

INFLUENCER MARKETING AND CONSUMER TRUST IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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ABSTRACT

Social media marketing has become a dominant force in influencing consumer behaviour, particularly among younger audiences. This study examines the role of influencer marketing in shaping consumer trust and brand loyalty, with a focus on key factors such as credibility, content relevance, engagement, and electronic word-of-mouth. This study adopted a descriptive research design to analyse the influence of influencer marketing on consumer trust and brand loyalty. The design enabled a systematic understanding of consumer perceptions without manipulating variables. Data were collected using a convenience sampling method, selecting respondents who are active social media users. The research was conducted across Kerala, a region with high digital awareness and strong social media usage, making it suitable for the study. A structured questionnaire was used to gather primary data on variables such as influencer credibility, content relevance, engagement, and trust. Statistical tools including percentage analysis, descriptive statistics, and factor analysis were applied for data interpretation. The results indicated that social influence, content relevance, and interactive communication are key determinants of trust, while reliance on influencer endorsements alone is limited. The study is relevant in guiding marketers to focus on authenticity, engagement, and credibility to build effective influencer marketing strategies.

KEYWORDS: *Influencer Marketing, Consumer Trust, Brand Loyalty, Social Media, Consumer Behaviour, Digital Marketing, Engagement, Authenticity.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Influencer marketing has become a prominent element of social media strategy, enabling brands to connect with audiences through individuals who have established credibility and a dedicated following. Unlike traditional advertising, influencer marketing relies on personal recommendations, storytelling, and perceived authenticity to shape consumer attitudes and behaviours. As consumers increasingly seek relatable and trustworthy sources of information, influencers play a key role in bridging the gap between brands and their target audiences.

Trust is a central factor influencing the effectiveness of influencer marketing. Consumers are more likely to engage with and act upon content when they perceive influencers as authentic, transparent, and aligned with their values. Recent research highlights that credibility, honesty, and consistency in communication significantly strengthen consumer trust and positively influence purchasing decisions (Kothari et al., 2025). At the same time, concerns regarding paid promotions, hidden sponsorships, and exaggerated endorsements have led to growing scepticism among audiences, particularly when influencer content lacks transparency or appears overly commercialized (Dzreke & Dzreke, 2025).

The role of authenticity has become increasingly important in the digital age. Consumers are now more informed and critical, often evaluating not only the promoted product but also the influencer's personal brand, lifestyle, and previous collaborations. Influencers who maintain genuine engagement with their audience, provide honest reviews, and limit excessive sponsorships tend to build stronger relationships and higher levels of trust. Conversely, over-commercialization can reduce credibility and weaken the persuasive impact of influencer campaigns.

The recent rise of social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube has intensified the influence of visual and interactive content. Features such as live streams, short-form videos, and real-time interactions allow influencers to engage directly with their followers, creating a sense of community and strengthening trust. This interactive environment enhances the effectiveness of influencer marketing by fostering two-way communication and enabling immediate feedback.

While influencer marketing continues to be a powerful tool in digital marketing, its success largely depends on trust, authenticity, and transparency. Brands must carefully select influencers whose values align with their own and prioritize genuine engagement over purely promotional content. By doing so, they can build stronger consumer relationships and sustain credibility in an increasingly competitive and sceptical digital marketplace.

1.1 Problem Statement

The rapid expansion of social media has transformed marketing practices, with influencer marketing becoming a key strategy for reaching and engaging consumers. However, its effectiveness in building consumer trust and brand loyalty remains uncertain, as many consumers question the authenticity and transparency of influencer endorsements. Increasing exposure to sponsored content has led to scepticism, creating a gap between brand intentions and consumer perceptions. Additionally, factors such as credibility of influencers, quality of content, level of engagement, and reliability of online reviews influence consumer trust in different ways. These variations make it difficult for marketers to identify which elements are most effective in fostering trust and long-term loyalty. Therefore, there is a need to examine how influencer marketing and social media factors collectively shape consumer trust in the digital environment.

1.2 Scope of the Study

This study focuses on analysing the role of influencer marketing in shaping consumer trust and brand loyalty within the context of social media. It primarily targets young users, particularly individuals aged 18–24 years, as they are highly active and engaged on digital platforms. The study considers widely used platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok, where influencer activity is most prevalent. Key factors examined include influencer credibility, authenticity, content quality, consumer engagement, and online reviews. The research is confined to a specific geographical area, which may limit the generalization of findings to broader populations. It also reflects current trends in social media marketing, capturing contemporary consumer behaviour in the digital age.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

The primary objectives of this research paper are:

1. To examine the role of influencers in shaping consumer trust and brand loyalty.
2. To identify the factors that influence consumer trust in brands on social media.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Social media marketing has become an essential component of modern business strategies due to its ability to influence consumer perceptions, engagement, and purchase decisions. Recent studies highlight that social media platforms provide interactive environments where consumers actively participate in content creation, information sharing, and brand evaluation. Trust and engagement are considered central elements in this process, as they directly impact consumer behaviour and purchase intentions (Ahmad et al., 2025).

Influencer marketing has gained considerable attention as a tool for enhancing consumer trust and brand engagement. Research indicates that influencers act as opinion leaders who shape consumer perceptions through authentic communication and relatable content. The effectiveness of influencer marketing is largely determined by factors such as credibility, authenticity, and transparency, which significantly influence trust and purchase intention (Chavda & Chauhan, 2024; Dandona et al., 2025).

Consumer trust in social media environments is also strongly influenced by electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). Studies show that the credibility and quality of online reviews significantly affect consumer attitudes and decision-making processes. Information usefulness and adoption play a mediating role, indicating that consumers must engage with and internalize eWOM content before it impacts their purchase intentions (Ngo et al., 2024; Bui et al., 2025).

In addition to eWOM, content characteristics such as relevance, emotional appeal, and presentation style have a substantial impact on consumer engagement. Research suggests that visually appealing and meaningful content enhances perceived value and strengthens the relationship between consumers and brands. Interactive and personalized content further increases engagement, which ultimately leads to higher purchase intentions (Krowinska & Dineva, 2025; Nature Communications, 2024).

The concept of authenticity has emerged as a critical factor in digital marketing. Studies indicate that consumers are more likely to trust brands and influencers who present genuine and consistent messages. Authenticity is not spontaneous but strategically constructed, requiring careful alignment between brand values, influencer identity, and audience expectations (Chmiel & Korneta, 2025).

Social media marketing activities such as communication, responsiveness, and relationship-building significantly influence brand trust and loyalty. Research demonstrates that effective social media strategies enhance self-brand connections, brand equity, and trust, which collectively lead to stronger brand loyalty (Ali et al., 2024).

Consumer engagement plays a crucial role in determining the success of social media marketing strategies. Engagement is driven by both functional and emotional factors, including entertainment, information value, and social interaction. Interactive marketing approaches that encourage participation and dialogue are more effective in building long-term relationships compared to passive communication methods (Theodorakopoulos et al., 2025; Davis & Smith, 2023).

Recent research also highlights a growing sense of scepticism among consumers toward excessive promotional content and influencer endorsements. Studies show that consumers are becoming more selective, valuing transparency and meaningful interactions over repetitive advertising. This trend emphasizes the need for brands to adopt more customer-centric and engagement-driven strategies (Hootsuite, 2024).

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a descriptive research design using a survey method to collect quantitative data. A convenience sampling technique was used to select 90 active social media users from diverse age groups and backgrounds across the state of Kerala. Primary data was collected through a structured questionnaire designed via Google Forms, comprising multiple-choice and Likert-scale questions covering demographic profile, content preferences, engagement frequency, trust factors, and purchase behaviour. The collected data was analysed using SPSS software. Descriptive statistics including frequency distributions and percentages were calculated to summarize the demographic characteristics and response patterns. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was performed using Principal Component Analysis (PCA) with Varimax rotation to identify underlying dimensions of consumer perceptions towards social media marketing.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Demographic Profile of Respondents

Table 1: DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS.

Demographic Variable	Category	Percentage (%)
Age Group	Below 18	10
	18-24	73.3
	25-34	16.7
Gender	Male	53.3
	Female	46.7
Education Level	High School	25.6
	Undergraduate	74.4
Employment Status	Student	83.3
	Employed	16.7
Social Media Usage Frequency	Daily	83.3
	Several times a week	16.7

The demographic characteristics of the 90 respondents are presented in Table 1. The majority of participants (73.3%) were aged 18-24 years, followed by 25-34 years (16.7%) and below 18 years (10.0%). No respondents belonged to the 35-44 or 45+ age categories. Gender

distribution was fairly balanced, with 53.3% male and 46.7% female respondents. Regarding education, 74.4% of respondents were undergraduates, while 25.6% had completed high school. Employment status revealed that 83.3% were students, with only 16.7% employed. Social media usage was notably high, with 83.3% of respondents using social media daily and 16.7% using it several times a week.

4.2 Trust Factors in Social Media Brands

Table 2: Factors Influencing Trust in Brands on Social Media

Trust Factor	n	%
Positive Customer Reviews	39	43.3
Verified Account/Status	37	41.1
Influencer Collaborations	14	15.6

Table 1 presents the factors influencing consumer trust in brands on social media. Positive customer reviews emerged as the most influential factor (43.3%), closely followed by verified account/status (41.1%). In contrast, influencer collaborations were cited by only 15.6% of respondents as a trust-building factor. Notably, no respondents selected high engagement with followers as a trust factor.

4.3 Consumer Trust in Influencer Endorsements

Table 3: Trust in Brands When Seeing Influencers Using Products.

Response	n	%
Strongly Disagree	38	42.2
Disagree	13	14.4
Neutral	28	31.1
Strongly Agree	11	12.2

Table 2 reveals consumer perceptions regarding influencer product usage and brand trust. A substantial proportion of respondents (42.2%) strongly disagreed that seeing influencers use products increases their trust in brands, while 14.4% disagreed. Neutral responses accounted for 31.1%, and only 12.2% strongly agreed. Notably, no respondents selected the "agree" option.

4.4 Authenticity Perception of Influencer Collaborations

Table 4: Brands Collaborating with Influencers Seem More Authentic.

Response	n	%
Strongly Disagree	28	31.1
Disagree	14	15.6
Neutral	13	14.4

Agree	9	10
Strongly Agree	26	28.9

Table 3 presents mixed opinions regarding whether brands collaborating with influencers appear more authentic. Approximately 38.9% of respondents agreed (10.0%) or strongly agreed (28.9%) that influencer collaborations enhance brand authenticity. However, 46.7% disagreed (15.6%) or strongly disagreed (31.1%), while 14.4% remained neutral.

4.5 Content Types Influencing Purchasing Decisions

Table5: Content Types Influencing Purchasing Decisions.

Content Type	n	%
Sponsored Ads	28	31.1
Interactive Content	28	31.1
Influencer Promotions	20	22.2
User-Generated Content	14	15.6

Table 4 shows that sponsored ads and interactive content (polls, quizzes, giveaways) were equally the most influential content types, each cited by 31.1% of respondents. Influencer promotions influenced 22.2%, while user-generated content (reviews, testimonials) impacted 15.6% of respondents.

4.6 Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA): *The Factors That Influence Consumer Trust In Brands On Social Media.*

The combination of a KMO value of .782 and a significant Bartlett's test ($p < .001$) confirms that the data meets the necessary assumptions for factor analysis. The KMO value indicates that the sample of 90 respondents is adequate for extracting factors, while the significant Bartlett's test confirms that the variables are sufficiently inter-correlated to identify meaningful patterns. These results support the validity of the factor analysis conducted in this study, justifying the extraction of three factors that collectively explain 88.56% of the total variance in consumer perceptions towards social media marketing.

Principal Component Analysis (PCA) with Varimax rotation was employed to extract factors with eigenvalues greater than 1.0 (Kaiser's criterion). This resulted in three factors that collectively explained **81.11%** of the total variance. The eigenvalues for the three retained factors were 4.521, 2.134, and 1.456, respectively. factor loadings below **0.35** were omitted from the final interpretation.

Table 6: Pattern Component Matrix, Eigen Values and Total Variance Percentage for Components obtained by Principal Component Analysis with Varimax Rotation Method.

Variables	Component		
	1	2	3
Social media marketing influences my decision to buy a product		0.919	
I trust brands more when I see influencers using their products			0.55
I am more likely to purchase a product when I see positive online reviews	0.932		
I follow brands on social media to stay updated on promotions		0.63	
I prefer to engage with brands that respond to comments and messages			0.94
I find social media ads more effective than TV or print advertisements		0.918	
I am more likely to buy from a brand that provides interactive and engaging content			0.96
Brands that collaborate with influencers seem more authentic to me		0.731	
I tend to ignore social media advertisements unless they are relevant to my interests	0.924		
My buying decisions are influenced by social media trends and viral products	0.955		
Eigen values	4.521	2.134	1.46
Percentage of total variance	45.21	21.34	14.6
Note: Factor loadings <0.35 have been omitted from the table.			

Factor 1: Social Influence & Purchase Intention

Factor 1 accounted for 45.21% of the variance and demonstrated high loadings on variables related to social proof and purchase decisions. Variables with strong loadings included: "My buying decisions are influenced by social media trends and viral products" (0.955), "I am more likely to purchase a product when I see positive online reviews" (0.932), and "I tend to ignore social media advertisements unless they are relevant to my interests" (0.924). This factor suggests that consumers are heavily influenced by social proof, peer recommendations, and trending content, while emphasizing the importance of relevance in capturing attention.

Factor 2: Influencer Trust & Brand Engagement

Factor 2 explained 21.34% of the variance and captured variables related to influencer marketing and brand engagement. High loadings included: "Social media marketing influences my decision to buy a product" (0.919), "I find social media ads more effective than TV or print advertisements" (0.918), and "Brands that collaborate with influencers seem more authentic to me" (0.731). This factor indicates that influencer marketing and brand engagement are valued by consumers, who perceive social media advertising as more effective and targeted than traditional advertising channels.

Factor 3: Interactive Communication & Relationship Marketing

Factor 3 accounted for 14.6% of the variance and reflected the importance of interactive communication and relationship building. Variables with strong loadings included: "I am more likely to buy from a brand that provides interactive and engaging content" (0.957), "I prefer to engage with brands that respond to comments and messages" (0.940), and "I trust brands more when I see influencers using their products" (0.551). This factor suggests that consumers value two-way communication, interactive experiences, and relationship-building with brands that actively listen and respond to their audience.

4.7 DISCUSSION

The demographic profile indicates that the sample is predominantly composed of young adults aged 18–24 years (73.3%), undergraduates (74.4%), and students (83.3%) who are active daily social media users (83.3%). This distribution reflects the strong presence of Generation Z in digital environments, where social media consumption is deeply embedded in everyday life. Recent studies confirm that younger consumers exhibit significantly higher engagement levels with digital content, social networking platforms, and interactive media compared to older cohorts (Wan et al., 2025).

The relatively balanced gender distribution (53.3% male and 46.7% female) suggests that social media marketing exerts comparable influence across genders, consistent with contemporary research indicating that digital platforms have become universally accessible and gender-neutral channels for brand communication and engagement (Alnaser et al., 2024). However, the dominance of students in the sample represents a limitation, as it may not fully capture the attitudes and behaviours of older consumers or working professionals who differ in purchasing power, lifestyle, and online engagement patterns. The high frequency of daily usage further underscores the pervasive role of social media, providing brands with continuous engagement opportunities while simultaneously intensifying competition for consumer attention in saturated digital spaces.

The factor analysis revealed three major dimensions explaining 81.11% of the total variance. The first factor, Social Influence and Purchase Intention (45.21% variance), demonstrates the critical role of social proof mechanisms such as positive online reviews and trending content in influencing consumer decisions. Recent research highlights that electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), perceived relevance, and trustworthiness significantly enhance consumer purchase intention and brand perception (Wei, 2025; Alnaser et al., 2024). The strong loading for ad relevance further emphasizes that consumers are increasingly selective, responding more

favourably to personalized and contextually relevant content rather than generic advertisements.

The second factor, Influencer Trust and Brand Engagement (21.34% variance), confirms that influencer marketing continues to shape consumer attitudes, particularly through perceived authenticity and credibility. Contemporary studies demonstrate that influencer trust, communication transparency, and emotional appeal significantly affect both engagement and purchase intention (Chavda & Chauhan, 2024; Nature Communications, 2024). However, the descriptive findings indicating that only 15.6% of respondents trust influencer collaborations, while 56.6% express scepticism, reveal a critical paradox. Although influencer marketing remains influential, its effectiveness is increasingly dependent on authenticity, alignment with brand values, and transparency. Supporting this, recent reports indicate that while a substantial proportion of consumers make purchases influenced by influencers, only a minority consider them the most impactful factor, reflecting growing critical awareness among audiences (Sprout Social, 2024; Ahene, 2024).

The third factor, Interactive Communication and Relationship Marketing (14.56% variance), highlights the importance of two-way communication and engagement-driven strategies in fostering consumer relationships. High loadings for interactive content and brand responsiveness demonstrate that consumers increasingly expect brands to actively engage, respond, and communicate transparently. Recent empirical evidence confirms that social media involvement—including interaction, self-expression, and engagement—has a positive and significant impact on purchase intention and relationship development (Wan et al., 2025). Furthermore, social media marketing activities that enhance perceived value and engagement are found to directly influence consumer decision-making, underscoring the importance of relationship-oriented strategies (Alnaser et al., 2024).

The content type analysis reveals that sponsored advertisements and interactive content are equally influential (31.1% each), while influencer promotions (22.2%) and user-generated content (15.6%) exert comparatively lower influence on purchasing decisions. The effectiveness of interactive content aligns with recent findings that engagement-driven and emotionally appealing content significantly enhances consumer responses and purchase behaviour (Wei, 2025). The relatively lower influence of user-generated content suggests that while peer reviews contribute to trust formation, they may not independently drive purchase decisions without additional persuasive factors such as brand credibility and engagement.

Moreover, trust factor analysis indicates that positive customer reviews (43.3%) and verified account status (41.1%) are more influential than influencer collaborations (15.6%),

reinforcing the growing importance of authenticity and transparency. This aligns with recent research emphasizing that trust, perceived value, and social brand engagement are key determinants of consumer behaviour in social media contexts (Alnaser et al., 2024; Huo & Filieri, 2025)

5. CONCLUSION

This study highlights the significant role of social media marketing in influencing consumer behaviour, particularly among young users. Social influence and content relevance were found to be key drivers of purchase intention. While influencer marketing contributes to brand engagement, its impact is limited by concerns over authenticity and trust. Consumers place greater reliance on positive reviews and verified brand information than on influencer endorsements. Interactive communication and brand responsiveness play a crucial role in building strong consumer relationships. The findings suggest that trust is developed through a combination of credibility, engagement, and transparency. Effective social media marketing requires a balanced strategy that prioritises authenticity, relevance, and meaningful interaction. Future research can explore diverse age groups and cultural contexts to better understand how trust and influencer effectiveness vary across different consumer segments.

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