

IMPACT OF INFLUENCER MARKETING ON FOOD CONSUMPTION AMONG GEN Z AND MILLENNIALS

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Abstract:

This literature review investigates the profound impact of influencer marketing on the food consumption patterns of Generation Z and Millennials. As digital natives, these cohorts increasingly rely on social media personalities for culinary inspiration and purchasing decisions, shifting away from traditional advertising. The analysis synthesizes existing research to explore the dual nature of this influence, highlighting its potential to drive both unhealthy eating behaviours, such as increased cravings for promoted foods, and positive dietary changes through the promotion of nutritional awareness. Key factors like perceived authenticity, trust, and the alignment between an influencer's content and their audience's interests are identified as critical mechanisms shaping consumer behaviour. The review concludes by identifying significant research gaps, including the need for longitudinal studies on long-term health effects and region-specific analyses to quantify the direct impact on consumer spending, providing a foundation for future research and ethical marketing practices in the food industry.

Keywords: Influencer marketing, social media influencers, consumer behaviour, Generation Z, Millennials, food consumption, healthy eating, obesity, dietary patterns.

Introduction:

The global food industry, a behemoth valued at over \$8 trillion (Global Industry Report, 2024), is a fundamental sector undergoing a rapid digital transformation. Its economic significance is particularly pronounced in emerging economies; for instance, in India, the food processing sector alone constitutes nearly 10% of the national GDP and is projected to reach a valuation of \$535 billion by 2025 (India Brand Equity Foundation, 2023). Beyond its sheer economic scale, this industry wields a powerful influence over global dietary patterns, consumer culture, and public health outcomes. Concurrently, the landscape of marketing has been revolutionized by the rise of social media, giving birth to the influencer marketing industry, now an estimated \$21 billion global market (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2023).

For Generations Z and Millennials, who have come of age in this digital ecosystem, food choices are no longer merely functional acts of sustenance. Instead, they have become deeply intertwined with identity construction, social connection, and lifestyle expression (Barska et al., 2023). These digital-native cohorts are increasingly turning away from traditional advertising, seeking authenticity and relatable guidance from social media personalities. Research indicates that a substantial majority now seek culinary inspiration online, with a significant portion making purchasing decisions based directly on influencer recommendations (Social Media & Food Report, 2024). This shift has positioned influencers as pivotal "socialization agents" (Vidani et al., 2023), shaping not just what these generations buy, but also their perceptions of taste, quality, and trends.

The influence of these digital personalities is particularly potent and ambivalent within the food sector. On one hand, studies have shown a direct correlation between frequent exposure to food influencers and increased food cravings, potentially contributing to unhealthy eating patterns and weight gain (Ibrahim et al., 2025). On the other hand, this very same medium holds immense potential as a vehicle for promoting nutritional awareness and positive dietary change,

especially when influencers focus on healthy eating and provide credible information (Ibrahim et al., 2025). The efficacy of this communication is deeply rooted in established psychological theories, where factors like trust, perceived expertise, and personal relevance are found to be more critical drivers of behaviour than peer pressure (Vidani et al., 2023; Hapsari et al., 2024).

This confluence of a multi-trillion dollar industry, a booming new marketing paradigm, and the evolving consumption habits of two key generations underscores a critical need for a synthesized understanding. Therefore, this literature review aims to consolidate existing academic research to critically examine the mechanisms, magnitude, and implications of influencer marketing on the food consumption habits of Gen Z and Millennials, exploring both the risks and opportunities presented by this powerful digital force.

Problem Statement & Research Gap:

Despite the acknowledged sway of social media and influencers on dietary decisions, several critical knowledge gaps persist. The precise magnitude of their impact, the specific elements of influencer content that most effectively drive consumer behaviour, and the potential variations in this influence between Gen Z and Millennials remain inadequately measured. A notable research gap exists in the scarcity of region-specific studies that move beyond broad trends to quantify actual shifts in consumer expenditure directly attributable to influencer marketing campaigns.

Furthermore, while existing research often highlights short-term or viral trends, there is a comparative lack of longitudinal analysis on the enduring effects of influencer marketing. The long-term implications for dietary quality, health metrics, and the adoption of sustainable eating practices are poorly understood. This gap in the literature is particularly concerning given the ethical and regulatory questions emerging from the prevalent advertising of unhealthy products, instances of product misrepresentation, and the targeted marketing directed at younger, more impressionable audiences.

Objectives of Research

- To evaluate the impact of social media on food consumption of Gen Z and Millennials.
- To identify the regional difference in terms of food consumption habits.
- To identify the healthy choice about food consumption among Gen Z and Millennials.

Literature Review:

The landscape of contemporary marketing has been fundamentally reshaped by the emergence of social media influencers, a phenomenon that, while impactful, is still undergoing conceptual refinement in academic literature (Vidani et al., 2023). At its core, this marketing strategy leverages individuals external to a brand who possess the ability to shape the purchasing decisions of a dedicated audience. These digital personalities are engaged by companies to disseminate brand narratives and promote products to specific, highly-engaged target segments on platforms like Instagram and TikTok (Hapsari et al., 2024). A significant advantage of this approach is its perceived authenticity; consumers often place greater trust in influencers than in traditional corporate advertising, viewing them as more reliable and credible sources of information (Vidani et al., 2023). In an era where consumers actively employ ad-blockers and are inundated with commercial messages, influencer content is perceived as less intrusive and more organic, fostering a two-way dialogue between brands and their digital communities.

The efficacy of influencer marketing is deeply rooted in established psychological theories. Research by Vidani et al. (2023) effectively utilizes the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) and Social Learning Theory to deconstruct its mechanisms. Their study identified that a positive attitude towards influencers and perceived behavioural control (e.g., the ability to gain valuable domain knowledge) were significant drivers of consumer behaviour. Interestingly, the influence of subjective norms, or peer pressure, was found to be negligible, suggesting that following influencers is an act of personal interest rather than social conformity. Expanding on this framework, the study uncovered critical new constructs such as trust, self-importance (personal relevance of content), and inspiration as fundamental to the

influencer-follower relationship. This relationship is characterized by a low perceived risk, as followers can easily disengage by unfollowing, placing the onus on the influencer to maintain authenticity and value.

The impact of influencers extends across key demographic cohorts, notably Millennials and Generation Z. A comparative study by Hapsari et al. (2024) confirms that social media influencers significantly affect the purchase intentions of both generations. However, their research highlights that customer trust acts as a critical moderating variable, strengthening the link between a positive online experience and the final intention to buy. This underscores that for these digitally-native generations, the perceived authenticity and reliability of an influencer are paramount in converting engagement into a concrete purchase decision.

Nowhere is the influence of these digital personalities more potent and double-edged than in the food sector. A cross-sectional study by Ibrahim et al. (2025) on Gen Z in Egypt reveals a direct correlation between frequent exposure to food bloggers and increased food cravings, with a significant portion of respondents reporting weight gain. This highlights a serious public health concern, as influencers often promote high-calorie, unhealthy foods. Conversely, the same study points to the positive potential of this medium. A majority of respondents preferred bloggers who focused on healthy eating and provided nutritional information, and those who adopted healthy habits from influencers reported a more positive emotional relationship with food. This demonstrates that food influencers can function as either a risk factor for unhealthy patterns or a powerful vehicle for nutritional awareness, depending on their content.

A critical strategic insight for marketers lies in achieving an optimal product-influencer fit. Vidani et al. (2023) developed a "Product-Influencer Fitment Matrix" which demonstrates that different product categories resonate best with specific types of influencers. For instance, while celebrities may be preferred for beauty and lifestyle categories, micro-influencers and professional bloggers are often deemed more effective and authentic for niche areas like food and travel. This evidence confirms that a one-size-fits-all approach is ineffective; success hinges on carefully aligning the influencer's niche, audience, and perceived expertise with the brand's product and values.

Research Methodology:

This study follows a **secondary research approach**, relying on a systematic and integrative review of existing literature. The main objective is to bring together and analyze current knowledge, highlight key themes, and answer the research questions through insights drawn from already published academic articles, industry reports, and credible online sources.

This approach is particularly well-suited for a fast-evolving area such as **influencer marketing**, where new trends and consumer behaviours emerge rapidly. By using secondary data, the study is able to explore a wide range of perspectives and gain a deeper understanding of the topic without the time and financial limitations that often accompany primary data collection. In essence, this methodology enables the development of a **comprehensive and evidence-based overview** of how influencer marketing shapes food consumption among Gen Z and Millennials.

Research Design:

This study follows a **qualitative research design** based on a **systematic literature review**. This approach was chosen because it allows for an in-depth and organized understanding of what has already been discovered about this modern and complex topic. A systematic review ensures that the research process is **structured, transparent, and repeatable**, so that the findings are credible and comprehensive.

The design unfolds in the following stages:

- **Problem Formulation:** Clearly defining the main research objectives and questions that guide the entire study.
- **Literature Search:** Conducting a detailed search across multiple academic sources and databases using carefully selected keywords.
- **Data Evaluation:** Reviewing and filtering the collected studies based on specific inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure only high-quality and relevant sources are used.

- **Data Analysis and Synthesis:** Analyzing the chosen studies to identify recurring themes such as *authenticity*, *health awareness*, and *generational differences*. These insights are then combined to form a broader and more cohesive understanding of the topic.
- **Reporting and Presentation:** Organizing the findings into a clear and logical narrative that not only answers the research questions but also highlights knowledge gaps and suggests directions for future research.

This **non-empirical, secondary research approach** provides a solid foundation for understanding the topic as a whole. By integrating insights from existing studies, it helps to connect fragmented evidence and develop a framework that can guide future primary research in influencer marketing and consumer behavior.

Nature of the Study:

This research is both **exploratory** and **analytical** in nature. It is exploratory because it seeks to understand and map out a rapidly growing field — influencer marketing — where theories and frameworks are still developing. The study aims to uncover the key factors, patterns, and relationships that explain how influencer marketing shapes the food consumption habits of Gen Z and Millennials.

At the same time, the study is analytical because it goes beyond simply summarizing what past researchers have found. Instead, it **critically examines, compares, and connects** different studies to identify common insights, differences, and deeper trends. In doing so, the research aims to explain *how and why* influencer marketing impacts consumer choices, and to build a clear, evidence-based understanding of the overall phenomenon.

Data Collection Method:

The data collection process for this study was carefully structured and carried out in several stages to ensure that only the most **relevant, reliable, and high-quality secondary sources** were included. The steps are outlined below:

1. Identification of Sources

A detailed search was conducted using leading academic databases such as **Google Scholar, JSTOR, ScienceDirect, and ResearchGate**. To complement these, **industry reports** from reputed organizations — including *Influencer Marketing Hub*, *Global Industry Analysts*, and the *India Brand Equity Foundation (IBEF)* — were also reviewed. These sources provided valuable statistical data, market insights, and trend analyses relevant to the topic.

2. Keyword Search Strategy

To locate precise and comprehensive information, a combination of keywords and Boolean operators was applied. The main search strings included:

- (“influencer marketing” OR “social media influencer”) AND (“food consumption” OR “dietary habits”)
- (“Gen Z” OR “Millennials” OR “Generation Z”) AND “food choices”
- (“digital marketing” AND “food industry”)
- (“impact of social media” OR “consumer behaviour” AND “food”)
- (“food bloggers” AND “healthy eating”)

This strategic combination of search terms ensured a broad yet focused collection of literature relevant to the research objectives.

3. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To maintain academic rigor and focus, the following criteria were used:

Inclusion Criteria:

- Published in **English**

- Released between **2018 and 2025** to ensure contemporary relevance
- Focused on **Gen Z and/or Millennials**
- Addressed themes related to **social media, influencer marketing, food consumption patterns, or consumer behaviour**

Exclusion Criteria:

- Non-peer-reviewed articles
- Opinion-based pieces lacking empirical data
- Studies centered on demographics other than Gen Z or Millennials

4. Selection and Synthesis of Data

After compiling the search results, the titles and abstracts were first screened for relevance. The full texts of selected papers were then reviewed in depth.

An **integrative review technique** was used to synthesize the literature. Key findings, methods, and conclusions were extracted from each study and organized under major thematic areas. This process made it possible to compare and contrast various research outcomes, uncover shared insights, point out inconsistencies, and identify gaps in the current understanding of the subject.

By following this well-defined and systematic process, the study ensures that the analysis of **influencer marketing's impact on food consumption patterns among Gen Z and Millennials** is both reliable and valid. The combination of academic and industry sources strengthens the overall credibility of the research and provides a balanced perspective on evolving consumer behaviors in the digital era.

Sources of Database:

To ensure a comprehensive and credible analysis, this literature review was conducted using a systematic search across several academic databases and digital repositories. The primary sources of information included:

- **Google Scholar:** Served as a primary tool for discovering a wide range of interdisciplinary studies using targeted keywords.
- **Academic Databases:** Specialized databases such as **ScienceDirect**, **PubMed**, and **Scopus** were utilized to access peer-reviewed journal articles from reputable publications in marketing, public health, and nutrition.
- **Open Access Repositories:** Platforms like **SSRN** and **MDPI** were consulted to include high-quality, openly accessible research papers and preprints.
- **Publisher Websites:** Direct searches were conducted on the official websites of relevant journals to obtain the most accurate and final versions of cited articles.

Conclusion

In summary, the body of research clearly establishes social media influencers as powerful agents shaping the food consumption landscapes for Generation Z and Millennials. Their impact is profoundly dualistic, presenting both significant risks and promising opportunities for public health and marketing. On one hand, the frequent promotion of high-calorie and unhealthy foods can trigger cravings and contribute to the development of poor dietary habits. On the other, influencers who champion nutritional awareness and healthy eating can act as effective catalysts for positive behavioural change, fostering a more mindful and emotionally healthy relationship with food for their followers.

The efficacy of this influence is not absolute but is critically moderated by factors of trust, perceived authenticity, and the strategic fit between the influencer's niche and the promoted product. For these digital-native audiences, a relatable and credible personality is far more persuasive than traditional advertising or even peer pressure. This underscores the

necessity for marketers and public health advocates alike to move beyond a one-size-fits-all approach, carefully selecting influencers whose values and expertise genuinely align with their campaign goals.

Ultimately, this review highlights an urgent need for further empirical research to address existing gaps. Future studies should employ longitudinal designs to understand the long-term health implications and conduct region-specific quantitative analyses to measure the direct impact on consumer expenditure. By deepening our understanding of these dynamics, stakeholders can harness the potential of influencer marketing to promote healthier eating patterns while developing ethical guidelines to mitigate its risks.

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