

From Reach to Trust: A Multi-Criteria Analysis of Strategic Factors in Restaurant Influencer Marketing

Chung-Te Ting^{1*}, Wei-Lun Hsu², Szu-Chin Pan³ and Ya-Chou Cheng³

Abstract

Influencer marketing has become an important strategy for restaurant businesses seeking to enhance market visibility and consumer engagement. This study develops a multi-criteria framework for identifying and prioritizing strategic factors in restaurant influencer selection from a “reach-to-trust” perspective. The Fuzzy Analytic Hierarchy Process (FAHP) was applied to integrate the judgments of 10 experts with extensive hospitality industry and management experience. The framework comprises four dimensions—Influence Quality, Content Expertise, Trust and Relationship, and Professional Background—and 16 evaluation criteria. The results identify Influence Quality as the highest-priority dimension, followed by Trust and Relationship and Content Expertise. At the criterion level, Follower Scale ranks first, followed by Reputation Risk, Reachability, Message Delivery, Follower Trust, and Parasocial Interaction. These findings indicate that market reach remains a fundamental consideration in influencer selection, while relational trust, content communication, and reputational risk provide additional strategic considerations. Thus, the “reach-to-trust” perspective does not imply that trust replaces reach; rather, it represents an expanded decision framework that moves beyond reach-only evaluation toward a more comprehensive assessment of influencer collaboration.

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Keywords: Influencer Marketing; Restaurant Industry; Fuzzy Analytic Hierarchy Process (FAHP); Influencer Selection.

¹ Associate professor, Executive Master of Business Administration, Chang Jung Christian University, Tainan City, Taiwan.*Corresponding author.

² Ph.D. student, Ph.D. Program in Business and Operations Management, Chang Jung Christian University, Tainan City, Taiwan.

³ Assistant Professor, Department of Tourism, Food & Beverage Management, Chang Jung Christian University, Tainan City, Taiwan.

1. Introduction

The rapid growth of social media and digital platforms has fundamentally changed how consumers obtain information about restaurants. Traditional advertising and interpersonal recommendations are increasingly complemented by social media, video-sharing platforms, and electronic word of mouth. This shift is particularly relevant to the restaurant industry because dining is highly experiential and visually oriented. Before visiting a restaurant, consumers often form initial impressions through photographs, short-form videos, online reviews, and influencer recommendations, making social media an important communication channel between restaurant brands and consumers. Within this environment, social media influencers have become important intermediaries through which restaurant brands disseminate information, increase market visibility, and reach potential customers by leveraging their social influence, content-creation capabilities, and relationships with followers (De Veirman et al., 2017; Conde and Casais, 2023). Compared with the predominantly one-way communication of traditional advertising, influencer marketing offers greater interactivity and personalization and enables brands to reach specific consumer segments through influencers' established social networks (Lou and Yuan, 2019).

The marketing value of influencers has traditionally been assessed through quantitative indicators such as follower count, reach, and engagement rate (De Veirman et al., 2017), reflecting a marketing logic centered largely on visibility and exposure. In the restaurant industry, influencers with large follower bases and strong communication reach can provide substantial market visibility for restaurant openings, new products, and promotional campaigns. Market reach therefore remains a fundamental consideration in influencer selection because sufficient audience access is necessary for disseminating brand messages. However, greater reach does not necessarily translate into effective marketing outcomes (Lou and Yuan, 2019; Weismueller et al., 2020). In an information-saturated social media environment, exposure alone may be insufficient to persuade consumers or translate attention into consumption behavior. The strategic value of restaurant influencer marketing should therefore be evaluated not by reach alone, but by whether that reach is accompanied by effective communication, credible relationships, and acceptable brand-related risks.

Content is central to transforming influencer reach into meaningful brand communication. Influencers must communicate food attributes, dining environments, service experiences, and brand values in ways that consumers can readily understand and find appealing. Content quality, message delivery, information credibility, and creative expression can therefore shape the effectiveness of brand communication (Lou and Yuan, 2019; Weismueller et al., 2020).

Even influencers with substantial reach may generate limited communication value if their content fails to convey the distinctive characteristics of a restaurant. Influencer marketing thus involves not only generating visibility but also translating audience attention into consumer awareness and understanding of the restaurant brand.

Trust and relational ties further distinguish influencer marketing from conventional digital advertising. Through sustained content sharing and social interaction, influencers can develop trust and parasocial relationships with followers, strengthening the credibility and persuasive potential of their recommendations (Sokolova and Kefi, 2020; Yuan and Lou, 2020; Su et al., 2021). Stronger parasocial relationships may also enhance perceived recommendation credibility and purchase intentions (Aw et al., 2022). However, influencer–brand collaborations entail reputational risks. Controversies or inappropriate conduct involving an influencer may become associated with the collaborating brand and negatively affect consumer evaluations (Singh et al., 2020). Restaurant businesses must therefore consider not only an influencer's ability to generate visibility but also follower trust, relational value, and potential reputational risk. Trust and brand safety are consequently complementary strategic considerations for evaluating the quality and sustainability of market influence rather than substitutes for reach itself.

Despite the growing body of research on influencer marketing, prior studies have predominantly examined how influencer characteristics affect consumer attitudes, brand perceptions, trust, and purchase intentions (De Veirman et al., 2017; Lou and Yuan, 2019; Sokolova and Kefi, 2020; Conde and Casais, 2023). Comparatively less attention has been paid to influencer marketing from the managerial decision-making perspective of restaurant businesses, particularly to how market influence, content expertise, trust-based relationships, and professional background should be considered simultaneously and prioritized. In practice, restaurant businesses operate with limited marketing budgets and managerial resources and must make trade-offs among multiple criteria, including follower scale, reachability, content quality, information credibility, reputation risk, and professional background. Without a systematic evaluation framework, firms may rely disproportionately on follower counts, influencer popularity, or managerial intuition, limiting their ability to develop a systematic influencer selection strategy.

Against this background, this study examines restaurant influencer marketing from a “reach-to-trust” perspective and employs the Fuzzy Analytic Hierarchy Process (FAHP) to construct a hierarchical framework for evaluating the strategic factors underlying influencer selection. The framework comprises four dimensions—Influence Quality, Content Expertise, Trust and Relationship, and Professional Background—and their corresponding evaluation criteria. Rather than presuming that trust supersedes market reach, the framework examines how reach functions alongside content capability, relational trust, and brand-related risk in managerial decision-making. FAHP extends conventional AHP by incorporating fuzzy set theory into pairwise comparisons, allowing linguistic judgments to be represented through fuzzy numbers and thereby accommodating the uncertainty and ambiguity

inherent in expert evaluation (van Laarhoven and Pedrycz, 1983; Buckley, 1985; Chang, 1996; Liu et al., 2020). This approach is particularly appropriate for influencer selection, where decisions depend substantially on managerial experience, brand-related judgment, and subjective evaluation (Baki, 2020).

Accordingly, this study has four objectives. First, it develops a multi-criteria evaluation framework for restaurant influencer marketing. Second, it assesses the relative importance of Influence Quality, Content Expertise, Trust and Relationship, and Professional Background. Third, it identifies the key criteria that restaurant businesses should prioritize when selecting influencers for collaboration. Fourth, it clarifies how market reach, content communication, relational trust, and brand risk jointly shape the strategic logic of influencer selection. Importantly, the notion of “from reach to trust” does not imply a sequential or causal transition in which reach generates trust, nor does it suggest that trust replaces or becomes more important than reach. Rather, it represents an expanded managerial perspective that moves beyond reach-only decision making by considering market visibility together with content capability, relational value, and brand safety. Reach provides the visibility necessary for influencer collaboration, while content communication, relational trust, and reputational risk provide additional considerations for evaluating the strategic value of that visibility. By shifting attention from the consumer-response orientation prevalent in existing research toward the decision logic of restaurant managers, this study provides a systematic basis for influencer selection, marketing resource allocation, and brand risk management.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Influencer Marketing in the Restaurant Industry

Influencer marketing has become an important component of firms' digital marketing strategies. Social media influencers are generally individuals who possess influence within particular online communities or digital platforms and shape followers' attitudes and behaviors through content creation, information sharing, and social interaction (De Veirman et al., 2017; Lou and Yuan, 2019). Compared with traditional celebrity endorsers, influencers typically engage with more clearly defined audience segments and develop ongoing relationships with followers through continuous content sharing and interaction. Such relationships can make their recommendations appear more relatable and facilitate the dissemination of information within social networks (Conde and Casais, 2023). Influencers have consequently emerged as important intermediaries connecting brands with consumers (Ooi et al., 2023).

Restaurant consumption is highly experiential, making it difficult for consumers to fully evaluate food quality, service, and the dining environment before an actual visit. Consumers therefore frequently rely on reviews, photographs, videos, and the experiences of others to reduce information uncertainty. Influencers can transform food characteristics, dining atmospheres, and consumption experiences into visual and narrative content, thereby increasing brand exposure and potentially shaping

consumers' perceptions and restaurant choices (Lee et al., 2021; Weismueller et al., 2020). However, influencers differ substantially in follower scale, reachability, content quality, information credibility, follower relationships, and professional background, and these factors may simultaneously affect the dissemination of brand messages and consumer responses (Pan et al., 2025; Conde and Casais, 2023). Restaurant influencer marketing should therefore be regarded as a strategic decision involving multiple criteria rather than a selection process based solely on follower counts or reach.

2.2 Influence Quality

Influence is one of the most direct and observable characteristics of influencer marketing and primarily reflects an influencer's ability to disseminate information to target audiences and generate market responses. In the social media environment, an influencer's influence should not be assessed solely on the basis of popularity. Rather, it should encompass the size of the audience base, the ability to reach target consumers, and the capacity to stimulate consumer action. From the perspective of restaurant businesses, one of the fundamental purposes of influencer marketing is to extend the reach of brand messages through influencers' established social networks. Influence Quality therefore constitutes an important foundation for evaluating influencer marketing strategies (Ooi et al., 2023).

Follower Scale represents the potential audience base accumulated by an influencer. A larger follower base generally implies greater potential for brand messages to reach a broader range of consumers (De Veirman et al., 2017). However, follower count alone does not fully represent actual influence; Engagement Rate and Reachability must also be considered. Engagement Rate reflects the extent to which followers respond to content through likes, comments, shares, and other forms of participation, thereby indicating actual audience responses to influencer-generated content (Gross and von Wangenheim, 2022). Reachability, in contrast, concerns whether a message effectively reaches target consumers rather than merely reflecting the nominal size of an influencer's follower base. In addition, Conversion Capability reflects an influencer's ability to translate social media exposure into subsequent consumer actions, such as searching for restaurant information, making reservations, or visiting the restaurant (Lou and Yuan, 2019; Saima and Khan, 2021). Accordingly, this study incorporates Follower Scale, Engagement Rate, Reachability, and Conversion Capability as the four evaluation criteria within the Influence Quality dimension.

2.3 Content Expertise

Content serves as a critical mechanism through which influencers transform their personal influence into effective brand communication. Restaurant consumption is highly experiential and visual, and consumers cannot assess the actual dining experience solely on the basis of product specifications. Consequently, how influencers present food characteristics, service processes, spatial atmosphere, and

brand stories can shape consumers' understanding and evaluation of restaurant brands. In this sense, influencers are not merely channels for generating exposure; they also function as translators of brand messages, transforming restaurant experiences and brand attributes into content that can be communicated effectively to social media audiences.

Content Quality reflects the completeness, attractiveness, and overall presentation of influencer-generated content. High-quality content can help consumers acquire relevant information about restaurant products and services while reducing information search costs (Lou and Yuan, 2019). Message Delivery, meanwhile, concerns whether influencers can communicate brand characteristics in a clear, comprehensible, and persuasive manner, enabling consumers to quickly understand the core values that a restaurant seeks to convey (Weismueller et al., 2020).

Information Credibility refers to the extent to which consumers perceive restaurant-related information provided by an influencer as truthful and reliable (Kumsawat et al., 2025). When influencer content appears excessively commercialized or the information presented is inconsistent with consumers' actual experiences, followers may become less receptive to the influencer's recommendations (Saima and Khan, 2021). Creative Expression, by contrast, can enhance content appeal through distinctive narratives, visual elements, and presentation styles, helping brands attract attention within a crowded social media environment. Taken together, Content Expertise extends beyond the production of visually appealing posts; it encompasses the broader capabilities represented by Content Quality, Message Delivery, Information Credibility, and Creative Expression.

2.4 Trust and Relationship

Trust represents one of the key features distinguishing influencers from conventional forms of digital advertising. Through sustained content sharing and social interaction, influencers develop relationships with their followers over time. When followers trust an influencer and the information provided, they are more likely to accept the influencer's recommendations (Lou and Yuan, 2019; Verma et al., 2024). The value of influencer marketing therefore derives not only from the number of followers an influencer possesses but also from the foundation of trust established between the influencer and those followers.

Follower Trust reflects the extent to which followers believe in an influencer and the information that the influencer provides. It represents an important condition through which personal influence can be translated into persuasive effects (Verma et al., 2024). Authenticity concerns the perceived consistency and genuineness of an influencer's image, experiences, and recommendations. When consumers perceive influencer content as reflecting personal experience and genuine viewpoints rather than merely commercial promotion, they are more likely to evaluate the information positively (Andonopoulos et al., 2023; Ren et al., 2023).

Parasocial Interaction refers to the psychological connection and sense of familiarity that followers develop with influencers through repeated exposure to

their content and ongoing social media interactions. Such connections can make influencer recommendations appear more personal and relevant to followers (Sokolova and Kefi, 2020; Aw et al., 2022; Su et al., 2021; Yuan and Lou, 2020). Through these relationships, influencers function not only as disseminators of advertising messages but also as relational links within social communities.

However, influencer–brand collaborations may also involve Reputation Risk. When an influencer becomes involved in controversies, inappropriate statements, or other negative incidents, the influencer's personal image may become associated with the collaborating brand, potentially affecting brand evaluations (Singh et al., 2020). This concern is particularly relevant to restaurant brands, which rely heavily on consumer word of mouth and trust. Firms must therefore consider potential brand risks while seeking to benefit from the relational value embedded in influencers' social networks (Conde and Casais, 2023). Accordingly, this study incorporates Follower Trust, Authenticity, Parasocial Interaction, and Reputation Risk into the Trust and Relationship dimension to capture the coexistence of relational value and risk management in restaurant influencer marketing.

2.5 Professional Background

In addition to influence, content, and trust-based relationships, an influencer's professional background may affect restaurant businesses' assessments of collaboration value. Traditional source credibility and endorsement research suggests that messages tend to be more persuasive when the information source possesses product-related knowledge, experience, and expertise (Ohanian, 1990). Accordingly, influencers with experience in food service, restaurant management, or related industries may theoretically have a better understanding of restaurant products and service characteristics and may be better positioned to create content that reflects the specific context of the industry (Lee et al., 2022).

However, professional value in the social media environment is not necessarily equivalent to conventional professional qualifications. An influencer's market value may also derive from content-production capabilities, social media management, prior collaboration experience, and demonstrated work outcomes. This is particularly relevant to restaurant influencers, who must transform actual consumption experiences into communicable brand content. Their previous collaborations and demonstrated performance may therefore provide additional indications of their ability to execute marketing activities effectively (Lee et al., 2022). Accordingly, this study incorporates Food Service Experience, Restaurant Management Knowledge, Collaboration Experience, and Work Outcomes into the Professional Background dimension to evaluate the relative importance of industry knowledge and practical collaboration capabilities in restaurant influencer marketing decisions.

2.6 Theoretical Foundation and Multi-Criteria Decision-Making Perspective

Source Credibility Theory provides an overarching theoretical foundation for understanding how source characteristics influence the persuasiveness of marketing communication. The theory emphasizes that expertise and trustworthiness shape how audiences evaluate and respond to information (Ohanian, 1990). This perspective is particularly relevant to influencer marketing because influencers function not only as channels for brand communication but also as information sources whose perceived credibility can affect consumer responses (Lou and Yuan, 2019; Weismueller et al., 2020). In the restaurant context, where consumers often evaluate experiential attributes before visiting, influencer credibility becomes especially important.

From this perspective, the four dimensions developed in this study represent complementary aspects of influencer evaluation. Influence Quality reflects the ability to reach target audiences and generate market visibility. Content Expertise captures the ability to translate restaurant experiences and brand attributes into clear and persuasive messages. Trust and Relationship encompasses follower trust, authenticity, parasocial interaction, and reputation risk, while Professional Background reflects expertise through foodservice experience, restaurant management knowledge, collaboration experience, and work outcomes. Together, these dimensions incorporate market, communication, relational, and professional considerations relevant to restaurant influencer selection.

However, Source Credibility Theory explains why source-related characteristics such as expertise and trustworthiness matter but does not specify how managers should prioritize multiple criteria. Restaurant businesses must make trade-offs among these factors under limited marketing resources, making influencer selection a multi-criteria decision problem (Pan et al., 2025). Multi-criteria decision-making (MCDM) methods are therefore appropriate for establishing relative priorities among hierarchical evaluation criteria (Forman and Gass, 2001; Akincilar and Dağdeviren, 2014).

Accordingly, this study integrates Source Credibility Theory with an MCDM perspective and employs FAHP to determine the relative priorities of theoretically and managerially relevant factors. Source Credibility Theory provides the theoretical basis for credibility- and expertise-related characteristics, while the broader influencer marketing literature supports the inclusion of market influence, content communication, relational value, and professional capabilities. This integration moves the study beyond a purely mathematical prioritization exercise and provides a theoretically grounded framework for understanding restaurant businesses' influencer selection decisions.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Framework and Design

This study aims to identify and prioritize the critical factors underlying influencer marketing strategies in the restaurant industry. From a strategic “reach-to-trust” perspective, influencer selection is conceptualized as a multi-criteria decision-making problem involving trade-offs among market influence, content communication, trust-based relationships, and professional qualifications. Accordingly, the Fuzzy Analytic Hierarchy Process (FAHP) is employed as the principal analytical method.

The Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP) decomposes complex decision problems into hierarchical levels and determines the relative importance of criteria through pairwise comparisons (Forman and Gass, 2001). However, influencer selection relies substantially on professional experience and subjective judgment, which may not be adequately represented by precise numerical values. FAHP incorporates fuzzy set concepts into AHP to capture linguistic judgments and uncertainty in expert evaluations (van Laarhoven and Pedrycz, 1983; Buckley, 1985; Liu et al., 2020) and has been applied to hospitality and tourism decision contexts involving professional judgment (Baki, 2020).

Based on the literature, a three-level hierarchical framework was developed. The first level represents the overall objective of identifying critical factors in restaurant influencer marketing. The second level comprises four dimensions: Influence Quality, Content Expertise, Trust and Relationship, and Professional Background. The third level contains 16 criteria. Influence Quality includes Follower Scale, Engagement Rate, Reachability, and Conversion Capability; Content Expertise includes Content Quality, Message Delivery, Information Credibility, and Creative Expression; Trust and Relationship includes Follower Trust, Authenticity, Parasocial Interaction, and Reputation Risk; and Professional Background includes Food Service Experience, Restaurant Management Knowledge, Collaboration Experience, and Work Outcomes. The complete framework and theoretical foundations are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Hierarchical framework and theoretical basis

Overall Objective	Evaluation Dimension	Evaluation Criterion	References
Critical factors in restaurant influencer marketing strategies	Influence Quality	Follower Scale	De Veirman et al. (2017); Ooi et al. (2023)
		Engagement Rate	Gross and von Wangenheim (2022); De Veirman et al. (2017)
		Reachability	De Veirman et al. (2017); Ooi et al. (2023)
		Conversion Capability	Lou and Yuan (2019); Saima and Khan (2021)
	Content Expertise	Content Quality	Lou and Yuan (2019); Weismueller et al. (2020)
		Message Delivery	Weismueller et al. (2020); Lou and Yuan (2019)
		Information Credibility	Kumsawat et al. (2025); Saima and Khan (2021)
		Creative Expression	Pan et al. (2025); Lee et al. (2021)
	Trust and Relationship	Follower Trust	Verma et al. (2024); Lou and Yuan (2019)
		Authenticity	Andonopoulos et al. (2023); Ren et al. (2023)
		Parasocial Interaction	Sokolova and Kefi (2020); Aw et al. (2022); Su et al. (2021); Yuan and Lou (2020)
		Reputation Risk	Singh et al. (2020); Conde and Casais (2023)
	Professional Background	Food Service Experience	Ohanian (1990); Lee et al. (2022)
		Restaurant Management Knowledge	Ohanian (1990); Lee et al. (2022)
		Collaboration Experience	Lee et al. (2022)
		Work Outcomes	Lee et al. (2022)

3.2 Questionnaire Design and Expert Participants

The expert questionnaire was developed based on the FAHP hierarchical framework presented in Table 1. Pairwise comparisons were used to assess the relative importance of the four principal dimensions and the four criteria within each dimension. Because experts may not always express differences in importance using precise numerical values, a fuzzy linguistic scale was adopted. Experts evaluated paired factors using linguistic judgments ranging from “equally important” to varying degrees of “more important,” which were subsequently converted into fuzzy numerical values to capture the uncertainty inherent in expert decision-making (Buckley, 1985; Liu et al., 2020).

A purposive sampling approach was employed to recruit 10 experts with substantial hospitality-industry experience or expertise in hospitality management. Eight were from the hotel industry and two from hospitality-related higher education institutions. Importantly, the hotel-industry experts were selected not merely for their general hotel experience but for professional roles and experience relevant to food and beverage (F&B) operations, restaurant management, managerial decision-making, or brand and public relations. Industry experts included chefs, executive chefs, managers, consultants, associate vice presidents, and deputy associate vice presidents, while the academic experts included a college dean/professor and a department chair/associate professor. Thus, although eight experts were affiliated with hotel organizations, their expertise extended to restaurant- and F&B-related managerial contexts relevant to the influencer selection decisions examined in this study.

The experts had 19–43 years of professional experience, averaging 30.1 years, and nine had more than 20 years of experience. The inclusion of hotel-affiliated F&B experts was considered appropriate because hotel and independent restaurants share fundamental influencer-marketing considerations, including market reach, content communication, follower relationships, brand reputation, and collaboration outcomes. Nevertheless, differences in organizational structure, resources, and brand-management practices may limit the generalizability of the findings across all restaurant formats. After questionnaire completion, the experts' pairwise judgments were aggregated and normalized according to the FAHP procedure. The relative weights and overall rankings of the four dimensions and 16 criteria were then calculated to support the subsequent analysis and discussion of managerial implications.

4. Results

This study employed the Fuzzy Analytic Hierarchy Process (FAHP) to integrate the judgments of 10 experts from the hospitality industry and hospitality management field and to assess the relative importance of the dimensions and criteria underlying restaurant influencer marketing strategies. Following pairwise comparisons, aggregation of fuzzy weights, defuzzification, and normalization, the weights and overall rankings of the four dimensions and 16 criteria were obtained, as presented in Table 2.

4.1 Consistency Test

To ensure that the experts' judgments exhibited an acceptable level of consistency, a consistency test was conducted. The consistency ratio (C.R.) for the overall comparison among the four dimensions was 0.0076. The C.R. values for Influence Quality, Content Expertise, Trust and Relationship, and Professional Background were 0.0035, 0.0020, 0.0075, and 0.0082, respectively. All values were below the recommended threshold of 0.10. These results indicate that the experts' pairwise comparisons demonstrated satisfactory consistency across all hierarchical levels, supporting the suitability of the data for subsequent weight estimation and priority analysis.

4.2 Weight Analysis of the Evaluation Dimensions

The results for the four dimensions show that Influence Quality received the highest weight (0.3721), followed by Trust and Relationship (0.2942), Content Expertise (0.2581), and Professional Background (0.0755). The first three dimensions together accounted for approximately 92.4% of the total weight, indicating that the expert evaluations place primary emphasis on market influence, social relationships, and content communication when assessing influencers for restaurant collaboration. Influence Quality ranked first, suggesting that an influencer's ability to provide a sufficient audience base and market communication capacity remains a key consideration in collaboration decisions. However, Trust and Relationship ranked a close second, indicating that firms also place substantial emphasis on the quality of the relationship between influencers and their followers, as well as on potential brand-related risks associated with collaboration. Content Expertise also accounted for a considerable share of the total weight, showing that restaurant influencers must not only be visible but also be capable of effectively presenting food characteristics and communicating brand messages. By contrast, Professional Background received a relatively low weight, suggesting that traditional foodservice or restaurant management experience is not a primary consideration in influencer selection decisions.

4.3 Weight Analysis of Criteria within Each Dimension

A further analysis of the criteria within each dimension reveals that, under Influence Quality, Follower Scale had the highest local weight (0.3972), followed by Reachability, Conversion Capability, and Engagement Rate. This result suggests that the size of the audience base and the ability to generate actual market reach remain the primary indicators used to assess influencer influence.

Within Content Expertise, Message Delivery received the highest local weight (0.3845), followed by Content Quality, Information Credibility, and Creative Expression. This finding indicates that restaurant businesses place greater importance on whether influencers can clearly communicate product characteristics and brand attributes than on whether the content is merely innovative in form. In the context of restaurant influencer marketing, the ability to communicate the brand effectively may therefore carry greater strategic priority than content novelty alone. Within the Trust and Relationship dimension, Reputation Risk received the highest local weight (0.3531), followed by Follower Trust, Parasocial Interaction, and Authenticity. This result suggests that while firms seek to benefit from influencers' established social relationships, they are also highly attentive to the potential negative brand consequences associated with collaboration. The relatively high weights assigned to Follower Trust and Parasocial Interaction further indicate that the relational connections accumulated between influencers and their followers constitute important components of collaboration value.

For Professional Background, the local weights of Work Outcomes and Collaboration Experience were higher than those of Food Service Experience and Restaurant Management Knowledge. This suggests that firms tend to assess influencer professionalism on the basis of observable performance and demonstrated collaboration outcomes rather than relying primarily on conventional industry experience or formal professional knowledge.

4.4 Global Weights and Key Findings

A comparison of the global weights of the 16 criteria shows that the six highest-ranked criteria were Follower Scale (0.1478), Reputation Risk (0.1039), Reachability (0.1037), Message Delivery (0.0993), Follower Trust (0.0871), and Parasocial Interaction (0.0756). Together, these six criteria accounted for 61.74% of the total weight. Notably, the highest-priority criteria were not concentrated within a single dimension; rather, they were distributed across Influence Quality, Content Expertise, and Trust and Relationship. This pattern demonstrates that restaurant businesses adopt a multidimensional approach when evaluating influencer collaborations.

Follower Scale ranked first overall, confirming that audience size and market visibility remain fundamental to restaurant influencer marketing. However, Reputation Risk ranked second and exceeded Reachability, indicating that firms are highly sensitive to the possibility that negative influencer-related events may spill over to the collaborating brand. Message Delivery also ranked among the leading

criteria, suggesting that the ability of influencers to communicate restaurant products and brand value effectively represents an important content-related capability in collaboration decisions.

Follower Trust and Parasocial Interaction were likewise included among the highest-ranked criteria, further demonstrating that social relationships have become a central component of influencer marketing value. By contrast, Food Service Experience and Restaurant Management Knowledge were among the lowest-ranked criteria overall, indicating that traditional foodservice expertise carries relatively limited priority within this particular decision context.

Overall, the findings show that restaurant influencer marketing cannot be adequately evaluated solely from an exposure-oriented perspective. Instead, the results support a multi-criteria framework that simultaneously considers market reach, content communication, relational trust, and brand risk.

Table 2: Global Weight and rankings of dimensions and criteria

Evaluation Dimension	Global Weight	Evaluation Criteria	Global Weight	Ranking
Influence Quality	0.3721	Follower Scale	0.1478	1
		Engagement Rate	0.0481	10
		Reachability	0.1037	3
		Conversion Capability	0.0725	7
Content Expertise	0.2581	Content Quality	0.0664	8
		Message Delivery	0.0993	4
		Information Credibility	0.0560	9
		Creative Expression	0.0364	11
Trust and Relationship	0.2942	Follower Trust	0.0871	5
		Authenticity	0.0276	13
		Parasocial Interaction	0.0756	6
		Reputation Risk	0.1039	2
Professional Background	0.0755	Food Service Experience	0.0102	15
		Restaurant Management Knowledge	0.0101	16
		Collaboration Experience	0.0250	14
		Work Outcomes	0.0302	12

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

As social media has become an important communication platform for restaurant brands, influencers increasingly function as intermediaries connecting brands, content, and consumer relationships. For restaurant businesses, the central issue has therefore shifted from whether influencers should be used to how appropriate collaboration partners should be selected. From a managerial perspective, this study conceptualized restaurant influencer selection as a multi-criteria decision problem and employed the Fuzzy Analytic Hierarchy Process (FAHP) to evaluate market influence, content communication, trust-based relationships, and professional qualifications.

A key finding is that market reach remains fundamental to influencer selection. Influence Quality emerged as the highest-priority dimension, while Follower Scale ranked first among all criteria, indicating that audience size and market visibility remain important foundations for collaboration. However, reach alone is insufficient to determine the strategic value of an influencer partnership. Trust and Relationship ranked second among the four dimensions, while Reputation Risk, Follower Trust, and Parasocial Interaction were among the leading criteria. These findings suggest that restaurant businesses consider relational trust and brand safety alongside market visibility when evaluating the quality and sustainability of influencer collaboration.

Accordingly, the “from reach to trust” perspective should not be interpreted as a linear transition in which trust replaces reach or becomes more important than market visibility. Rather, it represents an expansion from reach-only decision making toward a more comprehensive evaluation logic. Reach reflects an influencer's capacity to generate market visibility, while content capability determines whether that visibility can be translated into meaningful brand communication. Relational trust and reputational risk further help managers assess whether an influencer represents a credible and acceptable collaboration partner. Thus, “from reach to trust” means moving beyond reach as the sole decision criterion rather than moving away from reach itself.

The findings also highlight influencers' dual roles as content translators and brand collaboration partners. Because restaurant offerings are highly experiential, influencers must effectively communicate food, service, dining atmosphere, and brand characteristics while maintaining credible follower relationships. Their personal image and potential controversies may also become associated with collaborating brands, making influencer selection a matter of both communication effectiveness and brand risk governance. Moreover, the relatively lower priority of Professional Background suggests that observable work outcomes and collaboration experience may be more relevant than conventional industry credentials alone.

Overall, this study reframes restaurant influencer selection as a layered multi-criteria strategic decision rather than a choice based on isolated indicators. FAHP provides a systematic means of making these managerial trade-offs explicit. The

central implication is not that restaurant businesses should move away from reach, but that they should move beyond reach-only decision making by considering whether market visibility is supported by effective communication, credible relationships, and acceptable reputational risk.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings, restaurant businesses should first move influencer selection from experience-based judgment toward a more systematic evaluation process. Formal screening mechanisms should incorporate market reach, content performance, follower relationships, and collaboration risk rather than relying primarily on follower counts, popularity, or managerial intuition. Brands that frequently engage in influencer marketing may further establish standardized criteria to improve consistency across influencers and campaigns.

Second, influencer collaboration should extend beyond exposure management to include relationship and risk management. Before collaboration, firms should assess influencers' content styles, follower interactions, previous collaborations, public image, and alignment with brand positioning. During collaboration, brand information, content principles, and responsibilities should be clearly defined. For long-term or high-exposure partnerships, controversy-management and collaboration-termination mechanisms may further reduce potential reputational risks.

Third, restaurant businesses should regard influencers as partners in translating brand value into social media communication rather than merely as content distributors. Firms can provide essential information on products, services, and brand values while allowing influencers sufficient creative flexibility to communicate naturally with their audiences. This approach can balance brand consistency with authentic social media communication.

Fourth, influencer allocation should reflect specific marketing objectives. Restaurant openings may emphasize market reach, whereas brand-image campaigns may place greater emphasis on content communication and follower relationships. Long-term partnerships may require greater attention to brand fit and reputational stability. Such differentiated allocation can improve the strategic use of limited marketing resources.

Finally, this study primarily reflects the firm-side perspectives of hospitality-industry and hospitality-management experts. Future research could examine consumer responses to the identified factors, including brand trust, restaurant attitudes, and consumption intentions. Comparative studies across restaurant types, brand sizes, influencer tiers, and social media platforms could further determine whether strategic priorities vary across contexts. Future studies may also integrate alternative multi-criteria decision-making methods or consumer behavior models to provide a more comprehensive understanding of restaurant influencer marketing.

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