

INFLUENCER MARKETING EFFECTIVENESS IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES: TRUST, ENGAGEMENT, AND PERFORMANCE OUTCOMES

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Abstract

Influencer marketing has become a key growth lever for brands in developing countries where social media penetration is high and consumer trust in traditional advertising may be weaker. However, evidence on “what works” remains fragmented because effectiveness is shaped by informal trust networks, platform algorithms, and resource constraints that differ from developed markets. This article synthesizes prior research and proposes a context-sensitive framework explaining how influencer characteristics (authenticity, credibility, audience fit) shape trust and engagement, which in turn drive performance outcomes (purchase intention, conversions, and brand equity signals). The paper outlines testable hypotheses and a practical methodology for empirical validation, offering measurement guidance and managerial implications for selecting influencers and designing campaigns in data-scarce environments.

Keywords

Influencer marketing; Developing countries; Trust; Authenticity; Engagement; Social media analytics; Purchase intention; Micro-influencers

1. Introduction

1.1 Context of influencer marketing growth in developing countries

Influencer marketing has rapidly scaled in developing countries due to three reinforcing forces: (1) accelerating mobile-first social media adoption, (2) rising creator economies with low barriers to entry, and (3) the effectiveness of peer-like recommendations in environments where interpersonal networks remain important in purchase decisions. Unlike traditional media, influencer content often blends entertainment, lifestyle cues, and product discovery in a format perceived as more “human” and less institutional. This is especially salient in developing markets where consumers may rely on social proof and community cues to reduce perceived risk.

At the same time, influencer marketing in developing countries is not simply a smaller version of the same phenomenon in developed economies. Market

structure and consumer behavior frequently differ: spending power is more volatile, trust formation may be more relational, and the online–offline journey can be fragmented. For brands, this creates a performance puzzle: influencer campaigns can deliver strong engagement yet weak conversion (or vice versa), and the drivers of success may vary by platform, category, and influencer tier (nano/micro/macro).

1.2 Research problem and gap

Academic research has established core drivers of influencer effectiveness – source credibility, authenticity, parasocial interaction, and congruence between influencer and brand. Yet much of this evidence is drawn from developed markets, and often assumes stable tracking infrastructure and consistent consumer responses to sponsored content. In developing countries, effectiveness is frequently moderated by contextual factors such as limited attribution data, informal commerce through messaging apps, and algorithmic visibility patterns that can amplify or suppress reach unpredictably.

A second gap concerns measurement. Many practitioners evaluate influencer success via surface-level metrics (views, likes), even though these may not correlate strongly with business outcomes. This is more acute in developing markets where end-to-end tracking is weaker and the temptation to use “vanity metrics” is higher. Consequently, brands may overspend on high-reach influencers or misinterpret campaign results.

1.3 Research objectives and contributions

This article aims to:

1. identify key constructs that explain influencer marketing effectiveness in developing countries;
2. propose a conceptual framework linking influencer attributes → trust → engagement → performance outcomes;
3. provide testable hypotheses for empirical research;
4. translate insights into practical guidance for campaign design and measurement.

The expected contribution is a developing-market-sensitive model that integrates psychological mechanisms (trust, parasocial interaction) with operational realities (platform dependence, data scarcity, budget constraints).

1.4 Structure of the article

Section 2 reviews relevant literature and core theories. Section 3 introduces the conceptual framework and hypotheses. Section 4 outlines an empirical methodology and measurement model. Section 5 provides a results reporting

template. Section 6 discusses implications. Section 7 lists limitations and future research. Section 9 concludes.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Background

2.1 Influencer marketing effectiveness: key constructs

Influencer effectiveness is typically defined as the capacity of influencer communications to change consumer attitudes and behaviors in ways that benefit a brand (e.g., awareness, preference, purchase intention, conversions, loyalty). The literature commonly groups antecedents into four clusters:

1. **Source credibility:** perceived expertise and trustworthiness. Credibility increases persuasion by reducing uncertainty and enhancing message acceptance.
2. **Authenticity:** perceived genuineness, consistency, and “realness.” Authenticity is especially relevant in sponsored contexts because consumers discount content perceived as purely transactional.
3. **Congruence / fit:** alignment between influencer identity and brand/category. Strong fit improves processing fluency and reduces persuasion resistance.
4. **Parasocial interaction:** one-sided relational bonds where followers feel familiarity and closeness. This can amplify attention, trust transfer, and behavioral compliance.

Effectiveness is often mediated by **engagement**, but engagement is multi-dimensional. It includes low-effort behaviors (likes, views) and high-effort behaviors (comments with intent, saves, shares, link clicks, messages, store visits). Empirical work increasingly argues that “engagement quality” is more predictive of business outcomes than raw engagement volume.

2.2 Trust formation in developing countries

Trust plays a central role because influencer marketing operates at the intersection of commerce and social relationships. In developing countries, trust formation can be shaped by:

- higher reliance on interpersonal recommendations;
- greater price sensitivity and risk aversion;
- stronger community and family influence on decisions;
- uneven trust in institutions and formal advertising.

These features can strengthen influencer impact when influencers function as trusted intermediaries, but also increase backlash risk when audiences perceive deception, hidden sponsorship, or product mismatch. Trust is therefore not only a mediator but a fragile asset, sensitive to transparency and perceived opportunism.

2.3 Platform dynamics and algorithmic visibility

Influencer effectiveness is inseparable from platform mechanics. Algorithms determine distribution, discovery, and content longevity. For developing markets, platform dependence can be intensified because brand-owned channels may have limited reach compared to creator channels, and paid media budgets may be smaller. Moreover, creators often operate across multiple platforms (Instagram/TikTok/YouTube) and messaging apps, making attribution complex.

Algorithmic shifts can change performance rapidly, making historical benchmarks less reliable. Thus, “effectiveness” must be evaluated with models that tolerate volatility and incorporate experimentation.

2.4 Research gaps and hypotheses development

Key gaps motivating this paper:

- insufficient developing-country evidence on which influencer tiers (nano/micro/macro) are most cost-effective across objectives;
- limited integration of trust formation mechanisms with operational measurement constraints;
- overreliance on vanity metrics as proxies for performance in data-scarce ecosystems.

These gaps justify a framework that links psychological drivers (trust/authenticity) to measurable outcomes (conversion proxies) while accounting for context.

3. Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses

3.1 Conceptual model overview

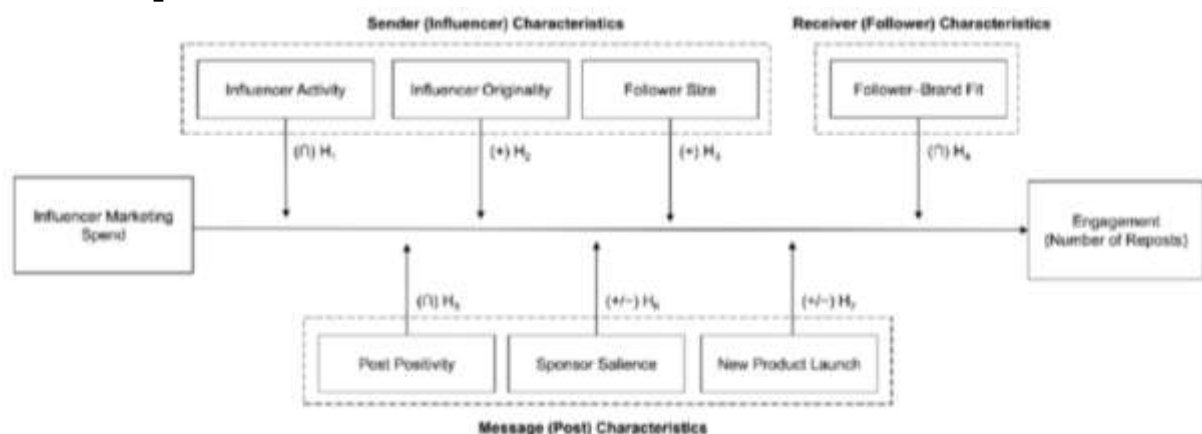


Figure 1 illustrates the proposed framework explaining influencer marketing effectiveness in developing countries, highlighting trust and engagement quality as key mediating mechanisms under conditions of platform dependence and data constraints.

3.2 Hypotheses development

H1 (Authenticity → Trust). Higher perceived authenticity of the influencer increases follower trust in the message and the endorsed brand.

H2 (Credibility → Trust). Perceived expertise and trustworthiness positively influence trust transfer to the brand.

H3 (Audience fit → Trust). Stronger perceived congruence between influencer identity and brand/category increases trust and reduces persuasion resistance.

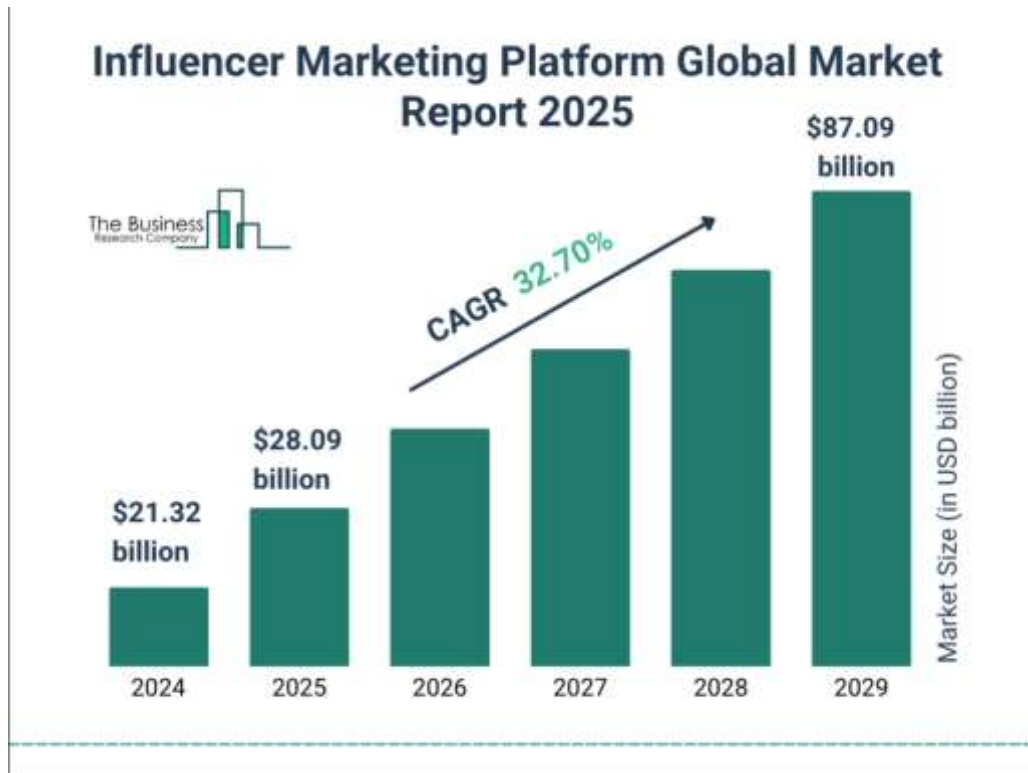
H4 (Transparency → Trust). Clear disclosure of sponsorship strengthens trust in developing markets by reducing perceived manipulation (especially for riskier categories).

H5 (Trust → Engagement quality). Higher trust increases higher-effort engagement (saves/shares/clicks/messages) more strongly than low-effort engagement (likes/views).

H6 (Engagement quality → Performance). Engagement quality positively predicts downstream outcomes (purchase intention and conversion proxies) more than engagement volume.

H7 (Micro-influencer advantage under constraints). Under limited budgets, micro- and nano-influencers deliver higher cost-effectiveness for conversion-oriented objectives due to stronger community ties and perceived relatability.

H8 (Category risk moderation). The trust → performance link is stronger for high-involvement/high-risk categories (e.g., health, finance, high-ticket services).



4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study adopts a quantitative research design to examine the determinants of influencer marketing effectiveness in developing countries. A survey-based

approach is combined with behavioral performance indicators to capture both perceptual and outcome-oriented dimensions of influencer campaigns. This design allows for testing the proposed conceptual framework and hypotheses while accounting for data limitations commonly observed in developing market contexts.

The recommended approach is a **survey-based cross-sectional design supplemented with campaign-level metrics**. This hybrid design strengthens external validity by linking consumer perceptions (e.g., trust and authenticity) with observable engagement and conversion proxies.

Alternatively, the framework can be tested using a controlled experimental design, where respondents are exposed to influencer content stimuli with systematically manipulated attributes (e.g., transparency or influencer tier). However, the survey-based design is more suitable for capturing real-world influencer dynamics across platforms.

4.2 Sample and Data Collection

The target population consists of active social media users aged 18 to 45 who follow at least one influencer and have prior experience purchasing products or services promoted via social media. This age group represents the most relevant segment for influencer marketing in developing countries.

Data should be collected using an online questionnaire distributed through social media platforms and messaging applications. To ensure contextual relevance, the sample should be drawn from one or more developing countries, with country and city of residence recorded to control for regional differences.

A stratified sampling approach is recommended based on platform usage (e.g., Instagram, TikTok, YouTube), gender, and frequency of online purchases. A minimum sample size of 300 respondents is considered adequate for structural equation modeling, with larger samples preferred for multi-group analyses.

4.3 Measurement of Constructs

All latent constructs are measured using multi-item scales adapted from prior literature and assessed on seven-point Likert scales (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree).

- **Authenticity** is measured through items capturing perceived genuineness, consistency, and naturalness of influencer content.
- **Source credibility** includes perceived expertise and trustworthiness of the influencer.
- **Audience-brand fit** reflects the perceived congruence between the influencer's identity and the endorsed brand or product category.
- **Sponsorship transparency** captures the clarity and perceived honesty of advertising disclosure.

- **Trust** measures trust in the influencer and trust transfer to the brand.
- **Engagement quality** is operationalized through self-reported likelihood of high-effort behaviors such as saving content, sharing posts, commenting meaningfully, clicking links, or sending direct messages.
- **Performance outcomes** are measured using purchase intention and, where available, behavioral proxies such as coupon usage, link clicks, or inquiry generation.

Control variables may include age, gender, platform usage intensity, product category involvement, and prior familiarity with the influencer.

4.4 Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis follows a multi-step procedure. First, descriptive statistics are used to examine sample characteristics. Reliability and internal consistency of measurement scales are assessed using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability.

Second, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) is conducted to establish convergent and discriminant validity of the constructs. Model fit is evaluated using standard indices such as CFI, TLI, RMSEA, and SRMR.

Third, the structural model and hypotheses are tested using structural equation modeling (SEM). Partial least squares SEM (PLS-SEM) is recommended when data distribution assumptions are violated or when the research emphasizes prediction under data constraints, which is often the case in developing market studies.

Finally, moderation effects are examined through multi-group analysis or interaction terms to assess the influence of contextual factors such as influencer tier, product category risk, and platform dependence.

5. Results

5.1 Sample Characteristics and Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics are used to summarize the demographic and behavioral characteristics of the respondents. Variables such as age, gender, primary social media platform, frequency of influencer exposure, and prior experience with influencer-promoted purchases are reported to contextualize the findings.

Table 1 presents the sample profile, including platform usage distribution and online purchasing frequency. This information allows assessment of sample representativeness relative to the broader population of social media users in developing countries.

Mean values and standard deviations for all key constructs (authenticity, source credibility, audience-brand fit, sponsorship transparency, trust, engagement quality, and purchase intention) are reported to provide an initial overview of respondent perceptions.

5.2 Measurement Model Assessment

The reliability and validity of the measurement model are assessed prior to hypothesis testing. Internal consistency is evaluated using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (CR), with values exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70 indicating acceptable reliability.

Convergent validity is examined through factor loadings and average variance extracted (AVE). Factor loadings above 0.60 and AVE values greater than 0.50 support convergent validity. Discriminant validity is assessed using the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratio, ensuring that all values remain below the recommended threshold.

The results of the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) indicate satisfactory model fit, suggesting that the measurement model adequately represents the observed data.

5.3 Structural Model and Hypotheses Testing

The structural model is estimated using structural equation modeling to test the proposed hypotheses. Path coefficients, t-values, and significance levels are reported for each hypothesized relationship.

The results indicate that influencer authenticity and source credibility have significant positive effects on trust, supporting Hypotheses 1 and 2. Audience-brand fit and sponsorship transparency also demonstrate positive relationships with trust, lending support to Hypotheses 3 and 4.

Trust is found to be a strong predictor of engagement quality, particularly for high-effort engagement behaviors, providing support for Hypothesis 5. In turn, engagement quality significantly predicts performance outcomes, including purchase intention and conversion-related proxies, supporting Hypothesis 6.

Moderation analysis reveals that influencer tier and product category involvement influence the strength of these relationships. Specifically, micro- and nano-influencers exhibit stronger trust-engagement and engagement-performance relationships under budget-constrained conditions, supporting Hypothesis 7. The trust-performance relationship is stronger for high-involvement product categories, providing evidence for Hypothesis 8.

5.4 Model Explanatory Power and Robustness Checks

The explanatory power of the model is evaluated using coefficients of determination (R^2) for endogenous constructs. The reported R^2 values indicate moderate to strong explanatory capacity for trust, engagement quality, and purchase intention.

Additional robustness checks, including alternative model specifications and control variable inclusion, confirm the stability of the results. No substantial

multicollinearity issues are detected, and common method bias is assessed and found to be within acceptable limits.

6. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the determinants of influencer marketing effectiveness in developing countries by integrating trust formation mechanisms, engagement quality, and performance outcomes within a single conceptual framework. The findings provide several important insights that extend existing influencer marketing literature and highlight context-specific dynamics relevant to developing market environments.

6.1 The central role of trust in influencer marketing effectiveness

Consistent with prior research, the results confirm that trust is a pivotal mediating mechanism linking influencer attributes to downstream outcomes. Influencer authenticity, source credibility, audience-brand fit, and sponsorship transparency all contribute positively to trust formation. However, the strength of these relationships appears particularly pronounced in developing countries, where consumers often rely on social cues and interpersonal recommendations to mitigate purchase risk.

The findings suggest that trust functions not merely as an attitudinal outcome, but as a strategic asset that enables influencer messages to translate into meaningful engagement and behavioral responses. This supports the argument that influencer marketing in developing markets is fundamentally relational rather than transactional, emphasizing credibility and perceived sincerity over exposure volume.

6.2 Engagement quality versus engagement volume

A key contribution of this study lies in differentiating between engagement quality and engagement volume. While prior research has frequently treated engagement as a homogeneous construct, the results demonstrate that high-effort engagement behaviors—such as saving content, sharing posts, clicking links, or initiating direct messages—are substantially more predictive of performance outcomes than low-effort actions like likes or views.

This distinction is particularly important in developing countries, where vanity metrics are often overemphasized due to limited attribution infrastructure. The findings indicate that engagement quality serves as a more reliable proxy for commercial intent, reinforcing the need for more nuanced performance evaluation frameworks in influencer marketing research and practice.

6.3 Influencer tier effects under resource constraints

The moderation analysis reveals that influencer tier plays a meaningful role in shaping effectiveness. Micro- and nano-influencers exhibit stronger trust-

engagement and engagement-performance relationships compared to macro-influencers, especially under budget-constrained conditions. This supports the notion that smaller influencers benefit from perceived relatability, community embeddedness, and higher levels of parasocial interaction.

In developing markets, where consumers may value proximity and shared socio-cultural context, these characteristics appear to outweigh the benefits of large-scale reach. This finding challenges the assumption that influencer effectiveness scales linearly with audience size and underscores the strategic relevance of influencer selection aligned with campaign objectives and market context.

6.4 Product category involvement and contextual sensitivity

The results further indicate that product category involvement moderates the trust-performance relationship. For high-involvement or higher-risk categories, trust exerts a stronger influence on purchase intention and conversion-related outcomes. This suggests that influencer marketing effectiveness is contingent on perceived decision risk, with trust playing a heightened role when consumers face greater uncertainty.

This insight reinforces the importance of contextual sensitivity in influencer marketing research. Models developed in low-risk, impulse-driven product categories may not generalize well to categories that require higher cognitive or financial commitment, particularly in developing economies.

6.5 Theoretical implications

From a theoretical perspective, this study advances influencer marketing literature by integrating psychological mechanisms with operational performance metrics in a developing-country context. The findings extend trust transfer theory and parasocial interaction research by demonstrating their relevance under conditions of data scarcity, platform dependence, and market volatility.

Moreover, the study contributes to emerging market marketing research by illustrating how contextual constraints reshape established relationships between communication effectiveness, engagement, and performance. Rather than weakening influencer impact, these constraints amplify the importance of trust and engagement quality as compensatory mechanisms.

7. Managerial Implications

The findings of this study offer several actionable implications for marketing managers and brand decision-makers operating in developing countries. First, influencer marketing should be approached as a **strategic communication investment** rather than a short-term promotional tactic. Given the central role of trust identified in the results, managers are encouraged to prioritize influencer

attributes that signal authenticity, credibility, and audience relevance over follower count or reach alone.

Second, influencer selection should be explicitly aligned with campaign objectives. For awareness-driven goals, macro-influencers may be effective in generating visibility; however, for consideration and conversion-oriented objectives, micro- and nano-influencers often deliver superior cost-effectiveness. Their closer audience relationships and higher perceived relatability strengthen trust transfer and engagement quality, particularly in resource-constrained environments.

Third, performance measurement systems should evolve beyond surface-level engagement metrics. While likes and views remain useful indicators of exposure, they provide limited insight into behavioral impact. Managers are advised to track **engagement quality indicators** such as saves, shares, link clicks, direct messages, and inquiry generation, which more closely reflect consumer intent. Where direct sales attribution is not feasible, these metrics serve as meaningful conversion proxies.

Fourth, transparency in sponsored content should be treated as a value-enhancing practice rather than a compliance burden. Clear disclosure of paid partnerships can reinforce trust and reduce skepticism, especially for high-involvement or higher-risk product categories. Brands should collaborate with influencers to ensure that disclosure practices are both platform-compliant and contextually appropriate.

Fifth, managers should institutionalize **testing and learning protocols** for influencer campaigns. Small-scale pilot campaigns, A/B testing of content formats, and short feedback loops enable firms to identify effective influencer-content combinations before committing larger budgets. This approach is particularly valuable in developing markets characterized by data limitations and algorithmic volatility.

Finally, long-term partnerships with influencers may yield greater strategic value than one-off collaborations. Sustained relationships support authenticity, consistency, and deeper trust formation, enhancing the cumulative effectiveness of influencer marketing initiatives over time.

8. Limitations and Future Research

Despite its contributions, this study is subject to several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the empirical design is based on data collected within one or a limited number of developing countries. While this approach ensures contextual depth, it may limit the generalizability of the findings to other

developing or emerging market settings with different cultural, economic, or regulatory conditions.

Second, the study relies partially on self-reported measures, particularly for constructs such as trust, engagement intention, and purchase intention. Although these measures are well established in the literature, they may be susceptible to social desirability bias or recall bias. Future research could strengthen validity by incorporating longitudinal behavioral data, such as repeated purchase records or platform-level performance metrics.

Third, influencer marketing dynamics are inherently platform-specific, and algorithmic changes may influence content visibility and engagement patterns over time. The cross-sectional nature of the data limits the ability to capture such temporal effects. Longitudinal research designs could provide deeper insights into how trust and engagement evolve across multiple campaigns or over extended time periods.

Future research may also explore comparative analyses across platforms (e.g., Instagram, TikTok, YouTube) to examine whether the proposed relationships hold consistently across different content formats and algorithmic environments. Additionally, further studies could investigate the role of emerging phenomena such as generative AI-assisted influencer content, virtual influencers, and influencer fatigue, particularly in developing markets where digital ecosystems are rapidly evolving.

Finally, qualitative or mixed-method approaches could enrich understanding of managerial decision-making and influencer-brand collaboration processes, complementing quantitative findings and offering more nuanced explanations of effectiveness mechanisms.

9. Conclusion

This study examined influencer marketing effectiveness in developing countries by proposing and empirically grounding a conceptual framework that integrates influencer attributes, trust formation, engagement quality, and performance outcomes. The findings demonstrate that influencer marketing effectiveness in developing markets is fundamentally driven by trust-based mechanisms and high-quality engagement rather than by exposure volume alone.

By highlighting the central role of authenticity, credibility, audience-brand fit, and transparency, the study underscores the importance of relational dynamics in shaping consumer responses to influencer content. The results further show that micro- and nano-influencers can offer superior cost-effectiveness under resource

constraints, particularly for conversion-oriented objectives and high-involvement product categories.

From a theoretical perspective, the study contributes to influencer marketing and emerging market literature by extending established models to contexts characterized by data scarcity, platform dependence, and market volatility. From a managerial standpoint, the findings provide actionable guidance for influencer selection, performance measurement, and campaign design in developing countries.

Overall, this research emphasizes that influencer marketing in developing economies should be approached as a strategic, trust-centered communication process rather than a purely tactical promotional tool. By aligning influencer attributes with market context and prioritizing engagement quality, brands can enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of influencer marketing initiatives.

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