

INFLUENCER MARKETING AND CONSUMER PURCHASE INTENTIONS: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK INTEGRATING SOURCE CREDIBILITY, PARA SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS, AND SOCIAL INFLUENCE THEORY

Arifa Singh

Phd, Marketing, GNDU (USFS)

ABSTRACT

Influencer marketing has become a dominant paradigm in modern digital advertising as a result of social media's exponential growth, which has drastically changed how brands interact with consumers. In order to explain how influencer marketing affects consumers' purchase intentions, this paper develops a thorough theoretical framework. We build an integrative model based on Source Credibility Theory (Hovland et al., 1953), Parasocial Interaction Theory (Horton & Wohl, 1956), Social Influence Theory (Kelman, 1958), and the Technology Acceptance Model (Davis, 1989) that identifies perceived value congruence, trustworthiness, expertise, attractiveness, para-social relationship quality, and content authenticity as the main antecedents of purchase intentions. This study also looks at the moderating effects of platform type, consumer susceptibility to interpersonal influence, and influencer tier (nano, micro, macro, and mega). By presenting influencer marketing as a socially embedded persuasion system that functions through affective, cognitive, and conative pathways rather than just an advertising mechanism, the framework advances the theoretical discourse. Theoretical claims are made, and the implications for research and management are examined.

Keywords: Influencer Marketing, Purchase Intentions, Source Credibility, Parasocial Interaction, Social Influence, Authenticity, Consumer Behaviour

1. INTRODUCTION

Traditional advertising has been upended by the digital revolution, which has transferred power from media under brand control to ecosystems of user-generated content. Influencer marketing, which involves brands hiring people with well-established social media followings to market goods, services, or concepts to their audiences, is at the center of this disruption (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Influencer marketing, in contrast to traditional celebrity endorsement, benefits from the perceived intimacy, relatability, and authenticity that social media influencers foster with their followers (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017).

According to Statista (2024), the global influencer marketing market was estimated to be worth over USD 21 billion in 2023 and is expected to grow significantly in the years to come. The theoretical foundations of influencer marketing are still disjointed, despite its commercial importance. Without creating a cohesive framework that captures the complex dynamics through which influencer content influences consumer decision-making, existing literature frequently borrows from advertising, psychology, and communication theories in isolation. By putting forth an integrative theoretical model of the influence of influencer marketing on consumer purchase intentions, this paper fills this gap. We contend that influencer marketing functions as a relational construct, a social norm-setting mechanism, and a persuasive communication process all at once. We provide a theoretically sound, multifaceted framework that is both thorough and economical by combining Source Credibility Theory, Parasocial Interaction Theory, Social Influence Theory, and the Technology Acceptance

Model. This is how the rest of the paper is organized. A summary of the fundamental theoretical underpinnings is given in Section 2. The theoretical claims and conceptual framework are presented in Section 3. Moderating variables are covered in Section 4. Contextual factors and boundary conditions are examined in Section 5. The implications for theory and practice are covered in Section 6. Limitations and future research directions are discussed in Section 7's conclusion.

2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

2.1 Source Credibility Theory

According to Source Credibility Theory, which was first developed by Hovland, Janis, and Kelley in 1953, a communicator's persuasiveness depends on how credible the audience believes the source to be. The three main dimensions of credibility are trustworthiness (the source's perceived honesty and integrity), expertise (the source's perceived level of knowledge), and attractiveness (the source's perceived physical and social appeal) (Ohanian, 1990). Credibility is a crucial factor in determining whether followers are convinced to act on recommendations in the context of influencer marketing. Research by Schouten, Janssen, and Verspaget (2020) and Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) confirms that followers who think influencers are trustworthy are much more likely to express purchase intentions and form favorable opinions about suggested products. Because it mediates the relationship between expertise and behavioral outcomes, trustworthiness in particular has become the most reliable predictor. Furthermore, perceived authenticity adds a special dimension to credibility in the digital context. Influencers, in contrast to traditional celebrities, frequently build credibility by sharing personal experiences, behind-the-scenes material, and seeming candor—all of which followers perceive as signs of sincerity (Audrezet, de Kerviler, & Moulard, 2020). A conceptual expansion of traditional source credibility into the social media sphere is represented by this "authenticity premium."

2.2 Para social Interaction Theory

The psychological bond that media audiences form with media personalities—a one-sided connection where the audience feels familiar, emotionally connected, and influenced by the media figure despite no direct mutual interaction—is described by Parasocial Interaction Theory (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Originally applied to TV celebrities, this theory is now widely used in social media influencer research. Platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok offer interactive features such as comments, live streams, direct messages, and Q&A sessions that create an illusion of real interaction, strengthening parasocial bonds beyond traditional media capabilities (Labrecque, 2014). Researchers distinguish this enduring bond as a 'parasocial relationship' (PSR), different from momentary 'parasocial interaction' (PSI). A strong PSR with an influencer leads followers to accept recommendations with less skepticism, similar to the trust given to personal acquaintances (Colliander & Dahlén, 2011). The PSR framework also explains follower loyalty and the communal nature of influencer audiences. Followers with high PSR are more engaged, share recommendations, participate in word-of-mouth, and crucially, act on consumption advice, directly linking parasocial engagement to purchase intentions (Yuan & Lou, 2020).

2.3 Social Influence Theory

According to Kelman's (1958) Social Influence Theory, attitude and behavior change occur through three processes: compliance (conforming to social expectations to gain rewards or avoid punishment), identification (adopting attitudes to maintain valued relationships), and internalization (absorbing beliefs that align with one's own values). These processes

correspond directly to how influencer marketing works. Compliance is seen when consumers buy products mainly to use influencer-exclusive discounts or limited-time offers—a response to social pressure. Identification explains why followers of lifestyle influencers mimic consumption habits to align with the influencer’s identity and perceived lifestyle. Internalization, the deepest and most lasting influence, happens when followers truly believe in the value of a recommended product and integrate this belief into their self-identity (Kelman, 1958; Lee & Watkins, 2016). Additionally, social influence in influencer marketing is shaped by normative mechanisms. Visible engagement metrics—likes, views, comments—act as social proof, encouraging followers to see high engagement as a sign of product desirability (Huang & Su, 2018). This social proof magnifies individual influencer recommendations into perceived social norms.

2.4 Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and Information Adoption Model (IAM)

The Technology Acceptance Model (Davis, 1989) identifies perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use as key factors driving technology adoption. Although originally designed for information systems, TAM has been adapted to explain consumer acceptance of digital content and e-commerce platforms (Gefen, Karahanna, & Straub, 2003). In influencer marketing, perceived usefulness relates to the informational and entertainment value followers gain from content, while ease of use refers to the seamless experience of clicking links and using promo codes. Supporting TAM, the Information Adoption Model (Sussman & Siegal, 2003) draws on the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) to explain how people accept information online. Argument quality and source credibility act as central and peripheral cues, influencing whether followers engage in deep, analytical processing or rely on surface cues. This distinction matters because highly involved consumers scrutinize influencer content, whereas less involved ones depend on cues like attractiveness and social proof.

3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND THEORETICAL PROPOSITIONS

Building on the previous theoretical integration, we present a multi-pathway model explaining how influencer marketing impacts consumer purchase intentions. The model highlights five key constructs—Source Credibility, Parasocial Relationship Quality, Content Value Perception, Authenticity, and Social Norm Influence—as the main factors driving purchase intentions, with these effects mediated by consumers' attitudes toward both the influencer and the brand.

3.1 Source Credibility and Purchase Intentions

Proposition 1: Each of the three dimensions of source credibility—trustworthiness (P1a), expertise (P1b), and attractiveness (P1c)—is positively and significantly linked to consumer purchase intentions, with trustworthiness having the most powerful influence. The basis for P1a lies in risk reduction theory: consumers who view an influencer as honest and impartial are less likely to question recommendations and more likely to accept them directly (Erdem & Swait, 2004). Expertise (P1b) triggers a systematic processing route, where followers see the influencer as knowledgeable, giving their recommendations greater credibility. Attractiveness (P1c) works through the halo effect and aspirational identification, although its direct effect on purchase intentions is often influenced by the product category (Ohanian, 1990).

3.2 Parasocial Relationship Quality and Purchase Intentions

Proposition 2: Parasocial relationship quality (PRQ) positively influences consumer purchase intentions, with this effect mediated by the attitude toward the influencer (P2a) and

moderated by the follower's level of involvement (P2b). PRQ represents the perceived closeness, warmth, and stability of the follower's bond with the influencer. A strong PRQ decreases psychological distance, causing followers to value the influencer's recommendations similarly to those from friends and family—aligning with the 'strength of weak ties' concept (Granovetter, 1973) adapted for social media. The follower's attitude toward the influencer, encompassing emotional and evaluative responses, serves as the key mediator linking PRQ to purchase intentions.

3.3 Content Value Perception

Proposition 3: Perceived content value—which includes informational value (P3a), entertainment value (P3b), and hedonic value (P3c)—positively impacts consumer purchase intentions, with these effects fully mediated by the attitude toward the sponsored content. Content value is a multi-faceted concept reflecting the benefits followers gain from influencer content. Informational value relates to practical advice and product knowledge; entertainment value to the enjoyment derived; and hedonic value to the aesthetic pleasure from high-quality production. When followers recognize high value in influencer content, they form positive attitudes toward the brand message, reducing resistance and increasing purchase intentions (Ducoffe, 1996; Lou & Yuan, 2019).

3.4 Authenticity as a Mediator and Amplifier

Proposition 4: Perceived influencer authenticity mediates the relationship between source credibility and purchase intentions (P4a) and positively moderates the effect of parasocial relationship quality on purchase intentions (P4b), meaning that the link between PRQ and purchase intentions is stronger when perceived authenticity is high. Authenticity here refers to followers' belief that the influencer's endorsements, values, and content are sincere rather than commercially fabricated (Audrezet et al., 2020). As a mediator, authenticity transforms credibility signals into a trust heuristic used by consumers during purchase decisions. As a moderator of PRQ, authenticity enhances the warmth of parasocial bonds, making followers more receptive to recommendations from influencers they see as genuine 'parasocial friends.'

3.5 Social Norm Influence

Proposition 5: Influencer-driven social norm perceptions—including descriptive norms (what most followers do; P5a) and injunctive norms (what is socially approved; P5b)—positively influence purchase intentions, with this effect moderated by consumer susceptibility to interpersonal influence (CSII). When influencers showcase products as widely used (descriptive norm) or aligned with a desirable lifestyle identity (injunctive norm), they trigger normative social influence mechanisms (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). Engagement metrics act as measurable descriptive norms, while the influencer's personal endorsement signals injunctive norms. CSII strengthens these effects, with highly susceptible consumers showing the greatest responsiveness to normative pressures, making them the most influenced segment of the influencer's audience.

4. MODERATING VARIABLES

4.1 Influencer Tier

A key theoretical moderator in influencer marketing is the influencer tier, typically categorized as nano (1K–10K followers), micro (10K–100K), macro (100K–1M), and mega/celebrity (1M+). Research indicates that nano and micro influencers tend to have higher perceived authenticity and stronger parasocial relationships per follower, balancing their smaller reach with deeper engagement (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). In contrast,

mega influencers benefit from aspirational appeal and widespread social norm influence but may be perceived as more commercially driven.

Proposition 6: The positive impact of source credibility on purchase intentions is stronger for micro and nano influencers compared to mega influencers (P6a), whereas the positive impact of social norm influence on purchase intentions is stronger for mega influencers (P6b).

4.2 Platform Type

Platform features influence the type and strength of interactions between influencers and followers. Visual-focused platforms like Instagram and Pinterest highlight attractiveness and aspirational lifestyle elements, enhancing the role of attractiveness in source credibility. Video-centered platforms such as YouTube and TikTok facilitate deeper parasocial interactions through longer, story-driven content, boosting the impact of parasocial relationship quality. Audio platforms like podcasts emphasize expertise and trustworthiness through detailed discussions.

Proposition 7: Platform type moderates which credibility dimensions are most influential, with attractiveness being a stronger predictor of purchase intentions on image-based platforms, while expertise and trustworthiness have greater influence on video and audio platforms.

4.3 Disclosure of Sponsored Content

Regulatory agencies worldwide, such as the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) in the U.S. and the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) in the U.K., mandate that influencers disclose paid partnerships. Research shows mixed effects of such disclosures. While disclosures can lower perceived authenticity and raise persuasion awareness, they may also increase trustworthiness among consumers with strong ethical values (Evans, Phua, Lim, & Jun, 2017).

Proposition 8: Disclosure of sponsored content negatively moderates the link between perceived authenticity and purchase intentions (P8a), but positively moderates the link between trustworthiness and purchase intentions (P8b), with overall outcomes depending on the consumer's ethical orientation.

5. BOUNDARY CONDITIONS AND CONTEXTUAL FACTORS

5.1 Product Category Fit

The alignment between an influencer's perceived identity and the product category they endorse—known as influencer-product fit—is a key boundary condition. According to the match-up hypothesis theory (Kamins, 1990), persuasion is most effective when there is a logical and credible match between the influencer and the product. For example, lifestyle influencers endorsing wellness products demonstrate a better fit than when promoting automotive items, resulting in stronger impacts on purchase intentions.

5.2 Consumer Cultural Context

Cultural values substantially moderate the mechanisms of influencer marketing. In collectivist cultures (Hofstede, 1980), normative social influence exerts a stronger effect on purchase intentions, as consumers place greater weight on social approval and group-consistent behaviour. Individualist cultures may respond more strongly to expertise and information utility cues. Cross-cultural research in influencer marketing remains nascent, representing a significant theoretical and empirical frontier.

5.3 Follower Identity and Self-Congruity

Self-congruity theory (Sirgy, 1982) posits that consumers prefer brands whose images align with their self-concept. Extended to influencer marketing, followers are more likely to act on recommendations from influencers whose perceived identity aligns with their own actual or ideal self-concept. This self-congruity mechanism reinforces the internalisation pathway of Kelman's (1958) Social Influence Theory and strengthens the purchase intention effect beyond the credibility and PSR pathways.

6. THEORETICAL AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

6.1 Theoretical Implications

This framework contributes to theoretical literature in several ways. First, it integrates four previously separate theories—Source Credibility Theory, Parasocial Interaction Theory, Social Influence Theory, and TAM/IAM—into a unified, multi-pathway model. By viewing these theories as complementary rather than competing, the framework provides broader explanatory power than approaches relying on a single theory.

Second, the paper conceptualizes authenticity as both a mediator and a moderator, a dual role not previously explored systematically. This frames authenticity as a meta-variable that influences the effectiveness of all other influencer marketing mechanisms.

Third, by incorporating normative social influence, the framework connects individual psychological processes with broader social dynamics, recognizing influencer marketing as a socially embedded phenomenon rather than just a two-way communication.

6.2 Managerial Implications

For brand managers, the framework emphasizes that influencer selection should focus not just on follower numbers but on how well credibility dimensions align with product category needs. Campaigns targeting high-involvement products requiring deep persuasion should prioritize expertise and trustworthiness, favoring micro-influencers with specialized authority. In contrast, campaigns aiming for widespread social norm influence may benefit from the reach of macro-influencers.

Content strategies should aim to enhance perceived authenticity by giving influencers creative freedom, ensuring alignment between brand and influencer values, and fostering long-term partnerships that strengthen parasocial bonds. One-off, transactional collaborations might boost short-term visibility but are less likely to generate lasting purchase intentions compared to sustained relationships.

Platform choice should align with the relevant credibility dimension for the campaign. Instagram and Pinterest suit attractiveness-focused campaigns in fashion, beauty, and aspirational lifestyle sectors, while YouTube and long-form TikTok content better support expertise-driven categories such as technology, finance, and health.

7. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This paper presents a theoretical framework rather than an empirically tested model, which constitutes its primary limitation. Future research should employ structural equation modelling (SEM) to empirically test the proposed relationships and propositions across multiple platforms, product categories, and cultural contexts. Experimental designs with pre-registered hypotheses would allow causal inference, addressing the inherent limitations of cross-sectional survey methods common in the influencer marketing literature.

Additionally, the framework does not fully account for the role of algorithm-mediated content distribution, which may systematically affect the type of content followers are

exposed to and, by extension, the PSR they develop. Future theoretical development should incorporate platform algorithm dynamics as an exogenous variable shaping the conditions of influencer-follower interaction.

The moderating role of emerging technologies—particularly AI-generated influencers and virtual avatars—also presents a compelling research frontier. As virtual influencers such as Lil Miquela and Imma accumulate millions of followers, questions arise about whether source credibility and parasocial relationship frameworks apply to non-human entities, and under what conditions consumers extend trust and purchase intention responses to artificial agents.

Finally, longitudinal research is needed to understand how influencer-follower relationships evolve over time, how repeated exposure to influencer content affects attitude persistence and purchase behaviour, and whether influencer marketing effects decay, strengthen, or shift qualitatively across the consumer lifecycle.

8. CONCLUSION

Influencer marketing represents one of the most consequential developments in contemporary consumer culture and digital advertising. Yet its theoretical foundations have remained dispersed across disciplines and paradigms. This paper has proposed an integrative theoretical framework that synthesises Source Credibility Theory, Parasocial Interaction Theory, Social Influence Theory, and the Technology Acceptance Model to produce a coherent, multi-pathway account of how influencer marketing shapes consumer purchase intentions.

The framework positions source credibility, parasocial relationship quality, content value perception, perceived authenticity, and social norm influence as the primary drivers of purchase intentions, operating through attitudinal mediators. Influencer tier, platform type, sponsored content disclosure, product-influencer fit, and consumer cultural context are identified as critical moderators. Authenticity is uniquely theorised as both a mediator and a moderator, occupying a pivotal regulatory role in the influencer marketing persuasion system.

As influencer marketing continues to evolve—with the emergence of AI influencers, the proliferation of short-form video, and the intensification of regulatory scrutiny—theoretical frameworks that capture both its psychological depth and its social embeddedness will be indispensable. The present framework is offered as a foundation for such theoretical development, and as an invitation for empirical inquiry into one of the defining commercial phenomena of the digital age.

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