Global Advances in Business Studies (GABS), 2025, 4(1), 14-25
GLOBAL ADVANCES IN BUSINESS STUDIES (GABS)
http://journal-gabs.org/gabs

From likes to loyalty: a netnographic study on trust-building in influencer-audience interactions on social media

Noor Fzlinda Fabeil[1], Zaiton Osman[1,*], Riesanti Edie Wijaya[2], Nur Ika Mauliyah[3], Harkaneri[4], Bushra Siddiqui[5]

[1]Faculty of Business, Economics and Accountancy Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia
[2]Faculty of Business and Economics Universitas Surabaya, Indonesia
[3]Faculty of Islamic Business and Economics Universitas Islam Negeri Kiai Haji Achmad Siddiq, Jember, Indonesia
[4]Faculty of Economics and Social Sciences Universitas Islam Negeri Sultan Syarif Kasim, Riau, Indonesia
[5]Faculty of Sociology Jamia Millia Islamia, Delhi, India

Article info

Article history:
Received: 15 January 2025
Accepted: 12 March 2025
Published: 25 March 2025

Keywords:
trust-building;
influencer marketing;
living netnography;
authenticity and engagement;
cultural alignment

Abstract

This study explores the key themes of trust-building in influencer-audience interactions on social media using a netnographic study. Living netnography explores trust-building, not just based on the actual posting in the social media, but through spiritual paradigm, that might construct the reality and values of trust. The analysis draws on three weeks of observational data from Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, and TikTok, focusing on three influencers from different cultural and regional backgrounds. By lurking at the audiences' comments and emojis on the influencer's posting, this study provides five clusters of trust-building based on relevant codes emerged from the data. The findings suggest authenticity, emotional engagement, responsiveness, economic inclusivity and religiosity have explained the meaning of trust. By integrating theoretical and practical insights, the study provides a schematic framework for fostering trust in influencer marketing, highlighting the importance of cultural values in digital environment from the non-Western context perspective.

JEL classifications: M31

Citation:
Fabeil, N.F., Osman, Z., Wijaya, R.E., Mauliyah, N.I., Harkaneri, and Siddiqui, B. (2025). From likes to loyalty: a netnographic study on trust-building in influencer-audience interactions on social media. *Global Advances in Business Studies*, 4(1), 14-25, https://doi.org/10.55584/Gabs.004.01.2

*Corresponding author: Zaiton Osman
zaiosman@ums.edu.my

E-ISSN: 2828-8394
doi.org/10.55584/Gabs.004.01.2

1. Introduction

The evolution of influencer marketing has undergone a transformative shift, driven by the pervasive influence of social media platforms and consumers' increasing emphasis on authenticity and trust. Originally rooted in traditional celebrity endorsements, influencer marketing has expanded to feature social media personalities who cultivate direct and personal connections with their audiences. Platforms such as Instagram and TikTok have further facilitated this transformation, fostering enhanced engagement and influence through interactive content (Joshi et al., 2023). However, the rise of this phenomenon also underscores critical challenges in maintaining authenticity and building trust. Authenticity and trust are pivotal in influencer marketing, shaping how audiences perceive and engage with content. Despite their importance, maintaining these qualities remains challenging due to increasing commercialization and audience scepticism. This study investigates how influencers navigate these complexities to build meaningful connections. In this context, authenticity extends beyond surface-level sincerity, requiring influencers to align their endorsements with their values and lifestyle to foster deeper connections with their audiences. The shift from traditional endorsements to influencer-driven marketing has amplified the importance of authenticity. While audiences value relatable and trustworthy content, the promotional nature of influencer marketing can undermine credibility. Exploring these dynamics is critical to understanding the evolving relationship between influencers and their audiences. Compounding this issue is the sheer volume of influencer content, which can desensitize consumers, fostering scepticism toward all influencer endorsements regardless of their authenticity. These challenges underscore the necessity for ongoing research into innovative and effective trust-building strategies to sustain influencer credibility in a rapidly evolving digital marketplace.

Trust on social media, particularly in influencer marketing, presents evolving challenges shaped by user interactions and experiences. As audiences grow more discerning, scepticism about influencers' authenticity and product endorsements increases, affecting trust and purchase intentions (Akdim, 2023; Rad et al., 2023). This highlights the need to continuously monitor influencer-audience relationships. While prior studies have examined influencer marketing, few have explored trust development through real-time, immersive methods like living netnography (Rajko et al., 2017; MacCarthy & Fanning, 2020). This study addresses that gap by analysing trust formation through unfiltered social media interactions over time. By applying trust-building factors from the literature and examining user feedback across major platforms, the research aims to uncover how influencers establish credibility, sustain emotional engagement, and navigate cultural expectations. The findings have implications for academic research and marketing, offering insights into designing more transparent, culturally sensitive, and emotionally resonant influencer campaigns (MacCarthy & Fanning, 2020; Kozinets et al., 2018). Transparency in sponsorships and partnerships is another critical factor influencing trust. Social media audiences are more likely to trust influencers who clearly disclose their paid collaborations, striking a balance between authentic product recommendations and promotional content. With living netnography, researchers can capture how influencers' approaches to disclosure are perceived by their audiences and how these perceptions evolve with each new campaign or post. Consistency in honesty and reliability also plays a vital role in building trust. Influencers need to maintain a steady reputation for transparency to cultivate trust over time. Living netnography allows researchers to identify whether influencers manage to uphold or undermine their credibility as they interact with their followers across various platforms.

Economic sensitivity and inclusivity is another area of concern for trust in influencer marketing. Promoting luxury or high-end products without acknowledging the economic diversity of the audience can alienate segments of followers, weakening trust. By employing living netnography, researchers can observe how an influencer's content strategy—whether

inclusive of budget-friendly options or focused solely on high-end items—impacts their audience's trust over a longer period. Similarly, trust is influenced by how influencers handle balanced engagement and constructive feedback. Audiences appreciate influencers who acknowledge and thoughtfully respond to constructive criticism. Living netnography enables researchers to observe these interactions in real-time, providing insights into how influencers adapt their content and engage with feedback to either strengthen or weaken their trustworthiness. Lastly, emotional and relational connections play a crucial role in trust-building. Trust on social media extends beyond product reviews; it is rooted in the emotional bonds that influencers create with their audiences through relatable stories and genuine engagement. Living netnography allows researchers to see how these connections are built and maintained, offering a lens into the dynamics of trust that develop through ongoing interactions, storytelling, and shared experiences. This comprehensive, immersive approach highlights the fluid and multi-dimensional nature of trust on social media, revealing how trust evolves as influencers and audiences navigate the complex landscape of online interactions.

Trust on social media, particularly in influencer marketing, presents complex and evolving challenges driven by user interactions and experiences. As audiences become increasingly discerning, scepticism about influencers' authenticity and product endorsements grows, affecting trust levels and purchase intentions (Akdim, 2023; Rad et al., 2023). This dynamic underscore the need for continuous monitoring of influencer-audience relationships. While prior studies have examined influencer marketing, few have explored trust development through real-time, immersive methods such as living netnography. This study seeks to fill that gap by analysing trust formation through authentic, unfiltered social media interactions over time. By applying trust-building key factors as mentioned in the literature and examining user feedback across major social platforms, the research aims to uncover how influencers establish credibility, sustain emotional engagement, and navigate cultural expectations. The study's findings have implications for both academic research and marketing practice, offering valuable insights into designing more transparent, culturally sensitive, and emotionally resonant influencer campaigns.

This study explores how influencers communicate trust and credibility through consistent and transparent interactions. By focusing on audience perspectives, it examines how influencers build meaningful connections, particularly through emotional engagement. The research investigates how responsiveness and relatability foster lasting relationships and how influencers' content—through helpfulness, positivity, and constructive feedback—shapes audience trust. Additionally, it considers cultural and religious alignment in fostering shared identity and community and assesses how economic awareness enhances inclusivity. To provide deeper insights into trust-building dynamics, the study addresses the following questions:

1. How do influencers communicate trust and reliability, and how are these qualities perceived by their audiences?
2. What role does emotional engagement play in helping audiences form personal connections with influencers?
3. How do influencers' responsiveness and relatability support the development of lasting and interactive relationships with their audiences?
4. How does economic sensitivity in content creation enhance inclusivity and strengthen trust among diverse audiences?
5. How do cultural and religious alignment influence audience trust and foster a sense of shared identity or belonging?

2. Literature review

Influencers play a significant role in building trust with their audiences and connecting brands to consumers through strategies that emphasize authenticity, credibility, and engagement. By sharing personal experiences and stories related to the products they endorse, influencers create a sense of genuineness and relatability, making their recommendations more persuasive compared to traditional advertising (Kailash, 2024). A key factor in this process is the influencer's credibility. Research shows that trusted influencers significantly impact consumer purchase decisions, particularly in industries like beauty, where product reviews influence perceptions and buying confidence (Cresentia & Nainggolan, 2022; Nuji et al., 2023). Maintaining trust requires influencers to align content with their personal values and consistently deliver reliable and predictable updates, which enhance authenticity and long-term engagement (Schram, 2024; Merz, 2019). Audience engagement further solidifies trust by fostering interactive, two-way communication. Activities such as responding to comments, answering messages, and sharing user-generated content strengthen relationships and build a sense of community (Nuji et al., 2023; Wang & Chan-Olmsted, 2024). Relatability is enhanced when influencers present themselves as approachable and share experiences that resonate with their followers, creating deeper connections. Similarly, interactive content and community-building activities foster a shared sense of belonging (Wang & Chan-Olmsted, 2022). Balancing promotional content with regular, value-driven posts is essential for maintaining authenticity. Successful influencers integrate sponsored content seamlessly into their brand identity and prioritize partnerships that align with their audience's interests. Careful selection of collaborations ensures influencers remain credible and avoid alienating their followers (Kailash, 2024; Wang & Chan-Olmsted, 2024). However, challenges such as over-commercialization and perceived inauthentic endorsements can lead to audience scepticism. To navigate these concerns, influencers must prioritize transparency, ethical behaviour, and the careful curation of content. By balancing authenticity, engagement, and promotional activities, influencers can sustain trust, nurture meaningful connections, and promote long-term audience loyalty (Merz, 2019).

Trust among social media influencers is shaped by various factors that remain subject to exploration and contextual understanding. Preliminary insights from existing literature suggest potential influences such as authenticity, emotional and relational engagement, helpfulness, scepticism, and cultural considerations. However, this study seeks to uncover and contextualize these factors and others that may emerge, shedding light on the dynamic and evolving nature of trust in virtual ecosystem. Research emphasizes authenticity as a multifaceted construct, involving sincerity, trustworthiness, and alignment with audience values (Balaban & Szambolics, 2022). Challenges such as over-commercialization and scepticism complicate the trust-building process (Gamage & Ashill, 2022). This study builds on these insights by examining how influencers leverage authenticity and trust to foster loyalty. Furthermore, it is evidence that emotional and relational engagement further enhances trust through empathic concern and perspective-taking, which foster affective trust essential for long-term follower relationships (Zhao et al., 2013). Parasocial interactions driven by media richness create strong emotional bonds that significantly influence their followers. Moreover, influencers that provide helpful content and creating positive impacts can contribute to building trust. Influencers who deliver valuable, practical advice increase cognitive trust, resulting in higher engagement and loyalty (Zhao et al., 2013). Additionally, influencers who positively impact followers' lives, such as influencing travel decisions, foster greater trust in their recommendations (Pop et al., 2021). Trust-building among social media influencers is a dynamic process influenced by changing audience expectations and technological advancements. The interplay between media characteristics and authenticity underscores the complexity of maintaining credibility in the digital age, requiring influencers to adapt continuously to preserve engagement and trust.

Hence this study explores trust-building mechanisms in influencer-audience interactions, focusing on how authenticity, emotional engagement, responsiveness, and cultural alignment shape these dynamics.

3. Research methods

Qualitative research was chosen for its ability to provide rich, in-depth insights into social phenomena. Living netnography, proposed by Kozinets et al (2018), emphasizes immersive, longitudinal engagement with online communities, allowing researchers to experience digital interactions as they unfold. This method was preferred over surveys or interviews due to its ability to capture natural, unfiltered user interactions, which are crucial for understanding trust-building mechanisms.

3.1. Data collection process

Data collection employed the lurking technique, where the researcher observed online conversations without direct involvement. This passive approach reduced the likelihood of the observer effect, ensuring that participants' behaviour remained authentic. Observations took place from October 8 to October 30, 2024, providing a three-week window that allowed for the monitoring of new content releases, audience reactions, and recurring engagement patterns. The three-week observation period was carefully chosen to align with the goals of the study and the principles of living netnography. This In-depth and real-time method emphasizes capturing real-time interactions, making this duration sufficient for identifying recurring patterns and emergent themes. By observing multiple influencers across four major social media platforms, the study captured diverse engagement dynamics within a manageable timeframe. Although the scope of the observation was limited to short-term interactions, the findings provide valuable insights into trust-building mechanisms that can inform future longitudinal research. Data were recorded through systematic screenshots, platform analytics, and manual notetaking. This mixed approach ensured comprehensive data capture while maintaining accuracy and context-specific interpretations.

3.2. Data sources and selection criteria

The study focused on four major social media platforms: Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, and TikTok. These platforms were selected for their global reach, diverse user demographics, and prominence in influencer marketing. The influencers chosen for the study were (i) Neelofa, a prominent Malaysian entrepreneur and media figure known for her brand endorsements and social advocacy, (ii) Alfiya Karim Khan, an Indian influencer celebrated for her detailed skincare product reviews, offering an informative and relatable persona, (iii) Tasya Farasya, an Indonesian beauty content creator with significant regional and international reach. Selection was based on their extensive follower bases, consistent content creation, and history of high engagement, which made them ideal for studying influencer-audience dynamics. The study examined various data points to understand how influencer content fosters trust-based interactions. User interactions such as comments, replies, and discussion threads provided insight into audience engagement and the nature of conversations sparked by influencer posts. Engagement metrics, including likes, shares, and views, offered quantifiable indicators of audience responsiveness and the overall reach of the content. Additionally, symbolic communication elements like emojis, hashtags, and other visual cues revealed the emotional undertones and contextual meanings embedded in online exchanges. Together, these data points facilitated a comprehensive, multi-dimensional analysis of how influencers generate trust through content-driven interactions.

3.3. Data analysis approach

Thematic analysis was employed to interpret the collected data. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework, data were systematically coded and categorized into themes related to trust-building mechanisms. The data analysis process began with familiarization, during which the researcher thoroughly reviewed the collected data to develop a foundational understanding of the content. This initial phase enabled the researcher to immerse himself in the data, noting key interactions and emerging patterns. Following this, the process of generating initial codes commenced. Recurring elements such as expressions of appreciation, claims of trustworthiness, and product endorsements were systematically identified. These codes highlighted common interactional motifs that signalled trust-related dynamics within influencer-audience engagements. Next, similar codes were grouped into broader thematic categories. For instance, codes reflecting emotional engagement, reliability signals, and audience empowerment were clustered together, forming meaningful themes that encapsulated core aspects of trust-building. Once these preliminary themes were established, a detailed review process ensued. Themes were refined to ensure clarity, coherence, and distinctiveness, eliminating overlap and sharpening focus. This refinement strengthened the thematic structure, ensuring that each category captured a unique aspect of the trust-building process. The final step involved defining and naming each theme clearly. Representative data excerpts were selected to illustrate key findings, grounding abstract themes in concrete examples. This systematic approach culminated in the production of a comprehensive narrative, weaving together the study's findings into a coherent, evidence-based interpretation of how trust is cultivated within digital influencer-audience interactions.

To enhance the validity and reliability of findings, data triangulation was employed by integrating multiple sources and methods. Data were collected from four social media platforms, namely, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, and TikTok, providing diverse perspectives on influencer-audience interactions. Triangulation was further achieved by combining screenshots, platform analytics, and manual notetaking, enabling cross-validation of observations. For instance, comments analysed on Instagram were compared with similar interactions on YouTube to identify consistent patterns in trust-building mechanisms.

3.4. Ethical considerations

Ethical responsibility guided every stage of this research. Only publicly accessible data were analysed, ensuring that user privacy was not compromised. Identifiable information such as usernames, profile pictures, and personal details were anonymized to maintain confidentiality. The lurking approach was deliberately chosen to avoid researcher interference, ensuring that participant behaviour remained uninfluenced. Additionally, the study adhered strictly to the terms of service and privacy policies of each social media platform. This compliance underscored the research's commitment to legal and ethical standards while respecting community norms in the digital space. This study adhered to ethical standards outlined by the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR), ensuring that only publicly available data were analysed. User privacy was protected by anonymizing all identifying information, including usernames and profile images. Although informed consent was not sought due to the observational nature of the study, researchers strictly complied with platform terms of service and avoided direct interaction with participants, maintaining a non-intrusive role.

3.5. Analysis

The data were subjected to thematic analysis, a method that involves coding textual and visual data to identify recurring patterns and themes. This process allowed the categorization of netizen feedback into positive, constructive, and critical responses. Comments were

analysed to understand how trust and engagement were built and maintained, while emoji usage provided visual cues for the emotional tone and sentiment of the interactions. Positive feedback was characterized by themes such as trust and reliability, appreciation and affection, and the perceived helpfulness of content. Comments like "I fully trust your recommendations" illustrated the importance of consistent, transparent communication, reinforcing that trust is deeply rooted in perceived authenticity. This theme resonated with the Islamic values of Amanah (trustworthiness) and Sidq (truthfulness), which emphasize the significance of honesty in interactions. The use of emojis such as ♡ and 😊 further underscored emotional connections and audience loyalty, reflecting the netizens' strong appreciation for influencers who present reliable content.

Constructive and critical feedback highlighted themes such as balanced critique, economic considerations, and scepticism about product claims. For example, comments like "All of the products are expensive 😅" pointed to the need for influencers to be mindful of their audience's economic realities. This aligns with the Islamic principle of Qana'ah (contentment and moderation), which advocates for financial mindfulness and avoiding extravagance. Scepticism was often expressed through emojis like 😂, indicating humour or polite disagreement, as seen in comments questioning the authenticity of influencers' product use: "I think you buy these products for the video 😂." Such feedback emphasizes the need for transparency and visible product testing to reinforce trust. emoji sentiment analysis provided an additional layer of understanding, revealing the emotional nuances in netizen responses. Positive sentiments were often conveyed using ♡ to express love and deep appreciation, while 😊 signified satisfaction and happiness with the content. On the other hand, emojis like 😅 were used to signal polite critique, especially in discussions about product affordability or perceived inconsistencies in claims, suggesting a balance between disapproval and respect. Figure 1 shows the schematic diagrams of the key themes for trust, consisting of the 'reality' codes based on the interpretivism from social media observation, and the 'living values' (i.e. living netnography) based on the principles of Islam.

4. Results and discussions

4.1. Authenticity and trust-building

One of the most significant findings was the importance of authenticity in fostering trust between influencers and their audiences. Comments such as *"I always watch your videos first to trust the product"* and *"Her reviews are so genuine that I only purchase products she has reviewed"* illustrate that trust is heavily linked to the influencer's perceived trustworthiness (the audience relies on the influencer as a credible source of information) and genuineness (the influencer is perceived as sincere in their recommendations). This finding aligns with the Islamic principle of *Amanah* (trustworthiness), where sincerity and ethical behaviour are essential. The study revealed that influencers like Alfiya Karim Khan, who consistently demonstrated product knowledge and genuine usage, garnered significant loyalty from their followers, creating a cycle of trust that reinforced the community's reliance on her recommendations. The Qur'anic teaching, *"And speak the truth"* (Surah Al-Ahzab 33:70), encapsulates this finding, emphasizing that *Amanah* (trustworthiness) fosters positive, trustworthy relationships. The netnography showed that influencers who align their messaging with such principles resonate more profoundly with audiences who value transparency and ethical conduct.

4.2. Emotional engagement and trust-building

Another key theme was the strong emotional bond between influencers and their audiences. Comments like *"I adore you"*, *"Love your reviews"*, and *"Your recommendations*

are always top-notch and sincere" were often paired with emojis such as ♡ and 😊, indicating a deep-seated affection when they used warm, emotional language which reflects a sense of fondness. The frequent use of these emojis signified not just contentment but a sense of personal connection. This aligns with the concept of *Ihsan* (excellence in doing good) and *Rahmah* (compassion), where positive, sincere interactions build a supportive community. These findings suggest that influencers who engage authentically and show compassion in their interactions cultivate a sense of belonging among their followers. The reciprocal nature of this engagement was evident in comments requesting additional content, such as *"Please create more skincare content like this... We trust you!"* and *"We need the 5th part!"*. This level of interaction shows that audiences seek continuity and further engagement for a specific type of content, indicating alignment with their interests. Influencers' content was also seen as valuable when it provided tangible benefits to the audience. Comments such as *"The video helped me choose a good sunscreen"* and *"You genuinely saved me"* highlighted that audiences are highly appreciative of content that aids their decision-making. This theme ties into *Khidmah* (service to others) and *Shukr* (gratitude), illustrating how influencers can positively impact their audiences by offering detailed, practical advice. This helpfulness fosters a relationship where followers express gratitude through comments and positive emoji reactions like 👏 (clapping hands), which signifies appreciation and encouragement. It was also found that the audience's willingness to follow recommendations was influenced by the perceived expertise of the influencer, further reinforcing trust and engagement.

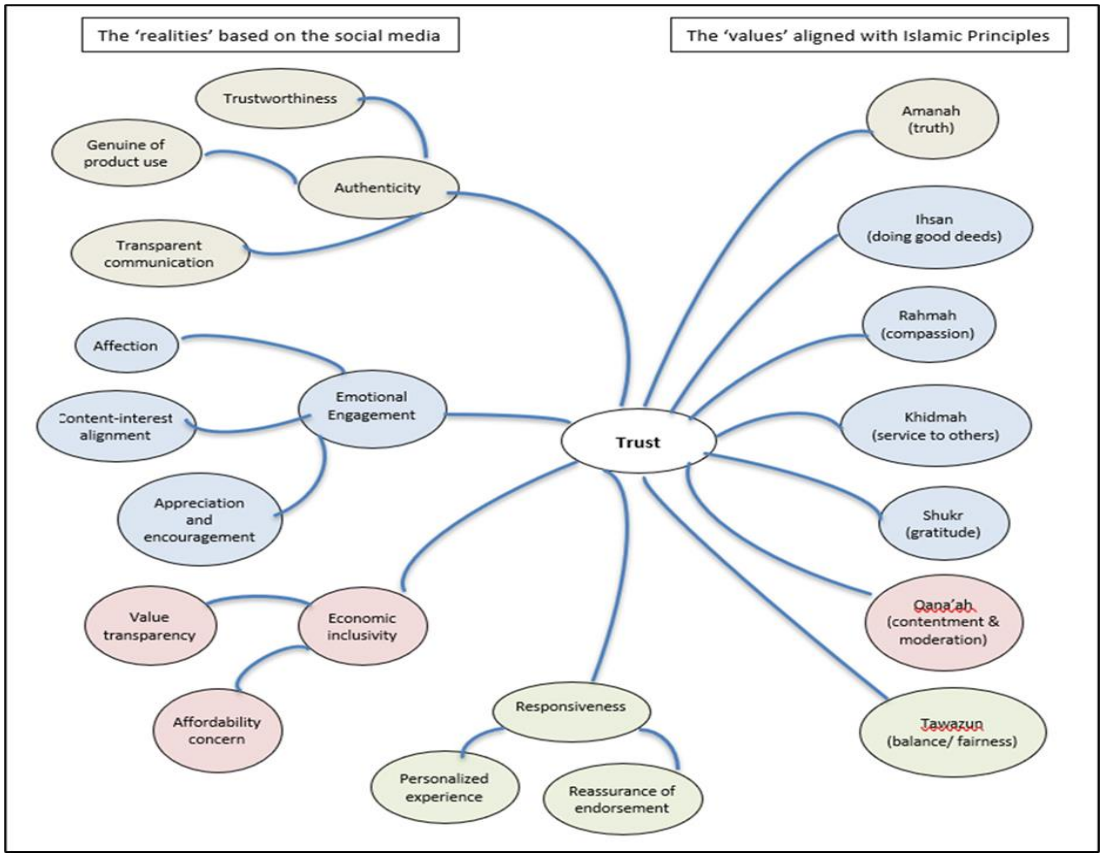

Figure 1. Schematic diagram of the codes and themes for trust based on social media observation

4.3. Economic inclusivity and trust-building

While there was a wealth of positive feedback, the analysis also revealed significant areas of critique, which were crucial for understanding the challenges influencers face. One

prominent theme was scepticism, often directed towards product claims. Comments like *"Please don't claim it's fragrance-free—it does have some scent"* reflected that audiences expects accurate product descriptions and value transparency. Another key finding was related to economic sensitivity. Comments such as *"All of the products are expensive 😅"* pointed to concerns about the affordability of recommended products. This aligns with the Islamic teaching of *Qana'ah* (contentment and moderation), which advises against promoting an overly extravagant lifestyle that may alienate parts of the audience. Emojis like 😅 (slight discomfort but responds playfully) were often used alongside comments about product prices, indicating a mix of emotions. This suggests that while audiences appreciate the influencer's expertise, they also wish for content that acknowledges diverse economic realities.

4.4. Responsiveness and trust-building

The study found that balanced feedback was a trait of smart netizen behaviour. Comments like *"The product suits you but not to us"* and *"I think you buy these products for the video 🤣"* demonstrated that audiences are actively participate in discussions, questioning the influencer's intent. The first comment shows a personalized experience which acknowledges that product effectiveness varies among individuals. The later comment shows audience seeks reassurances that the product reviews are based on influencer's real personal experiences. These comments align with the Islamic principles of *Tawazun* (balance) reflecting an audience that values fair and supportive discussions. Such constructive criticism helps maintain an environment where influencers can learn and adapt their content based on audience input. The emojis like 🤣 (representing humour or light scepticism) and 😅 (showing polite disagreement) highlighted how netizens used humour to express doubt or concerns without being confrontational. This feedback loop supports a culture of mutual growth and reinforces the idea that trust is not just built on praise but also on the ability to handle critique openly.

4.5. Religiosity and trust-building

A deeper layer of analysis showed that many positive themes and feedback were consistent with cultural and religious values, particularly in regions where Islamic teachings guide social norms. The alignment of values like *Amanah* (trustworthiness), *Sidq* (truthfulness), and *Qana'ah* (contentment and moderation) with the feedback suggested that influencers who naturally embody these principles resonate more strongly with their audiences. This cultural alignment strengthens trust and creates a community that values both authenticity and shared ethical principles. Overall, the study found that trust, authenticity, and relatable content are essential for building a loyal online following. Positive comments emphasized emotional connections, practical value, and trustworthiness, supported by emojis that conveyed strong affection and happiness. Constructive feedback highlighted the need for transparency, economic consideration, and balanced content that caters to different segments of the audience. Influencers who demonstrated knowledge, honesty, and empathy were perceived as more credible and trustworthy, fostering long-term relationships with their audiences. The inclusion of Islamic values, such as *Amanah, Ihsan*, and *Qana'ah*, showed that ethical and cultural considerations play a significant role in digital interactions and content reception.

5. Conclusions and suggestion

This study provides actionable insights for influencers and marketers aiming to enhance trust and strengthen audience relationships. Authenticity emerges as a cornerstone of trust-building, requiring influencers to align their endorsements with personal values and demonstrate genuine product use. Transparent content, such as behind-the-scenes accounts or detailed product reviews, fosters credibility and deeper audience connections. Emotional engagement further reinforces these relationships by creating meaningful connections through

relatable storytelling. Influencers who share personal journeys or challenges, particularly those highlighting the benefits of endorsed products, can evoke empathy and build audience loyalty. Responsiveness to audience feedback also plays a crucial role in trust-building. By acknowledging constructive criticism and incorporating it into their content strategies, influencers can create a collaborative dynamic with their audiences, demonstrating adaptability and care. Hosting live Q&A sessions or creating content that directly addresses audience concerns are effective ways to cultivate trust and encourage two-way interaction.

Cultural and religious sensitivity is another significant factor in fostering trust and a sense of belonging. Influencers should be mindful of shared values when engaging with culturally diverse audiences, ensuring that their messaging resonates with ethical and cultural principles. For example, highlighting halal certification or ethical sourcing in product promotions can strengthen connections with audiences who value such attributes. Economic inclusivity also enhances relatability, as audiences appreciate content that acknowledges their financial realities. By featuring a mix of premium and budget-friendly products, influencers can appeal to a broader demographic, ensuring that their content is accessible to both high-income and cost-conscious followers. These practical recommendations offer clear pathways for influencers and marketers to navigate trust-related challenges effectively.

This study contributes uniquely to the growing body of research on influencer marketing by introducing methodological and theoretical advancements. The use of living netnography is a significant innovation, capturing real-time, immersive data on digital interactions and enabling a deeper understanding of the dynamic processes underlying trust-building. Unlike traditional netnography, this approach allows for the observation of evolving audience perceptions, offering richer insights into influencer-audience relationships. Additionally, the study highlights the critical role of cultural and religious alignment in building trust, particularly in non-Western contexts, by integrating principles such as Amanah (trustworthiness) and Qana'ah (contentment). These culturally grounded insights diversify the global discourse on influencer marketing and emphasize the importance of tailoring strategies to regional and cultural nuances.

Although living netnography offered a deep understanding of influencer-audience dynamics, several limitations were recognized. One key constraint was the study's temporal scope. The three-week observation period, while sufficient for capturing short-term interactions, may not have fully reflected long-term trust-building processes that unfold over extended periods. Another consideration was the platform-specific nature of the findings. Since the study focused on major platforms like Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, and TikTok, the results may not be applicable to less prominent social media platforms with distinct community cultures and engagement norms. Additionally, cultural nuances tied to the influencers' regional contexts could have shaped the interpretation of certain interactions. Audience responses rooted in local customs, values, and linguistic expressions might have influenced how trust signals were perceived and analysed. Despite these challenges, the study's methodologically sound framework facilitated a thorough investigation of trust development in digital influencer-audience relationships. By combining systematic observation, thematic analysis, and ethical research practices, the study generated meaningful insights into the complex and evolving process of trust formation within online communities.

From a practical perspective, this research bridges theory and practice by offering actionable strategies for designing culturally sensitive, emotionally resonant, and economically inclusive influencer campaigns. By synthesizing key factors such as authenticity, emotional engagement, responsiveness, and inclusivity, the study expands the theoretical framework of trust-building, presenting a holistic understanding of how trust is cultivated, sustained, and strengthened in digital environments. These findings provide valuable guidance for both

academic researchers and marketing practitioners, advancing the discourse on trust dynamics in influencer marketing and offering strategies for fostering long-term audience loyalty.

References

Akdim, I. (2023). Acknowledging dynamic aspects of trust in recommender systems. *Proceedings of the 17th ACM Conference on Recommender Systems*, 1342–1343. https://doi.org/10.1145/3604915.3608881

Balaban, D. C., & Szambolics, J. (2022). A proposed model of self-perceived authenticity of social media influencers. *Media and Communication*, *10*(1). https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v10i1.4765

Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, 77-101

Cresentia, A., & Nainggolan, R. (2022). Pengaruh kredibilitas dan trustworthiness beauty influencer di instagram terhadap keputusan pembelian produk kosmetik wardah. *PERFORMA*, *6*(6), 526–535. https://doi.org/10.37715/jp.v6i6.2156

Gamage, T.C. & Ashill. N.J. (2022). Sponsored-influencer marketing: effects of the commercial orientation of influencer-created content on followers' willingness to search for information. *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, 32(2):316-329. doi:10.1108/jpbm-10-2021-3681

Joshi, Y., Weng, M., Lim., Khyati, Jagani., & Kumar, S. (2023). Social media influencer marketing: foundations, trends, and ways forward. *Electronic Commerce Research*, doi:10.1007/s10660-023-09719-z

Kailash, M.S.R (2024). Social Influence Strategies: unveiling the dynamics of Influencer Marketing in modern communication. *Shanlax International Journal of Management*, *11*(iS1-Jan), 48–54. https://doi.org/10.34293/management.v11iis1-jan.7139

Kozinets, R.V., Daiane, Scaraboto., Marie-Agnès, Parmentier. (2018). Evolving netnography: how brand auto-netnography, a netnographic sensibility, and more-than-human netnography can transform your research. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 34:231-242. doi: 10.1080/0267257X.2018.1446488

MacCarthy, M. & Fanning, S. (2020). From netnography to nethnography: an anzac commemorative experience trial. *Tourism Analysis*, doi: 10.3727/108354220X15957939969805

Merz, J. (2019). From trusted friend to trusted brand? Influencer marketing between trust and Mistrust. *Media Trust in a Digital World*, 117–126. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-30774-5_8

Nuji, M. N., Ali, A., Wan Noordin, W. N., Mohamed Thaheer, B. A., & Mathiew, V. (2023). Of trust and influence: a look at social media influencers and brand promotion. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, *13*(6). https://doi.org/10.6007/ijarbss/v13-i6/15444

Pop, R.-A., Săplăcan, Z., Dabija, D.-C., & Alt, M.-A. (2021). The impact of social media influencers on travel decisions: the role of trust in consumer decision journey. *Current Issues in Tourism*, *25*(5), 823–843. https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2021.1895729

Rad, D., Cuc, L. D., Lile, R., Cuc, P. N., Pantea, M. F., & Anta, D. (2023). Suspiciousness and fast and slow thinking impact on trust in recommender systems. *Proceedings of the International Conference on Business Excellence*, *17*(1), 1103–1118. https://doi.org/10.2478/picbe-2023-0099

Rajko, J., Wernimont, J., & Rajko, S. (2017). The living net: a haptic experience of personal data. 449-452. *Proceedings of the 2017 CHI Conference*, 449–452. doi: 10.1145/3027063.3050432

Schram, R. (2024). The trust factor: influencer marketing trends in 2024. *Journal of Brand Strategy*, *13*(2), 148. https://doi.org/10.69554/nejv7266

Wang, R., & Chan-Olmsted, S. (2024). Brand communication through social media influencers: trust building and trust transfer mechanisms. *International Journal of Business Communication*. https://doi.org/10.1177/23294884241255911

Zhao, J., Ha, S., & Widdows, R. (2013). Building trusting relationships in online health communities. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, *16*(9), 650–657. https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2012.0348