

Influencer Congruence and Emotional Drivers in Functional Food Consumption: A Stimulus–Organism–Response Perspective on Generation Z Consumers

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Abstract

The global market for functional foods has developed tremendously in recent years, particularly among Generation Z consumers, whose purchasing decisions are highly influenced by digital media and social identity expressions. Social media influencers (more popularly known as Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs)) are growing forces in determining consumer perceptions of wellness products. However, existing research has mainly focused on informational credibility with limited consideration of emotional mechanisms as the groundwork of influencer-driven consumption. This paper explores the behavior of buying functional food in reaction to personal influencers on the basis of the problem of emotional drivers, according to the model of Stimulus - Organism - Response (S-O-R). The data were collected through an online survey among Generation Z consumers with 298 valid responses. The postulated relationships were tested using structural equation modeling. The findings indicate that perceived influencer fit is important in health anxiety and self-indulgent motivation, a positive effect on purchase preferences of both emotional drivers, and a greater influence of self-indulgent motivation. Mediation studies subsequently show that the relationship between influencer congruence and purchase behavior is partially mediated by emotional responses. These results highlight the significance of emotional processes in influencer marketing, which means that the consumption of functional foods among Generation Z is not only driven by health, but also identity expression and lifestyle preferences.

Keywords

Influencer Marketing; Functional Food Consumption; Generation Z; Health Anxiety; Self-indulgent Motivation; Stimulus–Organism–Response Model.

1. Introduction

The global market of functional foods has been experiencing a high growth rate in recent years due to the growing emphasis on health and wellness in the daily lives of consumers. Functional foods, which provide physiological benefits beyond mere nutrition, have become particularly appreciated by the youngest consumer groups, with an emphasis on primarily preventive health-oriented solutions and lifestyle enhancement[1]. Mass health crises tend to raise health anxiety, causing individuals to engage in behavior that is aimed at restoring a sense of personal control. [2] Under this circumstance, the intake of functional foods can play protective and psychological roles, offering a sense of reassurance.

At the same time, digital media environments have fundamentally affected how consumers identify and assess health-related products. Social media influencers, or Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) as they are often called, have emerged as influential middlemen in shaping consumer attitudes and purchase decisions. Unlike traditional advertising, influencer marketing relies on perceived authenticity and social identification. Studies indicate that young consumers tend to

follow influencers' recommendations when making consumption decisions, especially for lifestyle and wellness products. [3] Influencers are thus not simply information sources, but also symbolic role models whose identities consumers may want to emulate.

High perceived congruence between the influencer, product and self-concept of consumers is what makes influencer marketing efficient, according to a recent study[3]. When consumers perceive congruence with a brand, they are more likely to feel positive emotions and accept the messages communicated by the brand. This may be especially significant among Generation Z, who have consumption habits that are intertwined with identity and emotion. Rather than making decisions solely on functional features, Gen Z consumers often tend to make decisions based on lifestyle cues and self-care. [4]

Although the role of influencer marketing in health-related consumption is becoming more significant, existing studies are sporadic. The conventional theories of consumer behavior, e. g., the Theory of Planned Behavior, emphasize mainly on rational processes of evaluation, such as attitudes, perceived control and subjective norms[5], which may not be able to explain the emotional processes that are becoming increasingly significant in online consumption settings. Specifically, there is a lack of literature investigating how influencer congruency can be effective when interacting with internal psychological states, including health anxiety and self-indulgent motivation, to aid in explaining the determination of functional food purchasing behavior.

To address this gap, the present study employed the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model to examine how KOL-perceived fit as a marketing stimulus evokes internal emotional responses, which in turn influenced consumer behaviour. [6] In particular, this study suggests a dual pathway model of emotional responses, whereby health anxiety and self-indulgent motivation mediate the relationship between influencer congruence and preference for functional food consumption among Gen Z consumers. This study integrates the theory of influencer marketing with views on emotional consumption to provide a more holistic view of the role of digital identity processes in today's wellness consumption. The findings contribute to both consumer behaviour theory and successful marketing strategies in the booming functional foods sector.

2. Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

2.1. Functional Food Consumption and Generation Z

Functional foods are a unique type of food products that provide health benefits in addition to their nutritional value and can be used in disease prevention or improved physiological performance[1]. Over the past few years, there has been an unprecedented increase in demand of functional foods across the globe as people have become more worried about remaining healthy and preventing diseases by consuming the food they take. This has been particularly noticeable among younger consumers who are becoming more conscious of nutrition as a significant and inseparable aspect of their general lifestyle and wellbeing.

The consumption patterns of generation Z consumers are unique in comparison to those of earlier generations. [7] The health products are not perceived as medical-oriented solutions, and the consumption of wellness-related products is moving towards more lifestyle and identity expression opportunities through social media, which is a significant factor affecting these behaviors due to the frequent exposure of young consumers to health and nutrition information on digital media[4]. Consequently, the use of functional foods is less affected by nutritional aspects and more social and emotional aspects of digital culture..

To understand the motivations behind Gen Z's functional food consumption, then, it is necessary to consider both psychological factors and digital marketing strategies. Specifically, influencer marketing has become a prominent way of marketing and shaping perceptions about wellness products in online spaces.

2.2. Influencer Marketing and Perceived Fit

The social media influencers, also referred to as Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs), have emerged as powerful players in the present digital marketing landscape. In contrast to traditional celebrity endorsements, influencers tend to develop a close relationship with their audiences by interacting with them regularly, sharing personal stories and perceived authenticity and credibility[3] This perceived authenticity may lead to trust and engagement with the content, which is why influencer recommendations can be effective in influencing purchasing decisions. Recent studies have indicated that the success of influencer marketing is not only related to credibility but also to the perceived fit between the influencer and the product they are promoting, as well as with the consumer's self-concept. [3] When consumers perceive a good match between the influencer's lifestyle and the product being marketed, they tend to internalise the message and then form positive attitudes towards the product.

Perceived congruence could be especially significant to Generation Z consumers, who tend to identify themselves through online platforms. The influencers are symbolic role models whose lifestyles are associated with aspirational identities. Emotional involvement increases when the consumer perceives a fit between his or her self-image and that of the influencer, and behaviour is more likely to result in consumption. In the context of functional foods, perceived fit can thus be a significant marketing cue to internal emotional responses influencing purchase behavior.

2.3. Emotional Drivers: Health Anxiety and Self-Indulgence

Emotional and psychological factors often drive consumer decision-making in health-related contexts. Health anxiety is one of such motivations, which can be defined as the disposition to be concerned about own health and the threat of becoming ill. [2] High rates of health anxiety can encourage individuals to take preventive measures to reduce perceived threats to their health. This can be translated into increased interest in food products that are thought to be healthy in terms of food consumption.

Meanwhile, hedonic motivations can also be the source of motivation to consumption behavior. According to hedonic consumption theory, consumers tend to purchase products not only based on their functional values, but also emotional gratification, pleasure and symbolic meaning [8]. In the modern wellness culture, functional foods are yet another market that is marketed to the self-care lifestyles of consumers, allowing them to indulge themselves without losing a healthy image.

Risk reduction and self-reward are two motivations that can coexist with the consumption of functional foods. Consumers might desire to buy such products not only to solve health issues but also to indicate an aspirational lifestyle identity. The knowledge of how this emotion drivers operate collectively is thus very critical in understanding the purchasing behavior of functional foods.

2.4. Hypotheses Development

The present research applies the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model to comprehend the psychological processes that are involved in functional food consumption. The theory suggests that external stimuli in the environment influence internal psychological states, which subsequently influence behavioral responses[6] In the influencer marketing scenario, perceived fit between influencers and consumers can be an external stimulus that triggers internal emotional processes. Consumers who experience a high level of congruence between the lifestyle of the influencer and their own self-concept might be more emotionally invested in health-related content. This interaction can increase awareness of health risks and enhance motivations to take protective measures in consumption. Thus, the health anxiety will likely be one of the main psychological mediators between the perceived fit and functional food consumption.

H1: KOL perceived fit positively influences health anxiety.

Moreover, perceived fit can make consumers feel like they are part of the influencer's lifestyle and consumption is a reward to themselves or self-care. This may enhance the self-rewarding motivations for wellness products.

H2: KOL perceived fit positively influences self-indulgent motivation.

Health anxiety can motivate consumers to take preventive health behavior actions, including purchasing functional and healthy foods that are believed to enhance wellbeing or lower health risk.

H3: Health anxiety positively influences functional food purchase preference.

Equally, self-indulgent motivation can stimulate consumers to view functional foods as rewarding lifestyle goods related to personal wellbeing and identity expression.

H4: Self-indulgent motivation positively influences functional food purchase preference.

According to the S-O-R framework, the two emotional drivers are also likely to mediate the relationship between perceived fit and purchasing behavior.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This paper adopted a quantitative research design in order to examine the psychological process that underlies functional food purchasing behavior among Generation Z consumers. The data on perceptions of influencer marketing, emotional motivations, and purchase preferences were collected with the help of a structured online survey. The quantitative survey methods have been extensively employed in consumer behavior studies to investigate the relationship between psychological constructs and behavioral intentions. [1]

The Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) framework, which holds that internal psychological states are influenced by environmental stimuli and subsequently form behavioral reactions, served as the foundation for the development of the research model. [6] In this study, KOL-perceived fit was conceptualized as the marketing stimulus, while health anxiety and self-indulgent motivation were conceptualized as the organismic emotional responses. Functional food purchase preference served as the behavioral outcome.

3.2. Sample and Data Collection

Data was acquired utilizing an online questionnaire distributed via social media platforms popular among young consumers. The target population was Generation Z individuals aged between 18 and 29 as this demographic group is one of the major consumers for functional food products and is very active on social media platforms.

In the beginning, 312 replies were gathered. There were 298 valid replies left for the study after statistical outliers and incomplete questionnaires were removed. This sample size is thought to be sufficient for modeling structural equations and offers enough statistical power to examine the suggested correlations between variables.

3.3. Measurement of Variables

All constructs were measured with multi-item scales modified from established studies to assess reliability and validity. Responses were recorded via a five-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). KOL perceived fit was measured using items adapted for influencer congruence research that assess the perceived congruence between the influencer's lifestyle and the consumer's identity. [3] Health anxiety was assessed as has been done in prior studies looking at concern about personal health and perceived vulnerability to illness. [2] Self-indulgent motivation was measured using items from the hedonic consumption literature on feelings of emotional gratification and self-reward associated with consumption

experiences. [4] Finally, functional food purchase preference was measured using items assessing consumers' predisposition to purchase functional food products and their willingness to do so in the future.

3.4. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM). This approach is popular in marketing and consumer behavior research because it allows for the simultaneous exploration of complicated interactions between latent components and mediating variables. The processing of the data was carried out in two steps. First, the measurement model was tested to examine reliability and validity by the indicators including Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability (CR), and average variance extracted (AVE). Second, the structural model was studied in order to investigate the theorized relationships in variables and to assess the mediating effects of health anxiety and self-indulgent motivation.

4. Results

4.1. Data Screening

A total of 312 responses were initially gathered using the online survey. After removing incomplete surveys and statistical outliers, 298 valid responses were considered for study. The final sample size was determined to be enough for structural equation modeling and had enough statistical power to assess the suggested research model. Preliminary data screening was carried out which analyzed the distribution of the variables. Skewness and kurtosis values for all constructs were within acceptable limits, suggesting that the skewness and kurtosis of constructs did not deviate from normality in any meaningful way. Descriptive statistics showed that the respondents generally had a positive perception about influencer marketing and the use of functional food. As indicated by Table 1, the mean values of all variables were moderate to high.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables

Variable	Mean	SD
KOL perceived fit	3.84	0.71
Health anxiety	3.41	0.76
Self-indulgent motivation	3.92	0.68
Purchase preference	4.02	0.64

These results show that respondents mostly stated moderate to high levels of engagement with influencer content and functional food purchasing intentions.

4.2. Measurement Model Assessment

Before assessing the structural correlations, the measurement model was evaluated for reliability and validity. Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (CR) were used to assess internal consistency. As shown in Table 2, all constructs met the recommended reliability threshold of 0.70, indicating satisfactory internal consistency.

Table 2. Measurement Model Results

Construct	Cronbach's α	CR	AVE
KOL perceived fit	0.89	0.92	0.65
Health anxiety	0.84	0.88	0.58
Self-indulgent motivation	0.86	0.90	0.61
Purchase preference	0.82	0.86	0.54

Convergent validity was shown because all average variance extracted (AVE) values above the acceptable threshold of 0.50. The Fornell-Larcker criterion also supported discriminant validity, implying that sets of constructs can be empirically distinguished from one another. Overall, the measurement model showed satisfactory reliability and validity, and thus, more analysis of the structural relationships could be conducted.

4.3. Structural Model Results

PLS-SEM was used to test a structural model in order to evaluate the proposed correlations. The findings demonstrated that both emotional drivers were significantly positively impacted by the KOL fit. Health anxiety ($\beta = 0.33$, $p < 0.001$) and self-indulgent motivation ($\beta = 0.48$, $p < 0.001$) were significantly predicted by perceived fit. These results indicate that when consumers perceive a greater degree of connection with influencers, they have both heightened awareness of health issues and enhanced motivations tied to their lifestyle. Both emotional drivers were also found to be a significant influence on purchase preference. Health anxiety was positively associated with purchase preference ($\beta = 0.21$, $p = 0.003$), whereas self-indulgent motivation was more strongly positively associated ($\beta = 0.44$, $p < 0.001$). Overall, the model accounted for 49% of the variation in functional food purchase preference ($R^2 = 0.49$) and therefore has high explanatory value for understanding consumer behavior in this area.

4.4. Mediation Analysis

Bootstrapping 5000 resamples were performed to investigate the mediating effects of the two emotional drivers. The results supported that there are significant indirect effects in both of these pathways. The indirect effect of KOL perceived fit on purchase preference through health anxiety was significant ($a = 0.07$, 95% CI [0.03, 0.12]). However, the mediation effect through the self-indulgent motivated was stronger ($\beta = 0.21$, 95% CI [0.14, 0.29]). Furthermore, the direct effect of perceived fit on purchase preference was still significant ($\beta = 0.16$, $p = 0.012$), which is suggestive of a partial mediation effect. These results state that influencer congruence directly and indirectly affect the consumer behavior through emotional motivations.

5. Result and Discussion

5.1. Results

The findings show that perceived congruence between social media influencers and consumers has a significant impact on purchase behavior through emotional responses. Purchase preferences were also significantly affected by health anxiety and self-indulgent motivation. Self-indulgent motivation was revealed to be a more significant factor among these factors influencing purchase preferences than health anxiety. The findings are also supportive of the proposed Stimulus-Organism-Response framework. [6]

5.2. Discussion

These findings suggest that influencer marketing can be used as a source of information and/or an elicitor of internal emotional responses, which in turn influences consumer decision-making. In particular, the more significant influence of self-indulgent motivation implies that Generation Z consumers do not perceive functional foods as a preventive health measure, but as part of a larger lifestyle centered on self-care and well-being. Risk-based health issues seem to be less of a motivating factor among young consumers who tend to integrate functional foods into aspirational lifestyle narratives, which are affected by social media influencers. The outcome is consistent with other researches that show that consumption behavior is becoming more in line with functional benefits that have symbolic and emotional worth. [4,8]

The results of the study have important implications for functional food marketers in reality. First, companies need to recognise that influencer effectiveness is not just about credibility but

also perceived fit between influencers and consumers. Influencer messages may be more likely to arouse positive affect and change consumer behaviour if they appear to represent values, lifestyles and identities that are desirable to consumers. [3]

Second, the marketing approach to Generation Z consumers can be enhanced by prioritising stories of self-care, improving one's life and well-being over health risks or just functional attributes. Better marketing could therefore be achieved through the integration of functional foods into everyday life and healthy living. While this is true, there are a few things to consider. First, this study used self-reported survey data which may lead to response biases and common method variance. Second, the cross-sectional nature of the study does not enable causal inferences to be drawn. Third, only Generation Z consumers were included in the sample, which might affect the generalisability of the findings. To address these issues, longitudinal, experimental or cross-cultural designs should be used in future research to gain further insight into the psychological mechanisms underlying the consumption of functional foods.

6. Conclusion

To conclude, this paper has demonstrated that emotional processes are quite significant in determining the consumption of functional foods among Generation Z consumers. Purchase behavior is influenced by health anxiety and self-indulgent motivation, with the latter being more influential. The findings prove the necessity to take into account emotional and identity-related variables in influencer marketing. The research paper will contribute to the better comprehension of the significance of digital marketing environments in influencing contemporary trends in health-related consumption.

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