

# CONSUMER TRUST IN INFLUENCER-BASED DIGITAL MARKETING: A QUALITATIVE STUDY AMONG BEAUTY PRODUCT CONSUMERS IN MAKASSAR CITY

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## Abstract

*Influencer marketing has emerged as a dominant strategy within the digital marketing landscape, particularly in the Indonesian beauty industry. This study investigates how consumers in Makassar City develop and sustain trust in influencer-based marketing content on social media platforms. Employing a qualitative descriptive approach, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 purposively selected participants who actively consume beauty content on Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis encompassing open coding, axial coding, and selective coding procedures. The findings reveal five core themes: (1) authenticity as the primary driver of trust formation; (2) the negative impact of excessive commercialization on perceived credibility; (3) the role of influencer expertise and product knowledge in legitimizing recommendations; (4) parasocial relationships as amplifiers of emotional attachment and brand loyalty; and (5) consumer skepticism as an emerging critical evaluation strategy. The study demonstrates that trust remains the central mediating variable linking influencer characteristics to purchase intentions. Consumers exhibit nuanced evaluation behaviors, distinguishing between genuine advocacy and sponsored content. The research contributes theoretically by integrating Source Credibility Theory, Parasocial Interaction Theory, and the Trust-Commitment Theory within the influencer marketing context. Managerially, the findings suggest that brands should prioritize authentic, transparent, and expertise-driven influencer collaborations rather than high-volume promotional campaigns.*

**Keywords:** *Consumer Trust, Influencer Marketing, Digital Marketing, Beauty Industry, Parasocial Interaction, Qualitative Study, Purchase Intention*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid proliferation of social media platforms has fundamentally transformed the global digital marketing ecosystem. According to Kemp (2023), more than 4.9 billion individuals worldwide actively use social media, representing approximately 60.49% of the global population. This seismic shift in media consumption has compelled organizations to

recalibrate their marketing strategies, redirecting significant portions of their advertising budgets from traditional channels toward digital and social media platforms. Among the most consequential developments emerging from this transformation is the rise of influencer marketing, a practice in which brands collaborate with individuals who possess substantial social media followings to promote products, services, or brand narratives (De Veirman et al., 2022).

The global influencer marketing industry was valued at approximately USD 21.1 billion in 2023 and is projected to exceed USD 47.8 billion by 2027 (Statista, 2024). This exponential growth reflects a broader paradigm shift in consumer behavior, wherein individuals increasingly seek peer recommendations, authentic reviews, and relatable content creators over conventional advertising messages. Particularly within the beauty industry encompassing cosmetics, skincare, haircare, and personal care products, influencer marketing has achieved an unparalleled level of penetration. Beauty influencers on platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube function as trusted advisors, opinion leaders, and aspirational figures simultaneously, shaping consumer perceptions and purchase decisions at an unprecedented scale (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020).

In the Indonesian context, these global trends manifest with particular intensity. Indonesia ranks among the world's largest social media markets, with over 167 million active users in 2023 (DataReportal, 2024). The country's beauty market, valued at approximately USD 7.5 billion, has experienced substantial growth driven in part by the proliferation of beauty content creators across digital platforms (Euromonitor, 2023). Indonesian beauty influencers, ranging from mega-influencers with millions of followers to micro-influencers commanding dedicated niche communities, have become instrumental intermediaries between brands and consumers. Platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube serve as primary arenas where beauty tutorials, product reviews, haul videos, and get-ready-with-me (GRWM) content circulate widely and generate considerable consumer engagement.

Central to the effectiveness of influencer marketing is the construct of consumer trust. Trust, broadly defined as a consumer's willingness to rely on an exchange partner in whom one has confidence (Moorman et al., 1992), serves as a critical psychological mechanism mediating the relationship between influencer communication and consumer behavior outcomes. When consumers perceive an influencer as credible, authentic, and genuinely aligned with their values, trust formation occurs naturally, subsequently facilitating positive attitudes toward endorsed brands and heightened purchase intentions (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Conversely, when influencer content is perceived as excessively commercialized, misleading, or incongruent with the influencer's established persona, trust erosion can occur, leading to reduced engagement and brand skepticism.

Despite the growing body of literature addressing influencer marketing and consumer trust, several significant research gaps remain unaddressed. First, the majority of existing studies adopt quantitative methodologies, employing survey instruments and structural

equation modeling to examine relationships between predetermined variables (Ismagilova et al., 2020; Trivedi & Sama, 2020). While these approaches yield valuable statistical insights, they often fail to capture the nuanced psychological processes, contextual interpretations, and lived experiences through which consumers evaluate influencer credibility and construct trust (Arif & Windarsari, 2026). Qualitative inquiry, by contrast, affords the depth and richness necessary to illuminate these complex processes.

Second, extant research disproportionately focuses on Western consumer contexts, particularly the United States, United Kingdom, and Western European markets, leaving the dynamics of influencer trust in Southeast Asian and Indonesian markets comparatively underexplored (Hudders et al., 2021). Cultural factors, including collectivism, social identity dynamics, and unique platform usage patterns, may significantly modulate how Indonesian consumers form and maintain trust toward influencers. Third, limited research has examined influencer marketing in the specific context of emerging secondary cities in Indonesia, such as Makassar, the largest city in Eastern Indonesia and a significant commercial and cultural hub. Understanding consumer behavior in this context is critical for brands seeking to expand their market reach beyond the major metropolitan centers of Jakarta and Surabaya.

Makassar, with a population exceeding 1.4 million and a rapidly growing middle-class consumer segment, represents a compelling research context for several reasons. The city has witnessed dramatic growth in social media penetration, smartphone adoption, and digital commerce activity over the past five years (BPS Kota Makassar, 2023). Beauty consumption in Makassar has evolved considerably, with consumers demonstrating increasing sophistication in their product knowledge, brand awareness, and critical evaluation of marketing messages. Local and regional beauty influencers based in Makassar have cultivated substantial followings, creating a distinctive influencer ecosystem that reflects both global trends and locally specific cultural dynamics.

Against this backdrop, the present study addresses the following research question: How do beauty product consumers in Makassar City develop trust toward influencer-based digital marketing content, and what factors influence their evaluation of influencer credibility and purchase intentions? This overarching question is operationalized through five sub-questions: (1) What characteristics of influencers are perceived as authentic by consumers? (2) How does the disclosure of sponsored content affect consumer trust? (3) What role does influencer expertise play in the trust formation process? (4) How do parasocial relationships contribute to emotional attachment and purchase intentions? (5) In what ways do consumers critically evaluate and resist influencer marketing messages?

The study aims to achieve three primary objectives: (1) to explore and describe the processes through which beauty product consumers in Makassar City construct trust toward influencer-based marketing content; (2) to identify the key dimensions of influencer characteristics that facilitate or impede trust formation; and (3) to examine the relationship

between consumer trust, parasocial interaction, and purchase intentions within the Indonesian beauty market context.

The contributions of this study are both theoretical and practical. Theoretically, the research extends the application of Source Credibility Theory (Hovland et al., 1953), Parasocial Interaction Theory (Horton & Wohl, 1956), and the Trust-Commitment Theory (Morgan & Hunt, 1994) within the contemporary digital influencer marketing landscape. It enriches the theoretical understanding of trust formation in mediated, algorithmically curated social media environments. Practically, the findings offer actionable insights for marketing practitioners, brand managers, and influencer agencies operating in Indonesian markets, particularly regarding the strategic management of influencer-brand collaborations that prioritize long-term trust-building over short-term promotional objectives.

## 2. RESEARCH METHOD

### 2.1. Research Design

This study employs a qualitative descriptive research design, grounded in the interpretivist epistemological tradition (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The qualitative approach is deemed most appropriate given the study's objective of exploring the subjective meanings, lived experiences, and interpretive processes through which consumers construct trust toward influencer-based marketing content. A qualitative inquiry does not seek to quantify relationships between predetermined variables; rather, it seeks to generate rich, contextually grounded descriptions of social phenomena as they are experienced and interpreted by participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

### 2.2. Research Site and Participants

The study was conducted in Makassar City, South Sulawesi Province, Indonesia. Participants were recruited using purposive sampling, ensuring that all informants met the following inclusion criteria: (1) female or male consumers aged 18–35 years; (2) active users of at least one social media platform (Instagram, TikTok, or YouTube); (3) self-identified followers of at least one beauty influencer; (4) active purchasers of beauty products (minimum two purchases per month); and (5) residents of Makassar City at the time of data collection. A total of 20 participants were recruited, representing a sample size consistent with the requirements of thematic saturation in qualitative research (Guest et al., 2006).

**Table 1. Characteristics of Research Informants**

Code	Age	Gender	Occupation	Platform	Purchases/Month
P01	22	Female	University Student	Instagram, TikTok	3-4
P02	25	Female	Private Employee	YouTube, Instagram	4-5
P03	19	Female	University Student	TikTok	2-3

P04	28	Female	Entrepreneur	Instagram	5-6
P05	31	Female	Civil Servant	YouTube, TikTok	3-4
P06	24	Male	University Student	TikTok, Instagram	2-3
P07	27	Female	Freelancer	Instagram	4-5
P08	20	Female	University Student	TikTok	2-3
P09	33	Female	Teacher	YouTube	3-4
P10	26	Female	Private Employee	Instagram, TikTok	4-5
P11	21	Female	University Student	TikTok	2-3
P12	29	Female	Entrepreneur	Instagram, YouTube	5-6
P13	23	Female	University Student	TikTok, Instagram	3-4
P14	35	Female	Private Employee	Instagram	3-4
P15	30	Female	Housewife	YouTube, TikTok	2-3
P16	22	Female	University Student	TikTok	2-3
P17	27	Male	Freelancer	Instagram	2-3
P18	24	Female	University Student	TikTok, YouTube	3-4
P19	32	Female	Civil Servant	Instagram	4-5
P20	26	Female	Private Employee	TikTok, Instagram	3-4

### 2.3.Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted between March and May 2024. Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and was conducted either face-to-face or via video call (WhatsApp or Zoom), depending on participant preference and availability. An interview guide was developed based on the conceptual framework, comprising open-ended questions about influencer evaluation, trust formation, emotional engagement, and purchase decision processes. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim.

In addition to interviews, the researcher conducted non-participatory observation of participants' social media interactions, with consent, examining comment sections, story reactions, and shopping behavior linked to influencer recommendations. These observations served as supplementary data to contextualize and triangulate interview findings.

**2.4.Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis, as operationalized by Braun and Clarke (2006), served as the primary analytical procedure. This approach involved six iterative phases: (1) familiarization with the data through repeated reading of transcripts; (2) generation of initial codes capturing meaningful features of the data; (3) searching for themes by clustering related codes; (4) reviewing and refining themes against the dataset; (5) defining and naming themes clearly; and (6) producing the analytical report. NVivo 14 software was employed to facilitate systematic coding and theme management.

**Table 2. Thematic Coding Matrix**

Theme	Sub-Theme	Sample Codes	Frequency
Authenticity Builds Trust	Genuine self-expression	Real review, Personal experience, Non-scripted	High (18/20)
Authenticity Builds Trust	Non-promotional appearance	Natural recommendation, Organic content	High (17/20)
Transparency	Sponsored disclosure impact	Paid partnership, #ad awareness	Moderate (14/20)
Transparency	Over-commercialization distrust	Too many ads, Constant promotion	High (19/20)
Influencer Expertise	Beauty knowledge credibility	Product ingredients, Skin type advice	High (16/20)
Influencer Expertise	Demonstration quality	Tutorial details, before-and-after results	High (15/20)
Parasocial Relationship	Emotional closeness	Feel like a friend, Personal connection	Moderate (13/20)
Parasocial Relationship	Brand loyalty via relationship	Buy because I trust them, follow recommendations	Moderate (12/20)
Consumer Skepticism	Critical review of behavior	Cross-check reviews, compare opinions	High (17/20)
Consumer Skepticism	Paid promotion awareness	Biased review, Money motive	High (18/20)

**2.5.Validity and Reliability**

Trustworthiness was established through four criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985): credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was ensured through member checking, wherein preliminary findings were shared with six participants who confirmed their alignment with participants' intended meanings. Triangulation was achieved through the integration of interview data with social media

observation records. A detailed audit trail documenting analytical decisions ensured confirmability, while a thick description of the research context enhanced transferability.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The thematic analysis yielded five overarching themes that collectively illuminate the multidimensional process of consumer trust formation in influencer-based beauty marketing. Each theme is presented below with supporting participant quotations (translated from Indonesian to English), theoretical integration, and comparison with extant literature.

#### 3.1. Theme 1: Authenticity as the Foundation of Trust

The most consistently and emphatically articulated theme across participant interviews was the primacy of authenticity in determining whether consumers trust an influencer's recommendations. Participants universally expressed greater trust toward influencers perceived as presenting their genuine selves, sharing honest opinions, acknowledging product limitations, and demonstrating consistency between their on-screen and off-screen personas.

Participant P04, a 28-year-old entrepreneur, articulated this sentiment with clarity:

*"I follow influencers who are honest about what they like and dislike about a product. If someone always says everything is amazing, I don't trust them anymore. The ones I trust are those who say, 'This moisturizer is great, but it's a bit heavy for oily skin types.' That kind of honesty makes me feel they genuinely care about their followers, not just about getting paid." (P04)*

Similarly, P12 noted that authentic influencers communicate a sense of vulnerability and relatability that distinguishes them from conventional advertising:

*"When an influencer shares that they struggled with acne for years and genuinely found a product that helped, I feel connected. I don't feel like I'm being sold something. I feel like a friend is sharing their experience." (P12)*

These findings are consistent with Audrezet et al.'s (2020) conceptualization of influencer authenticity as comprising self-expression, originality, and the communication of sincere personal experiences. The data extend this framework by revealing that Indonesian consumers are particularly attuned to the tension between authentic self-presentation and commercial imperatives, a tension that becomes increasingly salient as influencer-brand collaborations multiply. Lou and Yuan (2019) similarly establish that perceived authenticity significantly predicts follower trust, which in turn mediates the relationship between influencer credibility and purchase intention. The present findings not only confirm this relationship but also provide qualitative depth to the mechanisms through which authenticity is perceived and evaluated by consumers in a Southeast Asian context.

### **3.2. Theme 2: Transparency and the Disclosure Paradox**

The second major theme concerns consumer responses to sponsored content disclosure and the broader dynamics of commercial transparency in influencer marketing. The findings reveal a complex and somewhat paradoxical pattern: while participants generally expressed appreciation for influencers who disclose paid partnerships, the act of disclosure itself simultaneously triggers evaluative scrutiny and reduces the perceived objectivity of the recommendation.

P07, a 27-year-old freelancer, captured this paradox succinctly:

*"I respect influencers who are honest about being paid to promote something. At least they don't pretend. But honestly, once I see 'paid partnership,' I automatically lower my trust level. I know they might not be saying everything they really think." (P07)*

The most critical response was directed at influencers perceived as having excessively commercialized their content. Nineteen of twenty participants expressed some degree of distrust toward influencers who promote a large number of brands within short time periods or who appear to endorse products incongruent with their established content focus.

P19 stated:

*"There is one influencer I used to love following. She was so genuine and helpful. But lately, every single post is a collaboration. Skincare, food, vitamins, and even cooking utensils. I stopped trusting her beauty recommendations because it feels like she will promote anything for money." (P19)*

These findings align with Boerman et al. (2017), who establish that sponsor disclosure reduces persuasion knowledge resistance when executed authentically, but that excessive commercial frequency triggers reactance and trust erosion. The present data suggest that Indonesian consumers apply a mental threshold of acceptable commercial frequency, beyond which the cumulative effect of sponsorships overrides any individual trust signal. This finding has important implications for influencer portfolio management and brand exclusivity strategies.

### **3.3. Theme 3: Expertise and Knowledge Legitimacy**

The third theme centers on the role of influencer expertise, specifically, demonstrated knowledge of beauty products, skin science, and cosmetic formulations in legitimizing recommendations and strengthening consumer trust. Sixteen participants explicitly cited influencer expertise as a significant determinant of their trust levels, with particular emphasis on technical knowledge, product testing rigor, and the ability to explain the rationale behind recommendations.

P09, a 33-year-old teacher, explained:

*"I trust beauty influencers who actually explain why a product works. When someone tells me that a serum is effective because it contains niacinamide at 10% concentration and*

*explains how it reduces hyperpigmentation, I feel like they really know what they're talking about. That's someone whose recommendation I'll follow." (P09)*

Participants also drew distinctions between influencers who produce superficial unboxing or haul content versus those who conduct systematic, longitudinal product evaluations:

*"I don't trust influencers who only show a product once and immediately say it's amazing. How do you know after one use? I follow those who test a product for at least two to four weeks and then share the real results, including if it didn't work for them." (P02)*

These findings corroborate Ohanian's (1990) tripartite Source Credibility Model, in which expertise functions as a critical dimension of communicator credibility. In the beauty influencer context, expertise is not merely a static attribute but a dynamically performed quality, demonstrated through content that educates, explains, and engages with the scientific or practical dimensions of beauty product evaluation. This finding extends Schouten et al.'s (2020) work on influencer credibility by specifying the performative and educational dimensions of expertise that resonate most strongly with consumers.

#### **3.4. Theme 4: Parasocial Relationships and Emotional Attachment**

The fourth theme explores the role of parasocial relationships in mediating the relationship between influencer characteristics and consumer trust and purchase intentions. Thirteen participants reported experiencing a sense of emotional closeness, familiarity, or friendship toward at least one beauty influencer, manifesting as a subjective feeling of knowing the influencer personally despite the absence of reciprocal interaction.

P05, a 31-year-old civil servant, described this experience:

*"There's one influencer I've been following for three years. I know her skin type, her preferences, and her struggles with her skin. When she recommends a product, I feel like a close friend is giving me advice. I've bought many products just because she recommended them, and most of the time I'm happy with the results." (P05)*

P15 elaborated on the mechanism through which parasocial relationships translate into purchasing behavior:

*"I think the reason I buy what certain influencers recommend is not just because of the product. It's because I trust them as a person. I feel like they genuinely want me to find good products. That feeling comes from watching their content for so long. I feel I know their character." (P15)*

These findings are consistent with Horton and Wohl's (1956) original formulation of parasocial interaction and its subsequent applications to social media contexts (Hwang & Zhang, 2018; Yuan & Lou, 2020). The data further suggest that parasocial relationships in the Indonesian cultural context are reinforced by the collectivist orientation that prioritizes relational trust and interpersonal familiarity in consumer decision-making. Followers who

develop parasocial relationships exhibit higher tolerance for sponsored content and demonstrate greater brand loyalty, findings that underscore the strategic value of long-term influencer relationships over transactional campaign-based collaborations.

### **3.5. Theme 5: Consumer Skepticism and Critical Evaluation**

The fifth and final theme reveals an increasingly prominent strain of consumer skepticism in the influencer marketing landscape. Seventeen of the twenty participants reported engaging in active critical evaluation strategies when assessing influencer recommendations, including cross-referencing multiple reviews, consulting consumer feedback on e-commerce platforms, searching for dermatological or scientific validation, and maintaining deliberate awareness of the commercial incentives underlying influencer content.

P10, a 26-year-old private employee, described her evaluation process:

*"Before I buy any product recommended by an influencer, I always check the reviews on Tokopedia and Shopee. I look at what real customers say, especially the one-star and two-star reviews. Influencers are paid, so I take their reviews with a grain of salt. I use their content more to discover new products, then I do my own research."* (P10)

P06, notably one of two male participants, offered a particularly analytical perspective:

*"I assume any influencer with a large following is receiving some form of payment or gifting for what they review. That's just how the industry works. So I pay attention to how they present the product, whether they mention any negative aspects, and whether they compare it to other products honestly. These small signals tell me whether I can trust their specific review."* (P06)

These findings resonate with Friestad and Wright's (1994) Persuasion Knowledge Model, which posits that consumers develop sophisticated cognitive frameworks for identifying and responding to persuasive communication attempts. In the digital influencer context, persuasion knowledge activation, the recognition that influencer content is commercially motivated, generates a range of evaluative responses, from heightened scrutiny to selective discounting of recommendations. The emergence of sophisticated consumer skepticism in Makassar represents a significant finding, as it challenges assumptions that secondary city consumers in Indonesia are less critically engaged with influencer content than their metropolitan counterparts.

## **4. CONCLUSION**

This study set out to explore how beauty product consumers in Makassar City develop and sustain trust toward influencer-based digital marketing content. Through in-depth qualitative inquiry involving 20 purposively selected participants, five overarching themes were identified: authenticity as the primary driver of trust; the disclosure paradox of transparency; expertise as a legitimizing force; parasocial relationships as emotional

amplifiers; and consumer skepticism as a critical evaluative mechanism. Collectively, these themes articulate a nuanced and dynamic process of trust formation that is simultaneously shaped by influencer characteristics, platform affordances, cultural orientations, and individual consumer dispositions.

The study's theoretical contributions are threefold. First, it advances the application of Source Credibility Theory within the influencer marketing context by demonstrating that authenticity, expertise, and transparency function as contextually specific credibility dimensions that consumers evaluate through ongoing, longitudinal engagement rather than single-moment assessments. Second, the integration of Parasocial Interaction Theory highlights the affective dimensions of influencer-consumer relationships, establishing that emotional familiarity and relational trust constitute distinct and powerful mechanisms of trust formation that operate partially independently of rational credibility evaluations. Third, the activation of Persuasion Knowledge among Indonesian consumers challenges the assumption that developing market audiences are less sophisticated in their engagement with commercial media, thereby enriching the theoretical understanding of consumer agency in digital marketing contexts.

The managerial implications of these findings are significant. For brands operating in the Indonesian beauty market, the study recommends prioritizing authenticity and expertise over reach and frequency in influencer selection decisions. Long-term influencer partnerships that allow for genuine product familiarity and authentic self-expression are likely to generate more durable trust outcomes than high-frequency, multi-brand promotional campaigns. Additionally, brands should develop clear guidelines for transparent sponsored content disclosure that balance legal compliance with the preservation of influencer authenticity. Investment in micro- and nano-influencers with strong community engagement and demonstrated expertise may yield superior trust outcomes compared to mega-influencer campaigns, particularly in secondary city markets such as Makassar.

The study acknowledges several limitations. The sample was geographically restricted to Makassar City, limiting direct generalizability to other Indonesian contexts. The purposive sampling procedure, while appropriate for qualitative inquiry, means that the sample may not represent the full diversity of beauty product consumers in the city. Future research should consider multi-site comparative qualitative studies across Indonesian cities, longitudinal designs tracking trust evolution over time, and mixed-methods approaches that integrate the depth of qualitative insight with the breadth of quantitative verification. Cross-cultural comparative studies examining influencer trust dynamics across Southeast Asian markets would also represent a valuable contribution to the field.

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