

‘Beyond the Hype: Unveiling the Implications of Influencer Marketing on Consumers and Society’

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Abstract

Purpose | This study explores how trust in recommendations from influencers versus family and friends impacts consumer satisfaction. **Methodology** | It analyzes responses from 306 individuals using regression models to assess trust-satisfaction relationships, including moderation and mediation effects. **Findings** | Results show stronger trust in family and friends but acknowledge influencer recommendations' effectiveness when perceived as genuine. **Originality** | This under-researched area highlights the evolving consumer behavior in the digital age and provides insights for refining marketing strategies. Our research shows that the impact of influencer recommendations can be equivalent to personal network recommendations when perceived as authentic.

Key Words: Influencer Marketing, Consumer Satisfaction, Social Media Usage

1. Introduction

In today's fast-paced digital landscape, where multiple screens compete for limited consumer attention, marketers are increasingly using emotional appeals and collaborations with influencers to connect with audiences. Leveraging influencers with large social followings on platforms like Instagram has significantly changed marketing strategies and consumer behavior. Influencers, once niche content creators, now play a critical role in brand-consumer engagement, influencing decisions in areas such as lifestyle and fashion, and providing a more engaging alternative to traditional advertising, which many consumers bypass with ad blockers (Freberg et al., 2011). As trust in traditional advertising declines, influencers are seen as relatable and trustworthy figures, enhancing brand communication and awareness across digital platforms. Despite the growth of influencer marketing, concerns remain regarding the trustworthiness of influencer recommendations. This paper aims to explore this issue by using source credibility theory (Hovland et al., 1953), reasoned action theory (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975), and social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) to assess the credibility and trustworthiness of influencers relative to family and friends. By integrating these theoretical frameworks, our research provides insights into how trust in influencers versus family and friends affects consumer satisfaction, providing valuable information for marketers to refine their influencer strategies.

2. Literature review

Influencer marketing leverages individuals with significant social followings to influence consumer behavior through authenticity and engagement and differs from traditional advertising by fostering deeper trust (Freberg et al., 2011; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Lou & Yuan, 2019). Strategic alignment of influencers with brand objectives is essential for effective market penetration (De Veirman et al., 2017; Jin et al., 2019). Influencers not only promote products, but also shape cultural norms and societal values through social media platforms, reflecting a shift from generic advertising to personalized, direct consumer engagement (Lim et al., 2017). Influencer marketing ranges from nano-influencers with high niche engagement to mega-influencers and celebrities who reach large, diverse audiences (Jin et al., 2019; De Veirman et al., 2017; Freberg et al., 2011; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). This spectrum allows for authenticity and relatability in targeted marketing strategies, making influencers more effective than traditional advertising (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Influencers increase brand awareness and influence consumer behavior through both direct and indirect marketing (Lim et al., 2017; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). They also shape cultural trends and societal values through social media, improving public opinion and inclusivity through parasocial interactions that build trust and credibility (Jin et al., 2019; Lim et al., 2017; Horton & Wohl, 1956). Innovations such as AI-generated content and platforms such as TikTok are pushing influencer marketing toward more immersive and authentic strategies (Campbell & Farrell, 2020; Chopra et al., 2021).

A critical research gap in influencer marketing pertains to comparing the effectiveness of influencers against friends and family in influencing consumer purchase decisions. While existing literature acknowledges the substantial impact of social media influencers on consumer behavior (Lou & Yuan, 2019), there is limited understanding of how this influence compares to the trusted recommendations of friends and family (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Social comparison theory emphasizes the influence of peer groups and authoritative figures, such as friends and family (Festinger, 1954). Exploring trust and credibility dynamics, influencers offer broad reach and perceived expertise, but friends and family provide personal trust and firsthand

experience. Parasocial relationships, where followers feel emotional attachment to influencers, further complicate the comparison (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Additionally, the varying influence of influencers versus friends and family across product categories and consumer segments is underexplored (De Veirman et al., 2017). This research gap necessitates empirical studies directly comparing influencer and personal recommendations, considering trust, credibility, and product/service characteristics. Our study aims to address these issues, posing the research question: ‘Does trust in influencer product recommendations lead to higher purchase satisfaction than trust in recommendations from family/friends?’.

Our research aims to compare the influences of family/friends and influencers on consumer trust and purchase satisfaction, drawing from Source Credibility Theory, Social Identity Theory, and the Theory of Reasoned Action (Hovland et al., 1953; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). It explores how consumers perceive credibility dimensions of influencers and family/friends, and their impact on attitudes and behaviors towards recommended products. By integrating these theories, the study examines how identification with influencers or familial groups and normative pressures shape purchase intentions and satisfaction outcomes (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). This research aims for a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between source credibility, social identity, trust, and consumer satisfaction concerning influencer and family/friend product recommendations.

2.1 Trust, social media and credibility

Trust in product recommendations and satisfaction depend heavily on the source of the recommendation, influenced by social proof and persuasive knowledge theories (Friestad & Wright, 1994). Recommendations from family and friends are generally considered unbiased and trustworthy due to their noncommercial nature (Brown & Reingen, 1987). However, recommendations from influencers may elicit skepticism due to their commercial ties, despite efforts to establish authenticity (Evans et al., 2017; Lou & Yuan, 2019; De Veirman et al., 2017). Traditional advertising is often considered the least trustworthy due to its persuasive nature and lack of personal connection (Hajli, 2015). Satisfaction depends on how well these recommendations align with actual experiences, with personal recommendations typically leading to higher satisfaction (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). This dynamic will be explored through hypotheses that examine the effects of trust in influencers and friends or family on purchase satisfaction.

The rise of social media has also changed the dynamics of product recommendations, increasing exposure to influencers, and facilitating parasocial relationships, which may amplify satisfaction from influencer endorsements through increased trust (Chu & Kim, 2011; Hajli, 2014; Cheung & Thadani, 2012). Hypotheses H3a and H3b examine how social media use moderates these trust relationships.

Credibility plays a critical role in all recommendation channels, where credible sources are viewed as more persuasive and influence consumer attitudes and behaviors (Ohanian, 1990). In influencer marketing, credibility is particularly important due to the potential for commercial bias (Freberg et al., 2011). Conversely, the inherent trust in recommendations from family and friends stemming from personal connections significantly increases satisfaction (Brown & Reingen, 1987). Hypotheses H4a and H4b address how credibility moderates the effect of trust in influencers and family/friends on consumer satisfaction, consistent with theories of source credibility and social influence (Hovland et al., 1953; Ohanian, 1990).

H1: The trust in an influencer's product recommendation positively affects the buyer's purchase satisfaction.

H2: The trust in the product recommendation of family/friends positively affects the buyer's purchase satisfaction.

H3a: The impact of trust in an influencer product recommendation on purchase satisfaction is positively moderated by the consumers social media usage.

H3b: The impact of trust in product recommendation by family/friends on purchase satisfaction is positively moderated by the consumers social media usage.

H4a: The impact of trust in an influencer product recommendation on purchase satisfaction is positively moderated by the credibility of an influencer.

H4b: The impact of trust in product recommendation by family/friends on purchase satisfaction is positively moderated by the credibility of family/friends.

2.2 Perceived expertise as moderator and engagement

Perceived expertise is critical in product recommendations, increasing the persuasiveness of recommendations and aligning expectations with actual experience, thereby directly increasing consumer satisfaction (Ohanian, 1990). It reduces uncertainty and perceived risk, which is especially important for complex products, and increases source credibility, which is essential for building consumer trust (Silvera & Austad, 2004). Our study, based on source credibility theory (Hovland et al., 1953), posits that influencer expertise significantly improves consumer satisfaction by strengthening trust and meeting expectations (Ohanian, 1990). The persuasion knowledge model explains that recognizing an influencer's expertise makes consumers more receptive to persuasive messages and increases satisfaction (Friestad & Wright, 1994). Thus, influencer expertise is a key moderator in the trust-satisfaction relationship, suggesting that knowledgeable influencers significantly increase consumer satisfaction.

Engagement is key to product recommendations, increasing trust, persuasiveness, and satisfaction through closer ties between recommenders (influencers or personal contacts) and consumers (Hollebeek et al., 2014). It enhances information processing, emotional bonds, and social validation, especially through interactive activities such as commenting and sharing (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Engagement turns consumers into co-creators of value and enriches satisfaction by involving them in the decision-making and post-purchase processes. Our hypotheses suggest that deeper engagement improves satisfaction by influencing consumers' attitudes and behaviors, which is supported by Social Penetration Theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973). This underscores the critical role of engagement in maximizing the effectiveness of recommendations and improving consumers' shopping experiences.

H5a: The impact of trust in an influencer product recommendation on purchase satisfaction is positively moderated by the level of perceived expertise of an influencer.

H5b: The impact of trust in product recommendation by family/friends on purchase satisfaction is positively moderated by the level of perceived expertise of family/friends.

H6a: The impact of trust in an influencers product recommendation on purchase satisfaction is positively moderated by the consumers level of engagement with influencer's content.

H6b: The impact of trust in product recommendation by family/friends on purchase satisfaction is positively moderated by the consumers level of engagement with family/friends.

2.3 Perceived expertise as mediator and identity

Perceived expertise significantly influences trust in product recommendations, subsequently impacting satisfaction (Ohanian, 1990; Hovland et al., 1953). The mediation model suggests that perceived expertise acts as a psychological mechanism, mediating the recommendation's impact on satisfaction (Baron & Kenny, 1986). Empirical studies in marketing support this,

revealing that perceived expertise enhances consumer evaluations and outcomes, fostering higher satisfaction (Mudambi & Schuff, 2010). Therefore, the hypotheses posit that perceived expertise, whether from an influencer or personal contact, crucially mediates the positive influence of recommendations on purchase satisfaction, providing a trustworthy and credible basis for the endorsement.

Identity significantly influences product recommendations and purchase satisfaction and is rooted in an individual's self-concept and values (Sirgy, 1982). Social identity theory shows that recommendations that are consistent with group identity satisfy social needs and increase satisfaction (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). When products match personal identity, they fulfill emotional and cognitive expectations and increase the trust and credibility of the recommender, leading to greater satisfaction (Berger & Heath, 2007). Identity congruence also reduces cognitive dissonance and reinforces personal values, further increasing satisfaction (Swaminathan et al., 2007). Our hypotheses, based on social identity and self-congruence theories, propose that product recommendations that are congruent with a consumer's identity enhance satisfaction. This congruence mediates the relationship between recommendations and satisfaction, highlighting the need for marketing that reflects consumer identity to maximize recommendation effectiveness and consumer satisfaction.

H7a: Perceived expertise positively mediates the relationship between purchase recommendation by an influencer and purchase satisfaction.

H7b: Perceived expertise positively mediates the relationship between purchase recommendation by family/friends and purchase satisfaction.

H8a: Identity positively mediates the relationship between purchase recommendation by an influencer and purchase satisfaction.

H8b: Identity positively mediates the relationship between purchase recommendation by family/friends and purchase satisfaction.

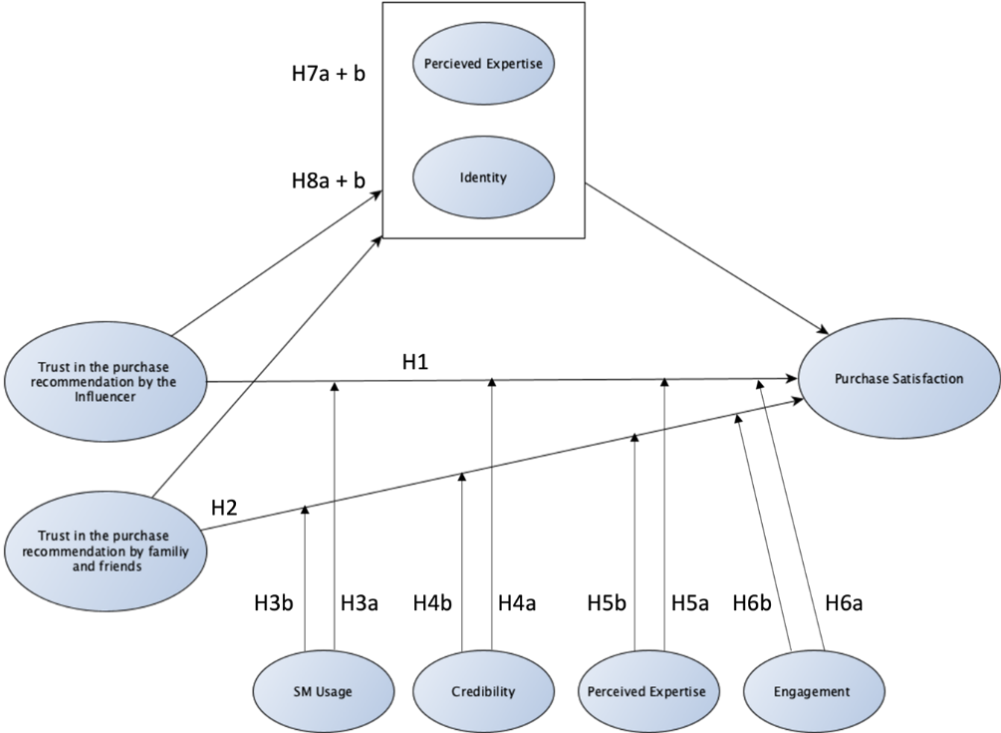


Figure 1. Research model

3. Methodology

This study focuses on influencer marketing, specifically investigating the effects of trust in purchase recommendations from friends and family, or influencers on purchase satisfaction. For this purpose, a specific questionnaire was developed to measure these constructs. The analysis targeted influencer activities on platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube. The study was conducted at the local university and shared across various social networks like LinkedIn, Instagram, and Facebook. This broad recruitment strategy enabled a diverse participation, with a basic understanding of social media being advantageous but not obligatory. The aim was to identify factors influencing purchase satisfaction, shifting the focus from customer engagement. A total of 627 individuals were surveyed in January and February 2024, with 320 completing the questionnaire and 14 failing the attention check, resulting in a sample size of 306. The demographic breakdown shows a majority in the 18-29 age group, reflecting the student and scholarly composition of the sample (demographic data on request).

Variable	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Var.	Min	Max
Credibility	306	2,9886	0,59184	0,350	1,50	5,00
Social Media Usage	306	3,1993	0,89688	0,804	1,00	5,00
Identity	306	1,9562	0,82663	0,683	1,00	5,00
Perceived Expertise	306	2,7340	0,71110	0,506	1,00	5,00
Engagement	306	2,6115	0,62714	0,393	1,00	4,78
Trust in purchase recommendation by Friends/Family	306	4,26	0,651	0,423	2	5
Trust in purchase recommendation by Influencer	306	2,33	0,933	0,871	1	5
Purchase Satisfaction Friends/Family	306	4,37	0,655	0,430	2	6
Purchase Satisfaction Influencer	306	3,75	1,221	1,491	1	6

Table 1. Summary statistics

In designing the questionnaire, established scales were employed as a foundation, with certain modifications made to align them with the specific research context. Social Media Usage ($\alpha=.491$), purchase recommendation and Trust ($\alpha=.781$) were measured using items from Hajli (2014), for purchase satisfaction and perceived expertise ($\alpha=.825$) we adopted items from Ki & Kim (2019), for Identity ($\alpha=.805$) the scale of Mael & Tetrick (1992) was used, and Engagement ($\alpha=.798$) was measured through the items of Hollebeek et al. (2014). The chosen scales allowed participants to indicate their levels of agreement or disagreement with the provided statements by using Likert-type answer styles, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The use of known scales with the necessary changes improves measurement consistency and makes it easier to compare results to prior research in the field (scale items on request).

4. Findings and discussion

The analysis of moderator effects, as well as direct and indirect influences in our study, provides insightful results regarding trust in product recommendations from influencers as well as family and friends, and their impact on purchase satisfaction. Regarding the influence of social media (SM) usage, it is found that there is no significant effect on trust in recommendations from family and friends ($\beta=-.2047$, $p\text{-value}=.4492$). In contrast, the significant influence of SM usage on trust in recommendations from influencers ($\beta=-.3789$, $p=.0488^*$) suggests that increased social media usage enhances satisfaction with products

recommended by influencers. User engagement shows no significant influence on trust in recommendations, both from family and friends ($\beta=.1000$, $p\text{-value}=.8133$) and from influencers ($\beta=-.4089$, $p\text{-value}=.1687$), with the value for influencers being closer to the significance threshold. Perceived expertise and credibility have no significant impact on trust in recommendations, for both family and friends and influencers. Notably, the p -value for credibility in influencer recommendations ($\beta=.2307$, $p\text{-value}=.4258$) is closer to the significance threshold, indicating potential trends that may require further investigation (full data on request).

The examination of direct and indirect effects reveals that recommendations from family and friends have a strong direct effect on purchase satisfaction ($\beta=.284$, $p\text{-value}^{***}=.0000$), showing the strong bond between and the great trust in this type of recommendation source, without significant indirect effects through perceived expertise and identity. This suggests that these factors do not contribute to explaining the relationship between family/friends' recommendations and purchase satisfaction. Conversely, influencers exhibit a significant direct effect on purchase satisfaction ($\beta=.202$, $p\text{-value}^*=.0109$), underscoring their important role in influencing purchase decisions and showing that consumers. Additionally, significant indirect effects are observed since the confidence intervals (BootLLCI=.0446 and BootULCI=.2183) for the factor of perceived expertise do not include zero, indicating a significant mediating role of this factor in the relationship between influencer recommendations and purchase satisfaction (data for direct and indirect effects on request). Based on the results, hypotheses H1, H2 and H7a were supported while hypotheses H3a, H3b, H4a, H4b, H5a, H5b, H6a, H6b, H7b, H8a and H8b were not supported. These findings highlight the differentiated role of social media, engagement, expertise, and credibility in influencing trust in product recommendations and their effects on purchase satisfaction. They emphasize the need to consider the specifics of the recommendation source and the mechanisms of their influence to develop effective marketing strategies in the digital age.

The limited influence of factors such as social media use, credibility, perceived expertise, and commitment on trust in family and friends' product recommendations reflects the personal nature of these interactions. Personal connections are often valued more than external validations such as social media or expertise, directly impacting satisfaction and highlighting the unique dynamics of personal relationships (Hayes et al., 2016). Similarly, in influencer marketing, the impact of credibility and expertise on trust and satisfaction is muted, as consumers often value personal connections and perceived authenticity over formal credentials (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Jin et al., 2019). The role of identity and perceived expertise as mediators in recommendations from family and friends is minimal, often overshadowed by emotional closeness and personal understanding of preferences. For everyday purchases, emotional trust is sufficient, whereas for specialized products, expertise becomes more critical (Murray, 1991). Conversely, the perceived expertise of influencers plays an important role in mediating trust and enhancing satisfaction, as expertise combined with authenticity can validate consumer identity and assure product value, thereby increasing satisfaction (Ohanian, 1990). This underscores the complex interplay of relational and informational factors in influencer marketing that shape consumer trust and satisfaction.

Based on user feedback on improving influencer marketing, we summarize four key areas for improvement that are consistent with prior research (Jin et al., 2019; Lou & Yuan, 2019; De Veirman et al., 2017; Evans et al., 2017). These areas include: (1) Transparency and compensation models: Users prefer clear, independent compensation models that advocate for authenticity over profit-driven recommendations, which increases trust and authenticity (Evans et al., 2017). (2) Authentic and Balanced Reviews: Influencers are encouraged to provide balanced, transparent reviews that include both positive and negative aspects, supporting informed consumer decisions (Lou & Yuan, 2019). (3) Trust and Credibility: To combat

skepticism, influencers must honestly disclose affiliations and uphold ethical standards in promotions, which builds credibility and trust with followers (Lou & Yuan, 2019; De Veirman et al., 2017). (4) Quality and Qualifications: Emphasizing qualifications and providing evidence-based content can reduce consumer fatigue and increase the relevance and effectiveness of recommendations (Jin et al., 2019). Improving these aspects not only meets consumer expectations, but also strengthens the ethical foundation and effectiveness of influencer marketing, preserving its value for brands and consumers alike.

5. Limitations and implications

Influencer marketing, central to today's digital landscape, significantly influences consumer behavior through authenticity, reach, and engagement, presenting both opportunities and challenges. Influencers foster trust by appearing relatable and trustworthy, in contrast to traditional advertising (Lou & Yuan, 2019). They excel at reaching niche markets and improving targeted marketing (De Veirman et al., 2017; Jin et al., 2019), but face credibility issues when sponsorships are not transparent, potentially leading to consumer distrust and ethical concerns (Evans et al., 2017; Lim et al., 2017). Content oversaturation can lead to consumer fatigue, and a mismatch between influencer and brand image can risk reputational damage (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Beyond product advocacy, influencers also shape societal norms, serving as both marketing agents and cultural mediators. This complex role highlights the need for careful brand strategy and ongoing research to address ethical issues, potential biases, and evolving digital dynamics (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Evans et al., 2017; De Veirman et al., 2017; Jin et al., 2019). Future studies should employ more robust methodologies, consider influencer categorizations, and explore the influence of social media algorithms and cultural contexts to improve the understanding and effectiveness of influencer marketing.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has delved into the complexities of trust in influencer versus family and friends' product recommendations and their impact on purchase satisfaction. While trust in family and friends remains a significant predictor of satisfaction, indicating the enduring value of personal connections, trust in influencers also shapes consumer satisfaction in the digital era. Social media usage notably enhances satisfaction with influencer recommendations, underlining digital platforms' transformative role in consumer trust dynamics. However, mediators like credibility, perceived expertise, and engagement present a nuanced picture, with varying significance across recommendation sources. The authenticity and personal relevance of influencer content appear pivotal in driving satisfaction, surpassing traditional metrics like credibility or expertise. These findings contribute to the discourse on influencer marketing, emphasizing the need for genuine connections and authenticity to enhance consumer satisfaction. They also highlight the enduring importance of recommendations from family and friends. Both traditional and digital recommendation forms have unique advantages and challenges in influencing satisfaction. As the digital landscape evolves, so will trust and satisfaction dynamics in influencer marketing. Future research should delve deeper into the mechanisms of digital and personal connections on consumer decisions for a comprehensive understanding. This paper not only enriches academic discourse but also provides practical insights for marketers navigating digital influence and personal relationships in consumer decision-making.

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