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INFLUENCER TRUSTWORTHINESS AND DIGITAL FOODSCAPES UNDER THE ELABORATION LIKELIHOOD MODEL WITH ATTITUDE MEDIATING RESTAURANT CHOICE

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Abstract:

Today's digital foodscapes rely on visually appealing marketing to grab consumers' attention quickly, often through peripheral processing. However, turning that first spark of interest into a real intention to visit a restaurant usually depends on whether people trust the source of the message. To address this gap, this study draws on the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) to examine how influencer trustworthiness and the attractiveness of food marketing shape restaurant choice intentions in Malaysia. Data were collected through a cross-sectional survey of 129 social media users and analysed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM). The measurement model showed satisfactory reliability and validity. Structural path analysis indicated significant positive direct effects of influencer trustworthiness (β = 0.171, p = 0.022) and food marketing

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attractiveness (β = 0.262, p = 0.009) on restaurant selection intention. In addition, the attitude toward influencers partially mediates both relationships, presenting significant indirect effects for influencer trustworthiness (β = 0.194) and food marketing attractiveness (β = 0.210), collectively accounting for 46.5% of the variance in attitude formation and 58.7% of the variance in restaurant selection intention. Visual attractiveness and source credibility jointly influence restaurant selection intention, practically, restaurant marketers and influencers should balance attention-grabbing sensory visuals with transparent and honest reviews. The evidence implies that the influencer trustworthiness and food marketing attractiveness have a crucial role in determining restaurant selection intentions, both directly and through perceptions of influencers. The research emphasises the necessity of merging source trustworthiness with visually attractive food marketing strategies in influencer-led restaurant promotion.

Keyword:

Attitude Towards Influencers, Attractiveness Of Food Marketing, Elaboration Likelihood Model, Influencer Trustworthiness & Restaurant Selection

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Introduction

Consumer choice is a key paradigm in the marketing strategy that drive organizations to refine promotional frameworks and secure competitive market advantage by uncovering the primary psychological factors that influence purchasing decisions (Adeniran et al., 2024).Decision-making models have traditionally been based on linear cognitive trajectories based on brand memory and physical word-of-mouth (Garg & Bakshi, 2024), but the advent of digital ecosystems has made consumer behaviour a highly dynamic and non-linear trajectory. In contemporary foodscapes, user-driven evaluations, real-time price transparency, and algorithmic content suggestions greatly enhance customer selectivity and evaluation criteria (Wang et al., 2022). Therefore, social media platforms have become important mediators in the hospitality industry and directly affect restaurant choice behaviours (Shirzadian et al., 2023).

In this digital context, social media content creators and food influencers function as effective persuasive catalysts. Influencers connect commercial dining businesses with potential clients through parasocial interaction, relatability, and perceived domain expertise (Cheah et al., 2024). The more important authentic culinary endorsements and visually stimulating gastronomic content are for consumers to explore restaurant alternatives and reduce dining risk (Misra et al., 2024). The exact psychological processes that drive the interaction of influencer qualities, namely trustworthiness and visual marketing aesthetics, in order to foster behavioural intents, remain a hotly contested topic within academia. The study of influencer trustworthiness and food marketing attractiveness is necessary because, each plays a different role in how

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people choose where to eat. Attractive visuals catch consumers' eyes almost instantly, working through quick, surface-level impressions. But for dining decisions that depend heavily on the experience itself, that first attraction is rarely enough. People also need to trust the source before interest turns into a genuine intention to visit.

To build a solid theoretical base, the study is anchored in the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) of persuasion (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). It also draws on related ideas from the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975) and Social Influence Theory (Kelman, 1958). This research, guided by the ELM framework, explores how social media users process persuasive digital food marketing through the central and peripheral channels of cognition. Specifically, this study investigates the direct and mediated structural relationships between influencer trustworthiness and food marketing attractiveness of restaurant selection with the essential mediating role of consumer attitude formation being examined.

Research Objectives

This study is guided by four specific research objectives:

- **RO1:** To assess the influence of influencer trustworthiness and the attractiveness of food marketing on restaurant selection intention.
- **RO2:** To evaluate the impact of influencer trustworthiness and the attractiveness of food marketing on consumer attitudes toward influencers.
- **RO3:** To determine the effect of consumer attitudes toward influencers on restaurant selection intention.
- **RO4:** To investigate the mediating role of consumer attitudes in the relationship between influencer trustworthiness, attractiveness of food marketing, and restaurant selection intention.

Literature Review

Influencer Trustworthiness

Trust is a multidisciplinary construct that has been widely conceptualised in marketing (Nazlan et al., 2024), sociology (Dubash & Brett, 2025), philosophy (Lim, 2023), organisational behaviour (Schilke et al., 2023), and behavioural economics (Song et al., 2023). Trust remains a fundamental strategic asset in commercial contexts to build and maintain long-term brand relationships (Guasmin & Rajindra, 2024). In the context of digital marketing ecosystems, influencer trustworthiness is described as the audience's view of the honesty, integrity, objectivity, and reliability of a content creator (Sahu et al., 2025). Unlike corporate brand trust, influencer trustworthiness relies heavily on perceived personal transparency and authenticity. Content creators that maintain a perceived level of integrity on a consistent basis are able to establish significant parasocial relationships with their followers, which in turn leads directly to increased levels of digital engagement and stronger purchase intentions (Tran et al., 2024).

Trustworthiness is one of the three main pillars of source credibility theory, alongside perceived integrity (adherence to ethical communication standards), benevolence (prioritising consumer welfare over commercial sponsorship gain) and domain expertise (demonstration of valid culinary knowledge) (Sahu et al., 2025; Wiedmann & von Mettenheim, 2021). Trusted influencers play an important role as risk mitigation agents in experience-driven sectors like as

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hospitality and gastronomy, where the quality of the service is intangible and cannot be verified before consumption (Ki et al., 2023). Consumers consider the food reviewer as highly reliable and objective, their cognitive scepticism decreases, and significantly increasing the persuasive impact of the restaurant recommendation (Ohanian, 1990).

Attractiveness of Food Marketing

Food marketing attractiveness in the context of digital foodscapes is seen as the visual sophistication, sensory appeal, plate aesthetics and narrative presentation of culinary information transmitted through social media platforms (Rizzo et al., 2023). High-definition gastronomic images and immersive short-form movies evoke instant sensory and affective responses that impact consumers' judgements of culinary quality, taste expectations and desirability (Yilmazel, 2024). The growing importance of digital presentation aesthetics in contemporary hospitality marketing has been driven by the rise of visual platforms such as TikTok and Instagram (Chowdhury et al., 2024).

The visual cues are generally used by consumers as heuristic signals to judge the standards and atmosphere of the restaurant before executing a dining decision (Janjić et al., 2023). The empirical literature argues that food marketing achieves optimal persuasive efficacy when the visual style of the creator is in good alignment with the underlying identity of the culinary

product (Rathnayake & Lakshika, 2023). Such peripheral stimuli as colour vibrancy, plating elegance, steam capture, and sophisticated table staging can be potent creative visual qualities that attract consumer attention, generate behavioural engagement and experience (Liu et., 2026; Idrus et al., 2025; Jansom & Pongsakornrungsilp, 2021).

Attitude Towards Influencers

Attitude represents an individual's enduring psychological evaluation, integrating cognitive beliefs, affective feelings, and behavioral tendencies toward a particular entity or object (Ilieva et al., 2024). In digital consumer behaviour, fostering a positive attitude toward an influencer is paramount, as attitudes serve as direct antecedents of behavioural intention and patronage implementation (Añaña & Barbosa, 2023). Consumers tend to view influencers more favourably when they see them as authentic, consistent in their content, and sharing similar values (Belanche et al., 2021; Dash & Paul, 2021). Influencer marketing works best when it strikes a balance between being entertaining and offering honest, accurate information about food. That balance creates positive feelings among followers and eases their suspicion that the content is just an advertisement (Chai et al., 2023). In addition, when an influencer's persona matches what consumers expect, they come across as more trustworthy, and followers become much more receptive to their dining recommendations and brand promotions (Al-Dwairi et al., 2024; He et al., 2024).

Restaurant Selection

The selection of a dining establishment is a complex, experience-based decision driven by both practical needs and social motives (Gandhi et al., 2023). The characteristics of hospitality services are intangible, inseparable, and perishable, diners cannot judge them fully in advance. As a result, they rely on outside information and recommendations from other diners to decide where to go (Steinhoff et al., 2022). Traditional factors such as price, location, and menu variety

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still matter, but digital food influencers have become key guides in this process (Azman & Abdul Majid, 2023). Since eating out is often spontaneous and driven by pleasure or social reasons, real-time reviews and immersive videos on social media can quickly shift what consumers plan to do, turning online engagement into actual restaurant visits (Patwardhan et al., 2024; Xia & Ha, 2023).

Theoretical Synthesis and Hypotheses Development

This research is framed around the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) of persuasion (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), with support from Social Influence Theory (Kelman, 1958) and the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). According to the ELM, people form

attitudes and respond to persuasive messages through two different routes: the central route and the peripheral route. The central route involves careful, critical thinking about the message's arguments and how credible the source is. The peripheral route, on the other hand, depends on sensory cues, visual appeal, and mental shortcuts.

In the digital foodscape, influencer trustworthiness is mostly exercised through the central route where consumers assess the creator's reliability, honesty, and domain dependability (Dinc, 2024; Durmaz et al., 2023; Kim & Yoon, 2023). In contrast, the attractiveness of food marketing works through the peripheral route, attracting attention through aesthetics of sensory plating and visual narrative (Abell & Biswas, 2023; Singh et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2024). Both processing routes are hypothesized to have a direct effect on eating choices while simultaneously cultivating consumer attitudes toward the creator.

According to TRA and Social Influence Theory, consumer attitude is an important mediator between external persuasive stimuli and final behavioural execution (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Kelman, 1958). While previous literature has shown direct relationships between influencer attribute and general purchase intention (Cheah et al., 2024; Immanue & Bianda, 2021), there is a significant empirical gap on how attitude formation mediates both central trustworthiness and peripheral visual aesthetics specifically when restaurant selection decision-making (Ilieva et al., 2024). In an effort to fill this gap in the literature the following structural hypotheses are proposed:

- **H1a:** Influencer trustworthiness positively influences restaurant selection intention.
- **H1b:** Attractiveness of food marketing positively influences restaurant selection intention.
- **H2a:** Influencer trustworthiness positively influences consumer attitudes toward influencers.
- **H2b:** Attractiveness of food marketing positively influences consumer attitudes toward influencers.
- **H3:** Consumer attitudes toward influencers positively influence restaurant selection intention.
- **H4a:** Consumer attitudes positively mediate the relationship between influencer trustworthiness and restaurant selection intention.
- **H4b:** Consumer attitudes positively mediate the relationship between attractiveness of food marketing and restaurant selection intention.

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Methodology

Research Design and Sampling

This study utilised a quantitative, cross-sectional survey research design to empirically test the structural relationships among influencer attributes, consumer attitudes, and restaurant

selection intentions. The intended demographic comprised Malaysian social media users who follow digital food content creators and gastronomy influencers. A non-probability purposive sampling technique was utilised to guarantee that participants had pertinent prior experience with influencer meal suggestions prior to making dining choices (Eslami et al., 2024).

To determine the minimum sample size needed for PLS-SEM, a statistical power analysis was performed using G*Power 3.1 software. The analysis was set up as a linear multiple regression

(random model) with a significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$, statistical power of 0.80, and three predictor constructs pointing to the endogenous variable (Hair et al., 2024). Based on these settings, at least 119 participants were required. During data collection, 129 complete and valid responses were obtained, which comfortably met the requirement for structural path modelling.

Instrument and Data Collection

Data were collected through a structured online questionnaire created with Google Forms and shared in popular Malaysian food communities and dining groups on Facebook. All questions were set as required, so every submitted response was complete and there was no missing data (Mirzaei et al., 2022). The questionnaire began with three screening questions to confirm that respondents currently lived in Malaysia, used social media at least weekly, and had previously visited a restaurant because of content from a digital creator. All assessment items were modified from recognised, psychometrically validated sources and evaluated with a standardised 5-point Likert scale (1 = 'Strongly Disagree' to 5 = 'Strongly Agree') (Obon et al., 2025). Influencer Trustworthiness (IT) was evaluated using 5 items sourced from Ohanian (1990) and Wiedmann and von Mettenheim (2021); Attractiveness of Food Marketing (AFM) consisted of 5 items modified from Jansom and Pongsakornrungsilp (2021) and Ohanian (1990); Attitude Toward Influencers (ATI) was gauged with 4 items adapted from Belanche et al. (2021) and He et al. (2024); and Restaurant Selection (RS) was characterised by 8 items based on Xia & Ha (2023).

Data Analysis

Statistical data analysis was performed using a two-stage software approach. SPSS version 26.0 was utilised to perform descriptive statistical analysis, summarizing the frequency and percentage distributions of participant demographic characteristics. To assess the reflecting measurement model and examine the structural hypotheses, PLS-SEM was performed using SmartPLS version 4.0 (Hair et al., 2017, 2021; Sarstedt et al., 2021). Following current PLS-SEM reporting guidelines, the analysis was carried out in two stages. The first stage assessed the reflective measurement model. This involved checking the outer loadings of the indicators, internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability), convergent validity (Average Variance Extracted, AVE), and discriminant validity through item cross-loadings and the stricter Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio (Henseler et al., 2016). The

second stage assessed the structural model. Here, the analysis looked at collinearity among the constructs (VIF), explanatory power (R^2), predictive relevance (Q^2), the significance of the path coefficients (β), and specific indirect mediating effects, using a non-parametric percentile bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 resamples (Hair & Alamer, 2022).

Results

Demographic Characteristics

Table 1 summarises the demographic profile of the 129 respondents across six categories: age, gender, education level, main social media platform used, frequency of use, and monthly income.

Table 1 Demographic Profile of the Respondents (N=129)

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age	18–24 years	86	66.7
	25–34 years	21	16.3
	35–44 years	5	3.9
	45–54 years	16	12.4
	55–65 years	1	0.8
Gender	Female	93	72.1
	Male	36	27.9
Education Level	Primary/Secondary School	14	10.9
	Diploma or equivalent	20	15.5
	Bachelor's Degree	80	62
	Master's Degree	15	11.6
Platform Usage	TikTok	68	52.7
	Instagram	38	29.5
	Facebook	23	17.8
Frequency of Use	Once a week	3	2
	Twice a week	4	3
	More than twice a week	122	95
Monthly income	RM1,000 and below	57	44.2
	RM1,001 – RM3,000	47	36.4
	RM3,001 – RM5,000	14	10.9
	RM5,001 and above	11	8.5

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The sample represents a highly active, digitally native group of social media users in an emerging market. As shown in Table 1, most respondents were Gen Z or younger millennials,

with 66.7% (n = 86) aged 18–24 and 16.3% (n = 21) aged 25–34. Women made up 72.1% (n = 93) of the sample, which is consistent with earlier findings that women engage more with food-related content. Respondents were also well educated: 62.0% (n = 80) held a bachelor's degree and 11.6% (n = 15) a master's degree.

TikTok was the main platform for engaging with food marketing (52.7%, n = 68), followed by Instagram (29.5%, n = 38) and Facebook (17.8%, n = 23). Usage was very frequent, with 94.6% (n = 122) using social media more than twice a week. In terms of income, the largest group (44.2%, n = 57) earned RM1,000 or less per month, which is typical of students and early-career workers who tend to be careful with their dining budgets.

Measurement Model Assessment

Following established PLS-SEM guidelines (Hair et al., 2017, 2021; Sarstedt et al., 2021), the reflective measurement model was evaluated for indicator reliability, internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. The standard psychometric benchmarks applied in this evaluation are summarized in Table 2.

Step 1: Reflective Measurement Model Assessment

To ensure the measurement instruments reliably capture their assigned constructs before evaluating causal relationships, the reflective model was assessed against standard psychometric rules of thumb (Table 2).

Table 2 Rules of Thumb for Reflective Model Assessment

Criterion	Rules of Thumb	Sources
Internal consistency reliability	Composite reliability (CR) > 0.70 Cronbach Alpha >0.70	(Jöreskog, 1971; Shrestha, 2021)
Indicator reliability	Standardised indicator loadings > 0.70; in exploratory studies, loadings of 0.40 are acceptable	(Hulland, 1999)
Convergent validity	Average Variance Extracted (AVE) > 0.50	(Bagozzi & Yi, 1988)
Discriminant validity Fornell-Larcker criterion	Each construct's AVE greater than it's squared of the correlation	(Fornell & Larcker, 1981)
Cross loadings	Each indicator should load highest on the construct it is intended to measure	(Sarstedt et al., 2021)
Heterotrait-monotrait	No discriminant validity problems (HTMT<0.85 criterions)	(Henseler et al., 2016)

Source: (Hair et al. 2017, 2021)

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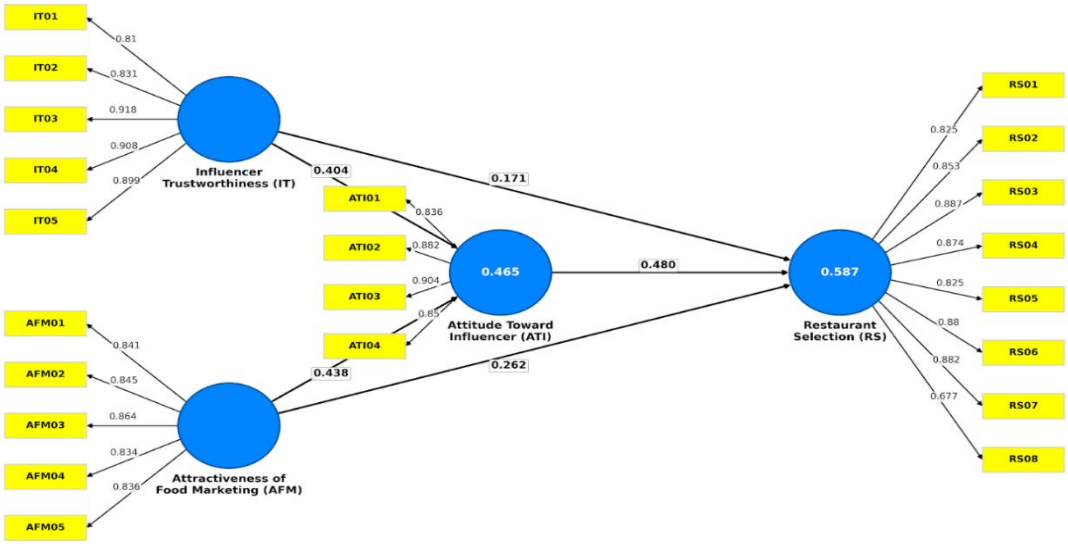


Figure 1: Measurement Model Assessment

Indicator Reliability, Internal Consistency, and Convergent Validity

Individual indicator reliability was evaluated by inspecting outer loadings. As detailed in Table 3, all item loadings ranged from 0.677 (RS08) to 0.918 (IT03). These results are above the exploratory threshold of 0.40 and above the preferred benchmark of 0.70, indicating Cronbach's alpha (α) and composite reliability (CR) were used to verify internal consistency reliability. The α values of the four latent constructs ranged from 0.891 to 0.940, and the CR values ranged from 0.895 to 0.948. There was strong internal consistency, with all measures above the necessary level of .70. Convergent validity was verified using the Average Variance Extracted (AVE). All constructs achieved AVE scores ranging between 0.706 and 0.764 (Table 3), well above the 0.50 minimum standard. This confirms that each latent construct accounts for more than 70% of the variance in its assigned indicators

Table 3 Measurement Model Assessment

Latent variable	Code	Items	Outer Loading	Cronbach Alpha	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Influencer Trustworthiness	IT01	The social media influencer in the advertisement is a dependable person	0.810	0.922	0.927	0.764
	IT02	The social media influencer in	0.831			

		the advertisement is an honest person				
	IT03	The social media influencer in the advertisement is a reliable person.	0.918			
	IT04	The social media influencer in the advertisement is a sincere person.	0.908			
	IT05	The social media influencer in the advertisement is a trustworthy person.	0.899			
Attractiveness of Food Marketing	AFM01	The dish presented in the social media influencer's advertisement is visually appealing.	0.841	0.899	0.899	0.712
	AFM02	The dish presented in the social media influencer's advertisement is sophisticated.	0.845			
	AFM03	The dish presented in the social media influencer's advertisement is beautifully presented.	0.864			
	AFM04	The dish presented in the social media	0.834			

		influencer's advertisement is elegant.				
	AFM05	The dish presented in the social media influencer's advertisement is quite tempting allure.	0.836			
Attitude Toward Influencer	ATI01	I believe that this influencer is intriguing.	0.836	0.891	0.895	0.754
	ATI02	I believe that this influencer is enjoyable.	0.882			
	ATI03	I believe that this influencer is appealing.	0.904			
	ATI04	I have a positive impression of the influencer.	0.850			
Restaurant Selection	RS01	The social media influencer helps me recognize that a decision needs to be made.	0.825	0.940	0.948	0.706
	RS02	The social media influencer prepares me to make a better decision in restaurant selection.	0.853			
	RS03	The social media influencer helps me identify the key factors to consider when deciding of choosing the restaurant.	0.887			
	RS04	The social media influencer	0.874			

	helps me understand which factors are most important to me in making the decision.	
RS05	The social media influencer helps me understand that the decision depends on what matters most to me.	0.825
RS06	The social media influencer helps me organize my thoughts when making decision.	0.880
RS07	The social media influencer helps me determine how involved I want to be in this decision.	0.882
RS08	The social media influencer helps me identify questions I want to investigate further.	0.677

Discriminant Validity- Cross Loading Analysis

Discriminant validity was evaluated at both the item level using cross-loading analysis and at the construct level using the Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT) criterion (Henseler et al., 2016; Sarstedt et al., 2021).

To establish item-level discriminant validity, the outer loading of an indicator on its assigned construct must strictly exceed its cross-loadings with all opposing constructs. Table 4 illustrates that each indicator had a considerably greater loading on its designated latent variable (bolded

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values ranging from 0.677 to 0.918) than on any other construct across the rows, hence validating the empirical distinctiveness of the survey items.

Table 4 Cross-Loadings

	ATI	AFM	RS	IT
ATI01	0.836	0.487	0.577	0.369
ATI02	0.882	0.468	0.619	0.460
ATI03	0.904	0.509	0.613	0.395
ATI04	0.850	0.493	0.679	0.620
AFM01	0.512	0.841	0.496	0.240
AFM02	0.448	0.845	0.520	0.275
AFM03	0.446	0.864	0.461	0.216
AFM04	0.446	0.834	0.511	0.297
AFM05	0.520	0.836	0.482	0.281
IT01	0.523	0.413	0.511	0.810
IT02	0.409	0.150	0.371	0.831
IT03	0.479	0.259	0.451	0.918
IT04	0.430	0.255	0.412	0.908
IT05	0.493	0.242	0.463	0.899
RS01	0.638	0.500	0.825	0.532
RS02	0.637	0.541	0.853	0.434
RS03	0.671	0.548	0.887	0.513
RS04	0.678	0.559	0.874	0.479
RS05	0.571	0.429	0.825	0.437
RS06	0.604	0.480	0.880	0.369
RS07	0.565	0.471	0.882	0.394
RS08	0.418	0.372	0.677	0.198

Notes: ATI= Attitude Toward Influencer, AFM= Attractiveness of Food Marketing, RS= Restaurant Selection, IT= Influencer Trustworthiness.

Discriminant Validity - Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio of Correlations (HTMT)

Following item-level verification, construct-level discriminant validity was evaluated using the HTMT criterion. As illustrated in Table 5, all HTMT ratios were safely below the conservative 0.85 threshold, with a peak of 0.775 (RS – ATI). The discriminant validity of the measurement model is fully established by these results, which demonstrate the absence of collinearity or conceptual overlap among latent variables (Henseler et al., 2016).

Table 5 Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio of Correlations (HTMT) Results

	ATI	**AFM**	**RS**	**IT**
ATI				
AFM	0.628			
RS	0.775	0.632		
IT	0.580	0.331	0.531	

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Notes: ATI= Attitude Toward Influencer, AFM= Attractiveness of Food Marketing, RS= Restaurant Selection, IT= Influencer Trustworthiness.

Step 2: Structural Model Assessment

After the measurement model met all validity and reliability criteria, the structural model was assessed to test the hypothesized causal relationships between exogenous and endogenous constructs (Sarstedt et al., 2021). Following standard PLS-SEM reporting guidelines, the evaluation of the structural model involves collinearity evaluation, examination of explanatory power (R^2), predictive relevance (Q^2), direct path assessment, and mediation analysis by bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples.

Collinearity Assessment and Common Method Bias (CMB)

Prior to the evaluation of the structure path coefficients, the potential multicollinearity among the independent predictor variables was investigated through the use of the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) and tolerance statistics. As illustrated in Table 6, the inner-model VIF values ranged between 1.097 and 1.831. Given that these scores remain well under the prudent limit of 3.0 to 5.0 (Sarstedt et al., 2021), multicollinearity does not affect the derived path coefficients. Additionally, given that all factor-level VIF values remain well under the 3.3 threshold, common method bias is not a critical threat to the empirical findings (Kock, 2015).

Table 6: Collinearity Assessment (VIF Values)

RS as dependant variable			**ATI as dependant variable**		
Construct	Tolerance	VIF	Construct	Tolerance	VIF
IT	0.724	1.381	IT	0.912	1.097
AFM	0.688	1.454	AFM	0.912	1.097
ATI	0.546	1.831	---		

Note. VIF < 3.0 indicates absence of multicollinearity; factor VIF < 3.3 confirms absence of common method bias.

Explanatory Power (R^2) and Predictive Relevance (Q^2)

The structural model had substantial explanatory strength, with the exogenous predictors accounting for 46.5% of the variance in Attitude Toward Influencer ($R^2 = 0.465$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.458$) and 58.7% of the variance in Restaurant Selection Intention ($R^2 = 0.587$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.581$). Furthermore, the implementation of Stone-Geisser's blindfolding technique produced predictive relevance parameters (Q^2) notably above zero, with Q^2 values of 0.329 for Attitude Toward Influencer and 0.393 for Restaurant Selection, thus confirming the model exhibits satisfactory out-of-sample predictive ability (Henseler et al., 2016).

Direct Testing of Hypotheses (H1a – H3) Hypothesis testing for the direct pathways was conducted using a non-parametric bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 subsamples. The results presented in Table 7, validate that all five direct hypotheses were statistically supported. H1a was supported, indicating that Influencer Trustworthiness exerts a significant direct positive effect on Restaurant Selection Intention ($\beta = 0.171$, $t = 2.299$, $p = 0.022$). H1b was supported, demonstrating that the Attractiveness of Food Marketing strongly drives Restaurant Selection Intentions ($\beta = 0.262$, $t = 2.620$, $p = 0.009$). H2a and H2b were also supported, demonstrating that both Influencer Trustworthiness ($\beta = 0.404$, $t = 4.470$, $p < 0.001$) and Content

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Attractiveness (β = 0.438, t = 5.063, p < 0.001) are substantial positive predictors of Attitude Toward the Influencer. H3 was supported, indicating that consumer attitude of the influencer serves as a key direct determinant of Restaurant Selection Intention (β = 0.480, t = 4.007, p < 0.001).

Table 7: Path Coefficient (β), T-Value and Significance Level

Relationship	β	Std. Dev	T statistics	P values	Result
H1a: Influencer trustworthiness positively influences restaurant selection	0.171**	0.074	2.299	0.022	Supported
H1b: Attractiveness of food marketing positively influences restaurant selection	0.262**	0.100	2.620	0.009	Supported
H2a: Influencer trustworthiness positively influences attitude towards influencers	0.404***	0.090	4.470	0.000	Supported
H2b: Attractiveness of food marketing positively influences attitude towards influencers	0.438***	0.087	5.063	0.000	Supported
H3: Attitude towards influencers positively influences restaurant selection	0.480***	0.120	4.007	0.000	Supported

Notes: 99% confidence interval: p-value<0.00***, 95% confidence interval: p-value<0.05**

Mediation Analysis

To evaluate the mediating role of Attitude Toward Influencers (ATI) in the relationships between the exogenous predictors (Influencer Trustworthiness and Attractiveness of Food Marketing) and Restaurant Selection (RS), specific indirect effects were examined using a non-parametric percentile bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 resamples (Hair & Alamer, 2022; Sarstedt et al., 2021). Following modern PLS-SEM reporting guidelines, mediation is established when the indirect path is statistically significant; the significance of the direct path subsequently determines whether the mediation is full or partial (Nitzl et al., 2016; Sarstedt et al., 2021).

As detailed in Table 8, both hypothesized indirect pathways achieved statistical significance. H4a: Influencer Trustworthiness (IT) exerted a statistically significant indirect effect on Restaurant Selection through Attitude Toward Influencers (β = 0.194, t = 2.360, p < 0.001, 95% CI [0.063, 0.376]). Because the direct effect of Influencer Trustworthiness on Restaurant Selection also remained statistically significant in the presence of the mediator (β = 0.171, t = 2.290, p = 0.022), the relationship is characterized by complementary partial mediation. As a result, hypothesis H4a was supported. H4b: Attractiveness of Food Marketing (AFM) had a substantial indirect effect on Restaurant Selection indirectly via Attitude Toward Influencers (β = 0.210, t = 3.852, p = 0.018, 95% CI [0.104, 0.318]). Even after the mediator was taken into account, Food Marketing Attractiveness still had a significant effect on Restaurant Choice (β = 0.262, t = 2.589, p = 0.010). This indicates that consumer attitude partially mediates the relationship. Therefore, H4b was supported.

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Table 8: Summary of Mediation Analysis in PLS-SEM (Specific Indirect and Total Effects)

Hypothesis	Mediated Path	Indirect Effect (β)	Std. Dev.	t-Value	p-Value	95% CI [Lower, Upper]	Direct Effect (β)	Total Effect (β)	Decision / Mediation Type
H4a	IT → ATI → RS	0.194	0.082	2.360	0.000***	[0.063, 0.376]	0.171*	0.365***	Supported (Complementary Partial)
H4b	AFM → ATI → RS	0.210	0.054	3.852	0.018*	[0.104, 0.318]	0.262*	0.473***	Supported (Complementary Partial)

Note. *** $p < 0.001$; * $p < 0.05$. For H4a: Direct effect $t = 2.290$ ($p = 0.022$); Total effect $t = 4.537$ ($p < 0.001$). For H4b: Direct effect $t = 2.589$ ($p = 0.010$); Total effect $t = 4.981$ ($p < 0.001$).

The reflective measurement model exhibited strong psychometric characteristics, meeting all defined empirical criteria for indicator reliability, internal consistency, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. The subsequent assessment of the structural model confirmed its predictive relevance and substantial explanatory power. All direct and indirect hypotheses (H1a to H4b) were statistically validated, confirming that influencer reliability and visual marketing appeal together affect the intention to choose a restaurant, both directly and indirectly through customer attitudes.

Discussion

This research empirically examined the two cognitive processes by which social media culinary content influences consumer choices in the hospitality industry. Our research indicates that the digital eating choices of Gen Z and younger millennials are influenced by a complex relationship between the aesthetics of visual content and the credibility of influencers. Our study reveals that the digital eating choices of Gen Z and younger millennials are more nuanced than a simple stimulus-response framework, influenced by a complex interaction of visual content appeal and influencer trustworthiness. Specifically, the credibility of the influencer and the aesthetic appeal of food advertising significantly influence restaurant choice, while simultaneously cultivating favourable emotional responses toward the digital creator.

Empirical evidence indicates that the appeal of visual marketing has a more significant direct and overall impact on dining choices compared to the source trustworthiness. Trustworthiness is crucial for forming an affective connection with the influencer, whilst stunning visual presentation serves as an immediate behavioural catalyst. Instead of depending exclusively on cognitive evaluation, digitally native consumers in emerging markets often make restaurant choices influenced by sensory stimulation and visual appeal, mediated by their overarching affinity for the content creator.

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Theoretical Implications and Advancements

The empirical results of this study contribute to important theoretical advances by contextualising and expanding the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) within the framework of short-form video food marketing (e.g., TikTok and Instagram Reels). According to the ELM, there are two classical methods in which persuasion takes place: the central route, which involves cognitive processing of source credibility and argument quality, and the peripheral route, which relies on surface cues such as sensory or aesthetic cues. This study challenges the traditional dichotomous separation of these routes in digital hospitality marketing. This demonstrated that in immersive short-form video contexts, central-route processing (Influencer Credibility) and peripheral-route processing (Attractiveness of Food Marketing) function concurrently and collaboratively to shape consumer attitude.

Moreover, our recognition complementary partial mediation provides an enhanced conceptual insight into the manner in which digital persuasion manifests as physical behaviour. The enduring direct effect between food marketing attractiveness and restaurant selection demonstrates that visual gastronomy on platforms such as TikTok may completely bypass thorough cognitive evaluation. This direct pathway establishes an empirically validated 'visual-impulse mechanism' within digital tourism and hospitality: high-definition, aesthetically sophisticated plating triggers immediate visceral craving and fear-of-missing-out (FOMO), thereby directly influencing dining behaviour regardless of the consumer's enduring trust in the creator. This finding addresses a critical gap in hospitality literature by differentiating between identity-oriented dining (influenced by trust in influencers) and impulse-based dining (stimulated directly by the appeal of visual marketing).

Practical and Managerial Implications

Beyond their theoretical contributions, these findings offer practical approaches for hospitality professionals and digital content creators to convert social media interactions into genuine consumer support. Understanding that consumers process information through two routes allows brands to build marketing strategies on empirical data rather than management instinct. Balancing Visual Stimuli with Authentic Evaluation: Marketers and influencers ought to use a progressive content approach. Creators are encouraged to commence short-form videos with captivating culinary imagery, including rising steam, close-up textures, or beautiful plating, to grab attention in the first few seconds. Once viewers are hooked, the video should quickly move to credibility cues that engage central-route thinking, such as clear pricing, fair taste reviews, and honest opinions. This integration guarantees that the promotion enhances sensory attraction while concurrently building consumer trust.

Collaborating with Local Micro-Influencers to Emphasize Value: A large share of the sample (44.2%) earned RM1,000 or less per month. Restaurants targeting younger customers therefore need to make sure their menus are affordable. For budget-conscious Gen Z consumers, polished advertisements featuring big-name celebrities may feel out of reach or insincere. Hospitality marketers would do better to work with local micro-influencers who have closer, more personal connections with their followers. These creators should be encouraged to promote "affordable quality" by pairing attractive food visuals with honest assessments of value for money.

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Evaluating Campaign Efficacy Through Source Credibility Metrics: Digital marketing is often judged by surface-level metrics like views, shares, and likes, which can give a misleading picture. The model in this study shows that while visual appeal drives engagement, it is the influencer's perceived trustworthiness that ultimately shapes the decision to visit a restaurant. Marketers should therefore look beyond basic analytics and include sentiment analysis after each campaign. By examining the tone and substance of audience conversations and tracking brand preference over time, businesses can gauge how credible an influencer really is, making sure their marketing spend builds lasting brand value rather than short-lived online buzz.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Although this study offers strong empirical results, it has some methodological limitations that open up promising directions for future research. First, the data were cross-sectional and collected from participants in a single emerging market (as reflected in the use of RM currency), which limits how far the findings can be generalised to other countries. Future studies could use longitudinal or experimental designs to explore how trust in influencers weakens or builds over time, especially after paid sponsorship disclosures or brand crises.

Second, the sample was mostly made up of women (72.1%) and Gen Z users (66.7%). While this reflects who is currently most active in engaging with digital food content, it leaves older consumers and male diners underrepresented. Future researchers could run multi-group analyses (MGA) in PLS-SEM to test whether gender and generation moderate the relationships. For example, does the peripheral, visually driven route dominate among Gen Z, while older consumers rely more on central-route cues such as creator trustworthiness and informative reviews? Future hospitality research should also consider price sensitivity and dining context (e.g., fast-casual versus fine dining) as moderating factors when examining how digital influencers shape food choices.

Conclusion

Overall, this study shows that turning short-form social media views into real restaurant visits depends on getting the balance right between eye-catching visuals and genuine creator integrity. In a highly competitive food industry, hospitality businesses need to look beyond engagement numbers and costly celebrity endorsements. Instead, they should adopt a simple two-step content approach: draw viewers in with appetising visuals in the first few seconds, then ground the message in honest, transparent reviews.

In addition, since Gen Z consumers earning RM1,000 or less make up an important market segment, working with relatable micro-influencers to promote affordable quality is key to driving actual visits while keeping menus accessible. Marketing teams should therefore focus on audience trust and sentiment rather than view counts alone. These insights offer clear,

practical guidance for restaurant owners. At the same time, the study's cross-sectional design and its mostly female, Gen Z sample point to limitations that future research should address. Future studies could use longitudinal tracking to see how trust in influencers grows or fades over time, run multi-group analyses to test whether older consumers rely less on visuals and more on careful evaluation, and examine how different dining settings, from fast food to fine dining, shape consumer decisions.

By combining strong visual storytelling with credible creators, restaurants can better navigate algorithm-driven platforms and turn fleeting online interactions into lasting customer loyalty. In short, the findings show that influencer trustworthiness and food marketing attractiveness both have a significant effect on restaurant choice intention, directly and through consumer attitudes. The results highlight how important it is to pair source trustworthiness with visually appealing marketing in influencer-led restaurant promotion.

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