

Assessing the Influence of Food Bloggers on Egyptian Consumers' Restaurant Selection Attitudes: The Moderating Effect of Bloggers' Expertise

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how the food bloggers' attributes affect Egyptian consumers trust and attitudes. The study employed structural equation modeling (SEM) using Smart PLS software with data collected from 538 participants. Collected data used to test different relationships between a blogger's information quality, entertainment value, homophily, popularity, and customer trust, and how that trust influences customer attitudes. Additionally, the study examines whether a blogger's perceived expertise is moderating the relationship between bloggers' attributes and trust.

The results indicated that all studied blogger's attributes, namely information quality, entertainment, homophily, and popularity, have a significant and positive role in enhancing customer trust, which in turn enhances customer attitudes. Interestingly, a blogger's expertise moderates the relationships between information quality and trust and homophily and trust, suggesting that expertise enhances these positive influences. On the other hand, expertise was found that it does not significantly change how entertainment or popularity affects trust.

The study provides valuable theoretical implications for understanding online trust and influence on customer attitude while also providing practical recommendations for different businesses on how to collaborate with food bloggers in order to build trust and encourage desirable customer attitudes. This study also highlights the powerful role bloggers play in shaping the customer food experience. Finally, recommendations are made for further research to enhance knowledge in this field.

Introduction:

Before the internet evolution, customers relied on traditional methods such as word-of-mouth (WOM) to gather the information required to support their purchase decisions. However, with the evolution of the internet, the traditional WOM became less important especially after the emergence of digital platforms such as social media and online review sites (Cong & Zheng, 2017). This shift has given rise to electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM), where individuals share their experiences through digital channels, to support future consumers to make the right purchase decisions (AL-Qadi et al., 2020;

Cong and Zheng, 2017). Social media platforms now provide users with unlimited access to information and have become an integral part of the users' daily activities and interactions (Pentina et al., 2018).

The emergence of these digital communication channels especially social media platform played a significant role in the emergence of social media influencers (Lim et al., 2017), defined as "a new type of independent third-party endorser who shape audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media" (Alwafi et al., 2022). Food bloggers emerged as an important type of social media influencers. Food bloggers often include individuals who post videos as well as

written content and photos (Nguyen et al., 2024). A food blogger creates videos about food, including recipes, restaurant reviews, and international food experiences while traveling (Luong and Ho, 2023). For the purpose of this study, we especially focus on food bloggers who share their dining experiences with their followers through engaging videos. People trust food bloggers' recommendations because they tend to be more credible than traditional advertisements (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Studies have also shown that trust in influencers is key in driving consumer engagement and purchase behavior, especially among younger audiences like Gen Z (Jin & Muqaddam, 2019).

These food bloggers have become an important marketing tool by developing engaging content that matches the preferences of their followers (Puspita & Hendrayati, 2020). A recent report by Sprout Social, which surveyed 2,000 consumers, found that almost half of them (49%) make purchases on a regular basis because of posts from social media influencers. Among various types of content, food and drink have the highest engagement, with 30% of people choosing to follow and interact with food-related content (Sprout Social, 2024).

Previous research has shown that several characteristics related to social media influencers can have a strong influence on consumers' level of trust and consequently on their purchase decisions (Lou and Yuan, 2019; Sokolova and Kefi, 2020; Cheung et al., 2021; Chu & Kim, 2011; De Veirman et al., 2017). For example, Lou and Yuan (2019) distributed an online survey for US social media users who follow at least one social media influencer and found that the credibility of the social media influencer, measured by factors such as trustworthiness, attractiveness, and perceived similarity, has a strong impact on social media users' level of trust which subsequently affect brand awareness and purchase intentions. In the context of food blogs, Mainolfi et al., (2022) found that both perceived homophily and enjoyment have a

significant impact on blog engagement for both American and Italian food blog readers, and this subsequently impact their willingness to visit the restaurant. In the beauty and fashion context, Sokolova and Kefi (2020) conducted a study among French female consumers and found that the credibility of female social media influencers is influenced by both physical and social attractiveness and the level of homophily with their followers. Moreover, credibility has a strong positive influence on purchase intention.

In the Egyptian context, Aisha et al., (2024) conducted a study on a sample of 354 fast-food restaurant customers and found that food bloggers' attributes such as experience, and recommendations, positively influence fast-food restaurant customers' willingness and intention to purchase. They also found that the relationship between food bloggers' attributes and customers' willingness and intention to purchase is moderated by content credibility, which is measured through various indicators such as accuracy, reliability, relevance, and importance of the information shared by the food blogger. In a similar context, Wang (2011) collected data from a sample of 329 Taiwanese customers who read gastronomy blogs to investigate the factors that affect their intention to taste the local food and beverages presented on the blog. Wang found that Taiwanese customers' willingness to taste local food and beverages is impacted by the gastronomy blog's characteristics, such as experiential appeal, presented guides, and social influence.

The current study is attempting to fill several research gaps. First, although there are many studies which results serve as the main base for studying the effect of food bloggers' attributes on customers' attitudes and purchasing intentions (e.g., Zhang et al. 2022; Filieri et al. 2023), there are few studies on the relationships between food bloggers' attributes and customers' attitudes, behaviors and purchasing intentions (Nurul & Muhammad (2020); Jesllyn et al, 2021; and Hutchinson et al, 2024). Additionally, there is a lack in studies on the relationship between food bloggers' attributes and customer trust.

Secondly, To the best of the authors' knowledge, there is no research on how food bloggers' expertise moderates the relationships between food bloggers' attributes (information quality, entertainment, homophily and popularity) and customers' trust.

To address these gaps, the main objective of this research is to assess the impact of food bloggers' attributes on consumers' attitudes towards restaurant selection and the role of trust in this relationship. Therefore, the current study aims to answer the following research questions:

- How do food bloggers' attributes, namely information quality, entertainment, homophily and popularity, influence customers' trust in restaurants?
- What is the effect of trust on customers' attitudes toward restaurant selection?
- Does the expertise of food bloggers moderate the relationships between their attributes and customer trust?

By addressing these questions, the study seeks to fill important theoretical and practical knowledge gaps. Moreover, this study will offer suggestions and recommendations for marketers and restaurant managers on how to make the best use of food bloggers as a marketing tool for their food products to attract more customers and increase their sales.

2. Literature review

2.1. Theoretical background

The research model for the current study is developed based on the integration of two theories. First, the theory of planned behavior (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991), asserts that people's behaviors are impacted by several factors such their attitudes and subjective norms. On the other hand, attitudes are impacted by a number of background factors or external influences such as demographics, personality traits, values, past experiences, and external environmental conditions. In the context of influencer marketing, food bloggers can significantly shape consumers' attitudes

toward visiting a particular restaurant by presenting their experiences in an engaging and credible manner (Luong and Ho, 2023; Aisha et al., 2024).

However, while the TPB explains the decision-making process, it doesn't consider how trust, as an important mediator between the background factors and attitude (Lou & Yuan, 2019), develops from specific social media influencer attributes. To complete our theoretical model and determine the factors that shape restaurant customers' trust in food bloggers and ultimately influence their attitudes, we decided to integrate the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) with the TPB. The ELM suggests that individuals process the persuasiveness of any communication message using either the central route or peripheral route to persuasion. Petty and Cacioppo (1986, p. 191) stated that "one route is based on the thoughtful consideration of arguments central to the issue (central route), whereas the other is based on affective associations or simple inferences tied to peripheral cues in the persuasion context (peripheral route)". Based on an extensive review of the literature, we selected four characteristics of food bloggers that represent the routes of persuasion, namely information quality (central route), and entertainment, homophily, and popularity (peripheral route).

By integrating the TPB and ELM, the proposed conceptual model suggests that food bloggers' attributes (information quality, entertainment, homophily, and popularity) impact customers' trust, which in turn influences their attitudes toward restaurant selection. Additionally, it is predicted that food bloggers' expertise plays a moderating role in the relationship between food bloggers' attributes and customers' trust. The conceptual model for the current study is illustrated in figure (1), and the relationships are discussed in the following hypotheses development section.

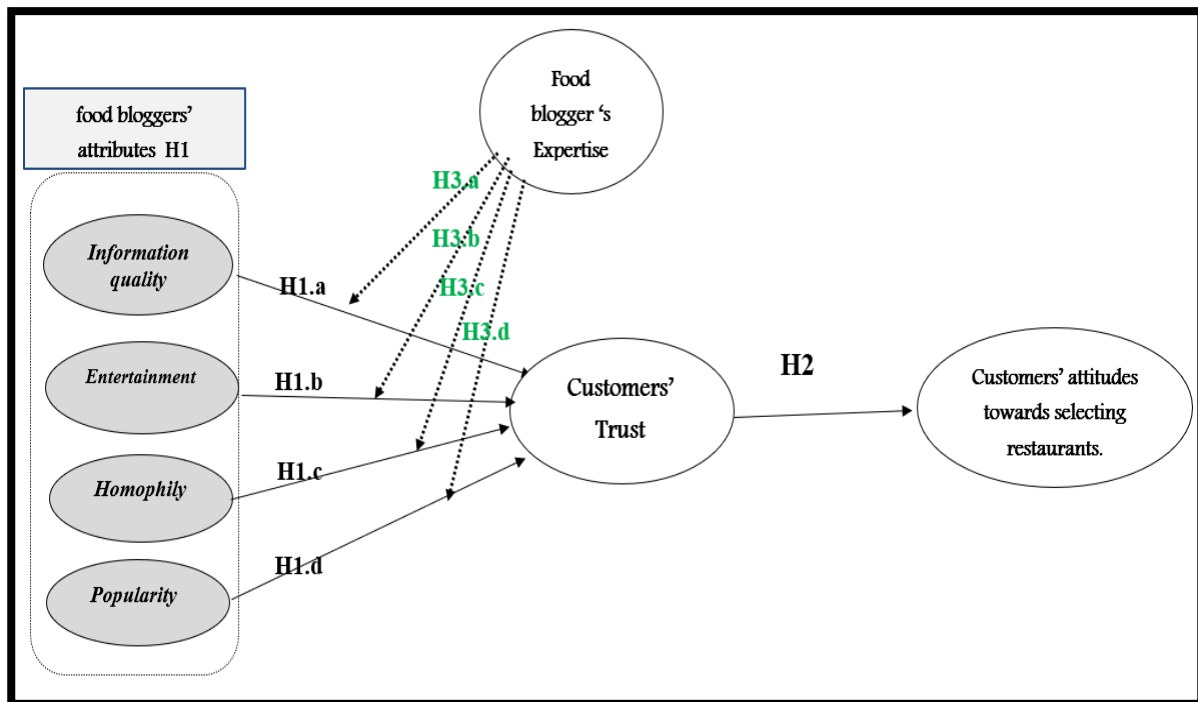


Figure 1. The conceptual model

2.2 Hypotheses development

2.2.1. Food bloggers' attributes and customer trust

People today seek out new restaurants to hang out with friends and enjoy unique food experiences (Hanifati, 2015). As consumers navigate the abundance of dining options available, they turn to food bloggers not only for recommendations but also for a sense of connection and assurance in their culinary choices (Luong and Ho, 2023). Central to the success of food bloggers is the trust they foster with their audience (Lou and Yuan, 2019). According to Colucci and Cho (2014), online trust refers to “an individual’s belief that an online exchange partner is dependable, able to fulfill promised roles or obligations, genuinely interested in the welfare of consumers, and refrains from opportunistic behaviors if given that chance.” Based on this definition, we define trust in food bloggers as followers’ belief that a food blogger is credible, trustworthy, and shares genuine content with followers. Previous literature has adopted a number of food bloggers’ attributes that help customers trust them, such as content credibility, expertise, popularity, similarity

(homophily), attractiveness, and so on (Saravanakumar and SuganthaLakshmi, 2012; Lou and Yuan, 2019; Munnukka et al., 2016; Luo and Donthu, 2006). The current study adopts four attributes that make customers trust food bloggers: information quality, entertainment, homophily, and popularity. These four attributes were selected based on several factors, including previous research that highlighted their importance in building customer trust and their relevance to the context of the study.

Firstly, information quality is considered a significant predictor of trust in food bloggers. Filieri et al. (2023) defined **information quality** as “the judgment of the content shared by the food blogger as informative, accurate, correct, relevant, valuable, and timely”. In an empirical study on a sample of students in the USA, Park et al. (2010) found that information-seeking is the key motivation that urges consumers to engage in the digital environment, specifically when reading blogs. In the context of food bloggers, Filieri et al. (2023) stated that food bloggers should prioritize information quality to foster stronger relationships with their followers, maintain

credibility in the long term which afterward affects their behavior and attitudes. The influence of information quality on customers' trust in online settings has been demonstrated by previous researchers. For example, Kim et al. (2008) investigated how information quality affects consumer trust and decision-making in B-to-C retailer Websites. They found that information quality is one of the strongest predictors of trust which consequently impacted online consumers' purchase decisions. Similarly, Flanagin and Metzger (2000) found that credibility in online communication depends on multiple factors, including expertise, trustworthiness, and information quality. In the context of food bloggers, research has shown that information quality is a significant factor influencing customer trust. In the context of travel blogs, Ho and Lee (2015) found that information quality plays a significant role influencing e-trust and consequently e-satisfaction of readers of travel blogs in Taiwan. In the context of the current study, we assume that food bloggers who consistently provide accurate, reliable, and well-researched information are more likely to gain trust from their followers. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H1.a: There is a significant correlation between food bloggers' Information quality and customers' trust.

A second factor that is predicted to affect customers' trust is **entertainment** of the food blogger. Entertainment is "a form of activity that holds the attention and interest of an audience or gives pleasure and delight" (Karat et al., 2001). In today's digital age, where attention spans are fleeting and content is abundant, food bloggers must compete for their audience's attention (Verma et al. 2024). Park et al. (2010) found that entertainment-seeking is one of the key motivations for followers to engage digitally with blogs. That is to say, entertainment enables the blogger to hold the followers' attention (Younes, 2024). Moreover, entertainment plays a crucial role in fostering a sense of connection between bloggers and their followers. When followers

find a blogger's content entertaining, they are more likely to feel a personal connection with this individual behind the screen (Younes, 2024). This connection forms the foundation of trust. By entertaining the followers, food bloggers can cultivate a loyal fan base that trusts their recommendations and values their expertise (Clemons, 2020). However, some studies have treated the impact of bloggers' entertainment on the customers' trust and found that entertainment was less important than food bloggers' attributes in affecting the customers' trust (Lockie, 2019). In the Egyptian context, Younes (2024) conducted a study on a sample of 450 Egyptian youth, aged 18 to 40 years old, and found a strong correlation between the entertainment perceptions of consumers' and their attitudes toward food bloggers which in turn affects their purchasing intentions. Drawing on a sample of 527 Chinese social media users, Zhang et al. (2022) found that perceived entertainments of social media platforms is a significant predictor of social media users' trust in the platform. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H1.b: There is a significant correlation between food bloggers' entertainment and customers' trust.

A third predictor of trust investigated in the current study is **influencer-follower homophily**. Homophily is defined as "a tendency for friendships to form between those who are alike in some designated respect" (Turner, 1993). Besides, Eyal and Rubin (2003) defined homophily as "the degree to which people who interact are similar in beliefs, education, social status, and the like". In the context of food blogging, the customer tends to rely on the recommendations of food bloggers who have similar thoughts, opinions, actions, conditions and lifestyles because he feels that he is not the only one to think or act like this (Razak and Zulkifly, 2020; Filieri et al. (2023). Furthermore, previous studies found that demographic homophily can foster trust and improve communications between individuals (Freeman, 1996; Filieri et al., 2023). In the context of influencer marketing

in the food sector, Verma et al. (2024) collected data from a sample of 383 social media users to test and validate their research model and found that there is a positive influence of influencer–follower similarity on followers' perceived trust, which in turn affects followers' food choices as well as brand advocacy. Similarly, Filieri et al. (2023) found that source homophily is a significant predictor of followers' perception of the quality and trust of the content shared by the social media blogger among viewers of online videos of travel experiences. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H1.c: There is a significant correlation between food bloggers' homophily and customers' trust.

Fourthly, we predict food bloggers' **popularity** to be a significant predictor of followers' trust in the food blogger. Filieri et al. (2023) stated that perceived vlogger popularity refers to “the number of followers of a vlogger, the number of comments on every posted video, the number of likes taken by audiences, and the frequency of views based on YouTube algorithms”. For customers who visit bloggers' profiles for the first time, popularity data can serve as an objective judgement cue (Filieri et al., 2023). Previous researchers have tested the correlation between bloggers' popularity and their followers' perceived trust. For example, Huang (2015) stated that recommendations and information of popular bloggers are more well known and widespread than unpopular bloggers, which enhance their customers' trust and confidence. Similarly, Liu et al, (2018) found that customers tend to follow and interact more with popular bloggers. This suggests that followers tend to be influenced more by the recommendations and information of popular bloggers, whom they perceive as more credible and more trustworthy than less popular ones. Filieri et al. (2023) found that source popularity is a significant predictor of followers' perception of the quality and trust of the content shared by the social media blogger among viewers of online videos of

personal technology products. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H1.d: There is a significant correlation between food bloggers' popularity and customers' trust.

2.2.2. Customers' trust and their attitudes in selecting restaurants

Customer trust is considered the key to success in online business (Pan et al., 2011; Huang, 2015). In the blogging context, customer trust refers to the sincere, honest, and truthful they receive when concerned about bloggers' information. According to Japariato and Adelia (2020) trust is considered as an important factor for the development and management of long-term relationships between online bloggers and their followers. Customer attitude is “the extent to which viewers of a blog develop positive feelings about the information that has been displayed by bloggers” (Hanifati, 2015). Previous researchers have linked customers' trust with their attitudes and behaviors (Ashghar and Nurlatifah, 2020; Harun and Ayu Salmah, 2020; Chu and Kamal 2008; Pan and Chiou, 2011). That is to say, when customers feel trust towards the food bloggers they follow, they tend to try and adopt their recommendations and food experiences. Following the above discussion, we propose the following hypothesis:

H2: There is a significant correlation between customers' trust and their attitudes in selecting restaurants

2.2.3. The moderating role of food bloggers expertise in the relationship between their attributes and customer trust

Food bloggers' expertise refers to the qualifications and competence, which include the skills and knowledge about the subjects they publish in their blogs (Venciute et al., 2024). Moreover, Kelly et al. (1992) stated that “customers can evaluate the expertise of bloggers on the basis of their level of experience, ability, intelligence, achievement, status, and knowledge on a given topic or issue”. Some studies examined the relationship

between food bloggers' expertise and customer trust (Colucci and Cho, 2014). To explain, the higher customers perceived the expertise of food bloggers, the higher level of trust they gain, and the greater booming of information happens (Wangenheim and Bayón, 2004). Also, researchers (e.g., Venciute et al., 2024) found that the expertise of the social media influencer in the lifestyle and fashion industry is a strong predictor of purchase behavior among Instagram followers in Lithuania. Similarly, using a sample of 348 university students in the UK, Serman (2022) found that food bloggers' experience has a strong positive impact on followers' perceived credibility and trust in the blogger.

To the authors' knowledge, no studies have treated food bloggers' expertise as a moderator between their attributes and customer trust. Yet there is a good reason to anticipate this effect in the context of this study. We assume that food bloggers' expertise is not a direct predictor of trust and rather plays a moderating effect. That means, when customers believe that the food blogger is highly experienced, the relationship between food bloggers' attributes (information quality, entertainment, homophily and popularity) and trust will be stronger. On the other hand, when customers believe that the food blogger is less experienced, the relationship between food bloggers' attributes (information quality, entertainment, homophily and popularity) and trust will be weaker. Following the previous arguments, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H3: Food Bloggers' Expertise moderates the relationships between food bloggers' attributes and customers' trust

H3.1. Food Bloggers' Expertise moderates the relationships between food bloggers' Information quality and customers' trust.

H3.2. Food Bloggers' Expertise moderates the relationships between food bloggers' entertainment and customers' trust.

H3.3. Food Bloggers' Expertise moderates the relationships between food bloggers' homophily and customers' trust.

H3.4. Food Bloggers' Expertise moderates the relationships between food bloggers' popularity and customers' trust.

3. Methodology of the study

The current study investigated the correlations between food bloggers' attributes (information quality, entertainment, homophily and popularity) and customers' trust and what is the effect of trust on customers' attitudes toward restaurant selection. More, this study proposed that the expertise of food bloggers moderates the relationships between their attributes and customer trust.

To achieve the objectives of the current study and test its theoretical model, a quantitative approach was adopted to collect and analyze the data. Data were gathered from social media's users, on various social media platforms: Facebook, Instagram, X, and WhatsApp, in order to provide insights regarding their perceptions of food bloggers' attributes, their trust and their attitudes toward restaurant selection.

3.1. Questionnaire development

An online questionnaire was employed to test the study hypotheses. The questionnaire is divided into three sections. The first section includes a brief abstract for the respondents regarding the topic of the study, its main purpose, and a 'Thank-you' message for their support and response. The second section includes questions about demographic characteristics (gender, age, education...) and the behavioral characteristics (number of times eating in restaurants, the most popular platforms for following food bloggers, and the most credible Egyptian food bloggers from the respondent's point of view). The third section was designed to measure the respondents' perceptions regarding food bloggers' attributes; including their experience, and customers' trust and their attitudes toward restaurant selection. Sentences which were used to measure information quality and entertainment (7 sentences) were adopted from (Wang, 2010; Aypar & Kazancıoğlu, 2020). Homophily was measured using sentences (4 sentences) adopted from (Wu, 2013). To

measure popularity, the study adopted a three-item scale from (Tamara et al., 2021). Sentences of food bloggers' expertise were adopted from (Wu, 2013). Six items from (Wu, 2013) were used to measure customers' trust and their attitudes toward restaurant selection. A 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 'Strongly Disagree' to 5 'Strongly Agree,' was used to assess all variables.

All scales used in this study were adopted from established and validated scales in similar contexts of studies. More, the reliability test (Cronbach's alpha) indicates high reliability for all the research constructs (Table 1).

Table 1. The reliability test (Cronbach's alpha)

Measures	N. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Information quality	3	0.799
Entertainment	4	0.865
Homophily	4	0.785
Popularity	3	0.797
Expertise	3	0.710
Customers' trust	3	0.786
Customers' attitudes toward restaurant selection	3	0.802

3.2. Data collection and analysis

This study utilized a convenience sampling technique to collect data through an electronic questionnaire which was designed on Google forms. Data collection process went through many stages. First, the questionnaire was translated into Arabic to increase the response rate. Second, as a preliminary step, the questionnaire was distributed to a number of academic experts as recommended by Olson (2010) to review the wording, accuracy of meaning, translation, and alignment with the goals of the questions. This stage provided valuable recommendations and insights that could enhance the structure and design of the questionnaire.

Third, to ensure an efficient data collection process, the researchers divided the study population (social media users) into groups: friends, relatives, academic experts, and members of Facebook pages about food and restaurant experiences. They then sent an online message that included greetings, a brief

description of the study topic, and the questionnaire link (in both Arabic and English). The questionnaire was distributed in January, 2024 till February, 2024.

After a series of follow-up messages, a total of 538 questionnaire responses were received with a response rate 99.07%. Valid responses were coded and entered into SPSS 25 statistical software. SMART-PLS 4.1.0.2 software were used to test structural equation modeling (SEM) using the partial least squares (PLS) path modeling.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Sample Characteristics

According to the first section of the questionnaire, responses of participants were divided into two categories: demographics and behavioral characteristics) (see Tables 2 & 3). As for respondents' demographics, men made up the largest group of participants (54.1%). The age range with the most respondents was (18-25), representing around 75% of the total. As for education, the largest percentage of participants are currently still at the university level, with a percentage of 70%.

Table 2 Demographic of respondents (N. = 538)

Demographic Characteristics	Frequency	%
Gender		
Male	216	61.2
Female	137	38.8
Age		
Less than 18 years old	4	0.7
From 18 to 25 years old	407	75.7
From 26 to 40 years old	98	18.3
From 41 to 55 years old	22	4.1
Above 55 years old	7	1.3
Education		
University student	378	70.3
Bachelor's degree	125	23.2
High school or less	17	3.2
Ph. D. degree	9	1.7
Master's degree	7	1.3
Others	2	0.4

Behavioral characteristics of respondents and their preferences indicated the following, 52% of respondents eat in restaurants from (1 to 3)

times in a month, 48.1% of respondents choose Morad Makram as one of the most credible Egyptian food bloggers, while Instagram and Facebook achieved nearly similar percentage as most used social media platforms to follow Egyptian food bloggers by 64.3% for Instagram and 63.9% for Facebook.

Table 3 Behavioral characteristics of respondents (N. of Responses= 538)

Respondents' preferences	Frequency	%
No. of restaurants visits		
1 to 3 times	284	52.79%
4 to 7 times	160	29.74%
8 to 12 times	47	8.74%
13 to 15 times	27	5.02%
more than 20 times	20	3.72%
Most credible food bloggers		
Morad Makram الأكيل	259	48.1
Mon3esh منعش	226	42
Amr Sherief المزاججي	162	30.1
Elmazangy حميدة	137	25.5
Hemidaa حميدة	109	20.3
Adham_singer	89	16.5
Amr Elhady	79	14.7
Garemt Akl	70	13.0
Essamyat	63	11.7
Abaza	51	9.5
Hesham Taha	33	6.1
others	13	2.4
Most used social media platforms to follow food bloggers		
Instagram	346	64.3
Facebook	344	63.9
TikTok	281	52.2
YouTube	204	37.9
Pinterest	29	5.4
Blogs/Forums	28	5.2
Twitter	19	3.5
other	2	0.4

4.2 Reliability and Validity of Research Variables

The reliability and validity of the variables were tested by conducting several appropriate tests for this purpose on the questionnaire

items that measure each variable of the study variables. These tests include Cronbach's alpha, Composite reliability (ρ_a), Composite reliability (ρ_c), and Average variance extracted (AVE). The SMART-PLS program was used to conduct these tests. The tests yielded positive indications of reliability and validity, as the scores recorded were higher than the minimum required to consider the variables to be reliable and valid, which is > 0.7 .

Consequently, it was considered that the questionnaire items do indeed measure customer perceptions of the research variables valid and reliably. (Table 4) shows the results of the reliability and validity tests for each research variable.

Table 4 Reliability and validity

Research variables	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (ρ_a)	Composite reliability (ρ_c)	(AVE)
Customers' Attitude	0.802	0.812	0.883	0.717
Entertainment	0.865	0.870	0.908	0.713
Expertise	0.710	0.721	0.836	0.631
Homophily	0.785	0.786	0.861	0.607
Information Quality	0.799	0.803	0.882	0.714
Popularity	0.797	0.797	0.881	0.712
TRUST	0.786	0.790	0.903	0.823

4.3 Descriptive analysis

This section provides a summary of the key characteristics of the study variables using descriptive statistics generated with SPSS software. The analysis included 538 valid responses from participants. As shown in Table 5, Customer Attitude had the highest mean score (3.69), indicating a generally positive sentiment among respondents. The remaining variables all had mean scores between 3.38 (Expertise) and 3.58 (Trust), suggesting a moderate to slightly positive perception of these factors. Standard deviations for all variables ranged from 0.92 (Customer Attitude and Expertise) to 1.04 (Entertainment), indicating some variability in the responses.

Table 5 Descriptive analysis

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Expertise	538	1.00	5.00	3.3897	.95172
information quality	538	1.00	5.00	3.4950	.95636
Entertainment	538	1.00	5.00	3.4619	1.04471
Homophily	538	1.00	5.00	3.4628	.93131
popularity	538	1.00	5.00	3.3804	1.03700
Trust	538	1.00	5.00	3.5143	.92749
Customer Attitude	538	1.00	5.00	3.6902	.96999

4.4 Hypotheses testing

Hypotheses testing for a research study with a sample size of 538 respondents conducted using structural equation modeling (SEM) using SMART-PLS software. Figure 4.1 indicates the resulted study model after

applying SEM using SMART-PLS and the significance of each hypothesized direct relationship as well as the significance of the hypothesized moderating effect of expertise on direct relationships between study variables.

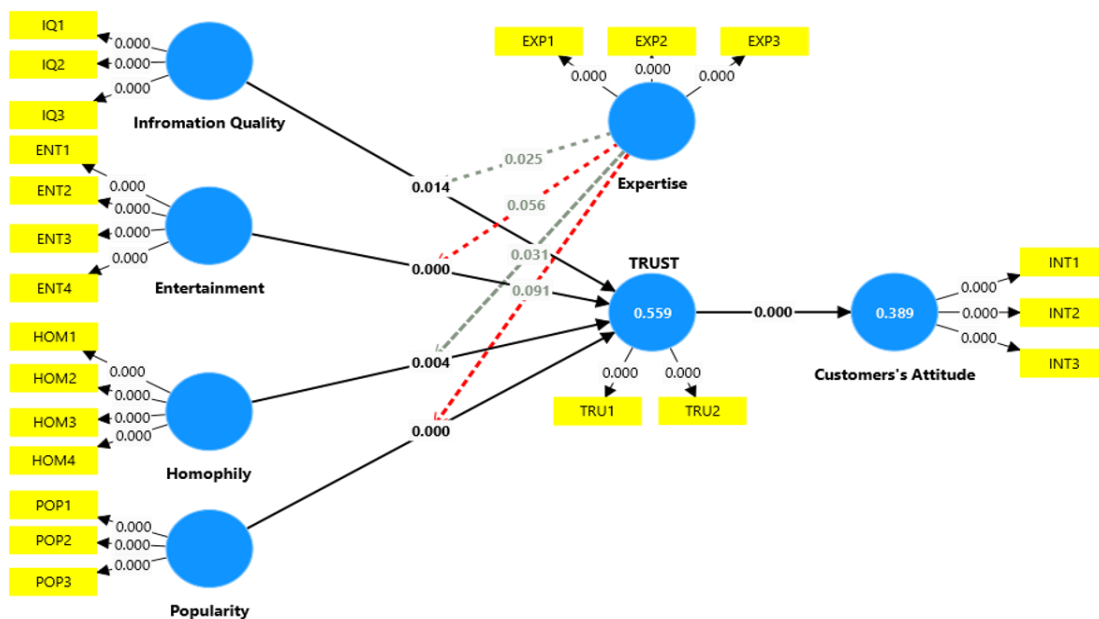


Figure (2) Measurement Model

Results provide strong support for most of the hypothesized relationships. All the direct relationships between the independent variables (information quality, entertainment, homophily, popularity, on trust) were found to be statistically significant ($p < 0.05$).

Furthermore, direct relationship between customers' trust and customer attitude was found also to be statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). (Table 6) shows the results of the direct relationships between the study variables.

Table 5 relationship between variables

Direct relationships between study variables	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (O/STDEV)	P values	Results of testing hypotheses
Information Quality -> Trust (<i>H1.a</i>)	0.058	2.452	0.014	<i>Supported</i>
Entertainment -> Trust (<i>H1.b</i>)	0.049	4.459	0.000	<i>Supported</i>
Homophily -> Trust (<i>H1.c</i>)	0.052	2.855	0.004	<i>Supported</i>
Popularity -> Trust (<i>H1.d</i>)	0.053	5.870	0.000	<i>Supported</i>
Trust -> Customers' Attitude (<i>H2</i>)	0.032	19.444	0.000	<i>Supported</i>

The moderating effects of expertise were also examined. The results indicate that expertise moderates the relationship between information quality and trust (H3.a), supporting the hypothesis that expertise enhances the positive effect of information quality on trust. It also moderates the relationship between homophily and trust

(H3.c), suggesting that expertise strengthens the positive influence of homophily on trust. However, expertise was not found to moderate the relationships between entertainment and trust (H3.b) or popularity and trust (H3.d). (Table 7) shows the results of testing the moderating effects of expertise on the direct relationships between study variables.

Table 7 the results of testing the moderating effects

Direct relationships between study variables	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (O/STDEV)	P values	Results of testing hypotheses
Expertise X Information Quality -> Trust (H3.a)	0.056	2.246	0.025	<i>Supported</i>
Expertise X Entertainment -> Trust (H3.b)	0.051	1.910	0.056	<i>Not Supported</i>
Expertise X Homophily -> Trust (H3.c)	0.062	2.159	0.031	<i>Supported</i>
Expertise X Popularity -> Trust (H3.d)	0.056	1.691	0.091	<i>Not Supported</i>

5. DISCUSSION

Food bloggers have become pivotal influencers in shaping consumers' decisions regarding restaurant selection. With their ability to engage audiences through information, entertainment, and personal connections, food bloggers significantly impact customer trust and attitudes. The primary aim of this research is to assess the influence of food bloggers' attributes—information quality, entertainment, homophily, and popularity—on customers' trust and how

this trust shapes their attitudes toward selecting restaurants.

To achieve this, the study addresses two key questions: (1) Do food bloggers' attributes influence customers' trust and, subsequently, their attitudes toward restaurant selection? (2) Does food bloggers' expertise moderate the relationships between their attributes and customers' trust? The hypotheses guiding the research include: (H1) a significant relationship between food bloggers' attributes and customer trust, with sub-hypotheses (H1.a, H1.b, H1.c, H1.d) examining the individual

effects of each attribute. Further, (H2) postulates a significant relationship between customers' trust and their attitudes, and (H3) explores the moderating role of food bloggers' expertise, with sub-hypotheses (H3.a, H3.b, H3.c, H3.d) assessing its moderating impact on each attribute.

As for the positive relationship between information quality and trust (H1.a) results conform. This is consistent with the elaboration likelihood model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), which suggests that individuals rely on substantive information when forming trust-based. Similarly, Tuncer and Kartal (2024) reveals a positive association between information quality and the importance attached to both participant and non-participant sharing on social media platforms, indirectly influencing customer trust and willingness to pay more (Tuncer & Kartal, 2024). Gomes et al. (2022) further supports this notion by highlighting the mediating role of blog content quality between trustworthiness and purchase intention in the context of fashion influencer marketing (Gomes et al., 2022).

Results also conform with Kang and Namkung (2018) who demonstrated the significant influence of information quality on perceived usefulness and ease of use, which in turn affects customer trust in online to offline (O2O) commerce. Kim & Peterson, (2017) indicated that perceived information quality significantly enhances trust in online vendors. Similarly, Flavián et al. (2006) highlight that precise, relevant, and well-structured information directly builds user trust. Within the same context, Chai and Kim (2010) found a positive relationship between bloggers' trust and knowledge sharing practices. Furthermore, Ho and Lee (2015) demonstrated that information quality significantly influences online satisfaction and trust in travel blogs. Additionally, Ho and Lee (2015) identified the mediating role of e-satisfaction between e-trust and e-loyalty, emphasizing the importance of quality information in developing and

maintaining customer relationships through blogs.

As for the relationship between perceived entertainment and trust (H1.b). The results of the study are consistent with Liao et al., (2024) who found that perceived media value, including entertainment, significantly influences trust in media-based brands. digital entertainment, particularly through DIY content and video blogging, enhances customer engagement and trust (Ravi & Mondal, 2021). Khan & Bhutto, (2023) showed that entertainment, along with interaction and e-word of mouth, impacts purchase intention through brand trust and brand awareness (Khan & Bhutto, 2023). Another study demonstrated that both informativeness and entertainment in digital content marketing positively affect brand trust which suggests that entertaining content is crucial for establishing trust among consumers, particularly in competitive markets (Ramadhan, et al., 2021). A study in the fast-food industry found that the effect of entertainment on purchase decisions was insignificant, although brand trust mediated the relationship between other social media marketing features and consumer purchase decisions (Hanaysha, 2022). On the other hand, while informativeness, perceived relevance, and interactivity of social media marketing positively affect purchase decisions, entertainment's effect was found to be insignificant (Hanaysha, 2022).

Study results regarding the relationship between homophily and trust (H1.c) have much in common with other previous studies. Homophily of influencers was found to be positively influences customer value co-creation behavior, expected brand value, and purchase intention. (Bu et al., 2022). Trust emerges as a critical factor in influencer marketing, with authenticity, expertise, and homophily significantly contributing to building trust among followers (Bari et al., 2024). Additionally, homophily has been shown to impact consumer trust in hotels being reviewed on online review sites (Kusumasondjaja, 2015). Interestingly, while homophily plays a role in building trust, other

factors like information quality and consumer risk propensity also contribute to trust formation in online contexts (Kusumasondjaja, 2015). Research by Zhang et al. (2021) found that perceived homophily among members of online health communities increased trust and knowledge sharing. This trust serves as a crucial mediator, enhancing the effects of influencers' characteristics on both influencer and brand loyalty. Interestingly, negative publicity does not significantly moderate the relationship between trust and loyalty in some cultural contexts (Bari et al., 2024). However, Chu & Kim (2011) found a negative relationship between homophily and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) behavior in social networking sites. Interestingly Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, (2011) indicated that some individuals might be more drawn to influencers who are different from them, while others might be more skeptical of those who seem "too similar"

As for hypothesis (H1.d), Weismueller et al. (2020) provides direct evidence of a positive relationship between the number of followers and customer trust in source. The study reveals that the number of followers positively influences source attractiveness, source trustworthiness, and purchase intention (Weismueller et al., 2020). This suggests that a higher follower count can enhance an influencer's perceived credibility and ultimately impact consumers' purchasing decisions. Interestingly, other papers highlight additional factors that mediate the relationship between follower count and customer decisions. For instance, Arrieta et al. (2019) introduces the concept of blogger social influence, which moderates the relationships between blogger interactive practices and intention to recommend the blogger, as well as between credibility and intention to follow their suggestions (Arrieta et al., 2019). On the other hand, Pittman and Abell (2021) found that lower popularity metrics can actually benefit "green influencers," leading to increased trust and purchase intentions. This contrasts with traditional assumptions about influencer reach.

As for hypothesis (H2) studies show that trust in social media influencers correlates positively with purchase intention, indicating that higher trust leads to increased likelihood of purchasing products endorsed by these influencers (Alkan & Ulaş, 2023). Studies have found that trustworthiness is a key factor contributing to consumer attitudes towards blogger recommendations, which in turn significantly influences purchase intention (Ing & Ming, 2018; Hsu et al., 2013). brand trust mediates the association between certain social media marketing features (interactivity and informativeness) and consumer purchase decisions in the fast-food industry (Hanaysha, 2022). In the travel blogging sphere, authenticity, transparency, and credibility are crucial factors in building trust and fostering loyalty among followers. The relationship between travel bloggers and their audience has significant implications for tourists' decision-making processes (Maggiore et al., 2022). Junior et al., (2022) indicated that in product review blogs, trust is influenced by the perceived credibility of the blog, which directly affects users' behavioral intentions, including their purchase decisions. However, Ing & Ming (2018) discovered that trustworthiness, while important for consumer attitudes, may not directly impact purchase intentions. Instead, attitude towards blogger recommendations mediates the relationship between trust and purchase intention.

Regarding hypothesis (H3) This study examined the moderating role of expertise on the relationship between various source characteristics and trust. The findings differed regarding the effect of bloggers' expertise regarding these relationships.

Specifically, the results indicate that expertise moderates the relationship between information quality and trust, supporting H3.a. This finding aligns with prior research demonstrating that individuals with higher levels of expertise are more discerning in evaluating information quality (e.g., Metzger & Flanagin, 2013). Source expertise enables individuals to assess the accuracy and reliability of perceived information, which enhance the positive effect of information

quality on trust. Source expertise has a positive role in moderating the impact of source trustworthiness on purchase intention (Kim et al., 2024). Likewise, expertise positively moderates the influence of information quality on individual benefits (Sudirman et al., 2014). In fact, the moderating influence of expertise is not the same in all situations. For example, in health education, for instance, individuals who deem themselves knowledgeable in health matters were not very approving of messages based on low argument quality (Lin et al., 2017). This implies that the possession of specialized knowledge increases the quality appraisal of information. On the other hand, in social networks, consumer expertise acts as a negative moderator in the relationship between social information cues and purchase intentions (Cheung et al., 2014).

Besides, it was found that expertise moderates the relationship between homophily and trust (H3.c). This implies that individuals who have a perceived similarity with a source are more likely to trust that source if there is expertise available. This result can be construed through social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) which explains that individuals are likely to discriminate against others based on a perceived social 'in-group'. Expertise in this manner can reinforce the idea that an individual is competent and reliable which allows for the broadening of the positive effects associated with homophily.

Ismagilova et al. (2019), Kim and Kim (2021) however, focus on the fact that expertise and homophily are factors that enable the building of trust and change a consumer's mindset. However, the relative importance of these factors can differ based on the context and the audience's needs. Interestingly, the impact of homophily on trust may be stronger when the source's expertise is highly perceived. This is because audiences often rely on sources that they feel to be similar to themselves, but this confidence is strengthened even more when the source additionally is perceived to have more expertise in the relevant field. (Alboqami, 2023). Conversely, in situations where expertise is crucial, such as in knowledge-intensive organizations, excessive

homophily might hinder performance and trust, especially for individuals in higher hierarchical positions (Ertug et al., 2022).

Interestingly, expertise showed no moderation effect between entertainment and trust (H3.b) or popularity and trust (H3.d). This could be explained by indicating that the influence of these characteristics on trust is less dependent on the perceived expertise of the source. Entertainment and popularity may serve as more inferential cues, relying on emotional responses rather than cognitive evaluation. (Chaiken, 1980). Consequently, the role of expertise in these relationships may be less pronounced.

These findings contribute to our understanding of how expertise shapes trust formation in online environments. While expertise enhances the impact of information quality and homophily, its role appears limited when it comes to entertainment and popularity. Future research could explore the interplay of expertise with other source characteristics, such as source credibility and benevolence, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of trust dynamics.

6. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

6.1 Conclusion

The current study, utilizing structural equation modeling with a robust sample of 538 respondents, provides compelling evidence for the significant role that bloggers play in shaping customer trust and subsequent attitudes. The findings clearly demonstrate that a blogger's perceived information quality, entertainment value, homophily, and popularity all positively contribute to building trust among their audience. Furthermore, the study highlights the critical role of trust as a key driver of positive customer attitudes. Importantly, the moderating effect of blogger expertise was confirmed for information quality and homophily, revealing that perceived expertise significantly strengthens the influence of these two factors on trust. While expertise did not moderate the impact of entertainment and popularity, their direct positive relationships with trust underscore their importance in influencing audiences.

6.2 Implications

study findings present many implications whether theoretical or managerial within the framework of the characteristics and qualities of food bloggers and their impact on customer trust and behavior.

Theoretically, the findings significantly contribute to the existing literature by demonstrating the crucial role played by a blogger's information quality, entertainment value, homophily, and popularity in shaping customer trust. The relationships that have been positively confirmed by these factors enlarge our grasp of the trust building factors present in an online space by highlighting the multi-faceted nature of influence caused by bloggers. In addition, the study advances the theoretical framework by adding the moderating effect of blogger expertise. The results show that a blogger's perceived expertise increases the impact of information quality and homophily on trust significantly, which suggests that audience's trust in the bloggers is higher if they are versatile and somewhat knowledgeable.

Managerially, these findings offer actionable implications for businesses collaborating with bloggers or developing their own blogging strategies. Marketers should focus on bloggers who do have a good reputation for providing good and true information as this is one of the basic foundations of building trust with consumers. Additionally, other factors should be considered in selecting bloggers by choosing ones who can entertain their audience, demonstrate shared values and interests (homophily), and possess a degree of popularity that will further enhance trust formation. The moderating effect of expertise indicates the importance of dealing with expert and trustworthy bloggers in their respective fields, particularly when targeting audiences who prioritize knowledge and credibility. However, it's noteworthy that a blogger's entertainment value and popularity appear to influence trust regardless of their perceived expertise. This suggests that leveraging

entertaining content and leveraging a blogger's existing popularity can be effective trust-building strategies across a broader audience. Ultimately, this research enables businesses to make better decisions when selecting and collaborating with bloggers, leading to more effective promotional campaigns that build trust, positively influence customer attitudes, and generate loyalty and positive publicity.

6.3 Future Research Directions

Building on the valuable insights gained from this study, several avenues for future research emerge. **Firstly, expanding the context** of this research would be beneficial. Future studies could investigate these relationships in different online environments, such as specific social media platforms (e.g., Instagram, TikTok, YouTube), or across different product or service categories. **Secondly, exploring other potential moderators** beyond expertise could enrich the model. Factors such as customer involvement, perceived risk, or platform-specific norms could influence the relationships between blogger characteristics and customer trust. **Lastly**, a more detailed analysis of the quality of the information is necessary. Future studies could look into particular aspects of information quality, like timeliness, accuracy, completeness, and objectivity, to see how important these are in influencing consumer trust. A more thorough and comprehensive understanding of the complex connections between blogger attributes, customer trust, and eventually, consumer behavior can be attained by following these research approaches.

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