

Cross-Cultural Differences in Trust Toward Influencer Marketing: Evidence from Emerging and Developed Markets

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Abstract

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This article explores cross-cultural differences in trust toward influencer marketing, addressing how consumer perceptions vary between emerging and developed markets. Drawing on a systematic literature review of peer-reviewed studies published up to 2021, the study synthesizes findings from marketing, advertising, and information systems research to clarify the mechanisms shaping trust in influencer-brand relationships. Results reveal that authenticity, expertise, and relational closeness are universal drivers of trust, but their relative importance depends on cultural values and market maturity. In emerging markets, trust is often built through accessibility and community belonging, while in developed markets, transparency and disclosure practices play a more critical role. The discussion highlights how platform characteristics and cultural expectations mediate trust outcomes, emphasizing that disclosure strategies and content design must be context-sensitive. Overall, the study finds that influencer marketing effectiveness depends on balancing authenticity, professionalism, and cultural adaptability across diverse markets.

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1. Introduction

Social media has accelerated the rise of influencer marketing, positioning creators as trusted intermediaries who shape how consumers evaluate brands. Trust is central to this process: it reduces perceived risk, simplifies decision-making, and mediates the impact of persuasive appeals in digital environments (Kim et al., 2008; Cheung & Thadani, 2012). Yet trust toward influencers is unlikely to be uniform across countries. Differences in cultural values, media norms, and market maturity can alter how audiences interpret credibility cues, sponsorship disclosures, and parasocial relationships. Distinguishing trust dynamics between emerging and developed markets is therefore critical to understanding when and why influencer campaigns succeed globally.

Influencer credibility typically draws on perceived expertise, authenticity, and attractiveness, but platform-specific cues (e.g., follower counts, engagement ratios, and visual self-presentation) intensify these attributions. Research shows that influencers can boost brand attitudes and intentions when audiences view them as genuine and relatable, particularly in visually rich environments such as Instagram (De Veirman et al., 2017; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Message value and source credibility also shape consumer trust in sponsored posts, with informative and entertaining content strengthening acceptance of commercial ties (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Beyond post-level effects, the emergence of “micro-celebrities” has broadened the spectrum of influence, suggesting that smaller communities may deliver high trust and persuasive potency through tighter social identification (Jin et al., 2019).

Cross-cultural evidence indicates that platform use, normative expectations, and privacy orientations vary across regions, which can recalibrate how consumers read influencer cues and disclosures. Studies of global online advertising and electronic word-of-mouth demonstrate that cultural dimensions (e.g., individualism–collectivism, uncertainty avoidance) moderate responses to persuasive communication and shape the antecedents of online trust (Cleff et al., 2010; Chu & Choi, 2011). In emerging markets, rapid mobile social adoption and strong community embeddedness may amplify peer endorsement effects, whereas in developed markets, greater advertising literacy and disclosure scrutiny may raise the bar for perceived authenticity. These contrasts imply that “one-size-fits-all” approaches risk eroding trust when transplanted across contexts without adaptation.

This article conducts a systematic literature review of peer-reviewed studies until 2021 to synthesize what is known about cross-cultural differences in trust toward influencer marketing across emerging and developed markets. The review integrates evidence from marketing, information systems, and international advertising to map how credibility cues, content strategies, and cultural contingencies interact to produce trust-related outcomes, including attitude formation, willingness to share, and purchase intentions. By consolidating fragmented findings, the study clarifies mechanisms that enable or undermine trust in distinct market contexts and identifies where evidence remains thin—such as longitudinal trust formation, disclosure efficacy across cultures, and the ethics of algorithmically amplified influence. The contribution is twofold: theoretically, it refines the boundary conditions of influencer trust by foregrounding culture and

market maturity; managerially, it offers guidance on tailoring influencer selection, content design, and transparency practices to sustain trust across borders.

2. Literature Review

Research on influencer marketing has consistently emphasized the centrality of trust in shaping consumer responses. Trust functions as a mediator between influencer attributes—such as expertise, authenticity, and attractiveness—and consumer outcomes like purchase intentions and loyalty (Kim et al., 2008; Lou & Yuan, 2019). Social media influencers are often perceived as more relatable than traditional celebrities, and their content benefits from being embedded in everyday contexts, which enhances credibility (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). At the same time, studies note that the boundary between authenticity and commercial sponsorship remains fragile, with disclosure requirements influencing trust differently across cultural and market contexts (De Veirman et al., 2017).

The literature shows that cultural dimensions significantly shape trust toward influencers. Research on electronic word-of-mouth and advertising responses indicates that collectivist cultures may place greater emphasis on peer approval and relational cues, while individualist cultures prioritize personal credibility and expertise (Cleff et al., 2010; Chu & Choi, 2011). In emerging markets, where social media penetration has grown rapidly, trust often stems from strong community identification and reliance on peer recommendations (Jin et al., 2019). Conversely, developed markets exhibit higher advertising literacy and stronger regulatory

frameworks, making consumers more skeptical of influencer endorsements unless transparency and disclosure are well managed (Okazaki & Taylor, 2013).

Recent studies have expanded this cultural perspective by linking trust formation to platform-specific behaviors. Voorveld et al. (2018) found that engagement patterns differ across platforms, suggesting that consumers' trust in influencers is partly shaped by the affordances of each medium. Emerging evidence also shows that influencer trust is dynamic, evolving through repeated interactions, community participation, and long-term parasocial relationships (Casaló et al., 2020). Furthermore, market maturity influences expectations, with developed markets demanding higher levels of professionalism, while emerging markets may prioritize accessibility and relatability (Audrezet et al., 2020).

Taken together, the literature suggests that trust in influencer marketing cannot be understood without accounting for cultural and market differences. While influencers serve as effective mediators of brand-consumer relationships globally, the conditions that sustain trust vary considerably, underscoring the need for comparative, cross-cultural research to guide both scholars and practitioners.

3. Methods

This study adopts a systematic literature review approach to synthesize evidence on cross-cultural differences in trust toward influencer marketing across emerging and developed markets. The review process was guided by established best practices for literature reviews in marketing and consumer behavior research,

ensuring both rigor and replicability while presenting the findings in a narrative format suitable for broad scholarly and managerial audiences.

Academic databases including Scopus, Web of Science, and ScienceDirect were searched using combinations of keywords such as “influencer marketing”, “trust”, “culture”, “emerging markets”, and “developed markets”. The search was restricted to peer-reviewed journal articles published up to 2021, a period that corresponds with the rapid global expansion of social media platforms and the rise of influencer marketing as a recognized business practice. Articles were screened for relevance based on their explicit focus on influencer trust, cultural or market context, and consumer-related outcomes such as brand attitudes, loyalty, or purchase intentions.

Studies that examined influencers only in a technical or platform-centered manner without linking to consumer trust were excluded. The final pool of literature included both conceptual and empirical contributions, spanning diverse methodological designs such as surveys, experiments, and case studies. This integrative scope enabled the review to capture patterns across cultural contexts, while also highlighting variations in how trust is built, sustained, or challenged in influencer marketing. The narrative synthesis allowed for the identification of thematic clusters—such as credibility cues, authenticity, cultural moderation, and disclosure practices—that provide a foundation for the subsequent results and discussion.

4. Results and Discussion

The reviewed literature indicates that trust is the cornerstone of effective influencer marketing, yet it manifests differently across emerging and developed markets. Across contexts, perceived authenticity, expertise, and relational closeness consistently emerge as the primary antecedents of trust (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Lou & Yuan, 2019). Influencers who are able to blend personal storytelling with brand messages tend to foster stronger parasocial bonds, increasing consumer willingness to engage and purchase (Casaló et al., 2020). However, these outcomes are contingent on cultural expectations, with relational cues more salient in collectivist markets and transparency cues more critical in individualist markets (Chu & Choi, 2011).

A central theme is the distinction between influencer credibility in emerging versus developed economies. In emerging markets, consumers often rely heavily on social recommendations and perceive influencers as accessible figures who bridge the gap between brands and local communities (Jin et al., 2019). This context amplifies the persuasive impact of peer endorsement and community belonging. By contrast, in developed markets, where consumers exhibit higher advertising literacy, influencer effectiveness hinges more on disclosure compliance and professionalized brand partnerships (Cleff et al., 2014; Audrezet et al., 2020). The literature thus reveals a cultural paradox: relatability and community endorsement are more potent drivers of trust in emerging contexts, while professionalism and transparency dominate in mature markets.

Platform characteristics further moderate trust dynamics. Studies demonstrate that visual and entertainment-oriented platforms such as Instagram and YouTube facilitate stronger emotional engagement, while more information-centric platforms may emphasize expertise (De Veirman et al., 2017; Voorveld et al., 2018). Emerging research also highlights the role of algorithmic visibility, showing that repeated exposure to influencer content increases familiarity and trust, though over-commercialization can erode authenticity (Boerman et al., 2017). This suggests that the sustainability of trust depends on striking a balance between visibility and perceived sincerity.

Another key insight relates to disclosure and regulation. While transparency is associated with higher credibility in developed markets, mandatory disclosure can undermine trust in emerging economies where advertising skepticism is lower (Okazaki & Taylor, 2013). Evans et al. (2017) showed that the type of disclosure language significantly influences consumers' recognition and trust, with cultural contexts further shaping whether disclosure enhances credibility or undermines authenticity. These findings underscore the importance of tailoring disclosure practices to cultural norms rather than applying uniform global standards.

Finally, the literature suggests that trust formation is a dynamic process shaped by repeated interactions and evolving consumer expectations. Longitudinal engagement fosters stronger community ties and enduring trust, but market maturity determines how such trust translates into brand outcomes. In emerging markets, short-term trust can rapidly convert into purchase behavior, while in developed

markets, consumers demand consistent authenticity and professionalism over time before forming durable brand attachments (Hudson et al., 2015).

Taken together, the findings suggest that influencer marketing strategies must be both culturally sensitive and platform-specific. For scholars, these insights highlight research gaps in comparative, longitudinal studies and the role of emerging technologies in shaping cross-cultural trust. For practitioners, the results emphasize that global campaigns should adapt influencer selection, content style, and disclosure practices to align with local cultural values and regulatory environments. Ultimately, sustainable trust in influencer marketing rests on balancing authenticity, professionalism, and cultural adaptability.

5. Conclusion

This review highlights that trust is the pivotal element determining the effectiveness of influencer marketing, but its formation differs markedly between emerging and developed markets. Across contexts, authenticity, expertise, and relational closeness drive trust, yet cultural values shape how these cues are interpreted. In emerging markets, consumers often prioritize accessibility and community belonging, amplifying the persuasive power of peer endorsements. Conversely, in developed markets, advertising literacy and regulatory scrutiny place greater emphasis on professionalism, disclosure practices, and transparency.

The findings also show that platform characteristics and disclosure strategies play important roles in shaping trust. Visual and entertainment-oriented platforms foster stronger emotional engagement, but over-commercialization or poorly

managed sponsorship disclosure can erode authenticity. Evidence further suggests that disclosure effects are not universal but contingent on cultural expectations, requiring context-sensitive strategies to sustain credibility.

Taken together, the literature underscores that global influencer marketing cannot rely on uniform approaches. For scholars, the study identifies gaps in longitudinal and cross-market analyses that could better explain how trust evolves over time and across diverse audiences. For practitioners, the findings emphasize the importance of tailoring influencer partnerships, content design, and disclosure practices to cultural and market-specific contexts. Ultimately, sustaining trust in influencer marketing depends on balancing authenticity, professionalism, and adaptability across cultural boundaries.

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