International Journal of Advance and Applied Research
www.ijaar.co.in
ISSN – 2347-7075 Impact Factor – 8.141
Peer Reviewed Bi-Monthly
Vol. 7 No. 48 July – Aug - 2026

Factors Influencing Consumer Trust in Creator-Led and Brand-Led Recommendations in Social Commerce

Srividyavathi. Vemuri
Students, Department of Commerce,
Little Flower Degree College, Uppal, Hyderabad
Corresponding Author – Srividyavathi. Vemuri
DOI - 10.5281/zenodo.23602315

Abstract:

People are buying online in an unmarked way. The suggestions and recommendations are no longer just from the ads; they're from very distinctive sources – content creators or influencers, and official brand accounts – and they're getting different responses. The purpose of this study was to examine people's trust in social media recommendation. It examines four together in a single model: Source credibility, perceived authenticity, Para social interaction (the friendship-like relationship perceptions of a follower towards a creator he or she follows regularly), and persuasion knowledge, which is the level of someone's awareness of being marketed to. In the literature available these factors are usually addressed individually, so compiling them all together was the primary focus of this paper. The data were gathered by a structured, self-administered questionnaire with items in a five-point Likert scale sent to the Internet related social media users. 89 respondents remained for analysis after they were screened out for having not purchased anything due on a social media recommendation. The results indicate very good internal consistency for all five constructs, ranging from 0.856 to 0.915 Cronbach's alpha. The four predictors accounted for 42.2 percent of the variance in consumer trust, $R^2(4,84) = 0.422$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.394$, $F(4,84) = 15.31$, $p < .001$, from a multiple linear regression. Para social interaction turned out to be the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.707$, $p < .001$), followed by perceived authenticity ($\beta = 0.400$, $p = .037$). Interestingly, with the others held constant, source credibility was negatively related to trust ($\beta = -0.511$, $p = .011$); and there was no measurable effect of persuasion knowledge whatsoever. The gist of it is that people feel that a recommender is an expert because they feel an emotional connection with that person, rather than because they look the part.

Influencer marketing plays a key role in shaping the perceived authenticity of social commerce content. Perceived authenticity of social commerce content is closely related to keywords such as social commerce, consumer trust, source credibility, Para social interaction, and persuasion knowledge.

Keywords: Social Commerce; Consumer Trust; Source Credibility; Perceived Authenticity; Para Social Interaction; Persuasion Knowledge; Influencer Marketing.

Introduction:

1. Background:

Instagram, YouTube and TikTok were initially designed to be a platform for people to share their lives, but they have quietly evolved to become complete commerce ecosystems. Today, a viewer can find a product, read about it, watch it in use and purchase it without leaving the app. In this area, two completely different voices vie for a shopper's attention. One side is individual content creators and influencers who create audiences through their personal content – often unscripted. On the other side, there are brands that use their official pages and paid promotions. They're after the same goal – a sale – but they're playing different psychological games to achieve it.

Trust is at the epicenter of this whole system. A customer in a physical store can take a product and read the label and then make a decision. That's not possible at all in social commerce. It is up to the viewer to determine if a recommendation should be taken based on the message itself and the person making it. There is a moderate amount of research out there on source credibility as well as on perceived authenticity as a source of trust more recently. But it's much less obvious how these more rational, evaluative judgements relate to the other, more emotional, component: the Para social bond between viewer and creator who follows him/her week after week, and how this awareness that the viewer is being marketed to alters the picture.

2. Existing Evidence:

According to the source credibility theory, the perceived credibility of the communicator, that is, his or her appearance as an expert and as a sincere communicator, will influence the effectiveness of persuasive message (Ohanian, 1990). When it comes to influencer marketing, this translates to viewers always being in the back of their minds whether a recommender really knows what they're talking about, and whether they're being honest with the audience. Research has consistently shown that these evaluations are associated with increased product attitude toward the product being advocated (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017; Lou & Yuan, 2019).

Perceived authenticity is a slightly different concept — it’s about how authentic and spontaneous a suggestion seems, as opposed to being a paid read-out (Moulard, Garrity, & Rice, 2016). Sponsored content is now ubiquitous and audiences are increasingly adept at detecting when it is sincere, and some recent studies have begun to classify authenticity as a separate, and perhaps greater, motivator of trust than formal credibility (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017).

The concept of Para social interaction is not new, dating back to Horton and Wohl (1956), who were the first to report studies of the one-way friendship-like relationship between audience members and the media personalities with whom they interact on a regular basis. Later, by Rubin, Perse and Powell (1985), this was converted into a measurable construct. For influencers, this relationship can take the form of a “friend's tip” instead of an advertisement, a practice that has been repeatedly highlighted in more recent studies on influencer marketing as a key reason behind the success of influencer content (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Persuasion knowledge, however, is the consumer's knowledge of the tactics used to persuade him/her (Friestad & Wright, 1994). Research that has followed this model has typically concluded that after an audience identifies a message as a message from a sponsor, they are more likely to be sceptical of the message (Bearden, Hardesty, & Rose, 2001). In theory, then, persuasion knowledge should, in turn, undermine trust, as per this logic.

For the purpose of this paper, Consumer trust is defined following the definitions of Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) and McKnight, Choudhury and Kacmar (2002) — a consumer's willingness to accept the information and intentions of a source in an uncertain situation. In the social commerce environment, that means that a viewer thinks that a recommendation is correct and is willing to make an opinion on a purchase based on it.

On the basis of this body of work, four hypotheses are proposed:

- H1: Source credibility has a significant positive influence on consumer trust.
- H2: Perceived authenticity has a significant positive influence on consumer trust. H3: Para social interaction has a significant positive influence on consumer trust.

- H4: Persuasion knowledge/scepticism has a significant negative influence on consumer trust.

Combining these, it is suggested that consumer trust (the dependent variable) can be jointly predicted by the four independent variables in the following regression equation:

$$CT = \beta0 + \beta1(SC) + \beta2(PA) + \beta3(PSI) + \beta4(PK) + \varepsilon$$

3. Research Gap:

Brands and creators are already investing in content for social commerce, but why viewers choose one recommendation over another is only partially understood, particularly since several competing explanations (expertise, authenticity, relational closeness and scepticism) are competing with each other, not just one at a time. Otherwise, a brand might end up investing too much in credentialed, expert-style endorsers and not enough in the relationship-building, authenticity-focused content that's more relevant to today's audience, or vice versa. Most of the evidence used in this study also comes from Western samples, which further limits the amount of primary data evidence available for India.

Objectives:

The purpose of this research is to investigate the factors that affect consumers' confidence in the social commerce recommendations. Specific objectives are:

1. To examine the influence of source credibility on consumer trust in social commerce recommendations.
2. To examine the influence of perceived authenticity on consumer trust in social commerce recommendations.
3. To examine the influence of Para social interaction on consumer trust in social commerce recommendations.
4. To examine the influence of persuasion knowledge/scepticism on consumer trust in social commerce recommendations.

Scope and Limits of the Study:

The results of this study cannot be generalised to all social media users because it is limited to those who have, at some time, bought a product that they had seen recommended online, and it has only used a convenience sample, obtained from an online questionnaire. The study also focuses on the five constructs mentioned above as part of a deliberate limitation to focus on those influences on attitudes toward trust; it does not aim at capturing all the possible influences on trust, such as price, product category, or platform-specific design features

Research Questions:

- RQ1: Does source credibility significantly influence consumer trust in social commerce recommendations?
- RQ2: Does perceived authenticity significantly influence consumer trust in social commerce recommendations?
- RQ3: Does Para social interaction significantly influence consumer trust in social commerce recommendations?
- RQ4: Does persuasion knowledge/scepticism significantly influence consumer trust in social commerce recommendations?

Significance of the Study:

In the case of academicians, this study integrates established credibility, authenticity and Para social and persuasion-knowledge frameworks under one umbrella and into an Indian context of social commerce, instead of considering them as distinct strands of literature. For industry people and creators, the findings provide some direction, based on evidence, on

which relational and content strategies will best create the type of trust that will lead to a purchase. The paper is designed to demonstrate to both the host institution and the broader commerce education community a practical approach for the study of consumer behaviour in the digital world using primary data, which aligns with the conference's focus on innovation in digital commerce.

Materials and Methods:

1. Research Design:

The study is quantitative in nature, descriptive and cross-sectional survey. The design selected was this one because the aim was to test hypothesised relationships between already known constructs at one time, rather than to track change over time or run an experiment.

2. Population and Sampling:

The target audience for this study was social media users who at some point had bought a product because of a social media recommendation. A convenience sampling method was used as reaching a fully random sample of social media users was not practically possible within the scope of an undergraduate research project, and thus the questionnaire was circulated online. A total of 100 responses were received. One screening question in the instrument inquired if the respondents had ever bought something based on a social media recommendation; 11 respondents answered no, and were dropped from the analysis. This is more than the minimum sample size suggested by Green (1991) which is $N \geq 50 + 8k$, where k is the number of the predictors, for a regression model with four predictors.

3. Research Instrument:

Structured questionnaire was developed by adapting previously used scales in marketing and communication research: source credibility (Ohanian, 1990); perceived authenticity (Moulard et al., 2016); parasocial interaction (Rubin et al., 1985); persuasion knowledge/scepticism (Bearden et al., 2001); and consumer trust (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001; McKnight et al., 2002). The final instrument consisted of one screening question, five demographic and usage questions, and twenty core questions (four per construct), rated on a five-point scale (from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree).

4. Data Collection Procedure:

The questionnaire was designed and made available on-line as a self-administered form. This link was disseminated on social media and messaging groups over a couple of weeks. Each respondent was presented with a brief note describing the academic objectives of the study prior to participation and was assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of his/her participation - no names, contact information or other identifying information were sought from any respondent. Responses were gathered, screened for the qualifying purchase-experience question, and only qualifying responses were moved on to the analysis stage.

5. Tools and Instruments Used for Data Analysis:

All analysis was performed in Python, which is implemented by Panda's library, NumPy library and SciPy library. Each of the five constructs was represented by a composite score, which was the average of the four items in each construct. Cronbach's alpha was used to test the internal consistency. Following this, descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, minimum and maximum) were calculated for each construct and then a Pearson correlation conducted between all five constructs. The main hypothesis test was a multiple linear regression of consumer trust on the four predictor constructs, and variance inflation factor (VIF) values were checked to rule out serious multicollinearity between the predictors.

6. Ensuring the Reliability of the Study:

Several measures were introduced to ensure the reliability of the results. First, for content validity, all scales in the questionnaire were taken from previously published and validated studies and not developed from scratch. Second, Cronbach's alpha was computed for each construct prior to any test of the hypotheses, and the widely accepted cut-off point of 0.70 was regarded as the minimum criteria for retaining a construct. Third, the screening question was employed specifically to exclude those who had not had experience consistent with the breadth of the study, such that the final sample only included those who had actually acted on a social media recommendation prior to.

7. Ethical Considerations:

No personally identifying information was kept at any time and all responses were anonymous. The study was designed to be self-selected and respondents could end the survey at any time without stating a reason. The study involved no more than minimal risk to its participants, based on the nature of the questions asked, which concerned shopping habits and opinions about social media content.

Results and Discussion:

1. Demographic Profile of Respondents:

Table 1 summarises the demographic and usage characteristics of the 89 respondents who were retained after screening.

Table 1. Demographic and social media usage profile of respondents (N = 89)

Demographic Variable	Category	n (%)
Age	Under 18	20 (22.5%)
	18 – 24	14 (15.7%)
	25 – 34	7 (7.9%)
	35 – 44	32 (36.0%)
	45 and above	16 (18.0%)
Gender	Male	46 (51.7%)
	Female	34 (38.2%)
	Prefer not to say	9 (10.1%)
Occupation	Student	35 (39.3%)
	Working professional	32 (36.0%)
	Self-employed	10 (11.2%)
	Other	12 (13.5%)
Daily social media use	Less than 1 hour	21 (23.6%)
	1 – 3 hours	36 (40.4%)
	3 – 5 hours	20 (22.5%)
	More than 5 hours	12 (13.5%)
Recommendation type encountered	Creator/influencer-led	35 (39.3%)
	Brand-led	10 (11.2%)
	Both equally	44 (49.4%)

The sample turned out fairly spread across age groups, with the biggest cluster falling in the 35–44 bracket (36.0%), and gender was close to evenly split between male (51.7%) and female (38.2%) respondents, with a further 10.1% choosing not to disclose. Students and working professionals together made up over three-quarters of the sample. Nearly half of all respondents (49.4%) said they come across creator-led and brand- led recommendations about equally often, which suggests both types of recommendation are genuinely part of people's everyday social media habits, not just one or the other.

2. Reliability Analysis:

Cronbach's alpha was calculated for each construct before moving on to hypothesis testing. As Table 2 shows, all five constructs cleared the commonly used 0.70 threshold comfortably, which points to good-to- excellent internal consistency across the board.

Table 2. Reliability statistics for study constructs

Construct	No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Interpretation
Source Credibility (SC)	4	0.903	Excellent
Perceived Authenticity (PA)	4	0.914	Excellent
Para social Interaction (PSI)	4	0.915	Excellent
Persuasion Knowledge (PK)	4	0.870	Good
Consumer Trust (CT)	4	0.856	Good

3. Descriptive Statistics:

Table 3 lists the mean, standard deviation, and range for each of the five composite construct scores.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics for composite construct scores

Construct	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Source Credibility (SC)	3.663	1.049	1.00	5.00
Perceived Authenticity (PA)	3.590	1.023	1.00	5.00
Para social Interaction (PSI)	3.688	1.007	1.50	5.00
Persuasion Knowledge (PK)	3.876	0.839	2.00	5.00
Consumer Trust (CT)	4.025	0.779	1.50	5.00

Consumer trust had the highest mean of all five constructs (M = 4.03, SD = 0.78), which suggests that, on average, people who took the survey do report reasonably high trust in the social commerce recommendations they encounter. Persuasion knowledge also scored fairly high (M = 3.88), meaning respondents generally believe they are capable of spotting sponsored content when they see it.

4. Correlation Analysis:

Table 4 shows Pearson correlation coefficients between all five constructs. Every single correlation came out positive and statistically significant at $p < .01$.

Table 4. Inter-construct correlation matrix (p < .01)**

Construct	SC	PA	PSI	PK	CT
SC	1.000				
PA	0.890**	1.000			
PSI	0.798**	0.774**	1.000		
PK	0.582**	0.577**	0.603**	1.000	
CT	0.412**	0.495**	0.612**	0.364**	1.000

What stood out here is how strongly source credibility and perceived authenticity moved together (r = .890), and to a slightly lesser extent source credibility and Para social interaction (r = .798), and perceived authenticity and Para social interaction (r = .774). In other words, respondents don't seem to draw a very sharp line between these three recommender-

related qualities in their own heads — a point that turns out to matter quite a bit when interpreting the regression results below.

5. Multiple Regression Analysis:

A multiple linear regression was run with consumer trust as the dependent variable, and source credibility, perceived authenticity, Para social interaction, and persuasion knowledge/scepticism entered together as predictors. The overall model was statistically significant, $F(4, 84) = 15.31$, $p < .001$, and accounted for 42.2% of the variance in consumer trust ($R^2 = 0.422$; adjusted $R^2 = 0.394$). Table 5 sets out the full regression output.

Table 5. Multiple regression results predicting consumer trust

Predictor	B	SE	Beta (β)	t	p	VIF
(Constant)	2.290	0.315	–	7.272	< .001	–
SC	-0.379	0.147	-0.511	-2.587	.011	5.661
PA	0.305	0.143	0.400	2.125	.037	5.149
PSI	0.547	0.113	0.707	4.831	< .001	3.115
PK	0.003	0.099	0.004	0.034	.973	1.660

Para social interaction came out as the strongest predictor of consumer trust by a clear margin ($\beta = 0.707$, $p < .001$), with perceived authenticity following as a positive and significant predictor in its own right ($\beta = 0.400$, $p = .037$). Source credibility was statistically significant too, but in the opposite direction to what was expected ($\beta = -0.511$, $p = .011$). Persuasion knowledge/scepticism made no significant difference at all ($\beta = 0.004$, $p = .973$). It's worth flagging that the VIF values for source credibility (5.66) and perceived authenticity (5.15) sit right around the conventional caution threshold of 5, which reflects the very high correlation between those two constructs noted earlier, and means their individual coefficients need to be read with some caution rather than taken completely at face value.

6. Summary of Hypothesis Testing:

Table 6. Summary of hypothesis testing outcomes

Hypothesis	Statement	Result	Decision
H1	Source credibility has a significant positive influence on consumer trust.	$\beta = -0.511$, $p = .011$	Not Supported
H2	Perceived authenticity has a significant positive influence on consumer trust.	$\beta = 0.400$, $p = .037$	Supported
H3	Para social interaction has a significant positive influence on consumer trust.	$\beta = 0.707$, $p < .001$	Supported
H4	Persuasion knowledge/scepticism has a significant negative influence on consumer trust.	$\beta = 0.004$, $p = .973$	Not Supported

Discussion:

The most unambiguous evidence in this data is for H3, that by far the most important determinant of consumer trust in this sample is Para social interaction. This aligns with a recent trend in influencer- marketing studies that audiences are now making a relational assessment of the recommendations, not just an evaluative assessment: When a viewer feels they "know" a person recommending something, they are more likely to take it as a tip from a friend than a commercial ad (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Perceived

authenticity also proved to be a key and positive predictor, confirming H2 and corroborating previous studies indicating that perceived sincerity is a predictor of the recommendation without taking into account the recommender's formal qualifications (Moulard et al., 2016; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017).

There's a little more unpacking to do in the result for source credibility. The raw (unstandardised) correlation between source credibility and consumer trust was positive (r = .412), but the standardised (standard) regression coefficient became negative and significant when both source perceived authenticity and Para social interaction were included in the model. As source credibility and perceived authenticity are tightly correlated (r = .890) and both have high VIF values (both > 5), it seems most likely that this flip is a statistical suppression effect due to multicollinearity, rather than evidence of a true effect of expertise on the loss of trust. Simply put, respondents don't seem to conceive of "expertise" and "authenticity" as two distinct properties of a recommender; they are so intertwined in their minds that after they have experienced the authentic quality, the remaining component is a kind of negative number, a fragile residual that is dependent on a model. H1 is thus considered not supported here, but that should be understood as a warning about overlap between the two constructs and not that being credible actually detracts from trust.

Persuasion knowledge/scepticism was not meaningfully related to consumer trust, which means that H4 is rejected. This is one plausible reason: today's social media users are so accustomed to sponsored content that they now don't see it as an indication of lack of trust. Consumers could be equally divided between: "this is probably sponsored" and "but I find it believable and authentic." This is in line with the findings of more recent persuasion-knowledge studies showing that the relationship between the perception of a persuasive intent and the discounting of the message is less than previously thought, given the presence of strong relational and authenticity cues (Boerman, Willemsen, & Van Der Aa, 2017; in the wider native-advertising literature).

Overall, these findings indicate that, in a social commerce environment that is already overloaded with sponsored content, relational and emotional signals (the sense of authenticity and closeness of the recommendation) are more effective for establishing trust than credible expertise alone. For brands and creators, that's a sign that building trust on the back of ongoing authentic connections with your audience is a better strategy than relying on professional credentials.

Theoretical Implications:

The study contributes to the literature by testing the source credibility, perceived authenticity, Para social interaction, and persuasion knowledge in a single unified trust model and with primary data from a relatively new base of primary users of social media in India. The relationship between the two constructs of source credibility and perceived authenticity is also highly correlated, suggesting that there may be conceptual overlap between the two that future scale-development could benefit from exploring.

Practical Implications:

For creators, it's a sign that ongoing, regular interaction that fosters a meaningful connection with fans is more likely to foster trusts than relying on credentials or knowledge. When brands are considering partnerships, the findings suggest that they should look for creators who can authentically incorporate a product into content that already has a Para social connection to their

audience, rather than solely endorsing the product with an "official" brand-account message or relying on an expert-style endorsement.

Limitations:

There are some caveats to this study that should be called out. The sample (N = 89) was obtained using convenience sampling which restricts the extent to which the results can be extrapolated to the larger population of social media users. The cross sectional design takes a "snapshot" of the situation at one point in time and does not allow for the determination of causality among any of these variables. All measures were self-reported, and thus susceptible to common method bias and social desirability effects. Finally, the multicollinearity between the two-source credibility and perceived authenticity scores reduces the confidence that could be had in the individual regression weights, and indicates that the two constructs would merit closer examination in future studies, perhaps using confirmatory factor analysis. An increased and more representative sample size, designing an experiment that directly compares creator-led and brand- led conditions, and even more outcome variables (e.g., purchase intent or word of mouth behaviour) would all be fair and logical next steps.

Conclusion:

This research aimed to investigate the interaction between source credibility, perceived authenticity, Para social interaction, and persuasion knowledge/scepticism in affecting consumer trust in social commerce recommendations with 89 survey responses. The two variables that were significant and positive predictors of trust were Para social interaction and perceived authenticity; source credibility was a significant and counter-hypothesised negative predictor of trust, likely due to the high overlap between source credibility and perceived authenticity, and persuasion knowledge/scepticism was not significant at all.

In total, the model accounted for a significant 42.2% of the variance in consumer trust, a relatively high rate for an investigation of this type and demonstrates the importance of relational and authenticity-based cues in today's context for assessing consumer trust in social commerce recommendations. In practice, it's brands and creators who wish to be trusted that are thinking less about asserting their expertise and more about creating a sustained, authentic connection with their audience that makes a recommendation feel like it's coming from a friend, not an advertiser.

In future, there is ample opportunity to expand upon this research with a larger and more representative group, a design that can directly compare creator-led and brand-led recommendations in an experimental format, and other outcome measures including actual purchase intent or word-of-mouth behaviour. Despite its shortcomings, this research has both theoretical and practical implications, adding a small refinement to the existing models of trust, and providing a little direction for brands and creators working to create more trustworthy commerce strategies in the digital age — especially relevant to this conference's emphasis on innovation in commerce in the digital age.

References:

1. Bearden, W. O., Hardesty, D. M., & Rose, R. L. (2001). Consumer self-confidence: Refinements in conceptualization and measurement. Journal of Consumer Research, 28(1), 121–134.
2. Chaudhuri, A., & Holbrook, M. B. (2001). The chain of effects from brand trust and brand affect to brand performance: The role

of brand loyalty. Journal of Marketing, 65(2), 81–93.

3. De Veirman, M., Cauberghe, V., & Hudders, L. (2017). Marketing through Instagram influencers: The impact of number of followers and product divergence on brand attitude. International Journal of Advertising, 36(5), 798–828.
4. Djafarova, E., & Rushworth, C. (2017). Exploring the credibility of online celebrities' Instagram profiles in influencing the purchase decisions of young female users. Computers in Human Behaviour, 68, 1–7.
5. Friestad, M., & Wright, P. (1994). The persuasion knowledge model: How people cope with persuasion attempts. Journal of Consumer Research, 21(1), 1–31.
6. Green, S. B. (1991). How many subjects does it take to do a regression analysis? Multivariate Behavioural Research, 26(3), 499–510.
7. Horton, D., & Wohl, R. R. (1956). Mass communication and para-social interaction: Observations on intimacy at a distance. Psychiatry, 19(3), 215–229.
8. Lou, C., & Yuan, S. (2019). Influencer marketing: How message value and credibility affect consumer trust of branded content on social media. Journal of Interactive Advertising, 19(1), 58–73.
9. McKnight, D. H., Choudhury, V., & Kacmar, C. (2002). Developing and validating trust measures for e- commerce: An integrative typology. Information Systems Research, 13(3), 334–359.
10. Moulard, J. G., Garrity, C. P., & Rice, D. H. (2015). What makes a human brand authentic? Identifying the antecedents of celebrity authenticity. Psychology & Marketing, 32(2), 173–186.
11. Ohanian, R. (1990). Construction and validation of a scale to measure celebrity endorsers' perceived expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness. Journal of Advertising, 19(3), 39–52.
12. Rubin, A. M., Perse, E. M., & Powell, R. A. (1985). Loneliness, Para social interaction, and local television news viewing. Human Communication Research, 12(2), 155–180.