Influencer Marketing and Consumer Engagement: The Role of Food Experts in Shaping Attitudes Towards Organic Products

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Abstract: *The Covid-19 pandemic has spurred a consumer trend toward embracing healthier lifestyles and diets. Leveraging primary studies centered on influencer marketing and its influence on consumer behavior, this study aims to scrutinize and evaluate the effect of Food Expert Influencers on consumers' attitudes towards organic products. Our conceptual model, utilizing the theory of social comparison, contributes to formulating hypotheses based on which specific characteristics of Food Expert Influencers are capable of influencing and impacting consumer behavior towards organic foods. On the basis of survey data collected from 306 respondents, structural equation modeling was employed to test our hypotheses and measure the proposed conceptual model. The results indicated that influencers' sexual orientation, appealing lifestyle, specialized knowledge in a particular domain, personal traits like beauty or sex appeal, and their follower count exert a considerable influence on consumer behavior, notably fostering positive attitudes towards organic products. These findings hold substantial theoretical implications, offering crucial insights for marketing strategies in the organic food products sector, as well as for corporate social responsibility. They underscore the importance of carefully selecting influencers who resonate with the target demographics and can forge authentic connections with them. Moreover, the results suggest that harnessing the credibility of Food Experts of Influence (FEIs) can influence consumer behavior and potentially bolster the sales of organic products.*

Keywords*: influencer marketing, social comparison theory, biological products, consumer behavior, Covid 19*

INTRODUCTION

Social media have rapidly dominated many sectors of our society (Dickey and Lewis, 2008), leading the majority of companies to extensively utilize these tools to enhance the effectiveness of their marketing and branding strategies (Gallaugher and Ransbotham, 2010). In the current context, leveraging social media influencers for marketing-commonly referred to as 'influencer marketing'- is progressively emerging as the preferred promotional strategy for modern companies (Kapadia, 2020). Influencer marketing provides a win-win strategy for all parties involved (Michael Haenlein et al., 2019), functioning as an integral part of everyday life. The Covid-19 pandemic and the emerging consumption patterns among younger audiences have heightened the interest in utilizing Influencer Marketing (Tanwar et al., 2020). Also, the Covid-19 pandemic period has notably bolstered the consumption of organic foods (Xie et al., 2020). Based on previous studies which have demonstrated that Influencers possess the ability to exert a positive influence on consumer behavior and purchasing decisions (Lou and Yuan, 2019), the majority of producers, aiming to effectively promote their products and capitalize on this growing demand, are called upon to explore and leverage advertising tools such as influencer marketing. Food Expert Influencers serve as a strategic tool for advertising organic products, contributing significantly to boosting their sales (Folkvord, 2019). To the best of our knowledge, there is a lack of academic research, on how a food expert influencer has an impact on the market of biological products, positively affecting social media consumer audience (Araujo et al., 2016).

Building upon these shortcomings, the aim of this research is to construct a conceptual model drawing upon both the Relevance Theory and Social Influence Theory. Specifically, the theory of social influence (K.Sokolova, H. Kefi, 2020), contributes to understanding Influencers as a reference group, which significantly impacts consumers' attitudes and behaviors due to the processes of conformity and identification inherent in the social influence theory. Inferentially, this model will describe, how Food Expert Influencers positively influence the consumer behavior of organic products, given that, the global organic foods market, forecasted to reach approximately $368.94 billion USD by 2026 (Sadiq et al., 2023).

Background and research hypotheses

According to Bento et al 2021, gender is regarded as a pivotal demographic factor that significantly influences and predicts online purchasing behaviors. Influencers, due to the relationships they foster with their followers, possess the capacity to sway opinions and shape consumer behaviors. Drawing from the theory of social identity and the mechanism of identification, consumers tend to be more easily persuaded when following advice from influencers who are the same gender as they do (Schouten et al., 2020). Homophily, which is defined as the extent to which individuals share similarities and engage based on demographic attributes like beliefs, education, and social standing, plays a significant role in consumer behavior decisions (Skinner et al., 2023). Based on the above discussion, we assume that:

H1: Social media followers are more affected in their consumer behavior towards biological products by influencers of the same gender.

Influencers have the capacity to endorse products to consumers who seek to emulate their image and lifestyle (Lou et al., 2019). Followers seek to uncover the daily routines of influencers as this engagement brings gratification through association with the influencers' lives (Schouten et al., 2020). If a consumer holds esteem for the influencer and the corresponding product they endorse, the identification mechanism posits that the consumer will develop an attachment to and affinity for the specific product promoted by the influencer. This attraction and adherence result from the theory of congruence, which explains that changes in consumers' beliefs and behavior stem from persuasion and the need for imitation and interdependence (Osgood & Tannenbaum, 1955). Assuming that followers aspire to emulate influencers (Campbell & Farrell, 2020), we assume that:

H2: Attractive lifestyle of food expert influencers has a positive impact on the followers' consumer behavior regarding biological products.

Drawing from social influence theory and the mechanism of internalization, influencers aiming to instigate desired behaviors in their followers must exhibit expertise (McCormick, 2016). Influencers are regarded as opinion leaders or authorities in various domains (Sokolova and Kefi, 2020). Hence, their followers will depend on them for their consumption patterns and purchases (Casalo et al., 2020). Influencers, through their suggested nutritional buying behaviors, have the capability to influence the nutritional consumption habits of their followers. The replication of influencers' behavior by their followers contributes to the influencers being perceived as opinion leaders (Casalo et al., 2020). Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H3: Perceived level of food influencers' expertise has a positive impact on the followers' consumer behavior towards biological products.

The utilization of Influencer Marketing aims to create the impression to customers that they can emulate influencers and foster a sense of close camaraderie with them (K. Sokolova, H. Kefi, 2020). Companies seek to establish partnerships with influencers due to their inherent sex appeal, leveraging it to attract followers through photo or video-sharing services (Crane-Droesch et al., 2019). Followers aspire to emulate and adopt the beauty and sex appeal traits of influencers to become part of this reference group, utilizing the products and brands promoted by them (McCormick, 2016). Based on the theory of social influence and specifically the mechanism of identification, the following hypothesis has been formulated:

H4: Food expert influencers' beauty and sex appeal has a positive impact on the followers' consumer behavior towards biological products.

As per the social influence theory, individuals have the capacity to modify their beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors through three pivotal processes: compliance, identification, and internalization. Consumers are enticed to embrace a majority compliance process, driven by the desire to belong and derive self-affirmation through group association. Influencers, regarded as a reference group, draw their followers to align and adhere to the group's norms and regulations through the mechanism of conformity (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010). Consumers, aiming to affiliate with a reference group composed of numerous members and to

express their identity, utilize products and services endorsed by influencers. Therefore, we propose that:

H5: The number of food expert influencers' followers has a positive impact on the followers' consumer behavior towards biological products.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework
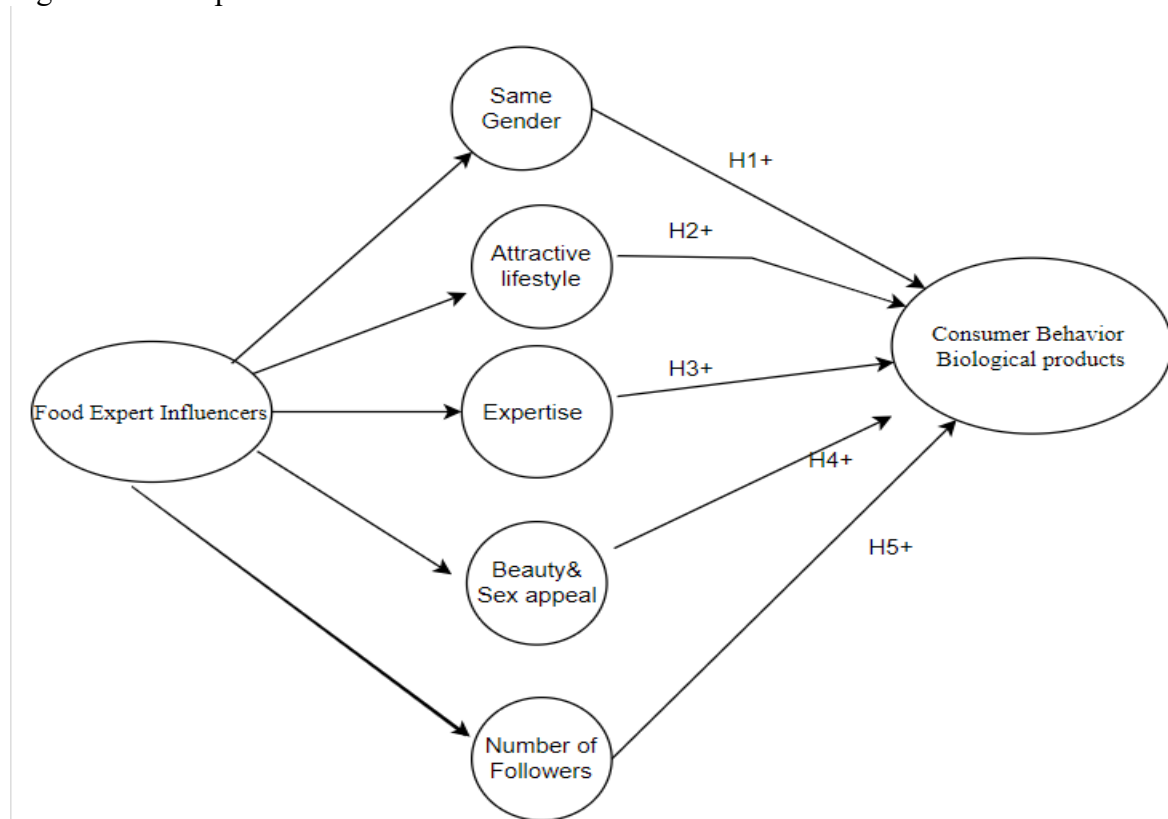
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study is based on quantitative research methodology and aims at investigating the impact of food expert influencers' traits on the consumption patterns of organic products. It focused on diverse attributes of the FEIs. The objective was to examine hypotheses H1 to H5, which outline the plausible associations between these attributes and consumer behavior. The sample comprised 306 participants recruited through social Networks. Out of the initial 363 participants, 57 were excluded due to incomplete questionnaire responses, resulting in their exclusion from the study. Inclusion criteria involved individuals actively engaged in social media usage and consuming organic products on at least an occasional basis. To ensure a wideranging demographic representation, no specific constraints were imposed regarding age, gender, or place of residence (Adedoyin, O. B. 2020). Drawing from a literature review, we developed a questionnaire comprising five sections: gender (3 items)-(Beaudreault, A. R. 2009), Lifestyle (5 items)-(De Veirman et al, 2017), Professional Food Expert Influencers (6

items)-(Peetz, T. B. 2012), Beauty and Sex Appeal (5 items)- (Peetz, T. B. 2012), number of followers (5 items)-(De Veirman et al., 2017) and demographic variables (gender,age,education, income, employment status). The measurements of each variable were developed according to the literature and previous research and modified in the context of the present study. Participants were asked, among various inquiries, to specify their frequency of organic product consumption, contributing to the recording of consumer behavior. All items were measured on a five-point Likert scale that ranged from 1(total disagreement) to 5(total agreement).

Spearman's Rho correlation coefficient was employed for data analysis. This non-parametric measure was selected due to its reduced sensitivity to non-normally distributed data and outliers, common characteristics in social science datasets. Correlations were computed for each specific attribute of the FEIs independently, aiming to ascertain the magnitude and direction of associations with consumer behavior. In addition, a structural model, reflecting the research hypotheses, was subsequently estimated utilizing IBM SPSS AMOS 26 software. The study was carried out in strict compliance with ethical principles (Žukauskas et al., 2018). Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and their consent was obtained before the start of the survey. Anonymity and confidentiality of the data were guaranteed and no personally identifiable information was collected.

RESULTS

The descriptive statistics show that the group examined includes a younger, well-educated population that is of working age and whose income varies. This audience is digitally savvy and could be an important target group for Food Expert influencers, particularly in terms of their purchasing power and ability to evaluate information. A two-tailed significance test was used to test the hypotheses. Values of $p < .01$ were considered statistically significant. A correlation coefficient of 0.238 for H1 indicates that there is a tendency for people who say they are influenced by food expert influencers of the same gender to show increased consumption behavior of organic products. A correlation coefficient of 0.455 for H2, indicating a moderate to strong positive correlation. For H3, the correlation coefficient of 0.380 indicates a medium positive relationship. The correlation coefficient for H4 is 0.385, which indicates a moderate positive correlation and 0.413 for H5 indicates a medium positive correlation, suggesting that an increase in the respective FEI characteristics is associated with an increase in the consumption of organic products. Table 1 depicts the path coefficients and statistical values for our hypotheses. The path coefficients, which indicate the strength of the relationship between the variables, vary between 0.056 and 0.208. The path of "FE → CB" has the strongest relationship with a coefficient of 0.208, indicating that the variable of the Food Influencers' expertise has a relatively larger influence on CB. A key point in the table is that the p-values of all paths are lower than the usual threshold of 0.05 for statistical significance. This suggests that the results are statistically significant and the hypotheses can be supported based on these data.

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Food Expert influencers with same gender with me→ ConsumerBehavior			200	00	
Attractive Lifestyle of Food Expert Influencers→Consumer Behavior			2,052	00	
Food Influences' Expertise→ Consumer Behavior			3,331	00	
Food Experts Influencers'Beauty & Sex appeal →Consumer Behavior			2,000	00	
Food Experts Influences with a number high of followers→ Consumer Behavior			2,607	00	

Table 1 Structural Model Analyses Results: Fit indices X2/df=2.65 RMSEA=0,06 CFI=0,998
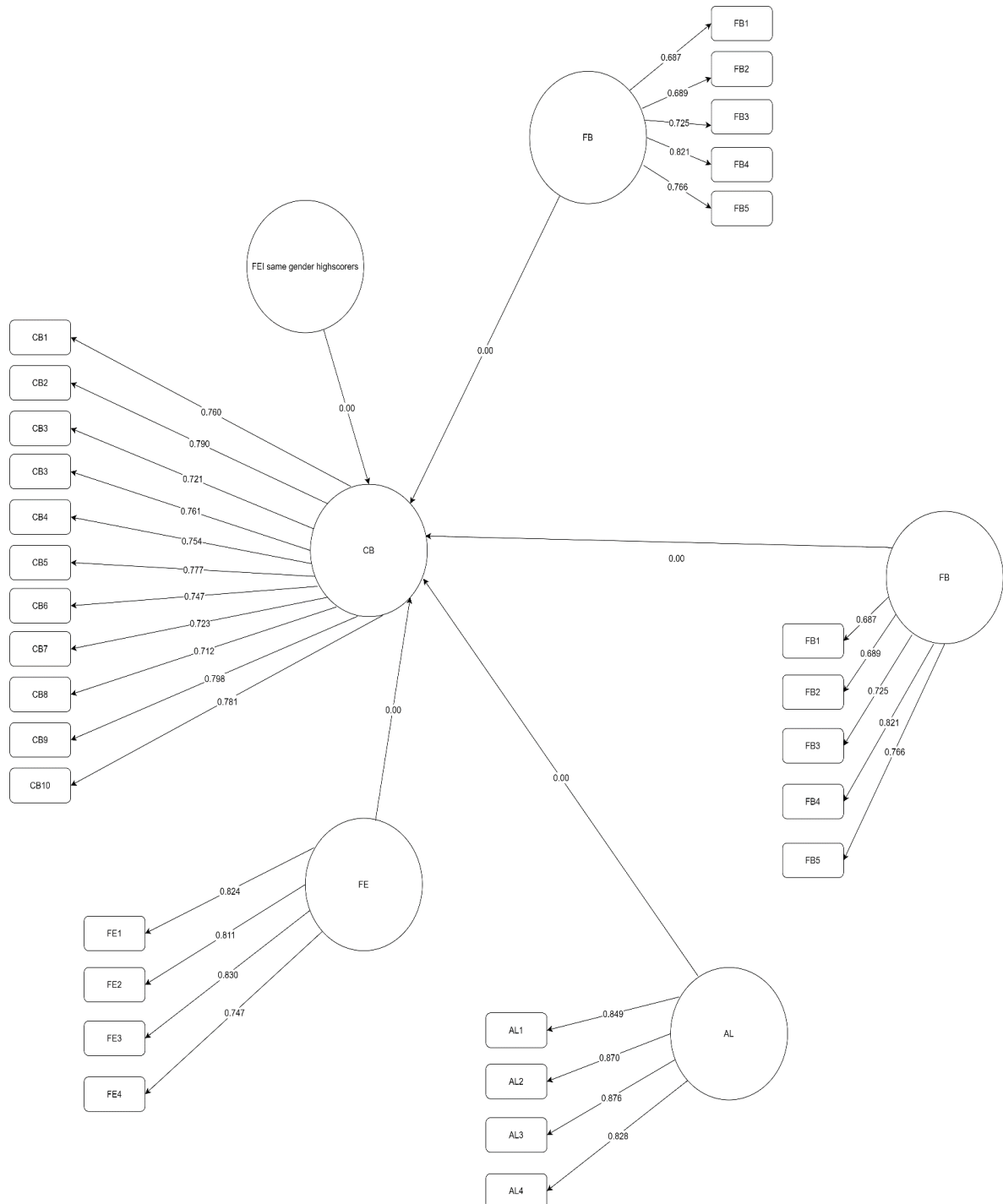
DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This research dealt in detail with the question of how the presence and characteristics of Food Expert Influencers (FEIs) affect consumer behavior towards organic products. By using Spearman's Rho for correlation analysis and the structural equation modelling, several significant relationships were identified. The research uncovered a significant positive correlation ($\rho = 0.238$) between the impact of same-gender Field Experts of Influence (FEIs) and the consumption patterns of organic products. This correlation implies a gender-specific association and influence. These findings align with social identity theories and the match-up hypothesis model, suggesting that similarity between the endorser and the recipient significantly affects persuasion (Ooms et al., 2019). Nevertheless, the moderate correlation coefficient indicates that additional factors, such as environmental consciousness or personal values, could exert further influence on consumer behavior. The subsequent observation further supports the premise that Field Experts of Influence (FEIs) embodying an appealing lifestyle exert a favorable impact on consumer behavior. While correlation does not establish causation, this association may be explicable through influencers' role-model status and the linkage between their lifestyle and perceptions of quality and sustainability. This alignment supports the theory of self-congruence. The expertise of FEIs also exhibited a notable positive correlation with consumer behavior. This reinforces the notion that the credibility and perceived competence of influencers play a pivotal role in engendering trust, subsequently impacting purchasing behavior.

Moreover, a substantial positive correlation emerged between the attractiveness and allure of Field Experts of Influence (FEIs) and consumer behavior. This discovery aligns with the halo effect theory (Talamas et al., 2016), positing that attractive individuals tend to receive more favorable attributions in various domains, including trustworthiness and expertise. These perceptions may subsequently influence consumer attitudes toward products. Ultimately, a correlation coefficient of 0.413 linking Field Experts of Influence (FEIs) with a substantial follower base to organic consumption behavior underscores the significance of social reach in shaping consumer behavior. This observation may be substantiated by the concept of social proof (Roethke et al., 2020), which suggests that individuals tend to emulate behaviors adopted by a large number of others.

The findings of this study should be considered within the scope of its methodological constraints. The reliance on self-reported data might entail socially desirable response tendencies (Latkin et al., 2017). Additionally, the correlational design precludes drawing causal inferences. Further experimental or longitudinal investigations would be imperative to validate the directionality and causality of the observed relationships. The utilization of correlation studies precludes definitive conclusions regarding causality. It is advisable to explore effects through experimental designs to authenticate the causal relationships between influencer attributes and consumer behavior. Moreover, employing qualitative methods could yield profounder insights into consumers' psychological processes. The outcomes of this study serve as a foundational platform for further research endeavors seeking a more comprehensive

comprehension of influencer marketing dynamics in an ever-evolving digital landscape, through the lens of social responsibility.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has empirically validated key components of Social Comparison Theory (SCT) within the context of organic product consumption, reinforcing the idea that individuals often look to perceived experts for guidance in their consumer behavior. The role of expert authority and credibility emerges as a critical factor, with food expert influencers serving as trusted references whose knowledge significantly impacts consumer attitudes and preferences towards organic products. These influencers, by leveraging persuasive communication techniques such as storytelling, demonstrations, and endorsements, effectively shape consumer perceptions, enhancing the appeal and credibility of organic offerings.

Moreover, the findings highlight practical implications for marketers and policymakers aiming to foster sustainable and ethical consumption behaviors. The strategic use of food expert influencers allows for targeted communication that not only educates consumers about the benefits of organic products but also promotes their widespread adoption. Marketers, therefore, have an opportunity to collaborate with credible influencers to deepen consumer engagement and increase market penetration in the organic product sector. Furthermore, the insights gained from understanding how food expert influencers affect consumer choices can inform the design of behavior change interventions. These interventions could strategically leverage influencer networks to promote healthier, more sustainable consumption patterns, thus aligning marketing practices with broader public health and environmental goals. By doing so, stakeholders can effectively promote organic products, driving both immediate consumption shifts and long-term behavioral change.

The present study has laid the groundwork for understanding the influential role of food expert influencers in shaping consumer attitudes and behaviors towards organic products. By applying Social Comparison Theory, it has demonstrated how consumers engage in social comparisons with perceived experts, using their authority and credibility as guiding points for their consumption decisions. However, this conceptual framework, while robust, calls for further empirical validation to fully capture the complex and multifaceted nature of these influencer-consumer interactions.

Future research should aim to expand the empirical evidence base by utilizing longitudinal studies and experimental designs. These methodologies would be critical for establishing the causal relationships between food expert influencers and consumer behavior, going beyond correlational findings to provide deeper insights into the dynamics of influence. Additionally, such studies could explore potential moderating or mediating factors—such as demographic variables, personal values, or the evolving digital landscape—that may further refine our understanding of how influencer marketing shapes consumer engagement with organic products. The need for future empirical work also extends to the exploration of the long-term

effects of influencer marketing on consumer behavior. Investigating how sustained exposure to food expert influencers impacts consumer loyalty, repeat purchases, and overall shifts in lifestyle preferences could offer valuable insights for marketers and policymakers alike. Understanding these patterns will be crucial for designing more effective behavior change interventions that promote sustainable consumption practices and foster a broader adoption of organic products.

In conclusion, while the current theoretical model provides a compelling framework for understanding the role of food expert influencers, continued empirical investigation is necessary to refine and validate the model, ensuring its applicability in real-world marketing and consumer engagement strategies.

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Appendix A - Hypotheses and variables constituting each subscale factor

H1

CB (Consumer behavior) - SUMconsumerbehav

CB1 - I trust the organic food market when it is promoted by a Food Expert Influencer.

CB2 - I believe in the superior quality of organic food products, if the Food Expert Influencer believes the same

CB3 - I often tend to buy organic products that are advertised by a special Food Expert Influencer that I follow.

CB4 - I generally recommend organic products that are advertised by a special Food Expert Influencer that I follow.

CB5 - I trust organic food brands that are promoted by a dedicated Food Expert Influencer that I follow.

CB6 - I am convinced to buy an organic food product when the Food Expert Influencer I follow shows me that it is the best to eat.

CB7 - I am convinced to buy an organic food product when the Food Expert Influencer I follow uploads a post that provides useful information about this organic food product.

CB8 - I find it more persuasive to buy a particular organic food product when it is promoted through a 'post' uploaded by a special Food Expert Influencer with many followers.

CB9 - It is more persuasive to buy organic food products, which are promoted by a special Food Expert Influencer with a large following.

CB10 - I have a strong desire to buy a particular organic food product when it is promoted through a 'post' uploaded by a special Food Expert Influencer with many followers.

FEISameGenderHigh

H2

AL (Attractive Lifestyle of FEIs) - SUMFEIattractivelifestyle

AL1 - I admire Food Expert Influencers because of their lifestyle

AL2 - I value Food Expert Influencers because of their lifestyle.

AL3 – I would like to be like the Food Expert Influencers because of their lifestyle.

AL4 - I feel that Food Expert Influencers guide me in the right direction in my life because of their lifestyle.

CB (Consumer behavior)

H3

FE (FEIs Food Expertise) - AVERFEIexpertise

FE1 - Food Expert Influencers are indeed experts in the concept of food.

FE2 - Food Expert Influencers have experience in the concept of food.

FE3 – Food Expert Influencers are experts in the concept of food.

FE4 - Food Expert Influencers have a good understanding of the concept of food.

CB (Consumer behavior)

H4

FB (FEI's Beauty) - AVERFEIbeauty

FB1 - Food Expert Influencers are viewable

FB2 - Food Expert Influencers are admirable
FB3 - Food Expert Influencers are charismatic
FB4 - Food Expert Influencers are attractive
FB5 - Food Expert Influencers are beautiful
CB (Consumer behavior)

H5
FF (FEIS with a high number of followers) - AVRFEIfollowers
FF1 – Food Expert Influencers who have a large following are more attractive
FF2 – Food Expert Influencers who have a large following are considered leaders
FF3 – Food Expert Influencers who have a large following are more persuasive
FF4 – Food Expert Influencers who have a large following are more recognized
FF5 - Food Expert Influencers who have a large following are more experienced when it comes to the food market
CB (Consumer behavior)