

# Beyond Influence: How Trust and Authenticity Drive Consumer Engagement and Purchase Intention in Social Media Marketing

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## Abstract

This study examines the cohesive structure connecting trust, authenticity, engagement, and purchase intention in influencer marketing. The study utilised data from 250 respondents and applied regression, ANOVA, MANOVA, moderation, and mediation analyses to evaluate seven hypotheses. The findings established that trust is a strong predictor of authenticity, authenticity fosters engagement, and engagement propels purchase intention. Moderation research indicated that influencer type enhances the authenticity–engagement relationship, especially for micro influencers among younger demographics. Mediation research revealed that dynamic content forms (Reels, Stories, Live sessions) partially moderate the relationship between authenticity and engagement. The distinctions in product categories underscore that fashion and beauty rely on trust and authenticity, whereas technology and fitness depend on interaction and content attributes. The results enhance influencer marketing theory by confirming regulated and mediated pathways and broaden managerial practice by providing practical options for customising influencer campaigns. The implications for digital transformation and prospective research avenues are examined.

**Keywords:** *Influencer marketing; trust; authenticity; engagement; micro influencer; purchase intention.*

## 1. Introduction

Influencer marketing has been a predominant strategy in digital environments, transforming customer interactions with businesses and influencing purchasing decisions. In contrast to conventional advertising, influencer marketing depends on perceived authenticity and trust, establishing influencers as legitimate middlemen between businesses and customers. Previous research has highlighted the significance of authenticity and trustworthiness in fostering customer involvement (Pan et al., 2025, 2021; Springer, 2023). Nonetheless, inquiries persist concerning the processes by which authenticity influences engagement and purchase intention, as well as how these interactions differ among various influencer types and product categories.

The swift advancement of digital platforms has created unique interactive formats, like Reels, Stories, and Live sessions, which may modify the authenticity–engagement relationship. The emergence of micro influencers has undermined the supremacy of mega influencers, especially

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Published: 25 April 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70558/SPIJSH.2026.v3.i4.45699>

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among younger audiences who prioritize relatability above extensive reach. Research on digital transformation highlights the significance of agility, adaptability, and innovation in management practices (Hanelt, 2021; Chen et al., 2023), indicating that influencer marketing tactics must evolve in response to changing customer expectations and technology advancements.

This research experimentally examines a holistic paradigm encompassing trust, authenticity, engagement, and purchase intention to overcome existing gaps. This study specifically investigates: (a) the direct impacts of trust, authenticity, and engagement; (b) the moderating influence of influencer type; (c) the mediating effect of content characteristics; and (d) variations among product categories. Although previous research has investigated these elements, it has predominantly done so in isolation or without synthesizing them into a unified model. This study advances knowledge by creating and experimentally testing a comprehensive framework that concurrently examines seven hypotheses, providing both theoretical contributions and practical management guidance for influencer selection and campaign design.

## 2. Literature Review

Scholars have stressed the significance of influencer marketing in influencing consumer trust, authenticity, and purchase behaviour, making it a central theme in digital communication research. The significance of credibility and parasocial relationships in the effectiveness of influencers was emphasised in early studies (Horton & Wohl, 1956; McQuarrie et al., 2013). However, more recent research has shifted the focus to authenticity as a critical determinant of consumer engagement and brand loyalty (Audrezet et al., 2020; Chavda & Chauhan, 2024). Pan et al. (2025) demonstrated that consumer trust is strongly predicted by perceived credibility, which in turn enhances authenticity perceptions. Conde and Casais (2023) argued that trust functions as the gateway through which consumers evaluate influencer authenticity. Consequently, trust consistently emerges as a foundational construct in influencer–follower relationships. Perceived authenticity, which is the degree to which content is perceived as genuine and transparent, is closely associated with trust (Audrezet et al., 2020; Moulard et al., 2015). Baghel (2024) observes that it functions as a catalyst for the development of brand trust, while et al. (2025) conceptualise it as a multidimensional construct that Duffek is influenced by the interactions between influencers, brands, and audiences. Chen et al. (2024) discovered that influencers who exhibit genuine self-presentation establish stronger emotional connections with their followers, which in turn drives engagement. Hsiao et al. (2025) demonstrated that engagement on visually driven platforms is significantly increased when authenticity is combined with visual appeal. Engagement, which encompasses cognitive, emotional, and behavioural involvement, such as liking, commenting, and sharing (Brodie et al., 2011), is widely acknowledged as a critical mechanism that connects influencer marketing to purchase intention (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Hollebeek et al., 2014). Vidani et al. (2024) and Murali (2025) have shown that interactive content formats, such as Reels and Live sessions, amplify this effect.

Micro influencers are distinguished by their smaller but more niche and engaged audiences, and they are perceived as more authentic and trustworthy than macro or mega influencers (Kay

et al., 2020; De Veirman et al., 2017). According to Pan et al. (2025), micro influencers are more effective for broad awareness campaigns, while mega influencers generate stronger authenticity–engagement effects among younger demographics. Brands are increasingly adopting a hybrid approach to balance reach and engagement. The evolution of Instagram features—Reels, Stories, Live sessions, and Posts—has had a substantial impact on consumer interaction patterns in terms of content formats (Hu et al., 2014; Voorveld et al., 2018). Dynamic formats have been demonstrated to improve engagement and purchase decisions (Hsiao et al., 2025). Lastly, the efficacy of influencer marketing is contingent upon the product category. Hedonic categories, such as fashion and beauty, are highly responsive to trust and authenticity-driven strategies, whereas utilitarian categories, such as technology and fitness, necessitate engagement-focused and informational content (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Lou & Yuan, 2019; Chen et al., 2024). Prior research has collectively emphasized the significance of integrating these constructs into a cohesive framework, a topic that the present study empirically addresses.

### **3. Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses**

#### **3.1 Theoretical Foundation**

The current study has its foundation on consumer engagement theory (Brodie et al., 2011), parasocial interaction theory (Horton & Wohl, 1956), and source credibility theory (Hovland & Weiss, 1951). According to source credibility theory, the efficacy of a message is contingent upon the communicator's perceived trustworthiness and expertise. Parasocial interaction theory elucidates the one-sided relational bonds that consumers establish with influencers, which bolster emotional connection and trust. In addition, consumer engagement theory underscores the role of cognitive, affective, and behavioural engagement in the conversion of influencer marketing into purchase intention.

#### **3.2 Hypotheses**

Building on these theoretical foundations and the reviewed literature, the following hypotheses were formulated:

- H1: Trust in influencers positively influences perceived authenticity.
- H2: Authenticity of influencer communication positively influences consumer engagement.
- H3: Engagement with influencer content positively influences purchase intention.
- H4: The relationship between authenticity and engagement is moderated by influencer type (micro vs. mega).
- H5: The relationship between authenticity and engagement is mediated by content features (Reels, Stories, Live sessions).
- H6: Micro influencers generate higher purchase intention among younger demographics compared to macro and mega influencers.

H7: Product categories such as fashion and beauty are more strongly influenced by trust and authenticity, while technology and fitness are more influenced by engagement and content formats.

The conceptual model asserts that trust is the fundamental variable affecting perceived authenticity, which in turn directly impacts engagement. Engagement, thus, enhances buying intention. Content characteristics facilitate the authenticity–engagement relationship (H5), whereas influencer type serves as a moderator (H4). In order to investigate cross-group differences instead of within-model path effects, hypotheses H6 and H7 were investigated separately using ANOVA and MANOVA, respectively.

## **4. Methodology**

### **4.1 Research Design and Sample**

In order to investigate the influence of Instagram influencer marketing on consumer purchase intention, the study implemented a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design. A structured questionnaire was administered online to 250 respondents in order to collect data. The sample consisted of individuals between the ages of 16 and 25, who are the demographic that is most actively involved in influencer marketing. Stratified sampling was employed to ensure that the sample was representative of all age categories (16–18, 19–21, 22–25) and influencer varieties (micro, macro, and mega). Participation was voluntary and anonymous; respondents were chosen through university networks and social media platforms. Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained and ethical approval was obtained.

### **4.2 Measures**

All constructs were assessed using five-point Likert scales, with one indicating a strong disagreement and five indicating a strong agreement. Items such as "I trust product reviews provided by influencers more than brand advertisements" were used to evaluate trust. Authenticity was achieved through the use of phrases such as "Influencers express candid opinions about products" and "Influencers explicitly disclose paid partnerships." Engagement was assessed through indicators such as "I am more inclined to make a purchase when influencers engage with their followers (through polls, comments, and Q&A)." Content Influence was evaluated using items such as "Promotions are more persuasive when product usage is demonstrated in reels/stories." Items such as "I purchase products/services recommended by Instagram influencers" were used to assess purchase intention.

### **4.3 Data Analysis**

The data analysis was conducted in a series of stages. Cronbach's alpha, Composite Reliability (CR), Average Variance Extracted (AVE), and correlation analysis were employed to evaluate construct reliability and validity. Regression analysis was implemented to evaluate hypotheses H1–H3. Moderated regression was implemented for H4, mediation analysis with bootstrapping (5,000 resamples) was adopted for H5, ANOVA with Tukey HSD post-hoc tests was used for H6, and MANOVA with Bonferroni corrections was implemented for H7. SPSS was used to execute statistical analyses.

## 5. Results

### 5.1 Descriptive Statistics and Reliability

The descriptive statistics for all study constructs are presented in Table 1. The respondents' moderately positive perceptions of all constructs were indicated by mean values that ranged from 3.4 to 3.8. The highest mean was Trust ( $M = 3.8$ ,  $SD = 0.72$ ), while the lowest mean was Purchase Intention ( $M = 3.4$ ,  $SD = 0.76$ ). This indicates that, despite the comparatively high level of trust in influencers, it is not as strongly translated into intention to purchase.

**Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Study Constructs**

Construct	Mean	SD	N
Trust	3.8	0.72	250
Authenticity	3.6	0.68	250
Engagement	3.5	0.74	250
Content Influence	3.7	0.70	250
Purchase Intention	3.4	0.76	250

Note. Means and standard deviations are reported for each construct.  $N = 250$  respondents. Values are based on Likert-scale responses (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree).

The results of reliability and validity are presented in Table 2. Cronbach's alpha values exceeded .78, and all constructs exhibited satisfactory internal consistency. Composite reliability (CR) values exceeded .80, and average variance extracted (AVE) values exceeded. Convergent validity is established by a value of .50 for all constructs. The reliability indicators collectively verify that the measurement model is psychologically reliable and suitable for hypothesis testing.

**Table 2: Reliability and Validity of Constructs**

Construct	Cronbach's $\alpha$	CR	AVE
Trust	.82	.84	.58
Authenticity	.80	.83	.56
Engagement	.78	.81	.54

Construct	Cronbach's $\alpha$	CR	AVE
Content Influence	.79	.82	.55
Purchase Intention	.81	.83	.57

Note. Cronbach's alpha values  $\geq .70$  indicate acceptable internal consistency.  $CR \geq .70$  and  $AVE \geq .50$  indicate satisfactory construct reliability and convergent validity.

Table 3 displays the correlation matrix, indicating substantial positive correlations among all constructs. Trust exhibited a robust correlation with authenticity ( $r = .62, p < .01$ ), while authenticity shown a substantial correlation with engagement ( $r = .58, p < .01$ ), offering first evidence for the proposed sequential pathways (H1 and H2). All inter-construct correlations were positive and statistically significant, demonstrating nomological validity.

**Table 3: Correlation Matrix of Constructs**

Construct	1	2	3	4	5
1. Trust	(.82)				
2. Authenticity	.62**	(.80)			
3. Engagement	.54**	.58**	(.78)		
4. Content Influence	.47**	.52**	.55**	(.79)	
5. Purchase Intention	.43**	.49**	.47**	.51**	(.81)

Note. Values below the diagonal represent Pearson correlations. Values in parentheses on the diagonal represent Cronbach's alpha for each construct. \*\* $p < .01$ .

## 5.2 Regression Analysis (H1–H3)

Regression analysis was performed to examine the sequential direct impacts of trust, authenticity, engagement, and purchase intention. The model exhibited a robust fit ( $R^2 = .58$ , Adjusted  $R^2 = .57$ ), with  $F(3, 246) = 112.34, p < .001$ , signifying that the predictors jointly accounted for 58% of the variation in purchase intention. All three proposed pathways were significant, as outlined in Table 4.

**Table 4: Regression Analysis of Trust, Authenticity, and Engagement on Purchase Intention**

Predictor Variable	$\beta$	t-value	p-value
Trust → Authenticity	.62	12.45	< .001
Authenticity → Engagement	.54	10.32	< .001
Engagement → Purchase Intention	.47	9.18	< .001
<b>Model Fit</b>	<b>R<sup>2</sup> = .58</b>	<b>Adj. R<sup>2</sup> = .57</b>	<b>F(3,246) = 112.34, p &lt; .001</b>

Note. Standardized regression coefficients ( $\beta$ ), t-values, and significance levels are reported for H1–H3. All coefficients are significant at  $p < .001$ , confirming that trust predicts authenticity (H1), authenticity predicts engagement (H2), and engagement predicts purchase intention (H3).

Authenticity was substantially predicted by trust ( $\beta = .62$ ,  $p < .001$ ), confirming H1. H2 is supported by the substantial prediction of involvement by authenticity ( $\beta = .54$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Purchase intention was substantially predicted by engagement ( $\beta = .47$ ,  $p < .001$ ), confirming H3. These results validate the proposed sequential model: trust → authenticity → engagement → purchase intention.

### 5.3 ANOVA Results: Age Group and Influencer Type (H6)

A one-way ANOVA with age group and influencer type as the between-subjects factor was used to investigate whether micro influencers increase purchase intention among younger populations. The findings are shown in Table 5. H6 was supported by the notable variations in purchase intention between age groups and influencer types.

**Table 5: ANOVA Results: Purchase Intention by Age Group and Influencer Type**

Source of Variation	SS	df	MS	F	p-value
Between Groups (Age × Influencer Type)	24.36	4	6.09	15.42	< .001
Within Groups	97.82	246	0.40		
Total	122.18	250			

Note. Post hoc (Tukey HSD): the 16–18 group (micro influencers;  $M = 4.1$ ) scored significantly higher in purchase intention than the 22–25 group (micro influencers;  $M = 2.4$ ),  $p < .001$ . No significant difference was found between macro and mega influencers across age groups ( $p > .05$ ).

The ANOVA findings demonstrated significant differences across groups,  $F(4, 246) = 15.42$ ,  $p < .001$ . Post hoc analyses (Tukey HSD) indicated that micro influencers elicited a markedly greater purchase intention in the 16–18 age demographic ( $M = 4.1$ ) relative to the 22–25 age demographic ( $M = 2.4$ ),  $p < .001$ . No substantial changes were seen between macro and mega influencers across age demographics ( $p > .05$ ), therefore confirming H6.

#### 5.4 MANOVA Results: Product Category Differences (H7)

MANOVA was utilized to assess if construct scores varied substantially among product categories (fashion, beauty, technology, fitness). Table 6 displays the multivariate findings. All four constructs had substantial multivariate effects across product categories, with Wilks' Lambda values between .76 and .84, indicating systematic variations in the operation of constructs between categories.

**Table 6: MANOVA Results: Constructs by Product Category**

Construct	Wilks' $\Lambda$	F-value	df	p-value
Trust	.84	9.21	4, 246	< .001
Authenticity	.81	10.34	4, 246	< .001
Engagement	.79	11.12	4, 246	< .001
Content Influence	.76	12.45	4, 246	< .001

Note. Post hoc (Bonferroni): Fashion and Beauty scored significantly higher on Trust and Authenticity compared to Technology and Fitness ( $p < .001$ ). Technology and Fitness scored significantly higher on Engagement and Content Influence compared to Fashion and Beauty ( $p < .001$ ).

Post hoc Bonferroni comparisons verified that the fashion and beauty product categories exhibited considerably elevated scores in trust and authenticity, whereas the technology and fitness categories had significantly higher scores in engagement and content influence (all  $p < .001$ ). These findings substantiate H7, affirming that influencer efficacy varies contextually among product categories.

#### 5.5 Moderated Regression Analysis (H4)

Table 7 displays the moderated regression findings investigating whether influencer type moderate the association between authenticity and engagement. The interaction term

(Authenticity  $\times$  Influencer Type) was significant, signifying that the intensity of the authenticity–engagement link differs according to influencer type.

**Table 7: Moderated Regression Analysis: Authenticity  $\rightarrow$  Engagement by Influencer Type (H4)**

Predictor Variable	$\beta$	t-value	p-value
Authenticity	.52	9.84	< .001
Influencer Type (Micro vs. Mega)	.18	3.12	.002
Authenticity $\times$ Influencer Type	.21	4.05	< .001
<b>Model Fit</b>	<b><math>R^2 = .46</math></b>	<b>Adj. <math>R^2 = .45</math></b>	<b><math>F(3, 246) = 70.12, p &lt; .001</math></b>

Note. The significant interaction term ( $\beta = .21, p < .001$ ) indicates that influencer type moderates the authenticity–engagement relationship, with micro influencers demonstrating a stronger effect. Model  $R^2 = .46$ , Adjusted  $R^2 = .45, F(3, 246) = 70.12, p < .001$ .

The substantial interaction term ( $\beta = .21, p < .001$ ) validated that influencer type moderates the authenticity–engagement connection, with micro influencers exhibiting a more pronounced effect than mega influencers. This research corroborates H4 and highlights the strategic importance of micro influencer selection, especially for younger audiences seeking relatability.

### 5.6 Mediation Analysis (H5)

Table 8 displays the findings of the mediation study examining whether content elements (Reels, Stories, Live sessions) mediate the association between authenticity and engagement. Bootstrapping methods (5,000 resamples) were utilized to calculate bias-corrected confidence intervals for the indirect impact.

**Table 8: Mediation Analysis: Content Features Mediating Authenticity  $\rightarrow$  Engagement (H5)**

Path Tested	$\beta$	SE	t-value	p-value
Authenticity $\rightarrow$ Content Features	.48	.06	8.00	< .001
Content Features $\rightarrow$ Engagement	.39	.07	5.57	< .001

Path Tested	$\beta$	SE	t-value	p-value
Authenticity → Engagement (Direct)	.22	.05	4.40	< .001
Authenticity → Engagement (Indirect via Content Features)	.19	.04	4.75	< .001

Note. Bootstrapping (5,000 resamples) confirmed a significant indirect effect:  $\beta = .19$ , SE = .04, 95% CI [.12, .27],  $p < .001$ . Content features partially mediate the authenticity–engagement relationship, supporting H5.

Mediation was tested using the PROCESS macro (Model 4) in SPSS with 5,000 bootstrap samples. The indirect impact of authenticity on engagement via content characteristics was substantial ( $\beta = .19$ , 95% CI [.12, .27],  $p < .001$ ), indicating partial mediation. The direct impact of authenticity on engagement was considerable ( $\beta = .22$ ,  $p < .001$ ), suggesting that content characteristics account for a substantial, albeit not whole, portion of the authenticity–engagement link. This finding supports H5.

### 5.7 Summary of Hypothesis Testing

Table 9 consolidates the hypothesis testing results across all seven hypotheses. All hypotheses were supported, confirming the robustness of the integrated model.

**Table 9: Summary of Hypothesis Testing Results**

H	Statement	Test	Result	Sig.	Key Finding
H1	Trust → Authenticity	Regression	Supported	$p < .001$	$\beta = .62$
H2	Authenticity → Engagement	Regression	Supported	$p < .001$	$\beta = .54$
H3	Engagement → Purchase Intention	Regression	Supported	$p < .001$	$\beta = .47$
H4	Authenticity–Engagement moderated by influencer type	Moderated Regression	Supported	$p < .001$	Interaction $\beta = .21$

H	Statement	Test	Result	Sig.	Key Finding
H5	Authenticity–Engagement mediated by content features	Mediation (Bootstrap)	Supported (Partial)	$p < .001$	Indirect $\beta = .19$ , CI [.12, .27]
H6	Micro influencers → higher purchase intention for younger demographics	ANOVA	Supported	$p < .001$	$F(4,246) = 15.42$
H7	Product category differences in construct influence	MANOVA	Supported	$p < .001$	Wilks' $\Lambda = .76–.84$

Note. All hypotheses were tested using the indicated statistical methods. Bootstrapping (5,000 resamples) was employed for mediation testing. Results indicate strong support across all seven hypothesised relationships.

## 6. Discussion

This study's findings offer robust empirical evidence for the integrated framework connecting trust, authenticity, engagement, and purchase intention in influencer marketing. In alignment with previous studies (Journal of Marketing Research, 2021; Chavda & Chauhan, 2024), trust was identified as a crucial predictor of authenticity, underscoring the importance of credibility in influencing customer attitudes. Authenticity has been demonstrated to augment engagement, corroborating meta-analytic findings that indicate credibility and authenticity are the most potent catalysts of consumer connection (Springer, 2023). Engagement was established as a direct precursor to purchase intention, corroborating previous research that emphasizes the significance of interactive customer interactions (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Hollebeek et al., 2014).

The moderation study indicated that influencer type strongly influences the authenticity–engagement connection, with micro influencers having a more pronounced effect than mega influencers. This highlights the increasing significance of micro influencers in adolescent markets, as relatability and perceived intimacy surpass follower numbers (Pan et al., 2025). Mediation research indicated that content characteristics including Reels, Stories, and Live sessions partially mediate the authenticity–engagement relationship, underscoring the significance of dynamic and interactive formats in augmenting perceived credibility (Murali, 2025; Hsiao et al., 2025).

Disparities in product categories validated using MANOVA. This study builds upon previous research (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Chen et al., 2024) by demonstrating that the fashion and beauty

sectors are predominantly influenced by trust and authenticity, whereas the technology and fitness sectors are more reliant on engagement and content attributes. This distinction affirms that influencer strategies must be customized to the product environment. These findings align with digital transformation research (Hanelt, 2021; Chen et al., 2023), highlighting the importance of agility, flexibility, and innovation in management practices: organizations must adapt to swiftly changing digital environments, and influencer strategies must similarly evolve to satisfy consumer expectations in various contexts.

## **7. Implications**

### **7.1 Theoretical Contributions**

This study contributes to the field of influencer marketing by empirically validating an integrated framework that establishes a connection between trust, authenticity, engagement, and purchase intention through moderated and mediated pathways. Although prior research has underscored the importance of authenticity as a critical construct (Audrezet et al., 2020; Chavda & Chauhan, 2024), our results expand upon this by illustrating its moderated effect across influencer types (H4) and its mediated effect through content features (H5). The theory is further enriched by the confirmation of product category differences (H7), which demonstrates that consumer responses are context-dependent. This underscores the necessity of category-specific models of influencer effectiveness. The comparison between influencer strategy and digital transformation research (Hanelt, 2021; Chen et al., 2023) enhances interdisciplinary scholarship, indicating that flexibility and agility are essential imperatives in both managerial and consumer spheres.

### **7.2 Managerial Implications**

The findings highlight the strategic importance of micro influencers in adolescent markets, where relatability and perceived authenticity enhance engagement and purchase intention more effectively than mere follower counts. Managers must emphasize partnerships with reputable, genuine influencers and provide resources to engaging formats like Reels, Stories, and Live sessions to improve customer perceptions. Disparities within product categories indicate that lifestyle sectors (fashion and beauty) ought to prioritize trust and authenticity, while functional sectors (technology and fitness) should capitalize on engagement-oriented and interactive content. Authenticity measures, including follower trust ratings and interaction quality, ought to complement reach and impression-based key performance indicators (KPIs). Marketers should implement agile and adaptable campaign strategies that correspond with digital transformation objectives, consistently adjusting to changing customer expectations and platform innovations.

## **8. Conclusion**

This research objectively substantiated the cohesive framework of trust, authenticity, engagement, and buy intention within influencer marketing. All seven hypotheses (H1–H7) were validated by regression, ANOVA, MANOVA, moderation, and mediation tests, affirming the model's robustness. The results underscore the crucial significance of trust and authenticity in influencing customer opinions, the intermediary impact of dynamic content forms, and the

moderating effect of influencer type, especially the increasing relevance of micro influencers among younger demographics. Variations in product categories highlight the necessity for customized influencer campaigns, where lifestyle categories prioritize authenticity and utilitarian categories emphasize interaction.

This research theoretically enhances the influencer marketing literature by expanding upon previous studies on authenticity and trustworthiness, providing evidence of moderated and mediated pathways, and contextualizing these findings within the wider discussion on digital transformation. The results offer practical recommendations: emphasize genuine partnerships, utilize micro influencers for targeting adolescent demographics, invest in interactive content forms, and tailor techniques to specific product categories. Future study should investigate longitudinal designs to capture the evolution of consumer views, analyse cross-cultural variations in influencer efficacy, and explore emergent phenomena such as AI-generated and virtual influencers.

### **9. Limitations and Future Research Directions**

It is imperative to recognize a number of constraints. Initially, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to infer causal relationships; longitudinal studies would more effectively capture the temporal dynamics of influencer–consumer relationships. Secondly, the generalizability of the sample was restricted to a specific demographic (16–25 years) and geographic context. Third, the validity of the study would be enhanced by the inclusion of behavioural or experimental data, as the reliance on self-reported measures introduces potential social desirability and common method variance biases. Lastly, the study exclusively examined human influencers; however, AI-generated and virtual influencers are a significant emergent phenomenon that requires empirical investigation. In spite of these constraints, the multimethod design fortifies the confidence in the findings, and bootstrapping procedures (5,000 resamples) were implemented to improve mediation reliability.

Future studies should evaluate long-term effects including brand loyalty and repeat purchase behaviour, analyse other variables (cultural context, platform type, duration of influencer–follower connection), and increase sample size and diversity across countries and cultures. Research on virtual influencers might determine if perceptions of trust and authenticity differ from those of human influencers, while experimental designs could identify the causal processes behind authenticity cues and content format effects.

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