

Influencer Attractiveness, Influencer Expertise, and Purchase Intention in Digital Marketing Transformation: A Systematic Review

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ABSTRACT: Digital marketing transformation has elevated influencer marketing into a strategic mechanism through which brands shape consumer evaluation and stimulate purchase intention across increasingly platformized environments. Prior broad reviews and recent meta-analyses have mapped influencer marketing and its aggregate effectiveness, yet evidence remains less clear on how influencer attractiveness and influencer expertise operate as analytically distinct source attributes across platform-specific contexts. This systematic review addresses that focused problem by examining how these two attributes are conceptualized and operationalized, how they are associated with purchase intention, which mediating and moderating mechanisms recur most frequently, and how the evidence differs across global and Indonesian contexts. Following PRISMA 2020 and a PICO-based review design, the study searched Scopus, ScienceDirect, Emerald Insight, SAGE Journals, and Springer Nature Link, applied explicit eligibility criteria, and synthesized 95 empirical journal articles published between 2016 and 2025. The findings indicate that the literature is highly concentrated in recent years, dominated by quantitative survey designs, and theoretically anchored primarily in source credibility and related source-evaluation perspectives. Across the included studies, attractiveness appears more visible in visually expressive environments such as Instagram, whereas expertise appears more salient in live commerce and social-commerce settings where consumers require stronger informational assurance. Parasocial interaction, trust, and perceived credibility emerge as the most recurrent explanatory mechanisms, while Indonesian evidence is analytically relevant but still limited in volume. Overall, the review contributes to digital marketing transformation scholarship by showing that isolating attractiveness and expertise from broader credibility bundles yields a more precise, context-sensitive explanation of purchase intention as a platform-contingent and mechanism-mediated outcome.

Keywords: Influencer Marketing, Source Credibility, Social Commerce, Purchase Intention.



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INTRODUCTION

Digital marketing transformation has reconfigured how firms communicate value, build relationships, and stimulate buying intentions across increasingly platformized consumer journeys. In this environment, influencer marketing has moved from a peripheral tactic to a strategically

embedded mechanism through which brands translate visibility, credibility, and social resonance into market responses. Prior work shows that digital transformation reshapes both marketing organization and the criteria consumers use to evaluate persuasive sources, while influencer marketing research documents rapid growth across industries and platforms (Cioppi et al., 2023; Verhoef et al., 2021; Vial, 2019; Hudders et al., 2021; Vrontis et al., 2021). Within this expanding field, attractiveness and expertise remain especially important because consumers evaluate influencers not only by appeal but also by perceived knowledge and competence. Classical endorsement theory treats these attributes as distinct yet related dimensions of persuasion, and recent social media studies confirm that this distinction remains analytically important in digitally mediated contexts (Ohanian, 1990; Schouten et al., 2020; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Jiménez-Castillo & Sánchez-Fernández, 2019). Attractiveness tends to work through affective appeal, liking, and aspirational identification, whereas expertise is more closely linked to diagnosticity and informational assurance. Both may contribute to purchase intention, but their relative visibility varies across product categories, influencer types, and platform architectures, often through engagement, expected value, perceived influence, and relational mechanisms such as parasocial interaction (Masuda et al., 2022).

The issue becomes more complex as marketing shifts toward short-video ecosystems, social commerce, livestream interaction, and hybrid human-virtual endorsement environments. TikTok research links humor, entertainment value, and credibility perceptions to purchase intention, social-commerce studies emphasize co-creation, trust, authenticity, and interaction, and virtual-influencer research shows that attractiveness effects are contingent on attachment and endorser fit (Alcántara-Pilar et al., 2024; Barta et al., 2023; Bu et al., 2022; Cheah et al., 2024; Shamim et al., 2024; Kim & Park, 2023). Prior broad reviews and recent meta-analyses have already mapped the field's expansion and aggregate effectiveness, but they remain wider in scope than the present construct-level concern and do not synthesize how attractiveness and expertise are separately defined, measured, and interpreted across platform environments in relation to purchase intention (Hudders et al., 2021; Vrontis et al., 2021; Pan et al., 2025; Spörl-Wang et al., 2025). This leaves three unresolved issues: many empirical studies still bundle credibility, the platform-contingent salience of attractiveness versus expertise remains insufficiently traced, and purchase intention is often embedded within broader outcome families despite its managerial relevance. Indonesia adds further contextual interest because digital commerce and influencer-led promotion are deeply embedded there, yet the available evidence remains limited and dispersed. Existing studies nevertheless show that the Indonesian setting can illuminate how influencer cues, platform use, and consumer response interact in an emerging digital market, so it is better treated as a comparative subcorpus than as a standalone evidence base (Dwidienawati et al., 2020; Suhardi et al., 2021).

Against this background, the present study offers a focused systematic review of influencer attractiveness, influencer expertise, and purchase intention within digital marketing transformation contexts. Its contribution is fourfold. First, it isolates attractiveness and expertise as analytically distinct source attributes rather than absorbing them into broader credibility bundles. Second, it interprets these attributes through the contextual lens of digital marketing transformation so that platform-specific and commerce-specific variation can be read more systematically. Third, it

integrates conceptualization, operationalization, theory use, methodological pattern, and mechanism evidence within a single review design. Fourth, it preserves a global evidence base while using Indonesia as a relevant, but still underdeveloped, comparative context. Accordingly, the review aims to synthesize how the two focal constructs are defined and measured, how they influence purchase intention across platforms and settings, which mediators and moderators recur most frequently, and which theoretical, methodological, contextual, and geographical gaps remain.

Accordingly, this study addresses four research questions: RQ1 examines how influencer attractiveness, influencer expertise, and purchase intention have been conceptualized and operationalized in influencer marketing studies within digital marketing transformation contexts. RQ2 examines what patterns of influence of influencer attractiveness and influencer expertise on consumers' purchase intention have been reported across digital marketing platforms and settings. RQ3 examines what mediating and moderating factors have been identified most frequently in the relationship between influencer attractiveness, influencer expertise, and purchase intention. RQ4 examines what theoretical foundations, methodological patterns, contextual differences, and research gaps characterize this literature, particularly across global and Indonesian settings. These questions guide the review and the integrated presentation of the results and discussion.

METHOD

This study employed a systematic review design to synthesize empirical evidence on how influencer attractiveness and influencer expertise shape consumers' purchase intention within digital marketing transformation contexts. The review was developed as a management-oriented evidence synthesis in which transparent question framing, reproducible searching, explicit eligibility rules, structured appraisal, and systematic synthesis were treated as interdependent methodological choices. The review was reported in line with PRISMA 2020, which guided the documentation of study identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and final inclusion (Page et al., 2021; Snyder, 2019; Xiao & Watson, 2019; Sauer & Seuring, 2023; Kunisch et al., 2023; Simsek et al., 2025).

Research Type

This article adopted a systematic review design with a management and digital marketing orientation. The review questions were framed using PICO, in which the population referred to consumers, followers, social media users, and online shoppers; the interest referred to influencer attractiveness, influencer expertise, and purchase intention; and the context referred to digital marketing transformation across global and Indonesian settings. A protocol was specified before screening to define search boundaries, eligibility rules, extraction fields, appraisal criteria, and synthesis outputs, because review quality depends on explicit and reproducible methodological decisions (Bandara & Syed, 2024; Sauer & Seuring, 2023; Simsek et al., 2025).

Population and Sample of Studies

In this review, the unit of analysis was published empirical studies examining consumer-side responses to influencers in digital environments rather than individual respondents collected

directly by the authors. Studies were eligible when they examined consumers, followers, social media users, or online shoppers and reported evidence relevant to at least one focal relationship involving influencer attractiveness, influencer expertise, and purchase intention. The final analytical sample comprised 95 English-language journal articles published between 2016 and 2025. This period was selected to capture the most recent decade of evidence while reflecting the expansion of platform-intensive marketing, social commerce, live commerce, and wider digital transformation processes (Vial, 2019; Verhoef et al., 2021).

Research Location and Context

The review was global in scope and was not limited to a single geographical site. Its contextual setting was defined as digital marketing environments in which influencer-related signals shape consumer evaluation and intention formation, including general social media, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, live-streaming commerce, social commerce, e-commerce-related influencer campaigns, and virtual influencer contexts. Indonesia was retained as a comparative subcorpus because platform architecture, market maturity, and consumer culture may condition whether attractiveness or expertise becomes more influential in purchase-intention formation (Vial, 2019; Verhoef et al., 2021).

Instrumentation or Tools

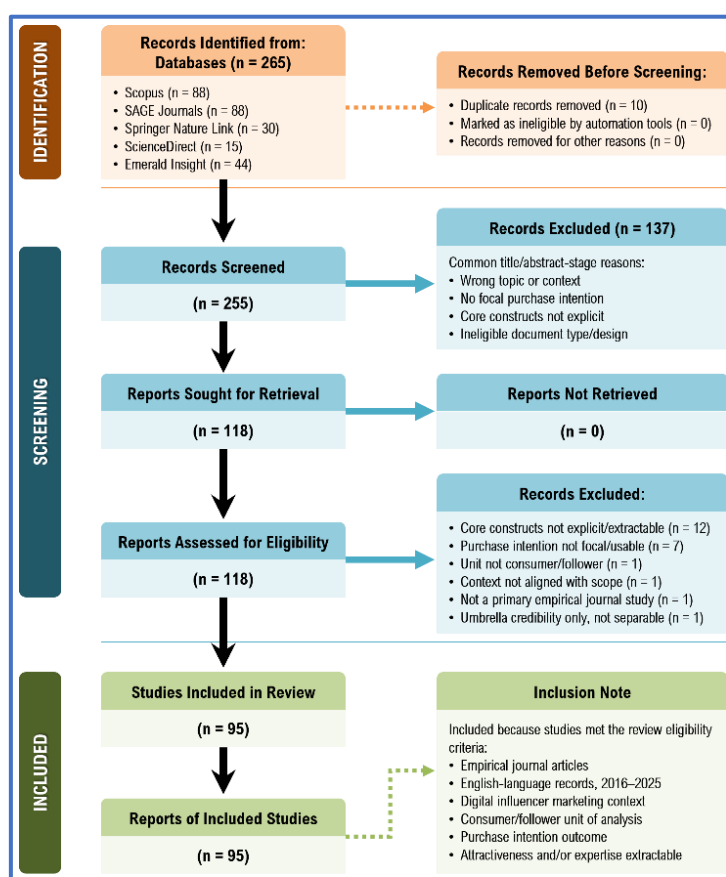
The review used structured search strings, eligibility forms, screening matrices, quality appraisal sheets, extraction templates, and thematic synthesis tables as its primary instruments. Database retrieval was conducted through Scopus, ScienceDirect, Emerald Insight, SAGE Journals, and Springer Nature Link in September 2025. Across databases, retrieval was restricted to English-language journal articles published between 2016 and 2025, and final or fully published records were prioritized. Where interfaces allowed, open-access or directly available content was used as an upstream retrieval filter to ensure that both reviewers could screen, appraise, and extract the retained studies consistently. The primary pooled identification set contained 265 exported records, comprising Scopus ($n = 88$), SAGE Journals ($n = 88$), Springer Nature Link ($n = 30$), ScienceDirect retained precision runs SD-1 ($n = 7$) and SD-2 ($n = 8$), and Emerald retained runs EM-3 ($n = 32$) and EM-4 ($n = 12$). Database-specific syntax was adapted to each interface while preserving the same conceptual core, namely influencer identity terms, focal source-attribute terms, purchase-intention terms, and digital marketing context terms. In ScienceDirect, only the two precision runs were carried into the primary pool because broader sensitivity runs substantially widened retrieval and reduced precision. In Emerald Insight, the retained exports likewise came from the All-field row logic after abstract-field precision runs collapsed to zero. Search decisions, pooling, duplicate handling, and screening outcomes were documented in spreadsheets and CSV files to preserve traceability from identification to final inclusion.

Data Collection Procedures

The study selection process followed PRISMA 2020 (Page et al., 2021). The pooled identification stage produced 265 exported records, of which 10 duplicates were removed, leaving 255 records

for title and abstract screening. Title and abstract screening was conducted independently by two reviewers using a predefined eligibility form. At this stage, 137 records were excluded because they were not sufficiently aligned with the review focus, did not report an eligible empirical design, or did not allow the focal constructs to be identified from the title and abstract. The remaining 118 reports were then assessed independently at full-text level. Twenty-three articles were excluded because core constructs were non-extractable ($n = 12$), purchase intention was not usable as the focal outcome ($n = 7$), the unit of analysis was non-consumer ($n = 1$), the digital context was ineligible ($n = 1$), umbrella credibility could not be separated into attractiveness or expertise ($n = 1$), or the publication type or version was ineligible ($n = 1$). The final synthesis therefore included 95 studies. Figure 1 presents the PRISMA 2020 flow diagram of the study selection process.

Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram of the Study Selection Process



Eligibility criteria were applied consistently at both screening stages. Studies were included when they were English-language empirical journal articles published between 2016 and 2025, examined influencer-related phenomena in digital marketing environments, reported evidence relevant to influencer attractiveness, influencer expertise, or both in relation to purchase intention, and allowed the focal constructs to be extracted with sufficient clarity for synthesis. Studies were excluded when they focused on traditional celebrity endorsement without a clear digital influencer setting, omitted a usable purchase-intention outcome, used a non-consumer unit of analysis, involved an ineligible publication type or version, or treated umbrella constructs such as credibility without allowing attractiveness or expertise to be meaningfully isolated. When reviewer judgments differed, both authors returned to the relevant full-text sections and resolved the decision through

discussion until consensus was reached. No article was retained or excluded on the basis of a single reviewer judgment (Xiao & Watson, 2019; Sauer & Seuring, 2023).

Data Analysis

The review used a three-stage analytical strategy. First, the included studies underwent structured quality appraisal conducted independently by the same two reviewers who completed screening. Because the final corpus contained surveys, experiments, qualitative studies, and a small number of mixed-method designs, appraisal used a rubric-based system adapted from established mixed-method and review-quality guidance, with emphasis on design clarity, sampling adequacy, transparency of construct operationalization, appropriateness of analytical technique, and sufficiency of reported findings for synthesis (Hong et al., 2018; Simsek et al., 2025). Scores of 16–20, 11–15, and 0–10 indicated high, medium, and low quality, respectively. Quality bands informed interpretive caution rather than automatic exclusion, and disagreements were resolved through consensus.

Second, data extraction captured bibliographic details, country or region, platform context, theory, research design, analytical technique, operationalization of attractiveness and expertise, purchase-intention outcome, mediators, moderators, and key findings. Third, the extracted evidence was synthesized through narrative synthesis and thematic mapping because the corpus was heterogeneous in design, context, platform, and measurement, making direct statistical pooling inappropriate (Snyder, 2019; Sauer & Seuring, 2023). The synthesis generated six outputs, namely a theory map, a methodological profile, a context and platform matrix, an effect-pattern matrix, a mediator-moderator synthesis, and a gap-oriented agenda for future research. Limited auto-labeling support was used only to organize early extraction files, but final coding, screening, quality appraisal, and manuscript-level interpretation remained author-driven and manually verified before inclusion in the synthesis (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Kunisch et al., 2023).

Ethical Approval

Formal ethical approval was not required because the review synthesized published literature and did not involve direct interaction with human participants, identifiable personal data, or experimental intervention. Nevertheless, the review followed research-integrity principles by applying transparent selection criteria, documenting exclusion decisions, preserving traceability across screening stages, and reporting the review process in a reproducible manner (Page et al., 2021; Kunisch et al., 2023).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Following the PRISMA-based study selection process, 95 empirical journal articles were retained for final synthesis. This section reports the findings through the corpus profile, construct conceptualization, theory use, context and platform distribution, effect patterns, and recurring mediating and moderating mechanisms. Four broad patterns frame the synthesis. The corpus is recent but methodologically concentrated around cross-sectional survey designs. Attractiveness

and expertise are both relevant to purchase intention, yet they are not isolated consistently enough to support a single fixed hierarchy. Descriptively, attractiveness is more visible in visually expressive environments such as Instagram, whereas expertise is more visible in live commerce and social-commerce settings. These contrasts should nevertheless be read cautiously because subgroup sizes are uneven and several studies still bundle the focal constructs within broader credibility models.

Overview of the Included Studies

The final corpus revealed a strongly recent but methodologically uneven literature base. Most included studies were published in the last three years of the review window, and among the records that could be classified confidently, quantitative survey designs were dominant. Purchase intention was usually treated as the primary dependent outcome, although a substantial subset positioned it as a mediator or proximal outcome linked to later behavioral responses.

Table 1. Descriptive Profile of the Included Studies (n = 95)

Dimension	Category	n	%
Publication period	2023–2025	76	80.0
Publication period	2019–2022	19	20.0
Study design	Quantitative survey	63	66.3
Study design	Experiment	8	8.4
Study design	Qualitative	4	4.2
Study design	Mixed methods	3	3.2
Study design	Design not clearly reported in source study	17	17.9
Quality band	High	33	34.7
Quality band	Medium	55	57.9
Quality band	Low	7	7.4
Purchase intention role	Primary dependent outcome	54	56.8
Purchase intention role	Mediator	35	36.8
Purchase intention role	Mediator and proximal outcome	4	4.2
Purchase intention role	Outcome with downstream actual behavior	2	2.1

Note: The category design not clearly reported in source study refers to records whose published methods did not permit confident classification into survey, experiment, qualitative, or mixed-method design.

Table 1 therefore suggests a literature base that is both current and analytically useful, but still uneven in reporting precision. The concentration of publications in 2023–2025 indicates rapid expansion of the topic. The predominance of quantitative survey designs should be read as a clear tendency within the classifiable studies rather than as an absolute profile of the entire corpus. A recheck of the records in the design not clearly reported in source study category confirmed that several published reports did not state design features with enough consistency to support uniform recoding. This reporting limitation does not make those studies unusable for substantive synthesis, but it does reduce methodological granularity and calls for caution when making strong field-level claims about design concentration.

Conceptualization and Operationalization of the Core Constructs

The first substantive question of the review concerns how influencer attractiveness, influencer expertise, and purchase intention have been conceptualized and operationalized. The synthesis showed partial convergence, but not full conceptual standardization. Attractiveness and expertise were frequently present in the literature, yet many studies still embedded them within broader credibility or influencer-attribute bundles.

Table 2. Conceptualization Profile of the Focal Constructs

Conceptualization Pattern	n	%
Expertise explicit or proxy-extractable	65	68.4
Attractiveness explicit	62	65.3
Credibility model bundle	25	26.3
Influencer traits or attributes bundle	11	11.6
Manual construct reading needed	4	4.2

Note: Categories are not mutually exclusive because one study may operationalize the constructs in more than one way.

Table 2 indicates that the focal constructs were widely acknowledged but not always analytically isolated. Consequently, some studies reported precise effects for attractiveness and expertise, whereas others allowed only indirect inference through broader constructs. This pattern is visible in Kumar et al. (2023) and Santiago and Serralha (2022) on Instagram, and in Sokolova and Kefi (2020) and Le et al. (2024) in video-based and beauty-oriented contexts. This conceptual variation helps explain why later relationship patterns remain uneven and why the field requires theory-sensitive interpretation rather than simple aggregation.

Theory Map of the Literature

The theoretical structure of the corpus was dominated by credibility and source-evaluation logic, followed by relational and parasocial perspectives, while a meaningful minority remained weakly theorized or descriptive.

Table 3. Theory Map of the Included Studies

Theory Family	n	%
Credibility and source evaluation	45	47.4
Relational and parasocial	21	22.1
No explicit theory	18	18.9
Stimulus-response and experiential	16	16.8
Congruence and fit	10	10.5
Behavioral intention and decision process	6	6.3
Media use and gratification	2	2.1
Social cognition and learning	2	2.1
Signal and information asymmetry	1	1.1

Note: Theory categories are multi-label, so the total exceeds 95.

Table 3 confirms that attractiveness and expertise are still interpreted mainly as source properties rather than as purely platform-generated outcomes. Credibility-oriented work remains central in Schouten et al. (2020), Kumar et al. (2023), and Chen et al. (2024), whereas relational and parasocial approaches are more visible in Sokolova and Kefi (2020), Lawrence and Meivitanli (2023), Marklen et al. (2025), and Atta et al. (2025). At the same time, the sizable share of studies without a clear theoretical anchor suggests that empirical growth has outpaced theoretical consolidation.

Context and Platform Matrix

The contextual profile shows that the field is no longer limited to generic social media settings. Instead, it now spans platform-specific and commerce-specific environments in which the relative salience of attractiveness and expertise may differ.

Table 4. Context and Platform Matrix

Platform or Context	n	%	Dominant Industry Pattern	Dominant Influencer Pattern
General social media	38	40.0	General or mixed products; fashion; electronics	General social media influencer
Live streaming or live commerce	21	22.1	General or mixed products; electronics; beauty	General influencer; virtual or AI streamer
Social commerce or e-commerce	20	21.1	General or mixed products; electronics; sustainable products	General influencer; virtual or AI influencer
Instagram	16	16.8	General or mixed products; electronics; beauty	General influencer; vlogger
Virtual influencer or AI streamer	12	12.6	General or mixed products; sustainability; electronics	Virtual or AI influencer
YouTube	9	9.5	Beauty and cosmetics; electronics; fashion	Vlogger
TikTok	5	5.3	Beauty and cosmetics dominant	Celebrity or general influencer

Note: Platform categories are also multi-label, so the total exceeds 95.

Table 4 shows that general social media remains the largest umbrella category, but live commerce, social commerce, Instagram, and virtual-influencer environments also represent a substantial share of the corpus. This matters because platform architecture shapes what consumers value. Visual-first environments tend to foreground attractiveness, whereas more transactional and information-rich settings tend to strengthen the salience of expertise. The same pattern appears in sectoral emphasis, with beauty, fashion, and visually expressive categories occurring more often on Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok, while live commerce and social commerce are more closely tied to evaluation-oriented settings.

Overall Effect-Pattern Matrix

At the aggregate level, the relationship between influencer attractiveness, influencer expertise, and purchase intention was not uniform. The corpus contained support for both constructs, but many studies still did not isolate them cleanly enough to support a simple field-level hierarchy.

Table 5. Overall Effect-Pattern Matrix

Effect-Pair Category	n	%
Both unclear or not reported	33	34.7
Expertise positive, attractiveness unclear	20	21.1
Both positive or supportive	20	21.1
Attractiveness positive, expertise unclear	18	18.9
At least one mixed or conditional	4	4.2

Table 5 shows that both constructs mattered, but not in a fully symmetric way. A substantial share of studies still failed to separate them clearly, which limits one-to-one comparison. Even so, the pattern becomes more informative when examined by platform.

When the corpus was read by platform, descriptive contrasts became clearer. Instagram-related evidence more often emphasized attractiveness, which is consistent with the platform’s visual logic and is reflected in Santiago and Serralha (2022), Marklen et al. (2025), and Kumar et al. (2023). By contrast, live-streaming and social-commerce studies more often foregrounded expertise through knowledge, competence, and trusted informational guidance, as shown by Chen et al. (2024), Zhou and Baskaran (2025), and Shui et al. (2025). YouTube appeared relatively balanced, while TikTok descriptively showed support for both constructs in studies such as Ta et al. (2025) and Lawrence and Meivitanli (2023). The virtual-influencer subgroup remained more unsettled because the context is still emerging and not all studies isolated attractiveness and expertise in a conventional human-source sense. These contrasts are therefore best read as descriptive concentration patterns rather than statistically validated platform differences.

Table 6. Platform-Specific Effect Profile

Platform	n	Attractiveness Positive n (%)	Expertise Positive n (%)	Preliminary Reading
General social media	38	14 (36.8)	15 (39.5)	Broad but diffuse support for both
Live streaming or live commerce	21	7 (33.3)	14 (66.7)	Expertise more visible
Social commerce or e-commerce	20	6 (30.0)	11 (55.0)	Expertise more visible
Instagram	16	10 (62.5)	4 (25.0)	Attractiveness more visible
Virtual influencer or AI streamer	12	3 (25.0)	2 (16.7)	High ambiguity, still emerging
YouTube	9	5 (55.6)	4 (44.4)	Relatively balanced
TikTok	5	3 (60.0)	3 (60.0)	Both salient

Note: The percentages in this table are descriptive within each platform subgroup and do not represent statistical comparisons across platforms. Interpretation should be cautious for smaller subgroups, especially TikTok and virtual-influencer or AI-streamer studies.

Mediator and Moderator Synthesis

The mechanism-level synthesis showed that mediator models were more common than moderator models, although both remained limited relative to the size of the corpus. Parasocial interaction or relationship was the most recurrent mechanism, followed by trust, perceived credibility, and brand attitude.

Table 7. Mediator and Moderator Synthesis

Mechanism	Role	n	%
Parasocial interaction or relationship	Mediator	5	5.3
Trust or trust in influencer	Mediator	3	3.2
Perceived credibility	Mediator	3	3.2
Brand attitude	Mediator	2	2.1
Consumer engagement	Mediator	1	1.1
Social similarity or homophily	Mediator	1	1.1
Attitude toward influencer or vlogger	Mediator	1	1.1
Product involvement	Moderator	2	2.1
Parasocial interaction or relationship	Moderator	2	2.1
Gender	Moderator	2	2.1

Note: Mechanisms were counted only when explicitly identifiable in the extracted studies.

Table 7 indicates that the literature has begun to move beyond simple direct-effect logic, but that development remains modest. Parasociality was especially visible in Lawrence and Meivitananli (2023), Marklen et al. (2025), and Atta et al. (2025), while trust-based explanations were more evident in Zhou and Baskaran (2025) and Shui et al. (2025). Brand-attitude mediation also appeared in contexts such as Handranata and Kalila (2025). The low number of explicit moderators suggests that the field still explains influence more often through general pathways than through clearly specified boundary conditions.

Table 8. Geographical Profile of the Included Studies

Region or Contextual Anchor	n	%
Global or not specified	56	58.9
Southeast Asia	12	12.6
East Asia	10	10.5
South Asia	8	8.4
Cross-regional	4	4.2
Africa	2	2.1
Europe	2	2.1
North America	1	1.1

The geographical profile was international but uneven. Table 8 shows that most studies were coded as global or not specifically country-anchored, while named settings were concentrated in Asia. Within the Southeast Asian subset, five studies were specifically Indonesia-focused. These studies spanned Instagram, YouTube, TikTok live streaming, general social media, and social-commerce-related settings. Lawrence and Meivitanli (2023) and Marklen et al. (2025) offered clear platform-specific evidence, while Kuswati et al. (2024) and Handranata and Kalila (2025) highlighted parasocial and brand-related mechanisms. Taken together, the Indonesian evidence is analytically valuable but still too limited to support broad contextual generalization.

Overall, the results show that the literature is expanding rapidly, remains methodologically concentrated, and presents platform-sensitive but uneven patterns. Attractiveness is more visible in visually expressive settings, whereas expertise becomes more salient where informational assurance and evaluative confidence are central. These descriptive findings provide the basis for the discussion that follows.

The review indicates that influencer attractiveness and influencer expertise should not be treated as interchangeable predictors of purchase intention. Their relative visibility varies with platform logic, interaction format, product type, and explanatory mechanism. This refines broader influencer marketing reviews and meta-analyses that establish influencer effectiveness in general terms but say less about which source attributes matter most under specific digital conditions (Hudders et al., 2021; Vrontis et al., 2021; Pan et al., 2025; Spörl-Wang et al., 2025). The evidence also remains fragmented because many studies bundle attractiveness and expertise within broader credibility models, rely on cross-sectional self-report data, and model positive paths more often than boundary conditions. The discussion therefore adopts a critical rather than deterministic reading of the evidence.

Interpreting the Relative Roles of Attractiveness and Expertise

The first major implication of the review is that attractiveness and expertise represent different persuasive routes rather than simply two correlated facets of a single credibility construct. Attractiveness is more visible where visual impression, aspirational appeal, and identity signaling shape judgment, which helps explain its prominence in Instagram-dominant, beauty, fashion, and lifestyle settings. This aligns with source-attractiveness logic and newer influencer studies emphasizing aesthetic fit and aspirational value (Ohanian, 1990; Schouten et al., 2020; Santiago & Serralha, 2022; Marklen et al., 2025).

By contrast, expertise becomes more salient where consumers face greater informational uncertainty and stronger evaluative demands, especially in live commerce and social-commerce settings, where product explanation, competence, and decision assurance matter more directly (Chen et al., 2024; Zhou & Baskaran, 2025; Shui et al., 2025). In some environments, especially hybrid commerce-entertainment formats, both attributes appear jointly relevant, but these joint patterns remain provisional because subgroup sizes and measurement approaches are uneven. The evidence therefore shifts the key question from whether influencers work in general to how specific source attributes fit platform affordances and consumer decision stages.

Reframing Influencer Effectiveness in Digital Marketing Transformation

The second major implication concerns digital marketing transformation. Influencer persuasion cannot be understood independently from platformized marketing systems that reshape exposure, interaction, recommendation, and transaction. Instagram amplifies visual display and identity signaling, YouTube combines explanation with narrative depth, TikTok compresses persuasion into short-form high-engagement interaction, live commerce increases the need for real-time explanation and trust transfer, and virtual influencers destabilize conventional cues of human attractiveness and authenticity. Studies such as Barta et al. (2023), Alcántara-Pilar et al. (2024), Kim and Park (2023), and Tseng and Ou (2025) therefore suggest that source traits still matter, but their meaning is conditioned by platform architecture. This supports reading source credibility through a context-sensitive lens within digitally transformed marketing environments rather than as a context-neutral model (Vial, 2019; Verhoef et al., 2021; Cioppi et al., 2023).

From Source Traits to Relational Mechanisms

A third implication is that the path from influencer attributes to purchase intention is rarely psychologically complete when modeled as a direct effect. The recurring presence of parasocial interaction, trust, perceived credibility, and brand attitude suggests that attractiveness and expertise work by shaping relational closeness, message credibility, and brand evaluation rather than by producing intention automatically. This interpretation is consistent with parasocial and influencer research across Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and livestream settings (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Jiménez-Castillo & Sánchez-Fernández, 2019; Lawrence & Meivitanli, 2023; Atta et al., 2025).

The dominance of parasocial and trust-related mechanisms in the evidence base also helps explain why attractiveness and expertise can produce different outcomes even when they are both positively evaluated. Attractiveness may support parasocial closeness and aspirational identification more effectively, especially in platforms organized around visual intimacy and repeated exposure. Expertise, by contrast, may feed directly into diagnostic trust, evaluative confidence, and product-based assurance. When these mechanisms operate together, purchase intention becomes the result of both affective resonance and informational confidence. When only one mechanism is strong, the balance between attractiveness and expertise shifts accordingly.

At the same time, the review shows that moderators remain underdeveloped. Product involvement, gender, and parasocial intensity appeared only sporadically as boundary conditions. This means that the literature still knows more about how source attributes operate in general than about when they operate more strongly for different consumers, product types, and platform contexts. In practical terms, this is a major opportunity for future research. In theoretical terms, it means that the literature has moved further in identifying mechanisms than in specifying contingencies.

Theoretical Implications

The review yields three theoretical implications. First, it reinforces the continuing relevance of source-based persuasion theory, especially source credibility and source attractiveness logic, but

also shows that these theories should no longer be applied in a context-neutral way. The evidence supports keeping attractiveness and expertise analytically distinct, because each appears to activate somewhat different consumer processes. This refines broad credibility-based interpretations and supports a more differentiated reading of influencer persuasion (Kumar et al., 2023).

Second, the review shows that source evaluation alone is insufficient for explaining purchase intention in contemporary digital environments. Relational constructs such as parasocial interaction and trust are not peripheral additions. They are central explanatory bridges between influencer attributes and consumer response. This means that future theory development should integrate source-based and relational perspectives more explicitly instead of treating them as parallel explanatory traditions. Such integration would be more consistent with how consumers actually encounter influencers in algorithmically curated, socially interactive, and commerce-enabled environments (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Hudders et al., 2021; Vrontis et al., 2021).

Third, the review suggests that digital marketing transformation should be treated not merely as a background condition but as an interpretive layer that shapes the persuasive role of source traits. Attractiveness and expertise do not operate in a vacuum. They operate within transformed systems of exposure, interaction, recommendation, and transaction. This means that future conceptual models should pay closer attention to platform affordances, interaction intensity, and digital commerce integration as structural conditions of persuasion rather than optional contextual details (Vial, 2019; Verhoef et al., 2021; Cioppi et al., 2023).

Methodological Implications

Methodologically, the field remains heavily concentrated around cross-sectional surveys and SEM-based modeling. This has helped establish recurring associations, but it also narrows causal inference because self-reported evaluations of attractiveness, expertise, credibility, and purchase intention are often captured at the same moment. Experimental, longitudinal, mixed-method, and moderator-based studies remain scarce, so the literature currently supports claims about recurring association patterns more confidently than claims about stable causal mechanisms across platforms or consumer groups.

Construct clarity is another issue, as many studies still embed attractiveness and expertise within broader credibility or influencer-traits bundles and some report insufficient detail for design or platform-sensitive comparison. Future research therefore needs clearer construct isolation, better reporting discipline, experimental manipulation of source cues, and comparative designs that follow intention formation across time and context (Hudders et al., 2021; Pan et al., 2025; Spörl-Wang et al., 2025).

Managerial Implications

The findings of this review carry practical implications, but they should be read as evidence-informed tendencies rather than universal prescriptions. The clearest pattern in the results is that influencer selection appears to benefit from platform-function fit. In visually expressive environments, especially Instagram-oriented settings, attractiveness is more consistently visible as

a persuasive cue. In more evaluative environments, especially live commerce and social-commerce contexts, expertise appears more consistently associated with purchase intention. Managers therefore should not assume that the same influencer profile will perform equally well across all campaign goals, products, or platforms.

A second implication concerns conversion-oriented settings. Because the synthesized evidence repeatedly links expertise, trust, perceived credibility, and explanatory competence in live and social-commerce environments, brands operating in those settings may gain more from influencers who can reduce uncertainty and support evaluation than from purely image-driven endorsers. This implication is supported more strongly in the live commerce and social-commerce portion of the corpus than in smaller subgroups such as TikTok-only or virtual-influencer studies, so it should be applied with contextual judgment rather than as a fixed rule.

A third implication concerns relationship quality. Across the studies that modeled mediators explicitly, parasocial interaction, trust, and perceived credibility recur as the most visible explanatory bridges. For managers, this suggests that long-term influencer effectiveness is unlikely to depend on reach metrics alone. Relational consistency, message credibility, and the ability to sustain audience connection appear to matter alongside visible source traits. The limited Indonesian subcorpus points in the same general direction, especially in beauty, fashion, and social-commerce-related settings, but that local evidence is still too small to justify broad market-wide prescriptions for all Indonesian sectors or MSMEs.

Limitations of the Review

Although the review offers a focused synthesis, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the review concentrated on empirical journal articles published in English between 2016 and 2025, which improved coherence but may have excluded relevant non-English or non-journal evidence. Second, directly accessible full-text availability functioned primarily as an upstream retrieval and handling rule. This improved the consistency of dual screening, appraisal, and extraction, but it may have underrepresented otherwise relevant paywalled studies and therefore narrowed the coverage of the synthesis. Third, the review prioritized studies in which attractiveness, expertise, and purchase intention were sufficiently extractable for synthesis, which necessarily reduced the number of broader influencer studies retained in the final corpus. Fourth, the included literature remained uneven in theory use, measurement transparency, platform subgroup size, and methodological diversity. In particular, the dominance of cross-sectional survey evidence, the limited number of moderator models, and the small size of some platform-specific and Indonesia-focused subgroups mean that the observed patterns should be interpreted as indicative concentrations rather than definitive causal or comparative conclusions.

Within those boundaries, the review still indicates that attractiveness tends to be more visible where visual resonance and aspirational identification are central, whereas expertise tends to be more visible where informational assurance and evaluative confidence matter more. Parasocial interaction and trust appear repeatedly as mechanisms that help translate both attributes into purchase-oriented outcomes. The value of the review therefore lies not in claiming a universal

ranking of influencer traits, but in clarifying the conditions under which different source attributes are more likely to matter within digitally transformed marketing environments.

Recommendations for Future Research

The review points to a next-generation research agenda that should move the field from broad effectiveness claims to more conditional, mechanism-rich, and context-sensitive explanations.

Table 9. Discussion-Derived Future Research Agenda

Research Domain	Priority Question	Suggested Design Direction
Theory integration	How can source-based and parasocial perspectives be combined in one coherent model?	Multi-theory models and mediation chains
Platform contingency	When does attractiveness outperform expertise, and when does expertise dominate?	Platform-comparative designs across Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and live commerce
Consumer heterogeneity	Which consumers are more responsive to attractiveness versus expertise?	Segmentation studies using involvement, age cohort, gender, and product familiarity
Causal inference	Are the observed effects stable under manipulated source cues?	Controlled experiments and field experiments
Temporal dynamics	How do source effects evolve with repeated exposure?	Longitudinal and panel studies
Contextual depth	How do emerging markets differ from established markets?	Cross-country and comparative regional studies
Indonesia and MSMEs	How do local MSMEs convert influencer activity into measurable purchase outcomes?	Context-rich studies in Indonesian digital commerce ecosystems
Virtual influencers	How should attractiveness and expertise be redefined for non-human endorsers?	Conceptual refinement plus hybrid human-AI comparison studies

Table 9 shows that the most urgent need is not simply “more studies,” but more differentiated studies. The field now needs stronger causal tests, better contextual comparison, and clearer conceptual boundaries. It also needs to invest more in emerging-market evidence, including Indonesia, where influencer-driven digital commerce is rapidly maturing but still underrepresented in cumulative international synthesis. This gap is particularly meaningful for MSMEs and platform-based entrepreneurs, because influencer marketing in these contexts may operate under different resource constraints and consumer expectations than in large-brand settings.

CONCLUSION

Influencer attractiveness and influencer expertise appear to function as distinct, though sometimes complementary, attributes within digitally transformed marketing environments. Across the

reviewed evidence, attractiveness is more visibly associated with purchase intention in visually expressive settings, whereas expertise is more visibly associated with purchase intention in contexts that demand stronger informational assurance and evaluative confidence. These patterns help explain why prior findings often seemed fragmented when both attributes were absorbed into undifferentiated credibility bundles.

The main contribution of this review is therefore not to claim a universal ranking of influencer traits, but to show that digital marketing transformation changes the conditions under which persuasive source attributes matter. By isolating attractiveness and expertise, and by reading them through platform context, relational mechanisms, and commerce configuration, the review contributes a more precise account of purchase intention as a platform-contingent and mechanism-mediated outcome. In that sense, the manuscript speaks not only to influencer marketing scholarship, but also to broader debates on how digital transformation reshapes persuasion, evaluation, and conversion in platform-mediated markets.

These conclusions should nevertheless be read with appropriate caution. The underlying literature remains dominated by cross-sectional survey studies, platform subgroup sizes are uneven, and the Indonesian evidence stream is still limited. Accordingly, the observed patterns are better understood as recurring associations within a growing but methodologically uneven field than as settled causal laws. Stronger experimental, longitudinal, and cross-platform comparative research is still needed before broader generalization can be made with greater confidence.

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