

INFLUENCER MARKETING: A PERSPECTIVE OF THE ELABORATION LIKELIHOOD MODEL OF PERSUASION

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ABSTRACT

The growing research on social media influencers suggests various key features of influencers and their post content but lacks a systematical view of their effects, including both direct and interaction effects, as marketing communication stimuli on followers' behavioral intentions. This research applies the elaboration likelihood model to understand the key features of influencers' marketing communication as central and peripheral factors triggering followers' message elaboration and purchase intention. A total of 487 Instagram users participated in an online survey. The results show a difference in the impact on purchase intention between the central route and the peripheral route. Central factors (i.e., post features such as perceived originality, perceived uniqueness, and perceived informativeness) have direct effects, while peripheral factors (i.e., influencer attributes such as perceived physical attractiveness, perceived trustworthiness, and perceived self-presence) primarily work through the effect of the interaction with central factors on followers' purchase intention. Among these factors, post uniqueness has the most prominent effect, and post informativeness has a consistent effect across varying scenarios of influencer features. These findings stress the importance of post content in influencers' marketing communication and add to the understanding of the interaction effects of post and influencer features on influencer marketing effectiveness.

Keywords: Social media influencer; Elaboration likelihood model; Post features; Influencer characteristics; Instagram

1. Introduction

With the vast prevalence of social media, influencer marketing has become a unique and prominent marketing approach for companies. Social media influencers are social media users who have gained considerable reach by branding themselves through engaging and appealing self-generated posts and content (Casaló et al., 2020; Dabiran et al., 2022; Farivar et al., 2022). In influencer marketing, companies hire influencers to endorse and recommend products/brands to their followers (De Veirman et al., 2017). Influencers' large, focused audiences and effective communications can lead to beneficial results for firms.

Influencer marketing has attracted increasing research interest in recent years. A growing body of studies have pinpointed and examined focal aspects of influencer marketing, such as opinion leadership (Casaló et al., 2020), parasocial relationships (Aw & Labrecque, 2020; Hwang & Zhang, 2018), information disclosure (Stubb & Colliander, 2019), influencer-brand fit (Breves et al., 2019), and followers' desire to mimic influencers (Ki & Kim, 2019). To

understand these focal aspects, research often identifies and examines influencer and post features, such as influencer's physical attractiveness and trustworthiness as well as post originality and informativeness, as antecedents (Casaló et al., 2020; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). For example, Casaló et al. (2020) focus on influencers' opinion leadership and suggest that post features such as originality and uniqueness contribute to influencer's opinion leadership, which in turn increases followers' intention to recommend, interact, and purchase. Sokolova & Kefi (2020), by contrast, examine the parasocial interaction perceived by followers and report that influencer features such as physical attractiveness and credibility affect the perceived parasocial interaction, which leads to followers' purchase intention.

By studying focal aspects of influencer marketing, extant research has suggested a range of influencer and post features but has yet to provide a comprehensive understanding of their roles in marketing communication and their synergetic effects on followers' responses. Communication research specifies that message and source features are important communication stimuli that audiences process to form their attitudes and intention (Leung et al., 2022; Petty et al., 1983; Ye et al., 2021). In the influencer marketing context, when followers receive and read an influencer's promotional post, they consider both the characteristics of the influencer as well as the message/post features in forming their decision (Farivar et al., 2022; Huang et al., 2018); therefore, it is crucial to study and understand the simultaneous effects of influencer and post elements.

However, extant studies have rarely examined influencer and post features together. As a result, the relative roles of key influencer and post features in influencer communication are unclear. In addition, the understanding of the simultaneous processing (e.g., interaction effects) of influencer and post features in consumers' decision-making process is lacking. A systematical study on influencer and post features in influencer marketing can offer insights into their complex roles as marketing stimuli in persuasive communication and is essential in the theoretical and practical development of influencer marketing.

To address this gap, the current study compares the impact of influencer and post features on followers' purchase intention through a theoretical framework of the elaboration likelihood model of persuasion (ELM). The ELM explains different roles of communication stimuli in audiences' message elaboration and persuasion results (Petty et al., 1983) and thus is suitable to guide an integrative analysis of multiple factors in influencer marketing. In particular, with the ELM, the effects of key influencer and post features can be posited and analyzed according to their roles as central or peripheral factors in followers' message elaboration. Central factors are those considered in followers' evaluation of the true value of post messages, including post originality, uniqueness, and informativeness. Peripheral factors are heuristic cues that followers use to make simple inference of message merits for decision, and in this study, they include influencers' perceived attractiveness, trustworthiness, and self-presence in posts. To gain a deeper understanding of the influencing mechanisms of the marketing communication stimuli, this study aims to answer two research questions:

1. Do central factors of the influencing mechanism (i.e., perceived post originality, uniqueness, and informativeness) and peripheral cues (i.e., perceived influencer attractiveness, trustworthiness, and self-presence) exert differential effects on followers' purchase intention?
2. Do peripheral cues of the influencing mechanism interact with central factors to affect followers' purchase intention?

Empirical results from a survey of 487 Instagram users reveal a notable pattern of the effects of central and peripheral factors. All three central factors (i.e., perceived originality, uniqueness, and informativeness of post content) have strong direct effects on followers' purchase intention, and among them, post uniqueness has the greatest effect and post informativeness has a consistent effect across varying scenarios of influencer attributes. Peripheral factors have prevailing moderation roles in the relationship between central factors and purchase intention. That is, peripheral factors primarily work with central factors to influence purchase intention. However, influencer attractiveness has both direct and interaction effects, indicating its importance in influencer marketing.

This research contributes to the influencer marketing literature in two ways. First, it treats influencer marketing as a persuasive communication process and takes the ELM approach to examine and compare the impacts of major influencer and post content features on followers' purchase intention. The ELM approach differs from previous approaches taking specific perspectives on influencer status (e.g., opinion leadership) or follower motivation (e.g., desire to mimic) (Casaló et al., 2020; Ki & Kim, 2019) and offers a holistic view of the various roles of marketing stimuli in influencer marketing effectiveness. Second, this study differs from previous research by considering the simultaneous processing of central and peripheral factors in the followers' decision-making process. Through this angle, we examine both direct and interactive effects of influencer and post features on followers' purchase intention in influencer marketing communications. The study of the interaction between central and peripheral factors adds new insights to influencer marketing.

The empirical findings provide useful insights and actionable guidelines for influencer marketing practice. Overall, the findings indicate that Instagram users carefully elaborate on influencers' messages pertaining to

product/brand recommendations in forming purchase intention. Followers, in an established influencer–follower relationship, do not make simple inferences for recommendation adoption. This finding highlights the importance of argument strength of the post message in influencer marketing. In addition, this study suggests key factors for influencers and marketers to stress in their attempts to improve influencer marketing effectiveness. Post uniqueness is more salient than other factors in affecting purchase intention, and post informativeness has a consistent effect. Thus, results-driven influencers and marketers should carefully design their influencer marketing messages to maximize desirable follower responses.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Social Media Influencers

The growing body of research on social media influencers and influencer marketing has explored several key issues, including people’s motivations for using social media and following influencers (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Sheldon & Bryant, 2016), the comparison between influencer and traditional celebrity endorsement (Jin et al., 2019; Schouten et al., 2020), and influencer marketing mechanisms (Casaló et al., 2020; Farivar et al., 2021; Farivar & Wang, 2022). These issues relate to two processes of social media influencing: (1) the networking process of establishing a sizable group of social media followers and forming influencer–follower relationships, and (2) the marketing process of promoting a product/brand to influence followers’ purchase decision.

The networking process of establishing a sizable group of followers is essential for social media influencers, directly determining their market value. Research suggests that users are motivated to use social networking sites and follow other social media users by their interests and enjoyment in knowing about others (Jin & Muqaddam, 2018; Sheldon & Bryant, 2016; Wang et al., 2021) and needs for information and knowledge (Ki et al., 2020). Factors such as the post engagement rate (e.g., likes, comments) (Arora et al., 2019; Dabiran et al., 2023) and high-quality pictures incorporated in posts (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017) can enhance the popularity of an influencer.

The marketing process toward followers involves effective communication and persuasion. Table 1 summarizes key empirical studies on influencer marketing that include followers’ purchase intention as an output measure. These studies have investigated influencer marketing through various output measures, such as attitude toward product/brand, and intentions to purchase, to interact, and to recommend (word of mouth (WOM)) (Belanche et al., 2021; Casaló et al., 2020; Farivar & Wang, 2021; Hwang & Zhang, 2018). Followers’ purchase intention is an important output measure because it is directly associated with the sales purpose of influencer marketing.

Table 1: A Comparison of Key Influencer Marketing Studies

Study	Research media & method	Theories	Precedent factors			Outputs
			Influencer	Post	Follower	
Lee & Watkins, 2016	YouTube, survey-experiment	Parasocial and social comparison theory	Physical attractiveness, attitude homophily			Purchase intention
Hwang & Zhang, 2018	Weibo, survey	Uses and gratification theory			Knowledge on persuasion, Empathy, loneliness, self-esteem	Purchase and WOM intentions
Jiménez-Castillo & Sánchez-Fernández, 2019	Survey	Media dependency theory	Perceived influence			Purchase intention
Ki & Kim, 2019	Instagram, survey	Consumers’ doppelganger effect		Visual attractiveness, prestige, expertise, information, interaction		Purchase and WOM intention
Stubb & Colliander, 2019	YouTube and Instagram	Persuasion knowledge model, reactance theory		Sponsorship disclosure, hyperlink to landing page		Purchase intention, brand attitude

Casaló et al., 2020	Instagram, survey	Opinion leadership		Originality, uniqueness, quality, quantity		Intention to purchase, to recommend, to interact
Sokolova & Kefi, 2020	Instagram and YouTube, survey	Communication & persuasion parasocial interaction	Physical attractiveness, homophily, social attractiveness, credibility			Purchase intention
Sánchez-Fernández & Jiménez-Castillo, 2021	Survey	Social influence theory, two-step flow communication theory	Information value		Emotional attachment	Purchase and WOM intentions
Kim, 2021	Instagram, experiment	Social cognitive theory	Social/self-presence			Purchase intention
Kim & Kim, 2021	Survey	Social exchange theory, source credibility model	Authenticity, expertise, physical attractiveness, homophily			Purchase intention, loyalty to influencer, product attitude
Shin & Lee, 2021	Instagram, experiment	Doppelganger effect, information gap theory	Socioeconomic status	Product novelty		Purchase intention, intention to use social shopping service
Chia et al., 2021	Social commerce, survey	Social capital, social exchange, and social learning theories	Attractiveness, credibility, trust		Social identity, willingness to help, reciprocity	Purchase intention
Belanche et al., 2021	Instagram, survey	Balance theory, cognitive dissonance theory, congruity theory	Influencer–product congruence		Congruence between the consumer and the product	Attitude toward product, intention to purchase, Intention to recommend
Farivar & Wang, 2022	Instagram, survey	Social identity theory	Opinion leadership		Social identity, Interest fit	Purchase intention
Masuda et al., 2022	YouTube, survey	Persuasion theory	Trustworthiness, perceived expertise, homophily, attractiveness		Parasocial relationship	Purchase intention
Bu et al., 2022	Social media influencers, survey	Social exchange theory	Homophily	Expected brand value	Participation behavior, citizenship behavior, parasocial relationship (moderator)	Purchase intention
This study	Instagram, survey	ELM of persuasion	Physical attractiveness, trustworthiness (moderator), self-presence (moderator)	Originality, uniqueness, informativeness		Purchase intention

As Table 1 shows, extant research has examined influencer marketing through various perspectives. For example, some studies take an opinion leadership perspective to understand influencer marketing and consider opinion leadership the central construct affecting followers' attitudes and intention toward influencers' recommendation (Casaló et al., 2020). Other studies consider followers' parasocial relationship a key construct leading to purchase intention (Lee & Watkins, 2016; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Still other studies apply the theoretical angle of persuasion knowledge (i.e., audience's knowledge of marketer's purpose and tactics of persuasion) to determine the effect of sponsorship disclosure in influencer posts (Hwang & Zhang, 2018; Stubb & Colliander, 2019). However, influencer marketing research has not applied the ELM, a key persuasion theory, to assess marketing stimuli in influencer communications and their simultaneous effectiveness.

Various attributes of influencers, followers, and posts have been suggested as precedents to the aforementioned focal constructs. Influencer attributes include attractiveness, authenticity, credibility, social/self-presence, and numbers of followers (De Veirman et al., 2017; Jiménez-Castillo & Sánchez-Fernández, 2019; Ki & Kim, 2019); follower attributes include online interaction propensity, empathy, loneliness, and self-esteem (Hwang & Zhang, 2018; Lee & Watkins, 2016); and post features include informativeness, originality, and uniqueness (Casaló et al., 2020; Stubb & Colliander, 2019). As the focus of prior studies is on focal mediators, a systematic approach to understand the effects of these precedent factors is lacking (Vrontis et al., 2021). The choice of factors in studies is fragmented; influencer and post features are rarely evaluated together; and their indirect effects on followers' purchase intention are tested through focal mediators (Masuda et al., 2022).

According to the communication research, message and source attributes are important communication stimuli that audiences use to form their attitudes and intention (Leung et al., 2022; Petty et al., 1983; Ye et al., 2021). In the influencer marketing context, when followers receive promotional posts from the influencers, they assess both the message elements (i.e., post features) and source attributes (i.e., influencers characteristics) to make their decision (Farivar et al., 2022; Huang et al., 2018). Thus, it is important to examine and compare the role of post features and source attributes in the influencer marketing context. We draw important influencer and post features from the influencer marketing literature and examine their effects in influencers' marketing communication.

2.2. The ELM of Persuasion

The ELM is a widely used dual-process model for understanding an audience's evaluation of persuasive communication. It postulates a continuum of message elaboration anchored at the two ends of information processing: the central route and the peripheral route (Petty et al., 1983; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). The central route of information processing reflects a situation in which message recipients engage in a high level of cognitive effort and carefully evaluate the true merits of the message argument (Bhattacharjee & Sanford, 2006). Factors used to evaluate the true merits of the message are central factors. In the peripheral route, recipients avoid cognitive effort and rely on heuristic and peripheral cues to make simplified inferences about the value of the message. Factors used to make simplified inferences are peripheral factors. Most message elaborations involve both central and peripheral factors (Petty et al., 1983; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

Research has widely used the ELM as a theoretical lens to investigate persuasive situations, such as in advertising, online shopping, electronic WOM, and online reviews (Huang et al., 2018; Zhu et al., 2014). For example, studies have applied the ELM to explain how readers evaluate online product reviews by elaborating on review messages (central factors) or by assessing reviewer attributes (peripheral cues) (Cheung et al., 2012). In an advertising context, studies have used the ELM to understand the process by which advertisements cause a change in audiences' attitudes and behavioral intentions (Geng et al., 2021; Spilker-Attig & Brettel, 2010). In general, attributes of the advertisement message/content are deemed as central factors and the attributes of the advertiser as peripheral factors; depending on the contexts of study, the effects of a factor may vary (Chang & Thorson, 2004; Trampe et al., 2010).

Influencer marketing is essentially a persuasion process. As such, the ELM offers a strong theoretical foundation for this study. In ELM literature, "[t]he effect of the persuasion process is typically measured by attitudinal and behavioural effect" (Kitchen et al., 2014, p. 2035). Research has used both attitude change and behavioral intention to evaluate persuasion results (Kitchen et al., 2014; Petty et al., 1983). Many studies focus on attitude change and regard it as predictive of behavior; other studies, including earlier work on the ELM (Petty et al., 1983), and recent information system studies (Leong et al., 2019; Shi et al., 2018; Zhou, 2022) have examined the direct effect of persuasion factors on behavioral constructs without attitude constructs. Investigating the behavioral effect directly can avoid the issue of a varying correlation between attitude and behavioral intention caused by differing levels of message elaboration (Kitchen et al., 2014; Petty et al., 1983), thus addressing the behavioral effects of communication stimuli more accurately. The current study follows the second stream of ELM studies to examine the effects of central and peripheral factors on purchase intention rather than the attitude change of followers. This is in line with the focus of influencer marketing literature on followers' behavioral intentions (Casaló et al., 2020; Farivar et al., 2021). Because influencer marketing has a strong sales orientation, purchase intention helps evaluate influencer marketing

effectiveness (Kim & Kim, 2021; Shin & Lee, 2021). As such, we apply the ELM to explain the impacts of various factors of influencer marketing on followers’ purchase intention toward influencers’ recommendations.

3. Research Model and Hypotheses

Drawing on the ELM, we organize and categorize major influencer attributes and post features as central and peripheral factors and examine their direct and interaction effects on followers’ purchase intention. We selected key influencer attributes and post features from extant research depending on their importance in influencer marketing. As Figure 1 illustrates, central factors include perceived originality, uniqueness, and informativeness of post content, and peripheral factors include perceived physical attractiveness, trustworthiness, and self-presence of influencers.

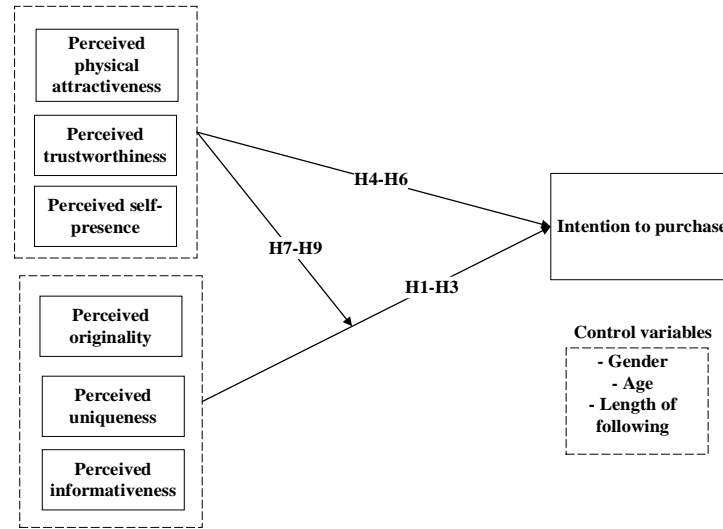


Figure 1: Research Framework

3.1. Central Factors

Originality refers to the quality or appeal of being new, and original content is created by a source or content creator (Casaló et al., 2020). Communication and marketing research indicates that original content often receives more attention from information seekers and is highly valued because it demonstrates creativity and generates respect among audiences (Bertrandias & Goldsmith, 2006).

Social media influencers are known for their self-generated posts and content. While influencers can post content from other sources, self-generated content that describes influencers’ activities and opinions is considered authentic and appealing (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Original content is critical for social media influencers to attract followers. In influencer marketing, prior research has found that post originality is essential for the formation of influencers’ opinion leadership (Casaló et al., 2020). As social media followers are drawn to influencers’ original content, post originality is a key feature that affects followers’ content processing and message evaluation of the true merits of the message. Thus, we hypothesize the following:

H1: *The perceived originality of an influencer’s posts positively affects followers’ intention to adopt the influencer’s recommendation and purchase.*

Perceived uniqueness refers to the extent to which a thing, behavior, or person is considered specific and unique compared with similar things, behaviors, or people (Maslach et al., 1985). Choice theory in decision making suggests that perceived uniqueness makes a choice/option seem apart from competing alternatives, thus raising the prominence and weight of the option in decision scenarios, such as purchasing (Dhar & Sherman, 1996).

On social media, content uniqueness distinguishes an influencer’s posts from others and can draw attention and enhance communication effectiveness (Casaló et al., 2020). Social media users tend to follow multiple influencers and constantly receive post feeds (Farivar & Wang, 2022). With the continuous influx of information, audiences look for and value non-redundant, unique posts. As such, post uniqueness is a key feature that affects followers’ evaluation of post content. Prior influencer marketing research has also found that post uniqueness can positively affect followers’

perception of an influencer's opinion leadership (Casaló et al., 2020). When followers perceive an influencer's posts as unique and different, they become more interested in his or her recommendations for purchasing decisions. Thus:

H2: *The perceived uniqueness of an influencer's posts positively affects followers' intention to accept the influencer's recommendation and purchase.*

Advertising literature has long suggested the importance of information content of advertisement messages (Lee & Hong, 2016). Advertisements with more information and description about the advertised product enable consumers to form a more accurate judgment about the message and the advertised product/brand (Lee & Hong, 2016). Similarly, social media research has identified the importance of the informative message (Wan & Ren, 2017). A primary reason to follow influencers on social media is to attain information; therefore, people tend to like and follow influencers whose posts are more informative (Ki & Kim, 2019; Ki et al., 2020). Followers elaborate on the information contained in promotional posts to form their attitudes and intention toward the recommended products. Thus:

H3: *The perceived informativeness of an influencer's posts positively affects followers' intention to adopt the influencer's recommendation and purchase.*

3.2. Peripheral Factors

The perceived physical attractiveness of influencers refers to followers' judgment of the influencer's physical appearance. The attractiveness of the information provider is among the most important and early identified peripheral cues in the ELM literature (Kahle & Homer, 1985). Its effect has been confirmed in a wide range of persuasion contexts, including advertising, WOM, and e-commerce (Ozanne et al., 2019; Till & Busler, 1998). For example, customers tend to form more positive intentions toward products when an attractive salesperson or advertiser promotes the product (Argo et al., 2008; Reinhard et al., 2006).

Influencer marketing literature has commonly studied the perceived physical attractiveness of influencers, and its effects on influencers' opinion leadership and taste leadership (i.e., influencers' leadership in exhibiting and defining what is aesthetically appealing through their social media content) are recognized (Casaló et al., 2020; Ki & Kim, 2019). Physical attractiveness, which pertains to the hedonic and aesthetic elements of social media use, is an important factor on social media. In particular, studies have shown that people use Instagram to enjoy aesthetic and pleasant content and are mostly interested in seeing enchanting pictures and videos (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Influencers perceived as attractive are more popular among Instagram users (Lee & Watkins, 2016), and their advice is more acceptable to followers (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Therefore, we suggest the following:

H4: *The perceived physical attractiveness of an influencer positively affects followers' intention to adopt the influencer's recommendation and purchase.*

Perceived trustworthiness refers to message recipients' perceptions of the honesty, believability, and sincerity of the source (Erdogan, 1999; Wang et al., 2018). It is a widely studied factor in advertising and online content research, in which its effect on consumer/user intention and behavior has been shown (Jin et al., 2019; Mittal & Silvera, 2020). Trustworthiness can be an advantage of digital influencers over traditional celebrities in product endorsement (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). That is, followers often relate better to digital influencers than to traditional celebrities and perceive their messages as more credible (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2018). Influencer credibility contributes to parasocial interactions of followers (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020), and trust leads to followers' purchase intention (Kim & Kim, 2021). Thus:

H5: *The perceived trustworthiness of an influencer positively affects followers' intention to adopt the influencer's recommendation and purchase.*

Influencers' self-presence, or the social presence of influencers in their posts, is an important social cue and can significantly affect the audience's perception of influencers and the post effectiveness. Social presence refers to "the degree of salience of the other person in the interaction" (Short et al., 1976, p. 65). It is an important factor in computer-mediated interactions because it can enhance the quality of communication (Cyr et al., 2018). Studies on online shopping have shown that social presence positively influences users' purchase intention (Gefen & Straub, 2003).

The effect of social presence may be even more salient in the social media context given its socialization feature. Recent influencer marketing research has examined social presence in the form of influencers' self-presence (Jin et al., 2021; Kim, 2021; Ledbetter & Meisner, 2021). As many social media users follow influencers to gain feelings of closeness (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017), the presence of the social media figure can increase followers' parasocial interaction (Kim, 2021; Ledbetter & Meisner, 2021). Influencer presence in posts provides an important cue for followers in evaluating the merit of the message. That is, it provides a sense of personal experience and endorsement and evokes the feeling of relational closeness. Therefore, we propose the following:

H6: *The self-presence of an influencer in posts positively affects followers' intention to adopt the influencer's recommendation and purchase.*

3.3. Moderation Effect

The ELM suggests that factors may play multiple roles under various elaboration conditions. For example, depending on elaboration likelihood, source factors can be used as peripheral cues directly affecting persuasion results or as moderators impacting the extent of thinking and the consideration of central factors (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Petty et al., 2002). As such, we posit and examine the moderation effects of influencer attributes on the relationship between post features and purchase intention in influencer marketing.

Depending on the varying situation of persuasive communication and the audience's deliberation, salient peripheral factors such as attractiveness and trustworthiness may either enhance or reduce the extent of elaboration on central factors, resulting in a positive or negative moderation on the effect of central factors (Jiang & Zhang, 2021; Moore et al., 1986; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Sussman & Siegal, 2003). A positive moderation may occur when source factors such as attractiveness, trustworthiness, and self-presence are used by the audience to determine whether a message is worth considering (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). A negative moderation may occur in certain conditions in which less deliberation is involved and source factors such as influencer characteristics are easy to assess and may have a queuing effect of being processed before central factors of content features. The initial exposure to source characteristics and the level of involved deliberation may make central factors less important (Fei et al., 2021; Jiang & Zhang, 2021; Luo et al., 2013)

The context of influencer marketing on social media likely effectuates a positive, rather than negative moderation effects of source factors. That is, when influencers are perceived as more attractive, trustworthy, and with higher self-presence, their posts are valued higher by followers and elaborated more for purchasing recommendation adoption. Purchase decisions are of relatively high personal relevance in that they are associated with costs (Casaló et al., 2020). Followers are motivated and are capable of elaborating on influencers' messages for purchase decisions. Therefore, purchase decisions are associated with high elaboration likelihood. Yet on social media, followers are exposed to a large amount of information and receive constant post feeds from multiple influencers. Thus, they may rely on source factors to decide whether a message is worth considering (Farivar et al., 2022; Hwang & Zhang, 2018; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Source factors affect followers' message selection process. That is, messages from influencers who are attractive, trustworthy, and present themselves in the messages, may catch more attention from the followers and be more carefully considered (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). This may manifest in a positive moderation effect of peripheral factors on the relationship between central factors and purchase intention. We hypothesize:

H7: *An influencer's perceived physical attractiveness positively moderates the relationship between the central factors (a) originality, (b) uniqueness, and (c) informativeness and followers' purchase intention.*

H8: *An influencer's perceived trustworthiness positively moderates the relationship between the central factors (a) originality, (b) uniqueness, and (c) informativeness and followers' purchase intention.*

H9: *An influencer's self-presence in posts positively moderates the relationship between the central factors (a) originality, (b) uniqueness, and (c) informativeness and followers' purchase intention.*

4. Methodology

To test the hypotheses, we conducted an online survey with followers of Instagram fashion influencers. With more than one billion monthly active users (Statista, 2018), Instagram is one of the most popular social networking sites. It is prevalent in influencer marketing (Enberg, 2018) and has been a common context of study in influencer marketing research. Fashion is among the most active industries on Instagram, and influencers frequently collaborate with fashion brands. Reports show that fashion brands receive the most benefit from influencer marketing (Enberg, 2018).

Table 2 lists the measurement items in the survey. All constructs were measured by 7-point Likert scales. We adapted most measures from established scales in the literature but developed new measurement scales for self-presence for this research. Three business researchers familiar with the survey-based approach examined the scales of the survey. After their confirmation, to test the reliability, validity, and clarity of the measurement items, we carried out a pilot test through interviews and a survey with a sample of 30 university students (aged 19–21 years) who were Instagram users. The results of the pilot study showed that respondents clearly understood all questions, and all items, except two for perceived originality, loaded well on their respective constructs. We removed the two measurement items with lower loadings accordingly.

The online survey occurred in February 2021. The survey was sent to 1,000 active Instagram users in a panel of North American participants of a reputable research company (Qualtrics). We added screening questions to ensure three criteria: (1) the respondents follow at least one fashion influencer, (2) the influencer whom the respondents are following and referring to in the survey is located in North America, and (3) the influencer actively collaborates with companies and recommends products/services to his or her followers. We asked respondents to select one influencer they were following and to answer the survey questions with this influencer in mind. We collected 487 valid responses.

Table 2: Measurement Items

Constructs	Items	Loadings	Mean	SD	Sources
Intention to purchase	1. I will buy the product that this influencer advertised through Instagram.	0.857	4.6	1.38	(Hwang & Zhang, 2018)
	2. I have the intention to buy the product that this influencer advertised through Instagram.	0.902			
	3. I am interested in buying the product that this influencer advertised through Instagram.	0.892			
	4. It is likely that I will buy products that this influencer advertised through Instagram in the future.	0.883			
Perceived originality	Posts on this influencer’s Instagram account are ...		5.2	0.95	(Casaló et al., 2020)
	1. Original.	0.883			
	2. Novel.	0.925			
	3. Innovative.	0.829			
Perceived uniqueness	Posts of this influencer’s Instagram account are ...		4.9	1.26	(Casaló et al., 2020)
	1. Highly unique.	0.912			
	2. One of a kind.	0.900			
	3. Really special and different to others.	0.907			
Perceived informativeness	1. In the promotional (advertisement) posts, this influencer provides enough product information and description.	0.795	4.9	1.08	(Ki et al., 2020)
	2. I use this influencer’s posts as a source of information.	0.885			
	3. The information provided on this influencer’s posts is informative.	0.830			
Perceived physical attractiveness	1. I find this influencer very attractive physically.	0.879	5.1	1.16	(Lee & Watkins, 2016)
	2. I think this influencer is quite pretty.	0.886			
	3. This influencer is very sexy looking.	0.877			
Perceived trustworthiness	I believe this influencer is ... (1–7)		5.3	1.18	(Ohanian, 1990)
	1. Undependable/dependable	0.815			
	2. Dishonest/honest	0.858			
	3. Unreliable/reliable	0.904			
	4. Insincere/sincere	0.888			
5. Untrustworthy/trustworthy	0.897				
Self-presence	1. This influencer uses the products/brands in his/her advertisements (he/she is present in her advertisement posts).	0.890	5.03	1.13	Newly developed
	2. This influencer’s posts mostly contain him/herself (he/she is present in his/her posts).	0.743			

Of the 487 respondents, 65% were female and 35% were male. The respondents were of a similar age range to that of general Instagram users (Statista, 2020): 37% were aged 18–29 years, 32% were aged 30–39 years, 18% were aged 40–49 years, and 13% were aged 50 and over. Table 3 shows detailed respondent demographics. The distributions of age and other demographic information are in line with the typical Instagram user profile (Omnicores, 2021) and those in previous studies on followers of Instagram influencers (Casaló et al., 2020; Farivar et al., 2022; Martínez-López et al., 2020). As such, non-response bias is not a salient concern in our study. Moreover, to assess the non-response bias, we followed the wave analysis method suggested by Armstrong & Overton (2018). This procedure assumes that respondents who complete the survey later are more likely to resemble non-respondents; therefore, a significant difference between early and late respondents could indicate non-response bias. Following this procedure, we compared the early (first 200 responses) and late responses (last 200 responses) in our survey by t-tests. We found no significant difference between these two sets of responses in all demographic categories (age, gender, education, length of using Instagram, and length of following). Hence, the non-response bias is not a significant issue in our dataset.

Table 3: Respondents’ Demographics

		Number	Percentage
Age	18–29 years	181	37%
	30–39 years	154	32%
	40–49 years	88	18%
	50 years and over	64	13%
Gender	Female	318	65%
	Male	169	35%
Education	High school or equivalent	103	21%
	Some college but no degree	106	22%
	Bachelor’s degree	210	43%
	Master’s degree	43	9%
	Doctorate degree	10	2%
	Other	15	3%
Length of using Instagram	Less than a month	15	3%
	Less than six months	23	5%
	Less than a year	38	8%
	1–2 years	125	25%
	More than 2 years	286	59%
Length of following selected influencer	Less than a month	79	16%
	Less than six months	167	34%
	Less than a year	134	28%
	1–2 years	65	13%
	More than 2 years	42	9%

5. Results

We assessed the research model and hypotheses using the PLS-SEM technique with SmartPLS 3.3.3 (Ringle et al., 2015). We used the PLS technique because of its suitability for (1) latent variable analysis and (2) exploring relatively new phenomena (Roldán & Sánchez-Franco, 2012). Previous studies on influencer marketing have also used PLS-SEM (Casaló et al., 2020; Farivar et al., 2021; Martínez-López et al., 2020).

Table 4 provides the results of the measurement model testing, which demonstrated satisfactory convergent and discriminant validity and reliability of the measurement model. The composite reliability values of all constructs were above 0.75, indicating sound internal consistency of construct measurements (Hair et al., 2014). All average variance extracted (AVE) values were above 0.6, exceeding the commonly recommended threshold of 0.5 (Hair et al., 2010). Moreover, the square root values of the AVEs (the diagonal values) exceeded their corresponding correlation coefficients between constructs, indicating sufficient discriminant validity.

As Table 5 shows, all heterotrait-monotrait ratio values were below the suggested threshold of 0.85 (Henseler et al., 2015). To investigate potential common method bias, we ran a full collinearity test (Kock, 2015). All variance inflation factors (VIFs) for factor levels are below 3.3. Moreover, Herman’s single-factor test showed that no single factor explains more than 43 percent of the variance. Thus, we considered the measurement model free of common method bias.

Table 4: Discriminant Validity

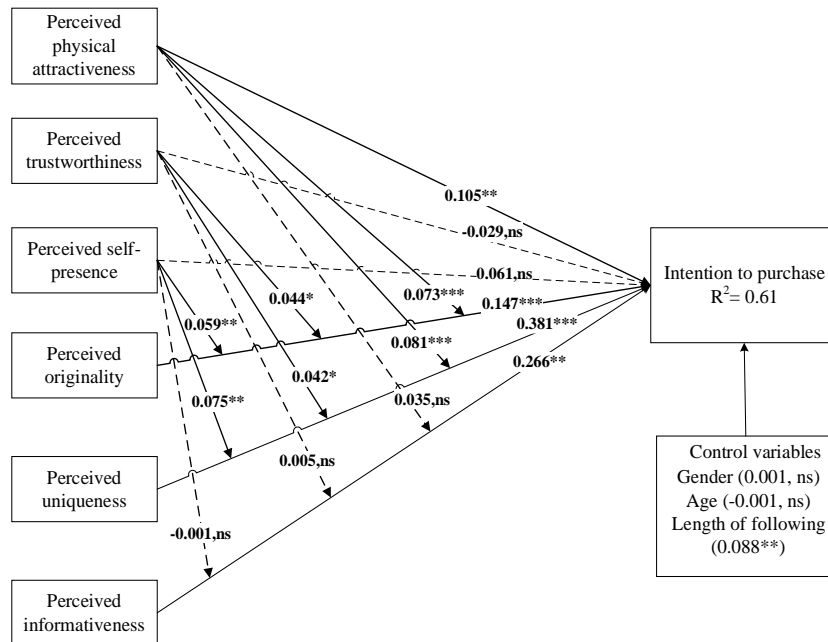
	CR	AVE	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Intention to purchase	0.934	0.781	0.884						
2. Perceived attractiveness	0.912	0.775	0.508	0.881					
3. Perceived trustworthiness	0.941	0.762	0.421	0.412	0.873				
4. Self-presence	0.802	0.672	0.546	0.448	0.581	0.820			
5. Originality	0.911	0.774	0.632	0.549	0.497	0.556	0.880		
6. Uniqueness	0.933	0.822	0.700	0.555	0.507	0.617	0.701	0.906	
7. Informativeness	0.760	0.617	0.616	0.363	0.396	0.508	0.514	0.569	0.786

N = 487; CR = composite reliability.

Table 5: Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio Values

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Intention to purchase						
2. Perceived attractiveness	0.576					
3. Perceived trustworthiness	0.459	0.463				
4. Self-presence	0.769	0.643	0.790			
5. Originality	0.712	0.639	0.560	0.801		
6. Uniqueness	0.760	0.634	0.559	0.780	0.701	
7. Informativeness	0.810	0.593	0.653	0.805	0.514	0.569

After ensuring the adequacy of the measurement model, we tested the structural model (see Figure 2 for the results). The R-square value of the model is 0.61, indicating a good fit, with 61 percent of the variance in followers’ purchase intention explained by the model. In addition, we ran PLS predict to evaluate the model’s predictive performance. The Q² values (all higher than 0.35) revealed medium to high predictive relevance of the model (Hair et al., 2019). Moreover, PLS estimates of RMSE, MAE, and MAPE were lower than the corresponding linear model estimates, suggesting better prediction in the PLS model than in the linear regression model (Hair et al., 2019).



p* < .05; *p* < .01; ****p* < .001

Figure 2: Structural Model Results

As Figure 2 shows, all central factors in the model (i.e., perceived originality, uniqueness, and informativeness) have significant, positive impacts on followers’ purchase intention. Thus, H1, H2, and H3 are supported. Among the three factors, perceived uniqueness has the highest effect size ($\beta = 0.381$, $f^2 = 0.137^1$). Among the peripheral cues, perceived attractiveness has a significant and positive direct effect on purchase intention, but the effects of the other two (i.e., perceived trustworthiness and self-presence) are nonsignificant. Thus, H4 is supported, but H5 and H6 are not.

Among the nine hypothesized moderating effects of peripheral factors, six (i.e., the moderation effects pertaining to the central factors of originality and uniqueness) are significant; thus, H7a, H7b, H8a, H8b, H9a, and H9b are supported; by contrast, those pertaining to post informativeness are nonsignificant; thus, H7c, H8c, and H9c are not supported. This latter finding indicates that the effect of post informativeness on followers’ purchase intention is consistent across various scenarios of influencer characteristics. Conversely, the effects of perceived originality and perceived uniqueness of influencers’ posts on followers’ purchase intention are subject to significant moderation of

¹ f^2 (effect size) assesses the change in R-square when an exogenous variable is removed from the model.

source factors. In addition, the results reveal the positive moderation of source factors on the effects of post originality and uniqueness on purchase intention. These effects are stronger when influencers are perceived as attractive and trustworthy and have more self-presence in posts.

Overall, our results reveal notable patterns. Central factors (i.e., the post features of perceived originality, uniqueness, and informativeness) have direct effects on followers’ purchase intention, while peripheral factors (i.e., influencer attributes such as perceived physical attractiveness, trustworthiness, and self-presence) mainly work with central factors to influence purchase intention. Except for the perceived physical attractiveness of influencers, peripheral factors do not directly affect purchase intention; that is, without central factors, peripheral factors do not by themselves drive purchase decisions. This finding indicates the importance of post messages in influencer marketing; that is, followers elaborate on influencers’ post messages when making purchase decisions. They do not make easy inferences for purchase decisions. In addition, post uniqueness has the strongest effect among post characteristics and post informativeness has a consistent effect on purchase intention across various conditions of influencer attributes. They are key in the persuasion process of influencer marketing.

6. Post Hoc Analysis

Among the control variables, the length of following an influencer has a significant, positive impact on purchase intention. That is, with an increased length of following, followers are inclined to accept more of the influencers’ purchase recommendation. This raises the question whether the length of following may affect the hypotheses testing results in the main analysis. To better explore the role of followers’ experience, we conducted a post hoc analysis by using the multigroup analysis (MGA) in SmartPLS to test whether our hypotheses differ for followers with different levels of experience. We ran the MGA with two distinct subsamples: experienced followers (i.e., following more than six months) and inexperienced followers (i.e., following less than six months). Table 6 shows the MGA parametric test results. The p-values of the differences of comparable paths between the two subsamples are nonsignificant, indicating consistent effects across people with different following experience. Thus, the results of the main analysis are robust.

Table 6: MGA Parametric Test Results

Path	Path coefficients diff (experienced vs. inexperienced followers)	T-value (experienced vs. inexperienced followers)	P-value (experienced vs. inexperienced followers)
Perceived physical attractiveness → purchase intention	0.098	0.94	0.348
Perceived trustworthiness → purchase intention	-0.036	0.382	0.702
Self-presence → purchase intention	0.089	0.752	0.452
Perceived originality → purchase intention	0.005	0.042	0.966
Perceived uniqueness → purchase intention	0.042	0.326	0.745
Informativeness → purchase intention	-0.113	1.074	0.283
Moderation of attractiveness on originality → purchase intention	0.049	0.364	0.716
Moderation of attractiveness on uniqueness → purchase intention	0.063	0.49	0.624
Moderation of attractiveness on informativeness → purchase intention	-0.102	0.831	0.406
Moderation of trustworthiness on originality → purchase intention	-0.055	0.343	0.732
Moderation of trustworthiness on uniqueness → purchase intention	0.128	0.735	0.463
Moderation of trustworthiness on informativeness → purchase intention	0.027	0.204	0.838
Moderation of self-presence on originality → purchase intention	0.107	0.719	0.472
Moderation of self-presence on uniqueness → purchase intention	-0.133	0.792	0.429

Moderation of self-presence on informativeness → purchase intention	-0.12	0.87	0.385
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7. Discussion

This research treats influencer marketing as a persuasion process and, drawing on the ELM (Bhattacharjee & Sanford, 2006; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), examines the impacts of key attributes of influencer and post content on followers’ purchase intention toward influencers’ recommendation. It assesses the direct and interactive effects of influencer and post attributes on followers’ purchase intention through the classification of central and peripheral factors in followers’ evaluation of post messages.

The results clearly show a difference in the impact on purchase intention between the central route based on content characteristics and the peripheral route based on influencer characteristics. All three central factors have direct and strong effects on followers’ purchase intention, with post uniqueness being the most prominent feature and post informativeness having a consistent effect across varying scenarios of influencer attributes. Among the peripheral factors, the perceived physical attractiveness of influencers has a direct effect on followers’ purchase intention, while perceived trustworthiness and self-presence do not. However, all peripheral factors interact with central factors of post originality and uniqueness to influence purchase intention. These results corroborate ELM theory (Bhattacharjee & Sanford, 2006; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) and provide insights specific to the influencer marketing context (Masuda et al., 2022; Shin & Lee, 2021).

Consistent with previous studies (e.g., Casaló et al., 2020; Masuda et al., 2022; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020), we show that post features are critical elements that influence followers’ purchase decisions. However, influencers’ characteristics mostly work together with post elements to affect purchase behaviors. This result contrasts with previous studies that emphasize the role of influencers’ characteristics (e.g., Chia et al., 2021; Kim & Kim, 2021; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020) and thus stresses the importance of investigating influencer and post features together to systematically understand their roles in followers’ message elaboration processes.

7.1. Theoretical Contributions

This research contributes to the literature in several ways. First, it considers influencer marketing persuasive communication and applies the ELM to systematically examine and compare the roles of several key influencer and post content features in followers’ message elaboration and opinion formation. This differs from prior influencer marketing research that focuses on a single perspective of influencer status (e.g., opinion leadership) or follower motivation (e.g., desire to mimic) to examine influencer marketing (Aw & Labrecque, 2020; Casaló et al., 2020; Masuda et al., 2022; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Moreover, prior studies are limited in assessing the simultaneous effects of influencer and post features (e.g., Kim, 2021; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). This is an issue not only in influencer marketing research but also in other research contexts, such as review helpfulness research (Hu & Yang, 2021; Karimi & Wang, 2017). Through the ELM angle (Bhattacharjee & Sanford, 2006; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) and attribution inference theory (Eagly et al., 1978; Eagly & Chaiken, 1975), we provide a holistic view on influencer and post features and test their direct and interactive effects as communication stimuli on followers’ purchase intention.

Second, our empirical results provide context-specific insights into the effects of the studied central and peripheral factors. The significant direct effects of central factors, such as post originality, uniqueness, and informativeness, are consistent with previous studies in electronic WOM and online shopping contexts (Fu et al., 2012; Lee & Watkins, 2016) and indicate followers’ high message elaboration in forming purchase intention. That is, Instagram followers, while having keen interests in influencers and voluntarily receiving their messages, do not make simple inferences in recommendation adoption and purchase decisions; rather, they carefully consider message merits for decision-making. This insight deviates from previous influencer marketing studies on influencer status-focused features (Chia et al., 2021; Farivar et al., 2021; Kim & Kim, 2021; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020) and enhances understanding of influencer marketing.

Third, the comparison of central factors offers a novel insight into the influencer marketing literature (Bu et al., 2022; Farivar & Wang, 2022; Ki & Kim, 2019): post uniqueness has the greatest effect size, while post informativeness is more robust and consistent (i.e., not moderated by influencer attributes) in affecting followers’ purchase intention. Providing enough informative content in the promotional post should always positively influence followers’ purchase intention, and this effect will not be influenced by followers’ perception of the influencer’s attractiveness, trustworthiness, and self-presence.

The varying roles of peripheral factors reported in this research offer an in-depth understanding of the effects of influencer attributes (Chia et al., 2021; Kim, 2021). Compared with the other peripheral factors (i.e., perceived trustworthiness and self-presence), perceived attractiveness is unique in that it has both a direct effect and an interaction effect with central factors on purchase intention. Perceived trustworthiness and self-presence, by contrast, manifest their effects by leveraging the relationship between post characteristics (specifically perceived originality

and uniqueness) and purchase intention. The direct effect of perceived physical attractiveness on followers' purchase intention reveals the importance of influencer attractiveness on Instagram (Chia et al., 2021; Lee & Watkins, 2016; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020), which originates from the nature of Instagram and users' motivations to use this platform. Influencers perceived as attractive are most popular among Instagram users (Lee & Watkins, 2016; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020).

An intriguing result is the nonsignificant direct effect and only interaction effects of perceived trustworthiness and self-presence on followers' purchase intention. The result on trustworthiness deviates from previous findings in online shopping and traditional advertising, which indicate a direct effect of trust on purchase intention (Jin et al., 2019; Mittal & Silvera, 2020). A study on influencer marketing also reports a direct effect of trust on followers' purchase intention, but in that model, trust was the sole factor directly leading to purchase intention (Kim & Kim, 2021). The inconsequential direct effect of trust in our study may be associated with the unique context of influencer marketing, which occurs through the established influencer–follower relationship (Farivar & Wang, 2022; Kim, 2021). Trustworthiness may affect whether social media users follow an influencer (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). However, people who voluntarily follow an influencer and continue to receive his or her messages show a bonding relationship with the influencer (Farivar et al., 2022), which reduces the importance of influencer trustworthiness in their purchase decisions. Trustworthiness affects followers' purchase intention through its interaction with post originality and uniqueness.

In addition, self-presence does not directly impact followers' purchase intention. This result is in contrast with findings in other contexts, such as e-commerce, which suggests that social presence increases purchasing intentions (Gefen & Straub, 2003). The reason for this contrast could be the nature of social media and influencer marketing. In e-commerce, the lack of social connection is more salient and therefore, social presence could be more important in leading to purchase intention. However, in social media like Instagram, the social presence is high; thus, as our findings show, its direct effect on purchase intention is not salient. However, influencers' self-presence in their advertisement posts can enhance the effects of post features on purchase intention.

7.2. Managerial Implications

The findings of this study have several important practical implications that can help both influencers and companies improve their influencer marketing programs. As the results show, followers do not make easy inferences, but instead, elaborate on post content to form their purchase intention. Thus, to better persuade their followers in influencer marketing, influencers could focus on improving their post content; specifically, they should take advantage of followers' interest in their original posts and work on their posts' unique and informative content features to differentiate themselves from other influencers. Promotional posts should contain sufficient information on the endorsed product/brand, as well as features that can increase the convenience and efficiency of purchasing, such as adding a link to the product shopping sites, offering additional links to Q&As on common issues in purchasing, and providing advice on product options.

In addition, influencers should focus on their own characteristics to boost the effectiveness of their promotional posts. For example, they can enhance their self-presence in their promotional posts. Instead of using a standard product image, they can post their own picture/video with or while using the product. Influencers can also explore various ways to build a trustworthy relationship with their followers to enhance the effects of promotional posts; for example, being more responsive and helpful, replying to followers' comments/messages, being more active (e.g., posting often, having live streams), and maintaining transparency and honesty would help build trust with followers. In addition, influencers need to pay attention to enhancing their physical attractiveness. Attractiveness has always been one of the important elements in traditional and social media celebrity endorsement (Ozanne et al., 2019; Reinhard et al., 2006). According to our findings, physical attractiveness is very important and has both direct and moderation effects on purchase intention. Influencers need to maintain a high level of physical attractiveness as part of their aesthetic content. Photographically, influencers need to be familiar with and take advantage of their camera settings and features (e.g., portrait, stability, or live mode), and they should use proper lighting and appropriate filters (TrentPeek, 2022).

Our findings also offer guidance to companies on selecting influencers and designing influencer marketing programs. As the findings show, firms should look for influencers who are involved with their post content, have unique and original posts, and are perceived as attractive. In addition, they should provide influencers with enough information and description about their products to enhance the informational content of influencers' posts and collaborate with influencers to make purchasing an easy task for followers.

7.3. Limitations and Further Research

This research is built on a sound theoretical foundation, and we expect reasonable generalizability of the findings in the influencer marketing context. However, caution is necessary when factors not considered in this study become important in the influencer marketing context. First, we conducted a cross-sectional survey on Instagram followers. Our respondents in general have followed the influencers for a certain period and can be considered “in a relationship.”

Influencer–follower dyads are an evolving process of several stages, including the pre-following stage, when users need to decide whether and whom to follow; the early-following stage, when users are following but unsure about the information they receive or their expectations of the influencer; stable-following stage, when users reasonably know about the influencers and understand their expectations; and the late-following stage, when users start getting bored, change interests, and lose attention. It would thus be useful to explore how the effect mechanism changes along the evolving influencer–follower dyad. We call for longitudinal research to explore social media influencers and their followers' behavior over time.

In addition, we followed prior research (e.g., Casaló et al., 2020; Chia et al., 2021; Kim, 2021; Masuda et al., 2022) in selecting influencing variables and control variables in the study. As influencer marketing and its effectiveness involve factors of multiple aspects, further research could expand the perspective and consider the effects of other factors, such as the average price level of influencers' endorsement and followers' ethnicity. Controlling for and exploring the effects of these variables may enhance the robustness of results and reveal additional insights.

This study applies ELM to examine the behavioral intention effect of central and peripheral factors but does not consider the attitudinal effect of persuasion. Attitude change is a key output measure in ELM literature and has often been studied as an immediate persuasion output and a predictor of behavior. A full relationship model that incorporates persuasion factors, attitude, and behavioral constructs could be used to study the effects of influencer marketing persuasion.

This study surveyed followers of influencers on Instagram; however, influencers are also active on other social media platforms, such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter. These social media platforms each have unique features, functions, and contexts that need to be considered when applying our findings across social media platforms. Future research could identify platform-dependent factors and cross-platform variations. Moreover, to enhance the generalizability of the results, we suggest that future studies test our findings in other contexts, such as other types of influencers and other social media platforms.

Finally, in this research, we suggest positive moderation of peripheral factors for relationships between central elements and behavioral intentions. Depending on the context and the level of the audience's message elaboration, peripheral factors could have a negative moderation effect. In contexts where decisions do not require a high level of deliberation, such as deciding whether to follow an influencer, the initial exposure to positive characteristics of the source may make central factors less important. Strong signals from source factors may distract the audience's attention and reduce the sensitivity to central factors (Jiang & Zhang, 2021; Luo et al., 2013). However, in our context, in which the decision is whether to purchase a product, peripheral factors exert a positive impact on the effects of central factors on intentions. Future research should further examine the situations in which negative moderation of peripheral factors exists.

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