
Social Media Influencer Marketing in the Food Industry: A Spatial Distribution of Research

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Abstract:

Purpose: The aim of this article is to conduct a review of the literature on influencer marketing and the food industry, in terms of research subject and the spatial distribution of research.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The study used elements of the systematic literature review method (SRL). The SRL method employed the Scoping Review (SR) tool for selecting and aggregating knowledge through the process of mapping and structuring information provided by the literature review, and the technique of in-depth analysis of full-text articles (73 items).

Findings: The review of the literature showed that research on influencer marketing in the food industry is dominated by the issue of social media influencers' impact on infants, children, and adolescents. The literature review regarding the spatial distribution of analyzed studies indicates the dominance of researchers affiliated with the world's leading research centers in the USA, Western Europe, and Australia.

Practical Implications: Influencer marketing in the food industry is a powerful tool that harnesses the influence of popular individuals to promote food products, restaurants, or culinary experiences. However, Influencers should be made aware of the ethical responsibility they have when choosing to promote products. Regulations to protect children from marketing must extend beyond paid advertising to include paid content in posts generated through web-based communities and by influencers.

Originality/Value: Research into influencer marketing in the food industry is still in an early stage of development, especially in the context of influence on young consumers and their parents. The results of the literature review of 73 articles made it possible to identify the subject of the research and its spatial distribution.

Keywords: Social media, influencer marketing, food industry.

JEL codes: M31, L66, L82.

Paper type: Review article.

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1. Introduction

Technological advancements are revolutionizing the way businesses operate in today's world. From postal services (Drab-Kurowska and Budziewicz-Guźlecka, 2021) to restaurants (Lee *et al.*, 2021), every industry must adapt to these new trends in order to stay competitive and meet customer expectations. In the field of promotion and marketing, technological changes are paramount. Traditional advertising methods such as newspapers and television are losing ground to the Internet and social media (Kumar and Mirchandani, 2012).

One way to use social media to achieve marketing goals is by collaborating with social media influencers, also known as social media influencer marketing (De Veirman *et al.*, 2019; Haenlein *et al.*, 2020). Recent studies have shown that “Generation Z” or “millennial” consumers tend to shun traditional media in favor of online content generated by influencers (Cabeza-Ramírez *et al.*, 2022; Ghosh and Islam, 2023; Mostafa, 2021; Panopoulos *et al.*, 2023; Sfodera *et al.*, 2020).

Influencers (Ouvrein *et al.*, 2021) are individuals who have built an online following through the creation of content on social media, and influencer marketing is a strategic collaboration between a brand and an influencer to promote a product or service (Coates and Boyland, 2021; Maruši and Vraneševi, 2021).

Instagram and TikTok stand out regarding their importance in influencer marketing: they have the youngest user base and therefore attract customer segments who are particularly susceptible to this form of marketing communication (Barbosa and Añaña, 2023; Haenlein *et al.*, 2020). Influencer marketing is especially popular in industries related to fashion, beauty (Sudaryanto *et al.*, 2022), fitness (Duplaga, 2020), food (Spotlight on Grains and Legumes Nutrition Council, 2020), and travel (Soltani *et al.*, 2021), but it can be used in any industry, even in the stock market (Dogan *et al.*, 2020) or for promoting lab-grown meat (Chong *et al.*, 2022). Certain brands can benefit more from influencer marketing than others.

Influencers may have more impact on buying apparel, accessories, cosmetic, and, surprisingly, utilities (Pragathi and Saravanakumar, 2022; Zak and Hasprova, 2020). The advantage of influencers over celebrities is evidenced by the fact that people identify more with influencers than with celebrities, feel more similar to influencers than celebrities, and trust influencers more than celebrities (Schouten *et al.*, 2020).

Consumers rely on trusted cues and information to help them verify the food quality and credence attributes they seek (Wu *et al.*, 2021). They use their platforms to generate excitement, create awareness, and encourage their followers to try the promoted food offerings (Drew *et al.*, 2022; Gil-Quintana *et al.*, 2021).

Influencers are using more and more interesting forms of marketing such as food live-streaming shopping, which features a host eating and promoting the products to

viewers (Lee and Wan, 2023) on live-streaming platforms like Twitch (Pollack *et al.*, 2020; 2021; 2022). Healthy food marketing has the potential to influence dietary behavior (Folkvord and Hermans, 2020).

Despite their popularity, the topic of social media influencers and their influence on the food industry remains fairly understudied in academic literature thus far. Limited research is available to describe the extent of food marketing to children on web-based media, and measuring actual exposure is challenging (Kelly *et al.*, 2021).

The aim of this article is to carry out a review of the literature on influencer marketing and the food industry, in terms of research subject and the spatial distribution of the research. The rest of this paper proceeds in four parts: data and methods, results, summary and discussion, final remarks.

2. Data and Methods

The study used elements of the systematic literature review method (SRL) (Bekisz *et al.*, 2023; González-Limon *et al.*, 2022). The SRL method employed the Scoping Review (SR) tool for selecting and aggregating knowledge through the process of mapping and structuring information provided by the literature review, and the technique of in-depth analysis of full-text articles. The primary source of data was the Web of Science (WoS) database. The time scope of the analysis covered the period of March-June 2023.

The aim of the SLR was to identify the research subject and spatial distribution of research on influencer marketing in the food industry. In order to achieve the research goal, the following research questions were formulated:

1. Who undertakes research on the issue of influencer marketing in the food industry? (country of the researcher's origin based on their affiliation with the research)
2. What subjects of research dominate in the issue of influencer marketing in the food industry?

The process of selecting and aggregating literature for an in-depth analysis of the full content was carried out using the process of scoping review. The aim of this process was to embed the issue of influencers' activities in previous research and indicate their spatial distribution.

The scoping review process used the VOSviewer IT tool (version VOSviewer_1.6.17), an open-source software available online (<http://www.vosviewer.com>). The second stage of the research was an in-depth analysis of the full content of the selected articles. Finally, 73 items of literature were selected for in-depth analysis of full texts.

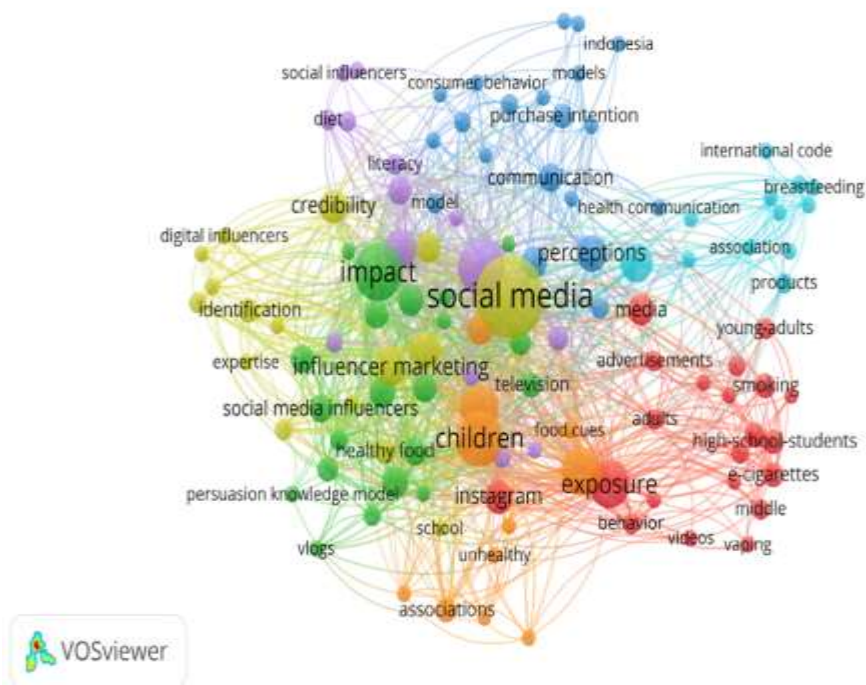
3. Results

3.1 Scoping Review Using VoSviewer

In the co-occurrence analysis, source data (bibliographic data) from the WoS database in RIS (Research Information System) format was used. Using the VOSviewer tool, keywords co-occurrence analysis was carried out to visualize the main research areas in the field of "influencer marketing" refined by "food" and "social media" and their interconnections. In the co-occurrence analysis, source data (bibliographic data) from the WoS database in RIS (Research Information Systems) format was used.

For the query "influencer marketing", refined by "food" and "social media", the search selected 73 items of literature. The first variant assumes the minimum threshold of keyword occurrences at level 2 (the widest range of keyword "influencer marketing"). Out of 462 keywords, 115 meet the threshold.

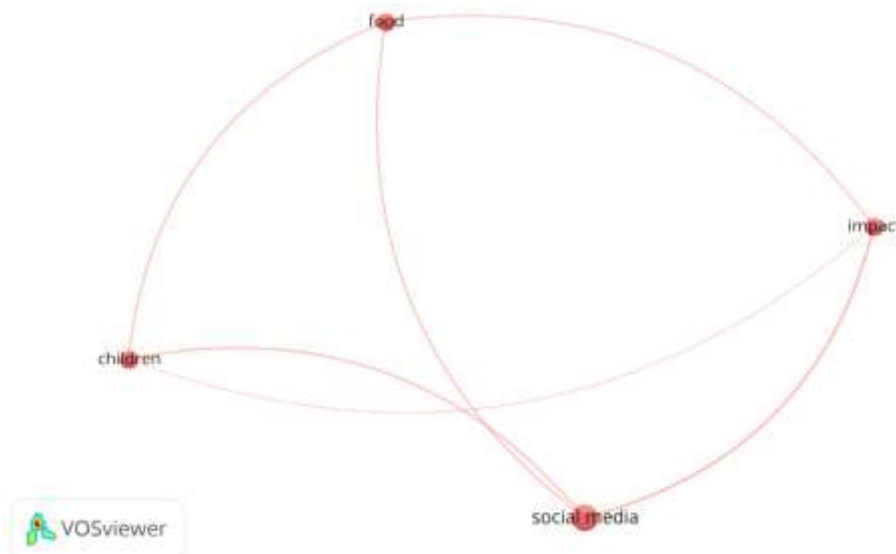
Figure 1. Slogan: "influencer marketing" refined by "food" and "social media" in the network of connections; 115 keywords (minimum threshold of occurrences at level 2)



Source: Own elaboration using VOSviewer and data from the WoS database.

With the set threshold of minimum occurrences (1), the analysis indicated that the issues of "influencer marketing" refined by "food" and "social media" most often occur in connection with research on their impact on children. This suggests a dominant research perspective focused on analyzing the impact of influencers on the eating habits and health of minors. In the second variant, the minimum threshold of keyword occurrences was assumed at the level of 17 (min available). Out of 462 keywords, 4 meet the threshold, including: food, children, impact, and social media.

Figure 2. Slogan: „influencer marketing" refined by "food" and "social media" in the network of connections; 4 keywords (minimum threshold of occurrences at the level of 17)



Source: Own elaboration using VOSviewer and data from the WoS database.

With the set threshold of minimum occurrences (1), the analysis of keyword associations confirmed the results obtained in the first variant of the analysis. Research on the analyzed issues is most focused on the issues of the impact of social media on children's nutrition and eating habits. Conclusions from the literature mapping process were used in the literature selection process for in-depth content analysis.

3.2 In-depth Analysis of the Full Content Selected Literature

3.2.1 Areas and directions of research

In the first step, an in-depth analysis of the literature allowed distinguishing the main subject of research, which is social media influencers' impact on infants, children, and adolescents.

Infants:

Globally, too few children are breastfed as recommended. Although the International Code of Marketing of BMS prohibits all forms of marketing, promotion has been observed in digital environments (Jones *et al.*, 2022).

Breastmilk substitutes companies promote their products in digital media using unethical strategies that fail to comply with the International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes (Mota-Castillo *et al.*, 2023). There is an urgent need to regulate the online marketing of milk formula and all food and beverage products for children under the age of 3 (Hidayana *et al.*, 2023).

The promotion of nutritionally poor food and beverages (F&B) has a proven effect on children's eating preferences and, therefore, plays a significant role in today's childhood obesity epidemic (Winzer *et al.*, 2022).

Obesity and state of being overweight are beginning to be treated as global epidemics (Castonguay and Messina, 2022). In this context, health professionals are increasingly acting as expert opinion leaders that use social media to connect with the public, in order to promote healthy lifestyles and provide specific recommendations for different product categories (Segovia-Villarreal and Rosa-Díaz, 2022).

Children:

Research published in 2019 (Coates *et al.*, 2019) shows that popular social media influencer promotion of food affects children's food intake. During childhood, children encounter different advertising sources shaping their tastes and preferences, trying to turn them into brand loyalists as they grow older (De Veirman *et al.*, 2019). The biggest dietary gatekeepers of children are their parents and more specifically mothers.

In the research by Beuckels and De Jans (2022), it turned out that mothers like sponsored Instagram posts better when they are posted by a mom influencer compared to a brand. Child health experts raise numerous concerns about the negative effects of children's exposure to unhealthy digital food marketing, including advertising and branded product placements on child-oriented videos on YouTube (Coates *et al.*, 2019a; Fleming-Milici *et al.*, 2023).

A study by Loose *et al.* (2023) was conducted on children aged 4 to 7 to examine their knowledge and skills for television commercials, YouTube pre-roll ads, and influencer marketing. Results revealed preschool children have advertising literacy skills for TV commercials and YouTube pre-roll ads, but not for influencer marketing.

That is why it is so important to acquire more insight into the frequency and amount of time children spend on viewing vlogs (Folkvord *et al.*, 2019), especially that

vlogs are among the few media channels where beverages and foods can still be advertised without restrictions (Smit *et al.*, 2020). 71% of kid YouTube vloggers channels with the presence of food products examined in the study (Martínez-Pastor *et al.*, 2021) were classified as non-essential and unhealthy foods.

Adolescents:

The type of product prominently portrayed on social media is food (Abell and Biswas, 2022). Social media exposure leads to unfavorable eating patterns in both children and adolescents (Sina *et al.*, 2022). Adolescents' exposure to social media food promotion mostly concerns unhealthy foods, shown in advertisements and other food-related posts, which are integrated into a wide variety of entertainment appreciated by adolescents (van der Bend *et al.*, 2022).

What is more, food and beverage companies utilize marketing techniques that differ based on gender (Amson *et al.*, 2023). The interviewees of the research (Feijoo *et al.*, 2022) recognize that they primarily receive commercial messages about food and products related to physical appearance, such as makeup or clothing, from influencers. That is why it is crucial to question the advertising management of a digital space which was created for dialogue (Almoussa *et al.*, 2020) such as social networks, in which advertisers prioritize selling products and services (Feijoo and Sadaba, 2022; van der Bend *et al.*, 2023).

Food and beverage companies use social media to market their products by targeting the adolescent population. The use of celebrities and influencers and the promotion of "unhealthy" products appear to be commonly used tactics (Kucharczuk *et al.*, 2022; Tsochantaridou *et al.*, 2023). Previous studies have shown that advertising effectively increases the intake of unhealthy foods, while not much is known about the promotion of healthier foods (Folkvord and de Bruijne, 2020).

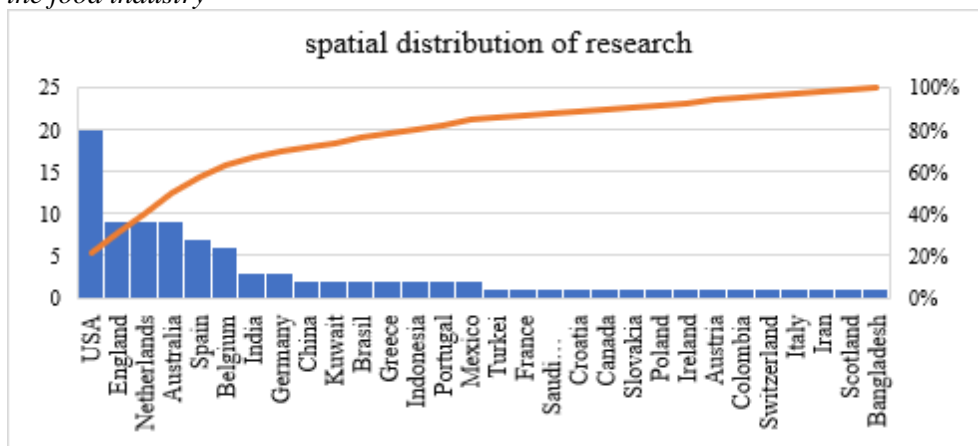
The rapidly changing digital media environment, such as social media, has been exploited by the tobacco industry to promote their products among both youth and adults (Groom *et al.*, 2021; Kong *et al.*, 2019, 2022; Vasseyy *et al.*, 2019; 2022).

There is a huge need for increased regulation of social media messaging and marketing of tobacco, with a particular focus on regulating social media, paid influencers, health communication campaigns, and marketing that appeals to adolescents and young adults (Guo *et al.*, 2020; Liu *et al.*, 2020).

3.2.2 Spatial distribution of research

Figure 3 presents the spatial distribution of research on the undertaken issue (frequency of occurrence of researchers with affiliation from a scientific unit from a given country).

Figure 3. Spatial distribution of research on social media influencer marketing in the food industry



Source: Own elaboration and data from the WoS database.

The analysis showed that research on the issue of influencer marketing in the food industry is led mainly by researchers from research centers located in three regions of the world, i.e., North America (USA), Western Europe (England, Netherlands, Spain, Belgium), and Australia.

4. Summary and Discussion

Today we live in a globalized world with no boundaries, where we can be updated on any information by the minute. Tools, such as search engines like Google, Bing, Yandex, etc. and social media (i.e., Facebook, Instagram and Twitter) or blogs, are making information sharing easier, but uncontrolled (Vasconcelos *et al.*, 2021). The Internet is today the largest platform for food distribution, and there are concerns about the impact that digital marketing has in the field of nutrition by promoting non-evidence-based recommendations (Jenkins *et al.*, 2020; Lynn *et al.*, 2020; Tricas-Vidal *et al.*, 2022).

The review of the literature indicated that research on influencer marketing in the food industry is dominated by the issue of social media influencers' impact on infants, children, and adolescents.

As new social media platforms emerge and social media marketing continues to grow, future regulatory policies on food marketing exposures should be expanded to include older populations (especially adolescents) and novel forms of advertising (especially social media influencer marketing) (Bentz and Veltri, 2020; Pollack *et al.*, 2022).

It is equally important that policy makers and technology companies embrace digital design, data collection, and marketing practices within today's broad digital

environment that support healthier decision-making and outcomes (Radesky *et al.*, 2020). The literature review in terms of the spatial distribution of analyzed studies indicates the dominance of researchers affiliated with the world's leading research centers in the USA, Western Europe, and Australia.

In terms of directions for further research, more research is needed to understand the impact of digital food marketing on children and inform appropriate policy action (Coates *et al.*, 2019c). Influencers should be made aware of the ethical responsibility they have when choosing to promote products (De Jans *et al.*, 2022), not only on YouTube but also on TikTok, which is very popular among children (Brooks *et al.*, 2022).

Regulations to protect children from marketing must extend beyond paid advertising to paid content in posts generated through web-based communities and influencers (Kelly *et al.*, 2021). Future research should concentrate on how to enable children to deal with influencer marketing and how to protect them from influencer marketing through guidelines and regulations (De Veirman *et al.*, 2019; Van Royen *et al.*, 2022)

5. Final Remarks

Influencer marketing in the food industry is a powerful tool that harnesses the influence of popular individuals to promote food products, restaurants, or culinary experiences. The conducted literature review using the systematic review methodology (73 items) indicated that the main subject of the undertaken research is the impact of influencers on consumers categorized by age, i.e., infants, children, and adolescents.

In terms of the spatial distribution of the research, scientific centers from North America, Western Europe, and Australia dominate. More research is needed to understand the impact of digital food marketing on young consumers and/or their parents and to inform appropriate policy actions.

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