



The Role of Social Media Influencers in Shaping Consumer Purchase Intention: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Social media has quietly but substantially changed how people discover and decide to buy things. What was once driven by television commercials and newspaper ads is now increasingly shaped by a person with a ring light talking directly to their audience about a product they may or may not genuinely use. This shift from broadcast advertising to influencer-driven recommendation is the starting point of this research.

This study explores how social media influencers shape consumer purchase intention, with particular interest in the human side of this process: the trust consumers place in influencers, the emotional connections they form, and the mental calculations they make before buying something. A qualitative approach was used, drawing on semi-structured interviews with six purposively selected consumers. Three theoretical frameworks guide the analysis: the Elaboration Likelihood Model, Parasocial Interaction Theory, and the Source Credibility Model.

Five themes emerged from the data: how and why consumers follow influencers, what builds or breaks trust in a recommendation, how authenticity and emotional connection factor into purchase decisions, how the decision-making process actually unfolds across multiple stages, and how platform and content format shape the whole process. The findings suggest that effective influencer marketing is less about reach and more about trust built over time through credible, experience-based content.

Keywords: influencer marketing, purchase intention, social media, consumer behavior, qualitative research

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Think about the last time you bought something you had not been planning to. Somewhere in that decision, there is a reasonable chance a social media post played a role. Maybe it was a review you stumbled on, a product you kept seeing in your feed, or someone whose opinion you have come to trust over months of following their content. This is the everyday reality of influencer marketing, and it is operating at a scale that keeps growing.

India alone has over 750 million active social media users. Platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and a growing cluster of homegrown alternatives such as Moj and Josh have made content creation and consumption a central part of daily life. In this environment, influencers have moved beyond entertainment to occupy a genuine role in how people make purchasing decisions. The global influencer marketing industry was valued at over USD 21 billion in 2023 (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2023). Brands are spending that money because it delivers results.

But how exactly does it work? That is the question this study takes seriously. Purchase intention refers to a consumer's likelihood of buying a product within a given timeframe (Ajzen, 1991). Most existing research has measured this at a statistical level. Far less attention has been paid to what is actually happening in a consumer's mind when they encounter influencer content. What makes them stop scrolling? What makes them trust a recommendation? What makes them buy something a year after first seeing it? These are not questions that survey data alone can answer.

1.2 The Gap This Study Addresses

Most influencer marketing research has been quantitative, measuring outcomes like clicks and conversions without getting close to the consumer experience that produces them. There is also a tendency to focus on specific niches such as beauty or fashion, or on younger demographics like Gen Z. A broader, cross-industry look at how general consumers across different life stages and platforms make sense of influencer recommendations is harder to find. This study attempts to fill that gap.

1.3 Research Objectives

1. To explore how social media influencers shape consumer purchase intention across different product categories.
2. To identify the factors that drives or undermines consumer trust in influencer recommendations.
3. To understand how consumers evaluate influencer credibility and authenticity in their own terms.
4. To draw out practical insights that brands and marketers can use.

1.4 Research Questions

1. RQ1: How do social media influencers shape the purchase intentions of general consumers?
2. RQ2: What influencer characteristics matter most when consumers form trust and purchase intention?
3. RQ3: How do consumers evaluate authenticity and credibility in influencer content, and how does this shape buying behavior?

1.5 Why This Research Matters

Academically, this study adds qualitative depth to a field that has relied too heavily on surveys and scale measurements. Practically, it speaks to real challenges that brand managers and digital marketers face daily: how to choose the right influencer, how to brief them, and how to build campaigns that consumers actually believe. Having spent over seven years working across marketing, advertising, and brand management with organizations including HP, HTC, Honda, and Lokmat, the researcher brings both academic grounding and direct industry experience to these questions.

1.6 Paper Structure

Section 2 reviews the relevant literature. Section 3 presents the theoretical framework. Section 4 describes the research methodology. Section 5 presents and discusses the findings from six interviews. Section 6 concludes with implications, limitations, and directions for future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 What Influencer Marketing Actually Is

Influencer marketing is not a new idea. Using respected, well-known individuals to endorse products has existed in advertising for decades. What changed is the intimacy and accessibility of the relationship. Today an influencer does not need to be a Bollywood star. They can be a Mumbai-based food blogger with 80,000 followers or a Jaipur-based photographer who documents their craft on Instagram. Their power comes not from mass reach but from the genuine trust their audience extends to them (Brown & Fiorella, 2013).

This connects to Katz and Lazarsfeld's (1955) concept of opinion leadership — the observation that certain individuals within social networks carry disproportionate influence over the attitudes of others. Social media has effectively democratized opinion leadership, creating thousands of niche influencers across every imaginable subject area, each with their own loyal following. Research suggests these smaller, more

specialized influencers often generate stronger engagement and more authentic consumer responses than their mega-influencer counterparts (Doyle et al., 2019).

2.2 Purchase Intention

Purchase intention is one of the most studied constructs in marketing research. It refers to how likely a consumer is to buy a product within a certain period (Dodds et al., 1991). The process that leads to that intention is rarely simple. Ajzen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behavior establishes that intentions are shaped by attitudes, perceived social pressure, and a person's sense of control over the behavior — all of which a well-placed influencer post can influence.

Davis's (1989) Technology Acceptance Model has been extended to digital marketing contexts, showing that consumers assess online content by how useful and accessible it feels (Shareef et al., 2019). A product review that directly answers a question a consumer already has can be genuinely useful, and that perceived utility drives intention.

2.3 Credibility and Trust

No amount of polished content will persuade a consumer who does not trust the person delivering it. Credibility sits at the heart of influencer effectiveness. Drawing on Hovland, Janis, and Kelley's (1953) Source Credibility Model, researchers identify two core dimensions: expertise (does this person actually know what they are talking about?) and trustworthiness (are they being honest?).

Lou and Yuan (2019) found that both dimensions significantly shape purchase intention on social media. Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) showed that perceived trustworthiness had a stronger effect on purchasing behavior than sheer popularity. Trust, as Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) established, bridges positive feelings about a source and actual buying behavior. Influencers, when they get the relationship right, can build that bridge.

2.4 Authenticity and Parasocial Connection

Spend enough time following an influencer and something shifts. You start to feel like you know them. You know their opinions, their routines, the kind of humor they have. This is not accidental. Communication scholars call it parasocial interaction: a one-sided emotional connection that feels real even though it exists only through a screen (Horton & Wohl, 1956).

Sokolova and Kefi (2020) demonstrated that the stronger the parasocial relationship, the more likely consumers are to act on a recommendation. The logic is simple: you trust a friend's advice more than a stranger's advertisement. When an influencer feels like a friend, even an imagined one, their endorsement carries that same weight. Audrezet et al. (2020) found that consumers are good at detecting when an influencer is genuinely enthusiastic about a product versus performing enthusiasm for a fee. Those who maintain honesty and personal relevance in their endorsements keep consumer trust; those who do not, lose it gradually. Lee and Watkins (2016) confirmed that authentic influencer content generates stronger purchase intention than visibly promotional material.

2.5 Content, Platforms, and Persuasion

Research consistently shows that informative, relevant, and engaging content drives purchase intention most effectively (Ducoffe, 1996). Platform format shapes this too. Voorveld et al. (2018) found that different platforms create different kinds of engagement and different paths to purchase. Instagram's short-form visual format tends to create awareness and desire. YouTube's longer format moves consumers further toward decision. This platform-specific dynamic has direct implications for influencer campaign strategy.

2.6 What the Literature Leaves Out

Most existing research measures consumer responses rather than listening to them. Surveys can tell you that credibility scores correlate with purchase intention, but they cannot tell you what a consumer is actually thinking when they watch a review at midnight before deciding whether to spend their money. That kind of understanding requires a different approach. This is the space this study occupies.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Why Three Frameworks

No single theory can fully account for what happens when a consumer watches influencer content and decides to buy something. The process involves how information is processed, how emotional connections form, and how source credibility shapes perception. Three frameworks address these distinct but connected dynamics: the Elaboration Likelihood Model, Parasocial Interaction Theory, and the Source Credibility Model.

3.2 Elaboration Likelihood Model

Petty and Cacioppo (1986) describe two routes through which people process persuasive messages. The central route involves careful, effortful evaluation of the actual content — reading a detailed review, comparing features, weighing pros and cons. The peripheral route is faster and more instinctive — being drawn to a product because the influencer seems aspirational, or because the content feels good.

Both routes operate in influencer marketing, sometimes simultaneously. A consumer researching a camera might spend an hour watching technical YouTube reviews, engaging deeply with the arguments. The same consumer might buy a skincare product after seeing it repeatedly in reels with very little deliberation. Understanding which route is active for a given consumer in a given context is central to understanding when influencer content actually drives purchase.

3.3 Parasocial Interaction Theory

Horton and Wohl (1956) first described parasocial interaction in the context of television — the way viewers develop a sense of relationship with on-screen personalities they have never met. Social media has given this phenomenon new dimensions. Influencers share opinions, daily routines, and personal moments in ways that feel direct and personal. Followers develop genuine affection and loyalty in response — feelings that are real even if the relationship is one-sided.

This matters for purchase behavior because we are far more likely to act on advice from someone we feel we know. Sokolova and Kefi (2020) confirmed that parasocial bonds with influencers translate directly into higher purchase intention, with credibility mediating this relationship. The most effective influencer marketing does not feel like advertising. It feels like a recommendation from someone you trust.

3.4 Source Credibility Model

Hovland, Janis, and Kelley (1953) established that the persuasiveness of any message depends heavily on who is delivering it. Their model identifies expertise and trustworthiness as the two core credibility dimensions. Ohanian (1990) added attractiveness — which in this context means likability and aspiration rather than just physical appearance.

In influencer marketing, this explains why a tech influencer's smartphone review carries more weight than the same review from a fashion blogger. It is not about follower count. It is about whether the audience believes the influencer genuinely knows the domain and is being honest about what they think. When those two conditions are met, credibility becomes the primary driver of consumer trust and, from trust, purchase intention follows.

3.5 How the Three Frameworks Connect

Together, these frameworks suggest a coherent model: influencer characteristics such as credibility, authenticity, and expertise interact with content quality to shape the parasocial relationship between influencer and consumer. That relationship, modulated by how deeply the consumer engages with the information (as described by ELM), builds trust. Trust, in turn, drives purchase intention.

The practical implication is direct. If brands understand that purchase intention flows from trust, and trust flows from credibility and genuine connection, then the strategy becomes clear: partner with influencers who are genuinely credible in the relevant domain, give them the freedom to communicate honestly, and invest in relationships over time rather than transactions.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Why Qualitative

Quantitative studies on influencer marketing are not in short supply. What is rarer is research that sits with consumers and listens to how they actually talk about their experiences. Numbers can confirm that trust matters. Conversations can tell you what trust means to a real person in the middle of a real purchase decision. That is the kind of understanding this study was designed to generate.

The study is grounded in interpretivism — the position that human experience cannot be reduced to measurable variables, and that understanding requires engaging with the meanings people attach to their own behavior (Bryman, 2016). From this standpoint, a qualitative approach is not just appropriate but necessary for the questions being asked.

4.2 Research Design

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the primary data collection method. This format offers enough structure to ensure all key areas are covered, while leaving room for participants to introduce directions the researcher did not anticipate. Some of the most useful insights in qualitative research come from exactly those moments (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

4.3 Sampling

Participants were selected through purposive sampling — a deliberate, criteria-based approach (Patton, 2002). To be included, a participant needed to be an active social media user, to have encountered influencer content regularly, and to have made at least one influencer-influenced purchase in the past twelve months. Six participants were interviewed for this study, with data collection ongoing toward a target of 15 to 20 participants, consistent with theoretical saturation norms in qualitative research (Guest et al., 2006).

4.4 Data Collection

Interviews were conducted via video call and lasted between 45 and 60 minutes each, audio-recorded with participant consent. The interview guide covered six areas: general social media usage, influencer following behavior, credibility and trust, authenticity and parasocial relationships, purchase decision-making, and platform and content format preferences. Sample questions included:

1. What makes you trust a social media influencer's product recommendation?
2. Can you walk me through a specific time when an influencer's content led you to buy something?
3. Does it change anything for you when you find out a post is sponsored?
4. Which platform and content format do you find most convincing when you are actually considering a purchase?

4.5 Analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing and refining themes, defining and naming them, and producing the written analysis. NVivo was used to organize and manage the coding process. Transcripts were shared with participants for member checking to verify that the researcher's interpretations aligned with what participants actually meant.

4.6 Ethics and Rigor

All participants provided informed consent before the interview began and were told they could withdraw at any time. Real names were replaced with participant codes throughout. Data is stored securely and will be retained for five years before destruction. Trustworthiness was addressed using Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria: credibility through member checking and peer review, transferability through detailed contextual description, dependability through a documented audit trail, and confirmability through reflexive acknowledgment of the researcher's own position and potential biases.

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1 Participant Profiles

Six participants were interviewed thoroughly for this study. P01 is a 34-year-old male professional working in the influencer marketing industry, with nearly two decades of social media experience. P02 is a 26-year-old female working as Lead Content and Design at a school, with over a decade of social media usage and around ten hours of daily engagement across platforms. P03 is a 24-year-old male content creator and educator with four years of media industry experience, spending around seven hours daily on social media. P04's profile details are incorporated within the thematic analysis. P05 is a teenage student and photography enthusiast who has been using social media since the age of ten, primarily on Instagram. P06 is a 34-year-old female working at an advertising agency as Lead Content and Design, with over a decade of social media experience, who also identifies as a mother, adding a distinct life-stage perspective to the dataset.

The six participants span multiple age groups, professional backgrounds, and social media usage patterns. This diversity strengthens the transferability of the findings and ensures that the themes reflect a genuine range of consumer experiences.

5.2 Overview

Five themes emerged from the analysis: influencer following behavior and niche preference; credibility, trust, and the limits of honesty; authenticity, relatability, and parasocial connection; the purchase decision-making journey; and platform and content format as drivers of purchase persuasion. Each is discussed below, drawing on participant voices across all six interviews.

5.3 Theme 1: Who Consumers Follow and Why

Across all six interviews, the pattern was consistent: participants followed influencers because of what they knew or who they were, not because of how many people followed them. P01 followed niche photography specialists whose work he genuinely admired. P03 followed choreographers whose content fed his own creative practice. P05, a teenage student with a passion for photography, described following a YouTube creator called Mythpat whose theory-based content she found genuinely engaging. P06, as a mother, followed Rajasthani cultural creators, saree enthusiasts, and parenting bloggers whose content matched her life as she actually lived it.

P02 had the most varied portfolio, following creators across fashion, cinematography, reviews, and humor, each serving a different purpose. This is a useful observation in itself: consumers do not think of influencers as a single category. They maintain different relationships with different creators for different reasons, and understanding that segmentation matters for how brands think about influencer partnerships. Algorithm recommendations played a role in initial discovery for most participants, but personal resonance determined whether the follow lasted. P03 described it plainly:

"It pops up on your feed, and then you like the content of them, and you just follow. It's relatable, and then you follow and keep a watch, and you wait for the next content to be posted."

P06 described the same process from her own experience: once she started engaging with a type of content, the algorithm surfaced similar accounts, and she followed those that felt personally relevant. Unfollowing was equally deliberate across participants — triggered by political commentary, repetitive content, a disappointing live experience, controversial opinions, or simply content that no longer felt worth the time. The finding that niche expertise drives following behavior is consistent with Doyle et al. (2019). Consumers are drawn to people who know things they want to know, not to people who are simply well-known.

5.4 Theme 2: Credibility, Trust, and What Consumers Actually Expect

Every participant in this study acknowledged, at some point in the interview, that influencers are generally not fully honest in their commercial endorsements. What makes this interesting is that none of them stopped engaging with influencer content as a result of knowing this. They developed their own ways of filtering for genuine credibility within a system they understood to be commercially motivated.

P01, who works inside the influencer marketing industry, was the most direct:

"Being in influencer marketing myself, I know that brands sometimes provide them the script, and they try to be neutral, but they are not 100% honest about the product they are collaborating with."

P02 and P06 said essentially the same thing from a consumer standpoint. P05 drew a generational distinction worth noting:

"Niche influencers are a lot of times honest. Big influencers usually do it for sponsorships. Smaller ones are more honest, I feel."

This consumer-generated taxonomy of trustworthiness by influencer size is practically significant. It suggests that for a segment of consumers, particularly younger ones, micro and niche influencers carry a credibility premium that follower count alone does not explain.

P06 offered the clearest account of what sustained trust actually requires:

"Long-term relationships matter more than one-time promotions. If I have been following an influencer for years and I have seen them consistently use or talk about a particular product, I am much more likely to trust their recommendation."

Domain expertise was confirmed as a core trust signal by all six participants. A tech influencer recommending a smartphone is credible. The same person recommending a skincare product is not. This is consistent with Ohanian (1990), and it has a direct implication for brand-influencer matching: expertise alignment between influencer and product category is not optional. It is the foundation of the whole persuasion process.

5.5 Theme 3: What Authenticity Means in Practice

Authenticity came up in every interview, but participants defined it differently, and those differences are worth taking seriously rather than collapsing into a single definition.

For P01, authenticity was behavioral: would this influencer actually buy this product? For P03, it was cultural and relational: does this content feel like it comes from someone who understands my world? He described a Punjabi influencer whose content impersonating Punjabi women with an Amritsari accent felt genuine precisely because it was grounded in a shared cultural reference:

"Authenticity for me is relatability."

P02 defined authenticity contextually, as the natural integration of a product into existing content rather than a clearly scripted promotional insert. P05 offered a definition that deserves particular attention:

"Authenticity is when an influencer is genuine and passionate about making videos and not viewing it as a money-making gig. Money is a part of it, but when influencers do it because it's their passion, then I feel like they're authentic."

This is a subtle but important shift. P05 does not expect influencers to work for free. She expects them to be genuinely invested in what they create regardless of whether they are being paid. The authenticity benchmark she applies is about creative conviction, not commercial neutrality.

P06 added a life-stage dimension that none of the other participants articulated:

"As a mother, if I see another woman or mother talking about how she actually uses a product in her everyday life, I am more likely to pay attention because I can imagine myself using it too."

This relational authenticity — the sense that the influencer occupies a similar life situation and therefore genuinely understands the consumer's needs — is a form of identity-based credibility that goes beyond domain expertise. For consumers at particular life stages, shared experience is as powerful a trust signal as professional knowledge.

On parasocial connection, the six participants showed a meaningful range. P01 and P05 described genuine emotional connections with creators they followed, built through consistent exposure to their work and personality. P02 described familiarity rather than friendship, a sense of knowing someone's persona through their content without feeling personally attached. P03 related to content without describing a

strong personal bond. P06 described something more instrumental: a process of sub-conscious brand retention where recommendations stay in mind until circumstances make them relevant.

This range suggests that parasocial interaction is not a binary state but a spectrum, and that even its lighter forms — familiarity, identification, retained awareness — appear sufficient to generate the consumer trust that influences purchase behavior. That extends Horton and Wohl's (1956) original framework in a useful direction.

On sponsored content, all six participants described a conditional rather than categorical response. P05 was the most explicit about where the line was for her:

"If they are disclosing it in the video themselves, then I don't mind that much, but if they are boasting about the product a lot, and then later on we find out it's a sponsorship, then that would disappoint me."

The issue was not sponsorship itself but concealment. Disclosure maintained trust; concealment broke it. This is a more nuanced finding than the broad claim that sponsorship disclosure reduces consumer trust, and it has different implications for how brands should approach transparency in influencer campaigns.

5.6 Theme 4: How Purchase Decisions Actually Happen

None of the six participants described buying something because of a single influencer post. Every account involved multiple stages, multiple inputs, and some degree of active research before a purchase was made. Influencer content functioned as a starting point or a trust-builder, not as the sole cause of purchase.

P01 purchased a soundbar after watching a tech influencer's YouTube listicle, but rated the outcome as neutral because the product did not live up to the review's implied promise. This expectation inflation dynamic appeared implicitly across multiple interviews: when content is highly persuasive, it can set expectations the product cannot meet.

P03's most revealing account concerned a purchase from a small e-commerce website promoted by an influencer, which resulted in poor customer service and a delayed delivery. When he followed up with the influencer, the response was frank:

"He said he's not credible — he did it because it was a barter."

This experience made visible what the research often leaves implicit: the accountability gap in influencer marketing. When a recommendation leads to a bad consumer experience, responsibility is diffuse. The influencer points to the brand. The brand points to the influencer. The consumer is left with a bad product and no clear recourse.

P03 also described buying a product a full year after first seeing it promoted, after continued exposure kept the product in mind until he eventually wanted it. P06 articulated a similar pattern more explicitly:

"Sometimes I don't immediately buy something because an influencer recommended it, but the recommendation stays in my mind. Then, when I actually need that product later, I might remember that particular influencer and consider that brand."

This delayed purchase intention dynamic — influencer content planting a seed that activates months later when circumstances align — is underrepresented in the existing literature, which tends to measure immediate or short-term purchase intention. It suggests that the long-term value of influencer marketing may be systematically underestimated.

P05 demonstrated careful pre-purchase research behavior, checking independent reviews before committing to anything. She described deciding against a Mama Earth lip balm after discovering through non-sponsored reviews that it was overpriced and not genuinely effective, despite significant influencer promotion. P06 described the most detailed purchase journey in the dataset: initial awareness from consistent influencer content, sustained interest through seeing the product used in regular routines, and a final purchase triggered by a combination of trust and a discount code:

"The influencer created the awareness and interest, her personal experience built some trust, and the discount code gave me that final push to actually purchase the product."

P06 then added something theoretically significant: if she had seen the same discount code in a random advertisement, it would not have had the same effect. The discount amplified an already existing trust relationship. Without the trust, the promotion was just noise. This finding suggests that promotional mechanics in influencer marketing function as trust multipliers, not independent persuaders, which has direct implications for how brands design and measure influencer campaigns.

Price sensitivity emerged as a moderating variable across multiple participants. P01 noted the asymmetry between influencers who receive products for free and consumers who must pay. P05 cited overpricing as a reason for not buying despite strong influencer endorsement. P06 described price as a final-stage filter that could override even a trusted recommendation. This convergence across very different participants suggests that price sensitivity is more systematically important in the influencer-to-purchase chain than most influencer marketing research currently acknowledges.

5.7 Theme 5: Platform and Content Format

The platform-differentiation finding was the most consistent across all six interviews. Short-form content creates awareness and emotional interest. Long-form content is where purchase decisions are actually made. This held regardless of age, profession, or primary platform preference.

P06 described the distinction with the clearest structural logic:

"Instagram is usually where I discover a product. I might see a reel or a story, and that creates the initial interest. But when I am actually considering spending money on something, especially if it is expensive, I prefer YouTube. YouTube gives the influencer more time to explain the product, show how they are actually using it, and talk about the pros and cons."

P01 described the same logic. P03 sought out long-form YouTube reviews before any significant purchase, cross-referencing three or four different reviewers before committing. P05 offered a generational qualification worth flagging:

"In short formats they're easily able to quickly grab your attention, while in long formats you just see the timestamp, and you're not interested in hearing about the product."

For younger consumers, long-form content length can itself be a barrier. This does not contradict the broader platform-differentiation finding, but it does complicate it: the value of depth in YouTube reviews may depend on the consumer's age, patience, and level of involvement in the product category. One size does not fit all demographic segments.

P06 also introduced a product-category layer to the platform question:

"Instagram is more effective for impulse purchases or products that are visually appealing, like fashion, beauty, home décor, or lifestyle products. If I see something that looks interesting in a reel, I might click on the link and explore it immediately."

This adds useful specificity to the platform-differentiation model: the right platform depends not just on where in the purchase journey the consumer sits, but on the nature of the product being promoted. Visually driven, low-involvement products play well on Instagram. High-involvement, considered purchases benefit from YouTube's informational capacity.

Content format preferences varied across the six participants. P01 prioritized 30 to 60-day usage reviews over launch-day content. P02 found tutorials most useful. P03 gravitated toward unboxing reviews. P05 favored honest reviews and raw unboxing videos without cuts. P06 preferred tutorials and honest reviews. Despite this variation, a common thread ran through all six accounts: consumers wanted content that felt genuinely informative and experiential, not polished, scripted, or promotional.

P03's account of brand over-scripting confirmed this from the creator's side:

"Every influencer has its own niche, its own way of creating content. If you are approaching an influencer about promoting your product, you can maximum give pointers — but it should be an influencer's call on how to portray that in their content. My content gets tweaked most of the time, and the creativity gets dead. It just looks like another ad, and it does not add any value."

P05 advised brands independently to let influencers try products before making content. P06 argued for prioritizing long-term trust over immediate sales. Three different participants, with different ages and different relationships to the influencer industry, all arriving at the same practical conclusion: let the influencer be themselves, or the content will not work.

5.8 Discussion

Looking across all six interviews, several conclusions emerge that are strengthened by the diversity and independence of the accounts that support them.

Consumer trust in influencers is real, conditional, and continuously maintained. All six participants trusted certain influencers and not others. Their criteria, while individually expressed, converged on a consistent core: domain expertise, content consistency, perceived genuine engagement with the product, and selectivity in what they chose to endorse. Broad fame and follower count did not appear in any of these accounts as meaningful trust signals.

Commercial awareness does not destroy trust. It recalibrates it. Every participant knew that most influencer content is commercially motivated. None withdrew from influencer content as a result. Instead, they each developed filtering mechanisms: looking for signals of genuine conviction within an acknowledged commercial context. This finding complicates prevailing assumptions about sponsorship disclosure effects in meaningful ways.

Purchase intention is a journey with multiple stages. Influencer content is an important input, sometimes the trigger, sometimes the final nudge, sometimes just a seed that takes a year to germinate. Brands that expect a single post to drive direct purchase are misreading how consumer decision-making works.

Authenticity is not one thing. The six participants defined it through behavioral, motivational, cultural, contextual, and relational lenses. No single definition dominated. This suggests authenticity is not a fixed property of an influencer but a perception that each consumer constructs based on their own identity, values, and needs. That has implications for how brands evaluate influencer fit: the right influencer for one audience segment may not be authentic to another.

The most theoretically significant new finding from this expanded dataset concerns sub-conscious brand consideration. Influencer content does not always produce immediate purchase intention. It can deposit a brand into a consumer's long-term consideration set, where it remains available for activation when need and circumstances align. If that is true, then the impact of influencer marketing may be systematically underestimated by research designs that measure only short-term outcomes.

6. Conclusion

6.1 What This Study Set Out to Do

This study started with a question that is harder to answer than it first appears: how do social media influencers actually shape consumer purchase intention? Not in theory, but in the lived experience of real consumers making real decisions. To answer it, the study used in-depth interviews with six consumers, grounded the analysis in three theoretical frameworks, and took the participants' own words seriously as data rather than treating them as illustrations of pre-existing conclusions.

What emerged was more complicated and more interesting than a simple 'influencers drive purchase intention' narrative. The consumers in this study are active, discerning participants in the influencer ecosystem, not passive targets of persuasion. They evaluate credibility, cross-reference sources, remember recommendations for months, and distinguish between genuine enthusiasm and scripted promotion. Their trust is earned through consistency and expertise over time, not given freely to anyone with a large following.

6.2 Theoretical Contributions

This study makes three theoretical contributions. First, integrating the Elaboration Likelihood Model, Parasocial Interaction Theory, and the Source Credibility Model within a single analytical framework offers a more complete account of influencer effectiveness than any one theory can provide. Second, the study adds qualitative depth to a field dominated by survey research, showing what constructs like credibility and authenticity actually mean to consumers in their own words. Third, the finding that sponsored content disclosure does not uniformly reduce trust among digitally literate consumers, and the identification of delayed purchase intention as a meaningful but underexplored phenomenon, both extend existing theoretical models in directions that future quantitative research could test at scale.

6.3 Practical Implications

For marketers and brand managers, the implications of this study are direct. Select influencers based on domain relevance and audience trust, not follower count. Give them the freedom to be honest. Scripted enthusiasm fools a smaller percentage of consumers than the industry seems to assume. Invest in long-term partnerships rather than launch-day posts, because consumers actively prefer reviews that reflect sustained product use over initial impressions. Build a platform strategy that uses short-form content for awareness and long-form content for conversion. And account for price sensitivity in campaign design: influencers who receive products for free are not the best judges of whether their audience can afford what they are recommending.

In the Indian context specifically, where regional language creators and nano-influencers in Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities are growing rapidly, these principles become even more relevant. Authenticity and local cultural resonance will outperform imported celebrity appeal for a growing share of Indian consumers.

6.4 Limitations

This study has limitations that should be stated clearly. Qualitative findings are not statistically generalizable. What is true for six participants cannot be projected onto all consumers. Self-reported interview data is subject to recall bias, and participants may not always accurately describe the factors that influenced past decisions. The sample, while purposive and diverse, does not fully represent the range of Indian social media consumers. The influencer marketing landscape also changes quickly — platforms, content formats, and consumer attitudes shift in ways that limit how long any snapshot study remains fully current. The initial findings are based on six interviews, and while strong thematic convergence is already evident, the researcher is continuing data collection toward the target of 15 to 20 participants.

6.5 Where to Go from Here

The conceptual framework proposed here could be tested quantitatively with large survey samples, adding statistical validation to qualitative insight. Longitudinal research could track how consumer trust in specific influencers changes over time. Industry-specific studies could examine whether the dynamics identified here hold in high-stakes categories like healthcare, financial services, or education, where the consequences of misplaced trust are more serious. Cross-cultural and cross-regional research within India could examine how cultural identity, language, and local platform preferences shape influencer effectiveness differently across diverse consumer groups.

6.6 A Final Observation

There is a habit in marketing research of treating consumers as variables in a model. This study resists that. The people who participated in these interviews are thoughtful, skeptical, and increasingly sophisticated in how they navigate a media environment full of commercial noise. They know when they are being sold to. What moves them, when something does, is the rare influencer who combines genuine knowledge with honest communication and a real relationship with their audience.

That is not a media strategy. It is a relationship. And relationships, more than reach, impressions, or follower counts, are what drive the decisions that matter.

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