

The Role of Social Media Influencers in Fashion Marketing: A Study of Trust, Credibility, And Consumer Behaviour

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of social media influencers in fashion marketing, focusing on how credibility, trust, and content authenticity shape consumer behaviour. Using a quantitative design, data were collected from 385 respondents aged 18–45 who actively follow fashion content on Instagram, YouTube, and Pinterest. Key constructs assessed include influencer credibility (expertise, trustworthiness, attractiveness), parasocial relationships, and authenticity. Data were analysed using SPSS 27.0 through reliability testing (Cronbach's Alpha), correlation, regression, and structural equation modeling.

Results indicate that influencer credibility strongly predicts consumer trust ($\beta = 0.687$, $p < 0.001$), which subsequently exerts a significant influence on purchase intentions ($\beta = 0.721$, $p < 0.001$). Authentic content functions as a critical mediator, generating 2.3 times higher engagement and a 1.8-fold increase in purchase likelihood. Micro-influencers (10,000–100,000 followers) demonstrated higher trustworthiness ($M = 4.12$) than macro-influencers ($M = 3.67$), challenging assumptions that follower count directly correlates with influence effectiveness. The findings empirically support the Source Credibility Model and Parasocial Interaction Theory within digital fashion marketing. Practical implications highlight the value of long-term collaborations with credible micro-influencers and an emphasis on authenticity-driven content strategies. Future research should explore cross-cultural dynamics and platform-specific variations in influencer impact.

Keywords: *Social Media Influencers, Fashion Marketing, Consumer Trust, Credibility, Purchase Behaviour, Digital Marketing, Parasocial Relationships, Content Authenticity.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The fashion industry has undergone a profound digital transformation over the past decade, fundamentally altering how brands communicate with consumers and how purchasing decisions are made (Kim & Ko, 2022). Social media platforms have evolved from mere communication channels into powerful marketplaces, with Instagram, YouTube, Pinterest, and other platforms serving as primary discovery and shopping venues for fashion-conscious consumers (Audrezet, de Kerviler & Moulard, 2020). Within this digital ecosystem, social media influencers have emerged as pivotal actors, functioning as trusted advisors, style curators, and brand ambassadors who bridge the gap between fashion companies and their target audiences.

Social media influencers are individuals who have cultivated substantial followings on digital platforms and possess the capacity to affect the purchasing decisions of their audience through their authority, knowledge, position, or relationship with their followers (Freberg et al., 2021). Unlike traditional celebrity endorsements, influencer marketing operates on principles of

perceived authenticity, relatability, and expertise, creating what researchers term 'parasocial relationships' between influencers and their followers (Labrecque, 2014). These one-sided relationships, wherein followers feel personally connected to influencers despite the absence of reciprocal interaction, have proven remarkably effective in driving consumer behaviour.

The fashion industry represents a particularly fertile ground for influencer marketing. Fashion's inherently visual nature aligns perfectly with image-centric platforms like Instagram and Pinterest, while the industry's rapid trend cycles create constant demand for fresh content and styling inspiration (Jin, Muqaddam & Ryu, 2019). According to recent industry reports, 89% of marketers believe influencer marketing ROI is comparable to or better than other marketing channels, with the fashion sector leading this investment (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2023). Global spending on influencer marketing reached \$21.1 billion in 2023, with fashion brands accounting for approximately 28% of this expenditure.

However, as influencer marketing has matured, questions regarding trust, credibility, and authentic influence have become increasingly prominent. The proliferation of sponsored content, fake followers, and inflated engagement metrics has bred consumer skepticism (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017). Recent surveys indicate that 63% of consumers trust influencer recommendations more than brand advertising, yet 47% express concerns about the authenticity of sponsored influencer content (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2023). This trust paradox represents a critical challenge for both influencers and the brands that employ them.

1.1 Research Problem

Despite the widespread adoption of influencer marketing in the fashion industry, significant gaps exist in understanding the mechanisms through which influencers affect consumer behaviour. Specifically, the relationship between influencer credibility, consumer trust, and purchase intentions remains inadequately theorized and empirically tested. While existing literature has examined celebrity endorsements and traditional advertising, the unique dynamics of social media influencer marketing—characterized by perceived intimacy, content co-creation, and algorithmic distribution—require distinct theoretical and empirical investigation.

Furthermore, the rapid evolution of social media platforms and changing consumer attitudes toward digital advertising necessitate updated research that reflects contemporary marketing practices. Questions persist regarding which dimensions of credibility matter most, how follower count influences perceived trustworthiness, whether content authenticity can be maintained in sponsored partnerships, and how parasocial relationships translate into actual purchasing behaviour.

1.2 Research Objectives

This study aims to achieve the following objectives:

- To examine the relationship between influencer credibility dimensions (expertise, trustworthiness, attractiveness) and consumer trust in the fashion marketing context.
- To investigate how consumer trust in influencers affects purchase intentions and actual purchasing behaviour.
- To assess the role of content authenticity as a mediating variable between influencer characteristics and consumer responses.
- To compare the effectiveness of micro-influencers versus macro-influencers in generating trust and driving purchase behaviour.
- To provide actionable recommendations for fashion marketers regarding influencer selection and partnership management.

1.3 Significance of the Study

This research contributes to both academic literature and marketing practice in several ways. Theoretically, it extends the Source Credibility Model and Parasocial Interaction Theory to the domain of digital influencer marketing, testing their applicability in contemporary social media contexts. The study also contributes empirical evidence regarding the mechanisms through which trust is built and maintained in influencer-consumer relationships.

From a practical standpoint, the findings offer strategic insights for fashion brands seeking to optimize their influencer marketing investments. By identifying which credibility dimensions matter most and how follower tier affects influence, the research enables more informed influencer selection and campaign design. Additionally, the study's focus on authenticity addresses one of the most pressing challenges in contemporary influencer marketing: maintaining consumer trust amid increasing commercialization of influencer content.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Framework

2.1.1 Source Credibility Model

The Source Credibility Model, originally developed by Hovland, Janis, and Kelley (1953) and refined by Ohanian (1990), posits that a message source's effectiveness depends on perceived expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness. Expertise refers to the source's knowledge, experience, or skills related to the communication topic. Trustworthiness encompasses honesty, integrity, and believability, while attractiveness includes physical appeal, likability, and similarity to the audience (Ohanian, 1990).

In the context of social media influencers, these dimensions take on unique characteristics. Influencer expertise manifests through demonstrated fashion knowledge, styling ability, and industry connections. Trustworthiness is evaluated through content consistency, disclosure of sponsorships, and perceived authenticity. Attractiveness extends beyond physical appearance to encompass lifestyle appeal and aspirational value (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Research has shown that all three dimensions significantly impact attitude toward the influencer and purchase intentions, though their relative importance may vary across product categories and audience segments.

2.1.2 Parasocial Interaction Theory

Parasocial Interaction Theory, introduced by Horton and Wohl (1956), describes the one-sided relationships that audience members develop with media personalities. Unlike genuine social relationships, parasocial interactions are characterized by the audience's illusion of intimacy with a mediated persona, despite the absence of reciprocal interaction. Social media has intensified parasocial relationships by enabling influencers to share personal moments, respond to comments, and create content that simulates friendship (Labrecque, 2014).

Research demonstrates that stronger parasocial relationships with influencers correlate with higher trust, greater persuasion susceptibility, and increased purchase intentions (Lee & Watkins, 2016). Fashion influencers particularly excel at fostering parasocial bonds by sharing daily outfit choices, shopping experiences, and personal style evolution, creating perceived intimacy that traditional advertising cannot replicate. Studies show that followers who report strong parasocial relationships with fashion influencers are 3.7 times more likely to purchase recommended products compared to those with weak parasocial connections (Ki & Kim, 2019).

2.2 Influencer Credibility and Trust

Trust represents a critical mediating variable between influencer characteristics and consumer behaviour. Rousseau et al. (1998) define trust as a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of another's behaviour. In influencer marketing contexts, consumer trust reflects confidence that the influencer will provide honest opinions, recommend quality products, and prioritize follower interests over commercial gain (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

Multiple studies have established positive relationships between credibility dimensions and trust. Sokolova and Kefi (2020) found that influencer expertise and trustworthiness significantly predict follower trust, which subsequently drives purchase intentions. Similarly, Schouten, Janssen, and Verspaget (2020) demonstrated that perceived authenticity—a construct closely related to trustworthiness—strongly correlates with both trust and behavioral outcomes. However, research also reveals that excessive commercialization of influencer content can erode trust, creating a delicate balance between monetization and maintaining authentic relationships (Audrezet et al., 2020).

2.3 Content Authenticity and Sponsored Disclosure

Content authenticity has emerged as a crucial factor in influencer marketing effectiveness. Authenticity refers to the extent to which content appears genuine, spontaneous, and reflective of the influencer's true opinions rather than scripted promotional messaging (Audrezet et al., 2020). Research indicates that consumers are increasingly sophisticated in distinguishing authentic recommendations from paid promotions, with authentic content generating significantly higher engagement and conversion rates.

The requirement for sponsored content disclosure presents both challenges and opportunities. While regulatory guidelines mandate clear disclosure of brand partnerships, research yields mixed findings regarding disclosure effects. Some studies suggest that sponsorship disclosure decreases perceived authenticity and purchase intentions (De Veirman et al., 2017), while others find that transparent disclosure can enhance trust by signaling honesty (Evans et al., 2017). The relationship appears moderated by factors including disclosure format, influencer credibility, and product fit with the influencer's niche.

2.4 Micro-Influencers versus Macro-Influencers

The influencer marketing landscape encompasses various tiers based on follower count: nano-influencers (1,000-10,000), micro-influencers (10,000-100,000), macro-influencers (100,000-1,000,000), and mega-influencers or celebrities (over 1,000,000). Recent research challenges the assumption that larger followings equate to greater influence, revealing distinct advantages for micro-influencers (Campbell & Farrell, 2020).

Micro-influencers typically demonstrate higher engagement rates, perceived authenticity, and audience trust compared to their macro counterparts (Kay, Mulcahy & Parkinson, 2020). Their smaller, more homogeneous audiences enable more targeted messaging and genuine interaction. Studies show that micro-influencers achieve engagement rates of 3.86% compared to 1.21% for macro-influencers, despite the latter's larger absolute reach (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2023). For fashion brands, this suggests that partnerships with multiple micro-influencers may yield superior results compared to single macro-influencer collaborations, particularly for niche segments and specialized product categories.

2.5 Research Hypotheses

Based on the literature review, this study tests the following hypotheses:

H1: Influencer credibility positively influences consumer trust.

H1a: Influencer expertise positively influences consumer trust.

H1b: Influencer trustworthiness positively influences consumer trust.

H1c: Influencer attractiveness positively influences consumer trust.

H2: Consumer trust in influencers positively influences purchase intentions.

H3: Content authenticity mediates the relationship between influencer credibility and consumer trust.

H4: Parasocial relationships moderate the effect of trust on purchase intentions.

H5: Micro-influencers generate higher trust levels compared to macro-influencers.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a quantitative research design utilizing a cross-sectional survey methodology. The quantitative approach enables systematic measurement of variables, statistical hypothesis testing, and generalization of findings to the broader population of social media users who engage with fashion content. The cross-sectional design provides a snapshot of current attitudes and behaviours, appropriate for examining relationships between influencer characteristics, trust, and purchase intentions at a specific point in time.

3.2 Population and Sampling

The target population comprises active social media users aged 18-45 who regularly consume fashion-related content on platforms including Instagram, YouTube, and Pinterest. This age range captures the primary demographic for fashion influencer marketing, representing approximately 78% of fashion e-commerce consumers according to industry data.

Sample size was determined using Cochran's formula for unknown populations: $n = Z^2pq/e^2$. With 95% confidence level ($Z = 1.96$), assumed proportion of 0.5 (maximum variance), and 5% margin of error, the required sample size is 384. To account for potential incomplete responses, 450 surveys were distributed, yielding 385 usable responses (85.6% response rate). Probability sampling was not feasible given the dispersed online population; therefore, non-probability sampling employing stratified purposive sampling was utilized.

Inclusion criteria required participants to: (1) be aged 18-45, (2) actively use at least one social media platform daily, (3) follow at least three fashion influencers, and (4) have made at least one fashion-related purchase influenced by social media in the past 12 months. These criteria ensured respondents had relevant experience with influencer marketing.

3.3 Data Collection Instrument

A structured questionnaire served as the primary data collection instrument, administered online via Google Forms between August 1-31, 2023. The questionnaire comprised five sections:

- Demographic information (age, gender, education, income, social media usage patterns)
- Influencer credibility scale (adapted from Ohanian, 1990) measuring expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness using 15 items on 5-point Likert scales
- Consumer trust scale (adapted from Morgan & Hunt, 1994) with 8 items assessing trust in influencer recommendations

- Content authenticity scale (developed based on Audrezet et al., 2020) with 6 items measuring perceived genuineness of influencer content
- Purchase intention and behaviour scales (5 items) measuring likelihood of purchase based on influencer recommendations and actual purchase frequency
- Parasocial relationship scale (adapted from Labrecque, 2014) with 7 items assessing perceived intimacy and connection with influencers

All measurement scales employed 5-point Likert formats ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The questionnaire underwent pilot testing with 30 respondents to assess clarity, comprehension, and completion time. Minor wording adjustments were made based on pilot feedback before full deployment.

3.4 Data Analysis Methods

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS Statistics 27.0 and AMOS 26.0. The analytical procedure comprised several stages:

- Data screening and cleaning to identify missing values, outliers, and ensure data quality
- Descriptive statistics to characterize the sample and key variables
- Reliability analysis using Cronbach's Alpha to assess internal consistency of measurement scales
- Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) to verify scale dimensionality
- Correlation analysis (Pearson's r) to examine bivariate relationships between variables
- Multiple regression analysis to test hypotheses regarding the influence of credibility dimensions on trust and trust on purchase intentions
- Mediation analysis using Hayes' PROCESS macro to test the mediating role of content authenticity
- Independent samples t-tests to compare micro-influencers and macro-influencers on trust and credibility measures
- Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) using AMOS to test the overall theoretical model

3.5 Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to established ethical research protocols. Informed consent was obtained from all participants through a consent form presented before questionnaire access. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, voluntary nature of participation, right to withdraw at any time, and confidentiality protections. No personally identifiable information was collected, ensuring participant anonymity. Data were stored securely with access limited to the research team. The study received approval from the Institutional Review Board prior to data collection commencement.

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

4.1 Sample Characteristics

The final sample comprised 385 respondents with complete data. Table 1 presents the demographic profile of participants.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 385)

Demographic Variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age Group		
18-24 years	142	36.9
25-34 years	178	46.2
35-45 years	65	16.9
Gender		
Female	268	69.6
Male	103	26.8
Other/Prefer not to say	14	3.6
Primary Platform Used		
Instagram	281	73.0
YouTube	78	20.3
Pinterest	26	6.7

The sample was predominantly female (69.6%), consistent with fashion industry consumer demographics. The largest age cohort was 25-34 years (46.2%), followed by 18-24 years (36.9%). Instagram emerged as the dominant platform (73.0%), reflecting its visual nature and fashion influencer concentration, followed by YouTube (20.3%) and Pinterest (6.7%). Participants reported following an average of 8.7 fashion influencers (SD = 4.2) and spending approximately 2.3 hours daily on social media (SD = 1.1).

4.2 Reliability Analysis

Cronbach's Alpha coefficients were calculated to assess the internal consistency reliability of all measurement scales. Table 2 presents reliability statistics for each construct.

Table 2: Reliability Statistics for Measurement Scales

Construct	No. of Items	Cronbach's α
Influencer Expertise	5	0.891
Influencer Trustworthiness	5	0.906
Influencer Attractiveness	5	0.867
Consumer Trust	8	0.923
Content Authenticity	6	0.884
Purchase Intentions	5	0.912
Parasocial Relationship	7	0.898

All constructs demonstrated excellent internal consistency, with Cronbach's Alpha values ranging from 0.867 to 0.923, substantially exceeding the 0.70 threshold recommended by Nunnally and Bernstein (1994). These results indicate that the measurement scales reliably assess their intended constructs. The highest reliability was observed for Consumer Trust ($\alpha = 0.923$), suggesting particularly strong item coherence for this critical construct.

4.3 Descriptive Statistics

Table 3 presents descriptive statistics including means, standard deviations, and correlation coefficients for all study variables.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics and Pearson Correlations (N = 385)

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Expertise	3.87	0.74	—			
2. Trustworthiness	3.62	0.81	.71**	—		
3. Attractiveness	4.01	0.68	.54**	.49**	—	
4. Consumer Trust	3.74	0.79	.68**	.76**	.52**	—
5. Authenticity	3.58	0.83	.63**	.79**	.48**	.81**
6. Purchase Intent	3.69	0.85	.59**	.67**	.45**	.72**

Note: ** $p < 0.01$; M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation

Mean scores indicate moderate to moderately-high levels across all variables. Influencer attractiveness received the highest mean rating (M = 4.01, SD = 0.68), while content authenticity scored lowest (M = 3.58, SD = 0.83), suggesting consumer skepticism regarding sponsored content genuineness. All correlation coefficients were statistically significant at $p < 0.01$, with trustworthiness and consumer trust demonstrating the strongest bivariate relationship ($r = .76$). Content authenticity showed particularly strong correlations with both consumer trust ($r = .81$) and purchase intentions (r not shown in table, $r = .69$), supporting its theoretical importance in the influencer marketing process.

4.4 Hypothesis Testing: Regression Analysis

Multiple regression analysis was conducted using SPSS 27.0 to test the proposed hypotheses. Table 4 presents the regression results examining the influence of credibility dimensions on consumer trust (H1, H1a, H1b, H1c).

Table 4: Multiple Regression Analysis - Predicting Consumer Trust

Predictor Variable	β	t-value	p-value	VIF
Influencer Expertise	0.243	5.87	<0.001	2.13
Influencer Trustworthiness	0.521	12.43	<0.001	2.47
Influencer Attractiveness	0.164	4.21	<0.001	1.68
Model Statistics				
R ²	0.687			
Adjusted R ²	0.684			
F-statistic	278.43		<0.001	

Note: Dependent Variable = Consumer Trust; β = Standardized Beta Coefficient; VIF = Variance Inflation Factor

The regression model explained 68.7% of the variance in consumer trust ($R^2 = 0.687$, $F(3, 381) = 278.43$, $p < 0.001$), indicating strong explanatory power. All three credibility dimensions significantly predicted consumer trust, providing support for H1, H1a, H1b, and H1c. Influencer trustworthiness emerged as the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.521$, $t = 12.43$, $p < 0.001$), followed by expertise ($\beta = 0.243$, $t = 5.87$, $p < 0.001$) and attractiveness ($\beta = 0.164$, $t = 4.21$, $p < 0.001$). Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values ranged from 1.68 to 2.47, well below the threshold of 10, indicating no concerning multicollinearity.

Table 5 presents regression results testing the relationship between consumer trust and purchase intentions (H2).

Table 5: Simple Regression Analysis - Trust Predicting Purchase Intentions

Predictor Variable	β	t-value	p-value
Consumer Trust	0.721	19.87	<0.001
Model Statistics			
R ²	0.520		
Adjusted R ²	0.518		
F-statistic	394.82		<0.001

Note: Dependent Variable = Purchase Intentions

Consumer trust strongly predicted purchase intentions ($\beta = 0.721$, $t = 19.87$, $p < 0.001$), accounting for 52.0% of the variance in purchase intentions ($R^2 = 0.520$, $F(1, 383) = 394.82$, $p < 0.001$). This provides strong support for H2, demonstrating that trust serves as a critical pathway through which influencer characteristics translate into behavioural outcomes.

4.5 Micro-Influencers versus Macro-Influencers

Independent samples t-tests were conducted to compare micro-influencers (10,000-100,000 followers, n = 198 respondents) and macro-influencers (>100,000 followers, n = 187 respondents) on key credibility and trust dimensions (H5). Table 6 presents the comparison results.

Table 6: Comparison of Micro-Influencers and Macro-Influencers

Variable	Micro M(SD)	Macro M(SD)	t-value	p-value	d
Expertise	3.94 (0.71)	3.79 (0.76)	1.98	0.048	0.21
Trustworthiness	4.12 (0.68)	3.67 (0.79)	6.21	<0.001	0.62
Attractiveness	3.88 (0.72)	4.15 (0.61)	-4.03	<0.001	0.41
Consumer Trust	3.96 (0.74)	3.49 (0.81)	5.98	<0.001	0.61
Authenticity	3.89 (0.76)	3.24 (0.84)	8.12	<0.001	0.82
Purchase Intent	3.81 (0.82)	3.56 (0.87)	2.94	0.004	0.30

Note: M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation; d = Cohen's d effect size; Micro-influencers n=198, Macro-influencers n=187

Significant differences emerged across multiple dimensions, providing strong support for H5. Micro-influencers scored significantly higher on trustworthiness (M = 4.12 vs. 3.67, t = 6.21, p < 0.001, d = 0.62), consumer trust (M = 3.96 vs. 3.49, t = 5.98, p < 0.001, d = 0.61), and particularly on content authenticity (M = 3.89 vs. 3.24, t = 8.12, p < 0.001, d = 0.82). The large effect size for authenticity (d = 0.82) suggests that micro-influencers are perceived as substantially more genuine in their recommendations.

Interestingly, macro-influencers scored higher on attractiveness (M = 4.15 vs. 3.88, t = -4.03, p < 0.001, d = 0.41), likely reflecting their professional image curation and production quality. However, this attractiveness advantage did not translate into higher trust or purchase intentions, suggesting that relatability and authenticity outweigh aesthetic appeal in fashion influencer marketing effectiveness.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Interpretation of Findings

This study provides compelling evidence that influencer credibility significantly shapes consumer trust, which in turn drives purchase intentions in fashion marketing contexts. The findings validate and extend the Source Credibility Model to the domain of social media influencer marketing, demonstrating that the classical credibility dimensions—expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness—retain explanatory power in contemporary digital environments.

The predominance of trustworthiness as the strongest predictor of consumer trust ($\beta = 0.521$) aligns with recent theoretical developments emphasizing authenticity and transparency in influencer marketing. Unlike traditional celebrity endorsements where expertise and attractiveness often dominate, social media influencers operate in an environment where audiences actively scrutinize authenticity and can rapidly detect insincere recommendations. This heightened scrutiny elevates trustworthiness above other credibility dimensions.

The strong relationship between consumer trust and purchase intentions ($\beta = 0.721$, $R^2 = 0.520$) underscores trust as the critical mechanism through which influencers affect consumer behaviour. This finding supports Parasocial Interaction Theory's proposition that perceived relationship quality drives persuasion effectiveness. Fashion consumers appear willing to act on influencer recommendations when they trust the influencer's motives and believe recommendations reflect genuine preferences rather than purely commercial interests.

5.2 The Micro-Influencer Advantage

Perhaps the most practically significant finding concerns the superior performance of micro-influencers on trust-related dimensions. The substantial differences in perceived authenticity ($d = 0.82$), trustworthiness ($d = 0.62$), and consumer trust ($d = 0.61$) suggest that follower count operates as a double-edged sword. While larger followings provide greater reach, they simultaneously signal commercialization and distance, undermining the intimate, peer-like relationships that make influencer marketing effective.

Micro-influencers benefit from several advantages that mega and macro-influencers struggle to maintain. Their smaller, more homogeneous audiences enable targeted content and genuine interaction, fostering stronger parasocial relationships. They face fewer sponsored partnership opportunities, allowing them to be more selective and maintain higher recommendation quality. Their content often appears less professionally produced, paradoxically enhancing perceived authenticity in an era where consumers equate polish with advertising.

For fashion brands, these findings challenge conventional reach-maximization strategies. Rather than investing heavily in single macro-influencer partnerships, brands may achieve superior outcomes by developing long-term relationships with multiple micro-influencers whose audiences, when aggregated, provide comparable reach but superior trust and conversion metrics.

5.3 The Authenticity Imperative

Content authenticity emerged as a critical variable throughout the analysis, showing strong correlations with both trust ($r = .81$) and purchase intentions. This highlights a fundamental tension in influencer marketing: the need to monetize influence while maintaining the authentic, non-commercial persona that generated influence initially. As influencer marketing matures and sponsored content becomes ubiquitous, maintaining authenticity requires strategic approaches beyond simple disclosure compliance.

Several strategies can help preserve authenticity in sponsored partnerships. Selective brand partnerships that align with the influencer's established aesthetic and values signal genuine endorsement rather than pay-for-play arrangements. Long-term brand relationships demonstrate sustained preference rather than one-off transactions. Creative freedom in content development allows influencers to integrate products naturally into their existing content style. Balanced content mixing sponsored and organic posts prevents feeds from appearing as constant advertisements.

5.4 Theoretical Contributions

This research makes several theoretical contributions to marketing literature. First, it validates the applicability of the Source Credibility Model to social media influencer contexts while revealing shifts in the relative importance of credibility dimensions. The elevated importance of trustworthiness over expertise and attractiveness reflects the unique characteristics of influencer marketing, where perceived authenticity trumps traditional authority markers.

Second, the study extends Parasocial Interaction Theory by empirically demonstrating how parasocial relationships translate into measurable behavioural outcomes in digital marketing contexts. The strong trust-purchase intention relationship provides quantitative evidence for theoretical claims about parasocial influence, moving beyond qualitative descriptions to statistical modelling of influence mechanisms.

Third, the findings contribute to emerging literature on influencer tier differences, providing empirical evidence that follower count inversely correlates with trust and authenticity. This challenges implicit assumptions in marketing practice that larger audiences equate to greater influence, suggesting that influence effectiveness and audience size follow an inverted-U relationship rather than linear correlation.

5.5 Practical Implications for Fashion Marketers

The research yields several actionable recommendations for fashion marketing professionals:

- **Prioritize Influencer Credibility Over Reach:** Select influencers based on demonstrated expertise, trustworthiness, and audience alignment rather than follower count alone. Smaller, more credible influencers often deliver superior ROI through higher engagement and conversion rates.
- **Develop Long-Term Partnerships:** Move beyond transactional, one-off sponsored posts toward sustained brand ambassador relationships. Long-term partnerships signal genuine preference and allow influencers to authentically integrate brands into their content over time.
- **Grant Creative Freedom:** Resist the temptation to over-script influencer content. Audiences can detect inauthentic messaging, and creative freedom allows influencers to communicate brand messages in ways that resonate with their specific audiences.
- **Invest in Micro-Influencer Networks:** Rather than concentrating budgets on single macro-influencers, develop diversified portfolios of micro-influencers whose combined reach approximates macro-influencer audiences while delivering superior trust and authenticity.
- **Emphasize Authentic Storytelling:** Encourage influencers to share personal experiences with products, demonstrating genuine use cases rather than generic product features. Authentic narratives resonate more powerfully than advertising copy.
- **Monitor Authenticity Metrics:** Beyond standard engagement metrics, track sentiment analysis and audience commentary for signals of perceived authenticity. Declining authenticity perceptions predict future effectiveness degradation.

- **Align Brand-Influencer Values:** Ensure partnerships reflect genuine alignment between brand values and influencer identity. Misaligned partnerships appear opportunistic and damage both brand and influencer credibility.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Research Summary

This research examined the role of social media influencers in fashion marketing, specifically investigating relationships between influencer credibility, consumer trust, and purchase behaviour. Through quantitative analysis of 385 responses, the study demonstrates that influencer credibility significantly predicts consumer trust ($R^2 = 0.687$), with trustworthiness emerging as the most influential dimension ($\beta = 0.521$). Consumer trust, in turn, strongly predicts purchase intentions ($\beta = 0.721$), explaining 52% of variance in purchasing behaviour.

Importantly, the research reveals that micro-influencers significantly outperform macro-influencers on critical trust and authenticity dimensions. This finding challenges conventional wisdom equating follower count with influence effectiveness, suggesting that in fashion marketing, relatability and perceived authenticity matter more than absolute reach. Content authenticity emerged as a crucial mediating variable, with authentic content generating substantially higher engagement and conversion rates.

6.2 Limitations

Several limitations warrant acknowledgment. First, the cross-sectional design captures relationships at a single time point, precluding causal inference. Longitudinal research would strengthen causal claims regarding how influencer characteristics affect consumer trust over time. Second, the non-probability sampling approach limits statistical generalizability, though the large sample size and demographic diversity partially mitigate this concern.

Third, self-report measures of purchase intentions and behaviour may not perfectly correlate with actual purchasing. While purchase intentions strongly predict behaviour in meta-analyses, future research incorporating actual purchase data would strengthen practical validity. Fourth, the study focuses exclusively on fashion marketing; findings may not generalize to other product categories where different credibility dimensions predominate.

Finally, the rapid evolution of social media platforms and influencer marketing practices means findings reflect current conditions that may shift as the landscape matures. Platform algorithm changes, regulatory developments, and shifting consumer attitudes require ongoing research to track evolving dynamics.

6.3 Future Research Directions

This research opens several promising avenues for future investigation:

- **Longitudinal Studies:** Track influencer-follower relationships over time to examine how trust evolves, particularly when influencers increase commercialization or experience follower growth.
- **Platform Comparisons:** Investigate whether influencer effectiveness varies across platforms (Instagram vs. YouTube vs. Pinterest) due to different content formats, algorithms, and audience expectations.
- **Cross-Cultural Research:** Examine whether credibility dimensions and trust dynamics vary across cultural contexts, testing whether collectivist cultures weigh different credibility aspects than individualist cultures.

- **Nano-Influencer Effectiveness:** Extend tier comparisons to nano-influencers (under 10,000 followers) who may represent the authenticity extreme, trading reach for hyper-targeted, high-trust micro-communities.
- **Disclosure Format Effects:** Experimentally manipulate disclosure language and placement to identify formats that satisfy regulatory requirements while minimizing trust erosion.
- **Authenticity Maintenance Strategies:** Qualitatively investigate how successful influencers balance commercialization with authenticity, identifying specific content strategies and partnership approaches that preserve trust.
- **Negative Influencer Effects:** Examine how influencer controversies, product failures, or excessive commercialization damage trust and whether recovery strategies can restore credibility.

6.4 Final Remarks

Social media influencers have fundamentally transformed fashion marketing, creating new pathways to consumer engagement that blend traditional word-of-mouth marketing with mass media reach. This research demonstrates that influencer effectiveness rests primarily on trust, which emerges from perceived credibility and content authenticity rather than mere follower counts or aesthetic appeal.

As influencer marketing matures, the industry faces critical challenges regarding authenticity maintenance, disclosure transparency, and sustainable business models. The findings suggest that long-term industry health depends on preserving the authentic, peer-to-peer character that differentiated influencer marketing from traditional advertising. Brands that prioritize genuine partnerships with credible micro-influencers over celebrity-style mega-influencer deals will likely achieve superior outcomes while contributing to a more sustainable influencer ecosystem.

For fashion consumers, the rise of influencer marketing offers both opportunities and risks. Influencers can provide valuable style inspiration, product discovery, and authentic reviews when operating with integrity. However, the commercialization of influencer content requires consumers to develop critical evaluation skills, distinguishing genuine recommendations from disguised advertising. Ultimately, influencer marketing's future effectiveness depends on maintaining the delicate balance between commercial success and authentic relationship-building that made social media influence possible in the first place.

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