



## Influencer Credibility and Emotional Connection in Social Media Marketing: A Qualitative Study of Influencers, Marketers, and Consumers

Marella Meghana<sup>1\*</sup>, Nattawat Wongwilatnurak<sup>2</sup> and Isaya Sinpongsporn<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Graduate student, Department of Global Communication, Faculty of Communication Arts, Bangkok University.

<sup>2</sup> Academic lecturer, Department of Broadcasting and Streaming Media Production, Faculty of Communication Arts, Bangkok University.

<sup>3</sup> Academic lecturer, Department of Innovative Media Production, Faculty of Communication Arts, Bangkok University.

\*Corresponding author, E-mail: megrm10@gmail.com

### Abstract

With the advent of social media, consumer preferences are shifting quickly, with younger generations increasingly relying on influencer insights when making purchases. This shift has positioned influencer marketing as an important lens to understand contemporary consumer decision-making. This study adopts a qualitative research approach to address these gaps by exploring consumer perceptions of influencer credibility, authenticity, and the role of emotional connection in purchase decisions. Data was collected through in-depth interviews and focus groups with three key stakeholder groups: influencers, marketers, and consumers. The findings indicate that influencer credibility is closely tied to natural self-presentation, accuracy of reviews, and willingness to offer honest criticism. Emotional connection, meanwhile, is fostered through the sharing of real-life stories and personal experiences, which strengthens consumer trust and engagement. Overall, the study highlights that carefully designed influencer–marketer collaborations can significantly drive brand success, while poorly executed strategies risk major setbacks.

**Keywords:** Influencer Marketing, Social Media, Consumer Purchase Decision, Influencer Credibility, Marketing Strategy

### Introduction

Social media's introduction has not only altered communication patterns but also the marketing environment by giving companies new avenues for connecting with their target markets (Sengar, 2021). Influencer marketing, which uses people's social media popularity and credibility to promote goods and services, is one of the most effective and quickly expanding digital marketing strategies (Leung et al., 2022). Influencers are social



media celebrities with sizable and active fan bases who are seen by their audiences as genuine and approachable. Influencer marketing capitalizes on their power. Because of their perceived sincerity, influencers have the power to change the thoughts and actions of their followers, which makes them useful collaborators for companies looking to establish deep connections with customers (Vrontis et al., 2021).

The impact of influencer marketing on consumer purchasing decisions is still being studied and debated, despite the fact that this marketing strategy is very popular. Although a number of studies indicate that influencer endorsements can boost consumer trust, raise brand awareness, and influence purchasing behavior, the precise mechanisms underlying these effects are still unclear (De Veirman et al., 2019, Kádeková & Holienčinová, 2018; Vrontis et al., 2021). Customers' reactions to these promotions can be influenced by a number of factors, including the influencer's reputation, the product's applicability to the influencer's audience, and the sponsored content's transparency. Furthermore, there is a growing interest in determining whether micro-influencers, who may have smaller but more engaged and loyal audiences, or macro-influencers, who have larger followings, have a greater impact on consumers' purchasing decisions. Thus, the present research has examined consumer perceptions of influencer credibility and authenticity and the role of emotional connection while decision making influencer marketing's effectiveness.

### **Problem Statement**

Social media has taken center stage in influencing consumer behavior in the digital age. Brands are increasingly focusing their marketing efforts on platforms like Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Twitter as these platforms have become indispensable to the daily lives of billions of users worldwide. Influencer marketing has become one of the most potent and successful methods used by brands to connect with and interact with consumers. Influencer marketing, as opposed to traditional advertising, enables brands to work with people who have sizable fan bases and a lot of sway over particular niches, allowing for a more genuine and individualized interaction with potential clients.

The need to gain a better understanding of how influencer marketing functions as a strategic tool in influencing consumer purchasing decisions is the driving force behind this study. Although this marketing strategy is becoming more and more popular, it is still unclear exactly how influencers impact consumer behavior. Every year, brands spend millions of dollars on influencer marketing, but it's still unclear if these initiatives are really producing measurable results like higher sales, customer loyalty, and trust. Understanding how influencer marketing affects consumer choices is further complicated by the emergence of micro- and nano-influencers, who have smaller but more engaged



audiences (Vrontis et al., 2021). Thus, it is crucial to evaluate the efficacy of influencer marketing as a tool for influencing consumer purchasing behavior since brands are always searching for new and creative ways to stand out and engage with their target audiences. Furthermore, consumer preferences are shifting quickly, with younger generations particularly Gen Z and Millennials prioritizing social values, authenticity, and trust when making purchases. Because of this change, influencer marketing is even more important for comprehending how contemporary consumers make choices.

Although influencer marketing has been adopted by many brands as an essential part of their overall marketing strategy, little empirical research has been done to examine its true effects on consumer behavior. Despite being widely regarded as a successful strategy for reaching specific audiences, influencer marketing's ability to affect consumer decisions in comparison to more conventional marketing techniques has not yet been thoroughly measured. Furthermore, the swift expansion of influencer marketing has brought about a number of difficulties, such as figuring out how to calculate ROI, evaluating the legitimacy and authenticity of influencers, and dealing with concerns about sponsored content transparency.

### Objectives

1. To examine the Consumer Perceptions of Influencer Credibility and Authenticity
2. To examine the Role of Emotional Connection while making decisions in Influencer Marketing's Effectiveness

### Review of Literature

The rapid expansion of social media platforms has fundamentally transformed the contemporary marketing ecosystem. Over the past decade, the exponential growth in social media usage has intensified digital congestion, commonly referred to as “marketing noise,” thereby diminishing the effectiveness of traditional paid advertisements (Arora & Chand, 2022; Vidani & Das, 2021). The widespread adoption of ad-blocking technologies further compounds this challenge, prompting brands to seek alternative strategies that foster authentic consumer engagement. As a result, customer-centric approaches such as content marketing, native advertising, and influencer marketing have gained prominence. Among these, influencer marketing has emerged as one of the most impactful strategies due to its strong alignment with word-of-mouth communication.

Influencer marketing is frequently conceptualized as a digital evolution of traditional word-of-mouth marketing (Bakker, 2018; Doshi et al., 2022). While both strategies rely on interpersonal influence, influencer marketing differs in its structure and



often paid nature. Drawing on consumer decision-making models, Percy and Elliott (2016) identified influencers as key participants in the purchase process, functioning alongside initiators, deciders, purchasers, and users. Within this framework, influencers play a pivotal role in shaping early-stage perceptions and reducing information asymmetry for consumers.

Recent literature has also emphasized the significance of parasocial relationships in influencer marketing. Parasocial interaction refers to the one-sided emotional bonds that followers develop with influencers, often characterized by feelings of familiarity, trust, and emotional attachment. Empirical studies suggest that parasocial relationships exert a stronger influence on purchase intention than influencer attractiveness or expertise alone (Fernando et al., 2021; Masuda et al., 2022). These relationships enhance perceived authenticity and deepen emotional engagement, making influencer recommendations more persuasive.

The theory of planned behavior (TPB) acts as a major framework for understanding, predicting, and changing human social behavior. The three core components of TPB are attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioral control. According to the theory, behavior intention is an immediate antecedent of the attitude of the consumer. The changes in behavior, normative and control beliefs can produce changes in intentions and these changes in intentions can reflect in the subsequent behavior (Ajzen, 1991). The theory suggests that the key proximal determinant of any individual's actions or behaviors is one's behavioral intention to engage in that behavior. Behavioral intention is one's conscious plan, decision, or self-instruction to perform the target behavior.

## Gap Identified

While the field of influencer marketing and its impact on consumer purchasing decisions has been extensively studied, several gaps in the literature persist. Many studies are conducted in Western contexts, neglecting the Indian context. Further, the existing research emphasizes macro and celebrity influencers, leaving a gap in understanding the effectiveness of micro and nano-influencers. It was also found that platform-specific (Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, or LinkedIn) studies are limited.

## Methodology

### Research Strategy

The present research is qualitative research. Herein interview and focus group methods have been used to collect data. Through the use of focus groups and in-depth



interviews, the transcripts have been collected using open ended qualitative list of questions. The collected data is primary in nature.

### **Population**

The research has been focused to incorporate three types of stakeholders, namely, influencers, marketers, and customers. For influencers, the influencers working in the domain of cosmetic industry focusing on Maybelline India via Instagram have been considered to be population. The reason for choosing this group as respondents is that their followers range from teenagers to adults, across gender identities and skin tones owing to which these influencers cater to varied purchasing behavior. For marketers, the marketing organizations and agencies who work with influencers in the domain of cosmetic industry focusing on Maybelline India and use Instagram as social media platform for these influencers have been considered to be population. The reason for choosing this group as respondents is that these organizations and agencies negotiate contracts, manage collaborations, and ensure content aligns with brand values. Thus, they have insider knowledge on the strategies, rationale, and objectives behind influencer marketing. Herein, only senior managers were considered.

Finally, for customers, the customers who are followers of influencers working in the domain of cosmetic industry focusing on Maybelline India via Instagram have been the population. The reason for choosing this group as respondents is that these customers regularly engage with cosmetic influencers through tutorials, reviews, and brand collaborations. Hence these can provide insights on how influencer content forms perceptions, preferences, and buying decisions.

### **Sampling Design**

The present research has adopted convenience sampling. This is the technique when the respondents are chosen based on the convenience of the researcher. There is no pattern in obtaining the respondents from the selected population. The reason for using convenience sampling is because of ease of access it provides while selecting the participants who are readily available and willing to participate.

### **Sampling Size**

The qualitative analysis conducted in the present research has a total of 6 interview responses. Out of this, 4 interviews are with influencers and 2 are with marketers. Further, focus group method was applied to three groups (6 respondents in each group) of customers, that is 18 customers. The reason for considering three focus groups was that the researcher wanted the groups to be divided into three age groups. This is because with each age group, the cosmetic needs, spending power and perception towards beauty standards change.



### Measuring Instrument

Two sets of question list were created, one for each objective. The first list of questions was for customers to assess how consumers perceive the credibility and authenticity of social media influencers, and how do these perceptions impact their purchasing decisions. Face to face interviews were conducted either by meeting the respondents personally or by connecting with them telephonically or via Google meet/ Zoom meet. The focus group discussions were conducted via Google Meet/ Zoom meet.

### Data Analysis

Coding of text, gauging the steadiness and reliability of coding used in the analysis are to be tested. Lastly, drawing inferences on the foundation of coding and providing the results are the final steps to be performed.

### Validity

Validity establishes whether the results of the findings of the qualitative study are true and certain or not. The results are true if they accurately reflect the situation and are certain if they are supported by evidence. In qualitative studies, validity is established using triangulation methods. The type of triangulation used in the present research is data triangulation. This method involves the collection of data from different sources to increase validity. The present research has collected responses from influencers, marketers, and focus groups that are further divided into different age groups. The responses collected from these sources are used to determine the areas of agreement and of divergence in the perceptions of the respondents.

### Results

#### Objective 1:

#### **To study the consumer perceptions of influencer credibility and authenticity**

The study is assessing the consumer perceptions of Influencer Credibility on three factors namely Attractiveness, Trustworthiness, and Expertise. On analyzing the customer perceptions derived from the focus groups, under attractiveness factor, it is observed that trusting the credibility of influencer depends on the visibility of natural beauty and not artificial. Customers also prefer the influencer to use non-generic aesthetics in their campaigns which gives marketing a more natural look. One respondent stated, “She is radiant because of confidence, not makeup” while another one stated “She is graceful and elegant.” In the same direction, third respondent stated that influencer is “She is elegant, not over-the-top.” This means that when influencers’ emphasis on showing real features like skin texture and not editing or filtering, the followers consider influencers to be credible. Another respondent has stated a similar expression, “Her appearance helps,



but it's not just about her looks". This shows that attractiveness is not just about the make-up and how the person looks after make-up, it is also about the social appearance and internal beauty of the influencer that attracts the customers.

Under trustworthiness factor, accuracy of reviews provided by the influencer and honest criticism of the product hold the highest weight when it comes to gaining trust of the customers. One respondent stated influencer to "That builds dependability" while another one stated that "She often tests products for weeks before reviewing". Thus, it can be stated that followers appreciate influencers whose reviews match their personal product experiences. In the same direction, the third respondent said "She's honest about results, doesn't promise miracles" which is important for the consumers. Usually, it is seen that beauty advertisements show a glowing, radiant skin after use of the product which is all fake. Another respondent stated, "Don't buy this product, not worth it", respect!". These kinds of comments by influencers earn the trust of the customers.

Under expertise factor, authority that the influencer holds and their professional advice on the product shows their expertise on the subject and holds high significance in defining the credibility of the influencer to judge the product. One respondent stated that "I have bought products based solely on her guidance" while another one stated "I trust her for both beauty and skincare advice." In the same direction, third respondent stated that "Her sunscreen guide was life-changing for me". Thus, it can be stated that followers trust influencers more than official sources or brand websites. Another respondent said "Very credible and educated." This is what followers need from the influencer, to be experienced, knowledgeable, and mature.

Consistency of influencer is showcased with the authenticity that they present in their marketing campaigns to their viewers. The review needs to be consistently authentic. One respondent stated, "No sudden switches to luxury or gimmicky products" while another one stated that influencer does "No sudden branding switches". In the same direction third respondent stated that the influencer takes "No sudden detours into youth-centric trends". Thus, it can be stated that trust builds through visible consistency & transparency. This makes the influencer authentic for followers.

Originality of influencers is visible through the uniqueness of their content which is not just a gimmick from somewhere, rather something self-tried and tested. One respondent stated, "Her real skin real glow series is unique" while another respondent stated that the influencer "includes menopause-related skincare, which I haven't seen elsewhere". In the same direction a third influencer stated, "That originality feels respectful, not gimmicky". This means that standing out from typical influencer trends is appreciated by their followers. The influencer's originality is accepted.



Lastly, transparency is defined through the honesty of the reviews of the influencers and their marketing campaigns. One respondent stated, “Never hides under heavy filters” while another one stated “she is refreshingly honest.” In the same direction, third one stated that “When she says, this works for me but maybe not for you, I feel respected.” This means that followers notice and value rare levels of honesty in influencer space. This study showed that as per the perceptions of the consumers, there are various factors that define an influencer’s credibility and authenticity. After fulfilling those criteria, an influencer can gain the trust of their viewers which would impact the purchase decision of the consumer.

### **Objective 2:**

#### **To examine the role of emotional connection while decision-making in influencer marketing’s effectiveness**

An unambiguous theme reverberated across all reactions is the power of storytelling as a channel for emotional reverberation. When influencers vulnerably share personal experiences, they transcend the superficial boundaries of digital content. These narratives, steeped in authenticity and humanity, cultivate an emotional intimacy that feels less transactional and more relational.

Captivatingly, emotional connection was consistently rated as a more decisive factor than brand reputation or product price when making a purchasing decision. Respondents admitted that once trust is established through emotional connection, they are even willing to invest in premium products, often overlooking pricing considerations. This highlights the transformative power of trust and emotional arrangement, which serves as both a differentiator and a faithfulness driver in packed digital marketplaces.

However, this emotional trust is delicate. Illustrations where influencers were supposed to be inauthentic were distinguished as unfavorable. Such behaviors were viewed as unscrupulous and damaged the perceived truthfulness of the influencer, highlighting that reliability, transparency, and sincerity are non-negotiable features in supporting emotional bonds.

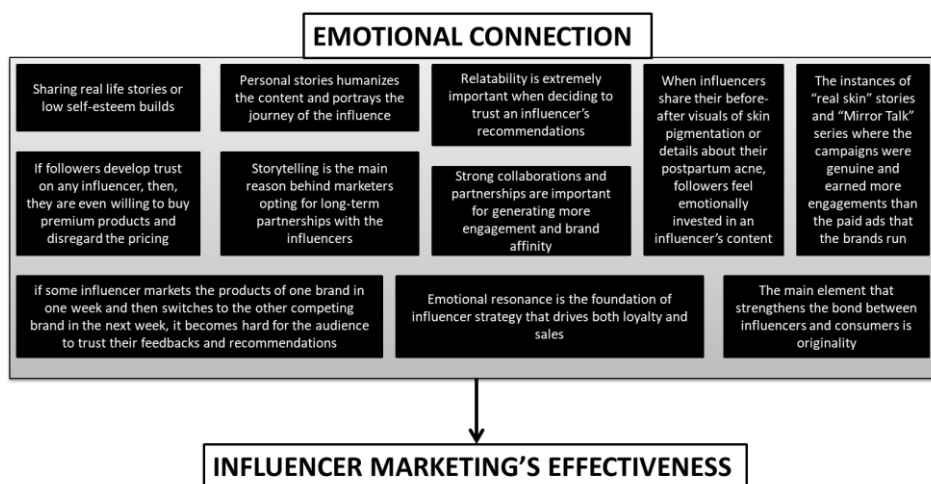
Respondents also highlighted that brand-influencer partnerships must be co-creative and unscripted. Mandatory narratives dilute authenticity and can quickly alienate an emotionally engaged audience. Instead, brands are recommended to allow influencers with imaginative freedom, permitting them to assimilate the product into their personal stories without any artificial approach.

The study examines the role of emotional connection while decision-making in influencer marketing effectiveness by interviewing influencers and marketers and gathering



their perceptions on the purchase decisions that customers make. The first section analyzes the emotional connection with influencers.

The main aspect of building emotional connection with the customers is by sharing real-life stories, experiences, and journey of influencers with them. This makes the customers a part of the influencer’s journey. One respondent stated that “They celebrate my wins like friends would” showed that viewers build an emotional connection with the influencer and their journey. Storytelling also humanizes the product. The statement highlights how influencers, by being emotionally open and consistent, can create bonds that feel like friendship. This perceived intimacy makes audiences more empathetic, engaged, and loyal. This facilitates transforming viewers into a supportive community rather than just passive spectators. One respondent stated that “It humanizes the product.” This statement implies that storytelling infuses emotion, personality, and context into a product that would otherwise be just a commercial item. While another respondent said, “It’s the soul of the content.” The respondent emphasizes that storytelling gives content depth, emotion, and identity. This statement clearly states that storytelling acts as a connector between a faceless brand and a real-life human experience. Without stories, influencer posts can feel flat or transactional. But stories provide context, personality, and purpose. In the same direction, third respondent said that “That’s the bridge between brand and person”. This showed that storytelling really builds connection between the influencer and the viewers. These responses collectively highlight the transformative power of storytelling in influencer marketing. Each response reflects how storytelling functions as more than just a content strategy it becomes the emotional glue that connects the influencer, the product, and the audience.



**Figure 1:** Relation between Role of Emotional Connection and Influencer’s Marketing Effectiveness



## Conclusions and Discussion

### Objective 1:

#### To study the consumer perceptions of influencer credibility and authenticity

The responses showed a variety of opinions on the factors that influence customers towards influencer's credibility and authenticity. The credibility of the influencer has been validated on three major factors namely Attractiveness, Trustworthiness, and Expertise. When talking about attractiveness, the customers find the influencer credible if the influencers prefer to showcase natural beauty than artificial skin tones full of make-up. This gives the promotion a natural look without any edits and filters. As per the research conducted by Filieri et al., (2023), the influencer's attractiveness towards natural looks affects the perceptions of the customers about the expertise and trustworthiness of the influencers. It also acts as a predictor of customer purchase decisions. Trustworthiness of the customers on the influencers is also impacted by the accuracy of reviews that the influencers present in their campaigns. The honest criticism that the influencers present in their marketing campaigns also presents the credibility of the influencers. The research conducted by Hassan et al., (2021) stated that the knowledge of the influencers plays a key role in earning the trust of the customers and showing their credibility. When the customers find the review of the influencer to be honest and accurate, then they start believing in them and trust their credibility. The customers believe that influencers should not only present the positives of the product in front of the customers but also its drawbacks. Sharing honest criticism of the beauty products helps the customers more in their purchase than positive reviews and feedback. Lastly, an influencer's credibility is also validated based on their expertise. The authority that the influencer holds and their professional advice on the product or the brand matter a lot in proving their credibility if the influencer validating the beauty product is trained in democosmetics or is an esthetician. The research conducted by Johnson et al., (2021) stated that if the influencers presenting the product are totally unrelated to the product, they are marketing, then it does not work in favor of the customers to show trust in the influencers. On the other hand, if the influencer is more related to the field and holds an authoritative position in the field then, the customers tend to trust them more. This presents a supporting notion as per the findings of the research.

Originality is another parameter that displays the authenticity of influencers. Originality of influencer is defined by the uniqueness of the content that they post on social media. The research conducted by Kapitan et al., (2022) stated that customers are attracted towards the uniqueness of the content of the influencers. If the content is unique and self-created but not a gimmick of some other promotions then, this is something that



attracts the customers and presents their originality. Lastly, Transparency that the influencer presents also represents their authenticity. Transparency is defined by the honesty of the reviews of the influencers towards the products or brands they are promoting. To present a completely transparent review, the influencer has to test the product themselves and share their honest opinion on it or demonstrate it online to the customers. The research conducted by Steils et al., (2022) stated that authenticity and engagement are both maintained only when the influencers are completely transparent in their promotions. Showing both sides of a coin shows their authenticity and honesty towards their work and attracts the customers as well. Thus, the research supports the notion presented in the current research.

#### **Objective 2:**

#### **To examine the role of emotional connection while decision-making in influencer marketing's effectiveness**

The research also analyzed the role that emotional connection plays in decision-making towards the marketing conducted by the influencers. After conducting interviews with influencers and marketers, several insights have been gained that show how customers get emotionally connected with the marketing activities of the influencers. The most important aspect that has been derived from customer's opinions is the real-life stories that the influencers share. The strongest connection that the customers build with the influencer is through their real-life journey that inspires others and motivates them to learn something from that journey. Umrallyeva et al., (2022) in their research stated that content creation is a very important aspect of influencer marketing. It is majorly responsible for building a personal connection with the audience. When customers can relate to the journey of the influencer, they tend to trust the influencer more and prefer buying the product recommended by them. This is also connected to the storytelling capability of the influencer which is the next important parameter in building an emotional connection. The manner of conveying the story whether it is fictional or non-fictional holds great importance in attracting the audience towards the product. The research conducted by Kemp et al., (2021) defines storytelling as a form of art that formulates the opinions of the customers. The story should be believable to the audience whether it is fictional or non-fictional. If audience believes the story, then they will also be attracted to trusting the influencer and buying the product broadcasted. Thus, storytelling is also important in building emotional connection between influencers and customers. Building an emotional connection has a strong impact on decision-making of consumers. Once the customers build a connection, they are no longer worried about the reputation of the brand or the price of the product they are buying. The connection makes a bigger difference for them



than other factors. Gaur, (2024) in their research compared influencer marketing with emotional marketing and stated that these are both quite identical. If the influencers can build an emotional connection with the audience through their marketing tactics, then they will be successful in selling their products. Once an emotional connection is built, the customers also tend to neglect the brand reputation and the price of the product before making their purchase. Lastly, authentic and genuine marketing of the product also affects their purchase decision. If the customers find the reviews to be authentic and genuine, they build trust on the influencer and buy the product based on that trust. A supporting notion has been presented by Okonkwo & Namkousse, (2023) stating that authentic and genuine reviews posted by influencers attract the customers towards making a purchase decision. Honesty in the marketing campaigns also builds trust in the customers which motivates them to make a purchase decision. Thus, the findings presented in the current research have been supported by the notions presented in the research thereby confirming that emotional connection plays a significant role in the decision-making effectiveness of influencer marketing.

### Recommendation for Further Application

The findings of this study suggest several practical and academic implications. For influencers, maintaining credibility requires a strong understanding of audience needs, consistency in content, authenticity in product reviews, and alignment between their area of influence and the products they promote. For marketers, effective influencer collaborations should be based on clear communication, co-creative campaign design, and integrated strategies across multiple channels to ensure both consistency and natural audience engagement. From an academic perspective, future research may expand this area by examining the effectiveness of micro- and nano-influencers, comparing influencer strategies across different social media platforms, and exploring both the positive and negative consequences of influencer marketing, such as authenticity loss, over-commercialization, and consumer fatigue. Further studies may also investigate influencer marketing in other product categories and niche markets to strengthen the broader understanding of its role in consumer decision-making.

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