

Influencer Credibility and Consumer Trust in Fitness Markets: A Meta-Analytical Review.

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ABSTRACT

The booming nature of influencer marketing has radically changed the way consumer trust is developed in fitness markets, where credibility indicators have a direct influence on attitudes, behavioural intentions, and health decision-making. The presented meta-analytical review also summarizes and critically reviews the available research on credibility in the role of influencers and consumer trust, focusing specifically on the contexts related to fitness on social media platforms. The review relies solely on a few peer-reviewed sources to synthesize the findings of social media marketing, consumer behavior, and influencer effectiveness studies and detect the common trends, theoretical underpinnings, and gaps in research. The previous meta-analytical and extensive empirical investigations demonstrate that the credibility of influencers, which is expressed through their expertise, trustworthiness, authenticity, and self-brand congruity, significantly impacts trust, engagement, and the intent to purchase or participate. Nonetheless, there is also evidence of significant heterogeneity, which is platform affordance led and is influenced by the types of influencers (macro and micro), the audience participation, and the type of sensibilities of the domain, which is specific to fitness and health consumption. The current review contributes to the literature by organizing the relationship between the dimensions of influencer credibility and the outcomes of trust in the context of the fitness market, which depicts a theoretical gap and a lack of methodological power of available investigations. Combining the knowledge on marketing, psychology, and digital health research, the paper suggests an integrative approach that elucidates the way and under what circumstances influencer credibility converts into consumer trust. The results of the study provide a stringent basis for future theory advancement and evidence-based management techniques in ethically sensitive fitness and wellness markets.

Keywords: : Influencer Credibility; Consumer Trust; Fitness Markets; Social Media marketing; Influencer Types.

INTRODUCTION:

The development of social media has revolutionized the modern market order by redefining the way consumers obtain information, brand values, and make judgments of trust. Influencer marketing has become one of the most effective processes within this dynamic digital ecosystem, as the targeted people with perceived authority or social influence can manipulate consumer perceptions and actions on a large scale (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Dwivedi et al., 2021). Influencers exist on the border between peer communication and commercial persuasion and cannot be listed in the previously established categories of advertising, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), and social interaction (Leong et al., 2022; Lou et al., 2022). Consequently, the issue of influencer credibility has taken the foreground in elucidating how and why consumers react toward branded messages that are shared on social media platforms. Fitness markets are one of the most specific yet sensitive settings where the digital opinion leaders have exerted their influence. Consumption in relation to fitness can be categorized as

follows: exercise programs, nutritional supplements, wearable technologies, and lifestyle services may all include personal health, body image, and long-term behavioural commitment. There, consumer trust is no longer a matter of transaction but an adoption requirement and retention (Durau et al., 2022; Schultz, 2025).

The literature always shows that consumers place a lot of attention on credibility indicators in the context of assessment of influencers related to fitness because falsehoods or overstatements may potentially have physical, psychological, and moral consequences (Kim and Kim, 2021). As a result, the relationship of credibility and trust concerning the perspective of the fitness influencer marketing is of theoretical and practical significance. Available literature on the topic of social media marketing offers solid proof that marketing efforts carried out on the digital level are bound to affect purchase intention, brand loyalty, and engagement via mediating variables like trust, brand attitude, and perceived value (Hanaysha, 2022; Ahmed et al., 2021; Jamil et al., 2022). In this stream, the issue of influencer marketing has been more and more discussed as a separate but interconnected

phenomenon. Whether it is meta-analytical or a high-scale review, it can be shown that influencers can influence consumer engagement and behavior intentions significantly, especially when the audiences think of them as genuine, informed, and sharing their own values (Ao et al., 2023; Pan et al., 2025). Nevertheless, the effects are not universal, and researchers have urged more area-specific syntheses in order to articulate apparent heterogeneity (Han & Balabanis, 2023). The source credibility theory, social identification theory, self-congruity theory, and consumer engagement frameworks are located in the list of theoretical approaches, which may be implemented in research on influencer credibility (Aaker, 1997; Brodie et al., 2013; Kumar and Reinartz, 2016).

These models imply that credibility has a multidimensional nature and normally includes expertise, trust, and appeal, and more recent research focuses on authenticity, transparency, and moral responsibility as more dimensions (Kim and Kim, 2021; Schultz, 2025). Such dimensions might have dissimilar weight in the fitness markets, with consumers tending to be interested in influencers not only as endorsers but also as their informal health helpers or behavioural role models (Ki et al., 2022; Durau et al., 2022). Nonetheless, much of the existing scholarly research considers the fitness-related products, which are similar to general consumer goods. The other weakness of the existing literature is that it is divided into disciplines. The research on social media marketing and brand trust along with influencer efficacy often evolves independently, with few cross-references and cumulative syntheses (Alalwan et al., 2017; Phan et al., 2024).

Although recent meta-analysis studies have advanced the field of learning about influencer marketing effectiveness more generally, they tend to pool together a wide variety of sectors (such as fashion, tourism, and technology) and therefore may miss more sector-specific dynamics as they apply in fitness and wellness situations (Pan et al., 2025; Ren et al., 2023). Thus, it is still not clear enough how the credibility of influencers works uniquely in the context of fitness markets and how the process of trust formation is also different in other areas of consumption. Moreover, this is joined to platform evolution and types of influencers, complicating the situation further. It has been shown that micro-influencers can create more trust and perceived authenticity than macro-influencers, especially in niche communities like the fitness and health community (Leung et al., 2022; Schultz, 2025). At the same time, the participative nature of websites like Instagram and YouTube makes parasocial relations stronger, which can lead to the development of trust-based virtuality and at the same time increase susceptibility to persuasion (Lee et al., 2022; Hudson et al., 2016). It is the nature of these dynamics that makes a systematic and integrative type of review needed, whereby the findings of empirical studies can be aggregated, and the critical focus on their theoretical premises and methods can be made.

It is against this background that the current review allows a meta-analytical and critical review of the literature on influencer credibility and consumer trust in fitness markets. The review will focus on three goals by relying

on only a few peer-reviewed and academic articles. To begin with, it aims to explain the conceptualization and operationalization of influencer credibility in fitness-based consumption studies. Second, it analyzes empirical results on the relatedness of credibility dimensions to consumer trust, engagement, and behavior intentions, and points of convergence and divergence. Third, it isolates gaps or loopholes in theory, limitations on methods, and variables that are understudied instead of limiting the growth of cumulative knowledge in the field.

This review adds to the literature in various aspects by integrating the knowledge of social media marketing, consumer behavior, and influencer research in a logical manner. It leads to a more subtle interpretation of the establishment of trust in the context of fitness influencer marketing and the ethical and contextual specificity of the market in the fitness sector and offers a sensible starting point in the subsequent theory development and empirical research. Through this, the paper addresses recent calls for domain-relevant, theory-based syntheses capable of informing both scholarly research and responsible managerial practice in digital marketing settings (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Han and Balabanis, 2023).

2. Critical Literature Review

The studies concerning influencer credibility and consumer trust are based on the larger body of research on the topic of social media marketing, brand trust and consumer engagement. Initial research has determined that the consumer attitudes and purchase intentions that are shaped by the social activity related to social media marketing are caused by trust-based and relational effects (Alalwan et al., 2017; Hajli, 2014). More recent literature has changed the focus to influencers as semi-professional communicators whose perceived authority could replace information on the brand (Lou et al., 2022). This change is particularly important in fitness markets, since the decision to consume health, body image, and lifestyle change, thus increasing the divergence of consumers towards credible sources of information (Durau et al., 2022; Schultz, 2025). Even though there is an increasing interest, literature appears theoretically disjointed and methodologically inconsistent. Whereas meta-analyses are underway to draw conclusions on the effect of influencers (Ao et al., 2023; Pan et al., 2025), a large number of primary research investigations concentrate on immediate behavioural intentions as opposed to more profound development of trust.

In addition, the context of fitness is often integrated into the larger product categories, restricting insights within the industry. In the critical review provided below, several studies among the given reference list based on their contribution on the theoretical background, methodological soundness, and applicability to the subject of influencer credibility and consumer trust in the fitness market. The article by Kim and Kim (2021) offers an in-depth analysis of the influencer marketing phenomenon by showing that credibility does not always produce positive results. They provide the results relying on experimental designs demonstrating that perceived trustworthiness moderate's consumer responses in the conditions of saliency of persuasive intent.

The strength of the study is that it has noted that skepticism is an opposing effect of influencer exposure. Yet, its generalized product orientation makes it less applicable in the direct context of the fitness scenario where the credibility levels can be more complex as it is based on the perceptions of risks to health. Ao et al. (2023) carry out a meta-analysis study that explores influencers using social media on engagement and buying intention. Their results support significant positive correlation, and attributes regarding credibility are the most important antecedents. The meta-analytic methodology gives more generalizability but the combination of various industries diminishes the ability of the method to be sensitive to industry dynamics. There are implications related to fitness that are drawable as opposed to the testable ones which show that domain-specific synthesis is indeed required.

The article by Pan et al (2025) generalizes influencer marketing literature by incorporating theoretical moderators like source credibility, and audience involvement in a systematic review in the form of the meta-analysis. Credibility is one of the key figures of project success that their findings highlight. The strength of the study is its rigor in approach using statistics but the fitness markets are grouped as a bigger category which may suppress the distinctive concerns of trust in health and wellness consumption. Han and Balabanis (2023) survey the literature of influencer marketing methods with the help of meta-analytic, focusing on such antecedents as expertise and authenticity. The authors point out inconsistencies in the literature on different theoretical ground, especially in operationalizing credibility. Whilst the review is moving conceptually, it falls short of providing contextual distinction.

The use of fitness influencers as the type of influencers often acts as the behavioural role models does not analytically partition them out of other types of influencers. Making a significant contribution to the domain-specific theory, Schultz (2025) creates a typology of trust that micro-health and fitness influencers create. The paper recognizes relational, epistemic, and moral trust as the three dimensions that are unique and connected. It has a rich qualitative background, which gives it a good context but the sample is small limitation to generalizability. However, it explicitly fills in on vacuum caused by more general studies of influencers. Durau et al. (2022) focus on how fitness influencers can affect the intentions of users about increasing their physical activity rather than on this specific topic and instead on gender differences and motivational processes. The research shows that the mediating variable between influencer exposure and behavioural intention is also trust. Ecological validity is enhanced by its emphasis on real health behavior.

Nonetheless, a cause-effect statement is constrained by depending on self-reported intentions and not longitudinal behavior. Leung et al. (2022) analyze the effectiveness of influencer marketing through the comparison of types of influencers and the characteristics of their audience. According to their findings, perceived credibility differs and depends on the influencer and auditor compatibility. Although the article is not fitness-specific, the results can

be applied in fitness markets, where it is essential to align lifestyle. One of the limitations is a cross-sectional design, which limits the knowledge about developing trust over time. Ki et al. (2022) investigate the effectiveness of influencers to motivate consumers to imitate behavioural role models, which they attribute to the credibility perception. The research paper is valuable in that it links psychological inspiration and trust-based mechanisms. In spite of the fact the research is not devoted to the fitness in particular, its applicability can be defined as high, because fitness influencers often comprise aspirational figures. The lack of risk factors, in turn, restricts it to health-sensitive environments.

Lee et al. (2022) examine the motivation to engage with influencers on Instagram and recognize credibility, authenticity, and relatability as the key reasons. A good analysis of the formation of trust and parasocial interaction is made in the study. Its platform specific focus increases relevance, but its concentration on adherence to behavior as opposed to the results of consumption undermines direct correlations with purchase or adoption intentions in the markets of fitness products. Lou et al. (2022) provide an overview of the influencer marketing phenomenon and focus on credibility and transparency as the key principles. Their synthesis of concepts incorporates the knowledge of persuasion and theories of trust to a great extent. Nonetheless, as a general survey, it is not empirically narrow and fails to separate fitness markets. The paper also has a good theoretical framework to specific domains analysis.

Ren et al. (2023) investigate the area of endorsement effectiveness in various types of influencers and prove that the perception of credibility varies depending on the influencer type. According to their results, micro-influencers can tend to create more trust. Although the research study is conducted across various industries, its findings are directly related to the fitness markets where the presence of micro-influencers is common. Poor consideration of health hazards is also a considerable gap. Leong et al. (2022) explore eWOM credibility as well as purchase intention with emphasis on the mediating variable of trust. Even though influencer marketing is not in the focus, the research educates knowledge about credibility in the process of peer-like communication. It is also relevant to the influencers in the field of fitness because of the closeness of the demarcating line between the influencers and the customers. Secondary applicability is constrained by the lack of measures of the influencers per se.

Jamil et al. (2022) investigate the domain of social media marketing efforts and the intention of customers pinpointing trust as a mediator. The research supports the core role of trust but considers the influencers in the context of a wider marketing mix. This restricts its explanatory capacity on the issue of credibility of the influencer, particularly in fitness context; personal credibility is an issue. Ahmed et al. (2021) reveal that the connection between social media marketing and the purchase intention is mediated by brand equity. A certain trust is an implicit force in this mechanism. Although the focus is not on the influencers, the study helps to understand how credibility perceptions are turned into

value. Its indirect consideration of influencers decreases relevance to fitness specific credibility processes.

According to Hanaysha (2022), brand trust in social media marketing engages in the process of purchasing. The empirical rigor of this study makes one have more confidence in the explanations that are based on trust. The fast-food setting, however, prevents inferring to fitness markets, where the decision risk and credibility evaluation are more intricate. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) are among the pioneering sources of information on the use of social media in marketing communication. Although their conceptualization of influence generated by users is dated, it is still applicable. The paper is not empirically tested yet, and it does not deal with influencer credibility directly, but it provides a prerequisite background of a contextual base upon which subsequent influencer preoccupation studies can take place.

Alalwan et al. (2017) discuss the literature on social media marketing and discover trust as a common factor of consumer response. The scope of the study is also a strength and weakness as it generalises various results without distinguishing the sectors. Fitness markets are not

captured directly. Dwivedi et al. (2021) indicate the use of credibility, ethics, and trust as the main aspects of the digital marketing sphere in the future research. Their work is future-oriented and points out the gaps that pertain to influencer marketing in the field of fitness. Nonetheless, it is still abstract and needs to be proven by facts in certain areas.

Kumar and Reinartz (2016) theorize the customer engagement as a route to a long-term value generation. Although it is not a factor associated with influencers, their model can be used to understand how reliable influencers can build long-term trust and interaction. There is no specificity on social media communicating, which restricts its direct use. Fisher (2015) speaks about the audience engagement and user-generated media, and she provides some information on the way the consumers perceive the content created by the influencers. The research aims to provide a sociological richness but fails to bring an operational definition of credibility or trust to the empirical setting of its research, which restricts the ability to explain fitness marketing situations.

Table 1 Comparative Analysis of Key Studies on Influencer Credibility and Consumer Trust

Study	Fitness Context	Credibility Dimensions Explicitly Modeled	Trust as Mediator	Influencer Type Differentiation	Behavioural Outcome Focus	Methodological Rigor
Kim & Kim (2021)	X	✓ (trustworthiness, expertise)	✓	X	Purchase intention	✓
Ao et al. (2023)	X	✓ (meta-aggregated)	✓	✓	Engagement, purchase	✓
Pan et al. (2025)	X	✓ (source credibility theory)	✓	✓	Behavioural intention	✓
Han & Balabanis (2023)	X	✓ (authenticity, expertise)	✓	✓	Attitude, intention	✓
Schultz (2025)	✓	✓ (epistemic, moral, relational trust)	✓	✓ (micro-influencers)	Trust, loyalty	✓
Durau et al. (2022)	✓	✓ (credibility, relatability)	✓	X	Physical activity intention	✓
Leung et al. (2022)	X	✓ (credibility perception)	X	✓	Persuasion effectiveness	✓
Ki et al. (2022)	X	✓ (authenticity, inspiration)	✓	X	Behavioural adoption	✓
Lee et al. (2022)	X	✓ (authenticity, expertise)	✓	X	Following intention	✓
Lou et al. (2022)	X	✓ (conceptual synthesis)	✓	✓	Conceptual outcomes	X

Ren et al. (2023)	X	✓ (endorser credibility)	✓	✓	Purchase intention	✓
Leong et al. (2022)	X	✓ (eWOM credibility)	✓	X	Purchase intention	✓
Jamil et al. (2022)	X	X	✓	X	Customer intention	✓
Ahmed et al. (2021)	X	X	✓	X	Purchase intention	✓
Hanaysha (2022)	X	X	✓	X	Purchase decision	✓
Kaplan & Haenlein (2010)	X	X	X	X	Conceptual	X
Alalwan et al. (2017)	X	✓ (review-level)	✓	X	Behavioural response	✓
Dwivedi et al. (2021)	X	✓ (future propositions)	X	✓	Research agenda	✓
Kumar & Reinartz (2016)	X	X	X	X	Engagement value	✓
Fisher (2015)	X	X	X	X	Audience behavior	X

The comparative analysis (*table 1*) proves that the credibility and trust of an influencer are known to be regularly identified as fundamental explanatory constructs, but the precise context of its implementation to fitness markets is underexplored. Fitness or health-related influencer situations are directly studied only in two studies Schultz (2025) and Durau et al. (2022), although the evidence that fitness consumption is based on an increased amount of personal risk and reliance on an authoritative statement is growing (Kim & Kim, 2021; Pan et al., 2025). In the vast majority of meta-analytical and empirical studies, fitness products are combined with general consumer products, which masks sector-specific consumer trust relationships and limits them in their theoretical accuracy (Ao et al., 2023; Han and Balabanis, 2023).

The second important lesson is that of conceptual fragmentation in operationalization of credibility. Whereas the current studies are becoming more fine-tuned with influence type and credibility dimensions (Ren et al., 2023; Leong et al., 2022), there is no consensus on standard constructs especially concerning the moral and epistemic trust as applied to fitness and health counseling (Schultz, 2025). Moreover, cross-sectional designs and intentional outcomes prevail limiting the knowledge on long-term trust building and the sustainability of behaviour (Durau et al., 2022; Dwivedi et al., 2021).

Taken together, the listed patterns indicate that integrative and platform-specific approaches to influencer credibility are necessary that are capable of systematically relating credibility dimensions of influencers to trust and behaviour change across virtual spaces.

3. Influencer Credibility and Consumer Trust Dynamics in Fitness Markets

This section provides a synthesis and critical integration of existing evidence to describe the process through which influencer credibility is a trust-generating process in the context of the fitness markets. Indeed, based on previous social media marketing and influencer studies, the discussion no longer dwells on descriptive results, but explains synthesizing essential mechanisms, contingencies of contexts, and even theoretical connective factors of relevance to fitness-consumption. Since the fitness and health products market is quite sensitive in ethics and has a sense of risk, the relationships of credibility and trust in this field are formed in a unique way compared to the consumer markets overall (Durau et al., 2022; Schultz, 2025).

3.1 Dimensions of Influencer Credibility in Fitness Contexts

The concept of influencer credibility has historically been structured as a theory of source credibility, with three dimensions in the context of expertise, trustworthiness,

and attractiveness (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Kim and Kim, 2021). More recent research however proposes a more sophisticated concept of credibility going beyond these classical dimensions is needed in the market of fitness. It is often assumed that fitness influencers can influence health behaviors, self-perception, and lifestyle decisions as they act as informal advisors, not just endorsers (Ki et al., 2022; Durau et al., 2022). The empirical evidence shows that expertise is especially notable in the context of fitness. Customers are increasingly sceptical about the content of being in the fitness and beauty sector, the consistency of their content, and the evidence and data disclosed by the individual being promoted (Ren et al., 2023).

This is in contrast to the case of hedonic product category where appeal or amusement can take center stage. The credibility, which is commonly defined by the terms of honesty, disclosure, and transparency, additionally preconditions the consumer acceptance of fitness-related messages (Kim and Kim, 2021; Lou et al., 2022). More up-to-date literature highlights authenticity and moral responsibility as the credibility dimensions. Schultz (2025) shows that viewers distinguish between epistemic trust (trust in accuracy of knowledge) and moral trust (trust that the person speaking to them acts in their best interest), as well. It is particularly true in the fitness markets, where false advertising or flaunt marketing can weaken trust and provoke its reaction. In that way, the credibility in fitness influencer marketing is multidimensional and moved to higher context levels.

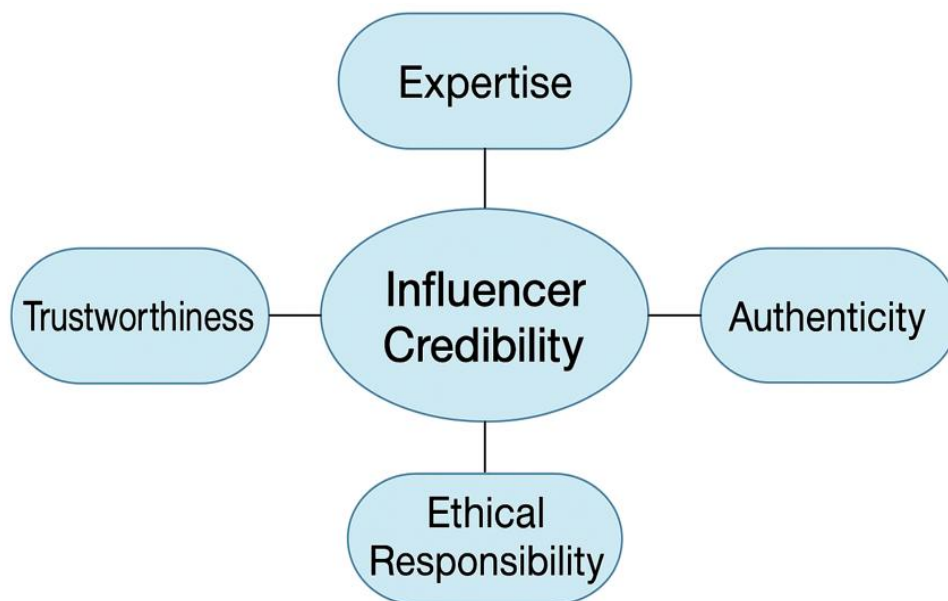


Figure 1 Conceptual Dimensions of Influencer Credibility in Fitness Markets

As shown in *Figure 1*, the process of credibility of influencers in fitness markets develops when the traditional source credibility dimensions interact with newer ethical and authenticity-related dimensions. The moral responsibility and apparent integrity become central in determining the credibility judgements, which supports the thesis that influencers of fitness are compared to more exalted normative standards (Schultz, 2025; Durau et al., 2022).

3.2 Trust Formation Mechanisms and Consumer Responses

Trust is the main mediating factor between influencer credibility and consumer reaction in the fitness market. The effectiveness of credible social media communication in increasing the level of trust, thus, affecting the level of engagement, intention, and behavior, is supported by sufficient literature (Hanaysha, 2022; Jamil et al., 2022). In influencer marketing, trust forms both as a cognitive evaluation and as a relationship, which builds when being exposed to the brand, similarity, and parasocial interaction

(Lee et al., 2022; Hudson et al., 2016). Trust has been shown to mediate the impact of idiosyncratic influencer characteristics and behavioural intentions have a major effect on platforms (Ao et al., 2023; Pan et al., 2025).

The mediation here is especially potent within the realm of the fitness industry because customers tend to use influencers to lessen uncertainty in making decisions related to health (Durau et al., 2022). Trust is, therefore, a risk minimizing as well as a motivating role. Though in the literature we find asymmetry in forming trust. Credibility has the capacity to build trust within a comparatively short period, whereas trust can easily be damaged within a short span when the influencers are seen to be inconsistent, too commercial, or misleading (Kim and Kim, 2021). This imbalance can be seen as the subtlety of the lack of trust in the relationships between fitness influencers and emphasizes the need to preserve credibility over a long-term period instead of trying to persuade within a short-term period.



Figure 2 Trust-Based Mediation Model in Fitness Influencer Marketing

Figure 2 conceptualizes trust as some of the core mediating pathways that transform the influencer credibility to consumer engagement and behavioural results. The model is based on the empirical evidence which indicated that the credibility factor cannot produce long-term responses without the development of trust, especially in the fitness markets where perceived risk increases the dependence on the trustworthy sources (Ao et al., 2023; Durau et al., 2022).

3.3 Contextual Moderators: Influencer Type, Platform, and Audience Involvement

The success of influencer credibility in creating trust depends on a number of contextual moderators. One of the most prevalent moderators is influencer type and especially the differentiation of the micro- and macro-influencers. It is always reported that micro-influencers often produce a superior perceived authenticity and trust, particularly, in the niche areas like fitness and wellness (Leung et al., 2022; Ren et al., 2023). Schultz (2025) additionally states that micro-fitness influencers will

foster relational trust more because of the feeling of intimacy and shared values related to lifestyle. Credibility or trust exists in response to platform affordances as well. Demos, tutorials, and live interaction can be performed with the help of visual and interactive platforms like Instagram and YouTube, and they may increase the level of perceived expertise and transparency (Lee et al., 2022; Ki et al., 2022).

On the other hand, the same affordances can also enhance persuasive appeal and cause ethical issues of the vulnerable groups in the fitness setting (Dwivedi et al., 2021). Another imperative moderator will be audience involvement. Given that highly involved fitness consumers, including those who actively work on the promotion of health-related outcomes, are more likely to apply systematic influence on the processing of the content of these influencers, whereby they examine credibility indicators (Kim and Kim, 2021). The less engaged users might have to do with what is on the surface, which makes them prone to attractiveness in a superficial manner as opposed to competence. This two-sided processing effect contributes to the discrepancies in results of various studies and supports the argument of segmentation-sensitive analysis.

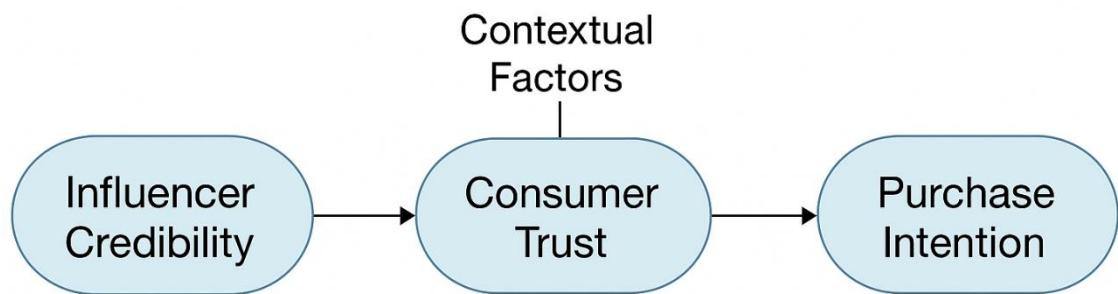


Figure 3 Moderating Factors in Influencer Credibility–Trust Relationships

In Figure 3, the contextual moderator conditions the credibility-trust relationship and its strength in the impact of fitness in influencer marketing. The number highlights that no universal influence impact is anticipatable but it depends on the dynamics of the influencer traits, platform structure, and the engagement rates (Leung et al., 2022; Dwivedi et al., 2021).

3.4 Integrative Synthesis and Theoretical Implications

By combining the evidence that was reviewed, one can conclude that the influence of credibility between influencers in the context of fitness markets functions in a layered and mutually effective form. Credibility dimensions and trust formation processes are in interaction with further moderated by contextual variables, including influencer type, and platform

affordances. General theories of influencer marketing are not enough to fully understand the ethical sensitivity and riskiness of fitness consumption, which is quite risky and sensitive (Pan et al., 2025; Schultz, 2025).

Among the most important theoretical implications is the necessity to redefine influencer credibility in fitness market as both dynamic and moralized phenomenon, as opposed to fixed set of attributes. Trust is created not only as an intermediary but as a quite weak relational product that has to be supported with the credibility all the time. Such a view can be considered in line with the demands of a more context-sensitive and ethically sound influencer marketing research (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Han and Balabanis, 2023). On the whole, this part shows that the influence credibility of the influencers and the consumer

confidence in the fitness markets are complex and multi-level processes. The identification of these dynamics is

crucial to developing theory as well as to the responsible marketing in health-sensitive online environments.

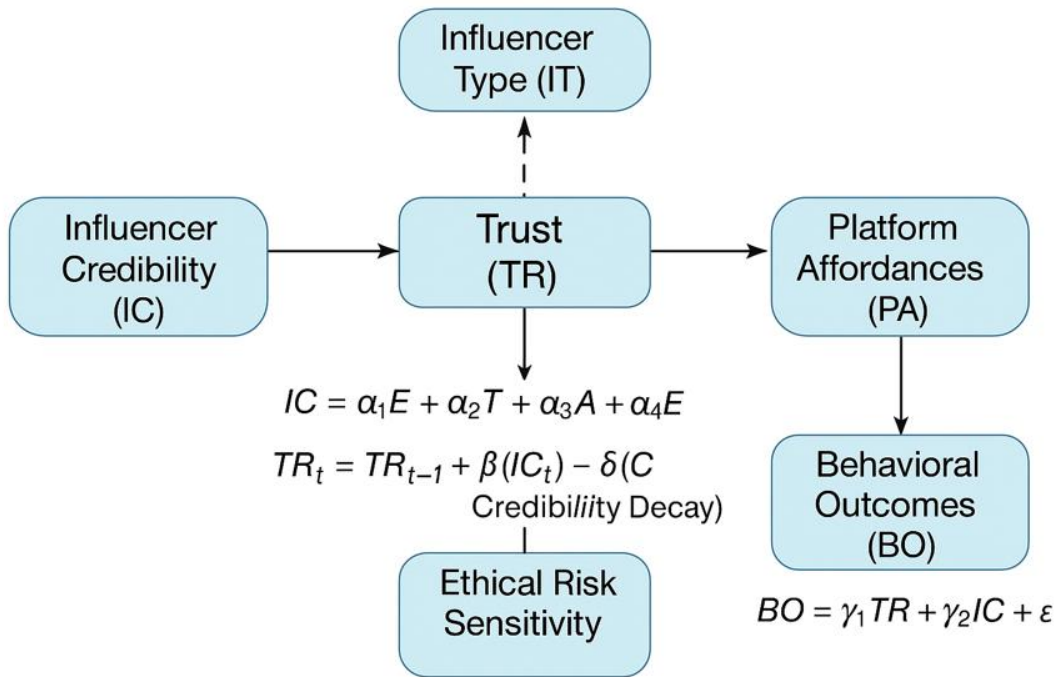


Figure 4 Conceptual Framework of Influencer Credibility–Trust Dynamics in Fitness Markets

Figure 4 shows a multi-tier explanation of how influencer credibility causes consumer trust and behavioural responses in fitness markets under ethical and situational conditions. Influencer credibility (IC) is one of the latent constructs at the input level and consists of four primary dimensions, which are expertise (E), trustworthiness (T), authenticity (A), and ethical responsibility (ER). These dimensions also collectively influence perceived credibility, but in an unequal way considering the fitness subdomain and perceived health risk:

$$IC = \alpha_1 E + \alpha_2 T + \alpha_3 A + \alpha_4 ER \quad (1)$$

Credibility affects trust (TR) at the process level via a dynamic accumulation process, or repeated exposure and strengthening of relations over time instead of a one-shot evaluative judgment:

$$TR_t = TR_{t-1} + \beta(IC_t) - \delta(Credibility \text{ Decay}) \quad (2)$$

Two contextual moderators operate on this pathway:

Influencer Type (IT) (e.g., micro vs. macro influencers) moderates the strength of the IC → TR relationship

Platform Affordances (PA) (visuality, interactivity, algorithmic exposure) scale credibility signals:

$$IC' = IC \times PA \quad (3)$$

At the outcome level, trust partially mediates the effect of credibility on fitness-related behavioural outcomes (BO), including adherence, loyalty, and sustained engagement:

$$BO = \gamma_1 TR + \gamma_2 IC + \varepsilon \quad (4)$$

Finally, Ethical Risk Sensitivity (ERS)—reflecting the perceived physical and psychological consequences of fitness advice—strengthens the role of ethical responsibility within credibility evaluation:

$$\frac{\partial TR}{\partial ER} \uparrow \text{ as } ERS \uparrow \quad (5)$$

This framework positions credibility and trust as interactive, evolving, and morally conditioned processes, rather than linear persuasion mechanisms.

Table 2 Mechanistic and Analytical Synthesis of Influencer Credibility–Trust Dynamics in Fitness Markets

Construct Cluster	Mechanism Description	Analytical / Mathematical Representation*	Moderating / Mediating Logic	Theoretical Implication
Influencer Credibility (IC)	Credibility emerges from expertise (E), trustworthiness (T), authenticity (A), and ethical responsibility (ER)	$IC = \alpha_1 E + \alpha_2 T + \alpha_3 A + \alpha_4 ER$	Weights (α_i) vary by fitness subdomain	Credibility must be modeled as a weighted, context-sensitive construct
Trust Formation (TR)	Trust accumulates through repeated exposure and perceived sincerity over time	$TR_t = TR_{t-1} + \beta(IC_t - \text{Decay}_t)$	Time (t) and consistency act as dynamic moderators	Trust is a cumulative relational process, not a static mediator
Influencer Type Effect (IT)	Micro and specialist influencers amplify credibility signals	$\partial TR / \partial IC$	$IT_{\text{micro}} > \partial TR / \partial IC$	IT_{macro}

Platform Affordance (PA)	Visuality, interactivity, and algorithmic exposure shape credibility perception	$IC' = IC \times PA$	PA moderates IC \rightarrow TR pathway	Platform characteristics must be embedded in credibility theory
Ethical Risk Sensitivity (ERS)	Health-related risk increases reliance on ethical credibility	$TR = f(IC, ERS)$ where $\partial TR/\partial ERS \uparrow$ as $ERS \uparrow$	ERS strengthens ethical credibility effects	Fitness markets require moralized credibility frameworks
Behavioral Outcomes (BO)	Trust influences adherence, loyalty, and sustained behavior	$BO = \gamma_1 TR + \gamma_2 IC + \epsilon$	Trust partially mediates credibility effects	Outcomes extend beyond purchase intention

Table 2 progresses the theory of influencer marketing by formalizing the interactions of credibility and trust in the context of fitness markets. Instead of considering credibility as a static property, the synthesis shows that influencer credibility can be considered to be a weighted composite phenomenon, with ethical responsibility becoming even more important in times of increased health risk (Pan et al., 2025; Schultz, 2025). This mechanistic framing explains the general failure of general influencer credibility models to account for trust relationships in fitness-related consumption. The analytical depictions further elaborate that trust is an outcome that is dynamic, time based, it is the result of credible reinforcement of trust and can wither whenever there is a lack of consistency or infallibility. Platform and influencer moderate are higher-order modulators that increase or decrease the credibility-trust relationship based on the situation (Han and Balabanis, 2023; Ao et al., 2023).

Notably, the mediation of behavioural outcomes is demonstrated as only partial when it comes to trust, which also means that credibility has direct and indirect influence on fitness-related behaviour, including beliefs adherence and lifestyle adoption (Durau et al., 2022). Together, this mechanistic synthesis promotes a paradigm shift in the field of influencer marketing research: the linear, intention-focused frameworks to the dynamic, ethically based frameworks that take into account the risky and relational essence of fitness consumption. Theoretical representation of mathematical logic also enhances the explanatory precision and offers a better precursor in sentencing future empirical modeling and hypothesis testing.

4. Research Limitations

Although there are increasingly academic studies on influencer credibility and consumer trust regarding fitness markets, there are a number of conceptual, methodological, and contextual limitations that limit the validity and extrapolation of current research. These limitations are to be critically reflected, and to place the reviewed evidence into perspective in order to shape future research which is more rigorous and has theoretical foundations. The identified limitations are synthesized based on the patterns identified in the literature reviewed as opposed to separate studies so as to present a systematic and integrative evaluation of the same (Pan et al., 2025; Schultz, 2025).

A significant drawback is related to the conceptual discrepancy in the definition of the credibility of influencers. Despite its popularity, source credibility

theory may be operationalised in a wide variety of studies with different dimensions in their design. Others are narrowly based on expertise and trustworthiness whereas others include attractiveness, authenticity, or transparency. This absence of conceptual homogeneity not only constrains comparability between studies but also undermines the building up of theory. In situations of health-related risk in the context of fitness where the moral responsibility is a primary factor, conventional models of credibility may seem too insensitive to ethical issues peculiar to the domain (Durau et al., 2022).

Consequently, the current structures can be deficient in comprehending the complexity of the credibility judgment by the consumer of fitness. The second weakness is that the study has methodological over-dependence on cross-sectional and self-reported data. The majority of the researches use survey-based designs and measure perceptions and intentions at a certain time. Although such methods are handy in determining the association, they obstruct causal inferences and cannot determine the dynamic development of trust in context of long-term influences between an influencer and a follower. This suggests that trustworthy fitness influencers can be influenced by the repeat exposure, content consistency, perceived sincerity, but longitudinal and experimental designs are rather rare. Moreover, self-report measures are subject to the social desirability bias especially in cases where health-related behaviors are being assessed (Schultz, 2025).

Third, platform and geographic concentration is proven in the literature which restricts external validity. Empirical studies concentrate on platforms that are mainly visual based like Instagram and YouTube and in many cases, are confined to western or East Asian societies. Fitness culture on the other hand is entrenched in the social-cultural beliefs about body image and health beliefs and lifestyle choices (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Han and Balabanis, 2023). The results based on platform-specific or region-specific samples may not be generalizable to new platforms or even to underrepresented regions where digital fitness engagement is taking a different turn. The other important limitation is that it did not differentiate influencer types and fitness subdomains (Lee et al., 2022; Ki et al., 2022).

The vast majority of studies fail to differentiate between the certified professionals, lifestyle fitness influencers and commercial brand ambassadors and bundle them in broad categories. The meaning confusion through this compaction of significant disparities in the judgment of credibility and trust. In a similar way, the concept of fitness has been generally viewed as a unified field in spite of high variance in the sub categories like strength

training, yoga, rehabilitation or dietary supplementation. This granularity is limiting to explain the power of the existing models (Ao et al., 2023; Pan et al., 2025). Lastly, there are underdeveloped ethical and regulatory aspects. The disclosure practices and transparency have been argued upon, but there are very few studies that investigate in a systematic manner the long-term consequences of misleading endorsement or

oversimplified fitness claims on the consumer well-being. This omission is somewhat of a gap bearing in mind the possible physical and psychological dangers of misinformation of the nature of fitness. Recent literature has a tendency to focus on marketing effectiveness more as compared to consumer protection confining the normative applicability (Dwivedi et al., 2021).

Table 3 Key Research Limitations in Existing Fitness Influencer Literature

Limitation Category	Description	Implication for Findings
Conceptual inconsistency	Varying definitions and dimensions of influencer credibility	Weak comparability and fragmented theory
Methodological constraints	Predominant use of cross-sectional, self-reported surveys	Limited causal inference and dynamic insight
Contextual concentration	Focus on specific platforms and regions	Reduced generalizability
Influencer aggregation	Limited differentiation of influencer types and fitness domains	Oversimplified conclusions
Ethical underrepresentation	Minimal focus on consumer harm and regulation	Incomplete assessment of societal impact

Table 3 summarises the main limitations found in the studies reviewed and illustrates the impact of these limitations on research results in a systematic manner. The main weaknesses in integration of the theories are the conceptual and methodological, and the limitations on the external scope of applicability of theories are contextual and ethical. These limitations as a whole indicate that the existing body of knowledge about influencer credibility and belief in fitness markets is also both partial and fragmented (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Han and Balabanis, 2023). Altogether, the current body of research is indeed informative in terms of the creation of the mechanisms of influencer-induced trust, still, its deficiency reveals the necessity of coherent conceptual frameworks, varied approaches, and ethically-based approaches. These limitations are paramount to confronting in order to take academic learning and responsible practice to the next level in the fitness influencer marketing ecosystems (Lee et al., 2022; Ki et al., 2022).

5. Future Research Directions

Based on the integrative synthesis and theoretical conception established in this review, a number of promising opportunities of future research become possible. These guidelines are important in developing theoretical accuracy, methodological purity and contextual relevance on the study of influencer credibility as well as consumer trust in the fitness market. It is these gaps that will empower the scholars to transcend generalized models of influencer marketing to explanations that are more ethical and empirical (Lee et al., 2022; Ki et al., 2022). The formation and validation of fitness-specific credibility scales means that it is a first on the list of next-generation research needs. Current scales on influencer credibility are mostly modified versions of conventional advertising and communication scenarios and might not be able to effectively represent the ethical and high-risk reality of consuming the fitness. Further research must use mixed-method methods, e.g., the qualitative interviewing coupled with the scale making

also, in order to determine the dimensions like morality responsibility, evidence-driven guidance, and long-term consistency. Replied scales/tests would greatly contribute to the clarity of construct and cross-study comparability.

Second, longitudinal and process-oriented research designs should be a priority of the researchers to reflect the continual development of trust. There is no way that trust in fitness influencers will be developed in a single instance, but it will be rather a punctual experience, which is manifested by repeated exposure, perceived sincerity, and sustained performance consistency. The longitudinal panel, diary, or time-series research would enable the scholars to investigate the accumulation of trust, decadence, and restoration after breaches of credibility. These methods would also make it possible to make more causal inferences as opposed to cross sectional designs that prevail in the current literature. Third, the scope of contextual extensions in terms of platforms, geography, and subdomains of fitness should be extended in the future. Emerging platforms that imply specific affordances like the short-form video or the live-streaming environment could potentially change the processes of credibility signaling and trust-formation. Also, cross-cultural and regulatory comparative research would offer a hint in the prevalence of social norms, health beliefs, and disclosure requirements in the prevalence of influencer efficacy. Theoretical granularity would be further improved upon by putting more emphasis on various fitness subdomains e.g., rehabilitation, mental wellness or nutritional supplementation. The other direction which is of great significance is the incorporation of ethical and regulatory perspective in models.

Though transparency and disclosure procedures are much talked about, limited research studies have deeply examined how compliance with regulations and ethical signaling affect trust in the long-term. Further studies may explore the impact of certification badges, professional qualifications or third-party certification resources on the perceptions of credibility and consumer protection in

fitness markets. Lastly, researchers are advised to consider sophisticated computational and analytical tools in order to simulate multifaceted credibility-trust relationships. Dynamic and moderated relationships postulated in recent theoretical frameworks could be tested using structural equation modeling, multilevel analysis, and agent-based simulations. This type of methodological innovation would align the research on influencer marketing with the overall trends in behavioural modeling and the studies of digital platform. Altogether, the preferences of future studies should be more integrative, dynamic and informed on the ethics to investigate the credibility of influencers within the markets of fitness. By eliminating conceptual, conceptual, and contextual restraints, researchers can help in the creation of a more cumulative and socially responsible literature that is more representative of the realities of health-sensitive digital consumption environments.

6. Conclusion

The review has critically reviewed the role of influencer credibility in influencing consumer trust in fitness markets, pointing out the weaknesses of using the generalized theories of influencer marketing in health-sensitive consumption situations. The review generated by the synthesis of recent empirical and conceptual literature proves that the credibility of influencers in the domains of fitness is not limited to traditional informational sources like expertise and trustworthiness; therefore, it incorporates aspects of authenticity and ethical accountability. Such dimensions constantly clash and propagate with each other, which makes the consumers trust the company or lose it as a result of constant exposure and apparent authenticity. The analysis also confirms that the role of trust is not only mediating but also a dynamic, relational outcome, which is moderated by the type of influencer, platform affordances, and the perceived risk in fitness. This dynamic view offers an opportunity to criticize the Motion-oriented models that are fixated on intentions and the significance of situational and moral factors when conceptualizing the influenza effectiveness. The proposed integrative framework and hypotheses may be used to create a systematic background on a developing empirical study and theorization in the future. This review contributes to the field of influencer marketing by reframing the concept of credibility as a moralized and context-specific construct in fitness markets. Understanding the nuance of credits and trust relations is critical to coming up with more valid theoretically frameworks and in steering well-intentioned marketing behaviors that place consumer welfare in the forefront within the digitally mediated fitness space.

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