

## SOCIAL INFLUENCE AND CONTEMPORARY FOOD CHOICES: A QUALITATIVE PERSPECTIVE ON CONSUMER DECISION MAKING

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### Abstract

Social influence has a profound effect on how consumers choose contemporary foods, particularly in situations where beliefs are shaped by societal and interpersonal interactions. This study explores the impact of social factors on consumer decision-making regarding contemporary food, focusing on the perspectives, beliefs, behaviours, external influences, and demographic variables of working professionals. Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were employed to select professionals from the food industry, resulting in 20 in-depth interviews with individuals from a food and hospitality background. Social media, referral groups, brand advertisements, and electronic word of mouth were identified as significant social influencing factors. The findings reveal that influencers and bloggers on social media platforms have a considerable impact, especially among young consumers, while the influence of celebrity endorsements has waned. However, expert opinions, peer recommendations, and user-generated content continue to steer consumer choices in contemporary food sectors. This shift points to a growing preference for authentic information from relatable sources, enabling brands to build connections with their target consumers. The study also examines future contemporary food trends and market opportunities in developing countries, aiming to promote sustainable food practices.

**Keywords:** Social influence, Sustainable food, E-WOM, Referral groups, Food choice, Contemporary food.

**JEL Classification Codes:** D12, M31, Q18

### 1. Introduction

Social influence refers to the mechanisms by which individuals' thoughts, emotions, attitudes, and behaviours are shaped by others within their social environment (Liang et al., 2024; Wood & Hayes, 2012). While previous studies have primarily addressed fast food and organic consumption, more recent research has examined contemporary food options, largely within developed economies. However, such studies often overlook emerging contemporary food markets like India, where shifting health awareness, cultural transitions, and urbanization are reshaping consumer preferences.

This evolving landscape has led to increasing demand for contemporary food products—defined by their novelty, modern presentation, and alignment with global trends. Three major sources of social influence—social media, referral groups, and brand advertisements—play a critical role in shaping consumer perceptions and purchase intentions towards contemporary food options. Although digital platforms exert a substantial influence, traditional word-of-

mouth, peer recommendations, and family preferences continue to hold sway over food choices.

Social media platforms, as dynamic tools of virtual engagement, enable content creation, sharing, and information dissemination (Wood & Hayes, 2012). Influencers and bloggers, in particular, have emerged as powerful agents in directing consumer behaviour (Oladipo, 2024). These interactions, embedded within broader social frameworks, significantly impact decision-making processes—both consciously and subconsciously (Mathew & Dinoy, 2024; Agro & Dahl, 2020).

According to Statista (2021) approximately 92% of consumers follow brand advertisements, blogs, and influencer content. Further, 43% actively consult online reviews, 45% report purchasing based on high recommendations, and nearly 60% of Indian consumers in 2024 acknowledged being influenced by digital interactions while shopping (Bashir, 2024).

Simultaneously, the Indian food industry is undergoing rapid transformation in contemporary food options. Innovations such as plant-based alternatives, fusion cuisine, lab-grown foods, and emulsion-based products have widened consumer options (Joshi & Rahman, 2015). Previously confined to institutional settings like hotels and restaurants, these offerings are now entering mainstream retail. As a result, India's contemporary food market is projected to grow by 8.1% by 2028, with the organized sector expected to comprise 52.9% of the market (Desk, 2024). Casual dining formats and QSRs (Quick Service Restaurants) are at the forefront of this growth.

In this context, consumer demand is increasingly shaped not only by functional food attributes but also by social validation and perceived lifestyle alignment. Contemporary food is frequently associated with visual appeal, trend alignment, and cosmopolitan identity. As such, understanding the interplay of social factors—particularly digital influence, peer endorsement, and expert validation—is critical for both academic inquiry and industry practice.

This study seeks to examine: (1) How do social media, referral groups, and influencer endorsements impact consumer purchase intentions for contemporary food in India? and (2) What is the broader role of social influence in driving the adoption of contemporary food practices?

## **2. Literature review**

Theories of social influence examine how individuals alter their behaviours, attitudes, and beliefs in response to real or perceived social pressures. Traditional food is positively preferred as compared to innovative food, with mixed reactions by consumers. Neophobic have concerns about taste and quality, but Necrophiliac opts for new food for its health benefits (Goulart et al., 2020). According to classic frameworks proposed by Kelman (1958) and Deutsch and Gerard (1955) social influence can be categorized into three primary processes: compliance, identification, and internalization.

Compliance refers to behavioural changes that occur when an individual conforms publicly to social expectations while privately maintaining their own views—often driven by peer pressure

or social approval (Liang et al., 2024). Identification involves adopting behaviours or opinions to establish or maintain a self-defining relationship with another person or group, such as emulating a celebrity or brand. Internalization, the deepest form of influence, occurs when an individual genuinely adopts the beliefs or values presented, integrating them into their personal value system.

Deutsch and Gerard (1955) further distinguish between normative and informational influences. Normative influence arises from the desire to gain approval or avoid disapproval, often resulting in conformity even when the individual believes the group is wrong. In contrast, informational influence stems from the belief that others possess more accurate information, leading to acceptance based on perceived expertise or credibility.

More recent studies have extended these foundational theories to digital contexts. For instance, Davlembayeva et al. (2024) emphasize how virtual influencers affect consumer choices through immersive social media experiences. Similarly, Oliveira et al. (2021) highlight that the perceived authenticity of influencers contributes significantly to consumer trust and engagement.

Social influence theory has also been widely applied in the domain of food consumption. According to Agro and Dahl (2020) consumers are influenced through both active and passive mechanisms. Active influence occurs when there is direct interaction—such as a recommendation from a salesperson—while passive influence arises through environmental cues like social media posts, advertisements, and online reviews.

### ***2.1 Social influence on purchase intention***

Social influence significantly shapes consumer decision-making for contemporary food, especially in environments where perceptions are constructed through interpersonal and societal interactions. According to Cruwys et al. (2014) and Wood and Hayes (2012) an individual's food preferences and consumption behavior are often molded by the attitudes, behaviors, and presence of others in their social environment.

Moussaïd et al., (2013) and Agro and Dahl (2020) extend this perspective by noting that individuals are susceptible to influence both consciously and subconsciously. This influence manifests through mechanisms such as peer approval, perceived social norms, and the desire to belong. Yasmeen and Fischer (2024) emphasize that the socio-cultural environment in which consumers operate has a profound impact on their food preferences for both traditional and contemporary foods, particularly when convenience, affordability, and trend alignment are involved.

Research suggests that social media evaluations not only enhance product visibility in the tourism sector but also strengthen consumer recall and intention to repurchase (Mittal et al., 2022). Kelman's (2005) framework provides further insight, identifying three psychological processes that mediate social influence: interest protection, relationship maintenance, and identity affirmation. These processes are instrumental in how consumers navigate contemporary food choices within their social contexts.

Higgs and Thomas (2016) affirm that eating behavior is largely shaped by the social context in which consumption occurs. Environmental Cues increase consumption, where men tend to eat

more compared to women in mixed-gender groups (Higgs & Thomas, 2016). With the proliferation of digital media, marketers increasingly rely on social influencers and live-streaming commerce to generate purchase motivation (Meng et al., 2021).

Active social influence, such as direct communication with marketers or salespersons, contrasts with passive influence, which emerges from content shared by peers, reviews, or ambient marketing cues (Jennifer & Darren, 2020; Yasmeen & Fischer, 2024). Since food is commonly consumed in social settings, it follows that both consumption patterns and product evaluations are subject to societal pressure and communal norms (Cruwys et al., 2015). Consumer behaviour and purchase intentions for organic food are positively driven by health consciousness, environmental concerns, and ethical considerations (Yiridoe et al., 2005). High prices, limited availability, and lack of awareness affect its widespread adoption (Rana & Paul, 2017). Also, a consumer with low self-esteem differentiates themselves by experiences (Dommer et al., 2013).

## ***2.2 Social media on purchase intention***

Social media has emerged as a dominant force in shaping consumer perceptions, particularly in the food and lifestyle sectors. Defined as digital platforms that enable users to interact, share content, and engage in dialogue, social media serves not only as a communication tool but also as a critical driver of consumer awareness, preference formation, and purchasing behaviour (Eckert et al., 2025; Lim & Rasul, 2022).

Social media platforms are uniquely positioned to influence purchase intentions due to their capacity for rapid content dissemination, user engagement, and peer validation. As noted by Chen and Law (2016) corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities shared through social platforms can positively impact brand perception and foster consumer loyalty, especially in the hospitality and foodservice sectors.

With billions of active users, platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook function as digital ecosystems where opinions are shaped and trends emerge. Social media has become a preferred medium for discovering new products and services, including contemporary food items, influencing everything from travel plans to restaurant choices (Joseph et al., 2020; Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Dellarocas et al., 2007).

This influence is especially pronounced among younger demographics, who rely heavily on visually appealing and socially validated content. The credibility of a food product is often gauged by its visibility and reception on social platforms. Visual storytelling, influencer endorsements, and interactive campaigns have proven effective in translating interest into purchase behaviour.

## ***2.3 Electronic word of Mouth (E-WOM) on purchase intention***

E-WOM refers to the informal communication between consumers over digital platforms regarding their experiences with products or services. It is considered one of the most persuasive forms of consumer influence towards organic food products due to its perceived authenticity and relatability (Rana & Paul, 2017).

According to Deepika (2024), E-WOM occurs in three stages: creation, exposure, and evaluation. Consumers generate content such as reviews and ratings, which are then circulated within online communities, shaping the purchase decisions of others. Approximately 88% of consumers trust online reviews as much as personal recommendations, making E-WOM a critical tool in the digital marketplace.

Many global brands, including Amazon, Zomato, Swiggy, and OnePlus, have leveraged E-WOM to strengthen consumer engagement and expand market reach (Cohen, 2023). Empirical evidence on hotel sales indicates that positive reviews can substantially increase purchase likelihood, while negative or inconsistent feedback can deter potential buyers (Ye et al., 2009).

Studies on the hospitality sector in China found that a 10% increase in review ratings can lead to a 4.4% rise in bookings, whereas a 10% increase in review variance can reduce bookings by 2.8% (Ye et al., 2009). This demonstrates that not only the content of reviews but also the consistency and volume of feedback significantly influence consumer behaviour.

Cheng et al. (2021) differentiate E-WOM from broader social media influence by emphasizing its user-generated, experience-based nature. While Gunawan et al. (2020) for innovative food products said social media facilitates exposure, E-WOM directly informs judgment and risk assessment by offering post-use evaluations. Platforms like Zomato and TripAdvisor, which rely heavily on peer feedback, have become central in guiding for new and innovative food-related decisions.

As consumer trust increasingly shifts toward peer-generated content, the impact of E-WOM on food choice, especially for new and unfamiliar products, is undeniable (Liang et al., 2024).

#### ***2.4 Referral groups on purchase intention***

Referral groups—comprising family, friends, colleagues, and peer networks—play a foundational role in shaping consumer behaviour, particularly in food-related decisions (Goyal & Singh, 2014). These groups act as reference points that individuals look to for approval, validation, or guidance when making purchase choices, especially for products that are new, experiential, or culturally evolving, such as contemporary food options.

Social comparison theory suggests that individuals often evaluate their behaviours, preferences, and consumption decisions by observing those around them (Li & Cao, 2020). This is particularly evident in food selection, where choices are not only personal but also social. Adolescents and young adults, in particular, are influenced by peers in their adoption of food trends, dietary experiments, and novel cuisines (McMillan et al., 2018; Fernandes & Panda, 2019).

The influence of referral groups is not confined to youth; especially girls are more likely to be influenced by friends compared to boys (McMillan et al., 2018). McPherson et al. (2021) describe homophily—the tendency of individuals to associate with others who share similar values, interests, or socioeconomic profiles—as a key mechanism through which referral influence is reinforced. In the context of food, this means consumers often mirror the preferences of those within their social circles, especially during initial trial or adoption stages.

Thus, referrals do not simply inform — they legitimize. They help mitigate the perceived risks associated with trying unfamiliar or innovative food products, offering a sense of social assurance.

### **2.5 Brand advertisements on purchase intention**

Brand advertisements serve as a deliberate and strategic form of social influence, aiming to create aspirational associations and shape consumer perceptions of credibility, quality, and trend alignment. In the context of contemporary food options, where novelty and perceived sophistication play a significant role, advertising is not merely informative; it is persuasive and identity-driven.

Online and offline advertisements, particularly those involving influencers, bloggers, and celebrity figures, have long been employed to enhance product visibility. However, the nature of influence is shifting. While celebrity endorsements once commanded broad consumer trust, recent studies suggest a declining impact in food-related contexts, particularly where authenticity, expertise, and health consciousness are central to consumer decisions (Meng et al., 2021).

Consumers are increasingly turning to domain-specific experts—such as chefs, nutritionists, or food bloggers with credible reputations—for purchase guidance. As noted by McPherson et al. (2021) consumers use brands to construct social identity and to manage acceptance or exclusion from social groups. In this sense, contemporary food is more than sustenance; it is a lifestyle signal, and the credibility of the messenger (i.e., the advertiser) becomes essential.

## **3. Material and methods**

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the determinants of social influence affecting Indian consumers’ purchase intentions toward contemporary food options. A qualitative approach is appropriate due to the exploratory nature of the research, which aims to understand deep-seated motivations, perceptions, and social dynamics that shape food-related decisions. The semi-structure interview was conducted using open ended and the guided questions mentioned below in table to allow participants to get into deep and relevant conversation, ensuring consistency across all the participants.

**Table 1**  
Semi-structured questionnaire used for interviews

Questions	Information sought
How do you define “contemporary food” in your personal experience, and what factors shape that understanding?	Background context
Do you intentionally follow new food trends and innovative food products? Why or why not?	Food trends

Questions	Information sought
How do social media platforms influence your food discovery and decision-making? How often has this led to a purchase of contemporary food?	Social media impact
Can you describe a specific instance when an online review or social media post influenced your contemporary food purchase?	E-WOM impact
To what extent do recommendations from friends or family influence your willingness to try contemporary or unfamiliar food?	Referral groups impact
Do you find yourself more persuaded by brand advertisements or expert endorsements when it comes to trying new food products? Why?	Brand advertisement impact
Are there any cultural norms, regional trends, or community habits that affect how you choose contemporary food products?	Social influence (In general)
Is there anything else you want to share about your interest in contemporary food or factors influencing your dining choices?	Open space and exit

**Source:** Author's own work

### ***3.1 Sampling Technique***

Participants were selected using a purposive and snowball sampling technique. The sample consisted of 20 individuals, including working professionals and food industry stakeholders, ensuring a diverse range of perspectives. In total, 30 professionals were approached based on their qualitative experience background, only 22 participants showed their interest and were found suitable with their active engagement with contemporary food choices and familiarity with digital media and social trends. Because 4 were unavailable on their scheduled interview, only 18 participants were interviewed. Using snowball sampling, an additional two participants were recruited who had higher job grades and flexible working hours.

### ***3.2 Data Collection***

Data were gathered through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted both in person and over the phone. A total of 20 participants were interviewed: n = 8 via telephone and n = 12 face-to-face. Interviews were scheduled based on participant availability, typically during lunch hours or immediately after work.

Each session lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes and followed a flexible interview guide aimed at exploring social influences such as social media, referral groups, E-WOM, and the impact of brand advertisements on contemporary food choices. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and anonymised to ensure confidentiality. During the interviews, when participants referred to other internal, external, or socio-demographic factors influencing their food choices, additional probing questions were asked to gain deeper insights into social influence dynamics. While these broader contextual influences were noted and coded, they fall outside the scope of this article and are therefore not included in the present analysis.

### ***3.3 Data Analysis***

Once the interviews were completed, all recordings were transcribed and cross-checked to ensure transcript accuracy. Thematic analysis was then conducted using NVIVO software (version 15) to identify key patterns and recurring themes within the data. A codebook was developed based on the study's theoretical framework and conceptual model. Initial coding was carried out manually, with codes and subcodes derived from the five core constructs outlined in the literature: social influence, social media, E-WOM, referral groups, and brand advertisements. These codes were subsequently imported into NVIVO and organized hierarchically within the software's coding structure.

All transcripts were coded and reviewed within NVIVO to identify inconsistencies or overlaps, ensuring reliability across the dataset. In parallel, condensed data matrices were created using Microsoft Excel (2021) to visually map participant responses under each thematic category. The analysis process combined both inductive and deductive approaches: inductive coding allowed emergent themes to surface organically from participant narratives, while deductive framing ensured alignment with the study's research questions and theoretical constructs. A code frequency report, Table 3, was generated using NVIVO 15 to assess the density of participant responses under each theme to validate thematic constructs of the study.

### ***3.4 Conceptual Framework***

This study helped validate the prominence of five core constructs that closely aligned with the theoretical framework used to examine the purchase intentions of Indian consumers under the influence of societal factors. One of the key motivations for this research was to explore the growing interest in contemporary food options in India, a developing country experiencing rapid changes in food culture. While prior studies have largely focused on fast food consumption (Goyal & Singh, 2014; Mukherjee, 2014; Khalid et al., 2019) or consumer behaviour toward organic food (Xue et al., 2021; Goulart et al., 2020), this study adopts a qualitative approach to uncover the depth and complexity of social influences on food choices.

Based on these insights, the following hypothesis is proposed:

**H1.** Social influence has a positive effect on the purchase intention of consumers toward contemporary food options.

The conceptual framework (see Figure 1) highlights key social factors, including social media, referral groups, brand influence, and E-WOM. While social media bloggers often present a predominantly positive narrative, participants expressed concern that E-WOM can be manipulated if not adequately regulated through transparent feedback mechanisms. Participants emphasized that although mass usage and high product ratings help establish credibility, many consumers continue to trust social media supported by (Yiridoe et al., 2005) and E-WOM without verification (Agro & Dahl, 2020; Chen & Law, 2016; Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006; Cruwys et al., 2014; Cruwys et al., 2015). Consequently, the following hypothesis is proposed:

**H2.** Social media has a positive and significant impact on consumers' purchase intention toward contemporary food options.

**H3.** E-WOM has a positive and significant impact on consumers' purchase intention toward contemporary food options.

Moreover, both positive and negative word-of-mouth were found to significantly influence consumer perception, acceptance, and rejection of new food options (Yiridoe et al., 2005). For instance, Chen and Antonelli (2020) suggest that individual choices are heavily shaped by peer input, while Chevalier and Mayzlin (2006) found that negative reviews often have a stronger impact on consumer behaviour than positive ones. Based on these observations, the following hypothesis is proposed:

**H4.** Referral groups have a positive and significant impact on consumers' purchase intention toward contemporary food options.

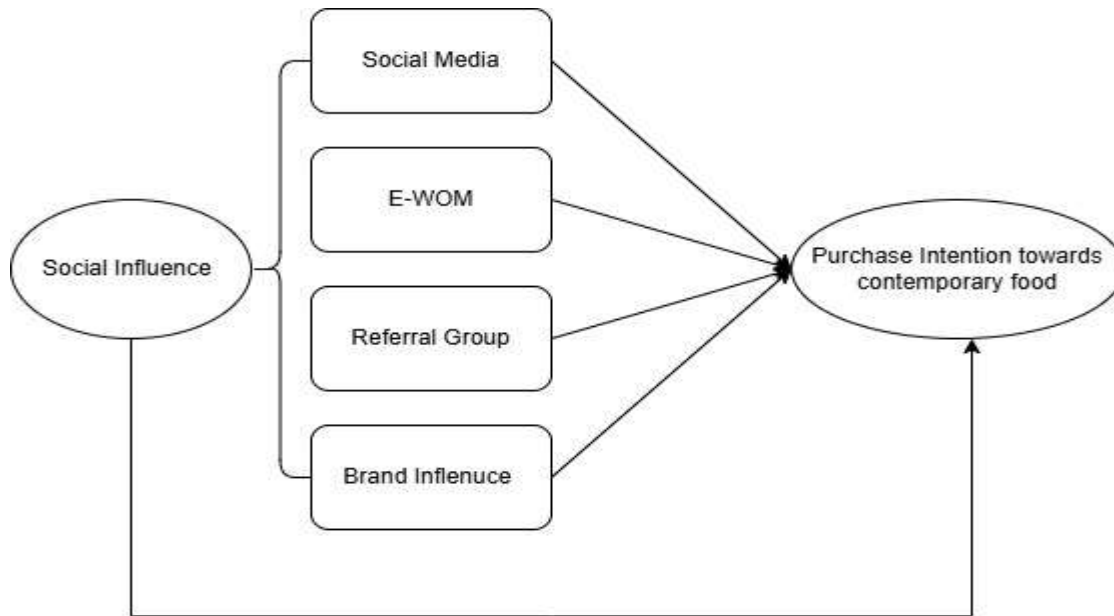
In terms of brand influence, companies are increasingly creative with their advertising techniques. Many brands now position their products as “green” or “eco-friendly” and frequently collaborate with celebrities to build trust. Schivinski and Dabrowski (2014) draw a critical distinction between firm-generated advertising and user-generated communication. While brand-controlled media may influence brand attitude, it is user content that has a stronger effect on brand equity and purchase intention. This observation is particularly relevant in food marketing, where the emotional resonance and visual appeal of advertisements often shape first impressions but need to be supported by perceived authenticity.

Data-driven branding strategies, supported by influencer analytics, AI-generated targeting, and micro-niche segmentation, are now central to contemporary food promotion (Malik et al., 2022). These campaigns appeal to values such as sustainability, convenience, health, or global taste, aligning consumer identity with brand storytelling. Based on this synthesis, the final hypothesis is proposed:

**H5.** Brand advertisements have a positive and significant impact on consumers' purchase intention toward contemporary food options. This study applies these theoretical frameworks to explore how social factors influence the purchase intentions of Indian consumers with respect to contemporary food choices. By focusing on social media, referral groups, E-WOM, and brand advertising, this research contributes to a nuanced understanding of how compliance, identification, and internalization drive contemporary food-related purchase intention. The two

main objective of the study are 1. to qualitatively explore the effect of social factors on consumers' purchase intentions toward contemporary food options. 2. to explore how consumers perceive the combined influence of referrals, social media, and brand advertisements on their purchase intentions toward contemporary food options.

**Figure 1** Conceptual framework



**Source:** Created by the author

#### 4. Results

**Table 2:**

Participants n=20 coded as E1-E20

S.No.	Expert Code	Designation	Background
1	E1	Head chef,	Food consultant
2	E2	Chef	Food consultant, Food Blogger
3	E3	Chef	Academician, Researcher, Consultant
4	E4	Chef	Academician, Practitioner influencer
5	E5	Chef	Academician, Author, Practitioner
6	E6	Food Instructor	Celebrity chef, Entrepreneur, Social media Influencer
7	E7	Food Instructor	Academic, Practitioner
8	E8	Associate Professor	Researcher

9	E9	Assistant Professor	Academician, Researcher, Nutritionist
10	E10	Media Manager	Branding expert from Food processing plant
11	E11	Associate Professor	Food and beverage expert, Academician, Researcher
12	E12	Food and Beverage Manager	Food and beverage expert, Academician
13	E13	Assistant Professor	Researcher, Academician, Food expert, Author
14	E14	Food and Beverage Manager	Food and beverage expert, Academician, Researcher
15	E15	Production Manager	Food and beverage expert, Academician, Researcher
16	E16	Director of Catering	of Event management company (EMC), Food consultant, Sales expert
17	E17	Food and beverage Manager	Food and beverage expert, Academician, Researcher
18	E18	Director	Food and beverage expert, EMC Food industry
19	E19	Manager (EMC)	Food and beverage expert, Research and development expert
20	E20	Assistant Professor	Academician, Chef

**Source: Author's own work**

A frequency analysis was conducted using NVIVO 15 to quantify the most frequently discussed concepts across the qualitative interviews. The top five codes—social media, reference group, E-WOM, fusion food, and brand advertisements with respect to two related themes, purchase intention and contemporary food options, emerged as the most recurrent themes. These codes were drawn from in-depth interviews with 20 participants, coded as E1 to E20 for anonymity. As presented in Table 2, the distribution of these themes highlights their salience across responses, while Table 3 presents the word frequency count for each coded concept. This frequency mapping served as a preliminary framework to guide the thematic interpretation of social factors influencing for contemporary food purchase intentions.

**Table 3**  
 Summary of frequency and coded themes in NVIVO

Coded Theme	Description	No. of References
Social Influence	Social media, E-WOM, reference group, brand advertisement,	422
Social Media	Mentions of Instagram, YouTube, food content, Food bloggers	196
E-WOM	Online reviews, ratings, social recommendations	68
Reference group Recommendations	Friends and family, Peer influence food choices	92
Brand Advertisements	Celebrity endorsements and Expert advise	94
Contemporary food options	Mentions of trying new, modern, or trending foods	80
Purchase intention	Buying, Recommendation, Trying, Choose	67

**Source: Authors own work**

#### Theme 1 and 2: Contemporary food options and Purchase intention

Contemporary cuisine is preferred due to its convenience, taste, and fun, whereas traditional food has cultural and family significance (Yasmeen & Fischer, 2024). Age and education have a positive impact on traditional food options, whereas media and globalization positively affect contemporary food consumption (Chen & Antonelli, 2020). Consumers were not only passively observing content but actively experimenting, evaluating, and in some cases, adapting choices to local markets to buy contemporary food options (Yasmeen & Fischer, 2024)—reflecting a blend of global influence and personal context (Khalid et al., 2019).

*“People are not only gaining knowledge about fusion food, ready to eat food, supplement rich food but they are also more openly consuming that as well. Many of us still consider traditional food, but the source may or may not be traditional. Participant 3*

*“Especially during festivals, group dining, workplace lunches, and community events have emerged as significant settings that influence consumers' eating habits.”— Participant 18*

*“It’s very common these days and it’s changing every day: you are working, you are single, you have kids, you are health-conscious, you can’t ignore it, and the definition of food is different for everybody.” - Participant 1*

### Theme 3: Social Influence

Most of the participants have mentioned how their food preferences have been affected due to various social influences, particularly when it comes to the diversity of contemporary food in the market. Due to the excess of connectivity at a global level, mainly through social networking platforms and the availability of such products, the consumption of contemporary food has increased in various segments of the food industry: ultra-processed food, plant-based alternatives, and fortified food.

*"As consumers and practitioners, most of them agreed that social expectations and cultural dynamics are changing and the way consumers eat."* — Participant 9

*"Humans are always looking for new experiences, especially with food. When friends suggest trying something new, like a drink, a dish, or a restaurant, it does influence you. And yes, I'm more likely to try something if it's recommended by an expert, or a strong brand ad."*—

Participant 2

*"It is very important when somebody is buying the food. When I see what my colleagues order during lunch, I tend to try the same thing, especially, when I travel if it's something new or trendy."* — Participant 3

*"In my friend circle, whenever something gets hyped and I enjoy the idea, we all go for it. Fusion food is almost a norm now. You feel out of place if you're not updated, so I also go just to have the experience."* — Participant 7

As most participants as well as (Goyal & Singh, 2014; Agro & Dahl, 2020) indicated that social influence plays a significant role in shaping their purchase intentions (Cruwys et al., 2014) for contemporary food. Among these, social media and referral groups, when combined with positive word-of-mouth, were found to be particularly impactful in popularizing contemporary food trends. Hence the qualitative findings of theme 1,2 and 3 support Hypothesis 1 (H1),

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### Theme 4: Social Media

Participants consistently referenced Instagram, YouTube, and Zomato as key platforms for discovering (Gunawan et al., 2020) new food options. The visual nature of posts, combined with the social media credibility of certain influencers, was mentioned as a trigger for both interest and purchase behaviour (Cheng et al., 2021; Joseph et al., 2020).

*"Earlier we used to do it through Google, now social media has become a very good option to gain access or information about a particular place beforehand. Honestly, I explored a lot of trending the contemporary food, Seeing those places only because I saw them trending on Instagram reels."* — Participant 11

*"Social media is definitely like giving lot of things. Like for example, it is also floating so many things about contemporary food options and I follow a couple of nutritionists who share reviews and recipes. I trust them more than any advertisement."* — Participant 5

*"I learned about San Marzano tomatoes through social media and modern cooking shows. You start noticing these things, and then you begin experimenting. But eventually, you also evaluate what actually fits your local market."* — Participant 2

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#### Theme 5: E-WOM

Participants frequently mentioned relying on reviews and online feedback before experimenting with unfamiliar food. Many cited Zomato, Swiggy, and YouTube reviews as sources of reassurance. (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006) Negative reviews have a stronger impact on sales or affect other consumers more than positive reviews. E-WOM has a direct significant effect on initial sales and can be used as a tool for boosting the business (Deepika, 2024; Ye et al., 2009). E-WOM have a positive influence on revisit intention (Gunawan et al., 2020).

*"It matters, that, how the people are reviewing for a particular food. If a dish has good reviews—even if I've never heard of it, how the people are saying about the food—I'll probably try it."* — Participant 14

*"One thing what I always believe is the very strongest marketing is word of mouth marketing, You check the star rating and comments, referral you know in marketing that plays a very important role. If it's all positive, you just go for it."* — Participant 9

*"I usually go for food products that have good star ratings. If something doesn't have a rating, I tend to avoid it. I like to compare before choosing."* — Participant 16

*"Electronic word of mouth has changed everything. We're no longer just connected to a few people — now it's billions. One review or post can reach the entire world."* — Participant 1

These findings lend support to Hypotheses 2 (H2) and 3 (H3), confirming their significant positive influence on consumers' purchase intentions toward contemporary food options.

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#### Theme 6: Referral Groups

Referral groups played a strong role in influencing trial behaviour, particularly among participants who were unsure about taste, pricing, or authenticity. Friends and family members at various stages often acted as initial influencers, while peer suggestions validated decisions (Goyal & Singh, 2014). According to Cao and Li (2019) when referral costs are low and network externalities are strong, group buying on social networks affects sales positively and consumer purchase intention. Consumer behaviour is significantly influenced by referral groups and familial factors, and strategies are tailor-made for specific social networks to achieve maximum sales (Li & Cao, 2020). Peers affect lifestyle and social visibility decisions (Fernandes & Panda, 2019).

*"Many times, a person has just talked about, that must not have been an endorsement purpose Next day you will want to try it, That is how strong that influence could be. That's how I started ordering fusion rolls."* — Participant 1

*"I find something interesting; I make sure I share that particular video or I share it with someone on my known. Similarly, I don't follow trends blindly, unless someone I trust has already tried it and liked it or I had some personal experiences"* — Participant 16

*"If someone is praising something a lot, then another person will also think about having the same. I will be having the same craving for the similar thing. It's a human tendency"* — Participant 7

Thus, Hypothesis 4 (H4) was confirmed to have a dual effect on consumer purchase intention, depending on the tone and source of the review.

Theme 7: Brand Endorsements

The traditional way of having a celebrity as a brand ambassador doesn't work anymore, especially when it comes to food products; it has a diminishing impact. Customer-related CSR activities on social media directly or indirectly affect E-WOM and purchase intention of consumers of contemporary business (Cheng et al., 2021). Participants have acknowledged that most of the food products are famous or trending only by being influenced by domain experts such as chefs, bloggers, and food-specific YouTubers. There is a shift towards authentic and relatable information sources as key drivers. A positive brand image strongly impacts purchase intention, moderated by the trust factor (Liang et al., 2024).

*"Unless the person is a legit expert I would be influenced by their prediction or the kind of suggestions but that should be a real expert real expert. If a chef I follow recommends a product from a brand, I'll take it seriously. It feels more trustworthy." — Participant 10*  
*"A five year ago would have been a different answer, now brands where celebrities promoting food don't matter much, But if a food blogger shows how to use it, that convinces me." — Participant 6*

Hence, findings suggest that while celebrity endorsements are present, the new norm in food marketing seems to favour expert reviewers, chefs, and food influencers over traditional celebrities. First-time purchases are often driven by this trusted content, making social media campaigns featuring niche influencers highly effective. Therefore, Hypothesis 5 (H5) was found to be partially significant, especially when expert reviews and social media influencers are involved, indicating a strong but selective impact on purchase intention.

**Table 4**  
Summary of hypotheses (H1–H5) and their qualitative findings

Hypothesis	Statement	Finding	Interpretation
H1	Social influence has a strong impact on consumer purchase intentions.	Supported	Consumers are influenced by social dynamics in making food-related choices.
H2	Social media positively affects purchase intentions for contemporary food.	Supported	Social media plays a major role in shaping trends and encouraging first-time purchases.
H3	Referral groups and positive word-of-mouth boost purchase intentions.	Supported	Trusted referrals and group influence reinforce food choices.

Hypothesis	Statement	Finding	Interpretation
H4	E-WOM has a dual effect (positive and negative) on consumer behaviour.	Supported	Consumer perception can shift significantly based on online reviews—both favourable and critical.
H5	Brand influence significantly affects purchase intention, especially via expert endorsements.	Partially supported	Expert-led promotions are more effective than celebrity endorsements in contemporary food marketing.

**Source: Authors own work**

## 5. Discussion

This study explored how social influence affects Indian consumers' purchase intentions toward contemporary food options. The findings reveal that consumer behaviour in this domain is shaped by a complex interplay of social, digital, and cultural factors, many of which are amplified in today's hyper-connected and trend-driven food landscape.

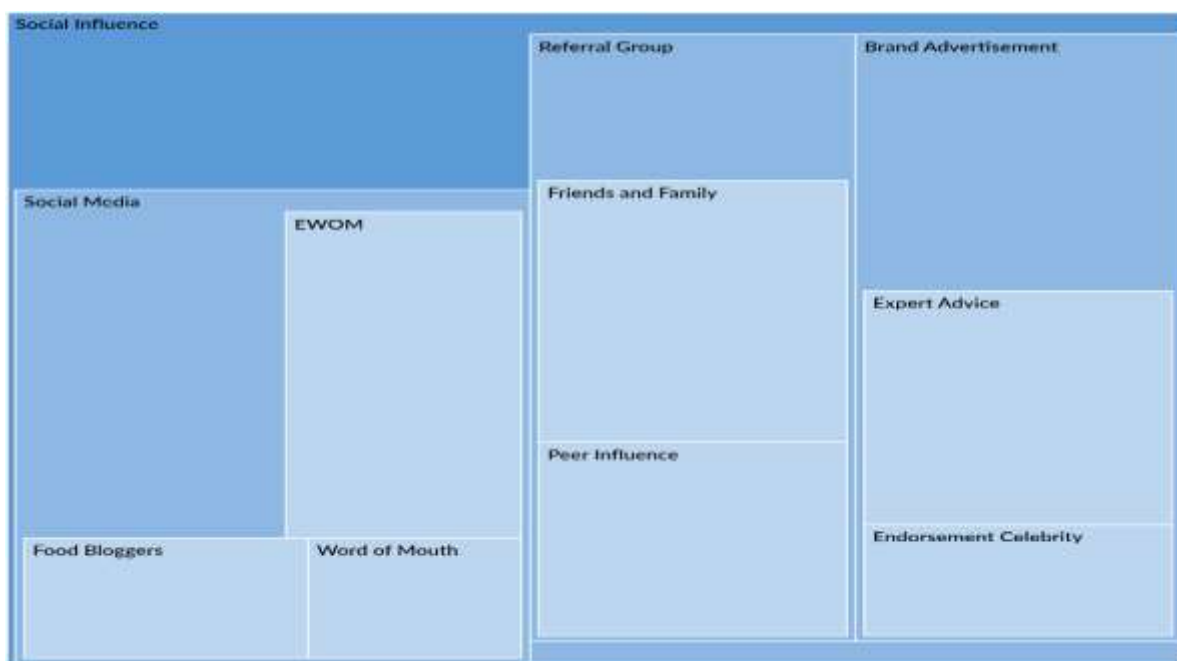
Participants consistently described a strong desire to stay updated with contemporary culinary trends, which were frequently introduced through social circles and digital media. Social media platforms, particularly Instagram and YouTube, served as gateways to food discovery, reinforcing earlier studies that link digital environments to food awareness (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Joseph et al., 2020). However, this study adds to existing literature by highlighting how visual appeal, expert-led content, and peer validation converge to guide food-related decisions. Knowledge of the product impacts the consumer purchase intention but mislabelling by the brands and misconceptions about the product hold them back (Yiridoe et al., 2005).

E-WOM emerged as a particularly powerful driver of behaviour. Participant narratives illustrated a high level of reliance on online reviews, star ratings, and user feedback, especially when trying unfamiliar or premium contemporary food items. This aligns with previous research that emphasises E-WOM's credibility and immediacy in digital consumer decision-making (Rana & Paul, 2017; Ye et al., 2009). Yet, unlike in Western markets where volume of reviews may dominate, Indian consumers in this study appeared to place more emphasis on consistency and review authenticity, possibly due to greater sensitivity to value-for-money and trust.

Referral groups — especially friends and family — continued to exert influence across age groups. In contrast to the common perception that digital influence is replacing personal networks, this study found both to be complementary. Many participants shared examples of

trying new foods based on peer suggestions, often framed within group experiences like dining out or shared social media viewing. These findings reinforce theories of normative social influence (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955) while also expanding them into contemporary, urban Indian settings where lifestyle choices are increasingly shaped by collective consumption.

Interestingly, while celebrity endorsements were generally seen as less persuasive, domain experts such as chefs, nutritionists, and niche food bloggers carried more weight. This shift reflects how consumers now place greater confidence in social media influencers and expert advice (Moussaïd et al., 2013) compared to traditional movie stars or celebrity endorsements, which increasingly shapes their purchase intentions toward brands and endorsed products (Meng et al., 2021; Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2014). Participants reported that these figures helped reduce perceived risk, especially in decisions involving novel or “experimental” food products like plant-based meals or global fusions.

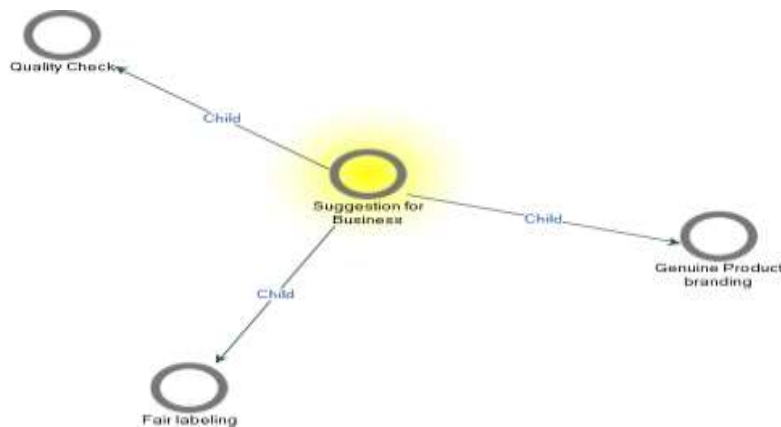


**Figure 2** Tree map of coded themes generated using NVivo 15

**Source: Authors own work from NVIVO**

## 6. Social Implications

Overall, the study suggests that contemporary food choices are not merely personal preferences but socially situated actions, mediated by multiple layers of influence. These insights are particularly relevant in the Indian context, where food carries not just nutritional value but strong cultural and social significance.



**Figure 3** Suggestion for businesses to improve brand image  
**Source:** Created by authors from NVIVO 15

Brand introducing new products are always advised to keep a track of quality check, have fair labelling so the consumer buying the contemporary food totally own its own understating of trust on genuine products of brands. The findings bridge a gap in the literature by providing an India-specific, qualitative understanding of how social influence manifests in contemporary food consumption — a topic previously dominated by studies from Western contexts.

## 7. Conclusion

In our study, factors such as referral networks, social media, E-WOM, and brand advertising, both individually and in combination, have demonstrated a significant impact on consumers' purchase intentions for contemporary food options. Food companies can adjust their contemporary food products and marketing strategies by gaining a better understanding of consumer preferences and the effect of social media, referral networks, and brand promotions. Influencers, bloggers, and friends on platforms like Instagram and YouTube share a variety of culinary trends, leading to increased interest in unique contemporary food experiences and health-conscious options. E-WOM platforms provide peer-based feedback and ratings, driving first-time purchases and encouraging consumers to read and discuss reviews within their age group. Brand advertising contemporary food options is also vital, as strong brand images and trustworthy brands are deemed more dependable for purchasing contemporary food. However, the effectiveness of celebrity endorsements has declined in comparison to expertise and personal experiences. Recommendations from family, friends, and social circles also play a significant role in shaping into contemporary food choices.

## 8. Limitations of the study

Participants in the research study come from a wide range of experts. Their perspectives on current eating habits and suggestions towards contemporary food options can differ from those of the public. Before purchasing a contemporary food choice, people usually need to consult several trustworthy sources. Despite having greater expertise in the field of cooking and seeing food every day, the possibility of understanding complementary foods will be different. The current research primarily focuses on general consumer behaviour by the expert advice for social influences, which may overlook specific factors influencing purchase intentions, such as cultural differences, socioeconomic status, knowledge of the food, and individual dietary preferences.

## 9. Suggestions for future research

Future research needs to look at the complex relationship between social influence concerning food knowledge and purchase intentions, taking into account variables such as psychological effects, emerging trends in health-conscious and sustainable eating, and demographic factors under the social influence of contemporary food choices. Several factors, including price variations, food safety, and health benefits, influence consumer preference for contemporary food products and can look for future considerations using deep demographic factors through qualitative study.

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## 11. Statement of Ethics

The author(s) reported that the study does not involve human subjects, human data or tissue, or animals without prior consent. The data collected through in-depth interviews with the experts was recorded with their prior consent and transcribed for use solely in research findings, ensuring the confidentiality of personal information.

## 12. Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s)

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