

## INFLUENCER MARKETING AUTHENTICITY: A MULTI-METHOD STUDY ON FOLLOWER DISCERNMENT AND ITS IMPACT ON PERSUASION KNOWLEDGE

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### Abstract

This study examines the role of authenticity in influencer marketing and investigates how follower discernment shapes persuasion knowledge and consumer responses. As influencer marketing continues to expand across digital platforms, authenticity has become a critical determinant of trust, engagement, and effectiveness. Drawing on a multi-method research design that integrates surveys, experiments, and content analysis, this study explores how followers identify cues of authenticity and sponsorship in influencer content. The findings reveal that detection cues such as language, tone, and visual consistency play a key role in shaping authenticity perceptions, while individual factors such as experience and media literacy influence the ability to discern persuasive intent. The study further demonstrates that perceived authenticity and persuasion knowledge act as central mediators, determining whether consumers respond with trust or skepticism. The activation of persuasion knowledge often leads to increased critical evaluation and resistance, particularly when content is perceived as overly commercial. However, authenticity and transparent disclosure can mitigate these effects and sustain engagement. The study contributes to theory by extending the Persuasion Knowledge Model to influencer contexts and offers practical insights for designing authentic and effective influencer strategies. Future research should explore cross-platform and cultural variations in authenticity perception.

**Keywords:** *Influencer marketing; authenticity; persuasion knowledge; follower discernment; consumer trust*

### INTRODUCTION

The rapid rise of influencer marketing has transformed the digital marketing landscape, reshaping how brands communicate with consumers across social media platforms. Influencers, ranging from celebrities to micro- and nano-creators, have become key intermediaries who bridge the gap between brands and audiences (Joshi et al., 2023). Their ability to create relatable, engaging, and personalized content has made them highly effective in influencing consumer attitudes and behaviors. As digital platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube continue to grow, influencer marketing has evolved into a central component of contemporary marketing strategies (Libai et al., 2025). This shift reflects broader changes in consumer behavior, where individuals increasingly rely on peer-like recommendations rather than traditional advertising. Consequently, influencer marketing has gained significant attention from both practitioners and researchers (Zhou, 2023).

Within this context, authenticity has emerged as a critical factor in shaping influencer–follower relationships. Authenticity is often associated with perceptions of genuineness, transparency, and relatability, which contribute to the credibility of influencers. Followers are more likely to trust influencers who appear honest and consistent in their communication. As a result, authenticity plays a key role in fostering engagement, loyalty, and long-term relationships (Mishra & Ashfaq, 2023). However, maintaining authenticity becomes more challenging as influencers engage in sponsored collaborations with brands. The integration of commercial content into personal narratives can blur the line between genuine expression and strategic promotion (Samanta, 2025). This dynamic highlights the

growing importance of understanding how authenticity is perceived in influencer marketing. Despite its effectiveness, influencer marketing is increasingly accompanied by consumer skepticism and heightened awareness of persuasive intent. As audiences become more familiar with sponsored content and advertising tactics, they develop greater ability to recognize promotional messages (Viswanadh, 2024). This awareness can activate persuasion knowledge, leading consumers to critically evaluate influencer content. In some cases, this may result in reduced trust, skepticism, or resistance to marketing messages. The challenge for influencers and brands lies in balancing commercial objectives with the need to maintain authenticity. Failure to achieve this balance can undermine the effectiveness of influencer marketing campaigns (Gopal, 2023). This growing skepticism underscores the need for deeper investigation into how consumers interpret and respond to influencer content.

In response to these challenges, this article aims to examine how followers discern authenticity in influencer marketing and how this discernment influences persuasion knowledge and consumer responses. By integrating insights from marketing, communication, and consumer psychology, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms underlying authenticity perception. It focuses on identifying the cues and factors that shape follower judgments, as well as the consequences of these perceptions for trust, engagement, and purchase intentions. Additionally, the article explores how persuasion knowledge is activated and how it affects consumer decision-making in influencer contexts. Through a multi-method approach, the study contributes to both theoretical and practical discussions on influencer marketing. Ultimately, it aims to provide guidance for designing more authentic and effective influencer strategies.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Evolution of Influencer Marketing**

The evolution of influencer marketing reflects a shift from traditional celebrity endorsements to more decentralized and diverse forms of influence. Historically, brands relied on celebrities to endorse products, leveraging their fame and broad reach to influence consumer perceptions (Gupta, 2024). While effective in generating awareness, this approach often lacked relatability and personal connection with audiences. Over time, the rise of social media platforms enabled the emergence of influencers who built their own audiences through content creation. Micro- and nano-influencers, in particular, gained prominence due to their perceived authenticity and closer relationships with followers (Joshi et al., 2023). These influencers often operate within niche communities, allowing for more targeted and meaningful engagement. As a result, influencer marketing has become more personalized and community-driven (Libai et al., 2025).

The role of social media platforms has been instrumental in shaping influencer ecosystems and enabling this transformation. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube provide the infrastructure for content creation, distribution, and interaction (Zhou, 2023). They allow influencers to engage directly with their audiences through comments, live streams, and interactive features. Algorithms further amplify content visibility, enabling influencers to reach wider audiences while maintaining niche appeal (Mishra & Ashfaq, 2023). These platforms also facilitate collaborations between brands and influencers, creating new opportunities for monetization. However, the increasing commercialization of influencer content has introduced challenges related to authenticity and trust. Understanding the dynamics of these ecosystems is essential for analyzing the effectiveness of influencer marketing (Samanta, 2025).

### **Concept of Authenticity in Marketing**

Authenticity in marketing is a multifaceted concept that encompasses dimensions such as genuineness, transparency, and relatability. Genuineness refers to the perception that a message or endorsement is sincere and reflects the true beliefs of the influencer. Transparency involves clear disclosure of sponsored content and honest communication about brand partnerships (Gopal, 2023). Relatability captures the extent to which audiences feel connected to the influencer based on shared experiences or values. Together, these dimensions shape how consumers interpret and evaluate marketing messages (Gupta, 2024). Authenticity is particularly important in influencer marketing, where personal identity and content are closely intertwined. It serves as a key factor in differentiating credible influencers from purely commercial actors. Authenticity is also a critical driver of trust and engagement in digital environments. When followers perceive influencers as authentic, they are more likely to trust their recommendations and engage with their content (Okonkwo & Namkoisse, 2023). This trust can translate into higher levels of interaction, loyalty, and purchase intention. Conversely, perceived inauthenticity can lead to skepticism and disengagement. The challenge lies in maintaining authenticity while integrating sponsored content into personal narratives. Influencers must balance commercial interests with their established identity and values. Brands, in turn,

must collaborate in ways that preserve the influencer's credibility (Aw & Agnihotri, 2023). This highlights the strategic importance of authenticity in shaping consumer responses.

### **Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM)**

The Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM) provides a theoretical framework for understanding how consumers recognize and respond to persuasive attempts in marketing. According to PKM, consumers develop knowledge about persuasion tactics over time, which they use to interpret and evaluate marketing messages (Joshi et al., 2023). This knowledge includes an understanding of the motives, strategies, and intentions behind advertising. When consumers recognize that a message is intended to persuade, they may activate this knowledge and adjust their responses accordingly. This can lead to more critical evaluation and, in some cases, resistance to the message (Libai et al., 2025). PKM highlights that consumers are not passive recipients but active interpreters of marketing communication. This perspective is particularly relevant in the context of influencer marketing.

In digital contexts, the activation of persuasion knowledge is influenced by various factors, including disclosure, content style, and audience experience. Explicit disclosures of sponsorship can signal persuasive intent, making consumers more aware of the commercial nature of the content (Zhou, 2023). At the same time, subtle or integrated forms of promotion may delay or reduce the activation of persuasion knowledge. The level of consumer expertise and familiarity with influencer marketing also plays a role in shaping these responses. As consumers become more experienced, they are better able to detect persuasive cues (Mishra & Ashfaq, 2023). This dynamic creates a complex interaction between authenticity perception and persuasion awareness. Understanding how and when persuasion knowledge is activated is essential for evaluating the effectiveness of influencer marketing strategies.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study adopts a multi-method research design to provide a comprehensive examination of influencer marketing authenticity and its impact on follower discernment and persuasion knowledge. By combining quantitative and qualitative approaches, the study aims to capture both the depth and breadth of consumer responses in digital environments. The research integrates survey methods, experimental designs, and content analysis to triangulate findings and enhance validity. Data collection involves multiple sources, including social media data, follower surveys, and controlled experimental stimuli that simulate influencer content. This approach allows for the observation of both naturally occurring behaviors and controlled responses to specific variables. The sample consists of followers of influencers across various social media platforms, ensuring diversity in demographics, platform usage, and levels of engagement. This diverse sample enables a more robust understanding of how different audiences perceive authenticity and respond to influencer content.

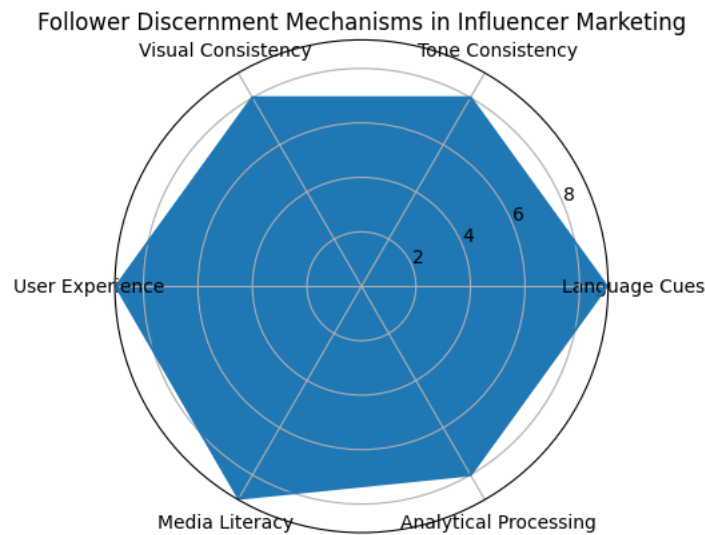
To measure key constructs, the study employs validated scales for authenticity perception, persuasion knowledge, trust, and behavioral intention. These measures capture both cognitive and affective responses, providing a holistic view of consumer reactions. Analytical techniques include thematic analysis for qualitative data, allowing the identification of recurring patterns and cues used in authenticity discernment. Quantitative data is analyzed using regression analysis and structural equation modeling (SEM) to examine relationships between variables and test the proposed conceptual framework. These methods enable the exploration of both direct and indirect effects, as well as mediating and moderating relationships. However, the study is subject to limitations, including context-specific findings that may not generalize across all platforms or cultural settings. Additionally, platform bias may influence results, as different social media environments vary in content format and user behavior. Despite these limitations, the multi-method approach provides a comprehensive and rigorous analysis of influencer marketing authenticity.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Follower Discernment Mechanisms**

Follower discernment mechanisms refer to the processes through which audiences identify whether influencer content is authentic or commercially driven. One of the primary mechanisms involves detection cues such as language, tone, and visual consistency (Joshi et al., 2023). Followers often analyze the wording used in posts, looking for overly promotional language or scripted phrasing that signals sponsorship. Similarly, tone plays a crucial role, as sudden shifts from casual, personal communication to formal or sales-oriented messaging can raise suspicion (Libai et al., 2025). Visual elements, including product placement, editing style, and overall aesthetic, also serve as indicators of authenticity or sponsorship. Consistency between an influencer's usual content and a sponsored post is particularly important in shaping perceptions. These cues collectively enable followers to interpret the intent behind

influencer content (Zhou, 2023). In addition to content-based cues, the role of experience and media literacy significantly influences follower discernment. More experienced users, who are frequently exposed to influencer marketing, develop a stronger ability to recognize persuasive intent (Mishra & Ashfaq, 2023). Media literacy equips individuals with the skills to critically evaluate content, understand marketing tactics, and identify subtle promotional strategies. As a result, these users are more likely to detect sponsored content even in the absence of explicit disclosures (Samanta, 2025). This heightened awareness can lead to more analytical processing of influencer messages. Conversely, less experienced or less media-literate followers may rely more on surface-level cues and emotional responses. These differences highlight the importance of considering audience characteristics when analyzing authenticity perception (Gopal, 2023).



**Figure 1.** Radar Chart of Follower Discernment Mechanisms in Influencer Marketing

The radar chart as shown in Figure 1 illustrates the multidimensional nature of follower discernment in influencer marketing, highlighting the combined influence of content-based cues and audience capabilities. High values across language cues, tone consistency, and visual consistency indicate that followers rely heavily on observable elements within influencer content to detect authenticity or sponsorship (Gupta, 2024). At the same time, equally strong scores in user experience and media literacy demonstrate that individual knowledge and familiarity with influencer marketing significantly enhance the ability to recognize persuasive intent. Analytical processing, while slightly lower, still plays an important role in enabling followers to critically evaluate content beyond surface-level impressions. The relatively balanced shape of the chart suggests that discernment is not driven by a single dominant factor but by the interaction of multiple dimensions (Aw & Agnihotri, 2023). This reinforces the idea that both message characteristics and audience sophistication are essential in shaping authenticity perception. Overall, the chart underscores that effective influencer marketing must consider not only how content is presented but also how it is interpreted by increasingly knowledgeable audiences (Bilgihan et al., 2024).

### Impact on Persuasion Knowledge

The discernment of influencer authenticity directly influences the activation or suppression of persuasion knowledge among followers. When followers detect cues indicating that content is sponsored, their awareness of persuasive intent is activated. This activation leads to more critical evaluation of the message, as consumers become conscious of the influencer's commercial motives. In contrast, when content is perceived as authentic and non-commercial, persuasion knowledge may remain suppressed or less salient. In such cases, followers are more likely to process the message in a less defensive and more receptive manner (Giuffredi-Kähr et al., 2022). This distinction between activation and suppression is central to understanding how influencer marketing affects consumer responses. It highlights the delicate balance between authenticity and transparency in shaping persuasion outcomes (Pergelova & Hachey, 2023). The activation of persuasion knowledge has important consequences for skepticism and resistance. When consumers recognize persuasive intent, they may become more skeptical of the message and question its credibility. This skepticism can reduce trust in both the influencer and the brand, leading to lower engagement and weaker behavioral intentions (Boerman & Muller, 2021). In some cases, it may even trigger resistance, where consumers actively reject or counter-argue the message. However, if authenticity is maintained

alongside transparent disclosure, negative effects may be mitigated. Consumers may still accept the message if they perceive it as honest and aligned with the influencer’s identity (Giambastiani et al., 2025). This suggests that persuasion knowledge does not always lead to negative outcomes but depends on how authenticity is perceived. Understanding this relationship is critical for effective influencer marketing strategies.

**Table 1.** Persuasion Knowledge Activation and Its Effects in Influencer Marketing

Dimension	Definition	Key Characteristics	Consumer Outcomes
Activation of Persuasion Knowledge	Awareness of persuasive intent when content is perceived as sponsored	Recognition of commercial motives, critical evaluation	Increased skepticism, reduced trust, potential resistance
Suppression of Persuasion Knowledge	Limited awareness when content is perceived as authentic	Natural message processing, low defensiveness	Higher receptivity, stronger engagement, positive attitudes
Skepticism and Resistance	Negative reactions triggered by perceived persuasion	Doubt, counter-arguing, message rejection	Lower purchase intention, decreased brand and influencer credibility
Authenticity-Moderated Response	Influence of perceived authenticity on persuasion outcomes	Transparency, alignment with influencer identity	Mitigated skepticism, maintained trust, improved acceptance of sponsored content

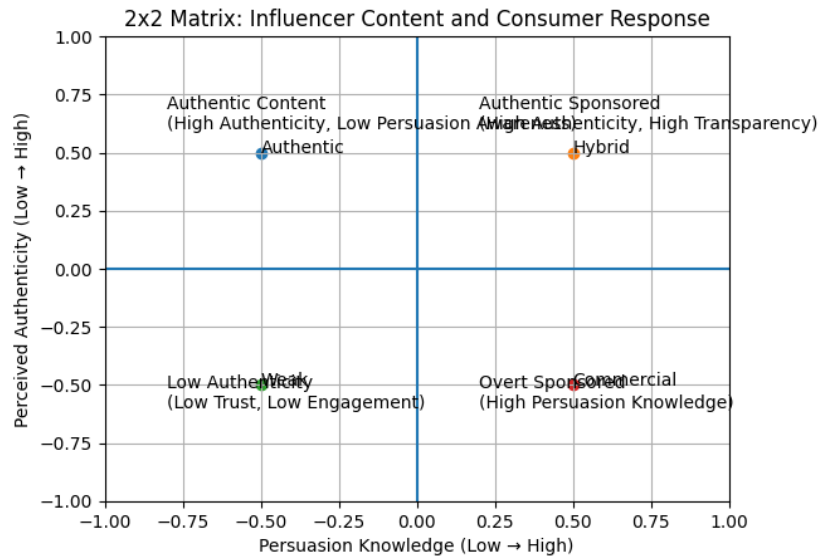
The table illustrates the dynamic relationship between influencer authenticity and the activation of persuasion knowledge, highlighting how consumer responses vary depending on content perception. When persuasion knowledge is activated through the recognition of sponsored cues, consumers tend to engage in more critical evaluation, leading to increased skepticism and potential resistance (Breves et al., 2024). In contrast, when authenticity is perceived and persuasion knowledge is suppressed, followers process content more naturally, resulting in greater receptivity and positive engagement. The inclusion of skepticism and resistance underscores the potential negative consequences of overt commercial signaling, particularly when authenticity is compromised. However, the authenticity-moderated response dimension demonstrates that transparency, when aligned with genuine influencer identity, can mitigate these negative effects. This suggests that persuasion knowledge does not inherently undermine marketing effectiveness but interacts with authenticity perceptions to shape outcomes (Lou, 2021). Overall, the table emphasizes the importance of balancing authenticity and disclosure to maintain trust while managing persuasive intent in influencer marketing.

**Conceptual Framework (Proposed Model)**

The proposed conceptual framework begins with influencer content as the primary input, distinguishing between authentic and sponsored messages. This distinction is central to how followers interpret and respond to influencer communication. Authentic content is typically perceived as genuine and aligned with the influencer’s personal identity, while sponsored content may be viewed as commercially motivated (Joshi et al., 2023). These inputs shape the initial perception of the message and influence subsequent cognitive and emotional processing. The framework emphasizes that not all sponsored content is perceived negatively, as authenticity can still be maintained through appropriate integration. This highlights the importance of content design in influencing consumer responses (Giuffredi-Kähr et al., 2022). By categorizing inputs, the model provides a foundation for analyzing how different types of content affect outcomes.

The framework further incorporates mediating factors such as perceived authenticity and persuasion knowledge, which explain how inputs translate into consumer responses. Moderating variables, including follower expertise, trust, and disclosure clarity, influence the strength and direction of these relationships (Pergelova & Hachey, 2023). These factors determine how consumers interpret influencer content and whether they respond positively or negatively. The outcomes of the model include attitudes toward the influencer and brand, engagement with content, and purchase intention. These outcomes reflect both cognitive and behavioral responses to influencer marketing (Boerman & Muller, 2021). The framework provides a comprehensive structure for understanding the

complex interplay between content, perception, and behavior. It also offers a basis for empirical testing and further theoretical development.



**Figure 2.** 2x2 Matrix of Influencer Content, Perceived Authenticity, and Persuasion Knowledge

The figure as shown in Figure 2 presents a clear conceptual mapping of how influencer content is interpreted by followers based on the interplay between perceived authenticity and persuasion knowledge. It illustrates that consumer responses are not determined solely by whether content is sponsored, but by how authentic it is perceived to be in conjunction with awareness of persuasive intent (Giambastiani et al., 2025). The top-left quadrant shows that authentic, non-commercial content generates the highest levels of trust and engagement, while the bottom-right quadrant highlights that overtly commercial content with low authenticity leads to skepticism and resistance. Notably, the top-right quadrant represents an optimal balance, where sponsored content can still be effective if it maintains authenticity and transparency. In contrast, low-authenticity content in the bottom-left quadrant fails to create meaningful impact regardless of persuasion awareness (Breves et al., 2024). The matrix emphasizes that authenticity serves as a critical buffer that can mitigate negative effects of persuasion knowledge activation. Overall, the figure underscores the importance of aligning content design, transparency, and influencer identity to achieve positive consumer responses (Lou, 2021).

**Managerial Implications**

The findings of this study have important implications for managers and practitioners seeking to enhance the effectiveness of influencer marketing. One key implication is the need to develop strategies that maintain authenticity while incorporating sponsored content (Giuffredi-Kähr et al., 2022). Brands and influencers should collaborate to ensure that promotional messages align with the influencer’s established voice, style, and values. This alignment helps preserve credibility and reduces the risk of negative perceptions (Pergelova & Hachey, 2023). Additionally, selecting influencers whose personal brand naturally fits the product or service can enhance authenticity. Long-term partnerships may also contribute to more genuine and consistent messaging. These strategies highlight the importance of authenticity as a central element of influencer marketing success.

Transparent disclosure practices are another critical consideration, as they influence how persuasion knowledge is activated and interpreted. Clear and honest disclosures can enhance trust by signaling integrity and accountability (Boerman & Muller, 2021). However, disclosures should be integrated in a way that does not disrupt the natural flow of content. Balancing branding objectives with the influencer’s personal identity is also essential, as overly commercial content can undermine authenticity. Influencers should retain creative control to ensure that sponsored messages remain consistent with their usual communication style. By achieving this balance, brands can minimize skepticism and maximize engagement (Giambastiani et al., 2025). Ultimately, effective influencer marketing requires a careful integration of authenticity, transparency, and strategic alignment.

## CONCLUSION

This article has examined the role of authenticity in influencer marketing and its impact on follower discernment and persuasion knowledge. The findings highlight that followers are not passive recipients of influencer content but actively interpret and evaluate messages using various cues such as language, tone, and visual consistency. The ability to discern authenticity is further shaped by individual factors such as experience and media literacy, which influence how persuasive intent is recognized. The study also demonstrates that the activation of persuasion knowledge plays a critical role in shaping consumer responses, often leading to increased skepticism and resistance when content is perceived as overly commercial. However, authenticity can mitigate these effects by fostering trust and credibility, even in sponsored contexts. These insights underscore the complexity of influencer marketing, where authenticity and persuasion operate simultaneously. Overall, the study emphasizes that successful influencer strategies must carefully manage the balance between genuine communication and commercial objectives.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes by extending the Persuasion Knowledge Model to the context of influencer marketing, integrating authenticity as a key mediating factor. Practically, it provides guidance for brands and influencers to design content that maintains authenticity while ensuring transparency and compliance with disclosure requirements. However, the study is limited by its context-specific findings and potential platform bias, which may affect generalizability. Future research should explore cross-platform differences, longitudinal effects of influencer relationships, and cultural variations in authenticity perception. Additionally, further studies could investigate how emerging technologies, such as AI-generated influencers, influence authenticity and persuasion dynamics. Ultimately, the effectiveness of influencer marketing depends on the ability to build and sustain trust through authentic and transparent communication.

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