The impact of social media influencers on consumer decision-making in the GCC: A theoretical and empirical analysis

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Abstract: This study examines the impact of social media influencers on consumer decision-making in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region, where social media usage rates are among the highest globally. The purpose of the research is to explore the psychological and social mechanisms through which influencer marketing shapes purchasing behavior. A quantitative research design was employed, drawing on Cognitive Dissonance Theory, Social Identity Theory, and the Elaboration Likelihood Model. Data were collected from 500 respondents across Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Kuwait using a structured questionnaire. Regression analysis revealed that identification with influencers is the most influential predictor of consumer decisions, while credibility and value misalignment trigger cognitive dissonance, reducing trust. Peripheral cues, such as emotional and visual content, also significantly affect decision-making. The study concludes that influencer marketing in the GCC is most effective when it aligns with cultural values and fosters emotional and social connections. Practically, brands targeting GCC consumers should prioritize value congruence and community-oriented content strategies to drive consumer engagement and loyalty.

Keywords: Cognitive dissonance, Consumer decision-making, GCC, Influencer marketing, Social identity, Social media.

1. Introduction

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region, comprising Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates, has witnessed an unprecedented surge in social media usage [1]. According to a recent survey by DataReportal [2] social media penetration in the GCC exceeds 95%, with Qatar and the UAE leading at 99%. On average, citizens in the region spend over three hours daily on platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. This high level of digital engagement has positioned the GCC as a global hotspot for influencer-driven marketing and consumer interaction.

Fueled by an annual growth rate exceeding 50% (Influencer Marketing Hub), the influencer marketing sector in the GCC has become a vital component of digital marketing strategies. Influencers are widely regarded as credible sources of lifestyle and product recommendations, and their perceived trustworthiness significantly impacts consumer behavior [3]. In particular, the perception of influencer credibility has emerged as a critical factor in shaping consumer decision-making.

Cognitive Dissonance Theory Festinger [4] provides a psychological foundation for understanding how conflicting values between consumers and influencers may create discomfort, prompting reevaluation of purchasing decisions [5]. When influencer content contradicts personal beliefs, it can trigger cognitive dissonance, affecting emotional responses and leading to hesitation or rejection of a product [6]. Addressing dissonance is essential in managing consumer reactions to influencer marketing.

Social Identity Theory Tajfel [7] further explains how consumers identify with influencers based on shared values, lifestyle, or group affiliation. Influencer content aligning with the audience's identity enhances credibility and persuasive power [8]. This identification fosters a sense of belonging and

emotional connection, which strengthens the impact of influencer endorsements on purchasing behavior [9].

Furthermore, influencer marketing contributes to forming brand communities—tight-knit groups where consumers feel empowered and loyal to brands promoted by influencers. Reinikainen, et al. [10] found that such communities enhance brand loyalty and commitment, with consumer empowerment as a mediating factor.

Understanding the interplay between influencer credibility, cognitive dissonance, social identity, and emotional engagement is crucial for decoding how influencer marketing shapes consumer decision-making in the GCC context. This study explores these dimensions through both theoretical and empirical lenses to provide a comprehensive understanding of this rapidly evolving phenomenon.

2. Literature Review

The rapid proliferation of social media has reshaped consumer decision-making, particularly in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region, encompassing Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Oman. With social media penetration rates exceeding 95%—among the highest globally—and countries like Qatar and the UAE achieving near-universal adoption at 99% [2] the GCC offers a compelling context for examining the influence of social media influencers. This review synthesizes the literature on social media's impact and the role of influencers in shaping GCC consumer behavior, highlighting trends, cultural dynamics, and research gaps.

2.1. Influence of Social Media on GCC Consumer Behavior

The GCC exhibits exceptional social media engagement, with Saudi Arabia reporting over 30 million active users (approximately 43% of its population) and the UAE having 9.6 million users as of 2020 [2]. Consumers spend an average of 3 hours and 28 minutes daily on platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat, using these spaces to exchange information, evaluate products, and form opinions DataReportal [2]. Bhasin and Rajesh [11] note that social media facilitates peer-to-peer and influencer-consumer interactions, enabling GCC consumers to seek trusted recommendations. This shift has disrupted traditional consumer journeys, fostering dynamic, socially driven decision-making processes [12].

Cultural nuances, such as the GCC's collectivist ethos and emphasis on trust, significantly mediate these interactions. For instance, consumers often prioritize recommendations from influencers who align with communal values, such as family or religious principles, reflecting the region's tribal and faith-based social structures [13]. However, the literature lacks depth in exploring how these cultural factors—particularly religious values or tribal affiliations—shape consumer responses, highlighting a need for context-specific studies.

2.2. Role of Social Media Influencers in the GCC Market

Social media influencers play a pivotal role in the GCC's digital landscape, wielding significant influence over consumer preferences due to their perceived authenticity and relatability Hurley [14]. Nielsen [15] reports that 94% of GCC consumers trust influencers over traditional advertisements, attributing this to their ability to create engaging, value-aligned content [16]. A prominent trend is the rise of micro-influencers, who, with followings typically ranging from 10,000 to 100,000, foster highly engaged communities in niche markets such as beauty, fitness, and halal food [17]. For example, micro-influencers in the UAE have driven 20% higher engagement rates than macro-influencers for beauty brands, owing to their perceived authenticity and localized appeal [18].

Macro-influencers, with followings exceeding 1 million, dominate high-visibility campaigns, such as luxury fashion promotions, but often face skepticism due to perceived commercial motives [19]. A notable GCC campaign exemplifies this dynamic: Saudi influencer Njoud Al Shammari's collaboration with Dior in 2022 leveraged her cultural resonance and modest fashion advocacy to enhance brand trust among young Saudi women, resulting in a 15% sales increase [20]. Conversely, over-commercialized

campaigns, like those involving celebrity influencers with misaligned values, have sparked backlash, underscoring the importance of cultural congruence.

Despite these insights, the literature rarely addresses the risks associated with influencer marketing, such as consumer skepticism toward sponsored content and the erosion of trust due to over-commercialization. Additionally, empirical comparisons of micro- versus macro-influencer effectiveness in the GCC remain scarce, warranting further investigation.

2.3. Social Identity and Consumer Behavior

A 2023 study found that consumers' social identity has a significant influence on their engagement with influencers, directly affecting purchase intentions and brand-related behavior [21].

2.4. Influencer Marketing Effectiveness: A Meta-Analytic Review

This review synthesizes findings from 98 empirical studies, concluding that follower characteristics—especially identity congruence—strongly shape attitudes and behavioral responses beyond transactional contexts [22].

2.5. Influencers and Consumer Behavior in the Gulf

Focused on the GCC context, this study emphasized the importance of influencer credibility and cultural fit in shaping consumer decisions across the region [23].

2.6. Impact of Influencer Marketing on Consumer Behavior and Brand Loyalty

A recent paper demonstrated that influencer credibility and emotional resonance significantly enhance consumer engagement, brand trust, and purchase intentions in digital environments [24].

2.7. Analyzing Influencer Marketing through Social Influence Theory on TikTok

This study applied social influence theory to TikTok campaigns, showing that both normative and informational social influences impact consumer reactions and engagement [25].

2.8. Synthesis and Research Gaps

The GCC's high social media penetration, consumer trust in influencers, and rapid digitalization create an ideal environment for influencer marketing. Successful campaigns, such as Kuwaiti influencer Ascia Al Faraj's partnership with local startup Zain Beauty in 2021, demonstrate how culturally aligned influencers can drive engagement, with Zain reporting a 30% sales uplift through Ascia's authentic storytelling [26]. However, the literature fails to examine how cultural factors—collectivism, religious values, or gender dynamics—mediate influencer persuasion. For instance, the influence of Islamic principles, such as modesty or halal compliance, on consumer preferences is underexplored, despite their centrality in GCC societies. Similarly, the comparative efficacy of micro- versus macro-influencers across product categories (e.g., luxury versus everyday goods) remains a critical gap, necessitating research that combines quantitative impact assessments with qualitative cultural analyses.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study integrates Cognitive Dissonance Theory, Social Identity Theory, and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) to analyze influencer marketing's impact on GCC consumer decision-making. This multi-theoretical framework captures consumer behavior's cognitive, social, and psychological dimensions, tailored to the GCC's cultural context.

3.1. Cognitive Dissonance Theory

Festinger [4] Cognitive Dissonance Theory posits that individuals experience psychological discomfort when their beliefs conflict with external stimuli. In influencer marketing, dissonance occurs when consumers perceive a mismatch between an influencer's content and their values, prompting

skepticism or purchase reconsideration [27]. For example, a GCC consumer may reject a beauty product endorsed by an influencer whose lifestyle contradicts Islamic modesty principles, as such misalignment triggers discomfort [19]. In the GCC, where religious and tribal values are deeply ingrained, dissonance is particularly pronounced, requiring influencers to align messaging with cultural norms to enhance persuasion.

3.2. Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory Tajfel [7] asserts that individuals derive self-concept from group memberships, influencing their attitudes. In influencer marketing, consumers identify with influencers who reflect their values or cultural identities, fostering emotional bonds [28]. In the GCC, collectivism amplifies this effect: influencers like Qatari food blogger Mama Anisa, who promotes family-oriented recipes, resonate with audiences by embodying communal values, enhancing trust and persuasion [29]. However, the theory's application to virtual communities, where affiliations are transient, requires further exploration to understand how digital identities translate into purchase behaviors.

3.3. Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM)

The ELM Petty and Cacioppo [30] distinguishes between central (systematic) and peripheral (heuristic) information processing. Due to social media's fast-paced nature, GCC consumers often rely on peripheral cues, such as visually appealing TikTok videos or relatable influencer personas [31]. Central processing dominates for high-involvement purchases like luxury goods, as consumers scrutinize claims, as seen in campaigns for brands like Chanel in the UAE. The ELM's adaptability to platform-specific (e.g., TikTok's emotional appeal versus Instagram's polished aesthetics) and product-specific (e.g., luxury versus daily essentials) contexts enhances its relevance to the GCC.

3.4. Integrated Framework and Hypotheses

Integrating Cognitive Dissonance Theory, Social Identity Theory, and the ELM provides a comprehensive lens for examining influencer marketing's impact. Cognitive dissonance underscores value alignment's role in mitigating skepticism, Social Identity Theory highlights group affiliation's persuasive power, and the ELM elucidates content processing dynamics.
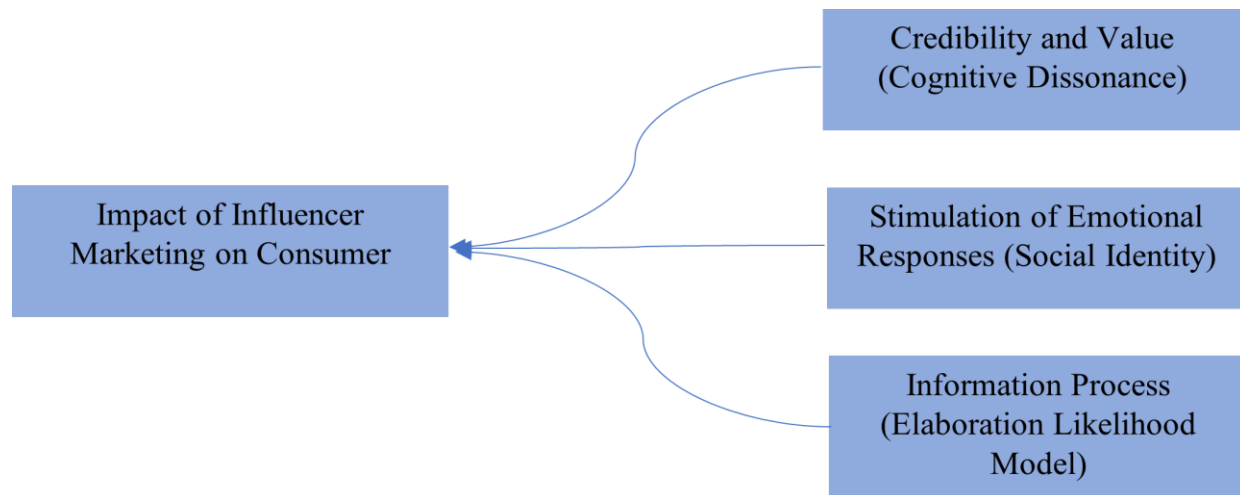

Figure 1.
Theoretical Framework.

The following hypotheses guide the study:

3.5. Hypothesis

    H_1: Influencer marketing negatively impacts consumer perceptions when cognitive dissonance arises due to concerns about influencer credibility or value inconsistencies.

    H_2: Influencer marketing encourages impulsive purchases by evoking positive emotional responses to influencer content.

    H_3: Social identity elements—value alignment, personal similarity, and a sense of belonging—significantly influence consumer purchasing decisions.

    H_4: Peripheral cues, including visual content and emotional appeals in influencer marketing, significantly affect purchase behavior.

    H_5: High-quality arguments and critical evaluation of claims in influencer content positively influence purchase decisions through central information processing.

While these theories provide a robust foundation, their application to the GCC context requires careful consideration of cultural nuances. Cognitive Dissonance Theory may overemphasize individual psychological conflict without fully accounting for the collectivist orientation of GCC consumers, who may prioritize group consensus over personal beliefs. Similarly, Social Identity Theory's focus on group membership must be adapted to virtual communities, where transient affiliations may weaken traditional identity dynamics. The ELM, while versatile, may underplay the role of emotional and cultural cues in low-involvement contexts, where heuristic processing dominates. Future research should refine these theories by incorporating GCC-specific cultural variables, such as religious values or tribal affiliations, to enhance their explanatory power.

4. Research Methodology and Data Collection Procedures

This study adopts a quantitative, deductive research approach grounded in the positivist paradigm, aiming to test hypotheses derived from theoretical models. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire distributed to consumers across four GCC countries: Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and Kuwait.

The questionnaire consisted of Likert-scale items and closed-ended questions, designed to align with the study's objectives and measure key constructs such as influencer credibility and values (based on Cognitive Dissonance Theory), social and emotional connection (based on Social Identity Theory), and information processing behavior (based on the Elaboration Likelihood Model).

The data collection period extended from January to June 2023, using online platforms and email invitations to ensure a broad geographic reach. Ethical protocols were rigorously followed: participants were informed about the study purpose, participation was voluntary, and confidentiality was strictly maintained.

4.1. Data Collection and Sampling

The study employed a purposive sampling technique to target 700 consumers affiliated with five startups operating in the GCC. This method was chosen to ensure that participants had relevant experience with influencer marketing in actual purchasing contexts. Of 700 invited participants, 516 responses were received via a Google Forms survey. After screening for completeness and relevance, 500 valid responses were retained for final analysis.

Purposive sampling is appropriate when the research requires input from individuals with specific knowledge or exposure [32]. In this case, respondents were selected based on their likelihood of prior interaction with influencer campaigns in the GCC region, enhancing the validity and depth of insights regarding the impact of influencer marketing on consumer decision-making.

4.2. Definition of Variables

This study focuses on one primary dependent variable:

Consumer Decision-Making (CDM) is operationalized through items measuring perception, emotion, and purchase intention.

The independent variables are:

Influencer Credibility and Values (ICV) – Based on the principles of Cognitive Dissonance Theory.

Identification and Group Identity (IGI) – Derived from Social Identity Theory.

Information Processing (IP) – Grounded in the Elaboration Likelihood Model.

Each construct was measured using multi-item scales adapted from previous validated studies and modified for the GCC context.

4.3. Validity and Reliability

To ensure the reliability and validity of the questionnaire, a pilot study was conducted with 30 participants.

Content validity was established by consulting academic marketing and digital communication experts.

Internal consistency was tested using Cronbach's Alpha, where all constructs exceeded the acceptable threshold of 0.70, indicating satisfactory reliability.

4.4. Data Analysis Techniques

Data were analyzed using SPSS and regression models to examine the relationships between variables.

The techniques used include:

- Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation).
- Correlation analysis to identify associations.
- Multiple regression to test hypothesis strength.
- ANOVA to assess model significance.

4.5. Ethical Considerations

This research adhered to strict ethical standards in line with academic research practices. A detailed introduction at the beginning of the survey form informed participants about the study's nature, purpose, and voluntary nature. Informed consent was obtained from all respondents prior to participation.

All responses were anonymous, and no personally identifiable information was collected. The data was used exclusively for research purposes and was stored securely to ensure confidentiality and data protection. The institution's ethics committee guidelines reviewed the study for ethical compliance.

4.6. Limitations and Future Research

Despite the valuable insights this study provides into the impact of social media influencers on consumer decision-making in the GCC, several limitations should be acknowledged.

First, the study relied on self-reported data collected through online questionnaires, which may be subject to response bias or social desirability effects. While the anonymity of responses was maintained, future research could incorporate qualitative interviews or behavioral observation to understand actual decision-making processes better.

Second, the research focused solely on consumers from four GCC countries (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, and Kuwait), which may limit the generalizability of the findings to the entire GCC or other cultural contexts. Comparative studies involving other Middle Eastern or global regions could uncover cultural variations in influencer marketing effectiveness.

Third, the study concentrated on three theoretical dimensions: cognitive dissonance, social identity, and elaboration likelihood. While these provided a strong foundation, future research could explore additional constructs such as perceived authenticity, parasocial relationships, or trust transfer mechanisms between influencers and brands.

Finally, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to capture changes in consumer attitudes or behaviors over time. A longitudinal approach could track the evolving influence of social media marketing on brand loyalty, customer retention, and engagement patterns.

Future studies are encouraged to adopt mixed methods, investigate new influencer typologies (e.g., virtual influencers), and explore how AI-driven content personalization interacts with identity and credibility in shaping consumer behavior.

5. Results

5.1. Demographic Profile of Respondents

The study sample included 500 valid respondents from across the GCC. The majority were from Saudi Arabia (43.4%), followed by the UAE (30.4%), Qatar (15.4%), and Kuwait (10.8%). Regarding gender, 60.2% were male and 39.8% were female. This distribution reflects a reasonably balanced gender composition and diverse representation across the GCC region.
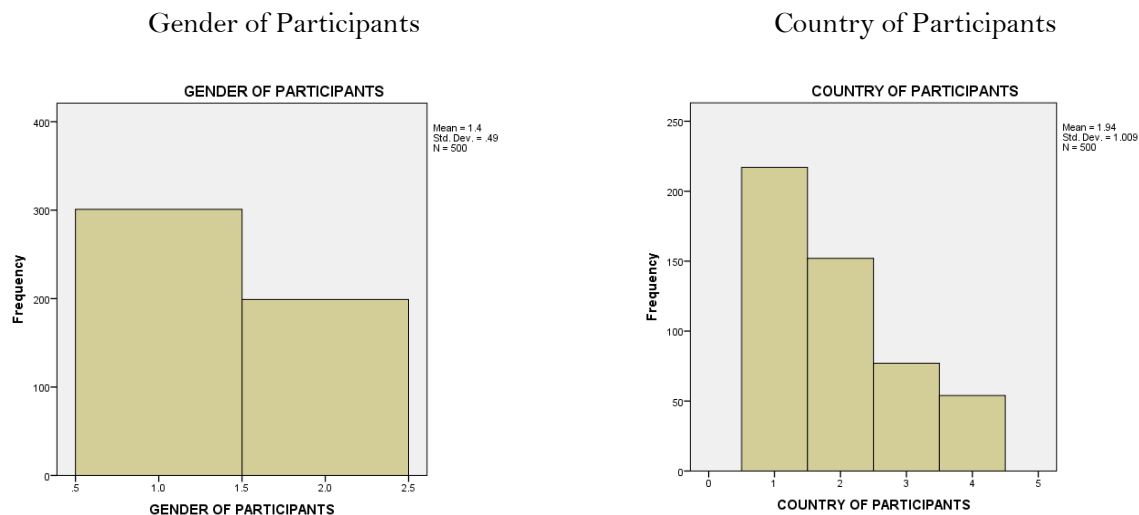
Gender of Participants   Country of Participants

Figure 2.
Demographics of Participants.

5.2. Frequency Analysis: Influence of Influencer Marketing

Responses related to the general influence of influencer marketing revealed that:

- 36% strongly agree and 38% agree that influencer content affects consumer perceptions.
- 30.6% strongly agree and 37.8% agree that influencers evoke emotional reactions leading to impulsive purchases.
- 39.4% strongly agree and 39.4% agree that influencer content changes their purchase perspective.
- 39% strongly agree and 38.2% agree that trust and connection with influencers influence their decisions.

These findings highlight the persuasive nature of influencer marketing, especially its reliance on credibility and emotional resonance.
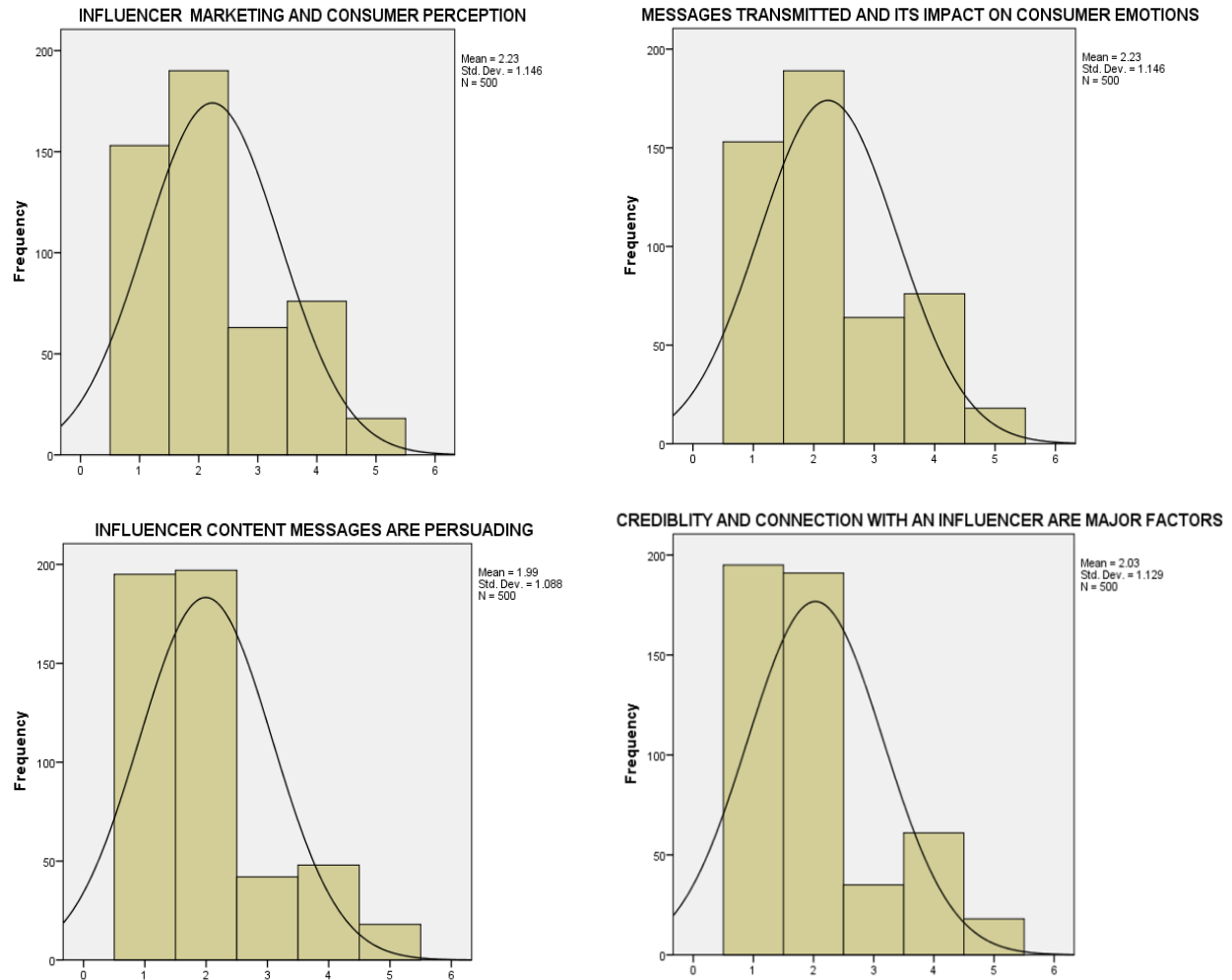
Figure 3.
Impact of Influencer Marketing on Consumer Behavior.

5.3. Influencer Credibility and Values (Cognitive Dissonance Theory)
Regarding influencer credibility:
- 31.4% strongly agree they feel skeptical toward influencer content.
- 33.4% agree that conflicting values with influencers cause them to reconsider purchases.
- 35.4% strongly agree that influencers trigger emotional responses affecting decisions.
- 42.4% agree that influencer content creates confusion or conflict in decision-making.

These responses underscore the relevance of cognitive dissonance, emphasizing the importance of aligning consumer values with influencer messaging.
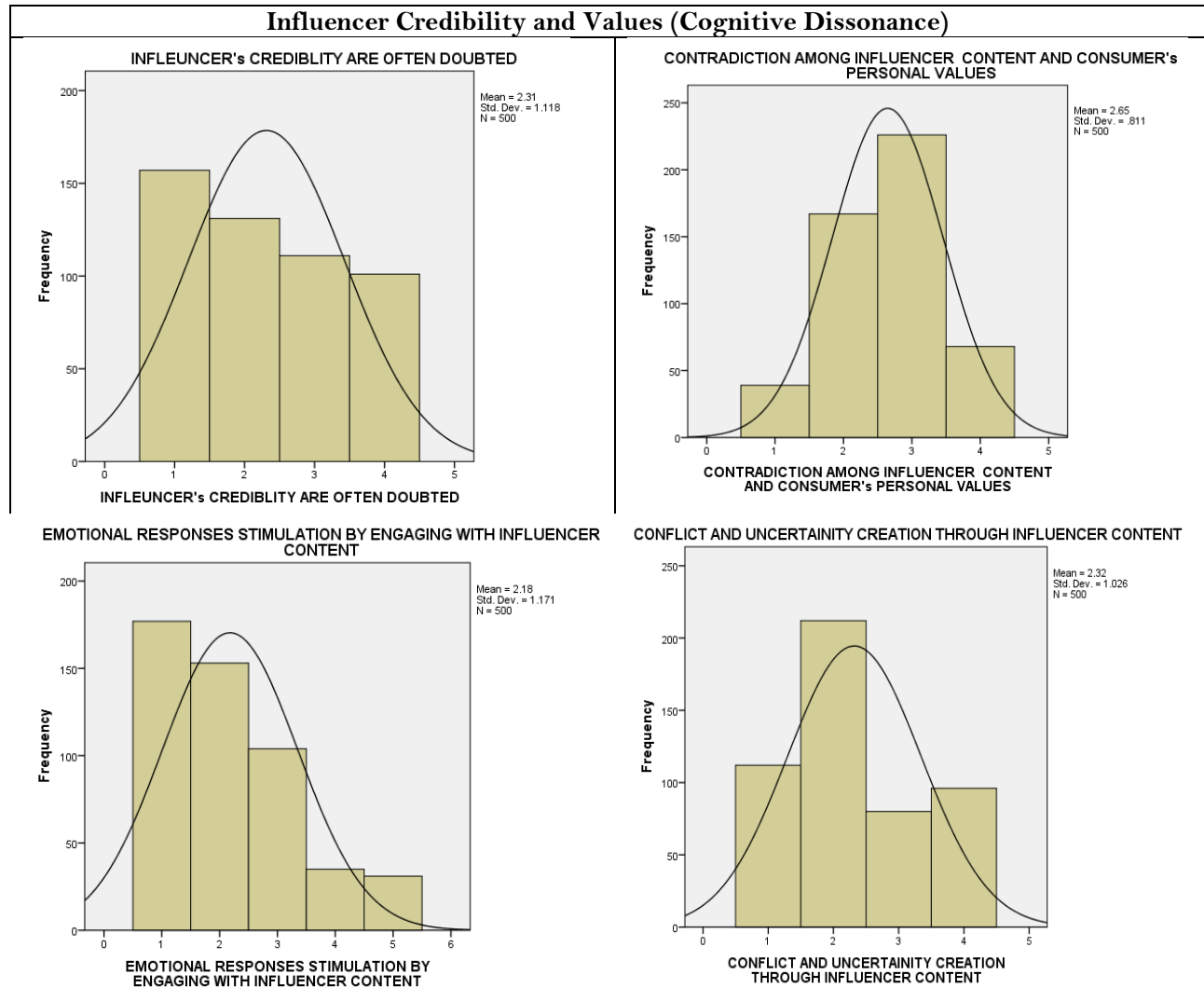
Figure 4.
Cognitive Dissonance Indicators.

5.4. Identification and Group Identity (Social Identity Theory)

Participants indicated strong identification with influencers they perceived to share common values and lifestyles:

- 44.2% strongly agree that shared values increase trust.
- 39.6% agree that feeling a sense of belonging enhances persuasion.
- 36.8% strongly agree that group alignment makes them more receptive to influencer content.

These findings validate the role of social identity as a key factor in shaping consumer responses to influencer marketing.

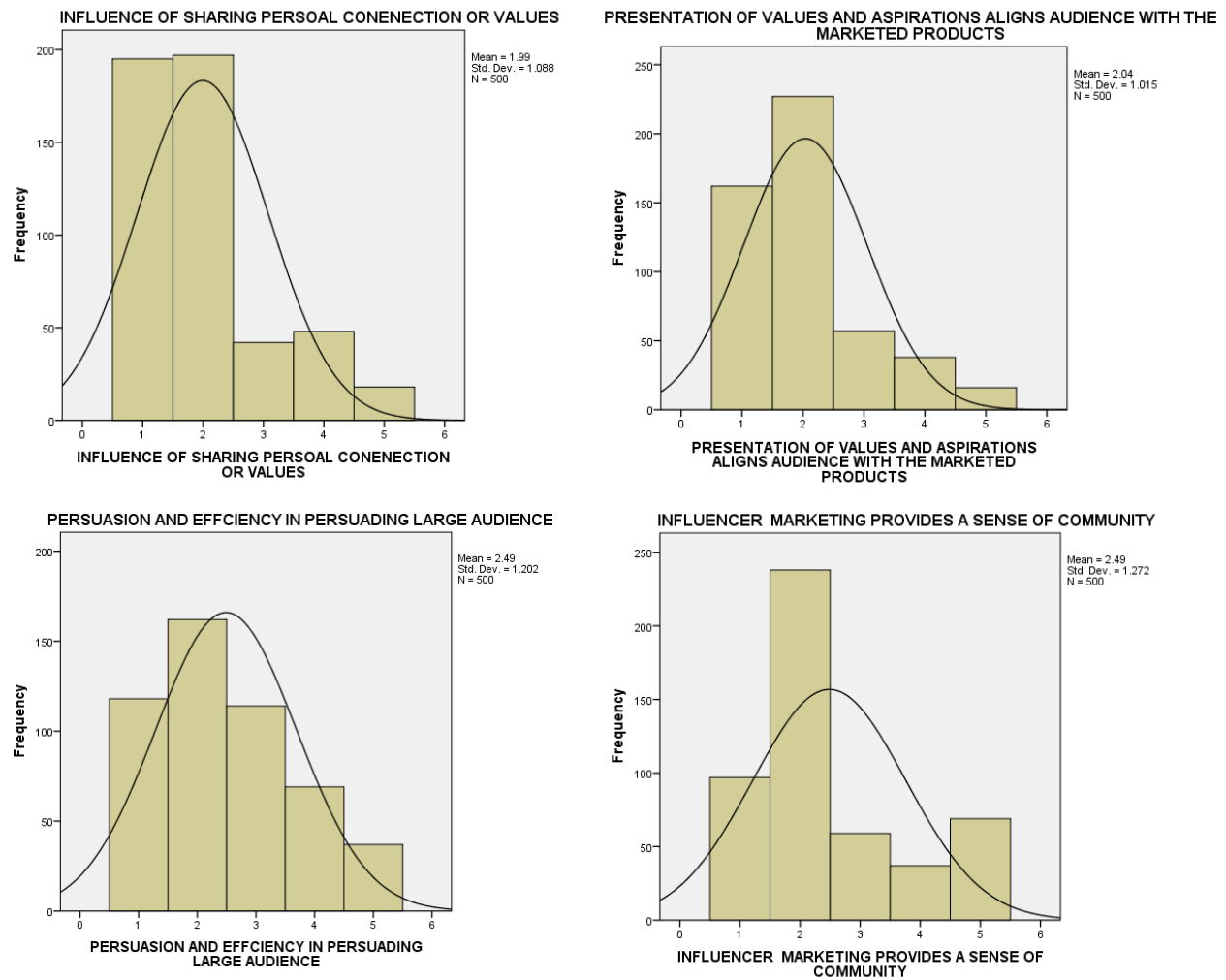Figure 5: Identification and Group Identity (Social Identity Theory)

Figure 5.
Social Identity and Consumer Influence.

5.5. Information Processing (Elaboration Likelihood Model)

Regarding how consumers process influencer content:

- 40.4% strongly agree and 40.6% agree that visual content is persuasive (peripheral processing).
- 12.8% strongly agree and 26% agree that endorsements and emotional appeals influence purchases.
- More varied responses regarding logical reasoning and argument quality were observed, suggesting mixed engagement with central route processing.

These results demonstrate that heuristic and systematic processing are in line with the ELM framework.

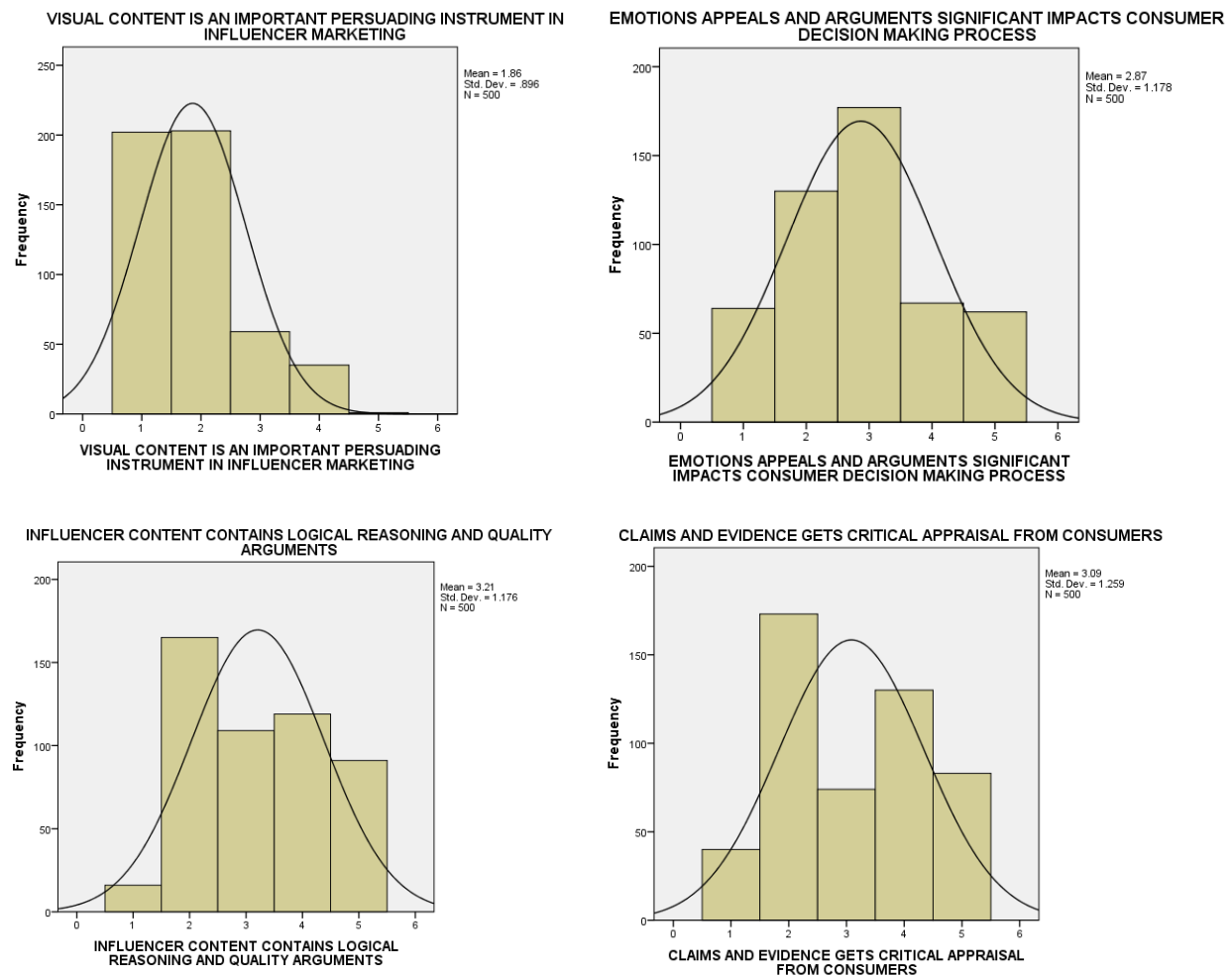Figure 6: Information Processing (Elaboration Likelihood Model)

Figure 6.
Information Processing Indicators.

5.6. Correlation Analysis

Correlation results reveal:

- A **s**trong positive correlation between Identification and Group Identity (IGI) and Influencer Marketing's impact on decision-making (IM-CDM) (r = 0.486, p < 0.01).
- A moderate positive correlation between Influencer Credibility and IGI (r = 0.313, p < 0.01).
- A weak negative correlation between Influencer Credibility (ICV) and IM-CDM (r = -0.060), indicating that skepticism toward influencer content may slightly reduce its impact.
- Information Processing shows minimal correlation overall.

These results highlight that social identity is the most influential factor in driving consumer decisions, followed by credibility, while processing style plays a secondary role.

Table 1.
Correlation Matrix of Key Constructs.

Correlations					
		Influencer marketing	Influencer credibility and values	Identification	IP
Influencer marketing and its influence on consumer decision-making	Correlation	1	-0.060	0.486**	-.030
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.180	0.000	0.502
	N	500	500	500	500
Influencer credibility and values	Correlation	-0.060	1	0.313**	0.019
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.180		.000	0.673
	N	500	500	500	500
Identification and group identity	Correlation	0.486**	0.313**	1	0.088*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000		0.050
	N	500	500	500	500
Information Processing	Correlation	-0.030	0.019	.088*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.502	0.673	.050	
	N	500	500	500	500

Note: **. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

5.7. Model Fit and Regression Analysis

The Model Summary revealed an R-squared value of 0.291, meaning that the model explains 29.1% of the variance in consumer decision-making behavior influenced by influencer marketing. While this may seem moderate in absolute terms, it is notable in behavioral and social research, where a broad range of unobservable factors influences human behavior.

The Adjusted R^2 (0.287) confirms that the model maintains its explanatory power even when adjusted for the number of predictors, indicating good model stability.

In consumer behavior studies, R^2 values between 0.20 and 0.30 are considered acceptable and meaningful, particularly when the studies focus on inherently complex psychological constructs that are difficult to fully capture.

Thus, the model demonstrates a sound level of predictive validity, supporting the conclusion that influencer marketing, mainly mediated by social identification and perceived credibility, plays a statistically relevant and interpretable role in consumer decision-making.

Table 2.
Model Summary.

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of Estimate
1	0.540	0.291	0.287	0.893

5.8. ANOVA Test of Overall Model Significance

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Table 3.
ANOVA Summary.

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	162.569	3	54.190	67.897	.000
Residual	395.867	496	0.798	--	--
Total	558.435	499	--	--	--

5.9. Regression Coefficients Analysis

The individual regression coefficients provide further insights into the strength and direction of each independent variable's influence on IM-CDM:

Table 4.
Regression Coefficients Summary.

Predictor	B (Unstd.)	Std. Error	Beta (Std.)	t	Sig.
(Constant)	1.061	0.256	—	4.152	0.000
Influencer Credibility & Values	-0.405	0.069	-0.236	-5.917	0.000
Identification & Group Identity	1.052	0.074	0.566	14.163	0.000
Information Processing	-0.127	0.064	-0.075	-1.986	0.048

The regression coefficients offer a deeper understanding of the magnitude and direction of each independent variable's effect on Influencer Marketing's Influence on Consumer Decision-Making (IM-CDM).
(N = 500; Dependent Variable: IM-CDM).

5.9.1. Identification and Group Identity (IGI): β = 0.566, p < .001

This variable has the highest standardized coefficient, indicating it is the most powerful predictor of consumer decision-making. The strength and significance of this relationship (t = 14.163, p < .001) confirm that consumers who emotionally and socially identify with influencers are more susceptible to their recommendations.

This finding validates Social Identity Theory [7] which asserts that individuals define themselves through group membership. When an influencer reflects the consumer's values, lifestyle, or aspirations, the sense of belonging enhances emotional engagement and loyalty, often overriding rational judgment. Chopra, et al. [33] and Mason, et al. [34] further support this, noting that group alignment creates an emotional shortcut to persuasion, especially in digital spaces where identity signaling is prominent.

In practice, this suggests that influencer marketing is most effective not when the message is persuasive, but when the messenger is personally relatable.

5.9.2. Influencer Credibility and Values (ICV): β = -0.236, p < .001

Surprisingly, the coefficient for credibility is negative, indicating that when consumers perceive a disconnect between their values and those projected by the influencer, their likelihood of acting on the recommendation decreases significantly.

This aligns with Cognitive Dissonance Theory (Festinger, 1957), which explains that contradictory cues cause discomfort, leading consumers to reject the message or the source. Despite the assumption that credibility is a positive influence, this negative coefficient may reflect a mismatch between perceived and actual authenticity—a critical insight in an age where "influencer fatigue" and skepticism are rising.

The significance of the result (t = -5.917, p < .001) emphasizes the sensitivity of consumers to value misalignment, especially in high-trust cultures like the GCC, where interpersonal harmony and authenticity are core social values.

5.9.3. Information Processing (IP): β = -0.075, p = .048

The third variable has a statistically significant but comparatively weaker influence. The negative sign suggests that greater analytical or critical processing might reduce the persuasive effect of influencer content.

This may seem counterintuitive, but it aligns with ELM [30]: consumers evaluate arguments more critically when they engage in central route processing. If the content lacks depth or logical appeal, deeper processing may undermine its influence.

This reinforces that emotional resonance and social identity (peripheral cues) may play a stronger role than rational evaluation in influencer-driven decision-making. However, the significance (p = .048) still suggests that information quality and depth should not be ignored, especially for high-involvement products or B2B contexts.

5.9.4. Strategic Insight from the Combined Model

The combination of:

- strong identity alignment (IGI),
- careful credibility calibration (ICV), and
- strategic content structuring (IP)

offers a blueprint for influencer selection and message design. Brands must balance relatability with credibility and employ emotional and logical cues depending on the audience and product type.

6. Discussion

This study employed a robust theoretical framework grounded in Cognitive Dissonance Theory, Social Identity Theory, and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) to investigate how influencer marketing affects consumer decision-making in the GCC region. The discussion presented here contextualizes the statistical findings, draws parallels with existing literature, and offers theoretical justification for the observed relationships.

6.1. The Role of Cognitive Dissonance in Influencer Marketing

The analysis revealed that influencer credibility and value misalignment negatively affect consumers' perceptions and decisions, as shown by the significant negative beta coefficient (β = -0.236, p < 0.001). This supports the proposition of Cognitive Dissonance Theory [4] which posits that individuals experience psychological discomfort when external information contradicts their beliefs or values.

This outcome aligns with Lou [16] and Belanche, et al. [35] who demonstrated that when influencers promote content perceived as inauthentic or conflicting with audience expectations, consumers react with skepticism, distancing themselves from the brand or product. Vukmirović, et al. [19] further affirm that such dissonance can trigger a reevaluation of the purchase intent, sometimes resulting in rejection or switching behaviors.

Moreover, the correlation coefficient between Influencer Credibility and Values (ICV) and Identification and Group Identity (IGI) (r = 0.313) highlights a reinforcing relationship: consumers are more likely to identify with influencers they trust, while distrust leads to weaker group association and lower influence power. This finding suggests that credibility is not only a direct driver of perception but also an enabler for deeper social connection, amplifying or weakening the influencer's impact based on perceived alignment with personal values.

6.2. Social Identity and the Power of Belonging

Among all tested variables, Identification and Group Identity showed the strongest predictive power (β = 0.566, p < 0.001) and the highest correlation with IM-CDM (r = 0.486), confirming that social identity is the most influential factor in shaping consumer decisions under influencer marketing.

This supports Tajfel [7] concept that people categorize themselves based on group affiliation and derive self-worth from group membership. In influencer marketing, consumers increasingly identify with influencers for content and because they represent lifestyles, beliefs, and aspirations. According to Chopra, et al. [33] such identification leads to emotional bonds that heighten receptiveness to the influencer's recommendations.

Furthermore, Setterstrom and Pearson [28] highlight that influencers act as "digital leaders," facilitating virtual communities where followers feel seen and validated. The present study reinforces this view: participants who perceived a shared identity with influencers were more emotionally engaged and willing to accept product endorsements without deep critical analysis, indicating trust and emotional convergence.

This finding is particularly relevant in the GCC, where social relationships, trust, and community values are highly culturally significant. Influencers who skillfully align their image with GCC cultural codes are likelier to generate loyal and emotionally invested audiences.

6.3. Information Processing and the Dual Routes of Persuasion

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) offered crucial insights into how consumers process influencer content. The regression coefficient for Information Processing (IP) was significant ($\beta = -0.075$, $p = 0.048$), though smaller in magnitude. This suggests that while IP does influence decision-making, it acts as a supporting mechanism, not a dominant one.

Consumers responded strongly to visual content and emotional appeals—indicators of peripheral route processing, where persuasion occurs through aesthetics, credibility cues, or emotional resonance rather than argument strength. This aligns with Wang, et al. [36] and Skoric, et al. [37] who argue that in fast-paced digital environments, consumers often rely on heuristics when engaging with social media.

However, the less consistent impact of central processing (such as logical reasoning and critical evaluation) found in this study reflects a limited depth of engagement, possibly due to content overload, cognitive fatigue, or the entertainment-oriented nature of platforms like Instagram and TikTok.

Still, Chen, et al. [38] demonstrated that users with higher identification and trust are more likely to process content deeply, indicating an interaction between credibility, identity, and elaboration. This layered interpretation supports a hybrid model: emotional engagement draws the consumer in, and identity and trust facilitate deeper, sustained influence.

6.4. Synthesis of Findings and Theoretical Integration

The empirical results support all five proposed hypotheses and confirm that influencer marketing operates through a multi-dimensional psychological mechanism involving:

- Cognitive congruence (or dissonance), which frames the trust dynamic.
- Social identity, which anchors emotional affiliation.
- Information processing, which governs the depth of persuasion.

This holistic interpretation aligns with Coulter, et al. [39] who emphasized that a blend of emotional, social, and cognitive factors shapes consumer decision-making.

Moreover, this study builds on and extends previous GCC-based research by empirically demonstrating that GCC consumers are highly responsive to influencer cues, but in culturally mediated ways, where trust, group identity, and social alignment may override purely rational considerations.

6.5. Practical and Strategic Implications

From a business and marketing perspective, these findings offer critical guidance:

- Authenticity and alignment with audience values must be prioritized in influencer partnerships.
- Community-oriented messaging, emotional storytelling, and relatable personas increase the probability of positive consumer response.

- Brands targeting the GCC market should consider the cultural emphasis on trust, shared values, and social belonging, and adapt their influencer strategy accordingly.

Table 5.
Hypotheses Summary with Status and Significance Levels Based on Regression Analysis.

Hypothesis	Status	Significance Value
Influencer marketing has a detrimental impact on consumers' perceptions of products and services due to cognitive dissonance brought on by concerns regarding the credibility of influencers and value inconsistencies.	Accepted	0.000
Influencer marketing persuades consumers to make impulsive purchases by evoking positive emotional responses in response to influencer content	Accepted	0.000
Influencer marketing successfully sways consumer purchasing decisions because of social identity elements such as personal likeness, value alignment, a sense of belonging, and community.	Accepted	0.000
Through influencer marketing, information processing modalities relating to visual material and endorsements/emotional appeals significantly affect customer purchasing decisions.	Accepted	0.000
Influencer content positively affects customer purchase decisions through influencer marketing if the quality of the arguments and critical evaluation of claims and evidence are significant.	Accepted	0.048

7. Conclusion

This study provides compelling evidence that influencer marketing significantly shapes consumer decision-making in the GCC region. The research, grounded in Cognitive Dissonance Theory, Social Identity Theory, and the Elaboration Likelihood Model, offers a multi-theoretical understanding of how consumers perceive, emotionally respond to, and act upon influencer content.
The results highlight that:

Social identity emerged as the strongest predictor, demonstrating that consumers are more likely to respond positively to influencers with whom they share values, lifestyle, or group affiliation.

Influencer credibility and alignment with personal values are critical in reducing psychological dissonance, enhancing consumer confidence in decision-making.

Information processing, particularly through peripheral cues such as visual content and emotional appeals, was found to have a statistically significant, though less dominant, role. This suggests that persuasion is primarily driven by emotional resonance and visual impact rather than logical argumentation alone.

The acceptance of all five hypotheses validates the relevance of this framework and supports a more integrated view of consumer behavior, where emotional, cognitive, and social mechanisms interact.

8. Recommendations

Based on the study findings, several practical and academic recommendations can be drawn:

8.1. For Practitioners and Marketers

Prioritize authenticity and credibility in influencer selection. Consumers are susceptible to perceived dissonance or insincerity in influencer messaging.

Leverage social identity dynamics by partnering with influencers who reflect the values, language, and lifestyles of target GCC audiences. Personal resemblance and value alignment enhance emotional bonding.

Use emotionally engaging and visually compelling content to capitalize on the peripheral processing route, which is particularly important for platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat.
Foster community and inclusion, not just promotion. Building a digital "brand tribe" around influencers encourages long-term brand loyalty.

8.2. For Startups
- Startups with limited budgets can benefit more from micro-influencers with highly engaged and trust-based followings in niche sectors.
- Invest in co-created content with influencers, allowing more authenticity and mutual value to emerge organically.
- Measure engagement beyond likes—monitor emotional reactions, shares, and comments to assess actual influence on behavior.

8.3. For Academic and Future Research
- Future studies could explore **cross**-platform behavior or compare different influencer types (e.g., celebrities vs. micro-influencers).
- A longitudinal approach may help measure the long-term effects of influencer credibility on brand loyalty.
- Qualitative follow-up interviews could offer more profound insight into the emotional and cognitive triggers behind consumer responses in this context.

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Institutional Review Board (IRB) Statement:
This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Tabuk, Saudi Arabia. All procedures involving human participants adhered to the ethical standards outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki. Informed consent was obtained from all participants after being briefed on the research objectives, their rights, and the confidentiality of their responses. Participation was entirely voluntary, and no personal identifying information was collected.

Transparency:
The author confirms that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

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