

Food Marketing through Social Media Influencers: The Impact on Millennial Consumers' Purchase Intentions

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ABSTRACT

Manuscript type: Research paper

Research aims: The current study investigates the influence of social media food influencers and the moderating effect of millennial consumers' gender on buying intention.

Design/Methodology/Approach: Following a quantitative research approach, 453 responses were collected using a non-probability convenience sampling technique. Partial least squares–structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) and the fuzzy set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA) approach were applied to assess the proposed measurement and structural models.

Research findings: The results show that food influencers with familiarity, attractiveness, and credibility positively affect millennial consumers' buying intentions. However, no evidence of the moderation effect of gender on buying intent was found. The fsQCA results confirm the significance of all the source characteristics, including product match-up as determinants, and provide the configurations that can lead to purchasing intentions.

Theoretical contribution/Originality: To the best of our knowledge, this study is the first to explore the impact of food influencers and the moderating effect of gender on the buying intention of millennial consumers by using SEM and fsQCA.

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Research limitations/Implications: This study does not look into the direct effect of customers' emotions, which might play a significant role in their decision-making. Future studies may evaluate the relative impact of additional components, such as the emotions and socio-economic characteristics of millennials.

Practical/managerial implications and/or Social/economic implications: This study offers theoretical and practical implications for scholars and marketers. It extends our understanding of associative learning, suggesting that pairing a brand with positive stimuli can elicit favourable responses towards the brand. Furthermore, this study provides insights for millennials to understand how food markets operate, by whom, and how food influencers influence them.

Keywords: Food influencers, source credibility, purchase intention, social media, millennials, fsQCA

JEL Classification: M31, M37

1. Introduction

The digitalisation and proliferation of social media have fundamentally altered the ways in which people learn, communicate, and make purchasing decisions. The influencer marketing industry has seen substantial growth as a result. In 2021, the global influencer marketing market was valued at an impressive USD13.8 billion, reflecting a significant increase from previous years (Ahmad & Ahmad, 2021). This trend is projected to continue, with significant growth expected in various regions, including the United States. For instance, the expenditure on influencer marketing in the United States was USD2.42 billion in 2019 and is forecasted to nearly double to USD4.62 billion by 2023 (Wielki, 2020). This surge is driven by the increasing effectiveness of influencers in reaching and engaging with target audiences, thereby becoming a crucial component of modern marketing strategies (Chopra et al., 2021).

Consequently, social media influencers (SMIs) have become a reliable promotional tool that can enhance brand image and develop direct rapport with target consumers (Malik et al., 2023). SMIs influence the target audience through their unique lifestyle, expertise, knowledge, buying habits, positive attitude, and behaviour. Consumers also trust them and are influenced by their social media posts and comments (Onofrei et al., 2022). Although several social elements directly affect consumer purchase intention, such as reference groups, friends, and family, SMIs have recently emerged as opinion leaders (Neuhaus et al., 2022). SMIs can directly influence the large, lucrative segment of young consumers to make purchasing

decisions because they are young, educated, and active on different social platforms (Dinh et al., 2022).

Despite the significant increase in interest in influencer marketing, many of its aspects have not yet been sufficiently researched (Vrontis et al., 2021; Masuda et al., 2022; Schouten et al., 2020). This is especially true for the impact of SMIs on food brands, a subject that remains relatively underexplored. Food marketers creatively display and promote their foods and food-related products through social media platforms (Van der Bend et al., 2022). Customers' engagement with different food brands is now easier than ever due to food reviews and comments on social media platforms (Rahman et al., 2023; Hanaysha, 2022). Besides, food-connected generations and cultures, as well as food influencers, act as a bridge that enhances communication between food marketers and consumers (Fan et al., 2023). Hanifati (2015) finds that the recommendations and synthesised information from SMIs profoundly impact consumers' food and food-related purchasing intention. Millennials, or Generation Y, are the generation that grew up with mobile phones, the Internet, and different social media (Wang, 2019). More than 50% of millennials regularly use social media (Borland, 2018). Several studies related to the influence of social media on the buying intentions of younger generations have been conducted in different developed countries. However, identifying and measuring the role of SMIs in the food industry, especially among millennial consumers, is still relatively underexplored in Bangladesh.

In Bangladesh, the rapid digital transformation has led to increased social media usage, creating new opportunities for brands to engage with consumers. However, there is limited empirical evidence on the effectiveness of using SMIs in promoting food brands within this market. According to Ahmed et al. (2021), while influencer marketing is a growing trend globally, the academic literature lacks comprehensive studies on how influencers affect consumer perceptions and purchasing decisions in the Bangladeshi food sector. Besides, Hossain and Rahman (2021) note that while local food brands are beginning to experiment with influencer partnerships, there is a lack of structured research to assess the outcomes of these marketing efforts. This gap is critical because cultural and regional differences can significantly affect the efficacy of marketing strategies (Hossain et al., 2022). Moreover, the unique socio-economic and cultural landscape of Bangladesh necessitates tailored research to understand how influencers can effectively promote food brands and influence consumer behaviour in this region.

Therefore, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the impact of SMIs on the food industry, particularly among millennials. Addressing the research gap, this study will assess the influence of food influencers on millennials' purchasing intentions through four key constructs: source credibility (Ohanian, 1990), source attractiveness (Erdogan, 1999), product match-up (Kamins & Gupta, 1994), and source familiarity (Keller, 2008). By identifying the impact of food influencers on the purchasing decisions of the millennial cohort, this research offers valuable insights for food marketers, SMIs, restaurants, and online food delivery services. Understanding these dynamics can help food marketers refine their promotional strategies and business models, ultimately influencing the purchasing decisions of their target customers more effectively.

2. Literature Review

2.1 *The Role of SMIs as eWOM Marketing*

WOM (word-of-mouth) is considered a source of informal communication among different interested parties (Tan & Lee, 2019). According to Turki and Amara (2017), more than 76% of consumers gain knowledge and purchase intentions via WOM, such as from family members and friends. The same scenario is evident in the food industry (Van Tonder et al., 2018). In the evolution of digital time, social networking sites have become a predominant communication technology for today's Internet users. As a result, marketers attempt to harness the power of eWOM (electronic word-of-mouth) on social networking sites (Chu & Kim, 2011). eWOM denotes any affirmative or negative appraisals and statements provided by prospective and former buyers regarding any products or services online, which is considered the most trusted and reliable marketing source (Ambarwati et al., 2019).

eWOM is considered a strong stimulus in marketing communication and the purchasing intention-making process. However, influencer marketing is an updated form of marketing, where the main focus of advertising is on specific personalities with many followers. An influencer could be considered a person or character who has the skill to influence others' buying decisions due to their power, information, and good relationship with their viewers. Al-Emadi and Yahia (2020) define SMIs as personalities who have a job other than providing material on social media, such as athletes, actors, or content creators. Besides, many social media users

follow different popular social media accounts; therefore, they are considered a new opinion leader cohort and SMIs (Vaibhavi & Leena, 2018). Influencer marketing is a more professional and extended version of the initial idea of WOM marketing based on a social perspective. And it is a form of relationship-building which could encourage brands to develop their target audience and transform them into loyal consumers by instilling self-confidence and reliability (Sudha & Sheena, 2017). Surveys and different empirical studies reveal that SMIs are leaders at eWOM by sharing their opinions and experiences (Ambarwati et al., 2019).

2.2 *SMIs and Millennial Consumers*

Millennials grew up with Internet facilities and are obsessed with the online world through their desire to seek influence, involvement, and valuable connections (Casalegno et al., 2022). The millennial generation (born between 1981–2000) is defined as an approximately 20-year group of young persons whose prominent members completed high school in 2000, hence the term millennial (Brazil & Candipan, 2023; Latkovikj et al., 2016). Millennials are the key target group for retailers among generational consumers. Millennials are nearly 25% of the world population, with more purchasing power and personal income, making them the most influential buyer group among different customers (Sharma & Kanchwala, 2022). Additionally, millennials are likely to spend a higher percentage of their income on food industries, such as restaurants (Suhartanto et al., 2019).

Consequently, WOM recommendations substantially influence millennials, along with suggestions from friends and acquaintances, and views shared social media, forums, blogs, etc. (Dabija et al., 2018). They also like these communication networks because of the fast information sharing and the discovery of new and unknown things. Millennials find online feedback and reviews more reliable than the information given by businesses, which influences their final buying decision (Dabija et al., 2018). Krishnamurthy and Kumar (2018) and Prasad et al. (2017) find a direct relationship between eWOM and young adult consumers' product purchase intentions. SMI and digital content can easily influence their regular internet and social media use and online experiences (Tafesse & Wood, 2023).

2.3 *SMI's Influence on Millennial Consumers' Food Purchasing Intention*

Food is essential to daily life and is now more visible and shared due to social media. In Saldamlı and Özen's (2019) study on the effect of SMIs on consumer preferences, specifically for food businesses, they find that the influencers have a meaningful impact on consumers' food preferences. SMIs are successfully used to expose product information and new commercials to their online followers with the help of social media platforms, for example, Facebook, Youtube, Instagram, and Twitter (Lim et al., 2017). Consumers who use social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, FourSquare, UrbanSpoon become regular and loyal customers (Alalawneh et al., 2022). One survey revealed that more than 80% of Australian millennials use Facebook daily, especially regarding food decisions. Because young people are more familiar with their peers, whose advice they are more likely to trust (Coates et al., 2019). Due to their extraordinary amiability quality in building a relationship with consumers, SMIs are considered more trustworthy, reliable, and skilled than traditional celebrity endorsement advertising strategies, especially for businesses targeting younger stars (Lim et al., 2017).

Therefore, our research objective is to examine the influence of SMIs on millennials and their food-buying intentions. It mainly focuses on the food influencers who endorse and share food-related information and exchange recipes online from restaurants and chefs. This study used four constructs (i.e., source credibility, source attractiveness, product match-up, and source familiarity) to measure the efficacy of SMIs.

3. **Underpinning Theory and Hypotheses Development**

Influencer marketing has become an essential strategy in digital marketing, recognised for its effectiveness in targeting specific customer segments and enhancing brand visibility (Yesiloglu & Costello, 2020). This approach leverages electronic word of mouth, where companies collaborate with influencers to promote their products to extensive audiences, thereby optimising costs and maximising reach (Evans et. al., 2017). Influencer marketing aims to drive brand awareness and purchase decisions through individuals who share content on social media platforms, leveraging their credibility and follower base (Lou & Yuan 2019). The effectiveness of this marketing strategy stems from the tendency of social media followers to trust and purchase products recommended by

influencers. Influencers' authenticity and relatability contribute significantly to their persuasive power, making their endorsements more impactful than traditional advertising methods (De Veirman et al., 2017). According to Lou and Yuan (2019), influencers serve as "digital opinion leaders," shaping their followers' perceptions and behaviours regarding brands and products (Hassan et al. 2021). Companies have reported notable improvements in financial performance due to the integration of influencer marketing into their overall strategies (Vrontis et al. 2021).

The relationships between followers and influencers significantly impact purchase intentions, which involve a combination of consumers' interest (cognitive behaviour) in a brand or product and the likelihood of purchasing these items (Gustafsson & Khan, 2021). When customers face difficulties differentiating products or services, brand awareness becomes a crucial factor in their decision-making process (Tran, 2021). The actual buying behaviour is heavily influenced by the information followers gather about a product or service through various social media platforms. Consequently, this behaviour depends on their preference for a particular product and the influence of this preference on the customer, closely linked to consumer attitudes. Advertising plays a pivotal role in shaping attitudes toward the advertised brand, thereby influencing consumers' purchase intentions (Shareef et al., 2022).

The theory of associative learning posits that learning involves forming connections between two phenomena. According to a study by Lienemann and Stalgaitis (2022), results from classical conditioning studies—a common method of associative learning—suggest that using celebrities who evoke positive feelings as unconditioned stimuli in conditioning trials should lead to favourable responses toward brands. Consequently, endorsements by credible influencers are likely to elicit desired reactions from followers from a marketing perspective. Research confirms that the level of influencer credibility positively impacts the evaluation of the endorsed brand (Lou & Yuan, 2021).

In online interactions, source credibility emerges as a critical determinant influencing decision-making processes, attitudes, and purchasing intentions (Rajaei et. al., 2018). When examining the impact of influencer marketing on social media, the credibility of influencers stands out as a pivotal factor that enhances their value (Cheng & Tsen, 2021). This credibility significantly influences followers' purchase intentions and serves as a fundamental precursor to advertising effectiveness (Erdem & Swait, 2004). Moreover, the

dimension of influencer expertise plays a crucial role in shaping perceptions of influencers' ability to effectively endorse products or services on social media platforms. Influencers are perceived as individuals knowledgeable about the subjects they endorse, thereby enhancing their persuasive power (McCracken, 1989). Conversely, trustworthiness represents followers' confidence in the integrity of the content shared by influencers. It reflects the extent to which followers perceive influencer posts as genuine and unbiased opinions or as influenced by external factors (Wiedmann & von Mettenheim, 2021).

In the digital era, brand managers are increasingly employing strategies to engage consumers through compelling content on online platforms (Martínez-López et al., 2020). However, there remains a scarcity of research on the effectiveness of influencer credibility in promoting food brands among millennials in Bangladesh, as well as the impact of influencer type.

3.1 Purchase Intention and Source Familiarity

Purchase intention denotes the state where a purchaser decides to buy an item in the future (Carrión Bósquez et al., 2023). Purchase intention also indicates the frequency and probability of an individual buying a product (Hong et al., 2023). Awareness, knowledge, and consumer assessment at the time of purchase are vital factors in driving purchase intention (Zhou et al., 2022). Consumers' involvement with social media platforms dramatically influences their attitudes and purchase intentions (McClure & Seock, 2020). The influence is possible only when the source is familiar to the target group. Familiarity alludes to the availability of information regarding the celebrity endorser who has gained popularity using social publicity platforms among a target group of people (Özer et al., 2022). Celebrities are sophisticated people in distinct disciplines who appreciate public acknowledgement by an enormous portion of a specific cluster of individuals (Ngai, 2022). They have positive acceptance among members of society (Adnan et al., 2021). For the users who have shared similar experiences or liked the same content, their communication and recommendation services are usually much more specific and relevant in helping users to simulate purchase intentions (Wang et al., 2021). Building upon this, the more familiar the consumer is with the influencer, the more likely they are to purchase the recommended product (Al-Darraji et al., 2020). Thus, the first hypothesis is developed as follows:

Hypothesis 1: There is a positive relationship between source familiarity and purchase intention.

3.2 Source Credibility

Credibility denotes how much the source is seen as having details of the information or enough experience to provide an honest judgment about a product or brand (Walten et al., 2022). The way recipients of a message perceive the believability of its source is theoretically considered source credibility (Hsieh & Li, 2020). Source credibility is commonly used to analyse the effectiveness of endorsement (Hovland & Weiss, 1951). When source credibility is conferred, two matters come forward: trustworthiness and expertise. An endorser with a high level of knowledge and trust in a given field increases acceptance of a delivered message (Kumar, 2023). A customer's value perception gets a positive push if a reliable figure endorses it, affecting the final product choice from available alternatives (Li et al., 2022). Information from credible sources can affect consumers' trust, opinions, assertiveness, and behaviours (Wang et al., 2017). According to Breves et al. (2019), highly credible sources can positively impact consumer purchase-related decisions and act as strong brand communicators. A study on Malaysia's online community finds that source credibility strongly influences consumers' purchase intentions (Hui, 2017). Similarly, source expertise, source trustworthiness, and source homophiles have a positive effect on purchase intention (Rusdiana et al., 2022). As a result, the following hypothesis is suggested:

Hypothesis 2: There is a positive relationship between source credibility and purchase intention.

3.3 Source Attractiveness

Source attractiveness is correlated with the corporeal attributes belonging to an endorser (Arora et al., 2023). Perception regarding a brand can be considerably enriched by the physical charm of the advocate (Wong & Hung, 2023). An endorser's somatic characteristics, such as weight, height, and facial appearance are considered the initial judgmental factor for a consumer on whether to follow the endorser or make any purchase decision based on their recommendation (Wong & Hung, 2023). Interestingly, if consumers find some commonalities with the characteristics of the endorser, they find them more attractive (Bauer et al., 2022). Physical looks are vital for endorsers, though occasionally ignored by followers (Seiler

& Kucza, 2017). Largely, SMIs who are considered attractive have a higher possibility of capturing the attention of their followers (Seiler & Kucza, 2017). Consumers' positive attitudes toward a product significantly impact their purchase intentions and recommendations to others (Belanche et al., 2021). The perceived brand image of the sponsor is expected to positively impact purchase intentions among community members (Fink et al., 2020). Thus, the following hypothesis can be developed:

Hypothesis 3: There is a positive relationship between source attractiveness and purchase intention.

3.4 Product Match-up

A way to enhance brand personality by transferring positive messages to customers is to match celebrity endorsers with the product personality (Parmar et al., 2020). An appropriate affiliation between the brand and the tastemaker triggers the success of the applied marketing strategy (Gamage & Ashill, 2023). Product match-ups consider celebrity endorsers' image and perceived fit (Bauer et al., 2022). When SMIs promote any brand, it is accepted if a perfect match-up is found between the product and the advocate's characteristics (Lim et al., 2017). In today's marketing reality, one of the essential factors in brand success is the match-up (Bauer et al., 2022). If a perfect match-up occurs, customers show positivity towards an endorsed brand (Parmar et al., 2020). A better similarity between celebrity endorsers and products can create a better brand image (Lee et al., 2022). The idea of product match-up entails a likeness between the personality traits of celebrities and the characteristics of the brands they endorse (Khan et al., 2019). Achieving consumer purchase intention fundamentally hinges on ensuring a strong match-up between the endorser and the brand (Lim et al., 2017). A positive relationship between product match-up and purchase intention is evidenced by the need to accurately align influencers with specific products, as endorsers are more effective when there is a fit between them and the endorsed product (Ezenwafor et al., 2021). Therefore, the following hypothesis is developed:

Hypothesis 4: There is a positive relationship between product match-up and purchase intention.

3.5 Moderating Role of Gender

The probability of involving in a particular behaviour is influenced by consumer characteristics (Sharma et al., 2022). Individual attributes, including gender, age, and educational achievement, have been shown to influence shopping behaviour, adoption, and deployment of new technology (Jaiswal et al., 2022). The impact of celebrity endorsements on consumer attitudes and purchase intentions varies based on the gender of the celebrity and the target audience (Bogollu & Saravanan, 2023). Consumption and gender are interconnected, and studies on the influence of gender on consumer behaviour have been documented (Dedeoğlu et al., 2016). Female customers are more influenced by the attractiveness of the celebrity, while male customers are more influenced by the celebrity's experience and personality (Abbas et al., 2018). Despite being perceived as a product being equally important by both genders, the influence of a variable (such as product price) on consumer behaviour may vary based on gender (Dedeoğlu et al., 2016). However, given the impacts of value on behavioural intentions observed in several studies (Zhu et al., 2023; Jaiswal et al., 2022), gender is likely to have a role in the link between value kinds and behavioural intentions (Dedeoğlu et al., 2016).

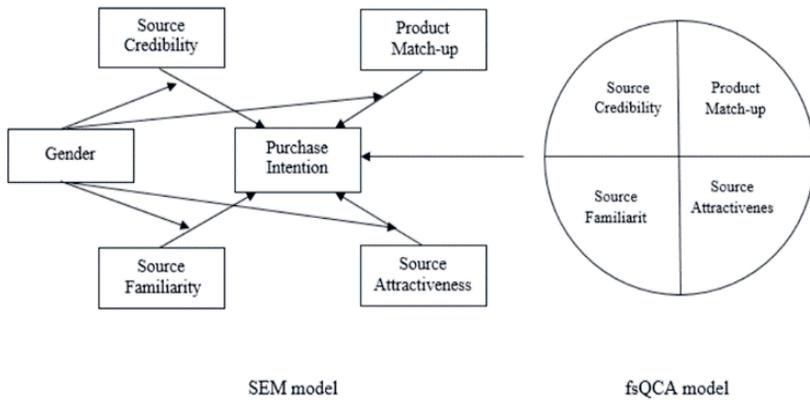
Moreover, consumers, particularly women, are more likely to be influenced by the familiarity of the celebrity, which can lead to increased purchase intention (Evan et al., 2021). Abbas et al. (2018) find that female consumers are influenced by the credibility of the celebrity, leading to increased purchase intention. Although several studies have been conducted on the role of gender in online marketing (Mosquera et al., 2018), however, empirical proof concerning the influence of the gender of respondents on the connection between celebrity endorsements and purchase intention is still scarce. It is believed that investigating the moderating influence of gender is worthwhile because it has been utilised widely for market segmentation due of its simplicity and accessibility (Mosquera et al., 2018, Dedeoğlu et al., 2015). Given the paucity of investigations regarding the moderating effect of gender, the following research model (Figure 1) and hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis 5: Consumer's gender moderates the relationship between the source attractiveness of the celebrity and consumer purchase intention.

Hypothesis 6: Consumer's gender moderates the relationship between source familiarity of the celebrity and consumer purchase intention.

Hypothesis 7: Consumer's gender moderates the relationship between the source credibility of the celebrity and consumer purchase intention.

Figure 1: Conceptual Model



4. Materials and Methods

A structured survey questionnaire was developed and distributed to collect data for the study. The convenience sampling method was applied to select the respondents. For sample size determination, the software, namely G*power 3.1 (Ji et al., 2022), was used with the following arrangement: $f^2 = 0.15$ (medium), $\alpha = 0.05$, and number of predictors = 4, with power fixed at 95% (Cohen, 1992), and the required sample size at 129. However, to minimise the errors in fulfilling the questionnaires and possible complications that may arise from a limited sample size, overall, 460 responses were collected. Seven responses were later discarded through the data screening process. A Google Docs form was used to administer the survey due to ease of building the questionnaire. As it was self-administered, every participant was given a choice to answer the questionnaire or ignore it if they were not interested due to time limitation or any other factors. The survey link was disseminated through email and instant messaging platforms like Messenger and WhatsApp. The data were then extracted into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. Before dissemination, the questionnaire was pre-tested with ten respondents of the population of interest and an expert in academia. Their opinion was considered in designing the final questionnaire. Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the respondents.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 453)

Profile	Frequency	Percentage (%)
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	263	58.1
Female	190	41.9
<i>Age</i>		
22–26 years old	386	85.2
26–30 years old	45	9.9
31–39 years old	20	4.4
40 years and above	2	.5
<i>Marital status</i>		
Married	41	9.1
Unmarried	411	90.7
Divorced/separated	1	.2
<i>Educational Background</i>		
SSC	4	.9
HSC	111	24.5
Honours	311	68.7
Master's	27	6.0
<i>Occupation</i>		
Professional	16	3.5
Executive/Manager	19	4.2
Self-employed/own business	21	4.6
Student	394	87.0
Others	3	.7
<i>Monthly household income</i>		
Bellow BDT 30,000	191	42.2
Tk. 30,000- 50,000	107	23.6
Tk. 50,000 – 80,000	80	17.7
Tk. 80,000- 100,000	36	7.9
Above 100,000	39	8.6

4.1 Measures

The initial part of the survey questionnaire includes the demographic profile of the participants, followed by information about source familiarity, source credibility, product match-up, source

attractiveness, and purchase intention. All the question items of latent variables were measured on earlier validated measurements with minor modifications. The items used to measure source attractiveness and source credibility were adapted from Spry et al. (2011) and Ohanian (1990); items to measure source familiarity were adapted from Spry et al. (2011); items to measure measured product match-up were adapted from Schmidt and Hitchon (1999); and items to measure purchase intention were adapted from Liu and Brock (2011). The exogenous variables (source attractiveness, source familiarity, source credibility, and product match-up) and endogenous variables (purchase intention) were measured using a five-point Likert scale. Participants rated their agreement or disagreement with a series of statements on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5, with 1 indicating strong disagreement and 5 indicating strong agreement.

4.2 Data Analysis Technique

The study applied structural equation modelling (SEM) and fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA) techniques to analyse the data. The fsQCA approach can be used to determine the various combinations of causative factors that could result in the same outcome (Mustafa et al., 2022). Traditional statistical methods focus on the net influence of independent factors on dependent variables, and the results demonstrate that several causal paths could lead to the same outcome. The fsQCA approach goes a step further to clarify the configurations of conditions that can lead to a result, and more crucially, that the presence and absence of an outcome can be caused by different reasons (Maalouf & Hoque, 2022).

4.3 Calibration

All condition and outcome variables must be calibrated using the fsQCA method (Hsu & Hung, 2013). Calibration generates a fuzzy-set score related to the degree of membership in a set based on theoretical and practical knowledge (Navarro et al., 2016). Calibration is used in this study to generate fuzzy-set scores using the “direct method” (Hsu & Hung, 2013). As the variables were measured using a five-point Likert scale, the original value of 5 is assigned as complete membership, 3 is set as a cross-over point, and 1 is defined as full non-membership. Following the calibration process stated above (Hsu & Hung, 2013), the outcome variable purchase intentions is calibrated as fs_purchases. The condition variable source credibility is calibrated as fs_credibility, source attractiveness

is calibrated as fs_attractiveness, product match-up as fs_match-up, and source familiarity as fs_familiarity.

5. Analysis and Results

The study measured kurtosis and multivariate skewness with WebPower software, a collection of tools for conducting statistical power analysis online (Hair et al., 2017; Cain et al., 2017). The findings reveal that the data used in the research is not multivariate normal, as measured by Mardia's multivariate skewness (β 1.92, $p < 0.01$) as well as Mardia's multivariate kurtosis ($\beta = 38.72$, $p < 0.01$), hence it was decided to use a non-parametric test software, namely SmartPLS.

PLS-SEM was used to examine the research framework. The PLS-SEM technique enables concurrent modelling of the associations between multiple explanatory, observed, and moderating constructs in a single theoretical model. PLS-SEM estimation is a two-stage method that starts with a measurement model analysis (validity plus reliability of the measures), before moving on to a structural model study (Sarstedt & Cheah, 2019; Hair et al., 2017). A bootstrapping process (5,000 resamples) was also executed to examine the significance of loadings and path coefficients (Hair et al., 2017). PLS-SEM was performed using SmartPLS 3 software.

5.1 Common Method Variance

This study applied Harman's single-factor technique to determine the impact of common method bias (CMB). In this context, a particular item having an overall variance of more than 50% can impact CMB with the data as well as the empirical conclusions. Based on this test, the first factor in this study explained 32.674 % of the total variation. The factor analysis results revealed that no general factor existed.

Besides Harman's single factor technique, the study also partially applied out of general factor (Podsakoff & Todor, 1985) of partial correlation procedures. The general factor or unmeasured marker variable was partly out by using SmartPLS as suggested by Tehseen et al. (2017). The R^2 value of the endogenous construct before and after adding an unmeasured marker variable was observed. The R^2 value of purchase intention was 0.502 before adding an unmeasured marker variable. After adding the unmeasured marker variable, the R^2 value of purchase intention was slightly increased to 0.600. Therefore, incorporating this factor has a non-significant effect on the R^2 value of the endogenous construct, implying that there is no common method bias in this study.

5.2 Measurement Model Analysis

Two types of validity were tested to evaluate the measuring model: convergent validity and discriminant validity.

5.2.1 Convergent validity

The loadings, average variance derived (AVE), and composite reliability are typically used to determine the measurement's convergent validity (Rahman et al., 2023). The value of all item loadings is above 0, the composite reliabilities value is more than 0.7, and the AVE value of all constructs is above 0.5. The outcomes of the measurement model are exhibited in Figure 1, and the measures for convergence validity and reliability are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2: Convergent Validity

Constructs	Items	Loading	Cronbach	rhoA	CR	AVE
Source attractiveness	SA1	0.756	0.788	0.811	0.852	0.538
	SA2	0.646				
	SA3	0.840				
	SA4	0.698				
	SA5	0.713				
Source familiarity	SFAM1	0.854	0.782	0.783	0.873	0.696
	SFAM2	0.817				
	SFAM3	0.832				
Source credibility	SC1	0.773	0.801	0.804	0.870	0.627
	SC3	0.812				
	SC5	0.826				
	SC6	0.755				
Product match-up	PM1	0.677	0.808	0.852	0.873	0.633
	PM2	0.777				
	PM3	0.856				
	PM4	0.860				
Purchase intention	PI1	0.655	0.837	0.838	0.881	0.555
	PI2	0.708				
	PI3	0.708				
	PI4	0.797				
	PI5	0.815				
	PI6	0.771				

Note: SC2 and SC4 were deleted due to low loading.

5.2.2 Discriminant validity

The heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations method was used to assess discriminant validity (Henseler et al., 2015). The results are presented in Table 3. If the HTMT value is above 0.85 or 0.90, there is an issue regarding discriminant validity. Since the values meet the criteria of HTMT0.90 and HTMT0.85, discriminant validity is proven.

Figure 2: Measurement Model Results

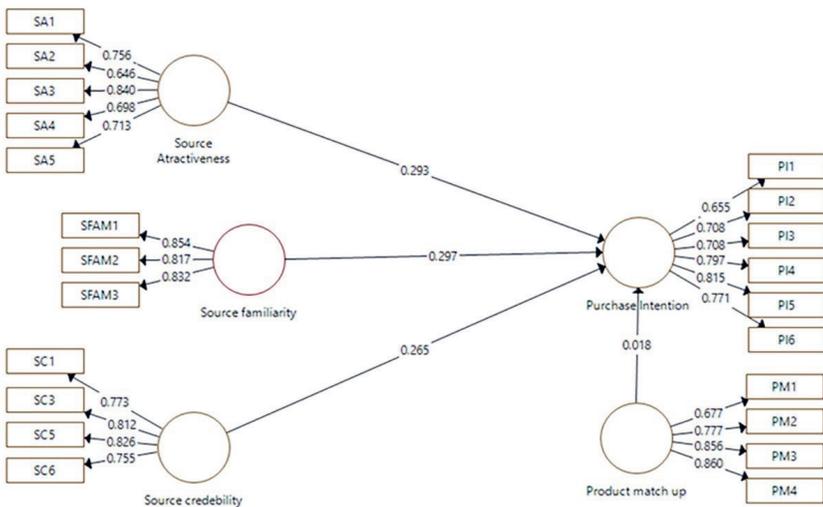


Table 3: Discriminant validity

	Product match-up	Purchase intention	Source attractiveness	Source credibility	Source familiarity
Product match-up					
Purchase intention	0.236				
Source attractiveness	0.126	0.658			
Source credibility	0.355	0.712	0.537		
Source familiarity	0.333	0.742	0.579	0.770	

5.3 Structural Model Analysis

5.3.1 Hypothesis testing results

Hair et al. (2017) propose a bootstrapping process considering a resample value of 5,000 to determine the structural model by measuring the R^2 beta (β) and t-values. It is also recommended that the researcher should document the coefficient of determination (R^2), the predictive significance (Q^2), and the effect sizes (f^2) so that the predictive strength of the model assessment can be evaluated. Whereas R^2 evaluates the research model's predictive accurateness, Q^2 estimates the predictive significance of the inner model (Haenlein et al., 2020). Moreover, f^2 calculates the structural effect of each predictor latent variable in the path model and decides whether it has a small, medium, or strong structural influence. Besides, a p-value will reveal whether or not there is an effect, but it will not give an idea of the effect size (Sullivan & Feinn, 2012). Thus, both statistical relevance (p-value) and substantive relevance (effect size) are significant findings to be presented in analysing studies (Sullivan & Feinn, 2012).

As recommended, a complete listing of path coefficients, including their t-values, R^2 , Q^2 , and f^2 , are listed in Table 4. It can be noticed from the findings that three of the four direct association hypotheses were supported. The findings showed that source attractiveness ($\beta = 0.293$, $t = 7.258$, $p < 0.005$, $f^2 = 0.125$), source familiarity ($\beta = 0.297$, $t = 6.444$, $p < 0.005$, $f^2 = 0.101$), source credibility ($\beta = 0.265$, $t = 5.688$, $p < 0.005$, $f^2 = 0.081$), have a positive connection with purchase intention; hence H_1 , H_2 , H_3 are accepted. On the other hand, an insignificant association was observed between product match-up and buying intention ($\beta = 0.018$, $t = 0.510$, $p > 0.005$, $f^2 = 0.001$); thus, H_4 is rejected.

Table 4: Findings of the Hypothesis Test

Hypothesis	Relationship	Std. beta	Std. error	t-value	p-value	Decision	VIF	R ²	Q ²	f ²
H ₁	SA→PI	0.293	0.041	7.258	0.00	Supported	1.386	0.502	0.271	0.125
H ₂	SFAM→PI	0.297	0.046	6.444	0.00	Supported	1.763	0.502	0.271	0.101
H ₃	SC→PI	0.265	0.047	5.688	0.00	Supported	1.748	0.502	0.271	0.081
H ₄	PM→PI	0.018	0.035	0.510	0.301	Not supported	1.108	0.502	0.271	0.001

Note: SA= Source attractiveness, SC= Source credibility, SF= Source familiarity, PI= Purchase intention

Figure 3: Bootstrapping Results

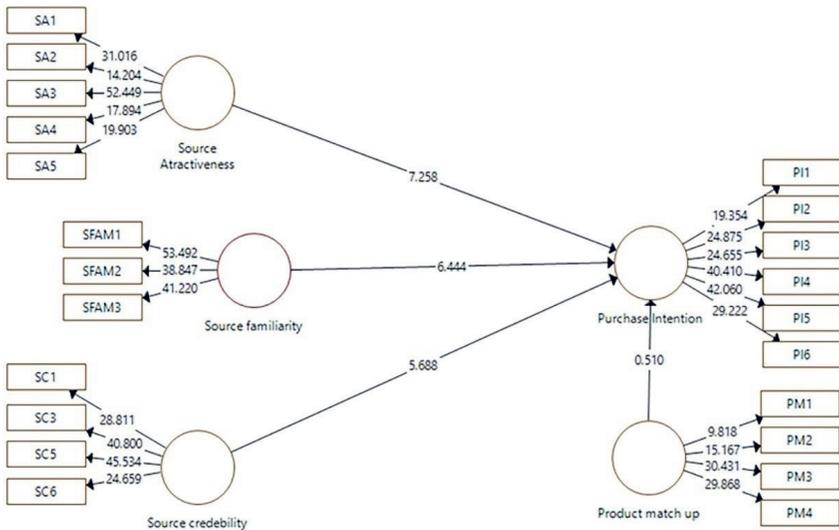


Table 5: Moderating Effect

	Main effect	Interaction effect			
	Std. beta	Std. beta	t-value	p-value	Decision
SC→PI	0.265	0.297			
SA→PI	0.293	0.408			
SFAM→PI	0.297	0.103			
PM→PI	0.018	0.019			
Gender		-0.025			
Gender*SA→PI		-0.001	0.012	0.990	Not supported
Gender*SC→PI		-0.113	1.122	0.262	Not supported
Gender*SF→PI		0.153	1.460	0.144	Not supported

Note: SA= Source attractiveness, SC= Source credibility, SF= Source familiarity, PI= Purchase intention

5.3.2 Moderating effect

Next, the moderating influence of millennials' gender on the association between source attractiveness and purchasing intention, source credibility and purchasing intention, and source familiarity and purchasing intention was examined. The findings of the interaction effect analysis are presented in Table 5. The moderating effect of gender and source attractiveness on buying intention is -0.001 ($t = 0.012$, $p = 0.990$), gender and the source credibility on purchase intention is -0.113 ($t = 1.122$, $p = 0.262$), gender and source familiarity are 0.153 ($t = 1.460$, $p = 0.144$). All the results are insignificant, and thus, it can be concluded that consumer gender does not moderate the relationship between source attractiveness, source credibility, source familiarity, and purchasing intention.

5.4 Importance-performance matrix analysis

The study used SmartPLS 3 software to conduct an importance-performance matrix analysis (IPMA) to classify the endogenous variable's key determinants. IPMA compares the overall impact of antecedents (importance) as well as the mean values of the unobserved variable scores (performance) on a particular construct (i.e., endogenous variable) in the structural model (e.g., Wong et al., 2020; Groß, 2018). This study model examines the antecedents' overall effects and means exogenous variable scores (i.e., product match-up,

source attractiveness, source familiarity, source credibility) on the target construct (i.e., purchase intention). Table 6 and Figure 4 present the IPMA results that show that product match-up performance is the highest of the four elements, at 68.982. However, the importance of this element is the lowest as it has a total effect of 0.018.

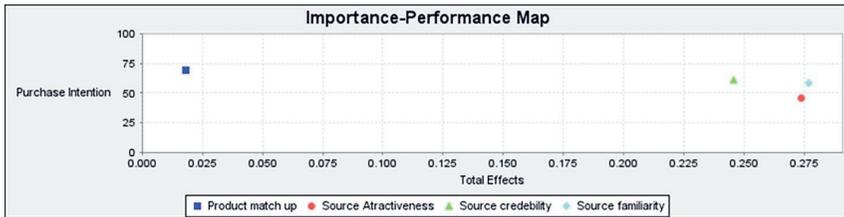
Conversely, source familiarity has the highest importance, with a value of 0.277 and a moderate performance value of 57.906. A one-unit improvement in source familiarity increases the purchase intention to 0.277 units. The results of the other two variables satisfy the anticipated values regarding importance and performance.

Table 6: Important Performance Matrix Analysis

Construct Variables	Purchase intention	
	Total effect	Performance
SA	0.274	45.325
SC	0.246	60.998
SFAM	0.277	57.906
PM	0.018	68.982

Note: SA= Source attractiveness, SC= Source credibility, SF= Source familiarity, PI= Purchase intention

Figure 4: Importance-Performance map



5.5 Results from fsQCA

First, the study examined the necessary conditions. A condition or a combination of conditions was regarded as ‘necessary’ if the consistency score was above the cutoff of 0.9 (Navarro et al., 2016). The findings of the necessary condition analysis for the presence of purchase intention are shown in Table 7. It is found that source attractiveness, source credibility, source familiarity, and product match-up are necessary conditions for purchase intention.

Table 7: Necessary Condition Assessment for Purchase Intention (PI)

Condition	Outcome: PI	
	Consistency	Coverage
fs_credibility	0.999978	0.999891
~fs_credibility	0.000065	1.000000
fs_attractiveness	0.998717	0.999956
~fs_attractiveness	0.001392	1.000000
fs_match-up	0.998391	0.999913
~fs_match-up	0.001674	1.000000
fs_familiarity	0.982802	1.000000
~fs_familiarity	0.017350	1.000000

The second step examines observed causal combinations (i.e., configurations). A truth table is compiled in this process. Table 8 displays the results. Interestingly, the resulting intermediate solution consists of only one combination sufficient to lead to purchase intention. As shown in Table 8, the configuration indicates that source attractiveness, source credibility, source familiarity, and product match-up led to purchase intention.

Table 8: fsQCA Output: Intermediate Solution Leading to Purchase Intention

Sets	Raw coverage	Unique coverage	Consistency
fs_credibility* fs_attractiveness* fs_match-up* fs_familiarity	0.982063	0.982063	1
Solution coverage	0.982063		
Solution consistency	1		

6. Discussion

This research investigated the influence of source familiarity, product match-up, source credibility, and source attractiveness on millennials' purchase intentions towards food products endorsed by SMIs. The SEM results showed that source attractiveness, source credibility, and source familiarity positively relate to purchase intention. However, the findings indicate that product match-up did not impact buying intent. On the other hand, fsQCA results revealed that all the source characteristics, including attractiveness, credibility, familiarity, and product match-up are necessary conditions and lead to purchase intention.

First, the source credibility of food influencers on social network platforms was found to have a positive association with buying intention. This result supports previous studies (Seiler & Kucza, 2017; Arai et al., 2014; Yilmaz et al., 2011), suggesting that millennials acknowledge social media food bloggers as sincere and reliable for the brands they endorse. Endorsers may induce feelings of honesty among respondents, thereby creating positive purchase intention (Erdogan, 1999). Further, Fink et al. (2020) find that influencer credibility increased purchase intention with regard to sponsored brand image. This phenomenon is especially applicable to younger generations, as influencers' trustworthiness significantly influences purchasing intent (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020).

The source attractiveness of food influencers in social media also proved significant with millennials' buying intention. This result is consistent with research outcomes from Weismueller et al. (2020); Khan et al. (2015), and Liu et al. (2007). The result is expected, considering that physical appearance might influence the endorser's sense of credibility and favourable attitude (Ohanian, 1991). With a stylish and classy presence, an influencer may indicate the expected quality of the brand (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). According to van der Walddt et al. (2009), endorsers perceived as attractive are more likely to lead to purchase aspiration. Besides, millennials may find a food influencer attractive when they believe they have something in common with the endorser. Thus, along with products such as perfume, cosmetics, clothing, and apparel (Kamins, 1990), the source attractiveness of influencers is compelling for the food brands they promote.

The study reveals that the source familiarity of food influencers has a favourable association with buying intention. Myers (2021) studied influencer familiarity and finds that it affects influencers' effectiveness. The finding is also consistent with Adnan et al. (2021). However, this result is contrary to the Priyankara et al. (2017), who argue that despite their popularity, celebrities may not influence a consumer's attitude concerning the brand and buying intention. On the other hand, well-known food bloggers are thought to be more trustworthy than less popular food bloggers (Benedic & Granjon, 2017). Therefore, an endorser's popularity significantly impacts purchasing intention (Kumar, 2023).

This study shows that product match-up was not a reliable predictor of purchase intent. Several studies have reported the magnitude of compatibility between the brand and its endorser as a crucial factor for promotional success (Carrillat et al., 2013; Fleck

et al., 2012; Gurel-Atay et al., 2010). However, the finding of this investigation is consistent with Silalahi and Komalasari (2018) and Emma and Matilde (2017), as these studies reported no influence of the endorser's product match upon purchase intention. However, the fsQCA results suggest that product match-up is necessary and leads to purchase intent. Belanche et al. (2021) show that congruence between the influencer and the product affects influencers' effectiveness. Consumers connecting the symbolism related to endorsers and endorsed brands are more likely to interpret and transfer brand meanings, resulting in increased purchases. The study demonstrates that respondents are more willing to accept messages from brands supported by SMIs they saw as having a likeness to themselves or whom they admired.

6.1 Research Contributions and Implications

6.1.1 Theoretical contributions

From a theoretical standpoint, this study contributes to associative learning, which posits that learning involves forming connections between two phenomena that can be leveraged from a marketing perspective to enhance brand perception and consumer behaviour (Domjan, 2018). In the context of influencer marketing, influencers act as the unconditioned stimuli that evoke positive feelings and associations among their followers. By associating a brand with a credible and positively perceived influencer, marketers can condition consumers to develop favourable attitudes towards the brand. Besides, the study adds to the knowledge of the current stream of study by examining the integrated effect of source familiarity, source credibility, source attractiveness, and product match-up on the buying intention of millennials. These outcomes validate the strength of the different source characteristics of celebrity endorsements, which can help us understand of the distinct nature of the online relationships consumers form and develop with social media food influencers. The present study, utilising SEM and fsQCA methods, provides innovative analytic techniques to investigate the influence of different source characteristics on purchase intention. The fsQCA approach allows the current study to investigate the necessary condition and configuration of source characteristics that lead to purchase intentions. Therefore, this study contributes to the methods used in brand endorsement research.

6.1.2 Managerial implications

Brand managers are increasingly using social network platforms and endorsed marketing to promote their brands and products, and online promotion is becoming more prevalent. The outcomes of the present study offer a few implications for marketers and businesses concerned with engaging food influencers as a strategic marketing tool. This study can guide marketers in selecting a suitable food influencer to increase brand awareness, build perceived quality, and influence purchase intention from a managerial aspect. The data analysis of this study pointed out that source attractiveness and source familiarity are the most important predictors of buying intention. Hence, it is suggested that marketers should try to choose food influencers who are perceived as highly attractive, very popular, and credible by millennials. This alignment ensures that the positive associations with influencers are effectively transferred to the brand. Furthermore, consistent and authentic interactions between influencers and their followers can reinforce these associations over time, leading to stronger brand loyalty and increased purchase intention (Chetioui et al., 2020). Moreover, food influencers can also be used to promote healthy food, as most food promoted in mainstream media and online contain unhealthy levels of salt, saturated fat, and sugar (Boyland et al., 2016). It is evident that food influencers influence their followers' purchase intentions and, potentially, actual purchases. It would be a strategic move to engage them in endorsing and promoting healthy food brands.

6.2 Limitations and Future Research

The findings and inferences of this paper are limited by a few constraints, some of which open up possibilities for further studies. This study investigates how different source characteristics of a food influencer influence millennials' buying intentions. However, the study does not look into the direct effect of customers' emotions, which might play a significant part in their decisions. Future research may evaluate the relative impact of additional components, such as emotions and socioeconomic characteristics as moderators by applying the model proposed by this study. Additionally, previous positive or negative purchasing experiences may influence millennials' buying intentions. This experience could lead to a high possibility of predisposition in the response received, substantially impacting the information collected. Therefore, future research could use hypothetical food brands or social media food endorsers to prevent any prejudice affecting participants' questionnaire answers.

Apart from these, the extent to which social media food influencers influence followers may differ among social network platforms. This study does not focus on any specific social media network. Further research might explore whether followers of a Facebook or a YouTube food influencer are similarly motivated as followers of a food influencer on Instagram. Also, people engaged on social media and following food influencers are not just millennials. Although most social media visitors are between 16 and 34, this does not rule out elder users. Nearly 70% of those over 35 were quite active on Facebook in 2016 (Greenwood et al. 2016). Therefore, future research might look at different consumer groups to investigate if they are responsive to the same stimuli or source features as revealed in this study. Finally, the study is based on stated preference survey responses that may not predict actual behaviour. Future research may consider an approach to find the revealed preferences to reduce hypothetical bias and provide more accurate decision-making predictions.

7. Conclusion

The present study examines how the buying intention of millennials is influenced by source characteristics of food influencers, including source attractiveness, source credibility, source familiarity, and product match-up, based on social learning theory and celebrity endorsement literature. This research provides a novel analytical technique for food brand endorsement research. It has been revealed that credibility, attractiveness, product match-up, and familiarity are essential when millennials evaluate food influencers. The study also highlights the moderating effect of gender concerning source characteristics and millennials' buying intentions. The investigation does not find any impact of gender in this regard; however, the outcome may differ depending on the age group or cultural context. This research will help restaurants appoint the right food bloggers to brand their business. Besides, food influencers who have just started their careers can gain insights from the study to better generate material that audiences want to see.

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