

# **The Role of Instagram Influencers in Shaping Consumer Trust Towards Emerging Brands**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study examines the role of Instagram influencers in shaping consumer trust toward emerging brands, with a particular focus on users in the Mumbai region. Social media platforms, especially Instagram, have become critical in modern branding due to their visual appeal, interactive features, and influencer-driven content. Through a descriptive research design and purposive sampling of 345 respondents, this research evaluates how influencer credibility and engagement impact brand perception and consumer behavior. Primary data was collected via a structured questionnaire, supported by secondary sources. The findings aim to highlight influencer marketing's effectiveness in building trust for new brands.

**Keywords:** Instagram Influencers, Branding, Consumer Trust

## **INTRODUCTION**

According to Appel et al. (2020), social media marketing has become an essential component of digital strategies, transforming the way consumers and businesses interact. The authors emphasize that the dynamic nature of social media allows for personalized, data-driven marketing efforts that are more effective in capturing consumer attention and influencing purchasing behavior. As social platforms continue to evolve, brands must adapt their strategies to stay relevant and competitive, making social media marketing a critical tool in the modern business landscape.

Social media marketing plays a crucial role in today's digital economy by enabling businesses to engage with a global audience, build brand recognition, and foster customer loyalty. It offers a dynamic platform for sharing content, promoting products, and receiving instant feedback, all of which help companies adapt quickly to consumer needs and market trends. Through interactive features like comments, shares, likes, and direct messaging, brands can develop personalized relationships with their audience, enhancing trust and emotional connection. Social media also allows for precise targeting based on user demographics, interests, and behaviors, making marketing efforts more efficient and effective. Furthermore, it encourages user-generated content and peer recommendations, which significantly influence consumer purchase decisions. As

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) note, social media provides a unique blend of communication and interaction that allows companies not only to broadcast their messages but also to participate in conversations with their customers, thereby transforming the traditional one-way communication into a collaborative dialogue.

Branding is a multidimensional concept that extends beyond logos or visual symbols to encompass the overall identity, perception, and emotional connection that a consumer associates with a product, service, or organization. According to Keller (2013), brand equity the added value a brand name gives to a product is built through consumer perceptions shaped by marketing efforts and customer experiences. As such, branding serves as both a strategic business tool and a vital communication mechanism, essential for market differentiation and sustained growth.

The fitness industry is considered one of the most vital sectors, as it contributes significantly to the global economy. One key reason for its prominence is that fitness serves as a major motivation for individuals to engage with image-based social networking sites like Instagram. Branding plays a crucial role in shaping the fitness lifestyle industry, where personal identity, image, and values are closely tied to health and wellness choices. Fitness influencers, brands, and athletes often build strong personal brands that resonate with audiences seeking motivation, guidance, and authenticity. Through consistent messaging, visual aesthetics, and product endorsements, these individuals and companies establish trust and loyalty among followers. Social media platforms like Instagram and YouTube amplify this branding, allowing fitness personalities to share workout routines, diet plans, and lifestyle habits that reflect their brand ethos. As a result, branding in the fitness lifestyle segment extends beyond products to encompass experiences, aspirations, and a sense of community, influencing consumer behavior and shaping industry trends.

Over the past century, the world has undergone rapid transformation, and marketing has evolved alongside it. In earlier times, brands primarily relied on magazines, posters, and billboards for promotion. The digital age has introduced a variety of tools like social media platforms and email marketing to connect with consumers. Among these, influencer marketing has emerged as a particularly popular and widely adopted strategy. In India, there has been a noticeable surge in online content consumption whether through images, videos, or blogs. This shift has fueled the growth and engagement of numerous brands that actively produce content to connect with consumers on a daily basis. What began as a niche tactic has now evolved into an essential element of modern marketing, forming an ecosystem that brands increasingly depend on.

Food Instagrammers have emerged as a modern lifestyle trend within the digital age. Nearly every Instagram user has shared food photos at some point, but food Instagrammers focus primarily on culinary content. While they may not receive the same level of recognition as in developed countries, their influence on social media users is substantial. In major cities, leveraging food Instagrammers has become an increasingly popular

and effective marketing strategy. The increase in the number of Food Instagrammers on Instagram increasingly proves that social media is the most popular media today.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Trusov et al. (2009) highlight that consumers generally view reviews and comments as impartial, making them a more dependable source of information compared to other influences. They found that referrals greatly influence both customer acquisition and retention, as they are seen as more credible and trustworthy than conventional advertising.

Bond et al. (2010) suggest that marketers have numerous opportunities to develop impactful strategies in response to the rapidly evolving consumer landscape. Their study revealed that businesses can effectively engage with audiences on social media, fostering large and loyal followings who may eventually act as brand advocates. Utilizing permission-based messaging or offering content through subscriptions could greatly enhance consumer receptiveness and attitudes toward brand communications on social platforms.

Consumer cynicism has become a significant focus in contemporary marketing and consumer behavior studies. It refers to the skeptical and critical outlook consumers develop toward brands, advertising, and the broader culture of consumption. According to Chylinski and Chu (2010), this cynicism emerges when consumers repeatedly experience a disconnect between their personal goals or values and the practices of companies. They further highlight that such value misalignment plays a major role in intensifying cynical consumer responses.

According to Freberg et al. (2011) influencers are widely seen as key opinion leaders who can greatly impact the perceptions and actions of their audiences. They often have expertise in specific areas, which enhances their authority and trustworthiness. In other cases, they are well-connected individuals with broad social reach, allowing them to effectively spread messages and engage large groups of followers.

Since online shopping carries greater risks and uncertainty compared to traditional retail, consumer feedback is viewed as a reliable and relatively unbiased information source. Moreover, such feedback significantly affects purchase intentions. According to Purnawirawan (2012), it functions as a technology-driven tool that helps build trust and reduce perceived risk for potential buyers in digital marketplaces.

Van Reijmersdal & Rozendaal (2012) highlight how the line that sets entertainment content and commercial content apart, especially on social networks is becoming increasingly blurry. Consequently, it is necessary to put special focus on which information is processed when they receive this type of content given that the format used in this type of advertising lacks standardization, and greatly depends on the context in which the content is developed.

Aytan & Telci (2014) found that marketing efforts conducted via social media platforms have a notable influence on a company's brand image. These digital campaigns not only enhance brand visibility but also shape consumer perceptions and emotional connections with the brand. The interactive nature of social media allows companies to build stronger relationships with their target audience, resulting in improved brand recognition and loyalty..

According to Abidin (2016), social media influencers are central to influencer marketing due to their ability to form authentic relationships with their audiences, who value and trust their views and suggestions. Their impact is largely driven by their relatability, subject-matter knowledge, and skill in producing content that resonates with the preferences and lifestyles of their followers.

Rebelo (2017) aimed to investigate how Instagram users, acting as consumers, perceive the influencers they follow on the platform. The study specifically focused on how the perceived credibility of these influencers influences consumers' purchasing intentions. It also sought to determine which aspects of credibility play the most significant role in shaping consumers' intent to buy.

According to Aragoncillo and Orus (2018) content shared by social media users such as images of purchases and product recommendations serves as a strong source of inspiration for consumer buying behavior, with social platforms significantly shaping purchasing decisions.

Černikovaitė (2019) aimed to explore the impact of influencer marketing on consumer purchasing behavior and identify the most effective partnership opportunities. The study utilized a combination of literature review and quantitative statistical analysis of empirical data. Results from research conducted in Lithuania revealed that consumers frequently turn to social media for information and heavily depend on reviews and feedback from other users when making buying decisions.

According to Dhanesh & Duthler (2019), influencers develop their careers through social media platforms by forming and maintaining direct connections with a wide audience. Their goal is to inform, entertain, and influence users, particularly by shaping their opinions, attitudes, and purchasing decisions.

Folkvord and de Bruijne (2020) conducted a study to assess the effectiveness of influencer marketing on Instagram in promoting vegetable consumption among adolescents aged 13 to 16. The results showed that such marketing strategies had no significant impact on increasing the intake of vegetables in this age group.

Sokolova and Kefi (2020) highlight that Instagram users often develop para-social relationships with beauty influencers, forming one-sided emotional bonds that foster a sense of familiarity and trust. As a result, followers tend to adopt the influencers' values, beliefs, and preferences. This emotional connection increases their likelihood of purchasing the products endorsed, as they feel aligned with the influencer's lifestyle and choices.

Canet et al. (2021) emphasized that the widespread presence of social media has provided people with unparalleled access to a vast array of food-related content. Platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and Snapchat are filled with eye-catching visuals, including photos, videos, and posts that highlight appealing dishes, popular diets, and diverse culinary experiences from around the world.

Bansal and Bhati (2022) emphasize that Influencer marketing serves as a powerful tool for shaping consumer behavior, as it can greatly influence brand perception, consumer attitudes, and purchasing decisions. They emphasize the importance of understanding both the underlying factors that drive influencer marketing and its broader implications.

According to Rini et al. (2024) with the advancement of the digital era, an increasing number of people are relying on online platforms for motivation, advice, and social approval regarding their eating habits. Social media has significantly impacted the way we make food-related decisions, influencing our tastes, preferences, and behaviors and creating a new framework for how we interact with and think about food.

## OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

- To evaluate the impact of Instagram Influencers in Branding.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a descriptive research design to evaluate the impact of Instagram influencers on branding. A purposive sampling technique was used to select 345 respondents from the Mumbai region, chosen based on relevant user characteristics aligned with the study's objective. Primary data was collected through a well-structured questionnaire designed to gather insights into consumer perceptions and influencer impact. The methodology aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how Instagram influencers contribute to brand trust and recognition among targeted users.

## ANALYSIS

Table 1: Response to the question “On a scale of 1-10, how influential do you think food and fitness influencers are in shaping?” (1 being not influential, 10 being extremely influential)

Scale	Response (In numbers)	Response (In %)
1 to 2	12	3.48
3 to 4	29	8.40
5 to 6	91	26.39
7 to 8	172	49.85
9 to 10	41	11.88
<b>Total</b>	<b>345</b>	<b>100</b>

Analysis: The responses indicate that food and fitness influencers hold a moderate to high level of influence over the audience. The majority of respondents, 49.85%, rated their influence between 7 to 8, suggesting that these influencers are perceived as significantly impactful in shaping opinions or behaviors. Another 26.39% selected a 5 to 6 rating, reflecting a moderate influence. A smaller yet notable group, 11.88%, rated the influence very high at 9 to 10, while 8.40% assigned a lower influence level of 3 to 4. Only 3.48% believed these influencers have minimal impact, giving a 1 to 2 rating.

Table 2: Response to the question “How much do you trust the recommendations of food and fitness influencers you follow” (1 being not at all, 10 being completely trustworthy)

Scale	Response (In numbers)	Response (In %)
1 to 2	14	4.06
3 to 4	52	15.07
5 to 6	116	33.62
7 to 8	139	40.29
9 to 10	24	6.96
<b>Total</b>	<b>345</b>	<b>100</b>

Analysis: The analysis reveals that a majority of respondents demonstrate a moderate to high level of trust in the recommendations of food and fitness influencers they follow. Specifically, 40.29% rated their trust between 7 to 8, indicating a relatively strong confidence in influencer content. 33.62% selected 5 to 6, reflecting a cautious but open attitude. A smaller segment, 6.96%, expressed a high level of trust by rating 9 to 10. On the lower end, 15.07% rated their trust between 3 to 4, and 4.06% reported very low trust with a rating of 1 to 2.

Table 3: Response to the question “Do you regularly engage with content from food and fitness influencers (likes, comments, shares)?”

Components	Response (In numbers)	Response (In %)
Strongly Agree	70	20.29
Agree	89	25.80
Neutral	60	17.39
Disagree	88	25.51
Strongly Disagree	38	11.01
<b>Total</b>	<b>345</b>	<b>100</b>

Analysis: A combined 46.09% of respondents agree or strongly agree that they regularly engage through likes, comments, or shares, with 25.80% agreeing and 20.29% strongly agreeing. This indicates that nearly half of

the participants actively interact with influencer content. 25.51% disagree and 11.01% strongly disagree, totaling 36.52% who do not regularly engage.

Table 4: Response to the question “Do you feel influenced by the content shared by food and fitness influencers?”

Components	Response (In numbers)	Response (In %)
Strongly Agree	93	26.96
Agree	131	37.97
Neutral	35	10.14
Disagree	61	17.68
Strongly Disagree	25	7.25
<b>Total</b>	<b>345</b>	<b>100</b>

Analysis: Majority of respondents feel influenced by the content shared by food and fitness influencers. Specifically, 37.97% agree and 26.96% strongly agree, totaling 64.93% who acknowledge being influenced to some extent. Meanwhile, 10.14% maintain a neutral stance, possibly indicating occasional influence or uncertainty. On the other hand, 17.68% disagree and 7.25% strongly disagree, adding up to 24.93% who do not feel influenced.

Table 5: Response to the question “Do you believe influencer marketing affects your purchasing decisions regarding food and fitness products?”

Components	Response (In numbers)	Response (In %)
Strongly Agree	53	15.36
Agree	116	33.62
Neutral	71	20.58
Disagree	73	21.16
Strongly Disagree	32	9.28
<b>Total</b>	<b>345</b>	<b>100</b>

Analysis: The influencer marketing has a noticeable impact on purchasing decisions related to food and fitness products for a significant portion of respondents. 33.62% of respondents agree and 15.36% strongly agree, indicating that nearly 49% feel their buying behavior is influenced by influencer marketing. Meanwhile, 20.58% remain neutral, 21.16% disagree and 9.28% strongly disagree, totaling 30.44% who do not perceive any effect on their purchasing decisions.

Table 6: Response to the question “Do you trust the recommendations made by food and fitness influencers?”

Components	Response (In numbers)	Response (In %)
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Strongly Agree	48	13.91
Agree	112	32.46
Neutral	56	16.24
Disagree	98	28.40
Strongly Disagree	31	8.99
<b>Total</b>	<b>345</b>	<b>100</b>

Analysis: The analysis shows that 46.37% of respondents (agree 32.46% and strongly agree 13.91%) that they trust the recommendations made by food and fitness influencers, indicating a moderate level of trust in influencer content. Meanwhile, 16.24% remain neutral, suggesting undecided about the reliability of such recommendations. Whereas a significant portion, 28.40% disagree and 8.99% strongly disagree, totaling 37.39% who express distrust.

Table 7: Response to the question “Do you believe that influencers accurately represent the brands they promote?”

Components	Response (In numbers)	Response (In %)
Strongly Agree	54	15.65
Agree	101	29.28
Neutral	75	21.74
Disagree	81	23.48
Strongly Disagree	34	9.85
<b>Total</b>	<b>345</b>	<b>100</b>

Analysis: The responses indicate mixed perceptions regarding the accuracy with which influencers represent the brands they promote. A combined 44.93% of respondents (agree 29.28% and strongly agree 15.65%) that influencers accurately represent brand values and offerings, reflecting a moderate level of confidence in influencer-brand alignment. However, 21.74% of participants remain neutral, suggesting uncertainty on the matter. 23.48% disagree and 9.85% strongly disagree, totaling 33.33% who doubt the authenticity or transparency of influencer endorsements.

## CONCLUSION

Firstly, food and fitness influencers are perceived to have a moderate to high level of influence over their audience, playing a significant role in shaping health, lifestyle, and dietary behaviors. Secondly, a majority of respondents express moderate to strong trust in the recommendations provided by these influencers, indicating a meaningful level of confidence in the authenticity and relevance of influencer content.

Thirdly, audience engagement with influencer content is varied, with nearly half of the respondents actively participating through likes, comments, or shares, while a significant portion remains passive or inconsistently



involved. Fourth, influencer content is acknowledged as persuasive by a large segment of the audience, confirming that such content has the capacity to impact attitudes and perceptions related to food and fitness.

Fifth, influencer marketing notably affects purchasing decisions for many respondents, suggesting that brand collaborations with influencers can directly shape consumer buying behavior in this domain. Sixth, while many respondents trust influencer recommendations, a considerable segment remains disagreed, pointing to the need for influencers to maintain credibility and transparency in their promotional efforts.

Lastly, respondents demonstrate a moderate level of confidence in influencers' ability to accurately represent brand values and offerings, although a notable portion questions the alignment and authenticity of such endorsements. These conclusions underscore the strategic importance of influencer marketing in branding, particularly when trust, authenticity, and consumer engagement are prioritized.

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