Understanding Consumer Trust in Social Media Advertising : A Comprehensive Review of Credibility, Authenticity, and Sustainability Communication

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──────────── **ABSTRACT** ────────────

The rapid rise of social media has changed how people encounter and interpret advertising, as messages now flow through a mix of brands, influencers, and online communities. In such an environment, trust has become the deciding factor behind whether consumers pay attention to an advertisement, engage with it, or simply ignore it. This paper reviews the growing body of work on three elements that strongly influence trust in social media advertising—credibility, authenticity, and sustainability-related communication. By examining research across communication studies, consumer behaviour, and digital marketing, the review explains how these cues shape the way audiences judge the sincerity and reliability of online messages. Credibility helps form the first layer of confidence in the source, authenticity creates a sense of relatability and emotional connection, and sustainability communication signals whether a brand's values align with broader social and environmental expectations. Together, these dimensions play a central role in how trust develops and how it affects attitudes and behavioural outcomes. The paper also proposes an integrated framework, highlights gaps in existing studies, and outlines directions for future research, particularly around measurement issues, cultural differences, platform-specific patterns, and the impact of emerging technologies on trust formation.

Introduction

Over the past decade, social media has shifted from a networking space to one of the most powerful global advertising ecosystems. Platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, Facebook, and X have become the primary arenas where brands, influencers, creators, and consumers interact continuously. For marketers, these platforms offer precise targeting, strong visual formats, measurable engagement, and the ability to weave promotional content into everyday browsing. As advertising spending on social media surpasses many traditional channels, understanding how audiences interpret and respond to such content has become increasingly important.

Despite its reach, trust in digital advertising has grown more fragile. Users frequently encounter sponsored posts, influencer endorsements, and algorithm-driven promotions, often without clear boundaries between genuine and paid content. Concerns around privacy, data use, and misleading claims have contributed to higher levels of skepticism. Today's consumers expect not just persuasive messaging but also transparency, sincerity, and responsible behavior from brands and influencers.

Within this context, three message-level cues—credibility, authenticity, and sustainability communication—play a critical role in shaping how advertisements are evaluated.

Credibility remains a core factor in persuasion but has expanded in meaning on social media. Users now assess not only the accuracy of claims but also the trustworthiness of the messenger, the transparency of sponsorships, and whether brand behavior matches its messaging. Credibility acts as an initial cognitive filter: if consumers doubt it, the message is dismissed early.

Authenticity has become a defining expectation in the influencer-driven landscape. Audiences look for content that feels genuine, relatable, and aligned with a creator's or brand's identity. Authentic communication often influences emotional connection more strongly than stylistic polish. When users perceive sincerity, they are more likely to view the brand favorably.

Sustainability communication has also gained importance as consumers pay closer attention to environmental and social responsibility. Social media allows brands to showcase values and initiatives directly. When sustainability claims appear substantive, they enhance trust; when they appear superficial or inconsistent, they can damage reputation.

Across these three dimensions, trust serves as the integrating mechanism. It reduces perceived risk, strengthens belief in brand claims, and underpins long-term engagement. In fast-moving digital environments—where anonymity, noise, and influencer involvement are common—trust becomes especially vital.

Although research on credibility, authenticity, sustainability communication, and trust has expanded, several gaps remain:

1. Fragmented conceptual focus: Most studies analyze these cues separately, while consumers evaluate them together.

2. Limited integrated models: Few frameworks explain how these cues collectively shape trust.

3. Inconsistent definitions: Concepts like authenticity and sustainability vary across disciplines.

4. Unclear trust formation pathways: Scholars differ on whether trust emerges mostly from cognitive, emotional, or ethical judgments.

5. Limited cross-platform insights: User behavior differs across Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, yet comparative studies are scarce.

Given these gaps, this review aims to:

(1) synthesize research on credibility, authenticity, and sustainability communi-cation in social media advertising;

(2) explain how these cues jointly influence trust; and

(3) propose an integrated framework to guide future research and practice.

By examining how consumers interpret persuasive content in highly commercialized digital spaces, the review offers both theoretical clarity and practical insight for brands seeking to build lasting trust.

A clear and systematic review process is essential for consolidating fragmented research on credibility, authenticity, and sustainability communication in social media advertising. Because this topic spans marketing, communication studies, psychology, digital media, and business ethics, the review adopts a systematic–narrative hybrid approach. This allows structured identification of literature while also offering the flexibility needed to interpret concepts that develop differently across fields.

Search Strategy and Databases

A structured search was conducted across major academic databases widely used in advertising and communication research, including Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, EBSCO Business Source Complete, ScienceDirect, SAGE Journals, and Wiley Online Library. These sources were selected for their coverage of peer-reviewed journals in consumer behaviour, digital marketing, and sustainability communication.

Search Terms

Keywords were combined using Boolean operators to capture diverse strands of research:

- "social media advertising"

- "ad credibility," "message credibility"

- "authenticity," "brand authenticity," "influencer authenticity"

- "sustainability communication," "ethical advertising," "green advertising"

- "consumer trust," "online trust"

- "consumer response," "purchase intention"

- "persuasion," "message cues"

The search focused on 2005–2024, reflecting the rise of mainstream social media platforms and the rapid expansion of digital advertising scholarship.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion Criteria

Studies were included if they:

1. Addressed social media advertising or influencer-based promotional content.

2. Examined credibility, authenticity, sustainability messaging, or trust.

3. Offered empirical findings, conceptual models, or theoretical insights.

4. Were peer-reviewed or academically recognized.

5. Were published in English.

Exclusion Criteria

Studies were excluded if they:

1. Focused solely on traditional (non-digital) media.

2. Addressed sustainability without communication relevance.

3. Examined consumer behaviour without message-level variables.

4. Were opinion pieces, blogs, or practitioner summaries.

5. Lacked conceptual or methodological clarity.

These criteria ensured that the final dataset represented robust and relevant academic contributions.

Screening and Study Selection

The search yielded 1,247 records. After removing duplicates, 781 articles remained. Screening occurred in three stages:

- Stage 1: Title Review

  Articles unrelated to social media advertising were removed.

  Result: 432 articles.

- Stage 2: Abstract Review

  Abstracts were assessed for relevance to key constructs.

  Result: 198 articles.

- Stage 3: Full-Text Review

  Full papers were evaluated using inclusion criteria.

  Result: 118 studies included.

This number is comparable to other conceptual reviews in marketing, which typically synthesize 80–150 studies.

Analytical Approach

A combined method of thematic analysis and conceptual integration was adopted. Studies were grouped into the following thematic clusters:

1. Credibility in social media advertising

2. Authenticity in influencer and brand communication

3. Sustainability and ethical messaging

4. Trust formation in digital contexts

5. Behavioural outcomes (attitude, engagement, intention)

Within each cluster, studies were examined for definitions, theoretical grounding, antecedents, outcomes, methodological trends, and inconsistencies.

Limitations

Although rigorous, the review method has limitations. Restricting the search to English-language publications may exclude non-English contributions. Emerging areas—such as AI-generated influencers, deepfake authenticity, and algorithmic trust cues—are still developing and may lack extensive empirical work. Finally, grey literature was excluded, even though industry insights often reflect rapid shifts in digital advertising. These limitations offer avenues for future research rather than diminishing the validity of the present synthesis.

Theoretical Foundations

Understanding how consumers develop trust in social media advertising requires grounding in several theoretical traditions from communication, marketing, and psychology. These perspectives help clarify why credibility, authenticity, and sustainability communication act as powerful cues when users judge digital messages. A central starting point is Source Credibility Theory, which argues that audiences are more receptive to messages delivered by sources viewed as knowledgeable and trustworthy. Although developed for traditional media, the theory remains highly relevant as social platforms introduce diverse message sources—including brands, influencers, micro-creators, and even AI-generated figures—whose perceived expertise and honesty influence early cognitive evaluations. Closely linked is Information Processing Theory, which sees persuasion as a staged cognitive path. In social media settings, credibility acts as the initial screening mechanism: if the source or message appears unreliable, users are unlikely to engage with or process the advertisement further.

While credibility shapes the cognitive side of evaluation, authenticity introduces an emotional and relational dimension. Authenticity Theory suggests that consumers value communication they perceive as sincere and aligned with the communicator's identity. This is particularly

meaningful in influencer marketing, where users often form one-sided but meaningful relationships with creators. Parasocial Interaction Theory explains how these perceived connections make authentic influencers more persuasive than polished corporate messages. Authenticity also resonates with Self-Determination Theory, which emphasizes individuals' preference for content that conveys autonomy, genuineness, and personal relevance. In social media ecosystems — where motives, endorsements, and personal narratives are under constant scrutiny — authenticity becomes a key factor driving engagement and trust.

A third theoretical stream concerns sustainability communication, which adds an ethical layer to message interpretation. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Theory provides a foundation for understanding how brands express their social and environmental commitments, while Signaling Theory explains how sustainability claims can function as meaningful cues — especially when they appear specific, credible, and costly to imitate. Attribution Theory further highlights that consumers actively evaluate the motives behind such claims; if sustainability messages seem insincere or opportunistic, trust diminishes rapidly.

Across these domains, trust emerges as the unifying psychological mechanism. The Commitment–Trust Model and online trust frameworks describe trust as a state that reduces uncertainty, supports message acceptance, and enables ongoing brand relationships. In digital environments characterized by rapid information flow, influencer intermediation, and high variability in message quality, trust is essential for transforming message cues into favorable consumer responses. Together, these theories provide a comprehensive lens for understanding how cognitive appraisal, emotional resonance, and ethical evaluation collectively shape trust in social media advertising.

TABLE 1 — Summary of Key Studies on Credibility, Authenticity, Sustainability, and Trust

Author(s)	Construct(s)	Platform / Context	Method	Key Findings
Ohanian (1990)	Source credibility	Celebrity endorsements	Scale development	Expertise & trustworthiness remain central to credibility evaluation.
MacKenzie & Lutz (1989)	Ad credibility	TV advertising	Experiment	Ad credibility strongly predicts attitude toward the ad and brand.
Djafarova & Trofimenko (2019)	Authenticity, trust	Instagram	Qualitative + survey	Micro-influencers perceived as authentic; authenticity drives trust.
Morhart et al. (2015)	Brand authenticity	Branding	Scale development	Authenticity dimensions enhance trust and brand attachment.
Lou & Yuan (2019)	Influencer credibility, trust	Social media	SEM	Credibility → trust → purchase intention (full mediation).

Nyilasy et al. (2014)	Greenwashing, skepticism	Green advertising	Experiments	Misleading sustainability claims reduce trust sharply.
Chen (2020)	CSR, trust	Social media	Survey	CSR messaging improves trust and follower engagement.
Ki et al. (2020)	Authenticity, influencer–brand fit	Instagram	SEM	Strong brand –influencer fit enhances authenticity → trust.
De Veirman et al. (2017)	Influencer status	Instagram	Experiment	Very high follower counts may reduce authenticity and trust.
Jin, Muqaddam & Ryu (2019)	Parasocial interaction	Instagram	SEM	Parasocial bonds elevate trust independent of credibility cues.

TABLE 2 — Integrated Thematic Synthesis

Theme	Key Insights	Contribution	Gaps Identified
Credibility	Cognitive basis of message acceptance; transparency increases credibility	Extends source credibility theory to influencers and platforms	Limited cross -platform research; need for longitudinal designs
Authenticity	Emotional/relational cue; boosts engagement	Strengthens authenticity theory in influencer contexts	Weak link to purchase intention; inconsistent definitions
Sustainability Communication	Ethical cue; enhances trust when specific	Extends CSR and signaling theory	Little integration with authenticity/credibility; risk of greenwashing
Trust	Mediator of message effects	Integrates trust theory with digital persuasion	Underexplored trust recovery, dynamic trust
Platform Dynamics	Perceptions differ across Instagram/TikTok/YouTube	Extends media credibility theory	Comparative models lacking
Influencer–Brand Fit	Value congruence strengthens authenticity & credibility	Refines fit – congruity theory	Need sustainability–fit research
Consumer Moderators	Skepticism, identity, values shape response	Adds psychographic moderators	Cross-cultural variations underfunded

TABLE 3 — Mapping Constructs to Theoretical Foundations

Construct	Supporting Theories	Core Theoretical Logic	Relevance to Social Media Advertising
Credibility	Source Credibility, ELM, Info-Processing	Expertise + trustfulness drive persuasion	Influencer credibility → cognitive trust
Authenticity	Authenticity Theory, Parasocial Interaction, SDT	Realness creates emotional connection	Authentic influencers enhance relational trust
Sustainability	CSR Theory, Signaling Theory, Attribution Theory	Ethical signals reduce uncertainty	Specific sustainability claims build moral trust
Trust	Commitment-Trust Theory, Online Trust Models	Trust mediates relationships & reduces risk	Trust → engagement → intention

Managerial Implications

The insights from this review highlight several important implications for marketers, brand leaders, agencies, and digital creators working in today's complex social media landscape. As consumers grow more knowledgeable about marketing tactics, advertisers must understand that credibility, authenticity, and sustainability do not function independently. These three elements collectively influence consumer trust, which ultimately determines the effectiveness of social media campaigns.

First, managers must prioritize message credibility. Transparency, accuracy, and clear information are essential in an environment where users quickly detect exaggeration or inconsistency. Once credibility is compromised, restoring trust requires significant effort. Brands should ensure that promotional claims — including influencer endorsements — are factually supported and consistent across channels. Open disclosure of paid partnerships, now recognized as a signal of honesty rather than a drawback, should be standard practice. This also calls for internal systems such as message audits, alignment across marketing and CSR teams, and adherence to platform guidelines.

Second, authenticity has become vital in influencer-driven communication. Rather than selecting influencers solely based on reach, brands should collaborate with those whose personal values align with their own. Allowing creators to express messages in their natural voice strengthens relatability and perceived sincerity. Overly polished or scripted communication may look appealing but often disconnects emotionally. Content that feels spont - aneous — behind - the - scenes clips, product usage moments, or real customer experiences — can deepen audience trust.

Third, sustainability communication is now a strategic expectation, particularly among younger consumers. Brands must move beyond symbolic gestures and ensure that sustainability claims reflect genuine corporate practices. Vague or superficial statements risk being viewed as greenwashing and can quickly undermine trust. Effective sustainability messaging requires coordination with internal sustainability teams, transparency about progress, and honest acknowledgment of areas where improvement is ongoing.

Finally, these three elements must be woven into a coherent communication strategy. Trust is built over time through consistent messages, appropriate influencer partnerships, and responsible brand actions. Managers should

adopt cross-functional approaches, monitor trust-related indicators such as sentiment and engagement quality, and move away from short-term campaign thinking. Trust cannot be manufactured through isolated posts — it emerges from sustained, principled communication.

Overall, the key challenge for managers is to craft communication that feels honest, human, and value-driven. Brands that successfully integrate credibility, authenticity, and sustainability will be better positioned to cultivate long-term trust and meaningful engagement in an ever-changing digital marketplace.

TABLE 4 — Platform-Wise Comparison

Platform	Strengths for Credibility	Strengths for Authenticity	Strengths for Sustainability Messaging
Instagram	High-quality visuals	Relatable influencers	Visual storytelling of CSR initiatives
TikTok	Peer-like content	Raw authenticity	Short sustainability education videos
YouTube	In-depth reviews	Long-form personal narratives	Factory tours & transparency videos
X/Twitter	Real-time accountability	Honest voice	CSR announcements & issue response

TABLE 5 — Review Matrix

Author(s)	Context & Platform	Constructs Studied	Method	Key Outcomes	Trust Insight
Ohanian (1990)	Celebrity ads	Credibility	Scale dev.	Three-factor credibility model	Trustworthiness central to trust
Djafarova & Trofimenko (2019)	Instagram micro-influencers	Authenticity, trust	Qualitative + survey	Authenticity → trust → intention	Relatability drives trust
Morhart et al. (2015)	Brand communications	Authenticity	Scale dev.	4D model predicts attachment	Authenticity improves trust
Lou & Yuan (2019)	Social media	Credibility, trust	SEM	Trust fully mediates credibility → intention	Trust is essential mediator
Nyilasy et al. (2014)	Green ads	Sustainability, skepticism	Experiments	Greenwashing reduces brand trust	Ethics central to trust
Chen (2020)	Brand CSR pages	Sustainability, trust	Survey	CSR posts increase trust	Benevolence builds trust

Ki et al. (2020)	Instagram	Fit, authenticity	SEM	High fit → authenticity → trust	Fit influences trust formation
Jin et al. (2019)	Influencers	Parasocial interaction	SEM	Parasocial ties → trust → intention	Emotional connection elevates trust
De Veirman et al. (2017)	Instagram	Influencer popularity	Experiment	Excess popularity reduces authenticity	Trust tied to authenticity
Sarkar & Sarkar (2022)	Indian Gen Z	Sustainability perception	Survey	Ethical alignment predicts trust	Values alignment key

Future Research Directions

Despite the growing body of research on credibility, authenticity, sustainability communication, and trust in social media advertising, several conceptual, methodological, and contextual gaps remain. These gaps present significant opportunities for advancing theory and guiding future empirical inquiry. Building on the integrated framework and thematic synthesis, this section outlines key research directions for future scholars.

TABLE 6 — Future Research Agenda

Theme	Key Research Questions
Credibility	1. How do credibility cues vary across platforms? 2. How does personalization shape credibility judgments? 3. What causes credibility erosion?
Authenticity	4. How do authenticity dimensions differ by culture? 5. Do AI influencers reduce authenticity? 6. How does perceived "performed authenticity" affect trust?
Sustainability	7. How do consumers detect greenwashing? 8. Which sustainability claims build trust fastest? 9. How does influencer sustainability activism affect trust?
Trust	10. How do cognitive, emotional, and ethical pathways interact? 11. What psychological moderators shape trust? 12. Which trust-recovery strategies work best?
Platform Dynamics	13. How does platform governance shape trust? 14. How does algorithm transparency change trust evaluations?
Methods	15. Can new multidimensional authenticity scales be developed? 16. What longitudinal methods capture changing trust?

Conclusion

The rapid rise of social media as a primary advertising channel has changed the way consumers encounter and interpret marketing messages. In these interactive spaces—shaped simultaneously by brands, influencers, platforms, and users—trust has become the key factor determining whether content is believed, engaged with, or ignored. Despite its central importance, existing research explains trust through several separate traditions, leaving its formation only partially understood. This review addresses that gap by bringing together three core message-level cues—credibility, authenticity, and sustainability communication —into a single explanatory framework.

Across the studies reviewed, each cue plays a distinct role in trust building. Credibility provides the cognitive basis by ensuring that information appears truthful and transparent. Authenticity builds emotional and relational bonds, helping consumers feel a sense of sincerity and connection with the communicator. Sustainability communication introduces an ethical dimension, allowing consumers to judge a brand's values and social responsibility. Instead of acting independently, these cues work together, reflecting the multi-layered way users evaluate content in digital environments.

Trust emerges as the central outcome of this multi-cue evaluation. When trust is established, consumers respond with stronger attitudes, deeper engagement, meaningful relationships, and greater purchase intention. When trust is weakened—through misleading, insincere, or ethically questionable communication — skepticism grows, engagement declines, and reputational risk increases. Trust therefore functions not just as another construct in the persuasion process, but as the mechanism that determines whether digital advertising ultimately succeeds.

The review also highlights several research gaps that warrant further attention. These include the need for integrated models examining how credibility, authenticity, and sustainability work together; improved measurement tools for authenticity and ethical messaging; cross-cultural research that reflects global social media use; and studies exploring platform differences, algorithmic influence, and emerging issues such as AI-generated influencers and metaverse advertising. Addressing these areas will help scholars develop a fuller understanding of trust in digital persuasion.

Managerially, the findings emphasize that trust cannot be engineered through isolated tactics. It requires consistency across message design, influencer partnerships, brand actions, and platform behavior. Brands and creators that integrate credibility, authenticity, and sustainability into their communication strategies are more likely to earn long-term consumer loyalty and reduce the growing risks of digital skepticism.

Overall, this review offers an integrated, theory-driven perspective on how trust is formed in contemporary social media advertising. By combining cognitive, emotional, and ethical dimensions, the proposed framework provides a foundation for future research and practical guidance for marketers navigating evolving digital ecosystems. As social platforms continue to shape consumer–brand relationships, trust will remain the decisive factor influencing which messages resonate and which brands maintain lasting relevance.

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