concerns regarding food safety.

Perceived risk and trust in seller have been identified as two important factors influencing consumer decision-making in online purchasing environments. Perceived risk refers to consumers' assessment of the likelihood and severity of negative outcomes arising from a purchase decision (Featherman & Pavlou, 2003; Stone & Grønhaug, 1993). Trust in seller reflects consumers' confidence that a seller is honest, reliable, and capable of providing products that meet expected quality and safety standards (Gefen et al., 2003). In informal social media food markets where formal verification mechanisms are often absent, trust may function as a substitute for institutional assurance and become a more influential determinant of purchasing behaviour than objective food safety considerations. Previous studies have further suggested that purchasing decisions among Generation Z consumers are frequently influenced by emotional responses, social validation, and digital interactions rather than solely by rational evaluations of risk and safety (Mishra & Singh, 2021; Zhou & Wang, 2023).

This study is grounded in the integration of Protection Motivation Theory (PMT) and the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB). PMT explains how individuals respond to perceived threats through cognitive appraisal processes involving awareness and risk perception (Rogers, 1983; Maddux & Rogers, 1983), while TPB explains how behavioural evaluations and social influences shape decision-making and behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). The integration of these theories provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how food safety awareness influences purchase behaviour through the mediating roles of perceived risk and trust in seller.

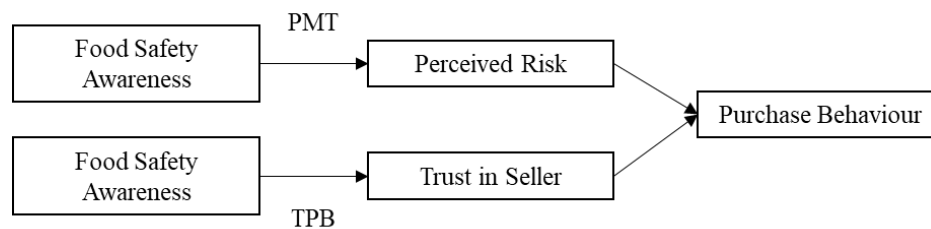


Fig. 1. Theoretical foundation linking PMT and TPB to the measured constructs

Although previous studies have examined food safety, online purchasing behaviour, and social commerce, empirical evidence remains limited regarding how food safety awareness influences actual purchase behaviour within informal social media-based food commerce environments. Existing studies have primarily focused on purchase intention, general online shopping attitudes, or food safety issues within regulated food supply chains. Furthermore, the mediating roles of perceived risk and trust in seller have received limited attention in the context of Generation Z consumers purchasing food through social media platforms. Given the increasing importance of social media food commerce and the growing participation of young consumers in these digital marketplaces, further investigation is needed to understand the

mechanisms underlying food purchasing decisions.

Therefore, this study aims to examine the influence of food safety awareness on purchase behaviour among Generation Z consumers in social media-based food commerce. Specifically, the study investigates the mediating roles of perceived risk and trust in seller in explaining how food safety awareness influences purchasing decisions. By examining these relationships, the study seeks to contribute to the growing literature on food safety, digital consumer behaviour, and social commerce while providing practical insights for food regulators, social media platforms, and online food sellers seeking to promote safer and more trustworthy digital food commerce environments.

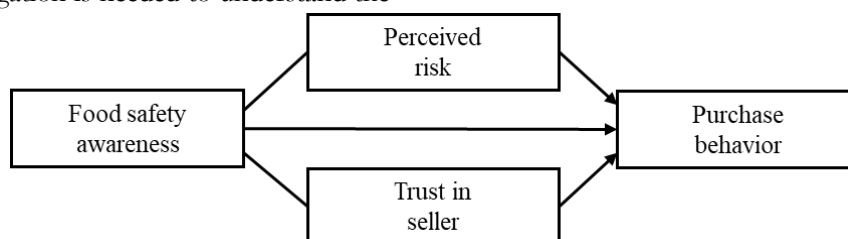


Fig. 2. Conceptual Framework of the Influence of Food Safety Awareness on Gen Z's Purchase Behaviour in Social Media Food Commerce

Based on the proposed conceptual framework, the following hypotheses were developed:

H1: Food safety awareness significantly influences Generation Z consumers' purchase behaviour in social media-based food commerce.

H2: Food safety awareness has a positive and significant influence on perceived risk.

H3: Food safety awareness has a positive and significant influence on trust in seller.

H4: Perceived risk significantly influences purchase behaviour.

H5: Trust in seller has a positive and significant influence on purchase behaviour.

H6: Perceived risk mediates the relationship between food safety awareness and purchase behaviour.

H7: Trust in seller mediates the relationship between food safety awareness and purchase behaviour.

2. Methodology

This study employed a quantitative research approach to examine the influence of food safety

awareness on purchase behaviour among Generation Z consumers in social media-based food commerce. A cross-sectional survey design was adopted to collect data from respondents at a single point in time. The quantitative approach was considered appropriate because the study sought to examine the relationships among food safety awareness, perceived risk, trust in seller, and purchase behaviour, as well as to test the proposed hypotheses using statistical analysis techniques. The target population comprised Generation Z consumers residing in Penang, Malaysia, who had experience purchasing food through social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok. Generation Z consumers were selected due to their high level of digital engagement and active participation in social media-driven purchasing activities. A non-probability purposive sampling technique was employed to ensure that respondents met the specific criteria relevant to the study objectives. The selection criteria required respondents to be between 18 and 28 years old, active social media users, and individuals who had purchased food from social media sellers at least once prior to participating in the survey. The questionnaire was distributed online through social media platforms and digital communication channels to facilitate access to the targeted respondent group. Although the study initially targeted 300 responses, a total of 100 valid responses were successfully collected and retained for analysis. According to Hair et al. (2022), Partial Least

Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) is suitable for exploratory studies and predictive models involving small to medium sample sizes. Furthermore, the sample size satisfied the ten-times rule, indicating adequacy for model estimation. The unit of analysis in this study was the individual consumer. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire developed based on validated measurement scales adopted and adapted from previous studies. The questionnaire consisted of two sections. The first section collected demographic information, including age, gender, education level, purchase frequency, and preferred social media platform for food purchases. The second section measured the study constructs, namely Food Safety Awareness, Perceived Risk, Trust in Seller, and Purchase Behaviour. All measurement items were assessed using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Food Safety Awareness was measured using four items adapted from Byrd-Bredbenner et al. (2007) and Abdul-Mutalib et al. (2012). Perceived Risk was measured using three items adapted from Stone and Grønhaug (1993) and Featherman and Pavlou (2003). Trust in Seller was measured using three items adopted from Gefen et al. (2003) and Pavlou and Fygenson (2006), while Purchase Behaviour was measured using three items adapted from Dodds et al. (1991) and Ajzen (1991). The measurement constructs and sources are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Measurement Constructs and Sources

Construct	Items	Source / Origin
Food Safety Awareness (FSA)	4	Adapted from Byrd-Bredbenner et al. (2007); Abdul-Mutalib et al. (2012)
Perceived Risk (PR)	3	Adapted from Stone & Grønhaug (1993); Featherman & Pavlou (2003)
Trust in Sellers (TR)	3	Adopted from Gefen et al. (2003); Pavlou & Fygenson (2006)
Purchase Behaviour (PB)	3	Adapted from Dodds et al. (1991); Ajzen (1991)

The questionnaire was developed using Google Forms and distributed online through social

media platforms and messaging applications. Prior to answering the questionnaire,

respondents were required to confirm that they met the screening criteria. Participation in the study was voluntary, and respondents were informed that their responses would remain anonymous and confidential. Data collection was conducted over a designated period until sufficient responses were obtained and screened for completeness before analysis.

Data analysis was performed using IBM SPSS Statistics and SmartPLS 4.0. SPSS was used to generate descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages for respondent demographic characteristics. SmartPLS 4.0 was employed to assess both the measurement model and structural model. The measurement model assessment included indicator reliability, internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity using factor loadings, Composite Reliability (CR), Average Variance Extracted (AVE), and the Heterotrait–Monotrait Ratio (HTMT). Subsequently, the structural model was evaluated using bootstrapping procedures to examine path coefficients, hypothesis significance, mediation effects, effect sizes (f^2), predictive relevance (Q^2), and the coefficient of determination (R^2). Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values were also examined to assess potential multicollinearity and common method bias issues.

3. Results

A total of 100 valid responses were obtained from Generation Z consumers residing in Penang, Malaysia. Although the initial target was 300 respondents, the final sample was considered adequate for Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM). According to Hair et al. (2022), PLS-SEM is suitable for exploratory studies involving small to medium sample sizes and predictive-oriented research models.

Table 2 presents the demographic profile of the respondents. The majority of respondents were aged between 18 and 20 years (52%), followed by those aged 21 to 23 years (22%), 24 to 26 years (17%), and 27 to 29 years (9%). Female respondents accounted for 67% of the sample, while male respondents represented 33%. Most respondents possessed a bachelor's degree (57%), followed by diploma holders (35%). In terms of purchasing frequency, 47% reported purchasing food through social media occasionally, 27% monthly, 22% weekly, and 4% daily. Instagram was identified as the most frequently used platform for food purchases (50%), followed by Facebook (17%), TikTok (14%), and other platforms such as GrabFood, Foodpanda, Shopee, X, and RedNote (19%).

Table 2: Respondent Demographic Profile

Variables	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Age	18-20	52	52
	21-23	22	22
	24-26	17	17
	27-29	9	9
Gender	Male	33	33
	Female	67	67
Education	High School	2	2
	Diploma	35	35
	Bachelor's Degree	57	57
	Master's Degree	6	6
Purchase Frequency	Daily	4	4
	Weekly	22	22
	Monthly	27	27
	Occasionally	47	47
Platform	Instagram	50	50
	Facebook	17	17
	TikTok	14	14
	Others	19	19

The measurement model was assessed through indicator reliability, internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. As presented in Table 3, all indicator loadings exceeded the recommended threshold

of 0.70. Composite Reliability values ranged from 0.869 to 0.964, exceeding the minimum recommended value of 0.70. The Average Variance Extracted values ranged from 0.625 to 0.899, indicating satisfactory convergent validity.

Table 3: Reliability and Convergent Validity Assessment

Variables	Indicators	Loadings	CR	AVE
Food safety awareness	FSA2	0.837	0.869	0.625
	FSA4	0.832		
	FSA1	0.767		
	FSA3	0.721		
Purchase Behaviour	PB1	0.928	0.964	0.899
	PB2	0.956		
	PB3	0.960		
Perceived risk	PR1	0.900	0.926	0.808
	PR2	0.906		
	PR3	0.890		
Trust in seller	TR1	0.927	0.959	0.886
	TR2	0.938		
	TR3	0.958		

The discriminant validity of the constructs was assessed using the Heterotrait–Monotrait Ratio (HTMT). As shown in Table 4, all HTMT values

were below the recommended threshold of 0.85, indicating satisfactory discriminant validity among the constructs.

Table 4: Discriminant Validity Assessment Using HTMT

Variables	Food safety awareness	Perceived risk	Purchase behaviour	Trust in seller
Food safety awareness				
Perceived risk	0.565			
Purchase behaviour	0.238	0.084		
Trust in seller	0.357	0.150	0.683	

Potential common method bias and multicollinearity issues were examined using Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values. All VIF values ranged from 1.000 to 1.424, which were below the recommended threshold value of 3.3,

indicating that multicollinearity and common method bias were not significant concerns in this study.

The structural model was assessed using bootstrapping procedures. Table 5 presents the

path coefficients, t-values, p-values, confidence intervals, effect sizes, and hypothesis testing results. The results showed that Food Safety Awareness had a significant positive influence on Perceived Risk ($\beta = 0.469$, $p < 0.001$) and Trust in Seller ($\beta = 0.339$, $p = 0.001$), supporting H2 and H3. Trust in Seller had a significant positive influence on Purchase Behaviour ($\beta = 0.668$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H5. However, Food Safety Awareness did not significantly influence Purchase Behaviour ($\beta = -0.083$, $p = 0.390$), and

Perceived Risk did not significantly influence Purchase Behaviour ($\beta = 0.013$, $p = 0.899$), resulting in H1 and H4 being unsupported. The mediation analysis revealed that Trust in Seller significantly mediated the relationship between Food Safety Awareness and Purchase Behaviour ($\beta = 0.227$, $p = 0.002$), supporting H7, whereas Perceived Risk did not demonstrate a significant mediating effect ($\beta = 0.006$, $p = 0.905$), resulting in H6 being unsupported.

Table 5: Structural Model Results and Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Std-Beta	Std-Dev	T-value	P-value	BCI LL	BCI UL	F-square	VIF	Decision
H1	-0.083	0.096	0.859	0.390	-0.269	0.104	0.008	1.424	Not Supported
H2	0.469	0.090	5.231	0.000	0.243	0.613	0.283	1.000	Supported
H3	0.339	0.100	3.402	0.001	0.109	0.507	0.130	1.000	Supported
H4	0.013	0.106	0.127	0.899	-0.200	0.217	0.000	1.284	Not Supported
H5	0.668	0.074	9.011	0.000	0.502	0.797	0.679	1.131	Supported
H6	0.006	0.053	0.120	0.905	-0.094	0.115	-	-	Not Supported
H7	0.227	0.074	3.072	0.002	0.081	0.370	-	-	Supported

The coefficient of determination (R^2) values is presented in Table 6. The model explained 22.0% of the variance in Perceived Risk, 11.5% of the

variance in Trust in Seller, and 41.8% of the variance in Purchase Behaviour.

Table 6: Coefficient of Determination (R^2)

Construct	R^2	Interpretation
Perceived Risk	0.220	Weak to Moderate
Trust in Seller	0.115	Weak
Purchase Behaviour	0.418	Moderate

Predictive relevance was assessed using the PLSpredict procedure. The Q^2 values for all endogenous constructs were greater than zero, indicating predictive relevance of the model. As

shown in Table 7, Perceived Risk recorded a Q^2 value of 0.194, followed by Trust in Seller (0.090) and Purchase Behaviour (0.004).

Table 7: Predictive Relevance of Endogenous Constructs

Construct	Q^2 predict
Perceived Risk	0.194
Trust in Seller	0.090
Purchase Behaviour	0.004

4. Discussion

This study examined the influence of food safety awareness on purchase behaviour among Generation Z consumers in social media-based food commerce, with perceived risk and trust in seller serving as mediating variables. The findings revealed that food safety awareness significantly influenced perceived risk and trust in seller, while trust in seller emerged as the strongest predictor of purchase behaviour. In contrast, food safety awareness did not directly influence purchase behaviour, and perceived risk did not demonstrate a significant effect on purchase behaviour. Furthermore, trust in seller significantly mediated the relationship between food safety awareness and purchase behaviour, whereas perceived risk did not demonstrate a significant mediating role. The significant relationship between food safety awareness and perceived risk indicates that consumers who possess greater awareness of food safety issues are more likely to recognize potential risks associated with purchasing food from informal social media vendors. This finding is consistent with Protection Motivation Theory, which suggests that awareness of potential threats increases individuals' risk appraisal and perceived vulnerability (Rogers, 1983; Maddux & Rogers, 1983). The finding also supports previous studies that reported a positive association between food safety knowledge and risk perception among consumers (Kuo et al., 2020; Basha et al., 2021). As consumers become more informed about food contamination, hygiene practices, and foodborne illnesses, they are more likely to identify potential risks when evaluating food products offered through social media platforms.

The results further revealed that food safety awareness significantly influenced trust in seller. This finding suggests that consumers with higher levels of food safety awareness tend to evaluate sellers more carefully before developing trust. In social media-based food commerce, trust is often established through seller credibility, customer reviews, responsiveness, transparency, and social engagement. Consumers who are aware of food safety concerns may actively seek cues that signal reliability and responsible food handling practices

before deciding to trust a seller. This finding is consistent with previous studies highlighting the importance of trust formation in online purchasing environments where formal verification mechanisms are limited (Gefen et al., 2003; Pavlou & Fygenson, 2006). Interestingly, food safety awareness did not directly influence purchase behaviour. Although consumers may understand the importance of food safety, such awareness alone may be insufficient to influence actual purchasing decisions. This finding suggests that Generation Z consumers do not necessarily translate food safety knowledge into behavioural action when purchasing food through social media platforms. One possible explanation is that purchasing decisions within digital environments are influenced by multiple factors beyond awareness, including convenience, social influence, visual attractiveness, and perceived seller credibility. This finding supports previous research indicating that awareness does not always lead to behavioural change, particularly when other motivational factors are present (Tran et al., 2021; Zhou & Wang, 2023). Similarly, perceived risk did not significantly influence purchase behaviour. Although consumers with higher food safety awareness reported greater levels of perceived risk, this perception did not discourage them from purchasing food through social media platforms. This finding suggests that Generation Z consumers may normalize food-related uncertainties within digital environments due to their familiarity with online transactions and extensive exposure to social commerce activities. As a result, risk perception alone may be insufficient to alter purchasing behaviour. This finding differs from some previous studies that reported a negative relationship between perceived risk and online purchasing behaviour (Featherman & Pavlou, 2003), but supports emerging evidence suggesting that younger consumers often tolerate higher levels of perceived risk when convenience and trust-related factors are present.

Trust in seller demonstrated the strongest influence on purchase behaviour and emerged as the most important determinant within the proposed model. This finding highlights the

central role of trust in shaping purchasing decisions within informal social media food markets. In environments where consumers cannot physically inspect food products and where regulatory assurances may be limited, trust becomes a substitute mechanism for evaluating quality and safety. Consumers appear to rely heavily on seller reputation, customer feedback, social validation, and online engagement when making purchasing decisions. The findings suggest that trust-related evaluations may play a more influential role than food safety concerns in shaping Generation Z consumers' purchasing decisions. This finding is consistent with the Theory of Planned Behaviour, which emphasizes the importance of behavioural evaluations and social influences in determining consumer behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). The mediation analysis further revealed that trust in seller significantly mediated the relationship between food safety awareness and purchase behaviour, whereas perceived risk did not demonstrate a significant mediating effect. These findings suggest that food safety awareness influences purchasing behaviour indirectly through the development of trust rather than through increased perceptions of risk. Consumers who are more aware of food safety issues may become more selective when evaluating sellers and subsequently develop trust in those perceived as credible and reliable. This trust then influences their purchasing decisions. The findings therefore extend the application of both Protection Motivation Theory and the Theory of Planned Behaviour within social media-based food commerce environments by demonstrating the complementary roles of awareness, trust, and behavioural evaluation in shaping consumer behaviour.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the growing literature on food safety, social commerce, and digital consumer behaviour by integrating Protection Motivation Theory and the Theory of Planned Behaviour within a single framework. The findings demonstrate that awareness-related mechanisms and trust-related mechanisms operate differently in informal digital food markets. While food safety awareness increases risk perception, risk

alone does not influence purchasing behaviour. Instead, trust emerges as the primary pathway through which awareness influences consumer decisions. This finding provides a deeper understanding of how cognitive and relational factors interact within social media-based food commerce environments. From a practical perspective, the findings provide valuable implications for food regulators, social media platform providers, and online food sellers. Food safety authorities should strengthen consumer education initiatives that promote informed food purchasing decisions within digital environments. Social media platforms may consider implementing seller verification systems, trust badges, hygiene certifications, or transparent review mechanisms to enhance consumer confidence. Online food sellers should prioritize trust-building practices, including transparent communication, consistent service quality, customer engagement, and the disclosure of food preparation practices. Such initiatives may improve consumer confidence and encourage safer purchasing behaviour.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study focused exclusively on Generation Z consumers residing in Penang, Malaysia, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other demographic groups and geographical regions. Second, the study employed a relatively small sample size of 100 respondents. Although the sample size was adequate for PLS-SEM analysis, larger samples may provide greater statistical power and improve the generalizability of future findings. Third, the cross-sectional design captured consumer perceptions at a single point in time and therefore does not allow causal inferences to be established. Future studies may consider longitudinal research designs to examine changes in food safety awareness and purchasing behaviour over time. Additionally, future research may incorporate other variables such as social influence, electronic word-of-mouth, influencer credibility, platform trust, or perceived convenience to provide a more comprehensive understanding of consumer behaviour in social media-based food commerce.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the influence of food safety awareness on purchase behaviour among Generation Z consumers in social media-based food commerce, with perceived risk and trust in seller serving as mediating variables. The findings revealed that food safety awareness significantly influenced perceived risk and trust in seller, while trust in seller emerged as the strongest predictor of purchase behaviour. In contrast, food safety awareness and perceived risk did not directly influence purchase behaviour. The mediation analysis further demonstrated that trust in seller significantly mediated the relationship between food safety awareness and purchase behaviour, whereas perceived risk did not exhibit a significant mediating effect. These findings suggest that trust-related evaluations play a more influential role than risk perceptions in shaping Generation Z consumers' purchasing decisions within informal social media food markets. The

study contributes to the literature by extending the application of Protection Motivation Theory and the Theory of Planned Behaviour to explain food purchasing behaviour in social media-based food commerce environments.

The findings provide important implications for food regulators, social media platform providers, and online food sellers. Efforts to enhance consumer trust through greater transparency, seller verification mechanisms, and food safety communication may contribute to safer and more reliable digital food commerce environments. Future research is encouraged to examine a larger and more geographically diverse sample to improve the generalizability of the findings. Additional factors such as social influence, electronic word-of-mouth, influencer credibility, platform trust, and perceived convenience may also be incorporated to provide a more comprehensive understanding of consumer behaviour in social media-based food commerce.

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8. Author Declaration

- We hereby declare that this manuscript is original, has not been published previously, and is not under consideration for publication elsewhere. All authors have contributed significantly to the study and have approved the final version of the manuscript.
- The authors declare that there are no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.