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Research Paper

Digital footprints and field observations: A study on Cirebon's traditional culinary landscape

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze consumer perceptions of Cirebon's traditional cuisine by integrating online review data and direct field observations. The research method uses a mixed-method approach on 13 sample eateries, combining web scraping for sentiment analysis of text reviews from Google Maps (January to June of 2025) and structured observation to assess parameters such as taste, facilities, service, price, and location. The research also employs Spearman's analysis to examine relationships between variables. The results reveal a popularity-quality paradox, where digital popularity (number of reviews) does not always linearly correlate with high ratings; eateries with few reviews often achieve very high ratings due to quality consistency and a holistic dining experience. Our study indicates that Google Maps ratings are most strongly influenced by perceived value for money and the atmosphere of the eatery. We confirm that while there is general alignment between online reviews and on-ground reality, consumer assessments on digital platforms are a complex construct influenced by holistic experiential factors beyond just the food taste. Integrating direct observations with online reviews comprehensively reveals factors shaping consumer satisfaction in local culinary tourism

Keywords: Culinary tourism, Food, Online reviews, Sensory perception, Sentiment analysis

Declaration of Conflict of Interest: The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the digital era, the internet proliferation and smartphones has catalyzed the emergence of "smart tourism", wherein tourists increasingly rely on a variety of mobile applications for travel planning, information gathering, and navigation in new destinations (Giotis & Papadionysiou, 2022; Gupta et al., 2024). Navigation applications like Google Maps have become indispensable tools for determining routes and locating restaurants, cafes, and culinary hubs, while simultaneously providing real-time information on travel duration and traffic conditions (Metz, 2022). Beyond their navigational utility, the review and rating features on Google Maps are leveraged by tourists as preliminary exploratory tools before deciding to sample a culinary offering firsthand. Numerous studies indicate that Google Maps reviews can be processed using text-mining and sentiment analysis techniques to excavate visitor perceptions. However, the quality, depth, and potential biases inherent in this user-generated content necessitate cross-verification with more systematic data sources or direct field experiences (Halim & Setiawan, 2024; Lalrinawma & Nunsanga, 2025; Maududie et al., 2024).

Online reviews are not only beneficial for visitors but also for culinary business owners, serving as crucial sources of feedback and shapers of business reputation (Pan et al., 2022; Pezenka & Weismayer, 2020). Positive reviews and high ratings have been empirically shown to enhance consumer purchase intention and drive foot traffic to restaurants, thereby contributing to sustainable revenue streams (Sondakh et al., 2022). Consistently, research across various contexts demonstrates that positive reviews significantly influence purchasing decisions, whereas negative reviews can substantially diminish visit interest (B. Chen et al., 2025). Consequently, high ratings function as a powerful form of "social proof", bolstering the confidence of potential new customers without requiring substantial promotional expenditure (Sharma & Goyal, 2023), this is because consumers tend to emulate choices perceived as popular and trustworthy within the digital sphere (Arzaghi et al., 2023).

This digital context holds particular relevance for local culinary industries, which are increasingly dependent on online visibility to attract tourists. Cirebon is renowned not only as a destination for historical, cultural, and religious tourism, evidenced by its royal palaces (*keraton*), ancient mosques (*masjid agung* or *masjid kuno*), and other cultural heritage sites (Putro & Maharani, 2017). Cirebon also possesses a highly prominent culinary tourism potential, where its distinctive local cuisine serves as both a pillar of cultural identity and a driver of the local economy (Roels et al., 2025). Cirebon's traditional culinary offerings, such as Tahu Gejrot (fried tofu in sweet-spicy sauce), Nasi Jamblang (rice served with various side dishes), Empal Gentong (spicy beef stew), Nasi Lengko (rice with tofu, bean sprouts, and peanut sauce), and Docang (rice cake in spicy vegetable soup), are understood as integral components of cultural heritage. They represent the history, social values, and way of life of the Cirebon community, transcending their role as mere sustenance (Wibowo & Setiawan, 2024). Furthermore, the appeal of Cirebon's local cuisine is amplified when supported by factors such as accessibility, taste, presentation, and hygiene, suggesting significant future potential for packaging it into thematic tourism packages (Widiawaty et al., 2019).

Research on Cirebon's culinary scene has been undertaken by several scholars. A gastronomic study employing qualitative analysis revealed that its culinary tourism identity is the product of a cultural melting pot, incorporating Sundanese, Javanese, Chinese, Arab, and Indian influences, shaped by local commodity availability, food production techniques, norms, religion, and distinctive flavor preferences (Putra, 2019). Another study focusing on local food tourism in Cirebon, utilizing a framework of culinary attributes, culinary experience, and dining atmosphere, demonstrated that all three dimensions significantly contribute to the culinary tourism experience and offer practical implications for destination development. Concurrently, recent Indonesian literature highlights a growing trend of applying sentiment analysis to online reviews for tourism destinations, primarily using Google Review

and Google Maps data (Aprilia & Pratama, 2025; Suryandari et al., 2024). However, existing studies in Cirebon predominantly remain focused on surveys or qualitative approaches targeting tourists who have already visited. A comparative integration of field survey data and sentiment analysis of online reviews within the specific context of Cirebon's traditional cuisine remains relatively underexplored.

From a food science perspective, the measurement of food quality and acceptance ideally combines human sensory evaluation with other objective data, including consumer behavior data or online reviews (T. Chen et al., 2022). Studies analyzing millions of food product reviews reveal that flavor dimension is the primary determinant in consumers' online assessments of food, indicating that textual analysis of reviews can reflect real-world sensory responses (Nandwani & Verma, 2021; Reed et al., 2019). Simultaneously, literature on sensory evaluation underscores that sensory testing, both analytical and affective, is a key tool for assessing food acceptance and quality. It is increasingly recommended to be combined with other approaches to yield a more comprehensive picture of consumer preferences (Świąder & Marczevska, 2021).

Addressing this identified research gap, this study aims to investigate Cirebon's traditional food by integrating three primary data sources: (1) the specific locations of eateries serving traditional cuisine, (2) subjective perceptions obtained through first-hand sensory tasting experiences, and (3) online reviews collected from Google Maps. These datasets will be systematically compared to assess the extent to which online reviews and Google Maps ratings align with the research subjects' sensory evaluations of taste, quality, and the direct culinary experience. Additionally, this research will examine the relationships between culinary/popularity (as indicated by ratings and volume of reviews), the actual conditions at the locations (including ambiance and service), and the spatial characteristics of the eateries. The novelty of this study lies in its integrated approach, combining primary field sensory data with digital footprint analysis within the context of Cirebon's traditional culinary landscape. It is anticipated that the findings will provide valuable contributions to the strategic development of local culinary tourism.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Culinary tourism

Culinary tourism, frequently termed gastronomic tourism, encompasses travel activities where individuals actively seek to experience the distinctive food, beverages, and culinary heritage of a particular destination. It has been proposed that food constitutes an essential component of the travel experience, as it serves as a reflection of a region's culture, heritage, and identity (Marín-Arroyo et al., 2025). This form involves exploring cuisine as a cultural artifact that can deepen travelers' understanding and appreciation of local lifestyles (Ellis et al., 2018). Culinary tourism in influencing destination choice is increasingly evident. Researchers have argued that culinary experiences can significantly enhance a destination's appeal and contribute to the development of its tourism products (Stone et al., 2019). Modern tourists frequently seek authentic and unique food encounters that facilitate a meaningful connection with local communities and their cultures (Zaenal et al., 2025). These gastronomic experiences, such as sampling traditional dishes, navigating local markets, or participating in hands-on cooking classes, are instrumental in forging an emotional bond between the visitor and the place.

Such experiences profoundly shape tourists' overall perceptions of their trip and have been shown to be significant determinants of both tourist satisfaction and the intention to revisit a destination (Hurdawaty et al., 2025; Ibrahim et al., 2024). Beyond individual satisfaction, culinary tourism holds a strategic function in destination marketing and economic growth. It is noted that destinations can

effectively leverage their unique culinary heritage to attract visitors and create a distinctive competitive advantage (Okumus et al., 2018). This is evident in the strategic efforts of local governments and tourism stakeholders who integrate food festivals, culinary routes, and other food-centric attractions into their promotional campaigns. By doing so, culinary tourism not only strengthens tourists' cultural engagement but also enhances the destination's overall image. A positive gastronomic encounter often encourages repeat visitation. Furthermore, these memorable experiences frequently compel tourists to share their stories and images on social media and other online platforms, thereby organically influencing the travel decisions of potential future visitors. In this study, culinary tourism is limited to traditional food or cuisine in Cirebon. Traditional food is closely tied to a community's history, place as well as way of life, and is usually passed down from one generation to the next as part of cultural identity (Meyer-Rochow, 2025). It is often made with local or indigenous ingredients and prepared in customary ways with little industrial processing (Alqurashi et al., 2025). Beyond being nourishment, traditional cuisine also carries symbolic meaning in daily life, rituals, and celebrations, helping express belonging and preserve cultural memory (Aggarwal et al., 2025). Traditional culinary is not just an old recipe, but a living heritage that reflects a society's values and roots (Rocillo-Aquino et al., 2021).

2.2. Online rating and tourism visitors

Digital technology has fundamentally transformed how travellers seek information and make decisions. Within this landscape, online rating platforms and review websites have become central, enabling users to evaluate a wide array of tourism services, including restaurants, hotels, and attractions. These platforms generate a substantial volume of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) reviews, which research indicates have become a frequently consulted information source for potential travellers (Özdemir-Akgül et al., 2026). It has been observed that online reviews and ratings not only shape travellers' perceptions of service quality but also serve to mitigate the uncertainty inherent in selecting tourism products (Yang & Xu, 2025). Furthermore, studies reinforce the critical role of these reviews in the decision-making process, noting that higher ratings and positive feedback can significantly increase consumer trust in tourism services (Kwok et al., 2017).

Online ratings are particularly pronounced within the specific contexts of restaurant selection and culinary tourism. Research explains that tourists commonly rely on digital platforms to seek restaurant recommendations and assess the quality of food, service, and overall dining experience (Xia & Ha, 2023). In this situation, positive ratings and reviews can substantially enhance an establishment's visibility and reputation, while negative reviews possess the potential to deter future customers.

Restaurants accumulating numerous positive ratings tend to hold greater appeal for tourists, as they are frequently perceived as reliable indicators of quality and popularity. This underscores the increasingly pivotal role of digital platforms in shaping tourist demand and behavioural patterns within the broader tourism sector (Ye et al., 2009). However, the reliability of online ratings as an objective measure is not absolute. It is acknowledged that, in an effort to cultivate a favorable online presence, some culinary businesses may employ various strategies to encourage patrons to leave positive feedback. Such practices can potentially compromise the objectivity of the information presented on these platforms, resulting in reviews that do not always accurately or authentically represent the typical tourist experience. Nevertheless, this very phenomenon paradoxically highlights the critical importance of positive online reviews in bolstering a culinary business's reputation and sustaining its attractiveness in an increasingly competitive digital marketplace.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research design and data acquisition

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative and qualitative data to obtain a comprehensive understanding of consumer experiences at eateries serving Cirebon's typical cuisine (Khoo-Lattimore et al., 2019; Truong et al., 2020). This approach was selected for its capacity to provide analytical depth through qualitative data while enabling the generalization of patterns from quantitative data. The research population encompasses all eateries selling Cirebon's typical food within the City and Regency of Cirebon. Samples were selected using purposive sampling based on specific criteria to ensure data representativeness and depth. These criteria include: (1) selling at least one of five selected typical foods; (2) having measurable online review activity on the Google Review platform; (3) location accessibility; and (4) each food type being represented by a minimum of two eateries to allow for comparison.

Based on these criteria, 13 eateries were selected as units of analysis. The number of eateries selected per food type (Empal Gentong "EG" = 5 eateries, Nasi Jamblang "NJ" = 3, Tahu Gejrot "TG" = 3, Nasi Lengko "NL" = 2, Mie Koclok "MK" = 2), reflects proportionality based on popularity and prevalence in the field, where a higher sample count indicates greater market penetration and fame among the community (Jacob & Michael, 2021). These five dishes represent Cirebon's rich cultural acculturation, blending influences from Arab, Indian, Chinese, and local traditions (Javanese-Sundanese). Each carry profound historical value and ties to local rituals, reinforcing Cirebon's culinary identity as an authentic, enduring cultural heritage. The geographic distribution of the 13 sampled eateries can be seen in Figure 1. These eateries in Cirebon are generally very specific and highlight only one traditional food menu.

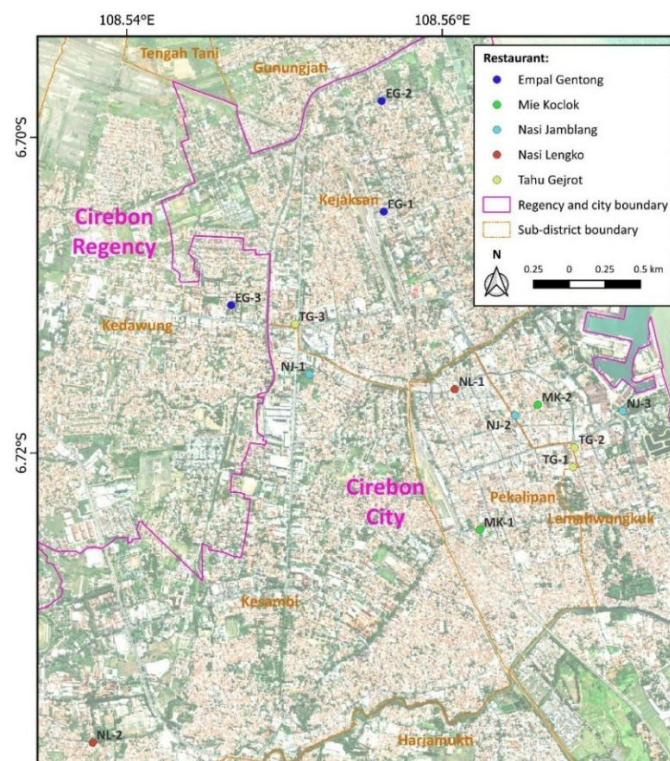


Figure 1. Research location and sample distribution.

Source: Authors analysis, (2026)

Primary data was collected from two main sources. First, direct observation and in-situ assessment were conducted using a structured instrument (Afghoni & Busro, 2017; Priyanto & Desmafianti, 2023).

This observation instrument was designed to capture various aspects of the consumer experience, synthesizing the conceptual framework of Tourism 4A (attraction, accessibility, amenity, ancillary service) with traditional and digital marketing strategies (Andrianto & Sugiana, 2016; Dede et al., 2024).

The instrument was formatted as a 1-5 Likert scale, corresponding to the rating options on Google Review. The assessed parameters include: 1) eatery identity and food type, 2) location and accessibility, 3) facilities (cleanliness, completeness, parking area), 4) service quality (serving duration and friendliness), 5) food taste, 6) price and value for money, 7) eatery atmosphere or ambiance, and 8) the perceptual footprint formed on social media and online platforms. Second, online review data was collected from the Google Maps platform during January-June of 2025. This large-scale data collection was performed using web scraping techniques via the Apify service to extract textual reviews along with metadata such as rating, date, and reviewer name. The scraping process was conducted with careful attention to research ethics and the platform's terms of service.

3.2. Data analysis

The collected data was analyzed using an integrative approach. Textual review data from Google Maps was processed using R-Studio software with a suite of specialized libraries. The text analysis commenced with data (text) cleaning using the stringr library, followed by tokenization and sentiment analysis employing the `tidytext` package (Robinson & Silge, 2019; Silge & Robinson, 2016). A complete schematic of the data analysis pipeline is presented visually in Figure 2.

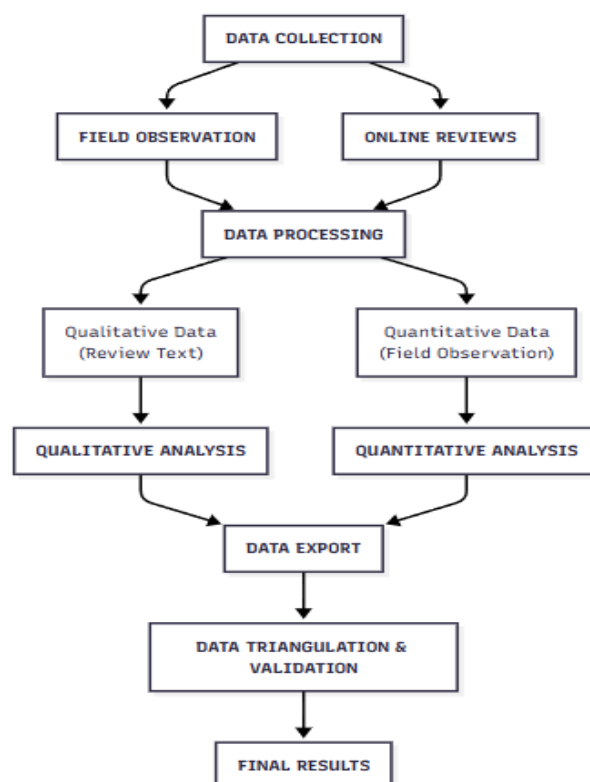


Figure 2. Framework for data analysis.

Source: Authors' analysis, (2025)

The sentiment analysis functioned to identify, categorize, and interpret the polarity of opinions (positive, negative, neutral) within the review corpus, thereby enabling a more objective mapping of consumer perceptions (Tonkin, 2016). Lexicon-based sentiment analysis considers socio-cultural

context to accurately capture emotional nuances, such as in culinary reviews that reflect local identity. Subsequently, to visualize the dominant themes and keywords emerging from the reviews, word clouds were generated using the `wordcloud2` library (Lang & Chien, 2018). In this visualization, font size represents word frequency, where larger words indicate terms more frequently mentioned by consumers (McNaught & Lam, 2010). This technique aids in identifying overarching patterns and themes characterizing the consumer experience (Atenstaedt, 2021).

In addition to qualitative text analysis, quantitative analysis was performed to examine relationships between various variables. Primarily, the correlation between numerical ratings on Google Review and field observation findings was analyzed. This relationship was assessed using Spearman's Rank correlation test with a 95% confidence level (two-tailed) (Nurbayani et al., 2023), selected because rating data does not always follow a normal distribution (Widiawaty et al., 2026). The entire data processing workflow, from reading raw data using `readr` and data manipulation with `dplyr` to exporting final comma-delimited results using `writexl` (Widiawaty, 2019), was conducted within the integrated R programming language.

Findings from the digital data analysis were then critically confronted and compared with the results from direct field observation. This triangulation of data sources (observation and online reviews) and mix methods (qualitative and quantitative) aims to validate findings, reduce bias, and provide a more holistic, dynamic, and in-depth understanding of consumer experiences and the competitiveness of Cirebon's traditional eateries.

4. RESULT

4.1 Digital popularity and consumer satisfaction

From online review data from the sample, we revealed significant variation between digital popularity and satisfaction levels as reflected in ratings (see Table 1). Eateries NL-2 and NJ-1 achieved the highest ratings (4.9/5.0), followed by TG-3 (4.8). Conversely, several eateries with high popularity exhibited comparatively lower ratings, such as EG-3 (4.5), NJ-3 (4.4), and MK-1 (4.1). In terms of review volume, EG-3 dominated with 9,675 reviews, far surpassing NJ-3 (3,910) and NL-1 (3,023).

Table 1. Online review for Cirebon traditional culinary until mid-2025

ID	Food	Rating	Count	ID	Food	Rating	Count
EG-1	Empal Gentong	4.3	57	NJ-3	Nasi Jamblang	4.4	3910
EG-2	Empal Gentong	4.7	732	NL-1	Nasi Lengko	4.2	3023
EG-3	Empal Gentong	4.5	9675	NL-2	Nasi Lengko	4.9	38
MK-1	Mie Koclok	4.1	84	TG-1	Tahu Gejrot	4.7	12
MK-2	Mie Koclok	4.7	235	TG-2	Tahu Gejrot	4.6	123
NJ-1	Nasi Jamblang	4.9	313	TG-3	Tahu Gejrot	4.8	5
NJ-2	Nasi Jamblang	4.7	372				

Source: Authors' analysis, (2025)

In contrast, TG-3 had only five reviews and TG-1 had twelve, this pattern reflects a sharp disparity in digital visibility: some establishments have built a strong online reputation, while others remain in the early stages of digital penetration. This phenomenon indicates that online popularity does not always correlate directly with consumer satisfaction, a condition known as the popularity-quality paradox in digital marketing literature (Gaeta et al., 2022). A quality-quantity paradox is also evident, where eateries with few reviews, such as TG-3, NL-2, and NJ-1, achieve very high ratings (4.8 to 4.9), while those with thousands of reviews, like EG-3 (9,675 reviews), attain more moderate ratings (4.5). This

suggests that high visibility does not inherently guarantee consistent satisfaction (Fernandes & Oliveira, 2022; Schoenmueller et al., 2020).

This divergence can be explained from two opposing perspectives. First, eateries with high ratings but limited reviews, such as NL-2, TG-3, and NJ-1, tend to serve a smaller, more loyal niche market, making it easier to maintain consistency in product and service quality (Bai et al., 2006; Balderas-Cejudo et al., 2019). These establishments generally do not rely solely on taste but also offer a holistic experience supported by amenities like clean restrooms, adequate parking, and friendly, responsive service (Española & Janaban, 2023). An easily accessible location further contributes to positive impressions, even if their digital exposure remains limited. Conversely, eateries with extremely high review volumes, such as EG-3 and NJ-3, face more complex operational challenges.

4.2 Location and accessibility

The majority are located in strategic areas near main roads (8 eateries). In contrast, three others are situated in more secluded locations such as residential neighborhoods or around train stations, while the remaining two are located inside or near shopping centers like traditional markets or malls. Locations on main roads are generally more accessible and widely recognized (Dascălu et al., 2024), and presence in crowded hubs like markets or malls also offers high visitation potential due to significant human traffic flow.

However, spatial factors do not always positively impact consumer perception. Ease of access is often accompanied by criticism regarding overly crowded and uncomfortable conditions. Eateries near main roads or shopping centers are frequently associated with congestion that leads to traffic and a suboptimal dining experience (Jacobsen et al., 2019). This aligns with findings that a strategic location does not automatically guarantee customer satisfaction if it is not balanced with adequate capacity management and spatial comfort. On the other hand, more hidden locations within residential areas can create an impression of being a hidden gem (Adilah et al., 2025), or a comfortable spot for consumers who value privacy and a quiet atmosphere.

4.3 Direct observation on food and eateries

The average Google Maps rating across all samples was 4.56, indicating a generally high level of overall consumer satisfaction. The taste parameter received the highest average score (4.53), followed by accessibility (4.41) and service (4.38) (Table 2).

Table 2. Ratings and assessment of Cirebon's traditional food

Variable	Rate	Facility	Services	Taste	Price	Accessibility	Atmosphere	Media
Mean	4.56	3.91	4.38	4.53	4.06	4.41	3.69	4.28
Median	4.65	4.00	5.00	5.00	4.00	4.50	4.00	5.00
Minimum	4.10	2.00	2.00	2.00	2.00	2.00	2.00	2.00
Maximum	4.90	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00

Source: Survey analysis, (2025)

This indicates that the aspect of food flavor is the primary priority for consumers. Flavor is a dominant determinant in consumer assessment of food on digital platforms (Namkung & Jang, 2007). The predominance of the taste parameter also reflects the intrinsic characteristics of Cirebon's traditional cuisine, which possesses a distinctive flavor profile resulting from a melting pot of various cultures (Adhitya et al., 2021). Conversely, the atmosphere parameter recorded the lowest average score (3.69), suggesting that aspects of physical comfort and dining space aesthetics remain a common weakness for most eateries. Facilities also showed a relatively lower score (3.91), which can be linked to infrastructure limitations such as restroom availability, parking areas, and general cleanliness. This finding highlights a gap between the quality of the culinary product and the quality of supporting

infrastructure, a common challenge for traditional small and medium-scale culinary businesses in Indonesia.

Table 3. Assessment at each traditional Cirebon food eatery

ID	Facility	Services	Taste	Price	Accessibility	Atmosphere	Media
EG-1	4.00	2.00	2.50	2.50	3.50	2.50	3.00
EG-2	5.00	5.00	5.00	4.50	5.00	5.00	5.00
EG-3	2.33	4.33	4.67	3.00	4.00	3.67	5.00
MK-1	4.00	5.00	4.00	3.00	5.00	4.00	5.00
MK-2	4.75	4.75	5.00	4.50	4.25	3.75	4.25
NJ-1	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	4.50	5.00	5.00
NJ-2	3.00	3.00	4.75	4.25	4.25	3.25	3.00
NJ-3	4.00	4.50	4.00	3.00	4.50	4.00	5.00
NL-1	3.20	4.60	4.80	4.20	4.60	2.60	4.20
NL-2	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00
TG-1	3.00	4.50	5.00	4.50	4.50	3.50	5.00
TG-2	4.33	4.67	3.67	4.00	4.00	3.33	3.00
TG-3	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00

Source: Survey analysis, (2025)

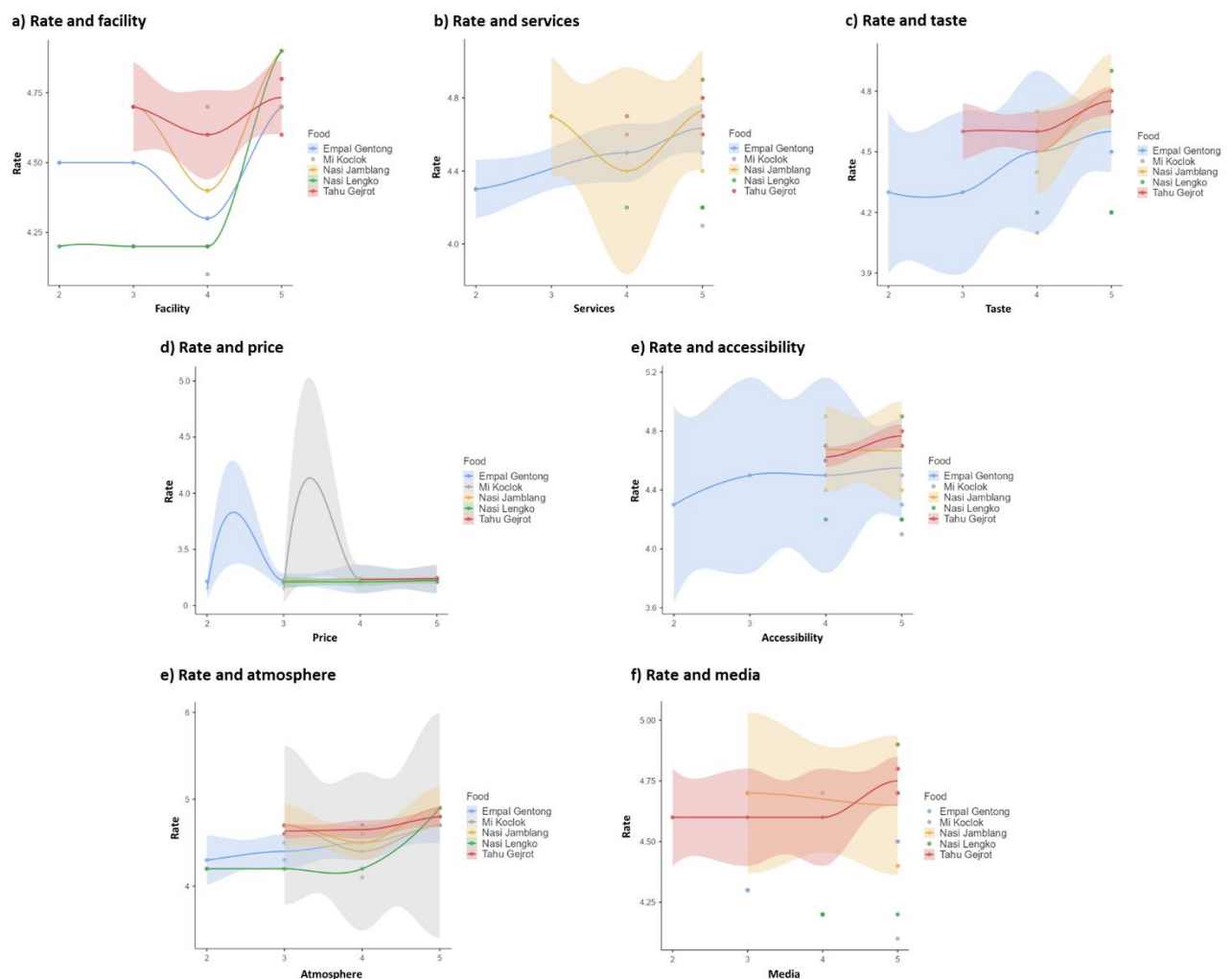


Figure 3. Ratings and parameters of Cirebon's traditional food
Source: Authors' analysis, (2025)

The fairly wide distribution of minimum and maximum scores (ranging from 2 to 5) across almost all parameters indicates significant heterogeneity in quality among the studied eateries. Some establishments achieved perfect scores in various aspects, while others still face major challenges regarding facilities, service, and atmosphere. From detailed observation of each eatery, it is evident that NL-2, TG-3, and NJ-1 achieved perfect or near-perfect scores across all parameters (Table 3).

In contrast, EG-1 showed pronounced weaknesses in service, taste, price, accessibility, and atmosphere, which likely impacted its relatively low Google Maps rating (4.30). The generally high Google Maps ratings align with the positive assessments from direct observation across various dimensions of the culinary experience. Eateries with high ratings tended to excel in several aspects simultaneously, particularly taste, facilities, and service (Figure 3).

4.4 Sentiment patterns in online reviews

Sentiment analysis was performed on a corpus of reviews from 13 eateries, totaling 11,070 reviews categorized as positive, negative, and neutral. Overall, the majority of detected reviews were positive. EG-3, which had the highest review volume (4,251 reviews), showed a dominance of positive reviews (79.7%), although it still contained 204 negative reviews (4.8%). NJ-3 and NL-1 showed a similar pattern with positive review proportions of 57.3% and 56.0%, respectively (Table 4).

Table 4. Sentiment categorization.

ID	Positive (%)	Negative (%)	Neutral (%)
EG-1	56.1	7.0	36.8
EG-2	72.8	1.6	25.5
EG-3	79.7	4.8	15.5
MK-1	42.9	4.8	52.4
MK-2	52.3	0.9	46.8
NJ-1	78.5	0.0	21.5
NJ-2	44.5	0.5	55.0
NJ-3	57.3	4.3	38.4
NL-1	55.9	5.9	38.2
NL-2	34.2	0.0	65.8
TG-1	91.7	0.0	8.3
TG-2	55.3	0.8	43.9
TG-3	60.0	20.0	20.0

Source: Authors' analysis, (2025)

Interestingly, several eateries with high ratings exhibited a very strong dominance of positive sentiment. EG-2 recorded 72.8% positive reviews and only 1.6% negative. NJ-1 even achieved an outstanding result with zero negative reviews out of a total of 312, reflecting an almost perfect level of satisfaction. NL-2 and TG-1 also showed similar patterns with no negative reviews, although their total review counts were relatively small. Empal gentong and tahu gejrot emerged as the food items with the highest proportions of positive reviews (Figure 4). This consistency of positive experiences indicates the presence of stable quality standards in food presentation, service, and facilities at these eateries.

On the other hand, eateries such as TG-3 and TG-1 still have data that is too sparse for further statistically robust analysis, although the visible trend is largely positive. This highlights a limitation of sentiment analysis for eateries with low review volumes, where generalization is difficult and results can be easily skewed by a few extreme reviews. A high quantity of reviews does not always align with the quality of the customer experience.

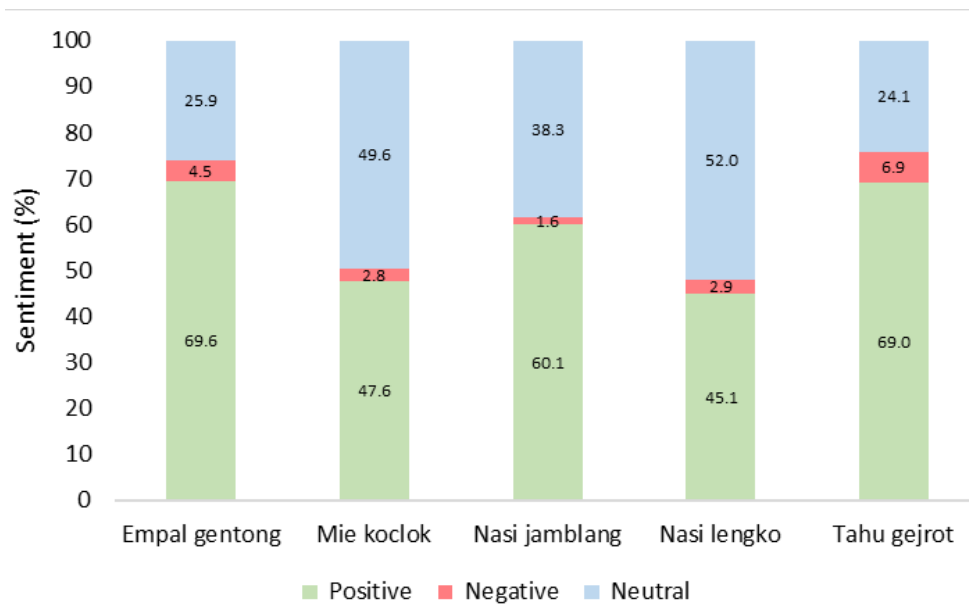


Figure 4. Sentiment for each food
Source: Authors' analysis, (2025)

Eateries with average ratings that are not exceptionally high but have large review volumes (like EG-3) likely experience more heterogeneous variations in consumer experiences, reflecting inconsistencies in service, food quality, or facilities. This variation can be attributed to factors such as differences among cooks, time of visit (morning vs. evening), or crowd levels affecting service speed (Hopkin et al., 2015). Conversely, eateries with high ratings but few reviews (like NL-2 or TG-3) tend to deliver more consistent experiences but have a more limited market reach, possibly due to less strategic locations or minimal digital promotion (Noone et al., 2009).

Word cloud visualization was used to identify the most frequently occurring keywords in reviews of different sentiments. In reviews with positive sentiment, the most dominant words included "*enak*" (tasty/delicious), "*mantap*" (excellent/awesome), "*murah*" (cheap), and "*nyaman*" (comfortable). The appearance of these words indicates a sense of satisfaction and a pleasant experience after tasting the food. Additionally, there were other words that, while not as dominant, still reflected positive impressions, such as "*cepat*" (fast), "*ramah*" (friendly), "*terjangkau*" (affordable). Interestingly, reviews were not only written in formal Indonesian but also frequently used informal language or English, for example: "*mantul*," "*manteb*," "good," "juicy," "recommended," and "friendly." This phenomenon of mixed language use reflects the heterogeneous characteristics of digital consumers in Indonesia, including younger generations accustomed to informal language and foreign tourists using English (Azyizah & Nuryanti, 2023).

The words "*enak*" and "*mantap*" generally refer to the flavor of the food, while "*murah*" and "*terjangkau*" describe prices perceived as within the consumer's means (Figure 5). Meanwhile, the word "*nyaman*" refers to facilities meeting expectations, the friendliness of servers or owners, and a strategic location making it easy to find. The dimensions of taste and price are the two most frequently mentioned factors in food product reviews on digital platforms (Gunden et al., 2020).

On the other hand, in negative sentiment reviews, the most frequently appearing words were "*kurang*" (lacking/not enough), "*mahal*" (expensive), "*panas*" (hot), "*salah*" (wrong), and "*asem*" (sour). Furthermore, there were other words that, although less dominant, still indicated an unpleasant experience, such as "*gerah*" (stifling hot), "*pelit*" (stingy), "*sempit*" (cramped), "*jauh*" (far), "*cuek*" (indifferent/unfriendly), "*berisik*" (noisy), "*kotor*" (dirty), "*berisik*" (noisy), and "*ramai*" (crowded). The word "*mahal*" signifies dissatisfaction with prices perceived as not commensurate with quality, while

4.5 Observational findings vs online ratings

Table 5. Correlation between observation and online ratings.

Source: Authors' analysis, (2025)

Facilities also showed a significant positive correlation, indicating that the availability of supporting infrastructure such as restrooms, parking areas, and general cleanliness plays a crucial role in shaping consumer satisfaction. Similarly, taste was significantly correlated, affirming that the sensory quality of food remains a fundamental element in culinary evaluation, although its influence on the overall rating is not as strong as that of price and atmosphere. Conversely, accessibility showed a very weak and non-significant correlation ($r\text{-value} = 0.091$). The same pattern was observed for service ($r\text{-value} = 0.213$) and media footprint ($r\text{-value} = 0.226$). These results can be explained by several possibilities. First, most sample eateries already had relatively good accessibility (mean score of 4.41), so the variation among them was insufficient to form a strong correlation.

5. DISCUSSION

The concept of regression to the mean explains that as the sample of reviews increases, so does the likelihood of variation in consumer experiences (Altab et al., 2022). High visitor volume can potentially lead to fluctuations in quality, whether in service, taste consistency, or physical comfort during peak hours (Jacobsen et al., 2019). This study has revealed that social proof also plays a role, as massive popularity attracts visitors from diverse segments with varied expectations, resulting in a wider range of assessments (Li et al., 2020).

Digital visibility (measured by the number of reviews) and experiential quality (measured by rating) are often separate dimensions. High ratings are more closely associated with the ability to deliver a complete and consistent culinary experience, encompassing taste, service, facilities, and accessibility (Wijanarti & Purusottama, 2022). Meanwhile, online popularity is influenced more by factors such as strategic location, operational duration, and the aggressiveness of digital marketing strategies (Melo et al., 2017). For consumers, a high rating paired with a not-yet-massive review volume can indicate a managed and personal experience. For business owners, these findings affirm that building consistent customer satisfaction is a crucial foundation that must be prioritized before pursuing massive digital popularity.

Nonetheless, secluded locations are not free from critique, such as being perceived as too cramped or difficult to access, especially for tourists unfamiliar with the area (Zainol et al., 2025). Thus, spatial location demonstrably plays a dual role in shaping consumer perception: on one hand, it enhances visibility and visitation potential through good accessibility (Park & Widyanta, 2022); on the other hand, it introduces challenges related to comfort, tranquility, and parking availability, which can negatively impact the overall culinary experience.

The price parameter had an average score of 4.06, reflecting the perception that most eateries offer reasonably good value for money, though there is still room for improvement. This positive perception of price is significant given that traditional cuisine is generally perceived as affordable and authentic, unlike modern restaurants which emphasize ambiance and visual presentation (Peri, 2006). This confirms that the success of an eatery does not depend on a single factor (Rahman et al., 2024), but rather on a harmonious combination of various elements of the consumer experience (Bangsawan et al., 2017).

The presence of words related to the physical condition of the place, such as "*sempit*" (cramped), "*kotor*" (dirty), "*panas*" (hot), "*gerah*" (stuffy/oppressive), in negative reviews confirms the findings from direct observation that the atmosphere and facilities parameters are the main weaknesses of most sample eateries (Figure 6). This indicates an alignment between perceptions expressed in online reviews and actual conditions on the ground (Hartmann et al., 2023). As for neutral sentiment, the words that appear tend to be informative or merely supplementary within the reviews. Unlike positive and negative sentiments, which can serve as evaluation material for business owners, neutral sentiment

is often overlooked in studies. Although not containing strong emotions, neutral words remain important to note as they represent real interactions experienced by buyers.



Figure 6. Sentiment analysis positive (green), negative (red), and neutral (blue) for all selected eateries
Source: Authors' analysis, (2025)

The most frequently mentioned neutral-toned words include "empal", "Cirebon", "nasi" (rice), "sate" (satay), and "lengko", which are generally related to Cirebon's typical foods. When all reviews from the 13 eateries are combined and analyzed via a word cloud without sentiment categorization (Nurbayani et al., 2025), the most dominant words are relatively similar to those appearing in the neutral sentiment category, such as "Cirebon" (city name), "enak" (delicious), "empal", "sate" (satay), "gentong" (clay pot), "makanan" (food), "kambing" (goat meat), and "jamblang". The dominance of these words indicates that a large portion of reviews focuses on mentioning the location, type of food, or local culinary characteristics, rather than directly expressing emotional evaluation (Novakarti et al., 2021). This shows that culinary reviews function not only as a means to convey satisfaction or disappointment but also as an informative medium to describe the food tried.

Consumers rating on Google Maps likely focus more on affective and emotional aspects (such as price and atmosphere) than on technical factors like ease of access, which may be considered a baseline expectation that must be met (Jeong et al., 2019). The weak correlation for the service parameter may stem from inconsistencies in service quality, which is highly dependent on crowd conditions and time of visit, making it difficult to capture accurately in an aggregate rating.

To enhance online ratings and reputation, business owners should prioritize improving physical facility quality, creating a comfortable atmosphere, and offering competitive prices with commensurate value. Although taste remains important, the elements of a holistic experience, encompassing comfort and monetary value, prove to have a greater influence on consumer perception on digital platforms (Kim et al., 2019; Makwena, 2024; Nor et al., 2023). Our study highlights the importance of integrating

direct observation with online reviews to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that shape consumer satisfaction and loyalty in the context of local culinary tourism.

6. CONCLUSIONS

While high-rated eateries excel in both flavor and ancillary factors like service, cleanliness, and ambiance, popularity alone does not guarantee excellence. The so-called culinary legends with thousands of reviews often fail to achieve top ratings, whereas smaller, less visible establishments can deliver a memorably cohesive experience by masterfully balancing taste, attentive service, and atmosphere. Sentiment analysis of online discourse reinforces these distinctions: positive reviews celebrate taste, price, and comfort, while negative feedback consistently targets high costs, disappointing flavors, indifferent service or “*cuek*”, and uncomfortable physical conditions. Neutral reviews, though emotionally muted, preserve valuable factual information about local cuisine and authentic customer interactions. Spatial positioning further shapes perception in a dualistic manner. Eateries on main roads enjoy visibility but frequently suffer complaints about noise and congestion; conversely, hidden spots in residential alleys are cherished as unique hidden gems, even when access or space is limited.

This study has several limitations, its cross-sectional design captures only a single moment in time, failing to track evolving perceptions. The sample of 13 Google Reviews eateries omits feedback from platforms like TripAdvisor or social media, and sentiment analysis for venues with few reviews remains vulnerable to extreme opinions. Future research should adopt longitudinal methods to observe changes following renovations or management shifts, and comparative multi-platform studies would yield richer insights. Investigating the popularity-quality paradox on how small eateries sustain exceptional satisfaction despite low digital visibility could reveal strategies for balancing consistency with growth. Finally, qualitative interviews with owners would illuminate operational challenges in preserving quality amid high customer volumes, offering practical pathways for the broader food industry.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS (CRediT)

Gitasiswhara: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Resources, Methodology, Conceptualization.

Millary Agung Widiawaty: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Methodology, Conceptualization.

Moh. Dede: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Conceptualization.

Ahmad Hudaiby Galih Kusumah: Funding, Validation, Resources, Supervision.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare there is no conflict of interest with the current organisation and no unethical practices followed during the study.

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