

Storytelling as a Strategic Tool in Influencer Marketing: Impact on Engagement, Authenticity and Purchase Intent

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Abstract

Storytelling has become an important strategic tool in influencer marketing and transformed how engagement, authenticity and purchase-intent is perceived among audiences. This study investigated how influencers on Instagram and TikTok narratively integrate products into personal, brand-related, or lifestyle storylines. Utilizing Narrative Transportation Theory and Source Credibility Theory, the study used a qualitative thematic analysis of six influencers in fashion, lifestyle, technology and financial spaces. Results indicate three archetypal modes of storytelling. Storytelling based upon personal experience encourages consumers to become involved and perceive emotionally, and this resonates with narrative transportation, as well as means of supply that are personal and relatable. Brand-focused story-telling highlights competence and credibility, increasing trust and inviting questions on the purchase side. Life-integrated narrating places products in the story-rich contexts of aspirational practices and identity work, fostering parasocial closeness and everyday authenticity. Cross-platform comparison shows that identical narrative strategies produce different engagement cues, depending on the affordances of the platform. This work contributes to theoretical research by illustrating that also micro-narratives can induce transportation and credibility effects and by refining the boundary conditions of these theories in influencer settings. Contributions include explication of the connections between narrative modes and dimensions of credibility and the medium specific operation of persuasion. These findings highlight the importance for marketers to employ personalized storytelling tactics that combine narrative immersion and perceived authenticity to enhance consumer responses and intention to purchase.

Keywords: influencer marketing, narrative transportation, storytelling, source credibility, purchase intent

1. Introduction

1.1 Influence-Led Storytelling for Digital Marketing

The past decade has witnessed a profound transformation in digital marketing, largely driven by the proliferation of social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. These spaces have enabled ordinary individuals, termed influencers, to build loyal followings and shape purchasing behaviors through personal and authentic interactions (Hermawan, 2021). Unlike traditional advertising, influencer marketing relies on parasocial relationships that merge brand promotion with everyday storytelling. Influencers construct narratives that invite followers to share emotional experiences, lifestyle aspirations, and values, thereby humanizing brands and embedding them in social identity formation (Rundin & Colliander, 2021; GowdaV & H, 2024).

Storytelling in this context is more than a creative device—it is a strategic method of sustaining brand narratives in consumers' daily lives. Influencers often blend commercial content with autobiographical stories about self-image, family, work, or wellness, creating hybrid spaces where marketing and personal experience overlap (Barta et al., 2022). This form of narrative advertising resonates particularly with Millennials and Generation Z, who reject overtly transactional marketing in favor of authenticity and shared meaning (Krishna & Agrawal, 2024). By positioning products as integral elements of lived experiences, influencers generate trust and foster emotional connection that drives engagement and purchase intent.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this trend by amplifying the public's desire for relatable, "real" digital content (Modgil et al., 2021). As consumers turned to social media for both socialization and commerce, influencers' storytelling became a vital bridge between brand identity and audience intimacy. Story-based endorsements now outperform static advertising by encouraging dialogue, user sharing, and emotional participation—transforming consumers from passive viewers into active co-narrators of brand meaning (Baghel, 2024).

1.2 Power of Narrative in Consumer Psychology

The persuasive strength of storytelling lies in its psychological capacity to immerse audiences. According to narrative transportation theory, stories transport individuals into an imagined world where they identify with characters, empathize with situations, and adopt message-consistent attitudes (Green & Appel, 2024). This immersion reduces counter-arguing and enhances perceived authenticity (Thomas & Grigsby, 2024). Influencer marketing leverages this mechanism by blending personal experiences with branded messages. For example, a fashion influencer narrating their outfit choices for a life event allows followers to visualize themselves in similar contexts, aligning brand identity with personal aspiration (Jin et al., 2019).

Moreover, storytelling facilitates the formation of parasocial relationships—one-sided yet emotionally significant bonds between influencers and followers (Reinikainen et al., 2021). Through daily narratives, influencers cultivate trust and relatability, even when followers are aware of the commercial nature of the content. This trust mitigates consumer skepticism toward sponsored posts and fosters long-term loyalty (Fernandes et al., 2024). Emotionally rich narratives—featuring joy, struggle, nostalgia, or transformation—activate empathy and memory, which in turn strengthen behavioral intention (Escalas, 2007). Social media algorithms reinforce these processes by amplifying emotionally engaging stories, thereby extending their persuasive reach across digital networks (Joshi et al., 2023).

1.3 Framing the Study

Although storytelling has become central to influencer marketing, empirical studies that dissect how different narrative modes affect engagement, authenticity, and purchase intent remain limited. Much of the literature treats storytelling as an auxiliary feature of persuasive communication rather than a core mechanism (Kurdi et al., 2022). Furthermore, the interaction between narrative form (personal, brand-centric, lifestyle) and platform affordances (Instagram vs. TikTok) is underexplored. Addressing these gaps, the present study investigates how influencers strategically employ storytelling to shape audience perceptions and consumer behavior.

Drawing upon Narrative Transportation Theory and Source Credibility Theory, this study examines the psychological and social dynamics that make influencer storytelling persuasive. Specifically, it asks:

- 1) How does storytelling enhance authenticity in influencer marketing?
- 2) What effect does storytelling have on consumer purchase intent?

By employing a qualitative case study of six prominent influencers across Instagram and TikTok, the study identifies distinct storytelling modes and demonstrates how these narrative strategies translate into engagement cues and purchasing behaviors. The findings contribute to both theoretical refinement and practical marketing applications by explaining how micro-narratives generate authenticity and influence in digital environments.

2. Theoretical Framework

This research is built upon two interrelated theoretical perspectives to explain the ways of storytelling in influencer marketing and its effect on consumer attitudes and behaviors: 1) Narrative Transportation Theory, and 2) Source Credibility Theory. Such frameworks account for the psychological processes first by which narratives are persuasive, as well as by which the source of a message is trusted, providing an all-encompassing lens through which storytelling can be examined as a strategic marketing tool.

2.1 Narrative Transportation Theory

The concept Narrative Transportation Theory, developed by Green and Brock (2000), explains that individuals become absorbed by a narrative world due to the emergence of engaging stories. This process of "transportation" happens when a story creates attention, imagery, and emotional involvement, which in turn leads to a suspension from disbelief: the artificial moment in which the person is taken from the real world. When we become moved, we take on the viewpoint and ideas of the story, so are more accepting of persuasive injunctions.

Storytelling in the world of influencer marketing Storytelling serves as a mode of conveyance that brings consumers into the influencers' experiences (Okonkwo & Namkousse, 2023). Whether recording vlogs, Instagram stories or TikTok videos, influencers share moments that matter to them: from everyday lifestyle rituals to product user experiences. Immersed in these narratives, followers are less likely to question the content and more likely to perceive it as authentic (Atiq et al., 2022). That immersive approach helps to explain why influencer content that is driven by storytelling often garners more persuasive results than direct advertising.

It is suggested on the basis of narrative transportation research that perceived identifiability of characters and related stimuli may be heightened through narrative transportation, such that early adopters are able to perceive role models as more accessible (Febrian & Fadly, 2021). When, for instance, a fashion influencer narrates the antique essay of the pre-event classics of the clothing brand they attached, followers are able to imagine themselves in the same situation

and thus translate the story of the influencer to their own aspirational experience. This identification creates emotional associations and increases purchase intentions as the brand becomes associated symbolically to personal goals and self-concept (Aziz & Ahmed, 2023; Salimi & Khanlari, 2018).

Narrative Transportation Theory can also assist with elucidating the authenticity effect in influencer advertising. Much like the human experience behind it, experiences rooted in the real world are believed by its savvy consumers—out of which come genuine narratives—because it factors brands into a life, not in table lists of desired features. Through their touching and emotional narratives, the stories are able to fabricate a sense of closeness, strengthening the parasocial connection between influencers and their audience (Richter et al., 2025). This effect is particularly pronounced on platforms like TikTok and Instagram where community content relevancy algorithms prioritize content featuring strong emotional engagement, creating virality of stories to expand scope and gain social proof (Cheng & Li, 2023; Zhou, 2024).

Thus, narrative transportation theory offers a useful framework for explaining how narrative can help immerse, emotionally connect and persuade consumers. It helps explain why stories are not simply the domain of brand hype, but can function as potent mechanisms for attitude formation, trust and purchase intention development.

2.2 Source Credibility Theory

While the theory of transportation explains the underlying mechanisms of how narratives persuade, the efficiency of storytelling in influencer marketing is also dependent on the perceived credibility of the storyteller. According to Source Credibility Theory, initially formulated by Hovland and Weiss (1952) and further elaborated by Ohanian (1990), the persuasive appeal of a message heavily relies on the perceived expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness of the source. In the context of influencing marketing, credibility is a principal determinant of engagement and purchase intentions. Importantly, consumers tend to believe the influencer when they consider him externally authoritative due to relevant expertise, honest or open communication style, and high levels of attractiveness and appeal. Trustworthiness, therefore, is a burning issue in digital environments where consumer skepticism about a commercial message is high. Storytelling, in this case, serves as a trust-enhancing function that alleviates concerns about hidden persuasion. The intrinsic links between storytelling and trust-based purchase behavior are laid in the results of Bogoevska-Gavrilova and Ciunova-Shuleska (2022), which shows that storytelling enhances truthful perception of motivation in content. Credibility also involves expertise. For example, technology influencer promoting the features of iPhone is perceived as more authoritative in the message they are sharing than the fashion influencer performing the same task. These specialists' opinions matter more since they erase fake realities in the information that they pass. Strength in credibility implies that they do not appeal to many people, but rather they are legitimized within certain increasing influence. Attractiveness or charisma is a relative concept to credibility theory (Joseph, 1982). The closer the influencers are to their students, the stronger the parasocial bonds. This is parallel to the intimacy model discussed by Wellman (X. Zhou et al., 2024). The stronger these bonds, the stronger the credibility competence. Recent studies hypothesize an interaction between credibility and self-presentation strategies. There is evidence that selling storytelling to conjure holiness. According to Boerman et al. (2012), laypersons “could differ from authority attributes.” This presence would give average people trust, and credibility would lead to storytelling. In other words, the positioning aspect resonates with credibility in the evolution of influencers. In conclusion, Source credibility theory delineates the grounds under which storytelling becomes effective. Indeed, even the most immersive of stories fade off once the influencer loses credibility. On the other hand, when these two constructs are combined, the persuasive effect awakens.

2.3 Integrative Value of the Frameworks

Taken together, Narrative Transportation Theory and Source Credibility Theory provide a useful framework for studying storytelling in the context of influencer marketing. Transportation accounts for how stories transport consumers into enriched worlds that provoke emotional responses and motivation to believe, whereas credibility accounts for why consumers perceive the narrative as credible or not.

By combining these frameworks, the study empirically considers storytelling as a psychological process (i.e., one of narrative engagement) and a social process (i.e., one imbued with considerations about source trustworthiness, expertise, and relatability). This two-fold viewpoint contributes to a stronger understanding of storytelling as a strategic tactic to elevate engagement, build trust, and boost purchase intent in digital influencer marketing.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study used a qualitative, single-case study design to investigate how the use of influencer storytelling in social media brand recommendations on an image-based platform, specifically Instagram, goes beyond mere emotional persuasion to play a strategic role that influences consumer engagement, authenticity, and purchase intention. The

adoption of such a qualitative design was justified given the rich and contextually embedded nature of data in which human actions and sense-making are situated (Baxter & Jack, 2015). Storytelling is an intricate form of communication that calls for investigation beyond numbers and thus a qualitative prism is capable of capturing nuances in narrative strategies, emotional appeal or consumer reaction.

The case study design was considered appropriate as it allows detailed exploration of contemporary events in their real-life context (Hollweck, 2015). Influencer marketing is rooted in the dynamic context of social media platforms, and it is therefore very important to analyze narratives in situ. Based on a sample of influencers from TikTok and Instagram, the research examined how storytelling tactics operate as persuasive mechanism in digital environments.

3.2 Research Philosophy and Approach

The research philosophy that guided the study was interpretivist, which concerns subjective meanings and social construction of human experience (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). Interpretivism acknowledges that consumers interpret influencer narratives through their own experiences, cultural lenses, and social contexts. This orientation equipped the researcher to investigate how authenticity and engagement are co-created among influencers and followers.

An inductive process was utilized in order to let the themes unfold from the data. Instead of testing existing hypotheses, the study strove to develop theoretical interpretations, based on the practices of influencers and reactions from followers, with a focus on discovery, rather than confirmation. Induction appeared especially valuable when it came to the identification of different storytelling approaches and patterns of engagement which could not have been anticipated by existing literature.

3.3 Study Population and Sampling

The sample consisted of active influencers on Instagram and TikTok, the dominant platforms for influencer marketing. Both platforms are highly visual and are storytelling mediums, so are good case examples of storytelling techniques. There are about 317,118 Instagram and 810,819 TikTok influencers in the UK (Modash, 2025).

A purposive sampling technique was applied from this population for selection of six influencers, prescribed advertising, numeric of followers, type, degree of specialization, relativity to research problems in this study. This purposive sampling approach was used to deliberately include those cases most likely to afford rich insights into narrative persuasion (Campbell et al., 2020). Table 1 illustrates the sample size selected for this study.

Table 1. Sample of Influencers Analyzed Across Platforms

Platform	Influencer Name	Niche/Category	Notability
Instagram	Molly-Mae Hague	Fashion / Beauty / Lifestyle	High-profile influencer and entrepreneur, former <i>Love Island</i> contestant
Instagram	Harry Lewis (W2S)	Digital Entertainment / Sport	Popular YouTuber and content creator known for sports-related challenges
Instagram	Lydia Bright	Style / Beauty / Family Lifestyle	Media personality with strong presence in lifestyle and family-oriented content
TikTok	Carl Cunard	Fashion / Entertainment	Known for fashion, grooming, and lifestyle storytelling
TikTok	Aash Thapa	Finance / Money Management	Creates engaging personal finance and savings content
TikTok	Safwan Ahmed Mia (SuperSaf)	Tech / Product Reviews	Tech reviewer with strong cross-platform presence (YouTube, TikTok, Instagram)

3.4 Data Collection

The sample was based on systematic observation and content analysis of the influencers' original posts, stories, and videos which were publicly accessed during a period of six months. The content comprised image and video posts and reels on Instagram, TikTok videos and captions, hashtags, and user engagement (ie, likes, comments, and shares). A primary emphasis was placed on the identification and classification of story-telling techniques including; Personal experience narratives, Brand-centric storytelling, and Lifestyle-integrated narratives

In order to provide a frame of reference for levels of audience engagement, the researcher also studied comments and reactions from consumers, focusing specifically on trust, authenticity and purchase intention. Through triangulation of narratives generated by influencers and their audiences, the research focused on both production and reception sides of storytelling.

3.5 Data Analysis

A thematic-analysis technique was employed which involved determining patterns and themes from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The data analysis involved six processes:

- a) Familiarization: Re-visit content from influencers and engage with the target audience.

- b) Coding: Researcher used initial codes that identified narrative strategies, engagement markers, and emotional appeals.
- c) Development of Themes: Codes were grouped into higher-order themes, which included “authenticity through personal storytelling,” “brand integration through lifestyle narratives,” and “emotional resonance.”
- d) Theme Review: Themes were re-reviewed to address internal consistency and distinct boundaries.
- e) Identification of and Naming Themes: The themes were explained in relation to the research questions.
- f) Results were discussed through the theoretical paradigms of Narrative Transportation and Source Credibility.

3.6 Validity and Reliability

To establish validity, the study implemented triangulation of data across several influencers and platforms. Credibility was further increased through thorough documentation of coding decisions and through transparent processes of interpretation (Noble & Smith, 2015). The inclusion of heterogeneous influencers across categories enhanced transferability and the generalizability of findings to different types of influencer marketing.

Reliability was enhanced as an audit trail of coding was kept to ensure that the coding process and decisions made during analysis were traceable, so that the study is replicable. Common use of thematic analysis in all cases guaranteed Methodological integrity.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

The study followed the code of research ethics in human participant study using digital data. As the information was collected from publicly available social media, there was no direct communication with influencers or consumers. However, ethical safeguards were included. Although the influencers’ names were not anonymized as they could easily be recognized by the public, we had to anonymize consumer comments to preserve the privacy of the users.

4. Results

An examination of six targeted influencers across Instagram and TikTok found that storytelling emerged as a critical strategy in framing consumer engagement, perceptions of authenticity, and purchase intent. Though each influencer represented a separate archetypal category such as fashion, lifestyle, technology, money, or entertainment, three dominant models had been identified throughout their narratives: personal experience storytelling, brand-centric storytelling, and lifestyle-integrated storytelling. Different modes were used for persuasion purposes, from aiming to engender reality to framing products in an aspirational context.

Moreover, the results showed noticeable audience participation trends in relation to narrative styles. Posts and videos that were based on personal or emotional narratives got more likes, comments and shares than posts that were informational or promotional. For both Instagram and TikTok, the storytelling practice heightened perceptions of authenticity and strengthened parasocial relationships, thus enhancing consumer trust and purchasing intentions.

Theme 1: Personal-Experience Storytelling

Across the cases, personal-experience narratives—when influencers situate a brand or product within a lived experience—consistently aligned the best with indications of authenticity in audience reactions (i.e., expressions of empathy, “I bought this,” asking for information.) and with the audience’s subsequent sustained engagement. This is no ordinary disclosure or #ad tagging; it’s a form of brand use that’s woven into the stories followers are already tracking and that they already care about (motherhood, routines, career highs).

Molly-Mae Hague is this narrative mode’s very archetype. Her journey as an entrepreneur (her “self-tan line ‘Filter by Molly-Mae’” and launch of a clothing brand “Maebe” in 2024–25) is related to the sequence of life chapters like pregnancy, new motherhood, refocusing work—which makes commercial announcements feel like plot points rather than interruptions. Even the Maebe debut was presented as the end result of “a secret project” and the news coverage mentioned the collection sold out almost immediately (24 minutes, according to industry analysis), which represents both pent-up demand and community-fueled hype over an old-fashioned ad blitz (Goat Agency, 2025). That sharing of community energy flows through every dispositional touchpoint with the brand. Filter’s product pages and capsules become artifacts in her story world that fans can “enter” by buying, audience comments more often taking on the varnish of belonging and identity than pure product talk (Filter By Molly-Mae™, n.d.)

Personal narratives are also at play in the work of Lydia Bright, whose content is concerned with family life — most notably her new role as “Loretta’s mum” — and the long process of renovating an 18th-century Georgian house, which acts as a serial storyline. Renovation reels and home reveals (e.g., “17 months after moving into our Forever Home Fairytale...”) prompt comments congratulating on milestones and inquiring for product that one receives, each day —those patchy brand tags that appear (e.g., Pitusa clothing) are unfolded within the sequence of a day-in-the-life, not as

sole ad spots. The media and partner content (there is a collaboration with Sharps on a bespoke dressing room, after all) even contextualize the campaign deliverable as a chapter in an ongoing personal story: renovation “magic” which sits the home’s era and her identity as a mother and presenter.

Personal storytelling also percolates in finance and tech, where it’s more challenging to signal “authenticity.” Aash Thapa’s short-form videos entwine practical advice (the surprising costs of Bupa health insurance) with conversational, on-the-street formats and accessible voiceover; a typical video will score thousands of likes and well wishes in the comments, often asking for follow-ups or comparing their own circumstances —signals of perceived helpfulness and trust. Thapa’s own profile foregrounds “Financial Literacy / Personal Finance,” establishing why-listen-to-me and stabilizing perceived role identity consistent across videos—critical in a category where audience skepticism around #ad motives can be rampant.

On the other hand, Safwan Ahmed Mia (SuperSaf)’s man-in-the-field stories tend to correlate with career highlights (e.g., Tim Cook and Apple Intelligence/WWDC24 interviews). These posts mix behind-the-scenes access (“what does Tim Cook actually use?” with creator commentary, which humanizes top echelon tech coverage and welcomes parasocial intimacy (“*we were there together*”). The Tim Cook bites show up on both TikTok and YouTube and coverage from MacRumors, among others, (not Macworld, no) presents evidence of the access event, providing a realness to the credibility and serving as narrative “receipts” that the audience can further disseminate. Comments in response to such posts tend toward curiosity (“*should I upgrade? “What device is he using?”*”) – pointing out a bridge from personal milestone to self-perceived expertise to purchase-adjacent talk.

Two significant cross-platform trends occurred in this theme. For one thing, Instagram supports richer comment-based affiliative talk (*congratulations, requests for advice, life-stage solidarity*), which is perfect for family/renovation arcs (Lydia) and brand-building arcs (Molly-Mae). On the other side, TikTok tends to prioritize episodic discoverability — finance tips, GRWM vignettes or “*walk with me*” slices that are self-contained but serially coherent (Aash, SuperSaf). In both cases, the effect is the same: personal-experience storytelling fattens up the relational tissue, which the audience reads as, authenticity, allowing subsequent brand cues to feel less like ad copy and more like recommendations from someone they know.

And even then, when there are instances of scrutiny or critique (*Maebe’s size-gate/quality debates, parental judgments in Lydia’s instance*), the center is not the product; it’s the person, which means debates still take place within the relationship frame and not from the remove of the review frame. This uncomfortable edge can ironically provide an edge to engagement, at least so long as the influencer’s narrative identity (mother, founder, householder, educator, cultural critic) remains both stable and reactive (Allcock, 2025)

Storytelling of the personal-experience enhances perceived authenticity, fuels life-stage identification, and keeps the brand objects as characters in a story world that fans want to live in — which drives expressive engagement (comments, tagging friends) and real-world behaviors (info requests, purchase intent).

Theme 2: Brand-Centric Storytelling

Brand-Centric stories make mention of the brand but, most successful method is embedding them in a riveting story and that’s where origin stories, testing, versus and backstage features, make the audience create a sense of presence and participation. This theme correlated highly with purchase-intent language in comments and with searchable utility (viewers coming back to search for model names, links, codes).

In the examples, SuperSaf’s content follows a clear model: high-salience brand touchpoints (Apple Intelligence, device daily drivers, executive interviews) are narrated as access stories (“*here’s what Tim Cook says/uses; here’s why it matters*”), centering the brand while maintaining the expert persona/creator front and center. Representative TikTok and YouTube posts demonstrate how Tim Cook mentions Apple Intelligence in a way similar to but not the same as his treatment of other AI platforms. Technology publications usually publish unbiased round-ups of these segments, and by doing so, give added wings to them and some kind of stamp of authenticity. The comment exchanges on these posts often include questions of upgrading, feature consolidation, and model rivalry, constituting direct evidence of consumer involvement at the decision-making level as opposed to wish fulfillment.

For gaming/entertainment, W2S (Harry Lewis) brand-centric content often incorporates a retailer partner and a games IP into challenge formats or prizes. A telling insta post (“*I’ve* teamed up with @jdofficial...a £500 gift card and a PS4*”) uses pool mechanics to drive follows and comments on a retail brand post, yet grounds the promotion in Harry’s recognizable voice and humor. This type of activation narrative (*follow–tag–win*) transforms a static advertisement into an action-packed plot, where the brand becomes the enabling protagonist. Beyond Instagram, his long-standing relationship with Sidemen and regular mention of sponsorships, such as Fortnite-sponsored videos, point to a steady brand-content ecosystem in which the story is “*we’ll try X with Y brand and see what happens.*” Here, audience

comments tend to comprise banter alongside brand recall (“*which model/shoe/game?*”), a cross between shopping and an entertainment frame of mind.

Brand context Molly-Mae’s brand as narrative is not one of sensational, statement personal storytelling but as a type of aspirational storytelling, with the brand taking up a focal role in this. This is especially clear in the Maebe launch story, and first look teasers and capsule overviews, and *Filter* product releases that are supported by thorough product explanations and gifting/subscription devices. This is classic brand-centric storytelling, even though emotional residue is on loan from her personal story line. Key coverage from creator-economy agencies countered that Maebe’s launch “worked” differently, with the event-staging and community hype themselves figuring not just as inventory or pricing levers, but also as narrative devices; even the industry comments have been on fast sell-through. What sets apart strong brand-focused posts from weak ones in our sample are: Context and stakes (why this product now), Demonstration (unbox, compare, before/after), and Dialogic prompts (the audience can be asked to pick, vote, guess). So, tech reviews are a natural fit in this triad; fashion/beauty posts. Even on the most overtly commercial collaborations, creators who give the brand a role in a satisfying micro-plot — as opposed to just showing off — draw out more comments that include “*which one should I get?*” or “*link?*” and fewer accusations of insincerity.

Another example is the perennial audience question, “*What phone is Tim Cook actually using?*” On TikTok, these questions are often posed in the platform’s preferred form of a demonstration that opens with the reveal, echoing its emphasis on brand-aligned snippets and fast-paced viewer interaction. On the other hand, Instagram will tend to favor carousel posts or reel storylines that enable more lifestyle context woven around the product in the same publication. The credibility is offered up in the form of access, perceived expertise, and testing rigor, all of which are tactically injected as narrative constructs to induce consumer-motivated reasoning and drive the decision.

Product or brand story-telling is most effective when the brand is cast as hero in a story arc that involves both stakes (something has to change) and demonstrations (proof that a change has happened). It is because this type of narrative framing always aligns with expressions that indicate purchase intent, such as: consumer questions; product comparisons; purchase links. Enhancing the Power of this strategy, third party media validation, example being technology press coverage of executive interviews also contribute to reinforcing customer confidence.

Theme 3: Lifestyle-Integrated Storytelling

The storytelling here is integrated with life, situates a product within a broader aesthetic and daily, and even existential frame — dressing for a cold, morning commute; styling a room in a Georgian home; fitness, mental health, and pet care. Unlike the intimacy conveyed through personal milestones or the direct demonstration of brand, the persuasive factor at work in this genre is aspirational everydayness. This narrative communicates and implicit message, “*it is part of my everyday life and it can become part of yours*”.

Carl Cunard provides a compelling illustration of life-integrated story-telling. His feed combines men’s fashion content (with occasional appearances by his dog) to achieve a whimsical mood that turns the everyday practice of piecing together an outfit into fun and games (e.g. “*weekend ready*,” “*British business look*,” or a series of layered “*get ready with me*” segments). Many of the representative TikTok videos involve Cunard narrating dressing-room decisions straight into the camera while with his Chow Chow, a detail that offers increased relatability and a touch of entertainment. Engagement numbers (public, major like counts) signal robust audience resonance, and comment threads often feature users asking for item details or styling advice, reiterating the aspirational identification his content enables. The “dog wardrobe” meta-narrative (YouTube vlogs demonstrating the pet’s walk-in closet) and behind-the-scenes photoshoots deepen world-building beyond simple posts, allowing the brand cozy, repeat cameos in a lifestyle that fans re-visit.

Lifestyle integration also characterizes Lydia Bright’s telling of home and motherhood. Reels showcasing the process of iterative renovations (fireplace swaps, bathroom reveals, kitchen/dining transformations) are practical inspiration, but they also telegraph taste and values (period-appropriate finishes, soothing palettes for rooms shared with children). The house-dedicated account (“*Our Forever Home Fairytale*”) reinforces, culinary pageant-style, the lifestyle-as-location viewers can drop by; brand partnerships (fitted wardrobes with Sharps) are ingested as predictable stages in the aesthetic journey rather than bolt-on ads. It’s the pattern between the posts — progress updates, heart-tugging captions and cute kid vignettes — that allow followers to imagine their homes and the functions they might serve for them, and comments frequently ask for sources or advice, indicating the effective transition from viewing to planning/purchasing. Instagram+2Instagram+2Sharps

In the context of fashion and lifestyle, the “everyday elegance” trope serves a comparable rhetorical function in knotting style into aspirational but achievable rituals. The work Lazar explored with Cunard — she describes his “British gentleman looks”, his “*show-inspired outfits*” and the way he was “*mentally on holiday*” — signals how work–leisure hybrid identities are manufactured within fashion narratives. Many viewers regard his clips as modular templates (swap

out a coat or a pair of trousers or an accessory) a reading validated by the commenters who keep asking the same question, time and again, about where to buy or how to size an item. Even non-platform media placements (like interviews with GQ South Africa) help to bolster the consistency of Cunard's lifestyle brand. By weaving in stories involving fitness, mental health, and dedication, these stories pivot wardrobe decisions away from transient trends and toward articulations of a permanent and constructed identity.

Molly-Mae trades in lifestyle integration as well, though typically with personal-experience or brand-driven arcs attached. Filter's product pages embrace use-case copy ("*instant tanning water*," *duos*, *subscriptions "for Christmas"*), nudging the audience to slot items into repeat-use rhythms (seasonal events, weekend plans) instead of treating themselves to them as singular trips. Media coverage of Maebe's launch, too, emphasized cohesiveness — vests, jeans, giant blazers — as the pieces that would act as building blocks in an every-day matchy wardrobe, urging a consumer to imagine wearing the story, not just owning a product content shown by pop sugar lifestyle integration displays two persistent engagement signatures in comments: Consultative questions ("*what size are you wearing?*" "*link to the trousers?*" "*tile shade?*") in which the "purchasing" is said to describe the audience in the role of a purchaser; and

Identity echoes ("*this is so us*," "*need this for school runs*," "*perfect for the office*"), illustrating narrative internalization. Where the criticism shows up (debates about co-sleeping or parenting choices in Lydia's mention) the lifestyle frame can stand in and take the hit (without toppling the brand relationship): the disagreement does not shake the brand's aesthetic and practical foundation and future content brings that life back inside the shared project of home making.

Finally, the platform grammar matters. On TikTok, loopable beats in lifestyle vignettes increase watch time and discovery (e.g., "*weekend ready*" with *high, visible like counts*; *coat over shoulder, dog cameo, reveal*). Instagram's carousels and longer reels support instructional lifestyle (step-by-steps, before/after), and the deeper comment threads and saving/archiving behavior (users return to content while on their own projects). The same arc of lifestyle, then, is articulated differently: fast flicks through mood boards on TikTok vs. how-to tours on Instagram.

Stories that are seamlessly woven into everyday life to turn products into familiar props in an inspiring, endlessly repeatable ritual. Engagement is calculated using consultative and identification cues, both are strong signals of purchase. When repeated over months (wardrobe motifs, room-by-room reveals), that theme accumulates compounding equity: people return again and again to see what happens next, bringing brands along for the ride.

Result Summary Table

Table 2. Summary of Results

Theme	Exemplar Posts / Cases	Typical Engagement Cues	Likely Persuasion Outcome
Personal-Experience Storytelling	Molly-Mae's Maebe launch; Lydia Bright's home renovation reels; Aash Thapa's personal finance TikToks	Congratulations, empathy, advice requests, sharing own stories	Heightened <i>authenticity perception</i> ; followers trust product as part of life chapter; increased willingness to try recommended products
Brand-Centric Storytelling	SuperSaf's Tim Cook interviews and Apple device reviews; Harry Lewis' JD/PS4 giveaways; Molly-Mae's Filter product explainer	Purchase questions ("which model?"), product comparisons, code requests, link clicks	Elevated <i>purchase intent</i> ; credibility reinforced through expertise and demonstration; brand gains salience
Lifestyle-Integrated Storytelling	Carl Cunard's fashion + dog GRWMs; Lydia Bright's house Instagram; Molly-Mae's capsule wardrobe framing	Consultative queries ("what size/color?"), identification ("this is so us"), saves/shares	Strengthened <i>relatability</i> and aspirational alignment; products absorbed into everyday routines, driving durable consumer interest

5. Discussion

Drawing on narrative transportation and source credibility theories, this study examined the role of storytelling in influencer marketing on Instagram, and comparatively, on TikTok. Narrative transportation suggests that when one is engaged in a compelling narrative, one is more susceptible to attitudes consistent with the narrative (Van Laer et al., 2012). Source credibility theory, conversely, contends that the effectiveness of a message stems from the degree of expertise, trustworthiness and attractiveness of its source (Seiler & Kucza, 2017). The two frameworks used together created a double pair of glasses to understand how to approach influencer storytelling strategies for engagement, authenticity, and purchase intent.

The findings suggests that storytelling is not homogenous but takes on at least three different but co-occurring forms as follows: personal-experience storytelling, brand-centric storytelling and life-integrated storytelling. Each mode does not in the same way, however, map onto the theoretical variables. Storytelling of personal-experience elicited narrative immersion above, which is consistent with transport theory positing that the inclusion of rich and life-like experiences

in a story contributes to a sense of narrative character identification. Brand storytelling on the other hand emphasized the expertise dimension, where influencers presented themselves as an informed and trustworthy voice on the features of a product. Last, life-integrated storytelling emphasized the beauty and relatability dimensions, utilizing aspirational ordinariness to develop parasocial intimacy respectively. This fine-grained mapping emphasizes that the persuasive function of storytelling is based in the ability to activate a variety of theoretical channels at any one time.

The findings support previous research about the influence of narrative immersion on persuasion. J Deborah and Whan Park (2015) found that consumers more deeply involved in a brand story are more favorably disposed toward the brand. Similarly, Martinez-Conde et al. (2019) propose that stories are more intrinsically persuasive when experience and emotions are evoked to shape the narrative within the listener's mind. The present results contribute to this literature by demonstrating that transportation effects can occur with even short-form forms of digital media, such as TikTok clips under 1 min. Molly-Mae Hague and Carl Cunard, are categorically excelling at this – by weaving in storytelling that contextually places the product within an aspirational-yet-attainable everyday scenario, thereby creating micro-narratives that evoke immersion. This adds to growing literature on storytelling in digital microform ads (Teraiya et al., 2023) and implies that narrative persuasion is not limited to story length but by the extent of the integration between product and lifestyle.

Djafarova and Rushworth (2016) highlight how influencer credibility shapes purchase decisions among young consumers, while Lou and Yuan (2018) emphasize its role in fostering trust in branded content. These findings underscore the need to explore how narrative strategies enhance credibility in influencer marketing. This study validates those observations and expands upon them. For instance, in SuperSaf's technology reviews, there is a strong stance on expertise, which aligns with results that technical expertise enhances persuasion (S. A. Jin & Phua, 2014). At the same time, Molly-Mae's posts convey trustworthiness and attractiveness, which corresponds to research that emphasizes authenticity and relatability as drivers of consumer trust (Audrezet et al., 2018; Tamara et al., 2021). Plotting these dimensions against storytelling types, this study elucidates that source credibility is enacted in varied ways depending on the narrative strategy employed and platform affordances.

The results also connect to research on authenticity and parasocial interaction within influencer culture. According to Abidin (2013), amateurism on an influencer level is "calibrated amateurism" whereby crafted shoots come across as hybrid "casual" and signal "authentic". This study supports that assertion, demonstrating how life-integrated storytelling — like Cunard's fashion posts with his dog — incites everyday intimacy, thereby enhancing parasocial closeness. There is striking evidence of Horton and Wohl's (1956) concept of parasocial interaction here; in comment threads where followers request information about product real details are expected, treating the influencer as a relatable friend rather than remote icon. These findings build on previous work by showing that parasocial closeness functions in different ways across storytelling modes; whereas personal storytelling creates intimacy through emotional sharing, lifestyle storytelling creates it through aspirational normalcy.

A key comparative insight is around platform affordances. This is reflected in prior work that details the focus on visual curation on Instagram (Leaver et al., 2020) and spontaneous, viral-friendly storytelling on TikTok (Triwidyati & Pangastuti, 2021). This research confirms those findings, but it also shows how the same narrative about a product can vary in mood and persuasive power depending on the platform. In contrast, while references in technology media or uncertain phrased Tweets about product upgrades made by Tim Cook about Apple Intelligence are neutrally summarized on the technology media, on threads regarding TikTok, they provoke speculative debates, indicating how platform-specific engagement cues modulate or redirect different narrative effects. This trend-agnostic approach to the influencer space is emblematic of an industry that has come to accept influencer marketing b2b best practise that is not one-size-fits all, or in this case, one platform fits all.

This research applies narrative transportation theory to short-form influencer content. Previous studies have typically focused on brand narratives or long-format advertisements (Lien & Chen, 2011). Transportation may still take place in short, sliced-up narratives when influencers integrate products in personalized or life contexts, however, as evidenced by this study. This indicates that transportation is about more than just length, but also about resonance and relatability, broadening even further the theoretical implications of narrative persuasion.

The theoretical implications also result in practical implications. For marketers, the results indicate that narrative tactics need to be tailored according to product type, influencer type, and platform features. Brands aiming to establish credibility through know-how might want to consider working with tech influencers on TikTok, which product demonstrations, side-by-side comparisons etc. resonate with the platform strong. Instead, lifestyle brands might benefit more from Instagram influencers who seamlessly incorporate products into aspirational lifestyles. More generally, the findings indicate that influencers should be seen not just as endorsers but as storytellers that influence consumer attitudes and purchasing intentions.

Notwithstanding its contributions, the present study also has limitations. Only six influencers, two per platform, were considered in the study, which limits the generalizability of the results. Future research might explore also a broader set of influencers, along with platforms (for example, YouTube or experimental short-form formats such as Instagram Threads). Moreover, the purchase intent is rather implied through engagement cues (e.g., comments, questions, asking for a link). This could be addressed in future research by using experimental or survey-based measures of actual behavior. Finally, longitudinal research might investigate the development of storytelling effectiveness as influencer personas grow and gain traction over time, tapping into the dynamic interplay between narrative, authenticity, and consumer trust.

6. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that storytelling is a multifaceted strategic tool that drives engagement, authenticity, and purchase intent in influencer marketing. Through a qualitative analysis of six influencers across Instagram and TikTok, three dominant storytelling modes were identified—personal-experience, brand-centric, and lifestyle-integrated narratives. Each mode activates distinct psychological and relational mechanisms aligned with the twin frameworks of narrative transportation and source credibility.

Personal-experience storytelling enhances authenticity by embedding brand messages within intimate life moments, allowing followers to identify with the influencer's experiences and emotions. Brand-centric storytelling foregrounds expertise and competence, establishing influencers as credible authorities whose recommendations appear trustworthy and rational. Lifestyle-integrated storytelling situates products within aspirational yet attainable everyday contexts, reinforcing parasocial closeness and the perception of authenticity through consistent lifestyle imagery. These modes collectively reveal that storytelling functions as a continuum between emotional engagement and informational persuasion.

From a theoretical standpoint, the findings extend Narrative Transportation Theory by demonstrating that even short-form, algorithm-driven content—such as TikTok clips—can elicit transportation effects traditionally associated with long-form narratives. Source Credibility Theory is refined by showing that trustworthiness and expertise are dynamically performed through narrative rather than fixed traits. Storytelling thus emerges as a mediating process that connects transportation and credibility, bridging emotional immersion with cognitive trust.

Practically, the results offer several implications for marketers and practitioners. Campaigns should align narrative style with brand objectives and platform affordances: intimate personal storytelling suits lifestyle and beauty brands on Instagram, while demonstrative brand storytelling aligns with technology or finance products on TikTok. Marketers should prioritize influencers whose narrative identity resonates authentically with the target audience rather than focusing solely on follower count. Maintaining transparency—through disclosure and consistent voice—preserves credibility and mitigates skepticism, sustaining long-term consumer trust. Ultimately, storytelling should be viewed not as an embellishment to influencer content but as the core mechanism that humanizes commerce, nurtures community, and transforms audiences into active participants in the brand narrative.

Future research could build on these insights through longitudinal or experimental designs to examine how storytelling effectiveness evolves as influencer personas mature and audience expectations shift. Quantitative studies could further validate the link between engagement cues and actual purchase behaviors, while cross-platform analyses could refine our understanding of how narrative strategies adapt across emerging media ecosystems.

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