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## **A Critical Review of Consumer Responses to Social Media Influencers**

**Sawkar Pooja Sanjay**

Research Scholar, Department of Commerce, Malwanchal University, Indore

**Dr. More Tarachand Ambar**

Supervisor, Department of Commerce, Malwanchal University, Indore

### **Abstract**

The rapid growth of social media platforms has transformed the landscape of marketing communication, creating new opportunities for brands to engage with consumers through social media influencers. Influencer marketing has emerged as one of the most effective digital marketing strategies because influencers possess the ability to shape consumer perceptions, attitudes, and purchasing decisions through authentic and relatable content. This review critically examines consumer responses to social media influencers by analyzing the roles of trust, attitudes, and buying behaviour. The paper synthesizes findings from recent academic studies and industry reports to evaluate how influencer credibility, expertise, attractiveness, and authenticity affect consumer decision-making processes. The review also explores theoretical foundations such as Source Credibility Theory, Parasocial Interaction Theory, Social Learning Theory, and the Theory of Planned Behaviour to explain consumer engagement with influencers. Furthermore, the paper discusses the impact of different influencer categories, including mega-influencers, macro-influencers, micro-influencers, and nano-influencers, on consumer behaviour. The findings indicate that trust and perceived authenticity are among the strongest determinants of influencer effectiveness. Positive consumer attitudes toward influencers often translate into stronger purchase intentions and brand loyalty. However, concerns regarding transparency, fake followers, sponsored content disclosure, and ethical issues continue to challenge the sustainability of influencer marketing practices. The review concludes by identifying research gaps and proposing future directions for understanding evolving consumer responses in an increasingly digital marketplace.

Keywords: Social media influencers, influencer marketing, consumer behaviour, trust, attitudes, purchase intention, digital marketing, social media.

### **1. Introduction**

The emergence of social media has fundamentally altered the way organizations communicate with consumers. Traditional advertising methods that relied heavily on television, radio,



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newspapers, and magazines have gradually been supplemented by digital marketing approaches that enable direct interaction between brands and consumers. Among these developments, social media influencer marketing has become one of the most significant phenomena in contemporary marketing practice. Influencers are individuals who have established credibility and a substantial audience on social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, Facebook, and X (formerly Twitter). Through their content, influencers shape opinions, promote products, and affect consumer purchasing decisions.

The popularity of influencer marketing is largely attributed to changing consumer preferences. Modern consumers increasingly seek authentic recommendations rather than traditional advertisements. Influencers often present products within their daily lives, making endorsements appear more genuine and trustworthy. This perception of authenticity has contributed to the effectiveness of influencer marketing campaigns across industries including fashion, beauty, technology, health, travel, and entertainment.

Consumer behaviour has become increasingly influenced by online interactions and digital communities. Consumers often rely on influencers for product reviews, demonstrations, and recommendations before making purchasing decisions. Consequently, understanding how consumers respond to influencers is essential for marketers seeking to optimize communication strategies and enhance brand performance. Trust, attitudes, and purchase intentions have emerged as key variables in determining the success of influencer marketing initiatives.

This review critically evaluates existing literature on consumer responses to social media influencers. It examines the factors that influence consumer trust, explores how attitudes toward influencers are formed, and analyzes the relationship between influencer characteristics and purchasing behaviour. By synthesizing contemporary research findings, the paper provides a comprehensive understanding of influencer marketing effectiveness and its implications for consumer decision-making.

## **2. Concept of Social Media Influencers**

Social media influencers are individuals who have developed a dedicated audience through the creation and sharing of content on digital platforms. Unlike traditional celebrities whose influence often stems from achievements in entertainment, sports, or politics, social media influencers gain recognition primarily through online engagement and content creation. Their influence is based on perceived expertise, authenticity, relatability, and frequent interaction with followers.

Influencers are commonly categorized according to audience size. Mega-influencers possess millions of followers and often include celebrities who extend their influence into social media platforms. Macro-influencers typically have hundreds of thousands of followers and are recognized as experts or prominent content creators within specific industries. Micro-influencers generally have between 10,000 and 100,000 followers and are valued for their strong engagement



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rates and close relationships with audiences. Nano-influencers have smaller but highly engaged communities and are increasingly attractive to brands seeking authentic consumer connections. The effectiveness of influencers is linked not only to audience size but also to audience engagement. Research indicates that consumers often perceive micro- and nano-influencers as more trustworthy than larger influencers because their recommendations appear less commercialized. This distinction highlights the importance of authenticity in shaping consumer responses.

### 3. Theoretical Foundations of Consumer Responses to Influencers

#### 3.1 Source Credibility Theory

Source Credibility Theory suggests that the effectiveness of a communication source depends on perceived expertise and trustworthiness. In influencer marketing, consumers evaluate influencers based on their knowledge, experience, and credibility regarding specific products or services. When consumers perceive influencers as trustworthy experts, they are more likely to accept recommendations and develop favourable attitudes toward promoted brands.

Research consistently demonstrates that influencer credibility significantly affects consumer trust and purchase intentions. Consumers are more receptive to recommendations from influencers who possess relevant expertise and maintain transparent relationships with followers.

#### 3.2 Parasocial Interaction Theory

Parasocial Interaction Theory explains the one-sided relationships that audiences develop with media personalities. Social media platforms enhance these relationships by enabling direct communication between influencers and followers. Through comments, live streams, stories, and personal updates, influencers create a sense of intimacy that encourages emotional attachment.

Consumers often perceive influencers as friends rather than advertisers. This perceived relationship increases trust and enhances the persuasive power of influencer endorsements. The emotional connection generated through parasocial interactions contributes significantly to consumer engagement and purchasing behaviour.

#### 3.3 Social Learning Theory

Social Learning Theory proposes that individuals learn behaviours by observing others. Influencers serve as role models whose actions and lifestyle choices can influence consumer attitudes and behaviours. Consumers may imitate influencer behaviours, including product usage and purchasing decisions, particularly when they identify strongly with the influencer.

This theory is particularly relevant among younger consumers who spend substantial time on social media platforms. The aspirational lifestyles portrayed by influencers encourage followers to emulate behaviours and consumption patterns associated with success, attractiveness, or social status.

#### 3.4 Theory of Planned Behaviour



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The Theory of Planned Behaviour suggests that behavioural intentions are influenced by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control. Influencer marketing affects all three components. Positive attitudes toward influencers and endorsed products can strengthen purchase intentions. Social norms established through online communities may encourage consumers to adopt similar consumption behaviours. Additionally, influencers often provide information that reduces uncertainty and increases confidence in purchasing decisions.

#### 4. Trust as a Determinant of Consumer Response

Trust is widely regarded as the foundation of effective influencer marketing. Consumers are more likely to engage with influencer content and act on recommendations when they perceive influencers as honest, credible, and authentic. Trust influences information acceptance, brand evaluations, and purchase intentions.

Several factors contribute to influencer trustworthiness. Authenticity is among the most important determinants. Consumers value influencers who present genuine experiences rather than purely promotional content. When endorsements appear sincere and aligned with the influencer's personal values, consumers are more likely to trust recommendations.

Transparency also plays a critical role. Regulatory bodies increasingly require influencers to disclose sponsored content. Transparent disclosure can enhance credibility by demonstrating honesty. Conversely, hidden sponsorships may damage trust and reduce consumer confidence.

Consistency in content creation further strengthens trust. Influencers who maintain a clear identity and consistently communicate values aligned with audience expectations are generally perceived as more reliable. Frequent contradictions or excessive promotional activities may undermine trust and weaken consumer engagement.

Studies indicate that trust mediates the relationship between influencer characteristics and purchase intentions. Even highly attractive or popular influencers may fail to influence consumer behaviour if trust is lacking. Therefore, trust remains one of the most significant predictors of influencer marketing effectiveness.

#### Literature Review

**Freberg et al. (2011)** conceptualised social media influencers as a new category of independent third-party endorsers who shape audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and other social platforms. Their study emphasised that influencers are perceived as more relatable and authentic than traditional celebrities, which enhances their persuasive power. The authors argued that the credibility of influencers is closely linked to perceived expertise and trustworthiness, both of which significantly affect consumer attitudes. Their findings laid the foundation for understanding influencer marketing as a distinct form of communication that relies heavily on interpersonal trust rather than institutional authority.



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**Djafarova and Rushworth (2017)** explored the impact of Instagram influencers on young female consumers and found that influencers have a stronger effect on purchase intentions than traditional celebrities. The study highlighted that perceived similarity and relatability between influencers and followers play a crucial role in building trust. Consumers tend to view influencers as peers rather than distant figures, which increases the likelihood of accepting product recommendations.

**De Veirman et al. (2017)** examined how the number of followers influences the effectiveness of influencers in brand promotion. Their findings indicated that influencers with a larger follower base are perceived as more popular and credible, which positively affects brand attitudes. However, the study also noted that extremely high follower counts may reduce perceived authenticity, thereby weakening trust. This highlights the delicate balance between popularity and credibility in influencer marketing and underscores the importance of perceived authenticity in shaping consumer responses.

**Lou and Yuan (2019)** investigated the role of influencer credibility and content quality in shaping consumer trust and engagement. Their study found that informative and entertaining content significantly enhances consumer attitudes and increases purchase intentions. The authors emphasised that trust acts as a mediating variable between influencer characteristics and consumer behaviour. High-quality content not only improves audience engagement but also strengthens the perceived reliability of influencers, which is essential for influencing purchasing decisions.

Schouten et al. (2020) analysed the effectiveness of influencer marketing compared to traditional celebrity endorsements. Their findings revealed that influencers generate higher levels of identification and trust among consumers due to their perceived authenticity. The study highlighted that consumers are more likely to develop positive attitudes towards brands when endorsements come from influencers who share similar lifestyles or values.

**Abidin (2016)** examined the evolving practices of social media influencers, particularly focusing on how personal content becomes commercialised within digital platforms. The study provided a nuanced understanding of how influencers construct an image of authenticity while simultaneously engaging in monetised collaborations with brands. Abidin argued that influencers deliberately blur the boundaries between personal expression and advertising by embedding promotional content within everyday narratives, making endorsements appear organic rather than overtly commercial.

**Evans et al. (2017)** explored how consumers respond to sponsored content shared by social media influencers, with particular emphasis on the role of disclosure in shaping trust and persuasion. Their study revealed that while transparency through sponsorship disclosure is essential for ethical and regulatory compliance, it can have mixed effects on consumer perception. Specifically, explicit disclosures may activate consumers' awareness of persuasive intent, leading to more critical evaluation of the content and, in some cases, reduced effectiveness of the marketing message.



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**Lim et al. (2017)** investigated the influence of social media influencers on consumer purchase intention, identifying trust and perceived credibility as central determinants of consumer decision-making. The study demonstrated that consumers are significantly more inclined to act on recommendations from influencers they perceive as knowledgeable, honest, and reliable. This perceived credibility is often built through consistent content quality, expertise in a specific domain, and authentic interaction with followers. Lim et al. further highlighted the role of emotional engagement, arguing that influencer marketing is not solely driven by rational evaluation but also by affective responses. When consumers feel emotionally connected to an influencer, they are more likely to internalise the recommendations and develop favourable attitudes toward endorsed products. The research also pointed out that storytelling, personal experiences, and relatable content enhance emotional resonance, thereby strengthening persuasion.

**Casaló et al. (2018)** focused on the interplay between perceived authenticity, credibility, and consumer behaviour in the context of influencer marketing. Their findings revealed that authenticity serves as a foundational element that directly influences trust, which subsequently shapes consumer attitudes and behavioural intentions. The study argued that authenticity is perceived when influencers maintain consistency in their values, messaging, and online persona, as well as when their endorsements align with their established identity.

**Ki and Kim (2019)** examined how specific influencer characteristics contribute to the development of consumer trust and subsequent purchase intentions. Their study identified key attributes such as expertise, attractiveness, and perceived similarity as significant factors influencing how audiences evaluate influencers. Expertise enhances credibility by signalling that the influencer possesses relevant knowledge or experience, making their recommendations more trustworthy. Attractiveness, both physical and personality-based, contributes to positive perceptions and increases audience engagement.

Author(s) & Year	Study Focus	Key Findings	Contribution to Consumer Behaviour
<b>Freberg et al. (2011)</b>	Concept of social media influencers and credibility	Influencers are perceived as authentic and trustworthy endorsers. Expertise and trustworthiness significantly affect attitudes.	Established the theoretical foundation of influencer marketing and consumer trust.
<b>Djafarova &amp; Rushworth (2017)</b>	Instagram influencers and young female consumers	Influencers influence purchase intentions more effectively than traditional	Demonstrated the importance of trust



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		celebrities due to relatability and similarity.	and identification in purchasing decisions.
<b>De Veirman et al. (2017)</b>	Impact of follower count on influencer effectiveness	Larger follower bases increase credibility but excessive popularity may reduce authenticity.	Highlighted the balance between popularity and perceived authenticity.
<b>Lou &amp; Yuan (2019)</b>	Influencer credibility and content quality	High-quality, informative, and entertaining content strengthens trust and purchase intention.	Identified trust as a mediating factor between influencer characteristics and consumer behaviour.
<b>Schouten et al. (2020)</b>	Influencers versus celebrity endorsements	Influencers generate stronger identification, trust, and positive brand attitudes.	Demonstrated the superiority of influencer endorsements in fostering consumer engagement.
<b>Abidin (2016)</b>	Commercialisation of influencer content	Influencers blend personal narratives with advertising to maintain authenticity. Excessive commercialization can reduce trust.	Explained how authenticity influences consumer perceptions and engagement.
<b>Evans et al. (2017)</b>	Sponsored content disclosure	Transparency is necessary but may increase awareness of persuasive intent. Established credibility reduces negative effects.	Highlighted the role of ethical disclosure in maintaining trust.
<b>Lim et al. (2017)</b>	Trust and purchase intention	Credibility and emotional engagement significantly influence consumer purchasing decisions.	Demonstrated the importance of parasocial relationships in influencer marketing.
<b>Casaló et al. (2018)</b>	Authenticity and consumer behaviour	Authenticity enhances trust, attitudes, purchase intention, and brand loyalty.	Established authenticity as a critical driver of



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			influencer effectiveness.
<b>Ki &amp; Kim (2019)</b>	Influencer characteristics and trust	Expertise, attractiveness, and similarity positively affect trust and purchase intentions.	Identified key influencer attributes affecting consumer responses.

## Review Summary

The literature on social media influencer marketing demonstrates that influencers play a significant role in shaping consumer attitudes, trust, and purchasing behaviour. Early studies established influencers as credible third-party endorsers who possess the ability to affect consumer decisions through authentic and relatable communication. Trust consistently emerges as the most important factor influencing the effectiveness of influencer marketing. Consumers are more likely to accept recommendations and develop favourable attitudes toward brands when influencers are perceived as trustworthy, knowledgeable, and authentic.

Several researchers have highlighted the importance of relatability and perceived similarity between influencers and followers. Unlike traditional celebrities, influencers often appear more accessible and genuine, which strengthens emotional connections and encourages consumer engagement. Studies further reveal that content quality, including informative and entertaining posts, enhances influencer credibility and positively affects purchase intentions. Trust frequently acts as a mediating variable between influencer characteristics and consumer behaviour, demonstrating its central role in the decision-making process.

The literature also emphasizes the significance of authenticity in maintaining audience trust. While influencers increasingly engage in sponsored collaborations, excessive commercialization may reduce credibility and create consumer scepticism. Transparency in advertising disclosures is therefore essential for sustaining long-term trust and ethical marketing practices. Additionally, factors such as expertise, attractiveness, follower count, and emotional engagement contribute to influencer effectiveness, although their impact varies across consumer groups and contexts.

The reviewed studies conclude that social media influencers significantly affect consumer responses by fostering trust, shaping attitudes, and increasing purchase intentions. However, maintaining authenticity and credibility remains crucial for ensuring the long-term success and sustainability of influencer marketing strategies in an increasingly competitive digital environment.

## Research Gaps

Although existing studies have extensively examined the influence of social media influencers on consumer behaviour, much of the research has focused on popular platforms such as Instagram and YouTube. Emerging platforms such as TikTok, Threads, and other short-form content



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applications have received comparatively less academic attention. As consumer engagement patterns continue to evolve across digital platforms, there is a need for more research to understand how platform-specific features influence trust, attitudes, and purchasing behaviour.

Another important gap relates to the changing nature of influencer authenticity. While many studies identify authenticity as a key determinant of consumer trust, limited research has explored how audiences respond to highly commercialized influencer content over time. The increasing use of sponsored posts, affiliate marketing, and brand partnerships may alter consumer perceptions of credibility. Longitudinal studies are needed to examine whether influencer trust can be sustained in increasingly commercial digital environments.

Furthermore, most existing studies primarily focus on young consumers, particularly Generation Z and Millennials. There is limited evidence regarding how older consumers, diverse demographic groups, and consumers from different cultural backgrounds respond to influencer marketing. Cross-cultural and demographic comparisons would provide a broader understanding of influencer effectiveness and consumer decision-making processes.

Finally, the emergence of artificial intelligence (AI)-generated influencers and virtual influencers presents a significant research opportunity. Current literature largely concentrates on human influencers, leaving uncertainty about how consumers perceive trustworthiness, authenticity, and credibility in virtual influencer endorsements. Future studies should investigate the effectiveness of AI-driven influencers and their potential impact on consumer attitudes, brand perceptions, and purchase intentions in the evolving digital marketing landscape.

## Conclusion

Social media influencers have become a powerful force in contemporary digital marketing, significantly shaping consumer attitudes, trust, and purchasing behaviour. The literature reviewed in this study demonstrates that influencer marketing is highly effective because influencers establish personal and relatable connections with their audiences, making their recommendations appear more authentic and trustworthy than traditional advertising messages. Trust emerges as the most influential factor affecting consumer responses, as consumers are more likely to engage with, believe, and act upon recommendations from influencers whom they perceive as credible, knowledgeable, and genuine. Additionally, positive consumer attitudes toward influencers are strengthened through perceived similarity, emotional engagement, high-quality content, and consistent communication. These factors collectively contribute to stronger purchase intentions, enhanced brand perceptions, and increased consumer loyalty. The review also highlights the critical role of authenticity in maintaining influencer effectiveness, as excessive commercialization or lack of transparency can reduce credibility and weaken consumer trust. Furthermore, influencer characteristics such as expertise, attractiveness, follower engagement, and content relevance significantly influence the success of marketing campaigns. Despite the growing importance of



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influencer marketing, several challenges remain, including concerns regarding disclosure practices, fake followers, ethical considerations, and the long-term sustainability of influencer-consumer relationships. The emergence of new social media platforms and AI-generated influencers further presents opportunities and challenges for future research. Overall, the findings confirm that social media influencers play a crucial role in modern consumer decision-making processes and have become valuable strategic partners for brands seeking meaningful engagement with target audiences. As digital communication continues to evolve, understanding consumer responses to influencers will remain essential for developing effective and sustainable marketing strategies.

## Future Work

Future research should focus on examining the impact of emerging social media platforms and evolving digital environments on consumer behaviour. While existing studies primarily concentrate on Instagram and YouTube, platforms such as TikTok, Threads, Snapchat, and other short-video applications have become increasingly influential. Investigating how platform-specific features affect trust, engagement, and purchase intentions would provide valuable insights for both researchers and marketers.

Another important direction involves exploring the long-term effects of influencer marketing on consumer relationships and brand loyalty. Most current studies focus on immediate purchase intentions and short-term behavioural outcomes. Future studies should adopt longitudinal approaches to assess how sustained exposure to influencer content influences consumer trust, repeat purchasing behaviour, and long-term brand commitment.

Researchers should also investigate the role of cultural, demographic, and psychological differences in shaping consumer responses to influencers. Comparative studies across countries, age groups, income levels, and educational backgrounds would enhance understanding of how influencer effectiveness varies among diverse consumer segments. Such research could help organizations develop more targeted and culturally sensitive marketing strategies.

Finally, future work should examine the growing influence of artificial intelligence and virtual influencers in digital marketing. AI-generated influencers are increasingly being used by brands, yet little is known about consumer perceptions of their authenticity, credibility, and trustworthiness. Investigating consumer attitudes toward virtual influencers and comparing their effectiveness with human influencers would contribute significantly to the advancement of influencer marketing literature and provide practical guidance for future marketing innovations.



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