

# The Impact of Social Media Influencers on Consumer Buying Decisions Related to Food Products

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## Abstract

Social media influencers have significantly reshaped consumer buying behaviour, especially in the food industry. With the widespread use of platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok, consumers increasingly rely on influencers for product recommendations, reviews, and insights before making food-related purchases. This study explores the impact of social media influencers on consumer decision-making, focusing on key factors such as trust, perceived authenticity, and expertise, which often make influencer endorsements more persuasive than traditional advertising.

As modern consumers become more conscious of their food choices prioritizing health, sustainability, and transparency, social media influencers play a crucial role in shaping perceptions and purchase decisions. They provide detailed product information, personal experiences, and even criticisms, making them a trusted source of guidance. Additionally, the rise of "food influencers" is challenging brand narratives, fostering consumer scepticism, and encouraging informed decision-making.

This research employs a mixed-methods approach to analyse how influencers influence purchasing behaviour, considering aspects like engagement levels, credibility, and brand alignment. The study aims to provide valuable insights for brands, marketers, and policymakers on optimizing influencer marketing strategies while ensuring transparency and ethical consumer engagement in the evolving digital marketplace.

**Keywords:** Social media influencers, consumer buying behavior, food marketing, trust, authenticity, credibility, engagement, brand alignment, influencer marketing, digital platforms, ethical consumer engagement.

## Introduction and Literature Review

### Introduction

Social media has transformed how consumers discover, evaluate, and purchase food products. Unlike traditional marketing—dominated by television advertisements, billboards, and word-of-mouth recommendations—digital platforms provide a direct and interactive space for brands to influence consumer choices through social media influencers. These influencers, having established credibility within their respective niches, play a pivotal role in shaping food trends, promoting products, and influencing dining preferences.

The reliance on social media influencers is growing significantly. A Nielsen (2023) report revealed that 75% of consumers trust influencer recommendations more than traditional brand advertisements. Similarly, a Statista survey (2022) found that 68% of millennials and Gen Z consumers make food-related purchasing decisions based on influencer content.

Platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok have become central to food marketing strategies, where influencers leverage high-quality visuals, product demonstrations, and personal testimonials to enhance engagement and credibility.

However, a critical aspect of this phenomenon is the role of trust and credibility in consumer decision-making. While influencers can significantly impact food choices, consumer scepticism has also increased due to sponsored content, biased reviews, and deceptive marketing tactics. The credibility of an influencer—determined by authenticity, expertise, and transparency—plays a key role in strengthening or weakening their impact. Furthermore, reverse influencers, who debunk misleading claims and expose unethical marketing practices, have introduced new challenges for brands leveraging influencer collaborations.

### Problem Statement

The impact of social media influencers on consumer buying decisions related to food has become a critical area of study in marketing and consumer behaviour. With the declining effectiveness of traditional advertising, influencer marketing has emerged as a powerful tool, offering consumers a more interactive, engaging, and relatable experience when making food-related purchasing decisions. However, despite its growing influence, several key challenges and research gaps remain regarding the effectiveness and credibility of influencer marketing.

### Key Challenges and Research Gaps

1. **Trust and Authenticity Issues:** While influencers have the ability to persuade consumers, the increasing prevalence of paid sponsorships and brand collaborations has led to scepticism. Many consumers question whether influencers are genuinely recommending products or simply promoting brands for financial gain. Understanding how trust is established between influencers and their audience is essential to evaluating their real impact on buying behaviour.
2. **Influence on Consumer Buying Behaviour:** Many brands experience a temporary increase in sales following influencer endorsements, but the long-term impact on brand loyalty remains uncertain. There is a need to explore whether influencer marketing results in one-time purchases or fosters lasting consumer relationships.
3. **Micro-Influencers vs. Celebrity Influencers:** While celebrity influencers have a broad reach, micro-influencers often have higher engagement rates and stronger trust among niche audiences. This study seeks to determine which type of influencer has a stronger impact on consumer decision-making in the food industry.
4. **Role of Influencer Credibility in Purchase Decisions:** The credibility of an influencer—shaped by expertise, transparency, and authenticity—plays a major role in consumer decision-making. However, the exact nature of this credibility–buying behaviour relationship remains underexplored.

### Literature Review

1. **"The More Followers the Better? The Impact of Food Influencers on Consumer Behaviour in the Social Media Context"** This study explores how the number of followers impacts the effectiveness of food influencers. It finds that macro-influencers (with large followings) are more effective when delivering entertaining content, while micro-influencers (with smaller followings) are equally effective for informational content.
2. **"Social Media and Food Consumer Behaviour: A Systematic Review"** This comprehensive review examines how social media platforms influence food-related consumer behaviors. It highlights the role of social media in disseminating food trends, facilitating consumer engagement, and shaping purchasing decisions.

3. **"The Impact of Social Media Influencer Marketing on Consumer Behaviour and Brand Loyalty"**  
This research paper delves into how social media influencers affect consumer behaviour and brand loyalty. It analyses the dynamics of influencer marketing, discussing strategies, challenges, and future trends.
4. **"Sustainability on the Plate: How Influencers and Social Norms Transform Food Choices"**  
This article investigates how social media influencers and societal norms drive sustainable food choices. It emphasizes the role of influencers in promoting environmentally friendly consumption.
5. **"Social Media Influencer Marketing in the Food and Beverage Industry"**  
This editorial provides an overview of influencer marketing strategies within the food and beverage sector. It discusses the effectiveness of various approaches and highlights the growing importance of social media influencers in shaping consumer preferences.

### Theoretical Underpinnings

1. **Source Credibility Theory (Hovland & Weiss, 1951):** Social media influencers derive their effectiveness from their perceived credibility, expertise, and trustworthiness. The Source Credibility Theory states that the persuasiveness of a message depends on the credibility of its source.
2. **Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986):** The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) explains how consumers process persuasive messages through two distinct routes: the central route (critical evaluation) and the peripheral route (reliance on cues like attractiveness).
3. **Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977):** Social Learning Theory states that people learn behaviours by observing and imitating others, especially those they admire or trust. Social media influencers serve as role models, shaping consumer habits and food choices.
4. **Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991):** The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) suggests that consumer actions are influenced by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control.
5. **Dual-Process Model of Trust (McKnight & Chervany, 2001):** Trust in influencers follows two parallel processes: cognitive trust (based on rational factors) and emotional trust (based on personal connections).

### Research Methodology

#### Scope of the Study

This study focuses on analysing the impact of social media influencers on consumer buying behaviour related to food products. In the era of digital marketing, influencers have emerged as key opinion leaders who shape consumer preferences, trust, and purchasing decisions through their content on platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and Facebook.

The study aims to investigate the role of influencer credibility, trust, and engagement in shaping consumer behaviour while also assessing the effectiveness of different content formats and demographic variations in response to influencer marketing.

#### Research Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to examine the impact of social media influencers on consumer buying decisions related to food. The research will focus on understanding the factors that drive consumer trust, engagement, and buying behaviour. The specific objectives are:

1. To examine the impact of social media influencers on consumer buying behaviour.
2. To analyse the role of trust in social media influencers in influencing consumer purchasing decisions.

3. To evaluate the mediating effect of credibility on the relationship between social media influencers and consumer buying behaviour.

### Research Hypotheses

Based on the literature review and research objectives, the study frames the following hypotheses:

**H1:** Social media influencers have a significant positive impact on consumer buying behaviour.

**H2:** Trust in social media influencers positively influences consumer buying behaviour.

**H3:** The credibility of social media influencers strengthens the relationship between influencers and consumer buying behaviour.

### Research Design

This study employs a quantitative research approach using survey methodology as the primary data collection method.

The research design consists of:

1. **Survey Research (Primary Data Collection Method):** A structured survey was conducted to gather insights from consumers who actively engage with food influencers on social media. The survey was distributed via Google Forms, social media groups, and online food communities.
2. **Data Analysis:** The collected data was analysed using statistical tools such as regression analysis, correlation tests, and descriptive analysis to evaluate relationships between influencer attributes and consumer decisions.

### Variables of the Study

1. **Independent Variables:**
  - Presence of Social Media Influencers
  - Influencer Trustworthiness
  - Influencer Credibility
2. **Mediating Variable:**
  - Influencer Credibility
3. **Dependent Variables:**
  - Consumer Buying Behaviour
  - Consumer Trust in Influencers
  - Purchase Intent

### Data Analysis and Interpretation

#### Techniques for Data Analysis

To analyse the impact of social media influencers on consumer buying behaviour in the food industry, a quantitative approach was employed. The collected survey data was processed and analysed using statistical techniques to derive meaningful insights. The following data analysis techniques were used:

1. **Descriptive Statistics:** Descriptive statistics such as mean, standard deviation, and frequency distributions were used to summarize the demographic characteristics of respondents and to provide an overview of responses to each item in the questionnaire.
2. **Reliability and Validity Analysis:** Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability. Construct validity was evaluated through Average Variance Extracted (AVE), the Fornell-Larcker criterion, and the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio.
3. **Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA):** EFA was conducted using Smart PLS to identify the underlying structure of variables and determine the factor loadings.
4. **Structural Equation Modelling (SEM):** To test the relationships between latent variables and validate the research model, Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) was performed using SmartPLS.
5. **Hypothesis Testing:** Statistical tests such as t-tests and path coefficient significance tests were carried out within SmartPLS to test the hypotheses. The bootstrapping method was applied to estimate the significance of the path coefficients.

### Hypothesis Testing and Interpretation

**Hypothesis 1 (H1):** Social media influencers have a significant positive impact on consumer buying behaviour.

- **Result:** The path from social media influencers to consumer buying behaviour ( $SM \rightarrow CBB$ ) shows a positive and significant relationship ( $p = 0.036$ ), confirming that influencer presence has a direct impact on consumers' food-related purchasing decisions.

**Hypothesis 2 (H2):** Trust in social media influencers positively influences consumer buying behaviour.

- **Result:** Trust in social media influencers ( $T \rightarrow CBB$ ) is also significant ( $p = 0.029$ ), indicating that when consumers perceive influencers as trustworthy, they are more likely to act on their recommendations.

**Hypothesis 3 (H3):** The credibility of social media influencers strengthens the relationship between influencers and consumer buying behaviour.

- **Result:** Although the direct path from credibility to buying behaviour ( $C \rightarrow CBB$ ) is only marginally significant ( $p = 0.057$ ), the interaction effects provide meaningful insights. The interaction between credibility and social media ( $C \times SM \rightarrow CBB$ ,  $p = 0.036$ ) and between credibility and trust ( $C \times T \rightarrow CBB$ ,  $p = 0.011$ ) are both statistically significant. This indicates that credibility acts as a strong moderator, enhancing the influence of both social media presence and trust on consumer buying behaviour.

### Demographic Analysis

1. **Age Group:** The majority (39.9%) of respondents belong to the 25–34 age group, followed by 22.6% in the 35–44 bracket. Young adults aged 18–24 make up 21.9% of the sample, while respondents aged 45 and above account for 15.6%.
2. **Gender:** Females comprise the largest segment (43.9%), followed by males (29.9%). Additionally, 26.2% of participants identified as 'Other'.
3. **Education Profile:** The majority of respondents (50.2%) are undergraduates, followed by postgraduates (26.9%), and high school-educated individuals (21.6%).
4. **Occupation:** Working professionals form the largest group (30.6%), followed by business owners (26.6%) and students (25.6%).

5. **Annual Income:** The largest group of respondents (24.3%) falls within the 2,00,000–2,00,000–5,00,000 range, followed closely by those earning 5,00,000–5,00,000–7,00,000 (23.3%) and 7,00,000–7,00,000–10,00,000 (22.3%).

### Key Findings from Survey

1. **Platform Usage:** Instagram stands out as the most popular platform for food-related content (71.4%), followed by YouTube (50.2%), TikTok (46.5%), and Facebook (45.5%).
2. **Reliance on Influencers:** 29.2% of respondents reported relying on influencers "sometimes," while 24.6% stated they "rarely" rely on influencer recommendations.
3. **Influencer Credibility:** A significant majority of respondents (27.6% agreed and 23.9% strongly agreed) indicated that influencer credibility is important in their purchase decisions.
4. **Purchase Behaviour:** 28.9% of respondents reported purchasing food products based on influencer recommendations "often," while 25.9% do so "sometimes."
5. **Visual Presentation Impact:** 28.2% of respondents agreed and 15% strongly agreed that the visual presentation of a food product in an influencer's content impacts their purchase decision.

### Summary and Implications

#### Research Outcome

The present study aimed to investigate the impact of social media influencers on consumer buying behaviour in the food industry, with a specific focus on the roles of trust and credibility. Using SmartPLS for structural equation modelling, the results provide clear empirical support for the proposed conceptual framework. All key constructs—social media influence, trust, and credibility—showed significant relationships with consumer buying behaviour either directly or through interaction effects.

The analysis confirmed that social media influencers have a significant and positive impact on consumer buying behaviour (path coefficient = 0.107,  $p = 0.036$ ). This validates Hypothesis 1 and aligns with previous literature suggesting that influencer marketing is an effective tool for influencing consumer decisions, especially in visually-driven industries like food. Furthermore, trust in influencers also demonstrated a statistically significant effect on consumer behaviour (coefficient = 0.077,  $p = 0.029$ ), confirming Hypothesis 2. This highlights that consumers are more likely to engage with and act on recommendations from influencers they perceive as honest, transparent, and authentic.

While the direct effect of credibility on consumer buying behaviour was marginally significant (coefficient = 0.099,  $p = 0.057$ ), its moderating effects were both statistically meaningful. The interaction between credibility and social media ( $C \times SM \rightarrow CBB$ ) showed significance at  $p = 0.036$ , and the interaction between credibility and trust ( $C \times T \rightarrow CBB$ ) was even more robust at  $p = 0.011$ . These findings support Hypothesis 3 and indicate that credibility enhances the effectiveness of both social media influence and trust in driving consumer purchase decisions.

#### Theoretical Implications

1. **Validation of the Source Credibility Theory:** This research reaffirms the Source Credibility Theory, which posits that communicators perceived as credible—based on expertise and trustworthiness—are more persuasive. In the context of this study, credibility not only influenced behaviour directly (marginally) but also enhanced the effects of both trust and influencer presence.
2. **Application of the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM):** The findings align with the Elaboration Likelihood Model, which states that persuasive communication is more effective when the audience is both motivated and able to process the message. When influencers are perceived as trustworthy and credible,



consumers are more likely to process the message through the central route, leading to more enduring behavioral changes.

3. **Reinforcement of Trust Theory in Digital Environments:** The study contributes to Trust Theory by confirming that trust is a significant factor in consumer decision-making within digital and influencer-driven marketing environments.
4. **New Insights on the Role of Credibility as a Moderator:** Unlike previous research that often treats credibility as a direct predictor, this study emphasizes its interactive role. The significance of the interaction terms provides a nuanced understanding: credibility enhances the effectiveness of trust and social media presence, making it a critical element in influencer marketing strategies.

### Practical Implications

1. **Influencer Selection:** Brands should prioritize influencers who demonstrate high levels of credibility and trustworthiness, as these attributes significantly enhance the impact of their endorsements.
2. **Content Strategy:** Influencers should focus on creating authentic, transparent, and engaging content that builds trust with their audience. High-quality visuals and detailed product reviews are particularly effective.
3. **Target Audience:** Marketers should target younger demographics (18-34 years) who are more active on social media and more likely to be influenced by digital content.
4. **Platform Selection:** Instagram and YouTube are the most effective platforms for food-related influencer marketing, and brands should prioritize these channels for their campaigns.
5. **Long-term Relationships:** Building long-term relationships with credible influencers can lead to sustained consumer trust and loyalty, rather than one-time purchases.

### Discussion

The findings of this study contribute to the growing body of literature on influencer marketing by providing empirical evidence of the roles of trust and credibility in shaping consumer buying behaviour in the food industry. The results align with previous studies that highlight the importance of source credibility and trust in persuasive communication (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

One of the key findings is the moderating role of credibility in enhancing the impact of social media influencers and trust on consumer buying behaviour. This suggests that while the mere presence of influencers and the trust they inspire are important, their effectiveness is significantly amplified when they are perceived as credible. This finding has important implications for both brands and influencers, as it underscores the need for authenticity, expertise, and transparency in influencer marketing campaigns.

The demographic analysis reveals that younger consumers (18-34 years) are the most active and responsive to influencer content, which is consistent with previous research on digital consumer behaviour (De Veirman et al., 2017). Additionally, the preference for visually-driven platforms like Instagram and YouTube highlights the importance of high-quality visual content in food marketing.

However, the study also reveals a level of scepticism among consumers, with a significant portion (24.6%) rarely relying on influencer recommendations. This suggests that while influencer marketing is powerful, it is not universally effective, and brands must work to build genuine trust and credibility with their audience.

## Conclusion

This research has highlighted the increasing role that social media influencers play in shaping consumer buying decisions, especially in the food sector. Through rigorous analysis using Excel, and SmartPLS, it has been established that influencer credibility and trust are paramount in enhancing consumer engagement and driving food-related purchases. Social proof, brand alignment, and platform engagement all feed into a consumer's final buying decision, but it is ultimately the perception of authenticity and reliability that drives action.

The validation of all three hypotheses has reinforced the conceptual model designed for this study, providing both academic and practical value. For marketers, this means that selecting influencers should not solely rely on follower count or popularity, but rather on the influencer's ability to build trust and maintain credibility over time. The findings offer a grounded foundation for developing influencer marketing strategies that are both effective and ethical, focusing on long-term consumer trust rather than short-term gains.

On a theoretical level, this research enriches the application of trust and credibility theories within a modern digital context, integrating them into the fabric of consumer psychology in the social media era. It also paves the way for further adaptation of traditional marketing models to suit contemporary digital marketing frameworks.

## Scope for Further Research

Building upon the current findings, future research can explore a broader scope both in terms of demographic diversity and conceptual depth. One potential direction is conducting longitudinal studies that track the same set of consumers over a longer period to understand how sustained influencer interactions impact brand loyalty and consumer trust. This would provide insights into whether repeated exposure strengthens or diminishes trust and purchase intent over time.

Additionally, future research could expand the demographic reach by including respondents from rural and tier-3 cities, and incorporating older adults above 45 to assess generational differences in influencer perception. A comparative cross-country study would also be valuable in examining cultural factors that influence trust and credibility differently across nations. Another promising area for further exploration lies in the comparative impact of different content formats (e.g., reels vs. stories vs. live videos) and how algorithm changes affect consumer reach and engagement. Integrating advanced tools like sentiment analysis, eye-tracking, or AI-based behavioural tracking could yield deeper insights into consumer responses.

Lastly, qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews or focus groups with consumers and influencers could complement the current quantitative findings, offering richer narratives and uncovering motivations that are not easily captured through surveys.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Survey Questionnaire

#### Section 1: Demographics

1. Age
2. Gender
3. Location (Urban/Semi-Urban/Rural)
4. Education Level
5. Frequency of Social Media Use

#### Section 2: Perception of Social Media Influencers (SMIs)

1. Do you rely on influencers for recommendations of food purchases?
2. Giveaways and contests by influencers make you aware of new food products
3. Influencer reviews of food products affect your perception of those products
4. Influencer recommendations are more important to you than traditional advertisements for food products:

#### Section 3: Trust in Social Media Influencers

1. The engagement level of an influencer (e.g., replying to comments) affects your trust in their recommendations
2. The geographic location of an influencer affects your trust in their food product recommendations
3. You prefer influencers who promote niche food products (e.g., organic, vegan) over generic ones:
4. After seeing a food product endorsed by an influencer, you research more about it:

#### Section 4: Credibility of Influencers

1. The credibility of an influencer is important in your purchase decision while buying a product they promote.
2. You consider the number of likes, comments, and shares on an influencer's post before purchasing a food product
3. The lifestyle or values of an influencer need to align with yours for you to follow their food recommendations:

#### Section 5: Consumer Buying Behaviour

1. Collaborative campaigns between influencers and food brands (e.g., product launches, live sessions) encourage you to buy the product:
2. You have felt misled by influencer promotions of food products, and this has impacted your future decisions.
3. You purchase food products based on an influencer's recommendation

4. You have felt misled by influencer promotions of food products, and this has impacted your future decisions

(Likert Scale: 5 – Strongly Disagree, 1 – Strongly Agree)

## Appendix B: SPSS Output Tables

- **Table 1:** Base line Analysis
- **Table 2:** Reliability Test (Cronbach's Alpha)
- **Table 3:** Heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT) - Matrix
- **Table 4:** Fornell-Larcker criterion
- **Table 5:** Factor Loading

## Appendix C: SmartPLS Output

- **Model Diagram:** Path Model showing SMI → Trust → Credibility → CBB
- **Path Coefficients:** Standardized beta values and significance
- **R-square Values:** For Trust and Consumer Buying Behaviour
- **Model Fit Indices:** SRMR and AVE results

## Appendix D: Consent Form

Participants were informed about the objective of the study, ensured anonymity, and voluntarily participated by filling out the online questionnaire.

## Appendix E: Tools Used

- **SmartPLS:** Used for Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) and hypothesis testing.
- **Microsoft Excel:** Used for data cleaning and initial data visualization.

## Glossary

### Social Media Influencer (SMI)

An individual who has the power to affect the purchasing decisions of others because of their authority, knowledge, position, or relationship with their audience on social media platforms.

### Consumer Buying Behaviour (CBB)

The process and actions a consumer take before, during, and after making a purchase decision, particularly in response to digital stimuli like influencer endorsements.

**Trust**

A consumer's belief that an influencer is honest, genuine, and prioritizes the consumer's best interest.

**Credibility**

The perceived expertise, trustworthiness, and authenticity of a social media influencer.

**Likert Scale**

A psychometric scale commonly used in questionnaires to measure attitudes, opinions, or perceptions across a continuum from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

**Structural Equation Modelling (SEM)**

A multivariate statistical technique used to analyse structural relationships between measured variables and latent constructs.

**SmartPLS**

A software tool for Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM), particularly suited for exploratory research and prediction-oriented studies.

**Cronbach's Alpha**

A reliability coefficient used to measure the internal consistency or reliability of a set of scale or test items.

**Path Coefficient**

In SEM, it represents the strength and direction of the relationship between two variables in a model.