



# The Curse of Knowledge in Consumer Decision-Making: Bridging the Gap Between Experts and Consumers in Food Marketing

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**Abstract:** *This study aims to explore the complexity of consumer decision-making through a complex cognitive psychological phenomenon, focusing on food consumption. The paper summarizes the general interpretation of the curse of knowledge and theories related to consumer decision-making. The novelty of the review lies in its focus on food consumption and the broadening of the perspective to include food marketing approaches. Both classic theories and more recent publications are discussed. In this study, the author analyzes the pervasive nature of the curse of knowledge, which extends its influence beyond adults to children. It can be stated that neglecting this phenomenon can have far-reaching consequences, including marketing. The curse of knowledge poses a significant challenge for brands regarding effective communication with their target audience, particularly regarding food consumption. The primary research is a qualitative study. The results of in-depth interviews with food influencers further illustrate the complexity of the problem. The phenomenon may lead to consequences such as the partial or total misinterpretation of messages, or even the complete breakdown of communication. Marketing professionals must understand and navigate the curse to communicate more effectively with their target audience and foster better engagement. At the end of the article, the author outlines future directions and offers suggestions for addressing the curse of knowledge. These approaches could effectively respond to the challenges presented by the ever-changing marketing environment and the impact of the curse of knowledge on consumer decision-making. These future directions include fostering empathy among professionals and using analogies, storytelling, and food influencers in marketing communication.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the dynamically evolving world of marketing relationships between consumers and brands face constant challenges. Communication between brands and consumers is becoming increasingly complex as consumers gain access to ever-greater amounts of information that can influence their decisions. An intriguing issue in food marketing is that, while in some cases the social media presence of food brands creates value, in others it can have a detrimental effect (Peeroo et al., 2017). Certain forms of branding can also lead to negative consumer evaluations due to the continuous erosion of credibility (Han et al., 2021).

This study aims to explore the challenges of decision-making situations in food marketing, focusing on the challenges related to the consumption of virtual food content. The article delves into the concept of the curse of knowledge, examining its roots in cognitive psychology and its broader implications for the marketing profession. The primary research focuses on food influencers.

The role of influencers in modern marketing is becoming increasingly significant. The success of influencer marketing lies in influencers' ability to establish authentic and direct connections with

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their target audience. Thereby purchasing decisions more effectively than traditional advertisements. Followers trust them, they think their messages are more personal and credible. This is especially important in light of the curse of knowledge phenomenon, where brands' communications often fail to persuade consumers. This article hypothesizes that food influencers bridge the communication gap between brands and consumers. The research focuses on the following two questions:

**RQ1:** Can food influencers bridge the gap between consumers and brands?

**RQ2:** How does the curse of knowledge manifest in the context of food influencers?

The goal of creating a comprehensive analysis is to illuminate how marketing professionals can effectively navigate the challenges presented by the curse of knowledge. This understanding is crucial for overcoming hurdles and ultimately building stronger connections with their target audience. The study aims to assist industry players in recognizing ways to overcome the curse of knowledge and establish valuable, long-term relationships with their consumers.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

An essential part of our social life is the ability to make ourselves understood by others and to understand those who communicate with us accurately. Additionally, a critical skill in social interactions is our capacity to consider perspectives other than our own, which forms the foundation of social interaction. However, researchers have consistently demonstrated that individuals often develop imperfect perspectives and exhibit egocentric biases (Camerer et al., 1989; Birch, 2005; Ghrear et al., 2021; Samuel, 2023; Tullis & Feder, 2023). In striving for effective communication, a specific cognitive bias frequently impacts our ability to accurately convey information we already know to others. This phenomenon, known as the curse of knowledge, has numerous implications across various fields from education to business.

Cognitive biases related to communication skills and the curse of knowledge affect not only individual relationships but also broader societal and business challenges. Previous literature highlights that during the learning process individuals often lose the accuracy of their judgments regarding others' knowledge (Camerer et al., 1989; Birch, 2005; Ghrear et al., 2021; Li et al., 2023; Samuel, 2023; Tullis & Feder, 2023). Assumptions driven by increased knowledge can lead to misunderstandings and conflicts between groups. Tullis and Feder (2023) found that learning and possessing more information decreases the accuracy of judgments about others' knowledge. This occurs not because individuals rely excessively on their experiences but because they lack diagnostic cues about others' knowledge (Tullis & Feder, 2023). Some findings suggest that egocentric biases are more likely to emerge when individuals are more deliberate, such as when making decisions under uncertainty (Samuel, 2023).

The curse of knowledge manifests in various ways in food marketing. For instance, wine consumers who perceive themselves as well-informed about wines are more likely to exhibit choice-seeking behavior (Ellis & Mattison Thompson, 2018). However, the theory of the curse of knowledge posits that better-informed agents may experience losses because they cannot disregard the additional information they possess. Furthermore, well-informed agents typically focus more on the outcomes of their decisions than on the decision-making process itself, often resulting in suboptimal outcomes (Camerer et al., 1989). More information does not always lead to better decisions as individuals may overestimate their ability to predict outcomes accurately. This overconfidence can amplify negative emotions such as regret and self-pity, especially when decisions lead to unfavorable outcomes.

The curse of knowledge is a cross-generational phenomenon as evidenced by research from Ghrear et al. (2021), which reveals that it can be observed even in children. Recent findings in food marketing research highlight that adolescents around the age of 12 are the primary target group for digital marketing communication promoting unhealthy foods (Ares et al., 2022; van der Bend et al., 2022; Kacharczuk et al., 2022). Food advertisements often depict various levels of reality leading less-informed consumers to perceive certain products as healthier than they truly are (van der Bend et al., 2022). The curse of knowledge may partly explain the assertion that a significant mental shift occurs during the cognitive development of children (Birch, 2005). Older generations, already possessing the knowledge expected from the younger ones, find it difficult to imagine a time when they lacked such understanding. This distortion can lead to misinterpretations which are a natural byproduct of the curse of knowledge and affect every generation.

Influencers play a crucial role in food marketing within the digital sphere. Several researchers identify influencers as key drivers of persuasive communication (Giuffredi-Kähr et al., 2022). Influencers simplify and translate brand messages into language and contexts that their followers can easily comprehend and embrace. As external observers of products influencers communicate in ways that resonate with consumers, thereby overcoming the communication barriers imposed by the curse of knowledge. They help brands more effectively convey the value of their products, enabling consumers to connect with the offerings on a personal level.

Navigating the new era of influencer marketing is no easy task, but selecting credible individuals for brand communication is critical. Haenlein et al. (2020) emphasize the importance of identifying suitable influencers for collaboration. This is vital in the industry as influencers are among the most significant factors influencing consumers' food related decision-making processes (Ares et al., 2022; Görgényi Hegyes et al., 2017; Vukolic et al., 2022). The method of delivering information to consumers and their reception of it matters greatly. Beyond misinterpretations, marketers must also address potential cognitive dissonance in their messaging.

The most apparent consequence of the curse of knowledge is miscommunication, and in extreme cases a complete breakdown of communication. In food marketing social media communication plays a particularly significant role. The virtual space has a profound impact on consumers' decisions related to food and gastronomy (Ares et al., 2022; Görgényi Hegyes et al., 2017; Vukolic et al., 2022). Therefore, it is crucial to consider the challenges posed by the curse of knowledge when analyzing influencer marketing communication in this field. I propose that influencers play a pivotal role in bridging the gap as they simplify and clarify product messages for their followers. By bridging the gap between expert and consumer perspectives influencers circumvent the communication challenges posed by the curse of knowledge, thereby enhancing the promotion of products.

The curse of knowledge is a pervasive cognitive bias affecting marketing communication across various domains. Recognizing its existence and implementing strategies to mitigate its impact is essential for understanding consumer decisions facilitating effective learning and improving the efficiency of collaborations.

### 3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

To address whether influencers can bridge the gap between consumers and brands (RQ1), it is essential to understand how consciously and professionally influencers operate and whether they experience the curse of knowledge (RQ2). Qualitative research involved conducting 11 online

in-depth interviews, guided by a questionnaire consisting of 12 open-ended questions. These interviews aimed to explore the participants' thought processes, gain deeper insights into their operational methods, uncover and comprehend their motivations, and analyze their approaches and habits for resolving marketing challenges. This research design provides a nuanced understanding of influencers' operations, the challenges they face in food marketing, and their potential to overcome the curse of knowledge.

**Table 1.** Comprehensive table of the food influencers

interview subject	Instagram Followers (in thousands)	YouTube followers (in thousands)	TikTok Followers (in thousands)	Profession
I.	85.3	95.1	4.5	full-time blogger
II.	77.6	8.89	10.5	full-time blogger
III.	4.4	0	0	self-employed, television personality in the sector
IV.	22	0.01	0	not a full-time blogger, employed in another sector
V.	56.5	4.95	2.8	not a full-time blogger, employed in another sector
VI.	16	0.08	5.8	self-employed in the sector
VII.	7.2	0.8	2.2	not a full-time blogger, employed in another sector
VIII.	43.5	0.02	23.9	not a full-time blogger, employed in another sector
IX.	15.3	0	0.003	not a full-time blogger, employed in another sector
X.	35.1	0	7.8	self-employed in the sector
XI.	51.3	0	11.1	self-employed in the sector

**Source:** Own research

### Participants Profile:

The interview subjects were Hungarian food influencers, including several prominent figures in the online gastronomy scene. The group consisted of:

- Influencers whose main platform is YouTube video creation
- Individuals recognizable from several television appearances
- Content creators with significant followings on Instagram and TikTok
- Food influencers who focus predominantly on blogging.

Through the open-ended questions, the goal is to uncover their perspectives on the current online food market, their level of professionalism and intentionality in communication, and their awareness of their audience. Specifically, it is examined whether they could characterize and segment their followers.

### Participant Categories and Platform Engagement:

The 11 interview participants were divided into three categories based on their primary professional focus (Table 1).

1. Full-time bloggers (2 participants): Exclusively active on their platforms which serve as their main livelihood.
2. Full-time entrepreneurs (4 participants): In addition to managing their platforms they undertake other sector-related activities such as marketing, product photography, and creative writing for other stakeholders in the market.
3. Part-time influencers (5 participants): Their primary income stems from jobs in other sectors.

### Platform Use:

- Instagram: All participants were active on Instagram, with varying levels of engagement.
- YouTube: Three participants regularly produced content, while four others maintained channels without consistent uploads.
- TikTok: All but two participants had a presence.

Based on the research, it can be concluded that a high number of followers is not a condition for activity in the sector to be an individual's primary source of livelihood. High number of followers is not necessary for someone to work in this field full-time, but they need to expand the focus of their activity and work on other sites in some form besides their own (e.g. photography, marketing). However, based on the sample high number of followers is essential for an individual to be a full-time blogger and live exclusively from their platforms.

## 4. RESULTS

In terms of communication, nine of the respondents do not communicate consciously but rather rely on their intuitions. Six inform, one person primarily uses storytelling, and two people mentioned entertainment: they use words with vague meanings. Absolute objectivity appeared in two additional individuals. In many cases they do not even inform, they only objectively state the name of the cake and the recipe, and they do not color their communications with any adjectives. Interestingly, based on this sample no correlation can be shown between the number of followers and communication. It cannot be established that entertainment and audience involvement would result in a higher number of followers. Surprisingly even with absolute objectivity an exceptionally high number of followers can be achieved when examining the communication strategy, *ceteris paribus*.

“For me education is a very important mission. I am not a showman. I understand why things happen in the media, but I can't identify with it. For me, my communication is absolutely educational. When we started the Main Menu (TV show), this was also a problem.” – Interviewee III.

“Sometimes I just write down the name of the cake and the recipe, and nothing else, and I don't think anyone takes it seriously.” – Interviewee V.

According to the research the biggest challenge for the subjects is knowing their followers. Out of all 11 subjects only 2 people said they didn't know their followers and couldn't characterize them in any way. The rest of the influencers think they know them completely but when they were asked to characterize them, the opposite was experienced. However, 6 people can make statements and facts about them based on the data, but they can't characterize them in detail.

“I think 91% of my followers are women, and the 20-50 age group is the largest. So I try to “shoot” at women and shape my content more feminine.” – Interview subject VIII.

“I am not in a confidential relationship with the majority of my followers. There is a certain circle who take pictures of their food and send them to me and give feedback, I am very happy about them. But there are a lot of people who do not react to anything, so obviously I do not know their taste and what they would like to see. I do not expect 50 thousand people to indicate one by one, but... I see that they are young. Mothers are not so typical.” – Interview subject V.

The majority of the subjects have an idea of who their followers are and can give facts about them, but the vast majority cannot characterize them or classify them.



Based on the results, analyzing competitors is a mentally stressful process for a significant part of the subjects (6). They consider competitor analysis unworthy of their time and view it as a waste of effort. Although the majority try to analyze website data in some form, most of the respondents lack the knowledge, resources, or motivation to analyze or incorporate insights. The majority (9) believe that the innovative nature of the market is driven by supply. Additionally, most interviewees (7) observe that there are peaks in demand during the autumn and winter seasons, with a decline occurring in the summer and at the beginning of the year, consistently every year. When defining the market, all but one of the interviewees highlighted the significant influence and unpredictability of algorithms used by social media platforms. Most of the subjects (10) attribute a prominent role to visuality in this market, and they try to comply with this to the best of their ability. Overall, it can be concluded that the two full-time bloggers have a more professional approach to many business factors, and it seems that they are making significant efforts to not only maintain their existing competitive advantage but also to increase it in the future.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The psychological roots of the curse of knowledge stem from the inability to imagine what it was like to live without that particular piece of information. This phenomenon can impact both adulthood and childhood. This study explained that neglecting the curse of knowledge can have serious consequences in the field of marketing. The paper focused specifically on the phenomenon of consumer decision-making within the context of virtual food marketing. By understanding the cognitive roots and analyzing real-life cases, marketers can navigate the challenges posed by the curse of knowledge to build more authentic and effective relationships with their target audience.

Based on the qualitative research, it can be concluded that most food influencers do not communicate consciously, they are very intuitive. According to the curse of knowledge simplicity and clarity should guide communication, for which intuition is the key. This is why they can serve as excellent actors to bridge the communication gap between brands and consumers (RQ1). It should be emphasized and noted that the curse of knowledge also appears in food influencers (RQ2). The reflection of the curse is manifested in the fact that analyzing competitors is a mentally stressful process for a significant part of the subjects and they experience it quite negatively. It is also interesting to note that while the majority of the subjects believe they know their followers, most are actually unable to accurately characterize or categorize them. The study highlighted that different forms of the curse can appear from communication problems to incorrect assumptions about knowledge, and these can hinder consumers' decision-making and the effectiveness of marketing strategies in many ways. Overcoming the curse of knowledge is not just a skill but a necessity in the pursuit of effective communication. Analyzing and comprehensively exploring the curse can provide valuable insights for researchers and marketers alike. Understanding this area is key to effective communication, product management, and marketing strategy development across a wide range of sectors.

## 6. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

In conclusion, this study explores potential future directions and offers suggestions for practitioners providing a forward-looking perspective on this pervasive cognitive bias. As the marketing landscape continues to evolve, so must our strategies for combating the curse of knowledge. To overcome the curse of knowledge marketers must adopt targeted strategies. Developing empathy in professionals can be a good starting point. If they can put themselves in the mindset of a novice, they can approach a familiar topic with the humility and curiosity of someone hearing it for the first time. This mindset allows the expert to see the topic from the perspective of the learner, which

can improve communication. Breaking down complex ideas into more digestible components should be among the basic strategies for effective knowledge transfer.

Simplicity and clarity should be the guiding principle in communication, avoiding and abandoning unnecessary jargon can result in easier understanding. Therefore, influencers who rely primarily on intuition can perform outstandingly in the sector. Furthermore, storytelling as a marketing communication tool can appear as an effective antidote to the curse of knowledge. The psychological characteristics behind the effectiveness of storytelling in marketing (consumers' recall stories faster than facts (Töröcsik, 2018)) can guide the development of narratives that resonate with the target audience. Creating a hook and metaphors can also be an effective tool for experts to bridge the communication gap. By drawing parallels between well-known concepts and more complex ideas messages become more relatable, comparable, and accessible to the audience. This will help assess the level of understanding of consumers, and then make modifications in the approach to the topic and communication accordingly.

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