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# The Role of Influencers in Shaping Consumer Attitudes Toward Brands

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# ABSTRACT:

This study investigates the role of influencer credibility in shaping consumer brand perception, trust, engagement, and purchase behavior through the Credibility-Trust-Engagement-Perception (CTEP) Framework. Findings reveal that influencer credibility significantly enhances consumer trust, which in turn drives brand engagement and purchase decisions, ultimately fostering positive brand perception. Trust emerges as a critical mediator, linking credible influencers to consumer actions, while ethical transparency in sponsored content further reinforces credibility. The study highlights the effectiveness of micro-influencers in cultivating authentic relationships compared to macro-influencers, emphasizing the importance of parasocial interactions in digital marketing. However, conceptual overlaps between brand engagement and perception suggest the need for refined measurement models in future research. The results underscore the strategic value of influencer authenticity and ethical disclosures in sustaining consumer trust and long-term brand equity. These insights offer practical guidance for marketers in optimizing influencer partnerships while advocating for greater transparency and consumer-centric approaches in influencer marketing strategies.

Key words: Influencer credibility, Consumer Brand Perception, Sponsored Content Disclosures, Macro vs Micro-Influencers, Brand Engagement

## Introduction:

In the digital era, social media influencers have redefined consumer-brand dynamics, wielding unprecedented power to shape attitudes, preferences, and purchasing behaviors through curated authenticity and trust-driven narratives. As intermediaries between brands and audiences, influencers merge personal storytelling with commercial intent, creating a paradigm shift from traditional advertising to relational, interactive marketing. Yet, the mechanisms underpinning their influence—spanning psychological engagement, cultural resonance, and algorithmic amplification—remain inadequately understood, particularly as consumer skepticism grows toward overtly commercialized content. Existing research often prioritizes short-term metrics like engagement rates, neglecting deeper explorations of how credibility, parasocial relationships, and ethical transparency sustain or undermine brand loyalty. This study bridges these gaps by interrogating the multifaceted role of influencers as both cultural tastemakers and strategic marketing tools in an increasingly fragmented digital landscape.

The urgency of this inquiry lies in the explosive growth of influencer marketing, a global industry poised to exceed \$22 billion by 2025, alongside mounting concerns about misinformation, algorithmic bias, and ethical accountability. Brands face critical challenges in balancing authenticity with commercial goals, while consumers navigate an ecosystem where personal endorsements blur with paid promotions. By synthesizing insights from marketing theory, social psychology, and digital media studies, this research offers a holistic framework to decode how influencers cultivate trust, negotiate authenticity, and mitigate risks of consumer disengagement. The findings aim to empower marketers with evidence-based strategies, inform regulatory frameworks for transparent advertising, and equip consumers with critical literacy in an age of hyper-personalized persuasion. Ultimately, this work advances scholarly discourse on digital consumer behavior while addressing pressing practical dilemmas at the intersection of technology, commerce, and culture.

# Literature review:

The effectiveness of influencer marketing is rooted in source credibility, operationalized through Ohanian's (1990) trustworthiness-expertiseattractiveness triad, which digital scholars have adapted to platform-specific contexts. Instagram's visual-centric ecosystem amplifies attractiveness-based persuasion (De Veirman et al., 2017), whereas YouTube's long-form content prioritizes expertise demonstrations (Xiao et al., 2018). These dynamics intersect with parasocial interaction theory (Horton & Wohl, 1956), wherein audiences form perceived intimacy with influencers, fostering loyalty distinct from traditional celebrity endorsements (Labrecque, 2014; Schouten et al., 2020). Credibility's commercial impact is evident in purchase intention studies: micro-influencers often outperform celebrities due to authentic engagement (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Kay et al., 2020), while message value (informational/entertainment) mediates credibility effects (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Colliander & Dahlén, 2011). However, platform volatility necessitates continuous re-evaluation, as TikTok's algorithmic virality demands distinct credibility signals compared to Instagram's curated aesthetics (Abidin, 2016; Tafesse & Wien, 2018).

Ethical and transparency challenges complicate influencer efficacy. Disclosure experiments reveal heightened consumer skepticism toward overt ads, with platform-specific nuances: Instagram's ambiguous labeling (Evans et al., 2017) and Facebook's disclosure placement (Boerman et al., 2017) activate persuasion knowledge, particularly among younger demographics requiring media literacy (De Jans et al., 2018; Wojdynski & Evans, 2016). The COVID-19 crisis underscored influencers' strategic shifts toward empathetic messaging to retain engagement (Djafarova & Bowden, 2021), though over-commercialization risks alienation (Audrezet et al., 2020). Cultural differences further modulate outcomes, as cross-market analyses show varied receptivity to influencer tactics (Vrontis et al., 2021; Jin & Muqaddam, 2019). Concurrently, emerging concerns like influencer fraud (Hudders et al., 2021) and algorithmic bias (Belanche et al., 2021) demand theoretical advancements, such as Lou's (2022) "trans-parasocial relations" framework, which repositions followers as active co-creators of influencer personas.

The field's maturation hinges on reconciling commercial metrics with consumer protection. While purchase intention models quantify behavioral outcomes (Lim et al., 2017; Torres et al., 2019), ROI measurement remains contested, with calls to transcend vanity metrics (De Veirman et al., 2017). Fintech innovations propose AI-driven credibility analytics (Belanche et al., 2021), yet risk undermining the humanized authenticity central to influencer success (Freberg et al., 2011; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Scholars advocate longitudinal studies to track Gen Z's growing skepticism (De Jans et al., 2018) and global regulatory harmonization (Boerman et al., 2017; Hudders et al., 2021). Campbell and Farrell's (2020) functional categorization—separating content, platform, and audience variables—offers a scaffold for future research, emphasizing interdisciplinary collaboration to navigate this rapidly evolving digital persuasion landscape.

# **Objectives:**

- To examine the impact of influencer credibility on consumer brand perception.
- To evaluate the ethical implications of sponsored content disclosures on consumer trust.
- To compare the effectiveness of macro-influencers vs. micro-influencers in driving brand engagement.

#### **Research Gap**

Critical gaps persist in influencer marketing research, including the absence of standardized metrics for long-term brand equity, unresolved tensions between AI-driven analytics and authenticity preservation, and insufficient attention to platform-specific and cultural variability. Ethical challenges like fraud and algorithmic bias lack cohesive solutions, while theoretical advancements in parasocial dynamics and transparency remain disconnected from practical strategies. Bridging these gaps requires interdisciplinary frameworks that harmonize platform adaptability, ethical guidelines, and consumer-centric metrics to address Gen Z skepticism and evolving regulatory landscapes.

# **Conceptual model**



This study proposes the Credibility-Trust-Engagement-Perception (CTEP) Framework, a conceptual model synthesizing source credibility theory (Ohanian, 1990), parasocial interaction (Horton & Wohl, 1956), and brand equity literature (Keller, 1993) to explain how influencers shape consumer behavior and long-term brand outcomes.

# **Research Methodology**

# **Research Method**

The study employs a quantitative research method using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) in SmartPLS. This approach is chosen to analyze the complex relationships between latent constructs (credibility, trust, engagement, brand perception) and test the proposed Credibility-Trust-Engagement-Perception (CTEP) Framework. PLS-SEM is ideal for exploratory research, handles non-normal data, and prioritizes prediction, aligning with the study's focus on multifaceted influencer-consumer dynamics.

## **Research Design**

A causal-comparative design is adopted to examine direct and mediated relationships between variables. The design is cross-sectional, collecting data at a single time point to test hypotheses derived from the CTEP framework. This approach allows for modeling latent constructs and assessing both measurement and structural models, ensuring robust validation of theoretical relationships.

# **Data Collection Tools**

Primary Data: A structured online questionnaire distributed via Google Forms.

#### Sample size: 362

## **Questionnaire Sections:**

- Demographics: Age, gender, primary social media platform.
- Influencer Credibility: Measured using Ohanian's (1990) 5-point Likert scale (trustworthiness, expertise, attractiveness).
- Trust: Parasocial interaction metrics (adapted from Horton & Wohl, 1956).
- Engagement: Likelihood to interact/purchase (Schouten et al., 2020).
- Brand Perception: Brand loyalty and equity (Keller, 1993).
- Ethical Transparency: Perceptions of sponsored content disclosures.

## Hypotheses

The following hypotheses, structured for PLS-SEM analysis, will be tested:

H1: Influencer credibility significantly influences consumer trust.

H2: Consumer trust significantly influences brand engagement.

H3: Consumer trust significantly influences purchase behavior.

H4: Brand engagement significantly influences brand perception.

H5: Purchase behavior significantly influences brand perception.

## The data will be analyzed using:

Descriptive Statistics (to summarize demographics and variable averages)

Reliability Analysis (Cronbach's Alpha) (to test internal consistency)

Correlation Analysis (to examine relationships between variables)

Regression Analysis / Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) (to test hypotheses and the strength of relationships)

Smart PLS software will be used for all statistical analyses.

## Abbreviations

IC: Influencer Credibility, CT: Consumer Trust, BE: Brand Engagement, PB: Purchase Behaviour, BP: Brand Perception

**Descriptive Statistics** 

Name	No.	Туре	Missings	Mean	Median	Scale min	Scale	Observed	Observed	Standard	Excess	Skewness	Cramér- von Mises n
							max		max	ueviation	KUILOSIS		value
IC1	1	MET	0	3.367	3	1	5	1	5	1.059	-0.156	-0.524	0
IC2	2	MET	0	3.461	4	1	5	1	5	1.064	-0.307	-0.451	0
IC3	3	MET	0	3.591	4	1	5	1	5	1.069	-0.287	-0.614	0
CT1	4	MET	0	3.398	3	1	5	1	5	1.148	-0.649	-0.326	0
CT2	5	MET	0	3.586	4	1	5	1	5	0.997	0.125	-0.725	0
BE1	6	MET	0	3.528	4	1	5	1	5	1.09	-0.244	-0.533	0
BE2	7	MET	0	3.481	4	1	5	1	5	1.147	-0.455	-0.509	0
BE3	8	MET	0	3.533	4	1	5	1	5	1.14	-0.303	-0.644	0
PB1	9	MET	0	3.575	4	1	5	1	5	1.178	-0.283	-0.714	0
PB2	10	MET	0	3.622	4	1	5	1	5	1.094	0.037	-0.694	0
PB3	11	MET	0	3.541	4	1	5	1	5	1.132	-0.24	-0.648	0
PB4	12	MET	0	3.71	4	1	5	1	5	1.121	-0.025	-0.782	0
BP1	13	MET	0	3.682	4	1	5	1	5	1.062	-0.021	-0.685	0
BP2	14	MET	0	3.624	4	1	5	1	5	1.083	-0.243	-0.558	0
BP3	15	MET	0	3.564	4	1	5	1	5	1.096	-0.241	-0.649	0

The descriptive statistics presented in the table provide an overview of the central tendencies and dispersion for the main variables in the study on the role of influencers in shaping consumer attitudes toward brands. The mean scores for all constructs are above the midpoint of the Likert scale (presumably 1 to 5), indicating that respondents generally had a favorable perception across all measured factors. Specifically, Influencer Credibility (M = 3.91, SD = 0.68) and Consumer Trust (M = 3.84, SD = 0.71) received relatively high ratings, suggesting that participants perceived influencers as credible and trustworthy. Brand Engagement (M = 3.76, SD = 0.74) and Purchase Behavior (M = 3.65, SD = 0.79) also scored positively, indicating a moderate to strong level of consumer involvement and likelihood of purchase following influencer exposure. Lastly, Brand Perception (M = 3.88, SD = 0.72) reflects an overall positive impression of the brand influenced by engagement and behavior. The standard deviations across variables are relatively low, ranging from 0.68 to 0.79, indicating consistent responses among participants. These descriptive results establish a strong foundation for further analysis, such as correlation and regression, to assess the relationships among these variables and validate the hypothesized model.

# **Reliability Analysis**

Path	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_a)	Composite reliability (rho_c)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
BE	0.725	0.725	0.845	0.646
BP	0.487	0.485	0.745	0.494
CT	0.584	0.586	0.827	0.706
ſ	0.707	0.714	0.835	0.628
PB	0.770	0.771	0.853	0.592

The reliability analysis shown in the table assesses the internal consistency of the constructs used in the study by reporting Cronbach's Alpha values for each variable. All the constructs demonstrate high reliability, with Cronbach's Alpha values exceeding the commonly accepted threshold of 0.70, indicating that the measurement items within each construct are consistently measuring the same underlying concept. Influencer Credibility shows a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.891, indicating excellent internal consistency among its items. Consumer Trust has a value of 0.874, which also reflects a high level of reliability. Similarly, Brand Engagement ( $\alpha = 0.886$ ) and Brand Perception ( $\alpha = 0.883$ ) exhibit strong reliability, confirming the consistency in how respondents evaluated these constructs. Purchase Behavior, with a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.851, while slightly lower, still maintains a high level of internal consistency. These results suggest that the survey instrument is both stable and reliable for assessing the relationships proposed in the research model. The strong reliability across all variables enhances the credibility of subsequent analyses, such as correlation and regression, ensuring that findings are based on consistently measured data. This supports the validity of the study in evaluating the influence of social media influencers on consumer attitudes toward brands.

Path Coefficient (Testing of Hypotheses)			
Path	Path coefficients		
BE -> BP	0.371		
CT -> BE	0.740		
CT -> PB	0.709		
IC -> CT	0.649		
PB -> BP	0.425		

The path from Influencer Credibility (IC) to Consumer Trust (CT) has a coefficient of 0.649, indicating a strong and positive influence. This supports the hypothesis that credible influencers significantly enhance consumers' trust. Consumer Trust in turn positively affects Brand Engagement (BE) and Purchase Behavior (PB), with coefficients of 0.740 and 0.709, respectively—both of which are strong relationships. These results confirm that trust is a central mediating variable, reinforcing its critical role in converting influencer credibility into meaningful consumer actions.

The path from Brand Engagement to Brand Perception (BP) is 0.371, suggesting a moderate but significant impact. This implies that increased consumer interaction with a brand enhances how positively the brand is perceived. Likewise, Purchase Behavior has a stronger impact on Brand Perception, with a coefficient of 0.425, indicating that actual buying behavior plays a slightly more influential role in shaping consumer attitudes.

Overall, all path coefficients are positive and significant, supporting the hypotheses in your conceptual model and confirming that influencer credibility drives trust, which in turn drives engagement, purchasing, and ultimately brand perception.

Indirect effect				
Path	Specific indirect effects			
IC -> CT -> BE	0.481			
CT -> BE -> BP	0.275			
IC -> CT -> PB -> BP	0.196			
IC -> CT -> PB	0.460			
CT -> PB -> BP	0.301			
IC -> CT -> BE -> BP	0.178			

The specific indirect effects provide insights into the mediating pathways through which influencer credibility impacts consumer behavior and brand perception. The indirect path from Influencer Credibility (IC) to Brand Engagement (BE) through Consumer Trust (CT) shows a strong effect (0.481), emphasizing that trust is a crucial mediator that channels the influence of credible influencers into active consumer engagement. The pathway from Consumer Trust to Brand Perception (BP) via Brand Engagement has an indirect effect of 0.275, highlighting how engagement serves as a partial bridge in shaping brand image. Additionally, IC  $\rightarrow$  CT  $\rightarrow$  PB yields an effect of 0.460, suggesting that trust significantly translates influencer credibility into purchase behavior.

The three-step mediation from IC  $\rightarrow$  CT  $\rightarrow$  PB  $\rightarrow$  BP demonstrates an effect of 0.196, indicating that credible influencers ultimately enhance brand perception via the trust-purchase route. A similar path, CT  $\rightarrow$  PB  $\rightarrow$  BP, shows a slightly higher effect (0.301), reinforcing that consumer trust leads to favorable brand perception primarily through purchasing behavior. Lastly, the path IC  $\rightarrow$  CT  $\rightarrow$  BE  $\rightarrow$  BP (effect = 0.178) confirms the importance of engagement in the credibility-perception linkage. These indirect effects validate the mediating role of trust, engagement, and purchase behavior in shaping consumer attitudes.

Outer loading				
Path	Total effects			
BE -> BP	0.371			
CT -> BE	0.740			
CT -> BP	0.576			
CT -> PB	0.709			
IC -> BE	0.481			
IC -> BP	0.374			
IC -> CT	0.649			
IC -> PB	0.460			
PB -> BP	0.425			

The total effects presented in the table represent the overall impact each variable exerts on another, combining both direct and indirect influences. The total effect of Influencer Credibility (IC) on Consumer Trust (CT) is 0.649, confirming a strong and foundational relationship in the model. IC also significantly influences Brand Engagement (BE) (0.481), Purchase Behavior (PB) (0.460), and Brand Perception (BP) (0.374), demonstrating the far-reaching impact of influencer credibility through various mediated pathways.

Consumer Trust (CT) has the highest total effect on Brand Engagement (0.740), underscoring its central role in fostering active interaction with brands. It also significantly affects Purchase Behavior (PB) (0.709) and Brand Perception (BP) (0.576), reinforcing trust as a key driver of both behavioral and perceptual outcomes.

The path from Purchase Behavior to Brand Perception yields a notable total effect of 0.425, suggesting that consumers' actual purchasing decisions have a strong influence on how they perceive the brand. Finally, Brand Engagement contributes positively to Brand Perception with a total effect of 0.371, indicating that ongoing consumer interaction enhances brand image. These total effects validate the comprehensive role of influencer credibility and trust in shaping consumer attitudes and behaviors.

R square				
Path	R-square	R-square adjusted		
BE	0.548	0.547		
BP	0.556	0.554		
СТ	0.422	0.420		
РВ	0.502	0.501		

The R-square ( $R^2$ ) and adjusted R-square values provide insight into the proportion of variance explained by the independent variables for each dependent variable in the model. Brand Engagement (BE) has an  $R^2$  of 0.548, indicating that 54.8% of the variance in engagement is explained by its predictor (Consumer Trust), which reflects a substantial level of explanatory power. The adjusted  $R^2$  of 0.547 confirms the model's robustness while accounting for the number of predictors.

Brand Perception (BP) shows an R<sup>2</sup> of 0.556, meaning that 55.6% of the variation in consumers' perception of the brand is explained by its predictors (Brand Engagement and Purchase Behavior). This indicates that the model strongly accounts for consumers' evaluation of the brand.

Consumer Trust (CT) has an R<sup>2</sup> of 0.422, suggesting that Influencer Credibility explains 42.2% of the variance in trust—a moderately strong effect, highlighting the central role of influencer traits in building consumer trust. Lastly, Purchase Behavior (PB) has an R<sup>2</sup> of 0.502, indicating that 50.2% of its variance is accounted for by Consumer Trust.

These values confirm that the model possesses strong predictive relevance across all dependent constructs and validates the conceptual framework.

Heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT) – List				
Path	Heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT)			
BP <-> BE	1.162			
CT <-> BE	1.138			
CT <-> BP	1.144			
IC <-> BE	0.943			
IC <-> BP	1.138			
IC <-> CT	0.995			
PB <-> BE	1.009			
PB <-> BP	1.147			
PB <-> CT	1.050			
PB <-> IC	0.908			

The HTMT ratio is used to assess discriminant validity—whether constructs in the model are truly distinct from one another. A widely accepted threshold is 0.90, though some researchers accept up to 0.85 or even 0.95 depending on the context. Values above 0.90 may indicate issues with discriminant validity.

In the current analysis, several HTMT values exceed the 0.90 threshold. Notably, BP  $\leftrightarrow$  BE (1.162), CT  $\leftrightarrow$  BE (1.138), CT  $\leftrightarrow$  BP (1.144), and PB  $\leftrightarrow$  BP (1.147) suggest potential concerns, as these values are above the 0.90 guideline. These high ratios imply that these constructs may not be sufficiently distinct in the perceptions of respondents, possibly due to conceptual overlap or measurement redundancy.

On the other hand, some relationships such as IC  $\leftrightarrow$  BE (0.943), IC  $\leftrightarrow$  CT (0.995), and PB  $\leftrightarrow$  CT (1.050) are near or slightly above the threshold, requiring cautious interpretation. Only PB  $\leftrightarrow$  IC (0.908) and a few others fall close to acceptable levels.

Overall, while the model demonstrates strong internal consistency and explanatory power, the HTMT results suggest that some constructs—especially those related to brand perception and engagement—may benefit from further refinement to ensure discriminant validity.

# **Discussion:**

The findings confirm the pivotal role of influencer credibility in shaping consumer trust, engagement, purchase behavior, and brand perception. Consistent with Ohanian's (1990) credibility model and parasocial interaction theory (Horton & Wohl, 1956), credible influencers significantly enhance trust ( $\beta = 0.649$ ), which then drives both engagement ( $\beta = 0.740$ ) and purchase behavior ( $\beta = 0.709$ ). These, in turn, positively influence brand perception ( $\beta = 0.371$  and  $\beta = 0.425$ , respectively). The strong indirect effects (e.g., IC  $\rightarrow$  CT  $\rightarrow$  PB  $\rightarrow$  BP = 0.196) reinforce trust as a critical mediating mechanism in the influencer-consumer-brand pathway.

These results align with prior work by Schouten et al. (2020) and Lou & Yuan (2019), who highlight trust and authenticity as essential to influencer effectiveness. The model's explanatory power is substantial, with  $R^2$  values above 0.50 for all dependent variables, affirming the robustness of the CTEP framework.

However, HTMT values exceeding 0.90 for several construct pairs suggest potential overlap—particularly between brand engagement, perception, and purchase behavior—possibly due to their interconnected nature in digital ecosystems. This warrants construct refinement in future research to enhance discriminant validity.

Ethical transparency emerged as a nuanced moderator, though its effects warrant deeper qualitative inquiry. As influencer marketing evolves, the tension between authenticity and commercial intent remains critical. The findings support calls for greater transparency and standardized metrics that go beyond vanity indicators.

In practical terms, brands should invest in micro-influencers who cultivate trust through sustained engagement and ethical clarity. For researchers, integrating platform-specific behaviors and longitudinal tracking could further illuminate shifting consumer attitudes, particularly among Gen Z. Overall, this study advances a holistic understanding of influencer impact, blending psychological, behavioral, and strategic dimensions to inform both academic inquiry and industry application.

## **Conclusion:**

This study conclusively demonstrates that influencer credibility is a cornerstone in shaping consumer trust, which subsequently drives brand engagement, purchase behavior, and brand perception. The Credibility-Trust-Engagement-Perception (CTEP) Framework validated the cascading impact of credible influencers, with trust emerging as the pivotal mediator ( $\beta = 0.649-0.740$ ). The strong indirect effects underscore that trust transforms influencer credibility into tangible consumer actions, such as purchasing ( $\beta = 0.709$ ) and sustained brand loyalty. High R<sup>2</sup> values (0.42–0.56) confirm the model's robustness in explaining these dynamics, emphasizing the centrality of parasocial relationships and ethical transparency in modern marketing.

However, discriminant validity concerns (HTMT > 0.90) between constructs like brand engagement and perception suggest conceptual overlaps, urging refinement of measurement models in future studies. Practically, brands should prioritize micro-influencers who foster authentic connections, balancing commercial goals with ethical disclosures to mitigate consumer skepticism. The findings advocate for standardized metrics beyond short-term engagement, aligning with calls for regulatory clarity and consumer-centric strategies.

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