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INDIA AND CENTRAL ASIA RELATIONS: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT

Throughout history, Central Asia has formed an important strategic link between the East and the West and been described as the great pivot in the early twentieth century. This research paper looks at the relations between the Central Asian states and major external powers. It shows how these nations have kept the fragile geopolitics of the region free of the so – called New Great Game. This paper evaluates the roles of major powers such as Russia, the United States, China, and Iran as well as India and its Silk Road strategy. It also compares the regional geopolitics of Central Asia with its neighbors country.

KEYWORDS: *Central Asian Republics, Cultural, Economic, And Political Connections, Aryans, Sak: As, Kushans, Turks, Mughals, Buddhism, East India Company, Silk Road.*

INTRODUCTION

Since the independence of the Central Asian Republics in the year 1991, it has been viewed through regional and global prospective. The region's advantageous geopolitical abundance in natural resources and location made it a potential source of competing interests among various regional and global powers. The competitive dynamics of the region is further exacerbated by the lack of a unidirectional policy of the Central Asian Republics (CARs). They are towards the outside powers and among themselves. As a result, the policy of the region resembled a volatile, turbulent, and unpredictable scene. But momentous Central Asia in recent times, as well as the rapid change in the international environment and accompanying strategic imperatives, are calling that volatility into question. Central Asia is strategically positioned as a gateway between Europe and Asia and offers great potential for trade, investment, and growth. The region is rich endowed with commodities such as crude oil, aluminum, gold, natural gas, cotton, copper, cotton, and iron. These strategies growing importance of the region's oil and gas resources has produced new rivalries between outside powers.

Due to its multilateral location, demographic composition and availability of oil and mineral wealth, Central Asia has become vital for global politics in general and India in particular. To examine the real nature of India's policy towards this region. It is equally essential to understand the defining features of this region as well as its historical background.

The Central Asian Republics have the enormous hydrocarbon reserve between 90 to 200 billion barrels of oil and 46 percent of the known world gas reserves. Thus, Central Asia has the potential to emerge as an important long term energy provider to India. Besides, underdeveloped economy and weak socio-economic infrastructure of these countries offer rich opportunities to

technically expert local force and natural resources to enhance Indian entrepreneurs desirous of setting up joint ventures in Central Asia. All these economic trends compel India for positive engagement with this region.

The cultural, economic, and political connections between India and Central Asia date back to the dawn of history. Central Asia was the center of civilization and trade between the East and West. The discovery of the experience of human history indicates that history and culture play a particularly important role in the behavior of individuals, additionally in the behaviors of societies in world politics. The evolution of human history is the result of various factors which took a multidimensional approach. It is based on the gradualism and relativism of the influence and weight of various factors such as historical experience, the level of the political system, and the role of leadership. The history of relations between India and Central Asia is as old as the development of their civilizations. Since ancient times and the middle ages, there have been multilateral cooperation between India and Central Asia like socio-economic, commercial, political, and cultural ties etc.¹

India and Central Asia shared a geo-cultural affinity and a long tradition of historical contacts that since ancient times. Despite the physical barriers like mountain ranges of the Himalayas and the Hindu Kush, close socio-economic and cultural ties existed between the people of India and Central Asia. The ideological power of Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Islam, and Sufism; the invasion of Aryans, Sakas, Kushans, Turks, Mughals, and so on, and the great mobility of intellectuals, spiritualists, artists, craftsmen, writers, and traders have all contributed to cementing these ties. The movement of people, trade, ideas, and shared cultural influences have broadened human development, horizons and had a significant impact on the social, political, and economic spheres throughout the region.²

India and Central Asia have been connected for 2,500 years. Indian historical narratives refer to the territory north of the Himalayas as "Uttarkuru." The historical Silk Road connected India with Europe and China passed through the Ferghana Valley, Samarkand, and Bukhara, three important centers of Central Asian civilization. It made trading easier, but there was constant Exchange of ideas, people, art, culture, and religion. These interactions were mirrored in the political developments of the area, with Central Asia serving as a base of operations for many incursions into India. At various points in time, the Saka, Macedonian, and Kushan kingdoms included parts of both Central Asia and India.³

The state of Kushana encompassed a sizable region that stretched from northern India to the western portion of Central Asia. The Kushan Empire was in place when relations between India and Central Asia peaked. There is now free movement of people, products, ideas, and institutions between Northwest India and Central Asia, because of their unification into a single nation.¹⁴ The material prosperity of two regions was another noteworthy aspect of the Kushan period. A few historic Indian cities, such as Taxila and Purushapur, served as beginning points for the dissemination of cultural influences throughout Central Asia. Regarding linguistic and cultural advancements, the Sanskrit, Gandhara, Prakrit, Kharosthi, and Brahmi scripts were crucial in providing the "Ethno-linguistic developments of this region" with a fresh identity. India and Afghanistan once shared a unified language in the form of the Kharosthi script. It was also the language of the court throughout the Kushan era. The fact that the name of the city Herat is derived from the Indian name Hari Rud, which resonates with the Indian God Vishnu, suggests that India and Afghanistan have great cultural ties.⁴

During the Kushan era, India and Central Asia experienced profound cultural links and mutual enrichment. This age of tremendous cultural fusion is well demonstrated by the Kushan coins, which attest to the coexistence of Zoroastrianism with the Indian religions of Saivism and Buddhism. The Kushan era was one of material prosperity for Central Asia. China and the East were connected to Europe and India by the Silk Road, which travelled via Central Asia. It was the first transcontinental trade and diplomatic route in human history.⁵

The people who lived in significant towns and the trade routes in Central Asia, both played a crucial role in the transfer of cultural characteristics from one place to another. The inhabitants of the Tarim Basin were familiar with Western art and philosophy, having travelled to Bactria and the areas Alexander had conquered. This area of Central Asia was frequently traversed by warlike nomads from the beginning of time until the middle Ages. The same trait was shared by the Turks and Mongols during the middle Ages and the Sakas, Yueh-chi, and Huns of antiquity. They exchanged messages and brought concepts and cultural elements from one area to another.⁶

The spread of Buddhism from India to Central Asia and eventually to China was a significant turning point in the evolution of relations. The first missionary to bring Buddhism to Central Asia was Vairocana, a Buddhist scholar travelled from Kashmir. Eventually, Buddhism used Central Asia as a transit region to reach China. According to Chinese Texts Buddhism as a religion of China was established in 217 B.C. The two primary figures credited with spreading Buddhism in the area was the Indian Emperor Ashoka in 203 B.C. and King Kanishka of the Kushan realm, a Central Asian realm included Kashmir. It is true that Buddhism had such a profound and wide-ranging influence in Central Asia.⁷

Mahmud of Ghazni (998–1030 AD) travelled to India during the middle Ages. When the "Delhi Sultanate" phase began, the Muslim era in Indian history officially began. India and Central Asia's political, economic, and cultural links continued to grow during this time. It was Turkmen tribes that gave rise to the Khilji dynasty. They established a strong organization called "Forty," the number of its founder.⁸

The Indian subcontinent's politics, literature, language, and governance have all been significantly influenced by continuous immigration. Before the Mughal Era, Persian and Turkish existed in India, and Persian eventually became the official language of the Delhi Sultanate. A number of explanations for its development have been proposed. For instance, during the Sultanate era, most of the nobility and many of the Sultans were indigenous Turks from Central Asia, who spoke the Turkish languages as their native tongue.⁹

India's positive image towards Central Asia is a result of its historical trade and cultural connections. In ancient, medieval, and modern periods, the Farghana Valley, which is currently shared by three countries in Central Asia, maintained constant communication with India. The famous Sufi saint of the Chishti order, Qutbuddin Bakhtiar Kaki, came from Osh (Kyrgyzstan). During Humayun's reign, the renowned Kazakh Mirza Muhammad Haidar Dulati governed Kashmir. Akbar's instructor, Bairam Khan, was a Turkman, and Tajikistan was home to the renowned Persian poet Abdul Qader Bedil. They all settled in India and served at the Mughal Durbar. In every State, these legendary personalities are once again promoted to the status of national heroes.¹⁰

The legendary road from China to Rome's capital is known as the Silk Road, which connected the people and customs of Asia and Europe throughout the first millennium B.C. as the first

transcontinental trade route in human civilization. As a matter of fact, it brought together two radically different worlds: East and West, or the cultures of Asia and Europe. The Silk Road is a singular illustration of history, cooperation, and transcontinental cooperation in the exchange of ideas and culture as well as in business. The geographical center of the ancient Silk Road was formed by the five Central Asian former Soviet republics: Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. German geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen first used the name "Silk Road" in 1877 to refer to the transcontinental trade routes that connected China to India, Persia, and Europe. From the Chinese city of Xi'an, the route went west to Kashgar in Xinjiang. From there, it passed through what are now Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Iran, and finally reached its terminus in Europe.¹¹

History attests to the importance of trade along the Silk Road in the advancement of civilization in Mesopotamia, Egypt, China, India, and Persia. The Silk Road was significant to India, primarily because it developed into a vital conduit for religious and cultural contacts between India and other nations. Located at the center of the Silk Road, the Central Asian region is currently dealing with a variety of political, economic, and ideological pressures. The historic Silk Road played a distinctive role in international trade and diplomatic relations, extending well beyond Asia's borders. The historical regions that made up the Silk Route are rich in history and can be viewed as a bridge connecting the East and the West, using the advantages of contemporary trade, transportation, and communication advancements. The Great Silk Road was crucial for the development and maintaining of diplomatic connections, in addition to being a major trade route.¹²

India has been a significant exporter since ancient times, and there are many examples of the goods that have been shipped from India. Silk, cotton textiles, furs, wooden, and ivory artefacts were brought from Sindh. While Delhi served as a hub for the export of copper and brass vases among other goods, Lahore was known for its cotton textiles and paper goods. Brass and copper goods were also exported from Agra. Bihar exported knives, forks, beans, and salt.⁴³ India's principal imports were horses, gold, sheep, silver, precious stones, metals, and fruits, particularly nuts, while its main exports were sugar, cotton textiles, wool rugs, shawls, and dyes. A sizable Indian diaspora emerged in Central Asia as a result of the Silk Road's development and diversification as well as the caravan trade. The Indians were given access to one of the 200 caravanserais in Bukhara, a trading hub on the Silk Road.¹³

The Silk Road was the oldest international roadway in the world, and it conveyed Buddhism throughout Central Asia in addition to other items like silk and paper. These goods were equally important in global history as trade and migration. Buddhism was brought from India to China as early as the first century A.D. Northwest India was the starting point of the transmission, which spread to Pakistan, Afghanistan, Central Asia, Xinjiang, China, Korea, and modern-day Japan. Although the exact date of Buddhism's arrival in China is unknown, missionaries and pilgrims started travelling between China, India, and Central Asia with the construction of the Silk Road. Using Afghanistan's potential as a bridge between East and West and connecting the Centre with South Asia, the main goal of US strategy is the economic growth of the country. According to historians that long-term stability in the region can be achieved through political unification fostered by economic incentives. The US realized the significance of Central Asia. Congress introduced and enacted the Silk Road Strategy Act. Its goal was to alter foreign aid to promote the political and economic independence of Central Asia and the Caucasus. Ever since CARs have served as the prerequisite for the advancement of democracy.¹⁴

According to geography, Ladakh is one of India's largest administrative region has closeness to Central Asia, bordering both Xinjiang and Tibet due to its strategic location. Ladakh has been serving as a major entry point for the centuries-long Indo-Central Asian exchange of people, goods, and ideas. In the region, there are renewed hopes for the revival of ancient India-Central Asia trade routes that run through Ladakh and Xinjiang, thanks to the Indian Government's declaration of Union Territory over the districts of Leh and Kargil in the former state of Jammu and Kashmir.¹⁵ Ladakh has been crucial to communication, land trade, and cultural exchange in this border region. The Srinagar-Leh-Yark and route was the most well-known and well-traveled route between India and Central Asia, despite its physical challenges. The multilateral trade between British India and Central Asia was facilitated by the improvement of the Kullu-Leh route by the British authorities, although traders preferred the Srinagar-Leh route, since it was the most straightforward and well-supplied.¹⁶

Additionally, Indian tea exports to Central Asia have been increasing, which can be attributed to the region's unique taste in tea. Indian products were easily transported to Khiva, Bukhara, and Russian Turkestan by Bukharan traders, who had unrestricted access to this market. The Peshawari merchants' monopoly on the tea trade with Central Asia was somewhat disrupted by the 1894 Law. Now, part of this commerce started to go to the Russian traders. However, the introduction of new shipping routes and railways, such as the Transcaspian railway from Krasnovodsk on the other side of the Caspian Sea to Baku on the Black Sea, and the Transcaucasian railway from the Black Sea port of Batumi to Baku, reduced the cost of transportation and allowed Indian merchants to compete with Russian merchants for the Central Asian tea trade. About ten Indian traders were involved in the tea trade in Bukhara in the 1880s; by 1911, there were eighty-three. With the supply of tea on long-term credit, the Indian merchant from Bukhara reclaimed their lost position in the Turkestan tea trade in the 1890s.¹⁷

Trade between Central Asia and India suffered in the 19th century because of Anglo-Russian rivalry over Central Asia. The trading link was the main reason why so many Indians, especially Kashmiris, visited Central Asian marketplaces and how Central Asian traders were drawn to the markets in Leh and Srinagar.

The social relationships between the two regions were reinforced by this reciprocal interaction. Under Soviet Union rule, land trade between India and Central Asia became more challenging to sustain due to the government's appropriation of commerce.

Over the 19th and 20th centuries, India and Central Asia drifted apart, although this was not initially the intention of Tsarist and British imperial policies. Throughout the 19th century, they were rebuffed in their attempts to seize each other's possessions. Eventually, at the turn of the 20th century, they decided that it was time to draw boundaries between their lands and create Afghanistan as a buffer state between tsarist Central Asia and imperial India. This was the only way to practically avoid full-scale conflict, resolve disagreements over Persia and preserve the delicate balance of power in Europe. The Tsar's aspirations to extend out to Kashmir and North India were preceded by Imperial Britain's intentions on the Khanates of Kiva, Bukhara, and Kokand. Working for the East India Company, English explorer William Moorcroft organized a trip to Turkestan in 1816 to buy horses with George Trebeck and his agent Mir-Izzat Allah. They planned to travel as far as Bukhara and Samarkand. The British would receive one of the first-hand reports of Central Asia thanks to Charles Metcalfe, the Company Resident of Delhi, who backed Moorcroft's missions.¹⁸

In the decades that followed Russia's acquisition of the Khanates, Britain was able to maintain a very effective espionage network throughout Central Asia. First, and possibly more importantly, the goal was to monitor any plans for Russian expansion southward and increased involvement in the governance of the Khanates.

Secondly, the goal was to monitor any interactions between Indians and Russian operatives positioned in Central Asia. The kings of Kashmir, Indore, Gwalior, and Jaipur attempted to get in touch with Tsarist Russia between 1866 and 1880, hoping to capitalize on a Russian standoff with Britain and gain by forging early ties. Indian monarchs had been quick to send feelers to the Russians. Not only did Indians and Russians interact with their rulers, but also with religious communities such as the Kukka Sikhs and other self-governing individuals who fled the failed mutiny of 1857, settled in the Khanates, and remained closely connected to India effort to rally support for the Russians back home.¹⁹

Before the 1850s, neither Russia nor Britain shared a direct border with Afghanistan. However, they both moved in its direction, the British heading south from Central Asia and both irritated at the other for obstructing their path. From its military outposts on the Syr Darya, Russia seized Tashkent, which was a part of the Khanate of Kokand, in 1865 and Samarkand, which was a part of the Emirate of Bukhara, in 1868. In 1872, the Indian government of Great Britain seized Baluchistan from its bases in Sindh and Punjab.²⁰

Soon after the 1917 October Revolution, Central Asia was once more a Russian colony. The Soviet model included elements of the Tsarist era, such as the deprivation of civil and political rights, as well as the motivations and actions of the populace. The primary goal of the Socialist Revolution was to seize governmental authority and rebuild the Russian Empire under the pretext of an international Marxist-Leninist facade. By a delimitation strategy, the Soviet Authority split the area into five separate entities: Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. The artificial borders, known as mandates, split the republics of Central Asia. International borders were established by the British and French in their respective colonies in Asia and Africa.²¹

Indo-Soviet relations emerged within the broader framework of nation-to-nation interactions being formed by independent India. Prior to this, Manabendranath Roy, as the leader of the Mexican Communist Party, participated in the Second Communist International (comintern) of June. 19 August 1920 in Paris, where V.I. Lenin submitted Roy's thesis on colonies along with his own to the Plenum. These interactions marked the first concrete exchanges between prominent Indian politicians and the Soviet leadership following the Revolution. In Tashkent, Roy established the Indian Communist Party in October 1920. Stalin was deeply distrustful of the Indian National Congress, and his recognition of Soviet achievements during the visit of Indian nationalist leader Jawarlal Nehru in 1927 did little to change that.²²

In the broad spirit of Indo-Soviet relations, India's contacts with Central Asia were revived after 1947. Because of Indo-Soviet warm relations, India had an advantage over both its close and distant neighbours when it arrived in Central Asia during the Soviet era. In fact, direct ties have grown between Indo-Central Asia in a few domains, including trade, education, culture, science and technology, and the film industry. There were flights from Indian Airlines to Tashkent twice in a week²³ The first Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, was a supporter of the Socialism. Experiments, greeted representatives of Central Asia at the first Asian Relations Conference, which took place in New Delhi in March and April 1947.²⁴

India is interested in Central Asia from an economic, geopolitical, and socio-cultural standpoint. Trade between India and West Asia has been influenced by global shifts in the system as well as domestic political factors. Relationship history goes back to the British Raj era before independence, when India was viewed as the Middle East's net security provider. The British Raj shaped the Eastern Gulf's foreign contacts, but the region did maintain a high degree of internal autonomy. Jawaharlal Nehru's India had mixed feelings about keeping on the British tradition of assuming responsibility for West Asia's security after independence. However, Nehru recognized the region's significance for both the nation and the rest of the globe, and his audacious decision to hold the inaugural Asian Relations Conference in New Delhi in March 1947 demonstrated his aim to forge close political and economic relations with it. Since then, a lot of the surrounding nations have been eager to create or restart unique security alliances with India.²⁵

Moscow oversaw all contacts with the area during this time of Soviet domination. One of the few nations with connections to the area at the time was India. During the Soviet era, India and the Uzbek SSR (Soviet Socialist Republic) had close relations. Leading Indians go to Tashkent and other locations frequently. On January 11, 1966, in Tashkent, Prime Minister of India Shri Lal Bahadur Shastri passed away following his signature of the Tashkent Declaration with Pakistan.²⁶

One prominent example of this is Uzbekistan's role in settling the dispute between India and Pakistan. It is well known that India had to deal with military conflicts with Pakistan in 1947–1948, 1965, and 1999 in the Kashmir area, which shares borders with both nations, following its proclamation of independence.

The leaders of India and Pakistan met in Tashkent in 1966, only because of the efforts of nations that valued peace. Tashkent was selected for a very good reason, it can be explained, in part, by the centuries-old similarities between the histories, cultures, and ways of life of the two nations; on the other hand, it demonstrates of Uzbek's people commitment to peace and their never-ending desire to assist in resolving conflict situations.²⁷

The Central Asian peoples emerged into their own during the Soviet era; previously, they had only been pieces in the imperialist chess match between Tsarist Russia and Britain. There is no longer any separation from their bordering countries, and as a free and equal Republic of the USSR, they are effectively fostering more cordial ties with them. A fresh chapter in India's connections with the peoples of Central Asia was also made possible by the country's independence in 1947.²⁸

During the Soviet era, the Central Asian republics were confined within their defined borders. The sovereign nations of Central Asia have inherited the political structure, interests, and cultural norms that were imposed upon them during Russian rule.

The Archaeological Service of India must step in to help excavate, preserving, and restore these ancient sites that are currently in a dilapidated condition so that the testimony of the historical and cultural relationship between India and Central Asia is not destroyed by vagaries of nature, time, and neglect. These sites and monuments can be easily restored and developed into important cultural centers after doing the necessary renovations and giving all the services of a modern museum. The process of academic and cultural exchanges between learning centers, universities, institutes, etc. India and Central Asia should be streamlined and institutionalized so that Indian specialists in Central Asia collaborate with their counterparts in their specialized

areas of study.

Another vital area of cultural cooperation is the joint production of films, television series, and book publications, the exchange of printed and visual materials, and the regular exchange of artists.

The inseparable influence of these two regions is not only of the last decades but of antiquity. The relationship is intertwined through multifaceted dimensions of socio-religious, socio-political, and ethnic exchanges and exchanges during the known period of over 3000 years. It establishes how prehistoric and historical connections shaped the bilateral nature of the two world geographies. Numerous linguistic similarities have been found which in turn reinforce the mutual dependence on the relationship. The influence was not limited to linguistic or religious effects, but largely due to the monarchical system and later influenced the modern social structure as well as the caste system. More importantly, this multifaceted and multidimensional study creates the opportunity to have a microcosmic study to find better strategic factors to strengthen the multilateralism of these regions of the world.

For India, Central Asia has always remained an area of high priority due to historical, political, cultural, geographical reason. The new emerging trends in this region are going to provide prospects and problems for India. The main objective of this study is to study the Geo-politics of India Central Asia, and to study the history of India-Central Asia Relations.

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THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS IN SHAPING CONSUMER FOOD PREFERENCES: A MARKETING PERSPECTIVE ON BRAND ENGAGEMENT AND PURCHASE INTENTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Background:

Social media has evolved into a powerful marketing platform that significantly influences consumer behavior, particularly in the food industry. Social media influencers, through their credibility, reliability, and engaging content, shape how consumers discover, evaluate, and choose food products. However, the specific ways in which influencer attributes and strategies translate into consumer preferences, brand engagement, and purchase intentions remain underexplored.

Aim:

This study aims to examine the combined influence of influencer attributes, content style, and influencer–brand congruence on consumer food preferences, brand engagement, and purchase intentions, while also exploring the mediating role of trust and authenticity.

Methods:

A descriptive and exploratory research design was employed using primary survey data from 214 respondents who follow food influencers. Data were collected through online questionnaires distributed via Google Forms and targeted social media outreach. Non-probability convenience sampling was used. Descriptive statistics and regression analysis were performed to assess relationships between influencer factors and consumer behavior.

Findings:

The results show that influencer credibility and trustworthiness have a strong and significant positive effect on purchase intentions. Content style—both informative and entertaining—significantly enhances brand loyalty, while influencer–brand congruence strengthens consumer trust and positive brand perception.

Results:

Regression analyses confirmed significant positive relationships ($p < 0.01$) for all three key factors: credibility and trustworthiness ($\beta = 0.482$), content style and engagement ($\beta = 0.441$), and influencer–brand congruence ($\beta = 0.468$). These findings highlight the strategic importance of selecting credible influencers, delivering high-quality and engaging content, and ensuring alignment between influencer identity and brand image in food marketing campaigns.

KEYWORDS: *Brand Congruence, Brand Engagement, Consumer Behavior, Content Style, Food Marketing, Influencer Credibility, Purchase Intentions, Social Media Influencers.*

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, social media has transformed from a simple communication tool into a powerful marketing platform that significantly influences consumer behavior. The rapid growth of platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Facebook has enabled brands to connect directly with their audiences, transcending traditional advertising channels. In particular, the rise of social media influencers—individuals who have cultivated large, loyal followings—has reshaped how consumers discover, evaluate, and choose products, especially in the food industry.

The food sector has witnessed a dramatic shift in marketing dynamics as influencers leverage their authenticity, reliability, and trustworthiness to engage audiences. Unlike traditional celebrity endorsements, influencer marketing often creates a sense of personal connection between the influencer and their followers. This parasocial relationship fosters higher levels of engagement, brand loyalty, and ultimately, purchase intentions. Visual and interactive content, such as recipe demonstrations, taste tests, and lifestyle integration, allows influencers to showcase food products in an appealing, real-world context.

From a marketing perspective, influencer-driven content not only increases brand visibility but also impacts consumer perceptions and preferences through social proof and perceived expertise. Consumers are more likely to experiment with products recommended by influencers they trust, making influencer collaborations a strategic asset for food brands aiming to capture and retain market share. Furthermore, the interactive nature of social media—through likes, comments, shares, and direct messages—creates two-way communication channels that strengthen brand-consumer relationships.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Despite the growing prevalence of social media influencer marketing in the food industry, there remains a lack of comprehensive understanding of how these influencers specifically shape consumer food preferences, drive brand engagement, and influence purchase intentions. While brands increasingly invest in influencer collaborations, the measurable impact on consumer behavior is often unclear, and the underlying psychological mechanisms—such as trust, perceived authenticity and social proof—are not fully explored. This gap in knowledge makes it challenging for marketers to design effective influencer strategies that translate digital engagement into actual purchasing behavior, highlighting the need for empirical research in this domain.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Ao et al. (2023) investigated the influence of key social media influencer attributes—credibility, trustworthiness, expertise, informativeness, entertainment value, and product-influencer congruence—on customer engagement and purchase intentions. Their findings showed that these attributes play a decisive role in shaping positive consumer perceptions and fostering stronger brand connections. The study concluded that aligning influencer qualities with brand positioning is essential for maximizing the effectiveness of influencer marketing campaigns.

Misra et al. (2024) examined how follower size (micro vs. macro) and content style (informational vs. entertaining) affect consumer responses to food influencers. The study revealed that micro-influencers delivering informative content generated higher levels of trust and engagement, while macro-influencers with entertaining content attracted more immediate attention but less sustained consumer interaction. These results highlight the need for strategic matching of influencer type and content style in food brand promotions.

Jamil et al. (2024) applied the Elaboration Likelihood Model to explore how influencer cues affect consumer well-being and subsequent purchase intentions. The study found that persuasive cues—such as relatable storytelling and visually appealing presentations—enhanced consumer mood and trust, which in turn boosted willingness to purchase. This work is especially relevant to food marketers seeking to engage audiences through short-form video platforms.

Rini et al. (2024) conducted a large-scale systematic review in *Trends in Food Science & Technology* covering 377 studies on social media's influence on food-related behaviors. Their review found consistent evidence that social media impacts food attitudes, intentions, and consumption patterns across multiple demographic groups and geographic regions. The authors emphasized that the combination of visual appeal, social proof, and interactive features explains the strong influence of online food marketing.

Ding (2024) examined how Gen Z restaurant patrons perceive and respond to influencer marketing. The study revealed that perceived trustworthiness was the most significant predictor of perceived brand value and purchase intentions. This finding underscores the importance of building authentic, transparent relationships between influencers and their audiences, suggesting that brands targeting younger consumers should prioritize credibility over reach in selecting influencer partners.

RESEARCH GAP

Research Gap

While existing literature has demonstrated the significant role of social media influencers in shaping consumer perceptions, engagement, and purchase intentions within the food industry, several critical gaps remain. Most prior studies have examined isolated factors such as influencer credibility, follower size, or content style, without integrating these elements into a holistic framework that explains their combined effect on consumer decision-making. Furthermore, the majority of research focuses on either short-term engagement metrics (likes, comments, shares) or self-reported purchase intentions, with limited empirical evidence on actual purchasing behavior and long-term brand loyalty. There is also a lack of cross-platform comparative studies, particularly in emerging spaces like TikTok and Instagram Reels, where content formats and audience interactions differ markedly. Additionally, few studies have explored the psychological mechanisms—such as parasocial relationships, perceived authenticity, and emotional engagement—that mediate the link between influencer marketing and food choice behavior. Addressing these gaps can provide deeper insights for marketers to develop more effective, evidence-based influencer strategies in the food sector.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To examine the combined influence of influencer attributes—such as credibility, trustworthiness, content style, and follower size—on consumer food preferences, brand engagement, and purchase intentions.

2. To analyze the role of psychological mechanisms, including parasocial relationships, perceived authenticity, and emotional engagement, in mediating the impact of social media influencers on consumer decision-making in the food industry.
3. To compare the effectiveness of influencer-driven food marketing across different social media platforms (e.g., Instagram, TikTok, YouTube) in generating short-term engagement and fostering long-term brand loyalty.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

S. No	Research Methodology	Research Source
1.	Research Design	Descriptive and Exploratory Research
2.	Data Source	Primary data collected through surveys; Secondary data from academic journals, industry reports, and social media analytics
3.	Sample Size	250 respondents
4.	Sampling Method	Non-Probability – Convenience Sampling
5.	Respondents	Social media users who follow food influencers
6.	Data Collection Method	Online surveys via Google Forms and targeted social media outreach

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The following analysis presents key findings from the collected data, focusing on the relationship between social media influencer attributes, consumer food preferences, brand engagement, and purchase intentions.

Demographic Information

Table 1: Demographic Information of Respondents

Factor	Sub Variable	Frequency	Percent (%)
Age	18–25 years	78	31.2
	26–35 years	92	36.8
	36–45 years	50	20.0
	Above 45 years	30	12.0
Gender	Male	118	47.2
	Female	132	52.8
Education	Undergraduate	64	25.6
	Graduate	112	44.8
	Postgraduate	58	23.2
	Other/Diploma	16	6.4

The demographic data indicates that the sample is balanced in gender representation, with slightly more female respondents (52.8%). The largest age group falls within 26–35 years (36.8%), reflecting the high social media usage among young adults. Educationally, most respondents hold a graduate degree (44.8%), followed by undergraduates (25.6%). This suggests that the study captures insights from a digitally active, well-educated audience.

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics for Influencer Impact on Consumer Food Preferences

Item	Mean	Std. Deviation	Interpretation
Q1. Influencers inspire me to try new food products.	4.12	0.73	High agreement
Q2. I trust food recommendations made by influencers I follow.	4.05	0.76	High agreement
Q3. Influencer content increases my awareness of food brands.	4.25	0.68	High agreement (most positive)
Q4. I am more likely to purchase food products featured by influencers.	4.00	0.80	High agreement
Q5. Influencer authenticity affects my willingness to try new food.	4.18	0.71	High agreement

The results indicate that respondents strongly agree on the positive influence of social media influencers in shaping food preferences. The highest mean score (4.25) was for 'Influencer content increases my awareness of food brands,' highlighting their role as brand awareness drivers. Trust and authenticity also emerged as important factors affecting purchase intentions.

Objective 1: To assess the influence of influencer credibility and trustworthiness on consumer food purchase intentions

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics

Item	Mean	Std. Deviation	Interpretation
I consider influencer credibility before acting on their recommendations.	4.10	0.72	High agreement
Trust in an influencer makes me more likely to buy recommended products.	4.15	0.69	High agreement

Table 4: Regression Analysis

Independent Variable	Unstandardized Coefficients	Standardized Coefficients	t-Statistic	p-value
Influencer Credibility & Trustworthiness	0.528	0.482	6.214	0.000

Regression analysis shows a significant positive relationship ($p < 0.01$) between influencer credibility/trustworthiness and consumer purchase intentions, confirming its importance in food marketing strategies.

Objective 2: To examine the role of content style and engagement in shaping brand loyalty

Table 5: Descriptive Statistics

Item	Mean	Std. Deviation	Interpretation
Informative content makes me more likely to follow a food brand.	4.08	0.75	High agreement
Entertaining content keeps me engaged with a food brand longer.	4.12	0.73	High agreement

Table 6: Regression Analysis

Independent Variable	Unstandardized Coefficients	Standardized Coefficients	t-Statistic	p-value
Content Style & Engagement	0.462	0.441	5.328	0.000

Content style and engagement show a strong, significant relationship ($p < 0.01$) with brand loyalty, emphasizing the role of creative presentation in influencer campaigns.

Objective 3: To analyze the impact of influencer–brand congruence on consumer food preferences

Table 7: Descriptive Statistics

Item	Mean	Std. Deviation	Interpretation
I respond more positively to influencers who align with a brand’s image.	4.14	0.70	High agreement
Influencer–brand match increases my trust in a product.	4.09	0.74	High agreement

Table 8: Regression Analysis

Independent Variable	Unstandardized Coefficients	Standardized Coefficients	t-Statistic	p-value
Influencer–Brand Congruence	0.497	0.468	5.702	0.000

Regression results indicate a significant positive relationship ($p < 0.01$) between influencer–brand congruence and consumer food preferences, suggesting that strategic matching can improve marketing effectiveness.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study clearly indicate that social media influencers play a significant role in shaping consumer food preferences, brand engagement, and purchase intentions. Across all three objectives, the results point to a consistent pattern—consumers respond more favorably to influencers who possess high credibility, produce engaging content, and align closely with the brands they endorse. These elements, both individually and collectively, contribute to building trust, enhancing brand perception, and increasing the likelihood of purchase.

First, the positive and significant relationship between influencer credibility/trustworthiness and purchase intentions reinforces the conclusions of prior studies (e.g., Ao et al., 2023; Ding, 2024), which emphasize trust as a cornerstone of effective influencer marketing. This study’s regression analysis confirms that consumers’ trust in an influencer translates directly into higher purchase likelihood, suggesting that credibility is not just a desirable attribute but a measurable driver of consumer behavior.

Second, the results show that content style and engagement significantly influence brand loyalty. Informative content appears to enhance consumers’ sense of brand reliability, while entertaining

content sustains their interest over time. This aligns with research highlighting that successful influencer marketing often balances education with entertainment to maintain audience attention (Misra et al., 2024). Food marketers, therefore, should focus on delivering content that not only promotes products but also engages consumers through relatable, creative, and interactive formats.

Third, the study finds that influencer–brand congruence significantly boosts consumer preferences. When consumers perceive a natural fit between the influencer’s image and the brand’s identity, it strengthens brand trust and fosters a sense of authenticity. This is consistent with the match-up hypothesis, which posits that endorsement effectiveness increases when there is a good fit between the spokesperson and the product. For food brands, this implies that influencer partnerships should be selected not merely on follower count but on alignment of values, audience demographics, and communication style.

These findings contribute to the growing body of literature by offering empirical evidence on the combined effects of influencer attributes, content strategies, and brand alignment. The study also highlights the need for marketers to adopt a more strategic and evidence-based approach in designing influencer campaigns, moving beyond surface-level metrics toward long-term consumer relationship building.

LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSION

While this study provides strong evidence that social media influencers significantly shape consumer food preferences, brand engagement, and purchase intentions, several limitations should be noted. The reliance on self-reported survey data may introduce response bias, and the use of non-probability convenience sampling limits the generalizability of results. Additionally, the cross-sectional design captures perceptions at one point in time, without accounting for long-term behavioral changes, and the focus on selected platforms may not reflect influencer impact across all social media channels. Despite these constraints, the findings clearly indicate that influencer credibility, engaging and informative content, and strong influencer–brand congruence are key drivers of consumer response. For food marketers, strategically selecting credible influencers, delivering balanced and authentic content, and ensuring alignment between influencer identity and brand values can foster trust, strengthen loyalty, and enhance purchase intentions.

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LEVERAGING USER GENERATED CONTENT FOR ENHANCED CUSTOMER JOURNEYS: ANALYZING ITS IMPACT ON EWOM INFLUENCE IN FMCG BRANDS

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ABSTRACT

This topic focuses on the dual role of User Generated Content in enriching the customer journey and amplifying eWOM's impact within the FMCG industry. It examines how User Generated Content acts as a bridge between consumer experiences and brand narratives, influencing decision-making processes at various stages of the customer journey. The manuscript highlights specific examples of User Generated Content applications, such as unboxing videos, user reviews, and social media tags, that contribute to the overall customer experience.

The research further analyzes the quantitative and qualitative impacts of User Generated Content on eWOM, providing data-driven insights into its role in shaping consumer opinions and fostering brand loyalty. It discusses how FMCG brands can leverage advanced analytics to map the influence of User Generated Content across touchpoints, enabling targeted marketing strategies that maximize eWOM's reach and efficacy. The study concludes by emphasizing the importance of User Generated Content in creating a more engaging, customer-centric approach to brand communication in the FMCG space.

KEYWORDS: *User Generated Content, Fmcg Brands, Ewom Influence.*

INTRODUCTION

In the ever-evolving landscape of digital marketing, Fast-Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) brands are increasingly recognizing the power of consumer-driven content in shaping their marketing strategies. With the rapid rise of social media platforms, online reviews, and digital communities, User Generated Content (UGC) has emerged as one of the most influential and authentic forms of engagement in the digital age. UGC, consisting of content such as reviews, photos, videos, and posts created and shared by consumers, has the potential to create a more meaningful connection between brands and their audiences. Unlike traditional advertisements, which are often perceived as one-sided and promotional, UGC is perceived as more authentic and relatable, offering a real-time, peer-driven perspective that resonates more deeply with consumers.

One of the key aspects of UGC's impact on consumer behavior is its role in shaping electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) influence. eWOM refers to the online sharing of opinions, experiences, and recommendations between consumers, and it plays a pivotal role in shaping purchasing decisions, particularly in the FMCG sector where purchase decisions are often impulsive and influenced by social proof. The influence of eWOM is amplified by the widespread dissemination of UGC across social media platforms, review websites, and online forums, where consumers interact with content shared by other users. As a result, UGC acts as a catalyst for brand conversations and significantly impacts brand perceptions, trust, and ultimately, consumer decision-making.

This research explores the strategic integration of UGC in enhancing the customer journey, with a specific focus on its ability to amplify eWOM influence within FMCG brands. The customer journey today is no longer linear; it is a dynamic, multi-touch experience that spans from awareness to consideration, purchase, and post-purchase stages. As consumers increasingly rely on peer reviews, testimonials, and personal experiences before making purchase decisions, UGC has become a critical tool in guiding them through this journey. The study delves into the ways in which FMCG brands can curate, encourage, and amplify UGC to foster a deeper connection with their audiences and influence key stages of the customer decision-making process.

Recent studies from 2021 to 2025 have increasingly highlighted the pivotal role of User Generated Content (UGC) in shaping consumer behavior and enhancing brand-customer interactions, especially within the Fast-Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) sector.

USER GENERATED CONTENT AND CONSUMER ENGAGEMENT

A growing body of research emphasizes that UGC serves as a powerful engagement tool by providing authentic, peer-driven content that enhances trust and brand credibility (Kim & Park, 2022; Singh et al., 2023). Unlike traditional advertising, UGC's perceived authenticity makes it a more effective driver of consumer interest and involvement, fostering a sense of community and co-creation (Lee & Choi, 2024). For FMCG brands, where purchase decisions are often spontaneous, UGC's influence is critical in stimulating immediate interest and engagement (Chen et al., 2023).

UGC AND EWOM INFLUENCE

Several recent empirical studies have focused on the relationship between UGC and electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) communication. UGC acts as a catalyst for eWOM by encouraging consumers to share experiences, reviews, and recommendations that significantly impact others' purchase decisions (García & Martínez, 2022; Zhao et al., 2024). Notably, the viral nature of UGC in social media environments amplifies the reach and credibility of eWOM, thereby accelerating the diffusion of brand messages and shaping consumer perceptions more effectively than traditional marketing approaches (Patel & Singh, 2023).

IMPACT ON CUSTOMER JOURNEY

Recent literature explores how UGC influences various stages of the customer journey—from awareness and consideration to purchase and post-purchase advocacy (Kumar & Sharma, 2022; Wong et al., 2024). Studies indicate that UGC enriches the customer experience by providing real-life testimonials and interactive content that reduce perceived purchase risk and increase satisfaction (Ahmed & Lee, 2023). Additionally, FMCG brands that actively engage with UGC

can nurture stronger customer-brand relationships and encourage brand loyalty and advocacy in the post-purchase phase (Tran et al., 2025).

STRATEGIC USE OF UGC BY FMCG BRANDS

Emerging research advocates for FMCG companies to develop integrated strategies for curating and promoting UGC within their digital marketing ecosystems (Rodriguez & Lim, 2022). Successful brands leverage UGC to create personalized marketing campaigns, co-creation initiatives, and community-building efforts that align with consumers' values and preferences (Mehta & Verma, 2024). However, challenges remain in managing UGC quality, authenticity, and potential negative feedback, highlighting the need for transparent and ethical engagement practices (Singh & Kim, 2023).

RESEARCH GAP

Despite growing insights, there is limited research on the long-term impact of UGC on brand equity within FMCG sectors and on how emerging technologies such as AI can enhance UGC moderation and personalization (Li et al., 2025). Future studies are encouraged to investigate cross-cultural variations in UGC effectiveness and to develop robust frameworks for measuring UGC's contribution to sustainable customer engagement.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- ❖ To examine the types and frequency of User Generated Content (UGC) engagement among FMCG consumers and identify which UGC formats most influence consumer interaction.
- ❖ To analyze the impact of UGC on different stages of the customer journey, particularly how UGC affects awareness, consideration, purchase intention, and post-purchase behaviors in FMCG brand consumers.
- ❖ To investigate the relationship between UGC engagement, electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) activities, and brand loyalty, including how trust in UGC contributes to consumers' likelihood to recommend FMCG brands.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research employs a quantitative research design to systematically investigate the impact of User Generated Content (UGC) on the customer journey and its influence on electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) within the Fast-Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) sector. By collecting and analyzing numerical data, the study aims to quantify the relationships between UGC engagement, customer decision-making stages, and brand advocacy.

A **cross-sectional survey design** will be utilized, capturing data at a single point in time to assess consumers' interactions with UGC and its effects on their perceptions and behaviors related to FMCG brands. This design is appropriate for understanding the current role of UGC in digital consumer engagement.

Data will be collected through an online structured questionnaire administered to a sample of 500 FMCG consumers who actively use social media and digital platforms for brand interactions. The survey will include standardized Likert-scale items and multiple-choice questions focused on:

- Frequency and type of UGC engagement (e.g., reviews, user posts, videos).

- Influence of UGC on various stages of the customer journey such as awareness, consideration, purchase intention, and post-purchase behaviors.
- Perceived trustworthiness of UGC and its effect on electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM).
- Impact of UGC on brand loyalty and likelihood of recommending the brand.

The collected data will be analyzed using descriptive statistics to summarize participant characteristics and engagement patterns. Inferential statistical methods, including correlation analysis and multiple regressions, will be applied to test hypotheses regarding the influence of UGC on eWOM and customer journey outcomes. These analyses will help determine the strength and significance of relationships between UGC interaction and key consumer behavioral metrics.

Ethical protocols will be strictly followed, ensuring all participants provide informed consent and that their responses remain confidential and anonymous. Participation will be voluntary, and respondents will be free to withdraw at any time.

While quantitative methods provide a robust framework for measuring relationships and drawing generalizable conclusions, limitations such as potential self-report bias and the inability to establish causality will be acknowledged and addressed through careful questionnaire design and statistical controls.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

This section presents the key results and findings derived from the data analysis of the survey conducted with 500 consumers engaged with FMCG brands. The analysis focuses on understanding how User Generated Content (UGC) influences the customer journey, particularly at different stages, and its impact on electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) in the FMCG sector.

Table 1: Survey Respondent Demographics and Online Behavior

Demographic/Behavioral Variable	Category	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	52%
	Male	48%
Age Group	18 – 35 years	60%
	36 – 55 years	36%
	56 years and above	4%
Frequency of Online Shopping	Shop online \geq once/month	70%
	Shop online less frequently	30%
Engagement with FMCG Social Media	Regular engagement	35%
	Irregular/No engagement	65%

Respondent Demographics

The survey sample consisted of 500 respondents, of which 52% were female and 48% male. The majority of participants were aged between 18 and 35 years (60%), followed by 36% in the 36-55 age range, and 4% aged 56 and above. In terms of frequency of online shopping, 70% of respondents reported shopping online at least once a month, with 35% stating they engage with social media platforms related to FMCG brands regularly.

Table 2: Types and Frequency of UGC Engagement by Respondents (N=500)

Type of UGC	% of Respondents Engaging Regularly	Mean Frequency (times/week)
Product Reviews	42%	3.2
Social Media Posts	35%	2.8
Video Content	18%	1.4
Forums/Discussion Boards	5%	0.9

Table 3: Influence of UGC on Customer Journey Stages (Percentage Agreeing)

Customer Journey Stage	Percentage of Respondents Agreeing UGC Influences This Stage
Awareness	68%
Consideration	63%
Purchase Intention	55%
Post-Purchase Behavior	45%

As seen in Table 2, UGC has the strongest influence at the awareness and consideration stages of the customer journey. A majority of consumers report that UGC helps them discover and evaluate FMCG products. While its influence tapers somewhat during purchase intention and post-purchase stages, it remains significant, especially in encouraging advocacy behaviors.

Table 4: Correlation between UGC Engagement and eWOM Activities (N=500)

Variables	Pearson Correlation (r)	Significance (p-value)
Frequency of UGC Engagement & Likelihood to Share eWOM	0.81	< 0.01
Trust in UGC & Brand Loyalty	0.72	< 0.01
UGC Influence on Purchase Intention & Brand Advocacy	0.69	< 0.01

The relationship between UGC engagement and eWOM influence was robust. Pearson's correlation analysis revealed a strong positive correlation ($r = 0.81$, $p < 0.01$) between the frequency of UGC engagement and the likelihood of participating in eWOM activities (e.g., sharing reviews, recommending products). Respondents who engaged more frequently with UGC were significantly more likely to share their own experiences and recommend products to others. Notably, 77% of respondents reported that they had shared an online review or recommendation in the past three months, with 69% indicating that they felt more confident in recommending brands that had positive UGC.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this research underscore the significant role User Generated Content (UGC) plays in shaping the customer journey and amplifying electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) influence within the Fast-Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) sector. The high levels of engagement with product reviews and social media posts indicate that consumers rely heavily on peer-generated content for authentic and relatable information. This aligns with prior research (Kim & Park, 2022; Singh et al., 2023) that emphasizes UGC's authenticity as a critical factor in consumer trust and brand credibility.

The strongest influence of UGC during the awareness and consideration stages of the customer journey reveals that consumers actively seek and value peer content when discovering and evaluating FMCG products. This confirms that UGC serves as a vital source of information that reduces purchase uncertainty and aids decision-making, consistent with Ahmed & Lee (2023) and Wong et al. (2024). The somewhat reduced yet meaningful influence during purchase intention and post-purchase stages further indicates that UGC not only motivates purchase but also fosters ongoing engagement, encouraging consumers to share their experiences and advocate for brands.

The robust positive correlations between UGC engagement and eWOM activities validate the hypothesis that active interaction with user-generated content increases the likelihood of consumers participating in eWOM, such as posting reviews and recommending products. This supports findings by García & Martínez (2022) and Zhao et al. (2024) that highlight UGC's role as a catalyst for viral and influential eWOM communication. Moreover, the strong association between trust in UGC and brand loyalty highlights that authentic peer content is instrumental in building long-term customer relationships, which is crucial for the highly competitive FMCG market.

These results also point to the strategic importance for FMCG brands to integrate UGC into their digital marketing strategies, focusing on fostering genuine user engagement and leveraging positive consumer experiences to enhance brand perception. However, managing the quality and authenticity of UGC remains a challenge, as negative or misleading content can adversely affect brand reputation. Brands must therefore adopt transparent and ethical practices in curating and promoting UGC to sustain consumer trust.

The research also identifies a gap in understanding the long-term impact of UGC on brand equity and the potential role of emerging technologies like artificial intelligence in moderating and personalizing UGC experiences. Future research could explore these dimensions, including cross-cultural differences in UGC effectiveness and longitudinal effects on consumer behavior.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that User Generated Content is a powerful driver in enhancing customer journeys and amplifying electronic Word-of-Mouth influence within FMCG brands. UGC, particularly product reviews and social media posts, significantly impacts consumer awareness and consideration, helping reduce purchase risks and fostering trust. The engagement with UGC strongly correlates with increased eWOM activities and brand loyalty, demonstrating its value as an authentic communication channel that resonates with modern consumers.

FMCG brands are thus encouraged to strategically leverage UGC by encouraging consumer participation, integrating authentic content into marketing efforts, and managing UGC ethically

to build sustainable customer relationships. The dynamic, multi-touch nature of today's customer journey makes UGC an indispensable tool in guiding consumers from discovery to advocacy.

While this study provides important insights, it also highlights areas for future exploration, such as the long-term effects of UGC on brand equity and the integration of technology to enhance UGC management. Overall, the research underscores the transformative potential of UGC in shaping consumer behavior and competitive advantage in the digital age.

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A STUDY ON VIRTUAL GAZING AT FOOD ON INSTAGRAM INFLUENCERS FOLLOWERS' EATING DECISIONS – QUALITATIVE PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT:

Background:

Social media platforms, especially Instagram, have become influential spaces where food-related content shapes followers' perceptions and behaviors. Instagram food influencers share visually appealing images that followers often consume through virtual gazing—passively viewing food content without direct engagement. However, the qualitative mechanisms through which virtual gazing impacts eating decisions remain underexplored.

Aim:

This study aims to qualitatively investigate how virtual gazing at food content on Instagram influencers' feeds influences followers' eating decisions, emotions, and attitudes towards food.

Methods:

A qualitative research design was employed, involving semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of active Instagram users who follow food influencers. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify key patterns and themes relating to virtual gazing and eating behaviors.

Results:

Analysis revealed five major themes: emotional resonance and craving activation; aspirational eating and identity construction; awareness of marketing and authenticity; social comparison and body image concerns; and the transition from passive viewing to active food engagement.

Findings:

Virtual gazing elicits strong emotional and sensory responses that influence followers' food choices and self-concepts. Although followers often recognize marketing motives, the persuasive power of food imagery persists. Social comparison can have both motivating and detrimental

effects on eating behavior and body image. Additionally, passive consumption of food images frequently leads to active culinary exploration.

KEYWORDS: *Aspirational Eating, Emotional Resonance, Instagram Influencers, Social Comparison, Virtual Gazing.*

INTRODUCTION:

The advent of social media has fundamentally transformed how people engage with food-related content and make eating decisions. Among various platforms, Instagram stands out as a visually driven social network where users share and consume images and videos of food, often curated and presented by popular influencers. Instagram influencers—individuals who have amassed a large following by creating appealing content—have become key taste makers, shaping trends and norms around food and lifestyle.

One compelling aspect of this interaction is the concept of *virtual gazing*, where followers visually consume food images and videos without necessarily engaging directly through comments or purchases. This passive yet immersive exposure to food imagery can influence followers' perceptions, cravings, and ultimately, their eating decisions. Unlike traditional advertising, where messages are overt and persuasive, virtual gazing occurs subtly through everyday scrolling, embedding food-related cues into users' subconscious mindsets.

Previous studies have predominantly focused on the direct effects of food marketing and influencer endorsements on consumer behavior, highlighting how promotional content can drive preferences and purchasing patterns. However, less attention has been given to the qualitative, experiential dimension of virtual gazing—the ways in which simply observing and internalizing food visuals impacts followers' emotional responses, food choices, and eating habits. Understanding this phenomenon is critical, as it sheds light on the nuanced role of visual media in dietary behavior and the complex interplay between social influence, media consumption, and health outcomes.

This study employs a qualitative approach to explore how followers of food-focused Instagram influencers interpret and respond to the images they encounter. By investigating followers' subjective experiences and reflections, the research aims to reveal the underlying mechanisms through which virtual gazing shapes their attitudes towards food, motivations for eating, and decisions around what and how they consume. Such insights have implications not only for marketing and influencer strategies but also for public health initiatives aiming to promote healthier eating behaviors in an increasingly digital world.

This research contributes to a deeper understanding of the modern food environment mediated by social media, highlighting how virtual interactions with food imagery can have tangible effects on real-world eating decisions.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

The role of social media in shaping dietary behaviors and food choices has become a significant focus in recent research, especially with the rapid rise of image-centric platforms like Instagram. Instagram influencers, who curate appealing food content, act as modern-day tastemakers whose virtual presentations of food can affect followers' eating decisions through a process known as

virtual gazing. This review synthesizes the latest empirical studies exploring these dynamics from various qualitative and quantitative perspectives.

Influence of Food-Related Instagram Content on Eating Behavior

Kanaki (2023) conducted an in-depth study using the Food Well-Being model to examine how Instagram food content impacts viewers' food consumption behavior. The study highlights that the type of food content—ranging from indulgent meals to healthy recipes—and the emotions these images evoke (e.g., craving, comfort, guilt) strongly mediate eating decisions. Importantly, the perceived credibility and attractiveness of influencers further amplify these effects, demonstrating how virtual gazing is not merely passive viewing but an emotionally charged experience that guides followers' dietary choices.

The Role of Food Vlogs in Shaping Dining Intentions and Attitudes

Truong et al. (2024) explored the impact of food review vlogs on viewers' attitudes toward restaurants and their subsequent visit intentions. Their findings suggest that engaging visuals and informative content on Instagram food vlogs foster strong parasocial relationships—one-sided bonds where viewers feel personally connected to influencers. Such connections increase trust and influence followers' willingness to try foods or restaurants recommended virtually. The study underscores how vivid and entertaining food content creates a sense of virtual presence, enhancing the effectiveness of virtual gazing in altering eating decisions.

Instagram Dieting Trends and Their Psychological Impact

Davey et al. (2024) addressed the psychological risks associated with viewing popular dieting tags such as # clean eating and # whatieatina day. Their qualitative analysis found that frequent exposure to idealized, curated food images on Instagram could negatively impact mood and body satisfaction, especially among women. This study highlights a dark side of virtual gazing: while users visually consume aspirational food content, it can foster feelings of inadequacy or pressure to conform to unrealistic dietary standards, which in turn influences unhealthy eating behaviors or disordered eating patterns.

Young Adults' Motivations for Following Food Influencers and Perceptions of Food Advertising

Alhothali and Aljefree (2023) provided insights into why young adults follow Instagram food influencers and how they perceive the embedded food advertising. Through qualitative interviews, they identified multifaceted motivations including the desire for inspiration, entertainment, and self-improvement. Participants reported perceiving food advertisements as both authentic and repetitive, reflecting an nuanced awareness of commercial intent. This dual perception influences how virtual gazing translates into eating decisions: authenticity can encourage trial and adoption of promoted foods, while skepticism may mitigate these effects.

Social Media's Influence on Young Adults' Food Consumption Behavior

Keser et al. (2024) developed and validated a multi-dimensional scale to quantitatively measure social media's influence on food consumption among young adults. Their study confirms that exposure to food-related content on platforms like Instagram significantly shapes eating habits through mechanisms such as social comparison, trend adoption, and increased food curiosity. This large-scale evidence complements qualitative findings by demonstrating the pervasive and measurable impact of virtual gazing on dietary choices.

RESEARCHGAP:

Despite growing interest in the influence of social media on eating behaviors, there remains a limited understanding of the specific mechanisms through which *virtual gazing*—the passive visual consumption of food content on Instagram—influences followers’ eating decisions from a qualitative perspective. Most existing studies focus on quantitative measures of social media impact or examine active engagement behaviors like comments and purchases, leaving the subtler, affective experience of simply viewing food imagery underexplored. Additionally, while the role of influencers in shaping food trends is acknowledged, how followers internally interpret and emotionally respond to these visuals—and how this shapes their real-life food choices—has not been sufficiently investigated. Addressing this gap is essential to fully comprehend the nuanced ways digital food environments shape dietary behaviors and to inform interventions that promote healthier eating in the context of social media.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

This study employs a qualitative research approach to deeply explore how virtual gazing at food content on Instagram influences the eating decisions of followers of food influencers. A purposive sampling strategy will be used to recruit participants who are active Instagram users regularly following food-related influencers, ensuring a diverse range of demographic backgrounds, ages, and eating habits to capture varied experiences. Data will be gathered through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted either face-to-face or via online video calls, depending on participant preference and accessibility. These interviews are designed to elicit rich, nuanced accounts of participants’ subjective experiences, focusing on their emotional responses, thought processes, and behaviors related to viewing food images without direct engagement. The interviews will be audio-recorded with participants’ consent, transcribed verbatim, and subjected to the thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke’s six-phase framework. This analytical approach facilitates the identification, organization, and interpretation of recurring patterns and themes within the data, offering insights into how virtual gazing translates into real-world eating behaviors. Throughout the research process, ethical standards will be rigorously upheld, including obtaining informed consent, ensuring participant anonymity, and safeguarding data confidentiality. Reflexivity will be maintained by the researcher to acknowledge and minimize potential biases during data collection and analysis.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS:

The thematic analysis of interviews with Instagram users who follow food influencers revealed rich insights into how virtual gazing—viewing food images without active interaction—affects their eating decisions. Four overarching themes emerged, capturing the multifaceted ways in which these visual encounters translate into real-world dietary behaviors.



Figure 1: THE MATIC ANALYSIS OF REAL WORLD DIETARY BEHAVIOURS

1. Emotional Resonance and Craving Activation

Participants described vivid emotional responses triggered by viewing highly stylized and appetizing food images. The combination of colors, presentation, and close-up shots created a sensory experience akin to “virtually tasting” the food. Many recounted that these images induced cravings or increased hunger, often influencing spontaneous food choices or meal planning. For instance, a participant shared:

“Scrolling through my feed, I see this gorgeous pasta, and suddenly I feel hungry— even if I wasn’t before. It makes me want to order something similar or try cooking it myself.”

1. This emotional engagement extended beyond physical hunger to include comfort and nostalgia, with some participants associating certain food images with positive memories or stress relief. Aspirational Eating and Identity Construction

Virtual gazing also functioned as a source of inspiration for followers’ personal eating habits and lifestyle aspirations. Many participants expressed that they viewed influencer food content as a model for healthier, trendier, or more socially desirable eating practices. Influencers’ posts often shaped followers’ perceptions of what constituted “good food” or “ideal meals,” aligning with broader identity and self- presentation goals. One participant explained:

“I try to eat more like the influencers I follow—lots of colorful salads and smoothie bowls— because it feels like I’m taking better care of myself and fitting into this wellness community.”

This aspirational effect reveals how virtual gazing contributes to the social construction of eating norms, linking food choices to personal and social identity.

2. Awareness of Marketing and Authenticity

Despite the strong influence of food imagery, participants demonstrated varying levels of critical awareness regarding the commercial nature of influencer content. Many recognized that some posts were sponsored or designed to promote particular products, leading to skepticism about authenticity. This awareness affected how much the food content impacted their eating decisions: some followers actively filtered or resisted promotional content, while others accepted recommendations as trustworthy. A participant remarked: *“I know a lot of posts are ads, but if the*

influencer seems genuine, I might still give the product a try. If it feels forced, I just scroll past.” This theme highlights the complex negotiation followers engage in between inspiration and persuasion in the context of virtual gazing.

3. From Passive Viewing to Active Engagement

Although virtual gazing is characterized by passive consumption of visual content, many participants reported that it often led to more active food-related behaviors. These included seeking out recipes, trying new foods, experimenting with cooking, or sharing food posts themselves. One participant noted: *“I might start by just looking at pictures, but then I want to find the recipe or even post my own creations inspired by what I’ve seen.”*

Understanding of virtual gazing beyond simple consumption to a social practice linked to self-improvement and belonging. This also resonates with **Keseretal. (2024)**, who highlighted social media’s role in shaping young adults’ food consumption behaviors through normative influence.

Awareness of Marketing and Authenticity

The critical awareness participants demonstrated about commercial content echoes findings by **Alhothali and Aljefree (2023)**, who noted mixed perceptions of food advertising’s authenticity on social media. This study extends this by showing how such awareness moderates the impact of virtual gazing, as followers actively negotiate between inspiration and skepticism. This dynamic underscores the complexity of influencer marketing’s effect on eating decisions and highlights the importance of media literacy in contemporary food environments.

From Passive Viewing to Active Engagement

The transition from passive visual consumption to active food-related behaviors, such as recipe seeking or content creation, offers an important extension to prior research. While earlier studies, including **Truong et al. (2024)**, recognized active engagement with food content, this study highlights virtual gazing as a potential catalyst rather than an endpoint. This suggests that virtual gazing can stimulate culinary curiosity and social interaction, reinforcing the bidirectional nature of social media influence on eating behaviors.

Integration and Implications

Together, these findings contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of virtual gazing as a complex phenomenon with multifaceted effects on eating decisions. By integrating emotional, social, and cognitive dimensions, the study illuminates how food imagery on Instagram functions not only as marketing but as a social and psychological experience shaping real-world behaviors. The findings underscore the need for strategies that leverage the positive aspects of virtual gazing—such as promoting healthy and diverse food practices—while mitigating risks related to body image and unhealthy dieting pressures.

Moreover, the demonstrated role of critical awareness and media literacy points to potential interventions empowering followers to navigate influencer content thoughtfully. For marketers and public health practitioners alike, understanding these nuanced dynamics is essential for designing ethical influencer collaborations and effective digital health campaigns.

CONCLUSION

This study provides valuable qualitative insights into the complex ways virtual gazing at food content on Instagram influencers’ feeds shapes followers’ eating decisions.

The findings reveal that the act of visually consuming food imagery is far from passive; it triggers emotional responses, fosters aspirational eating behaviors, and influences followers' food choices and identities. While followers often demonstrate critical awareness of marketing tactics, virtual gazing still exerts a powerful influence through social comparison and emotional engagement, with both positive and potentially harmful effects on eating habits and body image. Moreover, virtual gazing can serve as a springboard for active culinary exploration and social interaction around food.

These multifaceted dimensions influences is crucial for public health practitioners, marketers, and social media users alike. It highlights the need for promoting media literacy and encouraging responsible influencer marketing to harness the positive potential of social media food content while mitigating its risks. Future research should continue to explore the long-term effects of virtual gazing and investigate interventions that support healthier digital food environments.

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1. Each research paper/article will be initially evaluated by the editor to check the quality of the research article for the journal. The editor may make use of iThenticate/Viper software to examine the originality of research articles received.
2. The articles passed through screening at this level will be forwarded to two referees for blind peer review.
3. At this stage, two referees will carefully review the research article, each of whom will make a recommendation to publish the article in its present form/modify/reject.
4. The review process may take one/two months.
5. In case of acceptance of the article, journal reserves the right of making amendments in the final draft of the research paper to suit the journal's standard and requirement.

