



Communication in the Age of Social Media: Influencers, Credibility, and the Transformation of Digital Public Engagement

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<i>Keywords</i> social media communication; influencers; digital communication; credibility; parasocial interaction; public engagement <i>Published</i> 02 March 2026	The rise of social media has fundamentally transformed the processes, actors, and effects of communication in contemporary society. Unlike traditional mass communication, digital platforms enable interactive, personalized, and algorithmically curated forms of public engagement, thereby reshaping how information is produced, circulated, and received. Within this evolving environment, social media influencers have emerged as prominent communicative intermediaries who bridge institutions, brands, professionals, and audiences. Their growing visibility highlights a wider shift from institutional authority to networked visibility, emotional connection, and perceived authenticity in digital communication. At the same time, this transformation has generated significant concerns regarding credibility, misinformation, persuasion, and the commercialization of everyday discourse. By synthesizing the literature on social media communication and influencer culture, this article offers a conceptual discussion of how communication is being redefined across personal, commercial, and public-interest domains. It concludes that future communication research must account more fully for the intersections among platform logics, audience psychology, and ethical governance in order to understand the broader social consequences of communication through social media.

1. Introduction

Communication has entered a new historical phase shaped by the rise of social media platforms, where interaction is immediate, networked, and deeply embedded in everyday life. In contrast to earlier media systems dominated by one-to-many broadcasting, social media enables many-to-many communication in which users simultaneously act as audiences, content creators, distributors, and interpreters. This shift has altered not only the speed and reach of communication, but also the mechanisms through which influence, trust, and public attention are produced. As global social media adoption has continued to expand, these platforms have become central infrastructures for information exchange, identity performance, social connection, and public discourse (DataReportal, 2023; Statista, 2023b). At the same time, the communication environment has become more fragmented and algorithmically organized, creating new opportunities for participation while also complicating the conditions under which messages are evaluated and

Citation: Carter, E. (2026). Communication in the age of social media: Influencers, credibility, and the transformation of digital public engagement. *Journal of Digital Media, Communication and Mediated Realities*, 1(1), 18-40.

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<https://doi.org/10.64744/jdmcmr.2026.182>

believed (Bozdag, 2013; Valkenburg, 2022).

Within this transformed media ecology, the rise of social media influencers has become one of the most visible developments in contemporary communication. Influencers are not simply online celebrities; they are communicative actors who build attention, legitimacy, and persuasive capacity through continuous self-presentation, audience interaction, and content circulation across platforms. Their importance lies in the fact that they often occupy a position between institutions and ordinary users, thereby functioning as culturally significant intermediaries in digital communication. Research has shown that influencers derive persuasive power not only from popularity or visibility, but also from the appearance of intimacy, authenticity, and experiential proximity to followers (Khamis et al., 2017; Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2016). In this sense, influencer communication reflects a broader shift in communication authority away from formal expertise alone and toward relational credibility shaped by online performance and perceived personal connection.

This transformation is especially important because communication on social media increasingly operates through hybrid forms of persuasion that blur the boundaries between information, entertainment, advertising, advocacy, and interpersonal interaction. For example, influencers now play visible roles in public health communication, lifestyle promotion, consumer behavior, and issue advocacy. Studies have demonstrated that influencers can support positive outcomes such as vaccine awareness, health education, exercise motivation, and screening intention when their communication aligns with audience expectations and appears trustworthy (Bonnevie et al., 2020; Gupta et al., 2022; Fielden & Holch, 2022). Yet the same communicative mechanisms can also be used to normalize unhealthy products, spread questionable advice, or amplify misleading claims, especially when persuasive intent is obscured or source expertise is weak (Coates et al., 2019b; Chou et al., 2018; Wasike, 2022). As a result, communication research must now address not only message content, but also the platform logics, relational dynamics, and credibility cues through which messages acquire influence in digital environments.

A central issue in this discussion is credibility. Classical communication scholarship has long emphasized that message effectiveness is shaped by perceptions of source expertise and trustworthiness (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Ohanian, 1990). However, social media complicates these concepts because credibility is increasingly negotiated through follower counts, aesthetic presentation, audience comments, algorithmic visibility, and repeated interaction rather than through institutional credentials alone. Contemporary research suggests that influencer effectiveness is strongly shaped by perceived credibility, product–endorser fit, authenticity, and audience identification (Janssen et al., 2022; Lou & Yuan, 2019; Schouten et al., 2020). This means that communication on social media is often evaluated less through formal authority and more through relational and symbolic cues that signal sincerity, similarity, and relevance. Such developments require a reconsideration of how persuasion operates in digital contexts where the boundaries between expert knowledge, personal experience, and branded communication are increasingly porous.

Another major factor shaping social media communication is parasociality. The concept of parasocial interaction originally described the illusion of face-to-face relationship that audiences form with media figures (Horton & Wohl, 1956). In social media environments, these relationships become more interactive, persistent, and commercially consequential because influencers regularly respond to comments, share personal routines, disclose emotions, and invite followers into

seemingly intimate aspects of daily life. Recent studies have shown that parasocial relationships contribute significantly to audience trust, identification, and behavioral intention in relation to influencer content (Kim, 2021; Li et al., 2023; Reinikainen et al., 2020). Thus, social media communication is not simply informational; it is affective and relational, relying heavily on emotional attachment and perceived familiarity. This dynamic helps explain why influencers can be highly effective communicators, but it also raises ethical concerns regarding audience vulnerability, hidden persuasion, and the commodification of trust.

The significance of these developments extends beyond commercial communication. Social media now plays a major role in how people encounter news, health information, public debates, and social causes. Communication scholars have therefore increasingly examined how platform structures and communicative intermediaries shape public understanding and civic engagement. Incidental exposure to information, cross-platform circulation, and influencer-led discourse all affect what audiences see, believe, and share in ways that differ markedly from older gatekeeping models (Schäfer, 2023; Bruns, 2021; Navarro et al., 2020). In this context, the study of communication and social media must address both empowerment and inequality: social media can democratize participation by lowering barriers to visibility, yet it can also concentrate influence in the hands of those most able to master platform norms, self-branding strategies, and algorithmic attention economies (Marwick, 2015; Van Driel & Dumitrica, 2020). Communication on social media is therefore best understood as a field of contested power in which attention, legitimacy, and persuasion are unevenly distributed.

Against this background, the present article explores how communication is being reconfigured by social media, with particular attention to the communicative role of influencers, the redefinition of credibility, and the relational mechanisms that structure digital public engagement. Rather than treating social media merely as a new channel, the article argues that it represents a distinct communication environment shaped by platform architecture, visibility metrics, and audience participation. By synthesizing literature across communication studies, digital media research, and influencer scholarship, this paper aims to clarify the conceptual foundations of communication in social media settings and to examine its broader implications for public discourse, persuasion, and ethical communication practice.

2. Literature Review

The literature on communication and social media has expanded rapidly over the past decade, reflecting the growing centrality of platforms in everyday interaction, information exchange, and public discourse. Comparative scholarship has shown that social media studies increasingly require cross-national, cross-platform, and cross-media perspectives because communicative practices differ across technological environments and cultural settings (Matassi & Boczkowski, 2021). This insight is important because communication on Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, X/Twitter, or Weibo cannot be treated as functionally identical. Each platform organizes visibility, interaction, temporality, and content circulation differently, thereby shaping not only what can be communicated but also how audiences interpret and engage with messages. As a result, social media communication should be understood as a platform-dependent process rather than a single unified phenomenon.

A foundational strand of this literature examines how social media has altered the structure of communication itself. Rather than relying on centralized gatekeepers, digital communication now

unfolds through distributed networks in which users encounter information through feeds, recommendations, peer sharing, and incidental exposure. Reviews of digital communication research have emphasized that this environment produces both enhanced accessibility and heightened unpredictability, since exposure is often driven by algorithmic systems and social recommendation rather than deliberate search or editorial selection (Schäfer, 2023; Andi, 2020). This shift has weakened the monopoly of traditional media institutions over public communication while expanding the role of informal, semi-professional, and commercial actors in setting communicative agendas. Consequently, communication is increasingly characterized by simultaneity, hybridity, and competition for attention.

The transition from broadcast communication to platformed communication has also transformed the logic of visibility. In social media environments, attention is quantified through likes, shares, comments, views, and follower metrics, turning communication into a measurable performance. This metricized environment rewards content that can attract rapid engagement, emotional response, and algorithmic amplification. Research on the professionalization of influencers suggests that online communication has become closely tied to self-branding, consistency of persona, and strategic visibility management (Khamis et al., 2017; Audrezet et al., 2020). In this sense, communication is not merely the transmission of ideas but a performative process in which speakers must continually sustain presence, relevance, and perceived authenticity within a crowded platform economy. The communicative value of a message is therefore often inseparable from the social identity and digital labor of the communicator.

One major body of literature focuses specifically on social media influencers as emerging communication actors. Influencers have been conceptualized as hybrid figures who combine elements of celebrity, peer communication, brand mediation, and content production. Unlike traditional celebrities, their influence is often rooted in perceived accessibility and ongoing interaction rather than institutional fame alone. Casaló et al. (2018) argue that influencers function as opinion leaders in digital environments, shaping attitudes and behavior through their credibility and social presence. Similarly, De Castro et al. (2021) note that the influencer phenomenon cannot be reduced to marketing alone, since influencers increasingly participate in wider processes of meaning-making, recommendation, and everyday norm construction. These perspectives suggest that influencers have become structurally important to understanding modern communication because they mediate between institutions and audiences in ways that appear personal, immediate, and relatable.

The communicative effectiveness of influencers has been studied extensively through the lens of source characteristics. Classical persuasion theory highlighted expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness as important determinants of message effectiveness (Hovland et al., 1953; Ohanian, 1990). In social media settings, these features remain relevant but are reconfigured through new digital signals. For instance, follower count, visual style, perceived transparency, and consistency of self-presentation all contribute to how credibility is judged online. Kim and Kim (2021) argue that trust in influencers is not a simple function of popularity but depends on a nuanced combination of authenticity, relational cues, and audience expectations. Likewise, Weismueller et al. (2020) demonstrate that credibility interacts with disclosure practices, meaning that audiences may respond differently when persuasive intent is made explicit. The literature therefore indicates that social media communication depends on complex credibility negotiations in which traditional source effects are filtered through platform-specific norms and audience literacy.

Relatedly, studies on authenticity have become central to the analysis of social media communication. Authenticity is often invoked as a key reason audiences trust and follow influencers, yet the concept itself is unstable because digital authenticity is frequently produced through strategic performance. Research has shown that influencers must balance commercial collaboration with the maintenance of a personal, sincere, and consistent persona. When this balance fails, audience trust may erode. Van Driel and Dumitrica (2020) describe this tension as a defining feature of professionalized influencer culture, where authenticity becomes both a communicative value and a market asset. Similarly, Jenkins et al. (2020) emphasize that audience judgments of credibility and authenticity are especially important in health-related communication, where users may rely on online figures for practical guidance. These findings suggest that authenticity in social media is not the opposite of strategy; rather, it is often strategically enacted in ways that shape persuasion and trust.

Another key strand of scholarship highlights parasociality and identification as mechanisms of social media influence. The affordances of digital platforms enable communicators to cultivate a sense of intimacy by sharing routines, emotions, vulnerabilities, and personalized advice. These repeated practices foster parasocial bonds that can make audiences feel connected to figures they have never met. Brown (2015) argues that audience involvement with media personae can take several forms, including transportation, identification, and parasocial interaction, each of which contributes to persuasive engagement. In the social media context, these dynamics are intensified because platforms create the appearance of reciprocal interaction through comments, stories, live streams, and direct responses. Research on influencer advertising further shows that identification can shape how audiences evaluate both the communicator and the message, thereby increasing persuasive impact (Jung & Im, 2021). Thus, social media communication is deeply relational: messages work not only because of what is said but because of who appears to be saying it, how they relate to followers, and how audiences imagine that relationship.

The literature also demonstrates that influencer communication operates across multiple substantive domains, particularly health, lifestyle, fitness, and food. In health communication, influencers have attracted attention both as opportunities and risks. On the one hand, studies indicate that social media influencers can be effective in promoting positive public health outcomes. Bonnevie et al. (2021), for example, found that influencer-based messaging can support favorable attitudes toward vaccination over time. Pretorius et al. (2022) similarly show that mental health professionals on TikTok and Instagram may contribute to mental health literacy and help-seeking. On the other hand, a growing body of research warns that health-related communication on social media often contains misinformation, oversimplification, or commercially motivated advice. Marocolo et al. (2021) document the spread of misleading exercise and health content, while Nan et al. (2022) review why some individuals are more susceptible to health misinformation in digital contexts. Together, these studies reveal that communication on social media is consequential because it increasingly shapes public understanding in areas previously dominated by institutional expertise.

The same pattern appears in lifestyle and consumption-oriented communication. Research on food, fitness, and beauty influencers suggests that social media communicators play an important role in normalizing certain bodies, habits, preferences, and aspirations. Pilgrim and Bohnet-Joschko (2019) show that influencers often mix health discourse with aspirational lifestyle branding, making persuasive appeals appear both educational and desirable. In the domain of physical activity, Sokolova and Perez (2021) found that following fitness influencers can shape exercise intentions

through parasocial mechanisms, although viewing such content does not automatically translate into behavioral change. Similar tensions appear in studies of food promotion, where the persuasive appeal of influencers may encourage either healthier or less healthy consumption, depending on the content, context, and audience (Folkvord et al., 2020; Smit et al., 2020). This literature underscores the need to analyze social media communication not just as message delivery, but as a broader cultural process through which values, identities, and routines are socially modeled.

The issue of persuasion becomes particularly significant when communication overlaps with advertising. Influencer communication often blurs the boundary between personal recommendation and paid promotion, creating ambiguity about intent. Research on advertising disclosure shows that audiences do not always recognize commercial persuasion, especially when branded messages are embedded within intimate or entertaining content. De Veirman et al. (2017) demonstrate that both the number of followers and product congruence affect brand evaluations, suggesting that audience response depends on a combination of social proof and perceived fit. Meanwhile, Lou and Kim (2019) found that influencer content can shape adolescents' parasocial relationships and consumer orientations, raising concerns about how commercial communication becomes embedded in seemingly personal digital interaction. This line of scholarship reveals that communication on social media frequently operates through subtle forms of influence that require renewed ethical and regulatory attention.

Another important literature addresses misinformation and the destabilization of communicative authority. Social media has expanded access to information, but it has also enabled the rapid circulation of false, misleading, or unverified claims. Chou et al. (2018) argue that health-related misinformation has become a major challenge in the digital era because emotionally engaging and easily shareable content can travel widely regardless of evidentiary quality. Wasike (2022) further shows that influencer signaling can shape engagement with COVID-19 misinformation, highlighting the role of trusted communicators in amplifying problematic content. These concerns are not limited to health; they extend to science, politics, and public affairs more broadly. The growing presence of misinformation indicates that communication on social media cannot be evaluated solely in terms of reach or engagement, since communicative success may coexist with informational harm. This makes credibility, platform governance, and audience literacy central concerns for contemporary communication scholarship.

The literature also explores how algorithms shape communication outcomes. Social media platforms do not simply host content; they actively organize visibility through recommendation systems, moderation practices, and engagement-driven ranking. Bozdog (2013) warned that algorithmic filtering introduces forms of bias that affect what users see and how perspectives are prioritized. More recent work on reduction and recommendation moderation suggests that platform governance operates not only through removal but also through subtler strategies of deprioritization, demonetization, and visibility control (Gillespie, 2022). These processes matter for communication because they influence which voices become prominent, which messages circulate, and which publics form around specific issues. In other words, communication in social media environments is co-produced by human actors and algorithmic infrastructures, making platform power an essential dimension of the communication process.

A further line of research considers the implications of social media communication for public discourse and social polarization. Systematic reviews have shown that social media may contribute to political polarization by reinforcing identity-based communication, emotional engagement, and

selective exposure (Kubin & Von Sikorski, 2021). Studies of issue communication, including climate change, suggest that platform dynamics can intensify fragmentation and conflict, particularly when communicative visibility rewards outrage or ideological signaling (Falkenberg et al., 2022; Schäfer, 2020). Although not all forms of polarization are caused by social media, the literature increasingly recognizes that communication within platformed environments often amplifies contestation rather than consensus. This is significant because public communication is no longer shaped primarily by shared media agendas but by networked, segmented, and often emotionally charged interactions.

Despite these advances, the literature also exhibits notable limitations. First, many studies remain heavily concentrated in specific domains such as marketing, health, and youth culture, leaving broader communication-theoretical questions underdeveloped. Second, much of the empirical work focuses on single platforms or specific campaign contexts, which makes it difficult to generalize across communicative environments. Third, while concepts such as authenticity, credibility, and parasocial interaction are widely used, they are sometimes treated as stable variables rather than contextually negotiated processes. Finally, research often prioritizes audience outcomes such as purchase intention, engagement, or attitude change, while giving less attention to the structural and ethical implications of influencer-centered communication for the public sphere. These gaps suggest the need for a more integrative framework that connects platform structures, communicator strategies, audience psychology, and normative concerns.

Taken together, the literature indicates that communication in the age of social media is shaped by the convergence of platform logics, relational influence, and credibility performance. Social media has not simply created new channels for old forms of communication; it has redefined who communicates, how communication is valued, and under what conditions messages become persuasive or socially consequential. Influencers exemplify this transformation because they combine visibility, intimacy, and persuasion in ways that challenge conventional distinctions between interpersonal communication, media communication, and strategic communication. The next section therefore develops a conceptual framework for understanding how communication, credibility, and public engagement intersect within contemporary social media environments.

3. Conceptual Framework

To understand communication in contemporary social media environments, this article proposes a conceptual framework built around four interconnected dimensions: platform affordances, influencer source characteristics, relational mechanisms, and audience outcomes. This framework is designed to explain why communication on social media differs from traditional mass communication and why influencers have become such powerful communicative actors in digital public life. Rather than treating social media simply as a channel, the framework assumes that communication is shaped by the interaction among technological systems, message producers, audience perceptions, and social contexts. In this sense, social media communication is best understood as a socio-technical process in which meaning, persuasion, and engagement emerge through dynamic relations among platforms, communicators, and audiences.

The first dimension is platform affordances. Social media platforms structure communication through specific affordances such as interactivity, persistence, visibility, personalization, and virality. These affordances determine not only how content is distributed, but also how users encounter, interpret, and respond to messages. Valkenburg (2022) argues that the uses and effects

of social media must be grounded in platform-sensitive theorizing because different features stimulate different psychological and social processes. Short-video platforms, for example, privilege brevity, visual immediacy, emotional punch, and algorithmic recommendation, while image-centered or discussion-based platforms may facilitate different modes of attention and response. As a result, communication in social media contexts is inseparable from interface design and platform logic. This article therefore treats platform affordances as the structural layer of the framework, establishing the conditions under which communication becomes visible, interactive, and influential.

The second dimension is source characteristics, particularly the communicative features of influencers. Traditional communication research has long shown that persuasion is affected by source credibility, which includes perceived expertise and trustworthiness (Hovland & Weiss, 1951). In social media environments, however, source characteristics also include relatability, consistency of persona, visual self-presentation, follower metrics, and perceived authenticity. Ki and Kim (2019) suggest that influencers are persuasive partly because audiences develop a desire to emulate them, meaning that source effectiveness derives not only from trust but also from aspiration. Similarly, Lu et al. (2020) show that genuineness plays an important role in public engagement on social media, indicating that the perceived sincerity of the communicator shapes whether audiences respond positively. Within this framework, source characteristics are therefore understood as a combination of classical credibility cues and digitally specific signals that together shape communicative influence.

The third dimension centers on relational mechanisms. Social media communication is rarely a one-off exchange; it is often embedded in repeated exposure, comment interaction, story updates, and forms of mediated familiarity that make communication feel ongoing and personal. This means that messages often work through psychological and affective mechanisms rather than through information alone. Parasocial interaction is especially important in this regard. Although originally associated with traditional media, parasociality takes on new intensity in social media settings because influencers simulate accessibility and responsiveness through everyday content and semi-interactive practices. Research on health and lifestyle influencers has shown that these relationships can shape audience attitudes, trust, and behavioral intention in significant ways (Heiss & Rudolph, 2022; Sokolova & Perez, 2021). In the present framework, parasociality functions as a mediating relational mechanism through which communication gains emotional force and persuasive capacity.

Identification is another key relational process. Social media communication is especially effective when audiences see the communicator as similar, admirable, or personally relevant. Identification differs from general liking because it involves a degree of self-referential alignment: audiences imagine themselves in relation to the influencer's lifestyle, values, or choices. This matters because communication in digital spaces often unfolds through aspiration and imitation rather than through detached evaluation. Schouten et al. (2020) demonstrate that identification is central to understanding endorsement effects, particularly when audiences perceive a meaningful fit between communicator and message. In addition, Kim (2021) argues that social presence on Instagram contributes to stronger parasocial interactions, further reinforcing audience responsiveness. These findings support the view that communication on social media is deeply relational, and that influence emerges when audiences feel not only informed by a communicator but also socially connected to them.

The fourth dimension concerns audience outcomes. In this framework, communication

outcomes are understood broadly to include cognitive, affective, attitudinal, and behavioral responses. Social media messages may increase awareness, shape perceptions, influence judgments, trigger emotional responses, stimulate discussion, encourage consumption, or motivate action. Importantly, these outcomes are not determined by message content alone. They arise from the interaction of platform affordances, source characteristics, and relational mechanisms. For example, a highly credible influencer on a platform optimized for visibility may produce stronger engagement than an expert with limited social presence. Likewise, a message that aligns with audience identity and parasocial attachment may have greater impact than a more factually detailed but emotionally distant message. This helps explain why communication on social media can be highly persuasive even when it is informal, visually simple, or lightly sourced.

To clarify these relationships, the framework also draws selectively on the Theory of Planned Behavior. Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) argued that attitudes, social norms, and perceived control shape intention and behavior. In social media environments, influencers may affect all three elements simultaneously. They can shape attitudes by framing products, practices, or issues positively; shape perceived norms by making certain behaviors appear common, desirable, or socially rewarded; and shape perceived control by presenting actions as easy, accessible, and personally achievable. This is particularly visible in communication related to health, exercise, lifestyle habits, and screening behavior, where influencers often model routines in ways that normalize and simplify action. The usefulness of this perspective is that it links social media communication to broader behavioral processes without reducing persuasion to message exposure alone.

At the same time, the framework incorporates the concept of message–source congruence. Social media research consistently shows that communication is more effective when there is a perceived fit between the communicator and the topic, product, or cause being promoted. Audiences are more likely to accept communication when the influencer appears appropriate to the subject matter and when the message aligns with their established identity. Janssen et al. (2022) found that product–influencer fit significantly affects influencer evaluations and advertising outcomes through credibility and identification. This suggests that communicative success depends not simply on who speaks, but on whether the audience perceives coherence between the speaker, the message, and the communicative context. In the proposed framework, this coherence functions as an evaluative filter through which audiences judge legitimacy.

The framework also recognizes that social media communication is shaped by commercialization and governance. Many influencer messages are embedded in monetized relationships, sponsorship agreements, and platform incentive structures. As a result, communication cannot be understood as purely interpersonal or purely informational. It is often simultaneously relational and strategic. Research on disclosure practices indicates that audiences may respond differently when the commercial nature of content is made visible, raising questions about transparency and persuasion ethics (Weismueller et al., 2020). Furthermore, the platform itself has governance power through moderation, recommendation, and monetization systems. Thus, the proposed framework treats social media communication as occurring within a layered environment where interpersonal trust, market incentives, and platform control intersect.

An important implication of this framework is that communicative power on social media is distributed unevenly. Not all users benefit equally from platform affordances, and not all communicators can convert visibility into trust or trust into influence. Those who can successfully

combine authenticity performance, relational maintenance, topical congruence, and platform literacy are more likely to become influential communicators. This helps explain why social media ecosystems often concentrate attention around particular individuals while still appearing open and participatory. It also helps explain why misinformation may spread effectively when conveyed by trusted or emotionally resonant figures rather than by anonymous sources. Communication on social media is therefore shaped not only by openness, but also by asymmetries of symbolic capital, digital skill, and platform optimization.

Overall, this conceptual framework positions communication in social media environments as a multi-level process. Platform affordances create the structural conditions for communication; source characteristics shape first-order judgments of trust and relevance; relational mechanisms such as parasocial interaction and identification intensify engagement; and audience outcomes emerge as cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses. This framework offers a way to integrate diverse strands of literature that are often examined separately, including source credibility, digital intimacy, persuasion, platform studies, and strategic communication. In the next section, this framework is used to develop a broader analytical discussion of how influencers, credibility, and social media infrastructures are jointly transforming digital public engagement.

4. Main Discussion and Analysis

The transformation of communication in social media environments can be understood most clearly through the changing relationship among visibility, trust, and participation. In traditional mass media, communication power was largely associated with institutional access, professional authority, and editorial control. In contrast, social media allows influence to emerge through a combination of networked reach, emotional resonance, and algorithmic amplification. This does not mean that institutions have disappeared; rather, they now coexist with a broader array of communicative actors competing for attention in the same digital space. Influencers are among the most important of these actors because they embody the platform-era fusion of personal branding, audience engagement, and persuasive communication. Their role reveals that contemporary communication is no longer defined only by who has information, but by who can render information socially compelling, relatable, and shareable.

One of the most significant changes introduced by social media is the personalization of public communication. Messages that once circulated through formal institutional channels are now increasingly mediated by individuals whose authority depends on style, familiarity, and identity performance. This is especially evident in issue communication, where users often encounter public-interest topics not first through journalists or official organizations, but through creators, curators, and influencers who embed these issues within narratives of everyday life. Pearce et al. (2019) describe this as part of the “social media life” of public issues, in which platforms, publics, and future imaginaries become intertwined. In communication terms, this means that public discourse is increasingly filtered through personalities and affective communities rather than through impersonal information systems. Influencers matter not simply because they attract attention, but because they repackage complex topics into forms that align with platform culture and audience expectation.

This personalization process has major communicative consequences. First, it lowers the perceived distance between speaker and audience, making information appear more immediate and socially relevant. Second, it changes the basis on which messages are evaluated. Rather than asking

whether a message comes from an institutionally sanctioned source, audiences may instead ask whether the communicator seems trustworthy, relatable, transparent, or emotionally sincere. Research in influencer communication repeatedly shows that source evaluation in digital spaces is shaped by these interpersonalized criteria. Kim and Kim (2021) found that trust in influencers is built through nuanced perceptions rather than simple popularity metrics, while Reinikainen et al. (2020) showed that credibility and parasocial dynamics jointly shape how audiences respond to influencer content. These findings suggest that the rise of social media has not eliminated the importance of trust; it has redistributed trust into new communicative forms that depend on digital performance and relationship management.

At the same time, personalized communication creates vulnerabilities. When trust attaches more strongly to individual communicators than to institutions, persuasive influence can become less transparent and more difficult to regulate. Followers may interpret advice, endorsements, or claims as authentic guidance even when such communication is commercially motivated or weakly evidenced. This issue is particularly visible in sectors such as health, beauty, exercise, and nutrition, where influencers often present lifestyle content as a mixture of expertise, personal testimony, and aspirational example. Rogers et al. (2022) note that nutrition information communicated by influencers is highly varied in quality and often difficult for audiences to evaluate. Similarly, Pfender and Devlin (2023) show that social media discourse about birth control can shape health understanding through personal storytelling that may or may not align with medical evidence. These studies indicate that communication on social media often derives power from experiential authority, but experiential authority can become problematic when it displaces professional or evidence-based judgment.

Another major transformation concerns the hybridization of communication genres. On social media, the boundaries between interpersonal communication, public communication, advertising, activism, and entertainment are increasingly blurred. A single post may simultaneously function as self-expression, recommendation, persuasion, and community-building. This hybrid character is one reason why influencer communication can be especially effective: it rarely appears as a purely formal message. Instead, it is embedded in everyday routines, informal language, visual storytelling, and repeated interaction. Kaye et al. (2022) argue that short-video culture on TikTok illustrates this dynamic particularly well, as communicative influence emerges through creativity, trend participation, and culturally coded performance rather than through explicit argument alone. In such contexts, communication becomes ambient and iterative. Audiences are persuaded not necessarily through one strong message, but through repeated low-intensity encounters that normalize certain attitudes, products, habits, or viewpoints over time.

This hybridization also changes how audiences process persuasive intent. In traditional advertising, commercial messages are relatively easy to identify because they are separated from entertainment or editorial content. In influencer communication, however, commercial persuasion is often woven into narrative intimacy and lifestyle display. De Veirman et al. (2017) showed that influencer characteristics such as follower count and brand congruence affect brand attitudes, but these effects operate within a communicative setting where persuasion is often subtle. Weismueller et al. (2020) further demonstrated that disclosure matters, yet its effectiveness depends on how audiences interpret the credibility of the source. The key point is that communication on social media frequently persuades through relational continuity rather than through explicit promotional cues. This makes influencer communication especially powerful in consumer culture, but also especially difficult to separate from ordinary social interaction.

The transformation of communication is equally visible in the area of public health. Social media platforms have become major spaces where health information is sought, shared, debated, and performed. Influencers, health professionals, patients, and ordinary users now all participate in a communicative field that was once dominated more clearly by formal institutions and professional gatekeepers. This shift has clear benefits. Bonnevie et al. (2021) found that influencers can communicate positive vaccine information effectively across time, while Pretorius et al. (2022) suggest that mental health professionals on TikTok and Instagram can play constructive roles in mental health literacy and help-seeking. Looi et al. (2022) similarly show that influencer tier and message construal affect the impact of COVID-19 prevention messaging, indicating that social media communication can be strategically mobilized for public-interest communication when source and message are appropriately aligned.

Yet the same communicative environment also enables misinformation, oversimplification, and symbolic distortion. Chou et al. (2018) warned that health misinformation on social media is a serious public challenge because corrective communication must compete with emotionally engaging and widely circulated inaccurate content. Thompson (2022) extends this concern by showing that the rise of health professional influencers complicates public pedagogy, since expertise itself becomes entangled with platform visibility, self-branding, and audience metrics. What emerges is a communication order in which truthfulness alone does not guarantee reach or trust. Instead, content must also succeed within the cultural and algorithmic logic of platforms. This helps explain why misinformation can flourish even when authoritative information is available: communication effectiveness in social media environments depends not only on evidence quality, but on narrative style, perceived authenticity, emotional charge, and the social standing of the messenger.

Algorithmic systems intensify these dynamics by shaping what content gains exposure in the first place. Social media platforms are not neutral carriers of communication. Their recommendation architectures prioritize some messages over others, often according to engagement likelihood rather than social value. Bozdag (2013) identified early concerns about algorithmic filtering and personalization, showing how such systems can introduce biases into information exposure. More recent research suggests that moderation and recommendation do not only remove problematic content; they also selectively enhance, suppress, or redirect attention in ways that structure communicative life. Gillespie (2022) describes reduction as a form of moderation, emphasizing that platforms can quietly influence visibility without full deletion. This is crucial for understanding communication because it means that public discourse is shaped by infrastructures that operate beneath the surface of apparent user choice. In practical terms, social media communication is always partly co-authored by the platform itself.

The role of algorithms is especially significant in relation to controversy and polarization. Communication studies increasingly suggest that platforms may reward emotionally intense, identity-reinforcing, or conflictual content because such material generates higher engagement. Kubin and Von Sikorski (2021), in their systematic review, argue that social media can contribute to political polarization under certain conditions, particularly when communication becomes organized around group identity and selective exposure. Research on climate communication shows similar patterns. Falkenberg et al. (2022) documented growing polarization around climate change on social media, while Schäfer (2020) argued that fragmented and polarized platform communication can make constructive policymaking more difficult. These findings demonstrate that communication in digital spaces is not simply more democratic because more people can

participate. Participation may expand, but the quality and direction of public communication can still be distorted by platform incentives that privilege conflict, simplification, and emotional escalation.

Another important feature of social media communication is the collapse of distinctions between expertise and popularity. In many digital settings, communicative authority can be inferred from visibility signals such as follower counts, engagement rates, professional aesthetics, or platform verification. Yet these signals do not necessarily correspond to substantive expertise. Ohanian (1990) conceptualized expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness as distinct dimensions of source evaluation, but in social media environments these dimensions are often conflated. A communicator may appear credible because they are attractive, active, and socially validated, even when their subject-matter knowledge is limited. This creates a structural tension in digital communication: the signs that audiences use to assess trust are increasingly shaped by platform culture rather than by institutional credentialing. The success of many influencers demonstrates that communicative effectiveness may depend more on how expertise is performed than on whether expertise is formally established.

This tension is intensified by the economy of authenticity. Social media rewards communicators who appear genuine, emotionally open, and unscripted, yet those appearances are often carefully managed. Audrezet et al. (2020) note that authenticity under threat becomes a key tension for influencers who must go beyond simple self-presentation to sustain audience trust. Hendry et al. (2022) describe this as a form of “influencer pedagogy” in health communication, where authenticity becomes both an educational resource and a communicative problem. On the one hand, authenticity can humanize communication, reduce distance, and make information feel accessible. On the other hand, authenticity can be strategically commodified, making it difficult for audiences to distinguish sincere care from persuasive performance. The central issue, then, is not whether influencers are “really” authentic, but how authenticity functions as a communicative resource that organizes attention, trust, and audience attachment.

Parasocial interaction plays a crucial role in converting authenticity into influence. When audiences repeatedly consume content from a familiar figure, they may develop a sense of intimacy that enhances receptivity to messages. This is especially important in fitness, health, beauty, and lifestyle communication, where content often revolves around ongoing routines and visible self-disclosure. Li et al. (2023) found that parasocial relationships significantly shaped exercise intention in the context of fitness influencers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Heiss and Rudolph (2022) showed similar dynamics in the context of following cancer patients on Instagram, where motivations and consequences are shaped by affective and relational factors. These studies reinforce the idea that communication in social media settings cannot be reduced to information transfer. It is often a form of mediated relationship-building in which emotional familiarity becomes an infrastructure of persuasion.

The communicative significance of social media is also evident in the growing importance of incidental exposure. Unlike traditional communication models that often assume deliberate message seeking, social media users frequently encounter information while browsing for entertainment, social updates, or unrelated content. Schäfer (2023) reviews how incidental news exposure has become a defining feature of digital media environments. This matters because it changes both the context and the readiness with which audiences process information. Public health advice, political claims, brand messages, and social issues may appear unexpectedly in

entertainment-oriented feeds, where they are interpreted under conditions of low attentional commitment but high repetition. Communication under such conditions may be more susceptible to heuristic evaluation, emotional cues, and social proof. In other words, the social media environment changes not only what people see, but also the cognitive mode through which they encounter communication.

In addition, communication on social media is increasingly transnational and culturally uneven. Platform norms, influencer roles, and audience interpretations vary by region, language, and media system. Matassi and Boczkowski (2021) argue that comparative social media studies are essential because communicative practices differ significantly across national and platform contexts. Liu et al. (2017), for example, showed that health-related virality on Sina Weibo is shaped by distinct platform-specific dynamics, while Liu and Zou (2023) examined how reproductive health taboos are negotiated through communication strategies on Chinese social media. These studies suggest that there is no universal model of social media communication. Rather, platform affordances interact with local values, institutional trust, and cultural norms to shape how messages gain traction. Any adequate theory of social media communication must therefore remain attentive to contextual diversity rather than assuming a single global communication logic.

Taken together, the analysis suggests that communication in the age of social media is defined by five interrelated transformations. First, communication has become more personalized, with public discourse increasingly mediated by individual communicators rather than only by institutions. Second, communication has become more hybrid, blending information, advertising, intimacy, and entertainment within the same content forms. Third, communication has become more relational, relying on parasociality, identification, and perceived authenticity to shape influence. Fourth, communication has become more infrastructural, with algorithms and platform governance actively shaping visibility and reach. Fifth, communication has become more unstable in normative terms, because the same mechanisms that support engagement and participation can also amplify misinformation, commodify trust, and weaken distinctions between evidence and performance.

These transformations do not imply that social media communication is inherently harmful or inherently beneficial. Rather, they show that communication has become more contingent on the interaction among platform systems, source performance, audience psychology, and social context. Influencers are central to this transformation because they exemplify how communication now operates through the management of visibility, credibility, and intimacy. Their success reveals the possibilities of more engaging and accessible public communication, but it also highlights the need for stronger ethical frameworks, media literacy, and governance responses. The next section therefore turns to the practical and theoretical implications of these developments for communication research and social media practice.

5. Implications

The transformation of communication in social media environments carries important implications for communication theory, professional practice, public institutions, and platform governance. At the theoretical level, the findings discussed in this article suggest that communication can no longer be adequately explained through linear sender–message–receiver models alone. Social media communication is recursive, relational, and infrastructural. Messages are shaped not only by communicator intent, but also by platform affordances, audience feedback,

algorithmic distribution, and the broader visibility economy in which communication unfolds. This means that communication theory must move beyond rigid distinctions such as interpersonal versus mass communication, paid versus unpaid communication, or public versus private discourse. In digital environments, these categories increasingly overlap, and communicative influence often arises precisely from their intersection.

One implication for communication scholarship is the need to treat credibility as a dynamic and socially negotiated process rather than a stable attribute of a source. Classical persuasion models remain useful, but digital communication requires more attention to how trust is performed, perceived, and contested in platform settings. As Jenkins et al. (2020) suggest in their discussion of health communication, credibility today often depends on whether communicators can combine expertise with visibility, relatability, and affective presence. This does not mean expertise has become irrelevant; rather, expertise must now compete within environments where visibility, narrative style, and audience intimacy strongly shape message reception. Future research therefore needs to integrate source credibility with platform studies, audience psychology, and digital labor perspectives in order to explain why some messages travel widely while others remain marginal.

A second implication concerns the role of influencers in strategic communication and public engagement. Influencers should not be understood only as marketing tools or entertainment personalities. They increasingly function as intermediaries in public communication, helping organizations, institutions, and causes reach audiences who may be less responsive to traditional messaging. Gupta et al. (2022) argue that social influencers can play an important role in effective public health communication, especially when campaigns seek to increase reach, familiarity, and participation. This suggests that communication practitioners in fields such as health, education, sustainability, and civic engagement should take influencer communication seriously as a legitimate part of contemporary communication strategy. However, doing so requires careful attention to message–source fit, ethical transparency, and audience trust. Influencer partnerships that prioritize reach without regard to credibility or congruence may generate attention but undermine long-term communicative legitimacy.

A third implication is that public institutions need to adapt their communication strategies to the realities of social media culture rather than simply repurposing traditional messages for digital channels. Organizations often struggle online because their communication remains formal, impersonal, and institution-centered in environments that reward responsiveness, emotional resonance, and relational tone. Albalawi and Sixsmith (2015) proposed adapting agenda-setting perspectives for the social media era, recognizing that public attention now develops through more decentralized and participatory communicative processes. For institutions, this means that communication effectiveness increasingly depends on dialogue, symbolic accessibility, and networked circulation rather than on message issuance alone. Public organizations must learn not only how to post information, but how to participate in communicative ecosystems where authority is negotiated through interaction.

This shift is especially important in health communication. Social media has become a major site where people seek advice, compare experiences, and encounter both accurate information and misleading claims. As a result, health institutions and professionals can no longer assume that official expertise will automatically command attention. Instead, they need communication models that combine accuracy with visibility, empathy, and audience-centered design. Jenkins et al. (2020) suggest that health professionals can act as trusted communicators when they are able to humanize

expertise without compromising integrity. The implication is clear: professional communication must evolve from one-way information delivery toward relational, intelligible, and culturally adaptable forms of digital engagement. This does not require that every institution imitate influencers, but it does require understanding why influencer communication works and how some of its communicative strengths can be translated into responsible public communication.

A fourth implication concerns media and information literacy. Because social media communication often blurs boundaries among expertise, opinion, entertainment, and promotion, audiences require stronger interpretive skills to evaluate messages critically. The challenge is not simply identifying false information, but recognizing how credibility cues are constructed and how parasocial familiarity may shape judgment. Nan et al. (2022) show that susceptibility to misinformation varies across individuals, which means communication interventions should not rely only on fact correction after the fact. Greater emphasis should be placed on anticipatory literacy: helping users understand disclosure, platform incentives, visual persuasion, testimonial authority, and the difference between experiential narratives and evidence-based claims. In practical terms, communication literacy in the social media era should include not only content verification, but also relational and platform awareness.

Another implication is ethical. Social media communication increasingly operates through emotional intimacy and symbolic trust, and this creates moral responsibilities for both influencers and institutions. When communication is persuasive because it appears personal and caring, misuse of that trust can be especially harmful. This is evident in domains such as children's food marketing, health advice, and public crisis communication, where audiences may be especially vulnerable to subtle influence. Smit et al. (2020) demonstrate that social media influencers can affect children's dietary behaviors, highlighting the broader ethical concern that influence may operate powerfully even when audiences do not recognize persuasion. The implication for policy and professional codes is that transparency alone may not be sufficient. Ethical communication on social media requires stronger norms around accountability, vulnerable audiences, and the communicative consequences of monetized intimacy.

Platform governance also emerges as a critical area of implication. If communication visibility is shaped by recommendation systems, moderation practices, and engagement-based ranking, then platforms are not merely neutral hosts but active participants in shaping public discourse. This raises the question of how platform design affects communication quality, misinformation risk, and access to trustworthy information. Gillespie (2022) argues that moderation includes not only removal but also forms of reduction and recommendation control, which means governance often operates invisibly from the user perspective. The practical implication is that improving digital communication is not solely a matter of changing user behavior or communicator ethics; it also requires structural attention to how platforms distribute communicative opportunities and harms. Regulatory debates should therefore consider how platform architectures influence not just content moderation, but the broader ecology of public communication.

For communication practitioners, a further implication is that metrics should be interpreted more carefully. Engagement indicators such as views, likes, comments, and shares are often treated as proxies for communicative success, yet they do not necessarily measure understanding, trust, or beneficial impact. A message may perform well algorithmically while still spreading confusion or encouraging unhealthy behavior. This is particularly important for public campaigns that partner with influencers or adopt social media-native strategies. Kostygina et al. (2020) show that

influencer and meme-based strategies can boost campaign reach and engagement, but reach alone does not resolve the question of communicative quality or social consequence. Communication professionals therefore need more nuanced evaluation frameworks that distinguish visibility from credibility, and attention from meaningful impact.

A final implication concerns future research. Much of the current literature is still organized around specific domains such as advertising, health, or youth media use. While these studies are valuable, there is a growing need for broader integrative scholarship that examines communication as a general social process under conditions of platformization. Future studies should compare platforms systematically, investigate how different publics interpret influencer credibility, and examine how algorithms and commercial incentives reshape communicative norms over time. Comparative and cross-cultural research will be especially important because social media communication does not operate identically across contexts. Communication scholarship must therefore move toward more flexible frameworks that capture the interplay among infrastructure, identity, persuasion, and governance in digital environments.

Overall, the implications of this article are both analytical and practical. Social media communication has expanded participation and created new possibilities for accessible, engaging, and community-based communication. At the same time, it has destabilized older markers of expertise, intensified commercialization, and made trust more performative and fragile. Responding to these changes requires a combination of theoretical revision, institutional adaptation, ethical accountability, and platform reform. In that sense, the future of communication research depends not only on studying social media as a new medium, but on understanding how it is reshaping the very conditions under which public meaning, influence, and social trust are produced.

6. Conclusion

This article has argued that communication in the age of social media is not simply a digital extension of earlier media practices, but a qualitatively different communicative environment shaped by platform infrastructures, influencer culture, relational persuasion, and algorithmic visibility. Social media has transformed who communicates, how messages circulate, and what counts as credible or persuasive in public life. In this new environment, influencers have become especially important because they embody the convergence of self-presentation, audience intimacy, and strategic communication. Their role illustrates a broader reorganization of communicative authority in which trust is increasingly produced through visibility, authenticity performance, and parasocial attachment rather than through formal institutional standing alone.

The discussion has shown that contemporary communication on social media operates through several key shifts. First, it is more personalized, as individuals increasingly mediate public issues and everyday information exchange. Second, it is more hybrid, blending interpersonal expression, commercial persuasion, advocacy, and entertainment within the same communicative forms. Third, it is more relational, relying on identification, credibility cues, and affective familiarity to shape message effectiveness. Fourth, it is more infrastructural, because recommendation systems, moderation practices, and platform designs actively organize communicative visibility. These transformations collectively indicate that digital communication must be understood as a socio-technical process rather than as a simple matter of message transmission.

At the same time, the article has emphasized that the communicative power of social media is

fundamentally ambivalent. On the positive side, social media enables more interactive, accessible, and targeted forms of engagement. Influencers and other digital communicators can help translate complex topics into relatable formats, extend the reach of public campaigns, and create affective connections that traditional institutional messaging often fails to achieve. In areas such as health communication, civic participation, and lifestyle guidance, these capacities may strengthen public engagement when used responsibly. On the negative side, however, the same mechanisms that support accessibility and influence can also facilitate misinformation, hidden persuasion, commercialization of trust, and distorted perceptions of expertise. Social media communication therefore expands opportunities for participation while simultaneously raising serious normative and governance challenges.

A central conclusion of this article is that credibility has become one of the most contested and important concepts in digital communication. In traditional settings, credibility was often associated with recognized expertise, institutional authority, or editorial legitimacy. In social media environments, by contrast, credibility is produced more fluidly through visual presentation, narrative intimacy, follower response, and perceived authenticity. This does not mean that factual expertise has disappeared, but it does mean that expertise must now compete within communicative systems where emotional connection and platform visibility strongly shape audience judgment. As a result, communication research and practice must pay closer attention to how trust is constructed, negotiated, and exploited in social media environments.

Another major conclusion is that communication cannot be separated from platform design. Algorithms, interfaces, recommendation systems, and moderation policies shape not just the distribution of content but the social conditions under which communication is interpreted and acted upon. This means that responsibility for the quality of digital communication does not rest solely with users or influencers. Platforms themselves are deeply implicated in structuring public discourse, amplifying some messages while reducing the visibility of others. Understanding communication in the social media era therefore requires moving beyond content-centered analysis toward a broader account of communicative infrastructure and governance.

Overall, this article concludes that communication in the social media era is best understood as an evolving field of negotiated visibility, relational trust, and strategic influence. Influencers are not marginal cultural figures but central actors in this field because they reveal how communication now works through the fusion of personal presence, symbolic authority, and platform optimization. For scholars, this calls for more integrative frameworks that connect persuasion, credibility, affect, and platform studies. For practitioners, it calls for communication strategies that are not only visible and engaging, but also ethical, transparent, and socially responsible. For institutions and policymakers, it calls for renewed attention to media literacy, platform accountability, and the governance of digital persuasion. In this sense, the future of communication research lies not only in studying new media technologies, but in rethinking the very foundations of communication under conditions of platformized social life.

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