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Examining Consumer Engagement in Social Media Marketing Moderating Effect on Artisan Cafe Patrons Continuance Intentions in Penang, Malaysia

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Abstract

Independent artisan cafés face an increasingly saturated market, making customer retention far more critical to business survival than initial acquisition. This study investigates the psychological and social factors driving patrons' continuance intentions within Penang's vibrant café market. To evaluate these dynamics, this research develops a conceptual framework that integrates the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) with Social Cognitive Theory (SCT). The model specifically examines five intrinsic experiential drivers, service value to a peaceful life, service value to social recognition, service value to social integration, gastronomic identity, and social comfort. Furthermore, it explores how customer engagement in social media marketing moderates the relationship between these internal values and the decision to return. Methodologically, the study is designed as a quantitative, cross-sectional analysis using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) to evaluate survey responses from 138 local patrons. The unit of analysis is strictly defined as the individual patron of independent artisan cafés in Penang. By merging TPB and SCT, this paper moves beyond traditional transactional models to reframe modern café patronage as a digitally mediated act of self-definition, offering actionable insights for operators to blend physical service design with interactive digital storytelling.

Keywords: Artisan Cafés, Customer Continuance Intention, Service Personal Values, Social Media Marketing Engagement, Theory of Planned Behaviour, Social Cognitive Theory

Introduction

Cafés are no longer just places to buy coffee. Over the past decade, the global café industry has shifted, turning basic coffee houses into essential "third places" (Aprilia & Suryani, 2020). Consumers now use these spaces as psychological and social refuges to escape the daily grind of work and home life. In Penang's culturally rich and highly competitive hospitality landscape, building long-term customer loyalty is a complex challenge. Getting a customer through the door once is relatively easy, but getting them to return consistently is much harder (Nazli et

al., 2024). Today's artisan cafés act as digitally mediated spaces where people go for social visibility, lifestyle curation, and personal self-expression (Sarkis et al., 2025). Keeping these modern consumers engaged relies less on how well a barista pulls a shot of espresso and more on fostering deep emotional attachments. A café must present a distinct gastronomic identity that fits naturally into a consumer's desired lifestyle (Zhang & Abdullah, 2025).

The reality for Penang's independent café operators is a tough sustainability challenge, operational costs are rising, and the market is flooded with new competitors. To stay profitable over the long term, management needs to stop obsessing over transient customer acquisition and start focusing on repeat patronage. This requires a careful blend of physical service design, ambient atmosphere, and digital interaction. Utilizing intuitive digital interfaces is a necessary part of this mix, as they reduce the friction of the transaction and help tech-savvy patrons feel more comfortable (Kim & Shin, 2024). When operators get this right, it creates an emotional attachment that strongly predicts long-term continuance intention (Rather et al., 2022). Building this kind of loyal community is invaluable because regular patrons act as co-creators who validate the brand and help refine the service delivery (Jaakkola & Alexander, 2024).

While foundational frameworks like the Theory of Planned Behaviour do a good job of mapping out rational consumer choices, they struggle to capture the full picture of today's identity-driven experience economy (Ajzen, 1991). Consumers do not just make rational calculations about price and quality anymore. Because of this, the current study brings in Bandura's (1986) Social Cognitive Theory to help bridge the gap between a consumer's internal identity motivations and their external digital behaviour. The primary aim of this research is to analyse what drives patron continuance intention in Penang's artisan cafés. We do this by evaluating how specific intrinsic service values interact with social media marketing. To be precise, the unit of analysis for this study is the individual patron of independent artisan cafés in Penang, Malaysia. This individual-level focus is maintained consistently throughout the research design to ensure we are accurately capturing personal cognitive commitments, subjective values, and self-reported behavioural intentions.

Understanding these dynamics has real economic weight. The food and beverage sector is a major economic engine in Malaysia, with its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) contribution hit RM 58.61 million in 2025 (Department of Statistics Malaysia [DOSM], 2026). However, a lot of the existing hospitality literature in Southeast Asia focuses heavily on massive Western franchises. By anchoring our investigation in Penang's unique, localized café culture, we address a notable empirical gap. In environments rich with heritage like Penang, going to a café is about cultural symbolism and social belonging just as much as it is about the food (Lim & Rasul, 2022). Ultimately, this research looks at how physical café patronage is validated by the digital world, exploring how a brand's physical and digital ecosystems work together to affirm a patron's sense of self (Huang & Benyoucef, 2024).

Conceptual Framework and Literature Review

Customer Continuance Intentions

In contemporary marketing research, the conversation has rightly shifted from how to acquire a customer to how to keep them. Customer continuance intention is the focal point of this shift. In the context of our study, we operationalize this dependent variable as deliberate,

repeated patronage by the individual consumer. It is the result of a psychological bond that forms after someone evaluates their visit, weighing what they expected against what they experienced. In a crowded market like Penang's artisan café scene, functional utility is just the baseline. Sustaining patronage demands that a café aligns with a consumer's deeper cognitive values and social goals.

Older retention literature leaned heavily on Expectation Confirmation Theory, arguing that if a business met functional expectations, the customer would be satisfied and return (Oliver, 1980). But as markets grew saturated, researchers realized that trying a service for the first time and deciding to make it a habit are two completely different psychological processes (Bhattacherjee, 2001). Today, just being "satisfactory" is not enough. People look for brands that offer identity congruence and psychological resonance (Hossain et al., 2020).

By using the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) to frame Continuance Intention, we can isolate that specific cognitive commitment a user makes right before they decide to come back. This approach blends the rational evaluation of a café's utility with the subconscious, emotional mechanics of habit formation (Santosa et al., 2021; Puriwat & Tripopsakul, 2021; Mehrabioun, 2023). In boutique hospitality, this intention is the strongest predictor of long-term engagement because it marks the moment a conscious choice turns into a reliable habit (Wang et al., 2022; Rashid et al., 2021). Modern consumers deliberately pick venues that improve their psychological well-being, offer a peaceful break, and help them curate their lifestyle. Long-term loyalty happens when a brand's public narrative feels like a mirror to the patron's internal identity and cultural capital.

Service Value to a Peaceful Life

The idea of a café providing a "peaceful life" might sound abstract, but it represents a very real intersection where human existential needs meet commercial consumption. Lages and Fernandes (2005) established that finding peace is a terminal existential objective. People actively look for daily escapes from the noise and stress of urban living. When we look at Penang's artisan sector through this lens, it becomes clear that individual patrons are not just buying coffee, they are investing money and time into a curated sanctuary. They are paying for a brief psychological retreat from daily friction.

If a café can successfully deliver this ambient calm, it immediately separates itself from competitors who only focus on the transaction. Creating this environmental peace forms a resilient psychological bond with the patron, which is exactly what independent businesses need to survive (Hau & Thuy, 2012). We see independent operators deliberately tweaking physical variables like installing sound-dampening materials to improve acoustics or using warm, indirect lighting to help people decompress (Seow et al., 2024; Putri et al., 2025). By acting as a quiet partner in a patron's mental well-being routine, the café builds a cognitive brand attachment. This psychological comfort is a powerful driver of enduring customer loyalty and significantly boosts long-term continuance intention, even in highly saturated markets where competitors are aggressively discounting prices (Lin & Mattila, 2019; Rashid et al., 2021).

Service Value to Social Recognition

Service value goes beyond just what a customer gets for their money, it acts as a strategic tool for projecting who they are. The localized service value to social recognition measures how a commercial encounter elevates a person's prestige within their own social circles. In Penang's artisan café market, individual patrons often seek peer admiration by choosing highly curated spaces that signal a specific type of cultural capital (Lages & Fernandes, 2005). This behaviour is tied to a basic human need: we rely on external validation to reinforce our internal sense of self-worth (Amer & Obradovic, 2022).

Choosing where to drink coffee is a calculated act of social positioning, this dynamic has only escalated with the rise of the visually driven digital economy. Consumers extract a lot of value from how a hospitality interaction enhances their prestige, both in person and online (Akarsu et al., 2025; Busalim & Ghabban, 2021). Standard service evaluations often miss this psychological layer, but modern transactions are essentially identity performances. Patrons invest in the prestige that comes with occupying premium, aesthetically pleasing spaces (Pivarski et al., 2024). They use these settings to manage how others see them, accumulating peer respect by broadcasting an elevated lifestyle.

Because this behaviour relies on self-congruity, individuals naturally stay loyal to establishments whose physical look and feel accurately reflect how they view themselves (Anjani & Dewi, 2021). Delivering this symbolic social acknowledgment creates a behavioural loyalty that easily beats standard pricing strategies. In the context of the Theory of Planned Behaviour, this peer validation acts as a highly favourable subjective norm (Touni et al., 2022; Nguyen et al., 2024).

Service Value to Social Integration

Rooted in the SERPVAL framework, the service value to social integration measures the psychological payoff consumers get when a space actively helps them feel like they belong to a community (Lages & Fernandes, 2005). Independent cafés in Penang serve as crucial third places where individuals can build shared, localized identities with like-minded people. When authentic social interactions happen whether that is a genuine conversation with a barista or running into a neighbour, it generates a deep emotional attachment. From a sociological standpoint, this feeling of belonging dictates the total experiential value of the visit far more effectively than the baseline quality of the product (Rashid et al., 2021).

Contemporary marketing emphasizes that perceived value relies heavily on this kind of social integration, it transforms a standard purchase into a meaningful communal bond. When an environment accurately mirrors a patron's internal identity, they instantly feel a sense of communal attachment, which drives behavioural engagement (Tsaur et al., 2023). And this integration does not stop at the café door. Digital communities extend the physical atmosphere into expansive online networks, keeping that peer integration alive long after the customer has gone home (Park & Namkung, 2022).

Creating sustainable commercial value depends on how well café operators can design their spaces to break down psychological barriers. Good spatial architecture turns standard consumption into a dynamic platform for interaction, by satisfying the human need for belonging, operators provide perceived social support, embedding their brand into the

patron's actual emotional support network. When evaluated through the Theory of Planned Behaviour, facilitating this localized community integration elevates internal attitudes and serves as a dominant driver of long-term continuance intention (Ogunnaike et al., 2022; Bramantyo & Kaihatu, 2021; Alnaser et al., 2024; Maluenda-Albornoz et al., 2022).

Gastronomic Identity

Gastronomic identity is not solely about eating, it is a sophisticated framework people use to articulate their cultural existence which acts as a region's culinary fingerprint. It relies on local ingredients, traditional preparation techniques, and historical influences to tell a collective community narrative (Güleç & Yilmaz, 2023). Sociologically, when a person chooses a specific cuisine, they are weaving those cultural practices into their own personal identity. In artisan environments, keeping things authentic ensures that a patron feels they are honouring traditional roots (Ünan Göktan & Uslu, 2022).

Historically, academics treated food just as a functional necessity, that reductionist view has changed entirely. Food traditions are living embodiments of cultural narratives that define the soul of a localized destination. Gastronomic identity sits right at the intersection of tradition and sociological meaning. Modern scholarship views culinary traditions as central cultural markers that regions leverage to build distinct identities (Suna & Alvarez, 2021; Lin et al., 2021). Because modern consumers want deep cultural immersion, traditional cuisines act as a form of intangible heritage. They pass down localized knowledge while driving economic revenue (Cheng, 2024).

Researchers are now prioritizing psychometric evaluations of this concept, looking at perceived culinary authenticity, unique flavour profiles, and cultural representation. A dish's perceived value depends heavily on its apparent authenticity, and consumers are quick to reject fabricated commercial traps. For cafés, a strong gastronomic identity is a formidable competitive advantage. Experiencing genuine authenticity influences subjective norms, generating the peer validation necessary to form a profound psychological attachment (Liu et al., 2026; Wondirad & Verheye, 2023; Jalis et al., 2024). When this is amplified by social media, the storytelling bridges the gap that often separates consumers from unfamiliar culinary cultures, driving their intention to return (Nurwitasari et al., 2024; Almansouri et al., 2022; Lopes et al., 2023).

Social Comfort

Social comfort acts as an essential psychological bridge in shared commercial spaces. It goes beyond product satisfaction to measure how freely people can interact without feeling ambient anxiety (Garmaroudi et al., 2021). Profound interpersonal ease does not just happen by accident in a busy artisan café, operators have to engineer it. They create a curated social servicescape that blends smart spatial architecture with welcoming emotional cues from both the staff and the other patrons in the room (Fan et al., 2023).

Historically, the concept of social comfort was restricted to evaluating clinical interpersonal anxiety (Lawrence et al., 2010). Modern hospitality scholars have inverted this, treating psychological safety as a deliberate operational outcome. The focus has shifted from just basic physical ergonomics to profound psychological security, consumers expect an environment devoid of social friction. When service personnel use interactive, unscripted communication

styles, patrons immediately feel a sense of psychological autonomy, which neutralizes any interpersonal risk (Li & Ma, 2022). At the same time, intelligent seating arrangements especially in narrow Penang heritage spaces do help mitigate crowding anxiety (Hamzah & Waqas, 2023).

By eradicating these latent psychological barriers, a café drastically elevates a consumer's perceived behavioural control within the framework of the Theory of Planned Behaviour. It transforms the physical space into an authentic, emotionally secure third place, when people feel safe and comfortable, their intention to continue visiting solidifies (Park & Namkung, 2022).

The Moderating Role of Social Media Marketing

Social media marketing is much more than a basic broadcasting tool, it functions as a highly strategic moderating variable. This dynamic digital environment interacts continuously with a person's internal factors to dictate their behavioural choices, a concept firmly grounded in Social Cognitive Theory (Laradi et al., 2024). To survive, independent establishments have to actively engineer their communities. They use multidimensional networking to alter consumer cognition and shape brand perception by amplifying their intrinsic service values across digital ecosystems (Yadav & Rahman, 2017).

Operating through the triadic reciprocal determinism of Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986), this digital ecosystem catalyses internal psychological constructs. It gives individual consumers a highly visible stage to broadcast their curated experiences, which triggers organic electronic word-of-mouth (Auliya et al., 2025; Schivinski et al., 2016). By building expansive digital third places where patrons can share localized narratives, interactive platforms trigger observational learning. This drastically boosts a feeling of communal integration (Li & Hua, 2022). Evaluating user-generated content also dismantles pre-visit anxiety by raising a potential customer's internal self-efficacy. These online interactions provide the external social proof required to anchor enduring brand loyalty (Khreis et al., 2025; Alnaser et al., 2024).

To pull this all together, evaluating continuance intention requires Ajzen’s (1991) Theory of Planned Behaviour to map internal cognitive structures directly onto the observable behavioural outcomes of the individual patron. A great physical ambiance engineers positive psychological attitudes, while subjective norms capture the peer pressure to visit trending spots (Akmaz & Akmeşe, 2025; Amer & Obradovic, 2022). This research integrates our five experiential intrinsic value which is service value to peaceful life, service value to social recognition, service value to social integration, gastronomic identity, and social comfort as the primary drivers of behavioural intention (Bergmann et al., 2023; Pivarski et al., 2024; Li et al., 2022).

Because TPB sometimes struggles to capture the fluid reality of the modern experience economy, we integrate customer engagement in social media marketing as a strategic moderator based on Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986). Digital stimuli act like a volume knob, forcefully amplifying internal cognitive states to translate passive browsing into immediate behavioural action (Auliya et al., 2025; Khreis et al., 2025; Li & Hua, 2022).

Based on this integrated literature, we propose the following hypotheses regarding direct impacts:

- **H1:** The service value to a peaceful life positively influences artisan café patrons' continuance intentions.
- **H2:** The service value to social recognition positively influences artisan café patrons' continuance intentions.
- **H3:** The service value to social integration positively influences artisan café patrons' continuance intentions.
- **H4:** Gastronomic identity positively influences artisan café patrons' continuance intentions.
- **H5:** Social comfort positively influences artisan café patrons' continuance intentions.

Furthermore, we posit the following moderating hypotheses:

- **H6-H10:** Customer engagement in social media marketing moderates the relationship between each of the five intrinsic values (peaceful life, social recognition, social integration, gastronomic identity, and social comfort) and patrons' continuance intentions.

Methodology

Research Design and Unit of Analysis

To rigorously investigate what drives continuance intention in Penang's competitive artisan café sector, this research utilizes a quantitative, positivist paradigm. This approach evaluates objective reality through hypothetico-deductive reasoning, ensuring that our analytical findings are grounded in observable empirical evidence rather than subjective interpretation (Zhang et al., 2025).

As established earlier, the unit of analysis is strictly defined as the individual patron of independent artisan cafés in Penang. This specific, individual-level focus is maintained throughout the entire methodological design. By doing so, we ensure that cognitive evaluations, personal values, and behavioural return intentions are accurately measured at the consumer level, capturing genuine behavioural responses within a naturalistic social setting (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). We deploy a cross-sectional survey strategy to systematically transform abstract psychological concepts into explicitly measurable parameters. This design effectively mitigates latent response bias and maximizes external validity (Oranga & Matere, 2025; Aggarwal & Ranganathan, 2019).

Sampling Strategy

Because centralized consumer databases for independent café patrons are not available, this research uses a non-probability framework. We synthesize purposive and snowball sampling to deliberately recruit individual participants who possess the specific experiential profile needed for our evaluation (Palinkas et al., 2015). To reduce network biases, this strategy relies on multi-channel distribution, blending digital outreach with physical data collection. A statistically sound sample size is critical for quantitative reliability. Using G*Power to conduct an a priori analysis (95% confidence level, 5% margin of error, medium effect size), we established a mandatory baseline of 138 respondents. This ensures we have adequate statistical power for testing the structural relationships across our target population (Faul et al., 2009; Khoo et al., 2024).

Measurement Instruments and Data Collection

Data is collected via a structured online survey. We utilize a sensitive 7-point Likert scale to evaluate thirty-two rigorously adapted psychometric items (Fink, 2003; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The survey instrument quantifies overarching continuance intention, the five experiential independent variables, and the moderating influence of social media engagement. To ensure measurement stability, we adapted our variables from established literature. For example, Service Personal Values were adapted from Lages and Fernandes (2005), Gastronomic Identity from Suna and Alvarez (2021), Social Comfort from Lawrence and Fauerbach (2010), Social Media Marketing from Yadav and Rahman (2017), and Customer Continuance Intentions from Santosa and Taufik (2020).

To safeguard content validity, a specialized panel of experts reviewed the instrument (Davis, 1992). Following this, we ran a preliminary pilot test with 28 respondents to refine any structural ambiguities and confirm robust internal consistency before launching the primary survey (Saunders et al., 2011). Strict adherence to the Wawasan Open University Research Ethics Committee mandates was maintained throughout, prioritizing electronic informed consent and total respondent anonymity.

Data Analysis Procedure

The finalized primary dataset of 138 respondents is analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) via SmartPLS version 4. This variance-based predictive approach is ideal for handling complex, non-parametric conceptual frameworks (Hair et al., 2021). We validate measurement reliability through Confirmatory Factor Analysis evaluating Standard Factor Loadings, Average Variance Extracted, the Fornell-Larcker criterion, and the Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio for discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Henseler et al., 2015). Following this, the structural model deploys 5,000-subsample bootstrapping to map precise path coefficients, determining how these experiential values drive continuance intention and validating the moderating pathways of digital engagement.

Expected Contributions

This conceptual paper addresses critical sustainability challenges within the modern experience economy. By outlining this research framework, we anticipate yielding insights that bridge academic theory with real-world commercial application, offering distinct theoretical and practical implications.

Theoretical Implications

From a theoretical perspective, this manuscript advances contemporary consumer behaviour literature by actively moving away from older transactional models. Those models traditionally viewed baseline functional satisfaction as the primary driver of customer retention (Nik Mohd Nor et al., 2024). Our primary theoretical contribution is structurally integrating the predictive cognitive architecture of the Theory of Planned Behaviour with the interactive, environmental mechanics of Social Cognitive Theory. By combining these two frameworks, the study creates a dual-theory lens that is uniquely suited to model the fluid, digitally mediated reality of modern hospitality. We position social media not just as a basic communication tool, but as an active psychological moderator that alters perceived behavioural control and subjective norms.

Practical Implications

On a practical level, the expected findings offer independent artisan café operators evidence-based strategies to secure their survival against standardized corporate franchises. Recognizing that traditional functional attributes are merely the cost of entry today, our framework underscores the urgent need for operators to intentionally design physical social servicescapes. Management must optimize architectural layouts to prevent crowding and cultivate unscripted, interactive communication from their staff. Doing so dismantles ambient anxiety and delivers a vital psychological sanctuary for patrons trying to navigate urban stress. Crucially, by identifying customer engagement in social media marketing as a dynamic moderator, this research provides a strategic blueprint for blending physical hospitality with interactive digital storytelling. Operators can leverage user-generated content and observational learning to generate the external social proof that publicly validates a patron's lifestyle choices. By orchestrating these value-heavy digital exchanges, independent cafés can extend their physical ambiance into expansive online networks. This continuous digital validation actively amplifies intrinsic personal values, ultimately transforming a casual retail encounter into the deep, long-term psychological attachment necessary for sustainable business growth.

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