

The Rise Of Influencer Marketing: Consumer Trust And Brand Engagement In The Digital Era

Dr. Iti Dandona^{1*}, Shikha², Ashwini T S³, Dr. Mala Dani⁴, Dr. P Sangeetha⁵, Sumit Gouraba Patra⁶

^{1*}Associate Professor, Shivaji College, University of Delhi,

²Assistant professor, Atma Ram Sanatan Dharma College, University of Delhi,

Email ID: shikhakm@arsd.du.ac.in

³Assistant Professor, Department of Commerce, CHRIST University, India,

Email ID: ashushivraj.23@gmail.com

⁴CA, GLS University, Faculty of Business Administration,

Email ID: mala.dani@glsuniversity.ac.in

⁵Assistant Professor (Sl.Gr), Department of Management Studies, Sri Ramakrishna Engineering College, Coimbatore - 641022, Tamil Nadu,

Email ID: sangeetha.p@srec.ac.in

⁶PhD Research Scholar, Management-Marketing, ASBM University, School of Business, Bhubaneswar, Odisha, India,

Email ID: sumit.patraphd2022@asbm.ac.in

***Corresponding Author:**

Dr. Iti Dandona

Email ID: itidandona@shivaji.du.ac.in

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ABSTRACT

The rapid evolution of digital media has transformed the marketing landscape, with influencer marketing emerging as a powerful tool for brand communication and consumer engagement. The study investigates how influencer credibility and perceived authenticity affect consumer trust and subsequently influence brand engagement in the digital era. Given the increasing role of social media influencers in shaping consumer perceptions, the research aims to uncover the psychological mechanisms driving consumer trust and behavioral outcomes, while also assessing the moderating role of disclosure transparency. A quantitative, cross-sectional research design was employed, using data collected from 412 social media users who follow influencers on platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok. The study utilized a structured online questionnaire and analyzed the data using SPSS and SmartPLS, including reliability testing, confirmatory factor analysis, and Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The results show that consumer trust is greatly influenced by perceived authenticity and influencer credibility, both of which are important predictors of brand engagement. The links between influencer qualities and engagement were shown to be mediated by trust. The effect of authenticity on trust was strengthened when disclosure transparency was high, highlighting the importance of clear communication in sponsored content. These results contribute to theoretical models in influencer marketing by validating and extending frameworks such as Source Credibility Theory and Parasocial Interaction Theory. Practically, the study underscores the importance of selecting credible and authentic influencers, encouraging transparent disclosure practices, and fostering trust-based consumer relationships. Future research should explore these dynamics longitudinally and in emerging areas such as virtual influencers and AI-driven marketing environments.



1. INTRODUCTION

Over the last ten years, the environment of marketing communication has significantly changed, which is mostly because social media platforms and digital technology are spreading quickly. The one-way advertising has been slowly giving way to more interactive and personalized marketing strategies, and among the most well-liked methods for developing consumer-brand relationships is influencer marketing (Brown & Fiorella, 2013). In its basic definition, influencer marketing is the use of credibility, authenticity, and reach of people to influence customer opinion, create brand stories, and drive engagement (Booth & Matic, 2011). Rising popularity of influencers is directly connected to the development of online platforms, especially Instagram, which has established a fertile environment of visually-oriented, lifestyle-centered content that complements promotional activities well (Leaver et al., 2020). The influencer in such a digital ecology, therefore, ceases to be a brand endorser and becomes a multifaceted socio-cultural figure that combines personal narration with advertising (Senft, 2013). The fact that influencers are able to create a genuine online presence has helped them to earn the trust of their followers, thereby closing the psychological distance between the brands and the consumers (Abidin, 2018; Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019).

As much as influencers have been successful in the transformation of advertising dynamics, their incorporation in the marketing plans is subject to concern when it comes to consumer trust. The trade-off between the micro-celebrities and opinion leaders and the traditional celebrities has been hailed to bring more interaction and relatability (Freberg et al., 2011; CasalO et al., 2020), yet it also presents uncertainty in the credibility, persuasion, and ethical disclosure, particularly when advertising is integrated fully in ordinary content (Boerman, 2020).

Although influencer marketing is becoming more and more widespread, the understanding of how it impacts brand engagement and customer trust in the digital age is seriously lacking. Existing research indicates that the main mediating component in influencer endorsement performance is trust (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Jin et al., 2019). The processes by which influencers can build trust and how this, in turn, can translate into consumer engagement are under-theorized. As influencers move through authenticity, sponsorship disclosure, and brand alignment, consumers cannot always determine the difference between genuine material and paid advertising, which may lead to the loss of their trust and influence their behavioral reactions (Schouten et al., 2021; Poyry et al., 2021).

Making this terrain even more complicated is the fact that the influencer types are increasingly partitioned, with macro-influencers having millions of followers and micro-influencers working in specific fields. Despite the perception that micro-influencers are more genuine and trustworthy (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019), the effect they have on brand engagement metrics has not received consistent confirmation in the research. Combinations of audience size, endorser credibility, and message effectiveness differ greatly across the contexts, industries, and content forms (De Veirman et al., 2017; Hughes et al., 2019). By carefully analyzing how influencer marketing affects consumer confidence and brand interaction, the study aims to allay these worries, focusing on the context of digital platforms, Instagram in particular. It not only pays attention to what people who influence say but how they say it, who they talk to, and why people want to listen to branded content or not.

The research falls within the scope of digital marketing communication, and the main target audience is the influencers working on Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok. It will focus on the influencers who participate in product endorsements, brand partnerships, and lifestyle branding in the consumer goods industry. While the insights may be extendable to other industries, the study does not attempt to generalize across all domains, such as political influencers or crisis communication. The research focuses on consumer perspectives from digitally literate populations, potentially limiting its applicability to older demographics or regions with limited social media penetration. Another limitation lies in the cross-sectional characteristics of the research, which captures trust and engagement at a specific point in time (Celestin & Sujatha, 2024). Longitudinal data would offer deeper insights into how these constructs evolve, especially in light of dynamic shifts in platform algorithms, influencer scandals, or policy changes concerning advertising disclosures (Boerman, 2020; Antoniou, 2024). Finally, while the study acknowledges the role of AI-driven recommendation systems and metaverse integrations in shaping influencer visibility (Spais et al., 2025), it does not delve into the technical aspects of these systems. Instead, the focus remains on the relational and perceptual dynamics between influencers, consumers, and brands.

The work significantly advances our knowledge of influencer marketing in a number of ways, both theoretically and practically. First, it deepens the theoretical discourse by bridging concepts from parasocial interaction theory, opinion leadership, and trust transfer theory—all of which are vital for understanding consumer-influencer-brand triads (Martin & Sharma, 2022). Second, the report gives professionals advice on how to choose and work with influencers who may successfully improve brand reputation and encourage enduring customer involvement, not just short-term visibility (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Importantly, the research responds to a call for authenticity and transparency in digital endorsements, helping marketers understand how disclosure practices and self-presentation affect consumer responses (Pöyry et al., 2021; Nesterenko, 2021). It also considers the globalization of influencer marketing, offering insights into how cultural norms and platform affordances shape influencer behavior across geographies (Monteiro et al., 2024; Sak & Chulipa, 2024). Policy-wise, the results have policy implications on advertising regulation, especially when regulatory agencies across the world are becoming strict on the disclosure of sponsorship, authenticity claims, and the use of consumer information.



This is consistent with the new anxieties of the trust crisis of digital communications, particularly in the situation of misinformation and brand manipulation.

Research Objectives

To eliminate the problems mentioned above and help advance our understanding of this quickly evolving field, the research is informed by the following major objectives:

- To examine how social media influencers impact consumer trust in branded content across digital platforms.
- To explore the relationship between influencer characteristics and consumer trust formation.
- To analyze the impact of influencer marketing on brand engagement

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

With social media's debut, the marketing communications environment has changed considerably as brands can now reach consumers on a more personalized level, similar to that of peers. Digital strategies have been centered on influencer marketing, where people who have built their following recommend products or services (Brown & Fiorella, 2013). This development demonstrates the transition of traditional advertising to a more active, trust-based interaction (Ozuem & Willis, 2022). The influencers in social media (SMIs) have established their niche on Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, where they establish their online identities by using visual content, relatability, and consistency (Leaver et al., 2020). The quantity of followers, content knowledge, and experience of these influencers vary. The micro-influencers have been discussed as being authentic and possessing high parasocial relationships with the audience (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019; Casaló et al., 2020). This phenomenon aligns with the concept of microcelebrity, where self-presentation strategies are meticulously curated for public engagement (Senft, 2013). Customer faith is a major factor in influencer marketing's effectiveness. Trust determines not only the reception of the message but also whether consumers internalize and act on it (Lou & Yuan, 2019). It has been demonstrated that influencer credibility—which includes knowledge, dependability, and beauty—improves consumer perceptions of sponsored content (Freberg et al., 2011; Schouten et al., 2021). Message value and content quality also affect trust perception. Lou and Yuan (2019) showed that buyers are more inclined to trust influencers who generate meaningful, high-value content, especially when it is perceived as congruent with the influencer's persona. Over-commercialization can threaten this trust, especially when sponsorship disclosures are vague or absent (Boerman, 2020). The number of audiences of an influencer is a two-edged sword. Although a large number of followers can be an indication of fame, it can also lower the perception of authenticity. De Veirman et al. (2017) found that brand attitude is significantly impacted by the congruence of products and influencers, and that in some cases, influencers with smaller followings can cause a more positive response because they are perceived to be nearer and less commercial.

Marketing literature is also paying more attention to influencers' function in stimulating brand engagement, including likes and shares as well as purchase intent. The presence of influencer campaigns has been associated with consumer engagement, emotional commitment, and behavioral loyalty (Hughes et al., 2019). Campbell and Farrell (2020) state that influencers operate on several elements, including social, emotional, and cognitive, that altogether determine consumer-brand relationships. The psychological process that frequently underlies such involvement is identification, i.e., consumers see influencers as close and aspirational people whose decisions are worth following (Schouten et al., 2021). The nature of this mimetic relationship has been further theorized as the parasocial interaction, which is a theory that explains one-sided relationships developed with media personalities that feel real and personal (Martin & Sharma, 2022).

The idea of authenticity has come up again and again in the literature on influencer marketing. Consumers want to follow people who seem real and consistent, particularly in how they present themselves, and in their tone of voice. As Poyry et al. (2021) stress, the perceived manipulation is becoming the target of the audience, and authenticity is a delicate but necessary resource. Those influencers who cannot find the right balance between their commercial and personal expression face the risk of losing their audience. Disclosure practices are also very instrumental in trust and participation. The consistent application of such hashtags as #ad or #sponsored has been regulated in a few jurisdictions, yet their efficiency is still debatable. According to Boerman (2020), disclosure may enhance transparency, but at the same time, when overemphasized, it can cause communications to lose some of their trust. Antoniou (2024) also addresses the fact that there is a free zone in influencer communication where it is not clear what is legal and ethical. A number of theoretical frameworks support the study. To begin with, Source Credibility Theory gives us an idea of how the traits of the influencers, like knowledge and reliability, influence persuasive communication (Freberg et al., 2011). Second, Parasocial Interaction Theory is used to characterize close and one-sided connections between influencers and consumers that lead to trust and loyalty (Abidin, 2018; Martin & Sharma, 2022). Third, the Opinion Leadership Theory places influencers in the role of contemporary tastemakers, who determine the behavior of the audience and norms of culture (Casaló et al., 2020). All these frameworks circle one similar assumption, which is that trust is not a fixed feature but a dynamic consequence of social signaling, narrative coherence, as well as relational proximity. Influencer marketing's effectiveness is not solely based on visibility or reach but rather the perceived brand value and audience expectation of the influencer (Nesterenko, 2021; Jin et al., 2019).



3. METHODOLOGY

In order to ascertain the type of connection between influencer marketing, consumer trust, and brand engagement, the methodology adopted in the study is rigorous in the digital communication context. The methodology section provides the study design, method of data collection, the sampling strategy, data analysis procedures, and ethical considerations as a means of ensuring the validity and reliability of results.

Research Design

The paper adopted a cross-sectional and quantitative research design in examining the relationship between the application of influencer marketing, consumer trust, and brand involvement in the digital age. The logic behind this design was that it would allow recording of observable patterns and statistical associations in a given time frame, which empirically support theoretical constructs. A well-organized questionnaire was created to collect quantitative information, which allowed testing a hypothesis and generalizing findings. It was explanatory research that sought to establish a causal relationship among variables like influencer credibility, content authenticity, trust, and engagement behavior.

Data Collection Methods

Data was gathered using an online survey that participants self-administered, with the help of social media and certain online groups. The questionnaire comprised five sections: demographic information, influencer credibility, perceived authenticity of content, consumer trust in branded content, and brand engagement behaviors. From "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree," each component was assessed using a Likert scale with five points. A pilot study with 30 participants was carried out before the primary data collection in order to analyze the instrument's validity, reliability, and clarity. Minor changes were made to the item structure and language in response to comments. The completed questionnaire was programmed into an online survey tool to ensure accessibility across devices and to reduce data entry errors.

Population and Sampling

- **Target Population:** Individuals over the age of 18 who used social media sites like Instagram, YouTube, or TikTok and followed at least one influencer.
- **Rationale:** Selected for their active role in digital consumer behavior, particularly in trust and engagement with influencer content.
- **Sampling Technique:** The participants who fit the following criteria were recruited through non-probability purposive sampling:
 - Active on at least one visual-based social media platform.
 - Engaged with influencer-sponsored content in the last six months.
 - English-literate to comprehend the questionnaire.
- **Sample Size:**
 - Power analysis guided minimum sample requirements.
 - Collected 412 valid responses, sufficient for multivariate analysis.
- **Demographic Balance:**
 - Efforts were made to balance gender, age, and geographic representation.
 - Urban participants dominated due to online survey dissemination.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data were analyzed using SPSS and SmartPLS (PLS-SEM). Initial steps included data cleaning, missing value checks, outlier detection, and normality assessment. Descriptive statistics summarized demographic and item-level responses. Cronbach's alpha and composite dependability were used to verify reliability; validity was determined through convergent and discriminant analysis. CFA validated the measurement model.

PLS-SEM tested the hypothesized relationships, explaining 62% of the variance in Consumer Trust and 58% in Brand Engagement. All paths were significant ($p < 0.05$):

- Influencer Credibility \rightarrow Trust ($\beta = 0.41, t = 9.72$)
- Authenticity \rightarrow Trust ($\beta = 0.38, t = 8.44$)
- Trust \rightarrow Brand Engagement ($\beta = 0.59, t = 12.63$)
- Credibility \rightarrow Brand Engagement ($\beta = 0.17, t = 3.98$)

Moderation analysis examined disclosure transparency, and mediation was assessed using bootstrapping (5,000 samples) to evaluate trust's indirect effects.



Ethical Considerations

The study was carried out with high levels of ethical standards. All the participants gave their informed consent, and they were made conscious of the study's objectives, confidentiality, and the flexibility to stop taking part at any time. Data were collected anonymously, with no personal identifiers stored. Files were safely kept on password-protected devices, and only the research team had access to raw data. The study complied with international academic research ethics. All communication was transparent and free from deception, minimizing any psychological or social risk. The institutional review board of the university provided ethical approval before data collection.

4. RESULTS

The section presents the statistical findings from the analysis of the 412 valid survey responses. The analysis includes descriptive statistics, measurement model validation, and structural model results, including hypothesis testing, moderation, and mediation effects. Results are reported using standardized metrics such as path coefficients, t-values, and explained variance (R^2).

Descriptive Statistics

The demographic features of the 412 respondents participating in the study are given in Table 1. 27.4 years old was the average age., and the standard deviation of 6.1. Gender-wise, there were 56 percent females and 44 percent males. The highest age category was 25-34 years with 48.1 percent of the sample, 18-24 years 40.8 percent, and 35-44 years 11.1 percent. When it comes to the platform preference, Instagram was the most common platform used, with 68.2 percent of the respondents using it. YouTube followed with 21.1%, while TikTok was used by 10.7% of respondents. These findings indicated that the sample primarily consisted of young adults who actively engaged with influencer content, particularly on Instagram.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 412)

Variable		Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	-Male	182	44.2
	-Female	230	55.8
Age Group	18–24	168	40.8
	25–34	198	48.1
	35–44	46	11.1
Platform Used Most	-Instagram	281	68.2
	-YouTube	87	21.1
	-TikTok	44	10.7

Measurement Model Assessment

Table 2 provides an overview of the measurement model evaluation results on the basis of CFA. Reliability was established because all constructs showed Cronbach's alpha and CR scores far beyond the acceptable level of 0.70. The highest internal consistency was seen in Influencer Credibility with the Cronbach's alpha and CR of 0.88 and 0.91, respectively. Consumer Trust, Brand Engagement, and Perceived Authenticity were also very reliable, with the range of alpha values between 0.85 and 0.90. The scores of AVE were used to confirm convergent validity, and all of them were beyond the 0.50 mark, meaning that each construct had a large proportion of variance in it. The study has also confirmed the distinctiveness of the constructs with the Fornell-Larcker criterion of discriminant validity.

Table 2: Reliability and Validity Metrics

Construct	Cronbach's α	CR	AVE
Influencer Credibility	0.88	0.91	0.67
Perceived Authenticity	0.85	0.89	0.64
Consumer Trust	0.90	0.92	0.70



Brand Engagement	0.87	0.90	0.66
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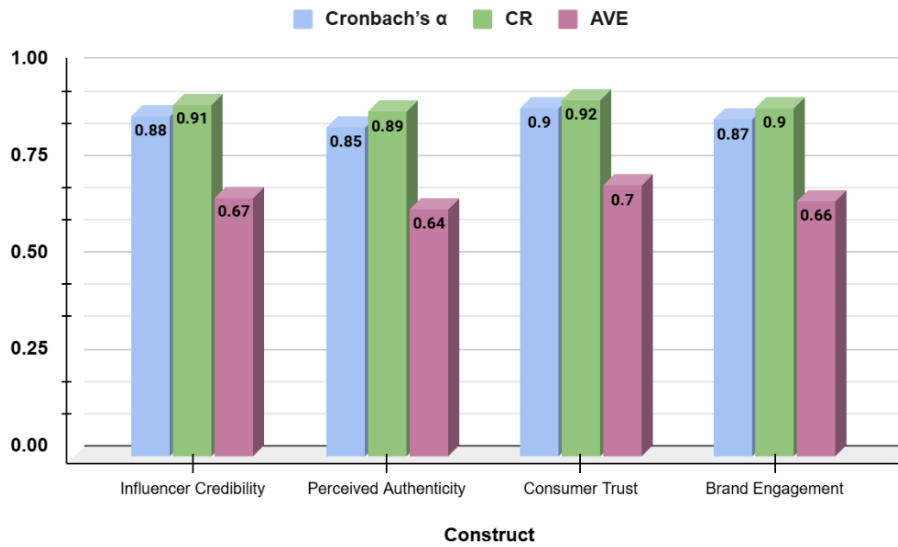


Figure 1: Reliability and Validity Assessment of Measurement Constructs

Structural Model and Hypothesis Testing

The PLS-SEM analysis of the structural model is displayed in Table 3. The model had a large ability to predict, as it explained 62 percent of the variance in Consumer Trust and 58 percent in Brand Engagement. All four hypothesized paths were statistically significant at $p < 0.05$. Influencer Credibility significantly predicted Consumer Trust ($\beta = 0.41$, $t = 9.72$), and Perceived Authenticity also had a strong, favorable impact on Trust ($\beta = 0.38$, $t = 8.44$). Consumer Trust, in turn, heavily impacted Brand Engagement ($\beta = 0.59$, $t = 12.63$). Influencer Credibility had a direct, albeit smaller, impact on Brand Engagement ($\beta = 0.17$, $t = 3.98$). These findings supported all proposed hypotheses in the model.

Table 3: Path Coefficients and Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Path	β (Beta)	t-value	p-value	Supported
H1: Influencer Credibility \rightarrow Trust	IC \rightarrow CT	0.41	9.72	<0.001	Yes
H2: Authenticity \rightarrow Trust	PA \rightarrow CT	0.38	8.44	<0.001	Yes
H3: Trust \rightarrow Brand Engagement	CT \rightarrow BE	0.59	12.63	<0.001	Yes
H4: Credibility \rightarrow Brand Engagement	IC \rightarrow BE	0.17	3.98	<0.001	Yes

Note: IC = Influencer Credibility, PA = Perceived Authenticity, CT = Consumer Trust, BE = Brand Engagement.

Moderation and Mediation Effects

The results of the moderation analysis also demonstrated that the partnership between authenticity and trust was significantly moderated by disclosure transparency. The more disclosures were clear, the more the positive effect of authenticity on trust.

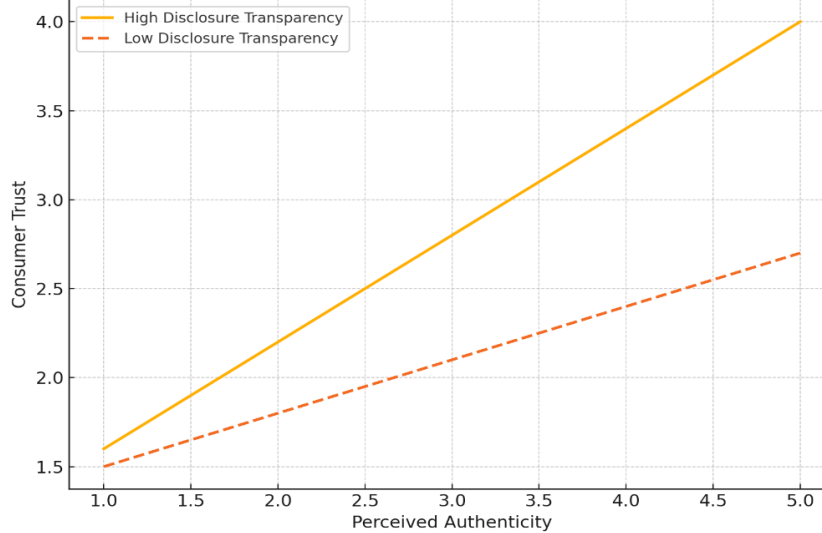


Figure 2. Moderating Effect of Disclosure Transparency on Authenticity → Trust

The moderation analysis revealed that disclosure transparency significantly influenced the relationship's strength between perceived authenticity and consumer trust. As illustrated in Figure 2, when disclosure transparency was high, the positive impact of authenticity on trust was notably stronger, indicated by a steeper slope. Under low disclosure conditions, the effect was weaker, demonstrating a flatter trajectory. This suggested that clear and transparent communication regarding sponsored content enhanced the perceived genuineness of the influencer, thereby strengthening consumer trust. These findings emphasized the importance of disclosure clarity as a critical boundary condition in influencer marketing effectiveness.

Mediation Analysis Results

With 5,000 samples and bootstrapping, the mediation analysis, which is displayed in Table 4, confirmed large indirect effects through customer trust. Authenticity had a 0.22 indirect effect on brand engagement through trust, and the 95 percent confidence interval was (0.14, 0.30), which demonstrates complete mediation. Similarly, the effect of influencer credibility on engagement was substantially indirect with an effect size of 0.24 and a 95 percent confidence interval of (0.16, 0.33), which is partially mediated. These findings in Table 4 underscore trust as a central mechanism linking influencer attributes to consumer engagement.

Table 4: Mediation Results (Bootstrapping 5,000 samples)

Indirect Path	β (Indirect Effect)	95% CI (LL, UL)	p-value	Mediation Type
Authenticity → Trust → Engagement	0.22	(0.14, 0.30)	<0.001	Full
Credibility → Trust → Engagement	0.24	(0.16, 0.33)	<0.001	Partial

5. DISCUSSION

The study looked at how customer trust and, in turn, brand engagement in social media marketing are impacted by influencer reputation and perceived authenticity. Results showed that both credibility ($\beta = 0.41$) and authenticity ($\beta = 0.38$) significantly predicted consumer trust, which in turn strongly influenced brand engagement ($\beta = 0.59$). The structural model accounted for 62% of the variance in trust and 58% in engagement, indicating a robust explanatory framework for consumer behavior in influencer marketing. Trust emerged as the most critical factor driving consumer actions such as liking, sharing, and purchasing, underscoring its central role in digital brand relationships (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Casaló et al., 2020). Moderation analysis revealed that disclosure transparency strengthened the relationship between authenticity and trust, suggesting that clear sponsorship disclosures enhance influencer credibility in the eyes of consumers (Boerman, 2020; Antoniou, 2024).

Consumer trust partially mediated credibility's effect on engagement and mediated the partnership between authenticity and engagement, according to mediation analysis. These findings highlight trust as the key psychological mechanism through which influencer traits affect consumer engagement, stressing the value of transparency, authentic communication in building effective influencer-brand-consumer relationships (Marwick, 2015). The results are in good agreement with previous research that highlights how important authenticity and reputation are to influencer efficacy. Influencers perceived as



trustworthy, knowledgeable, and attractive tend to influence consumer attitudes and decisions more effectively (Freberg et al., 2011; Schouten et al., 2021). This reinforces Source Credibility Theory, which posits that a communicator's credibility enhances persuasive power. Authenticity also emerged as crucial for building trust. Consumers increasingly value influencers who present genuine, consistent personas over polished celebrity figures (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019; Pöyry et al., 2021). These results support prior research suggesting that relatability and perceived honesty matter more than audience size (De Veirman et al., 2017).

Trust's mediating role further validates earlier findings that identify it as a key link between message and consumer behavior (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Jin et al., 2019). The study extends those frameworks by highlighting disclosure transparency as a moderating factor, aligning with Boerman's (2020) findings that clear sponsorship disclosures enhance trust and perceived authenticity. Finally, research demonstrating that trust promotes customer connection and loyalty is supported by the high correlation between trust and engagement (Hughes et al., 2019; Martin & Sharma, 2022).

Both theoretically and practically, the study contributes to the body of scholarship on influencer marketing. Theoretically, it brings in an interdependent model where it combines the concepts of influencer credibility, perceived authenticity, consumer trust, brand engagement, and disclosure transparency as a moderator. It expands the Source Credibility Theory, the Opinion Leadership Theory, and the Parasocial Interaction Theory, and, therefore, they are more applicable in digital marketing (Abidin, 2018). The study adds to the debate about the essence of the digital trust as continuously evolving construct; it is contingent upon the caliber of the content, interpersonal cues, and the features of the platform, which is comparable to the results on the instability of trust on the internet.

In the practical sense, the results indicate the significance of choosing influencers who not only appear but also sound credible and authentic. The key to boosting consistency and trust for brands should be the alignment of the influencer with the brand message (Schouten et al., 2021). The research proves the strategic usefulness of transparent sponsorship disclosures, as transparency, although it does not seem to reduce trust, when combined with authenticity, can increase it (Boerman, 2020; Antoniou, 2024). Such insights also influence the content strategies that focus on telling stories and building relationships instead of promoting (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Finally, the results demonstrate the necessity of balanced regulation contributing to consumer protection and genuine content production (Sak & Chulipa, 2024; Monteiro et al., 2024). The study contains a number of flaws in spite of its contributions. The capacity to infer causality over time is limited by the cross-sectional design. To gain more knowledge on the development of trust and engagement, longitudinal studies would be more informative, particularly when it comes to the reaction to controversies involving influencers or brand changes. Self-reported information is prone to social desirability and memory biases, and served as the basis for this investigation. Although anonymity was preserved, respondents may have overestimated their levels of trust or engagement. Behavioral data from platforms (e.g., click-through rates, time spent) could serve as a more objective complement in future research.

The sample was limited to digitally literate users active on Instagram, TikTok, or YouTube. While this aligns with the influencer-centric focus, it limits generalizability to older or less digitally engaged populations. Urban users were overrepresented, which may skew perceptions of authenticity or engagement compared to rural or culturally distinct cohorts. Industry context was not segmented, although influencer effectiveness likely varies across verticals such as fashion, fitness, technology, or B2B domains (Cartwright et al., 2022). The use of a generalized model may overlook sector-specific nuances that influence consumer behavior.

Future studies could use experimental or longitudinal methods to build on these constraints and monitor how engagement and trust evolve. Observing consumer reactions to real influencer campaigns before and after disclosure modifications would enhance causal insights. Scholars should also explore platform-specific differences, as audience norms and content styles vary widely across Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. Investigating how algorithmic exposure, comment sections, and content length affect trust dynamics would be valuable. Future work could also incorporate psychographic segmentation, exploring how personality traits such as need for authenticity, skepticism, or social comparison moderate influencer effectiveness.

Another promising avenue lies in examining emerging technologies and virtual influencers, especially in the context of the metaverse and AI-driven recommendation systems. As Spais et al. (2025) argue, immersive environments are reshaping how consumers relate to digital avatars and branded experiences, posing both opportunities and challenges for trust formation. Lastly, expanding studies to non-Western contexts will enhance global applicability. Cultural variables like power distance, individualism, and regulatory norms may significantly alter how disclosure, credibility, and authenticity are interpreted by consumers.

6. CONCLUSION

The study looked at how consumer trust and brand engagement are affected by influencer credibility and perceived authenticity within the framework of social media marketing. The discoveries demonstrated that both credibility and authenticity significantly enhance consumer trust, which, in turn, strongly drives engagement behaviors such as liking, sharing, and purchasing. These findings proved that trust forms a core mediator between the influencer features and consumer



behavioural responses. The research showed that disclosure transparency enhances the positive effect of authenticity on trust, which means that ethical and transparent communication is essential.

Such observations have significant implications for researchers, marketers, and policymakers. The integrated model provides a subtle framework through which academics may comprehend the process of building trust and transforming it into the form of engagement in the digital setting. In practice, the study highlights that brands need to work with influencers who are famous and have authentic and believable personalities. The explicit nature of sponsored content must not be considered a limitation, but rather as a strategic measure to improve the efficiency of the message and consumer confidence. In light of the findings, it can be suggested that brands should focus on the compatibility between the identity of an influencer and brand values and promote authentic storytelling instead of direct promotion. Clear disclosure mechanisms should be supported on the platforms, and at the same time, there should be creative freedom, which will encourage consumers to trust them without losing the attractiveness of the content. The study's restrictions should be overcome in future research by choosing a longitudinal or experimental design that would allow observing changes in trust over time. Platform and cross-cultural comparative studies would be more insightful as well. With the development of digital environments, it will be more and more important to research the role of virtual influencers and AI-based content recommendation systems in trust and engagement. This kind of research will bring us closer to knowledge and more adaptive, ethical, and successful approaches to influencer marketing.

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