

## **Influencer Marketing and Consumer Decision-Making: A Review of Recent Developments in Digital Marketing**

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### **Abstract**

Influencer marketing has emerged as one of the most consequential developments in digital marketing over the past decade, reshaping how brands communicate with consumers and how consumers, in turn, gather information and form purchase decisions. The review traces the evolution of influencer marketing from early social-media word-of-mouth phenomena to a structured, platform-specific discipline encompassing macro-, micro-, and nano-influencers across Instagram, YouTube, and other platforms. It is organised around four themes: source credibility and influencer attributes, parasocial relationships and authenticity, platform-specific and content-related dynamics, and sponsorship disclosure together with the ethical and regulatory dimensions of persuasion. The findings indicate that influencer credibility — comprising expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness — together with perceived authenticity and the parasocial bonds followers form with influencers, are consistently identified as central mechanisms linking influencer marketing activity to consumer attitudes, purchase intention, and, in some cases, actual purchase behaviour. At the same time, the literature highlights growing consumer scepticism toward overtly commercial content, the importance of transparent sponsorship disclosure, and platform-specific variation in how these mechanisms operate. A structured literature-review methodology underpins the analysis. The paper concludes by synthesising the practical implications of these findings for marketers and by outlining directions for future research, including the need for more longitudinal and cross-platform studies of influencer marketing effectiveness.

*Keywords: influencer marketing, consumer decision-making, source credibility, parasocial relationship, social media, purchase intention, digital marketing*

### **1. Introduction**

#### **1.1 Background of the Study**

The rise of social media platforms over the past fifteen years has fundamentally altered the marketing communications landscape, giving ordinary individuals with substantial online followings — commonly referred to as social media influencers — a degree of persuasive reach once reserved for traditional celebrities and mass media advertising. Brands across virtually every consumer product and service category now routinely collaborate with influencers to promote products, generate awareness, and shape consumer attitudes, a practice that has grown from an informal, largely unregulated activity into a structured, multi-billion-dollar segment of the global

digital marketing industry. This growth has been accompanied by a rapidly expanding body of academic research seeking to understand how, and under what conditions, influencer marketing actually shapes consumer decision-making, rather than simply assuming that influencer reach automatically translates into commercial impact.

This period is also notable for the diversification of influencer marketing beyond its early association with lifestyle, beauty, and fashion content into categories as varied as personal finance, technology, health and wellness, and business-to-business services, alongside the emergence of dedicated influencer marketing agencies, campaign-management platforms, and increasingly formalised contractual and disclosure practices. These developments have raised the practical stakes of understanding influencer marketing's actual effect on consumer decision-making, since brands now commit substantial marketing budgets to influencer partnerships on the assumption that such partnerships meaningfully shape consumer attitudes and purchase behaviour, an assumption that the academic literature reviewed in this paper has sought, with increasing methodological rigour, to test rather than take for granted.

### ***1.2 Evolution of Influencer Marketing in the Digital Era***

Influencer marketing can be broadly defined as a form of marketing communication in which brands collaborate with individuals who have built a dedicated online following and perceived credibility within a specific content niche, in order to promote products or services to that audience. The practice has evolved considerably since the early 2010s: initial academic and industry attention centred on blog-based product reviews and early YouTube content creators, before expanding to encompass Instagram-centred visual influencer marketing, and subsequently short-form video platforms. Alongside this platform evolution, the influencer landscape has stratified into recognisable tiers — typically distinguished as celebrity or macro-influencers with very large followings, micro-influencers with smaller but often more engaged and niche-specific audiences, and, more recently, nano-influencers with comparatively modest followings but high perceived authenticity and relatability. This stratification has itself become a significant subject of academic enquiry, since research increasingly suggests that follower count, perceived popularity, and audience engagement do not move in lockstep, and that smaller-scale influencers can, in certain circumstances, exert comparable or even superior influence over specific audience segments relative to larger-scale counterparts.

### ***1.3 Consumer Decision-Making in the Digital Age***

Consumer decision-making has traditionally been modelled as a sequential process encompassing problem recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision, and post-purchase evaluation. The proliferation of social media and influencer content has intervened most visibly at the information-search and alternative-evaluation stages of this process, providing consumers with an additional, highly personalised source of product information that sits somewhere between traditional advertising and interpersonal word-of-mouth recommendation. Because influencer content is typically framed as personal opinion or lived experience rather than

overt corporate messaging, it is frequently processed by consumers through different cognitive and affective pathways than conventional advertising, invoking constructs such as perceived source credibility, parasocial interaction, and identification that are less central to the evaluation of traditional brand-controlled advertising. Understanding how these influencer-specific mechanisms interact with, reinforce, or in some cases undermine established models of consumer decision-making is therefore a central concern of the literature reviewed in this paper.

This intervention is not limited to the earlier stages of the decision process alone. A growing subset of the literature suggests that influencer content also shapes post-purchase evaluation and continued brand loyalty, as followers who purchase a product on an influencer's recommendation often continue to monitor that influencer's subsequent content for validation of their choice, creating an ongoing feedback loop between influencer content consumption and consumer decision-making that extends well beyond the point of initial purchase. This has practical implications for how the decision-making process itself should be conceptualised in digital marketing contexts: rather than a single linear pathway culminating in purchase, influencer-mediated decision-making may be better understood as a recursive process in which pre-purchase information search and post-purchase reinforcement are interwoven through ongoing exposure to the same influencer's content over time.

#### ***1.4 Rationale of the study***

Despite a substantial and rapidly growing body of research on influencer marketing, the literature remains somewhat fragmented across disciplinary traditions — spanning marketing, communication studies, and consumer psychology — and across specific platforms, influencer tiers, and product categories, making it useful to periodically synthesise findings into a coherent picture of what is reasonably well established and what remains contested or under-researched. examine the relationship between influencer marketing and consumer decision-making.

## **2. Literature Review**

### ***2.1 Source Credibility and Influencer Attributes***

A substantial stream of research grounds the effectiveness of influencer marketing in classical source credibility theory, which holds that a communicator's perceived expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness jointly shape the persuasiveness of their message. Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) found that young female Instagram users perceived online celebrities and influencers as more credible and relatable than traditional celebrities, and that this perceived credibility, along with influencer attractiveness, significantly shaped both attitudes toward endorsed products and purchase intention. De Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders (2017) examined the specific role of follower count and product-influencer congruence, finding that influencers with larger followings were generally perceived as more likeable and popular, but that the persuasive benefit of popularity did not always translate into greater perceived opinion leadership, particularly when the endorsed product diverged from the influencer's typical content niche. This finding has been

echoed by subsequent research on product-endorser fit: Belanche, Casaló, Flavián, and Ibáñez-Sánchez (2021) demonstrated that congruence between an influencer's personal brand, the endorsed product, and the consumer's own self-concept significantly strengthened influencer marketing effectiveness, while incongruent pairings could weaken or even reverse positive effects. Similarly, Kim and Kim (2021) proposed a multiple-inference model suggesting that consumers form judgements about both influencer-product congruence and the influencer's underlying motives simultaneously, with perceived congruence generally strengthening persuasive impact while perceived commercial motive could weaken it. Hughes, Swaminathan, and Brooks (2019) provided complementary evidence from sponsored blogging campaigns, finding that influencer-driven brand engagement was shaped jointly by influencer characteristics and the structure of the sponsorship arrangement itself, underscoring that credibility operates alongside, rather than instead of, the broader campaign context. Table 1 summarises key findings from this stream of the literature.

**Table 1: Selected Studies on Source Credibility and Influencer Attributes**

| Author(s) / Year                                   | Focus                                                    | Key Findings                                                                                                              |
|----------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Djafarova & Rushworth (2017)                       | Instagram celebrity credibility among young female users | Influencers perceived as more credible and relatable than traditional celebrities; credibility shaped purchase intention. |
| De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders (2017)            | Follower count and product divergence                    | Larger followings increased perceived popularity and likeability, but not always perceived opinion leadership.            |
| Belanche, Casaló, Flavián, & Ibáñez-Sánchez (2021) | Influencer-product-consumer congruence                   | Congruence between influencer, product, and consumer self-concept strengthened marketing effectiveness.                   |
| Kim & Kim (2021)                                   | Influencer-product congruence and disclosure             | Consumers jointly infer congruence and commercial motive, both shaping persuasive outcomes.                               |
| Hughes, Swaminathan, & Brooks (2019)               | Sponsored blogging campaigns                             | Brand engagement shaped by both influencer characteristics and sponsorship campaign structure.                            |

## ***2.2 Parasocial Relationships, Trust, and Authenticity***

A second major theme in the literature concerns the parasocial relationships that followers form with influencers — one-sided, emotionally invested relationships in which followers feel a sense of intimacy and familiarity with an influencer despite the absence of genuine reciprocal interaction. Lou and Yuan (2019) found that the informational and entertainment value of

influencer-generated content significantly shaped followers' trust in that content, and that this trust, in turn, positively influenced brand awareness and purchase intention, positioning trust as a key mediating mechanism between influencer content and consumer decision-making. Jin, Muqaddam, and Ryu (2019) extended this line of enquiry by showing that parasocial relationships and a sense of vicarious brand experience through influencer content jointly shaped consumers' emotional engagement with endorsed brands. Sokolova and Kefi (2020) compared Instagram and YouTube contexts and found that both perceived credibility and parasocial interaction significantly predicted purchase intention, though the relative importance of these mechanisms varied somewhat by platform and content format. The related concept of authenticity has also received sustained attention: Djafarova and Trofimenko (2019) examined so-called 'Instafamous' micro-celebrities and found that followers placed considerable value on perceived authenticity and relatability, often viewing these micro-celebrities as more genuine than either traditional celebrities or larger-scale influencers. Audrezet, de Kerviler, and Guidry Moulard (2020) proposed that authenticity itself is not a fixed influencer trait but an ongoing self-presentation strategy that influencers must actively manage, particularly as they navigate the tension between commercial partnerships and maintaining a genuine connection with their audience; the study found that authenticity-related strategies, when perceived as credible by followers, could offset some of the scepticism that commercial partnerships might otherwise generate. Table 2 summarises key findings from this stream of the literature.

**Table 2: Selected Studies on Parasocial Relationships, Trust, and Authenticity**

| <b>Author(s) / Year</b>                        | <b>Focus</b>                                            | <b>Key Findings</b>                                                                                      |
|------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Lou & Yuan (2019)                              | Message value, trust, and branded content               | Informational and entertainment value shaped trust, which positively influenced purchase intention.      |
| Jin, Muqaddam, & Ryu (2019)                    | Parasocial relationships and vicarious brand experience | Parasocial bonds and vicarious experience jointly shaped emotional engagement with brands.               |
| Sokolova & Kefi (2020)                         | Instagram and YouTube comparison                        | Credibility and parasocial interaction both predicted purchase intention, with platform-based variation. |
| Djafarova & Trofimenko (2019)                  | 'Instafamous' micro-celebrities                         | Followers valued perceived authenticity and relatability of micro-celebrities highly.                    |
| Audrezet, de Kerviler, & Guidry Moulard (2020) | Influencer authenticity as a strategic practice         | Authenticity is an actively managed self-presentation strategy that can offset commercial scepticism.    |

### 2.3 Platform-Specific and Content-Related Dynamics

A third stream of research examines how influencer marketing effectiveness varies across social media platforms and content formats. Lim, Radzol, Cheah, and Wong (2017) found that social media influencer marketing significantly shaped purchase intention among younger consumers, with customer attitude toward the endorsed brand acting as a partial mediating mechanism between influencer exposure and purchase intention. Casaló, Flavián, and Ibáñez-Sánchez (2020) examined Instagram influencers specifically and identified originality of content and interaction with followers as significant antecedents of perceived opinion leadership, which in turn shaped followers' willingness to imitate the influencer's purchasing behaviour and to spread positive word of mouth about endorsed brands. Lee and Watkins (2016) focused on YouTube vlogger content in the luxury goods category and found that exposure to vlogger content positively shaped consumers' perceptions of luxury brand value and purchase intentions, suggesting that video-based, longer-form influencer content can be particularly effective for higher-involvement product categories where consumers seek more detailed information before purchase. Ki and Kim (2019) proposed that consumers' desire to mimic admired influencers functions as an important underlying mechanism linking exposure to influencer content with subsequent purchase-related behaviour, particularly for visually oriented lifestyle and fashion content. Ye, Hudders, De Jans, and De Veirman (2021) conducted a bibliometric analysis of the influencer marketing research field and observed a marked concentration of studies on Instagram relative to other platforms, alongside a growing but still comparatively underdeveloped body of research on newer, short-form video platforms, highlighting a specific direction in which future platform-focused research is likely to expand. Related work on live-streaming commerce, an increasingly influencer-adjacent format in many markets, similarly points toward flow, entertainment value, social interaction, and perceived endorsement as significant drivers of consumers' intention to continue using live-stream shopping platforms, suggesting that the psychological mechanisms identified in influencer marketing research extend, with some adaptation, into adjacent real-time commerce formats (Chen & Lin, 2018). Table 3 summarises key findings from this stream of the literature.

**Table 3: Selected Studies on Platform-Specific and Content-Related Dynamics**

| Author(s) / Year                         | Focus                                                    | Key Findings                                                                                                   |
|------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Lim, Radzol, Cheah, & Wong (2017)        | Social media influencer marketing and purchase intention | Customer attitude partially mediated the relationship between influencer exposure and purchase intention.      |
| Casaló, Flavián, & Ibáñez-Sánchez (2020) | Instagram opinion leadership                             | Content originality and follower interaction predicted opinion leadership and imitation of purchase behaviour. |
| Lee & Watkins (2016)                     | YouTube vloggers and luxury brands                       | Vlogger content exposure positively shaped luxury brand value perception and purchase intention.               |
| Ki & Kim (2019)                          | Consumer desire to mimic                                 | Mimicry desire mediated the relationship                                                                       |

|                                           |                                                        |                                                                                                  |
|-------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                           | influencers                                            | between influencer exposure and purchase-related behaviour.                                      |
| Ye, Hudders, De Jans, & De Veirman (2021) | Bibliometric analysis of influencer marketing research | Research remains concentrated on Instagram, with newer platforms comparatively under-researched. |

## ***2.4 Sponsorship Disclosure, Persuasion Knowledge, and Ethical Considerations***

A fourth theme in the literature concerns the effects of sponsorship disclosure and the activation of consumers' persuasion knowledge — their understanding of, and ability to recognise, commercial persuasion attempts — on the effectiveness of influencer marketing. Boerman, Willemsen, and Van Der Aa (2017) found that explicit sponsorship disclosure on Facebook activated consumers' recognition of persuasive intent, which in some conditions reduced positive brand attitudes, though the effect was moderated by how the disclosure was worded and positioned within the post. Evans, Phua, Lim, and Jun (2017) similarly examined Instagram influencer advertising disclosure and found that clearer disclosure language increased consumers' recognition of advertising content without necessarily producing uniformly negative attitudinal consequences, suggesting that transparent disclosure need not be commercially self-defeating if managed thoughtfully. Schouten, Janssen, and Verspaget (2020) compared celebrity and influencer endorsements directly and found that influencers generated stronger identification and perceived credibility among followers than traditional celebrities, an advantage that endured even when commercial sponsorship was disclosed, indicating that the persuasive advantage of influencers over celebrities is not solely a function of concealed commercial intent. At the same time, several studies caution that the effectiveness of disclosure-related transparency depends heavily on audience characteristics and platform norms, and that over-commercialised or excessively frequent sponsored content can erode the very authenticity and trust that make influencer marketing effective in the first place, creating a persistent tension between commercial scale and perceived genuineness that runs throughout the broader literature reviewed in this paper.

## **3. Research Methodology**

This paper adopts a narrative literature-review methodology rather than a primary empirical survey, since its purpose is to synthesise and critically organise existing research on influencer marketing and its relationship with consumer decision-making. The review process followed several structured steps. First, a search was conducted across academic databases and repositories commonly used in marketing and communication research, including Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, Taylor & Francis Online, SAGE Journals, Emerald Insight, and Springer Link. Search terms included combinations of keywords such as 'influencer marketing', 'social media influencer', 'consumer decision-making', 'purchase intention', 'source credibility', 'parasocial relationship', and 'sponsorship disclosure'.

Second, inclusion criteria were applied to select relevant studies: publications had to be peer-reviewed journal articles; published between 2014 and 2021, a period chosen to capture the

maturation of influencer marketing both as an academic research area and as an established digital marketing practice; and substantively concerned with the relationship between influencer marketing activity and consumer attitudes, purchase intention, or related decision-making outcomes. Studies focused primarily on unrelated aspects of social media marketing, such as general brand-page engagement unrelated to individual influencers, were excluded, as were studies published outside the specified date range unless required for essential conceptual background.

Third, the shortlisted studies were read in full and organised thematically, since a thematic structure better supports comparison across platforms, influencer tiers, and product categories than a purely chronological presentation. Four themes were identified inductively from repeated patterns across the literature: source credibility and influencer attributes; parasocial relationships, trust, and authenticity; platform-specific and content-related dynamics; and sponsorship disclosure together with persuasion knowledge and ethical considerations. Findings from each study were extracted and tabulated to allow side-by-side comparison, as reflected in Tables 1 through 3. Finally, the synthesised findings were used to develop the conclusions and future research directions presented in the sections that follow. As with any narrative review, this approach does not claim the exhaustive coverage of a formal systematic review or meta-analysis; rather, it aims to provide a coherent, thematically organised synthesis of an active and rapidly evolving research area.

#### **4. Conclusion**

This review has synthesised recent academic literature on influencer marketing and its relationship with consumer decision-making, drawing on studies published between 2014 and 2021 that collectively span the emergence, maturation, and increasing scrutiny of influencer marketing as a digital marketing practice. Across the four themes examined, several consistent patterns emerge. First, source credibility — comprising expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness — remains a foundational mechanism through which influencer marketing shapes consumer attitudes and purchase intention, though its effectiveness is conditioned by the congruence between influencer, product, and audience self-concept rather than operating as a uniform, one-size-fits-all effect. Second, parasocial relationships, trust, and perceived authenticity emerge as equally central mechanisms, with followers' sense of intimacy and genuine connection with influencers frequently cited as a key differentiator between influencer marketing and traditional celebrity endorsement or brand-controlled advertising.

Third, platform and content format matter: research suggests that visually oriented platforms such as Instagram favour dynamics of opinion leadership and imitation, while longer-form video content on platforms such as YouTube appears particularly effective for higher-involvement product categories requiring more detailed information processing, though research on newer short-form video platforms remains comparatively limited relative to their growing commercial importance. Fourth, the literature reveals a persistent tension between commercial transparency and perceived authenticity: sponsorship disclosure activates consumers' persuasion knowledge and

can, in some circumstances, reduce positive brand attitudes, yet clear and thoughtfully positioned disclosure does not appear to be uniformly damaging, and influencers often retain a credibility advantage over traditional celebrities even when commercial relationships are disclosed.

Taken together, the reviewed literature suggests that influencer marketing's impact on consumer decision-making operates through a layered set of psychological and relational mechanisms rather than through follower count or reach alone, a finding with direct relevance for marketers seeking to design more effective and more ethically sound influencer partnerships. For practitioners, the evidence points toward prioritising genuine product-influencer-audience fit and long-term relationship building over simple follower-count maximisation, and toward managing sponsorship disclosure transparently rather than treating it as a purely regulatory burden to be minimised. For researchers, the review highlights that the field, while maturing rapidly, still contains significant gaps regarding platform diversity, longitudinal effects, and the ethical dimensions of influencer-mediated persuasion, which are addressed further in the following section on future research directions.

It is also worth emphasising that the mechanisms identified across this review — credibility, congruence, parasocial connection, authenticity, and transparent disclosure — are not independent levers that marketers can optimise in isolation, but interact with one another in ways that the current literature has only begun to map systematically. A highly credible influencer promoting an incongruent product, for instance, may generate less favourable outcomes than a moderately credible influencer promoting a well-matched product, while an authentic-seeming influencer who discloses sponsorship transparently may retain follower trust in ways that a less transparent but nominally more credible influencer cannot. Recognising these interactions, rather than treating each mechanism as a standalone predictor of consumer decision-making, is likely to be essential both for advancing theoretical understanding of influencer marketing and for guiding more effective, more transparent, and more sustainable influencer marketing practice going forward.

## 5. Future Work

Several directions for future research emerge from the gaps identified in this review. First, the existing literature remains heavily concentrated on Instagram and, to a lesser extent, YouTube, while newer short-form video platforms that have grown substantially in commercial importance remain comparatively under-researched; future studies should extend the theoretical frameworks developed for established platforms to these newer contexts, testing whether mechanisms such as source credibility, parasocial interaction, and disclosure effects operate similarly or differently given these platforms' distinctive content formats and algorithmic dynamics.

Second, the overwhelming majority of studies reviewed employ cross-sectional survey or experimental designs capturing attitudes and behavioural intentions at a single point in time; longitudinal research designs are needed to examine whether influencer marketing effects on consumer decision-making persist, strengthen, or decay over the course of an ongoing influencer-brand partnership, and whether repeated exposure to sponsored content gradually erodes the

perceived authenticity that appears central to influencer marketing effectiveness. Third, much of the existing research relies on self-reported purchase intention rather than verified purchase behaviour; future studies incorporating actual transactional or platform-level engagement data would strengthen the evidentiary basis for claims about influencer marketing's commercial impact.

Fourth, given the consistent finding that product-influencer-audience congruence conditions marketing effectiveness, future research could usefully develop more precise, quantifiable measures of congruence that go beyond broad category matching, potentially incorporating computational or algorithmic approaches to assess semantic and visual alignment between influencer content and endorsed products at scale. Fifth, the ethical and regulatory dimensions of influencer marketing warrant continued attention, particularly as disclosure regulations evolve across jurisdictions; comparative cross-national research examining how differing disclosure requirements and enforcement practices shape both influencer behaviour and consumer trust would be a valuable addition to the literature. Finally, future research should give greater attention to influencer marketing's effects on vulnerable or younger audiences, including adolescents, given growing concern about the blurred boundary between authentic content and commercial persuasion in social media environments frequented by this demographic. Addressing these directions would strengthen the theoretical and practical foundations of influencer marketing research as the practice continues to evolve alongside the platforms on which it depends.

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