



Perceived authenticity and customer trust in social media influencer marketing: Insights from consumers in Guyana

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Abstract

Purpose: The study examines the effect of perceived authenticity and influencer credibility on customer trust in social media influencer marketing in Guyana. Specifically, it investigated how perceived authenticity of social media influencers affects customer trust, how influencer credibility shapes trust, and how these factors influence consumer engagement with promoted brands. The aim was to provide insights for designing effective influencer marketing strategies that foster trust and long-term brand loyalty in emerging digital markets.

Methodology/Design: A qualitative research design was adopted, using in-depth interviews with 25 active social media users in Guyana. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Trustworthiness, reliability, and validity were ensured through member checks, triangulation with prior studies, and consistent coding procedures. Findings were interpreted through the Source Credibility Theory and the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) Theory to understand how authenticity and credibility influence internal trust responses and consumer behavior.

Findings: The results revealed that perceived authenticity strengthens customer trust through genuine communication, consistency, and emotional relatability, while influencer credibility enhances trust through expertise, honesty in sponsored content, and alignment with brand values. Both factors were found to significantly influence consumer engagement and willingness to follow influencer recommendations.

Implications: Marketers and influencers should prioritize authenticity and credibility when designing campaigns, select aligned influencers, and promote transparent communication to build trust and engagement.

Originality/Value: The study contributes to the literature by applying Source Credibility and S–O–R theories in the Caribbean context, offering empirical evidence for effective influencer marketing strategies in emerging markets.

Keywords: Social media influencer marketing, perceived authenticity, influencer credibility, customer trust, Guyana, source credibility theory, S–O–R theory

Introduction

In recent years, social media has changed how firms connect with customers. Many brands now work with social media influencers to promote products and services in a more personal way. Influencers are seen as ordinary people who share their daily lives, opinions, and experiences online. Because of this, followers often feel close to them and trust their recommendations. This shift from traditional advertising to influencer marketing has created new opportunities for businesses, especially in developing and emerging markets.

A key issue in influencer marketing is authenticity. Perceived authenticity refers to the extent to which followers believe that an influencer is genuine, honest, and true to their values (Audrezet *et al.*, 2020) ^[2]. When influencers appear real and transparent, audiences are more likely to accept their messages. On the other hand, when promotions look forced or purely commercial, followers may question the influencer's motives. Research shows that authenticity plays a strong role in shaping attitudes toward influencers and the brands they endorse (Lee & Eastin, 2021) ^[14].

Customer trust is another important concept in this area. Trust can be described as the willingness of consumers to rely on a brand or individual based on positive expectations (Chopra *et al.*, 2021) ^[6]. In the online environment, trust becomes even more critical because consumers cannot physically examine products before purchase. Studies indicate that influencer credibility, honesty, and consistency

help to build trust, which then influences purchase intention and loyalty (Santiago *et al.*, 2022) ^[22].

The relationship between perceived authenticity and trust has gained attention in recent academic work. Scholars argue that when followers view influencers as authentic, they are more likely to trust both the influencer and the promoted brand (Kim & Kim, 2021) ^[12]. Authentic storytelling, disclosure of sponsored content, and alignment between the influencer's lifestyle and the product all strengthen this effect. In contrast, misleading endorsements may damage trust and reduce brand value.

While many studies have explored influencer marketing in Europe, Asia, and North America, limited research has focused on smaller markets such as Guyana. Guyana is experiencing rapid digital growth, with increasing use of platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok. Businesses in Guyana are beginning to collaborate with influencers to reach young and tech-savvy consumers. However, little is known about how consumers in Guyana perceive influencer authenticity and how this perception shapes their trust. Cultural values, social norms, and market structure may influence how authenticity is interpreted in this context.

The understanding of perceived authenticity and customer trust in Guyana is important for both scholars and practitioners. As influencer marketing expands in the region, brands need clear insight into what makes influencer communication believable and trustworthy. This study therefore seeks to explore how consumers in Guyana

perceive authenticity in social media influencer marketing and how these perceptions influence their level of trust.

Problem Statement

Influencer marketing has become a popular promotional strategy in many parts of the world, including Guyana. Businesses are investing in influencers to promote products and services with the hope of building stronger relationships with consumers. However, not all influencer campaigns achieve the desired results. In some cases, followers question the sincerity of influencers, especially when promotional content appears overly commercial or inconsistent with the influencer's personal image.

Although previous studies have confirmed that authenticity is linked to trust and positive consumer outcomes (Audrezet *et al.*, 2020; Kim & Kim, 2021) ^[2, 12], most of this research has been conducted in developed economies. There is limited empirical evidence from Caribbean or South American contexts, particularly Guyana. Without local evidence, brands may adopt strategies that do not align with the expectations and values of Guyanese consumers.

Furthermore, as influencer marketing continues to grow, concerns about fake followers, undisclosed sponsorships, and misleading endorsements have increased. These practices can reduce consumer confidence and weaken trust in both influencers and brands (Lee & Eastin, 2021) ^[14]. If perceived authenticity is low, customer trust may decline, which can negatively affect brand reputation and sales performance.

Given the limited research in Guyana and the rising use of influencer marketing in the country, there is a need to examine how perceived authenticity influences customer trust among consumers in this setting. This study aims to fill this gap by providing empirical evidence from Guyana.

Significance of the Study

The study will contribute to academic knowledge by expanding the literature on influencer marketing into the Guyanese context. Most existing research has focused on large and highly developed markets. In examining consumers in Guyana, this study will provide insight into how authenticity and trust operate in a smaller and growing digital economy. It will also add to current discussions on authenticity as a key driver of consumer trust in online environments (Santiago *et al.*, 2022) ^[22].

The findings will also be useful for businesses and marketing professionals in Guyana. Understanding what makes influencers appear genuine and trustworthy will help brands design better campaigns. Companies will be able to select influencers whose values match their brand identity and communicate in ways that strengthen consumer trust.

In addition, social media influencers themselves can benefit from the results. The study will highlight the importance of transparency, consistency, and honest communication. Influencers who maintain authentic relationships with their followers are more likely to sustain long-term trust and engagement.

Policy makers and regulatory bodies may also find the study helpful. As digital marketing grows, there is a need for clear guidelines on sponsored content and disclosure. Evidence from this study can inform policies that protect consumers while supporting fair marketing practices.

Research Objective

The study aims to examine how perceived authenticity in social media influencer marketing influences customer trust among consumers in Guyana. Specifically, the study seeks to

1. Examine the effect of perceived authenticity of social media influencers on customer trust among consumers in Guyana and;
2. Assess the relationship between influencer credibility and customer trust in social media influencer marketing in Guyana.

Literature Review

Theoretical Underpinning

Two main theories: Source Credibility Theory and the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) Theory underpin the study. These theories help explain how perceived authenticity in influencer marketing can shape customer trust among consumers in Guyana.

Source Credibility Theory

Source Credibility Theory states that people are more likely to believe a message when the source is seen as trustworthy, knowledgeable, and reliable (Ohanian, 1990) ^[19]. In social media marketing, the influencer is the source of the message. When followers see the influencer as authentic and honest, they are more likely to trust both the influencer and the promoted brand (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020) ^[23]. If authenticity is low, credibility may decline, and trust can weaken. This theory therefore supports the idea that perceived authenticity strengthens customer trust.

Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) Theory

The S–O–R Theory explains how external factors influence internal feelings and then lead to a response (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974) ^[18]. In this study, perceived authenticity acts as the stimulus. Customer trust represents the internal reaction. The response may include positive attitudes toward the influencer or brand (Kim & Kim, 2021) ^[12]. This framework helps to show how authentic influencer content can lead to stronger trust among consumers in Guyana.

Perceived Authenticity

Perceived authenticity refers to the degree to which consumers believe that an influencer is genuine, honest, and consistent in their communication (Audrezet *et al.*, 2020) ^[2]. Authentic influencers are seen as transparent and trustworthy, which increases followers' confidence in their recommendations. When authenticity is low, consumers may perceive messages as biased or overly commercial, reducing trust and engagement (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020) ^[23].

Customer Trust

Customer trust is the belief that a brand or individual will act in the consumer's best interest and provide reliable information or products (Chopra *et al.*, 2021) ^[6]. In online marketing, trust is crucial because consumers cannot physically verify products. Trust is strengthened by influencer credibility, honesty, and consistency, leading to greater acceptance of recommendations and higher purchase intentions (Kim & Kim, 2021) ^[12].

Social Media Influencer Marketing

Social media influencer marketing involves brands collaborating with individuals who have a strong online

presence to promote products or services (Lee & Eastin, 2021) ^[14]. Influencers can create personalized and relatable content that engages followers more effectively than traditional advertising. Their perceived authenticity and credibility play a critical role in shaping consumer attitudes, trust, and purchase behavior.

Examine the effect of perceived authenticity of social media influencers on customer trust among consumers in Guyana

Perceived authenticity has become a central concept in social media influencer marketing, significantly shaping how consumers develop trust toward influencers and the brands they endorse. Authenticity is typically defined as the perception that an influencer is genuine, transparent, and consistent in their values, beliefs, and online persona (Audrezet *et al.*, 2020) ^[2]. In digital marketing environments, where consumers cannot physically evaluate products or services, the perception of authenticity plays a crucial role in guiding consumer decisions. When followers perceive influencers as authentic, they are more likely to trust their recommendations, view the promoted brand positively, and form favorable attitudes toward both the influencer and the product (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020) ^[23].

Authentic communication takes many forms, including sharing personal experiences, maintaining transparency about sponsorships, and ensuring consistency between content and claimed values. Such practices help influencers establish emotional connections with their followers, which reinforces trust and encourages engagement (Lee & Eastin, 2021) ^[14]. Conversely, when followers detect inauthenticity such as over-commercialization, forced promotional messages, or inconsistencies in messaging trust may decline, leading to skepticism, disengagement, and reduced likelihood of following recommendations. Therefore, authenticity is not merely a superficial trait but a critical element in establishing meaningful relationships between influencers and consumers.

Empirical evidence across various markets, including Europe and Asia, demonstrates a strong positive relationship between perceived authenticity and customer trust in social media contexts (Kim & Kim, 2021; Audrezet *et al.*, 2020) ^[2], ^[21]. Supporting these findings, a study conducted in Ghana by Osei and Adomako (2022) ^[20] found that followers were significantly more likely to trust influencers who were perceived as genuine and transparent. This study highlights that authenticity directly affects consumer trust in a local African context, illustrating that followers place high value on honesty and credibility when evaluating online influencers.

These findings can be explained through the lens of Source Credibility Theory, which posits that the effectiveness of a message depends on the perceived trustworthiness, expertise, and honesty of the communicator (Ohanian, 1990) ^[19]. In the context of influencer marketing, when followers perceive an influencer as both credible and authentic, they are more inclined to accept recommendations and develop trust in the promoted brand. Authenticity enhances the influencer's perceived credibility, which in turn reinforces follower trust and promotes positive attitudes toward both the influencer and associated products. As a result, Perceived authenticity serves as a key determinant of customer trust in social media influencer marketing.

Relationship between influencer credibility and customer trust in social media influencer marketing in Guyana

Influencer credibility is a critical determinant of customer trust in social media marketing. Credibility is generally defined as the extent to which followers perceive an influencer to be knowledgeable, reliable, and honest in their recommendations (Ohanian, 1990) ^[19]. In online marketing environments, where consumers cannot physically evaluate products or services, credibility becomes essential in reducing uncertainty. When followers view an influencer as credible, they are more likely to trust the messages conveyed and accept the recommendations, which can positively influence their attitudes toward both the influencer and the promoted brand. This trust, in turn, can drive key marketing outcomes, such as purchase intentions, engagement with content, and brand loyalty (Chopra *et al.*, 2021) ^[6].

Several factors contribute to building influencer credibility. Expertise in a specific field allows followers to see the influencer as an authoritative source of information, while consistency in content helps maintain a sense of reliability over time. Transparency regarding sponsored content and alignment between the influencer's personal image and the brand further enhance credibility (Kim & Kim, 2021) ^[12]. For instance, when influencers clearly disclose partnerships while maintaining authentic and consistent content, followers are more likely to perceive them as trustworthy and genuine. Conversely, inconsistencies in messaging, exaggerated claims, or overly commercialized posts can erode credibility, ultimately weakening trust and reducing consumer engagement.

The Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) framework provides a useful lens for understanding the relationship between influencer credibility and customer trust. According to this theory, external stimuli in the environment influence the internal state of individuals, which then drives their behavioral responses (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974) ^[18]. In social media influencer marketing, a credible influencer serves as the stimulus. This stimulus triggers internal reactions in consumers, such as trust, confidence, and positive emotional responses. These internal reactions, which constitute the organism stage, then influence behavioral responses, including engagement with content, following influencer recommendations, and making purchases. Thus, the S–O–R framework explains how credibility shapes consumer behavior through psychological processes.

Empirical evidence from emerging markets supports this theoretical perspective. A study conducted in Nigeria by Eze and Okafor (2022) ^[9] revealed that influencer credibility significantly enhanced consumer trust. Credible influencers acted as effective stimuli that evoked positive emotional and cognitive responses in followers, which then encouraged engagement and purchase intentions. These findings illustrate that credibility functions as a stimulus in the online marketing context, influencing internal trust responses (organism) and resulting in favorable consumer behavior (response). Additional studies have also shown that transparent communication, domain expertise, and consistency of messaging amplify credibility and trust, suggesting that influencers who maintain these qualities are more effective in building sustainable relationships with consumers (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020) ^[23].

Empirical Review

Lopez and Vega (2024) employed a mixed methods design in San José, Costa Rica, surveying 260 social media users and conducting 30 in-depth interviews to explore how influencer engagement quality, perceived credibility, and transparency influence trust and brand loyalty. Quantitative data were analyzed using structural equation modelling (SEM), while interview responses were subjected to thematic analysis. The findings revealed that influencer credibility positively predicted customer trust, and that trust mediated the relationship between engagement quality and loyalty. Qualitative insights suggested that transparent disclosure of sponsorships and interactive communication increased followers' trust in influencers and the brands they promoted.

Additionally, Thompson and Richards (2024) [24] carried out a survey of 300 social media users in Kingston, Jamaica to assess the relationship between influencer credibility and customer trust in digital advertising. Using hierarchical regression models, the research examined how influencer expertise, honesty, and consistency jointly influenced trust in endorsed brands. The results showed that credibility had a strong positive effect on customer trust, with influencer honesty emerging as the most influential credibility component. However, the effect of expertise was moderated by users' prior experience with the product category, indicating that credibility matters differently depending on consumer familiarity with products and influencers.

More so, Kouassi and Yao (2023) [13] conducted a quantitative study involving 210 social media users in Abidjan, Ivory Coast to investigate the effect of influencer authenticity on customer trust and purchase intention. Data were collected through structured questionnaires administered to active Instagram and Facebook users aged 18–45, and relationships between perceived authenticity and trust were tested using multiple regression analysis. The study found that influencers perceived as authentic and transparent were significantly associated with higher levels of customer trust and stronger purchase intentions. While authenticity consistently predicted trust across demographic groups, the strength of the relationship was higher among younger users (18–30), suggesting that authenticity may be especially important for digitally native consumers in emerging markets.

Methodology

Philosophical Underpinning

The study was guided by a pragmatist philosophical underpinning, which emphasizes the use of practical approaches to explore research problems and integrate multiple sources of evidence to generate meaningful insights (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) [7]. The pragmatist paradigm allowed the study to focus on understanding the relationship between perceived authenticity, influencer credibility, and customer trust in social media influencer marketing while employing methods that provided both depth and clarity.

Research Design

A qualitative research design was adopted to gain an in-depth understanding of consumers' perceptions and experiences with social media influencers in Guyana. This design facilitated the exploration of complex social phenomena such as trust formation, authenticity perception, and credibility assessment in online environments.

Population and Sample

The study involved 25 participants, selected purposively based on their active engagement with social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok. Participants included consumers aged 18–35 who regularly interacted with social media influencer content, ensuring that responses reflected relevant and recent experiences with digital marketing practices. This sample size was deemed adequate for qualitative inquiry as it allowed the researchers to gather rich, detailed insights while ensuring manageability of data (Marshall, 1996) [17].

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed participants to freely express their views while ensuring that key research questions were addressed. Interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim to maintain data accuracy. Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns and recurring themes in the data, following a systematic process of coding and categorization (Braun & Clarke, 2006) [4].

Trustworthiness, Reliability and Validity

The trustworthiness of the study was ensured through multiple strategies. Credibility was enhanced through member checks, where participants reviewed transcripts and preliminary findings to confirm accurate interpretation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) [15]. Dependability was addressed through an audit trail documenting all stages of data collection and analysis, providing transparency of research procedures.

Reliability was strengthened by using consistent interview protocols across all participants. Validity was supported through triangulation of findings with prior literature and theoretical frameworks, including the Source Credibility Theory and the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) framework (Ohanian, 1990; Mehrabian & Russell, 1974) [18, 19].

Data Analysis Technique

The study employed thematic analysis as the primary data analysis technique. Thematic analysis was chosen because it allows for the systematic identification, analysis, and interpretation of patterns or themes within qualitative data, providing insights into participants' perceptions and experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006) [4].

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were observed throughout the study. Participants were fully informed about the purpose of the research, and informed consent was obtained before interviews. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained to protect participants' identities and ensure honest and open responses.

Results

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

This section presents the demographic profile of the 25 respondents who participated in the study. The understanding of the demographics helps provide context for interpreting the findings, as factors such as age, gender, education level, and social media usage may influence perceptions of influencer authenticity, credibility, and trust. The demographics were gathered through the interview sessions and summarized in Table 1

The table indicates that the sample was fairly balanced in terms of gender, with slightly more females (52%) than males (48%). Most respondents were aged between 25 and 30 years, representing a young adult population actively engaged with social media. In terms of education, a majority (60%) held undergraduate degrees, suggesting that participants had the literacy and digital skills to interact with influencer content effectively. Social media usage was high, with 88% of respondents spending at least one hour per day on platforms, highlighting the relevance of the sample for exploring social media influencer marketing dynamics. These demographic characteristics align with findings from prior studies. For example, Mensah and Ofori (2022) observed that Ghanaian social media users aged 25–35 were

highly engaged with digital content and often relied on influencer recommendations for product decisions. Similarly, Eze and Okafor (2022) [9] found that Nigerian social media users who were educated and digitally active demonstrated greater trust in credible influencers, particularly when content was perceived as authentic. In Jamaica, Brown and Lewis (2024) [5] reported that young adults with higher educational backgrounds were more likely to engage with influencers and showed heightened responsiveness to influencer credibility and authenticity. Collectively, these studies support the notion that age, education, and active social media use are critical factors shaping consumer trust in influencer marketing contexts across diverse cultural settings.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (n = 25)

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	12	48
	Female	13	52
Age (years)	18-24	8	32
	25-30	10	40
	31-35	7	28
Education Level	Senior High School	5	20
	Undergraduate Degree	15	60
	Postgraduate Degree	5	20
Frequency of Social Media Use	Less than 1 hour/day	3	12
	1–3 hours/day	12	48
	More than 3 hours/day	10	40

Source: Field Data, 2026

Trustworthiness, Reliability and Validity

Following the presentation of respondents’ demographic characteristics, it was essential to evaluate the trustworthiness, reliability, and validity of the data collected to ensure the credibility and accuracy of findings for the study objectives. Table 2 summarizes the trustworthiness, reliability, and validity measures for the study objectives. For objective 1, credibility was ensured through member checks and triangulation with prior studies from Ghana and Ivory Coast (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) [15]. Reliability was maintained by using consistent interview protocols and cross-checking codes with the supervisor (Braun & Clarke, 2006) [4]. Validity was supported by aligning findings with

the Source Credibility Theory and previous empirical research (Ohanian, 1990) [19]. Regarding objective 2, trustworthiness was enhanced through peer debriefing and confirming data saturation. Reliability was ensured through consistent coding and supervisor validation, while validity was strengthened by triangulating with studies from Nigeria and Jamaica and interpreting results using the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) framework (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974) [18]. These measures confirmed that the data for both objectives were trustworthy, reliable, and valid, providing confidence in the study findings.

Table 2: Trustworthiness, Reliability, and Validity for Study Objectives

Research Objective	Trustworthiness	Reliability	Validity
Objective 1: Examine the effect of perceived authenticity of social media influencers on customer trust among consumers in Guyana	Credibility ensured through member checks with participants and triangulation with prior studies from Ghana and Ivory Coast (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) [15]	Consistent interview protocols for all 25 respondents; coding cross-checked by researcher and supervisor (Braun & Clarke, 2006) [4]	Findings were aligned with Source Credibility Theory and triangulated with previous empirical studies to ensure construct validity (Ohanian, 1990) [19]
Objective 2: Assess the relationship between influencer credibility and customer trust in social media influencer marketing in Guyana	Peer debriefing and repeated review of codes; data saturation achieved with 25 interviews (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) [15]	Coding consistency maintained across transcripts; supervisor validated analysis steps to ensure dependability (Braun & Clarke, 2006) [4]	Triangulated with studies from Nigeria and Jamaica; interpreted within Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) framework for validity (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974) [18]

Source: Field Data, 2026

Objective 1: Examine the effect of perceived authenticity of social media influencers on customer trust among consumers in Guyana

This objective explored how consumers perceive authenticity in social media influencers and how it influences their trust in the influencers and the brands they

promote. Three themes emerged from the interview analysis as follows:

Theme 1: Genuine and Transparent Communication

Respondents emphasized that influencers who openly share personal experiences and are transparent about sponsorships build greater trust.

“I follow influencers who tell their real experiences with products, not just what brands want us to hear. That makes me trust them more.” (Participant 7)

Theme 2: Consistency between Persona and Content

Participants noted that authenticity was reinforced when influencers’ online content consistently reflected their values and personality.

“When an influencer posts different things all the time and it doesn’t match who they are, I feel like they are just advertising. But those who are consistent, I trust them.” (Participant 14)

Theme 3: Emotional Connection and Relatability

Respondents reported that authenticity helped them feel emotionally connected to influencers, which increased their willingness to trust recommendations.

“I trust influencers more when I feel like they understand people like me and share things I can relate to.” (Participant 3)

Objective 2: Assess the relationship between influencer credibility and customer trust in social media influencer marketing in Guyana

This objective examined how consumers assess influencer credibility and how credibility affects their trust and engagement with promoted brands. Three themes resulted from this objective as follows:

Theme 1: Expertise in Relevant Domains

Participants highlighted that credibility increased when influencers demonstrated knowledge or expertise in the area they promote.

“I trust tech influencers more if they really know about gadgets and can explain things properly.” (Participant 11)

Theme 2: Honesty and Transparency in Sponsored Content

Respondents emphasized that credible influencers disclose sponsorships and present unbiased opinions, which strengthens trust.

“If an influencer clearly says it’s a sponsored post and still gives honest feedback, I know I can rely on their opinion.” (Participant 19)

Theme 3: Alignment between Influencer and Brand

Participants indicated that credibility was enhanced when the influencer’s image and values matched the brand being promoted.

“When the influencer’s style and beliefs match the product, it feels genuine. I trust that more than random promotions.” (Participant 5)

Discussion of Findings

Objective 1: Examine the effect of perceived authenticity of social media influencers on customer trust among consumers in Guyana

This objective sought to understand how consumers perceive the authenticity of social media influencers and how this perception shapes their trust in both the influencer and the brands they promote. Analysis of the interviews revealed three key themes: genuine and transparent communication, consistency between persona and content, and emotional connection and relatability.

Theme 1: Genuine and Transparent Communication

Respondents highlighted that influencers who are honest about their experiences and transparent about sponsored content build stronger trust. Participants noted that authenticity is often tied to seeing influencers share personal stories and clearly disclose partnerships.

“I follow influencers who tell their real experiences with products, not just what brands want us to hear. That makes me trust them more.” (Participant 7)

This finding aligns with studies from Barbados and Haiti, where consumers indicated that trust increased when influencers communicated openly about endorsements and avoided exaggerated claims (Pierre & Clarke, 2021; James, 2022) ^[11, 21]. According to the Source Credibility Theory, the perceived honesty and trustworthiness of a communicator directly influence the acceptance of their messages (Ohanian, 1990) ^[19]. In this context, authentic and transparent influencers are seen as credible sources, which strengthens follower trust.

Theme 2: Consistency between Persona and Content

Participants stressed that authenticity is reinforced when influencers’ content aligns with their established personality and values. Inconsistencies were perceived as inauthentic and reduced trust.

“When an influencer posts different things all the time and it doesn’t match who they are, I feel like they are just advertising. But those who are consistent, I trust them.” (Participant 14)

Similar patterns were reported in Norway and Sweden, where followers were more likely to trust influencers whose content was coherent and matched their public persona (Lund & Olsen, 2020; Bergström, 2021) ^[3, 16]. This underscores the relevance of the Source Credibility Theory, as consistency in communication enhances perceived expertise and reliability, making followers more receptive to the influencer’s recommendations.

Theme 3: Emotional Connection and Relatability

Respondents revealed that authenticity also creates an emotional bond with influencers, increasing the likelihood of trusting their recommendations.

“I trust influencers more when I feel like they understand people like me and share things I can relate to.” (Participant 3)

Evidence from Haiti and Barbados shows that followers develop trust when they feel influencers are relatable and understand their needs (James, 2022; Pierre & Clarke, 2021) ^[11, 21]. Source Credibility Theory explains that when influencers are perceived as honest and relatable, they are considered trustworthy, which encourages followers to accept and act on their messages. Emotional connection therefore becomes a key mechanism through which authenticity translates into customer trust.

The findings indicate that perceived authenticity, through honesty, consistency and relatability, significantly enhances consumer trust in social media influencers in Guyana.

Objective 2: Assess the relationship between influencer credibility and customer trust in social media influencer marketing in Guyana

This objective explored how consumers evaluate influencer credibility and how it shapes their trust and engagement with promoted brands. Analysis revealed three main themes:

expertise in relevant domains, honesty and transparency in sponsored content, and alignment between influencer and brand.

Theme 1: Expertise in Relevant Domains

Respondents reported that credibility was strongly influenced by the influencer's knowledge and skills in the area they promoted. Expertise provided assurance that the influencer's recommendations were reliable and informed.

"I trust tech influencers more if they really know about gadgets and can explain things properly." (Participant 11)

Similar findings were reported in Jamaica and France, where followers placed higher trust in influencers who demonstrated domain-specific expertise, viewing them as authoritative sources of information (Brown & Lewis, 2024; Dupont & Martin, 2021) [5, 8]. The S-O-R Theory explains this process by framing the influencer's expertise as a stimulus that triggers positive internal responses (organism) such as trust, which in turn leads to favorable behaviors (response) like engagement and purchase intention (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974) [18].

Theme 2: Honesty and Transparency in Sponsored Content

Participants emphasized that credible influencers disclose sponsored content and provide unbiased opinions. Transparency helped reduce skepticism and increased consumer confidence in the recommendations.

"If an influencer clearly says it's a sponsored post and still gives honest feedback, I know I can rely on their opinion." (Participant 19)

Research from Spain and the UAE supports this, showing that disclosure of sponsorships and perceived honesty significantly increased consumer trust and engagement with influencer content (García & López, 2020; Al-Mansoori, 2022) [1, 10]. According to the S-O-R framework, the clear and honest communication of promotional content acts as a stimulus that evokes trust in consumers (organism), prompting positive responses (response) such as following recommendations or interacting with the brand.

Theme 3: Alignment between Influencer and Brand

Respondents indicated that credibility was enhanced when the influencer's values, style, and public image aligned with the brand being promoted. Misalignment reduced trust and the likelihood of engagement.

"When the influencer's style and beliefs match the product, it feels genuine. I trust that more than random promotions." (Participant 5)

Similar trends were observed in Jamaica and France, where brand-influencer fit was critical to consumer perception of credibility and trustworthiness (Brown & Lewis, 2024; Dupont & Martin, 2021) [5, 8]. In the S-O-R perspective, alignment acts as a stimulus that signals authenticity and relevance, encouraging the internal trust response (organism) and resulting in positive consumer behavior (response) such as brand engagement and purchase intention. These findings suggest that influencer credibility through expertise, honesty and brand alignment plays a pivotal role in shaping consumer trust in social media marketing in Guyana.

Conclusion

The study explored how perceived authenticity and influencer credibility influence customer trust in social media influencer marketing among consumers in Guyana.

Findings from the interviews revealed that authenticity, demonstrated through genuine communication, consistency, and relatability, significantly strengthens trust. Similarly, influencer credibility, shown through expertise, honesty in sponsored content, and alignment with the brand, plays a pivotal role in fostering consumer confidence and engagement.

The results align with the Source Credibility Theory, which highlights trustworthiness and honesty as critical to message acceptance, and the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) Theory, which explains how credible influencers act as stimuli that trigger internal trust responses, leading to positive consumer behaviors. Insights from prior studies in Barbados, Haiti, Norway, Sweden, Jamaica, France, Spain, and the UAE support these findings, suggesting that the mechanisms through which authenticity and credibility shape trust are consistent across diverse cultural contexts. Essentially, the study confirms that for social media influencer marketing to be effective, influencers must maintain transparency, demonstrate expertise and ensure alignment with their promoted brands.

Implications of the Study

The study findings offer both theoretical and practical implications for marketers, businesses, and future researchers interested in social media marketing strategies.

Theoretical Implications

The study reinforces the relevance of the Source Credibility Theory and the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) Theory in understanding consumer behavior in the context of social media marketing. In demonstrating that authenticity and credibility directly impact trust, the findings provide empirical support for the idea that the perceived honesty, expertise, and alignment of influencers shape consumer responses (Ohanian, 1990; Mehrabian & Russell, 1974) [18, 19].

The results also extend existing knowledge by showing that these theoretical principles apply in a Caribbean context, particularly in Guyana, where online consumer behavior is influenced by cultural norms and social media engagement patterns. This suggests that both theories are robust across different cultural and market settings, emphasizing the need to consider trustworthiness and credibility as central constructs in influencer marketing research.

Practical Implications for Marketers

For marketers and brands, the study highlights the importance of carefully selecting influencers who are both authentic and credible. Influencers should maintain transparent communication, consistently align their content with their persona, and demonstrate expertise in their domain to foster trust.

Brands can leverage these insights by:

- 1. Prioritizing Authenticity:** Encouraging influencers to share personal experiences, disclose sponsorships, and maintain consistency in messaging to build stronger emotional connections with followers.

2. **Focusing on Credibility:** Partnering with influencers who have domain expertise, exhibit honesty in sponsored posts, and align closely with the brand's image to enhance consumer trust and engagement.
3. **Enhancing Engagement Strategies:** Designing campaigns that highlight influencer relatability and expertise can increase follower participation, brand loyalty, and purchase intentions.

Implications for Social Media Influencers

Influencers themselves can use these findings to improve their personal branding and effectiveness in marketing partnerships. The demonstration of authenticity and credibility can enable influencers to increase their followers' trust, improve engagement rates and strengthen long-term relationships with brands and audiences.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several practical recommendations are proposed for marketers, brands, and social media influencers to enhance customer trust and engagement in influencer marketing in Guyana. The recommendations aim to translate the insights on perceived authenticity and influencer credibility into actionable strategies.

Recommendations for Marketers and Brands

1. **Select Authentic and Credible Influencers:** Partner with influencers who demonstrate honesty, transparency, and expertise in their domain. This ensures that followers perceive messages as trustworthy and increases the likelihood of engagement and purchase intentions.
2. **Ensure Brand-Influencer Alignment:** Collaborate with influencers whose values, style, and content align with the brand. Proper alignment reinforces credibility and helps followers perceive promotions as genuine rather than forced marketing.
3. **Promote Transparent Sponsored Content:** Encourage influencers to clearly disclose sponsored posts while sharing honest opinions. Transparency fosters trust and prevents follower skepticism.
4. **Monitor Content Consistency:** Regularly review influencer content to ensure that messaging aligns with the influencer's persona and brand guidelines, maintaining both credibility and authenticity.

Recommendations for Social Media Influencers

Maintain Consistency and Relatability: Influencers should consistently post content that reflects their personality and values while remaining relatable to their audience. This builds emotional connection and strengthens trust.

1. **Develop Expertise in Relevant Domains:** Influencers should focus on areas where they have knowledge and experience, as expertise increases perceived credibility and follower confidence in their recommendations.
2. **Practice Honest Communication:** Influencers should disclose partnerships, give balanced reviews, and avoid exaggerated claims to reinforce trustworthiness.

These recommendations highlight the need for authentic, credible, and aligned influencer partnerships to foster trust, engagement, and brand loyalty in social media marketing. The implementation of these strategies such as brands and influencers can maximize the impact of their marketing campaigns in Guyana and similar emerging markets.

Limitations and Direction for Future Study

This study was limited by its small sample size of 25 respondents and focus on social media users in Guyana, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, only qualitative interviews were used, so broader quantitative patterns could not be captured. Future research could expand the sample to include multiple Caribbean countries, employ mixed methods or surveys for larger-scale data, and examine additional factors such as cultural influences, platform-specific engagement, or visual content in influencer marketing to provide deeper insights into customer trust.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the research, authorship, or publication of this study. The study was conducted independently, and no financial, personal, or professional relationships influenced the results or interpretations presented.

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