

Dissecting Influencer Attributes: The Role of Credibility, Reach, and Content Type in Building Consumer Trust and Decision Confidence

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Abstract

Social media has revolutionized the way consumers, particularly Generation Z consumers, make purchasing decisions. The current study examines the influence of influencer characteristics i.e., credibility, reach, and type of content on food choices with consumer trust as a mediator. Drawing on Source Credibility Theory and the Theory of Planned Behaviour, this study explores the relationship between these characteristics and their impact on trust and eating behavior. The major focus of this study is Generation Z since they are deeply engaged with visual and interactive food, lifestyle, and travel content.

A purposive sampling approach was targeted at Gen Z respondents aged 18–30 years from Bengaluru who are reading one or more food or lifestyle blogs. 305 usable responses were collected via an online questionnaire and processed via PLS-SEM using SmartPLS 4. The study procedure was executed in two stages: measurement model test for validity and reliability, and structural model test for path coefficients, R^2 , Q^2 , and mediation effects.

Findings show that content type has very powerful impact on consumer trust, followed by credibility and reach. Impact on trust is strongest on dining decisions and mediates the influence of all three influencer attributes. Fit indices were excellent (SRMR = 0.04, NFI = 0.934), with moderate explanatory power for trust (R^2 = 0.295) and dining decisions (R^2 = 0.218). Findings confirm Gen Z consumers are interested in authenticity, quality of interaction, and perceived expertise when deciding on dining options via social media.

This study gives digital marketers, restaurateurs, and influencers a sense of how genuine content and trustworthy engagement matter. It enriches digital consumption behavior theories and puts trust at the forefront of influencer marketing. Platform-specific behavior, consumer trait effects, and trust development can be explored by future research.

Keywords: Influencer Marketing, Generation Z, Trust, Dining Decision, PLS-SEM, Social Media Behaviour, Hospitality Marketing

1. Introduction

Consumer behaviour has been transformed because of the meteoric ascent of social media as an influential marketing channel. Of the players in the digital space, social media influencers (SMIs) have emerged as genuine and impactful middlemen between brands and customers. As digital natives, Gen Z consumers are more prone to trust influencers to guide their consumption choices, particularly in experience-driven categories like food and restaurants.

Here, influencer marketing has turned from a supplementary promotion tactic into a central element of consumer persuasion. Previously, research has set up the influencer characteristics' fundamental role in defining followers' behavioural reactions (Ohanian, 1990; Jin & Phua, 2014). These are credibility (expertise, believability), reach (audience size and visibility), and content type (visuals, stories, interactivity). These characteristics have a direct influence on perceived authenticity and value of influencer endorsements.

One of the key middleman factors in this phenomenon is consumer trust. Trust is a psychological bridge that enables the transformation of external communications into internalized preferences and behavior intentions (Chu & Kamal, 2008). If consumers trust the content being offered by an influencer, they will tend to obey their recommendations and include them in the decision-making process.

This study examines the mediator role of consumer trust in the relationship between influencer characteristics (e.g., credibility, reach, and content type) and Generation Z consumers' restaurant preferences. Restaurant behaviours are particularly susceptible to social influence because they have an experiential nature and are heavily emphasized in social media contexts.

By deconstructing the influencer popularity drivers, this study adds to the emerging body of literature on influencer marketing and offers managerial insights for brand managers, content producers, and restaurant marketers attempting to reach Gen Z consumers via social media.

2. Literature Review

- 2.1. **Influencer Credibility:** The influencer credibility concept is best understood as the core component of the influencer marketing field. Ohanian (1990) suggests three crucial dimensions that make up credibility: expertise, trust, and attractiveness. In the food and restaurant industry, credibility takes on a specific significance because customers are presented with choices that impact their own lives and health. Credible influencers are more persuasive (Jin & Phua, 2014), because their recommendations are seen as authentic and objective.
- 2.2. **Influencer Reach:** Reach is the extent and magnitude of an influencer's audience. Influencers with high reach are seen to have higher social proof, and this increases their persuasiveness (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017). It has been found through research that reach does not always lead to effectiveness—there are micro-influencers with lower reach who form deeper parasocial connections and trust (Campbell & Farrell, 2020).
- 2.3. **Content Type:** The form and character of influencer material video, image, or interactive narrative strongly determine consumer interaction. Schouten et al. (2020) emphasized that image-dense material based on narratives creates an emotional bond

and allows for a message to be recalled. For Generation Z, who are most engaged with visual material and have mobile phones, the nature of the material strongly determines the believability or dismissal of a post.

- 2.4. **Consumer Trust as a Mediator:** Consumer trust is one of the psychological processes by which influencer traits affect behaviour. Influencer trust is an indicator of the honesty and credibility perceived in the message source (Chu & Kamal, 2008). Trust acts as a mediator of the influence of credibility, reach, and content engagement in the form that it translates exposure to messages into behavioural intentions (Lou & Yuan, 2019). High trust enhances the probability of a consumer acting on influencer recommendations.
- 2.5. **Dining Decision / Restaurant Preference:** Social proof and images are crucial in the Generation Z food culture. Both Instagram and TikTok are gateways to restaurant discovery and rating. Hwang and Zhang (2018) observe that customers want to eat according to recommendations from influencers who have the same lifestyle and taste. Food culture of the new generation is influenced by numerous factors, and our review summarizes dynamics such as trust, reach, content type, and trust. In general, our findings highlight the importance of an integral examination of social media influencers' influence on customers' behaviour.

3. Theoretical Background and Hypotheses

This section introduces the theoretical premises and assumptions of the conceptual model. The conceptual model is theoretically based on the Source Credibility Theory (Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953) and the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991), which both offer explanatory processes of how influencer attributes shape the consumer's trust and action intentions.

H1: Influencer credibility is positively related to consumer trust.

Through Source Credibility Theory, credibility includes expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness, and is essential to acceptance of the message (Ohanian, 1990). In influencer marketing, a very credible influencer is seen to be more authentic and credible, thereby raising the level of trust followers have in their posts (Jin & Phua, 2014). For this reason, influencer credibility will most likely have a positive impact on consumer trust.

H2: Influencer reach is positively related to consumer trust.

Reach encompasses the influencer's following and their reach in different platforms. People with large followings are seen to be socially validated and trustworthy, and this can increase levels of trust (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017). Social proof is among the terms applied in building trust, especially among Generation Z consumers who are likely to follow signs of popularity.

H3: Influencer content type is positively related to consumer trust.

Creativity and style in influencer posts determine how their message is received and perceived by their audience. Schouten et al. (2020) believe that rich-visual, interactive, and narrative content enhances the credibility and emotional value of influencer communication. These perceptions enhance message efficacy and credibility, therefore the suggested positive relationship.

H4: Consumer trust is positively related to dining decisions / restaurant preference.

Trust is a critical antecedent of behavioural intention. In influencer marketing, the followers who believe in influencers' recommendations are likely to incorporate those recommendations into their decision-making models (Lou & Yuan, 2019). This is particularly the case for lifestyle sectors such as food and dining, where trust influences behaviour and choices significantly (Hwang & Zhang, 2018).

H5: Consumer trust mediates the relationship between influencer credibility and dining decisions.

Based on the above, influencer credibility does not have a direct influence on food choice but via trust. A reliable influencer gains the trust of the followers first, which then translates to action in behaviour terms (Cheung, Luo, Sia, & Chen, 2009). Trust is thus proposed to mediate between credibility and consumer action.

H6: Consumer trust mediates the relationship between influencer reach and dining decisions.

Similarly, while popularity is reflected by reach and social approval, it is repeated exposure that leads to trust and ultimately makes the choices. Consumers are more likely to respond to endorsements when they feel that the popularity of the influencer reflects genuine endorsement (Campbell & Farrell, 2020).

H7: Consumer trust mediates the relationship between content type and dining decisions.

Powerful effective content type (i.e., video, storytelling, visuals) increases influencers' perceived authenticity, which leads to trust. This trust acts as the process by which content affects decisions. Consequently, trust is suggested as the mediator between content type and restaurant preference (Schouten et al., 2020).

4. Methodology

Sample

The present research employed a purposive sampling method, specifically aimed at individuals from Generation Z who utilize social media and are aged between 18 and 30 years, residing in Bengaluru, India. This method of purposive sampling was selected to guarantee the participation of individuals who actively engage with content generated by influencers within the food, lifestyle, or travel sectors that are most pertinent to the study's examination of dining behaviors (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). We also used an anonymous online survey posted on Instagram and WhatsApp groups. These are social media platforms which Generation Z widely uses to communicate and engage with influencers. (Smith, 2020; Pew Research Center, 2022).

To be meaningful, we set a requirement that participants would only participate if they were following at least one social media influencer with content that was mostly food, lifestyle, or travel. We used G*Power 3.1 software in default mode to pre-estimate a sample of 300 for PLS-SEM mediation models with a medium effect size ($f^2 = 0.15$), power = 0.80, and alpha level of $\alpha = 0.05$ (Faul et al., 2009). This provided adequate statistical power to examine our hypotheses and estimate bootstrapped mediation effects.

Out of 320 responses received, 305 were available for analysis after carefully cleaning the data by removing missing and incomplete records. Informed consent was explained to participants

that membership was voluntary, and information would be kept confidential. The research followed closely ethical principles, like getting consent and protecting respondents' privacy and anonymity, as is conventional in academic studies. (Bryman, 2016; BPS, 2021).

5. Data Analysis

To achieve the objective of this research, i.e., to investigate the complex interaction between influencer attributes, consumer confidence, and eating behavior, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) has been utilized with the help of SmartPLS 4.0 software. The application of SEM is founded on two basic assumptions. First, SEM is a powerful multivariate statistical method that supports the estimation and verification of causal relationships between latent variables (Hair et al., 2019). The application of this technique enables the researcher to concurrently consider both measurement and structural model elements, thereby explaining the interrelation between variables more comprehensively than any ordinary regression analysis. (Hair, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2011).

Second, PLS-SEM is specifically suitable for formative and reflective construct models, mediating processes, and non-normal distributed data, which is the conceptual framework of this study. Additionally, other relevant studies on hospitality, consumer behavior, and electronic marketing have supported the use of PLS-SEM in investigating behavioral intentions and trust relationships. (Ringle et al., 2020; Henseler et al., 2016).

The analysis followed a two-stage procedure:

Measurement Model Assessment: This was a step where construct reliability, indicator loadings, Average Variance Extracted (AVE) convergent validity, and discriminant validity were tested with the Fornell-Larcker criterion and the HTMT ratio. This ensures that the latent variables significantly measure the observed indicators without correlation.

Structural Model Evaluation: After establishing reliability and validity, the interrelations between the variables were then studied. These comprised path coefficient analysis, t-statistics, p-values, and R^2 values, and effect sizes (f^2) and predictive relevance (Q^2) to determine the strength and significance of the hypothesized relationships, including the mediating one of consumer trust.

Assessment of measurement model

To determine the reflective measurement model's internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity, a test was conducted in line with the guidelines of Hair et al. (2019) and Fornell and Larcker (1981). The test results are presented in Table 1 and include five crucial constructs: Content Type, Credibility, Dining Decision, Reach, and Trust.

The internal reliability was tested using Cronbach's Alpha, Composite Reliability (CR), and ρ_A according to Dijkstra and Henseler (2015). Table 1 shows that all the constructs had Cronbach's Alpha values above the minimum acceptable level of 0.70 according to Nunnally and Bernstein (1994), hence satisfying the internal consistency. The Composite Reliability for all the constructs was between 0.94 and 0.957, which lie in the desirable range of 0.70 to 0.95. Although values of CR greater than 0.95 indicate redundancy of items according to Hair et al. (2011), none of the constructs tested in this study had a value above this, hence indicating an ideal balance between item uniqueness and internal consistency.

Convergent validity checks if a set of indicators indeed measures the latent construct as it should, in that the indicators highly correlate with their latent variable (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). Convergent validity was examined in this study according to Indicator Loadings and Average

Variance Extracted (AVE). According to Hair et al. (2014) guidelines, indicator loadings need to be above the recommended minimum of 0.70. The results confirmed the condition since all item loadings ranged from 0.868 to 0.953, indicating high indicator reliability.

In addition, the AVE for every construct was greater than the minimum threshold of 0.50, indicating that more than 50% of every construct's variation is explained by its respective indicators. Specifically, Content Type recorded an AVE of 0.874, Credibility earned 0.866, Dining Decision recorded 0.807, Reach reported 0.883, and Trust recorded 0.841. All these high AVE values are strong proofs for convergent validity for all constructs, which confirm that chosen indicators are always measuring their respective latent variables.

This finding is in favor of the argument that every construct explains over 50% of variance in its indicators and thus establishes the existence of convergent validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

All the indicators loaded above the 0.50 threshold; therefore, no items had to be dropped. Additionally, the high Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values gave confidence that even poor indicators, which were present in this analysis, would never threaten construct validity in case of their emergence (Henseler et al., 2009).

The loading of all of the items was more than 0.7, indicating that the latent constructs are adequate to explain their indicators (Hair et al., 2017). For example, indicators of content type (CT1–CT4) showed high loadings (0.923–0.947), and credibility indicators (CR1–CR4) also showed high reliability (0.922–0.94). Similarly, the trust indicators were 0.907 to 0.941, which established tremendous indicator reliability.

Table 1: Analysing the data from scales used to measure various constructs

Construct/Indicators	Indicator Loadings	Mean	Standard Deviation	Composite Reliability	Cronbach Alpha	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Content Type				0.952	0.957	0.874
CT1	0.923	4.154	0.572			
CT2	0.938	4.121	0.58			
CT3	0.947	4.138	0.573			
CT4	0.931	4.157	0.574			
Credibility				0.949	0.958	0.866
CR1	0.931	3.954	0.523			
CR2	0.922	3.961	0.548			
CR3	0.93	3.97	0.527			
CR4	0.94	3.993	0.525			
Dining Decision				0.94	0.942	0.807
DD1	0.894	2.121	0.494			
DD2	0.912	2.121	0.494			
DD3	0.907	2.115	0.502			
DD4	0.868	2.138	0.459			
DD5	0.908	2.131	0.482			
Reach				0.956	0.957	0.883
RE1	0.94	3.787	0.559			
RE2	0.925	3.8	0.569			
RE3	0.941	3.8	0.597			

RE4	0.953	3.797	0.571			
Trust				0.953	0.953	0.841
Trust_1	0.92	3.587	0.537			
Trust_2	0.907	3.584	0.513			
Trust_3	0.941	3.6	0.529			
Trust_4	0.91	3.557	0.535			
Trust_5	0.908	3.574	0.52			

Table 2: Discriminant Validity (Fornell–Larcker criterion)

	Content Type	Credibility	Dining Decision	Reach	Trust
Content Type	0.935				
Credibility	0.174	0.931			
Dining Decision	0.176	0.21	0.898		
Reach	0.019	0.034	0.195	0.94	
Trust	0.327	0.25	0.467	0.299	0.917

The discriminant validity test is essential to prove that each member of the model is different from another. That is, they are capturing different concepts (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). To prove this, the Fornell–Larcker criterion was utilized. This is by comparing the square root of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) of each hidden variable with how it correlates with other hidden variables within the model.

Table 2 shows that the square root of Average Variance Extracted (AVEs) on the diagonal was always higher than its respective inter-construct correlations for all the measures. For instance, the square root of AVE of Content Type is 0.935, which is higher than its correlations with Credibility (0.174), Dining Decision (0.176), Reach (0.019), and Trust (0.327). Similarly, Trust, which is 0.917 on the diagonal, has lower correlations with all the other measures and therefore satisfies the Fornell–Larcker criterion.

This means that every construct shows a greater level of variability with its corresponding indicators than the indicators of other constructs, thus making it possess strong discriminant validity. This is the most common method in the whole structural equation modeling process (Hair et al., 2019; Henseler, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2015). Moreover, the model avoids the problem of multicollinearity since neither lateral nor vertical collinearity was present or needed to be examined in this case, based on the positive directional nature of the constructs utilized. (Sarstedt et al., 2017).

Structural model assessment and hypotheses testing

The structural model proposed was subjected to testing with Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) as an appropriate technique for latent variable models that allows exploratory theoretical testing (Hair et al., 2017). A range of measures was utilized to determine model fit, namely the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) and the Normed Fit Index (NFI). The estimated model SRMR was 0.04, less than the recommended acceptable value of 0.08 (Henseler et al., 2016), thus indicating a perfect fit between observed data and the proposed model. Furthermore, an observed value of NFI of 0.934 was higher than the acceptable value of 0.90 (Hu & Bentler, 1999), hence confirming the appropriateness of the proposed model. Other indicators, including d_ULS (0.409) and d_G (0.254), also attested to

the structural fit of the model. Since PLS-SEM prioritizes the predictive ability at the loss of absolute fit of the model, the findings further confirm the appropriateness of the model to the current study. (Khan et al., 2021).

The explanatory power of the model was evaluated by the coefficient of determination (R^2). The R^2 value for endogenous construct "Trust" was 0.295, while that of "Dining Decision" was 0.218, indicating moderate and weak-to-moderate predictive power, respectively (Chin, 1998). Examination of the correlation matrix indicated positive correlations between influencer characteristics and Trust: Content Type ($r = 0.197$), Credibility ($r = 0.146$), and Reach ($r = 0.130$). Trust was also positively correlated with Dining Decision ($r = 0.279$), thereby validating its mediating role. Bootstrapping analysis with 10,000 samples validated the significance of all direct and indirect paths at $p < .001$, including the mediation paths from influencer characteristics to Dining Decision through Trust. These findings suggest that the credibility, reach, and content type of the influencer are important in establishing consumer trust, which subsequently affects their dining decisions.

Predictive relevance was estimated based on the Stone-Geisser Q^2 statistics of a blindfolding approach to approximate the out-of-sample predictive performance of the model. While single Q^2 statistics are not explicitly tabulated, a positive Q^2 statistic signals adequate predictive relevance of the structural model (Geisser, 1975; Hair et al., 2014). The implications of this research highlight the strong influence of social media advertising, especially from trustworthy influencers, on consumer behavior. The model verifies that influencer credibility, audience reach, and content types engaging consumers are strong predictors of consumer trust, a key determinant of restaurant choice and dining conduct. These findings have far-reaching implications for restaurant managers and marketers who would like to use influencer collaborations to motivate customer engagement and desired behavioral outcomes.

Table 3 presents the results of hypothesis testing via path analysis using PLS-SEM and bootstrapping (10,000 resamples) confirming all hypothesized hypotheses with statistically significant correlations ($p < 0.001$). Hypotheses H₁, H₂, and H₃ tested the direct impacts of influencer attributes—Credibility, Reach, and Content Type—on Trust. All three of these hypotheses were confirmed empirically. Specifically, Content Type was found to influence Trust most significantly ($\beta = 0.378$, $t = 7.525$), followed by Credibility ($\beta = 0.326$, $t = 6.529$), and Reach ($\beta = 0.303$, $t = 6.548$), which means that consumers associate the quality of influencer content with being most relevant in establishing trust.

Hypothesis H₄ examined the direct influence of Trust on Dining Decision, and it also garnered support ($\beta = 0.467$, $t = 11.891$), indicating that consumers' propensity to choose dining alternatives supported by influencers is greatly influenced by trust in the influencer. The result supports that trust plays an important role in food decision-making in digital marketing contexts. All path coefficients had confidence intervals (CI) far greater than zero with narrow bounds (e.g., CI = [0.385, 0.541] for H₄), thereby supporting the validity of results.

Further, the mediation effects were also tested using hypotheses H₅, H₆, and H₇. These were used to test the role of Trust in mediating the influencer attributes and Dining Decision relationship. All three mediation paths were statistically significant: Credibility $\rightarrow$ Trust $\rightarrow$ Dining Decision ($\beta = 0.152$, $t = 5.373$), Reach $\rightarrow$ Trust $\rightarrow$ Dining Decision ($\beta = 0.141$, $t = 5.456$), and Content Type $\rightarrow$ Trust $\rightarrow$ Dining Decision ($\beta = 0.177$, $t = 6.307$). The findings highlight the partial mediating role of Trust, suggesting that influencer attributes have a direct influence on trust but also on decision-making indirectly via trust formation. The findings highlight the

importance of establishing influencer credibility and engaging content to maximize customer behavioral results in the online food and beverage marketing context.

Table 3 Hypothesis testing result.

Hypothesis	Paths	Path Coefficient	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (O/STDEV)	P values	CI 2.5 %	CI 97.5 %	Hypothesis Supported
H1	Credibility -> Trust	0.326	0.050	6.529	0.000	0.227	0.419	Supported
H2	Reach -> Trust	0.303	0.046	6.548	0.000	0.210	0.393	Supported
H3	Content Type -> Trust	0.378	0.050	7.525	0.000	0.278	0.473	Supported
H4	Trust -> Dining Decision	0.467	0.039	11.891	0.000	0.385	0.541	Supported
H5	Credibility -> Trust -> Dining Decision	0.152	0.028	5.373	0.000	0.099	0.209	Supported
H6	Reach -> Trust -> Dining Decision	0.141	0.026	5.456	0.000	0.093	0.195	Supported
H7	Content Type -> Trust -> Dining Decision	0.177	0.028	6.307	0.000	0.123	0.232	Supported

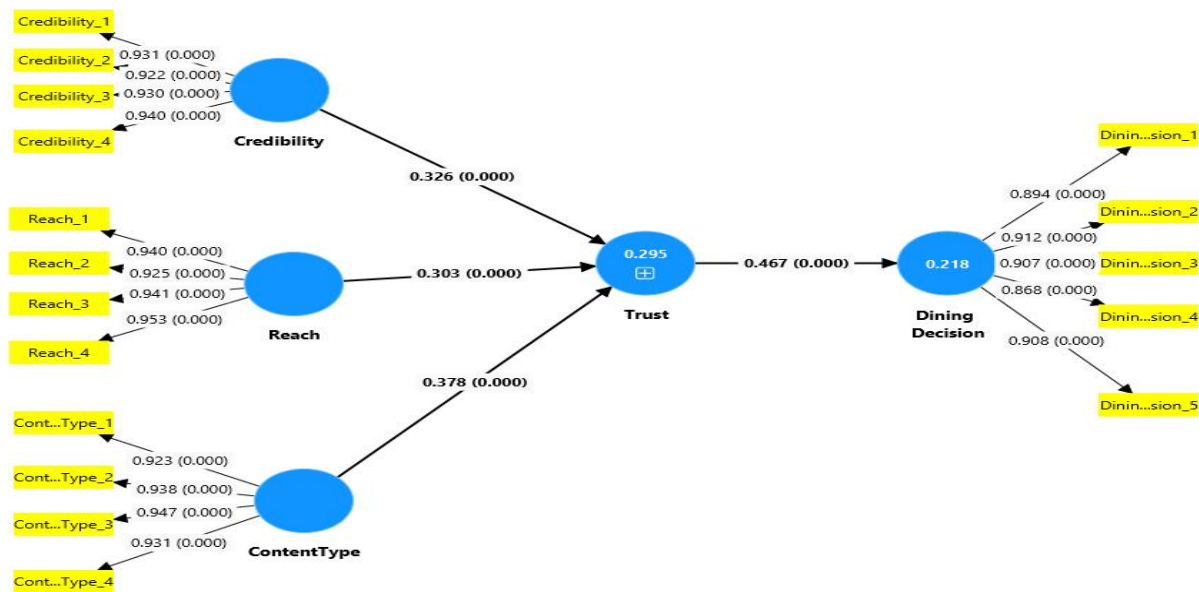


Figure 1: Structural Estimate.

6. Discussion

The current study aimed to investigate the primary drivers of diners' dining decision in the influencer marketing context, namely the influences of credibility, reach, and content type on trust, and the subsequent impact of trust on dining decision. Using the structural equation modelling method (PLS-SEM) and responses from 414 valid participants, the results validated all hypothesized. The model possessed good fit statistics (SRMR = 0.04; NFI = 0.934), validating it as suitable for analysis purposes. Consistent with earlier research into influencer performance and consumer behaviour, the path coefficients revealed significant positive relationships between the influencer dimensions (credibility, reach, content type) and the trust level. Importantly, content type was the most influential driver of trust ($\beta = 0.378$), consistent with evidence from earlier studies that highlighted content relevance and perceived authenticity in influencing trust in online endorsements. The results suggest that consumers process influencer information to make judgments regarding trustworthiness, which in turn affects their behavioural intentions.

The model also validated the mediating role of trust on dining decision-making. Not only did trust directly influence dining choice behaviour ($\beta = 0.467$), but it also mediated influencer attributes and dining intent influences. These findings are congruent with previous studies that highlight the intrinsic significance of trust in online consumer decision-making, particularly in instances of perceived risks or uncertainties, i.e., food consumption (Agag & Colmekcioglu, 2020). The mediation analysis validated indirect models such as Credibility $\rightarrow$ Trust $\rightarrow$ Dining Decision and Content Type $\rightarrow$ Trust $\rightarrow$ Dining Decision. These findings provide empirical support for the theoretical underpinnings of the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) and Source Credibility Theory, wherein both central and peripheral cues interactively determine persuasive outcomes. The significant R² values validating the model's explanatory capability (Dining Decision = 0.218; Trust = 0.295) further validate the model's explanatory capability, particularly to the influence of trust as a key construct to the theory.

The findings of this research have significant implications for digital marketers, restaurant brands, and influencers. The evidence supports the significance of producing meaningful content and being transparent in order to establish trust and shape consumer choice.

Moreover, this research contributes to the theoretical literature by synthesizing influencer marketing constructs with behavioral intention models. Although the moderation and mediation contribution of trust adds depth to our knowledge, future research may address the potential contribution of consumer attributes (e.g., involvement, digital literacy) to the moderation of these effects. Lastly, this research invites cross-cultural testing and industry-oriented research, especially in high-involvement consumption domains such as hospitality, health, or sustainable food systems.

7. Practical Implications

The results of this research have serious implications for advertising professionals, restaurant managers, and social media strategists who seek to tap influencer marketing as a driver of consumer engagement in the restaurant industry. One of the major takeaways is the greatest significance of content type in establishing consumer trust. This implies that marketers must take utmost care to develop high-quality, visually appealing, and relatable content that speaks to the interests and values of the target market. As further articulated by Lou and Yuan (2019), content high in authenticity, story, and personal experience greatly amplifies the credibility of influencers and establishes trust.

Further, credibility and accessibility are held to be imperative antecedents of trust, requiring influencer choice to move beyond follower count to include authenticity, expert opinion, and engagement quality (Freberg et al., 2011; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). The suggestion is to partner with influencers who have not just a large following but who also embody consistent, predictable actions and open communication. This is in line with previous research that shows micro-influencers, through their perceived credibility and relatability, can have greater influence over targeted audiences. (Boerman, Willemsen, & Van Der Aa, 2017).

Interestingly, trust acts as a mediator between influencer traits and consumer purchasing behaviour, suggesting the importance of creating ethical and transparent influencer marketing campaigns. Today's consumers are more sophisticated when it comes to promotional information; thus, transparency through disclosure and genuine reviews are essential to trust maintenance (Evans, Phua, Lim, & Jun, 2017). Since trust is a significant mechanism that acts in consumer attitudes and behaviour, brands need to create long-term partnerships with influencers reflecting the values of the brand and integrity in content presentation. By doing so, restaurants and brands can exert substantial influence on consumers' dining behaviours, build loyalty, and maintain competitive advantage in the digital economy.

8. Limitations and Future Research

The present research, while insightful, is limited by its cross-sectional design, which inhibits the ability to form causal connections. Longitudinal research is also called upon to examine influencer and consumer trust formation over time (Rindfleisch et al., 2008). Furthermore, the sample of participants was mostly digitally engaged consumers who were exposed to food influencers, which can limit the capacity to generalize results to a large consumer population. (Bryman, 2016).

The initial suggested model was missing the incorporation of some other relevant constructs, for example, perceived enjoyment and social identity, that can contribute explanatory power (Zhou et al., 2021). Future studies can further expand the model by incorporating additional mediators and considering differences in variations between platforms, thus explaining content size differences and follower and influencer interactive behaviours across social media platforms.

9. Conclusion

The current study targeted the influence of social media food influencers on eating behaviours of consumers and found the role of content type, credibility, and reach in developing trust among consumers. Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) found that each of the three dimensions of influencers performs an important role in developing trust, which, in return, performs an important role in influencing eating behaviour of consumers. Furthermore, the role of trust as a mediating variable in these processes was found, demonstrating its central position in the digital consumer engagement process.

This study contributes to the literature on influencer marketing by providing an empirical examination of several dimensions of influencer content that influence consumer behaviour in the hospitality industry. By connecting influencer dimensions to the trust-building process, this study calls for increased consideration of the role of online trust in shaping behavioural intentions and decision-making in actual contexts. Such knowledge is particularly pertinent to marketers, restaurants, and hospitality firms as they seek to craft successful influencer-driven campaigns that appeal to increasingly networked consumers on digital platforms.

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