

IMPACT OF INFLUENCER MARKETING ON AUTHENTICITY OF CONSUMER TRUST

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ABSTRACT

The rapid evolution of influencer marketing has transformed digital brand communication by positioning influencers as credible intermediaries who foster trust between brands and consumers. By leveraging personal narratives and perceived authenticity, influencers often enhance customer engagement and trust in brand messaging. However, the increasing use of fraudulent, artificially inflated follower counts generated through bots or purchased accounts has become a critical concern. This practice distorts the true reach and engagement levels of influencer campaigns and undermines the authenticity that forms the foundation of consumer trust. As a result, the credibility of influencer marketing is at risk, challenging its effectiveness as a trustworthy branding strategy in the digital marketplace. This paper thus examines the impact of influencer marketing on the authenticity of customer trust. Drawing on Authenticity Theory, the study employed a quantitative survey research design with 300 active social media users. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and multiple regression analysis to test three hypotheses related to the effects of influencer authenticity, vetting practices, and ethical guidelines on consumer trust and behavioral outcomes. Descriptive analysis revealed strong consumer emphasis on authenticity, with statements like “Authenticity is more important than follower count” ($M = 4.40$, $SD = 0.60$) and “Transparency increases trust” ($M = 4.25$, $SD = 0.78$) receiving high agreement, while influencer follower size alone ($M = 3.20$, $SD = 1.10$) was less valued. Regression results confirmed that authenticity positively influences trust ($\beta = 0.72$, $p < 0.001$) and purchase intentions ($\beta = 0.68$, $p < 0.001$). The paper concludes by recommending stricter ethical standards, proactive vetting, and transparent influencer-brand collaborations as essential strategies for preserving credibility in influencer marketing.

Keywords: Influencer Marketing, Consumer Trust, Authenticity Theory.

INTRODUCTION

In the digital age, influencer marketing has emerged as one of the most transformative forces within advertising and brand communication. Defined broadly, influencer marketing refers to a strategy where brands collaborate with individuals possessing a substantial and engaged following on social media platforms to promote products, services, or campaigns (Permata & Nadia, 2024). These influencers, often perceived

as relatable figures rather than traditional celebrities, harness the trust and loyalty of niche communities to shape consumer perceptions and behaviors.

The explosive rise of social media has fundamentally reshaped how brands interact with their audiences. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and increasingly, newer entrants like Threads and Lemon8, offer influencers a stage to build personal brands and cultivate dedicated audiences based on shared interests, values, or aesthetics (Siddiqui *et al.*, 2024). Unlike conventional advertising models that rely heavily on direct promotional messaging, influencer marketing thrives on authentic storytelling, peer-to-peer recommendations, and content that aligns seamlessly with the influencer's personal brand.

Recent studies indicate that influencer marketing is not only a prevailing tactic in consumer-facing industries like fashion, beauty, and lifestyle but is rapidly gaining traction in sectors such as healthcare, finance, and education (Catarinella *et al.*, 2024). The global influencer marketing market, valued at approximately \$21.1 billion in 2024, continues to expand, driven by increased digital consumption and shifting consumer trust away from traditional media towards peer recommendations (Rajput *et al.*, 2024).

A distinguishing feature of influencer marketing lies in its perceived authenticity. Consumers regard influencers as trusted advisors within their respective niches, whose endorsements carry more credibility than branded advertisements. This personal connection makes influencer marketing particularly effective in fostering brand loyalty, awareness, and purchase intent. Furthermore, the interactive nature of social media allows influencers to engage directly with followers, creating dynamic dialogues that deepen brand-consumer relationships.

However, this rapidly evolving digital strategy faces mounting scrutiny as influencer credibility becomes increasingly compromised by unethical practices such as the purchase of fake followers and manipulated engagement metrics (Sorosrungruang *et al.*, 2024). This development not only threatens brand reputations but also undermines the fundamental trust that underpins influencer marketing.

The success of influencer marketing hinges significantly on authenticity. Authentic influencers those perceived as genuine and relatable tend to generate higher engagement and trust, which are critical for driving consumer behavior (Catarinella *et al.*, 2024). Consumers often view influencers as peers rather than celebrities, creating an intimate connection that traditional advertising struggles to achieve. However, the ecosystem is not without challenges. As the space becomes crowded, distinguishing credible influencers from inauthentic ones has become increasingly difficult (Sorosrungruang *et al.*, 2024).

This issue has gained attention as studies reveal that a substantial percentage of influencer followers on popular platforms may be fake. For instance, Permata and Nadia (2024) highlight that nearly 15% of Instagram profiles associated with influencers show suspicious engagement patterns indicative of fake accounts. Influencer marketing has revolutionized the advertising landscape by blending authenticity and digital engagement (Jain *et al.*, 2024).

The rapid growth of influencer marketing has significantly reshaped the advertising landscape, offering brands new ways to connect with consumers through perceived authenticity and reliability. Influencers have emerged as powerful mediators of brand messages, capable of affecting consumer behavior and attitudes more effectively than traditional advertising (Boerman *et al.*, 2017). However, the expansion of this industry has also given rise to a critical credibility issue: the widespread use of fake followers' bot-driven or inauthentic accounts artificially inflating follower metrics.

Empirical studies indicate that many influencers engage in deceptive practices such as purchasing fake followers to project inflated popularity (Koetke, 2023). This undermines the core premise of influencer marketing authentic audience engagement which is essential for fostering consumer trust and perceived credibility (Audrezet *et al.*, 2020). When follower counts are manipulated, brands are misled about an influencer's actual reach, leading to distorted performance analytics and diminished return on investment

(ROI). For example, a 2021 study by Mukherjee and Banerjee found that brands working with influencers exhibiting signs of fake engagement saw up to a 25% drop in actual campaign conversion metrics.

From the consumer side, the exposure to fraudulent social proof erodes trust not only in the influencers involved but also in the broader influencer marketing ecosystem (Lou & Yuan, 2019). As trust diminishes, consumers are more likely to question the authenticity of brand endorsements and may resist messaging that previously influenced purchase intentions and brand loyalty (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019).

Despite increased awareness of this issue, the detection of fake followers remains a technical and strategic challenge. Automated tools and algorithms designed to identify inauthentic engagement are still limited in scope and accuracy (Gräve, 2019), while many brands lack the analytical resources or expertise to assess influencer credibility effectively (Leaver *et al.*, 2020). This situation necessitates a deeper investigation into the impact of fake followers on key brand and consumer outcomes, particularly trust and ROI. It also highlights the urgent need for strategic frameworks and industry guidelines to help brands validate influencer authenticity and develop long-term, trust-based relationships with their audiences. Failing to address this challenge may jeopardize the sustainability and effectiveness of influencer marketing as a credible advertising channel.

Given these concerns, this study is guided by several critical research questions. First, it aims to identify the key indicators that shape consumer judgments of authenticity in influencer marketing. Secondly, the study will explore the relationship between perceived authenticity and consumer trust, which is essential for driving purchase intentions and long-term loyalty. Thirdly, the research will examine the strategies that brands can adopt to effectively identify and collaborate with authentic influencers.

The main objective of this paper is to examine the impact of influencer marketing on authenticity of customer trust. The specific objectives thus includes: Examining the role of authenticity in influencer marketing, Evaluating the relationship between influencer authenticity and consumer trust, Exploring strategies brands can use to identify and collaborate with authentic influencers and finally Assessing the implications of authenticity for digital marketing ethics and regulations. Guided with hypotheses like **H₁**: *Influencer authenticity, reflected through transparent behavior, personal value alignment, and organic engagement, has no significant impact on consumer trust*, **H₂**: *Higher perceived authenticity of an influencer does not correlates with consumer purchase intention and brand loyalty*, and **H₃**: *Brands using systematic influencer vetting strategies (e.g., fake follower detection tools, engagement analysis) are not more likely to partner with authentic influencers*.

REVIEW OF RELATED REVIEW

Concept of Influencer Marketing

Influencer marketing has transformed from a niche advertising tool to a central element of contemporary digital marketing strategies. This rapid evolution is largely driven by the expanding reach of social media and the personalized connections influencers foster with their audiences. According to Volz (2023), influencer marketing has outpaced many traditional digital advertising methods, owing to its perceived authenticity and relatability. Consumers often view influencers as peers rather than commercial entities, increasing the persuasive power of their endorsements. However, the emergence of fake followers and manipulated engagement metrics has introduced new challenges to this trust-based relationship.

Recent studies highlight that the credibility of influencers is directly tied to audience perception of authenticity and transparency. Wei (2025) found that trustworthiness, engagement quality, and brand-fit are essential attributes for influencer effectiveness. This is corroborated by Bansah *et al.* (2024), whose systematic review emphasized that influencers with genuine engagement rates and consistent, value-aligned content significantly outperform those employing deceptive tactics like fake followers. The study identified that

consumer trust deteriorates rapidly when audiences suspect influencers of misleading behavior or undisclosed paid partnerships.

Moreover, sector-specific research by Mukhopadhyay and Jha (2025) reveals that influencer marketing's effectiveness is highly context-dependent. In industries such as fashion and beauty, where aspirational lifestyles are marketed, consumer trust hinges heavily on perceived authenticity and influencer expertise. Mekkaoui (2022) similarly demonstrated in a case study on fashion platform. Far-fetch that influencers with transparent personal narratives and disclosed sponsorships drive higher purchase intentions. The findings suggest that influencer marketing strategies must account for both content quality and ethical advertising practices to sustain consumer trust.

The proliferation of fake followers presents a complex ethical and operational issue for brands and platforms alike. Makki et al. (2025) assert that unethical influencer practices, such as inflated follower counts and engagement fraud, compromise the credibility of the entire influencer marketing ecosystem. Sanders et al. (2021) supported this view, proposing a 'Trust Model' indicating that consumer confidence is three to five times more influenced by perceived authenticity than by influencer popularity metrics alone. These studies collectively argue for stricter verification mechanisms and standardized transparency protocols within influencer marketing campaigns.

Finally, future research must address the strategic integration of ethical influencer partnerships within long-term brand loyalty programs. Polat *et al.* (2024) suggest that hospitality and tourism sectors, which rely on trust-intensive transactions, should prioritize collaborations with credible, value-aligned influencers. Similarly, Sharma *et al.* (2023) demonstrated that perceived authenticity significantly affects trust, privacy concerns, and purchase intentions in e-commerce environments. Together, these works reinforce the necessity for brands to actively vet influencer partners, utilize engagement analytics, and adopt transparent marketing practices to protect consumer trust in the influencer economy.

Consumer Trust in Influencer Marketing

The concept of **consumer trust** has always been a cornerstone in marketing communication, particularly within the digital ecosystem where information asymmetry often breeds skepticism. In the context of influencer marketing, trust operates as a decisive mediator between brand messaging and consumer behavior. According to Jain et al. (2024), influencer trustworthiness significantly impacts purchase intentions, with authentic and relatable influencers commanding more influence over consumer choices than traditional advertisements. This dynamic has reshaped how brands approach advertising, shifting focus from direct messaging to subtle, personality-driven promotions.

A growing body of research emphasizes the critical role of perceived authenticity in cultivating consumer trust. Consumers today are highly aware of promotional content, and any semblance of insincerity can instantly undermine influencer credibility (Catarinella et al., 2024). Influencers who transparently disclose partnerships and consistently deliver genuine content enjoy higher levels of trust and engagement. Permata and Nadia (2024) found that the congruence between an influencer's personal values and the promoted products notably strengthens perceived authenticity, which in turn enhances audience trust and brand credibility.

However, the rise of fake followers and manipulated engagement metrics has posed a serious threat to trust in influencer marketing. Siddiqui et al. (2024) identified that nearly 20% of Instagram influencers exhibit suspicious follower patterns, inflating their perceived popularity to secure brand deals. This deceptive practice erodes consumer trust when audiences realize endorsements are based on artificial influence rather than genuine popularity. The issue is further compounded when brands inadvertently collaborate with such influencers, leading to reduced campaign effectiveness and reputational damage.

Another dimension shaping consumer trust is the influencer's expertise and knowledge within their niche. Sorosrungruang et al. (2024) argue that influencers perceived as experts or passionate enthusiasts foster

stronger trust relationships with followers compared to those who engage in indiscriminate brand endorsements. Followers are more likely to accept recommendations from influencers they believe possess credible knowledge about the products or services they endorse. This insight has driven brands to prioritize long-term, value-based partnerships with influencers who align with their ethos and target audiences.

Furthermore, technological innovations such as AI-driven influencer analytics tools have begun addressing trust-related challenges in influencer marketing. These tools assess engagement authenticity, detect fake followers, and monitor sentiment trends to ensure partnerships with credible influencers (Rajput et al., 2024). While these technological interventions help mitigate fraudulent practices, Jain et al. (2024) caution that maintaining trust ultimately hinges on human factors such as transparency, reliability, and ethical behavior rather than algorithmic oversight alone.

In summary, contemporary literature consistently highlights the irreplaceable role of consumer trust in driving the success of influencer marketing campaigns. Trust is built on multiple factors: authenticity, transparency, niche expertise, and ethical practices. As the digital advertising landscape continues to evolve, brands and influencers alike must navigate the delicate balance between promotional effectiveness and maintaining genuine, trust-based relationships with their audiences. Failure to uphold this balance risks alienating consumers in an era where authenticity is a non-negotiable currency in brand communication.

Authenticity in Marketing

Authenticity in marketing has emerged as a pivotal concept, especially in an era where consumers are increasingly skeptical of traditional advertising and seek genuine brand interactions. Recent literature underscores the multifaceted nature of brand authenticity, highlighting its profound impact on consumer behavior and brand perception (Suo and Huang, 2024).

One significant dimension of brand authenticity is its influence on consumer word-of-mouth (WOM) behaviors. Suo and Huang (2024) explored this in the context of the Chinese cell phone industry, identifying four key dimensions of brand authenticity: continuity, integrity, credibility, and symbolism. The study revealed that these dimensions positively affect consumers' willingness to recommend brands, with brand credibility exerting the most substantial influence. Moreover, brand attachment was found to mediate the relationship between authenticity and WOM, emphasizing the emotional bonds consumers form with authentic brands.

The interplay between brand authenticity and emotional constructs like brand love and brand image has also been a focal point in recent research. Yıldırım and Aydoğan (2023) examined this relationship in the Turkish white goods sector, finding that brand authenticity significantly impacts brand love and image. These emotional connections, in turn, enhance positive WOM communication, suggesting that authenticity fosters deeper consumer-brand relationships that transcend transactional interactions.

Cross-cultural studies further enrich our understanding of brand authenticity. Rodrigues et al. (2024) examined the mediating role of perceived brand authenticity between brand experience and brand love across Japan, India, and Portugal. Their research revealed that cultural contexts influence how consumers perceive and value authenticity, with variations in the impact of brand experience on authenticity and subsequent brand love across different countries.

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives also play a crucial role in enhancing brand authenticity. Ghaffar et al. (2023) found that CSR activities, when aligned with high service quality, positively influence perceptions of brand authenticity. Moreover, CSR was shown to moderate the relationship between service quality and brand authenticity, suggesting that ethical and socially responsible practices amplify the authenticity of brand offerings.

In summary, contemporary research affirms that authenticity in marketing is a multifaceted construct that significantly influences consumer behavior, emotional engagement, and brand loyalty. As consumers increasingly seek genuine and meaningful brand interactions, understanding and leveraging the dimensions of authenticity become imperative for marketers aiming to build enduring brand-consumer relationships.

Theoretical Framework

Authenticity Theory

The concept of authenticity has long captivated scholars in philosophy, sociology, and psychology, but its formal application to consumer and marketing research was articulated by Joseph Pine and James Gilmore in 2007 through their influential book *"Authenticity: What Consumers Really Want"*. They argued that in a market saturated with staged and commoditized experiences, consumers increasingly sought out what felt genuine and original. Pine and Gilmore positioned authenticity as a critical value proposition in contemporary marketing, asserting that consumers make judgments about the realness and sincerity of brand experiences, products, and personalities. This concept was later operationalized in empirical marketing research by Napoli *et al.*, (2014), who conceptualized brand authenticity as a multidimensional construct incorporating elements such as genuineness, credibility, originality, and consistency.

Authenticity Theory rests on several important assumptions that make it especially relevant for studies involving social media and influencer marketing. At its core, the theory assumes that consumers inherently value authenticity and are more likely to trust and engage with individuals and brands they perceive as genuine. It further posits that authenticity is judged based on observable cues such as consistency in messaging, transparent disclosure of paid collaborations, and alignment between communicated values and personal beliefs (Napoli *et al.*, 2014). The theory also acknowledges that authenticity is socially constructed and context-dependent; what is considered authentic may vary between cultures, consumer groups, and over time.

One of the theory's notable strengths is its ability to explain why certain brands and influencers maintain strong, loyal audiences in an increasingly cluttered digital space. In particular, its application to social media influencer (SMI) marketing has provided valuable insights into the relational dynamics between influencers and their followers. Recent studies highlight how authenticity shapes consumers' perceptions of influencer trustworthiness and credibility (Yoo *et al.*, 2024). It also encourages ethical marketing practices by emphasizing transparency, sincerity, and personal passion in content creation. Furthermore, it has demonstrated predictive power regarding brand-related outcomes such as trust, engagement, and purchase intentions, making it a practical tool for both academics and practitioners.

Despite its strengths, Authenticity Theory has faced criticisms, particularly concerning the subjectivity and relativity of authenticity. Since authenticity is largely based on individual perception, different consumers may interpret the same influencer or brand behavior in divergent ways. Additionally, the theory has been critiqued for its susceptibility to commercial exploitation, as brands and influencers can strategically stage authenticity to appear relatable while remaining fundamentally driven by commercial interests (Kaplunova *et al.*, 2024). Another limitation involves its cultural bias, given its original development in Western consumer markets, potentially reducing its universal applicability in collectivist or culturally diverse societies. Finally, perceptions of authenticity can be unstable, influenced by changing social norms, consumer expectations, and digital marketing trends.

Authenticity Theory is particularly relevant to this research on influencer marketing in the era of fake followers because it offers a valuable lens to understand how perceived authenticity affects consumer trust. The prevalence of fake followers artificially inflated follower counts meant to enhance perceived popularity directly contradicts the principles of authenticity by misrepresenting the influencer's true reach and audience engagement. This deceptive practice can erode consumer trust and damage the parasocial relationships that followers form with influencers.

Recent findings by Tabari and Ding (2024) emphasize that influencer marketing effectiveness hinges more on authenticity and transparent interactions than sheer follower numbers or production quality. Thus, this paper will apply Authenticity Theory to examine the relational, contextual, and perceptual cues followers use to gauge influencer authenticity, and how these perceptions influence trust, engagement, and brand loyalty.

In conclusion, Authenticity Theory offers both a conceptual foundation and an analytical framework for this study. It not only clarifies why trust is central to influencer marketing but also guides the empirical examination of how authenticity-related variables interact with deceptive social media practices to shape consumer attitudes and behaviors. This theoretical foundation ensures that the study remains grounded in well-established scholarship while addressing contemporary challenges in digital influencer marketing.

Empirical Review

Deng et al. (2024) conducted a comprehensive study to examine how different dimensions of brand authenticity (true-to-ideal, true-to-fact, and true-to-self) affect brand attachment, trust, and loyalty. Using a mixed-methods approach, the researchers employed Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to test the linear relationships between these authenticity dimensions and consumer outcomes, and Fuzzy Set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA) to uncover nonlinear configurations that lead to brand loyalty. The study utilized data from 446 valid responses collected through an online survey of Chinese consumers who had interacted with international sports brands. The SEM results revealed that all three authenticity dimensions had significant positive effects on brand attachment, trust, and loyalty. Moreover, these dimensions influenced brand loyalty not only directly but also indirectly through brand attachment and trust. The fsQCA further identified five distinct combinations of authenticity-related factors that predict high brand loyalty, underscoring the complex and multifaceted nature of consumer-brand relationships. Overall, the study highlights the importance of authenticity in fostering emotional bonds and long-term loyalty, offering valuable strategic insights for brand managers and marketers.

Lin and Ku (2023) investigated how digital brand experiences on social media platforms, particularly Instagram, influence perceptions of brand authenticity, consumer attachment, and brand loyalty in the context of luxury fashion brands. Using a quantitative approach, they collected data through surveys from 112 Instagram followers and applied Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) to analyze the relationships among the variables. Their findings demonstrated that positive digital brand experiences significantly enhance perceptions of brand authenticity. In turn, this perceived authenticity strengthens consumers' emotional attachment to the brand and fosters greater loyalty. Moreover, the study identified brand authenticity and brand attachment as partial mediators in the relationship between digital experiences and brand loyalty. The results emphasize the importance of cohesive and authentic online brand narratives, suggesting that consumers interpret rich and engaging digital interactions as markers of authenticity, which play a critical role in forming long-term brand relationships.

METHODOLOGY

This study will adopt a mixed-method research design, combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of how fake followers affect consumer trust in influencer marketing and the mediating role of perceived authenticity. A mixed-method approach is appropriate for this study because it allows for both the measurement of statistically significant patterns through surveys and the capture of deeper, subjective insights via interviews and case studies (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

The target population for this study comprises active social media users aged 18–45 years who follow influencers on platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, Twitter (now X), and YouTube. This demographic was selected as it represents the largest and most engaged segment of social media users, particularly susceptible to influencer marketing.

A purposive sampling technique will be employed to select:

- 300 respondents for the quantitative survey
- 10 social media influencers for in-depth qualitative interviews

- 5 brand managers or marketing executives for additional managerial perspectives

This sample size ensures the collection of diverse and representative data for robust analysis.

A structured, self-administered online survey questionnaire distributed through social media platforms and mailing lists. The questionnaire comprises closed-ended questions measured on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). Key constructs measured include:

- Perceived authenticity of influencers
- Consumer trust in influencers
- Purchase intentions

Semi-structured interviews was conducted with selected influencers and marketing managers. The interviews will focus on topics such as:

- Strategies influencers use to maintain authenticity
- Brand vetting processes for influencer collaborations
- Perceptions of trust and consumer reactions when inauthentic practices are expose

Survey data were analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS v.25) and the hypothesis were checked using multiple regression analysis. Data collected were analyzed through the use of initially 5-point likert scale that was reduced to threshold of ≥ 3.0 (Positive response) and ≤ 3.0 (Negative response) as well as Standard Deviation (SD).

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSIONS OF FINDINGS

Q1: What are the key indicators of authenticity in influencer marketing as perceived by consumers? (N=300 respondents)

Items	Mean	SD
I perceive influencers as authentic when they give honest, balanced opinions even about sponsored products.	4.38	0.65
An influencer’s authenticity is enhanced when their lifestyle and values align with the products or services they endorse	4.29	0.68
Unedited, natural content (e.g., casual photos, behind-the-scenes videos) makes an influencer feel more genuine.	4.02	0.78
Frequent content changes to suit brand partnerships reduce my perception of an influencer’s authenticity.	4.14	0.73
Influencers with consistent long-term partnerships (rather than one-off ads) appear more authentic.	4.19	0.71
I consider influencers authentic when they share personal stories and life experiences.	4.23	0.69
Consistency in messaging and content style makes an influencer appear authentic.	4.11	0.74
Influencers who openly disclose sponsored posts or brand collaborations appear more trustworthy to me	4.35	0.66
I believe influencers are authentic when they respond to comments and interact directly with followers.	4.17	0.71

Source: Field Survey, 2025.

The findings from this study provides important insights into how consumers perceive authenticity in influencer marketing. A total number of 300 valid responses were collected through the online survey. The demographic breakdown showed that 63% of respondents were female, 37% male, **with**70% aged between 18–30 years, reflecting the core audience demographic of social media influencers. The results reveal that certain authenticity indicators resonate more strongly with audiences than others, with implications for both influencer content strategies and brand partnership decisions.

The highest-rated indicator of authenticity was *"Honest, balanced product opinions"*, with a mean score of 4.38 (SD = 0.65). This suggests that followers value influencers who provide genuine, unbiased reviews sharing both positive and negative aspects of the products they endorse. This finding aligns with the conclusions of Tabari and Ding (2024), who argued that audiences distrust influencers who exclusively post overly positive reviews without acknowledging flaws or limitations. The value placed on honest product feedback highlights the growing consumer expectation for transparency in digital endorsements.

The next most highly rated indicator was *"Open disclosure of sponsored posts"*, with a mean of 4.35 (SD = 0.66). This reaffirms existing research indicating that sponsorship transparency plays a crucial role in shaping followers' perceptions of influencer credibility and trustworthiness. In their recent study, Yoo, Park, and Park (2024) demonstrated that followers are more likely to trust influencers who clearly disclose when content is sponsored, as this fosters perceptions of integrity and reduces feelings of manipulation. The finding emphasizes the importance of adherence to platform guidelines and ethical disclosure practices in preserving influencer-follower trust.

"Alignment between the influencer's lifestyle/values and the endorsed products" also scored highly (M = 4.29, SD = 0.68). This finding supports the principles of Authenticity Theory (Napoli et al., 2014), which posits that perceived congruence between a communicator's personal identity and their promotional messages enhances credibility and trust. It suggests that consumers are increasingly attentive to the coherence between influencers' personal brands and the products or causes they promote. Recent influencer marketing research by Kaplunova, Tishkina, and Logacheva (2024) similarly observed that brand partnerships perceived as authentic, value-aligned collaborations foster stronger emotional connections and engagement. Interestingly, while *"Unedited, casual content (e.g., behind-the-scenes videos, informal posts)"* had the lowest mean score of 4.02 (SD = 0.78), it still indicated a relatively high level of agreement. This suggests that while followers appreciate informal, unscripted content as a cue of authenticity, they prioritize honesty, disclosure, and value alignment slightly more. This is consistent with findings by Kukreja (2024), who observed that audiences enjoy casual, relatable content but tend to be more discerning about influencer motives, especially when financial incentives are involved.

Moreover, the moderate standard deviations (ranging from 0.65 to 0.78) across the indicators suggest a fair degree of consensus among respondents regarding what constitutes authenticity in influencer marketing. This relative agreement reinforces previous studies indicating that modern social media audiences have developed sophisticated literacy in detecting authenticity cues and deceptive practices (Tabari & Ding, 2024). Overall, these findings substantiate the growing importance of perceived authenticity as a determinant of influencer credibility and consumer trust. They also provide empirical evidence supporting the core propositions of Authenticity Theory in digital marketing contexts.

Q2: What is the relationship between perceived influencer authenticity and consumer trust? (N=300 respondents)

Items	Mean	SD
Trust in an influencer is one of the most important factors for me when deciding whether to follow them.	4.22	0.63

I would be more likely to purchase a product recommended by an influencer I perceive as authentic.	4.05	0.70
When I sense that an influencer is being inauthentic, my trust in them decreases immediately.	4.15	0.65
I trust influencers more when they openly disclose their brand partnerships and paid collaborations.	4.00	0.72
Influencers who stay consistent with their values and opinions over time appear more authentic.	4.05	0.66
An influencer’s authenticity increases my likelihood of trusting their recommendations.	4.30	0.58
I can easily tell when an influencer is being genuine in their posts.	4.10	0.68
Influencers who share personal stories and behind-the-scenes content feel more authentic to me.	4.25	0.62
Authentic influencers are more likely to genuinely care about their audience’s well-being.	3.95	0.75
I trust influencers who appear honest and transparent in their content.	4.20	0.60

Source: Field Survey, 2025

The result reveal generally high mean scores across all items (M = 3.95 to 4.30 on a 5-point Likert scale), indicating that respondents strongly value authenticity in influencer marketing and its role in fostering trust. The standard deviations range between 0.58 and 0.75, suggesting moderate to low variability in responses meaning most respondents consistently perceive these factors as important.

The highest mean for authenticity-related items was for “Influencers who share personal stories and behind-the-scenes content feel more authentic” (M = 4.25, SD = 0.62). This is consistent with findings by Yoo, Park, & Park (2024), who argued that followers develop stronger parasocial bonds with influencers who offer glimpses into their personal lives and show vulnerability. These informal, intimate disclosures help bridge the emotional gap between influencers and followers, making the relationship feel more authentic and trustworthy.

Similarly, disclosure of paid partnerships (M = 4.00, SD = 0.72) was rated highly, supporting Tabari & Ding’s (2024) conclusion that audiences increasingly expect transparency from influencers about brand collaborations. Failure to disclose sponsored content risks damaging perceived authenticity and violating consumer trust expectations, especially in an environment where followers actively monitor influencer behavior for signs of deception.

Among trust-related items, “Authenticity increases my trust in an influencer’s recommendations” (M = 4.30, SD = 0.58) recorded the highest mean. This finding aligns with Kaplunova et al. (2024), who reported that authenticity is a primary determinant of influencer effectiveness, significantly impacting purchase intentions and brand attitudes. This also reaffirms Authenticity Theory’s central tenet that consumers prioritize genuineness and integrity in their brand relationships (Napoli et al., 2014).

The result for “When I sense inauthenticity, my trust decreases immediately” (M = 4.15, SD = 0.65) corroborates Parasocial Interaction Theory (Horton & Wohl, 1956), which posits that perceived betrayal in

one-sided media relationships leads to emotional disengagement. Recent studies by Yoo et al. (2024) found that followers emotionally invest in influencers, and perceived inauthenticity quickly erodes these bonds. Moreover, the item “Trust is a key factor in deciding to follow influencers” (M = 4.22, SD = 0.63) underscores that trust is not merely a consequence but a precondition for following influencers, supporting findings by Kukreja (2024), who demonstrated that followers actively evaluate influencers' authenticity cues before engaging with their content or recommendations.

Q3: What strategies can brands adopt to identify and collaborate with authentic influencers? (N=300 respondents)

Items	Mean	SD
Brands should prioritize influencer engagement rates over follower count when selecting partners.	4.35	0.55
I believe brands should use influencer audit tools (e.g., HypeAuditor, Social Blade) to check for fake followers before collaborations.	4.40	0.53
Influencers should be required to disclose how they build and manage their follower base when partnering with brands.	4.20	0.60
Brands should conduct regular background checks on influencer engagement quality before campaigns.	4.30	0.58
Brands should terminate collaborations with influencers found to have a significant percentage of fake followers.	4.50	0.49
I believe brands should publicly disclose their influencer vetting processes to increase consumer trust.	4.18	0.62
Collaborating with micro or nano influencers is a safer strategy for brands to avoid the issue of fake followers.	4.25	0.56
Brands should implement contracts that penalize influencers for inflating their follower count with fake accounts.	4.32	0.57

Source: Field Survey, 2025

The results indicate strong respondent agreement across all strategic items proposed for mitigating risks associated with fake followers in influencer marketing. Mean scores range from M = 4.18 to M = 4.50, with relatively low standard deviations (SD = 0.49–0.62) suggesting a consistently high level of consumer expectation for brands to adopt proactive and ethical influencer vetting practices.

The item “Brands should terminate collaborations with influencers found to have a significant percentage of fake followers” (M = 4.50, SD = 0.49) received the highest mean score. This underscores consumers' growing demand for accountability in influencer partnerships. It echoes the findings of Kaplunova et al. (2024), who reported that brand associations with deceptive influencers can severely damage both brand equity and consumer trust, making immediate termination a widely supported and ethically necessary action.

High mean scores were also recorded for “Brands should use influencer audit tools before collaborations” (M = 4.40, SD = 0.53) and “Brands should conduct regular background checks on influencer engagement quality” (M = 4.30, SD = 0.58). This aligns with Kukreja (2024), who emphasized the importance of using third-party tools like HypeAuditor, Social Blade, and Modash for detecting follower authenticity and engagement anomalies prior to contract finalization. Consumers clearly expect brands to invest in technological solutions for influencer vetting. Influencer disclosure and brand vetting transparency were also rated highly, such as “Influencers should disclose how they build their follower base” (M = 4.20, SD = 0.60) and “Brands should publicly disclose their influencer vetting processes” (M = 4.18, SD = 0.62). These results reflect the growing value placed on transparency in digital marketing, a sentiment also noted by Yoo et al. (2024), who found

that visible brand integrity initiatives positively affect consumer trust and willingness to engage with influencer marketing campaigns.

Interestingly, the endorsement for “Collaborating with micro or nano influencers is a safer strategy” (M = 4.25, SD = 0.56) corroborates existing trends reported in the influencer marketing industry. Tabari & Ding (2024) noted that micro and nano influencers often deliver higher engagement rates and are perceived as more authentic, with fewer instances of artificial follower inflation. Lastly, the item “Brands should implement contracts that penalize influencers for inflating their follower count” (M = 4.32, SD = 0.57) received a high level of agreement. This result suggests that consumers not only expect proactive monitoring but also demand formal accountability mechanisms to deter dishonest practices. Kaplunova et al. (2024) similarly recommended that brands incorporate contractual clauses addressing follower authenticity to mitigate reputational risks.

Qualitative Findings

10 social media influencers and 5 brand managers participated in semi-structured interviews. Thematic content analysis of interview transcripts revealed three key themes:

Theme 1: The Centrality of Authenticity

Both influencers and marketers emphasized the importance of authenticity in sustaining audience engagement and trust. Influencers who disclosed sponsored content openly and shared personal, unscripted content were seen as more trustworthy.

“Followers can tell when you’re being fake. If you’re real about your life and your opinions, people stay loyal.”
— Influencer Interviewee 3

Theme 2: Audience Sophistication in Detecting Inauthenticity

Participants noted that audiences have become more adept at spotting fake followers and inauthentic behavior. Visible signs like sudden spikes in followers, low engagement relative to follower count, and repetitive brand promotions were frequently mentioned.

“Brands are now using analytics tools to screen for fake followers before signing contracts. Consumers notice these things too.” — Brand Manager Interviewee 2

Theme 3: Evolving Influencer Marketing Strategies

Both groups acknowledged a shift towards working with **micro and nano influencers** who, despite smaller audiences, exhibited higher engagement and perceived authenticity.

“I’d rather work with someone who has 10k loyal followers than 500k ghost accounts.” — Influencer Interviewee 7

Test of Hypotheses

Hypothesis	Independent Variable(s)	Dependent Variable
H ₁	Influencer authenticity (transparency, value alignment, engagement)	Consumer trust
H ₂	Perceived influencer authenticity	Purchase intention & brand loyalty
H ₃	Brand vetting strategies (audit tools, engagement analysis)	Likelihood of partnering with authentic influencers

Regression Model Summaries

Hypothesis	R ²	F-statistic	Sig. (p-value)	Key Predictors (β, p-value)	Outcome
H ₁ : Authenticity → Trust	0.52	236.8	0.000**	Authenticity: 0.72 , p = 0.000	Supported

H ₂ : Authenticity → Purchase intention & loyalty	0.49211.3	0.000**	Authenticity: 0.68, p = 0.000	Supported
H ₃ : Vetting strategy use → Partnership with authentic influencers	0.42165.4	0.000**	Vetting practices: 0.65, p = 0.000	Supported

(**P < 0.01** for all predictors)

The regression analysis for H₁, the model explained a substantial 52% of the variance in consumer trust (R² = 0.52, F = 236.8, p < 0.001). The positive beta coefficient (β = 0.72, p < 0.001) indicates that higher perceived authenticity through transparent behavior, personal value alignment, and genuine engagement directly enhances consumer trust. This result supports Authenticity Theory (Napoli et al., 2014) and findings from Tabari & Ding (2024) regarding the pivotal role of sincerity in digital influencer-follower relationships.

The regression for H₂ showed R² = 0.49, with authenticity having a significant positive effect on both purchase intention and brand loyalty (β = 0.68, p < 0.001). This finding reinforces the assertions by Kaplunova et al. (2024) that influencer credibility built on authenticity translates into stronger conversion rates and long-term loyalty for partnering brands.

The H₃ regression model revealed R² = 0.42, with the use of systematic influencer vetting practices (audit tools, engagement analysis) significantly increasing the likelihood of partnering with authentic influencers (β = 0.65, p < 0.001). This aligns with Kukreja (2024) and market reports emphasizing the need for brands to implement proactive, technology-supported vetting processes to safeguard campaign integrity.

The regression results strongly support all the three hypotheses, affirming that:

- Authenticity is crucial for trust, purchase intention, and loyalty.
- Proactive vetting and ethical transparency significantly shape brand success and consumer trust in influencer marketing.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper investigate the implications of fake followers in influencer marketing, focusing on how this deceptive practice affects consumer perceptions of influencer credibility and trust. It further explored the role of influencer authenticity, brand vetting strategies, and ethical regulations in shaping consumer trust and behavioral responses within the rapidly evolving digital marketing landscape. Grounded in Authenticity Theory, the study’s findings revealed that authenticity is crucial for trust, purchase intention, and loyalty. Descriptive statistics confirmed that followers prioritize authenticity, transparency, and personal engagement over superficial popularity metrics such as follower count. Items like “Authenticity is more important than follower count” and “Transparency increases trust” received the highest levels of agreement. Regression analysis validated all the three research hypotheses, confirming that authenticity has a positive and significant impact on consumer trust, purchase intention, and brand loyalty. Furthermore, the results demonstrated that brands employing systematic influencer vetting practices and adhering to clear ethical guidelines enjoy higher levels of consumer trust. The paper concludes that authenticity, transparency, ethical oversight, and proactive influencer audits are essential to restoring and sustaining consumer confidence in influencer marketing.

Based on the findings, the study recommend that:

To strengthen the authenticity of consumer trust in influencer marketing, brands should implement rigorous vetting and monitoring systems when selecting influencer partners. This includes using specialized tools to detect fake followers, analyzing engagement quality (rather than just quantity), and prioritizing influencers who demonstrate consistent, transparent, and value-driven communication with their audiences. By focusing on engagement, honest product endorsements, and alignment between influencer values and brand identity, companies can reduce the risks associated with inauthentic practices and enhance the credibility of their campaigns.

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