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Trust me, I'm an influencer: How message sidedness and
influencer-product fit shape Gen Z responses on Instagram

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Abstract

Influencer marketing increasingly shapes how Generation Z consumers form product attitudes, yet the growing commercialisation of sponsored content has made its perceived authenticity and credibility a central concern. Prior research has examined message sidedness and influencer-product fit largely in isolation and within established influencer relationships, leaving open how these cues operate in the brief, single-exposure encounters that characterise everyday social media use. This thesis tests how the two cues jointly shape perceived authenticity and credibility, and how these perceptions translate into trust, product attitude and purchase intention. In a 2×2 between-subjects online experiment, 143 Generation Z participants viewed a single Instagram Reel from an unfamiliar fictional influencer in which message sidedness (one- vs. two-sided) and influencer-product fit (high vs. low) were manipulated. Two-sided messages significantly increased perceived authenticity, with a medium-to-large effect, but had only a marginal effect on credibility, while influencer-product fit and the predicted sidedness-by-fit interaction showed no significant effect. Bootstrap serial mediation revealed that authenticity and credibility each fed trust, attitude and purchase intention, yet only the authenticity pathway transmitted the experimental manipulation through to purchase intention. The findings position perceived authenticity as the dominant mechanism through which post-level cues shape consumer responses at first exposure and identify two-sided messaging as a practical authenticity-building strategy for brands.

Keywords: influencer marketing; message sidedness; influencer-product fit; perceived authenticity; source credibility; Generation Z

Abstrakt

Influencer-Marketing beeinflusst zunehmend, wie die Generation Z Einstellungen zu Produkten bildet. Gleichzeitig werden gesponserte Inhalte immer kommerzieller, wodurch ihre wahrgenommene Authentizität und Glaubwürdigkeit in den Mittelpunkt rücken. Bisherige Studien haben die Ein- oder Zweiseitigkeit einer Botschaft (message sidedness) und den Influencer-Produkt-Fit meist getrennt und vor allem bei bereits bekannten Influencern untersucht. Unklar ist bislang, wie diese Hinweise bei kurzen, einmaligen Kontakten wirken, wie sie im Social-Media-Alltag typisch sind. Die vorliegende Arbeit untersucht beide Hinweise gemeinsam. Sie prüft, wie sie die wahrgenommene Authentizität und Glaubwürdigkeit beeinflussen und wie diese wiederum auf Vertrauen, Einstellung zum Produkt und Kaufabsicht wirken. Dazu sahen in einem 2×2-Between-Subjects-Online-Experiment 143 Personen der Generation Z ein einzelnes Instagram-Reel einer fiktiven, ihnen unbekannten Influencer-Persona. Darin wurden die Botschaftsseitigkeit (ein- vs. zweiseitig) und der Influencer-Produkt-Fit (hoch vs. niedrig) variiert. Zweiseitige Botschaften erhöhten die wahrgenommene Authentizität deutlich (mittlerer bis großer Effekt), hatten auf die Glaubwürdigkeit aber nur einen marginalen Effekt. Der Influencer-Produkt-Fit und die erwartete Wechselwirkung aus Seitigkeit und Fit zeigten keinen signifikanten Effekt. Eine serielle Bootstrap-Mediationsanalyse zeigte, dass sowohl Authentizität als auch Glaubwürdigkeit über Vertrauen und Einstellung auf die Kaufabsicht wirkten. Bis zur Kaufabsicht weitergetragen wurde die experimentelle Manipulation jedoch nur über den Pfad der Authentizität. Die wahrgenommene Authentizität ist damit der wichtigste Mechanismus, über den Hinweise auf Beitragsebene beim ersten Kontakt das Konsumentenverhalten prägen. Für Marken sind zweiseitige Botschaften daher eine praktikable Strategie, um Authentizität aufzubauen.

Schlagwörter: Influencer-Marketing; Botschaftsseitigkeit; Influencer-Product-Fit; wahrgenommene Authentizität; Quellenglaubwürdigkeit; Generation Z

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1. Introduction

1.1 Phenomenon

Social media has become a central environment for brand-consumer communication. On Instagram, daily exposure to peer-generated content has reshaped how consumers gather product information and form brand attitudes (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Instagram is a leading marketing platform: in a 2026 worldwide survey, 82% of marketers reported using it, second only to Facebook (86%) and ahead of TikTok (32%) (Social Media Examiner, 2026).

Within this environment, influencer marketing has become an important strategy. Influencers cultivate large followings in niches such as beauty, lifestyle, travel or fitness, where audiences regard them as topical authorities (Lou & Yuan, 2019). By regularly sharing related content, they build relationships with followers and position themselves as opinion leaders in their communities (De Veirman et al., 2017). Brands therefore increasingly collaborate with them to promote products and services through sponsored posts.

Because such endorsements appear within the lifestyle content followers already consume, audiences typically read them as peer recommendations rather than commercial messaging, lending them perceived authenticity and credibility (De Veirman et al., 2017). Reflecting the sector's rapid growth, advertising spending in influencer marketing in the D-A-CH region is projected to reach approximately US\$1.26 billion by 2026 (Statista, 2025).

1.2 Problem

Despite the growing popularity of influencer marketing, concerns about the authenticity and credibility of influencer endorsements have increasingly emerged. The effectiveness of influencer marketing depends substantially on the perception that influencers provide trustworthy product recommendations to their followers (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Schouten et al., 2020). Because they share personal experiences and interact directly with their audiences on social media, influencers tend to be seen as closer and more trustworthy than traditional celebrity endorsers (Schouten et al., 2020).

However, the increasing commercialisation of influencer content may threaten these perceptions. As influencers collaborate with brands more often, followers may question whether they genuinely support the products they recommend or are mainly motivated by financial incentives. Prior research shows that brand partnerships and sponsored content can challenge influencers' ability to maintain an authentic image and create consumer scepticism (Audrezet et al., 2020). Recent research describes an emerging "authenticity crisis" as audiences perceive sponsored content as inauthentic (Duffek et al., 2025).

Generation Z has grown up immersed in social media and is more likely to use it than the wider population: in 2025, 89.3% of 16–29-year-olds in the EU reported using social networks, compared with 67.3% of the general population (Eurostat, 2026). This makes Gen Z a commercially significant audience, yet not a passive one. Gen Z consumers are particularly attuned to the authenticity of influencer endorsements and react with moral disapproval and avoidance when they perceive influencers as commercially controlled (Pradhan et al., 2023). This sensitivity makes them an especially relevant population for studying how post-level cues, such as message sidedness and influencer-product fit, shape authenticity and credibility perceptions. Much empirical work centres on Millennials; Gen Z's distinct engagement remains less understood (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020).

1.3 Research gaps & Research question

Message characteristics shape how consumers evaluate persuasive communication. Two-sided messages that acknowledge both positive and negative product attributes may enhance source credibility by signalling honesty (Eisend, 2006). In influencer marketing, two-sided messages also strengthen perceived authenticity and credibility (Lee & Johnson, 2022). At the same time, endorsement characteristics, such as perceived fit between the influencer and the promoted product, shape follower identification and brand evaluations (Janssen et al., 2022).

While prior studies emphasise the role of authenticity in influencer marketing (Audrezet et al., 2020; Duffek et al., 2025), they largely examine how authenticity is managed within ongoing, established influencer activity rather than the brief, fleeting encounters that characterise everyday social media use. Much of this research focuses on stable influencer attributes, such as trustworthiness or attractiveness (Lou & Yuan, 2019), typically assessed among audiences already familiar with the influencer. In contrast, consumers often

encounter influencer content while browsing social media feeds, where evaluations must form rapidly from limited post-level cues.

A close existing precedent is Wang (2025), who shows that two-sided messages in sponsored Instagram posts increase perceived sincerity and reduce attributions of commercial motivation, with both mediating attitudes toward the influencer and behavioural intentions toward the product. However, Wang (2025) does not test whether influencer-product fit moderates these effects. More broadly, message sidedness (Lee & Johnson, 2022; Wang, 2025) and influencer-product fit (Janssen et al., 2022) have rarely been examined together and, to the author's knowledge, their interaction has not been tested. Consequently, we lack a holistic understanding of how communication strategies interact with endorsement characteristics to shape evaluations. It remains unclear, for instance, whether two-sided messaging can compensate for a perceived lack of fit.

To bridge these gaps, this study uses a 2×2 experimental design manipulating message sidedness (one-sided vs. two-sided) and influencer-product fit (high vs. low) within a simulated social media profile and post, addressing the following research question:

How do message sidedness and influencer-product fit jointly influence consumers' perceptions of authenticity and credibility in sponsored influencer posts, and to what extent do these perceptions shape consumer responses to influencer marketing?

1.4 Contribution

The present study contributes to the influencer marketing literature in four ways. First, it shifts focus from stable, trait-based influencer attributes to post-level cues, examining how authenticity and credibility perceptions form from cues within individual posts. By using a fictional influencer with whom participants have no parasocial history (Horton & Wohl, 1956), the study captures the cue-based formation of perceptions that precedes long-term parasocial bonding. Second, it integrates message sidedness and influencer-product fit into a single framework, examining whether they interact to shape authenticity and credibility perceptions. Third, the experimental design provides causal evidence that post-level cues shape consumer perceptions. Moreover, the mediation analysis specifies the mechanisms linking these cues to trust and purchase intention. Finally, this study generates practical

insights for brands. By identifying how communication choices shape Gen Z perceptions and trust, the study informs how brands can choose, brief and empower influencers.

The remainder of the thesis develops the theoretical framework and hypotheses (Chapter II), describes the methodology (Chapter III), reports the results (Chapter IV) and discusses the findings, contributions, limitations and future research directions (Chapter V).

2. Theoretical background & hypotheses development

This chapter develops a dual-pathway source-evaluation framework in which two post-level cues, message sidedness and influencer-product fit, shape two parallel source perceptions, authenticity and credibility, which consolidate into trust and drive product attitude and purchase intention.

2.1 Conceptual foundations: Authenticity and credibility

Source credibility has long been identified as one of the primary mediators of endorsement effectiveness, including in recent meta-analytic evidence on influencer marketing (Pan et al., 2025). Authenticity has emerged as a parallel construct of growing importance in influencer contexts, where the boundary between personal expression and commercial communication is increasingly blurred (Hudders et al., 2021; Audrezet et al., 2020). Though related, the two perceptions capture distinct aspects of how consumers interpret influencer content and require separate conceptualisation.

In psychological literature authenticity is defined as “the unobstructed operation of one's true- or core-self in one's daily enterprise” (Kernis & Goldman, 2006, p. 294), a property of the person. Moulard et al. (2015) reframe authenticity as an audience evaluation, specifically, the judgement that a communicator is acting in accordance with their authentic self. It is therefore not a stable, objective characteristic but a dynamic and subjective evaluation that observers continuously construct by interpreting available cues (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010). Lee and Eastin's (2021) influencer-specific authenticity scale identifies five constituent dimensions: sincerity, truthful endorsements, visibility, expertise and uniqueness. Because influencer content blends personal expression with

commercial communication, audiences must evaluate whether an endorsement reflects a genuine opinion or is driven primarily by commercial motives (Audrezet et al., 2020).

Within commercial influencer contexts specifically, Audrezet et al. (2020) distinguish between two forms of authenticity: passionate authenticity, which reflects an influencer staying true to their personal identity and values regardless of commercial partnerships, and transparent authenticity, which relates to openness and honesty in commercial communication. Both are relevant to this study through different pathways: transparent authenticity is shaped primarily by message characteristics (Section 2.2), while passionate authenticity pertains to whether an endorser's commercial behaviour aligns with their established identity and niche (Section 2.3).

While authenticity refers to perceptions of genuineness and self-consistency, credibility represents a distinct but related construct. Drawing on the source-credibility framework (Ohanian, 1990), credibility refers to the extent to which a source is perceived as trustworthy and expert, a judgement audiences apply to influencers as sources of product information (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Although authenticity and credibility are conceptually distinct, they are closely interconnected (Lee & Eastin, 2021). Authentic communication can enhance credibility because consumers are more likely to perceive influencers as trustworthy when their content appears genuine and transparent (Lee & Johnson, 2022). However, credibility is also shaped by factors independent of authenticity, most notably perceived expertise (Ohanian, 1990), a dimension especially relevant to influencer-product fit (Section 2.3). The two constructs therefore respond to different types of cues and must be examined separately.

Building on these foundations, the study adopts a cue-based perspective: authenticity and credibility perceptions form from cues in the content itself (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010; Lee & Johnson, 2022). This is especially so when users encounter individual posts without prior knowledge of the influencer, isolating such perceptions from the parasocial bonds that develop over repeated exposure to familiar influencers (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Classical advertising research theorises two-sided messages mainly as a credibility mechanism: by signalling honest intent, they enhance perceived credibility (Eisend, 2006). In influencer marketing, however, authenticity has emerged as a distinct pathway through which post-level cues shape responses (Lee & Johnson, 2022). Examining both lets this

study test which pathway, classical credibility or emerging authenticity, operates when audiences encounter an unfamiliar influencer.

2.2 Message sidedness and its effect on authenticity and credibility

Message sidedness refers to the extent to which a persuasive message presents only positive information about a product (one-sided) or includes both positive and negative information (two-sided) (Eisend, 2006). In classical advertising research, two-sided messages are theorised as a persuasion strategy signalling honesty and transparency.

Two complementary frameworks explain the effectiveness of two-sided messages: attribution theory (Kelley, 1973) and the Persuasion Knowledge Model (Friestad & Wright, 1994). From an attribution perspective, including negative information alongside positive claims leads audiences to attribute the message to honest communication rather than purely persuasive intent, Kelley's (1973) discounting principle. This motive re-attribution enhances perceived credibility (Eisend, 2006). The Persuasion Knowledge Model offers a parallel explanation: consumers use their knowledge of persuasion tactics to cope with commercial messages. One-sided messages, presenting only favourable information, are readily categorised as persuasion attempts and activate defensive processing. Two-sided messages, by including information counter to the communicator's commercial interest, disrupt this categorisation and reduce persuasion-defence activation. Persuasion knowledge does not, however, translate uniformly into resistance: Pan et al. (2025) find its effects inconclusive and identify it, alongside source credibility, as one of the two principal mediators of post characteristics' effects on consumer responses. Two-sided messaging may therefore remain effective even when audiences recognise commercial intent, because the information counter to the communicator's interest offers a competing, honesty-based attribution (Kelley, 1973).

In influencer marketing, message sidedness is particularly relevant because influencer communication blends advertising and interpersonal communication (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Schouten et al., 2020). Given this reliance on content cues, acknowledging both positive and negative product attributes critically shapes perceived authenticity and credibility.

Empirical research supports the effectiveness of two-sided messages in influencer marketing. Lee and Johnson (2022) demonstrate that in Instagram product review

experiments, two-sided messaging significantly outperforms one-sided messaging on authenticity, credibility, advertisement attitudes and eWOM intentions. Ye and Li (2025) find that when influencers voluntarily disclose their own failures, perceived authenticity rises and purchase intentions follow. Similarly, Yi et al. (2025) extend the effect to travel contexts, where perceived realness and trust sequentially mediate the impact of two-sidedness on visit intentions. Field-level evidence further corroborates these findings: Liao and Chen (2024) find that two-sided messages in sponsored influencer videos significantly increase digital engagement, consistent with the broader observation that acknowledging product limitations can strengthen rather than undermine persuasion.

Most directly relevant to the present study, Wang (2025) examines two-sided messages in sponsored Instagram posts promoting a fitness application. Two-sided messaging strengthens audiences' perception of influencer sincerity and weakens their attribution of commercial motives, with both pathways driving attitude toward the influencer and intention to use the sponsored app. This parallel-mediation structure is consistent with the dual-pathway account developed here, although Wang operationalises the mechanisms as perceived sincerity and commercial-motive attribution. The outcomes also differ, attitude toward the influencer and intention to use the sponsored app, rather than product attitude and purchase intention. Wang (2025) does not, however, examine whether endorsement-level characteristics, in particular influencer-product congruence, moderate these effects, a gap the present study addresses.

Evidence on two-sidedness in influencer contexts is nevertheless not uniformly consistent. De Veirman and Hudders (2020) report a main-effect credibility advantage for one-sided messages, even though, in the same study, two-sided messages protected credibility against the negative impact of a sponsorship disclosure in Instagram posts. Meta-analytic work on related transparency mechanisms reinforces that such strategies have complex, context-dependent effects (Eisend et al., 2020). These inconsistencies suggest that message sidedness effects may depend on contextual factors, including influencer-product fit, which the present study examines.

Message sidedness may influence authenticity and credibility through distinct but complementary pathways. By acknowledging product limitations, two-sided messages operationalise what Audrezet et al. (2020) term transparent authenticity, openness and honesty in commercial communication, signalling that the recommendation reflects

genuine opinion rather than purely commercial intent. Simultaneously, by including information counter to commercial interest, they enhance perceived credibility through the attribution and persuasion-knowledge mechanisms outlined above. The mechanisms overlap but emphasise different dimensions: authenticity foregrounds sincerity and genuineness, credibility trustworthiness and expertise. Whereas classical credibility research did not treat authenticity as a separate dimension, recent influencer-specific work theorises it as a distinct construct (Lee & Eastin, 2021; Lee & Johnson, 2022). Authenticity and credibility function as key mediators through which post-level cues shape responses: Lee and Johnson (2022) show they jointly mediate sidedness effects on attitudes and purchase intentions, while Cheah et al. (2024) show that credibility erosion mediates the negative consequences of over-endorsement.

These mechanisms predict that two-sided influencer messages produce more favourable evaluations than one-sided messages through an authenticity and a credibility pathway:

H1a: Two-sided influencer messages lead to higher perceived authenticity than one-sided messages.

H1b: Two-sided influencer messages lead to higher perceived credibility than one-sided messages.

2.3 Influencer-product fit and its effect on authenticity and credibility

Influencer-product fit is the degree to which an influencer's brand personality, niche and expertise align with the endorsed product (Breves et al., 2019; Janssen et al., 2022). The concept derives from the match-up hypothesis in celebrity-endorsement research, which holds that endorsement effectiveness depends on endorser-product fit. High congruence produces more favourable evaluations of both the recommendation and the source (Kamins, 1990; Kamins & Gupta, 1994). The hypothesis rests on a deeper congruity logic: when an endorser's identity is congruent with the product, the pairing is recalled and evaluated more favourably, whereas incongruence weakens this effect (Misra & Beatty, 1990). McCracken's (1989) meaning-transfer model specifies the mechanism: an endorser carries culturally established meanings, here, the influencer's niche identity, which transfer to the product only when congruent, leaving an incongruent endorsement without a coherent source of meaning. This logic has been extended to influencer marketing, where

an influencer's self-constructed niche is the reference against which fit is judged (Breves et al., 2019; Janssen et al., 2022).

In influencer marketing, fit is relevant because influencers build their personal brands around specific topics or areas of expertise (De Veirman et al., 2017). When an endorsed product aligns with this image, it signals genuine personal affinity rather than commercial motivation, making the recommendation more likely to be seen as credible and authentic. Low fit signals a departure from the influencer's identity, triggering scepticism.

Empirical evidence supports the role of influencer-product fit in endorsement effectiveness. Janssen et al. (2022) show that high fit enhances perceived credibility, which in turn drives more favourable advertising outcomes. Breves et al. (2019) similarly show that influencer-brand fit enhances perceived trustworthiness and expertise. Together, these findings establish fit as central to how consumers evaluate the influencer as an information source. Pan et al. (2025) further identify influencer-brand fit, closely related to the influencer-product fit examined here, as a meaningful endorsement-level predictor of influencer marketing effectiveness.

The same attribution logic introduced in Section 2.2 applies: consumers infer the influencer's motives from the degree of fit (Kelley, 1973). High congruence is attributed to genuine experience or relevant expertise, whereas low fit prompts attributions to financial incentives, undermining perceived sincerity. Belanche et al. (2021) support this reasoning, finding that audiences who perceive an influencer-product fit rate the influencer as more credible and are less likely to view the post as paid promotion, consistent with the attribution-based discounting mechanism (Kelley, 1973).

Beyond credibility, fit also shapes perceptions of authenticity. As established in Section 2.1, authenticity is observer-constructed through available cues (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010; Moulard et al., 2015). Fit functions as an endorsement-level cue for this inference: high congruence signals what Audrezet et al. (2020) term passionate authenticity, the influencer staying true to their niche identity and values, strengthening perceived authenticity. Conversely, incongruence signals a deviation from that identity and undermines passionate authenticity perceptions. This evaluation operates even with limited familiarity, as profile information conveys initial impressions of an influencer's niche. However, such impressions remain thinner than those of long-term followers. Fit effects may therefore operate most fully under accumulated familiarity, a boundary condition for

single-exposure designs. This parallel structure, fit shaping both credibility and authenticity, highlights the value of examining fit alongside message sidedness as cues that may jointly shape evaluations.

These mechanisms predict that high influencer-product fit produces more favourable evaluations than low fit through an authenticity and a credibility pathway:

H2a: High influencer-product fit leads to higher perceived authenticity than low fit.

H2b: High influencer-product fit leads to higher perceived credibility than low fit.

2.4 Joint effects of message sidedness and influencer-product fit

Although message sidedness and influencer-product fit have been examined separately, both cues are simultaneously present in influencer marketing communication. Consumers therefore evaluate influencer posts based on a combination of message-level and endorsement-level cues, suggesting the persuasive effect of sidedness may depend on the endorsement context.

Although limited, existing research shows that sidedness effects are contingent on other factors. Eisend (2010) finds that the inferences consumers draw from two-sided messages depend on their cognitive load, and Wang (2025) shows the persuasive benefit of two-sided influencer messages is attenuated under high cognitive load. The present study extends this line of work by examining influencer-product fit as a source-level moderator, complementing the receiver-level evidence from these earlier studies. Whereas cognitive load operates as a general receiver-side constraint, fit operates as a specific attribution cue tied to a particular endorsement: low fit activates a commercial-motive inference against which two-sidedness provides counterevidence. The predicted pattern is compensatory.

As established in Section 2.3, low fit signals commercial motivation, heightening scepticism and activating persuasion defences (Friestad & Wright, 1994), whereas high fit prompts attributions to genuine expertise. This asymmetry in baseline scepticism shapes how message cues are processed.

Message sidedness may therefore play a compensatory role in low-fit endorsement contexts. As established in Section 2.2, two-sided messages reduce attributions of persuasive intent. This transparency signal is more diagnostic, and therefore more valuable,

when commercial-motive attribution is already elevated, as in low-fit conditions. By contrast, when fit is high, the endorsement already provides sufficient authenticity and credibility cues, making the incremental benefit of two-sided messaging less pronounced. This compensatory logic aligns with dual-process accounts of persuasion: under heightened scepticism, audiences engage in more elaborative processing (greater scrutiny) of message content, where transparency cues become more diagnostic of source intent (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). This reasoning implies an interaction between sidedness and fit in shaping consumer perceptions.

To the best of the author's knowledge, no prior study has simultaneously examined the interactive effects of message sidedness and influencer-product fit on perceived authenticity and credibility. While prior work has shown that sidedness effects depend on receiver-level factors such as cognitive load (Eisend, 2010; Wang, 2025), the specific question of whether message-level transparency can compensate for endorsement-level incongruence remains open. The present study addresses this gap by testing whether two-sided messages serve as a compensatory mechanism in low-fit endorsement contexts.

H3a: The positive effect of two-sided messages on perceived authenticity is stronger under low fit than under high fit.

H3b: The positive effect of two-sided messages on perceived credibility is stronger under low fit than under high fit.

2.5 The mediating role of trust and the chain to purchase intention

To link the perceptual mediators (authenticity and credibility) to the behavioural outcome, this thesis draws on two complementary frameworks. The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB; Ajzen, 1991) holds that behavioural intention is most proximally determined by attitude toward the behaviour, alongside subjective norms and perceived behavioural control. The present study focuses on the attitude pathway, holding normative and control influences constant across conditions. Applied to influencer marketing, TPB explains why followers' purchase intention is shaped by their attitude toward the endorsed product. The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) complements TPB by explaining how attitude forms. ELM specifies two routes to persuasion: a central route, in which audiences carefully evaluate message arguments, and a peripheral route, in which

they rely on heuristic cues such as source authenticity and credibility. A single-exposure encounter with an unfamiliar influencer's brief Reel sits toward the peripheral end of this continuum, where authenticity and credibility carry diagnostic weight as heuristic cues feeding attitude formation. ELM frames the upstream cue-to-attitude pathway, within which source perceptions consolidate into trust before shaping attitude, while TPB anchors the attitude-to-intention step. Cabeza-Ramírez et al. (2022) confirm robust paths from authenticity to attitude and from attitude to purchase intention among followers.

Perceived authenticity is a key antecedent of trust in the influencer's recommendation. Attribution theory (Kelley, 1973) suggests that when followers attribute a recommendation to the influencer's genuine convictions rather than external incentives, they relax their persuasion-knowledge defences (Friestad & Wright, 1994) and become willing to rely on the influencer's judgement. Authenticity therefore reduces perceived manipulative intent, creating conditions for trust. Kim and Kim (2021) demonstrate a strong effect of perceived authenticity on trust, and Ye and Li (2025) show that influencers' voluntary disclosure of their own failures enhances perceived authenticity and purchase intentions relative to influencers who do not disclose. Notably, Kim and Kim (2021) find that authenticity matters most for followers with weak ties ($\beta = 0.60$ vs $\beta = 0.31$ for established relationships), precisely the condition reproduced here.

H4: Perceived authenticity positively affects trust in the influencer's recommendation.

Perceived credibility is likewise proposed to build trust. Following Ohanian's (1990) source-credibility framework, credibility is treated here as the source-level perception that the influencer is trustworthy and expert. This thesis treats the two constructs as conceptually distinct (Lee & Eastin, 2021; Lee & Johnson, 2022), enabling a test of whether each pathway carries independent explanatory weight. Empirical support for the credibility-to-trust link comes from Kim and Kim (2021), whose expertise dimension predicted trust and from Sokolova and Kefi (2020), who show that source credibility shapes follower responses on Instagram and YouTube.

H5: Perceived credibility positively affects trust in the influencer's recommendation.

Trust in the influencer's recommendation is then expected to translate into a more favourable attitude toward the endorsed product. When followers trust the influencer, they process the product claim with less scepticism and more readily accept the positive evaluations in the post. Kim and Kim (2021) provide direct empirical support, reporting a strong effect of trust on product attitude. This pattern is consistent with Chaudhuri and Holbrook's (2001) foundational demonstration that brand trust shapes attitudinal loyalty and downstream brand performance.

H6: Trust in the influencer's recommendation positively affects attitude toward the product.

Attitude toward the product is expected to translate into purchase intention. This reflects TPB's attitude pathway (Ajzen, 1991). In the influencer marketing context, Cabeza-Ramírez et al. (2022) confirm a strong and significant path from attitude to purchase intention, while also documenting a smaller but significant direct path from perceived authenticity to purchase intention. This suggests that authenticity can additionally exert a shortcut effect on behavioural intention beyond its attitudinal route. A complementary pathway is reported by Sokolova and Kefi (2020), who find that credibility can influence purchase intention directly.

H7: Attitude toward the product positively affects purchase intention.

Taken together, H4 through H7 specify a sequential mediation chain from source-level perceptions to behavioural intention: authenticity and credibility, formed at message exposure, consolidate into trust in the influencer's recommendation, which shapes attitude toward the product, which in turn drives purchase intention. Theoretically, trust precedes attitude because relational evaluation of the source must occur before the evaluative response to the product can crystallise; attitude precedes intention per TPB's core prediction. This sequential logic mirrors the information-processing sequence underlying both ELM and TPB and has been empirically supported in the influencer marketing context by Yi et al. (2025), who document a realness → trust → visit intention chain. Similarly, Kim and Kim's (2021) mediation analysis confirms that trust mediates the effects of influencer-source characteristics on both product attitude and purchase intention.

H8: Trust in the influencer’s recommendation and attitude toward the product sequentially mediate the effects of perceived authenticity and perceived credibility on purchase intention.

2.6 Integrated conceptual model

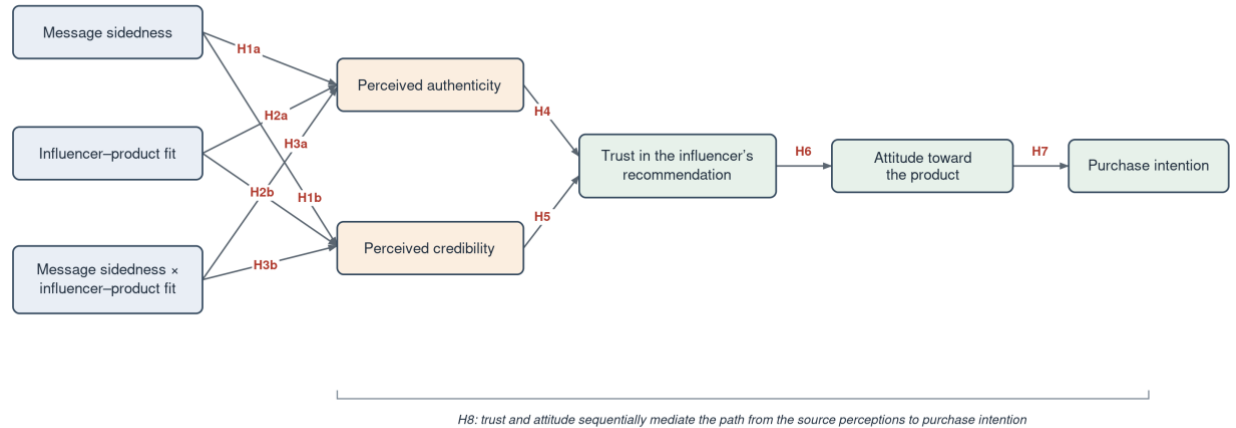


Figure 1 integrates the hypotheses developed across the preceding sections. Message sidedness and influencer-product fit, as post-level cues, are hypothesised to enhance perceived authenticity (H1a, H2a) and perceived credibility (H1b, H2b). Their interaction is predicted to be compensatory: the positive effect of two-sided messages on both perceptions is stronger under low fit than under high fit (H3a, H3b). Authenticity and credibility build trust in the influencer's recommendation (H4, H5), which shapes attitude toward the product (H6), which then drives purchase intention (H7). Finally, trust and attitude are predicted to sequentially mediate the effects of the two source perceptions on purchase intention, integrating the individual paths into a single end-to-end chain (H8).

3. Method

3.1 Research design

This study employed a 2×2 between-subjects online experiment, crossing influencer-product fit (high vs. low) with message sidedness (two-sided vs. one-sided). The dependent variables were perceived message authenticity, perceived credibility, trust in the influencer’s recommendation, attitude toward the product and purchase intention. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions, each comprising an Instagram Reel paired with a corresponding influencer profile.

An experimental design was chosen to permit causal inference about the effects of sidedness and fit. The factorial 2×2 structure enables direct tests of the predicted interaction between the two cues (H3a, H3b), which cannot be examined in two separate single-factor experiments. A between-subjects design was adopted to prevent contamination across conditions. Random assignment combined with controlled stimuli secured internal validity, while realistic Instagram content supported ecological validity.

3.2 Participants

A total of 148 participants were recruited via Prolific, with eligibility restricted to adults aged 18 to 30 who reported regular Instagram use. Due to limited availability of Austria-based participants on Prolific, recruitment was expanded to German-speaking countries (Germany, Switzerland and Luxembourg). Five participants who failed one or more attention checks were excluded from analysis, yielding a final sample of $N = 143$ ($M_{\text{age}} = 24.58$, $SD = 3.13$), of whom 65.0% identified as men, 34.3% as women and 0.7% preferred not to disclose. The male-skewed composition is acknowledged as a limitation in Chapter V. Participants completed the study online and received £1.40 in compensation.

A sensitivity analysis conducted in G*Power 3.1.9.6 (Faul et al., 2007, 2009) indicated that the achieved sample of $N = 143$ provided 80% power ($\alpha = .05$) to detect effects of $f = .24$ ($\eta^2_p \approx .05$) or larger in the 2×2 between-subjects ANOVA. The study was therefore well-powered to detect medium effects but underpowered for smaller effects, a consideration relevant to the interpretation of trend-level findings. The study followed standard ethical guidelines for online research with adult participants. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained, responses were collected anonymously, participants could withdraw and all received a debrief upon completion.

3.3 Procedure

After providing informed consent, participants completed screening questions verifying age (18-30), country of residence (Austria, Germany, Switzerland or Luxembourg) and regular Instagram use. Participants were then randomly assigned to one of four conditions.

Each condition presented a fictional Instagram profile establishing the influencer persona, followed by the corresponding Instagram Reel in which the influencer promoted the

product. Immediately after viewing the Reel, participants completed the first attention check, which asked whether they had carefully watched the video (yes/no). A second attention check at the start of the main measurement block asked participants to identify the type of product featured in the Reel from multiple options. Participants then completed the dependent measures: perceived message authenticity, perceived credibility, trust in the influencer's recommendation, attitude toward the product and purchase intention. Manipulation checks for message sidedness and influencer-product fit followed.

Participants subsequently reported control variables (whether they followed influencers on Instagram, use of dietary supplements, interest in fitness/health/wellness content on social media and interest in gaming/streaming content on social media) and standard demographics. A third attention check, an instructed-response item asking participants to select “agree”, was embedded within the control-variables block. The study took approximately 10 minutes. Participants were then debriefed about the study’s purpose.

3.4 Stimuli development

The study deliberately used fictional, unfamiliar influencer profiles to isolate post-level cues from accumulated parasocial influence (Horton & Wohl, 1956), capturing the initial formation of authenticity and credibility perceptions before parasocial bonding shapes interpretation. The experiment used two stimuli per condition: a screenshot of the influencer's Instagram profile and an Instagram Reel. The same actor portrayed both personas, holding physical appearance, age and ethnicity constant across the fit manipulation, so that perceived influencer-product fit varied only with the niche cues each profile conveyed. The Instagram profile provided background information on the influencer's niche; follower, following and post counts were held identical (100,000 followers, 756 following, 135 posts), with variation restricted to the profile picture, handle, bio, story highlights and first three grid photos. The high-fit persona, @katharina_longevity, presented a portrait-style profile picture, a bio framed around health and longevity, story highlights labelled “Food”, “Training” and “Routines”, and grid photos showing a healthy food bowl, an outdoor nature scene and a boxing bag. The low-fit persona, @letskatharina, presented a profile picture of her gaming setup, a bio framed around streaming and junk food (with a link to a Twitch channel), story highlights labelled “Setup”, “Discord” and “YouTube”, and grid photos featuring a gaming controller, her

gaming setup and fast food. The gaming-and-fitness contrast may not have produced as sharp a mismatch as intended: Gen Z culture features substantial overlap between the two domains (gamified fitness applications, fitness influencers active on gaming platforms, gaming-oriented nutrition brands), which may have softened the perceived incongruence between the low-fit persona and the dietary supplement. Full-resolution screenshots of both profiles are provided in Appendix A.

The main stimulus was a 45-second Instagram Reel with in which the influencer promoted the supplement powder. The sidedness manipulation was carried primarily by the spoken content of the Reel, accompanied by a condition-consistent caption. A paid-partnership disclaimer was deliberately omitted to avoid introducing disclosure as an additional variable; prior work suggests that Gen Z consumers are already highly sceptical of, and quick to infer commercial intent behind, sponsored influencer content (Pradhan et al., 2023; Hudders et al., 2021), which may attenuate the differential impact of an explicit disclaimer in this population. The actor, setting, product, lighting and editing of each Reel were identical across conditions. Outfits were held constant within each fit condition (gym outfit with Apple Watch for high-fit; hoodie with headset for low-fit).

The Reel scripts manipulated message sidedness while holding other message elements constant. The two-sided scripts acknowledged a minor drawback, the need to adjust to the taste and the absence of an immediate effect in the first few days, before presenting the product's benefits in qualified terms (e.g. energy ‘‘stayed more even’’; the product is ‘‘not a magic fix’’). The one-sided scripts contained only positive claims and made no reference to drawbacks or trade-offs. For ecological validity, the one-sided scripts also deliberately employed more emphatic, categorical phrasing and the two-sided scripts more qualified, hedged phrasing, mirroring how purely promotional and balanced content typically differ on Instagram. This deliberate sidedness-intensity covariation is addressed in Section 5.4. The full scripts are provided in Appendix A.

3.5 Measurements

All focal scales were adapted from established sources and rated on 7-point response formats. Multi-item measures were averaged to form a single index, with higher values indicating greater levels of the construct. Item wordings appear in Appendix B.

Manipulation checks

Message sidedness was assessed with two items adapted from De Veirman and Hudders (2020), each rated on a Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Participants rated the Reel on whether it gave opinions only in favour of the product (reverse-coded) and whether it gave opinions both in favour of and against the product. The two-item index showed strong internal consistency (Spearman-Brown $\rho = .91$).

Influencer-product fit was assessed with a three-item semantic differential scale adapted from Till and Busler (2000), using the adjective pairs *does not belong with – belongs with*, *does not go together – goes together* and *does not fit together – fits together* (Cronbach's $\alpha = .96$).

Dependent variables

Perceived message authenticity was measured with three Likert items adapted from Moulard et al. (2015), whose original scale was developed for celebrity authenticity and tailored here to message-level perceptions of Instagram Reels (sample item: "The message is authentic.") (Cronbach's $\alpha = .93$).

Perceived credibility was measured with six semantic differential items based on Ohanian (1990), capturing the trustworthiness dimension (untrustworthy – trustworthy, insincere – sincere, unreliable – reliable) and the expertise dimension (not an expert – an expert, unknowledgeable – knowledgeable, unqualified – qualified), in response to the prompt "Based on the content I just saw, I think the influencer is...". The attractiveness dimension of Ohanian's original scale was omitted for two reasons: the same actor portrayed both personas, holding physical appearance constant; and recent influencer marketing research has focused on the trustworthiness and expertise dimensions (Janssen et al., 2022). All six items were combined into a single credibility index (Cronbach's $\alpha = .91$).

Trust in the influencer's recommendation was measured with four Likert items adapted from Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) (sample item: "I trust this influencer's recommendations.") (Cronbach's $\alpha = .91$).

Attitude toward the product was measured with five semantic differential items adapted from Spears and Singh (2004), using the adjective pairs *unappealing – appealing*, *bad – good*, *unpleasant – pleasant*, *unfavourable – favourable* and *unlikeable – likeable* (Cronbach's $\alpha = .94$).

Purchase intention was measured with five semantic differential items adapted from Spears and Singh (2004), capturing likelihood of purchase across complementary phrasings (e.g. *never – definitely*; *definitely do not intend to buy – definitely intend to buy*) (Cronbach's $\alpha = .97$).

Control variables

In addition, four control variables were measured for sample characterisation. Use of dietary supplements was measured on a single five-point item ('How often do you use dietary supplements (e.g. vitamins, powders, capsules)?', 0 = never to 4 = very often). Interest in fitness/health/wellness content on social media and interest in gaming/streaming content on social media were each measured on a single seven-point item (0 = not at all to 6 = extremely). Whether participants followed influencers/content creators on Instagram was measured with a single yes/no item. Demographic variables collected for sample description were age (in years), gender, highest level of education and English proficiency.

3.6 Analytical strategy

All analyses were conducted in Stata/SE 19.5. Manipulation checks for message sidedness and influencer-product fit were tested via independent-samples t-tests. Main and interaction effects of sidedness and fit on each dependent variable were tested via two-way between-subjects ANOVAs, with partial eta-squared (η^2_p) reported alongside F-statistics as the standard effect-size measure for factorial ANOVA. Potential sources of bias in the factorial ANOVAs are those of the general linear model (Field, 2018, p. 620). Because the four cells were approximately equal in size, the analyses were treated as robust to moderate inequality of variance (Box, 1954), with the relatively large sample ($N = 143$) supporting reliance on the F-test via the central limit theorem; where the homogeneity assumption was clearly violated, as in the manipulation checks, Welch's correction was applied.

The path coefficients linking the source perceptions, trust in the influencer's recommendation, attitude toward the product and purchase intention (H4-H7) were estimated via ordinary least squares regression, with perceived authenticity and perceived credibility entered jointly as predictors of trust to isolate the unique contribution of each correlated source perception. Standard OLS regression assumptions were inspected via residual diagnostics (full results in Appendix C). The joint regression of trust on authenticity and credibility (H4, H5) and the regression of attitude on trust (H6) satisfied homoscedasticity and approximate normality of residuals. The regression of purchase intention on attitude (H7) showed mild heteroscedasticity (Breusch-Pagan $p = .017$), so heteroscedasticity-robust (Huber-White) standard errors were used for H7. The integrated chain proposed in H8, source perception $\rightarrow$ trust $\rightarrow$ attitude $\rightarrow$ purchase intention, was tested via bootstrap serial mediation following Hayes (2018) PROCESS Model 6, with 5,000 bootstrap resamples and 95% percentile confidence intervals. Bootstrap models were implemented using Stata's bootstrap command applied to structural equation models (sem). As a supplementary check, a parallel set of four-stage bootstrap mediation models was estimated to trace the indirect effects of the experimental manipulations on purchase intention through the source perceptions, trust and attitude, using the same bootstrap specification (reported in Appendix D).

4. Results

4.1 Sample description

The sample characteristics introduced in Section 3.2 are reported here in fuller detail. The 143 participants resided in German-speaking Europe, with the majority recruited in Germany ($n = 121$, 84.6%) and the remainder in Austria ($n = 16$, 11.2%), Luxembourg ($n = 3$, 2.1%) and Switzerland ($n = 3$, 2.1%). The vast majority (91.6%) reported being fluent or near-native in English, the language in which the study was administered. Most participants held or were pursuing a university degree. Reflecting the social-media context of the study, 81.1% of participants reported using Instagram daily and the same proportion followed at least one influencer or content creator on the platform.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions in a 2×2 between-subjects design. Cell sizes were approximately balanced (one-sided $\times$ low-fit: $n =$

38; one-sided $\times$ high-fit: $n = 38$; two-sided $\times$ low-fit: $n = 36$; two-sided $\times$ high-fit: $n = 31$) and a chi-square test of independence confirmed no association between sidedness and fit assignment, $\chi^2(1) = 0.20, p = .655$.

4.2 Descriptive statistics & correlation matrix

Means, standard deviations and intercorrelations of the five focal measures are reported in Table 1. All composite scores were based on 7-point scales, with higher values indicating more positive evaluations. Internal-consistency reliabilities (Cronbach's α), reproduced from Section 3.5 for convenience, appear on the diagonal. The five measures were strongly and positively intercorrelated, consistent with their role as sequential steps in the proposed source-perception-to-purchase-intention pathway.

The two source perceptions correlated strongly with each other (perceived authenticity / perceived credibility: $r = .70$) and with trust in the influencer's recommendation (authenticity / trust: $r = .73$; credibility / trust: $r = .77$). Further downstream, trust correlated with attitude toward the product ($r = .63$) and attitude was the strongest correlate of purchase intention ($r = .70$). All pairwise correlations were significant at $p < .001$, consistent with the constructs forming a common nomological network.

Table 1 Means, standard deviations, Cronbach's α and intercorrelations of the focal measures ($N = 143$)

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5
1. Perceived Authenticity	4.27	1.51	(.93)				
2. Perceived Credibility	3.83	1.17	.70***	(.91)			
3. Trust in the Influencer	3.44	1.35	.73***	.77***	(.91)		
4. Attitude toward the Product	4.02	1.32	.65***	.69***	.63***	(.94)	
5. Purchase Intention	2.58	1.47	.55***	.55***	.60***	.70***	(.97)

Note: All variables were measured on 7-point scales, with higher values indicating more positive evaluations of the corresponding construct. Perceived authenticity and trust in the influencer's recommendation were measured using Likert-type agreement scales; perceived credibility, attitude toward the product and purchase intention were measured using semantic-differential scales. Cronbach's α values are reported on the diagonal in parentheses. *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed).

4.3 Manipulation checks

Two manipulation checks were performed to verify that the experimental stimuli successfully manipulated message sidedness and influencer-product fit. The scales used are described in Section 3.5.

Message sidedness. Levene's robust test indicated significantly unequal variances across conditions, $W = 53.64$, $p < .001$, so Welch's t -test was used. Participants in the two-sided condition perceived the message as significantly more two-sided ($M = 4.27$, $SD = 1.77$, $n = 67$) than participants in the one-sided condition ($M = 1.76$, $SD = 0.83$, $n = 76$), $t(91.45) = -10.65$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.86$. The sidedness manipulation produced a very large effect.

Influencer-Product Fit. Levene's robust test indicated homogeneous variances, $W = 1.26$, $p = .264$; Welch's t -test was nevertheless retained for consistency with the sidedness check. Participants in the high-fit condition perceived the endorsement as a significantly better fit ($M = 5.38$, $SD = 1.27$, $n = 69$) than participants in the low-fit condition ($M = 4.78$, $SD = 1.55$, $n = 74$), $t(138.75) = 2.55$, $p = .012$, $d = 0.42$. The fit manipulation produced only a small-to-medium effect, roughly one-quarter the magnitude of the sidedness manipulation, and is acknowledged as a limitation in Chapter V.

4.4 Effects of message sidedness and influencer-product fit on source perceptions (H1-H3)

To test Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3, two 2 (Message Sidedness: one-sided vs. two-sided) $\times$ 2 (Influencer-Product Fit: low vs. high) between-subjects analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were conducted, with perceived authenticity and perceived credibility as the dependent variables. Type III sums of squares were used to accommodate the modest imbalance in cell sizes. Cell means and standard deviations for both dependent variables are reported in Table 2, and the full ANOVA results are summarised in Table 3.

Perceived authenticity (H1a, H2a, H3a). The 2×2 ANOVA on perceived authenticity revealed a statistically significant main effect of Message Sidedness, $F(1, 139) = 15.67$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .10$. Participants who viewed a two-sided endorsement perceived the influencer as significantly more authentic ($M = 4.78$, $SD = 1.52$) than participants who

viewed a one-sided endorsement ($M = 3.82$, $SD = 1.37$). The effect was of medium-to-large magnitude according to conventional benchmarks (Cohen, 1988). H1a was therefore supported. In contrast, the main effect of influencer-product fit was not significant, $F(1, 139) = 0.00$, $p = .992$, $\eta^2_p = .00$; high-fit ($M = 4.25$, $SD = 1.51$) and low-fit ($M = 4.29$, $SD = 1.53$) conditions produced virtually identical authenticity ratings. H2a was therefore not supported. The Sidedness $\times$ Fit interaction was likewise not significant, $F(1, 139) = 0.31$, $p = .582$, $\eta^2_p = .002$, indicating that the effect of sidedness on perceived authenticity did not depend on the level of influencer-product fit. H3a was therefore not supported.

Perceived credibility (H1b, H2b, H3b). The 2×2 ANOVA on perceived credibility revealed a marginally significant main effect of Message Sidedness, $F(1, 139) = 3.24$, $p = .074$, $\eta^2_p = .02$. Participants in the two-sided condition rated the influencer as somewhat more credible ($M = 4.01$, $SD = 1.08$) than participants in the one-sided condition ($M = 3.67$, $SD = 1.23$), but this difference did not reach the conventional $p < .05$ threshold. H1b was therefore not supported, although the direction of the effect was consistent with the hypothesis. The main effect of Influencer-product fit was not significant, $F(1, 139) = 0.08$, $p = .781$, $\eta^2_p = .001$, with high-fit ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 1.20$) and low-fit ($M = 3.81$, $SD = 1.16$) conditions producing essentially identical credibility ratings. H2b was therefore not supported. The Sidedness $\times$ Fit interaction was likewise not significant, $F(1, 139) = 0.53$, $p = .470$, $\eta^2_p = .004$. H3b was therefore not supported.

Of the source-perception hypotheses, only H1a was clearly supported. The marginal effect of sidedness on credibility ($\eta^2_p = .02$) falls below the $\eta^2_p \approx .05$ threshold the sample was powered to detect (Section 3.2). Possible explanations for the null fit effects and the marginal credibility effect are addressed in Chapter V. Because sidedness produced a clear effect on authenticity but only a marginal effect on credibility, a follow-up analysis tested whether sidedness affected the two perceptions to significantly different degrees. As authenticity and credibility were measured on different scales, both were standardised (z-scored), and the within-person difference (z-authenticity – z-credibility) was compared across sidedness conditions. This difference was significantly greater in the two-sided condition, $t(141) = 2.66$, $p = .009$, indicating that two-sided messaging raised perceived authenticity relative to perceived credibility.

Table 2 *Cell means and standard deviations for perceived authenticity and perceived credibility ($N = 143$)*

Condition	<i>n</i>	<i>Authenticity M (SD)</i>	<i>Credibility M (SD)</i>
One-sided x Low fit	38	3.89 (1.46)	3.71 (1.26)
One-sided x High fit	38	3.75 (1.28)	3.62 (1.22)
Two-sided x Low fit	36	4.71 (1.50)	3.92 (1.04)
Two-sided x High fit	31	4.85 (1.55)	4.12 (1.14)
Marginal: One-sided	76	3.82 (1.37)	3.67 (1.23)
Marginal: Two-sided	67	4.78 (1.52)	4.01 (1.08)
Marginal: Low fit	74	4.29 (1.53)	3.81 (1.16)
Marginal: High fit	69	4.25 (1.51)	3.85 (1.20)
Total	143	4.27 (1.51)	3.83 (1.17)

Table 3 Results of 2×2 analyses of variance for perceived authenticity and perceived credibility

Effect	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	η^2_p
Perceived Authenticity				
Message Sidedness	1, 139	15.67	< .001	.10
Influencer-Product Fit	1, 139	0.00	.992	.00
Sidedness x Fit	1, 139	0.31	.582	.00
Perceived Credibility				
Message Sidedness	1, 139	3.24	.074	.02
Influencer-Product Fit	1, 139	0.08	.781	.00
Sidedness x Fit	1, 139	0.53	.470	.00

Note: η^2_p = partial eta squared. Type III sums of squares.

4.5 Effects of source perceptions on trust, attitude and purchase intention (H4-H7)

Hypotheses 4 through 7 specify the path from source perceptions through trust in the influencer's recommendation and attitude toward the product to purchase intention. These path coefficients were estimated via three ordinary least squares regressions. Because perceived authenticity and perceived credibility were strongly intercorrelated ($r = .70$),

they were entered jointly as predictors of trust to isolate the unique contribution of each source perception; variance inflation factors confirmed that multicollinearity did not compromise estimation ($VIF = 1.97$ for both predictors). Standardised path coefficients (β) and unstandardised coefficients (b) are reported in Table 4.

Effects on trust in the influencer's recommendation (H4 and H5). Perceived authenticity and perceived credibility together explained 67% of the variance in trust, $R^2 = .67$, adjusted $R^2 = .66$, $F(2, 140) = 140.10$, $p < .001$. Perceived authenticity positively predicted trust, $b = 0.34$, $SE = 0.06$, $t(140) = 5.55$, $p < .001$, $\beta = .38$, supporting H4. Perceived credibility positively predicted trust, $b = 0.58$, $SE = 0.08$, $t(140) = 7.38$, $p < .001$, $\beta = .50$, supporting H5. The effect of credibility on trust was somewhat larger than the effect of authenticity, consistent with the conceptual proximity of credibility and trust as overlapping but distinct facets of source evaluation.

Effects on attitude toward the product (H6). Trust in the influencer's recommendation positively predicted attitude toward the product, $b = 0.62$, $SE = 0.06$, $t(141) = 9.67$, $p < .001$, $\beta = .63$, $R^2 = .40$, $F(1, 141) = 93.41$, $p < .001$. Trust alone accounted for approximately 40% of the variance in product attitude. H6 was supported.

Effects on purchase intention (H7). Attitude toward the product positively predicted purchase intention, $b = 0.78$, $SE = 0.06$, $t(141) = 12.14$, $p < .001$, $\beta = .70$, $R^2 = .49$, $F(1, 141) = 147.31$, $p < .001$. Heteroscedasticity-robust (Huber-White) standard errors are reported. Attitude explained nearly half of the variance. H7 was supported.

All four path coefficients were positive, significant at $p < .001$ and substantial (β s from .38 to .70), supporting Hypotheses 4 through 7 and providing the individual-path evidence for the sequential mediation test in Section 4.6.

Table 4 Path coefficients for the mediation chain ($N = 143$)

Path	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	β	R^2
H4: Authenticity → Trust	0.34	0.06	5.55	< .001	.38	.67 [†]
H5: Credibility → Trust	0.58	0.08	7.38	< .001	.50	.67 [†]
H6: Trust → Attitude	0.62	0.06	9.67	< .001	.63	.40
H7: Attitude → Purchase Intention	0.78	0.06	12.14	< .001	.70	.49

Note: All path coefficients are significant at $p < .001$ (two-tailed). β = standardised regression coefficient. † Authenticity and credibility were entered jointly as predictors of trust; the R^2 value reported (.67) refers to the full joint model. Degrees of freedom were 140 for the joint model (H4, H5) and 141 for the simple regressions (H6, H7). Heteroscedasticity-robust (Huber–White) standard errors are reported for H7.

4.6. Sequential mediation through trust and attitude (H8)

Hypothesis 8 stated that trust in the influencer’s recommendation and attitude toward the product sequentially mediate the effects of perceived authenticity and perceived credibility on purchase intention. Two serial mediation models corresponding to Hayes (2018) PROCESS Model 6 were estimated, one with perceived authenticity as the antecedent and one with perceived credibility as the antecedent. In each model, trust was specified as the first mediator, attitude toward the product as the second mediator and purchase intention as the dependent variable. Each downstream path was estimated controlling for all upstream variables in the chain, ensuring that the indirect effect represents the unique contribution of the proposed sequential pathway. Following standard PROCESS Model 6 convention, the two chains were estimated separately. Indirect effects were tested with 5,000 bootstrap resamples and percentile-based 95% confidence intervals (Preacher & Hayes, 2008; Hayes, 2018). Results are reported in Table 5.

Authenticity → *Trust* → *Attitude* → *Purchase Intention*. Perceived authenticity positively predicted trust, $a = 0.65, p < .001$. Trust, controlling for authenticity, positively predicted attitude toward the product, $d = 0.33, p < .001$. Attitude, controlling for both authenticity and trust, positively predicted purchase intention, $b = 0.59, p < .001$. The serial indirect effect through trust and attitude was significant, indirect effect = 0.127, $SE_{boot} = 0.039$, 95% CI [0.058, 0.207]. H8 was supported for the authenticity pathway.

Credibility → *Trust* → *Attitude* → *Purchase Intention*. Perceived credibility positively predicted trust, $a = 0.89, p < .001$. Trust, controlling for credibility, positively predicted attitude, $d = 0.25, p < .001$. Attitude, controlling for credibility and trust, positively predicted purchase intention, $b = 0.61, p < .001$. The serial indirect effect was significant, indirect effect = 0.135, $SE_{boot} = 0.054$, 95% CI [0.040, 0.252]. H8 was also supported for the credibility pathway.

H8 was supported for both source-perception antecedents. Trust in the influencer’s recommendation and attitude toward the product jointly carry the effect of source

perceptions to purchase intention. Although the indirect effects are modest (approximately 0.13 on a 7-point scale), their consistent direction and significance across both pathways support the proposed sequential mediation logic.

Table 5 *Bootstrap serial mediation results: Source perception → Trust → Attitude → Purchase intention (N = 143; 5,000 bootstrap resamples)*

Chain	<i>a</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>b</i>	Indirect (<i>ab</i>)	<i>SEboot</i>	95% CI	Significant?
Authenticity → Trust → Attitude → PI	0.65	0.33	0.59	0.127	0.039	[0.058, 0.207]	Yes
Credibility → Trust → Attitude → PI	0.89	0.25	0.61	0.135	0.054	[0.040, 0.252]	Yes

Note: *a* = effect of source perception on trust in the influencer's recommendation. *d* = effect of trust on attitude toward the product, controlling for the source perception. *b* = effect of attitude on purchase intention, controlling for source perception and trust. Indirect effect = $a \times d \times b$. CIs are percentile-based bootstrap intervals from 5,000 resamples. All path coefficients significant at $p < .001$.

5. Discussion

5.1 Summary of findings

The present study investigated how message sidedness and influencer-product fit jointly shape consumers' perceptions of influencer endorsements and their downstream effects on trust, attitude and purchase intention. Eight hypotheses were tested using a 2×2 between-subjects experimental design (N = 143), in which Gen Z social-media users were exposed to a single Instagram Reel featuring a previously unfamiliar fictional influencer. The results provide robust support for the proposed sequential mediation mechanism but only partial support for the upstream experimental manipulations. Two-sided messages significantly increased perceived authenticity, with a medium-to-large effect (H1a supported; $\eta^2p = .10$, $p < .001$). The effect of sidedness on credibility was directionally consistent but did not reach statistical significance at the conventional $p < .05$ threshold (H1b not supported; $p =$

.074). Contrary to expectations, influencer-product fit produced no main effect on either authenticity or credibility (H2a, H2b not supported) and the predicted Sidedness $\times$ Fit interaction was likewise not observed (H3a, H3b not supported).

The marginal effect of sidedness on credibility is also notable given Eisend's (2006) meta-analysis, in which source credibility was among the strongest effects of two-sided messaging (the single largest being on perceived novelty). The direction here is consistent with that benchmark, but the magnitude is much weaker. A plausible reason is contextual: Eisend's credibility gains derive largely from traditional advertising, whereas a single-exposure encounter with an unfamiliar influencer gives audiences little basis to revise credibility from one post. This fits the marginal effect falling below the sensitivity threshold the sample was powered to detect (Section 3.2), positioning the weak result as a boundary condition on the two-sided–credibility link rather than a contradiction.

In contrast, the path from source perceptions to behavioural intention was fully supported. Perceived authenticity ($\beta = .38$) and perceived credibility ($\beta = .50$) each significantly predict trust in the influencer's recommendation (H4 and H5 supported; both $p < .001$), trust strongly predicted attitude toward the product ($\beta = .63$; H6 supported) and attitude in turn predicted purchase intention ($\beta = .70$; H7 supported), consistent with the attitude-to-intention link central to the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). Bootstrap serial mediation analyses with 5,000 resamples confirmed that both source perceptions exerted significant indirect effects on purchase intention through trust and attitude, with 95% percentile confidence intervals excluding zero for both the authenticity chain (indirect effect = 0.127, 95% CI [0.058, 0.207]) and the credibility chain (indirect effect = 0.135, 95% CI [0.040, 0.252]; H8 supported for both pathways).

Supplementary analyses (reported in Appendix D) further established a complete four-stage pathway from the experimental manipulation to purchase intention. Specifically, two-sided messages indirectly increased purchase intention through the sequence Authenticity $\rightarrow$ Trust $\rightarrow$ Attitude (indirect effect = 0.116, 95% CI [0.043, 0.217]), representing the only experimental-condition pathway to produce a statistically significant downstream effect. The remaining three chains, sidedness via credibility (95% CI [-0.004, 0.128]), fit via authenticity and fit via credibility, were non-significant. Although these indirect effects were modest in absolute magnitude, their consistent direction and the robustness of the bootstrap confidence intervals support the proposed chain. The dual-pathway structure held

at the level of the source perceptions, both authenticity and credibility produced significant serial indirect effects on purchase intention (H8), but only the authenticity chain transmitted the experimental manipulation through to purchase intention. Perceived authenticity therefore emerges as the dominant mediating mechanism in single-exposure influencer marketing contexts.

5.2 Theoretical contributions

The findings make four theoretical contributions to the influencer marketing literature. First, perceived authenticity emerges as the dominant peripheral cue driving consumer response in single-exposure influencer contexts. While both authenticity and credibility functioned as effective mediators (H4, H5 and H8), only the pathway routed through perceived authenticity carried the effect of the experimental manipulation through to purchase intention. This pattern is consistent with the theoretical proposition developed in Chapter II that authenticity and credibility, although strongly related, are not interchangeable: they responded differently to the manipulation, with two-sided messaging raising authenticity significantly more than credibility (Section 4.4). The source-credibility framework (Ohanian, 1990) remains relevant, credibility still predicted trust, attitude and purchase intention, but in single-exposure encounters with unfamiliar influencers, authenticity is the more responsive construct when post-level cues are manipulated.

Second, the study shows that source perceptions can form rapidly from post-level cues alone, without accumulated parasocial history. Much existing research relies on participants who already follow the influencer, making it hard to isolate which post-level cues drive perceptions independent of prior impressions (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Using a fictional influencer in a single-exposure design removes that history (Horton & Wohl, 1956) and shows that authenticity and credibility can emerge from message- and endorsement-level cues alone. This aligns with the peripheral route of the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) and supports low-familiarity designs for isolating cue-based perception formation, consistent with Kim and Kim's (2021) finding that authenticity-to-trust effects are strongest under weak relational ties.

Third, the results are suggestive of, but cannot establish, a dissociation between communication strategies and endorsement characteristics in shaping source perceptions. Two-sidedness, a property of the message itself, produced a robust effect on authenticity,

while influencer-product fit, a property of the endorsement context, did not significantly shape either authenticity or credibility. This pattern complicates the implicit assumption in match-up hypothesis research (Kamins, 1990; Kamins & Gupta, 1994) and its influencer extensions (Breves et al., 2019; Janssen et al., 2022) that endorsement-level congruence is a driver of effectiveness. The present data instead suggest that, in the single-exposure conditions studied here, what an influencer says may carry more diagnostic weight than who is doing the recommending. This conclusion must, however, be interpreted with caution: the fit manipulation was comparatively weak (Cohen's $d = 0.42$ vs. 1.86), so the dissociation is best read as a tentative direction warranting replication with stronger fit manipulations. This issue is examined in greater detail in Section 5.4.

Fourth, the findings extend recent field evidence that acknowledging product limitations strengthens rather than undermines consumer response (Liao & Chen, 2024) to a controlled experimental setting. Liao and Chen's field data provide external validity; the present study adds internal validity through random assignment and controlled stimuli, showing that two-sidedness remains advantageous in single-exposure encounters with unfamiliar influencers among Gen Z audiences in German-speaking Europe. The field and experimental evidence thus converge: disclosure of product limitations is a robust authenticity-building strategy.

5.3 Practical implications

The findings carry several actionable insights for brands, influencers and managers, the most central being the strategic value of two-sided messaging. The present study provides causal evidence that endorsements acknowledging both positive and negative product attributes generate significantly higher perceived authenticity than purely promotional one-sided endorsements. This authenticity advantage propagates through trust and attitude to purchase intention. This directly informs how brands brief and empower influencers. Rather than directing influencers to deliver exclusively positive evaluations, the dominant convention in commercial briefs, brands should encourage them to voluntarily disclose minor product limitations alongside benefits. This presupposes, however, that the disclosed limitations are genuine rather than manufactured and that the influencer's communication is consistent with brand-influencer agreements and platform guidelines.

For influencers, strategic transparency offers a competitive advantage in an industry marked by audience scepticism toward commercial content (Duffek et al., 2025; Hudders

et al., 2021). Acknowledging product trade-offs is not a concession of weakness, but an act of communicative authenticity, which audiences interpret as evidence of genuine endorsement rather than purely commercial motivation. This matters especially for influencers who grow their audiences, where each new viewer forms source-perception judgements rapidly from individual posts.

The findings also speak to the commercial-authenticity tension raised by Duffek et al. (2025) and Hudders et al. (2021), the concern that commercialisation erodes audience trust. The present evidence suggests this ‘‘authenticity crisis’’ can be mitigated through specific communicative choices rather than by limiting sponsorship volume: transparency in commercial communication is itself an authenticity strategy. For the broader industry, this implies that briefing strategies prioritising polished promotional language may undermine the very mechanism through which influencer marketing works. A more grounded approach would encourage influencers to discuss products in balanced terms.

5.4 Limitations & future research directions

The findings of the present study should be interpreted in light of several methodological and design constraints that bound the conclusions drawn in Sections 5.2 and 5.3. Each constraint also opens a concrete forward research direction. Six limitations are discussed below, ordered from those most consequential for the theoretical claims to those bounding behavioural and measurement inference, before the section closes with the most theoretically interesting study this research programme could next undertake.

The first and most consequential limitation concerns the strength of the influencer-product fit manipulation. As reported in Section 4.3, the fit manipulation passed conventional significance thresholds ($M_{\text{high}} = 5.38$; $M_{\text{low}} = 4.78$; $d = 0.42$) but produced a between-condition contrast approximately four times smaller than the sidedness manipulation ($d = 1.86$). The null results on H2a, H2b, H3a and H3b should therefore be read in part as a methodological constraint, not solely as the absence of a fit effect on either source perception. A successful but modest manipulation tells us that fit perceptions varied as designed, but it does not provide the between-condition variance required to detect downstream effects on authenticity, credibility, trust or purchase intention. It is the primary reason the dissociation between communication and endorsement characteristics must be read as a tentative direction rather than a definitive conclusion.

The weak fit manipulation appears to reflect a feature of Gen Z creator culture rather than a flaw in the match-up logic. The boundary between health and gaming niches has become porous: prominent gaming streamers carry supplement-brand partnerships and gym-tok aesthetics circulate across communities. The low-fit gaming persona was therefore less unambiguously incongruent for Gen Z audiences than the design assumed, compressing the contrast between the two fit conditions. Future research should select categories and niches in which the identity contrast is sharper for the focal population or use pretested exemplars whose niche identities are clearly incongruent. A stronger manipulation would also create the conditions under which the compensatory interaction predicted by H3 could be detected. The theoretical logic developed in Section 2.4 remains intact; the empirical test it requires has not yet been conducted.

A second limitation is the single-exposure design with fictional influencers, which removes accumulated parasocial history (Horton & Wohl, 1956). What Section 5.2 framed as a strength, isolating cue-based formation of source perceptions, also constrains the inferences the study can support. Real Instagram consumption typically involves repeated exposure to known influencers and the passionate-authenticity mechanism for fit developed in Section 2.3 plausibly requires audiences to have prior knowledge of the influencer's identity in order to evaluate whether the endorsement is consistent with it. The null on fit may therefore be a property of the cold-encounter context rather than a general feature of influencer marketing. Future research should therefore test whether the fit pathway emerges with repeated exposure to a familiar influencer and whether authenticity's first-exposure dominance fades as parasocial ties strengthen, as Kim and Kim's (2021) weak-tie finding would predict.

A third limitation concerns a known covariation between message sidedness and linguistic intensity that was deliberately accepted in the stimulus design. As described in Section 3.4, the one-sided scripts used more categorical, emphatic language (e.g., “magic fix”) while the two-sided scripts used qualified expressions (e.g., “energy stayed more even”), a covariation deliberately maintained, on the assumption that purely promotional and balanced sponsored content typically differ in tone as well as sidedness. This prioritised ecological validity and ensured a strong manipulation, but it also implies that the H1a effect of sidedness on perceived authenticity may partly reflect differences in linguistic intensity rather than sidedness alone. Future research could isolate each cue through a factorial design crossing sidedness (one- vs. two-sided) with linguistic intensity

(categorical vs. qualified). Because the present design did not measure elaboration, it cannot establish which processing route was engaged.

A fourth limitation concerns the behavioural and ecological scope of the design. Purchase intention served as a proxy rather than an observed outcome and the intention-behaviour gap is well-documented (Sheeran & Webb, 2016). The indirect effect reported in Appendix D should therefore be read as an effect on intention, not as a forecast of actual behaviour. The single product category compounds this: the study used one dietary supplement powder, and authenticity gains from two-sided messaging may vary across categories with different involvement and credence profiles. The direction is theoretically ambiguous, peripheral-cue logic predicts that authenticity matters more in low-involvement contexts, a central-route explanation predicts the opposite, and resolving it is itself a question for future research. Finally, the Reel stimuli omitted an explicit paid-partnership disclosure (Section 3.4), a consequential cue whose documented effects on persuasion knowledge and brand attitudes would otherwise confound the manipulation (Eisend et al., 2020). The findings therefore speak to implicit-sponsorship contexts; an explicit-disclosure condition might activate persuasion knowledge more strongly (Friestad & Wright, 1994). Future research should combine behavioural outcome measurement with multi-category replication and explicit disclosure.

A fifth limitation concerns the composition of the sample. While random assignment protects the causal inferences reported in Chapter IV, generalisability is bounded by three features of the sample. The sample skewed male (65.0%), notable for a wellness category where women are typically the larger Instagram audience; this imbalance constrains gender-generalisability. Participants were recruited through Prolific, a paid online panel that over-represents particular demographic and motivational profiles relative to the general Instagram user base. Recruitment was further restricted to German-speaking Europe and authenticity norms in commercial communication may differ across cultural contexts in ways the present design cannot detect. Future research should test the model with gender-balanced, multi-region samples to assess whether the authenticity pathway documented here generalises to broader Gen Z populations.

A sixth limitation concerns the reliance on self-report. All dependent variables were assessed immediately after exposure using Likert and semantic-differential scales of similar format, raising the possibility that the strong intercorrelations among constructs

(Table 1) are partly inflated by common-method variance (Podsakoff et al., 2003). The direction and significance of the path coefficients in Section 4.5 are robust, but their absolute magnitudes should be read with this caveat in mind. Future research could mitigate it through behavioural, physiological or implicit measures and time-lagged designs that separate the measurement of mediator and outcome constructs. Relatedly, the strong intercorrelations mean authenticity, credibility and trust may be overlapping facets of a broader source-evaluation process rather than fully distinct constructs. Although they responded differently to the manipulation, formally establishing their discriminant validity is a task for future research. Finally, although the framework theorised transparent authenticity as the pathway for sidedness (Section 2.2) and passionate authenticity for fit (Section 2.3), authenticity was measured as a single global construct, so the design captures each manipulation's effect on overall authenticity but cannot isolate the sub-form. While the passionate-transparent distinction has been operationalised at the level of influencer strategies (Liao & Chen, 2024), isolating it here would require a measure capturing followers' perceptions of each sub-form.

Taken together, these limitations point most directly toward a single next study. The theoretical logic of the compensatory hypothesis developed in Section 2.4, that two-sided messaging may be especially valuable when influencer-product fit is low, remains intact and untested by the present design. A future experiment that combines a stronger fit manipulation in a category with sharper niche boundaries, a multi-exposure design that permits parasocial history to accumulate and a behavioural outcome measure would resolve several of the present constraints simultaneously. Establishing whether authentic messaging can in fact serve as a strategic lever for brands working with incongruent influencers is, on the present evidence, the most theoretically and managerially consequential question this thesis leaves open.

5.5 Conclusion

The present study set out to answer a single research question: how do message sidedness and influencer-product fit jointly influence consumers' perceptions of authenticity and credibility in sponsored influencer posts and to what extent do these perceptions shape consumer responses to influencer marketing? A 2×2 between-subjects experiment with Gen Z Instagram users provided the empirical basis for the answer that follows.

The findings support a clear conclusion with respect to message sidedness. Two-sided endorsements significantly enhanced perceived authenticity. This authenticity carried through trust in the influencer's recommendation, attitude toward the product and purchase intention. The operative pathway is perceived authenticity, not perceived credibility: while credibility supported the downstream chain, only authenticity transmitted the experimental manipulation cleanly through to the consumer outcome. With respect to influencer-product fit, the answer is more cautious. Neither high fit nor the predicted interaction with Sidedness produced significant effects on authenticity or credibility perceptions. This null pattern is partly methodological, reflecting a comparatively weak fit manipulation in a Gen Z context, where the boundaries between health and gaming niches have become porous. And partly substantive, suggesting that fit-based authenticity perceptions may require the prior knowledge of an influencer's identity that the cold-encounter design deliberately removes. The null on fit is therefore not the absence of an answer but evidence on a boundary condition.

Taken together, these findings position the present thesis at three points in the influencer marketing literature. First, perceived authenticity and perceived credibility appear to respond differently to post-level cues and may not be interchangeable, though their strong intercorrelation means this dissociation needs further test. Second, message-level cues can carry the diagnostic weight that endorsement-level congruence did not, under the conditions tested here, at least in the initial-encounter contexts that characterise much of how new audiences meet influencers on Instagram. Third, the brief, single-exposure encounters that increasingly characterise how audiences first meet influencers are enough to form consequential source perceptions, a context that warrants more research attention than the established-relationship paradigm it has largely been studied through.

The most consequential question this thesis leaves open concerns the compensatory hypothesis developed in Chapter II: that two-sided messaging may be especially valuable when influencer-product fit is low. It remains theoretically intact and, under the conditions tested here, empirically untested.

6. References

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Appendices

Appendix A: Stimuli

A.1 Influencer profiles

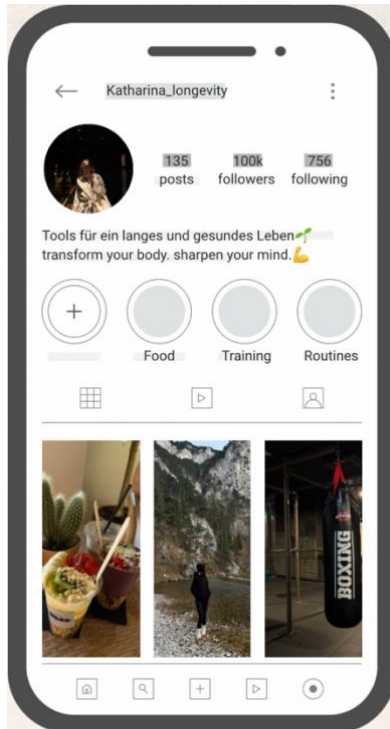


Figure A1. Influencer profile: high-fit

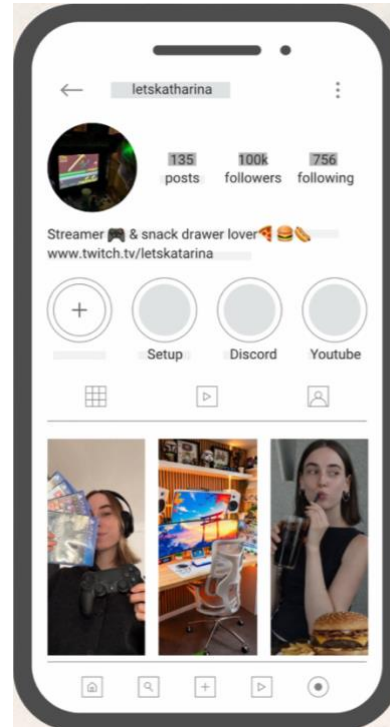


Figure A2. Influencer profile: low-fit

A.2 Reel scripts

Table A1. Reel scripts by condition

Script block	Condition	Text
Identity (<i>fit manipulation</i>)	High fit	“Hey guys, as you know I'm all about health, fitness and longevity. A big part of my routine is getting my body exactly what it needs.”
	Low fit	“Hey guys, as you know I'm a full-time streamer, so I spend long hours on my desk gaming and streaming, sometimes late into the night.”

Product introduction	All conditions	“For the past few weeks I've been using a supplement powder called VitalCore. You just mix it with water and it supports energy, immune function and digestion.”
Usage context (<i>fit manipulation</i>)	High fit	“I started it because on busy days, my energy would drop and I just didn't want to rely on coffee all the time.”
	Low fit	“I tried it because during long streams my focus drops and I didn't want to keep relying on energy drinks.”
Product evaluations (<i>sidedness manipulation</i>)	Two-sided	“But I have to be honest, it wasn't perfect right away. I had to get used to the taste and in the first few days I didn't notice much difference. But after using it consistently though, my energy stayed more even during longer workouts/streams and I also didn't crash as hard afterward. But don't get me wrong guys, it's not a magic fix, but over time it fit perfectly into my routine. This is just the kind of support I need during long days.”
	One-sided	“I swear to god, this is next-level incredible. The taste is perfect and I felt like a completely new person right away. The second I used it, my workouts/streams felt better, I have more energy and I just feel amazing. This product fits perfectly into my routine, no downside at all. It does exactly what it's supposed to do, it gives me all the support and no effort needed.”
Closing / Call-to-action	All conditions	“If you care about health and want something simple to add to your routine, this could be interesting to look into.”

A.3 Reel captions (by sidedness condition)

Two-sided: “Honest take after using the VitalCore supplement powder for a while. Took some time to get used to, but then it really supported my energy and digestion. A solid support for everyday life.”

One-sided: “Honestly, the VitalCore supplement powder is a game changer. Perfect taste, instant benefits and it supported my energy and digestion right away. Fits perfectly into my everyday routine.”

Appendix B: Measurement instrument

Unless otherwise noted, all multi-item scales used 7-point response formats. Likert items ranged from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree; semantic-differential items ranged from 1 to 7 between the anchors shown. Reliabilities (Cronbach's α / Spearman–Brown ρ) are reported in Section 3.5.

B.0 Screening and eligibility

1. Prolific ID: “For Prolific users, please indicate your unique Prolific ID:” (open text)
2. Age eligibility: “Are you between 18 and 30 years old?” (Yes / No)
3. Country of residence: “In which country do you currently live?” (Austria / Germany / Switzerland / Luxembourg / None of the above)
4. Instagram use: “How often do you use Instagram?” (Daily / Several times a week / About once a week / Less often / Never)

B.1 Dependent variables

Perceived authenticity (Likert; Moulard et al., 2015). Stem: “In this Instagram Reel (video), the message...”

1. ...is genuine.
2. ...seems real to me.
3. ...is authentic.

Perceived credibility (semantic differential; Ohanian, 1990). Stem: “Based on the content I just saw, I think the influencer is...”

not an expert – an expert · unknowledgeable – knowledgeable · unqualified – qualified · untrustworthy – trustworthy · insincere – sincere · unreliable – reliable

Trust in the influencer's recommendation (Likert; Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). Stem: “Based on the content you just saw, please indicate your level of agreement...”

1. I trust this influencer's recommendations.
2. I would rely on this influencer for information about products like this.
3. This influencer is an honest source for product information.
4. This recommendation is safe.

Attitude toward the product (semantic differential; Spears & Singh, 2004). Stem: “Please indicate your overall evaluation of the product on each of the following scales:”

unappealing – appealing · bad – good · unpleasant – pleasant · unfavourable – favourable · unlikeable – likeable

Purchase intention (semantic differential; Spears & Singh, 2004). Stem: “Please indicate how likely you would be to purchase this product:”

never – definitely · definitely do not intend to buy – definitely intend to buy · very low purchase interest – very high purchase interest · definitely not buy it – definitely buy it · probably not buy it – probably buy it

B.2 Manipulation checks

Message sidedness (Likert; De Veirman & Hudders, 2020). Stem: “To what extent do you agree with the following statements:”

1. The Instagram Reel only gives opinions in favour of the product. (*reverse-coded*)
2. The Instagram Reel gives both opinions in favour of and against the product.

Influencer–product fit (semantic differential; Till & Busler, 2000). Stem: “I think the combination of the influencer and the product:”

does not fit together – fits together · does not belong with – belongs with · does not go together – goes together

B.3 Attention checks

1. Self-report (after the Reel): “Have you carefully watched the video?” (Yes / No)
2. Product comprehension: “What type of product was shown in the video?” (A protein bar / A skincare cream / A supplement powder mixed with water)
3. Instructed response: “To show that you are paying attention, please select 'Agree' for this statement.” (7-point Likert)

B.4 Control variables

1. Following influencers: “Do you follow influencers/content creators on Instagram?” (Yes / No)
2. Dietary-supplement use: “How often do you use dietary supplements (e.g., vitamins, powders, capsules)?” (5-point: Never / Rarely (a few times a year) / Sometimes (about once a month) / Often (about once a week) / Very often (several times per week or daily))
3. Interest in fitness/health/wellness content: “How interested are you in fitness/health/wellness content on social media?” (7-point: not at all interested – extremely interested)
4. Interest in gaming/streaming content: “How interested are you in gaming/streaming content on social media?” (7-point: not at all interested – extremely interested)

B.5 Demographics

1. Age: “What is your age (in years)?” (open numeric)

2. Gender: “What is your gender?” (Female / Male / Non-binary / Prefer not to say)
3. Education: “What is your highest completed level of education?” (Secondary school / Apprenticeship / Bachelor's degree / Master's degree / Doctorate / Other or prefer not to say)
4. English proficiency: “Which best describes your English proficiency?” (Not fluent / Somewhat fluent / Fluent / Very fluent or native)

Appendix C: OLS regression assumption diagnostics for H4-H7

Table C1. OLS regression assumption diagnostics for H4-H7

Regression model	Test	Statistic	<i>p</i>	Conclusion
Trust ~ Authenticity + Credibility (H4,H5)	Breusch-Pagan	$\chi^2(1) = 1.36$	.244	Homoscedasticity holds
	Shapiro-Wilk (residuals)	$W = .990$	.404	Normality holds
	VIF (Authenticity, Credibility)	1.97 / 1.97	-	No multicollinearity (< 5)
Attitude ~ Trust (H6)	Breusch-Pagan	$\chi^2(1) = 0.02$	.894	Homoscedasticity holds
	Shapiro-Wilk (residuals)	$W = .987$	.179	Normality holds
PurchaseInt ~ Attitude (H7)	Breusch-Pagan	$\chi^2(1) = 5.74$	.017	Robust SEs applied
	Shapiro-Wilk (residuals)	$W = .988$	.237	Normality holds

Appendix D: Supplementary four-stage bootstrap mediation analyses

Four supplementary bootstrap mediation analyses were conducted to examine whether the experimental manipulations exerted indirect effects on purchase intention through the full theoretical pathway. Each model traced a 4-stage chain from one experimental factor (sidedness or fit) through one source perception (authenticity or credibility), then through trust in the influencer's recommendation, attitude toward the product and finally to purchase intention. Each downstream path was estimated controlling for all upstream variables in the chain, following the Hayes-style specification used in Section 4.6. Indirect effects were tested with 5,000 bootstrap resamples and 95% percentile confidence intervals. Results are reported in Table D1.

Only one of the four chains produced a significant indirect effect: the pathway from message sidedness through perceived authenticity, indirect effect = 0.116, $SE_{boot} = 0.045$, 95% CI [0.043, 0.217]. Viewing a two-sided rather than a one-sided endorsement increased perceived authenticity, which raised trust, which improved attitude toward the product, which in turn elevated purchase intention.

The parallel pathway from message sidedness through perceived credibility was not significant, indirect effect = 0.049, $SE_{boot} = 0.034$, 95% CI [-0.004, 0.128]. This pattern is consistent with the marginal main effect of sidedness on credibility reported in Section 4.4 (H1b) and indicates that sidedness influences purchase intention primarily through perceived authenticity rather than perceived credibility.

The two indirect effects involving the fit manipulation were both non-significant (indirect effects = -0.005 and 0.004 for the authenticity and credibility chains, respectively, with confidence intervals including zero). This null pattern is consistent with the absence of fit main effects on either source perception (H2a, H2b).

These supplementary analyses converge with the main results: message sidedness propagates to purchase intention through perceived authenticity, whereas the fit manipulation produced no detectable downstream consequences on the focal outcome.

Table D1. Bootstrap 4-stage serial mediation: experimental manipulation → source perception → trust → attitude → purchase intention ($N = 143$; 5,000 bootstrap resamples)

Chain	Indirect Effect	SE_{boot}	95% CI	Significant?
Sidedness → Authenticity → Trust → Attitude → PI	0.116	0.045	[0.043, 0.217]	Yes
Sidedness → Credibility → Trust → Attitude → PI	0.049	0.034	[-0.004, 0.128]	No
Fit → Authenticity → Trust → Attitude → PI	-0.005	0.033	[-0.068, 0.064]	No
Fit → Credibility → Trust → Attitude → PI	0.004	0.029	[-0.050, 0.070]	No

Note: Each downstream path was estimated controlling for all upstream variables. The sidedness condition was coded 0 = one-sided, 1 = two-sided; the fit condition was coded 0 = low fit, 1 = high fit. Confidence intervals are percentile-based bootstrap intervals.

Appendix E: Declaration on the use of Artificial Intelligence

In accordance with the University of Vienna's guidelines on the use of AI in studies, I disclose that AI-supported tools were used as auxiliary aids in the preparation of this thesis. ChatGPT (OpenAI) and Claude (Anthropic) were used to revise draft passages stylistically and improve readability, to suggest more concise formulations, to check the manuscript for internal consistency, to assist with formatting the reference list and to support the creation of the conceptual-model figure (Figure 1). The tools were used exclusively in a supportive capacity. The research question, hypotheses, study design, data collection, statistical analysis, interpretation of results and all substantive arguments were developed independently by the author. All AI-generated suggestions were critically reviewed, selected, adapted and verified by the author, who bears sole responsibility for the content and accuracy of this thesis. Their use complies with the applicable AI guidelines of the University of Vienna and did not replace independent academic work.