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Editorial Note:

This latest issue of the Journal of Contemporary Society Education (JCSE) arrives at a moment when the boundaries between the academic, the social, and the urgently practical have never been more porous. A glance at the twenty-one articles in this forthcoming collection reveals a publication that understands its mandate: to serve not merely as a repository of scholarship, but as a sharp, coherent lens through which to examine the pressing complexities of contemporary society, with a firm grounding in education as a transformative force.

What distinguishes this issue is its refusal to settle for disciplinary comfort. The contributions, drawn from institutions across Africa, demonstrate a welcome intellectual restlessness. We see scholars interrogating the intimate, such as Mudau et al.'s exploration of language as a source of family conflict within Vhavenda families alongside those grappling with structural questions, such as Sikwela and Diedericks' critical look at performance management as "a mirror of inertia" in public administration. This range is not a sign of incoherence; it is a testament to the journal's understanding that societal education occurs in classrooms, in homes, in municipal water governance (as Zulu and Nojiyeza's work on Zululand shows), and in the very language we use to communicate.

Several pieces stand out for their conceptual bravery. Maungedzo's reframing of academic literacy through sociocultural theory for rural teacher development tackles a perennial challenge with fresh theoretical rigour. Similarly, Lubombo and Zethi's work on "linguistic justice" and the Disciplinary Literacies framework asks a question that South African higher education can no longer afford to postpone: how do we re-imagine instructional communication not as a barrier, but as an equitable foundation? These are not abstract debates; they are core pedagogical interventions.

The journal also demonstrates a commendable commitment to surfacing marginalised voices and experiences. Nkumane's exploration of intersectionality and the lived experiences of Black women scholars at UNISA, and Sibango's ethnographic look at how belonging is negotiated in Anthropology departments, remind us that the university itself is a site of intense social contestation. When Lekoa and Nojiyeza connect off-campus housing to "ecologies of distress" affecting student mental health, they do what good contemporary scholarship must: they trace the material conditions of life directly into the outcomes of education.

If there is a through-line to this collection, it is the insistence that no social phenomenon, whether climate governance under the AU (Yemisi and Ani), the antinomies of decolonisation in literature (Moopi), or the gendered nexus of marital status and poverty (Dunga), exists outside the purview of rigorous inquiry. The JCSE is building a platform where scholars can hold those complex phenomena up to the light.

This volume does not offer easy answers. It offers something more valuable: a coherent, sharply focused set of questions, pursued with methodological care and regional relevance. For a journal of contemporary society and education, that is precisely the work that matters.

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THE INFLUENCE OF AUTHENTICITY, CREDIBILITY AND CULTURAL RELATABILITY ON CONSUMER TRUST AND PURCHASING BEHAVIOUR

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ABSTRACT

The rapid expansion of digital platforms has positioned influencer and social media marketing as important drivers of consumer engagement and purchasing behaviour. Existing scholarly work recognises the persuasive role of influencers; however, limited research has examined how authenticity, credibility, and cultural relatability shape consumer trust in emerging markets such as South Africa. This study therefore examined how these influencer attributes influence consumer trust and purchasing behaviour, and explored the broader influence of social media marketing on consumer behaviour and brand loyalty. The study employed a qualitative desktop research design based on secondary academic literature published between 2019 and 2025. Relevant studies were retrieved from major academic databases and analysed thematically to identify patterns relating to influencer credibility, trust formation, and consumer decision-making. The findings indicate that perceived authenticity, transparent brand affiliation, and culturally resonant communication play a critical role in strengthening consumer trust and influencing purchasing intentions. Influencers who demonstrate consistent values and culturally relevant narratives are more likely to generate consumer engagement and loyalty. However, ethical concerns such as undisclosed sponsorships and artificial follower inflation were identified as factors that may undermine consumer trust. The study concludes that effective influencer marketing in South Africa requires transparent communication, credible influencer partnerships, and culturally responsive engagement strategies that reflect the diverse social realities of local consumers.

Keywords: Influencer marketing, consumer trust, brand loyalty, purchasing behaviour, social media

Introduction

The rapid expansion of digital technologies has fundamentally transformed the marketing environment, reshaping how brands communicate with consumers and how purchasing decisions are formed. Traditional advertising models were largely characterised by one-directional communication delivered through mass media channels, where organisations exercised substantial control over brand narratives. However, the proliferation of social media platforms has decentralised this control by enabling individuals to generate and disseminate influential marketing content within interactive online communities. In this evolving landscape, influencer marketing has emerged as a dominant communication strategy through which brands engage audiences by leveraging the perceived authenticity and credibility of digital content creators (Nair & Kumar, 2025). Rather than relying solely on institutional authority or celebrity endorsement, influencer marketing operates through relational engagement, where trust is cultivated through everyday digital interactions between influencers and their followers.

Within these digitally mediated environments, influencers function as intermediaries who translate brand messages into socially meaningful narratives that resonate with consumers. Celestin and Sujatha (2024) argue that influencers operate as trust proxies who bridge the gap between corporate communication and consumer expectations by presenting brand information in ways that appear more authentic and relatable. As digital audiences increasingly value

transparency and personal connection, the perceived authenticity of influencers has become a key factor influencing how consumers evaluate brand endorsements. Abduraimov (2024) further observes that consumers are more likely to trust recommendations from individuals they perceive as socially similar or culturally aligned with themselves, particularly in online spaces where peer influence plays a significant role in shaping perceptions. Consequently, influencer marketing represents a shift from persuasion-driven advertising towards trust-based relational communication.

This transformation has been accelerated by the growing dominance of social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok, which enable influencers to cultivate continuous engagement with followers and create personalised marketing interactions. These platforms support algorithmically driven visibility and targeted communication, allowing influencers to address niche audiences through tailored content that reflects specific lifestyles, identities, and cultural contexts. Sankala (2024) explains that such digital ecosystems facilitate highly personalised marketing strategies that prioritise emotional connection and social identification. As a result, the effectiveness of influencer marketing increasingly depends not only on reach or aesthetic appeal but also on the perceived sincerity, consistency, and credibility of the influencer communicating the message.

The significance of these dynamics is particularly pronounced in culturally diverse societies such as South Africa, where social identity, cultural

representation, and economic inequalities influence how marketing messages are interpreted. South Africa's multilingual population and heterogeneous cultural landscape require marketing approaches that extend beyond standardised global messaging to incorporate locally relevant narratives and identities. Akolkar et al. (2024) contend that cultural context significantly shapes consumer responses to advertising, particularly in multicultural environments where symbolic meaning and social belonging influence consumer attitudes. Within such contexts, influencers can function as culturally embedded communicators whose lived experiences and social identities resonate with audiences in ways that traditional advertising often fails to achieve. Ghouse (2024) further argues that in emerging markets characterised by evolving brand loyalty and heightened consumer skepticism, influencers can reduce perceived risk by acting as credible intermediaries who humanise brand communication.

Despite the growing prominence of influencer marketing, the mechanisms through which influencer attributes shape consumer trust and purchasing behaviour remain insufficiently understood. While existing studies acknowledge that influencer credibility influences consumer engagement, less attention has been given to how authenticity, cultural relatability, and perceived credibility interact to shape trust formation within digitally mediated consumer environments. Nair and Kumar (2025) emphasise that consumer trust in influencer marketing is multidimensional and influenced by both psychological and socio-cultural

factors. Similarly, Gambhir and Ashfaq (2023) note that audiences increasingly scrutinise influencer endorsements for signs of transparency and genuine alignment with promoted brands. Within this context, trust emerges as a central mechanism linking influencer communication with consumer decision-making, as consumers evaluate not only the product being promoted but also the integrity and cultural alignment of the individual delivering the message. Beriwal, Sethia and Singh (2024) highlight that trust remains the foundational element underpinning consumer loyalty and long-term brand engagement in digital marketing environments.

Against this backdrop, the present study contributes to the evolving discourse on digital marketing by examining how relational characteristics embedded in influencer communication shape consumer perceptions and behavioural outcomes. Specifically, the study investigates how authenticity, credibility, and cultural relatability within influencer and social media marketing influence the development of consumer trust and subsequently shape purchasing behaviour within the South African digital marketplace. The study further investigates how social media marketing practices shape consumer behaviour and contribute to the development of brand loyalty in digital marketplace environments.

Problem Statement

The exponential rise of influencer marketing as a persuasive strategy for driving consumer engagement on social media platforms has generated widespread interest among scholars and marketers alike. Yet, critical gaps

remain in understanding how authenticity, credibility, and cultural relatability intersect to shape consumer trust and behavioural intent, especially within culturally complex and digitally stratified contexts like South Africa. According to Orenca (2023), the effectiveness of influencer marketing hinges not only on message delivery but also on perceived sincerity and cultural affinity between influencers and their audiences. However, the increasing commercialisation of influencer content and the saturation of branded messages have led to growing skepticism among consumers, who now question the authenticity of endorsements and the realness of influencer personas (Potage, 2024).

Despite the emergence of micro and nano-influencers who claim to offer more relatable and authentic engagement, there remains limited empirical understanding of how their perceived trustworthiness translates into actual purchasing behaviour. Ayar (2024) asserts that deceptive and exaggerated influencer content significantly undermines trust, while Sesar, Martinčević and Boguszewicz-Kreft (2022) argue that the absence of transparency in influencer endorsements, such as hidden sponsorships, can have lasting negative implications for brand loyalty. This dilemma is intensified in South Africa, where digital marketing is challenged by stark inequalities in digital access and literacy, alongside significant linguistic and cultural fragmentation (Goga, Paelo & Nyamwena, 2019).

Furthermore, global studies tend to dominate existing literature, often marginalising insights from emerging markets. Vidani (2024) explains that

most models of influencer effectiveness have been developed in Western economies, thus failing to account for contextual nuances in trust formation within non-Western, multicultural societies. As a result, South African marketers operate with limited evidence-based guidance on how to align influencer strategies with culturally grounded consumer expectations. The lack of robust, context-specific research on the nuanced interplay between influencer credibility and consumer decision-making impedes strategic marketing efforts aimed at cultivating genuine brand-consumer relationships. There is thus an urgent need to examine how consumers evaluate influencer messaging in diverse markets and what markers of credibility resonate most in socially heterogeneous environments. Through such an investigation can practitioners and scholars begin to bridge the disjuncture between global influencer marketing norms and local consumer realities.

Literature Review

This literature review critically engages with the scholarly and empirical foundations that inform the study of influencer and social media marketing within contemporary digital ecosystems. It systematically unpacks the conceptual and theoretical constructs underpinning the domain, such as authenticity, credibility, and cultural relatability, which are central to the development of consumer trust and behavioural outcomes. The review navigates through key theories including Social Proof Theory, Trust Transfer Theory, and Brand Community concept, grounding the analysis in both global and South

African contexts. In doing so, it interrogates the unique psychological and relational mechanisms that differentiate influencer marketing from traditional advertising, while highlighting the influence of digital platforms, such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, on consumer engagement, satisfaction, and loyalty. Furthermore, the literature review provides a comparative lens on global versus local influencer practices, ethical dilemmas surrounding transparency, and the socio-economic dynamics that shape opportunities and challenges within the South African marketing landscape. Collectively, these perspectives serve to frame the analytical scope of the study and reinforce its contribution to understanding the strategic interplay between trust-based marketing and consumer behaviour in digitally mediated spaces.

Conceptual Foundations of Influencer and Social Media Marketing

Influencer marketing is broadly defined as a strategic approach that leverages individuals with significant digital followings, commonly referred to as influencers, to promote products and shape consumer decisions through perceived authenticity and trustworthiness (Abduraimov, 2024). Unlike traditional celebrity endorsements, influencer marketing thrives in digital ecosystems where engagement, relatability, and personal connection take precedence over mass visibility (Kumar, 2024). Influencers are often perceived as peers or aspirational figures, which makes their recommendations more psychologically persuasive than

impersonal advertisements. According to Joyce (2024), this relatability allows influencers to embed marketing messages within organic content, making them less intrusive and more credible to target audiences.

Social media marketing, on the other hand, refers to the use of social networking platforms to promote brands, engage consumers, and influence purchase behaviour through both paid and organic content (Anas, Abdou, Hassan, Alrefae, Daradkeh, El-Amin & Alboray, 2023). Unlike one-directional traditional advertising, social media marketing allows for real-time interaction and feedback, thereby fostering co-creation and community around brands (Antczak, 2024). This interactivity has shifted power dynamics in marketing, allowing consumers to become active participants in brand narratives, which enhances emotional connection and behavioural influence.

Central to both influencer and social media marketing is the construct of consumer trust. Trust is not merely the absence of doubt but rather a psychological state wherein consumers willingly accept vulnerability based on positive expectations of a brand's actions (Beriwal et al., 2024). In influencer marketing, trust is closely tied to influencer credibility, which includes perceived expertise, honesty, and attractiveness (Suganya & Bawa, 2024). Orenchia (2023) adds that influencer credibility is heightened when the influencer's lifestyle aligns with the values of the target audience, an element that amplifies both cultural relatability and behavioural impact.

Social proof, as conceptualised by Cialdini (1993), refers to individuals' tendency to mirror the actions of others when making decisions, particularly under conditions of uncertainty. In digital spaces, metrics such as likes, shares, and follower counts serve as quantifiable indicators of social proof, thereby reinforcing the influencer's authority and increasing consumer confidence in their recommendations (Park & McCallister, 2023). Ghose (2024) supports this by showing that consumers are more likely to trust and emulate influencers who demonstrate widespread acceptance and community validation.

Therefore, the psychological depth and relational capital embedded in influencer and social media marketing render them uniquely potent in shaping consumer behaviour. While traditional advertising relies heavily on brand-driven messages and visual appeal, these contemporary strategies depend on trust, credibility, and interactive dialogue. Nair and Kumar (2025) contend that the evolution of digital marketing has redefined brand-consumer relationships, where trust is no longer brokered by corporations alone but co-produced through socially mediated interactions. However, Potage (2024) cautions that the same mechanisms enabling trust can also be manipulated, making transparency and ethical standards crucial in sustaining long-term consumer loyalty.

In the South African context, Celestin and Sujatha (2024) observe that local influencers gain traction not merely due to their digital reach but because of their ability to articulate culturally relevant experiences that resonate with everyday consumer realities. Thus, the

constructs of authenticity, credibility, and cultural relatability are not abstract ideals but operative mechanisms that materially shape purchasing intentions within and beyond the digital marketplace. This conceptual foundation serves as a critical base for examining how influencer marketing strategies function not just as promotional tools but as trust-building interventions in complex consumer environments.

Theoretical Perspectives Underpinning Influencer Marketing

Understanding how influencer marketing shapes consumer trust and purchasing behaviour requires a theoretical framework capable of explaining how audiences evaluate digital endorsements. Among the theories commonly applied in digital marketing research, Trust Transfer Theory provides the most direct explanation for how influencer attributes translate into consumer trust in brands. Complementing this central perspective, Social Proof Theory and the Brand Community concept help explain the social and relational mechanisms that reinforce trust formation in online environments. Together, these perspectives provide a theoretically grounded explanation of how authenticity, credibility, and cultural relatability influence consumer behaviour in influencer marketing contexts.

Trust Transfer Theory serves as the primary analytical lens for this study because it directly explains the mechanism through which trust placed in an influencer is transferred to the endorsed brand. According to Almahdi, Alsayed and Alabbas (2022), trust

transfer occurs when consumers rely on an already trusted intermediary to evaluate unfamiliar products or organisations. In influencer marketing, followers often perceive influencers as authentic and socially aligned with their own identities, allowing the credibility of the influencer to extend to the promoted brand. Celestin and Sujatha (2024) note that when influencers demonstrate transparency and consistent personal branding, audiences are more likely to attribute similar trustworthiness to the endorsed product. However, this process remains fragile; Potage (2024) emphasises that perceived inauthenticity or undisclosed sponsorships can disrupt trust transfer and weaken consumer confidence in both the influencer and the brand.

While Trust Transfer Theory explains the relational mechanism through which trust is transmitted, Social Proof Theory provides insight into the social signals that strengthen this process. Originally articulated by Cialdini (1993), Social Proof Theory suggests that individuals rely on the behaviour of others to guide decisions under conditions of uncertainty. In digital environments, engagement metrics such as likes, comments, and follower counts function as visible indicators of collective approval. Park and McCallister (2023) argue that these cues signal credibility and influence consumers' perceptions of influencer authority, thereby reinforcing trust in endorsed products. Similarly, Ghose (2024) observes that audiences often interpret high engagement levels as validation of both the influencer's expertise and the legitimacy of the promoted brand.

The Brand Community concept further enriches this theoretical framework by explaining how shared identity and social belonging shape consumer responses to influencer communication. Muniz Jr and O'Guinn (2001) conceptualise brand communities as groups formed around shared consumption practices, rituals, and values. Within influencer marketing, followers frequently develop a sense of affiliation with the influencer's audience community, which strengthens emotional engagement with promoted brands. Atiq et al. (2022) demonstrate that consistent storytelling and relatable content foster deeper social identification between influencers and followers. Dharma et al. (2024) further argue that influencers often act as cultural intermediaries who translate brand narratives into culturally resonant messages that reflect local identities and experiences.

Despite the explanatory value of these perspectives, scholars debate the stability of trust relationships in influencer marketing. Nair and Kumar (2025) highlight the strategic importance of aligning influencer identity with brand values to sustain credibility, whereas Ayar (2024) emphasises the growing volatility of consumer trust in an environment shaped by algorithmic promotion and performative authenticity. These tensions underscore the importance of contextual analysis, particularly in emerging markets such as South Africa where cultural diversity and consumer scepticism influence how digital endorsements are interpreted.

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives position influencer

marketing as a trust-mediated communication process embedded within social influence and community affiliation. By prioritising Trust Transfer Theory while drawing complementary insights from Social Proof Theory and the Brand Community concept, this study establishes a coherent theoretical foundation for analysing how authenticity, credibility, and cultural relatability shape consumer trust and purchasing behaviour in influencer-driven marketing environments.

The Role of Authenticity, Relatability, and Credibility in Influencer Marketing

The effectiveness of influencer marketing is largely determined by three interrelated attributes: authenticity, credibility, and relatability, which collectively shape how consumers evaluate digital endorsements and form trust in promoted brands. Rather than functioning as isolated traits, these attributes operate as mechanisms through which influencer communication reduces uncertainty and strengthens behavioural intention among followers.

Authenticity plays a foundational role in establishing relational trust between influencers and audiences. It reflects the extent to which influencers are perceived as genuine, transparent, and consistent in their communication. Okonkwo and Namkoisse (2023) argue that audiences are more receptive to endorsements when influencers present experiences and opinions that appear sincere rather than strategically curated. For digitally literate consumers, particularly Millennials and Generation

Z, authenticity signals that promotional messages are grounded in personal experience rather than purely commercial motivation. Orenca (2023) notes that this perception of “realness” strengthens audience confidence in the influencer, making followers more willing to consider the endorsed product.

Credibility extends this process by influencing whether consumers regard the influencer as a reliable source of information about a product or brand. It encompasses perceptions of expertise, trustworthiness, and professional competence within a particular domain. Suganya and Bawa (2024) demonstrate that consumers are more likely to act on recommendations from influencers perceived as knowledgeable and ethically trustworthy. When credibility is established, followers interpret endorsements as informed evaluations rather than promotional persuasion, which increases the likelihood of engagement and purchase intention. Al-Shehri (2021) further observes that perceived similarity between influencers and their audiences can reinforce credibility by enhancing identification and perceived relevance.

Relatability complements authenticity and credibility by strengthening the emotional connection between influencers and their audiences. Arefin and Urme (2024) explain that consumers are more responsive to influencers whose lifestyles, values, or aspirations resemble their own. Through storytelling and everyday content, influencers create narratives that audiences can identify with, transforming promotional messages into socially meaningful experiences. Atiq et al. (2022) show that such

narrative engagement increases message memorability and fosters stronger brand attachment.

However, the influence of these attributes is conditional. Ayar (2024) cautions that exaggerated endorsements or undisclosed sponsorships can rapidly undermine credibility and disrupt trust relationships. These dynamics are particularly significant in culturally diverse contexts such as South Africa, where consumers are increasingly attentive to authenticity and cultural representation in marketing communication. Panori et al. (2020) highlight that audiences often respond more positively to influencer content that reflects shared cultural identities and lived experiences. Consequently, authenticity, credibility, and relatability function as interconnected drivers of trust that shape how consumers interpret influencer endorsements and translate them into purchasing behaviour.

Influence of Social Media Marketing on Consumer Behaviour and Brand Loyalty

Social media marketing has transformed the dynamics of consumer engagement by enabling brands to cultivate meaningful relationships with audiences across platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. Its impact on consumer behaviour and brand loyalty is profound, particularly through mechanisms like content sharing and interactive engagement strategies. According to Anas et al. (2023), social media marketing fosters a unique form of engagement where consumers no longer passively receive messages but actively participate in brand discourse, significantly

influencing their purchase intentions and satisfaction levels.

The shift from traditional advertising to social media marketing lies in its capacity for immediacy and dialogue. Antczak (2024) explains that interactive platforms allow brands to gather real-time feedback, resolve queries, and personalise communication, which in turn cultivates deeper trust and brand affinity. These trust-building encounters are essential for reinforcing consumer loyalty, especially among Millennials and Generation Z consumers, who value transparency and responsiveness. Ooi, Lee, Hew, Leong, Tan and Lim (2023) reported that a high number of South African millennial respondents claimed that a brand's responsiveness on social media directly affected their purchasing decisions, while some noted that consistent online engagement fostered a sense of emotional connection with the brand.

Instagram, with its visual storytelling, and TikTok, with its user-generated virality, offer distinct opportunities for brands to humanise themselves. According to Vidani (2024), TikTok's algorithm amplifies authentic content, making it a powerful tool for creating relatability and driving behavioural change. This is particularly relevant for younger users, with Dharma et al. (2024) noting that over 60% of Gen Z consumers in emerging economies engage more with brands that align with their social values and cultural experiences. These findings are consistent with the assertion by Sankala (2024) that consumer loyalty in the digital age is increasingly contingent upon emotional engagement rather than transactional appeal.

Furthermore, YouTube enables in-depth product demonstrations and long-form content that deepen brand trust. Ghouse (2024) contends that detailed reviews and personal narratives shared by content creators positively influence customer satisfaction and purchasing intention by reducing perceived risk. In this sense, credibility becomes cumulative where the more consistently a brand delivers on promises within social media ecosystems, the more likely it is to earn long-term consumer loyalty.

However, some researchers point to inconsistencies. While Celestin and Sujatha (2024) argue that strategic influencer collaborations can magnify brand credibility, Ayar (2024) highlights the risk of exaggerated endorsements which can erode consumer trust and dilute brand loyalty. This tension reveals the double-edged nature of social media marketing where while it facilitates intimacy and connection, it also demands authenticity and coherence across digital touchpoints. Therefore, it becomes evident that social media marketing is not merely a promotional tool but a strategic framework through which brands co-create value with consumers. Its influence on purchasing behaviour and loyalty hinges on the authenticity of content, the credibility of message bearers, and the cultural relatability of brand narratives, factors which collectively mediate the trust-consumer loyalty nexus in the digital marketplace.

Global vs Local Dynamics in Influencer Marketing Practice

The operational landscape of influencer marketing is deeply shaped by socio-

economic, cultural, and infrastructural differences between mature economies and emerging markets such as South Africa. While influencer marketing in Western contexts often capitalizes on advanced digital ecosystems, in emerging economies it is refracted through localised lenses of accessibility, cultural resonance, and digital literacy.

According to Punjabi et al. (2024), mature economies benefit from high internet penetration, sophisticated data analytics, and platform integration that allow influencers to seamlessly engage audiences across multiple channels. In these environments, influencer marketing strategies are often backed by data-driven decision-making and globalised aesthetics, enabling consistent performance tracking and audience targeting. Liu (2024) asserts that such markets prioritise efficiency, automation, and global appeal, often leading to the rise of macro-influencers with international reach. However, Abduraimov (2024) cautions that the polished nature of content in these spaces may sometimes create distance from the everyday realities of followers, thus diluting perceived authenticity.

By contrast, emerging markets like South Africa present unique affordances and constraints. Goga et al. (2019) highlight that mobile connectivity rather than broadband access dominates digital interactions in South Africa, shaping how influencer content is accessed and consumed. As Sankala (2024) reported, majority of surveyed South African youth rely primarily on mobile phones for social media engagement, with Instagram and TikTok being the most accessible

platforms. This mobile-centric behaviour demands content that is data-efficient, contextually relevant, and visually engaging.

Cultural relatability plays a more pronounced role in South African influencer campaigns. As Akolkar et al. (2024) explain, cultural codes, language, and socio-political context significantly affect message reception in localised markets. Influencers who reflect indigenous identities, speak vernacular languages, or address socio-economic issues enjoy greater trust and loyalty. Orenca (2023) further supports this by noting that Gen Zs in Africa display heightened preference for influencers who mirror their lived realities and community-based struggles, as opposed to aspirational Westernised lifestyles.

Digital literacy also marks a point of divergence. While audiences in developed countries often navigate influencer content with critical awareness, emerging market consumers may lack the digital literacy to distinguish between organic content and sponsored endorsements. This raises ethical concerns about transparency and manipulation (Szakal, Brătucu, Ciobanu, Chițu, Mocanu & Ialomițianu, 2024). Potage (2024) argues that without clear advertising disclosures, the trust built between influencers and followers may become exploitative, particularly in markets where regulatory frameworks are still maturing.

Therefore, while influencer marketing is globally recognised as a powerful branding tool, its efficacy is mediated by local infrastructure, socio-cultural dynamics, and consumer

consciousness. South African influencers, though often operating with fewer resources, may possess a deeper emotional connection with their audiences, rooted in shared experiences and cultural familiarity. As such, authenticity and relatability are not just desirable traits but critical strategic imperatives in emerging market influencer campaigns.

Problems and Prospects of Influencer Marketing in South Africa

Despite the rapid expansion of digital marketing in South Africa, influencer marketing operates within a structurally uneven environment characterised by socioeconomic inequality, fragmented digital access, and limited regulatory oversight. One of the most significant challenges stems from persistent economic disparities that shape patterns of digital participation. Goga et al. (2019) note that income inequality continues to influence internet accessibility and online consumption practices, meaning that influencer campaigns often reach primarily urban and economically advantaged consumers while marginalising rural and low-income populations. This uneven digital participation limits the inclusivity of influencer marketing strategies and raises questions about their broader representativeness within the South African consumer landscape.

Regulatory uncertainty further complicates the credibility of influencer communication. Potage (2024) observes that, unlike many Western markets where disclosure of paid endorsements is strictly regulated, South Africa lacks comprehensive frameworks governing influencer advertising. The absence of clear

regulatory standards blurs the boundary between authentic opinion and sponsored persuasion, increasing the risk of misleading marketing practices and potentially undermining consumer trust. In addition, linguistic and cultural diversity introduces practical challenges for brands seeking to communicate effectively across South Africa's heterogeneous audience segments. While multilingual engagement may enhance authenticity and cultural resonance, producing locally adapted content across multiple languages and cultural contexts requires significant resources and strategic coordination (Ayar, 2024).

Notwithstanding these constraints, South Africa also presents notable prospects for influencer marketing growth. High mobile penetration has created a digitally connected consumer base that increasingly relies on social media platforms for information discovery and brand engagement. Sesar et al. (2022) report that a substantial proportion of young South African consumers access social media primarily through smartphones, with platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and WhatsApp shaping patterns of digital interaction. Within this mobile-first environment, micro- and nano-influencers have gained prominence by cultivating trust within hyperlocal communities where cultural familiarity and shared experiences enhance message credibility (Abduraimov, 2024).

Cultural diversity also offers strategic opportunities when approached thoughtfully. Orenchia (2023) argues that culturally embedded storytelling and vernacular communication can strengthen perceptions of authenticity

and relatability among audiences. Similarly, Sankala (2024) finds that consumers often respond more positively to influencers whose identities and lived experiences reflect their own social realities. Consequently, while South Africa's diversity presents operational challenges, it simultaneously enables more culturally grounded influencer strategies capable of fostering deeper consumer trust and engagement.

Overall, the South African influencer marketing landscape is characterised by a tension between structural constraints and emerging digital opportunities. While inequality, regulatory gaps, and audience fragmentation complicate influencer marketing effectiveness, expanding mobile connectivity and culturally resonant communication strategies create conditions for more locally embedded and trust-based digital engagement.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative desktop research design to examine how authenticity, credibility, and cultural relatability in influencer and social media marketing shape consumer trust and purchasing behaviour within the South African context. The study relied on secondary academic literature to synthesise existing knowledge on influencer marketing and consumer decision-making in digital environments.

Academic literature published between January 2019 and July 2025 was retrieved from databases including Google Scholar, EBSCOhost, JSTOR, ScienceDirect, ResearchGate, University of KwaZulu-Natal online library, and Scopus. Search queries

included combinations of keywords such as “influencer marketing South Africa,” “influencer credibility,” “consumer trust in social media marketing,” and “digital consumer behaviour.” Boolean operators (AND/OR) were used to refine the search and ensure relevance to the study focus.

The selected literature consisted of peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, book chapters, and scholarly reports addressing influencer marketing, digital trust, and consumer behaviour. Sources that examined the role of authenticity, credibility, transparency, and cultural alignment in shaping consumer responses to influencer communication were prioritised. Studies were included if they: were peer-reviewed or scholarly sources; examined influencer marketing, consumer trust, or purchasing behaviour, and; were published in English within the specified period. Sources lacking methodological clarity or direct relevance to influencer marketing and consumer behaviour were excluded. Selected studies were assessed for methodological rigour and relevance to the study objectives.

The collected literature was analysed using thematic analysis, where key concepts and findings were organised into analytical themes aligned with the study objectives. These themes included authenticity, influencer credibility, cultural relatability, trust formation, and purchasing intention. This approach enabled the study to synthesise existing scholarly insights and critically interpret how influencer attributes influence consumer trust and

purchasing behaviour in digitally mediated marketing environments.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study examined how authenticity, credibility, and cultural relatability in influencer and social media marketing shape consumer trust, purchasing behaviour, and brand loyalty within digital marketplace environments. The literature synthesis indicates that influencer marketing effectiveness cannot be explained solely through digital reach or engagement metrics; rather, it is shaped by socio-psychological mechanisms that govern how consumers interpret trustworthiness and identity alignment in online interactions. In emerging markets such as South Africa, these mechanisms are further influenced by cultural diversity, socio-economic realities, and generational shifts in media consumption. Consequently, influencer marketing operates not merely as a promotional tool but as a relational process through which brands cultivate trust and long-term loyalty.

Authenticity emerged as a foundational driver of consumer trust. Influencer communication gains persuasive power when audiences perceive it as sincere, transparent, and grounded in everyday lived experiences rather than corporate messaging. Studies indicate that Millennials and Generation Z audiences favour influencers who present relatable narratives and consistent personal values, reinforcing the argument that authenticity functions as a relational construct rather than a stylistic performance (Orencia, 2023; Okonkwo & Namkoisse, 2023). However, the literature also demonstrates that authenticity is highly

fragile; undisclosed sponsorships or excessive commercialisation can quickly undermine audience trust (Arefin & Urme, 2024). From the perspective of Trust Transfer Theory, consumer confidence in an influencer is often transferred to endorsed brands, suggesting that perceived authenticity directly influences purchasing decisions and contributes to the development of brand loyalty.

Credibility further strengthens this trust relationship by shaping how audiences evaluate the reliability and expertise of influencers. In the South African context, credibility is strongly linked to social identity and representation, as audiences are more inclined to trust influencers who reflect their linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic realities (Suganya & Bawa, 2024; Al-Shehri, 2021). For younger audiences in particular, credibility extends beyond product endorsement to include engagement with social issues such as mental health, inequality, and cultural pride (Panori et al., 2020). Within Social Proof Theory, visible indicators of audience approval, including follower numbers and engagement levels, reinforce influencer authority. However, the literature cautions that artificially inflated metrics or performative endorsements may undermine credibility when audiences perceive manipulation, thereby weakening both trust and purchasing intention.

Cultural relatability functions as the connective mechanism that integrates authenticity and credibility into meaningful consumer relationships. South African audiences demonstrate strong responsiveness to influencer content that reflects local languages,

cultural symbols, and everyday social experiences (Orencia, 2023; Punjabi et al., 2024). This cultural resonance facilitates emotional identification between influencers and their audiences, strengthening trust and encouraging long-term brand affiliation. The findings align with the Brand Community concept, which suggests that consumers develop deeper loyalty when marketing communication reflects shared cultural meanings and collective identity. Conversely, influencer campaigns designed according to globally standardised strategies often fail to resonate with local audiences, highlighting the importance of contextual sensitivity in digital marketing environments (Liu, 2024; Abduraimov, 2024).

Overall, the findings demonstrate that authenticity, credibility, and cultural relatability operate as interdependent mechanisms that shape trust formation, purchasing behaviour, and brand loyalty in social media marketing. While digital platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube enable intimate engagement between influencers and audiences, this engagement must be supported by ethical transparency and cultural awareness to sustain consumer confidence. Consequently, the strategic value of influencer marketing in emerging digital economies lies not in visibility alone but in the ability to cultivate culturally grounded and ethically credible relationships that transform short-term engagement into enduring brand loyalty.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study has provided a comprehensive and critical examination of how authenticity, credibility, and cultural relatability within influencer and social media marketing shape consumer trust and purchasing behaviour. Drawing on a robust synthesis of contemporary theories, namely Social Proof Theory, Trust Transfer Theory, and Brand Community concept, this study has established that the success of influencer marketing hinges not on shallow visibility, but on deeper psychological and cultural bonds formed between influencers and their audiences. In today's hyper-connected digital environment, consumers are no longer passive recipients of marketing messages, they are active participants who scrutinise the authenticity of brand narratives, the integrity of endorsements, and the cultural resonance of influencer identities.

The findings highlight that influencer marketing, when strategically grounded in genuine relatability and transparent communication, is a powerful mechanism for shaping trust and driving behavioural outcomes. However, this trust is unstable. Inconsistent messaging, lack of disclosure, or performative authenticity can quickly dismantle consumer confidence, especially among younger digital natives who are both digitally savvy and ethically alert. The South African context adds further complexity, as it demands influencer strategies that reflect linguistic diversity, socio-economic realities, and cultural specificity. Therefore, the strategic pillars of trust-building, which are authenticity, credibility, and

relatability, must be interpreted and applied through localised, ethically responsible, and audience-sensitive lenses.

Furthermore, the study underscores the importance of recognising influencer marketing as not merely a promotional tactic but as a culturally embedded, trust-mediated form of communication that operates at the intersection of psychology, technology, and society. The rapidly shifting digital landscape, coupled with rising consumer scepticism and the emergence of regulatory conversations, necessitates a more rigorous, transparent, and inclusive approach to influencer strategy. Ultimately, brands and marketers who fail to align their influencer practices with the expectations and lived realities of their target audiences risk alienating the very consumers they aim to persuade. This study, therefore, makes a timely and substantive contribution to both academic literature and practical marketing, affirming that consumer trust in the digital age is not simply given; it is earned through consistent, authentic, and culturally resonant engagement.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the synthesis of the literature, several context-specific recommendations emerge for improving the effectiveness and ethical governance of influencer marketing in South Africa. First, brands should prioritise partnerships with influencers who demonstrate consistent authenticity and transparent communication practices. This includes the explicit disclosure of paid partnerships through standardised

identifiers such as #Ad, #Sponsored, or #PaidPartnership, as recommended by international advertising standards. Clear disclosure practices reduce perceptions of covert persuasion and strengthen consumer trust, particularly among digitally literate audiences such as Generation Z.

Second, marketers should evaluate influencers beyond follower counts by prioritising credibility indicators such as community engagement, audience trust, and cultural alignment. In the South African context, this requires greater collaboration with micro- and nano-influencers who possess strong connections within local communities and communicate in culturally relevant ways. These influencers often demonstrate higher engagement rates and greater perceived authenticity among audiences in townships, peri-urban areas, and culturally diverse communities.

Third, influencer marketing strategies should incorporate cultural and linguistic localisation to enhance relatability. Given South Africa's eleven official languages and diverse socio-cultural contexts, campaigns that integrate vernacular language, locally relevant narratives, and culturally meaningful symbols are more likely to

resonate with audiences and foster emotional brand attachment. Such culturally embedded communication strengthens consumer identification with both the influencer and the brand, thereby contributing to the development of brand loyalty in digital marketplace environments.

Finally, stronger regulatory clarity and industry governance are required to safeguard consumer trust. South African regulatory bodies and industry associations, such as the Advertising Regulatory Board, should develop clearer influencer marketing guidelines that include mandatory disclosure of sponsored content, standardised definitions of influencer advertising, and penalties for deceptive practices such as fake followers or undisclosed endorsements. In addition, influencer agencies and brands should incorporate ethical compliance training into influencer partnerships to ensure responsible marketing practices. Implementing these measures would strengthen transparency in the influencer ecosystem and support the sustainable development of trust-based digital marketing practices in South Africa.

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