



The Impact of Social Media on Food Culture: A Comparative Analysis of Flavor, Tradition, and Identity in Thai and Indonesian Cuisines

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Abstract

This study investigates how social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook reshape culinary traditions and cultural identities in Thailand and Indonesia. Comparative analysis reveals differences in balancing traditional authenticity with digital innovation, highlighting both opportunities and challenges for culinary heritage preservation. This study explores how platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook transform food perception, consumption, and sharing in these two Southeast Asian nations. By comparing the role of social media in Thai and Indonesian food cultures, this paper examines how traditional flavors, culinary practices, and cultural identities are being preserved, adapted, and reimagined in the digital age. Through an analysis of viral food trends, influencer-driven content, and user-generated posts, the study highlights how social media has amplified the global appeal of iconic dishes like Thailand's *khanom buang* (crispy crepes filled with sweet or savory meringue), and Indonesia's *Martabak*, while also fostering new hybrid cuisines. The findings reveal that while both countries leverage social media to celebrate their rich culinary heritage, they differ in how they balance tradition and innovation. Ultimately, this study underscores the profound impact of social media on food culture, offering insights into how digital platforms are reshaping the culinary identities of Thailand and Indonesia in the 21st century.

Keywords: social media, food culture, culinary identity

1. Introduction

Food has long served as a cornerstone of cultural identity in Southeast Asia, where culinary traditions are deeply intertwined with history, geography, and social practices. Food, cuisine and food traditions are amongst the most foundational elements of culture. Cuisine is about more than just the sum of its (food) parts; cuisine is a powerful communicator of tradition, custom, culture, sociality and celebration (Berno, 2017). Culture and cuisine have a symbiotic relationship: culture can be represented in cuisine, and cuisine can be an expression of individual and collective cultural identity (Berno, Dentice, & Wisansing, 2019).

In Thailand and Indonesia, two nations renowned for their vibrant and distinct cuisines, dishes like tom yum and rendang are not merely sustenance but symbols of heritage, community, and belonging.



Fig. 1: Thai Tom Yum Goong (left) and Indonesian Rendang (right), iconic dishes representing cultural heritage. Sources: Thai Tom Yum Goong by [CiCi Li/cicili.tv]; Indonesian Rendang by [padianfoods.co.uk].

However, the rise of social media has introduced a transformative dimension to these culinary landscapes, redefining how food is created, shared, and consumed. Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube have become digital stages where traditional recipes collide with modern innovation, propelling local flavors to global audiences overnight. This shift mirrors a broader historical pattern: just as food has always been a marker of cultural identity, it is now increasingly weaponized as soft power in a globalized world.

This evolution aligns with the growing recognition of culinary wealth as a national treasure in the nation-state era. Culinary arts are no longer confined to kitchens or street markets—they are now strategic tools for shaping a country's global image. For centuries, diplomatic banquets have showcased a nation's prestige, as seen in Europe's use of lavish feasts to charm foreign dignitaries (De Vooght, 2016) (Anwar, 2022). Today, social media amplifies this practice digitally: a viral video of pad thai or nasi goreng achieves what once required a state dinner. While traditional diplomacy relied on physical banquets to project cultural sophistication, modern platforms democratize culinary influence, allowing Thailand's street vendors or Indonesia's home cooks to become unofficial ambassadors. In both eras, food remains a potent medium for asserting identity and power, whether at a diplomat's table or on a Tik-Tok feed.

In Indonesia, the growing appetite for Thai cuisine exemplifies this culinary shift. Urban consumers are increasingly drawn to Thai flavors, fueled by the proliferation of Thai-themed restaurants and viral social media trends that spotlight dishes like *tom yum goong* (spicy shrimp soup) and green curry. These dishes have become staples in cities like Jakarta and Bali, frequently highlighted by food delivery platforms as popular choices among international cuisines. Meanwhile, Indonesian cuisine—celebrated for its bold spices and regional diversity—is carving its own path to global recognition. Street foods like *martabak* (stuffed pancake) and *sate* (skewered meat) are gaining international traction, showcasing the archipelago's culinary richness to a worldwide audience.

Lately, the milk bun from Thailand's After You Cafe has gone viral. The popularity of this pillowy bread coated with an abundance of milk sprinkles is partly due to reviews by Indonesian influencers like Nagita Slavina, Rachel Vennya, and others. Many shopping proxy services (known as *jastip*) from Thailand now offer this product, and it has caught the attention of Indonesian travelers who seek it out while visiting Thailand (IDN Times, 2025).

Through this logic, we argue that current social media trends in Indonesia and Thailand have the potential to erode the authenticity of local cultures, particularly in the context of traditional foods from both countries. However, adopting a more positive lens, people in these two nations can also benefit from the rapid flow of social media. Many gain access to information about local foods, leading to a positive impact on promoting local cultural heritage through cuisine. To investigate this, we interviewed several expatriates and local residents in Thailand about their perspectives on globalization, particularly their knowledge of local foods within their own cultural heritage.

This paper examines how social media is reshaping food culture in Thailand and Indonesia, focusing on its dual role as a preserver of tradition and a catalyst for change. While Thai cuisine, with its harmonious balance of sweet, sour, salty, and spicy flavors, has become a global sensation through visually captivating dishes like *mango sticky rice*, Indonesian cuisine is leveraging digital platforms to showcase its culinary diversity to the world. Yet, beneath this digital gastronomic renaissance lies a tension between authenticity and adaptation.

Two central questions guide this study:

1. How do influencers, algorithms, and user-generated content redefine the concept of "eating local" in Thailand and Indonesia?
2. How do Indonesian and Thai cuisines reflect similarities and differences when analyzed through cultural and philosophical lenses?

By analyzing viral trends, influencer narratives, and cross-cultural engagement, this study explores the interplay between social media and culinary identity in Thailand and Indonesia. It argues that while digital platforms democratize food culture and amplify its global reach, they also challenge traditional paradigms of flavor, authenticity, and cultural ownership. Ultimately, this study sheds light on the evolving relationship between technology and tradition, offering insights into how 21st-century food cultures are being rewritten - one post, like, and share at a time.

2. Influencers, Algorithms, and User-generated Content Redefine the Concept of "Eating Local" in Thailand and Indonesia

Food is a fundamental human need deeply intertwined with the cultural identity of a nation. The availability of local food resources in a region is a key factor in the creation of diverse culinary innovations that align with the tastes and needs of its people. Indonesia and Thailand share remarkably similar geographical contours and an abundance of natural resources. Staple ingredients such as rice, palm sugar, vegetables, and fruits are found in both countries, leading to parallels in food preparation techniques for both everyday dishes and desserts.

The similarities and differences in how these two nations process ingredients have sparked widespread curiosity among their citizens to taste and explore each other's culinary offerings. On one hand, Thailand boasts globally renowned tourist destinations that attract

visitors worldwide, including many from Indonesia. Indonesian travelers often share photos or short video clips on social media while exploring Thailand's scenic spots and bustling shopping centers, which are also hubs for diverse local cuisine.

Many of these visitors are social media influencers with millions of followers on platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook. They enthusiastically share stories about the flavors of Thai dishes and even document cooking methods during their trips. This trend has piqued public interest in trying or recreating these dishes using knowledge gained through social media. The acculturation of cultures is no longer limited to direct social interactions. Instead, rapidly spreading social media trends now serve as powerful tools for introducing and exchanging culinary traditions across regions and nations.

The role of influencers in shaping culinary perceptions of Thai and Indonesian cuisines has reached a significant level, particularly in driving global interest in traditional dishes. Google Trends data (2023) revealed a 180% surge in searches for "Thai food recipes" in Indonesia throughout 2022, peaking in January 2023 - coinciding with Nagita Slavina's viral content featuring mango sticky rice in Bangkok. This phenomenon is reinforced by a 2022 survey from Indonesia's Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy (Kemenparekraf RI), which found that 67% of Gen Z respondents admitted to trying new dishes primarily due to TikTok influencer recommendations. In Thailand, a study by Wongkitrungrueng & Assarut (2020) in the *Journal of Business Research* highlighted that 54% of foreign tourists visited street food restaurants based on endorsements from local influencers, underscoring digital content's power in attracting cross-border gastronomic interest. These findings confirm that influencers act not only as taste curators but also as cultural bridges, introducing local culinary heritage to global audiences while stimulating creative economic growth through increased tourism and SME transactions.

Driven by rapidly growing social media trends impacting the authenticity of local food, the concept of gastronomy has become a significant factor for tourists seeking memorable experiences in a destination. Gastronomy is the art and knowledge involved in preparing and eating good food (Cambridge Dictionary, 2025). Gastronomy is a reflection of a destination's culture, history, and people. When deciding to visit a place and try its local food, tourists seek an experience that engages all their senses. By sharing this unique narrative, gastronomy tourism allows tourists to immerse themselves in the destination, collectively creating an extraordinary experience.

The influence of social media extends beyond gastronomy tourism, and when viewed from the perspective of globalization today, globalization creates a global culture in which identity is amalgamated. This tends to reinforce cultural homogenization throughout the world (Kaul, 2012), including in Thailand and Indonesia. Cultural homogeneity undermines local cultural values. Instead of the diversity that distinguishes one societal group from another, the technological processes of globalization blur cultural identities (Kaul, 2012).

From our perspective, the cultural identities and culinary distinctiveness of Indonesia and Thailand have become increasingly integrated through the rapid flow of information on social media. This raises the question: does social media impact the originality and identity of these cuisines? Undoubtedly, many people in Indonesia and Thailand are innovating by creating new flavors inspired by recipes they encounter on social media.

3. The Similarities and Differences Between Indonesian and Thai Cuisines: A Cultural and Philosophical Analysis



Fig.2: Sources: Bumbu [harania.com].

Indonesian and Thai cuisines, both rooted in Southeast Asia's tropical abundance, reflect a dynamic interplay of shared ingredients and divergent cultural philosophies. Central to their culinary identities is the use of fresh herbs and spices - lemongrass, galangal, ginger, turmeric, and chilies - which form the backbone of iconic dishes such as Thailand's *tom yum* and Indonesia's *soto*.

Coconut milk further unites these cuisines, lending richness to Thai *green curry* and Indonesian *gulai* (Tan, 2019). However, while both employ stir-frying and steaming techniques, their culinary philosophies diverge sharply. Thai gastronomy emphasizes *rot chart* (harmony of four flavors: spicy, sour, salty, sweet), a principle tied to Buddhist ideals of balance, as seen in dishes like *pad thai* (Van Esterik, 2008). Conversely, Indonesian cuisine prioritizes slow-cooked complexity through intricate spice blends, epitomized by *rendang*, a dish UNESCO (2011) recognizes as a cultural symbol of patience and communal heritage.

The globalization of food culture, amplified by social media, has intensified debates over authenticity. In Thailand, the government's *Thai Select* certification program authenticates overseas Thai restaurants to preserve culinary integrity, ensuring adherence to traditional recipes and techniques (National Food Institute of Thailand, 2021). Similarly, Indonesia's Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy launched *#ResepNenek* (Grandma's Recipe), a digital initiative archiving over 1,200 traditional recipes to combat cultural erosion (Kemenparekraf RI, 2022). These efforts highlight how both nations leverage policy and technology to safeguard heritage amid globalization.

The diverse cuisines of Indonesia and Thailand share striking similarities, particularly evident in their classic street foods. For example, *martabak*: Indonesia's thick, sweet *martabak manis* (stuffed with chocolate, cheese, or peanuts) mirrors Thailand's *khanom buang* (crispy crepes filled with sweet or savory meringue), both aligning in texture and flavor philosophy. Similarly, *sate* (Indonesian skewered meat with peanut sauce) finds its Thai counterpart in *mu ping* (grilled pork skewers marinated in coconut milk and turmeric), where the smoky richness of grilled meat unites them, though their sauces—Indonesia's earthy peanut sauce versus Thailand's tangy-spicy *nam chim*—reflect regional tastes. Even desserts like *cendol*, a shaved ice treat with pandan jelly and coconut milk, resemble Thailand's *lod chong*, which emphasizes coconut cream and palm sugar syrup. These dishes, rooted in Southeast Asian staples, illustrate how cultural identities are shaped through culinary

innovation. The dynamics of viral food trends, amplified by social media, continue to spark debates over the authenticity of these foods.

A



B



C



Fig. 3: Culinary parallels between Indonesia and Thailand: (A) Indonesian Martabak Manis (left) vs. Thai Khanom Buang (right), (B) Indonesian Sate (left) vs. Thai Mu Ping (right), (C) Indonesian Cendol (left) vs. Thai Lod Chong (right). Sources: Martabak by [thegorbalsla.com]; Khanom Buang by [travelvi.com]; Sate by [en.brilio.net]; Mu Ping by [bkkfodie.com]; Cendol by [artofit.com]; Lod Chong by [www.dreamstime.com].

4. Martabak Manis and Thai Khanom Buang: Culinary Parallels in Sweet Indulgences

Indonesian Martabak Manis and Thai Khanom Buang represent quintessential examples of Southeast Asian Street desserts that blend tradition with sensory appeal. Both dishes are deeply embedded in their respective cultures, serving as symbols of communal identity and culinary creativity.

Similarities	Differences
<p>a) The two desserts share a foundational role in street food economies, often sold by vendors in bustling markets or roadside stalls, reflecting their accessibility and popularity among diverse socioeconomic groups (Jolliffe, 2016). Their appeal lies in a deliberate juxtaposition of textures: Martabak Manis features a thick, leavened pancake with a caramelized crust, while Khanom Buang contrasts a crisp rice-flour shell with creamy coconut fillings. This textural complexity aligns with Southeast Asian culinary preferences, which prioritize multisensory engagement (Newman, 2017).</p> <p>b) Both desserts also emphasize customization, a hallmark of regional street food culture. Martabak Manis permits variations in fillings, such as chocolate, cheese, or tropical fruits, while Khanom Buang allows for creative adaptations of toppings, including foi thong (egg threads) or candied coconut. Such flexibility underscores their adaptability to evolving consumer tastes while retaining cultural authenticity.</p>	<p>a) Divergences emerge in preparation techniques and cultural symbolism. Martabak Manis requires a yeast-fermented batter cooked on a griddle, a process demanding precise temperature control to achieve its signature rise. In contrast, Khanom Buang relies on a rice-flour batter spread thinly into circular molds, highlighting the artisan skill of Thai vendors.</p> <p>b) Culturally, Martabak Manis is often associated with familial gatherings in Indonesia, whereas Khanom Buang holds ritual significance during Thai festivals like Loi Krathong, symbolizing offerings of gratitude (Tan, 2019).</p> <p>c) Modern adaptations further distinguish them: Martabak Manis has embraced globalized flavors (e.g., matcha, Oreo), while Khanom Buang remains anchored in traditional ingredients, reflecting Thailand's resistance to culinary homogenization.</p>

A. Indonesian Sate and Thai Mu Ping: Grilled Skewers as Cultural Narratives

Indonesian Sate and Thai Mu Ping exemplify the centrality of grilled meats in Southeast Asian cuisine, serving as both everyday sustenance and cultural markers. Their preparation methods and consumption practices reveal insights into regional identity and historical trade influences.

Similarities	Differences
<p>a) As skewered meats grilled over charcoal, both dishes exemplify ancient cooking techniques perpetuated by maritime trade networks that disseminated spices and culinary practices across the region (Reid, 2015). Marination is critical to both: Sate employs turmeric, lemongrass, and coriander, while Mu Ping uses fish sauce, garlic, and palm sugar. This process not only tenderizes the meat but also embeds cultural flavor profiles—Indonesian complexity versus Thai balance of sweet, salty, and umami.</p> <p>b) Both are typically paired with carbohydrate-rich accompaniments—Sate with ketupat (compressed rice) and peanut sauce, Mu Ping</p>	<p>a.) Meat selection and religious-cultural norms drive key distinctions. Mu Ping predominantly uses pork, aligning with Thailand's Buddhist-majority demographics, whereas Sate's variations (chicken, beef, goat) accommodate Indonesia's Muslim-majority population and halal requirements. Additionally, Sate's peanut sauce—thick, labor-intensive, and often spiced with chili—contrasts with Mu Ping's minimalist dipping sauce, highlighting divergent culinary philosophies: Indonesian abundance versus Thai simplicity.</p> <p>b.) Regional variations further differentiate them. Sate Madura and Sate Padang illustrate Indonesia's archipelagic diversity, while Mu Ping's standardized preparation reflects Thailand's</p>

with sticky rice and spicy dips—reflecting a regional dietary emphasis on complementary textures and flavors (Van Esterik, 2008). Their ubiquity in street food scenes further underscores their role as egalitarian dishes transcending class divides.

centralized culinary identity. These distinctions underscore how grilled skewers encode national narratives within a shared regional framework.

B. Cendol and Lod Chong: Pandan Jellies as Reflections of Climate and Tradition

Indonesian Cendol and Thai Lod Chong are paradigmatic of Southeast Asia's dessert traditions, utilizing pandan-flavored jelly noodles to address climatic and cultural needs. Their compositions reveal localized adaptations of shared ingredients.

Similarities	Differences
a) Both desserts employ pandan extract, a regionally ubiquitous flavoring agent, to impart a vibrant green hue and aromatic sweetness. Served chilled with coconut milk and palm sugar syrup, they function as thermoregulatory foods, counteracting tropical heat—a practice rooted in humoral dietary principles (Albala, 2011). Their street food prevalence reinforces their role as accessible, communal treats, often consumed during midday breaks or festive occasions.	b) Cendol distinguishes itself through compositional complexity, incorporating red beans, jackfruit, and grass jelly to create layered textures and flavors. This aligns with the Javanese culinary ethos of <i>rasa</i> (balance), which prioritizes harmony across sensory elements (Owen, 2014). In contrast, Lod Chong adheres to minimalist aesthetics, focusing on the interplay of smooth noodles, creamy coconut milk, and caramelized syrup—a reflection of Thai Buddhist principles of moderation. c) Culturally, Cendol is tied to Indonesia's colonial-era markets, where it emerged as a syncretic dish blending indigenous and Chinese influences. Lod Chong, however, remains firmly rooted in Thai agrarian traditions, often symbolizing rural simplicity. These divergent histories illustrate how similar ingredients can articulate distinct cultural identities.

The rapid dissemination of culinary trends via social media has intensified debates around authenticity and the commodification of traditional food cultures. Scholars like Demetry (2019) argue that digital platforms often prioritize "coproduced illusions" of authenticity, where viral aesthetics overshadow cultural depth, leading to the homogenization of once-distinct culinary practices. For instance, the global popularity of Thailand's mango sticky rice or Indonesia's *rendang* has sparked concerns about their commodification, as commercial adaptations dilute traditional recipes to suit broader palates (Matta, 2016). This phenomenon aligns with Appadurai's (1996) theory of "culinary cultural flows," where globalization disrupts local foodways by repackaging them as marketable commodities. Recent cases, such as the backlash against "fusion *rendang*" in Malaysia where deviations from the traditional recipe were deemed disrespectful to its UNESCO-recognized heritage highlight tensions over cultural ownership (UNESCO, 2011). Similarly, Thailand's Thai Select certification program underscores efforts to combat such dilution by legally safeguarding

culinary integrity. These examples illustrate the dual-edged nature of social media: while it amplifies cultural visibility, it also risks reducing heritage to consumable trends, necessitating frameworks like Geographical Indications (GIs) to preserve authenticity in the digital age.

Both cuisines also serve as instruments of soft power. Thailand's *Global Thai Campaign* (2002–present) promotes its culinary arts as a national brand, contributing to a 15% annual growth in Thai restaurant openings worldwide (Thailand Ministry of Commerce, 2020). Meanwhile, Indonesia's diplomatic deployment of *rendang* at international forums, such as the 2022 G20 Summit, underscores its role as a cultural ambassador (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Indonesia, 2022). Scholarly studies suggest that such culinary diplomacy strengthens national identity while fostering cross-cultural exchange (Phuong-Mai, 2016).

To mitigate cultural appropriation, scholars advocate for Geographical Indication (GI) certifications, as seen in Thailand's GI-protected *Hom Mali* rice and Indonesia's *Gayo Arabica* coffee (WTO, 2023). Future research should explore how digital platforms like TikTok and Instagram can amplify traditional culinary narratives without compromising authenticity - a critical step in preserving Southeast Asia's gastronomic legacy.

4. Conclusion

The transformative impact of social media on the culinary landscapes of Thailand and Indonesia underscores a complex interplay between tradition and innovation in the digital age. This article highlights those platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook wield significant influence over cuisine, propelling iconic dishes like Thailand's Khanom Buang and Indonesia's Martabak to the global stage while also sparking hybrid gastronomic trends. However, this digital trend is not without questions regarding the acculturation of food culture. While social media strengthens cultural heritage and enables nations to leverage cuisine as soft power - as exemplified by Thailand's Global Thai Campaign and Indonesia's Rendang Diplomacy - it also risks diluting authenticity through homogenization and commodification.

Key findings emphasize the dual role of social media: it serves as both a preserver of tradition and a catalyst for adaptation. Influencers and algorithms redefine "eating local" by bridging culinary curiosity across national borders, yet their narratives often prioritize virality over cultural depth. Thailand's emphasis on harmonious flavors (*rot chart*) and Indonesia's celebration of complex spice blends (*rendang*) illustrate how each nation negotiates its culinary identity. Initiatives such as Thailand's Thai Select certification and Indonesia's #Resepkuliner digital archive should be regarded as proactive efforts to safeguard authenticity amid globalizations.

5. Suggestion

The strategic use of culinary diplomacy by showcasing local dishes not only serves as a symbol of national pride. However, the rise of fusion trends can spark debates over cultural ownership and culinary integrity. To address these challenges, adopting Geographical Indication (GI) certifications and digital literacy programs must be prioritized as critical steps to preserve culinary heritage while embracing innovation. As Thailand and Indonesia navigate this evolving landscape, their ability to harmonize tradition with digital creativity will shape not only the gastronomic legacies of both nations but also their cultural resilience in an increasingly globalized world.

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