

Evaluating Consumer Psychology Theories in Explaining the Success and Failure of Influencer Marketing Campaigns

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Research Question: To what extent do consumer psychology theories explain the success and failure of influencer marketing campaigns?

Abstract

This paper explores the psychological foundations of influencer marketing by examining how consumer psychology theories explain the success and failure of contemporary campaigns. The paper begins by tracing the evolution of marketing from traditional mass communication to digital and social-media based strategies, establishing influencer marketing as a key outcome of this transformation. The paper then applies three core theories, the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), Source Credibility Theory and Bandura's Social Learning Theory to analyse how consumers process persuasive messages and develop trust towards influencers. Through two case studies, Fenty Beauty's successful influencer strategy and Pepsi's failed Kendall Jenner campaign, the study demonstrates how alignment between influencer identity, message authenticity and audience perception determines campaign effectiveness. The findings suggest that these psychological frameworks explain the outcomes of influencer marketing campaigns to a great extent, though a comprehensive understanding also requires consideration of socio-cultural factors.

Keywords: Influencer marketing, consumer psychology, Elaboration Likelihood Model, Source Credibility Theory, Social Learning Theory

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I. Introduction

The marketing industry has experienced numerous eras over the past years, each influenced by emerging technologies and changes in customer behavior. Marketing through print, radio and television commercials began in the traditional age (pre-internet) when marketing campaigns aimed to create broad awareness and build brand recognition, often with memorable slogans and jingles. As the concept of the internet spread and became accepted, a paradigm shift occurred in marketing with the introduction of digital marketing. In the last two decades, marketing has undergone a further transformation due to social media. At the start of October 2025, it was reported that there were 5.66 billion social media "user identities" around the world (Datareportal, 2025). The rise and popularity of social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok, have not only provided brands with a new and powerful avenue to market their products but also enabled individuals to build large networks and engage with audiences, giving rise to a new type of marketing: influencer marketing.

The ability of these individuals (influencers) to directly engage with followers creates an environment where traditional advertising takes a backseat, and personal recommendations and endorsements become a powerful tool for influencing purchasing decisions. Influencers are often seen as relatable and authentic. Consequently, by collaborating with these influencers, marketers can connect with consumers in a more genuine and approachable manner. This shift has paved the way for today's influencer-driven marketing strategies. However, the popularity of the influencer is not a guaranteed success criterion. Many brands fail to leverage influencer marketing effectively because they overlook the underlying consumer psychology principles that shape how people respond to influencers and marketing messages. Therefore, this paper aims to answer the following research question: **To what extent do consumer psychology theories explain the success and failure of influencer marketing campaigns?**

In answering the research question, this paper examines the consumer psychology underlying influencer marketing through the application of key theoretical frameworks such as the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), Source Credibility Theory and Social Learning Theory. It further evaluates how these theories explain the varying outcomes of real-world influencer marketing campaigns.

Evolution of Marketing

Marketing has undergone a remarkable transformation over the past century, shaped by technological advancements, evolving consumer behaviour and changing media landscapes. The history of marketing may be broadly divided into three key phases: the traditional marketing era, the digital revolution and the social media and influencer marketing era, each of which is marked by significant milestones and paradigm shifts in how brands communicate with their consumers.

Starting with the first era, during the early and mid-20th century, marketing was dominated by traditional media including newspapers, magazines, radio and television (Tugnait, 2025). These channels enabled firms to reach large audiences through one-way communication with messages being designed for mass appeal rather than individual targeting (Garcia, 2023). Print advertisements, for instance, became a staple for brand visibility with iconic campaigns like Marlboro's "Marlboro Man" (Johnson, 2023) symbolising the emotional and identity-driven marketing that came to define the era. Television further revolutionised advertising by introducing visual narratives that reached millions of households simultaneously (Kuyucu, 2020). While these strategies lacked direct consumer feedback mechanisms, they were instrumental in building brand identity and mass recognition. As Kotler and Keller (2016) note, traditional marketing prioritised persuasion through repetition and visibility, focusing on awareness generation rather than engagement. Even today, some companies continue to use these channels to target audiences who are less digitally active and to reinforce brand prestige through high-visibility campaigns, including Apple's televised product launches or Nike's billboard sponsorships at global sporting events.

The late 1990s and early 2000s marked the digital revolution, which introduced tools that transformed marketing from broad-based communication to data-driven precision. The rise of the internet, email marketing and search engines allowed brands to target audiences more effectively and measure campaign success in real time. Early websites served as digital brochures while platforms like Google (founded in 1998) and Yahoo enabled search engine marketing (SEM), a major shift towards performance-based advertising. The launch of Google AdWords in 2000, now known as Google Ads, marked a key milestone, enabling businesses to bid for keywords and reach consumers actively seeking their products and services (Gilmour, 2024). Unlike traditional media, digital marketing empowered companies to track impressions, clicks and conversions, laying the foundation for a measurable marketing ecosystem. As Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2022) highlight, this period saw the emergence of relationship marketing, where data analytics and email automation tools like Mailchimp or Constant Contact allowed brands to build personalised connections with consumers. Moreover, the proliferation of Web 2.0 in the mid-2000s enhanced interactivity (Kenton, 2024), giving rise to user-generated content and online reviews. This democratisation of content blurred the line between producers and consumers and fundamentally altered how trust and influence were built in marketing communications.

The 2010s ushered in the social media era which redefined marketing once again through real-time engagement and participatory culture. Platforms like Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and TikTok became not only communication tools but central arenas for brand-consumer interaction. Social media marketing, known as SMM, leverages algorithms to deliver hyper-targeted advertisements, allowing brands to connect with users based on interest, behaviours and demographics (Tarabieh, 2022). The emergence of influencer marketing represented a natural evolution of this space. Drawing from traditional celebrity endorsements, influencer marketing relies on digital personalities who have cultivated trust and authenticity with niche audiences. According to data displayed in Figure 1, the global influencer marketing industry was valued at more than USD 24 billion in 2024, an impressive increase from USD 1.7 billion just a few years back in 2016 (Oberlo, 2024), reflecting its rapid growth and mainstream acceptance. In fact, studies by the likes of De Veirman, Cauberghe and Hudders (2017) indicate that consumers perceive influencers as more relatable than even traditional celebrities, underscoring their value as tools of persuasion and purchase intention.

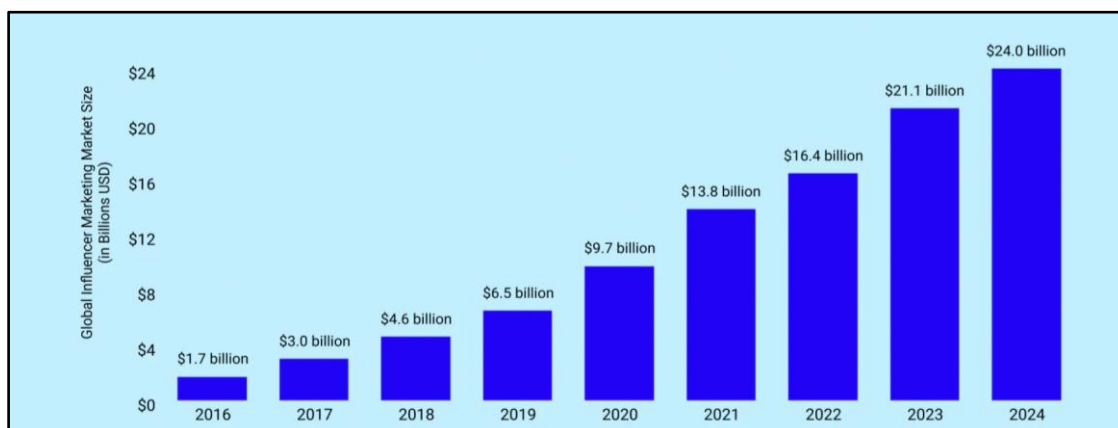


Figure 1: Influencer Marketing Market Size (2016-2024) (Oberlo, 2024)

Consumer Psychology Theories in Influencer Marketing

Influencers are individuals who possess the power to shape consumer opinions and behaviours due to the perceived authority, authenticity or relationship with the audience. As per Freberg et al. (2011), “social media influencers (SMIs) represent a new type of independent third-party endorser who shape audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media.” Their persuasive capacity lies not only in their popularity but also in the trust they are able to build through consistent, relatable content.

Influencers are often categorised according to the size of their following. For instance, influencers with 100,000+ followers are known as macro-influencers and they often possess broad appeal and work with global brands (Nizri, 2022). Micro-influencers with followers ranging from 10,000 to 100,000 have smaller but very highly engaged niche audiences, making them more effective for targeted campaigns (Eze, 2024). Lastly, nano-influencers with less than 10,000 followers usually maintain personal connections with followers, driving intimate and authentic engagement (Koss, 2023).

According to statistics published by Santora (2024) on the Influencer Marketing Hub, the industry making the most use of influencer marketing is fashion and beauty (21.6%). Gaming is another popular sector (11.9%), while sports, travel and lifestyle follow closely (8.6% each). Other verticals making use of influencer marketing are family, parenting and home (7.6%). The health and fitness sector also has a 7.6% share. These categories dominate as they rely heavily on visual storytelling, personal recommendations and experiential promotion, all formats that perform best on social media platforms like Instagram, YouTube and TikTok.

Some crucial theories from consumer psychology help to explain how influencer marketing works. For instance, developed by Petty and Cacioppo (1986), the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), as shown in Figure 2, explains how people are persuaded through two primary cognitive routes: the central route and the peripheral route. While the central route involves logical, message-based persuasion where audiences are highly involved and critically evaluate arguments, the peripheral route relies on superficial cues like attractiveness, credibility or emotional appeal, which are often used when audiences are less motivated to process information deeply. In influencer marketing, brands should ideally direct influencers to engage with the route that is deemed most appropriate based on the content being conveyed and the audience being targeted.

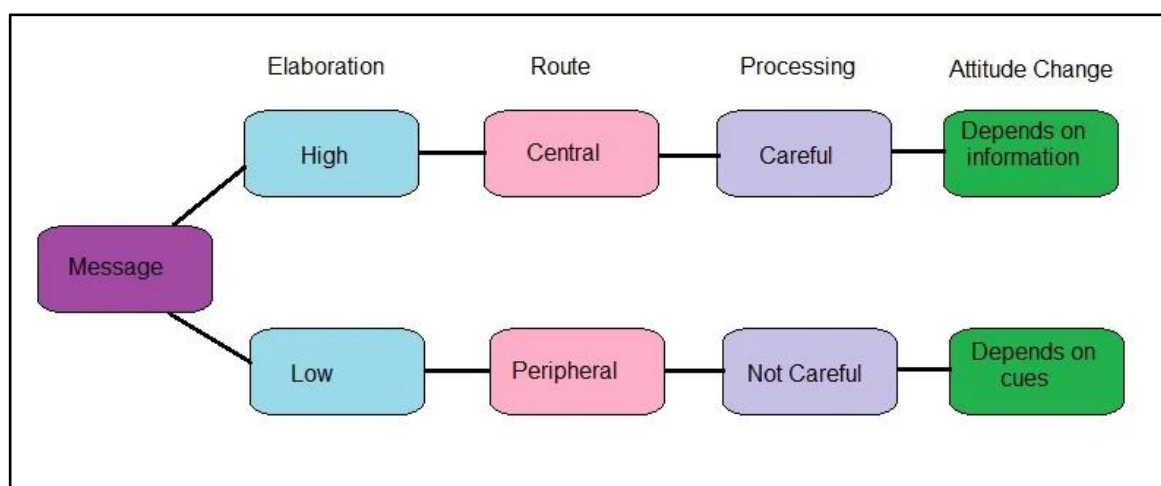


Figure 2: Elaboration Likelihood Model of Persuasion (Nickerson, 2023)

Another model is the Source Credibility Theory which was proposed by Hovland, Janis and Kelley (1953). This posits that the persuasiveness of a message will depend highly on three key attributes of the communicator: expertise, i.e., the perceived knowledge and competence in a subject area; trustworthiness, i.e., the perceived honesty and integrity; and attractiveness, i.e., the likability, charisma and relatability. When applied to influencer marketing, brands would benefit most by selecting influencers whose credibility aligns with the image of their product or service (Gavrilova and Shuleska, 2022). For instance, a make-up brand partnering with a professional beauty vlogger will benefit from the influencer's expertise and perceived authenticity. Conversely, selecting a poorly matched influencer risks damaging brand trust. Studies such as that by Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) emphasise that influencer credibility significantly influences consumer attitudes and purchase intention, especially among the younger demographics.

Lastly, a theory proposed by Albert Bandura, known as the Social Learning Theory, suggests that individuals learn behaviours by observing others, particularly when those others are perceived as relatable, aspirational or rewarded for their behaviour (McLeod, 2025). The theory involves four key processes: attention, retention, reproduction and motivation. Many times, influencers act like social models whose behaviour followers imitate. For instance, a skincare influencer demonstrating a nighttime routine may encourage audiences to replicate product use, reinforcing brand adoption. Similarly, fitness influencers who share transformation journeys motivate followers to purchase supplements or training gear. As Booth and Matic (2011) note, the effectiveness of influencer marketing relies on the audience's tendency to internalize modeled behaviours they perceive as rewarding or attainable.

Together, these three theories offer a very comprehensive framework for understanding why and when influencer marketing succeeds or fails. While the ELM explains how audiences process influencer content, the Source Credibility Theory clarifies who is most persuasive and the Social Learning Theory demonstrates why followers replicate influencer-endorsed behaviours. Collectively, they reveal that authenticity, relevance and modelling behaviour are all critical determinants of campaign success.

Case Studies of Influencer Marketing

The evolution of marketing from mass communication through traditional media to digital targeting and now to social media and influencer-driven engagement paves the way for examining how brands harness influencers today. The following case studies illustrate two contrasting outcomes of influencer marketing: one a success, one a failure. These examples demonstrate how the theoretical foundations covered earlier, including the ELM, Source Credibility Theory and Social Learning Theory, operate in real-world campaigns. By analysing the strategies, executions and outcomes of each, this section reveals the psychological mechanisms behind influencer marketing effectiveness.

Case Study One: The Success of Fenty Beauty's Influencer Marketing Strategy

In 2017, singer-entrepreneur Rihanna launched Fenty Beauty. The beauty industry was immediately taken by surprise by a product range that included 40 foundation shades from the outset, an explicit commitment to

inclusivity (Carpetta, 2023). Fenty Beauty merged this inclusive proposition with a robust influencer-driven social media strategy, leveraging creators across platforms to build community visibility and credibility (HOM, 2024).



Figure 3: A Fenty Beauty Campaign Featuring Diverse Influencers to Promote Inclusive Beauty Representation (Mandave, 2017)

From the perspective of the ELM, Fenty's influencer strategy engages consumers both via the central and peripheral routes. On the central route, beauty influencers and make-up artists produce detailed tutorials, shade-matching demonstrations and product benefit explanations appealing to highly engaged 'beauty-savvy' consumers. Simultaneously, the peripheral route is addressed through emotionally rich, individually driven content: hashtags like #FentyFace encourage user-generated content (Srivastava, 2024) while influencers of diverse skin tones model looks, creating aspirational and relatable cues (Abbas, 2025). This dual-route approach broadens appeal among both deeply involved and more casually involved audiences.

Source Credibility Theory further helps explain Fenty's success. The brands' influencer partnerships prioritise: expertise via make-up professionals and beauty influencers with authority in their niche; trustworthiness with authentic reviews across skin tones, real users and influencers; and attractiveness/relatability through diverse influencers who mirror the wide target consumer base. Because the influencer-brand alignment is strong, persuasion becomes meaningful rather than simply promotional. Social Learning Theory adds another dimension: consumers observe influencers of similar skin tone and backgrounds using Fenty products, modelling those behaviours and feeling empowered to imitate them. Community-driven user-generated content reinforces behavioural modelling, enabling followers to internalize the brand's inclusive message.

Empirical evidence supports these theoretical linkages. Jin et al. (2023) report that Fenty Beauty "successfully established a new benchmark for inclusiveness... significantly enhancing brand awareness and consumer loyalty". Further, Wu (2024) notes that Fenty's digital-marketing strategy dramatically improved consumer engagement by leveraging influencer collaborations and data-driven personalisation, contributing to rapid revenue growth in its first year.

Case Study Two: The Failure of Pepsi's Influencer Marketing Strategy

In April 2017, the same year as Fenty Beauty's launch, Pepsi rolled out its 'Live for Now' advertisement featuring Kendall Jenner. To date, this remains one of the most widely criticised influencer campaigns in modern marketing. While it was intended to celebrate global unity, the campaign immediately triggered widespread backlash for trivialising social justice movements, particularly Black Lives Matter (Frisch, 2025). As seen in Figure 4, the ad depicted Jenner, a supermodel and social media influencer, abandoning a photo shoot to join a protest, ultimately handing a Pepsi can to a police officer to resolve tensions (Abuat and Ali, 2024). Rather than conveying harmony, the campaign was condemned for oversimplifying systemic struggles using commercial imagery to co-opt genuine activism (Hart, 2023).



Figure 4: An Image from the Pepsi 2017 Ad Featuring Kendall Jenner (Victor, 2017)

Pepsi's use of Jenner leaned entirely on the peripheral route of the ELM, assuming that her fame and attractiveness would generate emotional appeal and brand association. However, given the politically charged nature of the message, audiences expected substantive, central-route communication that demonstrated empathy and understanding of the social issues represented. The absence of credible arguments or meaningful engagement with the themes of protest and equality, therefore, led to cognitive dissonance (Ryan, 2025), making viewers reject the message outright. The campaign misjudged the level of elaboration appropriate to the context.

In terms of the Source Credibility Theory, Kendall scored high on attractiveness as her established fame in fashion and modelling gave her aesthetic appeal and reach. However, that being said, she lacked perceived expertise or trustworthiness in social justice discourse. Viewers perceive Jenner generally as an influencer from a more privileged background, someone who has been largely insulated from the racial and socio-economic struggle symbolised by the protest scene. This created an intense source-message misalignment, where her persona and experience did not resonate with the narrative being portrayed. As Chu and Kamal (2022) note, modern consumers are highly sensitive to authenticity in influencer campaigns; when the spokesperson's image does not align with the message, audiences perceive manipulation rather than persuasion. Thus, Jenner's presence undermined credibility, causing a moral and emotional disconnect between the message and its delivery.

Lastly, from the perspective of Social Learning Theory, Pepsi's campaign failed to activate this learning mechanism because Jenner was not a relatable model for the role she performed. Once again, her privilege, background and lack of engagement with real activism made her depiction of social solidarity appear performative rather than aspirational. Instead of inspiring imitation, the ad prompted backlash for appropriating social struggle as a branding tool. By contrast, influencers with authentic histories of advocacy could have effectively demonstrated socially conscious behaviour that audiences might wish to emulate. The campaign, therefore, violated a core tenet of Social learning Theory – observers imitate models who reflect their social reality and whose actions seem genuine and socially rewarded.

The failure of Pepsi's campaign illustrates how theoretical missteps in influencer selection and message framing can lead to reputational damage. The ELM shows that the brand over-relied on peripheral cues when central, issue-driven messaging was necessary; the Source Credibility Theory highlights that Jenner's attractiveness could not compensate for her lack of credibility on sociopolitical issues; and the Social Learning Theory underscores that behaviour modelling collapses when the influencers are not perceived as authentic or relevant to the context. As a result, Pepsi's attempt to capitalise on activism without understanding its cultural and emotional depth backfired, forcing the company to withdraw the advertisement and issue a public apology within 24 hours (BBC, 2017).

II. Conclusion

In conclusion, the paper finds that the discussed consumer psychology theories, ELM, Source Credibility and Social Learning offer a strong explanatory framework for understanding the mechanisms behind influencer marketing success and failure. As seen in the first case study, Fenty Beauty's strategy exemplifies how an

influencer marketing campaign can excel when brand-influencer fit, credible messaging, audience modelling and multi-route persuasion are all orchestrated effectively. On the other hand, Pepsi's ad with Kendall Jenner in 2017, covered in the second case study, demonstrates that effective influencer marketing requires more than visibility; it demands authentic alignment between influencer identity, brand values and social context. The failure of the campaign is not only a cautionary tale of tone-deaf branding but also a valuable study of how consumer psychology can diagnose and prevent such misalignment in the future.

It is worth noting, though, that while the psychological theories substantially clarify how consumers form attitudes and intentions in influencer marketing, they must be complemented by socio-cultural awareness to fully account for campaign outcomes in today's digital landscape.

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