

THE DIGITAL MARKETING COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES FOR A HEALTHY FOOD BUSINESS: CASE STUDY IN BEHAVIORS AND BELIEFS AROUND ALMS-GIVING AMONG THAI BUDDHISTS

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Abstract

This conceptual article examines the intersection between Buddhist food-offering practices, monks' nutritional well-being, healthy food businesses, and digital consumption trends in contemporary Thai society. Rising rates of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) among Thai monks are partly associated with dietary patterns shaped by almsgiving practices, in which food offerings are often influenced by symbolic beliefs, perceptions of generosity, personal preferences, and convenience rather than the nutritional needs of monks. These practices may unintentionally contribute to long-term health concerns within the monastic community. Although previous studies have largely focused on monks' health conditions and dietary behaviors, less attention has been given to the socio-cultural and consumer-related factors shaping food-offering practices in Buddhist contexts. The expansion of social media, food delivery platforms, and digitally mediated merit-making practices has also begun to transform how urban Buddhists purchase, select, and offer food, creating new opportunities to connect health-conscious consumption with religious practices. The article argues that integrating nutritional knowledge, Buddhist ethical principles, and digital technology may support the development of more nutritionally appropriate food offerings for monks while preserving the cultural and spiritual significance of almsgiving traditions. In this context, healthy food businesses and digital platforms may serve as important channels for promoting greater awareness regarding nutritional quality and encouraging more health-conscious forms of merit-making in contemporary Thai society.

Keywords: Behaviors and Beliefs, Buddhists in Almsgiving, Digital Marketing, Healthy Food Business

Introduction

In recent years, rising rates of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) have heightened public attention to healthy eating and overall well-being. Appropriate nutritional intake is recognized as essential for reducing chronic health risks such as obesity, diabetes, and hypertension. As a result, interest in healthy food consumption has expanded beyond general

consumers to include communities whose dietary practices are shaped by cultural and religious traditions.

In Thailand, where Buddhism is central to social and religious life, food offering to monks remains a widely practiced form of merit-making. However, the foods selected by lay Buddhists often reflect convenience, personal preference, or notions of generosity rather than nutritional suitability. Because monks depend largely on donated meals, they may face increased vulnerability to nutritionally imbalanced diets. Multiple studies have documented elevated metabolic risks among Thai monks—including obesity, diabetes, hypertension, and dyslipidemia—largely linked to nutritionally imbalanced diets and limited physical activity (Angkatavanich et al., 2016; Sirivongs et al., 2019; Ko-amornsap et al., 2024). Although some initiatives have encouraged healthier food offerings, these efforts remain sporadic and lack sustained implementation (Puangkaew et al., 2018).

Despite existing research on monks' dietary behaviors and health conditions, less attention has been given to how laypeople's offering practices, consumer culture, and digital forms of merit-making influence monks' nutritional well-being. Moreover, connections between these issues and the role of healthy food businesses in shaping health-conscious offering practices remain limited. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, heightened health awareness and the increasing influence of digital platforms have reshaped food purchasing and consumption patterns among Thai consumers (Suvittawat & Suvittawat, 2024). These shifts create new opportunities for healthy food businesses to develop nutritionally appropriate products and services that align with Buddhist offering practices while promoting greater awareness of health-conscious almsgiving.

Accordingly, this conceptual article explores the intersection of healthy food business development, Buddhist food-offering practices, monks' nutritional well-being, and digital consumption trends in contemporary Thailand.

Health problem and Nutritional Balance

Non-communicable diseases (NCDs), including cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and hypertension, are major global health concerns closely associated with modifiable risk factors, particularly unhealthy dietary patterns and metabolic imbalance (WHO, 2022). As a result, balanced nutrition is widely regarded as a key factor in lowering chronic disease risk and supporting long-term health.



Figure 1: The Thai “2:1:1 Plate Model” illustrating recommended meal proportions consisting of vegetables, carbohydrates, and protein.

Source: Bureau of Nutrition (2009)

International and national nutritional guidelines similarly emphasize balanced dietary patterns as a central strategy for preventing NCDs and maintaining appropriate nutritional status (World Health Organization, 2023). In Thailand, these recommendations have been adapted to local dietary habits through public health tools such as the Nutrition Flag and the “2:1:1 plate model,” which promote balanced food choices and reduced intake of sugar, fat, and sodium (Bureau of Nutrition, 2007; Bureau of Nutrition, 2009).

The Nutrition Flag offers population-level guidance on recommended proportions of major food groups for daily intake, while the 2:1:1 plate model provides a simplified framework for meal composition by emphasizing greater vegetable intake and moderated portions of carbohydrates and protein. Together, these tools aim to encourage healthier eating behaviors and reduce risks associated with metabolic disorders and excessive caloric consumption.



Figure 2: The Thai Nutrition Flag illustrating recommended daily dietary proportions promoted by the Thai Ministry of Public Health

Source: Bureau of Nutrition (2007)

However, applying these recommendations may be more challenging in groups with distinct lifestyle or structural constraints. This is particularly evident among Buddhist monks, whose dietary practices are shaped by monastic discipline and reliance on alms offerings. Because they have limited control over the type and quantity of food received, their dietary patterns may not consistently align with nutritional guidelines, thereby increasing vulnerability to metabolic imbalance and diet-related diseases.

Buddhists' Behaviours in Almsgiving and Offering Alms-food to Buddhist Monks

In Buddhist thought, food is regarded as an essential requisite that supports both physical well-being and the monastic way of life. For monks, eating involves mindfulness and moderation rather than the pursuit of sensory pleasure. Food is intended to nourish the body and sustain religious practice, and Buddhist teachings emphasize mindful consumption, restraint, and balanced intake (Aonchai et al., 2022). These principles align with modern perspectives on balanced nutrition and preventive health. Some scholars have also noted conceptual links between monastic eating routines and contemporary intermittent fasting, although Buddhist practices are primarily grounded in discipline, mindfulness, and moderation rather than weight control alone (Mattson et al., 2019; Anonjarn et al., 2026).

The way these principles are practiced is shaped by wider social and cultural contexts, particularly in Buddhist societies where almsgiving strongly influences food consumption patterns. Religious and cultural beliefs are known to affect dietary behavior (Major-Smith et al., 2023). In Thailand, monks' food intake is closely connected to merit-making practices. Tak Bat (almsgiving) creates a reciprocal relationship in which laypeople provide food and daily necessities while monks provide spiritual guidance and religious teachings (Phra Suriyon Tassneeyo (Noisangoun), 2013; Butchant, 2016). Almsgiving also reinforces social ties and cultural continuity, while food offerings often carry symbolic and emotional significance. Donors may choose foods considered auspicious, desirable, or personally meaningful, and merit from these offerings may also be dedicated to deceased relatives. Studies show that these beliefs continue to shape offering practices in both urban and rural communities (Tasen & Tuongratanaphan, 2019).

However, social and economic changes have transformed almsgiving practices. Rural households often prepare home-cooked dishes, whereas urban lifestyles increasingly encourage reliance on ready-made food sets that are frequently high in sugar, fat, and sodium. These offering practices may also reflect broader consumer values that associate abundance, palatability, and desirable foods with generosity and merit. Although such offerings are rooted in religious devotion and generosity, their nutritional implications are often overlooked. The restricted control over donated meals, combined with the monastic lifestyle, contributes to an increased risk of chronic health conditions and hypertension among monks (Srimanee et al., 2013; Nonlaopon et al., 2024).

This tension between the symbolic meaning of food in merit-making practices and the nutritional needs of monks represents an important challenge for supporting monastic health in contemporary Thai society. In many cases, symbolic values associated with generosity, abundance, and palatable foods may take precedence over nutritional appropriateness in food offerings. As a result, almsgiving practices may unintentionally contribute to nutritionally imbalanced dietary patterns among monks.

Monastic Food Consumption and Health Risks

Empirical research in Thailand indicates that foods commonly offered to monks may contribute to nutritional imbalances and increase the risk of obesity, diabetes, hypertension, and other non-communicable diseases (NCDs) within the monastic community (Kittiyanamedhi et al., 2018). Frequently offered foods include coconut milk-based curries, fried dishes, sweetened beverages, and energy-dense desserts, whereas healthier options such as steamed foods or high-fiber meals are less commonly provided (Kuramasuwan et al., 2013).

These concerns have become more apparent alongside changing dietary practices and the growing use of commercially prepared almsgiving sets. Studies suggest that many ready-made offerings contain high levels of sugar, fat, and sodium while lacking adequate fiber and nutritional balance (Kamkokgruad et al., 2019). Because monks rely heavily on donated meals and have limited control over food selection, such dietary patterns may contribute to increasing rates of overweight, obesity, and metabolic disorders among monks (Phachan & Muktabhant, 2015).

Recent research also indicates growing awareness among some monks regarding the relationship between donated food and long-term health risks (Sirimongkon et al., 2025). Addressing these concerns may therefore require both greater nutritional awareness and broader public understanding regarding healthier food offerings. In this context, integrating nutritional knowledge into merit-making practices may help encourage food offerings that better support monks' physical well-being and long-term religious life. Such efforts may be supported through temple-based activities, health communication, and collaboration between religious and health-related organizations.

Healthy Food Business and Digital Merit-Making in Contemporary Thailand

Earlier market reports suggested that healthy food products in Thailand remained relatively limited and were concentrated primarily in urban consumer markets (Yamada Consulting & Spire Research and Consulting, 2018). Over time, increasing awareness of nutrition and lifestyle-related diseases has contributed to a growing demand for healthier food choices and health-oriented consumption patterns among consumers, reflecting broader shifts within the global and Thai wellness economy. As evidenced by growing concerns over diet-related NCDs among Thai monks (Nonlaopon et al., 2024; Sirimongkon et al., 2025), health is increasingly

becoming part of everyday life rather than solely a medical concern. At the policy level, national initiatives have increasingly emphasized disease prevention, public health awareness, and reducing diet-related non-communicable diseases (NCDs) (World Health Organization, 2022).

Thailand's rapidly developing digital environment has also reshaped consumer choices, especially regarding food, convenience, and health. Social media, online marketplaces, and food delivery applications now serve as key channels for accessing food products and health-related information (Statista, 2022; DataReportal, 2024; Wanvoraset & Monjagapate, 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated this shift by increasing reliance on online purchasing and food delivery services as changing lifestyles and mobility restrictions reshaped everyday consumption patterns (Roongsathaporn & Satawedin, 2021; Jaroenwanit et al. (2022). In response, healthy food businesses strengthened their digital presence to provide more convenient access to healthier food options.

Meanwhile, digital technologies have become more deeply integrated into religious and merit-making practices in Thailand. Online merit-making and digitally mediated Buddhist rituals expanded substantially during and after the pandemic, reflecting how religious practices have adapted to contemporary digital lifestyles (Rakmak et al., 2024). Through digital communication platforms, temples and related organizations can now facilitate participation in merit-making beyond physical settings, including online food offerings (Yavaprabhas, 2024).

These changes reveal a growing intersection between health-conscious consumption and Buddhist merit-making practices. Traditionally, food offerings prioritize generosity, symbolic value, taste, and convenience, often reflecting donors' preferences rather than monks' nutritional needs. These patterns may contribute to nutritionally imbalanced diets among monks (Kamkokgruad et al., 2019). In this context, healthy food businesses and digital platforms present new opportunities to promote more nutrition-conscious forms of merit-making by linking health-conscious consumption with Buddhist food-offering practices.

Overall, this convergence reflects evolving dynamics in contemporary Thai society, where digital consumption, health awareness, and religious merit-making increasingly intersect. As these trends continue, healthy food businesses may play a growing role not only as commercial providers but also as intermediaries connecting nutritional knowledge, religious values, and modern consumer lifestyles.

Conceptual Synthesis and Emerging Opportunities

The findings presented in this conceptual article indicate that monks' nutritional well-being is influenced not only by individual eating practices, but also by broader interactions among Buddhist beliefs, merit-making traditions, consumer behavior, digital technologies, and emerging trends in health-focused food businesses. To integrate these interconnected

elements, Table 1 summarizes how key nutritional concerns align with potential health-oriented opportunities within contemporary Thai Buddhist food-offering practices.

Table 1: Synthesis of Buddhist Food-Offering Practices, Nutritional Concerns, and Health-Oriented Opportunities in Contemporary Thailand

Dimension	Key Nutritional Concern	Potential Health-Oriented Response / Opportunity
Buddhist Beliefs on Food Consumption	Food offerings may prioritize symbolic meaning, generosity, and taste rather than nutritional balance.	Encourage understanding that nutritionally appropriate offerings can align with compassionate giving and enhance monks' long-term well-being.
Merit-Making and Almsgiving Practices	Ready-made or convenience foods commonly provided may be high in sugar, fat, and sodium.	Develop nutritionally balanced almsgiving meal sets guided by tools such as the Nutrition Flag and the 2:1:1 plate model.
Monastic Food Dependency	Monks depend almost entirely on donated meals, giving them limited influence over their dietary choices.	Promote nutrition education and public awareness through partnerships between temples and health agencies to support healthier food offerings.
Monastic Health Risks	Unbalanced diets can heighten risks of obesity, diabetes, hypertension, and metabolic disorders among monks.	Incorporate nutritional awareness into offering practices, health-conscious merit-making, and temple-based health promotion initiatives.
Digital Merit-Making Practices	Digital convenience may reproduce existing unhealthy food-offering patterns	Use digital platforms to promote healthier and more nutrition-conscious forms of merit-making
Healthy Food Business Development	Limited availability of monk-oriented healthy food options in the market	Develop Buddhist-compatible healthy food products and monk-appropriate meal services

As shown in Table 1, the growing intersection between nutrition awareness, Buddhist merit-making practices, and digital consumption trends creates new opportunities for developing more health-conscious forms of almsgiving in contemporary Thai society. These shifts indicate that healthy food businesses and digital platforms may play a growing role in

reshaping food-offering practices in ways that uphold spiritual values while enhancing monks' well-being.

Body of Knowledge

The proposed conceptual synthesis model begins with traditional Buddhist merit-making values, which represent personal, cultural, and religious factors shaping Buddhists' food-offering behaviors. These food-offering practices directly influence monastic food consumption patterns and may contribute to nutritional imbalance and health risks among monks, including obesity and non-communicable diseases (NCDs).

However, increasing nutritional awareness and the transition toward digital society act as important driving forces that create emerging health-oriented opportunities. These opportunities include healthy food businesses, health-conscious forms of merit-making, digital merit-making platforms, and more effective nutrition communication. Together, these developments reflect the evolving intersection among Buddhist practices, nutrition awareness, and digital transformation in contemporary Thai society.

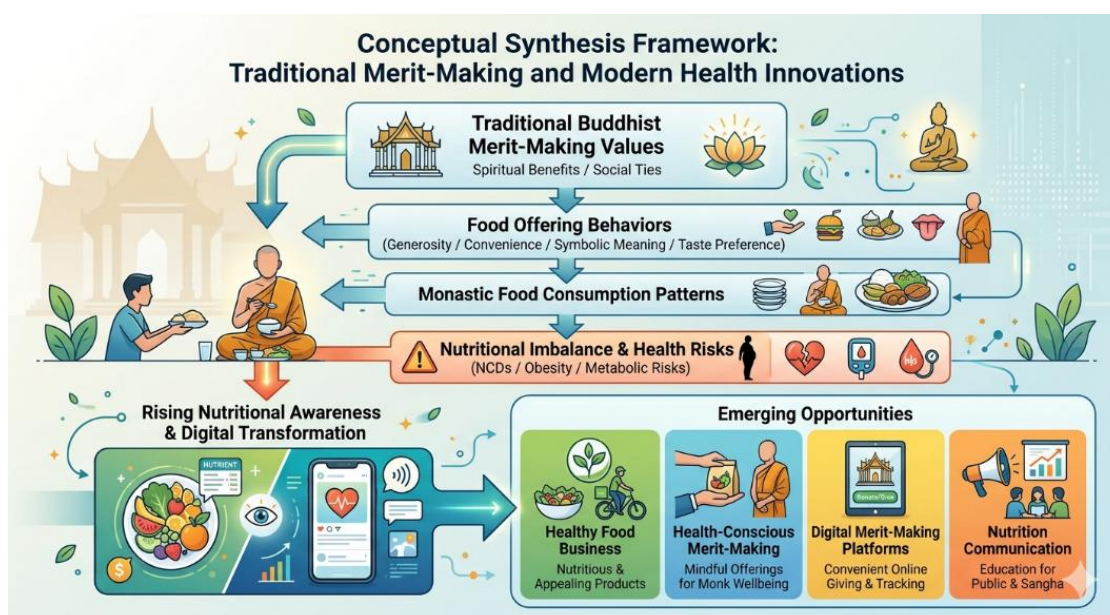


Figure 3: Conceptual synthesis model: Thai health – oriented merit - making

Source: Synthesized by the author using Gemini

Conclusion

The practice of offering food to monks in Thailand today is influenced by religious values, growing attention to health, and changes in consumer behavior shaped by digital technology. In the past, people often chose food for monks based on their intention to make merit, personal taste, convenience, or cultural beliefs, rather than on the actual nutritional

needs of monks. As a result, some offerings may not be nutritionally balanced and could affect monks' long-term health. With increasing health awareness, offering healthier food can be viewed as a way of supporting Buddhist practice through compassion, care, and mindful giving.

At the same time, technology has become more involved in merit-making activities. Online donation platforms and food delivery services for monks are becoming popular among urban individuals who may have limited time but have easy access to digital tools. This creates opportunities for healthy food businesses to develop meals specifically suitable for monks and to support new ways of making merit. In this role, healthy food providers may act not only as commercial sellers but also as intermediaries who help connect nutritional knowledge with cultural values and religious practices.

In addition to working with health organizations, collaboration with temples is also important. Online platforms can help promote awareness about healthier food offerings and support monks in understanding balanced and appropriate dietary choices. In the future, food offerings may gradually shift from being mainly symbolic acts of generosity toward a more health-aware approach to merit-making—one that maintains spiritual intention while also caring for the long-term well-being of the monastic community.

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