

Trust as the Engine of Influence: A Source-Credibility and Parasocial-Interaction Study of Social Media Influencers, Consumer Trust, and Purchase Behaviour

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Abstract: Social media influencers (SMIs) have now evolved as a pivotal player in digital marketing but the influence on consumer trust and buying behavior is only partially understood. This study focuses on the relationship between perceived engagement and authenticity of influencers and their trust and through trust, purchase behaviour, based on the theories of Source Credibility Theory and Parasocial Interaction Theory. The data collected were analysed in SPSS with reliability analysis, Pearson correlation, and three simple linear regressions, as well as an approximate indirect-effect test, using 81 active social media users aged between 18 and 45. Purchase behaviour was significantly predicted by trust, and an approximate Sobel test showed that part of the association between engagement and purchase behaviour was explained by the association between engagement and trust, suggesting that engagement affected purchase behaviour directly and indirectly via trust, in a dual-pathway model. Trust significantly predicted purchase behaviour and engagement and authenticity strongly predicted both trust and purchase behaviour, as an approximate Sobel test indicated that engagement was a direct influence on purchase behaviour, and an indirect influence via trust. Interestingly, the mean score for all three constructs was below the scale mid-line, indicating that even active users are still wary of the content from influencers. The study provides a consumer-focused perspective on digital persuasion, and managerial recommendations for establishing trust in the context of an integrated, collaborative approach that is authentic and transparent, while recognizing the constraints of a small convenience sample and correlational design.

Keywords: Social Media Influencers, Consumer Trust, Purchase Behaviour, Source Credibility, Parasocial Interaction, Authenticity, Engagement

Introduction

The digital revolution of communications has changed the way consumers interact with brands. Social media has become the main driver of public opinion, lifestyles, and buying habits. As of 2024, there were around 4.95 billion social media users globally, highlighting the behavioural reach of social media (Statista, 2024). As a result, social media influencers (SMIs) have gained increased visibility and become key influencers in guiding consumer attitudes, building brands, and influencing purchase decisions, especially through customised content (Khurana, Pannu & Dalal, 2024; Shen, Nie & Tong, 2024).

The reason why SMIs are perceived as more trustworthy than traditional endorsers is that influencers seem to be more authentic and establish proximity through direct communication and sharing (Tian & Li, 2022; Lou & Yuan, 2020). SMIs have a significant number of followers as well as the ability to establish a parasocial relationship with viewers (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Such emotional association has been linked to

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customers' reactions to product endorsements, especially in an e-commerce environment where they lack the opportunity to touch the product in person (Jin, Muqaddam & Ryu, 2021).

Despite the practical prominence of influencer marketing, academic debate persists regarding its effectiveness, centring on content authenticity, disclosure clarity, and the way trust relates to consumer behaviour (Khan, Zebran & Nabi, 2024; Chiu et al., 2024). Modern consumers increasingly regard conventional advertising as intrusive and unreliable (Hudders & Lou, 2023), while the rising volume of paid sponsorships can erode credibility and foster scepticism (Wang & Lee, 2021; Abrar Al-Hasan, 2024). Existing studies tend to examine influencer phenomena through isolated lenses—engagement metrics (Yahya & Çınar, 2024), content characteristics (Lee et al., 2024), or sponsorship transparency (Liu & Zhao, 2024)—and few integrate authenticity, engagement quality, and perceived credibility within a single behavioural framework (Sokolova & Perez, 2021). This study addresses that gap by examining how perceived engagement and authenticity relate to consumer trust and, through it, to purchase behaviour.

Research Aim and Objectives

The aim of this study is to assess how social media influencers relate to consumer trust and purchasing decisions, with particular attention to authenticity, engagement, and perceived credibility. The specific objectives are:

- To explore how consumers perceive and form trust in social media influencers;
- To identify the key factors associated with consumer trust in influencer content;
- To assess the extent to which trust in influencers relates to purchasing behaviour; and
- To examine how influencer engagement and authenticity relate to both trust and purchase behaviour.

Research Questions

- How do consumers perceive and form trust in social media influencers?
- What are the most significant drivers of trust in influencer endorsements?
- To what extent is consumer trust in influencers associated with purchase decisions?
- How are authenticity and engagement related to the trust-purchase relationship?

Significance of the Study

The research has theoretical and practical significance. On a theoretical level, it is an extension of the Source Credibility Model (Ohanian, 1990) and parasocial perspectives (Horton & Wohl, 1956) that brings consumer behaviour and relational psychology together in the field of digital marketing. In the real world, it provides guidance to marketers working with influencers on how they can go about finding the attributes that have been deemed as most indicative of trust, namely expertise, engagement, and transparency. The results also contribute to the ongoing debate on the ethics and regulation of influencers, a topic that is increasingly relevant under current consumer protection laws.

Literature Review

Social media has become more than just a medium for communication in the past 10 years; it's been a key part of the marketing mix. The social media influencers, people who have created an online persona to gain loyal followers, are now impacting the public's beliefs and purchasing decisions (Ruangwanit & Thongmak, 2025). Research on the phenomenon has mushroomed in recent times, but there is a lack of literature that looks at multiple variables or builds simpler models that do not reflect the complex relationship between influencers and audience behavior. However, early research was based on classic celebrity-endorsement theories like Source Credibility Theory that cannot adequately capture the nature of the relationship between the influencer and the audience in an interactive digital context, and more recent research adopted the Parasocial Interaction Theory proposed by Crespo and Tille (2023), which includes the concept of interpersonal connection and audience psychology.

Theoretical Framework

This research draws on two complementary pillars: Source Credibility Theory (Ohanian, 1990) and Parasocial Interaction (PSI) Theory (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Together they help explain consumer trust in influencers and how that trust relates to behavioural outcomes, addressing both credibility-based persuasion and relational engagement.

Source Credibility Theory: The Source Credibility Model assumes that the persuasiveness of the message is a function of the audience's perception of the source's expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness (Ohanian, 1990). These dimensions are related to the product domain expertise, transparent and honest behavior, and personal brand appeal of the influencer in the context of influencers. The dimensions in the influencer context are related to the product domain expertise, transparent and honest behavior, and personal brand appeal of the influencer. Various research studies have shown associations between credibility and trust and purchase: Bevan-Dye (2024) reports that the most important correlate of purchase was perceived trustworthiness over product quality when referring to partnerships that are clearly disclosed as being paid. Several studies have been conducted that found associations between credibility and trust and purchase: Bevan-Dye (2024) reported that the most important correlate of purchase was perceived trustworthiness over product quality when it comes to partnerships clearly disclosed as paid. The model, however, has its limitations: platform cultures and audience expectations are not addressed (Ghiassaleh et al., 2024), and the emotional and social factors that often play a significant role in digital decisions are not taken into account (Schouten, Janssen & Croes, 2021).

Parasocial Interaction Theory: The theory of emotionally charged, one-sided relationships between the audience and a media personality is called Parasocial Interaction Theory (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Today, consumers are creating strong relationships with influencers (Jin, Muqaddam & Ryu, 2021), and the emotional trust fostered through these relationships makes consumers feel that recommendations are authentic and relevant, greatly increasing the chance that they will follow the recommendation (Gaëlle Ouvrein, 2024). While Source Credibility focuses on attributes, PSI focuses on feelings of connection, and Horng et al. (2024) showed that parasocial connection was positive and that it led to increased purchases of endorsed products even after the disclosure of the sponsorship. Despite this, PSI has been criticized as not necessarily predictive but rather descriptive, and strong attachments can lead to reliance on influencer guidance (Kim, Kim & Lee, 2024; Park, Paeng & Shin, 2024).

Integrating the Frameworks: The Source Credibility + PSI Theory framework helps to look at trust through two complementary lenses: a more cognitive perspective on influencer characteristics and a more affective perspective on emotional attachments and perceived authenticity. Combining both provides a more complete picture of the factors influencing the development of trust and the impact of trust on consumer decisions, and directly feeds into the conceptual framework used in this paper. The cognitive, credibility-based perspective in this study is operationalised by the Trust construct (perceived honesty, transparency and expertise), and the affective, parasocial perspective is operationalised by the Engagement & Authenticity construct (see Section 3.5).

Trust in Influencer Marketing: In digital environments, products are not physically checked; therefore, consumer trust plays a pivotal role in determining behavioural intent towards the product (Zeqiri et al., 2024). In the context of influencer marketing, trust manifests when the followers think that the influencer is genuine, regular, knowledgeable, and acting in their best interest (Casaló et al., 2020), making it the factor that can turn content views into customer reaction. The link between followers' trust and brand attitude and purchase intention has been demonstrated repeatedly, but researchers do not agree about whether trust is a

cognitive evaluation of credibility (Ohanian, 1990) or an emotional offshoot of parasocial closeness (Chiu et al., 2024). Trust can be easily broken, and it depends on the context.

Once identified as sponsored content by consumers, consumer trust levels plummeted significantly, as discovered by Yahya and Çınar (2024), while hidden commercial intent was shown to generate perceptions of manipulation, which may eventually impair brand relationships, as per Shen, Nie and Tong (2024). Additionally, the credibility of influencers also differs according to the type of influencer; Micro-influencers often appear more credible than macro-influencers and celebrities, as they are perceived as more relatable and knowledgeable on the topics they post about (Khurana, Pannu & Dalal, 2024; Chen et al., 2024), and users also found them more trustworthy and engaging (Mulholland et al., 2025). While previous studies have identified trust as part and parcel of successful influencers, the dynamic nature of trust (that is, between influencers and followers) seems to have been understated, and is one aspect this study aims to highlight.

Authenticity and Engagement in Influencer Marketing

Consumers today rely on authenticity and engagement as key indicators to determine the credibility and influence of an influencer (Qureshi, Shahzadi & Hussain, 2024). However, authenticity is challenging to conceptualise as several scholars have described it as a “strategically managed performance” which aims to be “spontaneous” but is “deliberately curated” (Gonçalves et al., 2024; Kunert, 2023); influencers manage to gauge the level of self-disclosure to foster emotional connections (Harff & Schmuck, 2024). From an empirical perspective, the trust and engagement of consumers is increased with the perception of authenticity, as Pramesthi, Prasetyo, and Safitri (2024) showed. When the influencer presents both the strengths and weaknesses of a product, it is perceived as more trustworthy, and Tran et al. (2024) found that the more the content is congruent with the influencer's own self-image, the more authentic the product is perceived.

Engagement goes beyond likes and comments; it is about the quality of the relationship between the influencer and the follower (Casaló et al., 2020). An active response to comments and the sharing of user-generated content from influencers helps to strengthen the parasocial bond and can convey sincere intent, which builds trust and loyalty (Shamim & Azam, 2024; Gaëlle Ouvrein, 2024). Delbaere, Michael, and Phillips (2020) found that the more emotionally engaged, the more trusted influencer recommendations are, even without sponsorship. However, when influencers share content that is heavily commercialized or collaborate with brands that don't align with their personal brand, audiences quickly pick up on the inauthentic approach and lose trust in the content's authenticity, which can lead to a reduction in engagement and support (Guo et al., 2023; Qureshi, Shahzadi & Hussain, 2024). The dynamics are particularly strong with younger viewers who are particularly sensitive to “fake authenticity” (Colucci & Pedroni, 2021).

Trust and Consumer Behaviour

Whether it's a matter of trust or a matter of buy is the ultimate test of influencer marketing. The relationship between trust and consumers' favourable evaluation of endorsed products is also reported as positive, for instance, by Lou and Yuan (2020), who demonstrated that consumers who trust an influencer were significantly inclined to have a favourable evaluation of the endorsed products, and by Wang (2024), who illustrated that trust acts as a mediator between attractiveness, perceived level of expertise and purchase intention. Other research tempers the relationship and suggests that trust has an impact on brand attitude but that brand purchase behaviour is also influenced by product relevance, price sensitivity, and familiarity (Hughes et al., 2019), and that emotional trust can lead to brand purchase but is not sufficient for high-involvement products (Wei et al., 2022). Such a gap between intention and behaviour has been criticized in previous research related to attitude-behaviour models (Ajzen, 1991). Another moderator is influencer brand fit, which is congruence between the image of the influencer and the product: the stronger the congruence between trust and the influencer's image with the product, the stronger the association between trust and follower behaviour (Tian & Li, 2022).

Research Gap and Justification

In the literature, there are three weaknesses that are repeated. First, the variables of credibility, authenticity, and engagement are often examined separately and not as a part of a combined system. Second, while some studies consider and examine the cognitive dimension (Source Credibility) of influence, others focus on its affective dimension (parasocial), with few studies examining both at once (Wei et al., 2022; Han & Balabanis, 2023). Third, methodological approaches generally use a very limited assessment of trust based on Likert scales and do not incorporate correlation and regression calculations to establish a predictive pattern among the constructs (Chu et al., 2020; Velazquez-Solis et al., 2023). This study extends a more comprehensive (but preliminary) understanding of digital persuasion by employing a dual-theoretical, consumer-centred framework, which considers engagement, authenticity, trust, and behaviour as related constructs.

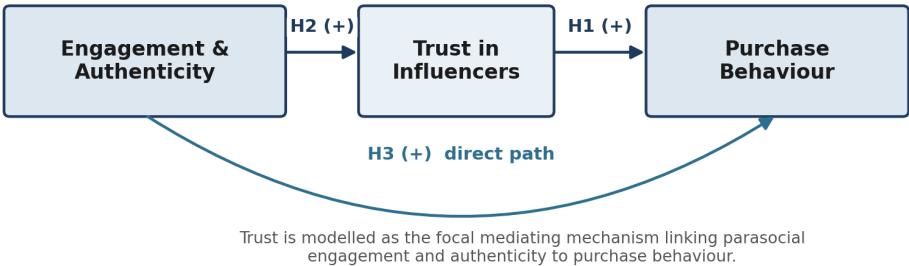
Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses

Drawing on the integrated framework, the study positions trust in influencers as a central construct shaped by perceived engagement and authenticity (transparency, self-disclosure, responsiveness, and content congruence), which reflect the parasocial perspective. Trust, in turn, is expected to relate to purchase behaviour, and engagement is hypothesised to relate to behaviour both indirectly (through trust) and directly. The hypothesised relationships are shown in Figure 1 and tested through the following hypotheses:

- **H1:** Trust in social media influencers significantly and positively predicts consumer purchase behaviour.
- **H2:** Influencer engagement and authenticity significantly and positively predict consumer trust.
- **H3:** Influencer engagement and authenticity significantly and positively predict consumer purchase behaviour.

Figure 1

Conceptual framework. Trust is modelled as the focal mediating mechanism; H1: Trust → Purchase Behaviour; H2: Engagement & Authenticity → Trust; H3: Engagement & Authenticity → Purchase Behaviour (direct path).



Methodology

Research Philosophy and Approach

The study adopts a positivist philosophy, assuming an objective reality measurable through systematic observation, which suits hypothesis testing of predefined variable relationships (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2021). A deductive approach was followed, with hypotheses derived from Source Credibility Theory (Ohanian, 1990) and Parasocial Interaction Theory (Horton & Wohl, 1956) and tested through quantitative analysis (Bryman, 2022).

Research Design

A cross-sectional quantitative survey design was used to obtain information about the present situation of consumers' responses. The design allows for efficient data collection from a large sample and testing of correlational and predictive relationships between trust, authenticity, engagement, and purchase behaviour without the complexity of longitudinal data (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). The psychological constructs were standardised by the use of structured instruments, the replicability of which was ensured. This is a correlational design and so cannot be used to draw inferences about causation, which is evident throughout the results.

Population and Sampling

The study aimed to target social media users aged 18-45, a group that is considered highly active and responsive to social media and influencer marketing strategies (Hudders & Lou, 2023; Ferraro et al., 2024). The participants for the study were recruited using non-probability convenience sampling, which is widely adopted in exploratory and behavioural digital-marketing research studies because sampling frames are generally unavailable (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2021). A total of 81 valid responses were obtained from the study, which is more than is required for Pearson correlation and simple linear regression, and adequate to achieve medium to large effect size detection (Hair & Alamer, 2022). Everyone said they follow influencers and interact with influencer-recommended content.

Data Collection Procedure

A self-administered online questionnaire using Google Form was employed as a method of data collection, due to its cost-effectiveness, scalability, and ability to take the survey to the target population in its natural environment online (Evans & Mathur, 2018). The information about the study was distributed via university email lists, social media groups and networking platforms, and accompanied by a brief introduction regarding the study purpose, confidentiality and consent. The questionnaire was open for 14 days. No identifying data were collected so that anonymity was maintained, and responses were combined into a secure data set to be analysed using SPSS.

Measures and Instrument Validation

The instrument contained 24 closed-ended items, evenly spread over the demographic items and the three constructs, each consisting of 6 items (see Appendix A). This was in line with Source Credibility Theory, where the dimensions of trustworthiness and expertise of the influencer's credibility were operationalised by the sub-dimensions of perceived honesty, transparency, and product knowledge, which are most directly related to cognitive credibility, the latter being the focus of the study. The attractiveness dimension of the scale by Ohanian (1990) was not assessed because the study's focus was on cognitive credibility. Engagement and authenticity were adapted from Audrezet, de Kerviler and Guidry Moulard (2020) and Jin, Muqaddam and Ryu (2021), which involved capturing emotional resonance, content congruence, and two-way interaction, and reflecting the parasocial perspective. These purchase-behaviour items were taken from Casaló et al. (2020) and reflected the respondents' past buying, product research, and intentions to buy. Engagement and authenticity were treated as a single concept as they were conceptualised as components of a parasocial connection, or relationship. The items in the attitudinal section were measured on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). A pilot test with 10 participants resulted in some minor wording changes. The constructs, definitions, sources, and reliability coefficients are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1
Construct Operationalisation, Sources, and Reliability

Construct	Operational Definition	Adapted From	Items	α
Trust in Influencers	Perceived honesty, transparency, and expertise of the influencer.	Lou & Yuan (2020); Sokolova & Perez (2021)	6	.70
Engagement & Authenticity	Emotional resonance, content congruence, and two-way interaction.	Audrezet et al. (2020); Jin et al. (2021)	6	.70
Purchase Behaviour	Past purchases, product research, and intention to buy.	Casaló et al. (2020)	6	.80

Note. α = Cronbach's alpha. All constructs measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree); all values meet the .70 acceptability threshold (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011).

Ethical Considerations

The research complied with institutional ethical norms and the standards of the British Psychological Society (BPS, 2018), and ethical approval was granted by the university's Research Ethics Committee prior to data collection. Participants received an information sheet describing the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, and the right to withdraw without consequence, and provided electronic informed consent before proceeding. No personally identifying information was collected; responses were accessible only to the researcher and stored on encrypted drives in compliance with the Data Protection Act 2018 and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

Data Analysis Strategy

Data were analysed in IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 28). Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, skewness, and kurtosis) summarised response distributions, and Cronbach's alpha assessed internal consistency, with values above .70 considered acceptable (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). Pearson correlation coefficients established the strength and direction of inter-construct relationships, after which three simple linear regressions tested the hypotheses: trust predicting purchase behaviour (H1), engagement and authenticity predicting trust (H2), and engagement and authenticity predicting purchase behaviour (H3). For each model, the model summary (R, R², adjusted R²), the ANOVA (F-test), and the coefficient estimates (B, SE, β , t, p, and 95% confidence intervals) are reported. Because trust is theorised as a mediating mechanism, the indirect pathway was additionally examined using the product-of-coefficients estimate and an approximate Sobel test; the limits of this approach, and the case for confirmatory bootstrapped mediation, are stated explicitly in Sections 4.5 and 5.6.

Results and Analysis

This section reports the findings from the 81 valid responses, beginning with the demographic profile, followed by descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, hypothesis testing through regression, and an examination of the indirect pathway.

Demographic Profile of Respondents

Of the 81 respondents, 65.4% were male (n = 53) and 34.6% female (n = 28). The sample skewed young: 48.1% were aged 25–34 (n = 39) and 40.7% aged 18–24 (n = 33), so that 88.9% fell within the 18–34 band most exposed to influencer marketing (Ferraro et al., 2024); the remaining 11.1% were aged 35 or above. The sample was highly educated, with 45.7% holding undergraduate and 38.3% postgraduate degrees. Social media use was frequent: 46.9% reported daily use and a further 25.9% several times a week. Instagram (67.3%) and YouTube (56.1%) were the most-used platforms, followed by TikTok (30.6%) and Facebook (26.5%). The male skew is atypical of broader influencer audiences and should be borne in mind when interpreting the results. The full profile appears in Table 2.

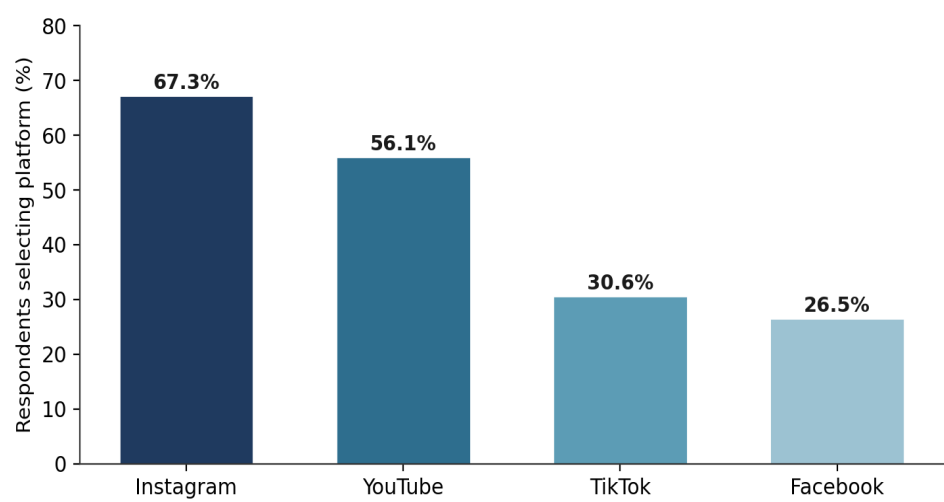
Table 2
Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 81)

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)
Gender	Female	28	34.6
	Male	53	65.4
Age	18–24	33	40.7
	25–34	39	48.1
	35–44	8	9.9
	45 and above	1	1.2
Education	High school or below	10	12.3
	Undergraduate degree	37	45.7
	Postgraduate degree	31	38.3
	Other	3	3.7

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)
Social media use	Daily	38	46.9
	A few times a week	21	25.9
	Once a week	20	24.7
	Rarely	2	2.5

Note. Percentages are valid percentages; totals may not sum to 100 due to rounding. Because respondents could select multiple platforms, preferences are reported as the proportion of the sample selecting each platform (Figure 2). Instagram and YouTube dominate, confirming that the sample is concentrated on the platforms where influencer marketing is most active (Statista, 2024).

Figure 2
Social Media Platform Preferences (N = 81; Multiple Responses Permitted, so Percentages Exceed 100)



Mean purchase-behaviour scores varied by age (Table 3). The youngest respondents (18–24) reported the highest mean ($M = 2.14$, $SD = 1.07$), while the 25–34 group scored lowest ($M = 1.65$, $SD = 0.53$), consistent with evidence that younger consumers respond more readily to influencer persuasion (Djafarova & Geere, 2023). The 45-and-above category contained a single respondent and is reported for completeness only.

Table 3
Purchase Behaviour by Age Group

Age Group	n	Mean	SD
18–24	33	2.14	1.07
25–34	39	1.65	0.53
35–44	8	1.88	0.44
45 and above	1	2.17	—
Total	81	1.88	0.82

Note. Purchase Behaviour measured on a 5-point scale. The 45-and-above cell reflects a single case and is not generalisable.

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics for the three constructs are reported in Table 4. All three means fell well below the scale midpoint of 3.00, indicating a general tendency toward disagreement: Engagement & Authenticity recorded the lowest mean ($M = 1.74$, $SD = 0.67$), followed by Purchase Behaviour ($M = 1.88$, $SD = 0.82$) and Trust ($M = 1.89$, $SD = 0.64$). All distributions were positively skewed and leptokurtic, with responses clustered toward the lower end of the scale. Because the sample was screened to include only active followers of influencers, these low means are notable: they suggest that consumers may engage with influencer content

while remaining guarded about trusting and acting on it, rather than indicating disengagement per se. The distributions were also markedly non-normal (skewness up to 2.45; kurtosis up to 7.90), reflecting the clustering of responses at the lower end of the scale; this floor pattern is revisited in the discussion.

Table 4
Descriptive Statistics for Study Constructs (N = 81)

Construct	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Trust	1.00	5.00	1.891	0.639	1.778	5.978
Engagement	1.00	5.00	1.741	0.666	2.449	7.896
Purchase Beh.	1.00	5.00	1.877	0.818	2.340	6.284

Note. Std. error of skewness = 0.267; std. error of kurtosis = 0.529. Engagement = Engagement & Authenticity; Purchase Beh. = Purchase Behaviour.

Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlations (Table 5) revealed strong, statistically significant positive associations across all pairs ($p < .001$). Engagement & Authenticity correlated most strongly with Trust ($r = .690$), Trust correlated moderately with Purchase Behaviour ($r = .572$), and Engagement correlated strongly and directly with Purchase Behaviour ($r = .657$). Notably, engagement was the strongest correlate of behaviour, exceeding the trust behaviour association. The absence of any correlation approaching unity indicates no multicollinearity threat for the bivariate regressions that follow (Sokolova & Perez, 2021; Mrisha & Xixiang, 2024).

Table 5
Means, Standard Deviations, and Pearson Correlations

Construct	M	SD	1	2	3
1. Trust	1.89	0.64	(.70)		
2. Engagement	1.74	0.67	.690**	(.70)	
3. Purchase Behaviour	1.88	0.82	.572**	.657**	(.80)

Note. N = 81. ** $p < .001$ (2-tailed). Cronbach's alpha coefficients appear on the diagonal in parentheses.

Hypothesis Testing

Three simple linear regressions tested the hypothesised paths. Each model is reported with its model summary, ANOVA, and coefficient estimates.

H1: Trust as a Predictor of Purchase Behaviour

A simple linear regression tested whether trust predicts purchase behaviour. The model was statistically significant, $F(1, 79) = 38.44$, $p < .001$, and explained 32.7% of the variance in purchase behaviour ($R^2 = .327$, adjusted $R^2 = .319$). Trust was a significant positive predictor ($B = 0.733$, $\beta = .572$, $t = 6.20$, $p < .001$; 95% CI [0.498, 0.968]): each one-unit increase in trust was associated with a 0.73-unit increase in predicted purchase behaviour. These results support H1, consistent with trust operating as a mechanism in influencer effectiveness (Mrisha & Xixiang, 2024). The full output appears in Table 6.

Regression Results for H1: Trust → Purchase Behaviour

Table 6a
Panel A. Model Summary

R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Std. Error	F (df1, df2) / Sig.
.572	.327	.319	.675	38.44 (1, 79), $p < .001$

Table 6b

Panel B. ANOVA

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F / Sig.
Regression	17.525	1	17.525	38.44
Residual	36.018	79	0.456	p < .001
Total	53.543	80		

Table 6c

Panel C. Coefficients

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	Sig.	95% CI for B
(Constant)	0.491	0.236	—	2.080	.041	[0.021, 0.960]
Trust	0.733	0.118	.572	6.200	< .001	[0.498, 0.968]

Note. Dependent variable: Purchase Behaviour. Predictor: Trust. N = 81. B = unstandardised coefficient; β = standardised coefficient; CI = confidence interval.

H2: Engagement and Authenticity as Predictors of Trust

A second regression tested whether engagement and authenticity predict trust. The model was highly significant, $F(1, 79) = 71.88$, $p < .001$, explaining 47.6% of the variance in trust ($R^2 = .476$, adjusted $R^2 = .470$)—the strongest of the three models. Engagement was a strong positive predictor ($B = 0.662$, $\beta = .690$, $t = 8.48$, $p < .001$; 95% CI [0.506, 0.817]). H2 was therefore strongly supported, consistent with the parasocial view that perceived authenticity and emotional connection underpin trust (Wang et al., 2024). Full results appear in Table 7.

Regression Results for H2: Engagement & Authenticity → Trust

Table 7a

Panel A. Model Summary

R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Std. Error	F (df1, df2) / Sig.
.690	.476	.470	.465	71.88 (1, 79), p < .001

Table 7b

Panel B. ANOVA

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F / Sig.
Regression	15.540	1	15.540	71.88
Residual	17.080	79	0.216	p < .001
Total	32.620	80		

Table 7c

Panel C. Coefficients

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	Sig.	95% CI for B
(Constant)	0.739	0.145	—	5.086	< .001	[0.450, 1.029]
Engagement	0.662	0.078	.690	8.478	< .001	[0.506, 0.817]

Note. Dependent variable: Trust. Predictor: Engagement & Authenticity. N = 81.

H3: Engagement and Authenticity as Predictors of Purchase Behaviour

A third regression tested whether engagement and authenticity directly predict purchase behaviour. The model was significant, $F(1, 79) = 59.89$, $p < .001$, accounting for 43.1% of the variance ($R^2 = .431$, adjusted $R^2 = .424$). Engagement was a strong positive predictor ($B = 0.806$, $\beta = .657$, $t = 7.74$, $p < .001$; 95% CI [0.599, 1.014]). H3 was supported: engagement is associated with purchasing both as a correlate of trust (H2) and directly, indicating a dual-pathway pattern (Sokolova & Perez, 2021). Full results appear in Table 8.

Regression Results for H3: Engagement & Authenticity → Purchase Behaviour

Table 8a

Panel A. Model Summary

R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Std. Error	F (df1, df2) / Sig.
.657	.431	.424	.621	59.89 (1, 79), p < .001

Table 8b

Panel B. ANOVA

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F / Sig.
Regression	23.089	1	23.089	59.89
Residual	30.454	79	0.385	p < .001
Total	53.543	80		

Table 8c

Panel C. Coefficients

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	Sig.	95% CI for B
(Constant)	0.473	0.194	—	2.436	.017	[0.086, 0.859]
Engagement	0.806	0.104	.657	7.739	< .001	[0.599, 1.014]

Note. Dependent variable: Purchase Behaviour. Predictor: Engagement & Authenticity. N = 81.

Examining the Indirect Pathway

Because the conceptual model positions trust as the mechanism linking engagement and authenticity to purchase behaviour, the indirect pathway was examined. The three conditions associated with the causal-steps logic (Baron & Kenny, 1986) are met: engagement predicts the outcome ($\beta = .657$, $p < .001$; H3), engagement predicts the mediator ($\beta = .690$, $p < .001$; H2), and the mediator predicts the outcome ($\beta = .572$, $p < .001$; H1). The product-of-coefficients estimate of the indirect effect of engagement on purchase behaviour through trust is $a \times b = 0.662 \times 0.733 = 0.485$, and an approximate Sobel test indicates this indirect path is statistically significant ($z = 5.01$, $p < .001$).

Two caveats are emphasised. First, the b-path used here is the bivariate Trust → Purchase coefficient rather than the coefficient adjusted for engagement, so the indirect estimate should be read as an approximate upper bound. Second, because purchase behaviour was not regressed on trust and engagement jointly, the direct effect (c') was not isolated, and the present design therefore cannot formally distinguish partial from full mediation. The pattern of a significant direct path (H3) alongside a significant approximate indirect path is consistent with a dual-pathway account in which engagement relates to behaviour both directly and through trust, but a confirmatory bootstrapped test on the raw data (e.g., PROCESS Model 4, with a bias-corrected confidence interval) is required to estimate the indirect effect precisely. The decomposition is summarised in Table 9 and the tested model in Figure 3.

Table 9

Indirect Pathway: Engagement → Trust → Purchase Behaviour (approximate)

Effect	Coefficient	Estimate	Sig.
Engagement → Trust (a path)	a	0.662	< .001
Trust → Purchase Behaviour (b path, bivariate)	b	0.733	< .001
Total effect (Engagement → Purchase Beh.)	c	0.806	< .001
Indirect effect ($a \times b$)	ab	0.485	Sobel $z = 5.01^{***}$

Note. Unstandardised coefficients. *** $p < .001$. The b-path is the bivariate coefficient; the direct effect (c') was not estimated. The indirect estimate is approximate and should be confirmed with a bootstrapped joint model on the raw data.

Figure 3

Tested Model with Standardised Coefficients (*** $p < .001$). The Indirect Path is Reported as an Approximate Estimate Pending Confirmatory Testing



Indirect path (Engagement → Trust → Purchase): $a \times b = .49$ (approx. Sobel $z = 5.01$, $p < .001$).
*** $p < .001$. R^2 : Trust = .48; Purchase (via Trust) = .33; Purchase (via Engagement) = .43.

$< .001$, and the indirect-pathway evidence is consistent with trust transmitting part of the engagement behaviour association. Table 10 consolidates the findings.

Table 10
Summary of Hypothesis Testing

Hyp.	Statement	β	R^2	Decision
H1	Trust significantly predicts consumer purchase behaviour.	.572	.327	Supported
H2	Engagement & authenticity significantly predict consumer trust.	.690	.476	Supported
H3	Engagement & authenticity significantly predict consumer purchase behaviour.	.657	.431	Supported

Note. All hypotheses supported at $p < .001$ ($N = 81$). β = standardised regression coefficient.

Discussion
Interpretation of Findings

The results are consistent in that they reveal a correlation between trust, engagement and willingness to act on the part of consumers in influencer marketing. The presence of trust was strongly associated with purchase behaviour (H1) and supported its position as a central mechanism in the effectiveness of influencers (Mrisha & Xixiang, 2024). The parasocial premise that meaningful one-sided relationships foster affective trust (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Jin, Muqaddam & Ryu, 2021) was supported by the strong relationship between engagement, authenticity, and trust. Also, engagement was a direct predictor of purchase behaviour (H3); the second pathway (indirect) was also confirmed, suggesting that engagement was associated with behaviour via trust, but also directly (Han & Balabanis, 2023). Importantly, engagement and authenticity showed the highest proximal correlate of behaviour, slightly outstripping trust; thus, trust should be considered the focus mediating mechanism, rather than the largest. Combined, these findings suggest an integrated theory that combines the cognitive component of the Source Credibility Theory and the affective component of Parasocial Interaction Theory.

Relationship with Existing Literature

The trust behaviour finding is also consistent with the work of Lou and Yuan (2020), who demonstrated that recommendations made by perceived trustworthy sources are more likely to influence consumer behaviour; and with Djafarova and Geere (2023), who suggested that trust is a mediator between credibility cues and consumer decision. This finding in the engagement trust relationship builds upon the relational-marketing literature, as Audrezet and de Kerviler Moulard (2020) and French and Guidry Moulard (2023) found that authenticity is not a matter of spontaneity, but rather of a calibrated self-disclosure. In the cases of Pieter and Angelopoulos (2024), it was found that emotional involvement can relate to behavior even if there is awareness of sponsorship, which calls into question strictly linear models that consider trust as the only mediator.

The Scepticism Pattern

One of the interesting things about these data is that all the construct means were below the midpoint of the scale, despite the fact that all respondents were identified as active followers of influencers. The most conservative interpretation of the findings is that while consumers can enjoy and engage with the content

being produced by influencers, they are not necessarily convinced of its credibility, and even less so of its actionability. This is supported by evidence showing that over-commercialisation and disclosure failures lead to loss of credibility (Yahya & Çınar, 2024; Shen, Nie & Tong, 2024). In parallel, such prevalence of this floor pattern is not necessarily a reflection of attitude, but may also represent measurement or response factors, and it is in tension with the headline associations that high predictive relationships exist on a floor that generally has low levels of trust and purchasing. The tension is informative, and one can only begin to treat it as a hypothesis for confirmatory work, rather than a conclusion.

Theoretical Contributions

The study makes three tentative contributions. It provides empirical evidence for the need to examine the Source Credibility and Parasocial Interaction perspectives together, as this gives a more complete picture of the relationship between influencers and consumer decisions both cognitively and affectively. Second, it suggests that engagement may be related to both trust and directly to purchase, thus arguing for models to also include mediation and moderation. Third, even with high levels of relationships between the different parts of the construct, the overall low means for trust and engagement reveal the fragility of digital trust and raise questions about the capacity of influencers to persuade in an overcommercialised setting.

Practical Implications

The findings for marketers reveal that it is not enough to simply be seen or reach in order to build trust. The affective trust of behaviour is rooted in authentic communication, consistent personal branding, and genuine two-way communication. Partnering with smaller influencers with larger audiences that are not as committed, but rather relatable, can prove to be beneficial to the brand, as well as special attention to influencer brand value alignment, as audiences are becoming more critical when it comes to congruence with sponsored content. Engagement has to do with both trust and behaviour, so it is likely that long-term partnerships, where influencers can seamlessly integrate brand storytelling, will yield better results than just a single promotional post.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

These findings are subject to a number of caveats. The limited generalisability of the findings is due to the non-probability convenience sampling (81 digitally active, primarily young, highly educated respondents) and the cross-sectional design, which only allows analyses of the associations at one point in time and does not enable analyses of trust development and changes over time. Self-reported data may also be subject to social-desirability and recall biases, and the indirect-effect estimate should be considered provisional until confirmed by a bootstrapped test. Larger and more representative samples, longitudinal designs, behavioural data (e.g., click-through and purchase data), and platform-specific and cross-cultural comparisons would help clarify the boundary conditions of the observed effects in the future.

Conclusion

The study looked at the relationship between social media influencers and consumer perceptions of trust and purchase using the integrated framework of Source Credibility Theory and Parasocial Interaction Theory. The results corroborate that trust is a key mediator between influencers and consumers: trust is a significant predictor of purchase behaviour, engagement and authenticity are significant predictors of trust, and engagement is also a significant predictor of purchase behaviour, which is partially mediated by trust. So it seems that influencers do have some power over consumer decisions, although not an absolute one, particularly when they build trust and credibility and have a transparent relationship with their audience that is actually an interactive one.

Meanwhile, the low scores in trust, engagement and purchase behaviour are uniformly low, reflecting increased consumer scepticism, possibly due to the rise of content being germinated and produced for profit, and the difficulty of separating out genuine content from manufactured content. The main managerial

takeaway is that brands and influencers should seek to collaborate in a long-term and value-informed relationship, with micro-influencers and disclosure transparency being preferred. The study integrates credibility based and relational narratives of influence and introduces a more nuanced treatment of trust as a product and process of digital persuasion, setting a precedent for future longitudinal, multi-platform and confirmatory studies. The results presented should be viewed as preliminary, however, because of the small convenience sample and the correlational nature of the design.

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Appendix A. Survey Instrument

Response scale (attitudinal items): 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree.

Section A: Trust in Social Media Influencers

1. I trust the recommendations made by influencers.
2. Influencers I follow are knowledgeable about the products they promote.
3. I believe influencers give honest opinions, even in sponsored content.
4. Influencers who disclose paid partnerships are more trustworthy to me.
5. I consider influencers to be more credible than celebrities.
6. I trust influencers more if I have followed them for a long time.

Section B: Influencer Engagement (Authenticity & Transparency)

7. Influencers I follow appear genuine and authentic in their content.
8. I feel a personal connection with some influencers I follow.
9. Influencers share real experiences that I can relate to.
10. I pay more attention to influencers who interact with their followers.
11. When influencers show both pros and cons of a product, I trust them more.
12. I am more likely to engage with influencers who respond to comments or messages.

Section C: Purchase Decisions Influenced by Influencers

13. I have purchased a product based on an influencer's recommendation.
14. I am more likely to buy a product that an influencer has used personally.
15. I often research products after seeing an influencer's post.
16. Influencer reviews help me make better purchase decisions.
17. I prefer influencer recommendations over traditional advertising.
18. I feel more confident buying a product if an influencer I trust recommends it.

Section D: Demographic Information

19. Age group: 18–24 / 25–34 / 35–44 / 45 and above.
20. Gender: Male / Female / Non-binary / Prefer not to say.
21. Highest level of education: High school or below / Undergraduate / Postgraduate / Other.
22. Frequency of social media use: Daily / A few times a week / Once a week / Rarely.
23. Platforms used most often (select all): Instagram / YouTube / TikTok / Facebook / Twitter (X) / LinkedIn / Other.