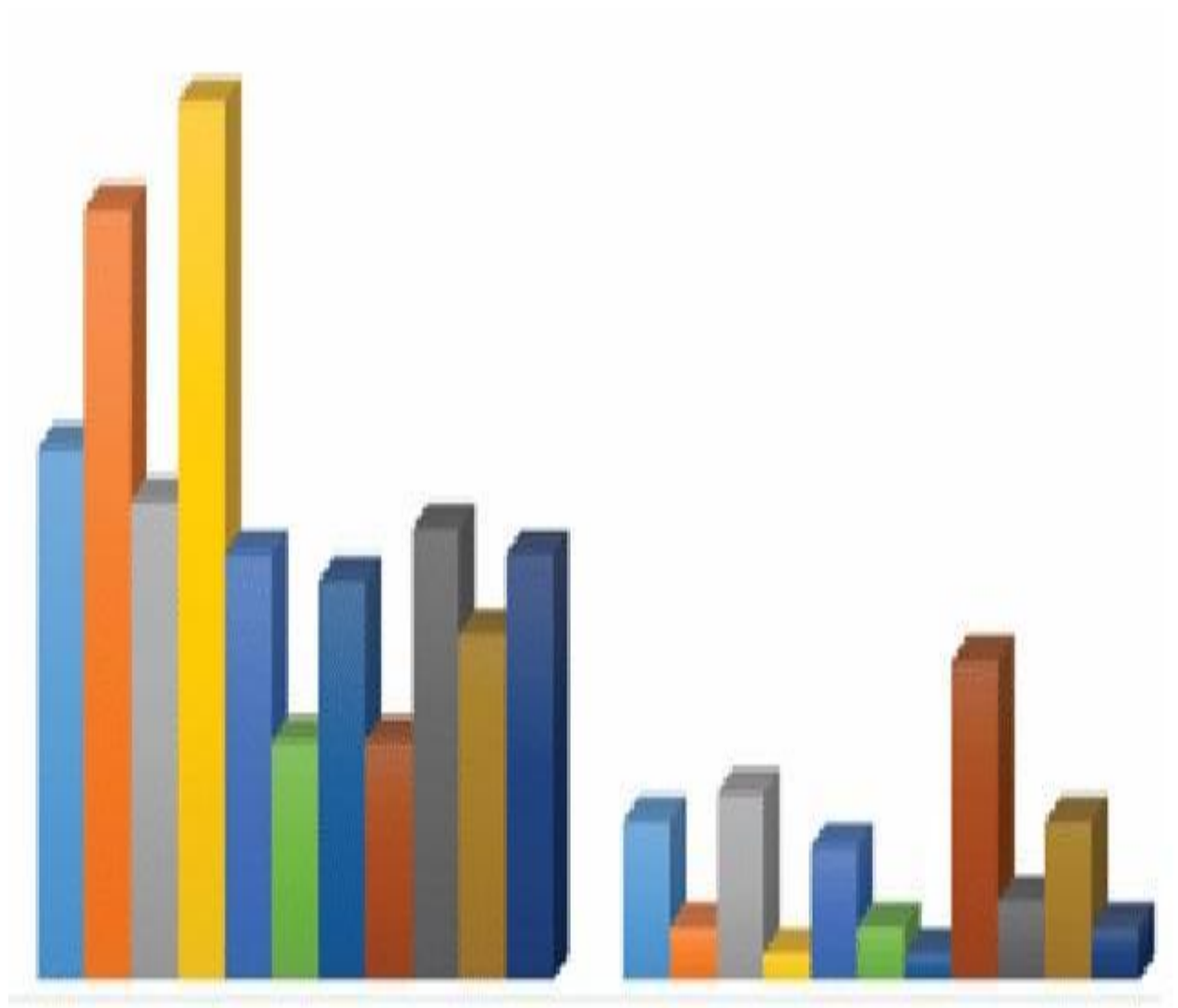


Perception, Motivation and Attitude Studies

Volume: 5 Issue: 3 Year: 2026

ISSN: 2957-4153



Received: 2 May 2026

Revised: 20 June 2026

Accepted: 25 June 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.64907/xkmf.v5i2.pmas.15>

Research Article

Influencer Credibility and Its Effect on Fashion Brand Image Formation

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ABSTRACT

The increasing dominance of social media has transformed the dynamics of marketing communication, particularly within the fashion industry, where symbolic meaning and visual identity are central to consumer engagement. This study examines the role of influencer credibility in shaping fashion brand image formation through a qualitative analysis of secondary data. Drawing on Source Credibility Theory, the Meaning Transfer Model, and Social Identity Theory, the research conceptualises influencer credibility as a multidimensional construct comprising trustworthiness, expertise, attractiveness, and authenticity. The findings indicate that credible influencers significantly influence consumer perceptions by enhancing trust, reinforcing brand values, and facilitating emotional and symbolic connections with brands. Authenticity and trustworthiness emerge as the most critical determinants of effective brand image formation, while influencer-brand congruence strengthens the transfer of meaning and consumer identification processes. However, challenges such as over-commercialisation, influencer fatigue, and lack of transparency can undermine these effects. The study contributes to the existing literature by providing an integrated theoretical framework and offering practical implications for fashion marketers aiming to develop effective influencer strategies in a highly competitive digital environment.

Keywords: influencer credibility, fashion brand image, social media marketing, authenticity, consumer perception, brand identity, influencer marketing

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1. Introduction

The rapid evolution of digital communication technologies has fundamentally transformed the way brands interact with consumers. In particular, the proliferation of social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube has redefined marketing strategies, enabling the emergence of influencer marketing as a dominant paradigm in contemporary brand communication. Influencers, defined as individuals who have established credibility within a specific domain and possess the ability to affect audience attitudes and behaviours through their content, have become critical intermediaries between brands and consumers (Lou & Yuan, 2019). This shift is especially pronounced in the fashion industry, where visual appeal, symbolic meaning, and identity construction are central to consumer decision-making.

Traditionally, fashion brands relied on celebrity endorsements and mass media advertising to shape brand image and consumer perceptions. However, the rise of social media has democratized content creation and distribution, allowing influencers, ranging from macro-celebrities to micro- and nano-influencers, to engage audiences in more personal and interactive ways (Abidin, 2016). Unlike traditional celebrities, influencers are often perceived as more relatable and authentic, which enhances their persuasive power and strengthens their impact on brand image formation (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017).

Brand image is a crucial concept in marketing, particularly in the fashion sector, where products often serve as symbols of identity, status, and lifestyle rather than purely functional items. According to Keller (1993), brand image refers to the set of associations linked to a brand in consumers' memory, encompassing cognitive, emotional, and symbolic dimensions. In this context, influencer marketing plays a vital role in shaping these associations by embedding brands within narratives that resonate with consumers' aspirations and self-concepts (Escalas & Bettman, 2005).

A key determinant of influencer effectiveness is credibility, which encompasses attributes such as trustworthiness, expertise, attractiveness, and authenticity. Source Credibility Theory posits that the persuasiveness of a communication is largely dependent on the perceived credibility of the source (Hovland & Weiss, 1951). In the context of influencer marketing, credibility influences how audiences interpret sponsored content and whether they accept or reject the associated brand messages. Trustworthy influencers are perceived as honest and reliable, while expert influencers are seen as knowledgeable and competent in their domain. Attractiveness, both physical and social, enhances the appeal of the influencer, while authenticity reflects the perceived genuineness and consistency of their online persona (Ohanian, 1990; Audrezet et al., 2020).

The importance of influencer credibility is particularly significant in the fashion industry, where consumers often rely on social cues and peer recommendations to

guide their purchasing decisions. Influencers serve as opinion leaders who curate trends, provide styling advice, and endorse products, thereby influencing consumer perceptions of brand quality, desirability, and identity (Phua et al., 2020). Through repeated exposure and engagement, influencers can shape brand image by associating brands with specific lifestyles, values, and social identities.

Despite the growing prominence of influencer marketing, there are also challenges and risks associated with its implementation. The increasing commercialisation of influencer content has led to concerns about authenticity and trust, as audiences become more sceptical of sponsored posts and paid endorsements (Audrezet et al., 2020). Additionally, the phenomenon of influencer fatigue—where consumers become overwhelmed by excessive promotional content—can reduce engagement and weaken the effectiveness of influencer campaigns. Issues such as fake followers, lack of transparency, and mismatched brand partnerships further complicate the relationship between influencer credibility and brand image formation (De Veirman et al., 2017).

Given these complexities, there is a need for a comprehensive understanding of how different dimensions of influencer credibility contribute to brand image formation in the fashion industry. While existing studies have examined various aspects of influencer marketing, there remains a gap in integrating these insights into a cohesive theoretical and analytical framework. This study seeks to address this gap by exploring the role of influencer credibility in shaping fashion

brand image through a qualitative analysis of secondary data.

Specifically, the study aims to: examine the key dimensions of influencer credibility and their relevance in the fashion context; analyse the mechanisms through which influencer credibility influences brand image formation; and identify potential challenges and limitations associated with influencer marketing strategies. By synthesising existing literature and theoretical perspectives, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of the interplay between influencer characteristics and consumer perceptions.

The findings of this research have important implications for both academia and practice. For scholars, the study provides a comprehensive framework for analysing influencer credibility and its impact on brand image. For practitioners, particularly fashion marketers, the study offers strategic insights into selecting and managing influencer partnerships to maximise brand value. In an increasingly competitive and dynamic digital environment, understanding the role of credibility in influencer marketing is essential for building strong and sustainable brand images.

2. Literature Review

Influencer marketing has evolved significantly over the past decade, driven by the rapid growth of social media and digital communication technologies. Initially, marketing strategies relied heavily on traditional celebrities to endorse products and enhance brand visibility. However, the

emergence of social media platforms has enabled ordinary individuals to gain prominence by creating and sharing content, thereby giving rise to a new category of influencers (Abidin, 2016).

Influencers differ from traditional celebrities in several key ways. They are often perceived as more accessible, relatable, and authentic, which enhances their ability to engage audiences and build trust (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). This relatability is particularly important in the fashion industry, where consumers seek inspiration and validation from individuals who reflect their own lifestyles and aspirations. As a result, brands increasingly collaborate with influencers to reach targeted audiences and create personalised marketing messages.

The effectiveness of influencer marketing lies in its ability to leverage social relationships and peer influence. Unlike traditional advertising, which is often perceived as intrusive and persuasive, influencer marketing integrates promotional content within organic and engaging narratives. This subtlety enhances the credibility of the message and increases the likelihood of consumer acceptance (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

2.1 Brand Image in the Fashion Context

Brand image is a central concept in marketing and plays a particularly significant role in the fashion industry. According to Keller (1993), brand image consists of the perceptions and associations that consumers hold in their memory about a brand. These associations

can be functional, emotional, or symbolic in nature.

In the fashion context, brand image is closely linked to identity construction and social signalling. Consumers use fashion brands to express their personality, values, and social status, making brand image a key determinant of purchase behaviour (Escalas & Bettman, 2005). For example, luxury fashion brands are often associated with prestige and exclusivity, while fast fashion brands emphasise affordability and trendiness.

Influencers contribute to brand image formation by embedding brands within their personal narratives and visual content. Through curated posts, styling tips, and lifestyle representation, influencers create associations that shape how consumers perceive a brand. These associations can influence not only brand awareness but also brand attitudes and loyalty.

2.2 Dimensions of Influencer Credibility

The concept of credibility is rooted in Source Credibility Theory, which identifies trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness as key determinants of persuasive communication (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Ohanian, 1990). In the context of influencer marketing, these dimensions have been expanded to include authenticity, reflecting the unique characteristics of social media environments (Audrezet et al., 2020).

Trustworthiness: Trustworthiness refers to the perceived honesty, integrity, and reliability of the influencer. It is considered the most critical dimension of credibility, as

it directly influences whether consumers believe the information provided. Trustworthy influencers are more likely to generate positive attitudes toward endorsed brands and increase purchase intention (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

Expertise: Expertise relates to the influencer's knowledge, skills, and competence in a particular domain. In the fashion industry, expertise may include styling ability, knowledge of trends, and familiarity with brands. Expert influencers are perceived as more credible sources of information, which enhances their ability to influence consumer perceptions (Ohanian, 1990).

Attractiveness: Attractiveness encompasses both physical appearance and social appeal. Attractive influencers are more likely to capture attention and create aspirational value, which is particularly important in fashion marketing. However, attractiveness alone is insufficient to sustain credibility, as consumers increasingly value authenticity and transparency.

Authenticity: Authenticity refers to the perceived genuineness and sincerity of the influencer. It has become a critical dimension of credibility in the digital age, where audiences are highly sensitive to inauthentic or overly commercialised content (Audrezet et al., 2020). Authentic influencers are more likely to build long-term relationships with their followers and foster trust.

2.3 Theoretical Perspectives on Influencer Marketing

Several theoretical frameworks provide insight into how influencer credibility affects brand image formation.

Source Credibility Theory: Source Credibility Theory suggests that the effectiveness of a message depends on the perceived credibility of the source (Hovland & Weiss, 1951). In influencer marketing, credible influencers are more persuasive and can positively influence brand attitudes.

Meaning Transfer Model: The Meaning Transfer Model (McCracken, 1989) explains how cultural meanings are transferred from influencers to brands and then to consumers. Influencers embody specific values and lifestyles, which are projected onto the brands they endorse. This process is particularly relevant in the fashion industry, where symbolic meaning plays a central role.

Social Identity Theory: Social Identity Theory posits that individuals derive their identity from group affiliations (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Influencers often represent aspirational groups, and consumers adopt associated brands to align with these identities. This alignment strengthens brand image and enhances emotional attachment.

2.4 Influencer-Brand Congruence

Influencer-brand congruence refers to the alignment between the influencer's image and the brand's identity. Research indicates that congruence enhances credibility and increases the effectiveness of influencer marketing (Till & Busler, 2000). When there is a strong match between the influencer and

the brand, consumers are more likely to perceive the endorsement as authentic and credible.

Conversely, a lack of congruence can lead to scepticism and negative brand perceptions. For example, if a luxury fashion brand collaborates with an influencer who is known for promoting budget products, the mismatch may undermine the brand's image.

2.5 Challenges in Influencer Marketing

Despite its advantages, influencer marketing faces several challenges. One major issue is the erosion of trust due to excessive commercialisation. As influencers increasingly engage in paid partnerships, audiences may question their authenticity and motives (Audrezet et al., 2020).

Another challenge is the presence of fake followers and engagement, which can distort the perceived influence of an individual. Brands that rely on such metrics may make ineffective partnership decisions (De Veirman et al., 2017).

Additionally, influencer fatigue can reduce the effectiveness of marketing campaigns. As consumers are exposed to a high volume of sponsored content, they may become desensitised and less responsive to promotional messages.

2.6 Research Gap

While existing literature provides valuable insights into influencer marketing, there is a need for a comprehensive analysis that integrates the various dimensions of influencer credibility and their impact on brand image formation. This study addresses

this gap by synthesising theoretical and empirical findings to develop a holistic understanding of the topic.

3. Theoretical Framework

Understanding the relationship between influencer credibility and fashion brand image formation requires a robust theoretical foundation that captures both the psychological and sociocultural dimensions of consumer behaviour. This study integrates three complementary theoretical perspectives-Source Credibility Theory, the Meaning Transfer Model, and Social Identity Theory-to provide a multidimensional explanation of how influencer characteristics shape consumer perceptions and brand associations.

3.1 Source Credibility Theory

Source Credibility Theory serves as a foundational framework for analysing persuasive communication. Originally developed by Hovland and Weiss (1951), the theory posits that the effectiveness of a message is significantly influenced by the perceived credibility of its source. Credibility is typically conceptualised through three primary dimensions: trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness (Ohanian, 1990).

In the context of influencer marketing, these dimensions directly influence how audiences interpret and respond to brand-related content. Trustworthiness refers to the extent to which an influencer is perceived as honest, ethical, and reliable. Influencers who disclose sponsorships transparently and maintain consistency in their messaging are more

likely to be perceived as trustworthy, thereby enhancing the persuasive impact of their endorsements (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

Expertise reflects the influencer's perceived knowledge and competence in a specific domain. In the fashion industry, expertise may be demonstrated through styling skills, trend forecasting, or professional experience. Influencers who are considered experts are more effective in shaping consumer perceptions of brand quality and credibility, as their recommendations are viewed as informed and authoritative (Ohanian, 1990).

Attractiveness encompasses both physical appeal and social likability. Attractive influencers tend to generate higher levels of attention and engagement, which can enhance message effectiveness. However, attractiveness alone is insufficient to sustain long-term credibility, particularly in an environment where consumers increasingly prioritise authenticity and transparency.

Recent research has extended Source Credibility Theory by incorporating authenticity as a critical dimension, especially in the context of social media. Authenticity refers to the perceived genuineness and sincerity of the influencer's content and persona (Audrezet et al., 2020). This addition reflects the evolving expectations of digital audiences, who value relatability and consistency over idealised or overly curated representations.

3.2 Meaning Transfer Model

The Meaning Transfer Model, proposed by McCracken (1989), provides a cultural perspective on how influencer endorsements shape brand image. According to this model,

meaning flows in three stages: from the cultural environment to the influencer, from the influencer to the brand, and finally from the brand to the consumer.

Influencers act as carriers of cultural meaning, embodying specific values, lifestyles, and social identities. Through their content, they communicate these meanings to their audience, creating associations that extend to the brands they endorse. For example, an influencer known for sustainable living may transfer values of environmental responsibility to a fashion brand, thereby enhancing its ethical image.

This process is particularly relevant in the fashion industry, where symbolic meaning plays a central role in consumer decision-making. Fashion products are often consumed not only for their functional attributes but also for their ability to convey identity and status (Escalas & Bettman, 2005). Influencers facilitate this symbolic consumption by embedding brands within narratives that resonate with consumers' aspirations and self-concepts.

The effectiveness of meaning transfer depends on the congruence between the influencer's image and the brand's identity. When there is alignment, the transfer of meaning is more seamless and credible. Conversely, a mismatch can disrupt the process and lead to negative perceptions, as consumers may question the authenticity of the endorsement (Till & Busler, 2000).

3.3 Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory, developed by Tajfel and Turner (1979), offers a psychological perspective on how individuals use social

categories to define their identity. According to this theory, individuals seek to enhance their self-concept by associating with groups that reflect their desired identity.

In the context of influencer marketing, influencers often represent aspirational reference groups. Their followers may identify with or aspire to join these groups, adopting associated behaviours, values, and consumption patterns. Fashion brands endorsed by influencers become symbols of group membership, enabling consumers to express their identity and social affiliation (Escalas & Bettman, 2005).

This process highlights the role of influencers as mediators of social identity. By aligning themselves with specific influencers, consumers can construct and communicate their identity through brand choices. This alignment strengthens emotional attachment to the brand and reinforces brand image.

Furthermore, Social Identity Theory explains the importance of relatability in influencer marketing. Influencers who share similar characteristics or experiences with their audience are more likely to foster identification, which enhances the effectiveness of their endorsements. This is particularly relevant for micro-influencers, who often have closer and more personal relationships with their followers.

3.4 Integrated Conceptual Framework

By integrating these three theoretical perspectives, this study proposes a comprehensive framework for understanding the impact of influencer credibility on fashion brand image formation. Source

Credibility Theory explains the persuasive power of influencer attributes, the Meaning Transfer Model elucidates how symbolic meanings are conveyed, and Social Identity Theory highlights the role of identity and group affiliation in consumer behaviour.

The framework suggests that influencer credibility, comprising trustworthiness, expertise, attractiveness, and authenticity, affects brand image through two key mechanisms: meaning transfer and social identification. Influencer-brand congruence acts as a moderating factor, influencing the effectiveness of these processes.

This integrated approach provides a holistic understanding of influencer marketing, emphasising both the cognitive and emotional dimensions of consumer perception. It also underscores the importance of strategic alignment between influencers and brands to maximise the impact on brand image.

4. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design based on the analysis of secondary data. Qualitative research is particularly suitable for exploring complex phenomena such as influencer credibility and brand image formation, as it allows for an in-depth understanding of underlying processes, meanings, and relationships (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Unlike quantitative approaches, which focus on measurement and statistical analysis, qualitative research emphasises interpretation and contextualization.

The use of secondary data enables the study to draw on a wide range of existing

knowledge, including academic literature, industry reports, and case studies. This approach is appropriate given the exploratory nature of the research and the rapidly evolving landscape of influencer marketing.

4.1 Data Sources

The study relies on multiple sources of secondary data to ensure a comprehensive and balanced analysis. These sources include:

- **Peer-reviewed journal articles:** Scholarly publications provide theoretical and empirical insights into influencer marketing, credibility, and brand image.
- **Books and academic texts:** Foundational theories such as Source Credibility Theory and Social Identity Theory are derived from established academic literature.
- **Industry reports:** Reports from organisations such as McKinsey and Statista offer practical insights and current trends in influencer marketing.
- **Case studies:** Real-world examples of influencer-brand collaborations in the fashion industry illustrate the application of theoretical concepts.

The inclusion of diverse data sources enhances the depth and reliability of the analysis by allowing for triangulation, which involves comparing and integrating findings from different perspectives (Bowen, 2009).

4.2 Data Collection Procedure

The data collection process involved a systematic review of relevant literature and

documents. Academic databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus, and Web of Science were used to identify peer-reviewed articles. Keywords such as “influencer marketing,” “source credibility,” “brand image,” and “fashion marketing” were used to guide the search.

Inclusion criteria were established to ensure the relevance and quality of the data. Only sources published in reputable journals or by recognised organisations were included. Preference was given to recent studies to capture current trends, although seminal works were also included to provide theoretical grounding.

The collected data were organised thematically based on key concepts such as influencer credibility dimensions, brand image components, and theoretical frameworks. This organisation facilitated systematic analysis and interpretation.

4.3 Data Analysis Method

The study employs thematic analysis as the primary method of data analysis. Thematic analysis involves identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns or themes within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method is widely used in qualitative research due to its flexibility and suitability for synthesising diverse data sources.

The analysis followed a structured process:

- **Familiarisation:** Reviewing and reading the collected data to gain an overall understanding.
- **Coding:** Identifying relevant segments of data and assigning codes based on key concepts.

- **Theme development:** Grouping codes into broader themes related to influencer credibility and brand image.
- **Interpretation:** Analysing the relationships between themes and concluding.

This approach allows for the identification of recurring patterns and insights, providing a nuanced understanding of the research topic.

4.4 Justification of Methodology

The choice of a qualitative secondary research design is justified by several factors. First, influencer marketing is a relatively new and rapidly evolving field, making it difficult to rely solely on primary data. Secondary data provide access to a broad range of perspectives and findings, enabling a more comprehensive analysis.

Second, the study aims to develop a conceptual understanding rather than test specific hypotheses. Qualitative methods are well-suited for this purpose, as they allow for the exploration of complex relationships and the integration of multiple theoretical perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Third, the use of secondary data enhances efficiency by leveraging existing research, reducing the time and resources required for data collection. This is particularly advantageous in academic research, where access to primary data may be limited.

4.5 Reliability and Validity

Ensuring the reliability and validity of qualitative research is essential for producing credible findings. In this study, several

strategies were employed to enhance rigour (Mannan & Farhana, 2026):

- **Triangulation:** Using multiple data sources to cross-validate findings (Bowen, 2009).
- **Source credibility:** Selecting high-quality and reputable sources.
- **Transparency:** Clearly documenting the data collection and analysis process.

These measures help to ensure that the findings are consistent, accurate, and trustworthy.

4.6 Limitations of the Study

Despite its strengths, the study has certain limitations. The reliance on secondary data means that the analysis is dependent on existing research, which may not fully capture emerging trends or context-specific nuances. Additionally, the qualitative nature of the study limits the ability to generalise findings to broader populations.

Future research could address these limitations by incorporating primary data, such as surveys or interviews, to validate and extend the findings.

5. Findings and Analysis

The analysis of secondary data reveals that influencer credibility plays a multidimensional and dynamic role in shaping fashion brand image formation. Drawing on thematic analysis, this section synthesises key findings across the four primary dimensions of credibility-trustworthiness, expertise, attractiveness, and authenticity-while also examining

moderating factors such as influencer-brand congruence, audience engagement, and digital platform characteristics. The findings demonstrate that influencer credibility does not operate in isolation; rather, it interacts with contextual and relational variables to influence consumer perceptions and brand associations.

5.1 Trustworthiness as the Foundation of Brand Image Formation

Among the dimensions of influencer credibility, trustworthiness consistently emerges as the most influential factor in shaping brand image. Trustworthiness refers to the perceived honesty, integrity, and reliability of the influencer, and it directly affects the extent to which consumers accept or reject brand-related messages (Ohanian, 1990). Thematic analysis indicates that consumers are increasingly sensitive to issues of transparency, particularly in the context of sponsored content. Influencers who clearly disclose partnerships and maintain consistency in their messaging are more likely to be perceived as trustworthy, which enhances the credibility of the associated brand (Audrezet et al., 2020).

Trustworthiness contributes to brand image formation in several ways. First, it reduces perceived risk, especially in online purchasing environments where consumers cannot physically evaluate products. When a trusted influencer endorses a fashion brand, consumers are more likely to infer that the brand is reliable and of high quality (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Second, trustworthiness fosters emotional connection, as consumers develop

parasocial relationships with influencers. These relationships create a sense of familiarity and intimacy, which can be transferred to the endorsed brand.

However, the findings also highlight the fragility of trust. Over-commercialisation, characterised by excessive sponsored posts or inconsistent endorsements, can erode trust and lead to scepticism. Consumers may perceive such behaviour as opportunistic, which negatively impacts both the influencer's credibility and the brand's image. This underscores the importance of maintaining a balance between promotional and organic content.

5.2 Expertise and the Construction of Brand Authority

Expertise is another critical dimension of influencer credibility, particularly in the fashion industry, where knowledge of trends, styling, and product quality is highly valued. Influencers who demonstrate expertise are perceived as authoritative sources of information, which enhances their ability to shape consumer perceptions (Ohanian, 1990).

The analysis reveals that expertise contributes to brand image formation by reinforcing perceptions of quality and competence. For example, when a fashion influencer provides detailed styling advice or product reviews, consumers are more likely to perceive the endorsed brand as professional and trustworthy. This effect is particularly strong for niche or specialised brands, where consumer knowledge may be limited.

Moreover, expertise enhances informational value, which is a key driver of consumer engagement. Influencers who provide useful and relevant content are more likely to attract and retain followers, thereby increasing their influence on brand image (Lou & Yuan, 2019). This suggests that expertise not only enhances credibility but also amplifies the reach and impact of influencer marketing.

Nevertheless, the findings indicate that expertise must be perceived as authentic and relevant. Influencers who attempt to endorse products outside their area of expertise may face credibility challenges. For instance, a fashion influencer promoting highly technical or unrelated products may create confusion and reduce the effectiveness of the endorsement.

5.3 Attractiveness and Aspirational Brand Associations

Attractiveness, encompassing both physical appearance and social appeal, plays a significant role in fashion marketing due to its visual and aspirational nature. Attractive influencers are more likely to capture attention, generate engagement, and create positive affective responses, which can enhance brand image (De Veirman et al., 2017).

The findings suggest that attractiveness contributes to the creation of aspirational brand associations. Consumers often associate attractive influencers with desirable lifestyles, and these associations are transferred to the brands they endorse. This process aligns with the Meaning Transfer Model, where symbolic meanings are

conveyed from the influencer to the brand (McCracken, 1989).

However, the analysis also reveals potential limitations of attractiveness as a credibility dimension. In an increasingly authenticity-driven digital environment, consumers may perceive overly curated or idealised content as inauthentic. This perception can reduce trust and weaken the impact of the endorsement. Therefore, while attractiveness enhances initial engagement, it must be complemented by other dimensions of credibility to sustain long-term influence.

5.4 Authenticity as a Critical Driver of Consumer Engagement

Authenticity has emerged as a central theme in the analysis, reflecting its growing importance in influencer marketing. Authenticity refers to the perceived genuineness, sincerity, and consistency of the influencer's content and persona (Audrezet et al., 2020). It is closely linked to trustworthiness but emphasises the alignment between the influencer's values, behaviour, and communication.

The findings indicate that authenticity significantly enhances brand image by fostering trust and emotional engagement. Authentic influencers are more likely to build strong relationships with their followers, which increases the effectiveness of their endorsements. Consumers perceive authentic influencers as more relatable and credible, which strengthens the transfer of positive associations to the brand.

Authenticity also supports brand storytelling, enabling influencers to integrate products into their personal narratives in a natural and

meaningful way. This integration enhances the perceived relevance of the brand and reinforces its identity. For example, an influencer who consistently promotes sustainable fashion can enhance the ethical image of a brand by aligning it with their values.

However, maintaining authenticity can be challenging in a commercialised environment. Influencers must navigate the tension between personal expression and brand partnerships, ensuring that their content remains genuine while fulfilling contractual obligations. Failure to achieve this balance can lead to authenticity erosion and reduced credibility.

5.5 Influencer-Brand Congruence and Meaning Transfer

Influencer-brand congruence emerges as a critical moderating factor in the relationship between influencer credibility and brand image. Congruence refers to the alignment between the influencer's identity and the brand's values, aesthetics, and positioning (Till & Busler, 2000).

The analysis demonstrates that high congruence enhances the effectiveness of meaning transfer, as consumers perceive the endorsement as natural and authentic. When an influencer's lifestyle and values align with the brand, the transfer of symbolic meaning is more seamless, resulting in stronger brand associations (McCracken, 1989).

Conversely, low congruence can lead to cognitive dissonance and scepticism. Consumers may question the authenticity of the endorsement and perceive it as purely transactional. This can undermine both

influencer credibility and brand image, highlighting the importance of strategic alignment in influencer marketing.

5.6 Audience Engagement and Parasocial Interaction

Audience engagement plays a crucial role in mediating the impact of influencer credibility on brand image. Engagement includes likes, comments, shares, and other forms of interaction that reflect audience involvement with influencer content. High engagement levels indicate strong relationships between influencers and their followers, which enhances the effectiveness of endorsements (Phua et al., 2020).

Parasocial interaction, defined as the one-sided emotional relationship between audiences and media figures, further strengthens this effect. Influencers who actively engage with their followers create a sense of intimacy and connection, which increases trust and loyalty. These relationships facilitate the transfer of positive associations to the brand, reinforcing its image.

5.7 Risks and Negative Impacts

Despite its benefits, influencer marketing is associated with several risks that can negatively affect brand image. These include influencer fatigue, fake followers, lack of transparency, and overexposure. The analysis indicates that these factors can reduce the effectiveness of influencer credibility and lead to consumer scepticism (De Veirman et al., 2017).

For example, influencer fatigue occurs when consumers are exposed to excessive

promotional content, leading to decreased engagement and interest. Similarly, the presence of fake followers can distort engagement metrics, resulting in ineffective marketing decisions.

6. Discussion

The findings of this study provide a comprehensive understanding of how influencer credibility shapes fashion brand image formation, offering both theoretical and practical insights. By integrating multiple dimensions of credibility with established theoretical frameworks, the discussion highlights the complex and dynamic nature of influencer marketing in the digital age.

6.1 Integration with Theoretical Frameworks

The results strongly support the relevance of Source Credibility Theory in explaining the effectiveness of influencer marketing. Trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness significantly influence consumer perceptions, confirming that credible sources are more persuasive (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Ohanian, 1990). The addition of authenticity as a fourth dimension reflects the evolving nature of digital communication, where audiences prioritise transparency and relatability.

The Meaning Transfer Model is also validated by the findings, as influencers are shown to transfer symbolic meanings to brands through their content (McCracken, 1989). This process is particularly important in the fashion industry, where brand image is closely linked to identity and lifestyle.

Influencers act as cultural intermediaries, shaping how brands are perceived and consumed.

Social Identity Theory further explains the role of influencers in facilitating identity construction. Consumers use influencer-endorsed brands to express their identity and align with aspirational groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This highlights the emotional and psychological dimensions of brand image formation, which extend beyond functional attributes.

6.2 The Central Role of Trust and Authenticity

One of the most significant insights from the study is the central role of trust and authenticity in influencer marketing. These dimensions are closely interconnected and serve as the foundation of influencer credibility. In an environment characterised by information overload and commercial saturation, consumers rely on trust as a heuristic to evaluate the credibility of messages (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

Authenticity enhances trust by signalling that the influencer's content is genuine and not solely driven by financial incentives. This is particularly important in the fashion industry, where consumers seek inspiration and guidance from influencers. Authentic influencers are more likely to build long-term relationships with their followers, which enhances brand loyalty and advocacy.

However, the discussion also highlights the challenges of maintaining authenticity in a commercialised environment. Influencers must balance personal expression with brand partnerships, ensuring that their content

remains consistent with their identity. Brands, in turn, must allow influencers creative freedom to preserve authenticity.

6.3 Strategic Implications for Fashion Brands

The findings have several important implications for fashion brands seeking to leverage influencer marketing. First, brands must prioritise credibility over reach when selecting influencers. While large follower counts may increase visibility, they do not necessarily guarantee effectiveness. Micro-influencers, who often have higher levels of trust and engagement, may be more effective in shaping brand image (De Veirman et al., 2017).

Second, brands must ensure alignment between influencer identity and brand values. Influencer-brand congruence enhances credibility and facilitates meaning transfer, resulting in stronger brand associations. This requires careful evaluation of the influencer's content, audience, and personal brand.

Third, brands should adopt a long-term approach to influencer partnerships. Continuous collaboration with the same influencers can strengthen relationships and enhance authenticity, leading to more consistent and impactful brand messaging.

6.4 Implications for Consumer Behaviour

The study also provides insights into consumer behaviour in the digital age. Consumers are increasingly active participants in the marketing process, engaging with content, providing feedback, and shaping brand narratives. This

participatory culture enhances the influence of social media and amplifies the impact of influencer marketing.

The role of parasocial interaction is particularly noteworthy, as it highlights the emotional connection between consumers and influencers. These relationships influence not only brand perceptions but also purchasing decisions and brand loyalty. Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing effective marketing strategies.

6.5 Challenges and Ethical Considerations

The discussion also addresses the challenges and ethical considerations associated with influencer marketing. Transparency is a key issue, as consumers expect influencers to disclose sponsored content clearly. Failure to do so can lead to mistrust and regulatory concerns.

Additionally, the prevalence of fake followers and engagement raises questions about the authenticity of influencer metrics. Brands must adopt more sophisticated evaluation methods to ensure the effectiveness of their partnerships.

6.6 Contribution to Academic Literature

This study contributes to the academic literature by providing an integrated framework for understanding influencer credibility and its impact on brand image. By combining multiple theoretical perspectives and synthesising existing research, the study offers a comprehensive and nuanced analysis of the topic.

7. Conclusion

This study provides a comprehensive examination of the role of influencer credibility in shaping fashion brand image formation within the contemporary digital marketing landscape. By integrating insights from Source Credibility Theory, the Meaning Transfer Model, and Social Identity Theory, the research demonstrates that influencer credibility is a critical determinant of how consumers perceive and engage with fashion brands.

The findings highlight that credibility is not a singular construct but a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing trustworthiness, expertise, attractiveness, and authenticity. Among these, trustworthiness and authenticity emerge as the most influential factors, reflecting a shift in consumer expectations toward transparency, relatability, and ethical communication. Influencers who are perceived as genuine and consistent are more likely to establish strong emotional connections with their audiences, thereby enhancing brand image and fostering long-term loyalty.

The study also underscores the importance of influencer-brand congruence in ensuring effective communication and meaning transfer. When influencers align with the values, aesthetics, and identity of a brand, the endorsement appears more natural and credible, strengthening consumer trust and reinforcing positive brand associations. Conversely, mismatched partnerships can lead to scepticism and negatively impact brand image.

From a managerial perspective, the research suggests that fashion brands should adopt a strategic and selective approach to influencer marketing. Rather than prioritising reach alone, brands should focus on credibility, audience engagement, and alignment with brand identity. Long-term collaborations with influencers who genuinely resonate with the brand can enhance authenticity and create more meaningful consumer relationships.

However, the study also acknowledges the challenges associated with influencer marketing, including the risks of over-commercialisation, influencer fatigue, and declining trust due to a lack of transparency. Addressing these challenges requires a balanced approach that maintains authenticity while leveraging the promotional potential of influencers.

In conclusion, influencer credibility plays a pivotal role in shaping fashion brand image by influencing both cognitive and emotional dimensions of consumer perception. As digital platforms continue to evolve, maintaining credibility and authenticity will be essential for sustaining the effectiveness of influencer marketing strategies. Future research may further explore emerging trends such as virtual influencers and algorithm-driven content in shaping brand image dynamics.

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