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Article

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Digital Business

Provided in Cooperation with:

International Telecommunications Society (ITS)

Suggested Citation: Chaichana Ampornklinkaew (2025) : The role of social media influencers in influencing consumers' imitation intentions, Digital Business, ISSN 2666-9544, Elsevier, Amsterdam, Vol. 5, Iss. 2, pp. 1-15,
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.digbus.2025.100143>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/338015>

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The role of social media influencers in influencing consumers' imitation intentions

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Influencer marketing
Social media influencers
Perceived credibility
Content attractiveness
Sales promotion
User-friendliness
Imitation intention

ABSTRACT

Given the proliferation of social media influencer marketing, companies are increasingly collaborating with social media influencers (SMIs) to shape consumer decision-making. This study examines how food-related content created by SMIs can influence consumers' imitation intentions. This paper developed an integrated model based on source credibility theory, which was extended to include sales promotion content and platform user-friendliness. We analyzed data from 449 participants using covariance-based structural equation modeling. The results indicate that sales promotions and content attractiveness influence imitation intention indirectly through influencer credibility, while user-friendliness has a direct effect on imitation intention. Theoretically, this research introduces new pathways among the variables being studied. Practically, companies should collaborate with food influencers who produce attractive content and incorporate sales incentives into their posts on relevant social media platforms.

1. Introduction

Social media has become an integral part of daily life, serving as a channel that provides boundless access to a vast amount of information worldwide (Chetioui, Butt, Fathani, & Lebdaoui, 2023). Therefore, companies are using social media influencers (SMIs) to enhance their brand visibility by enabling real-time, interactive communication between brands and consumers across various platforms (Shaikh, Glavee-Geo, Tudor, Zheng, & Karjaluoto, 2018). Moreover, the rapid growth of social media users has recently influenced marketing trends and strategies. According to DataReportal (2024), the number of social media users reached 5.04 billion in January 2024, accounting for 62.3% of the global population. Such progressions in social media usage have increased recognition of SMIs as powerful agents in shaping consumer perceptions.

Before SMIs, businesses relied on traditional celebrities for product promotion due to their fame and status (Piehler, Schade, Sinnig, & Burmann, 2022); however, consumers perceive SMIs as more relatable, given their similar social status, which fosters greater trust compared to traditional advertisements (Kim, Park, & Kim, 2023). Brands view influencer marketing as effective, often increasing budgets for it (Geysler, 2024); however, its impact is debated, with only about 50% of

marketers reporting customer acquisition through SMIs (Shepherd, 2024). Selecting suitable influencers is challenging, as traditional service provider criteria may not be applicable (Borchers & Enke, 2021), and SMIs face difficulties in identifying traits that attract brands and engage audiences.

Research in the field of influencer marketing often includes customer engagement (Ao, Bansal, Pruthi, & Khaskheli, 2023; Argyris, Wang, Kim, & Yin, 2020; Talha, Tahir, & Mehroush, 2023), brand attitude (Dhun & Dangi, 2023; Pick, 2021), and purchase intention (Li & Peng, 2021; Masuda, Han, & Lee, 2022; Trivedi & Sama, 2020) as commonly studied variables. This concentration suggests exploring other outcomes, such as imitation intention, as a more fitting behavioral variable than purchase intention for SMIs. As respected community experts, SMIs showcase lifestyles that consumers emulate, particularly food influencers who detail shopping, eating methods, and nutrition (Wielki, 2020). Imitation intention can drive engagement activities, such as likes and shares, reflecting consumers' desire to mimic influencer behaviors and enhance their own consumption experiences (Song, Xing, Duan, & Mon, 2023). Companies should investigate imitation intentions to promote products, as they can influence daily consumer behaviors, such as meal choices, while viewing related content. Imitation is driven by a bi-dimensional trust model (Ki, Chow, & Li, 2023), but the lack of a

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cohesive theoretical framework hinders the field's progress.

Moreover, previous studies usually focused on the relationship between influencers and their followers, such as influencer attributes and characterizations (Masuda et al., 2022), opinion leadership of influencers and parasocial relationship (Farivar, Wang, & Yuan, 2021), source credibility, physical attractiveness, and trust (Kim & Kim, 2021) concerning purchase intention. Furthermore, apart from the characteristics of influencers, the majority of the past research focuses on the characteristics of social media platforms, namely technological construct and social media adoption (Qalati, Yuan, Khan, & Anwar, 2021), social media engagement (Li & Xie, 2020), and social media during the COVID-19 pandemic (Saud, Mashud, & Ida, 2020). To the best of the author's knowledge, no research has represented all points of view among influencers, companies, customers, and platforms in the context of food-related content or the online food industry. Due to ongoing changes and progress in influencer marketing, it can be anticipated that such research will become increasingly relevant as the significance of SMIs rises, which will, in turn, impact consumers' spending habits. Therefore, research should focus on consumer perception and imitation intention toward SMIs. As the core of this study, this research extends the source credibility theory (Cohen, Gaynor, Krishnamoorthy, & Wright, 2022; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Flanagan, Winter, & Metzger, 2020; Hsieh & Li, 2020; Lep, Babnik, & Hacin Beyazoglu, 2020; Nadarevic, Reber, Helmecke, & Köse, 2020). It is necessary to study the mechanism by which consumers follow influencers' actions to develop an effective communication strategy. Perceived credibility and precursors that have not been tested before (i.e., content attractiveness, sales promotion content, and user-friendliness of the platforms) must also be considered. To explore this research gap, this study aims to address the following research questions.

RQ1: What role do content attractiveness, sales promotion content, and user-friendliness of the platform play in enhancing perceived credibility of SMIs?

RQ2: How does the perceived credibility of SMIs impact the consumer imitation intention?

This study contributes to the existing marketing literature by providing empirical insights into the relationships between variables. First, the research enhances the understanding of how SMIs' credibility triggers people to follow their actions. Second, the findings can reveal the positive effect of content features and the friendliness of the platform on SMIs' credibility, as well as how the platform features affect the content features and credibility.

The current study also exposes three key practical contributions. First, it will help marketers in the food industry understand the key aspects to consider when selecting influencers best suited to the brand's marketing purposes. Second, it offers valuable insights into how influencers induce consumer imitation intention. Third, it will be a guideline on how the nature of social media platforms affects influencer marketing. To this end, this study presents a theoretical framework and hypotheses, followed by a clarification of the data collection procedures and methodology. This paper then presents the research findings, along with discussions and contributions. Finally, it concludes with a discussion of limitations, relevant directions for future research, and conclusions.

2. Theoretical background and hypothesis development

2.1. The role of influencers on social media

The widespread use of social media has expanded the reach of expert and non-expert opinions, allowing individuals to share their views professionally, semi-professionally, or altruistically (Belanche, Casaló, Flavián, & Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2021a; Fan & Chan, 2023; Harrington, Taylor, Cowley, & Wogalter, 2013). SMIs are self-branded opinion leaders who recommend products or brands based on experience or expertise, acting as modern, independent endorsers who influence their

followers (Fan & Chan, 2023; Geng, Chen, & Wang, 2023; Joshi, Lim, Jagani, & Kumar, 2023). As content creators, SMIs discuss topics such as fashion, beauty, travel, and lifestyle, serving as role models to inspire consumer actions and generate brand benefits through their posts (Dekavalla, 2020; Kim, 2022; Ye, Hudders, De Jans, & De Veirman, 2021).

Influencers are positioned between friends and celebrities. Like friends, they share common interests and foster relationships with followers (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019; Do & Dang, 2022; Jacobson & Harrison, 2022); at the same time, they cultivate a marketable image for commercial purposes, similar to celebrities (Kim & Kim, 2020; Wang & Chan-Olmsted, 2023). Unlike traditional celebrities, whose reputations exist outside social media, SMIs rely on online platforms to build recognition, offer advice, entertain, and shape consumer mindsets and actions (Aw & Labrecque, 2020; Gräve & Bartsch, 2022; Hess, Dodds, & Rahman, 2022; Ozuem, Willis, Ranfagni, Howell, & Rovai, 2023). SMIs enhance brand visibility, engagement, and positive consumer reactions, offering cost-effective marketing through authentic, less commercial sponsorships (Argyris et al., 2020; Martínez-López, Anaya-Sánchez, Fernández Giordano, & Lopez-Lopez, 2020; Teresa Borges-Tiago, Santiago, & Tiago, 2023). Their credibility, driven by personality and authenticity, can surpass that of celebrities, making them valuable for effective marketing campaigns (Crnjak-Karanović, Kursan Milaković, & Elez, 2023; Gil-Quintana, Santoveña-Casal, & Romero Riaño, 2021; Harrigan et al., 2021; Schouten, Janssen, & Verspaget, 2020).

A recent review of the empirical literature reveals that several scholars have examined how SMIs influence behavioral intention across various research fields. Table 1 presents an overview of recent influential studies, demonstrating that source credibility theory (Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953) has been applied in various concepts and contexts. Different researchers have extended source credibility theory in their studies; however, they often overlook variables other than influencers' traits or characteristics when analyzing how SMI marketing impacts various outcomes related to consumers and brands. Therefore, the literature suggests that the relationship among influencers, consumers, brands, and platforms warrants investigation in the marketing field.

2.2. Source credibility theory

Source credibility theory explains how the perceived credibility of a message source influences its effectiveness. Recipients are more likely to trust and accept information from highly credible sources due to the assumption that "credibility implies accuracy" (Cohen et al., 2022; Flanagan et al., 2020; Hsieh & Li, 2020; Lep et al., 2020; Nadarevic et al., 2020). This perception shapes opinions (Zhou, Jin, Wu, Chen, & Wang, 2023) and has been applied in consumer behavior studies (Tanwar, Chaudhry, & Srivastava, 2022). According to Ohanian (1990), source credibility comprises trustworthiness, expertise, and physical attractiveness (Gupta, Burton, & Costa Barros, 2023; Jenkins, Ilicic, Barklamb, & McCaffrey, 2020; Saima & Khan, 2021). Trustworthiness and expertise are often combined as "credibility"; trustworthiness reflects an influencer's perceived honesty and reliability in providing accurate information (Foroughi et al., 2024; Johnson et al., 2021; Lee & Eastin, 2021), while expertise denotes their knowledge and skills in a specific domain (Susmann & Wegener, 2023). Consumers evaluate expertise based on the quality and quantity of information and professional achievements (Wiedmann & von Mettenheim, 2020). High trustworthiness and expertise are essential for influencers to drive attitudinal changes and opinion alignment in social media marketing (Bailey, Mishra, & Vaishnav, 2023; Chekima, Chekima, & Adis, 2020; Fernandes Crespo & Tille, 2023).

In the context of influencer marketing, influencer credibility refers to the extent to which consumers perceive the influencer as a reliable expert regarding a product or service (AlFarraj et al., 2021). Perceived credibility is a significant and often-used mediator to observe the

Table 1
Previous research on social media influencer marketing.

Study	Country/context	Key variables	Analytical approach	Key findings
Jamil, Qayyum, ul Hassan, and Khan (2024)	Pakistani TikTok influencers	Argument quality, source credibility, kindness, consumer wellbeing, purchase intention.	PLS-SEM, Multigroup analysis	Argument quality, source credibility, and influencer's kindness positively influence consumer wellbeing, predicting purchase intention.
Jiang, Zheng, and Luo (2024)	Virtual influencer in green marketing: A comparison between human-like (HVI) and anime-like (AVI) virtual influencers.	Product involvement, virtual influencer image, emotional appeal, perceived credibility, purchase intention, brand attitude.	Two-factor ANOVA	HVIs have a significantly greater effect on purchase intention, brand attitude, and credibility than AVIs. Product involvement is a significant moderator between VI image and emotional appeals.
Kim, Ki, Lee, and Kim (2024)	Virtual influencers	From realism, eeriness, coolness, behavioral realism, purchase intention, and follow intention.	The independent samples <i>t</i> -tests, two-way ANCOVA, and multiple regression.	Eeriness negatively influences purchase and follow-up intention, while coolness positively influences both purchase and follow-up intention. The results reveal a significant moderating effect of behavioral realism when assessing the relationship between form realism and purchase intention mediated by eeriness/coolness.
Masuda et al. (2022)	South Korea SMIs in video advertising	Attitude homophily, physical attractiveness, social attractiveness, trustworthiness, perceived expertise, parasocial relationship, and purchase intention.	PLS-SEM	Trustworthiness, perceived expertise, and parasocial relationships are influenced by physical attractiveness and social attractiveness, and are key predictors of purchase intention.
Myers, Sen, Syrdal, and Woodroof (2024)	Instagram Pet influencers	Ad disclosures, paid partnership disclosures, brand's logo, money reference, sponsored content, and engagement rate.	ANOVA	The study reveals that all proposed variables significantly inhibit engagement rate.
Qin, Chen, Yan, and Huang (2024)	Health and wellness SMIs	Influencer marketing platform intervention, purchase intention, and purchase behavior.	Co-variance based SEM	Influencer marketing platform intervention predicts purchase behavior via purchase intention.
Shamim, Azam, and Islam (2024)	Pakistan Facebook SMIs	Influencer credibility, message credibility, media credibility, trust in posts, persuasion knowledge, and urge to buy impulsively.	PLS-SEM	Consumers are more likely to make impulsive purchases when influenced by influencer credibility, message credibility, media credibility, and trust in the content of posts.
This study	Food SMIs	Sales promotion content, content attractiveness, user-friendliness of platforms, perceived influencer credibility, and imitation intention	Co-variance based SEM	Content will be more attractive when it includes sale promotions and is presented on user-friendly platforms. Moreover, content influences consumers to imitate what influencers say or do due to their credibility.

effectiveness of persuading consumers toward influencer marketing (Belanche et al., 2021a; Dhun & Dangi, 2023; Jang, Kim, Kim, & Chun, 2021; Janssen, Schouten, & Croes, 2022; Lee & Kim, 2020). Consumers become more accustomed to and skeptical when confronted with inauthentic marketing promotions (Becker, Wiegand, & Reinartz, 2019), and the absence of authenticity can lead to criticisms of influencers and companies (Cornelis & Peter, 2017). Therefore, the mechanism (including perceived credibility and the connection between the influencer and their followers) should be continuously investigated. Moreover, in response to the future research direction outlined by Ye et al. (2021), this study retains perceived credibility as a core component in the conceptual framework for further studies.

2.3. The concept of imitation intention

According to the Theory of Planned Behavior, behavioral intention reflects the likelihood that consumers will engage in specific behaviors, with stronger intentions increasing the probability of action (Pham Thi & Duong, 2024). Purchase intention is commonly studied in consumer behavior for its role in driving sales (Herrando & Martín-De Hoyos, 2022; Li, Lu, Hou, Cui, & Darbandi, 2021; Li & Peng, 2021; Masuda et al., 2022); however, this study focuses on imitation intention, where followers seek to emulate influencers' behaviors, viewing them as idols (van Eldik, Kneer, Lutkenhaus, & Jansz, 2019). Imitation intention involves adopting influencers' advice, which can significantly influence followers' decisions (Bastrygina, Lim, Jopp, & Weissmann, 2024; Casaló, Flavián, & Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2020), allowing consumers to shape their identities through consumption (Zhang & Hung, 2020). Businesses should capitalize on this tendency to effectively promote their products

(Song et al., 2023). Trust, distrust, influencer credibility, and attitude toward influencers are key drivers of imitation intention (Belanche et al., 2021a; Ki et al., 2023); however, further predictors require exploration, which this study aims to investigate.

2.4. Content attractiveness

Physical attractiveness refers to the perceived familiarity and likeability between influencers and their followers (Richardson et al., 2020). This study focuses on content attractiveness, as content is now more important than appearance for food influencers compared to fashion and beauty influencers, given that social influencers are primarily content creators. Content attractiveness refers to the extent to which an individual notices an influencer's social media content as visually or artistically appealing (Aw & Chuah, 2021). Karpenka, Rudienė, Morkunas, and Volkov (2021) stated that efficient content should elicit understandability (its ability to describe, highlight, and supplement fundamental information) so that images and text are mutually associated. Furthermore, the content's memorability is taken into account, as it should be created in a style or format that is easy for consumers to remember (Rust & Mehrpour, 2020). In the context of food, content can help stimulate physiological responses, such as appetite and cravings, since food is a sensory product (Spence, Okajima, Cheok, Petit, & Michel, 2016).

Attractive content is typically considered engagement-driven; it is motivating and valuable, and can help consumers form a bond with influencers and brands. Examples of this kind of content are information, comments, and attitudes. The perceived attractiveness of the content, such as pictures or videos of endorsed products (Grana & Ling,

2014), has been defined as an element of post quality and creativity (Bazi, Filieri, & Gorton, 2020; Tafesse & Wood, 2021). In this sense, the attributes of content generated in social media may affect consumer perception (Demmers, Weltevreden, & van Dolen, 2020), leading to consumers experiencing positive emotions and attempting to interact with brands on social media (Aw & Chuah, 2021; Sohaib & Han, 2023). Consumers may perceive the content as credible because the content's disposition appeals to them (Kim, Song, & Jang, 2021). Consumers are more likely to perceive SMIs who generate high-quality and engaging content as trustworthy and professional (Johnson et al., 2021). Conversely, if the content is of low quality and unappealing, the SMI's credibility declines, suggesting an absence of competence and genuineness (Saima & Khan, 2021). Moreover, previous studies suggested that content attractiveness could lead to behavioral intention. Camilleri and Kozak (2022) stated that consumers' intent to discuss the content they have seen depends on its attractiveness. Al-Emadi and Ben Yahia (2020) confirmed that consumers are more likely to express a favorable inclination toward visiting a restaurant if an influencer presents appealing visual content showcasing the food, interior décor, and ambiance. In contrast, Seçilmiş, Özdemir, and Kılıç (2022) stated that the attractiveness of the content is reflected as a stimulus from influencers to their followers, which contributes to generating travel intention. Furthermore, consumers reported that after watching specific content, they remembered and considered adopting the same behavior (Bazi et al., 2020). Therefore, this study posits that imitation intention is a response of consumers toward the attractiveness of food influencer content, as indicated in the following hypothesis:

H1a. : Content attractiveness is positively associated with perceived influencer credibility.

H1b. : Content attractiveness is positively associated with imitation intention.

2.5. Sales promotion

Unlike engagement-focused content, task-focused content is defined as instrumental communication aimed at accomplishing a task (Glikson & Erez, 2020). Task-oriented content provides information about a corporation's products, services, resources, or announcements of new offerings, as well as updates on corporate-related activities (Yaghtin, Safarzadeh, & Karimi Zand, 2020). Task-oriented content received the most likes, comments, and shares on Facebook and is the most widely used content on Twitter or X (Shahbaznezhad, Dolan, & Rashidirad, 2021; Zhang & Su, 2023). For marketing strategy, this kind of content can bolster revenue or sales (Karpenka et al., 2021); thus, sales promotion is a key example. Sales promotion (categorized into monetary and non-monetary sales promotions) refers to activities that offer extra incentives to customers to prompt immediate responses, typically within specified timeframes, specific locations, or among targeted customer segments (Gorji & Siami, 2020; Han, Bai, Raab, Shum, & Krishen, 2024). Monetary sales promotion refers to actions that provide consumers with price discounts, price bundling, and coupons (Wu, Zhao, & Chen, 2021). Non-monetary sales promotions involve bonuses, gifts, product trials, and opportunities to win sweepstakes by purchasing products (Bandyopadhyay, Sivakumaran, Patro, & Kumar, 2021). This study includes both types of sales promotion because monetary promotion can attract task-focused consumers more, while non-monetary promotion is more preferred for established hedonic products (Sinha & Verma, 2020). Influencers can reflect utilitarian value and provide some enjoyment or entertainment for their followers through these kinds of sales promotions.

Sales promotion content highlights how influencers act as commercial intermediaries between consumers and brands—sales promotion is a co-creation between influencers and brands, offering value to their customers. Gorji and Siami (2020) highlighted that sales promotion is a strong tool that can affect behavioral intention. This study suggests that

influencer content or media can be a new feature that displays branded sales promotions. Sales promotion displays can be defined as a special exhibition of sales promotions to enhance customer attraction and awareness (Gorji & Siami, 2020). As mentioned, the sales promotion display comprises physical and informative attributes: the physical attribute encompasses tools, such as banners or videos, and their design (Abolghasemi, Hurley, Eshragh, & Fahimnia, 2020), while the informative attribute represents details, such as the percentage of discount and categories of the promotion (Chen & Zhu, 2022). The display plays a crucial role in products' selling strategies and has been recognized as an effective marketing tool (Yeo, Khoo, Tan, & Lim, 2020). Prior studies also suggested that promotional activities are extensively used in the highly competitive food industry, since food promotions outweigh the negative impacts of high prices (Liang, Yang, Chen, & Chung, 2017). Therefore, if the influencer's content contains a sales promotion, it should increase the attractiveness of the content.

H2. : Sales promotion content is positively associated with content attractiveness.

Moreover, when promotional messages resonate with the influencer's content, they are perceived as more genuine and credible by the audience. This acuity occurs because the content can be considered dual-credibility content, where brands and endorsers/influencers are involved, as consumers expect congruence between these two parties (Yang, 2024). Therefore, influencers can reinforce their credibility by endorsing sales promotions that align with the interests, values, and preferences of their audience (Magano, Au-Yong-oliveira, Walter, & Leite, 2022). Followers may perceive that the influencer understands their needs, making their recommendations more trustworthy. In particular, influencers who consistently collaborate with reputable brands and maintain positive associations with promotions can build credibility over time through the continuity and reliability of their endorsements (Teresa Borges-Tiago et al., 2023). Sales promotion content can be viewed as branded content; however, it may not be considered harmful or less credible, as it, to some extent, benefits consumers. Therefore, the level of perceived credibility continues to increase.

H3a. : Sales promotion content is positively associated with perceived influencer credibility.

Jee (2021) stated that consumer expenditure aligns with how the effectiveness of a specific promotion technique is perceived, as sales promotion can affect brand image (Raji, Rashid, & Ishak, 2019), brand equity, and perceived quality (Crespo-Almendros, Prados-Peña, Porcu, & Alcántara-Pilar, 2022). Sales promotion has a positive impact on consumer attitude and behavior (Miao, Jalees, Qabool, & Zaman, 2020; Su, Duong, Thanh Tran Dinh, Nguyen-Phuoc, & Johnson, 2021; Yi & Yoo, 2011). For example, Yang and Mattila (2020) studied the context of the restaurant industry, suggesting that sales promotion can draw consumers' attention and increase their purchase intention. Moreover, Bandyopadhyay et al. (2021) concluded that sales promotion, especially immediate types, triggers consumers to make impulse, utilitarian, and hedonic purchases (Sinha & Verma, 2020), leading to both utilitarian and hedonic values (Jee, 2021). Regarding influencer marketing, sales promotion content, as a stimulus (Gao, Chen, Gao, & Yu, 2022), should motivate followers to imitate the behaviors of their influencers.

H3b. : Sales promotion content is positively associated with imitation intention.

2.6. User-friendliness

The emergence of social media has dramatically altered how consumers communicate and form connections with others and with brands (Wielki, 2020). The utilization of diverse known or influential people and personalities in influencer marketing appears to be intricately linked with the rapid evolution of social media platforms (Campbell &

Farrell, 2020). Wielki (2020) determined that several digital influencers are growing due to confidence in influencers and the progress in social media development. Consumers or followers perceive and categorize influencers based on their communication platforms (Geysler, 2022), using labels such as Facebookers, YouTubers, Twitterers, Bloggers, or TikTokers (Watanabe, 2023). Therefore, influencer marketing studies should include social media platform providers as a fourth party. Liao (2022) stated that the user-friendliness of the selected social networking site could significantly affect consumers' communication. User-friendliness is defined as the level at which social media platforms are easy to learn, comprehend, operate, assess, and interact with (Lin & Benneker, 2022). Moreover, user-friendly social media should provide safety, effectiveness, and enjoyment (Al-Qaysi et al., 2023; Al-Shamaileh & Sutcliffe, 2023). Audiences do not want to exert a high level of effort, and hard-to-use platforms tend to drive users away (Liao, 2022). For example, Topbaş, Paksoy, İslamoğlu, Çağlar, and Kul (2024) studied the concept of content and quality on the YouTube platform and suggested that YouTube's user-friendliness enhances consumers' appeal. In the context of food, the user-friendliness of platforms has a unique impact on the food industry; customers are often motivated by the visual appearance of the meal, and geolocation integration is essential due to the prevalence of delivery-based models. Moreover, food platforms must allow for extensive customization, such as dietary restrictions; therefore, messages or content delivered through user-friendly social media platforms can help reach a larger audience or followers due to their engaging content.

H4. : A platform's user-friendliness is positively associated with content attractiveness.

Additionally, if users encounter challenges in accessing or understanding content due to platform complexities, they may question why influencers choose these platforms. With this kind of question, the level of influencer credibility is reduced as users will doubt the SMIs' judgment. Furthermore, a poor platform experience may lead to frustration or disengagement among users, diminishing the impact of influencer marketing efforts. In contrast, if the environment is attractive and users can engage in effortless and flexible (in time and place) interaction with influencers (Li, Ding, Xu, & Yang, 2023), this will facilitate their behavior, such as the purchasing of products (Armutcu, Tan, Amponsah, Parida, & Ramkissoon, 2023). Therefore, this study proposes that user-friendly platforms will support and not interrupt users in imitating what influencers suggest.

H5a. : The platform's user-friendliness is positively associated with perceived influencer credibility.

H5b. : The platform's user-friendliness is positively associated with imitation intention.

Prior literature determined that attractiveness could lead to immediate effectiveness, while perceived influencer credibility may have a more prolonged impact on consumer behavior toward brands (Chetioui, Benlafqih, & Lebdaoui, 2020). The perceived degree of credibility that endorsers possess can significantly influence their followers' behavioral intentions (Belanche et al., 2021a). Moreover, perceived credibility might have an impact on followers' intention to purchase products or services they promote (Cabeza-Ramírez, Sánchez-Cañizares, Santos-Roldán, & Fuentes-García, 2022; Lee, 2021; Mabkhot, Isa, & Mabkhot, 2022), follow their updates and react to the content they post on their channels (Naderer, Matthes, & Schäfer, 2021; Zhang & Choi, 2022), or recommend influencers' accounts to others (Mainolfi, Lo Presti, Marino, & Filieri, 2022; Roy, Datta, Mukherjee, Eckert, & Dixit, 2024).

Influencers are opinion leaders who are perceived as professional and knowledgeable, exerting a disproportionate amount of influence on followers' decision-making (Wei & Meng, 2021). Followers may emulate influencers' behaviors, as consumers seem to experience a boost in their self-esteem when they engage in behaviors that have been endorsed by

influencers (Casaló et al., 2020). When followers develop constructive opinions about an influencer, they are more likely to follow the influencer's recommendations and exhibit specific behaviors (Jiménez-Castillo & Sánchez-Fernández, 2019) due to the influencer's perceived sincerity and truthfulness (Ki, Park, & Kim, 2022). Belanche et al. (2021a) suggested that influencer credibility could lower resistance to influencers' messages (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017); therefore, followers consider and implement the suggestions shared by influencers (Farrell, Campbell, & Sands, 2022).

H6. : Perceived influencer credibility is positively associated with imitation intention.

Fig. 1 depicts the conceptual framework, positioning sales promotion, content attractiveness, and user-friendliness as antecedents of perceived influencer credibility, which in turn influences customers' imitation intention.

3. Research methodology

3.1. Research context

This research focuses on food influencer marketing. The food industry is one of the largest industries globally, and it continues to expand. Martin (2023) noted that 2022 marked a 16 % increase in purchase intention for influencer marketing in the food industry, and this trend is expected to continue. According to Statista Market Forecast (2025), the compound annual growth rate of this industry from 2024 to 2028 is 6.53 %; however, with numerous participants in this industry, it is crucial to remain competitive at all times. With the increasing number of users, social media has become a recent and future battlefield for acquiring customer trust. The relevance of the influencer phenomenon is evident in the food industry, as antecedents and mechanisms of food purchases can be facilitated through customer-influencer/brand relationships (Abell & Biswas, 2023; Hamid, Azhar, & Sujood., 2023). Nevertheless, empirical research on influencer marketing in the food industry is quite limited. For example, the bibliometric analysis of influencer marketing by Ye et al. (2021) suggested that scholars have focused on other traditional product categories, such as fashion, travel, and beauty. Therefore, this current study focuses on the food industry to address the existing gap. Moreover, Chetioui et al. (2023) found a lack of research on developing countries. Hence, this current study's data collection focuses on an emerging country. Social media became one of the foremost sources of information for the Thai people, and 57.4 million of 71.9 million people use social media (Influencer Marketing in Thailand, 2024; Thailand Population, 2024). Furthermore, the Thai food market is expected to grow annually by 5.04 % from 2024 to 2028, consistent with the world compound annual growth rate (Statista, 2025), and the influencer industry in Thailand is projected to reach 68.78 million USD in 2024 (Taslaud, 2024). Given the above details, Thailand is an ideal location for this survey.

3.2. Data collection

Based on the findings of the literature review, data were collected from a convenience sample of participants through self-administered questionnaires. The questionnaires were distributed electronically through online communities and social media groups. The target respondents were subjects who are users of social media and are impacted by the posts shared or created by food influencers in Thailand, where food content is the third most popular influencer content, behind fashion and beauty, and entertainment (Taslaud, 2024). The insights of the Thai people are particularly relevant to the food context, as reported by Taslaud (2024), who noted that Thais tend to eat up to six to seven times a day, with each meal typically being small. Moreover, Thais also love to snack between meals. In terms of places, several restaurants and food stands across the country serve a variety of food, ready to accommodate

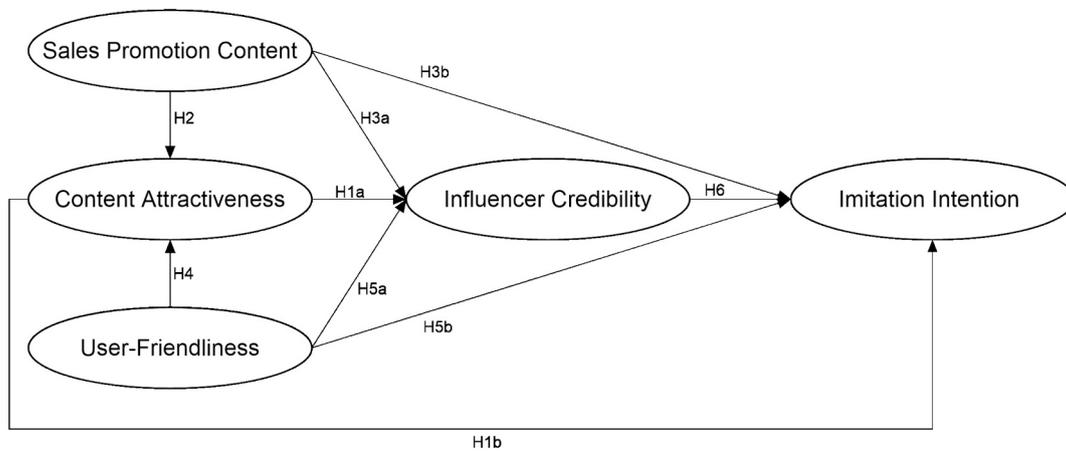


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework

the unique Thai food culture and trends. As a result, resorting to food influencers helps Thai people identify which places provide good food.

3.3. Measures

Respondents were presented with a personally administered questionnaire, which started with screening questions to confirm that the respondents had experienced food content from Thai influencers. Then they were asked to evaluate their perceptions using a questionnaire designed with a multi-item approach, where several items measured each variable to ensure validity and reliability. All variables were measured on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from (1) “strongly disagree” to (5) “strongly agree.”

All measurement items were borrowed from previous literature, pretested, and modified for the context of this study. A two-item measure of content attractiveness was adapted from Camilleri and Kozak (2022); for example, “I enjoy following the posts of food influencers.” Sales promotion content was measured using a five-item scale adapted from Raji et al. (2019) and Sinha and Verma (2020); for instance, “The influencers offer gift promotions.” User-friendliness was assessed by three-item scales adjusted from Kayode, Tella, and Akande (2020) and Vehko et al. (2019); for instance, “I find the application runs smoothly.” A five-item measure of perceived influencer credibility was adapted from Belanche et al. (2021a) and Chetoui et al. (2020); for example, “The influencer is trustworthy.” Finally, four statements were adapted from the study of Belanche et al. (2021a) to examine imitation intention; for example, “I would feel comfortable experiencing the same things as influencers did.”

4. Results

4.1. Respondents' profile and characteristics

After the respondents completed the questionnaire, 449 responses were deemed valid; 63.8% were female, and 24.7% were male. The vast majority were within the 18–23 age group (80.3%), while those aged 25 and above accounted for 19.7%. Most of the targeted respondents had a bachelor's degree (89.6%), while 3.5% had master's and PhD degrees. Within this group, 82.5% had purchased products or visited recommended restaurants after watching media from food influencers on TikTok (39.4%), YouTube (35.8%), Facebook (12.9%), and Instagram (11.7%). No respondents identified or answered using other social media platforms, indicating that these four were the most prominent platforms in Thai society.

4.2. Normality

Before applying advanced statistical techniques, an in-depth exploration of the data is required (Sadiq, Adil, & Paul, 2021). This current study first used SPSS 22 to screen for and assess missing data, outliers, and normality. After ensuring the data were free from any missing values, no extreme outliers remained for further analysis. The test of skewness and kurtosis confirmed that the data were normally distributed. The findings indicated that all values were within the suggested range of +3 to −3; thus, the data were moving toward a normal distribution (Griffin & Steinbrecher, 2013).

4.3. Structural equation modeling (SEM)

AMOS 28 was used to run the model and test the hypothesized relationships among variables in the research framework. Two-stage structural equation modeling (SEM) was employed for the analysis. According to Hair, Babin, Black, and Anderson (2018), SEM enables researchers to simultaneously examine numerous interconnected associations between observed (indicators) and unobserved variables (latent constructs). These associations may be addressed in the initial phase of SEM analysis, specifically the measurement model (confirmatory factor analysis [CFA]). Furthermore, SEM can confirm the connections among the latent variables that the second stage of SEM analysis focuses upon, known as structural model analysis (Alalwan, 2018).

4.4. Measurement model

Confirmatory factor analysis was used to test the measurement model. The results indicate a good model fit and robust indices, namely CMIN/DF = 2.768, GFI = 0.916, TLI = 0.927, AGFI = 0.888, NFI = 0.909, CFI = 0.939, IFI = 0.940, and RMSEA = 0.063. Average variance extracted (AVE) and composite reliability (CR) were tested (Hair et al., 2018). Table 2 shows that AVE values for all constructs were higher than 0.50, and CR values were also within their recommended level, with a value higher than 0.70 (Hair et al., 2018). Moreover, all items had a standardized regression weight (factor loadings) above 0.50 (Brown, 2015). The heterotrait–monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT) analysis was employed to assess discriminant validity. All the values in Table 3 were under 0.9 (Henseler, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2015), confirming the discriminant validity.

4.5. Structural model

The R^2 values for the endogenous variables of content attractiveness ($R^2 = 0.22$), perceived influencer credibility ($R^2 = 0.45$), and imitation intention ($R^2 = 0.54$) indicate that the model is statistically significant

Table 2
Factor loadings and scale reliability.

Construct	Factor loadings*	AVE	Composite reliability
Sales promotion content		0.533	0.850
1. Promotion information is announced on social media by the influencers (Raji et al., 2019).	0.777		
2. Price discounts are often offered on social media by influencers (Raji et al., 2019).	0.730		
3. Sales incentives are often promoted on social media by influencers (Raji et al., 2019).	0.733		
4. The influencers offer gift promotions (Sinha & Verma, 2020).	0.729		
5. The influencers offer a bonus (Sinha & Verma, 2020).	0.676		
User-friendliness		0.537	0.776
1. Performing the tasks does not take up too much time with the application (Kayode et al., 2020).	0.714		
2. The application enables me to accomplish tasks more quickly (Kayode et al., 2020).	0.778		
3. I find the application runs smoothly (Kayode et al., 2020).	0.703		
Content Attractiveness		0.637	0.777
1. I enjoy following the posts of food influencers (Camilleri & Kozak, 2022).	0.864		
2. I like browsing through the images and videos of food influencers (Camilleri & Kozak, 2022).	0.727		
Perceived Credibility		0.637	0.897
1. The influencer is trustworthy (Belanche et al., 2021a; Belanche, Casalo, Flavián, & Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2021b).	0.768		
2. The influencer is honest (Belanche et al., 2021a, 2021b).	0.829		
3. The influencer is experienced (Belanche et al., 2021a, 2021b).	0.801		
4. The influencer is an expert on the topic (Belanche et al., 2021a, 2021b).	0.787		
5. The influencer is a good reference (Chetioui et al., 2019).	0.803		
Imitation Intention		0.560	0.836
1. I would feel comfortable experiencing the same things as influencers did (Belanche et al., 2021a, 2021b).	0.776		
2. I would not hesitate to consider the suggestions from the influencers (Belanche et al., 2021a, 2021b).	0.755		
3. I would feel secure in following the suggestions of the influencers (Belanche et al., 2021a, 2021b).	0.683		
4. I would rely on the recommendations of the influencers (Belanche et al., 2021a, 2021b).	0.776		

* All factor loadings are significant at p -values less than 0.001.

(Cohen, 1988). Furthermore, the results for the structural model indicate the validity of the proposed framework. Six hypothesized relationships between variables were statistically significant, whereas two hypotheses yielded no significant results. In detail, the user-friendliness of the platforms had the most significant coefficient value concerning imitation intention ($\beta = 0.506, p < 0.001$). Content attractiveness ($\beta = 0.183, p < 0.01$) and sales promotion content ($\beta = 0.150, p < 0.05$) had an impact on imitation intention. Both content attractiveness ($\beta = 0.561,$

$p < 0.001$) and sales promotion content ($\beta = 0.282, p < 0.001$) had positive relationships with perceived influencer credibility. Moreover, sales promotion content had a positive influence on content attractiveness ($\beta = 0.664, p < 0.001$). Finally, Table 4 and Fig. 2 show that perceived influencer credibility had a significant effect on imitation intention ($\beta = 0.359, p < 0.001$).

Apart from the significant direct effects between independent variables and imitation intention, the analysis showed mediation. This study adheres to the methodology proposed by Preacher and Hayes (2008) to test the mediating roles of content attractiveness and perceived influencer credibility on the relationships among sales promotion content, the user-friendliness of the platforms, and imitation intention. Mediation analysis was conducted using the bootstrapping technique to ascertain the impact of the mediating variable within a structural model. A bootstrap procedure comprising 2000 samples was performed, yielding 95 % bias-corrected confidence intervals. A significant indirect effect of sales promotion content on imitation intention exists, which can occur through three pathways. Sales promotional content affects imitation intention indirectly through the path from sales promotion content to content attractiveness, then perceived influencer credibility, and finally imitation intention ($\beta = 0.134, p < 0.001$). Another path is a shortcut from sales promotion content, indirectly through perceived influencer credibility, to imitation intention ($\beta = 0.101, p < 0.01$). The final path began with sales promotion content, then content attractiveness, and ultimately led to imitation intention ($\beta = 0.122, p < 0.05$). Content attractiveness and perceived influencer credibility (together) partially mediate the effect of sale promotion content on imitation intention. However, no mediation effect of user-friendliness on imitation intention through content attractiveness and perceived influencer credibility was found, as evidenced by the insignificant p -values of the indirect effects in Table 5.

5. Discussion

This study examined the role of food influencers, whose recommendations can sway public opinion (Peter & Muth, 2023), encourage people to try new foods or visit new restaurants (Flor, 2020), and shape the consumption habits of new followers (Sun, Wang, Cao, & Lee, 2022). Food influencers attract a large number of admiring audiences who emulate their behaviors and perceive their endorsements as highly trustworthy (Marroncelli & Braithwaite, 2022). Therefore, this study aimed to understand followers' imitation, which can translate into market trends and sales. Our findings demonstrated different mechanisms where content attractiveness, sales promotion content, and platform user-friendliness are associated with perceived influencer credibility and the intention.

Platform user-friendliness was the most significant factor in predicting imitation intention, implying that followers who perceive the platforms as user-friendly can more easily imitate their influencers. For example, after a follower experiences the food content of influencers for the first time, they might forget some vital information needed to conduct the behaviors, such as the location of the restaurant they want to visit. User-friendly platforms help followers search for content and information, making them an essential source of materials for various kinds of products and services (Alalwan, 2018). Moreover, user-friendly platforms lower the barriers to content consumption. Users are more likely to spend time engaging with food-related content that is easily navigable, searchable, and interactive, such as recipes, meal prep videos, or kitchen hacks. This engagement can encourage users to replicate influencers' actions, as food content thrives on visual richness. Additionally, people engage in these behaviors and also take photos or record videos to post on social media; thus, if the social media is quick, smooth, and requires little time, people have no barriers to sharing that they experience the same things as the influencers do. Associated with user-friendliness, this result is parallel to previous studies that examined the role of this variable. For example, Armutcu et al. (2023) and Majeed,

Table 3
Discriminant validity (HTMT analysis).

	Sales Promotion	Content Attractiveness	Perceived Credibility	Imitation Intention	User-friendliness
Sales Promotion	0.730	0.377	0.396	0.433	0.321
Content Attractiveness	0.560	0.732	0.544	0.435	0.091
Perceived Credibility	0.440	0.610	0.798	0.533	0.105
Imitation Intention	0.537	0.594	0.615	0.798	0.346
User-friendliness	0.432	0.444	0.092	0.417	0.748

Notes: Correlations are presented below the diagonal. HTMT values are above the diagonal, and the square roots of the AVEs are on the diagonal.

Table 4
Results of path analysis.

Hypotheses	Relationships	Estimate	S.E.	T-value	p-value (2-tailed)	Remarks
H1a	CA → PIC	0.561	0.064	8.708	***	Supported
H1b	CA → II	0.183	0.063	2.918	**	Supported
H2	SP → CA	0.664	0.095	6.979	***	Supported
H3a	SP → PIC	0.282	0.083	3.381	***	Supported
H3b	SP → II	0.150	0.073	2.057	*	Supported
H4	UF → CA	-0.143	0.109	-1.306	0.192	Not supported
H5a	UF → PIC	-0.026	0.093	-0.278	0.781	Not Supported
H5b	UF → II	0.506	0.089	5.701	***	Supported
H6	PIC → II	0.359	0.060	6.030	***	Supported

Notes: * = $p < 0.05$; ** = $p < 0.01$; *** = $p < 0.001$. SP: Sales Promotion; II: Imitation Intention; PIC: Perceived Influencer Credibility; CA: Content Attractiveness; UF: User-Friendliness.

Notes: * = $p < 0.05$; ** = $p < 0.01$; *** = $p < 0.001$.

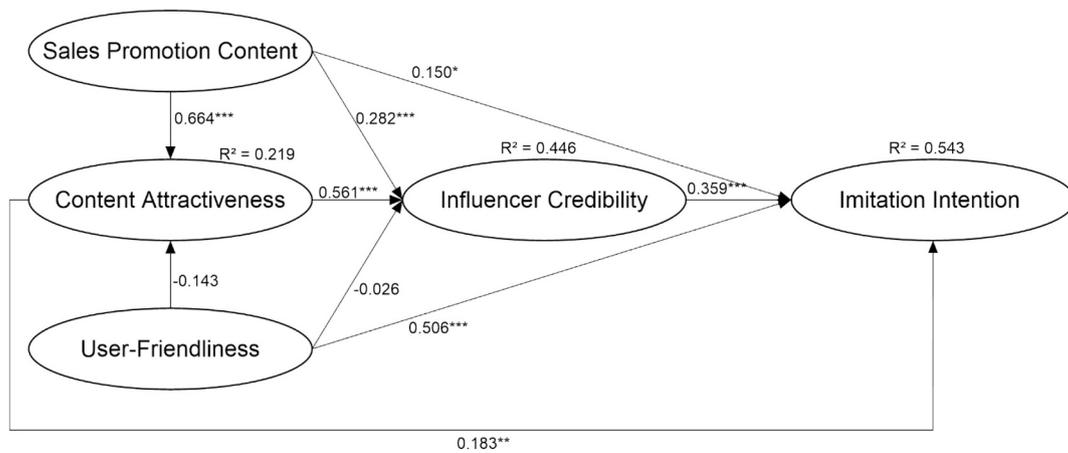


Fig. 2. Results of the structural model.

Table 5
Mediating effects.

Total effect	Estimate	Direct effect	Estimate	Indirect effect		Estimate	Remark
				Simple	Serial		
SP → II	0.506**	SP → II	0.150*	SP → PIC → II		0.101**	Partial mediation
				SP → CA → II		0.122*	Partial mediation
					SP → CA → PIC → II	0.134***	Partial mediation
UF → II	0.442**	UF → II	0.506***	UF → PIC → II		-0.009	No mediation
				UF → CA → II		-0.026	No mediation
					UF → CA → PIC → II	-0.029	No mediation

Notes: * = $p < 0.05$; ** = $p < 0.01$; *** = $p < 0.001$. SP: Sales Promotion; II: Imitation Intention; PIC: Perceived Influencer Credibility; CA: Content Attractiveness; UF: User-Friendliness.

Zhou, Lu, and Ramkissoon (2020) concluded that the user-friendly accessibility of social media information provides essential clues that influence behavioral intentions. However, this factor is not a significant indicator of content attractiveness and perceived credibility, potentially because followers perceive the variables separately. The user-friendliness of the platforms relies on social media providers. In

contrast, content attractiveness and perceived credibility usually depend on influencers and companies.

Content attractiveness is also a factor that influences perceived influencer credibility and imitation intention, potentially because influencers who can produce good content are more credible than those who produce improper content. When customers are drawn to the image

of food settings and restaurants, or influenced by the food experiences of influencers, they tend to believe and mimic what these food influencers do. This finding is consistent with previous studies (AlFarraj et al., 2021; De Veirman et al., 2017; Han et al., 2024), which have found that content quality and attractiveness significantly influence perceptions of influencer credibility, in turn affecting attitudes and behavioral responses. Similarly, Lee and Eastin (2021) emphasized that influencers who consistently deliver visually appealing and coherent content are more likely to be perceived as trustworthy and influential. Moreover, followers tend to emulate the behaviors of influencers who provide not only practical and useful media but also entertain them. When people watch clear, step-by-step food content or easy-to-follow visuals, such as information about food festivals, including how to travel and what the highlights are, this lowers perceived difficulty and encourages followers to internalize and mimic behaviors from influencers whose content resonates emotionally and is doable. This finding aligns with prior research that suggests the content attributed, such as post quality and design (Bazi et al., 2020), can affect follower engagement (Tafesse & Wood, 2021), intention to watch videos on YouTube (Sokolova & Perez, 2021), and trust in influencers, thereby affecting visit intention (Seçilmiş et al., 2022).

Another way to attract more followers is to include sales promotion content in influencer media, as this factor is a significant antecedent of imitation intention in the current study. This approach may work because sales promotion is an effective incentive and can act as a risk suppressor. When people try something for the first time, they may not be sure whether it suits them and are therefore less willing to make a purchase. Sales promotion can also create a lasting pattern of habits if executed promptly. This finding is consistent with Wongkitrungrueng and Assarut (2020), who concluded that incentives lead to positive emotions, which create affective trust. Similarly, Sinha and Verma (2020a, b) stated that consumers perceive value when they receive a promotional offer with the products. This finding is also consistent with Wahab, Alam, and Lahuerta-Otero (2025), who suggested that when consumers observe an influencer or peer taking advantage of a sales promotion, they might be motivated to imitate that behavior to avoid missing perceived benefits. This effect is especially pronounced on social media platforms, where influencers often share promotional content in appealing formats. Such promotional cues can lead consumers to believe that copying the influencer's behavior (e.g., purchasing the same product or using a discount code) will lead to similar rewards or social approval.

Furthermore, sales promotion has a direct effect on perceived credibility. People are more likely to follow the advice of food influencers if the food content comes with a sales promotion. There is a perceived risk associated with food products, given that their performance can vary depending on individual taste preferences; thus, the financial barrier should be reduced. Consistent with prior research, well-executed sales promotions can signal a legitimate partnership between the influencer and a credible brand, increasing the influencer's perceived legitimacy and authority (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). When an influencer promotes a deal that followers find valuable, it fosters a sense of alignment between the influencer and the audience. This alignment can lead followers to perceive the influencer as a more trustworthy individual who has insider access or expert knowledge of valuable products or services (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019). Therefore, followers will trust influencers who produce content that is entertaining, creative, informative, and beneficial.

This study's findings reveal that perceived influencer credibility is the second strongest factor determining imitation intention ($\beta = 0.359^{***}$). This finding is consistent with Janssen et al. (2022), who suggested that credibility could induce an intention to purchase. It also supports Belanche et al. (2021a), who concluded that influencer credibility has a strong influence on behavioral intention to imitate. In other words, followers are more likely to be motivated to imitate the behaviors of influencers if they realize that the influencers are trustworthy and

experts, because believing inexperienced influencers may be risky in terms of losing the resources needed to perform the behavior, such as the cost of food and transportation. Furthermore, this paper found the indirect effect of sales promotion content on imitation intention through content attractiveness and perceived influencer credibility. When people explore sales promotions in influencers' content, they may assume that influencers who offer sales promotions have a close relationship with companies; therefore, they may perceive such influencers as more credible than others. Then, these people may be motivated to follow the influencers' suggestions or try to emulate their behavior. Consistently, Lim, Radzol, Cheah, and Wong (2017) suggested that promotional content that is visually stimulating and contextually relevant could increase the likelihood of consumers adopting specific behaviors (such as buying products or recreating the content). In contrast, this study found no significant indirect effect of the user-friendliness of the platforms on imitation intention through perceived influencer credibility, as people may think that user-friendliness cannot accurately represent or reflect the credibility of influencers. Nevertheless, regarding the direct effect, user-friendliness generates a stronger intention to imitate influencers.

5.1. Theoretical contributions

This research makes several significant contributions to theory by empirically validating a nuanced, multi-stage framework that explains the development of consumers' imitation intentions in the SMI context. While previous research has investigated individual links with the influencer network (Belanche et al., 2021a; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Hsieh & Li, 2020; Roy et al., 2024), this study creates and examines a complete chain of promotional inputs, content perception, source assessment, and behavioral intention. In particular, the framework reveals that the user-friendliness of the platforms, a functional platform attribute, and sales promotion content, a tactical content element, serve as the main determinants. This attractiveness, in turn, acts as a crucial antecedent of perceived influencer credibility, which drives imitation intention. By establishing this integrated pathway, the study provides robust evidence for a layered framework that underpins social media influence, thereby enhancing theoretical clarity regarding the interplay between the platform, content, influencer, and consumer. Therefore, the primary contribution to the theory of imitation is its refinement of how observational learning operates in a digital environment. It shows that content attractiveness is the catalyst for building influencer credibility, the trust-based foundation required for both parasocial bonding, which suggests that followers develop a one-sided, perceived intimacy with influencers (Farivar, Wang, & Turel, 2024; Lou, 2022) and aspirational social comparison, which motivates followers to imitate their consumption and lifestyle (Petrescu et al., 2025; Tian, Cho, Jia, Sun, & Tsai, 2023). Moreover, by demonstrating that platform user-friendliness and promotional content indirectly promote imitation through their impact on influencer credibility, the research underscores the role of mediated social influence in shaping consumer behavior. Hence, for imitation to occur, the content itself must first be deemed attractive, which then transfers positive affect to the influencer, endowing them with the credibility necessary to inspire mimetic behavior. This contribution provides a modern framework for understanding how consumers adopt behaviors or preferences in response to online stimuli.

In the field of social media marketing literature, this study makes a significant contribution by identifying two distinct yet essential determinants that enhance influencer marketing effectiveness. First, it provides empirical evidence that the user-friendliness of the platform directly affects content attractiveness, bridging the gap between user experience (UX) design and marketing performance. This approach aligns with the fundamental principles of the technology acceptance model (TAM), which posits that perceived ease of use enhances user attitude (Marangunić & Granić, 2015). However, this study demonstrates that this favorable attitude extends to the content viewed on the

platform. Second, the finding that sales promotion content serves a dual role is a significant contribution. Its partial mediation effect reveals that promotions can directly induce consumers' imitation intention, possibly via perceived economic utility (Mishra, Kushwaha, & Gupta, 2024; Sinha & Verma, 2020); however, their strategic consequence is pronounced when they also trigger content attractiveness, thus magnifying influencer credibility and creating a more forceful, indirect path to manipulating consumers.

For marketing communications, this research provides a contemporary extension of classic persuasion models, specifically the elaboration likelihood model (Shahab, Ghazali, & Mohtar, 2021) and the source credibility model (Yilmazdoğan, Doğan, & Altıntaş, 2021). The model's relationship between content attractiveness and influence credibility refines the understanding of the source effects. It extends the elaboration likelihood model (ELM) by proposing a more integrated and serial pathway for persuasion in social media. Instead of treating the central and peripheral routes as mutually exclusive, the findings suggest that peripheral cues act as a crucial access to deeper processing. Implicitly, in the cluttered social media environment, attractive content can act as a powerful peripheral cue that captures attention and produces a beneficial impact, thereby making the audience more receptive to the message of the source. This finding refines the ELM for the digital age by demonstrating how a powerful peripheral cue can serve as a prerequisite for, rather than an alternative to, more intentional message processing. Regarding the source credibility model, this contribution reframes credibility as a dynamic outcome rather than a static attribute of the source by strengthening the audience's perceptions of the source's credibility. It undermines a strictly linear view of communication by displaying a recursive pathway where the message (content) actively shapes the perception of the source (influencer), offering a more dynamic model for the digital age in the creator economy.

Finally, this study provides a noteworthy contribution to marketing strategy development by offering an evidence-based, actionable framework. The investigated framework serves as a strategic blueprint, moving beyond a reliance on simple bases like follower counts, which can be misleading "vanity metrics" (Rogers, 2018). It implies that an effective influencer strategy must be holistic, considering platform, content, and source selection in unison. For instance, the finding on platform usability suggests that brands should consider the user experience of a platform when planning campaigns. Furthermore, the partial mediation finding provides a clear strategic directive: utilize sales promotions for both short-term activation (the direct effect) and long-term credibility building (the indirect effect), ensuring promotional messaging is integrated creatively to boost content attractiveness rather than being a purely transactional add-on.

5.2. Practical contributions

From a practical perspective, this study provides insights into how food influencers, particularly those with limited awareness and reputation, can utilize the creativity of their content and the innovation of technology to attract and engage their followers. The nature of food influencer marketing is that people need information, expertise, and incentives to commit to behaviors, unlike fashion and beauty influencers who need to attract their followers through their physical attributes. Therefore, food influencers should incorporate atmospheric elements so that followers perceive the content as appealing, on the right platforms, and containing valuable and relevant incentives. By this means, followers will be willing to imitate or follow the influencers without hesitation.

As mentioned by Belanche et al. (2021a), influencer marketing agencies will select influencers whose followers perceive them as credible sources. To enhance their credibility, the results of this study suggest that they should create visually appealing food content. Enjoyment and likability are two facets people are discovering in the content of influencers; therefore, when influencers present their content, for

example, via video, they should incorporate a sense of humor, good intonation, plain language, or something exotic to engage their followers. Food influencers can also explore local eateries, street vendors, and trending restaurants, capturing crisp, close-up visuals of the dishes alongside real-time reactions that combine honest feedback and sensory details. They can enhance relatability by reposting follower comments and sharing quick stories, such as travel mishaps or cultural food insights, while also inviting followers to vote on where they should eat next or share their recommendations. More specifically, Thai food influencers, such as TheFadd, Leena Jung, EarthSodCheun, and PEACH EAT LAEK, often visit the locations of shops or restaurants and use large trays or basins with a diameter of approximately 50 cm to display food on/in. In addition, TheFadd and PEACH EAT LAEK usually show their eating by consuming all the food in the receptacles that ordinary people may not be able to do so. Leena Jung usually adds 2–3 whole cups of chili seasoning to noodles to get her followers' attention. PEACH EAT LAEK always speaks in his dialect when he creates content. This way can help him have his unique characteristics and be more connected to his followers. After influencers capture their followers' attention, they can include reliable, factual information about the food or restaurants in their content, for example, indicating that the companies hold FDA or GMP certification and that the restaurants have received Michelin stars. Apart from that, this can be achieved by interviewing the owners of the products or brands about the extensive details in the video content. For example, they can narrate the history of the brands, such as the number of years their business has been in operation. Additionally, the length of the VDO content created should be appropriate, as it can lose or affect followers' attention, since people expect to consume content quickly. Nevertheless, it also depends on the platforms they use. For YouTube, the content is usually created in more depth, so 5–15 min or longer may be suitable. In contrast, VDOs on TikTok, X, Facebook, and Instagram should be less than one minute in length (Sahni, 2023). When people perceive all the information influencers try to communicate as a complete picture, they tend to believe and follow more easily.

Another insight relies on sales promotion content. The concept of sales promotion content has not been empirically studied in the context of food influencer marketing before, which is why we seldom or never realize that the content from the food influencers contains this issue. However, this study's results confirm that it is an effective tool to drive behavioral intention; therefore, food influencers should present more sales promotions or incentives to their followers through their content both monetary and non-monetary ones. As a result, food influencers can offer sales incentives, such as discounts, gifts, and bonuses, to their followers, especially those that are exclusive to their channels. To achieve this, influencers may enter into partnerships with companies or restaurants, allowing their followers to interact with them, such as purchasing food or visiting their establishments. The followers can inform them that they come from influencers' channels to receive special gifts (first-impression campaign), or influencers can provide promotional discount codes to buy food on social-media applications. A special privilege like this might create perceived credibility, as followers will realize that influencers and companies are collaborating, making it more comfortable for them to adopt certain behaviors. Moreover, as mentioned by Jee (2021) and Gorji and Siami (2020), the display of sales promotion affects both the utilitarian and hedonic benefits perceived from sales promotion. Therefore, the display techniques influencers used should be considered, as they can motivate followers differently. The details of sales promotions are usually presented at the end of the content nowadays, which can be problematic since followers sometimes lose their way while watching or viewing the content. To address this issue, influencers can briefly mention sales promotions at the beginning of their content to encourage followers to stay tuned to the end.

Time consumption is another matter that influencers need to focus on, as the results of this study suggest that followers avoid applications that do not run smoothly and consume excessive time. Influencers need to justify which applications to post their content on. However,

sometimes one application can be easily used by one person but not by the others. Therefore, influencers should mainly rely on their target followers. Zote (2024) stated that users aged 18–29 mostly use TikTok, while those aged 30–39 use X and Instagram. Facebook is typically used by those 40 years and above. Moreover, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok are the top four most popular social media platforms in 2024 (Bernhardt, 2024). After influencers identify their channels, they need to focus on the features of the application to provide convenience to their followers. For example, on YouTube, influencers can include important points in the descriptions provided under their videos. Food influencers might include the location of the restaurants or the channel for product distribution to help followers visit the restaurants or purchase the products. Furthermore, comments on social media enable followers to request more information immediately and effortlessly. They do not need to search or find out on their own, so influencers should monitor and answer followers' questions, aiming to turn them into clients. In addition, user-friendly platforms are also characterized by their security. For TikTok, a verified badge is the blue check mark symbol that appears next to a TikTok account's username in search results and on the profile. This mark confirms that the account belongs to the person or brand it represents. Followers can be sure that the accounts of influencers are secure, to some extent. Therefore, influencers should apply for verification, which can positively impact their perceived influence.

6. Limitations and future research

Current studies have some limitations that offer interesting opportunities for future research. According to Campbell and Farrell (2020), there are five distinct influencer categories, primarily based on the number of followers they have. Celebrity influencers have the highest number of follower counts, followed by mega, macro, micro, and nano influencers, in that order. This current research was not conducted on each type of influencer separately. In the future, scholars can compare followers' perceptions among these five categories to observe the differences. Next, the sample was heavily skewed toward the younger generation, so future studies should provide more insights into the older generation to inform businesses that target this demographic. Moreover, the questionnaire was administered in one developing country, Thailand. Future scholars should revisit the current framework and collect data from other countries with different cultural contexts. Moreover, in this research, only four platforms (TikTok, YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram) were primarily focused on, as no other platforms were mentioned by the participants in the questionnaire. Given the diversity of social media platforms, the roles of food influencers on other platforms should also be examined or compared.

Furthermore, this study focused on three predictors of perceived influencer credibility. Therefore, in the future, more attempts will be necessary to theoretically and empirically test the determinants of perceived influencer credibility and imitation intention in the food industry. For example, the digital literacy or media literacy of influencers is another interesting aspect that tends to form credibility. Moreover, future studies could also integrate qualitative research to gain a deeper understanding of antecedents, as it can provide more insights into each relationship. For example, researchers can conduct interviews or focus groups to observe which content characteristics gain more credibility and why, or the reasons why followers prefer one type of sales promotion to others. A qualitative approach can also offer insights into the insignificant relationship between the user-friendliness of the platforms and the attractiveness of the content.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Chaichana Ampornklinkaew: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Resources, Methodology, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors have no conflict of interest.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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