



SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS AND CONSUMER PURCHASE INTENTION: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF ANTECEDENTS, MEDIATORS, AND MODERATORS

Muhammad Rezaldi^{1*}, Daniel Bonartua Malau², Gendhi Haris³, Nova Novitasari⁴

¹ Digital Business, Universitas Teuku Umar, Meulaboh, Indonesia

² Development Economics, Universitas Teuku Umar, Meulaboh, Indonesia

³ Information Technology, Universitas Teuku Umar, Meulaboh, Indonesia

⁴ Digital Business, Universitas Samudra, Langsa, Indonesia

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received April 02, 2026

Revised April 15, 2026

Accepted May 20, 2026

Available online June 10, 2026

Keywords:

Social Media Influencers, Purchase Intention, Source Credibility, S-O-R Framework, Influencer Marketing



This is an open access article under the [CC BY-SA](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/) license.

Copyright © 2022 by Author. Published by CV Putra publisher.

ABSTRACT

This systematic review synthesizes 15 empirically rigorous studies (2020 to 2025) selected from 65 Scopus identified articles, applying the stimulus organism response framework. Studies were prioritized if they reported effect sizes, used structural equation modeling or experimental designs, and treated purchase intention as the primary outcome. The review examined three areas: the influencer attributes that predict purchase intention, the mediating psychological mechanisms, and the moderating contextual factors. Trustworthiness emerged as the strongest predictor. Information credibility, utilitarian value, and parasocial relationships were key mediators. Product category, generational cohort, and influencer type acted as moderators. Research gaps include cross cultural comparisons, longitudinal designs, and over endorsement saturation thresholds.

1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of social media has transformed how consumers make purchasing decisions, establishing social media influencers as essential links between companies and their target markets. Unlike traditional celebrity endorsements, SMIs cultivate perceived authenticity and relational proximity with followers, creating trust that operates through mechanisms distinct from those of conventional advertising (Hudders et al., 2021). As companies spend more on influencer marketing, researchers are increasingly studying how these online partnerships affect people's thinking and behavior (Burba, 2026).

Existing systematic reviews have laid important groundwork for understanding influencer marketing outcomes. Vrontis et al. (2021) synthesized 214 articles through bibliometric network analysis, mapping the structural relationships among key constructs such as credibility, engagement, and brand attitude. Similarly, Ye et al. (2021) conducted a meta-analytic review specifically examining source credibility effects on purchase intention, pooling effect sizes across multiple studies to establish credibility as a robust predictor of consumer compliance. While these contributions remain landmark references, three significant and interconnected gaps persist in the literature that justify the present review. First, neither review systematically incorporated the emergence of virtual and AI-generated influencers, a phenomenon that has accelerated substantially since 2021 and fundamentally challenges the assumption of human-exclusive source credibility in persuasion models (Tseng & Ou, 2025; Zeng & Lin, 2025). Second, generational cohort differences have been treated as peripheral moderators rather than primary boundary conditions in prior synthesis work, leaving the differential persuasion pathways of Generation X,

*Corresponding author.

E-mail: muhammadrezaldi@utu.ac.id (First Author)

Millennials, and Generation Z undertheorized despite growing empirical evidence of their significance (Cabeza-Ramírez et al., 2022; Cao et al., 2025). Third, consumer psychological well-being as a mediating mechanism has received no systematic attention in prior reviews, despite its empirical validation in short-form video environments such as TikTok (Jamil et al., 2024).

The need for this systematic review is further underscored by the empirical inconsistencies evident across prior studies. Findings on the relative dominance of trustworthiness versus attractiveness, for instance, diverge substantially across cultural contexts with attractiveness emerging as the strongest predictor in Malaysian luxury cosmetics settings (Abdullah et al., 2023) while trustworthiness dominates in Portuguese and Indian contexts (Coutinho et al., 2023; Vinish P et al., 2025). Similarly, the role of parasocial relationships as a predictor of purchase intention has been validated in some studies (Pereira et al., 2023) but treated as peripheral in others. These contradictions highlight the absence of a theoretically integrative synthesis that can account for contextual boundary conditions, a gap this review directly addresses through the S-O-R framework.

Three research questions structure this review, each mapped directly to a component of the S-O-R framework. RQ1: Which influencer attributes (Stimuli) are empirically associated with purchase intention, and with what relative effect sizes RQ2: What psychological mechanisms (Organism) mediate the relationship between influencer stimuli and purchase intention? RQ3: What contextual factors (boundary conditions) moderate the effectiveness of influencer stimuli on purchase intention? Together, these questions operationalize the S-O-R architecture as a three-stage synthesis scaffold, enabling a theoretically grounded and practically actionable review of the influencer marketing literature.

While prior reviews have made substantial contributions, three structural differences distinguish the present synthesis. First, unlike Vrontis et al. (2021), who applied bibliometric network analysis to 214 articles, this review employs systematic selection criteria based on explicit effect size reporting, ensuring a more methodologically homogeneous and comparable synthesis. Second, unlike Ye et al. (2021), whose meta-analytic focus was confined to source credibility and purchase intention, this review explicitly incorporates mediating mechanisms, including consumer well-being (Jamil et al., 2024), and moderating boundary conditions as primary analytical foci. Third, both prior reviews predate the substantial acceleration of virtual and AI-generated influencer research, which this review deliberately incorporates (Cao et al., 2025; Tseng & Ou, 2025; Zeng & Lin, 2025). These differences position this review as a theoretically updated, methodologically rigorous, and contextually broader complement to prior work.

2. METHODS

To ensure a rigorous and reproducible synthesis of empirical research, a systematic search of the Scopus database was conducted on January 11, 2026. The search strategy employed the following Boolean query in the TITLE-ABS-KEY fields:

("influencer marketing" OR "social media influencer" OR "SMI" OR "opinion leader") AND ("consumer trust" OR "source credibility" OR "authenticity" OR "trustworthiness") AND ("purchase intention" OR "buying behavior" OR "brand engagement" OR "conversion")

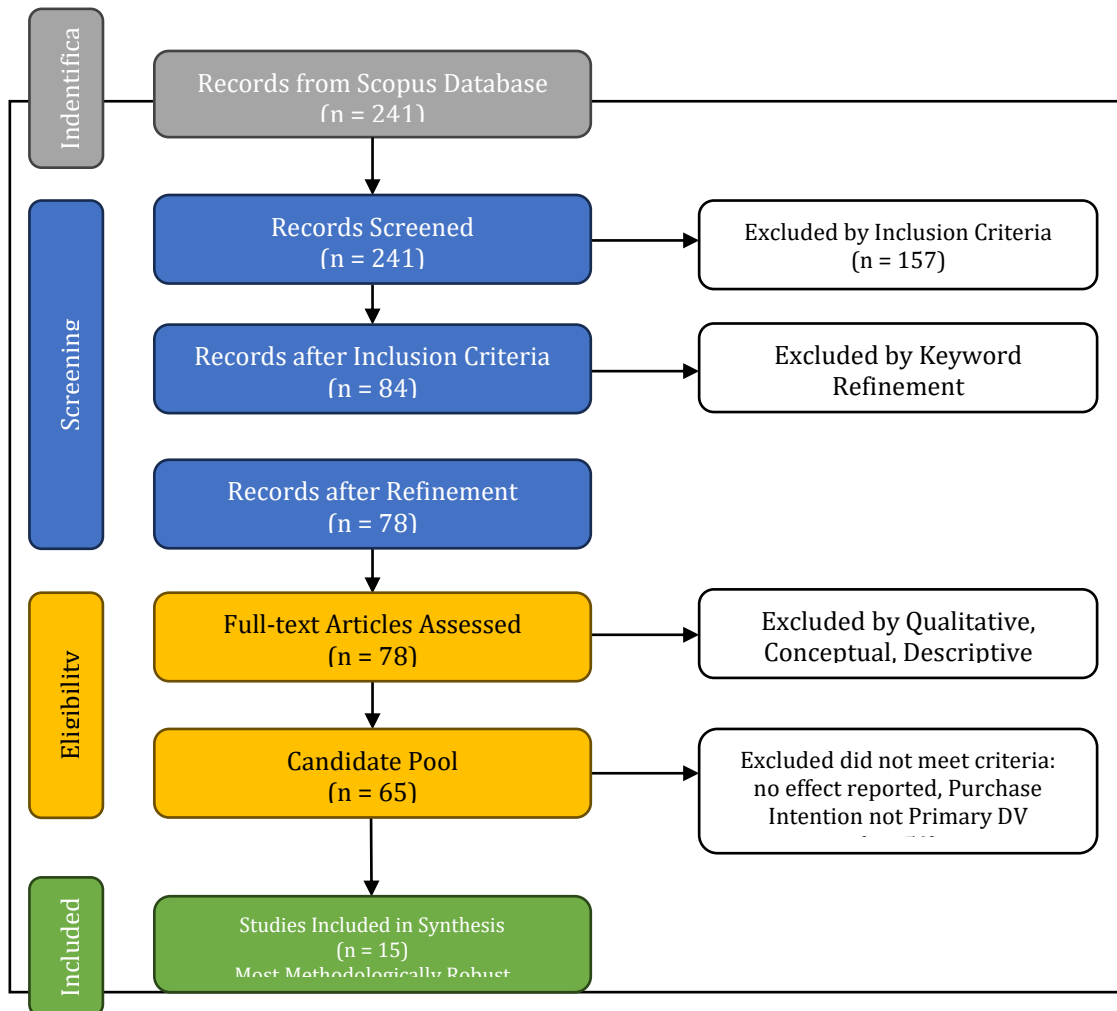
The initial search returned 241 articles. Inclusion criteria were then applied: publication year 2020–2025, article type only, English language, final publication stage, and open access availability (gold, hybrid, or green), reducing the pool to 84 articles. Following full-text retrieval and RIS export refinement using the keywords "influencers, trust, purchase," 78 articles remained. A further manual screening to retain only quantitative studies with inferential statistical testing excluded qualitative, conceptual, and purely descriptive work, yielding a candidate pool of 65 articles (see Table 1).

Table 1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria – Social Media Influencers and Consumer Purchase Intention

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Language	English	Non-English
Publication Type	Article only	Books, reviews, conference proceedings
Publication Year	2020 - 2025	< 2020 or ≥ 2026
Research Focus	Empirical studies examining social media influencers' attributes and their	Qualitative studies, conceptual/theoretical papers, and

	effect on consumer purchase intention, using quantitative methods (survey, experiment, or SEM) with inferential statistical testing.	descriptive research without inferential statistics.
Accessibility	Open access or full-text available	Restricted access or unavailable full text

Quality Appraisal Protocol. From the candidate pool of 65 quantitative studies, quality appraisal was conducted using four explicit methodological criteria to ensure that only empirically rigorous studies were included in the final synthesis. First, each study must report standardized effect sizes (β , r , or standardized regression coefficients) to enable cross-study comparison of construct relationships. This criterion was applied to ensure the synthesis could go beyond directional claims to comparative magnitude assessments. Second, consumer purchase intention was required to be the primary dependent variable, ensuring thematic coherence across synthesized studies. Third, the study must employ structural equation modeling (SEM), experimental design, or multi-group comparative analysis, which provides inferential strength beyond simple correlation or regression. Fourth, each study was evaluated for its contribution to contextual diversity, including geographic setting, platform, influencer type, or generational cohort, to ensure the final sample represents a broad contextual range rather than a single cultural setting. Studies satisfying all four criteria were retained, yielding a final synthesis sample of 15 studies.



Search Date: January 11,

Figure 1. PRISMA flowchart for Social Media Influencers and Consumer Purchase Intention

3. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

The influencer marketing literature draws on a multidimensional set of theoretical frameworks to explain how social media influencers shape consumer purchase intention (Anana & Barbosa, 2023; Tseng & Ou, 2025). These frameworks collectively address the cognitive, affective, and relational mechanisms activated when consumers process influencer endorsements, and are synthesized here within the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) architecture as an overarching metatheoretical scaffold.

At the stimulus processing level, the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) is the most widely applied framework across the reviewed studies (Anana & Barbosa, 2023; Boonchutima & Surakanon, 2023; Lu et al., 2024; Tseng & Ou, 2025; Zeng & Lin, 2025). The ELM posits that consumers evaluate persuasive messages through either a central route, involving rational appraisal of argument quality and informativeness, or a peripheral route relying on heuristic cues such as source attractiveness and trustworthiness. Closely integrated with the ELM is the Theory of Source Credibility (TSC) (Hovland et al., 1953; Ohanian, 1990), which operationalizes influencer effectiveness across three dimensions: perceived expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness (Anana & Barbosa, 2023; Boonchutima & Surakanon, 2023; Coutinho et al., 2023). Together, ELM and TSC explain how influencer attributes function as external stimuli that initiate consumer engagement, with involvement level determining which processing route dominates. Recent extensions of the ELM confirm that these dual-route mechanisms apply equally to AI-generated virtual influencers whose anthropomorphic attributes trigger comparable persuasion pathways (Tseng & Ou, 2025).

At the organism level, consumer responses are mediated by relational and affective states theorized through Parasocial Interaction Theory (Horton & Richard Wohl, 1956), Attachment Theory, and Social Influence and Social Identity Theories (Abdullah et al., 2023; Pereira et al., 2023; Shaheen et al., 2025; Zeng & Lin, 2025). Parasocial relationships, one-sided emotional bonds between consumers and influencers, explain how perceived similarity and artificial intimacy foster trust and reduce purchase uncertainty. Social Influence and Social Identity Theories further illuminate how group norms and identity alignment amplify the persuasive effect of endorsements, particularly among consumers with limited product expertise (Lu et al., 2024). These internal states are subsequently organized into behavioral intentions through the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) and the Heuristic-Systematic Model (HSM), which model how attitudes, perceived risk, and cognitive shortcuts jointly determine consumer compliance (Cabeza-Ramírez et al., 2022; Jamil et al., 2024; Shaheen et al., 2025; Vinish P et al., 2025). At the boundary conditions level, Generational Theory, applied through cohort analysis, provides a critical moderating lens, establishing that Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z differ systematically in how they evaluate influencer credibility, perceived value, and endorsement risk (Cabeza-Ramírez et al., 2022; Cao et al., 2025).

Taken together, the S-O-R framework integrates these theoretical sub-frameworks into a unified analytical architecture: influencer attributes and contextual stimuli (S) activate internal cognitive and affective states (O) that ultimately manifest as purchase intention (R). This positioning of S-O-R as the metatheoretical foundation of this review ensures analytical coherence across the antecedent, mediating, and moderating dimensions examined in subsequent sections.

4. Antecedent Variables: Stimuli Driving Purchase Intention

Within the digital marketing and consumer behavior literature, the evaluation of purchase intention is frequently operationalized through multidimensional theoretical frameworks, most prominently the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) paradigm and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) (Lu et al., 2024; Tseng & Ou, 2025; Zeng & Lin, 2025). Antecedent variables, functioning as the external stimuli (S), are the critical drivers that initiate cognitive and affective psychological states (the organism), which subsequently dictate consumer responses such as purchase intention (Cheah et al., 2024; Lu et al., 2024). A synthesis of the provided academic literature identifies several distinct categories of antecedent stimuli driving purchase intention from influencer-specific traits, content and message attributes, interactive platform characteristics, to contextual or brand-relational factors.

Influencer-Specific Attributes (Source Credibility and Characterizations)

The foundational elements of influencer stimuli are anchored in Source Credibility Theory, which explains three core antecedent dimensions: perceived expertise, trustworthiness, and physical or social

attractiveness (Pereira et al., 2023; Shaheen et al., 2025; Tseng & Ou, 2025; Zeng & Lin, 2025). Expertise acts as a stimulus by conveying the influencer's competence, skill, and domain-specific knowledge, which provides informational value and reduces consumer uncertainty (Anana & Barbosa, 2023; Shaheen et al., 2025; Tseng & Ou, 2025). Trustworthiness represents the perceived honesty, sincerity, and integrity of the source, indicating the influencer's willingness to make unbiased claims (Coutinho et al., 2023; Shaheen et al., 2025; Tseng & Ou, 2025). Attractiveness serves as a highly persuasive peripheral sign that encompasses physical beauty, which captures consumer attention and produces positive heuristic responses, as well as social attractiveness, which fosters likability and emotional resonance (Coutinho et al., 2023; Pereira et al., 2023; Tseng & Ou, 2025).

Beyond the traditional credibility triad, contemporary research introduces several relational and emerging traits as vital stimuli. Attitude homophily and perceived similarity act as powerful antecedents that enhance identification, attachment, and the persuasive impact of the endorsement (Pereira et al., 2023; Shaheen et al., 2025; Vinish P et al., 2025). Furthermore, emerging studies identify influencer "kindness" as a novel peripheral cue that fosters intimate bonds and drives well-being and purchase intent (Jamil et al., 2024). In the realm of AI-driven virtual influencers, "novelty" acts as a unique stimulus, while it can initially attract users and may also introduce perceived risk or uncertainty that negatively moderates purchase intention if the influencer lacks established credibility (Cao et al., 2025; Tseng & Ou, 2025). Finally, the scale of the influencer's popularity, categorized by their fanbase, for example, macro-influencers versus mega-influencers, is identified as an antecedent stimulus that dictates the magnitude of social influence and product evaluation (Jamil et al., 2024).

Content and Video Attributes (The Message)

The quality and multi-dimensional value of the content produced by influencers constitute a second major category of environmental stimuli (Lu et al., 2024; Shaheen et al., 2025). Under the ELM framework, "argument quality" serves as a central-route stimulus, requiring rational, high-involvement cognitive evaluation by the consumer to assess the persuasiveness and helpfulness of the informational message (Jamil et al., 2024; Vinish P et al., 2025). Content is further evaluated through multi-dimensional value propositions acting as stimuli: informativeness, entertainment, social value, and functional value (Cao et al., 2025; Shaheen et al., 2025). Informativeness drives purchase intention by providing relevant and actionable information that assists in consumer problem-solving (Cao et al., 2025; Shaheen et al., 2025). Entertainment value acts as a stimulus by delivering amusing, fun, or aesthetically pleasing experiences that captivate consumer attention and foster warm brand associations. Functional value stimulates purchase intentions by offering concrete utility, such as in-depth product reviews or tutorials (Shaheen et al., 2025). Additionally, the presence of incentives such as monetary discounts, free trials, or social rewards embedded in the posts acts as a direct stimulus that boosts cognitive processing and profoundly drives purchase intentions, particularly among younger cohorts like Generation Z (Cao et al., 2025; Shaheen et al., 2025). Broader video attributes, including visual aesthetics and overall content quality, are also fundamental stimuli that trigger both utilitarian and hedonic value perceptions (Lu et al., 2024).

Platform and Interactive Characteristics (The Medium)

The interactive infrastructure of social media platforms acts as an independent heuristic stimulus. Influencer interactivity and social advocacy (such as peer-to-peer interactions within comment sections) are platform-related cues that directly impact the perceived credibility of the information (Lu et al., 2024; Vinish P et al., 2025). This interactivity enhances consumer immersion and facilitates a deeper cognitive processing of promotional messages and incentive information, thereby acting as an antecedent to purchase intention (Cao et al., 2025).

Contextual and Brand-Relational Stimuli

Several antecedent variables are rooted in the context of the endorsement and the consumer's pre-existing cognitive schemas. Product involvement, defined as the inherent personal relevance, values, and interests a consumer associate with a specific product category like healthy food or luxury cosmetics, acts as a foundational antecedent that dictates the depth of information processing and the likelihood of advertising avoidance (Anana & Barbosa, 2023; Tseng & Ou, 2025). Pre-existing brand familiarity and prior

brand attitude similarly serve as antecedent factors that heavily influence how consumers initially perceive an influencer's authenticity, attractiveness, and the endorsed product's value (Zeng & Lin, 2025). Conversely, certain stimuli can trigger negative or skeptical processing. Influencer "over-endorsement" represents a saturation stimulus whenever an influencer promotes an excessive number of brands. It functions as an environmental trigger that activates consumers' persuasion knowledge (Cheah et al., 2024). This awareness of the influencer's commercial motives can lead to skepticism, diluting the perceived authenticity and credibility of the endorsements. To counteract this negative stimulus, sponsorship transparency and explicit advertising disclosures serve as critical antecedent variables that can mitigate deception, maintain authenticity, and preserve consumer trust (Saad et al., 2025).

5. MEDIATING MECHANISMS: THE ORGANISM COMPONENT

Within the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) paradigm and related cognitive-behavioral frameworks, the "organism" component represents the internal psychological, cognitive, and affective states that mediate the relationship between external environmental stimuli such as an influencer's characteristics or content and consumer behavioral responses such as purchase intention (Cheah et al., 2024; Lu et al., 2024). A synthesis of the contemporary literature reveals that several key mediating mechanisms govern this process, spanning cognitive evaluations, affective and psychological states, and brand-transfer effects.

Cognitive and Affective Value Perceptions

Researchers frequently conceptualize the organismic state through the dual lenses of utilitarian and hedonic value perceptions (Lu et al., 2024). Utilitarian value functions as the cognitive dimension, where consumers rationally appraise the practical usefulness, informativeness, and relevance of the influencer's message (Lu et al., 2024). Conversely, hedonic value serves as the affective dimension, capturing the internal enjoyment, pleasure, and emotional flow generated by the content's visual aesthetics and the influencer's authenticity (Lu et al., 2024). These internal value perceptions act as the mediating organism that transforms external stimuli such as a vlogger's interactivity, physical attractiveness, and video quality into positive behavioral responses like continuance and purchase intentions. Furthermore, Cao et al. (2025) demonstrate that the perceived value of virtual influencers' posts, specifically broken down into informativeness, entertainment, novelty, and incentives act as a crucial mediating mechanism (Cao et al., 2025). As users engage with an influencer's content, their internal perceptions of these specific values are enhanced, functioning as the organismic bridge that subsequently drives their intention to purchase (Cao et al., 2025).

Influencer Authenticity and Credibility

While source credibility is historically modeled as an antecedent stimulus, recent scholarship by Cheah et al. (2024) positions influencer authenticity and credibility directly within the organism component of the S-O-R model (Cheah et al., 2024). In scenarios involving negative stimuli, such as influencer "over-endorsement" (the promotion of an excessive number of brands), the consumer's cognitive and emotional processing capabilities can become oversaturated (Cheah et al., 2024). This over-saturation acts as a trigger that compromises the consumer's internal perception of the influencer's authenticity and credibility (Cheah et al., 2024). The erosion of these internal credibility states significantly diminishes the persuasive efficacy of the influencer, directly dampening the consumer's willingness to make a purchase. Similarly, perceived information credibility serves as a cognitive mediator that bridges heuristic cues such as source expertise, likability, and platform interactivity with final purchasing behavior, validating the role of internal trustworthiness evaluations in dual-process models (Vinish P et al., 2025).

Psychological Well-being, Attitudes, and Relational States

Beyond immediate evaluations of the marketing message, internal psychological well-being and relational states act as powerful mediating mechanisms. Jamil et al. (2024) highlight consumer well-being (CW) as a novel organismic state (Jamil et al., 2024). Within this context, positive external cues such as high argument quality, source credibility, and interpersonal influencer kindness cultivate a harmonious digital environment that reduces anxiety and fosters internal satisfaction, thereby improving consumer well-being.

This enhanced state of psychological well-being consequently predicts higher purchase intentions (Jamil et al., 2024).

Additionally, general consumer attitudes toward the influencer and the advertisement frequently mediate the effects of source attractiveness and trustworthiness on behavioral outcomes (Abdullah et al., 2023). To explain the psychological proximity in these digital spaces, researchers emphasize the role of parasocial relationships (PSRs). A parasocial relationship is an ongoing, one-sided emotional bond that consumers develop with mediated performers. This relational state functions as a vital internal mediating mechanism, where the intimacy and emotional involvement felt toward the influencer transform external attributes like physical and social attractiveness into concrete purchase intentions (Pereira et al., 2023).

Brand-Related Transference Effects

Finally, the organism component encompasses the internal cognitive transfer of trust from the influencer to the endorsed brand itself. Saad et al. (2025) identify brand credibility as a critical mediating variable that amplifies the impact of influencer characteristics on purchase intentions (Saad et al., 2025). When influencers demonstrate high expertise and attractiveness, it enhances the perceived authenticity and trust associated with the brand, directly driving the likelihood of consumer purchases. In a similar vein, Coutinho et al. (2023) empirically validate that brand equity mediates the relationship between an influencer's source credibility dimensions (such as expertise and attractiveness) and the consumer's final purchase intention (Coutinho et al., 2023). This indicates that the consumer's internal synchronization and involvement with the brand act as the ultimate organismic mechanism, converting influencer marketing stimuli into actual consumer compliance (Coutinho et al., 2023).

6. Moderating Variables And Boundary Conditions

The academic literature on influencer marketing describes several moderating variables and boundary conditions that dictate the strength, direction, and validity of the relationships between influencer stimuli and consumer purchase intentions. These boundary conditions are primarily categorized into consumer-specific characteristics, influencer and content typologies, and product-related contexts, offering a nuanced understanding of when and how persuasion mechanisms are activated.

Consumer-Specific Characteristics: Demographics and Psychographics

Generational cohorts serve as a prominent boundary condition, moderating how consumers evaluate and respond to influencer endorsements. Research indicates that demographic differences, particularly between Generation X, Millennials (Generation Y), and Generation Z, significantly alter the pathways of persuasion (Cao et al., 2025; Saad et al., 2025). For instance, members of Generation X tend to perceive influencer messages as highly credible and rely on them to mitigate decision-making insecurity, whereas Millennials are more intensely affected by perceived financial or product risks due to differing purchasing powers and sociodemographic traits (Cabeza-Ramírez et al., 2022). Furthermore, generational cohorts moderate the connections between consumer engagement, perceived content value, and purchase intentions, particularly in the emerging context of virtual influencer marketing (Cao et al., 2025). Beyond demographics, consumer psychographics such as product interest and product involvement act as critical moderating variables. Product interest functions as a protective buffer against the negative stimuli of influencer "over-endorsement," operating as a sub-moderator (Cheah et al., 2024). When an endorsed product aligns closely with a consumer's inherent interests, the detrimental effects of an influencer promoting an excessive number of brands on their perceived authenticity and credibility are significantly weakened. Consequently, high product interest weakens the adverse indirect impact of over-endorsement on final purchase intentions (Cheah et al., 2024).

Similarly, product involvement moderates the dual-route persuasion processes outlined in the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) (Tseng & Ou, 2025). Empirical evidence demonstrates that product involvement significantly moderates peripheral affective cues. Specifically, the impact of an influencer's trustworthiness and attractiveness on purchase intentions varies significantly across different levels of involvement. Interestingly, product involvement does not moderate central-route rational factors like perceived product value and source expertise, suggesting that consumers universally rely on cognitive evaluations of value regardless of their involvement state (Tseng & Ou, 2025).

Audience Subcultures and Social Norms

Audience subcultures and social norms also construct boundary conditions. Social norms significantly moderate the relationship between message credibility and perceived risk among followers (Cabeza-Ramírez et al., 2022). Additionally, audience subcultures, such as "Otaku" versus "non-Otaku" demographics, act as moderators that dictate varying susceptibilities to an influencer's expertise, attractiveness, and trustworthiness (Boonchutima & Surakanon, 2023). Conversely, while some prior literature suggests gender moderates the impact of physical attractiveness on consumer attitudes (Jamil et al., 2024), specific multigroup analyses in certain cultural contexts found that gender did not significantly moderate the relationships between influencer trustworthiness, perceived risk, and purchase intention (Cabeza-Ramírez et al., 2022).

Influencer and Platform-Specific Boundary Conditions

The structural characteristics of the influencer and their content impose distinct boundary conditions. Source credibility, traditionally viewed as an antecedent stimulus, is also conceptualized as a moderating variable that dictates the efficacy of consumer engagement and perceived value (Cao et al., 2025). For virtual influencers with low credibility, perceived novelty actually decreases purchase intentions, while the presence of advertising incentives increases the effect. In contrast, for highly credible virtual influencers, neither novelty nor incentives significantly alter purchase intentions, and the direct positive relationship between consumer engagement and purchase intention is vastly amplified (Cao et al., 2025). Furthermore, the influencer's niche or content typology acts as a boundary condition. The moderating effect of vlogger type (e.g., technology versus beauty vloggers) demonstrates that external stimuli do not uniformly affect consumer value perceptions (Lu et al., 2024). For beauty vloggers, video attributes and influencer characteristics predominantly drive affective, hedonic values, whereas for technology vloggers, these identical stimuli have a substantially greater impact on rational, utilitarian values. The scale and format of the influencer such as macro versus mega-influencers (Jamil et al., 2024), or human streamers versus virtual YouTubers (VTubers) further establish vital boundary conditions that limit or enhance the persuasive impact of the endorsement (Boonchutima & Surakanon, 2023).

Product Category Constraints

Finally, the intrinsic nature of the endorsed product creates boundary conditions for influencer efficacy. Drawing on the Foote, Cone, and Belding (FCB) grid model, the categorization of products into hedonic versus utilitarian types dictates whether consumers will engage in rational or affective decision-making processes (Tseng & Ou, 2025). For highly utilitarian products like a furniture or technology, cognitive and functional value remains the dominant determinant of consumer compliance, restricting the moderating power of personal involvement because the purchase decision is inherently anchored in rational cost-benefit analyses rather than affective heuristic signals (Tseng & Ou, 2025).

7. CONCLUSION

This focused systematic literature review synthesized 15 empirically rigorous peer-reviewed studies published between 2020 and 2025, selected from a screened pool of 65 articles. Across the three guiding research questions, the evidence converges on a coherent and theoretically grounded portrait of influencer marketing's impact on consumer purchase intention.

RQ1: Influencer Attributes and Purchase Intention

The review confirms that trustworthiness is the single most consistent and empirically robust predictor of purchase intention across all cultural contexts examined (Cabeza-Ramírez et al., 2022; Coutinho et al., 2023; Vinish P et al., 2025). Specifically, trustworthiness recognized the highest path coefficient toward information credibility ($r = 0.714$) in the Indian Gen Z context (Vinish P et al., 2025), and was the strongest driver of brand equity and consumer compliance in Portugal (Coutinho et al., 2023). Attractiveness emerged as a dominant force in product-specific contexts, particularly luxury cosmetics in Malaysia where it achieved the highest attitude formation coefficient ($r = 0.725$) across the entire sample (Abdullah et al., 2023), and for virtual influencers rated by ELM peripheral processing ($r = 0.524$) (Tseng &

Ou, 2025). Expertise was found to be especially salient among subculture-oriented audiences, with VTubers showing a correlation of $r = 0.465$ among Otaku respondents (Boonchutima & Surakanon, 2023). Perceived social similarity ($r = 0.324$) and consumer engagement ($r = 0.628$) emerged as the strongest individual predictors in Egyptian and Chinese contexts respectively (Cao et al., 2025; Shaheen et al., 2025). Parasocial relationships exhibited the highest single bivariate correlation with purchase intention ($r = 0.713$) across the entire dataset (Pereira et al., 2023), underscoring the decisive role of relational intimacy in digital endorsements. Collectively, these findings validate the explanatory power of the S-O-R framework and confirm that the traditional credibility triad of trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness remains the empirical backbone of influencer effectiveness, further strengthened by relational constructs such as similarity and parasocial bonds.

RQ2: Psychological Mediating Mechanisms

The review identifies four primary organismic pathways through which influencer stimuli translate into purchase intent. First, information credibility functions as a full cognitive mediator between influencer traits and purchase intention ($r = 0.603$), channeling trustworthiness into behavioral compliance in the Indian context (Vinish P et al., 2025). Second, utilitarian and hedonic value perceptions serve as the central mediating bridge within S-O-R models while utilitarian value emerged as the most powerful single mediator of purchase intention ($r = 0.718$) across technology and beauty vlogger contexts (Lu et al., 2024). Third, consumer well-being, a novel and under-explored mediating state, was empirically validated on TikTok, showing that positive influencer attributes foster internal psychological satisfaction ($r = 0.315$) (Jamil et al., 2024). Fourth, brand credibility ($r = 0.55$) and brand equity act as transference mechanisms, redirecting trust from the influencer persona to the endorsed brand itself, particularly in Saudi Arabian and Portuguese cultural settings (Coutinho et al., 2023; Saad et al., 2025). Collectively, these mediated pathways confirm that consumer purchase intentions are not direct reactions to influencer stimuli but rather products of layered internal evaluations spanning cognition, affect, psychological well-being, and brand perception.

RQ3: Contextual Moderating Factors

The evidence shows that influencer effectiveness is never one-size-fits-all; it always depends on specific moderating conditions. Generational differences are striking that generation X tends to be more persuaded by trust ($r = 0.58$), while Millennials are more cautious and risk-sensitive ($r = 0.408$) (Cabeza-Ramírez et al., 2022). Generation Z is most responsive to engagement cues, whereas Generation Y pays closer attention to informational content (Cao et al., 2025). Product type also shapes persuasion such as utilitarian goods require rational, value-based justification, while hedonic products are more easily influenced by emotion and peripheral cues (Tseng & Ou, 2025). Audience subculture matters too, Otaku versus non-Otaku identities determine whether expertise or trustworthiness drives purchase intent (Boonchutima & Surakanon, 2023). In virtual influencer settings, source credibility itself acts as a moderator (Cao et al., 2025), and over-endorsement can damage authenticity unless offset by strong consumer interest in the product (Cheah et al., 2024). Taken together, these findings highlight that the S-O-R framework's boundary conditions are far more nuanced than once assumed, requiring careful, context-specific calibration in both research and practice.

Theoretical Implications

This review makes quite a few theoretical contributions to the influencer marketing literature. First, it affirms the S-O-R framework as the dominant metatheoretical paradigm, capable of integrating diverse theoretical sub-frameworks under a single explanatory architecture. Second, the consistent empirical superiority of parasocial relationships over traditional credibility dimensions (Pereira et al., 2023) calls for a theoretical reorientation: future models should position relational intimacy and perceived similarity as primary constructs rather than peripheral moderators. Third, the emergent evidence on consumer well-being as a mediating mechanism (Jamil et al., 2024) introduces a psychological welfare dimension into influencer persuasion models that has been largely absent from prior theorizing, particularly in short video platform environments such as TikTok and Instagram Reels.

Fourth, the cross-study evidence on virtual influencers challenges the assumption of human-exclusive persuasion effectiveness. The finding that AI-generated influencers produce statistically equivalent effects to human counterparts for Gen Z consumers (Zeng & Lin, 2025) necessitates a theoretical

extension of the TSC and ELM frameworks to accommodate non-human, algorithmically constructed source credibility. Fifth, the dual role of source credibility is functioning simultaneously as an antecedent stimulus (Pereira et al., 2023) and a moderating boundary condition (Cao et al., 2025) reveals that a theoretical ambiguity in the S-O-R operationalization that future research must resolve through longitudinal and experimental designs.

Practical Implications

For marketing practitioners, several actionable strategic insights emerge from this synthesis. First, trustworthiness should be the primary evaluation criterion when selecting influencers across all product categories, given its consistent empirical dominance (Cabeza-Ramírez et al., 2022; Coutinho et al., 2023; Vinish P et al., 2025). Authentic, consistent, and transparent communication between the influencer and their audience is the most reliable driver of purchase conversion. Second, practitioners targeting luxury or aesthetics-driven product segments should additionally prioritize influencer attractiveness and its capacity to drive positive consumer attitudes, as evidenced in the Malaysian luxury cosmetics context (Abdullah et al., 2023).

Third, brand managers operating on platforms like TikTok and YouTube should invest in influencer kindness and emotional accessibility, which have been shown to elevate consumer well-being and indirectly strengthen purchase intent, particularly among younger demographics (Jamil et al., 2024). Fourth, multi-brand or high-frequency endorsement strategies should be approached with significant caution; the empirical evidence on over-endorsement (Cheah et al., 2024) clearly demonstrates that saturation diminishes the authenticity premium that drives influencer effectiveness. Frequency caps and niche alignment are recommended safeguards. Fifth, the strong generational moderation effects discovered (Cabeza-Ramírez et al., 2022; Cao et al., 2025) imply that influencer campaign design must be audience-segment specific, not universalized. Generation X cohorts are best targeted through trust-based credibility messaging, while Generation Z audiences respond more strongly to engagement-oriented and entertainment-driven content.

Limitations of This Review

This review faces a few limitations. Foremost, the search was confined to Scopus and English-language open-access studies, excluding potentially influential non-English work, especially from Southeast Asia and Latin America. Second, most studies used cross-sectional surveys, restricting causal inference and relying on self-reported purchase intention rather than actual behavior. Third, geographic coverage was skewed toward East and South Asia and Southern Europe, with limited representation from Africa, the Middle East, and Oceania, reducing generalizability. Fourth, the five-year scope (2020 - 2025) may not fully capture rapid shifts in technology and regulation, including AI-generated content and platform governance. Finally, heterogeneity in measures and contexts prevented formal meta-analysis of effect sizes.

Future Research Directions

Future work should prioritize longitudinal and experimental designs to establish causality between influencer attributes and real purchasing behavior. Cross-cultural comparisons are needed to test whether credibility effects are universal or culture-specific. Research should also identify endorsement thresholds where persuasion becomes counterproductive. Ethical and psychological implications of virtual and AI-generated influencers require deeper study, particularly regarding transparency and consumer protection. Underexplored formats such as livestream commerce and short-form video deserve attention, as they may involve distinct persuasion mechanisms. Finally, neuroscientific and biometric methods (e.g., eye-tracking, EEG) could provide more objective insights into consumer responses beyond self-reports.

8. REFERENCES

- Abdullah, S. I. N. W., Syed Ali, S. F., & Teng, P. K. (2023). Love, Trust and Follow Them? The Role of Social Media Influencers on Luxury Cosmetics Brands' Purchase Intention Among Malaysian Urban Women. *Malaysian Journal of Consumer and Family Economics*, 30(1), 271-301. <https://doi.org/10.60016/majcafe.v30.11>

- Anana, E., & Barbosa, B. (2023). Digital Influencers Promoting Healthy Food: The Role of Source Credibility and Consumer Attitudes and Involvement on Purchase Intention. *Sustainability*, 15(20), 15002. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su152015002>
- Boonchutima, S., & Surakanon, A. (2023). The Impact of VTubers and Streamers on the Purchase Intention of Otaku and Non-Otaku Respondents: A Comparative Study. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, 45(2-3), 63-79. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01973533.2023.2208246>
- Burba, A. (2026, April 29). *Marketers Are Spending Billions on Influencers—But Overlooking Their Most Engaged Audience*. Inc. <https://www.inc.com/annabel-burba/marketers-are-spending-billions-on-influencers-but-overlooking-their-most-engaged-audience/91337618>
- Cabeza-Ramírez, L. J., Fuentes-García, F. J., Cano-Vicente, M. C., & González-Mohino, M. (2022). How Generation X and Millennials Perceive Influencers' Recommendations: Perceived Trustworthiness, Product Involvement, and Perceived Risk. *Journal of Theoretical and Applied Electronic Commerce Research*, 17(4), 1431-1449. <https://doi.org/10.3390/jtaer17040072>
- Cao, N., Isa, N. M., Perumal, S., & Chen, C. (2025). Perceived Value, Consumer Engagement, and Purchase Intention in Virtual Influencer Marketing: The Role of Source Credibility and Generational Cohort. *Journal of Theoretical and Applied Electronic Commerce Research*, 20(2), 150. <https://doi.org/10.3390/jtaer20020150>
- Cheah, C. W., Koay, K. Y., & Lim, W. M. (2024). Social media influencer over-endorsement: Implications from a moderated-mediation analysis. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 79, 103831. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2024.103831>
- Coutinho, F., Dias, A., & F. Pereira, L. (2023). Credibility of social media influencers: Impact on purchase intention. *Human Technology*, 19(2), 220-237. <https://doi.org/10.14254/1795-6889.2023.19-2.5>
- Horton, D., & Richard Wohl, R. (1956). Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction: Observations on Intimacy at a Distance. *Psychiatry*, 19(3), 215-229. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00332747.1956.11023049>
- Hovland, C. I., Janis, I. L., & Kelley, H. H. (1953). *Communication and Persuasion: Psychological Studies of Opinion Change*. Yale University Press.
- Hudders, L., Jans, S. D., & Veirman, M. D. (2021). The Commercialization of Social Media Stars: A Literature Review and Conceptual Framework on the Strategic Use of Social Media Influencers. In *Social Media Influencers in Strategic Communication*. Routledge.
- Jamil, R. A., Qayyum, U., Ul Hassan, S. R., & Khan, T. I. (2024). Impact of social media influencers on consumers' well-being and purchase intention: A TikTok perspective. *European Journal of Management and Business Economics*, 33(3), 366-385. <https://doi.org/10.1108/EJMBE-08-2022-0270>
- Lu, H.-H., Chen, C.-F., & Tai, Y.-W. (2024). Exploring the roles of vlogger characteristics and video attributes on followers' value perceptions and behavioral intention. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 77, 103686. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2023.103686>
- Ohanian, R. (1990). Construction and Validation of a Scale to Measure Celebrity Endorsers' Perceived Expertise, Trustworthiness, and Attractiveness. *Journal of Advertising*, 19(3), 39-52. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.1990.10673191>
- Pereira, M. J. D. S., Cardoso, A., Canavarro, A., Figueiredo, J., & Garcia, J. E. (2023). Digital Influencers' Attributes and Perceived Characterizations and Their Impact on Purchase Intentions. *Sustainability*, 15(17), 12750. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su151712750>
- Petty, R., & Cacioppo, J. (1986). The Elaboration Likelihood Model of Persuasion. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 19, 123-205. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601\(08\)60214-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601(08)60214-2)

- Saad, M., Awad, A., Fathy Aziz, A., & Rashad Shma, T. (2025). Influencer marketing's impact on credibility and purchase intention: A study on University of Bisha students in Saudi Arabia. *Innovative Marketing*, 21(1), 326–337. [https://doi.org/10.21511/im.21\(1\).2025.26](https://doi.org/10.21511/im.21(1).2025.26)
- Shaheen, A., Khataan, A., Awad, A., Yahia Shams Eldin, A., & Elnour, A. (2025). The role of influencer content value and credibility in purchase intention. *Innovative Marketing*, 21(3), 14–30. [https://doi.org/10.21511/im.21\(3\).2025.02](https://doi.org/10.21511/im.21(3).2025.02)
- Tseng, W.-K., & Ou, C.-C. (2025). Can Virtual Influencers Drive Online Consumer Behavior? An Applied Examination of ELM Model Investigating the Marketing Effects of Virtual Influencers. *Sustainability*, 17(23), 10721. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su172310721>
- Vinish P, Hawaldar, I. T., Soni, A., Khan, R. K., & Pinto, P. (2025). Influencer Traits and Information Credibility in Driving Gen Z Women's Purchase Intentions. *International Journal of Accounting and Economics Studies*, 12(5), 1207–1216. <https://doi.org/10.14419/vh2af397>
- Vrontis, D., Makrides, A., Christofi, M., & Thrassou, A. (2021). Social media influencer marketing: A systematic review, integrative framework and future research agenda. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, 45(4), 617–644. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijcs.12647>
- Ye, G., Hudders, L., De Jans, S., & De Veirman, M. (2021). The Value of Influencer Marketing for Business: A Bibliometric Analysis and Managerial Implications. *Journal of Advertising*, 50(2), 160–178. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.2020.1857888>
- Zeng, H.-K., & Lin, C. A. (2025). Consumer Evaluation of Virtual vs. Human Influencers via Source Credibility, Perceived Social Similarity, and Consumption Motivation. *Journal of Theoretical and Applied Electronic Commerce Research*, 20(3), 168. <https://doi.org/10.3390/jtaer20030168>