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INFLUENCER MARKETING AND CONSUMER BEHAVIOR: HOW SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS SHAPE TRUST, CREDIBILITY, AND DECISION-MAKING

MONERA YOUSSEF, BS
BS Honor Student | Author

ROBERT ALLEN, DBA, MSM
Marketing Department Faculty Mentor | Research Advisor

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ABSTRACT

Influencer marketing has become an increasingly important strategy in modern digital advertising, as businesses rely on social media influencers to promote products and engage with consumers through platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. As social media continues to reshape how consumers discover and evaluate brands, influencers have emerged as key opinion leaders who can significantly affect consumer perceptions and purchasing decisions. However, despite the rapid growth and widespread use of influencer marketing, questions remain regarding how and why influencers influence consumer attitudes and behavior.

This qualitative research examines how social media influencers shape consumer behavior, with a particular focus on trust, credibility, authenticity, and consumer decision-making. Drawing on existing scholarly literature in marketing and consumer behavior, this research analyzes how influencer characteristics such as perceived expertise, relatability, and transparency influence consumer attitudes toward brands and their intention to purchase endorsed products. By synthesizing recent academic research on influencer marketing and digital consumer behavior, the qualitative research aims to identify the key factors that contribute to the effectiveness of influencer campaigns. The findings are aimed at providing insights into how businesses can strategically use influencer partnerships while maintaining ethical standards, authenticity, and consumer trust in the digital marketplace.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Over the past decade, marketing strategies have undergone a significant transformation as businesses shift from traditional celebrity endorsements to collaborations with social media influencers. Unlike traditional celebrities, who often maintain a distant and highly curated public image, social media influencers are perceived as more relatable and authentic. This shift has been largely driven by the rapid growth of digital platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, where influencers build personal connections with their audiences through consistent, interactive content. As a result, influencers are increasingly viewed as credible sources of information, particularly in areas such as lifestyle, fashion, and product recommendations.

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Traditional celebrity endorsements were historically effective due to their broad reach and established reputation; however, they often lacked the personal connection that modern consumers seek. But social media influencers cultivate a sense of trust and familiarity through ongoing engagement with their followers, which can lead to stronger consumer relationships and greater influence over purchasing decisions. Research suggests that consumers are more likely to trust recommendations from influencers they perceive as authentic and relatable compared to traditional celebrity endorsements (De Veirman et al., 2017).

The rise of influencer marketing reflects broader changes in consumer behavior, particularly the increasing importance of peer-like recommendations and digital word-of-mouth. Influencers often function as opinion leaders within their communities, shaping consumer attitudes and preferences in ways that traditional advertising cannot. As influencer marketing continues to grow, understanding the shift from celebrity endorsements to influencer-based strategies becomes essential for evaluating how modern consumers form trust, assess credibility, and make purchasing decisions in a digital environment (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

1.2 Significance

The growing reliance on digital platforms has significantly increased the importance of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) in shaping consumer behavior and brand perception (Ismagilova, et al., 2019). Unlike traditional advertising, which is often viewed as one-directional and company-controlled, digital word-of-mouth allows consumers to actively engage with and share opinions about products and services. Social media influencers play a central role in this process, as they act as intermediaries between brands and consumers, delivering messages in a way that appears more personal and trustworthy. As a result, influencer-driven content has become a powerful form of digital word-of-mouth that can strongly influence consumer attitudes and purchasing decisions.

Understanding the role of digital word-of-mouth is critical for modern brand strategy, as consumers increasingly rely on online recommendations and peer-like interactions when making purchase decisions. Research indicates that consumers tend to perceive influencer recommendations as more credible and persuasive than traditional advertising, particularly when influencers are viewed as authentic and relatable (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Additionally, electronic word-of-mouth has been shown to significantly impact brand awareness, trust, and purchase intentions, making it a key component of successful marketing strategies in the digital era (Ismagilova, et al., 2019).

For businesses, this shift highlights the need to move beyond traditional promotional methods and adopt strategies that prioritize authenticity, engagement, and trust-building. By understanding how influencer-driven word-of-mouth operates, marketers can design more effective campaigns that align with consumer expectations and behaviors. Therefore, examining digital word-of-mouth within the context of influencer marketing is essential for developing competitive and sustainable brand strategies in today's rapidly evolving marketplace.

2.0 PROBLEM STATEMENT

2.1 General Problem

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The rapid growth of influencer marketing has created a gap between its widespread adoption and the academic understanding of its long-term psychological effects on consumer trust (Freberg et al., 2010). While businesses increasingly rely on influencers as a primary marketing strategy, there is still a limited understanding of how sustained exposure to influencer content influences consumers' trust and decision-making processes over time.

2.2 Specific Problem

Despite high engagement rates in influencer marketing, it remains unclear how specific influencer traits, such as authenticity and professionalism, influence consumers' final purchase decisions, particularly among consumers who are more critical of sponsored content (Audrezet et al., 2018).

2.3 Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative research is to synthesize existing scholarly literature in marketing and consumer behavior to examine how influencer characteristics, especially credibility, authenticity, and professionalism, shape consumer trust and influence purchase decision-making. This research aims to identify the key factors that determine the effectiveness of influencer marketing and to provide insights into how these factors impact consumer perceptions and behavior.

3.0 THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Theoretical Framework

● Source Credibility Theory:

Source Credibility Theory suggests that the effectiveness of a message is influenced by the perceived credibility of its source, which is typically evaluated through expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness. Expertise refers to the perceived knowledge or competence of the source, trustworthiness reflects honesty and reliability, and attractiveness includes relatability and familiarity (Sokolova & Kefi, 2019). In the context of influencer marketing, these dimensions are essential in shaping consumer trust and attitudes toward endorsed products.

Influencers who are perceived as credible are more likely to persuade consumers and influence their purchasing decisions.

● Para-social Interaction (PSI) Theory:

Para-social Interaction (PSI) Theory explains the one-sided relationships that audiences develop with media figures, including social media influencers. Through repeated exposure and personal content sharing, influencers create a sense of intimacy and familiarity with their followers, making the relationship feel similar to a real-life connection (Horton & Wohl, 1956). This perceived relationship can increase trust and emotional attachment, which enhances the persuasive power of influencer recommendations. And that's how consumers may be more likely to rely on influencer opinions when evaluating products and making purchase decisions.

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3.2 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study illustrates the relationship between influencer content and consumer decision-making. Influencer-generated content serves as the initial input, which influences follower trust. This trust then shapes consumers' cognitive evaluation of the product or brand, ultimately leading to purchase decisions. This framework demonstrates how influencer characteristics and content contribute to consumer behavior through a step-by-step process of trust-building and evaluation. This relationship is supported by prior research, which shows that influencer credibility and interaction with audiences influence trust and subsequently impact purchase intentions (Sokolova & Kefi, 2019).

4.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Theme 1: Evolution of Social Media Marketing

The evolution of social media marketing has significantly transformed how brands communicate with consumers, shifting from traditional, company-controlled messaging to more interactive and consumer-centered approaches. With the rise of platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, influencer marketing has emerged as a dominant strategy, allowing brands to reach audiences through individuals who are perceived as more relatable and authentic. Unlike traditional celebrity endorsements, social media influencers build ongoing relationships with their followers through consistent content and engagement, which enhances their persuasive power. Research indicates that influencer marketing has become an essential component of digital marketing strategies, as consumers increasingly rely on peer-like recommendations rather than direct advertising when making purchase decisions (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). This shift reflects a broader change in consumer behavior, where trust and credibility play a more significant role in shaping brand perceptions and decision-making. This evolution is particularly important to this study, as it highlights the growing reliance on influencer-driven communication and explains why understanding factors such as trust, authenticity, and credibility is essential for analyzing consumer behavior in the digital marketplace.

Theme 2: Micro vs. Macro Influencers and the "Intimacy Gap"

The distinction between micro and macro influencers has become an important area of study within influencer marketing, particularly in understanding differences in consumer trust and engagement. Micro-influencers, who typically have smaller but more niche audiences, are often perceived as more authentic and relatable, leading to stronger emotional connections with their followers. However, macro influencers, despite having a larger reach, may be viewed as more commercialized and less personal. Research suggests that these differences create an intimacy gap, where smaller influencers are often more effective in building trust and influencing purchase decisions due to their perceived closeness with their audience (Audrezet et al., 2020).

This highlights the importance of authenticity and relatability as key drivers of influencer effectiveness in shaping consumer behavior. This theme is important to the study because it directly relates to how perceived similarity and authenticity influence consumer trust, which

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are central factors in understanding how influencer marketing affects decision-making in digital environments.

Theme 3: Sponsored Content and Consumer Skepticism

The increasing use of sponsored content and advertising disclosures, such as #ad, has raised important questions regarding consumer skepticism and trust in influencer marketing. As influencers are required to disclose paid partnerships, consumers become more aware of the persuasive intent behind the content, which can activate what is known as persuasion knowledge. This awareness may lead consumers to evaluate influencer messages more critically, potentially reducing their trust and purchase intentions. However, research suggests that the negative impact of disclosures is not always consistent, as factors such as influencer authenticity and credibility can moderate how consumers interpret sponsored content. When influencers maintain a consistent and genuine online persona, disclosures may not significantly harm their effectiveness, and in some cases, transparency can even enhance trust (Boerman et al., 2022). This highlights the complex relationship between transparency, trust, and persuasion in influencer marketing. This theme is important to the study because it directly examines how credibility and transparency influence consumer trust, which is essential for understanding how sponsored content affects decision-making and the overall effectiveness of influencer marketing.

Theme 4: Cross-Platform Differences (TikTok vs. Instagram)

The effectiveness of influencer marketing can vary significantly across social media platforms due to differences in content style, user behavior, and platform design. TikTok, for example, is characterized by highly engaging and trend-driven content that encourages rapid consumption and participation. This environment allows influencers to appear more spontaneous and authentic, which can strengthen emotional connections with audiences (Zeng & Kaye, 2022). While Instagram tends to emphasize more curated and visually polished content, this may enhance perceptions of professionalism but can sometimes reduce perceived authenticity. These differences influence how consumers interpret influencer messages and evaluate product recommendations. Research suggests that platform-specific features, such as algorithm-driven content exposure and interactive engagement tools, play a significant role in shaping user trust and purchase intentions (De Veirman et al., 2017). As a result, understanding cross-platform dynamics is important for marketers seeking to optimize influencer strategies and effectively reach diverse audiences. This theme is important to the study because it demonstrates how platform differences influence perceptions of authenticity, credibility, and trust, which are key factors in understanding how consumers respond to influencer content and make purchase decisions across digital environments.

Theme 5: Fear of Missing Out (FOMO)

Psychological factors such as Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) play a significant role in shaping consumer behavior within social media environments. FOMO refers to the anxiety or concern that others may be experiencing rewarding events without one's participation, which can drive individuals to remain constantly connected and engaged with online content. In the context of influencer marketing, FOMO can be triggered through limited-time promotions, trending products, and highly engaging content that creates a sense of urgency. This emotional response

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can lead consumers to make quicker purchase decisions to avoid feeling excluded or left behind. Research suggests that FOMO can significantly influence consumer attitudes and increase purchase intentions, particularly in highly interactive and socially driven digital environments (Przybylski et al., 2013). As a result, FOMO acts as a powerful psychological mechanism that connects social media engagement with consumer decision-making. This theme is important to the study because it highlights the psychological drivers behind consumer behavior, demonstrating how emotional responses such as urgency and social pressure influence trust, engagement, and purchase decisions in influencer marketing.

Theme 6: Influencer-Brand Fit

Another important factor influencing the effectiveness of influencer marketing is the alignment between the influencer and the brand, often referred to as influencer-brand fit. When there is a strong match between an influencer's content, values, and the brand they promote, consumers are more likely to perceive the endorsement as authentic and credible. In contrast, poor alignment can lead to skepticism and reduced trust, negatively impacting consumer attitudes and purchase intentions. Research suggests that congruence between influencers and brands plays a key role in shaping consumer perceptions and determining the success of influencer campaigns (Janssen et al., 2021). This highlights the importance of strategic partnerships in maintaining authenticity and influencing consumer decision-making. This theme is important to the study because it directly relates to how authenticity and credibility are formed in influencer marketing, highlighting how alignment between influencers and brands influences consumer trust and ultimately affects purchase decisions.

4.1 Research Questions

The main question this whole paper is trying to answer is how consumers perceive the authenticity of influencers and how this perception influences their decision-making process.

Analytical Guiding Questions

The following questions are used to guide the analysis in response to the central research question:

1. What types of content features in influencer posts contribute to building consumer trust?
2. How do negative comments or "cancel culture" impact the credibility of the associated brand?
3. How does influencer expertise affect consumer trust and purchase decisions?
4. How do different social media platforms influence the effectiveness of influencer content?
5. How does fear of missing out (FOMO) influence consumer responses to influencer marketing?

4.2 Research Methodology

This study uses a qualitative approach based on secondary data to explore how social media influencers affect consumer behavior. Qualitative research focuses on understanding meanings,

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perceptions, and behaviors, and is particularly suited for answering "how" and "why" questions rather than measuring numerical outcomes (Lim, 2024). In contrast, quantitative research involves the collection and analysis of numerical data to examine relationships between variables and test hypotheses (Slater & Hasson, 2024). Mixed methods research combines both qualitative and quantitative approaches within a single study to provide a more comprehensive understanding of a research problem (Wasti et al., 2022).

A qualitative approach was selected for this study because the research aims to interpret patterns related to trust, credibility, and consumer decision-making based on existing literature, rather than collect numerical data or conduct statistical analysis. A quantitative method was not appropriate, as this study does not involve measurable variables or statistical testing. Similarly, a mixed methods approach was not selected because the research does not integrate both qualitative and quantitative data. Instead, this study adopts a qualitative meta-synthesis approach, which involves systematically reviewing and integrating findings from multiple qualitative studies to generate deeper insights into a research topic (Thorne, 2022).

4.3 Research Objectives

The following research objectives are established to guide the study and ensure alignment with the central research question and supporting sub-questions:

1. Understand how consumers interpret and respond to the authenticity of social media influencers.
2. Identify which influencer characteristics are most effective in building trust with audiences.
3. Examine how different types of content, such as sponsored versus organic posts, shape perceptions of credibility.
4. Explore how perceived similarity between influencers and their followers influences trust and engagement.
5. Analyze how these factors ultimately affect consumer purchase decisions.

4.4 Ethical Considerations

This study ensures proper attribution of all original authors and sources in accordance with academic integrity standards. Although the research relies on secondary data, any reference to public social media content is handled carefully to maintain anonymity and avoid identifying individuals. Also, efforts are made to minimize researcher bias during thematic analysis by maintaining consistency and objectivity when interpreting findings.

5.0 FINDINGS

● Q1: What types of content features in influencer posts contribute to building consumer trust?

The findings indicate that specific content features such as authenticity, transparency, and relatability play a key role in building consumer trust. Influencers who share personal experiences, maintain consistency in their messaging, and avoid overly promotional language are more likely to be seen as genuine. Visual cues such as unfiltered content, behind-the-scenes

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moments, and interactive engagement also contribute to a sense of authenticity. As a result, these content features strengthen trust and increase the likelihood that consumers will rely on influencer recommendations.

● Q2: How do negative comments or "cancel culture" impact the credibility of the associated brand?

According to research on electronic word-of-mouth, particularly Ismagilova et al. (2019), negative online feedback can significantly influence consumer perceptions of both influencers and the brands they promote. When influencers are exposed to criticism, negative comments, or cancel culture, consumers often reassess the credibility and authenticity of their content. This negative sentiment can quickly spread across digital platforms, amplifying its impact and leading to reduced trust in both the influencer and the associated brand. In many cases, consumers may question the brand's decision to collaborate with the influencer, which can damage brand reputation and decrease purchase intentions. However, the extent of this impact can vary depending on how the situation is handled. Influencers who respond transparently and take responsibility may be able to partially restore trust. Overall, negative online discourse plays a powerful role in shaping credibility and can significantly weaken the effectiveness of influencer marketing efforts.

● Q3: How does influencer expertise affect consumer trust and purchase decisions?

The analysis shows that influencer expertise plays a crucial role in shaping consumer trust and purchase decisions. Influencers who demonstrate strong knowledge, experience, or specialization within a specific niche are more likely to be perceived as credible and reliable. This perceived expertise reassures consumers about the quality of the products being promoted, making them more likely to follow recommendations. As a result, niche influencers often have a stronger influence on purchasing behavior compared to influencers with large followings but limited expertise.

● Q4: How do different social media platforms influence the effectiveness of influencer content?

The findings reveal that the effectiveness of influencer content varies across social media platforms due to differences in content style and user behavior. According to Zeng and Kaye (2022), platforms such as TikTok emphasize short-form, engaging, and spontaneous content, which enhances perceived authenticity and relatability. But De Veirman et al. (2017) show that Instagram often features more curated and polished content, which may increase perceptions of professionalism but can sometimes reduce authenticity. These platform differences influence how consumers evaluate credibility and ultimately impact their purchase decisions.

● Q5: How does fear of missing out (FOMO) influence consumer responses to influencer marketing?

According to Przybylski et al. (2013), the fear of missing out (FOMO) plays a significant role in driving consumer responses to influencer marketing. Influencers often create a sense of urgency through limited-time promotions, trending products, or exclusive recommendations, which encourages consumers to act quickly. This emotional pressure can lead to impulsive

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purchasing behavior and increased engagement with influencer content. As a result, FOMO acts as a powerful psychological trigger that converts attention into action in the digital marketplace.

6.0 DISCUSSION

The findings of this study can be effectively interpreted through the lens of Source Credibility Theory, which emphasizes the importance of trustworthiness and attractiveness in shaping the persuasiveness of a message. The results support this framework, as influencer authenticity, perceived similarity, and expertise were consistently shown to influence consumer trust and purchase decisions. Influencers who demonstrate knowledge within a specific niche and maintain transparent, relatable content are more likely to be perceived as credible, which strengthens their ability to influence consumer behavior. This aligns with the theoretical assumption that credible sources are more persuasive and effective in shaping attitudes and decision-making.

Also, the findings highlight how influencer marketing differs from traditional marketing approaches used in previous eras. Unlike traditional celebrity endorsements, which relied heavily on status and broad appeal, modern influencer marketing emphasizes authenticity and ongoing interaction with audiences. Social media platforms have transformed marketing into a more interactive and participatory process, where consumers actively engage with content and form perceived relationships with influencers. This shift reflects a movement from one-way communication to a more dynamic form of digital word-of-mouth, where trust is built through perceived similarity and consistent engagement rather than solely through fame or recognition.

Overall, these findings reinforce the idea that consumers in the digital era value transparency and relatability, and are more likely to respond to influencers who align with their personal preferences and experiences. As a result, businesses must move beyond traditional marketing strategies and adopt approaches that prioritize trust-building and meaningful engagement to remain effective in today's digital marketplace.

7.0 CONCLUSION

This study highlights that trust has become the central currency in the digital marketplace, shaping how consumers engage with influencer content and make purchasing decisions. The findings demonstrate that factors such as authenticity, perceived similarity, and expertise play a more significant role than follower count in influencing consumer behavior. As influencer marketing continues to evolve, it is no longer enough for brands to prioritize reach alone.

Instead, brands must focus on alignment, partnering with influencers whose values, content, and audience closely match their own. This strategic alignment enhances credibility, strengthens consumer trust, and ultimately leads to more effective marketing outcomes. In an increasingly competitive and transparent digital environment, the success of influencer marketing depends on the ability to build genuine connections rather than simply maximize exposure.

7.1 Implications for Social Change

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The findings of this research suggest that influencer marketing has the potential to promote greater consumer awareness and critical thinking in digital environments. As consumers become more exposed to sponsored content and influencer promotions, there is an increasing need for digital literacy, enabling individuals to better recognize persuasive intent and evaluate the credibility of online information. This shift can empower consumers to make more informed decisions rather than relying solely on influencer recommendations.

In addition, the growing emphasis on authenticity and transparency in influencer marketing encourages brands and influencers to adopt more ethical communication practices. By prioritizing honesty, clear disclosure, and meaningful engagement, marketers can contribute to more responsible advertising standards. Over time, this may lead to a more transparent digital marketplace where trust is built through genuine interactions rather than deceptive or overly promotional strategies.

7.2 Study Parameters

7.2.1 Assumptions

This study is based on several key assumptions that guide the interpretation of the findings. First, it is assumed that the secondary sources used throughout the research, including peer-reviewed academic articles and industry reports, are credible, reliable, and provide accurate representations of consumer behavior in digital environments. This assumption is important, as the validity of the study depends on the quality and trustworthiness of existing literature. Also, it is assumed that the concepts explored in prior research, such as trust, credibility, authenticity, and consumer decision-making, are consistently defined and applicable across different studies. The research also assumes that patterns identified in previous studies reflect current trends in influencer marketing, allowing for meaningful synthesis and interpretation of findings. These assumptions enable the study to conclude without the need for primary data collection.

7.3 Limitations

This study is subject to some limitations that may affect the scope and depth of the findings. The primary limitation is the reliance on secondary data, which means there is no direct interaction with consumers. As a result, the study is unable to capture real-time opinions, evolving behaviors, or individual-level experiences. Additionally, the research depends on the availability, quality, and scope of existing literature, which may vary across sources in terms of methodology, context, and focus. Some studies may emphasize specific platforms, demographics, or industries, which can limit the generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, the absence of primary data collection methods, such as surveys or interviews, restricts the ability to explore more nuanced or context-specific insights. These limitations highlight that the findings are interpretive in nature and are constrained by the existing body of research.

7.4 Delimitations

The scope of this study is intentionally narrowed to ensure a focused and relevant analysis of influencer marketing and consumer behavior. Specifically, the research is limited to business-to-consumer (B2C) social media marketing, with a primary emphasis on influencer marketing

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as a key digital strategy. The study also focuses on recent developments in the field by primarily incorporating sources published within the past five years, ensuring that the findings reflect current trends and practices in digital marketing. In addition, the research concentrates on specific constructs, including trust, credibility, authenticity, perceived similarity, and consumer decision-making, rather than examining all aspects of social media usage. The study does not explore broader topics such as political communication, organizational internal communication, or non-marketing uses of social media. These delimitations allow for a more targeted analysis and ensure that the research remains aligned with its central objectives.

7.5 Future Research

Future research should explore the growing role of AI-generated influencers and their impact on consumer trust and decision-making. As virtual influencers become more common in digital marketing, it is important to understand how consumers perceive their authenticity, credibility, and transparency compared to human influencers. Additionally, further studies could examine whether AI-generated content enhances or reduces trust, and how it influences consumer behavior across different platforms and industries. This area presents an important opportunity to better understand the evolving relationship between technology, marketing, and consumer perception.

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