

The Role of Social Media Influencer Endorsements in Shaping Young Adults' Food Choices and Nourishment

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Abstract

The study explores how social media influencer endorsements shape young adults' food choices, purchasing behaviour, and understanding of nourishment. A quantitative approach was adopted, and data were gathered through an online survey completed by eighty-two respondents aged 18-29. Descriptive statistics were used to examine patterns of social media exposure, perceived credibility, and behavioural response. Most participants reported using social media several times a day, with Instagram emerging as the main platform for food-related influencer content. Although influencer recommendations were generally viewed as moderately credible, many respondents acknowledged trying new food items or making purchases based on endorsements. More than half also reported feeling uncertain about what qualifies as healthy eating after exposure to influencer content, and a majority believed that such content makes unhealthy foods appear more acceptable. The findings indicate that influencer marketing functions not only as a promotional tool but also as a factor shaping dietary perceptions and everyday food decisions. The results highlight the importance of strengthening digital and nutritional literacy, while encouraging greater responsibility and transparency in online food communication.

Keywords: Social media influencers, food consumption behaviour, young adults, influencer marketing, purchase intention, nutritional perception, digital media literacy.

1. Introduction

The rapid expansion of social media has transformed how young adults obtain information, shape their preferences, and make daily decisions about food. Platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter are no longer used only for communication; they have become spaces where lifestyle trends, product recommendations, and health-related content are shared constantly. Within these spaces, social media influencers have emerged as modern opinion leaders whose content shapes audience perceptions and purchasing behaviour. Food promotion has become a regular and highly visible part of influencer activity. Unlike traditional advertising, influencer promotions are often woven into personal stories and visually curated posts. Presenting products within everyday experiences makes promotional content appear more relatable and more appealing. As a result, audiences may view endorsements as genuine recommendations rather than paid advertisements. Continuous exposure to influencer-driven food content can gradually influence food preferences, brand choices, and broader ideas about what is considered healthy or socially acceptable to consume.

At the same time, questions have been raised about the credibility and nutritional impact of influencer-led food communication. The distinction between evidence-based dietary guidance and commercial promotion is not always clear. While some influencers promote balanced eating habits, others frequently highlight indulgent or highly processed foods in appealing and aspirational formats. Such representations may contribute to uncertainty about healthy eating standards, particularly among young adults who engage with social media daily.

Given the high level of engagement among young adults, it becomes essential to examine how influencer endorsements affect both behaviour and perception. Exploring these effects is important not only for marketing research but also for public health and nutritional awareness. The research therefore explores how influencer-driven food promotion shapes young adults' food choices, purchasing behaviour, and perceptions of nourishment in contemporary online settings.

2. Statement of the Problem

The increasing influence of social media personalities in digital food environments has reshaped how young adults understand and react to food-related content. Influencer endorsements often blend personal lifestyle content with promotional messaging, making it harder to distinguish between genuine recommendations and paid advertising. As a result, questions arise regarding the credibility of dietary advice shared on social media platforms.

While social media introduces users to diverse food trends and products, online feeds are filled with carefully curated images of both nutritious and less healthy options. Repeated exposure to influencer-driven food content may shape purchasing behaviour and influence perceptions of what is considered acceptable or desirable to eat. The frequent portrayal of indulgent or highly processed foods as part of everyday lifestyle content raises concerns about nourishment awareness and informed decision-making, particularly among young adults.

Despite prominent levels of engagement with influencer content, clarity remains limited regarding the extent of its behavioural and perceptual impact. Much of the existing literature examines marketing effectiveness or health outcomes separately, without fully integrating exposure frequency, purchasing behaviour, and nutritional interpretation within a single framework. Addressing this gap requires closer examination of how digital influencer marketing shapes food-related decision-making and dietary perception among young adults.

3. Purpose of the Study

The research examines how social media influencer endorsements shape young adults' food choices, purchasing behaviour, and perceptions of nourishment. Focus is placed on whether frequent exposure to influencer-driven food content influences behavioural decisions, such as trying new food products or choosing specific brands and restaurants. The analysis also considers how influencer content affects understanding of healthy and unhealthy eating. By examining perceived credibility, engagement patterns, and reported behavioural responses, the study seeks to clarify how digital endorsements contribute to changes in dietary perception and consumption habits.

A quantitative survey-based approach was used to provide factual insight into the relationship between influencer marketing and food-related decision-making among young adults.

4. Significance of the Study

The growing presence of social media in everyday life has changed how food-related information is shared and interpreted. As influencers continue to shape online food spaces, examining their impact becomes relevant not only for academic research but also for wider society. Understanding how influencer endorsements affect young adults' food choices, purchasing behaviour, and perceptions of nourishment adds meaningful insight to current discussions in both marketing and health-related fields.

From a marketing perspective, the study sheds light on how influencer-driven promotion influences consumer behaviour. By exploring exposure levels, credibility perceptions, and reported purchasing responses, the analysis helps explain how online endorsements translate into real consumption decisions. From a public health perspective, the findings are equally important. The increased acceptability of unhealthy foods and uncertainty surrounding healthy eating standards raise concerns about long-term dietary awareness. Addressing these issues highlights the need for responsible digital communication and stronger media literacy among young adults.

Overall, the research provides a balanced view of both the opportunities and challenges linked to influencer marketing within contemporary online food contexts, offering useful implications for marketers, educators, policymakers, and public health professionals.

5. Review of Literature

5.1 Social Media and Dietary Behaviour

Social media increasingly influences how young adults engage with food-related information and shape their consumption habits. Research has shown that social media use is linked to measurable nutrition outcomes, affecting dietary awareness and behavioural choices (Vassallo et al., 2018). As online engagement becomes part of daily routines, food-related messages appear repeatedly across digital platforms, reinforcing certain dietary cues and preferences.

More recent studies report both behavioural and cognitive changes among young adults following exposure to digital food communication (Parks et al., 2025). Social media platforms therefore function as more than simple information-sharing spaces; they can influence attitudes, intentions, and everyday food-related decisions. Broader systematic reviews also confirm connections between social media engagement and health-related behaviours across different populations (Paul and Headley-Johnson, 2024). Collectively, the literature emphasizes the expanding role of digital platforms in influencing dietary norms and everyday lifestyle behaviours.

5.2 Influencer Food Advertising and Audience Perception

In digital food environments, social media influencers occupy a unique position in framing and communicating dietary information to audiences. Qualitative research exploring young adults' perceptions of influencer-led food advertising suggests that audiences often engage with such content for entertainment, inspiration, and social connection rather than purely informational reasons (Alhothali and Aljefree, 2023). Influence in this context is therefore closely tied to perceived authenticity and relatability rather than formal expertise.

When promotional messages are woven into personal stories, the line between advertising and everyday lifestyle content becomes less clear. Products presented within familiar narratives may be interpreted as genuine recommendations, even when commercial intent is present. Such blending of personal and promotional communication can make critical evaluation more difficult and increase the persuasive impact of influencer-driven food content.

5.3 Credibility, Trust, and Purchase Intention

The effectiveness of influencer marketing is strongly connected to how audiences perceive credibility and message value. Research in digital advertising shows that perceived credibility plays a key role in shaping consumer trust and acceptance of branded content (De Veirman, Cauberghe and Hudders, 2018). In online settings, credibility often develops through authenticity, relatability, and consistency rather than professional expertise. Personal connection and familiarity therefore become central to persuasive impact. Research studies also identify a clear link between influencer endorsements and purchase intention (Khan and Rahman, 2025). Audiences are more likely to respond behaviourally when content feels personally relevant and emotionally engaging. Research focusing specifically on young adults further confirms that social media exposure can be measured as a predictor of food consumption behaviour (Taylan and Arslan, 2024). Together, these findings suggest that influencer marketing does more than increase visibility; it can influence real purchasing decisions.

5.4 Digital Misinformation and Nutritional Perception

While influencer marketing can increase engagement, concerns remain regarding the accuracy and reliability of online food communication. A recent study published in *Appetite* found that young audiences may accept nutrition misinformation shared by online health content creators, particularly when persuasive framing strengthens perceived credibility (Meyer and Vandevijvere, 2024). Presentation style, therefore, plays a vital role in how dietary claims are interpreted.

Systematic reviews also link social media exposure to body image concerns and changing food-related perceptions among young adults (Rounsefell et al., 2019). Visually curated food content can shape beliefs about health, attractiveness, and dietary norms, influencing not only what individuals consume but also how they define nourishment. Experimental evidence further shows that influencer posts promoting unhealthy foods may alter food choice behaviour, especially when accompanied by aspirational imagery (Boepple and Thompson, 2022). Digital food communication, therefore, affects both behaviour and perception.

5.5 Interventions and Emerging Research Directions

Recognition of social media's influence on dietary behaviour has led to growing interest in intervention-based research. A systematic review protocol examining digital interventions targeting eating behaviours among adolescents and young adults reflects increasing academic attention to structured online health strategies (Tang et al., 2023). Such work highlights the need to guide online food communication toward more balanced and informed choices.

Despite the expanding literature, research often examines marketing effectiveness and health implications separately. Limited work integrates exposure frequency, credibility perception, purchasing behaviour, and nutritional understanding within a single analytical framework. Addressing this gap requires closer examination of how influencer-driven food communication shapes both consumer decisions and dietary interpretation among young adults.

6. Methodology

6.1 Research Design

A quantitative research design was used to examine how social media influencer endorsements affect young adults' food choices and perceptions of nourishment. A survey approach was selected to collect measurable data on exposure levels, credibility perceptions, purchasing behaviour, and understanding of

healthy eating. This design allowed for clear identification of behavioural patterns within the selected group.

6.2 Participants and Sampling

Data were gathered from eighty-two young adults through an online questionnaire. All respondents regularly used social media platforms. The survey was distributed using convenience sampling through digital channels, and participation was voluntary. Responses were collected anonymously.

6.3 Data Collection Instrument

A structured questionnaire was designed and distributed online. The survey included close-ended questions that focused on:

- Frequency of social media usage
- Level of exposure to food-related influencer content
- Influence on purchasing decisions.
- Impact on understanding of healthy eating.
- Perception of unhealthy food normalization.
- Overall influence on personal food choices

Most questions used categorical response options such as “frequently,” “sometimes,” and “rarely,” which allowed for straightforward descriptive analysis.

6.4 Procedure

The questionnaire was shared online during the data collection period. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research before completing the survey and provided consent prior to participation. Responses were automatically recorded and later exported for analysis.

6.5 Data Analysis

The collected data were analysed using descriptive statistical methods. Frequencies and percentages were calculated to identify patterns in exposure, credibility perception, purchasing behaviour, and dietary understanding. The analysis focused on identifying trends rather than establishing causal relationships.

6.6 Ethical Considerations

Participation was voluntary, and no personal identifying information was collected. Participant anonymity and confidentiality were ensured throughout the study. Ethical guidelines regarding informed consent and responsible data management were strictly followed.

7. Findings and Discussion

7.1 Social Media Exposure and Digital Engagement

High levels of social media engagement were observed among respondents. A majority (80.5%) reported using social media several times per day (Figure 1). In addition, 59.8% indicated that they encounter food-related influencer content daily, while 37.8% reported exposure several times a week (Figure 2). These results demonstrate that digital food content forms a regular part of participants’ online experience.

Instagram emerged as the dominant platform for food influencer exposure (42.7%), reflecting its visually oriented design and emphasis on curated lifestyle presentation. The strong visual format of the platform may contribute to the memorability and appeal of promoted food content.

Previous research shows that frequent exposure to digital food communication is associated with measurable behavioural and cognitive shifts among young adults (Parks et al., 2025). Sustained engagement increases familiarity with promoted products and integrates influencer recommendations into everyday browsing habits. Earlier systematic evidence similarly identifies social media environments as

influential contexts shaping nutrition-related behaviours over time (Vassallo et al., 2018). The findings therefore reinforce the view that repeated exposure operates as a foundational mechanism through which digital influence is strengthened.

How often do you use social media platforms (e.g., Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, Facebook)?
82 responses

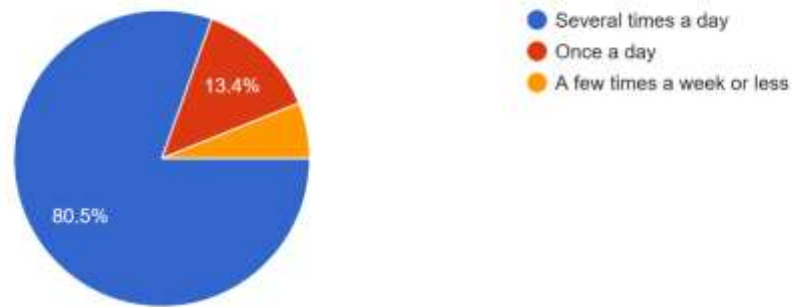


Figure 1. Frequency of Social Media Usage Among Respondents

How often do you see food-related content posted by social media influencers?
82 responses

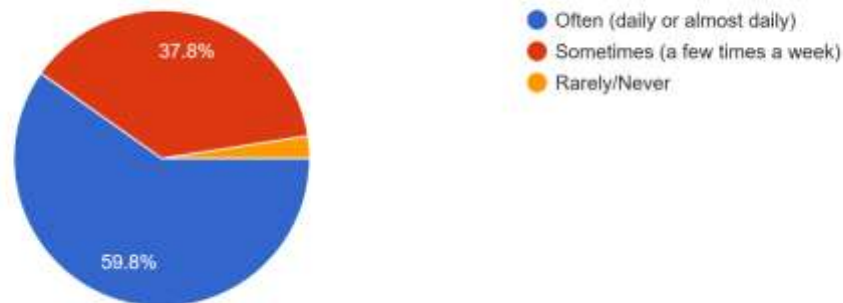


Figure 2. Exposure to Food-Related Influencer Content

7.2 Credibility Perception and Trust Formation

Perceptions of credibility varied among respondents (Figure 3). A majority (63.4%) described influencer recommendations as “somewhat credible,” while 29.3% considered them very credible. Only a small proportion (7.3%) indicated that such endorsements were not credible. The distribution suggests moderate trust rather than unquestioned acceptance.

Despite credibility not being overwhelmingly high, behavioural influence remained evident in the data. This indicates that credibility alone does not determine persuasive impact.

Research in digital marketing shows that credibility in online environments is often shaped by perceived authenticity, relatability, and consistency rather than formal expertise (De Veirman, Cauberghe and Hudders, 2018). The findings reflect a similar pattern. Even when recommendations were viewed as only moderately credible, respondents still reported behavioural responsiveness.

Visual presentation, repeated exposure, and alignment with personal lifestyle preferences may therefore strengthen influence. Professional qualifications appear less influential than emotional connection and familiarity in shaping consumer trust and response.

When a social media influencer endorses a food product, how credible do you find their recommendation?

82 responses

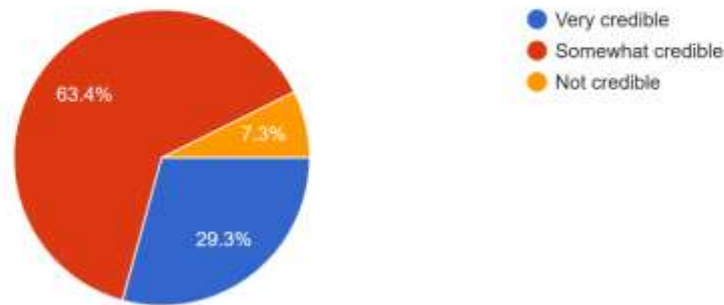


Figure 3. Perceived Credibility of Influencer-Endorsed Food Products

7.3 Influence on Purchasing Behaviour

Responses indicate a clear behavioural impact of influencer-driven content (Figure 4). Almost half of the respondents (47.6%) stated that social media influencers influence their purchasing decisions either often or sometimes, while 29.3% reported frequent influence. Only 23.2% indicated that influencer endorsements rarely or never affect their purchasing choices.

In addition, 57.3% reported trying a new food item or restaurant at least occasionally following an influencer recommendation. These findings demonstrate that digital exposure extends beyond awareness and translates into concrete consumer action.

Research shows a strong relationship between influencer endorsements and purchase intention in digital marketplaces (Khan and Rahman, 2025). Further scale-based analysis confirms that social media exposure functions as a measurable predictor of food consumption behaviour among young adults (Taylan and Arslan, 2024). The findings align with existing literature, reinforcing the position that influencer marketing operates as a behavioural driver rather than merely a visibility tool.

Do social media influencers influence your decision to purchase specific food products?

82 responses

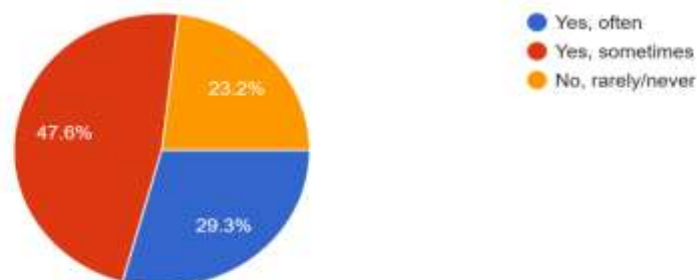


Figure 4. Influence of Social Media Influencers on Food Purchasing Decisions

7.4 Perceptions of Healthy Eating and Nutritional Confusion

Responses reveal noticeable perceptual effects beyond purchasing behaviour (Figure 5). Most participants (52.4%) reported that social media influencers sometimes create confusion about what constitutes healthy eating. In contrast, 31.7% believed influencers help clarify healthy choices, while 15.9% perceived no impact. The findings indicate that digital food messaging does not simply inform; it also shapes and at times complicates dietary understanding.

The overlap between lifestyle content and commercial promotion appears to blur distinctions between evidence-based nutritional guidance and sponsored messaging. When promotional material is presented in visually appealing and relatable formats, critical evaluation may become secondary to engagement.

Research on nutrition misinformation among online audiences shows that persuasive framing can influence acceptance of dietary claims, particularly when credibility cues are embedded within presentation style (Meyer and Vandevijvere, 2024). Systematic evidence also links social media exposure to shifts in body image perceptions and food-related attitudes among young adults (Rounsefell et al., 2019). The present findings reflect similar concerns, suggesting that influencer-driven food communication may contribute to uncertainty surrounding nutritional standards.

Do social media influencers affect your understanding of what constitutes healthy eating?
82 responses

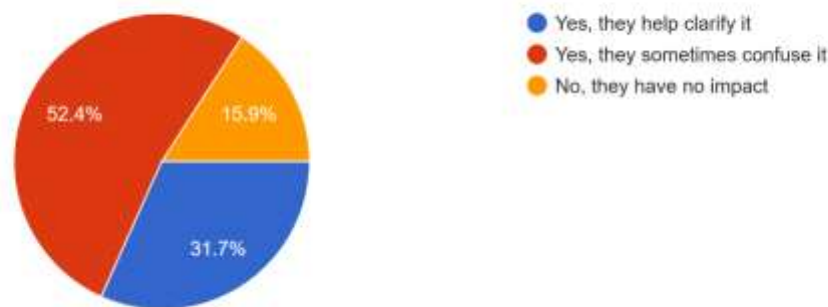


Figure 5. Perceptions of Healthy Eating and Nutritional Confusion

7.5 Normalization of Unhealthy Food Choices

Findings indicate that 56.1% of respondents believe influencers make unhealthy foods appear more acceptable or desirable. The pattern suggests a gradual normalization process in which indulgent or highly processed foods are presented as routine elements of everyday lifestyle content rather than occasional treats.

When such foods are consistently displayed within attractive visual settings and positive social contexts, their perceived risk may diminish. Over time, repeated exposure can shift perceptions of what is considered typical or socially acceptable consumption.

Experimental research supports this interpretation, demonstrating that influencer posts promoting unhealthy foods can influence food choice behaviour, particularly when combined with aspirational imagery (Boepple and Thompson, 2022). Observations within the sample reflect similar tendencies, where visual appeal and social validation reinforce acceptance of less nutritious options. Digital framing therefore contributes not only to purchasing behaviour but also to evolving dietary norms.

Do social media influencers influence your perception of "unhealthy" foods (e.g., making them seem more acceptable or desirable)?

82 responses

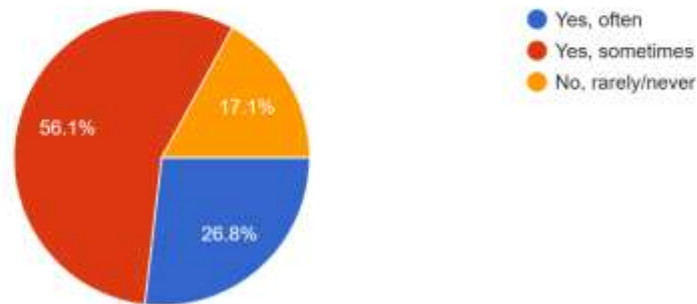


Figure 6. Perception of Unhealthy Food Normalization Through Influencer Content

8. Limitations of the Study

While the study provides valuable insights into the role of social media influencer endorsements in shaping young adults' food choices, several limitations must be acknowledged.

First, the research employed a convenience sampling method, which limits the generalisability of the findings. The sample consisted of eighty-two respondents, and although sufficient for identifying trends, it may not fully represent the broader young adult population across different regions or socio-economic backgrounds.

Second, the study relied on self-reported data. Participants described their own perceptions and behaviours, which may be affected by recall limitations or social desirability tendencies. As a result, reported purchasing behaviour may not always accurately reflect actual consumption patterns.

Third, the research adopted a cross-sectional design. Data were collected at a single point in time, which limits the ability to determine long-term effects. This approach does not allow for firm conclusions about cause-and-effect relationships between influencer exposure and sustained dietary behaviour, and the findings therefore represent associations rather than direct causation.

Finally, the study focused primarily on quantitative measures and did not include qualitative exploration. Future research incorporating interviews or focus groups could provide deeper insight into how young adults interpret and negotiate influencer-driven food messaging.

Despite these limitations, the study still provides useful insight into how influencer marketing affects young adults' food perceptions and behaviour.

9. Conclusion

The present study examined the role of social media influencer endorsements in shaping young adults' food choices, purchasing behaviour, and perceptions of nourishment. The findings demonstrate that influencer impact extends beyond mere exposure to digital content and translates into measurable behavioural and perceptual shifts.

First, the study confirms that frequent social media engagement creates an environment in which influencer recommendations become embedded within everyday routines. Although perceived credibility was moderate rather than absolute, a considerable proportion of respondents reported trying or purchasing

food products based on influencer endorsements. This suggests that behavioural influence operates not solely through expertise, but through repeated exposure, visual appeal, and social relatability.

Second, the findings reveal a blurred boundary between information and persuasion. More than half of the respondents indicated experiencing confusion regarding what constitutes healthy eating. This highlights the difficulty young adults face in distinguishing between evidence-based nutritional guidance and commercially driven content. The digital food environment therefore functions not only as a marketplace but also as a space where dietary norms are subtly negotiated.

Third, influencer-driven content appears to contribute to the normalization of unhealthy food choices. The frequent and visually appealing portrayal of indulgent or highly processed foods may reshape perceptions of what is considered routine or acceptable consumption. Such normalization reflects the persuasive power of lifestyle-oriented storytelling within social media contexts.

Overall, the study underscores the dual nature of influencer marketing in the food domain. While it offers engagement and accessibility, it also raises concerns regarding clarity, responsibility, and nutritional literacy. Strengthening critical media awareness among young adults, alongside promoting transparency and ethical communication practices among influencers, is essential to support informed and balanced dietary decision-making in an increasingly digital world.

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