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INFLUENCER MARKETING AND HUMAN CAPITAL:

THE STRATEGIC ROLE OF EMPLOYEES IN THE FOOD INDUSTRY

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Abstract

Influencer marketing is a strategy aimed at driving consumers' brand awareness and/or their purchasing decisions by leveraging the influence of opinion leaders (Brown & Hayes, 2008; Scott, 2015). Influencer marketing scholars have so far paid attention to influencers outside the company (social media personalities not affiliated with the company) and their ability to stimulate trust in consumers and guide their purchase intentions (Lou & Yuan, 2019), while limited attention has been paid to the managerial implications deriving from the ability of internal subjects to influence (internal influencers). Awareness of the effectiveness of the influencer marketing strategy has sparked debate in the food industry about the extent to which internal and external influencers can influence consumers. Previous research suggests that authenticity and credibility are key drivers of influencer effectiveness (Audrezet et al., 2020), making internal influencers a potential strategic

asset for brands undergoing digital transformation. The aim of this study, in line with the theory of the human mark (Kowalczyk & Pounders, 2016), is to analyse how consumers perceive employees versus external influencers in terms of credibility, authenticity, and emotional connection to the brand. This study will help fill a gap in the literature on influencer marketing.

The methodology adopted for this study is a 2x2 between-subjects experimental design, which allows us to analyse the joint effects of influencer type and the value alignment between the brand and the influencer on three dependent variables: consumer trust, consumer engagement, and purchase intention. The results of this work, in line with the literature on the topic under analysis (van Driel & Dumitrica, 2021), reveal that internal influencers elicit greater consumer trust and heighten perceptions of authenticity, whereas external influencers generate higher levels of consumer engagement.

Keywords: Internal influencer, External influencer, Behavioural intention, Food marketing

I. INTRODUCTION

The widespread adoption of social media has made influencer marketing one of the most effective communication tools in the contemporary landscape. Several scholars have focused on the analysis of the effectiveness of the use of external influencers (e.g. content creators with a significant following) in terms of brand perception and consumer behaviour (Hudders et al., 2021; Lou & Yuan, 2019), but little on the potential of internal influencers (e.g. employees or company owners) as a category of brand promoters. Drawing on source credibility theory (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Ohanian, 1990), this study investigates how influencer type (internal vs. external) affects consumer trust, post-engagement, and behavioural intention.

Trust is recognised as a key element in effective persuasion and consumer loyalty, especially in digital contexts, where the authenticity of content is often questioned (Kim & Kim, 2021). For further theoretical support, we draw on engagement theory (Hollebeek et al., 2014). Furthermore, relationship marketing theory (Morgan & Hunt, 1994) and authenticity theory (Wood et al., 2008; Pöyry et al., 2019) provide a solid framework to understand how trust and authenticity mediate and moderate the effectiveness of influencer content.

This study aims to investigate whether internal influencers generate higher levels of trust than external influencers, and whether such trust, in turn, drives engagement and purchase intentions. We also investigate whether perceived authenticity moderates these relationships and, if so, whether such moderation enhances or attenuates the observed effects, depending on how authentic the influencer appears to the audience. At the heart of this investigation is a broader question, with significant implications for human resource management (HRM): can employees serve a dual role, both as productive team members and as effective brand ambassadors?

Employee-led influencer marketing represents a cost-effective alternative to traditional influencer campaigns while simultaneously boosting employee morale, brand pride and organisational cohesion.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

II.1 Food Influencer Marketing

Influencer marketing attracts the attention of many scholars who, with their analyses, offer multifaceted perspectives on the impact of culinary marketing (Mainolfi et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2021) not only on consumer purchase decisions and loyalty, but also on the trust that is built over time (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Vrontis et al., 2021). Much remains to be explored regarding the criteria for selecting influencers and the alignment of brand messages with influencers' narratives.

Audrezet et al. (2020) highlighted the complexity of storytelling in marketing and identified strategies that merge personal narratives and promotional content. For example, food influencers often use inviting descriptions and share behind-the-scenes anecdotes about meals or personal experiences in preparing them. This approach may evoke emotions and encourage audiences to leave positive reviews or to spontaneously share the content, thereby increasing uptake and positive sentiment.

For Weng et al. (2022), changes in TikTok and Instagram algorithms are increasingly influencing the sustainability of users' attention span. For brands that need to maintain an image of authenticity and align with their audience's values, there is an urgent need to embrace new perspectives on culinary heritage and narratives about the origins of ingredients (Misra et al., 2024; Anjos et al., 2022).

These findings suggest an evolution in public preferences, increasingly oriented towards authentic and humanised relationships with brands rather than impersonal and sophisticated forms of advertising.

Teams frequently engage with multiple external influencers at the same time to increase brand awareness (Campbell & Farrel, 2020; Hudders et al., 2021). However, this practice can put the firm at risk of significant divergence in the messages that external influencers share (Childers et al., 2019), and this misalignment could erode trust among viewers who may suspect that monetisation strategies are overshadowing the culinary artist's passion. On the contrary, a stronger connection is more likely if marketing managers carefully select all collaborators (Janssen & Rudeloff, 2025).

It follows that strategic HRM policies could play a decisive role, as employees or business owners can be highly effective digital promoters, able to communicate the brand's ideals and enhance intangible assets that attract current and potential customers. Despite the lack of a cohesive core

of studies on the subject under analysis, some recent scientific articles suggest that internal brand ambassadors can strongly influence employee morale and represent concrete examples of the so-called corporate pride, which leads to greater economic loyalty towards the company (Li et al., 2024).

The use of internal influencers, in addition to representing a low-cost form of marketing (Ivanov et al., 2024), has the advantage of making personal stories seem authentic, and the brand merges with their real presence on social media (Seçilmis et al., 2025)

II.2 Hypothesis development

Consistent with the Source Credibility Theory (Hovland et al., 1953; Hovland & Weiss, 1951), the reliability of the source of a message represents a crucial factor in communication (Ohanian, 1990). For this reason, we believe that reporting the use of internal or external influencers can influence the success of the influencer marketing campaign. Some studies have highlighted greater credibility for internal influencers compared to external ones (Seçilmis et al., 2025), while others, while recognising the greater popularity of external influencers, note that their sponsorships can generate greater scepticism among consumers (Audrezet et al., 2020). Based on these premises, we can advance the following research hypothesis:

H1: Posts shared by internal influencers will generate higher levels of consumer trust than those shared by external influencers.

According to the influencer marketing literature, purchase intentions of sponsored products or services also depend on the type of source from which the social media post originates (Kumar et al., 2023). For this reason, we hypothesise that:

H2: Source type (internal influencer vs. external influencer) has a positive effect on individuals' behavioural intention.

Several studies in the literature highlight that the type of source also influences consumer engagement with posts published by influencers (Giakoumaki & Kreppa, 2020). According to De Vries & Carlson (2014), external influencers can generate higher levels of engagement thanks to an entertainment-oriented communication style. For this reason, we hypothesise that:

H3: Posts shared by external influencers will generate higher levels of engagement than those shared by internal influencers.

Lou et al. (2019) and Sardar et al. (2024) suggest that engagement with influencer posts positively affects consumers' purchase intention for sponsored products or services. Therefore, let's assume that:

H4: Consumer engagement positively affects individuals' purchase intention.

Kim & Kim (2021) highlight that trust facilitates transactions and relationships between consumers in digital environments. In influencer marketing studies, trust refers to individuals' disposition to rely on content shared by influencers (Schultz, 2025) and is considered an antecedent of engagement (Connolly et al., 2023; Vohra & Bhardwaj, 2019). Therefore, let's assume that:

H5: Trust positively affects individuals' engagement with the influencer's post.

Trust can enhance the effectiveness of the influencer's message and foster the behavioural intention to acquire the recommended products or services (Kim & Kim, 2021). Therefore, we propose:

H6: Trust positively affects individuals' purchase intention.

Recently, perceived authenticity, which can be defined as "being true to oneself" (Wood et al., 2008), has emerged as a central element in influencer marketing (Mucundorfeanu et al., 2025; Audrezet et al., 2020). According to Pöyry et al. (2019), authenticity can strengthen the bond between the influencer and their followers.

An analysis of the current literature shows that Dondapati & Dehury (2024) examined the role of authenticity as a moderating factor in the relationship between influencer type and outcomes. Considering these studies, it is hypothesised that perceived authenticity may act as a moderating variable. Consequently, the following hypotheses were formulated:

H7a: Perceived authenticity positively moderates the relationship between source type (internal vs. external influencer) and trust.

H7b: Perceived authenticity positively moderates the relationship between source type (internal vs. external influencer) and engagement with the post.

H7c: Perceived authenticity positively moderates the relationship between source type (internal vs. external influencer) and behavioural intention (purchase from a pizza shop)

III. METHODOLOGY

To achieve the research objective, a 2x1 between-subjects experimental design was adopted; participants were randomly assigned to view a social post promoting a pizzeria, published by either an internal or an external influencer.

The aim was to measure behavioural purchase intention, considering consumer trust and engagement as mediating variables and perceived authenticity as a moderating variable. To avoid familiarity with the brand or the influencer, the two scenarios were created using a fictitious pizzeria and invented names for the influencers (Li et al., 2025; Mo and Wang, 2025).

The experiment was conducted in April 2024 via the Qualtrics online platform. The crowdsourcing platform Prolific (Palan & Schitter, 2018) was used to recruit participants, the United States was selected as the reference country, and the number of participants was set at 300.

To verify that participants correctly identified the post's source (internal vs. external influencer), they were asked to agree or disagree with the statement: "An external influencer created this post?"

Participants were then asked to fill out a questionnaire to assess levels of trust, engagement, perceived authenticity, and behavioural purchase intention. To ensure the validity of the measurements, the questionnaire was constructed by referring to already validated scales (Netemeyer et al., 2003; DeVellis & Thorpe, 2021).

Trust was measured through four items from Kennedy et al. (2001) and Kim & Kim (2021) and rated on a Likert scale from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 7 ("strongly agree"), consumer engagement was assessed with four items from De Vries and Carlson (2014) and Giakoumaki and Krepapa (2020), also with a Likert scale from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 7 ("strongly agree"). Perceived authenticity was measured through five items adapted from Mucundorfeanu et al. (2025) and Russell and Rasolofoarison (2017) with a Likert scale from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 7 ("strongly agree"), behavioral purchase intention was assessed with three items from Taylor et al. (1975) and Kim & Kim (2021), using a Likert scale from 1 ("absolutely unlikely") to 7 ("absolutely probable").

All factors showed Cronbach's alphas above 0.7 and composite reliabilities above 0.7 (Hair et al., 2010), indicating the measurement model's reliability.

IV. RESULTS

IV.1 Sample Characteristics

The study participants ranged in age from 19 to 74 years, with a mean age of 39.06 years (standard deviation = 12.83). Regarding gender, 60% of the participants identified as female, 38.3% as male, and 1.7% selected the "other" option.

66.7% had a bachelor's degree, 21.3% had a high school diploma, and 12% had a master's degree. Regarding employment, 72% of participants were employed, 10.3% were unemployed, 6.3% were students, 6% were retired, and 5.3% were housewives. Monthly income was distributed across several bands, with the largest group comprising 15% of participants reporting earnings of more than $5,000 per month.

The participants' nationality was predominantly American (89.7%), with smaller percentages from other origins, including Pakistani, Hispanic, Chinese, and Indian.

IV.2 Results of the Structural Equation Model

The effectiveness of the experimental manipulation (Hauser et al., 2018) was assessed using an independent-samples t-test in IBM SPSS 25. The results showed that participants exposed to the post published by an internal influencer (Group 1) and those exposed to the post published by an external influencer (Group 2) reported significantly different levels of recognition of visual stimuli (internal influencer group: M = 2.50; standard deviation = 1.085; external influencer group: M = 5.81; standard deviation = 0.870; t(298) = -29.174; p < 0.001).

PROCESS Model 85 was used to conduct a moderated mediation analysis. In this analysis, influencer type was treated as the independent variable (X), while trust and engagement served as sequential mediators (M1 and M2). Perceived authenticity was included as a moderating variable (W), and behavioural purchase intention was the independent variable (Y).

The results of the study confirm hypothesis H1: internal influencers generated significantly higher levels of trust than external influencers (t (1, 1) = -0.8596; p<0.001), and internal sources are perceived as more credible.

H2 was not supported: The direct effect of source type on behavioural intention was not statistically significant (χ^2 β= 0.0250; p = 0.7861), suggesting that source type alone does not determine purchase intention.

H3 was confirmed: external influencers elicited significantly higher levels of engagement than internal influencers (t (36) = 0.3898; p = 0.0025). It should be noted that such engagement did not translate into an increase in purchase intention, which is why H4 was not supported: engagement did not represent a significant predictor of behavioural intention ββ = -0.0199; p = 0.6309).

H5 was rejected: trust did not significantly predict engagement β = -0.0354; p = 0.6028), indicating that in this context, trust and engagement operate as independent processes.

H6 was confirmed: trust had a significant positive effect on purchase intention (χ^2 = 0.2097; p < 0.001), reaffirming its central role in influencing consumer behaviour.

H7a was supported: perceived authenticity significantly moderated the relationship between source type and trust, with an interaction coefficient (β) of 0.3377 (p < 0.001). Furthermore, the indirect effect of source type on purchase intention, mediated by trust, increased at higher levels of perceived authenticity, with a coefficient β = -0.1803 at the mean level of authenticity. The moderated mediation index was found to be - 0.0806, with a 95% confidence interval of [-0.1504; -0.0275].

H7b was not confirmed: perceived authenticity did not significantly moderate the effect of source type on engagement with the post (interaction β = 0.0656; p = 0.5751), suggesting that engagement

is more likely influenced by the content format or the influencer's personality than by perceived sincerity.

H7c was not supported, as authenticity did not moderate the effect of source type on purchase intention through the engagement pathway. The serial mediation path (type → trust → engagement → intention) was also not significant.

V. DISCUSSIONS

The results of this study show that the type of source (internal vs. external influencer) did not exert a direct effect on behavioural purchase intention, contrasting with existing literature that suggests a positive relationship between source type and individual intention to purchase sponsored products or services (Kumar et al., 2023; Sardar et al., 2024). This result can be explained by considering the mediating roles of trust and engagement, which are more determinants of behavioural outcomes.

Internal influencers significantly increased consumer trust, a finding consistent with studies by Seçilmis et al. (2025) and Ivanov et al. (2024), which found that internal figures (e.g., employees) are perceived as more credible and transparent due to their direct affiliation with the brand.

External influencers elicited higher levels of engagement, in line with research by De Vries & Carlson (2014), who demonstrated that content generated and disseminated by external influencers stimulates greater user interaction on social media (De Vries & Carlson, 2014).

In this study, engagement was not found to be a significant predictor of purchase intention. This finding is not consistent with previous studies (Lou et al., 2019; Sardar et al., 2024). The reason could be the greater superficiality with which it was observed in the present analysis (e.g., a 'like').

Perceived authenticity significantly affected the relationship between source type and trust; for example, internal influencers were more effective at generating trust when perceived as authentic. This finding is consistent with previous studies (Pöyry et al., 2019). It should be noted that authenticity did not significantly affect the relationship between source type and post engagement. This suggests that engagement may be more influenced by aesthetic factors rather than influencer credibility (Wang et al., 2022).

The results of the study show that trust is more important than engagement in determining consumer behaviour. Consumers seem to be more attracted to an authentic voice from within the organisation.

The results suggest that authenticity is more persuasive when it is associated with a direct connection to the brand. Even if an external influencer appears sincere and honest, the lack of direct affiliation with the company can limit the trust-building effect of that authenticity.

These findings highlight the importance of relational alignment between influencers and promoted brands, in line with previous studies (Audrezet et al., 2020), and contribute to the literature by showing that internal authenticity has a stronger impact on consumer trust than perceived authenticity in external content creators.

V.1 Theoretical and Practical Implications

The findings of this work suggest multiple theoretical and managerial implications. The study, thanks to the integration of source credibility theory (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Ohanian, 1990), engagement theory (Holebeek et al., 2014), commitment-trust theory in relationship marketing (Morgan & Hunt, 1994), and authenticity theory (Wood et al., 2008; Pöyry et al., 2019), presents a comprehensive model that highlights the complex interaction between influencer type, trust, engagement, authenticity and consumer behavioral intention.

The results of this work, demonstrating that internal influencers are perceived as more trustworthy than external content creators, reinforce the source credibility theory. These results are consistent with the studies of Seçilmis et al. (2025) and Ivanov et al. (2024). However, the results show that trust alone is not sufficient; its effectiveness depends on the level of perceived authenticity in the context.

The results of this work confirm that external influencers tend to generate greater engagement in posts, thus contributing to engagement theory (De Vries & Carlson, 2014; Leung et al., 2022). Contrary to Lou et al. (2019), this study found that engagement does not significantly predict behavioural intention, questioning the assumption that all forms of engagement have the same value.

This work confirms the central tenet of commitment-trust theory (Morgan & Hunt, 1994), that trust is a key mediator influencing purchase intention. Trust, more than engagement, underpins behavioural outcomes in digital brand-consumer interactions (Kim & Kim, 2021). The study empirically supports the causal sequence proposed by recent trust-based digital marketing models (Connolly et al., 2023), in which trust precedes and reinforces consumer willingness.

The results reveal that authenticity strengthens the effect of internal influencers on trust, which in turn affects consumer intention. These results are consistent with the studies by Pöyry et al. (2019) and Mucundorpeanu et al. (2025), which found that authenticity is central to the effective communication of influencers.

A final piece that emerges is the contextuality of authenticity, which is not only a personal trait of the influencer but is more persuasive when it aligns with the corporate identity or the role of an employee.

Regarding managerial implications, this study, which highlights the strategic value of internal influencers, suggests that professionals should not rely exclusively on external influencers to gain visibility but should invest in employee-driven content strategies to build deeper, more sustainable relationships with consumers.

This leads to the need for a strategic change in the selection criteria of influencers, not focusing exclusively on the number of followers or entertainment value, companies should also evaluate the alignment of the influencer with the brand and their ability to convey authentic narratives integrated with corporate values.

Another element that emerges from the findings is the link between marketing and HRM. Using employees as brand ambassadors has been shown to strengthen organisational pride and commitment (Li et al., 2024), especially when they are free to share content that reflects their authentic work experience. This opens a new frontier for human resource (HR) departments, which can collaborate with marketing to identify and enhance employees best suited to represent the brand online.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

This work contributes to studies on food marketing on social media by offering an analysis of the psychological mechanisms through which the interaction among source type, trust, post engagement, and perceived authenticity influences consumers' behavioural intentions.

However, it is worth highlighting that the present work is not without limitations. It should be noted that: 1) the use of fictitious pizzerias and influencers may reduce the ecological validity of the results (Reis and Judd, 2000); 2) the generalizability of the results is limited by the fact that the study focused on a single industry (restaurants) and a single country (United States); 3) self-reported measures of behavioral intention, although common in digital marketing research, do not always translate into actual purchasing behaviors. Intentions do not reliably predict actions in the real world due to factors such as social desirability bias, memory errors, or situational constraints (Chandon et al., 2005; Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Future research can extend this work in several ways. First, it could be interesting to replicate the study with real influencers and brands to improve ecological validity and measure actual consumer behaviour. Conducting comparative studies across different cultural markets could help understand how cultural values shape perceptions of influencer authenticity and trustworthiness. Longitudinal

studies could monitor the development of trust, engagement, and purchase intention over time following repeated exposure to internal or external influencers. Finally, it may be appropriate to investigate the impact of internal influencers on HRM, focusing on their organisational impact and considering factors such as employee morale, brand loyalty, and alignment with the corporate identity.

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