

Impact of Sponsored and Non-Sponsored Influencer Content on Consumer Purchase Intention: The Mediating Role of Perceived Authenticity

Ms. Aditi Gupta

Research Scholar, Indira Gandhi National Open University, New Delhi.
aditigupta1706@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Influencer marketing is becoming more and more popular as a successful marketing tactic as a result of social media's explosive growth, which has completely changed how companies interact with their customers. Influencers on social media frequently advertise items through sponsored and unsponsored content, which could affect how customers view the legitimacy and sincerity of influencer recommendations. Although influencer marketing has received a lot of attention lately, little study has looked at how different kinds of influencer material impact consumers' intentions to make purchases through perceptions of authenticity. With perceived authenticity serving as a mediating variable, the current study attempts to investigate the effects of sponsored and unsponsored influencer material on customer purchase intention. Young social media users who regularly interact with influencer-generated material are the study's main emphasis. A structured questionnaire was used to gather primary data from social media users between the ages of 18 and 30 who frequently follow influencers on sites like Instagram. The results show that consumer purchase intention is influenced by both sponsored and unsponsored influencer material, and that perceived authenticity plays a major mediating role in this relationship. According to the findings, consumers are more likely to build trust with influencers and show greater intents to buy suggested products when they see their material as legitimate. By emphasising how perceived authenticity shapes consumer reactions to influencer advertisements, the study adds to the expanding body of research on influencer marketing. Additionally, the results offer brands and marketers useful information for creating credible influencer marketing strategies that use social media influencers to promote items.

Keywords: *Influencer marketing, Sponsored content, Non-sponsored content, Perceived authenticity, Purchase intention, Social media influencers*

INTRODUCTION

Social media's emergence and expansion have completely changed how companies interact with their customers. One of the most popular digital marketing strategies in recent years is influencer marketing, which uses people with sizable social media followings to connect with consumers. Social media influencers serve as a conduit between brands and customers by sharing with their followers their product suggestions, opinions, and experiences. Influencers on social media are increasingly seen as more relatable and reliable than traditional advertising (Joshi et al., 2023; Pan et al., 2024).

Numerous research has demonstrated how influencer marketing affects consumers' views and actions. Influencer recommendations are seen as electronic word-of-mouth and have a significant influence on consumers' opinions of brands and decisions to buy. Numerous studies have demonstrated that customers give influencer recommendations a lot of weight when deciding whether or not to purchase a good or service, particularly when doing so on social media (Popa et al., 2022; Farivar & Wang, 2022).

The distinction between sponsored and unsponsored influencer content is a crucial aspect of influencer marketing. Influencers that collaborate with brands in exchange for monetary compensation or other

incentives to promote the product are known as sponsored influencers. In order to let viewers know that the sponsored influencer content is a commercial endorsement, indicator hashtags like “#ad” or “paid partnership” are typically used (Bu et al., 2022). Conversely, natural product endorsements by influencers who share their own experiences with a product are known as non-sponsored influencer content.

Transparency is increased when sponsorship is disclosed in digital marketing communications, but consumers' opinions of influencer marketing advice may also be impacted. In particular, consumers may view sponsored influencer content as more commercial and compelling, which diminishes the message's credibility. According to Nilsson et al. (2023) and Syrdal et al. (2023), most consumers prefer authentic communicators who are transparent in their communication, hence authenticity plays a significant role in the communication's value.

Therefore, customer reactions to influencer marketing are significantly influenced by perceived genuineness. Influencers are more likely to gain followers' confidence and cultivate favourable opinions of the products they endorse when their material is seen as genuine. In the end, customers' behavioral intentions, such as their propensity to buy things that influencers promote, may be influenced by these perceptions of authenticity (Syrdal et al., 2023).

Relatively little study has looked at how influencer material, especially sponsored and non-sponsored content, affects consumers' views of authenticity and their buy intentions, despite the growing significance of influencer marketing. Fewer studies have examined the ways in which influencer material affects consumer perceptions and behavioral outcomes, whereas the majority of current research has concentrated on influencer legitimacy, trust, and engagement. Prior research also suggests that influencers act as opinion leaders who can significantly shape consumer attitudes and purchase behaviour through their credibility and online engagement (Casaló et al., 2020; Ki et al., 2020).

Thus, using perceived authenticity as a mediating variable, the current study attempts to investigate the effect of sponsored and unsponsored influencer material on customer purchase intention. The study adds to the expanding corpus of research on influencer marketing by examining how influencer content affects customer perceptions and behavioral reactions. It also offers insightful information to marketers looking to create more successful influencer-based marketing campaigns.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Influencer Marketing and Consumer Behaviour

Influencer marketing has become more and more popular in recent years as companies collaborate with social media influencers to promote and endorse goods and services. Influencer marketing has attracted significant academic attention in recent years, with studies examining its role in shaping consumer perceptions, engagement, and purchase behaviour (Leung et al., 2022; Campbell & Farrell, 2020). It has become more and more popular in recent years as companies collaborate with social media influencers to promote and endorse goods and services. Influencers are those who have the ability to change people's views and behaviors by their communication style and online presence. They are the ones that produce influencer marketing. These influencers have developed into powerful opinion leaders with the ability to influence consumer decision-making due to the constantly expanding social media platforms (Joshi et al., 2023).

The growing commercialization of influencer culture has further strengthened the role of influencers as key intermediaries between brands and consumers (Hudders et al., 2021)

Influencer marketing is a type of electronic word-of-mouth communication that can affect consumer attitudes and buying behavior, according to existing literature. For instance, Popa et al. (2022) found that

consumer opinion of brands and purchase intentions are significantly influenced by influencer endorsements. In the same way, Farivar and Wang (2022) contended that consumers frequently use influencer-generated material as a source of information when assessing goods and services.

Influencer marketing is also more successful for younger social media users who are more interested in influencer material, according to recent studies. According to Joshi et al. (2023), social media platforms' interactive features give influencers the chance to interact with their followers, building trust that may increase the persuasiveness of their recommendations. Additionally, Pan et al. (2024) found that influencer endorsements improved consumer engagement, brand attitudes, and purchase intentions across a range of product categories in their meta-analysis of the efficacy of influencer marketing.

Sponsored Influencer Content and Sponsorship Disclosure

According to Bu et al. (2022) and van Reijmersdal et al. (2024), sponsored influencer content is a type of advertising in which an influencer and a brand work together to promote goods or services in exchange for financial or nonfinancial reward. To help users realize the commercial nature of the promotion, this material is usually declared by "#ad" or "paid partnership" markers (Bu et al., 2022). According to additional study, consumers' perceptions of influencer authenticity and credibility may be impacted by sponsorship disclosure (Bu et al., 2022).

Customers may be more sensitive to the marketing message's persuasive intent when they learn that influencer material is sponsored, which could have an impact on how they understand the influencer's suggestion (Van Reijmersdal et al., 2024). However, the efficacy of influencer marketing may be diminished if sponsored influencer marketing is overused to the point where it is viewed as a commercial endorsement (Jhawar et al., 2024). Prior studies also highlight the role of credibility and parasocial interaction in strengthening the influence of social media influencers on consumer purchase intention (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Lastly, research has also been done on the "grey side" of influencer marketing.

Customers become confused about trustworthy influencer recommendations and sponsored influencer content because to inconsistent sponsorship disclosure (Jhawar et al., 2024). Because of this, influencer marketing researchers are starting to focus on the difference between sponsored and non-sponsored influencer content.

Perceived Authenticity in Influencer Marketing

The idea of authenticity in influencer marketing is expanding. Influencers are expected by consumers to communicate in a genuine and open manner. According to Nilsson et al. (2023), perceived authenticity in the context of social media refers to the extent to which we, as followers, believe that influencers are expressing genuine thoughts and experiences with products rather than only promoting them.

Previous studies have shown the significance of authenticity for influencer marketing's legitimacy. According to Nilsson et al. (2023), followers are more likely to develop trust in influencers who appear genuine and open with them. We (followers) are more likely to view an influencer's communication as authentic when we believe it aligns with their personal identity and values.

Perceived genuineness, according to Syrdal et al. (2023), increases the emotional connection between influencers and their followers. We (followers) are more inclined to trust influencers and react favourably to their recommendations when we believe that their communication is genuine. This can improve our (consumers') perceptions of the promoted product and boost the efficacy of influencer marketing.

Influencer Marketing and Purchase Intention

In marketing research, purchase intention is a frequently used indicator of consumers' propensity to buy a particular good or service in the future. The possibility that customers would buy products endorsed by social media influencers is known as purchase intention in influencer marketing.

Previous research indicates that customers' buying decisions may be significantly impacted by influencers' marketing choices. According to Popa et al. (2022), influencer marketing positively affects consumers' purchase intentions by changing their perceptions of the brands that influencers endorse.

Customers are more inclined to think about purchasing goods from influencers whose recommendations they trust, according to Shah et al. (2023).

Furthermore, Farivar and Wang (2022) highlighted that the efficacy of influencer marketing is influenced by customers' perceptions of influencers' legitimacy and authenticity. Customers are more inclined to form favourable opinions of the products endorsed by influencers when they believe that these recommendations are genuine and reliable. This leads to a rise in buy intentions.

RESEARCH GAP

There are still certain gaps in the literature despite the increasing amount of research on influencers' marketing efficacy. In order to determine the efficacy of influencer marketing, earlier research mostly examined the credibility, trust, and engagement of influencers. Few studies have looked at how different kinds of influencer material affect customer perception and behavioural intentions, despite the fact that research has demonstrated that influencer endorsements can affect consumer attitudes and buy intentions. In particular, there hasn't been enough research done on how sponsored versus unsponsored influencer material affects consumers' intentions to make purchases.

Prior research has mostly examined influencer trustworthiness and promotional efficacy without giving paid promotional influencer content and organic influencer content much thought. Second, few research have examined the mediating function of perceived authenticity to comprehend the influence of various influencer content on customers' buy intention, despite the fact that authenticity is an essential component of influencer marketing. Thirdly, only a small number of studies have looked at influencer marketing in developing digital markets like India, while previous research has mostly focused on influencer marketing in Western contexts. As a result, current study examines how influencer content—both sponsored and unsponsored—affects consumers' intentions to make purchases, using perceived authenticity as a mediating factor among young social media users.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The current study aims to fill the aforementioned research gap by examining how consumers react to various kinds of influencer content, with a focus on how consumers' purchase intentions are influenced by the perceived authenticity of the influencer's content in the context of influencer marketing.

The objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To examine the effect of sponsored influencer content on perceived authenticity.
2. To examine the effect of non-sponsored influencer content on perceived authenticity.
3. To analyse the influence of perceived authenticity on consumer purchase intention.
4. To examine the mediating role of perceived authenticity in the relationship between influencer content type and consumer purchase intention.

RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS

We propose several hypotheses that investigate the connections between influencer content type, perceived authenticity, and consumer buy intention based on the literature on influencer marketing and authenticity.

Sponsored Influencer Content and Perceived Authenticity

Consumer perception of the promotional message may be impacted when a brand pays an influencer to promote their content. Customers may see the marketing message as more convincing and commercial if they are aware that an influencer's content is sponsored. The authenticity of the influencer's recommendation may be seen less favourably as a result of these kinds of perceptions. As a result, followers' perceptions of authenticity may be adversely affected by paid influencer content.

H1: Sponsored influencer content negatively influences perceived authenticity.

Non-Sponsored Influencer Content and Perceived Authenticity

Organic product recommendations that are not the result of official commercial partnerships are known as non-sponsored influencer content. Customers view non-sponsored influencer material as more impromptu and genuine since it is based on the influencer's own experiences rather than paid advertisements. Consequently, consumers are more inclined to view non-sponsored influencer content as genuine and reliable.

H2: Non-sponsored influencer content positively influences perceived authenticity.

Perceived Authenticity and Purchase Intention

When it comes to how consumers react to influencer marketing, perceived authenticity is crucial. Customers are more inclined to trust influencers and form positive opinions about the suggested product when they believe that the influencer's material is more genuine. Customers may be more inclined to purchase the advertised goods as a result.

H3: Perceived authenticity positively influences consumer purchase intention.

Mediating Role of Perceived Authenticity

Influencer material can affect customer behavioural outcomes through a psychological process called authenticity. Consumer perceptions can be influenced by the kind of influencer material, which can then affect the behavioural intentions of consumers. Therefore, the relationship between influencer content type and consumer purchase intention may be mediated by authenticity.

H4: Perceived authenticity mediates the relationship between influencer content type and consumer purchase intention.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The study's conceptual framework, which is based on the suggested hypotheses, shows how consumer purchase intention, perceived authenticity, and influencer content type are related.

According to this concept, both sponsored and unsponsored influencer material are independent factors that affect perceived authenticity, which in turn affects consumers' intentions to make purchases. The impact of influencer content type on consumer behavioural outcomes is thought to be mediated by perceived authenticity.

The conceptual model of the study is shown in Figure 1:

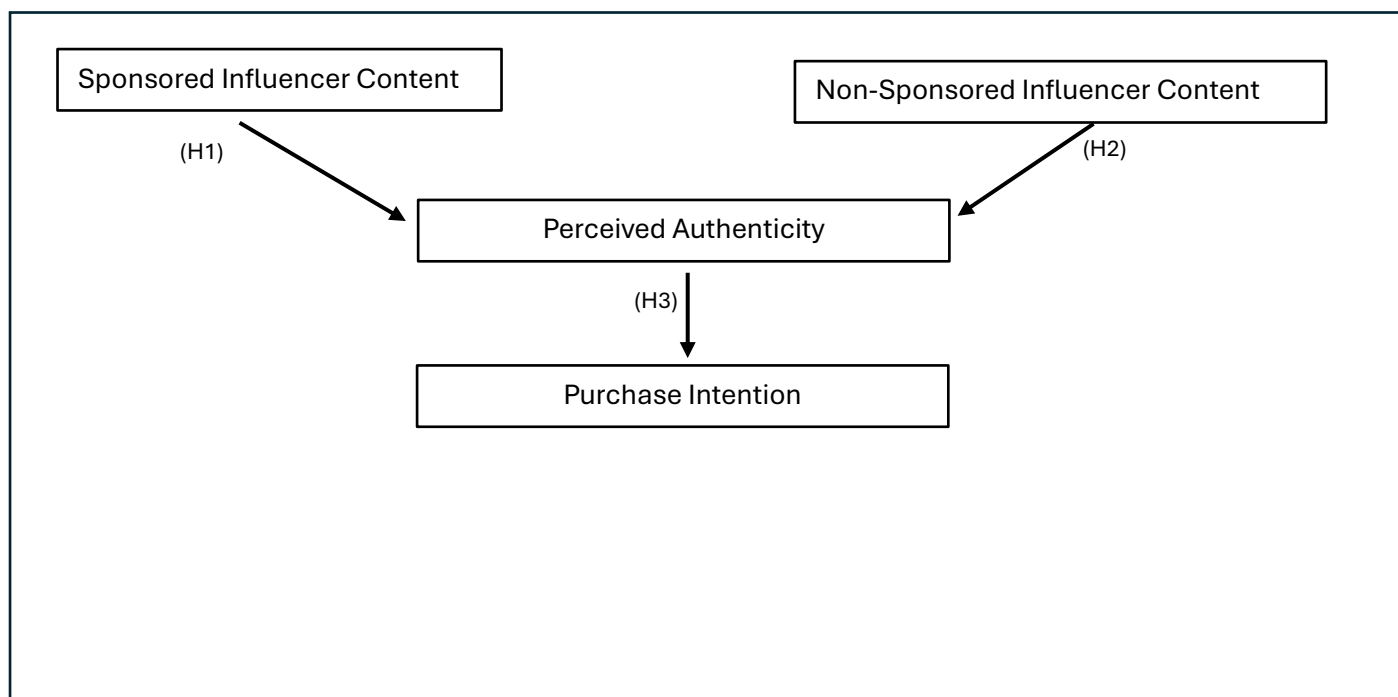


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of the Study

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

In order to examine the impact of influencer content type, perceived authenticity, and consumer buy intention, the current study used a quantitative research approach. A poll was used to gather primary data from social media users. Since quantitative research uses statistics to help determine the link between variables, it is appropriate for the current study.

Population and Sample

Young people who use social media and follow Instagram influencers make up the study's demographic. Because they actively participate in influencer content and rely on influencer recommendations for product and service evaluation, young consumers are deemed a viable demographic for this study. The respondents were individuals aged 18–30 who regularly use Instagram and follow at least one social media influencer.

Sampling Technique

Convenience sampling was the method utilized in the study to collect responses. In social media and consumer behavior research, convenience sampling is a popular sample technique where respondents are chosen based on their ease of contact and willingness to participate in the survey.

Sample Size

To enable statistical analysis, a sample of 180 respondents was chosen. This sample is suitable for applying regression analysis and correlation to investigate the links between variables.

Data Collection Method

A structured questionnaire disseminated via an online survey (Google Forms) was used to collect primary data for the study. Questions on their interactions with Instagram influencers they followed were posed to respondents.

Measurement Scale

The questionnaire items were measured using a **five-point Likert scale**, where respondents indicated their level of agreement with each statement.

1 – Strongly Disagree

2 – Disagree

3 – Neutral

4 – Agree

5 – Strongly Agree

The Likert scale is widely used in marketing and consumer behaviour research to measure attitudes and perceptions.

Measurement of Variables

The variables in this work were measured using multi-item scales based on earlier work in influencer marketing and consumer behaviour literature. A five-point Likert scale was used to score each measurement item (1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree).

Sponsored Influencer Content

Influencers that collaborate with brands produce sponsored influencer material, which is identified by a mark like “#ad” or “paid partnership.” Items that captured consumers' opinions on sponsored postings from influencers were used to measure sponsored influencer content.

Non-Sponsored Influencer Content

Influencer recommendations that are organic—that is, based solely on the influencer's own thoughts or experiences with a product—are referred to as non-sponsored influencer content. Items that captured consumers' opinions of authenticity and spontaneity in non-commercial influencer content were used to measure this construct.

Perceived Authenticity

Customers' belief that influencer content reflects an honest viewpoint and experience is known as perceived authenticity. Items that captured consumers' perceptions of authenticity in influencer recommendations were used to measure this concept.

Purchase Intention

Customers' propensity to purchase goods endorsed by influencers is known as purchase intention. Items that captured consumers' propensity to purchase, test, or learn more about things endorsed by influencers were used to measure this construct

Data analysis techniques

To look into the correlations between the variables, statistical analysis was applied to the gathered data. Initially, descriptive statistics were used to characterize the respondents' demographic profile.

The internal consistency of the measurement scales was then ascertained by reliability analysis using Cronbach's alpha. The link between the research variables was then investigated using a correlation analysis.

The effects of sponsored and unsponsored influencer content on perceived authenticity and purchase intention were then tested using regression analysis. Regression-based mediation analysis was also used to look at the mediating role of perceived authenticity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Respondent Profile

The study received 180 replies in total. Young consumers are the ones that interact with influencer-generated content on social media, since the majority of respondents were between the ages of 18 and 25. Of the responders, about 42% were men and 58% were women. Most respondents said they often use Instagram and follow at least one social media influencer. Crucially, this demonstrates that the right sample was chosen to look into how influencer-generated content affects consumers' intentions to make purchases.

Analysis of Reliability

Reliability Analysis

To assess the measurement scales' internal consistency, Cronbach's alpha was computed for every construct. It is widely acknowledged in the social science literature that scores higher than 0.70 are adequate.

Table 1. Reliability Analysis

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha
Sponsored Influencer Content	0.81
Non-Sponsored Influencer Content	0.84
Perceived Authenticity	0.88
Purchase Intention	0.86

The results indicate that all constructs demonstrate **good reliability**, suggesting that the measurement items used in the questionnaire were consistent and suitable for further analysis.

Correlation Analysis

The associations between the research variables were examined using correlation analysis. The findings demonstrate a positive relationship between perceived authenticity and purchase intention, suggesting that customers are more inclined to contemplate buying the suggested products if they believe the influencer material to be genuine.

Additionally, compared to sponsored content, influencer-generated non-sponsored material showed a larger positive correlation with perceived authenticity. This suggests that consumers view content from organic influencers as genuine and reliable.

Hypothesis Testing

The proposed hypotheses were tested using regression analysis.

H1: Sponsored influencer content negatively influences perceived authenticity.

The findings indicate that perceived authenticity is negatively impacted by sponsored influencer content ($\beta = -0.28$, $p < 0.05$). It is implied that when consumers believe influencer content to be sponsored, they will question the veracity of the recommendation.

Therefore, **H1 is supported**.

H2: Non-sponsored influencer content positively influences perceived authenticity.

The findings indicate that perceived authenticity is positively impacted by non-sponsored influencer content ($\beta = 0.41$, $p < 0.01$). suggests that followers view original influencer content as being more genuine. Hence, **H2 is supported**.

H3: Perceived authenticity positively influences purchase intention.

The findings indicate that purchase intention is significantly positively impacted by perceived genuineness ($\beta = 0.53$, $p < 0.01$). implies that customers are more likely to purchase the recommended products when they believe the influencer's advice to be genuine, Thus, **H3 is supported**.

H4: Perceived authenticity mediates the relationship between influencer content type and purchase intention.

The results of the mediation indicate that the association between influencer content type and consumer purchase intention is partially mediated by perceived authenticity. suggests that the perceived legitimacy of influencer content influences purchase intention. Therefore, **H4 is supported**.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study highlight how important perceived authenticity is in influencer marketing. According to the research, sponsored influencer postings may reduce customers' impressions of authenticity because they are perceived as commercial ads. However, non-sponsored influencer postings are seen as genuine, which raises followers' impressions of authenticity.

Additionally, the study demonstrates how authenticity affects consumer behavior. Customers develop more favourable opinions of the marketed goods and are more inclined to buy when they believe influencer posts to be genuine and reliable.

The results are consistent with earlier studies that demonstrated the importance of authenticity and credibility in influencer marketing success. The results also demonstrate how crucial it is to maintain authenticity in influencer-brand partnerships in order to preserve customer confidence.

CONCLUSION

Perceived authenticity plays a mediating role in the interaction between consumer purchase intention, non-sponsored influencer material, and sponsored influencer content on social media.

The current study investigates how customers' purchase intentions are impacted by sponsored and unsponsored influencer material. Additionally, this study looks at perceived authenticity's mediating function. Influencer content has become more significant in recent years due to influencer marketing as a digital marketing strategy. The younger generation uses social networking sites and digital media more frequently. Young people are also using influencer-generated material more frequently. The sort of information has a major impact on the perception of authenticity, according to research findings.

Because consumers view sponsored influencer material as a commercial endeavour, it was discovered that it adversely affects the perception of authenticity. Influencer content that wasn't sponsored was viewed as more reliable and genuine. As a result, the followers' sense of authenticity was enhanced. The

findings demonstrated that consumers' intentions to make purchases are significantly influenced by their impression of authenticity. It was discovered that consumers trust influencers and are more inclined to purchase the things they recommend when they believe the influencer is genuine and a trustworthy source of information. The study's findings support perceived authenticity's mediating function.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

There are certain limitations that should be taken into account, even if the current study has made some significant contributions.

First, because the study concentrated on young social media users who follow Instagram influencers, it is important to carefully assess how generalizable the results are to other age groups and social media platforms.

Second, because the study relied on self-recommended answers from an online survey, respondents' opinions and impressions might alter depending on their experiences with influencer marketing. Third, only a portion of the variables—influencer content type, perceived authenticity, and purchase intention—were taken into account. Consumer reactions to influencer marketing may also be influenced by influencer credibility, trust, and brand attitude.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The current work may be expanded upon in a variety of ways by future research. First, in order to better understand the mechanisms underlying the impact of influencer marketing on customer behavior, future study could take into account other psychological factors like trust, parasocial interaction, or emotional attachment.

Second, in order to evaluate consumer responses across several platforms, future studies might examine the impact of influencer material on other social media sites including Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok. Third, future studies should examine how customers' views of authenticity and purchase intention are affected by various influencer categories, such as micro-influencers or famous influencers. Fourth, cross-cultural comparison studies could be carried out in the future to provide further insight into how influencer marketing tactics affect consumer behavior in various settings.

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