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Research paper



Moderated Mediation of Credibility and Affinity on The Impact of Influencer Type and Number of Followers on Consumer Purchase Intention in live-Streaming

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Abstract

Against the backdrop of booming social media platforms, influencer marketing has become a pivotal channel for brands to engage consumers. However, the mechanism by which influencer characteristics in live-streaming e-commerce influence consumer purchase intent remains to be systematically explored. Building upon social influence theory and source credibility theory, this study employs two scenario experiments (Study 1 with 200 valid participants, Study 2 with 286 valid participants) to delve into the mechanisms through which influencer type (perfect vs. authentic), follower count (many vs. few), and influencer likability influence consumer purchase intent. Findings reveal: First, significant interaction effects between influencer type and follower count emerge for purchase intention. When influencers have large followings, idealized influencers more effectively boost consumers' purchase intentions; conversely, when follower counts are low, authentic influencers exert stronger positive effects on purchase intention. Moreover, influencer-follower closeness intensifies this moderating role of follower count. Second, trust mediates the influence of influencer type and follower count on purchase intention, with different combinations selectively activating distinct trust dimensions. Third, consumers' perceived influencer affinity moderates these relationships, further shaping the pathways to purchase intention formation. This study not only enriches theoretical understanding of influencer marketing in live-streaming e-commerce but also extends the application boundaries of social influence theory and source credibility theory. It provides practical guidance for brands to optimize influencer collaboration strategies and for influencers to enhance content marketing effectiveness. Additionally, it identifies research limitations, such as the exclusion of cultural context, and points the way for future studies.

Keywords: *Consumer Behavior; Live Streaming E-Commerce; Influencer Type; Number of Followers; Trsut; Influencer Affinity; Purchase Intention.*

1. Introduction

With the explosive growth of social media platforms, influencer marketing has emerged as a pivotal channel for contemporary brands to communicate with consumers, leveraging influencers' reach and fan relationships to enhance brand communication effectiveness and consumer engagement (Leung et al., 2022). Endowed with a loyal fan base on social platforms, influencers can enhance content credibility and persuasiveness by showcasing product usage processes and sharing personal experiences, thereby boosting audiences trust and purchase intentions (Pan et al., 2025). However, different influencer types exert distinct impacts on consumers' purchase intentions. In terms of presentation styles, two types of influencers are commonly observed: dramaturgical influencers, who self-present in ways conforming to social expectations or audience preferences (Gran, 2025; Jin et al., 2022), and authentic influencers, often regarded as "friend-like" opinion leaders who provide genuine advice and life experiences, gaining popularity among younger generations (Singer et al., 2023). Additionally, influencers can be categorized by follower count into macro-influencers (with large fan bases) and micro-influencers (with small fan bases), and different follower scales yield divergent effects on influence and marketing outcomes (Kapoor, 2023). While these classifications are critical for marketing practice, systematic research on how they synergistically shape consumers' trust and subsequent purchase intentions remains scarce.

Moreover, prior studies indicate that the affinity between influencers and followers may amplify or weaken consumers' trust and purchase willingness. For example, in high-affinity contexts, influencers can secure greater trust and positive brand attitudes even when displaying highly idealized or polished images (Rajput & Gandhi, 2024). Conversely, low affinity may constrain trust and conversion effects even for influencers with superior images (Wang & Chan-Olmsted, 2024). To date, however, no research has integrated influencer type, trust, and affinity into a comprehensive model of consumer responses. Abidin et al., (2025) recommended that authorities and policymakers develop cost-effective immersive activities and intervention programs for residents and prospective virtual tourists to select and finance.

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By answering these questions, our study not only extends Social Influence Theory to the domain of influencer marketing but also provides actionable guidance for firms to optimize influencer collaborations, maximizing consumer engagement and conversion by leveraging influencer type and affinity dynamics.
Although purchase intention is typically viewed as a psychological outcome, it also serves as a key leading indicator of economic performance in live-streaming commerce context, including conversion efficiency and realized demand. Accordingly, influencer characteristics shape not only consumer attitudes but also how effectively attention and trust are translated into economically meaningful outcomes.

2. Theoretical Background and Hypothesis Development

2.1. Social influence theory

Grounding our work in Social Influence Theory (Moussaïd et al., 2013), which posits that social influence operates through both informational cues and relational bonds, we construct and test a moderated mediation model. In this model: (1) influencer types (dramaturgical vs. authentic; macro vs. micro) influence purchase intention indirectly via consumers' trust in the influencer; and (2) influencer-follower affinity moderates this mediating process. Specifically, we address three core research questions: How do content presentation styles and follower scales (as dual dimensions of influencer type) jointly affect consumers' trust and purchase intention? What mediating role does trust play between influencer type and purchase intention? Under what conditions does influencer affinity strengthen or weaken the aforementioned mediating effects?

2.2. Source credibility theory

Rooted in (Hovland & Weiss, 1951), source-credibility research consistently shows that perceived expertise and benevolence shape audience adoption (Mang et al., 2024; Ohanian, 1990).
The Dramaturgical Theory offers a unique perspective for understanding "perfect-type" (or "persona-based") influencers(Naegele & Goffman, 1956). Much like actors on a stage, "perfect-type" influencers manage impressions to present a specific self-image to their "audience" (Han, 2023). This framework can also be applied to explain online self-presentation and interaction on social media (Merunková & Šlerka, 2019). For example, influencers make use of the concepts of "front stage" and "back stage," strategically employing various "props" to manage their impressions on social media (Krisnawati, 2020; Soto-Vásquez & Jimenez, 2022).
In the era of social media, a form of influencer distinct from the traditional "persona-based" performance has gradually emerged, namely, the authentic-type influencer. These influencers are characterized by their lack of deliberate image construction or excessive performance; instead, they tend to casually reveal their genuine personality, attitudes, and everyday lives (Nistor et al., 2025). This "de-persona" trend, to some extent, challenges Goffman's dramaturgical theory, particularly its core notion of "front-stage" performance and impression management in social interactions (Holmberg et al., 2018; Soto-Vásquez & Jimenez, 2022). For followers, such authenticity conveys that influencers' content is heartfelt and aligned with their own values (Ardley et al., 2022). This authenticity is crucial for influencers' persuasive power (Zniva et al., 2023) and for shaping consumers' purchase intentions (Andonopoulos et al., 2023; Ünalmış et al., 2024).
Source credibility is conceptualised along two experiential dimensions: passive credibility. Audiences' one-shot quality inferences drawn from visible cues such as follower numbers or stylistic polish (Kelman, 1961; Mang et al., 2024). Conversely, active credibility, forged through repeated exposure and dialogic interaction with the influencer(Lou & Yuan, 2019). The present study manipulates both routes via scripted high/low-follower perfect/authentic personas.
Authenticity is neither necessary nor sufficient for persuasive success (Andonopoulos et al., 2023). Therefore, this study applies Source Credibility Theory to explain how different types of influencers affect consumers' purchase intentions.

2.3. The interaction of influencer type and follower count (high vs. low)

In the context of live-streaming e-commerce, consumers' purchase decisions are often influenced by the hosting influencers before they commit to buying. Based on content presentation style, these influencers can generally be categorized into "perfect-type" and "authentic-type" (Y. Chen et al., 2024; Rahman, 2022). Perfect-type influencers typically rely on carefully curated visuals and narratives to construct an idealized image with high commercial distance. In contrast, authentic-type influencers tend to display natural appearances, everyday settings, and conversational language, thereby emphasizing relatability and low commercial distance to foster higher perceived sincerity (Ardley et al., 2022). As a result, influencer type significantly shapes audiences' perceived credibility and emotional connection (Zniva et al., 2023). Unfortunately, limited research has directly examined how influencer types affect consumer decision-making pathways in live-streaming sales contexts (Fletcher & Gbadamosi, 2024; Long et al., 2024).
Authentic influencers evoke immediate trust, whereas perfect influencers trigger ideal-self aspirations (Lyu, 2021). A possible explanation lies in the social presence inherent to live-streaming environments, which plays a crucial role in shaping consumer decisions (Li & Hua, 2022; Li et al., 2025). However, this effect may vary depending on the influencer's follower base. For example, influencers with fewer followers may be perceived as more approachable and authentic.
Whereas (Gupta & Mahajan, 2020) contend that micro-influencers' authenticity compensates for their weak social-proof cue, (Valsesia et al., 2020) show that refusing to amass followers can itself become a credibility signal, leaving open whether the 'fewer is better' argument holds once follower counts drop below the visibility threshold.
Follower count represents a visible social cue on digital platforms, referring to the absolute number of followers that live-streaming influencers accumulate on a given social media platform (Argyris et al., 2020; Wies et al., 2023). As an explicit numerical marker (Das et al., 2021), follower count acts as instant social proof (Abdul Talib & Mat Saat, 2017).
However, high-follower streams often sell out without discounts, whereas low-follower hosts rely on price incentives (He & Jin, 2024). Although prior research has examined the impact of follower count on live-stream sales (Wies et al., 2023), systematic evidence on the influencer-type * follower-count interaction remains scarce.
As already defined, follower count serves as a salient social-proof cue. Micro-influencers' authenticity offsets their lack of social proof (Gupta & Mahajan, 2020). Hence, follower count moderates the persuasiveness of influencer type.
Accordingly, this study proposes the following hypotheses.
H1. There is an interaction effect between influencer type and follower count on consumers' purchase intentions in live-streaming commerce.

Specifically: when influencers have a low follower count, authentic-type influencers are more effective in significantly enhancing consumers' purchase intentions; whereas when influencers have a high follower count, perfect-type influencers are more effective in significantly enhancing consumers' purchase intentions.

2.4. The mediating role of credibility

In the context of social media marketing, source credibility is regarded as a core psychological mechanism influencing consumers' purchase intentions(Ao et al., 2023; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Credibility generally consists of two dimensions: competence credibility (perceptions of expertise) and benevolence credibility (perceptions of sincerity and altruistic motives) (Hocevar et al., 2017; Lou & Kim, 2019). When confronted with influencer recommendations, consumers integrate cues from influencer type and follower count to infer these two forms of credibility, which in turn determine whether they adopt the recommendation and proceed to purchase (Liu & Zheng, 2024).
Authentic influencers maximize benevolence credibility under moderate followers, whereas perfect influencers need large followers to offset benevolence deficits (Moon & Yoo, 2022).
Although (Moon & Yoo, 2022) argue authenticity primarily boosts benevolence-credibility, (Peng, 2023) demonstrated that polished personas elevate competence-credibility; which dimension drives purchase intentions in high- versus low-follower regimes remains disputed. Perfect-type influencers, by contrast, convey professional and fashion authority through their polished and idealized self-presentation, which naturally strengthens competence credibility (Peng, 2023). Yet, an excessively high follower count may amplify perceptions of psychological distance and reduce benevolence credibility (Conde & Casais, 2023; Wies et al., 2023). On the other hand, a very low follower count contradicts their positioning as 'mainstream style benchmarks,' thereby weakening competence credibility (Veirman et al., 2017). Only when perfect-type influencers possess a large follower base can the broad audience serve as a professional endorsement (Valsesia et al., 2020), while the effect of social consensus helps to offset potential deficits in benevolence credibility.
Accordingly, this study proposes the following hypothesis.
H2. Credibility mediates the interaction effect of influencer type and follower count on consumers' purchase intentions.

2.5. The moderating role of influencer affinity

Parasocial interaction (PSI) theory describes a one-sided emotional connection or 'quasi-intimate' relationship formed between audiences and influencers (Ahmed et al., 2024; Horton & Richard Wohl, 1956). This one-sided sense of connection fosters feelings of closeness and identification with influencers (Conde & Casais, 2023). Influencer affinity is precisely the outcome of such parasocial interaction. Authentic (vs. ideal-type) influencers leverage affinity to amplify benevolence (vs. competence) effects (Rahayu et al., 2024).
In contrast, while ideal-type influencers primarily rely on their idealized image and professional authority to affect consumers, their impact on purchase intentions becomes more pronounced when they succeed in establishing strong emotional connections with the audience. That is, under conditions of high affinity, product recommendations from ideal-type influencers are more likely to translate into actual purchase behavior (N. Chen & Yang, 2023).
Micro-influencers' higher affinity buffers against external-motive attributions (Ren et al., 2023). Rising follower size amplifies external-motive attributions, which high affinity can buffer (Wies et al., 2023).
In short, the field has yet to settle when authenticity begins to outweigh social proof as follower counts drop, whether benevolence or competence credibility dominates at different influencer tiers, and how far affinity can continue to neutralize commercial suspicion once follower scale keeps climbing-gaps our simultaneous manipulation of influencer type, follower count and affinity is designed to bridge.
Accordingly, this study proposes the following hypothesis:
H3. Influencer affinity moderates the interaction between influencer type and follower count on consumers' purchase intentions.
Building on the above hypotheses, this study develops the following theoretical model (Fig. 1).

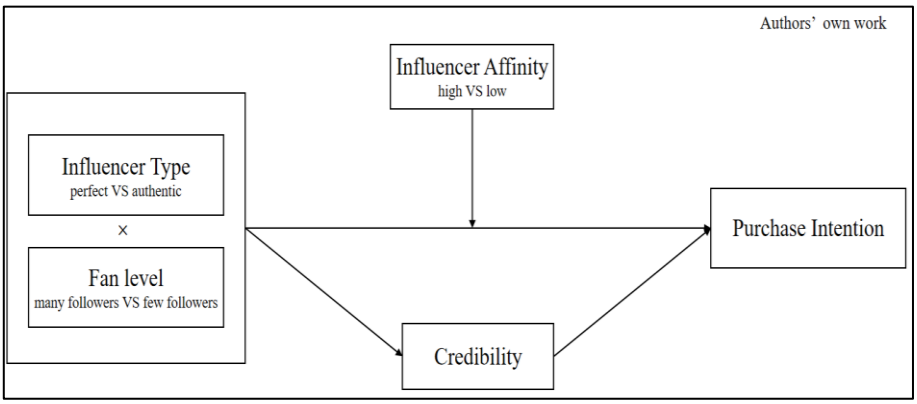


Fig. 1: Theoretical Model.

3. Pre-Test

Given the diversity of influencer domains, this study initially selected two popular product categories and their corresponding influencers for preliminary experiments, in order to facilitate subsequent experimental designs. First, This study conducted a focus group interview to explore the types of products participants commonly purchase through live-streaming in their daily lives. The interview was relatively small in scale and recruited participants via the Sojump platform's sampling service. A total of 12 participants, covering different age groups, occupations, and monthly income levels, were invited to ensure representativeness. Through a 60-minute online discussion, This study identified the five most frequently mentioned product categories: beauty and skincare, apparel and lingerie, food and beverages, home and lifestyle, and personal care and cleaning.
Next, this study incorporated these five categories and their representative macro-influencers into a survey. Respondents were asked to rank the categories based on their purchase likelihood in daily life, assigning values from 1 (least likely) to 5 (most likely). In the pilot

survey, 100 questionnaires were distributed, with 95 valid responses collected. A one-way ANOVA was conducted, and the results revealed significant differences in consumer preferences across categories ($M_{\text{food \& beverages}} = 4.168 > M_{\text{beauty \& skincare}} = 3.811 > M_{\text{footwear \& bags}} = 3.042 > M_{\text{smart home}} = 2.758 > M_{\text{apparel \& lingerie}} = 2.758$, $p < 0.001$).

Accordingly, Study 1 focused on food and beverage influencers as the primary experimental stimulus, while Study 2 targeted influencers in the beauty and skincare category. Specifically, in the formal experiments, the actual names of influencers were concealed and replaced with fictitious pseudonyms. Together with experimental instructions and perceptual measurement scales, this approach controlled for potential differences in familiarity and personal preference, thereby minimizing biases caused by celebrity effects and ensuring that the results reflected only the core experimental factors rather than pre-existing perceptions.

3.1. Study 1

3.1.1. Research design

Study 1 aimed to test Hypotheses 1 and 2. To examine in greater detail how different influencer characteristics shape consumer behavior, this study adopted a 2 (influencer persona type: idealized vs. authentic) × 2 (follower size: large vs. small) between-subjects design. At the beginning of the questionnaire, participants were provided with a priming scenario to immerse them in a realistic social media live-streaming commerce context. The instruction read: "Please imagine the following situation: you are browsing social media and come across an influencer who is promoting a product via live-streaming (see Appendix A). Based on your genuine perceptions of this influencer and their product recommendation, please complete the questionnaire." For participants assigned to the idealized influencer condition, the persona description stated: "This influencer has a polished appearance, produces high-quality content, and presents a lifestyle that approximates an ideal state." For those in the authentic influencer condition, the description read: "This influencer has a natural appearance, shares everyday life in a down-to-earth manner, and occasionally reveals small imperfections in daily routines." Regarding follower size, the large-follower condition described the influencer as: "This influencer has millions of followers on social media." In the small-follower condition, the description was: "This influencer has several thousand followers on social media."

This study operationalized the core variables involved. First, drawing on the work of Claeys et al. (2024), influencer type was assessed by having participants view situational materials, including influencer images, videos, and persona descriptions, and respond to the question, "Which type do you think this influencer belongs to?" The influencer persona type was measured on a 7-point scale (1 = very authentic, 7 = very perfect). Second, following Wies et al. (2023), the influencer's follower count was evaluated by asking, "Which category do you think this influencer's follower count falls into?" and measured on a 7-point scale (1 = very few, 7 = very many).

This study controlled for potential confounding variables. First, content comprehensibility was measured by asking, "How easy do you think it is to understand the content posted by this influencer?" using a 7-point scale (1 = very difficult to understand, 7 = very easy to understand). Second, the realism of the scenario was assessed by asking, "How likely do you think the scenario presented in the influencer's live stream could occur in real life?" also on a 7-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). In addition, At the same time, the measurements for trust and purchase intention are provided in Appendix C.

3.1.2. Research procedure and participants

The required sample size for Study 1 was calculated using G*Power software, with the following parameters: effect size = 0.25, α error probability = 0.05, power (1–β error probability) = 0.8, numerator degrees of freedom = 5, and number of groups = 4. This yielded a minimum required sample size of 180. The study recruited participants through Sojump's sampling service, randomly inviting individuals of different genders, ages, and monthly incomes to participate. A total of 220 participants were invited (55 per group). To encourage careful completion of the survey, a cash reward of 10 RMB was provided. After excluding questionnaires that failed attention checks or exhibited uniform response patterns, Study 1 retained 200 valid responses, resulting in a 90.9% validity rate. The sample distribution was as follows: 55.80% female and 44.20% male; mean age = 28.26 years. Monthly income distribution: 15.46% earned below 2,000 RMB, 27.63% earned 2,001–5,000 RMB, 35.65% earned 5,001–10,000 RMB, and 21.26% earned above 10,000 RMB.

3.1.3. Results and analysis

First, tests were conducted on influencer type and perceived follower count. Results indicated a significant difference in influencer type ($M_{\text{perfect}} = 6.15$, $SD_{\text{perfect}} = 0.685$; $M_{\text{authentic}} = 1.5$, $SD_{\text{authentic}} = 0.504$; $p < 0.001$). Similarly, perceived follower count also differed significantly ($M_{\text{many followers}} = 6.47$, $SD_{\text{many followers}} = 0.503$; $M_{\text{few followers}} = 1.5$, $SD_{\text{few followers}} = 0.504$; $p < 0.001$).

Second, a control check was conducted for the potential confounding variables. The results showed that the comprehensibility of the stimulus was high, with no significant difference ($M_{\text{perfect}} = 5.98$, $SD_{\text{perfect}} = 0.701$; $M_{\text{authentic}} = 6.03$, $SD_{\text{authentic}} = 0.802$; $p > 0.05$). Likewise, the realism of the scenario was also high and did not differ significantly between conditions ($M_{\text{perfect}} = 4.53$, $SD_{\text{perfect}} = 0.503$; $M_{\text{authentic}} = 4.50$, $SD_{\text{authentic}} = 0.504$; $p > 0.05$). These findings indicate that the control of confounding variables was successful.

Third, the main effects were tested. Two-way ANOVA results indicated a significant interaction between influencer type and perceived follower count on participants' purchase intentions ($F = 250.753$, $p < 0.001$). Subsequent simple effects analysis (Fig. 2) showed that when the influencer had many followers, perfect-type influencers were more effective than authentic-type influencers in stimulating consumer purchase intentions ($M_{\text{perfect}} = 5.860$, $SD_{\text{perfect}} = 0.379$; $M_{\text{authentic}} = 5.097$, $SD_{\text{authentic}} = 0.396$; $p < 0.001$). Conversely, when the influencer had few followers, authentic-type influencers elicited higher consumer purchase intentions ($M_{\text{authentic}} = 6.366$, $SD_{\text{authentic}} = 0.440$; $M_{\text{perfect}} = 5.275$, $SD_{\text{perfect}} = 0.446$; $p < 0.001$). Therefore, Hypothesis 1 is supported.

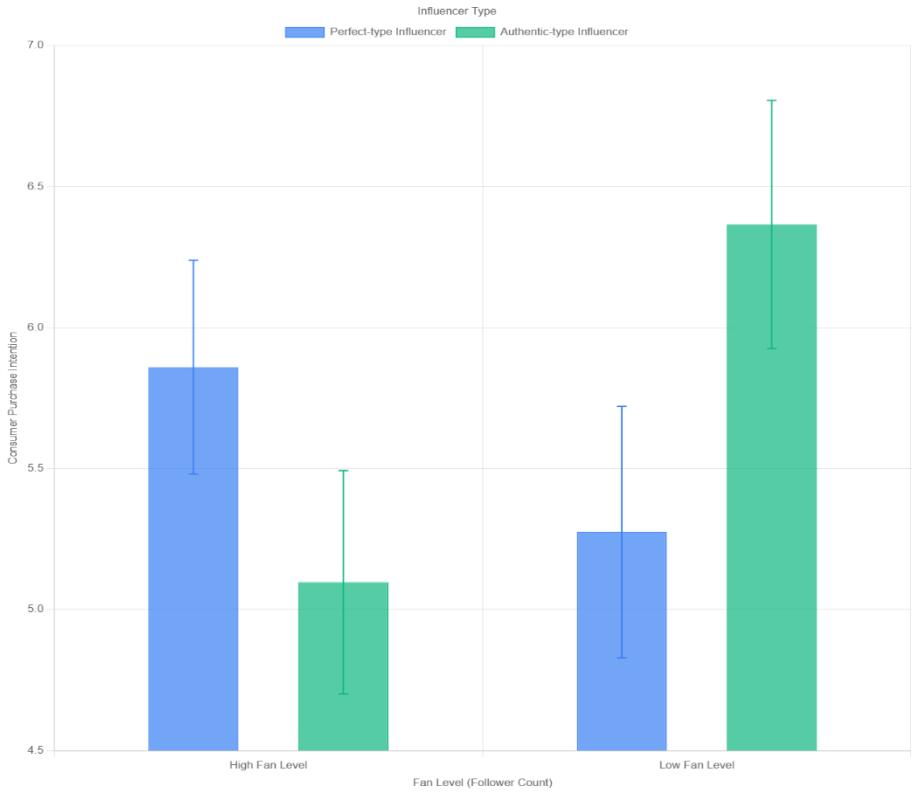


Fig. 2: The Impact of Influencer Type and Count of Followers on Consumer Purchase Intention.

Finally, a mediation analysis was conducted. Initial two-way ANOVA results showed a significant interaction between influencer type and perceived follower count on participants' perceived trust ($F = 301.258$, $p < 0.001$). Subsequent simple effects analysis indicated that when the influencer had many followers, perfect-type influencers increased participants' perceived trust more than authentic-type influencers ($M_{perfect} = 3.800$, $SD_{perfect} = 0.730$; $M_{authentic} = 3.485$, $SD_{authentic} = 0.808$; $p < 0.001$). Conversely, when the influencer had few followers, authentic-type influencers significantly enhanced perceived trust ($M_{authentic} = 5.998$, $SD_{authentic} = 0.518$; $M_{perfect} = 3.140$, $SD_{perfect} = 0.489$; $p < 0.001$). Finally, the mediation effect of perceived trust on consumer purchase intention was tested using the PROCESS macro (Model 4) in SPSS 27.0 with bootstrapping (perfect-type influencer = 0, authentic-type influencer = 1; many followers = 0, few followers = 1). Results indicated that perceived trust had a significant positive effect on consumer purchase intention ($b = 0.3624$, $p < 0.001$). Moreover, the mediating effect of perceived trust was significant across different influencer types and follower counts (95% CI = 0.1085~0.6290, excluding 0). Thus, H2 was supported.

Although Study 1 provided preliminary tests and supported certain hypotheses, it primarily focused on external factors related to the influencer's attributes and did not fully incorporate consumer-level internal trait variables. Therefore, Study 2 is designed to examine the role of consumers' perceived affinity toward influencers, a subjective trait perception, within this process.

3.2. Study2

3.2.1. Research design and process

Study 2 aims to test Hypothesis 3 (H3). Building on the framework of Study 1, Study 2 incorporates materials related to consumers' perceived affinity toward influencers, resulting in a 2 × 2 × 2 between-subjects design. Drawing on the work of Rajput and Gandhi (2024), four scale items were used to measure perceived affinity (see Appendix B), while other experimental materials remained consistent with those in Study 1.

This study used G*Power software to calculate the required sample size for Study 2, with the following parameters: effect size = 0.25, α error probability = 0.05, power (1–β error probability) = 0.8, numerator degrees of freedom = 7, and number of groups = 8, resulting in a minimum required sample size of 259. Participants were recruited through Sojump's sampling service, with 300 individuals randomly invited to participate, following the same procedure as in Study 1. Study 2 ultimately obtained 286 valid questionnaires, yielding a validity rate of 95.33%. The sample distribution was as follows: 56.68% female and 43.32% male; mean age = 31.08 years. Monthly income distribution: 22.13% earned below 2,000 RMB, 35.89% earned 2,001–5,000 RMB, 28.61% earned 5,001–10,000 RMB, and 13.37% earned above 10,000 RMB.

3.2.2. Results and analysis

First, manipulation checks were conducted for influencer type, perceived follower count, and consumers' perceived affinity toward the influencer. Results indicated significant differences in participants' perceptions of influencer type ($M_{perfect} = 6.38$, $SD_{perfect} = 0.613$; $M_{authentic} = 1.5$, $SD_{authentic} = 0.504$; $p < 0.001$) and perceived follower count ($M_{many\ followers} = 6.5$, $SD_{many\ followers} = 0.504$; $M_{few\ followers} = 1.62$, $SD_{few\ followers} = 0.585$; $p < 0.001$). Regarding perceived affinity, participants' perceived affinity toward the influencer was significantly different between conditions ($M_{high\ affinity} = 6.050$, $SD_{high\ affinity} = 0.350$; $M_{low\ affinity} = 2.196$, $SD_{low\ affinity} = 0.422$; $p < 0.001$).

Second, a control check for potential confounding variables was conducted. Results showed that the comprehensibility of the influencer materials was high, with no significant difference ($M_{perfect} = 5.83$, $SD_{perfect} = 0.827$; $M_{authentic} = 5.93$, $SD_{authentic} = 0.880$; $p > 0.05$). Likewise, the realism of the influencer material scenarios was also high and did not differ significantly ($M_{perfect} = 4.65$, $SD_{perfect} = 0.633$; $M_{authentic} = 4.63$, $SD_{authentic} = 0.581$; $p > 0.05$), indicating that the control of confounding variables was successful.

Third, a moderation analysis was conducted. Three-way ANOVA (interdependent = 1, independent = 0) revealed a significant interaction among influencer type, perceived follower count, and consumers' perceived affinity on participants' purchase intentions ($F = 251.538$, $p < 0.001$). Further simple effects analyses (Figures 3 and 4) indicated the following: When facing a high-follower influencer of the perfect type, participants with low perceived affinity were more likely to exhibit purchase intentions than those with high perceived affinity ($M_{low} = 2.968$, $SD_{low} = 0.461$; $M_{high} = 2.912$, $SD_{high} = 0.495$; $p < 0.001$). When facing an authentic influencer with many followers, participants with low perceived affinity were again more likely to show purchase intentions than those with high perceived affinity ($M_{low} = 3.509$, $SD_{low} = 0.404$; $M_{high} = 3.486$, $SD_{high} = 0.498$; $p < 0.001$). In the low-follower condition, for perfect-type influencers, participants with high perceived affinity were more likely to express purchase intentions than those with low perceived affinity ($M_{high} = 2.731$, $SD_{high} = 0.497$; $M_{low} = 2.338$, $SD_{low} = 0.475$; $p < 0.001$). For authentic-type influencers with few followers, participants with high perceived affinity were also more likely to exhibit purchase intentions than those with low perceived affinity ($M_{high} = 6.014$, $SD_{high} = 0.371$; $M_{low} = 4.690$, $SD_{low} = 0.402$; $p < 0.001$). These results support Hypothesis 3.

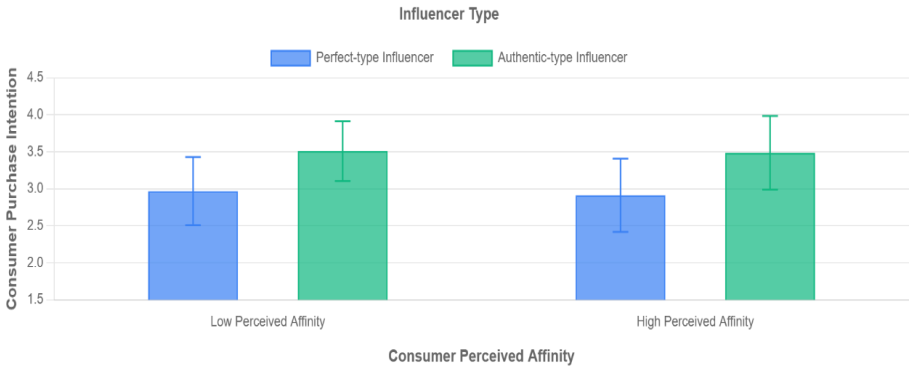


Fig. 3: The Moderating Effect of Consumer Perceived Affinity on the Relationship Between Influencers with High Follower Counts and Purchase Intention.



Fig. 4: The Moderating Effect of Consumer Perceived Affinity on the Relationship Between Influencers with Low Follower Counts and Purchase Intention.

4. Conclusion

This study, grounded in social influence theory and source credibility theory, employed a scenario-based experimental design to examine the complex mechanism through which influencer type (perfect vs authentic), follower count (many vs few), and influencer likability jointly affect consumers' purchase intentions in live-streaming commerce context. Until cross-national replication is available, the reported perfect-over-authentic advantage under high followers should be treated as culturally bounded rather than globally generalizable. The findings are as follows:

First, influencer type and follower count exert a significant interaction effect on consumers' purchase intentions in live-streaming commerce context. Specifically, when the influencer has a high follower count, idealized influencers more effectively enhance consumers' purchase intentions; in contrast, when the influencer has a low follower count, authentic influencers exert a stronger positive effect. This finding supports the "follower count signaling effect" proposed by Wies et al. (2023), which suggests that follower numbers, as a form of social proof, alter the relative weight consumers assign to influencer attributes. Unlike prior studies that primarily focused on single influencer characteristics, this research jointly examines influencer type and follower count, revealing their synergistic influence in the context of live-streaming commerce. In doing so, it extends the analytical framework of "dual-attribute interactions" in influencer marketing research and offers a fresh perspective for understanding consumer decision-making in high social-presence environments (M. Li & Hua, 2022).

Second, credibility serves as a mediating mechanism in the interaction between influencer type and follower count on purchase intention. Under low-follower conditions, authentic influencers promote purchase decisions by enhancing consumers' perceptions of benevolence credibility (e.g., sincerity, relatability). In contrast, under high-follower conditions, idealized influencers leverage competence credibility (e.g., professional image, social endorsement) to strengthen consumers' purchase intentions, and this mediating effect is empirically supported. This finding aligns with the core proposition of source credibility theory (Hovland & Weiss, 1951), namely that source

characteristics influence audience behavior through perceived credibility. At the same time, it contributes a novel insight that different combinations of influencer attributes selectively activate distinct dimensions of credibility. Unlike prior studies that often treated credibility as a unidimensional construct (Mang et al., 2024), this research clarifies how specific influencer attributes precisely align with particular facets of credibility, thereby providing a more nuanced theoretical basis for understanding the persuasion mechanisms of influencer endorsements.

Third, influencer affinity significantly moderates the above interaction. When engaging with high-follower influencers, consumers with low affinity are more likely to be influenced by both types of influencers to generate purchase intentions. In contrast, under low-follower conditions, consumers with high affinity exhibit stronger increases in purchase intention, with the moderating effect being particularly salient in the low-follower + authentic influencer combination. This finding echoes Rajput and Gandhi (2024) conclusion that "affinity amplifies the effect of emotional bonding," while also moving beyond prior research that focused solely on influencers' intrinsic attributes. Drawing on parasocial interaction theory (Horton & Richard Wohl, 1956), this study incorporates consumers' perceived traits into the analysis, revealing a dynamic matching mechanism between influencers' external attributes and consumers' internal perceptions. In doing so, it not only addresses the gap in existing research that has often overlooked consumers' subjective perceptions, but also provides a more comprehensive theoretical perspective on the multi-level synergies in influencer marketing.

5. Discussion

5.1 Theoretical contributions

First, this study extends the application and explanatory boundaries of social influence theory within the field of influencer marketing. While prior research has applied social influence theory to examine consumer behavior (Moussaïd et al., 2013), it has primarily focused on the independent effects of either influencer type or follower count, with limited attention to the interaction of these two core attributes in the context of live commerce. Live commerce is characterized by high social presence and real-time interactivity (Li & Hua, 2022), which fundamentally differentiates it from traditional social media settings: consumers not only derive passive social cues such as "social proof" from influencers' follower counts but also actively perceive the congruence between influencer type (perfect vs authentic) and follower count. This study demonstrates that follower count, as a salient social signal, moderates the influence of influencer type on consumers' purchase intention, amplifying the effect of idealized influencers under many-follower conditions and strengthening the impact of authentic influencers under few-follower conditions. By integrating these two attributes and exploring their synergistic mechanism in shaping purchase intention, this study advances the theoretical depth and contextual applicability of social influence theory within live commerce.

Second, this study enriches the theoretical framework of source credibility theory by refining the activation mechanism of its dimensions. Prior research grounded in source credibility theory has largely treated credibility as a holistic construct to explain its impact on consumer behavior (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Mang et al., 2024), while paying limited attention to how contextual factors trigger specific dimensions of credibility. This study reveals that the interaction between influencer type and follower count differentially activates the two dimensions of credibility: idealized influencers with large follower counts primarily enhance consumers' competence credibility through their professionalized image and social endorsement, whereas authentic influencers with small follower counts strengthen benevolence credibility through perceived sincerity and a "neighbor-like" closeness. This finding clarifies the matching rules between influencer attributes and credibility dimensions, supplements the theoretical understanding of how external source attributes finely shape credibility, and thereby advances the research framework of source credibility theory.

Finally, this study introduces influencer affinity as an individual-level perceptual variable, thereby broadening the theoretical perspective on factors influencing consumer purchase intentions in influencer marketing. Previous research on influencer-driven purchase intentions has largely focused on external factors such as influencer attributes and platform characteristics (Kapoor, 2023; Wies et al., 2023), while paying insufficient attention to the moderating role of consumers' internal perceptions. Drawing on parasocial interaction theory (Horton & Richard Wohl, 1956), this study incorporates influencer affinity, a core outcome of parasocial relationships, and demonstrates its moderating effect on the interaction between influencer type, follower count, and purchase intentions: high affinity amplifies the positive effect of authentic influencers with small follower counts on purchase intentions, whereas under conditions of low affinity, consumers are more easily influenced by idealized influencers with large follower counts. This research not only fills the gap in existing studies that have overlooked the dynamic matching mechanism between external attributes and internal perceptions but also enriches theoretical understanding of how multi-level factors involving both influencers and consumers jointly shape purchase intentions in influencer marketing.

5.2. Managerial implications

First, brands should treat influencers as differentiated inputs. High-follower perfect types lower market-education costs via mainstream legitimacy, whereas low-follower authentic types raise conversion density by reducing search costs. Allocate budgets to the glamour-authenticity mix that matches the target audience's trust-preference structure to maximise penetration per marketing dollar.

Second, an influencer' persona is a discountable signal asset. High-follower stars must preserve their mainstream-authority gleam; low-follower voices must protect their everyday proximity. Over-shifting styles triggers trust depreciation, so maintain a follower-aligned signal steady state to safeguard long-run credibility.

Finally, perceived affinity is a binding constraint, not an emotional extra. High affinity lowers price sensitivity; low affinity raises scepticism. Screen ex-ante: deploy authentic micro voices where affinity is already high to compress trust paths, and perfect macro voices where affinity is low to cover trust deficits with consensus signals.

Because all respondents were embedded in mainland-Chinese collectivist, super-app ecosystem, the reported effects should be treated as culturally contingent and await replication in individualistic or low power-distance markets.

5.3. Limitations and future research directions

Although this study used real influencers with verifiable reputations and historical sales data, the stimuli were still scenario-based: participants viewed a single, edited excerpt and static screenshots under controlled conditions rather than experiencing the influencers' natural, algorithm-driven live streams. Consequently, the observed effects capture instantaneous responses to de-contextualized cues and may not fully reflect the accumulated trust, repeated parasocial interactions, gift animations, bullet-screen dynamics, or past endorsement histories

that shape viewer behavior in ecological settings. Future work should therefore replicate the hypothesised patterns in real-time broadcast environments to consolidate external validity.

First, this study did not incorporate the influence of cultural background and consumers' individual cultural orientations. Prior research suggests that cultural differences between the East and the West significantly shape consumers' perceptions of "authenticity" and "social proof" (Klucarova & He, 2023). For instance, consumers in collectivist cultures may rely more heavily on follower size as a social signal, whereas those in individualist cultures may place greater emphasis on the personalized expression of influencer personas. However, this study did not differentiate samples by cultural background, which may limit the cross-cultural generalizability of the findings. Future research could introduce cultural dimension variables to compare differences in the "influencer type–follower size" interaction across cultural contexts, or further explore how self-construal interacts with likability to shape purchase decisions, thereby enhancing the universality of this research.

Second, this study employed standardized scenario materials without accounting for the potential influence of real influencers' pre-existing reputations and brand associations. In practice, consumers' perceptions of real influencers are influenced by their existing cognitive schemas, such as their past brand collaborations, their long-established image, and related media coverage (Audrezet et al., 2020). While the present study controlled for celebrity effects by concealing real influencer information, it also overlooked the trust foundation built through long-term 'real influencer-consumer' interactions, which may have affected the results. Future research could incorporate real influencers from different domains as experimental stimuli, combining their actual fan demographics and historical content data to examine how pre-existing reputation interacts with the 'type-follower size' effect, thereby enhancing the practical relevance of the findings in real marketing contexts.

Third, the sample is monocultural: every respondent lived and consumed within mainland-Chinese collectivist, super-app ecosystem. This constrains external validity because cultural value orientations (collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance) are known to moderate the weight consumers assign to social-proof versus authenticity cues. Future studies should embed the same experimental paradigm in Western, South-Asian, or Latin-American samples to test whether the type × follower interaction survives cultural transposition.

Finally, this study primarily employed experimental methods and quantitative analyses, resulting in a relatively limited methodological scope. While experimental designs are effective in controlling confounding variables and verifying causal relationships, they are less capable of capturing the dynamic psychological processes involved in consumer decision-making (e.g., the impact of real-time live-stream interactions such as bullet comments on trust perception). Moreover, they fall short in fully uncovering the complex pathways shaped by multiple interacting factors (Song et al., 2023). Future research could adopt mixed-method approaches: on the one hand, techniques such as in-depth interviews or eye-tracking experiments could be used to examine consumers' attention allocation and emotional fluctuations when watching live streams of different influencer types, thereby complementing the gaps left by quantitative methods; on the other hand, qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) could integrate multidimensional variables, including influencer attributes, consumer characteristics, and platform environments, to identify "configurational pathways" that drive high purchase intention (e.g., "low followers + authentic influencer + high affinity" or "high followers + perfect influencer + low affinity"), thus offering a richer understanding of influencer marketing decision-making mechanisms.

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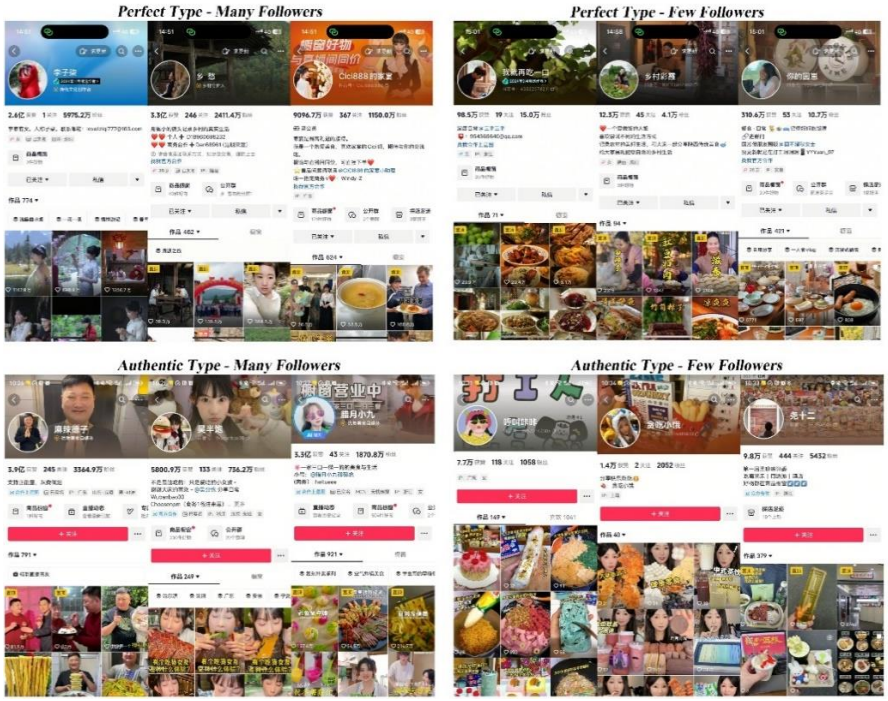
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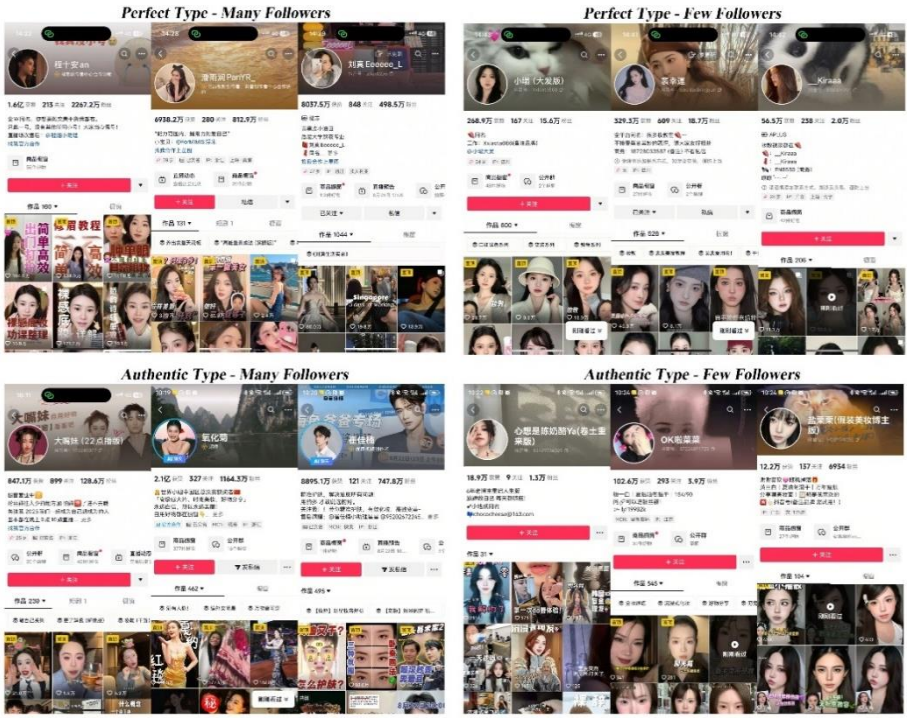
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Appendix A: Experimental Materials for Study 1



Appendix B: Experimental Materials for Study 2



Appendix C: Scale Measures

Construct	Items	Source	Cronbach's α（Study 1）	Cronbach's α（Study 2）
Trust	I feel this influencer is honest. I consider this influencer trustworthy. I feel this influencer is truthful. I think the content delivering by the online influencer I watched in the live show is credible. I think the products recommended by online influencer are more reliable. I trust the online influencer I watched. Influencers give genuine reviews. We can depend on getting the truth in most influencer ads.	(Masuda et al., 2022) (Zhao et al., 2024) (Rajput & Gandhi, 2024)	0.996	0.989
Purchase Intention	I will buy the products that this influencer promotes in the live streaming. I intend to purchase the products that this influencer promotes in the live streaming. I will consider this influencer's live streaming room as my first shopping choice. I am very likely to buy the products from this influencer. I would consider buying the products from this influencer in the future. I will strongly recommend others to purchase the product recommended by this influencer.	(Gao et al., 2023) (Lu & Chen, 2021) (Zhang et al., 2023)	0.701	0.978