

Guest editorial: Social media influencer marketing in the food and beverage industry

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1. Introduction

Social media influencer marketing has emerged as a critical tool to promote brands and products (e.g. goods, and services) (Han and Balabanis, 2024; Koay and Lim, 2024; Pradhan *et al.*, 2023). Many businesses are investing significant portions of their marketing budgets into this strategy due to its proven effectiveness and extensive reach among target audiences (Dogtiev, 2024; Joshi *et al.*, 2024). This approach has become particularly prominent and impactful in the food and beverage (F&B) industry, where it has shifted the focus from traditional advertising to more dynamic, personalized content creation (Bastrygina and Lim, 2023; Flood, 2024; Koay *et al.*, 2023). Such a transformation signifies an evolution in consumer advocacy of and engagement with brands. Noteworthy, the growing influence of social media personalities in shaping consumer preferences and trends highlights the complex interplay of various factors – including influencer characteristics, content strategies, economic considerations and psychological dynamics (Bastrygina *et al.*, 2024; Cheah *et al.*, 2024; Tanwar *et al.*, 2024; Koay *et al.*, 2023, 2024).

F&B operators, e.g. bars, cafés, cafeterias, catering services, food delivery platforms, fast food joints, restaurants, specialty food stores, as well as wineries and breweries, are increasingly collaborating with social media influencers to enhance their market presence and increase sales (Pham *et al.*, 2024). These partnerships enable the creation of engaging and interactive content across formats such as blog posts, contests, infographics, interactive polls, live broadcasts, photos, reels and videos, effectively turning followers into customers (Bastrygina *et al.*, 2024; Joshi *et al.*, 2024). The right influencer can potentially generate as much as \$18 for every \$1 spent (Digital Marketing Institute, 2024), emphasizing the substantial return on investment from such marketing strategies.

Social media platforms tailor distinct experiences that influence F&B marketing strategies. Our collective expertise in social media research and personal experience on social media suggests that Facebook's broad demographic appeal makes it ideal for community-driven content and promotions, contrasting with LinkedIn's professional network, which is better suited for business-to-business (B2B) marketing and industry insights in F&B sectors. Instagram's visually rich environment is perfect for showcasing mouth-watering images and short video clips, a stark difference from Red Book (*Xiaohongshu*), which combines lifestyle blogging and e-commerce, attracting a predominantly Chinese audience interested in detailed food reviews and culinary experiences. Snapchat and TikTok cater to younger audiences with creative and ephemeral video content that often goes viral, unlike Twitter or X, which excels at real-time engagement and can be used for timely promotions and customer service within the F&B industry. These platforms allow for tailored influencer campaigns that align with consumer behaviors and unique attributes associated with each service.

Despite the widespread adoption of social media influencer marketing, several gaps remain in the existing literature. Notably, there is limited understanding of the mechanisms through which various influencer attributes and marketing approaches affect consumer attitudes and behaviors, particularly in the F&B industry. Further, the existing research in this space often overlooks how social media influencer marketing interacts with firm-level outcomes, like corporate social legitimacy and economic performance. Therefore, the need to explore the nuances of influencer marketing – how it functions, why it succeeds or fails, and what drives consumer engagement, firm performance and return on investment – is greater than ever.



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This special issue endeavors to bridge these gaps by showcasing empirical studies that reveal the complex dynamics of social media influencer marketing within the F&B industry. The selected papers, which have undergone multiple rounds of rigorous peer review by international experts, not only enrich extant discourse in the literature but also offer practical insights that can guide F&B operators on what to expect from and how to go about social media influencer marketing. We, therefore, encourage F&B operators to engage with these findings actively, incorporating them into strategic planning to stay ahead in a rapidly evolving F&B market.

2. Contributors and contributions

The *first* paper, “The more followers the better? The impact of food influencers on consumer behaviour in the social media context” by [Misra et al. \(2024\)](#), challenges the widely held belief that an influencer’s effectiveness is directly proportional to their number of followers. Drawing on the heuristic-systematic model (HSM), their study explores how the interaction between influencer type (micro vs macro) and content type (informational vs entertaining) impacts consumer attitudes and purchasing intentions. They use an experimental design involving 197 US consumers to test their hypotheses. Their results reveal that macro-influencers have a more significant effect when producing entertaining content, while micro-influencers can be equally influential when presenting informational content. This finding challenges the traditional “more followers, the better” narrative, suggesting that the relationship between content type and influencer characteristics is key to successful social media influencer marketing strategies.

This study contributes to the theoretical generalizability of the HSM by demonstrating that consumers’ attitudes are shaped through both heuristic cues (like follower count) and systematic processing (such as content quality). The study provides empirical evidence that consumer engagement is not solely driven by the number of followers but also by the nature and quality of the content. This highlights the need for marketers to be strategic when selecting influencers, aligning both the influencer’s attributes and the type of content they produce with the target audience’s processing mode. This understanding challenges marketers to rethink their approach, particularly in cases where smaller influencers (micro) might be more impactful than larger ones (macro), depending on the content context.

Building on these insights, future research could explore additional mediating variables, such as brand familiarity, consumer involvement and product type, to understand when and why certain content formats and influencer types are most effective. Moreover, examining these interactions across different cultural and geographic contexts could reveal how the effectiveness of influencer marketing strategies varies internationally, providing marketers with a more global perspective on social media influencer marketing.

The *second* paper, “Social media influencer marketing and economic performance in the Spanish wine industry: unravelling the role of corporate social legitimacy” by [Martínez-Falcó et al. \(2024\)](#), shifts the focus to firm-level outcomes by investigating how social media influencer marketing affects the economic performance of Spanish wineries. Their study introduces the concept of corporate social legitimacy as a mediator in the relationship between social media influencer marketing and economic performance. Using structural equation modeling with data from 196 Spanish wineries, their study finds a positive relationship between social media influencer marketing and economic performance, with corporate social legitimacy partially mediating this effect. This study, therefore, provides valuable insights into how social media influencer marketing can transcend consumer-focused metrics to impact broader firm-level outcomes.

This study extends the social media influencer marketing discourse beyond its immediate consumer behavior effects to include its implications for firm legitimacy and market success. By positioning corporate social legitimacy as a critical mediator, this study offers a more holistic view of how social media influencer marketing strategies can enhance a firm’s

reputation and economic performance. The study argues that social media influencer marketing should be seen not just as a promotional tool but as a strategic asset that can strengthen a brand's social standing, particularly in niche markets such as the wine industry. This introduces a new layer of complexity to influencer marketing, emphasizing the role of social legitimacy in shaping consumer perceptions and, ultimately, economic outcomes.

Future research in this area could explore further how different forms of legitimacy, such as environmental and social (or community-based) legitimacy, interact with influencer marketing strategies to affect economic performance (Cheah *et al.*, 2024). Cross-sector comparisons would also be valuable in determining whether the positive relationship between corporate social legitimacy, economic performance and social media influencer marketing holds across various F&B subsectors or is unique to specific contexts like the wine industry. Such research could guide marketers and policymakers in determining the extent of effectiveness prior to leveraging social media influencer marketing to build legitimacy and enhance performance.

The *third* paper, "Role of influencer-follower congruence in influencing followers' food choices and brand advocacy: mediating role of perceived trust" by Verma *et al.* (2024), establishes influencer-follower congruence as a key determinant of marketing success in the digital food space. Their study draws on social comparison theory to argue that consumers are more likely to trust and be influenced by those they perceive as similar to themselves in terms of demographics and attitudes. Using a survey of 383 social media users in India, their study finds that demographic and attitude congruence between influencers and followers positively influences food choices and brand advocacy, with perceived trust serving as a mediator.

This study extends the theoretical generalizability of social comparison theory to social media influencer marketing by empirically validating that similarity between influencers and followers fosters trust, which in turn drives consumer behavior. This finding positions trust not merely as an outcome but as an essential process that mediates the relationship between congruence and consumer action. As such, this study enriches the theoretical understanding of how influencer marketing operates on a psychological level. Specifically, the findings highlight the importance of perceived similarity in building authentic relationships between influencers and consumers, underscoring the need for marketers to select influencers who resonate with their target audience's values, attitudes and lifestyles (VALS).

To expand on these insights, future research could explore other psychological mechanisms, such as authenticity perceptions, emotional contagion and parasocial relationships, which might mediate or moderate the effect of influencer-follower congruence on consumer behavior. Investigating other forms of congruence – such as ethical stances, lifestyle alignment and value congruence – could also deepen the understanding of what makes an influencer genuinely influential in specific contexts. Exploring these dimensions across different cultural settings would further enhance the generalizability and robustness of the ensuing findings.

The *fourth* paper, "How influencer characteristics drive Gen Z behavioural intentions of selecting fast-food restaurants: mediating roles of consumer emotions and self-construal" by Ghosh *et al.* (2024), explores the psychological underpinnings of how influencer characteristics impact Gen Z consumers' behavioral intentions in the fast-food sector. Their study introduces consumer emotions and self-construal as mediating factors to provide a finer-grained understanding of how influencer characteristics resonate with the identity and perception of Gen Z consumers. Their findings indicate that while influencer characteristics significantly affect behavioral intentions and self-construal, consumer emotions do not mediate this relationship.

This study contributes to the growing literature on identity-based marketing strategies by integrating self-construal and emotional processing theories. The findings emphasize that influencers' effectiveness is contingent on their alignment with the self-perception of their audience, particularly Gen Z, who are known for their emphasis on authenticity and personal identity. This insight moves beyond a one-size-fits-all approach to influencer marketing,

highlighting the need for marketers to consider the target audience's self-construal when selecting influencers and crafting messages.

Future studies could investigate additional aspects of consumer identity, such as cultural background, gender roles and social status, to further understand how these elements interact with influencer characteristics to shape behavioral intentions. Exploring the long-term effects of these interactions on brand loyalty and perception should also add depth to the body of knowledge on social media influencer marketing. Understanding how these identity factors play out across different social media platforms and would strengthen practical guidance for marketers in tailoring their messaging to specific demographics.

3. Conclusion

Social media influencer marketing is poised to remain a pivotal promotional strategy in the F&B industry. F&B operators, however, must stay vigilant and adaptable to the rapid evolution of this space, as social media platforms continuously introduce new features that pave the way for innovative marketing approaches. For example, Instagram initially supported only photo posts, but it has since expanded to include videos, reels and stories, allowing for diverse content tailored to different marketing goals. A short story post, for instance, may be ideal for a quick announcement while a longer video can facilitate in-depth product reviews. The recent addition of features like real-time location sharing opens new avenues for engagement, underscoring the importance of these developments. As technology advances and platforms innovate, F&B operators must stay abreast of these changes to leverage new features swiftly and effectively, securing a competitive edge in capturing consumer attention. We strongly recommend that F&B operators proactively monitor these trends and incorporate them into their strategic planning to enhance performance and maximize returns from social media influencer marketing.

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Further reading

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