

Influencer Marketing and Online Purchase Intentions: A Study of U.S. E-Commerce Consumers

Author Name & Affiliations

Mohamed Abdelrahman
Business Administration,
University of Wisconsin–
Whitewater

m.abdelrahman@uww.edu

Sara Elhassan
Business Administration,
University of Minnesota
Crookston

sara.elhassan@umn.edu

Article Processing History:

Received: 08 Nov 2022

Revised: 13 Dec 2022

Published: 10 Jan 2023

Index Terms : *influencer marketing; purchase intention; source credibility; parasocial relationship; e-commerce; social media influencers; consumer behavior; sponsorship disclosure*

Abstract

In the United States, an influencer's presence in social media has become a major part of the digital marketing mix, and companies are turning to their social media personalities for advertising instead of celebrity endorsement. This review article is an attempt to consolidate the empirical and conceptual literature on the relationship between the use of influencers and the intention to make an online purchase among consumers who engage in e-commerce activities in the United States. Using the constructs of source credibility theory, parasocial interaction theory, elaboration likelihood model and information adoption model, results are presented in four clusters: influencer credibility (expertise, trustworthiness, attractiveness); influencer type and follower scale (nano, micro, macro, and mega influencers); content characteristics (informational value, hedonic value, authenticity); and sponsorship disclosure practices (following Federal Trade Commission guidelines). The review shows some converging evidence that perceived credibility and parasocial bonds play a mediating role between influencer exposure and favorable consumer attitudes, whereas disclosure of a paid partnership has a more mixed and context-dependent relationship with favorable consumer attitudes and, consequently, with purchase intention. The review also draws on key literature addressing persistent shortcomings, such as a lack of awareness of U.S.-specific regulatory and cultural contexts, the use of cross-sectional survey designs, and a lack of longitudinal evidence to support a relationship between self-reported purchase intention and actual e-commerce transactions. A conceptual framework is suggested to aid future empirical research, and research directions for the use of nano-influencers, short-form videos, and post-disclosure trust repair are provided.

INTRODUCTION

In the last decade, the rise of social media has changed the way U.S. consumers discover products, consider brands, and make purchases. Broadly speaking, influencer marketing is the strategy of brands collaborating with influencers who have built an engaged audience online to market a product or service and is now a mainstream component of digital marketers' budgets. The global influencer marketing market is estimated to be worth over ten billion dollars, indicating that brand investments in sponsored content have grown exponentially on Instagram, YouTube, TikTok and beyond. Influencer partnerships, for instance, are often utilized to generate traffic, increase brand awareness, and, of course, turn followers into paying customers, especially for U.S. e-commerce businesses.

One of the most popular proxy measures for assessing the commercial effectiveness of influencer campaigns is purchase intention, which is a consumer's self-reported probability of purchasing a specific product or service. Theorizing and research about the processes between an influencer and purchase intention have also increased in tandem, building on the theories in communication research, social psychology, and consumer behavior. But the bibliography has been scattered across disciplines, platforms, product categories, and national contexts, which makes it challenging for researchers and practitioners to get a handle on what's known, what isn't, and what the gaps are.

To fill this void, this review focuses on synthesizing the literature on influencer marketing and online purchase intent, and particularly on implications for U.S. e-commerce consumers. There are three goals of the review. It summarizes the theoretical backgrounds frequently used to derive insights into the effect of influencers on purchase intention. Second, it structures the empirical findings in terms of the major antecedents found in the literature: influencer credibility, type of influencer, content features and disclosure of sponsorship. Third, it discusses methodological and contextual omissions in the literature and suggests avenues for future research, such as a conceptual framework that will help direct empirical testing of the findings in the U.S. e-commerce context.

REVIEW METHODOLOGY

The narrative review method is used to review this article based on the principles of systematic search. Academic databases and search engines were used to locate peer-reviewed journal articles, conference proceedings, and relevant regulatory publications that discussed influencer marketing, source credibility, parasocial relationships, E-wom, and on-line purchase intentions. Search phrases included a range of combinations of the terms “influencer marketing,” “social media influencer,” “purchase intention,” “e-commerce,” “source credibility,” and “sponsorship disclosure.” Studies published in ‘marketing and advertising journals’ were given priority, along with foundational theoretical works from before the social media period, which continue to underpin today's research (such as, for example, source credibility or parasocial interaction theory). Studies were included if they investigated in any empirical or conceptual way the relationship between influencer related variables and an outcome of interest related to consumer purchasing intention (including attitude toward the brand, trust, and engagement). The outcome of this literature review was a body of literature which was themed and presented in the following sections as antecedent clusters.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

SOURCE CREDIBILITY THEORY

The source credibility theory (Hovland and colleagues, 1962) posits that a message's persuasiveness is greatly influenced by the source's credibility. For endorser research, Ohanian (1990) operationalized this concept by creating a validated scale that measures three dimensions of source credibility: expertise, the degree to which the communicator is perceived to have relevant knowledge; trustworthiness, the degree to which the communicator is perceived to be honest and have integrity; and attractiveness, the degree to which the communicator is perceived to be physically and socially appealing. The model of credibility examined here is a tripartite one, which is repeatedly used, extended, and examined in different product categories and platforms in contemporary marketing research.

PARASOCIAL INTERACTION THEORY

Whereas the parasocial interaction concept has been introduced to help explain the one-way emotional relationships that TV audience members establish with their media stars, the theory has also been used to shed light on the relationships that followers establish with social media celebrities. Since such celebrities usually disclose personal information and engage in interactions with their followers through comments and messages, a feeling of friendship and intimacy emerges among their followers despite the asymmetrical relationship. Studies have established that increased parasocial interaction leads to favorable attitudes towards promoted products and increased purchase intention.

ELABORATION LIKELIHOOD MODEL

Elaboration Likelihood Model describes how central route processing involves the consumer evaluating the substantive claims made by a persuasive communication and how peripheral route processing involves the consumer using heuristics such as the attractiveness of the source to make purchase intentions. In the case of influencer marketing, this model can be applied to understand how credibility heuristics affect purchase intentions despite the fact that the consumers make low levels of effort in processing the sponsored messages.

INFORMATION ADOPTION AND EWOM

Influence content is often considered as a type of eWord of Mouth (eWOM) rather than regular advertising from consumers' point of view, and such an attitude influences the processing of this type of content and its credibility. Information adoption models suggest that the quality of information and credibility of its source are equally important factors that will define whether or not the message will be accepted and followed. Such a model is especially relevant in terms of e-commerce, because influencers' reviews of products, unboxings, and try-ons work like peer reviews.

INFLUENCER CREDIBILITY AND PURCHASE INTENTION

An extensive literature exists about the application of the credibility of sources model specifically to social media influencers. Lou and Yuan (2019) revealed that the influence of credibility of social media influencers and information value of branded posts on Instagram raise the level of trust in such content, which in turn fosters intention to make a purchase. At the same time, Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) observed that the credibility of Instagram celebrities had a

major impact on the purchase behavior of young females, who usually saw influencers as more accessible than regular celebrities. AlFarraj et al. (2021) studying the aesthetic dermatology field identified attractiveness, credibility, and expertise as predictors of purchase intention.

Trustworthiness, in particular, emerges as the most reliable predictor of purchase intention, whereas the results related to attractiveness and expertise seem to vary and depend upon product categories, channel used, and degree of involvement of consumers. Alignment between the influencer and the advertised brand is also an important factor because, as shown by Belanche et al. (2021), the match between an influencer, product, and self-concept of consumers boosts the persuasiveness of influencer marketing strategy, which coincides with the match-up hypothesis that had already been proposed in endorsement literature.

Not all reliable sources are celebrities. Munnukka, Uusitalo, and Toivonen (2016) discovered that regular peer endorsers might, depending on certain circumstances, turn out to be more credible than celebrity endorsers, a discovery which is relevant to the phenomenon of "relatable" micro- and nano-influencers to be mentioned in the next section.

INFLUENCER TYPE, REACH, AND ENGAGEMENT

However, the literature divides influencers into nano- (between 1,000 to 10,000 followers), micro- (between 10,000 to 100,000), macro- (between 100,000 to 1 million), and mega-influencers or celebrities (more than 1 million). Such division implies serious consequences when it comes to researching the purchase intention because there is an inverse correlation between reach and authenticity. De Veirman et al. (2017) proved that, on one hand, more followers will create a perception of being popular, but, on the other hand, they may decrease the perception of being likable and thus affect the relationship between followers and brand attitude. This tendency is also reflected in several research studies which have shown that nano and micro-influencers (although they have a less reach) form more parasocial connection and perceived authenticity compared to macro-influencers.

As opposed to macro- and mega-influencers, who provide brands greater visibility and are also considered more professional or aspirational, which could be beneficial when promoting a broad brand awareness campaign but would not be as efficient in encouraging the necessary recommendation that would lead to conversion in an online shopping context. In fact, according to Kay, Mulcahy, and Parkinson (2020), there is a difference in the way influencers' disclosure of commercial motives affect consumers' reactions due to type of influencer.

CONTENT CHARACTERISTICS: INFORMATIONAL AND HEDONIC VALUE

In addition to source-level characteristics, the features of the content itself impact the purchase intention outcome. Hughes, Swaminathan, and Brooks (2019) differentiated the value of sponsored content for providing information about the product (informational value of the content) from the hedonic value, which is the enjoyment derived from it, and found that both positively affect behavioral engagement and, consequently, positive marketing outcomes. Martins, Costa, Oliveira, Gonçalves, and Branco (2019) who researched the issue of advertising through smartphones came to a similar conclusion that perceived informativeness and entertainment value of the digital advertising content impact consumers' purchase

intentions. Therefore, the successful content created by influencers in e-commerce has to provide the information about the product and be entertaining at the same time.

Authenticity is another concept that keeps repeating itself in the selected sources. Authenticity refers to how genuine the content created by influencers can be regarded as since people are looking for organic content from people who are able to share their honest opinion about some topics instead of promoting products through ads. Due to the large number of sponsored posts, U.S. consumers often distinguish authentic campaigns from others.

SPONSORSHIP DISCLOSURE AND REGULATORY CONTEXT

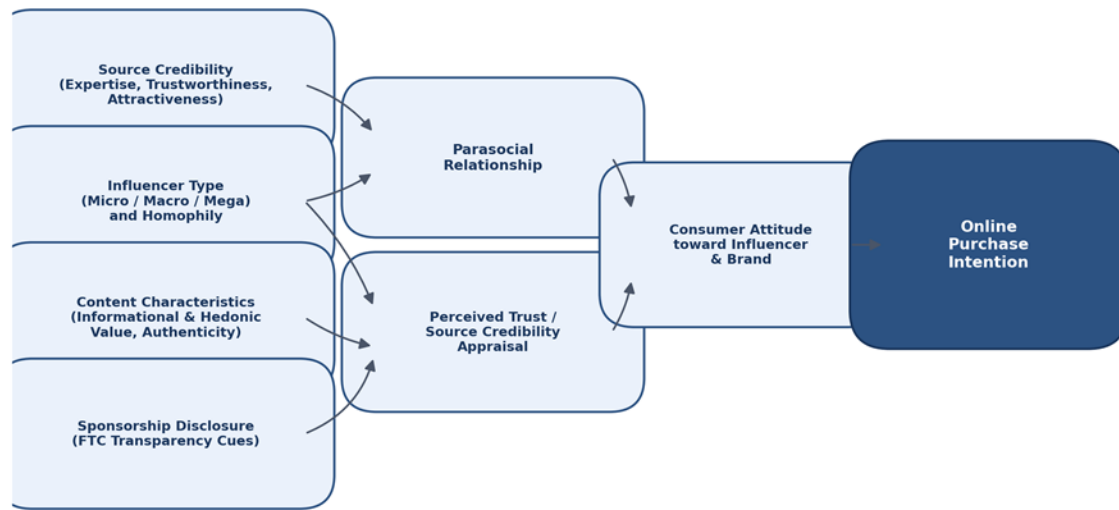
In the US, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) mandates the proper disclosure by social media influencers of any material connection with brands, which includes paid partnerships and freebies provided in return for promotion, via guidelines such as its paper "Disclosures 101 for Social Media Influencers." Even then, research on compliance indicates gaps between rules and actions. In an empirical audit of affiliate marketing disclosures on YouTube and Pinterest, Mathur et al. (2018) found that many sponsored posts were not compliant with the required disclosure.

The influence of disclosure on purchase intention, in contrast to credibility, is less conclusive. While some researches reveal that disclosure triggers persuasion knowledge among consumers, making them think critically about the message and thus diminishing their intention to make a purchase, other studies have proven that a clear disclosure can contribute to higher levels of trustworthiness and increase purchase intention by negating the persuasion knowledge effect. Kay, Mulcahy, and Parkinson (2020) have shown that the impact of disclosure on influencers' perceived authenticity varies depending on whether we deal with a micro-influencer or a macro-influencer. In sum, this literature review demonstrates that disclosure serves as a double-edged process because, on the one hand, it is a regulatory requirement, while, on the other hand, its influence on purchase intention depends on a number of factors.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Synthesizing both the theoretical and empirical streams outlined above, Figure 1 below outlines a theoretical model that connects the four antecedent categories noted in this review to online purchasing intentions, mediated by parasocial relationship and perceived trust and, finally, the dependent variable of consumer attitude. The model is to be used as a synthesizing tool in summarizing past research and also in laying the foundation for future empirical testing.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of Influencer Marketing and Online Purchase Intention



As seen from the conceptual framework, the effect of influencer credibility and influencer type is expected to work via the parasocial relationship route because of the emotional aspect of the influencer-follower relationship. On the other hand, content and disclosure are expected to work via consumers' conscious evaluation of the trust and credibility. Both routes end at the point of consumers' attitude towards the influencer and the recommended product. It is a well-known factor in consumer behavior literature as a close predictor of purchase intention.

SUMMARY OF KEY STUDIES

Table 1 gives a brief synopsis of some of the papers that have been analyzed in this paper categorized according to their main areas of focus, theoretical perspective, and findings

Author(s) / Year	Focus / Context	Theoretical Lens	Key Finding
Ohanian (1990)	Development of the celebrity/source credibility scale	Source Credibility Theory	Established expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness as measurable dimensions of endorser credibility.
Lou & Yuan (2019)	Instagram influencer branded content	Source Credibility / Message Value	Influencer credibility and informativeness of content increase followers' trust in branded posts, which raises purchase intention.
Djafarova & Rushworth (2017)	Young female Instagram users	Source Credibility	Perceived credibility of Instagram celebrities significantly shapes purchase decisions of young female consumers.
De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders (2017)	Instagram influencers, follower count	Source Attractiveness	Larger follower counts can raise perceived popularity but may reduce

Author(s) / Year	Focus / Context	Theoretical Lens	Key Finding
			perceived likability, moderating brand attitude.
Hughes, Swaminathan & Brooks (2019)	Sponsored blogging campaigns	Persuasion Knowledge / Engagement	Informational and entertainment value of sponsored content drive behavioral engagement and downstream purchase outcomes.
Breves, Liebers, Abt & Kunze (2019)	Instagram influencer-brand fit	Match-Up Hypothesis	Perceived fit between influencer and endorsed brand strengthens source credibility and persuasive effectiveness.
Munnukka, Uusitalo & Toivonen (2016)	Peer endorsers vs. celebrities	Source Credibility	Ordinary peer endorsers can be perceived as more credible than celebrities, enhancing advertising effectiveness.
Kay, Mulcahy & Parkinson (2020)	Macro vs. micro influencer disclosure	Persuasion Knowledge	Disclosure of commercial intent affects macro- and micro-influencers differently; less overt disclosure can sustain perceived authenticity for micro-influencers.
Mathur, Narayanan & Chetty (2018)	YouTube and Pinterest affiliate marketing	Regulatory / Disclosure Compliance	A substantial share of sponsored posts did not comply with FTC disclosure requirements, raising transparency concerns.
Belanche, Casaló, Flavián & Ibáñez-Sánchez (2021)	Influencer-product-consumer congruence	Congruence / Meaning Transfer	Congruence between influencer, product, and consumer self-concept strengthens marketing effectiveness.
Aw & Labrecque (2020)	Celebrity endorsement on social media	Parasocial Interaction / Need to Belong	Parasocial interaction mediates the relationship between celebrity endorsement and consumer response.
Chetioui, Benlafqih & Lebdaoui (2020)	Fashion influencers	Source Credibility / Attitude	Influencer credibility and consumer attitude toward the influencer jointly predict purchase intention in fashion e-commerce.
AlFarraj et al. (2021)	Aesthetic dermatology industry	Source Credibility Dimensions	Attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise each independently and positively predict purchase intention.
Martins et al. (2019)	Smartphone advertising	Advertising Value	Perceived informativeness and entertainment of mobile advertising content increase consumer purchase intention.

Table 1: Representative Studies on Influencer Marketing and Purchase Intention

IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. E-COMMERCE CONSUMERS

A number of characteristics of the market context of the United States are worth considering in light of the findings stated above. First, the regulation of the market in question, which is largely driven by FTC disclosure rules, provides a special context within which consumers perceive branded content, and consumers in the U.S. market might be more sensitive to disclosure hashtags and labels than consumers in markets with less developed systems of disclosure enforcement. Second, the well-developed e-commerce ecosystem in the United States, which includes features such as in-app checkouts and live shopping videos, reduces the distance between exposure to an influencer and purchasing behavior, making purchase intention a highly proximal construct. Finally, the U.S. consumer audience includes various subcultures and generations, and available research indicates that consumer response to influence credibility, parasocial interaction, and disclosure will vary by age, with younger consumers having a higher level of trust in influencers compared to traditional celebrity endorsers or advertising campaigns.

From the literature review done, it is evident that, in the case of American e-commerce practitioners, when selecting influencers to work with, factors such as credibility and audience fit should be considered as much as follower numbers, informative content will always outdo promotional content in most cases, and clear disclosure language can be used together with influencer partnership to form purchase intention.

RESEARCH GAPS AND LIMITATIONS

- The majority of past research utilizes cross-sectional and self-report measures of purchase intentions instead of actual purchase behavior, making it difficult to establish causality and the potential for intention-action discrepancies.
- However, relatively fewer studies have focused exclusively on the regulatory and cultural environment of the U.S., as most of the existing literature is based on empirical evidence collected from European and Asian samples with different disclosure culture and social media practices.
- Studies examining nano-influencers and new short-form video sites have been conducted much less than those looking at Instagram and YouTube macro-influencers.
- There has been very little longitudinal research conducted on how continuous exposure to sponsorship disclosures may impact erosion or rebuilding of trust.
- Not much research has been done on the heterogeneity among sub-populations within the United States, particularly the generation-specific vulnerability to influence.

This literature review itself has certain limitations. As the literature review is not systematic but narrative in nature, it lacks the inclusion details of PRISMA flow diagram type and even though the selection process was based on certain keywords, there was a level of subjective assessment done by the researcher concerning the relevancy and quality of the studies. Additionally, it has been conducted mainly through literature sources that have been published.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Based on the above discussion of the gaps in the literature, future research would need experiments and longitudinal research designs that can establish the influence of influencers on actual purchases on U.S. e-commerce sites, and not just on intentions. Comparing U.S. consumers with consumers in other regulatory environments would provide insights into whether the trust–disclosure linkage works cross-nationally. More work on nano-influencers, live shopping, and short-form videos will help bring current research on line with changes in platform practices. Finally, validating the integrated theoretical framework in Figure 1 using structural equation modeling with U.S. consumer samples will help confirm whether the pathways suggested here really apply.

CONCLUSION

The literature review provided here has covered both theoretical and empirical studies on the issue of influencer marketing and purchase intention in online environment, with emphasis on U.S. e-commerce users. Four factors, including influencer credibility, parasocial relationship, content-related issues, and sponsorship disclosure were identified in the existing studies as the key determinants of consumer attitude that result in the purchase intention. It is possible to trace the directions of these relationships quite clearly; however, there are still some gaps in the literature related to such issues as U.S. regulations, longitudinal and behavioral research findings, and the role of nano-influencers in the current market. The conceptual model presented in this article may serve as the basis for further research on the topic.

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