

Unpacking the Role of Brand Advocacy and Para-Social Relationships in Shaping Brand Trust on Social Media

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Abstract

This study investigates the impact of various factors in influencer marketing on brand performance when influencers endorse or collaborate with brands. Specifically, it examines the influence of quasi-social relationships, influencer attractiveness, influencer credibility, and endorsement content quality on brand trust, as well as the role of brand trust in brand promotion. The study is grounded in the stimulus-organism response hypothesis and encompasses a survey involving 333 participants. The results demonstrate that influencers' credibility significantly influences consumers' trust in brands, subsequently impacting brand publicity. These findings hold significant managerial implications and can assist decision-makers in selecting optimal marketing strategies. The findings show para-social ties often fails to enhance brand trust. Besides managers can use attractive influencers to craft visually appealing endorsements. To enhance brand trusts, managers need to collaborate with credible influencers with stronger reputation. Simultaneously, manager must ensure high quality and relevant content to enhance consumer trust.

Keywords: *Social Media Influencer Marketing, Para-Social Interaction, Influencer Attractiveness, Influencer Credibility, Endorsement Content Quality, Brand Advocacy, Brand Trust.*

Introduction

The trends in international marketing have shifted from traditional offline approaches to digital marketing strategies, which prove to be more effective in facilitating potential buyers' online research and purchase of products. Digital marketing encompasses market research, advertising, and social networking to create media that connects individuals worldwide with producers, market intermediaries, and potential customers. This transformation has revolutionized global marketing by enabling businesses to swiftly capture customer insights and align organizational goals with customer needs and desires (Saura J R, 2021).

Social media platforms have played a pivotal role in facilitating this paradigm shift, empowering businesses to effectively engage with customers and differentiate themselves in the ever-evolving digital landscape. Additionally, social media influencers have emerged as a novel communication channel for businesses to actively interact with their customer base. These communication channels serve as conduits that bring businesses closer to their customers, enabling them to discern their unique needs and preferences, thereby leading to more impactful marketing strategies. In essence, digital marketing has revolutionized global marketing by providing expansive and expeditious access to potential customers while allowing businesses to tailor their targeting efforts according to the specific demands and desires of their clientele. Social media platforms and influencers empower businesses not only to connect with customers but also gain invaluable insights into enhancing their marketing strategies (Masa Mustafa J M Al-Qatami, 2019; Saravanakumar, 2012). In recent times, there has been significant growth in influencer marketing in a global context. It has become one of the most effective and popular forms of digital marketing which has been successful in attracting millions of audiences who use social media platforms for multiple reasons like entertainment, product information and recommendation, influence and inspiration and others. As of 2023, the market value of global influencer marketing is 21.1 billion USD, which has increased 3 times since 2019 (Statista Research Department, 2023). Various social media platforms have been capitalized by different social media influencers which has further triggered the growth of influencer marketing. These influencers are the ones who are in the social graph of consumers and have a significant and direct impact on consumer

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behavior. Furthermore, through personal branding, these influencers are capable of building and maintaining relationships with their followers/ audience on social media, through their ability of entertaining, informing, and influencing the thoughts, behaviors, and attitudes of their followers (Joshi et al., 2023). Besides this, in the current digital era, there is an ongoing shift in consumer behavior who are more reliant on social media and social media influencers for making purchase decisions, gathering product information and so on. One of the notable examples is the case of Starbucks. The company collaborate with social media influencers who share their coffee rituals on a regular basis (Andreson, 2020). This eventually helps in making the target audience of the influencers to feel that they are a part of the routine which eventually contribute towards fostering para-social relationships.

This paper examines the impact of various characteristics of social media influencers on brand trust and advocacy. The study investigates the relationship between influencer traits, such as quasi-social relationships, trustworthiness, attractiveness, and the quality of endorsed content, and their influence on consumer outcomes. The quantitative analysis determines the effect of these factors on brand trust. These findings offer insights into how source appeal influences opinion formation and brand-related indicators like trust and publicity.

Literature Review

The transition from traditional to digital marketing has revolutionized consumer behavior. In the era of digitalization, the online market is fiercely competitive, necessitating businesses to comprehend how to effectively influence consumer behavior. Traditional marketing can be referred to as the basic marketing concept, which is a non-digital method of promoting the products and/ or services of a business (Bist et al., 2022). In other words, it mostly depends on conventional and offline methods like broadcast, print media, telephones and direct mails for brand, product and/ or service promotion. However, in the era of the fourth industrial revolution, Technology 4.0, there is an ongoing change in buyer and seller relationship. In order to adapt to this change, it is critical for organizations to adapt their marketing strategies in accordance to the new digital age. Therefore, companies must integrate new technologies in Industry 4.0 with traditional marketing strategies in order to address the current marketing needs and preferences of consumers in the technologically advanced era. The swift adoption of digital platforms facilitates consumer purchasing decisions and reinforces the significance of establishing a robust connection between brands and customers. However, the common aspect between traditional and digital marketing is that both the marketing concepts emphasize on promoting brands, creating brand awareness, influencing consumer preferences and increasing sales (Bist et al., 2022). This literature review aims to delve deeply into the impact of digital marketing on consumer behavior and explore the role that brand marketing and influencer marketing play in shaping consumer perceptions and beliefs.

Branding activities play a pivotal role in establishing a robust brand image within the minds of consumers. As per the research conducted by Gergana Angelova and Visselin Stoymenov (2022) along with Bill Beck (2012), a brand is defined as an amalgamation of overall perceptions and associations that reside in individuals' consciousness. This perception can be influenced and augmented through purposeful branding campaigns. Branding involves the process of presenting the products and services of a brand with the advantages that result in the building a strong brand (Liu et al., 2020). This plays a critical role in shaping the attitude, perception, emotions, and behavior of consumers. This can be said because through branding, companies can build a strong emotional connection with the audience, and draw their attention towards the products and services of the brand. Besides, it helps in building a sense of credibility and trust among consumers. In this regard, branding literature suggests that brand credibility is greatly shaped by a variety of antecedents, like image consistency and brand experience (Molinillo et al., 2022). Besides this, the perception of consumers is shaped by branding as it controls the ways in which customers perceive the products and services of the brand (Swaminathan et al., 2020). When a company is able to ensure an effective branding through storytelling or positioning of the brand by differentiating itself from potential competitors in the market, it allows a company to distinguish itself and highlight its own unique selling propositions; which can help to build a stronger preference for the brand among consumers.

The digital age has witnessed the rise of influencer marketing as a prevalent advertising strategy, which entails collaborating with influential individuals to create and promote branded content to both their own followers and the target audience of the brand. According to Chen Lou and Shupeí (2019) as well as Yuan Yodel (2017), influencer marketing is defined as an advertising approach that involves marketers and brands investing in specific influencers. This strategic method effectively shapes brand perception by capitalizing on the trust and credibility established by influencers with their followers. Especially for younger customers, aged around 25 years- the Gen Z consumers, it becomes highly challenging for marketers to get a marketing message out of this customer segment, and their consumer behavior is largely different from that of the older generations. Instead of watching television, the younger generation are more interested in online streaming platforms like Netflix, Spotify instead of Radio, and are more inclined towards the use of social media (Haenlein et al., 2022). However, not only the younger generation, but the older generations are also increasingly being inclined towards digital and influencer marketing.

In this regard, Campbell and Farrell (2020) have presented a number of factors which have given rise to social media influencers as a key marketing agent in the digital era. Firstly, there has been a significant shift of consumers from the consumption of print media to online media. Secondly, when consumers are online (especially on social media or the internet) they tend to react differently towards advertisements. This is because, when consumers are online, they tend to be more goal-directed, which in turn makes them more disinclined or concealed towards advertisements. This makes it highly difficult for marketers to advertise in online environments. As a result, marketers have started using softer, more authentic, and less overt, advertising approaches. Thirdly, it has been evident that consumers tend to spend a large proportion of their time online, specifically on various social media platforms (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Social media platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube are open forums where audiences are garnered, unlike print media. It enables consumers to test their content on field against the real-time responses of different other users/ consumers, which in turn leads to the emergence of talented people who have a higher compelling capability and are often considered to be highly authentic as compared to contents created by brands. Fourthly, consumers get the opportunity of having extended consideration and evaluation stages in the decision-making process due to social media platforms through lighter yet more frequent exposure to various products, services, and/ or brand information. Lastly, with the help of social media and the internet consumers can be easily aggregated based on their shared interests (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). This in turn helps in the emergence of influencers on social media who appeal to long-tail and relatively niche audiences. This further helps in building higher trust towards a social media influencer with whom a customer segment resonates and perceives to be authentic.

In the contemporary economic landscape, social media has emerged as a potent tool for promoting products and companies (Infante, A & Mardikaningsih, R. 2022). Mustafa J. M. Al-Qatami (2019) contends that the quality of promotional content plays a pivotal role in shaping consumer preferences and behavior. To enhance brand awareness, communicators must deliver high-quality content. The rapidly advancing technologies in the realm of digital media offer communicators an opportunity to generate more online information. When brands can be personified, consumers are inclined to recognize and engage with them, thereby extending their brand personality (Kara S, Gunasti K, 2020; Braxton D, L 2020).

Brand advocacy refers to the active promotion and defense of a brand by individuals to other consumers. Consumers highly value endorsements from fellow customers when considering new products, as these endorsements are perceived as trustworthy (Rivaldo, 2022; Masa Mustafa J M Al-Qatami, 2019). Furthermore, businesses that use memes, viral videos, and social media posts to promote their brand information are effectively endorsing their products online. The impact of online brand advocacy can extend to offline brand advocacy. In this regard, Wilk et al. (2018) have further opined that brand advocacy serves as a brand recommendation or a favorable form of communication to others or serves as a defense when a brand is attacked. It serves as a potential key which helps in breaking and navigating through the agglomeration of marketing messages. This concept significantly relates to social media influencers as these influencers serve as the advocates for different brands by

endorsing their products and services to their audiences. In this regard, it can be further stated that brand advocacy enhances when the social media influencers are perceived to be highly credible by the audience, which eventually results in better audience engagement and brand promotion (Al-Qatami, 2019). Therefore, brand advocacy is a critical factor which is promoted by social media influencers.

The research conducted by McMann (2015) and Mustafa J. M. Al-Qatami (2019) underscores the significant impact of online brands on offline purchasing decisions. When consumers share a positive experience and perception of a brand through an online platform, it molds the perceptions of others and motivates them to become advocates for that brand in face-to-face interactions. Consequently, this has resulted in an upsurge in offline conversations, recommendations, and ultimately, tangible purchases. However, in contrast, Leong et al. (2022) claims that not every word of mouth or reviews shared electronically/ online through social media platforms has the potential of influencing consumers purchase intentions. This is a major limitation as there is potential research gap pertaining to the effectiveness of online experience sharing upon consumer behavior.

Theoretical Underpinning

Para-Social Relationship (PSR)

Para-Social Relationships (PSRs) refer to the imagined connections that individuals develop with media performers. These connections stem from spending time with them through media consumption and are characterized by a sense of growing intimacy and extensive familiarity (Reinikainen, Hanna, Munnukka, Juha; Maity, Devdeep, Luoma-aho & Vilma, 2020; Brown, 2015, p. 275). Initially, the term PSR was used to describe the potential for in-person interactions between audiences and media performers in radio, television, or film (Reinikainen, Hanna, Munnukka, Juha; Maity, Devdeep, Luoma-aho & Vilma, 2020; Horton & Wohl, 1956). Furthermore, evidence suggests that it takes quite a lot of time to develop para-social relationships (Boerman & Van Reijmersdal, 2020). This is because it requires an individual to first communicate/ interact with the person, so that they can get to know the other person, and eventually develop respective attitudes and behaviour toward that person, resulting in the emergence of feeling or experience of intimacy. Although this relationship development through interaction tends to happen via media, such long-term contacts correspond to the development of an actual relationship. In this relationship development, social media plays a vital role. This is because through social media, followers are able to interact with a person (or a social media influencer), directly and further delivers the opportunity to continually expose themselves to details of the life of a person. Thus, through continuous/ frequent communication with social influencers, social media users are able to become part of the daily life of the influencers, which leads to the development of a feeling of similarity, intimacy, and closeness.

As the relationship between the audience and media performers develops, media consumption becomes a ritualistic and significant experience for the audience member (Reinikainen, Hanna, Munnukka, Juha; Maity, Devdeep, Luoma-aho & Vilma, 2020; Medina M, 2024). PSRs emerge during the experience of para-social interaction (PSI), also known as an illusion of exchange or “a simulacrum of conversational give and take,” with a media actor (Reinikainen, Hanna, Munnukka, Juha; Maity, Devdeep, Luoma-aho & Vilma, 2020; Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 215).

Within the context of PSRs, a private, intimate, and informal talking environment can be created, characterized by openness and interaction (Reinikainen, Hanna, Munnukka, Juha; Maity, Devdeep, Luoma-aho, and Vilma, 2020; Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011; Horton & Wohl, 1956). Platforms like YouTube, where vloggers directly address the camera, make eye contact with the audience, and utilize techniques such as eye-level views, further contribute to the sense of intimacy and enable influencers to establish PSRs and PSI (Reinikainen, Hanna, Munnukka, Juha; Maity, Devdeep, Luoma-aho & Vilma, 2020; Frobenius, 2011).

Hypothesis Development

The transfer of influencer characteristics and mindsets to the endorsed products has been established

in marketing and advertising literature, influencing consumers' perceptions of the recommended brand. However, the development of parasocial ties with internet influencers may weaken customers' faith in the endorsed product, as trust in the influencer may not necessarily transfer to the company. When the intensity of parasocial ties is low, followers may mistrust the recommendations made by internet influencers, thereby reducing their perception of inherent risks associated with the suggested brand:

H1: Parasocial connections to influencer have a negatively impact on brand trust.

It is a common practice in advertising to utilize attractive individuals as a means of capturing viewers' attention and generating interest in the promoted product (Anastasia Savitri, Suliyanto & Refius Pradipta Setyanto, 2021; Habibah M, 2021). Wiedman and Mettenheim (2020) along with Anastasia Savitri, Suliyanto and Refius Pradiptus Setyanto (2021) further demonstrate that the attractiveness of influencers can significantly impact levels of brand trust. Consequently, it is hypothesized that influencer attractiveness has a positive effect on brand trust (H2) (Anastasia Savitri, Suliyanto & Refius Pradipta Setyanto, 2021). In summary, attractive influencers possess the potential to enhance consumer trust and loyalty towards a brand, thereby serving as valuable assets within marketing campaigns. The allure of influencers can greatly influence consumers' perceptions and attitudes towards the brands they endorse (Anastasia Savitri, Suliyanto & Refius Pradipta Setyanto, 2021). This study may lead to the following assumptions:

H2: Internet influencer attractiveness positively affects brand trust.

According to previous research (Fernanda Polli Leite & Paulo de Paula Baptista, 2022; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Lou & Yuan, 2019), individuals may be influenced to purchase a product through social media endorsements from influencers they admire. The credibility of these influencers, as demonstrated through their knowledge, reliability, and attractiveness, can enhance the credibility of their product reviews. Similarly, when social media influencers are viewed as trustworthy, they can positively impact consumers' perceptions of brands, leading to favorable brand associations and reduced psychological risks associated with brand trust (Fernanda Polli Leite & Paulo de Paula Baptista, 2022; Dwivedi et al., 2015a).

H3: Internet influencer credibility negatively affects brand trust.

Recent studies have shown that high-quality endorsement content boosts a brand's perceived credibility (Lisichkova & Othman, 2017; Masa Mustafa J M Al-Qatami, 2019). Customers tend to develop favourable opinions about a product that has been endorsed by social media influencers, which further affects consumer behaviour such as EWOM, brand trust, and brand advocacy (Berger & Milkman, 2012; Chung & Cho, 2017; Peters, 2013; Masa Mustafa J M Al-Qatami, 2019). Therefore, the following hypothesis holds:

H4: Endorsement Brand trust is positively impacted by content quality.

According to Muhammad Hassan, Arslan Rafi, & Syed Sibtain Kazim (2015), the increase in market competition among businesses selling similar goods has led to a higher demand for high-quality and genuine products. To win over customers' trust, companies strive to establish a positive brand image and act as symbols of providing the best products available. In this context, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H5: The relationship between para-social relationships and brand trust is negatively mediated by brand advocacy.

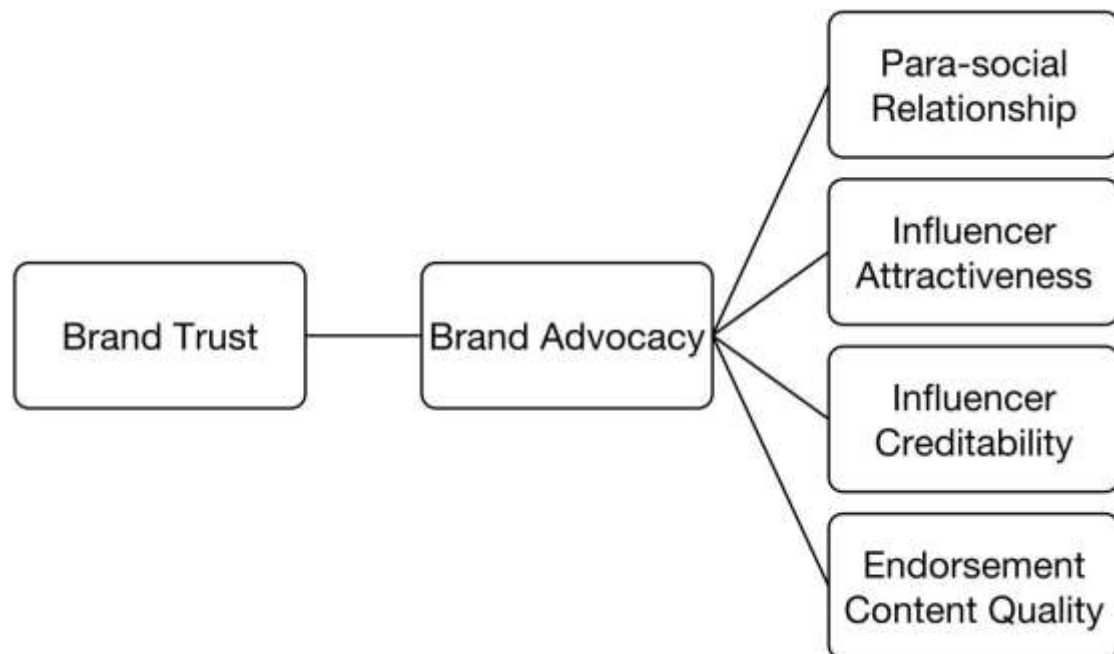
This suggests that brand advocacy serves as a link between influencer attractiveness, credibility, content quality, and brand trust. As brand credibility increases, consumer satisfaction and loyalty also rise, resulting in favorable word-of-mouth and recommendations. High brand satisfaction then mediates the relationship between word-of-mouth recommendations and brand trust. Moreover, research demonstrates that brand endorsement enhances brand trust and acts as a mediator between perceived source content quality and brand loyalty. Thus, the hypotheses state:

H6: Brand advocacy has a positive mediation effect on the relationship between celebrity attractiveness and brand trust.

H7: Brand advocacy has a positive mediation effect on the relationship between celebrity credibility and brand trust.

H8: Brand advocacy has a positive mediation effect on the relationship between content quality and brand trust.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework



(Source: Self-created)

Method

A quantitative approach was adopted to assess audience outcomes resulting from influencer endorsements. The study investigates the effects of influencer traits on brand-related metrics such as trust and advocacy. Four influencer factors were examined: para-social connections (PSR) (Reinikainen, Hanna, Munnukka, Juha; Maity, Devdeep, Luoma-aho & Vilma, 2020; Horton & Wohl, 1956), influencer attractiveness (IA) (Masa Mustafa J M Al-Qatami, 2019), influencer credibility (IC) (Masa Mustafa J M Al-Qatami, 2019), and the quality of endorsement content (CQ) (Zeithaml, 1988). The study aims to determine how these factors contribute to brand trust (BT) (Delgado, 2004).

To examine the variables and the relationship between them, a survey method data collection has been undertaken which consisted of 333 participants. A moderately large sample size has been considered for this research to ensure a meaningful quantitative analysis. While selecting the participants, a convenience sampling strategy has been undertaken which allows researchers to include participants based on

convenience. This has enabled the researcher to collect the desired data from a wider audience who are accustomed with influencer marketing on various social media platforms. Although this sampling strategy has its limitations in terms of result generalizability, the approach has facilitated a relevant sample that demonstrates the typical exposure of the social media users to various endorsements by social media influencers. Besides, the gathered data have been analyzed through statistical means like SPSS. In this study Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability tests have been conducted to establish the reliability and validity of the constructs. Besides, to assess the convergent validity, Average Variance Extracted has been calculated to confirm whether or not the measurement scales used in the study are appropriate for the undertaken constructs. Again, descriptive statistics has been performed to get an overview of the demographic profile of the sample in this study. A linear regression analysis has been performed to determine the effects of para-social relationship, influencer attractiveness, influencer credibility, and content quality (independent variables) on brand trust (dependent variable), and how brand advocacy mediates the relationship between the dependent variable and the independent variables.

The entire study has been conducted in an ethical manner, by complying with the standards and norms of conducting research. On approval of consent from the participants, data has been collected. Besides, no individual has been forced to take part in the study. Professional language and behavior have been thoroughly ensured with participants during the study. To ensure protection of personal information, the anonymity and confidentiality of the respondents have been maintained throughout.

Findings

In this study, demographic information was collected from respondents to gather insights into their characteristics. The demographic variables considered included age, race, gender, marital status, educational level, current education status, and job status. The following is a summary of the findings from the questionnaire.

Demographic Profile

Gender Distribution: Among the respondents, 183 (49.6%) were women, while only 150 (39.8%) were men. These results indicate that the majority of the respondents who filled out the questionnaire were female participants.

Age Distribution: The age distribution of the respondents is as follows: 77 people (18.8%) were aged 21 years and below, 156 people (41.5%) fell within the age range of 22 to 30 years, and 58 persons (13.6%) belonged to the age group of 31 to 40 years. From these descriptive statistics, it can be said that the majority of the respondents are young. Such a skew towards the younger customer segment can imply that the findings of this study are greatly applicable for the Gen Z and young millennials who tend to have a higher activeness on various social media platforms and have a higher chance of being influenced by social media endorsements.

Race Distribution: There were only a small number of respondents who were Chinese, Indian, or from other ethnicities, as the study sample primarily consisted of Malays. This information is crucial for understanding the racial diversity within the study population. Since most of the respondents on this study are Malaysian therefore, the results can be specifically applicable in the Malaysian context and might lack generalizability across different racial groups.

Education level: As per statistics, almost 44.8% of the respondents have identified themselves as students suggesting that the sample was well-educated. This can also imply that most of the respondents are critical of the brand messages and content quality of the social media influencers; and eventually have impact on the ways in which they perceive the trustworthiness of an endorsement and credibility of a social media influencer.

Employment: Most of the respondents of this study are employed or are students. It is more likely that the share of employed respondents is more likely to have higher purchasing power as compared to the

student.

Table 1. Demographic Profile

Age	21 or below	77	18.8%
	22-30 years old	156	41.5%
	31-40 years old	58	13.6%
	41-50 years old	28	5.8%
	51 or above	14	2.4%
Race	Malay	279	79.5%
	Chinese	46	10.4%
	India	5	29.9%
	Other	3	0.3%
Gender (1-M, 2-F)	Male	150	39.8%
	Female	183	49.6%
Marital Status	Single	240	67.1%
	Married	89	22.2%
	Divorced	4	0.4%
	Other	0	-
Education	SPM	97	24.4%
	Diploma	94	23.6%
	Bachelor Degree	133	34.8%
	Mater Degree	9	1.8%
	PHD	0	-
Years of Study	Year 1	6	0.8%
	Year 2	10	1.6%
	Year 3	47	10.7%
	Year 4	10	1.6%
	Graduated	137	36.0%
	Other	123	31.9%
Employment	Student	116	29.9%
	Employed	167	44.8%
	Self-employed	22	4.3%
	Not Employed	21	4.1%
	Other	7	0.9%

(Source: Self-created)

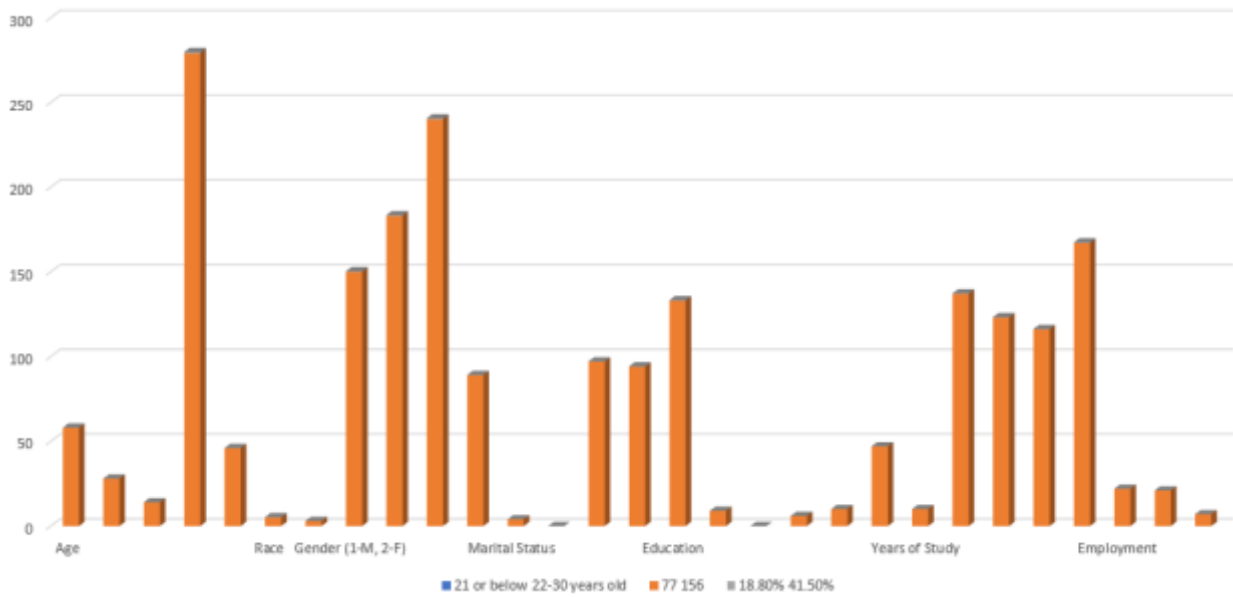


Figure 2: Demographic Profile

(Source: Self-created)

Reliability and Validity

Construct reliability was measured using Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability, with each research construct's Cronbach Alpha exceeding the recommended minimum value of 0.70 (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994). Composite reliability also exceeded the 0.70 threshold (Hair et al., 2010), ranging from 0.81 to 0.91. As such, construct reliability was demonstrated for each research construct.

To assess convergence validity of scale items, the extracted Average Variance (Fornell & Larcker, 1981) was used. Average variance-extracted values for all constructs were above the recommended threshold of 0.50 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), indicating that the scales used in the current study had the necessary convergent validity [table 2].

Table 2: Reliability Test

Variables	Items	Loadings	Cronbach Alpha's	Composite Reliability	AVE
Para-social Relationship	PSRs1	0.683	0.931	0.877	2.865
	PSRs2	0.633			
	PSRs3	0.666			
	PSRs4	0.806			
	PSRs5	0.729			
	PSRs6	0.783			
	PSRs7	0.452			
	PSRs8	0.841			
Influencer Credibility	CC1	0.652	0.945	0.918	2.084
	CC2	0.566			
	CC3	0.572			

	CC4	0.679			
	CC5	0.768			
	CC6	0.705			
	CC7	0.693			
	CC8	0.782			
	CC9	0.818			
	CC10	0.728			
	CC11	0.825			
Influencer Attractiveness	CA1	0.725	0.948	0.889	5.371
	CA2	0.848			
	CA3	0.867			
	CA4	0.824			
Content Quality	CQ1	0.774	0.912	0.926	2.547
	CQ2	0.785			
	CQ3	0.785			
	CQ4	0.771			
	CQ5	0.836			
	CQ6	0.786			
	CQ7	0.668			
	CQ8	0.738			
	CQ9	0.707			
Brand Trust	BT1	0.520	0.887	0.874	2.865
	BT2	0.593			
	BT3	0.648			
	BT4	0.521			
	BT5	0.815			
	BT6	0.673			
	BT7	0.793			
	BT8	0.852			
Brand Advocacy	BA1	0.641	0.739	0.778	7.642
	BA2	0.642			
	BA3	0.901			

(Source: Self-created)

The data collection process involved distributing a comprehensive six-part questionnaire to 333 participants, with each section focusing on a distinct aspect: quasi-social relationships, influencer credibility, influencer appeal, content quality, brand trust, and brand advocacy. The internal consistency measure (α value) was employed to assess the reliability of each construct.

Table 3: Reliability Test

	Brand Trust	Brand Advocacy	Content Quality	Influencer Attractiveness	Influencer Credibility	Para-social Relationship
Brand Trust	0.754					
Brand Advocacy	0.652	0.770				
Content Quality	0.539	0.565	0.846			
Influencer Attractiveness	0.636	0.550	0.680	0.821		
Influencer Credibility	0.652	0.586	0.645	0.582	0.909	
Para-social Relationship	0.574	0.690	0.550	0.642	0.707	0.875

(Source: Self-created)

The validation of discriminant validity was based on the square root of the average variance scores (AVE). The AVE of each construct exceeded the variance shared between the components, thus confirming the discriminant validity (Table 4).

The para-social relationship subscale displayed a high reliability coefficient ($\alpha = .846$), followed by influencer credibility ($\alpha = .908$), influencer attractiveness ($\alpha = .825$), content quality ($\alpha = .853$), brand trust ($\alpha = .921$), and brand advocacy ($\alpha = .842$).

Table 4: Average variance scores

Variables	Alpha	No. of items	Analysis
Para-social Relationship	.846	8	Good
Influencer Credibility	.908	11	Excellent
Influencer Attractiveness	.825	4	Good
Content Quality	.853	9	Good
Brand Trust	.921	8	Excellent
Brand Advocacy	.842	3	Good

(Source: Self-created)

Predictors of Brand Trust

To identify potential predictors of brand trust, we conducted a stepwise linear regression analysis, considering candidate variables such as influence on social relationships, influencer trustworthiness, influencer attractiveness, and content quality. The selection of variables for the regression model was based on their T-values and p-values. The results of the regression analysis are presented in Table 5.

In step 1, para-social relationship emerged as a significant predictor of brand trust ($\beta = 0.618$, $t =$

14.039, $p < 0.001$). Moving to step 2, both para-social relationship ($\beta = 0.518$, $t = 10.510$, $p < 0.001$) and influencer attractiveness ($\beta = 0.195$, $t = 3.957$, $p < 0.001$) remained significant predictors of brand trust. Proceeding to step 3, para-social relationship ($\beta = 0.181$, $t = 2.257$, $p = 0.025$), influencer attractiveness ($\beta = 0.417$, $t = 5.233$, $p < 0.001$), and influencer credibility ($\beta = 0.157$, $t = 3.268$, $p < 0.001$) were found to be significant predictors of brand trust. However, in step 4, para-social relationship ($\beta = 0.123$, $t = 1.668$, $p = 0.107$) and influencer credibility ($\beta = 0.067$, $t = 1.409$, $p = 0.160$) were no longer significant predictors.

Moreover, the analysis revealed that influencer attractiveness ($\beta = 0.205$, $t = 2.476$, $p = 0.014$) and content quality ($\beta = 0.400$, $t = 6.270$, $p < 0.001$) were significant predictors of brand trust.

Therefore, the linear regression indicates that the personal/ one-sided connection of consumers with influencers has a positive impact on trust development upon brand endorsements by influencers. Besides when social media influencers are physically more attractive, consumers tend to be more attracted towards them. However, the credibility of influencers is dependent on the quality of content, instead of the visual appeal of the influencers. Furthermore, it can be interpreted that the quality of the content by these social media influencers is a strong predictor of brand trust as it highlights valuable, relevant, and well-crafted contents, which enhances the trust of consumers upon brands. However, there is a short-term impact of para-social relationships and influencer credibility which is likely to reduce with time.

It is important to note that all the reported results are based on the t-values and p-values obtained from the analysis, as shown in parentheses after each predictor. These results provide empirical evidence of the variables that significantly contribute to brand trust in the context of the study.

Table 5: T-test

Independent Variable	Dependent Variable	Beta	SD	t-Value	p-Value	Results
PSRs	BT	0.618	0.038	14.039	<0.001	Accepted
PSRs	BT	0.518	0.044	10.510	<0.001	Accepted
IA		0.195	0.038	3.957	<0.001	Accepted
PSRs	BT	0.181	0.071	2.257	0.025	Accepted
IA		0.417	0.071	5.233	<0.001	Accepted
IC		0.157	0.047	3.268	<0.001	Accepted
PSRs	BT	0.123	0.068	1.618	0.107	Rejected
IA		0.205	0.074	2.476	0.014	Accepted
IC		0.067	0.046	1.409	0.160	Rejected
CQ		0.400	0.070	6.270	<0.001	Accepted

(Source: Self-created)

Table 6: Model Summary

Model		Unstandardized B	Coefficients Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients Beta	T	Sig.	95.0% Confidence Lower Bound	Interval for B Upper Bound	Zero-order	Correlations Partial	Part
1	(Constant)	.873	.187		4.666	<.001	.505	1.241			
	PSR	.110	.068	.123	1.618	.107	-.024	.243	.618	.089	.062
	IC	.183	.074	.205	2.476	.014	.038	.328	.651	.135	.095
	IA	.065	.046	.067	1.409	.160	-.026	.157	.461	.078	.054
	CQ	.439	.070	.400	6.270	<.001	.301	.577	.683	.327	.241

Hypothesis	Beta	SD	t-value	p-value	Results
H1: → PSR BT	0.123	0.068	1.618	0.107	Rejected
H2: →IA BT	0.205	0.074	2.476	0.014	Accepted
H3: →IC BT	0.067	0.046	1.409	0.160	Rejected
H4: →CQ BT	0.400	0.070	6.270	<0.001	Accepted

(Source: Self-created)

Discussion on the Hypothesis Testing

The study indicates that hypothesis 1 (H1) posits that social relationships do not exert any influence on brand trust, as the latter is deemed crucial for the strength of social relationships, and consumers do not perceive these relationships as vital for establishing a connection with the brand. Hypothesis 2 (H2) demonstrates that influencer attractiveness does impact brand trust, potentially due to its effect on consumer behavior. However, hypothesis 3 (H3) reveals that influencers' trustworthiness does not affect brand trust because consumers harbor skepticism towards influencers' evaluations of new products.

This study employs the Sobel test (refer to Table 7) to ascertain the significance of brand advocacy as a mediating factor in the association between quasi-social relationships and brand trust. The findings indicate that there is no substantial mediating effect of brand publicity on the relationship between quasi-social relationships and brand trust ($t = 0.199$, $p = 0.841$). Brand advocacy does not act as a mediator between quasi-social relationships and brand trust. Furthermore, brand advocacy significantly mediates

the link between influencer credibility and brand trust ($t = 6.354$, $p = 0.360$). The results demonstrate that brand publicity plays a mediating role in connecting Internet celebrities' credibility with brand trust. Additionally, brand publicity significantly mediates the relationship between influencer attractiveness and brand trust ($t = 6.688$, $p = 0.0001$). The outcomes reveal that brand publicity acts as an intermediary in linking influencer attraction with brand trust. Moreover, there is a significant mediating effect of brand advocacy between content quality and brand trust ($t = 6.3744$, $p = 0.516$). The results show that brand advocacy plays a mediatory role in connecting content quality with brand trust.

Table 7: Sobel test

Hypothesis	Variables/effects	t	Std. Error	p-value	Results
H5	PSR→BA→BT	0.19997865	0.03613886	0.84149728	Rejected
H6	IA→BA→BT	6.68832002	0.03829392	0.0001786	Accepted
H7	IC→BA→BT	6.35430746	0.04023208	0.36023113	Accepted
H8	CQ→BA→BT	6.37449918	0.050884	0.51664862	Accepted

(Source: Self-created)

The effect size (Table 8) was used to test if mediator included have an effect to model framework. It shows mediator statistically significant to independent variables and dependent variables ($R^2 = 0.394$, $F^2 = 0.2426$). Also, it shows the mediator have a medium effect to model framework. Next, if excluded the mediator, it shows independent variables and dependent variables statistically significant ($R^2 = 0.247$, $F^2 = 0.2426$). It also shows independent variables and dependent variables have a small effect to sample.

Table 8: Effect size

	Included	Excluded	f-squared	Effect size
R-squared	0.394	0.247	0.2426	Medium

(Source: Self-created)

Conclusion

This study constructs a comprehensive framework to elucidate the interrelationship between the variables. The findings demonstrate that brand trust is influenced by both the influencer's attractiveness and the excellence of the promoted product. Consequently, harnessing social media influence is deemed an indispensable marketing tool for achieving desired outcomes such as brand awareness and credibility.

To further enhance the comprehension of influencer marketing, future research should delve into the impact of sponsorship or endorsement disclosures. It has been observed that a considerable number of influencers fail to disclose sponsored advertisements, thereby creating an illusion of genuine endorsements for users. In such instances, the absence of transparency may induce users to trial the product without recognizing the influencers who are remunerated.

This study provides compelling evidence for the differential validity of structures associated with influencer marketing. The findings highlight a significant relationship between social connections, influencer credibility, influencer attraction, content quality, and brand trust. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the underlying factors that influence consumer trust in brands in the context of influencer marketing. But further research is needed on other variables within this space and their impact on brand trust.

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