

THE ROLE OF MESSAGE CREDIBILITY IN BUILDING INFLUENCER LOYALTY AND INCREASING PURCHASE INTENTIONS

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Purpose Companies employ influencer marketing by collaborating with key social media figures whose content reaches potential consumers (Jiménez-Castillo and Sánchez-Fernández, 2019). Influencers with values aligned to the brands they represent help companies identify and attract target audiences (More and Lingam, 2017). By creating and sharing brand-related content, they can shape followers' attitudes and behaviors, as well as influence broader audiences (Liu *et al.*, 2015; Grafström *et al.*, 2018). However, the effectiveness of such influence also depends on how individuals perceive the message credibility, which can shape their attitudes (Appelman and Sundar, 2016). This attitude change depends on attention, comprehension, and willingness to accept information (Hovland *et al.*, 1953) and is influenced by factors related to source, message, receiver, and channel (Hovland *et al.*, 1953; Petty and Cacioppo, 1981). According to the Elaboration Likelihood Model, message credibility is central to persuasion when individuals engage in high cognitive effort through the central route (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986). Message credibility dimensions such as clarity, argument strength, emotional appeals, and presentation style affect both credibility perceptions and attitude change (Slater and Rouner, 1996). While different authors highlight different dimensions, message credibility is generally linked to content features such as quality, consistency, and trustworthiness (Wathen and Burkell, 2002). Related studies identify dimensions such as source, content, format, timeliness, accuracy, and delivery (Rieh and Belkin, 1998; Metzger *et al.*, 2003), with more recent work emphasizing argument strength and information quality as key dimensions of message credibility. (Li and Suh, 2015). These dimensions are also relevant in the context of human branding. Human brand theory (Thomson, 2006) offers insight into how a media figure can evolve into a human brand that fosters audience attachment and drives positive marketing outcomes by meeting followers' needs (Ki *et al.*, 2020). A human brand is a well-known person with unique qualities (like a distinctive personality or talent) who can be promoted just like a product. Such individuals build strong connections with their followers and gain loyalty by satisfying their needs (Duffy, 2005; Thomson, 2006). Additionally, social exchange theory emphasizes reciprocity, where interactions are shaped by the value of exchanged rewards (Gouldner, 1960; Malinowski, 1922; Blau, 1964; Molm, 1990). In the influencer-follower context, influencers share content that attracts attention, while followers respond through engagement, thereby reinforcing the relationship. When these exchanges remain balanced, they foster ongoing commitment and strengthen psychological ties, motivating individuals to maintain the relationship (Kim and Kim, 2021). Thus, reciprocity contributes to loyalty, as balanced exchanges enhance the stability and continuity of the influencer-follower relationship (Kim and Kim, 2021). Loyalty reflects the strong bond between consumers and companies, driving repeat purchases and shaped by customer

experience (Serman and Sims, 2022; Alam *et al.*, 2012; Bilgihan, 2016; Chang, 2017). Rooted in attachment theory, it involves forming lasting connections that foster commitment (Drigotas and Rusbult, 1992; Hazan and Shaver, 1994). In this study, influencer loyalty refers to social media users' dedication to both influencers and their brand-related posts (Bogoevska-Gavrilova, 2023).

The research aims to explore the influence of message credibility, operationalized through argument strength and information quality, on influencer loyalty, and to assess the subsequent effect of loyalty on consumers' purchase intention. This paper is the first to examine message credibility through the dimensions of argument strength and information quality in the context of influencer marketing, with a specific focus on influencer loyalty and purchase intention. By doing so, it addresses a key research gap concerning how message credibility fosters influencer loyalty and how this loyalty subsequently drives consumers' purchase intentions in the context of the central route of persuasion. We propose the following research hypotheses:

H1: Argument strength positively affects influencer loyalty.

H2: Information quality positively affects influencer loyalty.

H3: Influencer loyalty positively affects purchase intentions.

Design/methodology/approach To examine the proposed hypotheses, a quantitative approach was employed through structural equation modeling (SEM), conducted in two stages: confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to validate the measurement model, and structural model testing using AMOS version 20.0. SEM is widely applied in marketing research due to its capacity to test models of consumer and market behavior (MacLean and Gray, 1998). The analysis was based on data from an online survey of social media users in North Macedonia, where 380 initial responses were collected and refined to a final sample of 307 valid cases, including only those who actively follow influencers. The sample is predominantly female (79.15%) and composed mainly of highly educated Generation Z respondents (≤ 27 years) who are active social media users, especially on Instagram, spending 1.5-3.5 hours daily. Information quality and argument strength were assessed using a five-point Likert scale, with four items for each construct adapted from Li and Suh (2015). Influencer loyalty was measured through a seven-point Likert scale comprising four items adapted from Kim and Kim (2021).

Finally, purchase intention was captured with four items measured on a seven-point Likert scale, adapted from Gomes *et al.* (2022). All scales were translated from English into Macedonian and pilot tested before data collection to ensure clarity and validity. To address potential common method bias (CMB), Harman's single-factor test was conducted, and the unrotated factor analysis revealed no evidence of a dominant factor, as the single-factor solution explained less than 50% of the variance (in line with the recommendations of Podsakoff *et al.* (2003) and Fuller *et al.* (2016)). Cronbach's alpha ensured internal consistency for each construct, with all coefficients exceeding the recommended 0.7 threshold (Hair *et al.*, 2010). During CFA, squared multiple correlations, standardized covariance residuals, and standardized regression coefficients were carefully examined (Hair *et al.*, 2006). The results confirmed that the measurement model adequately fits the data. Table 1 reports the standardized regression coefficients and estimates for the hypothesized paths.

Table 1: Structural model estimates

	Estimates
H1: Argument strength → Influencer loyalty	0.370***
H2: Information quality → Influencer loyalty	0.251**
H3: Influencer loyalty → Purchase intention	0.556***
Notes: The estimates are standardized, and the level of significance is: ***p < 0.001, **p < 0.01, *p < 0.05, ns – not significant	

(Source: Authors' calculations)

Findings The results presented in Table 1 confirm all three proposed hypotheses. Argument strength exerts the strongest positive effect on loyalty, followed by information quality, while influencer loyalty significantly enhances customers' purchase intentions. The findings of this study align with a growing body of research in marketing and communication that highlights message credibility as a critical determinant of consumer responses. Prior work has demonstrated that high information quality in online messages enhances consumer loyalty (Pearson *et al.*, 2012), while more recent evidence shows that message context, particularly its informative value, strengthens followers' perceptions of influencer content and fosters loyalty (Zainudin *et al.*, 2023). Similarly, argument quality has been found to promote user loyalty by increasing satisfaction (Handayani *et al.*, 2020). Furthermore, loyalty consistently exerts a strong positive influence on purchase intention (Malik *et al.*, 2013; Khan *et al.*, 2019). Taken together, these studies confirm the pivotal role of information quality and argument strength as drivers of loyalty, positioning loyalty as a key mechanism through which message credibility translates into consumer purchase behavior.

Originality/value Based on the literature reviewed, no prior studies have explicitly examined message credibility as a two-dimensional construct (comprising argument strength and information quality) in relation to consumers' loyalty to an influencer and its subsequent effect on purchase intention. Instead, earlier research has predominantly focused on the direct influence of message credibility on purchase intention (Hocevar *et al.*, 2017; Balaji *et al.*, 2021; Chakraborty, 2019). This study is the first to explore message credibility in the context of influencer marketing with a specific emphasis on influencer loyalty. The findings extend current knowledge by showing that message credibility, operationalized through argument strength and information quality, is a key driver of loyalty, which in turn significantly increases purchase intentions. For marketing managers, these results underscore the need to go beyond creating entertaining content, emphasizing instead the development of influencer-generated messages that are both persuasive and rich in reliable, high-quality information. By prioritizing well-structured arguments and credible informational value, managers can strengthen followers' loyalty to influencers and, ultimately, enhance consumer purchase behavior in social media environments. Lastly, the study acknowledges its single-country focus as a cultural limitation. Yet, it offers a focused understanding of influencer marketing within one cultural setting and provides a basis for future cross-country comparisons.

Keywords: *Influencer marketing, Message credibility, Information quality, Argument strength, Influencer loyalty, Purchase intention*

JEL classification: *M31, M37*

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