DIGITAL INFLUENCERS: CATALYSTS FOR CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT AND PURCHASE INTENTION

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Abstract: Social Media Influencer (SMI) marketing represents a contemporary addition to the arsenal of digital advertising tools. Digital Content Creators are individuals who regularly share a variety of content, including visuals, audio recordings, and updates, across multiple social media platforms to shape consumers' perceptions of a brand and its products. The focus of this study is to examine how the credibility aspects of social media influencers (expertise, attractiveness, and trustworthiness) influence purchase intention and brand intimacy while also considering the mediating role of consumer engagement. This study used a quantitative, cross-sectional design with convenience sampling targeting social media-active individuals. Data were collected via a questionnaire distributed through email and social media, selecting participants who followed influencers. To gather data, 250 participants were engaged in an online questionnaire distributed via Google Forms. The findings indicate that the credibility dimensions of SMIs, particularly their attractiveness and trustworthiness, positively influence brand intimacy and purchase intention. Furthermore, consumer engagement serves as a critical mediator, connecting the authenticity of social media influencers with purchase intention and brand intimacy. In line with these results, it becomes evident that consumer engagement indirectly influences influencer credibility (trustworthiness and attractiveness), purchase intention, and brand intimacy. Notably, expertise does not exert any discernible impact on either brand intimacy or purchase intention. This study's

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outcomes provide valuable insights for marketing managers, underscoring the significance of partnering with influencers who possess a high level of trust within their respective marketing niches.

1. Introduction

In today's fast-paced digital landscape, digital platforms have become an integral part of our daily lives, transforming the way we interact, share information, and connect with others. In 2022, a staggering 4.95 billion individuals harnessed social media networks to access the internet, with over 50% of them using these platforms to explore products and services offered by several brands (Sokolova and Kefi, 2019). Social media has, therefore, emerged as a potent tool for businesses to engage with potential customers, enabling them to reach millions of individuals simultaneously (Sajid, 2016). This extensive reach wields a substantial influence on shaping consumer purchasing decisions (Pütter, 2017). In contrast to traditional brand messaging, consumers increasingly place their trust in peer reviews when evaluating products and services (Lamberton and Stephen, 2016). Social media platforms offer an ideal environment for this practice, given the interconnectedness of online consumers.

With the advent of social media platforms, users who regularly share personal stories, reviews, and content on social networks have morphed into influential figures, commonly referred to as "social media influencers" (Khamis et al., 2017). These influencers also generate revenue through sponsored content and incentives from brands (Lou and Yuan, 2019). In contrast to traditional celebrities, social media personalities have gained prominence through their active engagement on social media platforms, including images, stories, and videos (Ismagilova, 2020; Zafar et al., 2020). Corporate expenditures in influencer marketing are projected to exceed $24 billion annually by 2024, signalling the growing recognition of the potential of this approach among businesses [62].

Influencer marketing has emerged as a popular method for brands to increase their exposure and connect with customers in recent years (Hair et al., 2017). When influencers endorse a brand, they lend it credibility and foster trust among their followers, leading to favourable perceptions of the brand and a stronger emotional connection (Wang et al., 2021). The concept of "brand intimacy" describes this emotional bond between customers and a specific brand (v et al., 2019).

This research aims to enhance our understanding of these areas that warrants further investigation (Wang, T., and Lee, 2021; Jin and Ryu, 2020). Specifically, it seeks to explore the factors contributing to the credibility of social media influencers and identify the elements influencing their followers' purchase intentions. By delving into these dimensions, the study intends to unravel the sources of influencer credibility and their impact on consumer behaviour. Additionally, the

study investigates how consumer engagement effectively influences brand intimacy, an area that has yet to be extensively explored as part of customer interactions.

2. Literature Review

Influencers Credibility Dimensions

The perceived credibility of a public figure is the extent to which an individual views the blogger's opinions as unaltered, genuinely realistic, and true (Cosenza et al., 2015). It is worth noting that the trustworthiness of the person conveying the message, or the message source, is a critical component for message effectiveness (Husnain and Toor, 2017). Credibility, in this context, refers to the level of trust placed in both the information and the individuals delivering it (Ohanian, 1990). In the realm of influencer marketing, the central concept revolves around leveraging respected online figures, often referred to as content creators, to convey a brand's message or products, whether customized or not, to their audience, thereby influencing their attitudes, outcomes, and behaviours (De Veirman et al., 2017). Credibility encompasses various dimensions related to "one's expertise and willingness to maintain performance-enhancing credentials" (Dwivedi et al., 2018). Therefore, we are going to analyse the dimensions of trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness can be defined as the extent to which the representative is perceived as honest, reliable, and authentic in the eyes of the audience (Ismagilova et al., 2020). The concept of trust in discourse pertains to the listener's level of reliance on and acceptance of the individual influencing them, and the message being conveyed (Abdulmajid and Wahid, 2012). Trustworthiness encompasses the trustor's confidence in the trustee's qualities and attributes (Kosiba et al., 2018). In essence, for social media influencers (trustees) to establish trustworthiness, end-users (trustors) must be convinced that the blogger's statements are credible.

To create a positive impression and foster trust, influencers should provide accurate and truthful information about both informational and functional products. When consumers place their trust in a seller or influencer, they are more likely to trust that product or influencer in the future (Pham et al., 2021; Shamhuyenhanzva et al., 2016). Hu et al. (2019) assert that when making online purchases, consumers are often susceptible to persuasion from highly reliable information sources. Consequently, if an influencer can establish an authentic and trustworthy image, they will find it easier to capture the attention of a more engaged audience. (Wang and Scheinbaum, 2018) conducted an examination of the significance of trustworthiness in the beauty market, focusing particularly on the role of popular figures. They identified a strong correlation between social media influencers and the beauty industry, which was pivotal in reshaping consumer perceptions. In turn, (Silva et al., 2020) delved into the impact of product endorsements by digital influencers on the Instagram platform and how this engagement influenced product recommendations. Trustworthiness has been identified as the primary credibility factor with a significant impact on the behaviour of followers (Wiedmann and Von Mettenheim, 2020). Building on these findings, the current study posits that the trustworthiness of social

media influencers is a key factor in establishing their credibility and influencing the purchase intentions of their social media followers. Consequently, the following hypotheses are formulated:

> *H1a:* There is a significant impact of Trustworthiness on Purchase intention.
> *H1b:* There is a significant impact of Trustworthiness on Brand Intimacy.

Expertise

Expertise has been characterized by Elaziz and Mayouf (2017) as the apparent competence of the source to offer valid affirmations. Therefore, the source is seen as someone qualified to deliver accurate evidence or knowledgeable about a certain topic (Elaziz and Mayouf, 2017). In the social media domain, the perceived amount of insight, competence, or understanding of an influencer is characterized as expertise. The skill of an influencer is comparable to qualities that directly impact the amount of belief necessary in convincing customers to purchase something suggested (v et al., 2022; Wang and Scheinbaum, 2017).

According to Zhu et al. (2016), when customers embark on shopping and encounter products that are unfamiliar to them, they typically lean on the insights of individuals with dedicated knowledge to gauge the practicality and value of these offerings. It is the expertise of influencers that will shape their credibility, as well as shape customers' buying behaviours and intentions (Schouten et al., 2021). Schouten et al. (2021) also suggested that the impact of the alignment between a product and its endorser on credibility is more conspicuous for influencers than for traditional celebrity endorsers. This is because digital creators have excellently positioned themselves as experts within specific domains of the interweb, such as 'technology enthusiasts,' 'fitness experts,' 'beauty enthusiasts,' or 'fashion aficionados,' and regularly communicate product material to their online supporters (Balog et al., 2008).

Influencer expertise affects followers' attitudes as well as their purchase intentions (AlFarraj et al., 2021). When deciding whether to adopt a product, consumers take into account their interactions with social media influencers (Martínez-López et al., 2020). Expert social media influencers can readily inspire consumers to follow their advice and knowledge on a particular subject (Chetioui et al., 2020). Hence, the expertise possessed by social media influencers plays a significant role in shaping the extent of customer engagement and, consequently, their purchase intentions.

> *H2a:* There is a significant impact of Expertise on Purchase intention.
> *H2b:* There is a significant impact of Expertise on Brand Intimacy.

Attractiveness

In the realm of effective advertising, the concept of source attractiveness is heavily shaped by the source's resemblance, closeness, and popularity to the audience (McGuire, 1985). Resemblance pertains to the perceived similarity between the audience (social media followers) and the source, closeness involves the familiarity-based understanding of the source, and likability is based on an affinity for the source due to their facial attractiveness and performance (McGuire, 1985). An influential factor in capturing public attention within messages is the attractiveness of influencers. Their attractiveness has a profound impact on community behaviour, as they tend to be more popular when they possess qualities deemed attractive (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017).

As per Tingchi Liu et al. (2007), attractive endorsers are more likely to positively impact customer purchase intentions. The attitudes of customers towards specific companies and their purchase intentions can be swayed by the actions of social media influencers. To gain customer trust and foster long-term relationships, these digital celebrities must consistently demonstrate their mastery of their content. Previous research has shown that when brand information or recommendations come from attractive and knowledgeable individuals perceived as experts, it has a favourable effect on customer behaviour toward those brands (AlFarraj et al., 2021). Therefore, the physical attractiveness of the source can be leveraged to enhance the impact of advertisements (Singh and Banerjee, 2018; Weismueller et al., 2020]. Endorsers with attractive characteristics have the potential to impact buyers' attitudes, leading to a purchase intention (Sokolova and Kefi, 2019). Furthermore, Lou and Yuan (2019) have demonstrated that the attractiveness of influencers can potentially enhance brand visibility and inspire the level of trust consumers place in the content they produce. Consequently, the following hypotheses are formulated:

> *H3a:* There is a significant impact of Attractiveness on Purchase intention.
> *H3b:* There is a significant impact of Attractiveness on Brand Intimacy.

Consumer Engagement

In the realm of marketing, consumer engagement, as defined by Pansari and Kumar (2018), signifies the depth of the interactive relationship established by a customer with a company. This concept finds its roots in relationship marketing (Vivek et al., 2012). Within the context of social media and online platforms, much of the research has predominantly focused on the action-based facet of consumer engagement. This includes activities such as liking, sharing thoughts, and other interactive behaviours (Barger et al., 2016). Additionally, these investigations have shed light on the consequences of engagement on consumer behaviours, encompassing aspects like electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) and purchase intentions (Mainardes and Cardoso, 2019).

As Social Media Influencers play an increasingly significant role in consumers' decision-making processes, brands are now distributing brand-related content through influencers' profiles [30]. Moreover, influential individuals on social media platforms can enhance digital engagement through factors like the content they produce and the type of ads they share. Their ability to interact and adapt contributes to heightened customer engagement, as influencers leverage their insights to understand and address the societal needs of their audience (Khalid et al., 2018). Social Media Influencers' channels provide consumers with opportunities to explore brand-related content, and engagement occurs when they view and interact with influencers' videos and stories related to the brand on various social platforms (Cheung et al., 2021).

Consumer engagement and purchase intention

Research by Mirabi et al. (2015) suggests that highly engaged consumers generate 23% more revenue due to their increased spending per transaction and more frequent purchases. This, in turn, enhances the customer's lifetime value while reducing the costs associated with acquiring new customers. In theory, highly engaged consumers are likely to encourage friends and family to become customers

as well (Mirabi et al., 2015). A similar finding (Algharabat et al., 2018), supported the role of customer engagement in the retailing industry in influencing consumer purchase intention and value co-creation. Tiruwa et al. (2016) discovered links between customer engagement in Facebook online brand groups and purchase intent. Husnain and Toor (2017) emphasized that customer interaction has a significant impact on purchase intention in the context of social media advertising in Pakistan. They pointed out that the improvement of consumer connection, communication, and the sharing of information about products and services have contributed to heightened customer engagement, subsequently influencing purchase intent. Therefore, this study will investigate the following hypothesis:

> *H4:* There is a significant impact of Consumer Engagement on Purchase Intention.

Consumer engagement and brand intimacy

Consumer engagement plays a pivotal role in cultivating a sense of closeness between consumers and brands (Junior et al., 2022). This, in turn, piques consumers' curiosity to learn more about the brand and actively engage with it. For the success of businesses, establishing robust connections between consumers and brands is paramount (Ki et al., 2020). When consumers follow bloggers on social media platforms and become part of virtual communities, their commitment increases as they interact with brands. This heightened engagement results in positive feelings towards the brand (Machado et al., 2019). Consumer engagement nurtures brand intimacy and the business-to-consumer connection, ensuring fruitful partnerships (Ladhari et al., 2020).

When social media influencer (SMI) activities enhance customer connections, such as sharing their expertise and experiences through personalization, consumers' favourable perceptions of the brand soar (Mathur, 2018). As outlined in the following hypothesis, the study proposes a direct connection between customer engagement and brand intimacy:

> *H5:* There is a significant impact of Consumer Engagement on Brand Intimacy.

Mediating Role of Consumer Engagement

While customer engagement serves as a significant predictor of thoughts, intentions, and actions (Harrigan et al., 2017; Prentice et al., 2019), it's essential to recognize that the direct impact of source characteristics, such as attractiveness and expertise, on purchase intentions is channelled through brand attitude (Vrontis et al., 2021). This implies that source attributes alone may not wield a substantial influence on purchase intentions. Instead, source qualities exert a positive effect on consumer attitudes, which, in turn, drive purchase intentions. As noted by AlFarraj et al. (2021), even when social media influencers possess a high degree of credibility, consumers must actively engage with the influencers' content and actions to foster a favourable intention towards the targeted companies or products. Hence, the following hypotheses are put forward:

> *H6a:* Consumer Engagement significantly mediates the relationship between Trustworthiness and Purchase Intention.

H6b: Consumer Engagement significantly mediates the relationship between Expertise and Purchase Intention.

H6c: Consumer Engagement significantly mediates the relationship between Attractiveness and Purchase Intention.

Numerous studies have acknowledged the role of consumer engagement as an intermediary in various marketing contexts. For instance, Rao and Aslam (2019) noted that consumer engagement acts as a mediator in the connection between brand affection and customer loyalty. Similarly, Toor et al. (2017) found that consumer engagement becomes a mediator between social network interactions and customer purchase intent. Moreover, Prentice et al. (2019) underscored the importance of consumer engagement as a mediator between internal and external factors and sustainable consumption behaviour.

Despite the existing research on the relationships between consumer engagement, the credibility dimensions of social media influencers, and brand intimacy, there is a dearth of studies exploring the role of consumer engagement as an intermediary among these constructs. Therefore, we present the following hypothesis:

H7a: Consumer Engagement significantly mediates the relationship between Trustworthiness and Brand Intimacy.

H7b: Consumer Engagement significantly mediates the relationship between Expertise and Brand Intimacy.

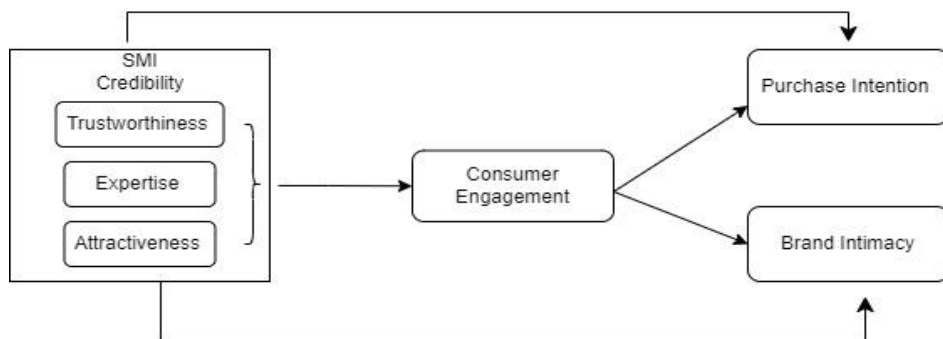*H7c:* Consumer Engagement significantly mediates the relationship between Attractiveness and Brand Intimacy.

Figure 1. Theoretical framework

3.Methodology

This study used a quantitative approach employing a cross-sectional study design. Data collection was facilitated through the distribution of a questionnaire, disseminated through various channels, such as email and social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram. To gather data from our specific target demographic, a convenience sampling method was employed. This choice was driven by the characteristics of our study population, mainly comprising individuals actively engaged in social media and following influencers.

Following the questionnaire distribution, participants were initially asked about their interaction with influencers on the platform. They were specifically questioned about whether they followed any influencers and, if so, were requested to provide the social media handle of their favourite influencer. Subsequently, only participants who confirmed following influencers and could provide their favourite influencer's name were selected to proceed with the questionnaire.

The questionnaire items were derived from previous research and employed a five-point Likert scale for measurement (table 1). To study Trustworthiness we included four distinct items from Lou and Kim (2019), Attractiveness is assessed through three items from Duran and Kelly (1988), and Expertise is evaluated using four items from Lou and Yuan (2019). To assess the mediating variable, Consumer Engagement, we thoughtfully integrated six items from Cheung et al. (2022). For measuring Purchase Intention, we adopted two items from the established work of Chetioui et al. (2020). The second dependent variable, Brand Intimacy, was assessed using a questionnaire adapted from Read et al. (2019).

Table 1. Dimensions and items

Dimension	Items	References
Trustworthiness	• I trust the influencer's opinion. • I think the influencer shares his or her honest opinion. • I trust the influencer's messages more than one coming directly from a brand. • I trust the influencer's knowledge about the product/service she or he endorses.	Lou & Kim, 2019
Expertise	• I feel this influencer knowns a lot. • I consider this influencer an expert on his/her area. • I feel this influencer is competent to make assertions about things that this youtuber is good at. • I consider this influencer sufficiently experienced to make assertions about his/her area.	Lou & Yuan, 2019
Attractiveness	• I think this influencer is handsome/ pretty. • This Influencer is somewhat attractive. • I have a better relationship with this influencer than other influencers.	Duran & Kelly, 1988
Consumer Engagement	• Participating in activities on [SMI]'s channels get me thinking about the brand endorsed by the [SMI]. • Participating in activities on [SMI]'s channels stimulate my interest in learning more about the brand endorsed by the [SMI]. • I feel very positive when I use the brand endorsed by the [SMI]. • I feel good when I use the brand endorsed by the [SMI].	Cheung et al., 2022

Dimension	Items	References
	• I spend a lot of time using the brand endorsed by the [SMI] compared with other brands. • I use the brand endorsed by the [SMI] the most.	
Brand Intimacy	• I feel more confident that the brand understands its customers. • I feel that I would be more comfortable describing the brand to someone who was unfamiliar with it. • I feel that I am more familiar with the range of goods and services that the brand offers. • I feel that I have become more knowledgeable about the brand. • I feel that I am likely to be following the brand's social media feed one year from now.	Read et al., 2019
Purchase Intention	• I most frequently have intentions to purchase products advertised by the fashion influencers. • I follow generally recommended products and/or services advertised by the fashion influencers I follow.	Chetioui et al., 2020

4.Data Analysis and Results

The sample of this study is characterized by a predominantly female composition, accounting for 71.7% of the total, while males make up the remaining 28.3% (Table 2). This distribution clearly indicates a higher representation of females compared to males in the study. When examining the age groups, the data reveals a substantial level of interest among younger individuals. The largest proportion of respondents falls within the 18-25 years age group, constituting 76.1% of the participants. The 26-33 years age group makes up 18.3%, while those aged 34 years or older represent 5.6% of the sample. These findings underscore a clear preference for participation among the younger age groups.

Table 2. Respondent Profile

	Respondent Profile	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	71	28.3
	Female	180	71.7
Age	18-25 years	191	76.1
	26-33 years	46	18.3
	34 or above	14	5.6
Time you spend on social media	2-3 hours	88	35.1
	4-5 hours	100	39.8
	6-7 hours	63	25.1

Furthermore, the analysis provides insights into the distribution of the percentage of time dedicated to social media usage. Most respondents reported spending 2-3 hours (35.1%), closely followed by 4-5 hours (39.8%), and 6-7 hours (25.1%). These results emphasize the significant level of engagement among respondents with social media platforms, with a substantial portion allocating several hours of their daily routine to these online activities.

The data analytics process unfolded in two distinct stages. Initially, alongside Cronbach's alpha, we employed Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) to assess the measurement model's validity and reliability of the measures. Subsequently, we harnessed Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to scrutinize the structural pathways within the conceptual model and conducted a moderation analysis.

Before subjecting the formulated hypotheses to testing, the research team conducted a reliability analysis employing Cronbach's alpha, a metric with a strong track record in prior studies. As per Pallant (2020), reliability values surpassing 0.7 are generally considered satisfactory, while values exceeding 0.8 are regarded as even more favourable. Upon scrutinizing the details presented in Table 3, it becomes apparent that the Cronbach's alpha value obtained falls within the acceptable range of 0.7, thereby validating the dataset's reliability.

Table 3. Reliability

Variables	Cronbach's Alpha
Trustworthiness	0.826
Expertise	0.809
Attractiveness	0.787
Consumer Engagement	0.886
Brand Intimacy	0.822
Purchase Intention	0.751

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was employed to estimate the model, and an assessment of the research study's validity was conducted following the approach outlined by Hair et al. (2017). In accordance with this method, items with factor loadings below 0.5 were eliminated from the analysis. As indicated in Table 4, three items were excluded due to factor loadings falling below the 0.5 threshold. These items were TRU1 from the Trustworthiness construct, EXP2 from the Expertise construct, and BI4 from the Brand Intimacy construct.

The composite reliability values in the research surpassed the 0.70 criterion recommended by Hair et al. (2017). Additionally, all constructs exhibited an average variance extracted (AVE) exceeding 0.50, consistent with the standards established by Hair et al. (2017). The model's appropriateness was further assessed by examining the goodness-of-fit criteria ($\chi 2/DF = 2.859$, GFI = 0.911, IFI = 0.936, CFI = 0.935). These values also fell within the acceptable range of threshold values.

The CFA test was conducted to confirm construct validity, assessing both discriminant and convergent validity. Applying Fornell and Larcker (1981) criteria for discriminant validity (Table 5), we observed that the square roots of AVE values exceeded the expected correlation values between the variables. As a result, the findings from the measurement model provide robust evidence for reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. These results provide a high level of confidence in affirming all the expected relationships within the structural model.

Table 4. Validity

Variables	Items	Loadings	CR	AVE
Trustworthiness	TRU2	.805		
	TRU3	.667	0.823	0.610
	TRU4	.858		
Expertise	EXP1	.565		
	EXP3	.814	0.796	0.573
	EXP4	.859		
Attractiveness	ATT1	.827		
	ATT2	.886	0.823	0.613
	ATT3	.608		
Consumer Engagement	CE1	.577		
	CE2	.714		
	CE3	.811	0.891	0.582
	CE4	.912		
	CE5	.716		
	CE6	.806		
Brand Intimacy	BI1	.561	0.804	0.511
	BI2	.816		
	BI3	.794		
	BI5	.659		
Purchase Intention	PI1	.817	0.759	0.612
	PI2	.746		

In our analysis, we identified a discriminant validity issue between the constructs Trustworthiness (TRU) and Expertise (EXP), as indicated by a high correlation (0.781) compared to the AVE values. This suggests that there may be an overlap between these constructs. However, we have decided to keep TRU and EXP distinct in our analysis for several reasons.

First, the theoretical literature consistently defines trustworthiness and expertise as distinct entities, each capturing distinct features of user behavior. Theoretical frameworks in consumer behavior differentiate between these constructs due to their unique impacts on user behavior (Filieri et al 2023). Additionally, Previous studies has consistently treated trust and experience as independent constructs due to their distinct effects on user behavior and decision-making. Trustworthiness relates to a source's perceived honesty and reliability, which determines the emotional connection and credibility that an influencer builds with their audience. Expertise, on the other hand, refers to the influencer's perceived skill and knowledge, which influences the cognitive appraisal of the information presented.

Secondly, other validity and reliability studies undertaken in this study confirm the distinction between TRU and EXP. measuring example, our factor analysis shows that items designed to measure trust load strongly on the trust factor, whereas items measuring experience load on the experience factor, showing that respondents see these as distinct terms. Additionally, internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) for each construct supports their reliability as separate measures.

Table 5. Discriminant Validity

	BI	TRU	EXP	ATT	CE	PI
BI	**0.866**					
TRU	0.398	**0.941**				
EXP	0.371	0.781	**0.757**			
ATT	0.464	0.306	0.170	**0.783**		
CE	0.715	0.409	0.319	0.535	**0.763**	
PI	0.722	0.354	0.291	0.497	0.718	**0.782**

Path Analysis

After assessing the validity and reliability, the structural path test was conducted to investigate both causal effects and potential mediating roles (Figure 2). In a broader context, the structural model was examined to confirm the validity of the conceptual framework and scrutinize the research hypotheses, following the recommendations of Anderson and Gerbing (1988), Byrne (2013), and Hair et al. (2010). Moreover, we appropriately evaluated the model by considering goodness-of-fit criteria (χ^2/DF = 3.270, GFI = 0.940, IFI = 0.928, CFI = 0.927, RMR = 0.021).
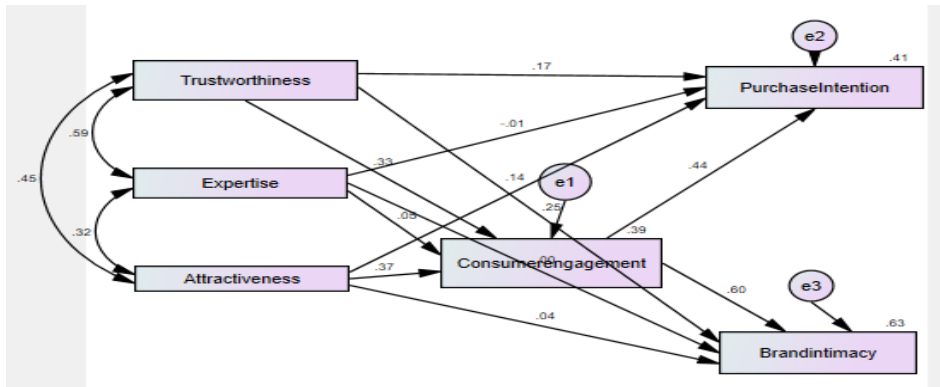

Figure 2. Path analysis

The analysis of direct effects yields several findings. Hypotheses H1b, H3b, H4, and H5 receive strong support with high levels of significance ($p < 0.001$). On the other hand, Trustworthiness exhibits a positive and statistically significant influence on Purchase Intention ($p < 0.01$), thus validating Hypothesis H1a, while Hypothesis H3a garners support at a significance level of ($p < 0.05$). However, Expertise fails to show a significant impact on both Purchase Intention and Brand Intimacy ($p > 0.05$), leading to the rejection of Hypotheses H2a and H2b. Additionally, it's noteworthy that Attractiveness does not significantly impact Brand Intimacy ($p > 0.05$).

Table 6. Result of Path Analysis

Hypothesis	Path	Estimates	t-value	p-value	Decision
H1a	TRU→PI	0.174	2.589	0.010	Accepted
H1b	TRU→BI	0.253	4.734	***	Accepted
H2a	EXP→PI	-0.006	-0.093	0.926	Rejected
H2b	EXP→BI	-0.003	-0.062	0.950	Rejected
H3a	ATT→PI	0.145	2.437	0.015	Accepted
H3b	ATT→BI	0.041	0.877	0.381	Rejected
H4	CE→PI	0.438	7.030	***	Accepted
H5	CE→BI	0.605	12.200	***	Accepted

In the context of mediating effects, the results underscore the crucial and positive indirect role of consumer engagement in shaping both trustworthiness and purchase intention, in line with hypothesis H6a ($p < 0.001$). Additionally, consumer engagement exerts a beneficial and indirect influence on attractiveness and purchase intention, thus confirming the validity of H6c ($p < 0.001$). However, the mediating role of consumer engagement in the link between expertise and purchase intention does not materialize ($p > 0.001$), leading to the rejection of hypothesis H6b. Furthermore, consumer engagement's impact on trustworthiness and brand intimacy is robust, supporting H7a ($p < 0.001$), as well as its impact on attractiveness and brand intimacy, endorsing H7c ($p < 0.001$). Conversely, the mediating role of consumer engagement in the connection between expertise and brand intimacy is not supported, resulting in the dismissal of hypothesis H7b. For the mediation analysis, AMOS software was employed, which included bootstrapping resampling rounds and a bias-corrected method at a 95% confidence level. This approach ensures the reliability and robustness of the generated findings (Table 7).

Table 7. Results of Mediation

Hypothesis	Path	Estimates	p-value	Decision	Type of mediation	Implication
H6a	TRU→CE→PI	0.197	0.001	Accepted	Partial	Both direct and indirect effects are significant, indicating that Consumer Engagement partially mediates the relationship. This suggests that trustworthiness influences purchase intention both directly and through its impact on consumer engagement.
H6b	EXP→CE→PI	0.026	0.524	Rejected	None	Neither the direct nor indirect effects are significant, indicating no mediation. This suggests that expertise does not influence purchase intention directly or

Hypothesis	Path	Estimates	p-value	Decision	Type of mediation	Implication
						through consumer engagement.
H6c	ATT→CE→PI	0.165	0.000	Accepted	Partial	Both direct and indirect effects are significant, indicating that Consumer Engagement partially mediates the relationship. This suggests that attractiveness influences purchase intention both directly and through its impact on consumer engagement.
H7a	TRU→CE→BI	0.296	0.001	Accepted	Partial	Both direct and indirect effects are significant, indicating that Consumer Engagement partially mediates the relationship. This suggests that trustworthiness influences brand intimacy both directly and through its impact on consumer engagement.
H7b	EXP→CE→BI	0.039	0.552	Rejected	None	Neither the direct nor indirect effects are significant, indicating no mediation. This suggests that expertise does not influence brand intimacy directly or through consumer engagement.
H7c	ATT→CE→BI	0.249	0.000	Accepted	Full	The direct effect is not significant, but the indirect effect is significant, indicating full mediation. This suggests that attractiveness influences brand intimacy entirely through consumer engagement.

5. Discussion

Three key dimensions of social media influencer credibility were explored: attractiveness, expertise, and trustworthiness. The primary research question focused on whether these influencer dimensions influenced purchase intention and brand intimacy. The findings unequivocally confirm a substantial and significant relationship between perceived trustworthiness and purchase intention. This aligns with prior research highlighting the positive influence of credible and influential sources on customers' purchase intentions and brand preferences (AlFarraj et al., 2021; Weismueller et al., 2020). The consistency between this study's findings and previous empirical evidence underscores the significance of this research.

Regarding the link between expertise and purchase intention, the results indicate that expertise does not have a significant impact on purchase intention. These findings are not in line with studies by Weismueller et al. (2020) and Chekima et al. (2020). However, it's essential to acknowledge that previous research has also reported insignificant results in this context. For example, Gomes et al. (2022) found no substantial correlation between expertise and purchase intention. This emphasizes the idea that while digital influencers are occasionally regarded as authorities in their respective fields, expertise alone may not significantly influence consumers' purchase intentions. The influence of an influencer's expertise may vary depending on factors such as cultural context and the nature of the products being endorsed (Gomes et al., 2022). Cultural variations can alter the dynamics of influence, highlighting that expertise can yield different outcomes in distinct cultural contexts.

The study's third dimension focuses on the attractiveness of digital content creators, revealing a positive and statistically significant correlation with purchase intention. This finding is consistent with earlier research, such as Lou and Kim (2019), which identified a strong connection between influencer attractiveness and purchase behaviour. Shirazi et al. (2022) research also emphasized the robust link between social media influencers' credibility (attractiveness) and customers' buying inclinations. These findings reinforce the ongoing importance of influencer attractiveness in shaping purchase intentions.

In relation to the impact of the credibility aspects of social media influencers, it becomes apparent that trustworthiness exerts a significant and undeniable influence on brand intimacy. Surprisingly, no prior research, to the best of our knowledge, has explored the relationship between brand intimacy and social media influencer credibility. This study underscores that the trustworthiness of influencers has a substantial and favorable impact on brand intimacy. In contrast, both attractiveness and expertise do not appear to significantly affect brand intimacy. Clearly, the trustworthiness of influencers enhances brand intimacy by establishing a sense of credibility and authenticity. Consumers rely on the recommendations of trustworthy influencers to forge genuine emotional connections with brands, whereas attractiveness and expertise may not yield the same level of influence in this context.

The findings further confirmed the mediating role of consumer engagement between the credibility dimensions of social media influencers and purchase intention. The data revealed that consumer engagement mediates the relationships between trustworthiness, attractiveness, and purchase intention, consistent with previous research (Jiménez-Castillo and Sánchez-Fernández, 2019; Ki and Kim, 2019). However, there has been no previous research on consumer engagement's potential

mediating role between brand intimacy and social media influencers. According to this study's results, consumer engagement does mediate the relationships between trustworthiness, attractiveness, and brand intimacy. Trustworthy and attractive influencers tend to foster stronger consumer engagement, which, in turn, enhances emotional connections and brand intimacy, providing a pathway through which these attributes positively impact brand intimacy. However, consumer engagement does not serve as a bridge between expertise, purchase intention, and brand intimacy. This result is reasonable, as expertise may not be as influential in the context of this study, given its specific nature.

6.Conclusion

This research presents substantial contributions in both theoretical and practical aspects. This study offers empirical evidence on the impact of social media influencer credibility factors on consumer engagement, purchase intention, and brand intimacy. It's noteworthy that this research establishes the vital role of digital influencers, demonstrating their considerable positive influence on brand intimacy and purchase intention. Moreover, this research extends our current understanding of brand intimacy by exploring the intricate relationship between consumer engagement and brand intimacy. These findings contribute to a richer comprehension of how contemporary consumers engage with businesses and establish strong connections in the digital era. Furthermore, this study solidifies the mediating role of consumer engagement in the relationship between influencer credibility factors and brand intimacy, deepening our understanding of these intricate dynamics.

On a practical note, the research offers valuable guidance for brand managers and decision-makers actively involved in or contemplating the use of influencer marketing strategies. It underscores the significance of selecting well-matched social media influencers in specific product or service niches. Strategic partnerships with these influencers can help organizations effectively target their desired consumer segments, stimulating purchase motivation, enhancing visibility, promoting special offers, fostering stronger customer relationships, and ultimately elevating brand intimacy.

There are several limitations of the research study that warrant consideration for future research. First, the study's relatively small sample size may restrict the generalizability of findings. Future investigations could address this limitation by using larger sample sizes to enhance the study's representativeness. Second, the use of convenience sampling may introduce bias in the results, as the sample was not randomly selected but rather consisted of individuals who were actively engaged in social media and following influencers. This limits the generalizability of the findings to a broader population. Third, the study specifically mentions the distribution of the questionnaire on platforms like Facebook and Instagram. The findings may not be representative of other social media platforms or the broader online influencer landscape. Fourth, the study examines only three independent variables related to influencer credibility and two dependent variables related to purchase intention and brand intimacy. It may not account for the full complexity of consumer behaviour and influencer marketing. Fifth, qualitative methodologies may also be employed in future research to uncover additional influencer characteristics that impact consumers' purchase intentions. Finally, the potential overlap between the constructs Trustworthiness (TRU) and Expertise

(EXP), indicated by a high correlation coefficient compared to the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values. Despite theoretical distinctions in the literature, which define trustworthiness and expertise as separate entities with distinct impacts on user behavior, we maintained TRU and EXP as distinct constructs in our analysis. Further validity and reliability analyses, including factor analysis and internal consistency tests, supported the distinction between TRU and EXP. However, future research could explore alternative measurement strategies to address this issue more comprehensively.

Since this study found no impact of influencers' expertise on purchase intention and brand intimacy, future research could also consider factors such as the influencers' area of specialization and the types of products they endorse to explore whether results vary. Consequently, it is advisable to expand the study into longitudinal research that spans different participants or adopt an experimental approach to capture evolving consumer reactions.

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