

Opinion Dissemination and Influencer Marketing in the Social Media Era: Reconsidering Digital Opinion Leadership and Consumer Response

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Abstract: This article examines how social media influencers reshape the circulation of public opinion and how this process contributes to the persuasive power of influencer marketing. Drawing on opinion leadership theory, source credibility theory, parasocial interaction, electronic word-of-mouth, and recent influencer marketing research, the article develops a process-based framework for influencer-mediated communication. It argues that influencers do more than deliver commercial messages. They select, interpret, contextualize, and personalize information before presenting it to audiences, thereby making promotional content easier to evaluate within everyday social relationships. Three connected processes are identified: selective interpretation, relational persuasion, and networked amplification. Expertise and trustworthiness create an initial basis for acceptance, while similarity, authenticity, and parasocial connection strengthen the perceived social meaning of recommendations. Platform affordances and algorithmic visibility can then extend a message beyond the original follower group. The article concludes that influencer effectiveness depends less on audience size alone than on the fit among communicator credibility, message value, audience relationships, and platform conditions, and it proposes directions for future research.

Keywords: Opinion dissemination; Social media influencers; Opinion leadership; Influencer marketing; Parasocial interaction; Electronic word-of-mouth; Consumer response

I. Introduction

The spread of information has become increasingly difficult to separate from the structure of everyday social relationships. On social media, people rarely encounter commercial or public messages only through formal media institutions. Instead, they encounter these messages through people they follow, creators whose routines they watch, and peers whose recommendations are embedded in ordinary conversations. This change matters for both communication theory and marketing practice. A product review, a political comment, a

short video, or a personal recommendation can move from an individual post to a chain of comments, shares, remixes, and private conversations within minutes. The result is a communication environment in which persuasion is no longer limited to a sender transmitting a message to an audience. It is distributed across people, platforms, and networked interactions.

The classical literature on opinion leadership provides a useful starting point. Katz revisits the two-step flow of communication by emphasizing that media influence is often mediated by interpersonal

relationships. Rather than assuming a direct path from mass media to passive audiences, the two-step flow perspective recognizes that some individuals interpret information and influence others. The theory is developed in a mass-media environment, yet its central insight remains relevant in social media settings: interpersonal actors can function as bridges between information and public interpretation. The rise of social media influencers makes this bridge visible on a much larger and more measurable scale.

Social media influencers are generally understood as individuals who develop an audience through social platforms and acquire the capacity to affect attitudes, perceptions, or behavior. Freberg et al. describes influencers as a new type of independent third-party endorser whose communication can shape audience attitudes. The contemporary influencer, however, does more than endorse. Influencers select topics, interpret product attributes, share personal experiences, answer followers, and participate in ongoing conversations. In that sense, the influencer is simultaneously a content producer, a relational actor, and a potential opinion leader. Recent research has explicitly returned to this connection, arguing that influencers can be conceptualized as a form of proximal mass opinion leader and that perceived opinion leadership can be more informative than follower count when explaining engagement and advice-following.

This development creates a need to reconsider influencer marketing from a communication perspective. Much of the marketing literature has focused on outcomes such as brand attitudes, purchase intention, engagement, and sales. These outcomes are important, but they do not fully explain how influence travels through social networks. An endorsement may affect one follower directly, yet its broader effect can arise when the follower comments, forwards the content, discusses it with others, or

incorporates the recommendation into a personal narrative. Opinion dissemination is therefore not an additional consequence of influencer marketing; it is part of the process through which influence becomes socially visible.

In this context, this article develops a conceptual framework linking opinion dissemination with influencer marketing. It asks three questions. First, how should opinion leadership be understood when communication is mediated by social platforms and algorithms? Second, through what communication mechanisms do influencers transform information into persuasive messages? Third, how can opinion dissemination explain the relationship between influencer characteristics and consumer responses? The article addresses these questions through a literature-based synthesis rather than a new survey or experiment. Its contribution is to bring communication and marketing perspectives into a common framework and to emphasize that influencer effectiveness depends not only on who speaks, but also on how information is interpreted, connected to followers' sense of self, and circulated through networks.

II. From Opinion Leadership to Digital Influence

A. The two-step flow as a foundation

The two-step flow of communication challenged the assumption that mass media exert a uniform and direct influence on citizens. Katz summarizes the basic proposition as a process in which ideas move from mass media to opinion leaders and then to less active sections of the population. The significance of this model is not merely that there are two stages. More importantly, the model introduces interpersonal mediation into the analysis of communication effects. Individuals do not simply

receive information; they encounter interpretations offered by people whose opinions they value or who are socially close to them.

In the original mass-media setting, opinion leaders were typically embedded in everyday social groups. They could be interested in politics, highly informed, or simply more active in discussing particular topics. This means that opinion leadership was contextual rather than universal. A person could be influential in one area without being influential in another. The same principle becomes even more visible online because social platforms allow users to organize themselves around highly specific interests. A creator may have little influence in general politics but be highly influential in cosmetics, gaming, fitness, travel, or consumer electronics. Digital opinion leadership is therefore often niche-oriented and domain-specific.

B. Influencers as networked opinion intermediaries

Social media changes the scale and architecture of interpersonal influence. An influencer can communicate simultaneously with thousands or millions of followers, while followers can respond publicly and redistribute the message to their own networks. The communication process is consequently better described as multi-step and recursive rather than simply two-step. A brand may brief an influencer; the influencer interprets the product; followers respond; secondary audiences encounter the responses; other users create derivative content; and platform algorithms determine which parts of the discussion become more visible. Communication flows back and forth rather than moving in a single direction.

This environment also changes the meaning of opinion leadership. Popularity is easily visible through follower counts, likes, and views, but these numbers should not be treated as interchangeable with influence. De Veirman et al. find that high

follower numbers could increase perceived popularity and liking, yet the relationship between follower count and perceived opinion leadership is more limited. More recent evidence is even more explicit. Korzynski et al. report that perceived opinion leadership predicted engagement and advice-following better than popularity metrics among nano- and micro-influencers. Their findings suggest that the market value of an influencer is not reducible to audience size. What matters is whether audiences treat the influencer as someone worth listening to.

Harff, Stehr, and Schmuck further conceptualize social media influencers as proximal mass opinion leaders. This formulation is useful because it captures a tension at the heart of influencer culture. Influencers can appear personally close to ordinary users while simultaneously reaching large publics. Their influence is therefore both mass-mediated and relational. They are not simply celebrities speaking downward to fans; they often present themselves as people with whom followers can identify, communicate, and share everyday experiences.

III. The Communication Logic of Influencer Marketing

A. From advertising message to interpreted recommendation

Traditional advertising typically makes its persuasive intention explicit. Influencer marketing is more flexible because promotional content can be integrated into an influencer's regular communication style. Skincare demonstrations, travel diaries, cooking videos, product comparisons, or daily-life posts can carry commercial information without adopting the formal appearance of an advertisement. This does not mean that advertising disappears. Rather, commercial meaning is embedded inside a

broader social narrative.

Lou and Yuan provide an important explanation for this process through their social media influencer value model. Their findings indicate that informative value, together with influencer trustworthiness, attractiveness, and similarity, contributes to trust in branded posts, which is associated with brand awareness and purchase intention. The implication is that persuasion does not emerge from promotional intent alone. Audiences evaluate whether the message is useful, whether the communicator seems credible, and whether the communication feels relevant to their own lives.

This mechanism can be described as interpretive mediation. The brand supplies an object of communication, but the influencer gives that object a position within a lived context. The creator may explain why a product is useful, compare it with alternatives, describe a personal experience, or connect it to a particular lifestyle. In doing so, the influencer reduces some of the cognitive distance between the consumer and the product. The consumer is not only receiving product information but also observing how that information is interpreted by a socially meaningful communicator.

B. Source credibility and perceived legitimacy

Source credibility remains one of the most established explanations of persuasive communication. Ohanian operationalized celebrity endorser credibility through expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness. These dimensions have retained relevance in the influencer context because audiences still ask whether the communicator knows the topic, whether the communicator is honest, and whether the communicator is appealing enough to hold attention.

Yet influencer credibility is more relational than conventional celebrity credibility. A television celebrity may be recognized because of fame

independent of any advertising message, whereas an influencer often earns credibility through repeated interaction with a specific audience. Credibility is therefore accumulated across posts, comments, self-disclosure, and perceived consistency. Lou and Yuan show that trustworthiness and related influencer characteristics can increase trust in branded content. Sokolova and Kefi similarly find positive relationships between influencer credibility, parasocial interaction, and purchase intention among audiences of beauty and fashion bloggers.

Credibility can also be damaged quickly. When an endorsement appears inconsistent with an influencer's usual content or when followers perceive the communicator as excessively commercial, persuasive resistance may increase. De Veirman et al. demonstrate that high follower numbers are not automatically beneficial; under some conditions, selecting a highly followed influencer for a divergent product can weaken perceived brand uniqueness and brand attitudes. This finding reinforces a broader point: communication effectiveness depends on fit between communicator, message, product, and audience expectations.

IV. Relational Persuasion and Parasocial Interaction

A. The social meaning of following

Influencer communication cannot be explained solely by source characteristics because following is itself a social and psychological relationship. Followers may develop a sense that they know an influencer, understand the influencer's preferences, or share an everyday routine with the creator. The relationship can be one-sided in a formal sense, but it can still generate expectations of familiarity, trust, and responsiveness. This is the core relevance of parasocial interaction to influencer marketing.

Sokolova and Kefi report that parasocial interaction and influencer credibility are positively associated with purchase intention, while attitude homophily is positively related to parasocial interaction. The result suggests that similarity is not simply a demographic issue. What matters is the perception that the influencer thinks, feels, or lives in ways that make sense to the follower. An influencer can become persuasive because the audience regards the communicator as a reference point for interpreting a product or lifestyle.

Balaban, Szambolics, and Chirică offer further evidence that parasocial relationships can strengthen the persuasive process. Their study find that parasocial relationships could contribute to perceptions of influencer credibility, which in turn supported more favorable brand attitudes, purchase intention, and content sharing. Interestingly, product involvement moderated the development of parasocial relationships among followers. This suggests that relational influence is not fixed; it becomes stronger when users have genuine involvement with the topic being discussed.

B. From parasocial interaction to electronic word-of-mouth

The importance of parasocial interaction becomes clearer when the unit of analysis moves from the individual consumer to the communication network. A follower who trusts an influencer may not simply buy a product. The follower may also comment, tag a friend, share the content, or recommend the product in an offline conversation. In this way, relational persuasion can become networked dissemination.

Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) is especially relevant because social media lowers the cost of redistribution. A consumer can circulate an influencer's message with little effort, adding a personal comment or adapting it to a new context.

The message may therefore become detached from the influencer's original intention. It can acquire new meanings as it travels. This recursive process helps explain why influencer marketing can create effects beyond the immediate audience exposed to the sponsored post.

The dissemination process also contains an evaluative dimension. Users do not forward every message they encounter. Sharing can signal identity, expertise, agreement, disagreement, or affiliation with a community. An influencer's content therefore enters a second stage of social evaluation when followers decide whether to reproduce it. This means that effective influencer marketing should not only maximize exposure; it should produce content that audiences feel comfortable using as part of their own communication.

V. A Conceptual Model of Opinion Dissemination in Influencer Marketing

A. Three communication mechanisms

Based on the preceding discussion, this article proposes three interconnected mechanisms through which influencers affect opinion dissemination and consumer response: selective interpretation, relational persuasion, and networked amplification. The mechanisms are analytically distinct but operate together.

Selective interpretation refers to the way influencers choose, organize, and explain information. Instead of passing on every feature supplied by a brand, influencers decide what deserves attention and what can be ignored. Their expertise, content style, and knowledge of audience interests shape that selection. In this stage, the influencer functions as a gatekeeper and interpreter. The message becomes more accessible, but it also becomes framed by the influencer's perspective.

Relational persuasion concerns the social connection between communicator and audience. Trustworthiness, similarity, perceived authenticity, and parasocial interaction influence whether followers accept the influencer's interpretation. This stage is especially important for products for which consumers face uncertainty. A credible communicator can act as a social shortcut, allowing consumers to use another person's experience as a reference when making a decision.

Networked amplification refers to the redistribution and transformation of content by audiences and platform systems. Comments, likes, shares, duets, remixes, and recommendation systems can increase visibility and expose the message to people who do not directly follow the influencer. The influence process therefore extends beyond the original follower relationship. Platform affordances do not create credibility by themselves, but they can determine how far a credible message travels.

B. A process-oriented framework

The conceptual sequence can be represented as: influencer characteristics and content quality → interpretation of information → perceived credibility and relational connection → audience response → electronic word-of-mouth and algorithmic amplification → wider opinion exposure → brand and consumer outcomes. The framework is deliberately process-oriented. It does not assume that every campaign follows a linear path or that every component has the same weight across contexts. Instead, it emphasizes that influence is created through an interaction among communicator, message, relationship, audience activity, and platform visibility.

The framework also distinguishes between influence potential and influence realization. Expertise, trustworthiness, or perceived similarity may create the potential to persuade, but potential

does not guarantee dissemination. The message must be relevant enough for followers to respond to, and the response must be sufficiently communicable to travel through the network. This distinction may help explain why some campaigns receive high engagement without strong purchase outcomes, while others generate modest visible engagement but meaningful advice-following or conversion.

VI. The Role of Platform Affordances and Algorithms

A. Visibility is partly technological

Opinion dissemination on social media cannot be understood only as a human process. Platforms organize visibility through recommendation systems, ranking mechanisms, trending functions, search tools, and personalized feeds. These systems influence which content becomes repeatedly visible and which remains confined to a small audience. Consequently, the diffusion of an influencer message depends on both social evaluation and technological selection.

This does not imply that algorithms determine public opinion in a simple or mechanical way. Users still interpret, ignore, challenge, and redistribute content. However, platform architecture changes the conditions under which interpersonal influence operates. A recommendation may be encountered by users who have no prior relationship with the influencer, creating a transition from follower-based influence to algorithmically mediated discovery. The resulting public can be much larger and less homogeneous than the influencer's original community.

B. From follower counts to quality of influence

The growing availability of platform metrics has encouraged brands to treat follower count as a convenient indicator of influence. Yet several studies

suggest caution. De Veirman et al. show that follower numbers can influence perceived popularity without necessarily producing stronger opinion leadership. Korzynski et al. find that opinion leadership was a better predictor of engagement and advice-following than follower count among nano- and micro-influencers. Spörl-Wang, Krause, and Henkel, draw on 93 articles and 108 studies, likewise synthesized influencer effectiveness around multiple categories that include account characteristics, personal characteristics, congruence, and content-related factors. These findings point toward a shift from quantitative reach to qualitative influence.

For brands, this means that influencer selection should begin with the communication task rather than the size of the account. A campaign intended to create awareness may benefit from broad reach. A campaign involving specialized product knowledge or a high-consideration purchase may need expertise and trust. A campaign designed to stimulate community discussion may prioritize interaction and audience fit. These are different forms of influence, and they cannot be captured by a single numerical metric.

VII. Implications for Influencer Marketing Strategy

A. Match the influencer to the communication objective

The first practical implication is the need to define what an influencer is expected to accomplish. If the objective is simple exposure, reach-related indicators may have value. If the objective is changing perceptions, the influencer's credibility and perceived expertise become more important. If the objective is discussion or recommendation, relational strength and audience participation should receive greater attention. In other words, an

influencer should be selected as a communication partner, not merely as a media inventory unit.

This perspective also explains why smaller creators can be strategically valuable. Nano- and micro-influencers often operate within narrower communities where their knowledge and everyday communication can appear more specific and credible. The evidence summarized by Korzynski et al. suggests that opinion leadership among such creators can translate into stronger advice-following than their follower counts would predict. For products that depend on trust, specificity, or community identity, this may be more useful than maximizing raw exposure.

B. Build content that can travel socially

Influencer content should also be designed for secondary circulation. A product message that only works inside the influencer's original video may have limited network value. By contrast, a useful comparison, a clear demonstration, an understandable explanation, or a memorable personal story can be reused by followers in their own conversations. Lou and Yuan emphasize the role of informative value, while the broader literature identifies content, influencer, and follower characteristics as interacting determinants of marketing effectiveness.

This suggests that brands should evaluate the communicative afterlife of sponsored content. The relevant question is not simply whether followers saw the message, but whether they found something worth repeating. Content that creates a reason to explain, recommend, disagree, or ask a follow-up question is more likely to become part of opinion dissemination. Such content may also provide richer signals for marketers than passive impressions.

C. Preserve credibility through disclosure and consistency

The relational nature of influencer persuasion creates an ethical as well as a strategic obligation.

Promotional content needs to remain consistent with the communicator's established identity and audience expectations. Excessive commercial intensity can weaken the perception of independence that makes influencer communication attractive in the first place. Credibility is therefore not a permanent asset that can be assumed once an influencer becomes popular. It must be maintained across repeated interactions.

From a communication perspective, the most important issue is transparency combined with contextual fit. An audience can accept commercial cooperation when it understands why the influencer is discussing the product and can evaluate the recommendation against an established history of content. The purpose is not to make commercial intent invisible. It is to ensure that commercial intent does not destroy the conditions of trust on which influencer-mediated opinion dissemination depends.

VIII. Research Agenda

A. Measuring opinion dissemination beyond engagement

Future empirical work should distinguish between visibility, engagement, opinion leadership, and behavioral influence. Likes and views are useful but incomplete indicators. A more communication-sensitive design could measure whether followers seek advice from the influencer, repeat the influencer's arguments, recommend the content to others, or incorporate the message into subsequent discussions. This would make it possible to test whether opinion leadership offers explanatory value beyond platform metrics.

B. Examining platform and cultural differences

Influencer communication is platform-specific. Short-video systems, image-centered platforms, livestreaming environments, and long-form video

communities encourage different interaction patterns. The meaning of authenticity, expertise, and intimacy may therefore vary across platforms. Cross-platform studies could test whether the same influencer attributes produce different outcomes when the communication affordances change.

Cultural context also deserves greater attention. Perceptions of expertise, similarity, attractiveness, authority, and trust are socially shaped. An influencer who appears relatable in one cultural context may appear commercial or overly familiar in another. Comparative research could investigate whether the proposed three-stage process—selective interpretation, relational persuasion, and networked amplification—operates similarly across national and cultural settings.

C. Integrating algorithmic visibility with interpersonal influence

A further challenge is to connect interpersonal influence with algorithmic distribution. Recent studies increasingly recognize that follower count is an imperfect proxy for actual influence. Yet the mechanisms through which algorithms amplify or suppress opinion leadership remain underexplored. Future models could treat algorithmic exposure as a moderator or mediator rather than as background technology. Such designs would help explain why a highly credible influencer may have limited public impact in one campaign while a moderately credible creator can suddenly become highly visible when platform recommendation systems favor the content.

IX. Integrated Discussion: From Influence to Opinion Dissemination

A. Opinion dissemination as interpretive mediation

Influencer marketing is often described in terms of endorsement, but endorsement alone does not explain why some messages travel further than others. The more useful concept is interpretive

mediation. An influencer takes information that may originate from a brand, platform, institution, or personal experience and reconstructs it for a particular social audience. This reconstruction gives the information a context. A product becomes relevant because it solves a familiar problem, fits a recognizable routine, or represents an identity that followers understand. In this sense, opinion dissemination begins before consumers share the content: it begins with the selection and framing of meaning.

Interpretive mediation also distinguishes influencer communication from the simple repetition of advertising claims. The influencer may compare alternatives, demonstrate use, disclose limitations, answer questions, or explain when a product is not appropriate. These practices can increase informational value because they reduce the effort required for consumers to translate technical or commercial information into everyday decisions. Lou and Yuan similarly emphasize message value and influencer credibility as important conditions of consumer trust. The broader implication is that informative communication can become persuasive without relying on overtly persuasive language.

B. Relational persuasion and audience judgment

The second part of the process is relational. Followers do not evaluate a recommendation only by checking product information; they also evaluate the person delivering the recommendation. Source credibility theory highlights expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness, while influencer research adds similarity, authenticity, and parasocial interaction as important relational dimensions. These dimensions interact rather than operate independently. Expertise can attract attention, but trust determines whether information is accepted. Similarity can make advice feel relevant, while parasocial connection can make the interaction feel

familiar. The persuasive effect is therefore produced by a combination of informational and relational cues.

Audience judgment remains active throughout this process. Social media users can compare the influencer's claim with previous content, comments, independent reviews, and their own experience. A persuasive message may consequently become the starting point of a discussion rather than the final conclusion. Followers can agree, challenge the recommendation, ask for clarification, or provide alternative evidence. Such responses are significant because they show that opinion dissemination is participatory. The influencer initiates or shapes a conversation, but the audience contributes to its meaning and direction.

C. Networked amplification and the communicative afterlife of sponsored content

The third part of the process is networked amplification. Once a message is placed on a platform, it can be redistributed through sharing, comments, reposting, quotation, or user-generated responses. The original audience is therefore only the first layer of possible exposure. Rogers reminds us that diffusion depends on communication across social systems, and the social media environment greatly reduces the cost of that redistribution. The practical consequence is that influencer content should be assessed not only by direct response but also by its communicative afterlife.

Electronic word-of-mouth provides one way to understand this afterlife. A follower who reposts an influencer's recommendation is not merely increasing reach; the follower is providing an additional social signal. A later user may trust the message partly because it has already been incorporated into another person's communication. This creates a chain of secondary endorsement. The process can strengthen brand credibility when

the discussion is favorable, but it can also intensify criticism when followers identify exaggeration or inconsistency. Networked amplification therefore increases both opportunity and reputational risk.

The distinction between visibility and influence becomes especially important at this stage. A highly visible post can generate many impressions without producing strong persuasion, while a smaller discussion can have greater informational value because participants are actively seeking advice. De Veirman et al. show that follower numbers affect perceptions of popularity, but popularity should not be treated as equivalent to opinion leadership. Recent research also suggests that perceived opinion leadership can be a stronger predictor of engagement and advice-following than popularity metrics among smaller influencers. This supports a more precise approach to campaign evaluation.

D. Trust repair, transparency, and the limits of persuasion

Trust is not a fixed attribute that an influencer simply possesses. It is a relationship that can be strengthened, weakened, or renegotiated across repeated encounters. This point matters because influencer marketing places commercial communication inside a relationship that may initially be perceived as personal rather than promotional. When an audience learns that a recommendation is sponsored, the disclosure itself does not necessarily destroy credibility. More important is whether the disclosure is consistent with the communicator's established identity and whether the recommendation appears reasonable in light of previous content. Lou and Yuan show that the value and credibility of branded messages are closely related to consumer trust, while Ki et al. emphasize the role of relational needs in the development of influencer–follower connections. These findings suggest that credibility is better understood as an ongoing judgment than as

a permanent personal characteristic.

Transparency also changes the way audiences interpret persuasive intent. A commercial message that is clearly identified can be evaluated as a commercial message, whereas an undisclosed promotion may be interpreted as an unplanned personal opinion. The distinction is important for opinion dissemination because audiences do not only assess what is being said; they also assess why it is being said. In this sense, disclosure operates as contextual information. It gives followers an additional cue for judging the source, the message, and the expected degree of persuasion. A transparent creator can therefore preserve trust when the cooperation is credible, the product is relevant, and the recommendation contains information that remains useful beyond the immediate sales objective.

The issue becomes more complex when influencers move between different domains of authority. A creator may be highly trusted in fashion, travel, gaming, or food but possess limited expertise in finance, medicine, or other information-sensitive areas. The visibility of social media can blur these boundaries because platform metrics make popularity easy to observe even when domain-specific competence is difficult to verify. For this reason, the concept of opinion leadership should be tied to a particular topic rather than treated as a universal status. The same individual may function as a persuasive opinion leader for one category and as an ordinary content producer in another. This distinction can help explain why follower size sometimes predicts attention but does not consistently predict persuasion.

Trust repair is likewise relevant after a failed recommendation. If followers discover that a promoted product does not match the influencer's claims, the resulting reaction may affect not only the focal brand but also the influencer's broader

communication credibility. In a networked environment, negative comments, reposts, reviews, and counterclaims can travel quickly and may become part of the public record surrounding the recommendation. Thus, influencer marketing should not be understood as a one-directional transfer of credibility from person to product. The relationship can operate in both directions: the influencer can strengthen the brand, but the brand can also shape how the influencer is subsequently judged. A process-based model therefore needs to account for credibility accumulation, credibility erosion, and the possibility of trust recovery over time.

E. Why audience interpretation matters more than simple exposure

Another important implication follows from the distinction between exposure and influence. Advertising research has often treated exposure as an early stage in a sequence leading toward attitude and behavior. In social media settings, however, exposure may be brief, incidental, and highly selective. Users can scroll past a recommendation, return to it later, read comments before forming a judgment, or seek external information before acting. An influencer message therefore enters a decision environment rather than a closed communication event. Its effect depends on how audiences interpret the message in relation to existing knowledge, identity, social comparison, and perceived needs. Sokolova and Kefi and Balaban, Szabolcs, and Chirică indicate that parasocial processes can help connect the interpersonal experience of following a creator with persuasive outcomes. These findings support a view of influencer marketing in which interpretation mediates the movement from seeing a message to assigning it social and commercial meaning.

Interpretation is especially important for explaining why apparently similar posts can produce very different outcomes. Two creators

may promote the same product, use similar visual formats, and reach audiences of comparable size, yet one recommendation may stimulate detailed discussion while the other receives little attention. The difference may arise from how convincingly the recommendation fits the creator's established narrative. A creator who routinely discusses budget-conscious consumption, for example, may make a price-sensitive recommendation appear consistent with prior content. Another creator known for premium products may frame the same item as an unexpected exception. The product information is similar, but the surrounding interpretive frame is different. Opinion dissemination therefore involves not only the movement of information but also the transformation of information through the communicator's narrative style and audience expectations.

X. Conceptual Propositions and Future Research Directions

A. Propositions for empirical testing

The integrated framework developed in this article generates several propositions that can be tested empirically. First, perceived opinion leadership should positively predict advice-following and information reliance after controlling for audience size. Second, the relationship between influencer credibility and consumer response should be stronger when followers perceive the influencer as similar and psychologically close. Third, higher informative value should increase the probability of secondary discussion because useful information gives followers a reason to save, share, explain, or debate the content. Fourth, platform visibility should moderate the relationship between message quality and diffusion because even credible content requires sufficient algorithmic exposure to enter wider conversations. Finally, product involvement

should condition the relative importance of relational and informational cues, with high-involvement decisions likely to produce more extensive external information search.

These propositions also suggest that future studies should avoid measuring influencer effectiveness with one dependent variable. Brand attitude, purchase intention, engagement, advice-following, electronic word-of-mouth, and actual purchase behavior represent different stages or expressions of influence. A creator may be highly effective at awareness but less effective at purchase conversion, or highly persuasive within a niche community while generating modest overall reach. Multi-stage designs would therefore provide a more accurate picture of how opinion dissemination develops over time.

B. Measurement beyond platform metrics

A major methodological challenge is the overreliance on platform statistics. Views and likes are easy to collect, but they do not necessarily identify the mechanism of persuasion. Future research could combine behavioral measures with psychometric scales assessing perceived expertise, trustworthiness, similarity, authenticity, parasocial interaction, and opinion leadership. Network analysis could then be used to trace secondary circulation and identify whether an influencer's content produces concentrated discussion within a niche or broader diffusion across communities.

Researchers should also distinguish original exposure from repeated exposure. One user may encounter a post directly from the influencer, while another sees it through a friend, search recommendation, or secondary creator. These routes of exposure are not equivalent because each carries a different credibility cue. Comparing first-order and second-order exposure would help clarify whether an influencer's influence depends primarily on the

strength of the source or on the social validation generated by redistribution.

C. Platform and cultural variation

Future studies should examine whether the proposed framework operates similarly across platforms and cultural settings. Platform architecture shapes what counts as persuasive content. Short-form video favors rapid demonstration and emotional immediacy, long-form video allows detailed explanation, livestreaming creates stronger perceptions of real-time interaction, and discussion-centered communities may encourage criticism and comparison. The same influencer can therefore produce different patterns of opinion dissemination depending on where the content is encountered.

Cultural context may also alter the meaning of influence. Expertise, authority, attractiveness, similarity, and authenticity are not interpreted identically across societies. Some audiences may value technical competence, while others may give greater weight to relational warmth or shared experience. Comparative research should therefore test whether perceived opinion leadership, parasocial interaction, and eWOM function as universal mechanisms or as culturally contingent ones. Such work would help move influencer research beyond platform-specific descriptions toward a broader theory of digital opinion leadership.

D. Ethical and governance questions

The expansion of influencer-mediated opinion dissemination raises questions that extend beyond marketing effectiveness. Commercial recommendations can become difficult to distinguish from ordinary conversation, particularly when sponsorship disclosure is weak or when content is embedded in entertainment. The problem becomes more serious when audiences make consequential decisions on the basis of simplified or emotionally persuasive claims. Future research should therefore

investigate how disclosure, media literacy, platform governance, and advertising regulation shape the conditions under which influencer communication is considered legitimate.

The ethical issue is not that influence exists; influence is a normal part of social communication. The concern is whether audiences can recognize the interests and evidence behind a persuasive message. Transparency can support informed judgment, while consistent disclosure and responsible content practices can help protect the credibility on which long-term influencer relationships depend. A mature theory of influencer marketing should consequently consider both commercial performance and the quality of the information environment created by influencer activity.

E. Toward a process-based view of influencer effectiveness

A process-based view also changes how campaign success should be interpreted. Instead of assuming that exposure leads directly to purchase, researchers can examine a sequence in which attention creates an opportunity for interpretation, interpretation creates a basis for evaluation, evaluation creates the possibility of recommendation, and recommendation creates further circulation. Breakpoints can occur at every stage. A viewer may notice the content but reject the source; a follower may trust the influencer but find the product irrelevant; a satisfied consumer may purchase without sharing the content; or a widely shared post may create awareness without producing long-term brand trust. This staged perspective makes it possible to identify where influence is created and where it is lost.

It also highlights the value of longitudinal research. Influencer relationships develop through repeated exposure rather than through a single advertisement. Trust may increase when

recommendations remain consistent with previous content, but it may decline when commercial intensity becomes excessive. Similarly, an influencer's opinion leadership can change as audiences grow, topics shift, or platform norms evolve. Future research should therefore examine influencer effectiveness as a dynamic process rather than a stable property of a creator. This approach would better reflect the actual conditions of contemporary social media communication.

Taken together, these arguments point toward a broader understanding of influencer marketing as an infrastructure for socially embedded persuasion. The commercial message does not begin with the sponsored post and end with the purchase decision. It can circulate through conversations before exposure, direct interaction during exposure, and peer exchange after exposure. The influencer's contribution is therefore partly informational and partly organizational: the creator helps audiences decide which details deserve attention, which comparisons seem relevant, and which kinds of evidence feel sufficient. This does not mean that followers accept recommendations passively. On the contrary, the strongest influence may occur when a creator reduces search costs while leaving room for audiences to confirm, challenge, or reinterpret the recommendation. Such a perspective also explains why engagement metrics should be read as signals of communication activity rather than definitive evidence of persuasion.

XI. Conclusion

Influencer marketing should be understood as a form of mediated opinion dissemination rather than merely as a contemporary advertising format. The central communication process begins when an influencer interprets information for a particular audience, continues when followers evaluate

that interpretation through trust and relational connection, and expands when the content is redistributed through peer networks and platform systems. Classic opinion leadership theory remains useful in this environment because it directs attention to interpersonal mediation, but the digital setting requires a more recursive and networked account of influence.

The literature reviewed here suggests that influencer effectiveness cannot be explained by follower count alone. Expertise, trustworthiness, similarity, informative value, parasocial interaction, authenticity, content quality, and audience fit all contribute to the conditions under which influence can occur. Recent research further suggests that perceived opinion leadership may outperform popularity as an indicator of engagement and advice-following. The theoretical implication is that influence should be studied as a process in which communication, relationship, and distribution interact rather than as a single attribute possessed by a creator.

For marketers, the practical lesson is equally clear. The strongest influencer strategy is not necessarily the one that purchases the largest audience. It is the one that identifies a communicator who can make information meaningful, credible, and socially shareable for a specific community. In an environment saturated with sponsored content, the capacity to lead interpretation and stimulate voluntary dissemination may matter more than the ability to generate exposure alone. Future research should therefore move from asking how many people an influencer can reach to asking how, why, and through whom an influencer changes what people discuss, believe, recommend, and eventually do. This process-oriented interpretation also provides a clearer basis for comparing campaigns, audiences, and platforms without reducing influence to a single

engagement statistic.

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