

Building Loyalty Through Trust and Sincerity: Evidence from Influencer Marketing on Instagram

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Abstract

The aim of this research is to analyze the relationships between trust in influencers, perceived sincerity, consumer behavior, and loyalty toward influencers within the context of the Instagram platform. It intends to improve understanding of how influencer characteristics affect both immediate reactions and long-term loyalty. The research uses a quantitative research methodology, based on data collected through a survey of Romanian consumers who follow at least one influencer on Instagram. Multi-item Likert scales that were adapted from prior studies were used to measure the variables. PLS-SEM was used to analyze the data in order to test the suggested hypotheses and evaluate the correlations between the variables. The results indicate that all the proposed relationships are positive and statistically significant. However, the effects are moderate, suggesting that, although these factors are important, they are not the only determinants of consumer reactions. This research adds to the body of knowledge on influencer marketing by merging perceived trust and sincerity into a cohesive framework that explains both behaviors and attitudes. Furthermore, the study provides empirical evidence regarding the Romanian context, which has been previously under-explored. The findings imply that in order to increase consumer loyalty and immediate engagement, influencers and marketers should concentrate on establishing trust and maintaining authenticity. However, given the moderate effects, these strategies should be complemented by other factors.

Keywords

Trust; influencers; perceived sincerity; consumer behavior; loyalty; Instagram; influencer marketing

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Introduction

In recent years, influencer marketing has become a key strategy in digital marketing, particularly on social media platforms such as Instagram. By creating content that integrates personal experiences with promotional messages, influencers play a central role in shaping consumer perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors. The effectiveness of influencer marketing, however, depends critically on the specific characteristics of influencers that determine consumer receptiveness and long-term engagement.

Among the factors determining influencer effectiveness, trust has consistently been identified as a fundamental factor. Research shows that influencers perceived as trustworthy have a significantly greater ability to influence consumer decisions and behaviors (Han & Balabanis, 2024). Trust acts as a catalyst that stimulates purchase intent by establishing the credibility and accuracy of the information provided (Khan, 2025). At the same time, sincerity, understood as authenticity and consistency between an influencer's public persona and their true personality, has emerged as another critical determinant. Authentic influencers who communicate transparently generate higher levels of consumer engagement and positive responses to marketing messages (Lee & Eastin, 2021; Helme, 2023). However, although trust and sincerity are

recognized as important factors, the mechanisms through which these influencer characteristics translate into sustained consumer behavior and long-term loyalty remain poorly understood. Previous research has predominantly examined trust or authenticity in isolation, rather than integrating them into a comprehensive relational framework that accounts for their sequential influence on consumer behavior and subsequent loyalty. This fragmented approach limits our understanding of how these credibility cues interact to shape both consumers' immediate responses and enduring brand-influencer relationships. Furthermore, although consumer behavior is conceptualized in the marketing literature as a precursor to loyalty, in which repeated positive experiences foster stable commitment (Haris, 2025), the specific pathways through which influencer-generated consumer behavior translates into loyalty toward the influencer in social media contexts remain insufficiently explored.

Thus, the objective of this research is to create and evaluate empirically a conceptual model that incorporates consumer behavior, perceived sincerity, influencer loyalty, and trust in the context of Instagram. By simultaneously examining these relationships, this research aims to elucidate how influencer characteristics influence consumer behavior and, ultimately, sustained loyalty. This integrated approach, grounded in relationship marketing theory and source credibility theory, aims to provide both theoretical advances and practical insights for influencer marketing strategy.

The paper has the following structure: a review of the literature and the formulation of hypotheses are presented in the first section; the research design, data collecting and analysis techniques are described in the second section and the findings are presented in the third section. The primary conclusions, limitations, and future research directions are presented at the end of the paper.

1. Literature review

A widely discussed topic in the recent influencer marketing literature is the consumer behavior on Instagram. This social media platform is a key environment nowadays for exposing users to persuasive content and promotional communication. It is effective and significant in shaping consumer behavioral responses and attitudes through influencer-generated content, as prior research emphasizes (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Shamim & Azam, 2024). Users' behavior is shaped using Instagram, not only through direct advertising, but also through content created and shared by influencers. This kind of content blends entertainment, social interaction and product-related information, which can translate into meaningful consumer responses (Gross & von Wangenheim, 2022). Consumer behavioral outcomes, including engagement, interaction and even purchase-related outcomes, are observed to result from influencer-created content on Instagram. Consumer purchase intentions and behavior could be strongly affected by Instagram influencers, due to perceived sincerity and trust (Liu & Zheng, 2024). Influencers perceived authenticity and users' responses to this aspect are also encouraged by Instagram's design features. Including algorithmic content delivery and visual storytelling formats, these mentioned features intensify user involvement, continuous engagement with influencer content and finally lead to purchase intentions (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020).

Trust is one of the most important factors for consumers, especially in the online environment. It is one of the most important factors in the relationship between consumers and influencers. Studies show that influencers perceived as trustworthy have a greater ability to influence consumer decisions and behaviors (Lou et al., 2022). In general, customer behavior and purchase decisions are greatly influenced by trust (Seçilmiş et al., 2021). Customers are more likely to react favorably to promoted content when they think an influencer is reliable and gives correct information. Therefore, in this dynamic and rapidly changing market, trust acts as a catalyst to stimulate customers' purchasing intent (Chen & Yang, 2023). As a consequence, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Influencer trust has a positive effect on consumer behavior.

Authenticity or sincerity embodies what is true and real. According to several writers, authenticity in this context can be defined as the degree to which an individual stays true to themselves. If a person is genuine, unique, and creative, they are deemed authentic. They behave in a way that reflects their inner passion, thoughts, feelings, and beliefs (Silva et al., 2023). The perceived authenticity of an influencer's content is fundamentally linked to the extent to which audiences view their behavior as a sincere reflection of their true character. Authentic influencers are typically characterized by robust intrinsic motivation, which leads them to express their genuine convictions, emotions, and interests (Zniva et al., 2023). When influencers demonstrate transparency and sincerity, they tend to catalyze greater audience engagement. Consequently, authenticity serves as a pivotal factor in shaping consumer receptivity to promotional messaging within the digital landscape (Mucundorfeanu et al., 2024). As a result, the hypothesis that follows is formulated:

H2: Perceived influencer sincerity has a positive effect on consumer behavior.

Consumer behavior is an important precursor to loyalty. According to classical marketing models, repeated positive experiences and behaviors can lead to the development of loyalty toward brands or products (Ahmed et al., 2024). Loyalty is defined as a stable and persistent commitment. For example, brand loyalty represents the commitment to repurchase a brand's products or services, regardless of situational factors or marketing initiatives. This loyalty, in the online environment, is reflected in the intention to continue following the content of a YouTube channel, for example, and to recommend that content to others (Lombardo, 2024). In a similar vein, influencer loyalty reflects a steadfast dedication among followers to interact regularly with a creator's posts. Within the sphere of influencer marketing, favorable interactions with such content can strengthen the bond between the consumer and the endorsed brand (Alcántara-Pilar et al., 2024). Consequently, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: Consumer behavior has a positive impact on consumer loyalty.

Drawing upon these theoretical perspectives and the established hypotheses, a conceptual framework was constructed for this study, as depicted in Figure no. 1.

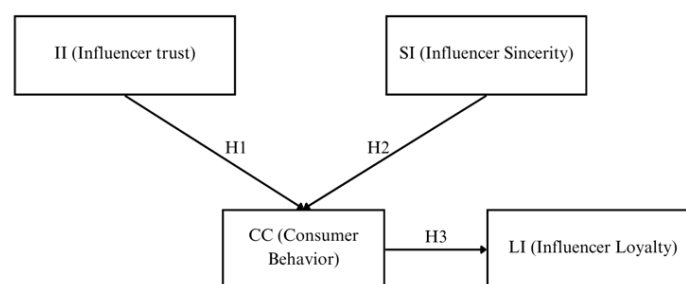


Figure no. 1. Conceptual model

2. Research methodology

To investigate the relationship between online consumer behavior and perceptions of influencers, this research adopts a quantitative approach. The introduced conceptual framework evaluates the influence of perceived influencer trust and authenticity on consumer loyalty and actions. To validate this model, Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), specifically version 4.1.1.8, was employed. This technique is particularly effective for predictive analysis and for examining models featuring latent variables represented by various indicators (Wang et al., 2024). Additionally, PLS-SEM is a robust choice for exploratory studies aimed at maximizing the explained variance of dependent variables (Ringle et al., 2024; Cheah et al., 2026).

For conducting data analysis, SmartPLS software was utilized, a tool frequently used in PLS-SEM-based research due to its flexibility in estimating complex structural models (Zhao et al., 2025). Data were gathered using an online questionnaire issued to active Romanian Instagram users who follow digital influencers. Romania represents an extremely important research context within the broader European digital ecosystem. The country has one of the highest social media usage rates in Central and Eastern Europe (Bentley et al., 2021), and Instagram ranks among the most popular platforms for digital marketing and influencer activity. The Romanian market adopts significant international trends, such as an increased reliance on micro-influencers, the implementation of artificial intelligence tools for content creation, and the growing importance of authenticity and trust in digital storytelling, but these phenomena occur within a distinct socio-economic framework, shaped by EU regulations, diverse audiences, and resource constraints. This makes Romania an excellent environment for investigating how communication tactics evolve in a new but rapidly maturing market. Consequently, the examination of Romanian influencers adds to a deeper knowledge of how global influencer marketing models are adapted and localized in diverse nations, giving valuable insights for both researchers and practitioners globally (Eurostat, 2024).

Online surveys are frequently used in research on consumer behavior in the digital environment because they provide fast access to respondents who interact with online content (Sánchez et al., 2021). A screening criterion was used to select participants: they had to follow at least one Instagram influencer and have engaged with that influencer's content (e.g., by viewing, liking, or commenting). This condition was introduced to ensure the relevance of the responses to the study's objectives. After eliminating incomplete or inconsistent responses, the final sample comprised 659 validated respondents (429 women and 226 men).

The research instrument was a structured questionnaire that included items adapted from scales validated in the literature on digital marketing and influencer marketing. The items were adapted for the context of social media and the relationships between consumers and influencers. The constructs included in the model are: Influencer Trust (II), which measures consumers' level of trust in the influencers they follow, using items adapted from Pop et al. (2022) and Agnihotri et al. (2023); Sincerity of Influencer (SI), which reflects perceptions of influencers' authenticity and sincerity, measured using items adapted from Pop et al. (2022) and Agnihotri et al. (2023); Consumer Behavior (CC), which measures consumers' reactions and purchasing behaviors after viewing influencers' content. The research evaluated perceptions of influencer authenticity and sincerity using scales adapted from Pop et al. (2022) and Agnihotri et al. (2023). Consumer Behavior (CC), representing post-viewing purchasing actions and reactions, and Loyalty (LI), signifying the intent to maintain influencer support, were similarly operationalized through items derived from the same foundational studies (Agnihotri et al., 2023; Pop et al., 2022).

Constructs were assessed via a five-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5)—a standard measurement approach in behavioral research (Cheah et al., 2026; Wang et al., 2022). Data analysis followed a two-step PLS-SEM procedure (Cheah et al., 2026; Wang et al., 2024). The initial phase involved evaluating the measurement model to confirm construct reliability and validity. This stage included testing for internal consistency through Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability, convergent validity via Average Variance Extracted (AVE) (Table no. 1), and discriminant validity through the Fornell-Larcker criterion (Table no. 2).

Table no. 1. Reliability and Convergent Validity

Construct	Chronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE
CC	0.881	0.918	0.737
II	0.870	0.909	0.714
LI	0.876	0.915	0.731
SI	0.852	0.910	0.770

Notes: Cronbach's Alpha indicates internal consistency reliability; Composite Reliability assesses construct reliability; AVE represents Average Variance Extracted. II = Trust in Influencer; SI = Influencers Sincerity; CC = Consumer Behavior; LI = Loyalty toward the Influencer.

Table no. 2. Discriminant Validity (Fornell-Larcker criterion)

Construct	CC	II	LI	SI
CC	0.859			
II	0.404	0.845		
LI	0.812	0.461	0.855	
SI	0.364	0.765	0.429	0.878

Notes: The Fornell-Larcker criterion is used to assess discriminant validity. II = Trust in Influencer; SI = Influencers Sincerity; CC = Consumer Behavior; LI = Loyalty toward the Influencer.

During the second phase, the structural model was examined by analyzing path coefficients, coefficients of determination (R^2), and the statistical significance of the hypothesized relationships through a bootstrapping technique. Within PLS-SEM, bootstrapping is the preferred method for determining the distribution of coefficients and validating the significance of structural paths (Cheah et al., 2026; Wang et al., 2024).

3. Results and discussion

3.1 Descriptive Statistics of the Sample

The study was conducted on a sample of 659 respondents, of whom 65.25% were women, 34.29% were men, 0.45% belonged to other categories. Valid ages range from 14 to 60 years. The distribution of education levels is as follows: College graduate: 52.05%; Postgraduate: 25.49%; High school: 21.24%; Below high school: 1.21%.

The mean age is approximately 25.34 years, suggesting a sample consisting mainly of young people. The median age of 23 years indicates that half of the respondents are at most this age, and the standard deviation of 8.11 years indicates moderate variability. The range spans values between 14 and 60 years, so the sample includes both adolescents and adults, but the majority are concentrated in the 20-30 age group. Regarding time spent online, 659 valid responses were recorded, with an average of 3.72 hours per day. This value falls between the "3-4 hours" and "4-5 hours" categories, while the median of 3.5 hours confirms that half

of the participants spend at most 3-4 hours online. The standard deviation of 1.30 hours indicates moderate differences in usage patterns, and the range of extreme values, from 0.5 hours ("less than 1 hour") to 5.5 hours ("more than 5 hours"), shows variable exposure to the digital environment.

The time spent on Instagram shows 657 valid responses and an average of 1.89 hours per day, which falls roughly between "1-2 hours" and "2-3 hours." The median of 1.5 hours indicates that half of users do not exceed 1-2 hours per day on this platform, while the standard deviation of 1.23 hours suggests significant differences among respondents. As with the internet, the range extends from 0.5 hours (the "less than 1 hour" category) to 5.5 hours ("more than 5 hours"). Overall, the sample consists mainly of young people who are constantly exposed to the online environment: approximately four hours a day on the internet and nearly two hours on Instagram. The distribution by age group and time spent online confirms a predominantly digital profile, specific to younger segments of the population.

3.2 Measurement Model Assessment

Assessment of the measurement model indicates that all constructs demonstrate adequate reliability and internal consistency. As shown in Table 1, the Cronbach's Alpha and composite reliability (CR) values for all variables surpass the 0.70 benchmark, confirming the internal stability of the applied scales (Wang et al., 2024; Cheah et al., 2026). These findings imply that the indicators reliably represent the latent concepts, providing a robust foundation for evaluating structural paths and minimizing the potential for systematic measurement bias.

Convergent validity was evaluated using the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) metric (Table 1). The analysis reveals that AVE scores for all studied constructs exceed the requisite 0.50 threshold (CC = 0.737, II = 0.714, LI = 0.731, SI = 0.719). These results substantiate that the indicators account for the majority of the variance within their respective latent constructs, aligning with established methodological standards (Joshi et al., 2023; Cheah et al., 2026). Furthermore, factor loadings generally remain above 0.70, reinforcing that the items effectively capture the underlying theoretical constructs.

To evaluate if there is any conceptual overlap between constructs, additional diagnostic analyses were conducted. First, item cross-loadings were examined to identify any similar loadings across multiple constructs. Second, to confirm that the constructs were factor separable, an exploratory factor analysis using oblimin rotation was carried out. Third, an alternative model was estimated in which the CC and LI variables were combined into a single latent construct. The results of these analyses show that the items retain higher loadings on their theoretical constructs, and the combined model does not significantly improve the model's explanatory power (R^2 for the dependent variables). Consequently, the two constructs were kept distinct in the final model; however, this limitation is explicitly reported, and future studies could reconsider the operationalization of these dimensions to improve conceptual discrimination (Cheah et al., 2026; Wang et al., 2024). Multicollinearity was assessed using Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values. The results indicate VIF values ranging from approximately 1.6 to 3.0 for the model indicators, below the conservative threshold of 5 and, in most cases, below the stricter threshold of 3 recommended in the literature (Cheah et al., 2026). These results suggest the absence of significant multicollinearity issues among the predictors included in the structural model and indicate the stability of the coefficient estimates. The assessment of the model's overall fit yielded acceptable results, although slightly marginal relative to strict methodological thresholds. The SRMR value for the estimated model is 0.080, which is very close to the recommended threshold of 0.08. At the same time, the other fit indices indicate a reasonable fit of the model to the data: $d_ULS = 0.787$, $d_G = 0.233$, $\chi^2 = 903.341$, and $NFI = 0.868$. Although the NFI remains below the conventional threshold of 0.90, these values do not indicate major deviations in the model.

According to methodological recommendations in the PLS-SEM literature, marginal exceedances of fit thresholds do not automatically invalidate the model, particularly in applied studies or relatively complex structural models (Wang et al., 2024; Cheah et al., 2026). Thus, the model can be considered adequate for examining the hypothesized relationships, with the caveat that the results should be interpreted with caution and presented transparently. The significance of structural relationships was assessed using the bootstrap procedure with 5,000 repetitions. The findings, presented in Table no. 3, demonstrate the presence of positive and significant relationships between the examined variables. First, trust in the influencer has a moderate and considerable impact on consumer behavior ($\beta \approx 0.303$; 95% CI [0.196, 0.412]). This result supports Hypothesis H1, indicating that influencers' perceived trust and credibility contribute to greater engagement, receptiveness to recommendations, and purchasing intentions. This finding is consistent with recent research (Kim et al., 2024; Shamim & Azam, 2024), which highlights that confidence in influencer-generated postings on Instagram positively influences consumer behavioral reactions, particularly by raising consumers' desire to act on influencer recommendations. In addition, compared to other research that reveal a more substantial effect in different cultural contexts or on different platforms, the results

suggest a more moderate effect on the context of Romanian Instagram users, which may reflect the significance of contextual factors on behavior.

Second, Table no. 3, the perceived sincerity of influencers also exerts a positive effect on consumer behavior, albeit of lesser intensity ($\beta \approx 0.132$; 95% CI [0.015, 0.248]). Although the effect is relatively modest, the confidence interval does not include zero, which confirms Hypothesis H2 and the statistical significance of the relationship. Previous studies (Liu & Zheng, 2024; Zniva et al., 2023) underline that when influencers are seen to be real, transparent, and authentic in their communication, customers react more positively and are more likely to act on their recommendations. The idea that sincerity plays a significant role in influencing customer behavior in social media settings is typically supported by these studies. The results of this research support the body of literature by demonstrating a strong and favorable correlation between consumer behavior and influencer authenticity. In the context of Romanian Instagram users, however, the strength of this link seems to be moderate, indicating that although sincerity is important, its influence could not be as strong as that of other elements like trust or platform-specific interaction mechanisms. Third, consumer behavior influenced by influencer content has a positive and significant impact on loyalty ($\beta \approx 0.312$; 95% CI [0.187, 0.417]). This result indicates that positive interaction with influencer content can contribute to the development of a loyal relationship with the promoted brands or products, which confirms Hypothesis H3. Overall, the fact that the bootstrap confidence intervals do not include zero for these relationships confirms the robustness of the results and supports the validity of the tested theoretical hypotheses. In other words, when consumers interact favorably with influencers' content and recommendations, they may gradually get more attached to and loyal to those influencers. This result is consistent with previous evidence (Alcántara-Pilar et al., 2024) which shows that favorable customer responses to influencers content, such as purchase intentions, are correlated to loyalty intentions towards those influencers. In this manner, the current study adds to the body of literature by emphasizing how behavioral engagement with influencer content influences the emergence of loyalty among Romanian Instagram users, even when the effect is mediated through previous customer responses rather than being direct or instantaneous. According to these findings, short-term behavioral reactions could eventually develop into long-term relational outcomes. Therefore, by emphasizing the relation between customers' immediate behavior and their loyalty intention toward influencers, the results of this research reinforce the logic of relationship marketing, while also broadening the understanding of this relationship, showing its moderate effect in the context of Romanian consumers.

Table no. 3. Results of Hypotheses Testing

Paths	β	T-value	p-value	Result (Accepted/Rejected)
II→CC	0.303	5.537	0.000	H1 accepted
SI→CC	0.132	2.231	0.026	H2 accepted
CC→LI	0.812	60.599	0.000	H3 accepted

Notes: β represents standardized path coefficients; T-values are obtained through bootstrapping; p-values indicate statistical significance. Hypotheses are considered supported when $p < 0.05$. II = Trust in Influencer; SI = Influencers Sincerity; CC = Consumer Behavior; LI = Loyalty toward the Influencer.

The R^2 values (present in Table no. 4) show that the endogenous constructs have various levels of explanatory power. In particular, the model accounts for 17.1% of the variance in consumer behavior, indicating a comparatively low but significant explanatory ability to forecast Instagram user behavioral reactions. On the other hand, the model shows a significantly higher explanatory power for loyalty, explaining 65.9% of its variance. This indicates that the proposed predictors have a moderate to strong capacity to explain loyalty-related outcomes. This trend implies that although sincerity and trust have a little direct explanatory impact on consumer behavior in the short term, their influence increases when loyalty creation through behavioral engagement is taken into account.

Table no. 4. Coefficient of Determination

Endogenous construct	R^2	R^2 adjusted
CC	0.171	0.168
LI	0.659	0.658

Notes: R^2 represents the explanatory power of the model for each endogenous construct; R^2 adjusted is the adjusted coefficient of determination accounting for model complexity; CC = Consumer Behavior; LI = Loyalty toward the Influencer.

Therefore, it can be stated that the results of the structural analysis support a theoretical mechanism in which trust in influencers and, to a lesser extent, the perception of their sincerity influence consumer behavior, and this behavior subsequently contributes to the development of loyalty. These findings are

consistent with the literature on the role of source credibility in digital marketing and with classical theories of consumer loyalty (Cheah et al., 2026). The findings emphasize the relevance of trust as a key factor in the relationship between customers and influencers, implying that perceptions of authenticity and trustworthiness might have a direct impact on consumer behavior and attitudes.

Conclusions

This research examined the relationship between trust, perceived sincerity, consumer behavior, and loyalty intention in the context of Instagram influencer marketing. The results confirmed the hypotheses, highlighting that the proposed relationships are positive, albeit with a moderate effect. Thus, the significance of trust and authenticity in shaping consumer behaviors, as indicated by purchasing behavior and loyalty intention, is highlighted.

The theoretical implications of this research include providing empirical evidence on the combined role of trust and sincerity in influencing consumer behavior and loyalty toward influencers. By integrating perceived sincerity and trust into a unified framework, the research explains both behavioral and attitudinal outcomes. However, the moderate effects observed suggest that this marketing strategy operates within a complex ecosystem, in which various contextual and individual factors may also play an essential role. In particular, the fact that approximately 60% of the variation in loyalty remains unexplained indicates the need for further exploration of mediating and moderating variables, such as influencer-audience fit, the category of the promoted product, and platform algorithms.

From a practical point of view, the research results have relevant implications for both influencers and marketing professionals. Building and maintaining trust appears to be essential not only for influencing consumers' immediate behavior but also for fostering a long-term relationship with them based on loyalty. At the same time, perceived sincerity or authenticity remain key factors in determining how consumers respond to content created by influencers. Therefore, influencers should focus on conveying authentic, transparent messages, avoiding overly commercial communication styles.

Beyond its contributions, this research also has some limitations. Among these is the use of a convenience sample composed of Romanian customers. This limits the findings' generalizability to other cultural environments. Furthermore, the data were collected using self-reported responses, which may have resulted in some errors. Third, the focus on a single social media platform, namely Instagram, limits the applicability of the results to other platforms that may have different dynamics and user behaviors.

Future research directions could include examining more diverse and representative samples, as well as expanding to other social media platforms used in influencer marketing. This could address the limitations mentioned above. Additionally, future research could explore additional variables and potential moderating or mediating effects. This could provide a more nuanced understanding of the relationships identified in this study.

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