

Influencer Credibility vs. Relatability: What Drives Consumer Trust?

Dr. Veena Grover¹, Chandan Singh², Chitrasen Kumar, Dev Bhardwaj, Divanshu

NIET Business School, Greater Noida¹

NIET Business School, Greater Noida²

Abstract

In the dynamic digital marketing environment, influencer marketing has become a vital force in determining consumer behavior and influencing buying decisions. The crux of its success, however, lies in the idea of consumer trust, which has two important determinants: influencer credibility and relatability. Although credibility encompasses ideas such as expertise, authority, and trustworthiness, relatability encompasses ideas such as similarity, authenticity, and emotional connections. This research aims to compare and contrast the relative importance of these two concepts in determining consumer trust, and also how they interact with one another through Source Credibility Theory and Social Comparison Theory, and how they relate to contemporary marketing practices. This research has concluded that, although credibility provides a cognitive foundation for trust, relatability provides a means for affective engagement, which is vital for long-term consumer relationships in a crowded digital marketplace.

Keywords: Influencer Marketing, Consumer Trust, Source Credibility, Relatability, Social Media, Purchase Intention.

1. Introduction

The exponential growth of social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok has completely transformed the marketing landscape in contemporary times. The traditional “one-to-many” approach, characterized by mass communication through conventional media, has transformed into a “peer-to-peer” approach, in which consumers play an active role in consuming and influencing each other through co-created meanings and engagement with content. This transformed marketing landscape has seen the emergence of influencer marketing, not just as a part of digital marketing, but as a core constituent of brand communication in contemporary times.

Influencer marketing, or the use of individuals with a digital footprint and audience trust to promote and communicate brands, has seen unprecedented growth and has become a multi-billion-dollar industry worldwide. However, such a marketing strategy cannot be explained through simplistic means such as audience size and reach. As emphasized by De Veirman et al. (2017), visibility does not necessarily imply persuasion, and size does not necessarily imply influence.

NIET Journal of Management (NIETJOM)

Volume 15, Issue 2 Winter / Summer 2024

ISSN: 0975-7643 (Print)

At the heart of this influencer success is a far more complex and intangible concept: trust. In an environment that is increasingly becoming characterized by information overload, content curation through algorithms, and the spread

of misinformation and authenticity, consumers have become increasingly skeptical about promotional communications. No longer do they simply accept a promotional endorsement; rather, they seek to evaluate the influencer who is sending this message. The basis for this evaluation is often provided by two fundamental questions that are asked:

“Does this person know enough about this product to recommend it to me?” and

“Do I relate to this person and can I see myself reflected through this influencer?”

The two concepts that are directly raised through these questions are those of influencer credibility and relatability. The concept of influencer credibility is based on the theoretical constructs of Source Credibility Theory and represents a cognitive process that helps to reduce the level of perceived risk and uncertainty for the consumer, especially for high-involvement purchase situations such as health, finance, and technology.

On the other hand, relatability is based on Social Identity Theory and represents the level of perceived similarities and genuine experiences with the influencer. Relatability is a psychological construct and works as an emotional driver to create a sense of connection and understanding between the influencer and the consumer. Relatability tends to dominate the influencer-consumer relationship in day-to-day consumption scenarios like fashion, food, travel, and lifestyle.

However, the most interesting fact is that these constructs are not mutually exclusive and operate independently of each other. Rather, they interact with each other to influence the influencer-consumer relationship and can be regarded as the ‘glue’ of influencer marketing.

This paper aims to contribute a comprehensive analysis of these two constructs of influencer marketing effectiveness. Specifically, the study aims to look into the ways in which credibility works as a risk-mitigation strategy in high-pressure decision-making situations and relatability works as a link between brands and the day-to-day lives of consumers. By understanding the underlying mechanism of the process of building trust between the influencer and the consumer, the study aims to contribute to the theoretical and practical understanding of the increasingly complex influencer-consumer dyad.

In this process, the paper will contribute to a better understanding of how trust is built, sustained, and utilized in digital settings, a process that is critical in developing effective, ethical, and sustainable influencer marketing strategies in today’s world.

2. Conceptual Framework

2.1 Influencer Credibility: The Cognitive Anchor

- "Influencer credibility" is based on Hovland's "Source Credibility Theory" developed in 1953. It is a multi-dimensional concept comprising:
- Expertise: "The extent to which the communicator is perceived to be a source of valid assertions." In an online environment, this is often "proven" through "certifications," "hobbyist dedication" over long periods of time, or "professional background."
- Trustworthiness: "The extent to which the listener believes in the speaker's motive to communicate assertions he considers most valid" (Ohanian, 1990).
- Attractiveness: While this includes physical attractiveness, it can also be "source-receiver similarity" and "likability."

2.2 Influencer Relatability: The Affective Bridge

- "Influencer Relatability" is a more recent concept often examined through Festinger's "Social Comparison Theory" developed in 1954. Unlike traditional celebrities who "survive" on "aspirational distance," relatable influencers thrive on "perceived proximity."
- Authenticity: "The perception of being 'genuine' and not a corporate puppet" (Audrezet et al., 2018).
- Homophily: "The tendency for individuals to form associations and bond with similar others." Consumers trust relatable influencers because they have "common struggles" – be it parenting, budget constraints, or skin problems.

3. Literature Review

The discourse on influencer marketing has moved from "celebrity" to "peer-leaders."

Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) found that non-traditional celebrities, such as bloggers/influencers, are seen as more credible compared to traditional celebrities because they are perceived as "real people." Their study found that young female consumers especially prioritize the "friendship" element of social media over professional authority.

Lou and Yuan (2019) extended this research to explore the role of "informative value" and "trustworthiness" on purchase intention. Their results showed that although "expertise" is important for raising awareness, "attractiveness" and "similarity" (relatability) are crucial for driving the final click to purchase.

Moreover, Abidin (2016) introduced the construct of "perceived interconnectedness," whereby influencers are able to build trust through perceived accessibility to the audience through direct comments and live streams. Schouten et al. (2020) found that consumers are more likely to relate to influencers compared to traditional celebrities, resulting in increased levels of trust and advertisement recall.

However, most critically, Kozinets et al.'s (2010) study revealed how, when such influencers become "too commercial," they also become less relatable and therefore less able to build a sense of trust, a phenomenon termed a

NIET Journal of Management (NIETJOM)

Volume 15, Issue 2 Winter / Summer 2024

ISSN: 0975-7643 (Print)

"trust deficit" that even expertise levels cannot overcome. This implies a complex "authenticity paradox" whereby professionalization can undermine trust initially built through such an influencer.

4. Credibility as a Driver of Trust

4.1 Impact on Consumer Perception

Credibility is also described as a cognitive heuristic. If the consumer does not have time or knowledge to process the product, they will use the influencer's expertise to help make the decision. According to Freberg et al. (2011), this type of influencer is classified as a "Social Media Personality," acting as a third-party endorser to offer the consumer a "seal of approval."

4.2 Role in High-Involvement Purchases

In high-risk situations, such as investing in cryptocurrency, purchasing a \$2,000 laptop, or selecting an anti-acne skincare routine, credibility is the primary motivator. Brown and Hayes (2008) argue that in high-involvement product categories, consumers seek "rational proof." If an influencer is providing data, long-term testing, and technical jargon to promote the product, they are building an "expert shield" to protect the consumer from an adverse purchasing experience.

4.3 Limitations of Credibility

The "Expert Gap" is when an influencer is so credible that they have lost touch with being human. Enke and Borchers (2019) state that even credible sources, at times, are perceived to be "scripted" or "bought" due to high production qualities, almost to the point that they seem more like an untrusted television commercial.

5. Relatability as a Driver of Trust

5.1 Emotional Engagement and PSI

The engine behind relatability is Parasocial Interaction (PSI), which Horton and Wohl (1956) originally called the "illusion of friendship." Relatable influencers open up about their flaws, daily routines, and "unfiltered" experiences. This elicits the "friendship heuristic," in which we tend to believe those close to us, so if the influencer is a friend, we tend to believe them.

5.2 Influence in Low-Involvement Purchases

For low-involvement products, the "bad buy" risk is low, e.g., fast fashion, snacks, or home decor items. In these categories, the consumer doesn't need a PhD in textiles to make a purchase, but rather wants to see how the product looks on someone whose body resembles theirs. Kay et al. (2020) show the effect of relatability in these industries, which elicits "impulse trust," the feeling that "if it works for her, it will work for me."

5.3 The Power of the Micro-Influencer

NIET Journal of Management (NIETJOM)

Volume 15, Issue 2 Winter / Summer 2024

ISSN: 0975-7643 (Print)

Micro-influencers, those with 10k-50k social media followers, can attain engagement rates 60% higher than those of mega-celebrities. Katz and Lazarsfeld's (1955) "Two-Step Flow" theory of social influence is particularly pertinent here, in which the micro-influencer acts as an "opinion leader" translating mass media messages to the "local" audience within their niche community.

6. Credibility vs. Relatability: A Comparative Analysis

Dimension	Credibility	Relatability
Psychological Basis	Source Credibility Theory	Social Comparison Theory
Type of Trust	Cognitive (Head)	Affective (Heart)
Consumer Motivation	Risk Reduction	Social Belonging / Self-Expression
Product Category	Tech, Finance, Medical	Fashion, Travel, Food
Ideal Content	Tutorials, Reviews, Data	Vlogs, "Get Ready With Me," Stories
Failure Mode	"Sold Out" / Fake Expertise	"Out of Touch" / Too Polished

- 7. The Interplay Between Credibility and Relatability
- The most influential influencers tend to be situated in what has been termed the "Sweet Spot" of influence. They tend to be "Approachable Experts." * The Credible-Relatable Loop: The influencer becomes relatable first, allowing him or her to gain an audience. As he or she becomes more experienced, he or she becomes more credible. If he or she has been able to remain "the original self" while becoming an expert, he or she will have gained a trust level that brands simply cannot hope to match through advertising.
- The Balance Act: Marketers tend to be guilty of requiring the relatable influencer to deliver scripted lines. The result is that the influencer becomes unrelatable, and there has been no gain in terms of credibility. Campbell and Evans (2018) proposed that "co-creation" enables the influencer to remain unscripted while still delivering the brand's core message.

8. Implications for Marketers

8.1 Strategic Selection

Brands need to conduct a "Trust Audit" prior to hiring an influencer.

Is the objective Education? Hire an "Expert" on the basis of "Credibility."

Is the objective Community Lifestyle? Hire a "Peer" on the basis of "Relatability."

The Match-Up Hypothesis, as presented by Kamins (1990), emphasizes that a mismatch (e.g., a high-fashion model for a low-end cleaning product) may actually promote cynicism among consumers.

8.2 Content Strategy: The "Lo-Fi" Shift

Consumers are becoming "ad-blind." To circumvent this, brands are forced to use "Lo-Fi" content. Instagram Stories and TikToks that are "raw and unproduced" use the power of "relatability" to get through the consumer's "defensive walls." Labrecque (2014) found that influencers who use "real-time" engagement (e.g., Q&As) are able to build a "social capital" that brands can "leverage" through partnerships.

8.3 Long-Term Partnerships

The move from "Transactional" to "Relational" is a major influencer marketing strategy. If a brand is promoted by an influencer for three years, then that brand becomes a part of the influencer's "life story," combining **credibility through consistent endorsement** and **relatability through lived experience**, thereby strengthening consumer trust over time.

9. Challenges and Ethical Considerations

- The industry has a "crisis of authenticity." * Disclosure: Vrontis et al. (2021) observe that, although #ad tags are legally necessary, they also provoke "persuasion knowledge" and therefore undermine trust.
- AI Influencers: The emergence of virtual influencers, such as Lil Miquela, poses a new problem: Is a robot capable of being "relatable"? Current trends indicate they can be "credible" (i.e., perfect and polished), but they do not possess "vulnerability" necessary for human relatability.
- Ethics: Marketers have a moral obligation to prevent "relatable" influencers from spreading damaging body images or financial cons in the guise of "friendship."

10. Future Trends

- Nano-Influencers: Those with fewer than 1,000 followers represent a new frontier for Pure Relatability.
- Video-First Trust: Video content allows for "micro-cues" such as tone of voice and facial expressions, making it easier for consumers to judge credibility and relatability.

NIET Journal of Management (NIETJOM)

Volume 15, Issue 2 Winter / Summer 2024

ISSN: 0975-7643 (Print)

- Niche Authority: We are witnessing the emergence of "Granular Experts" – influencers who specialize in only one thing, like "The Air Fryer Guy," who have extreme credibility and relatability.

11. Conclusion

In the constantly changing world of influencer marketing, the value of trust has proven to be the most valuable and defining factor. While the digital world continues to blur the line between personal and promotional content, the

consumer is no longer simply a recipient of brand messages but rather a participant in the evaluation of authenticity and intent. This study further supports the idea that credibility and relatability are not mutually exclusive concepts but rather complementary concepts that significantly contribute to the formation of consumer trust.

Credibility is the rational component of trust and provides a sense of security and reassurance to the consumer that the information being presented is credible and worthy of consideration. Credibility eliminates uncertainty and risk, especially in high-involvement decision-making situations, and provides a sense of reassurance and security to the consumer. Credibility answers the internal question of the consumer: "Can I trust this?"

Relatability, on the other hand, is the emotional and psychological component of trust and provides a sense of belonging and connection with the influencer and the brand. Relatability provides a sense of identification and connection with the influencer and the brand and answers the internal question of the consumer: "Is this relevant to me?"

The real strength of influencer marketing, therefore, does not lie in choosing between these two forces, but rather in how best to harmonize both. Indeed, while credibility may be what sparks trust, relatability is what maintains it. The two, therefore, work together in tandem to form a holistic trust mechanism, which in turn influences both attitudes and behaviors.

Moving forward, therefore, the future of influencer marketing will likely be shaped by what can only be referred to as the 'humanization of expertise.' Indeed, in today's world where consumers have become more and more skeptical towards overly polished and commercialized content, traditional notions of expertise have lost much of their pull. On the contrary, there has been a rising demand for what may be referred to as 'vulnerable authority.' Indeed, this term refers to a form of influence where expertise, authenticity, imperfection, and experience come together.

This, therefore, shows that today's consumer no longer wants experts who are perfect, but rather experts who, despite their expertise, remain relatable, experts who, despite their confidence, remain human. Indeed, an influencer who, despite their expertise, remains vulnerable, imperfect, and real, will be more likely to win trust than one who remains aspirational and perfect.

NIET Journal of Management (NIETJOM)

Volume 15, Issue 2 Winter / Summer 2024

ISSN: 0975-7643 (Print)

Ultimately, trust is constructed through a blend of logic and emotion. It is constructed when an influencer, apart from being knowledgeable and proficient, connects the two, i.e., expertise and real-world living. As has been succinctly defined:

“Trust is highest when an influencer can communicate:

‘I know this works’ (Credibility) and ‘I use it in my real, imperfect life—just like you would’ (Relatability).”

This has considerable implications for marketers, and what follows is a re-evaluation of influencer selection, content, and tone of communication. The bottom line, therefore, is no longer just reaching out to consumers, but connecting with them intellectually and emotionally.

In conclusion, what has been discussed above with regard to the changing nature of consumer behavior has considerable implications for marketers, and what follows is that the most effective influencer strategy will be one that seamlessly blends credibility and relatability, thereby transforming trust from a transactional construct into a relational one.

References

- [1] De Veirman, M., Cauberghe, V., & Hudders, L. (2017). *Marketing through Instagram influencers: The impact of number of followers*. International Journal of Advertising.
- [2] Hovland, C. I., Janis, I. L., & Kelley, H. H. (1953). *Communication and Persuasion*. Yale University Press.
- [3] Ohanian, R. (1990). *Construction and validation of a scale to measure celebrity endorsers' perceived expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness*. Journal of Advertising.
- [4] Festinger, L. (1954). *A theory of social comparison processes*. Human Relations.
- [5] Audrezet, A., de Kerviler, G., & Moulard, J. G. (2018). *Authenticity under threat: When social media influencers need to manage image congruency*. Journal of Business Research.
- [6] Djafarova, E., & Rushworth, C. (2017). *Exploring the credibility of online celebrities' Instagram profiles*. Computers in Human Behavior.
- [7] Lou, C., & Yuan, S. (2019). *Influencer marketing: How message value and credibility affect consumer trust*. Journal of Interactive Advertising.
- [8] Abidin, C. (2016). *Visibility labour: Engaging with Influencers' fashion brands and #OOTD advertorials on Instagram*. Media International Australia.
- [9] Schouten, A. P., Janssen, L., & Verspaget, M. (2020). *Celebrity can't teach me how to cause a selfie*. Frontiers in Psychology.
- [10] Kozinets, R. V., de Valck, K., Wojnicki, A. C., & Wilner, S. J. S. (2010). *Networked narratives*. Journal of Marketing.
- [11] Freberg, K., Graham, K., McGaughey, K., & Freberg, L. A. (2011). *Who are the social media influencers?* Public Relations Review.
- [12] Brown, D., & Hayes, N. (2008). *Influencer Marketing*. Elsevier.
- [13] Enke, N., & Borchers, N. S. (2019). *Social Media Influencers in Strategic Communication*. International Journal of Strategic Communication.
- [14] Horton, D., & Wohl, R. R. (1956). *Mass communication and para-social interaction*. Psychiatry.
- [15] Kay, S., Mulcahy, R., & Parkinson, J. (2020). *When less is more: The impact of macro and micro-influencers*. Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services.
- [16] Katz, E., & Lazarsfeld, P. F. (1955). *Personal Influence*. Free Press.

NIET Journal of Management (NIETJOM)

Volume 15, Issue 2 Winter / Summer 2024

ISSN: 0975-7643 (Print)

[17] Campbell, C., & Evans, N. J. (2018). *The role of a companion banner and sponsorship transparency in recognizing and evaluating influencer advertising*. Journal of Advertising.

[18] Kamins, M. A. (1990). *An investigation into the match-up hypothesis in celebrity advertising*. Journal of Advertising.

[19] Labrecque, L. I. (2014). *Fostering consumer–brand relationships in social media environments*. Journal of Interactive Marketing.

[20] Vrontis, D., Makrides, A., Christofi, M., & Thrassou, A. (2021). *A systematic review of consumer-side social media marketing research*. International Journal of Consumer Studies.