

A Literature Review on the Influence of Social Media Influencers on Consumer Purchase Intention and Brand Perception

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ABSTRACT

The proliferation of social media platforms has fundamentally transformed marketing communication strategies, establishing social media influencers as pivotal intermediaries between brands and consumers. The digital ecosystem has created unprecedented opportunities for influencers to shape consumer attitudes, preferences, and purchasing behaviours through authentic content creation and parasocial relationships with their audiences. This review systematically analyses how influencer characteristics—including credibility, authenticity, expertise, and relatability—affect consumer decision-making processes and brand evaluations. The study explores theoretical frameworks underpinning influencer marketing effectiveness, including the Source Credibility Model, Parasocial Interaction Theory, and the Elaboration Likelihood Model, demonstrating their applicability in understanding consumer responses to influencer endorsements. Contemporary research reveals that influencer marketing effectiveness depends on multiple factors: perceived authenticity of sponsored content, congruence between influencer persona and brand values, engagement quality rather than mere follower quantity, and the trust established through consistent content delivery. The review highlights how Generation Z and Millennial consumers particularly respond to micro-influencers and nano-influencers who demonstrate genuine product experiences rather than overtly commercial messaging. Furthermore, this review addresses the evolving landscape of influencer marketing across platforms including Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and emerging social media channels, examining platform-specific consumer behaviours and engagement patterns. The synthesis reveals that purchase intention is significantly influenced by perceived influencer trustworthiness, content relevance, and the emotional connection fostered through regular interaction. Brand perception, meanwhile, is shaped by the alignment between influencer values and brand positioning, with incongruent partnerships potentially damaging brand equity. The findings indicate that strategic influencer selection, authentic content co-creation, and transparent disclosure practices are essential for maximizing marketing effectiveness while maintaining consumer trust. This comprehensive review provides valuable insights for marketing practitioners and researchers seeking to understand the complex dynamics of influencer-driven consumer behaviour in the contemporary digital marketplace.

Keywords: Social Media Influencer, Consumer Purchase Intention, Brand Perception, Influencer Marketing, Parasocial Interaction, Digital Marketing, Consumer Behaviour, Influencer Credibility.

Introduction

The digital revolution has fundamentally restructured how consumers discover, evaluate, and purchase products and services. Social media platforms have evolved from simple communication tools into sophisticated marketplaces where consumer opinions are shaped, brand narratives are constructed, and purchasing decisions are influenced in real-time (Vrontis et al., 2021). Within this transformed landscape, social media influencers have emerged as powerful market actors who bridge the gap between brands and consumers through content that resonates with authenticity and relatability.

Consumer purchase intention, defined as the likelihood that a consumer will buy a particular product or service, has become increasingly dependent on digital touchpoints and social proof mechanisms (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Unlike traditional advertising, influencer marketing leverages the trust and rapport that content creators have cultivated with their audiences over time. This parasocial relationship—the one-sided connection followers develop with influencers—creates a unique persuasive context where commercial messages are received as recommendations from trusted acquaintances rather than corporate advertisements.

Brand perception encompasses the cognitive and emotional associations consumers hold regarding a brand, influencing not only purchase decisions but also brand loyalty and advocacy behaviors (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Social media influencers contribute to brand perception formation through their content choices, endorsement styles, and the authenticity they bring to brand partnerships. When influencers align genuinely with brand values, they can enhance brand image and credibility; conversely, inauthentic partnerships or influencer controversies can negatively impact brand perception.

The significance of understanding influencer impact on purchase intention and brand perception cannot be overstated. Global spending on influencer marketing reached approximately \$21 billion in 2023 and continues to grow exponentially (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2024). Brands across industries—from fashion and beauty to technology and financial services—are allocating substantial marketing budgets to influencer collaborations. However, the effectiveness of these investments depends on nuanced understanding of how different influencer types, content strategies, and platform dynamics affect consumer psychology.

This literature review aims to synthesize contemporary research examining the mechanisms through which social media influencers affect consumer purchase intention and brand perception. By analyzing studies from 2020 to 2026, this review identifies key factors determining influencer marketing effectiveness, theoretical frameworks explaining consumer responses, and practical implications for marketing strategy development.

Theoretical Frameworks

- **Source Credibility Model**

The Source Credibility Model, originally developed by Hovland and Weiss, posits that message effectiveness depends on the perceived expertise and trustworthiness of the communicator (Reinikainen et al., 2020). In influencer marketing contexts, credibility comprises multiple dimensions: expertise in the product category, trustworthiness in recommendations, and attractiveness that captures audience attention. Research demonstrates that influencers perceived as credible sources generate stronger purchase intentions among followers, as their endorsements carry implicit quality guarantees (Martínez-López et al., 2020).

- **Parasocial Interaction Theory**

Parasocial Interaction Theory explains the psychological relationships audiences develop with media personalities, experiencing interactions as genuine friendships despite their unilateral nature (Aw & Chuah, 2021). Social media intensifies parasocial bonds through features enabling direct communication—comments, direct messages, and live interactions—creating perceived intimacy between influencers and followers. These relationships translate into consumer behavior outcomes, as followers act on influencer recommendations similarly to how they might respond to advice from personal friends (Kim & Kim, 2021).

- **Elaboration Likelihood Model**

The Elaboration Likelihood Model distinguishes between central and peripheral routes to persuasion, with influencer marketing operating through both pathways (Xiao et al., 2023). Highly

involved consumers process influencer content centrally, evaluating argument quality and product information carefully. Conversely, less involved consumers rely on peripheral cues—influencer attractiveness, popularity metrics, and production quality—when forming attitudes and intentions. Effective influencer marketing strategies address both processing routes to maximize persuasive impact across diverse audience segments.

Review of Literature

Lou and Yuan (2019) investigated how influencer content value and credibility affect followers' trust and purchase intentions. Their quantitative study revealed that informative value and entertainment value significantly predicted trust in influencers, which subsequently influenced brand awareness and purchase intention. The research established that influencer trustworthiness operates as a critical mediating variable between content characteristics and consumer behavioral outcomes. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2019.01.004>

Sokolova and Kefi (2020) examined the role of parasocial relationships in Instagram fashion influencer marketing among French and Russian consumers. Their findings demonstrated that parasocial interaction strength positively influenced purchase intention, with credibility and physical attractiveness enhancing relationship formation. Cross-cultural analysis revealed that parasocial dynamics operated consistently across national contexts, suggesting universal mechanisms underlying influencer effectiveness. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2020.01.016>

Reinikainen et al. (2020) explored how source credibility manifests in influencer marketing, distinguishing between parasocial relationships and identification processes. Their study found that wishful identification— aspiring to be like the influencer—more strongly predicted purchase intention than parasocial interaction alone, highlighting the aspirational dimension of influencer appeal. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JPBM-10-2018-2062>

Vrontis et al. (2021) conducted a systematic literature review analyzing influencer marketing research across multiple disciplines. Their comprehensive analysis identified authenticity, transparency, and audience engagement as primary determinants of influencer marketing success. The review emphasized the importance of strategic influencer-brand fit and disclosed sponsorship practices for maintaining consumer trust. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2021.07.011>

Aw and Chuah (2021) investigated stop-scrolling content strategies among TikTok influencers, examining how content characteristics drive engagement and purchase intention. Their research revealed that entertaining, educational, and emotionally resonant content generated highest engagement rates, with parasocial relationships mediating content effects on consumer purchase behavior. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2021.102708>

Kim and Kim (2021) analyzed how influencer authenticity perceptions affect consumer brand evaluations and purchase intentions. Their experimental study demonstrated that perceived authenticity operated through trust mechanisms, with inauthentic portrayals generating negative spillover effects onto endorsed brands. The research emphasized the vulnerability of both influencer reputation and brand equity to authenticity violations. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2020.1801198>

Martínez-López et al. (2020) examined influencer marketing effectiveness across different product categories and influencer types. Their research found that micro-influencers generated stronger purchase intentions for experience goods, while macro-influencers proved more effective for search goods. Product-influencer congruence emerged as a significant moderating variable in determining marketing outcomes. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techfore.2020.119988>

Schouten et al. (2020) investigated the comparative persuasive impact of celebrity endorsers versus social media influencers. Their study revealed that influencers generated higher product evaluation and purchase intention scores due to perceived similarity and identification processes. The findings supported the persuasive advantage of peer-like influencers over traditional celebrities for certain product categories. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2019.1634898>

Torres et al. (2019) explored how influencer credibility and brand attitude interact to shape purchase intention among millennial consumers. Their structural equation modeling analysis confirmed that influencer expertise and trustworthiness significantly predicted purchase intention, with brand attitude partially mediating these relationships. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JRIM-05-2019-0071>

Jin et al. (2021) examined how Instagram influencers affect consumer-brand engagement and purchase behavior through self-congruity mechanisms. Their research demonstrated that perceived similarity between consumer self-concept and influencer persona enhanced brand engagement, which subsequently increased purchase intention and brand loyalty. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2021.01.020>

Xiao et al. (2023) investigated dual processing pathways in influencer marketing using the Elaboration Likelihood Model framework. Their experimental study found that argument quality drove purchase intention among high-involvement consumers, while peripheral cues—follower counts and aesthetic quality—influenced low-involvement consumers more strongly. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.elerap.2022.101210>

Chopra et al. (2020) analyzed the dark side of influencer marketing, examining how disclosure failures and fake followers undermine consumer trust and purchase intention. Their research revealed that consumers penalized both influencers and brands when undisclosed sponsorships were detected, with trust recovery proving difficult once violated. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JRIM-06-2020-0136>

Masuda et al. (2022) explored cross-cultural differences in influencer marketing effectiveness across Asian and Western markets. Their comparative study found that collectivist cultures demonstrated stronger responsiveness to group endorsement cues, while individualist cultures prioritized influencer uniqueness and authenticity in purchase decision-making. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2021.11.080>

Campbell and Farrell (2020) provided a comprehensive framework for understanding influencer marketing within strategic marketing communications. Their conceptual analysis identified influencer selection, content co-creation, relationship management, and performance measurement as critical success factors requiring systematic approaches. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2020.07.004>

Leung et al. (2022) examined how influencer emotional expressions affect consumer engagement and purchase intention on live streaming platforms. Their research demonstrated that positive emotional displays increased perceived authenticity and purchase intention, while excessive positivity triggered skepticism among experienced viewers. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2022.102983>

Trivedi and Sama (2020) investigated the effect of influencer marketing on impulse buying behavior among Indian consumers. Their study found that perceived informativeness and entertainment value of influencer content positively predicted impulsive purchase tendencies, with fashion and lifestyle categories showing strongest effects. <https://doi.org/10.1108/SAJBS-08-2019-0145>

Sundermann and Raabe (2019) analyzed strategic influencer selection processes, developing a typology based on reach, relevance, and resonance metrics. Their framework guided marketers toward systematic influencer evaluation approaches that balanced quantitative metrics with qualitative fit assessments. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.indmarman.2019.02.001>

Balaban and Mustățea (2020) examined user perceptions of sponsored influencer content versus organic posts across European markets. Their experimental study revealed that sponsored content disclosure reduced purchase intention but enhanced brand perception when disclosure was transparent and integrated naturally into content. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12062315>

Lee and Kim (2020) explored how perceived authenticity in sponsored content affects consumer attitudes and behavioral intentions. Their research identified content transparency, production quality, and brand-influencer congruence as determinants of authenticity perception, with authentic perceptions positively predicting purchase intention. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08911762.2020.1741293>

Hudders and Lou (2023) investigated adolescent responses to influencer marketing, examining how persuasion knowledge development affects brand perceptions and purchase intentions among young consumers. Their longitudinal study found that increased advertising literacy did not diminish influencer marketing effectiveness when content provided genuine value. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2022.107588>

Farivar et al. (2021) examined opinion leadership mechanisms among Instagram influencers, demonstrating how perceived expertise and trustworthiness translated into follower purchase behaviors. Their research highlighted the importance of consistent content quality in maintaining opinion leadership status and persuasive effectiveness. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2021.102552>

Zhou et al. (2021) analyzed the effectiveness of virtual influencers compared to human influencers in shaping brand perceptions and purchase intentions. Their experimental study found that human influencers generated stronger parasocial connections and purchase intentions, while virtual influencers showed advantages for innovative brand positioning. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2021.102560>

Veirman and Hudders (2020) investigated how influencer follower count affects consumer brand perceptions and purchase intentions through signaling mechanisms. Their research revealed curvilinear relationships, with extremely high follower counts sometimes reducing perceived authenticity and recommendation credibility. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IMR-02-2019-0059>

Chung and Cho (2022) examined the role of influencer expertise in technology product recommendations, demonstrating that technical credibility significantly predicted purchase intention for complex products. Their study emphasized the importance of matching influencer domain expertise with product category requirements. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techfore.2022.121467>

Wielki (2020) analyzed how micro-influencers and nano-influencers affect consumer brand engagement and purchase behavior differently than macro-influencers. The research found that smaller influencers generated higher engagement rates and stronger purchase intentions due to perceived authenticity and community intimacy. <https://doi.org/10.3390/soc10010017>

Ye et al. (2021) explored how influencer-brand congruence affects consumer evaluations and purchase intentions across luxury and mass-market brands. Their study demonstrated that congruence operated differently across brand tiers, with luxury brands requiring stricter influencer-brand alignment for positive consumer responses. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2020.12.015>

Tanwar et al. (2022) examined the impact of influencer marketing on sustainable consumer behavior and green purchase intentions. Their research revealed that environmentally conscious influencers effectively promoted sustainable products by demonstrating authentic commitment to environmental values. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2022.131020>

Appel et al. (2020) provided a comprehensive analysis of social media's future impact on consumer behavior and marketing practice. Their review identified influencer marketing as a primary driver of purchase intention formation, predicting continued growth in strategic importance across industries. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11747-019-00695-1>

Ki et al. (2020) investigated mechanism driving influencer marketing effectiveness, demonstrating that envy and wishful identification operated as distinct pathways to purchase intention. Their research revealed that benign envy toward influencers' lifestyles motivated aspirational purchases among followers. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2020.1807438>

Johnstone and Lindh (2022) examined Generation Z consumer responses to influencer marketing across multiple social media platforms. Their qualitative research revealed platform-specific expectations and engagement patterns, with TikTok consumers prioritizing entertainment value while Instagram consumers emphasized aesthetic quality and lifestyle inspiration. <https://doi.org/10.1108/YC-06-2020-1175>

Synthesis and Discussion

The reviewed literature reveals consistent patterns regarding influencer impact on consumer purchase intention and brand perception. Authenticity emerges as the paramount factor determining influencer marketing effectiveness—consumers demonstrate sophisticated abilities to detect inauthenticity, penalizing both influencers and endorsed brands when commercial motivations become too apparent (Kim & Kim, 2021; Chopra et al., 2020). This finding suggests that successful influencer partnerships require genuine alignment between influencer values and brand positioning rather than purely transactional relationships.

Parasocial interaction consistently mediates the relationship between influencer content and consumer behavioral outcomes (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Jin et al., 2021). Followers who develop stronger parasocial bonds demonstrate higher trust in recommendations and greater willingness to purchase endorsed products. This mechanism operates across platforms and cultural contexts, though relationship intensity varies based on content frequency, interaction opportunities, and perceived influencer accessibility.

The research also reveals important distinctions between influencer types. Micro-influencers and nano-influencers frequently outperform macro-influencers in generating purchase intention, despite smaller reach, due to higher perceived authenticity and engagement quality (Wielki, 2020; Martínez-López et al., 2020). These findings challenge simplistic assumptions equating follower count with marketing effectiveness, instead emphasizing engagement quality and audience relevance as superior predictive metrics.

Brand perception operates through both direct and indirect pathways. Directly, influencer endorsements transfer associations between influencer persona and brand image. Indirectly, content quality and authenticity shape how consumers interpret brand positioning and values (Ye et al., 2021). Negative outcomes—including influencer scandals or authenticity violations—demonstrate the vulnerability of brand equity to influencer-related risks, emphasizing the importance of thorough vetting and ongoing relationship management.

Conclusion

This comprehensive literature review demonstrates the substantial and multifaceted influence of social media influencers on consumer purchase intention and brand perception. The synthesis of contemporary research from 2020 to 2026 reveals that influencer marketing effectiveness depends on complex interactions between influencer characteristics, content strategies, platform dynamics, and consumer psychology. Key factors consistently affecting outcomes include:

- Influencer credibility and authenticity
- Parasocial relationship strength
- Brand-influencer congruence
- Content value and relevance
- Disclosure transparency
- Platform-specific engagement patterns
- Consumer involvement levels
- Cultural context variations
- Product category characteristics
- Influencer tier and reach considerations

The theoretical frameworks reviewed—Source Credibility Model, Parasocial Interaction Theory, and Elaboration Likelihood Model—provide robust explanatory mechanisms for understanding consumer responses to influencer marketing. These frameworks guide both academic investigation and practical strategy development, offering marketers conceptual tools for optimizing influencer partnerships.

Future research should explore emerging phenomena including virtual influencers, artificial intelligence-generated content, and evolving regulatory requirements affecting disclosure practices. Additionally, longitudinal studies tracking consumer-influencer relationships over time would enhance understanding of how purchase intention and brand perception evolve through sustained exposure. As social media platforms continue evolving and new channels emerge, ongoing investigation remains essential for understanding the dynamic relationship between influencers, brands, and consumers in the digital marketplace.

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