

# Understanding Consumer Response to Instagram Influencer Marketing: A Study Based on Online Chocolate Retail Platforms

Judith Harriet Francke  
Nawaloka College of Higher Studies, Colombo Sri Lanka

## Abstract

This research explores consumer responses to Instagram influencer marketing in the context of online chocolate retail platforms. It investigates how consumers perceive and respond to influencer endorsements of chocolate products, focusing on key factors like trust, credibility, engagement, and purchasing behavior. Using in-depth consumer interviews and content analysis of Instagram campaigns, the study aims to understand the influence of social media personalities on consumer decision-making and brand perception in e-commerce.

The results highlight that consumers highly value influencer authenticity, relatability, and alignment with the brand. Influencers who are seen as genuine and whose values align with the promoted product inspire greater trust, leading to stronger emotional connections with the brand. This connection significantly influences purchasing decisions, as consumers are more likely to purchase products recommended by influencers they trust. The study also emphasizes the importance of engaging content and consistent messaging, as influencers who maintain active engagement with their followers tend to foster greater trust and interaction.

The findings carry important implications for online chocolate retailers, suggesting that leveraging Instagram influencer marketing can effectively boost brand awareness, build consumer trust, and increase sales. By collaborating with influencers who resonate with their audience, chocolate brands can strengthen their presence in the competitive online market.

## Keywords:

Instagram Marketing; Consumer Perception; Trust; Consumer Behavior

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, Instagram has emerged as a leading platform for influencer marketing, particularly in sectors such as food, lifestyle, and consumer goods. The global chocolate market, with its broad range of products and highly competitive nature, has seen a notable increase in online chocolate retailers using Instagram influencers to enhance brand visibility and engage consumers (A Audrezet, 2020). As social media continues to play a crucial role in shaping purchasing decisions, influencers have become essential in driving consumer behavior, especially in the food industry. Despite the growing use of influencer marketing, there is limited research exploring how consumers specifically respond to influencer endorsements of chocolate products on Instagram (A Brandão, 2019).

This study aims to fill this research gap by examining consumer perceptions of influencer marketing in the context of online chocolate retail. It will investigate how consumers view influencer endorsements of chocolate products on Instagram and how these perceptions influence trust, credibility, brand engagement, and purchasing behavior. Given the visual nature of Instagram, the research will also explore how the way chocolate products are presented by influencers through images, videos, and stories affects consumer attitudes toward the brands promoted (A Durmishi, 2024).

The study will focus on several key areas such as, how consumers assess the trustworthiness and credibility of influencers promoting chocolate products, how these assessments influence their emotional connection to the brand and level of engagement on Instagram and, how influencer marketing impacts purchasing decisions, both online and offline

(A Korotina, 2016). Through a combination of surveys, interviews, and content analysis, this research will gather consumer feedback and behavior patterns to offer insights into the effectiveness of influencer marketing strategies in the chocolate sector.

The results of this study are expected to provide valuable recommendations for marketers in the chocolate industry seeking to optimize their influencer marketing efforts. By understanding consumer responses to influencer endorsements, brands can better design their campaigns to increase trust, foster brand engagement, and boost sales (A Marchand, 2024). Additionally, this research will contribute to the broader field of influencer marketing, with a particular focus on the chocolate market and its unique consumer dynamics. Ultimately, the study aims to assist chocolate brands in leveraging Instagram influencers more effectively to build lasting customer relationships and strengthen their market position (AC Antunes, 2023).

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Influencer Marketing on Instagram

Influencer marketing has emerged as a powerful force in modern advertising, particularly in industries like food and beverages. This type of marketing involves collaborations between brands and individuals with a large and engaged social media following. Influencers, with their established credibility, promote products to their audience, influencing their purchasing decisions (AM Purnomo, 2022). In the food and beverage industry, influencer marketing has proven to be especially successful due to the authenticity influencers bring to their content and the visual nature of platforms like Instagram.

One of the main reasons influencer marketing is effective in this sector is because influencers present products in a more genuine, relatable way compared to traditional advertising. While traditional ads can often feel impersonal and overly polished, influencer content is viewed as more organic. Influencers naturally incorporate products into their daily lives, often showcasing them in real-life situations (AS Pratama, 2024). An influencer might post a casual video of themselves enjoying a chocolate snack while talking about their day. This approach makes the product promotion feel like a personal recommendation rather than a hard sales pitch, creating a sense of trust

between the influencer and their followers. When a product is shown in an authentic and natural context, it increases the likelihood that followers will believe in the recommendation and consider making a purchase (Aro, 2020).

Studies suggest that influencer marketing works best when there is a strong connection between the influencer and their audience. Influencers who actively engage with their followers replying to comments, starting conversations, and maintaining a consistent online presence tend to be more trusted. This creates a sense of familiarity and closeness, making product endorsements feel more like advice from a friend rather than a commercial advertisement (C Valmohammadi, 2023). When followers see an influencer as genuine and relatable, they are more likely to trust their recommendations and take action. Research also indicates that influencers with a loyal, engaged audience can significantly impact consumer behavior, driving higher levels of engagement, greater brand recognition, and increased sales.

In the food and beverage industry, this connection is particularly crucial. Since taste and sensory experiences play a significant role in consumer choices, a recommendation from an influencer who genuinely enjoys a product can have a powerful effect (D Belanche L. C., 2021). For example, if an influencer shares a visually appealing image of a delicious chocolate bar, their followers may feel a strong desire to try it themselves, influenced by both the influencer's enthusiasm and the product's visual appeal. This emotional and sensory connection is amplified by the visual-centric design of platforms like Instagram.

Instagram is particularly well-suited for influencer marketing in the food and beverage industry because of its focus on visuals. The platform is designed to showcase photos and videos, making it an ideal space for influencers to highlight food and beverages (E Ballester, 2021). Stunning images of food can evoke cravings or feelings of indulgence, which can sway consumer decisions. The visual appeal of indulgent items like chocolate plays a crucial role in attracting attention and enticing consumers. When influencers share photos or videos of tempting products, their followers often experience a sensory response that might lead them to purchase the product.

In addition to visual content, Instagram's interactive features, such as stories, polls, and

direct messages, allow influencers to engage with their audience in real-time. These features foster deeper connections by enabling influencers to respond to followers' comments, provide additional product details, and answer questions. This increased interaction enhances the perception of authenticity and transparency, further strengthening the influencer's role as a trusted source of product recommendations (E Winzer, 2022).

Influencer marketing is highly effective in the food and beverage industry, largely because of the trust, relatability, and authenticity influencers build with their followers. The ability of influencers to present products in an engaging and genuine manner, combined with the visual power of Instagram, makes them valuable partners for brands looking to influence consumer behavior and increase sales (F Velicia-Martin, 2023). Influencer marketing has become an essential tool for brands aiming to raise awareness, foster engagement, and drive purchasing decisions in the competitive food and beverage market.

## 2.2 Consumer Perception of Trust and Credibility

Trust plays a vital role in the success of influencer marketing, as consumers often place greater confidence in influencers than in traditional advertisements. This trust is primarily driven by the influencer's perceived authenticity, expertise, and consistency in brand partnerships (GP Ing, 2018). Influencers are seen as more relatable and genuine compared to traditional ads, which helps make their endorsements feel more personal and trustworthy to their audience. In contrast to conventional advertisements, which can often seem impersonal or overly polished, influencer marketing is more engaging, authentic, and effective at reaching today's consumers.

Authenticity is arguably the most crucial factor in building trust. Influencers who are perceived as sincere and transparent tend to form stronger connections with their followers. Authenticity develops over time through consistent behavior and open communication. When influencers share personal experiences, honest opinions, and true feelings about products, they increase their credibility (Han, 2023). When an influencer incorporates a product into their life in a natural, unscripted manner, their endorsement feels like a personal

recommendation rather than just another commercial. For example, an influencer sharing their genuine enjoyment of a chocolate brand will likely gain the trust of their followers, as the endorsement appears sincere, not driven by sales. This perceived authenticity makes followers more inclined to trust the recommendation and consider purchasing the product.

Another critical element in earning trust is expertise. Influencers who are considered knowledgeable in a specific area tend to be more trusted when endorsing related products (Hensel, 2024). This is especially relevant in niche industries like food, beauty, or fitness. When influencers consistently engage with topics they specialize in, they become credible sources of information, making their product recommendations more valuable. For instance, an influencer who frequently discusses food products is likely to have more influence when recommending a particular chocolate than someone without relevant expertise (J Sun, 2018). Their followers see the influencer as well-informed and their recommendations as based on knowledge, not just promotion.

Consistency in brand partnerships is equally important in maintaining trust. Influencers who consistently promote products that align with their personal brand, values, and interests are more likely to preserve their credibility. Followers expect influencers to stay authentic, and when influencers regularly promote products that genuinely reflect their identity, their trustworthiness is reinforced (M Augusto, 2018). On the flip side, frequent or inconsistent endorsements, especially those that don't align with the influencer's usual content, can make their recommendations seem less reliable. For example, if an influencer known for advocating healthy living suddenly promotes junk food or luxury items that don't fit their brand, their followers may question the authenticity of these endorsements. Therefore, it's crucial for influencers to partner with brands that resonate with their personal values and message, ensuring their endorsements feel seamless and trustworthy (M De Veirman, 2017).

Alongside trust, credibility is another key factor in the effectiveness of influencer marketing. Credibility encompasses an influencer's expertise, appearance, and reliability. Expertise plays a major role in an influencer's credibility (M Hasan, 2021).

When an influencer has established themselves as knowledgeable in a particular field, their product endorsements are taken more seriously. For example, a well-known food critic or chef has more authority when recommending a chocolate brand than someone without culinary knowledge. Their expertise gives their endorsements weight and makes their recommendations more impactful. Attractiveness can also play a role in an influencer's credibility, particularly on visually-driven platforms like Instagram. Influencers with an appealing appearance or who create visually striking content tend to attract more attention and engagement (M Veloso, 2023). Their attractiveness can amplify their influence, making their endorsements more persuasive. A visually appealing post can help attract a larger audience and drive higher engagement, enhancing the effectiveness of their recommendations (TB Cornwell, 2021). Finally, reliability is essential for credibility. Reliable influencers consistently produce high-quality content that aligns with their personal brand and resonates with their followers. Influencers who maintain a regular posting schedule, interact with their audience, and ensure their content is consistently engaging and informative are seen as dependable and trustworthy (MJA Gonçalves, 2024). This reliability reinforces their credibility and strengthens the impact of their endorsements, as followers know they can count on the influencer for honest and dependable product recommendations. Trust and credibility are fundamental to the success of influencer marketing. Influencers who demonstrate authenticity, expertise, and consistency in their partnerships are more likely to build lasting relationships with their followers and influence consumer behavior (MTB Lirag, 2023). Trust is cultivated through transparent, honest communication, and when influencers stay true to their personal values, their endorsements feel more genuine. A combination of trustworthiness and credibility allows influencers to engage effectively with their audience, boosting brand awareness, loyalty, and ultimately driving purchasing decisions. In the competitive world of marketing, influencers who prioritize these qualities are more likely to create meaningful connections with their followers and achieve long-term success (Moilanen, 2023).

### 2.3 Impact of Influencer Marketing on Consumer Behavior

Influencer marketing has emerged as one of the most effective strategies for influencing consumer behavior, especially within the highly competitive food and beverage industry. Numerous studies have shown that consumers are more likely to engage with brands that are endorsed by influencers they trust, which in turn leads to increased brand awareness, higher engagement, and a stronger intent to purchase (P Chaihanchai, 2024). This is particularly true in sectors like food and beverages, where emotional connections, trust, and personal preferences are crucial to driving consumer decisions.

One of the most compelling pieces of research on this subject comes from who found that when consumers perceive an influencer as credible, their product recommendations are more likely to lead to positive consumer actions, including likes, shares, and actual purchases (Pashaei, 2020). The study suggests that influencers, when seen as trusted sources, have the power to shape consumer behavior far more effectively than traditional advertisements. This is particularly important in the food and beverage sector, where personal preferences and emotional connections often drive purchase decisions (R Rietveld, 2020). For food products like chocolate, these factors are even more significant, as consumers are not just looking for the best taste but also for experiences, indulgence, and a connection to the brands they choose to consume.

In the context of online chocolate retail, where consumers are often presented with a vast array of options, influencer marketing becomes even more valuable. The chocolate market is incredibly competitive, with a multitude of brands vying for attention. For a brand to succeed in such an environment, it must find a way to differentiate itself from the many other offerings available (R Rietveld, 2020). Influencers play a key role in helping brands stand out by promoting specific chocolate products. When an influencer endorses a particular brand, they effectively bring it to the attention of a broader audience, helping it rise above the noise of countless alternatives.

What sets influencer marketing apart from other forms of advertising is the emotional

bond influencers establish with their followers (S Khan, 2023) Consumers often view influencers as more relatable and authentic than traditional advertisements, which are often perceived as impersonal or overly polished. Influencers have the unique ability to create emotional connections with their followers, and this emotional bond is incredibly powerful when it comes to products like chocolate (S Molinillo, 2020). Chocolate is often associated with personal indulgence, comfort, and emotional satisfaction. As such, it is a product that benefits from being marketed through authentic, personal experiences. Influencers who share their genuine love for a particular chocolate brand or flavor help create a sense of familiarity and trust with their audience, making consumers more likely to choose that brand when they're looking to indulge.

The visual and emotional appeal of chocolate also makes it an ideal product for influencer marketing. Platforms like Instagram, which are centered around visual content, provide the perfect medium for influencers to showcase chocolate's sensory qualities (S Teixeira, 2023). Chocolate, with its rich textures, appealing appearance, and often luxurious packaging, is a highly visual product. Influencers can leverage this by posting images and videos that highlight these aspects, thereby capturing the attention of their followers and creating a desire for the product. Visual storytelling is a powerful tool, as it can trigger sensory responses and evoke emotional reactions, making it more likely that consumers will form a positive perception of the brand (SA Bhat, 2023). These visual cues play a critical role in how consumers perceive the product and can drive them to take action, whether by visiting the brand's website, engaging with the post, or making a purchase. The emotional connection fostered by visual content is crucial for increasing consumer engagement. When influencers share personal experiences with a chocolate product, they offer an authentic, relatable perspective that traditional ads simply cannot match (SW Kühn, 2018). A consumer who sees an influencer enjoying a chocolate bar while unwinding after a busy day or sharing a special moment with loved ones is more likely to form a positive association with the product. This type of content goes beyond simply showcasing the product it tells a story and

invites the audience to imagine themselves enjoying the product as well. As a result, the emotional appeal becomes a driving force for consumer action (Suprawan, 2015).

Furthermore, influencer marketing helps build consumer trust by offering authentic, first-hand experiences with the product. When influencers share genuine reviews or show how they incorporate a chocolate product into their daily lives, their recommendations are perceived as more credible than traditional advertisements. Consumers trust influencers because they feel they are getting an honest opinion from someone they follow and admire, rather than from a brand trying to sell them something. This authenticity is vital for developing long-term relationships with consumers. It encourages repeat purchases, fosters brand loyalty, and builds trust over time. For brands in the competitive chocolate industry, establishing this type of trust is essential for retaining customers in the long term.

Influencer marketing is also highly effective in promoting specific product features. For chocolate, this could mean highlighting a brand's unique ingredients, artisanal production methods, or commitment to sustainability. Influencers who genuinely believe in the brand's story and values can communicate these elements to their audience in a way that feels natural and engaging (Z Saturnus, 2024). This approach helps consumers connect not only with the product itself but also with the brand behind it. As consumers become more interested in the ethical and social aspects of the products they purchase, influencer endorsements that emphasize these qualities can help build deeper connections with the brand.

Influencer marketing serves as a powerful tool for online chocolate retailers, allowing them to differentiate their products in a crowded market and create emotional connections with their target audience. By partnering with trusted influencers, brands can enhance their visibility, increase engagement, and strengthen consumer trust and loyalty (V Gugliucci, 2023). Influencers bring authenticity and relatability to product endorsements, which are especially valuable in the food and beverage industry, where trust and personal preference are critical to purchasing decisions. Through engaging visual content and authentic storytelling, influencers can make a lasting

impact on their audience, leading to increased brand awareness, stronger purchase intent, and ultimately, long-term customer loyalty (TB Cornwell, 2021).

### 3. Research Objectives and Questions

This study aims to explore how Instagram influencer marketing affects consumer responses in the context of online chocolate retail platforms. The research focuses on the following key questions:

- 1.How do consumers perceive the trustworthiness and credibility of influencers endorsing chocolate products on Instagram?
- 2.What factors contribute to consumers' emotional engagement with influencers and chocolate brands on Instagram?
- 3.How does influencer marketing on Instagram impact consumer purchasing decisions for chocolate products?

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1 Qualitative Research Design

Given the exploratory nature of the research, a qualitative approach was selected to gain a deep understanding of consumer perceptions and reactions to Instagram influencer marketing. The study utilizes two main data collection techniques: semi-structured interviews and content analysis. Semi-structured interviews provide detailed insights into consumers' opinions on influencer credibility, emotional connection, and purchasing decisions. Content analysis is used to examine Instagram posts and influencer content, focusing on aspects like trustworthiness, engagement, and messaging. Together, these methods offer a thorough understanding of how influencer marketing influences consumer behavior within the online chocolate retail sector.

### 4.2 Data Collection

The study utilized two primary data collection methods: semi-structured interviews and content analysis. First, 25 participants were selected for in-depth semi-structured interviews. These individuals were regular consumers of chocolate products and active users of Instagram, particularly those who follow food and lifestyle influencers. The interviews aimed to explore participants' perceptions of influencer marketing, their trust in influencers, and how influencer endorsements influenced their attitudes toward

chocolate brands. The interviews provided valuable insights into the emotional responses to influencer content, the credibility assigned to influencers, and how these factors shaped participants' purchasing behavior and brand preferences.

The second method, content analysis, focused on analyzing 10 Instagram campaigns where influencers promoted chocolate products across various online platforms. These campaigns were chosen based on engagement metrics, including likes, comments, and shares, which indicate the level of consumer interaction and interest. The study also considered the type of influencers involved, distinguishing between macro-influencers with large followings and micro-influencers with smaller but often more engaged audiences. This differentiation helped to assess how influencer reach and engagement impacted consumer responses to the campaigns. The content analysis involved examining the messaging, visuals, and overall effectiveness of the influencer posts, as well as strategies used to build emotional connections and trust with the audience. By combining these two methods, the study offered a comprehensive understanding of how Instagram influencer marketing influences consumer behavior, specifically in the context of online chocolate retail platforms.

### 4.3 Data Analysis

The data gathered from semi-structured interviews and content analysis was examined using thematic analysis to uncover key themes and patterns related to trust, credibility, engagement, and purchasing behavior. This approach allowed for an in-depth understanding of how consumers view influencer marketing, their level of trust in influencers, and how these perceptions influence their attitudes and purchasing decisions concerning chocolate products. NVivo software was utilized for coding and organizing both the interview data and Instagram content. The software helped manage large amounts of qualitative data, making it easier to identify recurring themes and categorize responses. This process enabled the study to highlight significant trends in consumer engagement, perceptions of influencers, and the impact of influencer endorsements on consumer actions. Ultimately, thematic analysis facilitated the

extraction of valuable insights into the effectiveness of influencer marketing in the context of online chocolate retail platforms.

## 5. Results and Discussion

### 5.1 Trust and Credibility

Trust was identified as a key theme in consumers' responses to Instagram influencer marketing, significantly influencing their perceptions of influencers and their purchasing decisions. Participants expressed greater trust in influencers who exhibited a genuine passion for the products they promoted. For instance, chocolate influencers who shared personal experiences or showcased a long history of endorsing high-quality products were viewed as more trustworthy. Consumers appreciated influencers who authentically engaged with the product, such as posting about their personal love for a specific chocolate or sharing recipes using the product, rather than offering generic or detached endorsements.

Transparency was also a crucial factor in building trust. Many participants stated that they were more likely to trust influencers who clearly disclosed paid partnerships in their posts. Clear sponsorship disclosure helped to reinforce the perception that influencers were being honest with their audience, making their endorsements feel more credible. Conversely, a lack of disclosure regarding paid promotions led to skepticism and diminished trust in the influencer's authenticity.

Credibility, closely tied to trust, was influenced by the perceived expertise and authenticity of the influencer. Participants were more likely to trust influencers who were regarded as knowledgeable in relevant fields, such as food, wellness, or lifestyle. For example, fitness influencers promoting artisanal or health-conscious chocolates were seen as more credible than celebrities endorsing mass-produced chocolate products. The expertise of the influencer was crucial in shaping consumer perceptions of the brand.

Furthermore, consumers tended to trust influencers who were perceived as "real" and relatable, rather than those who seemed overly commercialized or involved in excessive brand endorsements. Influencers who appeared genuine, down-to-earth, and approachable were more likely to gain trust compared to those who seemed overly focused on commercial gain. In conclusion, trust and credibility in influencer marketing were

shaped by the authenticity, transparency, expertise, and relatability of the influencer, all of which played a critical role in influencing consumer behavior and purchase intentions.

### 5.2 Emotional Engagement

Emotional engagement was a crucial factor in the effectiveness of influencer marketing, with consumers reporting a stronger connection to chocolate brands when the influencer's message resonated with their emotions or personal values. Influencers who depicted chocolate as a luxurious or indulgent treat were able to create a sense of desire and enjoyment, encouraging consumers to engage with the brand emotionally. This emotional bond often led to higher trust in the product and an increased likelihood of purchasing. For example, influencers who promoted chocolate as a comforting food during stressful times or as a treat for special occasions elicited positive consumer responses by aligning with personal lifestyle preferences.

Consumers were more likely to connect with content that reflected their own experiences or values. Influencers who portrayed chocolate as part of moments of self-care, relaxation, or celebration fostered stronger emotional engagement. When influencers shared personal stories about enjoying chocolate after a long day or as part of family traditions, it resonated with their audience, creating a relatable and authentic connection. This alignment between the influencer's portrayal of chocolate and consumers' lifestyles made the endorsement feel more genuine, leading to positive consumer reactions.

Additionally, content that reflected consumers' values such as promoting sustainable or ethically sourced chocolate—further strengthened emotional engagement. When consumers felt the product aligned with their own beliefs, it deepened their emotional connection with the brand.

Emotional engagement was a key driver of influencer marketing success, with consumers more likely to engage with and trust chocolate brands that resonated with their personal values and emotions. Influencers, who connected chocolate to indulgence, comfort, or special moments were particularly effective in fostering strong emotional bonds, which led to increased brand loyalty, trust, and purchasing intent.

### 5.3 Influence on Purchasing Decisions

The influence of Instagram influencer marketing on purchasing decisions was clearly evident in the study. Many participants reported purchasing chocolate products after seeing them endorsed by influencers they trusted. The impact was particularly strong when the influencer's message aligned with the consumer's personal preferences, such as those promoting organic or ethically sourced chocolate brands. When influencers shared products that resonated with the consumers' values, the endorsement felt more authentic and relevant, making it more persuasive and increasing the likelihood of a purchase.

However, some participants expressed skepticism about influencer endorsements, especially when influencers had a history of promoting a wide range of unrelated products. This over-commercialization caused many consumers to lose trust in the influencer's recommendations, as they felt the endorsements lacked authenticity. When influencers promoted a variety of products, particularly those unrelated to their usual content, it raised concerns about whether they genuinely used or believed in the products they were endorsing, or if the promotions were purely for financial gain.

This perception of inauthenticity undermined the effectiveness of the endorsement, leading consumers to disregard the influencer's recommendation. Participants preferred influencers who appeared selective in their partnerships, promoting only products they genuinely seemed to value. This authenticity was crucial in maintaining trust, and when it was compromised by over-commercialization, the effectiveness of the influencer's endorsements was significantly reduced.

While Instagram influencer marketing had a clear impact on purchasing decisions, the success of these endorsements depended heavily on the alignment between the influencer's message and the consumer's values. Endorsements from influencers who seemed authentic and consistent in their brand partnerships were more likely to result in purchases. However, over-commercialization and a lack of perceived authenticity weakened the trust consumers had in influencers, diminishing the overall effectiveness of the marketing strategy.

The findings from this study emphasize the vital importance of trust and credibility in

influencer marketing on Instagram, particularly in the context of online chocolate retail platforms. Consumers are becoming more selective about the authenticity of influencer endorsements, showing a clear preference for influencers who are genuine, transparent, and aligned with the values of the brand they promote. Influencers who maintain authenticity and consistency in their messaging are perceived as more trustworthy, making their product recommendations more persuasive. This highlights how crucial authenticity is in building consumer trust, which plays a significant role in influencing purchasing behavior.

Additionally, emotional engagement was identified as a key factor driving consumer behavior. Instagram posts that triggered positive emotions whether through indulgence, nostalgia, or a personal connection were more likely to boost consumer engagement and purchasing intent. For example, influencers who shared personal experiences of enjoying chocolate during special moments or used it as a form of self-care created a stronger emotional bond with their audience, enhancing the appeal of the product and increasing the likelihood of purchase.

However, the study also revealed that over-commercialization could negatively impact the effectiveness of influencer marketing. Consumers were skeptical about influencers who promoted a wide range of unrelated products, viewing such endorsements as inauthentic. This over-commercialization weakened the influencer's credibility, leading to diminished trust in their recommendations and lessening the impact of the marketing effort.

For online chocolate platforms, these insights underscore the importance of partnering with influencers who authentically represent the brand and connect with the target audience. Marketers should prioritize transparency and choose influencers who genuinely resonate with their followers and share similar values. Building long-term, authentic relationships with influencers is essential for fostering trust and loyalty among consumers. By focusing on authenticity, emotional connection, and transparent partnerships, marketers can ensure the effectiveness and sustainability of their influencer marketing campaigns.

## 6. Conclusion

This study provides valuable insights into how consumers respond to influencer marketing in the context of online chocolate retail platforms, highlighting key factors such as trust, credibility, emotional engagement, and authenticity. These elements are crucial in shaping consumer perceptions and behaviors. Trust is a fundamental aspect, with consumers more likely to engage with influencers who are seen as genuine and transparent. Credibility is also essential, as consumers tend to favor influencers who align with the brand's values and maintain consistency in their endorsements. Emotional engagement, driven by authentic and relatable content, further influences consumer decisions, fostering a stronger connection to the brand and increasing purchase intent.

For online chocolate brands, the findings stress the importance of carefully selecting influencers who authentically represent the brand and resonate with their target audience. Brands should prioritize influencers whose values align with their own and who can create genuine emotional connections with followers. Additionally, maintaining transparency and consistency in influencer partnerships is vital to building lasting trust with consumers.

Future research could expand on these findings by examining the long-term impact of influencer marketing on brand loyalty and retention in the food sector. Exploring how consistent influencer endorsements affect consumer perceptions and repeat purchasing behavior would provide further insights into the sustainability of influencer marketing strategies. Such research would be valuable for brands looking to enhance their influencer marketing approach and foster long-term consumer loyalty in the competitive online market.

## 7. Implications for Marketing Practice

This study provides several key recommendations for online chocolate sellers to enhance their influencer marketing strategies, fostering trust, engagement, and increased purchasing behavior. Emotional engagement is a significant factor, as chocolate is often associated with feelings of indulgence, celebration, comfort, and nostalgia. To capitalize on this, chocolate brands should design influencer campaigns that resonate with these emotional aspects.

Influencers can share personal stories of enjoying chocolate for special occasions, relaxing moments, or as a form of self-care. By aligning their messaging with the emotional desires of their audience, brands can create a stronger, more personal connection with consumers. Additionally, collaborating with influencers who naturally embody these values ensures a consistent and authentic narrative that deepens engagement.

Transparency is also crucial in influencer marketing. Consumers are increasingly wary of influencers who do not clearly disclose paid partnerships. For online chocolate sellers, it is important to ensure that influencer collaborations are transparent and clearly labeled. Influencers should openly use hashtags like #ad or #sponsored to disclose paid content. Such transparency not only helps build trust but also shows that the brand values honesty and integrity in its marketing practices. Clear disclosures foster consumer confidence, which in turn positively influences their purchasing decisions.

Lastly, the study reveals the detrimental effects of over-commercialization in influencer marketing. When influencers promote an extensive range of unrelated products, it can cause consumers to question their authenticity, as it appears that financial gain rather than genuine product endorsement is the primary motivation. To preserve credibility, chocolate brands should partner with influencers who maintain a consistent brand image and are selective in their endorsements. Influencers with a focused niche and careful brand partnerships help maintain the authenticity of the collaboration. By limiting the number of partnerships and ensuring alignment with the brand's values, online chocolate sellers can avoid over-commercialization and preserve the effectiveness of their influencer marketing efforts.

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