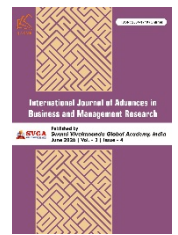




FROM CREDIBILITY TO PURCHASE INTENTION: THE ROLE OF AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT IN INFLUENCE MARKETING



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Abstract

The rapid growth of social media has established influencer marketing as a key medium through which brands seek to shape consumer behaviour; however, despite increasing academic interest, the mechanisms through which influencer attributes affect purchasing decisions remain largely theoretical. This paper proposes a comprehensive conceptual framework that positions audience engagement as the central mediating variable linking two primary antecedents—namely, influencer credibility and content authenticity—to consumer purchase intention. Drawing on Source Credibility Theory, the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), and Consumer Engagement Theory, the study develops five formal propositions that explain the pathways through which influencer marketing influences consumer behaviour. The proposed model contributes to existing literature by integrating prior research, identifying key gaps, and clearly defining core constructs, while also offering a strong conceptual foundation for future empirical validation using structural equation modelling (SEM) and partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) techniques.

Keywords: Audience Engagement; Content Authenticity; Conceptual Framework; Influencer Marketing; Mediation; Purchase Intention; Source Credibility

Introduction

Social media has influenced marketing communication due to its rapid development, leading to the rise of social media influencers as significant opinion leaders. Unlike traditional celebrities, influencers build closer, more interactive relationships with their audience, making their suggestions more relatable and credible. As a result, influencer marketing is increasingly popular among brands for shaping consumer attitudes and purchase behaviour [1, 2]. However, there is limited theoretical insight into how influencer marketing contributes to consumer purchase intention, with much research focusing on individual aspects such as credibility, content type, or the number of followers, without integrating these factors into a unified framework. This fragmented approach makes it difficult to fully understand how influencer attributes affect consumer judgment. Consumer behaviour is driven by numerous factors, and, as Diddimani [3] suggests, should be explained through a combination of frameworks, rather than isolated explanations. Credibility, referring to the perceived trustworthiness and expertise of the influencer [1, 4], and authenticity, defined as the perceived genuineness and transparency of content [5], are key aspects but lack clear explanation regarding their impact on purchase intention. One overlooked area in the literature is the involvement of the audience as a bridging mechanism; engagement, often seen as a mere result (likes, comments, shares), can also be understood as a cognitive, emotional, and behavioural process of interaction with content [6, 7]. Raghavendra and Mg [8] support this perspective, highlighting the importance of engagement in connecting influencer attributes to consumer reactions. Moreover, process-based

models suggest that consumer behaviour occurs in stages, with mediators playing a key role in translating influencing factors into intentions [9]. Thus, audience engagement could act as an intermediary between influencer attributes and purchase intention. Furthermore, research stresses the need to integrate multiple variables into a framework. Researchers like Raghavendra and Shivaprasad [10], and Sheethal [11] emphasise that effective frameworks clarify the relationships between various factors, an integrated approach currently missing in influencer marketing studies. This research aims to develop a theoretical framework that explains how influencer credibility and content authenticity impact purchase intention, based on audience interaction, providing a foundation for future research.

Research Objectives

- To understand how influencer credibility and content authenticity affect audience engagement.
- To explain how audience engagement influences consumer purchase intention.
- To develop a simple conceptual framework linking these factors together.

Conceptual Background

Influencer Marketing and the Digital Context

Influencer marketing is a form of social media marketing where individuals with established credibility and a strong following in specific content areas promote products or services on behalf of a brand. Unlike traditional advertising, influencer marketing offers perceived authenticity and relatability, which are often lacking in conventional ads [12]. As De Veirman et al. [2] demonstrate, influencer endorsements become more successful as the number of followers and the relevance of the niche audience increase, with engagement metrics serving as key indicators of campaign success. Similarly, Lou and Yuan [1] highlight that the credibility of influencers and the value of their messages significantly impact consumer trust and behavioural responses. Additionally, Audrezet et al. [5] emphasise that the perceived authenticity of influencer communication fosters greater trust and engagement among audiences. These dynamics are strategically important in the digital ecosystem, where platforms like Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and X (formerly Twitter) facilitate the continuous creation, consumption, and sharing of influencer content. In this environment, credibility and authenticity function as critical perceptual filters that determine whether audiences engage with, trust, and ultimately act on influencer-promoted content.

Key Constructs

The conceptualisation of influencer credibility, as based on Ohanian [4] and Lou and Yuan [1], is multidimensional, encompassing expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness. Expertise refers to how well the influencer is perceived to be knowledgeable about the content domain, trustworthiness relates to the perceived honesty and integrity of the influencer, and attractiveness includes both physical appeal and social desirability. Content authenticity pertains to how much the content created by the influencer is viewed as authentic, transparent, and aligned with their personal brand. According to Audrezet et al. [5], authentic influencer communication—characterised by honest disclosure and consistency between the influencer's personal values and the content they promote—effectively enhances perceived credibility and audience receptivity. Audience engagement, on the other hand, is a multidimensional interactive process involving cognitive, emotional, and behavioural reactions of audiences to influencer content [6, 7]. As Raghavendra and Mg [8] demonstrate, consumer engagement serves as a crucial process that connects antecedent perceptions to consumer reactions, such as behavioural intentions. Purchase intention, in this context, refers to the subjective probability of a consumer buying a product or service recommended by an influencer, aligning with the Theory of Planned Behaviour framework proposed by Ajzen [13].

Theoretical Foundation

Source Credibility Theory

The underlying theory that explains how the characteristics of influencers affect their audience is based on the theory of source credibility [4, 14]. According to this theory, the perceived credibility of the source, particularly expertise and trustworthiness, are crucial factors in persuasive communication. In influencer marketing, viewers are likely to consider

the knowledge, authenticity, and integrity of influencers before accepting their advice. When credibility is perceived as high, cognitive resistance is minimised, and message acceptance is increased, leading to greater engagement with the content [15]. This mechanism is further supported by recent studies that show influencer credibility positively influences consumer trust, which in turn fosters engagement and purchase intentions [1, 16].

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM)

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) of persuasion, proposed by Petty and Cacioppo [17], offers a dual-pathway explanation of persuasive communication that is highly relevant to influencer marketing. When viewers are motivated and able to process information, they activate the central route, which allows them to critically assess the quality and strength of arguments—circumstances that are typically facilitated by high credibility and authentic content. On the other hand, in the peripheral route, viewers are influenced by heuristic cues such as attractiveness, popularity, and social proof from influencers. Engagement can be stimulated through both routes, but the central route is more likely to result in lasting attitude changes and purchase intentions [17]. Authenticity serves as a powerful central-route stimulus that promotes deeper thinking and greater attention. This is supported by recent studies, which have shown that genuine and trustworthy content from influencers enhances message elaboration and significantly increases consumer engagement and behavioural reactions [1, 16].

Consumer Engagement Theory

Engagement, as outlined by Brodie et al. [6] and further elaborated by Hollebeek et al. [7], can be conceptualised as a context-related, motivational state, defined in cognitive terms of Vigor, emotional enthusiasm, and behavioural activation towards a focal object or brand. In the context of influencer marketing, the focal objects include both the influencer and the product or service being promoted. Engagement serves as a crucial mediator, transforming passive content consumption into active relationship investment, thereby increasing the likelihood of purchase.

Process-Based Behavioural Models

Behavioural intention is not directly influenced but is formed through a chain of intermediate psychological constructs, where antecedents impact mediators such as trust, satisfaction, and engagement, which then influence purchase intention. This sequential logic is supported by empirical evidence indicating that trust affects purchase intention through serial mediators like perceived quality and satisfaction [18], and that trust itself mediates the relationship between upstream factors and behavioural intention [19, 20]. This time-based reasoning supports the existing model, where engagement serves as a mediating variable between pre-purchase perceptions and purchase intention. Similarly, Kumar et al. [21] emphasise that mediators are crucial in transforming upstream antecedents into downstream behavioural intentions.

Literature Review

The body of research on the topic of influencer marketing has grown exponentially in the last decade, generating useful information on individual constructs. Table 1 summarises the most significant literature that has informed the current conceptual framework in the fields of credibility of influencers, authenticity of the content, consumer engagement, and purchase intention.

Table 1: Key Literature Informing the Conceptual Model

Author(s) & Year	Construct(s) Addressed	Key Conceptual Contribution	Role in Present Framework
Ohanian [4]	Source credibility	Decomposed credibility into expertise, trustworthiness, attractiveness	Foundation for credibility antecedent
Fogg [15]	Web credibility	Credibility perception shapes online behaviour	Digital credibility context

Brodie et al. [6]	Consumer engagement	Engagement as multi-dimensional interactive process	Conceptual grounding for engagement
Hollebeek et al. [7]	Consumer brand engagement	Cognitive, emotional, and behavioural engagement dimensions	Engagement dimensionality
Lou and Yuan [1]	Influencer credibility, purchase intention	Credibility of social media influencers drives consumer outcomes	Credibility → intention pathway
De Veirman et al. [2]	Influencer marketing, engagement	Follower numbers and niche relevance shape engagement	Antecedents of influencer effectiveness
Audrezet et al. [5]	Authenticity, disclosure	Authentic influencer communication enhances credibility	Authenticity antecedent construct
Ki and Kim [22]	Parasocial interaction, purchase intention	Para-social bonds mediate influencer impact	Engagement mechanism theoretical support
Raghavendra and Mg [8]	Consumer engagement, trust	Engagement links technology antecedents to consumer response	Mediation logic and framework
Sheethal [11]	Integrated conceptual framework	Digital/structural factors as strategic enablers of outcomes	Framework integration methodology
Diddimani [3]	Behavioural outcomes	Integrated models over isolated variable examination	Research gap justification
Vinyas [23]	Mediators, moderators	Indirect pathways explain behavioural effects	Mediation proposition logic
Kumar et al. [24]	Process-based behavioural models	Sequential constructs: expectation → trust → intention	Engagement → purchase intention sequence
Raghavendra and Kumar [9]	Conceptual paper methodology	Theoretical integration and proposition-based frameworks	Methodological justification
Kumar et al. [21]	Mediation, skills/mindset	Mediators translate antecedents into behavioural intention	Engagement as mediator argument
Raghavendra and Shivaprasad [10]	Conceptual framework building	Key variables identified, grouped, and integrated into one model	Framework development process

Source: Compiled by Researcher

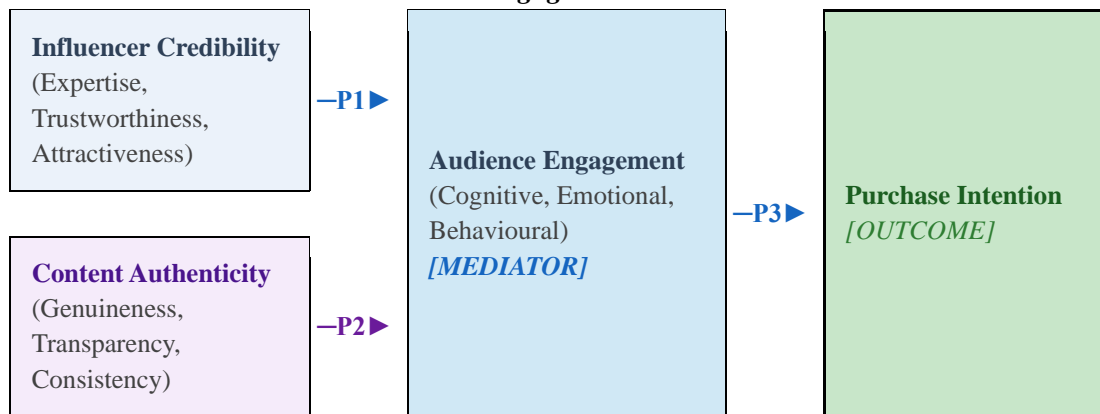
Although this body of literature is valuable, three major gaps exist. First, most studies examine constructs individually without explaining the mechanisms that connect antecedents to outcomes [3]. Second, while the mediating effect of audience engagement has been theorised, it is rarely modelled in detail; engagement is often viewed consequently rather than a process [6, 7]. Third, the interactive influences of credibility and authenticity—conceptually distinct but practically interconnected constructs—have not been jointly modelled in a single framework that positions engagement as the mediating channel to purchase intention. These gaps collectively highlight the need for a coherent conceptual model that (a) clearly outlines the constructs in question, (b) delineates the directional relationships between them, and (c) proposes testable propositions for further experimental elaboration. This paper specifically addresses these needs.

Conceptual Framework Development

The conceptual framework developed in this paper is based on the iterative variable-identification and integration process proposed by Raghavendra and Shivaprasad [10]. This process involves first identifying key variables, grouping

them by their theoretical roles, and then integrating them into a single, cohesive model. Four constructs are introduced: influencer credibility and content authenticity as exogenous antecedents, audience engagement as the mediating mechanism, and purchase intention as the endogenous outcome. Sheethal [11] demonstrates that effective conceptual frameworks combine various areas into a single conceptualisation, viewing digital and structural considerations as strategic facilitators of behavioural results, while making the interrelationships among constructs explicit. Following this approach, both antecedents are positioned as independent determinants of engagement, with the effect of these antecedents on purchase intention being entirely mediated by engagement. Raghavendra and Mg [8] provide additional conceptual guidance, showing how technology-enabled antecedents translate into consumer engagement, which in turn influences downstream consumer reactions. In the context of influencer marketing, this logic suggests that credibility and authenticity, as structural properties of influencer content, act as the technology-analogue antecedents that trigger engagement. The structure is shown in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework: From Credibility and Authenticity to Purchase Intention via Audience Engagement



Note: P4 = Engagement mediates Credibility → Purchase Intention; P5 = Engagement mediates Authenticity → Purchase Intention

Source: Collected by Author

The framework's internal logic is grounded in source credibility theory (credibility antecedent), ELM (authenticity antecedent), consumer engagement theory (mediating mechanism), and process-based behavioural models (engagement → intention sequence). Table 2 provides formal construct definitions and the proposed relationships within the framework.

Table 2: Construct Definitions and Proposed Relationships

Construct	Definition	Role in Model	Proposed Relationship
Influencer Credibility	The degree to which an influencer is perceived as a believable, trustworthy, and expert source of information [1, 4]	Exogenous antecedent variable	Credibility positively predicts audience engagement (P ₁); indirect effect on purchase intention via engagement (P ₄)
Content Authenticity	The extent to which influencer-generated content is perceived as genuine, transparent, and consistent with the influencer's identity [5]	Exogenous antecedent variable	Authenticity positively predicts audience engagement (P ₂); indirect effect on purchase intention via engagement (P ₅)

Audience Engagement	A multidimensional, interactive process encompassing cognitive, emotional, and behavioural responses of audiences toward influencer content [6, 7]	Central mediating mechanism	Engagement mediates both credibility → PI and authenticity → PI pathways (P_3 , P_4 , P_5)
Purchase Intention	A consumer's self-reported likelihood of purchasing a product or service recommended by an influencer [13]	Endogenous outcome variable	Driven directly by engagement (P_3) and indirectly by credibility and authenticity through engagement (P_4 , P_5)

Source: Compiled by Researcher

Proposition Development

Influencer Credibility and Audience Engagement (P_1)

Using an influencer who is perceived as credible—possessing expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness—allows the audience to allocate cognitive and emotional resources more effectively toward processing the influencer's content. The theory of source credibility posits that sources with high credibility will attract more attention, face less resistance during information processing, and improve the quality of the audience's engagement experience. Lou and Yuan [1] empirically support this hypothesis, demonstrating that influencer credibility positively influences audience engagement with influencer posts. Ki and Kim [22] further show that the relationship between an influencer's characteristics and consumer responses is mediated by parasocial bonds, which are strengthened through perceived credibility. Yuan et al. [25] also confirm that source credibility enhances parasocial relationships. Accordingly:

P_1 : Influencer credibility is positively associated with audience engagement.

Content Authenticity and Audience Engagement (P_2)

The central route of the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) operates through content authenticity, which stimulates deeper elaboration and a higher degree of relational investment among audiences. Perceived influencer authenticity, openness, and consistency in values reduce psychological reactance and increase intrinsic motivation to act. According to Audrezet et al. [5], genuine communication with an influencer strengthens the connection between the influencer and the audience, leading to greater engagement and more time spent with the content. Vinyas [23] suggests that conceptual models that include authenticity as an antecedent benefit from specifying the mediating processes through which authenticity exerts its downstream effects, a role that engagement plays in the present model.

P_2 : Content authenticity is positively associated with audience engagement.

Audience Engagement and Purchase Intention (P_3)

Consumer engagement theory posits that engagement is not merely an indicator of content popularity, but a motivational state that triggers behavioural intentions. When audiences are cognitively, emotionally, and behaviourally engaged with influencer content, the psychological proximity between the audience and the promoted product increases, perceived risk decreases, and purchase intention rises. Kumar et al. [24] provide process-based evidence showing that intermediate constructs, particularly trust and satisfaction developed during engagement, gradually build towards behavioural intention. This reasoning supports the pathway from engagement to purchase intention.

P_3 : Audience engagement is positively associated with purchase intention.

Mediation: Engagement Mediates Credibility → Purchase Intention (P_4)

The indirect route between credibility and purchase intention, through engagement, is based on the understanding that while credibility is necessary, it is not sufficient on its own to drive purchase behaviour. Instead, credibility stimulates involvement, and it is the actual experience of this involvement—not merely the perception of credibility—that motivates purchase intention. Kumar et al. [21] explain that mediators serve as the link between antecedent conditions

and downstream intentions, with the mediating construct becoming the conceptual connection that makes the antecedent effect behaviourally consequential. Raghavendra and Kumar [9] further emphasise the importance of defining such mediation paths in conceptual papers to ensure theoretical specificity and testability.

P₄: Audience engagement mediates the relationship between influencer credibility and purchase intention.

Mediation: Engagement Mediates Authenticity → Purchase Intention (P₅)

Similarly, it is hypothesised that the influence of content authenticity on purchase intention operates indirectly through audience engagement. The nature of the engagement experience determines the quality and strength of the engagement, which, in turn, transforms attitudinal receptivity into purchase intention. Vinyas [23] demonstrates that indirect pathways, which are mediated mechanisms, explain how attitudinal influences are converted into specific behavioural outcomes. This observation can be directly applied to the authenticity-engagement-purchase intention chain.

P₅: Audience engagement mediates the relationship between content authenticity and purchase intention.

Discussion

This paper establishes a conceptual framework that helps describe how influencer marketing influences consumer purchase intention by engaging the audience. The framework combines influencer credibility and content authenticity as antecedents and positions engagement as a mediating mechanism to provide a more detailed explanation of influencer effectiveness than previous direct-effect models. A major gap in the literature is the lack of coherent coverage of key constructs. Previous research has tended to investigate credibility, authenticity, and engagement individually, failing to provide insights into how these variables interplay in a single process. In line with the claim that consumer behaviour depends on various interrelated factors [3], the current research combines these constructs into one framework. This method is consistent with conceptual development approaches that focus on systematically identifying and combining variables to account for behavioural outcomes [10, 11]. The framework, therefore, adds value by providing a systematic explanation beyond individual relationships. The suggested connections among influencer credibility, content authenticity, and audience engagement (P_1 and P_2) outline the complementary nature of these antecedents. The credibility of influencers enhances their reliability and expertise, thereby maximising the chances that audiences will cognitively process and accept influencer messages [1, 4]. Conversely, content authenticity boosts perceptions of transparency and authenticity, reducing scepticism about promotional intent [5]. It is noted that these constructs work in tandem to create more profound engagement, implying that influencer communication is effective not only when source characteristics are considered but also when messages are properly delivered and received. An important theoretical contribution is the conceptualisation of audience engagement as a mediating process rather than a mere result. Although engagement is often operationalised in terms of behavioural indicators, such as likes and shares, this paper adopts a broader perspective, involving engagement as cognitive, emotional, and behavioural participation, based on consumer engagement theory [6, 7]. Further evidence of this interpretation comes from Raghavendra and Mg [8], who show that engagement is a mechanism connecting antecedent conditions with consumer responses. Positioning engagement in the causal chain explains why perceptions introduced through influencers can be converted into meaningful behavioural results. The connection between purchase intention and audience engagement (P_3) supports the role of engagement in consumer decision-making. Engagement involves a higher level of interaction, enhancing psychological attachment to both the influencer and the promoted product. This process aligns with process-based behavioural models, which suggest that decisions are formed at intermediate stages rather than through direct exposure impacts. Kumar et al. [24] reveal that consumer intentions develop sequentially through mediating constructs, with Kumar et al. [21] reiterating that mediators transform initial perceptions into action intentions. These perspectives highlight the importance of engagement as a decisive step in the decision-making process. The mediation of engagement (P_4 and P_5) makes a significant contribution to the theory of influencer marketing. The framework shows that the effects of credibility and authenticity are mediated by audience engagement, inferring that credibility and authenticity have a direct impact on purchase intention. This view is consistent with conceptual arguments that indirect pathways more accurately describe behavioural processes. Vinyas [23] emphasises the significance of mediating mechanisms in explaining the effect of antecedents, while Kumar et al. [21] note that mediators are essential to understanding how upstream factors become behaviourally relevant. Including engagement as a mediator strengthens the model, increasing its power in explaining

and introducing more theoretical specificity. The inclusion of both credibility and authenticity highlights the dynamic nature of digital consumer assessments. While credibility has been the focus of persuasive communication, the growing commercialisation of influencer marketing has amplified the significance of authenticity. Viewers are more conscious of promotional intent and are more likely to assess the authenticity of influencer content compared to personal expression [26]. The interplay of these constructs enables the framework to reflect modern consumer expectations and offers a more refined understanding of influencer effectiveness. Another way the study shows how conceptual frameworks can be developed systematically is through the integration of theories. The model uses well-defined methods [10], determining key constructs, assigning them roles, and connecting them with theoretically justified relationships. This procedure aligns with the perspective that conceptual frameworks should represent the interrelations among variables to explain complex behavioural outcomes [11]. The model is consistent and can be empirically validated. The discussion points to the need to move beyond isolated variables toward process-based explanations in influencer marketing research. The study contributes to a better theoretical understanding of how influencer-based communication can influence consumer purchase intention by explaining the roles of credibility, authenticity, and engagement within a single framework [27].

Implications

Practical Implications

- **Role of Influencer Credibility in Driving Engagement**

Based on the proposed framework and discussion (P_1), influencer credibility plays a direct role in enhancing audience engagement. This suggests that brands should prioritise influencers who are perceived as trustworthy and knowledgeable, as credibility strengthens audience involvement, which is essential for influencing purchase intention.

- **Importance of Content Authenticity in Enhancing Engagement**

The findings related to P_2 indicate that content authenticity significantly contributes to audience engagement. This implies that influencer content should be perceived as genuine and consistent with the influencer's identity, as authenticity reduces scepticism and fosters deeper interaction with the content.

- **Engagement as a Driver of Purchase Intention**

In line with P_3 , audience engagement is identified as a key factor influencing purchase intention. This suggests that marketing efforts should focus on increasing meaningful audience involvement, as engagement serves as the mechanism through which influencer communication translates into behavioural outcomes.

- **Engagement as a Mediating Mechanism**

The framework (P_4 and P_5) demonstrates that the effects of credibility and authenticity on purchase intention occur through audience engagement. This indicates that improving influencer characteristics alone may not directly influence consumer behaviour unless they generate sufficient engagement, emphasising the importance of focusing on engagement as an intermediate outcome.

Social Implications

- **Importance of Trust and Authentic Communication**

The study highlights the role of credibility and authenticity in shaping audience engagement, indicating that consumers rely on trustworthy and genuine content when interacting with influencer communication. This reinforces the importance of maintaining honest and transparent communication in digital environments.

- **Consumer Engagement as an Active Process**

By conceptualising engagement as a cognitive, emotional, and behavioural process, the study suggests that consumers are actively involved in interpreting and responding to influencer content. This reflects a shift from passive exposure to active participation in digital communication.

- **Influence on Consumer Decision-Making Process**

The framework demonstrates that purchase intention is influenced through engagement rather than direct exposure. This highlights that consumer decisions are shaped through interaction and involvement, rather than immediate response to promotional content.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

This is a conceptual study, and as such, it has its limitations, which also serve as guidance for future research. The suggested framework is constructed based on theoretical justification and the current literature, without any empirical support. Therefore, the relationships need to be tested through quantitative or experimental research. Influencer credibility, content authenticity, and audience engagement are specifically addressed in the model, but other relevant aspects, including influencer-brand congruence, platform features, and audience demographics, are not included and could play a role in the proposed relationships. Furthermore, the framework presupposes a generalised social media environment and fails to consider differences among platforms, where interaction processes might differ. The proposed propositions (P_1-P_5) should be empirically tested using appropriate analytical methods in the future, and the mediating effect of engagement should be tested. Additionally, the model should be extended by adding moderating variables (type of platform and audience characteristics). Comparative and longitudinal designs can also help deepen the understanding of the development of engagement over time and in different contexts, thereby strengthening the explanatory value and applicability of the framework.

Conclusion

This paper establishes a conceptual model that describes the role of influencer credibility and content authenticity in consumer purchase intention through audience engagement. By combining these constructs into a single model, the study provides a process-based description of how influencer marketing functions in online contexts. The framework places audience engagement at the centre as a mediating mechanism, demonstrating that the impacts of credibility and authenticity on purchase intention are not direct but are mediated by increased audience involvement. This perspective addresses one of the major limitations in current studies, which have often treated these variables separately or as directly related. Another contribution of the study is the development of a systematic approach to conceptual framework development, including the identification of key constructs, a description of their functions, and the connection of these constructs via theoretically based propositions. It thus provides a solid foundation for future empirical studies to measure and test the proposed relationships. By aligning the framework with the study objectives, the research clarifies the connection between influencer characteristics, engagement, and consumer behaviour. The suggested model enhances the understanding of influencer marketing effectiveness and lays the groundwork for further theoretical and empirical development in the field.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interests.

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