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## The Impact of Social Media Influencers on Online Purchase Intention in Vietnam: The Mediating Role of Trust

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### ABSTRACT

This study investigates the impact of social media influencers (SMIs) on the purchase intentions of Vietnamese social media users, with a particular focus on the mediating roles of trust and parasocial relationships. Drawing on Source Credibility Theory, Parasocial Interaction Theory, and the Persuasion Knowledge Model, the study develops a conceptual model incorporating both first- and second-order constructs. Using the Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) approach and data collected from active social media users in Vietnam, the study examines how influencer-related attributes—such as physical attractiveness, social attractiveness, and attitudinal homophily—affect trust in the influencer and parasocial relationships. In addition, the informational and entertainment value of influencer-generated content is assessed for its role in building brand trust.

The findings reveal that while influencer credibility alone does not directly affect purchase intention, parasocial relationships and brand trust play significant mediating roles. Social attractiveness emerged as the strongest predictor of both influencer trust and parasocial interaction. Moreover, brand trust was found to have the most substantial direct influence on purchase intention, reaffirming its central role in consumer decision-making. The study contributes to the theoretical understanding of digital persuasion mechanisms and offers practical insights for marketers seeking to build effective influencer strategies in emerging markets.

**Keywords:** Social Media Influencers (SMIs), Parasocial Relationship, Brand Trust, Purchase Intention, PLS-SEM

### 1. Introduction

With the rapid digitalization of daily life, social media platforms have become integral to Vietnamese consumer behavior. This digital shift has fostered the rise of influencer marketing, where everyday individuals gain influence and drive engagement through authentic content. Unlike traditional celebrity endorsements, SMIs are trusted for their expertise, relatability, and perceived authenticity in niche fields. Despite growing usage in Vietnam, research exploring the mechanisms by which SMIs influence purchase intentions—especially through trust—remains limited. This study addresses that gap, focusing on how perceived trust mediates the relationship between influencers and consumer purchase intention. In the digital age, social media has revolutionized the way consumers interact with content, brands, and each other. Vietnam, with one of the fastest-growing populations of internet and mobile users in Southeast Asia, is experiencing a profound transformation in consumer behavior due to the pervasiveness of social networking platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. These platforms are no longer just channels for communication; they have become powerful tools for commerce, branding, and influence (Statista, 2024).

Among the most significant developments within digital marketing is the rise of social media influencers (SMIs)—individuals who, despite not being traditional celebrities, have built a substantial following and credibility in specific domains such as fashion, lifestyle, fitness, or cosmetics. Unlike traditional celebrity endorsements that rely heavily on mass media, influencer marketing allows for more personalized, peer-to-peer communication that is perceived as more relatable and authentic (Freberg et al., 2011; Lou & Yuan, 2019).

This shift is particularly relevant in Vietnam, where a 2023 survey revealed that approximately 78% of internet users follow at least one influencer, and 79% have purchased a product based on an influencer's recommendation (Statista, 2023). The increasing reliance on SMIs for product recommendations signals not only a transformation in marketing strategy but also in consumer decision-making processes.

Despite this observable impact, there is a lack of comprehensive academic research on how and why SMIs influence purchase intention, particularly in the context of emerging economies. Existing literature has primarily examined influencer marketing in Western countries, often overlooking the cultural, economic, and digital dynamics specific to countries like Vietnam. Moreover, although many studies have established a link between influencers and consumer behavior, they often ignore the mediating role of trust—a psychological construct that determines the strength and credibility of the influencer-consumer relationship.

Therefore, this study investigates the impact of social media influencers on the purchase intentions of Vietnamese social media users, focusing specifically on the mediating role of perceived trust. By integrating established communication theories with empirical insights from Vietnam, this study aims to bridge an important research gap and provide strategic guidance for businesses operating in digitally saturated and culturally distinct markets.

## 2. Review of Literature

### 2.1 Influencer Marketing: Evolution and Strategic Role

Influencer marketing has evolved as a dominant form of digital communication where brands collaborate with individuals who possess significant social media influence to promote products or shape public perception (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Unlike traditional advertising, influencer marketing benefits from the perceived authenticity, interactive content, and community-driven dialogue that social media offers. In contrast to celebrities, social media influencers (SMIs) are often perceived as peers or experts rather than distant public figures, which enhances their credibility and effectiveness (Freberg et al., 2011).

Freberg et al. (2011) defined SMIs as independent endorsers who shape audience attitudes through personal content on blogs or social platforms, rather than via traditional broadcast channels. Subsequent work by Lou and Yuan (2019) elaborated that SMIs can drive persuasion due to their perceived domain expertise, social connection with followers, and content authenticity. Thus, SMIs represent a form of digital opinion leadership, blending personal branding with targeted brand communication.

### 2.2 Typology and Characteristics of SMIs

Research has categorized influencers based on the number of followers and level of engagement. Mega-influencers (1M+ followers) offer vast reach, macro-influencers (100K–1M) balance reach and engagement, micro-influencers (10K–100K) provide niche trust and authenticity, and nano-influencers (<10K) offer hyper-local, community-level influence (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Notably, micro- and nano-influencers, despite having smaller audiences, often exhibit higher engagement rates and perceived trustworthiness—critical factors for affecting purchase intentions (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019). Research (e.g., Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019; Shen, 2021) has consistently shown that micro-influencers outperform larger influencers in generating purchase intention due to their higher perceived authenticity, more personal content, and stronger community relationships.

Furthermore, platform characteristics play a significant role in shaping influencer effectiveness. For example, Instagram's visual appeal supports aesthetic-driven marketing, while YouTube facilitates long-form storytelling and product reviews. Despite their popularity among Vietnamese youth, platforms such as TikTok and Facebook remain underexplored in the academic literature.

### 2.3 Theoretical Foundations

Numerous studies have applied established communication and psychological theories to understand influencer effectiveness. Four dominant theoretical lenses are especially prevalent:

#### a) Source Credibility Theory (Hovland & Weiss, 1951)

This theory suggests that an audience's acceptance of a message is largely determined by their perception of the source's credibility, defined by expertise, trustworthiness, and, in later models, attractiveness (Ohanian, 1990). In influencer marketing, these dimensions predict consumer trust and purchase intention (Breves et al., 2019; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Studies show that a strong fit between influencer and product enhances source credibility and persuasive outcomes (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020).

#### b) Parasocial Interaction Theory (Horton & Wohl, 1956)

Parasocial relationships (PSRs) refer to one-sided emotional attachments that consumers develop with media figures. When applied to SMIs, PSRs explain the strong sense of familiarity, trust, and loyalty followers exhibit, despite lacking real-life interactions (Reinikainen et al., 2020). PSRs are linked to increased consumer engagement and purchase intention, although some research (Aw & Chuah, 2021) suggests that excessive intimacy may backfire in cases of perceived over-commercialization.

#### c) Persuasion Knowledge Model (Friestad & Wright, 1994)

The Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM) posits that consumers possess cognitive schemas to detect and evaluate persuasive intent. In influencer marketing, disclosure of paid content can either enhance transparency (Kay et al., 2020) or provoke skepticism (Woodroof et al., 2020). Hence, PKM introduces a nuanced understanding of how message transparency and platform policies moderate the effectiveness of sponsored content.

#### d) Match-Up Hypothesis (Kamins, 1990)

This theory postulates that the perceived congruence between the influencer and the endorsed product influences consumer evaluations. When the influencer's image aligns with the product's attributes, perceived authenticity increases, resulting in more favorable attitudes and stronger purchase intentions (Zhu et al., 2022; Djafarova & Bowes, 2021).

## 2.4 Empirical Research Trends

Recent years have seen a significant increase in academic publications related to influencer marketing, particularly after 2019 (Tanwar et al., 2024). However, the majority of these studies are concentrated in Western or high-income economies. Research in the Asian context, especially in Vietnam, remains scarce despite the region's rapid social media adoption and burgeoning consumer base. A growing body of empirical literature has explored the constructs that mediate or moderate the relationship between influencers and consumer outcomes. Prominent variables include:

- Antecedents: Influencer attractiveness, expertise, trustworthiness, credibility, homophily, and content quality (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021; Wahab et al., 2022).
- Mediators: Trust, parasocial relationships, and emotional attachment (Masuda et al., 2022; Koay et al., 2023).
- Moderators: Disclosure clarity, platform type, cultural values, and product-influencer fit (Aw & Chuah, 2021; Woodroof et al., 2020).

Despite this progress, few studies have examined trust as a central mediator in emerging economies like Vietnam, where consumers may be more sensitive to source authenticity and social proof.

Moreover, most studies have been conducted within the fashion and beauty industries, with limited exploration in sectors such as sustainable consumption, tourism, health, or technology (Masuda et al., 2022). Similarly, platforms like TikTok and Snapchat are underrepresented in the literature, even though they dominate younger demographics in Vietnam.

## 2.5 Key Variables and Research Gaps

A systematic literature review (SLR) by the research team, adopting the SPAR-4-SLR protocol, integrated 76 peer-reviewed articles published from 2011 to 2023. The findings reveal several under-researched areas:

- Geographical Gaps: Most studies are conducted in Western contexts; research in Southeast Asia, particularly Vietnam, remains limited despite the region's high influencer engagement rates (Farivar & Wang, 2022).
- Platform Gaps: Instagram and YouTube dominate academic focus, while TikTok, Facebook, and Shopee Live—popular in Vietnam—are largely neglected.
- Sectoral Gaps: Fashion and beauty industries are overrepresented. Other sectors such as sustainable products, healthcare, and digital services are under-investigated.
- Variable Gaps: While many studies explore attitude or brand awareness, few examine purchase intention as the ultimate behavioral outcome (Pradhan et al., 2023a). Similarly, trust is often treated as an independent variable rather than a mediator.

### Future Directions

1. Emerging literature (Vrontis et al., 2021) encourages interdisciplinary approaches by incorporating psychological, sociological, and cultural dimensions. Suggested future directions include:

- Exploring virtual influencers and AI-generated content.
- Investigating the longitudinal effects of influencer exposure.
- Examining the differential impact of influencer types across consumer segments (e.g., Gen Z vs. Millennials).
- Testing new theoretical frameworks, such as Cultural Dimensions Theory (Hofstede, 2001), Social Identity Theory, and Cognitive Dissonance Theory.

## 3. Framework and Methodology

### 3.1 Research Objectives

The primary objectives of this study are as follows:

To explore the factors that influence the **perceived trustworthiness** of social media influencers (SMIs).

To identify the **impact of various influencer attributes** on the **purchase intention** of social media users in Vietnam.

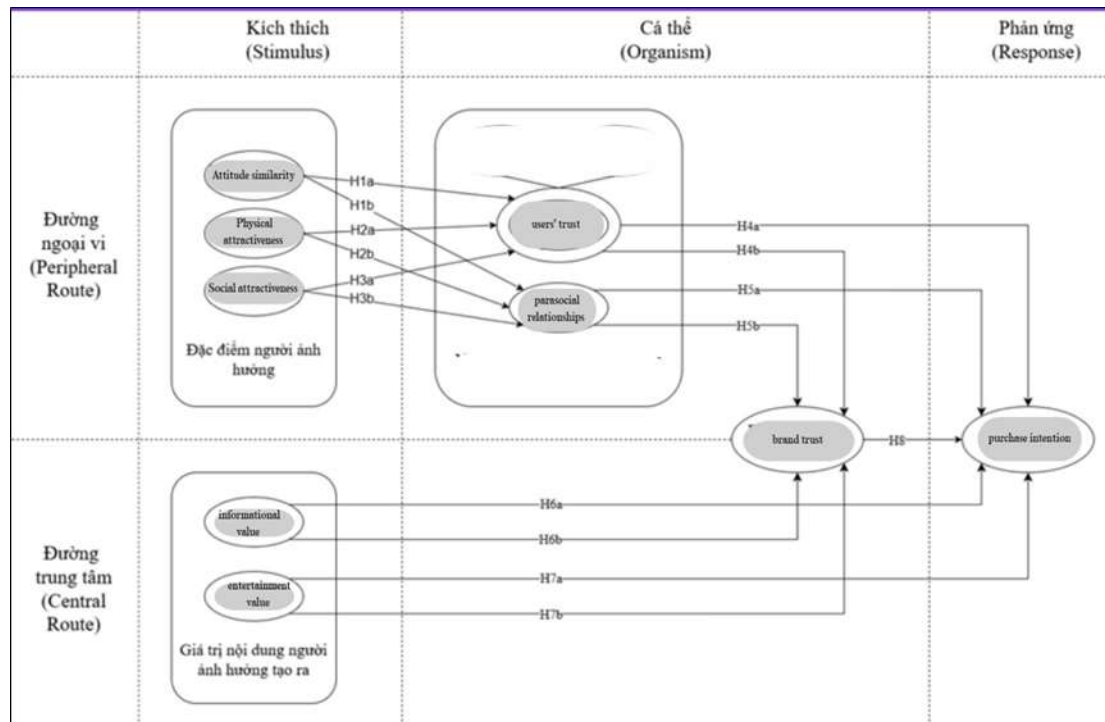
To analyze the **mediating role of trust** in the relationship between influencers and consumers' purchase intentions.

### Scope of the Study

**Geographical Scope:** The study is conducted across major social media platforms popular in Vietnam, namely Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Shopee.

Time Frame: Data collection and analysis are conducted between November 2024 and July 2025.

Content Scope: The research focuses on evaluating the influence of social media influencer attributes on consumers' online purchase intention, with a particular emphasis on the mediating role of trust.



### 3.2 The research framework

The proposed model integrates influencer attributes (credibility, expertise, attractiveness) as independent variables, trust as a mediator, and purchase intention as the dependent variable

#### Hypotheses

- H1a:** Attitude similarity impacts social media users' **trust** in social media influencers.
- H1b:** Attitude similarity impacts social media users' **parasocial relationships** with social media influencers.
- H2a:** Physical attractiveness impacts social media users' **trust** in social media influencers.
- H2b:** Physical attractiveness impacts social media users' **parasocial relationships** with social media influencers.
- H3a:** Social attractiveness impacts social media users' **trust** in social media influencers.
- H3b:** Social attractiveness impacts social media users' **parasocial relationships** with social media influencers.
- H4a:** Social media users' **trust** in social media influencers impacts social media users' **purchase intention**.
- H4b:** Social media users' **trust** in social media influencers impacts social media users' **brand trust**.
- H5a:** Social media users' **parasocial relationships** with social media influencers impacts social media users' **purchase intention**.
- H5b:** Social media users' **parasocial relationships** with social media influencers impacts social media users' **brand trust**.
- H6a:** The **informational value** of content created by social media influencers impacts social media users' **purchase intention**.
- H6b:** The **informational value** of content created by social media influencers impacts social media users' **brand trust**.
- H7a:** The **entertainment value** of content created by social media influencers impacts social media users' **purchase intention**.
- H7b:** The **entertainment value** of content created by social media influencers impacts social media users' **brand trust**.
- H8:** Social media users' **brand trust** impacts social media users' **purchase intention**.



Regarding **influencer-generated content**:

**Informational value (IV)** has a significant positive impact on brand trust ( $\beta = 0.371, p < 0.01$ ). When consumers perceive the shared content as useful, credible, and practically relevant, they are more inclined to trust the associated brand.

**Entertainment value (EV)** also exerts a considerable influence on brand trust ( $\beta = 0.346, p < 0.01$ ), indicating that engaging, creative, and entertaining content contributes to a more favorable brand image and enhances consumer trust.

However, the **direct effect of influencer trustworthiness on purchase intention is not statistically significant**, implying that consumer trust in the influencer does not automatically translate into purchase intention unless mediated by other psychological or behavioral mechanisms. Moreover, in this study, trust in the influencer does not significantly affect brand trust, which invites future research to examine potential mediating variables or conditions under which influencer trust may—or may not—impact purchase intention among followers.

In contrast:

**Parasocial relationship** has a significant positive effect on purchase intention ( $\beta = 0.411, p < 0.01$ ), underscoring its role as an emotional bridge between consumers and influencers in shaping behavioral outcomes.

**Brand trust emerges** as the strongest direct predictor of purchase intention ( $\beta = 0.431, p < 0.01$ ), reaffirming that consumer confidence in the brand is a critical determinant in the decision-making process.

A summary of the proposed hypotheses and the final conclusions regarding their validation is presented in the table below.

<i>Hypothesis</i>	<i>Relationship</i>	<i>Conclusion</i>
H1a	$AH \rightarrow IC$	Not enough basis to reject ( $\alpha=1\%$ )
H1b	$AH \rightarrow PSR$	Not enough basis to reject ( $\alpha=10\%$ )
H2a	$PA \rightarrow IC$	Not enough basis to reject ( $\alpha=1\%$ )
H2b	$PA \rightarrow PSR$	Not enough basis to reject ( $\alpha=1\%$ )
H3a	$SA \rightarrow IC$	Not enough basis to reject ( $\alpha=1\%$ )
H3b	$SA \rightarrow PSR$	Not enough basis to reject ( $\alpha=1\%$ )
H4a	$IC \rightarrow PI$	Reject hypothesis
H4b	$IC \rightarrow BC$	Reject hypothesis
H5a	$PSR \rightarrow PI$	Not enough basis to reject ( $\alpha=1\%$ )
H5b	$PSR \rightarrow BC$	Reject hypothesis
H6a	$IV \rightarrow PI$	Reject hypothesis
H6b	$IV \rightarrow BC$	Not enough basis to reject ( $\alpha=1\%$ )
H7a	$EV \rightarrow PI$	Reject hypothesis
H7b	$EV \rightarrow BC$	Not enough basis to reject ( $\alpha=1\%$ )
H8	$BC \rightarrow PI$	Not enough basis to reject ( $\alpha=1\%$ )

## 5. Discussion, recommendation and implications

### 5.1. Discussion of Key Findings

The present study provides robust empirical evidence that social media influencers (SMIs) significantly influence consumers' purchase intentions in the Vietnamese digital marketplace, with trust playing a central mediating role. Grounded in the Source Credibility Theory and Parasocial Interaction Theory,

the study affirms that influencer credibility—measured through perceived expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness—significantly enhances consumer trust, which in turn drives purchase intention.

These findings align with previous studies (e.g., Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Breves et al., 2019; Reinikainen et al., 2020), confirming the indirect path from influencer attributes to purchase behavior via trust. However, this study uniquely contributes by validating this pathway in the emerging market context of Vietnam, where consumer skepticism toward overt advertising and growing reliance on peer-based recommendations are especially pronounced.

Notably, the data suggest that micro- and macro-influencers outperform mega-influencers in fostering trust due to their relatability, perceived authenticity, and consistent niche content. This supports the assertion that audience intimacy, rather than sheer follower count, is a more effective predictor of consumer behavior in influencer marketing.

Moreover, the role of platform specificity was indirectly observed, as respondents on platforms like TikTok and Shopee were more likely to exhibit spontaneous purchase behavior. This highlights how platform dynamics shape consumer responsiveness and reinforce the need for contextual alignment between content, influencer, and platform characteristics.

## 5.2. Theoretical Implications

This study offers several theoretical contributions to the expanding body of knowledge on influencer marketing and consumer behavior. First, by empirically validating the mediating role of trust in the relationship between influencer characteristics and purchase intention, the study refines the application of Source Credibility Theory within the digital marketing context. Rather than treating trust as a static attribute, the research demonstrates that perceived credibility elements—expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness—work through trust as a psychological conduit that shapes consumer intention. Second, the integration of Parasocial Interaction Theory provides a nuanced explanation of the emotional and relational dynamics between influencers and followers, offering a theoretical basis for understanding the interpersonal perceptions that arise in digital environments. Third, the findings indirectly engage with the Persuasion Knowledge Model, especially in highlighting how authenticity and message transparency interact with consumer skepticism and message acceptance. Taken together, the study advances a multi-theoretical framework that integrates both cognitive and affective drivers of influence, offering a more holistic view of how influencer marketing operates in emerging markets like Vietnam.

## 5.3 Practical Recommendations for Marketers and Brands

Based on the research findings, several practical recommendations can be made to marketers, brand managers, and digital strategists:

The study also presents actionable insights for marketing practitioners, particularly those operating in digitally active, trust-sensitive markets such as Vietnam. Brands are advised to move beyond influencer selection strategies based solely on reach or follower count and instead prioritize individuals who exhibit high levels of perceived authenticity, domain-specific expertise, and audience relatability. In particular, micro- and macro-influencers are shown to offer significant advantages in building trust and stimulating consumer action. Furthermore, influencer campaigns should be designed to enhance transparency—through honest product endorsements and clear disclosure of paid collaborations—as trust is identified as the critical mechanism through which influencer attributes translate into consumer behavior. Marketers should also tailor content to platform-specific dynamics, recognizing that user expectations and engagement patterns differ markedly across channels such as TikTok, Instagram, and Shopee. Additionally, fostering parasocial interaction—by encouraging influencers to share personal narratives and engage with followers—can reinforce relational authenticity and deepen consumer trust. Finally, data-driven tools that evaluate influencers based on engagement quality, audience sentiment, and credibility metrics should be employed to guide strategic partnerships.

The research also given the blurred line between organic and sponsored content in influencer marketing, Vietnamese policymakers and advertising regulators should strengthen guidelines around disclosure transparency, sponsored content labelling, and truth-in-advertising standards to protect consumers and maintain ethical industry practices.

Establishing industry benchmarks for influencer credibility and content authenticity can also support businesses in self-regulating their influencer collaborations and reduce consumer backlash related to deceptive endorsements.

## 5.5. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Despite its contributions, the study has several limitations that suggest directions for future research. First, the use of a cross-sectional survey design limits the ability to infer causal relationships or assess how influencer-consumer dynamics evolve over time. Future studies employing longitudinal or experimental designs could capture shifts in trust and intention following repeated influencer exposures. Second, while the study examined users across major platforms, it did not model platform-specific effects, leaving open the opportunity for research that compares influencer effectiveness across social media environments such as Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, and Shopee. Third, the study focused on trust as the sole mediating variable; future investigations could explore other mediators and moderators such as brand engagement, cultural congruence, consumer-brand identification, or impulse buying tendencies. Lastly, although this study was conducted in Vietnam, its findings would benefit from cross-cultural comparisons, particularly between other emerging and developed markets, to uncover the contextual sensitivities of influencer effectiveness in shaping purchase behavior.

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