



## Social Media Influencer Marketing: Exploring the Dynamics of Follower Engagement

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### Abstract

This study explores the dynamic realm of influencer marketing, a transformative force in contemporary digital marketing. Influencer marketing harnesses the power of social media influencers (SMIs) to endorse products, services, or causes, reshaping the consumer-brand relationship. Despite extensive research in this field, a critical aspect remains underexplored: the factors and processes influencing follower engagement. The study utilizes a qualitative research approach, employing triangulation to synthesize existing literature and conduct focus group discussions. This study introduces an integrative framework encompassing "Influencer Content Characteristics," "Source Characteristics," and "Psychological Characteristics." These dimensions shed light on the multifaceted influencer marketing landscape, providing insights into how influencers shape trust, connections, and persuasive impact. The study offers a deeper understanding of follower engagement, empowering marketers to craft more effective influencer strategies in the ever-evolving digital sphere. As the global influencer marketing industry continues its meteoric rise, this research becomes increasingly pertinent, forecasting a promising future for influencer marketing's role in brand engagement and consumer decision-making.

**Keywords:** Influencer Marketing, Follower Engagement, Consumer Behavior, Brand Engagement, Integrated Model

### 1. Introduction

The concept of utilizing opinion leaders to shape consumer decisions has a rich historical lineage dating back decades. It finds its origins in the two-step flow model, initially illuminated during the 1940 American Presidential Election, demonstrating the indirect impact of mass media through opinion leaders (Rogers, 2004; Weismueller, 2020). Building upon this foundation, Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) expanded the theory, emphasizing the pivotal role of interpersonal communication in shaping consumer responses compared to mass media (Katz, 1987).

Fast forward to the contemporary digital landscape, characterized by the pervasive adoption of social media, which has brought about a transformation in communication dynamics (Hanelt, 2021). This digital revolution has not only facilitated the ascendancy of social media marketing but has also given birth to the influential phenomenon of influencer marketing (Duffett, 2017; Pangarkar & Shukla, 2023). Influencer marketing has redefined how brands connect with their target audiences, leveraging social media influencers (SMIs) – individuals with substantial and engaged online followings – to endorse products, services, or causes (Rossi & Rivetti, 2023). This approach capitalizes on the trust and credibility that influencers have cultivated within their niche communities. Moreover, the advent of social media has reshaped the roles of consumers within power structures and redefined their relationship with brands (Vrontis, 2021). Consumers have evolved from passive recipients into both consumers and advocates for brands in these computer-mediated environments. Brands have recognized the potential of collaborating with SMIs, a practice known as influencer marketing (IM), often incentivizing them with free products or compensation. This approach enables brands to shape favorable consumer responses that align with their objectives, fostering a dynamic where both SMIs and their followers actively participate in crafting the brand image on social media (Koay et al., 2023).

The emergence of SMIs and IM has accelerated the proliferation of opinion leadership in the digital era (Cortellazzo, 2019; Pop, Săplăcan, 2022). SMIs possess the capability to reach broad consumer audiences through their social media platforms, with their recommendations often perceived as more credible and trustworthy than conventional marketing messages (Pop et al., 2022). Consequently, IM has become a favored marketing strategy for brands aiming to connect with and influence consumers. The heightened interest in social media influencer marketing has attracted significant attention from researchers and industry professionals alike. However, despite extensive research in this field, a crucial aspect has received limited focus: the factors and processes influencing follower engagement (Delbaere, 2021). While previous research has identified numerous influencer-related variables and mechanisms, a comprehensive and integrated model remains conspicuously absent (Wong, 2022). This gap in understanding hinders the development of effective influencer marketing strategies. This paper aims to bridge this knowledge gap and provide a comprehensive understanding of follower engagement with influencers. The study comprehends the previous knowledge by proposing a model for Influencer follower engagement that content, source, and psychological aspects of influencer marketing. This paper seeks to offer a holistic framework that synthesizes existing research and comprehends the relevant factors, ultimately deepening our understanding of the multifaceted influencer marketing landscape. Moreover, it provides practical insights to

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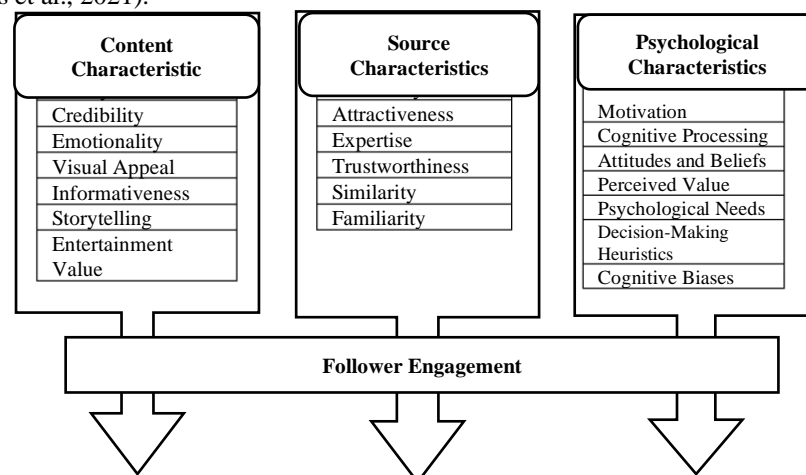
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empower marketers in crafting more effective influencer strategies tailored to engage and resonate with their target audiences in the ever-evolving digital sphere.

**2. Literature Review**

The concept of leveraging opinion leaders to influence consumer decisions is not a novel idea. Individuals who exert significant influence over consumer attitudes and behaviors through word-of-mouth have been explored for decades (Lin, Crowe, Pierre, & Lee, 2021). This concept traces its roots to a study conducted during the 1940 American Presidential Election, which revealed that mass media indirectly impacted the audience through opinion leaders, a phenomenon known as the two-step flow model (Weimann, 1994). Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) expanded on this theory, asserting that consumers' responses to mass media messages were mediated by opinion leaders who conveyed their interpretations through group interactions (Balci, 2022). Consequently, interpersonal communication wielded greater influence over decision-making processes and behavior compared to mass media (Viswanathan & Jain, 2013). In the contemporary digital landscape, the pervasive adoption of social media has brought about a paradigm shift in communication dynamics. This digital landscape has not only facilitated social media marketing but has also given a boost to influencer marketing (Scholz, 2021). Influencer marketing has emerged as a transformative force in contemporary digital marketing, revolutionizing the way brands connect with their target audiences (Varadarajan, 2022). This strategy harnesses the power of social media influencers—individuals with sizable and engaged online followings—to promote products, services, or causes. Unlike traditional advertising, influencer marketing leverages the trust and credibility influencers have cultivated within their niche communities. Moreover, social media has transformed the conventional roles of consumers within power structures and reshaped their relationship with brands (Gensler, 2013). In these computer-mediated environments, consumers have transcended their passive recipient status and have evolved into both consumers and advocates for brands.

Brands are increasingly recognizing the potential of collaborating with SMIs, incentivizing them with free products or compensation in a practice known as influencer marketing (IM). This approach enables brands to cultivate favorable consumer responses aligned with their interests, fostering a dynamic where both SMIs and their followers actively co-create the brand image on social media (Chalke, 2023). The emergence of SMIs and IM has accelerated the proliferation of opinion leadership in the digital era. SMIs possess the ability to reach extensive consumer audiences through their social media platforms, and their recommendations are often perceived as more credible and trustworthy than conventional marketing messages (Mabkhot, Isa, & Mabkhot, 2022). Consequently, IM has become an increasingly popular marketing strategy for brands aiming to connect with and influence consumers. The growing interest in social media influencer marketing has drawn significant attention from both researchers and industry professionals. This heightened interest underscores the importance of gaining a comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon (Khang, Ki, Ye, & Quarterly, 2012). Such an understanding is crucial for advancing academic knowledge and improving marketing practices. While there has been substantial research in the realm of influencer marketing, it is noteworthy that the factors and processes influencing follower engagement have received relatively little attention (Vrontis et al., 2021). Previous research has identified various influencer-related variables and mechanisms that impact consumer outcomes (De Cicco, 2021). However, there is a notable absence of a systematic assessment or an integrated model that consolidates these findings. Consequently, there is a shortage of strategic insights into effectively utilizing this evolving marketing tool (Ebert, 2008). Researchers have explored various facets of follower engagement, but the existing knowledge is fragmented. In light of this, our study proposes an integrative framework that synthesizes the existing literature and comprehends the relevant factors (Santos, 2022). Addressing these knowledge gaps holds the promise of not only deepening our understanding of the intricate interplay of factors affecting follower engagement with influencers but also enhancing marketers' ability to craft more effective influencer strategies that resonate with and engage target audiences. The following proposed conceptual diagram presented overview of relevant factors (Vrontis et al., 2021).



### 2.1. Influencer Content Characteristics

In the contemporary digital landscape, the symbiotic relationship between influencer content characteristics and follower engagement holds paramount significance. Empirical evidence underscores the pivotal dimensions of influencer content: relevance, originality, quality, engagement, and authenticity (Campbell & Farrell, 2020; Vrontis et al., 2021). Relevance, as highlighted by a Nielsen study, emphasizes the alignment between content, the influencer's audience, and the brand's target market, essential for fostering trust and achieving desired outcomes (Kumar, 2023). Originality, corroborated by Sprout Social's research, distinguishes content and elevates trust, while high-quality execution reflects professionalism and bolsters credibility (Moore, 2020). Engagement, dynamic and interactive, cultivates a sense of community and extends influence, while authenticity, a bedrock of influencer marketing, forges enduring connections based on sincerity and credibility (Camputaro, 2018). The intricate interplay of these characteristics elucidates their indispensable role in navigating the evolving influencer marketing paradigm, enabling influencers to achieve their objectives in an era inundated with digital content (Barry, 2018).

### 2.2. Source Characteristics

In the realm of influencer marketing, the often-overlooked yet profoundly influential factor of influencer personal characteristics on follower engagement comes to the forefront (Watkins, 2018). This academic exploration delves into the multifaceted interplay between influencers' inherent attributes and the levels of engagement exhibited by their followers (Aw, Agnihotri, & Practice, 2023). Drawing from extant literature and empirical evidence, it investigates the roles of authenticity, relatability, expertise, and charisma (Brown, Chen, & O'Donnell, 2017). These personal characteristics not only shape the trust followers place in influencers but also dictate the depth of their engagement and the dynamics of the influencer-follower relationship. While authenticity fosters trust and relatability for personal connections, expertise lends credibility, and charisma captivates, each playing a pivotal role in navigating the intricate landscape of influencer marketing and achieving strategic objectives through engaging authentic content (Odoom, 2023). This inquiry underscores the need for further research into the nuanced influence of influencer personal characteristics on follower engagement within the evolving field of influencer marketing.

### 2.3. Psychological Characteristics

In the dynamic realm of influencer marketing, the often-overlooked yet paramount dimension of psychological characteristics exhibited by influencers holds sway over follower engagement (Matthias, 2023). This academic exploration delves into the intricate interplay between psychological attributes, including credibility, identification, social influence, persuasion, and follower personality factors, and the levels of engagement observed among followers. Supported by established theories and empirical research, this study elucidates how these psychological characteristics foster trust, emotional connections, social conformity, and persuasive impact (Aw & Chuah, 2021). In doing so, it underscores their pivotal role in shaping influencer marketing strategies, shedding light on the complex dynamics that influence follower engagement and how they interconnect with followers' personalities, further enriching our understanding of this multifaceted landscape (Danielson, 2023). This inquiry also underscores the need for continued research to delve deeper into the multifaceted influence of psychological characteristics in influencer marketing, recognizing their practical implications for crafting impactful influencer strategies in the ever-evolving digital sphere.

## 3. Methodology

The research employs qualitative research methods to gain a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the subject (Crotty, 1998). This study utilized the model paper methodology established by Huang and Rust (2018) and (Jaakkola, 2020) approach. The process involved an extensive literature review focusing on influencer marketing and engagement theories. Subsequently, focused group discussions were carried out on predefined themes. Finally, domain and method theories were selected to form the foundation of a coherent framework. The framework was developed through the formulation of theoretical propositions and the identification of causal factors, ultimately enabling the prediction and explanation of follower engagement dynamics.

The primary objective of this study is to explore the intricate aspects of follower engagement within the realm of social media influencer marketing. In conjunction with the insights gained from the literature review, the overarching research goal is to advance academic comprehension of the nature and dynamics of customer engagement. To guide this inquiry, the following research questions were formulated:

- What are the key factors that influence follower engagement?
- How do these factors interplay within the framework of influencer content, influencer personal traits, and psychological characteristics?

**Table 1: Key Concepts**

<b>Concept</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Content Characteristic	Refer to the specific qualities and features of the content or message that influence how it is perceived and received by the audience (Macnamara, 2005).

Concept	Definition
Source/Influencer Characteristics	Refer to the attributes or qualities associated with the source of information or communication that influence how the audience perceives and responds to that information (Han, 2021).
Psychological Characteristics	Refer to the internal cognitive and emotional processes of follower that influence their responses to influencer messages, advertisements, and persuasive communication (Sánchez-Fernández, 2021).

#### 4. Results and Discussion

The literature review reveals that follower engagement is contingent upon three critical factors. First, it hinges on the interaction with the content shared by the influencer. Second, it is influenced by the source from which the content is disseminated. Lastly, follower engagement is intricately connected to the psychological factors of the followers themselves.

While researchers have extensively explored various facets of influencer marketing, there is a notable gap in the development of an integrated model that offers a holistic perspective on the influencer marketing landscape (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Morgan, 2019). Specifically, factors such as source characteristics, influencer characteristics, and psychological influencers on consumer responses have received limited attention (Ye, Hudders, 2021). The proposed model seeks to address this gap by elucidating how content quality, source credibility, emotional appeals, and cognitive processes collectively contribute to the level of engagement exhibited by consumers in response to influencer-generated content.

This proposed model is supported by the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) and the Dual Process Theory. ELM suggests that individuals can process persuasive messages through central and peripheral routes, highlighting the importance of content quality (central) and source attractiveness (peripheral) (Gao, 2021). Dual Process Theory explains how consumers switch between automatic and reflective processing when exposed to influencer content, emphasizing the role of psychological factors (Evans & Stanovich, 2013). By integrating these theories into the model, we can better understand how consumers engage with influencer content on multiple cognitive and emotional levels, ultimately contributing to a more comprehensive framework for influencer marketing research.

**Table 2:** Findings of key concept of focus group discussion about content, source, and psychological factors in the context of influencer marketing

Category	Key Characteristics: Description
<b>Content Characteristics</b>	<p><b>Relevance:</b> Alignment with audience needs and interests.</p> <p><b>Clarity:</b> Ease of understanding and minimizing misunderstandings.</p> <p><b>Credibility:</b> Trustworthiness and reliability of presented information.</p> <p><b>Emotionality:</b> Emotional appeal evoked by the content.</p> <p><b>Visual Appeal:</b> Aesthetics, graphics, images, and layout.</p> <p><b>Informativeness:</b> Value and usefulness of information provided.</p> <p><b>Storytelling:</b> Narrative techniques used to convey the message.</p> <p><b>Entertainment Value:</b> Use of humor, drama, or entertainment elements.</p> <p><b>Tone and Style:</b> Mood, voice, and style of the content.</p> <p><b>Call to Action (CTA):</b> Specific requests or instructions for the audience.</p>
<b>Source Characteristics</b>	<p><b>Credibility:</b> Trustworthiness and expertise of the source.</p> <p><b>Attractiveness:</b> Appeal, likability, similarity, and familiarity of the source.</p> <p><b>Expertise:</b> Knowledge and competence in a relevant domain.</p> <p><b>Trustworthiness:</b> Perceived honesty and reliability of the source.</p> <p><b>Similarity:</b> Resemblance to the target audience in characteristics or values.</p> <p><b>Familiarity:</b> How well the audience knows the source.</p> <p><b>Emotions:</b> Influence of emotions on decision-making and behavior.</p>
<b>Psychological Characteristics</b>	<p><b>Motivation:</b> Internal driving forces that lead to action.</p> <p><b>Cognitive Processing:</b> How individuals think, reason, and process information.</p> <p><b>Attitudes and Beliefs:</b> Pre-existing attitudes and beliefs affect responses to messages.</p> <p><b>Perceived Value:</b> Assessment of a product or service's worth.</p> <p><b>Psychological Needs:</b> Fulfillment of psychological desires such as belonging or self-esteem.</p> <p><b>Decision-Making Heuristics:</b> Mental shortcuts in making choices.</p> <p><b>Cognitive Biases:</b> Systematic patterns of deviation from rational judgment.</p> <p><b>Self-Identity and Image:</b> Choices aligned with self-identity and desired image.</p> <p><b>Social Influence:</b> Impact of peers, social norms, and reference groups on behavior.</p>

#### 4.1. Proposed Model Overview

Based on the comprehensive synthesis of existing literature and insights gathered from focus group discussions, the author has developed a proposed conceptual framework that outlines the relationships between various key elements. The proposed model aims to elucidate how follower engagement within the context of influencer marketing is influenced by two primary factors: content characteristics and source characteristics. Additionally, the model introduces the role of psychological factors as moderators that can impact these relationships.

#### 4.2. Content Characteristics and Follower Engagement

The first core relationship in the model focuses on content characteristics and their impact on follower engagement. Content characteristics encompass various attributes of the content shared by influencers. These attributes include relevance, clarity, credibility, emotionality, visual appeal, informativeness, storytelling, entertainment value, tone and style, and the presence of a call to action (CTA). As per the proposed model, it is expected that these content characteristics significantly and positively influence follower engagement. For instance, content that is highly relevant, emotionally appealing, and visually captivating is likely to capture the attention of followers and encourage them to engage with the content. Similarly, clear and informative content that resonates with the audience's preferences can contribute to increased engagement.

#### 4.3. Source Characteristics and Follower Engagement

The second core relationship in the model explores how source characteristics affect follower engagement. Source characteristics encompass factors such as credibility, attractiveness, expertise, trustworthiness, similarity, and familiarity of the influencer. In accordance with the proposed model, source characteristics are expected to have a positive and significant impact on follower engagement. Influencers who are perceived as credible, trustworthy, and relatable are likely to exert a stronger influence on their followers. For example, followers are more inclined to engage with content shared by influencers they trust and find attractive.

#### 4.4. Psychological Factors as Moderators

The proposed model introduces psychological factors as moderators in the relationships between content characteristics, source characteristics, and follower engagement. These psychological factors include emotions, motivation, cognitive processing, attitudes and beliefs, perceived value, psychological needs, decision-making heuristics, cognitive biases, self-identity and image, and social influence. Psychological factors play a crucial role in shaping how followers respond to influencer-generated content. They can either enhance or diminish the impact of content and source characteristics on follower engagement. For instance, an emotionally charged content piece may have a stronger effect on engagement for individuals with high emotional responsiveness.

#### 4.5. Moderation Effects

**4.5.1. P3a: Psychological Characteristics Moderating Content Characteristics:** This component of the model suggests that psychological characteristics can moderate the relationship between content characteristics and follower engagement. Depending on individuals' emotional states, motivations, cognitive processing styles, and other psychological factors, the impact of content characteristics on engagement may vary.

**4.5.2. P3b: Psychological Characteristics Moderating Source Characteristics:** Similarly, this part of the model posits that psychological characteristics can moderate the relationship between source characteristics and follower engagement. Different psychological states and inclinations among followers may influence how they respond to various source characteristics exhibited by influencers.

#### 4.6. Proposed Statements

**P1:** Content characteristics significantly and positively influence influencer follower engagement.

**P2:** Source characteristics significantly and positively influence influencer follower engagement.

**P3a:** Psychological characteristics act as a moderator, influencing the relationship between content characteristics and influencer follower engagement.

**P3b:** Psychological characteristics act as a moderator, influencing the relationship between source characteristics and influencer follower engagement.

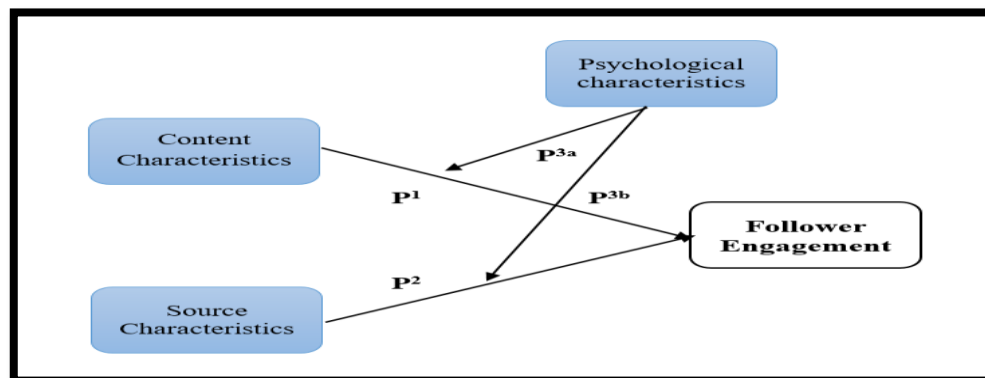


Figure 1: Proposed Model

## 5. Conclusions

This study probes into the evolving landscape of influencer marketing, tracing its historical roots in opinion leadership and highlighting its transformative impact in the digital age. The rise of social media and the proliferation of social media influencers (SMIs) have reshaped how brands connect with their target audiences, harnessing the trust and credibility cultivated by influencers within their niche communities. The global influencer marketing industry's exponential growth underscores the importance of this marketing strategy in the modern business landscape. However, despite extensive research in this field, a crucial aspect has received limited attention: the factors and processes influencing follower engagement. This knowledge gap hinders the development of effective influencer marketing strategies.

The article proposes a comprehensive model that integrates content characteristics, source characteristics, and psychological characteristics as key elements influencing follower engagement. The model is supported by established theories such as the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) and the Dual Process Theory, offering a holistic perspective on the influencer marketing landscape.

Furthermore, the study employed qualitative research methods, including literature synthesis and focus group discussions, to gain a deeper understanding of follower engagement within influencer marketing. The research questions explored the key factors influencing follower engagement and their interplay within the framework of influencer content, influencer personal traits, and psychological characteristics.

The findings from the focus group discussions highlighted the significance of content characteristics (e.g., relevance, clarity, credibility), source characteristics (e.g., credibility, attractiveness, expertise), and psychological characteristics (e.g., emotions, motivation, cognitive processing) in shaping follower engagement. These factors are essential components of the proposed model, shedding light on the multifaceted dynamics of influencer marketing.

This article contributes to the evolving field of influencer marketing by providing a comprehensive framework that synthesizes existing research and comprehends the relevant factors influencing follower engagement. By bridging the knowledge gap and offering practical insights, this research empowers marketers to craft more effective influencer marketing strategies tailored to engage and resonate with their target audiences in the ever-evolving digital sphere. It also underscores the importance of continued research in this dynamic field to enhance our understanding of influencer marketing's intricacies.

## 6. Limitations and Future Research Direction

This study, while offering valuable insights into follower engagement within influencer marketing, is not without its limitations. Firstly, the generalizability of the findings may be restricted due to the qualitative nature of the research and the relatively small sample size in focus group discussions. Further, the study did not explore the potential impact of demographic variables on follower engagement. Moreover, the dynamic nature of influencer marketing, characterized by evolving platforms and trends, suggests that the study's findings may have a limited shelf life. Additionally, the proposed model, while outlining relationships between content characteristics, source characteristics, psychological factors, and follower engagement, does not establish causality definitively. To address these limitations and expand the knowledge base, future research endeavors could involve cross-cultural analyses to examine the influence of cultural differences on follower engagement. Longitudinal studies would track changes in follower engagement over time, providing insights into the sustained effectiveness of influencer marketing strategies.

Quantitative validation of the proposed model on a larger scale could establish the robustness of the relationships explored. Moreover, segmentation analysis could uncover how diverse demographic groups respond to influencer marketing, enabling more targeted strategies. Research should also consider the impact of emerging platforms and technologies, ethical dimensions of influencer marketing, comparisons with traditional advertising, and the role of platform algorithms in shaping follower engagement. In sum, while this study contributes significantly to understanding follower engagement in influencer marketing, the identified limitations and future research directions highlight the need for continued exploration and innovation in this ever-evolving field.

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