

**Beefing Up Influencer Credibility: The Effect of Source and Message Type on Perceptions
of Source Expertise and Trust**

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Introduction & Need for the Study

As individuals become further removed from agriculture, their trust in the food chain is dwindling (Fischer et al., 2020). In fact, only 24% of U.S. adults have a high degree of trust in the information they receive about where and how their food is produced (UM CFNAS, 2022). It is becoming imperative to communicate information about agricultural food products to build consumer confidence in the food system (Fischer et al., 2020). One trust barrier is the misconception regarding beef nutrition, which is a pivotal factor in changing meat consumption habits (Latvala et al., 2012). Consumers have turned to online sources before, consulting with professionals for guidance on health and nutrition (Bergeron et al., 2017). This online content consumption creates an opportunity for agriculturalists to leverage social media to potentially motivate consumers' eating habits and expand their nutrition knowledge (Ahmad & Bruno, 2021) leading to behavioral and diet change (Cash et al., 2014; IFIC, 2023). A variety of content types exist; however, many consumers make purchasing decisions based on the advice from social media influencers (Rogers et al., 2022). However, for influencers to effectively communicate complex topics such as health and nutrition, they must be perceived as credible.

Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by Framing Theory and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM). Framing explains the way information is presented can evoke different responses from the audience, impacting perceptions and trust (Entman, 1993; Goffman 1974). This study leveraged two distinct frames for beef nutrition: evidence-based messages (i.e., utilizing statistics and data) and advice-based messages (i.e., incorporating recommendations and opinions). Framing can work in tandem with the ELM to influence consumers' information processing pathways. The ELM outlines two cognitive routes individuals use to process messages: central, a more critical analysis of the message through deep analysis and scrutinization, and peripheral, a "short cut" route where an individual places emphasis on external cues for message acceptance (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). When messages are beyond an individual's cognitive capacity, they look for cues or heuristics to make a judgement to accept the message (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). One cue is the perceived source credibility, where the person quickly evaluates two criteria: expertise and trustworthiness (Cooper et al., 2016; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). This study seeks to determine if source type and message type affected perceived-source credibility of influencer messages related to beef nutrition.

Methods

A Qualtrics survey was distributed to a nationwide non-probability opt-in sample. We gathered 1,010 complete responses with a sample reflecting the U.S. census demographics in terms of age, gender, income, race, and regionality. The research was conducted through a 2 (message type: evidence-based or advice-based) X 3 (source type: registered dietician, fitness coach, or beef advocate) experimental design with the dependent variables of source expertise and trust. To differentiate the two message types, we used prior literature insights, feedback from a panel of experts, and pilot testing to align the script, tone, and appearance (Chambers et al., 2023; Harrington et al., 2015). Both messages conveyed beef as an excellent source of protein based on the FDA Daily Value Recommendation. The source type was described in the profile contents

and influencer introduction. The respondents were randomly exposed to 1 of 6 Instagram scenarios (i.e., the stimuli) where they viewed an Instagram profile and Reel. Efforts were made to control all aspects of the profile (e.g., same influencer, profile metrics) other than the manipulated aspects of message type and source type. Following the scenario, the respondents provided their perceptions of expertise and trust using 5-point semantic differential scales to the statement, “I believe [influencer name] was...” Source expertise ($\alpha = .93$) was measured using: *not an expert/expert, unskilled/skilled, inexperienced/experienced, unqualified/qualified, and unknowledgeable/knowledgeable* (Ohanian, 1990). Source trust ($\alpha = .92$) was measured using: *dishonest/honest, unreliable/reliable, untrustworthy/trustworthy, insincere/sincere, and undependable/dependable*. We analyzed this data independently using two-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVAs) in SPSS version 29.

Results

The first two-way ANOVA tested the effects of source type and message type on *source expertise*. We found the main effect of source type to be significant, $F(2,1004) = 7.12, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .014$. Bonferroni post hoc comparisons revealed significant differences of source expertise between the Registered Dietician, the Coach ($p = .002$), and the Beef Advocate ($p = .005$); however, there was not a significant difference between the Coach and the Beef Advocate ($p = 1.00$). Additionally, the main effect of message type was significant, $F(1,1004) = 17.00, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .017$. However, the interaction effect of source type and message type was not significant, $p = .23$. This analysis shows that respondents who received the influencer message about beef nutrition from the Registered Dietician sharing the evidence-based message had higher levels of source expertise.

The second two-way ANOVA tested the effects of source type and message type on *source trustworthiness*. We found the main effect of source type to be significant, $F(2,1004) = 3.77, p = 0.023$, partial $\eta^2 = .007$. Bonferroni post hoc comparisons revealed significant differences of source trustworthiness between the Registered Dietician and the Coach ($p = .021$); however, there were not significant comparisons between the Registered Dietician and the Beef Advocate ($p = .180$), nor between the Coach and the Beef Advocate ($p = 1.00$). The main effect of message type was not significant, $p = .18$, nor was the interaction effect of source type and message type, $p = .58$. This analysis revealed those who received an influencer message from a Registered Dietician had the most positive source trustworthiness.

Conclusions/Discussion/Recommendations

When using influencer marketing for beef nutrition, communicators should focus on utilizing credentialed professionals to improve source credibility. In this study, credentials induced the ELM, leading respondents to look at heuristic cues of the source’s qualifications to trigger their brain to perceive the source as an expert (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). This study suggests consumers prefer evidence-based messages to make decisions regarding beef nutrition. Communicators should prioritize data, facts and statistics for credibility and avoid personal opinions. Following registered dietitians, respondents indicated a moderate amount of trust for the industry advocate. Communicators can leverage beef industry advocates to serve as a secondary source of information. Additional research to explore influencer marketing in different sectors and with varying credential types is warranted.

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