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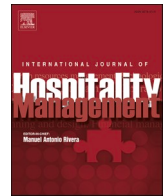
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Full length article

Navigating influence: a mixed-method study on the role of social media influencer type and message content in driving digital engagement and patronage intentions

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ABSTRACT

Grounded in Social Influence Theory (SIT), this study adopts a mixed-methods approach to examine the effectiveness of cause-related marketing (CRM) versus service quality messaging (SQM) delivered by social media influencers (SMIs) in shaping consumers' digital engagement and patronage intentions. The research further investigates how different influencer types (micro- versus macro-SMIs) interact with message appeals to influence consumer behaviour. Findings across three studies involving 555 participants reveal that CRM messages significantly enhance both digital engagement and patronage intentions. Macro-influencers generally elicit higher engagement owing to their broad reach, whereas micro-influencers prove more effective in promoting CRM messages, underpinned by perceived authenticity and stronger follower relationships. Perceived authenticity mediates the relationship between message appeal, digital engagement, and patronage intention, with CRM messages perceived as more authentic. Building on recent research, this study extends Social Influence Theory to the hospitality context and contributes theoretically by elucidating how influencer characteristics and message content jointly drive consumer behaviour. Practical implications are offered for the development of influencer marketing strategies in the restaurant industry.

1. Introduction

In today's digital landscape, Influencer Marketing has become a transformative strategy where firms engage social media influencers (SMIs) to leverage their extensive follower bases for brand promotion (Ye et al., 2021). This strategy has evolved into a global phenomenon, integral to marketing across various sectors, as exemplified by influencers like Amy Blondie (@blondieinchina) and Andrés Moreno (@amorenocastillo), who have significantly shaped consumer behaviour within the restaurant industry (Kroon, 2023). The influence of SMIs is underscored by data showing that nearly half of social media users have made purchases based on influencer endorsements, with this figure rising to 55 % among Younger Millennials (McGrath, 2023). The growing reliance on influencer marketing is further evidenced by over 90 % of marketers collaborating with SMIs to achieve objectives ranging from brand awareness to sales growth (Cascio Rizzo et al., 2024).

In the restaurant industry, influencer marketing is critical for

enhancing brand visibility and consumer engagement due to SMIs' perceived authenticity and broad reach (Cheung et al., 2022; Leung et al., 2022). Research indicates that SMI-generated content, particularly visual and endorsement-based, significantly influences consumers' dining choices and experiences (Lee et al., 2021). By leveraging SMIs' extensive reach and perceived authenticity, businesses can effectively attract customers and enhance brand visibility cost-effectively (Femenia-Serra et al., 2022). Consumers increasingly rely on SMI-generated content to inform their dining experiences, evaluating restaurants based on shared reviews, visual content, and personal endorsements (Lee et al., 2021; Nazlan et al., 2024). As trendsetters, SMIs effectively showcase the ambiance, service quality, and unique offerings of restaurants, thereby influencing potential customers to visit these establishments (Lee et al., 2021; Polat et al., 2024). By producing relatable and engaging content, SMIs cultivate trust and connection with their audience, which is vital for fostering consumer engagement (Abell and Biswas, 2023; Lou and Yuan, 2019).

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Recent research has advanced understanding of how SMIs shape consumer engagement and behaviours. Grounded in *Social Influence Theory*, prior studies have demonstrated that SMIs can influence consumer decision-making through mechanisms of compliance, identification, and internalisation (Kelman, 1958; Cialdini and Goldstein, 2004). For example, Cheung et al. (2022) highlighted how SMIs' contents foster consumers' identification, while Ki et al. (2022) further demonstrated how consumers emulate SMIs' choices, reflecting compliance-driven behaviours. More recently, Cheung et al. (2024) demonstrated that content grounded in shared values facilitates internalization and strengthens perceived value congruence, which in turn deepens parasocial bonds and promotes relational cohesion between consumers and SMIs. Building on these insights, recent work has begun to examine how SMIs craft persuasive content; however, limited attention has been paid to the motivational framing of SMI-initiated messages.

In parallel, several studies have explored how content strategies of different SMI types impact perceived authenticity and consumer engagement. For example, Chan et al. (2023) compared micro- and macro-SMIs in TikTok-based e-commerce campaigns, focusing on charisma, informational content, and audience bonding as drivers of engagement and brand sales. Similarly, Cascio Rizzo et al. (2024) examined the effects of high-arousal language on engagement and trust across SMI tiers, finding it increases trust for micro-influencers but reduces it for macro-influencers. More recently, Mulholland et al. (2025) investigated authenticity management strategies in sponsored YouTube content, identifying tactics like disclosure, passion, and relatability. Notwithstanding, these studies tend to narrowly conceptualize content, focusing primarily on product-related information and presentation, while overlooking the motivational purpose of the message (e.g., cause-related vs. service-related messages). Additionally, they fail to address how message intent, framing, and the alignment between SMIs' profiles and the content influence consumer responses.

Despite previous findings, empirical understanding of *message–influencer congruence*—the alignment between the motivational framing of a message (e.g., cause-related vs. service-related) and an influencer's popularity (macro vs. micro), remains limited, particularly in hospitality settings. This gap is especially salient in the restaurant sector, where consumer decisions are strongly shaped by perceptions of authenticity, appeals, and social norms (Jang et al., 2024). The differential effects of cause-related messages (CRM), which align marketing efforts with charitable or prosocial causes and appeal to consumers' altruistic values (Varadarajan and Menon, 1988; Bergkvist and Zhou, 2021), and service-related messages (SQM), which emphasize service quality and experiential value (Chow et al., 2007), are particularly important because each taps into distinct motivational drivers that may interact differently with influencer type to shape consumer engagement and patronage intention.

The alignment between these message types and SMIs' popularity is particularly salient. Macro SMIs, with their broader reach and aspirational positioning, are often perceived as more commercialized and less personally connected (Cascio Rizzo et al., 2025). In contrast, Micro SMIs typically maintain closer and more authentic relationships with their audiences (Pittman and Abell, 2021). These distinctions suggest that the effectiveness of message framing, whether altruistic or utilitarian (e.g., CRM vs. SQM), may depend not only on the content itself but also on the fit between the message and the SMIs' perceived role, popularity, and relationship with followers. This study investigates these interactions to better understand how *message–influencer congruence* drives consumer response, as represented by digital engagement and patronage intention, in the restaurant context, thereby helping marketers optimise their strategies for greater effectiveness within the restaurant industry. In addition, this study also explores how message appeal of SMIs drives authenticity, digital engagement and patronage intention. Specifically, this research seeks to:

1. Compare the influence of CRM and SQM on consumers' online and offline behaviours.
2. Assess the extent to which the popularity of the influencer (micro vs. macro) affects the reception of the message and subsequent engagement, including actions such as liking, sharing, and the willingness to visit the promoted restaurant.
3. Investigate how the nature of the message impacts the ultimate intention to visit the promoted restaurant.

The subsequent sections will explore the literature and theoretical foundations at the intersection of cause-related marketing, service-quality advertising, and influencer marketing. This comprehensive approach bridges the identified gaps and provides actionable insights for marketers aiming to optimise their influencer marketing strategies and effectively engage consumers in the digital age.

2. Literature review

2.1. Theoretical foundation: social influence theory

This research is grounded in Social Influence Theory (SIT), which posits that individuals' attitudes and behaviours are shaped by their interactions with others through mechanisms of compliance, identification, and internalisation (Kelman, 1958). Compliance occurs when individuals adopt attitudes or behaviours to gain rewards or avoid punishments; identification happens when individuals emulate someone they admire; internalization arises when individuals genuinely accept influence because it aligns with their values (Kelman, 1958; Cialdini and Goldstein, 2004).

Applying SIT to influencer marketing, CRM messages are expected to activate *internalization* processes, as consumers identify with the SMI's endorsement of prosocial values and socially meaningful causes (Chen et al., 2020). In contrast, SQM messages are more likely to elicit *compliance* processes, appealing to consumers' pragmatic assessments of functional service benefits (Davlembayeva et al., 2024). SMIs can shape followers' attitudes through these pathways by offering content that either resonates with personal values or offers tangible, self-interested rewards (Audrezet et al., 2020; Cascio Rizzo et al., 2024).

Recent studies suggest that perceptions of authenticity play a significant role in the influential power of SMI-initiated messages on consumers' behavioural intentions (Lou et al., 2024; Xue and Mattila, 2024). When consumers perceive an influencer's message as authentic, they are more likely to internalise the promoted attitudes and behaviours, enhancing engagement and patronage intention. Therefore, the conceptual framework of this research positions perceived authenticity as a central mediator linking message type, influencer type, and consumer responses within hospitality marketing contexts.

2.2. Influencer marketing

Influencer marketing has become an increasingly prevalent strategy in the restaurant and hospitality industry, leveraging SMIs to enhance consumer engagement and encourage patronage. This approach draws on SIT, which explains how individuals modify their attitudes and behaviours in response to social cues through three key mechanisms: compliance, identification, and internalisation (Kelman, 1958; Cialdini and Goldstein, 2004). Recent research has applied this framework to examine how SMI endorsements shape consumer behaviour. For example, Lee et al. (2020) highlighted the role of influencer characteristics and restaurant attributes in fostering engagement, particularly among younger consumers, reflecting the identification process, wherein individuals align themselves with admired figures. Similarly, Ki et al. (2022) demonstrated how consumers are first "inspired by" SMIs and subsequently "inspired to" emulate their lifestyle choices and recommendations, reflecting *compliance*, where behaviour is shaped by a desire for social approval and norm conformity. More recently, Cheung

et al. (2024) highlighted the importance of conveying shared values through shared language in fostering cohesive relationships between SMIs and consumers, thereby shaping consumer behavioural intentions. Their findings illustrate how value-driven content facilitates **internalisation**, as consumers begin to adopt the influencer's values and preferences as their own. Collectively, these findings provide a nuanced understanding of how SMIs influence consumer behaviour through multiple psychological pathways.

In parallel, growing attention has been paid to SMIs' content strategies and their role in driving authenticity and engagement. However, research remains limited in its examination of the motivational framing of messages, particularly with respect to **message-influencer congruence**—the alignment between message purpose (e.g., cause-related vs. service-related) and SMI popularity (macro vs. micro), which are essential for developing more nuanced marketing strategies (Pansari and Kumar, 2017; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). For instance, Chan et al. (2023) compared persuasive strategies used by different influencer types, yet their operationalization of content focuses on product features rather than the underlying intent or purpose of the message. Cascio Rizzo et al. (2024) explored how high-arousal language affects trust and engagement across influencer tiers, but their focus remains on linguistic style, not motivational framing, and their study is centered on consumer products rather than experiential services. Similarly, Mulholland et al. (2025) examined authenticity management strategies across SMI network positions but do not differentiate between cause-driven and service-promoting messages, nor do they test how these interact with influencer type in shaping consumer perceptions.

While these studies offer valuable theoretical insights, there remains a notable gap in empirical understanding of how **message-influencer congruence**—specifically the interaction between message motivation (CRM vs. SQM) and SMI popularity (macro vs. micro)—affects perceived authenticity, digital engagement, and patronage intention. This gap is particularly relevant in the hospitality domain, where service experiences are intangible and consumer decision-making is heavily influenced by trust, authenticity perceptions, and social norms. For example, Moon (2020) explored how environmental beliefs influence green restaurant behaviour but does not consider how such beliefs might be shaped by influencer messaging. Filieri et al. (2022) emphasized authenticity and sincerity as critical predictors of trust and purchase intent but overlook the role of influencer type, despite evidence that micro-influencers foster stronger identification and parasocial bonding. As influencer marketing becomes more embedded in restaurant branding (Lee et al., 2021), there is a pressing need to investigate how message framing and influencer popularity interact to shape consumer responses in this service-driven, experience-based context. This study addresses that need by examining the effects of message-influencer alignment on authenticity, engagement, and patronage intention in the restaurant sector.

2.3. Micro vs. Macro SMIs

SMIs attract significant followings, positioning themselves as trusted sources of advice (Leung et al., 2022; Vrontis et al., 2021). To understand their varied impacts on consumer behaviour, it is crucial to categorise them as mega, macro, meso, or micro SMIs (van der Harst & Angelopoulos, 2024). This categorisation aligns with Social Influence Theory, which explains how these influencers facilitate compliance, identification, and internalisation among their followers.

This study focuses on micro and macro SMIs, the most extensively discussed categories in both academic literature and marketing practice (Dhanik, 2016; De Veirman et al., 2017; Hatton, 2018; Kusumasondjaja & Tjiptono, 2019; Schouten et al., 2019; Kay et al., 2020; Cascio Rizzo et al., 2024). Micro SMIs, with 5000 to 100,000 followers, are often perceived as more relatable and authentic, making them particularly effective in niche markets where deep internalisation of their messages is more likely (Schouten et al., 2020; van der Harst & Angelopoulos,

2024; Chen et al., 2024). Their ability to engage with followers personally enhances trust and loyalty, fostering stronger identification and internalisation processes (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). This close connection enables micro-SMIs to resonate strongly with consumers, leading to greater compliance and internalisation of the values they promote (Audrezet et al., 2020).

However, the effectiveness of micro SMIs can vary significantly, largely depending on their level of engagement, which is a crucial determinant of their impact (Hughes et al., 2019). While some sponsored posts generate considerable interest, others fall short, often due to doubts about the influencer's trustworthiness. Consumers are generally sceptical of advertising, particularly when they know influencers are paid for endorsements (Leung et al., 2022). Yet, micro SMIs often overcome this scepticism through their perceived authenticity and close relationships with their audiences, fostering higher trust and engagement. The COVID-19 pandemic further amplified the authenticity and relatability of micro SMIs, as they were seen as everyday individuals offering genuine, firsthand experiences during challenging times (Chen et al., 2024).

Conversely, macro SMIs, with 100,000–1 million followers (Borges-Tiago et al., 2023; Kay et al., 2020), often regarded as reputable SMIs. Their reliance on social media income can sometimes compromise their perceived authenticity and trustworthiness, impacting the identification process with their audience. The growing awareness that influencers are compensated for endorsements often exacerbates this issue, leading to concerns about their motives and further undermining their credibility (Cascio Rizzo et al., 2024). This concern is particularly pronounced as macro-SMIs' posts are more likely to be perceived as overt advertising, which can reduce engagement (Karagür et al., 2022). However, a larger follower count can positively influence engagement, as it often signals popularity, status, and reputation (Leung et al., 2022). The trade-off between reach and authenticity is crucial, as macro SMIs are more effective at generating broad visibility and initial compliance but may not achieve the same level of personal connection and internalisation as micro SMIs (Campbell and Farrell, 2020). Moreover, Pradham et al. (2023) found that among Gen Z, perceived brand control can lead to avoidance behaviours, with macro SMIs exacerbating this effect compared to micro SMIs, who tend to mitigate it due to their perceived authenticity and relatability. Understanding these dynamics through SIT provides a nuanced perspective on the strategic use of different types of SMIs in marketing campaigns. Ultimately, the distinction between macro and micro-SMIs is particularly relevant in campaigns aiming to foster long-term consumer engagement, where the depth of influence—through internalisation—becomes more critical than mere compliance (Vrontis et al., 2021).

Arguably, the effectiveness of influencer marketing depends not only on the message content but also on the fit between influencer type and message appeal (Campbell and Farrell, 2020). Micro SMIs, valued for their perceived credibility and relatability, are particularly effective in driving engagement with socially responsible messages (Lou and Yuan, 2019; Mulholland et al., 2025; Pittman and Abell, 2021). In contrast, macro SMIs are better positioned to generate reach and promote service-oriented benefits, especially when messages highlight functional attributes over social causes (Chan et al., 2023; Cascio Rizzo et al., 2024; Mulholland et al., 2025). Although prior studies have examined these factors independently, their interaction remains insufficiently explored in hospitality—a context where aligning message type with influencer characteristics may be critical to shaping digital engagement and patronage intention.

2.4. Cause-related marketing and SMIs

CRM refers to a strategic alignment between a brand and a social cause, designed to simultaneously achieve corporate and societal objectives (Varadarajan and Menon, 1988). CRM initiatives seek to foster positive brand associations, enhance perceived authenticity, and deepen

emotional engagement among consumers (Bergkvist and Zhou, 2021; Nazlan et al., 2024).

In the context of influencer marketing, CRM campaigns endorsed by SMIs can leverage parasocial bonds and perceived authenticity to strengthen consumers' emotional responses and behavioural intentions (Lou and Yuan, 2019; Lou et al., 2024). Influencers perceived as genuinely supporting social causes are more likely to evoke internalisation processes among followers, leading to stronger alignment with the brand (Audrezet et al., 2020; Xue and Mattila, 2024).

However, recent research warns that performative or insincere CRM efforts may backfire, leading to consumer scepticism and reduced brand trust (Xue and Mattila, 2024). The perceived authenticity of the influencer and congruence between the influencer's persona and the cause are therefore critical to the success of CRM messaging in hospitality marketing. While CRM effectiveness has been explored in broader contexts, its interaction with influencer type and hospitality-specific outcomes remains underexamined, presenting a key focus for this research.

2.5. Service quality messages and SMIs

SQMs emphasise tangible attributes of a brand's offerings, such as efficiency, reliability, ambience, and service excellence (Chow et al., 2007). In the hospitality sector, service quality perceptions are critical drivers of customer satisfaction, loyalty, and positive word-of-mouth behaviours (Zeithaml et al., 1996; Polat et al., 2024).

SMIs can effectively promote service quality by showcasing experiential aspects of a restaurant visit through visual and narrative content (Lou and Yuan, 2019). Such endorsements enable potential customers to form expectations and reduce perceived risk associated with service encounters (Cheung et al., 2022).

Research suggests that macro-SMIs may be particularly effective at promoting service quality benefits due to their broader audience reach and higher perceived expertise in lifestyle domains (Campbell and Farrell, 2020; Kay et al., 2020). While service quality messaging generally appeals to consumers' rational evaluations, authenticity perceptions remain important: endorsements perceived as overly scripted or promotional may undermine message credibility (Audrezet et al., 2020; Luo et al., 2025).

Despite the established importance of service quality in hospitality marketing, limited research has examined how influencer characteristics interact with service-focused message appeals to drive digital engagement and patronage behaviours, particularly within restaurant contexts. This study seeks to address this gap.

3. Study 1 – qualitative phase

3.1. Research design

Study 1 adopted a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews to explore how different message appeals (CRM vs. SQM) influence consumers' perceptions of SMIs and how SMI types moderate these perceptions. This approach allowed for an in-depth understanding of underlying attitudes and mechanisms.

3.2. Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 21 participants recruited via purposive sampling on social media platforms. Participants were required to have prior exposure to influencer marketing in the hospitality sector. Interviews were conducted via Zoom, lasted approximately 30–45 min, and were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. , ,

3.3. Data analysis

A thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke's

Table 1
Participant Demographics for Study 1 (Qualitative Phase).

Participant (Pseudonym)	Gender	Age Group	Edu	SM Use/ Week	SMI Following
P1	F	> 46	Uni	3–5	2
P2	F	28–35	Uni	3–5	> 5
P3	M	> 46	Uni	> 11	3
P4	M	> 46	Uni	6–10	> 5
P5	F	> 46	HSch	3–5	2
P6	M	36–45	Uni	> 11	> 5
P7	F	28–35	Uni	0–2	None
P8	F	28–35	Uni	3–5	2
P9	F	> 46	Uni	> 11	2
P10	F	36–45	Uni	> 11	3
P11	M	> 46	Uni	6–10	3
P12	F	> 46	Uni	> 11	2
P13	F	18–27	Uni	> 11	None
P14	M	28–35	Uni	> 11	None
P15	F	36–45	Uni	> 11	> 5

Note. SMIs = Social Media Influencers; SM=Social Media; Uni=University; HSch=High School

(2006) six-phase framework. Two researchers independently coded the transcripts to enhance reliability, with discrepancies resolved through discussion. NVivo software was used to facilitate data management and coding.

3.4. Results of the qualitative interviews

Thematic analysis of the qualitative interview data identified key themes regarding the impact of CRM and SQM messages, and participants' perceptions of macro- and micro-SMIs. Participants valued sustainability but differed in the priority they gave to cause-related communications compared to practical service information when considering restaurant patronage. Views on influencer types also varied. Micro-SMIs were associated with authenticity and emotional resonance, while macro-SMIs were linked to professionalism and broad reach, although concerns about authenticity were noted. The following sections present detailed findings on message appeal and influencer type.

3.4.1. Impact of cause-related (sustainability) vs. service quality influencer messages

Participants showed mixed responses to CRM and SQM messages. While some valued sustainability communications, others preferred service-focused messages that provided useful information for making dining decisions.

Those favouring cause-related messages described these posts as emotionally appealing, fostering a positive image of the restaurant and the influencer. In contrast, participants preferring service quality messages highlighted the importance of practical information about food, service, and ambience, which directly influenced their dining choices.

The appeal of each message type often depended on participants' individual priorities, personal values, and the context in which they were evaluating restaurant options.

3.4.2. Cause-related (sustainability) messages

Participants who favoured CRM messages reported that such content enhanced their emotional connection with the brand. Posts highlighting sustainability initiatives were described as "meaningful," "inspiring," and "aligned with my values."

Many participants expressed admiration for influencers who advocated for environmental or social causes, particularly when the messaging was perceived as genuine. Authentic sustainability messaging appeared to foster trust, enhance brand image, and increase participants' willingness to support the restaurant.

However, a few participants cautioned that if sustainability messages seemed insincere or overly commercialised, they could provoke

Table 2
Comparing the Impact of SMI-initiated CRM vs. SQM Messages on Participants.

Participant (Pseudonym)	Influencer Type	Quote	Trust Driver
P5	Macro	"I guess the larger their following the more I would want to have their advice."	Larger following implies more advice and worthiness if many others follow their advice.
P14	Macro	"I tend to think that influencers with a large following (macro-influencers) have more credibility."	Influencers with a large following are seen as more credible and their content is trusted by a larger audience.
P2	Macro	"I think I follow and trust more influencers with a big following."	Large following suggests influencers can afford to rate places genuinely, providing unbiased opinions.
P6	Micro	"I generally trust recommendations if micro-influencers as I feel they are more genuine."	Micro-influencers are perceived as more genuine and relatable.
P15	Micro	"I would trust a micro-influencer over a macro-influencer because our lifestyles are more likely to be comparable."	Micro-influencers' lifestyles are seen as more comparable to the participants', enhancing relatability and trust.
P12	Micro	"I would be more inclined to trust a recommendation from a micro-influencer."	Reduces the risk of a large payment influencing the review, making it more genuine.
P8	Micro	"I generally do not mind if it is micro or macro as long as I see it is projected as sincere."	Sincerity in the content is crucial, regardless of the influencer's follower size.
P10	Micro	"Of course, I tend to trust micro-influencers much more than macro ones."	Smaller follower base maintains a bit of authenticity, which is often lost with larger followings.
P13	Micro	"I think on balance that I would trust a micro-influencer over a macro-influencer."	Micro-influencers are more comparable in lifestyle to participants, enhancing credibility.
P4	No Preference	"I usually am not bothered if they're a macro-influencer or a micro-influencer, as long as I feel they're authentic."	Authenticity is the key factor, regardless of the influencer's follower size.
P8	No Preference	"I generally do not mind if it is micro or macro as long as I see it is projected as sincere."	Sincerity in the content is crucial, regardless of the influencer's follower size.
P11	No Preference	"We are happy to take recommendations from anyone as long as the person is engaging and genuine."	Engaging and genuine content is more important than the influencer's follower size.

Note. SMI = Social Media Influencer.

scepticism rather than trust.

3.4.3. Service quality messages

Participants who preferred SQM messages valued the practical information provided about the restaurant's food, service, and atmosphere. Service-focused posts were described as "helpful," "informative," and "reassuring," especially when participants were in the process of selecting a dining venue.

Practical endorsements were seen as useful in reducing uncertainty and managing expectations regarding dining experiences. However, some participants noted that service quality messages, if overly polished or heavily promotional, could risk appearing insincere, diminishing trust in both the influencer and the restaurant.

Table 3
Summary of Participants' Preferences for Macro- and Micro-SMI Messages.

Participant (Pseudonym)	Influencer Type	Quote	Trust Driver
P5	Macro	"I guess the larger their following the more I would want to have their advice."	Larger following implies more advice and worthiness if many others follow their advice.
P14	Macro	"I tend to think that influencers with a large following (macro-influencers) have more credibility."	Influencers with a large following are seen as more credible and their content is trusted by a larger audience.
P2	Macro	"I think I follow and trust more influencers with a big following."	Large following suggests influencers can afford to rate places genuinely, providing unbiased opinions.
P6	Micro	"I generally trust recommendations if micro-influencers as I feel they are more genuine."	Micro-influencers are perceived as more genuine and relatable.
P15	Micro	"I would trust a micro-influencer over a macro-influencer because our lifestyles are more likely to be comparable."	Micro-influencers' lifestyles are seen as more comparable to the participants', enhancing relatability and trust.
P12	Micro	"I would be more inclined to trust a recommendation from a micro-influencer."	Reduces the risk of a large payment influencing the review, making it more genuine.
P8	Micro	"I generally do not mind if it is micro or macro as long as I see it is projected as sincere."	Sincerity in the content is crucial, regardless of the influencer's follower size.
P10	Micro	"Of course, I tend to trust micro-influencers much more than macro ones."	Smaller follower base maintains a bit of authenticity, which is often lost with larger followings.
P13	Micro	"I think on balance that I would trust a micro-influencer over a macro-influencer."	Micro-influencers are more comparable in lifestyle to participants, enhancing credibility.
P4	No Preference	"I usually am not bothered if they're a macro-influencer or a micro-influencer, as long as I feel they're authentic."	Authenticity is the key factor, regardless of the influencer's follower size.
P8	No Preference	"I generally do not mind if it is micro or macro as long as I see it is projected as sincere."	Sincerity in the content is crucial, regardless of the influencer's follower size.
P11	No Preference	"We are happy to take recommendations from anyone as long as the person is engaging and genuine."	Engaging and genuine content is more important than the influencer's follower size.

3.4.4. Mixed views

Some participants expressed mixed views about the appeal of CRM and SQM. They noted that both types of content could be persuasive depending on the context.

For example, participants valued sustainability messages when seeking an emotional connection or when the cause aligned closely with their personal beliefs. However, during the decision-making stage,

particularly when choosing among several dining options, participants found practical service information more useful.

Contextual factors such as dining occasion, personal values, and immediate priorities influenced whether participants responded more strongly to cause-related or service-focused messages.

4. Conclusion

The qualitative findings revealed that both CRM and SQM influence consumer perceptions in distinct ways. CRM messages were more effective in eliciting emotional engagement and fostering brand trust, particularly when delivered by Micro-SMIs perceived as authentic.

SQM messages were valued for their practicality and usefulness in supporting dining decisions, although overly commercialised presentations risked diminishing trust.

Overall, participants' reactions suggested that message effectiveness depends not only on the content itself but also on the perceived authenticity and credibility of the SMI delivering the message.

Participants' perceptions of macro SMIs vs. micro SMIs

Participants expressed distinct perceptions regarding macro- and micro-SMIs. Micro-SMIs were consistently described as more relatable, trustworthy, and genuine. Participants felt that micro-SMIs lived lifestyles closer to their own and were less commercially motivated. This perceived authenticity enhanced participants' willingness to trust their recommendations, particularly when CRM messages were involved.

Macro-SMIs, in contrast, were often associated with broader reach, higher professionalism, and greater visibility. However, several participants also voiced scepticism about the authenticity of macro-SMIs, suggesting that commercial incentives might undermine their credibility. Despite this, some participants recognised that macro-SMIs could effectively communicate service quality messages by leveraging their status and expertise.

Impact on SMI messages

The type of SMI moderated participants' perceptions of the marketing message. CRM messages were seen as more credible and emotionally engaging when delivered by micro SMIs. Participants emphasised that Micro SMIs' perceived authenticity amplified the persuasive effect of sustainability-focused endorsements.

In contrast, participants found SQM messages more acceptable when communicated by macro-SMI. Macro-SMIs were viewed as credible sources of expertise about service and quality standards due to their broad exposure and experience.

Overall, participants' comments indicated that the congruence between SMI type and message content significantly influenced message credibility and engagement.

4.4.1. Summary of qualitative findings and discussion

Study 1 revealed divided participant preferences between CRM and SQM messages from SMIs. Participants who favoured cause-related messages valued the emphasis on sustainability and ethical practices, consistent with findings that cause alignment enhances perceived authenticity and brand trust (Vrontis et al., 2021; Wei et al., 2020). In contrast, participants who prioritised service quality were influenced by detailed accounts of the dining experience, including food quality, atmosphere, and customer service, reflecting the importance of tangible service attributes in shaping consumer satisfaction and behavioural outcomes (De Veirman et al., 2017).

The study also revealed differing perceptions of SMI types. Macro-SMIs were generally regarded as more credible due to their large followings, which were seen as lending social proof and trustworthiness to their recommendations, consistent with prior research linking influencer reach to perceived expertise (Schouten et al., 2020; De Veirman et al., 2017). In contrast, micro-SMIs were perceived as more genuine,

relatable, and personally engaging. These findings reinforce research suggesting that micro-SMIs are often valued for their authenticity, trustworthiness, and greater lifestyle comparability with consumers (Vrontis et al., 2021; Schouten et al., 2020; De Veirman et al., 2017).

Overall, these findings suggest that SMI marketing strategies should carefully align both message appeal and SMI type with target audience preferences to maximise engagement and behavioural outcomes. They underscore broader calls within marketing scholarship to recognise the nuanced interplay between message framing, influencer characteristics, and consumer engagement dynamics (Pansari and Kumar, 2017; Vrontis et al., 2021).

5. Study 2 – quantitative phase 1

Building on the qualitative insights from Study 1, the primary objective of Study 2 is to quantify the impact of message type—specifically, CRM versus SQM—on digital engagement metrics (likes, shares, and comments) and patronage intention (willingness to visit the promoted restaurant). In addition, Study 2 examines whether these effects are moderated by SMI popularity, contrasting micro- and macro-SMIs. By doing so, it aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how message appeal and SMI characteristics jointly shape consumer behaviour in the restaurant context.

Hypotheses development

Drawing upon SIT, SMI-initiated messages are likely to strengthen consumers' engagement and purchase intentions because endorsements and recommendations increase consumers' receptivity to messages, leading to higher digital engagement and patronage behaviours (Hazari et al., 2024). More specifically, when SMIs promote CRM, these communications are likely to activate consumers' internalization processes, whereby consumers align their own values with those espoused by the SMI (Cialdini and Goldstein, 2004).

He and Harris (2020) found that CSR activities during the COVID-19 pandemic significantly boosted consumer engagement, supporting the notion that CRM fosters stronger emotional bonds. Additionally, Lou and Yuan (2019) emphasise that the credibility and perceived sincerity of CSR messages positively influence consumer trust and engagement on social-media platforms. Based on these theoretical and empirical foundations, we hypothesize:

H1. CRM will lead to higher digital engagement than SQM messages.

CSR-focused messages not only enhance digital engagement but also influence patronage intention. When consumers internalize the values promoted by SMIs, they are more likely to convert engagement into tangible actions, such as restaurant patronage (Davlembayeva et al., 2024; Gani et al., 2023). Prior studies demonstrate that CSR activities positively impact consumer trust, a critical driver of behavioural intention (Morhart et al., 2015). Thus, we propose:

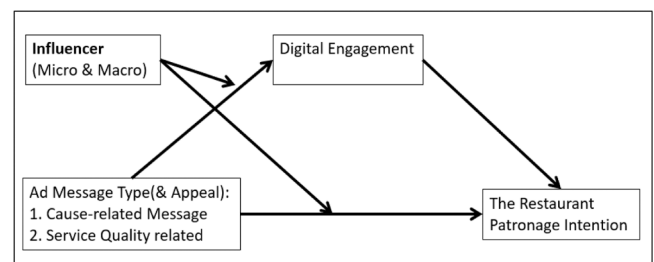


Fig. 1. Conceptual Framework. Fig. 1. Conceptual Framework of the Relationships Among Influencer Type, Message Appeal, Digital Engagement, and Patronage Intention. Note: CRM = Cause-Related Marketing; SQM = Service Quality Marketing; SMI = Social Media Influencer.

H2. CRM will lead to higher patronage intention than SQM messages.

SIT emphasizes how perceived authority and popularity influence consumer behaviour and drive compliance (Davlembayeva et al., 2024). Macro-SMIs, with their large follower bases, are often seen as more authoritative and influential, which increases their ability to elicit compliance from consumers and, in turn, drive higher levels of digital engagement (Uzunoğlu and Kip, 2014; Schouten et al., 2020; Pittman and Abell, 2021). Based on this understanding, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3. Macro-SMIs will generate higher digital engagement compared to micro-SMIs.

While macro SMIs may drive higher digital engagement, micro SMIs can effectively influence patronage intention. The perceived authenticity of micro SMIs, who often have closer, more trust-based relationships with their followers (Chen et al., 2024), can be more effective in driving patronage intentions (De Veirman et al., 2017; Kay et al., 2020). Recent studies suggest that the authenticity and relatability of micro SMIs can be more effective in shaping consumers' behavioural intentions, as they are more likely to create personalized messages and interact directly with their followers, fostering stronger emotional connections and greater trust (Chen et al., 2024; De Veirman et al., 2017; Colliander and Marder, 2018; Park et al., 2021). Building on these insights, it is reasonable to propose that micro-SMIs have greater influence in driving consumers' patronage intentions, leading to the following hypothesis:

H4. Micro-SMIs will have a stronger impact on patronage intention than macro-SMIs.

Arguably, consumers' digital engagement is often driven by two key motivations: a sense of citizenship that encourages supporting SMIs with whom they have strong relationships (Cheung et al., 2024), and a desire for social recognition by sharing popular content and contributing to its perceived value (Hossain et al., 2018). Building on this, we posit that *message-influencer congruence* enhances consumers' digital engagement intention, such that SQM are more impactful when delivered by micro-SMIs, while CRM are more persuasive when endorsed by macro-SMIs.

SQM, which emphasize tangible benefits such as discounts, exclusive offers, and product quality, are likely to capture attention. In this context, passionate consumers are more inclined to comment, like, and share SQM initiated by SMIs with whom they have strong, cohesive relationships (Cheung et al., 2022). For instance, consumers are more willing to post comments and share content about the performance of green products promoted by green SMIs, a type of micro-SMI (Cheung et al., 2024). On the other hand, CRM, which emphasize social responsibility, sustainability, and community engagement, are increasingly appreciated and recognized. When CRM is promoted by macro-SMIs, it is more likely to generate buzz and gain popularity due to their broad reach and influence (Campbell and Farrell, 2020; Cascio Rizzo et al., 2024). As a result, consumers are more inclined to share these CRM initiatives initiated by SMIs to gain social recognition. Based on the above insights, we posit the following exploratory hypotheses:

H5. There is an interaction between message type and SMI type on digital engagement, such that (a) cause-related messages generate higher digital engagement when delivered by macro-SMIs, and (b) service quality messages generate higher digital engagement when delivered by micro-SMIs.

Consumers' behavioural intention, such as patronage intention, is often shaped by perceived tangible benefits, the strength of their relationship with endorsers, and value alignment (Hu et al., 2020; Vrontis et al., 2021). Building on this, we posit that *message-influencer congruence* enhances persuasive effectiveness, such that SQM are more impactful when delivered by macro-SMIs, while CRM are more

persuasive when endorsed by micro-SMIs.

SQM often emphasize tangible benefits, such as convenience, efficiency, or expertise—attributes that align closely with the broader appeal and perceived authority of macro-SMIs. Due to their large followings and professionalized image, macro-SMIs are typically viewed as more knowledgeable and persuasive when promoting service-oriented content (Boerman, 2020; Campbell and Farrell, 2020). In contrast, micro-SMIs, while more relatable, may lack the perceived expertise or reach to effectively influence patronage decisions based on service quality alone (Kay et al., 2020). Therefore, the persuasive impact of service quality messages on patronage intention is expected to be stronger when delivered by macro-SMIs than by micro-SMIs.

Shared values in CRM typically include commitments to social responsibility, environmental sustainability, equity, or community well-being (Cheung et al., 2025; Guerreiro et al., 2016). Micro-SMIs often build their followings around these values, fostering a sense of psychological connection and mutual trust (Pittman and Abell, 2021). When they promote causes aligned with these principles, their messages are more likely to resonate with audiences who already prioritize similar ideals, strengthening emotional connection and increasing patronage intention. In contrast, macro-SMIs may be viewed as more commercialized, which can dilute the impact of cause-related appeals (Hogsnes et al., 2024; Pittman and Abell, 2021). Thus, the influence of cause-related marketing messages on patronage intention is expected to be stronger when conveyed by micro-SMIs than by macro-SMIs, leading to the following hypothesis:

H6. There is an interaction between message type and SMI type on patronage intention, such that (a) service quality messages generate higher patronage intention when delivered by macro-SMIs, and (b) cause-related messages generate higher patronage intention when delivered by micro-SMIs.

The proposed conceptual framework is depicted in Fig. 1.

5.4.1. Experimental survey design and procedure

Study 2 recruited 268 participants from the Prolific platform, primarily from the United Kingdom, resulting in a diverse sample (31.7 % male, 68.3 % female; 15.3 % Gen Z, 73.5 % Gen Y, 11.2 % Gen X; 63.8 % with a university education). Participants were assigned to either a micro-SMI or macro-SMI condition.

The survey comprised three sections: Informed Consent and Overview, Stimuli Presentation and Measurement, and Attention Checks. Participants rated their perceptions using 7-point Likert scale items adapted from validated scales. Patronage intention was measured with statements such as "It is likely I will have the intention to dine at this restaurant in the future" (Dodds et al., 1991). Digital engagement was assessed through responses to actions such as "After reading the post, how likely would you be to 'Like,' 'Share,' and 'Comment' on the influencer's social media channel" (Reich and Pittman, 2020). All measures demonstrated reliability above 0.70.

Experimental stimuli, presented in Appendix 1, included two types of influencer messages: cause-related and service-related. Message appeal was operationalised through these two message types, reflecting distinct content emphases on social responsibility (CRM) and service excellence (SQM). Participants were shown these stimuli, which depicted messages from either micro- or macro-SMIs. The CRM posts highlighted social responsibility initiatives, while the SQM posts focused on the quality and experience of the restaurant. This setup aimed to gauge the impact of different message types and influencer sizes on participants' engagement and patronage intentions (see Appendix Fig. 1a and Fig. 1b).

To ensure data integrity, trap questions were included to assess participants' attentiveness. Eighteen participants were excluded for non-compliance, leaving a refined sample size that provided valuable insights into the interaction between influencer size and message type on consumer behaviours within the target population.

5.4.2. Study 2 data analysis and findings

5.4.2.1. Digital engagement. A two-way repeated measures ANOVA was run to determine the effect of message type (cause-related vs. service quality) on digital engagement (DE) across micro- and macro-SMIs. Analysis of the studentised residuals showed normality, as assessed by the Shapiro-Wilk test of normality, and no outliers, as assessed by no studentised residuals greater than ± 3 standard deviations. There was sphericity for the interaction term, as assessed by Mauchly's test of sphericity ($p > .05$).

Results indicated that macro-SMIs consistently generated higher DE for both CRM (mean = 3.10) and SQM (mean = 2.64) compared to micro-SMIs (means = 2.86 and 2.27, respectively) (see Fig. 2). The significant main effect of message type on DE (Pillai's Trace = .210, $F(1, 266) = 70.77$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .210$) confirmed that CRM led to higher digital engagement. However, the interaction between message type and SMI type was not significant (Pillai's Trace = .004, $F(1, 266) = 0.99$, $p = .320$, partial $\eta^2 = .004$), suggesting no differential impact based on influencer type. The analysis showed that macro-SMIs were significantly more effective overall ($F(1, 266) = 3.88$, $p = .050$, partial $\eta^2 = .014$).

These findings support H1 and H3, confirming that CRM led to higher DE and that Macro SMI generate higher DE overall. However, H5a and H5b were not supported, as no significant differences were found based on SMI type.

Qualitative findings reinforced these results. Participants who favoured CRM emphasised the importance of ethical and environmentally friendly practices. For instance, Participant P4 noted, "I really like pro-social influencers that have a sustainability-focused approach," indicating that such messages add authenticity and credibility to the influencer's recommendations. Participant P14 emphasised, "For me, the sustainability of a restaurant is more important than service quality." This group believes that sustainable practices reflect a restaurant's commitment to quality and ethical operations, making them more likely to patronise such establishments.

5.4.2.2. Patronage intention. As above, the dataset met assumptions of normality and showed no outliers, and sphericity was assumed for the interaction term ($p > .05$). A two-way repeated measures ANOVA was conducted to examine the effects of message type on patronage intention (PT) across influencer types, with Bonferroni adjustment applied.

Cause-related messages led to higher PT, with micro-SMIs showing a mean of 4.82 and macro-SMIs 4.72. For service quality messages, macro-SMIs had a higher mean PT (4.58) than micro-SMIs (4.31) (see Fig. 3). Multivariate tests confirmed significant main effects of message type on PT (Pillai's Trace = .114, $F(1, 266) = 34.35$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .114$) and a significant interaction between PT and SMI type (Pillai's Trace

= .040, $F(1, 266) = 11.10$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .040$).

While H2 was supported (CRM led to higher PT), H4 was only partially supported. Although the interaction between SMI type and message type was significant, micro-SMIs did not consistently demonstrate stronger effects on PT. Instead, macro-SMIs were more effective for SQM.

A multivariate analysis revealed a significant interaction between message type and SMI type on PT (Pillai's Trace = .040, $F(1, 266) = 11.10$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .040$), as well as a significant main effect of message type (Pillai's Trace = .114, $F(1, 266) = 34.35$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .114$). Follow-up comparisons showed that for CRM, micro-SMIs elicited higher PT ($M = 4.82$) than macro-SMIs ($M = 4.72$), while for SQM, macro-SMIs generated higher PT ($M = 4.58$) than micro-SMIs ($M = 4.31$). Thus, H6a and H6b were supported. These results highlight the importance of aligning message framing with SMI type to optimize consumer response.

These findings highlight the significant roles of message type and SMI type in influencing DE and PT, supporting and extending SIT in influencer marketing. The results particularly underscore the effectiveness of macro-SMIs, and the higher engagement driven by CRM.

Participants who prioritised service quality messages were more influenced by information about the dining experience, including food quality, atmosphere, and customer service. For example, Participant P8 stated, "I think both are important, but service and quality are usually what I am influenced by," highlighting that poor service is a significant deterrent when choosing a restaurant. Participant P6 added, "I would be more influenced by service quality messages," reflecting that dining out is a special treat and a positive service experience is crucial.

5.4.3. Summary

Study 2 yielded several key empirical insights, confirming and extending the qualitative findings from Study 1. Firstly, it confirms that macro-SMIs generate significantly higher digital engagement than micro-influencers ($F(1, 266) = 3.88$, $p = .050$, partial $\eta^2 = .014$), attributed to the perceived credibility of macro-SMIs stemming from their larger follower bases.

Additionally, Study 2 emphasises the strong consumer preference for CRM, which is highly valued for its focus on sustainability and ethical practices (Pillai's Trace = .210, $F(1, 266) = 70.77$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .210$). CRM messages led to significantly higher digital engagement compared to SQM messages.

Notably, macro-SMIs were particularly effective in promoting SQM messages to drive consumers' patronage intentions (Pillai's Trace = .040, $F(1, 266) = 11.10$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .040$), whereas micro-SMIs proved more effective in promoting CRM messages (see Fig. 2 and Fig. 3). The perceived genuineness and authenticity of micro-SMIs made them particularly persuasive for cause-related content, aligning

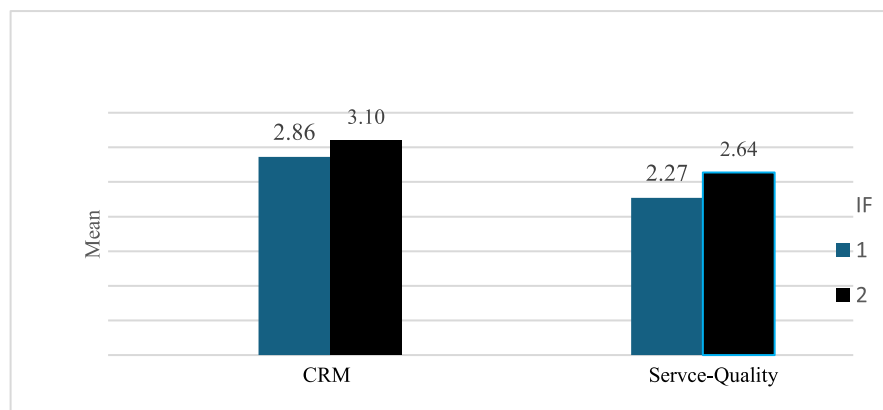


Fig. 2. Comparison of Interaction of Means Across Digital Engagement and Influencer Size. Fig. 2. Comparison of Mean Digital Engagement across Cause-Related and Service Quality Messages by Influencer Size. Note: IF1 = Micro-SMI, IF2 = Macro-SMI.

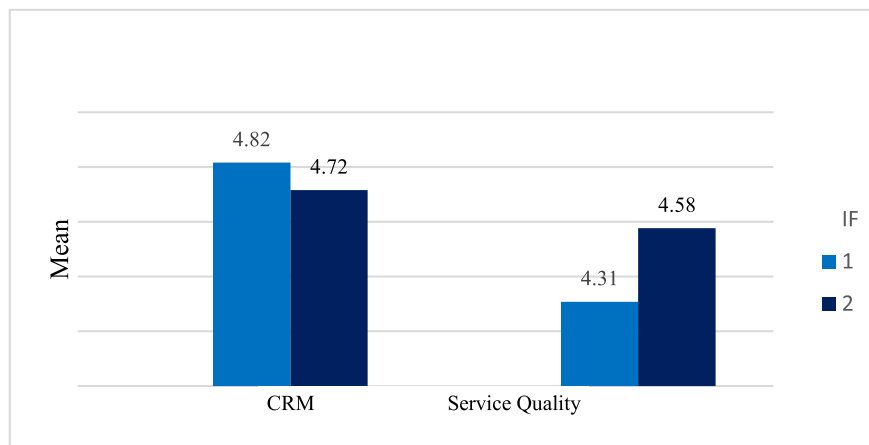


Fig. 3. Comparison of Interaction of Means Across Patronage Intention and Influencer Size. **Fig. 3.** Comparison of Mean Patronage Intention across Cause-Related and Service Quality Messages by Influencer Size. Note: IF1 = Micro-SMI, IF2 = Macro-SMI.

with the strong consumer preference for CRM observed in Study 1.

These findings underscore the impact of influencer credibility and the engaging nature of cause-related content in driving digital engagement, providing valuable insights for leveraging influencer marketing strategies. As Participant P15 noted, "Prosocial/sustainability is more important to me personally," expressing a preference for genuine causes over marketing gimmicks. This reinforces the need for marketers to ensure authenticity in their campaigns to maintain consumer trust.

6. Study 3 – quantitative phase 2

Study 3 seeks to extend the findings from Study 1 and 2 by investigating how SMI-initiated messages impact dining decisions, specifically examining the mediating roles of perceived message authenticity and digital engagement. This study aims to fill a gap in the literature by exploring the interplay between message appeal (MA) of both CRM and SQM, authenticity, digital engagement and patronage intention. By focusing on the authenticity and engagement elicited by these messages, Study 3 provides deeper insights into the underlying psychological mechanisms that drive consumer behaviour in the restaurant and hospitality sectors. This study is critical for developing more effective influencer marketing strategies and understanding the intricate nature of social influence, an area previously underexplored in existing literature (Rao Hill, Qesja.,2023).

6.1. Hypotheses development

Authenticity, often linked to truthfulness, sincerity, and originality (Henderson et al., 2010), is a crucial factor that strengthens consumers' intention to engage with SMIs (Kowalczyk & Pounders, 2016). Within the framework of SIT, authenticity plays a vital role, particularly in the internalisation process, in driving consumers' positive behaviours (Ozuem et al., 2021). Authenticity enhances the credibility of a message, making followers more likely to engage with content they perceive as genuine (Audrezet et al., 2020; Reinikainen et al., 2020). Given that perceived authenticity is suggested when considering both cause-related and SQM. This leads to the hypothesis:

H7a. Perceived authenticity will mediate the relationship between message appeal and digital engagement.

Similarly, the impact of message appeal on patronage intention is expected to be mediated by perceived authenticity. Consumers should be more inclined to patronise a brand if they trust the authenticity of the influencer's message, aligning with the internalisation process where belief in the message translates into action (Morhart et al., 2015). Thus, we hypothesize:

H7b. Perceived authenticity will mediate the relationship between message appeal and patronage intention.

We integrate the internalization process with the sequence of influence, proposing that a message's appeal initially enhances perceived authenticity, which subsequently drives digital engagement and ultimately leads to patronage intention (Reinikainen et al., 2020). This sequential mediation captures the comprehensive impact of SMIs' messages on consumer behaviour, grounded in the theoretical framework of SIT. Thus, we hypothesize:

H8. The relationship between message appeal and patronage intention will be sequentially mediated by perceived authenticity and digital engagement.

6.1.1. Method, data analysis, and results

Study 3 recruited 287 participants, consisting of 30.7 % male and 69.9 % female respondents, spanning Gen Z (14 %), Gen Y (73.8 %), and Gen X (11.5 %). A majority (62.7 %) held a university degree. Participants evaluated CRM and SQM posts by rating message appeal, perceived authenticity, digital engagement likelihood, and patronage intention.

All measurement scales were drawn from validated sources: message appeal from Bruner and Kumar (2000), perceived authenticity from Kapoor et al. (2023), digital engagement from Reich and Pittman (2020), and patronage intention from Dodds et al. (1991). Message appeal was operationalised as a perceived evaluation based on participants' responses to the stimuli (Bruner and Kumar, 2000). All scales demonstrated acceptable reliability with Cronbach's α exceeding .70 (see Appendix 2).

Serial mediation analysis was conducted using Hayes' PROCESS

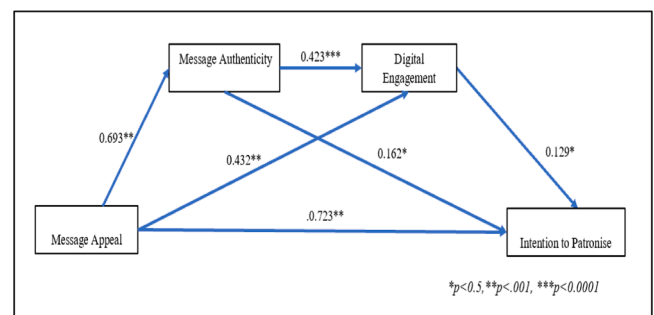


Fig. 4. Conceptual Framework for Study 3: Mediation Model Linking Message Appeal, Perceived Authenticity, Digital Engagement, and Patronage Intention.

macro (Model 6) with 5000 bootstrap samples. The results showed that message appeal significantly predicted perceived authenticity ($R^2 = .480$, $F(1, 285) = 263.24$, $\beta = .693$, $p < .001$). Both message appeal and perceived authenticity significantly predicted digital engagement ($R^2 = .286$, $F(2, 284) = 56.74$, $p < .001$). Furthermore, digital engagement, perceived authenticity, and message appeal significantly predicted patronage intention ($R^2 = .718$, $F(3, 283) = 239.59$, $p < .001$).

The indirect effects were also significant. The path from message appeal to patronage intention via authenticity alone had an effect size of $b = .117$ with a 95 % confidence interval [.038,.204]. The path through digital engagement alone was $b = .056$, 95 % CI [.022,.102], while the sequential path through both authenticity and digital engagement showed an effect of $b = .040$, 95 % CI [.017,.067]. Thus, hypotheses H67, H7b, and H8 were supported.

6.1.2. Summary of study 3 findings

Study 3 highlights that perceived authenticity significantly mediates the relationship between message appeal and both digital engagement and patronage intention. These results reinforce that influencer authenticity is not merely a static trait but an actively managed perception that requires careful balance between intrinsic passion and commercial collaborations (Audrezet et al., 2020; Nistor et al., 2024). Furthermore, digital engagement plays a sequential mediating role alongside authenticity.

These findings confirm the vital importance of developing authentic and engaging influencer content to enhance consumer response within the hospitality sector, thus advancing both theoretical understanding and practical influencer marketing strategies (Chen et al., 2024; Luo et al., 2025).

7. Discussion

Utilizing a mixed-method approach, this study provides several key findings in the context of SMI marketing within the restaurant sector. First, we found that CRM is more influential in driving consumers' digital engagement and patronage intention than SQM, suggesting that consumers are more motivated by value-driven, cause-related campaigns when making decisions about digital engagement and patronage. While the effectiveness of CRM, which highlighting sustainability and ethical initiatives, and SQM, which focusing on tangible service benefits has gained scholarly attention because consumers increasingly expect businesses to engage in socially responsible practices and offer outstanding service quality simultaneously, empirical understanding of the distinct effects of CRM and SQM is still limited, particularly within the hospitality context. Our findings highlight the importance of CRM messages, characterized by its focuses on sustainability and ethical initiatives, in driving consumers' digital engagement and patronage intention, by aligning brand values with those of socially conscious consumers (He & Harris, 2020; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001). Conversely, SQM, focusing on tangible service benefits, appeals to expectations for quality but may lack emotional or ethical resonance. The result aligns with previous studies (e.g., Cheung et al., 2024; Hu et al., 2020) in relation to the importance of shared values in fostering stronger emotional connections and trust among consumers, which in turn fosters consumers' positive behavioural intentions.

Second, the results of this study revealed that macro-SMIs are more influential in driving consumers' digital engagement, highlighting the significant role of their extensive reach and widespread visibility in capturing attention and generating interaction. Our findings align with previous studies (e.g., Campbell and Farrell, 2020; Hudders et al., 2021) that emphasize the importance of macro-SMIs' popularity and broader reach in driving engagement-related outcomes. The results suggest that consumers may be more inclined to engage with content endorsed by well-known influencers due to the perceived social value and recognition associated with sharing or interacting with popular influencers.

Third, this study underscores the importance of *message-influencer*

congruence, defined as the alignment between the motivational framing of a message and the popularity level of SMIs, in shaping distinct consumer behavioural outcomes—namely digital engagement and patronage intention. Specifically, our findings show that macro-SMIs are more effective in driving digital engagement regardless of message type, while micro-SMIs exert a stronger influence on patronage intention when promoting CRM, and macro-SMIs are more effective when promoting SQM. These results are consistent with recent studies that emphasize the value of *message-influencer congruence* (Hudders et al., 2021; Vrontis et al., 2021), suggesting that aligning message strategies with the inherent strengths of different types of SMIs can significantly enhance marketing effectiveness by better matching consumer motivations with perceived influencer credibility and appeal. Our study provides valuable insights into the nuanced ways that message type and SMI characteristics interact to shape consumer behaviour in the restaurant industry (Lee et al., 2018; Pop et al., 2022; Femenia-Serra & Gretzel, 2020; Van der Harst & Angelopoulos, 2024; Cascio Rizzo et al., 2024; Chen et al., 2024).

Lastly, our mediation model demonstrates that perceived authenticity plays a significant role in enhancing the effectiveness of SMIs' message endorsements. Our findings align with previous studies (e.g., Audrezet et al., 2020; Pittman and Abell, 2021), highlighting the central role of authenticity in fostering emotional connection, and ultimately influencing consumer behaviours such as engagement and patronage intention.

7.1. Theoretical implications

This study extends SIT by demonstrating that CRM is more influential than SQM in driving digital engagement and patronage intention within the restaurant sector. While previous studies have examined the impact of SMI endorsements on consumer behaviour (Davlembayeva et al., 2024; Hazari et al., 2024), empirical comparisons between CRM and SQM messages through the lens of SIT remain scarce. Our findings indicate that CRM is more effective than SQM in driving digital engagement and patronage intention, aligning with research suggesting that CSR communications are particularly persuasive in hospitality contexts (He & Harris, 2020; Pansari and Kumar, 2017). This is because CRM fosters consumer internalization by aligning with shared values between consumers and restaurants, whereas SQM primarily elicits compliance through pragmatic, benefit-driven appeals. In this context, internalization driven by CRM has a greater impact on digital engagement and patronage intention than the compliance prompted by SQM in restaurant marketing promotions.

Second, this study contributes to the marketing literature by advancing the ongoing debate on influencer effectiveness, offering nuanced insights into the relative impact of micro versus macro-SMIs. While macro SMIs are typically valued for their broad reach and visibility, and micro-SMIs are recognized for their relatability and approachability (Kay et al., 2020; Li et al., 2024; Vrontis et al., 2021), our findings reveal that these two types of influencers have distinct effects on different consumer behaviours, specifically digital engagement and patronage intention. More precisely, our results show that macro-SMIs are more effective in driving digital engagement, largely due to their popularity, which enables consumers to gain social recognition by sharing content endorsed by widely known figures. In contrast, micro-SMIs exert a stronger influence on consumers' patronage intentions, an effect attributed to their higher perceived authenticity and relatability, which foster deeper trust and emotional connection with followers. These findings challenge conventional wisdom that often emphasized the overall superiority of macro-SMIs (Campbell and Farrell, 2020; De Veirman et al., 2017), by highlighting the differentiated impacts of macro and micro-SMIs on key consumer outcomes.

Third, this study contributes to the marketing literature by emphasizing the importance of *message-influencer congruence* in the context of SMI marketing within the hospitality sector. While previous research

(e.g., Cheung et al., 2022; Ki et al., 2020) has explored how different types of SMI content strategies influence consumer behaviour, empirical understanding of message–influencer congruence—specifically, the alignment between a message’s motivational framing (e.g., cause-related versus service-related) and an influencer’s level of popularity (macro versus micro)—remains limited, especially in hospitality contexts. Our findings underscore the significance of matching message type with influencer characteristics. Specifically, micro-SMIs are more effective in value-driven campaigns such as CRM, where authenticity and shared values play a critical role in driving consumers’ patronage intentions. In contrast, macro-SMIs are better suited for promoting service quality messages, where tangible service benefits are central, leading to stronger patronage intention.

Fourth, this study highlights authenticity as a critical mediator of consumer behaviour. While prior research (Reinikainen et al., 2020) emphasized the role of authenticity in driving engagement, our findings reveal that message appeal enhances perceived authenticity, which in turn influences both digital engagement and patronage intention. Furthermore, recent studies suggest that authenticity is not a fixed trait of influencers but a dynamic construct that evolves over time, particularly under commercial pressures (Audrezet et al., 2020; Nistor et al., 2024). Our findings contribute to marketing literature by suggesting SMIs to navigate the tension between authentic self-presentation and brand partnerships, as consumer perceptions of their authenticity can shift in response to these strategic choices.

Lastly, in terms of research design, this study adopts a mixed-methods approach by integrating insights from both qualitative (interviews) and quantitative (experiments) approaches. The qualitative phase provides rich, contextual understanding of how consumers interpret influencer popularity and message types, revealing nuanced perceptions of authenticity and trust in the hospitality setting. These findings offer depth and help uncover underlying motivations behind consumer engagement. Complementing this, the experimental results allow for causal inference by systematically testing the effects of SMI popularity (Macro vs Micro) and message strategy (CRM vs. SQM) on digital engagement and patronage intention. While previous studies have typically relied on either qualitative or quantitative approaches in isolation, this study combines both to offer a more comprehensive, panoramic view. By doing so, it enhances both the interpretive depth and generalisability of the findings, contributing valuable insights to theory and practice in influencer marketing within the hospitality industry.

7.2. Managerial implications

The findings indicate that micro-SMIs are particularly effective in delivering CRM messages, largely due to their perceived authenticity and the close, trust-based relationships they maintain with their followers. These qualities make them especially influential among consumers who value social responsibility and ethical business practices. For hospitality brands aiming to establish or strengthen a socially responsible image, collaborating with micro-SMIs presents a highly effective strategy. As such, hospitality managers are recommended to use social-media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube to search for micro-SMIs, typically defined as having between 10,000 and 100,000 followers. They should focus on identifying micro-SMIs whose content naturally reflects values aligned with the brand’s CSR priorities, such as sustainability, ethical sourcing, or charitable partnerships. Beyond follower count, it is important to assess the influencer’s content history and tone to ensure a consistent and genuine alignment with the brand’s narrative.

Once suitable micro-SMIs are identified, hospitality managers can collaborate with them to co-develop CSR-themed campaigns. These might include eco-friendly menu launches, partnerships with local charities, or socially focused events. Rather than relying on scripted promotional messages, hospitality managers are recommended to invite

micro-SMIs to share personal, story-driven content that reflects their authentic engagement with the initiative. More specifically, hospitality managers should encourage micro-SMIs to document their behind-the-scenes experience, express their support for the cause, and articulate why it resonates with them, to strengthen credibility, build consumer trust and deepen consumer engagement.

In contrast, macro-SMIs are better suited for promoting messages that emphasize service quality, such as highlighting premium dining experiences, unique offerings, or new menu items. Their large follower base and polished content style position them as highly recognized figures who can lend credibility and aspirational value to the brand. For these campaigns, hospitality managers should seek macro-SMIs with established reputations in sophisticated lifestyle and culinary, and work with them to produce visually engaging, professionally styled content. For service-driven promotions, such as new menu launches, high-end dining packages, or unique venue experiences, managers should collaborate with macro-SMIs whose polished content and aspirational appeal enhance perceptions of quality and exclusivity. For example, macro-influencers can feature immersive previews of a restaurant’s fine dining experience or exclusive event coverage that showcases the brand’s attention to quality and detail.

To maximize the effectiveness of influencer marketing campaigns, hospitality managers should prioritize a strategic alignment between the type of message being communicated and the type of influencer engaged (i.e., *message-influencer congruence*). Specifically, micro-SMIs are most effective for conveying CSR-related messages, as their authenticity and close follower relationships help foster emotional resonance and build brand trust. In contrast, macro-SMIs are better suited for service-focused promotions that highlight quality, exclusivity, and aspirational experiences, owing to their broader reach and polished professional image.

Authenticity should remain a central consideration across all campaigns. It is essential that influencer partnerships are built on genuine alignment between the influencer’s personal values and the brand’s message. This alignment ensures consistency in storytelling and enhances message credibility. For CRM campaigns, where consumer expectations for sincerity are especially high, a lack of authenticity can significantly undermine trust and reduce engagement. Therefore, carefully selecting influencers who naturally embody the values the brand seeks to promote is key to driving meaningful and lasting consumer responses.

By integrating these practical steps into their influencer marketing strategies, hospitality managers can create more targeted, credible, and effective campaigns that respond to the increasing consumer demand for transparency, social impact, and meaningful brand interactions.

7.3. Limitations and future research

While the study offers important insights, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the sample demographic was predominantly UK-based and highly educated, which may restrict the generalisability of the findings to other cultural and demographic contexts. The United Kingdom, as an individualistic society, may influence consumer responses to influencer marketing and message appeals, particularly regarding perceptions of authenticity and engagement with CRM. Recent scholarship emphasises that consumer engagement with CRM initiatives is culturally contingent, with collectivist societies potentially responding more favourably to cause-based appeals than individualistic audiences (Vrontis et al., 2021; Wei et al., 2020). Future research should explicitly explore cultural boundary conditions by replicating the study across different societies to assess the stability of the observed effects. More specifically, comparative studies could explore how cultural orientation influences the perceived effectiveness of micro- and macro-influencers, as well as how consumers across different societies interpret authenticity and brand sincerity. Future research could investigate how consumer trust in influencer communications differs between collectivist and individualist cultural settings, and whether CSR

messages have greater persuasive power in cultures that place a stronger emphasis on social harmony and collective well-being.

Second, reliance on self-reported measures may introduce bias. Although validated scales were employed, traditional engagement metrics, such as 'likes' and 'shares', may not fully capture meaningful behavioural outcomes. Future research would benefit from integrating objective behavioural data, such as click-through rates, time spent on content, or transactional metrics including purchases and donations. This would allow researchers to more accurately assess how influencer messages translate into measurable consumer actions.

Third, the study focused on two message types (CRM and SQM) and two influencer categories (micro and macro-SMI). This limited scope may not capture the full spectrum of influencer marketing strategies commonly employed in practice. Future studies should examine a wider range of influencer tiers, including nano-influencers, meso-level influencers, and celebrity endorsers, as well as alternative message appeals such as health-focused content, vegetarian recipes, or lifestyle-oriented promotions such as mindfulness or wellness routines. Expanding the variety of influencer profiles and messaging themes would enable researchers to assess the generalisability and nuance of the current findings across more diverse marketing contexts.

Finally, the cross-sectional design limits causal inference. Although the experimental design offers internal validity, longitudinal studies are needed to capture how influencer marketing effects and message strategies evolve over time (Pansari and Kumar, 2017). Although the experimental design strengthens internal validity, it does not capture the long-term effects of repeated exposure to influencers or the evolution of consumer-brand relationships. Longitudinal research would offer deeper insights into how influencer campaigns influence loyalty, engagement, and trust over extended periods. Future studies could monitor changes in consumer attitudes and behaviours across multiple time points to

better understand the durability of influencer impact. For instance, researchers might examine whether repeated exposure to CSR messages from the same influencer strengthens brand loyalty, or whether consumer perceptions of authenticity and credibility shift over time.

Addressing these limitations by incorporating culturally diverse samples, objective behavioural data, a broader range of influencer and message types, and longitudinal designs will help to validate and expand the current findings. This approach would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how influencer marketing strategies interact with consumer psychology across varying contexts and over time.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Cheung Man Lai: Writing – review & editing, Validation, Investigation, Data curation. **Ndasi Wilson Nih:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Supervision, Software, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Appendix 1

Experimental Stimuli



Appendix 1a. Cause-related influencer message. The experimental stimulus is an Instagram post promoting Downplace Restaurant's sustainability efforts. The post features a vibrant image showcasing an array of appetising dishes, accompanied by engaging text and emojis to convey the restaurant's commitment to environmental responsibility. The headline, "Savouring Sustainability at Downplace Restaurant!", captures attention, while the body text details the restaurant's initiative of allocating 5 % of monthly profits to eco-friendly farming charities. It highlights local and eco-friendly sourcing, ethical farming practices, and a farm-to-table approach. The post invites interaction with a call to action: "Swipe left to explore these initiatives and join in supporting Downplace's commitment to sustainability!" and "Tag your foodie friends for a night to remember at Downplace!" Hashtags such as #SustainableDining, #GreenCuisine, and #DownplaceEcoDining boost visibility and engagement. This stimulus aims to test the impact of cause-related messages on digital engagement and patronage intention by leveraging appealing visuals, persuasive content, and social media features



Appendix 1b. : Service-quality related influencer message. The experimental stimulus is an Instagram post promoting the dining experience at Downtown restaurant. The post features a vibrant image showcasing a variety of appetising dishes, complemented by engaging text and emojis to convey excitement and quality. The headline, "Elevate Your Dining Experience at Downtown!", grabs attention, while the descriptive body text highlights exceptional service, attentive staff, and a diverse menu that promises a symphony of flavours. The post encourages interaction with a call to action to "Swipe left to glimpse the inviting atmosphere and some delectable dishes that await you!" and to "Tag your foodie friends for a night to remember at Downtown!" Hashtags such as #DowntownDining, #ExquisiteExperience, and #DowntownExperience are used to increase reach and engagement. The stimulus aims to test the effectiveness of influencer marketing in driving digital engagement and patronage intention by leveraging high-quality imagery, engaging content, and social media features

Appendix 2. Measurement items Appendix: Scale Items. (S = Service Quality Message (SQM) items; C = Cause-Related Message (CRM) items)

Construct	Items	Code	Mean	Std. Deviation	Cronbach's Alpha
Patronage Intention	(adapted from Dodds et al., 1991)				0.926/0.940
	If I were to look for a restaurant near me, the likelihood of choosing this restaurant is high.	sPT1/cPT1	4.422/ 4.751	1.110/1.007	
	I would be highly inclined to dine in this restaurant if I were looking for a restaurant near me.	sPT2/cPT2	4.512/ 4.790	1.133/0.994	
	The likelihood that I would consider dining in this restaurant is high.	sPT3/cPT3	4.401/ 4.753	1.184/1.094	
Digital Engagement	(adapted from Reich and Pittman, 2020)				0.831/0.826
	Like	sDE1/cDE1	2.521/ 3.164	1.597/1.735	
	Share	sDE2/cDE2	2.264/ 2.743	1.464/1.540	
	Comment	sDE3/cDE3	2.591/ 3.052	1.530/1.593	
Message Authenticity	(adapted from Kapoor et al., 2023)				0.882/0.926
	This post is typical of the posts I have seen on social media.	sAuth1/ cAuth1	4.514/ 5.062	1.195/1.026	
	Many people are likely to experience the scenario portrayed in the post.	sAuth2/ cAuth2	3.903/ 5.372	1.330/1.132	

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(continued)

Construct	Items	Code	Mean	Std. Deviation	Cronbach's Alpha
Message Appeal	The content of the post was based on facts.	sAuth3/ cAuth3	4.201/ 4.960	1.137/1.054	0.914/0.926
	The image portrayed in the post made sense.	sAuth4/ cAuth4	4.171/ 5.161	1.202/1.067	
	(adapted from Bruner and Kumar, 2000)				
	Appealing	sAppl1/ cAppl1	4.872/ 5.020	0.938/0.994	
	Interesting	sAppl2/ cAppl2	4.651/ 5.111	1.030/0.953	
	Like it	sAppl3/ cAppl3	4.582/ 4.933	1.117/1.029	

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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