

The Role of Influencer Marketing on social media in Shaping Purchase Intention

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Abstract

This study investigated the role of influencer marketing in social networks on the formation of consumers' purchase intentions. Based on the theory of source credibility and the theory of planned behavior, the conceptual model of the study was designed including three main influencer characteristics (expertise, attractiveness, and perceived intimacy) and the mediating role of trust. Data were collected from 412 social media users and analyzed using structural equation modeling in SmartPLS software. The results showed that all three influencer characteristics significantly affect trust, and trust also plays a key role in strengthening purchase intentions. Indirect paths through trust were also confirmed. The findings indicate that trust in the influencer is the most important factor in translating personality traits into consumer behavior, emphasizing the need for brands to focus on selecting credible and intimate influencers.

Keywords: Influencer Marketing, Purchase Intention, Trust in Influencers, Social Networks, Structural Equation Model

1- Introduction

In the digital age, social media has become one of the most influential communication platforms in social, cultural, and economic interactions. The dramatic growth of platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and Twitter has transformed the way brands communicate with their target audiences and has provided a new platform for the formation of marketing strategies. Among the new digital marketing methods, influencer marketing is recognized as one of the most effective methods for gaining trust, interaction, and encouraging audiences to make purchasing decisions. Influencers, relying on social credibility, expertise, or personal appeal, have been able to play a new intermediary role between brands and consumers; a role whose impact has sometimes exceeded that of official advertising (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

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According to market reports, the amount of investment by companies in influencer-based marketing has increased exponentially in recent years. The main reason for this growth is the high ability of influencers to create a personal and emotional connection with their followers; a connection that can ultimately lead to trust, identification and, ultimately, increased purchase intention (Ki, Cuevas, Chong, & Lim, 2020). In such an environment, brands are trying to use the capacity of influential figures on social networks to influence the mind of consumers in a targeted way, instead of relying on mass marketing methods.

From a theoretical perspective, the concept of purchase intention is known as an indicator for predicting purchase behavior in behavioral research and is closely related to the cognitive and emotional factors of the individual. The Theory of Planned Behavior suggests that attitudes towards behavior, subjective norms and perceived behavioral control are among the most important predictors of behavioral intention (Ajzen, 1991). Considering this framework, influencers can play an effective role in strengthening purchase intention by shaping the audience's positive attitude towards the brand, creating new social norms, and reducing psychological barriers to purchase (Sokolova & Perez, 2021).

Previous studies have shown that various influencer characteristics such as credibility, expertise, attractiveness, and perceived closeness are among the key factors in increasing the influencer's influence on consumer behavior (Freberg, Graham, McGaughey, & Freberg, 2011). On the other hand, some studies have emphasized the role of trust in the influencer as a mediating variable between source characteristics and purchase intention (Jin, Muqaddam, & Ryu, 2019). In this framework, when the audience is assured of the influencer's intentions and honesty, they perceive his advertising message not as advertising content, but as a friendly and trustworthy recommendation.

Despite the growing importance of influencer marketing, there are still serious gaps in the theoretical and empirical literature in this area. First, many studies have limited themselves to examining the general relationship between influencer marketing and consumer behavior, without providing more detailed causal and structural models to analyze the paths of influence. Second, mediating psychological variables, such as trust, willingness to engage socially, or identification with the influencer, have been less rigorously included in empirical modeling (Casaló, Flavián, & Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2020). Third, cultural and generational differences in the response to influencer marketing, especially in developing countries, have not yet been systematically investigated.

The present study is designed to respond to these gaps and aims to analyze the role of influencer characteristics and perceived trust on the purchase intention of audiences on social networks. The main focus is on how the elements that make up the influencer image (such as expertise, attractiveness, and intimacy) can influence users' willingness to purchase products introduced by them by increasing trust. To this end, using an integrated theoretical framework and structural equation modeling, research hypotheses are formulated and tested by collecting data from active users of social networks.

Finally, the results of this research can not only enrich the literature on influencer marketing from a theoretical perspective, but also provide effective recommendations for brands, digital marketing managers, and even influencers themselves at a practical level. Understanding the real paths of influence on social networks has become a key tool for the survival and success of businesses in competitive markets.

2- Literature review

With the increasing expansion of the digital space, marketing on social media platforms, especially by using influential figures (influencers), has become one of the effective solutions for brands to interact with consumers. Influencer marketing is defined as a branch of digital word-of-mouth marketing in which well-known people on social networks, using their reputation and social influence, promote brands, products or

services, thereby influencing the attitude and purchasing behavior of the audience (Lou & Yuan, 2019). In the past decade, the role of influencers in guiding consumer behavior in areas such as fashion, beauty, technology and lifestyle has increasingly attracted the attention of researchers (Casaló, Flavián, & Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2020; Kalogeras et al., 2022).

Early studies in the field of influencer influence were mainly based on classical theoretical foundations such as the Source Credibility Model and the Source Attractiveness Model. These models suggest that the effectiveness of the message sender is largely dependent on characteristics such as expertise, honesty, and physical or personality attractiveness (Ohanian, 1990). Research has shown that these characteristics in influencers can lead to trust, interest, and even behavioral imitation by the audience (Freberg et al., 2011). Among them, perceived trustworthiness has been proposed as one of the strongest components influencing the acceptance of the message by the consumer (Jin et al., 2019).

From the perspective of behavioral theories, the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) provides a suitable framework for analyzing the role of influencers in the formation of purchase intention. According to this theory, behavioral intention is a function of attitude toward behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control (Ajzen, 1991). Influencers can have a direct impact on purchase intention formation by shaping positive attitudes toward the product, reinforcing social norms surrounding consumption, and reducing psychological or informational barriers. The AIDA (Attention, Interest, Disposition, Action) model has also been used in some studies to describe the influence process of influencers (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2016; Nozari et al., 2024).

In the empirical field, several studies have attempted to model the causal pathways between influencer characteristics, trust, and purchase intention. For example, Lou et al.'s (2019) study showed that source credibility and message value play a significant role in building trust, and that trust directly affects consumers' purchase intention. In another study, Sokolova and Perez (2021) concluded that influencer expertise and intimacy increase audience identification, thereby paving the way for purchase decisions. Similarly, Casaló et al. (2020) used structural equation modeling to show that influencers exert influence through creating emotional engagement with the audience and creating a sense of brand loyalty.

Another notable point in the existing literature is the emphasis on mediating variables in the influence process. In this regard, the role of trust in the influencer as a key mediating variable has been confirmed in many studies (Jin et al., 2019). When the audience believes in the influencer's intentions and honesty, they are more likely to consider his message authentic and trust his recommendations. Some studies have also identified the role of social interaction, identification, and even perceived enjoyment of the content as mediating variables in the path between influencer characteristics and purchase intention (Ki et al., 2020).

Despite these findings, existing research in this area faces several limitations. First, most studies have focused on platforms such as Instagram and YouTube, and there has been limited examination of other social networks. Second, many studies have ignored differences in age, cultural, or gender groups in the degree of influence from influencers. Third, most studies have used cross-sectional methods and have not considered the long-term or dynamic effects of audience interaction with the influencer (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017).

In terms of influencer characteristics, some studies have attempted to provide more precise classifications between the type of influencer (e.g. micro, nano, or macro influencer), their area of expertise, and their level of influence. For example, some results suggest that micro-influencers are sometimes more influential than more famous influencers due to their closer connection to their audience and higher level of interaction (Brown & Hayes, 2008). Some studies also emphasize the role of fit between brand identity and the

influencer's personality; that is, the greater this fit, the greater the likelihood of success of advertising campaigns (Marques et al., 2021; Kalogeras, 2025).

Overall, the literature review shows that although a relatively large body of research has examined influencer marketing and its impact on consumer behavior, there are still gaps in the deeper analysis of its psychological and social mechanisms. The present study aims to fill a certain portion of this gap by utilizing rigorous theoretical frameworks and valid empirical data. By focusing on individual variables (such as influencer expertise, attractiveness, and intimacy), the mediator variable of trust, and the dependent variable of purchase intention, a model is presented that can paint a clearer picture of the process of influencers influencing audiences on social networks.

3- Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses Development

In line with the literature and theoretical foundations previously discussed, this study proposes a conceptual framework that investigates how different characteristics of social media influencers influence consumers' purchase intention, mediated by trust in the influencer. The framework is grounded in the Source Credibility Theory, the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991), and empirical studies that identify trust as a key mediator between influencer traits and consumer behavioral outcomes (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Jin et al., 2019; Sokolova & Perez, 2021; Nozari & Abdi, 2024).

Three core attributes of influencers are incorporated into the model as independent variables: expertise, attractiveness, and perceived intimacy. These attributes are widely acknowledged in previous research as powerful antecedents to shaping perceptions of credibility and enhancing the effectiveness of persuasive communication in digital environments (Freberg et al., 2011; Ohanian, 1990; Fallah & Nozari, 2021).

Expertise refers to the influencer's perceived knowledge, experience, or competence in a specific domain. Influencers who are seen as domain experts are more likely to be trusted and taken seriously by their followers (Casaló et al., 2020).

Attractiveness, both physical and interpersonal, can enhance the relatability and appeal of influencers, making their messages more persuasive through emotional engagement and admiration (Sokolova & Perez, 2021).

Perceived intimacy captures the emotional closeness and sense of connection followers feel toward the influencer, which is often cultivated through regular, authentic, and personal content shared over time (Ki et al., 2020).

The mediating variable, trust in the influencer, reflects the audience's belief in the honesty, reliability, and integrity of the influencer. Trust is posited to be a critical psychological mechanism that converts influencer characteristics into behavioral intentions (Lou & Yuan, 2019). When trust is established, consumers are more likely to accept recommendations and act on them.

The dependent variable is purchase intention, defined as the consumer's stated likelihood to buy a product or service recommended by the influencer. This intention is not only a precursor to actual behavior but also a key metric in evaluating marketing effectiveness (Ajzen, 1991).

Based on the above rationale, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- **H1:** Influencer expertise has a positive effect on trust in the influencer.
- **H2:** Influencer attractiveness has a positive effect on trust in the influencer.
- **H3:** Influencer perceived intimacy has a positive effect on trust in the influencer.

- **H4:** Trust in the influencer has a positive effect on consumers' purchase intention.
- **H5:** Trust in the influencer mediates the relationship between influencer expertise and purchase intention.
- **H6:** Trust in the influencer mediates the relationship between influencer attractiveness and purchase intention.
- **H7:** Trust in the influencer mediates the relationship between influencer perceived intimacy and purchase intention.

This conceptual model enables an integrated view of how cognitive, emotional, and relational aspects of influencer-follower interaction shape consumer behavior. The proposed framework is visually presented in Figure 1 below.

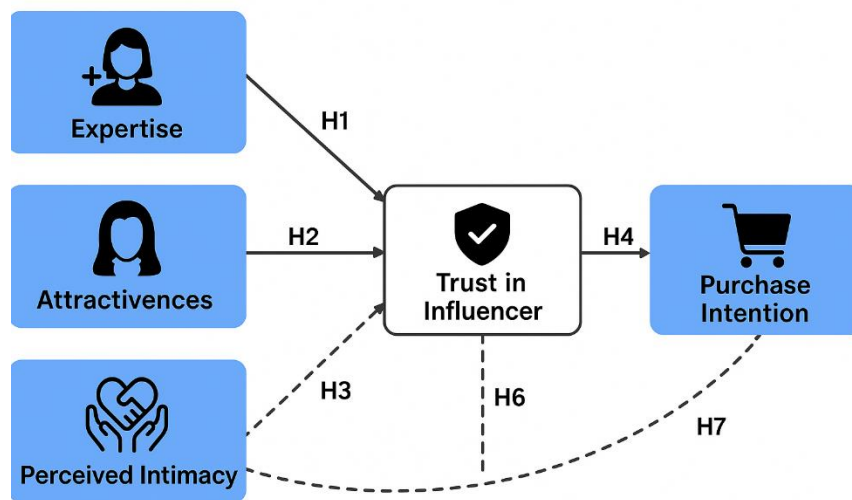


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of the Study

As seen in Figure 1, the research conceptual model clearly explains the causal relationships between influencer characteristics, perceived trust, and purchase intention.

4- Research Methodology

This study adopts a quantitative, cross-sectional, and explanatory research design aimed at examining the causal relationships between influencer attributes, trust in the influencer, and purchase intention within the context of social media marketing. The research is positioned within the positivist paradigm, relying on structured data collection and statistical analysis to test the hypothesized model derived from the conceptual framework.

To empirically validate the proposed model, data were collected through an online survey distributed to users of popular social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. The target population included individuals aged 18 to 45 who follow at least one social media influencer and have had exposure to influencer-promoted content in the past six months. The rationale for this selection was to ensure that respondents possessed sufficient familiarity and interaction with influencer-based marketing content,

enabling them to evaluate the constructs meaningfully. A non-probability purposive sampling technique was employed to reach participants who met the predefined criteria.

The primary instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire developed based on validated scales from previous studies. Influencer expertise, attractiveness, and perceived intimacy were measured using multi-item Likert-type questions adapted from Ohanian (1990), Sokolova and Perez (2021), and Ki et al. (2020). The construct of trust in the influencer was measured using items reflecting perceived honesty, reliability, and authenticity, adapted from Lou and Yuan (2019) and Casaló et al. (2020). Finally, purchase intention was operationalized using items indicating the respondent's likelihood to purchase a product or service promoted by the influencer, based on the scale by Jin et al. (2019). All items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

To ensure content validity, the questionnaire was reviewed by three academic experts in marketing and consumer behavior. A pilot study involving 30 respondents was conducted prior to full deployment to verify clarity, consistency, and reliability of the instrument. Based on the results of the pilot, minor wording adjustments were made, and Cronbach's alpha values above 0.7 for all constructs confirmed internal consistency.

The final dataset comprised 412 valid responses, which exceeded the minimum sample size recommended for structural equation modeling (SEM) using the PLS-SEM approach. Data analysis was conducted in two stages. In the first stage, the measurement model was evaluated to assess construct validity, convergent validity (through factor loadings and average variance extracted), and discriminant validity (using the Fornell-Larcker criterion). In the second stage, the structural model was tested to evaluate the hypothesized relationships using SmartPLS 4. Key indicators such as path coefficients (β), t-values, p-values, and R^2 were examined to determine the strength and significance of the causal paths.

In addition, bootstrapping with 5000 resamples was performed to assess the mediating role of trust in the relationships between the influencer attributes and purchase intention. The statistical significance of indirect effects was examined using bias-corrected confidence intervals.

The methodology followed in this study is summarized visually in Figure 2, which depicts the flow of the research process from model construction to hypothesis testing.

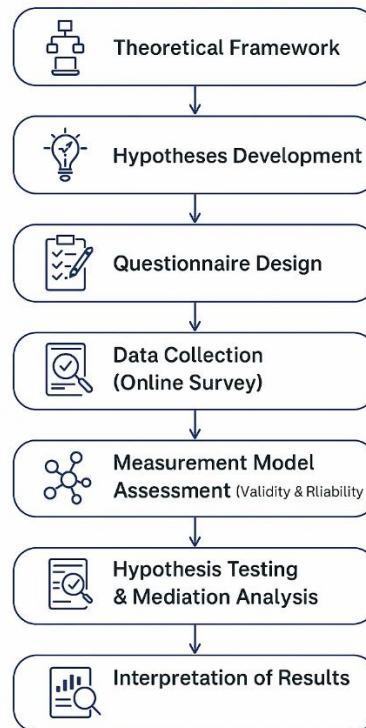


Figure 2. Research Process Flow of the Study

As can be seen in Figure 2, the stages of research implementation are outlined step by step, from developing a theoretical framework to interpreting the final results.

5- Data Analysis and Results

In this section, data collected from 412 respondents were analyzed using the partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) method and SmartPLS 4 software. The analysis process was carried out in two main stages. First, the measurement model was evaluated to measure the validity and reliability of the constructs. Then, the structural model was examined to test the hypotheses and evaluate the causal relationships between the variables.

To examine the measurement model, all outer loadings were reported to be higher than the standard value of 0.7, indicating appropriate item reliability. Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability values for all constructs were greater than 0.80, indicating the desirable internal consistency of the measurement tool. Also, the average variance extracted (AVE) for each construct was greater than 0.5, confirming convergent validity.

To measure the divergent validity, the Fornell-Larker criterion and the HTMT ratio were used. In the Fornell-Larker criterion, the AVE square root of each construct was greater than its correlation with other constructs. In addition, the HTMT values for all pairs of constructs were less than 0.85, which also indicates the distinctiveness of the measured concepts. In general, the results of the measurement model analysis showed that the research instrument has appropriate accuracy, consistency, and differentiation.

In the second stage, the structural model was analyzed with the aim of testing the hypotheses. The path coefficients (β), t-statistics, and significance level (p-value) were calculated using the bootstrapping method with 5000 resampling samples. The R^2 coefficient of determination for the influencer trust construct was

0.568 and for the purchase intention construct was 0.617. These values indicate the acceptable explanatory power of the model in predicting consumer behavior.

The findings from the hypothesis test are presented in Table 1. As can be seen, the effect of expertise on trust in the influencer was confirmed with $\beta = 0.304$ and t -statistic = 6.212 at a significance level of less than 0.001. Also, perceived attractiveness and intimacy also had a significant effect on trust. Trust in the influencer, as a key mediating variable, had a significant and powerful effect on the audience's purchase intention ($\beta = 0.653$). Indirect paths also showed that the variables of expertise, attractiveness, and intimacy have a significant effect on purchase intention through trust.

Table 1. Results of testing research hypotheses

Hypothesis	Path	Coefficient (β)	t-value	p-value	Result
H1	Expertise \rightarrow Trust in Influencer	0.304	6.212	<0.001	Supported
H2	Attractiveness \rightarrow Trust in Influencer	0.227	4.788	<0.001	Supported
H3	Intimacy \rightarrow Trust in Influencer	0.321	6.553	<0.001	Supported
H4	Trust in Influencer \rightarrow Purchase Intention	0.653	13.914	<0.001	Strongly Supported
H5	Expertise \rightarrow Trust \rightarrow Purchase Intention (indirect)	0.199	5.901	<0.001	Supported
H6	Attractiveness \rightarrow Trust \rightarrow Purchase Intention (indirect)	0.148	4.42	<0.001	Supported
H7	Intimacy \rightarrow Trust \rightarrow Purchase Intention (indirect)	0.21	6.217	<0.001	Supported

To better understand the structural relationships and strength of the paths in the model, the final structure of the research model is graphically displayed in Figure 3. This diagram includes path coefficients and R^2 values for the main constructs and provides a clear view of the mechanism of influencer characteristics on purchase intention through the trust variable.

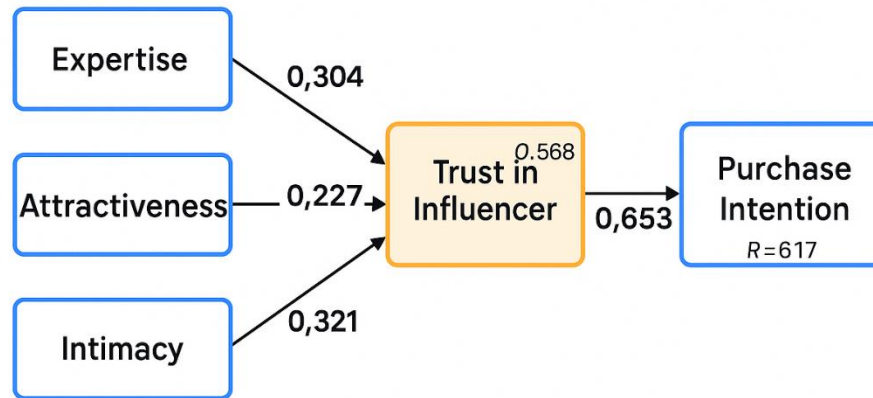


Figure 3. Final structural model with path coefficients and R² values

Based on the findings of this section, the role of trust in the influencer as an effective psychological mechanism in transferring the effect of influencer characteristics to purchasing behavior is confirmed. Also, the model presented in this study has high predictive power and can provide a suitable theoretical basis for future studies in the field of digital marketing and consumer decision-making.

6- Conclusion

The findings of this study provide a comprehensive understanding of how influencer marketing on social media platforms shapes consumer purchase intention through the mediating role of trust. By developing and empirically testing a structural model grounded in the Source Credibility Theory and the Theory of Planned Behavior, this research confirms that influencer characteristics, specifically expertise, attractiveness, and perceived intimacy, play significant roles in cultivating trust. In turn, this trust directly influences the likelihood of purchase. The mediating effect of trust is found to be both statistically significant and substantial, indicating that consumer behavioral intentions are not merely shaped by superficial impressions but are rooted in deeper psychological evaluations of credibility and authenticity.

The strong path coefficient from trust to purchase intention highlights the critical role of emotional and cognitive connection between the consumer and the influencer. Among the three influencer attributes examined, perceived intimacy exerted the highest indirect effect. This suggests that relational closeness and authenticity are more impactful than physical appeal or professional competence in influencing trust and subsequent consumer behavior. These findings are consistent with the evolving expectations of digital consumers, who increasingly value transparency, relatability, and sincerity over polished and impersonal branding.

From a theoretical perspective, the study contributes to the literature on influencer marketing by integrating multiple antecedents and articulating the mediating role of trust in a cohesive empirical model. It addresses existing gaps by detailing the specific pathways through which influencer traits affect consumer behavior. This contributes to a more nuanced and structured understanding of digital social influence mechanisms.

Practically, the results offer valuable implications for marketers, brand managers, and digital strategists. When selecting influencers, decision-makers should look beyond surface metrics such as follower count and focus on qualities like domain expertise, audience engagement, and emotional resonance. Influencers who can establish trust-based relationships with their followers are more likely to generate meaningful consumer responses. Micro-influencers, for instance, often yield better engagement and conversion results due to their perceived approachability and consistent interaction with audiences.

Influencer marketing campaigns should also be structured to build and reinforce trust. This can be achieved by incorporating authentic content, behind-the-scenes stories, interactive sessions, and personal testimonials. Such approaches help deepen the emotional connection between influencers and followers, which is essential for influencing purchase intentions.

For policymakers and platform administrators, the study underscores the importance of transparent disclosure practices in influencer marketing. Since trust significantly influences consumer decisions, misleading or hidden sponsorships may harm both consumers and brands. Establishing and enforcing clear guidelines for endorsement transparency can safeguard consumer interests while enhancing the long-term credibility of influencer marketing strategies.

This research, while valuable, has certain limitations. The cross-sectional nature of the data restricts the ability to observe changes over time, and the use of self-reported measures may introduce response biases. Future research is encouraged to employ longitudinal methods and incorporate behavioral tracking data to validate and expand upon the current findings. In summary, this study demonstrates that influencer marketing is a robust mechanism of persuasion anchored in psychological trust. Trust functions as the critical link between perceived influencer attributes and purchase intention, highlighting the essential role of authenticity, expertise, and interpersonal engagement in shaping consumer behavior in the digital era.

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