



Information V/S Influence: A Study Of Their Impact On First-Time Restaurant Choice

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Abstract: In today's world, people rely a lot on the internet before trying a new restaurant. This paper looks at how two major sources of online information like customer reviews and ratings on platforms like Google, and recommendations by food influencers on Instagram and YouTube affect a person's decision when they are visiting a restaurant for the first time. The study tries to understand which of the two is more trusted, which one helps people discover new places, and which one actually makes them go through with their decision. A structured survey was filled out by around 40 respondents mostly between the ages of 13 to 35. The findings show that online reviews are the main thing people check before visiting a new restaurant, while food influencers are more helpful in discovering new places. The paper also suggests that both sources work together rather than against each other i.e. influencers create the curiosity and reviews provide the confidence to finally go.

Keywords: Online Reviews, Food Influencers, Restaurant Choice, Consumer Decision-Making, Social Media, Digital Marketing, Consumer Behaviour.

I. INTRODUCTION

Think about the last time you tried a new restaurant. Did you just walk in, or did you check its ratings on Google, look at pictures on Instagram, or watch a YouTube video of a food creator reviewing it? If you did any of those things, you are part of a very large and growing group of consumers who rely on digital information before making dining decisions.

The way people choose restaurants has changed drastically over the past decade. Before the internet became so widely accessible, most people asked someone they knew for a recommendation or simply tried a place that looked good from the outside. Today, that behaviour has almost completely shifted. People now have access to thousands of reviews, star ratings, food photos, and influencer videos, all at the tap of a finger. This abundance of information has made the decision-making process both easier and more complex at the same time.

Two of the most commonly used digital sources in this process are online reviews and food influencer content. Online reviews are written by real customers who have visited a restaurant and shared their experience on platforms like Google, Zomato, or Swiggy. They talk about the food quality, service, pricing, ambience, and overall experience. Food influencers, on the other hand, are social media creators on platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok who post engaging content like photos, reels, vlogs about their dining experiences. Their content is often visually appealing and emotionally engaging.

Both of these sources can influence whether someone visits a restaurant, but they work in very different ways. Online reviews give you factual, experience-based information from multiple people. Influencer content gives you a personal, visual, and often exciting preview of what a place is like. The question is: when a person is visiting a restaurant for the first time, which of these two sources actually matters more?

This is the central question this research paper tries to answer. Understanding this is important not just for academic purposes, but also for restaurants and marketers who want to invest their time and money in the right digital channels. This study collected responses from approximately 40 people through a structured online survey and analyses their behaviour and preferences around both sources.

II. OBJECTIVES

The specific objectives are:

1. To study the influence of online reviews and ratings on first time restaurant choice.
2. To examine the role of food influencer recommendations on influencing first-time restaurant selection.
3. To compare the relative impact of online reviews and influencer recommendations on consumer decision-making.
4. To understand which source consumer, perceive as more reliable when choosing a new restaurant.
5. To analyze how these sources influence consumer confidence in restaurant selection.
6. To provide marketing insights for restaurants on optimizing digital presence and promotional efforts.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

Several researchers have studied how digital platforms affect the way people choose restaurants. This section brings together the most relevant findings from existing studies to build a foundation for this research.

The Shift to Digital Decision-Making

Traditionally, people depended on personal recommendations from friends and family or simply their own past experiences when choosing a restaurant. But over the last decade, this behaviour has changed significantly. The spread of smartphones, social media platforms, and review websites has given consumers immediate access to a huge volume of information (Fogel, 2017; Cheksengrat, 2017). Research confirms that consumers now routinely consult digital sources before dining out, particularly when visiting a place for the first time. One study found that the availability of digital information significantly reduces uncertainty in consumer decision-making and allows people to evaluate multiple options before committing (PMC, 2020). This shift has made it critical for restaurants to have a strong and positive digital presence. This transformation is largely driven by the rise of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) i.e. the sharing of opinions and experiences through online platforms. Unlike traditional word-of-mouth that spreads through personal conversations, eWOM can reach thousands of people instantly, making it far more influential in shaping consumer perceptions (IJMRA, 2023).

How Online Reviews Influence Restaurant Choice

Online reviews are one of the most studied topics in consumer behaviour research, and for good reason. Studies consistently show that reviews are a dominant source of information when people are deciding where to eat. Consumers use ratings and written feedback to form expectations about food quality, service, pricing, and overall experience before they even walk in (IJMRA, 2023). Platforms like Google Reviews, Zomato, and Swiggy have made this information more accessible than ever. What makes reviews particularly powerful is the trust factor. Because reviews are written by other customers and not by the restaurant itself so people tend to see them as honest and unbiased (Fogel, 2017). Research shows that when multiple reviews consistently say the same thing, people treat that as a reliable signal of what the restaurant is actually like (IJARSCT, 2023). This peer-generated feedback reduces the risk of trying somewhere new and increases the confidence of the person making the decision (SSRN, 2023).

Negative reviews also carry a lot of weight. Studies show that unfavourable feedback can strongly discourage potential customers, often more than positive reviews encourage them (SPERS Journal, 2021). This asymmetry means restaurants cannot afford to ignore negative feedback online.

How Food Influencers Shape Restaurant Awareness

Social media influencers especially food bloggers and vloggers have become a powerful force in the restaurant industry. By posting visually rich content like photos, reels, and detailed video walkthroughs of dining experiences, they create an emotional and aspirational appeal that goes beyond what a text-based review can do (Migkos, 2020). Research shows that influencer content is particularly effective among younger consumers who spend significant time on social media platforms (IJPREAMS, 2024). Studies on food vloggers have found that audiences often see these creators as knowledgeable and genuine, which makes their recommendations persuasive (IJPREAMS, 2024). Influencer credibility is a key factor here i.e. the more authentic and trustworthy an influencer seems, the more likely their followers are to act on their suggestions (TIJER, 2024). Research focusing on Gen Z consumers found that influencer characteristics like expertise and relatability significantly impact restaurant choice decisions (Taylor & Francis, 2025).

However, not all influencer content is viewed the same way. When audiences suspect that a recommendation is paid or promotional rather than genuine, the trust in that content drops considerably. This means that authenticity is not just a nice quality, it is a crucial one (TIJER, 2024).

Reviews vs. Influencers: What Does Research Suggest?

While both sources have been studied extensively on their own, direct comparisons between the two in the specific context of first-time restaurant choice are relatively rare. The existing research that does compare them suggests that they serve different purposes and operate at different stages of the consumer's decision journey. Online reviews are most effective at the decision stage. Because they contain detailed, factual information from multiple customers, they help people reduce perceived risk and feel more confident about their choice (Fogel, 2017). Influencers, on the other hand, are most effective at the discovery stage where they introduce people to restaurants they may not have found otherwise and create curiosity through engaging storytelling (Arif, 2023). Research on social media and dining behaviour suggests that consumers often use both sources in a sequence: they discover a restaurant through influencer content and then verify it through online reviews before making the final decision (Alliance University, 2022). This points to a complementary relationship rather than a competitive one, and is a pattern this study also explores through primary data.

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To answer the research questions, this study used a primary research approach, meaning data was collected directly from people rather than relying only on existing studies. Primary research was the right choice here because the study is trying to understand how people actually behave and what they personally trust, which can only be captured through direct responses.

Research Design

The study follows a descriptive research design. The goal was not to experiment or test a hypothesis in a laboratory setting, but rather to describe and understand the current behaviour and preferences of digital consumers when it comes to restaurant selection. A structured survey was used as the main tool for data collection.

Data Collection Method

A questionnaire was designed and shared through Google Forms. The form was distributed via WhatsApp and other social media platforms so it could easily reach the target group. The survey included three types of questions:

- Yes/No questions to capture clear behavioural patterns (e.g., "Do you check reviews before visiting a new restaurant?")
- Multiple choice questions to understand preferences (e.g., "Which source do you rely on more?")
- Rating scale questions (scale of 1–4) to measure strength of agreement with certain statements (e.g., "Online reviews reduce my hesitation while trying a new restaurant")

This mix of question types helped collect both factual data (what people do) and perception-based data (how they feel about each source).

Sample and Participants

Approximately 40 respondents participated in the survey. The target group was students and young working professionals between the ages of 13 and 35, based primarily in urban areas. This age group was specifically selected because they are the most digitally active, regularly using social media and review platforms in their daily lives. Convenience sampling was used, meaning the survey was shared with people who were easily accessible and willing to respond.

Data Analysis

Once all responses were collected, they were organised using a spreadsheet. Basic percentage and frequency analysis was done to identify patterns. The analysis focused specifically on comparing how respondents rated and relied on online reviews versus food influencer content across different decision scenarios.

Limitations

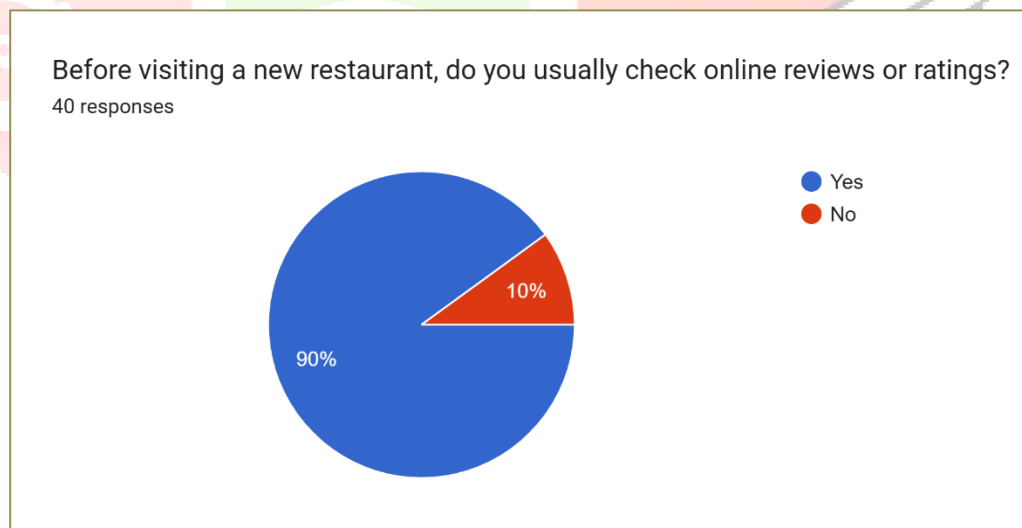
The main limitations of this study are its small sample size and the fact that it was limited to a relatively young, urban demographic. The findings may not fully reflect the behaviour of older consumers or those in smaller cities. Additionally, self-reported survey responses may not always perfectly mirror actual behaviour.

V. DATA ANALYSIS

This section presents the survey findings one question at a time, with an explanation of what each finding means. The analysis is organised around the six research objectives to ensure direct alignment between the study's purpose and the insights generated from the data.

1. Role of Online Reviews in First-Time Restaurant Choice

The survey results clearly indicate that online reviews play a significant role in influencing restaurant



selection decisions, particularly when consumers are visiting a restaurant for the first time. A large majority of respondents reported that they check online reviews or ratings before visiting a new restaurant. Approximately 90% of respondents indicated that they usually consult online reviews, while only a small proportion stated that they do not rely on such information. This suggests that online reviews have become an essential information source that consumers use to evaluate restaurants before making dining decisions. The impact of reviews becomes even more evident when considering the effect of negative feedback. A significant portion of respondents reported that **negative reviews have prevented them from visiting a restaurant they were initially considering**. This indicates that negative online word-of-mouth can strongly influence consumer perceptions and discourage trial behaviour. Restaurant ratings also emerged as an important decision factor. Most respondents considered restaurant ratings either very important or somewhat important when selecting a restaurant for the first time. Ratings provide consumers with a quick summary of overall customer satisfaction, allowing them to compare

multiple options efficiently. Furthermore, respondents generally agreed that online reviews make them feel more confident about their restaurant choice. By providing insights into the experiences of previous customers, reviews help reduce uncertainty and allow consumers to make more informed decisions.

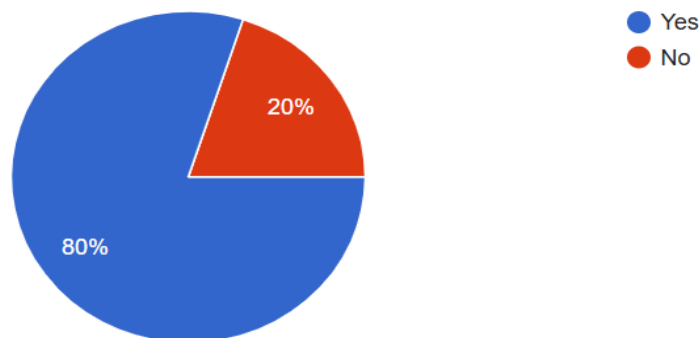
2. Influence of Food Influencers on Restaurant Discovery

The survey findings also highlight the growing role of social media influencers in shaping consumer awareness and interest in restaurants. More than half of the respondents indicated that they had visited a restaurant because it was recommended by a food influencer. This suggests that influencer marketing can effectively motivate consumers to explore new dining options.

Respondents also showed moderate agreement with the statement that food influencer content makes restaurants appear more appealing. Influencer posts typically include visually attractive food presentations, restaurant ambience, and personal experiences, which can create curiosity among viewers and encourage them to try new places.

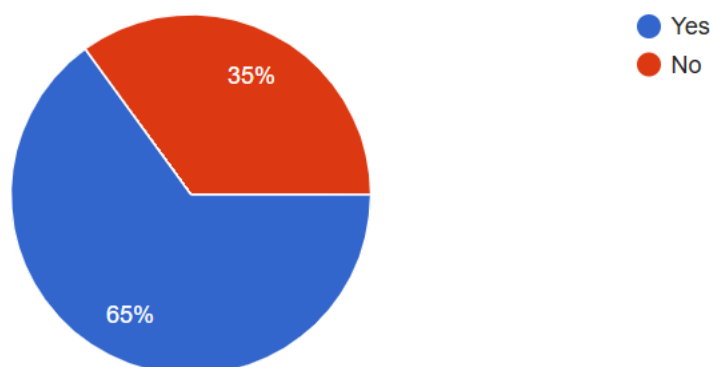
Have negative online reviews ever stopped you from visiting a restaurant you were considering?

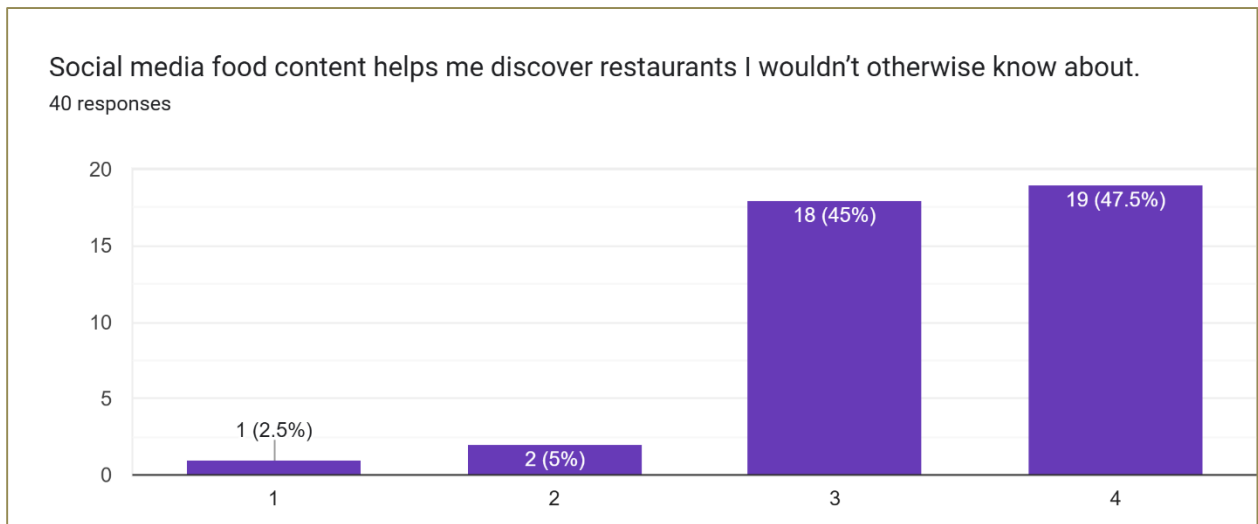
40 responses



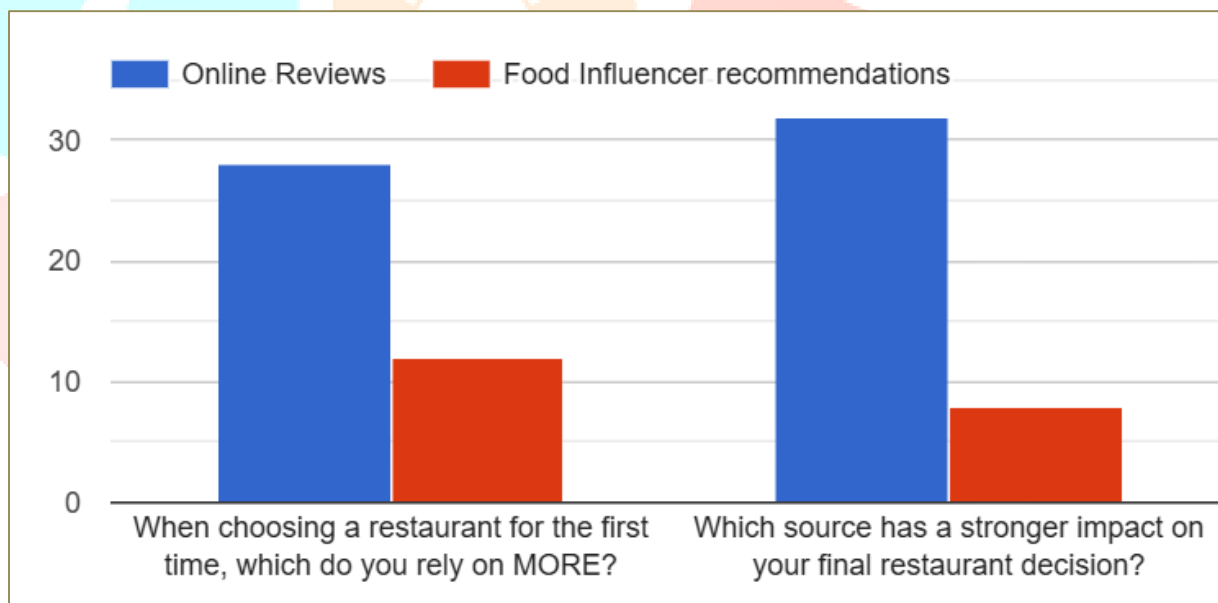
Have you ever visited a restaurant mainly because you saw it recommended by a food influencer?

40 responses





Another important observation is that many respondents agreed that social media food content helps them discover restaurants they might not have known otherwise. This indicates that influencers often function as discovery channels that introduce consumers to new dining experiences. However, responses regarding influencer credibility were mixed. While some respondents consider influencer recommendations credible, others appear more cautious about trusting such content. This suggests that although influencers can generate awareness and interest, their influence on final decision-making may vary depending on perceived authenticity.



3. Comparative Influence of Reviews and Influencers on Decision-Making

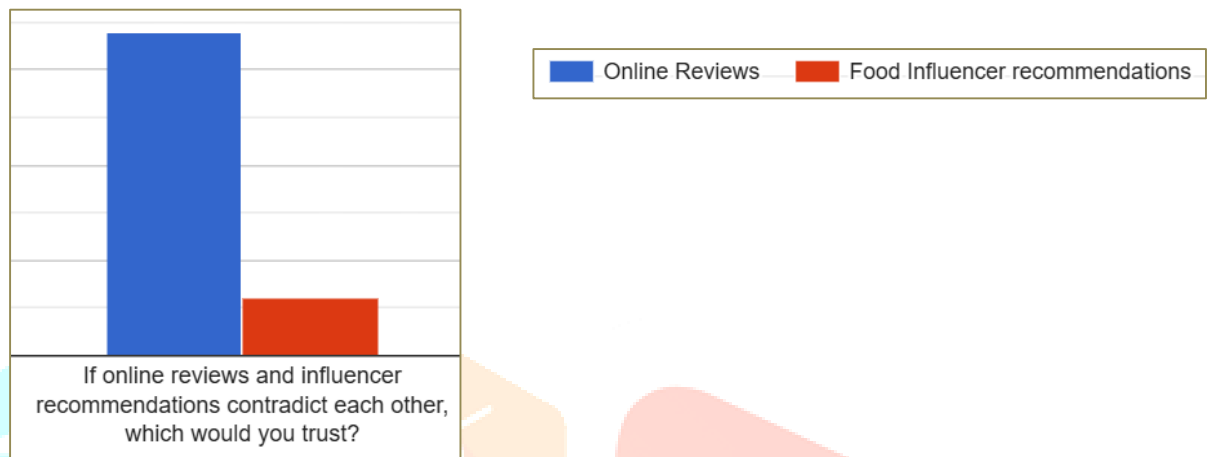
One of the key objectives of this study was to compare the relative influence of online reviews and influencer recommendations on consumer decision-making. The results indicate that online reviews generally have a stronger influence on restaurant choices compared to influencer recommendations. When respondents were asked which source they rely on more when choosing a restaurant for the first time, the majority selected online reviews rather than influencer recommendations. This suggests that consumers prefer information-based sources that provide detailed feedback from multiple users. Similarly, when asked which source has a stronger impact on their final restaurant decision, most respondents again selected online reviews. These findings suggest that while influencers may create awareness and interest, reviews tend to play a more decisive role in shaping the final choice.

4. Perceived Reliability of Online Reviews vs Influencer Recommendations

Reliability is a critical factor in consumer decision-making, particularly when individuals are evaluating unfamiliar restaurants. The survey results suggest that consumers generally perceive online reviews as more reliable than influencer recommendations.

When respondents were asked which source they would trust if reviews and influencer recommendations contradicted each other, the majority indicated that they would rely on online reviews. This finding highlights the higher credibility associated with user-generated content compared to promotional or influencer-based content.

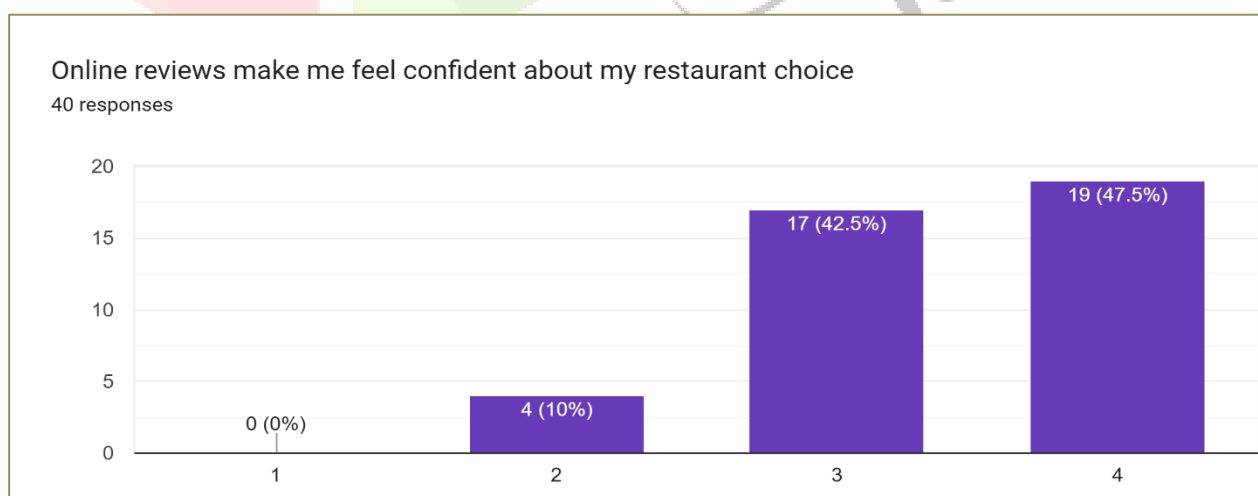
Additionally, responses to perception-based statements suggest that consumers tend to view influencer recommendations as more emotionally driven, whereas reviews are perceived as factual and experience-based. This difference in perception may explain why consumers often prioritize reviews when making final decisions.



5. Impact of Digital Sources on Consumer Confidence and Marketing Insights

Both online reviews and influencer recommendations contribute to consumer confidence, although their effects differ. The majority of respondents agreed that online reviews reduce hesitation when trying a new restaurant. By providing insights into previous customers' experiences, reviews help consumers anticipate the quality of food, service, and ambience, which increases confidence in the decision.

Influencer recommendations also play a role in shaping confidence, but their impact appears to be more moderate. While some respondents reported feeling assured by influencer recommendations, the level of confidence generated by influencers was generally lower compared to that generated by online reviews.



These findings provide valuable marketing insights for restaurants. Businesses should recognize that online reviews are critical for building trust and credibility, while influencer marketing is more effective for creating awareness and generating interest. Therefore, restaurants should adopt a balanced digital marketing strategy that focuses on maintaining positive online reviews while also collaborating with influencers to increase visibility.



VI. KEY FINDINGS

1. Online reviews are almost universally checked before a first visit.

90% of respondents consult reviews before visiting a new restaurant, making it the most widely used pre-visit information source.

2. Negative reviews have strong deterrent power.

80% of respondents have avoided a restaurant specifically because of bad reviews.

3. Food influencers are effective at driving discovery.

65% have visited a restaurant because of an influencer, and 92.5% agree social media helps them find new places.

4. When it comes to the final decision, reviews clearly win.

Significantly more respondents chose reviews as the source they rely on more and the one with stronger final impact.

5. Online reviews are seen as more credible.

When the two sources conflict, the majority trust reviews over influencer opinions.

6. Reviews build more pre-visit confidence.

77.5% say reviews reduce hesitation, and 80% say reviews give them more confidence overall.

7. Influencers and reviews are complementary, not competing.

The pattern shows a two-stage process: influencers create curiosity and awareness; reviews confirm the choice.

VII. RECOMMENDATIONS & SUGGESTIONS

1. **Actively encourage customers to leave reviews.** Since 90% of people check reviews before visiting, having a strong profile on Google, Zomato, and Swiggy is non-negotiable. Make it easy for happy customers to leave a review through QR codes at the table, a follow-up message on delivery orders, or a polite reminder at checkout.

2. **Take negative reviews seriously and respond to them.** Monitor reviews regularly and respond to negative feedback in a professional, constructive way. Acknowledging a complaint and showing that action is being taken can actually rebuild trust with potential customers reading those responses.

3. **Use influencers for discovery, not just promotion.** Choose influencers whose audience matches your target customer, and focus on collaborations that feel authentic. A well-placed reel or YouTube video from a trusted food creator can bring in a large new audience.

4. **Do not rely on influencers alone.** If a restaurant's review profile is weak, no amount of influencer promotion will convert curious followers into actual visitors. Reviews are the final check; hence they need to be strong first.
5. **Build an organic social media presence.** Post regular, high-quality photos of food and ambience, respond to comments, and share customer-generated content. This creates authenticity and community around the brand.
6. **Think of digital marketing as an integrated strategy.** Use influencer content to create awareness, and a strong review profile to give that audience the confidence to actually visit. Together, these two cover the entire consumer journey from discovery to decision.

VIII. CONCLUSION

This study set out to understand which digital source i.e. online reviews or food influencer recommendations, plays a bigger role when someone is choosing a restaurant for the first time. After surveying around 40 respondents and analyzing their responses, some clear and consistent patterns have emerged.

The most significant finding is that online reviews dominate the final stage of decision-making. Almost all respondents check reviews before visiting a new restaurant. Reviews reduce hesitation, build confidence, and are seen as more trustworthy than influencer content especially when the two give conflicting information. The fact that 80% of respondents said bad reviews have stopped them from visiting shows just how much power online word-of-mouth has over consumer behaviour.

Food influencers, however, are far from irrelevant. 65% of respondents have visited a restaurant because of an influencer, and 92.5% agree that social media helps them discover new places. Their content is engaging, visually appealing, and reaches people who might never have found a restaurant through reviews alone.

The most interesting takeaway is that these two sources are not in competition, they actually work together. Influencers introduce people to restaurants and create excitement, while reviews provide the credibility and assurance needed to turn that interest into a real visit. This complementary relationship is the core insight of this paper.

For restaurants, this means neither channel can be ignored. A restaurant that only works with influencers but neglects its reviews will create interest without conversions. A restaurant that has great reviews but no social media presence may struggle to reach new audiences. The smartest approach is to invest in both and make sure they reinforce each other.

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