

Providing a Model of Influencers' Position in the Social Media Purchase Process (Case Study: Instagram Social Network)

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ABSTRACT

Influencer marketing has emerged as a critical component of digital marketing that significantly shapes consumer behavior and online purchase preferences. This study was conducted with the aim of developing a model of influencers' position in the social media purchase process. Given the study's objective to expand the body of knowledge surrounding influencer activities, increase purchasing in social networks, and design and propose a model in this domain, it falls within exploratory–applied research. In terms of purpose, it is applied research, and in terms of data collection, it is descriptive and categorized as qualitative research using the grounded theory approach. Data collection was performed through semi-structured interviews with 12 active Instagram influencers and experts in the field of digital marketing, achieving theoretical saturation. The research data were analyzed using open, axial, and selective coding, which are specific to the grounded theory methodology, to produce an integrated model of all determining factors emerging from the interviews and field notes. The identified factors were further examined using the Delphi method. The findings indicated that Instagram influencers, by utilizing strategies such as content marketing and value creation and relying on their personality traits and professional ethics, play a central role in facilitating the purchase process. This role, embedded within social, economic, and technological contexts, leads to improved sales and increased brand awareness. Ultimately, influencers have emerged as key agents in enhancing the efficiency of the purchase process compared to traditional methods.

Keywords: Influencer marketing, influencer marketing strategy, consumer behavior, purchase process, social networks, Instagram.

Introduction

In recent years, social media has fundamentally reshaped the ways consumers search for information, evaluate alternatives, and make purchase decisions. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube have transformed passive audiences into active participants in content creation and brand interactions, giving rise to a new class of opinion leaders commonly referred to as social media influencers. These individuals leverage their visibility, perceived authenticity, and parasocial bonds with followers to shape attitudes, preferences, and ultimately consumption behavior across diverse markets. The rapid expansion of influencer-driven communication has similarly shifted marketing logic from firm-controlled brand messaging to consumer-centric, engagement-driven



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ecosystems, where influence emerges through trust, perceived expertise, and social identification (1, 2). As digital environments become more interactive, immersive, and algorithmically optimized, influencers increasingly serve as intermediaries who bridge brand intentions with consumer expectations, thereby accelerating purchase motivations and imitation tendencies (1, 3).

The proliferation of digital transformation initiatives has further strengthened the centrality of influencers in marketing ecosystems. Organizations across industries are integrating digital capabilities into their value propositions to remain competitive in a technologically dynamic marketplace (4). This evolution has expanded the scope of influencer marketing from isolated promotional tactics to a strategic pillar of integrated marketing communication. Such a shift is particularly relevant in contexts where consumer trust in traditional advertising is declining, and online social networks provide accessible, user-generated, and socially endorsed pathways for decision-making (5, 6). The emergent literature consistently evidences that consumers increasingly rely on influencer recommendations as credible information sources, perceiving them as authentic, relatable, and personally relevant compared to conventional brand messaging (7, 8).

Influencer marketing effectiveness is strongly associated with the perceived credibility, authenticity, congruence, and communication style of influencers. Scholars emphasize that influencers who exhibit expertise, attractiveness, trustworthiness, and alignment with followers' values have greater persuasive impact on consumer attitudes and behavioral outcomes (7, 9). Congruence between influencer identity and brand positioning is equally essential, as strong influencer–follower alignment enhances trust, customer engagement, and purchase intention (3, 10). This alignment affects not only consumers' cognitive evaluations but also emotional and symbolic dimensions of brand perception. When influencers embody lifestyles admired by followers, their endorsements serve as social cues that shape identity-motivated consumption behavior (11, 12).

Social media influencers also shape consumer behavior through mechanisms explained by the elaboration likelihood model, which differentiates between central and peripheral processing routes (13). Under peripheral processing, attributes such as influencer attractiveness, humor, perceived similarity, or social status may influence purchase decisions. Under central processing, followers evaluate the substantive quality of influencer information, expertise, and argument strength. Consequently, influencer-driven persuasion is multidimensional, simultaneously involving affective, cognitive, relational, and social comparison processes (1, 2). Research indicates that consumers frequently form parasocial relationships with influencers—emotionally charged, one-sided bonds that mimic relational closeness—which further enhances susceptibility to persuasion and increases brand loyalty (14).

As businesses increasingly integrate influencer strategies into broader communication systems, managerial practices have evolved to include influencer identification, performance evaluation, governance structures, and content co-creation routines (15). Managing influencer campaigns therefore requires structured planning, strategic alignment, and continuous measurement. Influencers can function as brand ambassadors, content creators, trend disseminators, and community builders, each role influencing various stages of the consumer decision journey. These shifts require organizations to reconsider how brand credibility is built and how social proof is amplified within digital environments (16). The State of Influencer Marketing Benchmark Report predicts continued growth in business investments, making the strategic positioning of influencers even more critical.

In emerging economies, including Middle Eastern and Asian markets, the rise of influencer-driven commerce is remarkably pronounced. Increasing smartphone penetration, youth-dominated demographics, and cultural affinity for social platforms have created fertile ground for influence-based communication models (17, 18). Consumers in

these contexts demonstrate heightened sensitivity to social cues, peer interactions, and brand narratives embedded within influencer content. Influencers thereby act as culturally proximate sources of information who contextualize brand offerings in ways that traditional marketing methods cannot. This explains why firms increasingly allocate budgets toward influencer collaborations to reduce perceived risk, enhance emotional connection, and increase conversion rates (19, 20).

Yet despite the widespread adoption of influencer marketing, significant gaps remain in understanding the structural position of influencers within the purchase process. Existing literature predominantly examines isolated factors—credibility, trust, engagement, message value—rather than developing holistic models that integrate personality traits, ethics, contextual conditions, technological dynamics, and strategic behaviors. Studies exploring influencer authenticity or ethical transparency suggest that professional integrity significantly affects followers' trust and purchase intention (7, 13). Others highlight that digital ecosystems shaped by artificial intelligence, recommendation algorithms, privacy concerns, and platform governance influence how followers interpret influencer content (14, 21). However, these fragmented insights have not yet been synthesized into a unified conceptual framework that captures how influencers function as pivotal agents within the entire purchasing pathway.

The relevance of personality traits has similarly gained attention. Influencers' emotional intelligence, communication style, narrative ability, and capacity to establish social intimacy all contribute to stronger engagement behaviors (1, 2). These characteristics influence parasocial bonding, perceived similarity, and perceived authenticity—three essential drivers of trust in branded content. Furthermore, cultural, political-legal, and economic conditions play considerable roles in shaping influencer performance and consumer response. For instance, legal ambiguities surrounding digital advertising, tax regulations, and platform restrictions can impact influencer credibility and brand cooperation strategies (5, 22). Socioeconomic factors such as digital literacy, economic inflation, and consumer spending patterns may equally affect ad receptivity and value perception (14, 17).

Technological affordances inherent in social media platforms—such as real-time interactivity, multisensory content formats, and algorithmic amplification—are central to understanding influencer impact. Digital environments determine message visibility, viral potential, and engagement metrics, thereby influencing both influencers' strategic behaviors and brands' campaign designs (4, 6). As intelligent virtual spaces evolve through AI-generated content, augmented reality filters, and automated analytics, influencer marketing strategies must adapt to heightened personalization and consumer expectations of transparency, novelty, and authenticity (23, 24).

Given this complexity, an integrated, model-driven approach is necessary to understand the influencers' role as mediators between brands and consumers. Scholars increasingly call for comprehensive frameworks that incorporate economic, technological, psychological, and sociocultural dynamics shaping influencer effectiveness (9, 16). The importance of such models is heightened in markets like Iran, where influencer-brand collaborations have expanded rapidly despite regulatory ambiguities and sociocultural diversity (19, 20). Furthermore, understanding the mechanisms through which influencers enhance brand awareness, facilitate purchase intention, and drive loyalty is essential for developing impactful marketing strategies (11, 18).

The present study therefore builds upon prior research by synthesizing multiple dimensions influencing influencer effectiveness—personality attributes, professionalism, content strategies, contextual forces, value co-creation, and consumer psychology—into a cohesive grounded-theory model. Such a framework allows for deeper insight into how influencers operate within the consumer decision process, how they shape perceptions and motivations, and how their strategic behaviors can be optimized for enhanced purchase outcomes (4, 7). By integrating causal,

contextual, intervening, strategic, and outcome-based categories, the study contributes to a more transparent and systematic understanding of influencer impact on modern digital consumption patterns.

The aim of this study is to develop an integrated conceptual model explaining the position of social media influencers within the consumer purchase process using a grounded-theory approach.

Methods and Materials

This study is classified as exploratory–applied research due to its aim to expand the body of knowledge concerning influencer activities, enhance purchasing behavior in social networks, and design and present a relevant model. In terms of purpose, it is applied research, and in terms of data collection, it is descriptive and falls within the domain of qualitative research. Because the present study emphasizes the development of a conceptual framework, an appropriate methodological approach was required to uncover the tacit knowledge of experts in this field and ultimately establish a theoretical framework. Moreover, research aimed at discovering fundamental principles, scientific laws, or identifying empirical relationships—without necessarily considering its immediate practical value—is regarded as basic research. Given that no model has yet been designed for organizational wisdom in this context, grounded theory was deemed a suitable methodology for answering the study's questions.

Grounded theory is a systematic and qualitative process designed to generate a theory that conceptually explains a process, action, or interaction regarding a real-world phenomenon and examines five social processes—causal conditions, contextual conditions, intervening conditions, strategies, and consequences—to understand patterns and relationships among elements. Among the approaches to grounded theory, the paradigmatic approach was selected due to its higher degree of structural precision. In grounded theory, data collection continues until theoretical saturation is reached—that is, until the researcher is confident that sufficient data have been gathered and that subsequent interviews or new data will not add substantially to the emerging findings.

To collect empirical data, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 active Instagram influencers and experts in digital marketing. Participants were selected purposefully based on criteria such as professional experience, follower count, and expertise in advertising. To validate the findings, the researcher continuously compared the data, transcribed interviews verbatim, reviewed field notes and documented observations, and examined the processes of conceptualization, interpretation, and theorizing to extract the core essence of the information. Each interview was coded and analyzed before the subsequent interview. Accordingly, open, axial, and selective coding procedures were followed. The researcher sought the central variable and the underlying process embedded in the data. Repeated reviews of the data, emerging codes and categories, memo writing, diagrams developed during data analysis, and the formulation of the main storyline all contributed to identifying the core variable of the study (Verhoef et al., 2021).

After the researcher identified the components of the conceptual model (constructed from interview findings), the Delphi technique was used to refine, integrate, and identify the main criteria and components necessary for project implementation. The resulting model was then evaluated and confirmed by the interviewees. To assess panel consensus, Kendall's coefficient of concordance—a nonparametric test measuring the degree of agreement among participants—was employed. Accordingly, the derived concepts and model, along with a questionnaire based on a 5-point Likert scale, were distributed to a sample of 10 experts in marketing and social media. After participants reviewed and responded to the questionnaire, Kendall's coefficient was analyzed using SPSS software.

Findings and Results

The extraction of qualitative data in this study was conducted using in-depth and semi-structured interviews. After editing and organizing the qualitative data and indicators, they were categorized and subsequently subjected to the necessary analytical processes.

In grounded theory, data analysis consists of three types of coding: (1) Open coding, which involves naming (conceptualizing) and categorizing phenomena through a detailed examination of the data. Thus, two key actions occur in open coding: conceptualization and categorization. (2) Axial coding, in which the codes extracted during open coding and sharing similar meanings must be integrated into a single code known as an axial code. Axial coding is the second stage of analysis in grounded theory, where the objective is to establish relationships among the concepts generated during open coding. This process is based on the paradigmatic model and helps the theorist carry out theory construction systematically. The foundation of linkage in axial coding rests on elaborating and expanding one of the categories. (3) Selective coding, which refers to selecting the core category, systematically linking it to other categories, validating these relationships, and refining categories that require further development. Based on the results of open and axial coding, selective coding represents the main theoretical stage. In this stage, the axial category is systematically connected to other categories, and these relationships are articulated in the form of a storyline, with necessary refinements made to categories needing improvement.

In this section, 12 semi-structured interviews were conducted with active Instagram influencers and experts in digital marketing. Fragmenting and conceptualizing the data involves breaking down an observed case, sentence, or paragraph into smaller components and assigning names to each event, idea, or occurrence—labels that represent or stand in place of the phenomenon. The following presents examples of the initial codes and extracted concepts derived from all interviews.

Table 1. Sample Initial Codes and Extracted Concepts

Row	Initial Code	Concept
1	Influencers must possess sufficient and up-to-date knowledge of cultural issues.	Influencers' cultural literacy
2	Influencers must have the necessary expertise relevant to the product or service they promote.	Alignment of influencer expertise with promotional content
3	In selecting an influencer, a brand places great importance on the influencer's appearance.	Importance of influencer physical attractiveness
4	One of the essential skills an influencer must have is creativity and the ability to generate new ideas.	Creativity and innovation capability of influencers
5	An influencer who has collaborated more extensively becomes more recognized and trusted by others.	Importance of collaboration duration and work experience
6	A successful collaboration between an influencer and a brand significantly increases the brand's sales.	Enhancing brand sales through constructive influencer engagement
7	Other successful influencers work in scientific domains, such as Mr. Koushyar, who has worked at Microsoft and creates content on cutting-edge AI technologies.	Scientific content creation
8	Alignment between a brand's products/services and the influencer's audience can lead to a successful collaboration.	Fit between product/service and influencer followers
9	As an influencer, commitment to the work being performed is highly important.	Influencer commitment and work consistency
10	The most important goal an influencer can pursue is adding value for their followers.	Importance of value creation for followers
11	An influencer must remain patient throughout their activity period and not react impulsively to criticism or hostility.	Influencers' emotional intelligence
12	Influencers should strive to deliver up-to-date content to remain competitive.	Capability for producing up-to-date content
13	One method to increase followers is using words and expressions that are easy for everyone to understand.	Use of accessible language with followers

14	Addressing current societal issues through documentaries or humor receives the highest engagement.	Representation of social issues through humorous content
15	One of the characteristics of an influencer is expertise: the level of competency required for authoritative commentary on a topic.	Influencer specialization
16	Another characteristic is trustworthiness, based on the audience's perception of the influencer's honesty and integrity.	Influencer trustworthiness
17	Storytelling ability is an essential skill an influencer must possess.	Influencers' storytelling capability
18	The main issue is increasing brand credibility.	Enhancing brand credibility
19	The main issue is creating a positive mental position for the brand in followers' minds.	Influencers' potential for positive brand positioning in followers' perceptions
20	Generational changes and the dynamism of new generations have led to rapid increases in social media users, giving influencers greater opportunities for activity.	Impact of digital space on the new generation
21	One effective social media marketing method is indirect marketing, such as word-of-mouth. This occurs when a satisfied customer shares their experience with others.	Word-of-mouth marketing capability in influencer marketing

The codes extracted during open coding that share similar meanings must be integrated into a single code, referred to as an “axial code.” Axial coding constitutes the second stage of analysis in grounded theory. The purpose of this stage is to establish relationships among the concepts generated during open coding. This process is conducted based on the paradigm model and assists the theorist in facilitating the construction of theory. The foundation of relational processes in axial coding lies in expanding and elaborating one of the categories. Table 2 presents this categorization.

Table 2. Axial Coding Categorization

Subcategory	Concepts
Personality Traits	Appropriate responsiveness of influencers, influence of influencers' good temperament on followers, trustworthiness and reliability of influencers, respect for followers' privacy, long-term responsibility toward products, use of skilled and reputable influencers, positive work experience and reputation, honesty and good standing, self-confidence and unique personality style, need for truthfulness and transparency, credibility and dependability, problem-solving and communication skills, accessibility and persuasive ability
Professional Ethics	Followers' trust in influencers' expertise, prioritizing follower interests over brand interests, influencers' commitment to social responsibility, necessity of follower credibility, prioritizing follower benefits, responsiveness and effective interaction, success without buying fake followers, organic follower growth, enhancing brand credibility through influencer endorsement, consistent activity on social networks, influencer work stability, product verification by influencers, quality assessment, avoiding exaggeration of product features, professional outlook in selecting influencers, avoiding overstatement in product promotion, credibility of information sources, source effectiveness and product expectations, legality and legitimacy, social commitment, influencers' purchase experience, influencer accessibility, Instagram's leadership in influencer marketing
Technological, Political–Legal, and Cultural Factors	Challenges of virtual influencers and their emergence through AI, concentration of influencer activity on Instagram, impact of digital space on new generations and their preference over traditional media, Instagram's capabilities for multisensory content creation, freedom of expression in virtual space, avoidance of political endorsement by influencers, lack of official recognition of influencer marketing in Iran, impact of sanctions on the economy and challenges of social media filtering, tax exemptions and legal obligations for influencers, popularity and influence of lifestyle influencers on brands and followers
Social Factors	Production of high-quality and up-to-date content, use of humor to address current societal issues, capability for creating scenarios and engaging narratives, direct influence of influencer popularity on follower purchase decisions, necessity of verifying influencer background, involving followers in content creation, importance of actual engagement rate (e.g., views) over follower count, alignment of follower characteristics with brand domain, purposeful content direction and production for greater impact
Content Marketing	Scenario building and content directing, creation of diverse content, content validation and updating, quality and expertise, engagement and coordination, use of humorous elements, avoidance of disturbing content, adherence to ethical principles in content production
Development of Communication and Social Interaction	Emotional and social engagement, challenge management, influence of influencers' good temperament, real-time monitoring, follower growth, informality and relatability, credibility building, quality communication, high engagement, word-of-mouth influence, communication skills, positive positioning, interactive environment
Influencer Specialization	Political literacy, cultural literacy, social literacy, financial literacy, emotional literacy, spiritual literacy, rational literacy, specialization, up-to-date expert knowledge, targeted segmentation of followers, impact of practical skills, professionalism, audience analysis, follower influence, professional training

Individual Strategies Value Creation	Influencers' verbal communication skills, attractiveness, intelligence Sufficient experience, content creation capability, competitive advantage, understanding follower needs, differentiated influence, creativity and innovation, page quality, value creation, personal branding, team building, power of reference groups, follower influence, agile responsiveness, distancing from traditional advertising methods, attraction through personal experience, influence in beauty products, protection of personal brand image, preservation of influencer reputation, value generation, inspiration
Brand Alignment	Alignment of influencer expertise with promotional topic, influence of brand commitment on influencer credibility, congruence of influencer credibility with brand owner, successful collaboration history, product-follower fit, alignment of influencer background with brand character, relevance of followers' needs to product benefits, harmony between influencer activity and brand, alignment with brand positioning, integration of influencer activity with brand identity, connecting brand and market through influencers, purposeful collaboration, demographic fit, influencer-brand target market alignment, influencer expertise relevance to advertising, stronger influence on fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG), similarity between opinion leaders and followers
Effective Campaign Management	Focus on beauty and youth products, influencer impact in fast food, activity in artistic domains, influence on beauty bloggers, follower participation in content creation, follower growth through advertising campaigns, use of followers' emotional energy, understanding followers' emotional and psychological needs, focus on nutrition, greater impact of fashion influencers, importance of story views in success, platform-focused strategy, advertising scenario creation, professional campaign design, character development in influencer marketing, self-management, support from specialized teams
Improvement of Sales and Profitability	Enhancing brand sales, follower trust, emotional transfer, constructive engagement, influencer marketing, influencer roles, investment effectiveness, price sensitivity, Instagram-based monetization, exponential sales growth
Enhancement of Brand Credibility and Awareness	Increasing brand followers through influencer marketing, influencer impact on market orientation, influence of branding on influencer success, brand benefits through influencer marketing, customer growth via constructive influencer engagement, influencer contributions to brand awareness and credibility, follower increase through campaign participation
Facilitating Followers' Purchase Process and Brand Sales	Reducing followers' purchase concerns, broad and rapid awareness through influencer marketing, high-impact influence in a short time, follower susceptibility to word-of-mouth advertising, influencer impact on purchase decision processes, creating attractiveness through sharing personal experiences, influencers' role in sales and profitability
Economic Factors	Economic efficiency, commercial nature of Instagram, rapid return on investment, reduction of advertising costs, influencer monetization, increased brand sales, cost-effectiveness, investment effectiveness, knowledge-driven impact, influence on price sensitivity, receipt of financial and psychological incentives, reduced marketing costs, savings
Competitor Management	Competitor monitoring, gap analysis, challenge of emerging virtual influencers, rise of AI-generated influencers, commenting on famous pages to gain followers, disruptive emergence of virtual influencers, positioning of influencers, knowledge-based interaction with other influencers
Inefficiency of Traditional Marketing Methods	Lack of two-way communication in television, distrust in TV advertising, decline of websites and blogs as marketing tools, higher effectiveness of influencers compared to traditional media, lower advertising costs, distinct advertising performance in influencer marketing, growth of influencer marketing in Iran, lack of interactivity in traditional media, audience disengagement from traditional channels, emergence of the "individual-as-media" concept, cost-efficiency, preference for digital platforms over traditional media among followers
Popularity of Social Networks	Rapid fame due to network expansion, Instagram's dominance in influencer marketing and growing public demand, Instagram's suitability for diverse multisensory content production, widespread use of influencers across sectors, follower susceptibility to word-of-mouth, consumer willingness to share brand content on social media
Growth of Intelligent Virtual Space and Digital Transformation	Digital-space-related factors including user pattern recognition, monitoring followers' content consumption, presentation of real-life alongside online presence, freedom of expression, expansion of digital utilization, emergence of virtual influencers, high internet penetration in Iran, advancement of influencer marketing technologies, digital space influence on new generations, and visualization of product advantages and disadvantages

Selective coding: Selective coding is the process of choosing the core category, systematically relating it to other categories, verifying the validity of these relationships, and completing the categories that require further refinement and development. Based on the results of open and axial coding, selective coding represents the main stage of theorizing. In this stage, the core category is systematically connected to other categories, these relationships are presented within a coherent narrative, and categories that require further enhancement and development are revised. This stage is reported in Table 3.

Table 3. Selective Coding Categorization

Dimensions	Subcategories
Causal Conditions	Inefficiency of traditional methods Popularity of social networks Development of virtual space
Contextual Factors	Economic factors Social factors Technological factors
Core Category	Influencers' position in the purchase process Influencers' personality traits Influencers' professional ethics
Intervening Conditions	Cultural factors Legal-political factors
Strategies	Development of communication and social interactions Competitor management Content marketing Brand alignment Effective campaign management Value creation Influencer specialization Individual strategies
Outcomes	Improvement of company sales performance and profitability Improvement of company brand credibility and awareness Facilitation of followers' purchase process and brand sales

The coding framework reveals the relationships between causal conditions, strategies, contextual and intervening conditions, and outcomes. In the second stage of the study, the Delphi technique was used, with the participation of 10 experts in marketing and social media, to screen and validate the identified categories. In the first round, the questionnaire was provided to the panel members so that they could express their opinions on each component within every dimension, ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." After reviewing the results of the first round, in order to decide on the continuation of subsequent Delphi rounds, attention was paid to Tables 4 and 5 and their results.

Table 4. Results of the Final Views and Opinions of the Expert Group on the Research Components in the First Delphi Round

Category	Subcategories	Mean	Standard Deviation
Causal Conditions	Inefficiency of traditional methods	4.15	0.790
	Popularity of social networks	3.94	0.258
	Development of virtual space	3.65	0.516
Contextual Factors	Economic factors	4.12	0.258
	Social factors	4.25	0.961
	Technological factors	3.95	0.378
Core Category	Influencers' position in the purchase process	4.15	0.516
	Influencers' personality traits	4.30	0.258
	Influencers' professional ethics	3.55	0.516
Intervening Conditions	Cultural factors	3.55	0.352
	Legal-political factors	3.85	0.378
Strategies	Development of communication and social interactions	4.00	0.661
	Competitor management	4.15	0.378
	Content marketing	3.55	0.378
	Brand alignment	4.20	0.617
	Effective campaign management	4.00	0.258
	Value creation	3.90	0.258
	Influencer specialization	3.65	0.258
Outcomes	Individual strategies	3.75	0.414
	Improvement of sales performance and profitability	3.50	0.258
	Improvement of company brand credibility and awareness	3.85	0.458
	Facilitation of followers' purchase process and brand sales	3.95	0.617

Table 5. Kendall's Coefficient in the First Round

N	10
Kendall's coefficient	0.394
Chi-square	76.226
Degrees of freedom	21
Significance	0.013

Given Kendall's coefficient in Table 5, which in the first round is equal to 0.394, it is necessary to continue the Delphi calculations for another round to minimize the differences of opinion among the panel members.

In the second round, the questionnaire was again distributed to the panel members; however, in this round, the score of each criterion from the first round was reported so that participants could reconsider their evaluations in light of the collective perspective. The results of the second round, obtained from aggregating the views of the experts, indicate an increase in Kendall's coefficient, which reflects a higher level of agreement. The coefficient reached 0.541, indicating a considerable improvement in the process. Therefore, it was necessary to extend the process by one more round to further reduce the differences between the two stages.

Table 6. Kendall's Coefficient in the Second Round

N	10
Kendall's coefficient	0.568
Chi-square	75.773
Degrees of freedom	21
Significance	0.000

As shown in Table 6, Kendall's coefficient improved and increased satisfactorily in the second Delphi round. However, given the subject matter and its sensitivity, this test was also continued into a third round so that Kendall's coefficient would reach its highest possible level. In the third round, panel members expressed their views on each dimension, and the Kendall's coefficient of concordance further increased to 0.872. Since the mean values showed relatively smaller increases compared to the second round, and given that the growth in consensus and agreement among members was no longer substantial, the Delphi rounds could be concluded. The results of the third Delphi round are presented in Table 7.

Table 7. Results of the Final Views and Opinions of the Expert Group on the Research Components in the Third Delphi Round

Category	Subcategories	Mean Round 1	Mean Round 2	Mean Round 3	Standard Deviation
Causal Conditions	Inefficiency of traditional methods	4.15	4.25	4.25	0.258
	Popularity of social networks	3.94	4.00	4.00	0.258
	Development of virtual space	3.65	3.65	3.70	0.258
Contextual Factors	Economic factors	4.12	4.15	4.15	0.258
	Social factors	4.25	4.25	4.30	0.258
	Technological factors	3.95	3.95	4.00	0.258
Core Category	Influencers' position in the purchase process	4.15	4.15	4.40	0.458
	Influencers' personality traits	4.30	4.35	4.35	0.258
	Influencers' professional ethics	3.55	3.60	3.60	0.258
Intervening Conditions	Cultural factors	3.55	3.60	3.60	0.258
	Legal-political factors	3.85	3.85	3.85	0.378
Strategies	Development of communication and social interactions	4.00	4.00	4.05	0.258
	Competitor management	4.15	4.15	4.15	0.258

	Content marketing	3.55	3.75	3.75	0.378
	Brand alignment	4.20	4.36	4.36	0.258
	Effective campaign management	4.00	4.15	4.15	0.258
	Value creation	3.90	4.10	4.10	0.258
	Influencer specialization	3.65	3.81	3.81	0.258
	Individual strategies	3.75	3.90	3.90	0.258
Outcomes	Improvement of sales performance and profitability	3.50	3.66	3.66	0.258
	Improvement of company brand credibility and awareness	3.85	4.00	4.00	0.458
	Facilitation of followers' purchase process and brand sales	3.95	4.10	4.10	0.258

Furthermore, given the desirable Kendall's coefficient of 0.87 in the third round and the significance level of the test being less than 0.05, the Delphi rounds can be concluded.

According to the results obtained in the third Delphi stage, the mean values for all subcriteria of the study exceeded the expected threshold of 70 percent, that is, 3.5 (considering that a 5-point Likert scale was used in this research, and therefore 70 percent of the scale corresponds to 3.50). Thus, all criteria were confirmed.

Figure 1. Conceptual model of the research

Since, in this study, the researcher aims to represent a portion of reality comprising causal or correlational relationships and comparative assessments among elements of phenomena, constructs, and variables, which may yield different outcomes across societies and only provide the researcher with a reduced and simplified representation of reality, the term “model” has been used.

The paradigmatic model illustrates the causal, intervening, and contextual factors of the central phenomenon and the strategies required to achieve the outcomes. This model is one of the main pillars of the grounded theory method, specifically in the Strauss and Corbin approach. The model consists of five components: causal conditions, contextual conditions, intervening conditions, strategies, and outcomes. At the center of the model lies the core phenomenon around which all activities are structured.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study provide a comprehensive and empirically grounded understanding of the role and positioning of social media influencers within the consumer purchase process. Results derived from open, axial, and selective coding reveal that influencers function as multidimensional agents whose impact is shaped by their personality traits, ethical conduct, strategic behaviors, and alignment with contextual, technological, social, and economic factors. The data underscore that influencer effectiveness does not solely arise from visibility or follower count but is deeply rooted in credibility, authenticity, congruence, and the capacity to create value for followers. These findings are strongly aligned with the literature, offering further validation that influencer marketing has evolved beyond simple promotional endorsement into a complex socio-technical ecosystem (1, 7). Influencers' ability to shape imitation intentions, emotional engagement, and perceived similarity has been widely supported, demonstrating that their influence is experienced both cognitively and affectively (1, 2).

One of the central results of this research is that personality traits—such as trustworthiness, authenticity, emotional intelligence, communication ability, and creativity—constitute fundamental determinants of influencer impact on consumer decision-making. These findings reinforce earlier scholarly work showing that influencer credibility and personal style strongly predict followers' attitudes, trust, and behavioral responses (7). The grounded data revealed that followers interpret influencers not merely as marketing agents but as aspirational figures whose characteristics shape perceived value and reduce purchase-related uncertainty. This aligns with prior research emphasizing parasocial relationships and the persuasion mechanisms described in the elaboration likelihood model, where both central and peripheral cues affect consumer behavior (13). Influencers who demonstrate consistent ethical behaviors, transparency, and honesty generate stronger central-route persuasion, while attractiveness, relatability, and humor strengthen peripheral pathways (6, 8).

The findings also highlight the critical importance of professional ethics, including honesty in product representation, careful validation of promotional claims, responsible communication, and prioritization of follower welfare. The strong emphasis on professionalism reflects wider concerns in recent scholarship regarding consumer skepticism toward paid partnerships and the necessity of preserving authenticity in influencer communications (9, 15). The data show that followers are increasingly aware of sponsored content and actively differentiate between ethical influencers and those who prioritize commercial gain. This aligns with global trends documented in influencer marketing reports, where authenticity is cited as the most important factor driving consumer trust (16). The emphasis on ethics in this study indicates that long-term influence emerges from relational trust rather than short-term advertising output.

Another significant result pertains to the strong contextual influences shaping influencer effectiveness. The analysis shows that economic conditions—including price sensitivity, purchasing power, and digital consumption patterns—moderate the extent to which followers rely on influencer recommendations. This observation resonates with studies from emerging economies where macroeconomic volatility and inflation affect consumers' trust and evaluation processes (17, 19). Cultural factors also emerged as powerful determinants, particularly in societies where social norms, collectivist tendencies, and moral expectations shape audience expectations of influencer behavior. The legal and political dimensions, including platform restrictions, regulatory ambiguities, and the absence of official frameworks governing influencer marketing, mirror findings from earlier work in Iran and similar markets (5, 22). These contextual considerations reinforce the need for localized strategies when designing influencer campaigns.

Consistent with the literature, the results also show that technological environments strongly condition the effectiveness of influencer strategies. Social media affordances—such as real-time interaction, algorithm-driven visibility, multisensory content, and user-generated engagement loops—play a decisive role in shaping follower response. The expansion of intelligent virtual environments and the integration of artificial intelligence, automated content curation, and augmented reality further extend the reach and influence of digital influencers (4, 21). The findings indicate that influencers who strategically utilize platform capabilities, adapt to algorithmic changes, and diversify their content formats are more likely to remain competitive in saturated markets. This observation aligns with the increasing body of research showing that platform literacy and technological adaptability are core components of influencer success (23, 24).

Strategic behaviors also emerged as central components in influencer efficacy. These include content marketing, storytelling, scenario design, brand alignment, competitor monitoring, and structured campaign management. The data affirm that influencer effectiveness is not merely a function of personal traits but also the result of deliberate strategies that enhance engagement and shape follower perceptions. Previous research emphasizes similar findings: specifically, that content quality, message value, and narrative coherence are strong predictors of consumer trust and purchase behavior (8, 12). Brand congruence also emerged as one of the most influential determinants of successful influencer-brand partnerships. This finding echoes studies showing that alignment between influencer identity and brand positioning enhances message credibility and increases follower purchase intention (3, 10). The results confirm that brand fit must be carefully evaluated in campaign design, particularly within industries such as beauty, tourism, and lifestyle where emotional symbolism plays a substantial role.

Another major theme emerging from the results is the integral role of value creation. Influencers who provide educational content, entertainment, product knowledge, or personal insights create stronger engagement and more meaningful relationships with followers. This aligns with the broader shift toward experiential and participatory consumption in digital environments (5, 11). The data show that influencers who cultivate communities rather than audiences foster deeper loyalty, higher interaction rates, and more sustainable long-term influence. The literature similarly emphasizes community building, user participation, and co-created value as essential elements of contemporary influencer marketing ecosystems (15, 16).

The consequences identified in this study—that influencers contribute to improved sales, enhanced brand awareness, and the facilitation of follower purchase processes—are consistent with a growing body of evidence from global markets. Recent research demonstrates that influencer marketing directly affects customer purchase intention, perceived brand value, and customer loyalty (18, 20). Furthermore, influencers have become integral to

the customer decision journey, particularly in sectors where experiential, aesthetic, or identity-driven factors dominate consumption (11, 23). In alignment with earlier studies, the findings confirm that influencer marketing is more cost-effective and impactful than traditional advertising formats, especially in environments where consumers distrust formal advertising and rely heavily on peer-based and socially endorsed information (6, 14).

Overall, the results of this study converge with global scholarship in demonstrating that influencers occupy a central and increasingly indispensable role in digital marketing ecosystems. The grounded model developed in this research synthesizes multiple dimensions—causal conditions, contextual factors, intervening variables, strategies, and outcomes—providing a holistic framework for understanding influencer impact. The model not only confirms many existing theories but also extends them by highlighting new relationships between personality traits, ethical conduct, strategic capabilities, and purchase facilitation. It further reveals the significance of integrating sociocultural, legal, and technological contexts into theoretical and managerial perspectives.

This study, while comprehensive, is limited by its qualitative nature and reliance on semi-structured interviews conducted with a relatively small sample of influencers and digital marketing experts. Although grounded theory allows for deep theoretical insight, the findings may not fully capture the diversity of influencer behaviors across different industries, platforms, or cultural settings. Additionally, the rapidly evolving nature of social media environments means that certain strategies or platform dynamics identified in this study may shift over time as algorithms, regulations, or user preferences change. Finally, the study focused primarily on Instagram, and thus the conclusions may not be directly generalizable to other platforms with differing interaction structures, such as TikTok, YouTube, or emerging decentralized networks.

Future research should consider conducting mixed-method or quantitative studies to validate the conceptual model developed here across larger and more diverse samples. Examining platform-specific differences in influencer effectiveness would yield valuable insights, particularly as digital ecosystems continue to diversify. Longitudinal analyses could also be beneficial for understanding how influencer credibility, audience dynamics, and platform algorithms evolve over time. Researchers may also investigate the emerging role of AI-generated virtual influencers, ethical challenges in disclosure practices, and the psychological mechanisms underlying follower susceptibility across cultural contexts.

Organizations implementing influencer marketing strategies should prioritize the identification of influencers whose personality traits and ethical standards align with their brand values. Emphasizing long-term relationships rather than transactional partnerships can significantly enhance authenticity and follower trust. Brands should also invest in evaluating influencer–audience congruence, engagement quality, and content relevance rather than focusing solely on follower count. Furthermore, marketers should design campaigns that leverage storytelling, value creation, and community engagement to strengthen the emotional and cognitive impact of influencer endorsements.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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